What I didn't grow up with is dangerous: How personal experience impacts perceptions of

what corrupts today's youth

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Abstract

Throughout history, new technological/societal changes have been viewed with suspicion, their influences interpreted as damaging, corrupting, a potential cause of societal downfall. The youth of the day are particularly seen as the victims of such developments. Why do we keep seeing technology/societal change as being harmful to young people? Two studies (N = 1,702) examine what technological/social factors people believe contribute to the corruption of the youth. In a pilot study, American adults generated a list of technological/societal innovations that they viewed as particularly problematic for youth in assorted ways. In study 2, we mapped the belief that specific technological/societal changes are corruptive onto whether American adults experienced them while growing up. Here we show that people see more modern technologies as particularly corrupting of today's youth. We further show a robust within-person relationship between people's exposure to particular technologies in childhood and their belief that the experienced change is corrupting the youth of 'the present'. People are more likely to see technological/societal changes as corrupting if they did not experience it themselves growing up. Intriguingly, however, reminding people of their own exposure to a particular innovation growing up, reduces their perception of its potential harm, Thus, as society continues to progress with new innovations, we may continue to 'see' technological/societal changes we did not grow up with as corrupting the youth of the future—in a vicious cycle that may persist indefinitely or at least until its likely source (mere unfamiliarity) is more widely recognized.

<div align="center">**Introduction**</div>

People have been complaining about the corruption of the youth and the decline of society for thousands of years (Freeman, 1912; Smart, 1836). These apparent declines have, throughout history, been blamed on changes in society and technology. Social Media in the early 21st century has been seen as corrupting the youth (e.g. Twenge, 2018), yet concerns about the devastation the radio has on children (e.g. Preston, 1941; Wartella & Jennings, 2000) and the panic about radio's ability to create a single mass culture with no dissenting opinions (e.g. Davis, 1965; Swingewood, 1975) have faded. Nevertheless, in the early 20th century radio was seen as an invading force that crowded out more intellectual past times such as reading (Eisenberg, 1936; Wartella & Jennings, 2000). Reading, however, was the enemy in the 18th and 19th centuries, leading to the belief that novels led to a frittering away of the young mind (e.g. Hitchcock, 1710; Proulx, 2019; see also Furedi, 2015), while people in the early 21st century complain that the youth do not read enough (Protzko & Schooler, 2020). It appears that we cannot keep our stories straight across generations about *which* technological/societal changes are actually corruptive of the youth. Why do we keep doing this?

This study explores the role of personal experience in shifting perceptions of the technologies that put the youth of the day at risk. Importantly, we make no claims about the empirical status of *whether* a given technological/societal change is itself harmful (see, Orben & Przybylski, 2019 for effect sizes from correlational work, for example), but rather seek to understand a psychological underpinning of why society's focus keeps shifting across 'corrupting influences'.

Shifting Foci

Examples of historical complaints about the corrupting influences of then-present technological/societal changes abound and are entertaining to review (see Orben, 2020, for more examples). Socrates criticized writing as a technology that would degrade the youth as it "will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves" (Plato, 360bce/Jowett, 2019). One would be hard pressed to find people complaining about the corrupting influence of books, the printing press, or writing in the present.

It is imaginable that there would be no need to identify a source of the decline of the youth of the day, as people could generally believe that the youth of 'the present'[1] are doing all right. Yet, both historically and contemporaneously, this is not what people report believing; rather, there is the persistent and historically pervasive belief that 'kids these days' are in decline, dating back to at least the 5th Century bce (e.g. Protzko & Schooler, 2020). People largely view the youth of 'the present', regardless of what present it is, as deficient and in decline compared to previous generations (see also Protzko & Schooler, 2022; Trzesniewski, & Donnellan, 2014). If the youth of 'the present' are seen as in decline, a reason must be sought.

