Better than Scrolling: Digital Detox in the Search for the Ideal Self

Stephanie J. Vialle, Tanya Machin, and Susan Abel

[2]School of Psychology and Wellbeing, University of Southern Queensland

Author Note

Stephanie J. Vialle   https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2672-3816

Tanya Machin   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4358-2149

Susan Abel   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4703-8415

Abstract

Many popular press articles promote the benefits of undergoing a digital detox for people who believe screen-based digital media is detrimental to their wellbeing. This qualitative study aimed to better understand the experiences of people who have undertaken a digital detox. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five women and two men who undertook digital detoxes. Reflexive thematic analysis of the data generated two themes: (1) *resisting temptation: the digital diet* and (2) *in search of the perfect self: actual versus ideal.* The motivations to undertake a digital detox focus on a discrepancy between an individual's ideal self and the way they perceive themselves when using digital technology. Here, digital technology, especially smartphones and social media, is seen as a threat to values, self-regulation, and self-esteem. While the digital detox is seen to reduce self-discrepancy, many people consider their digital technologies vital tools to manage their work and social lives. People experiencing self-discrepancy may benefit from greater exposure to research articulating the benefits of digital technology to shift their perception of abstinence being ideal when some consumption is almost inevitable in modern life.

Keywords: digital detox, social media detox, digital technology, self-determination theory, thematic analysis

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Screen-based digital platforms and devices are widely used in day-to-day activities (Gui & Büchi, 2021). People utilize internet-enabled devices, such as smartphones, for an increasingly broad variety of functions, including connecting with family or friends, accessing entertainment or news, tracking health and fitness, and shopping (Yellow, 2020). Globally, adults in 2020 spent almost seven hours per day, on average, using internet-enabled devices (Kemp, 2021a). With this popularity, access to social media and digital devices has been described as a "basic need" (Zhou et al., 2021, p. 774). For many people, the smartphone is the first thing they reach for in the morning and the last thing they put down at night (Damico & Krutka, 2018). Despite the popularity of digital platforms and devices, some users fear the use of these technologies can harm physical, psychological, and social wellbeing (Graham & Sahlberg, 2021). However, social science researchers are still building an understanding of these technologies' impacts, and the results are mixed (e.g., Gui & Büchi, 2021). For example, excessive smartphone use has been linked to increased risks of experiencing anxiety, depression, and poor sleep quality (Yang et al., 2020). Conversely, social media sites can provide opportunities for social support and higher levels of social support are associated with improved physical health, mental health, and general well-being (Abel et al., 2021; Gilmour et al., 2020).

In the popular press, a *digital detox* is presented as a strategy to promote wellbeing and balance the benefits and challenges of digital technology (e.g., Breen, 2021). A digital detox is defined in the Oxford Dictionary (2019) as a "period of time during which a person refrains from using their electronic devices, such as smartphones, regarded as an opportunity to reduce stress or focus on social interaction in the physical world". In a recent systematic literature review, Radtke and colleagues (2022) proposed a refined definition to capture the digital detox as a voluntary and intentional timeout from a device completely or aspects of smartphone use. Despite the proliferation of books and public awareness on the topic, qualitative research on digital detox interventions remains sparse. Further understanding what a digital detox is and why people undertake one will help inform future research into digital detox efficacy.

Digital Technology Use in Australia

Excluding television, social media is the most popular digital media activity for Australians, accounting for approximately one-third of the time Australians are spending online (estimated at 106 minutes per day; Kemp, 2021b). Social media refers to online platforms accessed via websites and applications where users can interact with social networks and create and share content (Machin & Abel, 2022). In 2019, 56% of surveyed respondents reported going on social media more than 10 times a day, with Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram the most popular platforms (Yellow, 2020). It is unsurprising, then, that over 90% of adults surveyed in the Growing Up Digital Report (Graham & Sahlberg, 2021) expressed concern about their social media use. Likewise, parents worry smartphone activity distracts them from spending time and connecting with their children (Kushlev & Dunn, 2019).

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) posits humans have needs that inform their motivation and psychological wellbeing. One of the theories suggested by SDT is the theory of basic psychological needs (BPNT; Ryan, 1995). According to BPNT, people seek to satisfy three intrinsic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Their social contexts and environments either support or thwart their needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

SDT and BPNT have been used in recent research to understand motivation, behavior, and wellbeing with digital technology. Recent research has examined need satisfaction and frustration in the context of social media (Masur et al., 2014), gaming (Mills & Allen, 2020), problematic smartphone use (Hong et al., 2020), and problematic internet use (e.g., Atasalar & Michou, 2019). Ryan and Deci (2017) argued SDT's framework for understanding motivation and behaviour, particularly through need satisfactions and frustrations, will apply to every new feature of technology. However, to our knowledge, no SDT research has focused on explaining deliberate disconnection from technology.

