Breaching perpetual contact: Withdrawing from mobile and social media use in everyday life
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Abstract
This qualitative study aimed to investigate the norms and daily practices around mobile and social technology by examining what happens when mobile phones and social media on any devices are removed from one’s daily life. Most studies on technology non-use focus on one device or platform. In this study, participants (N = 78) relinquished not only social media but also their mobile phones for a 10-day period, and made observations on their experiences before, during, and after the “withdrawal.” Participants initially experienced guilt and anxiety over violating a social contract by not being available and reachable anytime and anywhere, but mostly found their social capital — particularly bonding social capital — reinforced through the withdrawal. On the personal front, participants (re)discovered certain “life skills” like memory, imagination, and creativity in navigating their physical world and spending their time.

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Introduction

What mobile phones and their ancillary apps (like social media) have contributed to our lives is fairly clear. The capability to communicate with anyone in our lives whenever and wherever certainly has created new efficiencies and conveniences. Through social media, people have been able to express themselves online while cultivating a sprawling social network, if they so wish. At the same time, we have become dependent on these technologies, having developed and habituated ourselves to new ways to fill our time, maintain social connections, and organize our lives. Mobile and social media are entrenched in our lives, and as such, have taken on certain meanings in our self-conceptions and relationships, enabling and constraining ways of moving about the world and interacting with others. The purpose of our study was to investigate the norms and daily practices around social technologies by examining what happens when mobile phones and social media on mobile and all platforms/devices are removed from one’s daily life for a period of 10 days.

Mobile phones have rapidly become ubiquitous in the last decade. Nearly 90 percent of Americans owned a
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mobile phone in 2012. At the end of 2016, 95 percent owned a mobile phone and 77 percent owned a smartphone (Pew Research Center, 2021). The number is equally as high for those who go online at least daily (77 percent), and 69 percent of Americans use social media (Greenwood, et al., 2018). For the age group in this study, according to Pew, 88 percent used at least one social media site in 2012, and this proportion remained consistent (86 percent) in 2016.

The “mobile turn” (Caron and Caronia, 2007; Goggin, 2008) has affected numerous facets of our lives. Further, with the virtual communities accessible via mobile phones, the ways in which one can assert and perform their identities multiplies. Beyond a technological device, the mobile has taken on symbolic meaning within interactions. According to Pew, around 80–90 percent of people under 50 years old use their phones to avoid boredom (Smith, 2015). Young people, in particular, may use their phones as a way to avoid interacting with others (Smith, 2015).

Over time, the mobile phone has become “embedded” in the fabric of society, developing in that process mutual expectations for how we interact with one another (Ling, 2012). As such, resisting adoption or deciding not to use one’s phone at certain times takes on cultural and symbolic importance (Goggin, 2006). Thus, the “new” technology that has been introduced in the last two decades has shaped behavior and reorganized our personal and social lives.

For this study, which took place from 2012—2016, we tracked what happens when people’s mobile phones and social media on any device are given up for a sustained period of time. This is a novel approach for studying technology abstention, as most research focuses on removing a single device or platform. Our study also examines this total withdrawal within the context of everyday life, rather than a special trip or retreat, and therefore asks: What might normal life look like in a world where relationships are predicated on certain social expectations? How might these changes then affect people’s own sense of self? These are questions we explored in our research. By employing an extreme intervention of extended non-use, the study aims to explore the roles that communication technology plays in the daily, social lives of its participants.

Literature review

For this study, we apply Katz and Aakhus’ (2002) Apparatgeist framework and use a phenomenological approach to examine these questions. The Apparatgeist refers both to how individuals use a technology, and the ways in which their use is situated in broader social and cultural spaces. Describing how technology has advanced over time, the Apparatgeist identifies a “common set of strategies or principles of reasoning about technology” that brings together “individual and collective behavior” [1]. This framework translates well to a phenomenological approach because both allow for the mutual construction of technology and culture.

This approach is grounded in people’s everyday lives; therefore, we examine the full context of people’s withdrawal — their preparations, experiences during, social circle’s reactions, and perspectives afterwards. From their reflections, we tease apart the role these technologies play in their relationships, sense of selves, and life organization. The following literature review first looks at the role of the “perpetual contact” enabled by mobile and social media in people’s lives and relationships. We then discuss the impact these technologies have had on people’s identities, and how a “breaching experiment” in a natural setting may elucidate social norms through its disruption of accepted roles and interaction rituals.

Perpetual contact: Affordances of mobile and social media

Katz and Aakhus (2002) defined personal communication technologies, such as the mobile phone, by a “sociologic” of “perpetual contact” that has changed communication patterns and expectations. While people may not use their phones to literally remain in perpetual contact, the potential for contact is
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perpetual, and that reality shifts how we perceive and use time when we would otherwise be alone or engaged with others in person (Katz and Aakhus, 2002). Examining the evolution of this social expectation, Ling (2016) argues that we have turned perpetual contact into an “internal imperative”; to be unreachable or unavailable is to shirk one’s social responsibility.

As Katz and Aakhus (2002) develop in their “Apparatgeist” framework, the technology embodies a “spirit” and meaning for its users that extends beyond their utilitarian affordances. Studies on the “domestication” of technology (Silverstone and Haddon, 1996), as it is brought home and assimilated in the new environment, demonstrates that technology does indeed compel behavior change and prompt an evolution of norms. Mobile devices encourage certain “habits” like continual, brief “check-ins” that then promote more sustained pervasive use (Oulasvirta, et al., 2012). Smartphones’ affordances, in particular, provide dynamic content that may lure people into their device when they check their phone for one reason, but stay on it, prompting a kind of “hyper-connectivity” for users (Oulasvirta, et al., 2012).

