Book Review

Nirma University Journal of Business
and Management Studies
9(1) 114–119, 2026
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DOI: 10.1177/njb.261461374
njb.spectrumjps.com

Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, 2024, 385 pp., ₹.999. Penguin Random House, ISBN: 978-0593655030

Introduction

In recent years, concerns regarding mental health issues among young people have increased as a result of technological changes. Increased rates of mental disorders, including anxiety, depression, and other illnesses, have grabbed the attention of many researchers and practitioners who are investigating possible causes of this phenomenon. This interest has resulted in many studies being conducted to help explain the cause-and-effect relationship that exists (Keles et al., 2020; Twenge et al., 2018). A recent work on this topic is *The Anxious Generation*, written by Jonathan Haidt, which tries to explain what happened using the idea of old-fashioned play versus modern technology as a basis for understanding modern development as the 'great rewiring of childhood'.

Haidt argues that the movement away from play-based (i.e., play-based, social-based) childhood to childhood that revolves around cellphones and screens has created developmental consequences that are still being felt today in all parts of life where there are significant developmental milestones. He claims that these changes have negatively impacted important developmental milestones, including socialisation, emotional development, and creating one's identity. While Haidt's ideas resonate with common societal concerns regarding technology, the research that was conducted raises new questions regarding the subject of technology and its impact on children.

This review evaluates the ideas contained in Haidt's book. Evaluation will be based on identifying whether or not there are any advantages or disadvantages to the study being conducted. Furthermore, the review will provide a theoretical framework for Haidt's claims and examine their validity.

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Overview of the Book

The Anxious Generation tells a story about the relationship between the increasing mental issues experienced by young people and the proliferation of smartphone usage and social networking services in their lives since the beginning of the 2010s. According to Haidt, these are the years when children became increasingly exposed to the adverse effects associated with always being online.

In his analysis, Haidt compares the two concepts—the 'play-based childhood' and the 'phone-based childhood'. While the former involves children playing outdoors with friends and exposing themselves to various risks as a way of becoming socially competent, the latter makes them spend most of their time interacting online, which results in a number of problems, such as a lack of communication with peers and disrupted sleep (Gray, 2011; Levenson et al., 2017).

Additionally, the author provides some insights into how digital technology affects children differently depending on their gender. For girls, social media poses a bigger threat because they tend to experience more relational aggression and bullying, while boys are more likely to isolate themselves in the online world, engaging in solitary activities such as playing video games (Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Viner et al., 2019). The book finishes with several proposals for policymakers regarding children's internet use.

Theoretical Framing

Although Haidt's study does not directly draw upon one specific theoretical model, it may be explained based on several existing perspectives.

First, the displacement hypothesis implies that time spent engaging with digital gadgets and screens replaces participation in developmentally enriching behaviours, such as physical play and communication. Haidt's concern about the decrease in unstructured play matches this approach (Gray, 2011; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017).

Second, the perspective of social comparison theory helps explain the different effects of social media on different categories of teenagers. It may explain how upward social comparisons made online impact girls' self-image (Keles et al., 2020; Twenge et al., 2018).

Third, ecological systems theory suggests that the process of development is influenced by several environmental systems and their interactions. In this context, Haidt's focus on technology is too limited, as it fails to incorporate various contexts in adolescents' lives.

Lastly, the knowledge accumulated within the field of developmental psychology implies that peers play a significant role in adolescent behaviour. This fact supports the thesis advanced by Haidt, who considers overprotective parents and an underregulated online environment to undermine adolescents' growth process.

Critical Analysis of Key Arguments

Correlation Versus Causation

One of the principal ideas put forth in *The Anxious Generation* is that the increasing use of cellphones causes rising levels of adolescent psychological problems. Even though there are examples of correlational evidence provided by Haidt throughout his article, the research findings he uses to support his claims are mostly correlational in nature (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017).

This is important because, as research has shown, the correlation between the use of electronic gadgets and the psychological state of adolescents is weak. Weak correlations imply that there are other variables involved in the process. Furthermore, it can very well happen that young people who experience psychological issues spend a lot of time on their phones (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Orben & Przybylski, 2019).

In order to provide more convincing evidence, Haidt should rely on longitudinal and experimental research, which helps identify causation.

