Managing social media use in an "Always-On" society: exploring digital wellbeing strategies that people use to disconnect

Nguyen, Minh Hao

Abstract: As digital media have become an integral part of many people's everyday life, challenges also arise for people to cope with the constant connectivity and exposure to communication and information. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 adults, this study explores the strategies they use to disconnect from social media platforms and messaging apps, and how such disconnection relates to their sense of wellbeing. Participants employed strategies ranging from complete disconnection to nuanced ways to manage their connectivity (e.g., disconnecting from devices, social media platforms and apps, or from specific content and social connections). They also drew on features of technology to disconnect; however, such strategies were more common among those with greater digital skills. Finally, digital disconnection practices could benefit people in their everyday life activities and sense of wellbeing. By shedding light on people's multifaceted and ever evolving relationship with digital media, this study informs future research on digital media use, digital disconnection, and wellbeing.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2021.1979045

Managing Social Media Use in an 'Always-On' Society: Exploring Digital Wellbeing Strategies That People Use to Disconnect

Minh Hao Nguyen

Department of Communication and Media Research (IKMZ)

University of Zurich, Switzerland

This is the accepted version for publication in Mass Communication and Society.

Author note. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Minh Hao Nguyen, Department of Communication and Media Research (IKMZ), University of Zurich, Switzerland. E-mail: mh.nguyen@ikmz.uzh.ch.

Abstract

As digital media have become an integral part of many people's everyday life, challenges also arise for people to cope with the constant connectivity and exposure to communication and information. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 adults, this study explores the strategies they use to disconnect from social media platforms and messaging apps, and how such disconnection relates to their sense of wellbeing. Participants employed strategies ranging from complete disconnection to nuanced ways to manage their connectivity (e.g., disconnecting from devices, social media platforms, and apps, or from specific content and social connections). They also drew on features of technology to disconnect; however, such strategies were more common among those with greater digital skills. Finally, digital disconnection practices could benefit people in their everyday life activities and sense of wellbeing. By shedding light on people's multifaceted and ever evolving relationship with digital media, this study informs future research on digital media use, digital disconnection, and wellbeing.

Keywords: digital disconnection, media disengagement, digital detox, screen time, social media, wellbeing.

Managing Social Media Use in an 'Always-On' Society: Exploring Digital Wellbeing Strategies That People Use to Disconnect

Today, the Internet and information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become an integral part of many people's everyday life. The growing pervasiveness of mobile technology has also led to a culture where people are constantly connected and exposed to information and communication through the many social media and instant messaging apps available. Despite that research on digital media use and wellbeing suggests a more nuanced scenario (for a review, see Meier & Reinecke, 2020; and for a discussion, see Orben, 2020), concerns about a negative relation with wellbeing and ideas about the benefits of digital wellbeing interventions such as "digital detoxing" are highly visible in popular and news media (Barak, 2013; Barr, 2019).

Public perceptions mirror the sentiment that digital media use has negative effects on wellbeing. A report by GlobalWebIndex showed that one fifth of U.S. and U.K. digital media users had taken a break from technology at least once, and that seven out of ten had tried to limit their time online (Winther Paisley, 2018). The tech industry has also responded to this increasing public concern with Google launching the Digital Wellbeing initiative, and endorsing messages like "unplug more often" and "find a balance with technology that feels right for you" (Google, 2020). Moreover, digital wellbeing apps and in-app features of social media apps to help with controlling screen time and disconnecting are becoming increasingly popular (e.g., Apple ScreenTime, Moment). Given such public perceptions, scholars have suggested that ideas of digital harm are socially constructed and thus experienced as "real" by users (Sutton, 2020).

Drawing on interviews with 30 young adults who had taken a break from or stopped using social media, this study explores the strategies they use to voluntarily disconnect from social media platforms and messaging applications, and the extent to which they use

technology to do so. Moreover, the study explores how such disconnection has implications for one's sense of wellbeing.

Digital Disconnection: From Non-Use to Disconnective Practices

The increasing pervasiveness of digital media in today's society calls for more nuanced views on disconnection besides explicit non-use, as completely opting out is not always desirable to do. For instance, disconnecting from social media entirely may come with social repercussions that negatively impact communication and relationships (Baumer et al., 2013; Hargittai & Marwick, 2016). Digital media, and in particular social media, also function as sources of entertainment, information, and relaxation (Whiting & Williams, 2013), and can even lead to economic opportunities such as in the realm of job search (Karaoglu et al., 2021). As such, research on digital wellbeing and disconnection has highlighted the ambivalence of people's relationship with digital media (Aranda & Baig, 2018; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020; Vanden Abeele, 2020). On the one hand, users recognize the enjoyments and benefits that being on digital media has to offer. On the other hand, these experiences are sometimes overshadowed by unintentional digital media use that may conflict with one's social or professional responsibilities. When it comes to disconnecting then, many do not opt-out completely, but remain some form of connection by quitting some online services but not others (Nguyen et al., 2021) or by taking breaks from or limiting their use of digital media (Aranda & Baig, 2018; Franks et al., 2018; Light & Cassidy, 2014).

Depending on people's motivations to disconnect from social media platforms, non-use can be permanent or temporary in nature (Baumer et al., 2013). People may refuse or opt-out of social media as an act of political resistance against "big-tech" such as Facebook (Baumer et al., 2013; Portwood-Stacer, 2013), and in such cases disconnection may be longer lasting. However, some desire to find a balance in their digital media use, and thus engage in voluntary acts of disengagement that are not centered around permanent, but temporal disconnection instead (Jorge, 2019; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). Indeed, people may take

repeated breaks from social media, leading to cycles of disconnection and reconnection (Franks et al., 2018). Hesselberth (2018) further illustrates nuances in disconnective behaviors by arguing: "people's disengagement from technology is rarely total, but often situational, specific to the medium (e.g., one may opt-out of using a cellphone but use a computer), to the time and place of (non)use (e.g., only during work, not during dinner or in the library) and to the purpose of one's abstinence (e.g., privacy concerns may trigger different types of non-use than productivity concerns)."

