

## The Impact of Screen Time and Social Media Usage on The Mental Health in Daily Life

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### ABSTRACT

The rapid increase in screen time and social media use has prompted worldwide unease about its effect on mental health, especially of adolescents and young adults. The aim of this study was to bring together recent review literature and assess the connections between screen-based behaviors and various mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, stress, and well-being. The literature points strongly to the moderating variables associated with excessive screen time and problematic social media use and how these behaviors can be tied to one's likelihood of suffering psychological distress, while moderation and quality of content may protect against negative effects. This proposed study aims to clarify these connections and potential interventions and add to the theoretical understanding of states of daily psychological functioning for digital media (Firth et al., 2023; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Santos et al., 2023).

**Keywords:** *Screen time, social media, mental health, adolescents, depression, anxiety, systematic review, well-being, cyberbullying, self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, smartphone addiction, social connectedness, digital detox*

In today's world, screen-based technologies such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops are ingrained in the everyday experiences of children, teenagers, and young adults. In fact, the number of screen-based devices, including digital media (e.g., video games, watching reels) in educational settings, social situations, and leisure activities, is so far-reaching that each newfound technological innovation opens up new educationally relevant experiences. There are many positive aspects of screen-based technologies in terms of access to information and ability to connect and socialize; however, there are growing concerns regarding their effects on positive mental health outcomes. Many studies and conversations in public policy have surfaced, highlighting a growing body of evidence related to unmanageable amounts of screen time and social media use by kids and young adults in relation to increased rates of depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and impaired social-emotional well-being.

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The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to increased exposure to screens as a result of exposure to online learning, online forms of communication, and the inability to safely meet in person with peers (Camerini et al., 2022). When social distancing and family lockdowns were commonplace across the world, screens were often the only way to maintain the continuity of education and peer social relationships. The reliance on digital social and educational engagement raised concerns regarding youth, including worse possible outcomes for many students, since screens could also highlight or even accentuate pre-existing mental health vulnerabilities. While screens are unlikely to go away, the literature and knowledge base of scholars will also likely grow along with signs of possible harm to youth mental health. This literature review provides a structured way of synthesizing existing empirical literature exploring the mental health impacts of screen time and social media use on children, teenagers, and young adults.

Research continues to show an involved and complex relationship between screen time and mental health. For example, Twenge and Campbell (2018) found that even moderate exposure to screens (greater than one hour a day) was negatively correlated with adolescent psychological well-being, i.e., the adolescents' curiosity and distractibility. Likewise, Marchant et al. (2022) found that excessive use of social media, particularly in place of face-to-face interactions, could influence the risk of self-harm and emotional dysregulation in youth. Alonzo et al. (2023) and Keles et al. (2020) both found strong links between the use of social media and increased risk for depression and anxiety, particularly in adolescents.

On the other hand, Ferguson et al. (2021) and Orben et al. (2025) have questioned the need to see more evidence for a strong causal link and determined that most researchers had small effect sizes, meaning that there was little to suggest meaningful psychological harm in these studies. These competing perspectives highlight a need for critical evaluation that can appreciate nuances and abide by contextualized understandings. Several longitudinal studies (Tang et al., 2021) suggested that screen time might be a marker, rather than a cause, of emotional and behavioral difficulties.

### ***Importance of the Study***

Given our increasingly digital world, it is imperative to understand the relationship between screen time, the use of social media, and mental health. Adolescents and young adults may be especially vulnerable since those behaviors occur during crucial psychosocial development (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Santos et al., 2023). Such research is critical to educating the parents, educators, researchers, policymakers, and healthcare providers to ensure that the level of risk digital environments and technology pose, as well as protective factors for individuals, are well understood and to be proactive in helping design, develop, and implement evidence-based interventions related to screen time and social media (Stiglic & Viner, 2019; Firth et al., 2023). The importance of this study is its direct relevance to daily routine and psychological well-being in a digital society. Considering the increasing dependence on screens in our daily lives for communication, entertainment, school, and work, understanding how usage principles in relation to technology in general can help make more informed decisions. Evidence strongly suggests that excessive amounts of screen time and social media are related to many negative mental, emotional, and/or psychological problems (increased risk of depression, anxiety, long-term stress, and low self-esteem), and this is especially true for adolescents and young adults. The negative impact of excessive screen time is prominent through interference with sleep, less face-to-face socialization, and online social comparisons (negative), which all have immediate and long-term implications for daily functioning and emotional well-being. This study will empower individuals,

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families, and communities to adopt healthier digital habits and recognize warning signs of mental health issues in everyday life.

