



International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science

e-ISSN: 2544-9435

Operating Publisher
SciFormat Publishing Inc.
ISNI: 0000 0005 1449 8214

2734 17 Avenue SW,
Calgary, Alberta, T3E0A7,
Canada
+15878858911
editorial-office@sciformat.ca

ARTICLE TITLE	SCREEN-BASED LEISURE VS LIFE SATISFACTION IN ADULTS - A NARRATIVE REVIEW
----------------------	--

DOI	https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.3(51).2026.5762
------------	---

RECEIVED	19 April 2026
-----------------	---------------

ACCEPTED	23 July 2026
-----------------	--------------

PUBLISHED	27 July 2026
------------------	--------------

LICENSE	
----------------	--



The article is licensed under a **Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License**.

© The author(s) 2026.

This article is published as open access under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), allowing the author to retain copyright. The CC BY 4.0 License permits the content to be copied, adapted, displayed, distributed, republished, or reused for any purpose, including adaptation and commercial use, as long as proper attribution is provided.

SCREEN-BASED LEISURE VS LIFE SATISFACTION IN ADULTS - A NARRATIVE REVIEW

Sabina Kolawa (Corresponding Author, Email: Is.kolawa@gmail.com)

Medycyna Praktyczna, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0004-8847-7037

Julia Pilecka

Szpital Praski p.w. Przemienienia Pańskiego, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0007-4484-1716

Jędrzej Wojciechowski

Szpital Praski p.w. Przemienienia Pańskiego, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0001-7575-1816

Wojciech Markiewicz

Szpital Specjalistyczny im. Ludwika Rydygiera w Krakowie, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0009-2472-1543

Natalia Ostruszka

Szpital im. Stefana Żeromskiego w Krakowie, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0002-3641-2800

Arnold Borowiec

Independent Researcher, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0008-4236-8694

Maria Marusińska

5 Wojskowy Szpital Kliniczny z Polikliniką SP ZOZ w Krakowie, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0001-8421-115X

Michał Karpiński

Szpital im. Stefana Żeromskiego w Krakowie, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0007-1306-5275

Wiktoria Czyż

Samodzielny Publiczny Zakład Opieki Zdrowotnej w Myślenicach, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0006-6675-2389

Michał Parzniewski

Szpital Miejski Specjalistyczny im. G. Narutowicza, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0006-4209-5564

ABSTRACT

Objectives: This narrative review aimed to synthesize evidence on how leisure (non-work) screen-based activities—such as TV viewing, internet use, smartphone, social media, and gaming—relate to life satisfaction and broader well-being in adults, and to explore potential age differences and mechanisms.

Methods: A literature search was conducted in the PubMed and Google Scholar databases. Eligible studies examined adult populations, leisure screen use, and subjective life satisfaction or well-being, with higher-evidence designs prioritized. In total, 16 studies with heterogeneous designs were included and narratively synthesized.

Key Findings: Total leisure screen time showed null or slightly negative associations with life satisfaction and related outcomes, detrimental especially when use exceeded 2–3 h/day or displaced physical or social activity. Excessive use was also correlated with poorer subjective well-being, self-rated health, body satisfaction, self-control, and sleep. Associations varied by age, type, and quality of use, with some studies finding that younger adults were vulnerable to social media use downsides, while older adults benefited from online use for social connection purposes. Screen experiences that felt meaningful or socially connective to the user were neutral or positively related to well-being, whereas passive TV viewing and some social media patterns were more consistently unfavorable. Experimental and modeling work suggested that reducing recreational screen time or reallocating it to physical activity may improve mood and psychological well-being.

Conclusions: Adult leisure screen use is highly prevalent and, in higher, more passive forms, is modestly linked to lower life satisfaction. However, effects depend on dose, content, and context, and can be neutral or beneficial when screen activities feel meaningful, social, or goal-oriented. Encouraging intentional screen use, balanced with fulfilling offline leisure, as well as conducting more causal research on specific screen behaviors, may help support adult life satisfaction.