Across the empirical works on people's social media disconnection experiences, there have been mentions of various strategies that people use to disengage. People may intentionally take temporary breaks from social media or technology ("digital detoxes") to reconnect with their offline life (Jorge, 2019). While such digital detoxes can be embedded in people's everyday life, such breaks often happen in the context of vacation time (Aranda & Baig, 2018; Jorge, 2019). When it comes to social media, people may deactivate or delete accounts, remove apps from their devices, or find other creative solutions to limit their use (Baumer et al., 2013). Digital disconnection can also be less explicit, as people attempt to limit their screen time while still maintaining some extent of connection (Aranda & Baig, 2018; Cho, 2015). Light and Cassidy (2014) have introduced the notion of "disconnective practices," referring to nuanced strategies to manage one's connectivity and availability to others, such as by "unfriending" people on social media or adjusting privacy settings to limit who can see their content (Light & Cassidy, 2014). And with the rise of digital wellbeing tools such as screen time applications, some may revert to these technological solutions to support them in managing their digital media use (Schmuck, 2020).

Digital Disconnection and Wellbeing

While the above reviewed studies give insight into the strategies that people use to disconnect, a comprehensive overview of people's disconnection strategies, and how these relate to wellbeing outcomes, is lacking. In a recent meta-review, Meier and Reinecke (2020)

proposed a conceptual framework distinguishing four levels of analysis of communication channels ranging from the highest level being people's use of digital devices (e.g., mobile phones), to the use of overall types of applications (e.g., social media), specific branded applications (e.g., Facebook), and finally specific features of a communication channel (e.g., direct messaging, status updates). Like this taxonomy is useful in explicating the effects between digital media use and wellbeing (Meier & Reinecke, 2020), distinguishing people's disconnection strategies in a similar way – for instance, are people disconnecting from their devices, or from specific apps or features thereof? – can also help gain a better understanding of how such disconnection relates to wellbeing.

Acts of disconnection, or "digital wellbeing interventions," may interfere with the relationship between digital media use and wellbeing (Vanden Abeele, 2020). People who take a temporary break from Facebook may come back to using the platform in a more controlled and mindful way (Baym et al., 2020; Franks et al., 2018). Several studies examining the causal relationship between digital disconnection and wellbeing have looked at how taking a break from branded application (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) affects wellbeing outcomes, with mixed results (e.g., Brailovskaia et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2019; Stieger & Lewetz, 2018; Tromholt, 2016). However, the range of disconnection strategies people use goes beyond taking a pause from certain apps or platforms and is therefore worth exploring systematically. Moreover, to date, there is limited knowledge on which wellbeing outcomes may be particularly affected by such conscious disconnection.

This study explores which strategies people use to disconnect, the extent to which they use technology to manage their social media use, and how such disconnection shapes people's everyday life and sense of wellbeing. Specifically, this paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Which strategies do young adults employ to disconnect from social media?

RQ2: How do their disconnection experiences affect people's everyday life and perceptions of wellbeing?

Method

Participants

Between end of July and mid-September 2019, I conducted one-on-one in-person and telephone interviews with 30 Dutch adults between 21-39 years (average was 29 years; see Appendix A for sample characteristics and digital media uses). Young adults (i.e., Millenials) are more likely to engage in "digital detoxing" behaviors than people of other ages (Winther Paisly, 2018), making this group particularly relevant in studying everyday disconnection experiences. Participants were recruited through my own social network and advertisements in online fora, and I continued with snowball sampling through participants. I aimed for a variety of users who had taken a break from social media at least once and former users who stopped using social media entirely, as well as a gender-balanced sample with diversity in age and education level. Participants were financially compensated for their time (15 EUR). All participants were informed that their data would be used anonymously, and participants gave consent for audio recording the interview. Ethical approval for this study was waived by the regulations of the author's university.

Interview Protocol

Following previous scholarship, I approached disconnection as a way to manage connectivity that could range from a strict binary of use versus non-use to more nuanced strategies to limit screen time and disengage from social media temporarily. I considered social media in the broadest sense: as both social network sites (SNSs) and mobile messaging apps, as previous work has shown that people might disconnect from public platforms but then adopt more private channels of communication, such as mobile messaging apps (Nguyen

et al., 2021). Moreover, SNSs and instant messaging are the most popular modes of communication among Dutch young adults (Wennekers et al., 2016).

During the interview, I first asked questions about which social media they use(d) to get a sense of their social media repertoire. I followed with questions about their experiences leading up to disconnection to get an understanding of their motivations to disconnect. I then asked about the strategies they used to disconnect and the length of their disconnection attempt. I closed off with questions about if and how their disconnection experience had impacted their everyday life and wellbeing. Based on the same dataset as this paper, an exploration of *why* young adults disconnect from social media and which challenges they face can be found elsewhere (Nguyen, 2021). The current paper expands on this work and focuses on *how* these young adults disconnect, and how their experiences relate to their sense of wellbeing.

Coding and Analysis

The interviews lasted between 20-72 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated to English for coding. Building upon existing research on disconnective practices, I conducted a thematic analysis by first developing a coding scheme guided by previous research as well as the research questions of this study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Together with a research assistant, we then coded three to four interviews to test the coding scheme, while also remaining open to any emerging themes and adding these to the coding scheme (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Next, we held a consensus meeting to refine and determine an overall coding scheme. Throughout the coding process, we shared with each other general observations of the data through written memos to document the coding process. We wrote a case summary of each participant to describe his/her overall social media disconnection experience. The iterative process of coding and consensus meetings ensures the reliability and validity of the findings. While writing up the results, I went back to the full

interviews and case summaries to ensure that the results reflected participants' overall disconnection experience.

