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Landon Toth

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In the Zone and Off the Screen: Optimizing Free Time Through Flow Experiences

Landon Toth

Brigham Young University

Abstract

In recent years, people have become more dependent on using a screen, whether it be on a computer, a cell phone, or a television set. Studies have shown that exaggerated amounts of technology and internet usage can lead to problems in personal functioning. Studies also show that flow experiences, or experiences in which one achieves a balance between skill and challenge while experiencing a temporary loss of self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), are positively correlated with mental well-being. This study aims to investigate the influence that screen related hobbies can have on one's well-being by comparing them to non-screen related hobbies. Flow experiences and their influence on well-being are also investigated. It was found that having a non-screen related hobby is beneficial for emotional and social well-being. There was a positive correlation found between flow experiences and emotion and social well-being. Engaging in a non-screen related hobby seems to be beneficial for overall well-being.

In the Zone and Off the Screen: Optimizing Free Time Through Flow Experiences

With the modern influx of technology, social media, and screen-based pastimes such as video games and television, people all over the world are changing the way they spend their free time. A recent study showed that this increased use of technology, particularly the internet, has a negative relationship with the well-being of college students with 41.3% on the borderline of pathological use (31 to 40 hours of use a week) and 13% reported deficiencies in personal functioning as a result of their internet use (Maurya, Patel, & Sharma, 2018). In contrast, another study reported that Australian adults with greater engagement in visual arts, performing arts, and literature had significantly better mental well-being than those who did not (Davies, Knuiman, & Rosenberg, 2016).

It is clear that the way individuals spend their time has a significant effect on their general well-being. While studies done to this date have put the problem of free time usage into a greater perspective, two things should still be taken into consideration: (1) how particular types of hobbies influence well-being and (2) how flow experiences influence well-being. Flow is the “holistic sensation that people have when they act with total involvement” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). It occurs when one achieves a balance between skill and challenge while experiencing a temporary loss of self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). In other words, flow is when a person is “in the zone.” In a study examining knitting frequency and enjoyment among knitters around the world, researchers found that the knitters experienced increased happiness, calmness, and cognitive activity when they achieved a flow experience (Riley, Corkhill, & Morris, 2013). Positive leisure motivation has also been shown to be correlated with a decrease in delinquency in high school students (Agnew & Peterson, 1989) and recovery from mental illnesses in adults

(Lloyd, King, McCarthy, & Scanlan, 2007). This suggests that flow experiences can have positive effects on one's well-being, yet further examination is required.

The purpose of this study is to investigate if different types of hobbies (leisure activities and pastimes) affect physical, emotional, and social well-being in adults. The role that flow experiences play in well-being will also be examined. It is hypothesized that non-screen related hobbies will produce more flow experiences and will have a greater positive effect on all-around well-being. It is also hypothesized that greater flow experiences will be correlated with better all-around well-being. The goal of the study is to provide a greater understanding of the influence particular hobbies can have on adults' lives. This understanding will provide greater direction as to how one can most wisely spend their time. This will in turn improve the well-being of adults and, ideally, their posterities.

Method

Participants

Participants were 97 (20 male and 77 female) English-speaking adults in the United States. Participant's median age was 28. They identified themselves as White (94.8%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (1%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1%), Hispanic or Latino (1%), and Other (2.1%). Participation in this study took place on a voluntary basis. No compensation was offered. Participants were recruited through Facebook.

Materials

The following instruments were used: first, Schwartz and Waterman's (2006) Flow Experiences Scale ($\alpha=.70$), which includes a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all characteristic of me" to "very characteristic of me"; second, Jiang's (2017) Emotional Well-Being Scale ($\alpha=.76$), a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "all the time" to "none of the time," in

which higher scores indicate better emotional well-being; third, Robins, Hendin, and Trzesniewski's (2001) Physical Well-being Measures, a two-item measure which asks about current health and frequency of doctor visits; lastly, the Social Success Measure ($\alpha=.87$), authored by Pea et al. (2012), which includes a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Procedure

Participants were asked to specify if they had a hobby, to what extent they were involved in that hobby, and what type of hobby it would categorize as. They then completed a survey comprised of the previously described instruments.