Mascheroni and Vincent (2016) have qualitatively examined “perpetual contact” as a communicative affordance of mobile technology: among the young people they studied (across nine European countries), “constant availability” to one’s peers was an annoyance, though they generally adapted to their peers’ pressure to stay always available and connected. These “enhanced opportunities for communication” were related to positive feelings like intimacy and belonging; however, the “social expectations regarding ‘anywhere, anytime,’ accessibility and obligations to reciprocate” created negative feelings like anxiety and insecurity [2].

**Perpetual contact in relationships.** As a sociologic, perpetual contact is neither inherently “good” nor “bad,” rather, its incorporation and assimilation into our lives determines its influence. In an examination of one platform, social media’s positive effects on social capital, for example, have been well-documented. Ellison, *et al.* (2007) found that overall Facebook use most strongly and positively influenced bridging social capital (*e.g.*, activation and maintenance of “weak ties”), and was also positively, though more weakly, associated with bonding social capital (*e.g.*, having “strong ties”) and “maintained” social capital, which refers to continuing relationships from a “previously inhabited community.” It is still uncertain, however, what overall effect removing Facebook (and other social media) would have on one’s social life — whether temporarily severing online ties would affect off-line socializing. In Brandtzæg (2012), social media use did not replace intimacy or face-to-face interactions; rather, those who were more active on Facebook were also more socially active off-line. That said, non-users of Facebook had stronger perceived bonding social capital (Lampe, *et al.*, 2013). A more recent examination of Facebook abstention, however, found that being off the platform contributed to higher face-to-face engagement (Allcott, *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, image-based social media platforms like Instagram have been found to attenuate loneliness (Pittman and Reich, 2016).

Turkle (2011) envisioned that pervasive technological presence may ultimately degrade relationships. As people spend more time “alone, together,” they are physically co-present but psychologically and emotionally distant. Caron and Caronia (2007) confirmed that even the mere presence of a phone on a table between two people can damage feelings of closeness, connection, and conversation quality, given the potential of a “ghost participant” intervening.

The intersection of relationships and personal well-being as played out through mobile and social media is also apparent in the “Fear of Missing Out” (FoMO) phenomenon, when on-the-go communication enabled people to keep their plans loose and dynamic, in order to cram in more activities or hold out for better options (Schreckinger, 2014). It has become more widely recognized with social media, which prominently display the photos and messages of everyone else’s activities, and FoMO has been found to correlate with heavier social media use (Przybylski, *et al.*, 2013). These phenomena demonstrate this notion of “active role of things” in how the mobile phone as a symbolic object, beyond a conduit for communication, shapes human behavior (Caron and Caronia, 2015). This raises the question: what kind of impact would severing perpetual contact for a sustained period, by removing ones mobile and social media in their everyday lives, have on participants’ social relationships and on their use of time?
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Identity

Mobile phones can be disruptive because they represent a separate world from one’s conversation partner and are deeply personal objects to which people have formed emotional attachments (Vincent, 2006). Mobile phones serve both as a repository for one’s social life — where memories, contacts, photographs, and conversations — are stored, as well as an articulation of one’s identity. Identity as enacted through social practices is particularly important with mobile and social media because these technologies primarily revolve around people’s relationships.

Therefore, we have chosen to adapt Goffman’s conceptualizations of self and identity, which he situated within everyday social life. Following Mead (1934), Goffman (1959) contends there is no self but for the self that is performed in the course of one’s daily interactions. Different aspects of the self may be expressed given the social context and interactants (Goffman, 1959), but each “performance” is constitutive of one’s identity. While Goffman focused on face-to-face encounters, others have applied his concepts of identity performance and impression management to mediated communication (Rettie, 2009). In particular, the “context collapse” (Marwick and boyd, 2011) that occurs with mobile and social media can complicate identity work: people do not necessarily know what audience they are performing to online, or they may be confronted over the phone with personal matters while still engaging in public spaces. The Meadian/Goffmanian approach is prevalent in studies that examine identity in the context of new technology, perhaps because it is more outwardly performative and socially entwined.

The mobile phone has created “a new form of sociality in which the isolation of our physical bodies does not indicate a lack of connectedness but may be its precondition” [3]. Meaningful connectedness no longer relates to physical co-presence; rather, we stay connected with others by being physically close to our devices. In light of this ever-present and/or ever-possible sociality via the phone, Turkle (2008) cautioned that people may lose certain socio-emotional life skills like “the ability to be alone, to reflect on and contain one’s emotions” [4]. This raises the question: how would relinquishing mobile and social media affect participants’ socio-emotional lives?

Disrupting perpetual contact: Technology abstention

There has been increasing attention in recent years of people limiting their technology use in response to its saturation in their lives. Non-use of or abstention from technology cannot be considered a binary act, nor a monolithic behavior (Light, 2014; Baumer, et al., 2015; Neves, et al., 2015). In today’s saturated and fragmented digital environment, it may mean very limited use within a certain timeframe — such as during Lent (Schoenebeck, 2014), a weekend (Lee and Katz, 2014), or a trip (Rosenberg, 2019). It may also pertain to a limited scope of non-use, such as giving up a particular platform like Facebook (Ribak and Rosenthal, 2015; Neves et al., 2015; Dremljuga, 2018). Light (2014) has explored the ongoing and varied ways in which people choose to disconnect from social networking sites, which entails diverse practices and can be located with a platform (e.g., choosing not to use it), within a platform (e.g., choosing not to like posts, unfollowing certain people), between platforms (e.g., choosing not to connect accounts of one site with another), and between the platforms and their off-line world (e.g., choosing not to engage with platforms in public). In this conceptualization, disconnection is a practice that is fluid and situational.

