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The Effects of Digital Reading

In this 21st century world, everything seems to be driven by technology. More and more people are beginning to realize the effects of technology on younger generations. Viral videos of toddlers swiping at magazine pages as if they were touch screen are constant reminders that children today are growing up in the technology age. Another testament of the technology age is the growing desire for digital reading. There now exists many different media for reading digitally from e-readers to online news. However, these advances have not taken effect without criticism. There are many who feel the advances in technology are negatively impacting the reading and writing of youth. Despite the widespread hysteria claiming the rise of technology is negatively impacting the literacy of youth, digital reading is helping our youth become more engaged in reading and provides opportunity to improve their writing and communication skills.

In contrast to what critics say, millennials are reading more than the previous generation allowing for more opportunity to increase their reading comprehension skills. In an article by The Atlantic, a study from the PEW Research Center found millennials read more books than their previous generation at the same age (Howe). While it is noted fewer people are visiting libraries than before, that is attributed to the fact that more people are using the library websites (LaFrance). Although not in print, millennials are indeed reading more. The vast options for digital reading offer more opportunities to read. Today’s youth interact with a mix of paper magazines and books, as well as tablets, smartphones and e-readers. The amount of time spent on the internet allows them to read a variety of works. The more writing a person reads, the better they will grasp specific writing skills such as grammar and spelling. Despite the criticism of increased digital reading, “using one kind of technology does not preclude them from understanding another” (Jabr). Being able to read on multiple media helps to develop comprehension skills by exposing them to different ways of viewing understanding the content. Also, the convenience of the media devices offer youth multiples opportunities to engage in different types of reading. Smaller children can utilize audio books which help to teach and improve their reading skills through having a constant voice as an example. Millennials can utilize audio books to study while performing other tasks because it frees them from having to hold a physical book. Tablets or e-readers allow for students to hold multiple books on a single device rather than hauling pounds of books in a backpack for school. Other avenues for digital reading such as Buzzfeed, online news, and mobile devices continue to provide multiple opportunities to read and millennials are taking advantage of this technology. Instead of weakening their reading skills, as critics would say, this technology in fact, encourages them to read more thus expanding those very skills.

Since the onset of digital reading, many studies have been performed to determine the validity of arguments against it. In a Scientific American article by Ferris Jabr, many studies were completed to determine if reading comprehension is affected by reading on screens rather than in print. One of those studies by Kate Garland, of the University of Leicester, found students scored equally well on a short quiz after reading on either medium. The only difference was in how they remembered the information. This suggests the medium itself doesn’t affect the level of reading comprehension. So using technology to read on screens is not directly contributing to a decline in literacy skills as some critics would claim. In fact, tools such as autocorrect help to improve skills in grammar or spelling. Emory Professor Mark Bauerlein says “millennials should step away from their computer screens to improve their terrible grammar” (Booker). However, in a Harris Poll for Dictionary.com, 74% of millennials reported their disdain for seeing errors on social media (Booker). It should come as no surprise that millennials, the supposed generation of self-absorbed braggarts are eager to be correct. Thanks to advancements in technology with tools such as Autocorrect and spellcheck, they can be. Reading on screens of devices such as e-readers, tablets, and laptops simply offer another more convenient way for today’s youth to read. Critics of digital reading imply the use of these devices cause the youth to lose a level of quality in reading, but this is not true. The different devices offer a different experience and suitability. A study by cognitive scientists Rakefet Ackerman and Morris Goldsmith found that readers perceived printed works as better suited for longer more exhaustive reading and digital reading for shorter and faster reading (La Farge). A survey by Salve Regina University concluded that millennials still prefer reading in print when it comes to longer exhaustive readings such as novels (Jabr). So, they are not losing a quality of reading but are instead reserving certain media for specific types of reading. Texts such as short news articles or emails are regarded as “quick reads” which are typically read on the go and better suited for mobile devices or tablets. While many of the aforementioned studies have produced controversial results, one thing is clear -- the technology used in digital reading affords multiple opportunities for youth to read and as a result, improve their reading comprehension.

