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# Too amused to stop? Self-control and the disengagement process on Netflix

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## Abstract

Consuming media entertainment often challenges recipients' self-control. While past research related self-control almost exclusively to whether individuals engage in media use, it might be equally relevant for the *disengagement* from media use. Testing core assumptions of the Appraisal of Media Use, Self-Control, and Entertainment (AMUSE) model, the present study investigates the situational interplay of self-control and affective appraisals in predicting disengagement from Netflix use. Preregistered hypotheses were tested based on an event-contingent experience sampling design, in which 205 adult Netflix users in the Netherlands and Germany were tracked and surveyed for two weeks. Results demonstrate that disengagement is contingent upon enjoyment and appreciation and that enjoyment, in turn, can be "spoiled" by feeling guilty. Self-control influenced goal conflict and enjoyment throughout the reception process. We discuss opportunities for modeling disengagement from media use with situational research approaches.

**Keywords:** disengagement, experience sampling, media entertainment, Netflix, self-control.

The use of media entertainment on social media and streaming services like Netflix is ubiquitous in everyday life, yet many users feel they have problems controlling their own use (Vanden Abeele et al., 2022). Streaming appears to be particularly appealing, often resulting in longer viewing sessions than intended (Granow et al., 2018; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Indeed, series viewing and other forms of media entertainment consumption are perceived as temptations that users often succumb to despite conflicting goals (de Feijter et al., 2016; Hofmann et al., 2012). In such situations, users can muster *self-control*—the ability to guide behavior in a goal-directed manner (Kotabe & Hofmann, 2015). So far, self-control has mostly been examined as a self-regulatory mechanism that affects whether users engage in (i.e., *start*) media use under conditions of goal conflict. We, however, argue that the predominant focus of past research on the media selection phase misses another important intervention point for self-control: the *disengagement* from media use. Ultimately, media use does not turn into uncontrolled "binge watching" or "binge scrolling" if recipients find the right time to stop. The present research aims to fill this gap.

The *Appraisal of Media Use, Self-Control, and Entertainment* (AMUSE) model (Reinecke & Meier, 2021) proposes that besides its influence on media use engagement, self-control modulates how users disengage from (i.e., *stop*) media use. Qualitative evidence, for example, suggests that nearly half of all entertainment viewing sessions turn out longer than intended, and that in about one-third of viewing sessions, users find it hard to stop watching (de Feijter et al., 2016). In contemporary media environments, where large amounts of personalized content are permanently available and experienced as highly entertaining (e.g., Baumgartner &

Kühne, 2024; Flayelle et al., 2020a; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015), there is a lack of structural stopping cues typical for traditional media formats (Wonneberger et al., 2009). Together, these findings suggest that stopping media use at the right time is at least as challenging for self-control as avoiding starting media use at the wrong time.

The present study thus investigates the role of self-control beyond the initial media selection phase. Testing core assumptions of the AMUSE model (Reinecke & Meier, 2021), we aim to uncover how the interplay of self-control and affective appraisals drives disengagement from media use. We apply an event-contingent experience sampling method (ESM) that combines digital trace data with in situ surveys of 205 Netflix users. We choose to investigate disengagement from entertainment media use on Netflix, because (a) Netflix represents a media offering that is optimized for entertainment experience and, thus, frequently perceived as challenging for users' self-control and (b) it allowed us to leverage unobtrusive tracking data.

The processes of disengagement under investigation in the present study are arguably particularly prominent in the context of entertainment use, yet have wide-reaching implications also for other fields of communication research. The ubiquity of digital media content as well as growing levels of personalization and algorithmic curation that may impair self-control over media use are by no means restricted to entertainment media, but extend to various other contexts, such as journalistic content, political communication, or online social interaction (Vorderer et al., 2018). Correspondingly, self-regulatory difficulties to disengage from media use are widely documented beyond the entertainment context, for example in the form of "doomscrolling" of negative news (Sharma et al., 2022),

increased levels of online vigilance (Reinecke et al., 2018), or excessive forms of social media use (Vanden Abeele et al., 2022). Successful or unsuccessful disengagement experiences in everyday situations could, thus, have downstream influences on more stable perceptions of digital well-being or ill-being and selection or avoidance behaviors of particular media (content) that are relevant beyond entertainment fare. In the following, we will explicate why the study of disengagement is integral to understand self-regulated and unregulated forms of media use.

### A case for modeling media use disengagement

Permanently available media entertainment such as streaming services is often tempting to recipients. Past research demonstrates that entertainment viewing frequently results in prolonged use sessions that have been described as “binge-watching” (e.g., Granow et al., 2018, p. 392), and characterized recipients as “couch potatoes” (e.g., Reinecke et al., 2014, p. 569) who sometimes have little control over their media use. In this context, self-control has received increased research attention, specifically regarding its role during the selection and initiation of media use (e.g., Eden et al., 2018; Johnson, 2020). *Self-control* generally refers to the ability to guide one’s cognitive responses and behaviors to resolve *goal conflicts* between competing tasks and goals, for example, by resisting impulsive tendencies or initiating goal-conducive actions (Inzlicht et al., 2021). In the case of media use, this could, for example, mean that users resist the urge to watch Netflix when tired and go to bed instead. While self-control is a trait that varies between individuals (Hofmann et al., 2008), it can also vary *situationally*, depending on current (a) cognitive *capacity* and (b) *motivation* which individuals possess to control their behavior (Kotabe & Hofmann, 2015).

While self-control is indeed relevant for the initiation of media entertainment use, little is known about the role of self-control throughout reception, particularly toward the end of a media use session. We argue that the lack of research on the role of self-control for *disengagement* from media use represents a central research gap for two reasons.

First, contemporary forms of digital media entertainment may arguably challenge users’ self-control more than traditional formats. Media entertainment content is increasingly permanently available online and algorithmically curated to fit individual preferences (Flayelle et al., 2023). This optimization for readily available entertainment gratifications encourages recipients to view entertainment content longer and can make disengagement more challenging (Anderson & Wood, 2021; Shim et al., 2018). Besides the ubiquity and personalization of entertainment on streaming platforms, it is also structurally different from earlier mass entertainment. Traditional television formats, for example, are interrupted regularly by commercials. This breaks up the viewing process and allows users to check in with their viewing behavior (Wonneberger et al., 2009). Online streaming platforms, on the other hand, often purposefully reduce structural stopping cues to encourage prolonged viewing. Standard subscriptions to Netflix, for example, do not interrupt the viewing experience with commercials, and new episodes automatically start playing after the previous episode has finished. This may result in extended viewing sessions and require extra self-control to disengage from viewing.

