

# Digital Detox and Mental Well-being: A Phenomenological Analysis on How Social Media Use Affects Psychological Health

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## Abstract

The excessive use of social media is linked to cognitive overload and emotional exhaustion, along with reduced emotional well-being. This can prompt individuals to seek a digital detox and use it as a strategy for gaining psychological relief. This study used a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of ten participants who undertook a digital detox voluntarily. The study focuses on their motivations, challenges faced, and the perceived benefits gained from digital detox. Semi-structured interviews with these participants informed the study about the experiences of undergoing digital detox. Findings reveal that participants face loss of autonomy, cognitive overload, and digital fatigue because of overengaging with digital devices. Withdrawal symptoms experienced by participants were deemed crucial as they enabled them to improve their focus and better regulate themselves emotionally. Post-detox benefits include improvement in social interactions and being aware of digital engagement. Despite the findings offering insights into digital well-being, there are limitations concerning retrospective accounts of participants, which can be susceptible to memory bias. Future research can focus on longitudinal and cross-cultural studies.

**Keywords:** digital engagement, digital detox, social media overuse, psychological well-being, social interactions

## 1. Introduction

The interactions of individuals have been profoundly influenced by the rise of social media platforms. These platforms have become integral to the daily lives of people, as they offer opportunities for connectivity, self-expression, and entertainment. Studies by Hunt et al. (2018) and Twenge (2019) show the adverse psychological effects of using social media excessively, including anxiety, depression, disturbances in sleep, reduced attention span, and stress. The concept of digital detox, voluntary and temporary disconnection from digital devices, is popular for potential interventions to work off the adverse psychological effects. Therefore, digital detox programs, personal initiatives, and wellness retreats can be utilised as strategies to manage one's digital habits and mental well-being. Research suggested that taking a break from social media can improve mental health outcomes for heavy social media users (Graham et al., 2021). However, the benefits may be short-lived or depend on individual variations (Van Koningsbruggen et al., 2017). Besides that, disengaging from social media, which is such a consistent part of one's life, can lead users to feel withdrawal symptoms, social disconnection, and fear of missing out (FOMO).

Nevertheless, the psychological benefits of digital detox as a possible intervention can be feasible to counter the undesirable psychological effects of excessive social media use or digital engagement. The mental health benefits one can gain from temporarily disconnecting from digital devices includes reduction in stress and anxiety (Thomas et al., 2016), improvement in sleep quality (Wasie, 2024), enhancement in focus and productivity (Conroy et al., 2023), and stronger real-life social interactions (Twenge, 2019). It can also boost one's self-esteem and emotional stability as the loop of drawing constant comparisons or online validation-seeking behaviours is broken or put to a conscious halt (Wasie, 2024). Hence, the relevance of digital detox in modern society exists because of attempts to reduce the escalating screen time, concerns around mental health, digital overload/burnout due to workplace demands, and advocacy for digital well-being. The need for digital detox has increased among users because of their desire to engage in mindfulness, to improve their relationships, to be aware of their social media or digital addiction, and to resolve their mental exhaustion and burnout. It is

also important because social media use can hamper cognitive functioning with prolonged digital use in terms of memory retention and maintaining focus (Goodin, 2017). Additionally, a survey-based study found that excessive exposure to social media can lead to emotional exhaustion, fatigue, and mood swings (Sheng et al., 2023). This can again lead to decrease in productivity and increase in stress. For all these pertinent problems, digital detox can serve as a potential intervention to improve mental well-being by encouraging offline engagement with others and by reducing screen exposure.

The research aims to explore the lived experiences of individuals who have exposed themselves to digital detox and focus on the way they interpret and make sense of its influence on their mental well-being. Its objective is (i) to examine motivations behind individual decisions to undergo digital detox, (ii) to analyse psychological and emotional challenges encountered in the digital detox process, (iii) to investigate the individual perceived effects of digital detox on mental well-being, and (iv) to explore the way individuals interpret and reflect on the digital detox experience in terms of digital habits and lifestyle.

## 2. Literature Background

The widespread usage of social media platforms and digital technology has boosted the way individuals interact with one another, work, and entertain themselves. The current data reported by Statista says that among 5.56 billion global internet users, 5.24 billion were active social media users (Petrosyan, 2025). Digital connectivity surely offers benefits that include informational access, communication, and social networking, it also raises concerns due to its overuse and influence on psychological health of the users. Study shows that excessive use of social media is connected to an increase in stress, depression, and anxiety along with disturbances in quality sleep (Pera, 2020). This suggests that due to constant scrolling and algorithm-driven consumption of content, users might feel cognitive overload with reduced attentions spans. A review highlights that the negative impact on cognitive functioning and brain development due to excessive use of digital tech can be mitigated by digital detox, mindful technology use, or physical activity (Shanmugasundaram & Tamilarasu, 2023). Hence, the need for digital detox interventions emerges as a valid strategy where users voluntarily abstain from digital devices and social media platforms for a specified period.