Where Do People Disconnect From?

Participants had different perceptions of what social media meant to them. While most agreed that "the big platforms" (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) fell under "social media," IM apps (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram) were sometimes (not always) seen as a replacement for text messaging or phone calls rather than social media. Depending on how people used certain platforms and services, they considered some apps to fall or not fall under "social media." One participant (29, male) used Snapchat mainly to communicate with friends, both via one-to-one and one-to-many communications, but saw this as a substitute for texting and therefore did not consider this to be social media. Those who used IM apps for group communication considered this as "social media," while others did not, as they used them to gather news. Likewise, some used Twitter solely for news, and while acknowledging it as a social medium, they stressed that they did not use it for social purposes and thus did not see it as social media. These reflections reveal that how apps are used and what is considered as "social media" is highly individualized.

People's social media disconnection could have many different levels, ranging from complete disconnection from technology to more nuanced forms where people disconnect from certain aspects of social media. Moreover, disconnection attempts could be temporary and range from hours to months or be permanent. Disconnection strategies involve methods such as creating self-awareness about one's social media use and taking "digital detoxes" by disconnecting from devices, disconnecting from social media platforms and apps by removing accounts and apps, and disconnecting from specific features of platforms and apps by using technology to limit connectivity (e.g., through device and app settings). Although participants often used various strategies to manage their connectivity on social media, or had used different strategies over time, I will discuss these strategies separately for clarity purposes in

answering the first research question. Table 1 presents a typology of the disconnection strategies found.

Disconnecting From Devices: Creating Technology-Free Moments and Environments

While asking specifically about social media, many used their smartphone ("mobile phone") as a synonym in their discourses about disconnection. Several even talked about disconnecting from their phone as a way to disconnect from social media. Given that most participants used social media on their smartphone, notions of always having a device within reach and always being available played a central role in participants' disconnection experiences. When asking about social media use in the evening, one participant answered (30, female): "No, I never take my phone to bed. I'm trying to limit it. [My boyfriend] always makes me leave my phone downstairs and he's right about that." Another (29, male) explained how he felt he lived his life "through [his] phone" instead of "through [his] own eyes," highlighting that the mobile device itself was responsible for his desire to disconnect from social media.

A few talked about creating "digital detox" moments or technology-free environments as a strategy to disconnect from social media. Such experiences likely happened in the context of holidays, but some also took self-initiated breaks as part of their lifestyle. One participant went on a weeklong technology-free retreat (25, female), while others took "digital detoxes" by turning off the Internet for a week (31, female) or regularly engaged in technology-free days (33, male). Digital detoxes could require quite some preparation, as one participant – who also keeps a technology-free bedroom – explains (33, male):

> I also have technology-free moments. Sometimes a whole day. And that's more to connect to the normal world. […] It takes a lot of preparation, because there are certain [social] expectations. Then I send a broadcast message to everyone from "I'm currently unavailable," as if you're going on vacation, with your work email. […] I turn it [smartphone] off and I put it away. It really has to go out, I notice that otherwise I will

> search for something small. And then I get a load of other things that open and then I'm back in [my phone] and I'm feeding myself with something I shouldn't be doing.

Others created shorter technology-free moments by only allowing themselves to be on social media between specific times while putting digital devices away at other times. A recurring theme with such abstention (whether for a few hours, or up to days) was that the technology needed to be out of sight to reduce the temptation or break the habit of using it (30, female):

> I always try to put my phone away around 8 pm, so that I am offline and no longer use social media. […] If I don't see it, then I don't [use it]. So I'm really putting it out of sight. But if, for example, I'm sitting on the couch and it's lying next to me, I'm going to take it out of automatism.

Along similar lines, one participant had set up a system of switching around three phones to help with controlling his digital media use: his private smartphone with most of the apps installed, one smartphone for podcasts and meditation apps, and one prepaid "dumb" phone to call four family members. The use of various phones at specific times – while putting other devices away – allowed him to selectively disconnect. Finally, context also mattered: People often followed implicit norms about technology use in social situations (e.g., during dinner, when meeting friends), where they put their phone away or with the screen down.

Disconnecting from Platforms and Apps: Between Permanent and Temporary Non-Use

Participants frequently deactivated or deleted accounts and/or apps from their smartphone. Only few disconnected completely and removed their accounts from platforms they no longer used. One participant who had quit Facebook and Instagram for years was critical of those who kept accounts "just in case" and described how he felt relieved by deleting his profiles permanently (33, male):

> The revelation of "I'm really going to quit and I can just erase it. And if I ever want to start it again, I can just do it," is a line of thought that some people don't have. "Huh,

> stop social media, why? I'll lose everything". While you don't lose anything, just zeros and ones. Not me, personally, but I've seen it around me. […] No, I don't miss anything.

Indeed, several kept their account(s) deactivated, because they did not want to lose the contacts, posts, and media (e.g., photos, videos) they had on their accounts, even though they had not been active for a long time. One participant explained (25, female):

> I still have the app [Snapchat], and that's for one reason; because memories of it have been stored. So pictures and movies of me from a year ago. Because then I stopped using the app. And they're still in there. So, for example, if I want to look for them, I can find them there very easily, because I know "I made that specifically for Snapchat."

Likewise, several people deleted apps but kept their accounts in case they would want to continue with it in the future – "Maybe I'll regret it later or something" (28, male), thus preventing them from deleting their account permanently. Following the question why one participant kept his Facebook account deactivated even though being disconnected for several years already, he explains (35, male):

> Because I have a lot of family on it anyway. And I've built it up since I was a kid, so there are also friends or acquaintances on it from a long time ago, of which I don't have their phone number. […] It's a contact list you've built up over many years. It would be a pity for me to throw it off. And maybe I'll open it in a couple of years and you'll see the reactions back then and your pictures. So then I'd like to get back on track that way.

