

Culture Report 2018

**YOUTH
UNLIMITED**
TORONTO YFC

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"GROWING UP IN THE SMARTPHONE GENERATION"

Persuasive Technology: Looking Behind The Curtain



BY PAUL ROBERTSON
YOUTH CULTURE SPECIALIST (YU)

The father approached me at break; I was only halfway through my presentation on smartphones. With head down and eyes filled with tears, he began with what has become an all too common story for me. His 15-year-old son was addicted to online gaming and he didn't know what to do. As a father he felt like a failure; nothing seemed to curb his son's appetite for screens. Just like so many of the parents I've talked to this year, something is happening to their kids and they feel helpless to fix it.

It seems that a lot of adults have little to no understanding of why these screens have such influence over their kids. The answer is what's known as "persuasive technology" or "persuasive design", and it makes it almost impossible for kids not to get addicted. The goal of this technology is deliberately creating digital

situations that users feel fulfill their basic human drives even better than their real-world alternatives.

Persuasive technology is an intentional design strategy in which digital machines (smartphones, computers, iPads, iPods) and apps (Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Tumblr, Kik) are configured to alter human thoughts and behaviours. Screens and machines that now change what people think and do all for the purpose of exploiting kids for profit.

For girls, the basic drive is to be social, have friends, and avoid being rejected on social media. Social media uses persuasive design to prey on this desire to socially successful. Apps are driven by notifications surrounding "likes", retweets, reposts, comments on their great selfies, and long threads

on Snapchat. Girls can spend endless hours perfecting their "cyber" self – the picture that stays online 24/7 waiting for people to comment, and hopefully like; and they can be devastated by even one negative comment.

For guys, the basic drive is to accomplish something and gain a sense of competency. Video games have convinced our boys, better than anything else in our culture, that this is place to be rewarded for online skills. Boys are wired to want to master their environment and the rewards come second by second as they rack up points in an endless array of online games.

Cyber space makes life fun, stimulating and kids genuinely feel it makes them happy and successful. However, the latest research is showing that kids who spend more than 2 hours per day online tend to be more unhappy overall. Finding fulfilment online becomes so exciting that kids will lock themselves in a room, ignore the demands of school (so boring compared to screens), drop conversations with their own family, develop sleep disorders, and basically turn their back on

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life in the real world.

And who can blame them? Reality is a lot of work, risky, and scary - given you have to talk directly to people. It's no wonder that persuasive technology is creating addictive behaviours in underdeveloped young brains that thrive on new information and situations. They have been captured by digital machines and apps that demand attention, compelling them to return again and again, and ultimately grow the bottom line for multi-million dollar companies who have little consideration for what is happening to their young customers. ■

Finding Themselves: Why Trading Face-To-Face For Online Interactions Is Hurting Our Teens



BY MARIANNE DEEKS
YOUTH CULTURE SPECIALIST (YU)

Most teen girls can quickly explain the role social media plays in their lives. In a study done by the Pew Research Center, 95% of teens report they have a smartphone or access to one. Due to this accessibility, 45% of teens admit having a near-constant online presence (pewinternet.org). The arrival of the smartphone radically changed every aspect of teenagers lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health. According to Mary Aiken (author of *The Cyber Effect*), the goal of every young person is to discover who the “self” is, both positive and negative. Prior to the smartphone, this was accomplished through face to face interactions, allowing an individual to read social subtleties and learning that people don’t always mean what they say. Critical thinking is traditionally developed through these interactions. However, this has all changed. These formative face-to-face interactions have largely been replaced with emojis and gifs.

It is not uncommon for teens to have between 700-1000 friends/followers on their online personas. The feedback

from this online community can be incredibly important but also very confusing and unsettling. A study conducted by the National Institute on Drug Abuse shows that teens who spend more time than average on screen-related activities are more likely to be unhappy than their peers who engage in activities that involve interacting with people in real life.

