

Digital Habits and Cognitive Health in Indian College Students

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: College students in India spend a significant portion of their waking hours on digital devices, but the overall cognitive effects of internet addiction, excessive screen time and psychological distress have not been studied adequately in the Indian university setting.

Aim: This study examined the combined and independent effects of internet addiction, daily screen time and psychological distress on cognitive performance of college students of Delhi-NCR.

Materials and Methods: The study was a cross-sectional study conducted among 331 students (18 to 26 years) from different universities of Delhi-NCR. Cognitive function was measured using the Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA). Internet addiction, mental health, sleep, and physical activity {IAT, Depression Anxiety Stress Scales – 10 (DASS-10), Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI), International Physical Activity Questionnaire – Short Form (IPAQ-SF)} were assessed using validated self-report questionnaires, and daily screen time was self-reported. A two-block hierarchical regression was used, with the lifestyle covariates entered before the three main predictors.

Results: Almost 88% of students exhibited above-normal internet usage, with nearly 50% classified as moderately addicted. Daily screen time averaged around 10 hours, and many experienced significant psychological distress. One-third scored below the MoCA threshold for mild cognitive concern. Internet addiction had the strongest negative effect on cognitive performance, followed by screen time and psychological distress, which also compounded cognitive disadvantages. After considering these digital and psychological factors, sleep quality and physical activity lost their status as independent predictors of cognition.

Conclusion: Heavy internet use, prolonged screen exposure and increased psychological distress represent a significant and modifiable burden to student cognitive health, indicating a need for university-based digital wellness programmes that address both behavioural and psychological dimensions of digital overuse.

Keywords: Cognitive functioning, College students, Internet addiction, Mental health, Screen time.

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