



From Playgrounds to Screens: Impact of Digital Media on Emotional Development and Social Skills of Students (Classes 8–12)

¹**Dr. Sahaja Akuthota**, *PhD Scholar, Lingayas Vidyapeeth, Faridabad*

sahajamails@gmail.com

²**Somosukla Sarkar**, *PhD Scholar, Lingayas Vidyapeeth, Faridabad*

somosukla@gmail.com

³**Mayukha Anumula**, *PhD Scholar, Lingayas Vidyapeeth, Faridabad*

anumulamayukha@gmail.com

⁴**Kavya Narayana**, *PhD Scholar, Lingayas Vidyapeeth, Faridabad*

maligelikavya@gmail.com

⁵**Srihari Subudhi**, *PhD Scholar, Lingayas Vidyapeeth, Faridabad*

sriharisubudhi@gmail.com

Abstract: The rapid expansion of digital technology has significantly transformed the daily lives of adolescents, reshaping their communication patterns, learning habits, and social interactions. In India, students in secondary and higher secondary education increasingly rely on smartphones, social media platforms, online gaming, and digital learning tools. While digital media offers substantial educational and creative benefits, concerns are growing about its influence on emotional development and social competence. This study examines the impact of digital media usage on the emotional development and social skills of students studying in Classes 8 to 12. A descriptive research design was employed using primary data collected through structured questionnaires administered to 203 students and 209 parents. The data were analysed using frequency distribution, percentage analysis, and comparative interpretation. The findings reveal that excessive screen time is associated with emotional disturbances such as anxiety, irritability, mood swings, and reduced emotional regulation. In addition, a noticeable decline in face-to-face communication, peer interaction, and participation in outdoor activities was observed. While students acknowledged the positive role of digital media in enhancing

creativity and learning, parents reported increased distraction and reduced academic focus. The study concludes that unregulated digital media use poses significant risks to adolescents' emotional well-being and social development. It emphasizes the need for balanced digital engagement supported by parental guidance, school-based interventions, and policy-level initiatives to promote digital well-being among students.

Keywords: *Digital Media, Adolescents, Emotional Development, Social Skills, Screen Time, Social Media, Mental Well-Being*

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the way adolescents communicate, learn, and spend their leisure time. In the last decade, the widespread availability of smartphones, high-speed internet, and social networking platforms has led to an unprecedented rise in digital media usage among school-going children. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, online games, and video streaming services have become integral to adolescents' daily routines. As a result, traditional modes of socialization—such as outdoor play, group discussions, and face-to-face interactions—are gradually being replaced by screen-based engagement.

This shift is particularly significant during adolescence, a critical developmental phase marked by rapid emotional, psychological, and social changes. Between the ages of 13 and 18, young individuals develop emotional awareness, self-identity, interpersonal skills, and social competence. Emotional development refers to the ability to understand, express, and regulate emotions, while social skills involve communication, empathy, cooperation, conflict resolution, and relationship-building. These abilities are essential for academic success, mental well-being, and healthy adult relationships.

However, excessive exposure to digital media has raised serious concerns among psychologists, educators, and parents. Numerous studies suggest that prolonged screen time may be linked to emotional difficulties such as anxiety, irritability, mood swings, stress, and loneliness. Adolescents are increasingly exposed to unrealistic standards, online peer pressure, cyberbullying, and social comparison, which can negatively influence self-esteem and emotional regulation. At the same time, reduced participation in physical and social activities may limit opportunities to develop real-life communication and interpersonal skills.

In the Indian context, the impact of digital media has become even more pronounced following the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated online learning and increased reliance on digital platforms. While digital technology has improved access to information and

education, its uncontrolled use has blurred the boundaries between learning, entertainment, and social interaction. Many adolescents now spend more time on screens than engaging with peers, family, or outdoor environments.

The transition “from playgrounds to screens” symbolizes a deeper cultural and developmental shift. This study seeks to examine how digital media usage affects the emotional development and social skills of students in Classes 8 to 12, using perspectives from both students and parents. Understanding these effects is essential for creating balanced digital habits that support healthy emotional growth and social functioning.

2. Literature Review

The growing integration of digital media into adolescents’ daily lives has generated extensive scholarly attention across psychology, education, and sociology. Researchers worldwide have explored how increased screen exposure affects emotional development, mental health, and social competence. While digital platforms provide opportunities for learning and social connectivity, numerous studies highlight the risks associated with excessive and unregulated digital engagement.

