

Data Bytes

June 2026

How do digital activities affect young people's wellbeing?

Summary

Digital technologies are a central part of young people's lives, at school and in their free time. As "digital natives", many spend large amounts of time online. This has raised concerns about possible harm to wellbeing and led to calls to limit young people's access to digital activities.

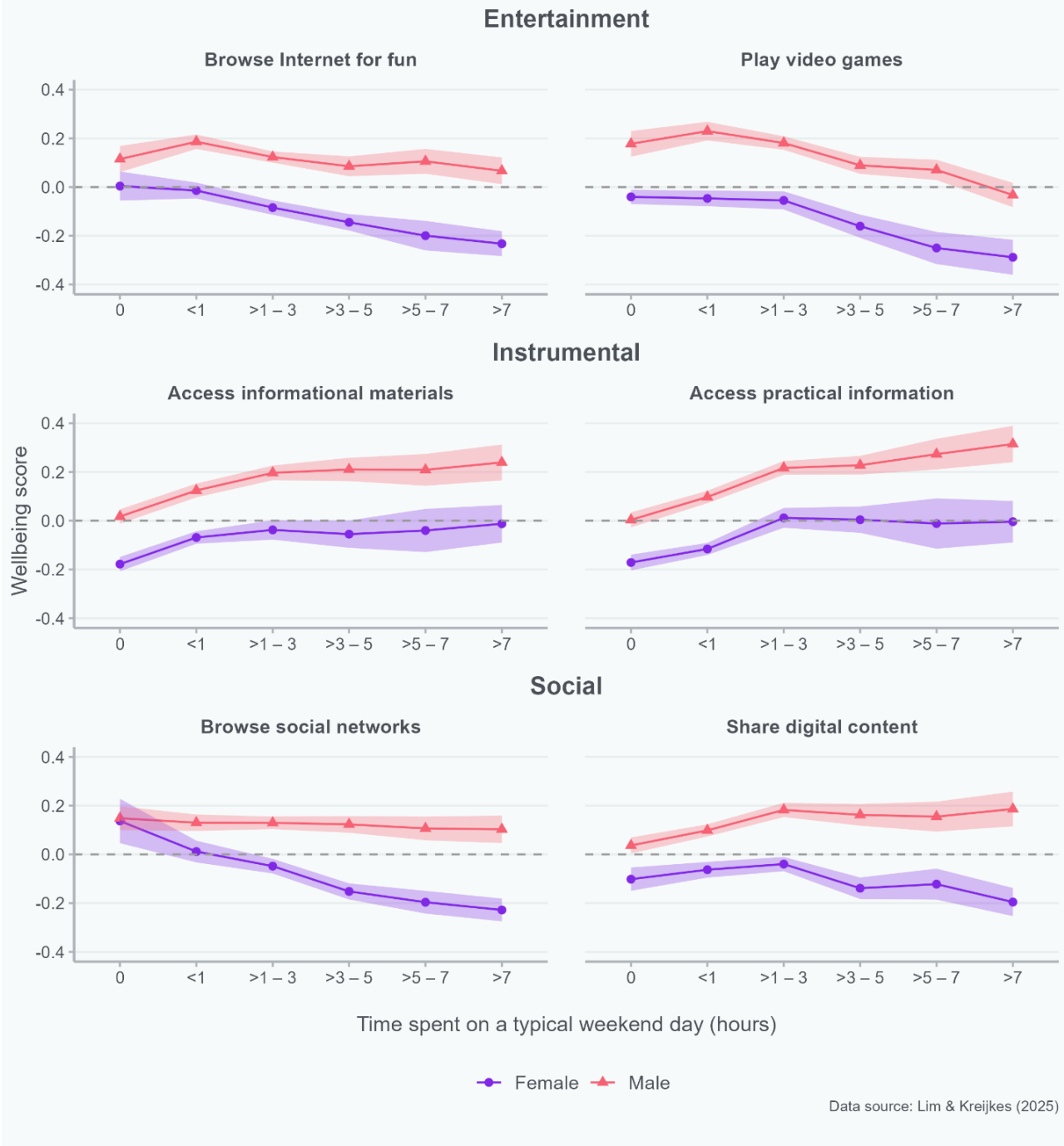
But what does the evidence actually show?

