



BLACK MIRROR 2.0

By Max Dalda Müller

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the effects of
technology and social media on human experience and relationships.



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Abstract

This dissertation explores the psychological and relational effects of digital technology and social media through the lived experiences of individuals who undertook a voluntary digital detox. Drawing on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and informed by Petrūska Clarkson's Seven Levels of Functioning, the study investigates how six participants made meaning from a temporary, conscious disengagement from digital life. Participants engaged in a two-week detox, bookended by semi-structured interviews designed to elicit reflective narratives.

The research situates itself within an integrative, postmodern therapeutic framework, acknowledging the increasing prevalence of digital distress observed in clinical practice. It critically engages with existing literature on digital behaviour, addiction, and wellbeing, while highlighting gaps in understanding the subjective experience of technological disengagement.

Findings indicate that participants experienced a range of emotional, cognitive, and somatic responses to the detox, including increased self-awareness, improved emotional regulation, and a heightened sense of agency. Recurring themes included ambivalence toward technology, emerging awareness of compulsive patterns, and the reclaiming of personal autonomy. Notably, the detox created space for participants to reconnect with intrinsic values and reflect on identity and meaning beyond the digital domain.

This study offers a novel methodological contribution by integrating IPA with Clarkson's model to capture multi-layered aspects of human experience. It underscores the importance of narrative, context, and embodiment in understanding the psychological impact of technology. Implications are discussed for psychotherapy practice, digital wellbeing interventions, and future research into behavioural change and technological self-regulation.

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Glossary

- **AI** – Artificial Intelligence
- **APA** – American Psychological Association
- **BACP** – British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
- **BERA** – British Educational Research Association
- **DSM-5** – Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition
- **GDPR** – General Data Protection Regulation
- **GETs** – Group Experiential Themes
- **ICO** – Information Commissioner’s Office

- **IPA** – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
- **LGBTQ+** – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and others
- **PETs** – Personal Experiential Themes
- **PTSD** – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- **WHO** – World Health Organization

Dissertation

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research is to investigate the subjective experiences of participants who take part in a conscious and consensual digital detox and, where possible, construct individual and collective meaning out of their personal and shared experiences.

1.1.2 Research Questions

This project will explore the narratives of six participants through two semi-structured interviews—one conducted prior to and one following the detox. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do individuals experience the use of digital technology and social media in contemporary society?
2. How do individuals experience the conscious limitation of digital technology and social media use?

1.1.3 Methodological Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, phenomenological approach, aiming to give voice to participants' lived experiences. The intention is to capture and understand the meaning-making processes involved in a digital detox journey. I will be using *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)* as my methodology of choice. I will be intersecting my use of IPA with Petrūska Clarkson's 7 Levels of Functioning (2002, pp. 147–149) as a lens through which to conduct the interviews and analysis.

1.2 Background and Relevance

1.2.1 Personal and Professional Context

There is an unattributed yet popular phrase in psychology and social science: “*All research is me-search.*” It is important to acknowledge how my personal and professional journey guided me towards this topic.

1.2.2 Early Influences: Technology and Imagination

Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, I was profoundly influenced by science fiction films and literature. Works such as *Tron*, *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner*, *Terminator*, and later *The Matrix*, alongside novels including *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, *I, Robot*, and cyberpunk classics like *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash*, shaped my early imagination regarding technology and the future.

Among these, *2001: A Space Odyssey* by Stanley Kubrick had a particularly lasting impact. As a child, the film offered a compelling vision of humanity's scientific and technological potential, especially the role of artificial intelligence in shaping the human experience.

1.2.3 Growing Digital Distress in Therapy

My professional formation as a therapist took place in the late 2000s, a period that paralleled the rapid adoption of smartphones and the proliferation of social media platforms. From early on, I became increasingly curious about how these technological shifts were influencing interpersonal dynamics and psychological wellbeing.

Following qualification in 2010, I began clinical practice—initially within addiction services and later transitioning into private therapy and teaching roles. By 2017, I observed a

noticeable rise in clients presenting with psychological difficulties that appeared to be directly linked to digital engagement and social media usage. Phrases such as, *“I feel like everyone’s life on Instagram is better than mine,” “The news makes me feel hopeless,” “I can’t stop checking my phone,” “I scroll for hours without meaning to,” “I’ve had arguments on Facebook,” “Dating apps consume me,”* and *“I’ve experienced online abuse”* became increasingly frequent in sessions.

In response, I often invited clients to reflect on their digital habits and, where appropriate, to consider limiting their technology use or taking temporary breaks. However, these proposals were not always readily embraced. Common reactions included: *“I rely on my phone for everything,” “I’d lose touch with friends and family,”* and *“My job depends on being online.”*

1.2.4 First-Person Heuristic Enquiry: The Original ‘Black Mirror’ Project

Reflecting on the above responses, I began to question my own relationship with technology. I recognised that I too had become highly dependent on digital devices, and that my own emotional wellbeing was, at times, affected by my use of technology. Motivated by a desire to gain deeper insight, I undertook a personal heuristic enquiry. I and replaced my smartphone for a basic mobile phone (a Nokia 3310), capable only of calls and text messaging. I logged out of all social media accounts, as well as streaming services and news platforms, establishing strict boundaries that limited technology use to essential work purposes only. This digital detox lasted for 30 days. I collected quantitative data by logging my technology use before and after the enquiry. I also analysed and reflected on my experiences through a heuristic lens. I named the project *Black Mirror*, in homage to Charlie Brooker’s groundbreaking series.

1.2.5 Insights and Impacts of the Digital Detox

The experience proved transformative. I observed a notable improvement in my mental health and developed greater self-awareness regarding my digital habits. This shift not only altered my personal relationship with technology but also enriched my therapeutic work, equipping me with more confidence to engage clients around technology-related distress.

1.2.6 Dissemination and Engagement with Wider Audiences

To communicate the outcomes of my research, I participated in a range of public and professional forums. These included delivering talks to general audiences—such as a presentation at Glastonbury Festival—as well as addressing psychotherapy practitioners at events in the Southwest of England and in Dublin, Ireland. Additionally, I contributed a literature review for an academic symposium at one of the higher education institutions where I lecture. This is publicly accessible via the institution's website: <https://www.somerset.ac.uk/getfile/133>.

1.2.7 Broadening the Perspective: From Self to Others

While valuable, this enquiry reflected only my perspective. I became increasingly curious about the experiences of others—especially members of the cohort known as “digital natives” (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), those born into the technology. I began planning a broader research project to investigate digital detox experiences.

1.2.8 The COVID-19 Catalyst and Technological Transformation

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic paused my original research plans but also intensified society's reliance on digital technology. Remote work, video conferencing, and online services became deeply embedded in daily life. Simultaneously, social media's influence deepened, and the rise of artificial intelligence, particularly tools like ChatGPT, introduced new layers of complexity to our digital experiences.

1.2.9 The Emergence of Black Mirror 2.0

Within this evolving context, I decided to revisit and expand my enquiry, leading to the development of this project: *Black Mirror 2.0*. This study seeks to explore not only the psychological and emotional effects of technology use and digital detoxing but also the meaning participants derive from choosing to temporarily step away from the digital world.

1.2.10 Research Contribution and Rationale

This project offers insight into how individuals experience voluntary disengagement from technology and contributes to the growing body of research on digital detoxing through a phenomenological lens.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I undertake a critical review of the existing literature relevant to my research area. I begin by examining the broader social and cultural context of our relationship with technology and social media, before turning to the existing academic discourse on digital detoxes. This review will highlight key themes, theoretical perspectives, and gaps in the literature that have informed the development of my project.

2.2 The Digital Age: Society's Relationship with Technology

2.2.1 The Development of the Internet and Rise of Social Media

The invention of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989 laid the groundwork for what would eventually become the modern internet (McNamee, 2019a, p. 36). The internet itself is commonly understood as a decentralised network, comprising a constellation of interconnected yet independently operated systems and devices (Ryan, 2011, p. 3). In its early form, the Web was an open and relatively unregulated environment, primarily inhabited by subcultures such as hackers, libertarians, digital idealists, scientists, and academic users. Over time, however, commercial enterprises—including Amazon and eBay—transformed the space into a hub of consumer-driven activity.

After the collapse of the dot-com bubble in 2000, a new digital era—referred to as Web 2.0—began to emerge. This phase was marked by Google's ascendancy in information access and Apple's resurgence, particularly in user interface design and digital lifestyle products (McNamee, 2019a, p. 38). Apple's innovations included the launch of the iPod and iTunes, culminating in the release of the iPhone in 2007. By 2018, over 1.5 billion iPhones had been sold globally (Statista, 2023).

Meanwhile, in 2004, Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook, initially intended as a platform for university students to connect. It rapidly expanded into a dominant global social media network. As of 2023, Meta—the company behind Facebook—reported more than three billion active users worldwide (Meta, n.d.).

Recent data from Ofcom (2023) and McNamee (2025) paints a vivid picture of the central role technology plays in contemporary life in the UK. As of 2024, 94% of UK residents aged

16 and over have access to the internet at home, and adult users spend an average of four hours and twenty minutes online per day, with women tending to spend more time online than men. A significant proportion of this time—around three-quarters—is spent using smartphones. Among 18–24-year-olds, daily internet use averages six hours and one minute, with young women in this age group spending approximately one hour more online per day than their male counterparts.

The most visited websites in the UK are owned by Alphabet, the parent company of Google and YouTube, which reach 99% of UK adults. Meta—owner of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp—closely follows with a 96% reach. Other major digital presences include Amazon, Microsoft, and the BBC. TikTok, while not appearing in the overall top ten, reached 75% of adults aged 18–24, indicating its significant popularity among younger users. Social media use remains high across the population, with the average daily usage sitting at one hour and 37 minutes (McNamee, 2025).

Meanwhile, the use of emerging technologies is increasing rapidly. In June 2024, 41% of UK adults had used a generative artificial intelligence tool, such as ChatGPT. Notably, AI was not mentioned at all in Ofcom’s 2023 Online Nation report, highlighting how swiftly this technology has entered mainstream use.

2.3 Potential Harms and Inequalities in Online Spaces

2.3.1 Online Safety and Exposure to Harm

At the same time, there is growing concern around online safety. Over 62% of internet users aged 13 and above reported encountering at least one potential harm online in a four-week period, with individuals aged 18–34 particularly at risk. Social media platforms—most notably Facebook—were cited as the most common spaces for such harms (47%). Women were more likely to report exposure to hateful, offensive, or discriminatory content and trolling. Furthermore, users from mixed ethnicity (74%) and Black backgrounds (71%) were more likely to encounter potential harms compared to their Asian (63%) and white (61%) peers. Interestingly, the report did not address risks relating to sexuality or gender identity. While 67% of internet users felt the benefits of being online outweigh the risks, this figure was lower among those with mental health conditions (59%) and minority ethnic backgrounds (65%) (Ofcom, 2023).

2.3.2 The Digital Environment and Its Impact on Human Experience

The evidence outlined above reinforces the idea that the internet has become embedded in the fabric of everyday life. From the perspective of integrative practice, I hold the view that the context in which relationships develop is just as influential as the people involved in them (Clarkson, 1993, p.145). As a registered member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), I follow its guidance to remain sensitive to the environmental, cultural, and social factors that shape clients' identities and lived experiences (BACP, 2018, p.15).

Given this, shifts in the digital environment are likely to affect how individuals relate to themselves and others. Suler (2016, p.278) notes that determining whether the internet and social media are helpful or harmful is complex and depends on a range of factors. These include a person's motivations for online engagement, the quality of their interactions—both digital and face-to-face—their personality traits, and any existing emotional or psychological challenges.

2.4 The Internet and Mental Health

2.4.1 Screen Exposure and Its Effects on Psychological Wellbeing

Scott et al. (2017) express concern that constant connectivity, ease of access, and the overwhelming volume of digital content are increasing users' vulnerability to some of the more adverse consequences of internet use—particularly heightened demands on attention and time. Similar views are expressed by Suler (2016, p.293) and Palfrey and Gasser (2008, pp.185–208). In a related study, Lepp et al. (2014) found associations between frequent smartphone use and elevated symptoms of anxiety and depression.

There is an expanding body of literature indicating that excessive screen use may be linked to declining mental health, especially among adolescents (Sparks, 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Research commissioned by The Prince's Trust (Crenna-Jennings, 2021) identified a connection between frequent social media use and poorer emotional wellbeing in teenage girls. However, more recent analysis by Plackett et al. (2023) questions the causal link, suggesting that while associations exist, there is insufficient evidence to assert that social media use directly leads to mental health issues. Their findings point to other co-occurring factors—such as low self-esteem—that may influence or mediate these outcomes.

Popovac, Fine and Hicken (in House and Brennan 2023) highlight the dual nature of social media's impact on mental health and wellbeing. They argue that social media can produce

both harmful and beneficial outcomes. On the negative side, they identify risks such as cyberaggression, cyberbullying, sexting, sexual coercion, and other unsafe online behaviours, as well as the spread of misinformation and exposure to radical ideologies or extremist groups. Conversely, they also acknowledge the positive potential of social media, including enhanced access to information, the provision of social support, and the fostering of a sense of belonging. These more positive aspects are linked to identity exploration and the expression of self, particularly among young people navigating complex developmental and social landscapes.

Despite the acknowledged dual impact of social media, societal perceptions—particularly in Western countries—tend to lean towards a predominantly negative view. Scheinebaum and Dayan (2024, p.7) observe that public discourse often emphasises the detrimental effects of social media, overshadowing its potential benefits.

There is an emotional aspect to social media that may, in part, help explain why users perceive their online experiences negatively. Social media platforms are designed to maintain user engagement by capturing attention, which in turn gathers valuable data. This has contributed to the rise of what is known as the ‘Economy of Attention’ (Goodwin et al., 2016).

Tristan Harris (in TED Audio Collective, 2019) and Roger McNamee (2019b) both highlight that one of the most effective ways to capture human attention is through content that evokes fear and outrage. These emotions, rooted in our ‘lizard brain,’ are primal and deeply embedded in our survival instincts. According to Polyvagal Theory (Dana, 2018 pp.8-9), our Autonomic Nervous System (ANS)—which governs our responses to everyday life—prioritizes survival over all other concerns. Events that trigger the fight-or-flight mechanism engage the brain more rapidly than those that induce feelings of happiness or relaxation. As Porges (2011) suggests, *“If we are not safe, we are chronically in a state of evaluation and defensiveness”* (p. 14).

This survival response explains why we slow down when we see a car crash, yet do not react with the same intensity to acts of kindness or compassion. Social media content, particularly clickbait, capitalizes on this instinct. This dynamic may partly explain why our online experiences often feel overwhelmingly negative.

Anthony Elliot (2024 p.10) argues that social media algorithms have created an *Ambient Anxiety*. Rice (2023 p.126) explains that algorithms are inert and meaningless, until paired

with databases from which to function. If the input is fear and outrage, the output will result in global angst and conflict.

2.4.2 The Role of Self-Esteem and Individual Differences

A key psychological phenomenon relevant to digital behaviour is the online disinhibition effect (ODE), a term developed by John Suler PhD (1996; 2005; 2016), describing the tendency for individuals to express themselves more openly in online spaces than they might in face-to-face interactions. This can manifest in two forms: benign disinhibition, where people feel freer and more authentic; and toxic disinhibition, involving hostile or antisocial behaviours.

Ofcom's (2023) report illustrates benign disinhibition, revealing that individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds, bisexual users, and those with mental health conditions are more likely to feel they can be themselves online and more freely share their views than the average internet user. Conversely, the report also highlights rising instances of toxic disinhibition, with 10% of users experiencing online abuse, 8% experiencing sexual harassment, 8% reporting catfishing, and another 8% subjected to group shaming, boycotting, or exclusion based on their views or actions (including online 'pile-ons'). These trends suggest that the ODE can influence both positive and negative aspects of psychological wellbeing.

