

FROM DIGITAL DEPENDENCE TO DIGITAL FREEDOM: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF WORKING COUPLES' DIGITAL DETOX JOURNEY

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15321779>

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
10 March, 2025	10 April, 2025	25 April, 2025	02 May, 2025

ABSTRACT

Digital technologies significantly influence individuals' behavior, personal lives, and professional activities. Consequently, digital detox practices and mindfulness are emerging as essential strategies for restoring mental well-being in today's technology-driven environment. The present study explores the digital detox experiences of working couples in Lahore. Grounded in the interpretive paradigm, this study aims to develop an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of married working couples.

A total of 20 working couples were recruited through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was employed using an interview guide to analyze data collected from in-depth interviews. The findings suggest that working couples recognize the critical need for brief breaks from digital engagement as a form of digital detox to enhance their personal well-being. After implementing digital detox practices, participants reported improvements in the quality of their marital and personal lives. However, they also encountered several challenges, including concerns about work-life productivity, initial temptations to re-engage with digital devices, and a lack of support.

This study underscores the importance of digital detox in improving well-being and highlights the barriers that working couples face in maintaining such practices.

Keywords: Digital Detox, Digitalization, Technology, Working Couples & Work Life Balance

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary times, looking away from screens and feeling present in the real world is increasingly perceived as a rare and ideal experience. Just as excessive consumption of any food can be detrimental to human health, an overload of technological connectivity negatively impacts cognitive and physical well-being. This excessive digital engagement presents challenges across various aspects of life, including personal relationships, social interactions, health, and professional responsibilities. Digitalization, along with the proliferation of computers, the internet, smartphones, and other digital devices, has

profoundly influenced individuals, society, and modern organizations due to its extensive utility and accessibility. Digital technologies have permeated every facet of daily life, from individual behaviors and personal relationships to workplace environments, information access, and entertainment (Degryse, 2016).

Individuals are increasingly tethered to digital devices, not only in their professional spheres but also within their personal and intimate lives. Even social activities, plans, and decisions are frequently shaped by digital connectedness (Vikuk & Newes, 2024; Schell, 2022; Chayko, 2014). This constant

connectivity significantly affects life satisfaction, happiness, and self-esteem and can lead to adverse consequences such as stress, depression, poor sleep, and social isolation (Nguyen, 2022). Additionally, excessive technology use poses health risks and disrupts the balance between personal and professional life (Bigaj et al., 2023). Individuals and organizations alike struggle with the “connectivity paradox,” which raises challenges regarding when and where to be online or offline and whether technology is perceived as disruptive, integrative, or beneficial (Ghita & Thorén, 2021; Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2022).

The rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has created new opportunities, such as attending multiple classes simultaneously, participating in real-time videoconferences, and engaging in concurrent business and social events. While these developments offer increased flexibility, they also contribute to social distancing and detachment (Bailenson, 2021; Umasankar et al., 2022). Digital social interactions can foster feelings of warmth, belonging, and excitement (Chmiel et al., 2011); however, they can also weaken interpersonal bonds and intimacy. The sense of social connectedness can shape relationships, often leading to obsessive-compulsive patterns and excessive technology use (Zhang et al., 2014).

One key aspect of digital well-being is digital detoxification, which involves temporarily disengaging from digital devices and online activities. Digital detox is one of the four components of digital hygiene and encompasses behaviors such as being digital-free, unplugged, or disconnected (Bigaj et al., 2023, p. 11). Bigaj et al. (2023) define digital detox as “health-protecting behaviors related to the use of ICT, especially screen devices and the internet” (p. 10). Similarly, digital detox is described as “a time when a person does not use digital devices such as smartphones or computers, especially in order to reduce stress and relax” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, 2024). However, the definition of digital detox remains inconsistent across various academic disciplines, including business management, education, communication, health psychology, tourism, and human resources (Hager et al., 2023).

The primary motivations for engaging in digital detox behaviors include the desire to temporarily withdraw from digital dependence for health and well-being benefits, such as improved mood and

sleep quality, as well as fostering healthier interpersonal relationships (Ozdemir & Goktas, 2021; Robertson et al., 2023). The overarching goal of digital detox is to minimize distractions caused by continuous connectivity and mitigate the stress associated with digital overuse (Anrijs et al., 2018; Basu, 2019).

The present study aims to explore and understand the experiences of working couples as they transition from digital dependence to digital detox. The practice of disconnecting from digital technology yields both positive and negative outcomes. Previous research has highlighted mixed emotions associated with disengaging from ICTs and digital devices, reflecting both relief and challenges in adjusting to reduced connectivity (Baumer et al., 2013; Schoenebeck, 2014; Brubaker et al., 2016; Woodstock, 2013; Dremljuga, 2018).

