University Stress – Why your digital habits might be undermining your studies

An essential guide for undergraduate and postgraduate students for managing digital stress



The pandemic has brought about an era of social distancing, remote work for employees and an online educational system for students. Being an undergraduate student myself at that time, I had first-hand experience of this transition to the 'new normal'. While the final year of an academic degree comes with its own challenges, the university and students became part of an experiment to determine the survival of the 'adaptable'. The isolation and mental stress brought about during these troubled times, truly tested one's abilities to manage time effectively, prioritize responsibilities, and preserve one's mental health as well as manage the risk of burnout. This article, based on my own experiences, explores the additional burden digital media exerts on students, the pros, and the cons of such technology and how to develop a more mindful and healthy relationship with your digital devices.

Breakdown of Article,

1. **Digital and University Stressors – The Problem**
2. **Student Attention - What the Problem Affects**
3. **Burnout and Exhaustion - Consequences of the Problem**
4. **Recovering and Productivity**
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1. Digital and University Stressors - The Problem



Innovation, fuelled by consumerism has giving rise to novel technologies which have dramatically changed the way we live, work and study. It has revolutionized how we interact and communicate with each other; simplified mundane tasks and even influences how we think and act. This is especially true for students and undergraduates who have grown up during the internet and smartphone era and are often referred to as digital natives, the iGen or GenZ, [1]

It's no surprise, that any form of higher academic study adds considerable stress. Examinations, assignments, presentations, and submission deadlines are a few of the probable causes and anxiety triggers within the existing educational framework.

Technology is an amazing tool that is essential for university life, however there is a much-less desirable side that, instead of positively supporting students, undermines their health and wellbeing, leading to more stress, anxiety and even burnout. The global pandemic forced students to acclimatize into a study-from-home system and transfer all academic processes online. For many students this can be a cost effective and simpler alternative, however less attention has been paid to the long-term implications of increased student stress levels.

Recent Polish research found that younger students were more prone to academic stressors, while also concluding that the current education system could involve, long-term consequences for their psychophysiological health (Wirkus *et al*., 2021). [2] A plethora of clinical and university-based research have also shown how the pandemic has created a sense of stress, anxiety and depression, with these levels rising especially in undergraduates (AlHadi, 2021; Moy and Ng, 2021). [3] In June 2022, the BBC reported that in a survey of UK Students, one in four students are lonely most or all of the time. [4]

2. Student Attention - What the Problem Affects

Student attention is being focused onto a digital, indoor, and more sedentary lifestyle. Entertainment now takes the form of time on a smartphone, rather than an outside activity or face-to-face conversation with friends. A "study break" has typically turned into a "phone break" which usually transitions into mindless scrolling. 'Doomscrolling', which is the excessive and compulsive urge to scroll through negative and bad news, not only makes us feel awful, but studies have also linked this to both anxiety and depression. ('The darkly soothing compulsion of 'doomscrolling', BBC). [5]

The Netflix documentary "The Social Dilemma" [6] shed light and exposed the inner workings of social media, and how its engineered, created, marketed, and monetized following a concept that stimulates dopamine release and mimics the behavioural psychology of the slot machine

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(Seymour, 2019). [7] The comparison of the psychology behind smartphone uses and slot machines is due to their use of multiple 'pull' triggers to elicit automatic and unconscious actions. This pull creates a sense of anticipation mixed curiosity, during which important brain neurotransmitters such as dopamine are released stimulating pleasure receptors. Since most "Apps" are free, what is marketed to advertisers, is the attention and time of the users.

The scarcest and most valuable resource is your time!

The "Digital Lifestyle" holds the potential to categorize and cater to an individual's personal interests, this is quite evident by Siri suggestions on Apple iPhones and Bixby Routines on Samsung devices. Smart devices make everything easier… but should everything be so easy?

