

## **A Positive Psychology Approach to Development and Use of Media and Technology**

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### **Abstract**

There is no denying that media and technology are an integral part of our lives. No aspect of our day to day functioning is unaffected by use of technology and media. This dependency on technology has only increased during and post pandemic as it was through technology only that we could still run our daily lives be it work, procuring necessary items for survival or staying connected with loved ones. The paper is a commentary on how positive psychology can be applied to technology and media so that they are not limited to making our lives easier but also contributing to our overall well being as well. Since most of the research has been done to explore the negative effects of technology/media, it is highly recommended that we start to explore how media and technology can aid to create a flourishing life by applying positive psychology concepts considering how in the 'new normal' the presence of technology and media will only surge.

### **Introduction**

In today's fast paced world almost everything in our life - from work, interpersonal interaction, social interaction, education to ordering necessary household items has become digital and this dependence on technology has only amplified during the covid era when both personal and professional lives are being maintained on interactive technology like zoom, Instagram, WhatsApp etc.

Now this presence of technology is not just limited to making life convenient but also crucial to our well being as well (Amichai-Hamburger, 2009) because the technology has been

invented and designed to enhance human experience. This influence of technology on our day to day existence has been under constant examination but mostly from a negative lens which reflects society's concern regarding impact of technology. However there is very little research which talks about the benefits of technology which extend beyond professional to personal flourishing.

Positive media psychology specializes in creating the technologies and using the media in such a way that it adds to the well being of an individual and helps them in creating a flourishing life (Rutledge, 2020) . It is based on the theoretical principles of positive psychology and these principles are used in the research and creation of the technology which can be used to support its users in building a life full of positive experiences, meaningful engagement, positive emotions and personal growth.

The objective of this paper is to give an insight as to how we can amalgamate concepts of positive psychology with media psychology and use them to understand the role that interactive technology plays in the flourishing and wellbeing of an individual.

The paper will try to understand the various concepts of positive media psychology and also give a review of the dearth of research done in the field of positive media psychology.

### **Virtual Learning**

The collaboration of technology and education has resulted in online education in the form of self-paced courses and training. There are several platforms like coursera, edx and udemy which offer a variety of courses. These online learning options have provided opportunities of learning to those who otherwise can't afford or are unable to access traditional educational institutions. Media technologies have proved to be beneficial for individualized learning and enhances motivation and self-efficacy. But when the world was faced with a pandemic and everyone was forced to stay locked in their homes, imparting education could have become a huge challenge but thanks to availability of technology, education and learning was made

accessible. Many academic publishers like Cambridge university press, McGill library made their resources freely available online to support teachers and students worldwide. Video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Ms Teams and Google Meet rose to the challenge of pandemic and quickly updated themselves to provide rich online classroom experience to both students and teachers. The research has also shown that these technologies have capacity to match the quality of learning of the physical classrooms (Cook & Sonnenberg, 2014; Li & Irby, 2008) With help of AI proctored technology even examinations could be conducted with fair means.

Along with the opportunities of learning online education, especially online classes on zoom, Ms teams have presented unique challenges as well which were not there in traditional learning. Challenges like video fatigue, low attention span and distraction have surfaced. To deal with these challenges positive psychology approaches like the concept of mindfulness and flow can be used.

Flow is a state of total immersion in the activity one is doing. It is a state of one pointed concentration, a complete sense of control on one's action, intrinsically motivated and loss of self reflection in context of one's surroundings (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

According to Csikszentmihalyi the condition of flow is achieved when the individual perceive that there is a congruence between his/her skills and demands put by the activity at hand, when there is clarity of goals and immediate feedback about the progress being made (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a, 1975b). If these condition are created in the online learning environment (both self paced course and virtual classrooms) meaning that the online learning is designed in such a way that it creates a sense of self efficacy in the students, they feel they also have a sense of control over the virtual learning environment, the activities given to them has clear goals and feedbacks are given to them at regular intervals. Integrating the concept of flow with technology can help us create a very positive experience of online learning for

students, which can help in dealing with issues like video fatigue and short attention span. It has been found that state of flow in a virtual learning environment leads to positive emotions in learners and enhances their academic performance as well (Rodriguez-Ardura & Meseguer- Artola, 2017).

Along with flow another positive psychology tool which can help in creating an effective virtual learning environment is mindfulness. The online learning experience has been known to be influenced by distraction and short attention span (Blasiman et al., 2018; Hollis & Was, 2016) . Guiding students in mindful activity at the start, middle and end of session can help them stay in the present moment and also help them feel less exhausted as well. Mindfulness has positive benefits like enhancing learning, memory, positive emotions etc (Hofmann et al., 2010; Ivanovski & Malhi, 2007).

Online lecture pedagogy especially requires adopting a framework which enhances state of flow and mindfulness. This is the time to harness the power of technology by integrating it with positive psychology. No doubt technology has been very effective in providing accessibility to learning and education but just accessibility is not enough if the integration and assimilation of that learning is not happening.

#### **Social Interaction and Empathetic Communication:**

Technology is all pervading. From supporting us in accessing basic necessities like groceries, medicine, food, education to helping us in maintaining our social life by keeping in touch with our loved one, it is everywhere. What this means is that now communication on these interactive digital platforms is not limited to personal interaction but it spans to giving one's opinion to everything that is happening in the world, writing reviews to the service providers, creating one's own content and commenting on others content. Initially the online interaction was limited only to information sharing but in current times people share their most intimate details which are accessible by not only those who are on their profile but could be made

accessible to others by making it viral. These interactive technologies like social media platforms and instant messaging apps have given immense power to one's word. One hashtag has the power to make a person famous or can destroy an individual's life. There is plenty of research to prove the impact of negative comments, trolling and cyberbullying on a person's overall self-esteem (Peled, 2019).