2.5 The Paradox of Digital Overuse

2.5.1 Self-Regulation and the Digital Consumption Cycle

A particularly paradoxical trend among users is the tendency to spend significant amounts of time researching strategies to reduce their time spent online (Radtke et al., 2022). Major smartphone operating systems now include features designed to monitor and limit usage, reflecting growing societal concern over digital overconsumption.

2.5.2 Digital Behaviour and Addiction Frameworks

From a clinical perspective, these findings invite comparisons with behavioural addictions, as defined in diagnostic frameworks such as the DSM-5 (APA 2023) and ICD-11 (WHO 2022). Common indicators include increased use despite negative consequences, and a desire to cut down or abstain. In substance misuse treatment, detoxification from the substance is often a necessary step. Similarly, within contemporary discourse on digital engagement, the concept of a digital detox has entered mainstream vocabulary (Clarkson,

2002a, p.159). Digital addiction, digital diet and digital detox have all become part of our Zeitgeist and are reflected in our culture, and are witnessed in TV programmes, advertising, and media more broadly.

2.6 Digital Detoxing: Evidence and Ambiguity

2.6.1 Understanding the Concept of Digital Detox

The term *digital detox* generally refers to intentionally taking a break from digital technologies—whether by temporarily disengaging from online platforms or reducing digital media consumption more broadly (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). Research by Hanley et al. (2019) demonstrated that even a brief pause from social media, such as a one-week break, can lead to noticeable improvements in an individual's perceived wellbeing.

Expanding on this area, Radtke et al. (2022) conducted what they regard as the first comprehensive review of the digital detox literature. Their systematic analysis covered 21 separate studies involving a combined sample of 3,625 individuals. A key finding of the review was that the definition of *digital detox* remains inconsistent across studies. Approaches ranged from complete abstention from digital devices to selective withdrawal from specific platforms, such as social media or smartphones. The duration of detox interventions also varied significantly—from short daily interruptions to extended breaks lasting several weeks. Overall, the review found mixed and often inconclusive evidence regarding the impact of digital detoxing on variables such as health, wellbeing, self-regulation, and interpersonal relationships.

Similarly, a systematic review by Ramadhan et al. (2024) reported that while detox interventions may significantly reduce depressive symptoms, they had limited impact on mental wellbeing, life satisfaction, and stress levels. Brockmeier et al. (2025) suggest that digital detoxes may support reductions in smartphone usage and contribute to improved self-efficacy among participants. A more comprehensive meta-analysis by Koçoğlu et al. (2024), which reviewed 144 studies, presents a more positive picture, reporting improvements in mental health, wellbeing, and social interaction across a wide participant sample.

However, other findings are less optimistic. Przybylski et al. (2020) found no significant increase in wellbeing following digital detoxes. Wadsley (2023) observed that participants' withdrawal symptoms did not match existing diagnostic criteria for dependency,

complicating the notion of 'digital addiction'. At the more extreme end, Pielot and Rello (2017) found that the sudden absence of notifications increased participants' anxiety and low mood, raising questions about the psychological adjustment period required during detoxes.

Taken together, these findings reflect a general ambivalence in both the academic literature and society's wider relationship with technology. Within the counselling profession, Motivational Interviewing (MI) offers a useful framework for understanding such ambivalence. Miller and Rollnick (2002, pp.13–19) note that ambivalence is a natural phase in behaviour change, and that meaningful transformation is more likely when the motivation to change arises internally. MI thus highlights the importance of self-directed insight — a concept that resonates strongly with digital detoxing as a self-initiated response to technological overload.

The rapid emergence of digital technologies and social media over the past two decades has led to profound shifts in behaviour, social connection, and identity formation. These changes have often occurred incrementally and without collective reflection, driven more by market forces and perceived necessity than by conscious choice. For many in my generation, the gradual integration of internet-based technologies into daily life represents one of the most significant cultural transformations of our time. As society continues to grapple with the impact of these changes, it is essential that individuals reclaim the capacity for informed decision-making. By acknowledging our ambivalence and understanding the forces that shape our digital behaviours, we may begin to reassert agency over how we engage with technology in the future.

2.8 Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

Having reflected on the above literature, I have observed that it is largely outcome focused. While such data provides valuable insights, it represents only one side of the coin — particularly when the goal is to support individuals in making meaningful and lasting changes. In my experience as a therapist, teacher, and facilitator of learning, simply advising individuals on what is 'right' or 'wrong' rarely leads to decisions that are sustainable or personally meaningful in the long term.

My professional role centres on relationally supporting individuals in making autonomous choices that align with their own values and beliefs. These internal frameworks are shaped by lived experience and are most authentically discovered through periods of reflection.

Change, in this context, is not about compliance but about congruence with the individual's sense of self. These ideas are reflected in the work of numerous psychotherapy theorists, including Carl Rogers (2004), Petrûska Clarkson (2003) and Russ Harris (2019).

One powerful means of accessing this self-awareness is through the sharing of personal narratives. Storytelling, a practice as old as humanity itself, plays a central role in shaping how we make sense of our experiences. It supports identity formation and re-formation across all stages of life and development. Within a therapeutic or research setting, narrative exploration offers a profound route to insight, integration, and transformation.

2.9 Integrating IPA with Clarkson's Seven Levels of Functioning

To the best of my knowledge, the integration of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with Clarkson's *Seven Levels of Functioning* has not been documented in existing research literature. Despite extensive searches, I have not encountered any published studies that explicitly combine these two frameworks. This suggests that the present study may represent a novel methodological contribution.

It is possible that this lack of integration is partly due to timing. Clarkson passed away in 2006, while key publications on IPA by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin were released later, in 2009 and 2022 respectively. As such, the potential for cross-pollination between Clarkson's phenomenographic model and IPA's phenomenological-existential foundations may have been unintentionally missed.

However, I would argue that Clarkson's theoretical work shares important philosophical and practical parallels with IPA. For example, in an article she edited in the book: *Counselling Psychology: Integrating Theory, Research and Supervised Practice* (Coyle and Wright in Clarkson 1998 p.57), Clarkson explicitly advocates for the integration of theory and practice—an aim echoed in IPA's commitment to bridging lived experience and applied psychological understanding. Furthermore, in her 1996 article in *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, Clarkson reviewed over 1,000 texts to explore the interplay between personal experience, theoretical insight, and clinical reflection in the therapeutic relationship. This aligns closely with IPA's intention to generate rich, idiographic insights that are situated within both personal and professional contexts (Smith et al., 2022, p.133).

Therefore, while no formal synthesis of Clarkson's model with IPA appears in the current literature, their underlying commitments—to depth, reflexivity, and the lived experience of the person—make this integration both coherent and, I would argue, overdue.

I also believe that this work offers a way of honouring the life and legacy of Petrūška Clarkson. Her remarkable contributions to the theory and practice of psychotherapy—and particularly to integrative approaches—remain, in my view, under-recognised within therapeutic circles. The reasons for this lack of recognition continue to puzzle me.

It may, in part, be due to aspects of her identity and professional stance. As an African, queer woman (Metanoia Institute, 2023), Clarkson occupied multiple marginalised positions in a field that has historically centred Eurocentric, male, and heteronormative perspectives. Moreover, she was known for her willingness to challenge ethical shortcomings when she encountered them—though not always in ways that encouraged consensus or dialogue. This may have alienated some within the professional community and contributed to her marginalisation (Rapp, 2007).

Her untimely death by suicide was a tragic loss to the field. Yet her work continues to offer insight, structure, and depth to those of us committed to relational and integrative approaches. In using and adapting her Seven Levels of Functioning within this research, I hope to demonstrate not only the enduring relevance of her model but also its capacity to evolve and contribute to new areas of inquiry.

This work, in its own way, is a tribute—to the depth and rigour of Clarkson's thinking, and to the courage it takes to create something ahead of its time.

2.10 Conclusion

This literature review has examined the evolving relationship between humans and digital technologies, exploring their development, widespread adoption, and the psychological, social, and relational impacts that have emerged as a result. While technology continues to offer significant benefits, particularly in terms of access to information, communication, and self-expression, it also brings a complex set of challenges—ranging from attention dysregulation and emotional distress to rising concerns about online harm, inequality, and dependency.

The concept of digital detox has emerged as a cultural and clinical response to these challenges, yet existing research in this area remains predominantly outcome-focused and quantitative in nature. While such studies provide valuable statistical insights, they offer limited understanding of how individuals make meaning from their detox experiences. A deeper, more person-centred exploration is needed—one that foregrounds subjective narratives, contextual nuance, and emotional depth.

My research responds to this need by seeking to offer a platform for lived experience and reflective storytelling. By integrating Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with Clarkson's *Seven Levels of Functioning*, this project proposes a novel, layered approach to understanding the human experience of digital detox. These two frameworks, though never formally combined in prior research, are philosophically aligned in their emphasis on depth, subjectivity, and holistic meaning-making. Together, they provide a structured yet flexible lens through which to explore not only how people relate to technology, but how they relate to themselves through the process of disengagement.

Beyond the topic of digital detox, this integrative approach may offer wider applications in the study of behavioural change, identity, and therapeutic reflection. In capturing the richness of participants' narratives and engaging with their meaning at multiple levels of experience, this research hopes to contribute to a more compassionate and nuanced understanding of our increasingly digital lives.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction and Personal Worldview

3.1.1 Positionality and Bias Awareness

Having lived through the transition from the 20th to the 21st century, my worldview has been shaped by both modern and postmodern paradigms. I recognise my personal orientation as aligning predominantly with postmodern thought. Clarkson (2003, p.222) defines postmodernism as the acceptance of multiple, coexisting narratives and frameworks. Giddens, as cited in Smart (1993, p.12), portrays this phase as “beyond

modernity” —characterised by future-centric ideals such as the end of scarcity, enhanced democratic processes, the demilitarisation of societies, ethical technological development, and the reimagining of utopian constructs. While aware of the limitations embedded in this perspective, I acknowledge it as the lens through which I engage with and interpret the world—both ontologically and epistemologically (McLeod, 2022, p.6).

I understand that my philosophical stance carries implicit biases which may subtly affect the data interpretation process, even more so than participants’ direct experiences. Despite this, my aim is to interpret their narratives with a consciousness that transcends my own temporal and cultural context. I am intrigued by meta-modernism, as conceptualised by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010), which is seen as epistemologically tied to postmodernism, ontologically situated between modern and postmodern, and historically situated beyond both. Trans-postmodernism, as discussed by Epstein (1997), also offers a useful frame for reaching beyond personal ideological limits. As Clarkson (1993, p.137) observes, time and context are mutually influential. Inspired by Flick’s (2023, pp.41–42) critique of the so-called “paradigm wars,” I aim to adopt an inclusive, pluralistic stance that echoes Cooper and McLeod’s (2011, p.118) view that there is no singular path to truth.

3.2 Research Paradigm and Methodological Approach

3.2.1 Qualitative Orientation

This study is rooted in the qualitative tradition, aiming to explore participants' subjective experiences. As Silverman (2014, p.5) outlines, qualitative inquiry involves interpreting meaning, studying phenomena in their context, and employing theory-based insights. Rather than merely identifying outcomes, qualitative research seeks to delve into underlying causes and processes (Punch, 2008, p.20).

3.2.2 Heuristic and Phenomenological Grounding

My initial exploration into digital detox drew upon Clark Moustakas’ heuristic methodology, derived from the Greek term *heuriskein*, meaning to discover—a concept reflected in the term “Eureka” (Moustakas, 1990, p.9). McLeod (2022, pp.126–127) describes the heuristic approach as conducive to novel insights, while Sultan (2020) highlights its humanistic and phenomenological dimensions.

Phenomenology seeks to understand lived experiences in depth (Smith et al., 2022, p.7). While it begins with exploration, meaningful interpretation is required to generate understanding (McLeod, 2022, p.93). This interpretative process, known as hermeneutics,

relies on thoughtful reflection (Bager-Charleson, 2020, p.71). As McLeod (2022, p.95) discusses, phenomenological research often involves “double hermeneutics,” wherein the researcher interprets the participant’s interpretation of their own experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022 pp.28-31).

3.2.3 Reflexivity and Subjectivity as Research Tools

This layered interpretive process necessitates a high degree of reflexivity from both researcher and participant. Etherington (2004, p.19) defines reflexivity as an acute awareness of how personal experiences, shaped by biological, psychological, and social influences, impact our perceptions and interactions. This dynamic process helps me remain attuned to both my internal responses and the participant’s narrative. Rather than being a limitation, Bager-Charleson (2020, p.90) identifies subjectivity as a valuable research asset.

3.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

3.3.1 Methodological Choice and Rationale

To explore the meanings embedded in participants’ digital detox experiences, I chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Developed by Jonathan Smith in the 1990s, IPA focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of pivotal life events (Smith et al., 2022, p.1). It integrates phenomenological and hermeneutic principles and adopts an idiographic perspective, attending closely to each participant’s unique viewpoint (Gray, 2022, p.27).

3.3.2 Philosophical Underpinnings of IPA

IPA typically involves semi-structured interviews, allowing for open dialogue rather than rigid questioning. As Smith et al. (2022, pp.54–63) explain, questions often emerge organically and may be retrospectively addressed during analysis. This flexible approach mirrors therapeutic encounters, where relational immediacy informs understanding. The double hermeneutic process unfolds both during interviews and in subsequent interpretation, echoing my professional background in counselling and reinforcing my confidence in this method.

3.3.3 Researcher Alignment and Therapeutic Synergy

This method’s emphasis on relational engagement parallels the therapeutic process, enabling participants to derive meaning through dialogue (Cooper & Mearns, 2018, p.71). Drawing on over a decade of clinical and academic experience, I hope to facilitate this interpretive journey by leveraging my relational competencies and therapeutic skills.

3.3.4 Interview Framework: Clarkson's Seven Levels of Functioning

To support and guide the interviews (Smith et al., 2022, p.56), I will employ Petrūška Clarkson's Seven Levels of Functioning—a *phenomenographic* model for exploring complex human experiences (Clarkson, 1993, pp.150–156). The levels are:

1. The **Physiological** or person as an amoeba.
2. **The Emotional** or person as a mammal.
3. **The Nominative** or person as a primate.
4. **The Normative** or person as social animal.
5. **The Rational** or person as a Homo Sapiens.
6. **The Theoretical** or person as a storyteller.
7. **The Transpersonal** or person as a spiritual being.

Lapworth and Sills (2011, p.145) highlight the usefulness of these levels in providing a holistic view of human experience. They also reiterate Clarkson's (2002a, p.148) assertion that the levels are not intended to be hierarchical. Some critique exists around the empirical foundation of this model: Eronen and Brooks (2018) suggest that psychological levels lack empirical validation and are best viewed as heuristic tools. Similarly, Thylstrup et al. (2016) argue that these types of models do not consistently demonstrate reliability and validity across studies.

However, as my research adopts a phenomenological stance, these critiques are less pertinent. My aim is not to test empirical generalisability, but to explore lived experience in depth. Within this context, Clarkson's framework serves as a useful structure for facilitating rich, multidimensional accounts of experience.

I have extensive experience using this model in both therapeutic and educational contexts and can now hold it with a degree of unconscious competence (Broadwell, cited in Keeley, 2021). This familiarity allows me to use the tool flexibly and responsively, rather than rigidly, in support of the interview process.

3.3.5: Evaluation of IPA as methodology of choice

When evaluating Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a research methodology, Clarke (2009) underscores its value in capturing the richness of lived experience, while Delve (2023) highlights its flexibility and adaptability—qualities particularly important for working with complex, subjective material. This latter point resonates with

Yalom's (1989 p.12) observation that "*an ability to tolerate uncertainty is a prerequisite for the counselling professions,*" reflecting the openness required of both researcher and practitioner.