### 2.1 Digital Detox and Its Effects

Digital detox refers to a deliberate and temporary disconnection from one's digital devices with the aim of restoring mental well-being and reducing engagement with the digital world. Individuals advocating for digital detox claim that breaks from digital devices can reduce stress, improve concentration, boost quality of sleep, and promote better offline social interactions (Salepaki et al., 2025; Vanman et al., 2018). To some extent, evidence on the effectiveness of digital detox has been inconclusive because studies report short-term benefits where users restore their social media usage after the detox (Koh et al., 2024). There is also a chance of psychological discomfort during the process of digital detox. A study found that withdrawal symptoms in such cases include heightened anxiety and a sense of isolation during digital disconnection (Salepaki et al., 2025). Here, doubt can be raised about the digital detox process and whether it serves as a meaningful intervention for mental well-being or just a temporary break from digital overload.

### 2.2 Theoretical Perspectives

The cognitive and psychological mechanisms around social media overuse and digital detox can be better understood with cognitive load theory (CLT) and self-determination theory (SDT). The CLT, developed by Sweller and Chandler (1991), aligns with the understanding around digital overload where human brain is said to have a finite capacity or resource for processing information. This is a reason why when individuals are exposed to excessive stimuli, their cognitive resources become overworked. The theory explains that it can lead to stress, mental fatigue, and reduced problem-solving ability. Excessive social media use leads to intrinsic cognitive load (depends on the complexity of the information being processed) and extraneous cognitive load (distractions such as advertisements and notifications) (Tian et al., 2025). Therefore, digital detox might be a strategy to reduce cognitive load that allows individuals to regain mental clarity and attentional control. Deci and Ryan (2012) proposed the SDT, which explains human motivation based on basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The use of social media to an excessive level can disrupt one's autonomy whereby people are stuck in a compulsive cycle of checking notifications on their devices or engaging with digital content (Tran et al., 2019). This culture of constant connectivity makes it difficult for disengagement from social media, which can give a sense of control over personal time and/or actions. More than that, social media promotes a curated version of self-presentation and social comparison that can undermine individuals' competence and self-worth (Ajewumi et al., 2024). From this perspective, digital detox can be an attempt to establish mental well-being and autonomy along with breaking the loop of compulsive digital engagement. Nevertheless, the experience is highly individualised, where it can be liberating for some users and a struggle with disconnection for others. This highly tangled connection with digital world and social media can be a fear of social exclusion or it can be an exacerbation to mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety. Hence, it is crucial to have insight into the contrasting experiences or thoughts people have during detox process.

### 2.3 Research Contribution

Considering these aspects, it is essential to delve deeper into the complexities and engage in a deeper exploration of the ways individuals experience and interpret digital detox in their lives. Prior research done in this field has been correlational (Hunt et al., 2018), experimental (Tromholt, 2016), and interviews with a thematic analysis approach. Notably, research in the lived experiences of individuals following a phenomenological approach is lacking. There is a gap in qualitative research that captures subjective narratives of digital detox participants, focuses on their interpretation of the detox process, the challenges they face, and the perceived beneficial influence on their mental well-being. Hence, this research takes on the opportunity to present research using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) with individual experiences of social media users who have undergone digital detox. This research's focus on first-person accounts will lend rich insights into the emotional and psychological dynamics of disengaging from using social media. It will contribute to an in-depth understanding of digital well-being strategies and inform the designs of interventions to promote healthier habits while using technology.

### 2.4 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework here shows the main ideas involved in the study (see Figure 1). The central ideas here involve digital detox and its effect on mental health, social media use, challenges experienced by participants, and the theoretical perspectives as well.

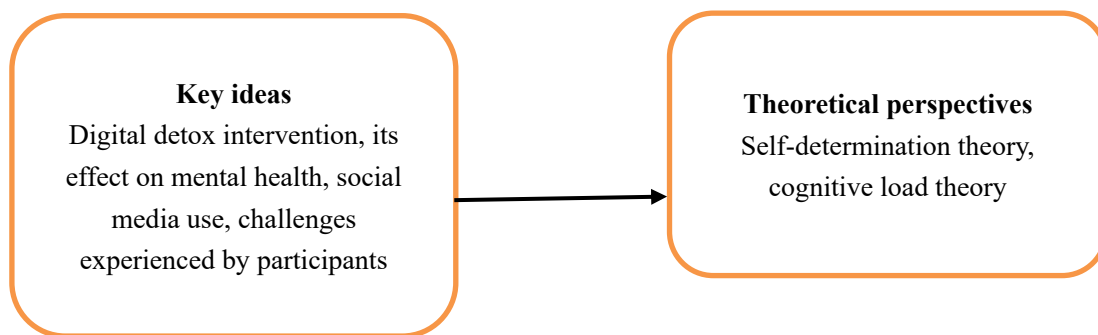


Figure 1. Main connecting ideas of the study

### 2.5 Research Questions

Based on the above information and the need to explore digital detox, the following research questions arise:

1. What key factors drive individuals to engage in digital detox voluntarily?
2. How do the psychological and emotional challenges experienced during a digital detox process play a role in contributing to post-detox benefits?
3. Why do individuals perceive the effects of digital detox as crucial for improving their mental well-being?
4. How do individuals make sense of and reflect on their digital detox experience pertaining to digital habits and lifestyle?

