

Editorial

Media Use and Well-Being

An Introduction to the Special Issue

Leonard Reinecke¹ and Allison Eden²

¹ Department of Communication, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Mainz, Germany

² College of Communication Arts and Sciences, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

The effects of media use on well-being are one of the most dynamically developing areas within current media effects research. While the field has made impressive progress over the last years, it remains fragmented and faces both theoretical and methodological challenges. This introduction provides a short overview of the most pressing tasks for current and future research on media use and well-being and highlights the impulses provided by the research presented in the special issue.

Media Use and Well-Being: An Introduction to the Special Issue

The question what constitutes the “good life” has moved philosophers and social scientists for a long time. First ponderings on the concept of psychological well-being date back to ancient Greece (for an overview, see Ryan & Deci, 2001). In modern psychology, research on well-being and its predictors has seen a renaissance since the advent of the “positive psychology” movement that has attempted to shift the traditional focus of (clinical) psychological research away from pathology and called for a stronger emphasis on factors such as happiness and positive experiences (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It is no surprise, then, that the construct of well-being has also raised the attention of media psychologists and communication researchers. Media use occupies a significant share of our waking hours (e.g., Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016), and mobile media have extended the scope of traditional mass media to make media available at any time and at any place (Vorderer & Kohring, 2013). In this “permanently online” environment, questions pertaining to the impact of media use on psychological well-being are more pressing for our discipline than ever before (Reinecke, 2017).

Concerns about the effects of this mass(ive) media exposure on users’ well-being have been a significant driver of

research since the early days of our discipline. Media effects research has long been dominated by an emphasis on understanding the detrimental effects of media use, such as media violence or excessive and addictive media use (see Lowery & DeFleur, 1995 for an overview). More recently, however, the field has also started to explore the potential benefits of media exposure on well-being (for an overview, see Reinecke & Oliver, 2017). The existing evidence suggests a complex relationship between the risks and benefits of media use for well-being. Consequently, gaining a better understanding of the underlying processes that drive these effects, or the situations and individual differences which may make some users more vulnerable to the risks and others more susceptible to the benefits of media use, remains a crucial task for the field of media psychology (Reinecke & Oliver, 2017). In the following, we will provide a short review of what – from our idiosyncratic perspective – seem to be the most pressing challenges that scholars in the field of media use and well-being are currently facing.

Current Challenges

A first central challenge arises from the multitude of different theoretical approaches to and empirical operationalizations of the well-being construct. Within the psychological literature, two broad research traditions exist (Huta & Waterman, 2014). The first of these two “schools” represents the *hedonic* research perspective that conceptualizes well-being in terms of the presence of positive and the absence of negative affect, along with high levels of life satisfaction as a cognitive component (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). The *eudaimonic* research tradition, in contrast, proposes a more complex view on well-being that extends beyond mere pleasure and positive experience and conceptualizes well-being in terms of personal growth, and the satisfaction of intrinsic needs and experiences of

meaning and purpose in life (Huta & Waterman, 2014). For a comprehensive understanding of the effects of media use on well-being, a balanced perspective taking the full breadth of well-being indicators into account is of paramount importance. Traditionally, however, media effects research has been dominated by a hedonic perspective on well-being, addressing media as a source of mood optimization (Zillmann, 1988). Only recently has research also started to focus on the effects of media use on eudaimonic well-being, for example by fostering psychological growth via “meaningful entertainment” (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011, p. 30).

A second challenge in understanding the relationship between media use and well-being is the rate of technological and social change in media use practices. While the field has long started to explore the implications of “new” media such as social media for well-being (e.g., Verduyn, Ybarra, Résibois, Jonides, & Kross, 2017), new developments in mobile media use come along with a multitude of new research questions. The ubiquitous availability of online content and communication lead to a new permanence in communication (Vorderer & Kohring, 2013) that may create new chances for positive media effects (e.g., constant availability of need satisfaction) but also new strains (e.g., digital stress) and challenges (e.g., new demands for the self-regulation of media desires) that could have a negative impact on well-being (Reinecke, 2017). Also, the presence of always-on mobile devices has resulted in a significant increase in media multitasking. The parallel use of multiple media at the same time (e.g., watching TV while checking Facebook on the smartphone) makes it more and more difficult to account for the individual effects of specific media stimuli. Yet, how media users and researchers may deal with these new challenges is still largely unclear.