Twenge (2017) reported that adolescents who spend more time on smartphones and social networking platforms experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and emotional dissatisfaction. Her large-scale longitudinal analysis found that heavy screen users were significantly more likely to report feelings of unhappiness and low self-esteem compared to peers who spent more time on physical and social activities. Similarly, the American Psychological Association (2020) emphasized that prolonged screen exposure is associated with emotional dysregulation, sleep disturbances, reduced attention span, and social withdrawal among adolescents.

Uhls et al. (2014) conducted an experimental study in which preteens participated in an outdoor education program without access to digital devices for five days. The researchers found that children in the screen-free group demonstrated significantly improved ability to recognize non-verbal emotional cues and facial expressions compared to those who continued regular digital use. This study highlighted the importance of direct human interaction in developing emotional awareness and social sensitivity.

In the Indian context, Kaur and Bansal (2021) examined smartphone dependency among urban adolescents and found strong associations between excessive screen time and emotional instability, irritability, and social isolation. Their findings revealed that adolescents who used mobile devices for more than four hours daily reported higher stress levels and poorer

peer relationships. Supporting this, a report by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS, 2019) identified digital addiction as a growing mental health concern among Indian youth, linking it to mood disorders, academic difficulties, and weakened interpersonal relationships.

However, not all scholars view digital media as entirely harmful. Several studies suggest that digital platforms can enhance creativity, self-expression, and digital literacy. Online learning tools and social networks allow adolescents to explore new interests, connect with peers globally, and access educational resources. Nevertheless, most researchers agree that these benefits are overshadowed when digital use becomes excessive or replaces real-life interaction.

Overall, existing literature indicates a complex relationship between digital media and adolescent development. While moderate use can support learning and creativity, excessive engagement disrupts emotional regulation and weakens social skills. These findings underscore the need for balanced digital practices and further empirical research, particularly within the Indian school context.

3. Statement of the Problem

The increasing dependency on digital media among adolescents has raised serious concerns regarding its impact on emotional health and social functioning. Students today spend a substantial portion of their daily time on smartphones, social media platforms, online games, and streaming services, often at the expense of physical activity, face-to-face communication, and family interaction.

This shift from real-world engagement to virtual interaction may be limiting adolescents' opportunities to develop essential emotional and social skills. Emotional challenges such as anxiety, stress, mood swings, and low self-esteem are becoming more common, while social difficulties such as reduced communication skills, social withdrawal, and lack of empathy are also being observed.

Despite the relevance of this issue, there is limited empirical research in the Indian school context that simultaneously considers both student and parent perspectives. Most existing studies focus either on psychological effects or on academic outcomes, with less emphasis on emotional and social development together.

Therefore, the present study seeks to examine the impact of digital media usage on the emotional development and social skills of students in Classes 8 to 12. By analyzing the perceptions of both adolescents and their parents, the study aims to provide a comprehensive

understanding of how digital media is reshaping adolescent development and to suggest strategies for promoting healthier digital habits.

4. Objectives of the Study

The present study is designed to explore the multifaceted impact of digital media on adolescents studying in Classes 8 to 12. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1. To examine the pattern of digital media usage** among secondary and higher secondary school students, including the type of platforms used, daily screen time, and preferred online activities.
- 2. To assess the impact of digital media on emotional development**, particularly in relation to stress, anxiety, mood swings, emotional regulation, and self-expression.
- 3. To analyze the influence of screen time on social skills**, including face-to-face communication, peer relationships, family interaction, empathy, and cooperation.
- 4. To compare the perceptions of students and parents** regarding the emotional and social effects of digital media usage.
- 5. To suggest practical measures and interventions** that promote responsible and balanced digital engagement among adolescents.

5. Research Methodology

This section outlines the systematic procedures adopted to collect and analyse data in order to achieve the objectives of the study.

5.1 Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based on primary data. This design is suitable for identifying existing patterns of digital media usage and understanding the emotional and social experiences of adolescents without manipulating any variables.

5.2 Sample

The sample consisted of 203 students from Classes 8 to 12 and 209 parents. The students were selected in such a way that each class level was almost equally represented to ensure balanced age distribution. The inclusion of parents provided an external and observational perspective to validate student responses.

