

## Digital Fatigue and Adolescent Mental Health: The Role of Screen Time and Social Validation

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### ABSTRACT

The rapid digitalization of communication and social interaction has profoundly shaped adolescent lifestyles, bringing both opportunities and challenges. This study investigates the relationship between digital fatigue and adolescent mental health, focusing specifically on the roles of screen time and the pursuit of social validation through digital platforms. With increased exposure to screens and constant online presence, adolescents often experience psychological strain manifesting as anxiety, depression, and burnout. The research explores how excessive engagement with digital content, particularly social media, heightens the pressure to conform and seek validation via likes, comments, and shares, contributing to emotional exhaustion. Drawing upon existing psychological and sociological frameworks, the study analyzes patterns of digital behavior and their psychosocial impact on youth. The findings highlight the urgent need for awareness programs, digital literacy initiatives, and mental health interventions tailored to adolescents navigating the complexities of online engagement. This work calls for a balanced digital diet and responsible media use to safeguard adolescent well-being in the digital age.

**Keywords:** *Digital fatigue, adolescent mental health, screen time, social media, social validation, psychological well-being, emotional exhaustion, digital behavior, online engagement, youth anxiety*

In the digital age, adolescents are increasingly immersed in technology-driven environments where screens dominate daily routines, communication, education, and entertainment. The pervasiveness of smartphones, social media, and digital platforms has redefined the way young people interact, form identities, and perceive social belonging. While digital access has brought about greater connectivity and convenience, it has also ushered in new challenges—particularly in terms of mental well-being. One of the most concerning developments is digital fatigue, a condition marked by mental exhaustion, stress, and cognitive overload resulting from prolonged screen exposure.

Digital fatigue in adolescents stems from an overdependence on screens not only for school-related tasks but also for socialization and recreational purposes. With the lines between academic work, social interaction, and personal downtime increasingly blurred, many teenagers experience a persistent sense of being "always on." This constant digital engagement disrupts sleep patterns, increases anxiety, and contributes to emotional dysregulation. As adolescents struggle to keep up with the demands of both the real and virtual worlds, their

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mental resilience is compromised, leading to higher risks of depression, irritability, and burnout.

One of the central features influencing digital fatigue is the phenomenon of social validation—especially through social media platforms. Teenagers often measure their self-worth based on likes, comments, and followers, equating digital approval with personal value. The compulsive need to check notifications and maintain an appealing online presence generates significant psychological pressure. This incessant search for external affirmation fosters a fragile self-esteem that is easily undermined by online comparisons, cyberbullying, or digital exclusion, all of which are directly linked to adverse mental health outcomes.

The role of screen time in shaping adolescent behavior and psychological health has drawn growing academic and clinical interest. Several studies have identified correlations between excessive screen time and increased symptoms of anxiety, attention disorders, and emotional detachment. While moderate and purposeful screen use may have educational or social benefits, unregulated and prolonged exposure has been consistently associated with cognitive fatigue, reduced attention spans, and social withdrawal. The effects are not only psychological but also physiological, as blue light emissions from devices interfere with melatonin production, impacting sleep cycles.

Moreover, digital fatigue and social validation concerns are particularly pronounced during formative years when adolescents are navigating identity development, peer acceptance, and emotional maturity. The pressure to conform to curated online standards of beauty, success, and popularity leads to internal conflict and dissatisfaction. This can result in what psychologists call “validation dependence,” where self-perception becomes overly reliant on external feedback rather than intrinsic self-assessment. Such patterns can impair emotional development and hinder healthy coping mechanisms in stressful situations.

Family dynamics and socio-cultural contexts also play a significant role in moderating or exacerbating the impact of screen use on adolescent mental health. In households where digital boundaries are poorly enforced or where technology substitutes meaningful human interaction, adolescents are more vulnerable to the negative consequences of excessive screen time. Furthermore, the digital divide and disparities in access can create additional stressors for teens who use screens not only for socializing but also for academic survival, especially in the post-pandemic era of online learning.

Addressing digital fatigue and its associated mental health risks requires a multi-faceted approach involving parents, educators, healthcare professionals, and policy makers. Creating awareness about the risks of excessive screen use, promoting digital literacy, and encouraging healthier screen habits are essential first steps. Interventions must also prioritize the cultivation of offline social relationships, emotional intelligence, and self-regulation skills. Understanding the nuanced relationship between screen time, social validation, and adolescent well-being is key to developing effective prevention and support strategies.