Nevertheless, IPA is not without its critiques. Tuffour (2017) notes concern regarding the potential for subjectivity and researcher bias, while Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) point to the time-consuming nature of IPA and its limited generalisability due to its idiographic focus.

Despite these acknowledged limitations, I believe IPA is the most appropriate methodology for this study. It is aligned not only with the core values and ethical principles of the counselling profession—such as autonomy, justice, and self-respect (BACP, 2018)—but also with my own personal values, particularly the importance of being heard and having one's experience validated (Erskine et al, 1999).

Chapter 4: Research Design and Ethical Framework

4.1 Participant Recruitment

In response to feedback on my research proposal from my supervisor, Mike Sims, I was advised to reconsider the inclusion criteria for participants—specifically, to limit participation to individuals over the age of 25. This recommendation arose from an ethical concern I had raised in my proposal, which is addressed in more detail in the ethical considerations section of this dissertation. While this adjustment was ethically appropriate, it did somewhat narrow the potential participant pool and, to some extent, influenced the demographic composition of the final sample.

My initial intention had been to advertise for volunteers within my professional network, including students, colleagues, and other practitioners. I had also planned to engage younger volunteers from the educational institution where I work. However, I was able to recruit enough participants through organic conversations at work and during my attendance at the Masters Series International Trauma Conference at Oxford University. In total, I secured six participants, along with two reserves. This method of recruitment eliminated the need for formal advertising and helped to avoid the associated logistical and ethical complexities.

I was mindful that this approach might result in a relatively homogeneous sample. However, Smith et al. (2022, pp.43–46) emphasise that IPA seeks a purposive sample—one for whom the research question holds particular meaning. I made what might be considered a bold assumption: that by recruiting individuals from professional and academic contexts, I would be more likely to engage participants with sufficient levels of maturity and self-efficacy. In my view, this reduced the likelihood of participant distress or withdrawal. As it transpired, there were no instances of dropout or emotional overwhelm during the project.

4.2 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set by both the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2019), with whom I hold professional membership.

Prior to initiating data collection, ethical clearance was granted by Bath Spa University (see Appendix). Participants were required to give informed consent and were issued with a comprehensive information sheet (see Appendix), which included the following components:

- A declaration of voluntary participation and informed agreement to take part in the research.
- A detailed description of both the interview process and the digital detox intervention.
- A breakdown of data handling protocols, including how data would be recorded, managed, stored, and ultimately disposed of in alignment with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK Government, 2021). I am registered as a data controller with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).
- An explanation of confidentiality safeguards and procedures to ensure participant anonymity and protect personal identities.
- A statement acknowledging that participation in the digital detox could involve emotional, psychological, physical, practical, or financial difficulties. I provided primary support as the lead researcher. Additionally, a secondary support option was made available via an independent BACP-accredited therapist in case I was unreachable.

- A reminder that participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage of the research process, without the need to justify their decision. Restricting this right would breach the ethical codes of both BERA and BACP.
- A commitment that I would maintain support systems throughout the study by engaging regularly with my academic supervisor at Bath Spa University, my clinical supervisor, and my personal therapist.

4.3 Reflexive Adaptations to Detox Process

The initial design of this project included the intention to explore the experience of undertaking a digital detox among individuals born into the digital age—commonly referred to as *digital natives* (O'Reilly et al., 2021, p.83), *Millennials*, or members of *Generation Z* (Haidt, 2024, p.5).

Dopamine release plays a central role in human engagement with technology and social media. It is a neurotransmitter involved in regulating pleasure, motivation, and reward (Alter, 2017, pp.71–72; McNamee, 2019, pp.86–88; White et al., 2024). Its influence extends beyond reward processing to include mood, memory, movement, attention, and learning (Watson, 2024). This makes dopamine a particularly relevant factor in understanding how individuals respond to reductions in digital stimulation.

Siegel and Bryson (2012) note that the human brain does not reach full maturity until approximately the age of 25—an important milestone for emotional, psychological, and cognitive resilience. In support of this, several studies indicate that dopamine systems undergo significant development during adolescence and early adulthood, impacting emotional regulation and brain function in individuals under 25 (Whalstrom et al., 2009; Ernst and Luciana, 2015).

Given the potential for neurobiological sensitivity to dopamine reduction in younger participants, it was considered ethically appropriate to limit participation to individuals aged 25 and over. This decision served two purposes: it mitigated the risk of long-term impact from changes in dopamine activity during the detox, and it increased the likelihood that participants would have the psychological resilience necessary to tolerate and reflect on the process.

Another impact I considered was the future dissemination of findings, and how this could land with participants, especially as some know each other and may be able to infer who said what from their findings, as highlighted by Uwe Flick (2023 p.130).

There was a further aspect of my project that required evolutionary adjustment. My initial intention had been to provide participants with a basic ‘brick phone’ that would allow only calls and text messaging, thereby supporting a more complete digital detox. However, during preliminary conversations with participants, it quickly became apparent that most were reluctant to part with their smartphones. Some found the idea of being without their device potentially distressing, while others cited practical concerns such as the need to remain in contact with children, manage banking, or use their smartphones for professional purposes.

One participant suggested using a mobile application called *ScreenZen*, which allows users to disable selected functions on their phones for a specified period of time. This solution emerged as a useful compromise: it preserved participants’ autonomy and respected their individual needs while upholding the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, in line with counselling ethics as outlined by the BACP (2018). In hindsight, this adaptation also reflects how deeply embedded technology use has become in everyday life since I first undertook my own digital detox in 2017.

4.4 Data Protection and Confidentiality

To maintain confidentiality and uphold the principles of data protection, all procedures followed the ethical guidelines of both Bath Spa University and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2019). All interviews were conducted via a secure digital platform—Microsoft Teams—accessed through my Bath Spa University student account.

Chapter 5: Data Collection Process

5.1 Interview Design and Process

1. Initial Interview

The first stage of the data collection process involved a semi-structured interview designed to explore participants' current relationships with digital technologies—particularly their use of smartphones, engagement with social media platforms, and consumption of online news. This conversation was guided by Petrūska Clarkson's Seven Levels of Functioning framework, which is further detailed in the following section.

During this initial meeting, I also introduced the digital detox intervention. Participants were invited to sign out of all news and social media platforms and, together, we developed a practical plan for maintaining access to essential online services required for daily life. They were also encouraged to document their thoughts and reflections throughout the detox period, preferably through handwritten journaling, to support deeper personal engagement.

Participation in the detox was strictly voluntary, and individuals were reminded that they could discontinue the process at any point. This approach was designed to uphold the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence, in accordance with BACP guidelines (2018) and reiterated by McLeod (2022, p.49). The agreed detox duration was 14 days.

2. Follow-Up Interview

A second interview was conducted roughly one week after the digital detox concluded. Using a similar semi-structured format and guided by the same theoretical lens, this conversation invited participants to reflect on their experiences during the detox. The interview focused on exploring the personal significance of the process, insights gained, and any perceived shifts in attitudes or behaviours related to their use of digital technology.

5.2 Application of Clarkson's Model

Clarkson (2002a, p.148) discusses the ways in which individuals can perceive and understand the same reality in profoundly different ways, while also suggesting that such perceptions can be loosely categorised into hierarchical groupings based on shared experiential criteria. Within this framework, her *Seven Levels of Functioning* model provided a flexible yet coherent structure for guiding the interviews.

Although each participant had a unique relationship with technology and social media, they were all using broadly similar devices and digital platforms and were situated within a

shared sociocultural context. In this sense, Clarkson's phenomenographic tool acted as both a needle and thread—helping to stitch together the distinct and personal narratives of each participant into a broader, coherent tapestry of experience.

My personal reflection on using this model is that it deepened my appreciation for the sophistication and applicability of Clarkson's work. It proved to be a powerful tool for holding complexity while still offering structure, and it helped me remain grounded in a process that prioritised the participants' meaning-making without becoming too rigid or prescriptive.

5.3 Recording and Transcription Methods

All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, which automatically generates a transcript alongside the video recording of each session. After completing both interviews with each participant, I reviewed the transcripts against the recordings to ensure accuracy. In line with the terms outlined in the participant consent form, I then permanently deleted the video recordings. The anonymised transcripts were retained securely until the completion of data analysis and were subsequently deleted, in accordance with ethical data retention practices.

5.4 Researcher–Participant Dynamics

I must acknowledge the potential bias inherent in recruiting participants who were known to me through professional or academic circles and who may already have been sympathetic to the topic. This creates a risk of what might be described as “preaching to the converted.” I am aware that my prior public engagement with themes around digital detox—through professional talks and discussions—may have influenced participants' interest in taking part, possibly leading to a heightened level of enthusiasm or alignment with my perspective (Seidman, 2013, p.57). This enthusiasm may have introduced a degree of unconscious bias into the interviews.

Furthermore, the relational nature of qualitative interviewing means that the interpersonal dynamic between researcher and participant can shape the data-gathering process. Given my dual role as a therapist and researcher, I am aware that transference dynamics may have emerged (Clarkson, 2003, p.67), potentially influencing the tone, content, or emotional depth of participants' narratives. While this relational element can enrich the interview

process, it also necessitates careful reflexivity to ensure that participants' meanings remain central and are not overly shaped by my own assumptions or expectations.

Chapter 6: Data Analysis Strategy

6.1 Bottom-up/inductive approach to analysis

The data analysis for this study was guided by the step-by-step framework proposed by Smith et al. (2022, pp. 76–108) for conducting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Although the authors emphasise the non-linear and iterative nature of IPA, they recommend that novice researchers follow these structured stages, incorporating reflexivity throughout the process (Vossler & Moller, 2015, p. 176). As a first-time IPA researcher, I adopted this structured guidance while remaining attuned to the emergent and interpretive qualities of the method.

The approach taken here is inductive and grounded in the data itself. Rather than applying pre-existing theories to participant accounts, I sought to allow meaning to emerge from the data in its own terms. This epistemological stance is reminiscent of the person-centred ethos of Carl Rogers (2004), which privileges the individual's subjective experience. It also reflects Maslow's (1966) caution against the over-application of theoretical frameworks, encapsulated in his observation that "*if the only tool you have is a hammer, you treat everything as if it were a nail.*" In line with these perspectives, I engaged with the data with openness, aiming to listen deeply before interpreting.

6.2 IPA with Clarkson's 7 Levels Analysis Steps

My intended use of Clarkson's *Seven Levels of Functioning* as a phenomenographic tool served as both a conceptual map and a practical guide for the analysis process. While the interviews did not always follow Clarkson's levels in a strict sequence, they provided a flexible structure that mirrored the layered nature of lived experience and allowed participants to engage in meaning-making across multiple domains.

For each level, the analysis progressed through the following seven interpretative stages:

1. Reading and Re-reading

Each transcript was read multiple times to support immersion in the participant's account. This stage facilitated the development of a close, empathetic engagement with the data while ensuring the safeguarding of participant confidentiality (McLeod, 2022, p. 105). This process formed the foundation for the double hermeneutic central to IPA.

2. Exploratory Noting

Descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes were recorded alongside the transcript. This marked the beginning of the interpretative process—where I, as the researcher, sought to make sense of how participants were making sense of their own experience (Smith et al., 2022, p. 75).

3. Constructing Experiential Statements

Rather than using the term "emergent themes," I followed the updated IPA guidance by forming *experiential statements*, which aimed to reflect both the participant's voice and my interpretative lens (Smith et al., 2022, p. 76). These statements distilled the narrative while preserving experiential richness (Bager-Charleson, 2020, p. 107).

4. Searching for Connections Across Experiential Statements

At this stage, patterns and connections were mapped between experiential statements within each level. Using Taguette, I explored clustering and coherence within the participants' accounts, looking for meaningful internal structures (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 90–94).

5. Naming the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Experiential statements were then grouped into Personal Experiential Themes (PETs), with subthemes identified where appropriate. This stage provided a structured yet interpretive overview of each participant's experiential world (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 91–99).

6. Developing Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

A cross-case analysis was carried out to explore both convergence and divergence among PETs. Rather than seeking generalisability, the aim was to highlight shared experiential dimensions while retaining the idiographic integrity of each individual narrative (Smith et al., 2022, p. 100).

7. Taking It Deeper: Levels of Interpretation

Finally, I engaged in a more nuanced interpretative layer—moving beyond surface content

to explore possible symbolic meanings, psychological processes, and contextual influences. This micro-analysis allowed for a deeper engagement with the material, consistent with the interpretative aims of IPA (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 106–107).

At the end of this process, and across all seven of Clarkson’s levels, I arrived at an integrated understanding that aimed to honour both the complexity and coherence of each participant’s lived experience. The combination of Clarkson’s layered lens and IPA’s idiographic rigour enabled a rich, multi-dimensional view of what it means to consciously disengage from digital technology in today’s world.

6.3 Use of Taguette for Coding

To support the analysis process, I used a free, open-source qualitative data analysis tool called *Taguette* (<https://taguette.org>). This software is designed specifically for coding and thematically analysing textual data, making it well-suited to the demands of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which requires a close, line-by-line engagement with participants’ narratives.

For the purposes of confidentiality and data protection, I used the self-hosted version of Taguette rather than the cloud-based option. All interview transcripts were fully anonymised before being uploaded into the tool, in accordance with GDPR guidelines and the ethical standards set by both Bath Spa University and the BACP.

Taguette allowed me to highlight key passages in each transcript and assign them labels (or “tags”) that corresponded to emerging experiential themes. These codes helped track recurrent ideas and patterns across interviews while preserving the idiographic focus of IPA. Importantly, the tool facilitated an iterative and flexible coding process, allowing me to re-tag and revise interpretations as my understanding of the data deepened. This reflective engagement supported the development of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and Group Experiential Themes (GETs), as described in the following chapter.

6.4 Reflexivity in Interpretation

Throughout, I maintained a reflexive stance, remaining aware of my own positioning, values, and assumptions. The goal was not to impose meaning but to collaborate with the data in the construction of insight—honouring the participant’s voice while also offering an interpretive reading grounded in psychological understanding.

Chapter 7: Findings

7.1 Participant Profiles

All participants in this study were over the age of 30. The group comprised two men and four women, all of whom are long-term residents of the United Kingdom. Five participants were of British origin, and one was of Latin American origin.

Each participant is an active professional with a high level of academic qualification. Two work in higher education, one in the performing arts, two are practising psychotherapists, and one both practices and delivers training in psychotherapy.

This brief profile provides a professional snapshot of the participants. However, it is important to acknowledge that professional identity represents just one dimension of a person's lived experience. Participants also brought personal, cultural, and contextual perspectives that shaped their engagement with the digital detox and the research process more broadly.

To protect anonymity, I have chosen not to include more detailed demographic information here. There are multiple layers of intersectionality—including aspects of ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, neurodiversity, and life experience—that are likely to have influenced participants' narratives. Where such aspects were explicitly relevant to the content of the interviews and the interpretation of themes, I have addressed them within the analysis. In doing so, I have sometimes had to be intentionally opaque or general in my descriptions to preserve confidentiality and ethical integrity.

7.2 Physiological Level of Functioning

Clarkson (2002, pp. 157–158) describes the *Physiological Level* as the perceptual lens through which individuals engage with the world via their senses and internal bodily awareness. This includes proprioceptive experience—the felt sense of inner states—and encompasses processes such as sleep, illness, nutrition, exercise, and the somatic manifestations of emotional distress. In Polyvagal Theory, this is closely linked to the concept of *neuroception*, the body's unconscious capacity to detect safety or threat in the

environment (Dana, 2021, p. 40). The physiological level, then, is foundational in shaping how we experience and respond to the world on an embodied level.

7.2.1 Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

In both interviews, the physiological level was often the first domain to emerge. This appeared to act as a gentle “warm-up” phase, where participants could begin reflecting on their digital habits through the more tangible and accessible language of bodily experience.

One prominent theme involved the use of technology for tracking movement and exercise. Participants described their reliance on step counters, heart rate monitors, and activity-tracking apps:

“I get curious about that and think maybe I’ll walk more next time.”