The ability to identify and segregate the interests of an individual, creates user profiles to be marketed and sold to advertisers and even organisations. Google has created Real-Time Bidding (RTB) where thousands of user profiles are shared with advertisers. [8]

Due to human nature, the same devices become a hub of easy access to negative influences. In fact, 'False/Fake news' and misinformation spread much faster. When people constantly compare themselves to celebrities and models, it causes additional stressors creating a more insecure generation (iGen, 2017).[9] Notable personalities such as Elon Musk, Selena Gomez and Joe Rogan have testified regarding the unhealthy aspects of social media (Insider, 2020). [10]

3. Burnout and Exhaustion - Consequences of the Problem

"There is of course a good side which means that children can get more done in a digital world, but we never stop to wonder what all this digital consumption and sense of dependency on technology can create…"

~Claire, Psychology Undergraduate~

Modern research and clinical studies, further identify that, often unknowingly, students fall victim to the negative effects of burnout (Kaggwa *et al*., 2021 [11]; Srisinghasongkram *et al*., 2021 [12]; Miguel-Berges *et al*, 2019 [13]). Burnout could be the result of the attention and time constraints of students, willingness to push forward and continue to work harder while foregoing sleep and rest, staying true to the philosophy, "I'll sleep when I'm dead".

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University stress levels worse than ever, says New Zealand union

Institutional leaders 'don't listen', leaving line managers to provide little more than 'palliative care'

2 October 2021 [14]

Burnout has been associated with conditions such as, Fatigue, Excessive Stress, Depression, Anxiety, Anger Management and Cardiovascular issues (Durmuş *et al*., 2022).[15] The adverse nature and effects of burnout are also well researched and documented among the scientific community, "Burnout negatively impacts physical health by increasing the incidence of sleep disorders, elevated levels of inflammation biomarkers, metabolic syndrome (high blood pressure, high blood sugar, excess body fat around the waist and abnormal cholesterol or triglycerides), cardiovascular disease, diabetes and neurodegeneration." (Norez, 2017).[16]

4. Recovering and Productivity

"Where there is lack of Rest, there is an abundance of Stress"

~Lysa Terkeurst~

The "hustle culture" is often glamorized in society and has been popularised by the entrepreneur Gary Vaynerchuk. Whether you approve or disapprove of it, as it's a matter of personal choice and commitment, it is vital for your productivity and mental health, that clear boundaries are set between work and personal time and that you apply disciplined time management to maintain a sustainable work/life balance. In my experience an issue with schools is that students are not adequately prepared for the workload and stressful environment at university level. Therefore, many students' express feelings of distress and frustration. The addition of a digital lifestyle only compounds these feelings further.

"With online lectures, as an engineering student it has been extremely difficult to understand the complex math used. This has resulted in excessive YouTube sessions and video calls with seniors to try to understand concepts. I believe my stress levels have increased overall but I have no solution to turn to other than my device."

~Kenneth, Engineering Undergraduate~

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5. Simple steps for your devices

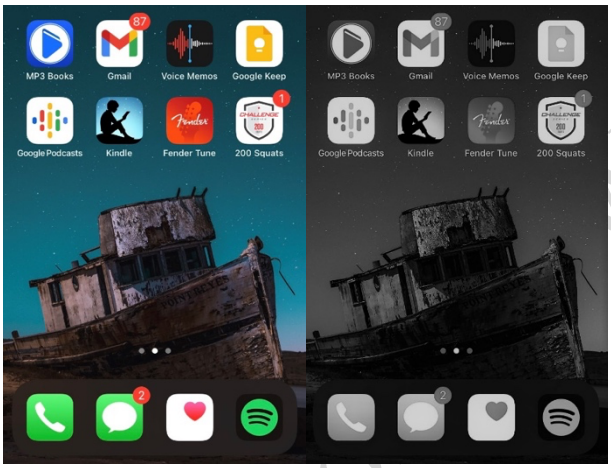
I. Distraction Blocking Apps

These apps could be used to restrict certain features and increase the friction between you and your device. I personally found that the Forest App works best for me in times of intense focus due to its gamified Digital Detox concept.