Objective of the Study

The objective of the present study is to explore the need for, experiences with, challenges of, and outcomes associated with digital detox among working couples in Lahore, Pakistan. This study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how digital detox impacts their personal and professional lives, examining both the benefits and obstacles encountered in the process.

Methodology

The current study is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which posits that realities are subjective and socially constructed through mutual interaction, experiences, and understanding of a given situation. The interpretivist paradigm provides the rationale for exploring this particular phenomenon from the perspectives and experiences of working couples (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2019). A qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for conducting the study, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences, beliefs, and attitudes (Fossey et al., 2002) of working couples regarding digital detox. Not all working couples engage in digital detox; therefore, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select research participants (Ames et al., 2019). The inclusion criteria for the study were as follows:

1. Working couples were recruited based on the assumption that couples who engage in stress-free quality time due to digital detox can better

articulate the reasons for their choices, experiences, and the impact on their lives.

2. Participants were required to be full-time employees (working at least eight hours per day) to establish a common job routine, as couples with demanding work schedules have limited time together at home.

3. Only couples who had made the intentional decision to undergo a digital detox for one week were included.

4. Participants were required to be mid-career professionals with a salary range of PKR 150,000 to 250,000.

5. The minimum duration of employment in the current job was set at two years to ensure that participants had completed the adjustment period in their workplace.

6. The minimum marriage duration was five years to ensure that couples had adjusted to their relationship and established smooth communication, which could influence their

decision to engage in digital detox for stress-free time.

The exclusion criteria for the study were as follows:

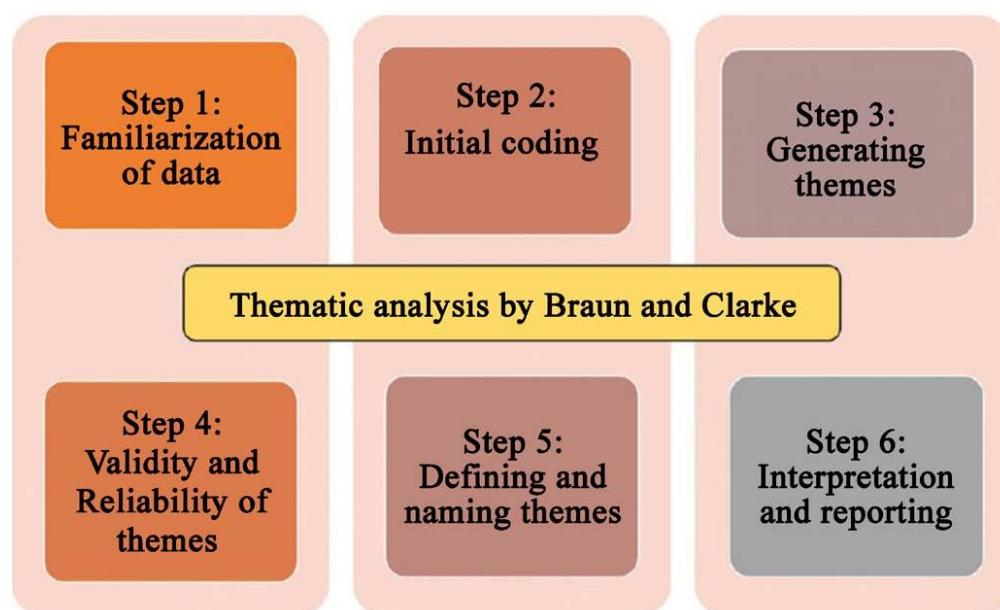
1. Couples working at the entry level or senior level.

2. Newly married couples.

3. Mid-career couples earning less than PKR 150,000.

The sample size for the study comprised 20 working couples (10 males and 10 females). Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The first section of the guide covered socio-demographic indicators, while subsequent sections focused on participants' motivations for digital detox, strategies for implementing digital detox, their experiences, and its impact on their personal lives.

The thematic data analysis of the study was conducted using the framework of Braun and Clarke (Byrne, 2022)



The six-step method was followed as outlined below:

1. **Familiarization with the Data:** The transcriptions were read and re-read multiple times to develop a comprehensive understanding of the data.

2. **Initial Coding:** Once the researchers had gained an understanding of the data and identified potential patterns, initial coding was conducted by labeling relevant segments.

3. **Code Mapping and Theme Generation:** The coded data were systematically mapped, and themes were generated based on the identified patterns.

4. **Theme Review:** The themes were reviewed multiple times to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' experiences and were free from bias.

5. **Validity and Reliability Checks:** To enhance the validity and reliability of the data, the first and second authors of the study swapped analyses and re-examined the data. This process allowed for cross-validation and further refinement of themes.

6. **Linking Findings to Existing Literature:** In the final stage, the study's findings were compared and connected to existing research to identify gaps in the literature and contribute new insights.