KEYWORDS

Screen-Time, Screen-Based Leisure, Digital Media, Life Satisfaction, Well-Being, Adults

CITATION

Sabina Kolawa, Julia Pilecka, Jędrzej Wojciechowski, Wojciech Markiewicz, Natalia Ostruszka, Arnold Borowiec, Maria Marusińska, Michał Karpiński, Wiktoria Czyż, Michał Parzniewski. (2026) Screen-Based Leisure vs Life Satisfaction in Adults - a Narrative Review. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 3(51). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.3(51).2026.5762

COPYRIGHT

© **The author(s) 2026.** This article is published as open access under the **Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0)**, allowing the author to retain copyright. The CC BY 4.0 License permits the content to be copied, adapted, displayed, distributed, republished, or reused for any purpose, including adaptation and commercial use, as long as proper attribution is provided.

Introduction

Leisure time, as a social and economic privilege, a time of greater autonomy over individuals' activities, has the potential of enhancing life satisfaction. In this narrative review, we examine existing research on this relationship, with a particular focus on screen-based leisure activities - a widespread and easily accessible form of leisure in contemporary adult life.

Screen-based activities include watching television, streaming services or movies, using computers, browsing the internet, reading or watching news, using smartphones, engaging with social media, scrolling through feeds, and playing video games. These behaviors now constitute a substantial part of daily life for many adults.

Most research on screen time has focused on children and adolescents, leaving adults comparatively underrepresented. Understanding the impact of screen-based leisure activities in adulthood is crucial, as such behaviors may influence various aspects of health and well-being.

In this review, we focus specifically on screen use during leisure time, rather than work-related screen exposure, in order to provide information that may be relevant regardless of one's profession.

Life satisfaction is typically considered a core component of overall well-being. Both "life satisfaction" and "well-being" are widely discussed in the literature, yet their definitions remain somewhat fluid and not fully settled. This article focuses primarily on life satisfaction, usually assessed as self-reported, perceived satisfaction with life. Nonetheless, many of the studies identified during the preparation of this review examined other dimensions of health and well-being. Given the lack of fixed, universally accepted definitions,

the authors chose to include such outcomes while carefully distinguishing and naming the different domains of health and well-being as precisely as possible.

The objective of this narrative review is to analyze and synthesize current evidence on the associations between leisure-time screen use and life satisfaction in adults. By doing so, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of how screen-based leisure activities may relate to subjective well-being and to offer insights that can help individuals navigate everyday life in an increasingly digital world.

Methodology

This narrative review synthesized evidence on the association between screen-based leisure time and life satisfaction in adults. A literature search was conducted in the PubMed and Google Scholar databases. We used combinations of the following keywords and their variants: “leisure” OR “recreational”; “screen-time” OR “internet” OR “digital screen” OR “smartphone” OR “social media”; “life satisfaction” OR “well-being”; and “adults” OR “adulthood”. Boolean operators (AND/OR) were applied to combine terms relevant to leisure, screen-based activities, subjective or perceived life satisfaction, and adult populations.

Studies were first screened based on titles and abstracts. Articles were eligible if they: (1) focused on adult populations; (2) examined screen-based leisure activities (e.g., general screen-time, internet use, social media, smartphone use) as an exposure; and (3) included subjective or perceived life satisfaction or well-being as an outcome. Studies with the highest evidentiary value (e.g., large population-based samples, validated measures, robust statistical analyses) were prioritized for inclusion.

We excluded studies that: (1) focused on very narrow or highly specific adult subgroups only (e.g., clinical populations with very specific health-related diagnoses); (2) were limited exclusively to the COVID-19 pandemic period; or (3) assessed health-related indicators (e.g., physical or mental health symptoms) without any measure explicitly capturing subjective or perceived life satisfaction or well-being. Full texts of potentially relevant articles were retrieved when abstracts met the inclusion criteria or when eligibility remained unclear.

Finally, data from the 16 included studies were narratively synthesized, with attention to study design, sample characteristics, operationalization of screen-based leisure, and measurement of life satisfaction or well-being. No formal quantitative meta-analysis was conducted due to heterogeneity in study designs, exposures, and outcome measures.

Results

1. Total Screen-Based Leisure Time and Life Satisfaction: Quantitative Analysis

Across the identified studies, results were primarily quantitative. Associations between total screen-based leisure time and life satisfaction in adults were generally small and sometimes inconsistent, with clearer negative associations emerging at higher, excessive levels of use or in specific subgroups.

