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From FOMO To Focus: Measuring the Benefits of a Structured "Disconnect to Re-Connect" Intervention

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of a structured digital detox intervention, "Disconnect to Re-Connect," on college students' emotions, behaviours, and cognitive outcomes. A sample of 100 young graduates and postgraduates participated in a five-hour program involving nature exposure, group activities, and puzzles, while abstaining from mobile phone use. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, correlation, and regression analysis. Findings revealed that participants reported high levels of satisfaction, improved focus, enhanced creativity, and meaningful mental recharge. Importantly, 77 per cent acknowledged increased awareness of their dependence on mobile devices, and a majority expressed intentions to consciously reduce phone usage or engage more in outdoor activities. Correlation and regression analyses highlighted that experiential factors such as mental restoration and recognition of mobile dependency were stronger predictors of satisfaction than demographic characteristics. Although demographic influences (age, gender, and course of study) were statistically weak, the intervention demonstrated clear potential in promoting healthier digital habits and well-being. The study concludes that short-term, well-structured digital detox programs can act as effective catalysts for behavioural reflection and change among young adults, with implications for educational institutions and campus wellness initiatives.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's hyperconnected era, young people are growing up in an environment where smartphones are not just communication tools but extensions of their identities, routines, and social lives. Mobile phones act simultaneously as sources of entertainment, information, and interaction, making them indispensable in daily functioning. However, this convenience has a hidden cost. Constant exposure to notifications, instant updates, and the pressure to stay online cultivates a psychological state popularly known as FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), the anxious feeling that others might be experiencing rewarding events in one's absence, which drives individuals to remain tethered to their devices. For students and young graduates, FOMO manifests as compulsive checking of social media, reduced concentration on academic tasks, and emotional discomfort when separated from their phones. The Fear of Missing Out has become a defining characteristic of modern youth culture. Studies reveal that FOMO is directly linked to higher mobile phone dependency, fragmented attention, and increased stress levels. Youngsters often feel pressured to be constantly updated with peers' activities, trending topics, or social feeds, leading to diminished face-to-face interactions, a lack of mindfulness, and reduced capacity for sustained focus. This phenomenon not only affects academic performance but also influences psychological well-being, fostering anxiety, restlessness, and dissatisfaction. Against this backdrop, the need for structured interventions to counter FOMO and reorient attention towards offline, meaningful engagements has gained urgent importance.

One such approach is the digital detox, a deliberate, temporary disconnection from mobile phones and digital platforms. Unlike arbitrary restrictions, digital detox programs create alternative experiences that are fulfilling, engaging, and socially enriching, reducing the perceived cost of being offline. In this study, the intervention titled "Disconnect to Re-Connect" was designed to immerse college students in a five-hour phone-free experience involving exposure to nature, group-based fun activities, puzzles, and interactive learning. By keeping phones aside, participants were not merely abstaining from digital devices; they were actively reconnecting with peers, themselves, and their surroundings. This deliberate shift aimed to transform the FOMO-driven anxiety of being disconnected into a renewed capacity for focus, creativity, and emotional well-being. The current research focuses on how this structured digital detox activity impacts young students' emotions, behaviours, and cognitive experiences. Specifically, it explores whether disengaging from mobile phones, even for a short duration, can reduce feelings of loneliness, improve interpersonal interactions, enhance creativity, and instil a sense of mental recharge. Importantly, it examines how demographic variables such as age group, gender, and course of study (graduate vs postgraduate) influence responses to the detox activity, as these factors may shape the extent of mobile dependency and the perceived benefits of disconnection. Liu, N., Zhu, S., Zhang, W., Sun, Y., & Zhang, X. (2024).

The title "From FOMO to Focus" encapsulates the central argument of this study: that youth, often burdened by the fear of missing out when offline, can rediscover deeper focus, social bonding, and personal growth when exposed to well-structured phone-free interventions. Instead of perceiving disconnection as deprivation, participants can learn to view it as an opportunity to engage more meaningfully with the present moment. The intervention also raises broader questions about habit formation—whether such short-term digital detox experiences can catalyse long-term awareness about phone usage patterns and promote healthier digital behaviour. Methodologically, the study employs a survey-based research design with 100 college students as participants. Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered immediately after the five-hour activity, capturing their emotions, levels of focus, creativity, perceptions of dependency, and behavioural intentions. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation, chi-square tests, and regression models to understand the interplay between demographics and behavioural outcomes. The goal is not only to measure the impact of the intervention but also to test hypotheses regarding demographic influences on phone dependency, focus, and satisfaction. Tugtekin, U., Tugtekin, E. B., Kurt, A. A., & Demir, K. (2020). This research makes two significant contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence on the feasibility and effectiveness of short-term, structured digital detox interventions in a higher education context. By offering insights into students lived experiences, it highlights the tangible benefits of substituting digital engagement with nature, puzzles, and peer interactions. Second, it contributes to the broader discourse on youth well-being in the digital age, demonstrating how carefully curated offline experiences can mitigate FOMO and channel attention toward constructive outcomes like focus, creativity, and emotional balance.

