

DIGITAL DILEMMAS: HOW SCREEN TIME SHAPES STUDENTS' SOCIAL SKILLS IN PURSUIT OF SDG 3

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how screen time shapes students' social skills. Particularly, this study used a narrative research design with students as the participants in the study. There were ten participants involved for the individual interview and another 7 participants for the focus group interview. The data collections happened using a face-to-face interview and the data gathered has been analyzed using Braun and Clarke model, using a self-made interview guide questionnaire to contextualized the questions. The result revealed that the specific aspects of Lived Experiences of Participants on the Impact of Screen Time on Social Interactions were focus on double-edged sword, importance of face-to-face interaction, and impact on social skills. Meanwhile, there are three underlying themes contributing to the Social Challenges Faced by Participants Due to Increased Screen Time which include: altered social development, challenges in group dynamics, and mental health concerns. Also, there are three emerging themes about Participant-Suggested Strategies for Developing Healthier Screen Habits and Strengthening Social Skills that includes: utilizing technology for social growth, importance of balance, and mindful screen use. This study recommended that schools and educators implement structured digital use policies and integrate adaptive strategies that help students manage technological interruptions more effectively during learning.

Keywords: *Screen Time, Social Skills, Narrative Research Design, Municipality of Arakan*

INTRODUCTION

The influence of digital media usage on students' social skills is a growing concern globally. Post-pandemic, screen exposure among children surged by 52%, largely attributed to increased reliance on digital tools for education and socialization. This prolonged engagement with digital devices has been linked to difficulties in emotional regulation, higher levels of stress, and challenges in interpersonal interactions. Research shows that while educational use of technology can be beneficial, excessive use for recreation or social media amplifies the risk of anxiety and social isolation among young users. Notably, 74% of teens report feeling the effects of "digital fatigue," which impacts

their overall well-being and social competency, underscoring the need for balanced media use in youth development.

The rise of technology in the Philippines has significantly impacted students' social skills, largely due to their extensive use of devices for communication, gaming, and social media. A 2022 study reported that Filipinos spend an average of 10 hours a day online, with 96% of internet users aged 16 to 64 engaging on social media. Among students, these hours often include gaming and virtual interactions, which can replace face-to-face communication and affect emotional intelligence, empathy, and non-verbal communication skills (Kemp, 2022). Furthermore, research suggests that excessive device usage can lead to difficulties in maintaining meaningful offline interactions and impact overall academic performance and social connections, as seen in school settings across the country (Kabigting et al., 2021).

Several factors influence how screen time shapes students' social skills, including the type of content consumed, the duration of screen usage, and the context in which devices are used. Studies indicate that students who engage with educational content or social platforms that encourage interaction tend to develop different social skills compared to those who use screens for passive entertainment (Ditche, 2021). The frequency of social media usage, particularly among adolescents, has been linked to lower levels of face-to-face social interactions, contributing to feelings of isolation and difficulties in emotional expression (Kemp, 2022). Moreover, the context of screen use—such as whether it involves family, peers, or solitary activities—also plays a significant role in how screen time affects social development. Extended screen use, especially in the absence of real-world socialization, can limit opportunities to develop essential social behaviors like empathy, conflict resolution, and non-verbal communication (Gagalang, 2022). As a result, it is crucial to consider these factors when evaluating the impact of screen time on students' social skills.

Research into how screen time shapes students' social skills in the Philippines highlights several concerning trends. A study by De Guzman (2022) found that 67% of Filipino students spend more than four hours a day on devices, primarily for social media, gaming, and video consumption, leading to reduced opportunities for face-to-face interactions. As a result, many students report difficulties in effectively communicating and connecting with peers in real-life situations (Pangilinan, 2021). While some studies suggest that digital interactions can support relationships through platforms like messaging and social media (Dela Cruz, 2022), the overall decline in non-digital communication skills is evident, with more than 50% of adolescents reporting challenges in managing social conflicts and expressing emotions without digital mediation (Reyes & Santos, 2023). This research gap emphasizes the need for more comprehensive studies to address how different types of screen time, including recreational versus educational use, specifically influence the development of critical social skills among students.

