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UNPLUG TO PERFORM: THE CONDITIONAL IMPACT OF DIGITAL DETOXIFICATION ON EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY THROUGH MENTAL WELL-BEING

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Abstract

The increase in work-related digital duties has made it more difficult for employees, making them more tired, worried about cybersecurity and concerned about maintaining their productivity. This study is based on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and investigates the role of digital detoxification in employee productivity, with mental well-being being the mediator and intensity of work serving as the moderator. With the help of a three-wave survey design, information was provided by 287 employees working in call centers in Punjab, Pakistan. Digital detoxification was found to boost employee productivity, as it helps improve their mental health which also increases productivity. In addition, having a high workload made it so that the benefits from digital detox were not as strong. These results suggest that resting from electronics and taking breaks is vital for saving and recharging resources and that doing so can strengthen mental toughness and output. It helps expand the field of digital well-being by looking at the different ways technology-use boundaries shape employee outcomes. Proposals are given that focus on improving occupational health, especially in places where achievements and communication are tracked continuously.

Keywords: Digital detoxification, employee productivity, mental well-being, workload intensity, COR theory, moderated mediation

Introduction

The increasing reliance on digital technologies in the modern workplace has fundamentally altered how employees engage with their work and manage personal boundaries. While digital connectivity has enhanced communication, flexibility, and accessibility, it has also contributed to a growing phenomenon of digital saturation—marked by excessive screen exposure, uninterrupted information flow, and a blurring of boundaries between work and rest (Mizrak et al., 2025; Supriyadi et al., 2025). These

conditions have led to digital fatigue, characterized by cognitive overload, mental exhaustion, and declining task focus, all of which pose serious threats to employee productivity (Rautela & Mani, 2023). In response, the practice of digital detoxification has gained attention as a behavioral coping strategy.

Digital detox involves intentional disengagement from digital devices for set periods, aiming to reduce psychological strain and restore cognitive clarity (Bora & Neelakandan, 2025). While the psychological and lifestyle benefits of digital detox are increasingly recognized, its effects within workplace contexts—particularly on employee productivity—remain underexplored. Much of the existing research focuses on wellness and screen-time reduction in general populations (Mujahid et al., 2024), leaving a significant gap in understanding whether such recovery behaviors can translate into improved work performance in occupational settings. Recent work has begun to highlight that the benefits of detoxification are often indirect, operating through psychological mechanisms such as mental well-being.

Employees who disconnect from continuous digital demands often experience improved emotional regulation, lower stress levels, and greater attentional capacity—conditions that support task efficiency (Rahman et al., 2024). Mental well-being, defined as a state of psychological balance and resilience, is increasingly viewed as a mediating factor in the relationship between recovery behaviors and performance outcomes (Bora & Neelakandan, 2025).

Even so such benefits may depend on other factors in the context. Experiencing stress isn't limited to difficult or unpleasant tasks; even having a lot to do in a little time is a source of pressure for workers. When tasks and demands are very high, people in these jobs frequently have difficulties stepping away from the screens for any length of time. Studies

suggest that in high-pressure settings, the effectiveness of recovery strategies like digital detox is significantly reduced (Mizrak et al., 2025), raising questions about the conditions under which these practices are truly beneficial. So as to study these dynamics, this research relies on the Conservation of Resources theory (COR), discovered by Hobfoll in 1989, that maintains that people work to get, save and guard their resources. When resources are threatened or used up, stress results and by behaving in specific ways, people can protect or obtain more resources, according to COR. In this framework, digital detoxification serves as a resource-conserving behavior, while mental well-being functions as a personal resource.

According to assumptions, if the intensity of one's workload is high, resource recovery is not as effective (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Thus, COR provides a robust lens to investigate how digital detox affects productivity, via well-being, and how this pathway is moderated by demand intensity. Despite theoretical support, empirical research integrating digital detoxification, mental well-being, workload intensity, and employee productivity within a single model remains limited, particularly in developing economies where digital transitions are ongoing but support systems are often weak. Mainly, few research projects have tested COR theory using technology-disengagement actions in connection with job settings. To address this gap, the present study investigates the relationship between digital detoxification and employee productivity, considering the mediating role of mental well-being and the moderating effect of workload intensity, within the theoretical lens of Conservation of Resources (COR). The work adds to the new research field by exploring how and why disengaging from technology can help people succeed in modern digital work.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Underpinning Theory: Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

This study is grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources—such as time, energy, and psychological health. According to COR, stress arises when resources are threatened, lost, or insufficient to meet environmental demands. Because of our increased device usage these days, it is possible to become run down, with lower mood, more fatigue and a decrease in productivity. Digital detoxification, defined as the intentional disconnection from digital devices, represents a strategic resource-conserving behavior. By temporarily removing technology-related demands, individuals can replenish their cognitive and emotional resources, aligning with COR's principles of recovery and resource restoration.

