

# DIGITAL WELLNESS: RETHINKING WELL-BEING IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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## Abstract

Digital wellness encompasses the profound influence of technologies and digital services on individuals' mental, physical, social, and emotional well-being. The realm of social media offers a plethora of positive energy boosters, serving as a platform for seeking health information, from online forums to wellness programs. The proliferation of information on social media, including health and wellness topics, has significantly impacted users' lives. Many individuals rely on social media content for daily inspiration and self-esteem boosts. However, excessive social media usage can be detrimental to physical, mental, psychological, and behavioral health, leading to addiction-like behaviors. The pervasive influence of social media has altered our understanding of healthy living patterns, making it challenging to balance technology use with other activities while safeguarding mental and physical well-being. In this context, this study, "Digital Wellness: Rethinking Well-Being in the Digital Era," explores the complex relationship between technology and individual well-being, identifying the potential benefits and drawbacks of digital interactions and offering strategies for promoting a healthier digital lifestyle.

**Key Words:** Digital Wellbeing, Positivity, Toxic Positivity, Social Media, Inspiration

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## INTRODUCTION

The growth and expansion of information and communication technologies (ICT) has brought positive and negative changes in communication norms worldwide. While it has eased communication, the 'dark side of digitalization' (Turel et al., 2019) has negatively blurred the individual's social, personal, and professional modes of communication. It is not always dark; studies have proven the positive side of smart devices and social media usage, as it can improve work performance (Falkof, 2020).

The onset of the digital era has permanently impacted how we interact, learn, and live in society and interpersonal relationships. It can majorly affect our emotional, mental, and physical health and practice of spirituality. The expansion of online social networks in the mid-1990s and the gradual launch and growth of Facebook in 2004 paved the way for its users to create a simple digital extension of their personal circle of friendship and relationships (Lundby, 2011; Verschoor-Kirss, 2012). Furthermore, the trend continues to grow with newer innovations.

Digital media has several positive aspects that enhance our lives, especially when we depend on technology for day-to-day activities. Access to information and providing good educational resources help people enhance their caliber. It is also a canvas of creativity and expression. It provides a platform for people to raise their voices and showcase their creativity, which otherwise would have remained unknown. Digital media has proved to be a stress breaker for many through a wide range of entertainment and inspirational options. The convenience and efficiency of digital media in making life seamless lead people to overlook its negative impacts.

Studies prove that we hardly disconnect from the internet. Smartphones are tapped, swiped, and clicked over 2 700 times per day, leading to a quest for digital well-being as an urgent issue of the time (Vanden Abeele, 2021).

The digital space, mainly social media platforms, has become a compelling source for both favourable and harmful effects on physical and mental health. It is a source of support for many people, specially a spiritual sustainer; it can also lead to feelings of void, isolation, anxiety, and depression. Uncontrolled use of technology and social media do relate to existing societal issues such as loneliness, the need for validation, an increasing gap in interpersonal relationships, and excess screen time, leading to poor time management and subsequently leading to stress and stress-related psychological disorders.

Digital wellness comprises a holistic approach to utilizing the digital landscape for sustainable results, including practices that promote healthy digital habits, such as reducing excessive screen time and easing the negative impacts of technology overuse. Individuals can enhance their well-being, improve productivity, and strengthen social connections by fostering mindful technology consumption.

This study aims to explore the various elements that hinder digital wellness, affecting mental health and personal well-being.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Most studies focus on work-related consequences of problematic smartphone and social media use separately, with a limited concurrent examination of smartphone and social media-related problematic behavior (Büchi et al., 2019; Falkof, 2020). Social media, which are social networking online sites that allow individuals to interact with each other, share

feelings, thoughts, observations, experiences, and so on with others, and allow other individuals to post their share of life experiences (Demiroğlu & Taş, 2021).

