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"It rings therefore I exist": Issues of emotional development in the digital world

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Abstract

In this paper, we have attempted to sketch the emotional space that ICTs now occupy in our lives at exponentially increasing speeds, before we have had enough time to fully grasp this development. Gradually computers and smartphones have become extensions of our psychical bodies in a manner that Marshall McLuhan (1964), one of the founders of communication and media studies, had foreseen back in the 1960s, well before the advent of the Internet. Today, ICTs are being carried around with us wherever we are, as extensions of the mind and body. They are always at our disposal for the provision of information, emotional connection, company and even relief. They have opened an exciting new world, but at the same time they are changing the way we think, feel about, and relate to this world - not always to our benefit. The psychological impact of ICTs is stronger for children, adolescents and young adults. They were born and raised in this digitally saturated environment where, from the start, ICTs can become emotionally invested objects which provide continuous soothing and acknowledgement of existence. But they can also obstruct individuation and separation processes, and weaken the capacity for salutary solitude. The research we present here indicates that the emotional relationship young users build with ICTs as objects shares some qualities with transitional experience. But, contrary to the healthy aspects of transitional objects, ICTs seem never to lose their meaning with time or become diffused by other experiences and relationships. Rather, they tend to remain unchallenged objects of dependence, keeping their user developmentally stuck in relation to transitional phenomena, in ways similar to those Winnicott (1951/1992) associated with addiction.