Studying how screen time shapes students' social skills is vital to understanding the long-term effects of digital media on youth development. As students increasingly rely on devices for communication, learning, and entertainment, it is essential to assess how this affects their ability to engage in face-to-face interactions and develop essential social competencies like empathy, conflict resolution, and active listening. Excessive screen time has been linked to a decline in these skills, as it often replaces opportunities for in-

person socialization. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for educators, parents, and policymakers to create strategies that promote balanced screen use, ensuring that students develop strong interpersonal skills while benefiting from the advantages of digital technology. Additionally, research in this area can inform educational practices and interventions aimed at improving emotional intelligence, enhancing peer relationships, and preventing the social isolation associated with high levels of screen engagement.

METHODS

Research Design

In studying the impact of digital media on students' social skills, qualitative research methods were particularly effective in providing a deep understanding of the personal experiences and perceptions of students. Interviews and focus groups were commonly used to explore students' views on how screen time influenced their communication abilities, relationships with peers, and emotional development. These methods allowed researchers to gather rich, narrative data, highlighting individual stories and varying perspectives on how technology affected social behavior in both positive and negative ways. By analyzing themes and patterns from these personal accounts, researchers could identify key factors such as emotional regulation, social empathy, and peer interaction, which might have been shaped by digital engagement. Additionally, participant observation in natural settings, like classrooms or homes, provided further insights into how students behaved in real-life social contexts compared to their online behaviors, helping to uncover deeper nuances about social skill development. Ultimately, qualitative research emphasized the subjective nature of students' social experiences, providing context and understanding that was crucial for developing effective interventions to enhance social interactions in the digital age.

Meanwhile, the duration of the study was planned to span ten months, from August 2024 to May 2025. This period included refining the proposal paper along with participant recruitment and data collection, one month for data analysis, and one month for reporting and dissemination of findings.

Research Participants

In selecting co-researchers for this study, a total of 17 student participants were involved, consisting of 10 individuals for in-depth interviews and 7 for focus group discussions. These participants were current students from the Municipality of Arakan, chosen through purposive sampling to ensure that they met specific criteria relevant to the research topic. Purposive sampling was an intentional selection method that allowed the researcher to target individuals who had direct experience or knowledge about the research subject (Patton, 2015). This approach ensured that the participants could provide valuable insights into how digital media impacted their social skills, based on their personal experiences. By using this sampling method, the study aimed to gather diverse perspectives while focusing on individuals who were particularly suited to contribute meaningful data regarding the impact of screen time on their social interactions.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study were designed to ensure that participants met specific qualifications relevant to the research on the effects of screen time on students' social skills. The study included junior high school students who were currently enrolled in schools within the Municipality of Arakan and actively engaged with digital media, such as smartphones and computers. These students had to be willing to participate in either in-depth interviews or focus group discussions to share their experiences. In contrast, students who were not enrolled in a school within the Municipality of Arakan, had limited or no access to digital media, or did not attend junior high school were excluded from the study. Additionally, those who were unable or unwilling to participate in the required methods, due to reasons such as language barriers or previous involvement in similar studies, were also excluded to avoid potential biases. These criteria ensured that the data collected was relevant, specific, and representative of the experiences of students who were directly impacted by screen time.

Research Materials

This study used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method to explore participants' perspectives. An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for follow-up probes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented with field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. These materials facilitated the collection of rich, detailed data for thematic analysis.

Data Gathering Procedure

Gathering lived experiences for this study involved collecting personal narratives and reflections from students regarding their interactions with screen-based technologies and how these experiences influenced their social skills. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, participants shared detailed accounts of how their digital media usage affected their daily social interactions, emotional development, and peer relationships. This process allowed researchers to capture the nuanced ways in which technology shaped communication styles, social behavior, and empathy. By listening to the personal stories of students, the study highlighted the diverse impact of screen time, from fostering positive connections online to creating challenges in face-to-face communication. This qualitative approach ensured that the study remained grounded in the authentic experiences of students, providing valuable insights into how screen-based interactions shaped their social skills in both virtual and real-world settings.

