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Citation: Mutsvairo, Bruce, Ragnedda, Massimo and Mabvundwi, Kames (2022) 'Our old pastor thinks the mobile phone is a source of evil.' Capturing contested and conflicting insights on digital wellbeing and digital detoxing in an age of rapid mobile connectivity. Media international Australia, incorporating Culture & policy. 1329878X2210909. ISSN 1329-878X (In Press)

Published by: University of Queensland

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878x221090992>
<<https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878x221090992>>

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‘Our old pastor thinks the mobile phone is a source of evil.’ Capturing contested and conflicting insights on digital wellbeing and digital detoxing in an age of rapid mobile connectivity

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Abstract

While Africa has largely been considered a digitally-disconnected country, recent studies have shown that connectivity figures are on a rise. In this paper, we theorize digital wellbeing in a context characterized by a fast-growing number of mobile data users despite a historically low Internet penetration. It is focused on an ongoing ethnographic research on mobile users and digital inequalities in Africa, zooming in on results from an explorative study featuring 10 in-depth interviews with young adult heavy users (more than 4–5 hours a day) and seeking to understand strategies they use in attaining digital wellbeing. The findings show how the sampled young adults (18–30 years old) struggle with the daily realities of digital participation including addiction and generational conflict in technology use. Results also reveal ways through which electronic connectivity is perceived both be a tool of freedom as well as a subtle form of potential digital enslaving.

Keywords

detox, digital wellbeing Africa, global south, Zimbabwe

Media International Australia

1–15

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DOI: 10.1177/1329878X221090992

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Introduction

By deconstructing the ultra-hype narrative insinuating digitalization leads to economic prosperity and potential financial freedom (Maiti et al., 2020), the present study critically discusses strategies for digital wellbeing and digital detoxing used by heavy Internet users in a fast-growing country. Recent studies have shown mobile networks springing up across Africa, igniting growth in the number of connected people (Mutsvairo and Ragnedda, 2019; Nothias, 2020). Furthermore, African Internet subscriptions are set to rise from 25 to 40 percent by 2025 (GSMA, 2020). In general, countries in the Global South have made huge strides in improving technological infrastructures as the need for accessing and using ICTs continues to gather worldwide momentum (Ragnedda and Gladkova, 2020). However, the availability of technologies does not necessarily transform into the adoption of such technologies (Mutsvairo 2016). Even though 84 percent of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa had a mobile signal, only one-third of adults owned smartphones in Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria and Kenya in 2015 (Silver and Johnson, 2018).

However, the last few years have witnessed a raft of changes with the number of mobile users rapidly growing, dramatically changing both individual and collective lives. Although the digitalization of societies hitherto at the 'margin' of the electronic revolution is intrinsically positive, these technological advancements have been encumbered by notable challenges including longstanding technological divides (van Dijk, 2020), growing digital inequalities (Robinson et al., 2020), lack of high impact tech innovation ecosystems and infrastructures (ITU, 2017) and as research in Angola, Namibia and Cameroon has shown 'technologies of communication have not led these communities into new dynamics of social relations but fit well in the translocal habitus' (de Bruijn and Brinkman, 2011:55) In fact, finding the balance between a life on and offline online remains one of challenges facing humans in the 21C.

In a digital reliant society, being connected and having the capacity and skills to use digital technologies in a proper way is part of the vital kit to become a full citizen (van Dijk, 2005). People belonging to a digitally disconnected or the digital underclass (Ragnedda, 2020) are in an underprivileged position, since they are excluded or have a limited access to the digital realm, where information, resources and opportunities are generated and shared. Sitting on the wrong side of the digital divide means being totally excluded from the digital arena (Ragnedda, 2018). This is what is defined as the first level of the digital divide (Attewell, 2001). However, digital inequalities cannot be reduced only to the possibility of accessing (or not) to the ICTs, but include also the skills/competences in using the ICTs – known as the second level of the digital divide – and the benefits or tangible outcomes individuals get from ICTs – known as the third level of the digital divide (Ragnedda, 2017). Among the competences and skills necessary in a hyperconnected society, there is also the (in)capacity to use digital media and ICTs to gain social benefits and improve life chances and not to get damaged by them (Scheerder et al., 2019).

