



Mobile Phone Application Use and Mental Distraction among University Students: A Field Study at Blida 2 University

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Abstract:

This paper aims to study the patterns of university students' use of mobile phone applications during study times, analyze the reasons for their mental distraction, and explore the strategies they employ to reduce this distraction. The descriptive method was employed, relying on an electronic questionnaire distributed to a voluntary sample of 152 students from the Department of Media and Communication at Blida 2 University.

The study concluded that students prefer using applications with short visual content over educational applications, with a noticeable increase in their usage during study times. This is primarily attributed to boredom and the desire to keep up with the latest updates. As for the strategies used to reduce distractions, they mainly consisted of turning off the internet and putting the phone on silent mode, but these measures remain of limited effectiveness.

Keywords: mental distraction; mobile applications; social media; students; academic achievement.



1. INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed rapid development in mobile phone technology and its applications, leading to a radical transformation in communication patterns, especially among university students. These devices are no longer just tools for communication; they have turned into a double-edged sword. These applications offer benefits in areas such as e-learning, quick access to information, and enhancing interaction among students, but their misuse has raised many concerns. Researchers have highlighted the potential risks associated with these applications, especially since they rely on artificial intelligence algorithms capable of capturing the user's attention. Among these risks are distraction, decreased academic performance, and reduced ability to focus deeply during study (Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013, p. 233). Research has also confirmed that excessive use of mobile phones during lectures or study times may contribute to a decline in academic performance and an increase in stress and anxiety levels (Lepp, Barkley, & Karpinski, 2015).

In response to these challenges, academic circles have shown increasing interest in understanding the technological, social, and communicative dimensions of the phenomenon of student distraction due to mobile phone applications. (Junco, 2012, p. 2263) analyzed the relationship between multitasking with phones during lectures and decreased academic performance, while (Amez & Baert, 2020) reviewed the methodological literature on the impact of smartphones on focus and attention. (Bernard R., 2016, p. 5) focused on the patterns of phone application usage that cause distraction, and the study by (Koessmeier & Büttner, 2021) examined the reasons for distraction and the behavioral strategies students adopt to reduce phone-related distractions. However, few studies have attempted to combine these three aspects -usage patterns, causes of distraction, and coping strategies- within a single field research framework based on the students' own perspectives, leading to a limited understanding of the phenomenon from the target audience's point of view.

This study came to describe the phenomenon of the impact of mobile phone applications on student distraction during study, with the aim of monitoring usage patterns, diagnosing the causes of mental distraction, and investigating the strategies used to reduce this distraction through the opinions of a sample of students from Blida 2 University.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- Q1: What are the patterns of university students' use of mobile phone applications during study times?
- Q2: What are the reasons for the mental distraction caused by mobile phone applications among university students during study time?
- Q3: What strategies do university students follow to reduce the distraction caused by mobile phone applications during study?

2. Methodology



2.1 Research methodology and tool

This research belongs to descriptive studies that describe and explain the current reality by detailing the nature of students' use of mobile applications, identifying the causes of mental distraction during study, and clarifying the strategies adopted to reduce technological distraction, using an electronic questionnaire form designed via Google Forms according to the research problem and its questions.

The validity of the questionnaire was tested by presenting it to a group of professors in media and communication sciences and humanities at Blida 2 University for evaluation, and their feedback contributed to improving and enriching the form.

The Holsti equation was also used to calculate the stability coefficient, as follows: R is the reliability coefficient, N is the number of judges, and C is the average agreement among the judges.

Calculating the agreement ratio:

The first judge: $13/13 = 1$

The second judge: $12/13 = 0.92$

The third judge: $13/13 = 1$

$C = 2.92 / 3 = 0.97$

$R = (3 \times 0.97) / (1 + (3 - 1) \times 0.97) = 0.98$

The reliability coefficient is considered high if it equals or exceeds 0.85.

2.2 Research community

The community of this study consists of students from the Department of Media and Communication Sciences at Blida 2 University (Algeria), across various academic levels (bachelor's, master's, and doctorate). The total number of these students is estimated at 1332, according to the official data provided by the department head for the year 2026.

