

Effects of screen time on the social well-being of adolescents

Abstract

This study specifically examines if adolescents' use of digital screens, including smartphones, tablets, and computers, affects their health and happiness. The aim is to provide stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and lawmakers with a comprehensive understanding of this issue. The study conducted a thorough review of secondary data, including studies published between January 2019 and June 2021, focusing on adolescents' screen time, social relationships, and mental health. The results highlight the importance of social networks in adolescents' screen time and the complex relationship between the amounts of time spent on screens, their purpose, and their mental health effects. The study offers practical suggestions that can guide lawmakers in developing customized programs to promote healthy media use among adolescents and enhance their overall health in the digital age.

Keywords: screen time, juvenile, wellbeing, social dynamics, health, policy implications, benefits

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Introduction

The increasing prevalence of digital devices in daily life has raised concerns regarding the impact of screen time on the social well-being of adolescents. The period from 2017 to 2023 has seen a growing body of research dedicated to understanding the nuances of this relationship. In the twenty first century, adolescents are more drawn towards screen activities such as playing computer games and using social networks online. However, this trend has raised concerns among parents, teachers, and healthcare professionals about the impact it can have on adolescents' life and health. According to Priftis, et al.,¹ as this trend continues, it is becoming increasingly important to address the issue. The rise of smartphones, tablets, and computers has made it easier for adolescents to access digital information, but it is competing with their hobbies, sports, and social interactions in person, as highlighted by Maria et al.² As a result, health issues for adolescents and the effects of screen addiction are now at the forefront of political and academic discussions. The advent of digital technology has brought the issue of screen time to the forefront of public and academic discourse, particularly regarding its effects on the social well-being of adolescents. Screen time, defined as the duration of exposure to digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, computers, and televisions, has become integral to the daily lives of young people, influencing various aspects of their development and health. While there are benefits to the connectivity and access to information afforded by these technologies, there is growing concern about the implications of excessive screen use for the mental health and social well-being of adolescents.

Key studies have explored the relationship between screen time and well-being, with findings indicating both beneficial and detrimental effects. The mental health of adolescents, a population already vulnerable to mood fluctuations and psychological stress, appears to be sensitive to the influences of screen time. Excessive use has been linked to depressive symptoms, anxiety, and feelings of social isolation. Yet, moderate engagement with digital technology is suggested to be crucial for social integration, given its role in contemporary adolescent socialization and communication. The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly altered the landscape of daily activities, particularly among adolescents. The

increased accessibility to digital devices has led to heightened screen time, which has become a subject of extensive research concerning its impact on the social well-being of adolescents.

Methods

A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple databases, including PsycINFO, PubMed, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar, to gather relevant studies and articles on screen time's impact on adolescents' social life. A total of 224 articles were identified. A search was performed on 02/01/2024 with the following question: Is there any association between screen time and mental health and social well-being in adolescents? For this, the following keywords were used: "screen time," "adolescent," "mental health," "social connectedness," "digital habits," and "health," combined with the operator AND on databases Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and EBSCOhost. An additional search was performed to update the research on 03/26/2024, using the same related publications were found through manual searches based on study references pulling an initial of encompassing both quantitative and qualitative research studies. These articles were selected based on their relevance to the topic and their contribution to the understanding of social interactions and screen time among adolescents.

In the first search carried out on 02/01/2024, 224 records were identified in the database through the search strategy. 196 duplicates were removed, and 28 articles were screened by title and abstract. After screening, 2 reports were excluded because they did not meet pre-established criteria. Thus, 26 articles were reviewed, of which 26 were included in this review. These 26 articles were added to the most recent search, carried out on 03/26/2024, totaling 36 articles reviewed in this study. Another 22 articles were pulled from EBSCOhost on 05/29/2024. After looking at the titles and going through the papers, removing the duplicates, 196 of the 230 records were unsuitable because the information they carried did not contain the key words and did not have answers to the research questions, some were excluded because they were review papers. After 196 records were turned down for outline review, 35 were sent for full-text review. Ultimately, the scope was limited to 36 publications that met the requirements to be included.

