

# The Displacement Hypothesis in the Ott Era: How Binge-Watching Erodes Adolescent Sleep, "Green Time," and Socialization

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## ABSTRACT

This Paper examines the profound transformation of childhood and adolescent development in the modern digital age, primarily driven by the ubiquitous shift toward algorithmically curated Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms. Due to a neurodevelopmental mismatch between the early-maturing limbic system and the later-developing prefrontal cortex, adolescents are uniquely vulnerable to the dopamine-driven design mechanics of these platforms, which encourage compulsive consumption and binge-watching. By synthesizing empirical data from global landmark studies between 2023 and 2025 including reports from the WHO, UNICEF, and Johns Hopkins University the research highlights a critical paradigm shift: the specific nature of the content consumed (such as violent, "dark," or hyper-sexualized narratives) and the mechanics of platform engagement are far stronger predictors of mental distress than aggregate screen time. Furthermore, utilizing the Displacement Hypothesis, the paper demonstrates that heavy digital immersion crowds out essential developmental behaviours, significantly eroding restorative sleep architecture and physical "green time," which correlates strongly with rising rates of depression, anxiety, and profound socialization deficits. The impact of this digital ecosystem is further moderated by individual pre-existing vulnerabilities, gender-specific pathways, and parental mediation styles. Ultimately, the research argues against purely restrictive "screen time" limitations, advocating instead for the cultivation of adolescent digital resilience, active parental mediation, and platform "Safety-by-Design" regulations to mitigate harm and foster healthier digital diets.

**Keywords:** Over-The-Top (OTT) Platforms, Adolescent Neurodevelopment, Displacement Hypothesis, Binge-Watching, Digital Resilience

## 1.1 Overview of Child Development in the Digital Age

The architecture of childhood development has undergone a fundamental transformation in the third decade of the twenty-first century. The traditional ecological systems theory, which once placed the family, school, and immediate peer group at the centre of a child's developmental universe, has been irrevocably altered by the ubiquity of digital ecosystems. As we advance through the post-pandemic era (2023–2025), the primary interface for adolescent socialization, identity formation, and entertainment has shifted from the physical world and linear television to the on-demand, algorithmically curated environment of Over-

The-Top (OTT) platforms. This transition is not merely a change in medium; it represents a comprehensive restructuring of the cognitive and emotional stimuli that shape the developing brain.

### 1.1.1 The Neurodevelopmental Mismatch in Adolescence

To understand the impact of OTT content, one must first appreciate the neurobiological context of the adolescent brain. Adolescence, broadly defined as the period from age 10 to 24, is characterized by a "developmental mismatch" between two key neural systems: the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex. The limbic system, responsible for reward processing, emotional intensity, and social sensitivity, matures early in puberty. In contrast, the prefrontal cortex, which governs executive functions such as impulse control, long-term planning, and emotional regulation, continues to develop well into the mid-twenties.<sup>1</sup> This asynchrony renders adolescents uniquely vulnerable to the design mechanisms of modern digital platforms. The adolescent brain is hypersensitive to social rewards and peer validation, a biological imperative designed to encourage independence and mating. However, OTT platforms and social media hijack this mechanism. The "dopamine loops" embedded in these platforms manifested through "likes," notifications, and the "cliffhanger" endings of web series provide supernormal stimuli that the immature prefrontal cortex struggles to regulate. The immediate gratification offered by a high-arousal video or the validation of a social media interaction bypasses the developing "stopping cues," leading to compulsive consumption patterns that are often mischaracterized as mere behavioral choices rather than biologically driven responses to engineered environments.<sup>2 3</sup>

