

Digital Dependence: Effect on Mental and Social Well-Being of College Youth

A Study of Government College Students in Jalore District, Rajasthan

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Abstract—The proliferation of digital technologies has significantly influenced the lifestyle of contemporary youth. This article aims to explore the impact of digital dependency on the mental and social conditions of college students in Jalore District, Rajasthan. Jalore is a semi-rural district in the state of Rajasthan, which has not received much attention in the context of the digital revolution, although the youth in the district have widely adapted digital technologies such as smartphones and social media. This article aims to fill the knowledge gap by exploring the impact of digital dependency on the mental and social conditions of college students in Jalore District. This article is based on a quantitative method of inquiry, in which primary data were collected through a Google Form questionnaire with close-ended items from 69 undergraduate students of four government colleges in Jalore District. The findings of the article revealed that the majority of the students in the district have spent 6-8 hours of their day on digital devices. A total of 55.1% of the students experienced sleep disruption due to digital devices, while 55.1% experienced negative thoughts while surfing the internet through social media. In addition, 61.0% of the students experienced nomophobia, or the fear of being separated from their mobile phones. Furthermore, 73.9% of the students in the district experienced negative thoughts while separating from their mobile phones. The majority of the respondents agreed that digital dependence is on the rise after the COVID-19 pandemic, and 76.8% of the respondents agreed that digital addiction is harmful to mental peace and social well-being. The results of the present study support the existing literature on digital addiction, smartphone addiction, and mental health issues due to social media. This study ends with policy recommendations for the development of a healthy digital environment for college youth.

Index Terms—digital dependence, mental well-being, social well-being, college youth, smartphone addiction, social media, Jalore, Rajasthan

I. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has been widely described as the digital age, an era characterized by the ubiquitous use of information communication technologies (ICT) in all spheres of human activity. Among the human populations most affected by this paradigm shift is the youth, whose developmental years have been forever altered by the ubiquitous presence of digital media. According to the World Health Organization (2019), the recent decades have seen a steady rise in the use of computer technology, internet usage, and the ownership of smartphones among the world's population. Though the recent advancements in computer technology, internet usage, and the ownership of smartphones have been beneficial, especially in the realms of education, communication, and healthcare, they have also spawned the recent trend of digital dependence, characterized by compulsive usage of digital media (Al-Harashseh & Abdelmoneium, 2023). Adolescents and young adults, in particular, form the most digitally active demographic segment, with the use of screens beginning at increasingly younger ages (Dadi, 2024). The smartphone, in fact, has become the most ubiquitous form of digital technology, facilitating constant connectivity across the entire spectrum of routine activities (World Innovation Summit, 2023). Such constant exposure, in turn, has been seen to produce a range of negative effects, including decreased attentional capacity, disturbed sleep, emotional instability, increased risk of anxiety and depression, as well as the erosion of the quality of real-world social relations (Chin, 2024).

In the context of India, digital adoption has been observed to be quite rapid among its youth population, with a projection of one billion smartphone users by 2026 (Business Standard, 2022). The implications for public health and policy are quite significant. However, as has been observed, most of the literature on digital dependence has been centered on urban populations, with little attention being paid to the semi-rural and rural populations, where digital adoption is gradually being felt but critical awareness and regulatory mechanisms are yet to be established.

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of digital dependence on the mental and social health of undergraduate students from government colleges within Jalore District, Rajasthan, as a contribution to an emerging field of great policy importance, with the COVID-19 pandemic further solidifying pre-existing trends of digital engagement, making it a critical time for analysis post-pandemic.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To study the impact of digital dependence on the mental health of college students in Jalore District, Rajasthan.
2. To study the impact of long hours spent using digital devices on the sleep, concentration, and mental health of college students.
3. To study the impact of digital dependence on the social life of the students.

