

**Forum:** ECOSOC

**Issue:** The Impact of Digital Technologies on Mental Health

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## Introduction

We live in the technological era, with massive amounts of information and possibilities at our fingertips. While the recent advances in digital technologies have allowed for a lot of improvements - such as saving lives, connecting people across the world, and giving us access to information - there are also some worries about its impact on mental health. In 2012 and 2013, there was a rapid increase in depression, anxiety, and self-harm among teenagers. This sudden change coincides nearly perfectly with the increase in popularity and usage of social media platforms.

Ever since, we've been trying to learn more about these devices and their effect on us. It's especially important that we understand both the benefits and harms of digital technology, because they're going to become even more important in our everyday lives than they already are right now. However, since this is a relatively new phenomenon, we still don't know much about the long term impacts of these technologies.

It's clear that there are many perspectives and sides to this complex issue, but it is imperative that it be addressed.

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

### **Digital Technology**

Digital technologies are electronic tools, systems, devices and resources that generate, store or process data. This would include social media, online games, smartphones, and multimedia. They have transformed how we communicate, work, and learn since their existence, and they will continue to do so as they become more developed in the future.

### **Social Media**

Social media is the websites and applications that allow users to create and share content, or to participate in social networking. Common social media platforms are Instagram, Twitter, Tiktok, YouTube, and Facebook.

### **Smartphones**

A smartphone is a mobile phone that performs many of the functions of a computer, usually with a touchscreen, internet access, and an operating system capable of running downloaded apps.

### **Mental Health**

Mental health is defined as a person's condition with regards to their physical and emotional well-being. Having good mental health is important for people to live happy, healthy, and successful lives. Our mental health can be threatened by mental illnesses and disorders, such as depression, anxiety, addiction, etc.

### **Depression**

Depression is a common mental illness. When a person is depressed, they have feelings of severe despondency and dejection, as well as lower levels of "feel good" neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine.

### **Anxiety**

Anxiety is defined as a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome. When it becomes severe, anxiety can become a mental illness and negatively affect a person's well being and lifestyle.

## **Background Information**

Digital technologies are a relatively new part of our world. The internet and home computers weren't developed until the 1970s, and it wasn't until the 2000s that it became a critical aspect of people's everyday lives. Now that it is, governments and other organizations have started to take action, attempting to mitigate its risks and maximize its benefits.

## **Benefits of Digital Technologies**

Digital technologies bring with them massive benefits. They help people to establish and maintain connections, especially through social media. People from all over the world can interact with each other, and meet new people. There are many chat groups and other ways for people to connect over common interests, which helps to foster social inclusion. Despite enabling communication, digital technologies also allow us to express ourselves - whether it be during digital discussions, YouTube videos, or social media posts. We can be creative and learn a lot by using digital technologies. All of these benefits are what made the recent pandemic survivable for many people across the globe. Another large benefit of digital technologies is the amount of knowledge it makes available. Now, anyone with internet connection and a device can type a quick google search to learn practically anything. Even though citizens in these countries don't have as great access to digital technologies as those in developed countries, digital technologies have greatly helped developing countries adapt to our globalized world. Already digital technologies are being used to help educate and connect people in these countries to people all over the world. Many nonprofits and organizations have been working to help these countries gain better access to digital technologies in the meantime. Digital technologies perform and/or make many tasks easier, such as computing, designing, and building. Also, while many worry about its negative impacts on mental health, digital technologies offer access to valuable support networks. There are many apps or chat groups that support mental health and well being, such as CalmHarm, Silver Cloud, Rally Round, Bluelce, and more.

## **Potential Risks, Harms, and Dangers of Digital Technologies**

However, these benefits do come with a lot of risks. One main risk is addiction - digital technologies are extremely addicting. Over ⅔ of parents in the US worry that young people spend too much time on screens. Digital technologies, especially social media, have special algorithms designed to keep a user engaged as long as possible. Now, the average person spends 4.8 hours a day on their device. This takes away from time that should be spent doing other things (physical exercise, maintaining non-digital relationships, and working). Research shows that those who try to stop using their mobile devices, especially smartphones, experience withdrawal symptoms, such as anxiety, mood changes, changes in appetite, and stress when away from their devices. The likes and comments on social media activate the release of dopamine that some state is similar to that of opioids. Digital technologies also pose the issue of comparison. Since digital technologies such as social media and blogs allow for people to post filtered versions of their lives, viewers see only the best parts of others, making their lives look bleak in comparison. This upward comparison leads to depression, feelings that one isn't good enough, body image concerns, and even self-harm. Digital technologies have been shown to cause FOMO, or fear of missing out, and loneliness as well. Due to the ease of being anonymous online, digital technologies are also the perfect platform for cyber bullying. Since digital technologies are now becoming the main way through which people engage with the news, they have become spreaders of misinformation/disinformation, which can cause stress and worsen mental health.