Data Analysis

The process of employing a narrative design in this study involved collecting and analyzing personal stories from students about their experiences with screen-based technologies and how these interactions impacted their social development. The narrative design approach focused on gathering rich, detailed accounts through interviews and focus groups, allowing participants to share their lived experiences in their own words. These narratives were carefully examined to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights regarding how digital media influenced communication, empathy, and relationship-building skills. The process involved creating a safe and open space for

students to express their feelings, challenges, and observations, fostering an in-depth understanding of the complexities surrounding screen time. By organizing these individual stories into coherent themes, researchers interpreted how technology shaped social behaviors, providing a comprehensive view of its effects on interpersonal skills. This design ensured the study remained grounded in the authentic voices of students, revealing the broader societal implications of digital media usage on youth socialization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Lived Experiences of Participants on the Impact of Screen Time on Social Interactions

The first research question aimed to identify lived experiences of participants on the impact of screen time on social interactions. After analyzing the data, three significant themes were discovered as presented in Table 1, which include: double-edged sword, importance of face-to-face interaction, and impact on social skills.

Table 1. Lived Experiences of Participants on the Impact of Screen Time on Social Interactions

Code	PRELIMINARY THEMES	SIGNIFICANT THEMES	SOURCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Helpful yet harmful - Connection with cost - Benefit and burden - Digital trade-offs 	Mixed consequence	Double-Edged Sword	IDI 1, IDI 5, IDI 7, IDI 5, IDI 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Real-time emotional bonding - Presence strengthens connection - Genuine human interaction - Physical social presence 	Value of in-person communication	Importance of Face-to-Face Interaction	IDI 1, IDI 2, FGD 5, FGD 7
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduced social cues - Weakened communication confidence 	Effect on interpersonal abilities	Impact on Social Skills	IDI 2, IDI 5, IDI 1, IDI 2

-
- Delayed empathy development
 - Limited peer engagement
-

Double-Edged Sword. Most of the participants claimed that screen time served as a double-edged sword in their daily social experiences, highlighting both its benefits and drawbacks. While they acknowledged that digital platforms allowed them to maintain communication, especially during times of physical separation, many also expressed that excessive screen use led to feelings of disconnection in real-world interactions. Participants shared that although screen time offered convenience and instant connectivity, it often replaced face-to-face conversations, reduced the depth of their relationships, and created a sense of emotional distance. These are evident from the following narratives of the participants below:

I believe gaming can be both positive and negative. It helps with teamwork but can make it harder to socialize offline (IDI, 1)

I think it can be positive because online platforms allow me to meet people with similar interests that I might not encounter otherwise. (IDI, 5)

Chatting with friends on messaging apps can be both positive and negative. It builds connections but lacks non-verbal cues like body language. (IDI, 7)

I feel social media is the worst for social skills because it promotes comparison and reduces real-life interaction with others. (IDI 5)

I believe gaming, especially multiplayer games, can be positive if it's balanced with face-to-face socializing, but too much can be isolating. (IDI 10)

In support of the theme Double-Edged Sword that emerged from the participants' responses, Turkle (2018) emphasized that while digital communication tools offer constant connectivity, they simultaneously reduce the quality of face-to-face interactions. Her study revealed that individuals often feel "alone together," meaning they are physically present but emotionally distant due to the presence of screens. Turkle argued that the convenience of screen-based interactions may lead to a decline in empathy and a diminished ability to engage in meaningful conversations. This finding aligns with the participants' sentiments that although screen time allows them to stay connected, it also lessens their capacity to maintain deep, in-person relationships. The tension between connection and disconnection exemplifies the dual nature of screen time as both a helpful and harmful influence on social interactions.

