

Assessment of Digital Media Use in the Adolescent Psychiatric Evaluation

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KEYWORDS

- Adolescent • Assessment • Evaluation • Internet • Mental health • Psychiatry
- Social media

KEY POINTS

- Twenty-first century adolescents are growing up in an increasingly digital world, and their use of technology has an impact on their biological, psychological, and social development.
- This article encourages a new approach to the traditional psychiatric assessment that incorporates an evaluation of digital media use, which more accurately captures the experiences and interests of today's adolescents.
- The assessment of digital media includes how teens access media, what content they consume and create, and the related positive and negative impacts on their mental health across all domains of the traditional assessment.

INTRODUCTION

At its heart, the practice of adolescent psychiatry begins with, and is defined by, an interview of an adolescent and, when available, a family. This interview covers a set of domains that organizes the psychiatrist's understanding of the family's concerns and the formulation of the information discussed. Child psychiatrists view their patients as embedded in systems and cultures: kinship and peer networks, school

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systems, neighborhood dynamics, and ethnic cultures.¹ These systems and cultures are important domains in a psychiatric assessment for their deep influence on both the adolescent's expression of mental illness and the families help seeking. The authors suggest that online social media and other "new media" enabled by the Internet are modern examples of such systems and cultures, with potentially potent influences on child and adolescent development. This article therefore aims to describe an approach to the psychiatric assessment of such media use by adolescents to help psychiatrists appreciate its meaning in their patients' lives. The authors apply the traditional framework of the adolescent psychiatric assessment² that is well known to mental health clinicians to innovate from within the typically covered domains. The authors focus on adolescents specifically because issues surrounding their digital media use are better elucidated, but clinicians may also find this approach relevant to younger children, especially as children get access to more sophisticated technology at earlier ages.^{2,3}

The rapid evolution of digital media devices and content ensures that the psychiatric evaluation of their use by teens will continue to evolve, and current approaches will become outdated. Thus, the authors' description of this approach is scaffolded by their clinical and research experience (N.C., M.G.) in adolescent development. Where available, research data have supplemented the authors' experience, clinical recommendations, and analysis.

Why Should the Psychiatrist Assess Internet Use by Adolescents?

The technology available to adolescents changes so rapidly that it is worth summarizing current trends in adolescent media use to convey how technology is affecting the biology, psychology, and social lives of twenty-first century teens.⁴ Recent national surveys reveal a consistent trend: both the amount of time spent online and the number of devices and platforms adolescents use continue to increase. As mobile smartphones become more available, access to the Internet is all too easy, with 92% of teens going online daily, and 24% who go online almost all the time.⁵ Screen time is no longer limited to a television or computer: watching shows, playing video games, texting, using social media, and even listening to music involve some form of screen-based technology. Most of these media are social, allowing communication with others and sharing one's own content. Not including academic computer use, American adolescents average close to 9 hours of entertainment media use per day.³ Clinicians working in lower-income and culturally diverse settings should also be sensitive to how media habits vary by cultural background and socioeconomic status (SES). The recent Common Sense Media survey suggests that African American and lower SES teens spend more time on social media than their counterparts (white and Hispanic teens, and middle and higher SES teens, respectively).³

Potential risks and benefits of media on psychological functioning and development exist for all teens, although youth with psychiatric distress may be particularly vulnerable.⁴ Some of the most concerning associations involve worse executive functioning, increased aggressive behavior due to violent media content, higher risk of depression for high users, and decreased sleep quality due to screen time.⁶ The Common Sense survey reported a correlation between lower social-emotional well-being and higher use of online social media (1:27 h/d vs 55 min/d among youth with higher well-being). Equally, digital media can help teens maintain social connections, foster creative endeavors and civic engagement, develop identity and worldviews, and learn about their health.⁶ Although many of these associations have yet to be studied prospectively, they validate one pressing message: teens in the twenty-first century are shaped and impacted by their digital lives. In the following sections, the authors

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