Relatedly, situational approaches to the study of entertainment viewing show that besides the selection phase, self-control might be relevant throughout the reception phase and for the

disengagement from entertainment viewing. Specifically, goal conflicts increase during entertainment viewing and predict when recipients stop watching (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024). In qualitative interviews, recipients similarly report to encounter difficulties disengaging from entertainment viewing (de Feijter et al., 2016), suggesting that media use can challenge self-control throughout the reception phase.

Second, modeling disengagement can extend insights into predictors and characteristics of self-control failure during media use. So far, self-control failure has usually been conceptualized as the engagement in media use despite goal conflict (Du et al., 2018) and, accordingly, interventions such as digital detox mainly target the initiation of media use (e.g., Radtke et al., 2022). However, self-control efforts could also fail if recipients are unable to disengage from media use as it starts to conflict with other goals, for example, when it is time to go to sleep. Investigating disengagement from media use can thus help to design interventions that consider the full range of self-control strategies.

Research on disengagement from media entertainment use is scarce. Processual studies of traditional television use focus on program choice during reception but do not attempt to predict disengagement (Wonneberger et al., 2009). Furthermore, investigations of temporal and social predictors (e.g., time of day, partner activities) of initiation and termination of television use do not account for viewing outside of the dyadic context or today’s media environment (Westerik et al., 2005). As argued above, the features of contemporary entertainment viewing may render self-control more relevant for disengagement compared to traditional mass entertainment. We therefore draw on the recently proposed AMUSE model (Reinecke & Meier, 2021) to investigate the roles of self-control and its downstream influences on goal conflict, feelings of guilt, and entertainment experience in the disengagement process.

### Dual affective appraisal process of disengagement

Past research demonstrated that self-control is linked to the use of media entertainment in various ways (e.g., Eden et al., 2018; Hofmann et al., 2016; Johnson, 2020), yet theoretical approaches to self-control and entertainment have long remained disjunct. The AMUSE model integrates those approaches, proposing a complex interplay of situational self-control and entertainment use in all phases of media selection, reception, and effects (Reinecke & Meier, 2021). Importantly, the model conceptualizes a *dual affective appraisal* process occurring in the reception phase of entertainment use: First-layer appraisal processes capture the affective reaction to *media content* leading to hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment experiences. Second-layer appraisal processes conversely describe that besides media content, recipients also appraise the *media use activity* itself, experiencing guilt when the activity conflicts with other goals. Ultimately, the two affective appraisals of entertainment experience and guilt are postulated as central predictors of whether users continue or disengage from media use.

In the present study, we particularly focus on the interplay of self-control and the second-layer appraisal process, that is, recipients’ appraisal of the media activity itself. While we do not directly test the effects of self-control on the complete first layer of content appraisal explicated in the AMUSE model (for the latter, see Gilbert et al., 2023), our work indirectly informs on this branch of the AMUSE model by

investigating the role of entertainment experience for disengagement. In the following, we will explicate relevant parts of both appraisals (i.e., content and activity) in their relation to entertainment experience, guilt, and disengagement.

### Entertainment experience as content appraisal

Entertainment viewing is associated with various entertainment gratifications (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024; Flayelle et al., 2020a; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Wirz et al., 2023). This entails both the hedonic *enjoyment* of media content as fun and suspenseful as well as the eudaimonic feeling of *appreciation*, that is being moved by media content experienced as meaningful and thought-provoking (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). The AMUSE model posits that this entertainment experience represents recipients' first-layer appraisal of the media content, and directly informs their decision of whether to disengage from entertainment viewing or to continue watching. Specifically, entertainment experience functions as feedback to the recipient that their needs and personal growth goals are being satisfied. The recipient should followingly be motivated to continue media use until the goals are fully met (Hartmann, 2013). In turn, when entertainment experience is low or declining, disengagement should become more likely (Reinecke & Meier, 2021). Indeed, both enjoyment (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024; Erdmann & Dienlin, 2022; Granow et al., 2018; Merrill, Jr. & Rubenking, 2019) and appreciation (Tukachinsky & Eyal, 2018) are positively associated with viewing duration in cross-sectional as well as situational research. Only few studies find mixed results, which is predominantly the case for experimental studies and raises methodological questions about stimulus choice (Czichon, 2019) and externally controlled viewing settings (Horvath et al., 2017; Wirz et al., 2023) in laboratory research on entertainment. Finally, one situational study explicitly investigated predictors of disengagement, finding that enjoyment lowers the likelihood that recipients stop viewing (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024). Following the AMUSE model and previous empirical findings, we thus expect that:

*H1: (a) Enjoyment and (b) appreciation are negatively related to media use disengagement in the same viewing episode.*

### Guilt as activity appraisal

Beyond entertainment experience as a first-layer appraisal relevant for disengagement, the AMUSE model proposes a second-layer appraisal in which recipients evaluate the media use activity per se. Based on whether recipients evaluate the activity of entertainment viewing to be goal-conducive or conflicting with other goals, they might experience guilt as an affective appraisal which should increase the likelihood of disengaging from entertainment viewing (Reinecke & Meier, 2021).

