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Digital Fugue: Conceptualizing Situation-Specific Digital Escape in the Context of Social Anxiety and Societal Pressures

Dijital Füg: Sosyal Kaygı ve Çevresel Baskılar Karşısında Durumsal Dijital Kaçışın Kavramsallaştırılması

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ÖZ

Amaç: Bu çalışma, bireylerin günlük yaşamda karşılaştıkları sosyal kaygı ve çevresel baskılar karşısında dijital cihazlara yönelme deneyimlerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Yöntem: Araştırma, fenomenolojik desende yürütülmüş nitel bir çalışmadır. Veriler, amaçlı örnekleme yöntemiyle seçilen 12 katılımcıyla gerçekleştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış odak grup görüşmeleri aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Görüşmeler, katılımcıların dijital cihazlara hangi bağlamlarda, hangi duygusal ve sosyal gerekçelerle yöneldiklerini ortaya koymaya odaklanmıştır.

Bulgular: Analiz sonucunda dört temel tema ortaya çıkmıştır: (1) sosyal etkileşimden ve sosyal baskıdan kaçınma amacıyla dijital cihazlara yönelme, (2) çevresel stresörlerden zihinsel olarak uzaklaşma, (3) dijital cihazların zihinsel kaçış ve kaygı düzenleme aracı olarak kullanılması ve (4) bu yönelimin durumsal ve geçici bir nitelik taşıması. Katılımcılar, kalabalık ve kaygı uyandıran ortamlarda dijital cihazları psikolojik bir kalkan işlevi görecek biçimde kullanarak fiziksel ortamdan kopmadan zihinsel bir geri çekilme yaşadıklarını ifade etmişlerdir.

Sonuç: Bu çalışmanın bulguları, bireylerin dijital cihazlara yönelme davranışlarının mevcut dijital bağımlılık ve patoloji temelli kavramlarla tam olarak açıklanamayacağını göstermektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dijital füg, dijital kaçış, sosyal kaygı, baş etme stratejileri, dijital davranışlar

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to examine individuals' experiences of turning to digital devices in response to social anxiety and societal pressures they encounter in daily life.

Method: The research is a qualitative study conducted using a phenomenological design. Data were collected through semi-structured focus group interviews with 12 participants selected using purposive sampling. The interviews focused on identifying the contexts in which participants turned to digital devices and the emotional and social motivations behind their use.

Results: The analysis revealed four main themes: (1) turning to digital devices to avoid social interaction and social pressure, (2) mentally distancing oneself from external stressors, (3) using digital devices as a means of mental escape and anxiety regulation, and (4) the situational and temporary nature of this tendency. Participants reported experiencing a form of mental withdrawal—without disconnecting from their physical surroundings—by using digital devices as a psychological shield in crowded and anxiety-inducing environments.

Conclusion: The results of this study indicate that individuals' behavior in turning to digital devices cannot be fully explained by existing concepts based on digital addiction and pathology.

Keywords: Coping strategies, digital escape, digital fugue, digital technology, social anxiety

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Introduction

The advent of digital technologies has had a profound impact on almost every facet of quotidian life. Consequently, individuals' modes of social interaction, emotional regulation processes, and stress coping strategies have undergone substantial transformation. Digital devices, and smartphones in particular, have evolved from mere communication and information access tools to functional instruments utilised by individuals in confronting social, environmental and psychological challenges. In everyday life, the increasing use of digital tools is becoming more evident as individuals face challenges in highly stimulating environments and face mounting social expectations (Turkle 2011, Twenge 2017, Acuner and Turan 2024).

As outlined in the existing literature, research on digital device use is predominantly situated within the conceptual framework of digital addiction, problematic use, nomophobia, netlessphobia, digital escape, and analogous technology-based pathologies (Griffiths 2005, Billieux et al. 2015, Elhai et al. 2017, Subudhi et al. 2020, Kanbay et al. 2022a, Kanbay et al. 2022b). As the existing literature often explains, digital devices are often used in a way that represents continuity, loss of control, impulsivity, and the pursuit of pleasure. However, this approach has limitations when explaining the situational and temporary experiences of mental withdrawal that individuals experience when turning to digital devices in response to anxiety-inducing social interactions, environmental pressures, and momentary stress (Panova and Lleras 2016).

Research in the field of social psychology and stress management has shown that people develop coping strategies in response to stressful situations. These strategies are not only problem-solving oriented but also focused on avoidance and emotion regulation (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). In this context, recourse to digital devices or their utilisation as a means of escape may be regarded not only as a pathological or addiction-based form of use, but also as part of an individual's effort to adapt to their social and environmental circumstances. Research has shown that, in particular in high-pressure situations or in environments that are noisy, busy or feel oppressive, digital devices can act as a psychological barrier or a source of comfort for individuals (Turkle 2011, Przybylski and Weinstein 2013, Kassymova et al. 2025).

