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# Tox and Detox

## Are Teens' Smartphone Use and Non-Use Practices Fully Fungible?

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Articles

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## Introduction

The public sphere includes a range of credible discourses asserting that a proportion of teenagers (“teens”) has an unhealthy dependence upon continuous connection with media devices, and especially smartphones. A review of media discourse (Jaunzems et al.) in Australia, and a critical review of public discourse in Australia and Belgium (Zaman et al.), reveal both positive and negative commentary around screentime. Despite the “emotionally laden, opposing views” expressed in the media, there appears to be a groundswell of concern around young people’s dependence upon digital devices (Zaman et al. 120). Concerns about ‘addiction’ to and dependency on digital media first emerged with the Internet and have been continually represented as technology evolves. One recent example is the 2020 multi-part Massey Lecture series which hooked audiences with the provocative title: “we need to reclaim our lives from our phones” (Deibert). In Sydney, a psychology-based “outpatient addiction treatment centre” offers specialised recovery programs for “Internet addiction”, noting that addicts include school-aged teens, as well as adults (Cabin). Such discourse reflects well-established social anxieties around the disruptive impacts of new technologies upon society (Marvin), while focussing such concern disproportionately upon the lives, priorities, and activities of young people (Tsaliki and Chronaki).

While a growing peer-reviewed evidence base suggests some young people have problematic relationships with digital media (e.g. Odgers and Robb; Donald et al.; Gaspard; Tóth-Király et al.; Boer et al.), there are also opposing views (e.g. Vuorre et al.) Ben Light, for instance, highlights the

notion of disconnection as a set of practices that include using some platforms and not others, unfriending, and selective anonymity (Light). We argue that this version of disconnection and what we refer to as 'detox' are two different practices. Detox, as we use it, is the regular removal of elements of lived experience (such as food consumption) that may be enjoyable but which potentially have negative consequences over time, before (potentially) reintroducing the element or practice. The aims of a detox include ensuring greater control over the enjoyable experience while, at the same time, reducing exposure to possible harm.

There is a lack of specific research that unequivocally asserts young people's unhealthy dependence upon smartphones. Nonetheless, there appears to be a growing public belief in the efficacy of "the detox" (Beyond Blue) or "unplugging" (Shlain). We argue that a teen's commitment to regular smartphone abstinence is non-fungible with 'as and when' smartphone use. In other words, there is a significant, ineluctable and non-trivial difference between the practice of regularly disconnecting from a smartphone at a certain point of the day, or for a specified period in the week, compared with the same amount of time 'off' the device which is a haphazard, as and when, doing something else, type of practice.

We posit that recurrent periods of smartphone abstinence, equating to a regular detox, might support more balanced, healthy and empowered smartphone use. Repeated abstinence in this case differs from the notion of the disconnected holiday, where a person might engage in irregular smartphone withdrawal during an annual holiday, for example (Traveltalk; Hoving; Stäheli and Stoltenberg). Such abstinence does have widespread historical and cultural resonance, however, as in the fasting practices of Islam (the month of Ramadan), the Christian season of Lent, and the holy Hindu month of Śravaṇa. Where prolonged periods of fasting are supplemented by weekly or holy-day fasts, they may be reprised with a regularity that brings the practice closer to the scheduled pattern of abstinence that we see as non-fungible with an unstructured as-and-when approach. An extreme example of the long fast and intermittent fast days is offered by the traditional practices of the Greek Orthodox church, whose teachings recommend fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays as well as on religious holy days. With the inclusion of Lent, Greek Orthodox fasting practices can comprise 180 fast days per year: that's about half of available days.

As yet, there is no coherent evidence base supporting the benefits of regular intermittent disconnection. The Australian mental health Website *Beyond Blue*, which asserts the value of digital detox, cannot find a stronger authority to underpin a practice of withdrawal than "Research from Deloitte's annual Mobile Consumer Survey report" which indicates that "44 per cent of people in Australia think their phone use is a problem and are trying to reduce how much time they spend on it" (Beyond Blue). Academic literature that addresses these areas by drawing on more than personal experience and anecdote is scarce to non-existent. Insofar as such studies exist over the past decade, from Maushart to Leonowicz-Bukala et al., they are irregular experiments which do not commit to repeated periods of disconnection.