What Defines a Digital Detox: Digital Platforms vs. Digital Devices? Moderation vs. Disconnection?

The meaning of *digital detox* is still being refined (see Radtke et al., 2022; Vanden Abeele & Nguyen, 2022). Given the purpose and use of the term detox, digital detox holds an underlying assumption that digital technology use is unhealthy or even toxic. Digital technology consumption has been likened to eating unhealthy food (see Orben, 2021; Sutton, 2017). During a digital detox people usually adjust or eliminate their use of digital devices or media (Radtke et al., 2022). The actions may also involve restricting devices from certain locations, such as the bedroom (Hughes & Burke, 2018). They might create digital barriers by logging out of apps or create physical barriers by locking a smartphone in a drawer (Zhou et al., 2021). Some people revert to using analogue technology, such as a watch or alarm clock, as it has less functionality than a smartphone or smartwatch and is therefore seen as less tempting to overuse (Zhou et al., 2021).

The concept of a digital detox within academic literature has loosely centered around the idea of deliberate, voluntary, and reversible disconnection, such as "digital detox holidays", or "giving up Twitter for lent" (Schoenebeck, 2014; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Researchers suggest selective and reversible disconnection is what distinguishes a detox from other forms of technology disconnection (Jorge, 2019). It is unclear whether a digital detox is a temporary or ongoing practice. Some researchers define a digital detox as temporary (Ratdke et al., 2022), while others suggest it can be an ongoing behavioral strategy to reduce and control digital technology use (Syvertsen 2020). This nuance is critical to understand if research continues to rely on experiments involving short-term abstinence from social media to research digital detox outcomes.

Motivations to Detox

Empirical research has provided insight into the motivations underlying digital detox practice. The primary focus within existing studies is on using digital detox to improve psychological and physical well-being, reduce unwanted habits, avoid addiction, resist technology overload, and pursue self-improvement, productivity, mindfulness, and meaningful social connection offline (e.g., Syvertsen & Enli, 2020; Vanden Abeele & Nguyen, 2022). To a lesser extent, a digital detox responds

to privacy concerns and is a display of resistance toward an increasingly technological and media-saturated environment (Vanden Abeele & Nguyen, 2022). A digital detox has been framed as a personal, individual pursuit, underscored by a culture of self-regulation and self-optimization (Syvertsen, 2020).

Some research supports abstinence or reduction of social media and smartphones to improve subjective wellbeing. Subjective wellbeing is a multifaceted and complex construct where factors such as life satisfaction, absence of negative emotions, presence of optimism, positive emotions, meaning, and self-realization lead to a sense of vitality, health, and longevity (Ryan & Deci, 2001). When participants underwent experiments involving taking a break from social media or reducing the amount of daily time on social media for one to three weeks, results showed detox was associated with higher life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing (Brown & Kuss, 2020). The same conditions have been associated with improved mood, increased positive emotions, and decreased symptoms of depression and anxiety (El-Khoury et al., 2021). Decreased symptoms of depression were especially noticeable for people with higher pre-existing levels of symptoms (Hunt et al., 2021). However, the results supporting digital detox to improve sleep, life satisfaction, affect, and mood are mixed and not yet conclusive (Radtke et al., 2022). These studies are also limited as they often used short interventions and relied on detox design parameters set by the researchers rather than grounding this design in how people choose to undertake a digital detox in their day-to-day lives.

Disconnecting from social media has been associated with improvements in mental wellbeing and positive emotions, which has been attributed to improvements in offline social connection during this time (Brown & Kuss, 2020). Consequently, improvements in wellbeing, particularly social and psychological, underscore the motivations to detox within the existing literature. Despite promising findings that forms of digital detox are effective in improving subjective wellbeing, the results are mixed and inconclusive (Radtke et al., 2022). For example, the effect of abstaining from Facebook for one week on life satisfaction and positive emotions varies depending on the level and style of use (Tromholt, 2016). Specifically, an increase in life satisfaction and

positive emotions has been shown to be stronger for people who ordinarily use Facebook heavily

and more passively (Tromholt, 2016). Other similar studies have found non-significant impacts on

positive and negative affect when restricting smartphone use (Eide et al., 2018).

