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| 2

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UNWANTED BEHAVIOUR AMONG YOUTH: INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Mateja Rek¹

| 123

Abstract

In many cases of unwanted behaviour that we analysed (for instance in case of cheating on school tests, beating, being bullied, conflicts with parents, gambling, intentionally damaging or destroying property) we found a statistically significant effect of the extent of digital media use on incidence of such behaviour. Youth, who are large digital media users, behave in such socially unwanted ways more often compared to smaller media users. A dominant share of youth isn't involved in violent behaviour or vandalism at all. However, the incidence of violence or vandalism in the large media users group is significantly higher compared to low and medium users group.

Key words: youth, digital media, media effects, unwanted behavior

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Introduction

The public discourse on youth and media is continuously marked by concerns. The concerns as well research interests are often related to media violence and its effects on children and youth (Anderson et al., 2003; Kirsh, 2012), how often and to what ends youth use media and what effects does the media consumption have on their psychological development (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel, 2011; Calvert and Wilson, 2011), learning abilities (Dunkels et al., 2011), health issues (physical activity, obesity, sleeping habits) (WHO, 2010; Stansburger et. al, 2010), self-perception and interpersonal relationships (Andsager and White, 2009), the development of unwanted behaviours (such as alcohol drinking or smoking) (Anderson et al., 2009; Wakefield et al., 2003) and so on. Discussions on these issues are frequently accompanied by pessimistic forecasts.

The purpose of this article is to explore the influence of digital media consumption on incidence of unwanted behaviour in youth. We use research results of a survey conducted on national representative sample of high school students (aged 15 to 18 years) in Slovenia in 2015 (Rek and Malinovski Brumat, 2016) to explore the relationship between the extent of digital media consumption and unwanted behaviour among youth. We analyse incidence of various types of unwanted behaviour, including: cheating at school tests, stealing, fighting, bullying, conflicts with parents, gambling, skipping classes, destroying property. We present data on occurrence of these types of unwanted behaviour and relate it to digital media consumption of youth. We show that in many cases of analysed unwanted behaviour a dominant share of youth isn't involved in such a behaviour at all. However, there is a higher incidence of unwanted behaviour in case of youth who are large digital media users, compared to medium and low digital media users. The interpretation of the analysis results is made using theoretical frameworks of Frankfurt school, American empirical school and Theory on late modernity.

The media effects debate

Discussions on the influence of mass media were, from the outset accompanied by pessimistic forecasts. Already at the end of the 18th century, when, in processes of industrialization and urbanisation first forms of urban commercial culture and mass markets began to develop, many intellectuals supported a general belief that these phenomena threaten the traditional cultural values and community. The circumstances of people living in incoherent mass urban communities were clearly different from closely knit, tightly connected communities and in this context traditional authorities of sense-making were also

faced with new phenomenon of developing media that could reach and influence masses. A similar type of discussion was reopened at the end of the 19th century with the emergence of film and radio, and continued in the early twenties of the last century, when it was anchored in the framework of the Frankfurt School.

Horkheimer and Adorno (2007) argued that the culture of mass societies is a subsidiary of industry. In the framework of critical theory contemporary culture can be seen as nothing more than business, it is in the service of socio-economic system, being shaped by dominant elites. They prefer to use the term of culture industry over mass culture to signify that these processes didn't develop spontaneously within masses themselves but are facilitated by industry and economy and are subjects of interests of economic and political elites. They perceive audience as passive recipients. Cultural industries rely on standardisation, similarity and repetition of products and social actions even though it claims to promote individualisation, but instead creates pseudo-individualisation, which deceives individuals into believing that they in some way have choices. The main task of the cultural industry is to create false needs among the people in order for its products to be sold and bring actors involved profit. On the other hand, this industry also has to adapt to the needs of people. This creates a vicious circle of imaginary and real needs at the heart of it, all aiming at the reproduction of the existing system and social relations. Cultural industry promotes entertainment and exhibits the art of relaxation. It accommodates the free time that people have after the mechanized work process is finished. By valuing entertainment and relaxation, it presents itself as an opposition to the work processes, which requires certain efforts. Effortless, entertaining and relaxed consumption of free time lives little space for reflexion processes of people, which fosters passivity. As mass media communication plays an ever expanding role in social life, socialisation and culture, this form of communication can be seen as an increasingly important instrument of power and social control.

