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A Qualitative Research on the Concept of Digital Dementia from the Perspective of Academics

Akademisyenlerin Bakış Açısıyla Dijital Demans Kavramı Üzerine Nitel Bir Araştırma

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Abstract

Aim: *The incidence of dementia is increasing worldwide, posing a significant health challenge. While dementia has many causes, the frequency of exposure to digital technologies is believed to accelerate the process of digital dementia. The aim of this study is to conduct a qualitative investigation into the concept of digital dementia from the perspective of academics, aiming to understand the effects of digital technology use on cognitive functions and to explore the definition, symptoms, and prevention of digital dementia in depth.*

Method: *Qualitative research method was used in the study. The research was designed with a phenomenological approach and the criterion sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used as the sampling method. In the research, a semi-structured interview form was prepared and data was collected using the in-depth interview technique. In the research, the data collected from 12 academics were analyzed thematically.*

Results: *In the research; It is seen that the participants use digital technology mostly for shopping, obtaining information and education, that digital technologies have a negative impact on the physical, psychological, cognitive and social health of the participants, and the concept of digital dementia is expressed as a new concept by the participants.*

Conclusion: *In order to better understand the effect of digital technologies on cognitive health, it is deemed important to conduct studies on different sample groups in order to better understand the subject.*

Originality: *When the literature was scanned, no study was found that both conceptually expressed the concept of digital dementia and was designed qualitatively. In this respect, the study is original and adds new findings to the literature.*

Key Words: *Digitalization, dementia, digital dementia.*

Öz

Amaç: *Demans, dünya genelinde önemli bir sağlık sorunudur ve insidansında artış öngörülmektedir. Demansın pek çok nedeni olmakla birlikte dijital teknolojilere maruz kalmanın sıklığı ise dijital demans sürecini hızlandırmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, akademisyenlerin perspektifinden, dijital teknoloji kullanımının sağlık üzerindeki etkilerini anlamak ve dijital demans kavramı konularında nitel bir araştırma yapmaktır.*

Yöntem: *Araştırmada nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Araştırma fenemonolojik yaklaşımla tasarlanmış olup örnekleme yöntemi olarak amaçlı örneklem yöntemlerinden biri olan ölçüt örnekleme yönteminden yararlanılmıştır. Araştırmada yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu hazırlanmış ve derinlemesine görüşme tekniği kullanılarak veriler toplanmıştır. Araştırmada 12 akademisyenden toplanan veriler tematik olarak analiz edilmiştir.*

Bulgular: *Araştırmada; katılımcıların dijital teknolojiyi daha çok alışveriş, bilgi edinme ve eğitim için kullandıkları, dijital teknolojilerin katılımcıların fiziksel, psikolojik, bilişsel ve sosyal sağlığı üzerinde olumsuz etkiye sahip olduğu ve dijital demans kavramının katılımcılar tarafından yeni bir kavram olarak ifade edildiği görülmektedir.*

Sonuç: *Dijital teknolojilerin bilişsel sağlığa etkisinin daha iyi anlaşılması için farklı örneklem gruplarında çalışmaların yapılması konunun daha iyi anlaşılması açısından önemli görülmüştür.*

Özgünlük: *Literatür tarandığında dijital demans kavramını hem kavramsal olarak ifade eden hem de nitel olarak tasarlanan bir çalışmaya rastlanmamıştır. Bu açıdan çalışma özgün ve alan yazına yeni bulgular ekleyen bir araştırmadır.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Dijitalleşme, demans, dijital demans.*