As mobile dependency continues to escalate globally, particularly among young adults, the findings of this study can guide universities, policymakers, and mental health practitioners in designing practical interventions to promote healthier digital habits. The message is clear: by disconnecting temporarily, students can reconnect more deeply with themselves, with peers, and with the real world. In doing so, the journey from FOMO to focus is not only possible but profoundly transformative.

Need, Objectives, and Research Design

The rising dependence on smartphones among young students has become a growing concern in contemporary society. What began as a tool for convenience has evolved into a central element of daily life, shaping communication, learning, and leisure. However, excessive phone use has been linked with addiction-like behaviours that affect both academic performance and personal well-being (Elhai et al., 2017). Students often experience difficulty concentrating, reduced sleep quality, and heightened anxiety when separated from their devices (Przybylski et al., 2013). One of the most common manifestations of this dependency is the Fear of Missing Out

(FOMO), a psychological state where individuals constantly feel the need to stay updated on their peers' activities and online content. Studies suggest that FOMO not only fosters compulsive checking but also undermines self-esteem, increases social comparison, and decreases face-to-face interaction (Baker et al., 2016). In the Indian higher education context, this issue is particularly acute as mobile phones increasingly mediate both social and academic engagement.

A growing body of literature emphasises the impact of digital dependency on focus, creativity, and social interaction. Rosen et al. (2013) found that frequent interruptions by technology significantly reduce students' ability to engage in deep cognitive tasks, while Mark et al. (2015) demonstrated that multitasking with digital devices impairs creativity by fragmenting attention. Similarly, Twenge (2017) highlighted how increased screen time correlates with declining social connectedness among young adults. Yet, despite these insights, there is a noticeable gap in research on structured interventions that deliberately separate students from their phones to measure changes in emotional and behavioural outcomes. While scholars such as Roberts and David (2020) have called for experimental approaches to studying "digital detox," empirical work in this area remains limited, particularly in emerging economies like India, where smartphone penetration among youth is rapidly accelerating. This study addresses that gap by examining the effects of a structured digital detox intervention called "Disconnect to Re-Connect." The activity involved a five-hour phone-free session where students engaged in nature walks, group-based games, puzzles, and interactive learning. The intervention was designed not as a form of deprivation but as a positive substitution, giving participants alternative sources of stimulation, enjoyment, and social bonding. By creating an environment that offered immediate offline rewards, the activity sought to reduce students' anxiety over missing digital interactions and instead promote focus, creativity, and emotional well-being.

The objectives of the study were threefold. First, it aimed to examine the emotional, behavioural, and cognitive impact of digital detox, focusing on feelings of restlessness, creativity, and mental recharge. Second, it sought to explore the relationship between demographic variables such as age, gender, and course of study (undergraduate vs postgraduate) and participants' responses, since past research suggests that demographic factors often shape digital habits and experiences (Lepp et al., 2015). Third, the study tested hypotheses concerning mobile dependency and key outcomes such as focus, creativity, and overall satisfaction with the detox program. By linking demographic factors with behavioural changes, the research contributes not only to theory but also to practical program design. To achieve these objectives, the research adopted a descriptive and analytical design. It was descriptive in capturing participants' experiences during the detox activity and analytical in identifying statistical relationships between variables. The study followed a quantitative approach, using structured questionnaires administered to participants immediately after the intervention.

The population for the study comprised college students, who are among the most affected groups when it comes to mobile dependency and FOMO-driven behaviours. A sample size of 100 students was selected, covering both undergraduates and postgraduates, to ensure a balance of perspectives. The sampling method employed was convenience sampling, as participants were drawn from accessible groups within the college setting. While this approach may limit external generalizability, it offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of the target population.