Digital Detoxification and Employee Productivity

Digital technologies becoming more common at work have definitely boosted how efficiently organizations operate, how people communicate in real-time and access to information. Yet, boosting digital connectivity has also meant employees experience too much cybersecurity and digital stress which was found to impact their performance and well-being negatively. Mizrak et al. (2025) study discovered that frequently encountering security prompts and demands online is linked to cybersecurity fatigue, leading to more emotional exhaustion and reduced productivity. The authors Supriyadi et al. (2025) mention that sustained use of digital technology, doing many tasks at the same time and screens affecting mental workload can lead to greater stress and less effective work.

As the COR theory states (Hobfoll et al., 2018), individuals often try to secure, guard and replenish energy, focus and well-being which are important resources for them. COR says that long-term digital exposure drains resources, leading people to feel pressure and less willing to take

on demanding work tasks. Similarly, practices like avoiding digital devices which help a person restore their strengths, help develop a sense of resilience and restore routine.

For this reason, careful plans to reduce use of digital devices are a good way to replenish our mental and physical resources. When employees take a break from technology, it reduces stress, makes them more creative and guides their actions towards goals. In this way, organizing digital detoxes might benefit not only the wellbeing of employees but also be seen as a useful strategy that uses resources carefully to motivate people.

H1: *Digital detoxification is positively associated with employee productivity*.

Mediating role of Well-Being

Employee behavior and their performance depend largely on their mental wellness which covers emotional balance, psychological durability and how satisfied they feel with their lives. Work environments filled with screens, notifications and work that requires attention constantly led to digital overload which lowers employees' ability to stay in control, pay attention and emotionally cope. As a result, this condition significantly increases stress while making it harder to pay attention which leads to more fatigue and tiredness during these tasks.

COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) suggests that mental well-being is an important resource that helps people perform high-quality work and it can easily be used up when facing stress. According to COR, when individuals constantly interact online, their energy, attention and emotional balance are used up which often results in stress and a desire to avoid these experiences. Fixing resources by resting from technology through digital detox may replenish a person's health and aid in their performance recovery.

Studies and observations back up the resource-based way of viewing this topic. In 2025, Bora and Neelakandan reviewed the literature and found

that digital detox helps reduce depression, anxiety and internet problems people may experience, leading to better psychological health. It shows that sometimes it is beneficial to finish with digital devices for a while to recapture your emotional state, grow your mindfulness and return to managing feelings and problems. When we feel well again, we can dive back into work and be more creative and productive.

In other words, mental well-being acts as the link responsible for digital detox boosting job performance. It guides the energy and focus recovered from detox towards actions that help you pursue your goals. Both theory and research suggest that this process fits with COR and supports studies on workplace wellness and digital behavior. This means that digital detox improves productivity by promoting good mental health which supports employees' concentration, emotional strength and positive work behavior.

H2: *Mental well-being mediates the relationship between digital detoxification and employee productivity*

Workload Intensity as a Moderator

While digital detoxification is increasingly recognized as a beneficial recovery strategy, its effectiveness is not universal and may depend heavily on contextual conditions, particularly workload intensity. In high-demand work environments characterized by tight deadlines, prolonged hours, and constant performance pressure, employees often find it difficult to disengage from digital platforms—even temporarily—due to persistent expectations for availability and responsiveness.

According to Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), individuals under heightened environmental demands are less likely to gain or preserve psychological resources, as the rate of resource depletion outpaces opportunities for recovery. In such high-strain contexts, even resource-enabling strategies like digital detox may be underutilized, delayed, or psychologically ineffective. Employees may remain cognitively tethered to their work through email notifications,