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, we seek to move beyond the concept of inequalities in accessing ICTs, known as the first level of digital divide, by zeroing in on the second and third levels of digital divide exploring the digital experiences of young adult Zimbabweans and efforts they are taking to unplug and disconnect from the electronic technologies, thus reducing the negative outcomes of unrestrained Internet use. We then highlight the (in)capacities of digital technologies towards improving social benefits and upgrading life chances, conceptualizing the impact of pervasive Internet access. Thirdly, the article proposes future research opportunities for this growing field.

The major contribution of this paper stems from our attempt to conceptualize and discuss digital wellbeing in a context characterized by a historically low Internet penetration but at the same time, a fast-growing number of mobile data users. Very little is known about digital wellbeing within the

African context. While research on digital wellbeing and digital detoxing in the West is on the rise (See Cai et al., 2019; Hassan, 2020) only a token of studies has explored these concepts in Africa, most of them focused on digital health (e.g. Neumark and Prince, 2021). However, there is an increasing interest on research exploring the African digital ecosystems ranging from societal impact of mobile phones to the social and political influence of social media platforms as well as many other areas of interest. While some like Donner (2015) have gone a step further by comparatively examining digital experiences of nations in the Global South (South Africa and India), questioning widely-held notions that mobile devices could help close the digital divide in less affluent nations, others like Hawkins (2021) have shown how mobile phones have helped strengthen African family ties and lifestyles, encouraging monolingual messaging (Lexander, 2011) or promoting business transactions (de Bruijn et al., 2009) particularly among women (Kwami, 2015), ultimately transforming hopelessness into hope (Nyamnjoh, 2013) as citizens maintain professional and personal contacts (Sey, 2015). But despite highlighting much of the aforementioned positives, Pype (2016)'s research in the Democratic Republic of Congo further shows the appropriation of mobile phones for potential state-led surveillance and repression. In view of these and other scholarly findings, we believe this article has the capacity to contribute to current and future global debates on digital wellbeing by offering perspectives from an understudied region of the world. To do this, we will use the following research question:

RQ1: How do young adult heavy users in Zimbabwe experience digital wellbeing?

Zimbabwe's case is particularly useful because it allows us to reflect upon the strategies, if any, that youths in an economically-ravaged country, which is experiencing growth in Internet usage, employ to dispel potential overuse of digital technologies. The country's Internet subscribers rose from a paltry 0.4 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2014 (Kabweza, 2014). In December 2018, 63 percent of Zimbabwe's 14 million people had access to the Internet according to statistics from the official Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ). That figure dropped to 57.2 percent in June 2019 owing to increasing cost of mobile data and connectivity fees (Kubatana, 2019). The Internet infrastructure however is still underdeveloped particularly in rural settings, where over 60 percent 'have no access to computers, the Internet, mobile telephone and financial services' (Nyamutswa, 2018). Still, current statistics show four million of the nation's 14 million people remain offline (Karombo, 2020). This article begins by exploring the concept of digital wellbeing before discussing and analysing findings, effectively drawing some conclusions. In pursuing this pilot study, we were encouraged by the fact that these preliminary findings will serve as a useful basis to future researchers interested in further exploring the complex interrelationship between digital time, usage duration, and overuse in an African setting.

