



# Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey 2018

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# Acknowledgements

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**Screen Education** is dedicated to tackling issues at the intersection of screens and human wellness through research, education, and consulting. Michael Mercier organized this project and provided subject matter expertise, questionnaire development, analysis, and reporting. To learn more about Screen Education visit [www.ScreenEducation.org](http://www.ScreenEducation.org).

**EMI Research Solutions** is a leading online sample provider to the market research industry. They leverage more than 150 partners in over 95 countries to provide the B2B or consumer sample that best fits their client's project. Michael Holmes, Brian Lamar, and Amy Carley contributed sample, survey programming, hosting, and project management. To learn more about EMI, visit [www.EMI-RS.com](http://www.EMI-RS.com).

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**Anxious Creations** provides state-of-the-art website design, development and creative services to get the most out of your digital marketing budget. Gina Young contributed the design of this report. To learn more about Anxious Creations visit [www.AnxiousCreations.com](http://www.AnxiousCreations.com).

**The Detroit Chapter of the American Marketing Association** offers valuable professional development opportunities and a place for marketers to connect and share knowledge throughout Southeast Michigan. Holly Shier and Dave Pagnucco administered and hosted the webinar. To learn more about the Detroit Chapter of the American Marketing Association, visit [www.AMADetroit.org](http://www.AMADetroit.org).

**Signoi** creates smart technology solutions for decoding cultural signals in an intuitively human way. It's a new form of quantitative semiotics. Andrew Jeavons contributed text analytics of open-ended responses. To learn more about Signoi, visit [www.Signoi.com](http://www.Signoi.com).

# Background

## Exploratory Research

The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* questionnaire was based upon exploratory research that Screen Education conducted in 2016, 2017, and 2018.

This exploratory research included informal qualitative research with college students, formal research with teens attending overnight summer camps that don't permit smartphones, and formal and informal research with a variety of junior high and high school stakeholders, including students, teachers, librarians, parents, administrators, and IT professionals.

Screen Education's exploratory research generated unique insights into teen smartphone addiction. We learned that teens were well-aware of the problems that smartphones cause them, that a large number want to limit their screen time and have attempted to do so, that smartphones place an emotional burden on them, that they lament that their smartphone addiction is an obstacle to fully engaging in life, that it diminishes their productivity and social life, and that many want help addressing the problem.

## Survey Objective

The objective of the *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* was to validate the insights Screen Education generated from its exploratory research, and to introduce these insights into the national conversation regarding teen smartphone addiction.

## Method

EMI Research Solutions recruited respondents through the EMI partner network, and conducted a 9-minute online survey between April 18-25, 2018.

The sample consists of 1,017 13- to 18-year-olds. This sample size is sufficient for all statistics using the full sample to have margins of error of 3% or less. All 1,017 respondents included in this statistical analysis completed the entire survey, so this criteria applies to all questions reported here.

EMI's proprietary SWIFT (Sampling with Integrated Fingerprinting Technology) dashboard was used to identify and remove bots and duplicate respondents to ensure the 1,017 respondents are unique, human respondents. All respondents had a smartphone.

The genders of the respondents were evenly split, with 48.2% self-reporting as "male", 49.5% self-reporting as "female", and 2.4% identifying as "other".

Middle school students (grades 7 and 8) comprised 32.9% of the overall sample, and high-school students comprised the remaining 67.1%. Quotas were used to ensure an unbiased distribution between the male and female respondents, and between the six grade levels represented by this survey.

The geographic distribution of respondents represents the geographic distribution of the United States. The 1,017 respondents represent all 50 states, and 961 different zip codes across the country. A statistical comparison of the number respondents to the total populations of the four census regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West) indicated that there is no statistical evidence of geographic bias on a regional level. There is a slight bias towards urban areas, with 87.6% of respondents reporting predominantly urban zip codes, compared to 85.3% of the United States population as a whole.

# Statistics

## SMARTPHONE ADDICTION

60% of teens' friends, in their estimation, are addicted to their phones

71% of teens know that companies design apps to be addictive

## SMARTPHONES & STRESS

58% of teens feel that people generally expect them to respond immediately to notifications

41% of teens feel overwhelmed every day by the quantity of notifications they receive

36% of teens witness someone being bullied online every week

89% teens find it upsetting when they witness someone being bullied online

31% of teens have seen online bullying result in physical violence

73% of teens feel that social media use contributes to conditions that can result in school shootings

45% of teens witness online drama every day

38% of teens witness online gossip every day

57% of teens are disturbed when they witness someone being gossiped about online

42% of teens are fearful of being gossiped about online

## SMARTPHONES & SOCIALIZING

33% of teens spend more time socializing with close friends online, rather than face-to-face

69% of teens wish they could spend more time socializing with their close friends face-to-face, and less time socializing online