Despite existing literature providing some insight into various digital detox practices, the

research relied on to promote the efficacy of a digital detox cites short-term experiments designed

to investigate the relationship between wellbeing and breaks from social media platforms (see

Radtke et al., 2022). Here, researchers design the detox interventions, and it is unclear how users

design a digital detox in the real world. Such an over-reliance on experiments without understanding

users' design is problematic as it relies on data divorced from natural occurrences (Braun & Clarke,

2013). Without a clear and accepted understanding of digital detox, comparing research is also

difficult and understanding the phenomenon is limited when detox practices are designed by others

or imposed on participants.

Similarly, most published studies of motivation for everyday digital detox examine

populations who detox on holiday, for religious practice, or for work. Except for a small sample of

qualitative studies, the voice of users who undergo a digital detox in day-to-day life is limited.

Likewise, where research has examined the motivations driving the desire for users to detox, most of

this work sits outside the field of psychology, with few applying a psychological lens to understand

these motivations. Researchers have repeatedly called for in-depth qualitative methods, such as

interviews, to understand practices of periodic disconnection and the subjective need for a digital

detox (El-Khoury et al., 2021).

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to provide rich descriptions of the experiences of people who have

undertaken a digital detox, without including or excluding any specific digital technology. The

invitation was open to participants' interpretations of a digital detox, whether referring to one or

multiple platforms or technologies, such as social media platforms, or devices such as smartphones,

televisions, personal computers, tablets, or the internet. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the meaning of a digital detox for people who self-identify as undertaking a digital detox?

2. What are the motivations for undertaking a digital detox?

Method

Research Design Overview

This study used a qualitative semi-structured interview design. Qualitative research is appropriate for collecting data about under-explored phenomena or new research areas (Nathan et al., 2019). For these reasons, it is ideally suited to the aims of this study. The data set was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (TA) within a critical realist framework. Critical realism is a contextualist philosophy of science based on ontological realism and epistemological relativism (Lawani, 2020). Participants construct their own accounts of their experiences within their social and cultural environment's broader structures, roles, culture, time, and language (Willig, 2013). Therefore, in this study, participants' experiences will be treated as true for them and acknowledged as being shaped through a mostly white Australian, adult, professional, and educated person's constructions related to health, digital technology, parenting, and socializing. Consideration of social-contextual factors is a central aspect of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), making a good fit between the psychological theory and the method used. The lead researcher identified as an Anglo-Australian educated woman and reflected she shared many of the participants' critical attitudes toward social media and smartphones. For example, like the participants, she saw these tools as a negative and addictive distraction that took her away from activities she valued, such as time with family. She carefully interrogated her assumptions through reflection and discussion with the two other research members who offered alternate perspectives, such as social media could be considered time spent with family in a digitally mediated environment.

Recruitment and Participants

We gained ethics approval from the host university before commencing the research. As we aimed to understand better the experiences of digital detox practitioners, we recruited a purposive sample of adults who self-identified with undertaking a digital or social media detox within the past 12 months (Braun & Clarke, 2013). We chose a period of twelve months so participants could accurately recall and reflect on more recent experiences. We placed digital advertisements on Facebook, Instagram, and the host university program site and did not attempt to recruit anyone directly. Avoiding solicitation helped mitigate any social risks associated with using our networks for recruitment. Participants were offered a choice of two incentives: entry in a cash prize draw of between $50 to $100 conducted by the university faculty or course credit for eligible students.

Data Collection

We collected data from 7 participants through a single semi-structured interview. While the number of participants was small, there is limited qualitative research on this topic, and we aimed to deeply explore individual perceptions and experiences (Sandelowski, 1995). Furthermore, in the findings section, we provided a rich contextualization of the data collected from the seven participants to facilitate the evaluation of whether the knowledge produced is transferable to other contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions to guide the interview such as "Can you tell me about your digital detox?", "Why did you design your detox in this way?", and "What were your reasons for undertaking a digital detox?". Individual Interviews took place over Zoom between May and June 2021, ranging from 54 to 70 minutes each (average 61 minutes). Participants selected the pseudonym used to de-identify them and we invited them to provide reflective feedback on the transcriptions; however we did not receive any feedback.

