Royal International Global Journal of Advance and Applied Research
Peer Reviewed International, Open Access Journal.
ISSN: 2998-4459 | Website: https://rlgjaar.com Volume-2, Issue-12 | December - 2025

Original Article

Digital Wellbeing for Students: Balancing Learning and Screen Use in the Age of Distraction

Swati Tulshan
Dept. Of, Human Development,J.D. Birla Institute, Jadavpur University

Manuscript ID:
RIGJAAR-2025-021215

ISSN: 2998-4459
Volume 2
Issue 12
Pp. 80-82
December 2025

Submitted: 10 Nov. 2025
Revised: 15 Nov. 2025
Accepted: 12 Dec. 2025
Published: 31 Dec. 2025

Correspondence Address:
Swati Tulshan
Dept.of, Human Development
J.D. Birla Institute, Jadavpur University
Email- swatit@jdbikolkata.in

Quick Response Code:

Web. https://rlgjaar.com

DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.18136633

DOI Link:
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18136633

Abstract

Digital technologies have become central to students' academic and social lives, offering unprecedented access to information, interactive learning, and global connectivity. However, excessive and unregulated screen use has introduced new challenges, including diminished attention span, increased cognitive overload, digital fatigue, and disruptions to emotional and physical wellbeing. This conceptual paper explores digital wellbeing among school and college students, focusing specifically on the need to balance academic learning with healthy technology use. Drawing from contemporary research in Human Development, cognitive psychology, and digital behaviour studies, the paper examines how screen-heavy environments shape attention, motivation, sleep patterns, and academic engagement. It also highlights the role of teachers, parents, and institutions in modelling and promoting mindful technology practices. Strategies such as digital hygiene routines, scheduled screen breaks, structured device rules, and the integration of offline learning activities are discussed as practical interventions. The paper argues that digital wellbeing is not merely about reducing screen time but about cultivating self-regulation, intentional use, and a healthy digital–life balance that supports long-term learning and developmental outcomes. Implications for educators and policy frameworks are presented to support sustainable digital habits among students.

Keywords- *Digital Wellbeing, Screen Time Management, Student Mental Health, Attention Span, Cognitive Overload, Media Multitasking, Digital Distraction, Online Learning.*

Introduction

Digital technology has become an inseparable part of students' academic, personal, and social lives. With the rise of online classrooms, digital textbooks, learning management systems, and AI-based tools, screen use has grown exponentially. While digital access has democratized learning and enhanced engagement, excessive or unregulated use has raised concerns related to attention span, academic performance, mental health, and overall wellbeing (Rosen et al., 2014; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016). For today's generation of learners often called "digital natives" screen-based environments are both an opportunity and a vulnerability. Many students struggle to balance educational screen use with recreational activities such as social media, gaming, streaming, and multitasking. The core aim of digital wellbeing is not to eliminate technology but to help students develop a healthy and sustainable relationship with digital tools (Stiglic & Viner, 2019). This conceptual paper examines the impact of excessive screen use on students' attention, behaviour, and learning, and proposes strategies to help students manage digital distractions while benefiting from technology's educational potential.

Understanding Digital Wellbeing

Digital wellbeing refers to a state where individuals maintain a healthy relationship with technology—balancing productivity, entertainment, rest, emotional health, and physical wellness (Google Wellbeing Research, 2020). For students, digital wellbeing includes:

- Regulated screen time
- Healthy posture and ergonomics
- Focused attention during study

How to cite this article:
Tulshan, S. (2025). Digital Wellbeing for Students: Balancing Learning and Screen Use in the Age of Distraction. Royal International Global Journal of Advance and Applied Research, 2(12), 80–82. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18136633

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- Responsible online behavior
- Self-regulation and awareness
- Reduced dependency on constant notifications

Digital wellbeing is crucial because the boundary between academic and recreational use is increasingly blurred. As a result, the same device used for learning becomes the source of distraction.

Screen Use Patterns Among Students

Research indicates that students aged 12–24 spend **6–9 hours per day** on screens, excluding school-related tasks (Twenge, 2017). Common patterns include:

Multitasking While Studying

Students often switch between academic content and social media, which disrupts working memory and reduces comprehension (Ophir et al., 2009).

Passive Consumption vs. Active Learning

Passive scrolling, binge-watching, and gaming dominate screen time, while intentional learning activities form a smaller fraction.

Late-Night Device Use

Exposure to blue light affects sleep cycles, memory consolidation, and daytime academic functioning (Cain & Gradisar, 2010).

