

ADHD and digital disconnection: Exploring inclusive and practical approaches

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Abstract

Digital disconnection is increasingly sparking widespread debate and action, with social media age restrictions and phone bans being enacted around the world. As more people are required or encouraged to disconnect from the Internet, this commentary argues for more inclusive and practical disconnection strategies, particularly for those with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). ADHD highlights the complexities of digital disconnection, as individuals with this neurodivergent condition are often seen as the intended beneficiaries of digital detox retreats, disconnection interventions, and emerging public policies such as social media or high school phone bans. This commentary seeks to facilitate dialog and debate among digital disconnection scholars, offering a starting point for researchers interested in digital disconnection, screen time, disability, neurodivergence, and digital inclusion. By examining digital disconnection from contrasting ADHD theoretical perspectives, the paper aims to broaden the understanding of digital disconnection, considering diverse relationships with technology and the socio-cultural contexts of screen use and productivity.

Keywords

ADHD, digital disconnection, disconnective media, neurodivergence, screen time

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Introduction: The privilege and practicalities of disconnecting from the Internet

Disconnecting from the Internet, or “digital disconnection” is increasingly sparking widespread debate and action. The Australian Government ban on children under 16 from using social media (Ritchie, 2024) and the Aotearoa New Zealand public school phone ban (Ministry of Education, 2024), represent growing concern that young people are addicted to their digital devices and not efficiently using their time. The point of a “right to disconnect” law in France is to protect employees’ personal time by establishing boundaries between work and life, ensuring they are not obligated to work outside of their designated working hours (Hesselberth, 2018; O’Reilly, 2023). Although the Internet is crucial for accessing information and finding community (Ytre-Arne, 2023), there is a growing public awareness that there can be too much screen time, and that stepping away could enhance mental health and productivity (Beattie et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024) especially in the context of online distractions (Carr, 2011; Duke and Christian, 2017) and social demands (Hayes et al., 2018; Mannell, 2018).

While the public debate on digital disconnection highlights its growing importance, research reveals the critical importance of understanding its feasibility and privilege. Despite its relative infancy as a field of research, digital disconnection studies have provided valuable insights into why and how people resist, avoid, or manage their Internet use (Nassen et al., 2023). In particular, research has shown that disconnection remains predominantly understood as a Western, elite, and individualistic practice (Cascone and Bonini, 2024; Treré et al., 2020) that involves going offline to avoid distractions and accessing an unmediated communicative state for productivity or wellness purposes (Beattie, 2020). This type of disconnection has become embraced by the wellness and technology industry, which has turned disconnection into productivity apps (Beattie, 2020), virtuous and expensive digital detox retreats (Fish, 2017; Sutton, 2020), and markers of class identity (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Reducing screen time has even been co-opted by social media platforms (Karppi and Nieborg, 2021) and framed as corporate social good (Beattie, 2020) with Facebook promoting “time well spent” on its platform (Jorge et al., 2022).

Digital disconnection research has also recognized the importance of digital inclusion. To choose to disconnect and oppose the idea of constant connectivity presupposes reliable access to the Internet and secure employment (Beattie, 2020; Nguyen and Hargittai, 2023). For example, in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is estimated that Māori households are 16% less likely to have reliable Internet access compared to non-Māori households (Digital Government, 2021). Many workers in the digital economy, such as Uber drivers and Facebook content moderators, do not have the luxury of disconnecting from their devices or the agency to choose what to disconnect from (Morozov, 2017). These workers are giving their time to their employers and have less discretionary time for leisure (Odell, 2023; Sharma, 2014). The feasibility of digital disconnection is deeply intertwined with socio-economic and cultural factors (Cascone and Bonini, 2024; Mannell et al., 2024), highlighting the need for a more inclusive approach in research.

