



## Digital culture and art therapy



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Digital natives  
Digital art therapy  
Digital media use in art therapy  
Multicultural considerations for digital media  
Conscious media adaptation

### ABSTRACT

This essay outlines the relevance of digital culture to art therapy, including native skills and activities that art therapists must grasp to become culturally competent with increasing numbers of clients. Because digital media use has expanded into daily life, the effects can be seen in routine communication and behaviors as well as influences in our language and thought processes. Children, youth, and adults are affected as ‘computer commons’ affiliation has increased for the general population of American society. Art therapists use digital media, both as tools of professional practice such as email, archiving, research, personal creativity, networking, and advertising practices, and as clinical tools including photography, animation, video, digital tablets, and augmented-reality software for therapeutic processes and outcomes. The author draws attention to digital divides previously identified in art therapy that illustrate ambivalence toward this media, including perceptions of traditional versus synthetic materials use, affordability and access issues, and a paucity of graduate education opportunities for adaptation and skill-building. Multicultural lenses of generational evolution, reactionary bias against technology, perils of colonized economy divides, and extreme responses including blind resistance or gullible adaptation to new media all provide arguments for art therapists to build ongoing competencies in and comprehension of computer technologies. Research and education can evolve to support art therapists’ informed and developmental learning with digital media in order to remain contemporary and to participate in ever-expanding creative palettes and conscious human–technology interfaces.

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### Digital culture

Digital culture is the integration and adaptation of comprehensive computer technologies for practical, creative, and connective platforms and practices. Beyond the physical limits of gear, tools, and software, new media are actively creating, remediating, and disseminating contemporary culture and cultural contexts (Blythe, Light, & O’Neill, 2007). As digital technologies have become all-encompassing in our daily lives, so has our membership in digital culture grown (López, 2012). Moreover, the large-scale utilization of computer tools and new technologies has shifted our communication, cognition, and behavior (Carr, 2008; Kapitan, 2007, 2009; Orr, 2010). McLuhan (1966) proposed we necessarily adapt to new ways of thinking and being in the world when we reorder our senses into new media. If the effects of technology use can be viewed as adaptive experiences within changing consciousness, then the study of our interdependence with these media raises complex questions.

Daily computer behaviors such as checking email accounts, completing multiple Google searches, visiting Facebook to see a

photo, and watching YouTube videos or TED talks reflect “new forms of expression and a subtle change in our expectation of what is possible” (Blythe et al., 2007, p. 5). Myriad computer technologies are shaping many aspects of our lived experience and reflect colonized daily communication practices (López, 2012). Media educator López (2012) wrote, “technology media is the plural form of medium, a medium being something that mediates communication” (p. 38). Furthermore, López considered media not as a “singular entity” (p. 38) but as “interacting ecologies of meaning” (p. 39) for anyone who has contact with multiple Internet platforms. The Cyberspace age has added non-physical, ‘virtual reality’ terrains of interactive space to the previous digital content stream from the Information age. These virtual spaces or “planetary communications commons” (López, 2012, p. 39) are created through the use of online systems, computer hardware, and software tools to virtually gather, archive, and share information, create graphics, sound files, identities, creative works, and resource a multitude of databases and sites across Internet space and time. While these common spaces have been described in both utopian and practical terms, there are perceived costs to technological environments. López (2012) asserted that technology-mediated environments are impacting our relationships to the natural world through physical space abstractions. He stated, “curiously, one of the greatest ironies of the globalization media commons is how it

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connects and disconnects us simultaneously” (p. 39). Virtual space and new media meld our physical bodies with ‘as if’ presence that propels us into the world of the ‘Net’ through representational means while we remain static and isolated at our computer screens (Orr, 2010). Online contact and communication with others is enhanced through sensory experiences of immediacy through symbolic representation while actual physical contact and knowing through body perception becomes disengaged (López, 2012). How these shifts in cognitive, psychological, and behavioral knowing are adapting new systems of reference to previous ones constitute relevant and timely inquiries.

Mass information disseminated through computers and new media has been both lauded as progress and denounced with skepticism. Postman (1998) described the human–technology interface as a “Faustian bargain” and stated “for every advantage a new technology offers, there is always a corresponding disadvantage. The disadvantage may exceed in importance the advantage, or the advantage may well be worth the cost” (para. 4). Technology historian Staudenmaier (1985) noted how America’s Industrial Revolution transmitted lore that the innovations of automating machinery would always be timesaving, helpful, and profitable. Specific benefits often ascribed to the computer are efficiency and immediacy of information access, communication, leisure entertainment, and work task completion and organization, via tools such as presentation platforms, email, and online networks of commerce and exchange (Carr, 2008). Counterpoint apprehensions regarding the computer often include privacy concerns and feared dependencies on machines that may result in the subsequent loss of human integrity. Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Terminator character or the fictional Borg race from Star Trek embody the hive-mind collective modeled on the mechanized thinking of computers. This conformity serves to threaten treasured human qualities including personal consciousness, sensate experiences, individualism, emotional connection to others, and creativity (Carr, 2008; Gerity, 2001; Kapitan, 2007). Interrelated concerns are the perceived identity shifts imposed by the automating and assimilating qualities of technology (Kapitan, 2009; Potash, 2009), “synthetic stimulation that blurs the boundaries of real and received experience to a dangerous degree” (Kapitan, 2009, p. 51), as well as our diminishing comprehension and control within the powerful watershed presence of burgeoning new technologies (Asawa, 2009). The magnitude of emergent technology and its cultural influences present multifaceted challenges and opportunities for digital media use in art therapy practice and education.