Perspectives on digital wellbeing

If wellbeing is centred on the overall satisfaction we get from life (Diener, 1984; Headey et al., 1985; King, 2016), then the term 'digital wellbeing' refers to the ways through which digital technologies positively impact people's lives. Scholars have underlined several psychological reasons to avoid or limit the use of our digital devices (Carr, 2010; Turkle, 2011, 2015). However, despite some of the risks associated with an (over)use of digital technologies, this investigation is interested, by contrast, in accentuating the perceptions that young heavy users have regarding their use of digital technologies, uncovering their need (if any) for disconnecting to preserve relationships and their strategies (if any) for maintaining healthy digital habits. The everyday digital

behaviours for the youths, their perceptions, and challenges are informed by an individual's interactions with digital technologies, and the socio-cultural contexts in which individuals live and operate. Therefore, it is important to analyse the individualised use of digital technologies in relation to the broader social and cultural environment, and their perceptions of wellbeing or quality of life (Diener et al., 2018; Helliwell and Aknin, 2018). For this reason, this research reflects upon the African and specifically Zimbabwean context in which the youth are growing up, to understand how the integration of digital technologies into their everyday lives might support and improve digital wellbeing. Taking a cue from Büchi (2021: 3)'s viewpoint that 'digital well-being interrogates the proximate relationships between the use of digital media and subjective well-being, as well as digital media's modifications of "analog" influences on and outcomes of well-being,' our exploratory research is grounded in this intertwined relationship between subjective well-being and the use of digital media, seeking to analyse an under studied social and cultural context.

Digital wellbeing generally seeks to find ways through which digitally networked people can live comfortably and happily in a world dominated by massive technological appliances. Indeed, digital technologies keep people in contact by removing time or place constraints (Vanden Abeele et al, 2018). ICT interventions have led to improved school performance (Liao et al., 2007). At the same time, innovations in information technologies (IT) and the rise of pre-internet technologies have revitalized organizational transformation (Nadkarni and Prügl, 2020). However, in light of Pype (2016)'s findings in the Democratic Republic of Congo showing electronic synchronicity does not always translate into social synchronicity, relating to each other has become more and more difficult among Africans due to generalized, often unproven perspectives linking technological connectivity to supposed social progress.

Children can use the Internet to develop socially, learn and play with others (Valentine et al., 2002). Better still, recent research has shown not all technologies are harmful. For instance, Liu et al., (2019)'s study asserts that phone calls and texting have a positive impact on well-being while social network sites (SNSs), instant messaging (IM) and online gaming could potentially be hindrances to happiness. Digital technology use will always impact people's lives. The only question is whether it has a positive or negative impact, posit Dienlin and Johannes (2020: 136) who assert that 'watching entertaining content can make us laugh and raise our spirits, while reading hostile comments makes us angry and causes bad mood.' Digital technologies enhance social connectedness among people, postulate (Burke et al., 2010). Recent research findings have also shown that adults committed to social media engagement enjoy the benefits of effective functioning within their social groups both online and offline (Nguyen et al., 2020). There is also mounting evidence pointing to the global COVID-19 pandemic's potential capacity to increase existing digital inequalities, which ultimately affects citizens' digital wellbeing (Nguyen et al., 2020; Ramsetty and Adams, 2020).

However, overusing digital technologies might create some personal and health red flags including anxiety, aggression and hostility, which have a negative impact over sleeping and eating (Chen and Gau 2016; Kuss 2013; Spada 2014) and repetitive action disorders (Suris et al., 2014). Studies including Lyngs et al., (2019)'s, which discovered there were 367 apps and browser extensions used in helping people fight online distractions demonstrate the magnitude of distress caused by online connectivity. Self-managing the time spent with technologies, using some apps to detect an overuse or seeking external support and help in managing the time spent online are some of the suggested ways of dealing with the techno-addiction (Dehue et al. 2012). However, spending too much time on digital media does not mean that users are addicted or that users need some forms of detoxing, whose positive effect on wellbeing is unclear (Radtke et al., 2021). For this reason, despite the difficulties in defining digital detox and framing it conceptually, this research

is attempting to investigate users' perceptions about their uses and what strategies, if any, they adopt to reduce their (over)uses.