Historically, explanations for the decline of the youth have tended to focus on contemporary technological/societal changes. While people cannot blame apparent declines on advances that do not yet exist, the focus often seems to be on 'new' technological/societal changes, not ones that have been around for generations. Complaints about the printing press, corrupting people with bombardments of information (e.g. Gessner, 1565, as cited in Blair,

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[1] Throughout this manuscript we put 'the present' in single quotation marks. The reason for this is to differentiate the temporal present (e.g. 2019 at the time of running this study, 2022 at the time of writing the manuscript) from a general 'present' whenever this study is read.

2003), were largely limited to when the printing press was a newer societal advance. At the time, complaints were no longer about writing in general (as Socrates bemoaned about 1200 years earlier) but about the new alleged problems introduced when reading was possible *en masse*.

Numerous reports have mocked these historic complaints, and some have even related such historic concerns to modern panics over contemporary technological/societal advances (see Bell, 2010; Gillard, 2018), yet the warnings of the new technological/societal change persist (e.g. Twenge, Haidt, Joiner, & Campbell, 2020). Why the constant panic? We propose a lack of personal experience with the technology/societal change as one psychological reason why adults perennially view new technology/societal change as a source of the decline of the youth of the day.

Personal Experience

Social Media arose and grew in popularity in the 1990s and 2000s, becoming ubiquitous in the 2010s (Pew Research Center, 2021). People born before the 1980s have personal experience of growing up as a child with the internet and social media having left adolescence before the adoption of such technologies. People born during the 1980s have the experience of growing up without *and with* such technologies, depending on when they adopted the technology. People born in the 2000s-2010s have little to no experience of not living in an internet and social media-connected world.

The stark differences in the experiences of individuals who grow up with versus without a particular technology raises the following possibility: individuals who lack access to a given technological/societal change while growing up may perceive grave risks of that technology for youth of 'the present' exposed to it. This would explain why people in the early 20th century,

lacking any experience growing up with the radio, would have seen it as such a corrupting influence on the youth (e.g. Eisenberg, 1936; Wartella & Jennings, 2000) while it may not be seen as dangerous to people in the early 21st century, as nearly all Americans have the experience of growing up with the radio.

Personal exposure may help explain why we see the next technology/societal change as dangerous to the youth of 'the present' while being much less concerned with those that we grew up with. Of course, one's generation and their exposure to a technology is often confounded as one cannot experience a technology that was not available. Nevertheless, the fact that individuals within a generation can vary in experience with particular technologies enables us to potentially unconfound these two variables. Specifically, the personal exposure hypothesis predicts that within a generation those who were more exposed to a particular technology should be less inclined to perceive today's youth as at risk from that particular technology relative to those who had less exposure.

In short, to better understand how exposure to technologies may impact people's assessments of the challenges facing "kids these days (Protzko & Schooler 2019, 2022) we investigated two questions: 1) In general, are anecdotal reports accurate in suggesting that adults perceive children at greater risk from newer technologies relative to ones that were available to their generation (i.e. is social media perceived as being more dangerous than reading)? 2) Are individuals who themselves lacked experience with a specific technology/societal advance especially inclined to perceive that particular technology as problematic?

Methods

We first ran a pilot study to elicit user-generated technological/societal influences that Americans believe are responsible for corrupting the youth. Participants were asked to identify the reasons or causes of the decline of the youth of 'the present'. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of nine different questions: either a general or a specific question referring to one of eight particular potential forms of decline. Participants reading the general decline question read:

> Children and youths today appear noticeably in decline from the standards of youth of the past. We would like to know what you think the reasons or causes of this decline are.
>
> Below are five open spaces. think about what you think is causing a decline in the youth of today. For each line, please write less than five words. So for example, if you think 'social media' is one reason, write that below. Please write whatever you honestly believe are the causes or reasons.