Studies suggest that the widespread use of smartphones in daily life, particularly smartphones, can lead to negative consequences (Falkof, 2020). However, the Internet is not a harmful medium per se; rather, it has a positive impact on those who can manage it well. The overabundance of digital communication and gradual addictive behaviors impairs personal well-being (Büchi et al., 2019; Burr et al., 2020a). The COVID-19 lockdown has significantly impacted the number of people accessing social media through their smartphones, resulting in a higher usage rate in recent times.

Wellness is described as practicing healthy habits leading to improved physical, mental, emotional, and psychological effects, so that the quality of living flourishes (Burr et al., 2020a; Shaikh et al., 2021). In this era, where information and communication technologies are evolving fast, cyber wellness has emerged as a topic of consideration, describing the positive wellness of internet users.

The pursuit of self-awareness is gaining popularity due to culture and lifestyle marketing, which suggests self-knowledge leads to self-improvement. This interest is reflected in various technologies and techniques, including oral, text-based, and digital self-awareness methods. The 'quantified self-movement', such as TED talks and conferences, aims to promote self-knowledge and personal development through technological innovation (Ajana, 2021). Personalized computer interaction allows individuals to access content and services based on their knowledge, needs, and consumer behavior (Burr et al., 2020b). This is known as digital well-being, which involves living a life as good as good in the information age (Burr et al., 2020b; Dienlin & Johannes, 2022).

The relationship between media and religion is now often seen as complementary rather than antagonistic. Meyer (2009) reconsidered gurus as media because of the mediation of religious practices through various forms of media (Copeman et al., 2023; Copeman & Ikegame, 2012). Social media spiritual influencers, have a broad reach and inspire action in their audience. Spiritual influencers are those who are interested in new-age spirituality and specific aspects of wellness culture (Heřmanová, 2022).

Positive emotions can trigger impulsive happiness and well-being, and if cultivated, they can lead to psychological growth and physical well-being (Fredrickson, 2001, 2004; Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008; Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006). The advice to always think positively is prevalent in the 21st century, with social media platforms and self-help books emphasizing happiness and positive vibes. Lifestyle bloggers and vloggers offer tips to maintain happiness and health. However, happiness has become a consumer product, with questionable ethics, and excessive focus on positive strokes can stagnate our progress (Kennedy, 2020). One of the studies conducted to gather the opinion of the users to combat online toxicity came up with the findings that users should avoid unnecessary content, self-control their actions, curate groups of friends and themes, ignore toxic people, practice self-care, shame toxic individuals, or report toxicity to the platform or police. The study suggests 12 platform interventions to avoid toxic positivity online. However, toxicity is a part of the online experience, and users cannot do anything. Prioritizing health over social media can help avoid the ramifications of toxicity. It is important to note that a positive environment is not always possible; the only way possible is for users to take self-precautions against it (Patel et al., 2021).

The cult of perfection is a prevalent culture in which the pursuit of acceptance, approval, social impact, and self-validation is universally desirable. This is evident in the abundance of lifestyle platforms promoting self-improvement techniques in various fields like beauty, fitness, fashion, relationships, wellness, wealth, and business success (Rojek & Baker, 2020). Mood management theory (MMT) posits that people utilize media to regulate their emotional and affective states of mind. Using communication tools, one can consciously or unconsciously arrange their environments to suit their moods (Oliver & Raney, 2014).

A study on the psychological impact of social media found that its intrusion has a significant effect on psychological health factors. Individuals who use social media and allow it to influence their self-perception often lack self-efficacy, which is the confidence in their ability to perform tasks effectively. This decreased self-efficacy is attributed to peer comparisons (Demiroğlu & Taş, 2021; Wood et al., 2016).

FoMO is a socially driven trigger that can lead to problematic social media and smartphone use. Phubbing is a distinct form of smartphone use where employees constantly check their phones during workplace interactions to alleviate FoMO. This conscious use of smartphones is a common practice in today's context.