The study sample was selected using the voluntary response sampling method, where the questionnaire form was published during the month of January 2026 on the official page of the Department of Media and Communication Sciences on Facebook, which is an approved platform by the department administration for communicating with students and posting announcements. The number of valid responses reached 152 for analysis (Table 1, 2)

Table 1. Gender distribution of the study participants

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Male	39	25.66%
Female	113	74.34%



Total 152 100%

Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table (1) illustrates the gender distribution of the study sample. The data reveal that females comprised 74.34% of the sample, and males represented 25.66%.

Table 2. Students' educational level

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Bachelor degree	86	56.58%
Master	63	41.45%
Phd	3	1.97%
Total	152	100

Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table (2) shows the distribution of the sample members according to their educational level. The results show that the majority of participants are studying at the bachelor's level, accounting for 56.58%, followed by master's students at 41.45%, while doctoral students represent a very limited percentage of 1.97%. These results indicate that the study sample is concentrated in the bachelor's and master's stages, with a weak representation of doctoral students. This is attributed to their small number in the study population.

2.3. Limitation of the Study

The study is limited by the use of a voluntary response sample, which may introduce selection bias and affect the representativeness of the study population. In addition, the sample was restricted to students from the Department of Media and Communication Sciences at Blida 2 University, which limits the generalizability of the findings to students at other universities or to other populations.

3. Results

3.1 University Students' Use of Mobile Applications

Table 3. Students' Most Used Social Media Platforms

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Instagram	147	96.71%
Snapchat	80	52.63%

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Tick tok	87	57.24%
Facebook	92	60.53%
Telegram	50	32.89%
what sup	45	29.61%
Electronic games	34	22.36%
Learning Applications	21	13.82%
Marketplace apps	24	15.79%
Total	580	-

Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table (3) shows the distribution of the most used social media platforms and applications among students. The findings indicate that Instagram ranks first with a very high percentage 96.71%, followed by Facebook 60.53%, TikTok 57.24%, and Snapchat 52.63%. In contrast, the usage of other platforms is lower, with Telegram at 32.89% and WhatsApp at 29.61%, while electronic games 22.36%, shopping applications 15.79%, and learning applications 13.82% show the lowest usage rates.

These results indicate a tendency among students to use applications with a visual character and short content, instead of educational applications, which reflects their inclination towards social and entertainment use rather than educational use of applications during study time.

Table 4. Frequency of Mobile App Browsing Among Students

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Every few minutes	68	44.74%
Every hour	36	23.68%
Sometimes during the day	48	31.58%



Total	152	100%
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Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table (4) shows the frequency of students browsing mobile applications while studying. The findings reveal that the highest percentage of students 44.74% browse mobile applications every few minutes, followed by 31.58% who browse them sometimes during the day throughout the day, while 23.68% browse them every hour.

These results indicate that nearly half of the sample browse the applications every few minutes, which may reflect the transformation of this behavior into a habit for them. This may negatively affect the level of concentration during study, turning these applications from a learning aid into a source of distraction.

Table 5. Daily Time Spent Browsing Mobile Apps While Studying on Non-Exam Days

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Less than half an hour	24	15.79%
From half an hour to one hour	38	25%
More than an hour	85	55.92%
Other	5	3.29%
Total	152	100%

Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table (5) shows the time students spend browsing mobile applications while studying during non-exam periods. More than half of the sample 55.92% reported that they spend more than an hour browsing applications, followed by 25% who spent between half an hour and an hour, while 15.79% reported spending less than half an hour.

These results indicate that 80.92% of students spend at least half an hour browsing applications while studying, which consumes a significant portion of study time rather than being a brief distraction.

3.2 Causes of mental distraction among students

Table 6. Mobile applications cause distraction during studying

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	87	57.24%

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No	65	42.76%
Total	152	100%

Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table (6) presents students' opinions on whether mobile applications cause distraction during study. The findings indicate that the majority of participants 57.24% believe that these applications cause them distraction, while 42.76% reported that they do not constitute a source of distraction during study.

These results indicate that mobile applications contribute to distracting a significant number of students during their studies, with a notable percentage seeing the opposite, reflecting a disparity in the perception of the impact of these applications on the level of concentration while studying.

Table 7. Feeling stressed due to the urge to check mobile apps while studying

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Always	17	11.18%
Sometimes	94	61.84%
Never	41	26.97%
Total	152	100%

Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table (7) illustrates the stress levels experienced by students in relation to their urge to use mobile applications while studying. The findings indicate that 61.84% of participants experience stress occasionally, whereas 11.18% report experiencing it consistently. In contrast, 26.97% of respondents indicate that they do not experience this form of stress.

