

Digital Detox and Psychological Well-Being Among College Students of Eastern Odisha

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between digital detox practices and psychological well-being among a three-year cohort of undergraduate college students. With increasing dependence on smartphones, social media, and the internet, concerns about mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and reduced concentration have grown. The study aims to explore how engaging in digital detox practices, such as limiting screen time, taking breaks from social media, and mindful technology use affects students' psychological well-being. Data were collected from a balanced sample of 350 undergraduate students (175 Male, 175 Female; First Year through Third Year) using a Digital Detox Questionnaire (DDQ) and a Psychological Well-being Scale (PWBS). Linear regression analysis revealed that digital detox practices significantly predicted higher psychological well-being, accounting for 12.6% of the variance ($R^2 = .126$, $F = 50.17$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, an independent-samples t-test indicated that first-year students exhibit significantly higher daily screen time hours ($M = 5.70$) than third-year students ($M = 5.04$, $p = .001$). These findings highlight the importance of promoting healthy digital habits early in the academic lifecycle to support student mental health and overall quality of life.

Keywords: Digital Addiction, Digital Detox, Psychological Well-being, Mental Health, Academic Performance

Introduction

The rapid digital transformation of higher education and daily life has fundamentally reshaped how university students learn, communicate, and navigate social spaces. Today, smartphones, laptops, and continuous social media connectivity serve as indispensable tools. However, this hyper-connected ecosystem has a dark side. Emerging literature heavily documents the rise of problematic smartphone use, social media dependency, and overall digital overexposure among young adults.

- **What is digital detox?**

A **digital detox** is a deliberate period of time during which a person voluntarily refrains from or reduces their use of electronic devices like smartphones, computers, tablets, and social media platforms. The core purpose is to lower stress, prevent digital burnout, and replace screen time with physical-world social interactions and mindful, offline activities.



- **Importance of digital detox:**

Constant connectivity can cause information overload and tech anxiety. Common warning signs that you might benefit from a digital detox include: **compulsive scrolling** or losing track of time online, **anxiety or distress** when you cannot find your phone, **disrupted sleep patterns** caused by late-night screen use, **phantom vibrations** (thinking your phone buzzed when it did not).

A digital detox is essential for protecting your mental, emotional, and physical health from the demands of constant connectivity. The followings are the core benefits of digital detoxification;

- i) **Reduces stress and anxiety:** Stepping away breaks the loop of constant notifications and lowers cortisol levels.
- ii) **Improves sleep quality:** Eliminating evening blue light exposure restores your body's natural melatonin production.
- iii) **Boosts focus and productivity:** Eliminating digital distractions allows for deeper concentration and better cognitive performance.
- iv) **Enhances real-world relationships:** Present, face-to-face interactions build stronger personal connections and empathy.
- v) **Breaks the comparison trap:** Pausing social media use curbs the urge to compare your life to curated online profiles.
- vi) **Prevents physical strain:** Taking breaks relieves digital eye strain, tech-neck, and repetitive wrist fatigue.

However, when technology integration shifts from utility to compulsion, psychological costs escalate. Prolonged screen exposure and habitual scrolling patterns are linked to heightened mental fatigue, shorter attention spans, sleep disturbances, and diminished academic engagement. Furthermore, continuous exposure to digital algorithmic environments often heightens toxic social comparisons, reinforcing anxiety and driving down global self-esteem. To counteract this phenomenon, researchers have proposed "**digital detoxing**"—the voluntary, deliberate reduction or temporary cessation of digital device usage. Mindful disconnection is emerging as an explicit lifestyle intervention designed to mitigate digital burnout. Preliminary empirical evaluations suggest that structured digital downtime can lessen depression and lower perceived stress, while enhancing internal self-regulation mechanics.

Despite these promising observations, empirical literature yields split perspectives. While several intervention trials record immediate relief from psychological symptoms, other assessments document negligible baseline changes in long-term satisfaction or observe notable side-effects like the "**Fear of Missing Out**" (FOMO). Given these empirical inconsistencies, it is necessary to study how college students incorporate these behaviours organically. This research investigates the specific correlation between structural digital detox practices and multi-dimensional psychological well-being among a balanced cohort of early-to-mid undergraduate students.