Some have argued that realistically today most abstention falls under “situational non-use” (Leavitt, 2014), in which users decide to abstain for a particular moment or context. “Digital detox” camps are one example, whereby people pay to be forced to relinquish their devices and unplug, because they seek to re-calibrate their relationship to technology and the people in their lives (Sutton, 2017). Rosenberg (2019) examined the experiences of backpackers who, at a liminal time in their lives, want to escape and experience the freedom of exploration. To that end, some choose to leave their mobile phones behind, while others, still bound and responsive to their families’ desire for connection, negotiate ways to maintain contact through their phones, though the contact is perhaps more circumscribed (Rosenberg, 2019).

In this way, studies on technology non-use expose both the personal and interpersonal dimensions of
people’s technology choices. When people voluntarily relinquish or abstain from technology for a period of time, as in the cases above, it can reveal dependencies and certain dynamics of expectations and control, as with the backpackers who kept their phones under pressure from their families (Rosenberg, 2019). Individually, people have found it difficult to relinquish their technology, even for 24 hours (Siew, 2010). The novelty of a device-free weekend may be appreciated, but it is also accompanied by a reluctance to completely disconnect with the digital world (Lee and Katz, 2014). This trepidation with giving up one’s technology is not without reason. In a small qualitative study of social media non-users (such as rejecters, resisters, expelled, excluded), Page, et al. (2018) found that they experienced a “social disenfranchisement” as a consequence of forgoing social media.

In these examples, technology non-use has been experienced in distinct contexts, often separate from people’s everyday lives: they go to a retreat to get away from their devices, or they selectively take away one platform. A recent large-scale experiment demonstrated that abstaining from one social media platform — Facebook — for an entire month had a positive impact on subjects’ well-being and use of time. In some instances, face-to-face socialization with friends and family replaced Facebook use (Allcott, et al., 2020).

This is an important study that shows even partial non-use of technology (e.g., deactivating one social platform) can have effects in other areas of people’s lives. What has been explored less is instances of expansive mobile and social media withdrawal in the context of one’s everyday life. Our study analyzed participants’ observations that reflected on both their intra- and interpersonal experiences, as well as their preparation, lived experiences, and post hoc realizations.

Methodology

Given how we have anchored our interactions and identity expressions to mobile and social media, what happens when we untether ourselves? Garfinkel (1967) examined “everyday practices” by disrupting their normal course in order to unearth the social encounters’ meaning. Social “interaction rituals” (Goffman, 1967) occur smoothly because people have “shared methods of practical reasoning [that] inform both the production of action, and the recognition of action and its meanings” (Heritage, 2001). Garfinkel’s aim was to “produce disorganized interaction” in order to learn “something about how the structures of everyday activities are ordinarily and routinely produced and maintained” [5]. In “breaching experiments,” he disrupted routine interactions to discern the “formal properties of commonsense activities” [6].

Following the “breaching experiment” tradition, our study asked people to disrupt the daily goings-on in their lives by abandoning their mobile and social media on any device for an extended period of time, and reflect on their experience before, during, and after the experiment. The data were made up of participants’ written reflective reports, which included their experiences and the reactions from those around them — friends, family, and fellow classmates. No other controls were implemented beyond the mobile and social media ban; for example, participants could choose for themselves whether or not they informed those in their lives of this withdrawal experiment.

The breaching experiment: Technology withdrawal and disruption process

The participants were students in one of the author’s graduate-level classes, “New media and technologies,” which was an elective that took place every Fall semester from 2012–2016 [7]. The technology disruption was incorporated as one of the class assignments, and written consent was received from the participants.

In the “withdrawal exercise,” participants (N = 78, with a median age of 24, and about two-thirds female) were instructed to go without their online social networking (e.g., social media sites like MySpace, Facebook, Second Life, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, as well as instant messaging, e-mail, and Skype) and relinquish their mobile phones for a period of 10 days. They were allowed to use their mobile phones at home as they would a landline, but not for any other communicative function. Aside from university
messages, e-mail and other digital messaging were proscribed. To minimize disruption with participants’ academic lives, this exercise was undertaken with the department’s professors’ collaboration to ensure there were no academic conflicts. The class professor granted exceptions for students on a case-by-case basis, if the disruption would significantly harm their professional or personal lives. In these few cases (less than 10 percent), workarounds were made, and written reflections were still a required component with the accommodations worked in.

Throughout the withdrawal, most participants took daily notes of their experiences. After the 10 days, participants handed in a reflection paper based on their day-to-day observations and overall conclusions. Most participants voluntarily handed in their daily observations either as an appendix or as notes within the reflection. Recording these observations and handing them in was not required and not graded. Then, they met for a roundtable discussion with the class professor to review their experiences and admit any “cheats.” There was overlap between the written observations and discussions; the discussion served as a higher-level review of participants’ observations, which delved deeper into their withdrawal experiences, in response to these four main questions:

1. What did you do to prepare for this exercise?
2. What were the reactions of people around you?
3. What has been most and least missed during this period?
4. What final reflection can you elaborate on the whole experience and your plans for future media use?