Girls aged 10-15 are on social media more than other adolescents; which is significantly shaping their self perception. Whenever I talk with girls of this age group, they will readily admit that the feedback they receive from their online community impacts how they feel about themselves. For example, if a picture is posted on Instagram, and it does not receive the desirable amount of ‘likes’, they will simply remove it.

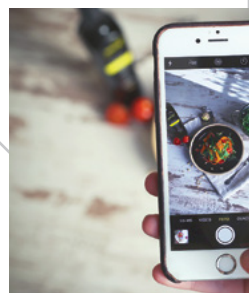
FOMO (fear of missing out) is another impulse, which can be devastating for a teen who is trying to figure out their identity and their place in their social environment and so feels the need to be constantly tapped in to the unending online activity of their friends list. Because social media is the platform to display the ‘perfect’

life, when a young person misses out on an event, it can be difficult to process. It’s no surprise that mental health issues such as anxiety and depression in teenagers have rapidly increased over the past decade.

As parents and loving adults, it is essential to encourage our teens to engage in face-to-

face interactions with people; asking questions about their world and supporting them in hobbies or activities allows them to create a health sense of self which they can take with them in adulthood. These are formative interactions that cannot be replaced by online connectivity. ■

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Holding Out for Authenticity



BY ALEX STREET

LAUNCH (YU) / YOUNG ADULTS CHAMPION (THE MEETING HOUSE)

“We don’t just want your attention, we want you to be authentic!”

I had been doing some research on Young Adult Ministry in the church and this sentence, proclaimed by a young adult with conviction in his voice, clarified everything for me. Youth and Young Adults today want authentic relationships. Unfortunately, this is a rare commodity in a world thriving on attention rather than authenticity.

To understand that, let’s take a closer look at the journey of someone in Generation Z. These are today’s youth - born between 1995-2010, 8-22 years old currently. They make up about 15% of Canada, and 26% of the U.S.’ population. They are often referred to as the “iGeneration”, “Digital Natives”, or, my personal favourite, “Screenagers”. For this generation, smartphones have existed for almost their entire lives, they spend an average of 4 hours a day in front of a screen, and they are growing up in a world in which most of the people around them are doing the same thing. Which simply means Gen Z came of age feeling connected to a world that they have fight for attention in; not just on their social media profiles - working for likes, comments, shares and reposts - but at the dinner table, in the living room, out with their friends, or in the cafeteria. It’s no wonder we think all they want is our attention.

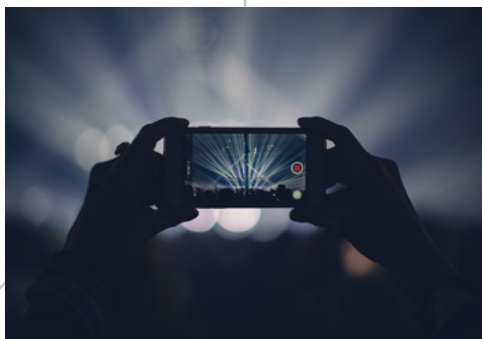
Consider how it feels when you’re talking with someone and they hear the ping of a text/email/notification, and their attention moves away from you for even just a second. It’s not the fact that you lost their attention that hurts, it’s the loss of authenticity in that moment - are you here with me, or are you there with them? Do you even see me?

I’m finding that although it may seem like today’s teens are striving for attention at any cost, they are really seeking out authenticity. They are desperate for someone to see them and help them see. When Jesus was walking through the streets there were hundreds of people crowding around him. I

can almost hear the the people shouting, “Jesus! Teacher! Rabbi!! Look here, come here!” In one particular story a woman reached out from the crowd and touched just the hem of his robe and was then healed of her 12-year-sickness. Jesus could have kept moving, but instead he stopped, looked at her, called her ‘daughter’ and gave her courage to live in new freedom. There is a profound difference between attention and authenticity; and Jesus didn’t just give people attention, he shared authentic relational space with them.

