



IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT ON ATTENTION SPAN AMONG
YOUNG ADULTS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF FEAR OF MISSING OUT

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Abstract

This study examined how social media involvement influences attention spans in young adults, emphasizing the role of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) as an intervening variable. A total of 220 participants completed standardized questionnaires regarding their levels of social media use, mind wandering, and FoMO. The data were analyzed through SPSS, which involved correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation analysis. The results suggest that increasing social media use is linked with more mind wandering, hinting at a diminishing of sustained attention. Moreover, analysis also, confirmed that social media involvement negatively impacts attention, and mediation analyses showed that FoMO partially explains this relationship. These findings suggest that emotional drivers like FoMO influence how digital habits shape cognitive focus. Addressing FoMO may therefore be key to improving attention in educational and mental health settings. This study contributes in the body of knowledge with regard to digital behavior and highlights FoMO impact in young adults.

Keywords: Social media Engagement, attention span, FoMO, young adults, Digital behavior

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INTRODUCTION

In the modern world where everyone is connected; Instagram, TikTok, X (previously Twitter) and Snapchat are major parts of young people's everyday lives. Platforms like these are tools to communicate, as well as a home, an expression of ourselves and a way of life (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Because these platforms update quickly and are very visual, people are constantly stimulated and can get instant rewards which sometimes results in checking their phones often and becoming psychologically dependent (Montag et al., 2019). According to Pew Research Center, people aged 18 to 29 around the world spend the most time on social media sites every day (Pew Research Center, 2023). Even though it helps people connect, it also leads to important concerns about how social media affects thinking skills, specifically the ability to stay focused. Being able to focus on something for a certain time is important for improving learning, memory strength and productivity (Rothbart & Posner in 2015). Short-form content sharing on TikTok and Instagram may lead people to quickly move on to new information which can make it harder for them to pay attention to longer tasks. When attention is fragmented, it may lower a person's school performance and their mental focus in the long run (Radesky et al., 2020). This urge to constantly engage is partly caused by the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) which means having anxious thoughts that people while you're away are having good experiences (Przybylski et al., 2013). Because FoMO encourages often checking and scrolling, it sustains a pattern of being distracted and having difficulties paying attention (Elhai et al., 2016).

Although past research has explored the psychological outcomes of social media use and the independent effects of FoMO, there remains a gap in understanding how FoMO may serve as a mediating mechanism between social media engagement and attention span. This link is particularly crucial for young adults, who are undergoing significant cognitive and emotional development and are simultaneously expected to meet high academic and occupational demands (Uncapher & Wagner, 2018). If FoMO acts as a bridge between digital engagement and cognitive depletion, it could help explain why even moderate users report difficulties with focus and concentration. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the mediating role of FoMO in the relationship between social media engagement and attention span among young adults. By focusing on this emotional-cognitive interaction, the research offers a more nuanced understanding of how digital behavior impacts mental performance. The findings can inform digital wellness strategies, educational policies, and therapeutic interventions aimed at mitigating the adverse cognitive effects of constant online connectivity. Given that most existing studies are conducted in Western contexts, this study also aims to contribute context-specific insights that reflect the unique experiences of young adults in diverse cultural environments. This culturally sensitive approach ensures that recommendations derived from the study are both effective and inclusive in addressing global challenges in digital mental health.

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

Social media engagement is how deeply people are involved intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally when interacting through social media applications such as Instagram, TikTok, or Snapchat. It involves active behaviors like posting, commenting, or sharing, and passive activities like browsing through streams or viewing stories without intervening. The distinctiveness of social media engagement is not merely that it is a function of time spent on these platforms, but rather how connected users feel to them. Features like infinite scroll, real-time notifications, and algorithm-curated content are deliberately designed to keep users hooked by offering constant stimulation and

unpredictable rewards, like likes or comments (Montag et al., 2019). This reinforcement makes it hard to disengage, particularly for young adults, who are the most active demographic on social media (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Engaging on social media touches three vital aspects: cognition, emotion and behavior. If you engage your thought in what you watch, read or hear, you are participating cognitively. Emotional engagement shows the feelings that people feel when seeing something positive or idealized on social media such as feeling happy or inspired or anxious or envious (Vannucci et al., 2017). Like, post, update and check: all these prominent actions are considered as behavioral engagement and they are commonly inspired by a search for validation or by the fear of missing out (FoMO), based on Przybylski et al. (2013). Personality, how confident someone is and how the platform works also have an impact on engagement. Social media allows people to interact and talk about themselves openly, but its mental influences should be recognized because excessive time on it may hurt your concentration, mood and self-image.