Social Media Dependency

Frequent notifications and fear of missing out (FOMO) contribute to anxiety and attentional fragmentation (Przybylski et al., 2013).

These behaviours highlight the need for regulated and mindful technology use.

Impact of Excessive Screen Use on Students

Attention Span and Cognitive Overload

Continuous exposure to digital stimuli reduces sustained attention and deep focus. Students often prefer quick, bite-sized content and struggle with extended reading or analytical tasks. According to research by Rosen et al. (2014), students shift attention every 3-6 minutes during digital study sessions.

Learning and Memory

Constant multitasking impairs working memory, making it difficult for students to retain complex concepts. Deep learning requires cognitive quietness and uninterrupted focus—conditions often missing in a screen-dominated environment.

Emotional and Social Wellbeing

Excessive social media use is linked to anxiety, comparison stress, and reduced self-esteem (Twenge, 2017). Notifications create a perpetual sense of alertness, increasing stress and reducing emotional regulation.

Sleep Disruption

Blue light exposure suppresses melatonin production, leading to poor sleep hygiene. Sleep deficits directly affect academic concentration, memory, and mood (Cain & Gradisar, 2010).

Physical Health

Poor posture, reduced physical activity, eye strain, and headaches are common. "Text neck" and digital eye strain have become widespread issues in adolescents.

The Role of Digital Learning in Education

Digital tools have immense learning benefits:

- Interactive simulations
- Multimedia resources
- Learning apps
- Instant access to global information
- Self-paced learning platforms

However, when digital learning is not guided or structured, students often drift into multitasking and recreational use during learning sessions. Research indicates that purposeful and structured digital use enhances learning, while unregulated use hinders academic outcomes (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017).

Promoting Digital Wellbeing in Students: Strategies and Practices

Digital Hygiene Routines

Simple habits can drastically improve digital health:

- Screen breaks every 25–30 minutes (Pomodoro technique)
- Using the 20–20–20 rule for eye relaxation
- Turning off non-essential notifications
- Keeping devices outside the bedroom at night
- Charging phones outside study areas

These routines help students break the "always online" cycle.

Structured Screen Use for Learning

Educators can design a clear pattern:

- Begin with 10 minutes of offline readiness (goal-setting)
- Followed by focused digital tasks
- End with reflection or summarising without devices

This balances digital and cognitive engagement.

Encouraging Offline Learning Activities

Reading printed materials, writing reflections, group discussions, and peer teaching can reduce digital dependency and develop deeper comprehension.

Teaching Self-Regulation Skills

Human Development research emphasizes the importance of self-monitoring and self-control in managing digital impulses. Students should be taught:

- How to identify digital distractions
- How to set personal rules
- How to use apps that track and limit screen time

Self-regulation is central to digital wellbeing (Duckworth & Steinberg, 2015).

Integrating Mindfulness Practices

Mindfulness improves attention, reduces stress, and increases awareness of digital habits. Short breathing exercises, grounding activities, or reflective journaling help students disengage from constant digital stimulation.

Parental and Institutional Involvement

Parents can encourage device-free meals, bedtime digital curfews, and role model healthy habits. Schools and colleges can create:

- Digital wellbeing policies
- Workshops for students and teachers
- Balanced digital–offline curriculum structures

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Conceptual Framework

Excessive Screen Use → Cognitive Overload → Reduced Attention & Sleep → Emotional Dysregulation → Poor Academic Engagement → Compromised Wellbeing

Digital wellbeing sits at the centre as a moderating factor that helps restore balance and support healthy development.

Conclusion

Digital wellbeing is a critical concern in modern education. Screens will continue to define learning, communication, and leisure, but their impact on attention, behaviour, and mental health must be acknowledged. The goal is not to discourage technology but to cultivate mindful, purposeful, and balanced digital habits. A combination of digital hygiene, self-regulation, structured academic use, offline engagement, and institutional support can enable students to thrive. Prioritizing digital wellbeing will empower learners to use technology as a tool for growth, rather than becoming dependent on it.

Acknowledgment

The author gratefully acknowledges the academic environment and institutional support provided by the Department of Human Development, J.D. Birla Institute, Jadavpur University, which enabled thoughtful engagement with contemporary issues related to students' digital wellbeing. Sincere thanks are extended to colleagues and mentors whose scholarly insights, discussions, and constructive feedback contributed to the conceptual clarity of this work.

Finally, the author is thankful to family and well-wishers for their continued encouragement and support throughout the research and writing process. Any limitations or interpretations presented in this paper remain solely the responsibility of the author.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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