GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

15 Years of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite
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www.galaxyimrj.com

From Television to Pocket Screens: The Evolution of Screen Leisure and Its Psychological and Cultural Costs in the Digital Age

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Abstract:

Situating screen-based leisure within the sweep of historical development from the era of television to today's mobile and social-media environment, this paper contends that screen immersion is now not only a technological but also a deep cultural shift in human attention, culture, and experience. Early critics like Jerry Mander warned that television mediated and colonized human experience; these concerns are now amplified in the age of smartphones, algorithmic feeds, and personalized digital ecosystems. The paper debates how structural changes in media production and consumption-instant access, personalisation, and increasing participatory platforms-heighten psychological risks such as anxiety, sleep disruption, diminished attention, identity pressures-particularly among the youth-as well as cultural consequences related to homogenization, shifts in value transmission, and the widening chasm between "real" and "reel" life. It concludes by calling for an intentional, mindful, and balanced approach to screen use that restores agency and the conditions for meaningful leisure.

 Keywords: screen leisure, digital media, social media use, psychological effects, cultural change, homogenization, mediated experience, brain rot, FOMO.

Introduction: Why are people glued to screens?

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle put *leisure* (scholé) not as the termination of work, but as the highest state of human existence—a condition of the soul dedicated to contemplation and the pursuit of truth. [1] For the ancients, leisure was an active, creative state. Today, however, the concept of leisure has been taken over by amusement- the passive abandonment to external atmospheres.

One of the contradictions of modern society is that people have more free time than their agrarian ancestors, yet feel more "time-poor" than ever. It is now ubiquitous to observe individuals across all age groups—adolescents, young adults, middle-aged people, and the elderly—absorbed in their phone screens, endlessly scrolling through social media platforms, short-form videos, binge-watching series on streaming services, or passively consuming user-generated content. Whether it is during an elevator ride, waiting for the kettle to boil, or while in bed, the modern human compulsion is to look into a screen. This is not just a habit; it is a migration of consciousness. We have become willful migrants of our social, professional, and recreational lives into a digital climate that asks for little less than our total, fractured attention. The screen has transformed from a tool of communication into a prosthetic for boredom, effectively eliminating the solitude necessary for deep thought. Such unimaginable devotion to screens is not just a fad for any generation; it is actually deeply planted in structural changes in how media are produced, distributed, and consumed.

It is for several interconnected reasons that screen-based media is so captivating:

- **Easy Access and Immediate Rewards:** Unlike reading a book, meeting friends, or playing sports, screen-based content is instantly accessible at little physical cost and often provides

instant rewards. A quick notification, a new video, a "like," or a comment can trigger a small dopamine hit, reinforcing repeated use. [2]

- **Social Connectivity:** Through social media, users can connect to friends and family from all over the world; they share updates, consume and share memes, follow influencers, and become part of global communities. The virtual presence supplements or complements the real one. As argued in media-psychological discourses, screen media often blur the boundaries between entertainment, identity formation, and social life. [3]

- **Escapism and Convenience:** Most, with often stressful or fast-paced settings, find screens an oasis. While never having to leave the comfort of one's home or exerting a great amount of time and energy, an individual can unwind, amuse themselves, or flee the grim reality, if only for a while.

- **Personalisation and On-Demand Control:** The modern screen has become a deeply personal and customizable thing. Through algorithms, it tailors its content to user tastes, allowing people to consume exactly what they want, at any time they want, and even for as long as they want. This combination of personalization and convenience creates lasting habits.

 Background: From the Television Era to Mobile Screens

In the decades preceding the digital revolution, screens meant, primarily, television sets. In the U.S. and much of the rest of the world, television was a cultural medium unto itself. As noted in

a 1979 review of Jerry Mander's book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* published in *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 99% of American homes had a television, with millions of people watching it for several hours per day. [4]

Media critics, however, were already sounding alarms. The most influential of these was arguably Jerry Mander, an advertising professional turned social critic. In his 1978 book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Mander argued that the problems with television lay not just in poor content, but in the medium itself. [5]

The core four points from Mander were:

1. The Mediation of Experience: television replaces direct experience with mediated images and sounds, narrowing human engagement with the world to only two senses: vision and sound.

2. The Colonization of Experience: television homogenizes and standardizes experience and; deprives people of sensual, fuller, and spontaneous experience.

3. The Effects on the Human Being: television viewing that is encouraged is a passive consumption that reduces imagination, critical thinking, and true creativity.

4. Television's Intrinsic Biases: as a centralised medium run by networks, it often serves the interests of capital, shapes perceptions, and restricts diversity of voice and view.

