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Digital Burnout: The Hidden Cost of Always Being Online

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Abstract

In today's hyper-connected society, being online has become an unavoidable part of daily life. While technology was designed to make communication and work more efficient, its overuse has led to a rising concern known as digital burnout. This form of mental and emotional fatigue arises from continuous digital exposure, multitasking, and the inability to disconnect from virtual spaces. Studies in psychology and behavioral science indicate that constant connectivity contributes to higher stress levels, anxiety, and reduced attention spans. The constant need to stay reachable and updated has blurred the line between personal and professional life, making rest and recovery increasingly difficult.

Digital burnout affects not only individual well-being but also overall productivity and social relationships. Continuous notifications, social media comparisons, and information overload amplify feelings of exhaustion and detachment. Young adults, students, and professionals appear particularly vulnerable to this imbalance. Addressing this issue requires a conscious effort to build healthier digital habits through mindful technology use, scheduled offline time, and institutional awareness programs. By recognizing the hidden emotional and psychological costs of being constantly online, society can move toward a more balanced and intentional digital culture.

Addressing digital burnout requires a combination of personal awareness and institutional responsibility. Individuals can adopt strategies such as digital detoxing, limiting non-essential screen time, disabling notifications, and designating "no-phone zones" to restore focus and emotional balance. Practicing mindfulness and engaging in offline hobbies can strengthen mental resilience and reduce dependency on virtual validation. Organizations and educational institutions also play a crucial role by promoting digital wellness workshops, encouraging flexible work hours, and creating tech-free spaces that prioritize mental health. Policymakers and technology developers must work together to design healthier digital ecosystems that value human limits. Ultimately, overcoming digital burnout is not about rejecting technology but about redefining its role in our lives—making it a tool that supports well-being rather than controls it.

Keywords: Digital burnout, constant connectivity, screen time, digital detox, social media.

1. Introduction

As hybrid and remote work models become increasingly common, a new challenge has emerged in contemporary workplaces: digital burnout. While technology enables flexibility, accessibility, and operational efficiency, it simultaneously blurs the boundaries between work and rest, presence and pressure, and productivity and overload. For many professionals, the resulting exhaustion is not derived from the nature of their tasks but rather from the digital modes through which their work is conducted.

The paradox of constant connectivity, Modern professionals are more "connected" than ever before. Notifications, video conferences, emails, instant messages, and collaborative digital platforms—tools originally designed to enhance communication and teamwork—can quickly become sources of overload. Responding to a message late in the evening or attending a brief weekend check-in may gradually evolve into habitual practices. Consequently, the distinction between professional and personal life becomes increasingly ambiguous, and the expectation of continuous availability becomes normalized, often without explicit acknowledgment.

Digital burnout extends beyond physical fatigue or irritation with excessive online meetings. It represents a deeper, systemic form of exhaustion that undermines focus, motivation, and emotional well-being. Unlike traditional workplace burnout, which typically arises within a physical or organizational context, digital burnout permeates multiple domains of life, creating a persistent state of mental fatigue driven by continuous digital engagement.

2. Review of Literature

i). Influence of Digital Competence on Perceived Stress, Burnout and Well-Being among Students Studying Online During the COVID-19 Lockdown: A 4-Country Perspective

Authors: Vilmantė Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė, Imran

***Corresponding Author:** Bhavasriya V

Aslan, Jurga Duobienė, Ewa Glińska, Victor Anandkumar
Summary: This study surveyed 1,097 students across Poland, Lithuania, Turkey, and India during the COVID-19 lockdown. It found that having greater digital competence (especially social and informational dimensions) helped students better handle stress and burnout, improving well-being. Key result: digital competence didn't directly reduce burnout but did so indirectly by lowering cognitive load.
Source: Psychology Research and Behavior Management, 2021.

ii). **Determining Digital Burnout in Nursing Students: A Descriptive Research Study**
Authors: (not all names specified here), but it's a team publishing via ScienceDirect/Elsevier; the study was done with nursing students in a university during 2020-21.
Summary: The research assessed digital burnout among 361 nursing students. It used the Digital Burnout Scale and found that the total digital burnout score was above average. Sub-scales included digital aging, digital deprivation, and emotional exhaustion. Spending more than five hours a day online, being always stressed, having poor physical/psychological health, and a lower economic status were all associated with higher burnout.
Source: ScienceDirect/Elsevier (Descriptive Study), published around 2022.