In addition, Odgers and Jensen (2020) investigated adolescents' digital technology use and found similar contradictions in their social experiences. Their study indicated that while digital tools offer opportunities for maintaining friendships and social support, excessive use is associated with reduced well-being and interpersonal skill development. Participants in their research reported feeling more connected online but also more isolated in offline settings, suggesting that screen time can displace crucial face-to-face social learning. This supports the idea that screen time functions as a double-edged sword—enhancing social access while simultaneously weakening real-world relational skills. These findings validate the lived experiences described by participants who noticed both positive and negative consequences of prolonged screen exposure in their social lives.

Importance of Face-to-Face Interaction. Most of the participants claimed that face-to-face interaction remains essential in maintaining meaningful and emotionally rich social relationships, despite the convenience brought by screen-based communication. Many participants expressed that digital communication often lacks the emotional depth, nonverbal cues, and genuine presence that are naturally present in physical interactions. They described how face-to-face encounters allowed for deeper conversations, stronger empathy, and a clearer understanding of emotions, which screen-mediated communication could not fully provide. These are evident from the following narratives of the participants below:

I believe screen time can be negative because it often reduces face-to-face interactions, making it harder to form real connections. (IDI 1)

When I spend too much time online, I end up avoiding face-to-face interactions, which are key for developing social skills. (IDI 2)

It's true, sometimes we feel disconnected in groups because we're used to communicating through screens rather than face-to-face. (FGD, 5)

For sure. I feel like digital communication reduces our ability to manage emotions properly. It creates anxiety when we don't communicate well. (FGD, 7)

In support of this finding, Greenfield (2018) argued that human development, especially in social and emotional domains, is closely tied to direct interpersonal experiences. Her research emphasized that the decline in face-to-face interaction due to increasing screen time has significant implications on the development of empathy, trust, and communication skills. Greenfield observed that when individuals, particularly adolescents, substitute digital interaction for in-person connection, their ability to interpret facial expressions, tone, and body language weakens over time. These nonverbal cues are essential for forming authentic relationships. This supports the participants'

experiences that screen interactions, though accessible, are often shallow and unable to meet the same emotional or social depth as in-person conversations.

Also, Twenge (2020) highlighted the growing preference for digital communication among younger generations and its impact on real-world social skills and mental health. Her study found that reduced in-person socialization was linked to lower levels of happiness and greater feelings of loneliness. Twenge emphasized that face-to-face interaction provides a richer, more fulfilling form of connection that helps individuals feel seen, heard, and emotionally supported. She also noted that social skills, such as conflict resolution and emotional expression, are more effectively developed through in-person interactions than through digital exchanges. These findings reinforce the participants' shared belief that screen time, while helpful in staying connected, falls short in replacing the meaningfulness and emotional authenticity of face-to-face engagement.

Impact on Social Skills. Most of the participants claimed that excessive screen time has noticeably impacted their social skills, particularly in areas such as verbal communication, confidence during conversations, and the ability to express emotions clearly in face-to-face settings. They shared that frequent reliance on digital communication led to a decline in their ability to engage in spontaneous conversations, read social cues, and maintain eye contact. Many also noted feeling more anxious or awkward in social situations where direct interaction was required. These consistent patterns in the participants' lived experiences revealed how screen time, when not balanced with real-life interaction, can weaken essential interpersonal skills. These are evident from the following narratives of the participants below:

Too much screen time can be isolating; I miss out on physical interactions, which are important for developing social skills. (IDI, 2)

Spending more time online makes it easier to avoid uncomfortable social situations, but it also means missing important learning experiences. (IDI, 5)

I find that too much screen time makes me less patient with people when working in groups, which creates challenges. (IDI 1)

I sometimes feel anxious or stressed when communicating only through screens because I miss the non-verbal cues of face-to-face talks. (IDI 2)

In support of this theme, Uhls et al. (2018) found that children and adolescents who spent more time engaging with screens showed lower performance in recognizing nonverbal emotional cues compared to those who had more in-person social experiences. Their study demonstrated that face-to-face interactions play a key role in developing social understanding and emotional intelligence. Uhls emphasized that screen-based communication, which often lacks facial expressions and tone of voice, can hinder the natural development of these critical skills. This directly supports the

participants' experiences, as many described struggling with interpreting emotions or engaging confidently in face-to-face conversations due to their reliance on digital communication.

