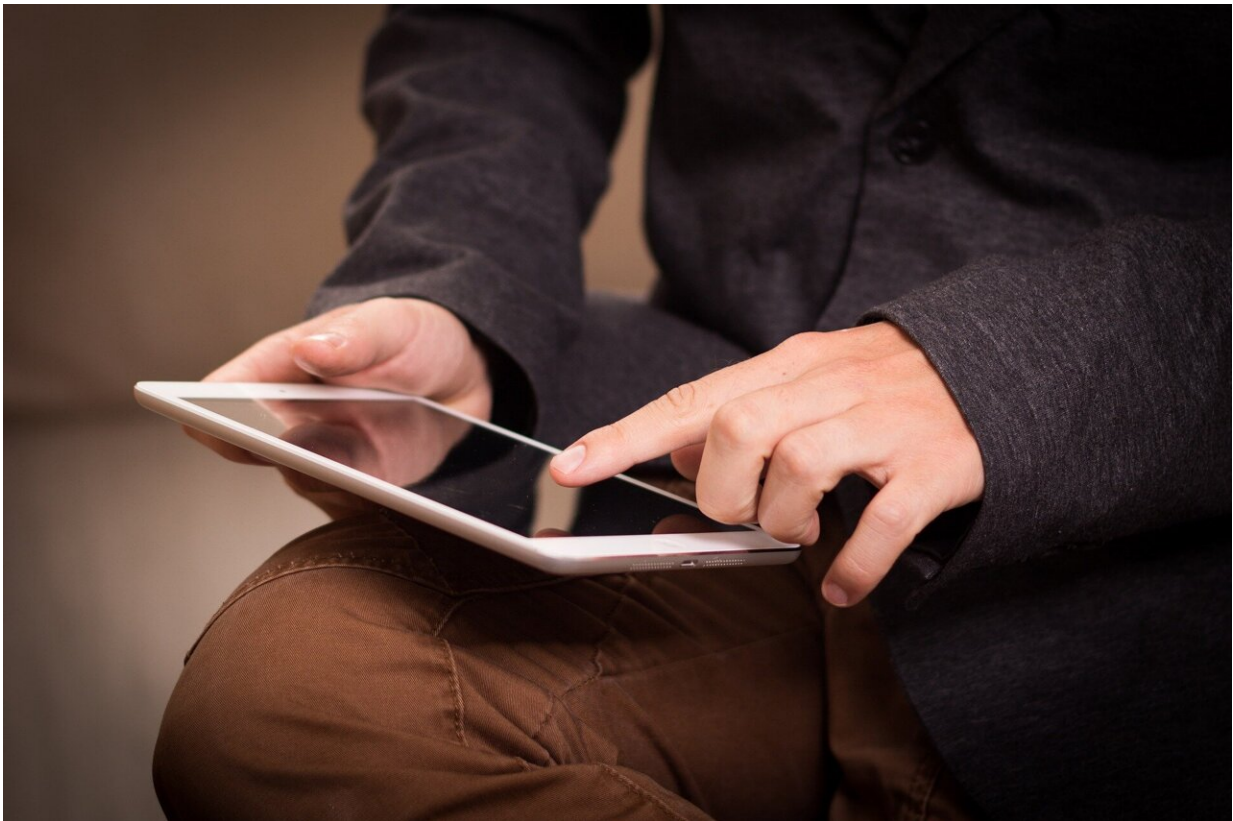


# Research reveals what we see online affects us more than length of exposure

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It is what we are looking at, rather than how much time we are spending our time online that influences our health and well-being, according to a major new report.

The [study](#), published in the journal *World Psychiatry*, is a comprehensive examination of the latest scientific evidence on [screen time](#) and [mental health](#), carried out by an international research team.

The authors emphasize the importance of taking an individualized and multi-dimensional approach to how the Internet affects mental health, cognition and [social functioning](#). Content that may be relatively harmless to some users may be damaging to a different demographic, such as the impact photos promoting unrealistic body shapes may have on people vulnerable to eating disorders or low self-esteem.

The report addresses a range of impacts that an increased online presence has on well-being, tackling issues such as "fear of missing out," how behaviors and viewpoints are manipulated through [social media](#), isolation, social comparisons, and the effects on the body such as increased sedentary behavior.

Co-author Lee Smith, Professor of Public Health at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), said, "Take two scenarios: In the first, a young person is accruing a total of four hours per day online, through constantly engaging with distracting notifications whenever they appear on screen, and then scrolling endless streams of short-form media which can be algorithmically geared towards their vices or insecurities. This could result in reduced concentration on important tasks, or cause body image issues or low self-esteem.

"In the second scenario, there is an older adult spending the exact same four hours per day online, but instead using this time to foster new social relationships and access [educational content](#), providing benefits for their well-being and even brain functioning. Here, we can see very different outcomes arise from the exact same amount of time spent online."

This emerging evidence of how the online world can influence our social

functioning and brain health can be used to begin developing more concrete guidelines and strategies for helping people to maximize the benefits, and minimize the risks, of their own individual "online lives."

Senior author, Dr. Josh A. Firth from University of Leeds, explained, "Right now, lots of the guidelines and recommendations around internet usage have focused on limiting the amount of time we spend online.

"While there is common sense in reducing our digital device usage to ensure time for healthy 'real world' activities, we are now able to describe how the consequences of our digital device usage are determined by things far beyond just time spent online."

Professor Smith added, "Through drawing together the latest evidence from neuroscience, populational health and [psychological studies](#), this report is able to describe how the positive or negative effects of [internet usage](#) for an individual can be influenced by simple things like age and sociodemographic status, along with complex factors around the actual nature of individuals' 'online lives.'"

**More information:** Joseph Firth et al, From "online brains" to "online lives": understanding the individualized impacts of Internet use across psychological, cognitive and social dimensions, *World Psychiatry* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/wps.21188](https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.21188)

Provided by Anglia Ruskin University

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