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EDITORIAL

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Disconnectivity in a Changing Media and Political Landscape: A Multi-Contextual and Interdisciplinary Lens

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Abstract

This thematic issue examines disconnectivity in a world where connectivity is often assumed to be the norm. Drawing on multiple areas of research, such as political unfriending, digital disconnection, migration studies, and media censorship, it delves into the complexities of disconnectivity, moving beyond its framing as voluntary choice and individual practice. Collectively, studies in this issue highlight disconnection as a compelled act for self-protection and a collective strategy to tackle systemic problems. By examining enforced and coerced disconnection, they also reveal disconnection's dual role as control and resistance. Through a multi-contextual and interdisciplinary lens, this issue challenges the normative assumptions implicit in our current understandings of disconnection, and, in doing so, advances the field.

Keywords

digital disconnection; enforced disconnection; inequality; interpersonal disconnection; political unfriending; power dynamics

1. Introduction

In a world of constant connectivity, disconnection has emerged as a critical practice and concept. Over the past decade, two areas of study—political unfriending and digital disconnection—have brought this phenomenon into focus. Research on political unfriending, rooted in the field of political communication, examines behaviors enabled by social media features such as unfriending, unfollowing, blocking, and muting–actions that sever ties between individuals, groups, and ideas. Critique in this area centers on its broader impact on democracy, with concerns that disconnection restricts information flows and diminishes engagement across political and social divides (Bozdag, 2020; N. A. John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Kim et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2017). Conversely,

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digital disconnection research focuses on intentional withdrawal from devices, technologies, and platforms—voluntary non-use of digital media. Concerned primarily with individual well-being, scholars see disconnection as a form of self-care against the relentless demands of hyperconnectivity and as resistance against Silicon Valley capitalism (Albris et al., 2024; Kaun, 2021; Nassen, Vandebosch, et al., 2023; Syvertsen, 2020).

Certainly, these two areas approach disconnection from very different vantage points, yet they converge in three key ways: both frame disconnection as a deliberate choice and individual effort, and anchor their discussions within the normative values dominant in their respective fields. Reflecting on a decade of research, this thematic issue seeks to bridge these perspectives and examine shared underlying assumptions to inform future research in and beyond these fields. As the ever-changing media landscape continues to present new forms and formats of disconnection, it is time to focus on what remains constant: disconnection as both a practice embedded in social-structural constraints and a symptom of systemic issues. In a period of uncertain and contentious politics, shifting cultural and political norms offer an opportunity to reflect on the values and assumptions implicit in our current understandings.

2. Is Disconnection a Voluntary Choice?

Disconnection is not passive; it is an active and intentional process. This deliberate nature often leads to the framing of disconnection as voluntary and agentic, driven by individual choice. Digital disconnection research views it as a strategy to reclaim personal well-being and resist the pressure of hyperconnectivity, while political communication research sees it as selective avoidance, prioritizing personal preferences over civic obligations to "hear the other side" (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024; Zhu, 2023). Both put individual choices, and by extension, individual responsibilities at the forefront.

Recent scholarship has challenged the notion that disconnection is entirely voluntary, highlighting constraints such as: social, professional, and political costs; human tendencies like congeniality biases and fear of missing out; digital platform designs; and the neoliberal hegemony of a booming digital disconnection industry (Ross et al., 2024; Zhu, 2023). These constraints are unevenly distributed, often along socio-economic lines and other markers of inequality. For instance, voluntary digital non-use is more accessible to individuals in privileged positions, while marginalized groups tend to unfriend majority members as a response to systemic exclusion (N. John & Agbarya, 2021; Nguyen & Hargittai, 2023; Zhu & Skoric, 2023).

Despite these structural constraints, disconnection is frequently portrayed as an expression of agency. This narrative risks shifting the burden and, implicitly, the blame onto individuals, suggesting that systemic obstacles are challenges to be overcome through personal effort. In response, we propose rethinking disconnection as pseudo-choice—a constrained decision shaped by systemic forces, where the alternative is an unaffordable cost. This highlights the need to see disconnection as a symptom of broader societal issues that demand systemic solutions.

3. Is Disconnection an Individual Effort?

The framing of disconnection as a voluntary choice not only places significant emphasis on individual responsibility but also obscures other forms of disconnection that are enforced rather than chosen. Practices

such as internet blackouts, websites and account bans, post deletions, and deliberate slowing down of internet connections serve as instruments to curtail information flow, silence marginalized voices, and restrict political mobilization in, but not limited to, non-democratic regimes (MacKinnon, 2011). In democratic contexts, enforced disconnection such as shadowbanning is also inherent to social media platform governance, disadvantaging non-normative cultural expressions and minority voices (Duffy & Meisner, 2023).

These practices of enforced disconnection, functioning as mechanisms of control and discipline, intersect with individual-level responses. Individuals often preemptively disconnect themselves from risky topics, people, and digital spaces to create "safe spaces" for self-preservation and political communication (Kocer & Bozdağ, 2020; Van Duyn, 2021; Zhu & Skoric, 2023). These intertwined practices of top-down disconnection and bottom-up withdrawal reveal how disconnection as a pseudo, coerced choice operates between repression and covert resistance (Lim, 2020). It underscores the need to understand disconnection beyond individual practice but as a product of power dynamics.

4. What Are the Normative Views Implicit in Our Current Understanding of Disconnection?

While both fields see disconnection as individual choices, they present contrasting perspectives on its political implications. In political communication, disconnection is often viewed negatively. The emphasis is on individuals' responsibility to stay informed and engaged for the health of democracy, which often downplays or even blames personal preferences. In this view, the collective democratic good takes precedence over individual choice. In contrast, digital communication research regards disconnection as a civic virtue, focusing on safeguarding personal autonomy and well-being. Here, disconnection is seen as a justified and empowering response to the structural pressures of the digital age.

This contrast reveals that the underlying, often unexamined, normative assumptions shape how we interpret the politics surrounding disconnection. These normative views are not static; rather, they change over time and across different contexts. The rise of digital disconnection, both as a practice and an area of research, reflects a cultural shift in which the digital habits and consumptions considered beneficial in the early days of broadband internet and social media are now being questioned (Albris et al., 2024). Similarly, the recent development in political communication also reflects an emerging cultural logic of self-care, driven by concerns over excessive political disagreement and its potential harm to individual well-being (Barnidge et al., 2023). These shifting norms not only mirror broader societal changes, but highlight the importance of examining disconnection within and across contexts.

Thus, this thematic issue brings together studies from distinct political regimes and cultures such as the US, Belgium, France, China, and India, and diverse fields such as political communication, media studies, migration studies, and journalism. Through this multi-contextual and interdisciplinary lens, we aim to make explicit the normative assumptions implicit in our understanding of disconnection, and, in doing so, move the field forward.

5. Articles in This Thematic Issue

This thematic issue first presents three studies examining disconnective practices as choices shaped by psychological and structural constraints. Nassen, Karsay, et al. (2024) examine the adoption of disconnection

tools (e.g., screen time trackers, detox apps) to cope with the negative consequences of social media overuse among Flemish adolescents in Belgium. Using a survey study, they reveal that disconnection patterns are embedded within individuals' lived experiences, suggesting developmental stages, gender roles, and well-being as important preconditions of disconnection. Zhang and Shoenberger (2024) focus on the roles of emotions and psychological needs in political unfriending and unfollowing. Through a US population-based survey, they argue that disconnection is an anger response to political disagreement perceived as threats and an emotional regulation strategy to avoid anxiety, and these emotional responses are constrained by individuals' need to belong. Von Nostitz et al. (2024) examine refraining from political use of social media as a salient form of being digitally connected but politically disconnected. Through a survey study after the 2022 French elections, they argue that such disconnection practices are influenced by individuals' digital skills and political interests and shaped by the affordances and culture of social media platforms.

Beyond psychological and structural constraints, disconnection is also shaped by the design of technical tools and discourses surrounding disconnection. Through a feature analysis, N. John (2024) offers a classification of features for tie dissolution on social media platforms. In doing so, he argues that technical features embed values and assumptions into their design, shaping technical outcomes, while also acknowledging that disconnection results from social considerations. Bozan and Treré (2024) critique the booming digital disconnection industry. Deploying discourse analysis grounded in a Marxist approach, they highlight how the discourse surrounding disconnectivity is rooted in material social structures: It frames disconnection as an obligation for labor quality and work efficiency, thereby reinforcing material power.

As the above studies illustrate that disconnection extends beyond individual choice, the next two studies shift focus to the disconnection effort at a collective level, highlighting that disconnection is a symptom of societal issues that demand systemic solutions. Leyn et al. (2024) explore the institutional conditions of disconnectivity. Drawing on interviews with digital (dis)connection policy-makers in Belgium, they reveal growing advocacy for regulation to reduce the burden on individuals, which however often conflicts with the need to preserve individual autonomy. Bossio et al. (2024) examine journalists' collective practices of disconnection. Based on interviews with journalists in the US and Australia, they highlight that the collective approach to disconnection—achieved through informal sharing of experiences and support and inter-organizational training—can contribute to systemic change in addressing the negative impact arising from organizational demand for online connectivity.

The following studies demonstrate that disconnection is a pseudo-choice, where the alternative is unaffordably risky due to unequal power dynamics. In two migration studies, Minchilli (2024) and Deng and Pridmore (2024) show that migrants, such as Turkish women living in Rome and Hong Kong citizens living in the UK, are compelled to disconnect. Practices such as selective non-use of platforms and groups serve as boundary-making, shaped by the often ambiguous discourse of otherness and the socio-political context underlying their migration experiences. Disconnection is also essential for creating safe spaces for political expressions, given their inherent ties to their homeland and the diffuse control enabled by digital connectivity. In the context of online dating, Šiša (2024) examines ghosting as a form of disconnection. Through interviews with Tinder users in Ljubljana, she shows that users resort to ghosting for self-protection, driven by vulnerability in the face of information overload on an intensely demanding online platform and a perceived lack of safety and authenticity in online connections.

The concluding two articles turn our attention to enforced disconnection as a tool for controlling information and suppressing dissent. Madapathi (2024) presents a case study on internet blackouts during the farmer's protests in India, illustrating how the internet shutdown imposed by authorities shaped political activism and reinforced inequality, and how various involved groups resisted the communicative restrictions. Based on interviews with internet users in China, He et al. (2024) demonstrate how, in the face of a sophisticated censorship program that disconnects individuals from connective actions, ordinary citizens navigate these threats through innovative tactics of connection, while elites use the enforced disconnection as a protective shield to evade public scrutiny.

Taken together, this thematic issue delves into the complexities of disconnectivity, moving beyond its framing as a voluntary choice and individual practice. It highlights disconnection as a compelled act for self-protection and a collective strategy to challenge systemic structures. By examining enforced and coerced disconnection, the articles reveal disconnection's dual role as control and resistance. Through interdisciplinary perspectives and diverse contexts and methodologies, this issue advances understanding of disconnection's broader implications and shapes future research directions.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Exploring Adolescents' Social Media Connection and Disconnection: A Latent Class Approach

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Abstract

In industrialized societies characterized by ubiquitous connectivity, many individuals disconnect from their phones or social media to break patterns of habitual use, reduce information overload, alleviate stress, and avoid distractions. Although research has predominantly focused on (young) adults, information on digital disconnection among adolescents remains limited. In response, in the present study, we analyzed survey data from 956 Flemish adolescents in Belgium (M_{age} = 15.10, *SD* = 1.61, and 64.8% girls) and, using latent class analysis, identified two subgroups: Class 1 labeled as "low adoption of social media apps and disconnection tools," and Class 2 labeled as "high adoption of social media apps and disconnection tools." Adolescents in Class 2 were more likely to use social media, specifically social networking, instant messaging, and entertainment apps, and to adopt disconnection tools (e.g., iOS Screentime or the Forest app). Next, drawing on the media practice model, we investigated how sociodemographic and sociopsychological factors contribute to those usage patterns and found that girls, older adolescents, and adolescents with higher scores for depressive symptoms and flourishing were more likely to belong to Class 2. Those findings offer new insights into adolescents' social media connection and disconnection that can inform interventions to promote healthier smartphone use among adolescents.

Keywords

adolescents; disconnection; latent class analysis; social media use; voluntary disconnection

1. Introduction

Concerning social media use among adolescents, there is a shared view that they constantly use the phone to seek gratification from social media platforms. Nevertheless, not all adolescents behave that way.

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The emerging sense of an inescapable online presence has triggered social media users, both young and old, to reflect on their use and that of others. Even so, no study has examined such disconnection practices among adolescents. That is surprising because adolescents' developmental sensitivities (e.g., heightened peer focus and identity exploration) make them more susceptible to becoming dependent on and affected by social media use (Heffer et al., 2019). In turn, teachers, parents, and policymakers have attempted to restrict adolescents' social media screen time by, for instance, banning smartphones in high schools (Anderson et al., 2024). However, adolescents do not readily accept forms of disconnection imposed upon them (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017).

Part of fostering a healthy relationship with social media platforms lies in providing the right tools to build a sustainable digital balance and exercise self-control when using the platforms. Although such digital balance (Vanden Abeele, 2021) can be obtained by voluntary disconnection, self-imposed disconnection among adolescents has rarely been investigated. In particular, adolescents' adoption of disconnection tools (e.g., iOS Screentime or the Forest app) to limit social media use has yet to be mapped.

Against that background, in the present study, we performed latent class analysis (LCA), which allowed us to identify subgroups of adolescents (i.e., classes) based on their social media use and adoption of disconnection tools. We also drew on the media practice model (Steele & Brown, 1995), which posits that individuals interpret and respond to media with reference to their lived experiences. According to this model, sociodemographic factors (i.e., age, gender, and socioeconomic status [SES]), as well as sociopsychological factors (i.e., depressive symptoms, loneliness, flourishing, and satisfaction with life) that shape adolescents' lived experiences, may be associated with the likelihood of belonging to a specific social media (dis)connection group. Those associations formed the focus of the current research.

2. Adolescents' Developmental Tasks and Social Media Use

Research on social media use and its effects has often specifically examined adolescents (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Adolescence is a developmental period marked by significant social, biological, and cognitive changes (Nesi et al., 2018) that occur while performing developmental tasks such as navigating peer relationships, developing self-identity, and establishing autonomy from adults (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). For contemporary adolescents, many of those tasks are partly undertaken on social media (Nesi et al., 2018). Adolescents receive their first smartphones at increasingly younger ages, with a recent report showing that the average age has dropped to 8 years among Flemish adolescents (Vanwynsberghe et al., 2022).

Smartphones give access to social media platforms, including TikTok, WhatsApp, and Snapchat, which are adopted by 78%, 74%, and 66% of children before their 12th birthdays (Vanwynsberghe et al., 2022). In turn, those platforms have become essential to adolescents' lives by affording constant opportunities for interacting with peers and exploring identity (Masur et al., 2022; Nesi et al., 2018). However, due to the ever-increasing use of social media, many scholars, parents, caretakers, and policymakers have voiced concerns about social media's potential negative effects on mental and physical health given harmful social media interactions and time displacement effects (Masur et al., 2022). One factor that might help adolescents strike a healthy balance in their digital media use is restricting their use of social media.

3. Adolescents' Disconnection From Social Media

Policy reports (Vanwynsberghe et al., 2022) and academic research on adolescents' social media use (Schmuck et al., 2023) that investigated the rules parents and schools impose on children highlighted that smartphones and social media restrictions are part of the upbringing of minors in contemporary society. Adolescents may need rules for social media use because they are believed to have limited to no self-control over it (Meinert & Reinecke, 2018). That reasoning may explain why voluntary disconnection has rarely been studied and why the literature on the topic mostly focuses on (young) adults. Voluntary digital disconnection can be defined as:

> A deliberate form of non-use of devices, platforms, features, interactions, and/or messages that occurs with higher or lower frequencies, and for shorter or longer periods, after the initial adoption of these technologies, and with the aim of restoring or improving one's perceived overuse, social interactions, psychological well-being, productivity, privacy and/or perceived usefulness. (Nassen et al., 2023, p. 13)

However, there is good reason to believe contemporary adolescents care about digital balance (Jorge et al., 2023). In their qualitative research, Neves et al. (2015) explored adolescents' motivations for disconnecting from social media and identified a sense of uselessness (e.g., perceived waste of time), unwanted social practices (e.g., online gossip), and unsatisfactory self-presentation (e.g., reluctance to partake in online impression management) among the top reasons. Beyond that, van der Wal et al.'s (2024) focus group study revealed that adolescents do engage in voluntary disconnection from social media as they found that adolescents try to disconnect from social media practices, including watching TikTok videos, even if they often fail in their attempts.

Among adults, various strategies for disconnecting from social media have been identified, including outright quitting, taking periodic breaks, reducing use, switching platforms, and adopting disconnection tools. These strategies can be applied at different levels, including the level of a device, (branded) application, feature, interaction, and message (Meier & Reinecke, 2021). Although most research on disconnection has focused on disconnecting from devices (Nassen et al., 2023), examples of more specific strategies for disconnecting are, for instance, restricting oneself to one hour on TikTok per day or silencing group messages. Another increasingly common way to disconnect is by adopting mobile disconnection tools (Nassen & Karsay, 2024; Nguyen, 2021), which provides a nuanced strategy by allowing disconnection from certain aspects of the smartphone without obstructing connections that the user wants to maintain. On that count, we distinguish two types of nuanced strategies for disconnecting from social media use (Nassen & Karsay, 2024). The first involves using *built-in device settings*, including iOS Screentime, to limit use, while the second involves using *external detox apps*, for example, the Forest app, which are non-default apps designed to set limits.

Such nuanced strategies for disconnecting from the mobile phone may be especially appealing to adolescents rather than invasive ones (e.g., a week without Instagram or a full day without using the phone), which are at odds in a time of constant connectedness (Nassen et al., 2023). Indeed, young adults (18–24 years old) are prevalent users of such nuanced disconnection tools (Schmuck, 2020). Adolescents may also fulfill their need for digital disconnection by using those tools and, in doing so, balance disconnection with their needs for online peer connections. After all, not all adolescents prefer unlimited social media use. Similar to adult users, they likely seek a trade-off between social media connection and disconnection (Rosič et al., 2024). Vanden Abeele

and Nguyen (2024) identified four types of digital well-being experiences among adults and confirmed the existence of distinguishable patterns of connection and disconnection. Meanwhile, other studies have even identified meaningful subgroups of adolescents based on their social media use (Foerster & Röösli, 2017). Nevertheless, no study thus far has simultaneously considered both adolescents' use of and disconnection from social media platforms, much less disconnection involving the adoption of disconnection tools. Therefore, our first research question (RQ) was:

> RQ1: What are the distinct subgroups of adolescents based on their use of social media apps and adoption of disconnection tools?

4. Individual Differences: Adolescents' Lived Experiences

Different sociodemographic and sociopsychological factors could play a role in whether someone adopts disconnection tools. The media practice model (Steele & Brown, 1995) suggests that lived experiences shape how individuals interpret and react to media. Adolescents are active (social) media users who, based on their identities and lived experiences, select, interact, and apply media. Following that reasoning, adolescents' adoption of disconnection tools is likely informed by the factors that shape their lived experiences, including sociodemographic and sociopsychological ones.

4.1. Sociodemographic Factors

4.1.1. Age

Social media use increases throughout adolescence due to more access to mobile devices and an increased desire to interact with peers (Coyne et al., 2019). Although it seems evident that social media connection increases, it is unclear whether adolescents also disconnect more from social media as they mature. In the early stages of adolescence, smartphone and social media use is primarily defined by rules and restrictions imposed by parents (Anderson et al., 2024). However, as adolescents grow older, they gain independence in their usage choices and develop self-control (Meinert & Reinecke, 2018; Siebers et al., 2021). As such, it is plausible that the desire to disconnect voluntarily becomes more prevalent. However, that possibility has yet to be explored.

4.1.2. Gender

Regarding gender, research has shown that girls use social media more often than boys and are more likely to use it for social purposes, for example, posting pictures (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). For that reason, girls may find it more challenging than boys to disconnect from social media. On that topic, studies have indicated that voluntary disconnection could also be more difficult for adult women due to differences in social expectations (Van Bruyssel et al., 2023). Care work is often mentioned as an important expectation ascribed to women that carries over into the online context, where women are expected to display more social etiquette (e.g., sending messages on every birthday) and engagement (e.g., making sure that the family gets together), which causes them to have less opportunities to disconnect (Baumer, 2018). Such social expectations may be valid for young girls as well. Jorge et al. (2023) found that voluntary disconnection seems more difficult for girls than boys because their gendered position makes them feel more connected to their friends on social media. Even so,

they might also be more willing to disconnect due to a stronger need to spend time with their families and without their phones.

4.1.3. SES

Contextual factors may also influence adolescents' social media use and adoption of disconnection tools. Among adolescents, inequalities exist, for instance, in digital skills, digital literacy, and (the stability of) internet access (Nguyen & Hargittai, 2024). Thus, recent scholarship on digital inequality has not only considered differences in access to media and technology but also differences in taking breaks from media when needed. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, some adolescents had more options to spend their free time in terms of spatial resources (e.g., their rooms to retreat to) and material resources (e.g., various materials for hobbies available at home). By contrast, others may have had fewer options, with their only means of self-expression and engaging in hobbies being via their mobile devices. Because engaging in practices of disconnection can therefore be a privilege (Treré, 2021), exploring the role of SES in the adoption of social media connection and digital disconnection tools is important.

Adolescents' identities can be attributed to forms of socioeconomic inequality and gendered socialization (Steele & Brown, 1995). Growing older also naturally involves gaining lived experiences. Thus, according to the media practice model, those sociodemographic characteristics can impact adolescents' social media use and adoption of disconnection tools (Steele & Brown, 1995). For that reason, our second RQ was:

> RQ2: Do sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., age, gender, and SES) vary across different classes of adolescents in terms of social media use and the adoption of disconnection tools?

4.2. Sociopsychological Factors

Adolescence is characterized by stage-salient developmental tasks and continuous fluctuations in well-being (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Sociopsychological factors, including levels of perceived loneliness, depressive symptoms, satisfaction with life, and flourishing, shape and are shaped by young peoples' lived experiences throughout adolescence (Steele & Brown, 1995). As such, those sociopsychological factors may also determine adolescents' social media use and adoption of disconnection tools.

4.2.1. Loneliness

The relationship between loneliness and social media use in adolescents is multifaceted and complex. Social media interactions can reduce loneliness among adolescents because meaningful interactions occur on social media (Yang & Brown, 2013). As such, feeling lonely may prevent adolescents from pursuing voluntary disconnection due to fear of feeling excluded. Loneliness has also been identified as a negative consequence that can result from disconnection (Nassen et al., 2023). However, some studies have suggested that limiting social media use can decrease loneliness (Hunt et al., 2018) by freeing up time for meaningful face-to-face connections (Nguyen, 2023). Loneliness may therefore play a role in adolescents' social media use and adoption of disconnection tools but remains underexamined.

4.2.2. Depressive Symptoms

Social media use may also relate to ill-being indicators such as depressive symptoms. On that count, adolescents who depend on social media feedback for their self-worth can feel more depressed (Schreurs et al., 2024). This can imply that adolescents who feel depressed engage in social media disconnection in an attempt to alleviate those feelings. Moreover, given the prevalence of negative discourse on social media use and ill-being (Valkenburg et al., 2022), adolescents could embrace the same mindset and attribute their negative feelings to their social media use. However, no research has investigated factors of ill-being, including depressive symptoms, and adolescents' voluntary disconnection from smartphones.

4.2.3. Flourishing and Satisfaction With Life

Adolescents' well-being may inform their social media use and adoption of disconnection tools. In the present study, we opted to investigate two distinct constructs of well-being—flourishing, and satisfaction with life—because they are subdimensions of two types of well-being: hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being. On the one hand, hedonic well-being focuses on the subjective experience of contentment and pleasure (Huta & Waterman, 2013) and includes, for instance, satisfaction with one's life (Diener et al., 1985). On the other, eudaimonic well-being focuses on another dimension commonly described as "the good life," which is characterized by experiences of meaningfulness, authenticity, and self-actualization (i.e., knowing one's true self and expressing it; Martela & Sheldon, 2019). One way to operationalize eudaimonic well-being is to measure flourishing (Diener et al., 2010). Overall, social media use research has consistently investigated its links with hedonic well-being. Also, research on adolescents' well-being has tended to focus on hedonia, while the quest for meaning, self-realization, and flourishing (i.e., eudaimonic well-being) among adolescents remains underexplored, even though those constructs are deemed essential to achieve optimal development. Additionally, since advocates of self-help initiatives such as digital disconnecting claim that disconnection practices can uniquely influence eudaimonia (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020), eudaimonic well-being is particularly interesting to consider when studying disconnection. From a purely hedonic perspective, engaging in voluntary disconnection is redundant if social media is used to provide immediate gratification. However, from an eudaimonic perspective, there are instances where maximizing pleasure might become problematic, which also applies to the context of social media use (Meier & Reinecke, 2021). For example, spending so much time on social media that one neglects other activities that bring joy or begins phubbing loved ones, might not result in the highest levels of well-being in the long run. However, literature on voluntary disconnection and eudaimonic well-being is scarce and is, among adolescents, virtually non-existent.

Therefore, in this study, we aimed to examine subdimensions of both types of well-being and investigate levels of satisfaction with life and flourishing among adolescents. In addition to well-being, we also sought an understanding of how adolescent levels of other sociopsychological factors (i.e., loneliness and depressive symptoms) relate to adolescents' social media app use and adoption of disconnection tools. Thus, our final RQ was:

> RQ3: Do sociopsychological characteristics (i.e., loneliness, depressive symptoms, flourishing, and satisfaction with life) vary across different classes of adolescents in terms of the use of social media apps and the adoption of disconnection tools?

5. Methods

5.1. Participants and Procedure

In this study, we used data from a larger multi-wave panel study conducted among Flemish adolescents in Belgium. Data from the third wave, in particular, conducted in June 2020 with 966 adolescents, served as our variables of interest. Adolescents were invited to participate in our study through their school but completed the online questionnaire at home. In the context of the larger research project, we collaborated with 24 high schools randomly selected from a list provided by the Flemish Education Department. However, because participation required schools' consent, the sampling method can be regarded as convenience sampling. Active consent was obtained from all participating adolescents, while parents provided passive consent. Confidentiality was assured, and ethical approval was obtained through the KU Leuven ethics committee (SMEC, G-2018 031187). Adolescents received a €5 voucher for completing the survey. During data collection, which coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, schools were partly reopened, and several restrictive social and economic measures were lifted following a national lockdown. A more detailed description of the sampling method and procedure appears in Schreurs et al. (2023).

Ten adolescents failed the survey's attention check and were removed from the analytical sample, which thus consisted of 956 adolescents. Their mean age was 15.10 years ($SD = 1.599$), 64.9% were girls, and 86% were born in Belgium. By comparison, in the overall population in 2020, 49.2% of high school students were girls, and 90% were born in Belgium (Onderwijs Vlaanderen, 2020).

5.2. Measures

5.2.1. Nuanced Mobile Disconnection Tools

After participants were given a definition of disconnection tools (i.e., tools used to control how much time a person spends on their smartphone and that enable them to limit the time spent using social media apps), they were instructed to indicate which disconnection tools they used. The questionnaire presented them with six external detox apps that were among the most popular at the time—i.e., Moment, Forest, QualityTime, Space, OFFTIME, and RealizeD—and two built-in device settings—i.e., iOS Screentime and Digital Well-Being for Android. They had to mark every app that they had previously used. Regarding the use of built-in device settings, 34.5% of the participants used iOS Screentime, while 7.6% used Android Digital Well-Being. As for external detox apps, 5.6% of the sample used the Forest app, while other apps (e.g., Moment and RealizeD), were used by less than 1%. Moreover, 3.6% reported using a different detox app not listed on the questionnaire. Lastly, 43.2% indicated that they were not using any disconnection tools. If the participants indicated using at least one of the tools before, then they were identified as users of disconnection tools. We distinguished two variables for the adoption of disconnection tools: the use of external detox apps and the use of built-in device settings.

5.2.2. Social Media Use

Adolescents reported how frequently they used 10 social media platforms—Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Messenger, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, Reddit, X, and Tumblr—on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *seldom*,

3 = *every few weeks*, 4 = *a few times a week*, 5 = *every day*, and 6 = *multiple times a day*). We aggregated those platforms into four categories of social media use: instant messaging (i.e., WhatsApp, Messenger, and Snapchat; $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.043$), social networking (i.e., Facebook and Instagram; $M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.229$), microblogging and news (i.e., Reddit, X, and Tumblr; $M = 1.36$, $SD = 0.724$), and entertainment (i.e., YouTube and TikTok; $M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.169$). This categorization is based on affordances shown by literature that Snapchat, for instance, is used mainly as an instant messaging platform due to the ephemerality and briefness of the messages, while also taking into account the specific platform affordances at the time of the study (i.e., Bayer et al., 2020). The categorization was also conceptualized based on literature describing how those social media platforms are used and what motivations for their use played a role in 2020 (Bayer et al., 2020; Rhee et al., 2021) when the data were collected.

