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Thích Nhất Hạnh's Interbeing and Mindfulness in the Digital Age: Toward Mindful Technology

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Original Research Articles

Thích Nhất Hạnh's Interbeing and Mindfulness in the Digital Age: Toward Mindful Technology

Hoàng Thị Thùy Dương*

Abstract

In today's digital era, the dominance of the "attention economy" and sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms has posed unprecedented challenges to mental health, leading to fragmented attention and digital stress. This paper investigates the application of the teachings of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh, particularly his engaged Buddhist philosophy, to develop an ethical framework and mindful practices for human–technology interaction. Using a qualitative approach – combining textual analysis with theoretical synthesis – the study proposes a "Mindful Technology" model grounded on two core pillars: the concepts of Interbeing and mindfulness. The findings indicate that restructuring the human–machine relationship through the lens of mindfulness not only mitigates the negative impacts of technology but also guides the development of human-centered AI. This paper contributes a novel perspective on applying Buddhist philosophy to digital wellbeing and advancing a global framework for ethical technology education through the Mindful Technology model.

Keywords: Thích Nhất Hạnh; Interbeing; Mindfulness; Mindful Technology

Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology and artificial intelligence is reshaping human cognitive life in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. In this dense digital environment, a notable phenomenon has emerged: "digital mindlessness." This concept describes a state in which individuals interact passively with devices and online content, being constantly influenced by notifications, short videos, and recommendation algorithms. As a result, attention becomes fragmented, the ability to concentrate declines, and psychological issues increase. People gradually lose their sense of agency, becoming objects of the "attention economy." According to

researchers Giraldo-Luque, Aldana Afanador, & Fernández-Rovira (2020): "It is necessary to raise awareness of the dangers of abuse in the consumption of social media for individuals, but above all thinking about the future of people's digital welfare." In Vietnam, the rapid proliferation of the internet and mobile devices has created a digital environment as dense as in other countries:

Vietnam is currently among the countries with the highest internet penetration rates in the world. As of early 2024, the country has 78.44 million internet users, accounting for 79.1% of the population; 96.6% of these users access the internet via mobile phones. The average daily time spent online is 6 hours and 18 minutes, of which 3 hours and 30 minutes are spent using mobile devices. (Minh Hoàng, 2026) Thus, the current context in Vietnam not only reflects the global trend of digital risks but also highlights an urgent need for mindfulness practices and the management of digital interactions: The use of social media is not merely for accessing information but must also be accompanied by the ability to be self-aware of potential risks. Every user, especially adolescents, needs to be equipped with skills to protect themselves and maintain control while using social media. This is the key to fully leveraging its benefits without negatively affecting mental health. (Minh Hoàng, 2026) Although previous studies have discussed mindfulness in the digital age (Berthon & Pitt, 2019; Uthaphan & Phooriko, 2024), most research approaches mindfulness as an attention-management technique designed to reduce distraction or stress when using technology. However, these approaches do not consider mindfulness as a comprehensive philosophical and ethical system. This creates a significant gap: no study has yet shown how Interbeing and mindfulness can transform digital devices into environments that cultivate awareness, rather than merely objects that generate distraction or psychological pressure. In this context, the thought of Thích Nhất Hạnh becomes particularly significant. As one of the most influential contemporary Buddhist monks, Thích Nhất Hạnh developed the philosophy of mindfulness closely linked with interbeing – a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of all things. In the digital era, interbeing provides a cognitive framework that helps us understand how technology, humans, and society interact, influence, and co-construct one another. Mindfulness, in turn, enables users to maintain presence, self-control, and dignity in an environment guided by algorithms. While AI can simulate computational abilities, it cannot replace awareness, compassion, and reflective insight. These values, according to Thích Nhất Hạnh, are at the core of human life. Therefore, approaching technology through the lens of interbeing and mindfulness opens a new path for digital ethics and digital wellbeing. Based on this, the article raises the research question: how can interbeing and mindfulness, as taught by Thích Nhất Hạnh, help people use technology mindfully and protect their mental health? To answer this question, the study draws on Thích Nhất Hạnh's nonfiction prose works, including "The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life" (2023a), "Planting Seeds: Practicing Mindfulness with Children" (2023b), and "No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life" (2024). From these sources, the article proposes a "Mindful Technology" model to help users recognize, adjust, and take ownership of their digital interactions. Mindfulness practice not only helps users become

clearly aware of their behaviors and reactions to information, notifications, or algorithms, but also supports maintaining dignity, humanistic values, and inner peace in the digital environment.