“I check my steps at least twice a day.”

“I look at steps, heart rate, sleep, meals—honestly, I find it useful.”

These accounts reflect a degree of agency and perceived control over bodily health, facilitated by digital tools. They also illustrate a fusion between Clarkson’s *physiological* and *rational* levels of functioning, where bodily regulation is supported—and in some cases shaped—by real-time data and feedback loops.

One participant, currently navigating menopause, commented on how social media served as an educational and supportive resource:

“It gave loads of information about the hormonal cycles and how we, you know, evolve in this process.”

Here, physiological change intersects with *theoretical* understanding and *narrative construction*, highlighting the potential for digital spaces to support both physical and psychological adaptation during life transitions.

Sleep was another key theme that emerged, especially in post-detox reflections. Multiple participants described improvements in their sleep patterns, though most were cautious about drawing direct conclusions:

“That everything was calmer. Sleep was a little bit better.”

“The second week I had much better sleep—not waking up and so on.”

“I’m just a light sleeper. But what I’ve noticed is I was able to go back to sleep for an hour and a half. So even from that point of view, I think... my brain just feels more relaxed.”

Although participants did not universally attribute better sleep to the detox alone, their narratives suggest a possible correlation between reduced digital engagement and improved physiological regulation, particularly around rest and recovery.

Participants also developed greater awareness of how their phones shaped movement in physical space:

“My movement around my flat and around where I’m moving in any space that I’m in is always linked to where my phone is.”

“These movements again and again... like reaching for the phone.”

“It’s the sort of unconscious movements—like the muscle that is trained to do something. Well, that happened with my phone.”

These reflections illustrate how digital behaviour becomes embodied over time, manifesting as automatic, habitual movements.

Finally, many participants reported experiencing anxiety-related sensations prior to the detox. This embodied tension often served as a bridge into later reflections at the *emotional* level—where participants began to more consciously interrogate the affective impact of constant connectivity.

7.2.2 Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

GET 1: Tech as tool to monitor the body – and sometimes control it.

Participants described using digital tools to track steps, sleep, food intake, and other bodily functions. These were largely perceived as helpful, providing reassurance and a sense of structure. However, the reliance on technology to mediate bodily awareness also raises questions around externalised self-regulation and the delegation of agency to devices (Alter, 2017 pp.115-116).

GET 2: The absence of tech changed physiological experience.

Several participants noticed subtle shifts in physical experience after reducing their screen time—particularly in relation to sleep and sensory regulation. While few attributed these shifts solely to the detox, there was a shared sense that removing digital stimulation created space for physiological calm.

GET 3: Smartphone influences how people move through space.

Participants became aware of how their phones influenced not only their routines but their literal movements—where they placed their bodies, how they walked, or when they reached reflexively for the device. These habits, once invisible, became evident during the detox and formed part of a growing bodily awareness.

7.2.3 Reflections on Meaning-Making

At this level, participants' narratives revealed a nuanced ambivalence toward digital technology. On one hand, apps and wearables were seen as valuable tools that offered insight, structure, and a sense of mastery over bodily processes. On the other, participants began to realise how much of their self-regulation had been outsourced to their devices. The detox acted as a pause—an opportunity to reflect on this relationship and to observe the habitual nature of tech-mediated bodily behaviours.

This was also the point at which a key shift occurred in my own understanding. I entered this research with a critical lens on digital engagement, expecting to hear primarily about the harms of technology. Yet participants shared numerous positive experiences at this level—particularly around agency, control, and information access. From a physiological perspective, technology was often welcomed, and its presence was framed as enabling rather than problematic.

However, a theme of ambivalence also began to surface. Participants described being “in two minds” about their tech use—acknowledging both benefits and drawbacks. Some stated explicitly that the detox created a shift they may not have achieved without that structured pause:

“I probably wouldn't have made any changes if it wasn't for this.”

These moments challenged my initial assumptions and highlighted the importance of staying open, reflexive, and curious as a researcher. I discussed this with my clinical supervisor, where I acknowledged that the process was already reshaping my own perspectives. I was reminded of Carl Rogers' observation the therapist is also changed by the therapeutic encounter (2004 pp.184-185).

In this sense, the physiological level served not only as a starting point for participants, but also as a catalyst for my own deeper engagement with the material.

7.2 Emotional Level of Functioning

Clarkson (1993, p. 150) describes the *Emotional Level of Functioning* as a preverbal domain of human experience that centres on emotional tone, affective states, and internal resonance. Emotions, as Rycroft (1995, p. 46) explains, are subjective feelings that arise in response to stimuli. These responses are always affectively charged—either pleasurable or unpleasant—but never neutral.

Such stimuli may be perceived through the *exteroceptive system*—our five senses, which detect information from the external world—or through the *interoceptive system*, which provides feedback from the internal body. Rothschild (2000, pp. 59–90) describes how exteroceptive triggers such as sight or sound can quickly activate emotional responses, particularly when connected to prior associations or perceived threats. Meanwhile, interoceptive awareness—such as heart rate, breath, or gut sensation—can also evoke emotion, often subtly and preconsciously (Siegel, 2020, p. 256).

At this level, emotion becomes the bridge between the physiological body and the psychological self. In the context of this study, participants frequently described emotional shifts that occurred during and after their digital detox.

7.2.1 Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

In both interviews, it was interesting how the focus on bodily experience organically shifted into the emotional realm. In the first interviews, the prevailing tone was one of anxiety, dread, and ambivalence. Many participants anticipated the detox with unease, describing conflicting feelings of wanting change while fearing disconnection.

One participant shared:

"Yeah, definitely the stress, initial anxiety... I wouldn't say overwhelming, but I don't remember feeling that anxious before. It was like, 'Oh my God, I have to make this change.'"

Another spoke of:

"A feeling building up... dread. I know there's avoidance there, and I have a fear of change—but I also want it."

Others expressed concern about losing access to sources of comfort or professional validation:

"I'll miss input from sites like LinkedIn. I find comfort in that."

"I have anxiety that I'll miss out on what my friends are doing."

"I rely on my phone and networks for work. I'm worried this will impact that."

Interestingly, some also described negative emotional responses to being online:

"Social media makes me feel uncomfortable and annoyed... it's a massive waste of time. The first word that comes to mind is 'disgusted.'"

"Why am I feeling this dread? I'm not being trolled or exposed to extreme views. So why the fear?"

Others mentioned:

"I get quite physically anxious around social media."

"It's like dread when I open emails. I assume there'll be something I have to deal with."

There were also **triggers for anger**:

"People's opinions, political stuff, headlines—they really provoke anger in me, and in others."

Several participants described a deep ambivalence—oscillating between enjoyment and frustration:

"Sometimes it brings happiness or contentment. Other times frustration—like watching myself do it from the outside."

By the second interview, there was a marked shift in emotional tone. Participants reported feeling calmer, more present, and emotionally clearer after the detox:

"I feel less pushed around by the phone."

"It's had a really positive effect on my mood."

"I've gone back to enjoying being myself more."

"Time slowed down."

"I found it easier to do mindfulness."

Others described a newfound sense of emotional spaciousness:

"In the mornings I wouldn't reach for my phone. There'd be calm space."

"I felt more present... more aware of my surroundings."

One participant articulated:

"There was a slight kind of satisfaction in how I experienced things... definitely more clarity, less distracted."

A significant emotional theme that emerged was shame—especially in how participants related to social media before the detox:

One said:

"I've been in a shame cycle. I'd scroll at night, go to bed later than I wanted, feel awful. I didn't realise it until I had the two-week break."

Another reflected:

"I feel shame and sadness... but also relief that I was holding myself back and can now allow a little more happiness."

There were powerful realisations about the subliminal emotional messaging embedded in digital content:

"Social media kept sending me ads about plastic surgery and fertility—things I wasn't even thinking about. For two weeks, I wasn't bombarded with those messages, and I didn't think about shopping at all."

Another echoed:

“There’s shame in the time lost. You look up and an hour’s gone. It’s like: what have I done with that time?”

7.2.2 Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

GET 1: Anticipation of the detox brought anxiety and ambivalence.

A dominant emotional theme in the first interviews was anticipatory anxiety. Participants expressed a mix of fear, avoidance, and vulnerability as they contemplated letting go of their habitual digital use. The detox appeared to trigger emotional resistance rooted in fears of disconnection, loss of control, or professional and social disadvantage. At the same time, many voiced a parallel desire for change—highlighting a deep ambivalence.

This tension reflects the emotional cost of behavioural change, particularly when the digital world is tightly woven into one's daily life and self-concept.

GET 2: Being online generates subtle but cumulative emotional distress.

While participants expected the detox to be difficult, several also described the emotional strain they routinely experienced while using digital media. These included feelings of dread, overstimulation, disgust, frustration, and even anger. Interestingly, this emotional load was often normalised or minimised until it was interrupted by the detox.

These findings suggest that everyday digital habits may accumulate an emotional residue that only becomes visible through contrast and reflection.

GET 3: Digital detox brought calm, clarity, and emotional regulation.

In the second interviews, many participants described a significant shift in their emotional landscape. A sense of calm, clarity, and improved emotional regulation emerged across accounts. Participants reported feeling more grounded, less reactive, and more in control, responsive. The absence of digital stimulation appeared to create space for emotional integration.

GET 4: Shame emerged as a hidden emotional undercurrent.

A powerful and unexpected group theme was shame—particularly around time lost, compulsive scrolling, or exposure to social comparison. Several participants only became aware of this shame after experiencing the contrast of the detox. In some cases, the shame related to deeper messages about ageing, productivity, or self-worth—subtly reinforced by targeted advertising and algorithmic feedback loops.

The detox allowed space to identify and interrupt these emotional patterns, offering opportunities for increased self-compassion and awareness.

7.2.3 Reflections on Meaning-Making

This level provided some of the richest material in the study. Most participants were unaware of the emotional toll of digital life until it was paused. Calmness, experienced post-detox, became a contrast to the normalised emotional overstimulation of everyday tech use.

Ambivalence was a key thread—mirroring wider narratives of technology as both empowering and overwhelming. Participants didn't resolve this tension but acknowledged it, which itself seemed valuable.

Shame surfaced perhaps unexpectedly. Its roots often lay in subtle cultural messages—about productivity, beauty, ageing—reinforced by algorithmic content. Brown (2013) defines shame as the belief that we are fundamentally flawed and unworthy of love and belonging. The detox allowed participants to name this emotion and, in some cases, disengage from its grip.

As a researcher, I was reminded how reflective pauses enable deeper insight. Like therapy, the detox seemed to give participants permission to access emotional truths often buried beneath digital noise. Carl Rogers (2004 pp.55-56) once suggested that change arises not from instruction, but from empathic understanding. In this study, the emotional level became the space where such understanding was made possible.

7.4 Nominative Level of Functioning

The Nominative Level, as described by Clarkson (2002a, p. 159), involves naming, structuring, and giving meaning to experience through language. It is through naming that emotional and sensory states become communicable, allowing for personal validation and interpersonal understanding (Clarkson, 1993, p. 151). Rothschild (2000, p. 24) explains that

language acts as a bridge between internal experience and external expression, enabling individuals to process, label, and regulate what they feel and sense.

This level was where participants moved from feeling into articulation—attempting to describe and interpret the effects of their digital engagement and detox through language. It was at this point in the interviews that participants began to put words to their inner conflicts and developing insights, offering deeper meaning-making.

7.4.1 Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

There were some particularly interesting themes emerging. Several participants used language that reflected a sense of being manipulated or controlled by the tech industry:

“I’m getting pitched to constantly—and I’m a sucker and I’m falling for it.”

“We’re being used, you know, by these companies. They’re getting rich. They’re taking stuff. We’re freely choosing—I’m freely choosing to post all of this—but actually it’s just giving out information that then gets shared on and monetised.”

“I am continually surprised by the way algorithms are used deliberately to make us behave as a load of controlled monkeys.”

There were also compelling statements referring to addiction and dependency. At this point in the process, I became increasingly curious about the shift in language participants were using when describing their relationship with technology and social media. For some, the language of ambivalence began to surface clearly—what was becoming one of the key emerging themes of the project overall:

“It’s a conduit for support, but also what I’m saying is—it’s a numbing device.”

“It’s a weird way of connecting—or not connecting—I don’t know.”

“It’s either like utopia or dystopia.”

“I’m almost having an inner argument with myself—I shouldn’t be spending this much time.”

Others, however, began explicitly naming addiction, or described experiences that clearly echoed the dynamics of compulsive behaviour:

“There’s a sort of compulsive element to it.”

“It’s really fun for a little while... and then that wears off, and you start to think—why am I actually doing this? What’s it doing to me?”

“The honeymoon period wears off, and you’re just compulsively doing this thing—and it’s

actually making me feel worse.”

“I definitely feel that’s why I wanted to do this detox—because I recognise I have an addiction.”

One participant made a powerful link to previous experiences of substance misuse:

“I used to be an alcoholic. I would say that in the last years of my alcoholism, there were times when Facebook probably replaced me punching the wall.”

At this point, I noticed a significant difference in the language used by participants who identified as being in recovery from substance misuse. Two of the participants spoke explicitly from within the nomenclature of addiction and recovery, and one reflected on a sometimes problematic relationship with alcohol. These participants used clear and direct naming, whereas the other three, who did not share such histories, used more tentative and exploratory language. Interestingly, this seemed to shift in the second interview, after the detox had concluded.

Participants now began to use words that reflected themes of freedom, choice, authenticity, and control—concepts strongly associated with recovery from addictive behaviours. The change in tone and confidence in language was striking.

Examples include:

“I want to be somebody in the world that’s not addicted. I’ve got more choice and autonomy.”

“Allowing more time for direct social interaction face to face. So yeah—Facebook out.”

“Some kind of sense of ownership, I suppose, of my space as well—being more aware of the present moment, of my surroundings.”

“I think I just got some more space in my life—and autonomy.”

“I don’t want to go back to how I was. I knew something was wrong—but I didn’t realise what was wrong was that I was in a shame spiral and an addictive cycle.”

“So by now, I’ve decided that I will come completely out of Facebook. 100%. It doesn’t give anything to my life. What I’m calling it is the illusion of connectivity.”

“My need to be on social media now is very, very low.”

This shift in narrative—from compulsion and confusion to agency and clarity—was one of the most powerful aspects of this level.

7.4.2 Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

GET 1: Tech is manipulative—and we are often not aware.

Several participants used language that framed their relationship with technology as one of manipulation or exploitation. They named the feeling of being used, tracked, or monetised—often for the first time.

GET 2: Ambivalence: is this good or bad?

A dominant theme in both sets of interviews was ambivalence. Participants described inner arguments, contradictions, and uncertainty. Tech was often seen as both comforting and numbing, connecting and isolating.

GET 3: Language of addiction and recovery.

Some participants, particularly those with experience of substance misuse, used direct addiction language. Others described behaviour that mirrored the dynamics of dependency: compulsion, loss of control, and guilt.

GET 4: After the detox, change talk is possible (Miller & Rollnick 2002 pp.85-91).

By the second interview, participants were using clearer, more empowered language. Themes of choice, clarity, and freedom emerged. This linguistic shift suggested not just reflection, but transformation.

7.4.3 Reflections on Meaning-Making

This level offered a deeper layer of insight. As participants began to name their experiences more confidently, it became clear how language shaped their sense of agency and understanding. Some described feeling manipulated by the digital systems they used daily; others spoke of dependency and compulsion. Many grappled with the unresolved tension between the benefits and harms of technology—highlighting the ongoing inner conflict that digital engagement can generate.

The digital detox appeared to facilitate a process akin to therapeutic reflection—offering a pause that created the stillness and distance needed for clearer naming, re-evaluation, and self-understanding. What especially struck me was the marked shift in language between the first and second interviews. Participants who initially expressed uncertainty or ambivalence began to articulate clearer intentions, demonstrate stronger self-awareness, and speak from a place of increased ownership.

