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A Review of the Integration of Media Usage and Online Therapy Methods as an Alternative to Standard Therapy Settings

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Abstract

The following literature review measures the efficacy of media usage from the standpoint of mental health specialists wanting to administer therapy to married couples or individuals living remotely. Given the current pandemic of coronavirus in the current moment of societal development (April 2020), the need for remote services to be evaluated based from past research on the topic has never been greater, or more opportune than now. Are online or teletherapies as effective as traditional face-to-face settings in America today? With rising demand for mental health professionals in our technology-saturated society, the need to perform new evaluations on the topic are critical to the well-being of those dependent on these fields, particularly in a time of enclosure where tensions or stressors may be at an all time high. The relationship between media usage and marriage is explored, the findings of past reviews and research compiled and investigated, and how these findings apply to our world both inside and outside a pandemic setting are analyzed.

Keywords: Online Therapy, Media Usage, Marriage Relationships, Pandemic, Review.

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Like no other time in human history before, technological advances in our daily lives have shown the various degrees by which we are affected by technology and media usage. Many who hear the phrase "technology" today may find their thoughts automatically thinking of devices members of our society are often quite fond of, such as cell phones, video games, VR headsets and computer screens full of engaging material all over the internet. Yet one must ask if these commonly associated items are in reality what mainly consitute a long-coming wave of technological developments in recent decades. Adult heterosexual romantic and marital relationships, the most common of human bonds in the history of the world, have adapted in many ways due to the increase, evolution, and wide distribution of technology in this day and age. Couples therapists in recent decades have had the gain of access to virtual connection with these families, and thus the question arises whether online mediums are a reliable means of administering thrapy. This essay will address how media usage and marriages correlate in different ways, how online therapy acts as a recent development in the past years has been measured in its success, the potential applications of online therapy in a Coronavirus stricken world, and what these links could mean in both positive and negative developments, and where past research is adequate to make accurate decisions in regards for therapist and clientele needs.

Section 1 – Overview of Marriage and Media Usage

Media, as defined within this literature review, is defined as the use of technology in the popular forms of cell phones, video gaming, streaming or television shows, social media platforms, recreational computer internet usage, and online video platforms like YouTube. The development of media of all kinds, movies, shows, streaming services, mobile phones, the internet and social media

have begun to show correlations with the relationship of romantic couples, as current generations continue to adapt to technological growth in society. Marriage, in this review will be the main family structure of reference, though some data includes cohabiting couple in its results, a necessity that will be explained in the paper's Discussion section. This paper will focus on heterosexual marriage as the primary focus of study. Heterosexual marriage is by far the longest standing officially recognized union in world history, and has great need to be examined under the influence of tech development as it becomes increasingly more complex and pervasive in our personal lives.

As an example of how common media engagement is, just from 5 years ago research has shown that 65% of American adults engage in social media (Perry, 2015), a tenfold increase from 2005, and has no doubt increased as time as gone on. Facebook as a social media platform alone has grossed over 2 *billion* users worldwide as of 2019 (Clemens, 202). This large increase did not include the myriad of other facets that the media platforms like streaming services, the internet, and others which would only add to the massive increase. The development comes with positive and negative outcomes, as the new mediums of media have had more time to assert themselves into our culture, showing more and more the effects they tend to have on married individuals.

It is common knowledge that all things can be taken too far, and technology use taken to the extreme is no exception. Within the context of marriage, the beginnings of negative results seem to occur when emotional connection suffers in a marriage. Excessive media usage can detract from the vitality of a marriage, infers widely renowned Dr. John Gottman (2012), as his research notes the "bids", or actions performed by spouses vying for the attention of the other. If hyper-preoccupation with media related activities occurs, Gottman's data suggests that many a marriage's feeling of positive sentiment, or the general feeling of positivity within a relationship, will gradually deteriorate consequently. In this regard women in particular were a concern for several researchers in terms of emotional connection and "technoference" (technological interference) potentially

lowering relationship satisfaction (McDaniel, 2016a). In in a sample of 143 women in a married or cohabiting relationship, 70% of women reported technoference that interrupted their everyday interactions. Those interruptions, particularly around the dinner table or during conversations (33-35%), were related to lower relationship satisfaction and increased conflict over technology use in the home. The use of media can detract from the well-being of these marriage or other romantic relationships.

These kinds of results have often been translated into warnings voiced by several members of society, perhaps by those uncomfortable with the novelty of a new way of life, but not all see heavy media use as necessarily a negative development. The counterargument to such claims is often made in citing benefits such as the increased connection that people now have to loved ones across far distances. Media chat services have been measured to be positively associated with reports of positive connection when face-to-face or audio conversations occurred with significant others, though the findings were not as significantly correlated however in regards to texting only (Goodman-Deane, 2016). Those who cite media usage as a medium for marital breakdown (McDaniel, 2016b), were those with lower satisfaction levels, higher levels of ambivalence, and greater levels of avoidance attachment reported higher levels of infidelity-related behaviors. Though most do not participate in such activities online according to McDaniel, the number who did show significant relationship issues related to the activity. It may be difficult for some to separate their own prejudice against or bias for technology's role in the world today, yet despite one's personal opinion, technology is still developing, and will not likely abate in it's progress.