For the specific declines, participants were told that children and youths today appear in decline on one of the following domains: they seem to: *be getting more narcissistic*, *be reading less*, *be more politically extreme*, *be lazier*, *lack the desire to work hard*, *be less respectful of authority*, *be too sensitive and politically correct*, *be more violent*. This list was chosen to reflect commonly heard complaints against the youth (e.g. Protzko & Schooler, 2020, 2022; Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2014) and was not meant to be comprehensive. The specific questions were meant to make the task easier for participants. We collected the responses that all participants gave and reviewed them to try to locate additional, commonly-occurring themes. No formal analysis was undertaken.

Participants were 200 members of Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk) who were given the survey from November 10, 2019 to November 12, 2019. As there was no confirmatory analysis planned or effect size sought or inferential statistics applied in this pilot study, no power analysis was conducted. See materials and data at https://osf.io/4zk9e/. The responses from this

pilot study were used to populate potentially corrupting technologies and societal changes for the main study.

Main Study: Does Not Growing up with a Technology Increase the Belief it is Corrupting the Youth?

The purpose of this study was to relate exposure to certain technological/societal advances in childhood (identified both historically and in the pilot study) to the belief that those advances are corrupting youth of 'the present'.

Methods

Materials

We populated our list of technologies and societal advances from historical complaints, contemporary complaints, and user-identified causes from the pilot study. Participants were given the list twice, once when they were asked what they believe contributes to the decline and corruption of the youth, and again when they identified whether they personally had access to any of these technologies or societal advances growing up. All items were presented in random order. The full list of 'corrupting' technologies and societal advances can be seen in Table 1, along with the base overall rate at which people believed the influence had a corrupting influence.

Table 1: Univariate percentages of American adults who believe each item is specifically corrupting the youth of 'the present'

Technology or Societal Element	% Who Believe it is Corrupting the Youth
Social Media	72.9
Smart phones	53.9
The Internet	58.8
The Radio	5.3

Television	31.0
Reading novels	2.1
Driving cars	4.4
Single parent families	48.6
Video Games in the home	46.9
Heavy Metal music	14.9
24-hour news	12.1
Dance clubs	6.5
Nicotine vaporizers	40.5
Netflix	14.1
Jazz music	1.5
Long hair	3.4
Ballroom dancing	1.3
Motion pictures	14.1
Not going to church	37.3
Online dating	22.1
Calculators	2.9
Autocorrect	7.5
Word processors	2.8
Audio/Electronic books	4.3

Procedure

Participants were first be asked what year they were born in on a drop down list from 2001 until 1918. Next, participants were randomly assigned to fill out the list of what they had growing up or what they believe is causing a decline in the youth scales in random order. For the *What I Had* scale, participants read:

Below is a list of different technologies and aspects of society.

Please select below all of the items that you personally had or experienced growing up.

So for example, if TV was around while you grew up but you never watched it, you would not check Television.

For the *Corruption* scale, participants read:

Children today appear to be in decline compared to the way children were when you were a child.

We are interested in what you believe contributes to this decline. Below is a list of possible causes. Please select as many as you honestly believe are contributing to the decline of the youth of today.

Participants were given the list of items, presented in random order, and allowed to check as many options as they saw fit.

Analysis Plan

The analysis is a within-person analysis, with the prediction that if someone had exposure to a given technological/societal change growing up, they would be less likely to view it specifically as corrupting the youth. This within-subjects mixed effects model includes whether the individual believes the technological/societal change is corrupting as the binary dependent variable, and whether they had exposure to the technology as the independent variable, run with robust standard errors. The model was not able to converge using the technological/societal change as a random-effect, so it was included as a fixed-effect. Analysis scripts, data, and all materials are available at https://osf.io/4zk9e/ . This study was preregistered prior to data collection at https://osf.io/yrzxw.

Participants

We collected 1,500 participants, drawn in a stratified way with unequal probabilities of selection, so that the people who complete each survey will resemble the nation's adult population (according to the most recently available Current Population Survey, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau) in terms of gender, age, education, ethnicity (Hispanic vs. not), race (allowing each respondent to select more than one race), region, and income. The data was collected in December of 2019. The sample size was determined as this study was part of a project running studies with fixed sample sizes at N = 1,500 (Protzko et al., 2021).

