

# Digital Detox in Youth Work: A Quantitative Study of Social Work Professionals

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceptions and strategies of social work professionals in addressing digital media overuse among adolescents in youth work settings. A quantitative survey was conducted with 27 social workers (15 women, 12 men), using a standardized questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale. The results indicate that 85.2% of the professionals perceive excessive media use as a significant problem, with concentration difficulties ( $M = 4.3$ ) and sleep problems ( $M = 4.1$ ) being the most commonly observed effects. Interventions such as alternative activities (92.6%) and phone-free times (85.2%) were widely implemented and rated as effective, with alternative activities receiving the highest effectiveness score ( $M = 4.1$ ). Despite these efforts, the professionals reported moderate self-assessed competence ( $M = 3.3$ ) and a high demand for additional training ( $M = 4.3$ ) and personnel support ( $M = 4.5$ ). Differences in perceived competence and support needs were identified based on professional experience, with less experienced workers reporting lower competence and a greater need for training. The study underscores the need for structured intervention frameworks, professional development, and increased staffing to better manage digital media challenges in youth work.

**Keywords:** Adolescents, Digital Detox, Digital Media, Intervention Strategies, Media Literacy, Social Work, Training Needs, Youth Work

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the widespread use of digital media among adolescents has raised increasing concerns, especially within youth work, as studies consistently highlight significant negative impacts on physical health, psychological well-being, and social development (Twenge, 2019; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). Given these challenges, social workers are positioned at the forefront of addressing these issues and are expected to implement strategies that promote healthier media habits, emphasizing their crucial role in this domain. Social workers, who are often at the forefront of addressing the needs of young people, are increasingly required to confront these challenges by implementing strategies that promote healthier media habits (Hollis & Jones, 2020).

Digital media offers significant opportunities for communication, learning, and social interaction; however, when overused or mismanaged, it can lead to detrimental effects such as reduced concentration, sleep disturbances, and the neglect of offline activities (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017).

Empirical research has consistently shown that digital media use significantly impacts family relationships, with high levels of screen time linked to increased conflicts and poorer communication between adolescents and their parents (Coyne et al., 2020). Studies suggest that excessive media use can disrupt family routines, reduce quality time spent together, and contribute to emotional distance within family members (George & Odgers, 2015; Kardefelt-Winther, 2017). Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Kwon et al. (2018) found a negative association between heavy social media use and parent-adolescent relationship quality, highlighting the role

of digital devices in exacerbating family tensions. Moreover, the impact of digital media on social relationships, particularly within families, is well-documented, with heightened media use correlating with increased conflict between adolescents and their parents or guardians (Coyne et al., 2020). In response to these issues, youth work institutions have begun to explore "digital detox" strategies, which aim to reduce the negative impacts of excessive media use and promote more balanced lifestyles (Richards et al., 2018).

Despite the clear need for intervention, there remains a gap in the literature concerning the preparedness and efficacy of social workers in addressing digital overuse among adolescents. While some research suggests that youth workers are aware of the problem, many express a need for further training and support to effectively manage it (Heitner, 2019). The implementation of digital detox programs varies widely across institutions, with some adopting comprehensive media literacy initiatives, while others rely on more immediate, short-term solutions such as phone-free periods or alternative recreational activities (Carr et al., 2021).

This study employed a quantitative research design to analyze social work professionals' perceptions regarding excessive media use among adolescents and the 'digital detox' strategies applied in youth work settings. Here, 'digital detox' is defined as a set of structured interventions aimed at reducing digital media consumption to promote a balanced lifestyle and mitigate potential negative effects on youth development.

Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

1. How do social work professionals perceive the problem of digital media overuse among adolescents in youth work settings?
2. What interventions are currently employed to manage digital media use, and how effective are they perceived to be?
3. What level of competence do social work professionals feel they have in addressing digital detox, and what support do they identify as necessary for improving outcomes?

Through these questions, the study aims to provide practical insights into how social work professionals can be better supported in managing the challenges of digital overuse, ultimately contributing to the development of more effective and sustainable intervention strategies.