### *Significance of the Study*

This study tackles an important public health challenge by providing consolidated findings from high-quality review research about the mental health effects of screen time and social media. The research work will clarify how large the effects are and how they operate, ultimately helping with the development of digital literacy, mental health promotion, and policy regulation efforts to improve mental health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023; Keles et al., 2020). The findings will also be important in the development of future research, prevention, and intervention efforts in a digital world. The study goes beyond academia and has implications for public health, education, and individual wellness. In real life, the results could help generate guidelines for healthy technology use, help with interventions to promote less digital harm, and help with mental health resilience in an increasingly connected world. For example, if people know that not all screen time is equal and social media and internet use are more related to mental health problems than gaming or TV, more nuanced recommendations and interventions can be made. Whether through helping parents set limits on technology use, helping educators structure their curriculum around digital literacy, or helping clinicians identify issues around technology and mental health, the study's results can help improve people's lives. The research provides valuable opportunities to create opportunities to promote healthy digital spaces that support well-being and productivity in daily life.

### *Rationale of the study*

What our devices and social media applications can do can be very advantageous, such as improving communication and information exchange, providing learning opportunities, or enhancing entertainment. Yet at the same time, digital devices and social media applications are changing our mental health and well-being in new ways. Increasingly, research is suggesting that increased screen time and problematic patterns of social media use are associated with increased risk of mental health concerns (especially depression and anxiety) (Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Santos et al., 2023). Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic likely exacerbated these trends by quickly increasing the level of digital engagement during this socially distanced time, as many had to rely on online platforms for education, work, and to stay socially connected (Camerini et al., 2022).

Despite growing research interest in this fundamental public health problem, results so far have been inconsistent and at times contradictory. Differences in the study design (cross-sectional vs. longitudinal) and specifically in how screen time, social media use, and mental health were measured have resulted in differences "in effects." Further, these differences may be due to individual differences in age, gender, socioeconomic status, personality, and psychosocial context, which can also play a role in variability in effects and on the generalizability of findings across the population.

In addition, much of the existing literature does not sufficiently address causality, focusing primarily on relationships while neglecting the direction and mediating mechanism of the relationship. There is a need to explore distinctions between harmful uses of screens versus benign or even helpful screen engagement, to explore key mediators and moderators (sleep quality, social support, digital literacy, type of digital activity), and then explore factors of risk or protective factors. Considering this will be critical for creating meaningful public health interventions.

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The review aims to provide both a clear and nuanced understanding of a complex topic by integrating different results and identifying inconsistencies and strengths and weaknesses in methodologies. Its end goal is to inform evidence-based public health recommendations, assist parents, educators, and clinicians on the particulars of managing youth digital media exposure, and support the development of targeted and effective interventions to encourage digital well-being and mental health resilience in a growingly digitized world.

### *Search Strategy*

A thorough literature search was performed to identify studies published from 2018 until 2025. The search included the following electronic databases: PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar. The search strategy utilized a combination of the following keywords: “screen time,” “social media,” “mental health,” “depression,” “anxiety,” “well-being,” “adolescents,” “systematic review,” and “meta-analysis.” The reference lists of the articles falling in the inclusion criteria were also searched. Inclusion criteria were (1) peer-reviewed systematic reviews, meta-analyses, or large-scale empirical studies; (2) studies that examined screen time and/or social media use as independent variables; (3) studies that reported mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, stress, or well-being; and (4) studies that were published in English. The exclusion criteria included case studies, editorials, and studies that did not examine one of the mental health outcomes. Inclusive studies were rated based on methodological quality using the advanced AMSTAR 2 tool to evaluate systematic reviews and the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale to assess observational studies, only including moderately and high-quality studies in the synthesis.

## **RESULTS**

The synthesis of qualitative reviews and quantitative studies points consistently to a link between excessive screen time, especially social media use, and negative mental health outcomes. Those particularly vulnerable to mental health problems are adolescents and young adults, and researchers found that higher levels of digital engagement were associated with greater levels of depression, anxiety, and stress and lower levels of psychological well-being (Santos et al., 2023; Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Furthermore, among digital activities, social media was more closely associated with negative outcomes than either television or gaming (Karim et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2020). The context and content of digital engagement also matter; research indicated that cyberbullying, negative social comparison, and passive content consumption were associated with greater psychological distress than active engagement, while supportive online interactions and educational content areas were associated with positive or protective effects (Naslund et al., 2020; Wan Sulaiman et al., 2024).