Results

First, as an exploratory analysis, we investigated whether there was a relationship between the year of a technology/social advance's invention and the extent to which it is seen as corrupting. Although not preregistered, this analysis naturally arises from the conjecture that personal experience impacts perceptions of which technology/societal innovations are especially corrupting or benign. We coded each year that each technology/societal advance was invented. In three cases where there was no introduction date (i.e. Long hair; Single-parent homes; Not going to Church) so dates were set to a time seen as generally coinciding with the period in which that societal change became of note: 1969 for Long Hair to coincide with the Hippie movement; 1989 for Single-parent homes to coincide with the popular scapegoating of rising crime in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the U.S. on single-parent homes (e.g. Cohen, 2012); and 2019 for Not going to church to represent the lowest attendance rate at church in the U.S. to that point (Jones, 2021). People in general believed that more modern technologies/societal changes are more corrupting than those that had been invented or popularized earlier ($r_S = .67$, $p < .001$; see Figure 1). Note that removing the three items that did not have introduction dates does not alter the strength of significance of the relationship ($r_S = .65$, $p = .001$).

% of People who Think a Technological/Societal Advance is Corrupting
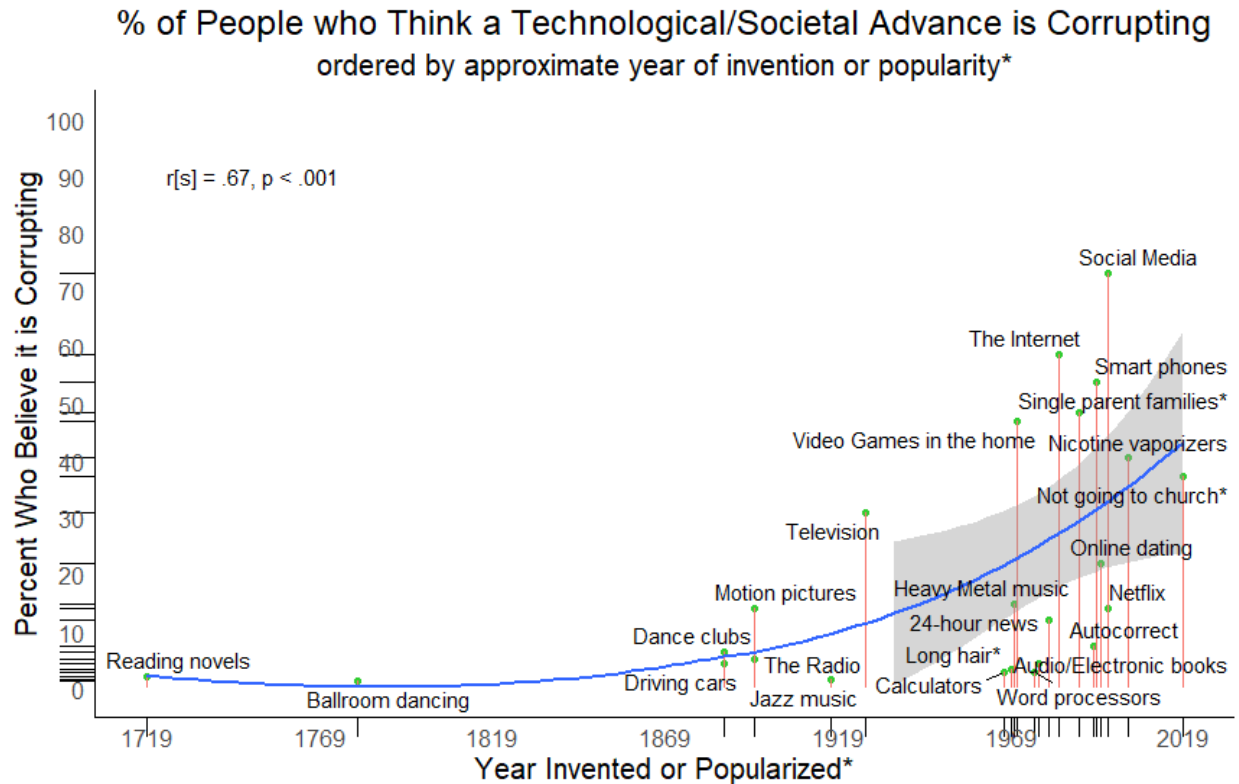### ordered by approximate year of invention or popularity*