This feature on digital devices lets people get some temporary relief without actually leaving their social environment, by mentally stepping away from it. Although there is some discussion in the existing literature of "digital escape" as a concept, this is mostly about people who are addicted to the internet and who spend a lot of time on social media. These people have difficulty focusing on the real world and use social media to escape from reality (Turel and Serenko 2012; Lisenkova and Trufanova 2023). But it's important to remember that some digital habits we see in our daily lives are not ongoing, depend on the situation, and often don't last very long. The point of these ideas is not to cut people off completely from society; instead, they are meant to create a short break in thinking during tough times. The fact that more and more people use digital devices, especially on public transport, in places like hospitals and banks, and in places where people meet up with friends and family, suggests that this behaviour cannot be explained simply by saying it is a habit or a leisure activity. People do this to protect themselves from things that make them anxious, to avoid social pressure and to stop themselves from getting stressed (Przybylski and Weinstein 2013, Elhai et al. 2016, Shensa et al. 2018).

This is shown by small behavioural patterns that appear in everyday interactions. To explain this, think about a young person who, according to social rules, has to give their seat on the bus or train to an elderly person. But sometimes, for different reasons, they might not want to. If a young person looks busy on their phone, they can avoid the social pressure and stares they would otherwise receive. If you don't want to talk to the person sitting next to you on a plane, you can use your phone to put a screen between you and the person. When going to parties or other social events, someone who doesn't want to be stared at might use a digital shield to protect themselves from other people's eyes. You can do this by making them look away for a moment and looking at their phone or pretending to use it. Such digital behaviours can be a way for people to protect themselves from the world around them. The present study uses the idea of "Digital Fugue" to examine this. The concept of "Digital Fugue" emphasises that this phenomenon involves a transient shift in identity and spatial perception, which extends beyond mere "avoidance" or "disconnection". The term "digital avoidance" suggests a passive action, whereas "digital fugue" represents

the individual's mental "escape" from their physical reality and the construction of a temporary safe space or identity for themselves through digital tools. In contradistinction to dissociative fugue, this state does not constitute a pathological loss of memory; rather, it is a situational cognitive detachment that the individual voluntarily undertakes in the face of social pressure. The employment of this metaphorical usage is intended to underscore the notion that the digital device functions not merely as a tool, but as a mental escape tunnel from the physical environment.

It is important to acknowledge that contemporary conceptual frameworks do not adequately address the experiences of individuals when using digital devices. Approaches to digital addictions, internet addiction, and phobia-based models primarily address these behaviours through the lenses of continuity, pleasure, and loss of control (Alrobai et al., 2016; Hall and Peters, 2022; Balcı and Kaya, 2023). Consequently, the situational, temporary and non-functional experiences of digital withdrawal that individuals encounter remain unacknowledged. In this context, Digital Fug is defined as a situation-based mental withdrawal experience that analytically differentiates itself from the concepts of addiction and escape as they are understood in the extant literature. In contradistinction to digital addiction, it does not entail persistence or loss of control. Furthermore, in contrast to digital escape, it is driven not by the pursuit of pleasure but by a dysfunctional protective motivation developed in response to social and environmental pressures. As Panova and Lleras (2016) have highlighted, this concept addresses a theoretical gap in the literature by defining the need for temporary distancing, which is developed based on the individual's motivation and involves using a digital device as a "social shield" (Turkle 2011, Panova and Lleras 2016) (Table 1).

Table 1. Differences between digital fugue/escape and addiction (Turkle 2011, Panova & Lleras 2016).

Characteristic	Digital Fugue	Digital Escapism	Digital Addiction
Aim	Protection from social/environmental pressure and emotion regulation.	Pleasure-seeking, entertainment, and escape from reality.	Loss of control, impulsivity, and persistent pleasure-seeking.
Continuity	Situational and temporary; ends when the context terminates.	Generally more long-term and tends towards continuity.	Chronic, involves loss of control and impairment in life functionality.
Causality	Directly related to the physical/social environment (crowds, noise, etc.).	Focused on individual psychological states rather than the physical environment.	A need that arises under all conditions, independent of context.
Pathological State	Not pathological; it is a 'dysfunctional coping strategy'.	Usually associated with addiction or a transition phase to addiction.	A clinical/pathological usage pattern.

While qualitative studies can offer significant insights into subjective experiences such as the "digital fugue," there is a paucity of literature that conceptualises these experiences holistically. The objective of this study is to examine individuals' experiences of using digital devices in the context of anxiety and societal pressures. The study will adopt a phenomenological approach. The primary aim of the study is to reveal the contexts in which individuals use digital devices, the emotional and social motivations behind this use, and the meaning this turn to digital devices holds for them. The study investigates whether the patterns of experience identified during the analysis point to a need for a new conceptualisation that goes beyond existing concepts. In this context, the study aims to make a qualitative and theoretical contribution to the psychosocial literature focused on understanding the relationship individuals establish with the social world in the digital age. As this research is exploratory in nature, it is not built upon any predefined hypotheses. In accordance with the tradition of qualitative research, this flexible and exploratory approach—which seeks to make sense of the phenomenon through participants' subjective experiences—constitutes the primary rationale for not formulating any prior hypotheses for the study. The study's objective is to explore in depth the complex motivations underlying digital escape, without any limitations.