ATTENTION SPAN

Having a good attention span is the way your brain stays concentrated and filters out distractions to focus on a job at hand for a period. Learning and productivity depend on a group of cognitive skills such as working memory, impulse control and executive functioning (Diamond, 2013). Paying attention for long periods of time in school or work helps learners to reason properly, remember what is taught and solve problems. The rise of TikTok and Instagram Reels now offers such fast and short videos that people learn to want new information all the time. Because of this, it becomes more difficult to focus on one thing for a stretch. Infinite scroll and many notifications cause an increase of dopamine in the brain, making people keep switching between apps (Alter, 2017). With each successive day, it becomes more difficult for children to focus and this may feel uncomfortable. Basically, our ability to pay attention in various ways is affected by using technology. Attention span is reduced by having your attention shifted quickly, as when studying or reading.

Since multitasking arouses more distractions, the ability to filter them with selective attention weakens as well. Although lots of younger people boast about being multitasking wizards, studies show that constantly changing tasks or apps leads to less concentration and efficiency (Rosen et al., 2013). Content that makes us feel left out or posts that are very exciting, can be a distraction and cause us to use more mental energy. Because their brain systems responsible for attention do not mature quickly and because so many of them are used to screens, young adults are more vulnerable. Not dealing with these issues could cause trouble in learning, mental health and staying focused in daily life.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT AND ATTENTION SPAN

Social media apps are built this way to keep users engaged using features like scrolling that never ends, constant notifications and videos or images that are only a few seconds long. This kind of interaction makes users switch their attention a lot which contributes to their attention being spread among different things. (Alter, 2017). As time passes, this kind of behavior may make it harder to pay attention for a long time because the mind is easily attracted by new interests and instant rewards. Because of this, people may struggle to pay attention for a long time or do lots of deep thinking. (Wilmer & Chein, 2016). There is actual evidence that this is an issue. Research has shown that engaging with social media a lot has negative effects on tasks that need long attention. Individuals who are always on social media while working or in school state they find it hard to concentrate and have

weak executive functions. Brain imaging studies by Montag et al. (2021) point towards a decrease in self-control and attention functions in brain parts of those who use social media a lot. This demonstrates that young adults may experience change in how their brains work when they use drugs, aside from behavioral effects. (Van der Schuur et al., 2019).

FEAR OF MISSING OUT AS A MEDIATOR

Fear of missing out means someone is always afraid that other people might be enjoying exciting opportunities when they aren't (Przybylski et al., 2013). It is a sign of wanting to be part of a social group. If people do not get these needs taken care of in real life, they might use social media to feel connected which can lead them to check it all the time and depend on it emotionally (Buglass et al., 2017). FoMO works like a trait, shapes our actions and affects our mental health over a long period.

Social networking sites are created so that people feel they are missing out when they use these services, as they provide continuous updates, time-sensitive stories and highlight the successes of others in their feed. Because of these features, people are inclined to compare to others more and as a result, they may feel excluded and stressed (Montag et al., 2021). Studies have pointed out that FoMO is related to higher risks of emotional distress, trouble sleeping and excessive smartphone use (Wolniewicz et al., 2018; Elhai et al., 2016). When emotions are disturbed, this can also disturb attention, learning and memory.

