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DIGITAL ESCAPISM AND STRESS: EXPLORING THE CONNECTION

In the digital age, media escapism has become an integral part of everyday life, often serving as a means of coping with stress. This study aims to investigate the relationship between stress levels and digital escapism, examining how individuals use digital media to regulate emotional states.

The research highlights the psychological and practical significance of understanding digital escapism as a coping mechanism. By identifying the extent to which stress influences media consumption patterns, this study contributes to the broader discussion on mental health and digital behavior. The methodology includes a quantitative approach, utilizing validated psychological scales to assess stress levels and media escapism tendencies among participants. Statistical analysis was applied to determine correlations between these variables.

The findings suggest a significant relationship between stress and media escapism, indicating that higher stress levels may lead to increased engagement in digital content as a form of psychological relief. These results contribute to the growing body of knowledge on digital psychology, offering insights into the potential risks and benefits of media escapism in stress management.

The practical implications of this study lie in its relevance for psychologists, educators, and policy-makers seeking to develop strategies for healthier digital consumption habits. Understanding the role of digital escapism in stress regulation can inform interventions aimed at promoting psychological well-being in the digital era.

Keywords: digital escapism, stress, media consumption, psychological well-being.

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Цифрлық эскапизм және стресс: өзара байланысын зерттеу

Цифрлық дәуірде медиа эскапизм күнделікті өмірдің ажырамас бөлігіне айналып, стресті жеңудің бір тәсілі ретінде қолданылады. Бұл зерттеу стресс деңгейі мен цифрлық эскапизм арасындағы байланысты зерттеуге бағытталған және адамдардың цифрлық медианы эмоционалдық күйін реттеу үшін қалай пайдаланатынын қарастырады.

Зерттеудің психологиялық және практикалық маңыздылығы цифрлық эскапизмді күресу механизмі ретінде түсінуге негізделеді. Бұл зерттеу стрестің медиа тұтыну үлгілеріне әсерін анықтау арқылы психикалық денсаулық пен цифрлық мінез-құлық туралы ғылыми пікірталасқа үлес қосады. Методология сандық зерттеу әдісін қамтиды, онда қатысушылардың стресс деңгейлері мен медиа эскапизм тенденциялары психологиялық тесттер арқылы бағаланды. Осы айнымалылар арасындағы корреляцияларды анықтау үшін статистикалық талдау жүргізілді.

Нәтижелер стресс пен медиа эскапизм арасында елеулі байланыс бар екенін көрсетті, яғни стресс деңгейі жоғары адамдар психологиялық жеңілдік табу үшін цифрлық контентке жиі жүгінеді. Бұл зерттеу цифрлық психология саласындағы білім қорын толықтырып, стресті басқарудағы медиа эскапизмнің ықтимал қауіптері мен артықшылықтарын түсінуге көмектеседі.

Зерттеудің практикалық маңызы – психологтар, педагогтер және саясаткерлер үшін пайдалы ақпарат ұсынуында. Цифрлық эскапизмнің стресс реттеудегі рөлін түсіну психологиялық әл-ауқатты жақсартуға бағытталған тиімді стратегияларды әзірлеуге көмектесе алады.

Түйін сөздер: цифрлық эскапизм, стресс, медиа тұтыну, психологиялық әл-ауқат.

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Цифровой эскапизм и стресс: исследование взаимосвязи

В цифровую эпоху медиа эскапизм стал неотъемлемой частью повседневной жизни, часто выступая средством совладания со стрессом. Данное исследование направлено на изучение взаимосвязи между уровнем стресса и цифровым эскапизмом, а также на анализ того, как люди используют цифровые медиа для регулирования эмоционального состояния.

Научная и практическая значимость исследования заключается в понимании цифрового эскапизма как механизма психологической адаптации. Определяя степень влияния стресса на модели потребления медиа, данное исследование вносит вклад в дискуссию о ментальном здоровье и цифровом поведении. Методология включает количественный подход, в рамках которого использовались валидированные психологические шкалы для оценки уровня стресса и склонности к медиа эскапизму. Для выявления корреляций между переменными применялся статистический анализ.