Method

Research Design

This study is a qualitative research project aimed at thoroughly examining individuals' experiences of turning to digital devices in the face of social anxiety and societal pressures, the meanings attributed to

these experiences, and common patterns of lived experience. As this study focuses on the subjective experiences individuals have with digital tools, it adopts a phenomenological approach. In analysing the data, consistent with this phenomenological perspective, the thematic analysis technique was used, which allows for the systematic identification of patterns. The analysis process aimed to reveal the common structures of meaning (themes) in the participants' experiences and was conducted according to the principles of "phenomenological thematic analysis," which lies at the intersection of Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology and thematic analysis (Sundler et al. 2019).

Given its descriptive nature, the research focused on deriving meaning from patterns emerging from the data rather than defining concepts in advance. For this reason, no hypotheses were formulated in the study. Instead, the extent to which the patterns of experience that emerged during the analysis process aligned with existing conceptual frameworks – and whether they indicated a need for a new conceptualisation – was evaluated.

Reporting Standard

The COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research) checklist (32 items) was used as the basis for the planning, conduct, and reporting of this study (Tong et al. 2007). In accordance with COREQ, the Methods section provides detailed information on the characteristics of the research team, reflexivity, the sampling strategy, the data collection process, the analysis steps, strategies for ensuring scientific rigour (trustworthiness), and ethical principles.

Research Team, Reflexivity, and Bracketing

The research team consists of experienced researchers specialising in qualitative research and phenomenological analysis. The data collection and analysis processes were conducted with the active participation of multiple researchers, and analytical consistency was ensured through discussion and consensus among researchers during the coding and theme development phases.

In accordance with the phenomenological approach, the principle of bracketing (epoché) was adopted to ensure that the researchers' preconceptions regarding the phenomenon did not influence the analysis process. In this context: Prior to the interviews, the researchers documented their individual assumptions regarding digital device use and digital escape in the form of written reflexive notes. It is important to note that great care was taken to ensure that these assumptions were not a factor during the data collection process. During the analysis, coding and thematic decisions were based solely on the statements made by the participants; personal interpretations were kept separate in analytical memos. This approach strengthened the traceability of researcher influence and ensured that the findings were data-driven.

Research Environment and Context

Focus group interviews were conducted in appropriate physical settings free from distractions, where participants could express themselves comfortably. During the interviews, group interactions, moments of silence, points of emphasis, and shared narratives were recorded by the researchers in field notes. These notes were evaluated as contextual data during the analysis process.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used in this study. This approach enables the collection of in-depth data in phenomenological studies by selecting individuals with experience related to the phenomenon under investigation. Twelve participants were included in the study based on the following inclusion criteria: voluntary participation, provision of informed consent, acceptance of confidentiality and anonymity conditions, and the use of digital devices (particularly smartphones) in daily life.

This research was conducted at a university. In order to create the study sample, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied in accordance with the nature of the study topic. The study sample included individuals who were at least 18 years old, reported daily active use of digital devices (smartphones, tablets,

etc.) for at least 4 hours, and signed the study participation form. Individuals who had already received a diagnosis of digital addiction from a professional institution and those with severe cognitive or hearing impairments that could affect the interview process were excluded from the study. Announcements were made on university campuses and in corporate workplaces to recruit participants. In the initial phase, preliminary interviews were conducted with volunteers who met the specified criteria. Subsequently, participants from a variety of age, gender and occupational groups were invited to focus group discussions, adhering to the principle of maximum diversity.

The data collection process was concluded when data saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new meaningful information was generated and narratives began to repeat. In this study, data saturation was determined within the framework of the "analytic saturation" principle proposed by Saunders et al. (2018). As we move forward with the tenth participant interview, it is important to note that the data collected simply reiterates existing codes. There is no new information that has come to light that would allow us to move forward.

Focus Group Structure and Organization

The data were collected through two separate focus groups. Each focus group comprised six participants. The groups were structured to ensure a balanced representation of participants' ages and life experiences. The focus group method was selected as it provides insights into both individual experiences and how these experiences are expressed in social interactions, as well as how shared meanings are constructed collectively. The fact that behaviour related to the use of digital devices often emerges within social contexts further reinforced the suitability of this method for the research objective.

Table 2. Features of participants

Code	Age	Gender	Occupation / Education	Daily Digital Usage	Primary Usage Motivation
P1	24	Male	Student (Undergraduate)	6-8 Hours	Social Media / Entertainment
P2	35	Female	Corporate Employee	4-6 Hours	Work / Avoidance / Social Media
P3	29	Female	Student (Graduate)	8+ Hours	Communication / Academic
P4	19	Female	Student (Undergraduate)	8+ Hours	Social Media / Communication
P5	32	Female	Student (Graduate)	8+ Hours	Social Media / Communication / Academic
P6	40	Male	Corporate Employee	6-8 Hours	Social Media / Entertainment
P7	35	Female	Student (Graduate)	8+ Hours	Social Media / Academic
P8	48	Female	Corporate Employee	4-6 Hours	Social Media
P9	39	Male	Corporate Employee	4-6 Hours	Social Media / Entertainment
P10	22	Female	Student (Undergraduate)	8+ Hours	Social Media/ Entertainment / Communication
P11	21	Female	Student (Undergraduate)	8+ Hours	Social Media / Entertainment
P12	20	Female	Student (Undergraduate)	6-8 Hours	Social Media / Entertainment

Data Collection

The data were collected through semi-structured focus group interviews. This method provides a framework aligned with the research focus while also allowing participants to freely express their experiences. Each interview lasted for an average of 50 minutes. With the participants' consent, all interviews were conducted with audio recordings. During the interviews, the researchers took notes in real time on notable statements and group interactions.