Defining digital detoxing

Little is known about the concepts digital detox and well-being in Africa. However, this lack of specificity and research goes beyond Africa as it remains unclear what digital detox is supposed to be theoretically in the first place. Furthermore, it is not always clear under what circumstances and practices do we define and conceptualize digital detox. However, despite the absence of clarity, we may argue that digital detoxing refers to breaks that allow us to separate ourselves completely from all electronic gadgets such as smartphones and computers. Syvertsen and Enli (2019) link digital detoxing to offering 'ways to counter experiences of inauthenticity' (p.2). They define it as retreating from digital life with variations ranging 'from spending an hour or two without a mobile phone to detox holidays of several weeks' (p.3). There is a genuine sense that digital technologies 'overwhelm' users, forcing others to seek detoxing mechanisms that provide a 'feeling of freedom and space and time' (Booth, 2015). Those spending days locked into an online world via one or more devices feel smartphones 'devalue' the essence of life and conversations (Przybylski and Weinstein, 2017). Furthermore, detoxing 'connotes ridding oneself of a foreign substance that has negative consequences for one's health and well-being' (Szablewicz, 2019:41). But giving up digital devices does not always come with the desired effect. A nine-month ethnographic study of 14 participants, who disengaged from social media platform Instagram showed they still felt derelict to themselves, their online devices and the digital communities they left behind (Kent, 2020).

Indeed, to understand the dynamics of digital detoxing in African societies, we need to come to terms with the fact that these new advancements in technology often conflict with longstanding values, culture, and ethics as Gwaka (2018)'s study on Zimbabwean rural communities concluded. Another study focusing on Zimbabwe contrastingly showed urban-based informal traders reaping the rewards of mobile phone ownership, which allowed them to not only communicate with other traders but also gave them the much-needed access to microcredit schemes (Tsarwe and Mare, 2021). Research on the societal use of mobile phones and digital technologies has yielded different results across Africa. While mobile phones bridged healthcare gaps, they did not reduce inequalities, recent research concluded (Hampshire et al., 2015). A recent Ugandan study showed hesitation for mobile phone use among sexual partners, who associated it with cheating (Kreniske et al., 2021). Considering many of these communities heavily rely on these mobile technologies for their livelihoods, the idea of voluntary short-term smartphone abstinence appears farfetched but also interesting given digital detox is a remarkably trending issue in other regions of the world, particularly the affluent ones.

In Africa, forms of digital detoxing campaigns are often associated with the tourism industry, with plenty of 'detox safaris' promising to help cut constant connection with the digital world by experiencing packaged retreats to nature and detoxifying leisure walks. It is a known marketing strategy for tourism operators keen on cashing in on those seeking to take a break from their electronic devices. Their destinations frequently do not have cell phone reception or Wifi on offer, insisting guests should either speak to each other or quietly meditate or reflect.

However, this kind of detoxing retreats (Sutton, 2020) seem centred on the elite or at least those who can afford to pay for nature and camping under the stars. Even though some may be taking constant breaks from their devices, the concept of digital detoxing is not known among many in Africa despite the growing body of literature on stress management and wellness campaigns associated with overuse of digital technologies, elsewhere (See Delecta, 2011; Smith and Kelly, 2006; Smith

and Puczkó, 2015). Apart from tourism, there are several other reasons why many Africans may seek to disconnect. For example, Kenyans cited ‘fake news and fake lives’ as one reason why they sought to break from social media (Elliot, 2017). The scarcity and prohibitive costs of broadband connections also means some may even be forced into detoxing sometimes without noticing or giving their consent.

