

Research Paper

Connected Yet Vulnerable: A Cross-Sectional Study on Digital Screen Use and Psychological Well-being among College Going Students

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ABSTRACT

A cross-sectional study was conducted using (N=29 participants) college going students from age 18-24 years with (Mean= 1.72, SD= 0.59) in Guwahati, Assam, India. The study uses purposive sampling technique and three standardized questionnaires have been administered Mobile use Screen Timing (MUST), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), The Realistic Optimism Scale (ROS) for understanding the relationship between digital screen usage (Smartphone), life satisfaction and realistic optimism across different age groups respectively considering the screen time of the participants. Data was collected using these questionnaire and computation was done using software SPSS version 26. Results revealed from the study that there does not exist any association between screen timing and life satisfaction along with realistic optimism. Whereas in a correlation analysis it has been found that the dimensions of mobile phone usage in screen timing namely cravings, consequences, coping and realistic optimism has been found positively correlated with each other. However, no correlation was found between life satisfaction and screen time dimensions. Overall, it can be concluded by the findings that age does not statistically significant in respect with screen timing nor with life satisfaction and realistic optimism. Also, none of the demographic characteristics statistically found significant. Future research can focus upon the underlying behavioral and psychological factors which determines screen timing patterns of the individuals.

Keywords: *Mobile use screen timing, Satisfaction with Life, The Realistic Optimism, Cravings, Coping*

Screen time refers to the amount of time an individual spend using smart phones, computers, tablets, televisions, or other digital devices for activities such as entertainment, education, gaming, and social networking (Martin et al., 2016; Sui et al., 2021). Recent evidence indicates that young adults aged 18- 25 years spend an average of approximately seven hours per day on screen- based activities, excluding educational purposes (Deyo et al., 2023). Similarly, Hrafnkelsdottir et al. (2018) reported that the average daily screen time among young individuals was approximately 5.3 hours exceeding internationally recommended limits.

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Connected Yet Vulnerable: A Cross-Sectional Study on Digital Screen Use and Psychological Well-being among College Going Students

Excessive screen time has been associated with smart phone addiction, anxiety, depression, poor quality and reduced psychological wellbeing (Sui et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies have consistently shown that prolonged screen exposure is negatively associated with life satisfaction, suggesting that individuals with higher screen time tend to report lower levels of overall well-being (Deyo et al., 2023; Hrafnkelsdottir et al. (2018).

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction is defined as an individual's overall cognitive evaluation of the quality of their life based on personal standards and expectations (Kainulainen et al., 2018). It encompasses positive affect, the absence of negative emotional experiences, and a cognitive appraisal of one's life circumstances (Bunz, 2021; Kainulainen et al., 2018). Higher levels of life satisfaction have been associated with better physical health, lower mortality risk, improved mental health, and healthier behavioral outcomes (Hrafnkelsdottir et al., 2018; Matin et al., 2016; Sui et al., 2021).

Several studies have reported a significant negative relationship between screen time and life satisfaction, indicating that excessive screen use is associated with reduced life satisfaction (Bunz, 2021; Hrafnkelsdottir et al., 2018; Iannotti et al., 2009; Singh et al., 2022). However, some researchers have found weak or non-significant associations, suggesting that the relationship may depend on the purpose and context of screen use (Bunz, 2021; Matin et al., 2016). Bunz (2021) reported that older adults who primarily used digital media for communication and information experienced fewer adverse health outcomes than individuals engaging predominantly in passive media consumption. Likewise, screen time devoted to educational activities, information seeking, or moderate entertainment appears to have minimal impact on life satisfaction, whereas excessive engagement in passive activities such as prolonged social media scrolling and non-communicative screen use has been associated with lower life satisfaction, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Singh et al., 2022, Sui et al., 2021).

Realistic Optimism

Realistic optimism refers to the tendency to maintain positive expectations about future outcomes while acknowledging potential risks and challenges (Scheier et al. 2001). It is considered an important psychological resource that promotes resilience, adaptive coping, academic persistence, and overall psychological well-being among college students.

Excessive screen time may influence realistic optimism through increased social comparison. Social media platforms frequently present idealized portrayals of success, happiness, physical appearance, and lifestyle, encouraging individuals to compare themselves with others. Continuous exposure to such curated content may reduce self-esteem and satisfaction with personal success, thereby weakening optimistic expectations about the future (Vogel et al., 2014). Similarly, Twenge and Campbell (2018) found that adolescents and young adults who spent more time using digital media reported lower life satisfaction, reduced happiness, and mental health than those with moderate levels of screen usage. According to Keles et al., (2020), in their systematic review, further concluded that increased social media use was consistently associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety and psychological distress.

