

# HOW CONCERNED ARE PEOPLE ABOUT THEIR 'SCREEN TIME'?



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This edition of the CPH Tech Policy Brief presents insights from a study by Malene Hornstrup Jespersen (PhD Fellow), Kristoffer Albris (Associate Professor), and Helene Willadsen (Postdoc) from the Copenhagen Center for Social Data Science (SODAS). This work was supported by the H2020 European Research Council (grant number 834540) as part of the project “The Political Economy of Distraction in Digitized Denmark” (DISTRACT).

## OVERVIEW

As digital media have increasingly permeated all areas of life, concern with the impact of prolonged screen time has been on the rise, in Denmark – a highly digitalized country<sup>1,2</sup> – as well as globally. However, despite plentiful debates in both public media and academic literature, we know little about the extent to which individuals would like to change their own screen time, which parts of their screen time they would like to change, and what they already do to achieve this. This CPH Tech Policy Brief highlights central findings from a comprehensive survey of the Danish population’s ideals and opinions concerning their own screen time. We find that a substantial proportion of the population – especially younger age groups – would like to lower their screen time, yet one fifth of these people take no action at all to do so. We also find that many have a multifaceted experience of the impact of digital technologies on their lives, and that there is a varied experience of which types of digital technology use should ideally be decreased. Policy discussions around regulations of digital devices and media could benefit from taking the variations in people’s own concerns into account.

## SCREEN TIME CONCERNS

Across the world, there is a growing concern that the widespread use of digital devices and platforms have negative psychological and social effects on people: decreasing mental well-being,<sup>3</sup> narrowing attention spans,<sup>4</sup> and digital behavioral addictions<sup>5</sup>

have all been linked to the spread of digital technologies. The social, psychological, and political effects of digitalization have thus become an urgent matter of concern<sup>6</sup> in society. While research is ongoing to uncover these purported negative effects, the just as relevant question is whether and to which extent people themselves are concerned with their own screen time? And to which extent they actively attempt to control and limit the role digital technologies play in their lives by disconnecting from the digital?

## DOES IT MAKE SENSE TO TALK ABOUT 'SCREEN TIME'?

In both public debates and academic literature, screen time has often been used as a catch-all term for a broad range of digital activities.<sup>7,8</sup> This has resulted in a variety of assumed meanings and subjective interpretations<sup>8</sup> and caused ambiguity as to the question of what is being talked about when we talk about screen time. To this end, several researchers have called for more nuanced conceptualizations, and to retire the catch-all phrasings.<sup>7,9,10</sup> In this study we attempt to deconstruct the concept of screen time and ask which specific types of screen use people are dissatisfied or satisfied with by asking respondents separately about their use of digital devices, social media platforms, and digital activities. By then comparing respondent answers across these categories, we can provide a nuanced picture of what people are concerned about when it comes to screen time.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

With the aim of both having a larger sample than previous studies, while also asking a broader range of questions about digital concerns, practices, and values, we distributed our survey via e-boks to a random selection of 80.000 residents in Denmark in the spring of 2023, representative according to age (between 18-75), gender, and post code. The results are weighed according to these demographics. With a completion rate of 12%, the final sample included 9619 respondents.

In the survey, we asked respondents about their wish to decrease time spent on a variety of digital devices (smartphones, TV, tablets, etc.), as well as popular social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) and digital activities (gaming, scrolling, taking pictures, etc.). The result is, to our knowledge, the most comprehensive and nuanced survey of people's concerns with digital technologies and wishes for disconnecting to date.

## HOW DO PEOPLE EXPERIENCE THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES ON THEIR LIVES?

To ascertain this, we asked respondents to indicate level of agreement with six different statements, as seen in figure 1. We find that the majority of respondents agree with both positive statements (e.g., that digital technologies make life easier) and negative statements (e.g., that digital technologies make life more stressful as well as feelings of distraction and addiction), suggesting an experience of ambivalence toward the impact of digital technologies on the part of the respondents.