4. To study if the digital dependence level increased among the students due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2 Research Questions

- Is excessive use of digital devices harmful to the mental health of college youth in Jalore District?
- Is dependence on smartphones and social media related to decreased concentration, sleep deprivation, and negative thinking patterns among college youth?
- Has the level of social interaction decreased among college youth due to digital dependence?
- Has digital dependence increased among college youth after the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.3 Scope and Significance of the Study

This study is specific to college youth who are undergraduate students between the ages of 17 and 21 attending government colleges in Jalore District of Rajasthan. Jalore is a semi-rural district of Rajasthan. The scope of this study is related to two major areas of well-being—mental health and social health. In a country where the youth are the largest segment of the total population of the country, the mental health and social health of youth affected by digital dependence is a matter of grave concern. In this context, the results of this study are significant to policymakers, administrators of educational institutions, and mental health professionals.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital Dependence: Conceptual Framework

Digital dependence is defined as the overuse of the internet or electronic devices to the point where it starts to impact one's day-to-day functioning (UNBC Academic Success Centre). Digital dependence comprises various concepts, such as internet addiction, smartphone addiction, social media addiction, and gaming disorder. Internet addiction is defined by Goldberg (1995) as the overuse of the internet to the point where the individual seeks to attain feelings of pleasure. Davis (2001) also pointed out the psychological aspect of internet addiction, such as the inability to control impulses and the inability to restrict the amount of time spent online. The World Health Organization's ICD-11 (2018) has also recognized gaming disorder as a mental health disorder, thereby acknowledging the psychological impact of digital dependence.

Orhan (2025) stated that the overuse of digital devices has also led to digital dementia, or the progressive deterioration of cognitive abilities. 'Brain rot,' or the inability to think analytically, is also another aspect of digital dependence. Digital hoarding is also another psychological aspect of digital dependence, which is defined as the inability to discard digital files (Bawden & Robinson, 2012). This is also linked to psychological concepts such as attachment anxiety (Anjum & Tariq, 2025).

2.2 Digital Dependence and Mental Well-being

The association of digital dependency and mental health decline is well supported in the literature. In the context of the impact of digital dependency on the mental health of adolescents, Dadi, Dachew, and Tessema (2024) studied the impact of the association of digital dependency and mental health decline in the context of the global scenario and noted the negative impact of the association of digital dependency and mental health decline on the mental health of adolescents. The study noted the occurrence of mental health or behavior-related disorders in one in every seven young people in the world. In the context of the impact of digital dependency on the mental health of adolescents in the Indian context, the study by Maurya, Muhammad, Maurya, and Dhillon (2022) noted the occurrence of 15.6% of male and 23% of female adolescents experiencing sleep disturbances due to the excessive use of smartphones.

The study by Abi-Jaoude, Naylor, and Pignatiello (2020) demonstrated the presence of significant correlations between the increase in the use of smartphones and social media and the increase in the prevalence of anxiety, loneliness, and suicidal ideation in the context of the North American adolescent population. The increase in the prevalence of self-harm ideation in adolescent girls by 110% in the period from 2009 to 2014 is also noted. The study by Levenson et al. (2017) demonstrated the negative impact of the use of social media immediately before sleep on the quality of sleep in young adults.

The impact of smartphone addiction on the mental health of Indian students in the age group of 18-27 years is the focus of the study by Tater and John (2024), which noted the negative impact of smartphone addiction on the mental health of 39% of the sample population of the study who used their smartphones for 2-4 hours a day for academic work. The negative impact of the association of digital dependency and mental health decline is also noted in the context of the negative association of the use of social media and self-control by the 50 college students in the study by Upadhayay (2018).

2.3 Smartphone Addiction and Nomophobia

Smartphone addiction has emerged as a significant world health problem (Sahoo, 2025). Haug et al. (2015) found in Western society that 98% of adolescents in the age group of 12-19 years were mobile phone users, and 97% of these adolescents were smartphone users. According to Wang et al. (2021), 85% of adolescents are smartphone users by the age of 14 years and spend almost six hours a day on non-academic internet use. In the Indian setting, Rao and Lingam (2021) found that the rise of smartphone adoption among young women in the country has challenged the existing social norms while promoting freedom of expression.

Nomophobia or the fear of not having or being separated from one's mobile phone is considered the most extreme kind of smartphone addiction (Sola, 2017). Herman (2023) proved that nomophobia is related to nervousness, social isolation, and emotional instability. At the same time, the author also proved that the social aspect of smartphone users reduces the adverse impact of nomophobia to a certain extent. Burke (2011) found that people who face social nervousness are eager to communicate online since it is more controlled for them.

