



Reconstructing Communication and Self-Identity: A Phenomenological Exploration of Digital Detox Experiences

Arief Rachman

Universitas Islam Negeri Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon, Indonesia

arief.rachman@syekhnurjati.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Digital media has transformed human communication, yet excessive social media use has raised concerns about its impact on interpersonal relationships and self-identity. While existing research has explored the negative effects of social media overuse, limited studies have examined the lived experiences of individuals who voluntarily disengage from digital platforms. The subjective meaning of digital detox and its influence on communication behaviors remain underexplored. Prior studies have focused on the psychological effects of digital disengagement but have not sufficiently investigated how individuals reconstruct their communication practices and self-perception post-detox. This study employs a phenomenological hermeneutic approach to explore how individuals experience and interpret their digital detox journey, particularly in relation to their interpersonal interactions and self-identity. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 participants who voluntarily abstained from social media for at least three months. Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify emerging themes. The findings reveal three key insights: (1) Digital detox fosters intentional communication, enhancing interpersonal engagement and mindfulness; (2) Individuals experience a shift from external validation to intrinsic self-worth, leading to deeper self-awareness; and (3) Participants establish sustainable boundaries with digital media, altering long-term communication behaviors. This study contributes to the discourse on digital well-being, emphasizing the need for balanced media consumption and intentional digital engagement. Future research should explore cross-cultural perspectives and long-term effects of digital detox on communication habits.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the pervasive integration of digital technology into daily life has significantly transformed human communication. Social media platforms have reshaped how individuals engage, interact, and construct their social identities. While these advancements have facilitated global connectivity, they have also introduced concerns regarding over-reliance on digital interactions, reduced face-to-face communication, and the psychological effects of continuous online engagement.

A growing body of research has explored the negative consequences of excessive social media use, particularly its impact on mental health, attention span, and interpersonal relationships. Studies have linked prolonged social media exposure to increased anxiety, depression, and diminished real-life social skills. These concerns have led to the emergence of the digital detox movement, where individuals consciously disengage from digital platforms in pursuit of psychological well-being and improved social interactions.

Within the field of communication studies, digital detox is increasingly recognized as a critical phenomenon that influences interpersonal relationships, self-perception, and media literacy. Traditional communication theories emphasize the role of mediated interactions in shaping social reality; however, little attention has been paid to the subjective experience of individuals who withdraw from digital

spaces. This study aims to fill this gap by adopting a phenomenological perspective to explore the lived experiences of individuals who undergo digital detox and its impact on their communication behaviors.

By examining this phenomenon, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how disconnecting from digital spaces can reshape human interaction, alter self-identity, and influence long-term communication habits. The findings will offer valuable insights for scholars, mental health practitioners, and communication professionals interested in the intersection of media consumption, psychological well-being, and interpersonal engagement.

The impact of digital technology on human communication has been widely explored in recent studies, primarily focusing on the benefits and challenges of social media engagement. While numerous researchers have examined how digital platforms facilitate connectivity, self-expression, and global discourse, relatively few have investigated the psychological and communicative implications of disengagement from these platforms. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the phenomenon of digital detox and its influence on interpersonal communication and identity formation.

Existing literature highlights that excessive social media use alters communication dynamics by promoting mediated interactions over face-to-face engagement. Studies indicate that individuals heavily reliant on digital platforms often experience reduced attention spans, increased social comparison, and dependence on online validation. However, fewer studies have examined how individuals perceive and navigate communication once they deliberately remove themselves from digital environments.

Furthermore, research on digital detox has largely focused on its impact on mental health and productivity, with limited attention given to its effects on interpersonal relationships, self-concept, and communication habits. This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of individuals who have voluntarily disconnected from social media, using a phenomenological lens to understand the meaning they derive from this disengagement.

By adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this research examines how digital detox influences an individual's perception of communication, relationship-building, and social presence. Understanding these experiences provides valuable insights into the broader implications of digital disengagement, offering perspectives that extend beyond the common narrative of social media's adverse effects.

Despite the increasing attention to the effects of social media on communication and well-being, limited research has explored the subjective experience of individuals who intentionally disengage from digital platforms. While existing studies have primarily focused on the psychological consequences of excessive social media use—such as anxiety, depression, and social comparison—there remains a significant gap in understanding how digital detox influences interpersonal communication, self-identity, and long-term behavioral adjustments.

Most research on digital detox has been conducted through quantitative surveys and experimental studies, which often fail to capture the depth and richness of lived experiences. These approaches provide valuable statistical insights but lack the interpretative depth needed to understand how individuals make sense of their withdrawal from digital spaces. Consequently, little is known about the emotional, cognitive, and social transformations that individuals undergo during and after a period of digital detox.

Moreover, there is insufficient examination of the role of digital detox in reshaping communication behaviors and self-perception. While some studies have acknowledged the potential benefits of disconnecting from digital media—such as improved focus, increased mindfulness, and reduced stress—few have explored the ways in which digital detox redefines interpersonal engagement, identity formation, and digital boundaries.