## 3. Methods

### 3.1 Research Design

The research design adopted here is an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) whereby the lived experiences of individuals are considered for research exploration purposes. For this study, individuals who have undertaken a voluntary digital detox will be considered. This is to maintain the stance that participants recognised and acknowledged their excessive digital exposure. In phenomenology, the main outcome is the interpretation of meaning from the lived experiences of participants (Frechette et al., 2020). It can include making sense of experiences, behavioural changes and the felt emotions. Therefore, by focusing on personal narratives, the subjective insights of participants can be captured readily. The IPA employed for this study, like Tomaszewski et al. (2020), seeks to explore the 'why' or 'how' aspects of a question rather than the 'what' only. This approach can help delve into the psychological, cognitive, and/or emotional effects of disconnecting from social media and digital devices for a specific period.

### 3.2 Sampling Approach and Method

To formally recruit participants, the study used word-of-mouth referrals and posted in online community forums on WeChat. Individuals who responded affirmatively to these were briefly asked about the motivators to go for a digital

detox. Individuals who were interested in taking part unanimously self-categorised their social media use or digital device engagement as problematic because it exceeded 6-7 hours, hampered their work, sleep, productivity, and drained their energy, making them feel lethargic. 10 participants were recruited for a phenomenological analysis of their experiences (heterogeneous sample – 6 males and 4 females; age range – 35-45 years). The recruitment summary is further detailed in Table 1. This selection of a fixed number of participants is supported by the study of Hossain et al. (2024), where semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants. Participants needed to be instructed to give as detailed accounts as possible of their involvement in the digital detox process, including their feelings, sense-making of their experiences, reflections, and thoughts post-detox.

Table 1. Participant demographics and recruitment summary

Pseudonyms of Participant	Gender	Age	Self-Reported Digital Usage Issues	Recruitment Source
P1	Male	37	Reported 7–8 hours/day on the phone Sleep disruption, reduced focus	WeChat community post
P2	Female	41	Excessive work-time scrolling Digital fatigue	Word-of-mouth referral
P3	Male	35	Trouble sleeping Compulsive app checking – drained by notifications	WeChat forum
P4	Female	44	Felt irritable, lethargic, and unproductive after constant device use	Referred by previous participant
P5	Male	38	Emotional exhaustion Inability to focus on family or hobbies	WeChat group post
P6	Female	36	Self-described “scrolling addiction” Unable to concentrate at work	Word-of-mouth referral
P7	Male	42	Multiple hours are lost daily Low energy levels, constant distractions	WeChat community post
P8	Female	39	Decreased motivation Compulsive content consumption	Word-of-mouth referral
P9	Male	35	Restless sleep, Low productivity Dependent on the device for stimulation	Referred by a colleague
P10	Male	45	Isolation due to overuse Felt mentally drained and emotionally flat	WeChat post

Purposive sampling method is used to recruit participants who have undertaken a digital detox in the last six months (considering a recent time). The study includes 10 participants, fulfilling the requirement of a small but information-rich participant pool (Smith et al., 2009). It allows in-depth engagement with and exploration of individual experiences by ensuring that a manageable amount of data is collected for rigorous analysis. To recruit participants, certain criteria were set to promote homogeneity. The inclusion criteria for study participants needed that they (i) must be 18 years or older, (ii) must have engaged in the digital detox voluntarily, (iii) must have completed the detox process in the past six months, (iv) must be willing to participate in an in-depth interview process where detailed accounts of their digital detox experiences will be enquired.

### 3.3 Data Collection

The main source of data was in-depth semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured nature provided flexibility in responses and allowed possibilities of exploring participant experiences while ensuring that the core desired area is explored with the questions (Lim, 2024). The questions were open-ended to promote rich descriptions and reflections from these participants. The interviews were finalised to be conducted on a pre-set date and time by consulting with each participant. It lasted for roughly 50-60 minutes and was conducted via a video conferencing platform (Zoom) (all participants chose online mode instead of in-person mode). Accommodations were made for other participants' preferred platforms, such as Google Meet and Skype. It was optional for the participants to keep their cameras on. All the participants chose to engage via audio-video mode with no exceptions. They were also optionally asked to share any information from their journals they might have maintained during the digital detox process.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

IPA was used here to analyse the collected data, as it is a well-established framework for personal meaning-making and examining lived experiences. This process involved a descriptive as well as an interpretive take, which promoted the exploration of participants' experiences and the way they interpreted these experiences. The following six-step approach of IPA (Smith et al., 2009) was followed here:

- *Reading and re-reading* of the transcripts to familiarise oneself with the data

- Generating *initial coding* of the significant statements and informative phrases from participant accounts of lived experiences
- Clustering codes to *develop emergent themes* that capture patterns across participants
- Themes will be examined for *identifying interrelations and connections*
- *Bracketing* is followed so that reflexivity is maintained to ensure participants' experiences are given priority instead of the researcher's assumptions
- Generating a *narrative account* where developed themes have a coherent and interpretive flow and are supported by quotes from participants

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants were given the necessary information about this study, and their queries (if any) were answered too. Written or digital consent was obtained from them to affirm their voluntary participation in the study, without receiving any incentives. They were duly informed that they hold the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. Permission was taken from them to audio record the interview session. It was ensured that their data would be used for developing transcripts later in the study and would not be used for commercial purposes. Their confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in the study by using pseudonyms to identify them. For example, P1, P2, P3, P4, and so on were used to refer to the 10 participants.

