Understanding the Challenges of Conducting a Social Media Detox Study: A Case Study Approach

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BACKGROUND

Social media has become deeply integrated into the lives of teens and young adults, with growing concern about its impact on mental health, productivity, overall well-being. This study initially aimed to experimentally compare three social media detox strategies, which included restricted access, complete disconnection, and gradual reduction; however, it shifted to a case study model due to participant drop-off. The transition highlighted real-world barriers in implementing behavior-change research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

- **Final Design:** Small-group comparison + case study
- **Groups:**
  - Control Group: No restrictions
  - Restricted Access: Used Brick device to block social media apps
  - Complete Disconnection: Removed all social media apps
- **Tools Used:**
  - Pre-/post-surveys (Google Forms)
  - Weekly Screen Time logs
  - Self-reported reflections

DATA AND FINDINGS

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT JOURNEY: Despite outreach to school groups and peer circles, including an EMT Honors Class and Student Support Collective club, participant turnout remained low. Even after offering community service hours, only 3 students signed up, and one remained consistent. (Figure 1: Recruitment Strategy)

TOP FEEDBACK TRENDS:

- Too Isolating: Participants described social media as essential for feeling connected.
- Poor Timing: AP exams, finals, and general school stress prevented participation.
- Practical Use: Many relied on social media for school-related communication.
- Commitment Concerns: Several expressed that the study was too long or hard to keep up with.

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS:

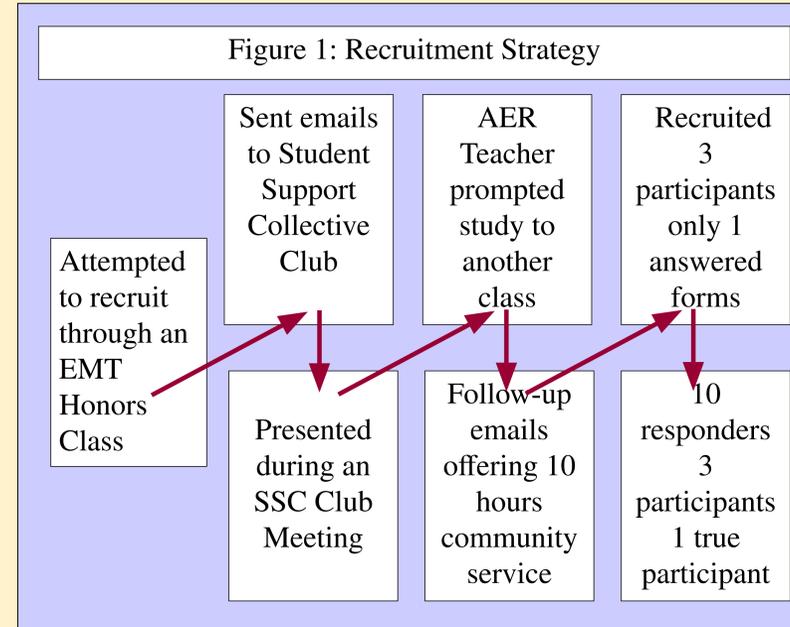A. Students underestimated how emotionally tied they were to social media.

B. One participant noted: "I did not realize how busy I would be."

Even without full data collection, these themes highlight the emotional, academic, and behavioral complexities of reducing screen time among teenagers.

Note: Due to small sample size and lack of participation, all findings are qualitative and exploratory.

DISCUSSION, ANALYSIS, AND EVALUATION

1. Although the study had limited data, the experience of trying to implement a behavior-change experiment revealed significant insights. Participant dropout was high even with community service incentives, which aligns with academic research showing that extrinsic motivators often fail to overcome deeply ingrained digital habits (Perski et al., 2021).

Figure 1: Recruitment Strategy

Attempted to recruit through an EMT Honors Class → Sent emails to Student Support Collective Club → AER Teacher prompted study to another class → Recruited 3 participants only 1 answered forms

Presented during an SSC Club Meeting → Follow-up emails offering 10 hours community service → 10 responders 3 participants 1 true participant

2. Changing digital behavior, more specifically social media, requires more than intention. According to Radtke et al. (2021), successful detox efforts must consider environmental and emotional factors, such as fear of missing out (FOMO) and the need for constant stimulation. My participants echoed this: even those who initially agreed to participate had difficulty completing weekly check-ins or reducing screen time.

3. Another finding is the emotional resistance that came with breaking routine. While apps like Brick provided physical restrictions, the internal struggle to disconnect remained. Many felt isolated or anxious during disconnection, suggesting that detox strategies must include emotional support tools, not just technological ones. Busse et al. (2021) argue that engagement drops when tools don't match user lifestyle or emotional needs, which my case study supports.

4. This project also revealed logistical barriers to student research: unanswered emails, busy schedules, digital fatigue, and uncertainty about the research process. Even though the detox was structured and offered support, maintaining engagement over three weeks was more difficult than anticipated. These issues should not be viewed as failures but as reflections of the complexity of real-life behavior-change work.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND NEXT STEPS

Limitations:

- With only three total participants and one full completer, the study lacks statistical reliability.
- Findings are not generalizable and should be viewed as exploratory and qualitative in nature.

Next Steps:

a. Collect feedback from non-responders to understand silent disengagement
b. Create more interactive or community-based strategies to sustain interest
c. Design shorter, more flexible interventions with optional tiers of participation
d. Incorporate digital wellness education alongside detox activities to help participants understand the psychological effects of overuse

While I cannot make claims about which detox method works best, I can clearly identify the difficulties of conducting behavior-change studies with teen participants. The study became more about participation itself: why it is so hard to sustain, what motivates initial interest, and what causes people to drop off. This case study contributes meaningfully by highlighting real-world resistance to digital change, reinforcing the idea that qualitative process data is just as valuable as outcome data in certain research contexts.

More broadly, this experience raised important questions about how digital habits are tied to emotion, identity, and daily structure. Understanding this deeper psychological attachment to social media is crucial for designing future interventions. Moving forward, researchers must approach digital wellness with sensitivity, flexibility, and a strong foundation in user-centered design.

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