

## **Do Psychologists Need to Know About Twerking? Why Staying Current with Adolescent Culture is Critical to Effective Research and Practice**

**Kelly-Ann Allen**

Toorak College, Mount Eliza  
The Melbourne Graduate School of Education  
The University of Melbourne  
*kellya@toorakc.vic.edu.au*

**Tracii Ryan**

Department of Psychology  
RMIT University

**Meredith O'Connor**

Institute of Positive Education  
Geelong Grammar School, Department of  
Paediatrics, The University of Melbourne  
Murdoch Childrens Research Institute  
Royal Children's Hospital

**Nerelie C. Freeman**

School of Psychology & Psychiatry  
Monash University

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**Abstract:** *Through social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Facebook), twerking became an online phenomenon in 2013 among young people in many Western countries, but has yet to appear in any scholarly discussions. This paper explores how well psychologists who are working with young people are 'keeping up' with a rapidly changing social landscape of popular youth culture, and whether it is important for them to do so. We argue that the hypermediacy of current adolescent culture poses significant challenges to the field of psychology in translating relevant, meaningful, and timely research and intervention. In identifying challenges currently experienced by psychologists that hamper efforts to maintain social cohesion with young people, we offer suggestions on how psychologists can address these challenges in research and practice.*

**Keywords:** *social cohesion, psychology, adolescent mental health, popular culture, social media, twerking, SNS, youth*

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With a focus on rapid exchanges of information across the globe, social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) have had a radical impact on adolescent development (e.g., identity formation; Carroll & Kirkpatrick, 2011; Davis, 2012; Ito et al. 2008). In fact, adolescent popular culture and language is changing more drastically and at a faster rate than ever before. Today's youth live in an influential culture of increasing *immediacy* and *hypermediacy*, or perspectives shaped by visual representations through new media (Marvin, Bolter, & Grusin, 1999). However, the implications of the information age for psychologists who work with adolescents has not yet been thoroughly discussed. In comparison to the rapid, dynamic, and ephemeral sharing of information by young people today, information disseminated within scholarly research and clinical resources can seem anachronistically slow.

The influence of social media use on the lives of adolescents illustrates a need for psychologists and other professionals working with adolescents to *stay current* with adolescent culture. If this is not achieved, young people may perceive a gap in their shared understanding with mental health practitioners. This may have the unwanted effect of discouraging adolescents from engaging with support services. Indeed, research suggests that Australian adolescents may be reluctant to seek help from a school counsellor (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010; Sawyer et al., 2012). Moreover, US research suggests that the perception that school psychologists were *out of touch* was a barrier to students' *help seeking* (Gulliver et al., 2010). In contrast, Derosé and Varda (2009) assert that an awareness of contemporary issues can lead to enhanced social capital for psychologists – specifically, increased opportunities for referrals and a stronger presence within the school community (for a review on social capital see Scrivens & Smith, 2013). This occurs when an adolescent recognises that a psychologist understands popular youth culture, and he or she spreads the word to other students. Hence, understanding what is important to adolescents is critical to both engaging clients and helping them to achieve better mental health outcomes.

Discussion of this issue has been framed around the concept of social cohesion (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Social cohesion refers to the ability of a society's constituents to cooperate with social norms (Koonce, 2011), and has been described as the degree of connectivity between individuals' "feelings, beliefs, actions, and behaviour" (Mooij, Smeets, & de Wit, 2011, p. 370). Researchers, practitioners, and educators promote social cohesion by providing many opportunities for young people to internalise the dominant social norms and cultural understandings necessary for meaningful contributions (Koonce, 2011). However, it seems uncertain whether social media use is hindering the efforts of psychologists to understand and remain abreast of adolescent culture, thereby reducing their ability to promote social cohesion.

By exploring the difficulties faced by psychologists in staying current with the language, norms, and social structures of adolescent popular culture, this paper attempts to describe the challenges currently experienced by psychologists that hamper efforts to maintain social cohesion with young people, highlight the importance of social cohesion in the profession, and offer practical strategies for addressing challenges in research and practice.