Although social media involvement might cause distracted attention, the fear of missing out helps explain this link. People with high FoMO tend to keep checking their phones, even when they should be focusing, out of fear they might miss important social events (Elhai et al., 2016). This makes people switch tasks often and lose focus which lowers their academic achievements (Wilmer & Chein, 2016). Buglass et al. (2017) confirmed that FoMO is strongly connected to using the phone too much and being too easily distracted and this occurs often in school. Various studies point out that FoMO adds to the amount of stress related to using social media. Alt (2015) revealed that students with stronger feelings of missing out often struggled with paying attention and were less likely to perform well in school. In the same study, Blackwell et al. (2017) showed that having FoMO made users use social media more compulsively and decreased their ability to hold their attention. This research suggests that FoMO helps explain how emotional anxiety and lack of attention are linked, mostly among young adults who care a lot about being accepted on social media.

RESEARCH GAP

While studies on how social media impacts mental health are increasing, several key mysteries still exist, particularly regarding how attention, habits and anxiety about missing out are linked in young people. It is known that frequent social media use can cause attention span to decrease (Wilmer & Chein, 2016), but few researchers have tried to explain why. Specifically, researchers haven't studied Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) as a reason why digital habits may lead to inattention and poor focus.

Cross-sectional studies also mean it is difficult to determine if social media leads to short attention spans or if people already with short attention spans are drawn to more social media. Also, most of these studies are completed in Western societies, so we have little information about these behaviors in other cultures. Young adults need to take this more seriously since they are big users of social media and are developing their brains' abilities for attention and self-control during this period in their lives (Liu et al., 2022).

Further research should attempt to consider the emotional and thinking parts of social media use side by side. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973), unmet social and emotional needs can make people experience more FoMO which then affects their ability to pay attention. With help from longitudinal studies, experiments and multicultural samples, researchers can learn more about how our minds work and come up with better ways to support mental focus especially for young people facing the biggest risks. In sum, at first, this study aims to examine the link between social media engagement and attention span, analyze how social media engagement directly shapes attention span and assess Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) as something that comes between attention span and social media engagement. To meet the objectives, the study has developed four hypotheses: (H1) there is a strong link between social media use, attention and feeling left out for young people; (H2) using social media decreases the attention span of young people; (H3) social media use is linked to feeling more anxious about being left out; and (H4) for young people, feeling left out causes attention to be reduced as social media engagement increases.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

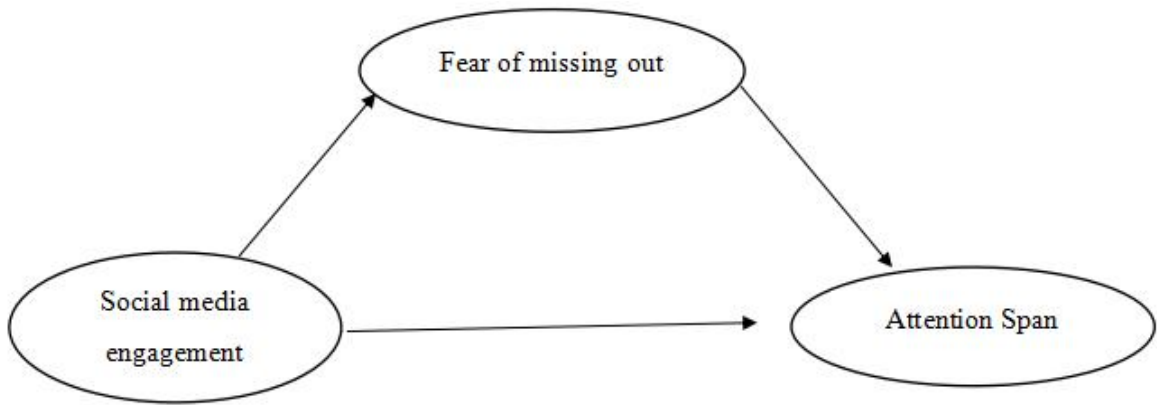


FIGURE 1

The figure presents a mediation model where Social Media Engagement affects Attention Span both directly and indirectly through FoMO. Increased engagement heightens FoMO, which contributes to reduced attention due to cognitive distraction.

