

# **Disconnect to Reconnect?**

## **Examining the Motives, Strategies, and Outcomes of Individuals' (Temporary) Social Media Abstinence**

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### **Abstract**

Research regarding social media abstinence in real-life settings remains rare. Social media abstinence is a complex construct that needs to be evaluated within the viewpoints of multiple disciplines. While experiences and outcomes of social media breaks are influenced by demographic markers and other variables, they can be generally described as difficult, but rewarding. This dissertation set out to examine individuals' temporary or permanent social media abstinence by investigating previous usage, motives for abstinence, strategies, experiences, and outcomes of such undertakings. A quantitative research approach based on the uses and gratifications theory was carried out, and a 60-item questionnaire developed. Out of 134 respondents, 105 eligible participants completed the survey. Results suggested that (a) females and singles are more prone to detrimental effects caused by social media usage, (b) internal motives provide greater motivation than external ones, (c) implemented strategies either tried to break habit cycles at the cue- or action-stage, or provided distraction in the form of participating in other activities, (d) females experienced higher levels of difficulties in abstaining from social media than males, and (e) participants generally perceived social media abstinence as a successful and beneficial undertaking.

*Keywords:* social media abstinence, disordered social media behaviour, addiction and habit, social media usage

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**List of Abbreviations**

DSM-5	:	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder
F	:	Female
FOMO	:	Fear of Missing Out
HE	:	Higher Levels of Education
HRQOL	:	Health-Related Quality of Life
KMO	:	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin
LE	:	Lower Levels of Education
M	:	Male
MetS	:	Metabolic Syndrome
PCA	:	Principal Components Analysis
R	:	In Romantic Relationship
S	:	Single
SM	:	Social Media
SMDS	:	Social Media Disorder Scale



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

At the moment of writing, it seems clear that social media is here to stay. With more than 3.6 billion social network users worldwide in 2020 (Statista, 2020a), it is imperative to investigate how the ever-growing phenomenon impacts and alters our lives on a daily basis. A growing body of literature illustrates the positive and negative impacts social networking sites have imposed on us (Bányai et al., 2017; Becker et al., 2013; Best et al., 2014; Caplan, 2007; Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol, 2016). Moreover, while some platforms such as *MySpace* have vanished after reaching their peak in user numbers, others are still recruiting new members, while new sites and platforms are frequently being added to the market.

Observing these developments of growth, another, contradicting movement has emerged over recent times. Some users decide to go against mainstream behaviour and either temporarily or permanently break from social media. This sub-group of social media users has sparked an academic debate and research has begun to emerge around their personas. In an attempt to fully understand the area of social media abstinence, multiple disciplines need to merge and combine findings in order to provide comprehensive insight into social media behaviour, addiction, habit and compulsive usage, motivators for usage, and effects on mental and physical well-being, to name but a few.

While these domains have experienced an extensive growth of research projects and undertakings, a detailed understanding of social media abstinence within real-life settings is still somewhat limited. It is, therefore, the objective of this dissertation to add to the body of literature and help bridge the knowledge gap by adding new empirical data.

As various research projects have demonstrated, social media has affected individuals' mental health (Bányai et al., 2017; Best et al., 2014; Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol, 2016;

Twenge et al., 2018), physical well-being (Bogdănici et al., 2017; Canadian Pediatric Society, 2017; Davies et al., 2012; Sisson et al., 2010), focus and concentration skills (Becker et al., 2013; Jacobsen & Forste, 2011; Andersson et al., 2014), and social and communication skills (Maier et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the literature suggests that social media behaviour patterns blur the lines between habitual behaviour (Lally & Gardner, 2013; Seo & Ray, 2019), compulsive or disordered behaviour (van den Eijnden et al., 2016), and addiction (Andreassen et al., 2017; Suhler, 2004). The idea of classifying social media behaviours as detrimental to users' mental health is winning supporters among academics, even though the DSM-5, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), a globally recognised handbook, has not yet included social media addiction as a mental health disorder. Drawing from these findings, it is essential to move the academic discourse forward and advance scholarly understanding of social media usage.

However, interest in the area of social media abstinence is by no means limited to the academic sector. Trending topics on online platforms related to social media detox, social media diet, social media hiatus, or social media abstinence indicate a growing curiosity among the public in this subject. Furthermore, mainstream media has brought attention to social media abstinence in recent years (BBC, 2018; Eldor, 2018; Hughes, 2019). Lastly, economic interests can be linked to this subject while businesses attempt to monetise the idea of guided social media breaks (Colier, 2017; Healing Holidays, n.d.; Mindful, n.d.; Queen of Retreats, n.d.; Raw Energy, n.d.). Consequently, this dissertation's contribution will not be limited to the academic sphere, but also add value to other domains.

Under the title *Disconnect to Reconnect? Examining the Motives, Strategies, and Outcomes of Individuals' (Temporary) Social Media Abstinence*, this dissertation aims to

investigate, (a) why individuals voluntarily choose to abstain temporarily or permanently from social media, (b) what motivates individuals to initiate social media abstinence, (c) which strategies individuals employ to cope with their undertaking, and (d) what insights the outcomes of such endeavours provide.

While this dissertation is primarily anchored within the field of media and communications, it will also draw from findings and practices of related and overlapping academic disciplines, such as behavioural and social sciences. In contrast to other research settings, this project does not seek to create an artificial framework for controlled social media abstinence. Instead, this dissertation sets out to investigate social media abstinence in real-life settings. Exploring individuals' motives and motivation, coping mechanisms and difficulties with such undertakings promises exciting insights into the rising phenomenon of social media abstinence.

This dissertation follows a quantitative research design. While a qualitative approach might result in more profound insights, the quantitative setup allows for the simultaneous exploration of multiple aspects of one topic. Therefore, a 60-item questionnaire was developed on the basis of a uses and gratifications approach and distributed to participants through online channels. The uses and gratifications approach was chosen to understand why and how individuals abstain from social media while taking advantage of its flexibility during the execution process. The acquired data was then examined in accordance with standard academic statistical practices and further investigated to extract valuable information and address the described research aims.

The dissertation has been composed of five chapters in the following order. First, the *Literature Review* provides background information on relevant themes and introduces other academic fields that are of importance for this thesis. It therefore illustrates how social media,

habit and addiction, motivation and influences contribute to this dissertation. The methodological approach of this study is then described in Chapter three, *Methodology*. On the one hand, it illuminates why a uses and gratifications approach was chosen for this research project, while on the other hand, it explains the development process of the quantitative research instrument in great detail. Next, Chapter four, *Data Presentation*, illustrates the findings of the survey and simultaneously demonstrates statistical analysis procedures to make the data accessible for further interpretation. The *Discussion* in Chapter five then places the findings within the body of literature and points out interesting and, sometimes, unexpected results. Finally, in Chapter six, the *Conclusion*, significant findings are summarised, limitations of the study identified, and recommendations for further research provided.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

This chapter provides insight into the most significant findings of previous research with regards to social media, addiction and habit, disordered social media behaviour, dopamine and the reward system, the building and deconstructing of habits, motivation, influences of social media on various aspects of life, and lastly, social media abstinence.

#### Social Media

What is *Social Media* (SM)? Even though everyone is using SM and is familiar with the topic, only a few can extract the essence of the various channels and platforms and combine them into a meaningful, timeless, understandable, and yet extensive definition. Many researchers approached the difficulty to satisfactorily explain the phenomenon SM and, at the same time, keep it open for multiple domains.

One challenge lies in fast-paced technologies. Recognised definitions often become outdated just as quickly as former popular social networking sites, such as *MySpace*. Another issue arises from the attempt to formulate a definition that proves true for multiple disciplines. Naturally, different areas of study will have various focal points. While uniting those key areas in one generally accepted definition is worth striving for to support the exchange of ideas, it is also a very complex undertaking. Additionally, not only channels and platforms undergo fast changes but also the technologies that allow access to them. For instance, smartphones will enable users to access other functions within the same social media networks as desktop or tablet devices. The technology used also influences how, how often, and with what intention SM is being used. A meaningful definition must reflect these aspects.

Carr and Hayes (2015) took up this challenge. They created a social media definition that differentiates itself from others in the literature:

Social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others. (Carr & Hyes, 2015, p. 50)

In contrast to their colleagues, the two researchers did not explicitly name platforms and networks. Instead, they refer to social media as “Internet-based channels”. This procedure results in a time-stable definition.

Furthermore, Carr and Hayes understand SM as user-independent technologies that allow for clear differentiation from similar technologies and services such as email and messenger programs. Therefore, a channel must be available in real-time and additionally allow for asynchronous communication. Last but not least, this definition approach enables and supports the exchange and collaboration among different disciplines. Research projects, such as this thesis, which draws from a wide variety of fields, particularly benefit from this approach.

The example of the messenger service *WhatsApp* further illustrates the importance of the examined aspects. When the service was first established in 2009 (WhatsApp, 2020), the smartphone app was purely meant to enable text-based dialogue between users. However, over the years, additional functions were integrated and since changed and expanded existing communication options and channels. The possibilities of group chats and broadcast messages enrich the former dually-oriented communication service by the aspects of mass communication. Status updates allow users to present themselves, publish selected content, restrict recipients through individual privacy settings, and blur the lines between synchronous

and asynchronous communication. Meanwhile, other users have the opportunity to react directly to the status updates of their messenger contacts. Furthermore, the option to exchange other, non-text based media (such as voice messages, images, gifs, videos, and more), raised the former messenger service to the level of a social media tool (WhatsApp, 2020).

The PEW Research Center (Perrin, 2015; Smith & Anderson, 2018) has been trying for many years to gain insights into the phenomenon of social media and its users. However, as a limitation to these efforts, their research is exclusively limited to the US market.

Deviations from other geographical and cultural backgrounds are to be expected.

Nevertheless, the data collection is almost unique in its scope and is a valuable contribution to the body of literature.

During the period from 2005 to 2015, PEW was able to record significant changes not only in the use of social media channels but also in the attitude of users towards them (Perrin, 2015). In particular, differences based on demographic aspects of users stand out. Within the categories age, gender, socio-economics, race and ethnicity, as well as community, significant differences could still be observed in 2015 (Perrin, 2015). According to Perrin, over the time-span of ten years, these gaps have narrowed noticeably in all categories. While demographic clues are still of importance in terms of user behaviour, their overall significance has decreased. For instance, while young adults (age 18 to 29; 90% in 2015) have always been the most likely to use social media, the amount of older people (age 65 and above) has risen from 2% in 2005 to 35% in 2015 (Perrin, 2015).

In line with the previous discussion, the importance of a uniform definition for meaningful research results also becomes evident in the PEW projects. Multiple adjustments of the classification criteria, which determine if participants categorise as social media users

or non-users, were necessary (Perrin, 2015). However, these adjustments also result in a limitation of the research, as the comparability of individual surveys might be compromised.

Another report published by the PEW Research Center offers insights into recent developments as of 2018 (Smith & Anderson, 2018). This report reveals a tendency to use multiple platforms and an increased frequency to visit those (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

The report also reveals a growing number of users who would rate abstinence from social media as hard or very hard: In 2014, those who stated it would be hard amounted to 28% while in 2018, this number had increased to 40% (Smith & Anderson, 2018). More so, 11% of those in 2014 thought it would be “very hard” compared to 14% out of the 40% in 2018. Those findings are also linked to the age of the users. Significantly more younger users (51%) aged 18 to 24 claimed abstinence would be difficult in comparison to only 31% of those aged 50 years or older (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Growing social media consumption, as well as the increase in remarks about the difficulties of abstinence, underline the relevance of this thesis.

### **Addiction or Habit**

Does an exaggerated, above-normal social media use classify as addiction, or does it fall into the category of habitual behaviour? Seo and Ray demonstrate in their research of habit and addiction in the use of social networking sites that a clear-cut distinction between both terms is not always present in the literature, but highly desirable in order to differentiate individuals usage patterns and to gain an overall greater understanding of social media usage (Seo & Ray, 2019).

In contrast to a growing body of literature stands the DSM-5, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which is published by the American Psychiatric Association (2013). In this globally recognised handbook, social media addiction has not yet



been listed as a mental health disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This disregard contributes to the disagreement among researchers and within the literature, if, when and to what extent social media usage can be classified as addiction and how clear lines can be drawn between habitual and compulsive forms of behaviour.

Seo and Ray (2019) illustrate the differences between habitual behaviour and addiction in the context of social media use as follows: They state that “[f]rom the fundamental theories underlying habit and addiction, we can intuit that these behaviours involve deeply different processes, beginning with different antecedent mental states and resulting in considerably different outcomes in people’s lives” (Seo & Ray, 2019, p.111).

Furthermore, they conclude that strong habits can be helpful to individuals to handle everyday tasks (Seo & Ray, 2019). However, their “findings clearly indicate that addicted individuals use SNSs more than they want to. Unsurprisingly, such overuse is known to have negative ramifications on individual users, organizations, and society as a whole (Hoen, 2001; Hur, 2006; Wang & Chu, 2007; Young, 2004)” (Seo & Ray, 2019, p. 120).

The efforts to classify social media as addiction can be traced back to the 1990s. Precisely, in 1996, Ivan Goldberg unwittingly laid the foundation stone for subsequent research. As a kind of “joke”, he summarised several symptoms under the term *Pathological Computer Use* and forwarded this to a psychology magazine (Suhler, 2004). Many researchers used this publication as an impetus to focus on topics such as *Virtual Addiction*, *Internet Addiction Disorder*, and as a subcategory of it, most recently also *Social Media Addiction* (Suhler, 2004). In 2004, Suhler already recognised the issue to find a clear distinction between enthusiasm towards social media and abnormal preoccupation (Suhler, 2004).