Coding and data analysis

We took a grounded theory, inductive approach to define the coding categories, which were derived from students’ written observations. Given the study’s emphasis on participants’ subjective experiences, an inductive approach was important because starting with a priori assumptions may occlude serendipitous discovery (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Of course, the study design was constructed with certain assumptions, reflected in part in the main questions to which participants were asked to respond, but the coding of their responses began as an open-ended endeavor, without any pre-determined categories. The coding dataset was comprised of relevant excerpts from their papers and notes; relevance was determined based on the major themes identified in an iterative, holistic coding process (Saldaña, 2021). The excerpted comments (N = 408) were then coded descriptively and structurally to analyze and find connections across subthemes.

Results

Participants’ reflections were in some cases real-time thoughts and reactions during the 10-day withdrawal, as they were experiencing the effects of the intervention. Further, the extended length of time for the exercise allowed participants to endure (and reflect on) different phases of the withdrawal. The comments broke down roughly into two main phases: 1) participants’ preparation for and experiences in the first few days of the withdrawal (35 percent), and 2) the duration of the withdrawal and their takeaways from the experience (65 percent) (see Appendix). Within these two phases, we have identified the main themes and salient sub-themes.

Preparing for and the Initial Withdrawal

In their preparation for and first few days of the withdrawal, participants grappled with social (family and friends’ reactions), emotional, technological, and behavioral adjustments. These encompassed logistical concerns — e.g., how will I navigate and get through my days without technology — as well as participants’ inter- and intrapersonal considerations. There was a ritualistic aspect to their various preparatory measures, as if they were readying for a long journey in a strange, foreign country. They had to plan ahead for their future needs, and inform others of their plans if they so wished — wrapping up their
lives and settling their affairs before the voyage.

Almost all participants reported some form of anxiety at the onset. Some students admitted that when they learned of the experiment, they had thought of quitting the class. But all stayed and were curious to see how they would survive the withdrawal. Broadly, participants were anxious about breaking social conventions, and anticipated these violations’ consequences. Practically speaking, withdrawing from mobile and social media was like breaking a habit for participants; in fact, approximately a third of participants chose to leave their phones at home so as not to be tempted to use them during the day. Some experienced physical symptoms from, and had emotional reactions to, the behavioral adjustments.

Social and emotional adjustments

In their written reflections, all of the participants addressed how they chose to inform family and friends. Broadly speaking, the reactions from friends and family were as follows. One type of reaction was resistance and a refusal to accept. Participants described how friends and family members expressed anxiety and sadness at the sudden loss of contact, and in some cases, control. Some even suggested that participants should “cheat” and not follow the exercise if possible. Another reaction was an acceptance, begrudging or otherwise, and efforts to find other ways to communicate. These demonstrated support and curiosity, and even admiration in the students’ participation. Some participants chose not to warn their social circle at all. They wanted to see how friends and family would react: whether they were missed, and if people would make extra efforts to stay in contact. In this way, they were testing the depth of their relationships.

It became apparent through their reactions to the exercise that participants’ friends and family not only came to expect relatively unrestrained and constant access to them, but also that losing this mechanism for connection was distressing. One participant’s boyfriend dismissed the exercise entirely:

I realized (somewhat irritated) at the end of the exercise that he had continued to send me messages, as if he did not take the experience seriously, as I did.

In a few cases, participants’ friends grew angry with them for not returning their messages, especially for those who had not been warned. For some, their friends escalated to a home phone call, demanding justification for not responding to their messages. In fact, for one participant who had not warned his social circle:

The only calls I received [at home] during those ten days were from people who, angry at me for not responding to the text messages or on Facebook, ended up calling me to ask me to justify myself. The fact of not notifying them allowed me to realize how much I was asked to be available at all times.

In an extreme reaction, one participant’s father accepted that she had to do the exercise for school, but he rejected the prospect of not being in regular, daily contact with his daughter; he ended up flying to her city to see her during that week.

Additionally, when informing their social circle, participants needed to justify the withdrawal to their friends and family. There was the sense that, in abandoning mobile and social media at all, participants were violating an established social contract. In some cases, the reason that it was for school was sufficient. According to one participant, his impending absence was:

Legitimated by a social contract whose accountability is linked to the school setting. This break-up would not have received such favorable support if it had been justified by mere will.
These adverse reactions to participants’ withdrawal revealed certain conventions with mobile and social media that Katz and Aakhus (2002) have anticipated, namely the expectations that participants should remain constantly available and responsive.

Further, about 23 percent of participants’ comments discussed how they had internalized the social expectations and felt guilty for breaking social conventions: the withdrawal’s “paradigm shift” affected not just the participants’ own lives, but also had consequences for other’s routines and expectations. Because they had to operate outside of established communication norms — being reachable by phone whenever and wherever — they felt they were burdening their social circle. By eschewing mobile communication, participants were reverting back to more face-to-face ways of communicating, and forcing others back with them. What started as a personal choice was in a way a unilateral decision foisted on participants’ contacts.

**Technological and behavioral adjustment**

In their preparation, 23 percent of participants’ comments described their technological and behavioral adjustments in the following ways. First was how they deconstructed the needs previously met by their mobile phones’ technological features, then replaced them with individual pieces of technology, such as a standalone camera, a watch, an answering machine:

> Having the time on me at all times became a need that I satisfied through the use of my cell phone. Wearing the watch has replaced my phone to meet this need. I had never worn a watch in my life, even before having a cell phone.
>
> I took the time to reconnect with voicemail, a tool that our generation seems to have abandoned and uses only in cases of extreme need.