Interview Guide

The semi-structured interview guide consists of 13 open-ended questions, which have been prepared based on a literature review and field observations. The questions were structured to focus on the contexts of turning to digital devices, the emotional and social reasons for this tendency, and the functions that digital devices serve for individuals. The interview guide was organised under the following headings: introductory questions, withdrawal from social interaction, environmental pressures, experiences of mental escape, and evaluation. The guide was used flexibly during the interviews based on the participants' narratives.

Data Recording, Transcription, and Data Administration

All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim following the interviews. To ensure the utmost accuracy, the transcribed texts were meticulously cross-checked against the original recordings. In order to ensure the security of the data, the names of the participants were removed and the participants were instead assigned codes (P1, P2, etc.). Digital data were stored in an encrypted environment, and raw data were accessible only to the research team.

Validity and Reliability (Trustworthiness)

The scientific rigour of the study was ensured in accordance with the criteria of credibility, transferability, reliability, and verifiability proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989). In this context, the findings were supported by direct quotations from participant narratives; coding and thematic decisions were made through inter-researcher consensus, and the analysis process was reported in detail. A detailed presentation of participant characteristics, context, and the data collection process allowed for the evaluation of the findings in different contexts. The analytical decisions and the coding process were thoroughly documented, and the code book and analytical memos were retained for reference. The findings were presented based on the data, and the interpretations were moved to the discussion section. Reflective field notes were used during the analysis process.

Ethical Principles

The research was approved by the Artvin Çoruh University Ethics Committee (E-18457941-050.99-168335.12.01.2025). Prior to the interviews, all participants were informed about the aim, process, and confidentiality principles of the study, and provided both verbal and written informed consent. All stages of the research process were conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant ethical guidelines (World Medical Association, 2013).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyse the data. The audio recordings were transcribed, and the data were then analysed in detail and coded. The codes were grouped based on content similarities to first identify subthemes and then main themes representing broader conceptual frameworks. In order to enhance the reliability of the research, inter-researcher consensus was established during the analysis process. The examination of codes and themes was conducted independently, with the final thematic structure being established through a joint evaluation process. Furthermore, participant quotes were incorporated directly into the text to support the analysis findings, thereby ensuring transparency. To ensure the analysis was not influenced by the researchers' preconceptions regarding digital culture, continuous comparative evaluation was conducted throughout the coding process. The coding and theme organisation were carried out using MAXQDA 18 software. The software facilitated the systematic execution of the analysis process and the visualisation of relationships between themes.

Results

The data obtained from the focus group interviews were examined through a phenomenological analysis. This process enabled the identification of common patterns of experience regarding the participants' experiences of turning to digital devices. The analysis demonstrates that individuals' use of digital devices is not merely a habit, a leisure activity, or entertainment-focused behaviour; rather, it represents a situational and functional orientation that emerges in response to social, environmental, and emotional pressures. The findings reveal how participants experienced their engagement with digital devices, what meanings they ascribed to this experience, and the function of this orientation within their daily life practices.

The phenomenological analysis identified four main themes:

1. Digital orientation as a strategy for avoiding social ınteraction and social pressure,
2. Mental dissociation from environmental pressures,
3. The use of digital devices as a means of mental escape and anxiety regulation, and
4. The situational and temporary nature of digital escape.

Rather than being separate categories that compartmentalize the participants' experiences, these themes represent different dimensions of the same lived experience. The themes, contexts, and functions of these experiences derived from the focus group interviews are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Thematic structure of the digital device engagement experience

Main Theme	Theme Description	Context	Function
Digital Orientation as a Strategy for Avoiding Social Interaction and Social Pressure	Individuals turning to digital devices to avoid anxiety-inducing or challenging social interactions	Crowded environments, being with unfamiliar people, situations with high social expectations	Creating a psychological shield, limiting social contact
Mental Dissociation from Environmental Pressures	Digital devices enable individuals to mentally distance themselves from noisy and crowded physical environments	Public transportation, waiting areas, noisy social venues	Disconnection from the environment, suppressing environmental stimuli
Mental Escape and Anxiety Regulation	Digital devices enable individuals to mentally distance themselves from noisy and crowded physical environments	Stressful waiting times, boring meetings, lectures	Reducing anxiety, mental relaxation, distraction
Situational and Temporary Nature of Digital Escape	Turning to digital devices being situation-specific and temporary coping behavior rather than a continuous one	Social pressure, stress, anxiety-inducing moments	Temporary relief, ability to cope with the situation

Theme 1. Digital Orientation as a Strategy for Avoiding Social Interaction and Social Pressure

The present study explores the notion of digital orientation as a strategic approach to evading social interaction and social pressure. The analysis of the participants' narratives suggests that individuals tend to resort to digital devices in particular social contexts that are characterised by feelings of anxiety. It was identified that the participants experienced significant levels of discomfort in crowded environments, during interactions with strangers, and in situations characterised by high social expectations. In such contexts, the adoption of digital devices was not perceived as a complete repudiation of social interaction, but rather as a strategy employed by individuals to safeguard their well-being and provide solace.

