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(Dis)advantages of Device-Free Experiences: A Qualitative Approach

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(Dis)advantages of Device-Free Experiences: A Qualitative Approach

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Background

As smartphone prevalence has increased, so have questions and concerns centering around their benefits and disadvantages.

Literature focusing on separation is largely quantitative and findings include:

- heightened anxiety levels (Clayton et al., 2015; Hartanto & Yang, 2016)
- negative outcomes related to withdrawal (Eide et al., 2018)
- increased life satisfaction and psychological well-being during reduction, over complete abstinence (Brailovskaia et al., 2022)

The prevalence of quantitative approaches has meant that there is a lack of:

- richer, participant-driven data about device-free experiences
- known expectations

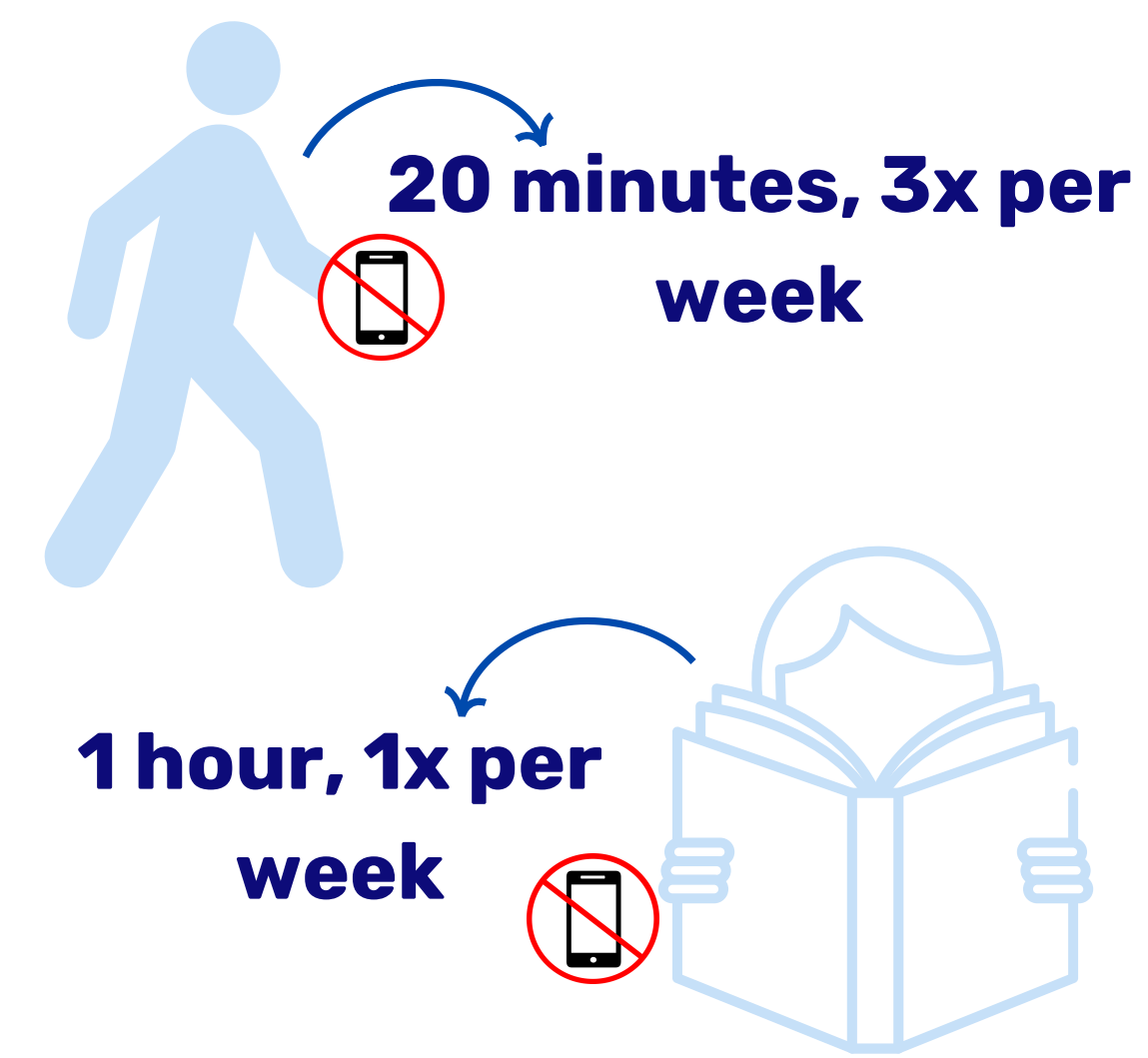
Current Study

Research Question: What do students expect, and what outcomes do they experience, from short device-free periods of time?