FoMo and Phubbing are conceptualized as "Persistent anxiety or concerns employees experience during work hours about being absent from or missing socially rewarding experiences that others may be having or sharing on social media platforms" and Phubbing as a "distinct type of social exclusion facilitated by the use of smartphones to access social media during workplace interactions; this use of smartphones may or may not have the specific intention of snubbing others but is driven by the pervasive concern of missing social media updates during work hours" (Falkof, 2020 p. 3)

Media can evoke emotions, leading to the formation of behavior and significant emotional learning. Cultivation of beliefs and the social learning of behaviors suggest that media can influence emotional beliefs and expression, developing emotional skills, social expression norms, and self-disclosure (Nabi, 2014).

Toxic positivity is an overgeneralization of a positive state of mind, urging individuals to focus on the positive aspects of life and avoid stress or negativity (Upadhyay et al., 2022). This phenomenon was particularly prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic, where focusing on the brighter side of life was crucial.

The term 'toxic positivity' was first mentioned in the book 'The Art of Queer Losing' by Halberstam, where he speaks about the fourth place: the art of losing, based on the experience of a photojournalist, who focuses on the 'losers' in the Olympics, who were nearly at, but were not good enough to make it (Halberstam, 2011). However, the concept was in discussion among psychologists in the 1980s. For example, 'The Unrealistic Optimism about the Future of the Events' by Neil D. Weinstein (1980) speaks about the excessive expectations of people about life and the future. The popular belief

makes them feel that they are invulnerable and that failure is meant for someone else (Weinstein, 1980). Similar phenomena can be observed among peers online and on social network services (SNS), who compare themselves with their peers and may develop a conflicting view of reality.

In recent years, studies have been conducted to understand the gravity of 'toxicity and toxic positivity from different angles. Displaying positivity can be beneficial if it enhances enjoyment or reduces reluctance to commit to public self-presentation. Social approval acts as a feedback loop, encouraging more positive sharing (Lew & Flanagan, 2023). The motivational gurus, a recent inundating trend on digital platforms, use their own experiences as persuasion strategies. The constant pressure an individual puts on their own development is an unwritten expectation. In contrast, a happy and contented person lives a happy life without expectation or pressure to create it (Bosveld, 2021).

One of the key constraints of the capital-driven media system is ensuring profits. Political economy incorporates the domain of control and survival in social life, involving all human activity and living processes. Cultural industries encompass the production and circulation of texts, including broadcasting, films, music, print, electronic publications, video games, advertising, marketing, PR, and web design (Fuchs, 2015). The Internet's attention system has a political economy, with users having different powers to be heard, seen, and read, resulting in inequality on capitalist social media platforms like Google, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Fuchs, 2021).

Political economics is rooted in the concept of 'Knowledge monopolies', developed by Harold Innis (Graham, 2007; Hardy, 2014; Mosco, 2009). Thomas Nicolas 'Death of Experts' (2017) highlighted the sheer amount of information on the internet, giving people the illusion of knowledge. Contemporary social media operates as an attention economy (Fuchs, 2021); it significantly impacts our emotions, providing psychological support, spiritual guidance, and self-help strategies to overcome obstacles, making it an essential source of entertainment.

Social capital is a process of attaining a social status through social contacts and links provided by contacts (Lin, 2002). Excess use of social media can impact the development of 'human capital', which refers to an individual's acquired and useful abilities, with knowledge being the most potent production engine (Westlund, 2006).

It is a proven fact that social networking sites or instant messaging apps can impair well-being and cause severe psychological impairments. Digital detoxing is suggested as a solution to reduce the negative impacts of smartphone usage (Radtke et al., 2022). The term was first introduced in 2012. Although the taxonomy of digital detoxing has evolved over time, what is a more acceptable factor of digital detoxing is that it refers to the voluntary and intentional removal of aversive stimuli, such as digital devices and smartphone use, to promote health behavior change (Radtke et al., 2022; Syvertsen & Enli, 2018).

