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Increasingly Forgetful and Distracted? A cross-temporal meta-analysis of everyday cognitive failures among university students

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Abstract. High levels of online media use have become the norm on university campuses across the world, engendering behavioural patterns characterised by habitual, rapid switching between media and non-media activities. In a growing body of literature, scholars from various fields have expressed concern about the potential negative effects of this form of behaviour on attention control and academic performance. Instructors, accordingly, perceive the current generation of students as distracted and absent-minded. In the present study, we investigate whether this is the case - Does the current cohort of university students display higher levels of distractibility than the previous cohorts? To address this question, we conduct a cross-temporal meta-analysis of the Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (CFQ) administered among a total sample of 7294 healthy university students across eight countries between 1999 and 2020. Our findings indicate a small, positive effect of time on CFQ scores, indicating higher distractibility in more recent years. Although this finding may reflect the negative effects of media use patterns on executive functioning, it may also be the result of a variety of other factors.

Keywords: digital distraction · cognitive failures · cross-temporal meta-analysis · media multitasking · students