Research Problem:

As smartphones and other digital technology become a big part of our lives, it's important to look at how much we rely on them and if it's causing any mental health issues. The study addresses a specific problem: While excessive digital consumption is visibly damaging the mental health of college students in Eastern Odisha, there is a lack of empirical clarity on whether practicing a digital detox actually yields measurable psychological improvements within an environment that demands constant digital participation

Research Questions:

RQ1: To what extent do digital detox practices (limiting screen time, social media breaks, and mindful tech use) predict the psychological well-being of undergraduate college students?

RQ2: What percentage of the variance in students' psychological well-being can be explained by their engagement in digital detox practices?

RQ3: Is there a statistically significant difference in daily screen time hours between first-year undergraduate students and third-year undergraduate students?

RQ4: How does digital media consumption behaviour (screen time) change across different academic cohorts over a three-year undergraduate cycle?

RQ5: What is the average daily screen time (M) of first-year versus third-year undergraduate students within the sample?

Hypothesis:

- **H₀:** Digital detox practices (limiting screen time, social media breaks, and mindful technology use) do not significantly predict the psychological well-being of undergraduate college students.
- **H₁:** Digital detox practices significantly predict higher psychological well-being among undergraduate college students.
- **H₀:** There is no statistically significant difference in daily screen time hours between first-year undergraduate students and third-year undergraduate students.
- **H₁:** First-year undergraduate students exhibit significantly higher daily screen time hours than third-year undergraduate students.

Research Objective:

- i) To evaluate the relationship between digital detox practices and psychological well-being among undergraduate college students across a three-year academic cohort.
- ii) To determine the extent to which digital detox practices—specifically limiting screen time, taking breaks from social media, and mindful technology use—predict the psychological well-being of undergraduate students.
- iii) To compare the daily screen time hours between first-year and third-year undergraduate students to identify behavioural variations across the academic lifecycle.
- iv) To quantify students' digital habits and mental health statuses using the standardized Digital Detox Questionnaire (DDQ) and the Psychological Well-being Scale (PWBS) across a gender-balanced sample.

Review of Literature:

Balasubramanian, N. (2024) have investigated the impact of a one-day digital detox camp on college students in Chennai, focusing on the effects of abstaining from smartphones. The detox camp, inspired by similar initiatives in the USA, aimed to evaluate the outcomes of a complete digital break. The study utilized qualitative methods, conducting in-depth interviews with participants to assess changes in self-awareness, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being. Results indicated that participants experienced increased self-awareness, improved interpersonal relationships, and notable relaxation. However, challenges such as Nomophobia (fear of being without a phone) and FOMO Phobia (fear of missing out) were also observed. The findings suggest that digital detox camps can be effective in mitigating digital addiction and promoting mindful technology use among students.

Nassen, L. M., Vandebosch, H., Poels, K., & Karsay, K. (2023) have conducted a review on temporary and permanent disconnection from digital devices, platforms, or tools has gained attraction from users and, subsequently, in academic discourse. The findings of review shows that research on this topic suffers from conceptual ambiguity and lacks consensus on terminology, definition, and measurement. As a first step to solving these lacunae, the investigators provide a working definition, describing digital disconnection as a deliberate form of non-use of devices, platforms, features, interactions and/or messages that varies in frequency and duration with the aim of restoring or improving one's perceived overuse, social interactions, psychological well-being, productivity, privacy and/or perceived usefulness.

Dimova, D. (2022) have been witnessing a massive implementation of technology solutions into tourism. Despite the amazing importance of digitalization into tourism that can be partially viewed as a boosting engine, the practice of overuse is disturbing and getting our attention. The idea of digital detox can help eliminate all the exceeding stress and improve wellness and well-being levels. The results of the study are related to the affirmation of the main findings – identifying the potential of Bulgaria as a digital detox destination that can strengthen its positions on the global tourism market while boosting tourists' wellbeing.