Indeed, media use frequently conflicts with other goals such as productivity (Hofmann et al., 2012). In the case of entertainment viewing, nearly half of all use episodes are accompanied by some degree of goal conflict (Lades et al., 2022). Importantly, the appraisal of goal conflict over the course of entertainment viewing has been associated with increased feelings of *guilt* (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024; de Feijter et al., 2016; Granow et al., 2018; Lades et al., 2022). The negative self-conscious emotion guilt occurs when

(media use) behavior is perceived to be incongruent with personal goals or standards (Tracy & Robins, 2004). This could be the case, for instance, when recipients perceive entertainment viewing as a waste of time. In that scenario, recipients would fail to control their behavior toward higher-order goals such as professional achievement or more meaningful leisure activities and instead favor immediate gratification such as watching Netflix. In an event reconstruction study, goal conflict explained 60% of the association between self-control and guilt about entertainment viewing (Lades et al., 2022). In line with the AMUSE model (Reinecke & Meier, 2021), we accordingly expect that:

*H2: Goal conflict is positively related to guilt in the same viewing episode.*

The relevance of guilt for the disengagement process lies in its motivational component: Appraisals of guilt signal to the individual that their current behavior conflicts with personal goals or standards and thus motivate behavioral adjustment (Tracy & Robins, 2004). In the context of social media use, for instance, guilt predicts intentions to discontinue usage (e.g., Vaghefi et al., 2020). Evidence on actual behavior beyond behavioral intentions and on entertainment viewing, though, is largely missing. In one situational study of entertainment viewing, guilt increased with viewing duration, yet did not emerge as a significant predictor of disengagement (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024; also see Lades et al., 2022). Qualitative evidence mirrors the finding that guilt associates with prolonged viewing, suggesting the motivation for behavioral adjustment to accumulate throughout the viewing process (Steiner & Xu, 2020). As the AMUSE model also proposes the motivational component of guilt to increase the likelihood of disengagement from media use (Reinecke & Meier, 2021), we pose the following hypothesis:

*H3: Guilt is positively related to media use disengagement in the same viewing episode.*

Besides direct effects on disengagement, guilt may be relevant in the disengagement process because it can decrease entertainment experience by "spoiling the pleasure" (Hofmann et al., 2013). The insight that self-control failures and accompanying negative self-conscious emotions can lower momentary happiness has been transferred to the entertainment context in the AMUSE model, thus extending previous entertainment models (Reinecke & Meier, 2021). In studies on various media (e.g., television, social media, gaming) guilt lowered media enjoyment (Myrick, 2015; Reinecke et al., 2014; Reinecke & Hofmann, 2016). In the context of entertainment viewing, on the other hand, findings are mixed. Some studies find no association between guilt and enjoyment (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024; Granow et al., 2018), while others do (Erdmann & Dienlin, 2022).

Similar to enjoyment, appreciation as the eudaimonic side of entertainment experience may be reduced by guilt. To our knowledge, no empirical test of the spoiled pleasure hypothesis exists for appreciation yet. As appreciation and guilt both build on personal values and identity goals (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Tracy & Robins, 2004), we expect feelings of guilt to negatively influence the experience of appreciation. Alongside the AMUSE model (Reinecke & Meier, 2021),

we assume that guilt is negatively associated with entertainment experience:

*H4: Guilt is negatively related to (a) enjoyment and (b) appreciation in the same viewing episode.*

### The role of self-control for disengagement

In sum, affective appraisals of hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment experience may “pull” recipients into pleasurable and meaningful viewing sessions, whereas affective appraisals of guilt may “push” recipients toward disengagement from entertainment viewing. Importantly, the AMUSE model explicates that situational self-control can influence both (a) the occurrence of these affective appraisals in the first place and (b) the weights of each appraisal in the disengagement process (Reinecke & Meier, 2021). Put differently, high self-control at the beginning of an entertainment use episode should be related to lower levels of goal conflict (which is associated with guilt), whereas during reception, the level of self-control would moderate the influence of entertainment experience and guilt on disengagement. This assumes that self-control may vary over the course of media use, for example, because recipients get tired while watching Netflix and thus have less self-control capacity and motivation after one hour of watching compared to the beginning of the viewing session. Both influences of situational self-control on the dual appraisal process of disengagement will be explained in the following.

First, levels of self-control at the beginning of a media use episode (i.e., *pre-use* self-control) are relevant to eventual disengagement from entertainment use because they set the stage for the role that goal conflicts and subsequent guilt appraisals play in the disengagement process. Prior research demonstrates that under conditions of low self-control, recipients are more likely to initiate media use that conflicts with other goals. Media use generally, and entertainment viewing specifically, represent a frequent desire that is hard to resist (Hofmann et al., 2012; Lades et al., 2022). Accordingly, situational studies have connected media use to a higher probability of self-control failure than other desires (Delaney & Lades, 2017; Hofmann et al., 2012). Similarly, low self-control is associated with both motivation for and frequency of engaging in excessive entertainment viewing in survey studies (Hasan et al., 2018; Merrill, Jr. & Rubenking, 2019; Tukachinsky & Eyal, 2018). On the flipside, high self-control is negatively linked to goal conflicts associated with viewing (Lades et al., 2022). Only few studies find inconsistent or no associations (Rubenking & Bracken, 2018; Tefertiller & Maxwell, 2018). In line with the AMUSE model, we therefore expect self-control at the beginning of a media use episode to be inversely correlated with goal conflict during entertainment viewing:

*H5: (a) Pre-use self-control capacity and (b) pre-use self-control motivation are negatively related to goal conflict while viewing.*

Second, besides the influence of pre-use self-control on the occurrence of appraisals that can drive disengagement, the AMUSE model postulates that self-control during the reception phase (i.e., *within-use* self-control) moderates the relationship between affective appraisals and disengagement.

Under conditions of high within-use self-control, media users should favor higher-order goals over immediate gratifications. This means that during reception they would follow the push factor of guilt in a goal-conductive direction and be influenced less by the pull factor of entertainment experience in the decision of whether to disengage from entertainment viewing or not (Reinecke & Meier, 2021). Indeed, high self-control can help to translate affective appraisals such as guilt or entertainment experience into goal-conductive behavior change (Inzlicht et al., 2014). Conversely, research found that individuals favor immediate gratifications in situations when self-control is low (e.g., Hofmann et al., 2012; Sirois & Pychyl, 2013). Low self-control has, for example, been associated with procrastinatory media use through which recipients postpone other tasks (Exelmans & van den Bulck, 2021).

Specific to entertainment viewing, low self-control relates to higher guilt after prolonged use in an event reconstruction study (Lades et al., 2022). Survey research similarly identifies self-control as a moderator of the relationship between feelings of guilt and prolonged viewing (Shim et al., 2018). Studies that apply inhibition and delay discounting tasks find that when self-control is low, users exhibit lower sensitivity to costs of continued watching and less disengagement from viewing (Dieterich et al., 2021), but this difference to conditions of high self-control is not statistically significant in all accounts (Flayelle et al., 2020b). Consequently, we expect within-use self-control to moderate the influence of entertainment experience and guilt on disengagement:

*H6: Within-use self-control capacity and within-use self-control motivation moderate the influence of (a) enjoyment, (b) appreciation, and (c) guilt on media use disengagement in the same viewing episode, such that under high self-control the influence of enjoyment and appreciation on disengagement is lower while the influence of guilt on disengagement is higher.*

All hypotheses are summarized in Figure 1.