Katz and Lazarsfeld (2005) on the other hand argued that the mass media messages are much less influence than an informal, personal communication. They argued that the response of an individual to media messages cannot be accounted for without reference to his social environment and to the character of his interpersonal relations. They imply that there are consequences for the transmission of communications: first, in the mere frequency of association with peers; second, in association with others who share a particular norm or standard; third, in being a member of a groups which supplements and reinforces the mass media message; fourth, in belonging to a social

group which has “hooked up” a human communications system of its own with that of the mass media; and finally, in being “near” enough to an appropriate social outlet to give expression to a motivated social action (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955: 29). In their view, media substantially expand and reinforce those messages whose values and norms are already part of the generally accepted normative consensus in a society. Since the normative consensus is seen as a positive concept, media messaging and their effects are also described as positive and benign. The media should, therefore, despite its openness to influences of the market, operate in favour of the society, because it strengthens the core value system that holds society together, while also enabling pluralism. Mass media are seen as a space of creating consensus about the core values in diverse, pluralist societies, even though Katz and Lazarsfeld never did explain in detail these processes of mass mediated core values creation.

Societies as well as mass media, their presence and role in societies and everyday lives of people, have changed significantly since Horkheimer, Adorno, Lazarsfeld and Katz were theoretically or empirically framing their arguments on the effects of mass media on their audiences. Grand institutions (such as family, community, national state) which relieve individuals from everyday reflections about the world and their orientation in it by offering them common-sense interpretations of normality and which supply them with reliable patterns of behaviour (Berger and Luckmann, 1999) are nowadays even more confronted with competing reference frameworks. They are faced with increasingly diversified, liquid (Bauman, 2001), atomized masses of mass media generated fragmented publics and flexible and fluid social networks of relations (physical and virtual) that are marked by a different quality of interpersonal ties. As massiveness, reaching beyond the physical limitations of space (Sennet, 2008) is becoming an icon of late modernity (Giddens, 1999), the exclusiveness of the attachment to the community or the nation-state is losing its authority.

Accessible ICT and virtualization enables smooth communication and what is especially important - continuous movement of information, ideas and value judgements through means of mass communication virtually anywhere in the world. There is an increasing amount of ideas and modes of behaviour accessible to people worldwide which are not grounded in signifiers or symbols, that would encourage and promote the membership to a particular grand institution and preserve its norms and values, but form a new set of fragmented affiliations.

Masses are not unified categories. They are social entities characterized by diversity and diversifications. Mass media (and their agenda setters) as the most common means of symbolic reproduction of masses even encourage such features by creating specific target audiences, which are characterized by different lifestyles and are fairly successful in creating new group affiliation between people that go beyond the physical and semantic spaces shaped by the more traditional grand institutions. The resulting groups of lifestyles have another important characteristic: they are rarely permanent. They don't limit the individuals in terms of their continued commitment but give them the appearance of freedom to choose and act according to "contemporary trends", which paradoxically do not depend directly on individuals' own will. Such constructed, dynamic groups within the masses of people do not provide individuals with long-term, solid frameworks that would sustainably guide their judgments and make sense of life situations (Atkins, 2012; Bjereld, 2009).

The task of reflexivity is being shifted onto the shoulders of the individual, becoming a part of his or her everyday practice. This means that individuals also bear the uncertainty of their decisions. The individual him/her-self becomes a reproductive unit of social life and the world (Beck, 1992). But this situation is paradoxical, because at the same time he/she is taking "responsibility" for his/her own life decisions, while also being increasingly depended on the situations and conditions, which are beyond his/hers reach, which are happening in the mass, on (global) markets and an individual is far from being able to control or resolve. He/she can only adapt. The choices and decisions individual makes are neither easy nor permanent also due to the pluralism of possible models of life that are worth to emulate (Habermas, 2005). With the accelerating speed of social change, the applicability of these models become shorter. In such circumstances of liquidity (Baumann, 2007) an important virtue of individuals as well as other individual players in a global scene is not a lasting conformity, but flexibility. With an increasing pace of social and technological change, with the development of increasingly diversified types of mass media, growing virtualisation of social interactions (as opposed too physical social interactions) the impact of mass media on masses or individuals remains a very current as well as contested issue also in contemporary late-modern societies.

