

Issues of research use in everyday media



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Exploring the Translation of Research for Everyday Life

Summary of Original Study

The study of *Association of Screen Time and Depression in Adolescence* (Boers, Afzali, Newton & Conrod, 2019) had zero reported conflicts of interest, and funding and support was provided by the Canadian institutes of Health Research and Fonds de la recherche en sante. The funders and sponsors had zero role in the design and conduct of the study, approval and/or submission of the manuscript.

The purpose of Boers, Afzali, Newton & Conrod (2019) study was to investigate the association of various types of screen time and depression in youth. The purpose is clearly stated in the Abstract and Introduction. The investigation has two primary aims. The first is to bridge the gap in research, as there is currently a lack of studies which longitudinally investigate the association between various types of screen time and depression. Pre-existing research has utilized a cross-sectional association or pre/post differences. The authors argue that these methods have limitations, for example they do not allow within person inferences as they do not account for developmental changes or underlying vulnerabilities of participants. The second aim of this study is to utilize three media effect theories: 1) Displacement hypothesis, 2) Upward social comparison, and 3) Reinforcing spirals.

Boers, Afzali, Newton & Conrod (2019) chose a randomized clinical trial as their method, as a way to perform a secondary analysis assessing a four year efficacy of a personality- targeted drug and alcohol prevention

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intervention. It remains unclear throughout the study what the personality-targeted drug and alcohol prevention intervention entails, and requires further inquiry. The study assessed screen time and depression over a four year span, utilizing an annual survey for youth entering grade seven, spanning until grade eleven across thirty-one schools in the Greater Montreal area. The critique about the populations is that there might be confounding variables within. For example, youth ages 12-16 are undergoing developmental changes such as puberty, and maturation could pose as a threat to the internal validity. Additional threats to validity could be the passage of time as well as experimental attrition. In terms of the passage of time, factors including technological advances from the years 2012-2016 could impact the quantity and/or quality of screen time. Furthermore, a student who begins the experiment in grade 7 might not have the same access to technology and screen time as they do in grade 11.

Experimental attrition might occur from students dropping out of the study, as well as incoming students being included in the study. A critique of the authors is that they do not state if and/or how these variables were accounted for.

To briefly summarize the results, the study established a significant between-person associations showed that for every increased hour spent using social media, a significant within-person associations revealed that a further 1-hour increase in social media use in a given year was associated with a further increase in depressive symptoms in that same year, a significant between-person and within-person associations between screen

time and exercise and self-esteem supported upward social comparison and not displacement hypothesis. Furthermore, a significant interaction between the between-person and within-person associations concerning social media and self-esteem supported reinforcing spirals hypothesis (Boers, Afzali, Newton & Conrod, 2019). Because this is the first longitudinal study performed that queried the association of various types of screen time and depression in youth, it does bare potential significant meaning for both clinical practice and public knowledge.

Boers, Afzali, Newton & Conrod (2019) offer that a strength of their study was utilizing a large sample size to determine association between screen time and depression. The authors offered two primary limitations to their study including: a lack of differentiation between the types of social medias and television that could be associated with depression, and, although measurement scales are reliable, the results may differ within a clinical setting. In the review of the conclusion, the authors state “ This study indicated that adolescents’ social media and use should be regulated to prevent the development of depression and to reduce exacerbation of existing symptoms television over time” (Boers, Afzali, Newton & Conrod, 2019, pg. 858). The above statement can be inferred as a recommendation made by the authors, however, it is the only recommendation which is made in summarizing the findings. The recommendation is not explicitly stated and the recommendation section remains incomplete, and the authors fail to make any additional recommendations based on other variables such as self-esteem, exercise

and sociodemographic, in relation to the three media effect theories in which they were evaluating.

Thus the recommendation section is inconclusive.

Translation of Research to the Press

The popular press article titled *Social Media, but not video games, linked to depression in teens, according to Montreal study* (CBC, 2019) which originated from the research of Boers, Afzali, Newton & Conrod (2019), requires critical and thoughtful considerations regarding its implications. To begin, the title elicits a message that the study solely concentrated on the comparison of video games, social media, and depression, while missing additional variables that were included within the study, including: sociodemographics, quantity of screen time, symptoms of depression, self-esteem and exercise. Not only could this title be misleading to its audience, it could create and maintain a confirmation bias amongst readers regarding the association between videogames, social media and depression.

