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| Mental Health vs. Technology  Esther Scott  6/10/2025 |

# Introduction

In recent years, growing concerns have unraveled regarding the potential impact of screen time on mental health, particularly among young people. For many college students, digital devices play an essential role in daily routines such as aiding academic responsibilities, social connection, and entertainment. However, as technology use increases, so do questions on whether it may be contributing to rising rates of mental health. This study examines the relationship between screen habits and emotional well-being among students at BYU–Idaho, with the goal of determining whether a campus-wide awareness campaign might be beneficial in promoting healthier technological practices.

In their article *A “Goldilocks Amount of Screen Time” Might Be Good for Teenagers’ Wellbeing*, Przybylski and Weinstein (2017) argue that screen time is not inherently harmful. Their research suggests that moderate or limited screen use can have positive effects by encouraging social connection and relaxation. However, their findings also indicate that there is a threshold beyond which screen time becomes detrimental, especially when it interferes with important activities such as sleep or schoolwork. They conclude that while some screen use may be beneficial, excessive or poorly timed usage can contribute to emotional strain and anxiety.

Similarly, Best, Manktelow, and Taylor (2014), in *Online Communication, Social Media and Adolescent Wellbeing: A Systematic Narrative Review*, emphasize that the effects of screen time depend largely on how technology is used. Their review found that online platforms can foster self-expression and social connection, which are important aspects of psychological well-being. However, they also noted risks such as increased anxiety and depressive symptoms when students experience online comparison, social pressure, or cyberbullying. This research highlights that both the quantity and quality of screen engagement are important factors in determining its emotional impact.

Taking a more cautionary stance, Twenge, Martin, and Campbell (2018), in their study *Decreases in Psychological Well-Being Among American Adolescents After 2012 and Links to Screen Time During the Rise of Smartphone Technology*, report a notable decline in adolescent mental health beginning around the time smartphones became widely used. Their findings show a strong association between high levels of screen time and decreased happiness, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. The author argues that excessive screen use is likely a major contributor to the increase in anxiety and depression observed in recent years, especially as it often replaces face-to-face interactions and healthy daily routines.

# Methods

The survey was given to BYU-I students enrolled in ENG 301 within an academic semester. All participants were current students, and participation was voluntary. No incentives were offered, and all responses were collected anonymously to protect student privacy.

A close-up of a table

AI-generated content may be incorrect.Each student was surveyed during class and was asked to complete it during that time. The survey consisted of two main sections. The first section used the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule – General (PANAS-GEN) scale to assess emotional well-being. This section included 20 emotion-based questions, 10 related to positive emotions and 10 to negative emotions. For each question, students selected a response from a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“very slightly or not at all”) to 5 (“extremely”). These numeric responses were added to produce a total emotional wellness score between 20 and 100, which was then categorized as low (20–60), medium (61–80), or high (81–100) wellness.

A white and black checklist with black text

AI-generated content may be incorrect.The second part of the survey included additional questions inspired by Twenge et al. (2018), which focused on students’ screen time use outside of school and work. These questions were created to identify the amount and type of screen-based activities students engaged in such as social media, streaming, texting, and gaming. This was to see if they had any perceived psychological effects. Responses were used to analyze possible patterns or correlations between screen habits and wellness scores.

The final data set, which included the number of participants shown in the study’s data tables, was analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends in screen use and emotional well-being. Open-ended responses, when applicable, were also reviewed to identify common themes related to stress, technology use, and emotional health.

# Results

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A table with numbers and text

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Our survey clearly indicates that students spend a significant amount of time online, even when they're not doing schoolwork or their job. Analyzing the data from the conceptual graph titled "How many hours a week do you spend online? - Total" (derived from the question "Not counting work for school or a job..."), we found that a substantial portion of students are deeply immersed in digitally. Specifically, over a third, or approximately 39.86%, of students are online for 10 or more hours each week purely for recreational purposes. Furthermore, a notable 16% are online for 20 hours or more in this non-essential capacity. While our survey did not directly assess anxiety or depression levels, this extensive screen time can inadvertently displace other vital healthy activities. For example, multiple hours dedicated to screen use may lead to reduced physical exercise, disrupted sleep patterns, and fewer direct face-to-face social interactions. Existing research consistently suggests that such habits can predispose young adults to increased anxiety and depressive symptoms, indicating that excessive non-essential screen time may inadvertently foster conditions that exacerbate these mental health challenges.A graph with different colored lines