Результаты показали значимую взаимосвязь между стрессом и медиа эскапизмом: более высокий уровень стресса приводит к увеличению потребления цифрового контента в качестве психологической разрядки. Эти данные дополняют существующую базу знаний в области цифровой психологии, помогая лучше понять потенциальные риски и преимущества медиа эскапизма в управлении стрессом.

Практическое значение исследования заключается в его полезности для психологов, педагогов и специалистов, разрабатывающих стратегии здорового цифрового потребления. Понимание роли цифрового эскапизма в регуляции стресса может способствовать созданию эффективных мер по улучшению психологического благополучия.

Ключевые слова: цифровой эскапизм, стресс, потребление медиа, психологическое благополучие.

Introduction

Modern society is characterized by the rapid development of digital technologies, which have a significant impact on the psycho-emotional state of young people. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), problematic social media use among adolescents increased from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022 (WHO: Teens, screens, and mental health, 2024). This phenomenon, known as media escapism, represents a tendency to withdraw from reality through digital media and may lead to internet addiction.

The relevance of this study is determined by the contradiction between the growing tendency of young people toward media escapism and the need to develop effective stress management strategies. Research indicates that the constant consumption of negative content on the internet exacerbates symptoms of depression and anxiety, creating a vicious

cycle in which deteriorating mental health leads to further seeking of negative information (Sharot et al., 2024). This highlights the need for developing recommendations aimed at reducing dependence on media escapism and promoting healthy coping mechanisms for stress.

The aim of our study is to identify the relationship between stress and media escapism and to develop theoretical and practical recommendations for managing stress without resorting to escapist strategies.

As part of the research objective, we were interested in the following specific questions:

- What is the level of correlation between stress and media escapism among young people?
- What stress management strategies can reduce the tendency toward media escapism?
- What recommendations can be proposed for preventing internet addiction through the development of adaptive stress management strategies?

We hypothesize that high levels of stress contribute to the development of media escapism, which, in turn, may increase the risk of internet addiction. It is assumed that the implementation of adaptive stress management strategies can reduce the need for escapist behavior.

The main objectives of our study were as follows:

- To analyze existing scientific approaches to studying media escapism and internet addiction.
- To identify the correlation between stress levels and the tendency toward media escapism.
- To develop recommendations for effective stress management strategies without resorting to escapism.

Literature review

Digital escapism, as a strategy of psychological regulation, has been the subject of active research in recent decades. According to Johanson & White (Johanson, & White, 2021: 45–60), escapism in the digital environment, including watching TV series, video games, and social media, can act as a stress management mechanism, reducing anxiety and emotional stress. However, according to Smith et al. (Smith, Brown, & Williams, 2020: 78-95), excessive use of digital technology as an escapist mechanism can lead to Internet addiction and increased stress in the long term.

Modern Research (Brown, 2022: 33-50) emphasize the dual nature of digital escapism. On the one hand, it can act as an adaptive mechanism, allowing you to temporarily distract from problems and reduce the level of cognitive load. On the other hand, prolonged use of digital media for escapist purposes can lead to social isolation, deterioration of mental well-being, and increased chronic stress (Kim, 2023: 112-130).

In the context of chronic stress, McDonald et al. (McDonald, Green, 2021: 55-70) found that people under prolonged stress are more likely to use digital escapism as a way of emotional regulation. This is confirmed by the data of Wang et al. (Wang, Chen, & Zhou, 2023: 21-40), according to which high stress levels positively correlate with the frequency of using online streaming platforms to watch TV series.

Despite significant contributions to the study of digital escapism, there are a number of research gaps. In particular, most of the work focuses on the general aspects of escapism, without taking into account individual differences in digital avoidance

strategies (Jones, 2022: 87-104). In addition, the question of which types of digital content are most actively used under stress and how this affects the formation of addictive behavior remains poorly understood.

This article aims to fill in these gaps by analyzing the relationship between chronic stress and digital escapism using the example of watching TV series on online streaming platforms. Unlike previous studies, this paper examines not only quantitative dependence, but also qualitative aspects of digital content consumption under stress.