2.4 Social Media and Youth Well-being

Social media is also an essential aspect of contemporary youth culture, with adolescents being active users of social media platforms such as YouTube (85%), Instagram (72%), Snapchat (91%), and Facebook (51%) (Nesi, 2020). Though social media plays a crucial role in the social lives of adolescents and provides them with emotional support, excessive social media engagement has also been linked to a variety of mental health consequences. A study by O'Reilly et al. (2018) revealed that

adolescents perceive social media as a major risk to mental health, and the main channels through which social media influences mental health include online comparison, cyberbullying, social exclusion, and the need to uphold an idealised online identity.

Moreton and Greenfield (2022) also studied the impact of Instagram on the mental health of undergraduate students in the United Kingdom. The study revealed a 94% increase in the demand for counselling services in the last five years and concluded that although Instagram plays a crucial role in the maintenance of friendship relationships, it also affects the mental health of users by portraying idealised images of life and the need to attain social validation. The WHO meeting in Copenhagen in September 2024 revealed an alarming increase in the prevalence of problematic social media use among adolescents. This increase in problematic social media use is from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022, and the levels of subjective well-being and the prevalence of substance use have reduced.

2.5 COVID-19 and Escalation of Digital Dependence

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for existing digital behaviors. Tyagi, Prasad, and Bhatia (2021) discovered that 90% of the sample population in India indicated increased use of the mobile phone during the lockdown, while 95% were aware of the health hazards, which include stress, anxiety, eye strain, and difficulty concentrating. Fernandes et al. (2020) discovered increased internet usage and gaming habits among adolescents in India, the UK, and Malaysia during the lockdown. The increased use of the internet correlated with increased depression, anxiety, insomnia, and social withdrawal.

Tiwari and Mishra (2023) discovered that excessive use of digital devices in the post-pandemic scenario in India leads to increased loneliness and decreased self-esteem, which negatively impacts the psychological well-being of the individual. Lawrence (2023) discovered that college students in the home environment during the pandemic were more likely to develop internet addiction, especially those with low social intelligence and those with more restrictive parental environments.

2.6 Research Gap

Though the existing body of literature offers a strong base of documentation of the challenges of digital dependence at global, international, national, and metropolitan levels, there still exist considerable gaps. The majority of the research studies have been conducted at large urban universities and technologically advanced locations, with minimal research being conducted among the rural and semi-rural populations at the grassroots level. The Jalore district of the state of Rajasthan, which is a largely agricultural and semi-rural area, has never been subject to any research aimed at studying the phenomenon of digital dependence and its associated well-being issues. In addition to this, no specific policy frameworks have been designed to counter the ill effects of digital dependence among such populations.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The present study employs a quantitative research design, utilising descriptive analysis to examine the prevalence and patterns of digital dependence and its effects on the mental and social well-being of college youth. The quantitative approach was selected because it facilitates systematic numerical analysis of behavioral patterns across a defined population, enabling generalisable and replicable findings appropriate for policy formulation.

3.2 Area of Study and Sampling

The study was conducted in Jalore District, Rajasthan, which comprises five government colleges. Four of these five colleges were purposively selected for inclusion in the study. A convenience sampling technique was adopted, wherein all undergraduate students present in the classroom at the time of data collection were included as participants. A total of 69 undergraduate students, aged between 17 and 21 years, constituted the final sample. This age cohort was deliberately targeted as it represents the transitional phase between adolescence and early adulthood — a period characterised by heightened digital engagement and heightened vulnerability to associated mental health risks.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The instrument comprised close-ended questions addressing participants' digital device usage patterns, the frequency and duration of smartphone and social media use, the perceived effects on sleep, concentration, and emotional states, changes in social relationships, the experience of nomophobia-related anxiety, and the post-COVID-19 trajectory of digital engagement. Prior to administering the questionnaire, the researcher visited each college, obtained permission from the principal, and explained the purpose of the study to students under faculty supervision. Participation was entirely voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using Microsoft Excel software. Descriptive statistical methods, including frequency counts, percentages, and graphical representations (bar charts and pie charts), were employed to present and interpret the findings. Results are reported at the aggregate level, and where relevant, comparisons by gender are drawn.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were observed throughout the data collection process. Institutional permissions were obtained from the respective college principals prior to fieldwork. Participants were fully briefed about the purpose and voluntary nature of the research, and their informed consent was secured before participation. All collected data were maintained in strict confidentiality, used exclusively for academic research purposes, and no personally identifiable information is disclosed in the findings or any related publication.