Recent literature underscores that this digital immersion is not occurring in a vacuum. The "digital ecosystem" interacts dynamically with hormonal changes, particularly the onset of puberty, which further heightens sensitivity to social acceptance and rejection. Consequently, the content consumed on OTT platforms is not passively viewed; it is actively integrated into the adolescent's constructing self-concept. When this content is algorithmically skewed towards unrealistic beauty standards, hyper-aggression, or depressive themes, the impact is amplified by the brain's developmental plasticity.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.1.2 The Displacement Hypothesis: Sleep, "Green Time," and Physical Activity

A central theoretical framework in recent research is the Displacement Hypothesis, which posits that the harm of digital media lies less in the activity itself and more in what it replaces. As screen time has ballooned with reports from India indicating that Gen Z now spends over half their digital time on non-social platforms like OTT streaming<sup>5</sup> essential developmental activities have been crowded out.

#### The Erosion of Sleep Architecture

Sleep is perhaps the most critical casualty of the OTT era. Sleep is the primary physiological mechanism for emotional processing and memory consolidation in adolescents. However, the 2024 WHO Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) report identifies a definitive link between intense media use and sleep-onset difficulties.<sup>6</sup> The mechanism is twofold: physiological and psychological. Physiologically,

<sup>1</sup> C. McNeely and J. Blanchard, *The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development* (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Robert F. Potter, quoted in D. Braun, "Binge-Watching and Your Brain", *Youth First* (2025), available at <https://youthfirstinc.org/binge-watching-and-your-brain-2/>.

<sup>3</sup> H. Yu and F. Alizadeh, "Online Binge-Watching among Chinese College Students: Implications for Mental Health", *17 Psychology Research and Behavior Management* 295 (2024).

<sup>4</sup> K. Mmari et al., "The Social Context of Early Adolescents in the Global Early Adolescent Study", *69 Journal of Adolescent Health* S5 (2021).

<sup>5</sup> T. Tharma-Asokan, "India's Gen Z spends over half of their digital time outside social platforms", *The Current*, Oct. 29, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> WHO Regional Office for Europe, *Focus on Adolescent Social Media Use and Gaming in Europe, Central Asia and Canada: Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study* (Copenhagen, 2024).

the blue light emitted by screens suppresses melatonin production, delaying the circadian rhythm. Psychologically, the "binge-watching" phenomenon, driven by narrative suspense, induces a state of "pre-sleep arousal." Adolescents remain in a state of cognitive alertness long after they have stopped watching, preventing the transition into restorative deep sleep. The consequences are a feedback loop of sleep deprivation, irritability, and lowered resilience to stress, which in turn increases susceptibility to anxiety and depression.<sup>7 8</sup>

### **Displacement of "Green Time"**

Parallel to sleep loss is the reduction in "green time" exposure to outdoor environments and physical activity. The Johns Hopkins University studies (2023-2024) have highlighted that the lack of physical exercise and outdoor exposure is a stronger predictor of depression than screen time in isolation. The sedentary nature of OTT consumption, often solitary and indoors, deprives adolescents of the mood-regulating benefits of physical exertion and sunlight. This sedentary behavior is not merely a lack of movement but a withdrawal from the physical world, creating a "nature deficit" that correlates with increased internalizing disorders.<sup>9</sup>

#### **1.1.3 Socialization Deficits and the "Lonely" Generation**

The paradox of the digital age is the rise of loneliness amidst hyper-connectivity. While OTT platforms offer access to a global library of narratives, they often facilitate a retreat from face-to-face socialization. The 2025 Indian case study on medical students revealed a stark "socialization deficit," where excessive OTT consumption was strongly correlated with reduced interaction with friends and family.<sup>10</sup>

This deficit arises from the substitution of real-world relationships with "parasocial relationships" one-sided emotional bonds with fictional characters or content creators. For an adolescent grappling with social anxiety, the predictable, controlled environment of a web series is safer than the unpredictable, high-stakes nature of real-world peer interactions. Over time, this preference for digital surrogates can atrophy social skills, making re-entry into social environments increasingly anxiety-inducing. The "withdrawal" reported by problematic users when separated from their devices mirrors substance addiction, suggesting that for many, the screen has become the primary attachment object, displacing human connection.<sup>11</sup>

### **1.2 Types of Harmful Content**

Moving beyond the aggregate metric of "screen time," the research consensus in 2025 has shifted decisively toward analyzing the specific nature of the content consumed. The UNICEF 2025 report explicitly states that exposure to specific types of harmful content is a more potent predictor of mental distress than duration of use.<sup>12</sup> The OTT landscape is vast, but four specific content vectors have been identified as particularly pernicious to child mental health.