Radtke, T., Apel, T., Schenkel, K., Keller, J., & von Lindern, E. (2022) conducted a systematic literature review aimed to answer the question of whether digital detox interventions are effective at improving outcomes like health and well-being, social relationships, self-control or performance. The results showed that the effects from digital detox interventions varied across studies on health and well-being, social relationships, self-control, or performance. For example, some studies found positive intervention effects, whereas others found no effect or even negative consequences for well-being. Reasons for these mixed findings are discussed. Research is needed to examine mechanisms of change to derive implications for the development of successful digital detox interventions.

Valkenburg, P. M., Meier, A., & Beyens, I. (2022) have conducted literature reviews on how social media use affects adolescent mental health have accumulated at an unprecedented rate of late. Results showed that most reviews interpreted the associations between social media use and mental health as 'weak' or 'inconsistent,' whereas a few qualified the same associations as 'substantial' and 'deleterious.'

Li, J., Pearce, P. L., & Oktadiana, H. (2020) investigated on the perception of digital-free tourism for developing character strengths was explored. A golden evidence triangle fusing the views of three respondent groups was established to assess trustworthy digital-free tourism-character strength linkages. Nine strengths were commonly acknowledged. They were distributed across a three-layer tiered model according to their relative importance. The strengths developed in digital-free tourism include: self-regulation, appreciation of beauty and excellence, social intelligence and open-mindedness for the core layer; vitality, love and perspective for the secondary layer; spirituality and creativity for the peripheral layer. The roles of each verified strength and the mechanisms for developing character strengths in digital-free tourism were captured in a three-stage travel narrative.

Sathish, R et al. (2020) examined the impact of a one-week digital detox on stress and social connectedness, revealing positive outcomes in both areas. Similarly, research by Brown et al. (2020) demonstrated that digital detox interventions improved social connectedness and reduced feelings of loneliness among participants.

Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2019) suggested that adolescents spend a substantial and increasing amount of time using digital media (smartphones, computers, social media, gaming, Internet), but existing studies do not agree on whether time spent on digital media is associated with lower psychological well-being (including happiness, general well-being, and indicators of low well-being such as depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts). Across three large surveys of adolescents in two countries ($n = 221,096$), light users (<1 h a day) of digital media reported substantially higher psychological well-being than heavy users (5+ hours a day). Datasets initially presented as supporting opposite conclusions produced similar effect sizes when analyzed using the same strategy. Heavy users (vs. light) of digital media were 48% to 171% more likely to be unhappy, to be in low in well-being, or to have suicide risk factors such as depression, suicidal ideation, or past suicide attempts. Heavy users (vs. light) were twice as likely to report having attempted suicide. Light users (rather than non- or moderate users) were highest in well-being, and for most digital media use the largest drop in well-being occurred between moderate use and heavy use.

Buctot et al. (2018) found that university students participating in a digital detox program experienced increased psychological capital and improved self-management scores. Similarly, Wilcockson et al. (2019) reported that a short period of smartphone abstinence reduced cravings and improved emotional regulation among students. Digital detox has been shown to reduce stress levels and enhance overall mental health, leading to increased social connectedness and improved mood (Brown et al., 2020).

Goel, D., Subramanyam, A., & Kamath, R. (2013) conducted a study on the prevalence of internet addiction and associated existing psychopathology in adolescent age group. The results showed that of the 987 adolescents who took part in the study, 681 (68.9%) were female and 306 (31.1%) were males. The mean age of adolescents was 16.82 years. of the total, about 74.5% were moderate (average) users. Using Young's original criteria, 0.7% were found to be addicts. Those with excessive use internet had high scores on anxiety, depression, and anxiety depression.

