

Teens today spend more time on digital media, less time reading

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If you can't remember the last time you saw a teenager reading a book, newspaper or magazine, you're not alone. In recent years, less than 20 percent of U.S. teens report reading a book, magazine or newspaper daily for pleasure, while more than 80 percent say they use social media every day, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Compared with previous generations, teens in the 2010s spent more time online and less time with traditional [media](#), such as [books](#), magazines and television," said lead author Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D., author of the book *iGen* and professor of psychology at San Diego State University. "Time on digital media has displaced time once spent enjoying a book or watching TV."

The research was published in the journal *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*.

Twenge and her colleagues analyzed data from Monitoring the Future, an ongoing study that surveys a nationally representative sample of

approximately 50,000 eighth-, 10th- and 12th-grade students annually. They looked at survey results from 1976 to 2016, representing more than 1 million teenagers. While the study started with only 12th-graders in the 1970s, eighth- and 10th-graders were added in 1991.

Use of digital media increased substantially from 2006 to 2016. Among 12th-graders, Internet use during [leisure time](#) doubled from one to two hours per day during that period. It also increased 75 percent for 10th graders and 68 percent for eighth-graders. Usage rates and increases were fairly uniform across gender, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, according to Twenge.

"In the mid-2010s, the average American 12th-grader reported spending approximately two hours a day texting, just over two hours a day on the internet—which included gaming—and just under two hours a day on [social media](#)," said Twenge. "That's a total of about six hours per day on just three [digital media](#) activities during their leisure time."

In comparison, 10th-graders reported a total of five hours per day and eighth-graders reported four hours per day on those three digital activities. And all that time in the digital world is seriously degrading the time they spend on more [traditional media](#), according to Twenge.

The decline in reading print media was especially steep. In the early 1990s, 33 percent of 10th-graders said they read a newspaper almost every day. By 2016, that number was only 2 percent. In the late 1970s, 60 percent of 12th-graders said they read a book or magazine almost every day; by 2016, only 16 percent did. Twelfth-graders also reported reading two fewer books each year in 2016 compared with 1976, and approximately one-third did not read a book (including e-books) for pleasure in the year prior to the 2016 survey, nearly triple the number reported in the 1970s.

While not quite as drastic, television and movie consumption also declined. In the 1990s, 22 percent of eighth-graders reported watching five or more hours of television per day versus 13 percent in 2016. Twenge said she was surprised that the decline in teens going to the theater to watch a movie only happened recently.

Provided by American Psychological Association

"Blockbuster Video and VCRs didn't kill going to the movies, but streaming video apparently did," she said.

The researchers were also surprised at the steep decline in reading. "It's so convenient to read books and magazines on electronic devices like tablets. There's no more going to the mailbox or the bookstore—you just download the magazine issue or book and start reading. Yet reading has still declined precipitously," said Twenge.

The findings give Twenge, as a university faculty member, a new perspective on the next generation as they approach college age.

"Think about how difficult it must be to read even five pages of an 800-page college textbook when you've been used to spending most of your time switching between one digital activity and another in a matter of seconds. It really highlights the challenges students and faculty both face in the current era," said Twenge.

"There's no lack of intelligence among young people, but they do have less experience focusing for longer periods of time and reading long-form text," she said. "Being able to read long-form text is crucial for understanding complex issues and developing critical thinking skills. Democracies need informed voters and involved citizens who can think through issues, and that might be more difficult for people of all ages now that online information is the norm."

More information: "Trends in U.S. Adolescents' Media Use, 1976-2016: The Rise of Digital Media, the Decline of TV, and the (Near) Demise of Print," by Jean Twenge, PhD, Gabrielle Martin, MA, and Brian Spitzberg, PhD, San Diego State University. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, published Aug. 20, 2018. DOI: [10.1037/ppm0000203](https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000203)

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