Reference lists of the included articles were not considered. Inclusion criteria: (1) articles that directly assessed associations between screen time [i.e., the amount of time spent using a device with a screen such as a smartphone, computer or video game console (active screen, screens that allow motor interaction and responsiveness), or television (TV) and videos (passives screens), for entertainment or educational use] and mental health, that is, (mood, internalization or externalization problems, sleep disorders, aspects related to mental well-being such as satisfaction with life, self-esteem and self-efficacy, among others), with at least one variable evaluated; (2) studies that measured mental health outcomes through validated scales/instruments; (3) studies with adolescents, average age between 12 and 18 years; (4) articles in English, published in the last 7 years. Exclusion criteria: (1) studies carried out with adolescents diagnosed with problematic internet use, (2) sample composed of adolescents already diagnosed with mental health problems or being followed up in mental health/psychiatry outpatient clinics, (3) research that used screen-based devices to aid functionality and (4) case reports and case series. The screening procedure was performed in pairs, including an initial independent search. After duplicate records were deleted, the titles and abstracts of each study were screened according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria: Reviews and studies on social connectedness through digital platforms and screen time from 2017–2023.

Exclusion criteria: Non-English papers or papers published before January 2019. 30 studies were most important to the topic, “how adolescents’ screen time affects their health and social well-being.” The studies have looked at how adolescents’ screen time affects their identity, their relationships, and their mental health. These studies together show how complicated screen time is and how it affects teens’ health and growth both in positive and negative ways.

Results

The study papers that were looked at go into detail about how screen time affects the health of teens. Some of the things that these pieces talk about in terms of screen-based media use are mental health and how people interact with each other. Granic et al.,³ argue that digital computers have changed society in a big way. People say that screens have changed into a mixed setting that is everywhere in modern life. Bond⁴ investigates the social factors that affect adolescents’ screen time. The study’s results show how teens’ use of social networks affects the amount of time they spend in front of a screen. Bond’s⁴ study suggests that taking part in programs that offer alternatives to screen-based media may influence how one’s peers use media. This means that attempts to promote healthy screen time should think about how interventions will affect society.

Woo et al.,⁵ investigate how screen time and smartphone use have an impact on the mental health of South Korean teens. The data show that factors related to mental health are greatly affected by how often and why people use their smartphones. Adolescents should not spend too much time in front of computers because it is bad for their mental health. Examining how much time adolescents and young adults spend on electronics and the reasons they use them is necessary to comprehend the effects of screen time. Pandya and Lodha⁶ talk about how teens’ screen time affects their search for their own identities. Digital tools, once thought to be purely recreational, have been shown to decrease young people’s mental and social health. Pandya and Lodha⁶ suggest that instead of using simple computer usage measures, developmental frameworks should be used to investigate the mental processes that happen when people use the internet. Conversely, there

is evidence linking excessive screen time with negative outcomes, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, and social isolation. A nationally representative survey of US adolescents indicated that those who spent more time on screens exhibited greater depressive symptoms and an increased risk of suicide than their peers involved in non-screen activities. Similarly, cyberbullying, which often occurs through digital device usage, has implications for adolescents’ mental health, correlating with higher rates of depression and anxiety among victims.

The relationship between screen time and academic performance has also been scrutinized, with cyberbullying victims being more likely to experience deteriorating school performance. Consistent with these findings, other studies suggest that screen time can negatively affect adolescents’ focus and behavior, leading to poorer academic outcomes. Certain studies suggest that moderate use of digital technology can facilitate social integration among adolescents, offering a venue for communication and social support. With the advent of social media and online communities, adolescents have opportunities to develop and maintain social connections, share interests, and gain access to informational and educational resources.