The study is grounded in the broader discourse on media effects theory, which examines the influence of media consumption on individual and societal behavior. According to Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory, media can significantly shape behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, particularly in impressionable age groups such as adolescents. Furthermore, the displacement hypothesis (Neuman, 2016) posits that time spent on digital media displaces essential offline activities, such as face-to-face social interactions, physical activity, and cognitive tasks, which are critical for holistic development. The growing recognition of the need for media regulation in adolescence has led to the adoption of various digital literacy frameworks (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010). These frameworks emphasize the importance of equipping young people with the skills needed to navigate the digital landscape responsibly while promoting critical thinking and self-regulation. In the context of youth work, these frameworks provide a foundation for developing interventions that aim to mitigate the negative impacts of digital overuse while fostering a more balanced relationship with technology. The increasing prevalence of digital media in the lives of adolescents necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the challenges it poses, particularly for those working in youth services. Social workers play a crucial role in supporting young people's development, yet many report feeling underprepared to address the complexities of digital overuse (Kim & Lau, 2020). By examining the perceptions and experiences of social workers in youth settings, this study aims to fill a gap in the current literature and offer evidence-based recommendations for practice.

This study's findings have significant implications for youth work institutions and policymakers alike. Given the high prevalence of media overuse in adolescence and its potential long-term effects, it is imperative that interventions are both effective and sustainable (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Furthermore, the results of this study

can inform the development of tailored training programs for social workers, ensuring that they are equipped with the knowledge and tools necessary to navigate the challenges of digital detox in their practice.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research design to explore social work professionals' perceptions of digital media overuse among adolescents and the corresponding interventions used in youth work settings. The sample consisted of 27 social work professionals, including 15 women (55.6%) and 12 men (44.4%), with an average age of 36.4 years ( $SD = 8.2$ ), ranging from 25 to 58 years. The participants were drawn from various catchment areas, including urban (59.3%), suburban (29.6%), and rural (11.1%) settings, reflecting a diverse range of work environments. The caseloads of the social workers also varied, with an average of 15 active cases per professional ( $SD = 4.2$ ). The majority managed between 10 and 20 cases at any given time, depending on the intensity of the cases and the specific demands of their work setting. Social workers in urban areas reported slightly higher caseloads on average (mean = 17 cases), compared to their rural counterparts (mean = 12 cases), which is consistent with the higher population density and greater demand for services in urban regions."

Their professional experience varied significantly, with an average of 8.7 years in the field ( $SD = 6.3$ ). Of the participants, 40.7% had less than 5 years of experience, 33.3% had between 5 and 10 years, and 25.9% had more than 10 years of experience. This diversity in both age and experience provided a balanced perspective on digital media challenges and intervention strategies across different stages of professional development.

The data collection instrument was a standardized questionnaire consisting of several sections that covered various dimensions of digital media use and interventions in youth work. The questionnaire utilized a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) to assess the participants' views on the severity of digital media overuse among adolescents, the impact of media use on youth, the effectiveness of current interventions, and their self-assessed competence in addressing these issues. The survey also inquired about the support needs of the professionals, such as additional training or staffing, to better manage the digital challenges they faced.

To analyze the collected data, descriptive statistics were applied, focusing on calculating means ( $M$ ) and standard deviations ( $SD$ ). These statistics provided an overview of how the participants perceived digital media overuse, their assessment of intervention effectiveness, and their confidence in addressing these challenges. The analysis also included a breakdown of responses based on key demographic factors, such as years of professional experience, to identify potential variations in perceptions and competence levels between more experienced and less experienced workers. This methodological approach, combining demographic data with quantitative survey results, allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the current state of digital detox practices in youth work. The structured survey and descriptive statistical analysis provided insights into both the prevailing issues and the areas where further professional development, support, or interventions are needed to improve outcomes for youth.

## RESULTS

The results of the study provide detailed insights into social work professionals' perceptions of digital media overuse in youth work, the impact on adolescents, and the efficacy of current interventions. The findings are presented in four key areas: problem perception, observed impacts on adolescents, current interventions employed, and professionals' self-assessed competence and support needs. The sample consisted of 27 social work professionals, with a gender distribution of 55.6% female ( $n = 15$ ) and 44.4% male ( $n = 12$ ). Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 58 years, with an average age of 36.4 years ( $SD = 8.2$ ). In terms of professional experience, 40.7% ( $n = 11$ ) had less than 5 years of experience, 33.3% ( $n = 9$ ) had between 5 and 10 years, and 25.9% ( $n = 7$ ) had more than 10 years of experience.