### Digital divides in art therapy

Art therapy and general population correlations for digital media use have reportedly shifted to a more even distribution in the last few years (Orr, 2012). Evidence is growing that art therapists utilize digital media for personal and professional use including an increasing adoption of therapeutic use (Kuleba, 2008; Orr, 2006b, 2012; Peterson, 2010; Peterson, Stovall, & Elkins, 2005). Art therapists using digital media maintain ongoing digital culture membership through their interest, purchase, upgrade, and continued use of digital media tools for creative and clinical work. Art therapists participate in communication networks as well as computing platforms that launch, display, and download software for their own creative art making (Chilton, Gerity, LaVorgna-Smith, & MacMichael, 2009; Malchiodi, 2009). Therapeutic digital media provided to clients may include the same or similar creative ‘apps’ for art making such as video, animation, digital drawing, collage, photography, and augmented reality software.

There has been a remarkably slow digital media adoption process for art therapists in comparison to the general population’s

use (Malchiodi, 2009; Orr, 2006b, 2012). Research explains this protracted process as historical reluctance to use the ‘synthetic’ new media, deferring to ‘traditional’ art forms valued as more therapeutic (Asawa, 2009; Gerity, 2001; Kapitan, 2007; Malchiodi, 2000; Orr, 2006b; Potash, 2009). Other barriers reported have been a lack of affordability and access (Malchiodi, 2000; Orr, 2006b; Peterson, 2010; Peterson et al., 2005) and an absence of professional training and learning experiences through the integration of new media in art therapy graduate programs (Asawa, 2009; Kapitan, 2009; Kuleba, 2008; Moon, 2010; Orr, 2012; Peterson, 2010). These research findings, or apparent digital divides within art therapy, might be identified as evidence of (1) art versus science valuations; (2) reflexive emotional reactions to technology; and (3) inequalities of access due to ability and economic circumstances. To elaborate, Kapitan (2007) described a significant digital divide in how fine art history distanced itself from synthetic art forms through the elevation of studio artists’ “purity” and the “handmade” qualities of their materials over the techies’ “demeaningly commercial forces of hybridization” (p. 50) with machines and science. Asawa (2009) referred to the other digital divides as both “emotional obstacles that art therapists face when engaging technology” (p. 58) and a “growing inequity of the information haves and have-nots” (p. 59) due to high costs of purchasing and maintaining digital media and computer tools.

New media learning is often self-taught and those practitioners become isolated in their clinical applications and uses. Art therapy has shown a critical lack of educational curricula inclusion to spur dialog or student development of competence through structured experimentation. As a result, art therapists are reported to feel under-skilled and under-qualified to engage in digital media with clients due to having had no or low exposure to applications and ethical practices in graduate programs (Ehinger, 2009; Kapitan, 2009; Kuleba, 2008; Orr, 2006b, 2012; Peterson, 2010). The author finds this educational gap to negatively impact meaningful discourse on digital media as a crucial choice for ever-expanding creative palettes and an adaptive response to an evolving world.

### Multicultural considerations for digital media inclusion in art therapy

#### *Generational influences*

Some art therapists might believe that a choice can be made about whether or not to engage with computer technology. An explicit choice might not exist due to technology’s exponentially growing presence for anyone with access to digital media, including young and future generations (Austin, 2009; Blythe et al., 2007; Edmunds, 2012). The increasing human–technology interface has schooled and immersed younger generations in the synthesis of technology into daily life. They have, therefore developed an “expertise and fluency with technology that those born before 1980 struggle to understand” (Edmunds, 2012, p. 11). Furthermore, digital media technologies have altered cultural norms among youth to such an extent that art therapists must attempt to grasp and follow the younger generation’s evolving communication and learning styles in order to practice competently with them (Austin, 2009; Blythe et al., 2007; Edmunds, 2012). Technology writer Carr (2008) suggested that it is not only our young that are being influenced by technology in the ways we think, process, and retain information. Media is affecting anyone using computers on a daily basis.

Differences in exposure to technology can create complexities of culture in art therapy practice as much as other intercultural considerations. Kalmanowitz and Potash (2010) promoted teaching non-art therapists the sensitive use of art materials and warned

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