

Fighting apps with apps: Analyzing tools for digital minimalism

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Abstract

Many people are dissatisfied with their technology usage and software tools have been created to help them. Most of these tools block apps and websites and promise more productivity. We qualitatively analyze the self-promotion material of such tools to investigate their positioning in terms of whether they want users to assist in long-term change towards healthy technology usage or merely act as short-term digital detox support. Furthermore, we explore how they handle their position as apps used in reaction to other apps. We aim to contribute to research on behavior change through technology, on the role of software businesses in an attention economy, and on digital detox.

Keywords

digital minimalism, digital detox, productivity software

Extended Abstract

There is a rising digital backlash [1], people refusing or trying to refuse digital technology because they are concerned how it impacts their life. There are frequent reports that people are not satisfied with their technology usage, especially when it comes to social media services [2, 3].

Interventions like digital detox have become more popular, periods of reduced IT use to prevent or recover from adverse effects [4, 5]. In turn, new types of apps and software tools have appeared. For example, there are many apps that block other apps so users are forced to digital detox. For a short time, the number one free app in the app store was a focus app, helping people to not use their smartphones as much [6].

Also in line with this trend is digital minimalism. Coined by Cal Newport in a self-help book [7], the term refers to the intentional usage of digital technology aligned with one's goals and values. It is based on the classical minimalist principle that less can be more. The method Newport outlines goes beyond classical detox approaches: although it includes a period without any non-necessary digital technology usage, this time is also meant for reflection on one's goals and rediscovering analog activities. After the detox phase, people are supposed to reintroduce technologies with rules on how they should be used in order to align with goals and values. Examples might be to only follow friends and family on social media or to only use Instagram for one hour each week.

The digital minimalism approach as described in Newport's book is thus supposed to be a long-term and stable approach in contrast to bursts of digital detox after which people go back to their normal usage [8]. It is about gaining back a feeling of control and autonomy [7, 9], which can be lost due to the automatic nature of habits developed in relation to IT [10, 11, 12]. Digital minimalism is aligned with consumptive or lifestyle minimalism, which is also about changing one's lifestyle and reducing physical things and consumption in alignment with goals and values [13, 14].

Notably, digital minimalism encourages users to find those tools that best fit with their goals and create value for them. Those tools might be analogue, physical IT, or software. Digital minimalism is

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not fundamentally opposed to using IT. Since digital tools are typically flexible, they have the potential for customization, making them ideal for tailoring them exactly to a user's needs in line with digital minimalism. Thus, software tools could be a good choice to support digital minimalism.

However, there is the inherent tension of using the poison as the cure, fighting apps with apps. It seems counterintuitive to use more tools to use less tools. For users showing habitual or even addictive behaviour, it might be counterproductive to use one digital tool to reduce the use of others. For instance, the habit could simply transfer from one tool to another. I aim to start exploring this paradoxical situation in this project.

We look at software tools for digital minimalism to investigate how they are presented and motivated, similar to how Stark and Gregg analyzed productivity tools [15]. We want to answer the following questions: How do tools for digital minimalism present themselves? What use cases and results are implied?

In order to gather a sample of tools, we identified a set of eight listicles recommending tools for digital minimalism. All listicles are presented in Table 1. We considered all listed tools (62 in total) and excluded those that were not geared towards reducing or improving time spent with technology (24). The improvement claimed had to go beyond being a more productive tool. Among those excluded were meditation apps, password managers, and note-taking apps for example. Two more apps were excluded since they have been retired. We then gathered self-promotion material from app or extension stores and websites for the remaining sample of 36 tools. We analyzed the texts through open coding of the material [16] with QualCoder [17]. An overview of the tools can be found in Table 2.

Table 1
Included listicles with links

Source	Title	Link
insiderbits	Digital Minimalism: Top Apps to Simplify Your Life	https://insiderbits.com/best-apps/digital-minimalism/
Nuvm Fluxo	Digital Minimalism Apps: 10 Apps to Support Your Journey	https://nuvemfluxo.com/digital-minimalism-apps
Well&Content	Best Productivity Tools For Digital Minimalism	https://wellcontent.io/best-productivity-tools-for-digital-minimalism
Minimal Angle	The Ultimate Collection of Digital Minimalism Tools & Apps	https://minimalangle.com/digital-minimalism-tools-apps/
Reddit user No_Necessary_2403	a big list of digital minimalism tools I've tried / researched	https://www.reddit.com/r/digitalminimalism/comments/1hjemj0/a_big_list_of_digital_minimalism_tools_ive_tried/
Google AI Overview		
Mindful Habits Media	Top Digital Minimalism Apps for Decluttering Your Phone: Essential Tools for Young Professionals Seeking Work-Life Balance	https://www.mindfulmediahabits.com/articles/top-digital-minimalism-apps-decluttering-phone/
DigitalLess	7 Essential Apps to Simplify Your Digital Minimalism Journey	https://digitalless.site/7-essential-apps-to-simplify-your-digital-minimalism-journey/

Preliminary results are presented in Table 3. They show a large focus on app or website blocking intended to avoid distraction and time waste, and improve focus and productivity. Other smaller categories are email management, file management, reader apps, or phone launchers. Apart from

Table 2

Software tools in the sample categorized; tools promising habit change in cursive

Category	Software tools
App and Website Modifiers	“No Distractions” for YouTube, Clean Twitter, News Feed Eradicator, Unhook
Content Readers	Instapaper, Inoreader
Email Management	Cleanfox, <i>Spark Mail</i> , Unroll.Me, SaneBox
File and Application Management	Droplt, Everything, File Juggler, Flow Launcher
Focus Timers and Time Loggers	Flipd
Notification Management	Daywise
Screen Time Apps and App or Website Blockers	Apple Screen Time, BePresent, <i>ClearSpace</i> , <i>Forest</i> , <i>Freedom</i> , Google Digital Wellbeing, <i>one sec</i> , <i>Opal</i> , <i>RescueTime</i> , <i>Roots</i> , <i>Superhappy</i> , <i>Zario</i> , FocusGuard, Cold Turkey
Smartphone Launchers and Home Screen Customizers	Before Launcher, Letters icon pack, Minimalist Launcher, minimalist phone, Olauncher
Web Browsers	Zen Browser

productivity, notable hopes connected with the use of these tools are balance, gaining control, better mental health, and more mindfulness.

