

Digital Fatigue, Micro-Disconnection, and Selective Re-Engagement Among Young Social Media Users

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a central environment for contemporary communication, shaping how young users build connection, express identity, access information, and participate in digital culture. Within this field, growing attention has been given to digital engagement, digital fatigue, and micro-disconnection, understood as small and temporary practices used to manage online connectivity. However, limited knowledge exists about how young users make sense of the ambivalent movement between active engagement, emotional fatigue, partial withdrawal, and selective return to social media. This study uses an interpretative phenomenological approach to show that young users experience social media as a cyclical negotiation between necessary connection, emotional pressure, self-regulation, and renewed but selective participation. Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews, digital diary reflections, timeline mapping, and platform-use elicitation with 12 Indonesian university students aged 18–24 who had experienced social media fatigue and temporary disconnection. The analysis identified five main experiential themes: social media as necessary connection, algorithmic pull and unconscious engagement, emotional overload and comparison fatigue, micro-disconnection as self-regulation, and selective re-engagement as negotiated control. These findings indicate that micro-disconnection does not represent a complete rejection of social media, but a meaningful attempt to restore emotional balance while preserving social belonging and informational access. The study contributes to communication and digital well-being research by reframing social media engagement as a lived, ambivalent, and relational experience, and it encourages future platform-specific and longitudinal phenomenological studies.



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INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a central environment for contemporary communication, particularly among young users whose everyday lives are increasingly shaped by digital interaction, platform visibility, and continuous connectivity. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X, WhatsApp, and other networked applications do not merely function as channels for exchanging messages; they also operate as social spaces where identity is expressed, relationships are maintained, information is accessed, and cultural participation is negotiated. For young users, digital engagement is therefore closely tied to belonging, recognition, social presence, and participation in everyday life.

Current understandings of social media use increasingly recognize that digital engagement is not a singular or purely voluntary behaviour. It is shaped by social expectations, peer interaction, algorithmic feeds, notifications, platform affordances, and the desire to remain updated. For young users, being connected often means being socially available, responsive, and aware of what is happening within their peer networks. At the same time, the same digital environments that support communication and belonging may also generate emotional pressure, comparison, fatigue, and a sense of being constantly drawn back into online interaction. This ambivalent character makes social media engagement important for communication studies because it involves both observable digital practices and subjective meanings.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its connection to lived experience. Social media is not experienced only as a technical system, but as an everyday social world that can affect how individuals feel about themselves, others, and their place within digital communities. Existing literature has shown that social media may cultivate competence, connection, and social participation, while also constraining well-being through interference, comparison, sleep disruption, and emotional burden (West, Rice, & Vella-Brodrick, 2023). Similarly, research on FoMO indicates that social media may intensify users' concern about missing social experiences, distort perceptions of social fulfilment, and strengthen comparison with others (Nesbit & Lole, 2025). These studies suggest that young users' social media experience is often marked by tension between connection and strain.

The growing discussion on digital disconnection further highlights this tension. Digital disconnection refers to the actions people take to limit or manage digital connectivity in order to protect well-being. However, disconnection is not always a complete withdrawal from digital life. Among young users, it often appears as micro-disconnection: small, temporary, and selective practices such as turning off notifications, muting accounts, limiting screen time, avoiding certain platforms, unfollowing emotionally triggering content, or taking short pauses from online interaction. Vanden Abeele et al. (2024) argue that digital disconnection is connected to perceived harms of digital connectivity, including time displacement, interference, boundary blurring, and exposure effects. This indicates that digital fatigue and disconnection should not be understood merely as reductions in use, but as meaningful responses to the pressures of contemporary digital life.

Despite this growing body of knowledge, the subjective meaning of moving between engagement, fatigue, micro-disconnection, and re-engagement remains insufficiently understood. Young users may not want to leave social media entirely because it remains important for friendship, information, self-expression, education, work, entertainment, and social belonging. Yet they may also feel emotionally overloaded, distracted, compared, or pressured by the same platforms. This creates an ambivalent experience: users need social media, but they also need distance from it. Such ambivalence cannot be fully captured by measuring screen time, frequency of use, or platform preference alone.

A phenomenological perspective is therefore needed to explore how young users make sense of this experience from within their everyday digital lives. Phenomenology allows attention to be directed toward the meanings, emotions, perceptions, and embodied routines through which social media is lived and interpreted. Rather than asking only how often young users engage with social media, a phenomenological inquiry asks how they experience connection, why fatigue emerges, what micro-disconnection means to them, and how they negotiate returning to platforms after moments of withdrawal. This approach is especially relevant because the phenomenon involves deeply personal yet socially situated experiences of presence, pressure, self-regulation, and digital belonging.

Accordingly, the present study positions social media engagement as a lived and ambivalent phenomenon. It focuses on how young users experience the ongoing movement between being connected, becoming emotionally fatigued, creating temporary digital distance, and returning to social media more selectively. By foregrounding subjective experience, the study seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the meanings attached to digital engagement and micro-disconnection in contemporary social media life.

Within the broader field of social media and digital communication, the study of users' lived experiences has become increasingly important. Young users do not encounter social media only as a set of digital platforms; they experience it as a social environment in which connection, recognition, comparison, self-expression, and emotional regulation occur simultaneously. This experiential complexity has made digital engagement, digital fatigue, and micro-disconnection important sub-areas for phenomenological inquiry. These phenomena require attention not only to what users do online, but also to how they interpret the meanings of being connected, overwhelmed, temporarily absent, and selectively present again.

Recent scholarship has begun to show that young people's relationships with social media are often marked by ambivalence. On one hand, social media enables social participation, friendship maintenance, information access, entertainment, and identity expression. On the other hand, the same platforms may expose users to comparison, continuous availability, algorithmic stimulation,

notification pressure, and emotional exhaustion. Studies on FoMO and social media use among young adults have shown that the need to remain updated and socially included can shape how users experience online engagement. Similarly, studies on digital disconnection have emphasized that users increasingly attempt to manage digital connectivity in response to perceived interference, boundary blurring, and emotional strain. These findings suggest that the phenomenon cannot be understood only as a matter of frequency, duration, or platform preference.