5.2.3. Sociodemographic Factors

Age was assessed by subtracting adolescents' birth year from 2020, the year of the study, while gender was indicated as either boy (=1) or girl (=2). Regarding SES, participants answered a validated measure of how well off they think their family is compared with other families ($M = 7.67$, $SD = 1.397$, range from 1–10; Goodman et al., 2001).

5.2.4. Sociopsychological Factors

Loneliness was measured with the UCLA loneliness scale (RULS-8) validated among Dutch-speaking adolescents (Goossens et al., 2013). Participants indicated how true eight statements were for them on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*completely untrue*) to 5 (*completely true*). Examples were "I miss company" and "I feel excluded" ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 0.719$, $\alpha = 0.83$).

Depressive symptoms were measured with a 12-item version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies depression scale (Poulin et al., 2005). Adolescents had to indicate how often they experience symptoms such as lack of appetite (e.g., "I did not feel like eating, my appetite was gone") and tiredness (e.g., "I felt too tired to do things") in the past week on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never/rarely*) to 4 (*always*; $M = 1.84$, $SD = 0.495$, $\alpha = 0.86$).

Flourishing was captured with four items on the flourishing scale (Diener et al., 2010). Adolescents indicated their agreement to items such as "I am optimistic about my future" on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*; $M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.070$, $\alpha = 0.78$).

Last, satisfaction with life was measured using one item on the satisfaction with life scale (Diener et al., 1985), for example, "I am satisfied with my life" rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; $M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.338$).

5.3. Analysis

Before analysis, confirmatory factor analysis supported the hypothesized one-factor structure of the validated scales for loneliness, depressive symptoms, and flourishing. Mean scores were created and transformed into positive integers. We followed a three-step approach (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014),

beginning with an LCA in Mplus to identify subgroups for social media use and the adoption of disconnection tools. We employed latent class indicators (i.e., social media use, built-in device settings, and external detox apps) to estimate the latent class model. Second, based on the most optimal class model, we created the variable of most likely class membership for each adolescent using the latent class posterior distribution. Third, logistic regressions were conducted to investigate the associations between the independent variables (i.e., sociodemographic and sociopsychological factors) and the dependent variable (i.e., most likely class membership) while accounting for misclassification in the second step (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014). Please see OSF for anonymized data, syntaxes, and complete materials (https://osf.io/69drn/?view_only=17697ea2b53f4d369eb5a4a7b735acb5).

5.3.1. Identifying the Optimal Class Solution

One to five class solutions were considered. The overall fit of each model was compared via the following tests: the Akaike information criterion (AIC), the Bayesian information criterion (BIC), and the Lo-Mendell-Rubin likelihood ratio test (LMR-LRT). While a lower AIC and BIC indicate a better fit, the LMR-LRT provides a p-value that denotes whether a class solution is statistically better than the previous solution with one fewer class ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, we evaluated the classification's accuracy based on the classification probabilities for most likely latent class membership, entropy, and minimum and maximum class sizes. Probabilities closer to 1 indicated a good classification, with acceptable values ranging between 0.80 and 0.90. The entropy value needed to be greater than 0.60, and a class needed to have a minimum class size of 5% of the total sample or at least 50 participants (Weller et al., 2020).

5.3.2. Predictors of Class Membership

To predict class membership, the variable of most likely class membership was employed as a latent class indicator variable, with uncertainty rates prefixed at the probabilities. We included the independent variables (i.e., sociodemographic and sociopsychological factors) as auxiliary variables (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014) by following the R3STEP method. The specified auxiliary variable was treated in the three-step method as a latent class predictor. Lastly, we examined the observed means and proportions of the predictive variables for each class of the optimal class solution using SPSS.

6. Results

Entertainment apps were the most commonly used social media platforms, which more than half of the adolescents used at least daily. By contrast, microblogging and news apps were rarely used. Less than half of the participants (43.2%) did not use any disconnection tools. However, 42.1% used at least one of the built-in device settings, 11.7% used at least one external detox app, and 4.5% used both disconnection tools.

6.1. Model Selection

Table 1 presents the model fit indices and classification accuracy indices of five LCA models. As shown, the AIC decreased from the second to the fifth model, and for all solutions, class membership probability and entropy estimates were appropriate. Entropy was the highest in the five-class solution, however this solution's minimal class size was less than 5%. The LMR-LRT p value was non-significant in the three-class solution,

Table 1. Model fit indices and classification accuracy indices LCA models ($n = 956$).

Par.	Class	BIC	AIC	Entropy	LMR-LRT value	LMR-LRT *p*-value	Min. class size	Max. class size	Min. probability	Max. probability
21	1	11563.642	11461.524	—	—	—	956	956	1	1
43	2[a]	11338.727	11129.629	0.704	373.422	< 0.001	236	720	0.777	0.959
65	3	11343.929	11027.850	0.669	144.820	0.8407	138	561	0.767	0.894
87	4	11440.719	11017.659	0.755	53.834	0.8058	48	405	0.733	0.954
109	5	11543.744	11013.704	0.758	47.640	0.1318	48	397	0.679	0.862

Notes: Par. = number of free parameters; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; AIC = Akaike's information criterion; LMR-LTR = Lo-Mendell-Rubin likelihood ratio test; [a] = elected as the final model.

which indicates that adding classes after the two-class solution did not improve the model's fit compared with a model with one fewer class ($p < 0.001$). Beyond that, the BIC was lowest in the two-class solution. Accordingly, we selected the two-class solution, which was also the most parsimonious model, to further interpret. This parsimonious model balances model complexity (i.e., number of latent classes) and model fit (i.e., how well the model explains the observed data).

6.2. Model Interpretation

Table 2 displays the prevalence and item-response probabilities for the variables of social media use and the adoption of disconnection tools. Class 1 comprised 24.7% of the participants, while Class 2 comprised 75.3%. Class 1 had a high probability of being moderate to low social media users. For example, the adolescents in that class had a 0.461 probability of using instant messaging only every few weeks. However, they also showed a higher use of entertainment media apps. Regarding disconnection tools, adolescents in Class 1 showed low probabilities for using built-in device settings (0.266) and external detox apps (0.133). Based on those results, we labeled Class 1 as "low adoption of social media apps and disconnection tools."

Class 2 consisted of adolescents who scored high for social media use. For instance, the probability of using instant messaging daily in Class 2 was 0.408. Concerning social networking, the adolescents in the group showed moderate to high use. However, microblogging and news apps, as in the other class, were not frequently used. Regarding disconnection tools, the adolescents in Class 2 showed a 0.459 probability of using built-in device settings and a 0.098 probability of using external detox apps. Based on those results, we labeled Class 2 as "high adoption of social media apps and disconnection tools." We further explored the significant differences in social media use and use of disconnection tools between the two classes with an independent samples t-test, we found significant differences for instant messaging, $t(907) = 31.899$, $p < 0.001$; entertainment media, $t(907) = -12.432$, $p < 0.001$; social networking, $t(363.020) = -21.442$, $p < 0.001$; and built-in device settings, $t(444.615) = -5.336$, $p < 0.001$; but not for microblogging, $t(359.120) = 0.852$, $p = 0.395$, or external detox apps, $t(349.317) = 1.899$, $p = 0.058$.

Table 2. Prevalence and item-response probabilities for disconnection tool use and social media use ($n = 956$).

		Latent classes	
Latent class prevalences		Class 1 (24.7%)	Class 2 (75.3%)
Indicators	Sample proportions	Inter-response probabilities	
	Total sample	Class 1	Class 2
Disconnection tools			
Use of built-in device settings	0.405	0.266	0.459
Use of external detox tools	0.108	0.133	0.098
Instant messaging			
Never	0.020	0.072	0
Seldom	0.058	0.211	0
Every few weeks	0.173	0.461	0.062
A few times a week	0.402	0.253	0.458
Daily	0.295	0	0.408
Multiple times a day	0.053	0.004	0.072
Entertainment media			
Never	0.010	0.036	0
Seldom	0.031	0.062	0.019
Every few weeks	0.113	0.213	0.075
A few times a week	0.276	0.411	0.225
Daily	0.263	0.128	0.315
Multiple times a day	0.307	0.150	0.367
Microblogging and news			
Never	0.756	0.768	0.751
Seldom	0.152	0.131	0.160
Every few weeks	0.074	0.070	0.075
A few times a week	0.013	0.025	0.009
Daily	0.006	0.007	0.005
Multiple times a day	0	0	0
Social networking			
Never	0.055	0.180	0.007
Seldom	0.045	0.141	0.008
Every few weeks	0.171	0.337	0.107
A few times a week	0.410	0.341	0.437
Daily	0.205	0	0.283
Multiple times a day	0.114	0	0.158

6.3. Associations Between Sociodemographic and Sociopsychological Factors and Latent Class Membership

Last, using logistic regressions, we investigated whether different sociodemographic and sociopsychological factors predicted the probability of belonging to Class 1 or Class 2. Table 3 presents the observed means and proportions of the variables by class, while Table 4 shows the results of the logistic regressions on Class 2 membership probability for each predicting variable. Being older and being a girl predicted a higher probability of belonging to Class 2 than to Class 1. Moreover, higher scores for depressive symptoms and flourishing predicted a higher probability of belonging to Class 2 than to Class 1.

Table 3. Observed means and proportions of study variables by class (n = 956).

	Class 1		Class 2	
	M/%	*SD*	*M/%*	*SD*
Age	14.42	1.339	15.32	1.917
Gender (% girl)	47.5	—	70.6	—
SES	7.57	1.478	7.70	1.369
Depressive symptoms	1.81	0.602	1.91	0.564
Loneliness	2.12	0.801	2.16	0.740
Life satisfaction	5.63	1.492	5.61	1.283
Flourishing	4.83	1.217	5.00	1.084

Table 4. Results of logistic regression, membership Class 2 (n = 956).

	Class 2 (reference category = Class 1)			
	B	SE	OR	95% CI
Age	0.565***	0.091	1.760	[1.473/2.104]
Gender	1.233***	0.199	3.431	[2.323/5.066]
SES	0.085	0.071	1.089	[0.948/1.251]
Depressive symptoms	0.402*	0.182	1.494	[1.045/2.136]
Loneliness	0.101	0.134	1.106	[0.851/1.439]
Life satisfaction	−0.015	0.078	0.985	[0.845/1.147]
Flourishing	0.172*	0.085	1.188	[0.851/1.439]

Notes: B = logit coefficient; SE = standard error; OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

7. Discussion

Through LCA, we aimed to investigate whether classes of adolescents significantly differ in their use of social media and adoption of disconnection tools (RQ1). Examining social media use and voluntary practices of disconnection simultaneously is crucial when studying different groups of adolescents. Previous LCA on adolescents' social media use has primarily focused on usage (e.g., Foerster & Röösli, 2017), while research on disconnection has primarily investigated involuntary disconnection, including parental control measures or school smartphone bans (e.g., Schmuck et al., 2023). However, initial research has indicated that today's adolescents are indeed concerned about maintaining a healthy digital balance (Jorge et al., 2023).

In our sample of 956 Flemish adolescents, we identified heterogeneity in how adolescents (dis)connect from social media and found two distinct classes. Adolescents in Class 1 can be labeled as "low adoption of social media apps and disconnection tools." In Class 2, labeled as "high adoption of social media apps and disconnection tools," adolescents reported higher use of instant messaging apps, entertainment media apps, and social networking apps than ones in Class 1. Moreover, adolescents in Class 1 showed low probabilities of using disconnection tools, specifically built-in device settings, while ones in Class 2 had higher probabilities of using those settings.

The different patterns in app usage between the two classes suggest that adolescents in Class 1 maintain a more detached relationship with social media. They do not use social media intensely and do not want assistance in disconnecting from the platforms that they use. A quarter of our sample belonged to Class 1. Conversely, adolescents in Class 2 showed a higher use of social media but were also more likely to search for balance by adopting disconnection tools. That finding indicates that most adolescents are frequent social media users, but they seek balance in their use. Adolescents adopting disconnection tools mostly used built-in device settings (e.g., iOS Screentime), while only 11.7% of the sample indicated using external detox apps (e.g., the Forest app). While previous studies have tended to merge those types of strategies (e.g., Schmuck, 2020), our findings suggest that it is important to distinguish types of disconnection tools because they seem to be adopted differently. One explanation could be that such tools might be adopted hierarchically by first attempting to disconnect without them (e.g., by putting the phone away) and, if that fails, by using the readily available settings (e.g., built-in device settings). In turn, external detox apps may be viewed as a last resort, for they also require the most effort to adopt.

Furthermore, we investigated whether sociodemographic (RQ2) and sociopsychological factors (RQ3) varied across the identified classes. Regarding sociodemographic variables, being older predicted a higher probability of belonging to Class 2. That finding aligns with previous results (Coyne et al., 2019) and literature on social media use among Flemish adolescents (Vanwynsberghe et al., 2022), which have shown that, throughout adolescence, the use of social media platforms increases. In that regard, age can be seen as a proxy for developmental change (Berk, 2014). Beyond the fact that age tends to determine whether and to what extent adolescents have access to mobile devices, a social developmental argument also applies, as the importance of peer relationships and staying connected increases during this time (Nesi et al., 2018).

Age predicting disconnection may be explained by higher social media use in the first place, but also by maturing and being able to reflect on their use (Meinert & Reinecke, 2018; Siebers et al., 2021). In line with research on developing self-control throughout adolescence, older adolescents will be more likely to reflect on their use, perceive it as too much, feel guilty about it, and want to change it (Coyne et al., 2019). Those feelings of perceived overuse can motivate voluntary disconnection (Nassen et al., 2023).

Regarding gender, girls were more likely to belong to Class 2 than boys. Research has indeed shown that girls use social media more often than boys and that it aligns with their tendency to spend more time on social relationships, dyadic friendships, and popularity, especially during adolescence (Twenge & Martin, 2020). Girls also seem more likely to engage in voluntary disconnection. Turel and Vaghefi (2019) found in their study among young adults that female social networking users were more likely to fail at self-imposed abstinence, which can be viewed as a risk for isolation, boredom, and fear of missing out. While those findings focus on failing at voluntary disconnection, they might indicate why adolescent girls are more likely than boys to use disconnection tools. The adoption of such tools can also be seen as a more drastic step in wanting to disconnect after offline mechanisms of self-control fail. Moreover, multiple studies have indicated that voluntary disconnection for women can be more difficult than for men due to gender differences in social expectations, including care work (e.g., Van Bruyssel et al., 2023). Those expectations may also apply to adolescent girls and make voluntary disconnection more difficult for them (Jorge et al., 2023). Girls might feel more obliged to stay connected at all times with close ones through social media (Baumer, 2018). In that regard, our findings confirm the possibility of the described gender difference, as previously suggested by Jorge et al. (2023).

SES did not predict membership to either of the classes. This could be due to our samples' overall high score for SES. Only 10.4% of respondents rated themselves 5 or less on a 10-point scale regarding their family's SES compared with other families. Because research has often emphasized socioeconomic inequalities in practices of disconnection (Gui & Büchi, 2021; Nguyen, 2021), future studies should pay close attention to digital inequalities among adolescents in terms of their connection and disconnection and be sure to include adolescents in their samples who represent all levels of SES. Especially in contexts such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the family context can influence the use and possibility for non-use of social media (Nguyen & Hargittai, 2024).

Regarding sociopsychological factors, higher reported levels of depressive symptoms predicted a higher probability of belonging to Class 2 ("high adoption of social media apps and disconnection tools") than to Class 1 ("low adoption of social media apps and disconnection tools"). This result is in line with past findings of positive associations between social media use and depression (Liu et al., 2019). Individuals with depression might perceive social media use as a potential driver in gaining social connectedness and peer support and, therefore, want to use it more (Dolev-Cohen & Barak, 2013). However, other research has suggested that using social media can heighten depressive symptoms among adolescents via media effects mechanisms such as availability stress, social comparison, and approval anxiety (e.g., Schreurs et al., 2023). As such, adolescents with depression may attribute their perceived ill-being to their high level of social media use and disconnect to alleviate those feelings. In any case, future qualitative research is needed to gain a more in-depth understanding of the motivations for social media (dis)connection among adolescents with depression.

Surprisingly, scoring higher on flourishing (Diener et al., 2010) also increased the probability of belonging to Class 2, whereas being satisfied with one's life (Diener et al., 1985) did not predict membership to that class. It is plausible that people with higher eudaimonic well-being are also ones who use disconnection tools, for those strategies can be seen as acts of self-help that are mostly adopted for improving eudaimonia (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). In that context, it is puzzling that depressive symptoms also predict a higher chance of belonging to Class 2. A possible explanation for the result may be the more state-like measure used for depressive symptoms (e.g., "in the past week...I did not feel like eating, my appetite was gone") and the more trait-like measure used for eudaimonic well-being (e.g., "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life"). The difference could suggest that disconnecting from social media may come in response to differing needs; adolescents who struggle with ill-being (e.g., depressive symptoms) in a day-to-day context may use disconnection to alleviate those feelings, whereas ones who perceive their lives overall as being purposeful and fulfilling may also engage in disconnection to maintain their eudaimonia. Research has indeed shown that digital detox apps can be valuable in preventing the effects of social media use that harms well-being (Schmuck, 2020). Individuals who score high for eudaimonia will also struggle in life from time to time but, in those periods, have the highest chances of finding strategies to restore well-being (e.g., by adopting disconnection tools). Future research is needed, however, to disentangle other traits and state well-being dynamics among adolescents in their disconnection strategies.

7.1. Practical Implications

The findings of our study present some practical implications. We found that about half of the adolescents in our sample voluntarily use disconnection tools to balance their social media use. So far, the focus of research

on managing adolescents' use has been on parental control and smartphone bans at schools. Current interventions for digital literacy increasingly focus on helping adolescents gain the knowledge and skills to exercise self-control over their use of digital media. However, the efficacy of those initiatives has been questioned, because self-control is not fully developed in adolescents (Meinert & Reinecke, 2018). Our study highlights the importance of assigning responsibility to adolescents regarding their social media use because voluntary disconnection seems to be an initiative that they can and are willing to undertake themselves. It is also important to address equal gender socialization concerning social media to ensure that boys and girls face equal opportunities to engage in voluntary disconnection. Moreover, initiatives to promote voluntary disconnection and healthy social media diets should target adolescents who frequently use social media, because this subgroup seems to experience an imbalance and seeks both connection and disconnection.

7.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Some limitations of our study should be addressed. First, we selected the two-class solution over the five-class solution primarily because one of the five classes was smaller than our minimal class size criterion of 5% or more than 50 participants. This small class size might be due to our sample's lack of diversity. Second, we assessed social media use and the use of disconnection tools with self-report measures. Future research could alternatively collect log data from adolescents' phones to gather an objective measure for those usage variables. Third, our data was collected six months into the Covid-19 pandemic when restrictions had already been partly lifted. That specific context might have resulted in altered or heightened (social) media use and, as a consequence, a greater need for disconnection. In response, future research should replicate our findings in a more recent, non-Covid-19 context. Fourth, as for the sociopsychological variables, we used self-report measures, meaning that only a perceived version of the concepts was assessed. However, these subjective assessments are also important in accounting for adolescents' perspectives (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Another interesting avenue for future research could be latent class growth analysis, which requires longitudinal data, and would allow us to determine changes in the trajectories of social media use and disconnection tool use throughout adolescence. Such research could be particularly relevant given our finding that age was associated with class membership. Future research should also investigate more recent types of nuanced mobile disconnection tools, including in-app features for well-being (e.g., Instagram's time spend feature).

8. Conclusion

This study was the first to reveal different subgroups based on social media use and the adoption of disconnection tools among adolescents. A quarter of the adolescents exhibited patterns of low social media use and low interest in using tools to disconnect from social media. Most adolescents used social media very frequently and were more likely to seek out tools to disconnect. Girls, older adolescents, and adolescents who scored higher for depressive symptoms and flourishing were more likely to seek out a balance between connecting and disconnecting from social media by adopting those disconnection tools. Thus, along with examining social media use among adolescents, our study has highlighted the importance of future research to equally prioritize the exploration of disconnection strategies, recognizing their significant role in fostering a comprehensive understanding of adolescents' social media behaviors. For adolescents, mastering skills for maintaining a balanced social media diet and proficient self-control will be essential for thriving on social media later in life.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Please see OSF for additional information on the study and the sample, anonymized data, syntaxes, and full materials (https://osf.io/69drn/?view_only=17697ea2b53f4d369eb5a4a7b735acb5).

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ARTICLE

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Navigating Political Disagreement on Social Media: How Affective Responses and Belonging Influence Unfollowing and Unfriending

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Abstract

While recent research has demonstrated how exposure to cross-cutting political opinions intensifies politically motivated disconnectivity on social media, there has been a notable gap in examining the influence of emotions and psychological traits in this process. Guided by the theories of selective avoidance and affective intelligence, our study employed a survey through Qualtrics panel drawn from a population-matching sample (*N* = 498) of the US population to investigate how perceived political disagreement on social media affects decisions to unfollow and unfriend others through the induction of affective responses (e.g., anger, anxiety) and the role of psychological trait—need to belong. Controlling for demographics and political ideology, our mediation analysis revealed that perceived political disagreement was significantly related to anger, which was further positively associated with both unfollowing and unfriending on social media. Perceived political disagreement was also related to anxiety while anxiety was positively associated with individuals' behaviors of unfollowing and unfriending. Furthermore, results showed that the need to belong played a significant role in moderating the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending. When perceiving the same level of political disagreement, individuals with a higher need to belong were less likely to unfriend others on social media, compared to those with a lower need to belong. However, the need to belong did not exert a significant impact on how perceived political disagreement influenced unfollowing behavior. This study contributes to understanding the nuanced dynamics of disconnectivity on social media, particularly in navigating political disagreements.

Keywords

affective responses; anger; anxiety; disconnectivity; need to belong; political disagreement; social media; unfollowing; unfriending

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1. Introduction

Social media has evolved into a platform where individuals express their political viewpoints (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Imagine yourself scrolling through your social media feed, encountering a post from a friend with an opposing political opinion. Research found that exposure to divergent political opinions increases the tendency towards politically motivated disconnectivity on social media platforms (e.g., John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; John & Gal, 2018; Neubaum et al., 2021). For example, during the 2014 Israel–Gaza conflict, Jewish Israeli Facebook users unfriended others to prevent certain content from appearing in their online public spheres (John & Gal, 2018). Similarly, Palestinians were found to unfriend Jewish Israeli citizens as a form of resistance against inequality. In general, individuals frequently choose to avoid dissenting opinions or disengage from content that challenges their own beliefs on social media (Neubaum et al., 2021). A recent Pew Research survey revealed that one in six Americans have employed the strategy of blocking others on social media to curtail exposure to religious content they find disagreeable (Diamant, 2023). The act of disconnecting from individuals with differing political opinions, whether by unfriending, unfollowing, or blocking, is increasingly common as a means of sidestepping the discomfort of encountering incongruent viewpoints. Notably, a national survey found that 61% of respondents admitted to unfriending, unfollowing, or blocking someone on social media due to political disagreements (posts or comments; Goodwin, 2020).

Research has investigated the circumstances and motivations behind politically driven avoidance actions on social media, such as unfollowing and unfriending (Barnidge et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2022; Zhu, 2023; Zhu & Skoric, 2022). Avoidance of political disagreement emerged as a primary reason for unfriending individuals on social media platforms (Bode, 2016; Neubaum et al., 2021; Skoric, Zhu, & Lin, 2018; Yang et al., 2017). This phenomenon aligns with selective avoidance theory, wherein individuals favor like-minded opinions while avoiding information against their pre-existing viewpoints to evade cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Stroud, 2010). Unfollowing and unfriending on social media to sidestep encountering political disagreement are manifestations of selective avoidance behaviors (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Skoric, Zhu, & Lin, 2018). It's worth noting the distinction between unfollowing and unfriending in terms of the degree of disconnection from friends on social media. Unfriending entails a complete severance of the online relationship, whereas unfollowing involves opting not to view others' content without cutting off the relationship entirely. We aim to examine the variances in factors precipitating unfollowing and unfriending behaviors.

While recent studies have elucidated how exposure to cross-cutting political opinions prompts individuals to avoid others on social media (e.g., Neubaum et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017), there exists a notable gap in exploring the role of emotions and psychological traits in this process. Affective intelligence theory suggests that individuals rely on emotions like anger, anxiety (or fear), and enthusiasm to regulate their attention, engagement, and comprehension of the political world (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000). For example, research indicates that anger diminishes exposure to news that contradicts one's prior attitudes (Song, 2017), while anxiety leads individuals to avoid counterattitudinal views when individuals find such information not useful for them (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009). Since anger often drives people to directly avoid opposing opinions, while anxiety prompts them to avoid counter-attitudinal information they deem unhelpful, anger is likely to result in unfriending more than unfollowing. Conversely, anxiety may lead to a preference for unfollowing rather than unfriending. Furthermore, psychological traits such as the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) have been utilized to explain how individuals avoid opposing opinions

from weaker ties but not strong ties on social media (Pennington & Palagi, 2023). Cognitive attributes, such as the need to belong, could play a crucial role in bridging political divides. However, limited research investigates how emotions and psychological traits specifically influence unfollowing and unfriending behaviors for political reasons on social media.

More importantly, as political communication in the US faces numerous challenges—such as the spread of misinformation, the reinforcement of echo chambers by social media, the crisis of political deliberation, and rising political anger and outrage (e.g., Garrett et al., 2013; Guess et al., 2023)—it is crucial to understand how emotions like anger and anxiety, along with individual differences in the need to belong, influence avoidance behaviors on social media. Such insights are essential for explaining political information processing and guiding future political communication strategies. To address this research gap, drawing on both selective avoidance theory and affective intelligence theory, we conducted a national population-matching survey to explore how perceived political disagreement on social media influences decisions to unfollow and unfriend others, considering the elicitation of emotional responses and the psychological trait of the need to belong. Given the significant role of social media as a primary source of political news, avoiding individuals with incongruent political views on these platforms may exacerbate partisan divides and perpetuate the validation of information, whether accurate or not (Guess et al., 2023). Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying unfollowing and unfriending behaviors on social media contributes to a deeper comprehension of their direct and indirect impacts on political engagement (Zhu & Skoric, 2022).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Politically Motivated Disconnectivity on Social Media

Social media serves as a crucial information source for Americans, with half of US adults obtaining news from these platforms at least occasionally (Pew Research Center, 2023). Moreover, social media has become a platform where individuals express and disseminate political opinions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Consequently, individuals may find themselves confronted with others' comments on political matters that they disagree with on social media (Bode, 2016). Perceived political disagreement encompasses encountering political opinions or viewpoints on social media that individuals find disagreeing (Neubaum et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017). The perceived intensity of political disagreement escalates with the frequency of exposure to such disagreement on social media (Yang et al., 2017). Individuals may feel offended by such political disagreement on social media and opt to engage in political debates with their peers or choose to ignore or avoid the content altogether (Bode, 2016; Neubaum et al., 2021).

Avoiding individuals with opposing political opinions has become a prevalent strategy to mitigate the discomfort of perceived political disagreement. Previous research has identified various forms of politically motivated disengagement, including unfollowing, unfriending, blocking, hiding, muting, and filtering (e.g., Baysha, 2020; Kim et al., 2022; Zhang & Shoenberger, 2021). Among these, unfriending and unfollowing are the most prevalent types (Baysha, 2020; Zhu, 2023). Scholars have viewed unfriending as a deliberate decision to terminate a dyadic relationship, resulting in the removal of the connection between the two parties in apolitical everyday life (Sibona, 2014) as well as in politically motivated disconnective actions (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Zhu et al. (2017) were the first to define unfriending (dissolving social ties) and unfollowing (removing or hiding content) as forms of selective avoidance within political movements.

Selective avoidance involves actively blocking sources of dissent and shielding oneself from information that might induce cognitive dissonance by filtering out opposing views and reducing connections that convey them (Zhu et al., 2017).

Unfollowing is a gentler approach wherein individuals opt to avoid seeing posts from others without severing the connection altogether (Zhang & Shoenberger, 2021). However, unfriending represents a complete cessation of the relationship on social media, and unfollowing maintains the connection while limiting exposure to content. Although previous research has often grouped unfriending and unfollowing together (e.g., Bode, 2016), we posit that these two behaviors carry distinct consequences and thus warrant separate examinations. Examining unfriending and unfollowing is important both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, these actions represent distinct forms of selective avoidance behavior (Barnidge et al., 2023). They differ in how much individuals disassociate from their social network, involving varying levels of cost-benefit analysis and leading to different social consequences, such as the potential removal of social connections. Practically, individuals may use different avoidance strategies to reduce perceived political disagreement on social media, each of which carries unique psychological and social implications.