Participants indicated that engaging with their mobile devices served to establish an intangible boundary between themselves and their immediate environment. This boundary functioned as a means of evading unwelcome attention, including stares and conversations, as well as expectations of interaction. This tendency has been described as a strategy that allows individuals to mentally and emotionally withdraw while physically remaining in the environment. The present accounts demonstrate that digital devices function as a psychological shield in social settings, thereby helping individuals to manage social pressure.

"When I'm in a crowded place, like on a bus or a minibus, and I don't want to talk to anyone, looking at my phone puts me at ease. That way, I don't have to make eye contact with anyone." (P3)

"Sometimes at get-togethers with friends, when the conversations don't interest me or I feel left out, I start looking at my phone. It's a really good excuse to both look busy and escape those uncomfortable situations." (P7)

"I'd rather look at my phone than give up my seat to someone on the bus. That way, I don't have to make eye contact with anyone, and I avoid those uncomfortable stares that remind me I should give up my seat. That puts me at ease." (P2)

"Picking up my phone in crowded places allows me to separate myself emotionally from others, even if I can't physically create distance. In that moment, it feels like I've built a wall." (P10)

Theme 2. Mental Dissociation from Environmental Pressures:

Participants' experiences indicate that recourse to digital devices serves not only to facilitate evasion of social interactions but also to create a psychological distance from physical and environmental stimuli. A range of environmental factors have been identified as having a significant impact on the use of digital devices. These factors, which include noise, crowds, waiting times and spatial discomfort, are considered to be important contextual elements that trigger the use of such devices.

In such environments, the utilisation of digital devices has been described by participants as a method of "coping without disconnecting from the environment". Engaging with a mobile phone enables the individual to temporarily establish a sense of mental separation by filtering out external stimuli. The extant literature demonstrates that digital device use serves not merely as a distracting activity for the individual, but also as a mental barrier against environmental pressures.

"When I'm in a crowded and noisy environment like a hospital, I try to tune out my surroundings by looking at my phone." (P5)

"My phone is like my personal space. Using my digital device in a crowded environment acts as a kind of shield; it makes me feel like I'm protected from the people around me." (P8)

"In crowded places, my phone lets me disconnect from the crowd. By focusing on my phone, I distance myself from everything around me and retreat into my own world." (P1)

"I look at my phone in a café or on a crowded bus because I don't want to interact with others at that moment. My phone sets a boundary, and I feel safe within that boundary. The louder the noise gets, the more I turn to my phone—it's as if it's pulling me away from my surroundings." (P11)

Theme 3. Mental Escape and Anxiety Regulation

Participants reported using digital devices as a means of mental escape during situations they found boring, overwhelming, or stressful. Turning to their phones during meetings, classes, waiting periods, or when faced with everyday sources of stress helps make the time more bearable and reduces anxiety levels.Participants mostly described this process using phrases such as "I take my mind off things," "I distance myself from that moment," or "I escape to another world." Turning to digital content allows individuals to temporarily set aside the negative emotions they are experiencing. These accounts demonstrate that the use of digital devices serves as an anxiety-regulating function for individuals and provides temporary relief in coping with negative emotions. It appears that digital devices are used to manage internal anxiety and provide mental relief during stressful and uncertain moments of waiting.

"When I'm waiting in line or feeling bored, I get lost in my phone—it's like I'm transported to another world." (P11)

"When I'm feeling overwhelmed, I check my phone; it takes my mind off things and helps me relax a bit. When I get home after a busy day, I start checking my phone even during dinner. Spending time on social media or watching a few videos helps me shake off the day's stress. I turn to my phone to mentally distance myself from everything around me." (P9)

"Some people's behavior really bothers me. For example, people who stand too close to me on a minibus or bus, or those who talk loudly... Checking my phone in that moment is a way to distance myself from them because I don't want to see or hear them." (P4)

"I turn to my phone to forget the distress I'm feeling in that moment." (P6)

"When I focus on my phone, my stress in that moment decreases, and I start to stop thinking about other things." (P12)

Theme 4. The Situational and Temporary Nature of Digital Escape

A recurrent theme in the participants' narratives is that their engagement with digital devices is not perceived as a constant or unregulated form of use. Conversely, this tendency manifests in specific circumstances, within particular contexts, and frequently on a temporary basis.

Participants indicated that their inclination to utilise digital devices is reduced in environments where they perceive a sense of comfort and security. This tendency is particularly evident during periods of social pressure, anxiety, or environmental discomfort. This finding suggests that recourse to digital devices functions as a situational coping strategy rather than a pathological pattern of addiction.