Objective

1. To develop a Mindful Technology model grounded in Thích Nhất Hạnh's concepts of Interbeing and daily mindfulness.
2. To examine how mindfulness and Interbeing reshape ethical human–technology relationships in AI-driven digital ecosystems.
3. To explore how digital devices can be transformed into tools for mindfulness practice and digital wellbeing.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

In recent years, the rapid development of digital technology has profoundly transformed human mental life, particularly the ability to focus, regulate attention, and maintain healthy living habits. Alongside this, mindfulness has been recognized as one of the most effective approaches to cope with these challenges. However, existing studies indicate a lack of a systematic approach grounded in Thích Nhất Hạnh's philosophy of interbeing and mindfulness specifically addressing the issue of technology use in the digital age. The following overview presents two main research directions related to the topic, while also highlighting the current gaps in the literature.

Attention Crisis – Consequences of the Digital Environment

Many studies have shown that digital technology directly impacts human attention capacity. Carr (2010) was among the earliest scholars to warn that the Internet "shallows" thought and fragments focus, making it difficult for users to sustain deep cognitive activities such as comprehension or independent thinking. This line of research has been further developed by McDonald (2025), who analyzed the operation of the "distraction economy," where technology platforms compete to capture and retain users' attention. According to him, care and attention have become scarce resources in cultural and media life. From the perspective of society and mental health, Giraldo-Luque, Aldana Afanador, and Fernández-Rovira (2020) pointed out that the abuse of social media increases stress, leading to psychological fatigue and reduced emotional regulation capacity. In Vietnam, Minh Hoàng (2026) also observed similar effects, particularly the rise of anxiety, depression, and social disconnection among people who excessively use social media. Going beyond individual analysis, recent studies emphasize that digital technology can exacerbate attention-related inequalities. Kärki (2024) argues that people with better living conditions generally have more effective control over their attention, while vulnerable groups become the primary targets of addictive design. Hartford and Stein (2022) refer to this as "attention damage" – a condition in which technology gradually erodes users'

capacity for focus, resulting in new psychological and social inequalities. Overall, studies in this group illuminate the severity of the attention crisis in digital life and underscore the urgent need for methods that restore focus and enhance mindfulness.

Interbeing, Mindfulness in Digital Life, and Buddhist–Technology Discourses

In response to the growing problem of digital distraction, the principles of interbeing and mindfulness have emerged as a means for regulating attention and coping with the pressures of technology. In the fields of business and applied psychology, Berthon and Pitt (2019) categorized forms of mindfulness suited for digital environments, emphasizing that mindfulness can help users recognize attention-invading factors and cultivate genuine presence. In applied Buddhist studies, Uthaphan and Phooriko (2024) proposed the concept of "digital mindfulness," in which Buddhist practices are utilized to help users regulate behavior, emotions, and social media habits. This work provides an important foundation for understanding how Buddhist teachings can support people in online spaces. In Vietnam, Ngô (2021) examined the impact of mindfulness on work performance and noted that practicing mindfulness can reduce stress, increase focus, and improve work quality. Although the study did not directly address digital environments, its results highlight the broad applicability of mindfulness in modern life. From the perspective of Buddhist philosophy and technology, Phrakrusrisitthibandit (2025) explored the relationship between Buddhist teachings and artificial intelligence, focusing on ethical issues, cognition, and the transformation of human experience. This research opens a new approach to how Buddhism can guide life in technological contexts, though it does not delve into mindfulness or the specific practices of Thích Nhất Hạnh. From this literature review, three main observations can be made: (1) Studies on digital distraction have thoroughly analyzed the damage technology causes to attention and mental health; (2) Research on digital mindfulness or mindfulness in digital contexts largely relies on psychological approaches or general Buddhist teachings; (3) No studies have directly applied Thích Nhất Hạnh's principles of interbeing and mindfulness to develop a model for mindful technology use. Thus, while previous research shows growing interest in human–technology engagement and mindfulness in the digital age, most studies approach the topic from generalized or modern psychological perspectives and do not directly investigate Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings on interbeing and mindfulness. Thích Nhất Hạnh, however, is a widely influential Zen master whose teachings emphasize the indivisible interconnection among humans, society, nature, and technology, as well as full presence in daily life. This provides a particularly suitable foundation for addressing the challenges of the digital era. Currently, the potential application of his thought to contemporary technological issues remains underexplored. This paper aims to fill that gap by: (1) analyzing the core principles of Thích Nhất Hạnh's interbeing and mindfulness; (2) linking these principles to the current state of digital distraction and technology dependence; and (3) proposing a model of "mindful technology use" based on Thích Nhất Hạnh's thought.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, combining text analysis and theoretical synthesis, to examine Thích Nhất Hạnh's philosophy and develop a "Mindful Technology" framework for digital environments. The first step involved textual analysis of Thích Nhất Hạnh's representative non-fiction prose works, including "The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life" (2023a), "Planting Seeds: Practicing Mindfulness with Children" (2023b), and "No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life" (2024). The selection criteria focused on teachings related to interbeing, mindfulness, the interrelation between subject and object, as well as guidance on stopping and deep looking. From this, the study extracted principles applicable to digital environments, where "objects" include digital interfaces and AI algorithms.

