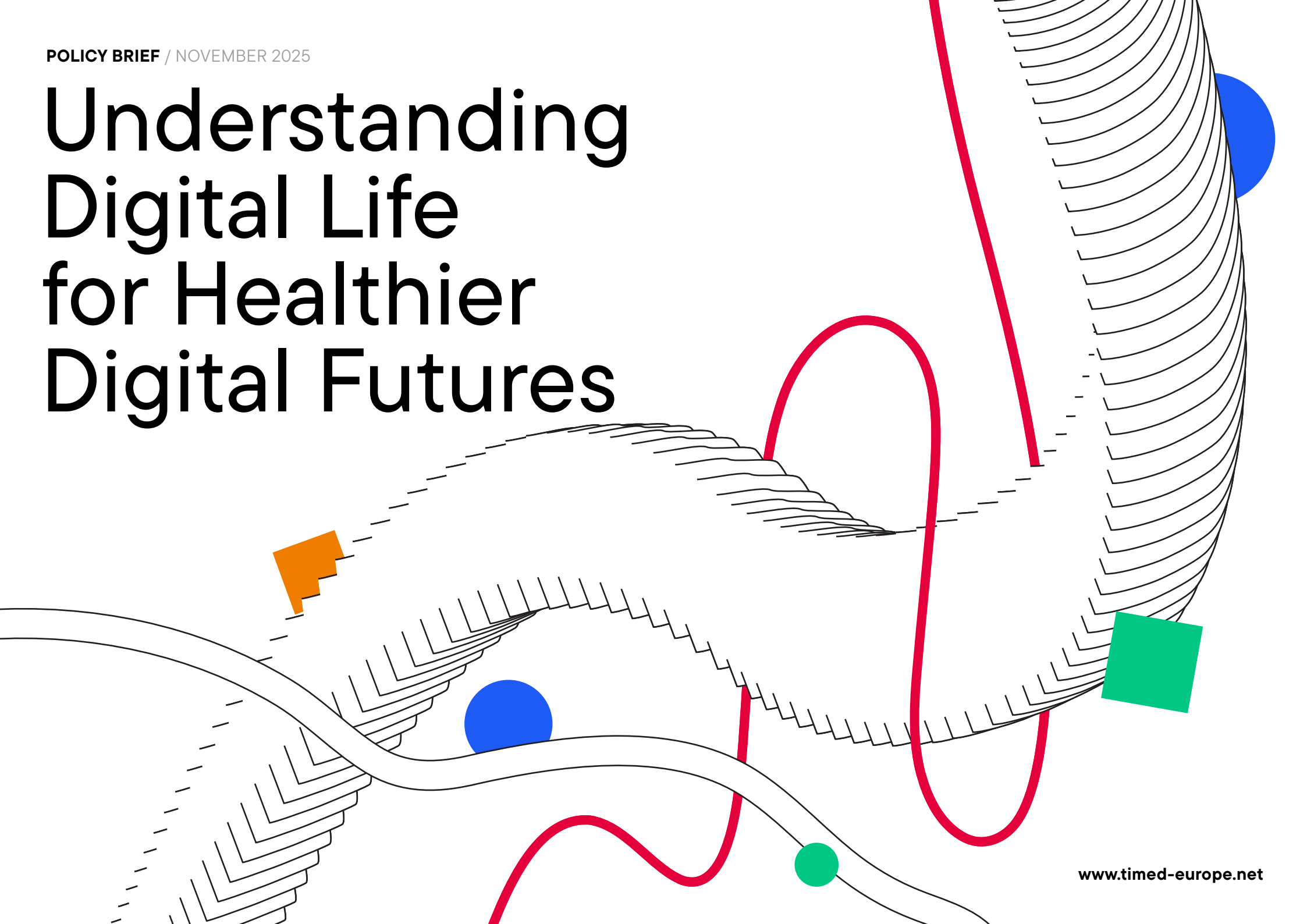
POLICY BRIEF / NOVEMBER 2025

Understanding Digital Life for Healthier Digital Futures



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Introduction

Digital technologies now permeate nearly every facet of social, economic, and personal life, transforming how people work, learn, connect, and access essential services (OECD; Beaconforce). Yet, despite these advances, 60% of EU citizens express concern about the impact of this deep digital integration on health, wellbeing, equality, and social inclusion. Whilst research has focused on screen time as a proxy for digital engagement, to truly grasp the influence of digital technology on individuals and societies, we must move beyond quantity and begin measuring the quality of people's digital experiences. Exploring how people live their digital lives—their habits, contexts, and outcomes—is essential for developing evidence-based policies and regulations that amplify the benefits of technology while mitigating its risks.