When I asked one Young Adult recently what he meant by authentic relationship he compared it to Punk vs Pop music. Top 40 pop music is catchy and has something to offer, but it’s made to make money. Punk music is grungy, rough, messy, and can’t be manufactured or it has lost its very essence. It’s made to express something. In a world of young people seeking authenticity, we are left wondering how to deliver what they need when it can’t be reduced to an event, a program, or an app.

Our response to this culture requires two steps, which we can discern in the way of Jesus; pausing and then seeing. First, pause; stop what you’re doing, put down your phone for long enough to listen. Then see; tell them what you see, and encourage them to step forward in confidence. In a world of addictions, apps, and attention-seeking, may you become one of the few authentic people in a teenager’s life. ■



“WE DON’T JUST WANT YOUR ATTENTION, WE WANT YOU TO BE AUTHENTIC!”

Case Study: Smartphone Use & Its Impact On Involvement In DOXA Programming



BY JEFF SMYTH & THE DOXA TEAM

HOW HAS TEEN INVOLVEMENT/ ENGAGEMENT TOWARDS DOXA PROGRAMMING SHIFTED AS A RESULT OF SMARTPHONE NORMALIZATION?

It is a mixed bag. It has created an instant access to teens lives. The wide access use of Bibles and reading plans on smartphones is excellent and helpful, teens have very easy access to good Biblical teaching on their phones and it creates a whole world of new games to interact with them. On the other hand it has become a distraction. Too many teens are unhealthily attached to their smartphones. The alienating nature of nonverbal communication through text and social media has increased conflict and anxiety among teens. There are also issues where teens are accessing damaging content online on a regular basis through their phones.

WHAT POTENTIAL MINISTRY OPPORTUNITIES HAVE ARISEN AS A RESULT OF SMARTPHONE USE?

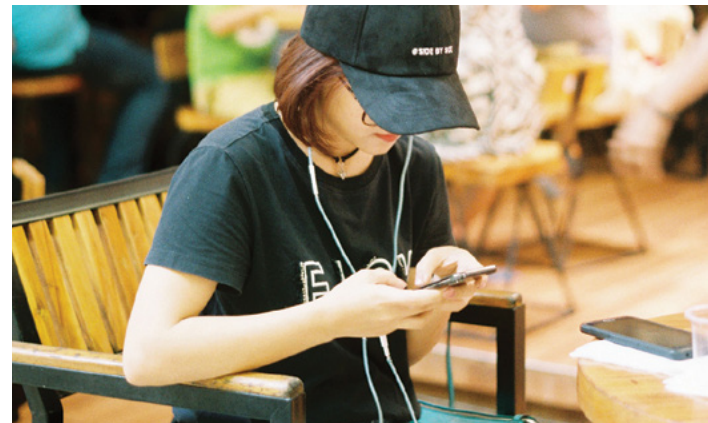
Group games and polls which involve smartphones. Teens are downloading programs like youversion (The Bible) and working through reading plans. They can also be directed to sermons, blog posts, scripture and so much more. The fact that most teens have their own phone allows for direct voice contact which is an important cornerstone of building healthy relationships in my ministry.

HOW THIS HAS SHIFTED HOW TEENS CONNECT WITH YOUR GROUPS SOCIALLY (WHERE PREVIOUSLY THIS REQUIRED PHYSICAL PRESENCE)?

Many of these issues are well documented. One that we deal with regularly is that people without context of tone often misunderstand text messages or posted on social media. It can create grudges, disconnection and anger with even innocent communications.

WHAT CHANGES IN ATTITUDE/ BEHAVIOUR HAVE YOU NOTICED THAT YOU WOULD LINK TO SMARTPHONE NORMALIZATION?

Lower EQ and social skills, anxiety is increased, teens sleep patterns has become even worse than ever because they will not turn their phones off beside their beds. Teens have much more agency in whether they engage in a social situation or not and unfortunately often choose to disengage. It also feeds their curiosity to learn new things because answers are so easy to find. ■



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