While Raikundalia (2017) projected smartphone connections in Africa to increase to 720m by the end of 2020, the use of new technologies, and in particular, the smartphone, is increasingly becoming widespread especially among the youth (Porter et al., 2016). Little is known about the mechanisms of digital wellbeing in a country with an increasing number of mobile users, specifically among young adults. By investigating how young adults in Zimbabwe tend to spend more time online, gaining entry into popular apps that are purposefully designed to increase the amount of time users spend on and with them (Guedes et al., 2016), we seek to contribute to knowledge production on emerging trends facilitating global digital wellbeing. It is against this backdrop that this qualitative research sheds light into the experiences of digital heavy users, the challenges they encounter and the steps they take, if any, to mitigate problems associated with the overuse of digital technologies.

Methodology

Research design

This exploratory research is part of a bigger and ongoing ethnographic research on mobile users and digital inequalities in Zimbabwe that began in July 2019. The project looks at the struggles young adult Zimbabweans meet when engaging the digital ecosystems. Given the general lack of literature and studies pertaining to digital wellbeing in Africa, we are seeking to expand the project to include other countries such as South Africa, Botswana and Zambia because of their geographical proximity to Zimbabwe and conduct comparative studies. The interviews were focused on understanding strategies (if any) among young adult heavy users that they apply to help attain a digital wellbeing, which Vanden Abeele (2021: 937) argues ‘has the potential to become a key concept in research on digital media use and wellbeing with ample practical relevance.’

Sample

Interview questions stimulate data about perceptions, adoption, and use of digital ICTs among young Zimbabweans. Recruitment took place by means of a flyer designed for this exploratory study. The flyers were distributed in the main public spaces including libraries and cafes in the Zimbabwean capital, Harare. We then interviewed urban youths (18-30 years old), heavy users using a gender-balanced sample with different levels of education. Therefore, among the interviewed, we selected 10 individuals who identified themselves as heavy users (more than 4–5 h a day). The sample included six females and four males from 18 to 29 years old. Finally, given the importance of education as a variable in analysing different uses of digital technologies (Blank and Lutz, 2018), we selected a sample with different sought of education. Specifically, four out of 10 of those interviewed had a university degree, one was a Master’s degree holder, two attended polytechnic colleges while three attained mandatory education.

Data collection and analysis

In an attempt to systematically respond to our research questions, we used semi-structured interviews as the main data collection technique. We transcribed each interview to determine latent

themes within the given responses. Given the small sample, we did not use any software to establish a coding scheme, but we manually used an inductive approach in which theme generation was directed by the content of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This allowed us to develop a nuanced interpretation of the digital wellbeing among young heavy users in Zimbabwe. As a result of this process, we identified four main themes to which the core findings correspond.

Findings and discussion

This research examined ways through which young adult Zimbabweans attain the process of digital wellbeing by looking at their digital experiences. We attempted to understand whether or not they think they are somehow addicted to digital technologies, without reducing the concept of digital wellbeing to issues of time, but underlined what people are doing and how this does or does not enhance their lives. Throughout the interviews, we also tried to understand what strategies, if any, our respondents use to achieve a form of digital detox and get the best out of their use of digital technologies. It is important to highlight that despite its complexity and potential to generate many meanings depending on several factors such as context, the concept of digital wellbeing goes beyond time of use and addiction. For example, contrary to our findings, which emphasized time and addictive factors, MacCallum (2022: 34) stresses the need to shift the focus 'from the binary positive versus negative wellbeing' while Dennis (2021) underline the importance of unrelenting ethical questions in their conceptualization of digital wellbeing. Despite this exploratory research focused on a limited number of interviewees, it appealingly shows some useful trends that can help provide future regional research directions in this field. It shows how the sampled young adults, despite being increasingly worried about the use of their mobile phones, do not always have a clear strategy to reduce the overuse of technology that could cause stress and anxiety. Little is known about Zimbabwe's digital cultures save only for research looking into online forms of political and social resistance, which have dominated the nation's digital realms given its longstanding battles against dissent (Mutsvairo, 2016).

Even so, four main common points emerged from this research, namely: a) the use of mobile phones is deeply routinized into their everyday life; b) a generational conflict with their parents and older relatives who invite them to reduce the use of their devices; c) lack of clear-cut boundaries when someone perceives themselves as addicted and not; d) a conflicting idea that digital media are both tools of freedom and a subtle form of digital coercion with several risks associated to them.

