

Critical Analysis of What Adolescents Miss when we let them Grow Up in Cyber Space

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Introduction

Brent Staples's 2004 essay "What Adolescents Miss When We Let Them Grow Up in Cyberspace" argues that heavy reliance on the internet can deprive young people of face-to-face experiences through which they learn responsibility, social judgment, and adult identity. The original critical analysis accurately identifies Staples's opening story, his concern about adolescent isolation, and his use of personal experience to make the argument persuasive. It needs a more precise rhetorical evaluation and a contemporary reassessment. Staples wrote before smartphones, algorithmic feeds, video platforms, and constant mobile access transformed adolescent life. Some of his concerns have become more urgent, including online impersonation, privacy loss, and displacement of sleep or in-person interaction. Other parts are too general because online communication can also support friendship, learning, creativity, civic participation, and connection for isolated young people. Staples's essay is strongest as a warning that social maturity requires embodied relationships and accountability. It is weaker when it treats "the internet" as one activity and implies a direct path from screen time to failed adulthood.

The Rhetorical Situation

Staples wrote as an editorial observer for a major national newspaper at a moment when household internet access had expanded rapidly but social media had not yet assumed its current form. The early 2000s produced public anxiety about chat rooms, anonymous identities, online predators, and young people spending long periods at desktop computers. His audience included parents, educators, and adult readers who had grown up without the internet and were uncertain about its developmental effects. The essay's purpose is cautionary rather than technical. Staples does not present a systematic review of research or a policy proposal. He uses personal narrative, social observation, and selected examples to encourage adults to ask what adolescents lose when online life replaces difficult encounters in the physical world. (Valkenburg)

The Opening Anecdote

Staples begins with a memory of visiting the father of a girl he liked when he was in tenth grade. The meeting required him to enter an adult-controlled household, endure scrutiny, and demonstrate that he could be trusted. He describes the father's intimidating handshake and the emotional pressure of

presenting himself as a worthy young man. The story works rhetorically because it makes “growing up” concrete. Maturity does not appear as an abstract psychological stage; it appears in the adolescent’s body, voice, manners, and response to another person’s authority. Staples then imagines how the encounter might be avoided through digital communication. The contrast establishes his main concern: technology can allow adolescents to pursue social goals while escaping the adult negotiation that once accompanied them.

Ethos: Staples as a Reflective Adult

Staples builds ethos through autobiographical honesty. He does not introduce himself as a scientist or claim complete neutrality. He presents himself as someone who remembers adolescent vulnerability and recognizes that awkward encounters contributed to adult development. This stance makes the argument less like a lecture from an uninformed outsider. His credibility also comes from acknowledging that the internet offers genuine benefits. He does not demand that technology disappear; he worries about what it may displace. The limitation of this ethos is generational. A personal experience from one adolescent life cannot establish that every young person needs the same ritual, family structure, or gendered encounter in order to mature.

Pathos: Anxiety About Lost Adulthood

The essay appeals strongly to adults’ fear that young people may become isolated, fraudulent, emotionally distressed, or unable to function in face-to-face life. The opening scene evokes nostalgia for direct accountability, while later examples of online deception create alarm. Staples describes the possibility that adolescents can build identities without the corrective presence of adults and peers who know them offline. This pathos is effective because adulthood is portrayed as something that must be practiced rather than reached automatically at a certain age. The emotional appeal becomes less reliable when it implies that online life is inherently artificial and offline life inherently authentic. Deception, performance, exclusion, and loneliness also occur in physical settings.

Logos and the Article’s Causal Reasoning

Staples’s reasoning follows a displacement model. Time and interaction invested online may replace face-to-face social experience; fewer embodied encounters may reduce opportunities to learn negotiation and responsibility; and weaker social preparation may delay maturity. The logic is plausible, but its strength depends on what online activity replaces. A video call with a distant family member is not equivalent to anonymous role-play, and a collaborative project is not equivalent to passive scrolling. The essay also cites concern about loneliness and depression without fully separating correlation from causation. Young people who already feel isolated may turn to the internet more often, while some online communities can reduce isolation. A stronger argument would

specify activities, duration, users, and contexts.

The Concept of “Real-World Experience”

Staples values real-world experience because it imposes consequences that are harder to edit or escape. Tone, silence, posture, timing, and another person’s immediate response become part of communication. Adolescents learn that relationships require patience and that an unwise statement cannot always be deleted. This insight remains valuable. Yet the distinction between online and real life has weakened. A group chat can affect school relationships, an online rumor can produce physical danger, and a digital portfolio can lead to employment. Online interaction is real in its consequences even when it lacks physical co-presence. The more accurate distinction is among forms of interaction that differ in accountability, richness, visibility, permanence, and control.