r[s] = .67, p < .001

Figure 1: Year of Invention or Popularization (denoted by an asterisk) and the extent to which people in general think those technology/societal advances are corrupting the youth. Line is a lowess line, gray bars are 95%CI that start once enough data becomes available.

We turn now to our preregistered examination of whether people think a technology or societal advance is more corrupting if they did not experience it themselves growing up. A univariate, item-by-item, analysis could be susceptible to an age confound, whereby older participants are less likely to be exposed to a given technology growing up (e.g. Netflix) and due to their age also happen to hold more negative views of the youth (e.g. Protzko & Schooler, 2022). This confound, however, would not operate on the within-person analysis, as such general negative views (between-person effects) are statistically divorced from the within-person effect of being exposed to a given technology of societal advance growing up. Therefore, a mixed-effects analysis is able to disentangle the within-person effect (context for growing up exposed to a specific technology) from the between-person effects (random intercepts of tendency to believe in overall corrupting influences).

Results from this overall mixed-effect model confirmed our hypothesis. If someone did not have the context of being exposed to a given technology or societal advance growing up, they were more likely to believe that it has a corrupting influence on the youth of 'the present' (b = -.09, SE$_{robust}$ = .01, p < .001, 95%CI = [-.11, -.09]; see Figure 1). This relationship did not change when including the item as a fixed effect in the model (b = -.04, SE$_{robust}$ = .01, p < .001, 95%CI = [-.05, -.03]). This corresponds to a 56% increase, across technological/societal changes, in the belief that something corrupts the youth of 'the present' if someone did not experience it themselves growing up.

Percent who Think a Given Technology is Corrupting the Youth
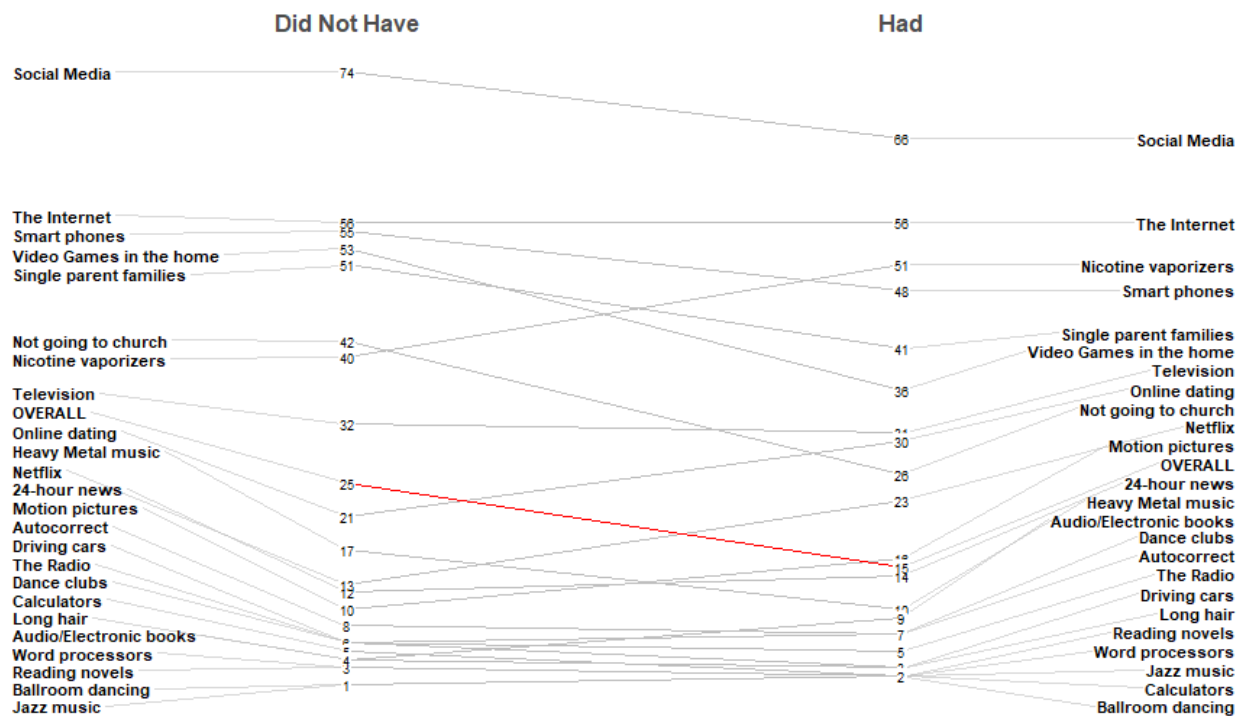Based on whether they had experienced it as a child

