

Screens, Adolescents, and Digital Addictive Behaviors

Pantallas, adolescentes y conductas adictivas digitales

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Received: 30/06/2026 · Accepted: 14/09/2026

Cómo citar este artículo/citation: Espada, J. P., Lloret-Irles, D. (2026). Pantallas, adolescentes y conductas adictivas digitales. *Revista Española de Drogodependencias*, 51(3), 8-10.

Digital technology has ceased to be merely a tool and has become an element that mediates interpersonal relationships and identity formation, particularly during early developmental stages. Exposure to digital devices and virtual environments among adolescents is now almost universal (OEDA, 2025; Orgilés et al., 2024). Epidemiological analysis nevertheless requires a clear distinction between intensive use, problematic use, and formally established behavioral addictions.

While daily consumption of digital content is a normative practice within youth culture, estimates of problematic social media use in Spain are around 17.4%, with a higher prevalence among females (Blanquer et al., 2026). In contrast, the prevalence of Internet Gaming Disorder ranges from 3% to 5.3% in na-

tional and international adolescent samples (Stevens et al., 2021; OEDA, 2025), predominantly affecting males. This distribution highlights the need to examine the nature and impact of these behaviors on the health and well-being of children and adolescents.

The integration of screens into everyday life poses a major challenge: identifying the point at which normative behavior becomes a problematic pattern. Research indicates that the distinguishing criterion lies not solely in the number of hours spent online, but in loss of control, compulsivity, and continued use despite negative personal, academic, or family consequences (Espada et al., 2026). The transition toward problematic use occurs when virtual interaction displaces essential developmental activities,

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such as sleep, school responsibilities, and face-to-face relationships, or when it generates psychological distress when access to digital environments is not possible.

Adolescents' susceptibility to digital environments can be explained to a large extent by neurodevelopmental models. During this stage, there is a maturational gap between the limbic system, which is involved in reward seeking and highly sensitive to dopaminergic stimulation, and the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for self-regulation and impulse control and does not complete its maturation until early adulthood. This neurobiological profile is accompanied by the developmental tasks of psychosocial and emotional maturation: identity consolidation, the need for peer-group belonging, and the search for autonomy. Digital platforms employ design architectures specifically intended to respond immediately to these needs, making it easier for some young people to turn to virtual environments as a means of escape or emotional regulation in response to frustration.

BEYOND SCREEN TIME: ASSESSING PATTERNS AND CONSEQUENCES

For some time, prevention guidelines focused primarily on the quantitative measurement of screen time. However, evidence shows that this metric alone is insufficient to predict the development of an addictive disorder. The development of problematic technology use results from a complex interaction between individual, family, and environmental variables, including difficulties in emotional regulation, impulsivity, anxiety or depressive symptoms, and low social competence.

CHALLENGES IN RESEARCH ON DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

The study of technology-mediated addictive behaviors faces the ongoing challenge of the rapid evolution of the digital environment itself. Theoretical frameworks developed to analyze traditional Internet use quickly become outdated.

The implementation of persuasive design mechanisms, such as infinite scrolling and personalized notifications, the convergence between video games and monetization, and the recent emergence of artificial intelligence-based agents are constantly transforming patterns of consumption. This dynamic requires continuous updating of psychometric assessment instruments and research designs to ensure the validity of diagnostic approaches.

The studies included in this special issue provide evidence from different perspectives on the relationship between technology and psychosocial adjustment during adolescence. Problematic video game use and monetization are addressed in the longitudinal study by Espada et al., which describes how profiles characterized by high levels of symptomatology and functional impairment show, over time, greater difficulties in emotional regulation and lower social integration. Vallejo-Achón and Bernaldo-de-Quirós examine consumption patterns, highlighting binge gaming and spending on monetization mechanisms as factors associated with the severity of Internet Gaming Disorder. Lloret-Irles et al. explore the convergence of these formats with gambling, emphasizing the role of loot boxes as a potential facilitator of gambling-related behaviors among young people.



Another aspect addressed concerns relational context and patterns of use. Within the family context, the study by Blanquer-Cortés and Martínez-Hernández identifies family conflict as a cross-cutting risk factor for problematic social media and video game use, with this association moderated by gender. Regarding temporal patterns of connectivity, the study by Villanueva et al. identifies an association between nighttime Internet use, sleep problems, and increased depressive symptoms. Finally, Pezzi et al. provide a critical review of dysfunctional use of generative artificial intelligence, proposing a theoretical framework based on emotional and motivational processes rather than purely symptom-based approaches.

Taken together, this body of research provides new and robust evidence aimed at advancing academic debate and informing public prevention policies designed to protect children and adolescents.

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