METHOD

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

A total of 220 young adults between 18 and 30 took part in the research and the participants were both male and female. Through university networks and social media outlets were used, with purposeful sampling to find participants. People were included as participants only if they were (1) active on at least one social network, (2) in the given age group and (3) agreed to enough the consent form. The study excluded individuals who indicated a diagnosed cognitive disorder (like ADHD), did not use social media regularly or did not finish all the survey questions. These guidelines made sure that the sample showed how social media is usually used and noticed by healthy young people. Data was collected using an online survey that let the participants take part whenever they wanted, without others noticing. Following their agreement to join, participants filled in a demographic information form and then took the Social Media Engagement Questionnaire (SMEQ), the Mind Wandering Questionnaire (MWQ) and the Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOS). It took participants on average 7–10 minutes to finish the full survey. Data were arranged so

that they no longer identified individual participants and documents were safely stored. There was no money given and people were free to participate at their own choice.

ETHICAL AND INFORMED CONSENT

People who took part were informed about the goal of the research, their rights and their participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were carefully explained what the survey involved and that they could take part or stop at any moment. No information that might reveal the identity of any person was gathered and all the answers were properly anonymized and protected.

INSTRUMENTS

In this research, self-report questionnaire were used to measure the study variables: social media engagement, attention span, and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO).

1. SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

Social media engagement scale was developed by Przybylski et al. (2013), the SMEQ measures both behavioral and emotional aspects of social media use. It includes items assessing frequency of use, emotional involvement, and the perceived importance of social media interactions. Responses are recorded on a 7-point Likert scale, from "not one day" to "every day." Higher scores indicate greater engagement. The SMEQ has shown strong reliability 0.80).

2. MIND WANDERING QUESTIONNAIRE (MWQ)

The MWQ, developed by Mrazek et al. (2013), measures of how frequently an individual's mind tends to drift away from a task. It contains five items rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "almost never" to "almost always." Higher scores reflect greater mind wandering, which is interpreted as lower attention span. The MWQ has demonstrated good reliability 0.85).

3. FEAR OF MISSING OUT SCALE (FOMOS)

The FoMOS, also developed by Przybylski et al. (2013), measures the emotional discomfort individuals feel when they believe others are experiencing rewarding events without them. The 10-item scale uses a 5-point Likert response format from "not at all true of me" to "extremely true of me." Higher scores represent stronger feelings of FoMO. The FoMOS is a widely validated scale and has shown consistent reliability across multiple studies examining social media-related anxiety.

ANALYSIS STRATEGIES

In this study, data were analyzed by using SPSS Version 20. Demographics was summarized using descriptive statistics and overall scores were also calculated for each scale. To see how the main variables social media engagement, FoMO and attention span are related, Pearson's correlation analysis was applied. Multiple regression analysis was used to check whether use of social media is directly linked to their attention span and feelings of missing out. To see if FoMO helps connect engagement with attention, a mediation analysis was performed using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4).

RESULTS

This study aimed to see how social media involvement influences attention spans in young adults, emphasizing the role of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) as an intervening variable. Therefore, descriptive analysis as well as regression and mediation analyzed were computed. Where are discussed below.

TABLE 1: FREQUENCIES OF ALL THE DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES USED IN THIS STUDY (N=220)

| Demographics | | f (%) |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|
| Age | 18-20 | 39(17.7%) |
| | 21-23 | 82(37.3%) |
| | 24-26 | 57(25.9%) |
| | 27-30 | 42(19.15%) |
| Gender | Male | 75 (34.1%) |
| | Female | 144 (65.5%) |
| | Prefer not to say | 1(0.5%) |
| Average daily social media use | less than 1 hour | 65 (1.4%) |
| | 1-2 hours | 95 (14.1%) |
| | 3-4 hours | 45 (46.8%) |
| | 5+ hours | 85 (37.7%) |
| Purpose of social media use | Entertainment | 119(54.1%) |
| | Communication | 31(14.1%) |
| | News and information | 28(12.7%) |
| | Work/Business | 19(18.6%) |
| | Studying and academic research | 23(10.5%) |