iii). **Always on standby: acknowledging the psychosocial risk of our postdigital presence in online digital labour in higher education**
Authors: Janine Arantes & Mark Vicars
Summary: This paper examines how academics (higher education workers) have experienced changes in work culture due to online digital work (especially post-COVID). It argues there's a blurring of home/work boundaries, normalized psychosocial risks (digital fatigue, being "always on standby"), and an intensification of digital labor. The authors propose concepts like postdigital presence and suggest counter-strategies such as Slow University or Quiet Quitting to protect well-being.
Source: Higher Education Research & Development, forthcoming volume/issue in 2024.

iv). **Social Media Burnout and Internet Addiction: The Role of Extroversion and Social Self-Concept in a Brazilian Sample**
Authors: Layrtthon Carlos de Oliveira Santos; Matheus Marcelino Alves
Summary: In a Brazilian sample (ages 18-45), this study explored how internet addiction relates to social media burnout, and how personality traits (extroversion) and social self-concept are involved. Findings: Internet addiction was positively correlated with social media burnout; both were negatively correlated with extroversion and social self-concept. Social self-concept also mediated between internet addiction and burnout.
Source: SAGE Journals, 2023.

v). **Screen time and stress: understanding how digital burnout influences health among nursing students**
Authors: R.K. Ibrahim M. Khaled, M. Almansoori, *et al.*
Summary: This 2025 study in BMC Nursing investigates how digital burnout (from screen time) is associated with stress and health outcomes in nursing students. It looks at academic pressures, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and how the demands of being online affect mental/physical health. It contributes recent empirical evidence that heavy screen usage combined with digital burnout correlates with worse health metrics in students.
Source: BMC Nursing, 2025.

3. Research Method

i). Population and Sample

Population: The research population comprises a diverse group of respondents, including students pursuing various fields of study, working professionals from different industries, and other general individuals from the broader community, likely homemakers, entrepreneurs, retirees, or others contributing to the diversity of responses.
This diverse mix provides a well-rounded view of opinions and trends across different segments of society.

Sample:
The sample population consists of

- **Students:** (e.g., undergraduate, postgraduate, various disciplines)
- **Working Professionals:** (e.g., IT, healthcare, finance, management)
- **General Public:** (e.g., homemakers, entrepreneurs, retirees)
- **Others:** (e.g., freelancers, artists)

This sample provides a diverse mix of demographics, ages, and occupations, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the research topic.

ii). Data Collection Method

For this study, data were collected through Google Forms, as mentioned earlier. A structured questionnaire was prepared and shared with participants involved in this process.
The study employed a quantitative research approach, utilizing option-based questions to gather numerical data and statistical insights.

Quantitative Component:

- Structured questions allowed respondents to select from predefined options, enabling efficient data collection and analysis.
- Numerical data facilitated the identification of trends, patterns, and correlations among variables.
- Statistical analysis provided a clear and objective understanding of the research topic

By focusing on quantitative methods, the study aimed to capture measurable and generalizable insights into the experiences and perceptions of the respondents.

iii). Research Instrument

The main instrument used for this study was a Google Form-based structured questionnaire designed to collect information related to Digital Burnout**:** The Hidden Cost of Always Being Online https://forms.gle/zMeqYDDvdQopKZCr7

iv). Data Analysis Techniques

Data Analysis Techniques: The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using the Mean Method. This

method helped to identify common patterns, perceptions, and attitudes toward reverse mentoring.

v). Research Questions

i). Age

ii). Gender

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

iii). On Average, how many hours per day do you spend online?

- Less than 2 hours
- 2-4 hours
- 4-6 hours
- 6-8 hours

iv). Do you often feel tired or stressed from using digital devices?

- Yes
- No

v). What is your main reason for being online?

- Work or school
- Social media
- Online shopping
- Others
- Ideal time management

vi). Have you ever tried a "Digital Detox" (Staying offline or purpose)

- Yes, for a few hours
- Yes, for a full day
- Yes, for multiple days
- No, never

vii). Which devices do you use most often?