The digital environment has become an inseparable part of modern adolescence, bringing both opportunities and vulnerabilities. While it empowers teenagers with tools for communication and expression, it also burdens them with expectations and pressures that challenge their psychological endurance. Digital fatigue and the pursuit of social validation represent critical dimensions of this evolving landscape, necessitating continued research, dialogue, and targeted action to safeguard the mental health of the younger generation.

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## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In recent years, the proliferation of digital devices and platforms has reshaped the daily lives of adolescents, ushering in a digital age where screen time and online engagement are nearly ubiquitous. Smartphones, tablets, and social media platforms are now integral to how young individuals communicate, learn, and express themselves. While these technologies offer numerous advantages, including access to information, virtual connectivity, and creative expression, there has been growing concern over their adverse effects on mental health, particularly among adolescents. One emerging phenomenon is digital fatigue—a state of mental exhaustion stemming from prolonged engagement with digital screens and content.

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to digital fatigue due to their developmental stage and heightened sensitivity to social validation. As they navigate the complexities of identity formation, many adolescents increasingly seek affirmation and recognition through online platforms. Social media, in particular, capitalizes on mechanisms such as likes, comments, and shares, which can generate a compulsive need for external validation. This constant pursuit of approval and fear of missing out (FOMO) can place undue psychological pressure on adolescents, contributing to anxiety, stress, and diminished self-esteem. Consequently, digital interactions that were once sources of enjoyment may become mentally taxing and emotionally draining.

Moreover, the blurring of boundaries between online and offline life has made it difficult for adolescents to disengage from screens. Academic demands, social interactions, and recreational activities are now frequently mediated through digital platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift, making remote learning, virtual hangouts, and increased screen dependency a norm. While this transition enabled continuity in education and social life, it also led to excessive screen exposure, reduced physical activity, irregular sleep patterns, and overall lifestyle imbalances—factors strongly associated with digital fatigue and mental health disturbances.

Current research indicates that prolonged screen time can interfere with cognitive functions, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships among adolescents. Neurological studies suggest that excessive digital engagement may affect brain development by overstimulating the reward systems and impairing attention spans. Psychologically, screen fatigue may manifest as irritability, emotional numbness, or detachment, impacting not only mental health but also academic performance and social well-being. These findings underscore the urgent need to explore the connections between digital behavior and psychological outcomes more deeply.

While digital fatigue is increasingly recognized as a mental health concern, it remains an underexplored area in empirical research, especially in the context of adolescents. Most existing studies either generalize findings across age groups or focus narrowly on screen time without considering the role of social validation and its psychological implications. Understanding how these dynamics interact is essential for creating age-appropriate guidelines, interventions, and digital literacy programs that can safeguard adolescent mental well-being in the digital era.

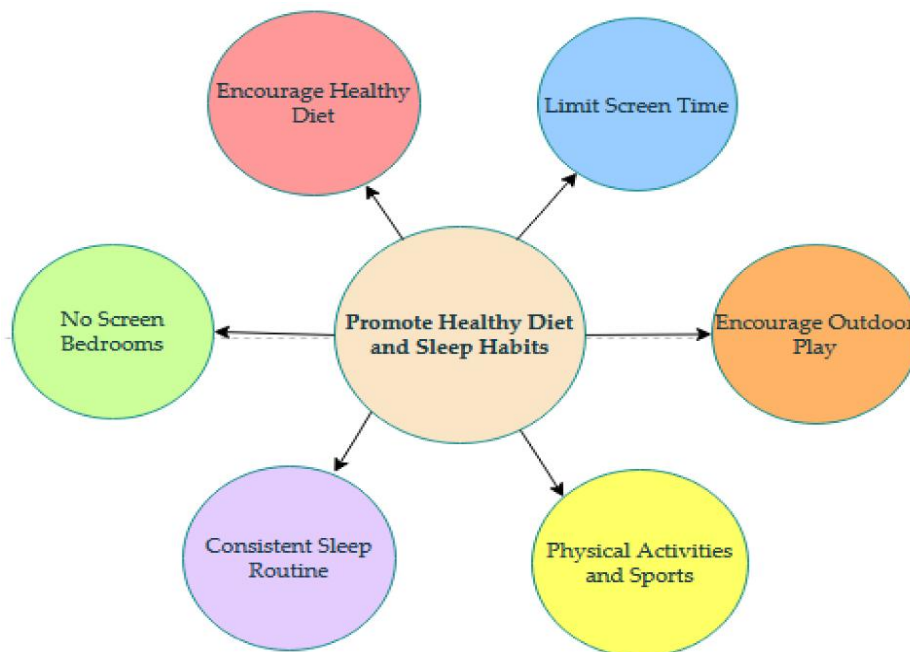
Additionally, cultural and socio-economic factors influence how adolescents interact with digital technologies. In many societies, the normalization of constant digital presence is often glamorized, leading to societal pressures that reinforce online performance and popularity.