The importance of smartphone

The idea that the mobile phones and the Internet are vital for everyday activities is something that comes out in all interviews, regardless of their gender, employment choice or level of education. As respondent 7, a female aged 26 pointed out 'A mobile phone with access to the Internet is an asset for all young people. Those without, I think they are backward.' This underlines not only the vital importance that smartphones play in everyday lives, but also the social pressure on the sampled young adults and potentially other generations, to adopt and use the latest technologies. Mobile phones are so deeply embedded in their everyday routine and, as in any other countries across the globe, are used for any kind of activities, such as 'e-learning, gyms; beauty hair, fashion, big people biographies, pen friends,' as accentuated by respondent 1, a female aged 26, who uses her mobile phone 8 h at the day.

Respondent 6, a male aged 25, emphasized the importance of digital connectivity, telling us, 'This is a global village and without a mobile you are disconnected from the world. Indeed, an

isolated star in the sky.’ Similarly, respondent 2 (male, 23 years old) pointed out that ‘my mobile phone is critical in enhancing communication.’ Interviewee 8 (female 19 years old) stated that the mobile phone is vital for her life: ‘I can’t do without a mobile phone please. It is educative, cheap and inspirational.’ Mobile phones, indeed are perceived as highly useful for friend or chaperone-seeking young adults as confirmed by respondent 4 (female, 22 years old), who stated: ‘To me, my mobile phone has become a life companion.’ This shows, once more, how difficult is for the young adults, and indeed people of other age groups, to be disconnected or detached from their mobile phones. Sometimes the use of smartphones and a connection to the Internet is a necessity for working young adults as confirmed by respondent 9 (male, 25 years old) who claimed that ‘Our business transactions are now being done online thereby making it extremely difficult to be offline.’ Finally, Interviewee 2 stressed the importance of using the mobile phone to help him look after his family: ‘An adult of my stature and big brother in a family of three has to be on the Internet. It is both a right and a necessity.’

These results were expected and are largely in line with previous research that, from different regions of the world, underlining how important is, in an increasingly networked society (van Dijk, 1999), the use of smart phones for everyday activities (Miller, 2012), business (Sarwar and Soomro, 2013), education (Rung et al., 2014), and/or entertainment purposes (Ragnedda et al., 2020).

Generational conflict

Another feature that emerges in several interviews include ongoing conflict between young adults and the older generation, trading barbs for overusing digital technologies, and refusing to accept they are somehow addicted. Interviewee 8, for instance, stated: ‘Sometimes my uncle thinks I am too much on the phone.’ She is an 18 years old female, who uses her smartphone at least 15 h a day. Interestingly enough, it is the same uncle, who now reproaches her for overusing the phone, which her uncle bought for her back in 2017. ‘...the phone was bought by my uncle. I learnt how to use the mobile phone on my own and my phone is helping in my studies and in other group social interaction. I also use my phone to watch movies and gospel music.’ Similarly, respondent 10 (female, 22 years old) emphasized the overuse of her phone against her father’s wishes. ‘My father discourages me from using this phone when I visit him in the rural areas, where he is pensioned.’ She does not listen to her father’s advice, admitting she uses her mobile phone at least 15 h a day, even though she is trying to reduce the time spent on it: ‘I started using the mobile phone in 2016, and the time I spend used to be much more because I was excited.’ Finally, respondent 3 underlined her ongoing conflict with her father, which is caused by perceived digital overuse: ‘I have battles with my father who accuses me of failing to cook in time and do domestic chores. This is mainly because I stay with my father and my brother and my mother is late. All the chores at home are supposed to be done by me.’

