Screenagers face troubling addictions from an early age

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Early exposure can lead to addiction. Credit: Brit., CC BY-NC-ND

In 1997, Douglas Rushkoff boldly predicted the emergence a new caste of tech-literate adolescents. He argued that the children of his day would soon blossom into "screenagers", endowed with effortless advantages over their parents, having been raised from birth on a diet of computers and micro-chipped devices.

Fast-forward to 2014: the screenagers have come of age in a world ruled by Twitter and Candy Crush Saga. A substantial body of evidence addresses the ways in which media saturation shapes the identities of children and adolescents.

While there are clear benefits to maturing as a digital native, a number of experts are concerned about the physical and psychological health of our screenagers.

The perils of media-immersion

There are advantages of tech-literacy from an early age such as gaining IT skills that will serve you well in the future but there are risks too.

Aside from the dangers of social isolation and physical inactivity, there are also dangers that come not directly from any IT medium itself, but what happens when children are exposed to them. The ability to access pornography or gamble online throws up all kinds of issues when children are involved.

Particularly insidious are "foot-in-the-door" products which, combined with big data marketing techniques, specifically target adolescents and stimulate pathological behaviour. For example, a number of free Facebook games, including Zynga Poker and Slotomania, normalise gambling and divorce the thrill of playing from the consequences of losing. The player gets to experience the highs of winning but because there is no money involved, they don't suffer any real life consequences when they lose. This poses a major risk and could lead to problem gambling in adolescence.

Other freemium app and internet games also carry a risk factor for pathological behaviour. So-called "casual games" such as Flappy Bird, Bejeweled and Candy Crush Saga use behavioural conditioning

techniques to keep players invested for long stretches, which may inhibit the social development of youngsters.

And even if we don't buy into the moral panic so often spread by the media, there is evidence to suggest that sustained access to pornography can have detrimental effects on young people.

Mental health website Psych Central reports that not only is pornography easy to stumble across online (with search terms like "toy" often throwing up adult images) repeated exposure can be over-stimulating and potentially addictive for young people.

According to the site, "Cybersex addiction functions in a similar way to any other addiction, leading to a cycle of preoccupation, compulsion, acting out, isolation, self-absorption, shame and depression as well as distorted views of real relationships and intimacy."

Most susceptible to compulsive porn viewing are teens with limited parental support, which also correlates with unsupervised web access.

New addictions

While the addictiveness of certain activities is reasonably well established, the more general concept of "media addiction" in young people is harder to pin down.

For a start, it isn't easy to define addiction as it applies to any activity, even traditional problems such as gambling. So when it comes to new technologies and services, the picture becomes more confused.

It is tempting to discuss "media addiction" as a catch-all term for spending too much time online but there are so many opportunities for digital natives to engage in harmful activities that we ought to think in

more detail about the problems that can arise for them.

While we might group people together as "Facebook addicts", for example, there may well be a big difference between someone who spends an unhealthy amount of time growing virtual tomatoes on Farmville and another who might be pathologically engrossed in instant messaging.

Starting young

These phenomena are disconcerting enough on their own but we also need to address the fact that for today's youngsters, the process of media immersion often begins in very early childhood.

Last year, GFK carried out a survey for Common Sense Media of 1,463 parents with children aged under eight in the US and found 75% had access to smart devices. This was up from 52% in 2011. This suggests that by the time they hit their teens, there is a high probability that young children will be active participants in global information networks.

Whereas children of the 1990s were raised on a diet of discontinuous digital media (MTV and 16-bit gaming), the next wave of screenagers will hold multiple social media accounts, exposing them to all the hazards this level of connectivity implies.

From underage users viewing gambling as a source of wealth to adolescents whose formative sexuality is filtered through internet porn, the influence of media-immersion on developing minds is disquieting.

One can only imagine the mental state of young people when a universe of information, temptations and perils can be carried around in their pocket. While it's obvious that internet-use carries huge advantages for young people, they also need to be educated about the dangers before

addictions develop.

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