In a large 3-year longitudinal cohort from New Zealand ($n = 11,085$), overall weekly screen-based leisure time was essentially unrelated to life satisfaction and other mental health outcomes (self-esteem, social support, psychological distress, mental disorder diagnoses). Instead, higher screen time was modestly but robustly linked to slightly higher BMI, lower body satisfaction, small reductions in sleep, self-control and subjective health, and, paradoxically, more hours of self-reported exercise. Among younger adults (<40 years), higher total screen time—especially video watching and gaming—showed somewhat clearer associations with lower life satisfaction, but effect sizes were very small and often not statistically robust. In older adults (≥ 40 years), screen-based leisure was largely unrelated to life satisfaction; associations with higher BMI, lower body satisfaction and lower self-control were more evident (De La Rosa et al., 2024).

A longitudinal fixed-effects analysis from Germany ($n = 7,633$; age range 15–41; mean ~ 27 years old) indicated that, within individuals over time, excessive internet use (≥ 3 h/day) was associated with lower life satisfaction compared with <3 h/day, even after adjusting for other leisure activities (socializing with friends, sports and vacation). Excessive TV viewing (≥ 3 h/day) was also linked to slightly lower life satisfaction when considered alone, suggesting a displacement of more rewarding activities. Non-use of TV or internet did not differ from moderate use in terms of life satisfaction (C. Schmiedeberg et al., 2016).

In a large cross-sectional European sample from 22 countries ($n = 40,185$), adults who met both physical activity (≥ 150 min/week) and recreational TV screen-time (≤ 3 h/day) guidelines (based on Canadian 24-h movement guidelines) reported the highest life satisfaction. Independently of physical activity, any TV viewing was associated with lower life satisfaction compared with no TV, although most participants met the ≤ 3 h/day threshold (Chen Z. et al., 2022).

Smaller cross-sectional studies further supported adverse correlates of high recreational screen time. One study ($n = 795$) reported very high prevalence of ≥ 3 h/day recreational screen time ($\sim 82\%$ on working days; $\sim 64\%$ on non-working days) and found that, after adjustment, men with high leisure screen use on working days more often reported poor perceived health (León-Gómez et al., 2020).

Another study of students or highly educated adults ($n = 446$; mean age ~ 26 years) found that leisure-time, but not work-related, internet use was associated with problematic internet use (assessed on ISS-20r scale, a tool to measure internet addiction), which in turn correlated negatively with quality of life. However, leisure-time internet use itself was not directly associated with perceived quality of life when examined in the same model (Gao et al., 2020).

A scoping review of 46 studies of all age groups, reported that more time spent sedentary or physically inactive was related to lower hedonic well-being (life satisfaction and affect), with associations being generally weak, but stronger for physical inactivity such as screen-time specifically (Sui et al., 2021).

An 18-year follow-up questionnaire in a cohort of Spanish university graduates (cross-sectional analysis; $n = 3051$; mean age 57.3 years) found that using digital screens (TV, tablet, mobile phone) for ≥ 2 h/day was associated with a 9% higher prevalence of not having optimal overall psychological well-being (assessed using 29-item Ryff scale), compared with < 30 min/day. Screen use ≥ 2 h/day was also linked to a higher likelihood of not achieving optimal environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth, all statistically significant. These associations remained significant after adjustment for age, sex, smoking, alcohol, physical activity, Mediterranean diet, personality traits, chronic disease, insomnia and computer use. Isotemporal substitution models suggested that replacing 1 hour/day of screen time with 1 hour/day of physical activity was associated with lower odds of not achieving optimal scores in environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth, and positive relationships, with statistical significance (Basterra-Gortari et al., 2024).

Together, these findings suggest that in adults analyzed regardless of age, total screen-based leisure time has generally null or small negative associations with life satisfaction; detrimental especially when use exceeds ~ 2 – 3 hours/day or displaces physical activity—and is also accompanied by slightly lower psychological health, higher BMI, lower body satisfaction and reduced self-control.

2. Qualitative aspects and types of screen use

Some articles in this review suggest that passive screen-time activities, TV viewing and social media use, are more often linked to lower life satisfaction and poorer well-being than other forms of leisure or digital engagement. In contrast, screen use that feels subjectively meaningful can be positively related to overall well-being.