### Method

The conceptual model was tested with data from an event-contingent ESM design. The study design and hypotheses were preregistered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at <https://osf.io/zujda> and received ethical approval at the University of Amsterdam.

### Participants and procedure

We recruited 298 adult Netflix users between March and May 2022 through behavioral science lab facilities and through e-mail lists at one Dutch and two German universities. An intake survey assessed descriptive and exploratory person-level variables. Participants were subsequently instructed to install the Chrome browser extension BWDAT (Cordeiro et al., 2021) which tracked their in-browser use of the online streaming service Netflix and to exclusively use the Chrome browser when watching Netflix during the next two weeks. Based on this behavioral data, the ESM surveys were triggered: (a) When participants opened a Netflix tab, a *pre-use* survey of eight items was administered ( $T_{pre} = 1,752$ ). (b) When finishing a Netflix episode, participants answered 13 items in a *within-use* survey ( $T_{within} = 1,950$ ). (c) When

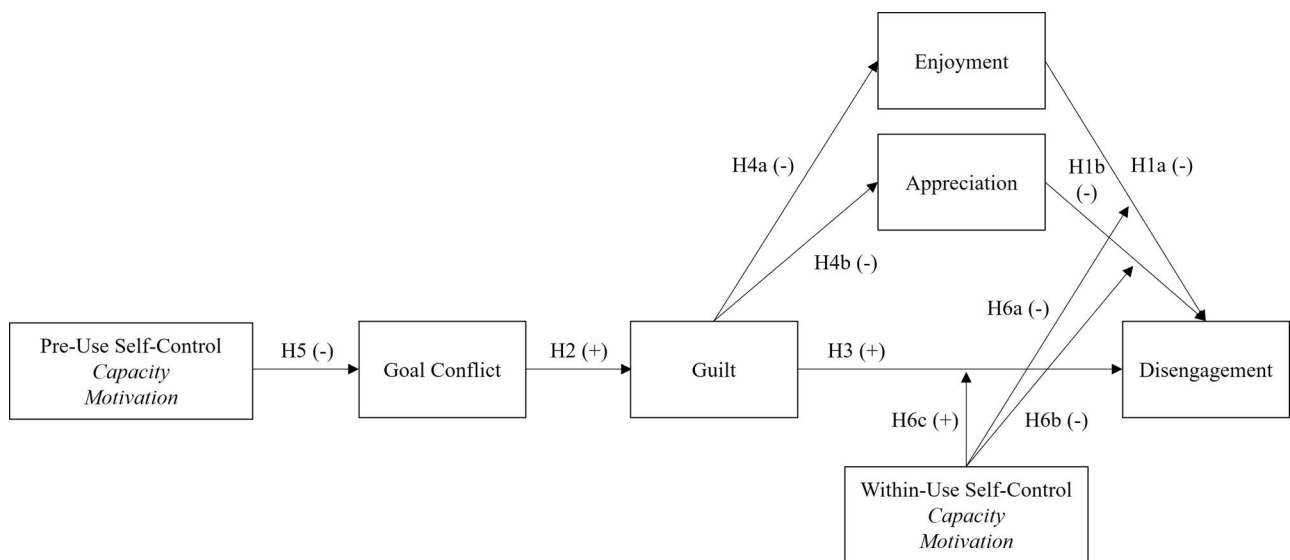


Figure 1. Proposed research model.

closing a Netflix tab, a *post-use* survey of five items was triggered ( $T_{\text{post}} = 1,123$ ). The ESM surveys each took 33 s on average to complete. Compliance with the ESM surveys was defined as the number of self-reported surveys divided by the number of behavioral observations logged by the BWDAT software and was, on average, 65% for pre-use surveys, 50% for within-use surveys, and 60% for post-use surveys. An exit survey on the last day of the study assessed additional control variables among the remaining 220 participants.

Based on their compliance, participants could receive a compensation of up to €15 or 1 research credit. When choosing a monetary compensation, €2.50 was paid for filling in the intake survey, €5 each for answering surveys in week 1 and week 2, respectively, and an additional €2.50 for filling in the exit survey. When choosing a compensation with research credits, participants received 0.5 research credit for filling in the intake survey and answering surveys in week 1, and an additional 0.5 research credit for answering surveys in week 2. After the first week, we sent a reminder via e-mail to increase compliance.

To ensure data quality for the multilevel analysis, we removed those participants from further analysis that provided fewer than two within-use surveys, resulting in a final sample consisting of  $n = 205$  participants,  $T_{\text{pre}} = 1,519$  pre-use surveys,  $T_{\text{within}} = 1,924$  within-use surveys, and  $T_{\text{post}} = 1,022$  post-use surveys. Participants in the final sample were predominantly young ( $M = 21.31$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ), women (82%), and university students (90%). A majority of the sample reported to use Netflix at least multiple times a week (86%). In the sampling period, participants engaged in 8.27 viewing sessions on average ( $SD = 6.51$ , range = 1–32), while a typical viewing session consisted of 1.71 episodes ( $SD = 1.35$ , range = 1–14). Sixty-three percent of sessions in the sample consisted of only one episode.

## Measures

All constructs included in the hypotheses were measured in the pre-use and within-use ESM surveys with seven-point agreement scales unless indicated otherwise. Detailed information on all measures, including exploratory variables from

the intake, post-use and exit surveys,<sup>1</sup> which are not included in our hypothesis tests, is available at <https://osf.io/p5qzcl>.

## Pre-use surveys

When participants opened a Netflix tab, we assessed *self-control capacity* with three semantic differentials (Schnauber-Stockmann et al., 2018) ranging from one to seven, for instance, “mentally exhausted”–“mentally rested.” The items were averaged into an index ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ) that demonstrated good reliability (within-person: Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .81$ , McDonald’s  $\omega = .82$ ; between-person:  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $\omega = .91$ ). *Self-control motivation* was measured with three items developed for the current study based on Kotabe and Hofmann (2015), for example: “Right now, I am motivated to keep my impulses under control.” The index was reliable ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ , within-person:  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $\omega = .90$ ; between-person:  $\alpha = .98$ ,  $\omega = .98$ ).

