

Not All Screen Time is Created Equal: Associations with Mental Health Vary by Activity and Gender

Aims

This study aims to examine:

- Associations between different types of screen activities (social media, Internet, gaming, and TV) and mental health indicators separately for boys and girls.

Key Findings

- Hours spent on social media and Internet use were more strongly associated with self-harm behaviours, depressive symptoms, low life satisfaction, and low self-esteem than hours spent on electronic gaming and TV watching.
- Girls generally demonstrated stronger associations between screen media time and mental health indicators than boys (e.g., heavy Internet users were 166% more likely to have clinically relevant levels of depressive symptoms than low users among girls, compared to 75% more likely among boys).
- Social media and Internet use among adolescent girls are the most strongly associated with compromised mental health.

Policy Context

Not all screen time is created equal. Parents, physicians, therapists, and policy makers should be aware that associations are not uniform across all activities or all individuals. Practitioners should be aware that some types of screen time are more likely to be linked to mental health issues than others. The use of social media and the Internet among girls appears to warrant the highest levels of concern.

The stronger associations between screen time and mental health for girls may help explain why their mental health has suffered more than boys in recent years as social media and Internet use have increased. Future research should examine adolescents' digital media use with even more granularity. For example, associations with mental health may differ depending on the specific social media platform (e.g., Instagram vs. Snapchat), whether most communication is with friends or strangers, and the specific content of the interactions. At minimum, future research should examine screen media activities and boys and girls separately where possible.

Methodology

This research draws from the Millennium Cohort Study, a large, nationally representative sample of children born in the UK between September 2000 and January 2002. In the sixth wave of data collection in 2015 (when participants were approximately 14 years old), adolescents (n=11,427) were asked about their screen media use as well as their mental health and well-being. The four mental health indicators were self-harm behavior, depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and self-esteem.

First, gender differences were examined in the amount of time adolescents spent on each screen media activity. Then each screen media activity, gender, and their interaction term were entered into a regression equation with each mental health indicator as the independent variable – the goal being to determine if associations between screen media activities and mental health were moderated by gender. Next the researchers examined correlations between screen media activity time and each mental health indicator among girls, boys, and the sample as a whole. These analyses were intended to capture the association between time spent on each screen media activity and mental health. Finally, the researchers compared the percentage of those with problematic mental health (self-harm behavior, depression, low life satisfaction, and low self-esteem) across categories of each screen media activity examining boys and girls separately. These analyses were intended to determine the association between time spent on specific screen media activities and the risk of negative mental health outcomes.

Background

Adolescents spend an increasing amount of time with screen media such as social media, gaming, the Internet, and TV. In the UK, 99% of 12–15 years old go online, for an average of 20 hours a week, double the frequency of 10 years ago. These trends have led to the concern that increasing screen media use may be connected to mental health issues – a research question that has produced conflicting results. Thus, it is important to determine if heavy use of screen media is associated with mental health and well-being. Existing research has neither sufficiently addressed how associations with mental health may differ across screen media activities, nor adequately examined gender as a moderator.

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