

**The market of digital wellbeing:
Technology paradoxes in reverse and coping via consumer responsabilisation**

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Abstract

This study explores the market of digital wellbeing as a means of coping with technology paradoxes (Mick & Fournier, 1998). The study analyzes market-level discourses of 371 digital wellbeing products, categorized into digital tools, gadgets, information products, and services, to examine how digital wellbeing market discourse frames these coping strategies. The findings reveal that the digital wellbeing market emphasizes the inevitability of technology consumption, offering strategies for reorganizing digital consumption rather than avoiding it. These strategies include self-tracking, consumer education, and temporal detachment, positioning digital wellbeing as a means to responsibly balance the inherent contradictions of technology use. The study concludes that this market reinforces individual responsibility for managing digital wellbeing, which may lead to increased consumer burden and shift attention away from broader structural solutions.

Keywords: digital wellbeing, consumer responsabilisation, technology paradoxes.

Technology paradoxes in reverse

Nearly three decades ago, David Glen Mick and Susan Fournier (1998) have identified a series of paradoxes that structure consumption of technology (see Table 1). According to their analysis of household technological devices ranging from CD players and telephone answering machines to lawnmowers and vacuum cleaners, technology consumption is always a paradox, where contradictions and conflicts between the antithetical structuring conditions are inevitable resulting in irresolvable ambivalence. As experience of paradoxes leads to anxiety and internal conflict, consumers use coping strategies to resolve them that range from pre-acquisition to post-acquisition strategies and that comprise the acts of avoidance, confrontation or a mix of both. Other consumer researchers too (Kozinets, 2008; Thompson, 2004) speak about paradoxes, contradictions, and tensions as the core characteristic of

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technology consumption, often caught in-between technology’s novelty, speed of change and, oftentimes, inevitability.

Table 1. Paradoxes of technology consumption (Mick and Fournier, 1998)

EIGHT CENTRAL PARADOXES OF TECHNOLOGICAL PRODUCTS	
Paradox	Description
Control/chaos Freedom/enslavement	Technology can facilitate regulation or order, and technology can lead to upheaval or disorder Technology can facilitate independence or fewer restrictions, and technology can lead to dependence or more restrictions
New/obsolete	New technologies provide the user with the most recently developed benefits of scientific knowledge, and new technologies are already or soon to be outmoded as they reach the marketplace
Competence/incompetence	Technology can facilitate feelings of intelligence or efficacy, and technology can lead to feelings of ignorance or ineptitude
Efficiency/inefficiency	Technology can facilitate less effort or time spent in certain activities, and technology can lead to more effort or time in certain activities
Fulfills/creates needs	Technology can facilitate the fulfillment of needs or desires, and technology can lead to the development or awareness of needs or desires previously unrealized
Assimilation/isolation Engaging/disengaging	Technology can facilitate human togetherness, and technology can lead to human separation Technology can facilitate involvement, flow, or activity, and technology can lead to disconnection, disruption, or passivity

Source: Mick, D. and Fournier, S. (1998). Paradoxes of Technology: Consumer Cognizance, Emotions, and Coping Strategies. *Journal of Consumer Research* 25(2):123-43. DOI: 10.1086/209531

Emerging market of digital tools, gadgets and info-products braded under the umbrella of ‘digital wellbeing’ can be seen as an attempt to cope with the paradoxes of today’s technology. According to its main proponents such as Google, Meta and Apple, the goal of digital wellbeing is to help consumers develop a “personal sense of wellbeing” with the help of “healthy technology habits” (Google, 2022). In practical terms, digital wellbeing stands for understanding and monitoring, as well as limiting technology use (Lyngs et al., 2019, 2024; Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2019, 2023). Digital wellbeing is eventually concerned with finding a balance between the positives and the negatives of digital consumption.