Data Analysis

Reflexive TA was chosen as the data analysis method due to its suitability to the research aim of generating contextualized knowledge about the topic, a critical realist philosophical framework, and because it encourages researchers to own their assumptions and their role in

shaping and informing the research (Braun & Clarke, 2021). We followed a six-phase analytic

process, beginning with familiarization with the data. The lead researcher transcribed the interviews,

made reflexive notes, and shared this data with the team for discussion. We then assigned codes to

all data that indicated something that could be psychologically or socially meaningful to the research

questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Next, shared patterns across the dataset were identified and we

constructed these as themes. This process involved *sensemaking* (Paull et al., 2015). For example, to

make sense of how a detox was time-bound for some and ongoing for others, we connected the

food analogies expressed by the participants, the use of diet jargon in the digital detox literature,

and a shared understanding of diet as both a noun and a verb. The fourth stage is about "quality

control", where we reviewed the draft themes to ensure they told a story faithful to the meaning

and spirit of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In stage five, we constructed the analytic story. Braun

and Clarke (2013) encourage researchers to concentrate on the importance and relevance of

excerpts to answering the research questions. We identified relevant quotes to each analytic

narrative and then named and described each theme. Stage six involved combining the excerpts with

the analytic narratives to answer the research questions (Braun et al., 2014).

Findings

This study aimed to provide rich descriptions of the experiences of people who have

undertaken a digital detox. Participant ages ranged from 34 to 50 years (*Mdn* = 37 years), and most

(*n* = 5) were female. Most had professional occupations (*n* = 4) and a majority (*n* = 6) were parents.

Outside a digital detox, the participants typically accessed the following digital platforms: email,

audio and video streaming services (e.g., Netflix, Spotify), social media, instant messaging (e.g.,

WhatsApp), online blogging, and applications for online shopping, news and current events (e.g.,

ABC News), life administration (e.g., online banking), and health and wellbeing (e.g., fitness

trackers). Their regular devices included smartphones, television, gaming consoles, personal

computers, tablets, eReaders, smartwatches, and smart home hub systems. The majority (*n* = 4) of

participants reported tracking their screen time on their smartphones. The average daily screen time

of each participant ranged from 40 minutes to 13 hours; however, reporting was flawed as some

participants reported average daily screen time captured on their smartphone devices whereas

others estimated average overall screen time on all digital technology. All participants reported

undertaking multiple digital detoxes. Table 1 shows the demographic data of the participants in the

study.

Table 2 provides a summary of the two themes developed through the analysis: (1) resisting

temptation: the digital diet, and (2) In search of the perfect self: actual versus ideal. The second

theme contains three sub-themes: threat to values, threat to self-regulation, and threat to self-

esteem.

Theme 1: Resisting Temptation: The Digital Diet

Participants reported a strong desire to use digital technology while concurrently

acknowledging the habitual nature of the behavior. They perceived their digital technology use was

detrimental to their psychological and social well-being. Despite this perception, they found it

difficult to resist the allure of digital technology. For example, Rose described digital technology as a

potent temptation requiring the implementation of a digital detox as a remedial measure, "Your

brain and those neuro-pathways kind of dull, and you stop wanting it, and you stop craving it, and

you eventually, you kind of learn to live without it". Participants characterized their engagement

with digital technology as a deeply ingrained habit that required little conscious deliberation to

initiate. Their descriptions highlighted the ease with which they would mindlessly immerse

themselves in technology usage without realizing the passage of time. For example, Hannah said,

"You'd open up the App, and then you'd start scrolling through. Then all of a sudden, it's like three

hours later." Bruce echoed the phenomenon of scrolling mindlessly, "I've found myself scrolling

through Instagram and 20 minutes later, what the heck have I wasted my life doing?".

Participants conceptualized the digital detox as a strategic Endeavor designed to counter

impulsive digital behaviors like a diet that aims to avoid impulsive eating. Claire, for instance,

explained the detox's purpose as, "something to break the circuit so that I wasn't just continually

reaching for something that was not what I needed. Like mindless snacking". Further, participants drew parallels between engaging in a digital detox and engaging in structured dietary practices. They identified alternate behaviors to the ones they perceived as unhealthy (using digital media or eating some foods).

> You definitely need a plan… like every time if you go on a diet, normally you, you turn to the diets that are online and it comes and most of the good ones nowadays come with your psychological side of things. I, you know, they, they kind of help you and they have worksheets and…they actually have things to do each week to try to keep you busy. I think social medias and digital technology would be, is the same exact same thing. You know, you really need some good things to do otherwise. (Rose)

Engaging in a digital detox was framed as the active resistance to temptation, prompting participants to restrict or diminish their use of the most enticing device or platform. Participants opted to stop using social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Messenger, and Reddit. To a lesser extent, the digital detox also encompassed refraining from engaging with podcasts, television, or streaming services (e.g., Netflix). Initially, participants appeared to be focused on reducing their social media use as evidenced by their identification with the term "social media detox". However, upon reflection, it became apparent participants wanted to curtail their smartphone usage, with social media applications serving as the most attractive options. Bruce articulated his deliberate targeting of social media to reduce his smartphone use, explaining that social media "was the thing that was drawing me back to looking at the palm of my hand over and over again".