## Within-use surveys

When participants finished watching a Netflix episode, we assessed seven constructs. First, a single item measuring *goal conflict* was adapted from Baumgartner and Kühne (2024): “I feel that my current Netflix usage has conflicted with other goals (e.g., working, sleeping, exercising, academic activities, etc.)” ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ). Feelings of *guilt* were assessed with a single item from Halfmann et al.’s (2021) adaptation of the SSGS Guilt Subscale (Marshall et al., 1994): “I have a guilty conscience for just having watched Netflix” ( $M = 2.39$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ). Entertainment experience was operationalized (a) as *enjoyment*, applying a single item from the Enjoyment Scale by Oliver and Bartsch (2010) (“It was fun for me to watch this Netflix episode,”  $M = 5.52$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) and (b) as *appreciation*, which we measured with a single item from the Appreciation Scale by Oliver and Bartsch (2010) (“I personally found the Netflix episode to be meaningful,”  $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ). *Self-control capacity* ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ , within-person:  $\alpha = .83$ ,  $\omega = .83$ ; between-person:  $\alpha = .95$ ,  $\omega = .95$ ) and *self-control motivation* ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ , within-person:  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $\omega = .91$ ; between-person:  $\alpha = .99$ ,  $\omega = .99$ ) were assessed in the same manner as in the pre-use surveys. Finally, a binary variable indicating whether

*disengagement* occurred after watching a Netflix episode (1) or not (0) was created based on the information which survey was answered (i.e., pre-use or post-use survey) after a within-use survey was recorded. In 46% of cases, participants disengaged from watching after the current episode. We assessed the control variables age and gender in the intake survey, and perceived academic strain during the study period in the exit survey.

### Data analysis

The data, analysis script, and descriptive analyses are available at <https://osf.io/p5qzc/>. In the data, observations (level 1) are nested within individuals (level 2). We therefore conducted multilevel analysis in R (version 4.2.1) with the lme4 package (version 1.1-34). Intraclass correlations ranging between .13 and .50 indicate that between one eighth and up to half of all variation in the respective dependent variable can be explained by between-person differences. Hypotheses were tested through random effects within-between models that allow to distinguish between- and within-person effects (Bell et al., 2019). For this purpose, we grand-mean centered level 2 predictors and group-mean centered level 1 predictors around their respective person means. The person means were additionally reintroduced to the regression as grand-mean centered level 2 variables. In the confirmatory analysis, the individual Netflix episode was the unit of analysis. Pre-use self-control measured when opening Netflix was used to predict goal conflict for each episode within a session. All other relationships between variables were analyzed within the same episode without lags. All models were specified to include a random intercept and fixed slopes. When demonstrating significantly better fit, we let slopes vary to inspect possible effect heterogeneity. As robustness checks, we tested each model again with the control variables age, gender, and perceived academic strain and without participants achieving a response rate < 0.25.

## Results

### Confirmatory analysis

To elucidate the influence of different affective appraisals on media use disengagement, we first tested the assumptions that entertainment experience would negatively relate to disengagement (H1), while feelings of guilt would be positively associated with disengagement (H3) in a logistic model. Indeed, statistically significant within-person relationships with disengagement emerged for enjoyment ( $b = -0.12$ , 95% CI [-0.23, -0.01]) and appreciation ( $b = 0.11$ , 95% CI [0.03, 0.21]; see Figure 2 for all results). The latter was however in opposite direction to the hypothesis and the between-person associations for both enjoyment and appreciation did not reach statistical significance. H1a is thus partially supported, while H1b is not. The affective appraisal of guilt, in turn, did not significantly relate to disengagement either, providing no support for H3.

To further inspect guilt appraisals, we tested the hypothesis that goal conflict positively relates to guilt (H2). Here, we allowed slopes to vary as the varying-effects model fitted the data better than the fixed-effects model (see OSF for details). Providing support for H2, both within-person ( $b = 0.53$ , 95% CI [0.48, 0.59]) and between-person ( $b = 0.69$ , 95% CI [0.63, 0.76]) differences in goal conflict were positively associated with guilt. Beyond that, the predicted slopes

demonstrated some degree of heterogeneity (see OSF). For some people, the relationship between goal conflict and guilt was thus more pronounced than for others, in that they felt more guilt even when goal conflict was low in intensity.