Nevertheless, not all forms of screen use negatively influence realistic optimism. According to Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, engaging with digital technologies for learning,

Connected Yet Vulnerable: A Cross-Sectional Study on Digital Screen Use and Psychological Well-being among College Going Students

skill development, and problem- solving can enhance self- efficacy, which in turn fosters realistic optimism. Individuals who develop competence grounded in actual abilities rather than unrealistic wishful thinking (Bandura, 1997).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

An institution based cross- sectional study was conducted in the state Assam (Guwahati), India. The study was carried out in June 2026 using purposive sampling technique. Across three colleges students participated in this study and those who are enrolled in bachelor and masters were selected. Considering from both private and government colleges.

Sample

This study was conducted among young adults aged 18-24 years enrolled in selected colleges in Guwahati, Assam.

Inclusion criteria

- Young adults aged 18-24 years of age
- Currently enrolled in a college belonging to the target population being studied.
- Able to read and write in English language.
- Willing to participate voluntarily and provide informed consent.
- Regular users of smart phone or social media.

Exclusion criteria

- Individuals who do not provide informed consent.
- individuals not having proficiency in English.
- individuals enrolled in the subject area in psychology.
- incomplete or improperly filled questionnaire.
- individuals with psychiatric and neurological illness

Sample Size

A total (N= 29) participants taken into consideration including both male, females and others, included both married and single as well.

Sampling Technique

A non- probability purposive sampling was adopted. Participants who fulfilled the required eligible criteria were selected for this study. The study sample was deliberately selected from the population to ensure the required objectives of this present study. Owing to the relatively small sample size, probability sampling was not feasible.

Study tools and procedure

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire where first section consisted of the demographic details of the participants and remaining section consisted of three types of standardized questions include screen timing, life satisfaction and realistic optimism scale. The participants were divided into three categorical groups on the basis of their age and duration, primary use and sleeping before using smart phone etc. The three standardized tools of this study are mentioned below –

- **Mobile use Screen Timing (MUST)**, a validated tool developed by Sharma et al. (2017) at the Service for Healthy Use of Technology (SHUT) Clinic, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bengaluru, which evaluates excessive

Connected Yet Vulnerable: A Cross-Sectional Study on Digital Screen Use and Psychological Well-being among College Going Students

or addictive smart phone use. MUST consisted of 18 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Never" to Always". The scale has four components: craving, loss of control, coping, and consequences. Smartphone use was classified as mild use (≤ 30), moderate use (31-49), and excessive/addictive use (≥ 50). The tool has demonstrated good reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93 and split-half reliability of 0.86. Permission to use MUST was obtained from the respective developers.

- **Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)** developed by Diener et al. (1985) was used as a self-report instrument for assessing life satisfaction. This scale consisted of 5-items designed to measure 'global cognitive judgments' of one's life satisfaction (not a measure of either positive or negative affect) of an individual. In this self-assessment instrument subjects are required to indicate that how much they agree or disagree with each of the 5 items on a 7-point rating scale ranging from strongly agree (7) to strongly disagree (1). Diener et al. (1985) reported a strong coefficient alpha of 0.87 and also 2 months a good test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.82.
- **The Realistic Optimism Scale (ROS):** The Realistic Optimism Scale (Nishaat, 2018) used in this survey consists of 12 items across three factors (future orientation, flexibility, and will/courage). The scale developer defines orientation as "the ability to step flexibility as "the ability to change one's mind flexibly from various perspectives, even when encountering difficulties" (Nishaat, 2021, p. 54). Furthermore, she defines will/courage as "the ability to face difficulties head-on" (Nishaat, 2021, p. 54). The first two factors—future orientation ($\alpha = .83$) and flexibility ($\alpha = .86$)—showed high internal consistency. The third factor—will/courage—also showed a moderate level of internal consistency ($\alpha = .60$). A five-point Likert scale ranging from 5 ("Quite applicable") to 1 ("Not applicable") was used to rate each item.

Procedure

A rapport was established while collecting data from the participants. Voluntary participation were encouraged to fill the form accordingly with proper instruction by the researcher. It takes almost 20-25 minutes to complete the entire questionnaire. The items were not so difficult, but proficiency of the English language is preferred. There was no right or wrong answers in each of the items. From the three different colleges the data has been collected respectively. The researcher from the part has ensured that if any discrepancy arose then the participants are free to ask questions when desired to do so. After filing all the responses from the part of the participants the researcher thanked for their cooperation.