This article is a call to investigate the possibly non-fungible benefits of teens' regularly practicing smartphone disconnection. It argues that there is actual evidence which is yet to be collected. New knowledge in this area may provide a compelling dataset that suggests verifiable benefits for the non-fungible practice of regular smartphone disconnection. We believe that there are teenagers, parents and communities willing to trial appropriate interventions over a significant period of time

to establish 'before' and 'after' case studies. The evidence for these opinions is laid out in the sections that follow.

## Teens' Experiences of Media, Smartphone, and Other Cultural Dis/connection

In 2018, the Pew Research Center in the US surveyed teens about their experiences of social media, updating elements of an earlier study from 2014-15. They found that almost all (95%) the 743 teens in the study, aged between 13 and 17 when they were surveyed in March-April 2018, had or had access to a smartphone (Anderson and Jiang). A more recent report from 2021 notes that 88% of US teenagers, aged 13-18, have their own smartphone (Common Sense Media 22). What is more, this media use survey indicates that American teens have increased their screen entertainment time from 7 hours, 22 minutes per day in 2019 to 8 hours, 39 minutes per day in 2021 (Common Sense Media 3). Lee argues that, on average, mobile phone users in Australia touch their phones 2,617 times a day.

In Sweden, a 2019 study of youth aged 15-24 noted a pervasive concern regarding the logical assumption "that offline time is influenced and adapted when people spend an increasing amount of time online" (Thulin and Vilhelmson 41). These authors critique the overarching theory of young people comprising a homogenous group of 'digital natives' by identifying different categories of light, medium, and heavy users of ICT. They say that the "variation in use is large, indicating that responses to ubiquitous ICT access are highly diverse rather than homogeneously determined" (Thulin and Vilhelmson 48). The practice or otherwise of regular periods of smartphone disconnection is a further potential differentiator of teens' digital experiences. Any investigation into these areas of difference should help indicate ways in which teens may or may not achieve comparatively more or less control over their smartphone use.

Lee argues that in Australia "teens who spend five or more hours per day on their devices have a 71% higher risk factor for suicide". Twenge and Campbell (311) used "three large surveys of adolescents in two countries (n = 221,096)" to explore differences between 'light users' of digital media (<1 hour per day) and 'heavy users' (5+ hours per day). They use their data to argue that "heavy users (vs. light) of digital media were 48% to 171% more likely to be unhappy, to be low in well-being, or to have suicide risk factors such as depression, suicidal ideation, or past suicide attempts" (Twenge and Campbell 311). Notably, Livingstone among others argues that emotive assertions such as these tend to ignore the nuance of significant bodies of research (Livingstone, about Twenge). Even so, it is plausible that teens' online activities interpolate both positively and negatively upon their offline activities. The capacity to disconnect, however, to disengage from smartphone use at will, potentially allows a teen more opportunity for individual choice impacting both positive and negative experiences.

As boyd argued in 2014: "it's complicated". The Pew findings from 2018 indicate that teens' positive comments about social media use include:

- 81% "feel more connected to their friends";
- 69% "think it helps [them] interact with a more diverse group of people"; and

- 68% “feel as if they have people who will support them through tough times.” (Anderson and Jiang)

The most numerous negative comments address how of all teens:

- 45% “feel overwhelmed by all the drama there”;
- 43% “feel pressure to only post content that makes them look good to others”; and
- 37% “feel pressure to post content that will get a lot of likes and comments.” (Anderson and Jiang)

It is notable that these three latter points relate to teens’ vulnerabilities around others’ opinions of themselves and the associated rollercoaster of emotions these opinions may cause. They resonate with Ciarrochi et al.’s argument that different kinds of Internet activity impact different issues of control, with more social forms of digital media associated with young females’ higher “compulsive internet use [...] and worse mental health than males” (276). What is not known, because it has never been investigated, is whether any benefits flowing from regular smartphone disconnection might have a gendered dimension.