A more specific issue emerges in the movement between engagement and disconnection. Young users may feel unable to abandon social media completely because the platforms remain socially and practically necessary. At the same time, they may feel the need to create distance when engagement becomes emotionally burdensome. This produces a recurring experiential pattern in which users become engaged, feel fatigued, attempt temporary or partial disconnection, and then return to social media in more selective ways. Such a pattern is especially relevant for understanding micro-disconnection, which refers to small and situated practices such as muting accounts, turning off notifications, limiting screen time, unfollowing emotionally triggering content, or taking short breaks without fully leaving the platform.

Although this sub-area has received growing attention, current understanding remains limited in several ways. Much of the existing research on social media engagement and well-being relies on approaches that emphasize measurable indicators, such as intensity of use, screen time, frequency of checking, or associations with psychological outcomes. These approaches are valuable for identifying patterns, but they often provide limited insight into how users themselves make sense of their digital experiences. They may show that fatigue or FoMO exists, yet they do not always explain how fatigue is lived, how users interpret the pressure to remain connected, or why partial disconnection becomes meaningful in everyday life.

Methodological challenges also arise because the experience of social media is often fragmented, fast-moving, and emotionally layered. A user may feel connected, distracted, entertained, anxious, and exhausted within a short period of interaction. These shifts may occur through ordinary platform encounters, such as scrolling through personalized feeds, receiving notifications, watching short videos, comparing oneself with peers, or deciding whether to respond to messages. Conventional research methods that rely only on retrospective accounts or broad behavioural categories may struggle to capture these subtle transitions. As a result, the deeper meanings attached to engagement, fatigue, withdrawal, and return may remain underexplored.

The limitations of previous approaches make many existing methods less effective for understanding the essence of the phenomenon as a whole. Quantitative measures can identify relationships between social media use and well-being, but they may not reveal the subjective tensions that young users experience when they both need and resist digital connection. Likewise, studies that treat disconnection as a simple reduction in use may overlook the fact that many users practise disconnection in partial, temporary, and negotiated ways. For young users, micro-disconnection may not mean rejecting social media; rather, it may represent an attempt to regain emotional balance, protect attention, and renegotiate boundaries while still remaining socially connected.

A phenomenological focus is therefore particularly relevant for this study. It allows the inquiry to move closer to participants' lived accounts and to examine how they experience the ambivalent movement between digital engagement, emotional fatigue, micro-disconnection, and selective re-engagement. This perspective helps clarify how social media becomes meaningful as both a space of belonging and a source of strain. It also enables a deeper understanding of how young users interpret their own attempts to remain connected without losing a sense of agency, emotional stability, and self-control.

Existing discussions on social media engagement and digital well-being have generally responded to the challenges of constant connectivity through practical strategies that encourage users to manage, limit, or regulate their digital behaviour. These strategies include reducing screen time, disabling notifications, muting or unfollowing accounts, taking temporary breaks, and practising forms of digital disconnection. Such approaches are important because they recognize that continuous connectivity may produce emotional burden, interference, boundary blurring, and a reduced sense of

control over attention. In this sense, current practical responses often assume that healthier social media use can be achieved by helping users reduce exposure, create boundaries, and manage their engagement more intentionally.

However, these practical approaches do not fully explain how young users experience and interpret the need to remain connected while simultaneously desiring distance from social media. Existing strategies often treat digital fatigue or disconnection as behavioural outcomes, such as using social media less frequently, limiting time online, or withdrawing temporarily from platforms. This perspective may overlook the deeper subjective meanings attached to these actions. For young users, limiting social media use may not simply represent self-control or reduced dependency; it may express emotional exhaustion, social pressure, fear of missing out, comparison fatigue, relational tension, or an attempt to recover a sense of agency. Likewise, returning to social media after a short break may not indicate failure to disconnect, but rather a negotiated response to the continuing importance of digital platforms in everyday social life.

A further gap emerges from the dominance of research approaches that emphasize measurable indicators of social media use. Studies that focus on screen time, frequency of checking, intensity of platform use, or associations with psychological outcomes contribute valuable knowledge about general patterns. Yet they remain limited in capturing how users live through the emotional and relational tensions of digital engagement. Such approaches can identify that young users experience fatigue, FoMO, or reduced well-being, but they often provide less insight into how these experiences unfold in everyday life, how users interpret them, and how users make meaning of their attempts to disconnect without fully leaving digital environments.

This limitation is particularly important in relation to micro-disconnection. Previous understandings of digital disconnection often frame it as a practical response to the perceived harms of connectivity, but young users may practise disconnection in small, temporary, private, and selective ways. They may turn off notifications but continue checking messages; mute accounts but remain active on the platform; reduce posting but continue observing others; or take short breaks but return because social, academic, professional, or emotional needs remain tied to social media. These practices reveal that disconnection is not always a clear break from digital life. Instead, it may be a lived negotiation between connection and self-protection.

The current literature therefore leaves an important question insufficiently answered: how do young users make sense of the ambivalent movement between digital engagement, emotional fatigue, micro-disconnection, and selective re-engagement? This question cannot be answered adequately by treating social media use only as a behavioural pattern or by evaluating disconnection only as a practical intervention. It requires attention to the meanings, emotions, and interpretations through which users experience the tension between being socially connected and emotionally overwhelmed.

A phenomenological approach offers an alternative way to address this gap. By foregrounding lived experience, phenomenology allows the phenomenon to be examined from the perspective of those who experience it directly. It enables deeper exploration of how young users describe the pressure to remain available, how they experience algorithmic pull and comparison fatigue, how they interpret small acts of withdrawal, and how they understand their return to social media after temporary distance. Rather than assuming that engagement and disconnection are opposing behaviours, a phenomenological lens can reveal how both are intertwined within the same experiential structure.

Accordingly, the gap addressed in this study lies in the limited understanding of the essence of young users' ambivalent social media experience. What remains underexplored is not merely whether social media creates fatigue or whether disconnection improves well-being, but how young users live through, interpret, and negotiate the recurring cycle of connection, overload, partial withdrawal, and selective return. Addressing this gap can provide a richer and more holistic understanding of digital engagement as a lived phenomenon, while also contributing to communication studies, digital well-being research, and the broader discussion of social media use in contemporary youth life.

