Youth and Digital Habits- The Consequences of Screen time on Mental Health and Social Well-being: A Review

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid advancement of digital technology, excessive screen time has emerged as a pervasive issue, significantly impacting individuals' health, relationships, productivity and overall development. While moderate and mindful use of digital devices can enhance well-being, excessive screen engagement is associated with numerous negative mental health outcomes, such as psychological distress, decreased emotional stability and a heightened risk of depression and anxiety. Issues often arise when digital usage becomes impulsive, compulsive, or addictive, disrupting critical aspects of mental and physical health, including sleep patterns, physical activity and emotional resilience. Although digital communication offers convenience, it frequently lacks the emotional richness of face-to-face interactions, contributing to feelings of isolation and disconnection. Excessive consumption of online content, especially *via* social media, exacerbates negative self-comparisons, fosters unrealistic expectations and distorts perceptions of reality. Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable due to their developmental need for genuine social connections and greater exposure to digital environments. Research indicated that adolescent girls and young women are more prone than their male counterparts to extensive social media use, face increased risks of cyber bullying and experience significant mental health challenges. These trends correlate with recent epidemiological findings, which highlighted that young females are especially susceptible to elevated symptoms of depression, self-harming behaviors and suicidal thoughts. Addressing the adverse effects of excessive screen time involved strategies such as parenting interventions, public health campaigns and school policies that regulate screen use. Encouraging young people to monitor and moderate their screen time is crucial for raising awareness of their usage habits and their impacts.

Key words: Adolescents, Digital habits, Mental health, Screen time, Social media, Social well-being.

Screen time and digital habits

Social media plays a pivotal role in shaping modern lifestyles, particularly among the youth. While it offers benefits such as instant information sharing and advanced communication, it also brings challenges, including health concerns and social issues that may affect overall well-being. Overuse of social media can lead to distractions and procrastination, impairing focus and the ability to retain information. This underscores the importance of maintaining a balance to cultivate productive learning environment.

Electronic media has become an essential aspect of daily life for today's youth. Children and adolescents increasingly rely on a growing range of digital media devices for leisure. Advances in technology have enabled these devices to deliver a diverse and fast-paced array of stimuli, accessible almost anytime and anywhere through mobile devices. This convenience has contributed to excessive screen time among youth, often exceeding the recommended daily limit of 2 hours (Henderson *et al.,* 2016). Although digital media provides advantages like quick access to information and fast communication, several recent studies have associated extended screen time with health and psychological problems in infants, children and adolescents.

As per the WHO Guidelines (2019) recommend that children under 24 months should not be exposed to screens, while children under 5 years old should have no more than of 1 hour of screen time per day.

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Screen time and mental health

Excessive screen time also has a detrimental effect on mental health and psychological well-being. During crucial developmental stages in childhood and adolescence, individuals require a focus on higher-order needs such as social connection, emotional regulation, identity formation and the search for purpose.

Consequences of excessive screen time on mental health

Internalizing symptoms

The primary internalizing symptoms include depression and anxiety. A meta-analysis by Liu *et al.* (2022) found a dose-dependent relationship between screen time and

depression among teenagers. The study also revealed that girls were approximately 1.5 times more likely than boys to exhibit depressive behaviors for each additional hour of screen time. A longitudinal study observed a partially bidirectional link between emotional disorders and TV, computer and video game usage. Specifically, more than 4 hours of daily TV, screen time was associated with symptoms of panic disorder, while over 4 hours of computer or video game, screen time was linked to anxiety and social phobia. However, physical activity appeared to mitigate anxiety symptoms.

Conversely, pre-existing panic disorder symptoms were not associated with increased screen time, but pre-existing depression or anxiety symptoms contributed to greater use of computers and video games (Zink *et al.,* 2019).

Externalizing symptoms

The primary externalizing symptoms include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and behavioral issues such as aggression. Kahn *et al.* (2021) found that more than 2 hours of daily screen time was associated with externalizing problems in preschool children, but only in those who experienced insufficient sleep. Similarly, a cohort study by Tamana *et al.* (2019) revealed that exceeding 2 hours of screen time at ages 3 or 5 was linked to an increase in externalizing problems by the age of 5.

Suicidal behavior

Excessive screen time contributes to social isolation, sleep disruption and exposure to cyberbullying, all of which increase the risk of suicidal ideation and self-harming behaviors. Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant digital risk factor and is strongly associated with suicidal thoughts and attempts among young people (John *et al.,* 2018).

Sleep disorder

Le Bourgeois *et al.* (2017) highlighted the importance of conducting experimental studies to better understand how the ongoing digital revolution affects sleep and circadian rhythms from infancy to adulthood, potentially resulting in poor health, learning challenges and behavioral problems. Their review highlighted findings that 75% of children and 60% of adolescents typically engage with digital screens within an hour of bedtime (Hysing *et al.,* 2015). Additionally, insufficient sleep is prevalent among children and adolescents (ages 6 to 17) when digital devices such as televisions, computers, or phones are kept in their bedrooms overnight. The negative impact of electronic media on sleep is mainly driven by factors such as time displacement, psychological stimulation from media content and the effects of light emitted by digital devices. This is particularly true for pre pubertal children compared to those who are post pubertal, as it disrupts circadian rhythms and sleep physiology (Council on Communications and Media, 2016).

Additionally, poor sleep quality resulting from digital device use can lead to daytime fatigue, which in turn negatively affects school performance and contributes to psychological issues, especially in younger children. Research has demonstrated that turning off phones an hour before bedtime can promote a more restful night's sleep by encouraging an earlier lights-out time and extending overall sleep duration (Alshobaili and AlYousefi, 2019).

