

A person is sitting on a wooden floor, wearing blue denim jeans with large rips and colorful sneakers with a floral pattern. They are holding a silver smartphone with both hands, which have bright pink nail polish. The phone's screen displays a book cover with a black background. The title 'Screen Addiction: A Teen Epidemic' is written in white and pink text. The author's name 'Bradley Steffens' is at the bottom in white. The person's legs and feet are visible in the background.

Screen Addiction: A Teen Epidemic

Bradley Steffens

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The Fear of Missing Out

“When I was 14, I got an LG Optimus smartphone, passed on from a school friend. It had a touchscreen and felt like it was from the future,” remembers Moya Lothian-McLean, an editor with the online British magazine *gal-dem*. “No longer could my mum boot me off the computer. . . . I could talk with my friends into the wee hours, refreshing the Facebook browser page every minute to see if their latest missive had come through. Never had I felt so alive. At the time, the entire world was at my fingertips, anytime, any place.” Now, however, Lothian-McLean realizes that she cannot control her use of electronic devices. She continuously switches between screens, unable to focus on her work:

I find myself reaching for my phone every few minutes, snatching it up when I get stuck on a sentence I’m typing and need to “reset” my mind by blankly scrolling. Sometimes Twitter will be open on a laptop screen in front of me and I’ll find myself idly pulling up the little blue bird app on my phone too. A great feeling of distress runs through me when I cannot spot my phone where I think I left it.³

A Basic Need

Lothian-McLean’s screen activity is not driven by curiosity or any rational motive. It is a compulsion, fueled by anxiety. She

has a deep-seated concern that she might be unaware of something happening on her phone or on social media. Screen addiction experts call this anxiety the fear of missing out, or FOMO.

FOMO was first defined by researchers at the University of Essex in England as “the uneasy and sometimes all-consuming feeling that you’re missing out—that your peers are doing, in the know about, or in possession of more or something better than you.”⁴ Since social media gives the user a real-time or near-real-time window into the activities of others, people today are much more aware of what their peers are doing. As a result, concerns about being out of touch or left behind are greater today than in the past.

The feelings are especially intense for teens, who have a deep need to fit in with their peers. Amy Summerville, a professor of psychology at Miami University in Ohio, points out that such feelings are not superficial. FOMO is an extension of the biological need for socialization and inclusion. Once basic needs such as food, shelter, and water are met, inclusion and social interaction are high on the list of human needs.

A Source of Anxiety

Because the need for social acceptance is so deep, FOMO can be strong and persistent, creating a mental health condition known as anxiety. To alleviate this anxiety, people in the grips of FOMO will check their devices. According to a Pew Research study, 45 percent of teens say that they spend hours online each day, with most of that time spent checking social media. They do so not out of genuine curiosity about their friends’ activities but rather to soothe their emotions. Engaging in an activity to modify a mood is a classic symptom of a behavioral addiction. “You let it go from

“I find myself reaching for my phone every few minutes, snatching it up when I get stuck on a sentence I’m typing and need to ‘reset’ my mind by blankly scrolling.”³

—Moya Lothian-McLean, an editor at *gal-dem*

being something you enjoy to something that's controlling you,"⁵ says Douglas A. Gentile, a professor of psychology at Iowa State University.

Unfortunately, checking a device provides only temporary relief from the anxiety, and over time the behavior makes the anxiety worse. Social media users instinctively know that as soon as they leave the website, someone could post new content. As a result, FOMO returns almost as soon as users leave the site. And because they have just checked their accounts, the awareness of what might be going on in social media remains at the top of their minds, fueling the urge to check their devices again. The never-ending cycle adds up to an astonishing level of involvement with screens. According to a study conducted by dscout, a technology research firm, cell phone users tap,

"You let it go from being something you enjoy to something that's controlling you."⁵

—Douglas A. Gentile, professor of psychology at Iowa State University

Fear of missing out drives some people to check their phones constantly and often makes it difficult to focus on other things, such as schoolwork.



scroll, or swipe their screens an average of 2,617 times a day to check on social media updates, read messages, and perform other tasks.