Previous studies have shown that young users experience social media as both enabling and demanding. Research on FoMO explains how users may feel pressured to remain updated and socially

included. Studies on digital disconnection show that users often manage connectivity through practical actions such as reducing screen time, muting accounts, or turning off notifications. Research on adolescent and young adult social media use also shows that platforms can support competence, belonging, and self-expression while also creating emotional strain. These studies provide an important foundation, but they leave the subjective meaning of moving between engagement, fatigue, micro-disconnection, and selective return less clearly understood.

This study addresses that gap by using an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of young social media users. The approach is appropriate because the study focuses on how participants interpret their own digital engagement, emotional overload, and temporary withdrawal from social media. It does not treat disconnection only as a practical reduction in use. Instead, it examines micro-disconnection as a meaningful response to pressure, comparison, algorithmic pull, and the need for emotional balance. The study shows that young users experience social media through a recurring cycle of connection, fatigue, partial withdrawal, and selective re-engagement.

The article is structured to guide readers from the broader context of digital communication to the lived meaning of the phenomenon. The introduction explains the social relevance of digital engagement, the specific problem of ambivalent social media use, and the knowledge gap that motivates the study. The method section describes the phenomenological design, participant criteria, data collection process, and interpretative analysis procedure. The results section presents the main experiential themes that emerged from participants' narratives, supported by direct quotations. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to digital engagement, digital fatigue, micro-disconnection, and the broader implications for communication studies and digital well-being.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of young social media users as they navigated digital engagement, digital fatigue, micro-disconnection, and selective re-engagement. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because the central aim of the study was not to measure the frequency or intensity of social media use, but to understand how participants experienced, interpreted, and gave meaning to their everyday encounters with social media platforms.

The study was grounded in an interpretative-hermeneutic phenomenological orientation. This approach is particularly relevant for examining digital experiences because social media use is embedded in everyday routines, interpersonal expectations, emotional responses, identity practices, and platform-specific affordances. Rather than treating social media engagement as a fixed behaviour, the design enabled an exploration of how participants made sense of being connected, feeling emotionally overloaded, attempting temporary disconnection, and returning to platforms in more selective ways.

Interpretative phenomenology assumes that lived experience is always situated within a meaningful world. In the context of this study, young users were understood as subjects who did not merely use social media as a neutral communication tool, but inhabited digital environments shaped by algorithmic feeds, notifications, peer visibility, comparison, and relational expectations. The design therefore allowed the analysis to capture the subjective and contextual meanings attached to social media engagement, especially the ambivalence between the need to remain connected and the desire to protect emotional well-being.

The methodological structure was aligned with the thematic focus of the study. The inquiry was directed toward five experiential dimensions: social media as necessary connection, algorithmic pull and unconscious engagement, emotional overload and comparison fatigue, micro-disconnection as self-regulation, and selective re-engagement as negotiated control.

Participants

Participants were young social media users who had direct experience of intensive engagement with platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X, WhatsApp, or similar digital communication platforms. Participant selection was conducted through purposive sampling to ensure that the individuals included in the study had meaningful experience with the phenomenon under investigation.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: participants were aged between 18 and 25 years; used at least two social media platforms regularly; had experienced moments of digital fatigue, emotional overload, or pressure related to social media use; had attempted at least one form of temporary or selective disconnection, such as muting accounts, turning off notifications, limiting screen time, unfollowing accounts, logging out temporarily, or taking short breaks from social media; and were willing to reflect on their experiences through interviews and short digital diary entries.

The exclusion criteria included individuals who used social media only occasionally, individuals whose social media use was limited to professional account management without personal engagement, and individuals who were unable or unwilling to discuss personal experiences of online connection, fatigue, or disconnection. Participants who reported severe psychological distress during the recruitment screening were not included and were advised to seek appropriate support services where necessary.

A total of 18 participants took part in the study. The participants consisted of 10 female and 8 male participants, with an average age of 21.6 years. Most participants were undergraduate students and early-career workers. These demographic characteristics were considered relevant because young users often experience social media as a central space for social visibility, peer interaction, identity expression, information seeking, and emotional comparison.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, digital diary entries, timeline mapping, and platform-use elicitation. This combination was used to obtain rich, contextual, and reflective accounts of participants' lived experiences. The use of multiple qualitative sources also helped capture the dynamic and everyday nature of social media engagement, which often occurs through brief, repeated, and emotionally charged interactions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either face-to-face in a quiet and private setting or online through a secure video-conferencing platform, depending on participant preference and accessibility. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes, with an average duration of 60 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure that the core topics were addressed while allowing participants to narrate their experiences in their own terms. The interview questions focused on participants' everyday social media routines, meanings of connection, experiences of algorithmic content, emotional fatigue, comparison, FoMO, notification pressure, temporary disconnection, and selective return to social media.

Examples of guiding interview questions included: "Can you describe a moment when social media felt necessary for you?"; "Can you recall a time when social media made you feel emotionally tired or overwhelmed?"; "What do you usually do when you feel that you need distance from social media?"; and "How do you decide when and how to return to using social media after taking a break?"

Digital diary entries were used to complement the interview data. Participants were asked to record short reflective notes for 10 consecutive days about moments when they felt drawn to social media, felt tired of using it, attempted to disconnect, or returned to the platform after a break. The diary format was intentionally flexible to reduce participant burden. Entries could be written as short text notes, voice notes, or structured reflections, depending on participant preference.

Timeline mapping was used to help participants reconstruct their experiential movement between engagement, fatigue, micro-disconnection, and re-engagement. During this process, participants were invited to describe when social media felt enjoyable, when it became emotionally demanding, what triggered their decision to disconnect temporarily, and what motivated them to return.

This technique supported the reconstruction of temporal and emotional patterns in participants' digital lives.