## **1. THE CHALLENGE: SPEED OF INFORMATION TRANSFER IN ADOLESCENT POPULAR CULTURE VS PSYCHOLOGY**

One topical example of the time lag between changes in adolescent culture and the appearance of research evidence is the controversial performance by Miley Cyrus at the 2013 MTV Music Awards (MTV, 2013). Cyrus' sexually suggestive dance moves quickly resulted in over seven million views on YouTube and created a *twerking* phenomenon among youth. The word *twerking*, was added to *Oxford Dictionaries Online* (2013) as a "dance to popular music in a sexually provocative manner involving thrusting hip movements and a low, squatting stance," and landed on a university's list of banished words (PBS, 2013). Yet despite the popularity and notoriety of this meme, and the potential risks associated with uploading videos of sexually suggestive dance moves, a search of the peer-reviewed psychological literature returned no results. Similarly, the psychological processes associated with *neknomination* - which involves accepting a challenge to drink large quantities of alcohol and posting video evidence on Facebook - are yet to be researched by scholars. This lack of published research is concerning, given that this dangerous fad has led to the deaths of multiple young people (Wilkinson & Soares, 2014).

These observations demonstrate a striking contrast between the way information is disseminated and received in adolescent culture, as compared to psychological practice. As a result of the often drawn-out peer review processes and intermittent publishing times of academic journals, psychological research is communicated to others only after a considerable time lag. Although research findings could be disseminated more rapidly by using online resources such as social media, blogs, and podcasts, some academics have been hesitant to engage (Anderman, 2011). Unfortunately, reliance on more traditional methods of dissemination presents a significant barrier to sharing information in a timely manner, particularly to individuals for whom the information would be of most benefit (e.g., policy makers, educators, and young people).

Even between psychological practitioners, information exchange can be problematic and slow. Active empirical research in the field has been made increasingly difficult by a decline in tertiary programs (Gilmore, Fletcher, & Hudson, 2013), variations in the conceptual understanding of the role of psychologists working with young people (Topping & Lauchlan, 2013), and time, funding, and resources. Psychologists who practice at the *coal face* with youth may be somewhat more successful at integrating information derived from new technologies into their practices (e.g., Caplan, 2007; Gold & Gold, 2012; Ryan & Xenos, 2011), while researchers may be particularly disadvantaged in becoming aware of new trends (Furlong, 2011). A lack of collaboration between research and practice can thus mean that research fails to capitalise on the knowledge practitioners hold about current phenomena in adolescent culture.

Clearly, disparity exists between the speed of information transfer amongst adolescents when compared to psychologists. Our concern is that this lag creates a gulf between the experiences of youth and the understanding of psychologists. This gulf not only limits the effectiveness of treatment, but may also reduce adolescents' interest in reaching out for treatment in the first place. In addition, a lack of collaboration between research psychologists and practicing psychologists in regards to the state of adolescent culture can impact on the relevance of published research. It is therefore necessary to identify areas in which improvements can be made.

## **2. HOW CAN PSYCHOLOGISTS BE MORE SOCIALLY COHESIVE?**

Promoting mental health and treating mental health problems are key roles of practicing psychologists. Mental health is a socially mediated phenomenon contextualised in time and place, and experienced through the lens of cultural understandings (Saraga, Gholam-Rezaee, & Preisig, 2013). For example, Gold and Gold (2012) found that the *Truman Show* notion - that one's every move is being filmed for the entertainment of others - is an increasingly observed delusion in psychosis due to the prominence of this idea in contemporary culture. This highlights the importance for psychologists to understand the social landscape that forms young people's mental health in order to sensitively and effectively help them. Evidence suggests that mental health interventions that address cultural differences, and are tailored to meet the needs of particular cultural groups, do indeed achieve better outcomes for clients (Griner & Smith, 2006). Hence, how do we boldly face this new challenge in our work as psychologists? We outline some possibilities below.

### **2.1. Reducing the Research and Practice Disconnect**

Since a lack of social cohesion is likely to adversely impact the quality of services that psychologists provide, it is imperative to identify how this issue can be addressed in the field. Reducing the research and practice disconnect, which can often occupy different *worlds* with little crossover (Lilienfeld, Ammirati, & David, 2012), could be one starting point. Since practitioners are influenced by their daily contact with young people, they may be more likely to recognise the influence of popular culture (e.g., twerking) than researchers. By recognising the complimentary needs for evidence-based practice and practice-informed evidence, psychology researchers can capitalise on practitioner expertise when designing methods for bringing the issues that matter most for today's young people to the forefront (Kazdin, 2008). The growing discipline of knowledge translation (the ability to bridge, translate, and interpret information) suggests that it is possible to promote effective two-way conversations between researchers and practitioners (Hunter, 2013), such as through direct collaborations (Kazdin, 2008).