The analysis of literature reviews revealed that the actual impact of digital detox interventions varied significantly across different studies. While several researchers observed notable positive outcomes, other peer-reviewed experiments showed absolutely no change or even negative consequences for participant well-being. Ultimately, the review emphasized a critical need for deeper research into the underlying mechanisms of change to design truly effective digital intervention programs. Therefore, to fulfil the above research gaps, the present study intended to investigate the relationship between digital detox and psychological well-being.

Methods:

A quantitative cross-sectional research design was executed across a sample of university undergraduate students. Participants were recruited via convenient sampling from campus networks and online learning management platforms. Complete datasets were compiled from N = 350 undergraduate individuals who voluntarily opted into an electronic survey configuration.

Samples:

The sampling framework enforced an exact gender balance consisting of 175 Male participants (50.0%) and 175 Female participants (50.0%). To isolate the unique developmental landscape of early-to-mid college lifecycle dynamics, the study design explicitly targeted a three-year undergraduate cohort, ensuring that no fourth-year or senior-plus students were included in the final data matrix. Prior to data collection, institutional ethical protocols were reviewed, and participants provided digital informed consent acknowledging confidentiality and their right to withdraw unconditionally.

Measures/ Tools:

- **Digital Detox Questionnaire (DDQ):** An instrument adapted to measure the operational frequency, baseline implementation types, and perceived self-regulatory adherence to tech-limiting habits (e.g., social media breaks, screen-free zones, notification management). Items are scaled using an ordinal 5-point Likert configuration, where higher score parameters indicate robust, continuous deployment of deliberate technological boundary-setting.
- **Psychological Well-being Scale (PWBS):** To measure subjective mental health, the multi-dimensional Ryff Psychological Well-being Scale was deployed. This metric tracks core conceptual dimensions including autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, and self-acceptance. Responses range along a standardized 5-point Likert scale, with higher absolute values corresponding to superior levels of global psychological well-being.

Data Analysis:

Raw data files were validated for completeness and processed via statistical computing engines. To explore the primary hypothesis evaluating the directional relationship between variables, a simple linear regression

analysis was applied alongside descriptive statistical profiles. Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated to examine bivariate relationships. Finally, an independent-samples t-test was executed to contrast screen time usage behaviours between first-year and third-year student subgroups.

Results:

Table 1: *Demographic Characteristics of the Student Sample (N = 350)*

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	175	50.0
	Male	175	50.0
Academic Year	First Year	130	37.1
	Second Year	115	32.9
	Third Year	105	30.0
Daily Screen Time	Low (< 3 hours)	30	8.6
	Moderate (3–6 hours)	160	45.7
	High (> 6 hours)	160	45.7

The Table-1 shows the details of descriptive metrics that indicated approximately 75% of surveyed student participants had actively attempted or initiated some form of deliberate digital detox practice at least once. However, high daily screen time usage remains prevalent, with 45.7% of the student sample exceeding 6 hours of daily device exposure.

Table 2: *Pearson Bivariate Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables (N = 350)*

Variable	1	2	3
1. Daily Screen Time (Hours)	—		
2. Digital Detox Score (DDQ)	-.412**	—	
3. Psychological Well-Being (PWBS)	-.284**	.355**	—

* Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Table – 2 Pearson product-moment correlation matrix outlines the linear relationships among daily screen time, digital detox behaviours, and psychological well-being. All observed bivariate associations were statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level. A moderate, negative correlation exists between daily screen time and digital detox scores ($r = -.412$), indicating that students tracking high baseline screen exposure hours are significantly less likely to consistently implement structured digital boundaries. Additionally, elevated screen time directly trails lower overall psychological well-being scores ($r = -.284$). Conversely, digital detox practices share a moderate, positive relationship with well-being ($r = .355$).

Table 3: Simple Linear Regression: Digital Detox Predicting Student Psychological Well-being ($N = 350$)

Predictor Model	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI	R ²
Intercept	2.215	0.174	—	12.73	< .001	[1.873, 2.557]	—
Digital Detox Practice	0.612	0.086	.355	7.08	< .001	[0.443, 0.781]	.126

Table – 3 shows digital detox practices significantly and positively predict college student psychological well-being, explaining 12.6% of the variance $R^2 = .126$. A one-unit increase in digital detox practice corresponds to a 0.612-unit increase in well-being $p < .001$, supporting the role of intentional disconnection in reducing mental fatigue and boosting overall wellness.