## HOW MANY PEOPLE WOULD IDEALLY LIKE TO SPEND LESS TIME ON THEIR SCREENS?

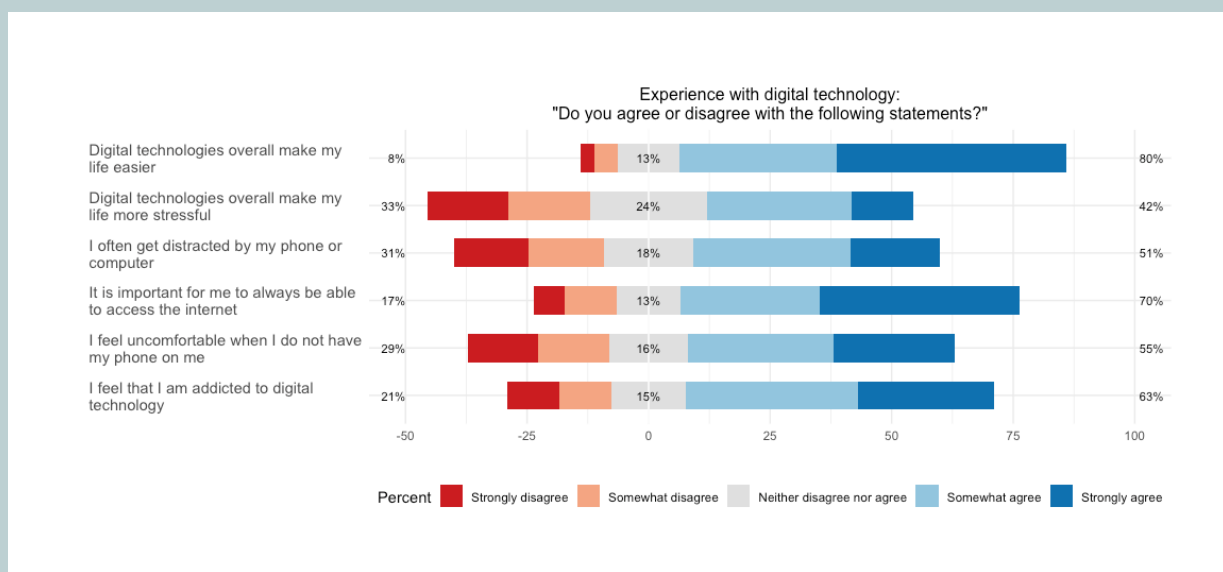
We asked respondents whether they felt they had spent “too much”, “the right amount” or “too little” time on their digital devices over the past twelve months (see figure 2). We also asked how large a percentage of the Danish population they believed would respond “too much” to this question. On average, respondents think 64% would respond “too much”. In reality, 40% of the sample feel they spend too much time on their devices. 59% feel they spend the right amount of time, and 1% feel they spend too little time on their devices. When analyzed across age groups, we see a noticeable difference between the younger and older age groups, where younger age groups to a higher degree would like to decrease their screen time.

## WHAT WOULD PEOPLE LIKE TO SPEND LESS TIME ON – AND HOW MUCH LESS TIME?

We asked how much respondents would like to reduce their screen time in percent and found that respondents who feel they spend too much time on their devices would on average like to decrease their screen time by 46%. We further asked the same question for specific digital devices, social media platforms, and digital activities. Taking the entire sample into account, respondents want to reduce their time spent on the following specific digital use cases the most: use of the smartphone (average desired decrease: -23%), TikTok (-32%), Facebook (-27%), Tinder (-26%), Instagram (-23%), and scrolling on social media in general (-27%). At the other end of the scale, respondents wish to spend more time on digital activities such as listening to podcasts (average desired increase: +11%), using

FIGURE 1

Experience of the effect of digital technologies on the respondent's life



Note: Survey responses indicating agreement or disagreement with six statements about the experience of the effect of digital technologies on the respondent's life. Responses have been weighted according to age, gender, and zip code.

their devices for hobby and leisure activities (+6%), and taking pictures and video (+4%). It should be noted that we observe a large spread in responses for all specific use cases.