These results are in line with a growing and rich literature in the field further underscoring the intergenerational conflict over the use of smartphones both within Africa (Archambault, 2013, Stark, 2013) and outside Africa (Hardill and Olphert, 2012; Horst and Miller, 2006). Furthermore, we noticed that this conflict emerges in particular when the users are female, showing a potential gender conflict in relation to technology.

Am I addicted to technologies?

In terms of feeling addicted or overusing smartphones, there is not a clear critical pointer to being addicted or accepting overusing the technologies. The users’ perceived digital overuse (Büchi et al.,

2019; Gui and Büchi 2019) shows the subjectivity of overuse. Literature considers age as one of the main predictors of problematic smartphone use risk, especially in the cohort of 16–25-year and 26–35-year olds (de-Kwon et al. 2017; Sola et al. 2017). For instance, Respondent 3, despite using the mobile phone 18 h a day, does not feel addicted to it and claims: ‘I am not addicted because I watch many platforms, not one. In some cases, if my father doesn’t buy airtime (credit) for me, I just leave it, but these are rare cases.’ Furthermore, she added that ‘I use the phone for important business.’ Evidently, the idea of ‘important business’ is always subjective, so she perceives their overuse as normal and not a waste of time, since it is related to important activities. Respondent 6, by contrast, claims that despite the heavy use of mobile phones (5 h or more a day) he does not feel he is overusing it. He explicitly denies he is addicted and claims he does not need any kind of detox. ‘No, I am not addicted, I use my mobile phone sparingly for business’ adding that ‘the detoxing does not apply to me’. This is an interesting aspect, since it shows the difficulties associated with both refraining from using smartphones and recognizing when overuse might be harmful. As explained earlier, this is part of the new digital skills required in a hyperconnected society, namely (not) using digital technologies when necessary.

The idea of using digital technologies for ‘important business’ comes out a few times, specifically when users need to justify their overuse. Finally, despite using her phone 8 h a day, respondent 1 feels she is not addicted. ‘I never thought the time I spent on internet and social media platforms is an issue. It is normal to me.’ Spending time on the smartphone is perceived as normal. Furthermore, talking about her family, she said ‘None of my relatives such as my brother, sisters, parents have encouraged me to reduce the use of my mobile phone. They are worse culprits than I am.’ In other terms, using the phone 18 h a day (Interviewee 3), 15 h a day (Interviewee 8) or 8 h (Interviewee 1) does not bring any concern for them, since they find it vital for their everyday business’ activities.

The lines between addiction to and overuse are difficult, or probably impossible, to trace and how addiction to technologies is conceptually and methodologically complex (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014) and we should avoid pathologizing common behaviours (Kardefelt-Winther et al. 2017). However, even though we did not use any psychometric scales such as the Brief Addiction to Smartphone Scale (BASS; Csibi et al. 2016) to assess the presence of smartphone behavioural addiction, we can safely argue that using the smartphone for 18 h a day raises some concerns in terms of potential behavioural addiction.

Digital media are both tools of freedom and subtle form of digital enslaving

Mobile phones can be useful for entertainment, educational, business and interactive reasons. At the same time, their overuse could cause stress and anxiety as acknowledged in the literature section. Despite the risks associated with the overuse of mobile phones, not everybody knows how to deal with the perils of excessive digital engagement. In fact, dealing with a (presumed) addiction might be complicated. Respondent 7, for instance, is aware of these risks but does not know how to deal with them. Specifically, she said: ‘I think the time I spend on my mobile phone is on the high side. I will deal with that and reduce the time by including other activities. However, how I should go about it, I really don’t know.’ Interestingly, respondent 9 insisted that a mobile phone was ‘very important for our company but problematic for my church, where I have a leadership role.’ This shows a kind of internal conflict with the use of technologies, specifically in a small community, where the power of religious institutions could be strong. This element was also underlined by respondent 4, who revealed that ‘our old pastor thinks the mobile phone is a source of evil,’ further reinforcing the idea of a kind of an emerging conflict between religion and technology.