The findings from the study seem consistent in comparison, that the technology itself does not necessarily prove to be detrimental to marriages unless used in ways to propagate infidelity (pornography usage, communication with extramarital partners, etc.). Another way that the results tend to agree is if the technology is distracting individuals by means that prevent the attention of

one spouse to adequately achieve meaningful connection on a consistent basis. It seems the lack of emotional connection in marriage settings, as opposed to the use of media itself proves to be the core issue, as cited by Gottman previously (2012).

Technology is miraculous to those seeking to connect with loved ones or significant others across a distance, allowing for audio or even face-to-face communication across the globe. Such access allows for marital couples to keep in contact despite the separation. However social media and advertisements on mobile devices can be negatively associated with exacerbation of emotional insecurities. Some cultural ideals that are not necessarily healthy or even possible to attain in regards to body image or appearance are associated with reports of lower levels of self esteem, and increases in self-loathing (Johnson et. al 2007). The examples range far and wide in regards to how social media can be utilized. Most positive examples of media usage such as Goodman-Deane's findings stem from the extended ability to communicate despite distances that a century ago could scarcely be reached by post (2016). Most negative developments seem to stem from negative feedback on self worth, over-comparison with the social images that others post, and cyber-bullying. The controversial nature of the change in our world's social fabric is not uncalled for from the development in technology, as there are ample ways for it to be used for both positive and negative purposes.

Past and Current Findings with Therapy and Media

There have been methods of therapy that have been documented in testing more so than others. For example, online administration of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy have already been tested in the context of individual counseling, while Emotionally Focused Therapy however has yet to make a documented attempt in study form of the effectiveness of this approach (Ruuward, 2012; Hollinghurst, 2010). In a preliminary study done on online therapy, self-reporting clientele reported

a generally positive therapy experience despite lack of face-to-face conversations. With audio calls and text/email services incorporated, the experience was reported as satisfactory for many participants, though the study was small in sample size (Cook & Doyle, 2002). Video chat evidence had not been as widely considered at the time as its availability was still in its budding stage.

Years later, however, reviews of the literature by University of Dublin's Derrek Richards and Noemi Vigano, online therapy ratings indicate that Cook and Doyle's findings were consistent to their claim of therapys' efficacy, even a decade after the preliminary study's results (2013). The study went through an in depth meta-analysis of the 123 relevant journal articles out of over 2000 potentials, including most of the relevant articles that had been published up to that point in 2013. Findings showed a similar positive outlook for the development, yet still acknowledged the tenuousness of the base of evidence that existed. The need for more research in the field was firmly asserted, despite the breadth of the study, something very clear as most relevant sources for this review date from early 2000's to 2013.

More recent studies have noted the presence of mindfulness in the evolution of the common forms of therapy in both individuals and couples. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) are part of a newer wave of treatments that have allowed forms of therapy such Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) to help care for the one's self in a self-aware and self-compassionate way. Separation of one's self from the perceived problem can quite helpful for clients, as is shown by Cognitive Behavioral Therapy at its core when dealing with "cognitive distortions". DBT therapy also deals with helping clientele with mindfulness exercises geared to help detach the enmeshed state of these negative ideologies.

According to a more recent meta-analysis by Spijkerman, Pots, and Bohlmeijer (2016), showing the impact of online-led MBI's, in comparison to online ACT guided therapy, showed significant that MBI's in certain online situations can benefit study participants' even more than

online guided ACT exercises. In contrast with hypothesized assumptions that lack of in-person cues would detract from the experience (Alleman, 2002), the data from 3 meta-analyses cited from existing literature all tend to agree that for therapy in general, online methods of administration are effective means of improving well being, as are in-person sessions.

Section 2 – Online Therapy in a Pandemic Context

Past studies have investigated the relationship with media usage as a medium of administering therapy, yet the field still stands to grow in this aspect. The need for updates is clear by observing that few literature reviews on the subject have been done within the past 5 years. Future research will be necessary in order to further establish the efficacy of these methods in administering these therapies in concordance with technological presentations (videos, audio clips), or to perform the regular therapy virtually altogether. With the development of the Coronavirus pandemic in recent months of 2020, the demand for virtual media services has gone from a pleasant alternative to a mandatory need in order for some practices to stay afloat in the country's current economic turmoil. Families who are forced to spend more time at home than before may very well find problems and stressors exacerbated, perhaps leading up to higher levels of domestic abuse or ongoing couple conflicts. Yet do the benefits of therapy outweigh the economic strain families are under today? With unemployment numbers reaching all time high numbers since the Great Depression according to Samuel Stebbins ("Unemployment", 2020), the need to show evidence of the benefits of and need for therapy, online or in-person, to help maintain domestic stability is great.