Data collected from the questionnaires were analysed using Excel, SPSS, and Python, enabling the use of descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, chi-square tests, and regression modelling. These techniques allowed the study to summarise trends, test hypotheses, and explore predictive relationships between demographic factors and behavioural outcomes. By employing both descriptive and inferential methods, the study ensured that its conclusions are both evidence-based and analytically robust. Ultimately, this design provides a comprehensive understanding of how short-term digital detox interventions can transform student experiences, shifting them from a state of FOMO toward enhanced focus, creativity, and emotional balance.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** Age group significantly influences perception of mobile dependency.
- **H2:** Gender is associated with emotional response without the phone.
- **H3:** Course of study (UG/PG) influences focus on activities.
- **H4:** Demographic factors significantly predict satisfaction with digital detox (Regression).

Data Analysis & Interpretation

The dataset comprised 100 completed questionnaires collected immediately after a five-hour "Disconnect to Re-Connect" activity. Respondents were predominantly undergraduates (93 UG, 7 PG) and female (59 female, 41 male). For quantitative analysis, categorical responses were coded onto ordinal numeric scales. Key numeric variables used in the inferential analyses include: (i) thoughts about phone during the 5 hours (scale 1–4; higher = thought about phone more), (ii) feeling lonely without phone (1–4), (iii) focus during activities (1–4; higher = more focused), (iv) creativity effects (1–4; higher = greater enhancement), (v) mental recharge (1–4),
(vi) change in perceived mobile dependency (0–3; higher = stronger realisation of dependence), and (vii) overall satisfaction (1–4; higher = greater satisfaction). Descriptive results and subsequent tests are reported below.

Descriptive statistics and response distributions

Frequencies show strong immediate positive reactions to the intervention:

Overall satisfaction: 48% rated the activity **Excellent**, 35% **Good**, 12% **Average**, and 5% **Poor** — producing a mean satisfaction score ≈ of **3.26** (on a 1–4 scale).

- Perception of mobile dependency: 44% responded "Strongly yes, I realised my dependence", 33% "Yes, to some extent", 17% Neutral, and 6% "No, I don't feel dependent". Mean perception change score ≈ 2.15 (0–3 scale).
- Behavioural intention (after the experience): 42% said they would "Reduce phone usage consciously", 37% said "Try more outdoor/nature-based activities", 11% were undecided, and 10% would use the phone as usual.
- Focus during activities: 59% reported being fully focused, 33% mostly focused, 7% Distracted at times, and 1% Hardly focused (mean focus ≈ 3.50).
- Creativity: 38% reported greatly enhanced creativity, 44% Slight improvement, 17% no change, and 1% reduced creativity (mean ≈ 3.38).
- Mental recharge: 49% reported being fully recharged, 29% somewhat recharged, 17% no effect, and 5% felt more tired (mean ≈ 3.27).
- Thinking about the phone during the 5 hours had a lower mean (≈ 1.60 on a 1–4 scale), indicating that most participants reported rarely or sometimes thinking about the phone rather than "frequently" or "almost all the time."
- Loneliness without the phone: 62% said Not at all, 27% Slightly, 6% Moderately, and 5% Very much (mean ≈ 1.54).

Taken together, the descriptive picture shows that the five-hour, phone-free intervention was experienced positively by a clear majority: high satisfaction, perceived cognitive and creative benefits, meaningful intention to reduce phone use, and little reported loneliness. BMC Psychology. (2021).

Correlation analysis

Pearson correlations were computed among demographics and primary outcome variables. Key findings:

Satisfaction correlated strongly with mental recharge (r = 0.654), change in perception of dependency (r = 0.618), and **creativity improvement (r = 0.535). Satisfaction also correlated moderately with focus (r = 0.418).**

- **Thinking about the phone during the session** negatively correlated with satisfaction (r ≈ **−0.355**) and was positively associated with reports of loneliness (r ≈ **0.408**) — suggesting those who thought about their phones more tended to feel worse and be less satisfied.
- **Loneliness** negatively correlated with satisfaction (r ≈ **−0.386**), and positively with thinking-about-phone (see above).

Interpretation

Participants who felt more mentally recharged and experienced greater creativity gains were significantly more satisfied; likewise, a stronger subjective realisation of mobile dependence was associated with higher satisfaction. Lower intrusion of phone-related thoughts corresponded to higher satisfaction and lower loneliness. These relationships are consistent with the program's hypothesised mechanism: substitution of phone-driven stimulation with rich offline experiences increases perceived benefit and satisfaction.

Chi-square tests of categorical associations (hypothesis testing)

In this research, we tested three categorical hypotheses using chi-square tests on the original categorical variables:

H1. Age group influences change in perception of mobile dependency.

