

Does reducing screen time increase productivity? Not necessarily

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Have you ever been accused (or accused someone else) of wasting too much time by looking at a cellphone? Turns out, that time might not be wasted time at all.

According to research recently published by Kaveh Abhari of San Diego State University and Isaac Vaghefi of City University of New York, using existing smartphone applications to monitor [cellphone](#) screen time can enhance focused or mindful cellphone usage, which, in turn, leads to higher perceived productivity and user satisfaction. The research was recently published in *AIS Transactions on Human-Computer Interaction* (THCI).

The positive effect of self-monitoring

Abhari (associate professor of management information systems at SDSU's Fowler College of Business) and Vaghefi (assistant professor of information systems at the Zicklin School of Business at Baruch College) said while there was substantial research establishing the negative effects of cellphone screen time (intolerance, withdrawal, and conflict with job-related tasks), their research was designed to determine if self-regulatory behaviors could lead to modified user behavior for more [positive outcomes](#).

"We theorized that individuals who tracked their cellphone usage and set goals surrounding that usage tended to have enhanced productivity and contentment with their productivity as they met their stated objectives," said Abhari. "Previous research has shown that [goal setting](#) tends to raise performance expectations and we wanted to see if this theory held true for smartphone screen time as well."

Putting it to the test

To make this determination, the researchers surveyed 469 participating university undergraduate students in California, New York, and Hawaii. The three-week survey required all participants to complete four questionnaires and about half of them were required to download a

screen-monitoring application to their phones. This app allowed users to monitor and set limits or goals with their cellphone screen time.

When the results were analyzed, researchers measured the perceived productivity of screen time reported by those surveyed, as well as the amount of screen time and the fatigue associated with self-monitoring. They also reviewed participants' contentment with their productivity achieved through cellphone screen time. "Self-monitoring appears necessary to encourage the optimized use of smartphones," said Abhari. "The results suggest that optimizing but not minimizing screen time is more likely to increase user productivity."

The effect of fatigue

However, the researchers also found that self-monitoring induces fatigue and weakens the effect on productivity, though it was not a significant factor affecting the relationship between self-monitoring and contentment with [productivity](#) achievement.

In conclusion, Abhari and Vaghefi determined that while uncontrolled cellphone use (or cellphone addiction) could negatively impact people's lives, monitored screen time—particularly monitored screen time with specific goals in mind—can result in positive outcomes and higher overall user satisfaction. "This study could lead system developers to embed features into [mobile devices](#) that enable self-monitoring," said Abhari. "These features could improve quality [screen time](#) and enhance the relationship between humans and digital technology."

More information: Kaveh Abhari et al, Screen Time and Productivity: An Extension of Goal- setting Theory to Explain Optimum Smartphone Use, *AIS Transactions on Human-Computer Interaction* (2022). [DOI: 10.17705/1thci.00169](https://doi.org/10.17705/1thci.00169)

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