Social media was often described as tempting to use, for instance, when bored or to pass time, and so participants actively looked for ways to remove nudges that would tempt them to go online. Several mentioned that they hid apps in folders so they were not in clear sight on their phone screen (25, female): "I don't open the app [Snapchat] anymore, it's somewhere in a folder and I don't see it either." A similar motivation was given by others who deleted apps from their phones. After explaining why screen time apps and time limitations did not work

for him, one participant said (24, male): “For me, it works best to just eliminate such a case, in this case to remove an app. Not an account, but an app.” Another explained (31, male): “If you have it on your phone, you’re more likely to look when you’re on the train or whatever. If you’re going to pick up your phone and scroll through it anyway, I don’t want that.” Participants shared that removing apps worked well as a strategy to manage their use: Some completely stopped using certain platforms, while others only occasionally accessed social media through a mobile or desktop browser in a more intentional and mindful way. Overall, hiding apps or removing apps from people’s mobile phones was frequently used as a strategy to disconnect.

Like using separate phones, a few shared how they distinguished private and professional interactions by using different apps for each. One participant, frustrated by the use of WhatsApp by her colleagues, moved her work-related conversations to a different app to separate it from her private conversations (37, female). This strategy was not to reduce the time spent on such messaging apps per se, but rather to make the communication flow more manageable. Indeed, another participant shared how this helped her to cope with incoming messages (25, female):

> WhatsApp and Telegram are really different, so WhatsApp are just friends and family. Those are the nice messages. And I can turn off Telegram [for work], I can say that I don’t want it on. […] And if you have it off, you won’t get any messages, those push notifications will be off. [Previously] when I got a message on WhatsApp, I got nervous about “Oh, it might be my job.” But now I know, WhatsApp is a nice interaction, those are nice notifications to receive. And Telegram, that’s work. So it’s different in my head, if you know what I mean.

Thus, people sometimes adopted other social media apps to organize communication with different contacts (e.g., private vs. work), allowing them to selectively disconnect.

Several participants kept track of their social media use via a screen time app, which sometimes involved setting time limits on certain apps to prevent overuse. One participant explicitly reflected on the game elements in her screen time app (Forest) to help her stick with her intentions (21, female). However, for most, setting time limits through screen time apps did not effectively reduce time on social media, although some appreciated the insight in their online activities. As one participant said (31, male): "I did that once, but I've noticed that it doesn't really work. Because at some point, for example, your WhatsApp will be locked. And then I press 'unlimited use' anyway." Participants shared that overriding the time limit is easy and often tempting to do, especially when they are in the middle of a related activity. Such situations could include having a conversation with someone about a certain post that one wants to share, or when people want to look up specific information on social media. As one participant explained (30, female): It's so easy to search for information with apps like that, and when you put a lock on it, you think "Do I have to wait until tomorrow morning or do I buy myself some extra time?" Overall, screen time apps were considered helpful in gaining insight into people's time online but rarely effective in disconnecting from social media.

Disconnecting From Platform/App Content and Features: Using Technology to Unplug

Many participants also used specific functions and features of technology to disconnect from social media. These strategies were often implemented when people desired to reduce their social media use or optimize their online experience, but not disconnect permanently. Participants commonly turned off notifications from SNS and messaging apps, from specific app functions, or from certain people. However, a few shared that this made them restless as they kept checking for messages, sometimes even experiencing "phantom notifications" where they thought to hear the sound or feel the vibration of incoming notifications. Some of them turned on notifications again, although sometimes only for close social connections. Through this way, participants could selectively disconnect from certain contacts, while staying available for others. Similarly, some used the "do not disturb" function but made

exceptions for close relatives (29, male): “I’ve set my phone so that when people call, it can only be my favorites. So my parents, my girlfriend, my cousins. So I’m not available to everyone. Unless I’m expecting something, then I’ll turn it back on.” One participant even used the do-not-disturb function continuously (25, female): “If there’s anything really serious, you should call me. But even then, I always have my cell phone on ‘the moon’”. Likewise, people also frequently used airplane mode when they did not want to be disturbed, such as during studying or work.

More than a few relayed moments where they revisited their online friends list to manage their connectivity on social media. This involved deleting contacts or muting notifications or posts from certain people. One participant, who experienced negative affect due to social comparison online, muted Instagram stories and posts from people she could not unfollow for professional reasons (27, female). Additionally, she also unfriended people to prevent being “bombed by pictures of people who don’t really matter at all in your life but who you will compare with.” Cleaning up one’s friend list could also allow for people to feel more comfortable with the content they post themselves as they do not have to worry about who gets to see it, as another participant who sized down her friend’s list drastically shared (30, female):

> I removed everyone I thought “they don’t really need to see my things anymore.” So it’s become a little more private now. And that makes me feel really good. […] If I post now, I feel less insecure about it. So I don’t really care. I post it because I like it myself and not because I think others like it or I don’t think about what they might think of it. Because they’re people I know well.

With regard to content, several reported unwanted content as spam or inappropriate (acknowledging it was not *really* inappropriate), so that this type of content would not reappear again. As one participant told (21, female): “Sometimes I flag them [posts] as spam. Sometimes I unfollow an account, for example, when I see things that don’t interest me.”

Another reported unfollowing accounts that appeared too often on her timeline (31, female). These participants also learned through these experiences and changed their online behavior by deliberately not liking posts and following accounts to prevent certain content from showing up on their feed in the future.