When researching the media impact scientists generally correspond to two separate but overlapping issues, namely: a) how much time people spend consuming the media and b.) what kind of media messages they are exposed to and how. In our attempt to determine the effects of

media consumption on unwanted behaviour among youth, we will rely on empirical evidence gathered regarding time spent using the digital media (TV, computer/tablet, mobile phone, video games consoles), while evidence relating to media content they are exposed to will be limited to the issue of entertaining content consumption, with special focus on violent content consumption and the use of media for learning and other work purposes.

Effects of time spent using media on incidence of unwanted behaviour

The data on the incidence of various types of unwanted behaviour that was selected for the analysis (cheating at school tests, stealing, fighting, bullying, conflicts with parents, online harassment, gambling, skipping classes, destroying property) was derived from a survey we conducted in 2015, collecting opinions of high school students in Slovenia (aged 15 to 19 years). The aim of the survey, conducted on a national representative sample, was to collect data on media habits of the youth, their ability to critically assess information, delinquency, vandalism in and outside of school, learning success, ability to concentrate and satisfaction with life. Data was collected using paper and online questionnaires. 818 highschool students participated in the survey. Their participation was anonymous, not involving a name or any identifiable information about subjects. Data was collected with the help of 37 highschools, evenly located in all geographical regions in Slovenia, covering approximately the distribution of rural and urban population in accordance to data of statistical office of Slovenia. Because more girls responded and participated in a survey, the data was weighted to improve the representativeness of the sample (the weight of boys was 1,50 for girls 0,758.). The data on incidence of unwanted behaviour is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Incidence of selected types of unwanted behaviour (in%)

How many times in the last years ... %	Almost every day	150 x	50 x	25 x	10 x	5 x	3 x	Once	Never
.. did you cheat on a school test?	3,8	1,8	3	6,2	11,3	13	15,3	16,7	27,9
... did you steal something?	0,9	0,2	0,5	0,5	2,2	0,8	2,5	7,3	84,2
... have you been involved in a fight?	0,7	0,3	0,3	1	2,5	2,1	3,2	8,2	81
... where you bullied?	0,6	0,7	0,9	1,1	2,9	2,2	5,4	10,1	73,7
... where you bullying others?	1,3	0,6	0,3	0,6	1,4	2	4,2	6,1	81,6
... did you have conflicts with your parents?	5	7,9	9,9	11,6	13,9	11,5	15,4	9,4	14,3
... did you gamble?	1,7	2,6	1,5	2,4	2,3	5,5	5,9	10,9	67,4
... unjustifiably missed classes?	1,05	1	2,7	3,8	7,3	8,6	10,6	15,1	49,1
... deliberately damaged or destroyed school property?	1,2	0,2	0,7	0,4	1,4	0,7	1,6	6,1	86,9
... deliberately damage or destroy any property that was not your property?	0,9	0,2	0,4	0,7	1	1,1	3,1	10,5	82,1

Source: own survey.

In most of the cases of unwanted behaviour that we gathered data on, a dominant share of youth isn't engaged in such behaviour at all. In such

cases actually realized unwanted behaviour refers to a smaller share of population on limited occasions. Exceptions are cheating at school tests and conflicts with parents, which are a more regular form of youth behaviour. Skipping classes is also relatively frequent activity, as only about half of the population never practiced it.

In the same survey we gathered data on the extent of digital media consumption, including daily time youth spend using digital media, like watching TV, video and films, using computer/tablet, mobile phones and video games consoles. On average Slovene high school students spend 102,92 minutes a day watching TV, videos and films, 136,21 minutes daily they use computers/ tablets, 204 minutes they spend using mobile phones and 59,62 video game consoles, which adds up to 8,4 hours of average daily screen exposure.