5.3 Tool for Data Collection

Two structured questionnaires were developed—one for students and one for parents—and administered using Google Forms. The student questionnaire included items on:

- Daily screen time
- Preferred digital platforms
- Emotional responses
- Social interactions
- Academic and creative impact

The parent questionnaire focused on:

- Observation of children's screen habits
- Changes in emotional behaviour
- Social interaction patterns
- Academic engagement

5.4 Method of Analysis

The collected data were analysed using:

- **Frequency distribution** to summarize responses
- **Percentage analysis** to interpret trends
- **Comparative interpretation** to compare student and parent perspectives

6. Analysis and Interpretation of Data

6.1 Digital Media Usage

The majority of students reported spending **between 3 to 6 hours daily** on digital devices. Social media, video streaming platforms, and online gaming were the most frequently used forms of digital media. Parents largely confirmed these usage patterns and expressed concern regarding excessive screen dependency.

6.2 Emotional Development

A significant number of students reported emotional symptoms such as irritation, anxiety, mental fatigue, and restlessness after extended screen time. Parents observed mood swings, reduced patience, and emotional sensitivity in their children. These findings suggest a negative association between excessive digital engagement and emotional stability.

6.3 Social Skills

Many students preferred online communication over face-to-face interaction and reported reduced interest in outdoor activities. Parents also noticed a decline in family interaction and peer bonding. This indicates that digital media may be weakening interpersonal communication and empathy.

6.4 Creativity and Academic Impact

While several students believed that digital media enhanced their creativity and learning, parents perceived it as a major source of distraction that affected concentration and study habits. This highlights the dual role of digital media as both an educational resource and a potential obstacle.

7. Discussion

The findings of the present study reveal that digital media plays a powerful and complex role in shaping the emotional and social development of adolescents. While technology provides access to knowledge, creativity, and global connectivity, excessive screen exposure appears to interfere with the healthy emotional growth and social interaction patterns of students in Classes 8 to 12.

The high levels of daily screen time reported by both students and parents reflect a growing dependence on digital platforms. Emotional disturbances such as irritability, anxiety, restlessness, and mood fluctuations were commonly reported, supporting earlier research that links prolonged digital exposure with emotional dysregulation. Adolescents are constantly exposed to online peer comparison, unrealistic beauty and success standards, cyberbullying, and performance pressure, all of which can intensify emotional stress and reduce self-esteem.

From a social perspective, the findings show a clear decline in face-to-face interaction and outdoor activities. Many students expressed a preference for digital communication over real-life conversation, which limits opportunities to develop essential social skills such as empathy, active listening, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Parents also observed reduced family interaction and weaker peer bonding, highlighting a growing gap between digital connectivity and real-world relationships.

Interestingly, the study also confirms the positive side of digital media. Students acknowledged that online platforms help them explore new ideas, learn concepts, and enhance creativity. However, this benefit is often offset by distractions, reduced concentration, and excessive entertainment use. The results suggest that digital media itself is not harmful, but its unregulated and excessive use can negatively influence emotional and social well-being.

Overall, the discussion emphasizes the need for balance. Adolescents must be guided to use digital technology as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for real-life interaction and emotional experiences.

8. Major Findings

Based on the research study findings, here are the major outcomes categorized by parental observations and student self-reports. The study utilized datasets from 209 parents and 203 students across Classes 8–12.

Digital Media Usage Patterns

Both groups report high levels of daily engagement with digital devices, with students generally reporting higher usage than parents observe.

- **Daily Screen Time:** 32.0% of students admit to spending more than 4 hours daily on devices, while 28.7% of parents reported the same for their children.
- **Primary Content:** Streaming videos (YouTube, OTT, reels) is the top activity for both parents (23.0%) and students (21.7%).
- **Secondary Activities:** Students prioritize educational apps (21.2%) and messaging (19.7%), whereas parents also noted high engagement with online games and social media.

Emotional and Cognitive Impact

There is a consensus that digital media significantly influences emotional well-being and cognitive focus.

- **Emotional Regulation:** 47.4% of parents believe screen time has a negative impact (slightly or significantly) on their child's emotional behavior.
- **Post-Usage Feelings:** After extended screen time, students primarily feel mentally tired (21.2%) or irritated/anxious (20.7%).
- **Attention and Focus:** A majority of parents (47.4%) agree or strongly agree that digital media negatively affects their child's attention span, patience, or focus.
- **Coping Mechanism:** When stressed or lonely, students are most likely to turn to digital media or talking to friends (22.2% each), while only 17.2% turn to parents.

Social Skills and Physical Activity

The data suggests a shift away from traditional physical and face-to-face social interactions.