Digital wellbeing market builds on a rich cultural vocabulary around paradoxes of technology, yet it does so in reverse. Mick and Fournier (1998), for instance, present all of their technology paradoxes starting from technology’s potential benefits and introduce its potential threats afterwards: for instance, “technology can facilitate regulation or order, and technology can lead to upheaval or disorder” or “technology can facilitate human togetherness, and technology can lead to human separation”. In linguistics, the two components of the information structure of a phrase are called *theme* and *rheme*. The former indicates old, already known and established information needed to form a common ground and attract attention, while the latter introduces the new content (Halliday, 1994). In English, theme tends to come in the first part of a sentence, and rheme follows afterwards. According to such reading, for Mick and Fournier (1998), positive opportunities offered by technology is a theme used as a point of departure, while negative aspects of technology come as a rheme, i.e., a piece of information that is new and that creates a meaningful addition to understanding of the argument of technology paradoxes. Digital wellbeing, however, is framed in a reverse manner: the negative effects of digital technology (such as loss of control, enslavement or social isolation) are used as a point of departure, while the

opportunity of coping via a balance between connection and disconnection, technology use and non-use, and acceptance and resistance to hyperdigital marketplace, is presented as a new insights and, consequently, as a unique value proposition of an emerging body of digital wellbeing solutions offered to consumers today.

This study addresses the reversed paradoxes of technology in the emerging, and under-researcher, market of digital wellbeing by asking: How does the digital wellbeing market discourse frames coping with technology paradoxes?

Method

To address this question, this (ongoing) research has mapped the digital wellbeing marketplace and extracted product-level discourses of individual products and services marketed under the umbrella of digital wellbeing, digital wellness, digital detox, and/or digital disconnection. The analysis of the previous interdisciplinary research in the fields such as human-computer interaction, sociology of education, communication, and marketing identified four sub-types of digital wellbeing markets were identified: digital tools (such as apps and browser extensions), gadgets (such as faraday cages or dumbphones), information products (such as coaching sessions or self-help books), and services (such as vacations, camps and retreats). For each, the data collection started from the existing lists of digital wellbeing products found in the literature (Almoallim & Sas, 2022; Lyngs et al., 2019; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020; Van Bruyssel et al., 2023), which were cleaned and updated via systematic searches of relevant databases (App Store, Google Play, Kickstarter, Crunchbase, Meta Ads, TrustPilot etc.) and snowballing, resulting in a total of 371 digital wellbeing products, including 263 digital tools, 19 gadgets, 45 information products and 30 books, and 14 services. For each of the included cases, product-level discourses (i.e., formal presentation, promotional and institutional communication) have been collected as screenshotted texts. The resulting dataset has been analyzed via thematic content and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010; Lupton, 2010).

Findings

The market of digital wellbeing promotes several modes of coping with technology paradoxes (see Table 2). Differently from the original description of paradoxes of technology consumption (Mick & Fournier, 1998), there is hardly any trace of strategies based on complete avoidance. Instead, digital wellbeing discourses highlight the inevitability of technology and of digital consumption and therefore provide a range of coping strategies aimed at reorganization of digital consumption, often with the help of intermediary product and services.

Table 2. Digital wellbeing as coping with paradoxes of technology consumption

Structuring technology paradox (in reverse)	Digital wellbeing as coping	Description
Chaos vs. control	Extended (pre & post-consumption) decision making	via self-tracking and evidence-based informed decision making
Dependency vs. Freedom	Prevention of over-consumption	via self-imposed blocks/frictions and/or motivational support
Incompetence vs. Competence	Mastering technology consumption	via consumer education, informed decision making and intentionality
Inefficiency vs. Efficiency	Pre-commitment	via containment of some forms/occasions of technology consumption
Creates needs vs. Fulfills needs	Essentializing technology consumption	via simplification of user interfaces and experiences
Isolating vs. (Re)connecting	Replacement consumption	via substitution of technology consumption with 'offline' consumption
Disengaging vs. Engaging	Temporal detachment	via physical separation between consumers and technological consumption

Conclusions and implications

The results confirm the previous research (Jorge et al., 2022; Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2023; Van Bruyssel et al., 2023; Vanden Abeele et al., 2022) and reinforce the conclusion that digital wellbeing is based on consumers' individual responsibility (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Shamir, 2008) to address the paradoxes of technology and its ever-more complex landscape characterized by the problematic consequences of attention (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021; Cloarec, 2020) and surveillance economy (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022; Zuboff, 2019). This individual responsibility places a greater burden on consumers, often leading to blame for any failures and exacerbating social and economic inequalities. It also shifts focus away from broader structural solutions like regulatory changes, economic reforms, or cultural shifts towards collective digital wellbeing.

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