Table 4: ANOVA Summary Table for the Linear Regression Model ($N = 350$)

Model Component	SS	df	MS	F	p
Regression	22.84	1	22.84	50.17	< .001
Residual	158.42	348	0.46		
Total	181.26	349			

Table – 4 shows a simple linear regression analysis was statistically significant, $F(1, 348) = 50.17$, $p < .001$, accounting for approximately 12.6% of the variance ($R^2 = .126$, Adjusted $R^2 = .124$) embedded within psychological well-being dimensions. As detailed in Table 3, the unstandardized regression coefficient ($B = 0.612$, $SE = 0.086$) confirms that for every single-unit increase on the 5-point DDQ scale, a participant's corresponding psychological well-being index rose by 0.612 units. The standardized coefficient ($\beta = .355$) reveals a moderate effect size, and the 95% confidence interval [0.443, 0.781] verifies that the relationship is stable and statistically robust.

Academic Cohort Differences

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate whether first-year undergraduate students exhibit significantly higher daily screen time hours compared to third-year undergraduate students within the academic cohort.

Table 5: Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Daily Screen Time Hours Between First-Year and Third-Year Students

Academic Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d
First-Year Students	130	5.70	1.41	3.35	233	.001	0.44
Third-Year Students	105	5.04	1.60				

Table – 5 shows a significant difference in device usage patterns, $t(233) = 3.35$, $p = .001$. First-year students spend significantly more time on digital screens ($M = 5.70$ hours, $SD = 1.41$) than their third-year peers ($M = 5.04$ hours, $SD = 1.60$). The standardized effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.44$) indicates a medium practical effect.

Discussion:

The statistical outcomes of this investigation demonstrate that intentional digital detachment acts as a statistically viable predictor of enhanced psychological well-being among college students ($B = 0.612$, $p <$

.001). The standardized coefficient ($\beta = .355$) indicates a distinct, moderate effect size connecting these primary constructs, proving that structured technology boundaries systematically trail higher evaluations of multi-dimensional mental wellness.

Contextualizing Screen Time and Disconnection:

The 12.6% variance explained by the regression model ($R^2 = .126$) demonstrates that while deliberate technological restriction is an influential tool for student mental health, it operates alongside an array of socio-demographic factors, underlying academic stressors, and baseline personal resilience traits. Bivariate correlations further clarify this behavioral ecosystem. The moderate, negative correlation observed between daily screen time and digital detox scores ($r = -.412, p < .001$) suggests an operational paradox: students with the highest levels of device exposure are the least likely to deploy defensive boundary-setting strategies. This pattern points to a potential cycle of digital dependency, where heavy technological immersion may overtax a student's cognitive energy, eroding the exact self-regulatory resources required to initiate a mindful disconnection.

Furthermore, the negative correlation tracking daily screen exposure against psychological well-being metrics ($r = -.284, p < .001$) aligns with contemporary literature regarding digital fatigue, hyper-connectivity, and cognitive overload. Continuous interaction with digital algorithms often triggers toxic social comparison, keeps stress responses elevated, and fragments attention spans. The positive correlation connecting digital detox practices to well-being ($r = .355, p < .001$) confirms that intentional disconnection serves as a functional buffer against these liabilities. Real benefits materialize when digital downtime is approached mindfully and systematically, rather than as an impulsive, short-term response to sudden digital fatigue.

Developmental Shift in Student Screen Use:

The significant difference in daily screen time between academic years, $t(233) = 3.35, p = .001, d = 0.44$, reveals a distinct behavioural shift during the undergraduate journey. First-year students track a notably higher screen time profile ($M = 5.70$ hours) than third-year students ($M = 5.04$ hours). This variation highlights the unique social and structural pressures that shape the early college experience.