- **Physical Activity:** 52.7% of parents report their child has decreased or very low interest in outdoor play compared to earlier years. Similarly, 50.2% of students find outdoor activities less appealing or not appealing at all compared to digital ones.
- **Social Interactions:** 29.6% of students only engage in face-to-face social interactions occasionally, and 25.1% admit that digital media has reduced their confidence in real-life communication.

Creativity and Awareness

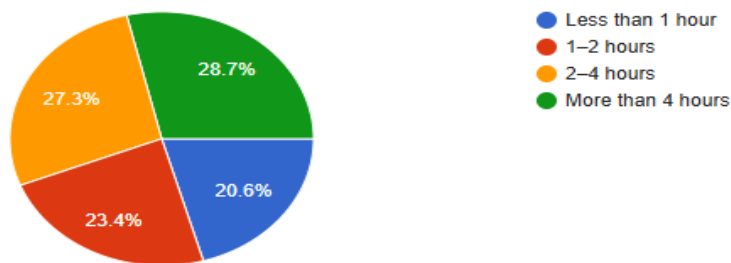
- Creativity: Both parents (31.1%) and students (31.0%) feel that digital media usage reduces creativity.
- Mental Health Awareness: 28.1% of students are "very aware" of the impact of social media on mental health, compared to 24.9% of parents who believe their child is very aware.

The responses received from the 209 parents on select parameters can be presented graphically as follows:

On average, how much time does your child spend daily on digital devices for non-academic purposes?

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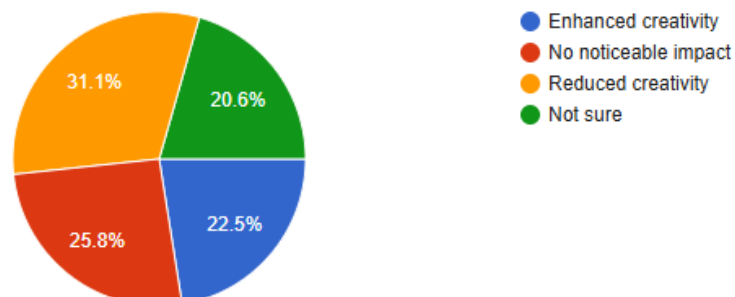
209 responses



In your observation, how has your child's use of social media affected their creativity?

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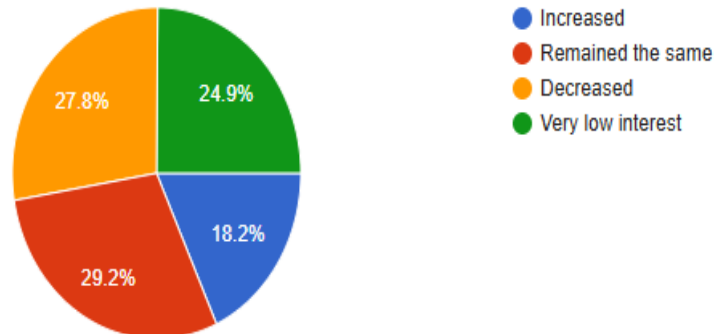
209 responses



Compared to earlier years, how would you describe your child's interest in outdoor play or physical activities?

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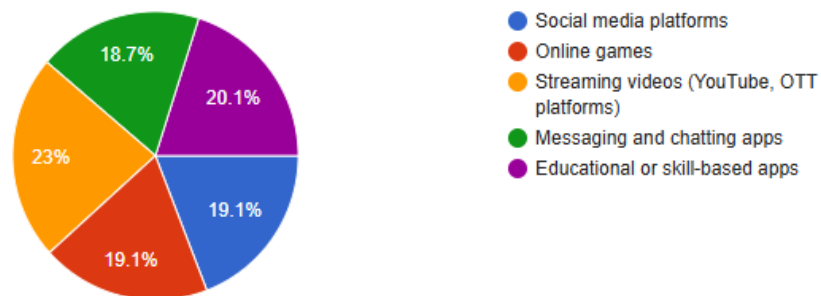
209 responses



What type of digital content does your child mostly engage with?

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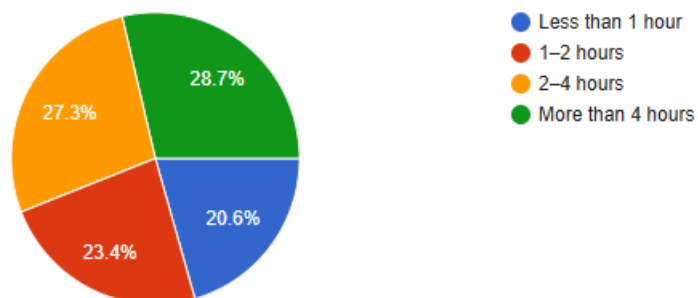
209 responses



On average, how much time does your child spend daily on digital devices for non-academic purposes?