The second step used theoretical synthesis to juxtapose these principles with concepts from the attention economy and addictive design, integrating Thích Nhất Hạnh's notions of interbeing and mindfulness. Based on this, the study proposed a three-tier model: philosophy (Interbeing), behavior (Mindful Consumption), and technology application (Mindful Technology Practice).

The research process was carried out in three phases. First, mapping the touchpoints between digital suffering and mindfulness teachings. Next, analytical synthesis was applied to examine the ethical structure within mindfulness practice to establish norms for AI and social media use. Finally, validation compared the proposed model with Digital Wellbeing standards to ensure feasibility, novelty, and practical applicability. This method provides a theoretical foundation that integrates Eastern philosophy with modern technological practice, while also opening avenues for quantitative or empirical research in future studies.

Results

The "Mindful Technology" model is built directly upon two core pillars of Thích Nhất Hạnh's thought: the concept of Interbeing and daily mindfulness. The Interbeing pillar emphasizes the profound interconnectedness between humans and technology, viewing technology not as an "enemy" to be eliminated or resisted. Technology is an inseparable part of the interbeing ecosystem, where all phenomena depend on and nurture one another. The second pillar is daily mindfulness, embodied through practices such as transforming digital devices into tools for mindfulness practice (digital mindfulness tools) and using notifications as "digital mindfulness bells," guiding users to shift from automatic reactions to conscious responses. In this way, the model not only mitigates the negative impacts of the digital age but also opens a human-centered approach, integrating mindfulness and compassion into our relationship with machines and artificial intelligence.