As shown in the previous section (5.3), users are not always aware of their potential addiction. However, in some cases, this is evident and actions to tackle this problem are taken. In this vein, respondent 9, a 25-year old man, confirmed that sometimes he felt addicted, ‘but I try to be extremely careful of the dangers of the Internet.’ This underlines that even though he shows caution in terms of how he engages digitally, fears of addiction run high despite the availability of home-made short-term solutions. He added: ‘Our business transactions are now being done online thereby making it extremely difficult to be offline. However, I’m trying to limit the use of my smartphone to the working hours.’ Respondent 3 claimed to be a heavy user since she uses the Internet and smartphone ‘18 h a day’ implying that she uses it all day long. She could see the risks associated with this and stressed the need to (re) focus on real-life social and familiar interactions. However, despite her heavy dependence on the mobile phone, she saw it as a necessity to connect with the ‘real’ world, claiming: ‘I enjoy my phone more than any other company. But sometimes I think the time I spent on it is too much.’

Limiting the use of smartphones to refocus on offline social interactions and actions could thus be a way to reduce stress and anxiety caused by the overuse of technology, as stated by respondent 9. Reducing the use of smartphones or the Internet only to working hours is also one way of dealing with this quagmire. Indeed, as she claimed, despite her business migrating online making it ‘extremely difficult to be offline’ she intends to limit her smartphone use to working hours. Another way, probably a more radical approach to deal with this problem, was suggested by respondent 5, male, 24, who moved a step further toward total digital detox by claiming that the mobile phone was an issue that distracted him from business and meaningful activities. The inability to achieve a state of flow at work (Duke and Montag 2017; Montag and Walla, 2016) due to being continually interrupted by the use of smartphones (Alton et al., 2014) is widely known. For that reason, respondent 5 decided to use an old-styled mobile phone. ‘I spend zero hours on my phone, because I don’t have a phone that has Internet access. I have an ordinary phone for communication, calling, receiving messages, texting, listening to radio and using a torch light during the night.’ Having a smartphone also comes at a heavy price due to high costs associated with surfing the Internet, which explains why others like respondent 5 are now resorting to basic phones, popularly known in the country as *kambudzi*. The use of this phone appears for the most part to be for affordability reasons but also to some extent, an indirect way to fight potential enslavement from technology use. Respondent 5 said: ‘In my view, people who spend time on these phones are generally not busy. I don’t need a mobile phone but an ordinary phone which is strong. Kambudzi (ordinary phone) is the way to go for me.’

Conclusion

This study sought empirical explanations to help illustrate how young heavy users in Zimbabwe make sense of their digital media use and ‘justify’ it. Rather than framing digital wellbeing as a matter of digital addiction and time spent using digital technologies, we underlined how our respondents cope with their overuse of digital technology and their strategies in getting the most out of their use of mobile phones. In this vein, one of the aims of this exploratory research was to investigate the uses of digital media as an aspect of digital well-being, both considering the subjective perception (micro-dynamics) and the broader social and cultural context (the macro-dimensions) of the use of digital technologies. Our research moved across these lines by discussing how everyday digital behaviours of young heavy users in Zimbabwe are informed by an individual’s interactions with technologies, family, and social contexts.

In fact, and despite its small sample, the empirical research shows the complex dialectics between digital time, social and cultural context, usage duration, and overuse. While the sample

size is tiny, a notable limitation of the study, we believe we have ascertained important trends that can help shape future research trajectories in this field particularly in Africa, where barely any research on digital wellbeing has been conducted. We recognize the need to broaden research on the theorization of digital wellbeing given only a handful of studies have been conducted in the Global South. More importantly, given the fact that much of Africa's digital connectivity is enabled by digital devices, future research should not only look at the how mobile phones and digital well-being relate to each other particularly in rural settings, which generally tend to have limited Internet and technological access but also consider a broad-based approach that factors in other issues beyond addiction and time of use.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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