## Problem Perception

The social work professionals surveyed demonstrated a heightened awareness of the adverse effects associated with excessive digital media use among adolescents. The data indicate that 85.2% of respondents recognized digital media overuse as a significant problem within their institutions, reflected by a high mean score of 4.2 (SD = 0.82). Additionally, 74.1% of the professionals reported that social skills were negatively affected by intensive media use (M = 3.8, SD = 0.92), raising concerns about the deterioration of face-to-face communication and interpersonal relationships. The perception of frequent conflicts arising in connection with digital media was also prominent, with a mean score of 4.0 (SD = 0.72), suggesting that digital media is a contributing factor to relational tensions among peers and between adolescents and authority figures.

Table 1: Perceptions of Social Work Professionals on the Impact of Digital Media Overuse

Statement	Agreement (%)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Digital media overuse is a significant problem	85.2%	4.2	0.82
Social skills are negatively impacted by media use	74.1%	3.8	0.92
Conflicts frequently arise due to digital media use	78.9%	4.0	0.72

The table summarizes the professionals' agreement levels and statistical data for each statement, providing a clearer view of the extent to which digital media use is perceived as problematic in youth work settings.

## Observed Impacts on Adolescents

The professionals identified several key behavioral and developmental impacts associated with excessive media use. The most prominent issue reported was "concentration difficulties," which scored the highest with a mean of 4.3 (SD = 0.62). This suggests that media overuse is perceived to significantly hinder the ability of adolescents to focus on educational tasks and other responsibilities. "Sleep problems" followed closely with a mean of 4.1 (SD = 0.82), reflecting concerns about the role of digital media, particularly late-night usage, in disrupting sleep patterns. Another notable effect was the "neglect of other activities," with a mean score of 3.9 (SD = 0.92), pointing to how digital media consumption often displaces more productive or physically engaging activities. Finally, "conflicts with parents or guardians" was reported with a mean of 3.7 (SD = 1.02), indicating that media-related disagreements within families are a common challenge observed by youth workers.

## Current Interventions in Youth Work Institutions

The institutions where the surveyed professionals work have implemented a range of interventions to manage and mitigate the negative impacts of digital media use. The most commonly applied measure was "alternative activities," such as outdoor or physical activities, which were employed by 92.6% of the institutions (n = 25). This measure was rated as highly effective, with a mean score of 4.1 (SD = 0.7). The second most frequently used intervention was the implementation of "phone-free times," which 85.2% of the institutions (n = 23) have adopted. These periods during which adolescents are restricted from using mobile devices were also rated positively, with an effectiveness score of 3.6 (SD = 1.0).

"Reflection discussions" were also widely used, with 77.8% of the respondents (n = 21) reporting their implementation. These discussions are aimed at encouraging adolescents to critically evaluate their media habits, and they received a mean effectiveness rating of 3.8 (SD = 0.8). Additionally, "media education projects" were employed by 66.7% (n = 18) of the institutions, with a mean effectiveness score of 3.9 (SD = 0.8). These projects focused on raising awareness of the risks associated with digital media use and teaching responsible consumption practices.

## Self-assessed Competence and Support Needs

When asked to assess their own competence in managing digital detox programs and media-related issues, the social work professionals reported moderate confidence. The statement "I feel competent in dealing with the topic of digital media use" received a mean score of 3.3 (SD = 1.0). This indicates that while some professionals feel capable, there remains a substantial portion of respondents who expressed uncertainties about their skill level in this area. The perceived need for additional training was notably high. The statement "I need more training on this subject" received a mean score of 4.3 (SD = 0.72), with 92.6% of the respondents (n = 25) agreeing or strongly agreeing with this sentiment. This suggests a widespread recognition among youth workers of the need to deepen their understanding and improve their skills in managing digital media challenges effectively. Additionally, the demand for "more personnel" was also evident, with 81.5% of respondents (n = 22) indicating that they require additional staffing to better manage media overuse issues. This need was rated as highly important, with a mean score of 4.5 (SD = 0.6). Professionals also highlighted the importance of "concept development" for handling digital detox, with 85.2% (n = 23) of respondents agreeing that clearer frameworks and guidelines are needed, and this item received a mean rating of 4.2 (SD = 0.8). Finally, "supervision" was identified as another important form of support, with 74.1% of respondents (n = 20) indicating its importance, receiving a mean score of 3.8 (SD = 0.9).