Introduction

Dementia represents one of the major global challenges for health and social care in this century. More than 50 million people worldwide suffer from dementia, and it is estimated that this number will triple by the year 2050 (Morovic et al., 2019, p. 332). Dementia is an umbrella term used for various diseases that significantly impair a person's ability to carry out daily life activities, affecting memory, other cognitive abilities, and behaviors (WHO, 2022). Dementia is generally defined as a progressive cognitive impairment that leads to a loss of independent function (Ljubenkov and Geshwind, 2016, p. 397). It is also a deterioration resulting from damage to the central nervous system, affecting multiple cognitive areas and preventing an individual from carrying out daily activities, characterized by a long-term and often gradual decline in thinking and remembering ability, severe enough to interfere with daily functioning, and categorized as a severe brain disease (Öz et al., 2022, p. 11; Woo, 2015, p. 6). Common symptoms of dementia include emotional problems, language difficulties, and decreased motivation (Arakelyan, 2019, p. 1). Additionally, behavioral and psychiatric symptoms such as personality changes, disturbances in perception and problem-solving, hallucinations, and emotional fluctuations are also observed (Yavlal and Aydın Güngör, 2016, p. 134). When looking at individuals diagnosed with dementia, it is observed that they struggle with forgetfulness, having difficulty remembering phone numbers, names of people, or individuals. It is also observed that excessive use of digital technologies such as computers, smartphones and the internet prevents the balanced development of brain functions (Woo, 2015, p. 6).

In recent years, various mobile communication devices such as phones have been increasingly used by more people every day (Khalid and Rehman, 2021, p. 9). According to the We Are Social report, as of 2023, the world population has reached 8.01 billion. Of this world population, 5.44 billion (68%) are mobile phone users, 5.16 billion (64.4%) are internet users, and 4.76 billion (approximately 60%) are social media users. This number is increasing day by day (We Are Social, 2023). Similarly, according to the Digital 2023 Turkey report prepared by We Are Social, out of the 85.59 million population in Turkey, 81.68 million (95.4%) are mobile phone users, 71.38 million (83.4%) are internet users, and 62.55 million (73.1%) are social media users (Digital 2023: Turkey, 2023).

With the advent of technology in our lives, the human mind and body have begun to experience the dangers of technology misuse (Khalid and Rehman, 2021, p. 9). The excessive use of digital technologies brings many negative consequences, including forgetfulness (Savaş and Alparslan, 2021, p. 420). The adverse effects of digital addiction include lack of concentration, superficiality, insomnia, weight gain, loneliness, depression, social isolation, violence, physical illnesses, learning difficulties, and stress (Spitzer, 2012, pp. 14-23; Preiss and Manfred, 2014, p. 31). Furthermore, several studies have shown harmful effects of these devices on our cognitive abilities (Sandu and Nistor, 2020, p. 1; Yamamoto et al., 2018, p. 310; Khalid and Rehman, 2021, p. 9). The intensive use of the internet develops the left lobe of the brain instead of the right lobe, negatively affecting memory and attention spans. Some forms of cognitive dysfunction associated with internet use are referred to as digital dementia (Dossey, 2014, p. 70-71).

The concept of digital dementia was first defined by a German psychiatrist, psychologist, and neurologist, Manfred Spitzer, in 2012. Digital dementia refers to the cognitive impairments observed in individuals due to excessive use of digital technology. Spitzer also suggests that prolonged use of technology will block and disrupt short-term memory pathways (Spitzer, 2012, p. 296). Digital dementia is described by some as a condition where the memory and computational ability of individuals using digital technologies excessively decrease due to their dependency on them (Ahn et al., 2015, p. 39). Digital dementia is a new diagnosis of a disorder caused by addictive use of digital media (Woo, 2015, p. 1). It is also defined as a decline in mental abilities in memory, attention, and thinking areas due to frequent and prolonged use of digital communication technologies (Horoszkiewicz, 2022, p. 290; Sandu and Nistor,

2020, p. 2). The diagnosis of digital dementia is said to bring together a series of symptoms similar to Alzheimer's disease when individuals use cell phones intensively and engage in several digital activities simultaneously (Sandu and Nistor, 2020, p. 2).

Digital dementia is directly related to cognitive decline, particularly memory loss, lack of concentration, coordination deficits, attention deficits, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and anger (Fryday, 2017, p. 15). The characteristics of individuals suffering from digital dementia include difficulties in concentration and focus, memory weakness, using digital devices for more than 7 hours, inadequacy in social relationships, fear of missing out (FOMO), shortening of attention spans, and displaying emotional reactions (Woo, 2015, p. 11).