If there is specific value in a capacity to disconnect regularly, separating that experience from haphazard episodes of connection and disconnection, regular disconnection may also enhance the quality of smartphone engagement. Potentially, the power to turn off their smartphone when the going got tough might allow young people to feel greater control over their media use while being less susceptible to the drama and compulsion of digital engagement. As one 17-year-old told the Pew researchers, possibly ruefully, “[teens] would rather go scrolling on their phones instead of doing their homework, and it’s so easy to do so. It’s just a huge distraction” (Anderson and Jiang). Few cultural contexts support teens’ regular and repeated disengagement from smartphones, but Icelandic society, Orthodox Judaism and the comparatively common practice of overnight disconnection from smartphone use may offer helpful indications of possible benefits.

## **Cross-Cultural and Religious Interventions in Smartphone Use**

Concern around teens’ smartphone use, as described above, is typically applied to young people whose smartphone use constitutes an integral part of everyday life. The untangling of such interconnection would benefit from being both comparative and experimental. Our suggestions follow.

Iceland has, in the past, adopted what Karlsson and Broddason term “a paternalistic cultural conservatism” (1). Legislators concerned about the social impacts of television deferred the introduction of Icelandic broadcasting for many years, beyond the time that most other European nations offered television services. Program offerings were expanded in a gradual way after the 1966 beginnings of Iceland’s public television broadcasting. As Karlsson and Broddason note, “initially the transmission hours were limited to only a few hours in the evening, three days a week and a television-free month in July. The number of transmission days was increased to six within a few years, still with a television-free month in July until 1983 and television-free Thursdays until 1987” (6). Interestingly, the nation is still open to social experimentation on a grand scale. In the

1990s, for example, in response to significant substance abuse by Icelandic teens, the country implemented an interventionist whole-of-Iceland public health program: the Icelandic Prevention Model (Kristjansson et al.). Social experimentation on a smaller scale remains part of the Icelandic cultural fabric. More recently, between 2015 and 2019, Iceland ran a successful social experiment whereby 1% of the working population worked a shorter work week for full time pay. The test was deemed successful because “workers were able to work less, get paid the same, while maintaining productivity and improving personal well-being” (Lau and Sigurdardottir). A number of self-governing Icelandic villages operate a particularly inclusive form of consultative local democracy enabling widespread buy-in for social experiments. Two or more such communities are likely to be interested in trialling an intervention study if there is a plausible reason to believe that the intervention may make a positive difference to teens’ (and others’) experiences of smartphone use. Those plausible reasons might be indicated by observational data from other people’s everyday practices.

One comparatively common everyday practice which has yet to be systematically investigated from the perspective of evaluating the possible impacts of regular disconnection is that practiced by families who leave connected media outside the bedroom at night-time. These families are in the habit of putting their phones on to charge, usually in a shared space such as a kitchen or lounge room, and not referring to them again until a key point in the morning: when they are dressed, for example, or ready to leave the house. It is plausible to believe that such families might feel they have greater control over smartphone use than a family who didn’t adopt a regular practice of smartphone disconnection. According to social researchers in the Nordic nations, including co-authors Kjartan Ólafsson and Elisabeth Staksrud, it is likely that an Icelandic community will be keen to trial this experience of regular smartphone disconnection for a period of six months or more, if that trial went hand in hand with a rigorous evaluation of impact.

Some religious communities offer a less common exemplar for teens’ regular disconnection from their smartphone. Young people in these communities may suspend their smartphone (and other media use) for just over a full day per week to focus on deepening their engagement with family and friends, and to support their spiritual development. Notable among such examples are teenagers who identify as members of the Orthodox Jewish faith. Their religious practices include withdrawing from technological engagement as part of the observance of Shabbat (the Sabbath): at least, that’s the theory. For the past ten years or so in Australia there has been a growing concern over some otherwise-Orthodox Jewish teens’ practice of the “half-Shabbat,” in which an estimated 17-50% of this cohort secretly use digital media for some time during their 25 hours of mandated abstinence. As one teacher from an Orthodox high school argues, “to not have access to the phone, it’s like choking off their air” (Telushikin). Interestingly, many Jewish teens who privately admit practicing half-Shabbat envision themselves as moving towards full observance in adulthood: they can see benefits in a wholehearted commitment to disengagement, even if it’s hard to disengage fully at this point in their lives.

