The Epidemic of Today: Technology and Its Effect on Teens

Over the last twenty years, technological advancements have been rapid, powerful, and impossible to ignore. We now live in a world where nearly every aspect of daily life relies on technology, and it's hard to fully participate in society without a smartphone. It's not enough anymore for a phone to just make calls—you need internet access, email, texting, and apps. To feel relevant, you have to be online. Though I believe that technology isn't inherently bad, I think we need mindful reform, especially for the mental health of those who are still figuring out who they are: teens.

For many born before the 2010s, life has changed drastically, but their sense of self is still rooted in a time before everything went digital. They may indulge in the conveniences of technology, the entertaining and fun aspects, but at the end of the day, find the important parts of their days elsewhere. However, for teens growing up in this era—those who were handed a tablet before they turned four, who swipe and scroll before they can write their names—life is something different. For most, their relationship with technology isn't just recreational; it's codependent.

In the cases of some teens, life isn't about living in the traditional sense anymore. It's now about watching others live from the curated safety of a screen. I have a younger brother—he's just about sixteen—and he spends at least seven hours a day online. He plays games, watches streamers, and prefers to spend time with his friends without actually doing so. He's fine in school, pulls good marks, and participates in extracurriculars, yet he finds little interest in any of the life he lives outside of screens and looks to online sources for most of his entertainment and information. I fear what this dependency means for him, and in turn, other

young adults. With this paper, I hope to find a way for teens like him to find joy in the offline world without asking them to give up technology or social media completely.

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In his article "End the Phone-Based Childhood Now," Jonathan Haidt quotes Thoreau's *Walden*, where Thoreau writes, "The cost of a thing is the amount of life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." In this equation, life is the most valuable currency. And today, we're watching it being traded away for hours of what has been dubbed (in a very aware title) "rotting," or the act of being online and doing nothing else for prolonged periods of time. And while I don't believe that all time spent online is wasted—there are real connections being formed and knowledge to be gained—I do believe that life outside of social media offers more depth, meaning, and fulfillment. Online friendships might provide comfort, but they don't necessarily translate into strong, healthy relationships in the rest of life. At our core, we are social beings, and in-person relationships are essential for emotional well-being and genuine human connection. However, there is a growing proclivity for digital interaction over real-world connection that isn't just a personal habit—it's a societal shift, visible in the daily routines of today's teens.

American teens now spend an average of five hours a day on social media and nine to ten hours a day on screens overall (Haidt 5). That's most of their waking life. Add in the time they need for sleep and eating, and there's barely anything left to live. Instead, kids spend their time on socials like TikTok, Instagram, and the viral hub, Twitch—a live-streaming platform where creators broadcast their lives in real time. On these platforms, teens watch people having fun,

making fools of themselves, or sharing information that ranges from helpful to dangerously unchecked. Though seemingly positive, these platforms are double-edged swords. Yes, they can be entertaining, but misinformation spreads on them like wildfire. Sure, they can provide anonymity, which enables expression and freedom from personal judgment, but also allows cruelty to run rampant without consequence. And absolutley, they can provide the space for influencers and businesses to thrive and gain traction, but they also feed into consumerism and waste.

Still, it's important to remember: it's not the youth's fault for loving their phones and these platforms as much as they do. In Andrew Marantz's *The New Yorker* article, "You Mad, Bro?" he explores how online spaces can create a sense of belonging for marginalized groups—people who feel invisible in their offline lives. In Marantz's article, the "marginalized group" in question is young men who feel lonely, unheard, and angry–but they're just one of the many groups who feel isolated. People of color, queer folks, and plenty of others feel similarly. However, in this case, it's young men who have turned to digital communities to feel seen. And for many, they have found a sense of belonging in the form of podcasters and streamers such as popular figures like Joe Rogan, Theo Von, and Andrew Schulz. Though these connections are parasocial, they're emotionally important and very real for the listener. These young men feel comforted, uplifted, and, crucially, understood. Even when the content leans heavily into controversial rhetoric, the draw is not necessarily the information or the politics—it's the connection.

Yet, the irony is inescapable: our constant digital connection is what has fueled the epidemic of loneliness and isolation. Despite being more "connected" than ever, young people are reporting higher levels of unhappiness, anxiety, and detachment from the world (Haidt 1).

In Christina Caron's *New York Times* article, "A Global Flourishing Study Finds That Young Adults, Well, Aren't," she highlights this trend that focuses on connection. The study she cites reveals that loneliness and social isolation among young adults are rising, and the reason is painfully simple: they're "busy looking at screens." Quoting Dartmouth economics professor Dr. David Blanchflower talking about Robert Putnam's book on disconnect and disengagement, *Bowling Alone*, Caron writes, "It's not that they're [teens] bowling alone... It's that they are not bowling at all" (Caron). Activities that once brought people together—sports, clubs, casual hangouts, even boredom-induced adventures—are being replaced by the passive consumption of others' lives. But this is the world that today's youth know. We can't fault them for adapting to it, however we should work toward change.