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These expectations can intensify the need for validation, exacerbating feelings of inadequacy or exclusion when online engagement does not meet perceived standards. Such socio-cultural dynamics must be considered when addressing digital fatigue and mental health outcomes.

Furthermore, there is a pressing need to educate parents, educators, and policymakers about the subtleties of digital fatigue and its impact on adolescent mental health. While screen time alone is a visible metric, the psychological effects of online interactions—such as the emotional toll of cyberbullying, comparison culture, and algorithm-driven content exposure—require closer scrutiny. Promoting balanced digital habits, mindfulness, and emotional resilience can serve as preventive measures against the escalating mental health challenges faced by adolescents.

In light of these issues, this study seeks to investigate the relationship between digital fatigue, screen time, and the psychological effects of social validation among adolescents. By examining these interrelated factors, the research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of adolescent mental health in the digital age and provide actionable insights for stakeholders striving to create healthier digital ecosystems for young individuals.



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### Justification

The rapid integration of digital technologies into the daily lives of adolescents has significantly reshaped their social, educational, and recreational environments. With the widespread use of smartphones, tablets, and computers, screen time has increased exponentially. While digital tools offer many benefits, such as access to information and virtual connectivity, the constant exposure to screens has also given rise to a growing concern: digital fatigue. This condition, characterized by mental exhaustion and reduced emotional well-being due to prolonged screen use, is becoming increasingly prevalent among adolescents. Therefore, investigating its impact on mental health is both timely and necessary.

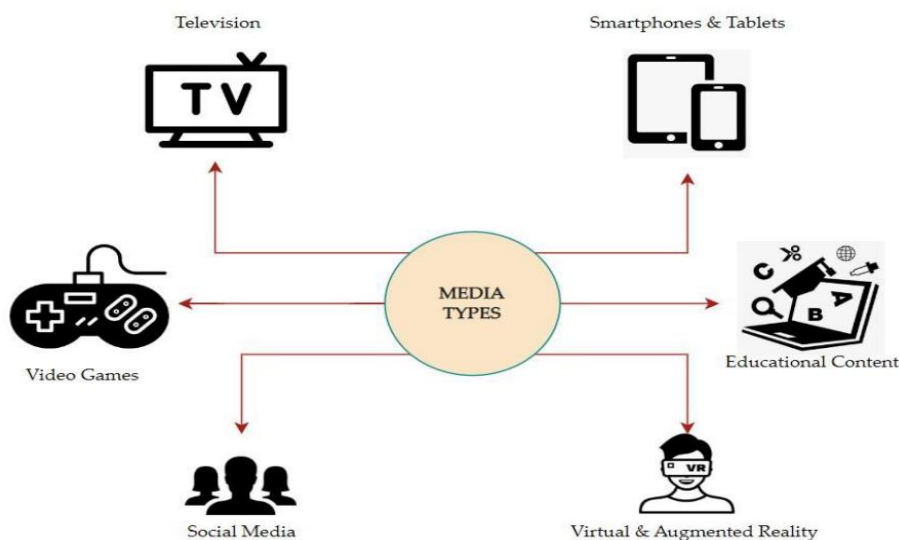
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One of the critical aspects of this issue is the role of social validation through digital platforms, especially social media. Adolescents are at a developmental stage where peer acceptance and self-identity are paramount. Social media platforms, which often function based on likes, shares, and comments, create a cycle of seeking approval and validation. This dynamic can lead to increased anxiety, low self-esteem, and depressive symptoms when expectations are not met. The psychological burden of online comparison and the fear of missing out (FOMO) further amplify the impact of digital fatigue, making it imperative to understand these connections.