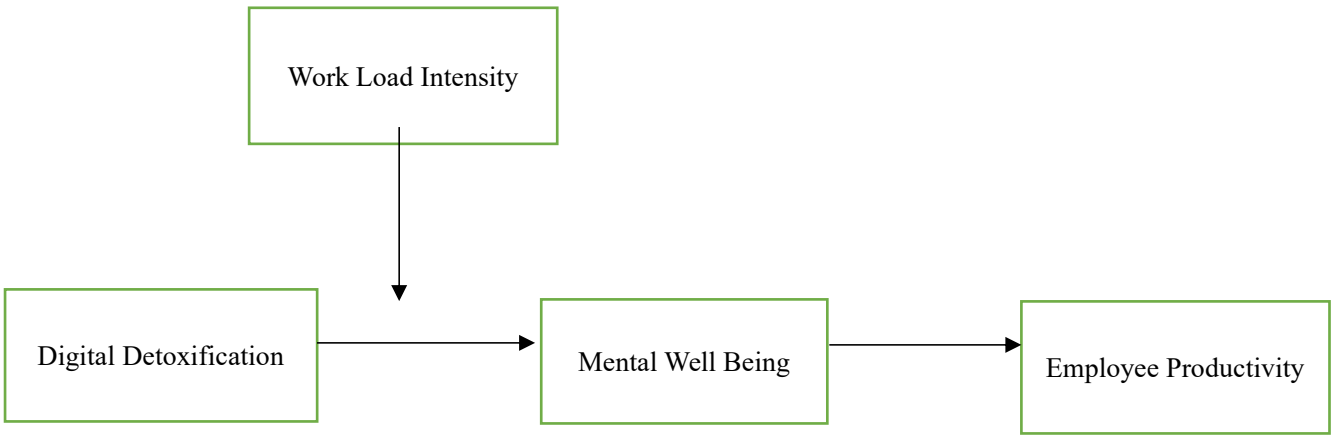
task urgency, or the fear of missing out (FOMO), thereby compromising the restorative benefits of digital disengagement.

Empirical support for this moderated dynamic is provided by Mizrak et al. (2025), who found that in high-intensity sectors, cybersecurity and digital fatigue persisted despite the implementation of digital wellness initiatives. The study concluded that increased workload intensity dampens the psychological gains employees might otherwise experience from temporary disconnection, thereby blunting the positive effects on well-being and productivity.

Thus, workload intensity is posited as a critical moderator in the relationship between digital detoxification and mental well-being. In line with COR theory's loss-spiral principle, when individuals are continuously taxed without reprieve, their ability to restore depleted resources diminishes. This suggests that the well-being benefits of digital detox are significantly weaker under conditions of high workload, as employees lack the psychological and structural space to meaningfully recover. As such, organizations must not only promote digital detox practices but also ensure that workload management supports their implementation.

H3: *Workload intensity moderates the relationship between digital detoxification and mental well-being, such that the positive relationship is weaker under high workload intensity.*

Theoretical Framework



Methodology

This study employed a time-lagged, quantitative survey design to examine how digital detoxification influences employee productivity, through the mediating role of mental well-being and the moderating effect of workload intensity. A three-wave data collection approach was adopted to mitigate common method bias, following the recommended procedures by Podsakoff et al. (2003). Each wave was spaced three weeks apart to ensure temporal separation of predictor, mediator, and outcome variables. The target population consisted of full-time call center employees operating in Punjab, Pakistan, where employees experience high digital interaction, task pressure, and continuous screen-based work. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants across major call centers located in Lahore, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, and Multan. At Time 1 (T1), data on digital detoxification, workload intensity, and demographics were collected. At Time 2 (T2), mental well-being was measured. At Time 3 (T3), the outcome variable — employee productivity — was captured. To match responses across waves while maintaining anonymity, participants were asked to use a pseudonymous ID format (e.g., initials + last 4 digits of phone number).

A total of 365 employees were contacted, and 287 completed all three waves, yielding a final matched response rate of 78.6%. The final sample included 167 males and 120 females, with an average age of 28.4 years and mean work experience of 3.9 years. The sample was considered sufficient based on both Tabachnick and Fidell's (2007) rule of thumb and statistical power thresholds for moderated mediation testing using PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018).

Measures

All measures were adapted from validated instruments and rated on 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Digital Detoxification was measured using a 6-item scale adapted from Hinsch and Sheldon (2013), revised to reflect workplace settings (e.g., "I

take short breaks to disconnect from digital devices during the workday").

Mental Well-being was assessed using the 5-item version of the WHO-5 Well-Being Index (Topp et al., 2015), widely used to measure positive emotional states and psychological functioning (e.g., "I have felt calm and relaxed").

Employee Productivity was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from Koopmans et al. (2013), capturing self-perceived task performance (e.g., "I am able to meet work deadlines efficiently").

