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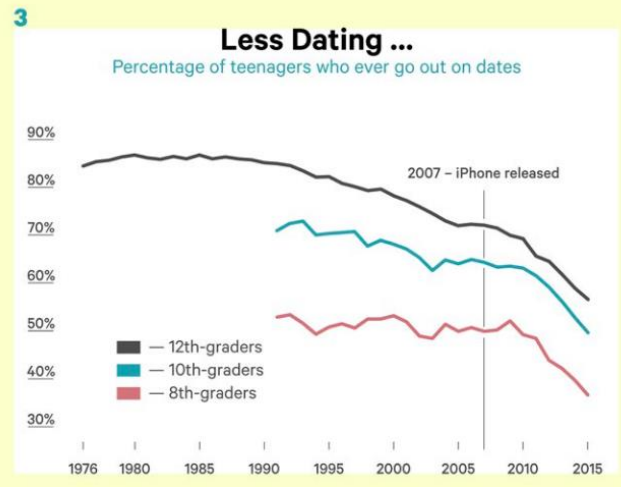
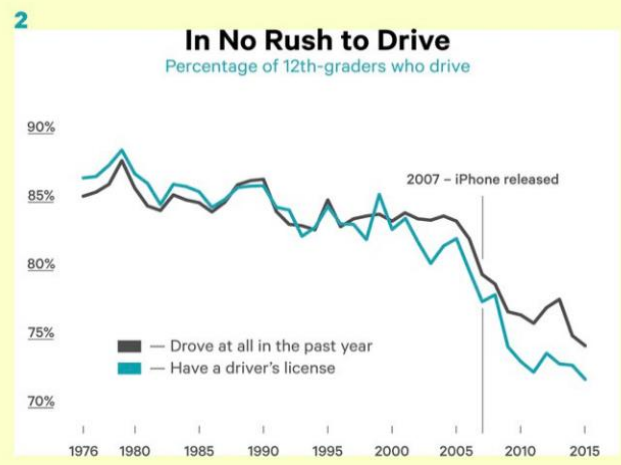
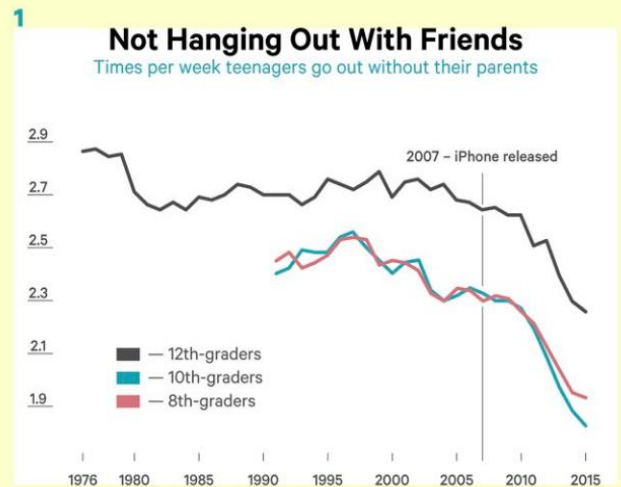
Is Teen Smartphone Use Leading to Health Risks?

Roughly twelve years ago, consumers were introduced to Apple's first model of the iPhone. Additionally, ten years ago consumers began to see other forms of the smartphone such as the first Samsung Galaxy. However, it hasn't been until recently that people have begun to make connections between smartphone use and mental health, specifically in teens. According to recent studies, nearly 39% of consumers in the United States admit to excessive smartphone use. What's more, according to these studies "an estimated 270 million Americans own a smartphone," making that 85% of the population (Spangler 2018). With that being said, researchers have become increasingly interested in finding the connections between this digital utopia and the effect it is having on *teens* and their overall health. Teens are becoming alarmingly dependent on their devices making a lack in smartphone use extremely rare. Psychology professor at San Diego State University Jean M. Twenge insists that smartphones are ruining generations and those to come. In her article, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation," Twenge illustrates all of the ways in which smartphone use is negatively contributing to the youth's overall mental health. For instance, she mentions that children and teens are becoming so dependent on digital lifestyles that they are neglecting relationships and experiences in real time. Nonetheless, Twenge argues that the youth feel more comfortable speaking and typing into screens opposed to face-to-face interactions. In fact, they are avoiding physical interactions all together (Twenge, 2017). Twenge's argument ultimately poses negative correlations between teens and their smartphones while on the other hand, the issues presented in Twenge's article have sparked debates for researchers and journalists worldwide. In recent years, consumers have been eager to learn more about the overall effects the digital world is having on teens. Therefore, consumers have seen a spike in articles on the topic at hand sparking debates on whether or not the findings are sound. This paper will examine Twenge's influential text and her