#### **1.2.1 Violent and "Dark" Content: Desensitization and Contagion**

The deregulation of content on OTT platforms has democratized access to hyper-realistic violence and

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<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 15.

<sup>8</sup> L. Exelmans and J. Van den Bulck, "Bedtime, shuteye time and electronic media: Sleep displacement is a two-step process", 15 *Journal of Sleep Research* (2017).

<sup>9</sup> C. Vidal *et al.*, "The Role of Social Media Use and Associated Risk and Protective Behaviors on Depression in Youth Adults: A Longitudinal and Network Perspective", 23 *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 3672 (2024).

<sup>10</sup> S. Sahoo *et al.*, "Prevalence of OTT addiction and its effect on physical, mental, and social health among medical students", *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* (2025).

<sup>11</sup> WHO Regional Office for Europe, *supra* note 76.

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF Innocenti, *Childhood in a Digital World: The effects of screen time, harmful content and abusive experiences on children's mental health* (Florence, 2025).

"dark" themes that were previously filtered by traditional broadcast standards.

### **The Normalization of Aggression**

Analysis of popular web series, particularly in unregulated markets like India, reveals a high prevalence of abusive language, misogyny, and graphic violence. A 2025 study on Indian web series noted that the glorification of "toxic masculinity" and retributive violence serves as a modeling framework for adolescent viewers.<sup>13</sup> Repeated exposure to such content leads to desensitization a reduction in emotional responsiveness to real-world aggression and an increase in normative beliefs that support violence as a conflict resolution strategy.<sup>14</sup> For the developing brain, which is learning to interpret social cues, this normalization can distort the baseline for acceptable behavior, leading to increased externalizing behaviors in peer interactions.<sup>15</sup>

### **"Dark" Narratives and Suicide Contagion**

Perhaps the most alarming trend is the proliferation of "dark" narratives that explore themes of suicide, self-harm, and severe depression. While often defended as "raising awareness," the graphic depiction of these acts can trigger social contagion, known as the "Werther effect." The controversy surrounding series like *13 Reasons Why* persists in the literature, with studies showing that vulnerable adolescents may identify with the "romanticized" suffering of protagonists. A 2025 analysis of "dark web" and surface web habits found that users who consumed illicit or "dark" content exhibited significantly higher depressive symptoms and paranoid ideation.<sup>16</sup> The narrative structure of these shows, which often portrays adults as incompetent and the world as irredeemably hostile, can reinforce feelings of hopelessness in viewers already struggling with mood disorders.<sup>17</sup>

### **1.2.2 Cyberbullying and Online Abuse**

While often associated with social media, OTT platforms with interactive elements (comments, live streams) are also vectors for abuse. The UNICEF 2025 report identifies **online sexual abuse and bullying** as the single strongest digital predictor of mental health crises, linking it directly to suicidal thoughts and self-harm.<sup>18</sup> Unlike traditional bullying, digital abuse is pervasive (following the child home via the screen), permanent (recorded in text or video), and often anonymous. The psychological toll is compounded by the "bystander effect" on a massive scale, where a child may witness thousands of users participating in the humiliation of a peer or a public figure, reinforcing a worldview that is hostile and unsafe.<sup>19</sup>

### **1.2.3 Sexualized Content and Body Image Dystymorphia**

The visual culture of OTT media promotes highly curated, often unattainable standards of physical beauty and lifestyle. For adolescent girls, in particular, the consumption of appearance-focused content is linked to "body surveillance" the habitual monitoring of one's own body and subsequent dissatisfaction. However, recent gender-specific analyses from 2025 indicate that this is not exclusively a female issue. While girls report lower social support linked to heavy usage, boys are increasingly targeted by

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<sup>13</sup> K. Sharma, "The portrayal of hate speech and evolving gender roles in Indian web shows", *International Journal of Indian Psychology* (2021).