- Smartphone
- Laptop/Computer
- Tablet
- Other

viii). How often do you multitask with multiple devices (eg, Phone+TV)

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Always

ix). Which of these have you experienced due to too much screentime?

- Trouble sleeping
- Eye strain or Headaches
- Mood changes
- None of the above

x). How long are your breaks from screens?

- Less than 5 minutes
- 5-15 minutes
- 15-30 minutes
- More than 30 minutes

xi). How does late night screen use affect your sleep?

- No effect
- Slightly delays my sleep
- Severely disrupts my sleep

xii). Do you feel pressure to reply to messages or notifications immediately

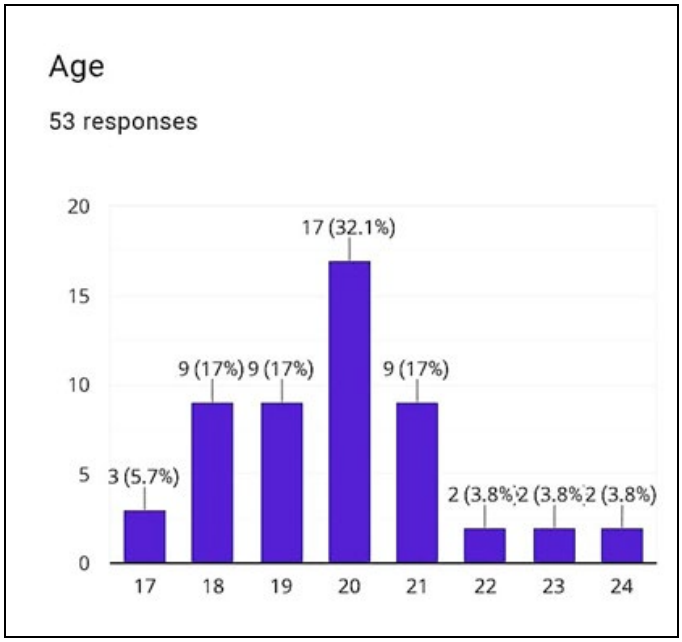
- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Always

xiii). When you take a break, how do you usually spent it?

- Physical activity
- Talking to someone in person
- Reading (paper books)
- Other

4. Findings

i). Age



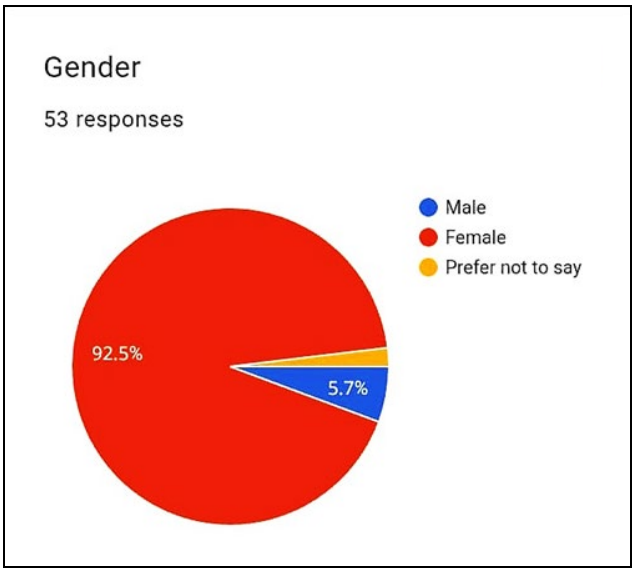
Based on the chart with 53 responses:

- Age 17: 3 (5.7%)
- Age 18: 9 (17%)
- Age 19: 9 (17%)
- Age 20: 17 (32.1%)
- Age 21: 9 (17%)
- Age 22: 2 (3.8%)
- Age 23: 2 (3.8%)
- Age 24: 2 (3.8%)

Key Findings:

- Most respondents (32.1%) are 20 years old.
- Ages 18, 19, and 21 each have 9 responses (17%).
- Ages 22, 23, and 24 have the least responses (2 each, 3.8%).