A particularly striking observation was the linguistic shift among participants with no formal recovery background. Those with lived experience of substance misuse and recovery naturally used language familiar to that discourse—words like addiction, compulsion, autonomy, choice. Initially, those without such backgrounds used more tentative or ambiguous language. However, after the detox, their narratives began to mirror those of the recovery-informed participants. This suggests that the detox not only changed behaviour but also altered self-perception and the language participants used to express it.

It feels important to bring my reflexive process into this analysis. As someone in long-term recovery from substance misuse, I am deeply familiar with the discourse and culture of recovery. I recognise that this might introduce both conscious and unconscious biases into how I interpret and assign value to certain language shifts. It is possible that I notice and privilege this shift more than others might. I ask myself: is this transition in language as meaningful to participants as it is to me? Is it reflective of genuine transformation, or am I projecting value based on my own experience?

As I acknowledged earlier in this dissertation, all research is also “me-search”—a process of personal exploration and meaning-making as much as academic inquiry. At least from a personal standpoint, I feel that this project is reshaping my own perceptions and narrative around technology, recovery, and the power of language.

Ultimately, this level echoed for me one of the core principles of both counselling and recovery—that naming and owning of experience is not just an act of description, but a step toward transformation (Narcotics Anonymous 1993 p.12). Participants, in giving words to previously inchoate feelings, appeared to begin hearing themselves more clearly. In doing so, they moved toward greater self-understanding and, potentially, greater self-agency.

7.5 Normative Level of Functioning

The *Normative Level*, as defined by Clarkson (1993, p. 152), involves the internalisation of social norms, values, collective belief systems, and expectations. It includes both explicit and implicit “rules” by which individuals are expected to live and interact within their culture. Lapworth and Sills (2010, p. 151) further describe this level as encompassing statistical and cultural norms—those often-unquestioned measures by which behaviour,

belief, and even identity are evaluated. What is considered “normal,” “acceptable,” or “desirable” is often contextually determined and geographically influenced.

In our increasingly digitised world, normative structures are shaped not only by local customs but also by global platforms. Algorithms amplify dominant cultural values, trends, and ideologies, while social media serves as a tool for both reflecting and reinforcing these societal standards. For participants in this study, digital detox allowed a pause to reflect on these collective narratives and to begin questioning which values they had truly chosen for themselves—and which had been unconsciously absorbed.

7.5.1 Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Many participants began naming the societal influences that shaped their digital behaviours, drawing connections between online content and cultural pressures related to identity, consumption, politics, and age.

One participant from Latin America reflected on how regional identity influenced their digital engagement:

"So I'm from Latin America... there are different elements that catch my attention—music, culture. It's different."

Another theme discussed was how digital media shaped consumer choices, particularly around appearance:

"I looked for a dress for a wedding on Pinterest... and Instagram started showing me loads of suggestions. It became this whole world—what am I wearing, how should I dress? I completely lost myself in it."

There were reflective comments on art and culture, revealing ambivalence toward how social media fits into more traditional or ‘authentic’ artistic values:

"There's a snob in me that has ideas about what art is... maybe less social-media related. But I also get that social media can evoke emotion—and maybe that's the point of art too."

Several participants commented on politics and polarisation, particularly the way digital platforms shape public discourse:

“It’s all that’s wrong with the world, really—stuff about dinghies or grooming gangs, shared without context. It’s like one-sided outrage.”

“We’re not living in much of a democracy anymore. Algorithms can be manipulated with money—what we see is curated for influence.”

There were also reflections on Western cultural values embedded in digital life:

“Our culture is so weird (westernised, educated, individualised, industrialised, rich, and democratic). That’s the lens—and it’s mirrored online.”

Reflections on age and generational identity also emerged:

“I used to put out a certain view of myself on social media... maybe age makes that feel less important now. But I think it must be really difficult being a kid.”

One participant described feeling culturally isolated during the detox process:

“I felt alone. Like culturally, socially—I really did feel alone.”

This perhaps highlights how social norms around constant connection are deeply woven into belonging and cultural identity. Disengagement from digital culture, even temporarily, disrupted not only habits but also participants' place in shared cultural rituals.

7.5.2 Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

GET 1: Digital platforms reflect and amplify societal values.

Participants became aware of how cultural beliefs and social expectations are embedded in digital experiences—from fashion and art to politics and social engagement. These platforms act as both mirror and megaphone for dominant ideologies.

GET 2: Algorithms shape what we see—and what we believe.

There was widespread concern about the influence of algorithms, particularly their role in reinforcing polarised narratives and manipulating attention. Participants expressed unease about how digital content subtly influences public opinion and personal values.

GET 3: Social media sets the standard for identity and self-concept.

Several participants acknowledged internalised pressure to present themselves in particular ways online. While some found themselves disengaging from this over time (often attributed to age), others recognised how these norms continue to affect younger generations.

GET 4: Disconnection disrupted cultural belonging.

The detox created an unexpected distance from shared cultural rituals and real-time social discourse. For some, this led to increased self-awareness; for others, it produced feelings of disconnection and cultural loneliness—especially among those whose social lives are deeply interwoven with digital platforms.

7.5.3 Reflections on Meaning-Making

The Normative Level revealed how profoundly societal expectations shape our digital behaviours. Whether in relation to fashion, politics, or artistic expression, participants described feeling subtly directed by forces larger than themselves. This illustrates how deeply embedded digital norms have become—not only in behaviour, but also in identity, personal and collective worldviews, and our sense of belonging.

What stood out to me, both as a researcher and practitioner, was how the detox gave participants the opportunity to step back from these social scripts—if only briefly—and ask a powerful question: *Whose values am I living by?* This kind of reflective pause mirrors the therapeutic process: a moment where internalised beliefs can be brought into awareness, their origins examined, and their relevance measured against personal values.

Russ Harris (2021, p. 40) refers to this as *The Choice Point*—a moment in which, through mindful reflection, we can choose whether to move towards or away from the person we want to become. Typically, this involves a re-alignment with our core values—those personal truths that offer meaning, integrity, and direction.

As someone trained in a relational and integrative tradition, I view digital culture as an extension of the relational field—a part of the contextual environment in which we live, interact, and make meaning. Clarkson and Lapworth (1993, p. 145) refer to this field as the *Zeitgeist* or *Spirit of the Age*. In this view, what we internalise through screens becomes woven into our self-narrative. Making these digital dynamics visible—not only on an

individual level, but also in a wider social context—is essential for fostering both autonomy and emotional resilience.

Participants did not always arrive at firm conclusions. But what emerged was a questioning of what had previously gone unquestioned. That, in itself, felt significant. In this act of reflection lies the seed of potential change—not just for the individual, but also at a cultural and collective level.

In parallel, I was invited to question my own social, cultural, and personal values—and how these may have shaped not only the design and focus of this project, but also the way I interpreted participants' narratives. This process of reflexivity feels vital: research, particularly of a qualitative and phenomenological nature, is never separate from the worldview of the researcher. As I supported participants in exploring their values and norms, I was simultaneously engaging in that same exploration within myself.

7.7 Rational Level of Functioning

The Rational Level, as described by Clarkson (2002a, p. 160), pertains to cognitive function—our capacity to make sense of experience through reasoning, critical thinking, and logical evaluation. At this level, facts are understood as rational conclusions derived from empirical data, not as subjective beliefs or emotional responses. It is where cause and effect are examined, learning is processed, and meaning is constructed through thought.

Lapworth and Sills (2010, p. 153) describe this level as the site of intellectual reflection—where individuals evaluate their experiences and beliefs through a logical lens. It is the domain of *why* and *how*, offering coherence and predictability.

Neuroscientist Dr. David Eagleman (2015) explains that the brain is constantly processing data—filtering, storing, retrieving, and applying knowledge. This mental activity enables us to interpret the world and act in ways that are strategic, adaptive, and intelligent.

7.7.1 Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Participants frequently described how their cognitive functioning had been affected by digital engagement, especially around focus, attention, and reflective capacity.

Several reported diminished concentration:

- *"I would say my attention span has become really diminished."*
- *"My brain has been trained to watch short videos—anything longer becomes difficult."*
- *"I don't have as much space to think. I used to read for longer... Now I read for shorter periods of time, and I need to stop and wander around a little bit and then go back to reading again."*
- There was awareness of cognitive overload:
- *"It was overloaded... What am I focusing on here? What am I even looking at? Which one? What? Which one do I look at? Too many choices."*
- *"I don't think or reflect as much. I feel squeezed for time and headspace."*

Some began to question long-term cognitive effects:

- *"What has this done to my brain? My attention span was already short..."*
- *"We don't really learn deeply, , I don't believe that we're getting the same learning experience.—just skimming the surface. Social media is a shortcut to thinking."*

However, tech was not universally viewed as harmful. Some reflected on positive cognitive affordances:

- *"Social media helped me store photos... it was a way to organise memories."*
- *"It stimulates my brain—like listening to travel stories or searching facts quickly."*
- *"It expands knowledge... I can learn about how World War One started, who so and so is. And find what the next apocalypse is predicted to do, or what that planet does, or what frogs' purpose in the biological cycle is, all these in seconds."*

After the detox, participants reported increased mental clarity and cognitive spaciousness:

- *"I want to spend more time with myself. I like myself more now."*
- *"I've been reflecting a lot on what this means and what I'm going to do next."*
- *"My brain is more focused. I want to read more—even on my phone."*
- *"Scrolling is constant and fast... now I choose to slow down, read, or write instead."*
- *"I gained some kind of sense of ownership of my space, like being more aware of the present moment, of my surroundings."*

7.7.2 Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

GET 1: Technology scatters focus.

Many participants described reduced attention spans, difficulty concentrating, and mental fragmentation. Digital platforms were seen as interrupting deeper thinking and long-form engagement.

GET 2: Cognitively overload created by increased choice and input.

The constant influx of notifications, options, and competing stimuli led to mental exhaustion. Participants described a sensation of “too many tabs open,” and difficulty prioritising focus.

GET 3: Tech helps organise my brain—but may weaken it too.

Participants acknowledged how technology can support memory, organisation, and access to information. However, they also questioned whether this convenience may impair deeper cognitive functions over time.

GET 4: After the detox, the mind feels clearer and calmer.

Several participants reported increased cognitive space after the detox. They described better focus, intentional decision-making, and a renewed desire for reading, reflection, and creativity.

7.7.3 Reflections on Meaning-Making

This level offered an interesting insight into how participants think about their thinking, aka metacognition (Siegel 2020 p.507). The detox created a space where many began to re-evaluate the quality and depth of their cognitive engagement. The contrast between digital immersion and digital pause illuminated the difference between mental noise and cognitive clarity.

Participants’ reflections suggest that digital tools affect not only what we think about, as reflected previously, but how we think. The constant stream of content can fragment attention, reduce tolerance for complexity, and encourage surface-level engagement. Yet, technology also provides tools for learning, organising, and stimulating the mind.

As a researcher, I noticed a tension between technological enhancement and cognitive erosion. This mirrored the ambivalence seen in earlier levels. It also invited a broader reflection on what kind of thinking we value in our lives—fast, broad, and reactive, or slow, deep, and reflective? Do we prioritise content over process? (Yalom 1985 p.137).

The detox seemed to temporarily shift this balance—supporting participants to reclaim their focus, question their habits, and engage with their inner world more deliberately. The Rational Level showed that the digital realm doesn't just shape our behaviour—it sculpts the way we process, interpret, and relate to our own minds.

7.8 Theoretical Level of Functioning

The Theoretical Level, as defined by Clarkson (2002a, p. 161), refers to the use of narratives, metaphors, symbols, hypotheses, and explanatory frameworks through which we make sense of our experience. At this level, human beings engage with meaning as “story-tellers” (Lapworth & Sills, 2010, p. 154), weaving their lived experience into broader personal, cultural, or philosophical stories.

Humans have always sought to tell stories as a way of understanding and preserving their existence. From prehistoric cave paintings that depict survival and relationship with nature—such as those found in Altamira (Spain), Lascaux (France), and Nawarla Gabarnmang (Australia) (Clottes, 2022)—to the development of written language and symbolic communication, storytelling has been a constant human impulse.

In today's digital age, this storytelling continues—but through radically new mediums. Will Storr (2020, p. 8) asserts that we experience everyday life as narrative, and in this light, the internet becomes a powerful narrative amplifier. It offers humanity the capacity to tell stories at speed, scale, and across previously insurmountable geographic divides.

John Suler (2016, p. 159) notes that not only has the internet enabled quicker and more widespread communication via text and images, but it has also led to the emergence of new linguistic styles and storytelling modes, unique to digital culture. Online platforms invite us to continually revise, perform, and curate our stories—whether through blogs, reels, status updates, or photo streams.

At the Theoretical Level, then, we begin to ask: How do we explain our experiences to ourselves and others? What stories do we choose to tell, and which do we silence? How do digital spaces alter or reinforce the frameworks through which we make sense of identity, meaning, and change?

7.8.1 Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Participants reflected deeply on how digital spaces are not just platforms of communication but stages upon which their stories are curated, shaped, and sometimes distorted.

One theme that emerged was the sense of entanglement with technology—of being unable to separate the self from the online persona. One participant commented:

“We’re inextricably linked to digital tech and social media... Even people who say they’re not online, we know they are—it’s shadow profiles, facial recognition. You’re there, whether you know it or not.”

Others noticed how their story is partly shaped for them by algorithms and patterns of engagement:

“You get swept into the algorithm of social media... by something that wasn’t even started by you.”

Another described the impact of social media “memories”:

“It tells my story... but it also tells the bad bits as well. Those memories pop up and take you back to who you were, what you were feeling and thinking.”

A shift was observed in those who gained narrative distance after the detox. One participant described crafting a new story of identity:

“I liked the new story of who I was. I could say it to people: I’m someone who’s self-disciplined... who’s making active decisions.”

Others moved from a reactive digital presence to a more intentional narrative:

“My story started out happy and connecting... then it became confusing and anxiety-inducing. Now I’ve realised it’s not good for me and I’m stepping away.”

7.8.2 Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

GET 1: My story is told online—whether I choose it or not.

Participants noted the inescapability of digital presence. Even those who attempted to opt out felt seen, tracked, or captured by algorithmic traces. The idea of being "always online"—even passively—created discomfort and a sense of narrative hijack.

GET 2: I perform a version of myself on social media.

Many reflected on how their digital story had become a performance of the “ideal self”—often subconsciously shaped by social comparison, relationship status norms, or trends. The expectation to present a polished or ‘coupled’ identity was especially resonant for those who felt out of sync with those norms.

GET 3: Detox created space to author a new story.

After the detox, several participants described a shift in how they viewed their own life narrative. They gained a renewed sense of authorship—moving from passively consumed content to more deliberate self-reflection and intention. One described it as “rewriting the script” (Clarkson 1992 p.12) from one of anxiety to purpose and clarity.

7.8.3 Reflections on Meaning-Making

At the Theoretical Level, the detox appeared to enable participants to step back and reframe the way they understood their lives. Their digital interactions were not just practical or emotional but deeply narrative—touching on identity, belonging, and self-definition.

For many, digital spaces had become both amplifiers and distorters of their story. The detox served as a narrative pause—a space to reclaim authorship. For some, this meant recognising the subconscious pressures to conform to online norms; for others, it allowed the emergence of a more values-aligned identity.

As a researcher and therapist, I was moved by how clearly participants were able to *hear their own stories differently* after disengaging from the digital noise. This mirrors what Clarkson (2002a pp.161-162) describes as the function of the Theoretical Level: not just to interpret, but to reinterpret—to tell a new story when the old one no longer fits.

In a culture where identity is increasingly shaped by algorithmic cues and digital echo chambers, the power to *re-story* oneself becomes a radical and revolutionary act. In this way, the detox was not simply about reducing screen time—it became a symbolic and literal invitation to take up the pen and write again.