To cite one passage from this tradition-the critique of mediated experience-in another influential work, *The Plug-In Drug: Television, Computers, and Family Life*, Marie Winn writes: "The very nature of the television experience apart from the contents of the programs is rarely considered. …one is always watching television when one is watching television rather than having any other experience."[6]

The Shift: From Living Room Sets to Pocket Devices

Fast-forward to the early 21st century, and the screens that bound their display in the TV set in the living room are now in the pocket, in the backpack, on the desk, and in the palm of everyone's hand. The shift is not merely technological but cultural, social, and psychological. Smartphones, streaming, social media, short-form video platforms, and globally accessible internet connectivity have transformed screens from a passive, shared, scheduled medium to an always-on, on-demand, deeply personal part of everyday life.

Thus, early critics' question whether mediated screen-based leisure poses risks to human experience returns with renewed urgency under conditions that have radically changed.

Changing Landscape: Earlier Content vs. Today's Content

Comparing a number of such multi-dimensional aspects like numbers of programs/abundance, format, timing/flexibility, length of content, purpose and range of content creation, advertising/influence, and the rise of influencers and follower culture between the "television era" and current "mobile/social-streaming era" can help gauge the level and character of change. Comparing the television era with the modern digital era across multiple dimensions highlights a number of key transformations:

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Dimension	Television Era (mid-20th to late 20th century)	Digital / Social-Media Era (2000s onward)
		Vast content libraries
Content volume & choice	Few channels, limited programming, fixed schedule	(streaming, social media, user-generated), on-demand access, global reach
Format	Linear TV shows, feature films, scheduled broadcasts	Short-form videos, long-form series, livestreams, stories, interactive posts, user-generated content
Accessibility& timing	Scheduled broadcast times, consumption tied to program schedules	Anytime access, binge-watching, short clips on the go, personal time flexibility
		Active user: consumer, creator, studios/networks
Audience role	Passive consumer of curated content	
Content purpose	Entertainment, information via	

	sharer, commenter; participatory culture	building, social signalling, community engagement, activism Algorithm-driven
	Entertainment, information, identity	
Social influence & advertising	Commercials, sponsored shows, limited targeting	advertisements, native advertising, influencer marketing, micro-targeting, global content, niche
Cultural scope	Broad, often national content; limited global exchange	communities, cross-cultural exchange, local and global reach

Indeed, these transformations have fundamentally changed the character of screen-based leisure, shifting it from a communal experience—families gathered around a television—to an isolated one, where individuals binge-watch content dictated by algorithms.

From Mander's Warnings to Today: Are his arguments still valid or amplified?

The arguments that Mander laid out decades ago, when television was the dominant medium, seem strangely revelatory when applied to modern screen-mediated culture-and in many cases, amplified.

- **Mediation of Experience & Colonization of Experience:** Mander contended that television reduces lived experience to mediated experience and in the process diminishes the sensory richness and spontaneous complexity of real life. Today, with mobile screens, algorithms, and content tailored to our various preferences, the "mediation" is even more pervasive and personalized and arguably more colonizing.

Every idle moment can be filled with curated content, minimising time for spontaneous, unscripted, real-life experiences.

- **Effects on the Human Being:** Mander warned about how television would weaken imagination and foster passive consumption. On modern platforms, however, passive consumption is now combined with passive and sometimes reflective engagement through infinite scrolls, short-form content, and constant feeds. The risk to mental health, attention span, creativity, and meaningful social interaction seems higher.

- **Intrinsic Biases and Inaccessibility to Democratic Potential:** Mander contrasted television as limiting what can appear or be exposed, facilitating a narrow range of voices-powerful studios, advertisers-and stifling diversity. The new gatekeepers in social media are the algorithms and monetisation mechanisms inspired by user engagement. In practice, attention seems to devolve into a few standard formats-short, sensational, emotionally charged-which may cultivate shallow content, echo chambers, or homogenization.

In effect, many of Mander's arguments are not only still valid but amplified in the age of smartphones, streaming, and social media.

Thus, the technological shift does not really redeem screen-mediated leisure; it changes its shape, but the inherent risks identified decades ago persist, perhaps with greater intensity and complexity.

Costs to Individuals: Psychological, Social, and Cultural Consequences

While the screen-content explosion has democratized entertainment and connection, it has also taken a remarkable toll. Experiential studies in recent years have signaled an

alarming correlation between heavy usage of social media or screens and poor mental health effects, particularly within adolescents and young adults.

- A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis concluded small but significant positive associations between social media use/problematic social media use and major depression, anxiety, sleep problems, and reduced well-being. [7]

- Another large study focusing on adolescents found that problematic social media use increased from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022, displaying a steep rise across a comparably short time period. The rise in problematic use is not trivial; this use was associated with lower mental and social well-being, sleep disturbances, and negative life consequences. [8]

- A 2025 study of young adults that examined time spent on multiple social media platforms reported that greater use of some platforms (TikTok, and YouTube) was consistently associated with more mental health issues.

