

Chapter 20

Digital Social Media Detox (DSMD): Responding to a Culture of Interconnectivity

Theresa Renee White

California State University, Northridge, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the findings of an empirical, qualitative, one-day intervention, in which 25 college students were invited to leave all digital technology at home and participate in ten hours of face-to-face communication. The project involved alternative activities providing an opportunity for students to socialize and interact without the distraction of digital technology, while affording the investigators an opportunity to observe patterns of social behavior and communication. Those findings are offered to illuminate the potential effects of overuse of digital social media, the pedagogical challenges in a contemporary educational environment, and the social problems we face as a result.

INTRODUCTION

College students in the United States are now more technologically sophisticated than ever (Jones & Shao, 2011). As our technological landscape continues to change and grow, students are faced with an endless stream of opportunities to interact online, both scholastically and socially. The

effects of digital social media on young people have been the subject of much scholarly discussion in recent years (Jones & Shao, 2011; Carr, 2010; Junco, 2010). Researchers such as Mayfield (2008) have studied the ways in which social media technologies (texting, email, Facebook and Twitter, and on-line video games) might interfere with the development of communication and

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social skills; and how those skills, in turn, affect academic performance and the ability to engage in an increasingly digitized world. This empirical study aims to explore how technologically mediated social relations change individuals and their society, and how educators can enhance pedagogical strategies to address these changes. I attempt to answer the question at the individual level, where choices about using technology are made and consequences experienced, while simultaneously focusing on the role of higher education in mitigating the potentially addictive and unfavorable outcomes of social media dependency.

New research suggests that the problem of social media overuse and the lack of ability to speak in public forums might be graver than previously thought. Three recent studies, one conducted by the University of Maryland (2010), another representing a follow-up by twelve universities led by the International Center for Media & the Public Agenda (ICMPA) (Deluca, 2011), and yet another by the private research firm InterSperience, suggest that actual addiction to the internet is a growing risk (Murphy, 2011). All three studies found that students experience withdrawal symptoms when asked to stay offline for up to 24 hours. Participants in the studies reported “shaking, tremors, and headaches,” as well as feeling “upset and lonely”—classic physical and emotional symptoms of addiction, similar to those reported by smokers and coffee drinkers trying to quit their habits.

Socialization is one of the main appeals of the Internet (Douglas et al., 2008; Preece, 2000; Wellman & Giulia, 1999), but as social media grows, dependency on it often develops pathologically. The connection between social and public skills, and potentially addictive behavior, warrants examination.

This chapter presents the findings of a Digital Social Media Detox – an empirical, qualitative, one-day intervention, in which 25 college students were invited to leave all digital technology at home and participate in ten hours of face-to-face

communication. The project involved alternative activities that ranged from traditional spelling bees to nature walks, providing an opportunity for students to socialize and interact without the distraction of digital technology, while affording the principal investigator and a team of trained assistants an opportunity to observe patterns of social behavior and communication. Those findings are offered to illuminate the potential effects of overuse of digital social media, the pedagogical challenges in a contemporary educational environment, and the social problems we face as a result. While there have been several studies that have documented the excessive use of social media tools and the ways in which educators are utilizing those tools in an academic environment, this project is unique and adds to a growing body of literature that documents face to face interaction between college students *without* the distraction of interconnectivity. Moreover the study highlights the potential for internet addiction, and the consequences of distracted thinking and superficial learning, which can turn into pathological compulsion to only pay attention via social media tools. Most importantly, this study highlights how, despite the distracting “anxiety of disconnection,” students can rediscover the pleasure of face-to-face connection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The frequent use of digital and social media in higher education has received mixed reviews, and offer many paradoxes, with respect to its usefulness in enhancing students’ learning experiences in and out of the classroom, its ability to provide a forum that bolsters creativity amongst college students, as well as its distractibility in and out of the classroom (Blankenship, 2011; Watkins, 2009). Some college professors claim noticeable increases in students’ contributions to discussions and the creative ways they respond to homework assignments using social media

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