Digital Media Usage in Art Therapy: A Brief Overview

By: Jordan Anthony Gonzales, AMFT

Digital media usage is so prolific in everyday life in the United States that it is often a major factor in therapeutic treatment. This is especially true for adolescents who are digital natives, individuals who have been raised in a digitally saturated environment and have inherently learned digital literacy by interacting with technology daily since, or soon after, birth (Choe, 2017; Garner, 2017). Today's children and adolescents have been exposed to technology-filled environments, including classrooms, after-school programs, and medical settings; they often view digital technology as a comfortable medium for productivity, entertainment, communication, and identity formation (Choe, 2017; Diggs, Lubas & De Leo, 2015; Thong, 2007).

Ninety-two percent of 13 to 17-year-olds use the Internet at least once a day, 87 percent have access to a laptop or desktop, 81 percent have access to a gaming console, and 73 percent have access to a smartphone (Lenhart, 2015).   A demographic survey conducted by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) in 2017, found that video game console ownership was 67 percent in U.S. households, similar to other technological devices. Sixty-seven percent of parents report playing video games with their children at least once a week. This is often done not only to ensure safety, but also to socialize and bond with their children (ESA, 2017).

Social media use is at a similarly high rate, with 88 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds stating they use any form of social media, with Snapchat (78 percent), Instagram (71 percent), Facebook (80 percent), and YouTube (94 percent) being especially popular. Eighty-two percent of 18 to 24-year-olds stated they use Snapchat on a daily basis, with 71 percent using it multiple times a day. These figures are similar for 18 to 24-year-old Instagram users, of whom 81 percent report using it daily and 71 percent reported multiple times daily (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Digital technologies have a complex and far-reaching impact on both a macro and micro level (Miller, 2018). The increase in digital technology and social media use has led to the formation of a digital culture, where digital usage influences patterns of behavior, cognition, communication, and relationships (Carlton, 2014; Choe, 2017; Kapitan, 2007). Children and adolescents are not only heavily impacted by their digital exposure but also utilize digital technology as a means of identity experimentation and formation (Thomas & Johansen, 2012; Vasalou & Joinson, 2009; Villani, Gatti, Confalonieri, & Riva 2012). This is especially evident in Role-Playing Games (RPGs) in which players are offered numerous ways to customize their characters to fit their own personality over the lifetime of the game.

Anstatd, Bradley, & Burnette (2013) found that in the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-

Playing Game (MMORPGs) Second Life, players often had multiple accounts; differences in accounts included fundamental identifiers such as race, gender, profession, body type, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Thomas and Johansen (2012) utilized Second Life to measure body image and self-esteem, finding that participants often created a character that embodied their idealized body type. Villani et al. (2012) noted that adolescents' use of MMORPGs provides an opportunity to explore various aspects of self-identity in a flexible virtual environment that often transitions into the physical world.

While children and adolescents have already harnessed digital mediums for their own growth, various psychotherapy fields have been less proactive. In the field of art therapy, there has historically been hesitation in adopting digital mediums due to ethical ramifications of digital storage and the cool, non-tactile nature of digital mediums in comparison to traditional mediums (Garner, 2017; Orr, 2006, 2012). Asawa (2009) theorized that this hesitation is likely due to art therapists' desire to use mediums that are comfortable for themselves in addition to the client. More recent art therapy literature argues that digital mediums present inherent advantages and drawbacks, much like traditional art mediums currently used by art therapists (Choe, 2017; Orr, 2016).

Orr (2012) noted that individuals often interact with digital mediums daily, in contrast to most traditional art mediums such as paint, clay, or drawing materials. Such interaction has been theorized to make digital mediums a less intimidating medium for artmaking, especially for digital natives who are less exposed to traditional mediums (Choe, 2017; Diggs, Lubas & De Leo, 2015). Digital mediums also present a wide range of creative options that encourage exploration, with the ability to manipulate and multiply images with little consequence to the overall image.

There are specific populations for whom digital mediums may prove more appropriate than other traditional mediums. A phenomenological study of adults with developmental disabilities who created art on tablets found that participants appreciated the "clean" manner in which colors could be "mixed" and felt a stronger level of independence than with traditional mediums, with which they may need assistance with tasks such as color mixing or cutting paper (Darewych, Carlton & Farrugie, 2015). In addition, digital mediums present inherent advantages in certain environments, such as medical settings, where infection control is paramount. The compact and contained nature of digital devices ensures easy sanitation and transportation within hospitals while maintaining patient safety (David, 2016).

There are, of course, inherent challenges with digital mediums as well. Garner (2017)

noted the "deceptive nature" of digital media in that it both yields instant gratification and can be harnessed as a tool for complex creative tasks over a significant period. Orr (2010) noted another paradox of digital media in that there exists a cultural inclusivity of digital media especially for communication and community building, yet it also places the user in lonely interaction with their device only.

While digital media has several unique traits in comparison to traditional media, the interpretation and gaining of therapeutic information from digital artwork is similar. Focus is placed on both the art-making process, final image, and personal meaning (Thong, 2007). Thus, digital mediums should not be considered the "end all" medium but as another additional option for art therapists to utilize (Orr, 2016; Peterson, 2010).

There have been numerous calls for increased training and adoption related to digital culture and digital media within the field of art therapy (Asawa, 2009; Choe, 2017; Gonzales, 2018; Orr, 2012; Peterson, 2010). Researchers have recognized that digital technologies have intertwined into everyday life and are a vital form of information gathering and processing for digital natives, especially children and adolescents. The harnessing of digital mediums as a therapeutic tool is vitally needed to meet the needs of an increasingly digitally native population (Choe, 2017; Gonzales, 2018; Orr, 2012).

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