In study using a daily diary and day-reconstruction reports of working adults (3 separate studies, in total $n=1455$), watching TV (including streaming services for on-demand movies and TV-series) was compared with other leisure activities (physical, social, cognitively stimulating, culture-oriented activities) in relation to psychological need fulfillment and subjective well-being. TV viewing provided similar relaxation and detachment from stress as other leisure activities but was less conducive to meaning, mastery, and affiliation, and was associated with lower satisfaction and some aspects of affective well-being. In contrast, daily time spent in physical activities was positively related to positive activated affect (Kuykendall et al., 2020).

In a correlational study of 139 adults reporting total daily screen time, as well as pleasure and meaning during screen use, screen time itself was not significantly correlated with well-being. Instead, perceived meaning experienced during screen use was positively associated with overall well-being and positive relationships, whereas mere quantity of screen time showed no such links, suggesting that the quality and perceived meaningfulness of screen activities are more important than duration (Wang & Vella-Brodrick, 2018).

A systematic literature review of 57 quantitative studies including 571,427 participants from 21 countries (with mean ages 13–44 years) found that daily social media use was associated with reduced life satisfaction and self-esteem, as well as higher stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and poorer sleep quality. Problematic social media use was further linked to emotion regulation difficulties, procrastination, and higher perceived stress. The study reports that worldwide, $\sim 64\%$ of people use social media platforms (Behera et al., 2025).

3. Differences between age groups

A scoping review of 52 articles found that socially oriented screen time (e.g., email, Facebook, Skype) in older adults (aged 50 years and above) was often associated with higher life satisfaction and subjective well-being. Themes highlighted for older adults' use of online social networking were communication with family and friends, as well as forming new online communities. These uses were generally associated positively with participants' mental health and social connectedness, including less loneliness and less depressive symptoms, as well as greater independence, although strength of these associations varied, with some being statistically insignificant after controlling for demographic characteristics such as income and age (Chen E. et al., 2021).

A longitudinal survey (n=11,085) stratified analyses by age (<40 vs ≥40 years). Overall, total screen-based leisure time was not associated with life satisfaction in the full adult sample, but among younger adults, higher total screen time, watching videos, and playing video games were more strongly linked to decreased life satisfaction. In adults ≥40, total screen-based leisure showed comparatively smaller evidence of association with life satisfaction (de la Rosa et al., 2024).

A cross-sectional study with 18-years follow-up (n=3051) had a middle-to-older adult mean age (57.3 years) and showed that ≥2 h/day of screen time related to suboptimal psychological well-being, including lower scores for purpose in life and personal growth (Basterra-Gortari et al., 2024).

A cross-sectional study of 407 Turkish young adults (mean age ~24 years) used structural equation modeling to test links between excessive screen time, FoMO, sleep disturbance, and life satisfaction. Excessive screen time showed a clear negative direct association with life satisfaction; FoMO and sleep disturbance sequentially mediated this relationship (Aslan, 2025).

Together, these studies suggest that younger adults may be more vulnerable to detrimental effects of high screen-based leisure on life satisfaction, whereas in older adults, socially oriented and connective screen use may support well-being.

4. Suggested mechanisms and associations with other health and well-being measures

4.1 Crowding-out of more fulfilling activities

Using three waves of German panel data, a longitudinal fixed-effects analysis of five leisure activities (sports, vacations, meeting friends, internet use, TV viewing) found that meeting friends, doing sports, and vacations were positively related to life satisfaction, whereas excessive TV viewing and internet use were negatively related; the negative effect of TV viewing was partly explained by crowding out other leisure activities, but this mechanism did not explain the internet effect (Schmiedeberg & Schröder, 2016).

In a cross-sectional cohort of 3051 middle-aged and older adults, isothermal substitution models showed that replacing 1 h/day of screen use with 1 h/day of exercise was associated with better psychological well-being, especially environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth, and positive relationships (Basterra-Gortari et al., 2024).

Conceptually similar, a paper in leisure science argues that TV (including streaming services for on-demand movies and TV series) is less conducive than other leisure to meeting needs for meaning, mastery, and affiliation, and thus to subjective well-being (Kuykendall et al., 2020).