2.2. Political Disagreement and Selective Avoidance

Encountering information that contradicts their beliefs often triggers mental discomfort in individuals, leading them to seek out like-minded information or avoid exposure to incongruent viewpoints to mitigate cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Stroud, 2008, 2010). Selective avoidance and selective exposure are distinct processes; while selective exposure doesn't necessarily preclude exposure to opposing opinions, selective avoidance constitutes a defensive strategy aimed at avoiding such exposure altogether (Garrett et al., 2013; Garrett & Stroud, 2014). The theory of selective avoidance has been used in explaining the rationale and psychological mechanisms behind avoidance behaviors on social media (Barnidge et al., 2023; Skoric, Zhu, & Lin, 2018). For example, individuals with strong opinions on social issues have been observed actively avoiding disagreement by unfriending others on social media (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Selective avoidance behaviors like unfriending and unfollowing are often employed as means to filter content and individuals who challenge their existing beliefs within their social networks (John & Gal, 2018).

Furthermore, social media predominantly functions as an interpersonal platform, facilitating connections and the sharing of experiences among individuals (Barnidge et al., 2023; John & Gal, 2018). Consequently, when individuals choose to unfollow or unfriend someone on social media, they engage in a cost-benefit analysis, weighing the discomfort or cognitive dissonance induced by encountering opposing views against any benefits derived from maintaining social contact with that user. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the mechanisms of selective avoidance on social media and how perceived disagreement within these platforms predicts avoidance behaviors with varying degrees of disconnection, both similarly and disparately.

Previous studies have indicated that the degree of perceived political disagreement on social media significantly predicts unfriending and unfollowing behaviors (Bode, 2016). Unfriending or unfollowing individuals for political reasons has been observed across various cultural contexts and countries, including Western countries, Asia, and Europe (Baysha, 2020; Lin et al., 2023; Kozman et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2017). Selective avoidance behaviors on social media are particularly prevalent in political contexts (Kozman et al., 2022). For instance, during political protests, unfriending and unfollowing behaviors on social media were

common strategies employed to mitigate perceived threats posed by dissenting opinions (Zhu et al., 2017). Overall, research has consistently shown that the intensity of perceived political disagreement correlates with an increased likelihood of unfriending and unfollowing (Lin et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2017). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

> H1: Perceived political disagreement will be positively associated with (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media.

2.3. Emotional Responses to Political Disagreement

Exposure to political disagreement can elicit emotional responses that subsequently influence one's political behaviors (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011; Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008). Even individuals with high political sophistication are susceptible to the impact of emotions on political decision-making (Miller, 2011). According to the cognitive appraisal theory of emotion, emotions arise when individuals cognitively evaluate their environment (Dillard & Shen, 2007; Lazarus, 1991). If an individual perceives uncertain threats in their environment, specific emotions (e.g., anger) may be activated, and each discrete emotion plays a unique role in shaping an individual's subsequent coping strategies to address the threat (Lazarus, 1991). When individuals perceive political disagreement in their social media environment, various negative emotions may emerge based on their appraisals of the causes of the threat. These emotions can enhance the desire to exert control over the situation, thereby influencing individuals' selective avoidance behaviors. In this context, the perceived threat can include both one's identity and emotional well-being (John & Gal, 2018). For instance, individuals may choose to unfriend or unfollow others to alleviate feelings of anger and anxiety (Neubaum et al., 2021).

Additionally, the affective intelligence theory proposes that emotions play a crucial role in political decision-making by motivating individuals to engage more deeply in the processing and assimilation of political information (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000). Three primary emotions—anger, anxiety, and enthusiasm—significantly influence political judgment and decision-making processes (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000). Research indicates that anxiety (or fear) typically prompts systematic and effortful processing of political information to alleviate uncertainty, while anger and enthusiasm trigger heuristic processing, such as reliance on partisan cues (Marcus et al., 2000; Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008). This study specifically focuses on anger and anxiety, as these emotions are commonly elicited by perceived political disagreement (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011) and play distinct roles in political information processing (Marcus, 2003).

More specifically, anger and anxiety stemming from perceived political disagreement on social media may have distinct impacts on unfriending and unfollowing behaviors. Emotions are typically viewed as short-term and intense responses to external stimuli (Lazarus, 1991; Nabi, 2010). Research suggests that actions triggered by emotions vary depending on the nature of the emotion itself, with different emotions leading to different behaviors (Lazarus, 1991; Nabi, 2010). For instance, anxiety or fear tends to prompt individuals to engage in low-cost political activities, whereas anger encourages higher-cost participation (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011). Anger arises when a threat can be attributed to a cause and is perceived as controllable, thereby mobilizing political participation (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011; Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008). In contrast, anxiety is triggered when individuals feel

a lack of control and struggle to attribute a cause to the threat, often resulting in low-cost actions. Considering that unfollowing and unfriending require individuals to weigh costs and benefits, with unfollowing entailing fewer social repercussions, anxiety may mobilize unfollowing more than unfriending. Anger, on the other hand, might lead to more unfriending, given its stronger emotional intensity and propensity for more drastic behavior compared to anxiety. Overall, both anger and anxiety are likely to increase the likelihood of unfriending and unfollowing, but we may observe differences between them.

While existing research suggests that both anger and anxiety contribute to selective avoidance behaviors (Garrett et al., 2013; Song, 2017; Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009), their specific roles in political disconnectivity behavior on social media remain underexplored. Drawing on the cognitive appraisal theory and affective intelligence theory and the arguments outlined above (Lazarus, 1991; Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000; Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011; Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008), we hypothesize that exposure to political disagreement on social media could evoke feelings of anger and anxiety, subsequently predicting unfriending and unfollowing behaviors. Specifically, the uncertain threat posed by perceived political disagreement may lead individuals to engage in systematic, effortful information processing, thereby inducing anxiety, while also prompting heuristic processing that evokes anger (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000). Additionally, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) suggests that exposure to disagreeing opinions challenging one's preexisting attitudes and beliefs can induce cognitive dissonance (Stroud, 2008, 2010), resulting in negative emotions like anger and anxiety. Consequently, these emotions may drive individuals to avoid political disagreement as a means of alleviating cognitive dissonance and reducing the perceived threat (Festinger, 1957; Marcus et al., 2000). Thus, we propose the following hypotheses to test the mediating role of anger and anxiety in this process:

> H2: Anger will mediate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media; such that political disagreement is positively associated with anger, which is further positively related to (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending.

> H3: Anxiety will mediate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media; such that political disagreement is positively related to anxiety, which is further positively associated with (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending.

2.4. Moderating Role of Need to Belong

Scholars have recently begun to explore psychological factors that may contribute to selective avoidance behaviors on social media, such as the need for cognition and the need to evaluate (i.e., the inclination to assess thoughts and form judgments; Kim et al., 2022). One psychological factor that has garnered attention in the literature is the need to belong (Pennington & Palagi, 2023). The need to belong refers to individuals' desire to establish and sustain interpersonal relationships and their tendency to avoid terminating relationships to fulfill this need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary et al., 2013). Individuals with a stronger need to belong prioritize gaining acceptance by others and maintaining relationships with others, whereas those with a weaker need to belong assign less importance to seeking acceptance and belonging (Leary et al., 2013).

Recent studies have used the need to belong hypothesis to explain why individuals are inclined to unfriend weak ties (acquaintances) but not strong ties (close friends) with opposing political views on social media

(Pennington & Palagi, 2023). However, the influence of individual differences in the need to belong on selective avoidance behaviors on social media remains unexplored. Considering that social media serves as both a public and personal sphere (John & Gal, 2018), individuals engage in a cost-benefit evaluation to determine whether to compromise interpersonal relationship maintenance to alleviate discomfort stemming from perceived political disagreement. In that case, the need to belong could moderate the relationship strength between perceived political disagreement and selective avoidance behaviors on social media. When individuals encounter political disagreement on their social networking sites, those with a high need to belong may be more inclined to preserve the relationship on social media and opt against unfriending or unfollowing compared to those with a low need to belong. Moreover, the impact of the need to belong on unfollowing and unfriending behaviors may differ. Unfriending represents a complete severing of the relationship on social media, while unfollowing is a more subtle approach, allowing individuals to maintain the connection but limit their exposure to the other person's content (Anderson, 2023; Zhu, 2023). Essentially, unfriending is social ties dissociation whereas unfollowing is a form of content filtering that hides specific content while keeping the social relationship (Zhu & Skoric, 2023). As a result, individuals with a high need to belong may be more likely to choose unfollowing over unfriending, as it enables them to preserve social ties while managing the level of engagement. It is also important to note that, according to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals with a stronger attachment to their political ideology or party are more likely to distance themselves from opposing views to protect their social identity. To account for this tendency, political ideology and ideological strength should be controlled when examining the moderating role of the need to belong. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

> H4: Need to belong will moderate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media; such that low need to belong will strengthen such relationships.

3. Method

This study recruited a nationally population-matching sample (*N* = 498) through Qualtrics Panels after obtaining Institutional Review Board approval. Prior to data collection, we conducted an a priori power analysis for linear multiple regression (f^2 = .10, power = .95) using G*Power software, which indicated a required sample size of 277 respondents. Adopting a more conservative approach, we aimed to collect 500 responses. The Qualtrics Panel company was responsible for distributing and collecting the survey questionnaires from their panel participants. Initially, we received 506 completed surveys from the Qualtrics Panel; however, eight respondents failed the attention check and were subsequently removed from the sample. Initial screening of age (18 years old or above) and time spent on social media (at least 10 minutes a day) in addition to ideology, gender, income, and education quotas were applied to ensure the representativeness of the sample (see a comparison of the study sample and US population demographics in Table 1). The average age of all respondents was 38.95 (*SD* = 13.53) with 50.4% of them being female and 69.1% of them White, followed by Black (14.9%), Hispanic (9.8%), Asian (4.6%), and Native American (0.6%). The median income was between $50,000 and $74,999. The median education level of the respondents was some college.

Table 1. Demographics comparison of study sample and the US population.

	Study sample (%)	US population census (%)
Gender:		
Female	50.4	50.5
Male	49.6	49.5
Race/ethnicity:		
White	69.1	75.3
Black or African American	14.9	13.7
Hispanic or Latino	9.8	19.5
Asian	4.6	6.4
Age:		
Average age	38.95	38.9
Education:		
High school and some college	62	54.8
Bachelor's degree or more	38	36.2
Household Income:		
Less than $25,000	18	15.2
$25,000 to $49,999	22.6	17.1
$50,000 to $74,999	18.4	16.1
$75,000 to $99,999	13.7	12.7
$100,000 to $149,999	15	17.4
$150,000 or more	12.3	21.5

Note: The median household income in the US is $77,719.

3.1. Procedure

At the beginning of the survey, respondents were presented with informed consent. Following their consent, respondents provided demographic information, disclosed their political ideology, reported their social media use, and indicated their perception of political disagreement on social media. Subsequently, respondents were asked about their emotional responses after they saw friends on social media posting about political issues in a way they disagreed with. They were then asked to indicate how frequently they had unfriended or unfollowed others due to their political postings. To ensure comprehension, participants were provided with brief explanations distinguishing between unfriending and unfollowing: Unfriending someone is a choice to remove a person from your social media friends list and decide to cut connections with that person on social media totally, while unfollowing someone is opting not to see a friend's posts while maintaining the connection. Respondents were asked about their unfollowing and unfriending behaviors on social media in general, rather than on a specific platform, as these actions take place across various social media platforms. Upon completion of the study, respondents were thanked for their time and participation.

3.2. Measures

Perceived political disagreement assessed the frequency of disagreement with others' political posts on social media (Yang et al., 2017). Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*), respondents were asked the answer the following question: "How often do you disagree with the political opinions your friends post on social media?" (*M* = 2.77; *SD* = 1.05).

Anger was measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) adapted from Dillard and Shen (2007), where respondents were asked how they felt when they saw their friends on social media posting views about a political issue that they do not agree with. Respondents rated their agreement to four statements assessing feelings of anger after perceiving political disagreement on social media: (a) "I feel irritated"; (b) "I feel angry"; (c) "I feel annoyed"; and (d) "I feel aggravated". These four items were combined to form an index of feeling of anger and ensured its reliability (α = .90; *M* = 3.93; *SD* = 1.60).

Anxiety involves not only feelings of anxiousness but also includes emotions such as sadness and dreariness/depression (Dillard & Shen, 2007; Marcus, 2003), the measure aims to capture this broader range of emotional dimensions associated with anxiety. Respondents rated their agreement to four statements assessing feelings of anxiety after perceiving political disagreement on social media: (a) "I feel anxious"; (b) "I feel dismal"; (c) "I feel sad"; and (d) "I feel dreary." These four items were combined to form an index of feeling of anxiety and ensured reliability (α = .84; *M* = 3.60; *SD* = 1.51).

Need to belong was measured by asking respondents to rate their agreement to five statements (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*; Leary et al., 2013): (a) "I want other people to accept me"; (b) "it bothers me a great deal when I am not included in other people's plans"; (c) "I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me"; (d) "I need to feel that there are people I can turn to in times of need"; (e) "I do not like being alone." All the items were combined into an index and ensured reliability (α = .82; *M* = 4.37; *SD* = 1.36).

Unfriending was measured by asking respondents if, when using social media, they have "unfriended" a person from their friend list on social media because of the following behaviors of their friends (Bode, 2016; 1 = *never* to 7 = *always*): (a) posted too frequently about politics or political issues; (b) posted something about politics or political issues that you disagree with or found offensive; (c) argue about political issues on the site with you or someone you know; (d) disagreed with something you posted about politics or political issues; and (e) posted something related to politics or political issues that you worried would offend your other friends or people who follow you. The items were combined into an index of unfriending behaviors on social media (α = .91; *M* = 3.54; *SD* = 1.68).

Unfollowing for political reasons was measured by asking respondents if they have "unfollowed" a person from their friend list on social media for political reasons (Bode, 2016) using the same items above for measuring political unfriending (1 = *never* to 7 = *always*). The items were combined into an index after rechecking the reliability (α = .88; *M* = 3.69; *SD* = 1.60).

Demographic variables include age, gender, education, income, race, and four other variables that serve as control variables such as ideological extremity based on prior research (Barnidge et al., 2023; Skoric, Zhu,

et al., 2022). Respondents were asked to indicate their political ideology (1 = *very liberal* to 5 = *very conservative*; M = 3.45; SD = 1.51) and answered one of the two items that applied to their ideology on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not very strong* to 5 = *very strong*): "How strongly would you rate your affiliation with the liberal/conservative political ideology?" The two items were merged into one item to indicate the strength of a person's ideology regardless of whether they lean toward more conservative or more liberal (M = 3.12; SD = 1.27). Respondents were also asked, generally speaking, how interested they were in politics (M = 3.28; SD = 1.28). Adapted from Ellison et al. (2007), respondents were asked to report their time spent on social media every day (1 = *0–30 min* to 6 = *4+ hours per day*; M = 3.28; SD = 1.28).

3.3. Data Analysis Technique

To test H1, we conducted an ordinary least squares regression model. To examine H2, H3, and H4, we employed process model five (Hayes, 2017), where perceived disagreement served as the independent variable, unfollowing and unfriending as dependent variables, and anger and anxiety as mediators, with need to belong as a moderator. Additionally, all other controlled variables from the regression model were included as covariates. Process model five enables the simultaneous examination of the mediating role of anger and anxiety in the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfollowing/unfriending, as well as the moderating role of need to belong in this relationship.

4. Results

H1 proposed that perceived political disagreement would be positively associated with (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media. Results showed that perceived political disagreement was positively related to unfollowing ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$) and unfriending behaviors ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$) on social media (see Table 2). Therefore, H1 was supported.

Table 2. Regression models testing perceived political disagreement and social media unfollowing and unfriending.

	Unfollowing	Unfriending
Block 1: Demographics	β (SE)	β (SE)
Age	.001 (.003)	–.08 (.004)
Gender (female)	–.07 (.12)	–.07 (.13)
Race (White)	–.04 (.13)	–.02 (.11)
Education	–.02 (.05)	–.004 (.05)
Income	.12* (.04)	.11* (.04)
ΔR^2 (%)	5.9%	7%
Block 2: Political attitudes		
Political interest	.01 (.03)	.04 (.04)
Political ideology	–.06 (.12)	–.06 (.13)
Ideology strength	.05 (.04)	.04 (.03)
ΔR^2 (%)	3.7%	3.6%

Table 2. (Cont.) Regression models testing perceived political disagreement and social media unfollowing and unfriending.

	Unfollowing	Unfriending
Block 3: Social media network belonging		
Need to belong	–.17*** (.06)	–.13** (.04)
Time spent on social media	.03 (.01)	.03 (.01)
ΔR^2 (%)	6.1%	3.9%
Block 4: Variables of interest		
Anger	.17*** (.05)	.11* (.05)
Anxiety	.25*** (.05)	.28*** (.06)
Perceived political disagreement	.12* (.04)	.11* (.03)
ΔR^2 (%)	14%	12.3%
Need to belong * Perceived political disagreement	.08 (.04)	.13** (.04)
ΔR^2 (%)	.2%	.6%
Total ΔR^2	29.9%	27.4%

Notes: $N = 498$; the coefficients are standardized Beta (β); SE = standard error; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

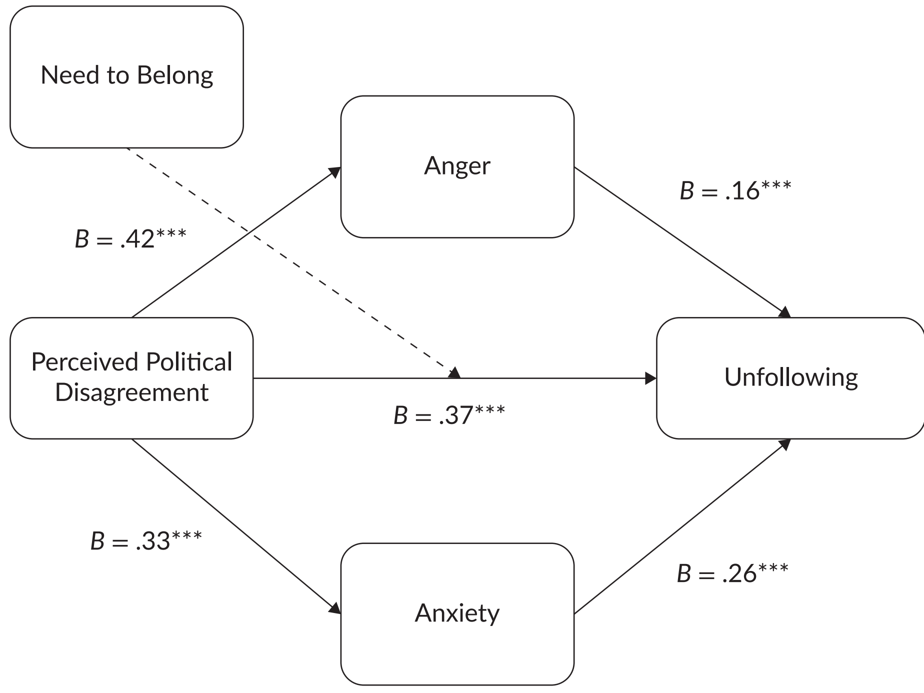

Figure 1. Effects of perceived political disagreement on unfollowing on social media, mediated through anger and anxiety and moderated by need to belong. Notes: $N = 498$; the path coefficients are unstandardized; the same control variables in Table 2 were included in this model; the indirect effects are—perceived political disagreement → anger → unfollowing ($B = .05$, 95% CI = [.02, .08]); perceived political disagreement → anxiety → unfollowing ($B = .06$, 95% CI = [.03, .10]); the interaction effect is $B = .05$, 95% CI = [–.02, .12], $p > .05$; CI = confidence interval; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

H2 proposed that anger would mediate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media. Mediation analysis results showed that anger mediated the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfollowing behaviors on social media ($B = .05$, 95% CI = [.02, .08]; see Figure 1). Specifically, individuals who perceived political disagreement on social media were more likely to feel angry after viewing their friends on social media posting views about a political issue that they do not agree with ($B = .42$, $p < .001$) which subsequently increased their possibility to unfollow someone ($B = .16$, $p < .001$). Similarly, mediation results showed that anger mediated the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending ($B = .03$, 95% CI = [.003, .07]; see Figure 2). Specifically, individuals who perceived political disagreement on social media were more inclined to increase their level of anger ($B = .42$, $p < .001$) which in turn increased the engagement in unfriending behavior ($B = .12$, $p < .05$). Therefore, H2 was supported.

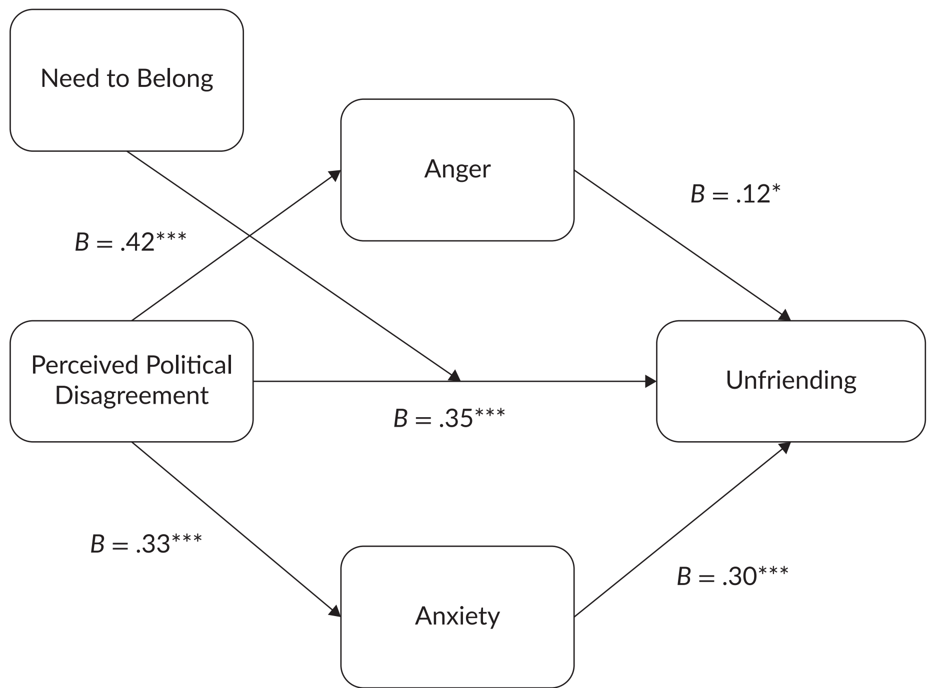

Figure 2. Effects of perceived political disagreement on unfriending on social media, mediated through anger and anxiety and moderated by need to belong. Notes: $N = 498$; the path coefficients are unstandardized; the same controls variables in Table 2 were included in this model; the indirect effects are—perceived political disagreement → anger → unfriending ($B = .03$, 95% CI = [.003, .07]); perceived political disagreement → anxiety → unfriending ($B = .07$, 95% CI = [.03, .11]); the interaction effect is $B = .08$, 95% CI = [.005, .15], $p < .05$; CI = confidence interval; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

H3 proposed that anxiety would mediate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media. Mediation analysis results showed that anxiety mediated the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfollowing behaviors on social media ($B = .06$, 95% CI = [.03, .10]; see Figure 1). Specifically, individuals who perceived political disagreement on social media were more inclined to increase their level of anxiety ($B = .33$, $p < .001$) which in turn increased their likelihood to unfollow someone ($B = .26$, $p < .001$). Similarly, mediation results showed that anxiety mediated the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending behaviors on social media ($B = .07$, 95% CI = [.03, .11]; see Figure 2). Specifically, individuals who

perceived political disagreement on social media were more likely to feel anxious ($B = .33$, $p < .001$) which subsequently increased the unfriending behavior ($B = .30$, $p < .001$). Therefore, H3 was supported.

H4 proposed that need to belong would moderate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media. Moderation analysis results showed that need to belong did not moderate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfollowing ($B = .05$, 95% $CI = [–.02, .12]$; see Figure 1). However, moderation analysis results showed that need to belong moderated the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending ($B = .08$, 95% $CI = [.005, .15]$; see Figure 3). More specifically, individuals with a lower need to belong were more likely to unfriend others as they perceived higher levels of political disagreement on social media. When perceiving the same level of political disagreement, individuals with a higher need to belong were less likely to unfriend others on social media, compared to those with a lower need to belong (see Figure 3). Therefore, H4a was not supported but H4b was supported.

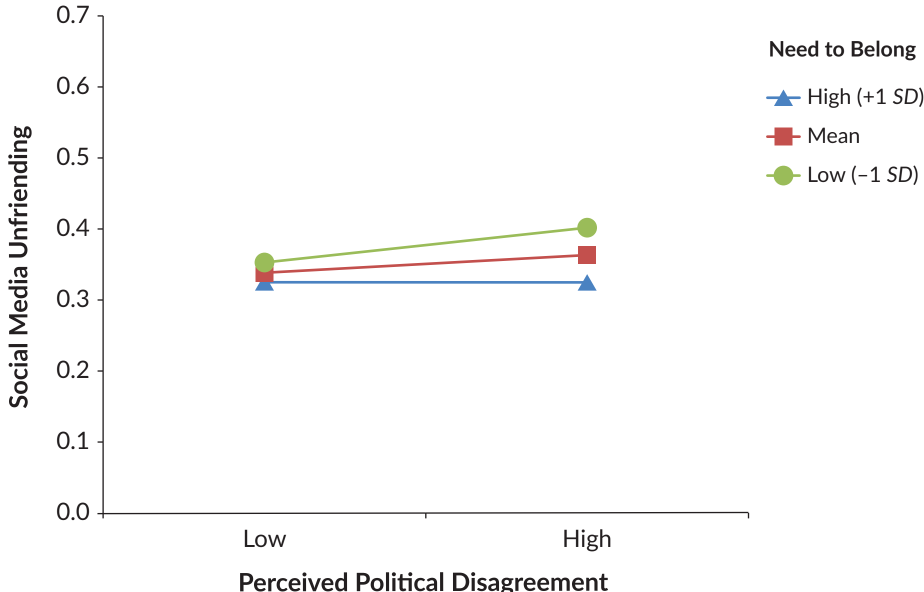

Figure 3. Interaction effects of perceived political disagreement and need to belong on social media unfriending.

5. Discussion

Due to proprietary algorithms and individual selective exposure tendencies, individuals often encounter a higher volume of like-minded information on social media platforms (Guess et al., 2023). Consequently, incongruent opinions on social media become more noticeable to users. While prior research has identified various selective avoidance behaviors triggered by perceived political disagreement on social media (e.g., John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Neubaum et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017), the role of emotional responses and psychological factors in selective avoidance has remained underexplored. Based on selective avoidance theory (Garrett et al., 2013; Stroud, 2008, 2010) and affective intelligence theory (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000), this study addresses this gap and identifies the mediating role of two specific discrete emotions—anger and anxiety—in this process. Perceived political disagreement was found to be positively associated with both anger and anxiety, which was further related to unfriending and unfollowing behaviors.

Additionally, the need to belong was found to moderate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending. Individuals with higher levels of need to belong were less likely to unfriend others after perceiving political disagreement. Our findings unpack the underlying mechanisms through which discrete emotions arising from perceived political disagreement and individual psychological traits—the need to belong—influence the selective avoidance process on social media. Given that this area of research is still in its nascent stages (Zhu, 2023), our study contributes to the literature by offering several significant findings and explanations.

First, we found that perceived political disagreement on social media predicted the likelihood to unfriend and unfollow others, consistent with previous research findings (e.g., Neubaum et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017). Through unfriending and unfollowing others for political reasons, individuals can alleviate cognitive dissonance derived from political disagreement on social media, as posited by the theories of selective avoidance and selective exposure (Festinger, 1957; Garrett et al., 2013; Stroud, 2008, 2010). Selective avoidance behaviors have been identified across various contexts where individuals are exposed to counterattitudinal political opinions, including news consumption (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Song, 2017), social media information exposure (Skoric, Zhu, & Lin, 2018), and participation in political protests (Zhu et al., 2017). Our findings contribute further evidence supporting exposure to political disagreement as a significant predictor of selective avoidance behaviors on social media.

Second, both anger and anxiety were identified as mediators in the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending or unfollowing. According to cognitive appraisal theory, distinct discrete emotions are elicited as individuals appraise environmental threats (Lazarus, 1991). Our findings revealed that perceived political disagreement serves as a type of uncertain threat, evoking negative emotions such as anger and anxiety. Despite both being categorized as negative discrete emotions, prior literature indicates distinctions between how anger and anxiety manifest (Lazarus, 1991; Nabi, 2010). Research suggests that anger is more likely to be induced when individuals can attribute the cause of the threat, while anxiety is more likely to be evoked when the cause cannot be attributed (Lazarus, 1991; Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011). We found that individuals exposed to political disagreement on social media experience both scenarios, inducing both anger and anxiety as they attempt to regain control of the situation.

We anticipated that anger would prompt action more strongly than anxiety, as anger typically triggers heuristic information processing (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000). Surprisingly, some studies found that anger might mitigate confirmation bias and foster engagement with opposing viewpoints (Young et al., 2011). However, our findings contradict this notion, revealing that anger stemming from perceived disagreement predicted the likelihood of both unfriending and unfollowing. It's essential to note that in our study, anger and anxiety stem from the perception of political disagreement, distinct from the anger provoked by viewing a specific media stimulus (Young et al., 2011). Generally, when individuals feel angry after perceiving political disagreement on social media, they tend to resort to unfriending or unfollowing. Moreover, anger tends to spur individuals toward more high-cost actions (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011; Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008). Given that unfriending entails severing relationships and necessitates thorough cost-benefit evaluations, anger emerged as a significant factor driving unfriending behavior.