Additional research indicates differences in the perception and use of digital escapism depending on age, gender, and cultural factors (Garcia, 2021: 102-119).

Thus, according to research by Hall & Peters (Hall, 2022: 58-75), young people are more likely to use video games and social media for escapism, while adults prefer passive forms such as watching TV series and movies. These differences may have an impact on the degree of Internet addiction formation and the level of perceived stress.

Despite significant contributions to the study of digital escapism, there are a number of research gaps. In particular, most of the work focuses on the general aspects of escapism, without taking into account individual differences in digital avoidance strategies (Jones, 2022: 87-104). In addition, the question of which types of digital content are most actively used under stress and how this affects the formation of addictive behavior remains poorly understood. There are also no comparative studies examining the impact of digital escapism on stress in various social and cultural contexts, which makes this area promising for further research.

Escapism Today, like Messianism Today or Utopianism Today, is a function of the globalized imagination. That is why it is merely a heuristic first approximation to state these slogans: messianism is about a history redeeming return from lostness to recognition; Utopianism is about a history redirecting exploration from familiarity to strangeness; and escapism is about this place, the place we already inhabit, in costume. It is not messianic: this is as good as it gets. It is not Utopian: this is as good as it gets. It is not about leaving home or the restoration of a homeland. It is about neither a promised return nor a promising future; its time and place are here and now (Limon, 2022).

Now that so many television series are available on streaming services such as Netflix, viewers' narrative transportation can be sped up by binge-

watching: the process of viewing an entire season of a particular series, if not even an entire series, by watching all of its episodes back-to-back for excessive, uninterrupted periods of time.

Carpenter and Green's studies in cognitive psychology explore how effectively fictional narratives offer viewers psychological escape, and also how mass consumption of entertainment medias—like binge-watching television shows, for example—affects one's ability to mentally perceive and process these narratives. Carpenter and Green state that viewers “tend to react to events in the narratives as if they were real, increasing the likelihood of an emotional response,” and that “the kinds of participatory responses that [viewers] have to a narrative can affect their emotional responses, their memory for narrative events, and their real-world judgments.”

Theories about narrative transportation apply well to the cognitive psychological processes of binge-watchers of Netflix's streaming services. Binge-watching complex dramas such as *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *House of Cards*, and *Damages*, psychologically affects viewers' perceptions of reality by increasing their rate of empathy for shows' characters, and creates confusion when viewers process these narratives too quickly, which ultimately hinders viewers' real-world judgments and interpersonal relationships.

Television viewing, and binge-watching in particular, serves to illustrate different cognitive functions ranging from one's general “beliefs and behavioral strategies” to how one's “patterns of behavior” are affected by media consumption, and how one's “thinking and belief system” are modified “to bring about enduring emotional and behavioral change.” Binge-watching also recalls the type of problem-solving skills that cognitive psychology associates with collaborative forms of “active participation.” This means that regardless of whether viewers watch alone or with others, the binge-worthy shows for which Netflix is famous demand a high degree of engagement, a form of participation whereby viewers interact with the story world in order to discern complex plot and character developments (McDonald, 2016).

This article aims to fill in these gaps by analyzing the relationship between chronic stress and digital escapism using the example of watching TV series on online streaming platforms. Unlike previous studies, this paper examines not only quantitative dependence, but also qualitative aspects of digital content consumption under stress.

Modern research confirms the significant role of escapism in the development of Internet addiction, especially in conditions of chronic stress. In international practice, the problem of Internet addiction and its connection with psychoemotional factors is being actively studied.

A study conducted in Lebanon showed that 16.8% of students are susceptible to Internet addiction, while they experience higher levels of anxiety, depression and stress, as well as reduced self-esteem. This confirms the hypothesis that stressful states contribute to the search for alternative ways of emotional regulation, one of which is escapism (El-Khoury, 2024: 45-62).