## HOW MANY PEOPLE TAKE STEPS TO LIMIT THEIR SCREEN TIME?

While many respondents would like to spend less time on their devices, actively setting limits can be a challenge. We asked respondents to indicate to which degree they made use of specific strategies to control their own screen use. In figure 3, we show the answers from respondents who feel they use their devices too much. 19% have “not at all” limited their overall digital use and 52% have limited their digital use only to a small degree. Overall, we observe that simple technical strategies such as deactivating notifications or uninstalling specific apps are most popular, while strategies involving the help of others are rarely used.

## IMPLICATIONS

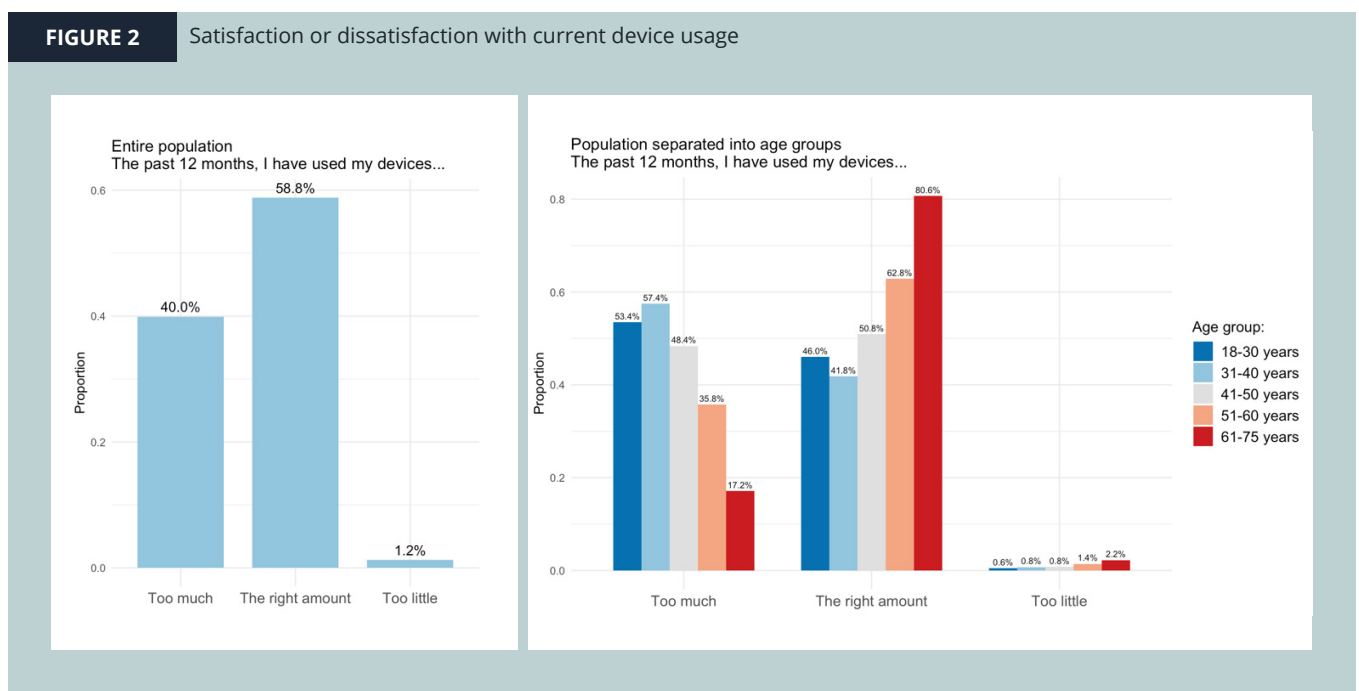
This survey provides a knowledge base with respect to how people are concerned with their own use of devices, platforms, and digital activities. The survey shows that a substantial proportion (40%) of the Danish population would like to spend less time on their devices. Respondents would especially like to spend less time on activities and social media platforms that are characterized by offering passive and solitary consumption of digital content. This can be taken as an indication that a considerable proportion of the population, especially younger age groups, share the concern over the impact of digital technologies expressed by many politicians and opinion makers in regard to their own lives. Nevertheless,

approximately one in five respondents that are dissatisfied with their own digital use report taking no action to limit their use, and many more report only taking a small degree of action. Furthermore, digital technologies are experienced as ambiguous, having both positive (making life easier) and negative (making life more stressful) impacts. The implication of our findings is that policy discussions around regulations of digital devices and media in schools, in workplaces, and in society, should take the variations about people’s own concerns into account.