### **The Social Media Disorder Scale**

Despite the controversies discussed, researchers from the Netherlands developed the so-called *Social Media Disorder Scale* (SMDS) in 2016 (van den Eijnden et al., 2016).

While developing the classification questions, the researchers based their work on previous research projects of *compulsive internet use* and *compulsive social media use*.

Accordingly, the following psychological constructs were particularly important to test the validity of the SMD scale: “Compulsive Internet Use, Self-declared Social Media Addiction, Self-esteem, Depression, Attention Deficit, Impulsivity, and the use of several social media applications” (van den Eijnden et al., 2016, p. 480). In addition, a strong connection between social media disorder and depression as well as attention deficit was found (van den Eijnden et al., 2016). A study in Norway was able to demonstrate a relationship between the addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem (Andreassen et al., 2017). In this current study from 2017, the research team concluded that “basic demographic variables (primarily age and sex), narcissism, and self-esteem are all associated with addictive use of social media” (Andreassen et al., 2017, p. 292).

According to the Norwegian research team, the most influential indicators for a tendency towards social media dependence are being of “lower age, being a woman, not being in a relationship, lower education, being a student, lower income, having narcissistic traits, and negative self-esteem” (Andreassen et al., 2017, p. 292). A considerably larger proportion of female participants (65% female, 35% male) represents a limitation of this study and possibly impacts results. In addition, the participants were recruited via online websites of online newspapers, which deal specifically with the topic of excessive behaviour. A certain degree of participant bias can therefore be assumed.

### **The Role of Dopamine**

The literature concerned with the subjects of addictions and compulsive behaviours increasingly assigns dopamine a vital role in the reward system. For a long time, the neurotransmitter was considered one of the essential building blocks of learned behaviour patterns. As a result, dopamine is presented as a “reward chemical”, which is crucial for the repeated execution of action sequences, even if they are perceived as unfavourable.

The viewpoint that dopamine is responsible for “good feelings” and “pleasure” is based on a study from 1960, in which rats were subjected to electric shocks in the brain while performing an activity such as operating a lever. In this experimental setup, the presence of dopamine could be demonstrated (Olds, 1960). Following these observations, it was concluded that dopamine is the driving factor which repeatedly causes the rats to perform the task by providing desirable rewards (Olds, 1960).

Also, the “myth of dopamine” was fuelled by the so-called *anhedonia hypothesis*. This hypothesis suggests that dopamine plays a central role in the concept of motivation by providing positively perceived rewards (Wise, 2008). Subsequently, it was wrongly concluded that increased or reduced levels of dopamine would accordingly lead to increased or reduced levels of happiness and pleasure (Wise, 2008).

However, further research shows that animals can still feel “pleasure” even when dopamine is almost entirely absent (Wise, 2008). Consequently, it can be concluded that the chemical dopamine is not responsible for the sensation of pleasure itself, but serves a different role within the reward system. When dopamine-producing cells in the brain do not function properly or are killed off, the desire to seek pleasure in activities also disappears (Wise, 2008). Hence, it can be assumed that dopamine drives to seek pleasure, but does not provide pleasure in itself.

How do these demonstrations relate to the social media context? While the question as to whether social media can be considered an addiction remains controversial, the involvement of dopamine in its usage cannot be denied. Most social media platforms, as well as other internet-based media services, have introduced measurements to reinforce usage based on pleasure seeking and utilising our reward systems. For example, the standard options to like, comment, or share posts in social networks fall into this category by providing positive feedback to its users. Furthermore, tech-companies have eliminated ways that have previously functioned as stop-cues, such as reaching the bottom of the feed page on Facebook or having to actively select and start another video on YouTube by implementing an autoplay option. The factor of uncertainty can exacerbate this binding effect. On Facebook, this would translate into algorithms that present the users with posts in seemingly “random” order, while on YouTube the video next in line has been machine-chosen as well. A research team compared the dopamine release in pathological gamblers and a control group when confronted with certain and uncertain rewards. They found that the gamblers showed an increase in dopamine release when they faced uncertainty about the expected rewards (Linnet et al., 2012).

Even though those findings cannot be directly transferred to social media use, similar reactions among compulsive users can be assumed. Social media channels and networks are fundamentally linked to aspects of uncertainty. Various platform algorithms, time, geographic and demographic factors, as well as numerous other elements, influence every individual's social media experience. For the user, these mechanisms operate in the background. Social media is tied to unpredictability. It often remains a mystery to users as to why they find certain content in their feeds or why selected posts are particularly well received. The

expectation of the uncertain attracts users. Meanwhile, platforms benefit from their users' dopamine reactions, further strengthened by non-transparent algorithms.

### **Building and Deconstructing of Habits**

However, habits are not just based on the role of the reward system and dopamine. According to Verplanken and Aarts (1999), there are multiple steps involved in the process of habit building: “Habits are learned sequences of acts that have become automatic responses to specific cues, and are functional in obtaining certain goals or end-states (Hull, 1943; James, 1890; Tolman, 1932; Triandis, 1977, 1980; Watson, 1914)” (p. 104).

Conceptualising the above definition, the following components of habit building can be extracted:

- 1) Cue: a situation, feeling, need, desire, or similar, which stimulates and precedes an action.
- 2) Action: the learned behaviour, the habit itself
- 3) Reward: the goal or end-state
- 4) Repetition

Besides, Lally and Gardner (2013) stress the importance that “action must be repeated *in a fashion conducive to the development of automaticity*” (p.139-140) which is exclusive to the process of habit formation. As a consequence, acting on cues as part of a habit is an automatic response “in the absence of awareness, conscious control, mental effort and deliberation (Bargh, 1994)” (Lally & Gardner, 2013, p. 137).

In order to resolve a habit cycle, an interruption is possible at any point. Triggers can be removed, actions changed, or rewards omitted. According to Lally and Gardner (2013), abstaining from habit cues as well as planning for alternatives are promising, research-based solutions.

In the social media context, this means that users can experience various aspects and actions on the platforms as rewarding. The continuous performance of these activities and numerous cues (tones, notifications, symbols, and such) catch the users' attention and call for ongoing repetition. These processes take place slowly and can be challenging to break, particularly since social networks become an ever greater part in users' everyday lives. Visual and audible triggers have also reached a vast presence, for example in the form of icons on websites or standardised notification tones on smartphones.

### **Motivation**

Within behavioural studies, the concept of motivation is of significant importance. According to Nevid (2012), "motivation refers to factors that *activate, direct, and sustain* goal-directed behavior" (p. 288) while "[m]otives are the 'whys' of behavior and explain why we do what we do" (p. 288).

Historically, the psychological discipline concerned with motivational studies investigated three possible causes for motivation: will, instinct, and drive (Reeve, 2015). However, all concepts were dismissed after they proved to be too narrow-sighted to keep the discourse open for further progress (Reeve, 2015). Now, "[c]ontemporary motivation study focuses not only on behavior's energy but also on its direction and endurance" (Reeve, 2015, p. 49).

The concept of motivation can be further divided into two sub-categories: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Within the *Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology*, intrinsic motivation is defined as follows:

Intrinsic motivation is a type of motivation based in people's natural interest in various activities that provide novelty and challenge. Intrinsically motivated behaviors do not require external rewards; rather, they are an

expression of a person's sense of who they are, of what interests them. (Deci & Ryan, 2010, p. 868)

Whereas extrinsic motivation triggers behaviours through separate consequences. These can include, but are not limited to, monetary rewards, avoiding punishments or the compliance to social norms (Deci & Ryan, 2010). Consequently, intrinsic motivation leads to an activity that is perceived as rewarding and exciting in itself, while extrinsically motivated activities are always tied to external influences.

It is essential to clarify at this point that a combination of aspects from both, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, does not necessarily lead to an overall increase of motivation: “A meta-analysis of 128 experiments examining this question confirmed that tangible extrinsic rewards tend to undermine intrinsic motivation for rewarded activities (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999)” (Deci & Ryan, 2010, p. 869).

Furthermore, not only are external rewards detrimental to intrinsic motivation but so are other external events such as “directives, surveillance, deadlines, threats of punishment, and negative performance feedback” (Deci & Ryan, 2010, p. 869). In contrast, other “external factors such as offering choice, acknowledging people's feelings, and providing positive performance feedback” (Deci & Ryan, 2010, p. 869), can positively impact intrinsic motivation and performance.

With regards to social media abstinence, it would be of interest to evaluate which factors motivate users to abandon social media and whether the motivation arises from intrinsic or extrinsic motives. Further studies in this area promise insights into success factors and dealing with potential obstacles during attempts of social media abstinence.

### **Social Media Influence**

There is no doubt that the various social media channels and networks have a massive impact on everyday life - in both, a positive and a negative sense. In the following paragraphs, consequences and further aspects, divided into the areas of *mental health, physical health, focus and concentration skills*, as well as *communication and social skills*, will be discussed.

#### ***Mental health***

Social media brings people together and enables them to stay in contact even over long distances and time restrictions. As a result, it could be assumed that those online activities could help to decrease feelings of loneliness and related depression and anxiety. A survey was able to uncover potential links between lowering feelings of loneliness and depression in users while chatting with strangers over the internet (Shaw & Ganz, 2002). According to these findings, participants experienced an increase in perceived social support and self-esteem after four to eight weeks. Despite this, the researchers could not rule out that aspects outside the study influenced these factors.

In addition, a survey among 401 undergraduate Facebook users demonstrated positive effects of social media on the mental health of its users (Nabi et al., 2013). Looking at this information, a connection between the number of Facebook friends, a stronger sense of social support, lower stress levels, fewer physical illnesses and a general increase in well-being could be established (Nabi et al., 2013). Nonetheless, these results leave room for doubts. On the one hand, effects minimised as soon as interpersonal network size was taken into consideration (Nabi et al., 2013). On the other hand, the sample size was too small to reveal differences in small associations (Nabi et al., 2013). Moreover, data was collected through self-reports which can be subject to errors (Nabi et al., 2013).



On the other side of this stands a study that examined the connections between screen-based behaviours and anxiety levels, life satisfaction, and self-esteem in Chinese adolescents. A positive correlation between the usage of social networks, as well as other screen-based behaviour, and increased levels of anxiety were observed (Yan et al., 2017).

As will follow, the results of several surveys and studies among young adults from the USA support these findings. Researchers found that young adults who spent more time using new media (including social media and electronic devices) were more likely to report mental health problems (Best et al., 2014; Bányai et al., 2017). Likewise, some studies link social media use to poor physical well-being (Becker et al., 2013; Best et al., 2014; Caplan, 2007; Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol, 2016). Others have made contrasting observations. They found connections between social media usage and increased psychological well-being (Best et al., 2014; Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol, 2016). In particular, these contradicting results seem to be driven by two factors: firstly, the motivation underlying social media usage and secondly, the question of whether the frequency of social media usage qualifies as addictive. Another point worth mentioning is that female users seem to suffer adverse effects far more often than their male counterparts (Bányai et al., 2017; Best et al., 2014). Negative consequences include depressive symptoms and also suicide-related outcomes (Twenge et al., 2018). Through daily diary entries, one research project has attempted to investigate whether users become depressed through social media or if already depressed users increasingly turn to social media. Their findings suggested that Facebook use increased experiences of negative mood, while negative mood did not lead to increased use of Facebook (Twenge et al., 2018).

### ***Physical health***

In addition to the effects on mental health, research also suggests that social media can influence physical health. On a positive note, social media provides the platforms and tools to easily spread information regarding healthy eating, exercise, well-being, and other health-related topics. Also, SM can help to bring like-minded people together and thus promote exchange and support in health projects.

On the other hand, the spread of misinformation is an important factor that weighs negatively. While physical consequences might not directly result from the usage of social media, they might be indirectly caused by the time-consuming use of screen-based devices and physical inactivity. Research has found that blue lights emitted by screens and especially mobile devices can negatively affect sleeping habits (Canadian Pediatric Society, 2017). Notably, there are indications that screen time in particular negatively impacts sleep, even before considering content (Canadian Pediatric Society, 2017). The presence of electronic devices in bedrooms alone can reduce melatonin production, and as a result, the number of minutes slept per night (Canadian Pediatric Society, 2017). Vision impairments, summarised under the term of *computer vision syndrome*, have also been ascribed to the use of mobile devices by researchers in Romania (Bogdănici et al., 2017).

One research project from Australia used cross-sectional data from 2008 to 2010 to examine the relationships between self-reported health-related quality of life (HRQOL), physical activity, and screen-time among 3,796 Australian adults. The study concluded that the combination of no physical activity and high screen time has the greatest negative impact on HRQOL (Davies et al., 2012). Drawing from these results, it was concluded that no physical activity showed a greater relevance in the experience of negative consequences than high screen time. Nevertheless, it is the combination of both that is most harmful to HRQOL

(Davies et al., 2012). Moreover, men seem to be more affected by the consequences of a lack of physical activity and increased screen time than women (Davies et al., 2012).

Another study examined the relationship between screen time, physical activity, and obesity in 53,562 U.S. adolescents. Sisson and colleagues (2010) found that boys, as well as girls with low levels of physical activity and high screen-based activities, were almost twice as likely to be overweight. These data must be interpreted with caution as the collection was mainly based on parental reports and might be subject to bias. Nevertheless, overall reliability is given due to the large sample size (Sisson et al., 2010).

However, another team of researchers was able to highlight the impact of too much screen time on physical health while looking into the relationship of screen time and metabolic syndrome in adolescents. Following this, it was found that screen-time increases the likelihood of suffering from metabolic syndrome (Mark & Janssen, 2008). It was observed that the amount of screen-time is primarily responsible for these links:

The likelihood of having MetS was only increased by 21% in the 2 h/day screen time group, an amount that was far from reaching statistical relevance. However, once a screen time level of 3 h/day was achieved, the likelihood of the MetS was increased by about twofold, and was clinically meaningful and of borderline significance ( $P = 0.06$ ). (Mark & Janssen, 2008, p. 158)

### ***Focus, concentration span, and productivity***

While the previous sections demonstrated the mental and physical impacts social media can induce on its users; the following one will highlight the impacts on focus and concentrations skills. Both are of great importance in work and educational environments and as the body of literature suggests, have undergone tremendous changes since the introduction of social media.