In Table 1, you can see the information about the participants' demographics. Most participants were between 21 and 23 years of age (37.3%), then came those aged 24 to 26 (25.9%), those aged 27 to 30 (19.1%) and those between 18 and 20 (17.7%). There were 65.5% females, 34.1% males and 0.5% who did not state their gender in the sample. About half of participants (46.8%) said they were active on social media for 3-4 hours, while almost a third (37.7%) used it for 5 or more hours every day. Entertainment (54.1%) was the main reason respondents use social media, while communication, getting info, learning and work came after

TABLE 2: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, RELIABILITY, AND CORRELATIONS OF STUDY VARIABLES

| Variable | M | SD | α | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|---|
| 1. Social media engagement | 23.25 | 11.89 | .87 | — | | |
| 2. Mind wandering | 20.30 | 7.37 | .91 | .68** | — | |
| 3. Fear of missing out | 31.01 | 13.06 | .96 | .65** | .78** | — |

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha; $p < .01$ (2-tailed). The table gives descriptive information, reliability and correlations for each of the study's variables. The scales all demonstrated high internal consistency (α at or above .87). The degree of engagement with social media (M = 23.25, SD = 11.89) was associated with higher levels of mind wandering ($r = .68$, $p < .01$) i.e. reduced attention span and FoMO ($r = .65$, $p < .01$), both significantly ($p < .01$). A strong positive correlation was found between FoMO (M = 31.01, SD = 13.06) and mind wandering ($r = .78$, $p < .01$), suggesting that the stronger someone feels about missing out, the more that person drifts off mentally.

TABLE 3: *MEDIATION ANALYSIS OF FOMO IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT AND MIND WANDERING (N = 220)*

| Path | B | SE | t | p | LLCI | ULCI |
|------------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|-------|
| Total effect (SMEQ → MWS) | 0.423 | 0.031 | 13.75 | < .001 | 0.362 | 0.483 |
| Direct effect (SMEQ → MWS) | 0.183 | 0.032 | 5.66 | < .001 | 0.119 | 0.246 |
| Indirect effect (SMEQ→ FOMO → MWS) | 0.239 | 0.032† | — | — | 0.181 | 0.305 |

The table 3 shows the results of mediation analysis to check if FoMO mediates the relationship between social media use and mind wandering. There was a strong relationship between social media use and mind wandering (B = 0.423, p < .001). With FoMO added, the direct effect was still significant, but it decreased slightly (B = 0.183, p < .001) which means that FoMO partially mediated the relationship. FoMO also had a meaningful impact (B = 0.239, 95% CI [0.181, 0.305]), pointing out that it explains a significant part of the relationship between social media use and attention span.