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209 responses



Overall Perception and Regulation

Perspective	Predominant View	Percentage
Parental Regulation	Moderately (occasional) supervision	37.3%
Parental Outlook	Both beneficial and harmful	35.9%
Student Outlook	Both positive and negative	33.5%

Based on the analysis and interpretation of the data, the following major findings were observed:

1. Most students spend more than three hours per day on digital devices.
2. Social media, video streaming platforms, and online games are the most commonly used forms of digital media.
3. Excessive screen time is associated with emotional issues such as anxiety, irritability, mental fatigue, and mood swings.
4. Face-to-face social interaction among adolescents has significantly declined.
5. Interest in outdoor play and physical activities has decreased.
6. Parents perceive stronger negative emotional and behavioral effects than students.
7. Digital media is seen as both beneficial and harmful by most respondents.
8. Students believe digital media enhances creativity, while parents feel it distracts from academics.

9. Educational Implications and Recommendations**For Students**

- Practice daily **digital detox hours**.
- Participate in sports, cultural activities, and group interactions.
- Develop real-life communication and emotional expression skills.

For Parents

- Set clear **screen time limits** and device-free family hours.
- Monitor digital content and encourage healthy online habits.
- Engage in open discussions about online experiences.

For Schools

- Introduce **digital well-being and life skills programs**.
- Encourage extracurricular activities and social learning.
- Provide counselling and emotional support services.

For Policy Makers

- Develop national guidelines on adolescent screen time.
- Integrate digital mental health education into school curricula.
- Promote awareness campaigns on responsible digital use.

10. Conclusion

The transition from playgrounds to screens represents one of the most significant cultural and developmental shifts in the lives of adolescents. Digital media has become an inseparable part of modern education, communication, and entertainment. While it offers numerous benefits such as access to information, creative opportunities, and global connectivity, this study clearly demonstrates that excessive and unregulated use of digital media poses serious challenges to the emotional and social development of students in Classes 8 to 12.

The findings reveal that high screen exposure is associated with emotional disturbances such as anxiety, irritability, restlessness, and reduced emotional regulation. At the same time, there is a noticeable decline in face-to-face interaction, outdoor activities, and interpersonal communication skills. Adolescents may be digitally connected, yet emotionally and socially disconnected. This imbalance can affect their academic performance, self-esteem, mental health, and future relationships.

However, the study also confirms that digital media is not inherently harmful. When used responsibly, it can enhance creativity, learning, and self-expression. The real challenge lies in achieving a healthy balance between digital engagement and real-world interaction. Parents, schools, and policy makers must work together to guide adolescents toward mindful and responsible digital habits. A balanced digital lifestyle is essential for nurturing emotionally stable, socially competent, and psychologically healthy individuals.

11. Limitations of the Study

Despite the meaningful findings, the present study has certain limitations that should be considered while interpreting the results.

Firstly, the study relies on self-reported data from students and observational reports from parents. Such data may be influenced by personal bias, memory errors, or social desirability, which can affect the accuracy of responses.

Secondly, the sample, though adequate for descriptive analysis, is limited in size and geographical diversity. The findings may not fully represent adolescents from different socio-economic, cultural, or rural backgrounds.

Thirdly, the study uses a cross-sectional design, capturing responses at only one point in time. Emotional development and social skills are dynamic processes that change over time; therefore, causal relationships cannot be established.

Finally, the analysis is primarily descriptive and does not employ advanced statistical tools or standardized psychological scales, which could have provided deeper and more precise insights.

12. Scope for Future Research

The present study opens several directions for future research. Longitudinal studies can be conducted to examine how continuous digital media exposure influences emotional and social development across different stages of adolescence.

Future research may compare digital media impact across rural and urban populations, as well as among different socio-economic groups. Gender-based differences in digital usage patterns and emotional outcomes can also be explored.

Researchers may use standardized psychological instruments such as Emotional Intelligence Scales, Social Skills Inventories, and Internet Addiction Scales for more objective measurement. Qualitative approaches such as interviews and focus groups can further enrich understanding of adolescents lived digital experiences.

Additionally, experimental studies may evaluate the effectiveness of digital detox programs, mindfulness practices, outdoor activity initiatives, and parental guidance models in improving adolescent emotional health and social competence.

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