While prior research suggests that emotions facilitating the identification of causes prompt action, and emotions failing to identify causes and provide a sense of control may lead to inaction (Marcus et al., 2000;

Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008), we found that anxiety exerted similar effects as anger in the process of unfriending and unfollowing behaviors. Anger and anxiety may prompt different types of political actions—anger leads to more high-cost actions, whereas anxiety or fear leads to low-cost actions (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011). Anger arises when individuals perceive the threat of political disagreement on social media and can specifically identify who is causing it within their social media networks. In contrast, anxiety may occur when an overwhelming of political disagreement information emerges on one's social media, and individuals perceive a lack of control over the situation, sometimes without knowing whom to blame. We found that anxiety can prompt actions to both unfriend and unfollow others. This contradicts affective intelligence theory, which posits that anxiety can stimulate more effortful processing of political information to reduce uncertainty (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000). Instead, it may be that people employ politically motivated disconnective behaviors as emotional regulation strategies, aiming to avoid the anxiety associated with exposure to opposing views (Zhu & Skoric, 2023).

Third, we found that the need to belong moderated the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending. For individuals with a higher need to form and maintain relationships on social media, unfriending—which involves completely cutting off relationships—may be a less desirable option (Pennington & Palagi, 2023). Consequently, they might opt to endure the discomfort rather than unfriend others. However, the need to belong did not moderate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfollowing. Since unfollowing does not necessitate a complete severance of relationships, the level of need to belong did not influence the impact of political disagreement on unfollowing. This finding highlights that networked connections on social media reflect similar offline relationship types including strong and weak ties and individuals value their online relationships. The limited impact of the need to belong on unfollowing behaviors derived from perceived political disagreement, as compared to unfriending, suggests that people may place importance on the strength and quality of these relationships. Choosing to unfollow, rather than unfriend, allows individuals to maintain these connections without causing potential harm to the relationship. This study represents one of the first investigations into how individual differences in the need to belong influence unfriending and unfollowing for political reasons on social media. Future research could explore whether the need to belong affects unfriending and unfollowing behaviors within strong ties or weak ties on social media (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Pennington & Palagi, 2023).

This study has several limitations worth noting. Firstly, we did not comprehensively cover all types of selective avoidance behaviors on social media but rather focused on the most prevalent ones. Given the diverse functions and applications of different social media platforms, actions like unfollowing and unfriending may carry varying implications. For instance, on Instagram, "mute" is akin to unfollowing, while "unfollow" is comparable to unfriending. One of our contributions is the examination of unfriending and unfollowing behaviors across social media platforms. To ensure clarity, we provided clear definitions of unfriending and unfollowing at the beginning of the survey, alongside questions pertaining to these behaviors for political reasons. Secondly, we are relying on cross-sectional survey data that cannot establish the causal relationships between perceived political disagreement, emotional responses, and selective avoidance behaviors. While our data allows for correlations of a general nature, future research could employ experimental designs to explore these relationships more rigorously. Thirdly, we asked participants to recall their emotional reactions upon encountering political disagreement, which may present challenges in accurately articulating these feelings. However, we specifically focused on the two most commonly reported emotions derived from perceived political disagreement (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino,

Brader, et al., 2011; Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008). Moreover, previous research investigating the impact of political disagreement on emotional responses has utilized survey methods involving the recall of feelings (e.g., Song, 2017; Zhang & Shoenberger, 2021). Therefore, we believe our approach enabled us to capture respondents' emotions stemming from political disagreement on social media effectively.

Despite its limitations, our study contributes to the literature on political disconnectivity by enhancing our understanding of the emotional and psychological factors that influence unfriending and unfollowing behaviors on social media. Specifically, our findings demonstrate the applicability of selective avoidance theory, affective intelligence theory, and cognitive dissonance theory in explaining political information avoidance behaviors on social media. Additionally, this study contributes to the existing literature by identifying individual differences, particularly the need to belong, as factors that can influence selective avoidance behaviors. Our findings also have practical implications for the design of social media content filtering, as platforms may consider incorporating features with varying levels of disconnectivity to accommodate individual differences such as the need to belong. For instance, social media platforms like Facebook have introduced various options for managing interactions, such as blocking or hiding content, in addition to unfriending and unfollowing. Users can also control who can view their timelines. Building on these features, platforms could design a grouping function that allows individuals to categorize their friends. This would enable users with varying levels of need to belong to selectively block content from specific groups without notifying them, maintaining relationships while managing content exposure. Furthermore, these findings have practical implications for mitigating political polarization, as individuals with a high need to belong may be less likely to unfollow or unfriend those with opposing political views. In this context, both social media platforms and society can encourage more constructive dialogue between people with different political opinions by enhancing individuals' sense of belonging. Specifically, platforms can design features that strengthen online relationships by fostering community-building, which may promote engagement across diverse viewpoints.

Broadly, our findings shed light on how the social media environment shapes individuals' processing of political information and their responses to political disagreement. Widespread adoption of selective avoidance behaviors, such as unfriending and unfollowing, may contribute to the formation of echo chambers, where people are exposed only to like-minded political opinions. Understanding the factors driving selective avoidance of political information in the digital age is crucial. It represents the first step toward developing strategies to promote democratic deliberation and counteract these divisive behaviors. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate how individuals' reasons for using social media may influence the role of political disagreement in promoting selective avoidance behaviors. The source of anger and anxiety stemming from political opinions on social media may not solely arise from encountering opposing viewpoints but could also result from content that does not align with one's motivations for using social media. Anecdotally, individuals have expressed fatigue with excessive political content on platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). Research has also demonstrated that using Facebook for political purposes can drive unfriending and muting behaviors (Zhang & Shoenberger, 2021). Furthermore, future research should include comparative studies examining the emotional and psychological antecedents of political disconnection on social media across different cultural contexts, as cutting off relationships on social media may carry different implications in various cultural settings (Skoric, Zhu, et al., 2022). In addition, future research should explore how other individual difference factors such as age and ideology influence emotional responses to political disagreement and selective avoidance behavior.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Patterns and Factors of Political Disconnection on Social Media: A Cross-Platform Comparison

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Abstract

There is a growing body of literature on the use and selection of social media platforms for political activism. However, less attention has been given to identifying citizens who are politically disconnected—those registered on social media platforms but not engaging in political activities. Additionally, whether patterns of non-use of social media for politics vary across different platforms remains understudied. Based on an online survey of 1,978 respondents conducted after the 2022 French presidential election campaign, this article aims to address these questions by examining the patterns and factors contributing to political disconnection from social media, particularly across six platforms: Facebook, private social networks, Instagram, Snapchat, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok. Our findings indicate that three main factors explain political disconnection: digital skills, interest in politics (except for platforms less frequently used for politics), and social media efficacy. These results provide significant and original contributions to the broader debate on how and why individuals disconnect socially and technologically on social media platforms. While many studies focus on the variables that account for political participation in the age of social media, ours examines the conditions that explain non-use in the context of political disconnection. We also contribute to the existing literature by analysing the phenomenon of non-use holistically, addressing platform type, demographics, digital literacy, and political traits (e.g., interest and competence).

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Keywords
digital disconnection; digital literacy; elections; online democratic practices; online non-participation; political disconnection; political interest; political participation; social media

1. Introduction

The use of social media platforms for political purposes by individuals has gathered increasing attention in academic literature (Boulianne & Hoffmann, 2022). Although online political activity has grown, individuals who engage in it still represent a minority (Segesten & Bossetta, 2017). While many people have accounts on social networks and frequently use them, most do not engage with political content (Neihouser et al., 2022). Online political activities, such as political expression or consuming political information, are primarily undertaken by individuals who are highly politicized and educated (Neihouser et al., 2022; Schlozman et al., 2010), and more often by men (Oser et al., 2013; Saglie & Vabo, 2009). Yet, surprisingly little is known about those who, though connected social media users, are politically inactive on social media.

Building on literature about digital disconnection (Ross et al., 2024), various studies explore the voluntary limitation or lack of political uses of social media by some citizens (Skoric et al., 2018; Zhu, 2023; Zhu et al., 2019). The polarization and increasing fragmentation of the public sphere—especially due to misuse of platforms by various political groups—are cited as factors potentially explaining this withdrawal from online political activities. However, this body of literature mainly focuses on very specific political non-users of social media who are often well-informed and politicized. It remains unclear whether the deterioration of the online public sphere is a significant factor for the political non-use of social media by other groups, particularly those less politicized, though they are similarly connected on digital platforms. In an era when digital technology permeates all aspects of our daily lives—from work and leisure to shopping, medical consultations, and administrative procedures—this article analyses why citizens refrain from using social media for political purposes.

Digital disconnection refers to the voluntary or involuntary disengagement from digital platforms, including social media, the internet, and other digital technologies. While political disconnection involves a lack of interest or participation in political processes, digital disconnection encompasses a broader range of activities, including withdrawing from online spaces for reasons of personal well-being, information overload, or distrust of technology (Syvertsen, 2020). Although digital disconnection can lead to political disconnection—since disengaging from digital platforms limits exposure to political news and discussions—the two concepts are not synonymous. Political disconnection may arise from disinterest in politics itself, whereas digital disconnection can be driven by broader concerns about privacy, mental health, or the quality of online interactions (Nguyen & Hargittai, 2023). Thus, while they intersect, digital disconnection reflects a wider spectrum of motivations beyond just political disengagement (Hesselberth, 2018).

The difference between political disconnection and non-use of social media for political purposes relates to the degree of engagement with political content online. Disconnection is a broader concept than non-use; it encompasses all types of disconnections, including the refusal to use technology for both political and non-political reasons. It applies to citizens who do not use the internet at all, as well as to those who actively avoid exposure to political information on social media. In contrast, non-use for political purposes

specifically refers to the absence of active engagement with political content on social media, rather than merely avoiding consumption of or exposure to political information online. In this study, we focus on a specific sub-category of disconnection, namely the use of social media but not for political purposes.

Further, we differentiate between general non-use of a platform and refraining from political uses of the platform. Political disconnection, in our definition, is thus related to both social media non-use and non-participation but concerns primarily non-political use of social media. According to the two variables used for building our classification matrix presented in Table 1—being a user of social media and being politically active—four categories of citizens were identified: those who are social media users and politically active (at least online), those who use social media but do not engage with political content online, those who are not social media users but are politically active offline, and those who are neither social media users nor politically active. To study disconnection, we focus on citizens who are social media users but not for political purposes (i.e., they are digitally connected but politically disconnected, see the bottom-left quadrant in Table 1), and compare them to citizens who are not social media users but are politically active offline (i.e., they are digitally disconnected—not registered on any platform—but politically connected, see the top-right quadrant in Table 1). Both groups are understudied in the literature on digital political disconnection. In Section 4, we further compare the profiles of individuals registered on social media but politically inactive with those of individuals belonging to the two remaining groups in the matrix, and particularly with citizens who are on social media and politically engaged (see the top-left quadrant in Table 1), to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the determinants of political disconnection.

Our study therefore focuses on the patterns and factors explaining the types of disconnection of the two groups studied in this article (see Table 1), focusing on three main predictors for explaining political disconnection: digital skills, interest in politics, and social media efficacy. To address these questions, we focus on a case study and we draw upon the results of a post-election survey conducted online after the second round of the 2022 French presidential election, using a representative sample of 1,978 individuals. This was the first national election after the Covid-19 pandemic, which potentially drove new and more users to engage with politics online. Furthermore, we focus on the presidential election as it is the most significant election in France, resulting in high levels of citizen engagement with politics both offline and online. Indeed, electoral participation was similar to that in past elections, with over 70% turnout in both rounds. Macron won in the second round with 58.5% of the vote, defeating Le Pen.

France's case is particularly interesting for several reasons. Firstly, despite the momentum generated by the presidential election campaign and the widespread adoption of social media among the population, the political use of social networks by citizens remains relatively uncommon (Neihouser et al., 2022). This usage is consistently linked to individuals' interest in politics, their ideological positioning, and their other offline political practices. For instance, those who actively follow political news and participate in offline political activities are more likely to engage with political content on social media. Conversely, citizens with low

Table 1. Classification of social media and political users.

	Social media user	Social media non-user
Political	Political social media users	Political social media non-users*
Non-political	Non-political social media users*	Non-political social media non-users

Note: * = Groups studied in this article.

political interest or engagement tend to avoid political discussions online, even if they are active on social media for other purposes. Additionally, political use of social media in France is highly socially differentiated, particularly by age. Younger individuals are more likely to engage in political activities online, but this engagement is often shallow, such as liking or sharing content rather than deeper involvement like participating in discussions or campaigns. On the other hand, older users, while generally less active on social media, may engage in more meaningful political exchanges when they do participate. However, no survey directly addresses the patterns of non-use of social media for political purposes, leaving a gap in understanding why certain demographics choose not to engage politically online despite being active on these platforms for other reasons. This lack of data hinders a comprehensive understanding of the nuances behind political disconnection in the digital sphere.

In the next section, we discuss the literature on the topic and formulate our hypotheses. After presenting our data and methods in Section 3, in Section 4 we present our analyses and discuss the results. Section 5 outlines the conclusions of this study. Overall, this article explores the patterns and factors influencing the political non-use of social media across different platforms. It demonstrates that non-use is driven not only by digital divides and lack of digital skills (Boulianne & Hoffmann, 2022; Boulianne & Larsson, 2024; Hargittai, 2001; Hoffmann & Lutz, 2021), but also by a range of personal and political disconnections. Our findings suggest significant differences in how individuals disengage from political content online, as they are influenced by their digital competence, interest in politics, and the specific types of social media platforms they use.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

Studies on the political non-use of social media are relatively scarce, with most research focusing instead on the broader phenomenon of political disconnection, highlighting the voluntary and deliberate aspect of restricting online political practices or abstaining from social media for political purposes (Zhu & Skoric, 2021). Among these studies, many examine selective exposure to online political information (Bode, 2016; Zhu et al., 2019), particularly through "politically motivated unfriending" on social media (Skoric et al., 2018; Zhu, 2023; Zhu & Skoric, 2022). Researchers suggest that this practice is primarily due to polarization and fragmentation of the public sphere in the digital age. More specifically, politically motivated unfriending is often intended to create online "safe spaces" (Zhu & Skoric, 2021) where individuals can communicate and express their political views without risking facing political disagreement, social isolation, or perceived systemic victimhood (Zhu & Skoric, 2022).

Indeed, Zhu et al. (2019) found that a heightened perception of out-group threats strengthens the relationship between Facebook use and selective avoidance. Investigating whether social media constitute a Habermasian public sphere, Kruse et al. (2018) demonstrated that individuals avoid online political discussions due to fears of harassment, workplace surveillance, fear of social isolation, and perceived systemic victimhood. They therefore prefer to exchange online only with politically similar others, especially when they perceive themselves as holding minority opinions. In other words, the results of these studies tend to show that individuals refrain from expressing themselves politically online or, at the very least, select the political information to which they expose themselves on platforms, due to their negative perception of certain aspects of the digital public sphere: polarization, fragmentation, risk of being sidelined, and so on.

While this literature primarily associates a degraded perception of the digital public sphere with political non-use of social media, it seldom explores other potential factors for individuals distancing themselves from online politics, often because it studies relatively specific individuals and political contexts (Zhu et al., 2019).

Furthermore, many studies define disconnection as a deliberate form of non-use (Nassen et al., 2023) or even as a "right to disconnect" (Hesselberth, 2018). In other words, it is seen as an active choice to opt-out, abstain, or unplug for psychological, socio-economic, and/or political reasons (Klingelhoefer et al., 2024). However, this literature rarely considers that disconnection, especially political disconnection, might not always be voluntary or deliberate. Being (politically) digitally disconnected for some individuals might not "work" in addressing issues of digital well-being (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024); instead, it may exclude them and silence their voices in both public and political debates, online and offline. This is particularly problematic in today's context, where we not only receive political information online and through social media, but political parties and politicians also gather information about citizens' demands and interact with them through data-driven campaigning (Dommett et al., 2024). This dynamic contributes to the concept of "digital citizenship" (DC), which expands societal participation and responsibilities into the digital sphere (Novelli & Sandri, 2024). Choi (2016) identifies four integral dimensions of DC that underscore the risks of digital political disconnection:

1. DC as ethics: emphasises the importance of engaging appropriately, safely, ethically, and responsibly online, recognising virtual communities as platforms where individuals frequently interact and communicate.
2. DC as media and information literacy: extends beyond the ethical use of digital technologies to include the ability to access, use, create, and critically evaluate information, underscoring the necessity to bridge the digital divide and ensure universal internet access.
3. DC as participation/engagement: explores the role of the internet in facilitating both broad and personalised forms of political, socio-economic, and cultural participation, highlighting activities ranging from e-voting to more personal cultural interactions online.
4. DC as critical resistance: while overlapping with participation, specifically calls for transformative actions that challenge existing power structures and promote social justice, often through innovative, decentralised methods.

This clearly demonstrates that, in today's world, being online is essential for full participation in politics, and digital political disconnection may be more harmful than beneficial. However, given that many individuals have multiple social media accounts on different platforms, they may not use all of them for political purposes. Additionally, social platforms exhibit technological heterogeneity (Theocharis et al., 2023), necessitating the multi-platform approach taken in this article. Furthermore, just because individuals are politically disconnected online does not mean they are not politically active offline. Therefore, it is important to compare online and offline political disconnection. However, the study of why some individuals engage politically on specific platforms, while others avoid them or prefer offline participation, must be expanded by considering additional factors.

First, studies of political disconnection do not, to our knowledge, consider those not engaged due to a lack of digital skills (van Laar et al., 2017), but see skills more as needed for engaging in disconnection practices (Nguyen & Hargittai, 2023). Digital skills, often defined as the ability to effectively use digital technologies

to access, manage, understand, and communicate information, are increasingly recognized as essential for navigating the contemporary digital landscape (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014).

Several studies highlight the importance of digital skills in facilitating online political engagement. Digital technologies, particularly those facilitating social interaction, open new pathways for political engagement. Online interactions can shape voting behaviour, drive participation in political movements, and influence the motivations behind various forms of participation (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017; Theocharis et al., 2023). For instance, social media has empowered citizens to easily initiate and organize boycott campaigns against political figures or policies. Thus, digital skills enable individuals to navigate and use digital platforms effectively, which is crucial for participating in online political activities (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Recent research further emphasizes that individuals with higher digital skills are more likely to engage in online political discourse and activism, as these skills enhance their ability to critically assess information and participate meaningfully in digital conversations (Boulianne, 2020). Recent research emphasizes that digital skills are not only necessary for participation but also mediate the quality of that engagement. For instance, Hargittai (2021) found that those with higher digital literacy were more likely to engage in nuanced, productive political discussions online. Other studies, such as those by Shaw and Hargittai (2018), indicate that gaps in digital skills contribute to unequal political engagement online, with marginalized groups often being left out of the political discourse due to limited access to or knowledge of digital tools. Similarly, studies on political non-use of social media often do not address the possibility that individuals do not see the point of expressing themselves politically online, simply finding online political engagement inefficient or time-consuming.

Moreover, this body of work rarely considers how interest in politics (Bimber et al., 2015; Oser & Boulianne, 2020) might impact non-political use of social media. Unlike broader political disconnection, non-political use of social media may stem from a low sense of digital or political competence, or from a negative judgment of the effectiveness of online political engagement. This is similar to how offline political non-participation can arise from low internal and external political efficacy (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Oser et al., 2022). Political efficacy is defined as the belief in one's ability to influence political processes, encompassing both internal efficacy (confidence in one's own abilities to understand and participate in politics) and external efficacy (belief in the responsiveness of political institutions, or in this case online platforms, to citizen input; see Boulianne et al., 2023).

As outlined above, political non-participation substantially differs from general online non-participation (Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017). On the one hand, political non-participation often refers to the deliberate choice of individuals not to engage in political activities, such as voting, campaigning, or discussing politics. This can be influenced by a variety of factors including political disillusionment, distrust in the political system, or a feeling of inefficacy and being too time-consuming (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Teorell, 2006). On the other hand, general online non-participation refers to the broader lack of engagement in digital activities or online platforms. This can include not participating in social media discussions, not engaging with online content, or not using digital tools for civic activities. The reasons for this can vary widely from lack of access to technology, digital literacy issues, or personal preferences for offline interactions (Boulianne, 2009). Thus, while political non-participation is often tied to attitudes and feelings towards the political system, general online non-participation is more about access, skills, and preferences related to digital technology. For this

reason, this study focuses on three predictors of non-political use of social media specific to variations in online engagement with political content, namely digital skills, political interest, and social media/political efficacy. Therefore, our first set of hypotheses is the following:

> H1: Individuals with lower digital skills are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes.

> H2: Individuals less interested in politics are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes.

> H3: Individuals who view online political engagement as ineffective are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes.

Furthermore, we know that people's use of social media varies depending on the platform. Indeed, depending on their affordances and digital architecture (Bossetta, 2018; Ruess et al., 2023), platforms attract different types of individuals for different purposes (Boulianne & Hoffmann, 2022; boyd, 2010). For example, X is often perceived as a platform that facilitates political dissemination, with most accounts being public and accessible even to unregistered individuals (Stier et al., 2019). Conversely, other platforms, where more accounts are private and exchanges are based on reciprocal links, tend to be used more for recreational activities, leisure, or maintaining social ties with loved ones (Stier et al., 2019). This is the case with platforms such as Facebook or Snapchat, even if these platforms are more and more used by politicians (Neihouser & Figeac, 2024). Following this literature, we can consider that the patterns and factors of political disconnection vary depending on the platform. Therefore, our fourth and fifth hypotheses are the following:

> H4: Individuals less interested in politics are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes on platforms like X, which are traditionally identified as being dedicated to political use.

> H5: Regardless of the platform, individuals with lower digital skills are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes, leading to greater digital and political disconnection.

We thus study the non-use of social media for politics to better understand if, for example, citizens are simply disinterested in politics, or actively repelled by certain characteristics of politics on social media. Overall, our main research question pertains to the conditions that explain political non-use of social media in the context of political disconnection.

3. Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a post-electoral survey focused on digital campaigning as part of the PEOPLE2022 (Pratiques Électorales et OPinions Lors des Élections de 2022) project (Briatte et al., 2024). This survey was carried out online from April 25, 2022, to May 9, 2022, immediately following the second round of the presidential election. It involved a sample of 1,978 individuals who were representative of the French population registered to vote and aged 18 and over. The sample was selected using the quota method based on gender, age, social class, urban area, and region. Weighting by calibration on the margins was applied for gender, age, socio-professional category (after recoding the declared profession), level of

education, and vote in the first round of the 2022 presidential election using the R "icarus" package (Rebecq, 2019). The survey was financed by the ESPOL Lille (European School of Political and Social Sciences), the CERAPS (Centre d'études et de recherches administratives, politiques et sociales, UMR CNRS/Université de Lille) and the LEM (Lille économie et management, UMR CNRS/Université de Lille). The sample was provided by Dynata France. In addition to the authors of this article, François Briatte collaborated in the production of the post-election survey, as did Étienne Farvaque.

The survey allowed us to study the non-political use of social networks and the justifications individuals cite for this non-use. Firstly, we asked respondents about their use of each platform considered in the study (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X, TikTok, YouTube, Twitch, and private messaging apps such as WhatsApp) through the following question: "During the campaign, did you view, share, 'like,' or comment on any content related to the presidential election on social networks?" The possible responses were: "Yes, often"; "Yes, a few times"; "No, never, but I am registered on this network"; "No, I am not registered on this network." Secondly, for those who answered "No, never, but I am registered on this network," a follow-up question was asked for six of the selected platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X, TikTok, and private messaging apps such as WhatsApp): "Why haven't you viewed, liked, shared or commented on any content related to the presidential election on [social media platform]?" The response categories were: "I am not interested enough in politics"; "It would take up too much of my time"; "It's pointless"; "I don't want to produce content that will be visible forever"; "I'm afraid of getting into trouble with people I know"; "I have political opinions that may be stigmatized by some people"; "I don't know enough about how this social network works"; "I have not been exposed to any content related to the presidential election on [social media platform]"; "None of these rationales." Multiple answers were possible.

To test our hypotheses, we analysed responses to these two questions for each of the six platforms. We also compared the profiles of individuals who are registered on social media but politically inactive with those who are both registered and politically active online. We employed a set of multinomial models. The dependent variable in our models is the political inactivity of respondents registered on the platform. We ran one model for each of the six platforms and a seventh model for respondents registered on at least one platform. The independent variables include the level of interest in politics, whether respondents in the last month have liked, commented on, or shared friends' and family members' posts or photos on the same social media platform, whether they have shared non-political information on the chosen platform, and the intensity of offline political activities (measured through a binary variable indicating participation in electoral meetings or in-person engagement with activists). Non-political activities on social media serve as a proxy for digital skills, while offline political activities and the sharing of non-political information online are used as proxy variables for political and social media efficacy. In this context, the value of social media as a platform for information sharing is assessed, and offline political activities may be preferred over online ones due to their perceived greater effectiveness. The control variables in our models include gender (binary sex), age, education, and political self-placement.

4. Results

Table 2 summarizes the political and non-political use of each of the six platforms studied. While the majority of respondents are registered on at least one platform (84.9%), only 43.5% are politically active on at least one platform. The proportion of individuals registered on at least one platform but not politically active is

Table 2. Use of different platforms for political and non-political purposes (%; and, in brackets, the unweighted number of respondents).

	Not registered	Registered but not politically active	Registered and politically active
At least one social media	15.1 (293)	41.4 (822)	43.5 (863)
Facebook	24.8 (492)	41.2 (819)	34.0 (667)
Private messaging apps	39.2 (753)	40.3 (815)	20.5 (410)
Instagram	48.3 (950)	32.2 (638)	19.5 (390)
Snapchat	55.7 (1,118)	30.0 (587)	14.3 (273)
X	55.2 (1,123)	25.2 (483)	17.5 (372)
TikTok	64.8 (1,281)	21.3 (424)	13.9 (273)

Notes: n = 1,978; weighted data. Source: Briatte et al. (2024).

significant (41.4%), which justifies the relevance of our study. This proportion is particularly high on Facebook (41.2%) and private messaging apps like WhatsApp (40.3%). On other platforms, this phenomenon is less common (ranging from 21.3% on TikTok to 32.2% on Instagram). This lower prevalence can be explained by the fact that most respondents are not registered on these platforms. When we focus only on those who are registered on a platform, the proportion of politically inactive users varies from 54.6% on Facebook to 67.7% on Snapchat. It reaches 66.3% on private messaging apps, which are therefore relatively less politically engaged, but only 59% on X. Instagram (62.6%) and TikTok (60.5%) fall in an intermediate range.

Table 3 presents the respondents' reasons for their non-political use of social media across the six platforms. The responses "I don't want to produce content that will be visible forever," "I'm afraid of getting into trouble with people I know," and "I have political opinions that may be stigmatized by some people" align most closely with explanations provided by the classic literature on general disconnection, as cited above. However, these reasons are the least frequently cited by respondents. Between 6.8% and 10.1% of respondents report that their main reason for not engaging with political content on the selected platform is fear of getting into trouble with people they know, while between 6.4% and 11.6% cite fear of being stigmatized by others. Lack of time and the desire to avoid leaving a permanent record of their opinions online are also infrequently mentioned. In contrast, the justification "I don't know enough about how this social network works" is cited more often by respondents (ranging from 7.4% to 16.1%) as a reason for not engaging with political content on the selected platforms, indicating that digital skills could be a more significant factor in political disengagement. Additionally, low interest in politics is a common reason (cited by 14.4% to 21.1% of respondents, depending on the platform), reinforcing the expectation that political interest levels are key determinants of political disconnection. However, the most frequently cited reason for not using social media for political purposes is low political and social media efficacy, with 28.5% to 38.3% of respondents offering this explanation, suggesting that social media efficacy is the primary factor in explaining political disconnection.

These descriptive statistics lead us to test three main factors for the non-political use of social media with our set of regression models: lack of digital skills (operationalized by non-political activities on social media), lack of political interest, and perception of political inefficacy (operationalized by greater offline political activity coupled with less frequent sharing of non-political information online). Table 4 presents the results of our regression models (odds ratios). In the first model, which focuses on registration and activity on at

Table 3. Justifications for non-use of social media for political purposes during the 2022 campaign (%).