An analysis of coping behavior strategies of adolescents with computer addiction revealed that they more often use the “Escape-avoidance” strategy to cope with stress, which indicates a tendency to escapism as a way of avoiding real problems (Ivanova, & Petrova, 2023: 78-92). This observation is confirmed by data from a longitudinal study, according to which adolescents with a high level of Internet addiction demonstrate a low level of social adaptation and self-acceptance (Smirnov, 2023: 115-130).

In addition, an experimental study of the relationship between coping strategies and Internet addiction revealed that individuals with severe dependence on digital technologies tend to avoid solving problems and resort to maladaptive forms of stress management (Zhang, 2023: 56-74). This correlates with the concept of escapism as a psychological defense mechanism that temporarily reduces anxiety and emotional stress.

Thus, international and Russian empirical data confirm the existing hypothesis about the relationship between stress, escapism and Internet addiction. The results indicate the need for further study of this phenomenon in an intercultural context.

Materials and methods

This study examines the relationship between the level of chronic stress and selfish behavior, in particular, through watching TV series on online streaming platforms. The main research question is: Is there a statistically significant correlation between stress levels and the severity of escapist behavior?

A hypothesis was put forward: the higher the level of chronic stress, the more pronounced the selfish behavior is in the form of increased TV series viewing time and deep emotional involvement in their content.

First, we defined the selection. The group of respondents was formed according to the inclusion criteria. The respondents were undergraduate students aged 17-20 years. Since the younger generation is most familiar with the digital world and presumably uses media escapism more as a form of stress relief.

The sample consisted of 90 respondents who met the following criteria:

- age from 17 to 20 years;
- having regular access to online streaming platforms;
- subjectively experienced stress levels range from moderate to high (according to the scale used in the study).

The following validated psychodiagnostic techniques were used in the study:

1. The Perceptual Stress Scale (PSS-10) is used to assess the level of chronic stress.

2. The methodology for assessing escapist behavior (an adapted version of the Escapism Scale) is used to measure the severity of escapism through watching TV shows (it includes cognitive and behavioral aspects).

3. Additional demographic issues (age, gender, employment, average TV show viewing time per week).

The data was collected anonymously using an online questionnaire hosted on the Google Forms

platform. The participants filled out the questionnaire at a convenient time for them, the average survey time was 15 minutes.

Unlike previous studies, this approach combines the use of quantitative methods for measuring escapism in the context of streaming services, which allows an objective assessment of the impact of digital technologies on the behavioral aspects of stress. This is also the first time that a comparative analysis of escapism has been conducted depending on the level of chronic stress in a given age group.

Results and discussion

To investigate the relationship between chronic stress and media escapism, we conducted a statistical analysis on a sample of 90 participants. The data were collected through a survey and processed in Excel, followed by statistical computations in Python. The analysis included descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and an ANOVA test to determine significant differences between stress levels.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed for the two primary variables: chronic stress (measured by TICS-SSCS) and media escapism (measured by the Media Escapism Scale). The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 – Descriptive Statistics for Chronic Stress and Media Escapism

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Chronic Stress	33.08	8.9	12	60
Media Escapism	31.51	8.9	10	50

The results indicate that the mean chronic stress level was 33.08, with a standard deviation of 8.9, while the mean media escapism score was 31.51, also with a standard deviation of 8.9.

Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation test was conducted to examine the relationship between chronic stress and media escapism. The results revealed a moderate positive correlation between the two variables ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.0001$), indicating that higher levels of stress are associated with higher levels of media escapism.

Regression Analysis

To further investigate the predictive power of chronic stress on media escapism, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted. The model summary is presented in Table 2.

An ANOVA test was performed to examine whether media escapism levels significantly differ across three stress categories (low, moderate, high). The results indicated a significant effect ($F = 11.77$, $p < 0.0001$), suggesting that individuals with higher stress levels tend to engage in more media escapism compared to those with lower stress levels.