Table 8. Thinking about phone notifications during studies

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	70	46.05%
No	82	53.95%



Total	152	100%
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Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table (8) shows how much students think about phone notifications while studying. The findings indicate that 53.95% of the participants did not think about phone notifications while studying, whereas 46.05% reported being distracted by them during study time.

These results indicate a relative variation in the extent to which students are mentally affected by phone notifications, reflecting a difference in the level of concentration and attention among students while studying.

Table 9. Students' desire to check mobile apps while studying

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Always	25	16.45%
Sometimes	118	77.63%
Never	9	5.92%
Total	152	100%

Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table (9) shows the extent of students' desire to check phone applications during study. The findings indicate that the majority of participants 77.63% sometimes feel this desire, while 16.45% reported that they always feel it, and 5.92% of the participants stated that they never feel this desire at all.

These results indicate that the desire to check phone applications while studying is a common phenomenon among most students.

Table 10. Factors that cause students' mental distraction due to mobile app use

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
It is important for me to respond to messages immediately	42	27.63%
I prefer to stay constantly updated on the latest information	73	48.03%
I am interested in following others' posts and shares.	18	11.84%

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My friends expect me to interact with them	9	5.92%
I want to stay connected with my friends.	34	22.37%
I am not motivated to keep up with my studies	3	1.97%
I want to avoid difficult or boring lessons	28	18.42%
I find it difficult to maintain focus	20	13.16%
I feel bored	79	51.97%
I get interrupted by notifications while studying	9	5.92%
I look for entertainment and enjoyment	41	26.97%
I follow social media influencers	3	1.97%
I track my activities on social media	38	25%
I keep track of my purchase and sales orders	25	16.45%
Other	0	0%
Total	422	--

Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table (10) presents the factors contributing to students' mental distraction due to the use of mobile applications during study. The findings indicate that boredom is the most important cause of mental distraction, accounting for 51.97%. Then it is followed by the desire to stay updated with new information at 48.03%, the pursuit of entertainment and enjoyment at 26.97%, and the importance of receiving immediate responses to messages at 27.63%. Additionally, 25% of students report tracking their activities on social media, while 22.37% express a desire to stay connected with their friends.

In contrast, the percentages of some other factors are lower, such as difficulty in maintaining focus 13.16%, the desire to avoid difficult or boring lessons 18.42%, and interest in following others' posts 11.84%, while factors such as getting interrupted by notifications while studying and following influencers record the lowest percentages (5.92% and 1.97%).



These results indicate that mental distraction is primarily linked to psychological factors; boredom during study suggests that the educational environment is unable to compete with the appeal of smartphones, in addition to students' desire to stay up to date with new information.

3.3 Strategies used by students to reduce technological distraction during studying

Table 11. Students' strategies for managing mobile app notifications during studying

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Ignoring notifications to continue studying	60	39.47%
Pausing studying to browse social media.	13	8.55%
Switching between browsing social media and studying	75	49.34%
Other	4	2.63%
Total	152	100%

Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table (11) shows the strategies students use to manage mobile application notifications while studying. The findings indicate that a significant proportion of students, including 49.34%, switch between browsing social media and studying. 39.47% of students ignore notifications to continue studying, while 8.55% pause their studies to browse social media. Additionally, there are students who responded with "Other" at a rate of 2.63%.

These results indicate the variety of students' strategies in responding to notifications. The majority rely on switching between tasks, which will affect their focus when returning to study activities.

Table 12. Strategies Students Use to Minimize Mental Distraction from Mobile Applications

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Switching off the phone	59	38.82%
Activating airplane mode	34	22.37%
Setting the phone to silent mode	70	46.05%
Turning off the internet	86	56.58%
Turning off notifications	45	29.60%

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Keeping the phone out of reach	45	29.60%
Logging out of app accounts	12	7.89%
Temporarily uninstalling apps from my phone	5	3.29%
Using apps to manage and control my phone	4	2.63%
Giving my phone to another family member	9	5.92%
Enabling only selected apps	8	5.26%
Other	2	1.32%
Total	379	--

Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table (12) illustrates the strategies employed by students to reduce mental distraction caused by using phone applications during study sessions. The findings indicate that the strategy most commonly followed by students is turning off the internet, at a rate of 56.58%, followed by setting the phone to silent mode at 46.05%, and then switching off the phone at 38.82%. A group of students relies on turning off notifications or keeping the phone out of reach while studying at a rate of 29.06%, while 22.37% activate airplane mode.