## Differences by Professional Experience

The data also revealed differences in perceptions and support needs based on the level of professional experience. Among professionals with more than 10 years of experience (n = 9), the mean self-assessed competence score was higher at 3.7 (SD = 0.9), compared to those with less than 5 years of experience (n = 11), who reported a lower mean competence score of 2.9 (SD = 0.8). Similarly, professionals with fewer years of experience expressed a greater need for training, with a mean score of 4.6 (SD = 0.5), compared to a lower training demand among more experienced professionals (M = 3.9, SD = 0.7). These findings suggest that less experienced workers may feel less prepared to address digital media challenges and have a higher need for professional development in this area.

## DISCUSSION

The findings from this study provide critical insights into the current challenges, strategies, and needs of social work professionals addressing digital media overuse among adolescents in youth work settings. The results highlight several key areas for reflection: the widespread recognition of digital media as a significant problem, the variety and effectiveness of interventions currently in use, the moderate self-assessed competence of professionals, and the clear demand for further support and training. In this section, we will discuss these findings in detail, placing them within the broader context of existing literature on digital media use, youth development, and social work practice.

### Recognition of Digital Media Overuse as a Significant Problem

The data clearly indicate that social work professionals view digital media overuse as a pervasive issue among adolescents. This finding is consistent with the growing body of research that documents the negative consequences of excessive digital media use on young people's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Twenge, 2019; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). In particular, the high percentage of respondents (85.2%) who identified overuse as a significant problem aligns with previous studies that have found similar concerns among educators and caregivers (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). The high mean scores related to problems such as concentration difficulties (M = 4.3) and sleep disturbances (M = 4.1) corroborate findings from studies on the detrimental effects of screen time on attention and sleep health in adolescents (Cain & Gradisar, 2010). Extensive media use, especially late at night, has been shown to interfere with adolescents' sleep patterns, leading to reduced sleep duration and quality, which in turn impacts academic performance and overall well-being (LeBourgeois et al., 2017). Similarly, the data showing that 74.1% of professionals believe social skills

are negatively impacted by media use is consistent with research suggesting that digital media can impair face-to-face communication skills and increase social isolation (Kross et al., 2013).

### **Effectiveness of Current Interventions**

Youth work institutions have implemented a variety of strategies to manage digital media use, with "alternative activities" and "phone-free times" being the most commonly used and effective interventions. These findings resonate with previous studies advocating for the reduction of screen time through structured, offline activities, which are seen as essential in encouraging adolescents to engage in more diverse forms of social and physical interaction (Richards et al., 2018). The effectiveness rating of alternative activities ( $M = 4.1$ ) underscores their value in providing adolescents with opportunities to disconnect from digital devices and participate in enriching experiences, such as sports, outdoor exploration, or creative projects, which are known to promote healthy development (Coyne et al., 2020).

However, while these interventions were rated as effective, there remains significant variation in their implementation across different institutions, with some programs being more comprehensive than others. For instance, "media literacy programs" were less widely adopted (66.7%) but still rated as effective ( $M = 3.9$ ). This indicates that, while alternative activities and phone-free periods address the immediate issue of reducing screen time, media literacy programs that teach critical thinking and responsible media use may provide more sustainable, long-term solutions (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010). These programs enable adolescents to make informed decisions about their media consumption, potentially reducing the need for external regulation by social workers in the future (Livingstone et al., 2014).