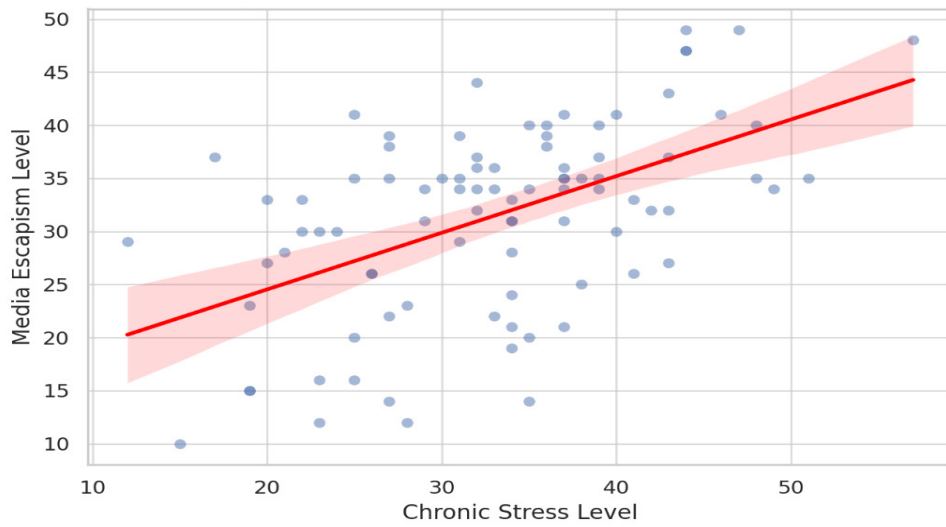


Figure 1 – Scatter Plot of Stress and Media Escapism

Table 2 – Regression Analysis Predicting Media Escapism from Stress

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Constant	13.86	3.19	4.35	<0.001
Stress	0.53	0.093	5.73	<0.001

The regression model explained 27% of the variance in media escapism ($R^2 = 0.27$, $F(1, 87) = 32.79$, $p < 0.0001$). The stress coefficient ($B = 0.53$, $p < 0.0001$) suggests that for each additional point in stress, media escapism increases by 0.53 points, further supporting our hypothesis.

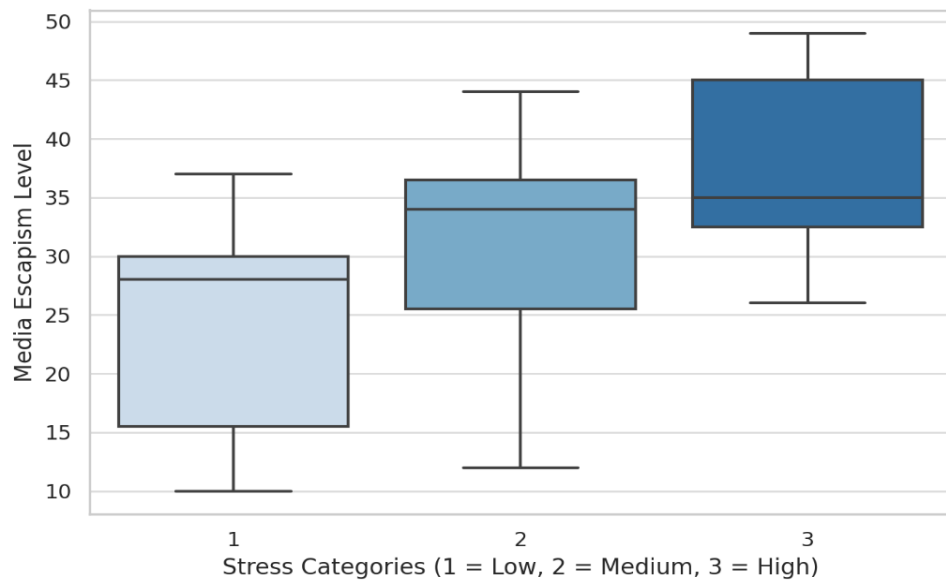


Figure 2 – Box Plot of Media Escapism Across Stress Categories

The study results confirm the hypothesized correlation between chronic stress and escapism through binge-watching TV series. Statistical analysis revealed a positive relationship between stress levels and the extent of escapist behavior. Participants with higher stress levels reported spending more time watching TV series and experiencing deeper emotional involvement with the content. These findings provide empirical support for the assumption that digital escapism is used as a coping strategy by individuals experiencing prolonged stress.