Results

Flow scores ranged from 8 to 36, with a lower score indicating a better flow experience. The mean flow score of 18.14 suggests that participants as a whole demonstrated greater propensity to have a flow experience. Emotional well-being scores ranged from 4 to 16 with a mean of 8.62. Lower emotional well-being scores indicate better emotional well-being. Social well-being scores ranged from 8 to 42 with a mean of 20.85. Lower social well-being scores indicate better social well-being. Physical well-being scores ranged from 2 to 10 with a mean of 5.27. Lower physical well-being scores indicate better physical well-being.

It was hypothesized that greater flow scores would be positively correlated with emotional, social, and physical well-being. To investigate this hypothesis, several correlations were conducted. Results indicated that there is a slight positive correlation between flow and emotional well-being ($r = .245$) and flow and social well-being ($r = .262$). There was no correlation between flow and physical well-being.

It was also hypothesized that non-screen related hobbies would have a positive effect on physical, social, and emotional well-being. Four separate ANOVAs were conducted (see Figure 1). The first, which compared the means of types of hobbies with the mean of emotional health, was not significant, $F_{(2, 94)} = 7.269$, $p < .05$, $\omega = .06$. There was no significant difference in the emotional health between those with screen related hobbies, those with non-screen related hobbies, and those with no hobby. However, an independent t-test was done comparing only the means of screen related hobbies and non-screen related hobbies, which proved to be significant, $t(96) = -2.032$, $p < .05$, $d = .81$, $CI_{95} = [-3.27, -.04]$. Those who participate in non-screen related hobbies ($M = 8.49$, $s = 1.96$) have significantly better emotional well-being than those who participate in screen related hobbies ($M = 10.14$, $s = 3.24$).

The second ANOVA compared the means of types of hobbies and social well-being. The results were significant, $F_{(2, 94)} = 4.153$, $p < .05$, $\omega = .06$. Through a Tukey HSD post hoc test, it was found that there were significant differences between non-screen related hobbies ($M = 20.26$, $s = 6.91$) and no hobbies ($M = 30.00$, $s = 4.14$). It can be concluded that having a non-screen related hobby is more beneficial for one's social well-being than not having a hobby, but having a screen related hobby ($M = 22.86$, $s = 5.64$) is not statistically more beneficial than not having hobby at all.

The third ANOVA compared the means of types of hobbies and physical well-being. The results were not significant, $F_{(2, 94)} = .192$, $p < .05$, $\omega = .01$. There were no differences between the physical well-being of those who participated in non-screen related hobbies ($M = 5.23$, $s = 2.03$), those who participated in screen related hobbies ($M = 5.71$, $s = 1.70$), and those who do not have a hobby ($M = 5.25$, $s = .50$).

The fourth ANOVA compared the means of types of hobbies and flow scores. The results were significant, $F_{(2, 94)} = 7.296$, $p < .05$, $\omega = .11$. A Tukey HSD post hoc test revealed that there were significant differences between the means of screen related hobbies ($M = 19.00$, $s = 5.16$) and no hobby ($M = 28.00$, $s = 6.98$) and between non-screen related hobbies ($M = 17.62$, $s = 5.29$) and no hobby. There was no significant difference between non-screen hobbies and screen hobbies.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine if non-screen related hobbies are better for emotional, social, and physical well-being. It was hypothesized, based on past studies, that screen related hobbies would have a negative effect on well-being. Another purpose of the study was to observe the effect that flow experiences have on well-being. It was hypothesized that flow would have positive effects on emotional, social, and physical well-being.

The findings of this study indicated that non-screen related hobbies are better for emotional and social well-being than both screen related hobbies and not having a hobby at all. In the case of emotional well-being, a t-test revealed that non-screen related hobbies are more beneficial than screen related hobbies. This could be because non-screen related activities generally involve focusing on yourself instead of watching the lives of others through a screen. In the case of social well-being, non-screen related hobbies are more beneficial than screen related hobbies. It was also found that screen related hobbies are not significantly better for social well-being than not having a hobby at all. Non-screen related hobbies generally indicate face-to-face interaction with other people, which calls for greater social well-being. In regards to physical well-being, no significant differences were found between non-screen related hobbies, screen related hobbies, and no hobby. The study also shows that there is a correlation between

flow experiences and both social and emotional well-being. This suggests that as people participate in an activity that they are deeply involved in, they are able to be more confident with themselves and their abilities. They are less shy around others and are happier with themselves because they know that there is something they feel they are good at. In contrast, there is no correlation between flow and physical well-being. Healthy and unhealthy people all had nearly equal levels of flow.