This unique time in our country has left millions economically strained or crippled, resulting in businesses adapting in creative and unexpected ways. Several questions arise of whether the strictly client-protected field of therapy can or should enter a more digital format. What are the advantages and the disadvantages of couples therapy performed virtually? Is the practice even viable

online? Are communications secure in the event of malware interruption or hacking? Are diagnostic capacities increased or decreased as a result of the virtual interaction? Several questions like these and more are perhaps forming in the minds of the therapy community. Due to the novel circumstances at hand, data is not yet available in regards to these questions in the context of the current pandemic. For future reference in similar shutdown scenarios as this, this kind of information could prove valuable, particularly in the case of domestic violence and perhaps offering digital interventions.

Discussion

After viewing the data and viewing both benefits and drawbacks that technology can bring, one may find themselves naturally gravitating in what many may believe of as a "happy medium" with media time and attention given to marriage relationships. Such as a rationale however as it seems too simple a solution for an increasingly complex phenomenon whose long term effects are still being investigated. Married couples are dealing with an attention economy that is unprecedented, making the need to know how to balance personal lives with technology usage all the more imperative.

It would seem to some to be common sense for one to believe that any cultural aspect, if negatively imbalanced or taken to an extreme, would prove detrimental for any one individual, group, or community of people. Yet technology alone could not be the single determinate in a complex culture such as the United States. There is little doubt that there are many confounding variables to be accounted for in the relationship between media trends and marital longevity. True, the information age presents unprecedented levels of media exposure never seen in the world before, making it tempting to assume recent changes occurring are a result of the rise in media

usage. Separating speculation with confounding variables will be one of the important distinctions necessary to make in future research.

I am of the impression based off of results that media is of itself a novel part of our lives, particularly for the past two decades. Media usage in of itself is inherently a use of time and attention like all pastimes (hence the name "pass-time's") and as such must be balanced properly with the level of attention given to the many demands of life, including maintaining marital equilibrium. Media simply expands the time and attention one gives to certain activities, activities that can bond spouses together (watching a movie together, playing an online game, etc.) and can prove harmful for their relationship also. Media is neither positive or negative, but is simply the platform to amplify messages to the entire public domain. Unlike smoking which generally has a negative effect on smokers and their close relationships, media is a much more neutral aspect of life.

The fact that media has become so pervasive in our culture in terms of how we function would lead one to naturally assume that therapy would evolve to match that trend. In regards to the functionality of therapy as a whole through the medium of audio connection only, mostly positive results have shown for the prospects of the practice. In the last 5 years as video chat platforms also continue to develop in their use throughout the public, the accessibility for clients to contact therapists and vice versa perhaps has never been greater.

Those worried about loss of cue connection between therapist and client may find the data suggests otherwise in past reviews of the literature on the subject. However, there can be little doubt that an updated, and more extensive, review must be conducted to report the proceedings in this development in therapist circles of what the data now predicts. The last major review of the relationship between online services and therapy was 7 years ago. Technology as we know it has changed a great deal since 2013, and as such calls for a reevaluation of the literature at large. If the

data continues to show similar correlations as have been found in the past regarding online efficacy via therapy, then it can safely be assumed that by and large it is certainly a viable option. Further developments of research may view how the quality of the media exposure during the therapy sessions (Video quality, audio clarity, and connection speeds via internet connection) may have a positive or negative effect upon clientele's perception of the session overall.

One weakness in several of the literature reviews was the lack of heterosexual -marriage specific data in regards to many of these findings. While individually and within couple settings the findings certainly apply, less known is the marriage-specific developments in regards to which online template is best, which of established approaches seem to be most efficacious, and if there are significant differences in therapy success in a marriage setting as opposed to cohabiting couples or individuals. Due to the cultural shift in our culture today away from marriage, and more towards cohabitation, these results may be more and more difficult to research on a wide scale as opposed to specific niche groups that threaten external validity.

Conclusion

In conclusion the relationship of media with marriages is as diverse as the nature of marriage was with prior external influences before the rise of the information age. It can be concluded by viewing the content of the studies presented within this paper that the development of technology as a whole today opens doors to expand upon the user's views, beliefs, choices, and actions like no other time before. Often the amount of attention that media usage can take can prove to be the more problematic factor in marriage relationships that are reported as unsatisfactory.

Those who receive online therapy as a means to help establish higher levels of well being will positively find, for the most part, that this method would work well for them. Since the early 2000's when the internet was catching on to our American culture, online communications have

soared in development, changing the format of communication on a global scale forever. This may open opportunities for more affordable means of treatment for mental disorders via psychotherapy throughout the world due to increase of accessibility via the internet, with the confidence of 20 years of research to support its claim.

In regards marriage, as long as the marriage is in a positive ratio of exchanges between spouses and the proper maintenance is done in order to preserve that sentiment, then the administration of therapy via media platforms will not detract from the overall experience. This is promising for situation-specific scenarios in the future, be it like today in a pandemic setting, or for remotely living married couples in need of assistance, the prospects for online therapy are optimistic. Keeping the proper amount of attention on a relationship is key to making any marriage succeed. As long as the necessary amount of positive sentiment is maintained, media will not break apart any marriage, but may very well help to strengthen it.

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