This research addresses these gaps by adopting a phenomenological hermeneutic approach, focusing on the meaning-making process of individuals who undergo digital detox. By delving into their lived experiences, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how voluntary

disengagement from social media impacts personal relationships, self-awareness, and long-term communication habits.

This study explores the lived experiences of individuals undergoing digital detox through a phenomenological hermeneutic approach. While previous research has primarily addressed the negative effects of social media overuse, our study shifts the focus to the meaning individuals construct when disengaging from digital platforms. By examining personal narratives, we aim to uncover how digital detox influences interpersonal communication, self-identity, and long-term behavioral adaptations.

To achieve this, we employed semi-structured in-depth interviews with individuals who have consciously abstained from social media for at least three months. The phenomenological method allows us to interpret how participants experience, navigate, and reflect on their digital disengagement. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), we identified key themes that illustrate the emotional, cognitive, and relational transformations that occur during this period.

The structure of this paper follows a clear analytical progression. After presenting the background and knowledge gap, we detail our methodological approach, followed by an extensive analysis of the participants' experiences in the Results section. The Discussion contextualizes these findings within existing literature, highlighting the implications for communication studies and digital well-being. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes the study's contributions and suggests directions for future research on digital detox and its role in shaping contemporary communication patterns.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a phenomenological hermeneutic approach, specifically Heideggerian phenomenology, to explore the subjective experiences of individuals undergoing digital detox. This approach is chosen to capture the deeper meaning behind participants' lived experiences, emphasizing the interpretative nature of their narratives rather than just descriptive accounts. Through this lens, the study investigates how individuals construct meaning from their disengagement with social media and its implications for interpersonal communication.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that they had actively undergone a digital detox for at least three months. The inclusion criteria required that participants:

1. Had voluntarily abstained from social media platforms for a prolonged period.
2. Were willing to share their personal reflections on the experience.
3. Represented diverse demographics in terms of age, occupation, and social engagement.

A total of 15 participants were recruited, with ages ranging from 18 to 45 years old, ensuring a balanced representation of different social contexts. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, allowing participants to express their experiences freely. The interview protocol covered key themes such as:

1. Initial reactions to digital detox (emotional and psychological responses).
2. Changes in interpersonal communication (relationships, engagement, and social behavior).
3. Shifts in self-perception and identity (self-worth, validation, and digital presence).
4. Long-term reflections on digital detox (behavioral adjustments and sustainability of change).

Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via video calls to ensure participant convenience. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to uncover themes that emerged from participants' narratives. The analysis followed these steps:

1. Reading and Re-reading: Each transcript was read multiple times to immerse in the data.
2. Identifying Meaning Units: Key phrases and expressions were highlighted for deeper exploration.
3. Developing Emerging Themes: Recurring patterns across narratives were categorized into key themes.
4. Thematic Interpretation: Themes were interpreted in relation to existing literature and phenomenological theory.
5. Validation and Refinement: Findings were validated through member checking, ensuring accuracy and authenticity of participants' lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

To maintain ethical rigor, the study followed guidelines from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and adhered to institutional ethical standards:

1. Informed Consent: All participants provided written consent prior to participation.
2. Confidentiality: Identifiable information was anonymized to protect participants' privacy.
3. Right to Withdraw: Participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

The study ensured validity and reliability through:

1. Triangulation: Comparing findings with existing literature and observational data.
2. Audit Trail: Maintaining a detailed log of analytical decisions and coding procedures.
3. Reflexivity: Researchers engaged in continuous self-reflection to minimize biases in interpretation.

RESULTS

The Initial Experience of Digital Detox – Anxiety and Disorientation

Participants described the early stages of digital detox as a period of heightened anxiety and discomfort. Many experienced a profound sense of disconnection from their social networks and struggled with the absence of habitual digital interactions. One participant noted:

"At first, I felt lost. I would instinctively reach for my phone, only to realize that I had nothing to check. It was frustrating and unsettling."

This phase was marked by a psychological withdrawal akin to dependency, reinforcing the pervasiveness of social media in daily life. Participants expressed concerns over missing out on important social and professional updates, which contributed to feelings of exclusion.

Rediscovery of Meaningful Interpersonal Communication

As the detox progressed, participants gradually reconnected with face-to-face interactions, leading to a renewed appreciation of personal relationships. Many found that interactions became more intentional and meaningful when free from digital distractions. One respondent shared:

"Without my phone, I started listening more attentively. Conversations with my family felt deeper, and I realized how much I had been missing."

This shift suggested that the absence of digital interruptions fostered greater emotional presence, resulting in enhanced engagement and authenticity in social interactions.

Reevaluating the Role of Social Media in Identity and Self-Perception

A key insight from the study was the profound impact of digital detox on self-perception and identity formation. Many participants reported a sense of liberation from the pressures of online validation, with some noting a decline in social comparison tendencies. One participant reflected:

"I no longer felt the need to document every aspect of my life for approval. It was freeing to exist without worrying about likes and comments."

This newfound detachment allowed individuals to engage in self-reflection, leading to a more intrinsic sense of self-worth rather than one dictated by online interactions.