Connected Yet Vulnerable: A Cross-Sectional Study on Digital Screen Use and Psychological Well-being among College Going Students

Table 1: Comparison of Mean Scores of Psychological constructs across Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Variable	Categories	C			LOC			CO			COP		
		M	f	p	M	f	p	M	f	p	M	f	p
Age	18-20	11.3	10		13.9	10		9.5	10		17.5	10	
		12.23		0.9	11.76		0.8	8.5		0.3	16.41		0.6
	20-22	10.23	17	35	9.7	17	49	8	17	16	19.41	17	76
		10.5	2		12.9.7	2		9.4	2		16.5	2	
Gender	Male	11.72	22		11.4	22		5	22		16.5	22	
		11.83	6	0.6	11.83	6	0.1	7.5	6	0.8	16.5	6	0.7
	Female	13	1	74	14	1	6	4	1	37	22	1	36
		11.13			12.14			8.8		0.8	17.17		0.4
Marital Status	Single	82	28	12	42	28	1	9	28	4	39	28	6
	Married	11	1		10	1			1			1	
Type of family pattern	Nuclear	11.87	0.0	0.7	12.29	0.2	0.8	9.1	0.1	0.4	17	0.5	
		11.87	2	76	12.29	08	63	2	01	74	17	07	1
Way of living	Joint Family	11.4			12.6								
		12.57	0.8	0.4	12.36	0.0	0.9		0.1	0.8	15.68	1.1	0.8
	Hosteler	11.57	7	22	12.36	69	62	9	64	14	68	35	4
		11.1			12.3								
Educational Qualification				0.7									
				76									
	B.A.	11.87	0.0		12.29	0.2	0.8	9.0	0.1	0.4	17.16	0.5	
		11.87	2		12.29	08	63	4	01	74	16	07	
Family income	M.A.	11.4			12.6			7.7			16		
		11.4			12.6			5			16		
	Low	11.5	0.2	0.8	15.75	0.6	0.3		0.0	0.9	15.25	0.7	0.5
		11.5	91	52	15.75	09	6	9	3	46	25	17	16
	Moderate	11.84			11.8			8.8			17.29		

Demographic Variable	Categories	FO			F			W/C			LSS		
		M	f	p	M	f	p	M	f	p	M	f	p
Age	18-20	13.8	10		10.7	10		10.5	10		15.8	10	
		13.35		0.6	10.52		0.0	11.41		0.7	15.11		0.0
	20-22	13.35	17	1	10.52	17	19	11.41	17	27	17.11	17	2
		13.35			10.52			11.41			17.11		
Gender	22-24	11.12	2		10.9.7	2		11.11	2		5	2	
		12.95	22		12.7	22		11.27	22		13.54	22	
	Male	14.33	6	0.6	12.5	6	0.9	10.33	6	0.6	20.166	6	0.8
		14.33		74	12.5		58	10.33		68	20.166		8
Marital	Other	16	1		16	1		11	1		31	1	
	Single	13.13	28	0.3	10.10	28	0.2	11.11	28	0.6	15.15	28	0.4

Connected Yet Vulnerable: A Cross-Sectional Study on Digital Screen Use and Psychological Well-being among College Going Students

Status		21		55	42		48	1		99	07		7
Type of family pattern	Married	17	1		14	1		10	1		28	1	
	Nuclear	13.	0.9	0.5	9.1	0.2		11.	1.3	0.8	14.		0.7
		12	6	21	6	02	0.1	04	3	99	29	0.7	94
		14.			13.			11.			21.		
	Joint	4			6			2			4		
Way of living	Family	13.	1.0	0.8	9.9	0.9	0.1	11.	4.2	0.6	14.	0.3	0.5
		47	61	14	4	38	37	21	61	79	31	33	68
	Hostel	13.			11.			10.			17.		
	ler	1			7			8			8		
Educational Qualification		13.	0.9	0.5	10.	0.2	0.0	11.	1.3	0.8	14.		0.7
	B.A.	16	6	21	08	02	1	12	3	99	52	0.7	94
		14.			13.			10.			21.		
	M.A.	5			5			75			75		
Family income		14.	0.6	0.4	10.	2.7	0.8	12.	0.3	0.1		0.6	0.2
	Low	75	33	53	75	21	9	7	97	47	12	12	47
	Moderate	13.			10.			10.			16.		
		12			52			8			08		

Note: *C* (Cravings), *LoC* (Loss of Control), *CO* (Consequences), *COP* (Coping); *FO* (Future Orientation), *F*(Flexibility), *W/C*(Willingness/ coping), *LSS*(Life Satisfaction scale)., *M*= Mean Scores, *f*= frequency (Number of participants); *p*= significance value. One ANOVA was employed for more than two categories of demographic variables, whereas Independent samples *t*-test was employed for demographic variables with two categories.