Due to the increasing prevalence of dementia and the difficulty in providing care (Yorulmaz and Dirik, 2021, p. 171), it is generally necessary to protect against dementia and specifically against digital dementia for public health. Recommendations for protecting individuals from digital dementia include being regular, getting good sleep, healthy eating, limiting sugar intake, socializing, engaging in daily physical exercise, staying mentally active, reducing stress, recognizing early signs of digital dementia, practicing meditation, laughing more, and reducing smoking (Woo, 2015, p. 15-16). Another recommendation, perhaps the most important for digital dementia, is to increase awareness of the purpose of using the internet and technologies and their impacts on health (Savaş and Alparslan, 2021, p. 420). It is undeniable that technology is of vital importance for human development, but its implications also need to be addressed (Moledina and Khoja, 2018, p. 12). Based on this issue, this research attempts to explain the concept of digital dementia through the purpose of using digital technologies and their reflections on health.

Method

Research Design

In this study, a phenomenological research design of qualitative research method was utilized. In phenomenological research, the aim is to derive common meanings from participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2016, p. 77). Similarly, in this study, an attempt was made to derive common meanings from the experiences of academics actively using digital technologies.

Research Questions

Three main research questions were identified in the study. The first one is about the purposes for which academics use digital technology, the second one focuses on the impact of digital technology on the health of academics, and the third one concerns academics' perspectives on the concept of digital dementia.

Participant Selection

The research was qualitatively designed, and purposive sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used to obtain qualified and diverse information. Purposive sampling allows in-depth investigation of situations considered to have rich information (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2016, p. 118). In this context, being an academic and actively using digital technologies were determined as criteria. In the research, participants who met these criteria were interviewed using a semi-structured interview form prepared in advance and through in depth interview technique. With the participant's consent, data collection was facilitated using a voice recorder.

Data Collection

Research data were collected by interviewing individuals who met the criteria and agreed to participate. The interviews were conducted between April and June 2023. The principle of voluntarism was considered when selecting participants for the study. Interviews were conducted with 12 academics who volunteered to participate. Participant information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Information

Number	Participant Code	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Unit (Department/Programme)	Years of Experience in Profession
1	K1	36	Female	Married	Health Institutions Management	2
2	K2	30	Female	Married	Pharmacy Services	6
3	K3	41	Female	Married	First and Emergency Aid	9
4	K4	36	Female	Married	Business Management	3
5	K5	37	Female	Married	Opticianry	7
6	K6	46	Female	Married	Health Institutions Management	18
7	K7	28	Female	Single	Pharmacy Services	4
8	K8	39	Female	Married	First and Emergency Aid	8
9	K9	37	Male	Married	Child Development	16
10	K10	34	Male	Married	Coaching	7
11	K11	33	Male	Married	Medical Documentation and Secretariat	9
12	K12	26	Male	Married	Pharmacy Services	3,5

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, one of the data analysis strategies of qualitative research method, was utilized in the study. Thematic analysis is shown as a method that can be used for a study aiming to explore using interpretations (Çakırcı et al., 2024, p. 129). Data collection continued until saturation was reached in the study. Participants in the study were coded as K1, K2, …. K12. The stages of data analysis based on qualitative research are "coding, creating themes, organizing codes and themes, and describing and interpreting findings" (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2016, p. 244). The researchers completed the coding process in the light of the data obtained. In the next stage, codes were reviewed by the researchers again. Codes were categorized and the process of thematic analysis was initiated. Expert opinion was obtained in creating themes.

Findings

As a result of the thematic analysis process, some important themes and sub-themes were identified. The themes are (1) Purpose of Using Digital Technologies, (2) Effects of Digital Technologies on Health, and (3) Concept of Digital Dementia.

Purpose of Using Digital Technologies

Individuals use technology not for a single purpose but for various purposes. Participants also stated in the interviews that they use technology for different purposes. Thematic data regarding the purposes of digital technology use by participants are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Participants' Views on the Purposes of Using Digital Technologies

Views on Technology Use Purposes	Participants
Information Acquisition	K1, K3, K6, K8
Education	K1, K2, K3, K4, K5, K6, K8, K9, K11, K12
Shopping	K1, K2, K4, K5, K6, K7
Communication	K4, K9
Academic Activities/Work	K2, K9, K10, K11, K12
Following the Agenda	K5, K8
Commerce	K1, K3, K10
Entertainment/Leisure Activities	K7, K11, K12

Digital technologies are designed to meet individuals' needs. Individuals use digital technologies for various purposes according to their needs. Participant K1 stated that they use digital technologies for acquiring information, as well as for shopping and online courses: *"I use it for acquiring information. I use it for electronic commerce and shopping. Especially, I use it for online courses."* (K1).

