

Impact of Social Media Detox on Mindfulness and Stress

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media use has raised concerns regarding its potential psychological consequences, especially in terms of its relationship with stress and mindfulness. The current study aimed to investigate the effect of a social media abstinence-based intervention on mindfulness and perceived stress levels in young adults. The present study examined the impact of a 14-day social media abstinence intervention on mindfulness and perceived stress among young adults. A total of 60 participants aged 18–25 years completed a pre–post intervention design in which they refrained from social media use for two weeks. Standardized measures, including the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), were administered before and after the intervention. Correlation analysis revealed a strong negative association between mindfulness and perceived stress ($r = -.756, p < .001$). Paired-sample t-tests indicated significant increases in mindfulness ($t = 11.44, p < .001$) and significant reductions in perceived stress ($t = 13.86, p < .001$) following the abstinence period. Qualitative interview data further suggested improvements in self-awareness, reduced anxiety, and enhanced interpersonal relationships. These findings suggest that short-term social media abstinence may contribute to improved psychological well-being among young adults. The results highlight the potential of structured digital detox interventions as accessible strategies for stress reduction; however, further research using controlled and longitudinal designs is recommended.

Keywords: *Mindfulness, Stress, Social Media Detox, Digital Well-Being, Young Adults*

Social media has become deeply embedded in daily life, serving as a primary platform for communication, self-expression, and social connection. While these platforms offer numerous benefits, increasing evidence suggests that excessive engagement may be associated with adverse psychological outcomes. For instance, heightened social media use has been linked to increased stress, anxiety, and reduced capacity for sustained attention and present-moment awareness (Twenge et al., 2018). Mechanisms such as fear of missing out (FOMO), social comparison, and continuous online connectivity have been identified as contributing factors to psychological distress (Przybylski et al., 2013).

Mindfulness, defined as nonjudgmental awareness of present-moment experience (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), has been consistently associated with improved psychological well-being.

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Received: March 04, 2026; Revision Received: March 27, 2026; Accepted: March 31, 2026

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Empirical research demonstrates that higher levels of dispositional mindfulness are related to lower perceived stress and greater life satisfaction (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Creswell, 2017). Mindfulness-based interventions have also shown efficacy in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Keng et al., 2011). These findings suggest that cultivating present-moment awareness may buffer against stress-related outcomes.

In response to growing concerns about digital overuse, voluntary “digital detox” practices including temporary abstinence from social media have gained popularity as potential strategies for improving mental health. Emerging evidence indicates that reducing social media use may lead to improvements in loneliness, depressive symptoms, and overall well-being (Hunt et al., 2018; Drouin et al., 2020). However, relatively limited research has examined the role of mindfulness as a mechanism underlying the psychological effects of social media abstinence. In particular, few studies have simultaneously investigated changes in mindfulness and perceived stress following structured social media detox interventions.

The present study addresses this gap by examining whether a 14-day period of social media abstinence is associated with changes in mindfulness and perceived stress among college students. By exploring the relationship between these variables within an intervention framework, this research aims to contribute to the growing literature on digital behavior and psychological well-being.

METHOD

Study Design

The present study employed a mixed-method pre–post intervention design to examine the effects of a 14-day social media abstinence period on mindfulness and perceived stress among young adults. Quantitative data were collected using standardized self-report measures administered before and after the intervention, and qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted post-intervention.

Participants

A total of 60 participants (aged 18–25 years) were recruited using convenience sampling from a college population. Eligibility criteria included (a) daily use of at least one social media platform and (b) age between 18 and 25 years. Exclusion criteria included (a) self-reported diagnosis of a severe pre-existing mental health condition (e.g., major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder), and (b) current participation in psychological or behavioral interventions targeting stress or mindfulness.

All participants completed both pre- and post-intervention assessments. Demographic information, including age, gender, and average daily social media usage, was collected at baseline.

Intervention Procedure

Participants engaged in a structured 14-day digital detox intervention. During this period, they were instructed to abstain from the use of all social media platforms.

Participants received written guidelines detailing the requirements of the abstinence period, along with strategies to manage potential urges or withdrawal-related discomfort. To promote adherence, daily email check-ins were conducted, during which participants confirmed compliance and reported any challenges experienced during the detox period.

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Measures

Mindfulness

Mindfulness was assessed using the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003). The MAAS is a widely validated self-report instrument measuring dispositional mindfulness, specifically present-moment attention and awareness. Responses are recorded on a Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater mindfulness. The scale has demonstrated strong internal consistency and construct validity in young adult populations.

Perceived Stress

Perceived stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen et al., 1983), a widely used instrument assessing the degree to which individuals perceive their lives as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overwhelming. Higher scores reflect greater perceived stress. The PSS has established reliability and validity across diverse populations. The PSS has shown satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx 0.82$) in adult samples, supporting its use as a measure of perceived stress.

Qualitative Interviews

Following the intervention, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' subjective experiences of the detox period. Interview questions focused on perceived changes in emotional well-being, attention, self-awareness, stress, and interpersonal relationships. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

Procedure

At baseline (Time 1), participants completed the MAAS and PSS prior to initiating the abstinence period. Following the 14-day intervention, participants completed the same measures (Time 2). Post-intervention interviews were conducted within one week of completion of the detox period.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Pearson product-moment correlation to examine the relationship between mindfulness and perceived stress. Pre-post differences were assessed using paired-sample t-tests. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

For qualitative data, thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and themes related to participants' experiences during the detox period.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Participants were debriefed following completion of the study and were provided with information regarding mental health support services if needed.