52% of teens, when they spend time with their friends on the weekends, have extended stretches of time when they are all silently sitting together, not talking to each other, while on their smartphones

## REDUCING SMARTPHONE USE

65% of teens wish they had a greater ability to self-limit the amount of time they spend on their phone

68% of teens have attempted to reduce the amount of time they spend on their phone

69% of teens succeeded in reducing the amount of time they spent on their phone

26% of teens wish that someone - for example, their parents, their school -- would help them reduce their screen time by imposing some reasonable time limits

37% of teens have tried to persuade a friend to spend less time on their phone

# Statistics

## SMARTPHONES & SCHOOL

67% of teens say their school bans the use of phones during class

53% of teens whose schools ban phones during class are glad they do so

15% of teens whose schools don't ban phones during class wish their school would implement a ban

72% of teens witness students using phones during class every day to watch videos, play games, and use social media

35% of teens do not consider this behavior --- using phones during class to watch videos, play games, and use social media --- to be rude

9 is the number of times/hour, on average, teens check their phones while doing homework

41% of teens feel that their phone is an obstacle to getting the best grades they can in school

## SMARTPHONES & ATTENTION SPAN

49% of teens feel that their smartphone shortens their attention span

56% of teens get online every day with the intention of doing one thing, and get sidetracked doing something else for an extended period of time

## COMPULSIVE SMARTPHONE USE

32% of teens want to stop using their phone, but find themselves unable to do so, every day

70% of teens have a list of 3-5 apps or sites that they continuously cycle through at any opportunity

## SMARTPHONES & PRODUCTIVITY

30% of teens end up not doing something they'd *like to do* every day simply because they spent time on their phone instead

35% of teens end up not doing something they *should do* every day simply because they're spending time on their phone instead

## SMARTPHONES & SLEEP

80% of teens typically spend time on their phone after they go to bed, but before falling asleep

22% of teens spend 30-60 minutes on their phone before falling asleep, 18% spend 1-2 hours, 11% spend 2-3 hours, and 11% spend more than 3 hours

# Summary

Teen smartphone addiction is widespread, and a large number of teens are aware that Silicon Valley intentionally designs apps to be addictive.

While social media has its benefits, it also can facilitate toxic exchanges that emotionally burden teens. Many teens witness online gossip, drama, and bullying very frequently, and they find this upsetting.

Many teens feel overwhelmed every day by the large number of notifications they receive, and feel pressure to respond because most people expect them to respond immediately.

Smartphone addiction erodes academic performance. One reason for this is that many teens use their phones recreationally in the classroom and while doing homework. For this reason, a majority of teens say their smartphone is an obstacle to getting the best grades they are capable of getting. Consequently, many of the teens attending schools that ban smartphones in the classroom are glad they do so.

Many teens admit to using their phones compulsively. For example, many teens every day have the experience of wanting to stop using their phone, but finding themselves unable to do so. Others have a list of 3-5 apps that they continuously cycle through at any opportunity to check for notifications.

Teens are frustrated by how infrequently they socialize with friends face-to-face, vis-à-vis online. A strong majority want to spend more time socializing face-to-face with friends. However, even when teens do socialize with friends face-to-face, their phones still can be an obstacle to social

engagement; a majority of teens say they have long stretches of time when they sit in silence together with their friends while everyone is on their phones.

Teens are losing a substantial amount of sleep to their smartphone. A huge number of teens use their smartphones after going to bed, and many are staying up on their smartphones for 1, 2, 3 or even more hours.

Teens know they are less productive because they can't stop using their smartphones, and many regret this. Many teens end up not doing something they'd *like to do* -- every day -- simply because they spent time on their phone instead. And slightly more end up not doing something they *should do* every day simply because they're spending time on their phone instead.

Teens are aware that smartphone shorten their attention span. Nearly a majority of teens feel that their smartphone shortens their attention span, and a clear majority have the experience -- every day -- of getting online with the intention of doing one thing, and getting sidetracked doing something else for an extended period of time.

Teens are frustrated by the problems their smartphones cause, and therefore want to reduce their screen time. A substantial majority wish they had a greater ability to self-limit their phone use, and have tried to reduce their screen time. Many have succeeded at some point in their lives in reducing their screen time. A good number of teens wish that someone would impose reasonable screen time limits on them.

# Discussion

## Teens estimate that 60% of their friends are addicted to their smartphone.

A 2016 Common Sense Media survey measured the ubiquity of teen smartphone addiction by asking teens whether they felt like they were addicted to their phones. Common Sense Media found that 50% of teens felt addicted to their phones.

Rather than duplicate Common Sense Media's measure of the ubiquity of smartphone addiction, Screen Education wanted to complement it with a different measure that would add dimension to it. Our exploratory research suggested that teens tend to underestimate their own level of addiction, yet more objectively assess their friends' level of addiction. So we decided that a good way to provide a complementary measure would be to ask teens to assess the percent of their friends teens believed to be addicted to their smartphones.