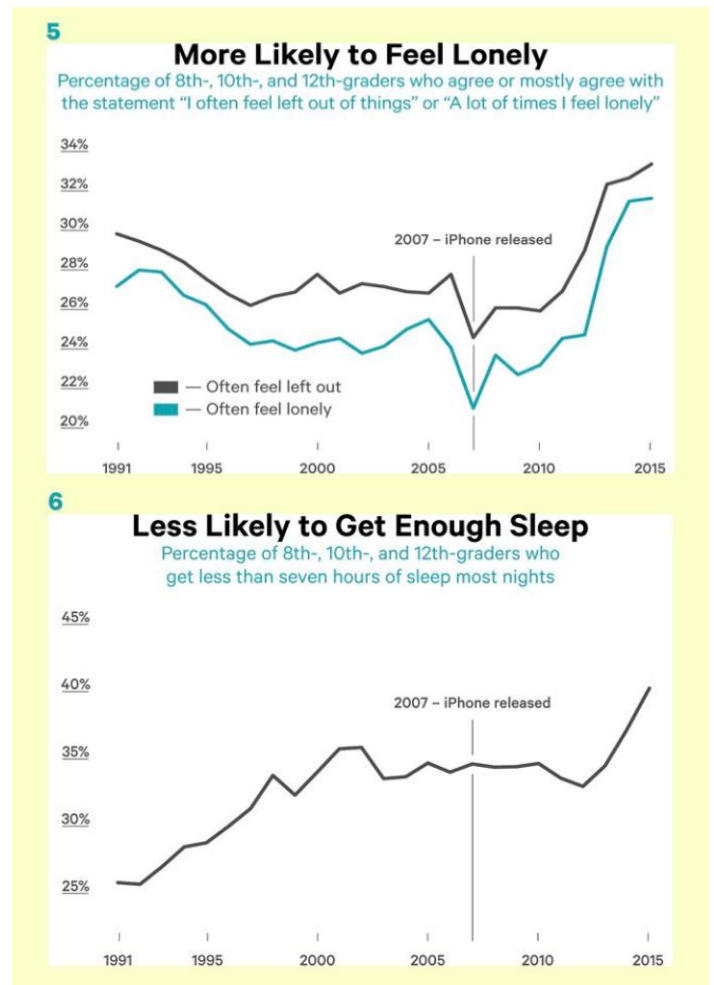
claims of smartphone use in teens. Further, I will explore the debate that has emerged between Twenge and two additional authors, one of which complicates Twenge's stance and the other challenges the validity of the claims. It is of interest to help readers better understand the debate and in doing so I will reveal major points of agreement, disagreement, and connection.

To begin, Jean M. Twenge began her research when noticing drastic changes in mood and behavior of teens in 2012. It is evident that Twenge holds the belief that because of the constant need to be connected digitally, teens are lacking physical connections in real-time. When introducing this claim Twenge writes, "The arrival of the smartphone has radically changed every aspect of teenagers' lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health" (Twenge 2017). Based on her original findings, Twenge aimed to conduct a study to merely understand and analyze the changes occurring in what she calls the "iGen" or "post-millennials" not only physically but mentally (Twenge 2017). According to her article, Twenge inserts an allegation that iGen could quite possibly be on track to a "mental crisis" if continuing on the same digital path. Twenge characterizes the iGen "as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades" (Twenge 2017). Having included such a strong statement poses the following question: Why? Drawing from data, Twenge accounts that since 2011 rates of negative mental health found in teens have been on the rise, ultimately leading to climbs in reported depression and suicide. When analyzing statistics Twenge ultimately shows "the twin rise of the smartphone and social media" that are seriously effecting young teens' drive, social presence, loneliness, and sleep. Consequently, these effects are leading to spiked rates of

negative mental health in teens (Twenge 2017). The graphs placed to the right show substantial declines in social interaction, dating, and driving with rises in loneliness and sleep in teenagers today. According to the article, these alarming statistics can be attributed to teenagers' desire for staying in. Because the online world of digital media and the convenient connectedness presented through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, teens no longer feel the need to leave the house according to Twenge (Twenge 2017). What's more, the spikes in reported loneliness raise concerns on a psychological level. Twenge discloses that it is not necessarily true that all teens who spend a substantial amount of time online are lonely, but it certainly is forming correlations worth looking in to. Moreover, because of increased rates of loneliness, depression found in teens is, too, skyrocketing (Twenge 2017). For instance, Twenge mentions that "eighth-graders who are heavy users of social media increase their risk of depression by 27 percent, while those who play



sports, go to religious services, or even do homework more than the average teen cut their risk significantly” (Twenge 2017). Additionally, Twenge inserts a statistic touching upon increased suicide rates in teens, stating that “In 2011, for the first time in 24 years, the teen suicide rate was higher than the teen homicide rate” (Twenge 2017). However, Twenge retracts this claim by clarifying that suicide rates have been on the rise since the 1990’s, before smartphones and social media existed (Twenge 2017). On the other hand, she found that, today, Americans are roughly four times as more likely to be seen to be taking some form of anti-depressant (Twenge 2017). Unfortunately, these changes