<sup>14</sup> A. Gupta and S. Rajput, "Psychosocial Effects of Web Series on Indian Youth", *Journal of Media Studies* (2023).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Study on Dark Web and Surface Web Users, *Crying Out in the Dark: Exploring the Mental Health Vulnerabilities of Dark Web Users* (2025).

<sup>17</sup> See J. Bridge *et al.*, "Association Between the Release of Netflix's *13 Reasons Why* and Suicide Rates in the United States", *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2019).

<sup>18</sup> UNICEF Innocenti, *supra* note 82.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

"manosphere" content that promotes rigid body standards (muscularity) and anti-social gender norms.<sup>20</sup> The ubiquitous presence of "soft-core" sexual content in mainstream web series further complicates sexual identity formation, often presenting sexual interactions as transactional or devoid of emotional intimacy.<sup>21</sup>

#### 1.2.4 Mechanistic Harm: The Psychology of Binge-Watching

The harm of OTT content is not solely in the what but in the how. "Binge-watching" consuming multiple episodes in a single sitting has been reclassified in 2025 literature as a distinct behavioral pattern with specific psychopathological correlates.

##### The Dopamine-driven "Cliffhanger" Loop

OTT narratives are engineered to prevent satiety. The "cliffhanger" ending of an episode triggers a dual response: a spike in cortisol (stress/anxiety about the resolution) and a surge in dopamine (anticipation of reward). In a linear TV era, the week-long break allowed this arousal to dissipate. In the OTT era, the "autoplay" feature resolves the tension within seconds, only to re-trigger it minutes later. This cycle keeps the adolescent brain in a state of chronic hyper-arousal, exhausting neural resources required for emotional regulation.<sup>22</sup>

##### Loss of Agency and "Post-Binge Regret"

The friction-less design of these platforms erodes user agency. Adolescents often report entering a "flow state" or dissociation where hours pass without conscious intent. This is frequently followed by "post-binge regret" feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety over wasted time and neglected responsibilities (homework, sleep). This regret fuels a negative self-concept and can trigger a cycle of procrastination and stress, further driving the adolescent back to the screen for escape.<sup>23</sup>

### 1.3 Empirical Evidence from Global Studies

The period from 2023 to 2025 has yielded a rich harvest of empirical data that moves the conversation from anecdotal concern to statistical certainty. The following section synthesizes four landmark studies that define the current understanding of the crisis.

#### 1.3.1 WHO Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Report 2024

##### Study Overview:

Released in September 2024 by the WHO Regional Office for Europe, this massive cross-sectional study surveyed nearly **280,000 adolescents** aged 11, 13, and 15 across **44 countries** in Europe, Central Asia, and Canada. It is one of the most comprehensive datasets on adolescent health behaviors globally.<sup>24</sup>

##### Key Findings:

- **Rise in Problematic Use:** The report documents a sharp increase in "problematic social media use" (PSMU), rising from 7% in 2018 to **11% in 2022**. PSMU is defined not by hours spent but by addiction-like symptoms: neglect of other activities, loss of control, and withdrawal symptoms.

<sup>20</sup> X.Y. Tse *et al.*, "Binge-watching and mental, social, and academic outcomes among children and adolescents: A gender-specific analysis", *PLOS ONE* (2025).

<sup>21</sup> S.B. Collins *et al.*, "Watching Sex on Television Predicts Adolescent Initiation of Sexual Behavior", 114 *Pediatrics* e280 (2004).