"I don't look at my phone this much when I'm at home or with my loved ones. It's more when I'm struggling that my hand reaches for my phone." (P4)

"Not all the time, but in certain situations, I feel the need to turn to my phone. When I feel lonely in a crowd, I look at my phone to escape a certain feeling of loneliness. What other people say or do can make me feel even lonelier. I try to shake off that feeling of loneliness by scrolling through my phone." (P8)

"I don't feel the need to use my phone when I'm comfortable." (P3)

"When everyone in a group is talking to each other, I feel like I'm left out. Checking social media makes me feel better in those moments; I can immerse myself in my own world without having to deal with the people around me. This feeling is temporary—I go back to normal once I leave that setting." (P7)

A holistic analysis of the themes reveals that participants' experiences of turning to digital devices are fundamentally rooted in a shared lived experience. This experience is characterized by the individual mentally and emotionally withdrawing into the digital realm via digital devices while physically remaining in a socially and environmentally challenging context. At the core of this experience lies not so much a desire for complete disconnection or escape from reality, but rather the individual's effort to protect themselves, find comfort, and cope with the current situation. Digital devices provide a safe, familiar, and controllable space for the individual during this process, allowing them to temporarily suspend their connection with the social world. This tendency is experienced as a form of mental withdrawal that is not continuous, is context-specific, and often ends once the situation subsides.

Discussion

Digital Fugue is a situational experience of mental withdrawal that analytically distinguishes itself from the concepts of addiction and escapism found in the literature. Unlike digital addiction, it does not involve continuity or a loss of control; and unlike digital escapism, it is driven by a functional motivation for self-protection against social and environmental pressures rather than the pursuit of pleasure. This concept fills a theoretical gap in the literature by defining the individual's need to create temporary distance while physically remaining in the environment, using a digital device as a "psychological shield" (Turkle 2011, Panova and Lleras 2016). The findings from this study indicate that individuals' experiences of turning to digital devices cannot be fully explained by the pathology-based approaches that dominate the digital behavior literature. In most studies, digital device use is addressed within the framework of digital addiction, problematic use, or technology-related anxieties (Griffiths 2005, Billieux et al. 2015, Kuss and Griffiths 2017). However, this study reveals that individuals' experiences of turning to digital devices often exhibit a situational, contextual, and functional pattern. At first glance, the behavior of turning to digital devices may appear to be a modern version of the traditional avoidance strategies known from the social anxiety literature (such as reading a newspaper or focusing on another object). However, the concept of "digital fugue" conceptualized in this study differs from traditional strategies in several fundamental ways. While traditional avoidance tools (such as a book) provide a "static" barrier that largely disconnects the individual from the social environment, digital devices simultaneously open up an "active" and "interactive" space for the individual in another social domain (social media, messaging, etc.).

In the participants' narratives, turning to digital devices manifests as a "functional" protective shield—a means of escaping immediate social pressure and regulating emotions. However, in the literature on social

anxiety, such withdrawals are often defined as "safety behaviors" or "avoidance-oriented coping," and it is emphasized that they may lead to the atrophy of an individual's social skills in the long term (Panova & Lleras 2016). Although the experience of digital fug provides the individual with short-term relief by reducing anxiety, there is a risk that this situation may become a dysfunctional strategy in the long term, as it delays confrontation with the anxiety-inducing stimulus (Elhai et al. 2017). However, the findings of this study indicate that participants interpret this state of "semi-disconnection" caused by the use of digital tools as a situational adaptation mechanism. Therefore, unlike classic avoidance behavior, digital escape should be evaluated as an effort to manage one's social presence through a digital layer rather than completely abandoning the environment. While escapism is generally defined in the literature as a pleasure-oriented activity (Subudhi et al. 2020), it appears that the primary motivation in the "Digital Fugue" experience is social shielding rather than pleasure. Parallel to Turkle's (2011) conceptualization of "alone together," participants construct a mental "micro-space" through digital tools while maintaining their physical presence. This suggests that digital fugue is not merely a use of technology but a phenomenological "spatial defense mechanism" developed by the individual in response to chaotic or highly anxiety-inducing environmental stimuli.

The findings suggest that turning to digital devices is not so much a persistent habit or a behavior involving a loss of control for individuals, but rather a coping strategy that emerges under specific social and environmental conditions. This tendency becomes particularly pronounced in crowded, noisy, and socially oppressive environments; it allows individuals to create a temporary psychological distance from their surroundings without completely disconnecting from face-to-face interaction. This aligns with avoidance- and emotion-regulation-focused coping strategies defined in stress coping theories (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The findings reveal that digital devices are not merely tools for communication or entertainment for individuals; they also serve as a psychological buffer against social and environmental pressures. The metaphors of "shield," "building a wall," and "personal space" that emerge in participants' narratives indicate that the use of digital devices is closely related to the individual's need to set boundaries and protect themselves. These findings are consistent with studies showing that mobile device use during face-to-face interactions reduces communication quality and causes individuals to psychologically distance themselves from the social context (Przybylski and Weinstein 2013, Shensa et al. 2016, Primack et al. 2019). Turkle (2011) notes that while digital technologies offer individuals a sense of constant connection, they can also encourage social withdrawal. The findings from this study show that this withdrawal is not always a permanent disconnection; more often than not, it serves as a temporary regulatory mechanism that allows individuals to cope with intrusive stimuli without completely detaching from the social environment.

In the literature, the behavior of turning to the digital world is often discussed within the framework of the concept of "digital escape." However, escape is often defined as the pursuit of pleasure, entertainment-focused content consumption, or a permanent escape from reality (Turel and Serenko 2012). The patterns of experience revealed in this study, however, indicate that turning to digital devices is often motivated by the need to protect oneself from a distressing context and to regulate anxiety, rather than simply to enjoy oneself or pass the time.

