

Technology is changing Generation smartphone, and not always for the better

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It's easy to imagine some graybeard long ago weighing in on how this new generation, with all its fancy wheels, missed out on the benefits of dragging stuff from place to place.

That dude would be wrong. What's more, his arguments would be futile. Technology is inevitable.

It would be just as dopey to ignore that wheels would beget roads, roads would produce crashes and millennia later it would become apparent that texting while driving leaves people dead and you should stop doing it.

Things that make life easier also change it. When you see somebody arguing on Reddit until 3 a.m. about the logic of Game of Thrones, that technology comes with a downside.

Now we have the smartphone, an addictive device that makes junkies out of almost anybody who can afford one. The older we are, the more prone we are to trot out the kids-these-days worries about faces buried in screens.

Yet something very real - and in ways unsettling - comes with all the iPhones and Androids. In an Atlantic article last week adapted from an upcoming book, psychologist Jean M. Twenge argues that growing up with smartphones and [social media](#) coincides with "abrupt shifts in teen behaviors and emotional states."

What she calls "iGen" - those born between 1995 and 2012 and raised with screens in their pockets - looks worse off than the generations that came before.

She paints, at times with a particularly broad brush, a picture of lonely teenagers curled up in their beds obsessed with social media feeds that keep them awake at night and foster a sense of hopelessness.

Yes, they're less likely to drink, to get in car accidents and to have sex at an early age. But it's because they just don't get out much. They leave the house without their parents far less than kids who preceded them by just

a few years.

Twenge notes that the teen suicide rate surpassed the teen homicide rate in 2011 - and suggests technology drove the swapping of one awful phenomenon for the other.

Critics will note that correlation doesn't equal causation. Teen sex rates were already falling before the iPhone's debut in 2007. The same goes for a drop-off in dating, for delays in obtaining driver's licenses and the amount of time teens spend hanging out with friends away from their parents.

Yet the drop in sleep and especially in reported feelings of loneliness increased dramatically for Generation smartphone.

How could adolescence not be different in a Facebook/Instagram/Twitter world? It takes cliqueishness public, has pre-adults comparing their real lives to the made-for-posting snippets of their peers' lives.

Children have always been cruel to each other. That meanness had to get rougher when the ridicule could be launched from a distance. Tracking likes, and the absence thereof, helps explain why teens check their phones 80-plus times a day (compared to fewer than 50 for adults with smartphones - addictive at any age).

Those things are why some parents rally behind efforts like the Wait Until 8th campaign - pledging not to buy smartphones for kids until they're in the 8th grade - in hopes of extending innocence in the digital age just a bit longer.

It's not all awful. Some of the relationships teens build online can prove as deep and valuable as those their moms and dads make offline. Many

of their parents, after all, met on Match.com.

Besides, the [smartphone](#) isn't going away, and nobody's going to outlaw WhatsApp or Tumblr.

Oldsters need to get over our nostalgia for a pre-internet world. Yeah, some of what's happening feels sad. But some of it's just unfamiliar.

We're not yet in a full-on dystopia of screen noir. Kids still play ball, make out, sneak bottles from the liquor cabinet and make the short-of-lethal mistakes that they'll grin about and exaggerate in adulthood.

Can we coax their eyes and sensibilities from the electronics in their palms? Make the offline world as captivating as their virtual networks? Can we hook them on books, on hiking, on the adventure of making conversation with people in the same room?

We can try.

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