Figure 2: Slopegraph of the percent of people who believe that a given technology or societal advance is corrupting the youth of 'the present', based on whether they had personal exposure to the technology or societal advance in their own childhoods. Red line is the overall model effect, people were 56% more likely to believe a given technology/societal advance was corrupting, on average, if they had personally experienced it growing up.

We also observed that the older someone is, the more likely they were to think that technological/societal changes are corrupting ($b = .001$, $SE_{robust} = .0002$, $p < .001$, 95%CI = [.0005, .001]). Nevertheless, conditioning on age ($M_{age} = 50.1$, range 18-87) did not change the results: people were still more likely to think a technological/societal changes was more corrupting if they did not experience it growing up ($b = -.04$, $SE_{robust} = .01$, $p < .001$, 95%CI = [-.05, -.03]). Thus, overall, older participants are more likely to see corruption of the youth, but even then having not grown up experiencing a given technological/social change corresponds to an increase in the belief that it is corrupting the youth, on average.

Finally, participants were randomly assigned to fill in what they believe contributes to the corruption of the youth either first or after describing what they had access to as a child. The relationship between personal experience and beliefs of corruption was stronger when participants indicated were first asked what they exposed to as a child ($b = -.05$, $SE_{robust} = .01$, $p < .001$, 95%CI = [-.07, -.04]) compared to when they were first asked whty they believe corrupts the youth first ($b = -.03$, $SE_{robust} = .01$, $p < .001$, 95%CI = [-.04, -.01])). Thus, the simple act of reminding someone that they had access to a given technological/societal advance when they were young is enough to reduce the belief that that particular advance is corrupting the youth of the present.

Discussion

People generally think that technologies and innovations that they did not grow up with are uniquely dangerous to today's youth. This sentiment was reflected by differences across innovations, with newer ones being characterized as dramatically more problematic than older ones. Critically, the impact of personal experience on assessments of the societal risks of innovations, was also within individual advances as a function of participants unique experiences

growing up. Participants who did not grow up experiencing a particular technological/social change showed a 56% increase in believing that specific aspect of life is corrupting the youth of 'the present'. American adults held varying beliefs on the corrupting influence of the items we presented. Social Media was seen as the most corrupting influence (74%) on the youth of 'the present', for example, but if someone grew up experiencing social media they found it a considerably less dangerous force (66%). The same is also said about growing up being exposed to Heavy Metal music; people who grew up not experiencing Heavy Metal music see it as particularly corrupting (17%), but much less so when they experienced heavy metal themselves (10%). Overall, these findings indicate that newer technologies/societal advances are often the targets of concern for the very reason that we lack the personal experience of growing up with them.