It is also observed that digital technologies facilitate life for individuals. Participant K3 made a comment indicating that digital technologies facilitate life: *"To access information. Accessing information is now very easy. I use it to make my life easier. I use it for banking transactions. Using Google books instead of the library to access information, using articles also makes my job much easier." (K3).*

Participant K5 stated that they use digital technologies not only for shopping and accessing information but also for following events happening in our country*: "I use it to access the information I need due to my profession. In addition, I benefit from digital technology in some points in terms of child development. I use it to follow innovations. I use it to follow the events happening in our country. I use it for shopping." (K5).* Like K5, K8 also stated that they use digital technologies to follow the agenda. The participant's comment is as follows: *"I use it for my job, for education, for research. I use it to acquire information. I actively use it to follow developments, to follow the agenda." (K8).*

Participants also stated that they use digital technologies for research, reading articles, and preparing lessons. It is thought that the profession of the participants is effective in expressing these purposes. Participant comments are as follows:

"I use it especially for my job. I use it for communication. There are also some online trainings. I refer to them. Besides that, I mainly use it for shopping." (K4)

"For information purposes, for research purposes, especially after the pandemic period, I think that the use of digital technologies has increased even more. Besides, we use it to access information related to our profession, our lessons." (K6)

"I use it for academic activities. I use it for communication. I use it for lessons." (K9)

"I use it to read articles. I use it especially to watch matches for my hobbies. I use it to research, analyze for my job." (K11)

"I use digital technologies to prepare lesson presentations, for the academic work process, for administrative tasks." (K12)

Based on participant comments, it can be seen that digital technologies are used more for education and shopping, and digital technologies are found to have multiple uses in various aspects of life, not just for a single purpose, by participants.

Effects of Digital Technology on Health

Effects of Digital Technology on Health Participants were asked about the effects of digital technologies on their health in the study, and two themes were created. These themes are "Positive Effects of Digital Technology on Health" and "Negative Effects of Digital Technology on Health". Additionally, the theme "Negative Effects of Digital Technology on Health" was divided into four sub-themes. These sub-themes are "Negative Effects of Digital Technology on Physical Health", "Negative Effects of Digital Technology on Psychological Health", "Negative Effects of Digital Technology on Cognitive Health", and "Negative Effects of Digital Technology on Social Relationships". Thematic data on the effects of digital technologies on health are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Participant Views on the Effects of Digital Technology on Health

The Effects of Digital Technology on Health	Participants
Positive Effects	K1, K5
Negative Effects	
Effects on Physical Health	K1, K2, K3, K4, K5, K6, K7, K8, K9, K10, K11, K12
Effects on Psychological Health	K1, K2, K3, K5, K6
Effects on Cognitive Health	K1, K2, K3, K4, K6, K7, K9
Effects on Social Relationships	K1, K2, K3, K5, K6, K12
The Effects of Digital Technology on Health	K1, K2, K3, K4, K6, K7, K11, K12

Positive Effects of Digital Technology

Based on some participant comments, the theme of "Positive Effects of Digital Technology" has been identified. Some participant statements related to this theme are as follows:

"In fact, there are positive effects too. You can handle some things in a shorter time, so you don't get too stressed." (K1)

Participant K5, on the other hand, mentioned the positive impact of digital technology on social relationships. The participant's statement is as follows:

"I think it has a positive effect on me. Because generally, I can stay informed about social activities through social media. If there were no digital technologies or if I didn't have internet access, I would meet people less frequently." (K5)

Negative Effects of Digital Technology

Based on participant comments, the theme of "Negative Effects of Digital Technology on Health" has been divided into four sub-themes: "Physical Health Effects of Digital Technology," "Psychological Health Effects of Digital Technology," "Cognitive Health Effects of Digital Technology," and "Effects of Digital Technology on Social Relationships."