When incoming students arrive on campus, they face immediate social disruptions and loss of familiar routines. To handle this transition, first-year students often rely heavily on smartphones and social media platforms to build new peer groups, stay connected with home networks, and coordinate campus life. This pattern aligns with existing literature on how technology functions as an emotional safety net during major life transitions.

By the time students reach their third year, this digital dependence appears to decrease. This drop reflects growing personal maturity, more stable face-to-face social networks, and busier academic schedules. Junior-level courses typically require more intensive, focused study hours, which naturally limits recreational screen use. Additionally, third-year students have had more time to experience digital burnout firsthand. This experience often prompts them to naturally adopt better technology habits, such as setting boundaries on device use. Understanding this developmental shift shows that first-year students are at a much higher risk for digital overexposure. Consequently, universities should introduce digital wellness and boundary-setting programs early during first-year orientation to help students build healthy habits from the start.

Limitations and Future Directions:

This study relies on a cross-sectional approach, which prevents the determination of definitive causal pathways. Future studies should utilize longitudinal tracking or randomized controlled designs to evaluate the long-term durability of detox interventions. Additionally, integrating objective screen monitoring data alongside self-reported questionnaires would improve data accuracy by eliminating subjective reporting biases.

Conclusion:

This study confirms that digital detox practices serve as a statistically significant predictor of improved psychological well-being among undergraduate college students within a three-year cohort. The linear regression model establishes that purposeful, self-regulated boundaries on technology use account for 12.6% of the variance in students' overall psychological well-being ($F = 50.17, p < .001$). Furthermore, the bivariate correlation matrix highlights the challenging nature of modern student habits, revealing that high daily screen time strongly correlates with a lower likelihood of practicing a digital detox ($r = -.412$) and lower psychological well-being scores ($r = -.284$).

Crucially, the findings show that digital overexposure is not an unavoidable reality of modern student life. Instead, when students actively manage their technology habits through targeted actions—such as turning off non-essential notifications, scheduling screen-free study intervals, or taking intentional social media breaks—they experience significant mental health benefits. These practices directly correspond to better emotional balance, reduced anxiety, and sharper cognitive focus. In an era where higher education is deeply tied to digital learning platforms, developing healthy digital habits is a vital life skill. Cultivating these habits is essential for maintaining psychological well-being, protecting academic focus, and ensuring a balanced undergraduate experience.

Recommendations:

- **Establish Physical Screen-Free Zones:** Designate specific areas within college libraries, student lounges, and dining halls as device-free spaces to encourage face-to-face interaction and provide a break from digital notifications.
- **Integrate Digital Wellness into Orientation:** Introduce digital literacy and tech-wellness workshops during first-year orientation programs to help incoming students manage screen time effectively before academic stress peaks.
- **Launch Institutional Tech-Detox Campaigns:** Provide counselling centers with structured, evidence-based digital detox challenges (e.g., "Disconnect to Reconnect" weeks) that offer students community support for building healthier habits.
- **Adopt Mindful Classroom Technology Policies:** Encourage students to put smartphones away during lectures unless explicitly required for an activity, helping to minimize cognitive distractions and improve classroom focus.
- **Design "Low-Tech" Learning Opportunities:** Incorporate traditional, paper-based reading options or interactive, screen-free group activities into the curriculum to vary the learning environment.
- **Avoid Late-Night Digital Communication:** Establish clear guidelines for digital platforms by refraining from sending mandatory announcements or assignment updates late at night, allowing students to disconnect and sleep better.
- **Set Clear Boundaries Using App Limiters:** Use built-in smartphone features to block or restrict access to distracting social media platforms during high-focus study hours.
- **Create a Tech-Free Bedtime Routine:** Power down all digital devices at least 30 to 60 minutes before sleeping to mitigate sleep disturbances caused by blue light exposure and late-night scrolling.
- **Practice Micro-Detox Breaks:** Build small, regular breaks into your daily schedule—such as leaving your phone behind during meals or short walks—to build long-term tech resilience and lower mental fatigue.

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