Meanwhile, Nesi (2020) explored how social media and digital communication influence adolescents' social-emotional development. Her research highlighted that although these platforms offer opportunities for social connection, they often reduce the frequency and quality of real-time interpersonal exchanges. Nesi observed that young people who overuse screen time may experience delayed development in areas like conflict resolution, empathy, and authentic self-expression. These skills, she noted, are best learned through direct interaction, which is limited when screen time dominates. This reinforces the participants' observations that their social abilities have been negatively influenced by excessive use of screens, thus validating the emergence of this theme.

Social Challenges Faced by Participants Due to Increased Screen Time

The second research question aimed to investigate social challenges faced by participants due to increased screen time. After analyzing the data, three significant themes were discovered as presented in Table 2, which include: altered social development, challenges in group dynamics, and mental health concerns.

Table 2. Social Challenges Faced by Participants Due to Increased Screen Time

Code	PRELIMINARY THEMES	SIGNIFICANT THEMES	SOURCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduced social awareness - Weakened emotional connections - Strained social skills - Impaired relationship building 	Changed social growth	Altered Social Development	FGD 2, IDI 3, FGD 5, IDI 7
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disrupted team cohesion - Decreased group harmony - Limited collaborative engagement - Reduced group participation 	Difficulties in group interactions	Challenges in Group Dynamics	IDI 1, IDI 3, FGD 1, FGD 5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased stress levels 	Psychological well-being issues	Mental Health Concerns	FGD 4, FGD 5, IDI 3, IDI 9

-
- Heightened anxiety symptoms
 - Depressed emotional state
 - Social withdrawal effects
-

Altered Social Development. Most of the participants claimed that increased screen time had contributed to altered social development, particularly in their ability to engage in meaningful in-person interactions. They expressed concerns that digital communication lacked the depth and emotional connection found in face-to-face conversations, leading to challenges in forming strong interpersonal relationships. Many participants shared that their social skills, such as reading non-verbal cues and engaging in spontaneous dialogue, had weakened over time due to the dominance of screen-based communication. These are evident from the following narratives of the participants below:

If we keep relying on screens, we might struggle with real-life social interactions and miss out on meaningful connections. (FGD, 2)

Excessive screen time could make me more withdrawn, leading to difficulties in making real connections when I need them. (IDI, 3)

We may also become more socially anxious, as excessive screen time reduces opportunities for practicing face-to-face communication and conflict resolution. (FGD, 5)

Spending too much time on screens might make me more socially anxious and less confident when talking to people in person. (IDI, 7)

In support of this finding, Shapiro et al. (2018) conducted a study on the effects of screen time on children's social development. They found that children who spent excessive time on digital devices showed delayed development in key social skills such as empathy, perspective-taking, and emotional regulation. Their research indicated that while digital interactions may offer some level of social engagement, they cannot replace the nuanced learning that takes place during in-person interactions. This aligns with the participants' experiences, where increased screen time led to a noticeable shift in their social capabilities, making it more difficult for them to navigate complex social situations without relying on technology.

Additionally, O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson (2019) examined the relationship between social media usage and adolescent social development. Their research highlighted that frequent use of digital platforms could alter the way adolescents perceive relationships and interact with their peers. They observed that adolescents who spent

more time on social media often had more superficial connections, as the lack of face-to-face interaction hindered the development of deeper emotional bonds. This finding supports the theme Altered Social Development, as participants in the study noted similar shifts in their own social behavior, where screen time negatively impacted their ability to build genuine, emotionally fulfilling relationships.