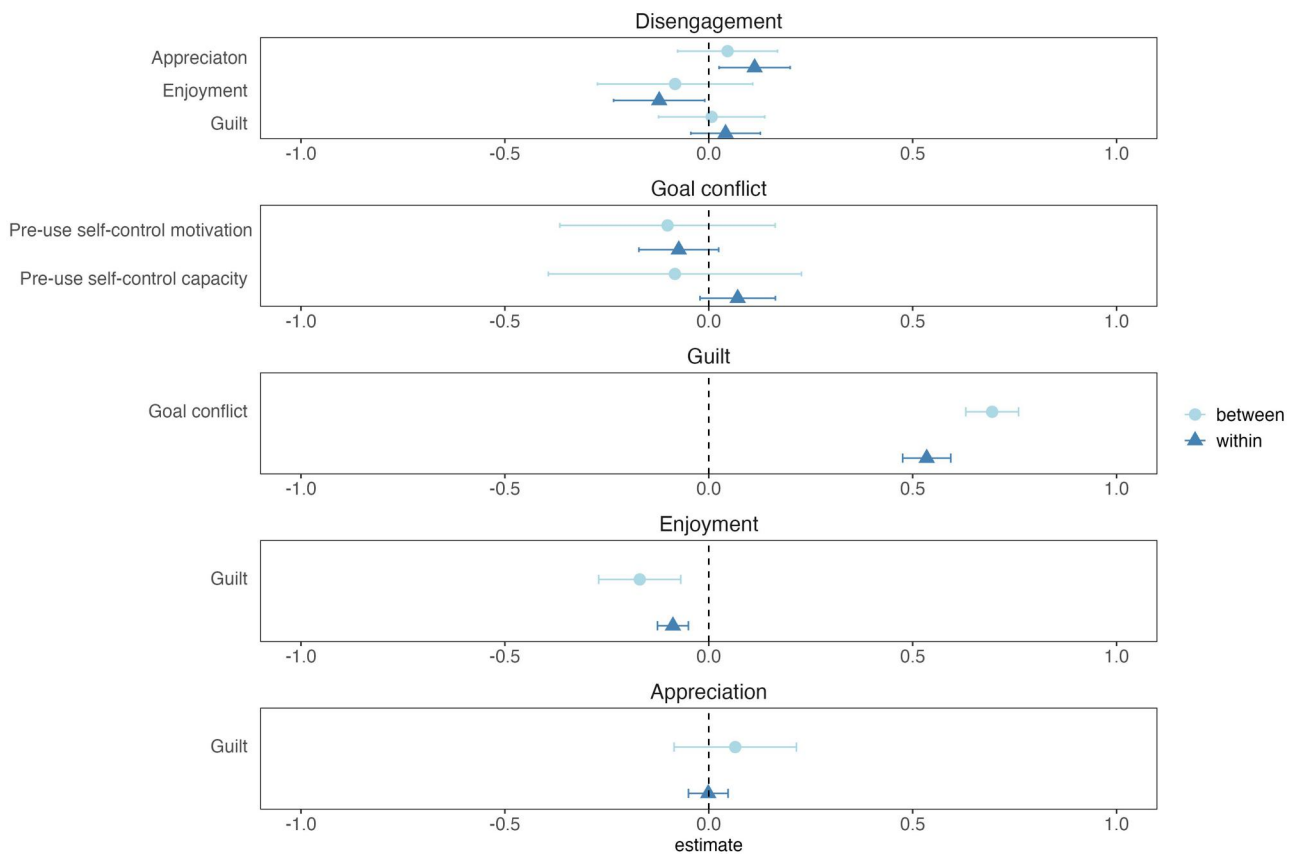
Whereas the resulting guilt appraisal did not seem to relate to the likelihood of disengagement, as seen above, we tested if it could decrease entertainment experience (H4). Our data provided support for the spoiled pleasure hypothesis (H4a), in that guilt was associated with lower enjoyment both within persons ( $b = -0.09$ , 95% CI [-0.13, -0.05]) and between persons ( $b = -0.17$ , 95% CI [-0.27, -0.07]). On the other hand, feeling guilty did not lower appreciation, thus not supporting H4b.<sup>2</sup>

As the last section of the confirmatory analysis, we tested the role that situational self-control plays both for the occurrence of affective appraisals and for their influence on disengagement. Specifically, H5 stated that higher situational self-control at the beginning of Netflix use would be negatively related to goal conflict while viewing. The data, however, do not support this hypothesis. Neither pre-use self-control capacity nor self-control motivation related to perceptions of goal conflict while viewing.

Besides that, we assumed that situational self-control during the viewing process would influence weights assigned to affective appraisals in the disengagement process. Specifically, we proposed that higher within-use self-control would decrease the relationship between entertainment experience and disengagement while increasing the relationship between guilt and disengagement (H6). In a logistic interaction model, both self-control capacity ( $b = -0.34$ , 95% CI [-0.64, -0.07]) and self-control motivation ( $b = 0.26$ , 95% CI [0.04, 0.51]) interacted only with enjoyment between persons (see OSF), but not with appreciation or guilt. H6a is therefore partially supported, but the data do not support H6b nor H6c.

### Exploratory analysis

Preregistered robustness checks for each model showed that neither the inclusion of the control variables age, gender, and perceived academic strain nor the exclusion of participants with a compliance rate < 0.25 changed the results of hypothesis tests. However, we found that in a substantial proportion of observations participants disengaged from Netflix after watching only one episode (see Method section). To check if the disengagement process unfolds differently in longer viewing sessions, we conducted non-preregistered exploratory robustness checks. Specifically, for each model we excluded viewing sessions that consisted of only one episode, which reduced sample size substantially (level-1 sample size ranging from 816 to 1,232) and limits power of this exploration. Overall, the results change for some but not all hypothesis tests (see OSF for details). For the relationships of goal conflict (H2) and entertainment experience (H4), respectively, with guilt, coefficients slightly changed, but not interpretation of hypothesis tests. For the model testing correlates of disengagement (H1, H3), the within-person coefficient of enjoyment increases ( $b = -0.22$ , 95% CI [-0.36, -0.09]), which does not alter the result of H1a. The within-person association between appreciation and disengagement, however, is no longer statistically significant ( $b = 0.11$ , 95% CI [0.00, 0.22]). In contrast to the confirmatory model, within-person differences in guilt are significantly related to disengagement ( $b = 0.16$ , 95% CI [0.05, 0.27]) in the exploratory analysis,



**Figure 2.** Within- and between-person associations for main effect models.

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients and 95% confidence intervals from within-between models.  $N = 205$  persons;  $T = 1,924$  observations.

lending support to H3. Regarding the role of self-control, we now observe that within-person differences in pre-use self-control capacity are significantly related to goal conflict ( $b = 0.16$ , 95% CI [0.04, 0.29]), which is in the opposite direction as proposed in H5a. In the moderation model, the between-person interactions of both within-use self-control capacity and motivation with enjoyment in the relationship with disengagement found in the confirmatory analyses render nonsignificant when excluding single-episode sessions, whereas a significant within-person interaction emerges between within-use self-control motivation and guilt on disengagement ( $b = 0.10$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.22]), supporting H6c.

## Discussion

In the present study, we aimed to (a) extend existing accounts of media use to include the concept of disengagement and to (b) investigate the relevance of self-control throughout the reception and end phases of media use. Central propositions of the AMUSE model (Reinecke & Meier, 2021) were tested with an event-contingent experience sampling design assessing Netflix use. Our findings demonstrate that disengagement from media use is contingent upon entertainment experience. Interestingly, the hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions of entertainment experience relate differently to disengagement. Situations of high enjoyment seem to pull recipients into continuing viewing sessions, whereas situations of increased appreciation serve as a push factor toward disengagement. This finding may reflect the different natures of enjoyment, which is experienced as pleasurable and “easy,” and appreciation,

which may be more taxing on cognitive and emotional resources (Tamborini, 2011). Whereas past studies have often focused on enjoyment, our findings illustrate the benefit of including both dimensions of entertainment experience to gain a full picture of media selection, processing, and effects. The finding of enjoyment as a pull factor into continued Netflix use furthermore aligns with recipients perceiving entertainment viewing as highly enjoyable and challenging to disengage from (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024; de Feijter et al., 2016; Flayelle et al., 2020a).