Conversely, students' reliance on other strategies decreases, such as logging out of app accounts at a rate of 7.89%, giving the phone to a family member at 5.92%, using apps to manage and control their phones at 2.63%, or temporarily uninstalling apps from the phone at 3.29%.

These results indicate that students adopt various strategies in dealing with their phones to reduce distractions, with varying degrees of strictness among them. The "Other" category, at 1.32%, shows that some students rely on self-discipline and prioritization or selectively manage their phone usage based on the importance of notifications.

Table 13. The effectiveness of students' strategy for reducing distraction

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Highly effective	58	38.16%
Moderately	88	57.89%



effective

Not effective 6 3.95%

Total 152 100%

Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Table 14. The Effectiveness of Students' Strategies for Reducing Mental Distraction Caused by Mobile Applications

Variable	Highly Eff		Moderately Eff		Not Eff	
	Fr	%	Fr	%	Fr	%
Switching off the phone	30	19.35 %	29	13.55%	0	0%
Activating airplane mode	18	11.61 %	16	7.48%	0	0%
Setting the phone to silent mode	24	15.48 %	42	19.63%	4	40%
Turning off the internet	35	22.58 %	49	22.9%	2	20%
Turning off the notification	20	12.9%	23	10.75%	2	20%
Keeping the phone out of reach	17	10.97 %	28	13.08%	0	0%
Logging off the app accounts	3	1.94%	9	4.21%	0	0%
Temporarily unistalling apps	1	0.65%	4	1.87%	0	0%
Using management/control apps	0	0%	3	1.4%	1	10%
Giving phone to a family member	3	1.94%	5	2.34%	1	10%
Enabling only selected apps	2	1.29%	6	2.8%	0	0%
Other	2	1.29%	0	0	0	0%

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Total	155	100%	214	100%	10	100%
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Source: elaborated by author based on survey data

Tables (13) and (14) illustrate the effectiveness of the strategies adopted by students to reduce mental distraction caused by using mobile applications during study. The results in Table (13) show that the majority of students, 57.89%, believe that these strategies are somewhat effective, while 38.16% consider them very effective, compared to a small percentage 3.95% who deem them ineffective.

It is evident from Table (14) that strategies such as switching off the phone, setting the phone to silent mode, and turning off the internet have high levels of effectiveness, recording high percentages in the "very effective" and "somewhat effective" categories. In contrast, other strategies such as using control apps or giving the phone to someone else show lower levels of effectiveness.

4. Discussion

- The study results indicate that students' use of mobile applications during study time shows a clear dominance of social media platforms with short visual content (Instagram 96.71%, Facebook 60.53%, and TikTok 57.24%) over educational applications, which account for only 13.82%, reflecting a more entertainment and social orientation rather than an educational one. This pattern can be attributed to the design of these platforms, which are intended to capture and sustain user attention through mechanisms like unlimited scrolling and algorithmic recommendations. The study also revealed that 44.74% of students use applications every few minutes, suggesting that this behavior has become a semi-automatic habit (Oulasvirta, Rattenbury, Ma, & Raita, 2012, p. 105), as users are unconsciously attracted to the applications they frequently use (Aagaard, 2015, p. 90). This outcome is consistent with the research conducted by (Rosen, Mark, & Cheever, 2013, p. 948), which indicated that participants spent an average of under six minutes on the task before switching to another activity, often due to technological distractions. The research conducted by (Oulasvirta, Rattenbury, Ma, & Raita, 2012, p. 105) demonstrated that frequent task-switching results in reduced cognitive performance. The results also showed that 80.92% of students spend at least half an hour browsing their phones while studying on non-exam days. These data reveal that the distraction caused by applications is no longer just a momentary interruption but has transformed into an intensive time consumption that reshapes students' focus patterns in the digital era. As a result, mobile applications have evolved from mere study aides to significant sources of attention fragmentation during academic work.