## 4. Results

This section presents findings derived from IPA that focus on the lived experiences of individuals who have voluntarily exposed themselves to a digital detox process. The four major themes extracted from the interview responses were (i) Motivations for digital detox, (ii) Psychological and emotional challenges experienced during digital detox, (iii) Cognitive and behavioural adjustments, and (iv) Reflections with long-term impact. Narratives given by study participants provide support to these themes with their direct quotes.

Table 2. Thematic codes

Theme	Respective Subthemes	Illustrative Thematic Codes
<b>1. Motivations for digital detox</b>	1.1 Psychological overload and burnout	"constant clutter", "brain engaged", "no rest", "endless scrolling sprees", "anxious"
	1.2 Desire for increased focus and productivity	"killed my productivity", "major call to action", "regain focus"
	1.3 Social-emotional disconnection	"Didn't feel like talking", "physical meetups felt meaningful", "fulfilment"
<b>2. Psychological and emotional challenges during detox</b>	2.1 Early discomfort and habitual urges	"reached out for phone subconsciously", "FOMO", "crave digital dose"
	2.2 Emotional withdrawal and mood fluctuations	"Emotional vacancy", "irritability", "crippled by boredom"
<b>3. Cognitive and behavioural adjustments</b>	3.1 Recognition of digital consumption patterns	"often reached for phone", "not touching phone during work hours"
	3.2 Development of healthier habits	"read" "journal", "DND mode", "reduced late-night screen time"
	3.3 Adjustments in social interactions	"noticed body language", "engage more", "less passive, more present"
<b>4. Reflections with long-term impact</b>	4.1 Sustained awareness of digital use	"I ask", "re-evaluate"
	4.2 Changes in perceiving digital dependency	"demand on brain's resources", "social media loop"
	4.3 Integration of healthier practices	"Deactivated two platforms", "Walking and chatting"

Table 2 represents the thematic codes that helped to develop the findings. Further themes and subthemes are discussed below with participant quotes/responses.

### 4.1 Theme 1: Motivations for Digital Detox

The decision to undergo a digital detox was highly influenced by emotional, cognitive, and psychological factors. Mental exhaustion was a common aspect pointed out by participants. It was mainly because of excessive digital engagement and feeling stress, anxiety, and cognitive fatigue as a result of constant notification checking and social media comparisons. The motivations of participants were deeply personal. Apart from mental exertion/exhaustion, social-emotional disconnection, psychological overload and burnout, as well as a desire for increased productivity and focus, are the key motivators revealed by their narratives.

Subtheme 1.1: Psychological overload and burnout

The overwhelming nature of digital engagement was a recurring theme among participants, mainly concerning stress, lack of mental clarity, and cognitive overload. Participants also shared that they felt as if they were constantly bombarded with information that ranged from news updates and work emails to social media notifications and close friend updates. They realised that it created a somewhat uninterrupted flow of digital stimuli that made it difficult for them to focus or unwind due to a sense of mental fatigue.

P3 reflected, *“Due to constantly being on my phone or my laptop, I began feeling as if my mind was under constant clutter. My day started with checking social media as almost the first thing in the morning, and ended with replying to messages or emails late at night. It was as if I always kept my brain engaged and never gave it a moment of silence. There was no literal real mental rest for my brain”*.

Participants also shared a growing sense of burnout due to excessive social media engagement.

P6 recounted, *“I would go on endless scrolling sprees at night sometimes, and I would just see people having perfect lives, friends and influencers both. I wanted to see more of it and unknowingly I was even comparing it with my life, maybe; I had my mind running on overdrive and I knew things had to change”*.

The comparison-led anxiousness reflects the negative psychological effects of social media overconsumption. This has undertones of low self-esteem, digital fatigue and anxiety that can push an individual to seek a digital detox.

#### Subtheme 1.2: Desire for increased focus and productivity

Excessive screen time impaired productivity and focus for participants. Their digital habits were distracting, and they interfered with their ability to concentrate on professional tasks or personal activities.

P5 recounted their struggle with concentration and productivity, *“I tried to sit down for study and work, yet I would keep checking my phone and take ‘scrolling breaks’, as if I earned that scrolling spree. At times, 2 hours would go by and I’d have finished no work despite having it. I knew I had to cut down my digital habits so that at least I would engage more with my tasks”*.

This shows that frequent digital interruptions led to a reduction in cognitive efficiency, and it made sustained attention difficult. This led to participants seeking a digital detox as a conscious choice for regaining control over their cognitive resources and time.

For this, P2 added, *“I was eager to see if I could stay without periodical digital engagement. It was to stop myself from switching between apps and tabs. It was a major call to action that I felt”*.

Hence, participants thought digital detox can serve as a cognitive reset to rebuild their ability and stay focused on work without digital interferences.

#### Subtheme 1.3: Social-emotional disconnection

The third motivator for digital detox stems from feeling emotional exhaustion and disconnection. Interestingly, participants’ views reveal that digital engagement and social media use have gone from being a tool for connecting with others to being a source of emotional strain and drain.

P7 explained, *“My digital engagement and social media sprees got to a point where I didn’t feel like talking or even interacting with people around me anymore. I was okay with just ‘me, my phone (or laptop), and my bed’ triangle. I was aware that everything online is curated, but it keeps you stuck in the loop of seeing another reel nonetheless”*.