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A closer examination of social media habits, derived from the "About how many hours a day do you spend on each of the following activities? - Averages by Wellness Scores" data reveals a critical distinction between passive content consumption and active interactive engagement, with implications for mental well-being. Students average 2.54 hours daily on "Social Media - Scrolling," significantly more than the 1.47 hours on "Social Media - Interactive with Others." Notably, those with "Low" wellness scores report a higher average of 3.058 hours daily on "Social Media - Scrolling," compared to 1.85 hours for "High" wellness scores. This imbalance towards passive absorption, particularly amplified in lower wellness groups, frequently instigates social comparison and exposure to idealized realities. Such engagement, largely devoid of genuine connection, creates a conducive environment for heightened anxiety and can contribute to depressive symptomatology among young individuals.

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The survey data from the "Which of the following best characterizes your phone use? - Total" graph reveals patterns with implications for mental well-being. While 31.35% characterize their phone use as "Communicating" and 9.33% as "Interacting with Others," a significant 30.75% cite "Passing Time" and 17.06% cite "Surfing and Exploring." This notable focus on less active engagement, often involving passive content consumption, can lead to increased social comparison and feelings of isolation, as these digital interactions frequently lack the depth of in-person connections. Consequently, this usage pattern may contribute to or aggravate anxiety and depression in young individuals.

# Discussion

This survey offers essential and localized insight into BYU-Idaho students' digital habits and their potential link to mental well-being. Unlike broader studies, our data directly reflects specifically this student population's behaviors and wellness scores. The "How many hours a week do you spend online? - Total" graph shows significant non-essential screen time with 39.86% of students online 10+ recreational hours weekly and 16% exceeding 20 hours. Critically, the "About how many hours a day do you spend on each of the following activities? - Averages by Wellness Scores" data reveals a compelling pattern: students with "Low" wellness scores report significantly higher "Social Media - Scrolling" averages (3.058 hours daily) compared to those with "High" wellness (1.85 hours). This suggests a strong correlation between high volume and passive screen time and reduced well-being. Furthermore, the "Which of the following best characterizes your phone use? - Total" graph indicates widespread passive engagement, with 30.75% for "Passing Time" and 17.06% for "Surfing and Exploring." This pervasive passive consumption likely fosters social comparison and isolation. Based on this evidence, it is our recommendation that the BYU-Idaho Wellness Office proceed with their proposed week-long, campus-wide awareness campaign.

To maximize impact, the campaign should have an emphasized focus on two key areas. First, educate students on the *quality* of screen time, differentiating between beneficial active engagement and detrimental passive consumption like excessive "Social Media - Scrolling" and "Passing Time." Provide practical tips to reduce passive use. Second, emphasize the importance of balancing screen time with offline activities such as physical exercise, proper sleep care, and increased face-to-face social interactions. The goal is to empower students with mindful technology practices that mitigate adverse effects on their emotional well-being.

# Conclusion

In conclusion, this study's survey of BYU-Idaho students provides strong empirical support for concerns about screen time's influence on mental health. Our findings reveal extensive, often passive, digital interactions that align with behaviors linked to increased anxiety and depression. While Przybylski and Weinstein (2017) suggest moderate screen time benefits, our data indicates many students, particularly those with lower wellness scores, exceed this healthy threshold, especially in passive activities. The prevalence of "passing time" and "surfing" on phones, as highlighted by Best, Manktelow, and Taylor (2014), underscores risks like social comparison and reduces genuine connection. Moreover, the high volume of screen time and its potential to displace vital face-to-face interactions resonates with Twenge, Martin, and Campbell's (2018) observations of declining student well-being alongside increased smartphone use. Therefore, our data compellingly suggests that current screen time patterns among BYU-Idaho students contribute to or worsen anxiety and depression. It is recommended that the BYU-Idaho Wellness Office proceed with its proposed campus-wide awareness campaign to guide students toward more mindful and balanced digital practices for improved emotional health.

# Reference List

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