Aside from reading, critics also claim technology, mainly social media, has negatively affected the writing skills of youth today. They claim the wide use of texting and tweeting causes much of the writing by younger people to be shorthand consisting of disconnected and fragmented thoughts. One critic claims, “So that’s where we are today -- stream of consciousness writing. It’s rambling, disconnected, fragmented, and indecipherable mumbo jumbo” (Wilson). This may be true of social media posts but it does not imply millennials lack these skills in other forms of writing. Stephen Dobranski, an English professor at Georgia State University says, “Social media has made millennials more aware of the different way language can be used across platforms. Perhaps some millennials have thus become more attentive to such details as punctuation and grammar, whether they are hashtags or semicolons or sentence fragments” (Booker). Millennials are aware of grammatical rules and understand those writing concepts. They may not adhere to them on social media, but they do possess those skills. Sure social media and texting have become more common and youth tend to write posts in shorthand without regard for sentence structure. But social media has limitations such as character limits which make it appropriate for shorthand writing. This is one example of why criticism of millennials’ writing without regard for the medium in which they are writing is misleading. Emory University administrator Helen Julien says “millennials are expert ‘codeswitchers’ who can seamlessly transition from ‘textspeak’ to academic writing.” While social media has rapidly increased the use of acronyms and hashtags, it has not affected the academic writing of youth today. In fact, in some ways it can improve certain aspects of their writing. Twitter’s one hundred forty character limit, and snapchat’s thirty-one character limit forces the writer to condense their thoughts removing the option for “mumbo jumbo.” So yes, social media encourages shorthand writing but millennials are just as well adept to write twitter posts as they are essays.

One of the biggest complaints about millennials is their self-absorption and inability to communicate with others which is widely blamed on social media. Critics claim millennials do not possess the proper skills to communicate in a professional environment and technology is to blame. Bram Lowsky, an executive vice president of Right Management says “with Gen X and Gen Y, because everything is shorthand and text, the ability to communicate effectively is challenged” (Holland). However, technology is what helps them develop better communication skills because it allows collaboration with all different types of people. Writing Professor William Ellet, notes that a majority of his students reported working with people they had never met and mainly communicated with them through email (Holland). The internet provides an opportunity to interact with people from across the world and in order to effectively collaborate, communication skills had to be learned. Slate columnist Laura Bradley notes “a favorite observation about millennials, both in the workplace and in their daily lives, is how wired in they are with their preferred technologies” (Bradley). Just because they prefer to text or write an email rather than pick up a phone, doesn’t mean they lack communication skills. Having a preference for a particular mode of communication, doesn’t imply a lack of skill in another. Critics claim millennials lack communication skills in the workplace but studies predict millennials will be the highest achieving generation to date (Grossman). Employers like to hire them not only for their tech savvy skills but also because they have an inherent ability to collaborate effectively with others. Having grown up in the technology age is what afforded them the opportunity to develop this skill.

Advances in technology have undoubtedly made it easier and more convenient to read text in multiple forms. Even technology critics would agree it has profoundly impacted the way we read and write today. Specifically, it has provided youth with many opportunities to read and write, thus encouraging them to engage in those activities more. Despite the criticism, this increased engagement allows for youth to better develop reading comprehension, writing, and communication skills. The many forms of digital reading ranging from short BuzzFeed articles and online newspapers, to one hundred forty character tweets, have resulted in increased reading by our youth. Does it really matter if that reading so happens to be digitally?

Destinee—you’re off to a very strong start here. Overall your essay is well organized, reasoned, and evidenced. You cite a range of specific and (mostly) credible sources and you (mostly) keep your focus on digital forms of reading and writing. I’ve added a few comments about those places where your focus seems to wander a bit. With just a bit of tinkering this will be a very strong first writing assignment for this class.

--Ryan Cordell

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