One of these changes is an observed switch to media multitasking, which subsequently is linked to negative impacts. Thus, media multitasking is found to be a “unique predictor of self-reported symptoms of both depression and social anxiety” (Becker et al., 2013, p. 133) while compared to specific personality traits (such as neuroticism and extraversion) and overall media use.

With regards to the effects of multitasking on school performance, researchers were able to observe “that about two-thirds of the students reported using electronic media while in class, studying, or doing homework. This multitasking likely increased distraction, something prior research has shown to be detrimental to student performance” (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011, p. 279). These findings are supported by a study that concluded that “*Facebook* users had lower grades and spent fewer hours per week studying compared to non-users” (Andersson et al., 2014, p. 38). As research suggests, the consequences of media-multitasking can be even more far-reaching. For instance, Andersson et al. came to the following conclusion:

When investigating the negative consequences of students' private social media use in 1:1 schools, we found that this kind of use makes students less social, that weaker students tend to more easily get distracted than the stronger, that teachers have no clear strategies on how to tackle the problem, and that students assume responsibility of the use themselves. (Andersson et al., 2014, p. 47-48).

Problems arise on several levels. First, the focus and concentration ability of students is reduced. While they should take responsibility for their actions, they find themselves lacking clear behavioural guidelines. In addition, parents and teachers are overwhelmed by the situation and have difficulties in enforcing such regulations. Authorities face the issue of

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

promoting and using social media based on its positive aspects in a meaningful manner, but at the same time restricting the usage in order to minimise negative consequences.

### ***Communication and social skills***

Now turning to the last section, social media has also had a major impact on the ways people communicate with each other - online and offline. Not only does SM offer the possibility of fast, real-time exchange, but it also allows for communication without the presence of other users. The presence of new media increasingly influences even offline get-togethers. While users are in physical proximity to each other, they still get distracted by their mobile devices and the overall media presence.

Special functions included in many social media tools, such as timestamps when messages were received or read, pressure users to respond promptly and to always be present. This artificially generated pressure can lead to social overload and the associated stress and emotional exhaustion (Maier et al., 2012).

Drawing from this, the usage of SM in offline settings is subject to controversies. On the one hand, it promotes connectivity; on the other hand, it can cause distraction and minimise presence as a result of multitasking in social settings.

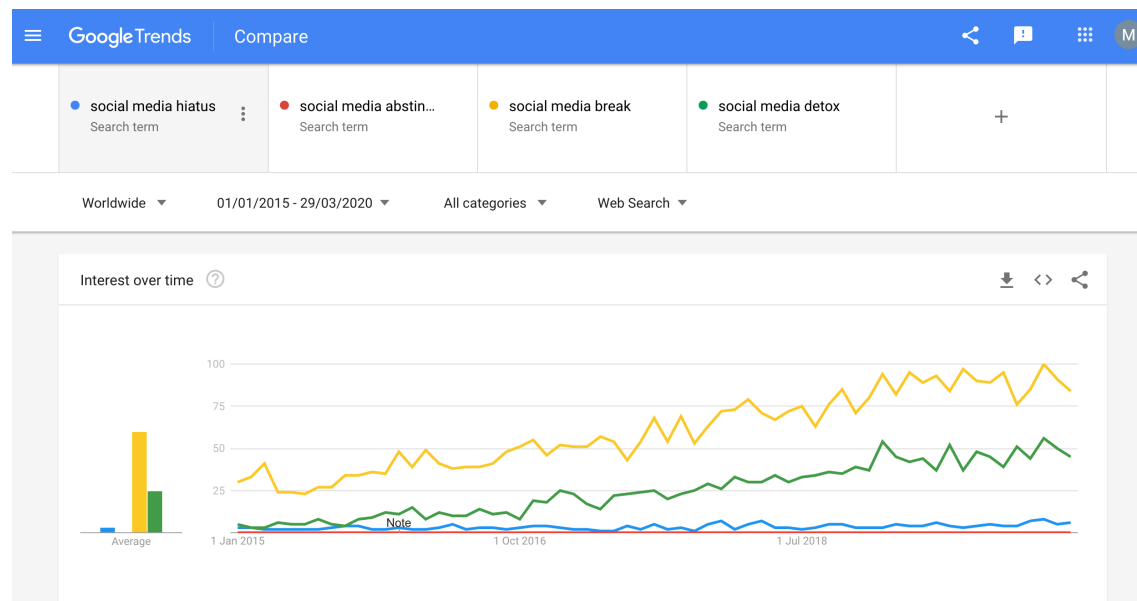
### **Social Media Abstinence**

So far, this review has focused on social media influences, as discussed in the literature. The following section will illustrate the increased interest in the topic of social media abstinence from various angles. Figure 1 displays the rising attention social media abstinence has received over the past five years in an online search engine.

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

**Figure 1**

*for Social Media Abstinence Related Online Searches*



Google Trends for the terms Social Media Hiatus, Social Media Abstinence, Social Media Break, and Social Media Detox. Retrieved 29th of March, 2020.

Respectively, as of 29th of March 2020, searching for those terms results in multiple millions of results on Google:

- Social Media Abstinence: 10.800.000
- Social Media Hiatus: 46.200.000
- Social Media Break: 3.820.000.000
- Social Media Detox: 119.000.000

It can be assumed that users' interests in these trends result from the illustrated negative aspects of social media, as mentioned in previous sections. This research work intends to contribute to the discussion of reasons and motivations for abstaining from social media.

Additionally, it can be observed that the topic of social media abstinence is also attracting an increasing amount of attention through business-oriented channels. Holiday

providers and health resorts offer at least a temporary exit from the digital world (Healing Holidays, n.d.; Queen of Retreats, n.d.). Users can participate in online challenges or purchase “social media detox” programs (Colier, 2017; Mindful, n.d.; Raw Energy, n.d.). Journalists and magazines are also addressing the phenomenon (BBC, 2018; Eldor, 2018; Hughes, 2019). A general increase in public interest in social media abstinence, temporary or permanent, can be observed.

Furthermore, academia has witnessed a growing research interest in social media abstinence, its causes and outcomes in recent years. For instance, Brown and Kuss (2020) examined how psychosocial factors such as fear of missing out, mental well-being, and social connectedness affected subjects before and after a seven-day social media break. The study revealed that users, in fact, reported an increase in both, mental well-being and social connectedness, while they simultaneously experienced a significant decrease in fear of missing out and overall smartphone usage (Brown & Kuss, 2020). Additionally, the research team concluded that “coping, habit, and boredom as motivations for [social media use], and notification distractions [present] a challenge for successful abstinence from [social media]” (Brown & Kuss, 2020, p. 1). The findings are limited by the fact that smartphone usage also significantly decreased. It is not clear, to which extent the reduction of smartphone usage and social media abstinence contribute to the findings.

Another study investigated short-term social media abstinence and came to a similar conclusion. Turel et al. (2018) were particularly interested in subjects' perceived stress levels in both typical and excessive social media users. While actual abstinence was encouraged, it could not be controlled, therefore forming a significant limitation of this study. However, the results showed that participants indeed experienced a reduction in perceived stress levels, excessive users more so than typical ones (Turel et al., 2018).

A third recent research project illustrates further perspectives. In this experimental investigation, participants of one group were asked to reduce their social media usage to ten minutes a day over three weeks and were then compared to the observations of a control group. While both groups reported a decrease of anxiety and fear of missing out, possibly due to increased self-monitoring, no improvement in social support, self-esteem, or psychological well-being of test-subjects could be observed (Hunt et al., 2018). Again, this research was limited by acquiring data through self-reports and subjects obedience to the rules of the project.

Vally and D'Souza (2019) found contradicting results in their research on social media abstinence and its effects on subjects' "well-being, affect, perceived stress, and sense of perceived loneliness" (p. 752). They observed that social media abstinence led to a decrease in life satisfaction and heightened experiences of negative affect as well as loneliness. Perceived levels of stress, however, declined. Since these findings partially contrast the overall consensus of the literature, they concluded that results might be influenced by "the functions for which social media are used" (Vally & D'Souza, 2019, p. 752).

The idea that social media abstinence does not always lead to positive outcomes for subjects is also supported by the findings of Hall et al. (2019). After a four week abstinence duration, no causal relationship between loneliness, affective well-being, or quality of day and social media abstinence could be observed (Hall et al., 2019).

With the above in mind, more research is needed to investigate further causality and correlation between social media abstinence and potential changes in mental well-being, fear of missing out, perceived stress, and other related factors. A prominent challenge of such



investigations lies in participants adherence to research rules and ethical limitations to enforce and control abstinence.

### **Conclusion**

This investigation has shown that a close examination of a variety of research fields is necessary in order to gain detailed insights into the topic of social media abstinence. While the positive and negative consequences of social networks on lifestyle and mental as well as physical well-being cannot be denied, questions regarding the classification of social media usage as addiction or compulsive behaviour disorder remain open.

*Disconnect to Reconnect? Examining the Motives, Strategies, and Outcomes of Individuals' (Temporary) Social Media Abstinence* aims to provide a useful contribution to the body of literature of various research areas. In particular, this research expects to gain a greater understanding of people's motivation to abstain from social media as well as the role of the previously presented effects in the undertakings. Previous research projects on social media abstinence have mostly created artificial frames in which participants were asked to give up social media for a pre-defined amount of time or under controlled circumstances. Why some people opt to remove those technologies from their lives still requires further investigations.

It can be expected that the data collected will contribute to the controversies listed and add to the literature in its entirety, helping to build links between disciplines. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the knowledge gained will open the way for further research in the areas of social media usage, behaviour, addiction and the motivation to use social media.

The next chapter describes the theories and methods used to examine users' social media abstinence through a quantitative research approach.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Methodology**

This chapter seeks to explain the methodological approach used in this research project. A quantitative research design based on the uses and gratifications theory was adapted to investigate the motives, strategies, experiences, and outcomes of individuals social media abstinence.

For this reason, a 60-item questionnaire was developed, and participants recruited through multiple online channels (see Appendix for full questionnaire). The construction of the questionnaire items as well as the underlying applicability of the uses and gratifications approach will be discussed in depth in the following sections. In addition, the strengths and limitations of the applied methodology will be highlighted.

#### **Uses and Gratifications Approach**

As noted by Ruggiero (2000), “the *uses and gratifications* (U&G) *approach* is generally recognized to be a subtradition of media effects research (. . .) [and] was developed to study the gratifications that attract and hold audiences to the kinds of media and the types of content that satisfy their social and psychological needs” (p. 3). Scholars try to understand why and how individuals seek out certain forms of media to fulfil their needs by utilising the uses and gratifications approach. Studying individuals' social media abstinence through this lense seems especially promising, since the uses and gratifications approach allows for enough flexibility to consider a multitude of components simultaneously. Accordingly, this research project does not seek to understand social media abstinence from a singular viewpoint, such as religious or spiritual beliefs, but wants to provide a more comprehensive insight. How do social aspects, entertainment needs, escapism, information gathering, among other components, influence individuals choices to abstain from social media? Do these

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factors correlate in any significant way with how people used social media prior to their abstinence? While Ruggiero (2000) reflects on the changes the uses and gratifications theory underwent throughout the decades, he also highlights that the individual himself remains the centre of data collection: “(. . .) that individual's activity is now analyzed in a plethora of psychological and social contexts including media dependency, ritualization, instrumental, communication facilitation, affiliation or avoidance, social learning, and role reinforcement” (p. 26). While speaking of the uses of the internet as a medium, these aspects still hold true for social media platforms. In fact, these contexts can be extended by social media-specific ones, such as self-presentation or the formation of online communities.

Ultimately, this research project makes use of the uses and gratifications approach in two significant ways. First, it seeks to understand individuals social media behaviour before they decided to abstain from all or certain platforms voluntarily, and second, it examines their underlying motivations to do so.

Finally, data collected with regards to previous behaviour patterns, motivations, strategies, experiences and outcomes will be evaluated to understand their interrelation.

### **Research Method**

For this project, a quantitative approach was employed since it allows to collect data in a standardised way. While qualitative approaches deliver more detailed insights into a topic, an approach that allows for greater comparability among data was preferred. As outlined before, gaining knowledge of the relationships between various concepts surrounding social media abstinence is of great relevance for this project.

Another significant advantage of quantitative research methods is that it can be executed in a time-efficient manner. Necessary research instruments can be developed and evaluated within a rather strict time-frame.

As a result, a quantitative research method that favours data standardisation and comparability in a time-efficient manner was favoured over individualised qualitative research designs. The following section will examine in close detail the questionnaire design, as well as the distribution and data collection process.

### **Questionnaire Design**

The research instrument consisted of seven sections in the following order:

*Demographics and Classificatory Questions, Previous Social Media Usage, Motives for Abstinence, Social Media Abstinence, Strategy of Abstinence, Experience of Abstinence, and Outcomes.* Moreover, the questionnaire consisted of a total of 60 items which were a mix of open-ended and closed questions, 5-point Likert-type scale questions, and multiple-choice questions. According to Malhotra (2011), a significant disadvantage of using the Likert scale within questionnaires lies in the fact that it is more time-consuming to complete in comparison to other rating scales. Therefore, a multitude of question types was included to enhance participants' willingness to answer all questions and to prevent respondents *fatigue effect*, which causes participants to grow tired of answering questions (Hesse 2017).