Seeing the impact of words on others it is crucial that we the citizens of this virtual world learn to communicate more empathetically via our language. The need for empathetic online communication becomes more relevant considering the lack of social cues in online interaction especially in chats, posts, comments and messages. Empathy is the capacity to understand what others are going through, it is understanding others perspective and then responding accordingly. Empathy leads to cooperation, helping behavior, and better interpersonal relationships (Decety, 2014 ; Einolf, 2008) .

Researchers' evidence has suggested that social media platforms like Facebook provide the benefit of social interaction which leads to wellbeing and increased self-esteem ( Manago et al., 2012). Research has shown that empathetic communication style on Facebook leads to more interpersonal trust (Ivcevic & Ambady, 2012; Manago et al., 2012,).

To make up for the missing social cues and make online communication more effective, emojis, GIF and stickers have been introduced. There are new technologies like bitmoji where personalized avatars of yourself with different facial expressions can be created and shared with the world, there are facial recognition software that are designed to map a person's face to produce emojis. But along with making technology more expressive we also need to train the users in more empathetic use of language so that the negative comments, hostile online debates, bullying and trolling can be reduced. It is not enough that we are connected but it's important that this connection leads to positive interactions and contributes

to well-being of all those involved because as proved by positive psychology meaningful engagement leads to flourishing life (Seligman, 2002).

### **Technology as a Tool to Support Flourishing Life**

Positive psychology talks about creating a flourishing life and mentions what are the components of a flourishing life. According to positive psychologists the flourishing life includes presence of positive emotions, meaningful engagement and relationship, meaning and purpose (Seligman, 2002). The presence of gratitude, flow, love, joy, learning new things, sense of achievement all these are what leads to a flourishing life. According to positive psychologists having a sense of meaning and purpose leads to a profound and internal happiness called eudaimonic happiness but at the same time positive psychology also recognizes the sense of happiness we get from sensory pleasure and identify it as hedonic pleasure (Rutledge, 2020)

Research has proven the benefits of positive emotions like happiness, gratitude, and mindfulness on physical and mental health (Davidson et al., 2000; Davidson & Lutz, 2008).

Research evidence has shown that practice of mindfulness leads to happiness and engagement and reduces levels of depression, anxiety and strengthens the immune system (Armenta et al., 2017; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Considering the penetration of social media and interactive technologies in everyday life, the question arises as to what way technology and media can contribute to cultivating a flourishing life. There are mobile apps and technologies like Headspace (n.d) and HeartMath developed with the purpose to enhance the experience of positive emotions and practice mindfulness meditation (Edwards, 2015; Puddicombe, 2011). These apps are designed on the basis of evidenced based protocols and guided meditation, Breathing exercises which are empirically supported. There are mobile app like Random App of Kindness (RAki), Daniel Tiger's Grr-ific Feelings, and Avokiddo Emotions developed to teach children and young

people about various emotions and empathy (<https://www.eastersealstech.com/2015/07/08/6-empathy-teaching-apps/>). There are wearable technology like the Fitbit, Apple watch and Samsung watches which provide real time data of physical state. This feedback makes a person aware of the connection between mental state and physical state and can motivate them to be more calm.

Apart from apps and wearables there is extensive use of VR as well to cultivate empathy, compassion and even to reduce discrimination and prejudice. The Virtual Human Interaction Lab (VHIL) at Stanford has created a virtual reality program called becoming homeless, where with the help of VR set a user is transferred to a situation where they experience situations like losing a job, living on the street, feeling vulnerable. The project aims to create compassion and understanding of homelessness. In another project with collaboration with Columbia university, VHIL developed 1000 cut journey where you can experience being a black man and come face to face with the difficult reality of prejudice and discrimination. Then there are video games and multiplayer games like minecraft and world of warcrafts which are designed on the basis of flow theory of Csikszentmihalyi. Evidence suggests that these games allow users to enter a state of flow which in turn have a positive impact on mood, subjective well-being and self-efficacy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Holt & Mitterer, 2000; Neal 2012).

Let's not forget the role of movies and tv series in creating positive emotions in everyday life. Web series like Schitt's Creek, Glow are highly popular and critically acclaimed for their LGBTQ content. Research has shown that watching period dramas like Downton Abbey, Pride and Prejudice can be a form of self care as watching them give rise to positive emotions and works as stress buster (Rutledge, 2021). The research evidence suggest that watching historical dramas could lead to improved mental health, social connections and listening skills (Gabriel et al., 2016). According to cinema therapist Gary Solomon watching movies

which are relevant to your current circumstance can provide an emotional release and help us understand our situation better.

### **Video Games**

The video games have expanded from the single player games to multiplayer skills based games like minecraft and World of Warcraft. The games are designed to achieve a state of engagement in players for which they have used Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow.

Research evidence suggests that games which are designed to create a state of flow leads to improvement in mood and reduces stress (Neal, 2012) .

### **Conclusion**

Technology and media has become an extension of our personality. Our dependency on technology especially during covid times has made it more important for us to understand and reflect upon the impact of the various media and technologies that we use in everyday life.

There is no doubt about the positive impact of technology in our lives, the application of positive psychology in developing and understanding technology can benefit humankind in creating a flourishing society. More research in the area of positive media psychology will help everyone understand the various ways through which technology can contribute to enhancing the overall well being in our lives. The principles of positive psychology are not just limited to developing technology and content in the media but can also be applied in guiding us in our use of technology.



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