IV. DATA INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Among the total of 69 respondents, 42 (60.9%) of them were males, while 26 (37.7%) of them were females. One respondent did not disclose their gender. All the respondents were from undergraduate studies at four government colleges in Jalore District. They all fell within the age group of 17-21 years. [Figure 4.1]

4.2 Daily Duration of Digital Device Use

Respondents were also asked how many hours a day they spend on digital devices. It was found that 30 (43.5%) of the total respondents spend 2-5 hours per day on digital devices, while 39 (56.5%) of the total respondents spend 6-8 hours per day on digital devices. It has also been found that a majority of the youth are highly engaged with digital devices. In addition, a global study has also found that the average hours of ICT use per day by adolescents around the world is 6 hours and 40 minutes (Rideout & Robb, 2019). [Figure 4.2]

4.3 Perceived Stress from Restricted Internet/Phone Access

Respondents were also asked whether they felt stressed when not allowed to use the internet or phone. It was found that 20 (29%) of the total respondents felt stressed when not allowed to use the internet or phone, while 33 (47.8%) of the total respondents did not feel stressed at all. In addition, 15 (21.7%) of the total respondents felt stressed occasionally. It was also found that a majority of the youth did not feel stressed at all when not allowed to use the internet or phone. However, a significant number of the total respondents felt stressed occasionally. [Figure 4.3]

4.4 Impact on Sleep Quality

The second interesting finding of the present study is the impact of excessive digital device usage on the quality of sleep. Out of the total 69 participants, 38 participants (55.1%) stated that the quality of their sleep had been adversely affected by the excessive use of digital devices. On the contrary, 22 participants (31.9%) stated that there had been no such impact of digital device usage on the quality of their sleep. Lastly, 9 participants (13.0%) stated that the quality of their sleep had been adversely affected sometimes by the excessive use of digital devices. This finding is in agreement with the general literature on the impact of digital device usage on the quality of sleep. Blue light emission from digital devices, late-night digital device usage, and psychological arousal due to social media have been stated as the major reasons for the negative impact of digital devices on the sleep-wake cycle of the users (Levenson et al., 2017; Maurya et al., 2022). [Figure 4.4]

4.5 Negative Thoughts During Social Media Use

The next question for the participants of the present study was whether negative thoughts arise while watching social media content. Out of the total 69 participants, 38 participants (55.1%) stated in the affirmative, 24 participants (34.8%) stated in the negative, and 7 participants (10.1%) stated that negative thoughts arise sometimes. This finding is in agreement with the general literature on the negative impact of excessive social media content viewing on the mental state of the users. Excessive viewing of social media content has been stated as the major reason for the development of negative thoughts in the users (O'Reilly et al., 2018; Moreton & Greenfield, 2022). [Figure 4.5]

4.6 Effect on Social Relationships

In terms of the effect of digital use on social relationships, 42 respondents or 60.9 percent reported that their social relationships were affected by excessive digital use, while 19 or 27.5 percent reported that they were not affected, and 8 or 11.6 percent reported that they were affected at times. On the question of whether they felt anxious or uneasy when they were separated from their phones—a question related to nomophobia—the results were: 19 or 27.5 percent reported affirmatively; 29 or 42.0 percent reported negatively; and 14 or 20.3 percent reported at times. [Figure 4.6]

4.7 Post-COVID-19 Increase in Digital Dependence

Out of the total 69 students, 51 (73.9%) affirmed the increase in digital dependence after the COVID-19 pandemic, while 18 (26.1%) did not perceive the increase in digital dependence. This is in line with the general observation of the increase in digital dependence in the post-COVID-19 period in the global population (Tyagi et al., 2021; Fernandes et al., 2020), and the increase in digital dependence in the Indian youth population during the lockdown. [Figure 4.7]