In order to confirm that participants understand questions fully and unambiguously, as well as to improve overall questionnaire design and structure, a pre-test with ten participants was conducted. Improvements resulting from this pre-test are highlighted in the relevant sections.

#### ***Demographics and classificatory questions***

The first section of the questionnaire served multiple purposes. First, demographic and classificatory questions ask for data that respondents are already familiar with. Hence, these questions help respondents to ease into the questionnaire and build trust (Malhotra, p. 84). Second, two classificatory items were included to prescreen all participants and end the

questionnaire should they not be eligible for the survey. Consequently, participants who stated that they had not used social media in the past or who had never intentionally attempted to abstain from all or certain social media platforms were directed to the end of the form.

Demographic items were restricted to four questions regarding age, gender, educational level, and relationship status. These four aspects were included as they have shown to be of high relevance in other social-media related research projects while not overwhelming the respondents with too many personal or highly sensitive questions (Andreassen et al., 2017; Bányai et al. 2017; Best et al. 2014; Perrin, 2015; Smith & Anderson, 2018). It was anticipated that this approach would lead to a greater willingness among participants to answer the questionnaire in its entirety. All questions were constructed as closed, multiple-choice questions.

### ***Previous social media usage***

The second section aimed to understand how participants used social media before their abstinence. This included insights into devices used to access social media, platforms that were used, and respondents general perception of their own social media usage prior to quitting.

First, participants were asked to indicate, for how long they had been using social media and second, how much time they used to spend on social media daily prior to their abstinence. For both questions, ordinal ranges were provided.

Participants were then asked to provide information about the devices they used to access social media as well as which platforms they used to frequent in the past. Ten options were provided, and multiple picks allowed. Nine out of the ten chosen platforms were drawn from the statistic *Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2020, ranked by*

*number of actives users* (Statista, 2020b). However, while evaluating these platforms, those prevalent in western cultures were favoured. Since participant recruitment would be focused on western states, this was deemed an appropriate measure. Furthermore, the platform “LinkedIn” as a popular western business-related social network was added. In addition, an “other” option was provided.

Eight questions, adapted from the *Social Media Disorder Scale (SMDS)*, assessed the participants' overall social media experience one month prior to their abstinence (van den Eijnden et al., 2016). While the original questions of the SMDS were constructed as closed questions, they were transformed into a 5-point Likert scale for this research project. The Likert scale was chosen to allow for a greater distinction of agreement, while the options were set to five, as suggested by Malhotra (2011). Further, the questions were reformulated in order to avoid leading questions.

### ***Motives for abstinence***

With regards to motives of abstinence, 20 items in a 5-point Likert-type scale format were listed in this section of the questionnaire. The aim of this part was to investigate the underlying motivation of individuals who chose to abstain from social media. These questions explore multiple possible motives: platform-related motives (such as security or technological issues), informative motives (no longer wanted to share or receive information through social media), health-related motives (stress, physical activity), social motives (others had left social media; wanted to meet face to face more often). Items used in this section were primarily adapted from the concepts mentioned in the literature review as well as the items used to understand motivations behind Facebook usages through a uses and gratifications approach (Smock et al., 2011). Those were then later adjusted in accordance with the specifics of this dissertation and pre-testing outcomes.

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

The last item in this section also explores the possibility of leaving social media because of religious or spiritual beliefs. As could be seen in the literature review, there is a growing audience interested in concepts such as *abstaining social media for lent*. In order to increase participants likelihood to disclose this rather sensitive information truthfully, the item was placed at the end of the section. According to Malhotra (2011), “[b]y then, rapport has been created and legitimacy of the project established, making respondents more willing to give information” (p. 85).

### ***Social media abstinence***

In this section, three items were used to determine for how long participants abstained from social media, if their abstinence was still ongoing, and which platforms they decided to abstain from. This information was considered highly valuable, as there is a significant likelihood that people will not abstain from all forms of social media simultaneously. Since each social media platform comes with unique features and is tailored to a specific audience, it is plausible to assume that one person using multiple social media platform might want to abstain from one specific site while still make use of the features of another. Platforms from which participants abstained from were adopted from the *previous social media usage* section.

### ***Strategy***

The fifth section of the questionnaire takes a closer look at participants strategies to abstain from social media. It seeks to answer how respondents approached their undertaking and which strategies were employed. Five dichotomous items, as well as one open-ended question, formed part of this section.

### ***Experience of abstinence***

In this part, participants experience during abstinence was examined.

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

These questions illuminate if respondents had to overcome obstacles during their abstinence and how they would rate the level of difficulty in relation to time passed.

In total, this section consisted of four items, of which two were open questions, and the other two were presented with a semantic differential scale ranging from “Very Difficult” to “Very Easy”.

The two open questions were included to give participants the chance to elaborate on their experiences as these were likely to be of a highly individual nature and problematic to measure through structured questions. However, as Malhotra (2011) points out, unstructured questions “relate to recording error, data coding, and the added complexity of analysis” (p. 86). Considering the possible advantages of this approach - a better understanding of people's strategies and difficulties during abstinence - these questions were assessed to be worth the increased analysis efforts.

With regards to the last two questions, respondents were asked to rate the level of difficulty to abstain from social media during the first seven days and thereafter. At this point, pre-testing uncovered one logical mistake. Some participants had only abstained social media for a duration shorter than seven days. Therefore, they lacked an appropriate option for the second question, should their abstinence not have exceeded seven days. As a result, an ‘Abstinence lasted less than 7 days’-option was added to the end of the semantic differential scale for the last question.

### ***Outcomes***

In the outcomes section, participants were asked to rate their overall experience with the abstinence through nine phases on a 5-point Likert scale. This section was included to evaluate if individuals would return to their previously used platforms, or might even consider switching to others. Furthermore, it was also investigated if participants experienced



benefits on a mental, physical, social or professional level. Since these experiences are all linked to key-areas of human life, it can be assumed that any benefits or disadvantages experienced in these might greatly influence an individuals decision to continue with their abstinence, return to social media, or switch to other platforms.

### **Questionnaire Distribution and Sample Size**

The following section explores the platform that was used to create the questionnaire, the recruitment process of participants, and provides details about the sample size.

*Google Forms* was chosen as a medium to create the questionnaire. This decision was preceded by a multitude of advantages that other survey providers could only partially fulfil.

Google Forms might be used free of charge, it presents a user-friendly frontend, and provides multiple options to design questions, such as multiple-choice, open- and closed-end questions, Likert- and other scales, and more. One essential aspect was the function to test participants for their eligibility for the study. Therefore, should participants not qualify for the research project, they should be directed to the end of the questionnaire immediately. Finally, it was essential that all data acquired could be exported entirely in the form of a .csv file to be later analysed via SPSS or other statistic software.

The sampling strategy followed a convenience sample approach in combination with snowball sampling. Participants were exclusively recruited through online channels.

Recruitment methods involved postings on social media platforms and discussion boards concerned with topics revolving around social media abstinence. All participants were then provided with a link to the Google Form with the questionnaire and were asked to fill it in. In addition, participants were asked to share the questionnaire with their online audiences. Respondents did not receive any form of compensation for their participation.

### **Evaluation**

This chapter has shown that the uses and gratifications approach forms an appropriate basis for this research project due to its flexibility to investigate multiple components at once. On this basis, a 60-item questionnaire consisting of seven sub-sections was designed and distributed through multiple online channels.

The main advantage of this approach was that it allowed combining several concepts of social media abstinence. The illustrated methods investigated people's motives, strategies, and outcomes in relation to their voluntary social media abstinence. Furthermore, the variation of questions, as well as their strategic structuring and wording, ensured that participants would not get overwhelmed with the answering process and the completion rate was high. As a result of the above mentioned, data collection and analysis could be concluded in a time-efficient manner and produce reliable and comparable results.

However, this methodological approach has a number of limitations. For instance, the use of multiple-choice questions limits the answers to a predetermined set of possibilities, while respondents might have given more significant insights through a qualitative approach.

After a pretest with ten participants was carried out, a total of 134 participants could be recruited of which 105 qualified for the entire survey. Gathering respondents proved to be a rather difficult task. One issue was that the online forums and social media sites used to distribute the questionnaire had a rather inactive community. While a great interest in the topic can be observed as illustrated before, there also seems to be a lack of online exchange and communities - probably due to the nature of the topic. Furthermore, with 60 items, the questionnaire was rather long and respondents might have exited midway. However, exit-behaviour could not be measured with the tools at hand. Consequently, the rather small sample size does not allow for results to be generalised. The same research setup with a

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

greater or differing sample size might result in different conclusions. It would be advisable, to replicate this research while setting restricting cultural, geographical, or other demographic markers to gain a better understanding of social media abstinence in one particular group.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this research approach provides a first insight into the outlined topic and can contribute to future research projects.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Data Presentation**

In this chapter research findings of the current investigation are being presented. The structure of this chapter follows the outline of the questionnaire. That is, demographic characteristics, previous social media usage, motives for abstinence, social media abstinence, the strategy of abstinence, the experience of abstinence, and outcomes are described in detail. The full questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

In order to investigate the motives, strategies, experiences, and outcomes of individuals' temporary or permanent social media abstinence, a 60-item questionnaire was distributed online to voluntary participants. By the end of the collection period, responses had been received from 134 individuals, 105 of whom qualified for the entire survey.

The accumulated data was then further assessed through the SPSS Subscription version 1.0.01461.

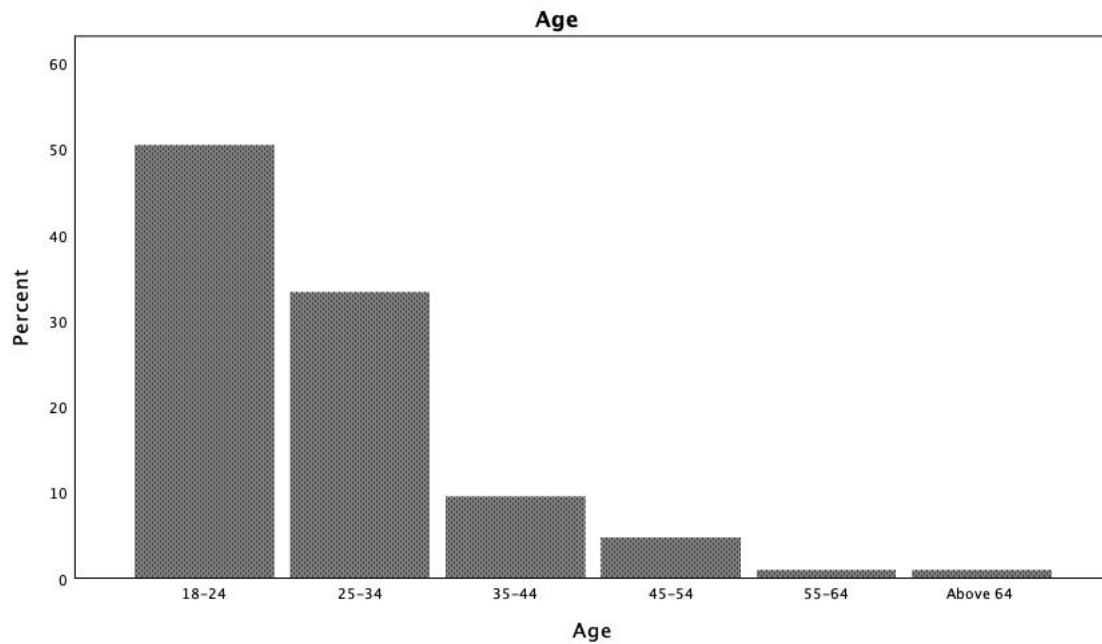
#### **Demographic Characteristics**

Of the 105 individuals who completed the questionnaire, 70 (66.7%) identified as female (F), and 35 (33.3%) as male (M). No participants selected the "other" option.

While seven age-ranges were made available to subjects, the majority (50.5%) reported being 18-24 years old. In addition, 33.3% were 25-34 years old, 9.5% were 35-44 years old, 4.8% were 45-54 years old, 1.0% were 55-64 years old, and 1.0% indicated to be older than 64 (Figure 2). The graph reveals that the age-category is highly concentrated on two consecutive ranges. Therefore, differences in participants responses were not further investigated with regards to the age-demographic.

**Figure 2**

*Age Distribution among Participants*



With regards to the level of education, 41.0% of participants stated to have achieved undergraduate levels, 36.2% reached a postgraduate level, and 16.2% upper secondary. A minority of 6.7% indicated to have reached secondary levels of education. For further analysis purposes, participants are divided into the categories 'Lower Levels of Education' (LE), which combines secondary and upper secondary levels, and 'Higher Levels of Education' (HE), which consists of undergraduate and postgraduate levels, respectively.

When asked about their relationship status, around half of the participants disclosed to be single (55.2%), while 30.5% stated to be in a steady relationship, and 14.3% were married. No subjects were divorced, widowed, or specified another state of relationship. In the following sections, participants' relationship status is referred to as either 'Single' (S) or 'In Romantic Relationship' (R) which includes participants who are either married or in a steady relationship.

## Previous Social Media Usage

In this section, respondents were first asked to determine, for how many years they used social media prior to their abstinence. Following this, 34.3% stated that they had used social media for 5-10 years, 21.0% for more than 10 years, 19.0% for 3-5 years, 16.2% for 1-3 years and a minority of 9.5% used social media for less than 1 year (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Duration of Prior Social Media Usage*

<i>Prior to my abstinence, I have used social media for</i>					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	less than 1 year	10	9,5	9,5	9,5
	1-3 years	17	16,2	16,2	25,7
	3-5 years	20	19,0	19,0	44,8
	5-10 years	36	34,3	34,3	79,0
	more than 10 years	22	21,0	21,0	100,0
	Total	105	100,0	100,0	

When the participants were then asked to specify the amount of time they had spent on social media daily, a third (33.3%) replied with 2-4 hours. Followed by 23.8% for 30 minutes-1 hour, 7.6% for less than 30 minutes, and lastly 15.2% for more than 4 hours. Since this data was self-reported and referred to behaviour in a time-span of the past, it might be subject to bias and reporting errors and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Figure 4 below presents the devices participants used to access social media. Since it was expected that respondents might access social media through a variety of technological devices, the option to select multiple answers was given. Smartphones lead the chart with 92.4% of cases, while only 19% of cases made use of tablets to log into social media. Notebooks/Laptops and Desktop Computers make up 61.9% and 27.6% of cases, respectively.