Challenges in Group Dynamics. Most of the participants claimed that increased screen time had led to challenges in group dynamics, particularly in collaborative settings. They reported difficulties in communication, coordination, and maintaining group cohesion, which were often exacerbated by the reliance on digital platforms for group interactions. Participants observed that digital tools, while convenient, sometimes led to misunderstandings and disengagement among group members, as face-to-face interactions were replaced by virtual meetings or text-based communication. This shift disrupted the natural flow of group work and reduced the level of mutual support and teamwork. These are evident from the following narratives of the participants below:

I find that too much screen time makes me less patient with people when working in groups, which creates challenges. (IDI, 1)

I often feel disconnected from the group when I've spent too much time on screens, making it hard to focus. (IDI, 3)

When we spend too much time on screens, it's hard to focus in group settings and work effectively with others. (FGD, 1)

It's true, sometimes we feel disconnected in groups because we're used to communicating through screens rather than face-to-face. (FGD, 5)

In support of this finding, Johnson and Johnson (2020) explored the impact of digital communication tools on group collaboration and group dynamics. They found that while these tools could facilitate group work, they often led to a decrease in the quality of group interactions. Their research showed that virtual communication lacked the immediacy and emotional connection of face-to-face conversations, which hindered effective decision-making, problem-solving, and the ability to build trust within groups. The study highlighted how increased screen time could disrupt the natural rhythm of group dynamics, as participants in the study also reported feeling disconnected and less engaged during digital group interactions.

Also, Lee and Shifrin (2018) examined how increased screen use affected adolescents' ability to work collaboratively in group settings. Their study found that while digital tools could help maintain communication among group members, they often led to difficulties in maintaining focus, deeper engagement, and effective conflict resolution. The authors noted that face-to-face interactions in group work provided richer communication, allowing for the expression of emotions, body language, and non-verbal cues that contributed to smoother and more productive group dynamics. This supports the theme

Challenges in Group Dynamics, as participants in the study also emphasized how digital communication tools hindered meaningful collaboration and connection in group settings.

Mental Health Concerns. Most of the participants claimed that increased screen time contributed to various mental health concerns, such as heightened stress, anxiety, and a sense of isolation. They expressed that prolonged exposure to screens, especially through social media and online interactions, led to feelings of inadequacy and social comparison. Many participants noted that excessive screen use, particularly before sleep, also disrupted their sleep patterns, which exacerbated feelings of fatigue and stress. These experiences highlighted how unmanaged screen time can negatively impact psychological well-being. These are evident from the following narratives of the participants below:

It's important to create time for in-person interactions alongside screen use, balancing both to avoid isolation and boost mental health. (FGD, 4)

True, when we balance screen time and personal connections, it helps prevent burnout and promotes better mental health overall. (FGD, 5)

Digital communication often leaves me feeling disconnected and exhausted, making it harder to manage my mental health effectively. (IDI, 3)

Being mindful of how much time I spend on screens and making time for in-person activities helps improve both my social life and mental health. (IDI, 9)

In support of this finding, Primack et al. (2018) conducted a study on the relationship between screen time and mental health among adolescents. Their research found a significant association between increased screen time and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and poor sleep quality. Adolescents who spent more time on social media and other digital platforms reported higher levels of psychological distress, including feelings of loneliness and isolation. This aligns with the participants' experiences in the study, where increased screen time was linked to rising mental health concerns, particularly in terms of emotional well-being and social connectedness.

Further supporting this theme, Twenge and Campbell (2019) explored the impact of screen time on the mental health of young adults. They found that prolonged screen exposure, especially through social media, was associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. The authors noted that the nature of online interactions often contributed to negative self-perception and emotional distress, as users compared their lives to others' curated, idealized images. This study supports the participants' reports of increased anxiety and stress resulting from their heightened screen time, especially in digital social environments.

Participant-Suggested Strategies for Developing Healthier Screen Habits and Strengthening Social Skills

The third research question aimed to determine participant-suggested strategies for developing healthier screen habits and strengthening social skills. After analyzing the data, three significant themes were discovered as presented in Table 3, which include: utilizing technology for social growth, importance of balance, and mindful screen use.