Recent research from Cambridge by Lim and Kreijkes ([2025](#), [2026](#)) used data from PISA 2022, a large international study of 15-year-olds, to explore how different digital activities are linked to different aspects of young people's wellbeing, and whether these links differ for males and females.

In this Data Byte, we'll take a closer look at one of their findings – how 'general wellbeing' scores change as time spent on digital activities increases.

Wellbeing and digital activities

Mean wellbeing score across ten countries (\pm 95% confidence interval)



What does the chart show?

The chart shows how wellbeing changes as the amount of time spent on six different digital activities increases, for PISA participants from ten countries or regions (Brazil, Costa Rica, Hong Kong, Hungary, Ireland, Macao, Panama, Saudi Arabia, Slovenia and Spain). These countries/regions were used as they were the only ones that administered both of the PISA wellbeing and ICT familiarity questionnaires.

The y axis gives scores for 'experienced wellbeing', a metric derived from responses to six specific questions, e.g., "*Did you smile or laugh a lot yesterday?*", and "*Did you have enough energy to get things done yesterday?*". Higher values relate to higher levels of wellbeing. Zero, shown by the dashed line, indicates the overall average wellbeing score.

The x axis gives the self-reported time participants spend doing the different digital activities "during a typical weekend day". Values toward the left indicate less time spent on that activity, and values toward the right indicate more time.

Each point therefore gives the mean wellbeing value for participants who report doing the digital activity for that particular amount of time. Shaded areas represent the 95% confidence interval around the mean.

Red points show values for male participants, and purple points show values for female participants.

As in Lim & Kreijkes ([2025](#)), the six digital activities are grouped into three broad categories: entertainment, instrumental (i.e., learning or work related) and social.

Why is the chart interesting?

The chart shows that the relationship between time spent on digital activities and young people's wellbeing varies by the *type* of activity, and between males and females.

"Instrumental" activities, relating to use of digital technology for learning or accessing information, are generally associated with higher wellbeing. This is seen for both male and female participants, although female wellbeing starts from a lower point and shows a limited increase beyond three hours per day.

Entertainment activities, relating to browsing the internet for fun and playing video games seem to be associated with lower wellbeing. The relationships are not uniformly negative though: male participants show higher wellbeing at <1 hour than at 0 hours, suggesting that spending *some* time on these digital activities may be beneficial.

Social activities, relating to the use of social media and sharing digital content, show an interesting difference between male and female participants. For males, spending more time on these activities is not associated with a meaningful change in wellbeing.

Conversely, for females, spending more time on them is associated with lower wellbeing, particularly so for social media.

We must note that the findings of this research do not tell us about cause and effect. For example, browsing social media *might* cause poorer wellbeing, *or* people with poorer wellbeing might spend more time browsing social media, *or* there might be another factor altogether linked to both wellbeing and social media use. Teasing these possibilities apart cannot necessarily be done from this type of survey data, but identifying these patterns provides a first step toward further investigation and gaining a better understanding.

Overall, the chart shows that the relationship between spending time on digital activities and young peoples' wellbeing is complex. Some actions may indeed have negative associations with wellbeing, whilst others may have positive associations. Also, different groups of young people might also be affected differently, with the charts here showing that wellbeing of males and females can have different associations with the same digital activity. These findings highlight the need for a nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of how digital engagement might affect young people's wellbeing differently.

Further information

Further details of the analysis and further findings can be found in:

Lim, C. H. J. & Kreijkes, P. (2025). *Youth wellbeing, digital use and digital literacy: Evidence from PISA 2022*. Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

<https://www.cambridge.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/757672-youth-wellbeing-digital-use-and-digital-literacy-evidence-from-pisa-2022.pdf>

Lim, C. H. J., & Kreijkes, P. (2026). Gaming and social media browsing: Evidence of links to wellbeing among girls and boys based on data from PISA 2022. *Research Matters: A Cambridge University Press & Assessment publication*, 41, 9–31.

<https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.127730>