

Six Hours a Day

A school in Kuala Lumpur asked its students to count their screen time. The arguments started immediately.

6 min read

Before you read

- **displacement** — the idea that time spent on one thing takes time away from another
- **correlation** — a link between two things that rise or fall together
- **self-reported** — based on what people say about themselves rather than measured directly
- **sedentary** — involving a lot of sitting and little movement
- **moderate** — to keep something within sensible limits



The Form 1 class compares their weekly screen-time figures

¹ At the start of term, a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur set its Form 1 students an unusual piece of homework. Each of them was to open the settings on their phone, find the weekly screen-time report, and write the number down. No judgement, the teacher promised. No punishment. Just the number.

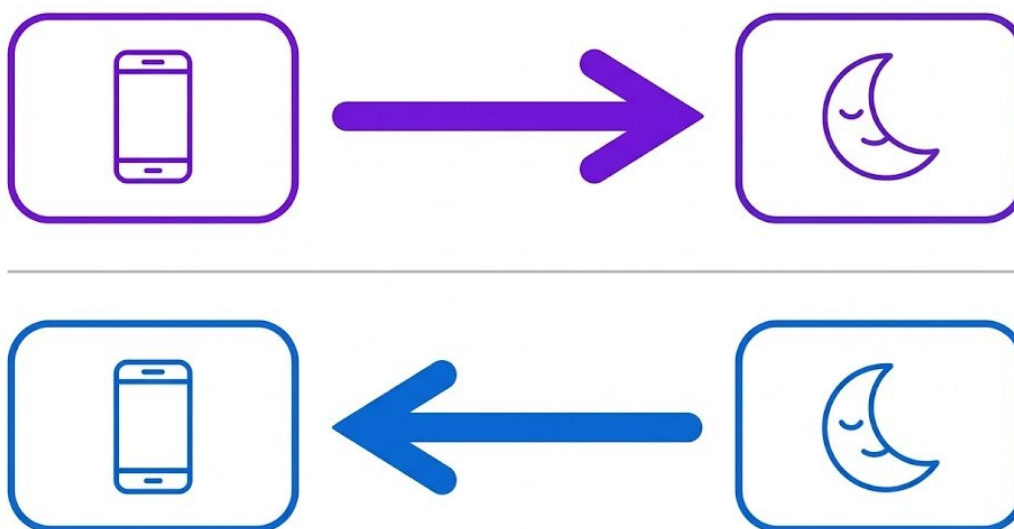
² The average came out at six hours and ten minutes a day.

³ The reaction in the classroom was not what the teacher had expected. Nobody was ashamed. Several students were surprised the figure was so low. One boy pointed out, reasonably, that two of his six hours were spent on a group video call doing homework with three friends, and asked whether that was really the same thing as watching short videos until one in the morning.

⁴ It is a better question than it sounds, and it is the question that makes screen-time research so difficult.

⁵ For about a decade, headlines have reported that screen use harms young people — their sleep, their attention, their mood. Many studies do find a correlation: groups who use screens more tend to report more of these problems. But a correlation is not a cause. Two things can rise together because one causes the other, or because both are caused by something else, or by coincidence. A teenager sleeping badly may be on their

phone at midnight *because* they cannot sleep, rather than the other way round.



The same correlation, read two ways: screen use disturbing sleep, or poor sleep leading to screen use

⁶ There is a second problem. Most of this research relies on self-reported figures, and people are poor witnesses to their own habits. When researchers have compared what people say about their phone use with what their phones actually record, the two often disagree by a wide margin — in both directions.

⁷ The finding that holds up best is not about screens at all. It is about displacement. An hour is an hour: time spent on a phone is time not spent sleeping, moving, reading or talking to someone in the same room. Where researchers find harm, it is usually clearest when screen use has pushed out sleep or physical activity, leaving a more sedentary day. The screen is the occasion for the problem rather than the cause of it.

⁸ That is why the Form 1 boy's objection matters. Six hours of lying on a bed watching videos displaces a great deal. Six hours that includes a video call with friends, a lesson, a map on the walk home and an hour of a game played with people you know displaces much less, and replaces some of it with something that looks a lot like company.

⁹ None of this means the number is harmless. Phones are designed by large teams of skilled people whose job is to make putting them down difficult, and a thirteen-year-old is not evenly matched against that effort. Notifications interrupt. Feeds do not end. The design is deliberate, and recognising it is not the same as being free of it.