This reflects how individuals perceived their digital habits as becoming detrimental to their well-being, that ultimately pushed them to seek, at least, a temporary disconnection from their digital devices.

P4 shared, *“I was not even spending hours on end talking to people online but I preferred physical meetups more – it felt different and more meaningful. I strongly felt I was letting myself be disconnected from emotionality in social interactions. It was like an eye opener”*.

Participants wanted to feel connected but they felt loneliness instead. It was evident from narratives that higher connectivity does not equate with deeper emotional fulfilment.

### 4.2 Theme 2: Psychological and Emotional Challenges Experienced During Digital Detox

During digital detox, participants encountered psychological discomfort, social disconnection, and emotional withdrawal. However, the difficulties contributed to beneficial post-detox effects.

#### Subtheme 2.1: Early discomfort and habitual urges

Participants unanimously responded that they felt the habitual need to check their devices during the initial detox days. It was a feeling of missing something, the constant notification high, or the informational input.

P1 voiced, *“Initially, I tried to subconsciously reach out to my phone, without even much thought. To put it extremely, my brain responded as if it was not getting its digital dose”*.

P8 and P9 shared similar sentiments stating, *“I was missing the feeling of my phone in my palms, almost like FOMO”*, and *“I thought it’d be a big deal for me to not be on phone as frequently as I used to be, I won’t say I didn’t feel the urge to check it, but sometimes I thought to myself that I could get used to this reduced mental chatter for sure”*.

The habitual reinforcement perspective explains the frequent need for digital engagement of participants that created conditioned responses and made it difficult to disengage without experiencing psychological discomfort.

#### Subtheme 2.2: Emotional withdrawal and fluctuations in mood

Mood fluctuation with irritability and boredom was common among participants since they did not have their digital distractions to help them escape from the situation. It was like an unsettling void they experienced.

P10 shared, *“I felt bored and had nothing to do initially without my phone. It was like a dependency that made me feel like an almost cripple”*.

P4 added, *“I was determined when I engaged in this detox, but I didn’t know the heavy emotional blank space I had, I didn’t know what all could be done without looking at a screen”*.

Regarding mood issues and irritability, a loss of control over habits and internal discomfort can be seen among participants.

P8 stated, *“During the detox, I felt like I had some sort of emotional vacancy, which I constantly filled with digital engagement; it kept me from feeling things deeply but it affected my mood when I wanted some ‘break’ from work but wouldn’t get any since I was not hitting that digital high, I guess”*.

These recounts show the frustration and emotional discomfort experienced by participants, where they felt uneasy in adjusting to a desired but sudden shift.

### 4.3 Theme 3: Cognitive and Behavioural Adjustments

Participants reported notable cognitive and behavioural shifts in terms of their digital habit awareness, self-regulation, and engagement with offline activities. Their initial attempts were marked by discomfort, but they gradually adapted to the modified routine and redefined their relationship with technology by working out alternative coping strategies.

#### Subtheme 3.1: Improvement in recognising digital consumption patterns

Participants reported their realisations during the detox concerning unconscious digital behaviours. They did not notice earlier the extent to which they depended on their digital devices for emotional regulation, entertainment, or validation.

P2 reflected, *“I thought I was aware of my involvement with my devices, but after the detox process, I came to acknowledge and realise that I reached for my phone quite often and this was just out of habit, even when I did not need it”*.

Such increased awareness alliance with metacognitive regulation, where recognising the habitual behaviours, the baseline state towards notifications, participants also set self-imposed boundaries and themselves after the detox.

P7 recounted, *“After the detox, I was aware of how many times I was looking at my phone for nothing. I gradually reduced this habit by intentionally not touching my phone during a set period of my working hours”*.

#### Subtheme 3.2: Development of healthier habits

Participants adjusted to the absence of constant digital engagement and developed alternative habits to fill the gap left by excessive screen time exposure.

P5 shared, *“I used to reach out for my phone just before sleeping and continued using it till late. After the detox, I have maintained the habit of reading a few pages of a book or journaling”*.

Besides this, other participants used a time-limiting feature, such as app timers or used sleep or DND (do not disturb) mode.

P3 added, *“I found it interesting that DND mode on my phone can put my phone to sleep, the screen becomes black and white (haha), and it helps me wind down by nudging me towards the sleep mode too”*.

This reflects the idea that gaining control over one’s use of social media engagement can provide increased self-control over their behaviour.

#### Subtheme 3.3: Behavioural adjustments in social interactions

Face-to-face communication of the participants improved, and they actively participated in conversations sometimes, without being distracted by their phones.

P1 reflected, *“Earlier, it was like either being a listener or staying passive in a conversation. Now, I am confident to give my inputs, as I do not have my phone in one hand. Body language has also become noticeable to me, and it is interesting how it can boost meaning even in brief conversations”*.

The result of attentional focus is evident here as it boosted social connectedness for participants while reducing their phone distractions.

#### 4.4 Theme 4: Reflections with Long-Term Impact

Participants gladly noted the long-term impact digital detox could have on their engagement patterns with their devices. The detox they engaged in was temporary, but it reshaped their attitudes towards personal fulfilment and digital consumption.

##### Subtheme 4.1: Sustained awareness and critically reflecting on digital use

Participants showed awareness in engaging with digital technology after reintroducing digital devices into their lives.