<sup>22</sup> Braun, *supra* note 72.

<sup>23</sup> Yu and Alizadeh, *supra* note 73.

<sup>24</sup> WHO Regional Office for Europe, *supra* note 76.

- **The Sleep-Mental Health Nexus:** The data established a robust correlation between intense screen use and sleep-onset difficulties. This was prevalent across all demographics but showed a gender disparity: **27.1% of girls** vs. **20.8% of boys** reported sleep difficulties linked to media use.<sup>25</sup>
- **Gaming vs. Social Media:** The report differentiated between risks, noting that **12%** of adolescents are at risk of problematic gaming, which is distinct from social media addiction but shares the displacement of sleep and social interaction.
- **Mental Well-being:** Adolescents classified as problematic users reported significantly lower life satisfaction and higher rates of psychological complaints (headaches, irritability, low mood), confirming that digital addiction has somatic as well as psychological manifestations.<sup>26</sup>

### 1.3.2 UNICEF: "Childhood in a Digital World" (2025)

#### Study Overview:

This seminal report analyzes data from the "Disrupting Harm" project and "EU Kids Online," covering **21 countries**, including diverse nations in the Global South (e.g., Ethiopia, Indonesia, Vietnam). It uses sophisticated statistical modeling (standardized beta coefficients) to isolate specific risk factors.<sup>27</sup>

#### Key Findings:

- **Content Over Time:** The report challenges the "screen time" orthodoxy. It found "no clear evidence" that the sheer volume of time spent online directly harms mental health. In fact, moderate usage was positively associated with digital skill acquisition.
- **The Hierarchy of Harm:** The analysis constructed a hierarchy of risk. At the top is **online sexual abuse and bullying**, which showed "moderate to strong" associations with anxiety, depression, and self-harm, consistent across all 21 countries. Below this were "harmful content" exposures (hate speech, gore), which had weaker but still significant negative associations.
- **Policy Implications:** The report argues that legislative efforts to simply cap screen time are "less likely to be effective." Instead, it calls for "safety-by-design" regulations that force platforms to reduce the algorithmic amplification of harmful content and improve moderation of abusive behavior.<sup>28</sup>

### 1.3.3 Johns Hopkins University Studies (2023-2024)

#### Study Overview:

Led by Dr. Carol Vidal and researchers at Johns Hopkins Children's Center, this series of longitudinal studies (published in the International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, May 2024) focused on the directionality of the relationship between digital media and depression in North American youth.<sup>29</sup>

#### Key Findings:

- **The Causality Dilemma:** The study tackled the "chicken or egg" question. While it confirmed a high correlation depressed adolescents use social media more it found **no longitudinal evidence** that high usage predicts future depression. This supports the "reverse causality" or "self-medication" hypothesis: adolescents with pre-existing depressive symptoms retreat into screens as a coping mechanism.
- **The "Green vs. Screen" Balance:** The researchers identified that the critical factor is lifestyle balance. The negative mental health outcomes were most strongly predicted by the displacement of **"Green Time"** (outdoor activity) and exercise. Adolescents who maintained physical activity levels

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 28.

<sup>27</sup> UNICEF Innocenti, *supra* note 82.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> Vidal *et al.*, *supra* note 79.

despite high screen use showed better mental health outcomes, suggesting that the screen is only toxic when it becomes a total substitute for physical life.

