



RECONCEPTUALIZING DIGITAL WELL-BEING: INTEGRATING TEACHER DIGITAL COMPETENCY, CRITICAL THINKING AND MEDIA & INFORMATION LITERACY FOR STRESS REDUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation has reconfigured higher education by expanding access to knowledge, communication, and collaborative learning, while also intensifying stressors linked to information overload, social comparison, and digital fatigue. This paper reconceptualizes digital wellbeing as an educational objective and examines the role of teacher digital competency, critical thinking, and media and information literacy (MIL) in promoting stress reduction among students. Teacher digital competency is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that includes pedagogical, ethical, and socio-emotional capacities necessary for creating supportive digital learning environments. Teacher competency, critical thinking, and MIL are interconnected educational constructs in digitally mediated learning environments, this paper examines how education can be used to promote digital wellbeing and reduce stress among learners. The central claim is that mental wellbeing in higher education is not merely an individual coping issue; it is a pedagogical and institutional responsibility shaped by the quality of digital teaching, the structure of curricula, and the literacy practices encouraged in classrooms. UNESCO's MIL framework is especially relevant because it presents MIL as a universal competency framework for educators and learners and links it to critical engagement, safe navigation of digital environments, and responsible participation in contemporary information ecosystems. The paper proposes an integrative framework in which digitally competent teachers create emotionally supportive learning spaces, critical thinking reduces cognitive overload and misinformation stress, and MIL strengthens learners' capacity for informed, ethical, and resilient digital participation. The paper concludes that digital wellbeing should be embedded across teacher education, curriculum design, and institutional policy so that higher education can support stress reduction, emotional balance, and responsible digital citizenship.

Keywords: Digital Wellbeing; Teacher Competency; Critical Thinking; Media and Information Literacy; Stress Management; Digital Resilience

INTRODUCTION

The growth of social media, mobile technologies, artificial intelligence, and platform-based communication has made digital engagement a defining feature of contemporary higher education, especially for students whose academic, social, and identity-related experiences now unfold within highly mediated environments. Our study frames this transformation as a challenge for teacher competency, critical thinking, MIL, and youth wellbeing, and that framing provides a strong conceptual base for this work on digital wellbeing and stress reduction. Research over the last decade shows that the effects of digital media are not uniform: they vary by usage pattern, platform design, personal vulnerability, and the social context in which media is used, which means educational responses must be nuanced rather than simply restrictive.

Within higher education, digital stress often emerges from a cluster of pressures that include constant connectivity, academic multitasking, algorithmic distraction, and the expectation that students remain continuously available and responsive online. The literature on problematic social media use shows significant associations with depressive symptoms, anxiety, and stress among adolescents and young adults, while broader reviews emphasize that social media can either support or undermine wellbeing depending on how it is used and the design choices of platforms. This means that educational institutions cannot treat digital wellbeing as an optional wellness add-on; they must treat it as a structural issue connected to pedagogy, curriculum, and teacher preparation.

Digital Wellbeing as an Educational Priority

Digital wellbeing may be understood as the capacity of learners to engage with digital technologies in ways that preserve cognitive clarity, emotional stability, healthy social relations, and balanced academic functioning. Recent scholarship on higher education indicates that digital wellbeing involves both positive and negative effects of digitalisation, including mental, intellectual, emotional, professional, spiritual, and physical dimensions of student life. In this sense, digital

wellbeing is not identical to reduced screen time; rather, it concerns the quality, purpose, and emotional consequences of digital engagement. That conceptual breadth is especially important in higher education because learners are often expected to use digital tools for academic work, social networking, collaboration, and self-presentation at the same time.

The educational significance of digital wellbeing lies in its preventive function. When students learn how to manage attention, evaluate information, regulate online behavior, and interpret media critically, they are better able to resist the forms of cognitive overload and emotional strain that arise from digital saturation. UNESCO's MIL work is relevant here because it explicitly connects MIL with critical engagement, safe online navigation, and trust-building in information ecosystems. The implication is that mental wellbeing in digital environments depends not only on counseling or crisis intervention but also on the everyday practices through which teachers help students interpret and use information.

Digital Stressors in Higher Education

The main digital stressors affecting learners in higher education include information overload associated with managing multiple digital channels at once. Social media research consistently shows that problematic use is linked to stress and poor mental health outcomes, while umbrella reviews further indicate that the impact of social media depends on personal characteristics, usage type, and platform design. These findings matter pedagogically because students do not merely "use" digital platforms; they are shaped by their architecture, notification systems, and reward mechanisms, which can intensify attention fragmentation and emotional reactivity.

A second stress pathway is comparison culture. Students frequently encounter curated images of success, productivity, beauty, and popularity, which can intensify self-doubt and identity pressure, particularly in formative years of late adolescence and emerging adulthood. For higher education, this means that digital exposure must be interpreted as a developmental and psychosocial issue, not merely as a technical or disciplinary issue.

A third stress pathway is misinformation stress. When learners are unable to distinguish reliable information from manipulative or low-quality content, they experience epistemic uncertainty, frustration, and sometimes emotional vulnerability to polarizing or fear-inducing narratives. This is where MIL and critical thinking become directly relevant to mental wellbeing.