Physical Health Effects of Digital Technology

Digital technologies not only facilitate our lives but also have negative effects on individuals' health in some aspects. One of the negative effects that emerges is the deterioration of individuals' physical health. Participants especially mentioned effects such as eye problems, poor posture, headaches, joint pain, and insomnia. Participant K2 expressed that *"When I spend long hours in front of the computer, I experience **head and neck pain**." (K2),* indicating that digital technology causes head and neck pain. In contrast, K3 mentioned experiencing eye problems and headaches differently from K2. The participant's statement is as follows:

*"When I spend too much time at the phone or computer, my legs ache due to my posture. I tend to sit cross-legged, and I struggle to stand up. It causes neck pain. My **eyes get very tired**, and sometimes I have **severe headaches."** (K3)*

"Participants K6, K8, and K12 have expressed that digital technologies cause eye problems. Their statements are as follows:

"I experience eye problems when I'm too immersed in technology." (K6)

"My eyes hurt when I stare at the computer for too long. I also experience pain in my lower back and spine." (K8)

Participant K12, in addition to eye problems, uniquely highlighted that digital technologies make individuals sluggish and have a negative impact on weight gain. Their view is expressed below:

"There can be an increase in eye prescription and eye fatigue. It leads to a sedentary lifestyle for individuals. I also believe it has a negative impact on weight gain." (K12)

The other participant statements are as follows:

"I believe it causes posture disorders and eye problems." (K5)

"It disrupts spinal structure. It leads to pain in the lower back, neck, and spine." (K9)

"Dealing with technology for a long time especially causes headaches for me." (K10)

"It disrupts anatomical structure. It causes sleep disorders. My eyes also burn. I also experience back pain." (K11)

The Psychological Health Impact of Digital Technology

Participants have expressed feelings of inadequacy, restlessness, and guilt when they use digital technologies for prolonged periods. The participants' statements regarding the issue are as follows:"

"(...) I believe it diminishes our ability to express ourselves. I believe it slows down our thought process." (K2)

"It sometimes makes me feel inadequate psychologically. When I see that I can't keep up with life and that other people are achieving more in life, I feel inadequate." (K5)

"I feel uncomfortable when I use it too much. I feel like I'm wasting my time. Psychologically, I blame myself. Especially if I've used social media a lot during the day, I feel bad about myself psychologically." (K6).

Cognitive Health Effects of Digital Technology

Participants have expressed that excessive exposure to digital technology leads to attention deficit, makes individuals lazier in terms of memory, diminishes memorization skills, causes focus problems, and contributes to distraction.

K1 particularly emphasized that digital technology slows down memory. They stated, *"It slows down memory. We don't have to memorize too much information. This inevitably regresses our memory."* (K1) K2, on the other hand, mentioned that it slows down thought speed and distracts attention. They stated, *"I believe it slows down thought speed. It distracts attention. Even during work, a message or notification on the phone, or the pages you visit, of course, disrupts concentration on both academic and social aspects and delays the work we need to do." (K2)*

Some participants have expressed that using digital technology too frequently leads to laziness. The participants' statements on the matter are as follows:

"(...) Yes, we access information, but it also leads to laziness. For example, we've forgotten how to memorize. We struggle to memorize now. (...)" (K3)

"I believe it makes one lazy in terms of memory. It at least obstructs my desire to learn something when I want to learn it. (...) It also affects attention span. I think it increases distractibility. I experience problems with focus. I believe it has a serious impact on focus issues." (K4)

"It makes a person lazy. I mean, I think it makes one lazy in terms of research and thinking a bit. (...)" (K6)

Additionally, Participants K7 and K9 have commented on how the use of digital technology reduces the permanence of learned information. Their statements are as follows:

"I access information easily, yes, but it negatively affects the process of retaining something in mind. It doesn't stay in my mind anymore. I think it's because we're exposed to too much technology." (K7)

"It weakens cognitive skills. When you spend a long time, the ability to retrieve information from long-term memory becomes difficult. Sometimes, you can't even remember your friend's name after meeting them. Constantly looking at the screen distracts our attention. This could lead to dementia later on." (K9).

