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Risk reduction and harm prevention in technology use

A commentary on Swanton et al.'s (2020) 'Problematic risk-taking involving emerging technologies: A stakeholder framework to minimize harms'

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COMMENTARY



ABSTRACT

This commentary paper draws on Swanton et al.'s (2020) paper "Problematic risk-taking involving emerging technologies: A stakeholder framework to minimize harms" to discuss issues pertaining to the challenges and possible risks emerging technologies may pose for the users. It acknowledges technology use is not problematic per se, but for some users, it can be associated with preventable harms. Corporate social responsibility is called for to protect consumers. It is argued that there exists a collective responsibility to ensure technology can be used in a healthy and beneficial way, risk is reduced and harm is prevented.

KEYWORDS

Risk reduction, harm prevention, technology, social responsibility, consumer protection

INTRODUCTION

In their paper "Problematic risk-taking involving emerging technologies: A stakeholder framework to minimize harms", Swanton, Blaszczynski, Forlini, Starcevic, and Gainsbury (2020) discuss key terms and concerns with regards to risk behaviours through the engagement with technology and set out policy guidelines to protect affected individuals. The authors state that a strategic policy framework regarding problematic technology use is currently lacking, necessitating the collaborative development of such. In this commentary, issues pertaining to the challenges and possible risks emerging technologies may pose for the users will be discussed, addressing treatment and harm prevention, whilst focussing on a call for increased corporate social responsibility and user protection.

EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

Swanton et al. (2020) view emerging technologies as encompassing the Internet, but also blockchain, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality, and make the point that technological development is ongoing and therefore policies should incorporate new developments as and when they occur, stressing decision making and behavioural engagement in activities that may put the user at risk of harm (Swanton et al., 2020). Some of these have been outlined in a

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report by the [Royal College of Psychiatrists \(2020\)](#) in the context of young people's technology use. These risks include sacrificing alternative activities and social time for engagement with technology, exposure to disturbing content and online bullying, risks of exploitation, ease of spending, and negative impacts on mental and physical health (including sleep, weight, mood, body image, and addiction).

PROBLEMATIC TECHNOLOGY USE

However, it needs to be noted that technology use is not problematic per se. It is acknowledged that the use of technology can benefit and enhance users' lives in multiple ways. This includes the convenient and mobile accessibility of services, such as shopping and entertainment, and the opportunity to engage socially across time and space boundaries, with supportive communities contributing to improvements in mental health and wellbeing ([Harkin, Beaver, Dey, & Choong, 2017](#)). Notwithstanding the necessary caution not to over-pathologise everyday technology use behaviours ([Billieux, Schimmenti, Khazaal, Maurage, & Heeren, 2015](#)), some individuals may experience various problems as a consequence of their engagement with technology, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress, and addiction. Treatment of problems once they have manifested may be required ([Kuss & Pontes, 2019](#)). There is now a formal diagnosis under which treatment can be provided. In 2019, the World Health Organisation included *Gaming Disorder* formally in their eleventh edition of the International Classification of Diseases, officially recognising addictive gaming as a mental health concern, which can now be legitimately diagnosed on behalf of recognised healthcare providers. This official acknowledgement has provided a strong backdrop on which to base decisions with regards to treatment development and provision, as enabled by healthcare systems in different countries across the world. As a consequence, in the UK, the country's first specialised treatment centre, the Centre for Internet and Gaming Disorders, was opened as part of the National Centre for Behavioural Addictions, under the auspices of the National Healthcare System, providing expert help to individuals affected by symptoms and repercussions of excessive gaming and related mental health concerns ([NHS, 2019](#)).