The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* determined that teens estimate on average that **60%** of their friends are addicted to their smartphones.

Therefore, we believe that a good estimate of how many teens are addicted to their phones is somewhere between Common Sense Media's 50% measure, and Screen Education's 60% measure.

## Some teens don't know that apps are designed to be addictive.

In 2017 there was considerable news coverage of the revelation that Silicon Valley intentionally designs apps to be addictive. If we are going to address the problem of smartphone addiction among teens, then it is crucial that all kids be made aware of this fact.

The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* indicates that **71%** of teens currently know that Silicon Valley intentionally designs apps to be addictive.

While this level of awareness actually is higher than we anticipated, our collective goal should be 100% awareness.

We also asked teens for their reaction to the fact that Silicon Valley intentionally make apps addictive. Their reactions ran the spectrum, from thinking it's good because it makes the apps more enjoyable, to shock, to acceptance, to anger, resentment and frustration.

## Many teens are emotionally burdened every day by online bullying, gossip, drama, and notifications.

Screen Education's exploratory research revealed that when teens attend summer camps that don't permit smartphones they are actually relieved to escape online drama, bullying, gossip, and the constant barrage of notifications.

Screen Education's *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* confirms that these are frequent experiences, and that they place an emotional burden on teens.

**Online Gossip.** One of the reasons online gossip is such a problem is that phones allow it to spread so quickly. And teens witness gossip frequently: **38%** witness it every day, and an additional **24%** witness it every week.

Online gossip imposes an emotional burden on teens --- **57%** find witnessing online gossip to be disturbing, and **42%** are fearful of being gossiped about online.

# Discussion

**Online Drama.** As with gossip, we found that teens witness online drama frequently --- **45%** witness it every day, and another **29%** witness it every week.

Teens generally characterized drama as consisting of inappropriate, and nasty, arguments being carried out publicly on social media.

**Online Bullying.** Like online gossip and drama, teens witness online bullying frequently, with **36%** witnessing it every week.

And it's serious --- **31%** have seen online bullying ultimately result in physical violence.

As a result, online bullying also is upsetting to teens --- **89%** of those who witness online bullying are upset by it.

**Notifications.** The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* found that **41%** of teens feel overwhelmed every day by the number of notifications they receive on their phone, with another **24%** feeling overwhelmed every week.

One of the reasons teens feel overwhelmed by their notifications is that they feel pressure to respond because people expect them to respond immediately --- **58%** feel that others generally expect them respond immediately to their notifications.

**Social Media & School Shootings.** The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* revealed that **73%** of teens feel that social media contributes to conditions that can result in school shootings.

Whether social media technically does or doesn't contribute to conditions that result in school shootings, the simple fact that teens perceive that

it does reflects just how toxic the social media environment can be for them.

**Teens admit to accomplishing less because they can't stop using their smartphones.**

It is commonly understood that smartphone-addicted teens compulsively use their phones to the exclusion of other activities, and, consequently, they accomplish less.

One way to measure teens' lost productivity is to determine how often they fail to fulfill their responsibilities as a result of spending time on their smartphone. The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* found that **35%** of teens don't do something they know they should do -- every day -- simply because they stayed on their phone instead. Another **33%** don't do something they should do every week.

Common examples of these unfulfilled responsibilities were homework and chores.

Perhaps an even better measure of lost productivity due to compulsive smartphone use is how often teens forego doing something they actually *want to do* because stay on their phone instead.

The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* found that **30%** of teens every day end up not doing something they want to do simply because they spent time on their phones instead. An additional **29%** don't do something they'd like to do every week.

Common examples of things they would have liked to have done were art, sports, exercise, and doing activities with family and friends.

# Discussion

## Teens are frustrated by their lack of face-to-face socializing with close friends.

Screen Education's exploratory research found teens to be shocked by how much better they get to know other people when they socialize with them face-to-face, rather than online. In many instances teens attending summer camps that don't permit smartphones talked about face-to-face communication almost as though it were a novel experience.

The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* revealed that **33%** of teens spend more time socializing online with close friends, and less time socializing face-to-face.

It also revealed that a full **69%** wish they could spend more time socializing with close friends face-to-face, and less time socializing online.

Even when kids do socialize face-to-face, their omni-present smartphones can still be an obstacle to fully engaging with each other. The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* indicates that **52%** of teens sit around in silence staring at their smartphones for extended periods of time when they are together with friends on the weekends.

## Smartphone addiction compromises the learning environment.

**Smartphone Addiction Hurts Grades.** Forty-one percent (**41%**) of teens say that their smartphone is an obstacle to getting the best grades they are capable of getting.