From table 1 with respect to age, participants aged 20-22 years obtained highest mean scores on C(M= 12.23), LOC= (M= 11.76) and FO(M= 13.35), whereas participants aged 22-24 years obtained the highest mean scores on COP (M= 19.50) and LSS(M= 17.50). However, no significant differences were observed in C (*p*= .935), LOC(*p*=0.849, CO(*p*= .316), COP (*p*=0.676) and FO(*p*= 0.610).Only in respect with age significant differences were observed F (*p*= 0.19) and LSS (*p*= 0..20), indicating that these variables differed significantly across three age groups.

Regarding gender, females scored slightly higher than males on C, LOC and FO, while males showed higher mean scores in some of the remaining constructs.

Similarly, type of family, way of living, educational qualification and family income does not contribute significantly to the mean scores of the study variables as all the corresponding *p*- values were greater than 0.05.

Connected Yet Vulnerable: A Cross-Sectional Study on Digital Screen Use and Psychological Well-being among College Going Students

Table 2 Correlation matrix representing Pearson correlation coefficient across different psychological constructs

Variables		Cravings	Loss of Control	Consequences	Coping	Life Satisfaction	Realistic Optimism
Cravings	<i>r</i>	1					
	<i>p</i>						
Loss of Control	<i>r</i>	0.334	1				
	<i>p</i>	0.77					
Consequences	<i>r</i>	0.33	0.523*	1			
	<i>p</i>	0.8	0.04				
Coping	<i>r</i>	.386*	.406*	0.323	1		
	<i>p</i>	0.39	0.29	0.87			
Life Satisfaction	<i>r</i>	-0.82	-0.249	-0.175	0.39	1	
	<i>p</i>	0.672	0.192	0.363	0.84		
Realistic Optimism	<i>r</i>	.515**	0.149	0.166	0.89	0.344	1
	<i>p</i>	0.04	0.441	0.389	0.646	0.68	

Note: * $p < 0.05$ level (2 tailed) ** $p < 0.01$ level (2 tailed)

From the above table 2 it has been revealed that positive correlation was observed between loss of control and consequences, $r = 0.523$, $p < 0.01$, indicating that individuals reporting greater loss of control also experienced more negative consequences. Cravings showed a significant positive correlation with coping, $r = .386$, $p < 0.05$, indicating that higher cravings were associated with greater use of coping strategies. Likewise, loss of control was positively associated with coping, $r = .406$, $p < 0.05$. Realistic optimism demonstrated a significant positive correlation with cravings, $r = .515$, $p < 0.01$. Whereas no significant correlation was found between life satisfaction with other variables. Similarly, the relationship between realistic optimism with loss of control, consequences, coping and life satisfaction were not statistically significant.

Table 3 One Way ANOVA showing differences in smart phone usage across different age groups ($N = 29$) $p < 0.01$ (level of significance)

Variables	F(2,26)	p
PUS	0.054	0.947
DSU	0.768	0.474
UBLF	1.556	0.23
BSU	0.285	0.754

Note: PUS= Primary use of Smartphone; DSU= Duration of Smartphone use; UBLF= Use Without Blue Light Filter for 30 minutes; BSU= Smartphone Use Before Sleeping.

From the above table no. 3 one way ANOVA was conducted it reveals that there does not exist any statistical significance exist across age groups in terms of smart phone usage. In primary use of smart phones while going to sleep, $F(2,26) = 0.054$, $p = .947$; duration of smart phone use, $F(2,26) = 0.768$, $p = 0.474$; smart phone use without a blue light filter for 30

Connected Yet Vulnerable: A Cross-Sectional Study on Digital Screen Use and Psychological Well-being among College Going Students

minutes, $F(2,26) = 1.556$, $p = 0.230$; and smart phone use immediately before sleep, $F(2,26) = 0.285$, $p = 0.754$.