Recipients often describe entertainment viewing as a “guilty pleasure” (de Feijter et al., 2016; Steiner & Xu, 2020). We found that guilt was strongly related to perceptions of goal conflict while viewing. Recipients thus negatively appraise a media use activity when they feel that it is at odds with the pursuit of other tasks and goals. There was, however, some heterogeneity in this association such that some recipients experienced greater guilt reactions to Netflix use conflicting with higher-order goals than others. The sample mean of guilt was comparably low, which indicates that guilt appraisals might be prevalent only among a subset of media users and speaks to potential individual differences in guilt proneness and valuation of temptation enactment (Cohen et al., 2012; Halfmann, 2022). This might also explain why we did not observe a robust relationship between guilt and disengagement from Netflix use. This finding is similar to another situational study on Netflix disengagement (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024), but runs against theoretical conceptualizations of guilt as a motivating force for behavioral adjustment (Tracy & Robins, 2004). In our exploratory



analysis which only included viewing sessions consisting of multiple episodes, however, guilt did relate positively to disengagement. Situational approaches could shed light onto media use duration and possible thresholds that guilt appraisals must reach before affecting disengagement. Situational studies of entertainment viewing, for example, suggest that feelings of guilt can increase during reception (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024; Lades et al., 2022).

Irrespective of its direct relationship with disengagement, guilt did influence the entertainment experience, which may have downstream effects for disengagement. Specifically, we observed a spoiled pleasure effect in which guilt lowered enjoyment both within and between persons. Those who generally experience more guilt enjoyed watching Netflix less, but also situations in which recipients felt more guilty than they usually do slightly lowered their enjoyment. Past studies on entertainment viewing have so far yielded mixed results on the spoiled pleasure hypothesis (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024; Erdmann & Dienlin, 2022; Granow et al., 2018). Our study, however, was the first to find evidence for the spoiled pleasure hypothesis on both the within-person and between-person level. Negative associations of guilt with entertainment experience did not extend to appreciation, though. This underlines the diverging affective structure of enjoyment and appreciation that may lead to differential susceptibility for a spoiled pleasure effect: The eudaimonic entertainment experience is characterized by mixed positive and negative affect to begin with, so negative guilt appraisals may not disrupt the momentary experience as much compared to its influence on hedonic enjoyment. The absence of a statistically significant association between guilt and appreciation also calls to the correlative nature of the data: It is, for instance, conceivable that guilt is an appraisal that follows entertainment experience instead of preceding it, such that when recipients perceive media use to be meaningful and to serve purposes of self-growth, they do not feel guilty about watching Netflix. Enjoyment, on the other hand, may be interrupted by feelings of guilt and the latter may thus have potential downstream influences on disengagement. We did, however, not explicitly test such mediation effects in the present study. In summary, disengagement from entertainment viewing seems to be a matter of both hedonic and eudaimonic facets of entertainment experience, which, in turn, can be partly disrupted by guilt. Guilt might be a more relevant predictor for disengagement during pro-longed, multi-episode viewing sessions.

### Self-control during reception and disengagement

Our second goal was to elucidate the role of self-control both for the occurrence of negative affective appraisals about media use and for the weights assigned to entertainment experience and guilt in the disengagement process. While we did not find pre-use self-control capacity and motivation to be related to perceptions of goal conflict in our confirmatory analyses, exploratory analyses suggested that for viewing sessions of two or more episodes, self-control capacity at the beginning of media use might slightly increase goal conflict. Due to low statistical power of our exploratory analysis, though, this finding needs to be interpreted with caution. It also runs against past research showing that those with higher abilities to resist temptations and impulsive reactions avoid problematic situations in general (Inzlicht et al., 2021) and, specifically, media entertainment use when it conflicts with other goals (e.g., Lades et al., 2022). To gain a clearer picture,

future research could compare the influence of both trait and situational self-control on goal conflict during varying lengths of media use sessions.

Beyond the focus of past research on self-control at the onset of media use, we investigated the moderating role of self-control in the disengagement process. We observed between-person interactions of self-control components and enjoyment in the relationship with disengagement that go in opposite directions: Individuals higher in self-control capacity were more likely to disengage despite enjoyment, whereas those higher in self-control motivation were even less inclined to disengage from watching when feeling hedonically entertained. In line with past work, those who have more cognitive resources such as attention and willpower available for self-control, thus were more successful in disengaging from media use regardless of short-term gratifications. The role of self-control motivation for engaging recipients in media use, on the other hand, questions the theoretical assumption that individuals with high self-control would always want to prioritize long-term goals over short-term gratifications. Rather, media use might have represented the primary goal for those participants high in self-control motivation. Research indeed suggests that the pursuit of hedonic goals such as media use can be conducive to well-being (Bernecker & Becker, 2020) and that recipients often use entertainment viewing to regulate their emotions (Rubenking & Bracken, 2018). Accordingly, the pursuit of the short-term goal of attaining entertainment gratifications could still be deemed successful self-control under a more holistic understanding of the concept. Moreover, our exploratory analysis suggested that in longer, multiple-episode viewing sessions self-control motivation did not moderate the relationship between enjoyment and disengagement, compared to short, single-episode viewing sessions. Further correlates of self-control including whether media use was planned or not and to what degree recipients value temptation enactment (Halfmann, 2022) could clarify the diverging influences of the capacity and motivation components of self-control on varying lengths of media use sessions in future research.

### Alternative predictors of disengagement

Taken together, the present study demonstrates how disengagement depends on entertainment experience, which in turn can be affected by feelings of guilt. Importantly, those appraisals of media use are influenced by self-control, which does exert influence throughout reception phases. The findings provide initial insights into the validity of the AMUSE model (Reinecke & Meier, 2021) and point to potential adjustments. For example, our data suggest differential roles of hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment experience in the relationships with guilt and disengagement. Moreover, we focused on propositions of the AMUSE model concerning appraisals of the media use activity, while not including all content-related variables featured in the model. This limited the representation of content variables to entertainment experience as a form of meta-appraisal but made sure to cover interindividual factors such as self-control and situational context variables such as goal conflict, too.