Effects of Digital Technology on Social Relationships

It is observed that digital technologies have negative effects not only on participants' physical, psychological, and cognitive health but also on their social relationships. Participant K2 expressed that digital technologies reduce social relationships, stating: "I generally think that it reduces our connections with people, our social relationships. Because we generally use our time and our need for socializing, our need to express ourselves on social media and the internet." (K2). K3 specifically mentioned that social media reduces socializing, saying: "I no longer feel the need to socialize. I noticed this. Maybe before, I would have wanted to be more involved with a circle of friends. But now, social media has a great impact." (K3). K11 and K12 emphasized the decrease in sociability. The statements of the participants are as follows:

"I think it makes not only me but everyone antisocial. I don't feel the need for too much socializing." (K11).

"It isolates individuals. You think you can manage on your own. It reduces the desire to socialize." (K12).

Digital Dementia Concept

When asked about what the term "digital dementia" meant to them, most participants stated that they were unfamiliar with the term, providing only superficial comments. Their opinions regarding the concept of digital dementia are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Participant Views on the Concept of Digital Dementia

Participant Views on the Concept of Digital Dementia	Participant
Digital Dementia Concept	K3, K4, K6, K9, K12

Some participants' comments are consistent with the content of the concept of digital dementia. The expressions of the participants are as follows:

"I haven't heard of it before, but I can relate. Dementia is already a disorder related to brain activities. It can cause serious forgetfulness, memory loss, and serious concentration problems as these conditions progress. So, I think the content of this definition is like that." (K4)

"The disease of our time is already dementia. It has been shown in many studies that technology has an effect on this. We know that it has a very negative effect, especially on children. Digital technologies make the brain lazy. We are exposed to some electronic data, which can isolate us. I also believe that it causes attention deficit. Perhaps the increasing frequency of technology use is the underlying cause of the increase in dementia today." (K6)

"I haven't heard of the concept of digital dementia before, but I can describe it as a forgetfulness situation caused by digital addiction." (K12)

Discussion

In this study, the aim was to understand the effects of digital technology use on health from the perspective of academics and to explain the concept of digital dementia, which is a new concept in the literature. Within this scope, some questions about digital technologies were directed to the participants. Most of the participants stated that they use digital technologies for education and shopping purposes. However, in a study conducted by Yıldırımoğlu et al., participants stated that they use the internet more for social media (Yıldırımoğlu et al., 2024, p. 167).

The use of digital technologies continues to increase day by day. The intense and prolonged use of digital technology products leads to many negative effects on individuals (Savaş and Alparslan, 2021, p. 420). The use of smart devices brings along with it a weakening of face-to-face communication, an increase in individualization, information overload, causing addiction, and many psychological disorders (Çiçek, 2023, p. 69). In the study, it is seen that participants emphasize the negative effects of digital technology in terms of physical, psychological, cognitive, and social aspects. It can be said that these negative effects may vary from individual to individual and depending on the frequency of use of digital technologies.

In the study, it was observed that the concept of digital dementia was previously unheard of by the participants. More than half of the participants did not comment on the concept. The participants who commented on the concept focused particularly on forgetfulness, concentration problems, brain laziness, and attention deficit caused by digital dementia. Kim and Kang (2013) described digital dementia as a condition where memory and calculation abilities decrease as symptoms of forgetfulness appear due to unconscious reliance on digital devices (Ahn et al., 2015, p. 39). The comments of the participants support the definition made.

The rapid spread of digital technologies has significant effects on the cognitive, psychological and social structures of individuals. In this context, the concept of digital dementia, which has emerged in recent years, refers to the negative effects of excessive dependence on digital devices on memory, attention and cognitive functions. Continuous use of digital technology leads individuals to rely on digital resources instead of memorising information, which can cause problems such as forgetfulness, distraction and cognitive laziness.

No study was found in the literature that conceptualizes and designs digital dementia both conceptually and qualitatively. In this respect, the study is considered as original and contributes new findings to the literature. Further research on this topic will contribute to a better understanding of the concept of digital dementia and filling the conceptual gap in the literature. Although many studies have been conducted on the effects of digital technologies on children's health, there are not many studies directly related to the effects on adult health. Conducting more research in this regard will contribute to a better understanding of the effects of digital technologies on cognitive health and to a clearer definition of the concept of digital dementia.

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