Throughout the study, all ethical considerations were upheld, including confidentiality, informed consent, the right to withdraw, and anonymity (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005).

Analysis

Smart devices and the internet have revolutionized numerous aspects of daily life, including homes, workplaces, shopping, entertainment, and leisure. This deep integration of digitalization has reshaped human experiences and relationships. It is undeniable that digital technology exerts significant control over individuals' lives and decisions. While every individual is influenced by this digital transformation, the present research specifically focuses on working couples who rely on these devices and technologies not only for personal use but also to meet professional demands.

Socio-Demographic Table:

Participants	Age	Gender	Occupation	Family Type	Duration of Digital Detox
P1	39	M	Management	Nuclear	3 Hours Every day for one week
P2	35	F	Teaching	Nuclear	3 Hours Every day for one week
P3	43	M	IT Officer	Joint	2 Hours Every day for three weeks
P4	38	F	School Administrator	Joint	2 Hours Every day for three weeks
P5	39	M	Banker	Nuclear	2 Hours Every day for one week
P6	32	F	Librarian	Nuclear	2 Hours Every day for one week
P7	43	M	Health Sector	Nuclear	4 Hours Every day for one week
P8	45	F	College Teacher	Nuclear	4 Hours Every day for one week
P9	39	M	Banker	Joint	4 Hours Every day for one week
P10	33	F	Self-Employed	Joint	4 Hours Every day for one week
P11	38	M	Teacher	Joint	1 Hour Every day for one month
P12	34	F	Banker	Joint	1 Hour Every day for one month
P13	44	M	Doctor	Nuclear	2 Hours Every day for one month
P14	37	F	IT Officer	Nuclear	2 Hours Every day for one month
P15	43	M	Lawyer	Joint	2 Hours Every day for two weeks
P16	32	F	Banker	Joint	2 Hours Every day for two weeks
P17	45	M	Teacher	Joint	2 Hours Every day for three weeks
P18	34	F	IT Officer	Joint	2 Hours Every day for three weeks
P19	42	M	Manager	Nuclear	1 Hour Every day for one month
P20	34	F	Banker	Nuclear	1 Hour Every day for one month

Intimate relationships often find digitalization both challenging and, at times, a source of ease, comfort, and necessity. However, excessive access to digital devices can be detrimental. Working couples have structured schedules that balance their personal and professional lives. The increasing dependence on digital devices and continuous connectivity has intensified professional demands. Consequently, disconnecting from these devices may create feelings of isolation and deprivation. This study

analyzes the experiences of working couples in the context of digital detox.

The socio-demographic table presents data from 20 participants (10 men and 10 women), representing 10 couples. Among them, six couples lived in a nuclear family system, while four couples resided in a joint family system. The duration of digital detox varied among participants. Seven couples practiced digital detox for two to three hours daily over a period of two to three weeks, whereas three

couples followed the practice for two to three hours daily for one month.

The following themes emerged from the collected data:

Need and Motive for Digital Detox

The quality of marriage and spousal relationships has consequences not only for the couple but also for many others in their lives. Numerous internal and external factors influence a couple's relationship, and digital technology is one of the most persistent factors shaping their well-being. Digital connectivity affects everyone; however, working couples are particularly vulnerable due to their additional work responsibilities and heightened expectations from both their professional and personal lives. The increasing work demands and the fast-paced nature of life necessitate a slowdown at some point. Digital devices significantly impact work-life balance, and for working couples, breaking free from the cycle of technology dependence is crucial. A digital detox is essential for these couples to reconnect in their real lives. As one female participant shared: "I felt a sense of lightness in my shoulders the day I began switching off my mobile at specific times for a set duration. This motivated me to continue practicing digital detox to enhance the quality of my personal life. I became more engaged in self-care and leisure activities, which also brought positive changes to my married life."

Time and attention are essential for growth and meaningful connections. However, digital connectivity increasingly dictates our time and personal lives. While technological advancements have solved many human challenges, they have also introduced new complexities. As digitalization becomes more ingrained in daily life, individuals must learn to regulate its influence. A male participant shared:

"We feel the need to unplug from these connections. It makes us restless and uneasy, as if a burden has entered our homes and personal spaces, deteriorating the quality of our time together. At times, we believe we are together, yet we are not truly connected."

In conclusion, the growing entanglement of digital technology in everyday life calls for conscious efforts to preserve the quality of intimate relationships. For working couples, digital detox can serve as a powerful tool to restore balance and foster deeper emotional connections. Prioritizing

intentional time together away from screens can ultimately lead to healthier, more fulfilling marriages.