Workload Intensity was measured with a 4-item scale adapted from Spector and Jex (1998), assessing the pressure and time demands of work (e.g., "My job requires working very hard, very fast").

Control variables included age, gender, education level, and tenure, all of which have been shown to affect both psychological and performance outcomes in service sector jobs. All constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.78 to 0.91 across the scales.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

The means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis and Pearson correlation coefficients for all study variables are given in Table 1. According to Kline (2015), all the skewness and kurtosis values were acceptable (in the ±1.0 range) which confirmed that parametric testing could be applied.

On average, digital detoxification rated 3.39 (SD = 0.60) for employees of call centers, indicating that many participated in disconnection behaviors. Mental well-being and employee productivity were both higher than the scale's midpoint, suggesting that, on a whole, psychological outcomes and performance are good. Workers found the work itself to be very demanding, reflected in a mean of 3.79.

Consistent with both theory and predictions, doing a digital detox improved well-being ($r = .43$, $p < .01$) and performance ($r = .36$, $p < .01$).

Also, there was a very strong positive relationship between mental well-being and productivity ($r = .52$, $p < .01$), showing mental well-being helped mediate between the two. There was a negative connection between workload intensity and how people feel mentally ($r = -.32$, $p < .01$) and how much they accomplish ($r = -.19$, $p < .01$).

Table 1: ***Descriptive Statistics, Normality, and Correlations (N = 287)*** **Note: p < .01 (2-tailed)**

Variable	Mean	SD	Skew	Kurtosis	1	2	3	4
1. Digital Detoxification	3.39	0.60	0.19	0.55	—			
2. Workload Intensity	3.79	0.48	0.14	−0.09	.28**	—		
3. Mental Well-being	3.11	0.40	0.15	0.10	.43**	−.32**	—	
4. Employee Productivity	5.08	0.43	−0.01	0.35	.36**	−.19**	.52**	—

Mediation and Moderated Mediation Analysis

To check the suggested mediation and moderation model, PROCESS macro Model 7 was used (see Hayes, 2018). The model looked at how digital detoxification boosts employee productivity by helping their mental health, with workload intensity as the regulating factor.

Table 2: ***Moderation of Digital Detoxification → Mental Well-being by Workload Intensity***

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Intercept	2.64	0.13	20.34	.000	[2.38, 2.90]
Digital Detoxification	0.36	0.05	7.53	.000	[0.27, 0.46]
Workload Intensity	−0.25	0.05	−5.05	.000	[−0.34, −0.15]
Detox × Workload Intensity	−0.11	0.04	−2.75	.006	[−0.19, −0.03]

Model Fit: $R^2 = .31$, $F(3, 283) = 42.75$, $p < .001$

Stronger digital detoxification boosted mental well-being, whereas a

demanding workload corresponded to lower levels (B = 0.36, p < .001; B = −0.25, p < .001). High workload seems to reduce the beneficial impact of digital detox on well-being. As a result, H3 is confirmed which aligns with the loss-spiral model, showing that job challenges can hinder recovery.

Table 3: ***Mediation Path: Predicting Employee Productivity from Mental Well-being and Digital Detoxification***

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Intercept	2.60	0.14	19.04	.000	[2.33, 2.87]
Mental Well-being	0.56	0.05	10.29	.000	[0.45, 0.66]
Digital Detoxification	0.22	0.04	6.14	.000	[0.15, 0.29]

Model Fit: R^2 = .48, F(2, 284) = 131.49, p < .001

Employee productivity was significantly affected by digital detoxification (B = 0.22, p < .001) and mental well-being (B = 0.56, p < .001), fulfilling H1 and H2. The importance of the mediation path shows that mental well-being partly lies between digital detox and productivity. Detoxing can be seen as a resource-recovering act under COR theory and doing so enhances well-being and encourages better performance.

Discussion

The research examined the effects of digital detox on productivity at call centers in Punjab, Pakistan, by studying the roles of mental well-being and workload intensity in mediating and moderating those effects. Relying on COR theory, the findings help us understand how digital disengagement strategies become effective in intense work environments. The proposed conditional mediation model was supported by all three tests.

As predicted by H1, digital detoxification was positively linked to productivity at work. Those who paused from work tasks by intentionally turning off their notifications or looking away from screens felt better able to focus, complete tasks and do them correctly. Science has recently discovered that shutting off your computer for a short while results in

more focus, less fatigue and greater attentional strength (Rautela & Mani, 2023; Mizrak et al., 2025). Within COR, these outcomes can be explained as a way to save and restore psychological power, so that workers can direct that energy back to their jobs.