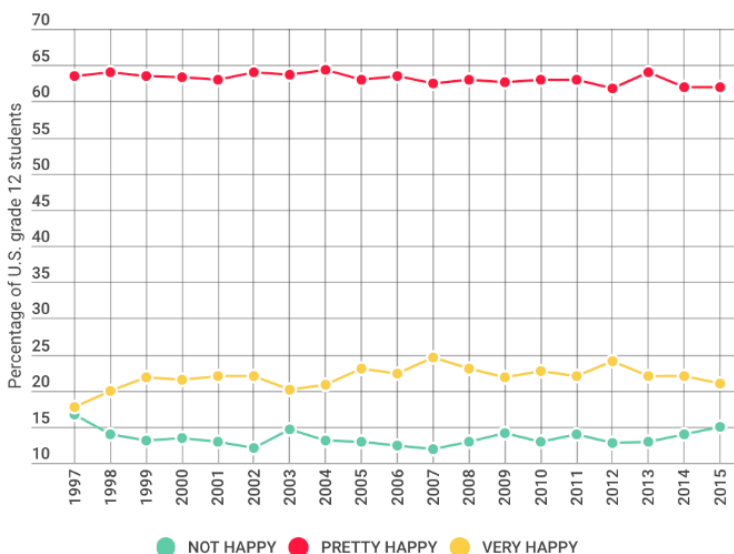


Photos retrieved from Twenge’s article.

continue to climb due to what Twenge suggests may be attributed to the fact that all “Americans who owned a smartphone surpassed 50 percent” (Twenge 2017). Overall, Twenge poses a strong stance on the issue at hand, however, when evaluating her text it is obvious that crucial information is being left out. For example, we are shown various numbers and statistics linking less dating, sleep, driving, and social activity to current years, but researchers might inquire if it is solely smartphone use causing these aspects to change drastically or if that is just a convenient assumption. Because of Twenge’s confident claims that teens are being destroyed by smartphone use, it has prompted various researchers and writers to look into the investigations. In the

following paragraph, I will be breaking down an article written by Alexandra Samuel titled, “Yes, Smartphones Are Destroying a Generation, But Not of Kids: Why parents need to embrace our role as digital mentors: offering kids and teens ongoing support and guidance in how to use the internet appropriately.” The purpose of including Samuel’s position on the matter is to not decide which details are correct, but to evaluate the debate occurring between researchers on the topic of teens and smartphone use.

Researcher and technology writer, Alexandra Samuel was inclined to expand on the claims made by Twenge, agreeing with certain aspects and rejecting others. Looking back to Twenge’s title for her article (“Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”), Samuel is unconvinced. Samuel does not seek to reject Twenge’s ideas overall, but rather demand more information. Unlike in Twenge’s article, Samuel concluded that much of Twenge’s research is derived from the “*Monitoring the Future Survey* series.” However, according to Samuel, this source is flawed as they do not “measure anxiety and depression” (Samuel 2017). Having said this, the overall credibility of Twenge’s argument is put into question. Although, Samuel makes it clear that it is not the ideas that Twenge presents as wrong but the lack thereof sound evidence

