

Book Review

The App Generation: How Today's Youth Navigate Identity, Intimacy, and the Imagination in a Digital World. Howard Gardner and Katie Davis. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. 244 pp. ISBN: 0300196210.

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Howard Gardner is a Hobbs professor of Cognition and Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education and Katie Davis is assistant professor at the University of Washington's Information School. In this work, they provide a fascinating and provocative account of a key area of information technology and youth with major implications for education and understanding ourselves as technology 'buffs.'

The App Generation: How Today's Youth Navigate Identity, Intimacy, and Imagination in a Digital World explores the impact of new technologies on three vital areas of adolescent life: identity, intimacy, and imagination. Applications, or 'apps' as they are commonly known, are computer programs typically run on mobile devices and designed to serve a particular purpose. They are not only desired by today's youth – they are expected.

This book examines the ways in which apps provide new forms of self-exploration and new methods of connecting to other people, and how they furnish new means for exercising the imagination. According to Gardner and Davis: "Young people ... are not only immersed in apps: they've come to think of the world as an ensemble of apps, to see their lives as a string of ordered apps, or perhaps, in many cases, a single, extended, cradle-to-grave app (or super-app)" (p.7).

Gardner and Davis contend that identity, intimacy, and imagination are three of the stages of psychosocial development proposed by the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. Through their research, the authors have discovered that these stages have been reconfigured significantly over generations. The researchers investigated these three stages primarily through interviews with adolescents and through focus groups involving adults who work with teens. To illustrate the generational divide, the authors share their perceptions of technology during their own respective lifetimes and also interviewed Katie's younger sister. There is also the insightful perspective of Oscar, Howard's six-year-old grandson.

The authors' research provides compelling answers to the following questions: Who are youth in relation to technology? How do youth relate to others via technology? How creative are teens in regard to the available technology?

Apps readily allow the 'Me Generation' to address the issues of youth. Antisocial personality traits such as Narcissism, and the effects of Helicopter Parenting, whereby parents feel the need to protect their children from their own life experiences, have resulted in an 'app mentality,' based on a rapid approach to information. Thus, the ubiquitous app can be viewed as a metaphor for this study and remain the focal point in the hopes of answering the pointed question, "Can youth take advantage of Apps without being programmed by them?"

This is a comprehensive study and further research should address these pointed questions. "Where do we go from here?" and "How can we use what we now know to involve educators, parents, and stakeholders?" After reading the book, we acknowledge that society has not understood even a fraction of the effect of technology on youth.

Logically then, the next phase of this research should probably focus on curriculum development in education and on addressing gaps in communication, creativity, and critical thinking, as well as the antisocial personality traits produced by contemporary technology on the App Generation.

App designers are responsible for whether the app tips the balance towards enablement or dependence. It is the authors' view that the balance can be tilted towards an app-enabled society among youths by parental modelling of the use of apps around their children. However, they must also help young people to find new ways to incorporate the technology into unexpected and distinct paths. Developing computational skills to help students have a more meaningful role in the app world would be an advantage. Additionally, students would be empowered if they gained experience of modifying existing apps and designing their own rather than just being consumers of technology.