4.2 Sleep disturbance

In a cross-sectional structural equation model of 407 young adults (mean age ~24 years) in Türkiye, excessive screen time (assessed by Multiple Screen Addiction Scale) significantly predicted higher FoMO, FoMO predicted more sleep disturbance, and sleep disturbance predicted lower life satisfaction. Excessive screen time was directly associated with lower life satisfaction, but only indirectly (through FoMO) associated with sleep disturbance (Aslan, 2025).

A systematic review of 57 quantitative studies (571,427 participants) found that daily social media use was consistently associated with poor sleep quality and that high in-bed use led to short sleep duration, insomnia, and anxiety (Behera et al., 2025).

In a longitudinal outcome-wide analysis of 11,085 New Zealand adults, higher screen-based leisure time was possibly associated with fewer average daily hours of sleep, although sleep was not the primary outcome (de la Rosa et al., 2024).

Together, these findings support a pathway from excessive screen time to lower life satisfaction via FoMO and sleep disruption in young adults, and a broader pattern of poor sleep quality with heavy social media use in diverse populations.

4.3 Health, physical & mental

Across physical and mental domains, screen-based leisure time shows mostly small but consistently negative associations with health and well-being.

In a large New Zealand longitudinal cohort ($n = 11,085$), greater screen-based leisure was linked to a very modest increase in body mass index and a very modest decrease in body satisfaction, with some evidence of lower subjective health and shorter sleep duration at follow-up (de la Rosa et al., 2024).

A cross-sectional study from Barcelona found that spending ≥ 3 h/day in recreational screen time on working days was associated with poorer self-perceived health among men, independent of physical activity, age, and social class, whereas this association was not significant among women (León-Gómez et al., 2020).

A comprehensive social media review (57 studies; 571,427 participants of all ages, with mean age range ~13-44 years) reported that daily and especially problematic social media use is associated with multiple somatic complaints (burning eyes, wrist pain, neck and shoulder pain, chest pain, stomach pain, nausea, headaches, and muscle pain), poorer body image, reduced sleep quality, lower life satisfaction and self-esteem, and increased stress, anxiety, depression, sense of isolation from family and society, and cognitive difficulties such as reduced executive function and prospective memory, particularly in adolescents and young adults (Behera et al., 2025).

Leisure-time (but not work-time) internet use was positively associated with problematic (addiction-like) internet use, and problematic use was in turn related to lower perceived quality of life (Gao et al., 2020).

In a young adult sample, excessive screen time predicted lower life satisfaction directly and indirectly through higher fear of missing out and subsequent sleep disturbance, highlighting a socio-emotional and behavioral pathway from heavy screen use to reduced well-being (Aslan, 2025).

Overall, evidence in adults suggests that heavy, especially problematic, leisure screen use is linked to poorer mental health, impaired emotion regulation, and in some cases lower cognitive performance, whereas moderate, balanced, goal-oriented use may be less detrimental or even associated with better perceived quality of life.

5. Experimental reductions in screen use

A randomized trial in Denmark assigned 89 families (164 adults) to either a two-week intervention limiting recreational digital screen use to < 3 h/week/person or to a control group; objective monitoring with apps and TV devices were used to measure intervention compliance. Reducing recreational digital screen use resulted in significantly improved self-reported well-being and mood in adults allocated to the intervention compared to control. It did not change daily salivary cortisol or cortisone levels (Pedersen et al., 2022).

A recent scoping review of 14 studies on “digital detox” strategies (typically lasting from one week to several weeks, ranging from full seven-day abstinence to gradual daily reductions over three weeks) in both children and adults, found reductions in depression, stress, boredom, and problematic use, alongside improvements in self-regulation, sleep, and life satisfaction. Benefits were strongest in adolescents, young adults, women, and individuals with higher baseline depression or problematic use. Adults in close relationships may also benefit through reduced phubbing (prioritizing smartphone use over interpersonal interactions, including within couples or families), which is associated with lower relationship satisfaction, higher stress, and poorer sleep. Some findings were mixed, with some studies reporting benefits and others showing no or minimal effects (Setia et al., 2025).

The isotemporal substitution analysis in the Spanish University cohort suggested that reallocating 1h/day from screens to exercise could improve multiple psychological well-being dimensions that contribute to life satisfaction (Basterra-Gortari et al., 2024).