Table 4 Multiple regression analysis predicting Screen timing from Life satisfaction and Realistic Optimism

Variables	b	SE	β	t	p	95% lower	95% upper
Screen timing	39.714	11.188		3.55	0.001	16.717	62.712
Life Satisfaction	-0.439	0.372	-0.231	-1.179	0.249	-1.204	0.326
Realistic Optimism	0.529	0.302	0.344	1.751	0.092	-0.092	1.151

Note : * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ $F = 1.722$, $p = .198$
 $R^2 = .117$

From the above table no. 4 reveals that overall regression model was not statistically significant, $F = 1.722$, $p = .198$, $R^2 = .117$, indicating that the predictors explained 11.7% of the variance in screen timing. For individual level, life satisfaction did not significantly predict screen timing, $\beta = -.231$, $t = -1.179$, $p = .249$, 95% CI [-1.204, 0.326]. Similarly, realistic optimism was also not significant predictor for screen timing $\beta = .344$, $t = 1.751$, $p = .092$, 95% CI [-0.092, 1.151]. Although realistic optimism showed positive regression coefficient but it does not able to signify it statistically.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined the relationship between screen timing usage (mobile phones), life satisfaction and realistic optimism among young adults. The findings demonstrated that demographic characteristics such as age, gender, educational qualification, family type, way of living and family income did not significantly predict most of the dimensions of screen time use, suggesting that smart phone- related behaviors were relatively consistent across the study sample. Similarly, the one -way ANOVA showed no significant difference between primary use, smart phone use without a blue filter, or smart phone usage before sleeping across different age groups, maybe due to the narrow age range between the samples. Likewise, Busch and McCarthy (2021), reported that demographic characteristics alone account for only limited proportion of variance in problematic smart phone use, with psychological and behavioral factors playing a key role. On the other hand, in terms of correlation analysis, positive association were found between loss of control and consequences, cravings, coping, and realistic optimism, which means individuals who experienced higher difficulty in regulating smart phone related usage also reported more negative consequences and greater reliance on coping strategies. These findings were supported by the theoretical framework by Billieux et al. (2015) identified impaired self-regulation as a central feature of problematic smart phone use, and are consistent with Elhai et al. (2017), who recommended that smart phone usage is regarded as coping strategies to regulate negative emotions and psychological distress. Moreover, life satisfaction was not significantly associated with the remaining construct which contrast with studies that excessive smart phone use linked with lower life satisfaction (Samaha & Hawi, 2016), although it has also been observed that this relationship is considered weak or inconsistent depending upon the sample characteristics and the measurement approach (Busch & McCarthy, 2021). Furthermore, in terms of multiple regression analysis it was found from the findings that life satisfaction and realistic optimism do not significantly predict screen timing and overall regression model was not statistically significant, explaining only 11.7%

Connected Yet Vulnerable: A Cross-Sectional Study on Digital Screen Use and Psychological Well-being among College Going Students

of the variance in screen timing. Although realistic optimism tries to explain the positive regression coefficient but also fails to emerge as a significant predictor, there might be other psychological factors like fear of missing out, habitual using of smart phone, self-control, social media engagement rather than by life satisfaction and realistic optimism alone (Elhai et al., 2017; Rozgonjuk et al., 2020). Overall, it can be concluded that several dimensions of problematic smart phone use are inter related, life satisfaction and realistic optimism alone are not sufficient to explain variations in screen timing. Future studies can focus upon diverse and larger sample with underlying behavioral and psychological factors which determine the smart phone usage screen time behavior.

Limitation of the study

The current study employed a correlational research design to examine the relationship between screen time, realistic optimism, and life satisfaction among college going students. However, the study has several limitations of its own. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, which may have limited the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the study included participants from a restricted age range and was conducted only in a specific region of Assam, thereby limiting the wider applicability. And lastly but not the least the measurement approach which might have affected the results to be statistically insignificant. Future research should include larger and more diverse sample thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings to the diverse population, with broader geographical representation and additional underlying psychological and behavioral constructs to provide more comprehensive understanding of the relationship among these constructs.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the current study, it can be concluded that screen time alone is not a significant predictor of realistic optimism and life satisfaction among college going students. It is possible that others psychological, social, environmental which may have contributed to play a more influential role in determining these outcomes. Although the findings did not support the proposed relationship, the study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the complexity of these constructs. Future research should focus on comprehensive framework for understanding the nature of screen timing using a wider perspective.

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Connected Yet Vulnerable: A Cross-Sectional Study on Digital Screen Use and Psychological Well-being among College Going Students

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Conflict of Interest

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Connected Yet Vulnerable: A Cross-Sectional Study on Digital Screen Use and Psychological Well-being among College Going Students

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