**Figure 4***Devices Used to Access Social Media*

*\$Devices Frequencies*

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
<b>\$Devices<sup>a</sup></b>	Smartphone	97	46,0%	92,4%
	Tablet	20	9,5%	19,0%
	Notebook/Laptop	65	30,8%	61,9%
	Desktop Computer	29	13,7%	27,6%
<b>Total</b>		<b>211</b>	<b>100,0%</b>	<b>201,0%</b>

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Furthermore, participants made use of the following platforms in descending order (multiple answers were acceptable; percentages refer to percent of cases): Facebook (84.8%), YouTube (84.8%), Instagram (76.2%), WhatsApp (68.6%), Twitter (50.5%), Reddit (43.8%), Snapchat (41.0%), LinkedIn (39.0%), Pinterest (24.8%), and TikTok (12.4%).

In the final part of this section, respondents were asked to illustrate their social media behaviour patterns in the month before their abstinence. Items in this section were taken from the *Social Media Disorder Scale* (van den Eijnden et al., 2016) and adapted to meet the needs of this survey. Since all items were presented as 5-point Likert-style questions, results were recoded into three categories: *agree* ('Strongly agree' and 'Agree'), *neutral* ('Neither Agree nor Disagree'), and *disagree* ('Strongly Disagree' and 'Disagree'). Consequently, it can be assumed that participants who agree or strongly agree with most of the presented items might have experienced disordered social media behaviours prior to their abstinence.

Overall, the examination of the collected data does not suggest that the sample was particularly prone to disordered social media behaviour. When asked if subjects thought about the moment that they would be able to use social media again, almost half (47.6%)

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

disagreed, while one third (32.4%) agreed with the item. 20% opted for the neutral choice.

Questioned, if they wanted to spend more time on social media regularly, the majority of subjects (64.8%) did not want to do so. These insights might indicate that subjects have already thought about a potential abstinence in the weeks preceding their hiatus.

30.5% of respondents agreed to have felt bad when they could not use social media regularly, while 56.1% disagreed with this statement. It is noteworthy that women agreed more than twice as often with this item than men (38.6% of all F; 14.3% of all M).

Interestingly, over half (53.3%) of the participants, had tried to spend less time on social media, but failed. Around one third (34.3%) disagreed with this item and 12.4% opted for the neutral response. The number of participants who agreed is made up of 60% of all female respondents but only 40% of males. Again, these responses indicate that a potential social media abstinence has formed an important concept in subjects' minds during the questioned period, more so for females than their male counterparts.

Only one third (33.3%) of those surveyed indicated that they had neglected other activities in order to use social media regularly. A significant amount of subjects (60.0%) stated not to have lied about the amount of time they spent on social media. However, this item revealed that men lied almost 1.5 times as often about their social media behaviour than female participants (31.4% of all M; 21.4% of all F). The following question required participants to indicate whether they used social media to escape from negative feelings regularly. Slightly more respondents agreed (45.7%) with this item than disagreed (42.9%).

Lastly, the majority of respondents (65.7%) disagreed with having had conflicts with people close to them because of their social media usage.

It should be added at this point that small differences in responses can also be detected between people in a relationship and single people. Overall, there is a greater level



of agreement with the following items among single people: “Wanted to spend more time on social media regularly” (24.1% of all S; 17.0% of all R); “neglected other activities because I wanted to use social media regularly” (39.6% of all S; 25.3% of all R); “used social media to escape from negative feelings regularly” (48.3% of all S; 42.6% of all R). Since the spotted differences while present, are relatively small, they might not be indicative and should therefore only be noted as interesting trends that require further investigation.

### **Motives for Abstinence**

A total of 20 items on the questionnaire measured respondents' motivation to abstain from social media. The items were adapted from a scale developed in *Facebook as a toolkit: A uses and gratifications approach* by Smock et al. (2011) and shared one common prompt: “I gave up social media because...”.

The 5-point Likert-type scale ranged from “Strongly Agree” (1) to “Strongly Disagree” (5). As can be observed in Figure 5 below, participants notably agreed with the items “it had become a habit”, “it took up too much of my time”, and “I felt distracted from other activities”. On the other hand, “others had left social media” and “it's no longer trendy” were disagreed upon to a greater extent. Concluding from these observations, it can be hypothesised that external events might not influence abstinence behaviour as much as internal ones.

**Figure 5***Motives of Abstinence - Means*

<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I no longer enjoyed it	105	1	4	2,20	1,004
it became boring	105	1	5	2,55	1,056
I no longer wanted to share information online	105	1	5	2,31	1,203
I no longer wanted to receive information through social media	105	1	5	2,40	1,149
I was concerned about private details I shared online	105	1	5	2,66	1,270
I felt distracted from other activities	105	1	5	2,08	1,158
I felt disconnected from people close to me	105	1	5	2,88	1,269
it took up too much of my time	105	1	5	1,90	1,148
others had left social media	105	1	5	3,96	1,134
it's no longer trendy	105	1	5	3,95	1,032
I was dissatisfied with the services provided by platforms	105	1	5	2,97	1,220
I no longer trusted platforms to handle my personal data securely	105	1	5	2,67	1,313
I felt disconnected from the real world	105	1	5	2,36	1,226
I felt lonely when I spent time on social media	105	1	5	2,33	1,253
I felt stressed when I spent time on social media	105	1	5	2,24	1,305
I felt physically inactive because of my social media usage	105	1	5	2,38	1,228
I felt I spent too much time in front of a screen	105	1	5	2,04	1,176
it had become a habit	105	1	5	1,82	,998
I felt I neglected meeting people face to face because of social media	105	1	5	3,03	1,282
I abstained from social media because of penance (Ramadan, lent, etc.)	105	1	5	4,11	1,163
Valid N (listwise)	105				

The 20-item scale was further analysed through Principal Components Analysis (PCA). In order to determine if the sample was adequate for such analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was measured, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was carried out.

The overall KMO measure is 0.792 (Figure 6) and thus, according to Kaiser's (1974) classification measure values, considered as "middling" and determined as adequate for further analysis. When examining the KMO measures of individual variables, all exceed 0.5 (Figure 7), and consequently, adequacy of sampling is given. Bartlett's test of sphericity is

statistically significant ( $p < 0.005$ ; Figure 6), therefore, indicating that the data is likely suitable for PCA.

**Figure 6**

*Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett's test of Sphericity – 'Motives of Abstinence'*

<i>KMO and Bartlett's Test</i>		
Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		,792
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1020,721
	df	190
	Sig.	,000

**Figure 7**

*Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin for Individual Variables – 'Motives of Abstinence'*

Item	KMO
I no longer enjoyed it	0.731
it became boring	0.691
I no longer wanted to share information online	0.741
I no longer wanted to receive information through social media	0.701
I was concerned about private details I shared online	0.657
I felt distracted from other activities	0.841
I felt disconnected from people close to me	0.918
it took up too much of my time	0.858
others had left social media	0.603
it's no longer trendy	0.757
I was dissatisfied with the services provided by platforms	0.674
I no longer trusted platforms to handle my personal data securely	0.691
I felt disconnected from the real world	0.839
I felt lonely when I spent time on social media	0.826
I felt stressed when I spent time on social media	0.782
I felt physically inactive because of my social media usage	0.841

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

I felt I spent too much time in front of a screen	0.822
it had become a habit	0.840
I felt I neglected meeting people face to face because of social media	0.869
I abstained from social media because of penance (Ramadan, lent, etc.)	0.753

Through PCA, six constructs could be derived based on an eigenvalue greater than one (Figure 8), while a visual examination of the scree plot (Figure 9) suggested that only four components should be retained (Cattell, 1966). Taking interpretability into account, another PCA with a forced six-factor extraction was carried out and resulted in the factor loading as presented in Figure 10 below. The item “I no longer wanted to share information online” provoked an issue. Not only was it similarly loading on two components, but it also became clear that it might have caused confusion among participants as it can be interpreted in two ways: the sharing of ‘private’ or ‘general’ content online. It was therefore excluded from further analysis.

### Figure 8

#### *Extraction Based on Eigenvalue-One – ‘Motives of Abstinence’*

*Total Variance Explained*

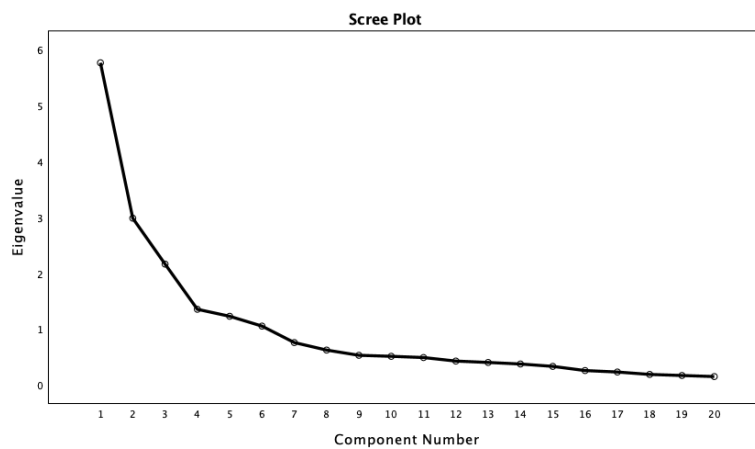
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	5,764	28,820	28,820	5,764	28,820	28,820	3,808	19,041	19,041
2	2,984	14,918	43,738	2,984	14,918	43,738	2,782	13,910	32,951
3	2,163	10,813	54,551	2,163	10,813	54,551	2,435	12,177	45,128
4	1,354	6,769	61,321	1,354	6,769	61,321	2,103	10,516	55,644
5	1,229	6,145	67,465	1,229	6,145	67,465	2,058	10,292	65,936
6	1,053	5,266	72,731	1,053	5,266	72,731	1,359	6,795	72,731
7	,759	3,794	76,525						
8	,624	3,121	79,646						
9	,531	2,654	82,301						
10	,513	2,563	84,864						
11	,491	2,453	87,317						
12	,428	2,138	89,456						
13	,403	2,014	91,469						
14	,375	1,876	93,345						
15	,333	1,663	95,008						
16	,258	1,290	96,299						
17	,232	1,159	97,457						
18	,189	,943	98,400						
19	,169	,847	99,248						
20	,150	,752	100,000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

**Figure 9**

*Extraction Based on Scree Plot – 'Motives of Abstinence'*



**Figure 10**

*Forced Six Factor Extraction – 'Motives of Abstinence'*

*Rotated Component Matrix<sup>a</sup>*

	Component					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
it took up too much of my time	<b>,834</b>	,076	,102	-,058	,019	-,036
I felt I spent too much time in front of a screen	<b>,826</b>	,119	,184	-,061	,031	-,029
I felt distracted from other activities	<b>,807</b>	,267	,034	,014	,127	-,073
it had become a habit	<b>,761</b>	,273	-,072	,096	-,044	,102
I felt physically inactive because of my social media usage	<b>,734</b>	,233	,191	,097	-,071	,098
I felt lonely when I spent time on social media	,220	<b>,874</b>	,003	,103	,065	,077
I felt stressed when I spent time on social media	,174	<b>,844</b>	,027	-,005	,166	-,032
I felt disconnected from the real world	,446	<b>,756</b>	,121	,087	-,110	-,029
I felt disconnected from people close to me	,434	<b>,517</b>	,197	,197	,068	,153
others had left social media	,095	,021	<b>,876</b>	,041	-,024	-,054
it's no longer trendy	,066	,112	<b>,811</b>	-,105	,157	,270
I abstained from social media because of penance (Ramadan, lent, etc.)	,122	-,051	<b>,666</b>	,289	-,246	-,223
I felt I neglected meeting people face to face because of social media	,337	<b>,404</b>	,550	,144	-,007	-,014
I was concerned about private details I shared online	,051	,052	,126	<b>,855</b>	,093	,218
I no longer trusted platforms to handle my personal data securely	,072	,175	,029	<b>,824</b>	,305	-,029
I no longer wanted to share information online	-,153	,081	,003	<b>,565</b>	,164	<b>,561</b>
it became boring	,085	,028	-,026	,070	<b>,821</b>	,198
I no longer enjoyed it	-,061	,160	-,182	,138	<b>,779</b>	,119
I was dissatisfied with the services provided by platforms	,030	-,041	,268	,366	<b>,691</b>	-,161
I no longer wanted to receive information through social media	,095	,014	,004	,122	,112	<b>,856</b>

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.  
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

Consequently, the following six relevant constructs were retained and further examined to establish the Cronbach's alphas to measure their internal validity:

- Consumption (0.881)
- Emotional State (0.848)
- External Influences (0.754)
- Data Concerns (0.801)
- Dissatisfaction (0.712)
- Information Gathering (single item)

According to DeVillis (2003) and Kline (2005), a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.7 or higher indicates an adequate level of internal consistency, which was achieved for all of the five examined constructs.

Motives for abstinence also revealed differences with regards to the demographic markers of gender, educational level, and relationship status.