7.9 Transpersonal Level of Functioning

The Transpersonal Level, as Clarkson (2002a, p. 162) notes, is perhaps the most elusive. It encompasses those dimensions of human experience that defy empirical logic—those

often described as mystical, spiritual, symbolic, or existentially profound. Clarkson (1993, p. 154) links this level with Jungian constructs such as archetypes, synchronicity, and the collective unconscious, recognising that human experience extends beyond cognition, behaviour, and emotion.

Lapworth and Sills (2010, p. 157) characterise the transpersonal as the domain that exists *beyond*—beyond the individual, beyond theory, beyond rationality. It includes dreams, metaphysical insights, religious and spiritual experiences, altered states of consciousness, and other non-ordinary moments of awareness. Yalom (2008, p. 133) describes this through an existential lens, suggesting that our search for meaning often involves immersing ourselves in “the river of life and death,” where we may find, or lose, a sense of self.

This level requires a degree of humility. It resists linear categorisation and asks instead for reverence, patience, and curiosity. Not all experiences can (or should) be explained. Some are simply to be witnessed. *“Beware the cloak of reason”* (Clarkson 2002 p.201).

7.9.1 Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

In the first round of interviews, few participants openly engaged with transpersonal themes—perhaps understandably so. The nature of this level makes it difficult to articulate, especially at the start of a process. I often felt I was “clutching at straws,” sensing something underneath but not yet visible in the language of participants.

However, during the second interviews, I noticed a shift. Several participants—without prompting—began to speak with more openness and depth about meaning, presence, disconnection, and self-reflection. These moments, though subtle and often softly spoken, pointed to something transpersonal.

One participant spoke of existential restlessness:

“What am I going to do? You know, this is like... well, in Buddhism they call it dukkha. It’s this kind of dissatisfaction.”

Another reflected on a quiet but meaningful shift:

“I liked the new story of who I was. I was someone making a decision, someone more purposeful. Before, I felt I was just being swept along.”

Several referenced a spiritual or existential quality in their increased self-awareness:

“It gave me more space. That reconnection with oneself—if that’s spiritual, then yes. That’s what I felt.”

Another spoke of change without needing explanation:

“When I’ve backed off from social media, I just feel better. I can’t explain why. It’s just smoother.”

Others described a kind of gentle transformation:

“I think that relationship with myself is changing. I want to spend more time with myself now. I like myself a bit more.”

One reflected on symbolic closure:

“I was happy to see you today—not just because it’s nice, but because this marks an end. Now I can get to the new point of where I want to be.”

And perhaps most powerfully:

“The detox gave me time to step back and really think about where I am in my life. I made a big decision in these two weeks.”

7.9.2 Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

GET 1: I experienced something I can’t quite name.

Several participants described emotional or existential shifts that were not easily classified. They spoke of spaciousness, clarity, and presence—yet avoided over-defining these moments. These accounts reflected something quietly meaningful, sensed rather than explained.

GET 2: Reconnection with self at a deeper level.

A number of participants described a return to self, or a softening of self-perception. The detox created space for reflection, which allowed new insights about identity, purpose, and values to emerge.

GET 3: The detox became a symbolic rite of passage.

For some, the detox wasn't just about screen use—it marked a turning point. Participants described decisions made, narratives reframed, and subtle but enduring changes in how they saw themselves and the world.

7.9.3 Reflections on Meaning-Making

The transpersonal level offered some of the most personally resonant moments in this research. While these experiences were infrequent and difficult to name, they stood out precisely because of their ambiguity and quiet profundity.

As a therapist, I am attuned to these moments—those flashes in therapy when a client encounters something beyond language. What surprised and moved me was that several participants appeared to touch this space within the framework of a digital detox. The removal of constant input seemed to create an opening—not just for emotional, cognitive or behavioural change, but for existential awareness.

This also touches my personal reflexivity. I found this level deeply satisfying to engage with—perhaps because it aligned with my own sense of meaning and my therapeutic orientation. Yet I am aware that this may bias my interpretations. I wonder: were these moments as significant for participants as they were for me? Or did I hear them through a transpersonal lens because I wanted, or needed, to?

Nonetheless, the data suggested that something more than behavioural change was taking place. The detox allowed for stillness, and in that stillness, several participants began to ask deeper questions—not about technology, but about themselves. The nature of these reflections invites us to consider that digital detoxing is not just a behavioural intervention, but potentially a pathway into the transpersonal—a space where meaning and purpose are quietly, and sometimes unexpectedly, redefined.

7.10 Synthesis Across the Seven Levels of Functioning

This chapter has presented a layered exploration of participant experience using Petrūška Clarkson's Seven Levels of Functioning as a guiding framework. Through this lens, it became possible to examine how the digital detox impacted individuals not only physiologically and behaviourally, but also emotionally, cognitively, socially, and

existentially. Each level revealed distinct yet interconnected insights—together forming a complex picture of what it means to live, relate, and reflect in a digitally saturated world.

At the *Physiological level*, participants became aware of how deeply embedded their devices were in their bodily rhythms—affecting movement, sleep, and even muscle memory. Technology was often used to monitor or control the body, offering a sense of agency, but also hinting at patterns of dependence.

The *Emotional level* offered rich, and at times surprising, insight. Many participants were unaware of how emotionally affected they were by their digital use until they stepped away from it. Anxiety, dread, ambivalence, and shame surfaced in the first interviews, while the second interviews reflected emotional spaciousness, calm, and a renewed sense of self-compassion.

At the *Nominative level*, participants began to find words for their experience. Their language evolved noticeably between interviews—from hesitant and ambivalent to more coherent, intentional, and aligned with values of recovery and autonomy. The act of naming gave shape to their internal processes, echoing therapeutic principles around the power of language to transform.

The *Normative level* exposed the social forces underlying our digital behaviours—cultural ideals, political anxieties, gendered messaging, and generational expectations. Participants reflected on how algorithms and online platforms often reinforce dominant narratives about beauty, productivity, and success. The detox created space to question: Whose norms am I living by?

At the *Rational level*, participants described changes in focus, memory, and cognitive capacity. Many noted a sense of mental overload while using digital media, and increased clarity once disengaged. Others acknowledged how tech helped them stay organised or stimulated, showing that digital engagement is not in itself healthy or unhealthy, echoing the words of Hamlet (Shakespeare, 1601, Act 2 Scene 2): “*there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so.*”

The *Theoretical level* brought forward reflections on narrative and identity. Participants became more aware of how they constructed and shared their personal stories online—and how social media had subtly shaped these narratives. Some began re-authoring these

stories post-detox, expressing shifts in identity and purpose. The detox was seen, in some cases, as a narrative pivot: a chance to step into a new chapter.

Finally, at the *Transpersonal level*, participants touched on deeper, existential themes. While often difficult to articulate, many reported a shift in self-awareness and meaning-making. Some made significant life decisions, while others described a quiet clarity or inner spaciousness that emerged in the process. These moments suggested that digital disengagement can open a doorway—not only to insight, but to a re-encounter with the self at a spiritual or symbolic level.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Implications

8.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study created a space for participants to engage in a consensual digital detox and reflect on their relationship with technology and social media. Temporary disengagement allowed them to reassess their usage, leading several participants to make meaningful, values-based changes in their lives.

8.2 Comparison with Existing Literature

The overall experience of the detox was largely positive, aligning with much of the literature suggesting benefits from digital disengagement. At the same time, the project confirmed the strong sense of ambivalence highlighted in earlier research. One unexpected finding was how clearly participants acknowledged the positive contributions that tech and social media make in their lives.

This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the rich, deeply personal experiences of digital use and detox. The emotional complexity—ranging from joy and shame to confusion and insight—offered a level of experiential depth that is often missing from more outcome-focused studies on digital wellbeing.

8.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The application of Clarkson's Seven Levels of Functioning provided a rare opportunity to organise and honour complex, nonlinear human experience. Rather than flatten the data

into reductive categories, the model supported a layered exploration of how people live with and reflect on technology.

This work feels, in many ways, like a tribute to Petrūska Clarkson. Her model offered more than structure—it gave ethical and philosophical depth to the research process. In applying her framework to a contemporary digital context, this study reaffirms the breadth, flexibility, and enduring relevance of her work.

In terms of future practice—both therapeutic and educational—three core themes emerged from the project:

- **The relationship between addiction and identity**
- **The importance of resolving ambivalence**
- **The need to align decisions with personal values.**

8.3.1 Addictive Processes and Identity

I've long understood addiction as a symptom—not the root problem. Gabor Maté (2009) writes that *"Addiction is not the problem. Addiction is the addict's attempt to solve a problem: the deep discomfort, the disconnection from the self, the lack of meaning."*

In 1961, Carl Jung wrote to Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous stating that (Salt Lake City AA 2015):

"The craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God."

Both these authors express, years apart, the same conflict that I constantly observe in humanity. We strive for and desire deep and meaningful connections with each other, from our early attachment in infancy, to our sense of tribal and social belonging in adolescence and adulthood. When our needs for structure, excitement, meaning, belonging and purpose are not met, we humans will latch on to the next best thing that replicates these. Drugs, alcohol, co-dependency, gambling, internet, social media and technology all provide temporary relief from our personal and societal crisis of disconnect and lack of meaning.

I have, for a long time, been familiar with the narratives and processes of recovery, it was surprising and deeply meaningful to observe the change of narrative and self-perception in some of the participants as they reflected on their detox. This project has reinforced my

belief that those presenting with addictive behaviours need to be met with kindness, compassion, empathy and warmth.

8.3.2 Resolving Ambivalence as the Catalyst for Change

Ambivalence was a recurring theme. In line with Miller and Rollnick's (2002, p.13) foundational work in Motivational Interviewing, participants embodied the tension of *"wanting to change, and at the same time not wanting to change."*

Through reflection, weighing pros and cons, and experiencing contrast, participants were able to move through their ambivalence and toward meaningful behavioural changes. The detox created the conditions for inner decision-making to emerge. This has direct implications for both therapy and education: real change is more likely when the client or student is placed at the centre of their process.

8.3.3 Values-Based Decision Making

Building on the previous point, lasting change occurs when it aligns with personal values. This is a core idea within Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), where values are understood as guiding principles that shape intentional living (Harris, 2019, p.7), whilst also appearing in *Motivational Interviewing's* idea that developing discrepancy between current behaviour against personal values is an essential (Miller and Rollnick 2002 p.83). Several participants reflected that the detox helped them reconnect with what truly matters—prompting a clearer alignment between daily habits and deeper values.

8.3.4 Summary

Together, these themes reinforce my commitment to Carl Rogers' core conditions: Unconditional Positive Regard, Empathy, and Congruence (2004, pp.50–57). My role—as therapist or educator—is to hold space for ambivalence, support values discovery, and foster a sense of agency in others' decision-making processes.

8.4 Reflexive Review

Throughout this project, the constant thread, apart from digital technology and social media, has been myself as researcher. I brought my own paradigms, values, and lived experience into the research space—particularly my experience of recovery and ambivalence around digital life.

I aimed to be reflexive, not detached—to notice my biases while remaining congruent and transparent. While IPA is a double hermeneutic process (Smith et al., 2022), I believe this research added a third dimension: my interpretive reflection as practitioner–researcher. Relationality was always present—between me, the data, and the wider cultural context in which we are all embedded.

8.5 Limitations and Recommendations

This study involved a small, relatively homogenous sample, which limits generalisability. Participants were all professionals, mostly over the age of 30, and many were already reflective in nature. A broader sample across different age groups and backgrounds—particularly younger digital natives—would likely generate richer contrasts.

Looking ahead, I intend to expand this work by conducting research with Millennials and Gen Z students in the academic setting where I work. As digital culture continues to evolve, capturing the lived experiences of these younger generations feels timely and necessary.

This project represents a snapshot—a time capsule—of our current relationship with tech. But it also invites an ongoing inquiry into how we adapt, cope, and grow within a shifting digital landscape.

8.6 Final Words

This project has been both a privilege and a challenge. I began with strong preconceptions—and thankfully, many of them were disrupted. I leave this process with greater humility, curiosity, and an expanded sense of what it means to explore lived experience.

I'm reminded of Bilbo Baggins' reflection in *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 1937, p. 42):

"You certainly usually find something, if you look, but it is not always quite the something you were after."

Indeed, what I found here was not what I first expected—but it was more human, more meaningful, and more alive.

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Appendixes

- A. Participant Information Sheet
- B. Consent Form
- D. Ethics Approval Documentation

Appendices

- A. Participant Information Sheet B. Consent Form C. Interview Schedule D. Transcript
Example E. Data Protection Plan

BLACK MIRROR 2.0

By Max Dalda Müller

A UK based Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the effects of technology and social media on human experience and relationships.

Dear participant,

Thank you for considering taking part in this research project, as part of my Master of the Art in Counselling and Psychotherapy Practice at Bath Spa University.

What is Black Mirror 2.0?

Since the iPhone was first introduced in 2008, the way we communicate has transformed significantly. Today, people spend an average of 4.8 hours daily on mobile devices (BBC, 2022), with usage having increased substantially during the lockdown periods. Video calls through platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams have become integrated into both professional and personal lives. As society adapts to the 'new normal,' it seems likely that some of these trends will persist.

My research intends to examine how technological tools have shaped communication, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will investigate the practical, social, psychological, and emotional impacts of technology on human communication and relationships. It will focus on both interpersonal

communication—how we interact with others—and intrapersonal communication, the ways in which we communicate within ourselves.

As a participant in this study, you will be undertaking a consensual ‘digital detox’ for two weeks. During this period, you will exchange your smartphone for a simpler mobile device, abstain from social media, and avoid internet-based news media. Please be assured that you are free to withdraw from the detox at any time. The length of time of the detox is not what I am looking at. It is trying to capture the experience, so any experience is valid.

The research questions guiding this study are:

- What is the experience of using technology in contemporary society?
- What is the experience of using technology in a deliberately restricted manner?

How will you be involved?

As part of your participation in this research study, we will conduct two interviews on Microsoft Teams to explore your relationship with technology, specifically focusing on smartphone use, as well as social and news media. The interviews will last between 45 and 60 minutes.

1. Initial Interview:

During the first interview, we will delve into your existing relationship with technology, with particular emphasis on your smartphone habits and engagement with social and news media. I will explain the process of the digital detox you will be undertaking.

You will be provided with a burner or brick phone, which will only allow you to make calls and send text messages, without internet access. We will also discuss how you will log out of all social and news media accounts and agree on how you will access technology and internet services for essential daily tasks.

If you choose to, you will be encouraged to keep a diary throughout the detox period. The diary is for your own process and not part of the research data. It will be made clear that you have the autonomy to make choices throughout this process, including the option to stop the detox at any time. This approach respects the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence (BACP 2018, McLeod 2022, p. 49).

The digital detox will last for a maximum of 14 days. Even if you decide to stop the detox, I would still like to hear your experience.

2. Second Interview:

The second interview will take place one week after you have completed the detox, or at the time you would have finished if you decide to finish it early. We will reflect on your experiences during the detox period and discuss what this experience has meant to you.

How will the information be used and stored?

As part of your participation in this research study, I would like to explain how the information collected during the interviews will be used and stored.

- The interviews will be recorded using Microsoft Teams through my Bath Spa University MS Office 365 account. An automatic transcription of these recordings will also be generated, ensuring that all information is stored securely and confidentially. The recordings will be deleted right away, once the transcriptions have been generated and checked for accuracy.
- I will analyse the content from the transcription as part of the research process. If you would like, you can request access to the transcription after the interviews are completed.
- Once the research process is concluded, all recordings and transcriptions will be deleted to maintain your privacy and confidentiality.

- The findings from this research will be reviewed by my research supervisor at Bath Spa University, as well as the marking and assessment team, including External Examiners involved.
- Any insights gained from this research will be shared in psychotherapy and academic circles; however, your anonymity as a participant will be always maintained.
- I will also share the findings from my dissertation with you if you would like to have access to it.