## **The Happy Medium**

The WHO, and many others, has found that adolescents who have a very low or very high internet use have the lowest life-satisfaction, while those with moderate use are the most happy. The problem that we face today is ensuring that we minimize the risks of digital technology as best as we can, and are still able to obtain its benefits.

## Countries and Organisations Involved

### OECD

The OECD has made many efforts to lessen the negative impacts that digital technology has on our mental health. They are especially interested in digital technology's effects on children. The OECD has recommended that countries empower children to be responsible online by teaching them about the potential risks, and showing them how to use the Internet in a positive way. They state that it is "imperative" that a child get help early when they show signs of mental illness. These signs include a lack of sleep, anxiety, mood swings, and depression. OECD also recommends that governments encourage online platforms and industries to produce technology that can provide only "age appropriate" content for its users.

### UNICEF

Like the OECD, UNICEF is particularly involved in this issue when it comes to children and young adults. On Safer Internet Day, the executive director of UNICEF gave a speech about the harms and potential risks for children that come with digital technologies. In this speech, the director stated that these risks and harms threatened childrens' rights, safety, and mental well-being, and made recommendations to work towards solving the issue. These recommendations included training workers on online risk, ensuring the tech industry guarantees enhanced safety and safeguarding measures that are accessible to all, working with public and private sectors to increase investments in safe technologies, and that children be given access to school-based counseling services.

### World Federation for Mental Health

In 1992, the World Federation for Mental Health introduced its first "World Mental Health Day". This day is a time for reflection and action to support mental health across the world, and in 2018 the theme was "Mental Health in a Changing World". It brought awareness to the issues within mental health arising with digital technologies, and inspired a lot of global change into the area. The awareness they raised led to an increased understanding of the harms of mental illness. Schools began psychosocial

support, for example, and parents began trying to learn how to help their children when they felt that something was wrong.

## **UN CSTD**

The UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) is a part of the ECOSOC committee, and it deals with issues relating to social media. While very few of its resolutions specifically deal with ways to prevent the harms of social media on mental health, they do recognize the problems that come with digital technologies, and want to work towards a way to improve them.

## **UN WHO**

The World Health Organization plays an important role in this issue. The WHO recognizes the severity of mental health, and with the recent pandemic, has made statements expressing their concerns on social media. This has raised awareness of the issue and spurred many countries to improve the mental health within their countries and try to prevent digital technology addiction.

## **The UN Office of Information and Communications Technology**

The OICT's goal is to work towards creating a better, safer, and more sustainable future through innovative technology. Their work and goals align well with social media, and they could become an important way for countries across the world to agree on social media regulations.

## Timeline of Events

### **The early 1980s**

In the early 1980s, enhanced fiber optics allowed us to begin developing digital communication networks. Digital technology began to replace analog signals for many ways of communication, such as cellular telephones and cable systems. The laptop computer was born, with a screen barely bigger than a matchbox.

### **1989**

In 1989, the World Wide Web was invented. However, only 0.05% of people were actually using the internet.

### **The early 1990s**

By 1992, commercial dial up internet became available. The first smartphone was released in 1994, with calls, email, and fax.

### **The late 1990s**

The first modern social media site, called Six Degrees, was launched in 1997.

In 1998, the US began commercial digital television broadcasts. This involved the use of direct broadcast satellites (DBS) that transmitted compressed digital signals for viewers to receive many different programs on TV. Satellites also were used for audio programs.

### **The early 2000s**

In the early 2000s, digital devices became more common. Computers came in many sizes and performed various tasks. There were supercomputers that could perform complex mathematical calculations and analyze vast amounts of data. Digital images were created, as well as disks to store digital information. Digital cameras had transformed technology. Skype launches, connecting people all around the world.