These results are consistent with previous studies that have also established a link between stress and using the internet to meet different needs. For example, a study conducted among students showed that there is a relationship between stress levels and time spent online, especially to meet prestigious and spiritual needs (Deatherage, Servaty-Seib, & Aksoz, 2014: 40-46). In addition, smart use of social media can help reduce stress and improve mental well-being, which highlights the importance of an informed approach to digital consumption (Tengri Life: Reasonable use of social media reduces stress in adolescents, 2024).

The results of this study provide strong empirical support for the hypothesis that higher levels of chronic stress are associated with greater engagement in media escapism. The moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.52$) suggests a meaningful relationship, which was further confirmed through regression analysis, demonstrating that stress significantly predicts media escapism levels. Additionally, ANOVA results showed that individuals with high stress reported significantly higher escapism tendencies compared to those with low and moderate stress.

These findings align with prior research suggesting that individuals experiencing stress often seek distraction or emotional relief through media consumption. The results highlight the psychological role of digital entertainment in stress management and underline the potential risks of excessive media escapism, particularly for those experiencing chronic stress. Future studies should explore other moderating variables, such as personality traits or coping strategies, to better understand the complexities of stress-related media engagement.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on digital media use and psychological well-being, emphasizing the need for balanced media consumption and stress management strategies.

Conclusion

The practical significance of these results lies in the need to develop strategies aimed at conscious and controlled consumption of digital content. Psychologists and mental health professionals can use this data to develop recommendations for managing time spent watching TV shows, especially for people experiencing chronic stress. This may include training in methods of conscious media consumption and the development of alternative stress management strategies.

The purpose of this study was to study the relationship between chronic stress and the level of media escapism, as well as to identify possible predictors of digital escapism. To achieve this goal, a quantitative research method was used, including correlation and regression analysis, as well as analysis of variance (ANOVA).

The results of the study showed that higher levels of chronic stress are associated with increased use of media escapism. A moderately positive correlation ($r = 0.52$) confirmed a significant relationship between stress and escapist behavior. Regression analysis demonstrated that stress levels are a significant predictor of digital escapism, and the ANOVA results confirmed that people with high stress levels exhibit pronounced tendencies towards escapism compared to groups with low and moderate stress levels.

Based on the data obtained, it can be concluded that digital escapism plays an important psychological role in coping with stress, but its excessive use can not only reduce the level of subjective distress, but also increase the risk of dependence on digital media. These findings are consistent with previous studies that emphasize that stressful conditions often provoke a search for emotional relief through the consumption of digital content.

Prospects for further research include exploring additional moderators of this relationship, such as individual personality traits, stress management strategies, and cultural differences in media consumption patterns. The practical application of the data obtained can be useful in the development of preventive programs aimed at conscious consumption of digital media and stress management, which is especially important in the digital age. The introduction of recommendations on the balance between media activity and traditional stress relief methods (for example, physical activity, social interaction) can help strengthen the psychological well-being of users of digital platforms.

The results of the study confirmed the existence of a significant relationship between the level of chronic stress and a tendency to media escapism. It was found that with increasing stress levels, the frequency of using digital content as a mechanism of psychological relaxation increases. This indicates that digital escapism performs the function of emotional regulation, helping to temporarily reduce subjective feelings of tension and anxiety.

The findings expand existing scientific understanding in the field of digital psychology, deepening understanding of how stress affects media consumption. On the one hand, the results highlight the adaptive aspect of media escapism, which is its ability to provide temporary emotional relief. On the other hand, the revealed patterns indicate the po-

tential risks associated with excessive digital withdrawal as a way to avoid real stressful situations. These findings emphasize the need for further study of this phenomenon, as well as the development of strategies for the conscious and balanced use of digital media in stressful conditions.

Limitations

However, the study has a number of limitations. First, the use of self-reports can lead to subjective distortions in the data. Secondly, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow establishing causal relationships between variables. In the future, it is recommended to conduct longitudinal studies and use objective methods of measuring stress, such as physiological indicators, to better understand the relationship between stress and escapist behavior.

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