ii). Gender

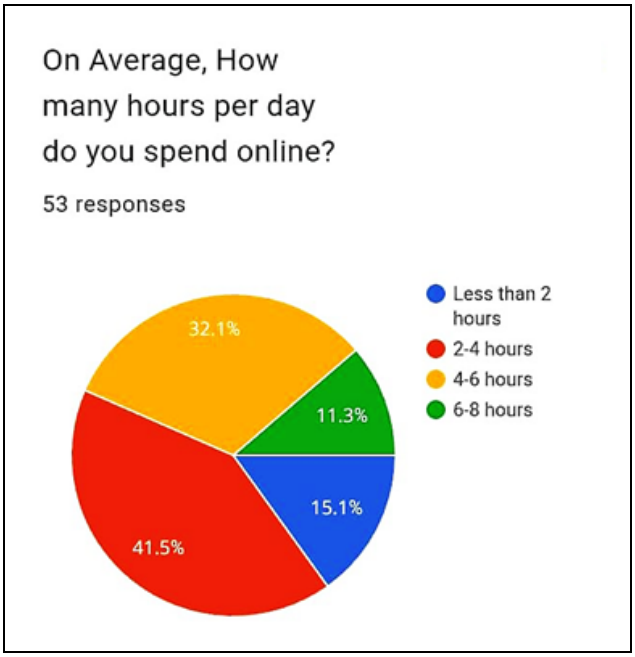


- **Female:** 92.5%
- **Male:** 5.7%
- **Prefer not to Say:** A small percentage (the remaining slice, approximately 1.8% given the total percentage should add up to 100%).

Key Findings:

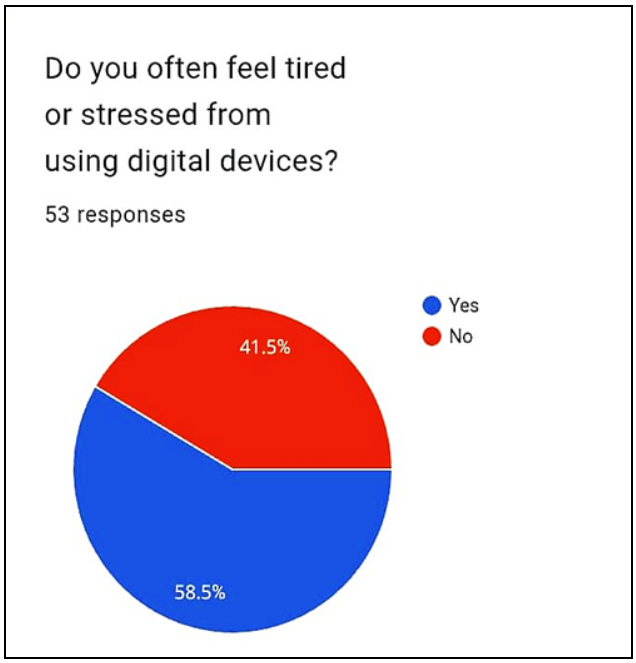
- The majority of respondents (92.5%) are Female.
- Male respondents make up 5.7%.
- A small percentage (about 1.8%) chose Prefer not to say.

iii). On Average, how many hours per day do you spend online?



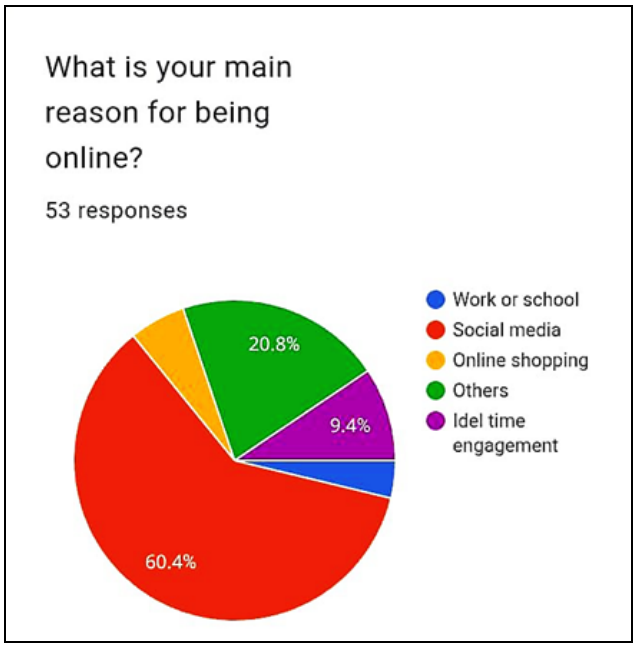
The data reveals that most respondents (about 73.6%, combining 2–4 and 4–6-hour groups) spend a moderate amount of time online daily, reflecting a balanced digital routine. However, the presence of nearly 11.3% spending up to 8 hours highlights a tendency toward heavy screen time among a few individuals, which could have implications for digital well-being and productivity.

iv). Do you often feel tired or stressed from using digital devices?



