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Stress Unseen: The Role of Social Connectedness on Digital Wellbeing for Students and Professionals

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Abstract. *The rapid development of technology is making it faster and more accessible for people worldwide to communicate and socialize. However, exposure to and use of online social media can harm wellbeing and psychosocial development, including mental health. This study investigates the relationship between perceived stress and digital wellbeing with social connectedness as a mediator variable. The research participants were recruited by convenience sampling, including 242 students and 100 workers. The regression analysis shows that the study's result implies that stress as a determinant of mental health has a mixed impact on overall digital wellbeing based on an individual's social connectedness. The findings of this study indicate potential long-term benefits or drawbacks in the debate regarding the use of digital media and technology in stressful situations for active users of digital media and technology, particularly among students.*

Keywords*: Digital Wellbeing, Employees, Perceived Stress, Social Connectedness, Students*

INTRODUCTION

The impact of digital technology on people's mental, emotional, and physical health, as well as their general feeling of wellbeing, is referred to as digital wellbeing (Vanden Abeele, 2021). It entails developing a sound and intentional relationship with technology and recognizing its ability to enhance rather than degrade our vision of the world. The prominent role of technology in today's life increases the need to understand the impact of digital technology use on overall wellbeing and health. This issue is a stimulating matter of concern because the 2021 Global Digital Wellbeing data report illustrates that Indonesia is included in the top 10 Digital Dependence Index Rank, implying that potential excessive use causes individuals to become addicted to digital technology (Digital Wellbeing Global Report 2021, 2022). Studies also imply that networked individuals in their 20s and 30s use a variety of digital communication channels and are reachable at any time because they are always online or have their cell phones within easy reach (Tripathi & Bajpai, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020).

The emerging use of digital technology, especially internet-mediated communication and social media, gives users an urge to have a deeper understanding of the consequences of these uses. Excessive and compulsive use of technology, particularly smartphones, has been flagged as potentially harmful behavior (Almourad et al., 2021). This phenomenon has led to the emergence of the digital wellbeing concept, which is a broad term that includes one's aptitudes and competencies in the digital era, including seeking to maintain a purposeful and healthy connection with technology in both personal and professional contexts (Al-Mansoori et al., 2023; Rad & Demeter, 2019). Digital wellbeing has emerged as an essential area of focus, addressing the balance between digital device use and overall mental and physical health (George et al., 2018).

Recent research indicates that elevated stress is a prevalent worry in the digital age of ever-improving technology, primarily because of the continual connection to digital devices. Even though the use of technology in the classroom has completely changed how students learn, offering them access to a multitude of knowledge, encouraging teamwork, and facilitating communication with instructors as well as fellow students, previous research has examined how digital technology can be utilized to benefit mental and physical health, as well as how it can have a negative impact, such as increased stress, anxiety, and depression, particularly among young individuals (K. N. Hampton et al., 2016). According to one study, as students' internet use increases, so does their degree of digital fatigue and perceived stress. Students who frequently used digital devices for academic purposes experienced higher levels of stress and anxiety as a result of the overwhelming amount of information, inducing unpredictability and lack of control, and adding pressure to meet academic demands (K. Hampton, 2015; J. Lee et al., 2015) and impair academic performance (Ahmad et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2019; Zhao, 2023).

Aside from students, people who work also experience the adverse effects of technology use and face unique challenges in terms of digital wellbeing. Overuse of technology can result in ineffective job performance and job dissatisfaction and is one of the primary causes of workplace stress (Dietz et al., 2022; Rasool et al., 2022). The proliferation of remote work and digital communication tools also blurs the boundaries between work and personal life, causing burnout and decreased productivity (Yadav & Madhukar, 2024). Technology's constant stimulation and diversions can also make it difficult for people to wind down and relax. Furthermore, feeling under pressure to reply to messages and being afraid of missing out on digital content can lead to anxiety and pressure, which raises stress levels (Ghani et al., 2022).