A digital detox was characterized as diet-like, particularly concerning the duration of the intervention. Some participants set a specific start and endpoint ahead of detoxing, ranging from one week to one year. For example, Lisa underwent a month-long digital detox every year. In contrast, others engaged in an open-ended digital detox with no specific endpoint. The temporal structure of the digital detox as either time-bound or an ongoing behavior mirrored the use of the

term diet as both a verb (e.g., to diet) and a noun (e.g., change in diet). The common purpose of

both practices entailed reducing digital technology use through a resetting mechanism to provide

space for self-reflection and facilitate the establishment of a new pattern of technology use. As

articulated by Aoife, "I'm hoping that it will help evolve future behaviors… it's more a transition into

what my new norm will be". Through the detox process, participants aspired to establish a balanced

diet of digital technology that would allow them to reap potential benefits such as fostering

connections with like-minded people via social media while shielding themselves from perceived

harm.

The participant's desire to achieve a balance between online and offline activities as

opposed to a permanent disconnection, reflects the contemporary reality of living in a society

characterized by ubiquitous digital technology use (Jorge, 2019; Sutton, 2017). Rose remarked:

"People treat electronics as important as air in today's society. And… they really are. They are as

important as air". Similarly, Claire likened her smartphone to a "lifeline" and Aoife described it as

"almost your life". It became evident that participants needed their digital devices for educational

and employment purposes and no participant implemented a digital detox that encompassed their

workplace digital technology. As Bruce reflected: "It didn't occur to me that [a digital detox] would

include technology at work. Because that's just part of what I have to do". This observation suggests

some usage patterns are perceived as beneficial and healthy (e.g., for work or study), whereas

personal use was regarded as self-indulgent and potentially harmful.

Finally, participants used strategies reminiscent of dietary practices characterized by

restriction and moderation. They employed techniques to change their smartphone habits use by

introducing obstacles designed to create friction, similar to the way a person on a food diet might

create friction by keeping food items out of sight. These strategies included changing social media

passwords, logging out or deleting smartphone applications, unfollowing individuals, utilizing

parental controls or in-application timers, and physically distancing themselves from their

smartphones by leaving them in another room. Aoife and Claire used smartwatches instead of their

smartphones as the watch had less functionality. By employing these tactics to keep items out of

sight or removing immediate accessibility, they decreased their digital technology usage. Here

Hannah metaphorically depicts digital technology as an alluring temptation that is difficult to resist,

employing the analogy of an individual who is alcohol-dependent hiding alcohol to help them resist

consuming it:

> It's almost like being an alcoholic and you abstain, but then your favourite
>
> drink [is] sitting in front of you. It's like, do I have that strong enough
>
> motivation…I guess to not touch it? Or is that temptation going to be stronger
>
> because it's accessible? So, I just remove it.

The participants also tried to replace the "unhealthy" platforms with options they saw as

healthier. For instance, Bruce read his bible instead of listening to podcasts. Finally, participants set

time limits for their smartphone and social media use, such as setting a maximum time they could

use them or only accessing at a specific time of day.

Theme 2: In Search of the Perfect Self: Actual Versus Ideal

Participants talk was underpinned by a theme of incongruence between their *ideal self* (self-

concept of the type of person they would like to be) and *actual self* (experience of how the person

sees themselves now; Rogers, 1959). Overall, participants portrayed their ideal selves as people who

are self-controlled, self-disciplined, self-sacrificial, and people who show integrity, courage to face

challenges, and strive for personal growth. In contrast, they perceived their actual selves enslaved to

their digital devices, distracted from loved ones, inferior to others, stressed, and at times

unproductive, jealous, and lonely.

Participants frequently portrayed offline life (e.g., face-to-face interactions) as inherently

better than life online (e.g., time on social media or a smartphone). The superior nature of offline life

was evident in Shane's description of taking time away from social media: he stated this was "…time

that could be better spent, happier spent, more productive, because anything's better than scrolling

on social media, anything at all, literally anything at all". There was a clear dualism between online

and offline spaces, and participants did not always explain why online was inherently worse – it simply was. However, this higher value for offline life resulted in discrepancy between their digital technology use and how their ideal self should be living life offline.

