

Should Smartphones Be Banned for Children or Does Cyberpsychology Have a Bigger Problem?

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‘Should smartphones be banned for children?’ appeared in April’s edition of *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, where Wiederhold suggested that ‘excessive smartphone use can lead to a myriad of potential problems,’ (Wiederhold, 2019). Like Wiederhold, we agree that this issue warrants discussion, particularly in light of recent government enquiries in the United Kingdom (UK Parliament, 2018). However, we were surprised to notice that unlike other editorials (e.g., Wiederhold, 2015), it relies on media articles at the expense of empirical research.

In less a deliberate sense, this commentary reveals some serious concerns for cyberpsychology as a whole. Specifically, the field often attempts to pathologize everyday behaviors to the point where the majority of the population can be classified as presenting ‘problematic’ or ‘addictive’ tendencies (Panova & Carbonell, 2018). This overlooks large and statistically robust studies, which suggest that the impact of technology use on well-being has been vastly overstated (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Methodological shortcomings are similarly glossed over as a limitation, rather than a fundamental stumbling block. For example, the assessment of technology use via self-report does not align well with objective behavior, and technology ‘addiction’ scales continue to be developed without subsequent validation (Ellis, 2019). To exemplify this point, another recent editorial in *Neurological Sciences* claims great progress in the area of problematic smartphone use. However, after acknowledging measurement limitations, the portrayal of a successful field becomes less convincing (Elhai, Levine, Dvorak, & Hall, 2016). If existing knowledge is built

on very weak foundations, an outsider would quickly conclude that our current understanding is poor and start afresh.

The harsh reality is that unsubstantiated claims about the impact of technology use on people and society continue to be repeated, irrespective of new evidence suggesting the contrary. This almost appears as a form of selective exposure where people will avoid information that would create cognitive dissonance because it is incompatible with current beliefs (Jeong, Zo, Lee, & Ceran, 2019). Some prominent voices have even suggested that the public should not believe scientists who disagree with them (Twenge, 2019). This undermines scientific progress and betrays public trust.

Editors and editorials can shape the discourse and direction of their respective fields, which we believe does happen within the pages of *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*. However, improvements concerning transparency are urgently required, and the community should give serious consideration to pre-registration, the sharing of data, and engaging constructively with debate post publication. Journals could also respond by building on facilities made popular by other publishers (e.g., PLOS) where readers can freely comment on published papers.

In summary, Wiederhold’s recent editorial highlights a very real challenge for cyberpsychologists and other organizations that represent psychological science. Debates concerning the impact of technology on psychology are not new, and smartphones will eventually evolve or be replaced. How the field engages with some harsh truths is

vital in order to remain relevant (Ellis, 2019). We must ensure that key societal issues—such as the effects of smartphones on children and individuals of all ages—

allow for the spirited exchange of ideas and enthusiastic debate. Discussion is the way forward, not cherry-picking or stonewalling.

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