P8 highlighted, *“It was vital for my mental well-being to stay aware of device usage and social media consumption. I do this by asking myself – Do I really want to engage with social media right now, or am I just bored? That’s it. I can see that I don’t want to tell my brain that I am incapable of sitting with my boredom, or worse, I choose social media as a way out”*.

This self-awareness shows active behavioural regulation among the participants, where they are re-evaluating their engagement with the digital world deliberately.

##### Subtheme 4.2: Changes in perceiving digital dependency

Participants expressed a better understanding of digital dependency, where their behaviours can be classed into almost compulsive usage rather than intentional or mindful.

P10 shared, *“I did not know that engaging with my phone and devices to such an extent could be that demanding on my brain’s resources. I am glad that after this detox, I have understood that it hogged so much of my time; I feel less stressed and anxious, even. Now, I have decided to keep it in check and not let it get the best of me”*.

P6 also recounted, *“I now see that digital loop didn’t add much value to my life apart from social comparisons over which I have no control”*.

There was criticality in their thinking, and it helped shape their daily life by helping them redefine the digital priorities.

##### Subtheme 4.3: Integrating healthier practices in digital use

Some participants withdrew from their social media accounts for two months, and they reported healthier engagement with self and others.

P9 described, *“I was so done with this that I deactivated my social media handles from two platforms. I wanted my time, energy, attention, and thinking resources back”*.

P4 added, *“I was happy going for a brief walk in my locality, the valuable time that I spent scrolling without means. I also chatted with some older people in the neighbourhood, and it made me feel good”*.

This shows that participants also had a renewed likeness towards offline social connection that gave them a sense of fulfilment.

## 5. Discussion

The study aims to explore digital detox and the mental well-being of social media users with excessive digital engagement. This section synthesises the findings with existing literature. It provides an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of individuals undergoing digital detox.



Table 3. Key Findings

Research Question	Key Findings	Supporting Themes/Subthemes
<b>RQ1</b>	Participants were driven by psychological burnout, mental exhaustion, emotional fatigue, and a desire for personal productivity and reconnection.	<b>Theme 1</b> -1.1 Psychological overload and burnout -1.2 Desire for increased focus and productivity -1.3 Social-emotional disconnection
<b>RQ2</b>	Initial stages were marked by discomfort, habitual digital cravings, irritability, emotional emptiness, and difficulty in mood regulation.	<b>Theme 2</b> -2.1 Early discomfort and habitual urges -2.2 Emotional withdrawal and mood fluctuations
<b>RQ3</b>	Participants developed greater self-awareness, improved self-regulation, replaced screen time with healthier offline habits, and improved interpersonal interactions.	<b>Theme 3</b> -3.1 Recognition of digital patterns -3.2 Development of healthier habits -3.3 Adjustments in social interactions
<b>RQ4</b>	Detox led to sustained critical reflection, a re-evaluation of digital dependency, and a conscious shift toward meaningful offline engagement.	<b>Theme 4</b> -4.1 Sustained awareness of digital use -4.2 Changes in perceiving digital dependency -4.3 Integration of healthier practices

Table 3 connects the results and the discussion by summarising the key findings to provide detailed analytical discussions of the central points.

### 5.1 Key Factors Driving Individual Engagement in Digital Detox

The findings from the results section indicated that individuals were motivated to bring about a change in digital engagement habits via a digital detox. They felt cognitive overload, emotional exhaustion, and a feeling of losing their autonomy over their behaviour because of overusing digital devices. Schmitt et al. (2021) conducted a survey study on 403 participants to find out the relationship between digital detox measures, perceived job performance, feelings of cognitive overload, and well-being. The study found that cognitive overload mediates the relationship between well-being and digital tools. Additionally, increased work demands also led the participants to undertake more digital detox measures. This idea relates to cognitive load theory, which explains that excessive information processing by individuals can burden their cognitive resources. It can lead to stress and decreased mental efficiency as well. The participants also highlighted facing triggers such as dissatisfaction with their excessive digital media usage and social media consumption. They showed concerns about productivity as well. Another study conducted with 341 Facebook users also confirms that excessive exposure to screens (for example, while using social media), cognitive fatigue increases, and it can result in emotional dysregulation as well (Turel & Qahri-Saremi, 2016). Hence, excessive screen time led to fatigue and disrupted sleep patterns that again negatively affected their productivity. Therefore, studies here support the motivation for undertaking a digital detox can be different for different individuals. It is also notable that desiring a break from constant digital distractions and experiencing emotional fatigue can be motivators for improving work efficiency and focus.

These motivations expressed by the participants align with previous research that indicates social media fatigue, which is driven by information overload and digital addictive patterns, often leads to taking breaks or engaging in digital detox measures (Nguyen, 2023). However, Nguyen (2023) cautions that the prime age range of social media users (21-39 years old) has various reasons for taking breaks from social media (such as lack of interest, privacy concerns, and maintaining work-life balance). Therefore, this ambivalent relationship with social media is more complex than it has been comprehended to be. An influential motivator for participants to engage in digital detox was a wake-up call, where they realised a decline in their social life and quality of interactions. A mixed-methods study with 25 informants found that participants reflected on their motivations for detox by reflecting inward on their work performance and enjoyment (Borghouts et al., 2022). This ascertains that some push is experienced by participants due to which they undergo voluntary digital detox. It supports the finding in this study where participants had a willing reason to undertake a digital detox.

