



Mediating Role of Internet Dependency on Screen Time Among Young Adults of Delhi NCR Region

¹Kashvi Goel*, ²Ishita Gupta**
and ³Faraz Ahmad**

¹ Department of Economics, School of Social Sciences, CHRIST
(Deemed to be University), Bengaluru, India

² Department of Economics, School of Social Sciences, CHRIST
(Deemed to be University), Bengaluru, India

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, School of Social Sciences, CHRIST
(Deemed to be University), Bengaluru, India

kashvi.goel@msea.christuniversity.in ·

Abstract: The research examines the psychological (stress), social (sociability) and economic (financial comfort) factors affecting screen time among young adults (18-25 yrs) in the Delhi -NCR region, focusing on the mediating impact of internet dependency. Data for the study were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed via Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The results showed that internet dependency fully mediates stress and screen time and partially mediated the relationship between sociability and screen time, whereas financial comfort did not demonstrate a significant influence. The study provides a multifaceted perspective on screen use among young adults and highlights the importance of addressing psychological coping and socially driven online engagement when designing policies to promote healthy digital behaviour.

Keywords: Screen Time, Psychological Factors, Social Influence, Economic Factors, PLS-SEM

1. Introduction

The widespread adoption of digital technologies in everyday life has made screen time an essential feature of young adulthood (*Mollborn et al., 2021; Twenge et al., 2018*). Young adults aged 18–25 heavily depend on digital gadgets for academic work, social networking, entertainment and emotional coping (*Scott et al., 2017; Fernandes et al., 2021*).

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Recent studies suggest that screen engagement is driven not only by accessibility, but is also influenced by behavioural routines, psychological states, and social interaction patterns (*Mougharbel & Goldfield, 2020; Van Dyck et al., 2011; Bond, 2022*). Earlier research suggests that stress and emotional discomfort led individuals to seek distraction through digital media, whereas active participation on online platforms further increases screen exposure (*Bond, 2022; Shensa et al., 2017*). However, existing literature largely examines these factors independently, offering limited insight into how they jointly shape screen behaviour. Overcoming this gap, our study examines the influence of stress, sociability, and financial comfort on screen time among young adults in the Delhi-NCR region. This study asks the following research question: How do stress, sociability, and financial comfort influence screen time among young adults, and does internet dependency play a mediating role linking these factors to screen use?

This study proposes and empirically tests a multifaceted framework with the help of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) using primary research data from 130 participants. Our findings show, internet dependency fully mediates stress and screen usage and partially mediates the effect of sociability and screen usage, but financial comfort shows no significant influence. The study focuses on the importance of psychological coping and socially driven engagement influencing digital usage among young adults (*Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Saleem & Jan, 2024*).

This research makes a notable contribution to the literature by incorporating various determinants into a single framework where internet dependency plays a significant role as a mediator.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Screen Time as a Growing Behavioural Concern

The growing digital technologies has exponentialized screen time among young people. Screen time is an important part of academic, social, and leisure routines. This raises concern about its behavioural and health implications. Early research by (*Salmon et al., 2011*) tells that sedentary screen behaviour is a major public health issue associated with multiple lifestyle risks. However, further research shows that screen engagement is influenced by the interaction of individual, social, and environmental factors rather than a personal choice (*Van Dyck et al., 2011*). Recent evidence suggests that young adults represent a particularly sensitive developmental phase for digital habit formation. Using a life-course perspective, (*Mollborn et al., 2021*) argue that the transition to adulthood involves shifts in autonomy, social roles, and technology use patterns, making individuals aged 18–25 especially vulnerable to excessive screen engagement. Empirical studies across different countries further confirm rising screen exposure among university students and young adults (*Caglar et al., 2017*).

2.2 Psychological Factors and Screen Engagement

A substantial body of literature links psychological distress with increased screen use. Depression, anxiety, stress, and emotional dysregulation have been consistently associated with higher digital engagement (*Hoare et al., 2017; Twenge, Martin, & Campbell,*

2018). (Mougharbel & Goldfield, 2020; Rathod et al., 2022) Reviews highlight that individuals often use digital media as a coping strategy for negative emotional states. Problematic or excessive smartphone use has also been associated with psychological dependence and reduced self-control (Augner & Hacker, 2012; Khan et al., 2024). In the Indian context, (Maurya et al., 2022) reported that longer smartphone screen time is significantly associated with sleep disturbances and psychological strain among adolescents and young adults. Similarly (Saleem & Jan, 2024) found that excessive screen and social media use is linked to poorer mental health outcomes. Many of the recent works emphasise the role of perceived loss of control and emotional reliance on digital connectivity. (Tomczyk & Lizde, 2023) demonstrated that real screen time strongly predicts problematic smartphone and social network use among young people. Overall, these studies suggest that stress and emotional vulnerability may directly impact screen exposure both directly and through the development of dependency patterns.