Anonymity and Identity Experimentation

Staples worries that the internet lets adolescents create alternative identities without adult oversight. Identity experimentation is not always harmful. Adolescents try styles, interests, communities, names, and roles while learning who they are. Online spaces can provide privacy and connection for young people whose local environments are hostile to their identity. Risk emerges when experimentation becomes deception, exploitation, or a substitute for every relationship in which the person is known over time. Modern platforms also complicate anonymity because many users are highly identifiable and permanently documented. Today’s adolescent may face the opposite problem from the one Staples emphasized: not freedom to escape a past identity, but difficulty escaping content created during childhood.

The Teenage Impostor Example

Staples discusses a fifteen-year-old who allegedly represented himself as an expert for an online information service and was accused of fraud. The example dramatizes how a young person can acquire authority through language and distance without possessing the age or credentials expected offline. It supports the argument that digital settings can conceal status cues. However, one dramatic case cannot establish the normal effects of adolescent internet use. The example also raises a different interpretation: the young person demonstrated intelligence, initiative, and technological skill while violating rules about identity and trust. A fuller analysis would ask why the platform’s verification system failed and how institutions should authenticate expertise rather than place the entire burden on adolescent character. (Odgers)

Adult Scrutiny and Its Ambivalence

The essay treats adult scrutiny as a developmental good because adolescents must learn to answer to people outside their immediate peer group. This is often true. Mentors, teachers, employers, relatives, and community members expose young people to standards they did not create. Adult authority can also be unfair, discriminatory, controlling, or unsafe. A teenager may use online communication partly to escape humiliation or exclusion in local settings. Staples's argument would be stronger if it distinguished constructive accountability from surveillance and domination. Growing up requires interaction across generations, but those interactions should preserve dignity and allow adolescents increasing autonomy.

Social Skills

Staples suggests that extensive online interaction can leave young people unprepared for face-to-face communication. Some skills are medium-specific. Reading facial expression, taking turns in a physical group, tolerating silence, resolving conflict without leaving the conversation, and adapting to an unfamiliar adult require practice. Digital communication also develops skills, including concise writing, asynchronous collaboration, media production, network management, and communication across distance. Problems arise when one mode dominates so completely that other skills receive little practice. The educational response should not be to declare online communication inferior. It should ensure that young people experience multiple settings and receive feedback about how communication changes across them.

Loneliness and Depression

The original analysis states that heavy internet use makes adolescents lonelier and more depressed. Contemporary evidence is more conditional. Research often finds associations between problematic or intensive use and poorer wellbeing, but average effects vary, direction of causation is difficult to establish, and the type of activity matters. Active communication with supportive friends may benefit a young person, while passive comparison, harassment, sleep disruption, and compulsive checking may worsen distress. Staples was right to resist the assumption that connection technology automatically creates connection. He was less prepared to distinguish the design and social mechanisms that make some digital experiences harmful and others protective.

What the Essay Predicted Well

Staples anticipated several enduring concerns. Adolescents can hide social lives from adults, adopt misleading identities, encounter strangers, and replace some direct interaction with mediated communication. Digital environments can reward performance over sustained character and allow

people to leave difficult conversations quickly. The concern about developmental displacement also remains relevant when social media interrupts sleep, family time, schoolwork, exercise, or local participation. His focus on adulthood as learned through responsibility is especially valuable. Technical competence and large online networks do not necessarily produce judgment, empathy, or reliability. (American Psychological Association)

What the Essay Could Not Anticipate

The 2004 article predates the smartphone, widespread social-network feeds, influencer economies, algorithmic recommendation, location tracking, and permanent audiovisual documentation of childhood. Adolescents no longer “go online” only from a computer; connectivity follows them through school, transport, meals, and sleep. Platforms quantify approval through likes and views and may recommend increasingly emotional content. At the same time, digital tools now support school systems, family communication, disability access, political organizing, and creative careers. The internet has become infrastructure rather than a separate destination. This makes Staples’s binary between cyberspace and ordinary life less accurate, while strengthening his demand that adults consider developmental consequences.