Some participants discovered hidden benefits to these more “traditional” technologies, as their uses were restricted and thus easier to control: checking the time on a watch started and ended with learning the time, whereas checking the time on one’s phone might lead to seeing a message notification and being drawn into a back-and-forth.

During idle time in public spaces, when they would otherwise be occupied with their phones, some participants did not know what to do with their hands, and were embarrassed by their uncertainty, which only emphasized their feelings of loneliness and isolation. They felt cut off and disconnected from other people, and some participants experienced discomfort and insecurity out in public without their phones to occupy them.

> To fill the void in non-time and non-places, I decided to read and write, behavior almost perceived as deviant. By writing in a notebook instead of writing on my smartphone, I felt I was doing a marginal behavior.

They also experienced “phantom limb” symptoms — hearing sounds and thinking it was their phone ringing, feeling a vibrating phone in a pants’ pocket even though they had left their phones at home — as if their smartphones were literal appendages that had been lobbed off.

After a few days, participants expressed relief in not being contacted every five minutes, and appreciated the relative isolation and quiet of their virtual disconnection:

> After a few days, I felt more relaxed. I stopped running. I did not have that superficial impression that was waiting for me elsewhere. A certain serenity inhabited me. I no longer had the
stress or sense of urgency that usually haunted me.

Additionally, some participants quickly rediscovered their enjoyment with talking on the landline phone at home, where they could be more focused and relaxed. Generally, the home environment is more controlled in terms of who else might be privy to one’s conversation, and it is a familiar, comfortable space. Thus, when using a landline phone, participants’ conversations lasted longer and were more detailed. As one participant found:

I have rarely spoken so much on the phone. I found a certain pleasure to communicate orally whereas since the beginning, as an exchange student at the university, I contact my family mainly only by short messages every day.

In short, they appreciated how their conversations from the home phone were qualitatively different from their usual mode of communicating with loved ones, which speaks to the improved quality time participants experienced, covered in the next section.

**Living the Withdrawal**

Mobile phones and social media occupy one’s time and attention, whether alone at home, outside on-the-go, or with other people. They also help people organize their lives and navigate the world, as well as facilitate socializing in their everyday lives. Participants experienced a tension of gaining some tangible benefits (e.g., improved productivity, re-discovery of skills and abilities), while also experiencing constraints. The latter centered not only on logistical issues, but also more broadly on the personal and relational issues that arise when one opts out of the normative modes of communication and interaction. For many participants, however, engaging with friends and family without their digital tools opened up for them greater depth of connection.

**Social identity**

Themes of identity ran through 30 percent of participants’ responses to what these disruptions to their normal routines and behaviors meant for their own self-conceptions. Given online interactions have become so routinized, we looked at whether their absence could have an influence on how participants defined themselves as social actors. Indeed, the withdrawal exercise had, in a few cases, a negative impact on participants’ social lives.

**Breaching communication conventions: Adverse social consequences.** While living the withdrawal exercise, participants worried that they would be left out of social activities, cut off from information and contact with others. As one participant described:

I experienced periods of boredom that affected my concentration in the office. I had a feeling of abandonment. An impression of not being popular anymore because I was not getting messages anymore.

Participants wondered whether people would take notice of their absence on social platforms and how it would feel if no one noticed their absence. Most were able to circumvent the technological limitations to maintain their social relationships. However, for some, rather than seeing anger or worry from friends (and feeling guilty about disconnecting), they felt a disinterest, as if being absent on social networks made them “cease to exist” among their friends. One participant’s friends jokingly created a WhatsApp group named “Adrienne Martin’s Memorial” during her 10-day absence, as if her “virtual disappearance was synonymous with death.”

In this way, the mobile and social media break revealed the fragility of certain social bonds — the
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Technology did indeed act as a necessary tether (Turkle, 2008) to their social networks. For a few participants like foreign students, the absence of social media revealed or confirmed their lack of a robust social life in their adopted city: the validation and interactions from social media were an important part of how they conceived of themselves. On the other hand, this encouraged them to explore their new environment.

In part, the solitude and loneliness some participants experienced was because they were not able to participate in the social conventions that buoyed their sociality. One participant described how any slight delay on their or their friends part would induce “a moment of questioning, even panic,” and that trust in one another’s reliability became paramount. They also missed event invitations that were sent out exclusively through Facebook, or they were not included in planning social activities with their friends when plans were being figured out over text or social media messages.

With my close friends, I felt somewhat put aside in the decision-making process. A good friend would simply give me information about where and when our group was going to meet.

Further, the struggles to maintain their regular lives during the withdrawal demonstrated a certain attachment to and reliance on technology for making sense of their social and public activity. One participant “cheated” during the withdrawal because she had had such a bad day and needed the emotional comfort of texting with a few friends, reinforcing Turkle’s (2008) concerns that such ready access to friends’ emotional support would hinder individual’s abilities to self-reflect and “contain” emotions.

Participants also felt hampered in reaching out to others. They hesitated to make phone calls because they could not arrange it first via text, feeling like they were breaching an unspoken rule:

I wondered if it was really worth calling the person to tell him just one thing. A text message makes it possible to not (or less) disturb the other person who is busy and thus to wait for his answer, whereas a call can be intrusive and pressing with the obligation to answer it instantly.

The mobile phone has become such a personal device that participants assumed one of its primary functions — making phone calls — would intrude on the recipient’s personal, private space. Texting someone first to arrange a phone call is a more cautious approach, and speaks to an overall shift in people’s communication habits and preferences. The withdrawal exercise did not introduce a new technology like the Internet, but it did introduce a new (old) mode of communication, with which most were out of practice.