The data clearly highlights that over half (58.5%) of users are negatively affected by continuous digital exposure, while 41.5% manage to maintain digital comfort. This emphasizes the growing concern of digital burnout among users and the importance of adopting healthier digital habits—such as scheduled breaks, eye relaxation exercises, and reduced screen dependency—to sustain mental and physical well-

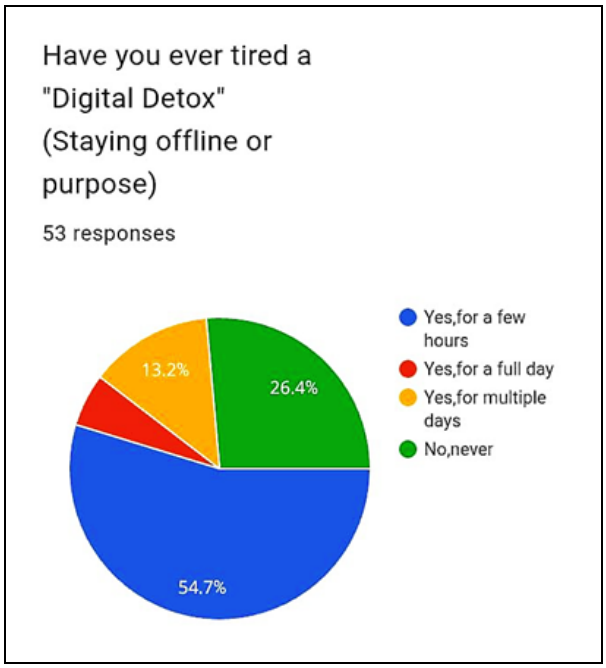
v). What is your main reason for being online?



The survey revealed that 60.4% of respondents are mainly online for social media, followed by 20.8% who use the internet for idle time engagement. Meanwhile, 9.4% go online primarily for online shopping, and a smaller percentage, 4.7% each, use it for work or school and other purposes. The data indicates that social media is the dominant reason people go online, showing its strong influence on daily digital habits. The relatively lower percentages for work, shopping, and

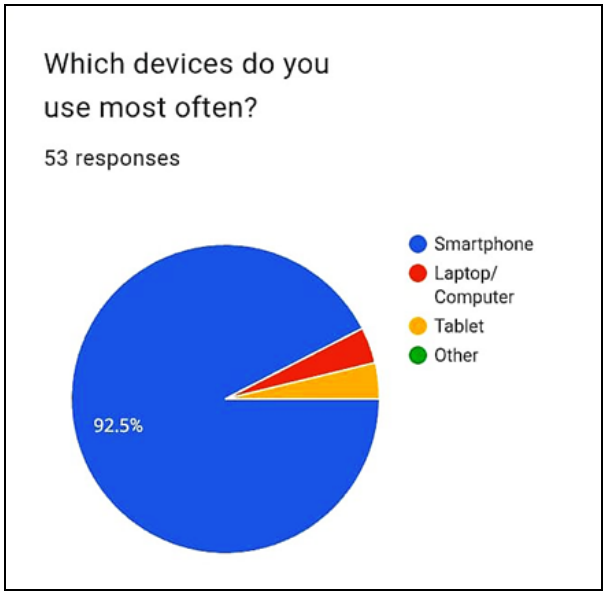
other purposes suggest that online activity is driven more by social interaction and leisure rather than productivity or necessity.

vi). Have you ever tried a "Digital Detox" (Staying offline or purpose)