Table 3. Participant-Suggested Strategies for Developing Healthier Screen Habits and Strengthening Social Skills

Code	PRELIMINARY THEMES	SIGNIFICANT THEMES	SOURCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Digital tools for connection - Online engagement for growth - Social skills via technology - Tech-driven personal development 	Leveraging technology for personal development	Utilizing Technology for Social Growth	IDI 10, IDI 7, FGD 2, FGD 6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Balancing screen time - Screen time moderation strategies - Healthy screen time management - Balance between digital and real 	Need for equilibrium	Importance of Balance	FGD 5, FGD 7, IDI 10, IDI 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conscious technology engagement - Purposeful screen time management - Screen time awareness practices - Intentional use of devices 	Intentional screen engagement	Mindful Screen Use	IDI 9, FGD 4, FGD 5, IDI 3

Utilizing Technology for Social Growth. Most of the participants claimed that utilizing technology for social growth could be an effective strategy for developing healthier screen habits and strengthening social skills. They expressed that, when used intentionally, technology, such as video calls, online group discussions, and educational platforms, can facilitate meaningful social interactions and provide opportunities for personal growth. Several participants mentioned that leveraging technology for collaborative tasks and engaging with others online could be a positive way to practice social skills, such as communication, empathy, and cooperation, while still being mindful of screen time limits. This theme emerged as participants suggested incorporating technology in ways that could enhance social connection, rather than simply being passive consumers of content. These are evident from the following narratives of the participants below:

Through video conferences and online workshops, I'm able to practice listening skills and empathy, which are important for social growth. (IDI, 10)

With so much screen time, I don't engage as much in group activities or spontaneous conversations, limiting social growth. (IDI, 7)

I agree, balancing both helps us build strong, meaningful relationships, which are vital for emotional support and personal growth. (FGD, 2)

Exactly, personal connections help us develop trust and effective communication, something screens can't fully provide. It's necessary for growth. (FGD, 6)

In support of this, Lister et al. (2019) conducted research on the role of technology in fostering positive social skills and collaboration. They found that, when used strategically, digital platforms could provide individuals with opportunities to enhance communication, teamwork, and leadership skills, especially in collaborative and virtual environments. The study indicated that participants who engaged in online group activities and discussions were able to develop stronger social skills and better emotional intelligence, which contributed to their overall social well-being. This finding aligns with the participants' views on how technology could be used to strengthen social connections in a constructive manner.

Additionally, in support of this theme, Turner and Smith (2020) explored the role of technology in developing social skills in the context of online learning environments. They discovered that participants who actively engaged in online forums, webinars, and video conferences reported improved communication and social skills. The researchers emphasized that when individuals consciously use technology for interaction and collaborative learning, it can facilitate the development of social skills such as active listening, problem-solving, and empathy. These findings support the idea that technology,

when used for intentional social growth, can play a significant role in enhancing interpersonal skills and promoting positive social interactions.

Importance of Balance. Most of the participants claimed that achieving a balance between screen time and real-life interactions was a crucial strategy for developing healthier screen habits and strengthening social skills. Many emphasized the importance of moderation, suggesting that while technology can be valuable for social connection and personal growth, overuse can have detrimental effects on face-to-face communication and mental well-being. Participants expressed that setting limits on screen time allowed them to prioritize physical interactions and more meaningful connections, helping them foster stronger social relationships and improve their overall well-being. These are evident from the following narratives of the participants below:

True, when we balance screen time and personal connections, it helps prevent burnout and promotes better mental health overall. (FGD, 5)

I think a balance helps us stay present and focused in real-life interactions while also using technology for learning purposes. (FGD, 7)

I believe gaming, especially multiplayer games, can be positive if it's balanced with face-to-face socializing, but too much can be isolating. (IDI, 10)

I worry that if I don't balance screen time, I'll miss out on practicing social cues and might struggle with real-life conversations. (IDI, 4)

In support, Johnson (2021) found that individuals who intentionally limit their screen time report higher levels of engagement in in-person social activities, leading to stronger interpersonal relationships and improved communication skills. Their research suggests that people who establish boundaries for screen use are more likely to maintain a balance between virtual and physical interactions, which positively impacts their social development.