H1: Stress has a substantial effect on screen time.

H2: Stress has a substantial effect on internet dependency.

H3: Internet dependency mediates the relationship between stress and screen time.

2.3 Social Influences and Peer Dynamics

Societal factors play a significant role in shaping screen behaviour, mainly during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Media use is strongly embedded within peer environments and social norms (Garcia-Contiente et al., 2014). Active social media participation, constant connectivity, and peer monitoring have been shown to extend time spent online (Bond, 2022 ; Scott et al., 2017). Moreover, various studies show that socially driven engagement can gradually transform into a habit or problematic engagement. Similarly, (Shensa et al., 2017) found that higher social media usage is associated with social isolation. (Primack et al., 2017) similarly found that high social media engagement can change patterns of social interaction among young adults.

H4: Sociability has a substantial effect on screen time.

H5: Sociability has a substantial effect on internet dependency.

H6: Internet dependency mediates the relationship between sociability and screen time.

2.4 Socio-Economic Factors and Digital Access

Socio-economic conditions have also been identified as important correlates of screen behaviour. Studies show that household resources, neighbourhood characteristics, and home media environments influence digital exposure (Carson et al., 2010; Magid et al., 2021). (Degerli & Budak, 2025) further emphasise the role of socioeconomic context in shaping children's screen time patterns. At the same time, evidence is mixed. Some studies suggest that increased access and affordability may enable greater digital consumption, while others indicate that psychological and social motivations are more decisive than purely economic capacity. (Van Dyck et al., 2011) found that psychosocial factors often outweigh demographic influences in explaining adult screen behaviour.

H7: Financial comfort has a substantial effect on screen time.

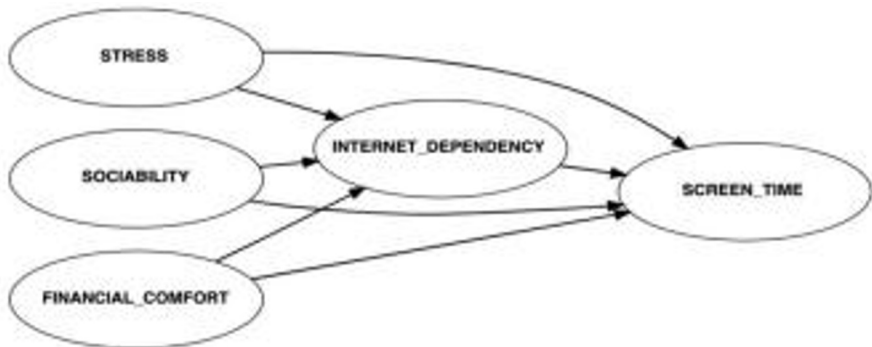
H8: Financial comfort has a substantial effect on internet dependency.

H9: Internet dependency mediates the relationship between financial comfort and screen time.

2.5 Internet Dependency as a Mediating Link

Recent studies highlight the importance of the dependency factor in understanding digital behaviour. Problematic internet and smartphone use has been defined as a behavioural addiction associated with reinforcement, habit formation, and emotional regulation needs (Khan et al., 2024; Tomczyk & Lizde, 2023). Studies conducted during the COVID-19 period demonstrate that increased online engagement can increase dependency (Fernandes et al., 2021; Wiederhold, 2020). However, many empirical studies treat screen time either as a predictor or an outcome without formally modelling internet dependency as a mediator linking psychosocial factors to behavioural exposure.

Fig. 1. Structural Model



2.6 Research Gap

Overall, existing literature suggests that screen time among young people is shaped by psychological distress, social engagement patterns, and socio-economic context. Nevertheless, three important gaps remain:

1. Most studies examine determinants in isolation rather than an integrated framework.
2. Major existing evidence focuses primarily on adolescent samples.
3. The mediating role of internet dependency between psychosocial factors and screen time is insufficiently tested using structural models.