Hadlington et al.’s article “I Cannot Live without My [Tablet]” similarly evokes a broader community crisis around children’s dependence on digital media, noting that many children aged 8-12 have a tablet of their own before moving onto smartphone ownership in their teens (Common Sense Media 22). We appreciate that not every society has children and young people who are highly networked and integrated within digital dataflows. Nonetheless, while constant smartphone connectivity might

appear to be a 'first world problem', preparing teens to be adults with optimal choice over their smartphone use includes identifying and promoting support for conscious disengagement from media as and when a young person wishes. Such a perspective aligns with promoting young people's rights in digital contexts by interrogating the possible benefits of regularly disconnecting from digital media. Those putative benefits may be indicated by investigating perspectives around smartphone use held by Orthodox Jewish teenagers and comparing them with those held by teens who follow a liberal Jewish faith: liberal Jewish teens use smartphones in ways that resonate with broader community teens. A comparison of these two groups, suggests co-author Lynne Cohen, may indicate differences that can (in part) be attributed to Orthodox Jewish practices of digital disconnection, compared with liberal Jewish practices that don't include disconnection.

If smartphone disconnection has the potential to offer non-fungible benefits, it is incumbent upon researchers to investigate the possible advantages and drawbacks of such practices. That can be done through the comparative investigation of current practice as outlined above, and via an experimental intervention for approximately six months with a second Icelandic/Nordic community.

## **The Potential Value of Investigating the (Non-)Fungibility of Digital Engagement and Digital Inactivity**

The overarching hypothesis addressed in this article is that a lived experience of regular smartphone disconnection may offer teenagers the opportunity to feel more in control of their personal technologies. Such a perspective aligns with many established media theories. These theories include the domestication of technology and its integration into daily life, helping to explain the struggle teens experience in detaching from digital media once they have become a fundamental element of their routine. Domestication theory asserts that technology moves from novelty to an integral aspect of everyday experience (Berker et al.). Displacement theory asserts that young people whose lives are replete with digital media may have substituted that media use for other activities enjoyed by the generations that grew up before them, while boyd offers an alternative suggestion that digital media add to, rather than displace, teens' activities in daily contexts.

Borrowing inputs from other disciplinary traditions, theories around mindfulness are increasingly robust and evidence-based, asserting that "attentiveness to what is present appears to yield corrective and curative benefits in its own right" (Brown et al. 1). Constant attention to digital media may be a distraction from mindful engagement with the lived environment. A detailed study of the non-fungible character of smartphone disconnection practices might offer an evidence base to support suggestions, such as those proffered by Beyond Blue, that a digital detox benefits mental health, resilience, and sociality. Such information might support initiatives by schools and other organisations central to the lives of teenagers to institute regular digital disconnection regimes, akin to Iceland's experiments with television-free Thursdays. These innovations could build upon aligned social initiatives such as "no email Fridays" (Horng), which have been trialled in business contexts. Further, studies such as those outlined above could add authority to recommendations for parents, educators, and caregivers such as those recommendations contained in papers on the Common

Sense Media site, for example, including *Tweens, Teens, Tech, and Mental Health* (Odgers and Robb) and *Device-Free Dinners* (Robb).

Relevantly, the results from such observational and intervention studies would address the post-COVID era when parents and others will be considering how best to support a generation of children who went online earlier, and more often, than any generation before them. These results might also align with work towards early-stage adoption of the United Nations' General Comment No. 25 on *Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment* (UNCRC). If so, an investigation into the fungibility or otherwise of digital abstention could contribute to the national and international debate about the rights of young people to make informed decisions around when to connect, and when to disconnect, from engagement via a smartphone.

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