Audience and Tone

Staples writes primarily to adults, not to adolescents. His tone is thoughtful but paternal. Young people appear mainly as subjects whose development adults permit or fail to protect. The essay might have gained depth by including adolescent perspectives: why do they seek online spaces, what do they learn there, what offline opportunities are unavailable, and which adult interventions feel helpful? Writing for adults was strategically effective because they control households, schools, and policy. It also risked reinforcing a moral panic in which youth practices are interpreted without youth testimony. Contemporary digital policy should involve young people in design and evaluation.

Structure of the Argument

The essay moves from personal anecdote to social claim, then to research and examples, before returning to the idea of adulthood. This structure makes the argument accessible. The anecdote supplies a standard of development; the middle sections show threats to that standard; and the conclusion warns that cyberspace can prevent transition. The structure is rhetorically coherent even when the evidence is limited. Staples’s choice not to overload the editorial with statistics supports readability, but it means the essay functions best as a prompt for inquiry rather than a definitive empirical conclusion.

Language and Metaphor

The phrase “grow up in cyberspace” suggests an environment detached from physical society. “Cyberspace” was a common term when online activity felt like entering another realm. The metaphor supports Staples’s warning because it imagines adolescents raised in a place without ordinary adult contact. Today, “digital environment” may be more accurate. Platforms are built by companies, governed by rules, connected with schools and markets, and populated by people whose offline identities often remain relevant. The older metaphor is historically revealing: it captures a period when adults understood the internet as elsewhere and therefore underestimated how deeply it would be integrated into daily institutions.

Counterargument: Online Spaces as Developmental Environments

Online communities can give adolescents opportunities to teach, create, organize, collaborate, and communicate with adults who share an interest. A young programmer, writer, musician, or activist may receive serious feedback unavailable locally. Adolescents with disabilities, rare conditions, minority identities, or geographically isolated lives may find essential support. These interactions can foster maturity when they involve responsibility, contribution, and consequences. The counterargument does not disprove Staples. It shows that adulthood is not produced by physical presence alone. The relevant question is whether a setting requires honesty, reciprocity, perspective-taking, and accountable action.

Counterargument: Offline Spaces May Be Inaccessible

Staples assumes that adolescents have meaningful adult encounters and community spaces available if they stop using computers. Many young people face unsafe neighborhoods, limited transport, overworked caregivers, exclusion, or institutions that offer few roles beyond obedience. Technology may compensate for a lack of opportunity rather than cause it. Telling adolescents to leave screens without improving schools, recreation, mentoring, and public space is incomplete. Adults who want more face-to-face development must create environments where young people are welcome and trusted with real responsibility.

A Contemporary Reformulation of Staples’s Thesis

The essay’s central insight can be restated without opposing online and offline life absolutely:

adolescents need a diverse developmental ecology containing embodied interaction, intergenerational relationships, private exploration, accountable digital participation, sleep, learning, play, and gradual independence. Risk increases when a single platform or mode monopolizes attention and replaces experiences that teach different skills. Adults should not attempt total surveillance, because privacy is part of development. They should establish age-appropriate boundaries, model healthy use, discuss difficult online experiences, and ensure that technology companies reduce foreseeable design harms.

Evaluation of Persuasiveness

Staples succeeds rhetorically because his personal story gives emotional and moral shape to a broad technological concern. His prose is vivid, his audience can imagine the father's handshake, and his conclusion connects social experience with adult identity. The argument is less persuasive as a general causal claim because it uses limited examples, treats internet use too uniformly, and does not engage strongly with benefits or structural reasons adolescents turn online. Its continuing value lies in the question it asks rather than every answer it offers: which forms of difficulty, accountability, and presence are necessary for growing up, and are digital systems helping or displacing them?

Conclusion

Brent Staples's "What Adolescents Miss When We Let Them Grow Up in Cyberspace" is a compelling early critique of digital development. Through an autobiographical encounter with a girlfriend's father, Staples illustrates how awkward face-to-face experiences teach self-presentation, accountability, and negotiation with adults. His ethos and pathos are strong, while his logos depends on a displacement argument that requires more qualification than the editorial provides. Since 2004, online and offline life have become deeply integrated, and digital spaces now support both meaningful development and serious harm. Staples was correct that technological connection cannot replace every embodied and intergenerational experience. He was less accurate in treating cyberspace as a single false world. The contemporary lesson is not to keep adolescents offline. It is to ensure that digital participation does not monopolize development and that young people still encounter relationships, communities, and responsibilities in which they are known, challenged, and able to grow. (Staples)

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