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Is smartphone time or social media time the real mental health problem for young adults?

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years it has become clear that increased time spent on smartphones and social media has a negative mental health effect on young adults. These consequences range from depressive symptoms, poor sleep, suicidal ideation, and many others. Despite this, not all researchers are convinced that screen time has a negative affect on mental health. The main reason for this variability is due to the relationships between screen time and mental health being much more complex than what current research shows. Given the lack of agreement among researchers, further research to determine the mental health effects screen time and social media has on young adults is vital.

OBJECTIVES

- Estimate average daily objectively measured smartphone screen time among college students
- Estimate average daily objectively measured social media time among college students
- Examine the independent associations of smartphone screen time and social media time on depressive symptoms

METHODS

This study used a web-based survey of college students at a small private, non-profit university in the northeast United States. Data collection was completed in October 2022. Participants had to be enrolled at the university, aged 18+, and use an iPhone. A total of 341 participants were included in this analysis.

The primary outcome measured was depressive symptoms utilizing the CES-D-10. The primary exposures were identified as smartphone screen time and social media time. Covariates included sexual and gender identity, age, race/ethnicity, social status, social support, and sleep problems.

RESULTS

- On average students spent slightly greater than 7 hours on their smartphones daily.
- 3.5 of those hours were specific to social media use.
- 56.7% of the sample met the definition for depression.
- Average daily social media time was higher among sexual or gender minorities and cisgender heterosexual females compared to cisgender heterosexual males.
- Students with depression had higher daily social media time than those without depression.
- A statistically significant relationship was found between average daily social media time and depression.

	AOR	95% CI
Average Daily Social Media Time in Hours	1.23	1.01, 1.51
Average Daily Smartphone Screen Time Time in Hours	0.95	0.84, 1.09

DISCUSSION

The study found no association between screen time being associated with depression. Despite this finding, researchers across the country found conflicting information. A meta-analysis in 2022 agrees with our findings while the majority of other current research shows screen time affects mental health. Despite this, we did find an association between time spent on social media and depression. Many current articles found similar results, and those that didn't had limited inclusion criteria and lacked variability in participants. Social media and screen time is an ongoing problem for adolescents. Clinicians need to focus on more preventative programs while social media companies need to lessen adolescent use to reduce lasting effects on future generations.

CONCLUSION

Based on our findings, we can conclude that increased social media use is associated with depression among college students. To help reduce these effects in the future, prevention campaigns can increase awareness to the public. Additionally, corporations can increase restrictions and awareness on social media platforms in attempt to limit daily screen time.

“Time spent on social media is associated with depression while smartphone screen time had no effect.”