Similarly, the characteristics of loss of control, impulsivity, and persistence emphasized in the literature on digital addiction do not align with the findings of this study (Griffiths 2005; Billieux et al. 2015). Participants reported that their behavior of turning to digital devices varied depending on the context and that this behavior ceased once the stressful situation had passed. This is consistent with the findings of Panova and Lleras (2016), who demonstrated that the use of digital devices leads to different psychological outcomes depending on individuals' motivations (Panova and Lleras 2016). These data demonstrate that digital devices have become an integral part of life and that the ways in which individuals turn to these devices are not only functional but also related to psychological and social dynamics (Mutsvairo et al. 2023).

The findings obtained from the phenomenological analysis indicate that the experience of turning to digital devices cannot be fully captured by existing concepts. The findings reveal that this engagement is a situational, transient, contextual experience that serves an emotion-regulating function. These

characteristics limit the applicability of approaches based on digital addiction and digital phobia and point to the need for a new conceptual framework (Elhai et al. 2017, Shensa et al. 2018).

Qualitative studies highlight the importance of subjective experiences and context in understanding individuals' digital behaviors (Patton 2014). Similarly, this study makes it possible to examine the meaning that turning to digital devices holds for individuals, independent of pathological labels. Although the "Digital Fugue" experience conceptualized in this study appears closely related to existing conceptual frameworks discussed in the literature regarding social anxiety and technology use, it is analytically distinct from these frameworks in terms of its triggering motivations, immediate functions, and situational nature. In the social anxiety literature, the strategies individuals develop in challenging social environments are often evaluated within the framework of avoidance coping or safety behaviors and are associated with dysfunctional or chronic outcomes in the long term. Similarly, patterns of emotion regulation via media and problematic smartphone use are also frequently treated as indicators of pathological processes or a persistent, pleasure-based form of escape. However, the experience of "Digital Fugue" identified in this study constitutes an unwanted, dysfunctional withdrawal—a dysfunctional situational "mental escape" developed in response to the immediate context in which the individual is fully immersed (crowds, noise, momentary social pressure, etc.) (Vanden Abeele et al. 2019, Reinecke and Wolf 2020).

The participants' actions represent a dysfunctional situational adaptation and psychological defense mechanism—one they resort to momentarily to maintain their social presence—rather than a chronic avoidance that completely rejects face-to-face interaction. On the other hand, concepts such as "phubbing" —which describes turning to one's phone while ignoring the people nearby—or "technoference," which refers to technological disruptions, focus more on the external and relational dimensions of the behavior. While Digital Fug may appear to be a "phubbing" behavior from the outside, it represents a deeper empirical reality in that it focuses on the function of a subjective "social shield" constructed within the individual's inner world to protect against social stimuli, as well as on a temporary shift in identity and spatial orientation. Consequently, Digital Fug fills a significant theoretical gap in the literature by identifying micro-level dysfunctional situational and digital barriers that emerge in ordinary moments of interaction in daily life—barriers that approaches based on addiction, chronic avoidance, or relational rudeness fail to adequately explain.

Based on the findings of this study and the phenomenological self-description, the concept of "Digital Fugue" is proposed to describe this experience of situational mental withdrawal that individuals undergo through digital devices. Digital fugue is a psychosocial pattern that describes an individual's temporary mental and emotional withdrawal—while physically remaining in their environment—as they turn toward the digital realm via digital devices within a socially and environmentally challenging context.

It is important to note that the concept of digital fugue should not be confused with dissociative fugue as defined in a clinical context. Clinical dissociative fugue is defined as a psychiatric disorder characterized by severe disconnections in identity, memory, and consciousness (APA 2013). The digital fugue defined in this study, however, is not a diagnostic term; rather, it is a metaphorical and phenomenological conceptualization. What is at issue here is not the loss of an individual's identity or perception of reality, but rather a temporary mental distance experienced through digital tools in the face of a stressful context.

Within the scope of this study, the distinctive characteristics of the digital fugue experience can be summarized as situationality, transience, functionality, contextuality, and non-pathological nature. Accordingly, these characteristics are as follows:

1. -Situationality: Digital fugue emerges under specific social and environmental conditions.
2. Transience: The experience is not continuous; it ends when the context disappears.
3. Functionality: The primary motivation is not pleasure, but rather self-protection and emotion regulation.
4. Contextuality: Digital fugue is directly related to the individual's social and physical environment.
5. Non-pathological nature: It does not involve loss of control or addictive characteristics.

These characteristics distinguish digital fugue from concepts such as digital addiction and escapism, and allow for a more nuanced understanding of the role of digital technologies in an individual's emotional regulation and social boundary-setting processes (Turkle 2011, Twenge 2017, Christakis 2019).