**Recreational Phone Use During Homework.** Because it is well-known that teens use their smartphones recreationally while doing homework, the *Teen Smartphone Addiction*

*National Survey* asked how many times per hour they check their phones while doing homework. On average teens report checking their smartphones **9** times per hour --- every 6.5 minutes --- while doing homework.

### **Recreational Phone Use in the Classroom.**

Screen Education's exploratory research with schools indicated that teachers frequently witness teens using their smartphones recreationally during class – to watch videos, play games, and use social media.

The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* confirmed this: **72%** of teens witness someone watching videos, playing games, and using social media in class, every day.

Shockingly, a full **35%** of teens do not consider this behavior to be rude.

**Teens Like Smartphone Bans.** Sixty-seven percent (**67%**) of teens attend schools that ban phone use during class. Of that 67% at schools that ban phones, **53%** are glad they do so.

## Teens stay on their phones for hours after going to bed.

Screen Education's exploratory research revealed that teens were shocked by how much better they slept while attending summer camps that ban smartphones. They were nearly unanimous in saying this was because they weren't staying up using their smartphones for several hours after going to bed.

The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* confirms this --- **80%** of teens typically spend time on their phone after they go to bed.

Of that 80%, **22%** spend 30-60 minutes on their smartphone before falling asleep. However, a full

# Discussion

**40%** spend an hour or more, with **18%** spending 1-2 hours, **11%** spending 2-3 hours, and **11%** spending more than 3 hours.

Losing this much sleep day after day likely impacts cognitive function, learning, and academic performance.

## Teens admit to compulsively using their smartphones.

People typically describe themselves as “addicted” to their smartphone when they use it compulsively --- that is, when they are unable to stop themselves from using their phones, even when they want or need to stop. The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* measured some of these compulsive behaviors.

***Inability To Stop Using Smartphone.*** The inability to stop using their smartphone --- despite their desire to stop --- is a daily experience for many teens. Thirty-two percent (**32%**) of teens every day have the experience of wanting to stop using their phone, but finding themselves unable to do so.

***Many Teens Engage In Cycling.*** One of the compulsive behaviors that Screen Education has identified is “cycling”. Cycling is the compulsion to consecutively go through a small set of favorite apps or sites to seek new notifications, at any opportunity, over and over again.

The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* indicates that **70%** of teens admit to having 3-5 apps or sites that they continuously cycle through at any opportunity.

## Teens know smartphones shorten their attention span.

It is well-known that smartphone use shortens attention spans. Therefore, we wanted to determine whether teens were conscious of this effect on them --- whether they felt that their smartphone shortened their own attention span.

The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* revealed that **49%** of teens feel that their smartphone shortens their attention span.

Additionally, **56%** of teens get online every day with the intention of doing one thing, and get sidetracked doing something else for an extended period of time.

## Teens are frustrated by the many problems smartphone addiction causes them, and they want to reduce their screen time.

Screen Education’s exploratory research suggested that a large proportion of teens are very conscious of the problems that smartphone addiction causes them, and they therefore want to reduce their screen time.

The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* sought to measure this desire to reduce smartphone use. We did this by examining 2 modes of reducing smartphone use: (1) by self-limiting screen time, and (2) by having screen time limits imposed on them by a parent or a school.

# Discussion

**Self-limiting Screen Time.** The *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* indicates that a very strong majority of teens want to self-limit their screen time. Sixty-five percent (**65%**) of teens wish they had a greater ability to self-limit their screen time, **68%** had actually attempted in the past to reduce their screen time, while **69%** have succeeded in the past in reducing their screen time. Thirty-seven percent (**37%**) actually had attempted to persuade a friend to reduce their

screen time.

**Imposed Screen Time Limits.** Twenty-six percent (**26%**) of teens say they wish someone, such as their school or their parents, would impose reasonable screen time limits on them. Additionally, of those attending schools that ban smartphone use in the classroom, **53%** are glad their school does this.

# Implications

Screen Education's *Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey* indicates that smartphone addiction causes teens many problems, that teens are fully aware of these problems, that they are troubled by them, and that they therefore wish they could reduce their smartphone use.

There are two general approaches we can take to help teens reduce their smartphone use: (1) we can find ways to impose reasonable limits on smartphone use, while simultaneously (2) cultivating within teens the ability to self-limit their screen time.

In order to do this we must embrace values that facilitate reducing smartphone use --- values that

elicit the personal qualities required to break smartphone addiction. These qualities include a deep consciousness of the problems the smartphones are causing them, and an ability to exercise self-discipline and self-denial, restraint, and mutual support in order to succeed at reducing smartphone use.

Cultivating these qualities will require broader cultural change --- it will require the cultural embracement of the virtue of reducing smartphone use, cultural support for instilling these qualities in young people, and some universal standards for when it is, and isn't, acceptable to use our smartphones.