Psychological well-being

A study published in the National Library of Medicine in 2018 highlighted that after one hour per day of use, additional hours of daily screen time were associated with lower psychological well-being among adolescents. This included reduced curiosity, lower self-esteem, and more frequent mood swings.⁷

Mental health concerns

Further research in 2023 by the National Library of Medicine concluded that excessive screen time is correlated with mental health issues in adolescents. The study emphasized the need for more structured and moderated use of screen time to mitigate these effects.

Behavioral and emotional impact

A 2023 study in ScienceDirect reported that decreased screen time was associated with reduced emotional, conduct, and prosocial behavior problems. This was particularly noted during adolescence, suggesting a critical period where screen time management could be beneficial.⁸

Physical and social consequences

Research on ResearchGate in 2022 found that two or more hours of recreational screen time daily raises risks of obesity, anxiety, social phobia, depression, and aggression among young people. This study highlights the broader social and physical health implications of excessive screen use.⁹

Discussion

The complicated link between teens’ screen time and health is better understood thanks to these four studies. The changing social importance of screen-based media needs to be understood. People today see screens as more than just a way to pass the time; they see them as important parts of a complex environment.³ This could affect every part of a teen’s life, including how they figure out who they are. Pandya and Lodha⁶ state that developmental frameworks should be used to study the psychological processes behind online experiences. Looking at it this way, it’s clear that more study needs to be done on screen time. Bond⁴ asserts that teens’ social networks affect how much media they really need to watch. This view asserts that efforts to cut

down on computer time should take into account the social setting in which people use media.⁵ After-school program participants may have an effect on their peers and the neighborhood as a whole.

Study limitations

There are study limitations and flaws in the literature that make it hard to test data. Due to response biases and mistakes, the results may not be true if people only rated their own health and screen time. When researchers only look at one group or area, their findings might not be useful for other cultures. The results might not be accurate because the sample numbers were too small or the ways the data were gathered were not clear. They also stress the need for careful analysis and more research to fill in gaps in knowledge and make the results better.

Policy implication and future studies

The literature shows that policies and studies can help deal with adolescent's excessive screen time. Therefore, governments may start programs based on the data to help adolescents use media in a healthy way and lessen the bad effects that too much screen time has on their mental health. Children, adolescents, and educators are all told to spend less time in front of computers through a program numerous studies suggest that we need to carry out more research to fully comprehend the intricate connection between screen time, social interactions, and mental health results in various groups. Longitudinal studies are needed to learn more about the risks of screen addiction and find ways to lower them. Understanding the cultural and developmental background of media use is important for finding answers that work. To support teens' digital health and healthy screen habits, academics and lawmakers can turn study results into useful ideas.¹⁰⁻¹³

Conclusion

The studies reviewed indicate a clear link between excessive screen time and various adverse effects on adolescents' social well-being. These findings underscore the importance of monitoring and regulating screen time to promote healthier social interactions and psychological health among adolescents. In conclusion, the literature indicates that while screen time is an integral element of adolescent life, its effects on social well-being are multifaceted. Excessive screen time has been associated with adverse mental health outcomes, such as depression and anxiety, and negative impacts on academic performance and social interactions. However, moderate use and positive engagement with digital technologies can promote connectivity and access to supportive networks, providing educational benefits and enhancing social ties. The challenging task is establishing what constitutes 'moderate use' in the digital age, identifying practices that are both safe and health-promoting. It is imperative that interventions and policies designed to address the complexities of screen time consider not only the amount of time spent on screens but also the quality of digital engagement. Thus, fostering digital literacy and ensuring safe online spaces are central to protecting adolescents' social and emotional development. Parents, educators, and policymakers must collaborate to provide frameworks for healthy technology use, striking a balance between the risks and rewards of the digital world. Overall, advancing our understanding of the nuances related to screen time is crucial. Future

research should target the identification of protective factors that can mitigate the negative effects of excessive screen use while enhancing the positive aspects that promote social well-being. This research will be essential for guiding the development of nuanced, evidence-based policies and practices that can navigate the challenges presented by the digital landscape in enhancing adolescent social well-being.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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