The EU-funded **TIMED** Project (**Time Experience in Europe's Digital Age**) investigated the digital practices of over 15,000 people from the UK, Spain, Germany, Poland, Switzerland, and Czechia. Interviews and questionnaires explored people's experiences with technology, assessing its impact on wellbeing, its potential to create free time, and their perceptions of what constitutes high-quality digital engagement. This policy brief presents the project's key findings and offers recommendations to guide future policies that support healthier, more inclusive digital futures.

Key findings

Digital life is deeply embedded:
In 2024, the average score for how digital everyday life is across Europe was 50, indicating a moderate level of digitalisation in daily life.

Quality matters more than quantity:
The emotional and psychological impact of digital technology is shaped more by how people feel about their engagement than by how much time they spend online.

New tools for measurement:
The Immersion in Digital Life Scale (IDLS) and Quality of Digital Experience Scale (QDES) offer more nuanced ways to assess digital engagement beyond screen time.

Positive experiences are linked to control and productivity:
Users report the highest satisfaction when digital use helps them meet personal goals and when they feel in control of their engagement.

Negative experiences stem from low-value content and time loss.
Algorithmically generated content often leads to feelings of wasted time, guilt, and regret, especially when users lose track of time.

Public perceptions influence wellbeing:
Fear-based narratives around digital use (e.g., addiction, cognitive decline) can undermine wellbeing—even when actual experiences are neutral or positive.

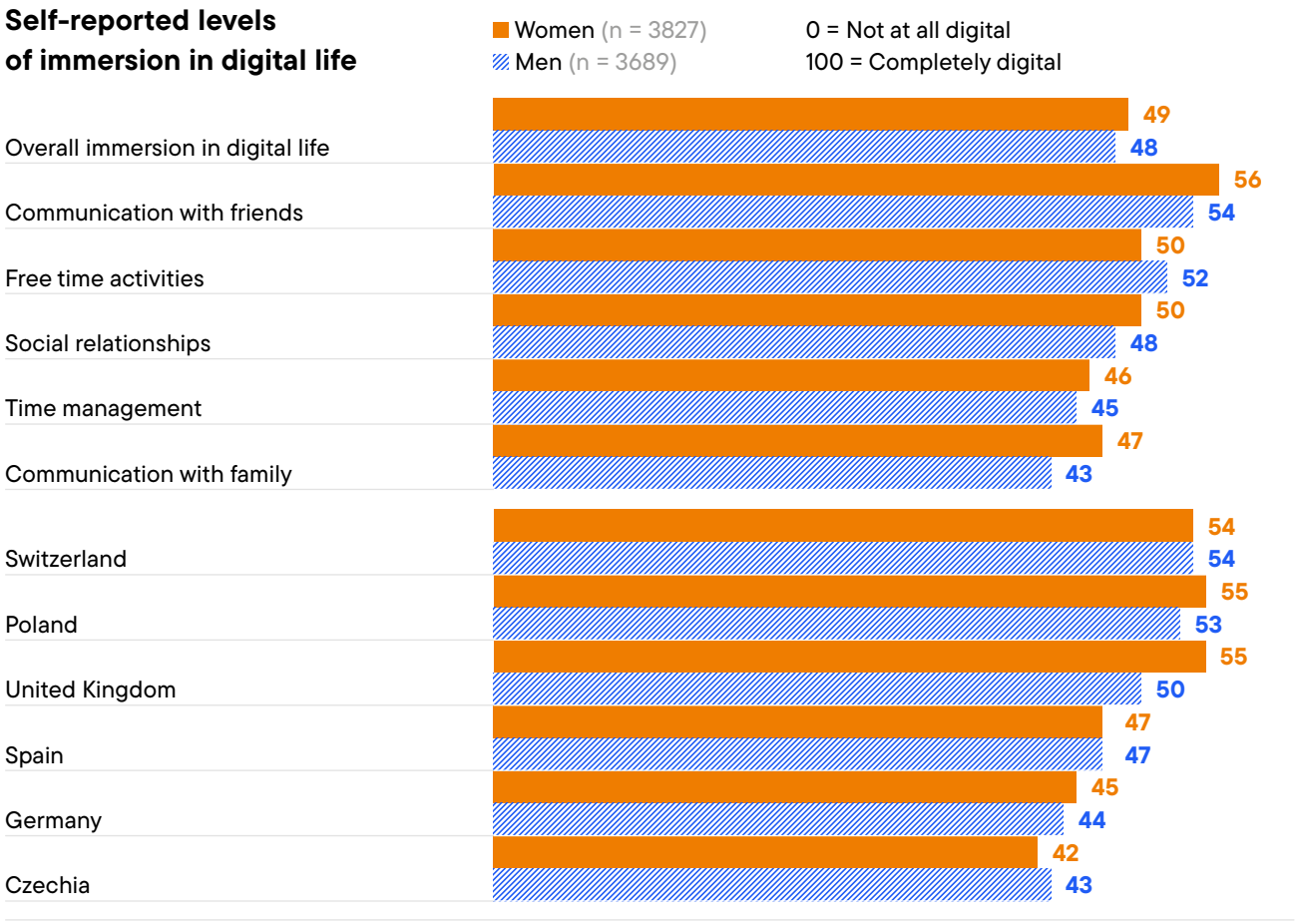
Digital engagement contributes to time poverty:
Time saved through technology is often reinvested into more tasks, increasing busyness and reducing opportunities for rest.