A few participants used more advanced settings of social media platforms to manage their digital experience. A social media-savvy participant who used her Facebook account for both private and business purposes created different friends list to control what she would see on her timeline, as well as which posts of her could be seen by whom. This allowed her to temporarily disconnect from certain social contacts, preventing her from becoming overwhelmed by her feed (31, female):

> When I add someone new, I try to use Facebook groups. So I have a group of clients, a group of friends and acquaintances. So I look and if I want to know something about my friends, I just click on the group of 'friends' and I only get things from my friends. And when I click on 'customers', I only get to see the timeline of my customers. […] If I didn't, I'd be out of my mind. […] Because then you'll just get everything in, won't you? Then there's no longer a filter.

These examples show that people actively use features of technology to manage their connectivity, allowing them to disconnect from certain contacts and content on their own terms.

However, some of these methods may require a certain level of digital skill to perform. Several indeed shared experiences that displayed substantive knowledge of how platform algorithms operate and how to get around them, as well as how to use advanced settings to disconnect (e.g., through content filters). One participant who deliberately avoided clicking on unwanted content to avoid related posts being displayed shared (29, male):

> You need to know a little bit about it, how it works. If you don't click on some things, you won't get any more of them. You can turn it off, too. But with Facebook, I have to turn everything off, I don't feel like it. I don't have time for that.

Others talked explicitly about their proficiency in using device, app, and platform settings to manage the information stream from social media apps (35, female): "I know how to block this in the settings and turn off push messages and such things. So it doesn't bother me too much."

People's digital know-how could stem from their occupational background. Several worked with digital media, and almost all of them shared that their knowledge of how brands and social media companies operate helped them to beware of the potential pitfalls, ranging from topics such as data sharing by companies, design features that make people keep scrolling, but also how social media content may be edited, not reflecting reality. As one participant who works as a digital consultant said (29, female): "I know a bit better what it's like." Similarly, a participant who worked as an influencer and photographer shared (25, female): "So I see people going on fantastic holidays and living in beautiful places. I don't have a problem with that at all, because it's precisely because of my work that I know how it all works and that it's not at all as beautiful and as fun as it seems." Overall, digital skills play an important role in people's digital media and disconnection experiences.

How Do Disconnection Experiences Relate to Perceptions of Wellbeing?

In their reflections on what social media disconnection had done for their wellbeing, participants often spoke to their overall experience based on a combination of strategies. In answering the second research question, I will thus analyze people's overall reflections on what disconnecting has done for them, and which outcomes were mainly impacted. Given that many disconnected in a variety of ways, dissecting how different strategies relate to people's sense of wellbeing proves to be challenging. From the analysis, it will become clear that most

strategies address similar dimensions of wellbeing, and only few strategies explicitly address particular outcomes.

Overall, participants felt that disconnecting had been a positive experience, and spoke to different aspects of wellbeing such as psychological elements (e.g., more peace and quietness), physical elements (e.g., improved sleep), as well as improved productivity and time management. Among those who disconnected from social media temporarily, many felt that taking distance helped them to revisit their relationship with social media and use it in a way that enhanced their digital experiences, and thereby wellbeing. For some participants, disconnecting had done nothing for their wellbeing, as they felt social media use did no harm to their wellbeing to begin with. However, these participants generally were happy not to spend time on something that they felt no longer added value to their lives.

Psychological Wellbeing

Participants shared that quitting social media platforms, using certain platforms less often than before, or using it in a different way, had brought them more peace and quietness and took off social pressures. One participant who had stopped using Instagram and Facebook permanently (27, female) admitted that it was difficult at first as she was using it daily, but that it turned out to be a positive experience: “I notice that I have much more peace and quiet, that I am no longer interested in what someone else does, that I no longer take pictures of myself. So it’s just restful.” A participant who had taken a temporary break voiced similar notions (25, female): “In the end, I can deal with it much more consciously for myself. And then I can take a step back, so that I have more peace of mind and don’t feel that social pressure.” Likewise, a participant who cleaned up her friend list also felt less social pressure and insecurity when posting her own content online (30, female). While most experiences were universal, the responses concerning social pressure were more often – but not exclusively – raised by female participants.

Others specifically related their source of wellbeing to reduced information load. One person (29, male) consciously stopped using his phone in the mornings, as he noticed that he was "already filled with all kinds of information on social media," while not being ready yet for the day. He continued: "Doing [it] less makes me feel better. I actually arrive at work more rested, so I have the energy in my head to focus on my work." By permanently leaving Facebook, another participant realized he was not exposed to undesired information anymore, bringing him more rest (29, male): "I found it a positive experience, in the sense that I don't feel an emptiness, that I think 'Oh, I'm missing something'. It feels much quieter in my surroundings, I have a feeling of more peace, because on social media you scroll down and read things you don't even want to read."

Disconnecting could also make some feel restless in certain situations, thus being detrimental to their wellbeing. One participant explained (27, female): "It's a bit up to the situation." While sometimes it felt good to be disconnected from her phone, such as during an activity, at other times, she felt restless, wondering if someone had already responded. She continued: "I have to say that if I feel like I'm missing something, then I have these restless feelings, that is not really something that I am proud of." Another (37, female) said that going off Facebook "gave [her] rest, but also made [her] restless": she had planned to seek more in-person connections during her time offline, but realized that others were not always available, leaving her with "some kind of emptiness that [she] didn't have before." Thus, while disconnecting can have positive implications on psychological wellbeing for many, such benefits are not always a given, as people's situational context shapes their experiences.

