

Abstracts of the 2021 Technology, Mind, & Society Conference

Social Media and Teen Anxiety: Preference for Communicating Online and Social Media Burden Predict Increased Anxiety Severity Among Those Showing Biased Attention to Threat

Jennifer, L, de Rutte (The Graduate Center, CUNY; Hunter College, CUNY), Kimberly, D, Marynowski (Hunter College, CUNY), and Tracy, A, Dennis-Tiwary (The Graduate Center, CUNY; Hunter College, CUNY)

Despite interest in the potential impact of digital technology on anxiety in young people, little is known about how motivations, goals, and attitudes towards computer-mediated communication (CMC) are related to anxiety in adolescents. Recent research suggests that psychologically distressed individuals develop a preference for communicating via CMC, thus leading to problematic internet use and negative consequences from that use (e.g., social media burden). Further, research linking CMC preference and differential processing of emotional stimuli suggests that those evidencing increased attention bias (AB) to threat may be more likely to have a preference to communicate via CMC (over FTF). This study tested whether preference for using CMC or social media (SM) burden was related to greater anxiety, and whether this association was moderated by a biased attention towards threat. Teens ages 12-14 ($M_{age} = 12.89$; $N = 78$) with mild to severe anxiety symptoms completed questionnaires assessing communication preferences (either face-to-face or via CMC), feelings of SM burden, and anxiety symptoms. AB to threat was assessed using eye tracking during a free viewing task and trial-level bias scores calculated from the dot probe. Greater feelings of SM burden were related to greater anxiety for those with a greater attentional bias to threat. Greater preference for conducting difficult communication via CMC was related to greater anxiety among those with either extreme biases towards or away from threat. Results suggest that SM burden and CMC preference are related to anxiety, but only in the presence of extreme biases towards and away from threat.