These experimental and modeling studies support the idea that reducing recreational screen-based leisure, particularly when time is reallocated to physically active or socially meaningful pursuits, might improve subjective well-being and constructs underpinning life satisfaction, however they do not provide information on long-term effects of such interventions.

Discussion

This narrative review examined the relationship between leisure-time screen use and life satisfaction in adults, with attention to broader well-being outcomes, age differences, and potential explanatory mechanisms. Across the 16 included studies, higher – especially excessive – leisure screen time shows small but fairly consistent negative associations with life satisfaction and related indicators such as psychological well-being, self-rated health, body satisfaction, self-control, and sleep, particularly when use exceeds roughly 2–3 hours per day or displaces physical or socially engaging activities. These effects are modest but may matter at the population level given the high prevalence of screen-based leisure. The picture is not uniformly negative, since meaningful, social, or goal-oriented activities often appear neutral or even beneficial, which was found especially in older adults.

One of the clearest patterns emerging from this review is that total screen time alone appears to be a relatively weak predictor of life satisfaction. Some large-scale studies found either very small associations or no significant relationship between overall leisure screen exposure and life satisfaction or wellbeing when adults were examined as a broad population (de la Rosa et al., 2024; Wang & Vella-Brodrick, 2018). However, associations became more consistently negative when screen use reached higher levels—typically exceeding approximately two to three hours per day—or when use reflected addiction-like behavioral patterns. This suggests a potential threshold effect, in which moderate recreational screen use may be neutral, whereas excessive use becomes increasingly associated with reduced well-being.

The type and quality of screen use emerged as particularly important. Passive forms of screen engagement, especially television viewing and passive social media consumption, were more consistently associated with lower life satisfaction compared to more active or socially meaningful forms of digital engagement. Television use (including on-demand movies and TV series) appeared less psychologically rewarding than other leisure activities because it fulfilled fewer needs related to meaning, competence, and social connection (Kuykendall et al., 2020; Yasunaga et al., 2021). Similarly, problematic social media use was associated with lower life satisfaction, poorer self-esteem, loneliness, and psychological distress (Behera et al., 2025). Setia et al. (2025) wrote that “these [social media] platforms are often engineered to exploit human desires through features such as adaptive feed experiences, which refer to personalized, algorithm-driven content. While this can create a highly engaging, customized experience, it also encourages habitual scrolling and unregulated prolonged device use by continuously presenting content that the user finds appealing or challenging to ignore”.

These findings can be also interpreted through self-determination theory, which proposes that well-being is enhanced when activities satisfy psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Passive scrolling, compulsive social media checking, and habitual television viewing may provide temporary distraction or relaxation but may fail to meet these deeper psychological needs, which is partly supported in Kuykendall et al (2020) research. In contrast, screen activities involving intentional communication, learning, creative engagement, or meaningful social connection may better support psychological well-being. Wang and Vella-Brodrick’s (2018) finding that perceived meaning during screen use predicted well-being more strongly than total screen duration supports this interpretation.

Another important finding concerns age-related differences. Younger adults appeared vulnerable to the negative effects of excessive screen use, particularly in relation to social media use, gaming, and video consumption. This may reflect developmental and social factors. Younger adults are likely to use digital platforms for social validation and peer comparison, which may increase susceptibility to fear of missing out (FoMO), perceived need to remain constantly connected, sleep disruption, and obsessive engagement (Aslan, 2025). The mediation pathway identified by Aslan (2025)—in which excessive screen use increased FoMO, which contributed to sleep disturbance and subsequently lower life satisfaction—offers one of frameworks for understanding these effects.

Findings among older adults were mixed and occasionally positive. For older adults, digital communication technologies may reduce social isolation, increase access to social support, and enhance independence (Chen E. et al., 2021). These findings are particularly significant in aging populations, where loneliness represents a major public health concern. Rather than universally discouraging screen use in older populations, interventions may be more effective when focused on promoting digital literacy and meaningful online social engagement.

A recurring theme across studies was the role of opportunity costs. Time spent on screens may displace activities that are more strongly associated with life satisfaction, such as physical activity, face-to-face social interaction, hobbies, travel, and volunteering. Schmiedeberg and Schröder (2016) found that activities such as

sports participation, vacations, and spending time with friends were consistently associated with higher life satisfaction than television viewing or personal internet use. Similarly, Basterra-Gortari et al. (2024) demonstrated that, in theory (in modeled substitutions), replacing one hour of daily screen time with physical activity was associated with improvements in psychological well-being dimensions such as purpose in life, personal growth, and positive relationships.