Further, participants perceived their relationships with smartphones and social media as "unhealthy", and some considered themselves addicted. Hannah described social media as "toxic", reflecting "there were no positive interactions I was getting from it". In contrast, Lisa found a strong sense of community on Instagram, which created less incongruence between her actual and desired behaviour. According to Rogers (1959), incongruence between the actual and ideal self produces an experience of anxiety or threat. Similarly, the participants externalized digital technology as a threat to realizing their ideal self, which prompted withdrawal. To understand this broader theme, the analysis generated three subthemes concerning specific threats to the ideal self: the threat to values, self-regulation, and self-esteem. Using Rokeach's (1973) definition, *values* mean ways of being or end-states considered personally or socially preferable. *Self-regulation* refers to "effortful and voluntary control of external behaviour and of internal thoughts, emotions, and attention, all in the service of meeting long-term goals" (Wagner & Heatherton, 2015, p. 1). Finally, *self-esteem* relates to people's feelings of self-worth (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Threat to Values

Participants were motivated to reduce their consumption of digital technology, especially smartphones and social media, as consumption was seen as a threat to participants' values of spending time offline, authenticity, family connection, and productivity. The threat of digital technology was exemplified by Bruce:

> I want to be a person who does grow and develop and become more patient
> and more gracious and loving and more adapted to the world around me. More
> intelligent and not dumber because I let my phone do everything for me. And
> not stagnate because I've distracted myself my entire life.

Participants valued authenticity and considered social media inauthentic. Hannah described offline as "reality" and online as "fantasy", claiming "there's no way that's authentic" when describing Facebook posts. The participants perceived online relationships as lacking quality and meaning. Rose explained, "I'm no more connected with somebody I'm looking at on Facebook than I'm reading about in the newspaper". Most participants believed digital technology presented a risk to meaningful connection. As Claire exemplified: "you just don't get the same connection with someone across the phone that you do when you meet them in person".

Parent's believed using digital media was a threat to the ideal family. For example, when mothers used digital technology for entertainment, they felt guilty about doing so at the expense of spending time with their children. Aoife's motivation to detox came when she realized that like her father, she was often distracted while ostensibly playing with her son:

> My dad, he's constantly in front of his phone and I would sit there watching [her
>
> father and son] interact…and then he'd go and pick up his phone. And I'm like,
>
> wow, that's what I see, so that's what Josh's seeing when he looks at me.

Further, parents wished to exemplify ideal-self attributes of self-control and meaningful social connection. Hannah shared how she hoped to "model the behaviour I want to see in them". Lisa described modelling self-control as teaching her children healthy behaviour and choice in using digital technology. She explained: "if we feel like we're being sucked in too much, it's okay you can take a break, take a step away". Additionally, participants wished to avoid being hypocritical by using their smartphones excessively in front of their children.

Engaging in excessive screen time was also incongruent with participants' ideal self as they perceived digital media a threat to productivity. Some participants such as Hannah chose a digital detox to help them meet work or study commitments and make "a conscious decision to step away from social media…because sometimes you can get on there and then three hours have passed".

The need for higher productivity is related to the value of offline and online activities. Bruce identified his smartphone as a challenge:

> I look at how much time I have spent during a day looking at my bloody phone... I could live for 70 years and 35 of them looking at a screen, which was completely unproductive. Utterly unproductive. There is just no—you go and make something in the garage or in a workshop; you have something to show for it. You go and do a piece of artwork; you have something to show for it. You read a book; you have something to...talk to someone about.

Participants believed it was important to use time productively, and preferably offline. Digital technology for entertainment was seen as frivolous and meaningless and a threat to connection with others.

Threat to Self-Regulation

Digital technologies were also portrayed as a *threat to self-regulation.* Participants revealed they perceived their use of smartphones ad social media as a distraction from challenges in life. This represented a failure of self-regulation which could be restored by a digital detox. Participants described thoughtlessly picking up their phone and opening social media as "mindless scrolling" (Rose and Claire). Claire expressed a desire to experience her life more completely by regaining control over her attention. She stated "being connected to a device meant I wasn't connected to my world right in front of my face. So, for me [the digital detox] was less about cutting out technology and more about being present in my real life".

Participants also described experiencing a loss of control because constant connection and information overload was stressful. Aoife shared how she struggled with the volume of messages received on her smartphone. When practicing a digital detox, Aoife felt "able to be more attentive to a certain group of people, friends, relatives, whoever it is, just my immediate family at home, compared to when I feel I'm needing to spread myself thin amongst many people". Research suggests individuals use strategies of disconnection to navigate the potential of constant connection

afforded by their digital devices and platforms (Schrock, 2015). Likewise, a digital detox functioned as a strategy to manage participant's availability to others and to regain control over their time.