Statistics of intense focus days using Forest (iOS)

II. Tricking the brain – Greyscale Mode/Monochrome Filter



You can also try switching the screen colours of your phone to grey scale. I personally find that the absence of colour reduces the exciting nature and dulls down those pesky notification bubbles.

III. Time Blocking

It's true we probably all procrastinate! So, one of the best solutions I've found is to schedule tasks and activities to do in the future. I personally use Google calendar, but there are countless apps and software available for this.

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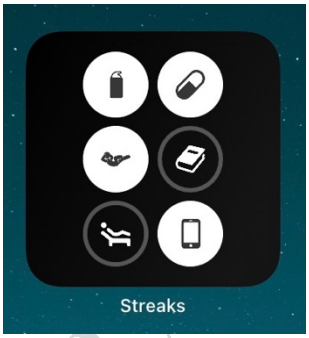
IV. Keystone Habits

To find the perfect balance in life I personally find habits helpful. Doing a series of habits in a succession can be termed as a Keystone habit. These habits could act as a routine at any time of the day and could be ideal to ground yourself when the going gets tough. I use the Streaks app for this, but also prefer to write down their completion on a notepad.



V. One Band to Bind it All – Physical Restraint



Putting a rubber band around your device sets up a physical barrier which takes some time to overcome. I find this as the perfect solution to compulsive picking up my smartphone and scrolling, and even serves as a reminder – 'do you really want to waste your time?' (It also gives some additional protection!)

VI. The answer may not always be another app!



We have become so attached to our technology that we tend to carry our smartphones with us wherever we go. For many, it's the last thing they see before going to sleep and the first thing they see when they awake in the morning.

This last suggestion is centred around the concept that our technology should be a useful tool for us, rather than us being a useful tool for the technology companies.

The best way to reduce the effects of student stress and be more productive, is to take regular breaks from technology, be fully present with other people, exercise, be surrounded by nature, eat well and sleep.

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6. Summary

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the additional challenges and potential stressors faced by university students resulting from today's digital culture. It also explored burnout and exhaustion, and its debilitating effects. The paper concluded with a number of simple tips and insights on how to manage some of these stressors.

It is interesting to observe the wide range of groups and individuals now speaking out and addressing the issues surrounding overuse and 'addiction' to digital devices and highlighting the physical, mental, and social consequences of it.

Since the impact of these issues will only continue to grow in the future, gaining knowledge and insights about these adverse effects and what we can do to mitigate them is a critical aspect of the solution. Books, documentaries, and videos on this topic are abundant. There are several free courses by the Open University as well as from Future Learn, but true change lies in taking effective personal action. As an iGen individual myself, this space of technology, university life and digital dependency were all factors that resonate personally with me, so I hope that this paper reaches out to those in need of its contents. I also hope that after reading this paper, you have at least one more valuable insight, to practice or integrate into your life.

If any of the above information resonate with you and you would like to get in touch to discuss an issue or any inquiry, do email me at glenbowen3@gmail.com

Thank you for your valuable time and looking forward to any comments and ideas.

7. About the Author & Technology Wellbeing Ltd

Glen Jude Bowen is Graduate Valedictorian and Biotechnologist, currently employed in the field of Research and Innovation. He is a Professional Life Coach, NLP Master Practitioner, and a Business Development Executive at Technology Wellbeing Ltd. His interests lie in the fields of Productivity, Research and Development and the Concept of enhancing the human performance of individuals to exceed personal and professional expectations while facilitating "Out of the Box thinking".

Technology Wellbeing Ltd focuses on the collision between technology and psychology and how this is changing the way we think, feel and behave. Home of 'The Digital Detox Coach', we help businesses and individuals achieve more healthy, sustainable life with technology through speaker events, workshops, courses and coaching.
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