Time pressure is a public health issue:
It accounts for around 25% of reported symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, and is a leading cause of burnout with significant economic costs.

How digital is Europe

Existing tools for assessing digital engagement have relied heavily on measuring time spent using technology, overlooking whether digital interactions actually help individuals achieve their goals. To address this gap, we created two newly developed and validated instruments—the Immersion in Digital Life Scale (IDLS) and the Quality of Digital Experience Scale (QDES)—to offer a more nuanced approach to measuring digital technology use. The IDLS captures how deeply digital technologies are embedded in everyday life, while the QDES evaluates how digital use contributes to wellbeing, social connectedness, and time efficiency savings.

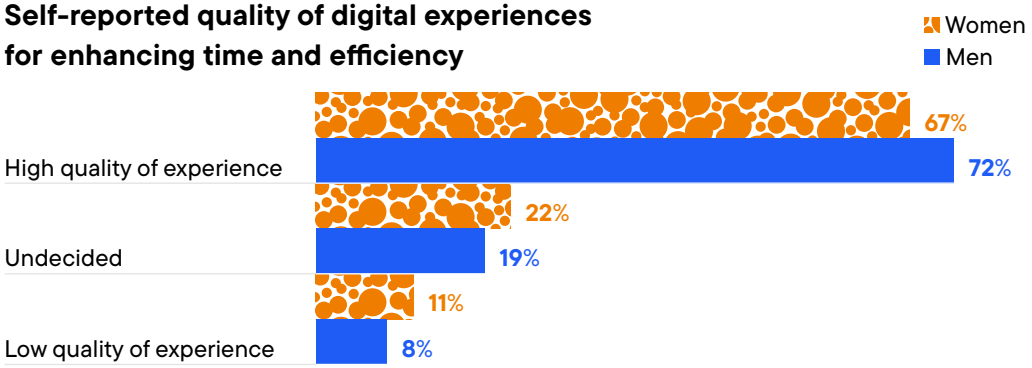
Our analysis shows that in 2024, everyday activities were conducted digitally at a moderate level.