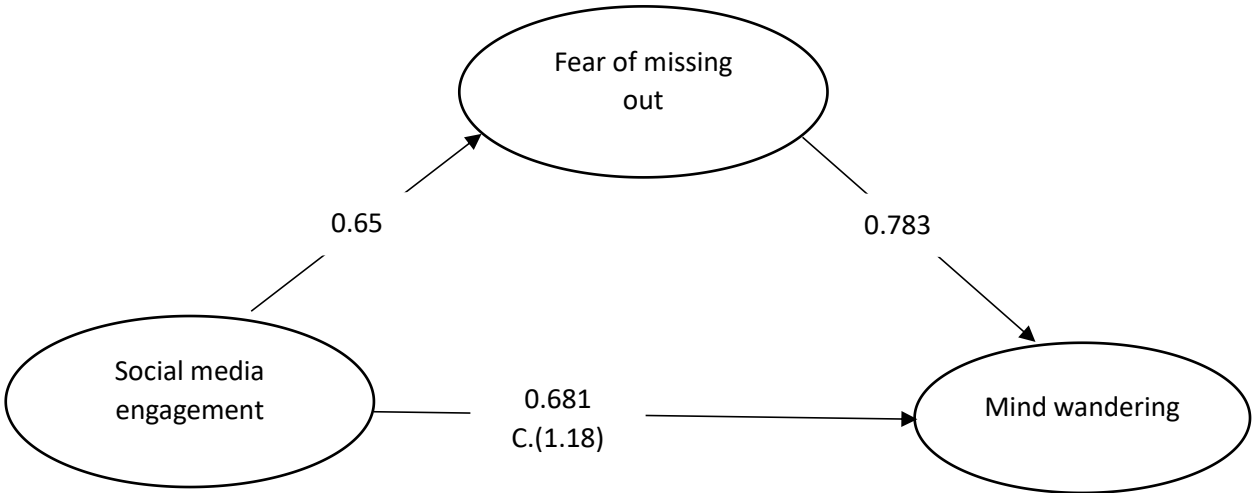


FIGURE 2: *A MEDIATION MODEL EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT AND MIND WANDERING, WITH FEAR OF MISSING OUT (FOMO) ACTING AS A MEDIATOR.*

DISCUSSION

This study sheds light on the way young adults handle the digital world, including their use of social media, its influence on their attention and the stress of not being included referred to as FoMO. All of them are intertwined and findings suggests that social media doesn't exclusively affect communication, but also the way we think and feel. As the first hypothesized (H1) a strong relationship was found among all three core variables: social media engagement, attention span, and FoMO. One thing that stands out is how much social media interactions, FoMO and a shortening of attention span are connected. Engaging more on Instagram, TikTok or Snapchat was linked by young adults to more instances of mind wandering as well as a shrinking attention span. In other words, people who are always connected can have a tough time paying close attention to what they do. The main reason these platforms keep people coming back is that they are fun, quick and

enjoyable, but it can impair your attention span and you would not be able to focus on important and professional tasks.

Regarding H₂, the study discovered strong evidence that using social media shortens attention spans. Mind wandering was significantly impacted by social media participation overall, indicating that individuals who are more involved had a harder time focusing for extended periods of time. This is consistent with previous research that indicates continuous digital stimulation may fragment attention and raise the risk of task-switching and cognitive drift, especially from sites like Instagram or TikTok that offer visually stimulating and fast-paced content. The connection between social media use and feeling nervous about being excluded (H₃) was found by the strong link between social media engagement and FoMO. This means platforms often promote constant viewing, sharing and tracking among people at any given time, leading to extra stress and an increased fear of exclusion. For young adults, it is more important to have robust friendships and feel included in the group.

The main result confirms H₄ which studied how FoMO plays a role in the relationship between social media use and attention span. Findings of mediation analysis shows that FoMO helped explain how social media use impacted mind wandering. As the literature such as Wegmann et al. (2017) and Elhai et al. (2018) indicates that lack of social inclusion can negatively affect both attentional and executive functions. In addition, the Limited Capacity Theory supports the idea that consuming a lot of media information at once, especially with emotions involved, like FoMO, can become overwhelming and use up most of our mental resources (Lang, 2000). Given these findings, FoMO is an important reason why social media has this effect on attention. It means that the fear of missing out partly influences certain mental processes, not just appearing as an unrelated effect.

LIMITATION AND SUGGESTIONS

Even with the strong outcomes, first, the research still has some weaknesses. Relying solely on questionnaires that people self-report can result in bias or inaccurate recall. Due to the cross-sectional design, Second, there is a relationship, but it may not be possible by using social media changes someone's attention or sense of FoMO. Third, only adults between the ages of 18 and 30 were included in the sample, making it hard to apply to other age groups as well. Due to the unique changes teenagers and adult go through in forming their personalities and being social, the impacts may vary depending on the age group (Twenge, 2017). It would be helpful for future studies to use longitudinal or experimental methods to examine what leads to as a result of using social media and its lasting effects. Moreover, adding tests of attention or executive functioning may provide extra support for the answers given by individuals. Also, qualitative research can offer more detailed information on how users feel using social media websites and what strategies they use to manage uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, overall findings of the study indicates that social media engagement is not just a passing habit; rather, it links to people's feelings and the way their minds work. By interacting more with social media we are losing our ability to sustain attention on study related and professional tasks. Because of the role of FoMO, digital overload may add to mental strain by making us more open to our worries. Supporting young people by teaching digital well-being or mindfulness may help them better control their time and well-being in a rapidly evolving world with constant connectivity.

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