TechXplore

Spending too much time online? Helpful tips to improve your digital wellness

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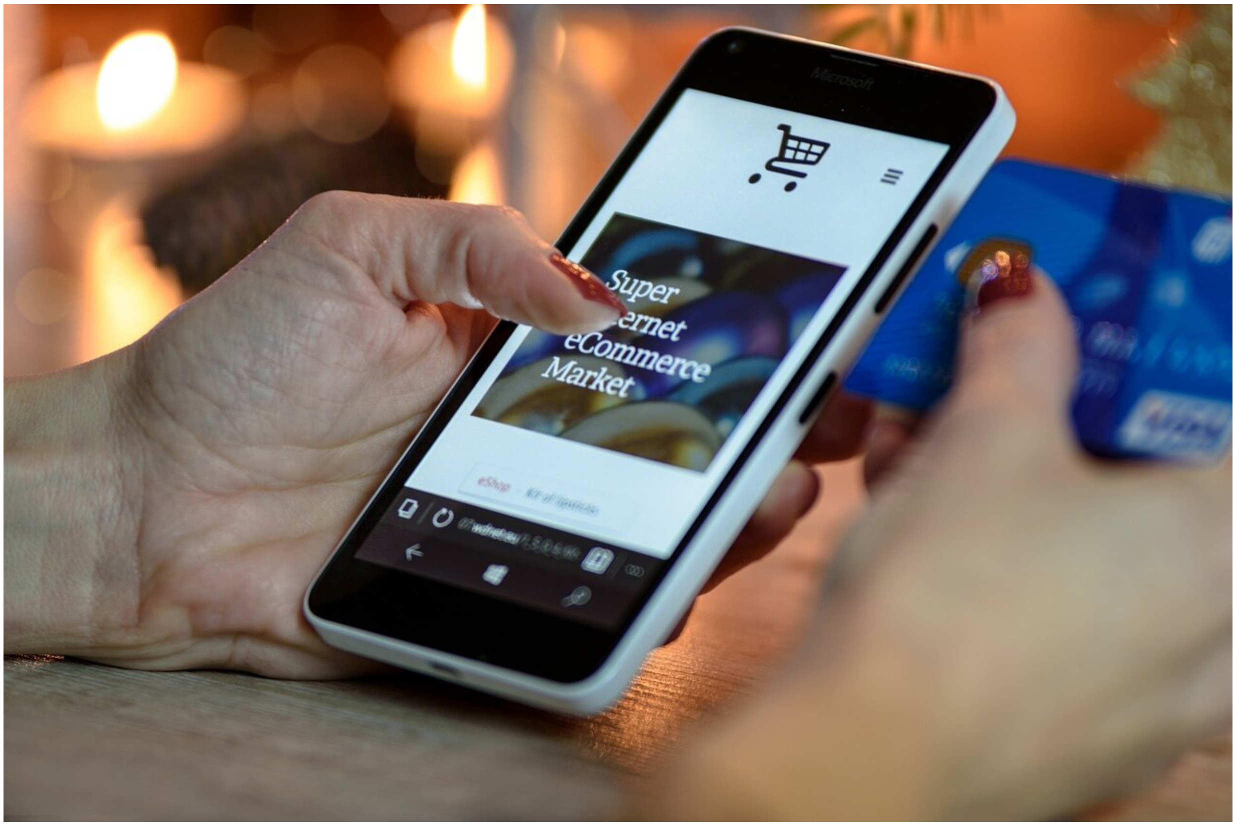

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Using digital platforms is increasingly the only option to manage our daily lives, from filling out forms at the doctor's office or government offices to ordering food, booking a cab, paying taxes, banking, shopping or dating. Often, people are coerced into using apps or online platforms by the absence of any other options.

Our social lives are equally entrenched in social media platforms. While the availability of services and opportunities on digital platforms may offer easier access or create an impression of wider connections, it also potentially harms our well-being.