- **Clinical Recommendations:** The study advises against total abstinence, which can lead to social exclusion in a digital-first world. Instead, it promotes "balanced use" and parental focus on ensuring offline healthy habits.<sup>30</sup>

### 1.3.4 Indian Case Study: OTT Addiction in the Global South (2025)

#### Study Overview:

Conducted in Bhubaneswar, India, this 2025 cross-sectional study of **423 medical undergraduates** provides a crucial perspective from the Global South, where digital adoption has been rapid and often unregulated. This demographic (medical students) represents a high-stress, high-intelligence cohort living largely in hostels.<sup>31</sup>

#### Key Findings:

- **Epidemic Levels of Addiction:** The study reported an alarming **68.37%** prevalence of OTT addiction (ranging from borderline to severe). This is significantly higher than rates typically seen in the West, likely driven by the availability of extremely cheap mobile data (the "Jio effect") and the cultural context of hostel life where parental supervision is absent.
- **Socialization Deficits:** The impact on social health was profound. Among severely addicted students, **55.66%** reported that their interactions with friends were hampered, and **92.45%** reported negative impacts on their lifestyle.
- **Psychopathological Correlates:** The study linked "binge-watching" explicitly to procrastination, anxiety, and "unhealthy competition." The consumption of Western and aggressive web series content was also noted to create cultural dissonance and dissatisfaction with local realities.
- **Gender Nuance:** While the study focused on addiction, other regional data (Tse et al., Hong Kong, 2025) suggests that male adolescents in Asia are particularly prone to sleep disruption from binge-watching, while females suffer more from the social isolation aspect.<sup>32</sup>

**Table 1.1: Comparative Summary of Key Global Studies (2023-2025)**

Study	Region / Sample	Core Focus	Key Mental Health Finding	Mechanism Identified
<b>WHO HBSC 2024</b>	Europe/Canada (280k adolescents)	Problematic Social Media Use (PSMU)	PSMU rose to 11%; linked to low life satisfaction & psychological complaints.	<b>Sleep Displacement:</b> Strong link between intense use and sleep-onset latency (Girls > Boys).
<b>UNICEF 2025</b>	Global (21 Countries)	Content vs. Time	<b>Content is Determinant:</b> Sexual abuse/bullying strongly linked to suicide/self-harm.	<b>Screen Time Neutrality:</b> Time alone is not the enemy; lack of safety-by-design is.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> Sahoo *et al.*, *supra* note 10.

<sup>32</sup> : Tse *et al.*, *supra* note 90.

<b>Johns Hopkins 2024</b>	USA (Longitudinal)	Causality & Depression	High correlation but <b>no longitudinal causation</b> (reverse causality supported).	<b>Displacement of Nature:</b> Lack of "Green Time" & exercise is the stronger predictor of depression.
<b>Indian Case Study 2025</b>	India (423 Undergrads)	OTT Addiction & Socialization	<b>68% Addiction Rate;</b> Severe impact on social health (55% social deficit).	<b>Structural Factors:</b> Cheap data + hostel isolation + addictive "binge" mechanics.
<b>Tse et al. 2025</b>	Hong Kong (2,267 Students)	Gender Differences	Binge-watching linked to depression/anxiety in both genders.	<b>Gendered Pathways:</b> Males suffer from sleep loss; Females suffer from lack of social support.

### 1.4 Factors Moderating Impacts

The impact of OTT content is not a monolith; it is filtered through individual, familial, and environmental layers. Understanding these moderators explains why two children with identical screen exposure may have vastly different mental health trajectories.

#### 1.4.1 Individual Susceptibility: The Role of Pre-existing Vulnerabilities

The "Differential Susceptibility Hypothesis" is strongly supported by recent data. Adolescents with pre-existing mental health conditions such as ADHD, anxiety, or sub-clinical depression are significantly more vulnerable to the negative effects of OTT consumption. For these individuals, the screen acts as a "digital pacifier," providing temporary relief from internal distress but ultimately reinforcing the avoidance of real-world coping strategies. The Johns Hopkins findings on "reverse causality" underscore this: the depressed teen seeks the screen, and the screen, by displacing sleep and exercise, worsens the depression.<sup>33</sup>

#### Gender-Specific Pathways

Gender acts as a critical moderator. As highlighted by the Hong Kong study (2025) and HBSC data, the mechanism of harm differs.