Females more often agreed with the items "I felt disconnected from people close to me" (48,6% of all F; 34,3% of all M), "I felt I neglected meeting people face to face because of social media" (40.0% of all F; 25.7% of all M), "others had left social media" (17.1% of all F; 2.86% of all M), "I felt stressed when I spent time on social media" (74.3% of all F; 54.3% of all M), and "I felt I spent too much time in front of a screen" (80.0% of all F; 68.6% of all M). Contrasting this, males indicated higher levels of agreement with "I was concerned about private details I shared online" (45.7% of all F; 57.1% of all M), "I was dissatisfied with the services provided by platforms" (30.0% of all F; 45.7% of all M), and "I no longer trusted platforms to handle my personal data securely" (37.1% of all F; 71.4% of all M). Drawing from this, females agreed more often with statements concerned with emotional

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

state and external influences, while males showed higher agreement with items of the dissatisfaction construct.

With regards to educational levels, differences between LE and HE can be observed with the following items: “I was concerned about private details I shared online” (41.7% of all LE; 51.9% of all HE), “I felt disconnected from people close to me” (29.2% of all LE; 48.1% of all HE), “it’s no longer trendy” (4.2% of all LE; 14.8% of all HE), and “I no longer trusted platforms to handle my personal data securely” (58.3% of all LE; 45.7% of all HE). Results indicate that HE participants were more often motivated by privacy concerns, social connectedness, and trends than LE participants, while LE participants responded higher to platform-related trust issues.

Lastly, relationship status highlights differences among participants. Singles agreed more often with the four following statements than respondents in relationships: “I no longer trusted platforms to handle my personal data securely” (55.2% of all S; 40.4% of all R), “I felt disconnected from the real world” (74.1% of all S; 59.6% of all R), “I felt lonely when I spent time on social media” (72.4% of all S; 48.9% of all R), “I felt stressed when I spent time on social media” (77.6% of all S; 55.3% of all R). Interestingly, three of the mentioned form part of the emotional state construct. Since social media platforms are often promoted as tools to bring people together, it is noteworthy that the opposite seems to motivate certain groups of people to abstain from social media.

### **Social Media Abstinence**

The fourth section of the questionnaire measured which platforms subjects chose to abstain from, the amount of time their abstinence lasted, and if their abstinence was still ongoing.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, participants could indicate their abstinence from ten popular social media networks or provide different choices through an “other” option. Participants were enabled to pick multiple platforms. Therefore, all percentages given refer to the percentage of cases. Figure 11 illustrates that the majority of respondents abstained from Facebook (75.2%) and Instagram (69.5%). Those two platforms were followed by Twitter (37.1%), Snapchat (28.6%), and WhatsApp (21.0%). 20% or less abstained from the remaining platforms (YouTube: 20.0%; LinkedIn: 17.1%; TikTok: 15.2%; Pinterest: 15.2%) while only a few chose to abstain from Reddit (14.3%).

**Figure 11**

## *Abstinence from Social Media Platforms*

<i>\$Social_Media_Platforms_Frequencies</i>				
		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Abstinence from Social Media Platforms <sup>a</sup>	Facebook	79	24,0%	75,2%
	YouTube	21	6,4%	20,0%
	WhatsApp	22	6,7%	21,0%
	Instagram	73	22,2%	69,5%
	TikTok	16	4,9%	15,2%
	Reddit	15	4,6%	14,3%
	Snapchat	30	9,1%	28,6%
	Twitter	39	11,9%	37,1%
	Pinterest	16	4,9%	15,2%
	LinkedIn	18	5,5%	17,1%
Total		329	100,0%	313,3%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

With regards to the duration of abstinence, the majority of respondents reported having abstained from social media for more than 3 months (36.2%) while the minority abstained for less than 1-2 weeks (11.4%). Others abstained for less than 7 days (14.3%), 2-4 weeks (21.9%), or 1-3 months (16.2%). It can be observed that just over half of the participants preferred a longer abstinence period (over 1 month, 52.4%) over shorter durations (up to 4 weeks, 47.6%). Examination of results also revealed that gender influenced



how long participants abstained (Figure 12). From the table, it can be seen that male participants abstained from social media more often for longer periods while abstinence among females is distributed more evenly over shorter- and longer durations.

**Figure 12**

### *Duration of Abstinence According to Gender*

Crosstab

			My abstinence lasted:					
			less than 7 days	1 – 2 weeks	2 – 4 weeks	1 – 3 months	longer than 3 months	Total
Gender	Male	Count	3	4	4	4	20	35
		% within Gender	8,6%	11,4%	11,4%	11,4%	57,1%	100,0%
	Female	Count	12	8	19	13	18	70
		% within Gender	17,1%	11,4%	27,1%	18,6%	25,7%	100,0%
	Total	Count	15	12	23	17	38	105
		% within Gender	14,3%	11,4%	21,9%	16,2%	36,2%	100,0%

When asked, if participants' abstinence was still ongoing, more than half (60.0%) replied "no", while the remaining ones indicated "yes" (40.0%). Interestingly, 25.7% of those still abstaining have been doing so for more than 3 months. In comparison, the highest-ranking group of those who returned to social media abstained for 2-4 weeks (18.1%). Moreover, with regards to percentage per cases, more males (60.0%) are continuing with their abstinence than females (30.0%).

### **Strategy of Abstinence**

The next section of the survey was concerned with the respondents' strategy of abstinence. Six items were included in this part, five of which were dichotomous questions and one was phrased as an open-ended question.

Starting with the closed-questions, half of the respondents deleted their social media accounts (Yes: 51.4%; No: 48.6%). An even higher percentage of participants (Yes: 82.9%; No: 17.1%) utilised the strategy to delete social media apps from their mobile devices. Male participants implemented this strategy more often than female ones (60.0% of all M; 47.1%

of all F). When asked whether they made use of blockers which deny access to social media sites, two-thirds (Yes: 33.3%; No: 66.7%) did not make use of such.

Just over half of the respondents (Yes: 53.3%; No: 46.7%) stated that they informed others about their social media abstinence, a strategy more frequently utilised by females (57.1% of all F; 45.7% of all M). Almost all subjects (Yes: 98.1%; No: 1.9%) did not receive professional help (i.e., counselling) to cope with their undertaking.

The final question of this section asked respondents to state any other strategies or means of support they might have implemented through their social media abstinence. While the majority of respondents did not rely on other strategies, 21.9% of participants did.

Respondents recorded a variety of strategies. For example, multiple participants indicated that they tried to lessen exposure to social media by hiding apps on their phone, deleting apps, or even hiding their phones. Others reported having logged out of their accounts on devices. All of these strategies make it harder for users to access social media by putting an additional obstacle between themselves and social networks. As a result, this might be an appropriate measure to disrupt habitual usage.

One participant reported to have suffered the loss of a pet and a friend and that these circumstances prevented the participant from accessing social media as a way of avoiding exposure to these topics and the resultant emotional distress.

Furthermore, some participants tried to limit their usage either by allowing themselves access within pre-determined time-windows, such as the weekend, or by making use of timers and stopwatches.

A different approach among participants was to distract themselves through other activities, books, or holidays.

Another participant stated to have made use of other applications to stay away from social media. One of which was *Forest App*, an application for smartphones that allows users to block certain functions of their phones for a pre-determined time and earn rewards in exchange for their “ability to focus” (Forest App, 2020). The same subject also mentioned “Future Self Journaling” as a means of distraction.

### **Experience of Abstinence**

Over half of those surveyed (63.8%) reported that they did not experience any difficulties during their abstinence. However, 36.2% of subjects indicated that they encountered obstacles during their journey.

One of the main themes mentioned was “boredom”. Participants described that abstaining was particularly difficult whenever they had “time to kill” and previously used social media to overcome boredom. Even when in public, one respondent reported to feeling “awkward” without social media. Furthermore, the fear of missing out (FOMO) was another common theme mentioned. By being absent from social media, participants felt left out or even anxious when they wanted to know what was going on online. One respondent reported having experienced difficulties abstaining since social media was used as a tool in the past to “numb” whenever the respondent felt anxious.

Subjects also highlighted the issue that many of them used integrated social media messaging services to stay in touch with their friends and families. Therefore, some subjects found it difficult and inconvenient to stay connected with people who would exclusively rely on one platform for online communication purposes. Consequently, it does not surprise that some respondents also listed the “loss of contact with friends” as another difficulty of their abstinence.

Lastly, one respondent listed unexpected reminders as challenging to deal with. The participant specifically mentioned having received email notifications with updates to previously used social media sites only to be unable to follow up on these.

When asked to indicate what participants missed about social media during their abstinence, 37.14% reported “nothing” while 62.86% of subjects provided a wide range of answers.

As already highlighted in the previous question, boredom reappeared as a common theme. Participants were missing the action of scrolling through their newsfeed to “kill time” and being entertained through what they saw on social media (for example, through memes). Furthermore, respondents reported missing the reception of updates on their family and friends, hobbies, and groups they were part of, as well as the general gathering of news and information. Additionally, instant messaging and staying connected to otherwise unavailable people were also mentioned. One participant even stated to have missed being able to check on their “crush” online.

Others were afraid to miss out on career-related opportunities or activities and events nearby. Participants expressed feeling left out since some information was only made available through social media. Anxiety and FOMO were reported as consequences of the lack of belonging.

Interestingly, only one respondent indicated to have missed sharing content online. The lack of responses concerned with active social media usage might indicate that passive social media usage could be more challenging to overcome. However, this idea would need further and more specified investigation to gain a better understanding of the matter.

The two tables below illustrate participants' perceived levels of difficulty to abstain from social media for either the first seven days of abstinence (Figure 13) or thereafter

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

(Figure 14). While abstinence within the first week appears to have caused greater difficulties, these results can also further be examined by gender. What stands out in the charts is that females, in general, seemed to have experienced greater levels of difficulties with their abstinence than men.

**Figure 13**

### *Level of Difficulty First Seven Days of Abstinence - Crosstabulation Gender*

*Gender \* I would rate the difficulty to abstain from social media during the first 7 days Crosstabulation*

		I would rate the difficulty to abstain from social media during the first 7 days					Total
		Very Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Neither Difficult nor Easy	Somewhat Easy	Very Easy	
Gender	Male	Count	4	6	7	12	35
		% within Gender	11,4%	17,1%	20,0%	34,3%	100,0%
	Female	Count	13	33	10	7	70
		% within Gender	18,6%	47,1%	14,3%	10,0%	100,0%
Total		Count	17	39	17	19	105
		% within Gender	16,2%	37,1%	16,2%	18,1%	100,0%

**Figure 14**

### *Level of Difficulty after Seven Days of Abstinence - Crosstabulation Gender*

*Gender \* I would rate the difficulty to abstain from social media after the first 7 days Crosstabulation*

		I would rate the difficulty to abstain from social media after the first 7 days					Total
		Very Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Neither Difficult nor Easy	Somewhat Easy	Very Easy	
Gender	Male	Count	4	2	2	9	35
		% within Gender	11,4%	5,7%	5,7%	25,7%	100,0%
	Female	Count	7	17	13	19	70
		% within Gender	10,0%	24,3%	18,6%	27,1%	100,0%
Total		Count	11	19	15	28	105
		% within Gender	10,5%	18,1%	14,3%	26,7%	100,0%

## Outcomes

Nine questions were included in the last sub-section of the questionnaire. This scale measured three constructs - *Future Behaviour*, *Benefits*, and *Success* - which were retained through practical components analysis after testing for Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and applying Bartlett's test for sphericity. Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha was determined for all constructs to measure internal validity.

The KMO measure for all variables was 0.710 (Figure 15) while individual variables all measured greater than 0.5 (Figure 16). Bartlett's test of sphericity showed statistical significance ( $p < 0.005$ ; Figure 15); therefore, the data was further analysed through PCA.

**Figure 15**

*Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett's test of Sphericity – 'Outcomes'*

<i>KMO and Bartlett's Test</i>		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		,710
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	316,087
	df	36
	Sig.	,000

**Figure 16**

*Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin for Individual Variables – 'Outcomes'*

Item	KMO
think it was a good idea	0.580
achieved my goals	0.516
will continue to abstain from social media for longer	0.654
benefitted from the experience mentally	0.842
benefitted from the experience physically	0.715
benefitted from the experience socially	0.688
benefitted from the experience professionally	0.867
will not go back to the platforms I used in the past	0.647
will not use other platforms in the future	0.834

The eigenvalue-one criterion led to the extraction of three components (Figure 16). This result is supported by the scree-plot, as shown in Figure 17, which also suggested that three components should be retained (Cattell, 1966). Furthermore, the division into three constructs can also be based on interpretability criteria. However, the item "I benefitted from

the experience mentally” loaded strongly on two components and was then assigned to the construct *Benefits*. This decision was taken after careful consideration of the available data, the small sample size, and internal logic.

Moreover, in this case, a varimax-rotation was used to retain the three constructs.

Varimax, however, is only one tool that can be utilised while other rotation options have lead to differing results. Since there was no stark contrast between the two loadings, and varimax was still evaluated to be the most feasible option within this PCA, while the internal logic of constructs was considered to be of a higher value for this analysis than factor loading alone.