- Test: Age group (18–20, 21–23, 24+) vs. categorical perception change.
- Result: χ^2 = **3.063**, p = **0.382** (df = 3).
- Interpretation: No statistically significant association between age group and reported change in perception — within this sample, age variance was small (93 respondents, 18– 20), which limits power to detect effects.

H2. Gender is associated with feeling lonely without the phone.

- Test: Gender vs. loneliness categories.
- Result: χ^2 = **6.760**, p = **0.080** (df = 3).
- Interpretation: The association approached but did not reach conventional significance (p < .05). The cross-tabulation shows females reported "Slightly" lonely more often than males in raw counts; however, the evidence is not strong enough to claim a gender effect at α = .05.

H3. Course of study (UG vs PG) influences focus during activities.

- Test: Course of Study vs. focus categories.
- Result: χ^2 = **0.844**, p = **0.839** (df = 3).
- Interpretation: No evidence that being an undergraduate vs. a postgraduate predicted categorical focus outcomes in this sample. The sample was heavily UG-dominated (93 UG), constraining the detection of differences.

Overall, chi-square tests show no strong categorical associations between the demographic variables tested and the categorical outcomes at conventional significance levels, though the gender–loneliness relationship approached marginal significance.

Regression analysis — predicting overall satisfaction

To assess joint predictive effects, an OLS regression model predicted overall satisfaction (numeric 1–4) from demographics and experiential variables:

Predictors entered: **Age**, **Gender**, **Course**, **thinking about phone**, **focus**, **creativity improvement**, **mental recharge**, and **change in perception of dependency**.

Key regression results:

- **Model fit:** R^2 ≈ **0.567**, Adj R^2 ≈ **0.529**; F(8,91) = 14.92, **p < .001**. The model explains a **substantial proportion (≈57%)** of variance in satisfaction.

- **Significant predictors ($p < .05$):**
- **Mental recharge** ($\beta \approx$ **0.323**, p = **0.001**) — strongest single predictor: participants who reported being more mentally recharged rated satisfaction substantially higher.
- **Change in perception of dependency** ($\beta \approx$ **0.262**, p = **0.006**): those who realised their dependence more strongly reported higher satisfaction (likely because the intervention was impactful enough to shift self-awareness).
- **Borderline predictors ($p \approx .05–.07$):**
- **Creativity improvement** ($\beta \approx$ **0.200**, p = **0.053**) — close to significance; enhanced creativity tended to raise satisfaction.

Course (PG vs UG) ($\beta \approx$ **0.635**, p = **0.055**) — postgraduate status tended to predict higher satisfaction, though the small PG cell (n=7) cautions interpretation.

- Thinking about phone ($\beta \approx -0.173$, p = 0.071) — more intrusive phone thoughts tended to reduce satisfaction.
- Non-significant predictors: Age, Gender, and Focus (in this multivariate model) were not significant after accounting for the other variables.

Interpretation: The intervention's subjective experiential effects (mental recharge and perceived shift in dependency) are the dominant drivers of satisfaction; demographic variables have limited independent predictive power. This suggests that program design should prioritise elements that maximise mental recharge and facilitate insight into personal device use (e.g., reflective debriefs), rather than tailoring primarily by age/gender.

Hypothesis summary (tested)

- H1 (age → perception): Not supported (χ^2 p = .382). Caveat: sample age skew toward the youngest cohort reduces statistical power.
- H2 (gender → loneliness): Not strongly supported (χ^2 p = .080; marginal). Suggestive pattern but not conclusive.
- H3 (course → focus): Not supported (χ^2 p = .839).
- H4 (demographics + emotional responses predict satisfaction — regression): Partially supported. While demographics alone were weak predictors, the combined model shows mental recharge and change in dependency perception significantly predict satisfaction ($R^2 \approx 0.57$), supporting the hypothesis that emotional/experiential variables (not raw demographics) drive satisfaction and behaviour change.

Practical interpretation & implications

1. **High immediate acceptability:** The activity produced strong satisfaction (83% Good/Excellent) and concrete intentions to reduce phone use or try more outdoor activities (79% combined). This indicates five-hour micro-detox interventions can be both acceptable and actionable for college students.
2. **Mechanisms:** recharge + insight: Statistical evidence points to mental recharge and increased awareness of dependence as core mechanisms linking the experience to satisfaction. Programs should therefore include environments and activities that create restorative experiences (nature walks, reflective exercises) and components that encourage insight (group reflection, brief self-monitoring).
3. **Demographics are less important than experience:** Gender, age, and course had limited direct effects. This suggests scalability across typical undergraduate populations; tailoring is helpful but secondary to ensuring strong experiential design.
4. Policy & practice: Universities can implement short, low-cost phone-free retreats or activity days with an emphasis on group interaction and reflective debriefing, expecting positive short-term effects on focus, creativity, and intent for behaviour change.