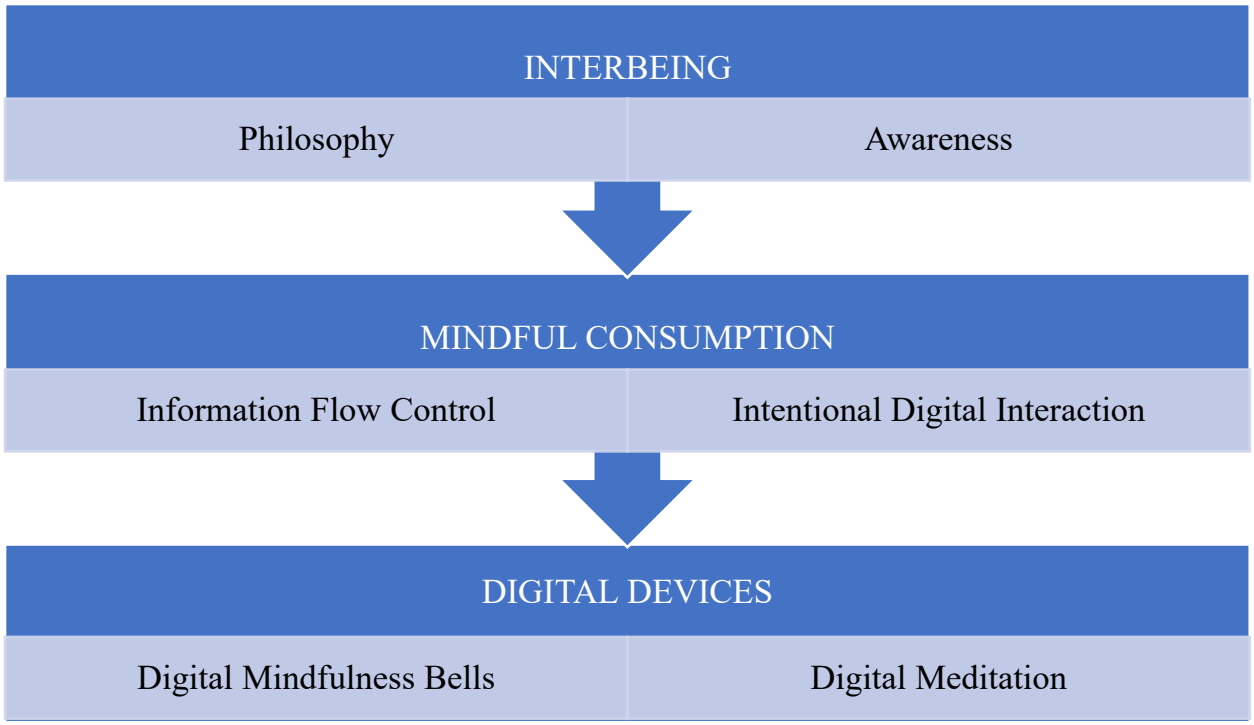

Figure 1. Mindful Technology Famework

The Mindful Technology model, illustrated in Figure 1, is structured around three interrelated layers that explain how mindfulness can be integrated into digital life. The first layer, Interbeing and the digital ecosystem, conceptualizes humans and technology as mutually constitutive, emphasizing interconnectedness and ethical responsibility. The second layer, Mindfulness in data consumption, examines how digital information intake shapes psychological states and behavior, advocating conscious and intentional consumption. The third layer, transforming digital devices into tools for practice, explores how digital technologies can actively support mindfulness practice and mental wellbeing. Unlike prevailing "digital mindfulness" models that focus primarily on attention control or stress reduction (Uthaphan & Phooriko, 2024), the Mindful Technology model is grounded in Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings on Interbeing. It understands technology as part of an interconnected life-world in which individual actions affect not only personal consciousness but also algorithms, digital ecosystems, and communities. This relational dimension extends mindfulness beyond the individual to encompass social and technological ethics; a perspective largely absents from prior research.

Interbeing and the Digital Ecosystem

Interbeing, a central concept in Thích Nhất Hạnh's philosophy, expresses the principle of dependent co-arising: no phenomenon exists independently, but only through interdependent conditions. Applied to digital ecosystems, Interbeing reframes the human–technology relationship as a dynamic, reciprocal process in which user behavior, data, and algorithms continuously shape one another. A single digital interaction contributes to broader data patterns and recommendation systems, reinforcing the idea that online actions participate in an extended chain of consequences. This view aligns with the "ecology of attending," in which attention operates within a tightly interconnected body–social–technical network. Recognizing digitalization as an Interbeing system has two implications. First, digital behavior cannot be treated as isolated individual choice, but must be understood as part of a broader ethical and socio-technical cycle. Second, addressing digital stress and dependency requires not only technical or legal solutions, but also mindful and intentional interaction practices. In the Mindful Technology model, Interbeing forms the philosophical foundation for cultivating attentional autonomy, reducing algorithmic dependence, and supporting proactive engagement with technology.

Interbeing, Mindfulness in Digital Life, and Buddhist–Technology Discourses

Mindfulness, in Thích Nhất Hạnh's teaching, is both meditative practice and way of life—an energy of awareness that anchors individuals in the present moment. In digital contexts, information consumption functions as a form of psychological intake. Mindful consumption therefore becomes a key bridge between Interbeing and practice, requiring users to attend to the mental, emotional, and social effects of the content they consume. Passive exposure to harmful or addictive information can destabilize attention and increase digital stress, whereas deliberate selection fosters clarity, emotional balance, and ethical participation. Mindful consumption in the data era involves three dimensions: awareness of content and its psychological impact; deliberate selection aligned with constructive purposes; and recognition of social impact, as individual consumption shapes algorithms and digital communities. Research suggests that mindful information practices reduce digital stress and enhance concentration, supporting the model's emphasis on user behavior as a critical layer linking philosophy and application.