Despite these drawbacks, the withdrawal from mobile and social media was a boon for most participants’ social identities. Given the initial resistance to and anger over their withdrawal, it was reasonable to imagine that removing the technology might sever a significant channel for participants’ social identities. Participants did in fact make a tradeoff with the withdrawal: contact was no longer perpetual.

**Bonding social capital: Spending quality time.** Bonding social capital refers to the “strength” of one’s ties, and we see evidence that not using mobile or social media may have increased participants’ bonding social capital. Ellison, et al. (2007) found that Facebook use was most strongly related to one’s “bridging” social capital (e.g., maintenance of “weak ties”), which they attributed to the platform’s affordances better serving superficial connections, rather than strengthening existing strong ties. Without the refuge of friends via mobile and social media, participants were compelled to work to a greater extent on their in-the-moment, in-person relationships. They thus became more aware of their social capital — recognizing their social circle’s care through the efforts to accommodate the withdrawal — or actively worked to improve their bonding social capital. Some participants spent more time physically with their immediate friends or spent lunch breaks with co-workers. And without easy access to friends’ plans, another participant instead
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resurrected a past activity with his mother:

The next day, not knowing what my friends were doing, I stayed with my mother and had dinner in front of the TV. It had been years since we had done this together.

To that point, participants described how they were better able to focus on the quality of their relationships without the distraction of their mobile phones: they found themselves more able to engage fully in face-to-face interaction. Further, the new mode for their mediated interactions (e.g., over a landline phone at home) were richer by dint of disrupting the default pattern of engagement (like sharing and discussing more superficial digital content):

I was more in the moment because there was little chance that I would be interrupted. I was doing activities with people physically present without worrying about what other people in my social circle were doing because I could not reach them.

Some friends called me at home during the exercise. I had interesting exchanges that I could not have had otherwise than by phone. Paradoxically, by refraining from communicating with my friends via our usual methods, I had the feeling to get closer to them, to share more important things than YouTube videos.

Communicating with others from a distance also took on a different tone: rather than sending short messages throughout the day, participants dedicated less frequent but longer swaths of time to catching up with their loved ones, either over the phone or face-to-face. The frequency of mediated exchanges (e.g., via text message, e-mail, or social media) decreased, but the quality increased. One participant noted that technically they had less contact with their parents, but that the phone conversations they did have were longer and more interesting — with less frequent points of contact during the days and week, there was more to discuss. When communication is fragmented through frequent contact, there is a sense of connectedness (there is literally more contact), but with such brief interludes of contact, the content is largely more superficial.

Self identity

Given that mobile and social media are connective technologies, it is logical that abstaining from them affected how participants conceived of their social identities. They are also incredibly personal technologies: mobile phones are typically always on one’s person, and social media or other online entertainment are accessible from anywhere at any time. The previous section reviewed how participants reconfigured or reinforced their social identity through the mobile and social media disruption, which was very much contingent on how others in their lives reacted to the disruption-by-proxy. From these reactions, participants thus reflected on “what am I to others?” as conveyed by the circumventions and modifications their social circle was or was not willing to do to accommodate the disruption. In this last section, we turn to the more personal self: how participants located themselves in the disruption, with 70 percent of comments touching on both behavioral and emotional experiences, broken down in more detail below. Much of these aspects of the withdrawal were characterized by personal discovery, as they discovered or re-discovered and re-evaluated their use of time and their everyday habits and life skills.

The self in time and reduced anxiety. While living the withdrawal, 29 percent of participants’ comments related to their productivity, gaining time, and living in the moment. In place of the communication norms of “perpetual contact,” which enable more flexibility in plans because one can always call and make changes, participants created new socializing patterns. Participants made more of a personal investment in their plans and become more punctual, because they could no longer warn people of delays. Similarly, they
had to plan social engagements in advance, and at times still ran into issues with miscommunication. While participants felt relieved of the burden of perpetual contact, ironically, they also had to be more intentional and rigid with social contact, without the ease of online planning.

In not being tethered (Turkle, 2008) to mobile and social media all day, though, participants described how they discovered new swaths of time that they could put to other ends beyond idle texting and social media browsing. Others discussed how they were able to put their energy into their present-moment activities, rather than distract themselves, and this “living in the moment” resulted in less stress and more productivity. One participant felt more anchored in her present because she could think about just herself rather than those she was always confronted with on social media or over her texts — she could prioritize herself in the “now time.”

During my commuting, I first disconnected from the notion of time. My bike trips had a start time, but the time of arrival and the route taken was not as important. Since my phone was also my watch, I was living more in the moment, rather than lingering over the future events of my day.

Some also described a “certain letting go” as they stopped asking what their friends were or were not doing without them. Comments along these lines identified that this release enabled them to focus more on their work and be more productive, which in turn improved their mood. Some felt more positive because of the control they were able to exert and others were pleased to discover that they could both finish their work and find moments to relax. In this newfound and new types of time, 17 percent of participants’ comments mentioned specifically a reduction in anxiety.

**Self and imagination/creativity.** In lessening their anxiety, some participants discovered how to be alone and not constantly occupied. One participant realized that they had spent much of their time waiting for messages to arrive or conversations to start through their technology. Instead, they learned how to do nothing. This had the added benefit, for another participant, of relieving tension she had been unaware of before the withdrawal:

> I suddenly realized that I was less stressed. Indeed, before I bit my nails and after 10 days, I noticed that I had lost this nervous behavior. It was unconscious, but as I thought about it, I remembered that every moment was calmer and more relaxed.