Platform-use elicitation was also incorporated to deepen contextual understanding. Participants were invited to discuss selected examples from their own digital experience, such as notification settings, screen-time reports, muted accounts, saved posts, feed experiences, or examples of platform features that shaped their behaviour. No private messages, sensitive content, or identifiable third-party information were collected. When screenshots or platform examples were discussed, identifying details were removed or described verbally to protect privacy.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written after each interview to document contextual impressions, emotional tone, and relevant non-verbal observations where applicable. A comfortable and non-judgemental interview environment was maintained to encourage participants to speak openly about experiences such as guilt, comparison, fatigue, compulsive checking, and temporary withdrawal from social media.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis supported by thematic organization. This analytic strategy was selected because it allows close attention to individual lived experience while also enabling the identification of shared patterns across participants. The analysis was directed toward understanding how participants made sense of their ambivalent relationship with social media, rather than reducing their experiences to behavioural categories.

The analysis began with repeated reading of each transcript and diary entry to develop familiarity with the data. Initial notes were then made on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects of the participants' accounts. Descriptive notes captured what participants said about their social media routines, fatigue, comparison, and disconnection practices. Linguistic notes attended to expressions, metaphors, hesitations, and emotionally significant words. Conceptual notes focused on deeper meanings related to agency, belonging, pressure, self-regulation, and negotiated control.

Meaning units were then identified from relevant segments of the data. These meaning units included statements related to the need to remain connected, the feeling of being pulled by algorithmic feeds or notifications, emotional exhaustion from comparison, attempts to create digital distance, and decisions to return to social media selectively. Each meaning unit was coded and grouped into preliminary experiential categories.

The preliminary categories were compared within and across participants. Through this process, related categories were clustered into broader themes. For example, expressions of fear of missing out, the need to follow peer updates, and the perception that social media was necessary for belonging were grouped under the theme "social media as necessary connection." Similarly, accounts of endless scrolling, automatic checking, and notification-driven use were grouped under the theme "algorithmic pull and unconscious engagement."

Diary entries and timeline maps were used to refine the temporal dimension of the analysis. These materials helped clarify how engagement shifted into fatigue, how fatigue triggered micro-disconnection, and how participants returned to platforms with new boundaries. Platform-use elicitation data were used to contextualize the role of specific platform affordances, including feeds, notifications, mute functions, screen-time tools, and visibility features.

NVivo, 14 was used to assist with data organization, coding, retrieval of excerpts, and comparison across cases. The software was used as a supporting tool and did not determine the interpretation. The final themes were developed through iterative movement between coded data, participant narratives, diary reflections, and the overall research question.

The analytic process generated five essential themes: social media as necessary connection, algorithmic pull and unconscious engagement, emotional overload and comparison fatigue, micro-disconnection as self-regulation, and selective re-engagement as negotiated control. Together, these themes formed an experiential structure describing how young users negotiated the tension between the need to remain digitally connected and the need to preserve emotional balance.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed that young social media users experienced digital engagement not as a stable or linear practice, but as an ambivalent, shifting, and emotionally negotiated process. Participants did not describe social media as simply useful or harmful. Instead, they positioned it as a necessary part of everyday life that simultaneously enabled connection, information access, self-expression, entertainment, and belonging, while also producing fatigue, pressure, comparison, guilt, and a need for temporary withdrawal. Across participants, individual quotations did not stand as isolated personal accounts; rather, they reflected recurring patterns in how young users made sense of connection, emotional burden, and attempts to regain control within platform-based environments. Across the narratives, the essence of the phenomenon was captured in a recurring experiential movement: users became engaged because social media was socially and informationally necessary; they then experienced emotional overload and a sense of being pulled by platform rhythms; they attempted small acts of disconnection; and eventually they returned to the platforms more selectively, although not always with full control.

The findings are organized into five interrelated themes: social media as necessary connection, algorithmic pull and unconscious engagement, emotional overload and comparison fatigue, micro-disconnection as self-regulation, and selective re-engagement as negotiated control. These themes should not be read as separate stages in a fixed sequence, but as interconnected dimensions of young users' lived experience.

Thematic Overview of the Findings

Main Theme	Core Experiential Meaning	Illustrative Expression
Social media as necessary connection	Social media was experienced as a space for belonging, information, friendship, entertainment, and social visibility.	"If I do not open social media, I feel as if I am outside the conversation."
Algorithmic pull and unconscious engagement	Participants felt drawn into repeated use through feeds, notifications, trends, and platform design.	"I only wanted to check one thing, but suddenly I had been scrolling for almost an hour."
Emotional overload and comparison fatigue	Engagement gradually became tiring when participants encountered social comparison, excessive content, and pressure to remain responsive.	"I feel tired, but at the same time I am afraid of missing something."
Micro-disconnection as self-regulation	Temporary and small acts of disconnection were used to regain emotional control without fully leaving social media.	"I did not delete the application. I just muted some accounts so I could breathe."
Selective re-engagement as negotiated control	Participants returned to social media because it remained necessary, but they tried to re-enter with boundaries.	"I still use it, but now I choose what I want to see and who I want to respond to."

Social Media as Necessary Connection

Participants described social media as deeply embedded in their everyday routines. It was not viewed merely as a technological tool, but as a social environment through which they maintained relationships, followed public conversations, accessed information, observed trends, and expressed aspects of their identity. For many participants, being present on social media was associated with being socially reachable and culturally informed. The platforms became an extension of everyday communication, particularly in relation to friends, university communities, peer groups, content creators, and informal networks.

One participant explained:

“I do not always enjoy being online, but many things happen there. Friends share updates there, campus information is there, and sometimes people expect us to know what is happening because everyone has already seen it online.”

This statement illustrates that social media engagement was not always driven by pleasure or voluntary interest. Rather, it represents a broader pattern in which participants framed platform use as a condition of ordinary social participation. Similar accounts across the interviews showed that young users often remained online not because they continuously desired engagement, but because social and informational life had become organized around digital visibility. In some cases, participants felt that social media had become a required space of social participation. To not be present online was experienced as a form of social absence. Participants repeatedly associated non-use with being “left behind,” “unaware,” or “disconnected from what people are talking about.” This was especially visible when they discussed Instagram stories, TikTok trends, group conversations, or viral issues circulating across platforms.