## DILEMMAS

- ➔ Digital technologies are experienced as simultaneously making life easier and more stressful. How should we as a society design practical solutions and policy initiatives for digital wellbeing that take this ambiguity as a starting point?
- ➔ The recent public debate over the effects of screen time in Denmark has been characterized by two fractions of experts and opinion makers. One fraction has been arguing for major policy changes to alleviate potential harms, and the other for calming alarmist reactions. How can knowledge about people’s own concerns with digital devices become a relevant and useful factor in informing this debate?
- ➔ Our survey findings indicate subjective experiences and concerns rather than answering questions of the extent to which digital devices are a problem for attention and mental health, etc.

**FIGURE 2** Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with current device usage



**Note:** Survey responses indicating satisfaction or dissatisfaction with current device usage. On the left, percentages are representative of the entire sample. On the right, percentages are representative of specific age groups in the sample. Responses have been weighted to represent the population according to age, gender, and zip code.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

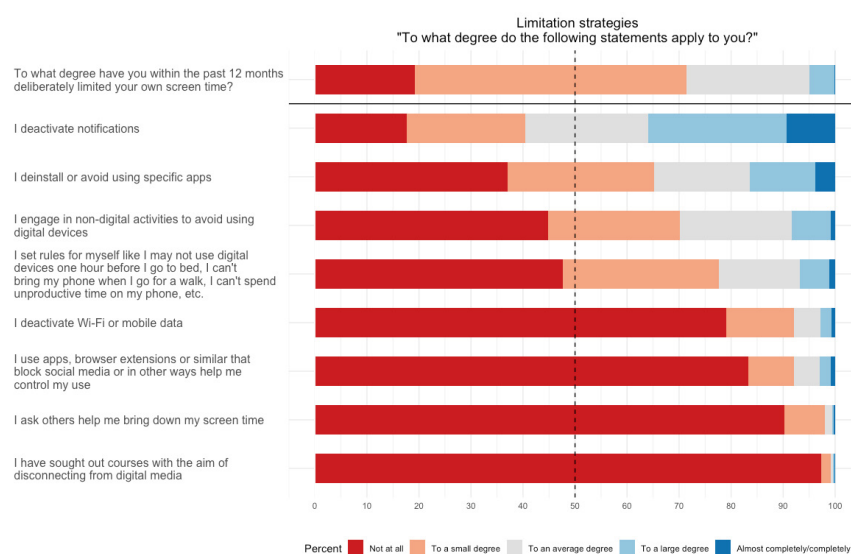
- ➔ Policy makers should be cognizant of the fact that not all digital use cases are experienced as (equally) unfavorable, and there is variation in how respondents would ideally like to use their devices. This calls for policy as well as practical solutions to identify which factors and activities of digital use contribute to stress and burnout and which factors contribute to making life easier.
- ➔ Policy makers should keep in mind that “screen time” covers many digital use cases. Respondents identify passivating and solitary use of screens as use cases they would like to spend less time on, while active and social uses of devices are not generally experienced as equally concerning. Additionally, different demographic groups have different needs and experiences. If we are to take seriously the concerns of the Danish population, regulating digital technologies at the societal level requires awareness of different types of screen use, and the problems posed – and for whom – by each use case.
- ➔ Policy makers should be cognizant of the fact that there is a gap between desires to reduce screen time and actions taken to do so.

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FIGURE 3

Specific strategies for limiting screen time



Note: Survey responses regarding the use of specific strategies for limiting screen time for the subsample of respondents that report that they feel they use their devices too much.