The previous works stated the correlation between elevated stress levels and using digital technology to establish connections or obtain information. Social connection and perceived stress are crucial for physical and mental wellbeing, as it is portrayed that higher social connectedness has been linked to lower perceived stress levels (Mickley Steinmetz et al., 2022). Furthermore, the "stress-buffering hypothesis" is supported by the idea that having support can lessen the detrimental effects of stress. As a result of the proliferation of digital technology and social media platforms, the impact of this technology on human social connectivity is an essential topic to investigate.

Based on the background mentioned above, this research aims to test the effect of perceived stress on digital wellbeing with social connectedness as a mediator variable. In this study, we investigate both academic and job settings to get a clear explanation regarding the beneficial and detrimental impacts of the penetration of technology in everyday life.

METHOD

This research used quantitative methods with convenience sampling. Two hundred and forty-two students were involved in this research, consisting of 57 men and 185 women. The average age of respondents is 20 years, with a range of (13 – 25 years). This research also involved 100 employees with an average age of 34 (18 – 58). Employee respondents consisted of 32 men and 68 women. All respondents were asked if they used digital media for a variety of purposes, including personal, academic, and professional.

This study employed multiple scales. The first scale was an adaptation scale of social connectedness (α= .853) (R. M. Lee et al., 2001), consisting of 20 items measuring an individual's relationship with others. The second scale to examine digital wellbeing (α= .832) (Arslankara et al.,

2022) includes three factors: digital satisfaction, safe and responsible behavior, and digital wellness, with five Likert options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The third scales were perceived stress, which was divided into two scales: perceived academic stress (α= .664) for student participants and perceived occupational stress for employee respondents (α= .863) (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015; Marcatto et al., 2022)).

The data analysis uses regression analysis to test the direct, indirect, and total mediating effects of the variables measured. The research uses a mediation model to explore and understand the mechanism through which perceived stress influences digital wellbeing via social connectedness as a mediator variable. This research also uses t-test analysis to investigate the difference between each variable for students and professional samples.

RESULTS

Three hundred forty-two respondents, consisting of 242 university and high school students and 100 employees, were involved in this research. The average age of students is 20, with a standard deviation of 1.89. Meanwhile, the average age of employees is 34, with a standard deviation of 9.67. All students and pupils come from West Sumatra. Meanwhile, employees come from West Sumatra, Jambi, Jakarta, East Java, and Riau. Table 1 depicts the descriptive statistical results of the social connectedness and digital wellbeing variables for respondents in this study. The average digital wellbeing score is 44.93, with a standard deviation of 6.34. The respondent's highest score on the digital wellbeing variable was 60, and the lowest was 20. The social connectedness variable had an average of 66.23 with a standard deviation of 12.30. The lowest score on the social connectedness variable is 24, and the highest score is 106.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of All Participants (n = 342)

Parameters	Social Connectedness (SC)	Digital Wellbeing (DWB)
Mean	66.23	44.93
Standard Deviation	12.30	6.34
Minimum	24	20
Maximum	106	60

The study results are described in the descriptive statistics for both sample groups. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for the variables perceived academic stress, social connectedness, and digital wellbeing among students. The average perceived academic stress is 57.64, with a standard deviation of 6.92 and a range (from 33 to 76). The social connectedness variable shows an average of 75.58 with a standard deviation of 11.13 and a range from 40 to 100. Meanwhile, the digital wellbeing variable is 44.91, with a standard deviation of 5.75 and a range of (20 to 60). There is a difference in social connectedness between students ($M = 75.58$, $sd = 11.13$) and workers ($M = 82.55$, $sd = 13.59$; $t = 4.56$, $p < .05$) where the level of social connectedness of workers is higher compared to students. Meanwhile, the result of the t-test also showed there is no difference in digital wellbeing between students ($M = 44.91$, $sd = 5.75$) and workers ($M = 44.96$, $sd = 7.61$; $t = .05$, $p > .05$).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Student Participants (n = 242)

Parameters	Perceived Academic Stress (PAS)	Social Connectedness (SC)	Digital Wellbeing (DWB)
Mean	57.64	75.58	44.91
Standard Deviation	6.92	11.13	5.75
Minimum	33	40	20
Maximum	76	100	60