There is a further difference in gender, with teenage girls having a much higher risk of social media-related depression and anxiety (Santos et al., 2023; Orben et al., 2025). Several interventions related to therapy or counseling to treat social media platform use disorder were shown to have better mental health outcomes than non-therapy-based treatments such as in-person time limits or abstaining from screens altogether (Firth et al., 2023; Radesky & Christakis, 2024). Some meta-analyses, however, have commented that effect sizes reported across the literature generally show small effect sizes, and cross-sectional studies reduce the ability to establish causation (Ferguson et al., 2021; Werner-Seidler et al., 2024). The literature does address the factors that diminish the negative aspects of time spent on screens. In the case of positive social interaction factors (for example, digital literacy and social support), they can reduce the negative aspects of excessive screen time, while in the case of negative interactions, such as exposure to cyberbullying on social media, they can

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also increase the negative effects of time spent on screens (Saleem & Jan, 2024; Camerini et al., 2022).

A growing number of studies over the past ten years have explored the relationship between screen time, social media use, and mental health, especially for children, adolescents, and young adults. The literature indicates consistently that excessive or problematic engagement with digital devices and online platforms is associated with negative psychological outcomes, although the strength and meaning of those associations vary according to population, context, and measurement. Recently, large-scale studies and systematic reviews have found that adolescents with internalizing mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety) spend more time on social media and engage in more social comparison and are more affected by feedback on social media than their peers without internalizing conditions. They also report less of a sense of control over their time online, indicating a particular vulnerability to problematic engagement with digital devices. Adolescents with externalizing conditions (e.g., conduct disorder) are similar to their peers only in terms of spending more time online but do not demonstrate differences in other dimensions of engagement. It is important to note that social comparison has been identified as one prominent mechanism linking social media to internalizing symptoms because social media platforms provide an endless source of social comparison opportunities, and many of these comparisons are unfavourable (Fassi et al., 2025)

Khalaf et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of 11 studies and concluded there is a small correlation between young people's social media usage and depressive symptoms that was statistically significant. However, the review also emphasized the lack of clarity regarding causation and the potential to be imprecise in self-report measures of technology usage. The review concluded social media usage is associated with not only depressive symptoms but also body image concerns and disordered eating (particularly among young women) and an increased risk of peer victimization, including cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is strongly linked to increased rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm in youth. The review also noted that while friendships online provide social support, face-to-face social support provides greater protection against peer victimization and adverse outcomes. Most importantly, the review suggested more personalized and family-based approaches to digital media use, such as personal healthy media plans and digital literacy interventions. (Khalaf et al., 2023)

Longitudinal evidence added to the evidence of an association between screen time and mental health outcomes, even with consistently small effect sizes. For example, Tang et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of longitudinal studies that revealed with developmental differences in researching screen time with animals, longer screen time was associated with later depressive symptoms in youth. The extent of the associative findings ranged from small to very small. Meaning that while screen time seems to be an important predictor for mental health outcomes, there will be a larger constellation of risk factors and mental health outcomes all likely working together. Furthermore, the association of screen time with mental health outcomes may be mediated or moderated by the specific type of screen time, the context of screen time, and an individual's own vulnerability (Tang et al., 2021).

The same findings appear to hold true for cross-sectional studies; that is a corroboration of the associations. Many of these studies also provide a greater level of detail about the prevalence and correlates of mental health symptoms. Saleem and Jan (2021) reported

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significant relations regarding excessive screen time and media use, increased rates of depression, anxiety, and stress, and decreased levels of self-esteem in youth.

Saleem and Jan (e.g., 2024) included factors that were also protective against negative mental health outcomes (e.g., strong social support and physical activity) and identified poor-quality sleep and being a victim of cyberbullying as exacerbating media influences.

Sleep disturbance comes up often in the literature, and there is evidence that problematic social media use is associated with poor sleep quality, which may be a risk factor for mental health issues. Ahmed et al. (2024) present systematic data showing that social media use is linked to both an increased likelihood of mental health problems and sleep disruption, which may increase the risk of depression and anxiety (Ahmed et al., 2024).

Intervention studies demonstrate that decreased leisure screen time has short-term effects on children's and adolescents' psychological symptoms. Schmidt-Persson et al. (2024) reported that a short-term reduction of screen media use in families also resulted in measurable changes in psychological symptoms. These findings lend support to intervention studies for target reductions in screen media use (Schmidt-Persson et al., 2024).