This study improves these gaps by developing and empirically tests a multidimensional model in which psychological (stress), social (sociability), and socio economic (financial comfort) factors jointly influence screen time through the mediating role of internet dependency among young adults in the Delhi NCR region.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Variables

Dependent Variables: Screen Time

Independent Variables: Stress, Sociability, and Financial Comfort

Mediating Variable: Internet Dependency

3.2 Data collection and sample

The study follows a quantitative research method and uses a cross-sectional survey. The data was gathered using a structured self-report online questionnaire. The study includes a sample of 130 participants from the Delhi NCR region. The respondents were young adults (18-25 yrs) and used a non-probability convenience sampling method which is based on accessibility and willingness to participate.

Table 1 Respondent profile in detail

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18 - 20 years	45	34.4
	21 - 23 years	72	55
	24 - 25 years	14	10.7
Gender	Male	53	40.5
	Female	78	59.5
Mode of Study/Work : online	Yes	103	79.2
	No	27	20.8
Daily Screen Time	<4 hours	16	12.2
	4 - 6 hours	39	29.8
	7 - 9 hours	32	24.4
	≥10 hours	44	33.6

3.3 Tools Used

The data was gathered using an online self-reported structured questionnaire. The responses were analysed using R statistical software. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyse the dependency among variables and to test the proposed mediation model. The analysis involved assessment of the measurement model through indicator reliability (outer loadings), internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha, rho coefficients, and composite reliability), convergent validity (average variance extracted), and discriminant validity (Fornell-Lacker criterion and HTMT ratio). The structural model was evaluated using the variance inflation factor (VIF) to assess multicollinearity and bootstrapping procedures to test the significance of direct and indirect paths. Mediation effects were evaluated on the significance of the indirect effects.

Ethical Considerations. The Participants joined the survey by choice, and they agreed to take part after getting full details about it. The data collected was used solely for academic purposes and the responders' information were kept anonymous and confidential.

4. Results and Analysis

The Screen Time Structural Model has a total of six constructs with Screen Time as the outcome variable and Internet Dependency, Stress, Sociability, and Financial Comfort as reflectively measured exogenous constructs. The main goal is to show that Internet Dependency acts as a mediator between Stress $\rightarrow$ Screen Time, Sociability $\rightarrow$ Screen Time, and Financial Comfort $\rightarrow$ Screen Time relationships. The hypothesis is that these relationships do not exist independently, but they require the presence of a mediator variable, i.e., Internet Dependency, which translates them into observed effects. There are two sub-models in the entire framework, i.e., the Screen Time Model and the Internet Dependency Model.

4.1 Measurement Model Evaluation:

Indicator reliability can be ascertained if each indicator's loading is greater than 0.708. In our case, a few loadings are below the threshold, but these indicators are retained to ensure content validity. One variable was dropped from the measurement model of Screen Time because of its very low loading, and another variable was dropped from the measurement model of Sociability for the same reason (**Table 2**).

Internal Consistency Reliability measures how much the indicators measuring the same construct are related with each other. It is measured by Alpha, RhoC, and RhoA. The (**Table 3**) shows that all of these are above the threshold of 0.7, thereby ascertaining Internal Consistency Reliability. Convergent Validity measures the extent to which the construct converges in order to explain the variance of its indicators. It is measured by the metric called Average Variance Extracted (AVE). As AVE exceeds the threshold of 0.5, we have convergent validity for all our constructs.

According to the Fornell-Larcker criterion (**Table 4**), to ensure discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE of each construct should be higher than the construct's highest correlation with any other construct in the model. This metric measures the extent to which a construct is empirically distinct from other constructs in the structural model. As the values on the diagonal are greater than all other values in the same row or column, we conclude that all the constructs in our model are empirically distinct from each other.

Hetero-Trait Mono-Trait (HTMT) is also a popular choice to ascertain discriminant validity. HTMT values for all pairs of constructs should be lower than the threshold value of 0.85. For constructs that, from a conceptual viewpoint, are very similar, HTMT should be lower than 0.90. The following shows bootstrapped 90% Confidence Intervals of HTMT estimates obtained for all pairs of relationships present in this model. As all HTMT values are well below the threshold of 0.85 (**Table 5**), this reinforces the presence of discriminant validity.

