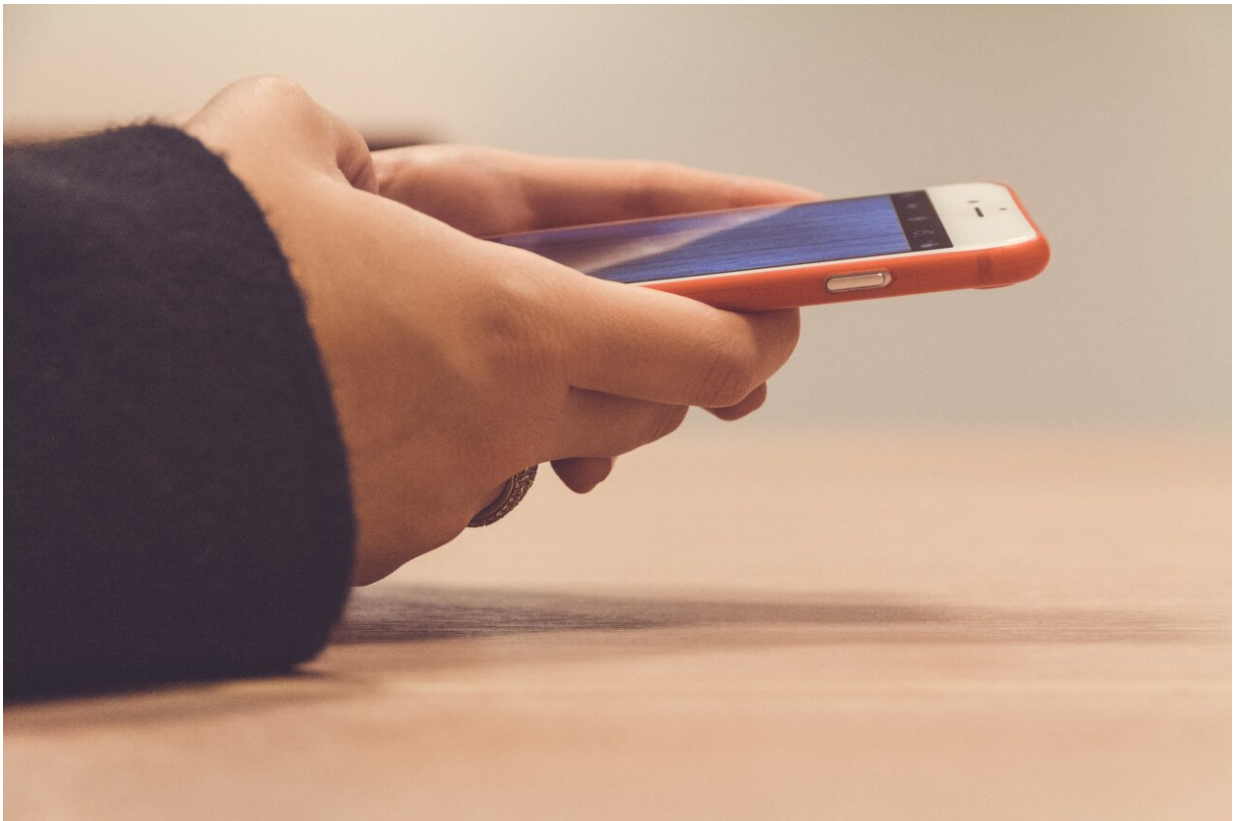# Want to spend less time online? Time limits might backfire

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Phones, tablets and third-party apps are helping consumers track and set limits on their screen time.

But optional time limits might actually backfire, causing people to spend more time online than users that don't set time limits, according to early research from marketing professor Jordan Etkin.

In a series of experiments, Etkin and colleagues Shalena Srna of the University of Michigan and Jackie Silverman of the University of Delaware discovered that simply knowing a time limit existed actually led people to spend more time online than people who had set no limits.

In a live discussion on Fuqua's LinkedIn page, Etkin said setting an optional limit changes the way people view the time they spend on that activity that falls under the limit.

"By definition, limits specify the maximum amount of time that is desirable or permissible to spend on an activity," Etkin said. "Embedded in that maximum is the suggestion that any time under the limit is acceptable. So if I say my limit is 60 minutes, how do I feel about spending 45 minutes on social media? Well, 45 minutes now might seem pretty good since it's under my limit."

In one controlled experiment, the researchers tracked people's engagement in two different online tasks. Participants had five minutes to spend on two activities—playing a "Bubble Shooter" arcade game, followed by an opportunity to earn money by transcribing strings of text.

Participants could manage their time as they wished, but half of them were told that they would get a reminder after they had reached the three-minute mark. People who were expecting the three-minute reminder spent about a minute and a half on the game, which was about 30 seconds longer than those who didn't expect a three-minute warning.

"Simply knowing there was a three-minute reminder seemed to increase the amount of time people in that group spent on the game before

moving to text transcriptions," Etkin said.

In a way, she said, a person using an app or timer to remind themselves that they're reaching their limit is outsourcing their self-regulation to the app. If people know the app will remind them that 60 minutes of [screen time](link) have gone by, those people may also infer that they don't need to exert as much effort to restrain or regulate their behavior for the 59 minutes before that limit, Etkin explained.

"The result is that spending up to the limit amount of time online may begin to seem like a better use of one's time than it would if there were no limit in place," she said.

As they continue their research, Etkin and her colleagues are exploring what types of limits could actually help consumers spend less time-consuming online content. Additional experiments suggested that when time limits are generous, they can encourage people to stay online longer. However, when limits are very short—15 seconds, for example—they can actually work to reduce a person's time on an activity.

"These findings have a lot of interesting implications for consumers and for marketers," Etkin said. "Whether it's for people that consume these apps and engage in these behaviors, or people that design these experiences and have to make choices about what kind of features or functionality to build in, there are a lot of interesting applications of this research. The findings also suggest that in various management, workplace or [educational settings](link), despite the best of intentions, policymakers, teachers, parents, etc., may be encouraging people to change their behavior in ways that do not necessarily align with their expectations or intentions."

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