As there is variance in consumption of digital media we divided highschool students into three groups similar in numbers (border framework 33 and 66 percentiles): a.) large digital media users (more than 10 hours of daily exposure to the digital media, N = 251); b.) medium digital media users (between 6 and 10 hours' daily consumption of digital media, N = 242); c.) small digital media users (less then 6 hour daily digital media consumption, N = 313). If the student falls within the large digital media users group, he or she is on average exposed to the digital media (TV, computer/tablet, mobile phone, consoles) 3,6 times more than small media users, as it is evident from Table 2. On average large digital media users are exposed to digital media for 14,5 hours daily.

Table 2: Average daily time spent using digital media for small, medium and large digital media users (in minutes)

	Small	Medium	Large	All users on average
TV, video and films	56,15	97,08	166,32	102,92
computer/tablet	61,80	128,65	233,62	136,21
mobile phone	99,18	185,44	351,47	204,08
video games (console)	21,13	42,95	122,24	59,62
total	238,43	454,12	873,65	502,83

Source: own calculation.

For each group of digital media users, we calculated the incidence of unwanted behaviour listed in Table 1. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Incidence of selected types of unwanted behaviour (expressed in mean values) according to membership in small, medium and large digital media users group

How many times in the last year ...	Small	Medium	Large	Average
.. did you cheat on a school test?	9,86	27,67	30,61	21,63
... did you steal something?	0,86	5,32	7,57	4,29
... have you been involved in a fight?	0,69	4,26	7,68	3,94
... where you bullied?	2,03	4,00	9,26	4,85
... where you bullying others?	2,24	7,44	10,20	6,31
... did you have conflicts with your parents?	31,70	37,19	53,40	40,11
... did you gamble?	6,13	10,16	19,90	11,76
... unjustifiably missed classes?	8,63	8,62	14,99	10,61
... intentionally damaged or destroyed school property?	0,64	3,05	13,11	5,24
... intentionally damage or destroy any property that was not your property?	0,79	2,85	9,79	4,21

Source: own calculation.

As we wanted to learn, weather the extent of digital media consumption has a significant effect on discussed forms of unwanted behaviour, we used ANOVA to determining the existence of differences among group means. There was a significant difference among groups in following cases of unwanted behaviour:

- cheating on school tests, $F(2, 807) = 7,797, p = 0,000$
- beating, $F(2, 809) = 3,558, p < 0,05$
- beeing bullied, $F(2, 802) = 3,828, p < 0,05$
- conflicts with parents, $F(2, 808) = 5,198, p < 0,05$
- gambling, $F(2, 815) = 5,469, p < 0,05$
- intentionally damaging or destroying school property; $F(2, 809) = 7,900, p = 0,000$
- intentionally damaging or destroying any property that was not your property;
- $F(2, 815) = 5,246, p < 0,05$.

No statistically significant differences were found in cases of following types of unwanted behaviour:

- stealing, $F(2, 808) = 2,941, p > 0,05$
- bullying others, $F(2, 797) = 2,674, p > 0,05$
- unjustifiably missing classes, $F(2, 813) = 1,753, p > 0,05$.

Even though conflicts with parents seem to be quite a common feature of high school student's relationships to their parents as shown in the Table 1, the incidence of such conflicts increases in the large digital media users group. The same argument can be made in case of cheating at school tests. Large media users gamble more often and they are often bullied more, but interestingly no statistically significant difference too other two groups were found in case of bullying others. In cases of more violent behaviour, such as being involved in fights or cases of vandalism, like intentionally destroying school or other property, a dominant share of youth doesn't exhibit such a behaviour at all. However, the incidence of violence or vandalism in the large media users group is significantly higher compared to low and medium users group.

Do large digital media users consume more entertaining or violent content?