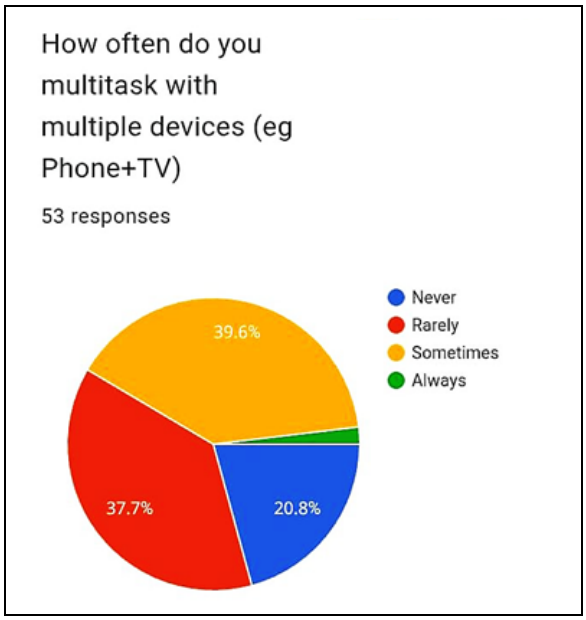
The results show that 54.7% of respondents have tried a digital detox for only a few hours, while 26.4% have never attempted one at all. Meanwhile, 13.2% managed to stay offline for multiple days, and a small portion, 5.7%, for a full day. This suggests that although most people recognize the need to disconnect, few are able to sustain it for long periods, highlighting the challenge of reducing digital dependence.

vii). Which devices do you use most often?



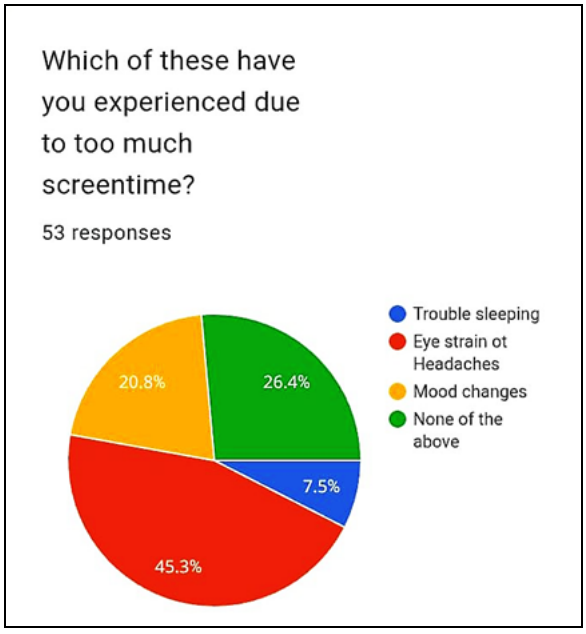
The findings reveal that 92.5% of respondents use smartphones most often, while only a small fraction rely on laptops or computers (around 4%) and tablets or other devices (about 3%). This indicates that smartphones have become the dominant device for daily digital activities, reflecting their convenience and central role in modern online engagement.

viii). How often do you multitask with multiple devices (eg, Phone+TV)



Based on the chart, out of 53 responses, 39.6% of participants said they sometimes multitask with multiple devices, 37.7% rarely do so, 20.8% never multitask, and only 1.9% always multitask. This shows that about 79% of people multitask at least occasionally, indicating that using more than one device at a time has become a common habit. The majority doing it "sometimes" suggests that while multitasking is frequent, people still balance it with moments of focus, reflecting how modern digital lifestyles promote multitasking as part of daily behavior.

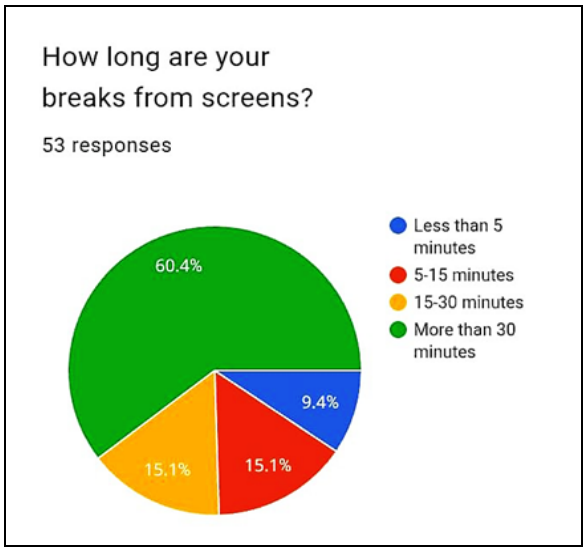
ix). Which of these have you experienced due to too much screentime?



