

# Today's teens increasingly disconnected from books, TV, movies

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As modern teenagers increasingly turn to digital technology, they are rejecting legacy media—books, newspapers and television—at an alarming rate.

In an analysis of surveys of more than one million teens, a team of researchers led by San Diego State University psychology professor Jean M. Twenge found that the percentage of 12th grade students who read a book, magazine or newspaper every day declined from 60 percent in the late 1970s to 16 percent by 2016.

The surveys were conducted between 1976 and 2016 with teens aged 13-18.

"This is not just a decline in reading on paper—it's a decline in reading long-form text," Twenge said. The team also found that the percentage of 12th graders who reported reading no books for pleasure in the last year nearly tripled between 1976 and 2016, reaching one out of three by 2016.

The team found a similar decline in movie-going among teens, but this began as recently as the mid-2000s. About 67 percent of 12th graders in 2000 reported going to the movies at least a few times a month; by 2016, only 44 percent did.

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

Thus, in the world of iGen—those born between 1995 and 2012—digital media does not complement the use of older legacy media, but instead displaces legacy media, Twenge found.

Co-authored with SDSU graduate student Gabrielle Martin and Brian Spitzberg, the Senate Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the School of Communication, the findings are detailed in an article, "Trends in U.S. Adolescents' Media Use, 1976–2016: The Rise of Digital Media, the Decline of TV, and the (Near) Demise of Print." The article was published in the American Psychological Association's *Psychology of*

*Popular Media Culture*, a peer-reviewed journal.

The team relied on data culled from the nationally representative Monitoring the Future Study, which explores the behaviors, attitudes and values of youth and young adults in the United States. Each year, about 50,000 individuals are surveyed, with the first surveys administered in 1975. Thus, the team was able to compare the habits of four different generations of teenagers: Boomers, GenX, Millennial and iGen.

The team found that iGen teens spend twice as much time online as Millennials did in 2006, a time when social networks like MySpace, Facebook, Tumblr and YouTube were well-established or emerging. Teens in the 2010s also visited [social media](#) sites more often, with 82 percent of 12th graders visiting every day in 2016, up from 52 percent in 2008.

"The large decline in time spent reading books accompanied by the increase in time spent on social media is the most concerning to me," said Martin, a second-year master's student. "Scrolling through [social media platforms](#) can be a passive way of taking in information, or misinformation, and it requires a shorter attention span. I worry that this doesn't help develop critical thinking skills in the same way reading traditional media would."

The trends over time in media use were consistent across gender, race or ethnicity and social class. The team also found that the generational shifts were not due to time spent on homework, involvement in extracurricular activities or in paid work, all of which have declined.

In fact, iGen teens have more leisure time than previous generations did, said Twenge, author of "iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood."

"As some of our previous studies have shown, those in-person social activities correlate with lower levels of depression among adolescents, so spending increased amounts of time on new media activities could have physical and mental implications," Martin said.

Other studies have also found that the majority of teenagers' time online is spent being entertained and communicating with friends and others, not for learning, consuming news or seeking information.

"There may be a shift to greater and greater attention decay as iGens increasingly acculturate to digital media that specialize in flashy attention stimuli, such as images rather than text, headlines rather than investigative reportage and synopses rather than studies," said Spitzberg, whose research has investigated issues related to communications skills, abuse of technology and societal uses of social media.

"A question for educators and authors is how to achieve the same or better learning outcomes in 'splashier' and less linear forms of exposition," he said.

That question weighs on Twenge, as a researcher and faculty member.

"The decline in reading was one of the largest generational shifts I've ever seen. These days, if it's not on their smartphone, teens are just not as interested," Twenge said. "And with teens watching TV less, more content will have to reach them online. Businesses and nonprofits trying to reach teens will increasingly move away from TV, movies and print and toward online ads or integrated social [media](#) influencer campaigns."

Twenge said the findings gave her a new perspective on the current generation of teenagers and new high school graduates entering college for the first time.

"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 swiping between one digital activity and another in a matter of seconds," Twenge said. "It really highlights the challenges students and faculty face in the current era."

**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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