- The results indicate that 57.24% of students consider mobile applications a source of distraction, and 73.02% (always + sometimes) report feeling stressed due to the desire to browse



these applications. Nearly half of the sample 46.05% shows that they are preoccupied with thinking about phone notifications during studying, while 77.63% desire to check applications "sometimes" and 16.45% "always." These results are consistent with the findings of the studies by (Lepp, Barkley, & Karpinski, 2015) and (Rosen, Mark , & Cheever, 2013, p. 948), who found that the phone is a source of distraction for students and negatively affects academic performance. The results reveal that the most contributing factors to this distraction are primarily the feeling of boredom 51.97%, the desire to stay updated 48.03%, immediate interaction with messages 27.63%, and the search for entertainment 26.97%, while notifications rank lower 5.92%. This indicates that digital distraction is fundamentally linked to psychological factors associated with academic boredom, rather than being merely a technical issue caused by applications and notifications, consistent with (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013, p. 1841) .

- The results indicate that students employ various strategies to reduce distractions while studying. When it comes to handling notifications, 49.34% of students prefer to switch between studying and browsing apps. In a study (Liao, Liu, & Lin, 2026), it was found that merely hiding notifications did not improve cognitive performance compared to leaving them visible; it only changed the usage pattern (from frequent checking to longer and less frequent usage periods). While 39.47% of students reported preferring to ignore notifications, this behavior can be viewed as a positive self-regulation strategy. However, recent research indicates the existence of a "hidden cost" to this neglect; the study by (Johannes, Veling, Verwijmeren, & Buijzen, 2019, p. 214) revealed the concept of "smartphone vigilance," which is a state of constant readiness to respond to notifications. Even when the student succeeds in suppressing the urge to check the phone, this suppression drains a part of their limited cognitive energy. The results of the study (Pielot & Rello, 2017, p. 8) indicate that notifications have put us in a dilemma: without notifications, participants felt less distracted and more productive, but they also felt unable to respond as quickly as expected, which led to some feeling anxious due to their increased fear of missing information. They also felt a weaker connection with their social environment.

As for the strategies students use to deal with their phones, they prefer direct solutions such as turning off the internet 56.58%, setting the phone to silent mode 46.05%, and turning it off 38.82%. In contrast, more stringent or organized strategies, like deleting apps or using control applications, are less favored. This is partly due to the extent of students' self-control when dealing with phone challenges; according to the study by (Troll, Friese, & Loschelder, 2021), those with low self-control may resort to more drastic and disruptive solutions in their interaction with the phone instead of building sustainable management habits.

Considering the evaluation of the effectiveness of these strategies, most students find them somewhat effective 57.89%, which is explained by the study (Ward, Duke, Gneezy, & Bos, 2017, pp. 149,150); the mere presence of a smartphone within the field of vision—even when notifications are turned off or the phone is placed face down—reduces cognitive capacity, with a cumulative effect that increases the closer and more visible the phone is. The researchers



concluded that moving the phone to another room was the only effective measure to reduce this 'brain drain.' Unlike some studies that found that distancing from the phone might increase anxiety, the participants in this study anticipated this distancing and were not exposed to notifications during it, which helped them improve their performance.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that university students' use of mobile applications during study time poses a challenge for them, going beyond momentary distraction to rather a time-consuming activity that affects patterns of attention and concentration in the digital age. The results showed a clear dominance of applications with short visual content (Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok) over educational applications, along with an increased frequency of their use during study times, reflecting a shift in browsing into a semi-automatic habit that consumes a significant amount of time. The study also revealed that digital distraction is not limited to technical notifications but is linked to psychological factors, particularly boredom and the desire to stay updated with the latest information. The study emphasizes the significance of educational strategies that target internal motivations for distraction rather than merely addressing their external expressions. As for the strategies adopted by students to reduce this distraction, the results indicated that they prefer direct solutions (such as turning off the internet, putting the phone on silent, and turning it off) over organized strategies (like deleting apps or using control apps), which may reflect a limitation in self-regulation. However, these strategies appear to be only partially effective, as simply having the phone in sight—even with notifications muted—induces a cumulative cognitive drain. These findings suggest that digital distraction represents a complex phenomenon in which technical, psychological, and behavioral dimensions intersect, necessitating a reconsideration of how technology is employed within the educational process. They also highlight the need to strengthen students' digital self-regulation through awareness programs, structured phone-free study periods, training in time and attention management, and the informed use of app and notification control tools, alongside the design of learning activities that reduce boredom and foster engagement and sustained concentration.



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