Based on the chart, out of 53 responses, 45.3% of participants reported experiencing eye strain or headaches due to excessive screen time, 26.4% said they experienced none of the above, 20.8% mentioned mood changes, and 7.5% faced trouble sleeping. This shows that nearly half of the respondents suffer from physical discomfort like eye strain,

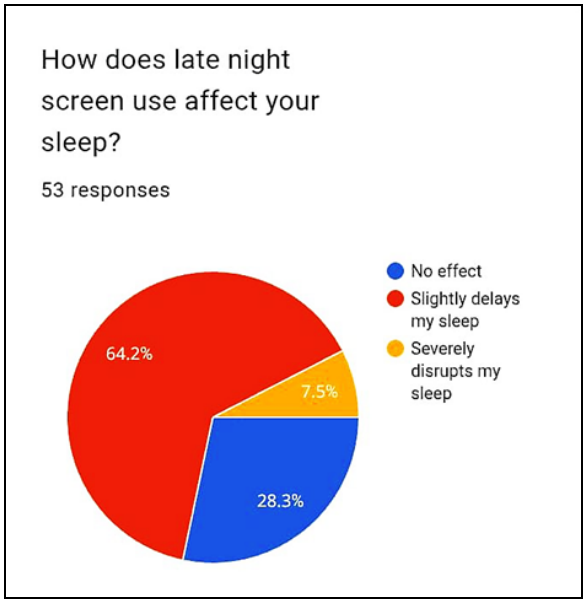
which is the most common issue linked to prolonged screen exposure. A smaller portion reported psychological effects such as mood changes and sleep problems, indicating that excessive screen time impacts both mental and physical well-being. However, the 26.4% who experienced no issues suggest that some individuals may be practicing better screen habits or taking sufficient breaks. Overall, the data highlights the growing health concerns associated with extended digital device use.

x). How long are your breaks from screens?



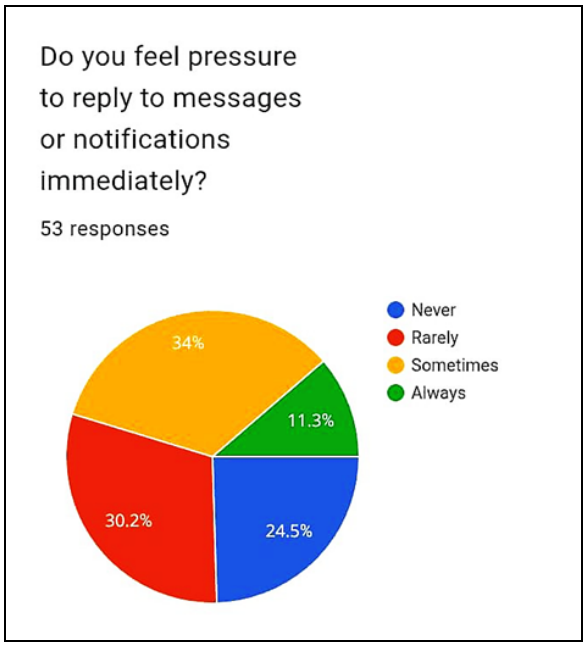
Based on the chart, out of 53 responses, 60.4% of participants take breaks from screens lasting more than 30 minutes, 15.1% take breaks of 15–30 minutes, another 15.1% take 5–15 minute breaks, and only 9.4% take breaks of less than 5 minutes. This shows that a majority of people prefer taking longer breaks, which is a positive habit for reducing eye strain and improving focus. However, a small portion still takes very short breaks, indicating that not everyone follows healthy screen-time practices. Overall, the data suggests that most individuals are aware of the importance of giving their eyes and mind sufficient rest from continuous screen exposure.

xi). How does late night screen use affect your sleep?