The literature documents a variety of behavioral and emotional outcomes associated with high levels of screen time, including hyperactivity, inattention, internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, and lower self-esteem. Francisquini et al. (2024) found that high daily screen time was positively associated with hyperactivity/inattention, depression, anxiety, and internalizing problems in children and adolescents (Francisquini et al., 2024).

Lastly, research on internet addiction and associated harms discusses the prevalence and dangers of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), depression, and suicidal thoughts in youth populations. Gillespie et al. (2024) provide a systematic review of literature that suggests that internet addiction is clearly related to NSSI, depression, and suicidal thinking; moreover, general internet use is related to increased risk of all three of these (especially harmful content exposure and responses after peer negativity—Gillespie et al., 2024).

Overall, the review of literature comes to a consensus that excessive or problematic screen time, in particular where social media use factors in, is consistently correlated with negative mental health outcomes in their daily lives, particularly in driving negative mental health outside of the defined construct, especially for youth populations that are already vulnerable to the harms of new technology. The degree to which these negative outcomes are accounted for and mediated by several other factors, all having their varying contributions, including how youth engage in digital spaces, the quality of youth online engagement, sleep, and protective bindings such as being active or feeling socially supported. Ultimately, while a large measure of previous findings discussed in the review have relatively low effect sizes, and not much causally detects these harms, together these studies signal an increased awareness of balanced digital engagement, appropriate intervention, and the need for continued research in this area, especially with technologies that create new forms of engagement for youth.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this literature review illustrate the complicated and complex relationship between screen time, social media use, and mental health in the everyday context of daily living. Overall, from systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and population-based studies, we

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find consistent evidence that excessive screen exposure, particularly for social media-based activities, can be connected to negative mental health outcomes, especially in adolescents and young adults (Santos et al., 2023; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Twenge & Campbell, 2018). The most frequent negative outcomes from screen use included increased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, in addition to decreased psychological well-being.

The literature revealed themes indicating that relationships and impacts depend on context and content. Not all screen time use was created equal, and varied use of social media differs in how it influences mental well-being through the lens of social comparison, filtered content through algorithmic feeds, and potential for cyberbullying compared to television viewing and other educational activities (Karim et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2020). Passive scrolling on social media was shown to have detrimental effects and was related to feelings of loneliness and inadequacy, while meaningful and positive online interactions provide protective factors to counter negative mental health outcomes (Naslund et al., 2020; Wan Sulaiman et al., 2024).

Adolescent girls appear to be more at risk than boys for depression and anxiety linked to social media, which we speculate may be influenced by greater sensitivity to social feedback, increased exposure to appearance-related content, and a greater tendency towards social comparison (Santos et al., 2023; Orben et al., 2025). Findings like these may strengthen the case for gender sensitivity in research and interventions.

Intervention research that was examined indicates that therapy-based approaches to reduce problematic screen time/social media use are more effective than simply stopping or restricting use. The use of cognitive-behavioral approaches, training in digital literacy, and incorporating family-based interventions have shown potential to ameliorate mental health problems (Firth et al., 2023; Radesky & Christakis, 2024). That said, a number of meta-analyses raise cautionary notes that the effect sizes are modest and that most studies are cross-sectional and use self-report measures, and hence the ability to draw causal conclusions is weak (Ferguson et al., 2021; Werner-Seidler et al., 2024). It is clear that more experimental and longitudinal research is needed on the directionality of these associations and the processes through which they work.

Several key theories help explain how screen time, social media use, and mental health symptoms are related and offer useful conceptualizations of both risk and protective considerations of digital involvement such as:

1. The Displacement Hypothesis is one of the most common theories used to explain mental health implications as As people spend more of their time in front of screens, the opportunities for face-to-face interactions and other positive behaviors decline. Therefore, increased screen time may lead to more social isolation, feelings of loneliness', and other mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression. Upward social comparison theory suggests that individuals tend to compare themselves to others who are seemingly better off than themselves, and perhaps in some cases, individuals face deeply curated, idealized versions of someone's life on social media. These upward social comparisons, especially if come across regularly, could contribute to lower self-esteem and body satisfaction levels, and therefore a higher risk of depressive symptoms and anxiety among highly active adolescents and young adults that engage on these platforms.
2. The Reinforcing Spirals Model offers a more complex analysis, claiming individuals tend to seek and select media content that aligns with their existing attitudes and

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beliefs. Social media algorithms can shape this pattern when similar types of content repeatedly appear in front of the user, enabling the reinforcement of certain ideas (like body ideals or political ideologies) and possibly even continuing to worsen a negative emotional state or maladaptive thought process. The social media user can develop so-called filter bubbles, which ultimately may increase vulnerabilities in already at-risk individuals.