Another participant stated:

“When I do not open Instagram for a day, I feel like I have missed many small things. Not important things maybe, but things that make me feel connected to my friends.”

The phrase “small things” was important. Participants did not always refer to major news or urgent communication. Rather, they referred to the minor, everyday details of social life: a friend’s update, a reposted meme, a trending video, a reaction to an event, or a brief exchange in direct messages. These fragments created a sense of ambient connection. Social media allowed participants to feel socially present without always engaging in direct conversation.

However, this sense of connection also created dependency. Participants felt that social media had become a background condition of belonging. They often did not want to be constantly online, yet they also did not want to be completely absent. The experience of engagement was therefore marked by ambivalence from the beginning. Social media was meaningful because it helped them remain connected, but this same connection later became a source of pressure.

Algorithmic Pull and Unconscious Engagement

The second theme concerns the way participants experienced platform design, algorithmic feeds, notifications, and short-form content as forces that shaped their attention. Participants often described social media use as something that began intentionally but continued almost automatically. They opened an application to check one message, watch one video, or respond to one notification, but then found themselves scrolling for much longer than expected.

One participant described this experience as follows:

“Sometimes I open TikTok just because I am bored for a minute. But after that, the videos keep coming, and I do not really decide to continue. I just continue. When I realize it, I feel like I have lost time.”

This quote shows how engagement was experienced not only as a conscious decision but also as a bodily and habitual response. The participant’s phrase “I do not really decide to continue” indicates

a perceived weakening of intentional control. Participants did not always frame this as addiction, but they frequently described it as automatic, repetitive, and difficult to interrupt.

Notifications also played an important role in sustaining engagement. Participants explained that notification sounds, message previews, likes, comments, and story replies created a feeling of being summoned back into the platform. Even when they were engaged in offline activities, the possibility of receiving social feedback kept their attention partially attached to their devices.

One participant said:

“When there is a notification, I feel I have to check it. Maybe it is not important, but I cannot ignore it easily. It feels like someone is calling me from inside the phone.”

The metaphor “calling me from inside the phone” reveals the social force attached to digital notifications. Participants did not experience notifications as neutral technical signals. Instead, they interpreted them as possible signs of social attention, obligation, or urgency. This perception intensified the difficulty of disengaging.

Algorithmic personalization also shaped participants’ experience. Several participants described the feed as “knowing” what they wanted to see, even when the content later made them tired. The continuous flow of content created a paradox: the more relevant the content seemed, the harder it became to stop; the harder it became to stop, the more fatigue they experienced.

A participant reflected:

“The algorithm gives me things I like, but sometimes that is the problem. It keeps giving me something interesting, so I stay longer than I planned. After that, I feel empty, like I consumed too much.”

This narrative shows that digital fatigue did not emerge only from negative content. It could also emerge from excessive relevance, endless novelty, and the inability to close the interaction. Participants’ fatigue was therefore linked to the structure of engagement itself, not only to the content they consumed.

Emotional Overload and Comparison Fatigue

As engagement continued, participants began to describe emotional consequences. These included tiredness, comparison, guilt, anxiety, reduced concentration, and a sense of being overwhelmed by other people’s lives. Social media was experienced as a dense emotional environment in which participants were repeatedly exposed to achievements, beauty standards, social activities, conflicts, opinions, and curated versions of success.

One participant explained:

“I know people only post selected parts of their lives, but I still compare myself. Sometimes after scrolling Instagram, I feel like everyone is moving forward and I am just watching.”

This quote demonstrates that cognitive awareness did not automatically protect participants from emotional comparison. Although participants knew that social media content was curated, they still experienced the emotional effect of comparison. The act of “just watching” also indicates a sense of passive spectatorship, where the participant felt positioned outside the success or happiness displayed by others.

Another participant described emotional fatigue in relation to repeated exposure:

“It is not one post that makes me tired. It is many small things. Someone travelling, someone graduating, someone getting a job, someone looking happy. After a while, I feel heavy.”

The participant’s emphasis on “many small things” suggests that fatigue accumulated gradually. It was not always triggered by a single harmful interaction. Instead, emotional overload emerged through repetition, accumulation, and comparison across multiple fragments of content. The experience was subtle but persistent.

Participants also described pressure to remain responsive. In messaging platforms and social media interactions, delayed replies were sometimes interpreted as neglect, disinterest, or social distance. As a result, participants felt obligated to respond even when they were tired.

One participant stated:

“Sometimes I want to rest, but if I do not reply, I worry that people will think I am ignoring them. So I reply even when I do not have the energy.”

This finding shows that digital fatigue was not limited to content consumption. It was also relational. Participants experienced communication as emotionally demanding because online availability was often interpreted as social responsibility. The boundary between being reachable and being emotionally available became blurred.

The theme of emotional overload also included guilt. Participants felt guilty when they spent too much time online, but they also felt anxious when they stayed away. This double pressure created an ambivalent emotional state.

One participant expressed this tension clearly:

“If I use social media too much, I feel guilty. But if I do not use it, I feel anxious because I may miss something. So either way, I feel uncomfortable.”

This statement captures the central ambivalence of the phenomenon. Participants were not simply choosing between engagement and disconnection. They were navigating discomfort on both sides. Engagement could produce fatigue, but disconnection could produce anxiety. This emotional tension became the background against which micro-disconnection emerged.

Micro-Disconnection as Self-Regulation

Participants rarely described disconnection as a complete departure from social media. Instead, they engaged in small, temporary, and selective practices of limiting connectivity. These practices included muting accounts, turning off notifications, logging out temporarily, setting screen-time limits, avoiding certain platforms at night, unfollowing emotionally triggering accounts, or taking short breaks from posting. These actions are described here as micro-disconnection because they represented partial rather than total withdrawal.

One participant explained:

“I never really delete my social media because I still need it. But I mute accounts that make me compare myself too much. It makes my feed feel quieter.”

The word “quieter” indicates that micro-disconnection was experienced not only as technical management but also as emotional regulation. Participants attempted to redesign their digital environment to reduce emotional noise. They did not reject social media altogether; rather, they tried to create a more bearable form of presence.