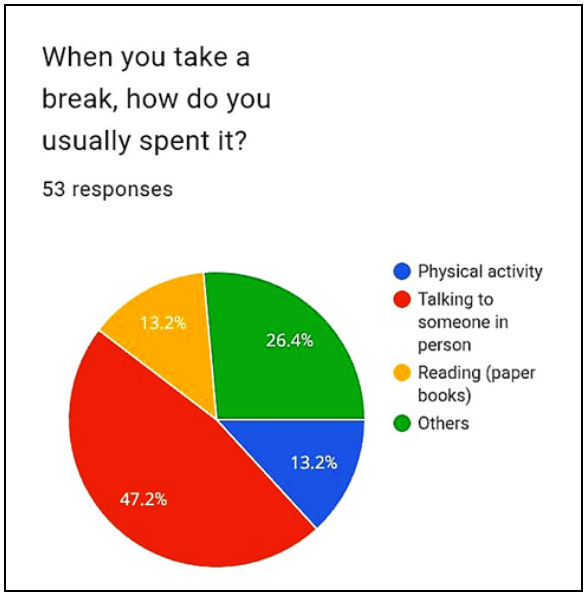
Among 53 respondents, the majority, 47.2%, spend their break talking to someone in person, showing a preference for social interaction during free time. 26.4% engage in other activities, indicating varied interests beyond the given options. Meanwhile, 13.2% use their break for physical activity, and another 13.2% spend it reading paper books. This suggests that while communication is the most common break-time choice, a smaller portion of individuals prefer solitary or active relaxation methods.

xii). Do you feel pressure to reply to messages or notifications immediately



Out of 53 participants, 34% said they sometimes feel pressured to reply immediately, making it the most common response. 30.2% rarely feel such pressure, while 24.5% reported that they never feel pressured. A smaller group, 11.3%, always feel the need to respond instantly. This analysis shows that while many experience moderate pressure to stay responsive, a significant number manage to avoid or limit that stress.

xiii). When you take a break, how do you usually spent it?



From the 53 responses, 64.2% indicated that late-night screen use slightly delays their sleep, suggesting that most people are somewhat affected by screen exposure before bed. 28.3% reported no effect, showing that a smaller proportion can use screens late without disturbance. Only 7.5% said it severely disrupts their sleep, meaning very few face strong negative impacts. Overall, the majority experience mild but noticeable sleep delays due to nighttime screen usage.

5. Overall Analysis

The findings reveal that most participants, primarily aged between 17 and 24, spend between 2 to 6 hours online daily, with social media being the main reason for digital engagement. Smartphones were identified as the most used devices, and a majority reported multitasking between multiple screens at least sometimes. This pattern indicates a high degree of digital dependency among young adults.

A significant portion of respondents acknowledged experiencing negative effects of screen time, such as eye strain, headaches, mood changes, and mild sleep disruption. Although many attempted short "digital detox" periods, the limited duration of these breaks (usually only a few hours or days) suggests that disconnecting fully remains difficult. Sleep delay due to late-night screen use was common, with most reporting that their sleep was "slightly delayed" rather than severely affected — showing moderate but widespread impact on rest quality.

Interestingly, in-person conversations and reading physical books emerged as preferred ways to relax, implying a subconscious desire to balance online and offline life. However, the persistent habit of immediate response to notifications indicates an underlying sense of digital pressure and anxiety tied to constant connectivity.

Overall, the study concludes that while digital engagement is integral to modern communication and lifestyle, it carries subtle yet cumulative risks for mental well-being and physical health. The results emphasize the importance of setting digital boundaries, practicing longer screen breaks, and cultivating mindful offline activities to prevent digital burnout and promote healthier technology use.

6. Conclusion

The study clearly highlights how constant connectivity has become both a comfort and a burden in today's digital age. While technology and online platforms have made communication, learning, and entertainment more accessible than ever, the findings reveal an emerging cost — digital burnout. Most participants spend several hours online each day, often switching between devices, primarily for social media use. This pattern of continuous engagement has led to symptoms such as eye strain, mood changes, and sleep disruption, reflecting the toll of being "always connected."

Even though many respondents have tried short digital detoxes, the struggle to stay offline for extended periods shows how deeply technology is woven into daily routines. The common feeling of pressure to respond instantly to messages or notifications also underlines the emotional fatigue linked to digital dependence. At the same time, activities like talking to people in person or reading physical books stand out as simple yet effective ways people naturally seek balance.

Overall, the study brings to light a vital message — digital wellness is as important as digital access. It calls for a conscious effort to use technology mindfully, take meaningful breaks, and reconnect with the offline world. Recognizing the hidden cost of constant connectivity is the first step toward building a healthier relationship with our digital lives.

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