Beyond those factors proposed in the AMUSE model, disengagement could be the result of other variables. In our additional exploratory analyses (see OSF), the trait-level automaticity of Netflix use emerged as a small negative predictor of disengagement, while the coefficients of

entertainment experience remained stable in size. Individual differences in media habits might consequently play a role in the disengagement process. Besides that, we did not explicitly consider external factors such as a family member coming home or the usual bedtime approaching. Past research on television use, however, found that both social context and time-related predictors only had a negligible influence on disengagement (Westerik et al., 2005). Correspondingly, a situational study of Netflix use found that time spent watching did not significantly predict disengagement (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024). Regarding the role of subsequent activities as predictors of disengagement, users in our sample typically reported to engage in work (33%), sleep (32%), or other types of media use (12%) after Netflix use. As work and sleep arguably represent competing goals to Netflix use, they should be covered by our goal conflict variable. In addition, the sleep covariate fatigue did not predict disengagement in our exploratory analysis. The use of other media, moreover, might map onto entertainment experience, in that when recipients experience low entertainment from Netflix use, they disengage and turn to other media. Still, information on the valence and urgency of subsequent activities could elucidate which context factors are relevant in the disengagement process.

### Contributions and limitations of a situational approach

Overall, our study was among the first to address disengagement from media use. We extend the few existing studies on disengagement from television and Netflix viewing (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024; Westerik et al., 2005) by considering the role of self-control, rooting our assumptions in a recent theoretical model (Reinecke & Meier, 2021) and by distinguishing within- and between-person associations. In addition, we measured disengagement with behavioral metadata. This approach has its own disadvantages, such as reliance on a specific logging technology or on participant compliance. For instance, we could only measure Netflix use that occurred in one browser. Using Netflix or other streaming services via other browsers or devices could not be logged with the browser extension. Similarly, for a considerable proportion of participants, we observed only a few viewing sessions, and many recorded sessions consisted of only one episode. Arguably, the surveys administered after each episode introduced friction to the viewing experience which may have led participants to become more aware of their motivations and behavior and, possibly, led some to disengage from Netflix use earlier than they would have without the ESM surveys. Future studies would ideally compare log data of baseline Netflix use without ESM surveys to the viewing behavior during an ESM phase. That way, unique data about viewing experiences could be gathered during reception while having a control for participants' regular, uninterrupted viewing behavior.

Beyond that, our metadata indicate that for about half of all disengagement occurrences, no corresponding within-use survey was recorded. Exploratory analyses show that higher situational self-control was associated with participants answering fewer within-use surveys, suggesting either that self-control influences viewing session length, which would be in line with our theoretical assumptions, or the presence of potential introspection effects such that participants high in self-control adjust their media use behavior due to ESM prompts.

As self-control was a variable of interest in our study, this might bias results on the role of self-control in the disengagement process. Still, compared to self-initiated event-contingent ESM designs, the automated prompting scheme we applied might mitigate issues of systematic non-response due to self-control but also other variables such as conscientiousness or participation motivation. Future studies on situational self-control could adjust the incentive scheme to make media use for study participation a more salient goal. Extending the field phase could also increase data quality by increasing the sample size on the situational level.

Overall, we believe that our study has important implications beyond the entertainment context and strongly underlines the value of studying situational disengagement from media use for the broader field of communication. Past communication theories have mainly focused on the selection phase. Yet, as the media ecology changes toward increasingly personalized, algorithmically curated, and permanently available offerings, a better understanding of the disengagement from media use becomes integral (Baumgartner & Kühne, 2024; Reinecke et al., 2022). Next to providing insights for optimized user experience design or for self-regulation interventions, the study of disengagement unravels how positive and negative appraisals of media use may accumulate from the situation to more stable perceptions such as digital well-being or ill-being, loss of control, or excessive use. In addition to such forms of under-regulated use, a better understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying media use disengagement may also inform research on withdrawal from media use, such as news avoidance (de Bruin et al., 2021) or digital disconnection (Vanden Abeele et al., 2022).

Critically, the present study demonstrates that both appraisals of the media content and, no less important, of the media activity itself shape the disengagement process. This could be one explanation for why positive (e.g., entertainment experience) and negative appraisals of media use (e.g., guilt) can coexist and mutually interact in media use episodes. The relevance of these appraisal processes is likely to go beyond the disengagement context. Recent research demonstrates that individual perceptions of social media use as beneficial versus harmful moderate the relationship between social media use and well-being (Lee & Hancock, 2024), suggesting that the influence of media activity appraisals extends to the context of media effects. Theoretical accounts that cover the two-level structure of appraisal of media content versus media use activity (Reinecke & Meier, 2021) thus appear to be a promising starting point for future communication research more generally. Ultimately, by studying the situational disengagement process, we gain a high-resolution picture of what it is about media use that users perceive as positive or negative and how this affects the self-regulation of media use, increasing motivations for digital disconnection, and calls for regulation of "addictive" digital technologies, including entertainment-oriented social media.

### Conclusion

Testing core assumptions of the AMUSE model (Reinecke & Meier, 2021) in a real-life, situational context, the present study provides initial evidence of the so far neglected end phase of the media use process. Studying disengagement can broaden our understanding of media use more generally, but it also highlights the role of self-control. Contemporary forms

of digital media challenge recipients' self-control due to permanent availability, personalization, and optimization for entertainment experience. In that context, assessing the interplay of self-control with the disengagement process elucidates a broader variety of potential self-control failures not just at the start but also at the end of media use episodes and, thus, opens avenues for more effective digital well-being interventions. Understanding when, how, and why individuals do (not) disengage from media use is central to the concept of agentic, self-determined media use in the digital era.

## Data availability

All data, materials, and analysis code underlying this article are available at <https://osf.io/p5qzc/>.

## Disclosure statement

A preprint of the article is available at <https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/2xnku>.

*Conflicts of interest:* None declared.

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## Notes

1. For exploratory purposes, we assessed alternative predictors of disengagement that were not accounted for in the conceptual model. This includes fatigue and automaticity of media use. All measures and exploratory analyses are available in the OSF at the link provided above.
2. As preregistered, we also inspected exploratorily how guilt in the current episode (T0) may influence entertainment experience over time, that is, in the subsequent Netflix episode (T+1). Results follow the same pattern as the associations without lags (see OSF for details).

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