Without the aid of their phones, participants had to re-ignite their creativity. Their comments (23 percent) discussed how they learned or re-learned how to be more autonomous, both in their intrapersonal world — learning to be alone and relaxed by themselves — and in their physical world.

> Incredibly — believing that I have a sense of underdeveloped orientation and a failing memory — I find the restaurant without any worries. My friends welcome me as a hero and I have the impression of having achieved an incredible feat — finding a restaurant without a phone.

These types of comments related to how participants were required to re-acquaint themselves with learning how to read maps, and more broadly, to rely on their own memories. One participant remarked that seemingly “banal” things like learning the subway schedule or memorizing a route required “reactivation” of cognitive functions that had laid dormant. Re-learning how to know and do things without the aid of Google or other apps forced participants to think more critically about their own behavior and decisions, re-learning to trust their own intelligence. This manifested in other ways beyond geographical navigation. One participant realized that he could, indeed, go shopping at the supermarket by himself and without phoning his spouse every five minutes to ask a question. He made a list and eventually memorized it.
In one instance, a participant wanted to get a birthday cake for his girlfriend. The bakery was out of her usual preference (black forest cake); he panicked, realizing that he could not call to ask for her alternative cake preference. Nevertheless, he decided on a Tiramisu cake instead, which she loved, not having had Tiramisu in a long while. With the safety net of impromptu mobile-phone consultations, possibilities for spontaneity had diminished.

In addition to re-discovering existing “skills” like spontaneity, everyday utilitarian objects like the refrigerator took on new meaning. One participant resorted to leaving notes on the fridge for roommates, rather than sending e-mail messages, and found that the “older” method was more effective in catching the roommates’ attention.

It is interesting to note, in the examples of participants that reverted to note-leaving and other older communication methods with others not immediately co-present, that they perceived these tactics as innovative, when in fact they were re-inventing the wheel, with strategies that had been employed long before digital communication devices. The norms and practices have evolved with newer technology such that older methods of relaying messages seemed new again.

**Conclusion**

This study examined how people navigated and experienced their everyday personal and social lives during a 10-day withdrawal from mobile and social media. It is distinct from extant research that has focused on only one device or platform, or looked at technology abstention over a short period of time or in a special context. This involved collecting the participants’ observations on their behavior and experiences as they were unfolding. In implementing an extreme version of technology disconnection, we were also looking for unexpected dynamics and their meanings that may reveal themselves (Garfinkel, 1967). We gathered responses on how they prepared to give up their technology and the reactions from their social circle, which are issues that have been largely overlooked in previous studies or accounts of technology abstention.

There are, of course, weaknesses to the study’s design that limit the findings’ generalizability and applicability. The sample consisted only of graduate students at a North American university and therefore has faults inherent in most studies that rely on a student sample, such as homogenous demographic makeup. Although the data recording and collection was voluntary and not graded, it was suggested in the course of completing a class assignment.

What this study adds in particular is how participants’ break from technology affected and elicited certain responses from others in their lives, which in turn had an impact on the individual’s own sense of self and confidence in their social standing. Nearly all of the participants felt that they required a “legitimate” justification to take this break from their phones, and that they were breaching a kind of social contract with their friends and family by removing the primary modes for communication, providing further evidence for how a “taken for grantedness” norm is created when these technologies are embedded in our social dynamics (Ling, 2012).

In the particular case of the mobile phone, mutual expectations have developed and normalized around one’s availability for social interactions: if someone has a phone, they should be readily reachable and available. Deviating from this understanding of perpetual contact thus made participants question or strengthen their social identities; they had to face an answer to the question, am I really part of the in-group or am I just another friend? For some, their everyday interactions took a different mode (e.g., over an at-home, landline-esque telephone instead of text), but they were still able to “perform” their selves constituted in their existing social relationships (Goffman, 1959), and the different kind of interactions added more meaning to their understanding of themselves.
The data also show interesting dynamics with communication modes and the ways participants could relate to their friends and family. Similar to what Rosenberg (2019) found when young people embarked on backpacking adventures and their families exerted control still in their pressure to remain in contact via cell phones, some participants experienced resistance from their loved ones in losing the “tether” of perpetual contact. On the other hand, there were some instances that when one’s “bridging” abilities were affected, bonding increased instead. Losing the ability to keep in more frequent contact compelled participants to interact with friends and family in ways — face-to-face and over-the-phone — that went into more depth and thus promoted more bonding.

Turkle (2008) warned of dependence on new technologies because they may enable people to subsume their entire identities through mediated sociality, losing the private, psychological self in the process. Indeed, withdrawing from technology ignited a process of self-discovery, as participants learned to rediscover their time and capacities for creativity. Similar to results in Allcott, et al. (2020), we found that participants saw improvements in their well-being, experiencing less anxiety, sleeping better, and being more productive. They also used their freed-up time to engage more in activities like reading that had been displaced by social media use. For the most part, technology promotes more “cognitive offloading” (Storm, et al., 2017) for things like problem-solving and memory, often aiming to mitigate the need for these “life skills.” In “surviving” the withdrawal, most participants rediscovered their creativity, reassured that they had the memory and skills without relying on certain technology, which bolstered their confidence in themselves.