Turning Digital Devices into Mindfulness Practice Tools

The third layer of the model reframes digital devices as potential mindfulness tools. In Buddhist practice, any object can function as a dharma tool if it awakens awareness. Similarly, smartphones, computers, and AI systems can support mindfulness when users intentionally restructure their relationship with technology. Notifications can function as "digital mindfulness

bells," prompting pauses for breathing and reflection rather than automatic reaction. Interactions with AI can become opportunities for ethical intention-setting and reflective engagement.

This approach differs fundamentally from existing digital mindfulness frameworks, which often treat technology as either a problem to manage or a neutral tool for self-regulation. Grounded in Thích Nhất Hạnh's insight, the Mindful Technology model reimagines technology as a meditative environment—one in which digital actions cultivate awareness, compassion, and ethical responsibility. In doing so, it opens a new direction for mindfulness research in the age of AI, integrating personal practice with social and technological transformation.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how the engaged Buddhist philosophy of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh can inform an ethical and mindful framework for human–technology interaction in the contemporary attention economy. The findings demonstrate that the integration of the principles of Interbeing and mindfulness provides a coherent and philosophically grounded response to the psychological and ethical challenges posed by AI-driven digital environments. In doing so, this research advances both theoretical understanding and practical approaches to digital wellbeing and human-centered technology design.

Mindfulness as a Response to the Attention Economy

The results indicate that mindfulness functions as a critical counterbalance to the dynamics of the attention economy, which prioritizes engagement maximization at the expense of users' cognitive and emotional wellbeing. Scholars such as Zuboff (2019) and Harris (2016) have argued that contemporary digital platforms exploit attentional vulnerabilities through algorithmic personalization and persuasive design. The present study extends this critique by demonstrating that mindfulness, as articulated by Thích Nhất Hạnh, does not merely serve as an individual coping strategy but operates as an ethical orientation that reshapes how technology is designed, used, and evaluated. By fostering present-moment awareness and intentional engagement, mindfulness directly addresses issues of fragmented attention, digital addiction, and technology-induced stress documented in prior research (Rosen et al., 2013; Mark et al., 2018). The findings suggest that mindful technology use enables individuals to recognize and disengage from compulsive interaction patterns, thereby restoring agency in human–machine relationships. This aligns with emerging digital wellbeing frameworks but offers a deeper moral and contemplative foundation rooted in Buddhist ethics rather than instrumental self-regulation alone.

Interbeing and the Ethics of Human–Technology Relationships

A key contribution of this study is the application of the concept of Interbeing to the ethics of AI and digital systems. Interbeing, central to Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings, emphasizes the profound interconnectedness of all phenomena. When applied to technology, this perspective challenges the dominant paradigm that treats AI systems as neutral tools detached from social, psychological, and ecological consequences. The findings suggest that viewing technology through the lens of Interbeing reframes ethical responsibility as collective rather than individual. This resonates with contemporary debates in AI ethics that emphasize relational accountability, social impact, and value-sensitive design (Floridi et al., 2018; Friedman & Hendry, 2019). By recognizing that designers, users, data, and algorithms co-arise within interconnected systems, the Mindful Technology model encourages a shift from extractive technological practices toward compassionate and responsible innovation. Importantly, this relational ethic expands existing human-centered AI frameworks by embedding compassion, non-harm, and awareness into both development and deployment processes. Rather than focusing solely on fairness, transparency, or explainability, the proposed model emphasizes ethical intention and mindful awareness as foundational principles guiding technological ecosystems.

Implications for Human-Centered AI and Digital Wellbeing

The findings further indicate that the Mindful Technology model has significant implications for the development of human-centered AI. Current approaches to ethical AI often remain reactive, addressing harms after deployment. In contrast, the integration of mindfulness and Interbeing offers a preventive ethical orientation, encouraging reflection on purpose, impact, and suffering at the earliest stages of design.

This aligns with calls from scholars and policymakers for AI systems that enhance human flourishing rather than merely optimize efficiency or profit (OECD, 2019). By incorporating contemplative practices and ethical reflection into technology education, the model supports the cultivation of morally aware developers and users alike. This contribution is particularly relevant in global contexts, where cultural and philosophical traditions remain underutilized in dominant Western technology ethics discourse.