Table 3 shows employees' perceived stress, social connectedness, and wellbeing. The results show that the average perceived stress is 8.73, with a standard deviation of 3.39 and a range (5 to 20). The social connectedness variable showed an average of 82.55 with a standard deviation of 13.59 and a range (of 31 to 110). Meanwhile, the digital wellbeing variable showed an average of 44.96 with a standard deviation of 7.61 and a range (20 to 60).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Employee Participants (n= 100)

	Perceived Occupational Stress (POS)	Social Connectedness (SC)	Digital Wellbeing (DWB)
Mean	8.73	82.55	44.96
Standard Deviation	3.39	13.59	7.61
Minimum	5	31	20
Maximum	20	110	60

Table 4 shows the correlation values between students' perceived stress, social connectedness, and digital wellbeing. The results of the analysis indicated a positive correlation between perceived stress and social connectedness ($r = .31$, $p < .05$) and with digital wellbeing ($r = 34$, $p < .05$). Social connectedness shows a positive correlation with digital wellbeing ($r = .28$, $p < .05$).

Table 4. Correlation between Perceived Academic Stress, Social Connectedness, and Digital Wellbeing

	Perceived Academic Stress	Social Connectedness
Perceived Academic Stress		
Social Connectedness	.31**	
Digital Wellbeing	.34**	.28**

Table 5 presents the correlations among perceived stress, social connectedness, and employee digital wellbeing. The results of the analysis show that perceived stress is negatively correlated with social connectedness ($r = -.25$, $p < .05$) but not with digital wellbeing ($-.06$, $p > .05$). In contrast, social connectedness was positively correlated with digital wellbeing ($r = .37$, $p < .05$).

Table 5. Correlation of Perceived Occupational Stress, Social Connectedness, and Digital Wellbeing

	Perceived Occupational Stress	Social Connectedness
Perceived Occupational Stress		
Social Connectedness	-.25**	
Digital Wellbeing	-.06	.37**

The results of the analysis indicate that perceived stress in the academic environment significantly predicts social connectedness (β = .51, SE = .10, z = 5.14, p < .05 [95% confidence interval (.31; .70)]). Furthermore, social connectedness also significantly predicted digital wellbeing (β = .10, SE = .03, z = 3.12, p < .05 [95% confidence interval (.04; .16)]). These results indicate a partial mediation effect because perceived stress also significantly predicts digital wellbeing (β = .23, SE = .05, z = 4.40, p < .05 [95% confidence interval (.13; .33)]). Meanwhile, the indirect effect showed significant results (β = .05, SE = .02, z = 2.67, p < .05) [95% confidence interval (.01; .08)]). The results of the analysis are shown in Figure 1.

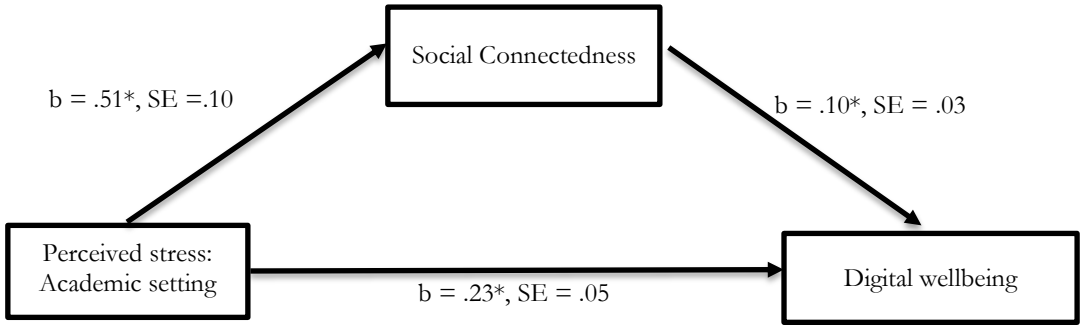

Figure 1. Direct and Indirect Effects of Perceived Stress on Academic Settings on Digital Wellbeing