Disconnecting is also challenging for other reasons. Going offline for many people is impractical and anxiety provoking (Franks et al., 2018) especially for young people

whose sense of self is intertwined with being able to access digital social spaces (Markham, 2021). The Internet has become infrastructure to people's day-to-day lives, with banking, transport, shopping, work, and social life all mediated by digital technology (Kaun and Schwarzenegger, 2014). There is also a gendered privilege to disconnection with research indicating that women often struggle more than men to disconnect from the Internet (Beattie et al., 2024; van Bruyssel et al., 2024). This difficulty is attributed to societal expectations that women should manage and nurture relationships and events, which necessitate staying online (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Consequently, disconnecting and pausing social interactions can be particularly challenging for women due to these normative pressures.

We need more inclusive and practical strategies for disconnecting from the Internet. Popular disconnection strategies (e.g. digital detox interventions) can be punitive (Beattie, 2020) exclusive (Fish, 2017; Sutton, 2020) and/or ineffective (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024), highlighting the need for approaches that are both functional – helping individuals achieve productivity and wellbeing goals – while remaining socially empowering to wider groups in society (Ross et al., 2024). This paper addresses these issues by analyzing digital disconnection from contrasting neurodivergent perspectives, focusing on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). While my research on digital disconnection with people with ADHD is ongoing, this commentary calls for other researchers to consider integrating neurodivergent perspectives into their projects (see for example, Vanden Abeele et al., in press). I will show how ADHD both underscores and complicates the concept of disconnecting from the Internet, but most importantly, can expand our understanding of disconnection. A person with ADHD exemplifies the typical imagined beneficiary of digital disconnection, drawing parallels to other users who struggle to disconnect, such as the social media-addicted teenager or the burnt-out office worker. By discussing different theoretical approaches to ADHD, I will draw attention to different relationships people can have with connectivity, distractions and technology, the sociocultural underpinnings of using screens and productivity, and the possibilities of disconnecting in an increasingly digital age.

ADHD and disconnecting from the Internet

The question of screen time and disconnecting is particularly salient for people with Attentional Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). In Aotearoa New Zealand, an estimated 280,000 New Zealanders have ADHD (Bradley, 2021), or 5% of the population – a significant minority with different cognitive capabilities and experiences to neurotypical people. ADHD is a compelling entry point into the topic of disconnection as it both underscores and problematizes the idea of reducing screen time. Whether ADHD compliments or complicates digital disconnection depends on the theoretical approach to ADHD.

Deficit approaches to ADHD and disconnection

Firstly, there is the biomedical or deficit approach to ADHD. This is the dominant perspective of ADHD which locates the issue within the individual brain. The deficit approach suggests that people with ADHD have dysfunction in executive functioning

(Alexander and Farrelly, 2018) or attentional or time “deficits,” and lack the cognitive capacities to pay attention or be present (Avisar and Shalev, 2011), and undertake time management or planning activities (Sibley et al., 2019). From a deficit approach, people with ADHD are particularly vulnerable to the attention-grabbing and habit-forming mechanisms of digital products, such as notifications, rewards, gamification, and infinite scrolling (Beattie, 2021; Eyal, 2014). These features can exploit the cognitive “deficiencies” of people with ADHD, such as impulsivity, distractibility, and boredom (Trollor, 1999), and lead to excessive and compulsive media use (Augner et al., 2023), which can have negative consequences for mental and physical health, academic and work performance, and social relationships (Dekkers and van Hoorn, 2022). Therefore, people with ADHD are likely to benefit from taking intentional breaks and disconnect from the Internet.

From the deficit perspective, people with ADHD will also suit temporarily removing any digital distractions. The majority of disconnective media offer this service, allowing users to set time limits on selected apps, block others or websites they flag as distracting. This conscious practice of cutting out certain media habits can be seen as a form of asceticism, involving self-discipline and self-improvement. Similar to religious fasting or Sabbaths, individuals limit their media use to achieve a better quality of life and heightened self-awareness (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). These apps encourage self-disciplinary modes of living within the so-called attention economy without dismantling the underlying structures of commercial surveillance and extractive data practices (Beattie, 2020). Additionally, some apps reinforce the deficit model by promising to “fix” smartphone users through behavioral techniques that promote mindfulness and self-regulation (Beattie, 2021).