Whilst treatment provision is required for some individuals experiencing severe symptoms of mental health problems associated with their technology overuse, it is recognised that prevention is better than cure ([Department for Health and Social Care, 2018](#)). In order to protect individuals from harms, strategies need developing and efforts need intensifying in getting together multiple stakeholder opinions to address prevention and protection opportunities. Starting relevant measures early is indispensable for success. However, current efforts regarding prevention initiatives are limited. The relevant empirical research requires to define problematic behaviours more accurately, use better psychometric tools for assessment, and reconsider time spent as main outcome. In addition to this, evidence-based

prevention plans should target the improvement of skills, emphasise protection and harm minimisation, and include problematic Internet use among different behaviours identified as risky and potentially harmful ([Throuvala, Griffiths, Rennoldson, & Kuss, 2019](#)).

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND COLLABORATIVE POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Corporate social responsibility measures are called for. Consumer protection becomes an even more pressing issue with the emergence of gambling-like items and activities in games, including 'loot boxes', which contain randomised in-game content, but must be purchased with actual currency outside of the game, and 'skins', cosmetic items that can be monetised in the game. Loot boxes have been found to entice gamers to play problematically and to generate additional profits for the gaming industry, including from young gamers ([Zendle, Meyer, & Over, 2019](#)). From an ethical perspective, this is highly problematic in the light of consumer protection. These kinds of micro-transactions are exploitative by using behavioural data derived from the gamer's in-game activities to tailor the available items and their cost in the game to the gamer's gaming behaviours, preferences and their previous spending, prey on their psychological commitment to the game and violate consumer protection guarantees ([King et al., 2019](#)).

It is not only the gaming industry that must increase their corporate social responsibility measures. The social media industry has come under serious criticism following data breaches in the context of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which used Facebook user data mining to target specific users with electoral messages with the aim to influence voting behaviours ([European Commission, 2018](#)). As a consequence, Facebook decided to change their terms and services to be more transparent about how user data are being used for targeted advertising ([European Commission, 2019](#)). This is a step in the right direction in safeguarding users and their data. At the same time, it has been suggested to impose a levy on the industry which may be in proportion to their profits to support research and stakeholder engagement, in line with established duty of care measures put forward by the gambling industry. Moreover, it has been suggested that loot boxes require better regulation in line with jurisdiction in countries that view them as a way to gamble. The introduction of a yellow card warning system has been suggested in line with the system available for pharmaceuticals to address harms. Age appropriate design and data protection law implementation has also been called for ([Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2020](#)).

[Swanton et al. \(2020\)](#) stress the requirement for collaboration to establish policies based on scientific research. In the UK, relevant efforts have led to the Government Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to call for scientific evidence regarding the impact of social media and screen use on young people's health, as well as for immersive and addictive technologies, including social media and gaming. In the context of policy and regulations regarding social media use



and gaming in the UK, recommendations include the development of educational materials and guidelines to be integrated within children and adolescents' teaching and learning, in addition to mandatory social media awareness sessions for parents and teachers, as well as focussing on a multiple stakeholder approach, bringing together young technology users, their families and teachers, research, clinicians and the social media and gaming industry. Additionally, it has been advocated to establish policies to reduce addiction risk in line with research on behavioural data shared by the gaming industry. It has furthermore been stressed that the industry has a duty of care and must engage in corporate social responsibility actions to safeguard users, which may be enforced by the government and supported by the relevant research base (Griffiths, Lopez-Fernandez, Throuvala, Pontes, & Kuss, 2018; Kuss et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

Taken together, Swanton et al.'s (2020) call for increased responsibility measures including the duty of care of both governments and industry to safeguard users from harm and to develop a strategic multinational policy framework is indispensable in a time where ubiquitous and mobile technology use is the status quo. Vulnerable users need to be safeguarded and protected from technology use-related harms. We must work together to create safe spaces and tools and support economical and targeted prevention programmes in line with establishing government policy and regulation informed by research evidence. As users of technology, parents, teachers, researchers, clinicians, technology companies and governments we have a collective responsibility to ensure technology can be used in a healthy and beneficial way, risk is reduced and harm is prevented.

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