- More importantly, however, the study also found that use of some platforms, including Snapchat, was associated with fewer mental-health issues, which would suggest that not

all social media are equal and aggregating time across platforms may mask important differences. [9]

- While many studies show associations, there is the problem of causality: it is complex and debated. For instance, the 2025 study does conclude that, due to the cross-sectional design, a direction could not be established about whether social media use causes problems with mental health, or perhaps it is the people with such problems who are more drawn to social media. [9]

Beyond mental health, there are broader consequences tied to pervasive screen use.

- **Sleep disturbance:** Many heavy users report irregular sleep patterns, delayed bedtimes, or poor sleep quality that is often associated with late-night screen use or "doom- scrolling." [10]

- **Poorer attention span / "brain rot":** The effects of this transition are measurable in the growing levels of mental distress. The slang expression "brain rot" has been popularised within Gen Z to convey the mental fogginess caused by a steady diet of short-form, high- stimulus content and frequent toggling between posts, reels, and clips may lead to a conditioning effect on users to superficial, momentary attention rather than to lengthier periods of focused thought, contemplation, or engagement. Nicholas Carr identifies this when he says, ".… because learning puts heavy demands on mental effort and focus, students are particularly vulnerable to the brain-draining impact of smartphones." [11] Similarly, Postman summarises Aldous Huxley's idea that "people will come to love their oppression to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think." [12]

Social pressure, FOMO, identity anxiety-with the rise of influencer culture, curated online personas through social comparison, and follower counts, many people, especially adolescents and young adults, feel compelled to post continuously, present an idealised life, get likes/comments, and stay "relevant." This may lead to a set of pressures into stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, or dissatisfaction with one's real life.

- **There is a disconnection between the real and screen life:** The complication of modern screen culture that deceives people the most is the one which is increasing the difference between "reel life"-the curated, mediated, consumable version of existence- versus "real life" which is the messy, irregular, sensory, embodied experience of living.

- ➢ *Social Comparison and Envy:* On social media, users are given highlight reels that could also be filtered photos, travel posts, lifestyle bragging, success stories showcasing ideals of living. Comparing one's life with such curated images brings about feelings of inadequacy, envy, low self-esteem, or dissatisfaction. This then leads to a continuous comparison of other people's successes or apparently perfect lifestyles with reality.

> ➤ ***Selective Reality & Echo Chambers:*** What users see is often filtered, both by algorithms that prioritise engagement but also by social pressures to project a certain image. Users could also tend to move toward content that reinforces beliefs, aspirations, or insecurities, remaining in echo chambers that confirm certain ideals while exempting messy, nuanced, or uncomfortable realities.

> ➤ ***Digital Validation Addiction:*** Likes, shares, views, or a number of followers, after some time, start to become indicators of personal worth. Aside from inner fulfilment and genuine self-confidence, this may lead to chemical dependence on digital external validation. This may culminate in anxiety, low self-esteem, or depression if such metrics are disturbed.

When consumption goes digital, and dominates leisure time, experiences of an unmediated real world-nature, interpersonal contact, sensory exploration, thoughtfulness, creativity, etc. tend to be reduced. The rich weave of lived life becomes a plane of images, posts, and videos, crafted for a reader rather than a life to be lived. This gap in reel life versus real life is not trivial since it delineates identity, relationships, self-perception, values, and experience of the world.

- **Cultural Identity, Values Transmission, and Homogenization**

Screen media proliferation and global content have an effect on culture in a much more subtle, yet deep, way. Screen time can impact the transmission of cultural values, traditions, and identities within families. The more screen time is devoted to globalised digital content, the less it may be focused on local customs, traditions, and community-oriented cultural expression. In this way, over time, cultural homogenization could occur as users in most parts of the world consume the same global content: videos, social media,

and streaming platforms.

Screen time is also used, regulated, and viewed differently in various cultural contexts. For example, families or societies that highly value education may view screen time as acceptable if it is used for learning, while others may perceive it as a leisure activity and henceforth and thereby allowing different cultural norms to emerge.

Not to mention cultural and regional differences. Much of the empirical data comes from high-income Western countries, so the dynamics in other contexts-for example, in developing countries, in multi-generational households, in different socio-cultural backgrounds-may be different, especially with regard to access, digital literacy, social norms, offline vs. online balance.