**Figure 17**

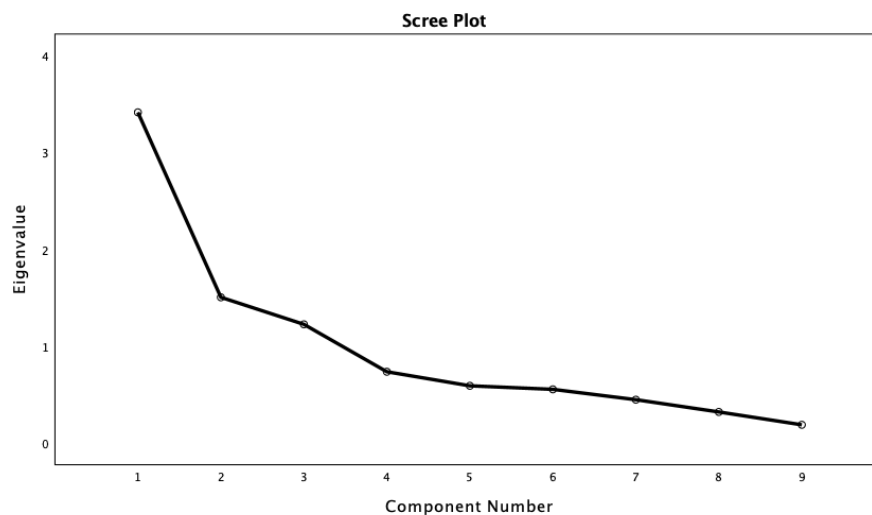
*Extraction Based on Eigenvalue-One – ‘Outcomes’*

Total Variance Explained									
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3,415	37,945	37,945	3,415	37,945	37,945	2,329	25,882	25,882
2	1,506	16,737	54,682	1,506	16,737	54,682	2,191	24,343	50,225
3	1,227	13,638	68,320	1,227	13,638	68,320	1,629	18,095	68,320
4	,738	8,201	76,522						
5	,593	6,589	83,111						
6	,557	6,184	89,295						
7	,450	4,997	94,292						
8	,323	3,590	97,882						
9	,191	2,118	100,000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

**Figure 18**

*Extraction Based on Scree Plot – ‘Outcomes’*



The constructs were then further tested for internal validity by measuring the Cronbach's alphas of all three. The construct *Future Behaviour* showed a high level of internal consistency, as determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.836. *Benefits* also reported an acceptable level of 0.753. Lastly, the construct *Success* was examined. This construct presented a low Cronbach's alpha of only 0.539. The low value might be explained by the fact that this construct consisted of only two variables and might also be subject to the relatively small sample size. Therefore, results and following interpretations should be observed with caution.

Examining the means of all items as presented in the table below (Figure 19), the following observations can be made. First, both variables within the *Success* construct reached high levels of agreement from respondents, indicating overall satisfaction with the abstinence experience. Second, from all proposed benefits, the one concerned with mental health received the greatest positive feedback from participants. *Future Behaviour*, however, shows an overall more neutral response and greater standard deviation. In fact, a significant amount of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the *Future*-related items, therefore indicating that they would return to the platforms they used in the past (41.0%) and that they would use other platforms in the future (41.0%).

Nevertheless, future behaviour differs also with regards to demographic markers. Males showed higher levels of agreement with the following items: "will continue to abstain from social media for longer" (65.7% of all M; 48.6% of all F), "will not go back to the platforms I used in the past" (57.1% of all M; 30.0% of all F), and "will not use other platforms in the future" (37.1% of all M; 28.6% of all F). Furthermore, singles and participants with lower levels of education do not intend to return to previously used



platforms as often as respondents from the categories in relationships (43.1% of all S; 34.0% of all R) or with higher levels of education (58.3% of all LE; 33.3% of all HE).

### Figure 19

#### *Descriptive Means – ‘Outcomes’*

<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
think it was a good idea	105	1	3	1,47	,651
achieved my goals	105	1	5	2,10	,894
will continue to abstain from social media for longer	105	1	5	2,28	1,061
benefitted from the experience mentally	105	1	4	1,66	,770
benefitted from the experience physically	105	1	4	2,31	,964
benefitted from the experience socially	105	1	5	2,56	1,160
benefitted from the experience professionally	105	1	5	2,72	1,096
will not go back to the platforms I used in the past	105	1	5	2,94	1,336
will not use other platforms in the future	105	1	5	3,07	1,295
Valid N (listwise)	105				

### Conclusion

In summary, the findings of this chapter highlighted the demographics of participants, their preferred devices to access social media, their pre-abstinence behaviour and their experiences during as well as after their social media hiatus. The data was examined following standard academic practices and further analysed and interpreted through statistical methods such as Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measurements, Bartlett's test of sphericity, Principal Components Analysis, and establishing internal validity by measuring Cronbach's alphas of constructs.

However, limitations to the acquired data were determined by the relatively small sample size, an ambiguous item within the *Previous Social Media Usage*-scale, and single-

item constructs. Concluding from this, results drawn from this data should be considered with these limitations in mind and interpreted with caution.

The following chapter, therefore, will move on to discuss these findings in view of the proposed aims of this dissertation.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

This study set out with the aim of assessing what motivates individuals to abstain from social media, which strategies individuals employ, how they experience their abstinence, and what the outcomes of such undertakings are.

In this chapter, a more detailed account of the previously stated findings is given. Therefore, the following sections not only discuss and interpret the findings of this research project, but also anchor them within the body of literature, point out limitations, and provide suggestions for further investigations.

#### **Demographic Characteristics**

With respect to demographic characteristics, the parameters 'gender', 'relationship status', and 'educational level' all revealed interesting differences in participants responses and behaviours. The parameter 'age', however, could not be further analysed since the sample size lacked participant variety in that aspect.

It is important to note that demographic variables have shown to lead to substantial insights in other social media related research projects (Andreassen et al., 2017; Perrin, 2015; Smith & Anderson, 2018) and should therefore be examined thoroughly.

Moreover, Smith and Anderson (2018) observed a narrowing of differences related to demographic markers in their social media research reports over the years. Repeated investigations that acknowledge that differences caused by or related to demographic parameters might change over time are necessary to present updated and extensive findings.

Further research should, therefore, be undertaken to investigate sample sizes with a different demographic setup. This would be particularly interesting since the demographic variety of this sample was somewhat limited. Moreover, it would add significantly to the

body of literature to extend the analysis to other demographic features, such as income, nationality, or ethnicity.

### **Previous Social Media Usage**

On the question of how individuals used social media prior to their abstinence, the following outcomes can be demonstrated: (a) Most subjects used social media for more than ten years and spent 2-4 h daily on it, (b) even though participants used multiple devices to access social media, a clear preference for smartphones could be observed, (c) respondents made use of multiple platforms simultaneously, (d) overall, subjects did not appear to present overly disordered social media behaviour prior to their abstinence, (e) over half of the participants attempted to abstain from social media earlier, but failed, and (f) variance among respondents reports within the section of previous social media usage could be traced back to the demographic variables of gender and relationship status.

With regards to distinctions related to gender, women reported more often about feeling bad about their social media behaviour than men, while men indicated in their responses to lie about 1.5 times as often about their social media usage than women. These findings might indicate that female and male perception of social media differs, as well as the understanding of how to interpret, rationalise, and communicate their own behaviour patterns. Furthermore, these implications point to new issues that could not be addressed with the data available and therefore require additional research: Why do men lie more often about their social media activities and what are the intentions behind these behaviours? When females state they feel bad about their social media usage, do they experience shame, guilt, anger or other emotions, and what causes these feelings?

While the overall sample size did not appear to suffer from disordered social media usage, singles displayed higher levels of agreement with the items adapted from the *Social*

*Media Disorder Scale* (van den Eijnden et al., 2016) compared to respondents in relationships. The observation that singles might be more prone to negative effects through social media is supported by Norwegian researchers Andreassen et al. (2017) who found that singles display higher tendencies for social media dependence. Furthermore, Kuss et al. (2014) demonstrated that individuals who are not involved in a romantic relationship are more prone to addictive social media usage.

Since this section of the questionnaire asked participants to self-report events from the past, reporting errors and bias cannot be eliminated, and consequently, findings must be viewed with caution. Future research should investigate ethical ways to monitor subjects social media usage closely prior to any abstinence attempts to gain deeper insights into levels of disordered behaviour, platforms and devices utilised, and time spent on social networks.

### **Motives for Abstinence**

Turning now to the motives for abstinence, the data showed that (a) motivation was influenced by gender, educational level, and relationship status, and (b) internal events might provide greater abstinence motivation than external events.

Considering that previous observations have demonstrated differences in how social media affects individuals' emotional state, physical- and mental well-being, as well as the overall quality of life (Bányai et al., 2017; Becker et al., 2013; Best et al., 2014; Caplan, 2007; Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol, 2016), it is, therefore, unsurprising that distinctions based on gender also appear within the dimension of motivators for abstinence.

Males of the analysed sample found greater motivation within platform- and privacy-related aspects than females. Females, on the other hand, expressed higher levels of agreement with emotionally loaded items. It appears that the differences in motivators between genders can be grouped into the categories of rational (male) and emotional (female)

motivators. The work of other studies complement these results, where researchers found that female social media users experienced negative effects related to emotional and mental well-being more often than male users (Bányai et al., 2017; Best et al., 2014).

While examining motivations in relation to educational level, it was observed that participants who achieved higher levels of education listed disconnection from people, privacy concerns, and trends as motivators more frequently than participants with lower educational backgrounds. This is interesting because there might be a greater awareness among higher educated individuals about the pitfalls and functions of social media, and as a result, motivations are drawn from this knowledge. An educational gap might be the reason why individuals with lower educational backgrounds agreed more strongly not to trust social media platforms with their private data.

When it comes to the demographic variable of relationship status, it can be highlighted that single individuals identified other motivators than their counterparts involved in romantic relationships. Interestingly, the differences are most apparent within the construct of emotional state. These findings raise the possibility that singles turn away to social media more frequently to fulfil emotional needs and socially connect, whereas individuals in relationships perhaps find these needs to be met more often in the offline world.

Understanding why people choose to abstain from social media voluntarily and then to connect these findings to other parameters, such as strategies and outcomes, can grant insights into what distinguishes successful and unsuccessful social media abstinences. Once underlying drivers are understood, this knowledge can then be used to develop and provide practical advice for people who suffer from the many adverse effects social media can have on individuals. Turning back to the finding that internal events might provide greater motivation than external ones shows consistency with observations reported by Deci and

Ryan (2010) in an earlier chapter. Hence, focused research on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in a social media setting should be carried out.

Additionally, acquired knowledge around motivators can also be used to initiate changes on social media platforms themselves to create a better, healthier, and more satisfying user experience. After all, not all aspects of social media function as motivators for users to distance themselves from platforms, but some are actually missed, as will be illustrated later on in this chapter.

The findings of this section were limited by the fact that the question “I gave up social media because I no longer wanted to share information online” proved to be ambiguous in the sense that it could be interpreted by participants as the sharing of “private” or “general” information. As a result, the item had to be excluded from further analysis. Continuous work on uncovering motivations and motivators to leave social media is needed. A platform-specific approach could provide a promising addition to the results presented here.

### **Social Media Abstinence**

The following section will discuss the findings concerned with social media abstinence itself.

First, the majority of participants reported having abstained from Facebook and Instagram. This is somewhat surprising, since when asked which platforms were used prior to their abstinence, YouTube and WhatsApp were also highly popular among participants. However, only around one-fifth of respondents chose to abstain from those two networks. While the reasoning behind these choices within this sample size remains unknown, it can be speculated that some platforms are perceived as more problematic than others by their users. Consequently, it would be fascinating to investigate further and identify which functionalities and characteristics are specifically driving factors in this matter.

Second, while neither relationship status nor education level suggested any noteworthy differences within this section, a slight overall preference for more extended abstinence periods was noted, being especially popular among male respondents. Measuring people's abstinence periods and then connecting this data to their experiences and outcomes supports understanding of difficulties imposed by social media abstinence.

### **Strategy of Abstinence**

The next paragraphs highlight the strategies implemented by respondents during their abstinence and conclusions that can be drawn from these.

Respondents demonstrated a clear preference for strategies that increase the difficulty to access social media. Strategies from this spectrum included deleting apps from mobile devices, logging out of accounts or deleting them altogether, hiding social media apps on their smartphones, or hiding the devices themselves. Disabling notifications was also mentioned and falls into this category. However, the usage of blockers that deny access to pre-determined websites was not popular among respondents. The unpopularity might be due to the assumption that users might be unaware of the existence of such tools.

Other strategies can be grouped under the theme of 'distraction'. Participants reverted to various offline actions, such as reading, vacation time, or outdoor activities, to distract themselves from social media.

One more way of ensuring abstinence was to limit usage to pre-determined time-sets or particular weekdays. Respondents indicated they made use of timers and stopwatches to adhere to their self-imposed abstinence.

All of the mentioned strategies have in common that they aim to disrupt the previously described habit cycle at some point. Briefly turning back to habit cycles, four



components of such were identified earlier: cue, action, reward, and repetition (Verplanken & Aarts, 1999).

By minimising exposure to social media, cues that initiate a habit are removed, a strategy that is supported by research and described as promising by Lally and Gardner (2013). Having to overcome obstacles in order to log into accounts, such as re-downloading an app, interrupts the automaticity of processes. The importance of automaticity within habit formation was particularly stressed by Lally and Gardner (2013). Furthermore, timers and stopwatches provide an end-cue to the activity that is often lacking on social media because of bottomless newsfeeds.

While the illustrated findings align with the observations demonstrated in current research, they were also limited by self-reports and closed-questions. Further utilisation of open-questions and qualitative research methods to even better understand which strategies are promising and which yield no results, is recommended.

### **Experience of Abstinence**

Moving on to explore individuals' experience of abstinence. This section aimed to understand how participants experienced their abstinence, if they had to face obstacles along the way, and to determine when difficulties arose and of what nature they were.

According to Smith and Anderson (2018), users of social media generally expect social media abstinence to be a challenging undertaking. However, the findings of this research project only partially supports these assumptions. Initial stages of abstinence (the first seven days) were rated to be of greater difficulty than later stages of abstinence (after seven days). Moreover, gender also played a role in the perception of difficulty, as women generally reported greater levels of difficulties during both stages. These findings are very interesting, as gender differences were already observed in previous sections. It can be

assumed that the motivators that drive social media usage and abstinence might also be responsible for the levels of difficulties experienced when abstinence is attempted.