Furthermore, the statement “ high levels of screen time-spent on social media and television in particular- are linked to symptoms of depression, a new study suggests” (CBC, 2019) can be misinterpreted as screen times *causes*

symptoms of depression, when the original study was merely looking for association. There were however statements that implied that the study was looking for association, as opposed to causation, as made evident by the statement “...investigated the relationship between depression and exposure to different forms of screen time in adolescents” (CBC, 2019). The term

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relationship which is used in the statement is appropriate to describe the association that was explored. Another statement that could be re-phrased is “ Conrod and her team found an increase in depressive symptoms...” (CBC, 2019). The word “ found” can be misinterpreted as causation. Although language can be quite nuanced, it is critical for popular press to accurately portray whether a study is looking at causation or association, as these have implications for how the content is interpreted by the readers.

Furthermore, the CBC (2019) article makes inferences that social media platforms such as Instagram, are linked to symptoms of depression. However, the original study does not use Instagram as a specific variable, more specifically, it uses “ Facebook, twitter, and other social medias” Boers, Afzali, Newton & Conrod (2019). This inference made by the popular press article is therefore a falsification of information. While there are some inaccurate translations within the CBC article, there are also accurate translations. For example, according to Boers, Afzali, Newton & Conrod (2019), the most important finding was that increased social media and televisions were associated with lower self-esteem over time. This was accurately depicted in the CBC article under the headline Low Self-Esteem in the statement: “ The study found that of all the forms of screen time, consuming social media can be the most harmful.” Although the CBC (2019) article does minimize the research as a whole, it does succinctly deliver the message of the original research with minimal misinterpretations.

Critical Discussion of Research Implications

The implications for the public's construction of knowledge based on exposure to the popular press is profound. The popular press acts as a conduit of information; summarizing, articulating and translating what are often complex topics of discussion into succinct, short and digestible pieces of information. Information in popular press is appealing to its audience members as it is often a cheap and quick way of accessing what is thought to be up-to-date information from quality sources. Gambrill (2010) contests that propaganda is an integral part of society and media, and refers to the supporting of beliefs and attitudes with little consideration for critical thinking and/or critical appraisal of the original sources and evidence. Propaganda can easily become the dominant narrative within societies because the knowledge and information that is delivered is easily accessible to its audience members. With regards to the helping professions, media can inflate claims of knowledge, including: inaccurate portrayal of the effectiveness of certain products, services and interventions, accurate portrayal of the problem and/or risk, claims regarding the origins of concerns, claims about the competence of professionals and the disregard for the research processes including assessment methods, strengths and limitations (Gambrill, 2010).

For example, while the CBC (2019) portrays a relatively consistent and accurate portrayal of the research disseminated, it fails to inform its audience members that the original study sought to measure sociodemographic, symptoms of depression, screen time, self-esteem and exercise in conjunction with the three media effect theories of 1) Displacement hypothesis,

2) Upward social comparison, 3) Reinforcing spirals. Audience members reading the CBC (2019) article aren't sufficiently made aware of all the variables that were looked at in the study. Furthermore, while the article does mention upward social comparison and reinforcing spirals, it does not provide an explanation for what these theories entail, giving it little meaning to the reader. Additionally, the original study disproved the displacement hypothesis, which has no mention in the article itself. This is an example of how media can minimize and oversimplify the knowledge that results from research.

When being a critical consumer of information, it is also important to note where the source is coming from, and to be knowledgeable that different popular press carries different amount of weight in terms of credibility. For example, CBC carries a considerable amount of weight compared to other sources of information such as People Magazines, social media articles, etc. This is because CBC is more strictly regulated, and the information being dispersed is more heavily monitored. Despite the standard in which CBC is held to, information can be minimized for publication purposes. Furthermore, it is important to note that this study took place in Montreal, Quebec. Quebec is not a conclusive representation of Canada as a whole, and varies in politics, economics, social and cultural affairs. All of these variables can shape the outcomes of research, thus this research should not be a representative of adolescents across Canada.

The roles and responsibilities for popular press writers, researchers and practitioners in translating research is multi-faceted. First, it is the role of the

researcher to produce research which is absent of fatal flaws, based on the ethical standards for research. It is then up to researchers to accurately disseminate the knowledge that is found and review the research as needed. Second, it is the role of popular press writers to utilize the most up to date literature, and to be able to accurately disseminate the research into more layman's terms for publication in popular press articles. Furthermore, popular press writers should seek consultation for clarification when necessary, and when possible, consult with the authors of the original studies.