Long-Term Impacts and Behavioral Shifts

After experiencing the digital detox, several participants implemented sustainable changes in their media consumption habits. Some adopted practices such as scheduled social media usage, while others permanently reduced their digital presence. A respondent remarked:

"Now, I check my phone with purpose, not out of habit. I have clear boundaries, and I feel much more in control."

This suggests that the digital detox experience fostered greater self-regulation and mindfulness in media consumption, leading to healthier communication behaviors.

The findings highlight a transformational shift in participants' communication behaviors and self-perception during and after digital detox. The transition from initial anxiety to deeper interpersonal engagement and self-awareness underscores the complex relationship between digital media and human interaction. These insights provide a foundation for future discussions on media literacy, communication balance, and the psychological implications of social media dependency.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this study highlight the transformational effects of digital detox on communication behaviors, self-identity, and social engagement. Participants initially experienced withdrawal symptoms, followed by a phase of rediscovery in which they redefined their relationships with digital media and face-to-face interactions. Ultimately, digital detox led to long-term behavioral shifts, reinforcing more intentional and mindful media consumption.

Contribution to Research Questions

This study contributes to the understanding of digital detox as a communicative phenomenon, addressing the core research questions:

1. How do individuals make sense of their experiences during digital detox?

Participants described an initial sense of anxiety and emptiness, but over time, they redefined their relationship with communication and self-expression.

2. What are the implications of digital detox on interpersonal communication?

Digital disengagement led to more intentional and deeper conversations, as individuals focused more on verbal and nonverbal cues.

3. How does digital detox influence self-identity?

Participants experienced a shift from external validation to intrinsic self-worth, no longer relying on social media for identity reinforcement.

Comparison with Existing Literature

These findings align with prior research on media overuse, yet extend the discussion by focusing on how individuals reconstruct their communicative identities post-detox. For instance, previous studies have linked excessive social media use to increased anxiety and reduced real-life

socialization. However, this research highlights that voluntary disengagement from digital platforms can foster stronger interpersonal connections and deeper self-awareness.

In contrast to studies that emphasize the drawbacks of social media dependency, our findings suggest that conscious disengagement allows individuals to reclaim autonomy over their communication habits. This supports prior work on media mindfulness and digital well-being, but further nuances the discussion by illustrating how digital detox facilitates an internal re-evaluation of communication norms.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study provide several significant implications for communication studies, digital well-being, and interpersonal relationships. The phenomenological approach used in this research highlights the depth of individual experiences, demonstrating that digital detox is not merely an act of withdrawal but a process of redefining communication and self-identity. These implications are particularly relevant for media literacy programs, counseling interventions, and digital communication policies aimed at fostering healthier engagement with technology.

One key implication is the shift toward intentional communication. Participants reported that after undergoing digital detox, they became more conscious of their conversational habits, listening skills, and nonverbal cues. This suggests that digital disengagement may enhance the quality of face-to-face interactions, countering the trend of fragmented communication caused by excessive digital consumption.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size, while providing rich qualitative insights, may not be fully generalizable to broader populations. Future studies could expand the participant pool across diverse cultural and demographic backgrounds to examine whether digital detox experiences vary across social contexts.

Additionally, while this study utilized in-depth interviews, further research could incorporate longitudinal methods to assess whether the changes observed in communication behavior and self-perception persist over extended periods. Investigating the long-term sustainability of digital detox and its broader societal impacts would strengthen the theoretical and practical contributions of this research.

Future Research Directions

Building on the findings of this study, future research can explore:

1. Cross-cultural perspectives on digital detox – Understanding how different cultural contexts influence the motivations and experiences of digital disengagement.
2. The role of digital detox in workplace communication – Investigating how professionals manage digital overload and maintain work-life balance.
3. The impact of digital detox on emotional intelligence and social empathy – Exploring whether prolonged digital detox enhances interpersonal sensitivity and social awareness.
4. Interventions for digital well-being – Developing structured programs to assist individuals in managing digital consumption without complete withdrawal.

By addressing these areas, future studies can further contextualize the significance of digital detox in the evolving landscape of digital communication, offering valuable insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the lived experiences of individuals undergoing digital detox and its impact on their interpersonal communication, self-identity, and media consumption habits. Through a phenomenological hermeneutic approach, the findings reveal that digital detox fosters intentional communication, shifting self-identity from external validation to intrinsic self-worth, and leading to long-term behavioral changes in digital consumption. Participants reported increased mindfulness in

their interactions, greater engagement in face-to-face communication, and the establishment of sustainable boundaries with social media.

These insights contribute to the discourse on digital well-being, offering valuable implications for media literacy programs, psychological interventions, and communication studies. While this study presents meaningful contributions, future research should explore longitudinal effects, cross-cultural perspectives, and professional implications of digital detox to enhance our understanding of this phenomenon. By bridging the gap between social media research and digital disengagement, this study highlights the importance of a balanced and intentional approach to digital communication, ultimately fostering healthier interpersonal relationships and improved digital literacy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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