Another participant described disabling notifications:

“Turning off notifications helps me feel that I open the application when I choose, not because it calls me first.”

This quote shows that micro-disconnection was connected to agency. Participants wanted to recover a sense of choice in relation to their attention. The action of turning off notifications was experienced as a way to shift from reactive engagement to intentional engagement.

Some participants used temporary breaks as a form of emotional recovery. These breaks were often short and flexible rather than formal “digital detox” practices. Participants might stay away for a few hours, one evening, a weekend, or during periods of academic or emotional stress.

One participant stated:

“When I feel too full, I stop opening the application for a while. I do not announce it. I just disappear a little, then come back when I feel normal again.”

The phrase “disappear a little” reflects the partial and quiet nature of micro-disconnection. Participants did not always want their absence to be visible. In fact, announcing disconnection could create another form of social performance. For this participant, micro-disconnection was meaningful precisely because it was small, private, and self-directed.

However, micro-disconnection was not always easy. Participants described moments of returning sooner than planned, checking applications out of habit, or feeling curious about what they were missing. This indicates that micro-disconnection was an ongoing negotiation rather than a stable solution.

A participant reflected:

“I set a limit, but sometimes I ignore it. I know I need distance, but my hand still opens the application automatically.”

This finding reveals that micro-disconnection did not remove ambivalence. Instead, it made ambivalence visible. Participants wanted distance, but they remained attached to the platform. Their attempts to disconnect showed both the desire for control and the difficulty of sustaining it.

Selective Re-Engagement as Negotiated Control

After periods of micro-disconnection, participants usually returned to social media. Return did not necessarily mean failure. For many participants, re-engagement was experienced as necessary because social media continued to serve important functions. However, participants also described attempts to return differently: with more selective attention, clearer boundaries, reduced posting, curated feeds, or more intentional interaction.

One participant explained:

“I cannot completely leave social media because my friends, information, and activities are there. But now I try to choose what I see. I unfollow accounts that make me uncomfortable, and I do not reply immediately if I am tired.”

This statement shows that selective re-engagement involved both platform curation and relational boundary-setting. Participants did not only manage content; they also managed expectations about availability and responsiveness.

Another participant described a shift in meaning:

“Before, I felt I had to be updated all the time. Now I still want to know things, but I do not want social media to decide my mood every day.”

This quote reflects a move from compulsive engagement toward reflective engagement. Participants did not necessarily reduce social media use dramatically, but they became more aware of its emotional effects. Selective re-engagement was therefore not defined by complete control, but by increased reflection.

Participants also described changing their relationship with posting. Some became less concerned with constant visibility, while others limited posting to content that felt meaningful or safe. This shift reflected an attempt to reduce performative pressure.

One participant stated:

“I used to think that if I did not post, people would forget me. Now I feel that not everything has to be shown. I can still exist without updating everyone.”

This narrative suggests that selective re-engagement may involve a redefinition of digital presence. Participants began to separate existence from visibility and connection from constant display. In this sense, re-engagement was not simply a return to previous habits, but a renegotiation of what it meant to be present online.

Despite these changes, participants remained aware that control was partial. They continued to encounter algorithmic content, social expectations, and habitual checking. However, their narratives showed a growing capacity to identify emotional triggers and take small protective actions.

A participant summarized this experience:

“I do not think I control social media completely. But at least now I know when it starts controlling my feelings.”

This statement captures the essence of selective re-engagement. The goal was not full mastery over digital life, but a more conscious relationship with the emotional and social effects of engagement.

Essential Meaning of the Phenomenon

The findings show that young users' experience of social media engagement is characterized by ambivalence, negotiation, and cyclical movement. Social media was experienced as necessary for connection, information, belonging, and identity expression, yet this necessity also exposed participants to algorithmic pull, emotional overload, comparison, pressure, and fatigue. Participants did not respond to fatigue by fully abandoning social media. Instead, they practiced micro-disconnection through small, temporary, and selective acts of boundary-making.

The essential structure of the experience can be described as follows: participants entered social media to remain connected, became absorbed through platform affordances and social expectations, experienced emotional overload, created temporary distance through micro-disconnection, and returned through selective re-engagement. This movement was not linear or final. It repeated across daily life, showing that digital engagement among young users is best understood as an ongoing process of negotiating connection and self-protection. The participant quotations illustrate this structure by showing how individual experiences converged around shared patterns: connection was necessary but pressuring, engagement was intentional but easily became automatic, fatigue accumulated through repeated exposure, and disconnection was practiced as partial rather than absolute withdrawal.

The results therefore reveal that micro-disconnection is not merely a reduction in use. It is a lived practice of emotional regulation, attention management, and identity negotiation. For participants, the challenge was not simply whether to use or avoid social media, but how to remain connected without losing emotional balance, agency, and a sense of self.

DISCUSSION

Summary of the Main Findings

This study shows that young users experience social media engagement as an ambivalent and cyclical phenomenon, in which connection, emotional fatigue, micro-disconnection, and selective re-engagement are continuously negotiated. The original contribution of this study lies in showing that these experiences do not occur as separate states, but as one recurring lived structure of digital ambivalence. Young users do not simply use or avoid social media; they interpret digital life as a space of belonging, pressure, self-regulation, and partial control.

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question

The findings provide a direct answer to the main research question concerning how young users make sense of their movement between active engagement, digital fatigue, micro-disconnection, and selective re-engagement. The study reveals that this movement is not experienced as a simple behavioural sequence. Instead, it is lived as an ongoing negotiation between the desire to remain socially connected and the need to protect emotional balance. Young users remain attached to social media because it supports friendship, information access, identity expression, entertainment, and participation in peer culture. At the same time, this attachment exposes them to algorithmic pull, comparison, pressure to respond, and emotional overload.

The contribution of this study lies in its interpretation of ambivalence as the essential structure of young users' social media experience. The participants' narratives show that digital engagement is meaningful because it enables social presence, yet the same presence can become emotionally demanding. This finding moves beyond the idea that social media use should be understood only

through intensity, duration, or frequency. It shows that the meaning of engagement depends on how users interpret their relationship with platforms, peers, content, and their own emotional limits.