Gendered Experiences of Digital Media

One of the most interesting discussions in the book is about gender differences. According to Haidt, girls are especially sensitive to the harms caused by social media because they are more sensitive to social criticism and interpersonal relationships. Scientific studies show that teenage girls suffer from anxiety and depression more than boys (Keles et al., 2020; Twenge et al., 2018).

There is still an incomplete analysis in the social media realm. When discussing social media, one only discusses the platforms' design and the social comparison aspect. Aspects such as sociocultural background, gender norms, body-image pressures, and the drive for success are typically ignored in this analysis. Each of the above existed before the creation of social media, so the impact of each on social media cannot be ignored.

The same can be said for boys using computer games. The digital world can provide boys with an avenue for communication as well as a way to develop or explore themselves (Montag et al., 2019).

Decline of Play and Developmental Implications

This focus on the loss of unstructured play from Haidt's perspective highlights a very valid point when it comes to the development of children. Unstructured play has been seen as a fundamental source for acquiring skills such as social skills, emotional management, and resilience (Gray, 2011).

The exact level to which this change occurs cannot be determined because the nature of play itself varies across different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds, and sometimes children still have peer interaction even though there has been greater exposure to technology. The link between a lack of play and the development of psychological problems may also involve many factors.

Despite the theoretical justification of this point, further evidence needs to be provided for it to gain traction.

Evaluation of Empirical Evidence

The author's research integrates various sources across disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and public health, which is one of the main strengths of the book under consideration. However, there are several drawbacks regarding the selection and analysis of evidence used. First, cross-sectional studies do not allow for establishing causality. Second, there is a potential for response bias and other errors when estimating self-reported data concerning adolescents' media use and mental health. Third, the heterogeneous nature of experiences associated with digital technologies is frequently ignored (Best et al., 2014; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Orben & Przybylski, 2019).

According to some recent meta-analyses, the effects of using digital technologies are rather complicated. They include both negative and positive effects of media usage on adolescents. The author's focus on negative consequences could be considered controversial since it does not give a comprehensive view of the problem (Best et al., 2014; Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017).

Contextual Limitations: A Global Perspective

The main drawback of this book lies in its emphasis on the Western world. It should be noted that this aspect does not make the results presented in it less relevant, but rather makes one question their transferability to different socio-cultural contexts.

For instance, in developing countries like India, technology adoption is influenced by other cultural factors. The stability of the family, collectivism, and parental control might alleviate certain negative effects of technology use. However, there are other psychological pressure sources, including economic insecurity, fierce educational competition, and societal expectations. There are a few more problems, such as shared devices, the digital divide, and digital illiteracy, that make the connection between technology and mental health even more complicated. Thus, taking a global perspective might enrich Haidt's theory.

Policy and Practical Implications

A major theme in the book is that recommendations like the ones Haidt gives for promoting well-being are good recommendations; however, implementing these recommendations into practice is difficult because it requires the cooperation of several individuals. It will be increasingly difficult for parents to not allow their children to have smartphones until they are older, only allow them to use social media, and forbid them from using their phones in schools, because more and more children are using the internet in both educational and social settings.

Technological recommendations will not account for additional issues like academic stress, socio-economic conditions, and access to mental health resources, which provide barriers to implementing the recommendations made by technology (Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Discussion

The Anxious Generation effectively conveys a very significant and complex issue. The book tells a riveting story, includes an accessible review of existing literature, and ends with a persuasive call to action; however, the way it defines anxiety in adolescents is limited because it primarily attributes the root of adolescent anxiety to technology.

Future researchers should broaden their lens of exploration with respect to adolescent mental health by including economic, cultural, and organisational perspectives. While digital technologies play an instrumental role, they function in certain systems that contribute to their effect (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Further research should include studies that take a long-term perspective and incorporate a cross-cultural approach to address this question. Moreover, it should emphasise the diverse nature of adolescents' interactions with technology (Best et al., 2014; Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Conclusion

All things considered, it must be said that the book under analysis makes a notable contribution to current discussions about youth's mental well-being. Indeed, the very idea that changes in children's lives caused by the digital age can have significant psychological effects is a highly intriguing one and requires careful thought. Further, the arguments made in the book need to be approached with some degree of scepticism since, although the author brings forward many possible dangers of growing up online, he fails to consider the intricacy of the situation and resorts to a technologically deterministic outlook (Best et al., 2014; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Orben & Przybylski, 2019).

On the whole, however, Haidt's writing can be considered productive insofar as it provokes critical discussion and research.

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