Not all screen time is created equal: associations with mental health vary by activity and gender

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## Sample

A nationally representative sample of 11,427 13–15-year-old adolescents in the UK.

## Implications For Parents About

Parental practices / parental mediation

# Abstract

Purpose Previous research on associations between screen media use and mental health produced mixed findings, possibly
because studies have not examined screen activities separately or accounted for gender differences. We sought to examine
associations between different types of screen activities (social media, internet, gaming, and TV) and mental health indicators
separately for boys and girls.
Methods We drew from a nationally representative sample of 13–15-year-old adolescents in the UK (n = 11,427) asking
about hours per day spent on specific screen media activities and four mental health indicators: self-harm behavior, depressive
symptoms, life satisfaction, and self-esteem.
Results Hours spent on social media and Internet use were more strongly associated with self-harm behaviors, 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).
Conclusion Thus, not all screen time is created equal; social media and Internet use among adolescent girls are the most
strongly associated with compromised mental health. Future research should examine different screen media activities and
boys and girls separately where possible. Practitioners should be aware that some types of screen time are more likely to be
linked to mental health issues than others.

# Outcome

"In a large, nationally representative sample of adolescents in
the UK, associations between screen media use and mental
health issues differed by type of screen media activity and
by gender, with the largest associations for social media and
Internet use among girls. Thus, not all screen time is created
equal.
Effect sizes were larger for social media and Internet use
compared to gaming and TV use. These differences may be
rooted in both the device used and the psychological processes
involved in each screen media activity... Associations also differed by gender. Heavy screen media
use was more strongly associated with mental health issues
among girls compared to boys, particularly for Internet use
and social media. The stronger associations for girls may
help to explain why girls’ mental health has suffered more
than boys’ in recent years as social media and Internet use
have increased." (Twenge and Farley, 2020: 211).