The findings of this study confirm the findings of Davies, Knuiiman, and Rosenberg (2016) in that those involved in social, culturally enriching hobbies have better mental well-being. These findings assist in our understanding of the positive influence non-screen related hobbies can have on not only our mental health but also our all-around well-being. These findings also add a new perspective to the studies of hobbies: flow. Some of the well-being in those with non-screen hobbies could be attributed to flow, as the results of this study indicate.

These results suggest that more flow experiences are beneficial for our emotional and social health. They also indicate that flow is more likely to occur if an individual participates in a hobby that does not involve a screen. The improved well-being could be attributed to more flow experiences and also to more exposure to others. These findings add to the theory of flow—the idea that having more flow experiences can yield improved well-being in several areas of life, including social and emotional. This is of interest because, due to the massive amounts of technology that are being used in recent years, well-being could be at risk. If more emphasis is put on the importance of non-screen hobbies, the result would be a happier, healthier human population.

Limitations of this study include having a small sample size. Having a greater number of responses to the survey could have made the study more valid. Another limitation of the study is

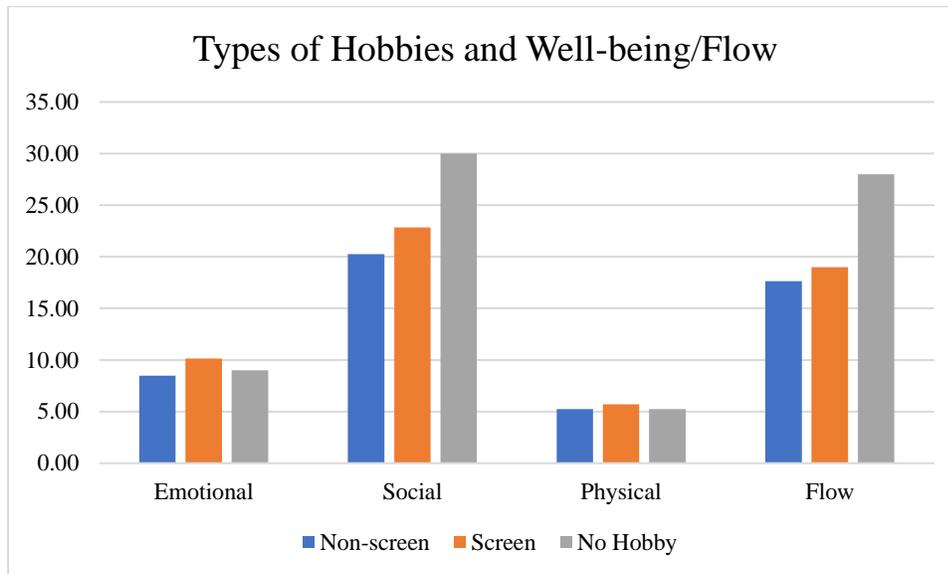
the fact that many people that reported to have a non-screen related hobby may still participate in other screen related activities daily. Each person chose only one hobby, which was then categorized into a screen or non-screen group. The participants may have several hobbies, screen or non-screen, and the results may have been different had they chosen a different hobby. Also, a large portion of participants were female, which may have had an impact on the outcome, as men and women tend to participate in different hobbies.

Future studies should have more focus on differentiating between screen related hobbies and non-screen related hobbies. A comparison between hours participants spend each day looking at a screen or participating in a non-screen related hobby would yield more useful information that could add to the findings of this study.

Overall, the findings of this study significantly show that spending free time without screen usage may improve emotional and social health. Participating in a book club, taking up a craft, or playing a sport regularly will help to increase flow experiences and improve all-around health. This study, along with previous studies, has shown that finding a hobby can help to make one happier and more consistently calm. This is one step that can be taken to improve the well-being in adults in the United States and, ultimately, the world.

Appendix

Figure 1:



*Lower scores indicate better well-being/flow. Non-screen related hobbies are more beneficial for emotional well-being than screen related hobbies. In regards to social health, non-screen related hobbies are more beneficial than having no hobby at all, but having a screen related hobby is not more beneficial than not having a hobby.

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