Table 2 Indicator loadings matrix

Item	STRUCTURE	INTERNET_DEPENDENCY	SOCIABILITY	FINANCIAL_CORRECT	SCREEN_TIME
ST2	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.633
ST3	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.726
ST4	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.842
ST5	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.779
ST6	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.715
ST7	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.693
PF1	0.795	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
PF2	0.770	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
PF3	0.769	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

P F4	0.762	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
P F5	0.668	0.000	0.000	-0.000	0.000
P F6	0.758	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
P F7	0.000	0.774	0.000	0.000	0.000
P F8	0.000	0.634	0.000	0.000	0.000
P F9	0.000	0.821	0.000	0.000	0.000
P F10	0.000	0.745	0.000	0.000	0.000
S F1	0.000	0.000	0.513	0.000	0.000
S F3	0.000	0.000	0.880	0.000	0.000
S F4	0.000	0.000	0.854	0.000	0.000
E F1	- 0.000	-0.000	0.000	0.445	0.000
E F2	- 0.000	0.000	0.000	0.713	0.000
E F3	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.793	0.000
E F4	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.782	0.000

Table 3 Reliability and AVE Results

Construct	Alpha	rhoC	AVE	rhoA
STRESS	0.851	0.888	0.570	0.873

INTERNET_DEPENDENCY	0.742	0.833	0.558	0.781
SOCIABILITY	0.643	0.804	0.589	0.738
FINANCIAL_COMFORT	0.712	0.784	0.487	0.710
SCREEN_TIME	0.828	0.874	0.539	0.846

Table 4 Fornell – Larcker Discriminant validity

Construct	STRESS	INTERNET_DEPENDENCY	SOCIABILITY	FINANCIAL_COMFORT	SCREEN_TIME
STRESS	0.755	.	.	.	.
INTERNET_DEPENDENCY	0.439	0.747	.	.	.
SOCIABILITY	0.158	0.425	0.768	.	.
FINANCIAL_COMFORT	0.087	0.227	0.347	0.697	.
SCREEN_TIME	0.321	0.495	0.356	0.203	0.734

Table 5 HTMT Matrix

Relationship	Original Est.	Boots trap Mean	Boots trap SD	T Stat.	5 % CI	9 5% CI
STRESS → INTERNET_DEPENDENCY	0.478	0.507	0.086	5.553	0.371	0.653
STRESS → SOCIABILITY	0.222	0.279	0.090	2.460	0.155	0.448

STRESS → FINANCIAL_COMFO RT	0.18 8	0.253	0.058	3. 224	0. 166	0. 356
STRESS → SCREEN_TIME	0.36 8	0.385	0.084	4. 361	0. 249	0. 526
INTERNET_DEP ENDENCY → SOCIABILITY	0.61 8	0.635	0.108	5. 743	0. 458	0. 813

INTERNET_DEP ENDENCY → FINANCIAL_COMFO RT	0.29 0	0.339	0.086	3. 355	0. 211	0. 493
INTERNET_DEP ENDENCY → SCREEN_TIME	0.57 4	0.582	0.085	6. 770	0. 440	0. 721
SOCIABILITY → FINANCIAL_COMFO RT	0.49 9	0.528	0.114	4. 365	0. 343	0. 718
SOCIABILITY → SCREEN_TIME	0.45 9	0.478	0.105	4. 390	0. 310	0. 656
FINANCIAL_COM FORT → SCREEN_TIME	0.25 9	0.305	0.066	3. 915	0. 206	0. 424

4.2 Structural Model Evaluation:

To inspect the structural model for possible collinearity issues between predictor constructs, the table shows the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). As the VIF is below 5 for all the constructs, we conclude that there are no collinearity issues in the model (**Table 6**).

A path coefficient is significant if the value zero does not fall into the given confidence interval. The table below shows bootstrapped paths for each pair of relationships in the structural model. The direct path coefficient (**Table 7**) from Stress to Screen Time is not statistically significant, but the Specific Indirect Effect from Stress through Internet Dependency to Screen Time is significant (**Table 8**). Therefore, the relationship between

stress and screen time is fully mediated by internet dependency, indicating that stress does not directly increase screen time. Instead, stress increases young adults' dependence on the internet, which leads to higher screen time. This finding suggests that Internet Dependency acts as the behavioural mechanism linking stress to screen use. Stressed young adults may increasingly rely on online activities for distraction or emotional regulation, gradually developing greater dependence on internet-based activities, which ultimately translates into increased screen time.