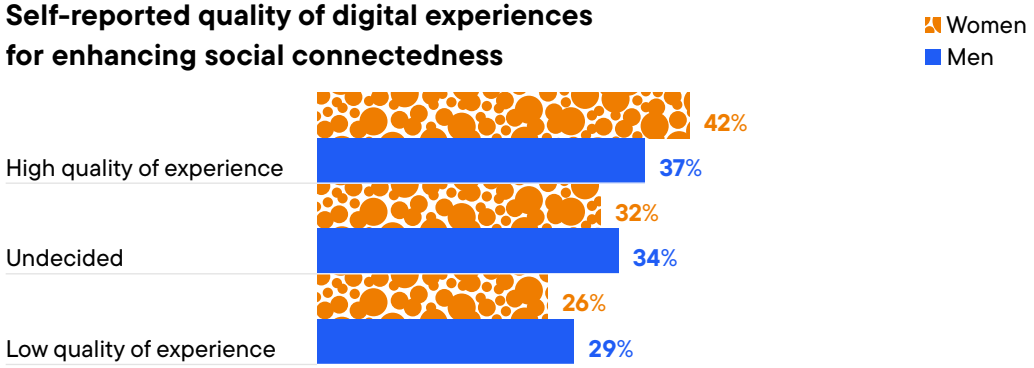
How digital is Europe

People report the highest quality of experience when using digital technology to improve efficiency and access time. Women are more likely than men to report positive experiences when using digital tools for social connection. Fewer than 30% report poor experiences in social domains, and fewer than 25% report poor experiences in wellbeing-related digital use.

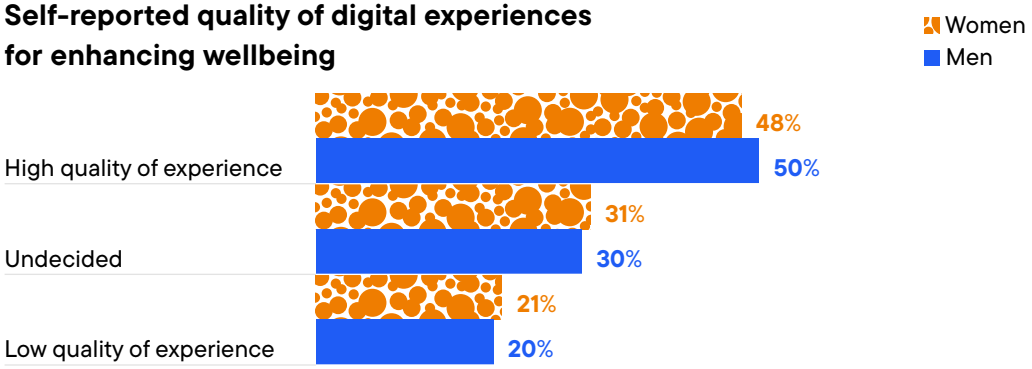
Self-reported quality of digital experiences for enhancing time and efficiency