We also confirmed that a number of technological/social changes that have historically been seen as corrupting or dangerous to the youth when they first appeared, are no longer thought to be dangerous. In 1843, for example, warnings were raised about the dangers of ballroom dancing which was growing in popularity in the United States: "If you wish to preserve in its freshness their modest innocence…suffer them not to waltz" (The Waltz, 1843, p. 152); yet in 2019, only 1% of American adults saw ballroom dancing as a corrupting influence on the youth of 'the present'. Thus, there is considerable heterogeneity across what people believe is corrupting, both presently and historically.

Why do we keep believing each new technological/social change comes with it a danger to the youth? Here we start to explore one reason, lack of personal experience. Someone growing up in a single parent house has context for what it is like, someone who grew up in a dual parent house does not, for example. Presumably, when individuals have personal experience with an

advance they realize it is not as problematic as they might have otherwise thought. They also may be more reluctant to express concern about growing up with a technology/innovation that might bear on their own proficiencies.

As people get older, they are more critical of the youth of 'the present' (Protzko & Schooler, 2022). We also show here that as people age, they tend to see more technological/societal changes as corrupting the youth overall. This may be because as people age their memories for their childhood become more favorable (Field, 1997) and they view the past as more idyllic (Protzko & Schooler, 2020; Eibach et al., 2003). Thus, not only do youth of 'the present' seem in decline as people age, but society seems in decline; older people are more likely to search for explanations involving technologies/societal changes they do not have context growing up with.

We also found an important mitigation strategy, simply reminding people of what technologies/societal advances they grew up with is associated with a decreased belief in the corrupting influence, strengthening the bond between experience and belief. This presents the intriguing possibility that simply being reminded of what one was actually exposed to as a child may reduce the belief that those technologies or societal changes are corrupting. Similar research has explored the idea that such simple reminders can reduce beliefs in the decline of society; asking people to reflect on how their own driving ability has changed in the past 10 years reduces the belief that other people's driving ability has become more aggressive, reckless, for example (see Eibach & Libby, 2009; see also our replications at https://osf.io/xrbfp/). Our results may extend future work about the power of simple contextual reminders on reducing prejudice against the youth and panics about the next technological/societal change.

The present findings are wholly consistent with the view that whether or not one grew up with a particular technology/societal change causally impacts their belief in its corruptive impact of the youth of 'the present'. It must be acknowledged, however, that this observed relationship was largely correlational. It is not random who takes up a new technology or societal advance. People who are more interested in the technology or who are more receptive to the societal change are undoubtedly more likely to be early adopters. Nevertheless, we did find an effect of whether or not people were first asked to consider their own personal experience with an innovation on their assessment of its impact. The mitigating effect of remembering that one personally used a technology when growing up further helps to build a causal case that a lack of personal experience with an innovation contributes to its perceived danger.

Conclusion

We can never know what it is like to grow up any other way than we did. We only have our own experience, no more and no less. This experience apparently matters for later beliefs about society. We are more likely to see a given technology or societal change as a corrupting, damaging force on the youth of 'the present' if we did not have the context for what it was like to experience it growing up. As society changes more rapidly and technological innovations become more frequent (e.g. Kurzweil, 2004), we will continue to find ourselves in a world that looks different from the one we grew up in—seeing danger for the next youth. This apparent recurring process—of new innovations being spurned as corrupting by older generations who did not grow up with them—could continue in perpetuity. Considering one's own experience with a technology, however, serves to mitigate projections of its negative impact on the young, potentially suggests one way to escape this perennial cycle. If older generations remember that they thrived in the context of the novel technologies and societal advances of their day, they may

gain a more optimistic vision that current youth can similarly prosper despite or perhaps even

because of the new developments that they grow up with.

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