Time Management and Productivity

Several participants shared that disconnecting helped them to find more time for other interests, to be more productive during activities or at work, or to be more mindful of the task at hand. Situated in a broader lifestyle change, one participant relayed how leaving social media freed up time to be engaged in other activities that gave him energy, such as reading a

book, working out, or going to social events (33, male). Likewise, another who had permanently quit social media said (35, male):

> It gives me more rest. You also see a lot less, […] something viral is going on again and you're busy with it. You're posting something and every minute you're checking to see if anyone likes it. So it all takes time and it has a lot of influence on the things I do every day. As it happens, I just restored a table, so I can just focus on that. If I had my phone with me and was still on social media, I would have taken a picture saying, "Look what I'm doing!" and in the meantime, I'd also look at who's liking it. […] Then I'd be working on the table an hour longer than I did right now. So I'll have time for other things. So somehow, it gives me more time and more rest.

Some stuck to specific time frames for using social media with the explicit goal of avoiding distractions and be more productive. One participant was quite disciplined in doing so, as it helped him to structure his everyday life (24, male):

> I always look at [social media] one or two fixed moments every day. I always check if there is a message, and if I have to respond or want to respond to that. […] I'm trying to do that to focus more. That I really start my day in the morning without distractions. So that means no e-mail, no social media, all locked up. And by doing that two hours in the morning, you really get a shitload of work done.

Besides people who took deliberate breaks from social media, more nuanced disconnection from app features could help reduce distractions too. Turning off notifications or using features like airplane mode and do-not-disturb helped with creating fewer distractions from digital devices. Among those who did not entirely quit social media but revisited the way they were using it instead, some also experienced more free time. For instance, one participant deactivated her personal accounts as she was constantly checking her feed, but she kept her professional accounts for blogging purposes, and was positive about the changes she made: "I'm much more comfortable in my skin. I can better have [in-person]

conversations. I have more free time." Overall, disconnecting from social media allowed people to be more productive or engaged in other activities more mindfully.

Physical Wellbeing

Disconnecting from social media also had impact on people's physical health, where sleep and physical rest were central. When asking a participant who repeatedly deactivated her social media accounts about the impact on her wellbeing, she answered that being off social media helped her to fall asleep better as she did not scroll for hours on her phone right before bedtime (25, female):

> My wellbeing, I think better, because then I wake up and I don't have to look at my screen right away. And before going to sleep, I really focus on sleeping, instead of just scrolling for two hours, for example.

Along similar lines, another participant shared how being off social media would improve his sleep significantly, leaving more energy for the whole day (33, male). Overall, several participants voiced benefits of less screen time by disconnecting from social media, and that this could impact their physical health in terms of sleep.

Discussion

Drawing on in-depth interviews with young adults ages 21-39 who had taken a break from or stopped using social media, this study examined the strategies people use to disconnect as well as how this affects their sense of wellbeing. Theoretically, the paper expands the sphere of what might be considered disconnective behavior, as well as what such disconnection means for people's relationship with digital media, their everyday life, and sense of wellbeing. As the role of digital media diversifies in people's lives, the granularity of disconnective behavior is likely to follow suit. As scholars have made the point, disconnection is not merely a strict binary between use and non-use, but also involves nuanced disconnective practices to limit connectivity (Light & Cassidy, 2014). The current paper substantiates an expanded theory of disconnective behavior by showing that (1) social media

disconnection is often temporary, situational, and takes place on different levels: through disconnecting from devices, from social media applications, and from specific features, content or people on social media; (2) theoretical notions from digital inequality scholarship can help explain people's uses of disconnection strategies; and (3) the ways in which people disconnect can help them manage the stream of information and communication through social media, thereby shaping their online experiences and the benefits they derive from it. By giving insight into people's multifaceted and ever-evolving relationship with digital media, this study adds value to theorizing relationships between digital media use, disconnection, and wellbeing, and provides methodological reflections on how to study digital disconnection in a world of ubiquitous connectivity.

As social media disconnection can shape people's sense of wellbeing, theory and empirical work on digital media use and wellbeing should account for such disconnection behaviors. Indeed, many shared that their disconnection experiences had positive impacts on their relationship with social media, their everyday life, and social connections, and various wellbeing outcomes – corroborating previous work (e.g., Baym et al., 2020; Franks et al., 2018). Even though many participants were in an ongoing process of renegotiating their relationship with digital media and figuring out which disconnection strategies worked for them, the findings point to that people's disconnection practices can interfere with the relationship between social media use and perceptions of wellbeing. Indeed, recent scholarship has proposed that digital wellbeing interventions – such as disconnecting – may "disrupt" pathways between digital media use and wellbeing (Vanden Abeele, 2020). The current study suggests that in theorizing and examining the social media-wellbeing relationship, one should not only consider people's online activities but also the everyday disconnective behaviors that people employ to manage their digital experiences, as these continuously shape the benefits that people derive from it.

Previous work examining the relationship between digital media use and wellbeing has shown that distinguishing between different levels of digital media use (e.g., devices, platforms, interactions) as well as wellbeing outcomes can help to disentangle the complex relationships between these variables (Meier & Reinecke, 2020). Besides presenting an analysis of the various levels of disconnection behaviors that people use to limit their social media use or optimize their online experiences, this study also reveals that several specific wellbeing outcomes that may particularly be impacted by such disconnection from social media. Recognizing that subjective wellbeing is an umbrella term encompassing many different interrelated concepts (Diener, 2006), the insights of this study are valuable in theorizing *which* specific outcomes might be impacted by digital disconnection. However, given that people often disconnected from social media using various strategies and reflected on the overall impact on their wellbeing, it was not always clear which strategy benefitted which outcome. To dissect which disconnection strategies impact which wellbeing outcomes explicitly, it could be worthwhile exploring this more systematically in quantitative research.

