

**Short-Form Video Consumption and Sustained Attention  
in Undergraduate Students: An Exploratory Study**

Alex Morgan

Department of Psychology, Midwestern State University

PSY 305: Research Methods in Psychology

Dr. Sarah Chen

April 18, 2026

## **Short-Form Video Consumption and Sustained Attention in Undergraduate Students: An Exploratory Study**

Adolescent screen time has more than doubled since 2015 (Twenge, 2023), a trend that has accelerated since the widespread adoption of short-form video platforms. While prior research has examined the relationship between social media use and self-reported well-being, less attention has been given to how the type of content consumed, rather than total time spent, predicts measurable changes in attention span. This paper examines that question by reviewing recent experimental and longitudinal studies on adolescent media use, with particular focus on the distinction between passive scrolling and active engagement.

The question matters for two reasons. First, attention is a foundational cognitive resource: changes in sustained attention capacity have downstream effects on academic performance, working memory, and reading comprehension (Carr, 2020). Second, public discourse on screen time has often collapsed all forms of media use into a single category, treating the act of looking at a screen as the relevant variable. If the type of content is in fact more predictive than the time spent, public health recommendations should be revised accordingly. The studies reviewed below suggest that the type-of-content hypothesis has stronger empirical support than the duration-of-use hypothesis, though significant methodological concerns remain in this literature.

### **Literature Review**

The literature on adolescent screen time falls into three distinct waves. Early studies, published between 2010 and 2015, treated screen time as a unitary variable and tended to report negative correlations with measures of academic performance and well-being (Anderson & Subrahmanyam, 2017). These studies established the basic correlation but were unable to isolate which components of screen exposure were driving the effect.

The second wave, from roughly 2016 to 2020, introduced finer-grained measurement. Researchers began distinguishing between social media use, gaming, video consumption, and

educational technology, finding that effects varied substantially across categories. Notably, Orben and Przybylski (2019) used specification curve analysis on a dataset of over 350,000 adolescents and found that the average effect of digital technology use on well-being was small and roughly equivalent to the negative effect of regularly eating potatoes, a comparison that prompted significant reassessment of the alarmist tone of earlier work.

The third wave, beginning around 2021, has focused on within-platform variation. The shift to short-form video, characterized by algorithmically curated feeds and average video lengths under 60 seconds, has been associated with measurable changes in attention metrics that did not appear in earlier longitudinal data (Hartanto et al., 2023). This third-wave research is what this paper most directly engages with.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

This study analyzed survey data collected from 312 undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a large public university in the Midwestern United States. Participants completed a 45-minute online survey assessing self-reported daily screen time, content type breakdown across six categories (short-form video, long-form video, social media feeds, messaging, gaming, and educational), and performance on a sustained attention task adapted from Robertson et al. (1997).

Participants were recruited through the department's research participation pool and received course credit for completion. The sample was 64% female, 32% male, and 4% nonbinary or undisclosed. Mean age was 19.4 years ( $SD = 1.2$ ). The institutional review board approved all procedures, and participants provided informed consent before beginning the survey.

### **Measures**

Sustained attention was operationalized using mean reaction time and commission error rate on the Sustained Attention to Response Task (SART). Higher commission error rates

indicate greater attentional lapses. Self-report measures of screen content consumption were validated against a one-week passive monitoring period using a screen-time tracking application installed on participants' primary devices, with strong concordance ( $r = 0.71$ ) between self-report and measured time.

## Results

Total daily screen time was not a significant predictor of SART commission error rate ( $r = 0.08$ ,  $p = 0.16$ ). However, time spent specifically on short-form video platforms was a significant positive predictor of commission errors ( $r = 0.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), even after controlling for total screen time, sleep duration, and self-reported anxiety.

Time spent on long-form video (films, longer educational content) was not significantly associated with attention metrics ( $r = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.51$ ). Social media feed scrolling showed a smaller but significant association ( $r = 0.19$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Gaming and messaging showed no significant associations.

A hierarchical regression analysis confirmed that short-form video time accounted for an additional 9.2% of variance in commission errors beyond what was explained by total screen time alone. This pattern held across the gender and age subgroups examined.

## Discussion

The results support the type-of-content hypothesis. Total screen time, when treated as a single variable, was not significantly associated with sustained attention performance in this sample. The effect emerged only when content was disaggregated by format, with short-form video showing the largest and most consistent association.

Two interpretations are consistent with these findings. The first is a habituation account: repeated exposure to algorithmically optimized short-form content trains the attention system to expect frequent novelty, which then degrades performance on tasks requiring sustained focus. The second is a selection account: individuals with pre-existing attentional difficulties may be drawn disproportionately to short-form video formats. The cross-sectional

design used here cannot distinguish between these accounts. Longitudinal data are needed.

Three limitations should be noted. First, the sample was drawn from a single university and may not generalize to non-college populations or to younger adolescents. Second, the SART is one of many possible measures of sustained attention, and the results may not generalize to other attentional constructs such as selective attention or attention switching. Third, self-report of content type, even when validated against passive monitoring, depends on participants' ability to categorize their own behavior accurately.



CollegeEssay

## References

- Anderson, D. R., & Subrahmanyam, K. (2017). Digital screen media and cognitive development. *Pediatrics*, 140(S2), S57-S61. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-1758C>
- Carr, N. (2020). *The shallows: What the Internet is doing to our brains* (Updated ed.). W. W. Norton.
- Hartanto, A., Lua, V. Y. Q., Quek, F. Y. X., Yong, J. C., & Ng, M. H. S. (2023). A critical review on the moderating role of contextual factors in the associations between video gaming and well-being. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, 4, 100135.
- Orben, A., & Przybylski, A. K. (2019). The association between adolescent well-being and digital technology use. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 3(2), 173-182. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0506-1>
- Robertson, I. H., Manly, T., Andrade, J., Baddeley, B. T., & Yiend, J. (1997). 'Oops!': Performance correlates of everyday attentional failures in traumatic brain injured and normal subjects. *Neuropsychologia*, 35(6), 747-758.
- Twenge, J. M. (2023). *Generations: The real differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents*. Atria Books.