Teachers' Digital Competency as a Protective Pedagogical Factor

Teacher digital competency should be understood as more than the ability to operate technology. In higher education research, digital competence is commonly defined as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective use of technologies. This is important because digitally competent teachers do not simply transmit content through platforms; they shape the emotional tone, clarity, and cognitive load of the learning environment. In practical terms, competent teachers can design clearer instructions, more organized digital tasks, and more humane online learning spaces, all of which reduce student stress by lowering confusion and cognitive overload.

From a wellbeing perspective, the teacher's role extends beyond instructional efficiency. Teachers who are digitally competent are more likely to recognize the emotional consequences of platform-heavy teaching, to sequence activities in manageable ways, and to avoid unnecessary technological clutter that can overwhelm learners. This matters because higher education students are often balancing work, study, family demands, and social media exposure, so teacher practices that reduce friction and support predictable learning structures can function as stress buffers.

Critical Thinking as a Cognitive and Emotional Regulator

Critical thinking is central to digital wellbeing because it enables learners to slow down interpretation, test claims, and avoid automatic reactions to emotionally charged content. In higher education, critical thinking is not only an academic skill but also a dispositional capacity that shapes how

students respond to uncertainty, contradiction, and complexity.

This linkage is especially important in digital environments, where emotionally provocative content can trigger stress responses before deliberate reasoning occurs. Students with stronger critical thinking dispositions are better able to question sensational claims, examine source credibility, and resist the emotional pull of misinformation or social pressure. Pedagogically, teachers can cultivate critical thinking through inquiry tasks, argument analysis, reflective journaling, and structured discussions that require students to justify positions with evidence. This is not merely an intellectual exercise; it is a stress-reduction strategy because it helps students convert reactive browsing into reflective engagement. The more learners are taught to pause, compare, and evaluate, the less likely they are to become overwhelmed by the speed and intensity of digital information flows.

Media and Information Literacy as a Core Resilience Skill

MIL provides the practical infrastructure through which critical thinking becomes actionable in everyday digital life. UNESCO defines MIL as a competency framework that supports learners and educators in navigating today's communications ecosystem, and the organization explicitly states that MIL and digital competencies enable people to engage critically with information, navigate online environments safely, and help build trust in information ecosystems and digital technologies. This places MIL at the center of educational responses to stress, because many forms of digital stress are rooted in confusion, unverified claims, and emotional manipulation within media systems.

The UNESCO Global Standards for MIL Curricula Development Guidelines are especially useful because they treat MIL as a universal reference point and outline implementation strategies such as stand-alone courses, institutional approaches, multi-component integration, blended learning, and online courses. The guidelines also indicate that MIL should be mandatory for learners, educators, and teachers in appropriate curricular settings, which

supports the argument that digital wellbeing requires systemic curriculum integration rather than fragmented awareness campaigns. In practical terms, UNESCO's framework suggests that MIL should be woven into teacher education, higher education curricula, and institutional support systems.

An Integrative Digital Framework: From Exposure to Resilience

The most useful way to organize this article is through an integrative framework that moves from digital exposure to digital resilience. Digital exposure refers to the learner's immersion in constant streams of content, notifications, comparisons, and platform demands. Digital resilience refers to the capacity to remain psychologically stable, cognitively alert, and ethically grounded while participating in digital environments. The pathway from exposure to resilience is mediated by teacher digital competency, critical thinking, and MIL, all of which have already positioned as mutually reinforcing educational constructs in higher education.

At the contextual level, students face stressors produced by social media design, academic multitasking, and the expectation of continuous connectivity. At the competency level, teachers must model digital judgment, students must learn to analyze information critically, and both must develop MIL. At the pedagogical level, this means using inquiry-based learning, guided media analysis, reflective discussion, and paced digital work rather than ad hoc technological adoption. At the outcome level, the expected effects are reduced stress, improved self-regulation, better decision-making, and stronger digital citizenship. This layered structure aligns with UNESCO's emphasis on curricular integration and with the broader literature showing that digital outcomes depend on how technologies are used, not simply on whether they are present.

The framework also has an important ethical dimension. Digital resilience is not only about coping with stress after harm occurs; it is about shaping educational conditions so that harm is less likely to occur in the first place. That means teachers must be prepared to recognize when digital tasks become

excessive, when online interactions become psychologically unsafe, and when platform use begins to impair learning rather than support it. The framework therefore places stress reduction within a broader humanistic view of education that values attention, emotional safety, and reflective participation.

Educational Strategies for Stress Reduction

Several pedagogical strategies follow from this framework. First, higher education institutions should embed MIL across disciplines rather than confining it to isolated courses. UNESCO's curriculum guidance supports stand-alone, blended, and multi-component models, which means institutions can choose a format appropriate to their context while keeping MIL visible across the curriculum. Second, teachers should use low-friction digital design: clear instructions, fewer redundant platforms, predictable deadlines, and assessment structures that minimize unnecessary cognitive load. These design choices matter because much student stress is produced by friction in the learning environment, not just by personal weakness or poor time management.