Eating disorder

According to the Robinson *et al.* (2017), children and adolescents who spend more time on screens tend to consume more processed foods, fewer fruits and vegetables and a higher proportion of their daily calories from fats and fast food. The findings suggested that young people often eat while engaging with screen media, without experiencing a corresponding increase in appetite or a decrease in their overall food intake. In other words, screen time significantly increases calorie consumption, primarily because of the tendency to snack while watching.

Screen time and social well-being

Excessive screen time negatively impacts youth's social well-being by reducing face to face interactions, increasing social isolation and contributing to mental health issues like anxiety and depression and low self-esteem due to unrealistic online comparisons.

Consequences of excessive screen time on social well-being

Decreased social connectedness

Numerous studies, including experimental indicated that smart phone use during social activities is linked to diminished feelings of social connectedness and less satisfying social interactions. This applies not only to close relationships, such as those with friends and family, but also to weaker social connections, such as neighbors and coworkers (Dwyer *et al.,* 2018; Kushlev and Dunn, 2019; Kushlev *et al.,* 2019; Kushlev and Leitao, 2020).

Reduced family interaction

Over the past decade, surveys tracking how teenagers spend their free time have highlighted a significant decline in family-focused activities like sharing meals, enjoying board game nights, or simply sitting down to talk. A Kaiser Family Foundation study revealed that youth aged 8 to 18 now spend over four hours daily on recreational screen media, leaving little time for household conversations or collaborative family projects. Increased recreational screen time has led to a decline in family-based activities and shared communication. Digital distractions reduce both the quality and quantity of family interactions, weakening emotional bonds.

Decline in face-to-face communication

Youth now spend less time engaging in direct social interactions with peers. Digital communication often lacks non-verbal cues essential for trust, empathy and emotional understanding, increasing vulnerability to social difficulties.

Increased frustration and emotional disconnection

Extended immersion in digital environments can result in emotional detachment from real-world experiences, leading to frustration, confusion and feelings of emptiness among adolescents.

Affect parent-child relationship

Studies have indicated that media usage at young ages, even when both the parent and child are involved, may hinder cognitive development, affect children's attention and have a negative impact on the parent-child relationship (Pempek and Lauricella, 2017).

This review adopts a descriptive narrative approach to examine the influence of screen-based digital behaviors on mental health and social well-being among children, adolescents and young adults. Literature was sourced from peer-reviewed journals, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, policy reports and textbooks within psychology, pediatrics, psychiatry and public health. The review primarily includes studies published between 2014 and 2024, ensuring relevance to contemporary digital environments. Authoritative guidelines from international health organizations were also incorporated. Studies were thematically analyzed and categorized into mental health outcomes, sleep and eating behaviors, social relationships and family dynamics.

The reviewed literature consistently shows that excessive screen time is associated with adverse mental health and social outcomes among youth. Increased exposure is linked to depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, sleep disturbances, unhealthy eating habits and reduced social connectedness. Adolescents, especially girls, appear more vulnerable due to higher social media engagement, online comparison and cyberbullying. Disrupted sleep and reduced face-to-face interactions emerge as key mechanisms underlying these effects. While digital media provides educational and social benefits, unregulated use may negatively affect emotional development, family relationships and peer bonding, highlighting the need for balanced and mindful screen use.

Strategies to manage excessive screen time

Digital detox

It involves disconnecting from electronic devices to reclaim mental clarity and enhance overall well-being (Mirbabaie *et al.,* 2022), is an important strategy for fostering digital wellness. Exploring its impact on digital well-being is crucial to understanding how it promotes a healthier relationship with technology. This is particularly relevant for students, who often turn to screens as a coping mechanism during periods of unhappiness or discomfort. By engaging in a digital detox, they can develop healthier self-care routines and alternative coping strategies.

Developing offline hobbies

Incorporating hobbies such as meditation, breathing exercises, drawing, journaling and other offline hobbies can help children better manage their emotions and cultivate inner peace amidst the distractions of the digital world (Jefferies, 2024). Limiting cell phone use 1-2 hours before bedtime is a straightforward yet highly effective habit for improving sleep quality and overall well-being. Using Smart phones close to bedtime has been associated with reduced sleep quality and disrupted sleep patterns, interfering with the calm and restful process of falling asleep (Rosen, 2024).

Wise use of technology

Encouraging the use of technology as a tool for learning rather than solely as a source of entertainment helps establish a healthier mindset.

Raising awareness

Public health campaigns can be instrumental in increasing awareness about the dangers of excessive technology use among adolescents, much like the successful initiatives that have addressed smoking, drug use and drunk driving.

Parent monitoring

Parents should establish a structured media or screen time plan to regulate both the duration and type of content their children consume. Additionally, they should advocate for schools and extracurricular programs to implement similar strategies, aiming to promote digital literacy while curbing excessive screen usage.

CONCLUSION

Excessive screen time poses significant risks to mental health and social well-being by negatively influencing emotional regulation, sleep quality, eating habits and vulnerability to depression, anxiety and suicidal behaviors. Prolonged digital engagement disrupts family interactions, reduces meaningful face-to-face communication and weakens social bonds, leading to increased loneliness and emotional isolation among adolescents. Over-reliance on virtual interactions further limits opportunities for developing strong interpersonal relationships and social support systems. Promoting balanced digital habits through parental monitoring, school-based interventions, public health awareness and increased engagement in offline activities is essential for fostering psychological resilience and healthy social development among youth.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or personal interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this review.

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