Self-regulation also meant delaying gratification and controlling the impulse to use digital technology. Even when restricting their digital technology use, and feeling in control, participants reported the pull of the smartphone was strong. As Bruce described: "sometimes I'll pick up my phone and scroll through what apps I have– it's ridiculous…I look for something interesting to look at even though I know there is nothing there".

Threat to Self-Esteem

Participants were also motivated to detox because they believed social media was detrimental to their self-esteem. Participants described comparing themselves to other user presenting polished versions of their lives (Verduyn et al., 2020). For example, when Shane described why he felt happier taking a break from Facebook, he referred to the comparisons he makes between himself and others on social media:

> People post… their wonderful houses, their great lives, and you get jealous,
>
> you get very envious, you think' Oh their having a good time, aren't they?
>
> Where's my big house? Where's my—whatever—my beautiful children?' And
>
> you get jealous, and that makes you feel resentful of your family… So, you
>
> just feel happier if you don't go on there all the time.

Conversely social media participants offered fewer opportunities to compare with people worse off. Social comparison research has proposed upward comparisons on social media (comparing yourself to someone better off) create negative mood, body dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem (e.g., Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). Upward social comparisons are particularly challenging on social media because the target of comparison is a peer, rather than a model in a magazine. Claire typified this experience when describing the challenge to self-esteem she experienced when comparing herself to ordinary people rather than people employed for their looks.

I always knew they're models. They starve themselves or whatever… it's their job to

look pretty. But on Instagram especially, they're people I know, they're real people,

they're not just models, they're teachers, they're lawyers, they're doctors, the

garbageman…they're real-life people who live very similar lives to mine, yet they

somehow seem to have everything sorted. They workout, and they look great, and

they've always got their hair done perfectly and that sort of thing… It seems to mess

with my head. (Claire)

Although the participants recognized social media posts as one-sided, they still felt inadequate when exposed to social media. Withdrawal from the platform was an attempt to manage self-esteem.

Participants also described wanting to avoid experiencing a conflict online. Bruce reflected his negative attitude motivated him to detox: "that attitude I found I had towards other people, I just found that to be unhealthy. I didn't like that in myself and figured I'm better off without [social media]". Likewise, Shane revealed his experiences of conflict with others on social media influenced his withdrawal from it. When undertaking a digital detox, Shane described feeling more at peace: "I just feel happy. I just feel like I can look at the sky. I [don't] have to have voices shouting at me in text space with angry typing." By withdrawing from social media participants also lost some social benefits. For example, Aoife described trying to balance what she gained from online social connection with feeling overloaded by it, stating "whenever you [go] back to engage you certainly get something from it. And I guess that's what always causes me to continually reflect…how do I incorporate that within my life without feeling like I'm spreading myself so thin?".

In summary, threats to self-esteem arose from lack of opportunity for downward comparison, conflict online, and experiencing negative thoughts toward others online. Holding a low view of self is incongruent with an ideal self, showing how threats to self-esteem motivated a digital detox. However, in detoxing, participants were trying to balance meeting one need (or the quality of that need) for another, particularly the need for social connection.

Discussion

These findings support prior research which showed a conceptual link between digital detoxes and diets. This perception suggests the complete and permanent disconnection is not viable due to contemporary dependence on digital technology for everyday life (Jorge, 2019). Although the food/technology metaphor is limited (e.g., unlike food, humans are not biologically dependent on digital technologies; Sutton, 2017) it helps conceptualize the digital detox.

The main elements of a digital detox were self-imposed usage limitation rules and the creation of physical or digital barriers between a person and their devices (Schmuck, 2020; Zhou et al., 2021). The present findings generally agree with research suggesting the focus of a digital detox are primarily social media and smartphones (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). In previous studies, the detox aim was to reduce social media use, and while this study found reduced social media use was targeted, the goal was to reduce mobile technology use (Hall et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2021). Conversely, where participants in prior research aimed to reduce their smartphone use, researchers found this was due to the pull of social media (Brown & Kuss, 2020; Damico & Krutka, 2018). Given the entanglement of social media and smartphones in a digital detox, the findings of this study support the use of a broader digital detox term unless social media is a distinct target.

In contrast to popular definitions of digital detox (e.g., Oxford Dictionaries, 2019; Ratdke et al., 2022), the findings suggest a digital detox may not always be intended as a temporary practice. Although the approach was time-bound for some—with participants undertaking periodic digital detoxes—the findings show it was intended to be an ongoing practice for others. This finding supports the definition of a digital detox as either a temporary or an ongoing behaviour change, as a strategy to reduce digital engagement (Jorge, 2019; Syvertsen 2020). Researcher have theorized successful temporary digital detox experiences might prompt people to undertake a long-term digital detox (Hughes & Burke, 2018). All participants in the current study had undertaken numerous digital detoxes, making it plausible a meaningful first experience prompted subsequent detoxes that were intended to be ongoing.