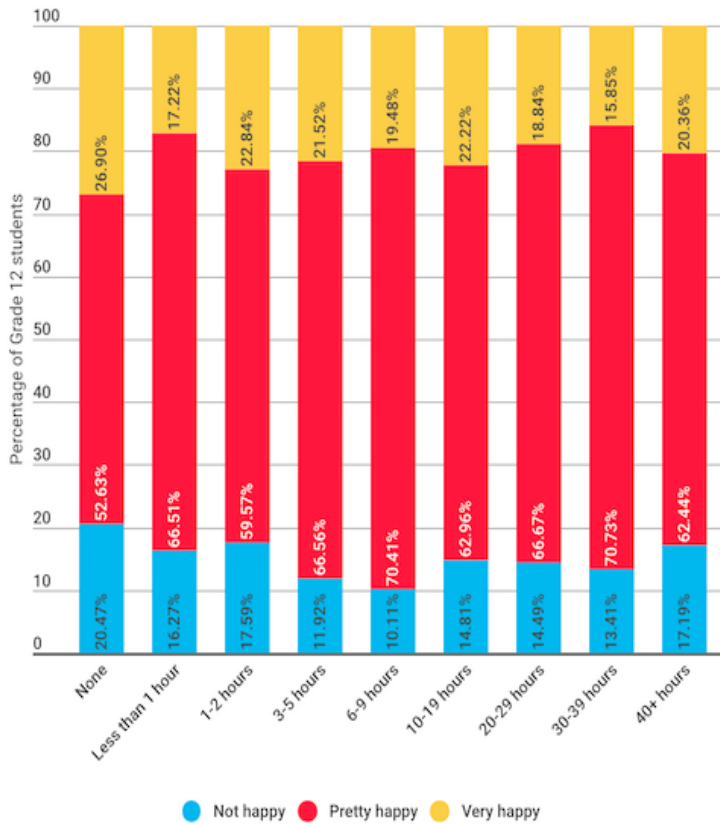


Graph Retrieved from Samuel’s article.

Source: Monitoring the Future grade 12 surveys.

being portrayed to researchers and consumers. When digging into her own research, Samuel found data that raises questions of reliability to the data presented in Twenge’s article. Alas, the past twenty year Samuel found that there “shows no teen happiness crisis” as Twenge previously mentioned (Samuel

2017). Provided in Samuel’s research, the graph above exemplifies a consistent rate in teen happiness that contradicts Twenge’s insertion drastically. Consequently, this is where the beginning of the debate begins. This paper previously included a quote by Twenge arguing that heavy social media and smartphone usage by eighth-graders is leading to increased depression, however, Samuel says differently. According to Samuel and her findings on twelfth-grade data, “teens report near identical levels of happiness regardless whether they’re on the higher or lower



Graph Retrieved from Samuel’s article.

end of social media usage” (Samuel 2017). What’s more, further data suggests that teens who lack a smartphone are indeed less happy. Moreover, data from *Monitoring the Future Grade 12 Surveys* shows that “high school seniors who are most likely to be unhappy are those who don’t use social media at all” (Samuel 2017). The graph to the left clearly shows percentages suggesting that regardless of the digital world skyrocketing, current teens show no correlating signs of being unhappy or depressed. Also,

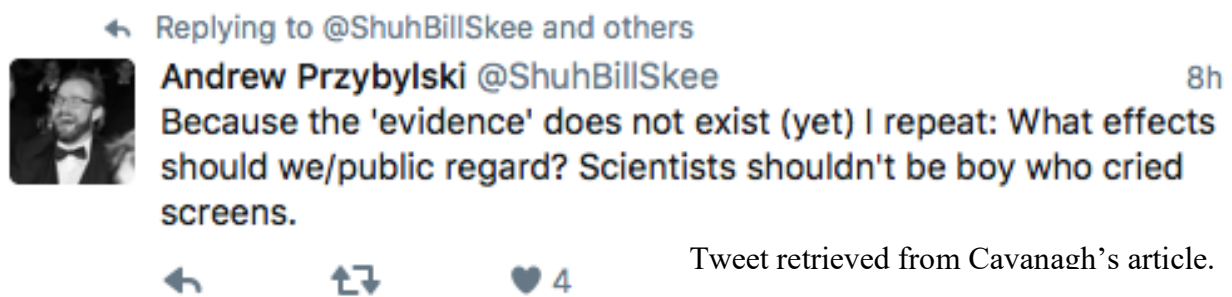
as Samuel mentions, the teens who show the most signs of being unhappy are the ones who have the least to do with smartphone use (Samuel 2017). Furthering her argument, Samuel believes that Twenge raises points worth considering but lacks disclosure of contributing aspects. The main claim Samuel makes in her article regarding teens and smartphone use is not asserting that teen behavior is the cause but rather the parents (Samuel