Limitations of the study

- Sampling: Convenience sampling and heavy skew toward undergraduates (93%) and age 18–20 limit external generalizability; caution in extending results to older or more diverse student populations.
- Cross-sectional post-test design: No pre-test or longitudinal follow-up; causal claims are limited. Self-reported intentions do not guarantee sustained behaviour change.
- Cell size for subgroups: Small PG cohort (n=7) reduces power to detect subgroup effects.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that a structured, short-term digital detox intervention can generate meaningful psychological, behavioural, and cognitive benefits for college students. By asking participants to disengage from their mobile phones for five hours and instead engage in carefully designed group activities, puzzles, and nature-oriented exercises, the "Disconnect to Re-Connect" program provided an environment conducive to self-reflection, creativity, and social interaction. The descriptive, correlational, and regression analyses together paint a consistent picture of positive impact, highlighting the relevance of such interventions in the contemporary academic and social context. One of the most notable insights from the analysis is that subjective mental recharge and enhanced awareness of mobile dependency emerged as the strongest predictors of overall satisfaction with the program. This suggests that students derive the greatest sense of value not merely from distraction or entertainment but from the restorative qualities of disconnecting and the realisation of their own patterns of technology use. In particular, the regression results indicate that demographic factors such as age, gender, and level of study did not significantly predict satisfaction or outcomes. Rather, it was the participants' internal experiences of feeling recharged, focused, and aware of dependence that determined the perceived success of the intervention.

The descriptive results further reinforce this interpretation. High proportions of students reported being fully or mostly focused, experiencing enhanced creativity, and feeling recharged mentally after the activity. Moreover, a considerable majority acknowledged their dependence on mobile phones, and many indicated intentions to reduce phone use or increase outdoor activities in the future. These outcomes suggest that even a relatively short intervention can create a space for deep reflection, interrupt habitual digital behaviours, and promote healthier lifestyle intentions. Importantly, the activity did not generate negative emotional outcomes, such as loneliness or restlessness, for most participants. On the contrary, the structured social and cognitive engagement appeared to buffer against such risks, making the intervention not only effective but also psychologically safe for young participants. At the same time, the results also reveal certain limitations and directions for future research. While the study successfully identified immediate experiential benefits, the data are cross-sectional and drawn from a convenience sample of 100 students in one college setting. Without pre- and post-measures, it is not possible to quantify the exact magnitude of change attributable to the intervention, nor can long-term behavioural outcomes be confirmed. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported perceptions, though valuable, introduces the potential for social desirability bias, as students may report what they believe is expected rather than their authentic experiences.

Nevertheless, the implications of this research are highly relevant for educational institutions and policymakers. The clear positive outcomes observed in this study suggest that structured digital detox programs can serve as an important complement to traditional student wellness initiatives. By providing immersive experiences that are interactive, social, and creativity-enhancing, institutions can help students become more conscious of their digital habits and equip them with strategies for managing technology use. Given the rising concerns about phone addiction, FOMO (fear of missing out), and digital distractions among youth, such programs represent a low-cost, scalable, and effective intervention strategy. Brown, K., & Kuss, D. J. (2021). For future research, several avenues are promising. First, longitudinal designs that follow participants over weeks or months would provide evidence about whether the intentions expressed immediately after the intervention translate into sustained reductions in problematic phone use. Newport, C. (2019). Second, experimental or quasi-experimental studies involving randomised groups (detox versus control) would strengthen causal claims about the benefits of such interventions. Third, integrating objective measures of phone use (such as screen-time data) alongside self-reports would enhance the validity of findings and reduce reliance on subjective perceptions. Finally, exploring cultural, regional, and institutional variations in response to digital detox activities would provide a richer understanding of how these interventions can be adapted across different contexts.

In summary, the quantitative analysis conducted in this study underscores the value of a structured digital detox program as a practical tool for enhancing student well-being. By shifting attention from constant digital engagement to collective activities and personal reflection, students not only experienced improved focus, creativity, and mental recharge but also developed an increased awareness of their own digital dependency. Although demographic variables played a minor role, the experiential outcomes were clear and robust. These findings suggest that short, thoughtfully designed interventions can act as catalysts for behaviour change and have significant potential as part of broader strategies to address mobile dependency and promote mental wellness among young adults in higher education.

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