Social critiques of ADHD and disconnection

In contrast, the social model of disability shifts the “problem” of ADHD away from the individual brain to wider society. It argues that our society, which often champions pace and productivity, is what disables people who are neurodivergent (McGee, 2012). To this end, critical media and disability scholars, have challenged the normative and prescriptive assumptions behind the concept of disconnecting, highlighting how discourses promoting disconnection are ableist (Samuel, 2018; Valasek, 2022). Often at the root of calls to disconnect is a fear of cognitive difference, becoming unproductive or anything other than what currently counts as neurotypical (Samuel, 2018). The popular concept of “screen time,” for example, is based upon a Western and neoliberal approach to temporality, where time is a scarce commodity best used for self-development or productivity purposes (Odell, 2023). Any unproductive screen time is therefore “wasted time” (Gregg, 2018). Such discourses subsequently moralize “focused” phone use (Beattie, 2020; Lacey et al., 2021) and pathologize habitual use (Valasek, 2022).

Disconnection discourses often imply a “right” way to use the Internet (Beattie, 2020; Lacey et al., 2021), stigmatizing those who deviate from “healthy” use (Valasek, 2022; e.g. having too many tabs open or a cluttered digital desktop (Brooks, 2020)). These discourses ignore the diversity and complexity of media practices and experiences. As a result, they can impose unrealistic and unfair expectations on people with ADHD, who

may have different strengths, needs, and preferences than neurotypical users (Ginapp et al., 2023). For example, people with ADHD might play games for therapeutic purposes (Rodrigo-Yanguas et al., 2022), access ADHD social media groups for support (Kaur and Saukko, 2022), or seek help navigating the mental health system (Murray, 2021). As such, scholarship from the social model of disability often refuse calls to disconnect (see Samuel, 2018) rather than advocating for strategies to reduce screen time or eliminate distractions.

The deficit and social model paradigms of ADHD present a complex dilemma. On one hand, the social model of disability emphasizes that initiatives aimed at reducing screen time or promoting digital disconnection can be ableist, as they fail to acknowledge diverse cognitive processes and media usage patterns. Furthermore, going offline or restricting access to social media can be overly stringent, resulting in feelings of isolation, frustration, and annoyance (Beattie, 2020). Nevertheless, individuals with ADHD, like others, are genuinely interested in managing their screen time to facilitate their daily activities, such as studying, reading books, or completing work reports. Simply put: how can individuals with ADHD disconnect without being pathologized as deficient?

Vanden Abeele et al. (in press) conclude that this dilemma places people's personal wellbeing in conflict with societal demands: either neurodivergent individuals disconnect to ease sensory load and fall short of social expectations of being available, or stay online and suppress their regulatory difficulties to keep up. They suggest that a way around this dilemma is to shift the responsibility of disconnecting from the individual to society and reframe disconnection as an act of care to support people with impaired self-regulation capabilities. While their suggestions are fruitful for structural change and redesigning digital environments in the attention economy, I believe there are other ways to disconnect or manage screen time that do not highlight deficits nor perpetuate ideal use of screens that arise from a fear of cognitive difference.

Cognitive differences approach to ADHD and disconnection

The cognitive differences model offers a third theoretical approach to ADHD. This model recognizes cognitive differences as natural variations rather than deficits and emphasizes understanding and valuing these differences (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2024). For example, Māori, or the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand, have long valued the differences that people with ADHD have and accommodated their needs (Rangiwai, 2024). In the te reo Māori (indigenous language) ADHD translates to Aroreretini, or "attention goes to many things," which reframes ADHD in a way that accepts cognitive differences. To expand this point Rangiwai (2024) uses the metaphor of the pīwakawaka, the New Zealand native fantail. The pīwakawaka is characterized by alertness, liveliness, and vibrancy. Just as the pīwakawaka darts through the air with speed and agility, individuals with ADHD often exhibit high energy and impulsivity, constantly changing direction in their thoughts and actions. The bird's ability to catch insects' mid-flight reflects the quick processing and multitasking skills often seen in individuals with ADHD. They engage with the world uniquely, much like the pīwakawaka's distinctive attributes and behaviors (Rangiwai, 2024).