Self-reported quality of digital experiences for enhancing social connectedness



Self-reported quality of digital experiences for enhancing wellbeing



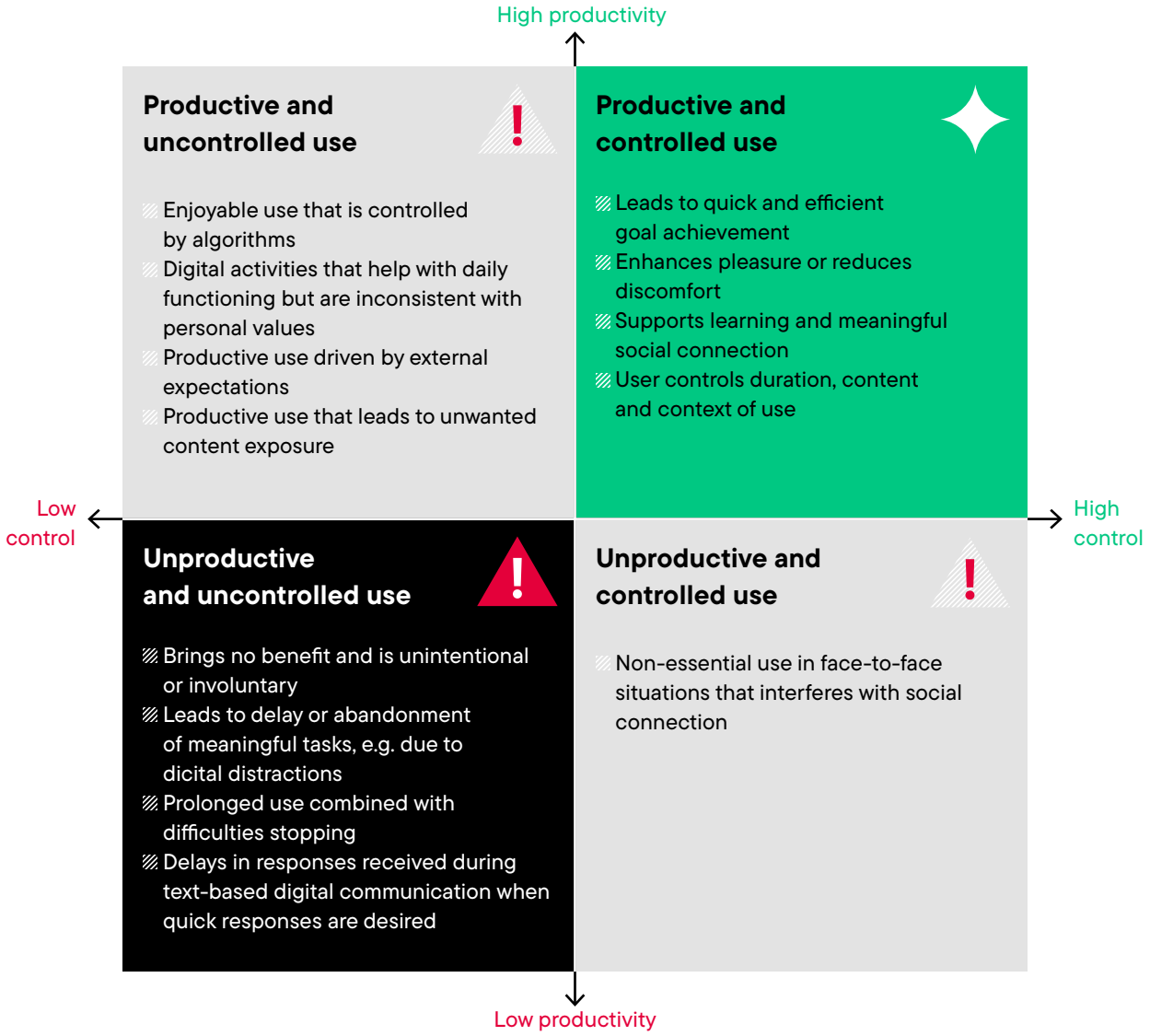
Digital technologies become increasingly embedded in everyday life. Therefore, national monitoring programmes that assess digital immersion and user experience are essential. This is important for (a) tracking their impacts on individuals and society and (b) for enabling governments and organisations to design policies that accurately reflect public behaviours and needs.

What enhances the quality of digital experiences

Our analysis of interviews with 550 people in Europe suggest that people evaluate digital experiences most positively when they feel both productive and in control of their technology use.

In this context, productivity refers to the extent to which the technology enables the user to meet their needs whether that be relaxation, entertainment, efficiency, communication or otherwise. Control refers to the extent to which users determine when, how and the duration of digital acts. Digital behaviours that combine high productivity with high control lead to the greatest satisfaction.

When productivity is high but control is low, the experience is often seen as tolerable. Conversely, low productivity paired with high control may be viewed as neutral or mildly negative.



What reduces the quality of digital experiences

The most negatively judged digital experiences occur when the user believes that the technology is not enhancing their productivity and when they are not in control of when, how and how long they use it for. Key factors which exacerbate poor experiences include:

Low-value content:

When users spend time consuming content which is perceived as low quality, inauthentic and lacking personal relevance they perceive that time to have been wasted. This is a common consequence of algorithmically generated content encountered on social media. Feeling like you have wasted time on digital technology generates feelings of guilt and regret after use.

Example quote:

> “ for me it’s a time thief... I catch myself doing it, that it would be better to read some collected thoughts... I mean on the basis that I could probably read more and bury myself in this less.

Loss of time awareness:

Users frequently report losing track of time during digital engagement, particularly with algorithmically generated content. This contributes to overuse, a sense of dysregulation, and a strong desire to regain control over their digital time.

Example quote:

> “ You’re sitting there and suddenly find out you’ve been on Instagram for half an hour, and you don’t even know what happened. That’s what scares me about it.

Public perceptions:

Some regret and guilt about time spent on digital technology appears to stem more from a general belief that it is harmful, rather than from direct personal experiences of negative consequences. Public concerns about the harms of technology (addiction, “brain rot” and loss of attentional capacity) are not always evidence-based. These fears discourage people from openly recognising the benefit they experience when using digital technology for relaxation and downtime.