2017). Samuel shapes her argument by inquiring, “you know what smartphones and social media are *really* great at? Tuning out your children” (Samuel 2017). Overall, Samuel is suggesting that surely teens are becoming “disengaged” with real-time, but why? According to the article, it ultimately comes down to the fact that parents are primarily “disengaged” (Samuel 2017). With that being said, Samuel points out that for parents it is easier to engage in smartphones than it is to attempt to engage with their teenagers. Along with a detailed testimonial from psychologist John Unger Zussman, Samuel confirmed the struggle between parents’ personal smartphone use and paying adequate attention to their children (Samuel 2017). By and large, Samuel’s counters to Twenge’s original arguments are worth noticing, however her stance does not completely disagree with that of Twenge. When concluding her thoughts, Samuel concedes, “But I do think that the concerns Twenge raises are valid (if overblown), if only because I constantly hear from parents who are struggling with their own version of these problems: Teens who are too busy online to come out of their room. Kids who are social butterflies on the Internet, but socially awkward in meatspace. Young adults who may be remarkable adept in front of a computer, but lack some of the practical life skills they’ll need when they step away from the keyboard” (Samuel 2017). Nonetheless, between Twenge and Samuel’s stances, the digital world is having an effect on teens and young adults. Whether these effects are directly correlated between smartphone use and depression is another question. In order to fully understand the issue at hand, it is important to look in to opposing claims on this on-going debate. Being said, the last article that this paper will be evaluating is that of psychologist Sarah Rose Cavanagh, “No, Smartphones are Not Destroying a Generation: The kids are going to be all right.” Comparing two opposing submissions will seek to tie together the debate at hand, ultimately suggesting that

research on the debate will continue to grow as more researchers and psychologists join the conversation.

Like Samuel, Cavanagh frames her side of the debate from Twenge's text ("Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?"). From Cavanagh's title alone, it is apparent which side her beliefs fall on. Contradicting, Cavanagh constitutes three general problems pertaining to the credibility of Twenge's findings: (1) "The data the author chooses to present are cherry-picked," (2) "The studies she reviews are all correlational," and (3) "The studies she reviews largely ignore social contexts and how people differ" (Cavanagh 2017). Having mentioned before, the data presented by Twenge is deemed compelling and worth looking in to, however, Cavanagh is correct in her argument that the data may be flawed. It is incorrect to say that the data is generically false information, but rather that it is not specifically tailored to the issue at hand. Cavanagh makes this clear by explaining how Twenge only reviewed supporting data and discarded "studies that suggest screen use is not associated with outcomes like depression and loneliness or that suggest that active social media use is actually associated with positive outcomes like resilience" (Cavanagh 2017). Furthermore, when looking at claims and findings from Twenge's article, Cavanagh found that Twenge's studies were only formed through direct correlations between smartphones and depression, observing cases solely on the two variables (Cavanagh 2017). Additionally, Cavanagh suggests that in order to truly find accurate data on the subject, proper and ethical research must be obtained. For instance, Cavanagh includes a suggestion of conducting experiments tailored to independent and dependent variables. In her own words, she recommends assigning "large groups of adolescents perfectly matched on all number of variables to a long period where one group uses smartphones extensively and the other does not, and then watch to see whether depression levels rise more in one group versus the

other” (Cavanagh 2017). Having a carefully tailored experiment determining whether or not smartphone use and depression are directly related is crucial to obtaining true findings. Lastly, Cavanagh questions Twenge’s source credibility in that it “ignores social contexts” (Cavanagh 2017). It is without denying that excessive social media and smartphone use to one is merely scratching the surface for another. Teens and young adults may differ socially, hold different jobs and positions, tackle different battles, etc. Twenge’s research does not brush upon these possible differences, making it difficult to assign all teens into one category. Further, Cavanagh continues to review and debate Twenge’s ideas by challenging the positives of smartphone use. On one hand Twenge asserts that smartphone use is “destroying a generation,” while on the other hand Cavanagh points out that Twenge includes positives as well. For example, Cavanagh notes



that Twenge mentioned positive effects such as “lower rates of alcohol use, teen pregnancies, unprotected sex, smoking, and car accidents” (Cavanagh 2017). Because Twenge includes this information it is hard to believe that smartphone use is solely negative, according to Cavanagh. In the photo of the Tweet above, Cavanagh as well as Andrew Przybylski say it can be argued that Twenge does not provide enough substantial evidence convincing consumers that smartphone use produces only negative effects. In other words, Cavanagh’s counter to Twenge’s arguments raise questions worth researching.

In conclusion, Twenge, Samuel, and Cavanagh pose articulate and well-thought out additions to the central issue at hand: Is there a connection between smartphone use and mental health? Should we as consumers take Twenge's argument more seriously than others? Is there more research needed to be conducted? How do we ensure that the rising rates of teen behavior provided by Twenge aren't solely related to smartphone use and if so what is needed to be done? All of these questions currently thrown into the conversation only mean obtaining results sooner. It is clear that Twenge's main argument is not strong enough to declare as credible as Samuel and Cavanagh rose questions diminishing the ethos of Twenge's sources and position. All in all, technology and modes of technology are only advancing as time goes on. With smartphone use on the rise, it will be important for researchers to continue Twenge's debate so that teens take precautions when investing all of their time into smartphone and social media use.

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