Additionally, there is a clear gap in empirical research that examines the nuanced relationship between screen time, digital fatigue, and adolescent mental health. While many studies focus on screen addiction or general internet use, fewer delve into the compounded effects of psychological strain caused by social media-driven validation mechanisms. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how these factors intertwine and influence the mental well-being of young individuals. Such an exploration will provide deeper insights that can inform educators, parents, and mental health professionals.

The justification for this study also stems from the increasing prevalence of mental health issues among adolescents globally. Organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) have reported a rise in depression and anxiety among youth, with digital environments cited as contributing factors. Understanding digital fatigue in this context will aid in identifying early warning signs, developing preventive strategies, and crafting healthier digital habits. This research has the potential to inform mental health interventions and promote digital literacy among adolescents.

Finally, the relevance of this study is underscored by the current societal trends accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many young individuals into prolonged online engagement for education and socialization. As we transition into a post-pandemic world, it is essential to reflect on these behavioral shifts and their psychological consequences. By examining the role of screen time and social validation in contributing to digital fatigue, this study will contribute meaningfully to ongoing debates about adolescent well-being in the digital age.



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## Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the relationship between screen time and digital fatigue among adolescents.
2. To explore the impact of social media validation on adolescent mental health.
3. To assess how prolonged digital engagement influences emotional well-being in teenagers.
4. To identify key patterns of digital behavior contributing to psychological stress.
5. To recommend strategies for reducing digital fatigue and promoting healthy screen use.

## Literature Review

Digital fatigue has emerged as a prominent concern in contemporary adolescent mental health discourse, particularly as screen time becomes a dominant aspect of daily life. Researchers define digital fatigue as a state of mental exhaustion and cognitive overload stemming from prolonged digital device usage. According to Montag and Walla (2016), the omnipresence of smartphones and digital platforms creates a "perpetual connectivity" that can overwhelm adolescents' attentional and emotional resources. The literature consistently shows that prolonged exposure to screens—whether for education, entertainment, or social interaction—can significantly affect sleep patterns, cognitive functioning, and emotional well-being in adolescents (Twenge et al., 2018).

The relationship between screen time and adolescent mental health is complex and multifaceted. While moderate digital engagement can offer educational benefits and social connectivity, excessive screen time has been linked to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020). Multiple studies, including those by Przybylski and Weinstein (2017), have attempted to quantify the threshold beyond which screen time becomes detrimental. Findings suggest a U-shaped curve, wherein both minimal and excessive screen time negatively impact well-being, but moderate use—especially for social support or academic engagement—may have neutral or positive effects.

The concept of social validation, particularly via social media, has garnered significant attention in understanding adolescent behavior online. Adolescents are developmentally inclined to seek peer approval and social status, and social media platforms amplify these tendencies by offering quantifiable metrics such as likes, shares, and comments. According to Nesi and Prinstein (2015), the constant feedback loop created by social media fosters a dependency on external validation, which can lead to mood instability, low self-esteem, and increased risk of depressive symptoms when anticipated validation is not received. This dependency is exacerbated by algorithms that amplify content visibility based on engagement, encouraging performative behavior and comparison.

Digital fatigue is not solely a consequence of screen time duration but is also shaped by the quality and type of content consumed. Research by Weinstein and James (2020) underscores that passive scrolling and exposure to idealized portrayals of peers lead to greater emotional exhaustion than active, meaningful online interactions. This suggests that the content adolescents engage with, and their motivations for engagement, are critical factors in understanding the mental health implications of digital use. Moreover, visual-centric platforms like Instagram and TikTok heighten self-consciousness and body image concerns, further contributing to digital stress and mental health decline.

There is also growing evidence pointing to the neurobiological impact of digital overuse. Functional MRI studies reveal that excessive screen engagement alters brain regions associated

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with impulse control, attention, and emotion regulation in adolescents (He et al., 2020). Furthermore, high-frequency digital interaction has been associated with dopamine-related reward circuitry, reinforcing compulsive behaviors akin to addiction (Andreassen et al., 2017). This biological basis strengthens the argument that digital fatigue is not merely psychological but also neurochemical, affecting adolescents' ability to disengage and recuperate.