Moreover, the literature also notes a variety of protective and risk factors, which can change the impact of screen time and social media on mental health. Protective factors include physical activity on a regular basis, social support networks, and digital literacy, all of which can act as a buffer when screen time use becomes excessive (Saleem & Jan, 2024; Wan Sulaiman et al., 2024). Risk factors include negative experiences online, being subjected to cyberbullying, poor sleep, and a lack of supervision from parents, which can intensify psychological suffering.

### ***Scope***

The objective of this review paper is to systematically review and synthesize current research on the relationship between screen time, social media use, and mental health outcomes of adolescents and young adults. The review draws from recent systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and large empirical studies published 2018-2025 focused on the relationships between forms, duration, and context of digital media engagement and psychological health and well-being outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and stress. The review examines which factors, including the screen activity, sex, age, sleep quality, social and family support, and digital literacy, moderate or mediate the relationship. Additionally, it assesses the strengths and weaknesses of the existing evidence base and examines the effectiveness of interventions to limit the impact of negative mental health effects. The combination of the evidence presented offers public health, educational, parental, and clinical considerations to best support healthy digital media use in youth.

### ***Limitations***

1. **Restricted Helpfulness for Individual Instances:** Because types of review articles usually assess broader patterns across diverse studies, authors of review articles are likely to find it difficult to justify their conclusions based on the specific situations, contexts, or needs of individuals they serve. What is true on average is not necessarily true for every individual or community.
2. **Difficulties in Applying Evidence to Practice:** Much of the research included in reviews is based on controlled experiments or surveys that were conducted in experimental conditions that varied greatly in comparison to the actual contexts of practice. Therefore, recommended interventions or associations (e.g., limits on screen time) will likely be difficult to implement or maintain in the contexts that practitioners work in where resources, constraints, and other stressors vary and exist.
3. **Lagging or Fast-Changing Topics:** Technology and digital media use trends change quickly. By the time a review is published, new forms of screen use, platforms, or new features may have already arisen that have diminished the relevance or applicability of review findings for present-day decisions about practice.
4. **Diversity of Measurement and Constructs:** When studies have various definitions of constructs that include "screen time" or "problematic use," it can create confusion or ambiguity for practitioners trying to establish rules or standards. Practically, this means that educators, parents, or clinicians may not know the specific behaviors to encourage or discourage.

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5. Cultural and Contextual Inattention: Many studies are conducted in a specific cultural or socioeconomic context; therefore, review results may fail to account for cultural beliefs and understandings surrounding technology, family systems, or local resources, making them less applicable in other contexts.
6. Feasibility and Sustainability of Interventions: While a review may depict evidence of efficacy for certain interventions (e.g., cognitive-behavioral therapy for screen addiction), there may be practical barriers to ensuring access, costs, or trained professionals are available to implement interventions, particularly in resource-scarce settings.
7. Bias in Self-Report or Reliability of Data: Since most of the reviewed literature is based on self-reported behaviors, it would be difficult to apply them practically if people' descriptions, or recall of their own screen use and mental health, were inaccurate.

### CONCLUSION

There is good scientific evidence from the literature reviewed here to suggest that screen time and social media usage have multi-dimensional and meaningful effects on most individuals' mental health in everyday life, and it is particularly pronounced among children, adolescents, and young adults. Together, these volumes of quality systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and large-scale empirical research with generalizable findings show that spending excess time on digital screens (specifically social media usage) is associated with greater risks for experiencing rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and reduced well-being (Santos et al., 2023; Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). These effects were especially pronounced in vulnerable populations, such as adolescent individuals and those who had precursory risk factors for mental health conditions, and were mediated by social factors, such as cyberbullying, negative social comparisons, and sleep disruption (Karim et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2020). Whereas the negative impact of excessive screen time and unhealthy social media habits is well established in the literature, it is important to recognize the subtleties acknowledged. Not all screen time is harmful. Individual screens are not equally harmful, and the activity type, quality of content, and context of use are recognized to moderate mental health outcomes (Firth et al., 2023; Stiglic & Viner, 2019). For example, educational and supportive interactions online potentially have benefits. In contrast, passive scrolling (or consuming negative content) can be especially harmful. Protecting factors such as having strong social support networks, being physically active, and having some degree of digital literacy may reduce some negative outcomes, which indicates that some degree of discernment should be used with technology (Wan Sulaiman et al., 2024; Radesky & Christakis, 2024).

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