What are the benefits of participating in this research project?

It is my hope that by taking part in this digital detox, you will gain valuable insights into your relationship with technology and social media.

Additionally, this research aims to capture and give voice to the experiences of a consensual digital detox in our age of pervasive technology. The insights gained may provide valuable information for both participants and professionals regarding how we interact with and through technology in today's world.

What are the potential risks?

Engaging in this research can be an emotional experience. One of the well-known effects of smartphones and social media is the increased release of dopamine.

When you significantly reduce your technology use, there is a possibility that you may experience withdrawal symptoms like those associated with Dopamine Agonist Withdrawal Syndrome (DAWS). Individuals affected by DAWS can experience a range of symptoms, including anxiety, depression, fatigue, sweating, agitation, and other physical symptoms akin to withdrawal from addictive substances.

During your digital detox, you may experience notable changes in your dopamine levels due to the limitation of dopamine-inducing activities such as social media and

gaming. If you have a history of impulse control disorders (ICDs), you may be at a higher risk of experiencing significant withdrawal symptoms.

To support you through this process, I recommend careful planning and access to support. Throughout the detox, you can contact me at any time to discuss your experiences and any challenges you may be facing. Additionally, I will provide you with the contact details of a colleague who is an experienced registered psychotherapist, in case I am unavailable when you need to reach out.

We will also discuss strategies for self-care during the initial interview to help you manage any difficulties that may arise.

Please be aware that you can withdraw from the research at any point.

What if I change my mind?

You are free to change your mind and withdraw from the project at any time, without needing to provide a reason. Participation is fully consensual throughout the study.

If you choose to withdraw, I will delete all your data and recordings, and your contributions will be removed from the analysis to ensure your privacy and autonomy are respected.

Has the research been officially approved? By whom?

I have sought and gained ethical approval from the Ethics Research Committee at Bath Spa University. If you have any questions about this, please email my supervisor Mike Sims: m.sims@bathspa.ac.uk

Thank you for your interest and willingness to take part in this study. Your insights are essential to understanding the role of technology in modern communication, and I look forward to working together.

Best regards, Max Dalda Müller



Black Mirror 2.0 By Max Dalda Müller- *An Interpretative*

Phenomenological Analysis of the effects of technology and social media on human experience and relationships.

Research project consent form

	Yes	No
I have read and understood the information sheet provided.		
I confirm that I am at least 25 years of age, or older.		
I consent to having the two interviews recorded on video and transcribed. Please let me know if you do not want the video recorded.		
I understand how my data will be recorded, stored, processed, and securely deleted upon the project's completion.		
I understand that my data will be anonymised in any publications or presentations resulting from this research.		
I understand that my data will be deleted once the research project has been completed.		
I am aware of the potential risks and benefits of participating in this consensual digital detox.		
I have been informed about the support resources available to me while engaging in this project.		
I understand that I can withdraw from this research at any time without providing a reason. If I withdraw, my data will be excluded from the analysis.		

Signed by participant:

Name in
print:

Date:

Restricted - Other

SECTION A – to be completed by all researchers

Name of applicant	Max Dalda Müller
Student ID number (if PGR student)	412477
Programme of study (if student)	Counselling and Psychotherapy Practice Master of the Arts

Date of submission of application:	17 th November 2024
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Supervisor name	Michael Sims
Department name	
Title of research projects	Black Mirror 2.0- An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the effects of technology and social media on human experience and relationships.

Brief overview OF THE STUDY: <i>Describe the aims and purposes of the research proposed. Outline the research questions and methods to be used and list the main types of research participants you intend to collect data from.</i>
Since the iPhone was first introduced in 2008, the way we communicate has transformed significantly. On average, individuals now spend 4.8 hours daily on mobile devices (BBC, 2022), with usage increasing substantially during lockdown periods. Video calls through platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams have become integrated into both professional and personal lives. As society adapts to the 'new normal,' it is likely that some of these trends will persist. My research intends to examine how technological tools have shaped communication, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brief overview OF THE STUDY:

Describe the aims and purposes of the research proposed. Outline the research questions and methods to be used and list the main types of research participants you intend to collect data from.

This study aims to investigate the practical, social, psychological, and emotional impacts of technology on human communication and relationships. It will focus on both interpersonal communication—interactions between individuals—and intrapersonal communication, the way individuals communicate within themselves.

Participants in this study will undertake a consensual 'digital detox' for a duration of two weeks, during which they will exchange their smartphones for simpler mobile devices, abstain from social media, and avoid internet-based news media. Participants are free to withdraw from the detox at any time.

Data will be collected and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Each participant will take part in two one-hour interviews: one before the detox period and one following its completion.

The aims of my research are as follows:

- To describe participants' subjective experiences as they engage with people, places, and objects through technology.
- To explore participants' experiences of a deliberate and consensual reduction in their use of technology.
- To interpret participants' experiences through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach.
- To amplify the phenomenological voices of the participants.

The research questions guiding this study are:

- What is the experience of using technology in contemporary society?
- What is the experience of using technology in a deliberately restricted manner?

Restricted - Other

RESEARCH ETHICS CHECKLIST

Please confirm you have consulted the guidelines of a professional association relevant to your discipline (i.e. BERA, BSA or BPS) in completing this checklist (please consult your supervisor if necessary) ☐ X

Please confirm that you and your supervisor (if appropriate) have discussed research ethics and safety issues ☐ X

Restricted - Other

Researchers should answer each question below by ticking the appropriate box:

	Yes	No
1. Will the research involve gathering personal information on identifiable living individuals?	☒ X	☐
2. Will the research involve gathering confidential information of any kind (i.e. information not currently in the public domain)?	☒ X	☐
3. Will the research involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent (e.g. children, adults with learning difficulties)?	☐	☒ X
4. Will the research require the cooperation of a "gatekeeper," e.g. an authority figure who has the power to grant access to groups and individuals possibly without their informed consent?	☐	☒ X
5. Will participants be remunerated in some form for the information they are asked to provide (e.g. being paid for interviews)?	☐	☒ X
6. Could the research cause harm to subjects or have negative consequences for them that exceed those experienced in everyday life?	☒ X	☐
7. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, will the research raise any issues which should be the subject of ethical consideration and/or review?	☒ X	☐
8. Does the research entail potential security or health and safety risks to the researcher that exceed those experienced in everyday life?	☐	☒ X
9. It is suggested that research reports are made available publicly upon completion to participants. Do you or your supervisor feel that, for any reasons whatsoever, access to your final report may need to be restricted?	☐	☒ X

If you have ticked NO to all questions, please sign below:

Researcher signature	Date

Restricted - Other

Supervisor signature (if researcher is student)	Date

If you ticked Yes to any of the questions in section A, please fill in the relevant sections in Section B and sign at the end of that section. Once the form is completed, as well as your supporting documentation, please send your completed application to the Research Support Office via ethics@bathspa.ac.uk

SECTION B - To be completed by researchers having answered Yes to any of the previous questions in Section A

<p>1. RECRUITMENT/SELECTION PROCEDURES: How will study participants be selected? What information will be provided about the study so that participants can make an informed decision. Is there any sense in which participants might feel 'obliged' to participate?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information provided to participants must consist of a brief factual account of the study aims and data collection methods so that participants can make an informed decision, if necessary following further discussion with the researcher.• The approach taken to requesting consent must be sufficiently separate from the provision of information. As a general rule researchers will use information sheets and consent forms, although there may be cases in which this is not appropriate.• If you are considering using social media to recruit and select participants please read the BERA 2018 guidelines on this topic and/or the ESRC guidance on internet-mediated research (link on p.11 of the BERA 2018 guidelines) and/or access the resources that can be found on the Research Office intranet site (https://thehub.bathspa.ac.uk/services/research-and-graduate-affairs/research-support/integrity-and-ethics) <p>Since undertaking my first digital detox in 2018, I have publicly shared my experiences and insights on this subject through lectures, presentations, and</p>

discussions with students, as well as in conferences and symposiums. These engagements have generated substantial interest in digital detoxes, leading to numerous voluntary offers from individuals willing to participate in this research. I have enough volunteers so I do not need to advertise for participants, These participants encompass only those in the fields of counselling and psychotherapy. While this approach will result in a relatively homogenous sample, I anticipate it will yield participants who are able to derive and articulate meaningful insights from the experience.

To maintain ethical boundaries, I am not working with any current students due to potential conflicts of interest and the risk of participants providing responses they think align with my expectations. Instead, I have only included former students who have a minimum of three years' separation from their time under my instruction.

Commented [RN1]: Good, but how exactly will you contact prospective participants? Via email/social media...? You need to detail that here. Also mention the information sheet (which I have added as an appendix here so all documents are together)

2. VULNERABLE INDIVIDUALS: Specify whether the research will include vulnerable groups, including children, vulnerable adults or others. If so, please explain what will be done to facilitate their participation and reduce possible harm to them. If working with people with disabilities, please explain how you will provide any special support that they may need, for instance, in relation to communication or to access to the interview site.

Please also refer to information sheet and consent form attached

All participants in this study will be aged 25 or over. This age requirement is based on neurological research suggesting that the brain generally reaches full maturity by this age, a factor essential for ensuring emotional, psychological, and cognitive resilience. A key focus of this study is the impact of reduced technology use on dopamine levels, as technology and social media are known to influence dopamine

release.

Given the potential impact of reduced dopamine stimulation, selecting participants aged 25 or over may potentially lead to more resilience throughout the digital detox process. Additionally, I aim to recruit participants from psychotherapeutic circles.

To further support participants:

- There will be support available throughout the process (see information sheet attached).
- Participants will also be provided with a secondary support contact—a colleague who is a registered BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) counsellor—in case I am unavailable.

Participants retain the right to withdraw consent and participation at any time. Ensuring this right aligns with the ethical guidelines set by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the BACP, which emphasise the importance of autonomy and respect for participants' well-being.

Commented [RN2]: Not relevant for ethics and also a bit biased! Be careful with wording if you are including something like this in your final dissertation.

Commented [MD3R2]: This was feedback I had from Mike Sims, which is why I added this. I have changed the comment to look less biased

Commented [RN4]: Clarify a bit more - those teaching at university level only?

Commented [RN5]: In what way? You need to be careful not to 'convince' them to remain on the study because you are leading it. It might be better to be able to point them in the direction of other support instead so the researcher boundaries are not blurred.

Commented [RN6]: good

<p>3. INFORMED CONSENT: Please explain your approach to how consent is to be obtained, including from parents, carers and children as appropriate. As a general rule a consent form should be used, unless this is not appropriate (if so please explain why). A copy of the proposed consent form, written in simple, non-technical language intelligible to your participants should be attached with this form. Participants' entitlement to withdraw consent should be explained on the consent form used.</p>
<p>Please refer to information sheet and consent form attached</p> <p>In it, participants are giving consent to the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of the information sheet. • Age confirmation. • Consent to being interviewed, recorded and transcribed. • Consent to data being recorded, stored, processed, and securely deleted • Agreement to data being anonymised in any publications or presentations resulting from the research. • Understanding of the potential risks and benefits. • Understanding of support available throughout the process. • Understanding of the consensual nature of the project and the right to withdraw at any stage without reason.
<p>4. PARTICIPANTS IN DEPENDENT RELATIONSHIPS: Specify whether participants will include students or others in a dependent relationship (this could affect their ability to decline to participate). For example, they may be children in a class you are teaching or working with. How will you ensure that participants feel able not to consent to the research or to withdraw?</p>
<p>N/A</p>
<p>5. PARTICIPANTS WHO YOU WORK WITH OR FOR: Explain how you have considered relationships with colleagues who you work with or managers you work for as part of this research (if appropriate).</p>

Commented [RN7]: I know it's all probably there (I haven't looked at them yet) but you do need to list the basic elements here too.

Restricted - Other

I am seeking participants from within my community of practice, though no one directly involved in working with me will be included. I recognise that this approach may mean I am, to some extent, “preaching to the converted.” Additionally, I am mindful of the influence my own views may have on participants’ experiences and interpretations. I have been open about my perspectives on the topic, which may

Commented [RN8]: good

Commented [RN9]: Not technically necessary for ethics approval

unintentionally lead participants to engage in the study with a bias towards my viewpoint.

Moreover, I acknowledge the potential for a transferential relationship to develop between myself and interviewees, where participants may project certain expectations or align their responses with my beliefs, consciously or unconsciously. I intend to examine how this dynamic might influence the research findings and will include a reflection on its effects as part of my dissertation. This reflexive exploration will contribute to the transparency and integrity of the research process.

Commented [RN10]: As above

6. CONFIDENTIALITY: Please state who will have access to the data and which measures will be adopted to maintain the confidentiality of research participants. Will the data be anonymised and if so in what ways?

The interviews will be recorded using Microsoft Teams through my Bath Spa University MS Office 365 account. An automatic transcription of these recordings will also be generated, ensuring that all information is stored securely and confidentially.

Participants will be offered the opportunity to review their interviews prior to starting analysis. By this, I am referring to the transcript, which can be easily made accessible to participants.

Commented [RN11]: I presume you mean the transcripts and not the actual recording. Will transcripts be anonymised and any identifying elements removed prior to sharing? This helps to ensure confidentiality. There is far less risk with storing anonymised transcripts than with video recordings.

I will always maintain the confidentiality of participants by not including any personal identifiable information in the dissertation. Participants names will not be used, instead I will use letters alphabetically, in order of when the interviews took place.

Commented [RN12]: All good. I would just add detail about who can access the data in your Office 365 account. Also include how you will refer to participants in the dissertation - are you using numbers/letters etc

I will give permission to my Bath Spa University supervisor Mike Sims to access and delete information, in case something happens to me. IT staff at Bath Spa

Commented [RN13R12]: I was simply looking for clarification that you are the only person who can access your BSU account 😊 Participants need this confirmation so they know any raw data is secure with restricted access.

Restricted - Other

could access data if necessary, under these circumstances.

Commented [RN14]: DELETE - this is unnecessary.

7. PROTECTION OF RESEARCHER (Applicant): Please state briefly any precautions being taken to protect your health and safety if appropriate. Is

there anything about the environment in which you will be researching that requires you to take extra precautions? Do you have any health condition that might give you serious problems during your fieldwork?

Throughout the research process, I will engage in self-care practices to ensure my emotional and mental well-being. I will attend regular sessions with my therapist, as well as my ongoing monthly mandatory supervision sessions. My **clinical supervisor**, who has previously completed the same MA programme, has insight into the specific challenges I may encounter and will offer guidance based on that experience.

With over 14 years of experience as a practising therapist, I am adept at utilising self-care techniques to manage the emotional demands of my work. I also participate in regular 12-step self-help group meetings, providing an additional layer of peer support. These combined resources will help me maintain a balanced approach to the research and address any personal challenges that may arise.

8. ANTICIPATED USE OF RESEARCH DATA: Do you anticipate using your data beyond your research project, e.g. for publishing articles or in a report for your organisation? If so, please state

All data, including interviews and transcripts, will be securely stored using my Bath Spa University MS Office 365 account. By default, all recordings are set to automatically delete after three months. **Once both interviews are completed, I will delete the recordings and use the transcripts only. These will be anonymised using letters to identify each participants.**

For the dissemination of findings and research processes, I will obtain informed consent from participants, ensuring that their anonymity is preserved. This consent will enable me to share the results of the study in public lectures, academic settings, and as part of my professional role in Higher Education. My previous work on this topic includes delivering public lectures and incorporating my experiences and findings into my teaching practice. Please refer to the attached consent form for further details.

Commented [RN15]: Clinical/professional supervisor or academic one?

Commented [RN16]: Do you intend storing the recordings for this length of time or will you delete once you have checked the transcripts?

