

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL WELL-BEING IN SUPPORTING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' LEARNING AND MENTAL HEALTH

*Norshuhada Samsudin¹, Wan Nur Shaziayani Mohd Rosly², Mawardi Omar³ and Sharifah Sarimah Syed Abdullah⁴
*norsh111@uitm.edu.my¹, shaziayani@uitm.edu.my², mawardio@uitm.edu.my³,
sh.sarimah@uitm.edu.my⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Jabatan Sains Komputer & Matematik (JSKM),
Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

*Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

In the digital age, university students rely heavily on technology for learning, communication, and academic productivity. While digital tools offer numerous educational benefits, excessive and unmanaged usage can negatively impact students' mental health and academic performance. This paper explores the concept of digital well-being and its significance in fostering a balanced academic experience. It examines the psychological effects of digital overuse such as stress, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and digital burnout and discusses how mindful technology practices can enhance concentration, emotional resilience, and social interaction. Drawing on recent literature, the study also highlights practical strategies for promoting digital well-being, including screen time management, digital detox activities, and institutional support. The findings emphasize the importance of cultivating healthy digital habits to ensure that technology serves as a tool for learning rather than a source of distress. Ultimately, promoting digital well-being is essential for creating supportive university environments that nurture both academic success and student mental health.

Keywords: University students', digital well-being, mental health, learning

Introduction

In today's university setting, students are deeply immersed in a digital environment where technology plays an essential role in academic life. From attending lectures and accessing course materials to conducting research and collaborating with peers, digital tools such as laptops, smartphones, and online platforms have become indispensable. This technological integration offers flexibility, efficiency, and convenience, enabling students to learn anytime and anywhere. However, constant exposure to digital devices also introduces new challenges, particularly in relation to students' mental health and learning behaviors.

Many students experience digital overload due to the pressure of being constantly connected, responding to notifications, multitasking across multiple platforms, and managing academic responsibilities online. This persistent engagement can lead to concentration difficulties, mental fatigue, sleep disturbances, and elevated stress levels. As digital boundaries between study time and personal time become increasingly blurred, students often struggle to maintain a healthy balance.

The concept of digital well-being has emerged as a response to these challenges. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021), digital well-being refers to the ability to use technology in ways that promote physical, mental, and social health. It involves

developing conscious and healthy digital habits, such as managing screen time, setting boundaries, avoiding digital distractions, and engaging positively with online content. For university students, cultivating digital well-being is crucial not only for maintaining psychological resilience but also for sustaining academic motivation and performance.

This paper explores the role of digital well-being in supporting university students' learning and mental health. Specifically, it aims to examine how students' digital usage patterns impact their academic outcomes and emotional well-being, and to identify strategies that students and institutions can adopt to promote healthier digital engagement. By understanding the link between digital behavior and student well-being, educators and policymakers can foster learning environments that are both technologically advanced and supportive of holistic student development.

Literature Review

Digital well-being, a concept gaining prominence in education and technology, lacks a consensus definition but generally refers to the impact of digital technologies on human flourishing (Cao & Li, 2023). It encompasses various dimensions, including emotional and mental well-being, particularly in technology-enhanced learning contexts (El Aadmi-Laamech et al., 2022). Research has identified factors contributing to digital well-being, such as duration and place of digital use, demographic characteristics, and parental influences (Cao & Li, 2023). Active learning methodologies and digital technologies in higher education have shown potential benefits for students' well-being, impacting academic achievement, physical health, and social life (Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2022). However, measuring digital well-being, especially in young children, remains challenging (Cao & Li, 2023). The ethical implications of digital well-being span multiple domains, including healthcare, education, governance, and entertainment, with ongoing discussions centered on positive computing, personalized human-computer interaction, and autonomy (Burr et al., 2019).

Many research indicates that excessive digital technology use can negatively impact health, particularly among children and adolescents. Common issues include visual strain, musculoskeletal problems, sleep disorders, and reduced physical activity (Shubochkina, 2021). Psychological effects such as internet addiction, depressive symptoms, and aggressive behavior have also been observed (Shubochkina, 2021). While general effects are small and negative, impacts vary based on usage type: procrastination and passive use correlate with negative outcomes, while social and active use tend to be more positive (Dienlin & Johannes, 2020). Moderate use appears to be associated with increased well-being, whereas both low and excessive use relate to decreased well-being (Dienlin & Johannes, 2020). To mitigate risks, experts recommend monitoring children's technology use in terms of content, duration, and frequency, while ensuring adequate physical activity, healthy eating habits, and proper sleep cycles (Prakash et al., 2024).

Impact of Digital Technology on Mental Health

The influence of digital technology on university students' mental health has become a growing area of concern. While digital tools provide convenience and access to information, prolonged and unregulated use can contribute to various psychological challenges. One of the most reported issues among students is the increase of anxiety due to constant connectivity. A chronic sense of urgency can be brought on by the pressure to reply to academic emails, messages, or online discussions as soon as possible, as well as by frequent notifications and alerts. Even outside of study hours, this hyper-responsiveness often referred to as "techno-stress," prevents students from fully disengaging and recovering mentally.

The quality of sleep is another important factor. Blue light exposure from excessive screen time, especially at night, has been connected to circadian rhythm disturbances. Many students report staying up late to finish online assignments or browse social media, which shortens their sleep duration and compromises their sleep hygiene. Over time, prolonged sleep deprivation can impair cognitive functioning, emotional management, and academic achievement.

Ironically, despite regular online connections, excessive digital use can also result in feelings of social isolation. While social media offers the illusion of connectedness, it can foster unhealthy comparisons, fear of missing out (FOMO), and low self-esteem especially when students compare their academic or personal achievements to curated images of others. This leads to a distorted sense of self-worth and depressed symptoms.