In the work context, the results of the data analysis show that perceived stress can negatively predict social connectedness (β = -1.02, SE = .39, z = -64, p < .05 [95% confidence interval (-1.78; -.24)]). Social connectedness also significantly predicted digital wellbeing (β = .22, SE = .05, z = 3.10, p > .05 [95% confidence interval (.11; .32)]). Meanwhile, perceived stress did not significantly predict digital wellbeing (β = .09, SE = .22, z = 4.40, p > .05 [95% confidence interval (-.33; .51)]). The results of this analysis indicate that complete mediation occurred. The indirect effect results showed significant results (β = -.22, SE = .10, z = -2.20, p < .05 [95% confidence interval (-.41; -.02)]). The results of the analysis are shown in Figure 2.

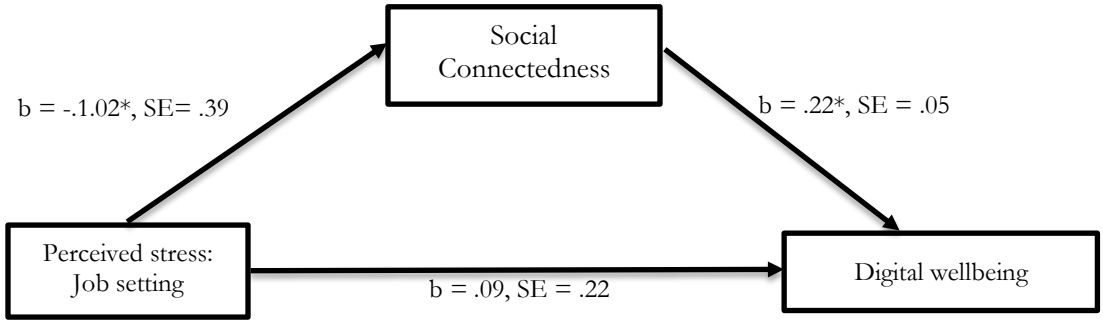

Figure 2. Direct and Indirect Effects of Perceived Stress in Job Setting on Digital Wellbeing

DISCUSSIONS

The idea of keeping a positive and purposeful relationship with technology in both personal and professional spheres is known as "digital wellbeing"(Duarte & Dias, 2023). Digital wellbeing highlights the importance of balancing technology use to improve the overall quality of life rather than enabling it to cause stress and anxiety. This concept includes limiting screen time, participating in meaningful online activities, and encouraging healthy in-person interactions. In the workplace,

digital wellbeing entails using technology to boost productivity while avoiding burnout, encouraging effective communication, and ensuring that digital tools promote rather than hinder work-life balance. This research further discusses the relationship between perceived stress, social connection, and digital wellbeing. The study's findings shed light on the variations among participants and the stressful situations they encounter in the context of digital technology users.

According to the study, perceived academic stress positively correlates with and strongly predicts social connectedness and digital wellbeing in an academic setting. This outcome deviates from numerous research investigations examining this relationship, which have shown that higher levels of academic stress are negatively correlated with social connectedness (Keat et al., 2018; McLean et al., 2023; Poole et al., 2023) and has been discovered that high levels of academic stress are linked to poor mental health as well as lower levels of positive affect, happiness, and life satisfaction (Smith & Firman, 2019). However, our study indicates that digital technology users, mainly university students, experience worsened stress associated with seeking social support through communication relying on digital technology and social media.

The buffering hypothesis explains why students under stress are more social (Taylor, 2012). This hypothesis proposes that social connections provide emotional support, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging that help mitigate the adverse effects of stress (Santini et al., 2015). When individuals are in stressful situations, having a network of close companions and family members can help them manage the impact of stress on their mental and physical health(Mo et al., 2022). The ubiquitous presence of these digital interfaces influences how people perceive stress and changes the dynamics of their social connections. Individuals, especially in their role as students, are becoming more reclusive and interacting with others mainly through mobile devices, leading to a decline in in-person interactions and an increase in reliance on digital communication (Gladden, 2018; K. R., 2018). The positive correlation between social connection and digital wellbeing could be explained by individuals engaging in positive social interactions via texting on social networking sites and phone conversations (Liu et al., 2019; Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021; Seabrook et al., 2016).