RESULT

Table 1 Pearson Correlation Between Mindfulness and Stress

Variable	1	2
1. Mindfulness	—	
2. Perceived Stress	-.76***	—

Note. ** $p < .001$.

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Table 2 Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores for Mindfulness and Stress

Measure	Pre-Test M (SD)	Post-Test M (SD)	t(59)	p	d
Mindfulness	123.14 (5.34)	138.02 (3.83)	11.44	< .001	1.48
Perceived Stress	30.02 (2.29)	21.00 (2.05)	13.86	< .001	1.79

Note. Scores indicate significant improvements in mindfulness and reductions in stress after detox.

Correlation Analysis

A Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between mindfulness and perceived stress. Results revealed a strong, statistically significant negative correlation, $r(58) = -.756$, $p < .001$, indicating that higher levels of mindfulness were associated with lower perceived stress.

Pre-Post Intervention Comparisons

Paired-sample t-tests were conducted to compare pre- and post-intervention scores on mindfulness and perceived stress following the 14-day social media abstinence period. Results indicated a significant increase in mindfulness from pre-test ($M = 123.14$, $SD = 5.34$) to post-test ($M = 138.02$, $SD = 3.83$), $t(59) = 11.44$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.48$, representing a large effect. Similarly, perceived stress significantly decreased from pre-test ($M = 30.02$, $SD = 2.29$) to post-test ($M = 21.00$, $SD = 2.05$), $t(59) = 13.86$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.79$, also indicating a large effect size. These findings suggest substantial improvements in mindfulness and reductions in stress following the detox intervention.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the effects of a 14-day social media abstinence intervention on mindfulness and perceived stress among young adults. The findings demonstrated significant increases in mindfulness alongside significant reductions in perceived stress following the intervention. Additionally, mindfulness and stress were strongly and inversely related, suggesting that individuals with higher present-moment awareness reported lower levels of stress.

These findings are consistent with prior literature indicating that mindfulness is associated with reduced psychological distress (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Creswell, 2017). One possible explanation is that temporary disengagement from social media reduces cognitive overload and attentional fragmentation, thereby allowing individuals to allocate greater cognitive resources to present-moment awareness. In line with research by Zeidan et al. (2010), improved attentional control may contribute to enhanced emotional regulation and stress reduction.

Several mechanisms may account for the observed effects. First, reduced exposure to continuous notifications and online social comparison may decrease cognitive strain and self-evaluative pressure. Second, limiting digital engagement may promote improved sleep quality and increased face-to-face social interaction, both of which have been associated with lower stress and improved well-being (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Hale & Guan, 2015). Finally, reduced exposure to curated social content may alleviate fear of missing out (FOMO), a construct linked to anxiety and stress (Przybylski et al., 2013; Twenge et al., 2018).

Importantly, the large effect sizes observed in this study suggest that even short-term abstinence may produce meaningful psychological changes. However, given the absence of

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a control group, causal interpretations should be made cautiously. It remains possible that expectancy effects or external factors contributed to the observed improvements.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest that structured social media abstinence may serve as a low-cost and accessible strategy for reducing stress and enhancing mindfulness in student populations. Universities may consider incorporating short-term digital detox initiatives within broader wellness programs. Clinicians might also explore digital behavior modification as a complementary strategy for clients experiencing technology-related stress.

Contributions to Literature

This study extends prior research by directly linking social media abstinence with changes in dispositional mindfulness. While previous studies have focused on formal mindfulness training or the adverse effects of excessive social media use, fewer investigations have examined whether digital abstinence itself may foster mindfulness-related benefits. The present findings suggest that temporary disengagement may function as an informal pathway to enhanced present-moment awareness.

Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of the study is its mixed-method design, integrating quantitative findings with qualitative insights. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample was limited to college students aged 18-25, restricting generalizability. The absence of a control group limits causal inference. Additionally, adherence to the detox protocol was self-reported, which may introduce response bias.

Future Directions

Future research should employ randomized controlled designs to strengthen causal conclusions. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether observed improvements are sustained after social media use resumes. Additionally, examining whether combining detox interventions with structured mindfulness training yields additive effects would be valuable.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the effects of a 14-day social media abstinence intervention on mindfulness and perceived stress among young adults. Findings demonstrated significant increases in mindfulness and substantial reductions in perceived stress following the detox period. Additionally, a strong inverse relationship between mindfulness and stress was observed, suggesting that greater present-moment awareness is associated with lower perceived stress levels.

These results contribute to emerging evidence that intentional reductions in social media use may support psychological well-being. The findings suggest that temporary disengagement from digital platforms may create space for improved attentional regulation, reduced cognitive overload, and enhanced emotional balance. While causal interpretations should be made cautiously due to the absence of a control group, the large effect sizes observed indicate that short-term abstinence may have meaningful psychological benefits.

Overall, this study highlights the potential value of structured digital detox interventions as accessible and low-cost strategies for promoting mental health in young adult populations. Future research employing randomized controlled and longitudinal designs is necessary to

determine the durability and generalizability of these effects across diverse populations and contexts.

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Acknowledgment

The authors gratefully acknowledge SDNB Vaishnav College for Women for providing financial support for this research. The authors also thank the participants for their valuable contribution to the study.

Funding

This research was supported by the Young Research Project Scheme of SDNB Vaishnav College for Women.

Conflict of Interests

The author declared no conflict of interests.

How to cite this article: Bhavadharini, R., Raksha, S.V. & Krishnaveni, A. (2026). Impact of Social Media Detox on Mindfulness and Stress. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(1), 2744-2750. DIP:18.01.273.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.273