Ultimately, participants returned to their mobile and social media, though most came back with a renewed perspective of how these technologies fit into their lives. Their anticipations for their future behavior fit nearly equally into three profiles. First, there were those who intensified their use, returning entirely to their technological bubble or “cocoon,” as some described it. Second, some participants intended to negotiate and reduce expectations with their social circle to not have to be always on and in instant interaction. Finally, there were participants who decided to reduce their use substantially, realizing they had not missed much that was important over the 10 days; they eliminated their news alerts, unsubscribed from notifications and newsletters, and blocked out advertising.

Research on technology non-use has been expanding over the last decade or so, perhaps in response to the growing ubiquity of media technology in our lives, such that disconnecting or opting out becomes ever out-of-reach (Hesselberth, 2018). As such, the act of disconnecting is worth studying because of the significant effort it entails. The reasons people resist, withdraw from, or curtail their technology use can be as illuminating as why and how people do use technology (Woodstock, 2014). To that end, studies on forms of technology non-use, withdrawal, or resistance have created different typologies to characterize these phenomena, acknowledging the unique affordances of each technology and its platforms and individuals’ own personal and social contexts (Mannell, 2019). This study showed that some were more resilient to the negative effects of removing mobile and social media from their daily lives, which tended to be contingent on their offline social lives and individual situations. These participants were therefore more able to enjoy the benefits of limiting technology.

On the cusp of mobile and social media in the 1990s and early 2000s, technology non-use was approached as a question of resources and access, and not being plugged in was regarded as a detriment, as the wrong side of the “digital divide” (Wyatt, 2003). As noted by Wyatt (2003) and Selwyn (2003), however, the picture was more complicated than simply the haves and have-nots, as there were people who voluntarily gave up or rejected certain technologies. Indeed, Light’s (2014) theorizing on use of social networking sites introduces the notion of “disconnective practice” that speaks to a more context-specific kind of technology use, wherein people selectively choose when, how much, and with which particular sites to connect or disconnect. Calling for a reconceptualization of non-use almost two decades ago, Wyatt (2003) foregrounds the idea that persistent and continued digital access is not necessarily a platonic ideal for all members of society. Indeed, today, the ability to “opt out” is a luxury, made explicit in the money some choose to lay out in order to go on a retreat for digital detoxing. It can also be a conspicuously performative act that may connote elitism (Portwood-Stacer, 2013) or privilege, given the difficulty in truly disconnecting from behemoth platforms like Facebook (Karppi, 2018). Too, the integral nature of today’s communication...
technology means that withdrawing from these modes requires certain amounts of social resources and professional flexibility.

These constraints are likely why so many have found that “disengagement from technology is rarely total, but often situational, specific to the medium ... [and] to the time and place of (non)use (e.g., only during work, not during dinner or in the library)” [2]. A way forward may be realizing the importance of these negotiated, context-specific decisions, and that people can mindfully choose when to use certain technologies, as others have suggested (e.g., Leavitt, 2014; Light, 2014; Baumer, et al., 2015; Neves, et al., 2015; Hesselberth, 2018). Our study showed to a certain extent that we need to reassess how much of technology we really want, need, and should use in our everyday lives. It is up to us to decide what the technology gives us and what it takes away.

As a final note, this article was first drafted in 2018–2019, before the Coronavirus pandemic took hold. As it turns out, the virus introduced nearly a reverse of the breaching experiment this study implemented: face-to-face contact was discouraged and replaced by mediated connection. Revising the article on the other side of 2020, we observe how existing and emerging forms of communication technology have been a social and professional lifeline for many. Anecdotally, we have seen that, in the absence of face-to-face contact, mediated forms of social connection have multiplied as virtual workarounds have been created for typical in-person activities. As such, we are seeing attempts to meet fundamental human needs for connection with whatever tools are available in a way that Apparatgeist (Katz and Aahkus, 2002) has predicted. This is not to suggest that technology solved every problem and disregard the real suffering that many have endured through personal and professional loss this past year. However, within the narrow scope of mediated interaction as part of our daily and social lives, it will be interesting to see what aspects of 2020 modes of connection remain — and which ones are happily jettisoned — once the pandemic is past.

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Notes

3. Turkle, 2008, p. 3.
7. The purpose of the study was not to make a longitudinal comparison, but rather to see the enduring trends over time. The results we report here were present over time and consistent throughout the experiment. While use of social media and smartphones increased over the five-year period, the “top players” in these spaces — Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn — remained fairly consistent (Perrin and Anderson, 2019). Further, the nature of the experiment asked participants to block out all of their mobile and social communication technology; as such, regardless of the specific platforms each participant employed, the impact across participants should be the same, which is to relinquish their most important digital forms of connection.

8. Names were changed to protect anonymity.


References


Breaching perpetual contact: Withdrawing from mobile and social media use in everyday life


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doi: [https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i6.7561](https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i6.7561), accessed 3 July 2021.


Appendix: Presence of themes in comments across both phases of the mobile and social media withdrawal experiment ($N = 408$).  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Preparation for and initial withdrawal ($n = 142$)</th>
<th>Living the withdrawal ($n = 266$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social and emotional adjustment</td>
<td>33 (23.2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance and refusal</td>
<td>47 (33.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begrudging acceptance</td>
<td>23 (16.2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No warning</td>
<td>8 (5.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological and behavioral adjustment</td>
<td>31 (21.8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identity</td>
<td></td>
<td>80 (30.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self in time</td>
<td></td>
<td>78 (29.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td>46 (17.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative and imaginative self</td>
<td></td>
<td>62 (23.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Editorial history

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