The hypothetical analysis results show distinctive findings demonstrating the positive relationship between academic stress and digital wellbeing mediated by social connectedness. This study implies that social connectedness also significantly predicts digital wellbeing and indicates a partial mediation effect because perceived stress also significantly predicts digital wellbeing. Stress experiences positively could be enhanced by technology in areas like co-creation and collaboration, planning and scheduling, togetherness and shared success, mental preparation tools, and recovery techniques (Heikkilä et al., 2015). Additionally, it fosters a more constructive and positive interaction between students and technology. Healthy use of digital technology can also distract from academic demands and problems and an emotion-focused coping strategy (Demirtepe-Saygili, 2019).

Unlike in academic settings, there are significant differences in the relationship between stress and social connectedness in work settings. Research shows that perceived job stress is negatively correlated with social connectedness. Individuals experiencing high stress may experience social isolation and loneliness. Employees overburdened with work may not have the time or energy to participate in social activities or form relationships with their colleagues (Bakker & Costa, 2014). This study gave an intriguing result that social connection at work positively impacts digital wellbeing, explaining that powerful interpersonal relations at work offer emotional support, allowing employees to have positive interactions with colleagues can make digital communication more enjoyable (Klingelhoefer & Meier, 2023; Pandey et al., 2021). On the contrary, the result showed complete mediation of social connectedness to digital wellbeing because perceived stress did not

significantly predict digital wellbeing. High job stress does not significantly lead to the overuse of digital technology. This issue is not straightforward and demands a deep dive. The relationship between job stress and digital wellbeing is a complex puzzle, influenced by various factors such as individual coping mechanisms, organizational culture, and resource availability. This research suggests that job stress does not directly correlate with digital wellbeing, as these intervening factors can either mitigate or exacerbate the impact of job stress.

The significant difference between students and professional participants is in how they perceived stress to predict their relationship with technology, as there is a difference in social connectedness between students and professionals. Social connectedness among professionals may boost worker productivity, which correlates with perceived stress and lower digital wellbeing. Meanwhile, many students use technology as a stress-reduction strategy, given that they consider themselves digital natives, which can strengthen their relationship with technology by making it a valuable ally in their academic pursuits (Abbas et al., 2021). However, using technology as a stress-management strategy requires special attention to ensure that a healthy equilibrium between online and offline life is not disturbed. On the other hand, Employees suffer stress from job obligations, time constraints, and work responsibilities, which results in heavy consumption of technology for work-related tasks, potentially leading to digital fatigue and burnout, adversely affecting job performance and overall wellbeing. To reduce the adverse effects of stress and improve overall wellbeing, both students and employees must develop strategies that promote a balanced and healthy relationship with technology (Flinchbaugh et al., 2012; Rohwer et al., 2022)

This research is not without shortcomings. Using the cross-sectional method limits the evaluation of variables to a single point in time, making it impossible to identify cause-and-effect relationships and comprehend the dynamics of a relationship. Second, the data collection relies on self-reports, which are susceptible to recall bias. This limitation implies that future research should include objective measurements of how respondents use digital media and technology to examine their technological behavior and its consequences accurately. The last recommendation is regarding the sample criteria. This research used a nonclinical sample, which did not entirely portray problems related to stress and wellbeing. We suggest future research to emphasize this issue and discuss the more profound implications related to age, specific academic and job demands, and learning and job characteristics (hybrid or remote).

CONCLUSION

This study leads to a different conclusion about the effects of perceived stress in the workplace and academic settings. It found that, for student participants, perceived stress significantly has an indirect impact through social connectedness on digital wellbeing, as well as a direct effect on digital wellbeing. The different result implies for employee participants. This finding suggests that we devise strategies to foster a balanced and healthy relationship with technology and manage their stress through social connections and how they view their overall wellbeing as users of digital technology, particularly on student samples and provide feedback on the implementation of technology in education, taking into account the impact on student wellbeing.

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