H2 was supported by discovering that the positive link between detoxing and productivity was strongly mediated by mental well-being. Individuals who spent less time on phones and didn't use social media as much tended to be mentally healthier and also more efficient. Despite the effects of not using technology being controlled for, well-being was still a strong factor in predicting performance, showing how it helps move resources between people and nature. Similar to Bora and Neelakandan (2025), the results suggest that taking breaks from digital activities helps increase mindfulness, decrease anxiety and improve emotional control. According to the theory, getting more resources can give people the chance to aim for important results such as innovation or good output quality.

Furthermore, H3 was verified when taking into consideration the strong impact of workload intensity. It was shown that employees experiencing high work pressure, multiple tasks or careful supervision had reduced benefits from taking a break. This matches COR's loss-spiral theory which means when pressure is high, resources are more quickly used up and the effectiveness of gains decreases (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Just like the earlier studies, Rahman and her collaborators (2024) discovered that any disengagement strategy can be less helpful if certain barriers make setting boundaries or recovering from work difficult. The study found that, due to endless monitoring, high productivity demands and expectations of digital replies, call center staff may lack the freedom they need to disconnect from their work devices.

All of these findings provide useful information to the field of digital well-being and occupational recovery. In the first finding, it is shown that digital detoxification is useful in recovery when workload is

properly monitored. Secondly, the model brings together detox, well-being and workload factors to provide a better look at how recovery happens for employees at work. The Planning concept within COR theory gives a clear reason for when and how digital behavior can drive performance results.

Significantly, the findings build on emerging work on digital health in low- and middle-income countries where strong recovery structures and traditions are not fully in place. These results indicate that, despite a lot of digital work and few resources, disengaging from online tasks may help employees avoid getting tired and stay productive, as long as their work does not get too overloaded.

Theoretical, Practical, and Policy Implications

This study provides several meaningful contributions to Conservation of Resources (COR) theory by applying it to a novel behavioral context — digital detoxification in screen-intensive work environments. While COR has traditionally focused on emotional and physical recovery, this study shows that digital disengagement functions as a resource-preserving behavior, offering an actionable mechanism for protecting psychological resources and sustaining performance. By positioning mental well-being as a mediating personal resource and workload intensity as a conditional boundary, the model offers an enriched view of how recovery, resource conservation, and environmental demands interact to shape employee productivity.

It is recommended for practitioners that wellness programs now include strategies to reduce digital distractions for employees. Firms in sectors where people use computers a lot, for example call centers, should give employees regular breaks off screens, set up some off-screen areas or use other strategies that encourage them to use fewer digital systems. Since reducing workloads might be the main issue for highly stressed employees, it's important for managers to couple detox strategies with ways to manage their workload.

Employers can help their workforce by making micro-recovery time a standard part of how the job is organized — such as giving workers five minutes without technology each hour or ensuring emails are not checked when they are not working. When family-work balance is more recognized than proper device use in a country such assistance helps avoid work loss and burnout at a minimal cost.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the reliance on self-reported productivity introduces the possibility of social desirability or perception bias, although this was mitigated by time-lagged data collection. Future research should consider objective performance metrics or supervisor evaluations for triangulation. Second, while the focus on call centers offers a relevant and underexplored population, the results may not generalize to industries where work is less screen-intensive. Future work should replicate the model across different job types and sectors to confirm its external validity.

Moreover, this study examined only one moderator (workload intensity); additional factors such as techno stress, job autonomy, or organizational support may further influence the detox–productivity relationship. Longitudinal or experimental studies can also better capture the temporal nature of recovery and allow stronger causal claims about the lasting effects of digital detoxification.

Conclusion

In an era marked by increasing digital dependence, the need for recovery strategies that are practical, scalable, and evidence-based has never been greater. This study examined how digital detoxification influences employee productivity in a screen-saturated work environment, revealing that this relationship is driven by improvements in mental well-being and contingent upon workload intensity. Grounded in Conservation of Resources theory, the findings show that recovery is not merely a personal choice, but a structured process that depends on both individual

behavior and organizational conditions.

As the boundaries between work and technology continue to dissolve, it becomes critical for employers to recognize that digital disconnection is not a luxury, but a necessity — not only for preserving mental health but for sustaining high-quality performance in the digital workplace.

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