The observation that social media abstinence does not always immediately result in positive outcomes is also supported by Vally and D'Souza (2019). They reported that abstinence resulted in a decline in life satisfaction and heightened affect, as well as loneliness (Vally & D'Souza, 2019). Furthermore, the researchers suggested that functions for which social media are being used should be observed first before abstinence attempts were taken out (Vally & D'Souza, 2019). In addition, determining when abstinence is perceived to be most difficult can contribute to the development of strategies to cope with the expected hardship.

With regards to difficulties experienced during their abstinence, fear of missing out, anxiety, and boredom were commonly mentioned themes. These results are surprising as they contradict current findings by other researchers. In fact, Brown and Kuss (2020) reported that users indicated a significant decrease in fear of missing out while simultaneously reporting increases in mental well-being and social connectedness. Nevertheless, the research by Brown and Kuss (2020) does support the notion that challenges for social media abstinence can be found within the parameters of coping, habit, and boredom.

On the question of what was missed during abstinence, social connectedness has evolved as a prominent topic. Individuals missed connecting with friends, family members and social groups online. The inability to use embedded instant messaging services on social media platforms was described as inconvenient and difficult. Current research supports these findings, as Nabi et al. (2013) found a link between the number of Facebook friends and a stronger sense of social support, as well as lower stress levels, a general increase in well-being, and fewer physical illnesses. Considering that it was found earlier that a sense of

disconnection from people and the real world were discovered to be drivers of motivation for abstinence, it is essential that future research looks into these contradictions.

Again, females generally seemed to have a harder time abstaining from social media than males. This finding is consistent with that of Andreassen et al. (2017) who found that females, singles, and people of lower education are more prone for a tendency towards social media dependence. Being able to identify individuals who are more likely to lean towards disordered social media behaviour can lead the way to implement targeted support offerings by health professionals.

Interestingly, except for one respondent, no one listed active social media functions such as sharing, liking, or commenting as items that were missed during abstinence. In this sample, passive functions and the consumption of information and news was reported to be missed to a distinctively greater extent. However, previous research suggests that passive usage is thought to negatively impact individuals' well-being, while active usage increases perceived life-satisfaction (Vally & D'Souza, 2019; Wenninger et al., 2014; Frison & Eggermont, 2015; Shaw et al., 2015). This finding reintroduces the question, what exactly keeps users hooked on social media? As explored in the review of the literature chapter, dopamine responses were listed as an important component within the brain's reward system and consequently, the building of habits and development of compulsive behaviours. Active social media functions such as liking, commenting, and sharing were linked to the release of dopamine and therefore, the encouragement of such actions. Perhaps these links are not as powerful as assumed or are overwritten by other factors that weigh more strongly. To develop a detailed picture of all the mechanisms involved, additional research must be carried out.

### Outcomes

Lastly, the outcomes of social media abstinence are being discussed. First of all, it should be mentioned that the vast majority of participants perceived their social media abstinence as a good idea and a success. This is particularly important to notice, since the detrimental effects of social media on mental-health, physical well-being, and other important aspects of life have already been uncovered in previous sections of this dissertation. Apparently, the benefits received through the abstinence outweigh the experienced downsides.

Considering the extensive body of literature that connects social media negatively to mental well-being, it comes as no surprise that participants agreed strongly to have benefitted mentally from their abstinence (Bányai et al., 2017; Best et al., 2014; Yan et al., 2017). Even though other researchers linked social media use to poor physical health, respondents did not indicate to have particularly benefitted in this area during their abstinence (Becker et al., 2013; Best et al., 2014; Caplan, 2007; Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol, 2016). One possible explanation for this result is that while social media usage might be detrimental to individuals' physical well-being, abstinence does not necessarily lead to healthier life choices and therefore, an improvement of such. It is unknown how participants chose to spend the time that was previously occupied by scrolling through social media once they started their abstinence. Hence, the investigation of how activity levels change during abstinence would promise exciting insights into the matter.

Another interesting finding was observed with regards to differences in intended future behaviour between genders. Not only did male participants abstain for more extended periods but they also intended less often to revert to past behaviour patterns. Keeping in mind that female participants' abstinence was rated as more difficult than that of males, it is

comprehensible that more women feel an urge to go back to previous behaviours. Again, these findings are congruent with those of the Norwegian research team, describing women as more prone to disordered social media behaviour (Andreassen et al., 2017). Nevertheless, male participants only made up around 28.5% of the sample size, and therefore, their insights might be limited and consequently, must be considered with caution.

Future research projects should try to gather a sample size with greater variance in demographic markers, since these form promising variables for interesting insights.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude this chapter, the previous sections have shown that demographic variables are of great importance within the field of social media research. Furthermore, the usage of multiple devices and platforms is widespread, though not all platforms lead to abstinence behaviour. Females and individuals not involved in romantic relationships are not only more prone to experience detrimental effects from social media usage but they also report facing more difficulties while attempting to abstain from such.

Overall, results are supported by the body of literature with a few contradictions that open the dialogue for further research projects.

In the chapter that follows, the research process, as well as its findings and limitations, will be reviewed and summarised in order to conclude the presentation of the research in this chapter.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

The aim of the present research was to explore four key questions through a quantitative research approach, namely a) why individuals voluntarily choose to abstain temporarily or permanently from social media, (b) what motivates individuals to initiate social media abstinence, (c) which strategies individuals employ to cope with their undertaking, and (d) what insights the outcomes of such endeavours provide.

A uses and gratifications approach was then utilised to develop a 60-item questionnaire that was distributed through online channels to 134 participants, of which 105 qualified for the entire survey. Based on this methodology, the following findings could be extracted and demonstrated.

Within the scope of social media usage, the study has shown that the demographic variable „gender“ highlighted interesting differences in participant responses and behaviours, much more so than other demographic markers did. In addition, respondents not involved in a romantic relationship were found to present a greater tendency to detrimental effects on their emotional well-being, likely caused by their social media usage.

Furthermore, another finding reveals that subjects did not only utilise a multitude of devices to access social media, but were also present on multiple social media platforms simultaneously. This result was interesting, since further investigation showed that respondents did not abstain from all social media platforms to the same extent. It can, therefore, be assumed that platforms which users choose to abstain from more often share certain characteristics that encourage such behaviours. It is, consequently, of interest to further examine these observations and identify the features and functions of social media platforms that are responsible for users' abstinence.

Regarding motives, this research project has uncovered that motivators to abstain from social media were significantly influenced by gender, educational level, and relationship status. Moreover, the results suggest that internal factors share a greater motivational force when it comes to breaking with social media than external factors. Inspecting the gender variable showed that men gained motivation more often through rational aspects while women leaned towards motivators with an emotional scope. Lastly, single individuals appeared to leave social media more frequently, because of motivators anchored in the dimension of emotional state. These findings were largely supported by the body of literature.

Moving on to strategies, the majority of those implemented by participants to help with their social media hiatus shared two common concepts. One was to break habit cycles right at the cue-stage by removing triggers and reminders that initiate habitual social media usage. The other one intended to break the habit cycle at the action-stage by disrupting automated behaviours through added obstacles. Furthermore, distraction through engaging in other activities was another popular strategy reported by participants.

With respect to experiences during abstinence, it was pointed out that females generally faced more difficulties than males. This pattern was consistently observed in all aspects of the research process and is supported by other researchers' findings. Furthermore, perceived levels of difficulty to abstain from social media decreased over time. One other interesting finding to emerge from this study is that participants greatly missed the aspects of social connectedness and interaction through instant messaging services.

Lastly, the outcomes section highlighted that abstinence, in general, was well received by participants and considered to be a good idea and successful. In addition, agreement among participants with regards to mental health benefits was high, which was also supported by the literature. In contrast to this stands the finding that participants expressed less often to

have noticed beneficial outcomes concerned with physical health, which contradicted findings of other studies.

Overall, the chosen approach to utilise quantitative research methods was successful in the respect that a variety of aspects could be investigated simultaneously without sacrificing the validity of valuable outcomes. However, in some instances it became clear that additional qualitative research is necessary to gain a full understanding of matters. That is to say, qualitative research should not replace the implemented quantitative strategy, but rather complement it.

The present study is limited by its relatively small sample size, possible reporting bias due to uncontrolled self-reports, and slight weaknesses with regards to the constructs of sub-scales.

It is therefore recommended to develop ethical ways to monitor participants and their social media behaviours to eliminate reporting bias and enrich the empirical data.

Furthermore, qualitative research approaches are required to investigate in a deeper way individuals' incentives and to uncover motivations and difficulties that cannot be grasped through quantitative methodologies. And lastly, greater variances in demographic markers within samples should be aimed for, since these variables proved to be of great significance for understanding individuals' social media behaviour.

In spite of its limitations, this research project positively contributes to the body of literature by bridging multiple academic disciplines and helping to understand social media abstinence further. Moreover, it strengthened already existing findings by adding new empirical data while simultaneously highlighting contradictions that enhance the academic dialogue for future research projects.



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## Appendix: Questionnaire

No.	Question	Answer Options				
I. Demographics and Classificatory Questions						
Q1	Age	Under 18	18-24	25-34	35-44	
		45-54	55-64	Above 64		
Q2	Gender	Female	Male	Other		
Q3	Highest level of education achieved?	Secondary	Upper Secondary	Under-graduate	Postgraduate	Other
Q4	Relationship status?	Single	In a steady relationship	Married	Divorced	Widowed
		Other				
Q5	Have you in the past or present made use of social media?	Yes	No	No = End of survey		
Q6	Have you in the past or present intentionally abstained from all or certain forms of social media?	Yes	No	No = End of survey		
II. Previous Social Media Usage						
Q7	Prior to my abstinence, I have used social media for	less than 1 year	1-3 years	3-5 years	5-10 years	
		more than 10 years				
Q8	Fill in the blank: On average, I used to spend ____ on social media daily.	less than 30 minutes	30 minutes - 1 hour	1-2 hours	2-4 hours	
		more than 4 hours				
Q9	I used the following devices to access social media:	Smartphone	Tablet	Notebook/ Laptop	Desktop Computer	
		Other	Multiple responses accepted			
Q10	I used the following social media platforms:	Facebook	YouTube	WhatsApp	Instagram	TikTok
		Reddit	Snapchat	Twitter	Pinterest	LinkedIn
		Other	Multiple responses accepted			
During the month before I quit social media, I						
Q11	thought about the moment that I could use social media again regularly	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q12	wanted to spend more time on social media regularly	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

Q13	felt bad when I could not use social media regularly	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q14	tried to spend less time on social media, but failed	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q15	neglected other activities because I wanted to use social media regularly	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q16	lied about the amount of time I spent on social media	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q17	used social media to escape from negative feelings regularly	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q18	had conflicts with people close to me because of my social media usage	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

### III. Motives for Abstinence

*I gave up social media because*

Q19	I no longer enjoyed it	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q20	it became boring	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q21	I no longer wanted to share information online	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q22	I no longer wanted to receive information through social media	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q23	I was concerned about private details I shared online	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q24	I felt distracted from other activities	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q25	I felt disconnected from people close to me	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

Q26	it took up too much of my time	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q27	others had left social media	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q28	it's no longer trendy	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q29	I was dissatisfied with the services provided by platforms	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q30	I no longer trusted platforms to handle my personal data securely	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q31	I felt disconnected from the real world	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q32	I felt lonely when I spent time on social media	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q33	I felt stressed when I spent time on social media	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q34	I felt physically inactive because of my social media usage	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q35	I felt I spent too much time in front of a screen	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q36	it had become a habit	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q37	I felt I neglected meeting people face to face because of social media	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q38	I abstained from social media because of penance (Ramadan, lent, etc.)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

### IV. Social Media Abstinence

Q39	I abstained from the following social media platforms:	Facebook	YouTube	WhatsApp	Instagram	TikTok
		Reddit	Snapchat	Twitter	Pinterest	LinkedIn
		Other	<i>Multiple responses accepted</i>			
Q40	My abstinence lasted:	less than 7 days	1-2 weeks	2-4 weeks	1-3 months	longer than 3 months
Q41	I am still abstaining from social media:	Yes	No			

### V. Strategy of Abstinence

Q42	I deleted my social media accounts	Yes	No			
Q43	I deleted social media apps from my mobile devices	Yes	No			
Q44	I made use of blockers which deny access to social media sites	Yes	No			
Q45	I informed others about my social media abstinence	Yes	No			
Q46	I received professional help with my abstinence (counsellor, etc.)	Yes	No			
Q47	I used other strategies or means to support my undertaking	Please indicate yes or no. If yes, please specify. - <i>Open text question</i>				

### VI. Experience of Abstinence

Q48	I encountered difficulties during my abstinence.	Please indicate yes or no. If yes, please specify. - <i>Open text question</i>				
Q49	Please indicate what you missed about social media during your abstinence, if anything.	<i>Open text question</i>				
Q50	I would rate the difficulty to abstain from social media during the first 7 days	Very Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Neither Difficult nor Easy	Somewhat Easy	Very Easy
Q51	I would rate the difficulty to abstain from social media after the first 7 days	Very Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Neither Difficult nor Easy	Somewhat Easy	Very Easy
		Abstinence lasted less than 7 days				

### VII. Outcomes

*When I think about my experience while abstaining from social media I*

Q52	think it was a good idea	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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## Examining Individuals' Social Media Abstinence

Q53	achieved my goals	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q54	will continue to abstain from social media for longer	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q55	benefitted from the experience mentally	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q56	benefitted from the experience physically	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q57	benefitted from the experience socially	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q58	benefitted from the experience professionally	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q59	will not go back to the platforms I used in the past	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q60	will not use other platforms in the future	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

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