¹⁰ It is also worth noticing who is doing the worrying. Every generation has had a technology it was warned about: the novel, the radio, the comic, the television, the video game. Each warning sounded urgent at the time and each now reads as faintly ridiculous. That history is a reason for caution about confident claims, but it is not an argument that this time must be harmless. Previous panics being overblown does not prove the current one is.

¹¹ What the research supports is narrower and duller than the headlines. Protect sleep first: screens late at night are the use most consistently linked to harm. Protect movement second. Beyond that, the kind of use matters more than the total, and a single number on a settings page cannot tell the difference between the two.

¹² The Kuala Lumpur class repeated the exercise eight weeks later. The average had dropped by about forty minutes, which the teacher had half expected. What she had not expected was the second column the students had added without being asked — a rough note, beside each figure, of what the time had actually been spent doing.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. What was the students' average daily screen time?

- A four hours and ten minutes
- B five hours exactly
- C six hours and ten minutes
- D eight hours

2. According to paragraph 5, why does a correlation not prove a cause?

- A Correlations are usually calculated incorrectly
- B Both things may be caused by something else, or linked by coincidence
- C Correlations only apply to large groups, never to individuals
- D A correlation is just another word for an opinion

3. What problem does the passage identify with self-reported data?

- A People often refuse to answer the questions
- B It takes too long to collect from large groups
- C People's accounts of their own habits often differ widely from what is recorded
- D It can only be collected from people who own phones

4. Which finding does the passage say holds up best?

- A Displacement — screen time pushing out sleep and movement
- B That all screen use damages attention
- C That games are more harmful than videos
- D That screen time has no measurable effect at all

5. The final paragraph suggests the students had come to understand that

- A the total number is the only thing worth tracking
- B what the time was spent doing matters as well as how much there was
- C screen time cannot be reduced without help from teachers
- D the first set of figures had been measured wrongly

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences, using evidence from the passage.

6. Explain the boy's objection in paragraph 3, and why the writer calls it 'a better question than it sounds'.

7. Using paragraph 5, give one reason a teenager might be on their phone at midnight that would reverse the usual explanation.

8. What does the writer mean by calling the screen 'the occasion for the problem rather than the cause of it'?

9. Paragraph 9 could be read as contradicting the rest of the passage. Explain why it does not.

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

10. Should a school be allowed to ask students to report their screen time, even with no punishment attached? Argue your case.

11. The passage says the research supports advice that is ‘narrower and duller than the headlines’. Why might dull, careful conclusions struggle to get attention? Does that matter?

12. Predict what the teacher does with this class next term, and say what in the passage makes you think so.

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. **C** — six hours and ten minutes | 2. **B** — Both things may be caused by something else, or linked by coincidence | 3. **C** — People's accounts of their own habits often differ widely from what is recorded | 4. **A** — Displacement — screen time pushing out sleep and movement | 5. **B** — what the time was spent doing matters as well as how much there was

Part B

6. He argued that homework on a video call with friends is not the same activity as watching videos late at night, even though both count as screen time. The writer agrees because it exposes the central weakness of the research: a single total treats very different activities as identical.

7. They may be using the phone because they already cannot sleep, rather than being unable to sleep because of the phone. Accept any answer that reverses the direction of cause.

8. The harm comes from what the time replaces — sleep, movement, company — not from the screen itself. The phone is where the lost hours happen to go, but any activity displacing sleep could do similar damage.

9. The earlier paragraphs argue the evidence of harm is weaker and more complicated than headlines claim; paragraph 9 argues phones are nonetheless deliberately designed to be hard to put down. Doubting the research is not the same as saying the design is harmless, so the two sit together.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

10. Strong answers weigh something real against something real — the value of the exercise against privacy, or the teacher's promise of no judgement against the pressure of reporting in front of classmates. Reward a position with a reason, whichever side it takes.

11. Look for an understanding that alarming claims travel further than cautious ones, and a judgement about the consequence — people may act on bad information, or stop trusting any of it. Prompt with: who benefits when the stronger claim is the one people hear?

12. A strong answer ties the prediction to the second column the students invented, or to the teacher's no-judgement approach — for example, moving from measuring totals to examining the kind of use. A weaker answer predicts with no link to the text.

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