An analysis of the findings reveals that the digital fugue experience is often defined as a situational coping mechanism resorted to during moments of social pressure. However, further longitudinal research is required to ascertain whether this behaviour functions as a transient coping mechanism in all situations or whether it progresses into a chronic avoidance pattern over time. The absence of systematic quantitative data on the intensity and frequency of participants' digital device use in this study hinders the ability to draw definitive conclusions regarding the persistence of this state of withdrawal. Despite the fact that the subjects described their experiences as "temporary", it is imperative for future studies to examine the long-term psychological effects of this situation and its potential to evolve into permanent isolation using longitudinal methods. This study extends the existing literature by exploring the phenomenon of individuals turning to the digital world as a psychosocial coping strategy, thereby revealing the complexity of digital device use as a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be reduced merely to technological behaviour or pathological tendencies. The concept of "digital fugue" provides a distinctive theoretical framework within the domain of digital psychology, elucidating the manner in which digital technologies function as a buffer, a boundary, and a regulatory mechanism in an individual's relationship with the social world.

The present study, an attempt to explicate the concept of "digital fugue," is not without its limitations. Firstly, given that the data were collected via self-report, it is possible that participants may have presented their own behaviours in a more positive or socially acceptable light than is actually the case. In other words, there is a risk that the findings may be subject to social desirability bias. Secondly, it should be noted that in the focus group discussions selected as the data collection method, some participants may have been reluctant to fully share their authentic experiences due to group dynamics and the influence of dominant personalities. It is important to note that the study's findings are shaped by a specific cultural context. Given that digital device usage and social distancing norms vary across cultures, the validity of these results in different social contexts should be tested in future research. In consideration of the nature of the qualitative research design employed in this study, it is imperative that the findings are evaluated within the confines of certain limitations. Primarily, the objective of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of individuals' experiences in relation to their utilisation of digital devices, with a focus on the intricacies of these contexts. Consequently, rather than offering findings that can be generalized to broader populations, the results hold the potential for analytical generalization for individuals in similar contexts and with similar experiences. This study was conducted with a limited number of participants selected through purposeful sampling. While the sample size obtained in the study was sufficient to achieve data saturation, it remains limited in terms of revealing how the experience of digital fug varies across different age groups, sociocultural backgrounds, and professional contexts. While this reinforces the contextual nature of the findings, it may also limit the diversity of experiences. For future studies on this topic, it is recommended to plan longitudinal qualitative or mixed-methods studies that address the developmental, temporal, and cultural dimensions of digital fugue.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that individuals' behavior in turning to digital devices cannot be explained solely by digital addiction, digital phobias, or entertainment-based usage patterns. The findings indicate that the use of digital devices has become an important coping and avoidance strategy for individuals, particularly in situations involving anxiety-inducing social interactions, environmental pressures, and mental strain. It has been determined that this tendency is often situational, context-specific, and temporary; individuals use digital devices not to completely disconnect from the social world, but to temporarily distance themselves from its challenging aspects. Research findings reveal that individuals turn to digital devices to avoid face-to-face interactions in crowded and socially stressful environments, to reduce social anxiety, and to create a psychological distance from environmental stimuli. This indicates that digital devices serve not only as tools for communication or entertainment but also as a psychological

refuge and a digital barrier. It was found that this behavior becomes particularly pronounced in stressful waiting areas, public transportation settings, and contexts characterized by intense mandatory social interaction.

In light of these findings, the study proposes the concept of "Digital Fugue" to describe this experience of escape that individuals undergo through digital devices. Digital fugue is a unique psychosocial pattern that describes a temporary mental withdrawal experienced by an individual—without undergoing a dissociative break in the psychiatric sense—by turning to the digital world in the face of social, environmental, and emotional pressures. This concept offers a new theoretical framework that goes beyond addiction- and phobia-centered explanations in understanding the motivations underlying digital device use. However, while digital fug behavior may provide individuals with relief and anxiety reduction in the short term, it is believed that it may carry risks in the long term, such as a weakening of face-to-face communication skills, the superficialization of social relationships, and a gradual loosening of the individual's bond with their environment. Individuals who constantly turn to the digital world to cope with anxiety may, over time, become more likely to withdraw from social settings and experience digital alienation.

In this context, several recommendations are presented based on the findings of this study. First, it is recommended that psychosocial support programs be developed to address the social anxiety, stress, and environmental pressures underlying individuals' use of digital devices as an escape mechanism. In particular, individual and group-based interventions aimed at reducing social anxiety and strengthening face-to-face communication skills may be effective in mitigating the long-term negative effects of digital escape behavior. Second, it is important to conduct awareness-based initiatives in educational settings and the workplace to understand why individuals turn to digital devices. Rather than treating digital device use solely as an "addiction" or a "discipline problem," it should be recognized that it may serve as an indicator of the psychological and social challenges an individual is facing.

The findings of this study highlight the functionality of digital fugue as an immediate coping mechanism. However, the potential long-term implications of such situational withdrawals on patterns of social interaction and individual social skills remain unclear. It is foreseeable that if digital fugue evolves into a chronic avoidance strategy, the use of face-to-face communication skills may be limited. However, further research is needed to empirically validate this conclusion. It is recommended that future studies examine the concept of digital fugue using quantitative methods and test its relationship with variables such as psychological well-being, social anxiety, loneliness, and digital alienation. Furthermore, studies examining how digital fugue is experienced across different age groups and cultural contexts will strengthen the concept's scope and explanatory power. In this regard, digital fugue offers a valuable and original conceptual framework for future research aimed at understanding the relationship individuals establish with the social world in the digital age.

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