### **2.2. Supporting the Development of Media Literacy**

Miley Cyrus' controversial performance provided one example of what Curnutt (2012) deemed a "by product of our evolving relationship with digital media" (p. 365). The development of media literacy or 'digital citizenship' is very much a relevant topic for psychologists, since researchers do not yet fully understand the relationships that exist between our youth and the media (Shaw et al., 2010). Since training may largely influence how psychologists approach the population they serve, psychology programs at universities would benefit from the inclusion of media literacy studies within course structures and curriculum. Increased knowledge sharing from researchers on media literacy is also crucial so that practical guidelines can be accessible for all psychological professionals. A study by Kim and colleagues (2011) discovered that young adults used social media as an information source. While Wikipedia was the most used site in order to obtain material, social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook was utilised in order to acquire everyday-life information. User reviews in YouTube as well as answers in Q&A sites such as *Yahoo! Answers* were also important information tools. These websites appeared to be valuable as well in academic-related situations. With these findings, it is important that professionals and educators peruse social media in order to disseminate quality information, adjunctive to more traditional ways of sharing information. It is also important for professionals to educate young individuals on how to critically assess information, and to recognise reliable data.

### **2.3. The use of Social Media to Disseminate Research**

Researchers are challenged to intentionally and directly disseminate results to further our understanding of adolescent health and development through venues and mediums beyond the traditional routes (e.g., journal publications or research conferences; Anderman, 2011). As modern technology continues to produce issues that highlight new needs and competencies for children and youth, researchers require outlets where findings can *go viral* while the issues are still current. The same media that impacts today's youth, such as Facebook, YouTube, and blogging (Mewburn & Thomson, 2013), can be used to translate research into meaningful change. Reflecting this, regulatory bodies, researchers, practitioners, and other consumers of research are experiencing an ongoing erosion of the cultural and spatial boundaries that have traditionally separated theory and practice (Anderman, 2011). If used appropriately, the use of viral content and alternative forms of

dissemination to advance scholarship can increase our ability to generate public capital in a way that is accessible and useful (Anderman, 2011).

#### **2.4. Working Collaboratively with Young People and Schools**

In daily practice, psychologists can improve social cohesion by involving young people in their work and asking for input into the support services offered in schools. The inherently subjective nature of most of the dimensions of mental health and illness means that consideration of young people's experiences and views are essential (Hamilton & Redmond, 2010). Moreover, incorporating young people's voice into psychological research is important from a rights perspective, adding to a rich and more complex picture of their health and wellbeing (ARACY & NSW CCYP). For example, Wyn (2008) reviewed Australian studies that examined young people's concerns through qualitative research methodologies, and found that physical safety, the ability to make decisions, and having a positive sense of self were central dimensions. Providing more opportunities for such two-way conversations with young people could be one way to keep research and practice in touch with the realities of adolescent lives. Ideally, conversations should take place among researchers, practitioners, educators *and* representative members of the adolescent population they serve.

Psychologists can also play a key role in developing the resources that support teachers to help youth develop the skills to be critical consumers of media. In order to fully address the complex and deeper social issues that *viral* phenomena stem from, psychologists need to consider media literacy along with interdisciplinary partnerships (i.e., cultural and media studies). Commitments to long-term collaborative relationships with teachers and school policy makers are also needed when considering the impact of media trends on psychological issues (Burns & Durran, 2007).

### **3. CONCLUSION**

This paper explored the challenges psychologists may face in keeping abreast of youth-related issues amidst our rapidly changing information age. We have identified various difficulties the profession faces in order to remain socially cohesive to best support the health and wellbeing of adolescents. Possible ways for our field to encourage social cohesion include supporting the development of media literacy, using social media to disseminate research, and working collaboratively with young people and schools, in order to work towards bridging the gap between all partners who have an investment in supporting youth development, including young people themselves. Media literacy and the use of new technologies can not only help us keep up-to-date with popular youth culture, but can also promote reciprocal dissemination practices among those concerned with supporting young people. By becoming familiar with the cultural moments that capture adolescents' digital attention, we can increase the validity of our intervention and prevention focus. Staying *up to date* will of course be an ongoing challenge: though relevant this week, next week will be another story - and another opportunity to use a real-world incident to educate and find common ground while supporting our youth.

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#### **AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY**

##### **Kelly-Ann Allen**

Toorak College, Mount Eliza and The Melbourne Graduate School of Education. The University of Melbourne

##### **Meredith O'Connor**

Institute of Positive Education, Geelong Grammar School; Department of Paediatrics, The University of Melbourne; Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, Royal Children's Hospital

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**Tracii Ryan**

Department of Psychology, RMIT University

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