Hypotheses: I expected qualitative themes of:

- negative expectations
- negative outcomes including anxiety
- generally positive outcomes (i.e., presence, focus, and psychological well-being)

Contemplative Practices



Methodology

Data:

- students enrolled in a number of honors courses completed **contemplative practices** as part of the course grade
- at the end of the course, students completed a summary reflection and discussed their experiences with the practices

Coding:

- a priori themes from literature + a grounded approach wherein codes emerged from the student reflections
- general expectations and outcomes scored on a Likert-like scale: -2 (very negative) to 2 (very positive)
- thematic expectations and outcomes coded as absent (0) or present (1)
 - **expectations:** difficult, pointless, general good, FOMO, boredom, indifference, hopeful, no utilities
 - **outcomes:** awareness, remembering things enjoyed, focus, presence, enjoyment, mental health, more anxiety/worsened affect, less connected to others, less dependency, usage change, heightened productivity, recommend to others, no access to utilities



Outcome	N	%	Description	Example
Mental Health	33	55.9%	positive mental health outcome	"allowed me to relax and work on my mental skills", "it truly did help my mental health"
Enjoyment	29	49.2%	enjoyment of device-free practices	"I found myself looking forward to [these practices]"
Awareness	19	32.3%	attentiveness to self and environment	"[these practices] made me more aware of the time I spend daily on my phone and looking at screens"
Presence	12	20.3%	present moment thoughts, feelings, experiences	"I have a freedom to do nothing but be with my thoughts and be present"
Usage Change	12	20.3%	change in device use	"by the end of the semester I had ended up using my phone less than I did when I first started the course"
Heightened Productivity	12	20.3%	more productive/accomplished more	"I found these practices to motivate myself to be more productive with my time"
Focus	8	13.6%	better focus	"[these practices] helped me a lot with focusing and ignoring my phone"
No Utilities	5	8.5%	couldn't access tools while away from phone	"many people depend on my accountability and I need to make sure I am there"
Remember Enjoyable Things	2	6.8%	enjoyment in activities that hadn't been enjoyed since before phone	"the biggest benefit I took away from this was the genuine interest in reading again"
More Anxiety/Worse Affect	3	5.1%	increased anxiety or negative mood	"these [practices] were stressful"
Less Dependency	3	5.1%	less dependent on phone	"this has helped me not become so dependent on my phone"

"The ability to free our hectic lives for an hour a week to read or twenty minutes a day to take a walk is so powerful. As busy college students, these device free practices are exactly what we need."

"My friend asked me, at the end of the day, if I could tell him what the sky looked like that day. It troubled me because I could not recall. After this conversation, I appreciated the practices even more than I already did. I realized I do not want life to pass by and only recall what happened on social media that day, or what my friends texted me."

"I found after this semester I have been less dependent on my phone and using social media... and I am liking the changes it has made in my life..."

"I was at peace without my phone. I will continue to use it but now I have a far better understanding of how it should be used."

Key Findings

- slightly negative expectations (M = -0.356, SD = 1.21) but positive outcomes (M = 1.47, SD = 0.916)
- no significant correlation between general expectations and outcomes (p = 0.56)
- 74.6% of participants would recommend these practices to others

A series of X² tests of association were run to see if there were associations between thematic codes:

- associations between expectation of **difficulty** and...
 - outcome of **mental health** [X²(1, N = 59) = 23.1, p<.001] and outcome of **enjoyment** [X²(1, N = 59) = 14.2, p<.001] were significant
 - outcome of heightened anxiety/worsened affect was not significant
- associations between both **enjoyment** and **recommendation to others** [X²(1, N = 59) = 9, p<0.01] and **mental health** and **recommendation to others** [X²(1, N = 59) = 4.84, p<0.05] were significant

Take-Home Message

Students, despite expectations, experienced important, beneficial outcomes from putting their phones away. The best news? It didn't take much - in total, only 2 hours of phone-free time was added per week. If even 2 hours per week of being away from your phone can reap such positive benefits, when will you start?



References