Many apps use gamification and social accountability to be more effective, other design features are minimalist design, special audio or visual design (such as lo-fi music or nature scenes), goal setting, monetary stakes, and delays. To convince users, the providers employ testimonials and praise the effectiveness by referencing the success other users had. Few tools use environmentalism, which is a notable motivation for many lifestyle minimalists [13, 18]. Some providers claim their apps are based on research and one provider references a scientific paper studying their app [19].

When motivating their tools, providers tend to emphasize the lost time while scrolling and speak of the addictive design of many apps. Only few actively acknowledge the positives of technology use, positioning their app as an enabler of positive use cases and disabler of negative ones. Some more speak of more healthy technology usage and balance, indirectly acknowledging that a lot of technology usage is immensely useful.

Overall, many tools position themselves as mere enforcers of digital detox, while some see themselves as tools assisting in long-term change processes. These tools often claim to change or disrupt technology use habits. Habits are automatic responses to triggers that result from repeated performance of a behavior with the reward of achieving a goal [12, 8, 10]. The tools disrupt these habits by either removing the trigger (for example, no icons on the screen) or inhibiting the reward or goal achievement (for example, immediate opening of an app).

While habits are not necessarily harmful [10]—indeed the tools’ providers speak of establishing better habits—the habitual use of technology is often a factor in people’s feeling of not-being-in-control [11]. This is due to the automatic nature of habit execution, which makes them difficult to control, even when they conflict with intentions [10].

Others mention how they want to keep users motivated through gamification or other other design features mentioned above. Lastly, some providers contrast their tools with others and claim they can finally solve users’ problems by tackling them at their root, compared to approaches that only combat the symptoms.

However, none of the tools explicitly align themselves with digital minimalism, they only allude to

Table 3

Inductively created codes gathered in categories and ordered by prevalence

Category	Codes with prevalence in parentheses
App Category	Productivity (13), Health & Fitness (1), News (1)
Design Features	uses gamification (16), social accountability (11), clean design (7), minimalist design (7), uses goal setting (6), special audio (5), using delay (5), cooperation with other firms (3), special visual (3), uses monetary stakes (2)
Functions	block apps or notifications (23), schedule blocks (21), monitor screen time (14), set time limits (14), customizable design (12), AI (10), block website or app elements (8), email management (8), time logging (8), set exceptions (6), filter notifications (5), file management (4), inhibit scrolling (4), reader (4), block mails (3), hide apps (3), monitor notifications (2), intended for long-term use (1), monitor physical phone use (1), schedule notifications (1)
Hopes	gain back focus (47), productivity (37), gain back time (36), avoiding distraction (33), change habits (21), mindfulness (19), reduce screen time (19), mental health (14), control over usage (13), intentionality (11), balance (10), healthy technology usage (10), alignment with oneself (9), change relationship with technology (7), control over technology (7), health (6), being organized (4), change life (3), change lifestyle (3), reduce information overload (3), attention (2), less spending (2), change technology (1), control over habits (1), gain back creativity (1)
Language	“what’s important” (14), metaphor home environment (12), metaphor sound (6), metaphor detox (5), therapy speak (2), digital minimalism (1), metaphor diet (1)
Rhetorical Devices to Sell	testimonials (32), abstract testimonials (27), addressing privacy concerns (19), contrast with other approaches (12), environmentalism (9), research mentioned (7), being part of a movement (6), research done (4)
Existing Relationship with Technology	addictive design (16), lost time (11), dopamine (9), ambivalence of technology (7), designers to blame (7), being sucked into tech (5), acknowledging positives of phone use (4), being pushed around (4), lost connection (4), controlled by technology (3), other users to blame (1), overstimulation (1), strong feelings towards phone (1)

a focus on or time for "what really matters" without really assisting users in digital decluttering and provide only limited assistance for building a digital environment that is aligned with users' values.

We plan to do a second round of coding, focusing more on the short-term vs. long-term distinction and notions of control. Whether these tools fulfil their claims or lead to different effects when users apply them, or whether users apply them differently [20], needs more investigation. Future steps could be to analyse online user responses in app store reviews and forum posts, analyse whether these tools follow strategies supporting behaviour change [21], interview existing users, and finally analyse interventions using such tools. We also plan to gather monetization data to investigate possible conflicts of interest. These would arise if providers claim to want long-term change for users while offering subscriptions, where providers would have an interest in users feeling no improvement.

Further extensions could be to look at non-software tools for digital minimalism such as smartphone safes or dumb phones, which I excluded in my analysis to focus on the possible conflict between tools operating on the same level (only software).

We hope to be able to contribute to research on behavior change through technology [22], to the role of software businesses in an attention economy, and research on digital detox [4, 5]. Understanding existing tools for digital minimalism might help us understand how satisfactory use of IT might look like and help us create tools (software or otherwise) that assist users in shaping a better relationship with technology long-term.

Declaration on Generative AI

The authors have not employed any Generative AI tools.

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