- **Females:** Are more prone to the social comparison effects of content (body image) and the loss of social support systems. Their "socialization deficit" manifests as loneliness and internalized distress.
- **Males:** Are more prone to the physiological disruptions of high-arousal content (violence/gaming), leading to sleep debt and externalizing behaviors (aggression). Interventions must therefore be gender-responsive.<sup>34</sup>

#### 1.4.2 Parental Mediation: The Failure of Restriction

Parental strategy is a decisive factor. Research in 2023-2024 distinguishes between three types of mediation: **Restrictive** (rules/bans), **Active** (discussion), and **Co-viewing**.

- **The Paradox of Restriction:** Studies consistently show that restrictive monitoring (strict time limits, banning apps) is often associated with higher problematic use. This is attributed to "psychological reactance" the adolescent desire to reclaim autonomy by engaging in the forbidden behavior.

<sup>33</sup> Vidal *et al.*, *supra* note 79.

<sup>34</sup> Tse *et al.*, *supra* note 90.

Furthermore, restrictions often address the symptom (time) rather than the cause (content/emotional need).<sup>35</sup>

- **The Power of Active Mediation:** Active mediation where parents discuss the content, ask questions about the characters' choices, and frame the experience is a protective factor. It builds "critical media literacy," allowing the child to deconstruct the manipulative elements of the content (e.g., "Why do you think the episode ended that way?"). This fosters internal regulation rather than external compliance.
- **Technoference:** A critical finding in 2025 is the role of parental modeling. "Technoference" interruptions in parent-child interactions due to the parent's device use is a strong predictor of the child's problematic use. Parents who are addicted to screens themselves cannot effectively mediate their children's usage.<sup>36</sup>

### 1.4.3 Digital Literacy and Resilience

Finally, the adolescent's own digital literacy is a powerful moderator. "Digital resilience" the ability to recognize risks (like hate speech or algorithmic manipulation) and seek help mitigates harm. UNICEF's data suggests that children with higher digital skills are better able to navigate online risks without experiencing severe mental distress. This supports the move toward school-based interventions that teach "digital citizenship" and emotional regulation strategies tailored to the digital environment, rather than abstinence-only approaches.<sup>37</sup> The "RAPID" framework (Reach, Assess, Prioritize, Increase, Develop) and other educational models emphasize that skills training can turn the digital environment from a threat into a space for agency and learning.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

The convergence of data from the WHO, UNICEF, Johns Hopkins, and independent researchers across the Global South in 2025 paints a complex but clear picture of the mental health crisis facing the "digital generation." The era of debating "screen time" is over; the era of scrutinizing "screen content" and "screen mechanics" has begun.

The evidence confirms that OTT content is not a neutral utility. It is an active environmental factor that interacts with the neurobiological vulnerabilities of adolescence. Through the mechanisms of dopamine-driven binge-watching, the normalization of "dark" and violent themes, and the displacement of essential biological needs like sleep and green time, unregulated OTT consumption poses a distinct risk to mental well-being.

However, the path forward is not Luddite rejection. The nuanced findings regarding "active mediation" and "digital resilience" suggest that the solution lies in **re-socializing** the digital experience. By shifting the focus from restricting minutes to curating content, and by redesigning platforms to prioritize user safety over engagement (Safety-by-Design), it is possible to mitigate the socialization deficits and anxiety loops identified in this research paper. The challenge for policymakers, parents, and educators in 2025 and beyond is to construct a "digital diet" that nourishes the adolescent mind rather than consuming it.

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<sup>35</sup> S. E. Domoff *et al.*, "Parental Monitoring, Family Context, and Early Adolescent Problematic Internet Use", *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* (2024).

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

<sup>37</sup> UNICEF Innocenti, *supra* note 82.

<sup>38</sup> UNICEF Innocenti, *Report Card 19: Child Well-Being in an Unpredictable World* (Florence, 2025).