The second research question aimed to explore the motivations to undertake a digital detox. This study found the main motivation was to reduce incongruence between actual and ideal self. When digital technology use is perceived as a threat to personal values, self-regulation, and self-esteem, a digital detox is attempted to align behaviour with the ideal self. The findings fit with previous literature showing motivations to detox underpinned by the pursuit of self-optimization and self-regulation (Syvertsen, 2020). The sub-theme *threat to values* shows how a desire to behave in alignment with their personal values can motivate people to undertake a digital detox. When behaviour is congruent with deeply held personal values, people experience vitality and authenticity that is crucial to wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Pursuit of productivity, personal growth, and meaningful connection with family can be understood as attempts to satisfy competence and relatedness needs.

The second sub-theme regarding motivation to detox reflects participants desire for greater self-regulation in response to the perception that digital technology use is of less value than offline activity and also addictive. These three challenges to self-regulation support the three major threats to self-regulation identified by Wagner and Heatherton (2015): self-awareness, self-regulatory capacity, and impulse strength. Theoretically, engaging in social media and smartphones for distraction and escape means less self-awareness, meaning less self-regulation when distracted. These findings, in combination with self-regulation research, demonstrate why digital technology may be perceived as a threat to self-regulation.

Finally, participants undertake digital detoxes because they believe social media is a *threat to self-esteem*. The participants make upward social comparisons when online, evaluating themselves against the polished profiles of others (Verduyn et al., 2020). Findings from a recent meta-analysis show people tend to make upward social comparisons even if this is harmful to their self-esteem (Gerber et al., 2018). Taking a break from social media, then, is a means to improve subjective wellbeing (Fioravanti et al., 2020)

Strengths Limitations, and Future Research Directions

Participants in this study targeted social media because they believed it resulted in excessive screen time. This entanglement between detoxing social media to change smartphone behavior, and vice-versa, has an important implication for future research. Research that exclusively focuses on temporary social media detoxes may mistakenly attribute an individual's motivation to avoiding social media platforms and not consider the intention to avoid screen time. Future research investigating the efficacy of digital detoxes should consider this entanglement when considering motivation.

Although this study did not aim to investigate the efficacy of a digital detox, it is unclear if people ultimately achieve their goals or if they revert to their original rates of digital technology consumption. Future research could investigate whether people remain in a cycle of dieting, never permanently losing hours of screen time.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate some people attempt to negotiate the friction between their use of digital technology and the values they hold. Although a digital detox might help someone move toward the behavior they expect from their ideal self, they might struggle to ever achieve this when abstinence is not a viable option in society. Although research demonstrates digital technology can be detrimental in some areas (Yang et al., 2020), it can also enrich people's lives (e.g., Abel et al., 2021). If digital technology has the potential to also meet people's needs and enrich their lives, knowing these benefits might help to reduce anxiety or threat experienced around its use. Subsequently, individuals experiencing self-discrepancy may benefit from education on the positive impacts of digital technology to inform their ideal use.

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Table 1

Participant Demographic Information and Number of Digital Detoxes

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Residence	Parent	No. digital detoxes
Shane	40	Male	Metro	No	4–5
Hannah	40	Female	Regional	Yes	3
Rose	36	Female	Regional	Yes	8
Aoife	34	Female	Regional	Yes	2
Claire	37	Female	Regional	Yes	2
Bruce	34	Male	Regional	Yes	2
Lisa	50	Female	Metro	Yes	7

Note. Metro = metropolitan; age in years; No. digital detoxes = number of digital detoxes

undertaken.

Table 1

Summary of Themes Generated Through Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Main theme	Sub-theme	Example quote
Resisting Temptation: The Digital Diet [a]	-	"If you take the bowl of chips away, you know, [your] hand's not going to go there." (Claire)
In Search of the Perfect Self: Actual Versus Ideal[b]	Threat to Values	"What I'm focused on is that my life at home is a life at home, not a life with me behind a screen." (Claire)
	Threat to Self-Regulation	"I feel completely enslaved to [my smartphone]." (Bruce)
	Threat to Self-Esteem	"[Social media] made me feel more inferior… it was dragging me down. It just didn't make me feel good." (Hannah)

[a] A diet-like practice where an individual restricts their digital interaction by abstaining from use or disconnecting from digital devices/platforms they consider tempting but harmful.

[b] The motivation to detox underpinned by a discrepancy between the actual self and ideal self.