Table 1. Overview of theoretical perspectives of ADHD and digital disconnection.

ADHD approach	Definition	Implications for disconnection	Type of disconnection
Deficit model	People with ADHD have cognitive deficits and lack self-regulation skills	People with ADHD will benefit from taking breaks from the Internet	Asceticism, or removing potential distractions; fixing cognitive deficits
Social model	Society obsessed with productivity and speed disables people with ADHD	Calls to disconnect stem from a fear of cognitive differences but no practical solutions	Refuse calls to disconnect
Cognitive differences	People with ADHD have variable intensity and attention	Disconnection accommodates cognitive differences	??? (but some examples include virtual body doubling)

In the context of digital disconnection, the cognitive differences approach allows for imagining how disconnection can *accommodate* the needs of people with ADHD rather than trying to fix any perceived deficiencies. Take for example the concept of *body doubling*, an ADHD strategy where having another person present helps maintain focus on tasks that might be difficult or lack motivation (Moriah, 2023). The virtual co-working tool Focusmate (2024) applies this strategy digitally by pairing a user with someone worldwide who wants to focus simultaneously. The user logs onto Focusmate, schedules a virtual call, announces their intentions, and works, with the idea that the virtual presence of another person helps keep them accountable. There is no restriction of access to social media or elimination of digital distractions. The “disconnection” that occurs is between the user and social norms around how to achieve focus (working alone). Focusmate is therefore a type of relationally focused disconnective media that generates new technology-user subjectivities (c.f. Beattie, 2020; Beattie and Daubs, 2020), orientating the user to other actors in their (digital) environment. It is one example that can shift our understanding of disconnection away from stripping away external stimuli or championing ascetic practices.

Table 1 provides an overview of how different theoretical approaches to ADHD influence understandings of digital disconnection. The deficit approach locates the responsibility of disconnecting within the individual brain, which in turn, frames disconnection as an ascetic or self-improvement practice about removing digital distractions like social media. In contrast, the social model critiques the normative assumptions underlying this dominant form of disconnection, without really offering any practical disconnection strategies other than refusing calls to disconnect. The cognitive differences approach, however, provides the potential for a more inclusive and expansive understanding of disconnection by recognizing the diverse ways people experience screen time and seek opportunities to disconnect. Strategies derived from this approach could help individuals resist social expectations, discourses, and norms, while also achieving their productivity and wellness goals.

The purpose of this table is to facilitate dialog and debate amongst digital disconnection scholars. It is not meant to provide a comprehensive model for considering digital disconnection in people with ADHD, but instead offer a starting point for researchers interested in digital disconnection, screen time, disability, neurodivergence, and/or digital inclusion. For example, a more detailed understanding of how disconnection can accommodate cognitive differences will emerge when empirical research is conducted with people with ADHD to explore the strategies they already use. Moreover, the cognitive differences approach could be further developed by focusing on other conditions – such as Autism, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and dyslexia – that fall under the neurodivergent umbrella.

Conclusion

This paper has explored digital disconnection through the lens of neurodivergent perspectives, particularly focusing on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). ADHD not only highlights but also complicates the concept of disconnecting from the Internet, offering a broader understanding of disconnection. This approach challenges the notion that disconnection is a one-size-fits-all solution, instead promoting a more nuanced understanding that respects individual differences and the varied ways people engage with digital technology.

Given that smartphones can create a pervasive sense of impairment for many people, this commentary may have broader relevance beyond people with ADHD. Rather than viewing these contrasting theoretical approaches as exclusively for people with ADHD, I hope to have shown that ADHD offers a critical entry point into the issue of screen time and can inspire everyone to disconnect on their own terms.

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