### 5.2 Psychological and Emotional Challenges Underlying Digital Detox

Regarding the emotional and psychological challenges faced by participants, their transition into digital detox was marked by certain withdrawal symptoms. They missed the feeling of their phone in their palms and even experienced FOMO. This finding aligns with research on social media dependency, stating that digital disconnection can trigger discomfort, and it can be akin to behavioural addictions' withdrawal symptoms (Hrynyszak, 2019; Nassen et al., 2023). Nevertheless, these challenges can contribute towards the eventual benefits of digital detox, where participants learn to self-regulate their emotions without getting dependent on their digital distractions. The finding here aligns with SDT, where autonomy is emphasised as an important factor in self-regulation and improving well-being.

Emotional clarity and improved focus were reported by participants as they regained control over their autonomy during the detox process. This finding is reinforced by existing research where temporary disconnection from social media and digital technology can improve mood and emotional regulation, along with an increase in mindfulness (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024). The authors highlight that digital detox also helps participants in resilience building because of the relief they feel after overcoming digital withdrawal symptoms. Hence, it allows participants to have a greater sense of control over the way they use and engage with digital devices. Overall, the challenges experienced contribute to their long-term sense of well-being and improved control over spending their time with digital devices by identifying the aspects they needed to work upon to improve their mental well-being and emotional stability. Interpersonal relationships of participants also improved due to the detox. They noticed that not being on their phones or checking their notifications boosted the quality of their interactions. It enabled them to engage actively in conversations and provide their inputs too. Disconnecting from digital technology can be difficult due to the excessive time spent exposed to screens (Zaidi et al., 2024). However, with the help of practical interventions and inspiring tales of people who have experienced this, individuals currently working their way out of digital overuse can find some help. This can ease the psychological and emotional challenges since talking about the problems with others can ease the process of undergoing through digital detox.

### *5.3 Perceived Effects of Digital Detox On Mental Well-Being*

There were multiple health benefits experienced by participants in the post-detox phase. It included reduced stress and anxiety, changes in behaviours before bedtime (reading a few pages of a book or journaling), greater emotional stability and social interactions. The findings here are consistent with an existing study (N=124) that suggests interventions, such as digital detox, can lead to improvement in psychological well-being and reduced stress (Williams et al., 2021). In addition, a study (N=380) on sleep and screen time confirmed that using social media late at night can disrupt the circadian rhythms and lead to poor quality of sleep (Arshad et al., 2021; Nakshine et al., 2022). The participants felt in better control of the behavioural adjustments they wanted to make to their use of digital devices. Hence, the sense of agency they regained post-detox aligns with SDT that emphasises one of the psychological needs to be autonomy. Hence, by limiting their screen exposure consciously and being aware of using their phones, participants experienced and exercised improved control over their cognitive and mental space. A semi-structured interview conducted with 12 participants confirmed that mindfulness-based digital intervention helped them in developing and boosting real-world connections via the detox intervention (Thomas et al., 2024). Overall, the effects of digital detox were perceived as crucial by participants for improvements in mental well-being because it helped them in realising the loss of control that they experienced subtly along with the changes they could probably bring in their routines.

### *5.4 Participant Reflection on Digital Habits and Long-Term Changes in Lifestyle*

Digital detox had long-term impacts in terms of the sustained awareness it brought when engaging with devices without any need or reason. When participants caught themselves reaching out for their phones, they were able to redefine their relationship with technology. Some strategies employed by participants included switching screen time before bed with books or journaling, screen-free time during a preset working period, deleting social media accounts, and being active participants in face-to-face communications. Findings here show that participants employed a wide range of strategies that suited them in dealing with their overuse of digital devices. About being alone and experiencing solitude, it is understandable that being open to the nuances and sensitivity of the physical and emotional responses can be a mindful practice (Leavitt et al., 2021). It can be useful for individuals who find it difficult to wind down after a long day without more stimulation of their brain. Hence, the digital habits of participants can be modified by conscious choices in controlling digital engagement with something meaningful or offline activities. Individuals can experience post-detox benefits in their everyday life by regaining autonomy over using their cognitive resources and by checking their habitual digital device engagement.

A review study points out that it is crucial to engage in voluntary digital disconnection because it assists in understanding the harm already done due to excessive digital engagement (Nassen et al., 2023). The way participants understand the need for a digital detox to be essential for their mental well-being can reflect the necessity for cutting down on digital engagements. The concept of digital well-being was examined in a study where seven digital tools were analysed (Jorge et al., 2022). They found that the digital disconnection features on social media platforms, which help users track and manage their activity, are insufficient in allowing users to recalibrate themselves. They lay the onus on individual users to be self-responsible in using social media. In contrast, the fact that they design their algorithms to keep a user highly engaged contradicts the features to manage time spent using the social media platform.

Research highlights that individual susceptibilities and deficits work in the formation of digital habits; this has been attributed as the 'drug' metaphor by Abeele et al. (2022). Likewise, this can be combined with the 'demon', the design and algorithm used by social media platforms. Therefore, to break from this cycle of overconsumption and fatigue,

individuals need to realise the loss of power and autonomy in letting their behaviours be controlled by social media usage. The study also establishes that reducing digital dependency can improve satisfaction with social interactions, which is necessary for elevating the quality of conversations. Overall, with the assistance of a digital detox experience, participants were able to reflect deeply on their digital habits. It allowed them to take charge of changing their lifestyle and ensuring that they maintain the adjustments to behaviours post-detox.