Conclusion

This study has explored the relevance and applicability of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh's philosophy of Interbeing and mindfulness in addressing the ethical and psychological challenges of the contemporary digital age. Through qualitative textual analysis and theoretical synthesis, the research proposed a Mindful Technology model that reorients human–technology relationships from attention extraction and instrumental use toward awareness, compassion, and ethical responsibility.

The findings demonstrate that Interbeing provides a powerful philosophical lens for understanding digital ecosystems as relational and co-arising systems, in which users, algorithms, data, and social structures mutually shape one another. Within this framework, mindfulness is not merely a personal technique for stress reduction, but a lived ethical practice that restores agency, attentional sovereignty, and dignity in technology use. By reframing digital devices and AI systems as potential supports for mindfulness practice—rather than sources of distraction alone—the study highlights a constructive path toward digital wellbeing without rejecting technological progress. The Mindful Technology model contributes to digital ethics and human-centered AI discourse by integrating inner awareness and ethical intention alongside external design principles. In doing so, it advances a more holistic understanding of digital wellbeing that bridges contemplative philosophy and contemporary technological realities. Particularly in contexts such as Vietnam, where digital penetration is high and concerns about mental health are growing, this model offers culturally resonant guidance for fostering healthier and more humane digital lives.

Overall, the study affirms that Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings are not only spiritually significant but also practically relevant to the global challenges of the AI-driven attention economy. Interbeing and mindfulness emerge as vital resources for cultivating ethical, sustainable, and compassionate relationships with technology in the digital era.

Suggestions

Suggestions for Implementation

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be proposed for implementing the Mindful Technology model across individual, educational, and institutional contexts:

1. Integration into Digital Literacy Education Educational institutions may incorporate mindfulness and Interbeing into digital literacy and media education curricula. This integration would help learners develop not only technical skills but also ethical awareness, attentional regulation, and reflective engagement with digital technologies.

2. Mindfulness-Oriented Technology Design Technology developers and designers are encouraged to embed mindful design principles into digital platforms, such as intentional notification systems, usage reflection prompts, and interfaces that support pauses rather than continuous engagement. Such features can transform everyday digital interactions into opportunities for awareness and ethical reflection.

3. Personal Mindful Technology Practices Individuals can apply the model by cultivating mindful digital consumption, including setting conscious intentions before using technology, transforming notifications into moments of mindful breathing, and periodically reflecting on the emotional and cognitive effects of digital content.

4. Organizational and Policy-Level Adoption Organizations, particularly those involved in AI development and digital services, may adopt mindfulness-based ethical training to support responsible innovation. Policymakers can also consider digital wellbeing and mental health as core criteria in technology governance frameworks.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study provides a theoretical foundation, further research is necessary to deepen and expand its contributions:

1. Empirical Validation Future studies could employ quantitative, experimental, or mixed-methods approaches to assess the psychological, behavioral, and cognitive effects of Mindful Technology practices on users in digital environments.

2. Cross-Cultural and Comparative Studies Comparative research may explore how Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist-informed framework aligns with or differs from other philosophical, religious, or indigenous approaches to technology ethics, contributing to pluralistic and globally inclusive models.

3. Application in AI Development Contexts Further research could investigate how mindfulness and Interbeing influence ethical decision-making, bias awareness, and responsibility among AI designers, engineers, and organizational teams.

4. Technological Prototypes and Interventions The development and evaluation of digital tools or applications grounded in the Mindful Technology model would help test its practical feasibility and long-term impact on digital wellbeing.

Declaration of Interests

The author declares that there are no financial, professional, or personal interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based entirely on qualitative textual analysis and theoretical synthesis of published works and does not involve human participants, personal data, or experimental intervention. As such, it does not require institutional ethical approval. All sources have been appropriately cited, and the research adheres to academic standards of integrity, transparency, and scholarly responsibility.

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Definition of Conflicts of Interest

A conflict of interest refers to any situation in which personal, financial, professional, or institutional relationships could compromise, or be perceived to compromise, the objectivity, integrity, or impartiality of the research process or its outcomes. In the present study, no such conflicts of interest were identified.

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