Response category	Facebook	Private social networks	Instagram	Snapchat	X	TikTok
You are not interested enough in politics	21.1	16	17.1	16.1	14.4	15.1
It would take up too much of your time	5	6.1	5.5	5.7	3.9	6
It's pointless	38.3	33.3	28.5	30.5	30.2	31.9
You have not been exposed to any content related to the presidential election on [social media platform]	10.5	19.1	11.6	17.4	5.8	13.6
You don't want to produce content that will be visible forever	15.8	NA	10.1	NA	10.5	8.5
You're afraid of getting into trouble with people you know	10.1	9.7	6.8	7.0	8.2	7.9
You have political opinions that may be stigmatized by some people	11.6	10.7	6.4	6.9	7.3	6.6
You don't know enough about how this social network works	7.4	9.1	11.5	9.9	16.1	12.4
N of respondents (unweighted)	819	815	638	587	483	424

Notes: NA = response category not available for this item; weighted data. Source: Briatte et al. (2024).

least one of the six social media platforms, we find that individuals interested in politics are significantly less politically disconnected. This resonates with our exploratory descriptive analyses, which show that among respondents registered on at least one platform, 71.7% of those not at all interested in politics are politically inactive on social media, compared to 32.4% of those highly interested in politics. Similarly, non-political uses of social media are associated with higher political disconnection. This too resonates with our exploratory descriptive analyses, which show that among respondents registered on at least one platform, 49.8% use social media to share non-political information and 70.8% use it to interact with friends or family. These practices are less common among registered but inactive respondents. Indeed, only 28% of respondents who shared non-political information on social media in the last month are politically inactive, compared to 69.4% of those who did not share any information. Similarly, only 38.7% of respondents who liked, commented on, or shared friends' and family's posts or photos in the last month are politically inactive, compared to 73.2% of those who did not engage in such activities.

These findings indicate that digital skills and political interest are key factors in explaining political disconnection. Regarding efficacy, there is a negative relationship between sharing non-political information and political disconnection, as well as between offline political activities and political disconnection. This suggests that politically disconnected individuals do not view social media as an effective platform for sharing information beyond personal connections, and they do not perceive offline political participation as more effective than online participation. Only 15.7% of respondents who participated in an electoral meeting or engaged with activists in person are politically inactive, compared to 60.4% of respondents who were not politically active offline.

Table 4. Odds ratios of the logistic regression models. Dependent variable: being registered on platforms, but politically inactive on social media (weighted).

Variable		At least one social network	Facebook	Private social networks	Instagram	Snapchat	X	TikTok
Sex	Male	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	Female	1.21	1.03	1.33	1.39	1.48	0.47	1.54
Age	18–24	0.28***	0.38**	0.41*	0.23***	0.51	0.66	0.33*
	25–34	0.61	0.80	0.75	0.43**	0.80	0.89	0.82
	35–44	1	0.65	0.87	0.71	0.70	1.28	0.99
	45–54	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	55–64	1.81*	2.00*	1.51	0.92	1.32	1.66	1.52
	65 or more	2.40***	2.24**	1.97*	2.29*	4.78**	4.09***	2.29
Level of education	Advanced higher education	1.05	1.34	0.99	1.26	1.23	1.38	1.01
	Higher education	1.03	1.51	1.04	1.31	0.75	1.24	1.56
	High school	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	Less than high school	0.56**	0.56**	0.84	0.83	0.63	1.81	0.74
Political interest	Not at all	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	A little	0.30***	0.49**	0.43**	0.83	0.56	0.50	0.51
	Some	0.31***	0.52*	0.45*	0.70	0.55	0.32	0.57
	A lot	0.17***	0.28***	0.24***	0.62	0.65	0.28	0.49
Self-position on political scale	Far-left	0.26*	0.73	0.26*	0.46	0.39	0.27*	0.15*
	Left	0.72	0.74	0.78	0.64	0.61	0.76	0.63
	Center	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	Right	1.03	0.96	0.88	0.90	0.96	0.57	0.68
	Far-right	0.44**	0.48*	0.53	0.60	0.48	0.61	0.30*
	No answer	0.96	1.10	0.81	1.46	0.70	0.93	0.58
Offline political activities	No	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	Yes	0.22***	0.22***	0.28***	0.22***	0.15	0.39***	0.24***
Like, comment, or share posts of friends and family on this social media	No	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	Yes	0.47***	0.61**	0.39***	0.41***	0.48	0.27***	0.36***
Share non-political information on this social media	No	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
	Yes	0.38***	0.35***	0.37***	0.51**	0.30	0.42***	0.32***
N of registered respondents (unweighted)		1,685	1,486	1,225	1,028	860	855	697
Akaike information criterion		1,735.22	1,598.25	845.29	1,230.68	1,031.23	796.18	693.76
Pseudo-*R2*		0.33	0.29	0.35	0.27	0.31	0.33	0.35

Notes: The reference category of the dependent variable used in the regressions is to be politically active on the social media considered; baseline categories for independent variables are marked as "ref" (i.e., reference category); both models are estimated on survey-weighted observations using the "survey" R package (Lumley, 2020) with pseudo-*R2* statistics computed using the Nagelkerke method (Lumley, 2017); two-tailed *p*-values—*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$; the "survey" R package fits weighted logistic regression models by maximizing the Horvitz-Thompson estimator of the population log-likelihood, which means that they do not have a pseudo log-likelihood (Lumley, 2020). Source: Briatte et al. (2024).

The results from our first model provide strong support for our initial three hypotheses. Specifically, individuals with lower digital skills are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes (H1). Additionally, those with less interest in politics are also more inclined to refrain from political engagement on social media (H2). Finally, individuals who perceive online political engagement as ineffective are more likely to avoid using social media for political purposes (H3). The six additional models (see odds ratios in Table 4) enable us to examine patterns of political disconnection across different platforms. Across all platforms, we observe a consistent negative relationship between political disconnection and offline political activities, as well as between political disconnection and non-political uses of the platform. These findings further confirm that, for all platforms, low digital skills and low social media or political efficacy are key factors contributing to political disconnection.

However, the relationship between political interest and political disconnection shows some nuanced results. While the data reveal a negative association between political interest and disconnection, this relationship is not uniform across all platforms. Specifically, individuals highly interested in politics are less likely to be politically disconnected than those with no interest, but the strength and significance of this relationship vary depending on the platform. This variation can be linked to the level of politicization on different platforms. On one hand, generalist platforms like Facebook, which are widely used by the general population and heavily targeted by political parties, exhibit clearer distinctions between politically active and inactive users. On the other hand, more specialized, politically focused platforms such as X show a sharper divide between those interested in politics and those who are disengaged. For example, among respondents registered on X, only 41.2% of those highly interested in politics are politically inactive, compared to 78.2% of those not at all interested in politics. This trend holds across other platforms but is less pronounced and statistically insignificant on newer platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok. On Snapchat, for instance, 87.7% of respondents not at all interested in politics are politically inactive, compared to 57.7% of those highly interested in politics.

These findings suggest that while political interest plays a significant role in explaining political disconnection on platforms that are either more generalist (like Facebook) or politically oriented (like X), it is less relevant on newer, less politicized platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, or TikTok, which attract younger users and are only recently becoming arenas for political engagement. Ultimately, our fourth and fifth hypotheses are only partially validated. Low digital skills and low social media/political efficacy emerge as significant factors in political disconnection across all platforms. However, the role of political interest is more platform-specific. While low political interest explains disconnection on politically focused and generalist platforms, it has less explanatory power on newer, less politicized platforms where political engagement is still in its early stages.

5. Conclusion

This article contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the non-political use of social media is not solely due to individuals' perceptions of the degradation of the online public sphere, which leads to fears of disagreement or social isolation (Zhu & Skoric, 2021, 2022). It showed that in addition to age, three factors structured political disconnection: digital skills, interest in politics (excepted for less politically oriented platforms), and social media/political efficacy. The phenomena of polarization and fragmentation in the online political sphere, and even the fear of disagreement, are not the sole factors deterring the political use

of social media. Online political participation remains a minority activity (Neihouser et al., 2022), not least because of the uneven digital skills across the population and highly variable levels of interest in politics.

While many studies focus on the variables that account for political participation in the age of social media, ours examines the conditions that explain non-use in the context of political disconnection. We also contribute to the existing literature by analysing the phenomenon of non-use holistically, addressing platform type, demographics, digital literacy, and political traits (e.g., interest and competence).

Moreover, we show that the perception of the futility of using social media for political ends is the primary reason for its non-use. While many studies highlight the risks of polarization in online public debates (Barberá, 2020; Yarchi et al., 2021), citizens often feel that expressing their political opinions online is useless. Rather than the spread of extremist ideas or the incivility of debates, it is the non-participation of individuals—who view such engagement as pointless—that disrupts democratic processes online.

Furthermore, our study shows that justifications for the non-political use of social media vary by platform, extending the literature on differences in digital architectures and platform affordances and their implications for user behaviour (Bossetta, 2018; Boulianne & Hoffmann, 2022; Ruess et al., 2023). Our data explore the use and non-use for political purposes of Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X, TikTok, YouTube, Twitch, and private messaging apps such as WhatsApp. However, our multivariate analyses on the reasons for non-use focused on only six of these platforms, namely Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X, TikTok, and private messaging apps such as WhatsApp. Our findings highlight distinct differences between Facebook, X, and Tiktok. A lack of interest in politics is frequently cited to justify non-political use on Facebook, while a lack of social media knowledge is the predominant reason for non-political use on X and Tiktok. These differences are influenced by the degree of politicization of the platforms and the profiles of their users. On less politicized platforms with larger user bases, such as Facebook, individuals are more likely to cite a lack of interest in politics as the reason for non-use for political purposes. Conversely, on more specialized and politicized platforms like X and Twitch, a lack of digital competence is most often cited. These preliminary results suggest the need for further investigation into the relationship between platform politicization, user profiles, and political engagement.

The main result highlighted in this article is that causes for not using social media for political purposes vary according to the profiles of the individuals concerned. The socio-demographic characteristics, digital skills, ideological positioning, and offline political engagement of individuals are very important for understanding political disconnection. Just as political uses of digital technology are socially differentiated (Neihouser et al., 2022), so are non-uses. Depending on their characteristics and skills, individuals avoid political expression on social media for various reasons. These may be digital-related—such as a lack of digital skills—or related to an individual's relationship with politics, such as a lack of interest and perceived futility of expressing oneself online. Notably, individuals who refrain from engaging with political content online due to a lack of social media competence often declare themselves politically active offline and express a high level of interest in politics. For these individuals, digital-related barriers outweigh their significant interest in politics, preventing them from engaging politically online. In contrast, those who are less interested in politics and use social media primarily to connect with friends and family more often cite political reasons for their lack of political engagement online. Thus, an individual's relationship with politics significantly influences their perception of social media's potential uses.

Exploring online political disconnection, especially by focusing on political non-use of social media, is crucial for better understanding digital disconnection in current digital democracies. Since political engagement increasingly takes place in online spaces, understanding why individuals choose to disengage politically online provides valuable insights into the broader phenomenon of digital disconnection. Political disconnection in digital contexts can reflect deeper issues, such as distrust in digital platforms, concerns about misinformation, or frustration with the quality of online political discourse. By studying online political disconnection, researchers can better grasp how digital environments shape not only political engagement but also broader societal behaviours, ultimately informing how democracies adapt to the challenges posed by the digital age. This exploration is essential for identifying strategies to foster more inclusive and effective digital participation.

However, this study is not without its limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on the French case. Testing our hypotheses in other political contexts would be valuable, as national environments significantly shape the adoption and perception of social media. For instance, X is far more popular in the United States than in France, and in some contexts, it is less frequently used by highly politicized individuals. Such contextual differences could impact the generalizability of our findings. Second, due to the design of our survey, there is an under-representation of politically disconnected individuals. To address this limitation, future research could benefit from incorporating qualitative interviews to more deeply explore the causes of political disconnection on social media. A mixed-methods approach would complement our quantitative results and offer richer insights into the underlying factors driving disengagement.

In conclusion, while this article presents important initial findings, it also highlights new avenues for research, particularly in terms of cross-national comparisons and more nuanced explorations of political disconnection through qualitative methods.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The research data associated with this article are available here: https://data.sciencespo.fr/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.21410/7E4/6FMMTC

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ARTICLE

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A Classification of Features for Interpersonal Disconnectivity in Digital Media: Block, Unfriend, Unfollow, Mute, Withhold, and Eject

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Abstract

This article presents for the first time a classification of, and lexicon for, features for dissolving interpersonal ties in digital environments: blocking, unfriending, unfollowing, muting, withholding, and ejecting. There are two main motivations and two main contributions. The first motivation is that analyses of social media features have not included treatment of features for interpersonal disconnectivity; the second is that analyses of interpersonal disconnectivity have not included reference to the features that enable it. The two main contributions are the disambiguation of a confusing terminological field, thus making it possible to analytically distinguish between types of feature, and an intervention in the question of whether the features described in the article concern filtering *information* or avoiding *people*. Data were collected from 37 social media platforms and other services that enable digitally-mediated communication. Features for interpersonal disconnectivity were documented and then the features were grouped based on five questions about their use, where A is the person using the feature, and B is the target of A's use of the feature: (a) Does it affect A's feed?; (b) does it affect B's feed?; (c) is A still connected to B?; (d) is B still connected to A?; (e) can A and B see each other's profile?

Keywords

blocking; disconnection; disconnectivity; feature analysis; social media; unfollowing; unfriending

1. Introduction

In this article, I offer a classification of, and lexicon for, features for dissolving interpersonal ties in digital environments. This is indispensable for two main reasons: First, because analyses of social media features

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have not included treatment of features for interpersonal disconnectivity; and second, because analyses of interpersonal disconnectivity have not included reference to the features that enable it. This will have two main outcomes. The first will be to disambiguate a confusing terminological field, thus making it possible to analytically distinguish between types of feature. The second will be to try and address an ambiguity between filtering *information* and avoiding *people*. That is, when a social media user blocks or unfriends another user, as researchers we would want to know whether they are doing so in order to distance themselves from the other user, or whether they are concerned with managing flows of information. Another way of putting it is that this study addresses questions about what we are to one another on social media, in particular given that following a person and following a newspaper on Instagram (for instance) are technically identical (Bucher, 2013), as indeed is the reversal of this tie formation.

Before presenting the classification, though, I shall present brief discussions of research into social media features and interpersonal disconnectivity online, and the methods for the collection and analysis of the data on which this study rests.

2. Features

Writing in the context of Facebook, Smock et al. (2011) define a feature as "a technical tool on the site that enables activity on the part of the user" (p. 2323), while conceiving of Facebook itself as a "*collection of tools*" (2011, p. 2323, emphasis in original). Similarly, for Sajtos et al., "platforms can be regarded as a collection of features" (Sajtos et al., 2022, p. 1226). Referencing Smock et al., Hasinoff and Bivens (2021) define features "as functions that developers publicize or make visible to users" (p. 97), or "that users control or are likely aware of" (p. 96). From these references, it seems that a feature is not just something that an app or service does, but rather something that the user can interact with or use. It also implies that the idea of a featureless platform is a contradiction in terms. This basic insight that all platforms necessarily have features—underwhelming as it may be—implies that the study of platforms must include the study of their features.

Indeed, given the effort and capital invested in designing social media interfaces and their features, and given that it is through them that users experience social media, it is not surprising that they have received critical research attention. Stanfill (2015), for instance, adopts a Foucauldian approach to website interfaces, which they call "discursive interface analysis." Arguing that "examining what is possible on sites—features, categories of use foregrounded, and how technological features make certain uses easier or harder—illuminates the norms of use," Stanfill maintains that a site's affordances "reflect, and help establish, cultural common sense about what Users do (and *should* do)" (2015, p. 1061, emphasis in original). As such, therefore, they are vectors of power.

This approach is shared by Bivens, who, in a series of collaborations, has carried out "feature analysis" in order to "reveal the average or typical ways that developers...think about the problems that their apps are designed to solve" (Hasinoff & Bivens, 2021, p. 89). If "programming practices bake values and assumptions into technology" (Bivens & Haimson, 2016, p. 1), then feature analysis seeks to expose those values and assumptions. Different scholars have taken different approaches to this. Elaheebocus et al. (2018) and Dawot and Ibrahim (2014), for instance, have offered taxonomies of social media taken as a whole, while others have focused on the features of a specific service, such as Twitter (renamed X since 2023; Bozyiğit et al., 2021; Burgess & Baym, 2020) or Instagram (Poulsen, 2018). Hasinoff and Bivens (Bivens & Hasinoff, 2018; Hasinoff

& Bivens, 2021), on the other hand, address collections of apps aimed at solving a particular problem (sexual violence against women). Yet others have written about a single feature, such as the like button (see, for example, Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Eranti & Lonkila, 2015; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Hallinan & Brubaker, 2021; Sumner et al., 2018).

There are, though, features that very rarely get any attention in studies of social media, namely, features that enable interpersonal disconnectivity (unfriending, blocking, etc.). Indeed, such features barely appear in the literature, even when authors make claims about comprehensiveness. For example, a central motivation behind O'Riordan et al.'s "feature-level analysis of social network sites" is that "a comprehensive list of features and affordances [in social media] does not exist" (O'Riordan et al., 2016, p. 2), yet their list includes none of the features for tie dissolution or other kinds of negative feedback (blocking, unsubscribing, etc.). Also, while Sajtos et al. (2022) *do* include blocking and "Hidden from Timeline" in their list of "20 commonly used features" on Facebook (p. 1232), it is unclear why their list does not include "unfriending" or indeed what constitutes a "commonly used" feature.

There is a certain irony in the almost blanket ignoring of features for disconnectivity in the literature on social media features, inasmuch as they address a problem that is created by social media themselves, namely, how to manage the sheer abundance (of information, of social ties) brought about by the social media features that *have* received attention. Put differently, beyond the challenges posed by the multitudes of other people in modern, urban settings (famously addressed by Goffman, Simmel, Le Bon, and many more), digital media enable us to be in contact—however fleeting—with more people than in any previous generation. Moreover, it is an attribute of social media ties (people whom we follow, or with whom we are friends) that they never "wither on the vine" (cf. Baxter, 1985), as most of the friendships we had when we were young children eventually did. Instead, they need to be intentionally broken (or otherwise managed) when they go bad, or when there are simply too many of them. This role of tie dissolution features, and especially unfriending, has been described by Light and Cassidy (2014) as a "social lubricant," in that by allowing users to refuse contact with specific others they actually enable those users to remain on the platform rather than feeling impelled to abandon it.

Weller calls these understudied features the "forgotten features" of social media (Weller, 2016), for which she offers three categories: they are "more recent features…related to publishing or interlinking multimedia content, and functionalities that delete content or *revoke social network relationships*" (p. 260, emphasis added). Weller hopes that more studies of user motivations in using such features will inspire new insights and questions concerning social media. The purpose of the current article, though, is even more basic: it is to identify the features for interpersonal tie dissolution, and then to classify them so as to create a common lexicon for future research.

3. Interpersonal Disconnectivity

It is not only that the features for interpersonal disconnectivity are (almost entirely) ignored by studies of social media features, but also that the entire realm is relatively obscure. Indeed, Zhu's (2023) recent review of politically-motivated unfriending found only 28 relevant articles published between 2015 and 2022. Part of the reason for this is that social media services deny researchers access to data about unfriending (John & Nissenbaum, 2019), meaning that substantive quantitative data can only be gathered through expensive surveys (for early examples, see John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Yang et al., 2017; Zhu et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, a body of research is growing, putting forward answers to important questions about social media, politics, culture, and everyday life. A main concern has been the political consequences of politically-motivated tie-breaking (for a recent review, see Zhu, 2023). Work with a more cultural leaning has used tie dissolution as a lens through which to understand digital culture more broadly (Hilmar, 2021; Kaun, 2021). Unfortunately, though, even within this body of literature there are terminological inconsistencies. For example, Hilmar (2021) defines unfriending as "the act of removing someone from the pool of individuals designated by the respective platform as 'friends' or 'followers' " (p. 3). This is confusing, though, primarily because it elides friends and followers: the former relationship is mutually constituted, while the latter is one-directional; moreover, if I remove someone from the pool of individuals designated by the platform as my followers, we would not say that I was unfollowing them, but rather that I was making them unfollow me—a feature I discuss in Section 5.6. Similarly, Wu et al. (2019) state that, "There are two basic actions for users to manage their social relationships: *follow* (relationship creation) and *unfollow* (relationship dissolution)" (p. 1), but this is to ignore the friend relationship just mentioned. There are instances in the literature where "unfriending" stands metonymically for other disconnectivity features, such as when Zhu (2023) states that she will be referring to "disconnective behaviors such as unfriending, unfollowing, and blocking" as "unfriending" (p. 5354), or when John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) elide unfriending and unfollowing. The same appears to be happening when Schwarz and Shani (2016) start a paragraph on unfriending (or "defriending," which is their preferred nomenclature) which pivots to blocking and hiding, which seem to be used interchangeably. Institutions such as the Pew Research Center also collapse unfriending, blocking, and unfollowing into one another. For instance, in a recent survey of religion and social media, a question asked, "Have you ever unfollowed, unfriended, blocked, or changed your settings to see less of someone on social media because of religious content they post or share online?" (Diamant, 2023).

In another early and influential article on unfriending, Peña and Brody (2014) also confuse unfriending, blocking, and hiding. They correctly say that "hidden contacts retain access to each other's information," but wrongly assert that "unfriended contacts can no longer access each other's profiles" (p. 144; this is actually true of blocked contacts). Nor is it the case that in order to "hide or ignore a Facebook connection, users need to search for the contact and click on a button to opt out from receiving updates from a target"—this is true for blocking, but not hiding or ignoring (Peña & Brody, 2014, p. 144). Moreover, John and Katz (2023) demonstrate that the terminology for these features changes over time, making it hard to know exactly what authors are referring to when talking, for instance, about "hiding."

There is need, therefore, for some conceptual clarity, an agreed-upon set of terms that will allow researchers to know that they are talking about the same phenomena. This article offers just that.

4. Method

This study makes use of a method very similar to that of O'Riordan et al.'s (2016) two-stage "feature-level analysis of social network sites." However, rather than identifying three major social network sites (SNSs) as O'Riordan et al. did (Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter), the sample for this study comprises 37 social media platforms and other services that enable digitally-mediated communication. An initial and comprehensive list of 61 services was taken from John's recent study of the word "sharing" (John, 2022). Because of the labor-intensive nature of the data collection, this list was trimmed down, but without sacrificing diversity: The sample was constructed to include the largest social network sites, such as Facebook and Instagram, as

well as more niche services, such as Deviantart. Additionally, non-US services, such as VK and Sina Weibo, and device-based services were added, such as those offered by Xbox or PlayStation were added. While it is not obvious what a representative sample of digital services would look like, this one is certainly broad and varied. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, there are no significant features that are not covered by it.

The services in the sample were: Academia.edu, Battle.net, Blackplanet, Deviantart, Discord, Facebook, FB Messenger, Flickr, Goodreads, Hi5, ICQ, Instagram, Last.fm, LinkedIn, LiveJournal, MySpace, OK.ru, Pinterest, Playstation Network (PSN), QQ, Reddit, Sina Weibo, Skype, Skyrock, Snapchat, Soundcloud, Telegram, TikTok, Tinder, Tumblr, Twitch, Twitter, VK, WeChat, WhatsApp, Xbox, and YouTube.

Having compiled the sample, the next step was to identify and document as many features for interpersonal disconnectivity as possible. This involved a combination of looking for expected features—such as blocking or unfriending—and exploring the service's app or website with the aim of finding additional features. Again following O'Riordan et al., the two components of this work were documentation analysis—collecting and analyzing "system help guides for end-users" (2016, p. 6)—and system analysis, defined as a "walkthrough of system functionality to validate data in documentation analysis and explore features of the system" (p. 6). Documenting the features involved collecting the following: the name given by the service to the feature; step-by-step instructions for using the feature; description of the feature in the service's help pages; screenshots of the feature in use; and a link to the page in the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. A 715-row file with the collected data is available on the OSF website (https://osf.io/z4ky8/?view_only=52b3a1feadbb4686863e084fd046c590).

Having documented the features, the next stage was to "[order] entities into groups or classes on the basis of their similarity" (Bailey, 1994, p. 1)—which produces a classification, or the "systematic arrangement of classes of entities based on analysis of the set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient characteristics that defines each class" (Jacob, 2004, p. 528). This classification, presented Section 5, includes each of the named features such that each appears in one class, and one class only. Additionally, by naming the classes, this stage requires the formulation of a lexicon, where "lexicons are standardized vocabularies that facilitate communication across diverse audiences" (Lawless & Civille, 2013, p. 270). This lexicon, or vocabulary, is a major contribution of this article.

5. Findings

Fifty-two differently-named features were found. When looking at how often they were named, there is quite a long tail: block (57), unfollow (27), mute (14), and unfriend (12) were mentioned most often, while 25 features were named only once. These include features such as "unwatch" (Deviantart) and "timeout" (Twitch). The full list of features is presented in Box 1. Note that "Block" appears more times than the number of services analyzed because each way of blocking (via a profile, for example, or from a post) was counted separately.

Some of these features can easily be consolidated. For instance, we can consider "mute chat," "mute conversation," "mute notifications," "mute profile," and "mute story" as instances of a broader class of "mute" features. Even then, though, we are left with around 35 different terms which sometimes mean different things in different services. For example, in Skype, "deleting" means expunging a contact from one's phonebook, while in Hi5, OK.ru, and WeChat it involves breaking a tie that had been mutually constituted by

Box 1. All of the features in the sample (with the number of times they appear; n = 52).

Ban (1)	Hide my moments (1)	Remove contact (1)
Banning a user (1)	Hide my posts (1)	Remove follower (3)
Blacklist (1)	Hide posts (1)	Remove friend (2)
Blacklist/shield (4)	Hide story (1)	Remove recommended content (2)
Block (57)	Ignore (4)	Restrict (4)
Block from commenting (1)	Infrequently contacted list (1)	Restricted list (2)
Block messages (2)	Mute (14)	Snooze (2)
Block/shield messages (from chat setts; 1)	Mute chat (1)	Snooze DMs (2)
Block/shield messages (from private message page; 1)	Mute conversation (1)	Take a break (hide to restricted list; 1)
Delete contact (2)	Mute notifications (3)	Take a break (see less; 1)
Delete friend (3)	Mute profile (2)	Timeout (1)
Hide (1)	Mute story (2)	Turn notifications off (4)
Hide comments (1)	No notifications (3)	Unfollow (27)
Hide content (2)	Not interested (2)	Unfriend (12)
Hide events (1)	Remove (3)	Unmatch (1)
Hide moments (1)	Remove a follow (1)	Unsubscribe (4)
	Remove a follower (1)	Unwatch (1)
	Remove a friend (3)	
	Remove connection (3)	

the two parties. At first blush, therefore, we can already see a need for an efficient and common vocabulary with which to talk about these features. The task at hand, therefore, is to construct a classification of features, to which we turn now.

I started with terms commonly used by the services themselves and, in particular, "block," "unfollow," "mute," and "unfriend," and tried to create distinctions between them. To start, the use of these features has implications for the feed or direct message inbox of the person using them: If I block, unfollow, mute, or unfriend another user, their content will no longer appear in my feed (or direct message inbox). I note, though, that blocking or unfriending another user means that my content can no longer appear in their feed either. Henceforth, I use "feed" to denote both a users' social media feeds and other ways of delivering information to them (such as through direct messages). There are, though, features that only involve the latter, that is, preventing flows of information *from* me *to* other users. In other words, the usage of some features has consequences for the information flow experienced by the person making use of the feature, while the usage of others has consequences for the information flow experienced by the other party. Another distinction relates to outcomes in that some features operate on the flow of information, without impacting on the tie, while others operate on the tie itself, with downstream implications for flows of information.

Building on the distinctions noted in the previous paragraph, the following is a description of each of the primary categories of tie-breaking and is based on the answers to five questions about the consequence of using the feature, where A is the person using the feature, and B is the target of A's use of the feature: (a) Does it affect A's feed?; (b) does it affect B's feed?; (c) is A still connected to B?; (d) is B still connected to A?; (c) can A and B see each other's profile? Answering these questions for each of the features observed in the document analysis stage unambiguously places each feature into discrete groups. We turn now to the classification system itself.

5.1. Block

By far the most common feature, some kind of blocking is offered by all of the services in the sample. Uniquely among the categories of features, blocking is a feature required of apps offered in the Google Play Store and the Apple App Store. For Google, "apps that contain or feature UGC (user-generated content)…must implement….UGC moderation that…provides an in-app system for blocking UGC and users" (Google, n.d.). For Apple, "Apps with user-generated content or social networking services must include…the ability to block abusive users" (Apple Developer, n.d.).

The primary function of blocking is to prevent communication. If there is a tie between the two users, then blocking breaks that tie. Sometimes—but not always—blocking also has the effect of deleting past interactions, reinforcing Schwarz's (2021) observation about how the objectification of interactions enables their temporal disunification. In other words, blocking can sometimes allow for a kind of rewriting of the past.

Blocking, though, does not only block direct messaging between users, it also prevents other kinds of service-specific interaction. For instance, blocking a user on Facebook prevents them from tagging the blocker or inviting them to events, while on Flickr, a blocked user cannot add photos posted by the person who blocked them to their galleries, or even "favorite" them (they can, however, see them). Another unique feature of blocking is that it can prevent the blocker from appearing in search results (Tumblr, Facebook), normally as part of a broader set of elements that render the two users involved invisible to one another on the service.