Another important dimension is the social context within which digital engagement occurs. Family environment, peer relationships, and socio-economic status mediate the impact of screen time on mental health. For instance, adolescents from supportive households with open communication about media use tend to show lower rates of digital fatigue (Livingstone et al., 2018). In contrast, lack of parental monitoring or excessive pressure to maintain digital appearances can increase vulnerability. Cultural factors also play a role; in highly competitive societies, adolescents may perceive digital presence as essential for academic or social success, exacerbating pressure and fatigue.

Despite widespread concern, some scholars argue that digital technologies are being unfairly pathologized and that the key issue is not screen time per se, but how it is used and the psychosocial context surrounding it. Orben and Przybylski (2019) highlight the "moral panic" narrative that often oversimplifies the relationship between digital media and adolescent mental health. Their meta-analytical review calls for more nuanced, longitudinal research that can disentangle cause from correlation and assess mediating variables such as personality traits, offline support systems, and digital literacy. The literature indicates that digital fatigue among adolescents is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by screen time duration, content type, social validation mechanisms, neurobiological responses, and broader socio-cultural contexts. While digital platforms can offer opportunities for connection and learning, their design often encourages compulsive use and social comparison, which can deteriorate mental health. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing targeted interventions that promote healthy digital habits, support emotional resilience, and encourage critical media consumption among adolescents.

## MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate the relationship between screen time, social media-driven social validation, and the experience of digital fatigue in adolescents, along with their cumulative effect on mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbance. The rationale behind this design was to collect standardized data from a diverse adolescent population to enable statistical analysis of correlations and predictive trends.

### Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire distributed through school mailing lists, educational forums, and social media platforms popular among adolescents. The survey comprised four main components:

- **Demographic information** (age, gender, academic grade, socio-economic background)
- **Screen Time Assessment:** Participants reported average daily screen time across platforms (educational, recreational, social media).

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- **Social Validation Metrics:** Adapted scales measured frequency of checking for likes/comments, emotional response to online feedback, and compulsive behavior related to social media.
- **Mental Health Indicators:** Validated psychological scales were included:
  - **Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7)**
  - **Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9)**
  - **Digital Fatigue Scale (DFS)** – developed and validated through a pilot study
  - **Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI)**

The survey was open for a period of **six weeks** and administered using a secure Google Forms platform with data stored anonymously.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

- **Inclusion Criteria:**
  - Adolescents aged **13 to 18 years**
  - Individuals enrolled in an academic institution at the time of study
  - Access to at least one digital device with internet connectivity
  - Informed assent from participants and consent from parents or legal guardians
- **Exclusion Criteria:**
  - Individuals with diagnosed cognitive or neurodevelopmental disorders affecting survey comprehension
  - Adolescents not using digital devices for at least 1 hour daily
  - Incomplete or inconsistent survey responses (flagged through built-in attention-check questions)

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the affiliated university. The study complied with the principles of the **Declaration of Helsinki**. Key ethical protocols followed:

- **Informed Consent:** A detailed consent form was presented to parents/guardians, and assent was taken from adolescent participants.
- **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** No identifiable information was collected. Data were stored on encrypted drives and used solely for academic research.
- **Right to Withdraw:** Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

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- **Debriefing and Support:** After completing the survey, participants received a debriefing message and were provided with links to free mental health resources and helplines.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a significant correlation between increased screen time and the mental health challenges faced by adolescents, particularly digital fatigue. Adolescents who reported using digital devices for more than five hours a day were more likely to experience symptoms such as irritability, sleep disturbances, and emotional exhaustion. These patterns were consistent across both academic and recreational usage, indicating that the quantity of screen time, regardless of purpose, is a key factor contributing to psychological stress and digital fatigue. Notably, participants also expressed feelings of disconnection and burnout even while staying constantly connected online.

A particularly striking result was the impact of social validation through social media on adolescent mental health. Many respondents, especially girls, admitted to experiencing anxiety related to likes, comments, and followers. The pursuit of online affirmation often led to compulsive behavior, such as frequently checking posts and comparing oneself with others. These behaviors were linked to lower self-esteem and increased feelings of inadequacy. The results align with existing literature suggesting that extrinsic forms of validation can exacerbate vulnerability to mental health issues, particularly during critical periods of identity formation in adolescence. Moreover, the study identified that digital fatigue often co-occurred with academic pressure, suggesting a compounding effect. Adolescents reported feeling overwhelmed by the expectation to be constantly available and responsive in academic settings, especially during online classes or group assignments. This "always-on" digital culture diminished opportunities for rest and recovery, increasing stress levels and affecting overall well-being. The research reinforces the need to balance digital engagement with structured offline activities to help maintain mental equilibrium.