Lastly, new technological developments also create new methodological challenges for the research field (Schneider, Reich, & Reinecke, 2017): The deluge of messages and notifications arriving on smartphones, and the frequency with which mobile devices are checked over the day, make it more and more difficult to adequately measure media exposure duration and frequency. Furthermore, mobile technologies enable the use of media and communication anytime and anywhere. This results in an exponential growth of the number and importance of context factors that may influence the effects of media exposure on well-being. The aforementioned multitasking issue also brings methodological challenges: How can researchers track content when multiple screens are streaming content in parallel? In combination, these developments clearly underline the need for methodological innovations (e.g., tracking user behavior) and the observation of media uses and effects “in situ” (e.g., via mobile experience sampling).

The Special Issue

The aim of this special issue was to address at least some of the challenges outlined above by showcasing state-of-the-art research providing innovative insights into the interplay of media use and well-being. In combination, the six published papers represent the breadth and diversity of perspectives and methods of this field. In terms of contributing to theoretical understandings of media use and well-being, the research presented here explores both the opportunities of media use for positive effects on well-being (e.g., as a social resource (Utz & Breuer, 2017), a tool for coping with stress (Nabi, Perez Torres, & Prestin, 2017) or a vehicle for the social sharing of emotions (Choi & Toma, 2017)), as well as the risks of media exposure for well-being (e.g., the affective consequences of news consumption (Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2017), social pressure in the context of mobile phone use (Hall, 2017), and digital stress potentially resulting from messenger use (Bauer, Loy, Masur, & Schneider, 2017)). The studies identify numerous mediator (e.g., feelings of “entrapment” (Hall) or mindfulness (Bauer et al.)) and moderator variables (e.g., media affordances and relationship types, see Choi & Toma) that govern the effects of media use on well-being. Additionally, the studies included here address both hedonic well-being (e.g., affect (Boukes & Vliegenthart), stress (Nabi et al.), and life satisfaction (Utz & Breuer)), but also eudaimonic facets of well-being (e.g., personal growth (Choi & Toma) and mindfulness (Bauer et al.)).

Methodologically, the research featured in this special issue helps to address the challenges posed by the constant technological developments in the media context by covering the interplay of media use and well-being over the whole spectrum of media content from traditional non-interactive media (Boukes & Vliegenthart; Nabi et al.), to social media and interpersonal communication (Utz & Breuer; Choi & Toma), to the opportunities and threats to well-being posed by new, mobile media (Hall; Bauer et al.). Furthermore, the papers document the effects of media use over a wide range of media users with diverse sociodemographic background and within everyday life - but also in times of crises (e.g., after a cancer diagnosis (Nabi et al.) or a romantic breakup (Choi & Toma)). The use of representative samples and longitudinal research designs (Boukes & Vliegenthart; Utz & Breuer) is complemented by the use of experience sampling (Hall) and diary methods (Bauer et al.) to address the empirical challenges resulting from the growing ubiquity of media use.

In conclusion, the research documented in this special issue significantly contributes to our understanding of the complex relationship between media use and well-being. Nevertheless, many questions remain unanswered and many challenges still lay ahead of us. The fact that

the effects of media use on well-being receive attention from diverse and siloed disciplines (e.g., clinical psychology, media psychology, communication science, media literacy research etc.) leaves the field largely fragmented, and calls for an integration of the extant empirical findings via meta-analyses and meta-reviews. The continuing development of information and communication technology, as well as the many digital traces users leave behind, will make it more and more important to incorporate the methods of the computational social sciences into research exploring the interplay of media use and well-being. We are optimistic that the research field will successfully take on these challenges and we hope that this special issue will provide inspiration and valuable impulses for future research endeavors.

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Leonard Reinecke

Department of Communication
Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz
Jakob-Welder-Weg 12
55182 Mainz
Germany
leonard.reinecke@uni-mainz.de

Allison Eden

College of Communication Arts and Sciences
Michigan State University
404 Wilson Road, Room 284
East Lansing, MI 48824
USA
edenalli@msu.edu



Leonard Reinecke (PhD, University of Hamburg) is an associate professor at the Department of Communication at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany. His research focusses on media uses and effects, media entertainment, and online communication. He has conducted research on various aspects of media use and well-being, including media-induced recovery from stress and strain and the interaction of media use and self-control.



Allison Eden (PhD, Michigan State University) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at Michigan State University. Her work focuses on understanding media enjoyment from a psychological perspective. She focuses on the role enjoyment plays in attention to and selection of media content, and more broadly the effects of entertainment on behavior and well-being. Dr. Eden is an affiliated scholar of the Media Neuroscience Lab at UC Santa Barbara, and is a founding member of the Communication and Biology interest group at ICA.