Studies have shown that digital detoxing has a positive impact on an individual's overall well-being, including improved self-regulation, decreased procrastination, enhanced quality of sleep, increased life satisfaction, improved mood, and increased mental and psychological well-being, as well as increased social relationships. Experiencing increased FoMo while on digital detox is high; however, adapting to other offline activities reduces the intensity of FoMo (Radtke et al., 2022; Syvertsen & Enli, 2018).

#### **Objective of the study**

Excessive and perennial use of digital media can be detrimental to physical, mental, psychological, and behavioral health, leading to addiction-like behaviors. The pervasive influence of social media has altered our understanding of healthy living patterns, making it challenging to balance technology use with other activities while safeguarding mental and physical well-being. This study aims to explore the complex relationship between technology and individual well-being, identifying the potential benefits and drawbacks of digital interactions and offering strategies for promoting a healthier digital lifestyle.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Methodology is the process, principles, and procedures by which a researcher undertakes a research study to seek answers. Qualitative methodologies portray the world's reality as socially constructed, complex, and ever-changing. They are subjective, experiential descriptions of life and the world of human beings in-depth, and observe socially constructed reality (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

The thematic analysis involves the identification of recurring patterns as overarching themes or statements, which is the dominant or unifying idea of qualitative research (Lochmiller, 2021). It is a method in qualitative research. Thematic analysis is a question-driven exercise that can report the participants' experience, meaning, and reality (Lochmiller, 2021). The researcher employed semi-structured interviews to gather data on individuals' perceptions of digital well-being and the challenges they encounter when using or overusing digital devices, particularly those connected to social media. The study employed simple random sampling (Acharya et al., 2013) to select 30 participants for semi-structured interviews. The participants were both male and female, with ages ranging from 19 to 60 years.

### **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

The interview responses were analysed for their recurring themes and patterns. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify patterns in a dataset, which is crucial for interpreting phenomena. The thematic analysis technique is a question-driven exercise that can report the participants' experience, meaning, and reality (Lochmiller, 2021; Zahay et al., 2021), and is used in making judgments of how the registered information addresses specific research questions or opens up a new conceptual or theoretical understanding of the underlying theme (Lochmiller, 2021).

The pervasive nature of digital media has sparked a pressing question: How much screen time is too much? While the duration of digital consumption varies widely, it is often driven by compelling factors such as social connectivity, entertainment, and the constant stream of information. The respondents in this study acknowledged that, on average, they spend six or more hours daily engaged with digital devices, with some exceeding sixteen hours. Notably, this extensive usage frequently occurs unconsciously, with users underestimating the time elapsed due to the immersive and addictive qualities of digital platforms. While some people succumb to boredom due to excessive social media use, others have realized it is a waste of time and are switching to more productive activities. However, this realization did not come easily; rather, it was a conscious decision to move away from addictive habits.

More than 50% of the respondents, who are students, have reported experiencing attention deficiency and poor time management due to OTT platforms. OTT platforms have revolutionized how we consume media, offering flexibility and personalized choices over traditional forms of media. Many of them admit that 60% of their time goes into watching entertainment. That is a huge waste of energy and time.