Decreased Emotional Intimacy

Digitalization has transformed communication methods, blurring emotional connections by reducing face-to-face interactions and minimizing personalization in close relationships. Some couples reported being so accustomed to digital interactions that even their quality time together often involves digital tools, such as watching movies or playing games. This reliance on technology has created a sub-personal zone in their private lives. A male participant shared: "I feel that push notifications keep us constantly engaged with the outside world, negatively affecting our emotional well-being, particularly in our marital life." Similarly, a female participant expressed frustration: "I am so sick of emojis. I feel like they have stripped us of real expression and emotion as human beings."

Many respondents emphasized the need to establish boundaries for digital device usage in their personal lives to enhance emotional intimacy with their spouses.

Techno Stress

Excessive use of technology and digital devices has significant consequences for physical and mental health, including anxiety, poor sleep, and lack of focus. These outcomes can negatively impact the quality of marital life. Some couples reported that increased mental health problems are linked to digital connectivity, which influences marital relationships, diminishes relationship quality, and creates conflicts between spouses. Respondents living in joint family systems particularly experienced a lack of interest in family gatherings and encountered conflicts due to this digital-induced detachment.

A female participant stated that:

"Due to continuous push notifications, I always feel the urge to check my phone repeatedly, even during sleep. This has ruined my sleep quality. I have now intentionally started switching off my mobile at night."

In conclusion, unchecked digital usage can disrupt daily routines and strain marital dynamics, especially in complex family systems. Prioritizing boundaries with technology is essential for

nurturing healthier relationships and improving overall well-being.

Patterns of Digital Detox:

Digital detox refers to the intentional reduction of digital device usage to eliminate its harmful effects. It involves temporarily disconnecting from digital connectivity to improve overall well-being. The increasing demands of modern life make it difficult to disengage from digital devices in both personal and professional settings. Digital detox requires individuals to focus on habit changes, behavioral adjustments, self-awareness, and conscious control over app usage. A male respondent shared his views:

"It is tough to cut down on device usage because we need it constantly for personal information. Sometimes, I feel it even alters the way my wife and I communicate. We plan to spend time together by switching off our devices for better communication, but the addiction and temptation like we are missing out on something make it difficult to stay away from them."

Many respondents attempted digital detox daily, ranging from one to three hours for at least two to three weeks. According to female: "Setting boundaries for digital device usage is very important and necessary. Additionally, we need the support of our loved ones to succeed in this practice."

In conclusion, digital detox is not just an individual effort but a shared commitment that requires mutual support, especially among couples. Consistent practice and intentional boundaries can lead to healthier relationships and improved emotional well-being.

Post-Digital Detox Experiences and Challenges

Detaching from digital connectivity is a significant challenge in today's world, especially for individuals who rely on it for both personal and professional purposes. Some respondents reported that, during the initial phase of digital detox, they experienced irritation, temptation, and cravings to use digital devices. A male spouse shared:

"At the start, my wife and I were very committed to taking small breaks from digital connectivity. We set specific times when both of us would detach from all digital devices. However, we found it incredibly difficult to stay away from them."

A female spouse expressed: "Digital connectivity has such a strong hold on us that we feel

discomfort, uneasiness, and even a lack of concentration when we start reducing or minimizing its use." Another respondent stated that:

"When we leave our mobile phones and other devices at home, we sometimes feel like we are missing something important from work, such as an email or a message in a WhatsApp group."

These reflections highlight the psychological dependency and habitual nature of digital device use in daily life. Despite the initial discomfort, couples recognized the need for balance and continued striving toward healthier boundaries. With time, consistent effort, and mutual support, digital detox can become a sustainable practice that strengthens relationships and overall well-being.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the current study highlight the importance of digital detox in improving the spousal relationships of working couples and enhancing work-life balance. The results indicate that working couples who practiced digital detox experienced improved relationship quality, enhanced communication, increased quality time together, and reduced stress. These findings align with previous research suggesting that excessive technology use can negatively impact relationships and overall well-being (Király et al., 2019; Roberts & David, 2016). Additionally, the results emphasize the significance of setting boundaries and prioritizing face-to-face interactions in maintaining healthy relationships.

The study's findings have implications for working couples, employers, and policymakers in Pakistan. Given the increasing demands of work and the pervasive use of technology, it is crucial for working couples to prioritize digital detox and establish boundaries to maintain a healthy work-life balance. This study contributes to the existing literature on digital detox and its impact on working couples in Pakistan, suggesting that digital detox is an effective strategy for improving work-life balance, relationship quality, and overall well-being.

From a practical perspective, employers can promote digital detox by encouraging employees to take breaks from technology, providing resources for stress management, and fostering a work culture that values work-life balance. Policymakers can also play a crucial role by implementing policies that support work-life balance, such as

flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and mental health resources.

Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of digital detox in maintaining healthy relationships, improving work-life balance, and enhancing overall well-being. By prioritizing digital detox, working couples in Pakistan can cultivate a healthier, more balanced lifestyle that benefits themselves, their relationships, and their communities.

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