5.2. Unfriend

Unfriending is probably the most well-known of the features discussed here, even though it is actually offered by relatively few services. This is a function of the definition of unfriending being offered here, namely, the dissolution of a mutually constituted tie. A mutually constituted tie is one that requires both parties' consent in order for it to be formed. The best example is that of Facebook friending: In order for A and B to become Facebook friends, one of them has to ask the other to be their friend, and the other has to accept the request. This is in contrast to following, which is a one-way act of connectivity: A does not need B's permission to follow them on Instagram (I ignore here the case in which B has a private account, which means that A can ask to follow B; B can accept or deny the request—however, even in this case, the tie is not mutual in that there is no necessary connection between B granting A permission to follow them, and B following A.) Of the services in the sample, only Discord, Facebook, Goodreads, Hi5, LinkedIn, LiveJournal, OK.ru, QQ, Snapchat, Twitch, VK, WeChat, and Xbox offer such reciprocal relationships, and thus only they offer unfriending as a feature.

Unfriending has a number of consequences. First and foremost, it breaks the tie between two users. Unlike the formation of the tie, this is unilateral: One user unfriends another; they cannot both unfriend each other (though two users can block one another). Once A unfriends B, B's content will no longer appear in A's feed, and nor will A's content appear in B's feed. However, unlike with blocking, A and B can still visit one another's profiles: as noted in Snapchat's help pages, after removing a user from one's friends list, "they'll still be able to view any content you have set to public" (Snapchat Support, n.d.).

Unlike blocking, unfriending returns the relationship between A and B to its condition before A and B became friends. In terms of their mutual visibility, A and B are to one another as they are to all the other users of the service with whom they have never been friends. While one would expect that the act of unfriending will be registered and saved by the platform, and may even have some impact on the algorithmic ranking of the content served to A, this is not information available to us.

5.3. Unfollow

If following someone on social media involves some kind of sign-up or subscription to that person's content, then unfollowing is the reversal of that. Given that this is the relationship model in most social media, it is unsurprising that this was the second-most prevalent feature for disconnectivity (after blocking). Like unfriending, unfollowing returns the network to its previous state, prior to the following. Unlike blocking and unfriending, though, unfollowing has no impact on the unfollowed person's relationship of following/not following the person who unfollowed them.

5.4. Mute

The features presented thus far all entail the breaking of a digitally-mediated tie. Muting, however, does not. Rather, it is a feature that silences a particular user; after A has muted B, B's content will not show up in A's feed, be that permanently or for a pre-defined period of time (such as with snooze on Facebook, whereby A can mute B for 30 days). Unlike with unfollowing, however, muting leaves the tie between A and B intact. In other words, muting does not act on the social graph itself, in that the tie between A and B persists. Instead, it acts on—and only on—the flow of data from B to A. As such, and unlike the previous features, muting is undetectable by B: A still appears on the list of B's followers.

A special version of muting is offered by Instagram. Called "restrict," this lesser-known feature allows B to comment on A's Instagram post, but withholds the comment from A and all of their followers. It leaves B with the illusion of connectivity—they really are commenting on A's post; they have not been blocked—but in fact, unbeknownst to them, their efforts at communication are stymied by A as their post remains undelivered. This is reminiscent of the satirical proposal for "heavenbanning," "the hypothetical practice of banishing a user from a platform by causing everyone that they speak with to be replaced by AI models that constantly agree and praise them" (near, 2022).

5.5. Withhold

In a sense, the features that I am terming "withhold" are the mirror image of muting. For A to withhold content vis-à-vis B means that A is preventing their content from reaching B's feed. To use the withhold feature is to control the potential recipients of a piece of content rather than controlling which content the service delivers to me. As with muting, withholding does not change the structure of the social graph. It is a feature that, inter alia, allows people to control the reach of their online communications and thus, in a way, resurrect the barriers between social contexts that social media so easily pull down (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Of the services in the sample, this feature is offered only by Facebook, WeChat, and QQ.

5.6. Eject

If A unfriending B means that both A and B's content will cease to appear in one another's feed, and if A unfollowing B means that B's content will cease to appear in A's feed, without impacting on whether A's content appears in B's feed, what I am here calling *ejecting* prevents A's content from appearing in B's feed, without impacting on whether B's content appears in A's feed. This is clearly similar to withholding, as described in Section 4.5, but this time involves breaking a tie. Thus, ejecting is described as "removing a follower" in the help pages of Goodreads, Instagram, TikTok, and Sina Weibo, the only services in the sample to offer this feature. YouTube used to enable users to remove subscribers but removed this feature before my sample was created. Twitter introduced such a feature shortly after this sample was created.

As discussed by John and Katz (2023), there is a catch in the use of the eject function in that it is only effective for as long as the ejected user is logged in. That is, if A removes B from his Instagram followers, all B has to do in order to be able to see A's posts once more is to log out of Instagram. To avoid this, A can make their account private, but this prevents everyone who is not a follower of theirs from viewing their content, and not only B.

The categories in this typology are shown in Table 1. Note that "n/a" means that the act being characterized does not impact that particular dimension.

Before delving into this classification, at the purely descriptive level, we can show the names given to the features in each category by the various platforms and services in the sample (Table 2), the services with features in each category (Table 3), and the categories per service (Figure 1).

This allows us to make a number of further observations. First, while no two rows of Table 1 are identical (obviously), they can be very similar, a fact that enables us to draw out the defining feature of a certain category of features. To start, we can see that blocking and unfriending are identical except in relation to the question of whether the users can see one another's profile (or at all) on the service. In other words, blocking renders future communication impossible and makes A and B invisible to one another on that particular service. Unfriending merely breaks the direct tie between A and B, but in a way that means they will still be able to come across each other's comments to mutual friends' posts, for example. Unfollowing and muting are also identical apart from the dimension of connectivity. In both cases, B's content will stop appearing in A's feed, but with muting A still remains a follower of B. The main implication of this is that B cannot know that A has muted them, at

Table 1. Typology of categories of features for interpersonal disconnectivity.

	Does it affect A's feed?	Does it affect B's feed?	Is A still connected to B?	Is B still connected to A?	Can A and B see each other's profiles?
Block	✓	✓	x	x	x
Unfriend	✓	✓	x	x	✓
Unfollow	✓	x	x	n/a	✓
Mute	✓	x	✓	n/a	✓
Withhold	x	✓	n/a	✓	✓
Eject	x	✓	n/a	x	✓

Table 2. Names of the features in the platforms sampled.

Block	Unfollow	Mute	Unfriend	Withhold	Eject
Block	Delete contact	Ban	Delete friend	Hide my moments	Remove a follower
Banning a user	Remove a friend/contact	Block from commenting	Remove	Hide my posts from this friend	
Blacklist	Unfollow	Hide	Remove connection/ friend	Restricted list	
Block messages	Unsubscribe	I don't want to see this	Unfriend	Take a break	
Shield	Unwatch	Ignore			
Unmatch		Mute			
		No notifications			
		Not interested			
		Remove recommended content			
		Removing recommendations			
		Restrict			
		Snooze			
		Snooze DMs			
		Take a break			
		Timeout			

least not from within the service. This can be a powerful motivation for muting over unfollowing, as described by Lopez and Ovaska (2013).

Muting is one of two features that leave A's connection with B intact. The other is withholding. Indeed, in a way, muting and withholding are mirror images of one another. They both leave A's connection with B in place, and are agnostic as to B's connection with A, but they operate on different feeds. Both features are unknowable by B because A is not actually breaking their tie with B: B can identify changes in their list of followers (at least in theory), but short of looking at other people's devices or asking them, B cannot know that A has muted them, or excluded them from receiving content that they (A) have posted.

Unfollowing and ejecting are also mirror image features. When A unfollows B, A changes their own feed, while not impacting B's. When A ejects B, A changes B's feed, while not impacting their own. Blocking and unfriending do not have such mirror features because, as we can see in Table 1, they already operate on A and B's feeds. Unfollowing, muting, withholding, and ejecting, on the other hand, operate only on one of A or B's feeds, while what distinguishes them is whether or not the A → B or B → A tie remains intact.

Table 3. The categories and the services that offer the relevant features.

Block (36)	Unfollow (27)	Mute (16)	Unfriend (12)	Withhold (3)	Eject (4)
Academia	Academia	BlackPlanet	Discord	Facebook	Goodreads
Battle.net	BlackPlanet	Facebook	Facebook	QQ	Instagram
BlackPlanet	DeviantArt	Messenger	Goodreads	WeChat	TikTok
DeviantArt	Facebook*	Instagram	Hi5		Twitter†
Discord	Flickr	LinkedIn	LinkedIn		
Facebook	Goodreads	OK.ru	OK.ru		
Messenger	ICQ	QQ	QQ		
Flickr	Instagram	Snapchat	Snapchat		
Goodreads	Last.fm	Telegram	Twitch		
Hi5	LinkedIn	Twitch	VK		
ICQ	LiveJournal	Twitter	WeChat		
Instagram	OK.ru	VK	Xbox		
Last.fm	Pinterest	WeChat			
LinkedIn	QQ	WhatsApp			
LiveJournal	Reddit	Xbox			
MySpace	Sina Weibo	YouTube			
OK.ru	Skype				
Pinterest	Skyrock				
PSN	Snapchat				
QQ	Soundcloud				
Reddit	TikTok				
Sina Weibo	Tumblr				
Skype	Twitch				
Skyrock	Twitter				
Snapchat	VK				
Soundcloud	WeChat				
Telegram	YouTube				
TikTok					
Tinder					
Tumblr					
Twitch					
Twitter					
VK					
WeChat					
WhatsApp					
Xbox					

Notes: † = Most of the time, what Facebook calls “unfollowing” falls under “muting” in this typology, however, because it is possible to follow someone on Facebook without being friends with them, it is possible to unfollow in the sense described here of A breaking a tie with B; * = This function was added to Twitter shortly after our sample period—It is included here because of the importance of Twitter in the social media ecosystem.

Table 4. Categories by service.

	Block	Unfollow	Mute	Unfriend	Withhold	Eject
Academia	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
Battle.net	✓	—	—	—	—	—
BlackPlanet	✓	✓	✓	—	—	—
DeviantArt	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
Discord	✓	—	—	✓	—	—
Facebook	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	—
FB Messenger	✓	—	✓	—	—	—
Flickr	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
Goodreads	✓	✓	—	✓	—	✓
Hi5	✓	—	—	✓	—	—
ICQ	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
Instagram	✓	✓	✓	—	—	✓
Last.fm	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
LinkedIn	✓	✓	✓	✓	—	—
LiveJournal	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
MySpace	✓	—	—	—	—	—
OK.ru	✓	✓	✓	✓	—	—
Pinterest	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
PSN	✓	—	—	—	—	—
QQ	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	—
Reddit	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
Sina Weibo	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
Skype	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
Skyrock	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
Snapchat	✓	✓	✓	✓	—	—
Soundcloud	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
Telegram	✓	—	✓	—	—	—
TikTok	✓	✓	—	—	—	✓
Tinder	✓	—	—	—	—	—
Tumblr	✓	✓	—	—	—	—
Twitch	✓	✓	✓	✓	—	—
Twitter*	✓	✓	✓	—	—	✓
VK	✓	✓	✓	✓	—	—
WeChat	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	—
WhatsApp	✓	—	✓	—	—	—
Xbox	✓	—	✓	✓	—	—
YouTube	—	✓	✓	—	—	—

Note: ✓ = yes, — = no; * = the "eject" function was added to Twitter shortly after our sample period—It is included here because of the importance of Twitter in the social media ecosystem.

6. Conclusions

This article offers for the first time a classification of features for interpersonal tie dissolution such that each of the features identified in the feature analysis (see Box 1) can be allocated to one (and only one) of the categories (see Table 2). Moreover, it will also be possible to similarly allocate features that will be released in the future based on whether they act on my feed or the other person's, whether or not they leave the tie between us intact, and whether they render us visible to one another in the service or not. In this regard, I take inspiration from Carr and Hayes who hope that their work will be "robust enough to include future social media tools that have not yet emerged" (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 47).

It may be objected that this classification of features for interpersonal disconnectivity actually includes features that disconnect nobody: if A mutes B, there is no tie-breaking involved. However, given evidence that in social media people negotiate the tension between the outcome they seek from using a feature with the possible implications for face (theirs and the other person's), then muting certainly can be part of the dissolution of a digitally-mediated relationship (John & Gal, 2018; Lopez & Ovaska, 2013), which, as noted earlier, will not "wither on the vine." Indeed, in a focus group study, Lopez and Ovaska (2013) showed how social considerations sometimes trump the technical outcome that users seek. That is, a Facebook user may refrain from unfriending someone (the technical outcome) because of the potential awkwardness should the two encounter one another outside Facebook (a social consideration). As a corollary to this, social media users may also achieve what a feature for tie dissolution might help them achieve without actually using any features. For instance, rather than unfollowing an Instagram tie, who might notice that they have been unfollowed, one could simply scroll past their posts or stories; or, rather than rejecting a Facebook friend request, one could leave it "in abeyance" (Light, 2014, p. 102; see also Lopez & Ovaska, 2013, pp. 6–7).

In another example of dissonance between designers' intentions and users' uses (see Bijker, 1992), there is growing evidence that features such as blocking and unfollowing are sometimes used in the service of bottom-up efforts towards moderation and governance, as perhaps most clearly seen in the use of shared blocklists (Geiger, 2016; Jhaver et al., 2018). In other words, while the motivation behind this study is to better understand computer-mediated interpersonal relationships, the tools for managing them can be used to achieve collective ends (e.g., Hallinan, 2021; O'Meara, 2019) through a process of de-scription (Akrich, 1992).

A final conclusion is that the question of whether people are using these features in order to manage *people* or *content* remains underdetermined by my data. On the one hand, Sibona and Walczak (2011) found that people often unfriend others on Facebook because of their behaviors in offline settings; in such cases, the purpose is not to manage the content that person posts, but rather to put distance between oneself and the other person. On the other hand, research in political communication inquires into the role of cross-cutting opinions in unfriending, which puts content ahead of the person posting it (e.g., Bode, 2016; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Neubaum et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017). Which one of these a particular act of unfriending or unfollowing is more similar to is knowable only if we ask the person carrying it out. However, the very fact that the same features for disconnectivity are offered for the purposes of managing people and content points to a blending of the two (Bucher, 2013).

Zooming out, this examination of how we can effect interpersonal disconnectivity in digitally-mediated environments raises questions for future research into the distinction between what a person *is* and what a

person *says*. This is a distinction that bearers of bad news have insisted upon for millennia, but one that on social media appears harder to sustain. Consider a social media tie who posts political content that you find deeply offensive. The way to prevent the content from reaching you will be to act somehow on the tie, as social media conflate the message with the messenger. The classification offered here could, for instance, serve as the basis of an empirical inquiry into which features are used when people are trying to curate a specific information environment, and which are used when people are trying to limit their contact with specific others.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data collected for this article are available online here: https://osf.io/z4ky8/?view_only=52b3a1feadbb4686863e084fd046c590

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ARTICLE

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The Politics of Disconnective Media: Unraveling the Materiality of Discourses on Disconnectivity

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Abstract

The commodification of disconnection has attracted growing scholarly attention. Previous research highlighted the instrumentalisation of disconnection for productivity, self-governance, and healthy life. Researchers have also explored the politics of the "products" used for disconnecting, such as smartphone applications and offline commodities. Yet, current studies generally neglect to connect digital disconnection's symbolic and material dimensions. In this article, we critically examine the discourses of what we call "disconnective media," the products (hardware and software) that offer disconnection from digital devices. To explain how discourses and products find a basis in material and social structures, we deploy a discourse-theoretical analysis grounded in a Marxist materialist approach to neoliberalism and the materiality of discourse. We critically analyse six disconnective media and focus on these key dimensions: justifications (why to disconnect), time/space (when/where to disconnect), devices/platforms (which devices are appropriate to disconnect from), and class (who is addressed to disconnect). Findings show that digital technologies in the workplace have been naturalised, whereas phones and social media remain problematic. Leisure time is constructed with a set of obligations to use time meaningfully and improve the self, while work time is presented through a scientific work management mindset that promotes efficiency. Disconnective media advocate the ideal image of healthy, efficient workers. This study stresses the importance of investigating disconnection concerning commodified labour and neoliberalism's material consequences.

Keywords

digital detox; digital disconnection; disconnection; labour; leisure; materiality of disconnection; media

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, we have witnessed the efforts and calls to withdraw and refuse the use of digital devices and services. Digital detox bloggers write about how and why to reduce the time spent using digital devices and platforms by giving advice and underlining the benefits of detoxing. Business entrepreneurs offer digital free services, such as a Wi-Fi-free café, and off-grid holidays. Tech firms encourage employees to take retreats (Fish, 2017), and some companies apply digital detox in the workplace (Guyard & Kaun, 2018). While digital media use has increased over time, a growing body of criticism directed at screen time has given rise to new lifestyles/subjectivities and digital wellness industries attempting to address the issue of isolated digital use (Valasek, 2022). Digital disconnection has become mainstream today, creating expertise such as detox writers and organisers, digital wellness advocators, and unplugging apps and devices. As Syvertsen (2020) pointed out, many forms of anti-media activism have existed, but there is no historical parallel to today's discourses on limiting personal media use. According to her, disconnection and digital detox represent a historical milestone: "a shift in emphasis from improving the media to improving the user" (Syvertsen, 2020, p. 73). This shift points out the neoliberal politics that make the individual agents responsible for their doings and un-doings.

On the one hand, while advice literature and digital products offer their solutions to remedy the problem of overuse, there has been a criticism that these products and services also reinforce the discourse of individual responsibilities (Jorge et al., 2022; Moe & Madsen, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020). On the other hand, there is also a contrast between responsibilities and the promotion of solutions, as disconnection commodities present their solutions without assigning powerful agency to individuals (Valasek, 2022). However, scholars primarily criticise discourses on disconnectivity, arguing that "fetishising individual choice and agency ignores the entrenched ubiquity of contemporary digital technologies" (Feldman, 2021, p. 107). Although disconnection is a relatively new phenomenon, considerable research has been conducted. Yet, there has been little research on the materialist ontology of digital disconnection, while more attention has been given to individual choices and discursive constructions. This study examines new products of disconnection in terms of commodification and instrumentalisation of disconnection from a Marxist materialist perspective.

2. Disconnective Media

One of the well-known solutions technologists offer for disconnection is to use another technological innovation, such as smartphone apps designed to limit the time spent on the screen (Beattie, 2020). For example, Apple and Google's digital well-being apps are claimed to protect users from overuse. Morozov (2013) calls such efforts "technological solutionism," a mindset that considers the internet and technological innovation as the only solution for societal problems. This approach presents paradoxes and contradictions as it requires a connection to disconnect (Hesselberth, 2018; Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019). Natale and Treré (2020) point out the irony of these new devices that are "presented as an antidote to our dependency from digital devices and platforms" (p. 627) while they are in the same way carried out around and attached to the body. Valasek (2022) states that digital well-being apps (or productivity/detox apps) are also nudges. Digital nudges, as a techno-solutionism, appear to be one of the defining characteristics of neoliberalism; people are given choices, but how these choices are framed by experts and those in power more broadly has illustrative effects (Valasek, 2022).

Previously, products of disconnection have been called “disconnection commodities” (Karppi et al., 2021), “technologies of avoidance” (Plaut, 2015), and “technologies of the Self” adapted from Foucault’s theory of governmentalities (Beattie, 2020). We introduce the term “disconnective media” to comparatively explain these technologies in relation to connective media. The term disconnective media combines disconnectivity and media, corresponding with the umbrella term “digital disconnection.” Therefore, we suggest that “disconnective media” is more comprehensive and appropriate for conceptualising new media products. Because these technologies are disconnective, they are designed to play an active role in disconnecting the connected devices and blocking specific apps. In other words, they turn the connective media into a disconnective one. Furthermore, some products are inherently disconnective, such as fake phones without digital functions. We define disconnective media with a holistic approach concerning any form of the product, either software or hardware, that plays a mediator role in practising digital disconnection. Another aim is to establish precise terminology for digital disconnection that moves beyond traditional labels like “old media” and “new media,” which are still prevalent in disconnection literature. Instead of framing media as simply old or new, we propose the terms “connective” and “disconnective” media technologies. The term “disconnective media” is particularly versatile, encompassing both established and emerging media technologies.

3. Instrumentalisation, Commodification, and Depoliticisation

Previous research has demonstrated how disconnection has been instrumentalised for productivity (Fish, 2017), and well-being (Syvertsen, 2020); depoliticised as a responsibilisation of individuals (Hesselberth, 2018; Moe & Madsen, 2021); and commodified as conspicuous non-consumption (Portwood-Stacer, 2013) and as new products (Karppi et al., 2021).

The responsibilisation of individuals has been a fundamental aspect of modern governance and behavioural management techniques. The emergence of new ethics of self-development has led to significant demand for individual reliability and responsibility (Sørensen & Christiansen, 2012). These politics have created, shaped, and governed modern humans as “good citizens.” Within discourses of disconnectivity, being a good citizen entails being a good digital user (Beattie, 2020). Regarding the commodification of disconnection, the products and services of disconnection promote self-control to manage their time and use it wisely, especially for professionals (Van Bruyssel et al., 2023).

The capitalist ideology guides the idea of wellness as a method for boosting productivity, assumptively on behalf of employers and employees. For instance, Smith and Puczkó (2015) suggest that many employers realise the benefits of reducing workplace stress by offering their workers wellness weekends, spa visits, afternoon naps, etc. Also, workers have long been expected to spend their off-work time wisely for a productive tomorrow (Nooney, 2021). This is an extension of work ethics to after-work hours. In neoliberalism, alterations to and regulations regarding the body are considered essential for job performance rather than remunerated components (Moore, 2018). Moreover, these practices run the risk of evolving into the most intrusive and intimate managerial strategies, which obfuscate affectivity and conceal the anxiety and oppression of precarity (Moore, 2018). Productivity, especially in commodified labour, is an output benefiting the employer rather than the employee. In this regard, all other outcomes of disconnection, such as well-being and self-management, are usually a precondition of productivity. Time management is also a matter of governable spaces and time. The invention of factory and work discipline has brought new

techniques for cutting up times to manage productive subjects (Rose, 1999). This can best be seen in the adverts of disconnective media—a strong message of self-control over time (Jorge et al., 2022).

4. Digital Disconnection Beyond Discursive Construction

While investigating discursive contractions can unfold many aspects of digital disconnections, it remains limited to only relative and imaginary aspects. Discourse analysis can provide how digital disconnection appears and is framed, but it does not explain why it appears in one way without a theoretical analysis. Although some calls have been made to investigate the materiality of disconnection (Kania-Lundholm, 2021), it has remained relatively understudied regarding empirical research. Moreover, there has been criticism that social studies, particularly media studies, have been too constructivist and ignored materiality and material conditions (Cloud, 2005; P. Jones, 2004). This is a concern because the matter is being replaced with language, culture, and all other semiotics (Barad, 2003). Critical realists explain how discourse has limitations and the material world exists outside of discourse, but discourse and the material world also have casual interactions. They suggest that "discourses, discursive practices, are in continual causal interaction with the material world," and practices affect the world, and "the world itself is causally efficacious on practices" (Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998, p. 13).

Another important consideration is that Marxist scholars consider changes in social practice/discourse regarding the changes in the mode of production, from feudal and family-based work to industrialisation and capitalist mode of production (Thompson, 2017). According to Thompson, time as measurement generates a relationship in which employees realise the distinction between their time and their employers, who must effectively utilise their employees' time and ensure it is not squandered. Thus, time becomes a measurement of money, not a task which is no longer passed but spent. This resembles Max Weber's explanation of instrumental rationality, the operative principle of maximising the value in modern civilisation, which illustrates how to design ways to complete tasks faster while eliminating wasteful and empty time (Bauman, 2013). Therefore, the negative framing of wasteful time and laziness is not just a matter of discourse but is rooted in material "circumstances that allow such a construction of this category" (Lanci, 2020, p. 98). While some scholars acknowledge that disconnection brings new moral obligations, particularly concerning work (Fast, 2021), we should also highlight how these obligations are bound to material conditions. Self-tracking devices exemplify how use and non-use aim for self-improvement and productive labour. The quantified self emerges as self-governing and a scientific work management method, similar to the justifications we witnessed in the disconnection discourse (Moore, 2018). Thus, there is a need to understand how both use and non-use are instrumentalised for capitalist productivity and profit making. Furthermore, disconnective media and disconnection discourse/practices can be meaningful in techno-material conditions. As Kania-Lundholm (2021, p. 25) points out, all social practices, such as work and leisure, are embedded in "the materiality and temporality of sociotechnical infrastructures." For example, different material conditions, such as poor communication infrastructures, can differently shape discourses/practices on disconnectivity (Bozan & Treré, 2024). Except, what has always been said as a paradox of disconnection is that disconnection applications require connection, but indeed, all discourses and practices of disconnection emerge as a result of the wide availability and accessibility of new technologies. Acknowledging the importance of the materiality of media technologies can reveal the impossibility of disconnection since the mass occupation of digital technologies is beyond human agency, and the choice to disconnect is highly rooted in privileges and precarious conditions (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2022).

To understand the relationship between discourses on disconnectivity and another social phenomenon, we also consider the Marxist concept of "social totality." This would provide a better understanding of which practices and aspects of disconnection are natural and which practices of connection, on the other hand, are problematic. Particularly, it can explain why time and space of disconnection are important to underline, as well as the problematisation of devices; as Marx states, "the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life (Marx, 1859, preface, p. 2). According to Eagleton (1997), Marx argues that social, political, and all major historical changes are determined by conflicts of material production. Marx explains how the very abstract forms of life are rooted in the material world and, indeed, the material activity of humans: "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life" (Marx, 2000, preface, p. 6). It is also evident in Marxist materialism that the ideas (discourses) are the products of the dominant material relations of productions, not randomly produced ideas, but very dependent on the social conditions and class structure:

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (Marx, 2000, part 1, p. 6)

This includes an examination beyond text and a look at which context the text is produced, including the material changes in production forces, from the industrial workforce to computer-based economies. Marx considers economic relations to be the core of material conditions defined in totality (Marx, 1859). Therefore, agency and structures are embedded in material conditions in the Marxist materialist conception of history. We suggest that disconnection studies should not be under isolation, and instead, we aim to address how the discourses of digital disconnection are interrelated to other phenomena, especially labour and economic realms, rather than only ideas, discourses, and representations. As Valasek (2022) points out, reading much of the literature on happiness and well-being is unnecessary to see a clear economic drive for self-care and productivity.

Nevertheless, this article takes discourses into significant consideration but does not consider discursive structures as prior ontological realities over materiality. Hence, a materialist approach to discourse analysis, especially one focused on material social reality, can contribute to disconnection studies with new explorations. In other words, it can reveal the conditions in the first place, enabling such phenomenon to penetrate some aspects of life over others, such as work over leisure. This is also because digital disconnection cannot be separated from the economic realms as Kania-Lundholm (2021) explains, it should concern "the conditions of power and labour in digital capitalism" but also the ideological mechanism of capitalism, especially "productivity, efficiency, and profit-making" (p. 28).

5. Methodology

This study investigates disconnective media with a sample of six products' websites and blogs: three are only software, one is software and hardware, and two are only hardware (Table 1). The sample selection is based on Google Search results using the keywords "digital disconnection products" and "digital detox products." Most

Table 1. List of disconnective media products.

Name of disconnective media	Type of media	Functions
RescueTime	Software	Blocking websites, providing statistics for productivity
Freedom	Software	Blocking websites and mobile applications
Offtime	Software	Blocking mobile applications
Unpluq	Software/hardware	Key for phone, app blocker
NoPhone	Hardware	Fake phones (made of plastic or silicon)
The Lockbox	Hardware	Lockbox for smartphones

of the products were found in the digital detox blog articles, even though only two appeared directly in search results. In addition, we sought to find a variation of the products and their relevance in this variation.

To explain how discourses and products find a basis in material social structures, we deploy a discourse analysis grounded in a Marxist materialist approach to neoliberalism and the materiality of media (Cloud, 1994; Dourish & Mazmanian, 2013). We focus on the critical analysis of disconnective media websites and blogs and examine these four key aspects: justifications (why to disconnect), time/space (when/where to disconnect), devices/platforms (which devices are appropriate to disconnect from), and class (who is addressed to disconnect).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) itself integrates some materialist features. As Fairclough points out: "The discursive constitution of society does not emanate from a free play of ideas in people's heads but from a social practice which is firmly rooted in and oriented to real, material, social structures" (1992, p. 66). However, although CDA scholars have materialist approaches, the CDA has been a highly constructivist method (P. Jones, 2004). Thus, we propose a Marxist materialist approach to CDA, which includes a discourse analysis and critically interprets how such discourses are rooted in today's material conditions. The resulting research questions are the following:

> RQ1: How do disconnective media commodify and instrumentalise digital disconnection?
>
> RQ2: How do discourses of disconnective media reflect the social, material reality?

RQ1 concerns the commodification of disconnectivity in the form of new products and RQ2 investigates the relationships between commodifying discourses and social material reality.