**Table 1 Analysis of the semi-structured interviews using Thematic analysis**

Themes	Sub Themes	Description
Digital Well-being	Positive / Negative impacts	<p>“Can stay connected with our relations like. Those who live very far away from us. .... No, I talk about whatever I consume. So it's a bit of a spiritual part also”.</p> <p>“when we need some academic help”</p> <p>“But others, you the 60% of the portion that goes in entertainment and all of this. So that is like that is not nicely affecting our brains”.</p> <p>“Use it often while eating, in class, or before and after”.</p> <p>“Because we get so much addicted that we don't realize just that we have nothing to do. We are having our phone in our hand and we just go and looking back and see something which is not even of our use. We are not even enjoying it. We just want to see it because”</p> <p>“I don't want to have a conversation with anyone, I can just randomly scroll even if I'm not watching it. I don't have to talk to them and I have a genuine reason. But I'm very addicted to my phone”.</p> <p>“You don't want to do something, you want to distract your mind. Just go there mindless scrolling and you'll be distracted”.</p>
	Toxic positivity	<p>“Yes, I do feel that and actually last past two, three months I've been facing that because I always thought being gone through every day it's gonna is a big challenge. But then I think sometimes we can be vulnerable. We can feel down, we can cry sometimes. So it's very okay. We just have to put that confidence in our backpack and then move on. Whenever it is necessary, we have to walk down the aisle then how we can bring that confidence and portrait. So that is okay. <b>That single time being confident or being a certain way that's not important. And people forcing that.</b> That's that this is what you are talking” about.</p> <p>“Even like people get inspired from such quotes or videos and they try to be honest and in the name of honesty they often end up becoming rude. They would say something on their face which would often hurt people and they don't even realize that”.</p> <p>“...even I download some one videos to get help”</p> <p>“People are extremely polite sometimes when they don't want to be”.</p> <p>“I feel very low because when I see other people's story I feel I am. I have no one or I have no friends”</p> <p>“Yes, at times it does. I tell you when. When I see airbrushed pictures of others and I'm like... ”.</p>

	Digital Detoxing and Mindfulness	Interactions are better than online for me personally. “after switching off I sleep off ... whole day” “I involve myself in doing some studies”  “I do that digital detoxing, it is not when I want. It is like when I have a fight with someone or something. I don't want to have a conversation with that person”.  “...if I decided I don't want to spend my time on I don't want that mindless scrolling I'll not do it”
	FoMo	“Frequent switching between apps”
Online content consumption and influence	Inspirational contents	“Escapism” “instant mood booster” “When I feel very low, I look for some content that gives me an answer at that time” “we get the energy, but it lasts only for few minutes” “when I become normal, I forget about what I was listening.... Impact is short-lived” “I said 60% of that is like a waste”
	Impact of Algorithm	“It is always a choice of mine that I want to be distracted”
	Clickbait	“We tend to forget like the actual motive”
Online / offline Spirituality	Spiritual online spiritual assistance Offline Spiritual practices	“I do, you know, I do listen to spiritual things. So basically sometimes the way I react, I try to, you know, recall those things. How a prophet had, you know, how he would have reacted or how would he would have taken action. So I might. I might do that”  “Whenever we feel low or something is not happening, then we listen to, you know, what has been said by whatever”.  “I do watch inspirational videos or not. Interested because when I feel low, I Straight away call my friends and they make me feel good. So I don't have to watch it over the YouTube or anywhere”.

The data was systematically coded into various themes and sub-themes to explain the nuanced aspects of digital well-being as perceived by the respondents. The comprehensive study examined the multifaceted impact of digital well-being on the psychological, emotional, and spiritual aspects of human experience.

Digital detoxing is something everyone aspires to, but few are able to achieve it consistently. People experience withdrawal syndrome that comes along with attempts for digital detoxing. While some reported that they utilize that time for productive activities, some people have experienced deep sleep and find themselves wasting time either sleeping or engaging in random activities. The study has found that the struggle associated with digital detoxing is not confined to a specific age group, but rather is a common phenomenon prominent among individuals who have used any digital device, especially a smart smartphone, for an extended period, regardless of age, educational qualification, or living status. The intensity of this struggle depends upon an individual's reliance on technology and their capacity to resist the constant stream of digital stimuli.

FoMo can also lead to alternative behavioral patterns, where individuals have filled the void with less motivational activities or avoided the issue, forcing them to temporarily abandon digital use. The smartphone becomes a masking instrument when one wants to avoid another person. Indulging in social media also provides an opportunity for escapism; when one does not want to do something or wants to distract their mind, people choose to scroll mindlessly. With Clickbait, people experience a kind of redirection and end up doing something they initially had not intended to do or losing motivation.