While it may seem paradoxical to use technology to disconnect, many social media platforms have introduced features to help people find a better balance between their everyday social media uses and other activities (e.g., Facebook, 2018). Some of the disconnection strategies that involve such tech solutions may require a certain level of digital skill to employ and may be more common among the tech-savvy. As the digitally skilled may be better able to manage their digital media use through these features, this could potentially create inequalities in people's online experiences and the benefits derived from it. Previous research has for instance shown that those with greater digital skills are exposed to fewer risks online (Dodel & Mesch, 2018) which may be important for one's digital wellbeing. Moreover, scholars have argued that distinct digital skills are needed for people to manage their digital media use – particularly the overabundance of communication and information in today's digital society – in a way that enhances wellbeing (Gui et al., 2017). Future research could

draw on notions from digital inequality theory and explore whether digital skills play a role the disconnection strategies that people use, and if such differences matter for the relationship between digital media use and wellbeing.

The present study also yields methodological implications. First, to develop large-scale surveys examining people's disconnection practices, it is important to have a comprehensive overview of the strategies that people use to manage their social media connectivity, which this study provides. Second, although explicitly asking about social media, participants sometimes described how they disconnected from their mobile phone, from the Internet, or from specific people on social media channels. Mobile technology and the Internet are often used for social purposes, and thus the findings suggest that it is not social media per se, but also specific affordances of apps and devices that play a role in people's desire for disconnecting. As such, the synonymous word choice of mobile phones and social media has methodological implications, and suggests that when studying disconnection, or effects of social media on wellbeing, it may be insightful to distinguish and compare mobile and desktop use, and other types of devices.

Relatedly, previous work has criticized digital disconnection scholarship for too often focusing on SNSs only and calls for a more comprehensive approach by looking at disconnection from digital media overall (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019). This study is a step forward in that direction, given that the study includes various new media that enable social communication (i.e., SNSs, messaging apps). Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that there are different modes through which people connect (e.g., email, video calls, voice calls). Indeed, in a work-related context people might desire to disconnect from email communication (Belkin et al., 2016). As such, and given that this study shows that people often disconnect from devices (or features thereof) to avoid social media and communication, future research on disconnection should focus not just on social media but on digital connectivity in general.

A limitation of this study concerns the sample. As I recruited people who had taken a break from social media at least once or stopped using it altogether, there may have been a self-selection bias where those who disconnect from social media more unconsciously were not included. Besides young adults, it is also worthwhile to look at other populations such as teens and older adults, as their experiences with social media disconnection might be different (Nguyen et al., 2021). Furthermore, this study focused on social media disconnection among young adults from The Netherlands, a country with a relatively good digital infrastructure and high digital media uptake (Eurostat, 2018). As such, generalization the findings to other countries with different digital infrastructures should be limited. Future research could study digital disconnection in countries where digital infrastructures and digital media use rates are different.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2019). *Americans are concerned about potential negative impacts of social media on mental health and well-being*. https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/americans-are-concerned-about-potential-negative-impacts-of-social-media-on-mental-health-and-well-being

Aranda, J. H., & Baig, S. (2018). Toward "JOMO": The joy of missing out and the freedom of disconnecting. *Proceedings of the 20th International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices and Services*, 19:1-19:8. https://doi.org/10.1145/3229434.3229468

Barak, J. (2013, July 16). Is it time for a digital detox? *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/insights/2013/07/is-it-time-for-a-digital-detox/

Barr, S. (2019). *Six ways social media negatively affects your mental health*. https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/social-media-mental-health-negative-effects-depression-anxiety-addiction-memory-a8307196.html

Baumer, E. P. S., Adams, P., Khovanskaya, V. D., Liao, T. C., Smith, M. E., Schwanda Sosik, V., & Williams, K. (2013). Limiting, leaving, and (re)lapsing: An exploration of Facebook non-use practices and experiences. *SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 3257–3266. https://doi.org/10.1145/2470654.2466446

Baym, N. K., Wagman, K. B., & Persaud, C. J. (2020). Mindfully scrolling: Rethinking Facebook after time deactivated. *Social Media + Society*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120919105

Belkin, L. Y., Becker, W. J., & Conroy, S. A. (2016). Exhausted, but unable to disconnect: After-hours email, work-family balance and identification. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, *2016*(1), 10353. https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.2016.10353abstract

Brailovskaia, J., Ströse, F., Schillack, H., & Margraf, J. (2020). Less Facebook use – More well-being and a healthier lifestyle? An experimental intervention study. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *108*, 106332, 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106332

Cho, I. H. (2015). Facebook discontinuance: Discontinuance as a temporal settlement of the constant interplay between disturbance and coping. *Quality & Quantity*, *49*(4), 1531–1548. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-015-0225-x

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. L. (2015). *Basics of Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Diener, E. (2006). Guidelines for national indicators of subjective well-being and ill-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *7*(4), 397–404.

Dodel, M., & Mesch, G. (2018). Inequality in digital skills and the adoption of online safety behaviors. *Information, Communication & Society*, *21*(5), 712–728. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428652

Eurostat. (2018, May 28). *Internet access and use statistics—Households and individuals*. Eurostat Statistics Explained. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Internet_access_and_use_statistics_-_households_and_individuals&oldid=379591#Internet_activity_by_age_group

Facebook. (2018, August 1). New tools to manage your time on Facebook and Instagram. *About Facebook*. https://about.fb.com/news/2018/08/manage-your-time/

Franks, J., Chenhall, R., & Keogh, L. (2018). The Facebook sabbatical as a cycle: Describing the gendered experience of young adults as they navigate disconnection and reconnection. *Social Media + Society*, *4*(3), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118801995

Google. (2020). *Digital wellbeing through technology*. Google Digital Wellbeing. https://wellbeing.google/

Gui, M., Fasoli, M., Carradore, R., & Carradore, R. (2017). "Digital well-Being". Developing a new theoretical tool for media literacy research. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, *9*(1), 155–173. https://doi.org/10.14658/pupj-ijse-2017-1-8

Hall, J. A., Xing, C., Ross, E. M., & Johnson, R. M. (2019). Experimentally manipulating social media abstinence: Results of a four-week diary study. *Media Psychology*, *24*(2), 259–275. https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2019.1688171

Hargittai, E. (2007). Whose Space? Differences among Users and Non-Users of Social Network Sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *13*(1), 276–297. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00396.x

Hargittai, E., & Marwick, A. E. (2016). "What Can I Really Do?" Explaining the Privacy Paradox with Online Apathy. *International Journal of Communication*, *10*, 3737-3757.