- 2004** In 2004, Facebook was born, beginning the age of social media. YouTube became popular a year later, and the first iPhone was launched in 2007. Phone usage began to explore. Also in 2007, Twitter was released.
- 2010** In 2010, Apple launched the iPad, bringing tablets into the mainstream. This same year, Instagram was first released as Burbn. A year later, Snapchat was released. Social media use began to surge, and with it, so did anxiety, depression, and self-harm, especially among teenagers.
- Present** In recent years, we have become more aware of the harms of social media on mental health. The legislation above has come into law, and we've been trying to curb its dangers ever since. The Facebook whistleblower in 2021 helped bring to light the lack of transparency of social media platforms.

## Relevant UN Treaties/Resolutions

While the UN has not written or passed many resolutions on this specific issue, they have addressed the issue in less direct ways quite a few times.

### [A/HRC/RES/32/18](#)

The UN Human Rights Council stated in their resolution in July of 2016 that mental health is a human right. It also states that a human rights perspective should be taken when dealing with mental health services. This means that all countries should be considering the human rights associated with mental health as they debate this topic.

### [E/CN.5/2021/L.4](#)

In this resolution passed by the Economic and Social Council in February of 2021, the UN recognizes the impact of covid-19 on our economy, society, and well-being. This includes mental health. In this way, delegates should

### [E/CN.5/2021/L.5](#)

This resolution both encourages the improvement of mental health as a human right and stresses the importance of updating regulations as digital technology improves. It also encourages nations to collaborate with other stakeholders to perform scientific research in technology and its effect on the individual, society, education, and health. They also ask that countries try to provide equal access to digital technologies for all, so that all can get the benefits that they bring. This would also include developed countries helping developing countries to obtain digital technologies.

## Previous Attempts to Solve Issue

So far, governments addressed this issue through making a range of various laws and recommendations. For example, the UK has begun reviewing current knowledge on mental effects of digital technologies. They also have created their “Digital 5 a Day” framework to help children be safe online. This framework allows for children to maintain relationships and be creative, yet encourages children to switch off their devices after a while, even if the apps are trying to get them to engage. The UK has also called for additional tax on the profits of social media companies to combat the negative effects it has on young people’s minds, and they’ve created a code of conduct for social media platforms in their company

In Germany, they encourage parents to educate their children on the risks of online behaviors. France passed a law in 2018 that prohibited students as old as 15 from bringing smartphones and/or tablets to school. The aim of this law was to protect children and adolescents. They also passed a law that required companies to draft rules limiting work emails and work-related technology outside of the office, to reduce stress and support the “right to disconnect”. Japanese legislation has funded and increased appropriate internet use, and has promoted internet filtering and monitoring to parents. Korea has prohibited children from playing online games that require a resident registration number between midnight and 6AM without having parental permission. The US has taken a different approach, suing Facebook and investigating Facebooks’ data to see how the social media platform has been wrong its users.

Also, as mentioned above, the OECD has made a wide range of recommendations to governments in an attempt to mitigate the risks that digital technologies pose to young children.

Some social media platforms have been making efforts to mitigate the potential dangers they prevent - for example, Facebook has started a Bullying Prevention Hub. While this has by no means made social media platforms more transparent and less harmful, it is a step in the right direction.

## Possible Solutions

There are many possible solutions to this issue.

Firstly, moderating use could be used to restrict the amount of hours a person spends on his/her device. In this way, people would be forced to spend more time focusing on important aspects of their life that they neglect during addiction to their device - such as spending time with family, working, and doing physical exercise. However, this is difficult to enforce and could be seen as a potential risk to human rights.

It would also help to address these issues at school. Many countries already have this in place, and it's been shown to be effective. By educating children about how to be safe online, we can avoid many risks that digital technologies present - such as data hacking and cyberbullying.

Another possible solution would be increasing transparency of social media platforms. Recent events, such as the Facebook whistle blower, have brought to light the lack of transparency in this field. Many social media platforms have known about the harms they cause to their users, yet have kept silent to keep earning money. If this information were to be made public, and social media companies made to become more transparent and held accountable, users might see the danger within these platforms. It could also help to create codes of conduct (or establish stricter rules) with social media companies to help reduce the harms and dangers that social media presents.

Another important part of solving this issue is increasing research efforts in the area. Since digital technologies are a relatively recent phenomenon, there is still much more to know about its impact on our mental health, especially in children. We could use the knowledge gained from research to better design and change social media platforms and laws, so that its negative impacts on mental health are lessened.

Digital technologies are inevitably going to be a large part of our world in the future. It's our job to ensure that it is used for good, and that its dangers are minimized as much as possible.

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