The toxic positivity of online behaviors gives people the notion that ‘everyone else is happy except me,’ and that feeling leads to low self-esteem and a tendency to compare oneself with others. On the other hand, people start to develop a superiority complex, an inflated ego, which again serves as an escape from the reality around them. The pervasive dissemination of positivity in digital media, often manifested through quotes, reels, testimonials, and motivational talks, can create unrealistic expectations of constant positivity. This can lead individuals to suppress authentic emotions and mask their genuine feelings in an attempt to conform to this idealized standard. Such forced positivity can ultimately be detrimental, hindering genuine human connection and emotional well-being, as one respondent expressed: “...People are extremely polite sometimes when they don't want to be...Another thing is you would be cut out from that group because you put the actual reality in front of them.”



FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and the attention economy are closely connected because they exploit limited human attention with visuals, clickbait, unlimited possibilities, and social media business tactics. Social media content is thriving in the attention economy. Internet algorithms urge people to indulge in unlimited scrolling down. The irresistible nature of embedded entertainment in social media keeps one glued to social media, even if one tries to distract oneself consciously.

Finding connections in offline circles has not yet gone stale. People look for offline connections for emotional and spiritual support. Respondents consistently emphasized the importance of a religious or spiritual foundation as a source of personal strength. They expressed that online spiritual content, such as prayers, devotional songs, religious discourses, and virtual rituals, enhances rather than replaces traditional religious practices. However, the primary motivation for engaging with online spiritual practices is convenience and accessibility. Respondents cautioned against excessive reliance on online spirituality, emphasizing the importance of striking a balance between digital engagement and offline religious activities. The role of personal spirituality was evident when respondents pointed out,

“... the peace I receive when sitting in the silence of the morning, basking in the morning sunlight and whispering slokas is immense”.

“... when I feel extremely tensed, I chant mantras and feel good; in such situations, I do not bother to look at mobile”

Digital media well-being is not an unattainable reality. People expressed that awareness of excessive internet use is the keystone to change, coupled with self-confidence and the motivation to engage in more productive activities. People also give suggestions as to how one can overcome addictive behaviours “...Okay, so it is a choice it is only a matter of mind, but you think that we can reverse the character if someone is so much addicted, it's not for everyone”

The political economy of social media also fosters a knowledge monopoly, where users often consume information without rigorous verification, uncritically accepting the authenticity of the content presented. This is particularly evident on platforms like YouTube, where visually compelling videos, coupled with a large number of likes and shares, can create a false sense of authority and objectivity. As a result, users tend to accept the disseminated knowledge at face value without engaging in critical analysis or seeking alternative perspectives.

## CONCLUSION

Digital media has several positive aspects that enhance our lives, particularly when we rely on technology for our day-to-day activities. Digital media has proved to be a stress breaker for many through a wide range of entertainment and inspirational options. However, the findings of this study support the earlier study, which reported that it was clicked over 2,700 times per day, a figure that is roughly the same as the current one.

The overabundance of digital communication and gradual addictive behaviours impair personal well-being. The toxic positivity prevalent in digital media, particularly on social media, encourages people to set unrealistically high expectations for themselves. The advice to 'think always positively' creates a tension of always being good. Happiness has become a consumer product, and inspirational speakers offer numerous tips on how to achieve happiness.

Digital detoxing is a suggested solution for reducing the negative impacts of smartphone usage, but people experience withdrawal symptoms and or app hopping to avoid the void. However, individuals have taken steps towards digital detoxing after having experienced high physical and mental impairment and unproductive activities. They call it a 'bold step' to delete certain social networking sites.

Undeniably, the digital revolution has significantly impacted every sphere of our existence, and it continues to progress, bringing in newer innovations. However, its rapid expansion also presents ethical challenges, potential pitfalls, and an impact on human behavior.

The widespread nature of digital devices has led to concerns about excessive screen time, FOMO, toxic positivity, virtual autism, echo chambers, and the attention economy. Although studies are conducted on these potential harms, individuals do not clearly understand how these phenomena affect their daily lives. There is a gap in digital literacy and the development of policies regarding digital ethics. Social institutions must promote responsible online behavior, and understanding ethical dimensions can enhance society's benefits while mitigating risks.

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