### **Moderate Self-Assessed Competence and High Demand for Support**

One of the most striking findings from this study is the moderate level of self-assessed competence reported by social work professionals in dealing with digital media overuse. The mean competence score of 3.3 indicates that, while professionals feel somewhat capable of managing media-related challenges, there is a significant portion who feel underprepared. This is consistent with existing literature, which suggests that while social workers are aware of the growing influence of digital media, many lack the formal training and resources needed to address it effectively (Hollis & Jones, 2020).

The high demand for further training ( $M = 4.3$ ) and additional staffing ( $M = 4.5$ ) reflects the increasing complexity of digital media issues in youth work and the pressures placed on professionals to stay informed about the rapidly changing digital landscape. Studies have shown that social workers often feel overwhelmed by the demands of integrating digital media management into their already diverse set of responsibilities, and they frequently call for more specialized training to develop the necessary skills (Kim & Lau, 2020). The results of this study suggest that there is a clear need for ongoing professional development, particularly in the areas of media literacy, digital detox strategies, and the psychosocial impacts of media use. This finding is particularly significant when considering the differences in perceived competence and support needs based on professional experience. Social workers with less than 5 years of experience reported lower competence ( $M = 2.9$ ) and a higher need for training ( $M = 4.6$ ), while those with more than 10 years of experience reported higher competence ( $M = 3.7$ ) and lower demand for additional training ( $M = 3.9$ ). This suggests that less experienced workers may struggle more with the complexities of digital media management, perhaps due to limited exposure to formal training on this topic during their education. This echoes previous research that has highlighted the need for digital literacy to be integrated into social work curricula to better prepare future professionals for the challenges they will face in practice (Chong et al., 2018).

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings from this study carry important implications for both youth work institutions and policymakers. First, the widespread recognition of digital media overuse as a significant problem underscores the urgency of developing more comprehensive and structured interventions. While alternative activities and phone-free

times are effective in the short term, institutions should also prioritize the implementation of media literacy programs that equip adolescents with the skills to regulate their own media consumption in the long term (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Second, the clear demand for additional training and resources highlights the need for investment in professional development programs for social workers. Tailored training programs that focus on digital media management, the psychosocial impacts of media use, and effective intervention strategies are essential for ensuring that professionals feel confident and competent in addressing these issues (Kim & Lau, 2020). Given the differences in support needs based on experience, these programs should also be tiered to meet the specific needs of both new and more experienced professionals. Third, the demand for additional staffing ( $M = 4.5$ ) suggests that current staff levels may not be sufficient to address the growing complexity of digital media issues in youth work. Policymakers and institutional leaders should consider increasing staff capacity to ensure that professionals have the time and resources needed to implement effective digital detox programs. This may involve re-evaluating the staff-to-youth ratios in youth work settings, particularly in institutions where digital media overuse is identified as a significant challenge (Richards et al., 2018). Finally, the development of unified, evidence-based frameworks for addressing digital media use in youth work is critical. As the results show, professionals expressed a need for clear guidelines and concepts ( $M = 4.2$ ) to help structure their interventions. Policymakers should support the creation of standardized frameworks that provide clear, actionable steps for managing digital media use while allowing for flexibility to adapt interventions to the specific needs of each institution and its population (Heitner, 2019).

### Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size ( $n = 27$ ) is relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could benefit from a larger, more diverse sample to provide a broader understanding of the challenges and strategies used by social work professionals in different regions and contexts. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants may overestimate or underestimate their competence or the effectiveness of the interventions they employ. Future studies could incorporate observational or longitudinal data to validate the self-assessments provided by professionals. Another limitation is the potential for regional variation, as the institutions represented in this study may not reflect the practices of youth work institutions in other areas. Future research could explore how regional differences in policy, resources, and youth demographics impact the management of digital media overuse in different settings.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant challenges social work professionals face in managing digital media overuse among adolescents and the critical need for more structured interventions, professional development, and additional staffing support. The findings underscore the importance of equipping youth workers with the skills and resources necessary to address the complexities of digital media use in a way that promotes healthier outcomes for young people. As digital media continues to play an increasingly central role in the lives of adolescents, ongoing research and policy development will be essential to ensure that youth work institutions can effectively navigate the opportunities and challenges of the digital age.

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