In his article, Haidt proposes four strategies to reduce tech dependence: (1) no smartphones before high school, (2) no social media before age sixteen, (3) phone-free schools, and (4) more independence and free play in early childhood. However, these are easier said than done. Haidt argues that many teens would cut back on social media if others did, but he also acknowledges that few will act first, for fear of missing out. There have been isolated cases where authoritarian rules like his have been successful in practice. I know that I myself lived a childhood similar to the one Haidt asks for—no phone until I was in high school, no social media until I was 15, and a lot of outdoor unsupervised play growing up—but asking the teens of today to give up their devices isn't the same as it used to be. Today, it's more akin to asking them to give up a perfectly healthy limb. No one wants to walk around without an arm while everyone else has two.

Phones have become so deeply embedded in our lives that we treat them as essential—as vital as air. But they're not air. They're not water, or human connection, or life itself. They're

more like cake—delightful and hard to resist, but virtually nutrient-free. And like cake, the issue with technology isn't consumption, but overconsumption. A tech-free "diet" based on deprivation won't last. Real, lasting change will happen when people learn to engage with technology mindfully and with intention.

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So, rather than removing social media or digital technologies entirely from teens' lives, I propose three alternatives that preserve the positive aspects—connection, education, and entertainment—while creating healthier, more balanced relationships with devices, and ultimately, with one another.

First, I believe the core issue isn't the platforms themselves, but how children learn to use—and misuse—them. Therefore, my first suggestion is to encourage platforms to require their users sixteen and under to create accounts jointly with a parent or guardian. If a user's mother is tagged in every comment, they're far more likely to think twice before posting something impulsive or inappropriate. While this might feel intrusive, I believe it's important to remember that kids don't actually need social media to survive. Adding thoughtful protections like this won't harm them—it just encourages accountability and safer digital practices. For those with concerns around parental involvement, I agree, there will always be cases of negligent parenting or teenagers pushing for privacy. I'm still trying to find where to draw the line between a young person's right to privacy and the need for oversight.

Second, I propose the introduction of transparency tools that make users' digital footprints more visible and accessible to the "average Joe"—not to punish, but to promote

responsibility. The tools currently in place on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitch are not effective deterrents against harmful or impulsive behavior. When people know their actions leave a visible trail, they're more likely to think before they post. One possible solution is to create a "public activity feed" on each user's profile that shows all comments and interactions they've made on other accounts. Just as users currently have a space for their own content, this would extend visibility to their interactions across the platform. These tools wouldn't be about surveillance, but about accountability in spaces where anonymity can otherwise fuel cruelty.
It could be argued that this kind of visibility threatens free expression. However, freedom of speech does not mean freedom from consequences. These tools wouldn't restrict what users could say, only ensure that their words are tied to their identity. However, I know that for some, social media is a place for connecting over niche interests, and I don't have any wish to isolate anyone. I am still working through the issue of the good of some, over the good of others. What I do know is the goal wouldn't be censorship; it would be accountability—and ultimately, a safer, more respectful online environment.

Lastly, I propose that schools implement programs similar to D.A.R.E.—Drug Abuse Resistance Education—that focus not on the dangers of drugs and alcohol, but on the addictive and harmful effects of social media and technology. Haidt notes that, while technology addiction isn't quite the same as opioid addiction, "they all involve abnormally heavy and sustained activation of dopamine neurons and reward pathways" (Haidt 7). If we care about the effects of drugs, which are in part similar to those of technology addiction—anxiety, insomnia, irritability, mental health decline—then we should care about the use of technology and educate young adults on both the benefits and the dangers early on. As we have discussed, social platforms offer

numerous positives, but they also come with significant negatives. I believe that there are too many downsides to simply leave it unchecked.

In these programs, possibly named T.E.C.H. – Teach, Empower, Connect, Heal—students would learn to: (1) Teach – Educate youth on digital literacy and responsible use. (2) Empower – Equip teens with tools and confidence to make smart, autonomous decisions online. (3) Connect – Encourage meaningful, respectful online and offline connections with others. (4) Heal – Look at the mental health impacts of technology on kids their age.

Held after school or integrated into the curriculum, these programs would have students research the histories and purposes of social media and technology use. I think it would also be beneficial if they met individuals affected by the negative impacts of technology and heard firsthand about the consequences of dependency and unhealthy use.

Some may argue that programs like this don't work, often citing D.A.R.E. as a well-known example that didn't live up to expectations. It's true that D.A.R.E. didn't completely stop underage drinking, drug experimentation, or casual drug use. But from personal experience—and in conversations with others who participated in the program—I believe it still made a difference. It didn't prevent all risky behavior, but it helped us recognize the lines not to cross and encouraged us to think before we acted. In that sense, D.A.R.E. didn't fail; it simply didn't solve the problem entirely, and that's okay. It planted awareness.

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We are raising a generation that did exactly what the generation before them hoped they would: become fluent in the language of technology. But that fluency didn't lead to deeper

connection as many hoped, but instead just means we're all constantly (dys)connected. Many teens today aren't simply addicted to screens; they exist in a digital world that has redefined what it means to grow up, to belong, and to be seen. And while it may be too late to turn back time or unplug the internet, it's not too late to offer something more meaningful: a path to the lives they've missed while they've been consumed by technology—lives that are still waiting for them, offline.

If we want our youth to flourish, as I want my brother to, we must stop demanding they give up the technology that raised them, and instead, we need to provide options that teach them how to appreciate it healthily without cutting it out entirely. We don't need a return to the past; we need a reimagining of the future—one where technology serves humanity. Not the other way around.

Works Cited

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