Critically, no one form of digital technology use is universally “good” or “bad”. Appraisal of a digital act is based on the immediate context and momentary goals. What is “bad” in one context, may be “good” in another.

The consequences of digitalisation

Increased time poverty:

While digital technologies are designed to enhance efficiency, our research shows they can also contribute to increased time poverty. Individuals are often averse to having unfilled time and tend to reinvest time saved through technology into additional tasks, resulting in heightened busyness. This effect is compounded by blurred boundaries between work and personal life, which further reduces opportunities for rest and recovery. This presents a significant public health concern.

Our research indicates that time pressure accounts for approximately 25% of reported symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. The impact of digital technology on time poverty may be particularly problematic for women, who already face greater time poverty due to disproportionate responsibilities in unpaid care and domestic work.

Impact on wellbeing:

Our research suggests that the emotional and psychological impact of digital technology use is shaped more by how individuals feel about their engagement than by how much time they spend online. While greater immersion in digital life is associated with increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, these relationships are relatively weak. Importantly, in all countries except Poland, a high-quality digital experience is positively linked to greater life satisfaction.

When digital technologies are perceived to support personal goals such as social connection or enjoyment, users report higher satisfaction. Conversely, problematic internet use only reduces life satisfaction when it leads to emotional discomfort. However, many individuals assume that digital technology is inherently harmful, often expressing fears about addiction, reduced attention span, and cognitive decline. These perceptions, shaped by public and media narratives, can prevent people from acknowledging the positive aspects of digital engagement.

As a result, even neutral or beneficial use may be followed by feelings of guilt and regret, further undermining wellbeing.

Recommendations

1. Embedding digital experience into national monitoring

To inform effective policy and infrastructure planning, governments must move beyond measuring screen time and begin assessing the quality of digital experiences. Long-term national monitoring using validated tools such as the IDLS and QDES can provide a holistic view of digital engagement. This approach will enable the development of evidence-based policies that reflect how people actually use and experience technology—supporting wellbeing, productivity, and meaningful digital participation across society.

2. Reframing digital success metrics

Improving the quality of digital content requires a sector-wide shift in how success is defined. Currently, platform performance is often measured by time spent, despite evidence that extended digital engagement is linked to lower user satisfaction. Users value digital technology most when it helps them achieve personal goals. A user-centred approach to evaluating success—focused on experience quality rather than duration—is essential for guiding algorithm design, content development, and sector standards. This shift can support more intentional engagement and help address public concerns around regretful or excessive use.

3. Embedding time-awareness into digital design

To reduce regretful and excessive digital engagement, policymakers should require platforms to incorporate time-awareness features that support user control. Loss of temporal awareness is a key driver of prolonged and unintended use. Introducing digital "nudge" functions such as optional time reminders or prompts to pause activity can help users make more conscious decisions about their engagement. These features should be standard across platforms, with flexible settings that allow users to activate or deactivate them based on personal preference. Such structural changes can support healthier digital habits and improve overall user wellbeing.

4. Public guidance for healthy digital engagement

To support wellbeing in an increasingly digital society, governments should invest in evidence-based public information that helps individuals navigate technology use in meaningful and healthy ways. Current negative narratives—often focused on addiction and "brain rot"—can discourage open discussion of the benefits of digital technology, particularly for relaxation and personal enrichment. Non-prescriptive, accessible guidance that empowers individuals to identify and choose personally valuable forms of digital engagement is essential. Such messaging should highlight the role of perceived productivity and control in shaping positive digital experiences and help alleviate public fears around overuse and harm..

5. Reduce time poverty to safeguard public wellbeing

Chronic time pressure should be recognized as a major public health concern due to its strong links to poor mental health, diminished wellbeing, and its role as a leading cause of burnout. The economic costs—through lost productivity, increased absenteeism, and workforce attrition—are significant. Digital technologies often intensify time pressure by eroding boundaries between work and personal life, with women disproportionately affected due to unequal caregiving responsibilities. To address this, workplace policies must promote digital disconnection and set realistic expectations around remote work and availability, helping to reduce time poverty and foster healthier, more equitable working lives.

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