## **6. Conclusion, Limitations, Future Directions**

### *6.1 Conclusion*

The study explored the lived experiences of individuals undergoing digital detox. It examined their motivations, perceived benefits, and psychological challenges concerning their involvement in the digital detox process. Findings extracted from participant responses suggest that the detox was not just a temporary escape for the participants from overuse of technology but it also was a transformative process for them that aided them in building their emotional resilience and mental well-being. It also improved their cognitive clarity and helped them realise the cognitive burden or resource overuse they were experiencing. The theoretical perspectives such as cognitive overload theory and SDT, have aided the study in highlighting the burden faced due to excessively engaging with digital devices. It also emphasised the importance of autonomy in boosting psychological well-being. The study developed a key insight in terms of challenges faced by participants during the digital detox. It identified that the challenges faced due to social media overuse and excessive engagement with digital devices can lead to withdrawal and emotional discomfort, where participants do not know what to do with the vacant time they have. However, this study focuses on the idea that facing challenges can be beneficial for the potential long-term benefits gained by participants. It links the challenges as a bridge towards improved resilience, self-awareness (in terms of using the phone unnecessarily), improved social interactions, and better emotional regulation. The sustained changes in digital behaviour of participants in the post-detox phase indicate that digital detox can be a catalyst to cut down on digital device overuse. It can also have potential long-term improvements for their well-being from consistent information processing, overworking, and digital overload. However, the study is in no way contesting for or promoting complete digital disconnection, since it is not a feasible solution in contemporary times. Nevertheless, it highlights and builds on the importance of mindful and intentional engagement with digital devices, whereby individuals could navigate their digital environments with awareness. They can also develop habits that boost their mental well-being instead of hampering it. Overall, digital detox is not just a trend but a growing response to a psychological need to avail some cognitive relief.

### *6.2 Limitations*

Besides the inferences drawn from findings, the study has certain limitations. While the study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of participants who underwent a digital detox voluntarily, the findings are limited by the small sample size (N=10). The decision to use IPA as the method for data collection requires a small sample size to preserve the richness and depth of individual narratives from each participant. Nevertheless, the study acknowledges the restricted extent to which these insights can be generalised to wider cohorts. All participants recruited for the study self-identified as experiencing problematic digital use, and this introduces a probable self-selection bias. Individuals having positive or neutral views about digital engagement were not included (as controls or comparisons), which potentially skewed the findings towards individuals having adverse experiences. Therefore, future studies that involve a larger and diverse sample size could enhance the transferability and applicability of results to the varied demographic/occupational groups.

The reliance on retrospective data is another key methodological limitation of this study. Participants were asked to recall and reflect on their experiences of digital detox, some of which occurred several months prior. The interviews yielded rich descriptions, but the inherent risk of memory reconstruction or distortion existed when past experiences were recounted. It may have affected the accuracy of the data, particularly regarding the emotional challenges and perceived benefits over time, either diminishing or exaggerating them. To cover for this limitation, future research could incorporate longitudinal studies involving diary-based research, including participants' documentation of their detox experience in real-time or shortly after it. It would provide nuanced insights into the influence digital detox has on mental well-being. Additionally, the period of post-detox reflections was the last six months from the time participants completed the detox. This does not contribute enough to the knowledge of digital habits after some years.

### *6.3 Practical Recommendations for Implementing Digital Detox Interventions*

The study has practical recommendations for mental health professionals, educators, workplace administrators, and individuals looking to reduce the psychological impact of excessively engaging in digital media. For mental health professionals, counselling sessions can involve digital detox planning, particularly for clients showing symptoms of digital burnout or poor sleep schedules. Educators, along with institutions' wellness workers, can organise workshops on mindful digital usage for students. At the workplace, HRs can start 'email-free' initiatives to ensure employees are

not bombarded with work emails after their working hours. Self-regulated methods, such as app-blocking tools or scheduling non-digital activities, for individuals can be improved with credible data to better their sense of autonomy, mental clarity, and emotional regulation.

#### *6.4 Future Research Directions*

As modern life is getting digitalised rapidly, research also needs to expand in various directions to help build knowledge. Future studies can examine the effects of digital detox on individuals from high-pressure working environments, students, healthcare professionals or corporate employees. Cross-cultural comparison is a promising future research direction. It can involve an investigation of the experiences of undergoing digital detox across varied demographic and cultural groups because the digital habits and their influences may vary across cultures. This study has focused on a relatively homogeneous sample. However, the motivations for digital detox, the perceived psychological benefits, and individual coping strategies may highly vary among different groups, such as students, professionals, or people belonging to different cultural backgrounds. For instance, collectivistic or individualistic societies may see digital engagement as linked to familial connection or leisure, respectively. This way, the study's applicability can broaden with a cross-cultural outlook to inform the development of culturally-sensitive interventions for digital well-being. Studies can also design digital detox interventions with different strategies and durations, such as gradual reduction versus sudden disconnection from digital technology.

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#### **Authors contributions**

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