- **Impact of Screen Leisure in terms of age and gender**

Age and gender have been regarded as key predictors of screen addiction. Csibi et al. found that the younger individuals are at higher risk for developing screen addiction; they are the most vulnerable age group. [13]

This is because the overflowing content of the digital platforms affects their developing brains, which are more sensitive to overstimulation, social comparison, and persuasive design. They face higher risks of problems with attention, anxiety, and identity pressure. Young adults are at times overwhelmed by lost productivity, loneliness, and expectations over online performance. Middle-aged adults are concerned with constant connectivity and the blurry boundaries between work and personal life. In older adults, digital exclusion may lead to frustration or social solitude.

In addition, gender shapes screen experiences differently. Women have generally greater

body image pressures, greater appearance-based comparison, and higher rates of online harassment. Men are more likely to participate in gaming culture, which can support social bonding yet also enables escapism or aggressive norms. Supportive online communities help gender-diverse people; however, digital harassment disproportionately targets them.

The screen, in the context mentioned above, shields an individual with anonymity and creates an "online disinhibiting effect": an effect where empathy is suspended and aggression-usually manifested through trolling-becomes a form of entertainment.

Recommendations

But this is a huge problem, and the abduction of screen-based media-one that has democratized expression, connection, and access to information-is neither realistic nor desirable. There are, however, various steps that individuals, educators, parents, and policymakers might be able to take:

1. Digital Mindfulness & Moderated Use

- Screen-time tracking tools to monitor and limit usage, such as capping certain times of uses per day.

- Practice scheduled times to be "screen-free" - meals, one hour before bedtime, weekends - in order to reclaim that time for activities to be performed offline: reading, socialising, physical exercise, and hobbies.

- Develop awareness of how digital media affects mood, self-esteem, sleep, and general

well-being.

2. Content Curating and Intention-Driven Consumption

- Instead, consume content with intention: choose educational, meaningful, or uplifting information; avoid echo chambers, doom-scrolling, and sensationalism.

- Limit exposure to negative or emotionally charged content during vulnerable times, such as before bed and when anxious.

- Follow diverse voices that are trustworthy, including local content, less commercial creators, information, or art-based content, that enriches rather than simply entertains.

3. Encouraging Real-World Social Interaction & Embodied Experiences

- Engage in activities such as offline socialising, face-to-face interaction, community events, physical recreation, nature, and hobbies to preserve real-world relationships and sensory engagement.

- Engage the children in different "growth-mindset" hobbies: reading, writing, drawing, music, crafts, sports, etc., so that creativity, concentration, and body awareness will be preserved.

- Conserve at least certain times or contexts as "gadget-free" meals with family/friends, walks, sunsets, weekends, etc.

4. Digital Literacy & Mental Health Awareness

- Educate users, particularly adolescents and young adults, on the risks associated with excessive or problematic use of social media, such as social comparison, pressure,

sleep disruption, addiction risk, and mood issues.

- Encourage open discussions on the themes of mental health, self-esteem, identity, real vs. digital reality, and online pressure.

- Provide access to mental health resources and support services, with special attention to vulnerable groups or heavy users.

5. Design/Platform-level Interventions

- Advocate for "humane design" in apps: features that encourage breaks rather than infinite scroll, features promoting well-being over engagement metrics.

- Encourage transparent algorithms, content moderation, and content diversity, rather than purely sensational content driven by engagement.

- Support policies that promote public awareness about balanced screen use and prudent consumption, particularly for adolescents.

6. Reclaiming Agency over Media Consumption

- Remember that users have agency — they choose what, when, and how to consume. Rather than being passively driven by the algorithms, individuals can decide to use screens as tools, not lifestyles.

- It is important to develop a critical attitude: question whether screen time is spent for a meaningful contribution to one's life or just to fill in idle moments out of habit.

- In this process, consciously balance online and offline life - perceive screens as one aspect of existence, not the only one.

Conclusion

Modern screen media have many benefits: democratized expression, global connection, easier access to information, entertainment, cultural exchange, and a creative outlet for many. Overly simplified critiques run the risk of ignoring the benefits and agency of individuals. As such, the paper calls for caution and mindfulness but does not argue for a wholesale rejection of screen media; rather, informed, balanced, and intentional engagement is the call.

The history of screen leisure from the 1970s living room TV to the modern smartphone is a history of the struggle for human agency. Where the television era threatened us with passivity, this digital era threatens us with a frantic, performative anxiety.

The solution is not to smash the smartphone, but to demystify it. By placing it in its historical context, explaining the technological mechanisms and the sociological pressures, we will be able to start using these tools as masters rather than servants. True leisure in the 21st century requires a deliberate act of resistance: the courage to be unconnected, the discipline to create without sharing, and the wisdom to know the difference between a life lived and a life posted. This paper concludes that screen leisure should be treated as a tool for information and limited recreation and not a way of life.

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