5.1. Four Mainframes and Sub-Questions

Regarding the justification (why to disconnect), our primary aim is to explore the narratives surrounding disconnection from two perspectives. First, our analysis identifies how the issue of connectivity is problematised and how disconnection is framed as a solution, justifying the need to disconnect. Second, we seek to uncover the link between this framing of disconnection and the current era of productivity.

Next, concerning the time and space framing (when and where to disconnect?), we analyse the texts and images associated with disconnective media to investigate the contexts in which disconnection is embraced,

such as in leisure versus labour settings or in workplaces versus retreat camps. In other words, we examine depictions of non-use within specific temporal and spatial frameworks. To analyse these narratives, we focus on the circumstances that challenge the value of connection and the suggestions that emphasise or celebrate the success of disconnective practices. This analysis includes various indicators, such as the choice of imagery and the settings where disconnection occurs.

Thirdly, as for the devices and platforms (what devices are appropriate to be disconnected from?), this analysis considers the various digital technologies that are both problematised and repurposed. Specifically, we examine the rationale behind the use of disconnective media in work and daily life. One of the key objectives of broadening the scope of digital discourse is to critically challenge the existing narratives that define and frame disconnection in relation to specific technologies. Consequently, the analysis focuses on the selection of devices and platforms within these narratives, particularly those portrayed as problematic.

Finally, regarding class (who is addressed to disconnect?), we analyse how the subjects of disconnection are represented, focusing not on demographic data but on the ways in which both voluntary and enforced disconnection are portrayed. Through materialist discourse analysis and theoretical exploration, we aim to uncover the relationship between commodified labour and the discourse of productivity.

6. Findings

6.1. Why Disconnecting?: Justifications

Productivity discourse is the most common theme among all the products that appear as work management and self-control tools. These products are designed as tools that supervise time management through temporary disconnections. Figure 1 illustrates how RescueTime offers time management to eliminate distractive time and increase efficiency and productivity.

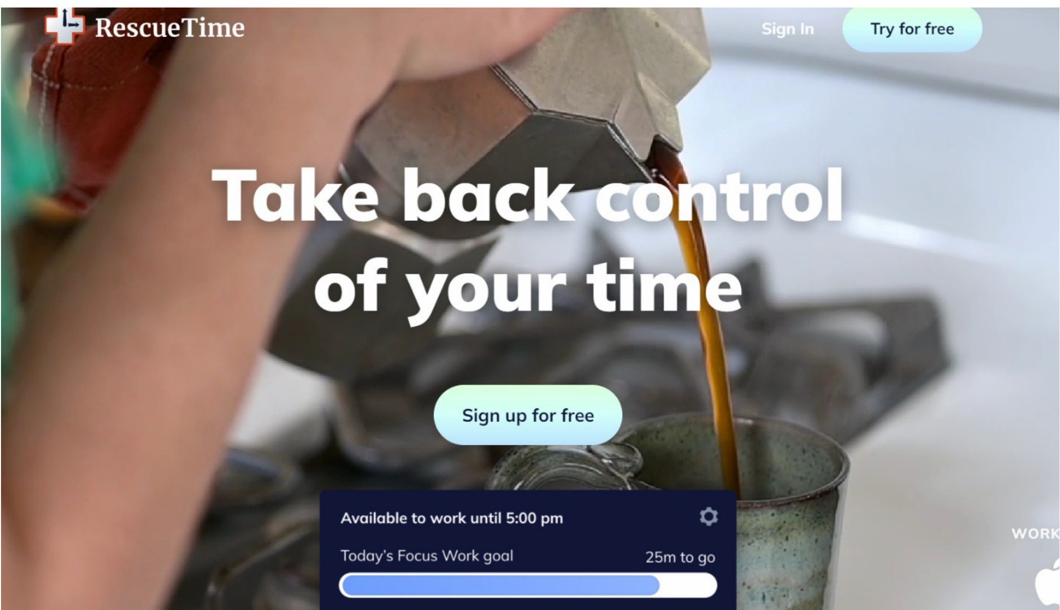

Figure 1. Self-control (RescueTime).

The rationalisation of such disconnection does not always appear directly as productivity and well-being. Instead, it is framed as an inexplicit expression, as seen in the promotion in Figure 2, which states, “features to help you do what you love” (Freedom). While it does not straightforwardly point to labour productivity, the overall context suggests being productive by “doing what you love.” Another example is how individuals may feel unhappy because they perceive themselves as unproductive and struggle to do their best work:

> Studies show that every time you check email, a social feed, or respond to a notification, your mind requires 23 minutes of re-focus time to get back on task. It’s a phenomenal cost to our entire workforce and to each of us individually as we strive to do our best work. (Freedom)

This workforce cost is expected to be solved by the workers themselves, which may not improve their outcome as Ebert and Zavarzadeh (2015, p. 154) criticise that for capital, the workers should perceive “higher levels of their own exploitation as positive social improvements.” Thus, productivity is usually their main motto: “Freedom to be incredibly productive” (Freedom).

Another theme of disconnective media is problematising connectivity through well-being issues. Figure 3 illustrates how connectivity is problematised through the quality of sleep. Although sleep is a biological need, it has been socially structured throughout history. The dominant representation of sleep has changed over time by scientific, medical, and popular forces, such as pathological definitions and commercial and media representations of sleep (Wolf-Meyer, 2012). “Get a good night’s sleep” already has a meaning that connotates appropriate bedtime and early start of the day. The emphasis on sleep is not just a matter of physical health but still a matter of the next working day. According to reports, employee sleep quality has become a significant concern for businesses, costing them millions of dollars (Galewitz, 2020).

The well-being discourse cannot be analysed without the context of productivity and social relations of production. Well-being is mostly a requirement and precondition of productivity. Freedom, for example,

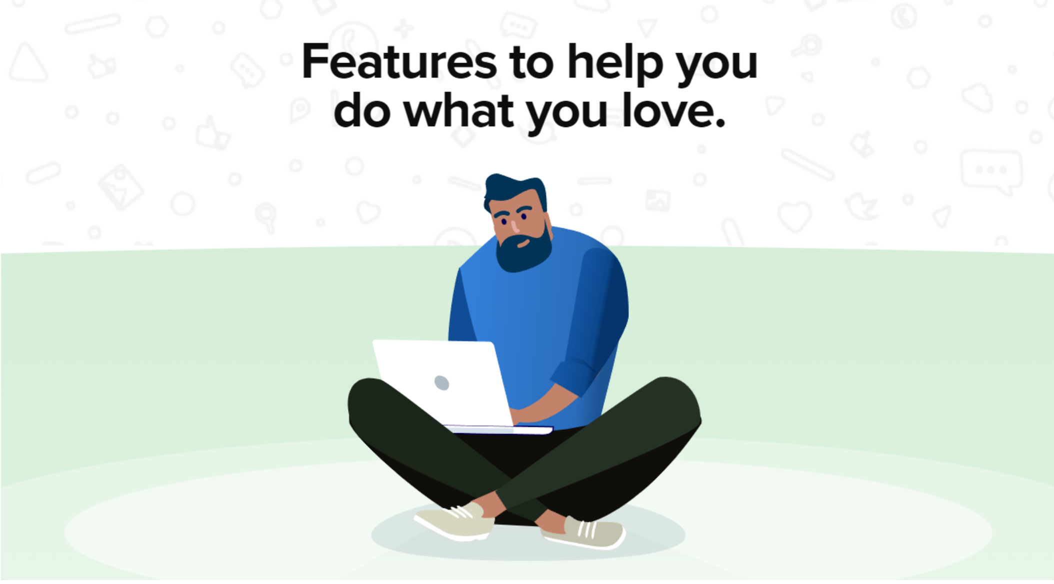

Figure 2. Being productive (Freedom).

Figure 3. Good night's sleep (Unpluq).

explains why well-being matters: "Your health and well-being *matter*. Make yourself a priority and enjoy the professional fulfilment and better quality of life that embracing deep work will bring."

A considerable difference from self-help literature is that these brands do not advocate ultimate willpower; rather, an incompetent individual must use their products. Offtime indicates this justification: "Most people can't just switch off their phone, and we provide a much better solution for the issue than others do." The manifestation of the lack of willpower and justification for using these products is best explained by The Lockbox: "With habit forming behaviours, willpower alone usually is not enough. Pre-commitment has been proven as a much more effective strategy for self-control. By restricting temptation, the device prevents the failures of willpower." Nevertheless, they do not illustrate digital disconnection as impossible, promoting the idea that it is very doable with some instrumental nudging.

6.2. Where and When to Disconnect?

A significant characteristic of disconnective media is when and where to disconnect. This can be seen best by emphasising sleep quality, distraction, and the depiction of the daily life circle in the visuals.

RescueTime visualises the commitment to daily life routines. Figure 4 depicts disconnection differently during work and off-work hours. Leisure time signifies a disconnected life and portrays a productive worker for the next day. For instance, reading a book before bedtime and drinking morning coffee indicates an organised life. These distinctions in labour and leisure time construction are evident in most apps.

The problematisation of screen time primarily focuses on leisure hours. For example, RescueTime states:

> According to the latest Nielsen report, the average American adult spends nearly 10 hours a day looking at screens. While (hopefully) most of that time is happening during work hours, it still leaves a big chunk of after-work time staring at screens.

Figure 4. Productive day cycle (RescueTime).

The use of the adverb "hopefully" underscores the unquestioned role of technology as a production tool and highlights the glorification of work. The app explicitly states that disconnection pertains to leisure time; thus, the concern is optimising outcomes during off-work hours. Similarly, the Freedom app describes how productive deep work extends beyond working hours:

> The deep work method is not just about putting in long working hours—It's also about what you do after the workday is over. Regularly resting your brain will improve the quality of your deep focus, so it's important to make downtime a priority.

While these products aim to promote disconnection and enhance productivity, they create contradictions. Firstly, self-help literature problematises digital connections using a medical dictionary (Syvertsen, 2020). Meanwhile, disconnective media portrays digital connection in the workplace as harmless and natural but as harmful in leisure contexts. For instance, The Lockbox aims to combat phone addiction and highlights its adverse effects but neglects other devices. Secondly, they reconstruct the legitimacy of work; instead of questioning its legitimacy in leisure settings, leisure becomes a definer of productive work. This illustrates how disconnection is framed differently across time and space, resulting in inconsistencies. Work time signifies dedication to tasks with minimised distractions, advocating for single-tasking and screen usage. Similarly to digital detox rhetoric, disconnective media does not wholly reject technology but promotes goal-oriented and spatiotemporal disconnection.

The discourse on digital disconnection, advocating self-control at work for productivity, may not align with workers' interests. While it is proposed that "banning tech from the bedroom is the quickest way to prevent devices from disrupting rest-time" (Freedom), it overlooks that digital entertainment serves as rest time for many.

6.3. Which Devices and Platforms?

The third problematisation includes devices and platforms. A typical representation of disconnection is the naturalisation of computer use, while smartphones and social media are the main problems.

Considering these products as tools for productivity aligns with their promises. While they view screens as detrimental to well-being, particularly emphasising the importance of a good night's sleep, the issue lies with smartphones or social media platforms. For example, Figure 5 depicts how the Unpluq key disables the smartphone while using the computer, which is deemed acceptable. Some products are exclusively designed to limit or replace smartphone usage, like the NoPhone, marketed as "a fake phone for people addicted to real phones."

These products promote a work ethic that advocates eliminating any sources of joy, such as gaming or social media browsing, framing any deviation from work as a distraction. Thus, eliminating all distractions is seen as combating laziness, which could be interpreted as a form of joy. The Freedom app exaggerates the consequences of multitasking, claiming it is "40% less productive" and "may even decrease your IQ by 10 points!"

Temporary device-based disconnection during work hours goes beyond self-control; it is seen as implementing scientific work management. Blocking social media apps, the entire internet, and addictive games are all tied to productive labour and efficiency. For instance, the Freedom app's promotional text states: "Whether it's Facebook, ESPN, or YouTube, block an unlimited number of distracting websites so you can focus on what matters." Here, what matters is not a personal preference but a work task that employees often lack control over. Another slogan used by Freedom is "with Website Exceptions, and you can even block all websites except the ones you need so you can focus on your work," highlighting how these discourses reflect the realities of work.

Figure 5. Smartphones vs computers (Unpluq).

Promoting a single screen and task mirrors features of scientific work management, particularly quantifying workers. Nudge engineers suggest that in cases of a lack of self-control to avoid social media distractions, individuals can utilise "pre-commitment devices" like social media blocking apps, which managers could employ over employees (Valasek, 2022). Figure 6 demonstrates how these technologies function as self-tracking devices for workers to monitor their productive and distracting time, proposing similar features to those used in self-tracking devices.

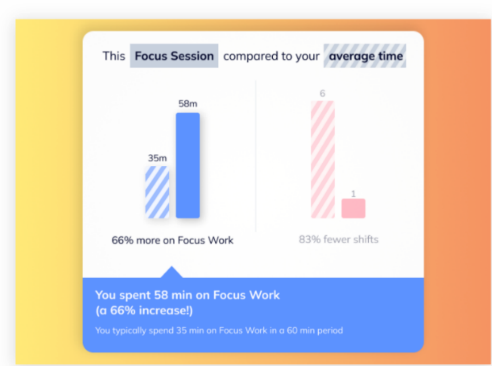

Figure 6. Focus and not waste time (RescueTime).

RescueTime provides data on how time has been used productively and distractions, as shown in Figure 6. This data is based on the type of activity and screen, as it does not problematise all devices. The problematisation of devices clearly can be seen in all the figures.

Productive work is usually constructed as an activity that someone loves. Thus, the argument of disconnective media is built on this embedded assumption that we are trapped unconsciously, which comes from the very nature of these devices: "Social media, shopping, videos, games...these apps and websites are scientifically engineered to keep you hooked and coming back. The cost to your productivity, ability to focus, and general well-being can be staggering. Freedom gives you control" (Freedom).

Workers' autonomy is granted in such representations; taking control of their time is almost a certain promise.

6.4. Who is Addressed to Disconnect?

This part of the analysis reveals the disconnected subject from a socio-economic point of view of class. The analysis covers the illustration of the targeted subject in the text and visuals and reveals whether this is a working or leisure class. Although these products promise a wide range of consumer benefits, the subject demonstrated in the promotions is mainly a working subject.

Figure 7 demonstrates a partly disconnected subject who must reduce distraction and increase focus and productivity in a discursive and moral view. Figure 8 represents a negative facial impression of the worker distracted by his phone. Feeling sad for not being productive is indeed related to someone's obligation to be productive. The materiality of discourse comes from the reality of work and survival for those who depend on their labour and have to sell the labour. Thus, discourses can only result in the optimism of employees' symbolic agency while "they have little or no control over the material conditions of their labour" (Cloud, 2005, p. 515).

Figure 7. Reducing distractions (Unpluq).

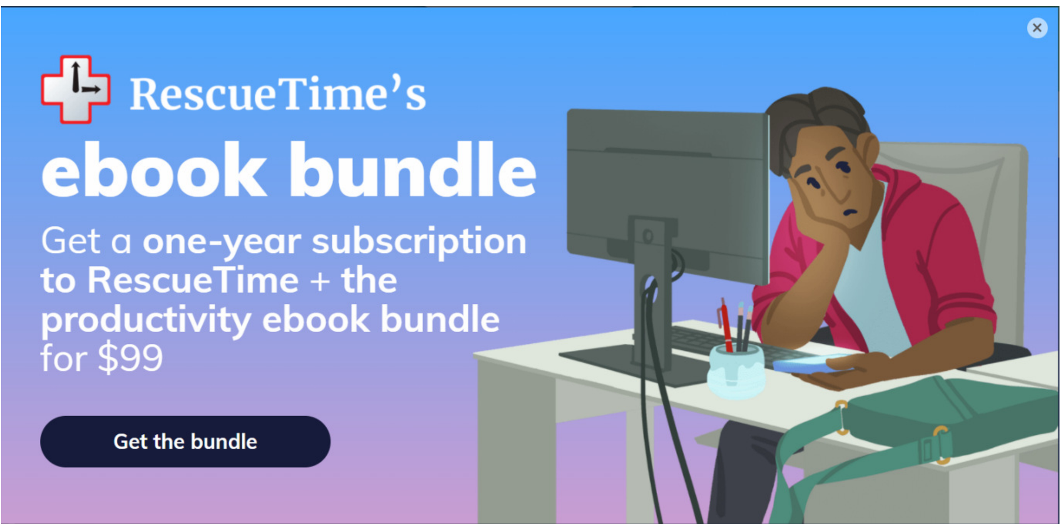

Figure 8. Being productive (RescueTime).

These apps have become a new workplace discipline tool, a tool of command for workers. As Marx (1990) describes, in the early stage of capitalism, supervision works in the name of capital to command the labour process; today, these apps are partly functioning in the same way as they offer team services for businesses. For instance, the Freedom app proposes, "Our Teams package is a simple, cost-effective way to ensure your employees have the best productivity tool on the planet." It justifies providing multiple justifications for employers to purchase it: "Digital distractions cost your business, freedom gives your team focus, happy, healthy teams are more productive" (Freedom). RescueTime time suggests a productive work and balanced life for work as "It offers real-time insights and guidance to improve your work habits, while simultaneously protecting your personal time and preventing burnout." The app is mainly designed for workers to monitor their productivity as it visualises productive time for its users. The assumption is that everyone embraces the dedication to work and is ready to leave distractions. It is suggested that people "work deeply, quit social media, embrace boredom, and ditch shallow work" (Freedom).

Although they target the working class, these products and their rhetoric contradict the working class. Cederström and Spicer (2015) find today's well-being practices and discourse contradictory and paradoxical for the working class. They suggest that more coaching sessions mean spending more money, which means more work in return. While people have to pay to use these products, they must work more to afford them, leading to more connectivity.

6.5. Disconnective Media as a Disconnection Commodity

The commodification emerges through the instrumentalisation of disconnection, especially for well-being and productivity. Hence, their functionality is questionable as some are made from plastic and have no function except to mimic an actual phone. Most NoPhone products are made from plastic in the shape and dimension of smartphones. The company also sells imaginary phones. Figure 9 shows that the company sells a pack in an empty place, but there is nothing except air, as they named "NoPhone Air." The company promotes it as "the lightest phone on the market." NoPhone describes the phone as "an invisible phone for people who use their phone too much." In that regard, the commodification of disconnection moved from the material (product) commodity, including digital ones, to a complete discursive commodity.

While all products can be considered discursive commodities, they provide physical or digital goods and justify their use by attempting to make them relevant. This justification varies among products. Unpluq, for instance, manufactures physical products and claims to be "truly different from all other apps." By offering both an app and a physical tag, Unpluq elevates its approach: "Our physical barrier helps you to make a very conscious choice and is designed to break your bad habit loops" Similarly, The Lockbox distinguishes between apps and physical products regarding effective nudging:

> We know from experience, they [apps] are way too easy to get around, making them ineffective at creating any real impact on your phone usage. The Lockbox is a physical solution that is guaranteed to change the way you use your phone, once and for all.

Figure 9. NoPhone Air (NoPhone).

RescueTime, however, offers more digital features, particularly self-tracking options. Daily activity is categorised as productive or distracted time, as depicted in Figure 6. Freedom simplifies its features, stating, "Block apps, websites, and the internet," and offers syncing across devices.

Additionally, Offtime employs more anti-capitalist rhetoric, particularly towards social media platforms and consumerism. It suggests, "In these times we receive constant stimulations from social media, advertising and the need to buy products, among many others." Ironically, they make these statements to sell another product: their promotional message. In other words, anti-advertising and anti-consumerism become what they criticise, turning discursive resistance into a new form of commodity. While these counter-narratives become commodities themselves, the complaint that "tech companies have been manipulating us to use their products more" (RescueTime) persists.

Unpluq utilises a similar discourse reminiscent of critical data studies, criticising digital capitalism by stating, "We live in the 'attention economy,' where your time is taking the place of money." This argument is common in data studies, but according to Unpluq, users are not products for them, distinguishing themselves from big tech companies:

> We are not storing any of your data to sell—You are not the product. At Unpluq, we design products that deliver benefits to the customer with privacy in mind. We want to be different from the big tech companies, where you are the product.

While they address some societal issues stemming from increased connectivity, disconnectivity is primarily reduced to personal preferences, becoming a matter of well-being and productivity for working individuals.

7. Discussion

The analysis of discourses reveals how disconnection is framed and justified, necessitating a theoretical discussion to emphasise its materiality. The pursuit of self-improvement, productivity, and well-being can stem from material and social relations of production rather than mere discursive constructs. While wellness and productivity are ingrained in neoliberal politics, neoliberalism is not solely an ideological shift but bears material consequences, particularly for the working class (Harvey, 2005).

Hence, wellness and productivity are interrelated, with productivity often dependent on a healthy body. Healthy individuals are deemed more employable, performing well on the factory floor, and tackling tasks that strain physical endurance (Bauman, 2013). Discourses surrounding disconnective media underscore workers' dependence on capital, necessitating the maintenance of a productive and healthy body, as capital relies on labour for reproduction and growth.

Disconnective media problematise connectivity, particularly connective activities that hinder work productivity. The focus on social media platforms and smartphones highlights disconnectivity concerning unproductive time. The problematisation of connectivity may emerge from material conditions necessitating employability in the neoliberal labour market, as Kania-Lundholm (2021) explains how digital disconnection is "both symptoms and responses to the conditions of life and work in digital capitalism" (p. 26). Thus, disconnection arises from various life circumstances, manifesting both as a privilege and an obligation,

deeply rooted in factors such as wealth and commodified labour. It is recognised that disconnection extends beyond individual responsibility and willpower (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). Under neoliberal capitalism, the relentless competition in the labour market, along with new forms of precarity and job insecurity, has introduced an additional layer to the existential challenge of freedom. Some scholars argue that disconnection is a privilege accessible only to those with time and spatial resources, while it remains unattainable for those engaged in essential work (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2022). Ironically, disconnective media mostly works as a productivity and well-being apparatus targeting the working class whose freedom highly depends on their commodified labour. This material dependency on the job market reinforces discursive responsibilisation as individuals are already materially responsible. Therefore, disconnection studies should critically analyse the emergence of individual responsibilisation, self-improvement and self-care, and all other spiritual practices under the material conditions of neoliberalism. As Harvey (2005, p. 40) suggests, no matter how important ideological and cultural aspects are, we must look beyond them to "better identify the material grounding for the construction of consent." Thus, we should rethink how any problematisation discourse functions in society. For example, Cederström and Spicer (2015, p. 26) explain that "smoking is bad for your health; it is bad for your career too." Thus, problematising connectivity is not just a marketing strategy of disconnective media but also rooted in material conditions, especially in precarious and insecure neoliberal employment. The conditions which Žižek (2019, p. 40) argues, "Capitalist freedom is…the very form of unfreedom for those who have nothing but their labour force to sell." Disconnective media thus represent not voluntary disengagement but a discursive obligation rooted in material realities. In that regard, disconnective media also serve as a means of productive labour, which Marx calls "command during the labour process in the name of capital" (Marx, 1990, p. 450). Unlike the early stages of capitalism observed by Marx, supervision in the digital era manifests in various forms, including the deployment of self-tracking technologies in the workplace for productivity and well-being measures. Similarly, disconnective media offer managerial techniques for businesses and individuals to monitor productivity and well-being.

Technological progress is another materiality enabling the discursive construction of dis/connectivity. From the outset, Luddites were fighting over technologies based on socio-economic interests against a "ubiquitous, remote, hierarchical economic force" (S. E. Jones, 2006, p. 35). In modern times, technological advances in infrastructure and the affordability of connection continue to shape the discourse around dis/connection (Bozan & Treré, 2024), reflecting shifts in traditional work forms to computer-based industries, necessitating productivity and wakefulness for 24-hour work (Barbee et al., 2018). Moreover, as most disconnective media products originate from tech elites, the discourse on disconnectivity is not independent of material power. As Marx (2000) argues, the ruling ideas of every epoch are the ruling class's ideas. Therefore, discourses of disconnective media may be shaped by those producing addictive technologies and providing solutions, and ownership of technological infrastructure and the means of production significantly influence the discourses on dis/connectivity.

8. Conclusion

We have demonstrated four frames evident in promotional accounts of these products. Firstly, digital disconnection is mainly justified by well-being and productivity, with productivity as the ultimate goal. These products promote well-being and enhance productivity, exemplified by sleep promotion for a healthy, dynamic worker. Secondly, work and the workplace are central to all problematisations, while leisure is an extension of labour and is obligated to contribute to productive labour. Work time emphasises scientific

work management for efficiency and delaying gratification, while leisure time offers retreat time. Thirdly, workplace digital devices like computers are normalised, while smartphones and social media remain problematic, serving as work efficiency and productivity management instruments. Fourthly, the primary subject in these representations is a working-class subject. Both in texts and images, the represented subject is the working class willing to increase productivity and maintain their well-being.

These products may articulate critical discourse but become commodities, decontextualising disconnection from the political realm and framing it as an individual matter. While some products critique data and surveillance, they quantify users' media use, exploiting their data. Jorge et al. (2022) note that built-in digital well-being tools expand insight into user data, perpetuating connectivity. Despite anti-datafication rhetoric, these products can collect more data on user usage patterns, commodifying digital disconnection.

Disconnective media assume individuals control boundaries between work and leisure. However, it does not promote strong individual willpower and agency, as the solutions are embedded in their products. Finally, this study shows how discourses constantly interact with material conditions by shaping new technologies and resulting from social and material reality. Discourses on disconnectivity are embedded in material structures, particularly social relations of production, focusing on labour quality and work efficiency, inevitably tied to commodified labour and neoliberal insecurities that enforce new obligations.

This article makes several contributions. First, it offers a Marxist analysis of discourses, critically engaging with the theory to reveal the interrelations between discursive constructions and material (socio-economic) realities. Second, the article examines how material conditions shape discourses of disconnectivity, considering differences in space, time, and devices. Third, it extends the discussion of digital disconnection by framing it not only as a privilege but also as a moral obligation (Fast, 2021) rooted in material circumstances, particularly for those engaged in commodified labour. While this study concentrates on disconnection research, future research could apply similar methodological approaches to other areas of social science.

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Conflict of Interests

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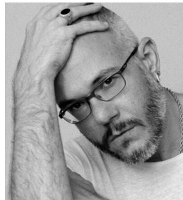

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ARTICLE

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Unburdening the (Dis)Connected Individual? A Digital Disconnection Policy Paradox in Flanders (Belgium)

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Abstract

The concept of digital disconnection, which refers to limiting digital media use for the sake of one's well-being, has gained prominence in scholarly and public debates. Compared to a burgeoning digital disconnection industry that commodifies individuals' struggles with constant connectivity, the development of evidence-based disconnection policies and regulations that support individuals to maintain digital well-being lags behind. The absence of digital disconnection policy may partly be due to a lack of studies investigating the contextual and institutional conditions in which policies and regulations are designed, implemented, and received. The few studies that do shed light on these conditions show that politicians' and policymakers' responses to digitalization involve discourses of individual responsibilization. Building on these insights, our study draws from in-depth interviews with 21 experts from organizations in Flanders (Belgium) who are responsible for digital well-being and digital disconnection across work, school, and family contexts. In particular, we have explored their perspectives on the challenges of constructing and implementing digital disconnection policies and regulations. Overall, the experts' discourses reveal a conflict between striving for autonomy and the need for regulations concerning digital disconnection. This conflict leads to a digital disconnection policy paradox in which experts advocate for collective disconnection initiatives but ultimately resort to solutions on an individual level. We discuss the implications of our findings for the scholarly field of digital disconnection as well as for media policymakers.

Keywords

agency; digital disconnection; digital well-being; digitalization; media policy; neoliberalism; regulations; responsibilization

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1. Introduction

Digitalization has profoundly impacted how people navigate everyday life in the work, school, and family environment (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). Notwithstanding the benefits afforded by ubiquitous digital connectivity, concerns have grown over the negative consequences of being permanently connected (Nassen et al., 2023). In particular, the resulting always-on society has been linked to various detrimental outcomes, including (relational) stress, reduced attention, and burnout (Syvertsen, 2020; Vanden Abeele, 2020; Vorderer et al., 2016).

The phenomenon of digital disconnection has emerged as an agentic response against these negative repercussions (Karsay & Vandenbosch, 2021). As a concept, digital disconnection refers to the myriad ways in which limits can be (voluntarily) placed on digital connectivity to improve individuals' overall productivity and well-being (Nassen et al., 2023). Examples of individual digital disconnection practices are placing limits on one's screen time (Karppi et al., 2021), changing the colors of one's phone to grayscale (Dekker & Baumgartner, 2023), and—temporarily—removing social media applications (Nguyen, 2023). Next to these individual strategies, however, digital disconnection can also be organized at the group or institutional level; for instance, through formal or informal rule-setting in social groups and organizations where people work, learn, and live together (Vanden Abeele & Nguyen, 2024).