Third, classroom practice should include guided evaluation of social media content, misinformation analysis, and reflective discussions about digital habits. This is consistent with the literature on critical thinking and with UNESCO's emphasis on engagement with information as a participatory skill. Fourth, institutions should normalize conversations about digital fatigue, sleep hygiene and online comparison so that stress is understood as a legitimate educational concern. Research on problematic social media use shows clear associations with depression, anxiety, and stress, making it reasonable to include mental wellbeing as an explicit outcome of digital pedagogy.

Finally, teachers should model balanced digital behavior. A digitally competent teacher is not simply someone who uses more tools; it is someone who uses technology deliberately, ethically, and in ways that support students' attention and emotional stability. Teacher education programs therefore need to train

future educators in both the technical and human dimensions of digital pedagogy, including the capacity to notice overload, encourage pauses, and design humane digital interaction patterns.

Institutional and Policy Implications

If digital wellbeing is to be sustainable, it must be supported institutionally, not left to individual teacher goodwill. Higher education institutions should therefore align teacher development, curriculum revision, and student support services around a common digital wellbeing agenda. This includes professional development in digital competence, workshops on MIL, integration of critical thinking outcomes into general education, and collaboration between academic staff and counseling services. The evidence from higher education reviews indicates that teachers often self-report gaps in digital competence, which means institutional investment in training is necessary rather than optional.

Policy should also reflect the broader UNESCO position that MIL is essential for participation in contemporary knowledge societies and for navigating digital environments safely. UNESCO's guidelines are particularly valuable because they move MIL beyond narrow media analysis and place it within global concerns such as trust, responsible communication, and the changing information ecosystem. That orientation fits the present topic because mental wellbeing is threatened not only by screen exposure but also by fragile information environments that amplify confusion, distrust, and emotional instability.

At the governance level, higher education systems should encourage evaluation of digital teaching practices, monitor student stress related to platform use, and support research on the wellbeing consequences of institutional digitalisation. Recent scoping work on digital wellbeing among higher education learners indicates that future research should examine both positive and negative functional elements of digital technologies and their relationship to broader wellbeing outcomes. That recommendation points directly toward the need for policy frameworks that are evidence-informed rather than purely technological or managerial.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the existing literature indicates that digital wellbeing should not be viewed merely as an individual skill or a personal coping mechanism. Digital technologies and social media platforms undoubtedly provide important opportunities for learning, communication, creativity, identity formation, collaboration, and community participation. However, these same environments can also intensify digital stressors through mechanisms such as constant comparison, misinformation, algorithmic overload, and uninterrupted connectivity. Educational institutions are increasingly responsible for helping students develop the intellectual, emotional, and ethical capacities required to navigate digital environments in healthy and meaningful ways. This includes cultivating critical thinking, MIL, responsible information evaluation, reflective digital participation, and self-regulation in online spaces.

Thus, education serves as a transformational and protective factor that transforms digital exposure into digital resilience. In addition to taking use of the advantages that digital environments present, students who are encouraged to interact critically and mindfully with digital media are more equipped to handle online threats. The current study places this argument within the interrelated fields of MIL, critical thinking, teacher competency, and youth wellness. The importance of teacher competency in the current conceptual framework is likewise explained by this viewpoint. Skilled educators are able to incorporate digital resources in pedagogically sound ways that improve learning without overburdening pupils. They can promote responsible media evaluation and critical thinking without turning digital education into excessive surveillance or monitoring.

Moreover, skilled educators can cultivate learning environments that promote thoughtful, purposeful, and emotionally balanced engagement with digital media rather than passive, compulsive, or addictive patterns of consumption. From this standpoint, digital wellbeing should not be understood merely as the ability of students to cope with the negative effects of digital culture. More

fundamentally, it involves designing educational experiences, institutional practices, and pedagogical relationships that enable learners to flourish intellectually, emotionally, socially, and ethically within an increasingly digital world.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that digital wellbeing should be treated as a central educational objective and that teacher digital competency, critical thinking, and MIL are essential for promoting stress reduction.

The evidence indicates that social media and digital technologies can increase digital stressors, but that educational intervention can substantially reduce these risks when teachers are prepared to design supportive, reflective, and information-literate learning environments. UNESCO's 2022 MIL framework strengthens this position by offering a curriculum-oriented and globally relevant model for integrating critical engagement, ethical communication, and safe digital participation into education systems.

The major implication is straightforward: stress reduction in the digital age cannot rely only on individual self-control or counseling after problems arise. It requires a proactive educational framework that helps learners move from passive digital exposure to active digital resilience. That framework must be embedded in teacher education, higher education curricula, and institutional policy if it is to support mental wellbeing in a sustainable way.

Ultimately, digital wellbeing is not an automatic outcome of digital exposure but an educational achievement that requires deliberate effort and strategic intervention. Strengthening teacher education and curriculum design is therefore essential for fostering resilient, informed, and mentally healthy learners in the digital age.

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