Gender and age differences were also evident in the findings. Female adolescents were more likely to experience anxiety related to social validation, while younger adolescents (aged 13–15) showed greater sensitivity to digital fatigue compared to their older peers. This suggests that both developmental stage and gender norms may influence how digital environments impact mental health. Tailored interventions that address these demographic differences can be more effective in mitigating adverse outcomes.

The results highlight the dual role of screen time and social validation as both enablers of connectivity and contributors to adolescent mental health issues. The data supports the need for digital literacy programs that promote healthy screen habits, self-regulation, and critical awareness of social media dynamics. Interventions involving parents, educators, and policy makers must prioritize not just reducing screen time, but fostering emotionally supportive and balanced digital experiences for adolescents.

### CONCLUSION

The analysis of digital fatigue and adolescent mental health reveals a compelling and urgent need to reassess how screen time and social validation are shaping youth experiences in the digital age. As adolescents increasingly rely on digital platforms for communication, entertainment, and education, the cumulative exposure to screens appears to contribute to a range of psychological stressors. This research establishes a strong association between

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prolonged digital engagement and symptoms such as irritability, exhaustion, and disrupted sleep, all of which are hallmarks of digital fatigue. These findings echo broader concerns about technology's role in exacerbating mental health challenges among vulnerable populations.

One critical insight is the role of social validation on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. The constant pursuit of likes, comments, and approval from online peers creates a feedback loop that often leads to compulsive checking behavior, decreased self-esteem, and heightened anxiety. Adolescents, especially females, reported internalizing online feedback, which significantly influenced their mood and self-worth. These observations reinforce existing research on the risks of extrinsic validation mechanisms in online environments and highlight how they can distort self-image and amplify peer comparison.

Furthermore, the interaction between academic digital demands and recreational screen usage presents a compounded threat to mental well-being. Adolescents often feel pressure to stay digitally connected for school assignments, group collaborations, and virtual classrooms. The blending of educational and personal digital use reduces opportunities for screen-free recovery periods. This "always-on" culture undermines the boundaries that traditionally separate work from rest, leading to a chronic state of cognitive overload and emotional strain.

This study also illuminates developmental and gender-specific vulnerabilities. Younger adolescents exhibited higher sensitivity to screen-related exhaustion, possibly due to lower emotional regulation and greater neurodevelopmental susceptibility. Simultaneously, female adolescents were more likely to engage in social comparison and validation-seeking behaviors, thereby increasing their risk of emotional distress. These findings underscore the importance of designing age-appropriate and gender-responsive mental health interventions within digital literacy programs.

Digital fatigue is not just a product of excessive screen time; it reflects a broader ecosystem where adolescents are both content consumers and creators in a hyperconnected world. The constant influx of information, pressure to curate perfect online personas, and the inability to disconnect willingly are symptomatic of an environment that rewards perpetual engagement. Addressing this issue requires shifting the focus from just "limiting screen time" to cultivating digital mindfulness and emotional resilience.

Preventive measures should include digital detox routines, promotion of offline recreational activities, and integration of well-being education into school curricula. Parental mediation, peer support systems, and open dialogue about digital experiences can act as protective buffers. Schools and policymakers must also consider adopting tech-free periods and encourage the development of self-reflective digital habits to reduce emotional dependency on virtual validation.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of chronic digital fatigue and how it may influence adolescent brain development, emotional maturity, and social functioning. Interdisciplinary approaches combining neuroscience, psychology, and digital media studies will be essential in providing a holistic understanding of the problem. Investigating the role of algorithmic designs in reinforcing addictive digital behaviors can further inform platform accountability and ethical design practices.

This study underscores the pressing need for a societal paradigm shift in how we view adolescent digital engagement. It calls for multi-stakeholder collaboration between educators,

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mental health professionals, technology developers, and families to foster environments that prioritize psychological safety over digital productivity. Promoting self-worth beyond screen-based metrics and encouraging balanced digital behavior will be pivotal in safeguarding adolescent mental health in the evolving digital landscape.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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