Third, it is the responsibility of social work practitioners to be able to disseminate both original research and popular press articles. Gambrill (2010) notes that the helping professions have political, social and economic interests, which are enmeshed with defining problems and solutions. For example, the research processes for cognitive behavioural therapy has recently posed questions in validity as a result of the inclusion and exclusion criteria for research, as well as the brief timelines for randomized control trials (RCT's). More specifically, Rasmussen (2018) draws parallels between the limitations of the research process and the lack of representation of racial and ethnic minorities. It is important to know strengths and limitations of research prior to applying them. Helping professions act as agents of social control, and have large input into shaping the dominant narratives within society. Thus social workers have an ethical responsibility to portray information which is accurate and truthful. According to CASW (2005), it is the responsibility of the social worker to maintain professional proficiency,

through increasing professional knowledge and skills while utilizing the best evidence based practice.

Practitioners must be able to critically appraise research, and then succinctly communicate that research to clients being served. Overall, it is the role and responsibility of practitioners, researchers, and press writers alike to translate and uncover reasonable limitations and fatal flaws (Rubin et al., 2012).

Participating in the comparison of original research to popular press articles has offered an insightful experience, in which three primary points related to learnings will be discussed.

1. Oversimplification in Popular Press: While popular press offers an easy to read, condensed version of relevant research, the overall findings can be oversimplified. As discussed earlier, while this particular CBC article did not falsify any information, it did leave out a considerable amount of data which was relevant to how the research was conducted, as well as how the results were obtained. While having all of this information is not conducive to creating summaries of research which are more succinct with readers, it is valuable to have an understanding that with every article that is published, there is often information that goes unreported in popular press articles.

2. Importance of Popular Press: While popular press can oversimplify original studies, it still has merit in being able to provide an abundance of information to the mass public. For the majority of the public, popular press articles are the golden standard for the distribution of

knowledge. Most people do not have access to libraries of recent and/or relevant research, and there is a reliance on the popular press articles for producing and publishing information which can be easily interpreted by people who cannot access original research for various reason.

3. Necessity to Merge Research and Popular Press: The ability to disseminate original research and to be critical consumers of research is vital for social workers. Within the clinical setting, clients which we work with might bring in pieces of popular press which they might find interesting and/or meaningful. It is the responsibility of a social worker to be able to determine the validity of the popular press articles, and provide clients with information that might be more accurate. Doing this activity solidifies the fact that social workers must be able to access original research, engage with evidence based practice, while simultaneously understanding the client's background, and work within a scope of the clinician's knowledge.

Research Methods Assessment

The capacity to be able to critically appraise both research and popular press articles is imperative for social workers. Critical appraisal for this particular research and pop press article

required the strengthening and acquisition of new skills and knowledge. To understand the pop press article, it was necessary to become familiarized with the original research, more specifically, how that research was conducted and the strengths and limitations of the methods that were chosen. The authors chose a quantitative methods design which places an

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increased emphasis on producing precise and objective findings which can be generalized to broader populations that are geared towards testing hypotheses about whether predicted causes can produce predicted outcomes (Rubin & Bellamy, 2012). This was a correlation study, which does rank lower on the research hierarchy, however, the larger sample size creates more validity (Rubin & Bellamy, 2012); having a large sample size of 3827 participants (47% female, 53% male) in conjunction with utilizing a randomized clinical trial means that selectivity bias was reduced. Additionally, despite the strength of having a large sample size, Rubin & Bellamy, (2012) posit that having a sample that is too large can create results which are trivial from a practical standpoint. The choice of a correlation study which relies on statistical associations can yield preliminary evidence, however the associations are only preliminary as correlation does not denote causation (Rubin & Bellamy, 2012).

Additional knowledge is required to be able to better discern reasonable limitations from fatal flaws, being able to better interpret the data which is portrayed in the analyses section, and having a more comprehensive understanding for how recruitment process happen, the validity of the scales that were utilized, and the application of this particular research to clinical practice.

The above is only a short list of areas that are in need of improvement. It is imperative for social work practitioners to be able to discern what research best applies to the populations in which they serve, and how research and evidence based practice can support a more ethical practice.

Research has the power to shape and influence dominant discourse, and as a social work

practitioner it is imperative to be able to critically appraise both the strengths and the limitations of research in order to better support clients being served.

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