These findings suggest that the consequences of screen use may depend partly on what is being replaced. Screen-based leisure may be particularly problematic when it crowds out activities that promote social integration, physical health, and psychological fulfillment.

The review also identified several mechanisms that may explain associations between screen use and life satisfaction. Sleep disruption emerged as one of the supported pathways. Heavy social media use and nighttime screen engagement were associated with shorter sleep duration, poorer sleep quality, and insomnia symptoms (Aslan, 2025; Behera et al., 2025). Because sleep is strongly linked to emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, and subjective well-being, this pathway may need attention in future research.

From a public health perspective, these findings might be relevant since recreational screen use is now deeply embedded in adult daily life. Even small associations may have meaningful population-level consequences given the prevalence of screen exposure. Recommendations to reduce daily recreational screen use to a moderate amount of less than 2-3h/day seem to be reasonable based on reviewed literature. Public health guidelines might also encourage self-observation of the effects of screen-based leisure, intentional screen use, reduction of passive content consumption, as well as increase awareness and accessibility to offline leisure activities, which are more consistently linked to higher life satisfaction and well-being. Emerging “digital detox” interventions show promising results, however sustainability of such an approach and its long-term effects remains unclear (Pedersen et al., 2022; Setia et al., 2025).

Overall, these findings suggest that leisure screen use is neither inherently harmful nor universally beneficial. Its effects on life satisfaction depend on how much time is spent on screens, what individuals do while using them, and what activities are displaced. A more nuanced understanding of digital leisure is needed to inform both future research and public health recommendations in increasingly screen-saturated societies.

Limitations

This narrative review considered only 16 studies, providing a far from exhaustive picture of a rich and expanding literature. Most studies relied on self-reported measures of screen use and life satisfaction, which increases susceptibility to a range of biases, including memory bias, self-enhancement, social desirability bias, and dependence on participants’ self-awareness. Cross-sectional designs dominated the literature, limiting causal inference and raising concerns about reverse causality. Individuals with lower life satisfaction may engage in greater screen use as a coping strategy, rather than screen use causing reduced well-being.

Future research

Future research could prioritize adult-only samples and explicitly incorporate life satisfaction as a primary outcome. Objective measures of screen use (e.g., device logs or digital trace data) rather than self-report could be implemented. Longitudinal and experimental designs are needed to clarify causal direction, including studies testing complete abstinence and graded reductions or increases in screen time over extended periods. Studies should also examine qualitative dimensions of use (for example purpose, screen type, content) and how these interact with individual, social, and other contextual factors. Identifying the underlying mechanisms of different screen uses may provide insight into which practices are neutral, beneficial, or harmful for life satisfaction and overall wellbeing.

Conclusions

Adult leisure time is increasingly spent on screens, making it important to understand how this relates to life satisfaction and broader well-being. This narrative review synthesized 16 studies examining leisure (non-work) screen use and subjective life satisfaction in adults.

Overall, higher, especially excessive, leisure screen time shows small but fairly consistent negative associations with life satisfaction and related indicators such as psychological well-being, self-rated health, body satisfaction, self-control, and sleep, particularly when use exceeds about 2–3 hours per day or replaces physical or socially engaging activities. Total screen time was rather unrelated or weakly related to life satisfaction. These effects are modest in size but may matter at the population level because screen-based leisure is highly prevalent.

The picture is not uniformly negative. Screen activities that feel meaningful, social, or goal-oriented can be neutral or even positively associated with well-being. In older adults, socially oriented online use may support social connectedness and satisfaction, whereas younger adults appear more vulnerable to harm from excessive use and some patterns of social media use, including pathways involving fear of missing out and sleep disruption.

Experimental and modeling work suggests that reducing recreational screen use, especially when time is reallocated to physical activity or active, offline leisure, can improve mood and several psychological well-being dimensions. However, most available evidence is self-reported and correlational, and high-quality causal studies remain limited.