The adverse impacts of digital use have grown since the pandemic, as social isolation has increased dependence on these technologies. Impacts of excessive use of digital technologies range from physical problems such as increasing eye strain or dry eye to emotional concerns such as social media dependence. This in turn could trigger mental health issues due to online comparison and trolling.

Other effects of platform dependence involve data privacy concerns with artificial intelligence and digital fraud. Likewise, social media comes with peer pressure, including the fear of missing out or social ostracism for not following digital trends. These affect our physical, mental, emotional and financial well-being.

Recognizing and managing digital problems can improve our digital well-being.

For some, digital autonomy refers to being in charge of personal data or having the right to withdraw consent from digital platforms. For others, it may be the ability to turn away from digital use and access non-digital options.

Digital independence

Choosing to reduce or eliminate the use of digital platforms might seem like a feasible option. However, the coercive nature of these systems limits the availability of non-digital alternatives.

For example, Meta's refusal to share Canadian news media content had real impacts, highlighting people's dependence on platforms for important news.

The question of our autonomy as digital users is complex, as seen in the current conversation around smartphone use and its potential ban in classrooms. This touches on issues such as the relationship between self-regulation and government regulation.

Another example emerges in the choices of how schools integrate digital learning—access versus screen time for example. Schools sometimes provide devices to students, and although this bridges the digital divide, it raises the question of whether students should be constantly available on digital devices?

What alternatives can there be to digital platforms? How can we create an environment with varied choices while providing non-digital alternatives to accommodate individuals prone to digital addiction? Conversely, how might individuals averse to digital platforms or those lacking digital accessibility avail non-digital opportunities?

Achieving balance

Well-being comprises of creating a pleasant flow in all areas of life including physical, mental, emotional, financial and spiritual.

Digital risks and digital overload can have detrimental effects on different areas of life including interpersonal relationships, productivity, sleep patterns and the quality of life.

Well-being in the digital space largely depends on how we navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by technology. This could mean taking actions like monitoring screen-time, refraining from random scrolling, partaking in offline activities and understanding the risks of digital overuse.

Focusing on balanced and ethical use of technology while addressing the potential negative consequences can help deflect negative impacts.

Yet there are larger roles and responsibilities for platform creators and government bodies to protect us from digital dependence, such as offering non-digital options. While we do not yet have complete agency over our data privacy, we can gain agency over our digital usage by encouraging opportunities for non-digital alternatives.

Tools for digital well-being

To manage digital dependence and overload, service providers can offer non-digital options. Engaging with technology without becoming dependent on it can contribute to physical, psychological, social and financial well-being. Incorporating some daily practices, creating new digital habits, and striking a healthy balance between digital use and non-use can support well-being.

Tracking: Paying attention to our daily digital usage and monitoring screen time helps us understand how, why and when we get drawn to our devices. Using the devices purposefully may assist in finding alternative activities.

Taking screen breaks: Turning off notifications or completely switching off for some time each day encourages us to take notice of the surroundings.

Creating a digital curfew: Setting up a specific cut-off time for digital devices some hours before bedtime can improve sleep hygiene.

Tech-free days: Assigning a day in a week or month which is tech-free helps to unplug digitally, limit digital dependence and help regain a sense of autonomy.

Assigning a specific space for devices: Allotting a space for all devices helps to keep them away from certain areas of the home which are meant for rest.

Nature-based activities: Spending time in nature, yoga and relaxation offer several health benefits. Likewise, practicing mindfulness helps reconnect with present surroundings.

Forming offline social connections: Staying away from digital devices while meeting friends in person can curb digital usage and bolster social connections.

Being wary of digital red flags: Learning how to identify a scam and validating websites before making online payments helps to avoid financial scams. Similarly, exercising due diligence when navigating online sites and social media platforms can help avert falling prey to cat-fishing which can lead to both emotional and financial losses.

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