Disconnecting from the Real World

One of the problems with the continual checking of devices is that it prevents users from being aware of and involved with things around them. This disconnection with real life and real relationships does not relieve the user's anxiety. It heightens it. "When an individual is not engaging in the world in a healthy way—interacting with others, managing themselves in challenging situations, whether it's in classes or speaking up in class, going on interviews, dealing with conflict with peers—and instead increase[s] their online presence, this can exacerbate their feelings of alienation, hopelessness, isolation, anxiety, and depression,"⁶ says Anne Marie Albano, director of the Columbia University Clinic for Anxiety and Related Disorders.

Albano's analysis is based on multiple studies showing that those most at risk for anxiety and depression often turn to screens to modify their moods. In 2021, Common Sense Media, a non-profit organization that studies media and technology, reported that young people with depressive symptoms are nearly twice as likely as those without depression to say they use social media almost constantly (34 percent versus 18 percent).

The same study found that 43 percent of fourteen- to twenty-two-year-old social media users said that using social media when they are depressed, stressed, or anxious usually makes them feel better, but nearly one in five—17 percent—said that engaging in social media at such times made them feel worse.

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FOMO Marketing

Recently, marketers have realized that FOMO can be used to manipulate consumers into making impulsive buying decisions. Marketing consultant Steve Hogan describes this technique, known as FOMO marketing:

In case you're allergic to social media and haven't ever before heard the term, FOMO means "the fear of missing out." . . . FOMO marketing refers to messaging that appeals to consumers' desire to latch on to every opportunity before it slips through their fingers. Many people would rather make an impulse purchase than regret failing to act later. . . .

Language matters a lot when it comes to FOMO marketing. You want your audience to feel as though time is running out and that they're about to lose on an amazing offer.

When you're crafting your marketing materials, use strong verbs and adjectives to instill FOMO in your target audience. Phrases like "don't miss this" and "while supplies last" are good examples, but you can get more creative.

FOMO marketing is real. So is FOMO itself. If you create a situation in which your audience has to act fast to get an opportunity they might not get again, you'll encourage sales and conversions.

Steve Hogan, "10 Effective FOMO Marketing Techniques to Increase Online Results," *Daily Egg* (blog), Crazy Egg, July 26, 2021. www.crazyegg.com.

"For those who have severe depression, social media plays an outsized role—more important for inspiration, support, and connection, but also more likely to make respondents more anxious, lonely, and depressed."⁷

Internal research conducted by Facebook and leaked to the public in September 2021 came to the same conclusion. The Facebook researchers found that 31 percent of teens with mental health issues said that browsing through photos on the photo-sharing app Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, worsened their mental health. Nevertheless, the vulnerable teens continued to expose themselves to the content because of FOMO.

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GETTING HELP AND INFORMATION

Center for Humane Technology

www.humanetech.com

The Center for Humane Technology is a nonprofit organization dedicated to exposing the negative effects of social media and empowering people to break free from persuasive technology. The website includes a youth toolkit with seven self-guided lessons to help young people navigate the social media environment.

Computer Gaming Addicts Anonymous (CGAA)

www.cgaa.info

The CGAA offers a twelve-step program to help addicted gamers recover. The organization has seventy-one chapters in the United States and another ten around the world. In addition to face-to-face support groups, the CGAA offers online meetings, a discussion forum, and a help line. Its website provides an online test for video game addiction and stories of gaming addiction on YouTube.

Game Quitters

<https://gamequitters.com>

Game Quitters is an online community for gamers who want to stop playing video games. Its website offers an online quiz for gamers to assess how serious a problem they may have and a step-by-step guide to help them quit playing. It also provides a separate guide for family members and friends of gaming addicts to help them recognize and stop video game addiction. The website also provides a forum, personal stories, videos, and more.

Internet and Technology Addicts Anonymous (ITAA)

<https://internetaddictsanonymous.org>

ITAA offers twelve-step treatment through online and face-to-face meetings for a variety of screen addictions, including internet and technology addiction, streaming addiction, social media addiction, and smartphone addiction. The website offers tools for recovery and a list of meeting locations.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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