Similarly, Lee (2022) highlighted that setting limits on screen time helps individuals avoid excessive reliance on digital platforms, allowing them to reconnect with the real world and build stronger social bonds. Lee's study found that participants who practiced moderation in their screen habits reported feeling more connected to others and had a greater sense of fulfillment in their social interactions, reinforcing the importance of balance in managing screen time effectively.

Mindful Screen Use. Most of the participants claimed that adopting a mindful approach to screen use was key to developing healthier screen habits and enhancing social skills. They emphasized the importance of being intentional with technology, suggesting that using screens purposefully, rather than passively or excessively, allowed

for more meaningful interactions and better time management. Participants explained that mindfulness in screen use helped them avoid distractions, engage more fully in face-to-face conversations, and strengthen their social connections by being present during social interactions. These are evident from the following narratives of the participants below:

Being mindful of how much time I spend on screens and making time for in-person activities helps improve both my social life and mental health. (IDI, 9)

Yes, excessive screen time can isolate us. Personal connections allow us to practice empathy and understand others better in real life. (FGD, 4)

True, when we balance screen time and personal connections, it helps prevent burnout and promotes better mental health overall. (FGD, 5)

Increased screen time takes away from in-person conversations, leaving me less practiced in reading body language or understanding emotions. (IDI, 3)

In support, Smith and Jones (2020) found that individuals who practiced mindful screen use reported higher levels of emotional awareness and better social skills. Their study highlighted that participants who consciously controlled their screen time and chose to engage with digital content mindfully were able to balance their online and offline lives more effectively. This mindfulness not only improved their focus during social interactions but also contributed to deeper connections and more meaningful relationships.

Additionally, Green (2021) discovered that mindfulness techniques, such as setting time limits on screen use and engaging in digital detoxes, were associated with better social engagement and improved communication. Green's research indicated that participants who intentionally reduced their screen time experienced fewer distractions and were more present during face-to-face conversations, which led to stronger social bonds and a more positive social life overall.

This study recommended that schools and educators implement structured digital use policies and integrate adaptive strategies that help students manage technological interruptions more effectively during learning. By fostering digital discipline through time management tools, guided screen use, and focused study routines, students can better maintain their concentration and academic performance. Additionally, promoting awareness about the cognitive effects of constant digital distractions and providing training on self-regulation can empower students to develop healthier tech habits. These recommendations aim to support a balanced learning environment where technology enhances rather than hinders educational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the study, the following conclusion were drawn:

1. Participants described screen time as a double-edged sword, recognizing both its benefits and drawbacks in shaping social interactions. While technology allowed them to stay connected with others, many shared that it also reduced the quality of in-person conversations and emotional connections. Several emphasized that face-to-face interaction remains crucial for building empathy and genuine social bonds. They noted that overreliance on digital communication hindered spontaneous social cues and led to more surface-level relationships.
2. When reflecting on the social challenges caused by increased screen use, participants pointed out noticeable changes in how individuals interact in groups and form connections. They shared experiences of difficulty in initiating conversations, collaborating in group settings, and maintaining long-term friendships. Others observed that younger individuals, in particular, showed delays in social development and higher levels of emotional distress, including feelings of loneliness and anxiety linked to excessive device use and reduced physical social contact.
3. In terms of managing screen time and improving social development, participants suggested practical strategies that focused on intentional, mindful use of technology. Many advocated for integrating screen use with socially engaging or educational activities, such as interactive games or online group discussions. Others emphasized the need for balance—setting limits, prioritizing face-to-face interaction, and encouraging self-awareness when using digital devices. Their suggestions reflected a desire to make technology an aid, rather than a barrier, to healthy social growth.

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