

Chapter 20

Digital Distractions, Mindfulness, and Academic Performance With Undergraduate College Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between digital distractions, mindfulness, and academic performance with undergraduate college students. A total of 199 students completed surveys that examined digital distractions and the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer et al., 2006). The results indicated that 96.5% of participants had a digital device near them when studying, and 94.0% used a digital device to help them study. The major purpose for using a digital device in the classroom was to check the time on their phone (91.0%) and text someone (88.9%). Some reasons for using a digital device for non-classroom purposes included to fight boredom (39.2%) and to stay connected with others (25.1%). Participants who had fewer digital distractions tended to be more mindful and a significant positive relationship ($r = .192, p < .05$) was obtained between overall mindfulness and academic performance.

INTRODUCTION

College students deal daily with academic issues like attending classes, writing papers, taking exams, completing homework, navigating roommate issues, and filtering distractions that are borne from digital device use (Rosini et al., 2017). Beyond their academic work, students have a variety of obligations competing for their time that include paid work, sports, recreational activities, and simple everyday life tasks that all combine to divert their focus (Alika, 2012; Zascavage et al., 2012). The combination of these diverse demands may impact student stress levels and academic performance in college (Adams et al., 2016).

Digital Device Usage and Distractions

The types of digital devices that college students have access to in the contemporary classroom include smartphones, laptops, tablets, and smartwatches (Edujee & Girlando, 2016; McCoy, 2016). According to Pew Research Center's data report (2019), 96% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 own a smartphone device, almost 75% of adult Americans own desktop or laptop computers, and 52% own tablets like an iPad.

Digital device use in the college classroom ranges from accessing classroom information, texting, photo-sharing, and research (Seemiller, 2017). In a 2015 study of 675 college students, McCoy (2016) explored the use of digital devices in the classroom for non-academic reasons. His study revealed that 63% used their devices to combat boredom and suggested that students might benefit from adopting self-control skills to help maintain focus in the classroom. The Center for Research on Learning and Training conducted a study on college students' ($n = 1,415$) views of how laptops used by students seated nearby affected their attentiveness. Interestingly, 46% in the control group and 40% in the LectureTools group (actively engaging students, allowing students to take notes, and pose questions) indicated they were somewhat or significantly distracted (Zhu et al., 2010). Other research indicates that technologies like laptops and cell phones can interfere with attention and students' ability to learn in the classroom (Attia et al., 2017).

There is mixed research on the impact of digital devices on academic performance and students' perceptions on the use of technology in the classroom. For instance, May & Elder (2018) in a review of other research studies indicate that media multitasking interferes with attention, test performance, note taking, self-regulation, and negatively impacts student GPA. On the other hand, Siraj et al. (2015) found Malaysian medical students at a public university that reported high internet usage also reported higher academic performance. A 2016 study examining the efficacy of digital devices in the classroom illustrated that students felt that digital device use in the classroom was not a distraction. The majority of the students ($n=64$) in this study utilized their iPad during class, with 70% of the students indicating the use of the iPad was effective/very effective as a digital tool in their classes (Edujee & Girlando, 2016). In contrast, a study conducted by Neiterman and Zaza (2019) indicated that 49% of students were distracted by other students' digital device usage that was unrelated to the class topic.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is defined as:

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