Jorge, A. (2019). Social media, interrupted: Users recounting temporary disconnection on Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, *5*(4), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119881691

Karaoglu, G., Hargittai, E., & Nguyen, M. H. (2021). Inequality in online job searching in the age of social media. *Information, Communication & Society*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1897150

Katz, J. E., & Aspden, P. (1998). Internet dropouts in the USA: The invisible group. *Telecommunications Policy*, *22*(4), 327–339. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0308-5961(98)00013-5

Kuntsman, A., & Miyake, E. (2019). The paradox and continuum of digital disengagement: Denaturalising digital sociality and technological connectivity. *Media, Culture & Society, 41*(6), 901-913. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719853732

Light, B., & Cassidy, E. (2014). Strategies for the suspension and prevention of connection: Rendering disconnection as socioeconomic lubricant with Facebook. *New Media & Society*, *16*(7), 1169–1184. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814544002

Meier, A., & Reinecke, L. (2020). Computer-mediated communication, social media, and mental health: A conceptual and empirical meta-review. *Communication Research*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650220958224

Nguyen, M. H. (2021). *Disconnect to reconnect? Young adults' motivations and challenges for disconnecting from social media*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Nguyen, M. H., Hargittai, E., Fuchs, J., Djukaric, T., & Hunsaker, A. (2021). Trading spaces: How and why older adults disconnect from and switch between digital media. *The Information Society*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2021.1960659

Orben, A. (2020). Teenagers, screens and social media: A narrative review of reviews and key studies. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 55*, 407-414. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-019-01825-4

Portwood-Stacer, L. (2013). Media refusal and conspicuous non-consumption: The performative and political dimensions of Facebook abstention. *New Media & Society*, *15*(7), 1041–1057. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812465139

Schmuck, D. (2020). Does digital detox work? Exploring the role of digital detox applications for problematic smartphone use and well-being of young adults using multigroup

analysis. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *23*(8), 526–532. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2019.0578

Stieger, S., & Lewetz, D. (2018). A week without using social media: Results from an ecological momentary intervention study using smartphones. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *21*(10), 618–624. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2018.0070

Sutton, T. (2020). Digital harm and addiction: An anthropological view. *Anthropology Today*, *36*(1), 17–22. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12553

Syvertsen, T., & Enli, G. (2019). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence*, *25*(5-6), 1269-1283. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325

Tromholt, M. (2016). The Facebook experiment: Quitting Facebook leads to higher levels of well-being. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *19*(11), 661–666. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0259

Vanden Abeele, M. P. (2020). Digital wellbeing as a dynamic construct. *Communication Theory*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa024

Wennekers, A., de Haan, J., & Huysmans, F. (2016). Communicatie via (sociale) media. *Media:Tijd in kaart*. https://digitaal.scp.nl/mediatijd/communicatie_via_media

Whiting, A., & Williams, D. (2013). Why people use social media: A uses and gratifications approach. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, *16*(4), 362–369. https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-06-2013-0041

Winther Paisley, E. (2018, September 5). *1 in 5 consumers are taking a digital detox.* GlobalWebIndex. https://blog.globalwebindex.com/chart-of-the-week/1-in-5-consumers-are-taking-a-digital-detox/

Ytre-Arne, B., Syvertsen, T., Moe, H., & Karlsen, F. (2020). Temporal ambivalences in smartphone use: Conflicting flows, conflicting responsibilities. *New Media & Society*, *22*(9), 1715–1732. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820913561

Table 1. Typology of Disconnection Strategies

Type of disconnection strategy	Examples of disconnection strategy	Commonalities between examples
1. Disconnecting from devices	• Not allowing mobile phones in certain areas (e.g., bedroom) • Putting mobile phones away during social gatherings • Taking technology-free days to disconnect (e.g., turning off the Internet or mobile phone) • Limiting mobile phone use during holidays or retreats • Setting up specific time frames within one can use mobile phones / social media • Switching between multiple mobile phones to disconnect selectively	• People disconnected from social media by disconnecting from devices • Devices often had to be out of sight to reduce the temptation or break the habit to use it • Disconnecting from devices was often done intentionally and may require preparation
2. Disconnecting from specific platforms/apps	• Deleting social media accounts • Deactivating social media accounts • Deleting social media apps from the mobile phone • Hiding social media apps in folders on mobile phone • Using different apps for private and professional communication • Using screen time apps to track use of and set time limits on specific social media apps	• Few people deleted their accounts permanently • People thought of ways to remove nudges to go on social media (e.g., deleting/hiding apps on mobile phone) • Additional social media apps could be adopted to selectively disconnect (e.g., separating private and professional communication)
3. Disconnecting from platform/app content, communication, and features	• Turning off notifications from social media apps • Using do-not-disturb functions or flight mode • Deleting or unfollowing certain contacts or accounts on social media • Muting posts from certain contacts on social media • Creating content filters to selectively disconnect from contacts/content on social media	• These strategies were often used to limit disturbances (e.g., incoming messages, notifications) or unwanted content • These strategies often involved the use of technology through device/app features • Some strategies required certain level of digital skill to employ • Strategies enabled to selectively disconnect from certain contacts while remaining available for others