In our survey, high school students were asked to state their agreement (on a Likert scale 1-5, where 1 means completely disagree and 5 means completely agree) with a statement: I use media primarily for entertainment. The average for three groups analysed wasn't statistically significantly different (small users, M=2,97; medium users, M=3,19; large users, M=3,18). They were also asked to assess daily time spent using media for learning or other work. The mean values characteristic for each group of users are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Daily time spent using computer/tablet for learning or other work (mean values in minutes)

Daily time spent:	Small	Medium	Large	Average
using computer/tablet for learning or other work	52,06	73,51	117,41	78,69

Source: own calculation

Large media users spend significantly more time using computer or tablet for learning or other work. The difference is statistically significant at $F(2,783) = 42,393, p=0,000$.

Use of violent content was observed in case of video games. The mean values of daily time spent for three different groups of digital media users (small, medium and large) is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Daily time spent playing video games and video games with violent content (mean values in minutes)

Daily time spent:	Small	Medium	Large	Average
playing video games	21,13	42,95	122,24	59,62
playing video games with violent content	11,05	29,22	90,41	41,50

Source: own calculation.

It is evident that youth, who are large media users, on average daily play 1,3 hours more video games than those in a group of medium users, and 1,7 hours more than youth, who are small media users. The difference between groups is statistically significant at $F(2,788) = 93,289, p = 0,000$. Additionally, large media users play significantly more video games with violent content. On average they spend an hour and a half a day playing video games with violent content, which is an hour more than those, who are medium media users and on average 1,3 hours more compared to small media users. The difference between groups is statistically significant at $F(2,763) = 57.512, p = 0,000$.

Conclusion

In many cases of unwanted behaviour that we analysed (for instance in case of cheating on school tests, beating, being bullied, conflicts with parents, gambling, intentionally damaging or destroying property) we found a statistically significant effect of the extent of digital media on incidence of such behaviour. Youth, who are large digital media users, behave in such a socially unwanted way more often compared to lower media users. Focusing only on violent unwanted behaviour or vandalism, we also see, that in the large digital media users group, there is significantly higher incidence of violent or destructive acts compared to low and medium users group. We've shown that large digital media users spend significantly more daily time playing video games, and choose to play significantly more violent video games compared to low and medium digital media users. So their dosage of daily virtual violence is on average at least 1,3 hours a day. Considering that only data on playing violent video games was included in our survey as we didn't have data on the time spent watching violent contents on TV, videos or films, the daily exposure to the violent media content may be in reality much higher.

Katz and Lazarsfeld (2005) argued that mass media messages are less influential than an informal, personal communication. However, in large digital media user's cases where average daily consumption sums up to 14,50 hours a day there is only a very limited space of time left for personal, face to face communication. Even though large digital media

users also use digital media to learn or work, which can be understood as positive behaviour, their daily personal communication with significant others remains low. In our analysis we only observed 4 forms on digital media consumption – TV, computer/tablet, mobile phone, video games consoles. If we would add other media like radio or print media, the daily time spent with media could increase, even if considering, that media consumption of various types of media can overlap. For large digital media users mediated social interaction becomes a dominant form of social interaction. Their perception of values, norms and behaviours become highly dependent on mass mediated content, that is less and less regulated by more traditional authorities of sense making like family, community or national state, and increasingly dependent on agenda setters of cultural industry (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2007). In an increasingly individualized society the task of reflexivity is being shifted onto the shoulders of the individual. A low level of reflexivity results in an individual shaped largely by their environment – in our case mass media. A high level of reflexivity would lead to an individual playing a more active role in shaping his/her own norm, values or taste and guiding their behaviour in accordance to them. Digital media use should be, in all cases, but especially in case of large digital media users supplemented by capability to reflect on, analyse and evaluate media messages and to be able to consider their intents and consequences. These processes include cognitive, emotional and social competences, with core competences being ability to use, ability to analyse, evaluate, reflect on the media messages as well as ability to create and focus on creative problem solving (Hobbs, 2010; Mascheroni and Murri, 2014) and given the amount of time media are consumed by children and youth, conquering such competences should become an important part of societies socialisation processes and institution. However, also a discussion on social responsibility of mass media, which are becoming a primary environment of social interaction for some groups of people, should not be focused predominantly on the role of media in democratic systems, but should also debate social responsibility of media in broader cultural and socialisation processes.

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7/58

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