In the case of Sociability, both direct and indirect effects on screen time are statistically significant, indicating complementary partial mediation. This means that sociability influences screen time both directly and indirectly through internet dependency. Although sociable young adults naturally spend more time on digital platforms to interact with others (direct effect), frequent online engagement may strengthen their internet dependency, which further increases their overall screen time. The table below shows that the bootstrapped indirect paths from stress to screen time and sociability to screen time are statistically significant.

Financial comfort neither has a significant direct effect on screen time nor a significant indirect effect through internet dependency. This suggests that greater financial resources alone do not necessarily lead to increased screen use among young adults. Rather, psychological and social factors appear to play a more important role in shaping the screen time behaviour than economic capacity.

Practical Implications. These findings have significant consequences for educators, policymakers, psychologist and parents. These results indicate that efforts to cut down on excessive screen time should emphasize improving psychological well-being and internet dependency instead of solely limiting screen usage. Educational institutions and policymakers might contemplate endorsing stress-management programs, digital well-being initiatives, and awareness campaigns that foster healthy online behaviours and self-regulation. Given that sociability contributes to heightened screen time due to Internet Dependency, campaigns that encourage balanced offline social interactions could further aid in decreasing excessive digital engagement among young adults.

Table 6: VIF

SCREEN_TIME :	STRESS	INTERNET_D EPENDENCY	SOCIABILITY	FINANCIAL_ COMFORT
	1.241	1.488	1.329	1.147
INTERNET_DE PENDENCY:	1.027	-	1.159	1.139

Table 7: Bootstrapped Total direct Effect

Relationship	Original Est.	Bootstrap Mean	Bootstrap SD	T Stat.	5% CI	95 % CI
STRESS → INTERNET DEPENDENCY	0.379	0.381	0.085	4.47 7	0.23 9	0.5 16
STRESS → SCREEN_TIME	0.135	0.141	0.087	1.55 2	- 0.00 7	0.2 81
INTERNET_DEPENDENCY → SCREEN_TIME	0.353	0.354	0.089	3.96 7	0.20 0	0.4 94

SOCIABILITY → INTERNET_DEPENDENCY	0.338	0.343	0.079	4.29 2	0.21 0	0.4 71
SOCIABILITY → SCREEN_TIME	0.166	0.170	0.087	1.91 9	0.02 4	0.3 10
FINANCIAL_COMFORT → INTERNET_DEPENDENCY	0.076	0.094	0.096	0.79 9	- 0.06 5	0.2 33
FINANCIAL_COMFORT → SCREEN_TIME	0.053	0.065	0.084	0.63 4	- 0.07 8	0.1 99

Table 8 Bootstrapped Total Indirect Effect

Relationship	Original Est.	Bootstrap Mean	Bootstrap SD	T Stat.	2.5% CI	97.5% CI
STRESS → SCREEN_TIME	0.134	0.136	0.049	2.729	0.050	0.243
SOCIABILITY → SCREEN_TIME	0.120	0.120	0.037	3.198	0.053	0.200
FINANCIAL_COMFORT → SCREEN_TIME	0.027	0.034	0.037	0.730	- 0.048	0.105

5. Conclusion

This research studies the impact of psychological, social and economic factors on screen usage among the young generation aged 18-25 in the Delhi NCR area and the mediating effect of internet dependency. The results of the measurement model indicated good reliability and validity, thus ensuring the strength of the proposed constructs, and the structural model yielded interpretable results on mediation effects. The results show that internet dependency fully mediated the association between stress and screen time and partially mediated the relationship between sociability and screen time. Stress does not have a significant direct influence on screen time, but stress influenced screen time indirectly through internet dependency, indicating that internet dependency serves as the mechanism through which stress influences screen time. Sociability also had a direct as well as an indirect positive impact on screen time, indicating that sociability applies both direct and indirect effects on screen time through internet dependency. However, financial comfort did not have any direct or indirect impact on screen time. In conclusion, our study reflected that screen usage of young generation is influenced by psychological tendencies of coping and online engagement and internet dependency plays a mediating role.

Limitations. While doing this research, we came across certain limitations, which are as follows:

1) The study employed a relatively a small sample (130 respondents) using convenience sampling and a cross sectional, self-reported survey designed. Because of the non-funded nature of the study and time constraint, the findings should be interpreted with care and as they may not fully generalize to the wider population of young adults.

2) It also has a regional bias, as it is focused on Delhi-NCR region only.

Future studies should use longitudinal designs, larger and more representative samples, and objective measures of screen use to strengthen causal inference and improve the generalizability of findings.

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