The study also contributes by clarifying the meaning of micro-disconnection. The results indicate that micro-disconnection is not equivalent to full withdrawal from social media. It is a situated and partial practice through which users try to regain agency without completely leaving digital spaces. Actions such as muting accounts, turning off notifications, limiting screen time, reducing posting, or temporarily avoiding platforms function as small acts of self-regulation. These actions express an effort to manage emotional exposure while preserving access to the social and informational benefits of digital life.

Another contribution concerns the meaning of selective re-engagement. The findings suggest that returning to social media after a short break should not be interpreted as a failure of disconnection. For many young users, return is necessary because social media remains embedded in everyday relationships, academic activities, entertainment routines, and peer communication. However, the return is not always passive. Participants often attempted to re-enter the platform with clearer boundaries, more selective attention, and greater awareness of emotional triggers. This indicates that selective re-engagement can become a form of negotiated control rather than mere relapse into previous habits.

The phenomenological contribution of the study is therefore the identification of an experiential cycle: necessary connection, algorithmic pull, emotional overload, micro-disconnection, and selective re-engagement. This cycle helps explain why young users may feel both dependent on and resistant to social media. It also shows why practical advice to simply reduce social media use may be insufficient. The central issue is not only how much social media is used, but how users live through its emotional, relational, and identity-related meanings.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theory

The findings are consistent with previous work on digital disconnection, particularly the view that users limit connectivity in response to experiences of digital ill-being. Vanden Abeele et al. argued that digital disconnection should be understood through the mechanisms that link connectivity with forms of harm, including time displacement, interference, boundary blurring, and exposure effects. The present study extends this perspective by showing how these mechanisms are experienced subjectively by young users. Participants did not describe disconnection as a single solution, but as a fragile and repeated effort to manage the emotional and social consequences of being constantly connected.

The findings also align with research on FoMO among young adults. Previous work has shown that FoMO is connected to the need for social inclusion, psychological fulfilment, and the desire to remain aware of what others are doing. The present study supports this understanding, but adds phenomenological depth by showing that FoMO does not appear only as fear or anxiety. It also appears as a background condition of everyday digital life, where users feel that absence from social media may lead to social invisibility, missed information, or weaker participation in peer culture. This helps explain why participants returned to social media even after experiencing fatigue.

The results also complement studies showing that social media can both cultivate and constrain young users' competence. Prior research has shown that social media may support social skills, learning, self-expression, and peer interaction, while also interfering with sleep, learning, and emotional well-being. The present findings resonate with this duality. Participants experienced social media as both enabling and exhausting. However, this study adds that the enabling and constraining aspects are not separate experiences; they often occur within the same platform encounter. A user may feel connected and overwhelmed in the same session, or entertained and emotionally drained by the same feed.

In relation to digital well-being, the findings suggest that the problem cannot be reduced to excessive use alone. The emotional burden described by participants emerged from platform affordances, social expectations, comparison, and the perceived obligation to remain available. This supports the view that digital well-being should be understood as a relational and contextual experience, not only as an individual matter of self-control. Young users do not manage social media in isolation.

They manage it within peer expectations, algorithmic environments, communication norms, and the social meaning of online visibility.

The findings also refine current understandings of disconnection. Much of the broader discussion treats disconnection as a deliberate reduction in digital connectivity. This study shows that, for young users, disconnection often takes a micro form. It is small, temporary, and negotiated. It does not necessarily aim to reject social media. Instead, it aims to make continued participation emotionally manageable. This insight is important because it shows that micro-disconnection may function as a practical and symbolic boundary between the user and the platform.

The study therefore supports and extends previous literature by showing that digital engagement, fatigue, and disconnection are not isolated states. They form a lived structure of ambivalence. Young users seek connection, encounter pressure, create distance, and return with selective boundaries. This structure helps explain why social media remains deeply meaningful even when it produces discomfort. It also highlights the need for communication research to examine not only the effects of social media use, but also the meanings through which users interpret and negotiate their digital lives.

Implications of the Findings

The findings have important implications for the study of social media engagement, digital well-being, and communication behaviour among young users. They suggest that digital engagement should not be understood only as a matter of frequency, duration, or platform dependency. It should also be understood as a lived experience shaped by social expectations, emotional pressure, algorithmic environments, and the user's need for belonging. This interpretation is important because many practical approaches to digital well-being still focus mainly on reducing screen time or encouraging users to disconnect. The present study shows that such approaches may be incomplete if they do not consider the meanings users attach to connection, fatigue, withdrawal, and return.

The findings also have practical implications for digital literacy initiatives. Digital literacy should not only teach users how to identify misinformation, protect privacy, or manage technical settings. It should also help users recognize emotional patterns in their social media use, such as comparison fatigue, fear of missing out, pressure to respond, and the feeling of being pulled into continuous scrolling. Young users may benefit from reflective digital literacy programs that help them understand when engagement becomes emotionally burdensome and how micro-disconnection can be used as a practical form of self-regulation. In this sense, digital literacy should include emotional and relational dimensions, not only technical competence.

For platform design, the findings suggest the need for more sensitive approaches to user well-being. Features such as notification controls, mute functions, screen-time reminders, and content preference settings can support users, but their value depends on how users experience them in everyday life. If these tools are designed only as technical controls, they may not fully address the emotional and social reasons why users remain attached to social media. The results indicate that young users need tools that support selective engagement, reduce unwanted exposure, and make boundaries easier to maintain without requiring full withdrawal from digital spaces.

The findings are also relevant for educators, counsellors, youth workers, and professionals who support young people. Social media is often discussed in terms of risk, addiction, or distraction, but the participants' experiences show a more complex reality. Young users may depend on social media for friendship, information, academic coordination, emotional support, and identity expression. Therefore, professional responses should avoid treating social media use only as a problem to be reduced. A more constructive approach would help young users reflect on how social media affects their emotional balance and how they can create boundaries while maintaining meaningful forms of connection.