9. DATA PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT: How do you intend to store your data? Have you thought carefully about archiving methods and where to keep confidential information? What data protection procedures will you follow to ensure the anonymity of your participants at all times? Please ensure you are aware of the GDPR guidelines.

I am a psychotherapist in private practice and am registered as a Data Controller with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). I am fully compliant with UK GDPR regulations in my professional role. In addition, I am a course leader in Higher Education at two separate institutions, where I am well-versed in adhering to data protection regulations concerning sensitive information.

All data for this research will be collected using my Bath Spa University MS Office 365 account. Interviews will be conducted via MS Teams, with recordings automatically saved to MS Stream and deleted after three months by default. I will delete the recordings once both interviews are completed and use anonymised transcripts only for analysis.

Data storage and processing will take place on BSU MS Office 365 account.

Please see attached consent form

10. FEEDBACK TO PARTICIPANTS: Will the data or findings of this research be made available to participants or to others? If so, specify the form and timescale for feedback – e.g. an electronic copy of your thesis or report. What commitments will be made to participants regarding feedback? How will these obligations be verified?

Participants will have the option to view their interview transcripts if they wish. Additionally, I will share the final version of the dissertation with them once it has been assessed by Bath Spa University staff, as stated in the consent form (see attached).

Commented [RN17]: As above, do you need to retain them for this length of time?

Commented [RN18]: This should also be on your BSU account and not on a personal one.

Commented [RN19]: I would suggest only the transcription which you referred to earlier in section 6

Commented [RN20]: And if all participants have consented to this?

Restricted - Other

Guidance and support, and templates for supporting documentation (including consent forms and information sheets), can be found on the UK Data service site at: <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/manage-data/legal-ethical/consent-data-sharing/consent-forms>

Please note that the information sheet should make it clear to participants that the title of the research may evolve and change contingent on the final findings of the research

DURATION OF PROJECT	
START DATE	1 st December 2024
END DATE	27 th January 2025

Researcher Signature	Date
	17 th November 2024

Document checklist for submission

I have completed and include relevant documents with this form, which may include:
Information sheet ☐
Consent form ☐
Interview format ☐
Interview schedule ☐
Observation schedule ☐
Survey ☐

Supervisor Signature (nb. For UG/PGT students only)	Date
<p>Address the points in RNM email dated 12Dec24:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Comment on section 6- Clarify when participants can withdraw (point in the study rather than an actual date)- Consider whether further consideration needs to be given to the inclusion/exclusion criteria considering wellbeing/qualification level <p>Once these are addressed you have permission to collect data.</p>	12 December 2024

Commented [RN21]: We also need to see a draft list of questions you will ask participants for each of the interviews.

Commented [MD22R21]: I have attached this at the end of this form

Restricted - Other

Róisín Ní Mhocháin & Lorraine Knibbs	
--------------------------------------	--

Restricted - Other

SECTION C – Review and Decision
Ethics Committee use only:

Decision on ethics form

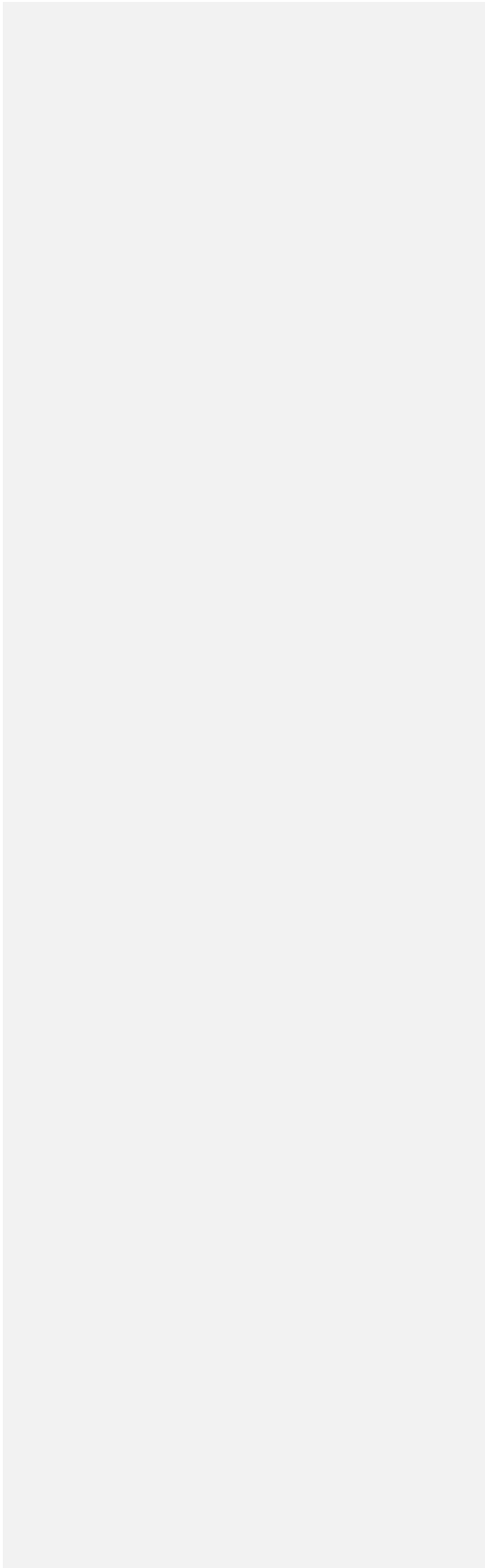
Pass	You can now start your research	
Conditional pass	You can start your research when you meet the following conditions:	
Redraft the form and resubmit	Please reconsider your approach to ethics and make changes taking account of the following comments (which may be provided separately by email). Then resubmit the form.	
Reject in current form	Please reconsider your research project in its entirety as the issues raised require a thorough re-examination of your research approach (please see comments send separately by email)	
Refer to University Ethics Committee	The University Ethics Committee will examine the issues raised in your ethics form. Please await further guidance.	
Ethics Peer Review College member signature		
UEC Chair signature (if referred is required)		

Please note that if necessary the University Ethics Committee or Ethics Peer Review College members may be asked to make further comments on this application, and these will be made in the box below:

Further notes from the University Ethics Committee or Chair or EPRC members

Restricted - Other

Signature and role	Date





Black Mirror 2.0 By Max Dalda Müller- *An Interpretative*

Phenomenological Analysis of the effects of technology and social media on human experience and relationships.

Research project consent form

	Yes	No
I have read and understood the information sheet provided.		
I confirm that I am at least 25 years of age, or older.		
I consent to having the two interviews recorded on video and transcribed. Please let me know if you do not want the video recorded.		
I understand how my data will be recorded, stored, processed, and securely deleted upon the project's completion.		
I understand that my data will be anonymised in any publications or presentations resulting from this research.		
I understand that my data will be deleted once the research project has been completed.		
I am aware of the potential risks and benefits of participating in this consensual digital detox.		
I have been informed about the support resources available to me while engaging in this project.		
I understand that I can withdraw from this research at any time without providing a reason. If I withdraw, my data will be excluded from the analysis.		

Commented [RN23]: As this is with Teams they need to consent to video recording unless they turn their cameras off.

Commented [RN24]: You say in the information sheet that all their data will be deleted, they don't need to request it.

Signed by participant:

Name in print:

Date:

BlackMirror2.0

By Max Dalda Müller

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the effects of technology and social media on human experience and relationships.

Dear [Participant's Name],

Thank you for considering taking part in this research project, as part of my Master of the Art in Counselling and Psychotherapy Practice at Bath Spa University.

Commented [RN25]: If this is the information sheet they technically haven't yet agreed to take part!

What is Black Mirror 2.0?

Since the iPhone was first introduced in 2008, the way we communicate has transformed significantly. Today, people spend an average of 4.8 hours daily on mobile devices (BBC, 2022), with usage having increased substantially during the lockdown periods. Video calls through platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams have become integrated into both professional and personal lives. As society adapts to the 'new normal,' it seems likely that some of these trends will persist.

My research intends to examine how technological tools have shaped communication, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will investigate the practical, social, psychological, and emotional impacts of technology on human communication and relationships. It will focus on both interpersonal communication—how we interact with others—and intrapersonal communication, the ways in which we communicate within ourselves.

As a participant in this study, you will be undertaking a consensual 'digital detox' for two weeks. During this period, you will exchange your smartphone for a simpler

Commented [RN26]: I would perhaps delete what is left in this section apart from maybe your research questions. Then the section on 'how will you be involved' comes next - some of what you have here is repeated there.

mobile device, abstain from social media, and avoid internet-based news media.

Please be assured that you are free to withdraw from the detox at any time. The length of time of the detox is not what I am looking at. It is trying to capture the experience, so any experience is valid.

Commented [RN27]: If they only last on the detox a few days will they still be able to continue to be a study participant or is it only those that last the two weeks you want to retain as participants? I think you need to make that clear.

The research questions guiding this study are:

Commented [RN28]: This is very academic. I would simplify this. Say it in layman's language. Informed consent means the information has to be very clear, so the information sheet isn't an academic document 😊

- What is the experience of using technology in contemporary society?
- What is the experience of using technology in a deliberately restricted manner?

How will you be involved?

As part of your participation in this research study, we will conduct two interviews on Microsoft Teams to explore your relationship with technology, specifically focusing on smartphone use, as well as social and news media. The interviews will last between 45 and 60 minutes.

Commented [RN29]: Each or combined! 90 minutes twice is a lot of time to give to a voluntary study. I know when it comes people will likely be very happy to talk about it, but when you are recruiting participants it could put some off!

1. Initial Interview:
 - During the first interview, we will delve into your existing relationship with technology, with particular emphasis on your smartphone habits

and engagement with social and news media. I will explain the process of the digital detox you will be undertaking.

- You will be provided with a burner or brick phone, which will only allow you to make calls and send text messages, without internet access. We will also discuss how you will log out of all social and news media accounts and agree on how you will access technology and internet services for essential daily tasks.
- If you choose to, you will be encouraged to keep a diary throughout the detox period. The diary is for your own process and not part of the research data. It will be made clear that you have the autonomy to make choices throughout this process, including the option to stop the detox at any time. This approach respects the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence (BACP 2018, McLeod 2022, p. 49).
- The digital detox will last for a maximum of 14 days. Even if you decide to stop the detox, I would still like to hear your experience.

2. Second Interview:

- The second interview will take place one week after you have completed the detox, or at the time you would have finished if you decide to finish it early. We will reflect on your experiences during the detox period and discuss what this experience has meant to you.

How will the information be used and stored?

As part of your participation in this research study, I would like to explain how the information collected during the interviews will be used and stored.

- The interviews will be recorded using Microsoft Teams through my Bath Spa University MS Office 365 account. An automatic transcription of these recordings will also be generated, ensuring that all information is stored securely and confidentially. The recordings will be deleted right away, once

Commented [RN30]: Are you paying for this? Why not just ask them to keep a diary?
Also, you haven't mentioned the diary as data in the ethical approval form. Is it going to be data or is it just for them to log how they are doing to help them remember during the interview afterwards?

Commented [RN31]: I would make this step 2 and give a few details such as what happens if they can't last 14 days. Then step 3 is the second interview. This will make the process very clear for anyone considering taking part.

Commented [RN32]: How long will you keep the recordings? Who has access to your account?

the transcriptions have been generated and checked for accuracy.

- I will analyse the content from the transcription as part of the research process. If you would like, you can request access to the transcription after the interviews are completed.
- Once the research process is concluded, all recordings and transcriptions will be deleted to maintain your privacy and confidentiality.
- The findings from this research will be reviewed by my research supervisor at Bath Spa University, as well as the marking and assessment team, including External Examiners involved.
- Any insights gained from this research will be shared in psychotherapy and academic circles; however, your anonymity as a participant will be maintained at all times.
- I will also share the findings from my dissertation with you if you would like to have access to it.

Commented [RN33]: Why do you need both? Doesn't IPA focus on language so there's no real need to keep the recording.

Commented [RN34]: In your ethics application you said you would send them the transcript. If you are indeed doing that for what we call member checking (fact checking essentially) then they are already getting the transcript and don't need the recording. Make life easier on yourself and don't offer this

Commented [RN35]: I would say recordings will be deleted once the transcripts are checked for accuracy. Then when the dissertation has been completed successfully (i.e. you have passed) all transcripts will be deleted.

Commented [RN36]: Technically we see your full dissertation - us and I would say the 'marking and assessment team' which would include External Examiners

Commented [RN37]: I would offer to share the findings perhaps so if you don't get consent to publish or share more widely (your previous bullet point) then you can still share what the findings were.

What are the benefits of participating in this research project?

It is my hope that by taking part in this digital detox, you will gain valuable insights into your relationship with technology and social media.

Additionally, this research aims to capture and give voice to the experiences of a consensual digital detox in our age of pervasive technology. The insights gained may provide valuable information for both participants and professionals regarding how we interact with and through technology in today's world.

What are the potential risks?

Engaging in this research can be an emotional experience. One of the well-known effects of smartphones and social media is the increased release of dopamine. When you significantly reduce your technology use, there is a possibility that you may experience withdrawal symptoms similar to those associated with Dopamine Agonist Withdrawal Syndrome (DAWS). Individuals affected by DAWS can experience a range of symptoms, including anxiety, depression, fatigue, sweating, agitation, and other physical symptoms akin to withdrawal from addictive substances.

During your digital detox, you may experience notable changes in your dopamine levels due to the limitation of dopamine-inducing activities such as social media and gaming. If you have a history of impulse control disorders (ICDs), you may be at a higher risk of experiencing significant withdrawal symptoms.

To support you through this process, I recommend careful planning and access to support. Throughout the detox, you can contact me at any time to discuss your experiences and any challenges you may be facing. Additionally, I will provide you with the contact details of a colleague who is an experienced registered psychotherapist, in case I am unavailable when you need to reach out.

We will also discuss strategies for self-care during the initial interview to help you manage any difficulties that may arise.

Please be aware that you can withdraw from the research at any point.

What if I change my mind?

You are free to change your mind and withdraw from the project at any time, without needing to provide a reason. Participation is fully consensual throughout the study.

If you choose to withdraw, I will delete all your data and recordings, and your contributions will be removed from the analysis to ensure your privacy and autonomy are respected.

Restricted - Other

Has the research been officially approved? By whom?

I have sought and gained ethical approval from the Ethics Research Committee at Bath Spa University. If you have any questions about this, please email my supervisor Mike Sims: m.sims@bathspa.ac.uk

Commented [RN39]: Technically it doesn't go to the committee however you will have followed BSU ethics approval procedures and been granted approval.

Thank you for your interest and willingness to take part in this study. Your insights are essential to understanding the role of technology in modern communication, and I look forward to working together.

Best regards, Max
Dalda Müller

Black Mirror 2.0

Interview Format

As a framework/guide for the interviews, I will use Petrūska Clarkson's 7 Levels of Functioning, described by her as a *phenomenographic* tool (2002 p.148-149).

The interview will consist of looking at the participant's relationship with technology through the lens of the Seven Levels or lenses. These are:

1. Physiological: looking at biological/physiological experience: age, gender, sexuality, sleep, nutrition, exercise, etc.
2. Emotional: referring to the feelings, mood and affect, and how these manifest in relation to technology.
3. Nominative: the language and name we use to label, distinguish, and make meaning out of experience.
4. Normative: referring to familial and social norms, culture, statistics, rules and boundaries. We also encompass equality, diversity, inclusion, and ethics under this lens.
5. Rational: referring to cognitive processes, mental images, neurotypicality and neurodiversity.
6. Theoretical: referring to the person as a story teller, how narrative unfolds and how humans express their experience to one another.
7. Transpersonal: spiritual, transcendental, religious. Those experiences which fall beyond the realm of logical and scientific explanation are encompassed in the transpersonal level of functioning.

I have sufficient experience in using this tool so that I can hold it in my awareness.

Reference: Clarkson, P. (2002) *On Psychotherapy 2*. London, UK. Whurr Publishers