In sum, adult leisure screen time is widespread and, in higher doses and more passive or problematic forms, is modestly linked to lower life satisfaction. Promoting balanced, intentional, and socially meaningful screen use, alongside richer offline activities, appears a promising avenue for supporting adult life satisfaction.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the open-access policies of PubMed, Google Scholar and the journals cited herein, which facilitated comprehensive literature access for this review.

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Consensus.app (Pro and Deep versions) and ChatGPT (Free version) in order to improve the structural organization, enhance readability, and assist in summarizing existing literature. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

1. de la Rosa, P.-A., Cowden, R. G., Bulbulia, J. A., Sibley, C. G., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2024). Effects of screen-based leisure time on 24 subsequent health and well-being outcomes: A longitudinal outcome-wide analysis. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12529-024-10307-0>
2. Schmiedeberg, C., & Schröder, J. (2016). Leisure activities and life satisfaction: An analysis with German panel data. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-016-9458-7>
3. Chen, Z., Sun, J., & Zhuang, W. (2022). Combination of physical activity and screen time on life satisfaction in adults: A cross-sectional survey. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 962520. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.962520>
4. León-Gómez, B. B., Palència, L., Puig-Ribera, A., Bartoll, X., & Pérez, K. (2020). Does adult recreational screen-time sedentary behavior have an effect on self-perceived health? *Public Health in Practice*, 1, Article 100055. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2020.100055>
5. Gao, L., Gan, Y., Whittal, A., & Lippke, S. (2020). Problematic internet use and perceived quality of life: Findings from a cross-sectional study investigating work-time and leisure-time internet use. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(11), Article 4056. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17114056>
6. Behera, N., Khuntia, S., Pandey, K., & Shankar, S. (2025). Impact of social media use on physical, mental, social, and emotional health, sleep quality, body image, and mood: Evidence from 21 countries—A systematic literature review with narrative synthesis. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12529-025-10411-9>
7. Sui, W., Sui, A., & Prapavessis, H. (2021). Relationships between indices of sedentary behavior and hedonic well-being: A scoping review. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 54, Article 101920. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2021.101920>
8. Basterra-Gortari, V., Gil-Conesa, M., Sayón-Orea, C., Lahortiga-Ramos, F., de la Fuente-Arrillaga, C., Martínez-González, M. A., & Bes-Rastrollo, M. (2024). Daily time spent on screens and psychological well-being: Cross-sectional association within the SUN cohort. *Preventive Medicine*, Article 107912. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2024.107912>
9. Kuykendall, L., Lei, X., Zhu, Z., & Hu, X. (2020). Leisure choices and employee well-being: Comparing need fulfillment and well-being during TV and other leisure activities. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12196>
10. Wang, T., & Vella-Brodrick, D. A. (2018). Examining screen time, screen use experiences, and well-being in adults. *Social Networking*. <https://doi.org/10.4236/sn.2018.71003>

11. Aslan, Y. (2025). Fear of missing out (FoMO) and sleep disturbance as sequential mediators in the relationship between excessive screen time and life satisfaction in Turkish young adults. *BMC Public Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-24547-6>
12. Yasunaga, A., Koohsari, M. J., Shibata, A., Ishii, K., Miyawaki, R., Araki, K., & Oka, K. (2021). Sedentary behavior and happiness: The mediation effects of social capital. *Innovation in Aging*, 5(Supplement_1). <https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igab044>
13. Pedersen, J., Rasmussen, M. G., Sørensen, S. O., Mortensen, S. R., Olesen, L. G., Brage, S., Kristensen, P., Puterman, E., & Grøntved, A. (2022). Effects of limiting digital screen use on well-being, mood, and biomarkers of stress in adults. *npj Mental Health Research*, 1, Article 14. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44184-022-00015-6>
14. Chen, E., Wood, D., & Ysseldyk, R. (2021). Online social networking and mental health among older adults: A scoping review. *Canadian Journal on Aging/La Revue canadienne du vieillissement*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0714980821000040>
15. Dirzytė, A., Patapas, A., & Perminas, A. (2022). Associations between leisure preferences, mindfulness, psychological capital, and life satisfaction. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(7), Article 4121. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19074121>
16. Setia, S., Gilbert, F., Tichy, M. L., Redpath, J., Shahzad, N., & Marraccini, M. E. (2025). Digital detox strategies and mental health: A comprehensive scoping review of why, where, and how. *Cureus*, 17, Article e78250. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.78250>