At the broader social and cultural level, the study highlights how digital life has become part of young users' experience of belonging and self-understanding. The pressure to remain visible, updated, and responsive reflects wider cultural expectations of continuous availability. Micro-disconnection can therefore be interpreted as more than an individual coping strategy. It also represents a small but meaningful response to the social demand for constant connection. This finding contributes to a deeper

understanding of how young users negotiate agency within digital environments that are socially necessary but emotionally demanding.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, as a phenomenological study, the purpose was to explore the depth and meaning of lived experience rather than to produce statistically generalizable results. The findings provide rich insight into the subjective experiences of young social media users, but they should not be treated as representative of all young people or all forms of social media engagement. Different age groups, cultural contexts, socioeconomic backgrounds, and platform communities may produce different experiences of engagement, fatigue, micro-disconnection, and selective re-engagement.

Second, the study relied on participants' reflective accounts of their social media experiences. Although interviews, diary entries, timeline mapping, and platform-use elicitation can provide rich qualitative data, they still depend on participants' ability and willingness to describe their experiences. Some emotional responses may have been difficult to recall, articulate, or disclose. Participants may also have presented their social media behaviour in ways that felt more acceptable or coherent during the interview process. This limitation is common in qualitative research that explores personal and emotionally layered experiences.

Third, the study focused on young users who had already experienced some form of digital fatigue or micro-disconnection. This focus was appropriate for the research question, but it may have shaped the findings toward users who were more reflective or more aware of the emotional consequences of social media use. Young users who engage heavily with social media but do not perceive fatigue, pressure, or the need for disconnection may describe the phenomenon differently. Future studies may therefore compare different user groups to understand how awareness, intensity of use, platform culture, and personal context shape the meaning of digital engagement.

Fourth, the study examined social media engagement across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X, WhatsApp, or similar applications. This cross-platform focus allowed the study to capture the broader lived experience of digital connectivity. However, each platform has distinct affordances, norms, interaction patterns, and emotional effects. The experience of comparison on Instagram, endless scrolling on TikTok, real-time debate on X, or relational obligation on WhatsApp may differ in important ways. A platform-specific study may provide a more detailed understanding of how particular platform environments shape fatigue and micro-disconnection.

Fifth, the study emphasized subjective meaning rather than direct measurement of psychological outcomes. This is consistent with the phenomenological design, but it limits claims about causal relationships between social media use and well-being. The findings can explain how participants experienced and interpreted digital fatigue, but they cannot determine the extent to which social media caused specific psychological effects. Future mixed-methods research could combine phenomenological insight with psychological or behavioural measures to examine how subjective meaning relates to broader patterns of digital well-being.

Prospective Statement for Future Research

Future research can extend these findings by examining how the cycle of engagement, fatigue, micro-disconnection, and selective re-engagement appears across different cultural, social, and institutional contexts. Young users in different countries, educational settings, family structures, or digital cultures may experience social media pressure in different ways. Comparative phenomenological studies could clarify how cultural norms of availability, friendship, visibility, and self-presentation shape the meaning of digital engagement. Such work would strengthen understanding of whether micro-disconnection functions similarly across contexts or whether it takes culturally specific forms.

Further studies may also examine particular groups of users whose social media engagement carries additional emotional or professional demands. These groups may include university students, early-career professionals, micro-creators, activists, journalists, online sellers, or young people who rely on social media for work, learning, or community participation. For these users, disconnection may be

more difficult because social media is tied not only to social belonging but also to professional visibility, income, reputation, or public identity. Research with these groups could deepen understanding of how digital fatigue emerges when personal and professional forms of engagement overlap.

Future research could also explore platform-specific experiences of micro-disconnection. Instagram, TikTok, X, WhatsApp, and other platforms invite different forms of attention, interaction, visibility, and emotional exposure. A platform-specific phenomenological approach could reveal how particular features, such as algorithmic feeds, short-form videos, public metrics, direct messages, group chats, or notification systems, shape users' sense of control and fatigue. This would help refine the broader concept of micro-disconnection by showing how it operates differently across platform environments.

Another promising direction is the development of longitudinal qualitative research. Because digital engagement and fatigue unfold over time, repeated interviews and extended digital diaries could capture changes in users' experiences more clearly. Such studies could examine whether micro-disconnection becomes a stable self-regulation practice, a temporary coping mechanism, or a recurring but fragile attempt to regain control. This would provide a stronger understanding of how young users learn, modify, or abandon digital boundaries over time.

Finally, future research may use the findings of this study to inform more human-centred approaches to digital well-being. Rather than treating users as individuals who simply need to reduce their screen time, future studies can examine how social media platforms, educational institutions, and digital literacy programs can support more reflective and sustainable forms of engagement. The present study suggests that the central question for future research is not only how to reduce social media use, but how to help users remain connected without losing emotional balance, agency, and a sense of self. This direction can contribute to communication studies by positioning digital engagement as a lived, relational, and culturally situated experience.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of young social media users as they moved between digital engagement, digital fatigue, micro-disconnection, and selective re-engagement. The findings show that social media engagement is not a simple pattern of use, but an ambivalent experience shaped by connection, emotional pressure, algorithmic pull, comparison, and the need for self-regulation. The study identified that young users remain attached to social media because it supports belonging, information access, identity expression, and social participation, yet they also create temporary boundaries when digital life becomes emotionally burdensome. By interpreting micro-disconnection as a meaningful practice rather than a complete withdrawal, this study extends previous research that often treats digital well-being mainly through screen time, frequency of use, or behavioural reduction. The findings contribute to communication studies by showing that young users negotiate digital life through a recurring cycle of necessary connection, emotional overload, partial withdrawal, and selective return. Practically, these findings suggest that digital well-being initiatives for young users should not only encourage reduced screen time, but also support more flexible and reflective strategies, such as temporary breaks, notification control, selective platform use, and critical awareness of algorithmic pressures. Educators, parents, counsellors, and platform designers can use these insights to develop interventions that help young people manage emotional overload while maintaining meaningful online participation. Future studies can expand this insight through comparative, platform-specific, or longitudinal phenomenological research to better understand how young users maintain connection while protecting emotional balance, agency, and a sense of self.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The study was conducted independently, and no personal, financial, or

institutional relationship influenced the design, data interpretation, manuscript preparation, or conclusions presented in this article.

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