Additionally, students often experience mental exhaustion or "digital burnout" from spending extended hours attending online classes, participating in virtual meetings, and multitasking across multiple platforms. This constant mental engagement can reduce motivation, increase emotional irritability, and diminish one's overall sense of well-being.

Overall, the mental health effects of digital overuse are multidimensional, affecting students' emotional stability, stress levels, and capacity for focus and motivation. The need to address these challenges is urgent, especially as digital learning environments continue to evolve. To clearly organize the common mental health challenges faced by university students due to digital technology use, Table 1 below summarizes the main causes and their psychological impacts:

Table 1: Summary of Digital Challenges Faced by University Students

Challenge	Cause	Impact on Mental Health
Constant notifications	Social media alerts, academic platforms	Anxiety, distraction, reduced mental clarity
Late-night screen use	Finishing assignments, scrolling social apps	Sleep disruption, fatigue, lower concentration
Tech multitasking	Switching between tabs and platforms	Cognitive overload, stress, reduced retention

Social media comparison	Viewing curated content	Low self-esteem, depressive feelings
Lack of digital boundaries	Always being online	Digital burnout, difficulty relaxing

Positive Effects of Digital Well-Being on Student Life

Digital well-being practice has several benefits for university students, especially for their mental health and ability to focus on their studies. By setting boundaries such as limiting screen time, turning off distractions, and taking regular breaks students often experience better concentration, time management, and learning efficiency.

Digital well-being also supports emotional health. Students who practice mindful digital habits report lower levels of stress and anxiety, improved mood, and better sleep quality. Establishing screen-free periods before bedtime, for example, helps restore healthy sleep cycles, which in turn enhances daytime alertness and emotional balance.

Moreover, healthier digital habits can strengthen real-life social interactions. Instead of passive scrolling or online comparison, students who use digital platforms intentionally are more likely to engage in meaningful communication and collaborative learning.

Overall, digital well-being empowers students to manage their technology use in ways that enhance not hinder their academic performance and mental resilience. Promoting these habits encourages a more balanced, focused, and fulfilling university experience.

Recommended Strategies for Promoting Digital Well-Being

In order to help university students maintain a healthier relationship with digital technology, it is essential to implement practical and evidence-based strategies that promote digital well-being. These strategies should aim to reduce digital fatigue, enhance self-regulation, and support both academic focus and emotional balance. Educational institutions play a crucial role in creating supportive environments that encourage students to adopt mindful digital habits. Table 2 outlines several recommended strategies, their intended purposes, and examples of how they can be implemented in a university setting.

Table 2: Recommended Strategies for Promoting Digital Well-Being

Strategy	Purpose	Implementation Example
Screen time limits	Prevent overuse and mental fatigue	Set daily application timers (e.g., 2 hours max)

Digital detox activities	Encourage offline balance	“Tech-Free Weekend” campaign
Sleep hygiene improvement	Encourage offline balance	Screen curfew 1 hour before bed
Digital literacy education	Raise awareness of healthy tech use	Workshops or orientation sessions
Balanced online learning design	Reduce digital overload from academic content	Mix of video, readings, and offline tasks

Conclusion

Digital well-being is essential in maintaining a healthy balance between academic demands and mental health among university students. While technology enhances access to learning and increases flexibility, unregulated and excessive digital engagement can lead to psychological strain, including anxiety, digital fatigue, poor sleep quality, and social isolation. These negative effects can hinder students’ academic motivation and overall well-being.

This paper highlights that digital well-being is not about rejecting technology, but it is about using it mindfully and intentionally. When students adopt healthy digital habits such as setting boundaries, taking breaks, and engaging meaningfully with online content, they experience improved focus, emotional regulation, and resilience.

To support this, universities must play a proactive role by promoting digital literacy, designing balanced online learning environments, and implementing well-being initiatives. Through institutional commitment and individual self-regulation, a more supportive and productive digital learning experience can be cultivated. As digital learning continues to evolve, prioritizing student well-being will be vital to fostering both academic success and holistic personal development.

References:

- Burr, C., Taddeo, M. & Floridi, L (2020). The ethics of digital well-being: A thematic review. *Science Engineering Ethics*, 26, 2313–2343. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-020-00175-8>
- Cao, S.; Li, H. (2023). A scoping review of digital well-being in early childhood: Definitions, measurements, contributors, and interventions. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(4), 3510. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20043510>
- Dienlin, T., & Johannes, N. (2020). The impact of digital technology use on adolescent well being. *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 22, 135 - 142.
- K. E. Aadmi-Laamech, E. Hakami, P. Santos and D. Hernández-Leo (2022). The term well-being in technology-enhanced learning: A systematic literature review. *2022 International Symposium on Computers in Education (SIIE)*, 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1109/SIIE56031.2022.9982319>

- Prakash, A. A., Mathur, R. P., & Sehrawat, S. (2024). Negative impact of digital technology on children's health. *Journal of Research in Vocational Education*, 6(10), 30–35. [https://doi.org/10.53469/jrve.2024.6\(10\).06](https://doi.org/10.53469/jrve.2024.6(10).06)
- Shubochkina, E. I. (2021). Digital space and its influence on the lifestyle and health of students: A literature review. *Sociology Of Medicine*, 20(1), 89-98. <https://doi.org/10.17816/1728-2810-20-1-91>
- Ribeiro-Silva E, Amorim C, Aparicio-Herguedas JL and Batista P (2022). Trends of active learning in higher education and students' well-being: A literature review. *Journal of Frontier Psychology*. 13(844236). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.844236>