4.8 Perceived Harm of Excessive Digital Use

The majority of the students, i.e., 53 (76.8%), felt that the excessive use of digital devices is harmful to mental peace and social life. Only 16 (23.2%) did not have such a perception. This finding is particularly interesting as it reveals the perception of the students regarding the potential harm of digital dependence, while the majority of the students have shown high levels of digital dependence. This finding reveals a high intention-behavior gap, which needs to be addressed. [Figure 4.8]

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study have revealed the digital dependence of the college youth in Jalore District, and its impact on mental and social well-being. The majority of the students in the present study have shown high levels of digital dependence, i.e., 6-8 hours of screen time. This finding is in line with the general observation of the high levels of digital dependence in the global youth population. The present finding is also in line with the observation of the high levels of digital dependence in the Indian youth population. In the context of the general observation of the high levels of digital dependence in the global youth population and the present finding of the high levels of digital dependence in the Indian youth population, the present finding reveals the alarming levels of digital dependence in the youth of Jalore District.

The discovery that 76.8% of the respondents perceived excessive digital use as harmful to their mental peace and social life is particularly interesting from a public policy point of view. It points to the existence of a nascent level of digital health awareness that can be built upon to create the foundation for preventive and corrective action. It also points to the existence of a level of digital addiction that cannot be broken through awareness.

The social dimension of digital dependence is particularly interesting. While over 60% of the respondents perceived that digital use has impacted their social life, the mechanism of this impact is multi-directional. Digital media replaces and supplements face-to-face social interactions. Depending on the quality of digital media use, the impact of digital media use on face-to-face interactions varies considerably (Magsamen-Conrad & Greene, 2014). In the case of youth living in a semi-rural setting such as Jalore, digital media might play a critical role as a conduit of face-to-face interactions. In other words, digital media might play a critical role as a conduit of youth social connectivity.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on digital dependence is particularly clear from the responses of the youth. Nearly three-fourths of the youth responded affirmatively to the impact of the pandemic on digital use. In other words, there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital use among the youth of Jalore. In a broader context, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital use across populations that previously had limited digital exposure. It is not clear whether this has been accompanied by the requisite digital literacy and digital self-regulation capabilities to deal with the attendant digital health risks.

VI. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

The present research offers empirical evidence of the risks associated with digital dependence to the mental and social health of college youth in the Jalore District of Rajasthan. The overwhelming majority of the participants reported high levels of daily digital engagement, and clear relationships have been found with sleep disturbances, psychological affect, nomophobia, and social relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation by heightening pre-existing levels of digital engagement without commensurate levels of development of digital self-regulation abilities. The present research thus lends further credence to the need for urgent policy-level interventions aimed at the issue of digital well-being among youth in general and in semi-rural areas like the Jalore District of Rajasthan in particular. Youth are the future of the nation, and their mental and social health are inextricably linked with the progress of the nation. The future of the nation will be a generation whose human capital will be systematically undermined by the very instruments meant to empower them.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

With the findings of this research and the insights gained from the literature review conducted, the following policy recommendations are being proposed:

- **Integration of Digital Literacy Programmes:** Educational institutions must integrate digital literacy programmes into their curriculum that enable students to develop critical, conscious, and self-regulated approaches towards technology use, including the concept of digital addiction and its warning signs.
- **Institutional Mental Health Support:** Educational institutions like colleges and universities across semi-rural districts of Rajasthan must provide students with mental health counselling facilities to deal with the issue of digital addiction and its psychological effects.
- **Screen-Time Regulation Policies:** The Government of Rajasthan and the Central Government must develop evidence-based policy recommendations for healthy screen-time practices among the youth of the state and promote the adoption of these recommendations through schools and colleges across the state.
- **Parental and Community Engagement:** Community-level awareness programmes must be initiated by the Government of Rajasthan to ensure parental and community-level engagement with the issue of digital addiction and its effects, especially in semi-rural areas of the state where awareness of the issue of digital addiction among the youth is relatively low.
- **Research and Monitoring:** To effectively deal with the issue of digital addiction among the youth of Rajasthan and other semi-rural districts of the state, research programmes must be initiated to continuously monitor the trends of digital addiction among the youth of the state.

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