In recent years, a digital well-being industry has bloomed (Van Bruyssel et al., 2023). Especially products and services that support *individuals* in their digital disconnection have gained a strong foothold in this rapidly emerging new economy (Beattie, 2020; Enli & Syvertsen, 2021; Jorge et al., 2022). Compared to the speed of the industry response towards individual disconnection, however, the development of policies and regulations at the organizational and institutional level has lagged behind (Enli & Fast, 2023). At the time of writing this article, for instance, the basic notion of people having the right not to use the internet remains underdeveloped in legislation, even though such a right could be interpreted from the existing human rights framework (Kloza, 2024).

Nonetheless, confronted with the daily reality of individuals struggling with their digital well-being, policymakers and institutions have woken up to the reality of needing to develop and implement policies and (regulatory) initiatives surrounding digital technologies' use and non-use (Kloza, 2024). This awakening aligns with a growing "techlash" characterized by increased skepticism about the impact of digital technologies on the health and well-being of children and adults, prompting greater calls for regulation of digital media in work, school, and family environments (Weiss-Blatt, 2021). In work organizations, for example, the right to disconnect has been legally recognized in several countries, including Belgium, the country where the current study is located (Wood & Shine, 2023). The introduction of this legislative framework has trickled down to the institutional and organizational level, where work organizations and institutions are now required to translate the right to disconnect into their organizational policies and regulations. Similarly, schools are implementing regulatory initiatives to address concerns about digital media's effects on performance and well-being (Gath et al., 2024). For example, the Dutch government has introduced a smartphone ban in schools, a move that has also garnered attention in Belgium. In the family context, public figures like Jonathan Haidt advocate for a higher legal age for social media use (Haidt, 2024), and in France, a presidential study recommended a complete screen time ban for young children (Santi, 2024).

Against the background of these initiatives and calls, which are often heavily debated in the public domain, experts are tasked with developing policies and regulations for their organizations and the stakeholders they serve. This raises questions about how these actors, who often also witness the impact of digitalization in their personal lives, can and should interpret digital disconnection and what challenges and obstacles they face in developing and implementing rules, policies, and regulations to enforce it. Therefore, the current study aims to examine these actors' perceptions and what informs them. Before sharing our findings, however, we first situate our study in the extant literature on digital disconnection.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Well-Being and Disconnection Across Work, School, and Family Contexts

In industrialized societies with advanced technology use, there is evidence of a "connectivity paradox": Individuals report a love–hate relationship with digital media as these technologies grant autonomy while simultaneously leading to loss of control over the time spent on screens and the internet (Vanden Abeele, 2020). Consequently, the concept of digital well-being has gained prominence, which refers to having an optimal balance between connectivity and disconnection so that one benefits from digital media use with minimal drawbacks (Vanden Abeele, 2020). The practice and ideal of digital disconnection, then, is conducive to digital well-being: It can support individuals to achieve the desired balance between the benefits and drawbacks of (dis)connectivity (Nassen et al., 2023).

Both in public and scholarly debates, questions about digital well-being and digital disconnection are often situated within the three primary contexts that structure everyday life: work, school, and family. In the work context, discussions over digital well-being and disconnection often revolve around how digitalization and the related availability norms of contemporary work culture challenge employees' well-being and productivity (Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2022; Kühner et al., 2023). These challenges include digital distractions that interrupt workflow, impede goal progress, create a sense of technological overload, and complicate efforts to maintain a healthy work–life balance (Kühner et al., 2023). The overall consensus is that, although digital connectivity grants employees flexibility, a healthy work-life balance also necessitates disconnection strategies to mitigate its negative impacts.

Similarly, digital technologies pose challenges for both teachers and students in a school context. For example, while educational platforms can increase participation, communication, and evaluation, these technologies can equally adversely affect school–home balance by pressuring students and teachers to be available beyond school hours (Van Steenbergen et al., 2018). Moreover, the presence of smartphones in the school context ignites discussions about the desirability of "phone bans" due to the devices' potential negative effects on academic achievement, mental health, and cyberbullying (Abrahamsson, 2024).

Finally, in the household, parents and children struggle with questions about screen time, posing both opportunities and challenges to the overall well-being of households and the health and well-being of their members. Regarding regulating children's media use, for instance, the extensive scholarship on parental mediation has been investigating the beneficial and detrimental effects of restricting children's screen time for decades (e.g., Lee, 2013). An increasing body of evidence is now also growing about how family members jointly navigate digital media use rules in the household (i.e., also subjecting parents to them; see for example Hiniker et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding the differential nuances within each context, there are obvious parallels between the work, school, and family context, such as the prevailing tensions between autonomy-supporting and autonomy-suppressing practices, which are a common thread within discourses on the importance of digital well-being and digital disconnection (Hesselberth, 2018). Moreover, the unique capacity of digital connectivity to disembed social activities from time and place constraints implies that some of these tensions result from the interplay between contexts; for instance, when a child is cyberbullied at home by classmates, or when work is interrupted by family communication (Castells & Cardoso, 2005). A growing body of research is therefore investigating digital disconnection holistically, as a phenomenon that unfolds across, and sometimes even at the intersection of the work, school, and family context (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024).

In the emerging field of digital disconnection studies, both post-positivist and interpretative-critical research traditions are evident (Ross et al., 2024). The former views non-use primarily as an individual attempt to reclaim control over digital media to improve quality of life. The latter emphasizes the various meanings and power dynamics surrounding digital disconnection by exploring disconnection as an act of resistance to the addictive design of digital technologies, its commodification, and the attribution of responsibility (Ross et al., 2024). What is missing to some extent, is a digital disconnection research strand that focuses on how the above insights are being translated in the development and implementation of organizational and governmental regulations and policies (Enli & Fast, 2023).

2.2. Digital Disconnection: An Individual or Institutional Responsibility?

The extant evidence on digital well-being and digital disconnection is equivocal in arguing that there is an urgent need for policy development and regulation (Enli & Fast, 2023). The digital well-being industry, for one, has been extensively criticized for framing digital well-being through disconnection as an individual responsibility by appealing to neoliberal values such as productivity, autonomy, self-actualization, and self-care (Syvertsen, 2020; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Moreover, it has been found that individuals struggle with self-regulating digital media use, especially vulnerable populations who lack the resources to freely organize their (dis)connectivity (Enli & Fast, 2023). Together, this gives rise to criticism over discourses emphasizing digital disconnection as an individual responsibility, thereby reinforcing inequality by overlooking the many structural forces that may hamper individuals from digitally (dis)connecting (e.g., Fast, 2021; Van Bruyssel et al., 2023; Zuboff, 2019).

To fully empower individuals living in digital societies, it is therefore crucial to examine what can be done beyond the individual, i.e., at the organizational and institutional level, to improve and support digital well-being through digital disconnection (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024). In other words, what can governments, organizations, and institutions do to develop and implement local digital disconnection policies and regulations that offer non-commodified frameworks that unburden individuals and responsibilize stakeholders such as the tech industry (Enli & Fast, 2023; Hesselberth, 2018; Zuboff, 2019)?

When observing the macro-level of the political sphere, scholars studying the institutional conditions of disconnection argue that contemporary policies fail to offer a solid and coherent regulatory response. The study of Enli and Fast (2023), for example, shows that Norwegian politicians elude political responsibility by framing disconnection as an individual and technological problem. Furthermore, Syvertsen (2023)

illustrates that digital detox organizers express a lack of faith in disconnection regulations and are skeptical of policy holding the tech industry responsible. Consequently, the contemporary digital disconnection movement seems to perpetuate individual responsibilization, which refers to the process in which individuals are burdened with self-regulating (dis)connectivity in the context of lacking governance on digitalization (Enli & Fast, 2023).

In between the macro-level of a failing political system and the micro-level of skeptical citizens, however, there is also the meso-level of local organizations and institutions who support and work with individuals on a daily basis as they perform their activities. These organizations include work (union) organizations, schools, and non-profit organizations, which need to respond to concrete questions from their stakeholders concerning how they should organize digital technology use and non-use. To date, there unfortunately remains a dearth of studies that scrutinize digital disconnection regulations and policies at this institutional and meso-level (cf. Enli & Fast, 2023).

We argue that it is paramount to gain a better understanding of how these organizations develop, implement, and receive digital disconnection regulations and policies on the ground. Doing so might advance understanding of the barriers and challenges to developing frameworks that truly unburden the individual when safeguarding digital well-being (Zuboff, 2019). Our study thus addresses this research gap by shedding light on how professionals within work-, school-, and family-oriented organizations with expertise in digital well-being and digital disconnection perceive the contextual and institutional conditions in which (dis)connectivity takes shape.

2.3. The Current Study

We situate this study in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. This Western European country occupies a central position in the governmental workings of the European Union. In terms of national politics, Belgium is characterized by various levels of governance such as the federal state, language-based communities (Flemish, Walloon, and German-speaking), territory-based regions (Flanders, Walloon region, and the Brussel Capital region), and municipalities (Van Audenhove et al., 2018). Although a discussion on the complexities of the Belgian state is beyond the scope of this article, it is essential to acknowledge that these various levels influence policy development regarding digital well-being and digital disconnection. For example, the right to disconnect is a labor law legislated on the federal level, while media policy is under the jurisdiction of the Flemish government. Regardless of these various governmental levels, however, institutions such as schools or workplaces typically have the freedom to autonomously develop policies and regulations (Van Audenhove et al., 2018). Moreover, Flanders is known for having a large and active civil society comprising numerous non-profit organizations that develop and influence policy work (Rochtus, 2023). These organizations play an intermediary role in the democratic process by making citizens' voices heard and weighing in on policy development (Rochtus, 2023).

In this study, we report on in-depth interviews with 21 experts in Flanders responsible for developing and implementing digital disconnection guidelines, policies, and regulations, both for their own organizations, and for the stakeholders that their organizations serve. By recruiting experts who occupy an intermediate position between individuals, organizations, and politics, we build further on and complement the studies of Enli and Fast (2023) and Syvertsen (2023). The interviews aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the experts perceive the impact of digital technologies across work, school, and family contexts?

RQ2: What role and responsibility do these experts assign to individuals, organizations, and governments concerning safeguarding citizens' digital well-being?

RQ3: Which obstacles do the experts encounter when developing and implementing digital disconnection policies and regulations?

3. Methodology

3.1. Recruitment Procedure, Sample, and Ethics

The study is part of a larger research project that examines digital disconnection across work, school, and family contexts, asking questions such as what people do to disconnect, why they disconnect, and for whom and under which conditions disconnection works best. To ensure societal valorization of the project's findings, the project is overseen by a board of Belgian stakeholders from private, non-profit, and governmental organizations who support employees, schools, and families in developing a healthier relationship with digital media. These stakeholders can be considered local experts as they are responsible for designing and implementing digital disconnection policies and initiatives for their own organizations as well as for the citizens they serve (Meuser & Nagel, 2009; Van Audenhove, & Donders, 2019). As such, conducting expert interviews with some of these stakeholders can shed light on the contextual and institutional conditions in which (dis)connectivity occurs (Enli & Fast, 2023).

We recruited participants from the project's stakeholder board. During the recruitment procedure, we aimed to achieve a gender balance among our participants and to include a diversity of organizations. In total, we interviewed 21 experts (11 men, 10 women) from 17 organizations. We sought to avoid overrepresentation of any single type of organization, resulting in an approximately equal number of organizations that are professionally active in the work, school, and family context: Three can be identified as labor union organizations, three as civil knowledge centers, two as semi-public organizations, four as educational organizations, four as technology and telecom organizations, and one as an organization on entrepreneurship. While some organizations are specifically active within one context, most interviewed experts reported that their activities span the work, school, and family context.

The recruited experts were free to decide whether to meet in person or digitally for the interviews. Eventually, five interviews were conducted in-person and 12 interviews were conducted via video conferencing from April 2023 until November 2023. As the participants were recruited from the project's stakeholder board, the experts showed a particular professional interest in the topic of digital well-being and disconnection. Most were already preoccupied with developing and implementing policies before the interviews took place. Although it is especially valuable to gain insight into how these stakeholders are confronted with obstacles to digital disconnection policy, their perspectives might not be representative of the broader population. On average, the interviews lasted 65 minutes. The study received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board of Ghent University. In order to protect the identities of our participants, we used pseudonyms throughout the manuscript and refrained from naming the organizations.

3.2. Research Instrument and Analysis

Prior to conducting the interviews, we constructed an interview guide supporting a semi-structured interview. This guide was structured according to four main themes. First, we inquired the experts how their organization is active within the work, school, and/or family context, what their roles and responsibilities are, and what motivated them to sign up as stakeholders within the research project. Second, we asked the experts to look back and reflect on the impact of digitalization. From these reflections, we moved on to the topics of digital well-being and digital disconnection. Third, we specifically focused on the various initiatives and policies being implemented within and beyond their organizations, to what extent they thought these initiatives and policies were (in)effective, and whom they saw as responsible for managing (dis)connectivity. Finally, our interviews concluded by asking the experts how we, as researchers, could aid them in developing effective disconnection initiatives and policies.

The data collection took place from April to November 2023. We ended our data collection after the observation that the expert interviews did not bring forth new topics and themes and when we had achieved a balanced representation of different organizations. Next, interviews were transcribed and analyzed in NVivo12, combining an inductive and deductive thematic analysis approach (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2022). In the first round of coding, we developed upper-level codes that corresponded with the topic guide's main themes: impact of digitalization, digital disconnection initiatives and policies, the effectiveness of disconnection, and obstacles to policy. We then inductively added specific lower-level codes based on the transcripts. After discussing patterns and relationships between the codes, we constructed a final code scheme to code the data deductively. In what follows, we report on the main insights derived from this analysis, shedding light on how Flemish experts conceptualize and implement digital disconnection in response to pervasive digitalization.

4. Results

Despite the professional experts being active in highly diverse organizations, our interviews revealed common themes and observations concerning how these professionals perceive and understand digital well-being and digital disconnection, how they see the role and responsibility of their organization, and what challenges and obstacles they face. Below, we share the core insights.

4.1. Digital Well-Being and Digital Disconnection as Urgent Topics

The first theme that we uncovered was that all of the interviewed experts identified digital well-being and digital disconnection as topics that urgently needed to be addressed. This sense of urgency was strongly related to how the experts experienced digitalization over the past decade: Overall, there was an overarching sentiment of "being caught by surprise" and "feeling overwhelmed" by the extent to which digital media have become embedded in everyday life. Several experts used metaphors to express their sense of overwhelm, referring for instance to an "avalanche of ever-growing digitalization waves" over which citizens experience little or no control.

In other words, digitalization was generally considered an unstoppable force happening at an unprecedented speed, to which individuals and organizations are ill-prepared but nonetheless have no choice but to adapt.

The interviewed professionals often expressed concerns about the potential disruptive impact of digital media use within their own work contexts. For example, Ilse, the mental well-being coordinator within a civil knowledge center on health, explained how she perceived people to increasingly experience "change-related stress" due to the rapid pace of digitalization: "It's going unbelievably fast. Citizens just can't keep up because it sometimes happens too fast. Like what will be the next big thing that will be thrown at us?''

Several experts were critical of the role of organizational leadership in this process, perceiving that these concerns were being exacerbated by the fact that digital innovations tend to be implemented top-down. Bart, a labor union representative, for instance, stated: "They [higher management] frame digitalization as an inevitable process that you have to push through to maximize efficiency and flexibility." However, concerns also stemmed from personal observations made in the private sphere of the experts' own families. Reflecting on his own family, for instance, the founder of a serious gaming company, Tony, talked about how family dynamics changed once his oldest daughter received her first smartphone: "It's interesting to see how one more smartphone disrupts everything. Suddenly, we also need to set rules on smartphone use for ourselves to be a good example to her [his daughter]." Together, these observations highlight how digitalization was perceived as a process of change driven mainly by neoliberal logics, yet profoundly impacting the everyday lives of citizens and how they organize their work and family lives.

Against this background of a society that is perceived to undergo relentless digital change, digital well-being and digital disconnection were identified as important emerging concepts that give individuals and organizations a common vocabulary that they can use to grapple with and respond to this change. In their understanding of digital well-being, unsurprisingly, the experts often referenced the always-on society when describing the negative effects of digitalization. They did so by recalling stories of the target populations they work with, reciting research reports, and drawing from their own personal experiences. Matthias, for example, who works as a staff member at a telecom operator, stated that customers increasingly struggle with managing continuous connectivity, while also acknowledging that he himself is "addicted" to being connected 24/7. Nonetheless, there is consensus among the experts that digitalization is not inherently and exclusively negative but also brings numerous benefits. As such, the interviewed professionals implicitly endorsed a conceptual understanding of digital well-being as an optimal balance between positives and negatives, which aligns with scholarly definitions such as that of Vanden Abeele (2020).

In line with this definition as well as other definitions (e.g., Büchi, 2024), the interviewed professionals also acknowledged that there is no universal experience of digital well-being but that this varies widely between individuals, contexts, and organizations. In this regard, an interesting critique of the common understanding of the digital well-being concept was formulated by Bart. According to him, digital well-being is mainly framed as a salient issue for white-collar workers, thereby obscuring the relevance of digital well-being and digital disconnection for those who are performing manual labor, i.e., for blue-collar workers:

> Blue-collar workers do not yet realize how the digital world has been creeping into their jobs, and employers themselves often deny the impact for those workers. But they also have work cell phones which are sometimes even being tracked by the companies. So you also have to protect those, precisely because it's so subtle there.

The professionals' understanding of digital well-being impacted their perspectives on digital disconnection. Overall, our interviews revealed that policies and regulations concerning digital disconnection were relevant

and urgently needed, but that the fast-paced nature of digitalization, as well as the differential experiences with it, also complicated experts' efforts to design and implement them.

This predicament was especially noticeable in educational organizations and how they experienced efforts toward digitalization following the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, schools in Flanders were lagging behind in terms of digital equipment. Hence, the Covid lockdowns proved to be an emergency in which the priority was ensuring that every student could digitally attend distance education. Sarah, a policymaker in an educational civil knowledge center, acknowledged, however, that the government's efforts to equip primary and secondary schools with digital infrastructure somehow came with a complete disregard for the potential repercussions for well-being. Stating how "digital well-being has been an afterthought," Sarah voiced her concerns over the schools' inability to adequately respond to technical and social problems, and to address the questions and worries of teachers, parents, and students about topics such as screen time or availability norms: "But what now? What advice should we give to schools? Because we didn't really think of these implications." In other words, a lack of understanding of how the intervention would impact digital well-being deeply complicated any further development in terms of digital disconnection policies and regulations.

The lack of clear guidelines and policies was not specific to the school context, but was a common thread throughout our interviews with all the professionals. All interviewees saw digital disconnection as a potentially powerful strategy to diminish the negative effects of pervasive digitization, and there was widespread consensus among them that people have been left to their own devices for far too long when managing (dis)connectivity. Laura, policy officer at an edutech organization, made this painfully clear with her critique on the contemporary state of disconnection guidelines and policies:

> There's no clarity or guidelines about how to disconnect. We're also experiencing it for the first time and we can't learn from previous generations how to deal with all these technologies. So, we're going to have to do something at one point. But right now you just have to look out for yourself, for stuff that may be unhealthy. What can I do and what are others doing? I think that's the only thing we can do right now, because I don't know how else to do it either.

4.2. Collective Action, but While Respecting Individual Autonomy and Flexibility

So, what do professionals see as the role and responsibility of their organization? Our interviews revealed that experts generally recognized the need to unburden individuals when managing (dis)connectivity. Yet, given the overarching sentiment that digital well-being and digital disconnection are not an individual responsibility, it was somewhat surprising that they were rather hesitant to accept overarching disconnection policies.

Experts' hesitancy over collective actions to disconnect mainly stemmed from concerns over how such policies could curtail individuals' autonomy and could be insensitive to personal disconnection needs. In this regard, experts emphasized that the flexibility afforded by digitalization is a key benefit. As such, policies and regulatory frameworks should foremost ensure that disconnection policies do not interfere with citizens' ability to organize their everyday digital lives as they see fit. The discrepancy between individualistic norms of autonomy and the observation that citizens struggle with managing (dis)connectivity due to vague guidelines, however, left many experts, such as Tony, conflicted over their organization's role and responsibility:

> The work context and educational environments actually require clear rules and nobody is able to offer those today and you can feel the frustration because we don't know how to implement good policies. But on the other hand, I don't think that it should be imposed because there are many people who love to work hybrid and who really experience advantages because of it. I'm going to pick up my kids from school after this interview and I'm not going to work anymore until 9 pm. I think that kind of autonomy and independence is important.

Given the thin line between autonomy-supportive and autonomy-suppressive disconnection policies, some experts were highly averse to their strict implementation and enforcement. When asked about the role of politicians and the government, they stressed that organizations (and the individuals that form them) should be in control of how they organize digital disconnection guidelines. As such, the interviewed experts think that governmental policies should not go further than decreeing a right to disconnect (as is now part of labor law in Belgium), and that the interpretation of this right should fall on the shoulders of the organization.

Interestingly, in the Belgian labor law, the right to disconnect is actually already interpreted—a point we will return to later. The labor law currently stipulates that employees have the right to be unavailable after working hours except for "emergency situations." Important to note, however, is that organizations themselves have to determine the acceptable hours for being (un)available through digital platforms in collective labor agreements.

Consequently, the experts refrain from formulating concrete normative positions regarding digital disconnection efforts and mostly seem to resort to the implementation of strategies that, ultimately, further emphasize individual responsibilities, albeit with the support of organizational tools and access to a knowledge base. In practice, this means that the organizations across the three contexts provide support by creating "policy tools," encouraging "team agreements," and developing "educational programs and campaigns." These organizational efforts mainly aim to create awareness and to stimulate discussions about digital well-being and digital disconnection.

While the experts believe that these initiatives are the most suitable solution at the moment to support individuals, they are also well aware that these initiatives are less effective in addressing contextual and institutional (dis)connection conditions, and ultimately often re-burden the individual. In the work-oriented semi-public organization of Cara, for example, employees can "book focus time" in which they are allowed to be unavailable for colleagues. While this initiative works for some, Cara notices that some employees find it difficult to set boundaries around their connectivity due to the vagueness of focus time:

> Someone in my team said to me that she finds it difficult to book focus time for herself. She didn't know how much focus time she's allowed to give herself because what's the right balance? So I'm afraid that it's not for everyone.

Moreover, the experts acknowledged that individual disconnection strategies are ultimately only one component of a sustainable solution for citizens' struggles with digitalization. In fact, the professionals reported that they believe in multi-dimensional and multi-level solutions that emphasize the shared responsibility of individuals, groups, organizations, and governments. Reflecting on an ideal situation, the experts desired to have insights based on scientific evidence that would enable them to adopt a more nuanced vision to foster digital well-being on these multiple dimensions and levels:

> It [digital well-being and disconnection] is a much more layered story: There should be education, you should also have some regulations, you should also think about disconnection norms at the group level, and most importantly, you have to develop a vision about disconnection. I think that's the first challenge: What is a nuanced perspective to go with? (Ilse, mental health coordinator)

On an organizational level, business philosopher Martin claimed that there is a tendency to "digitalize for the sake of digitalizing" even when digital media use does not substantially change processes and activities for the better. According to Martin, "digitalization should not be a goal in itself but a means to something better." Relatedly, he also observed that organizations do not always actively involve the people who will be affected by the introduced technologies. Therefore, Martin argues that digitalization should be approached in a more "people-oriented way by, for example, informing employees early on, making clear the 'why,' involving them in pilot projects, and asking them for input."

4.3. Beyond the Individual and the Digital: The Role of Governments and Societies

In the previous section, we have already foreshadowed how experts perceived the role of politicians and the government in enabling digital disconnection policies. When asked whether the government could and should go further in interpreting the right to disconnect, most experts were very weary. HR secretary Cara, for instance, responded that disconnection policies should strengthen resilience rather than impose rules concerning when and how one should disconnect:

> I think that the federal government said at one point like "we're going to block the mail servers after 7 pm." Our reaction was "no we're definitely not going to do that because employees need autonomy." We want to have as few rules as possible because disconnection differs for everyone. Rather, I believe that we must strengthen people's abilities to define boundaries.

This quote also illustrates a more generalized yet substantial distrust in governmental competence to construct adequate digital disconnection policies. On the one hand, some experts like Evelien believe that politicians elude their responsibilities by awaiting whether citizens themselves take action to claim "disconnection rights": "And also politics, I think they [politicians] could have a huge influence [on disconnection policies] but probably this will only happen bottom-up when citizens formulate and communicate a clear opinion on digitalization." On the other hand, experts are pessimistic, believing that if further governmental policies were developed, they would probably not be based on scientific research but rather on the intuitive knowledge of politicians and their departments. A secondary school principal, for example, stated that "the government should create a framework but that framework should be supported by experts who effectively know what they are doing." Consequently, the experts agree on the fact that there should be more research on the effectiveness of digital disconnection in order to call governments to action as well as to construct evidence-based policies in which they can invest their trust:

> Yes, the government should make sure that there is a policy and that they [politicians] are aware of the latest research findings. I think that your project is a first important step because you're a consortium of multiple universities so you can influence policy. You should all go to the politicians and say like "sorry guys but things have to change, it's time to put in some effort because our society is slipping away." (Tony, founder serious gaming company)

The general consensus that governments should not decide on the concrete policies and regulations of organizations, however, did not mean that experts did not see a role for the government in safeguarding its citizens' digital well-being: All experts were highly critical of international technology companies and the so-called addictive designs they implement in their products to "grab our attention" and "make us addicted." If the government has any responsibility, the interviewed experts believed it should be to curb the tech companies through regulation. However, most experts were skeptical of the government's ability and willingness to regulate and limit the power of international technology companies:

> I have my doubts about whether international big tech companies are doing enough; they're also not woven into the fabric of our Flemish society. Dialogue with them is very difficult and when I see what the Flemish supervisory commission does about Google. There is no dialogue whatsoever. (Karel, CEO of an edutech company)

Some experts went even further and openly criticized the lack of political and governmental vision on digitalization, which facilitates processes of individual responsibilization. In particular, Dennis, the general coordinator of a civil expertise center on teenagers' media use, stressed that the focus on individuals should shift towards a critical scrutiny of—the lack of—regulations surrounding digitalization:

> Our answer to everything that goes wrong with digitalization is "we need to make people more aware and resilient." That's really ridiculous in my opinion. That's like saying "regulation in the car industry? Never mind!" No obligations around brake technology, seat belts, and airbags. People just have to drive very carefully. It's an absurd idea to do this in the car industry, but with media and technology we do it this way because we don't really know how else to do it.

In a similar vein, business philosopher Martin criticizes the government for being unable—or even unwilling—to take into account the rapid technological advancements. According to this expert, the government predominantly acts reactively on specific threats and risks related to digital technologies. Instead, he argues, the government should act proactively by designing and implementing future-proof policies: "to base regulations on what is less likely to change [than specific ICTs]: human needs, social contact, autonomy, integrity, privacy, and so on."

Finally, some experts offered a unique perspective on the centrality of "the digital" when dealing with the "always-on society" and disconnection. During the interview with the labor union representative Bart, for instance, he concluded that, more so than digitalization, the sociocultural values in our society inherently glorifying being busy and productive were to blame: "Ask anyone how it's going and they say 'I'm good but busy, I'm very busy.' We live in a society that likes to be busy." Jade, the science communication coordinator of a media literacy knowledge center, similarly reported that our society seems to instill unrealistic availability norms on children and teenagers. In both cases, the experts did not see "the digital" as the main stressor but rather as an extension and amplifier of pre-existing neoliberal structures that place a burden on individuals. These accounts raise the question of whether policymakers and researchers alike overemphasize disconnection strategies that predominantly address "the digital" and, thereby, foreclose interventions on a sociocultural level:

> We don't actually have a shared value framework about disconnection yet as a society, "what do we want and what do we think is important?" We're not going to be able to solve that digital connection

> problem immediately. That requires societal evolution. Our mindset and culture has to change first. (Bart, labor union representative)

5. Conclusion

Our study aimed to investigate the contextual and institutional conditions of (dis)connectivity by reporting on in-depth interviews with 21 Flemish experts in Belgium responsible for shaping and implementing digital disconnection guidelines and policies for their respective organizations and organizational stakeholders. In particular, we have explored how (the right to) disconnection is interpreted by the experts, and which challenges and obstacles they observed in developing regulations to enforce it. Furthermore, we inquired what the experts perceived as the role and responsibility of various actors (individuals, groups, organizations, politicians, and the government) for safeguarding citizens' (digital) well-being.

Overall, the interviews reveal a conflict between autonomy and regulation. On the one hand, our experts' discourses on digital disconnection questioned appointing too much responsibility to individuals and claimed that regulations are needed in light of the fast-paced nature of digitalization. On the other hand, however, the experts stressed that such regulations should maximize the individual's capacity for autonomous decision-making, allowing for choice, personalization, and flexibility. This conflict in the participants' discourses reflects ongoing discussions on the voluntary or involuntary enforcement of digital disconnection (Fast, 2021). While voluntary approaches respect personal freedom, they may not be sufficient to address widespread issues. Conversely, stringent regulations could backfire as these can be experienced as paternalistic and can infringe on personal agency. This might especially be true for individualized societies like Flanders that favor autonomy over regulatory approaches.

However, the current study illustrates that the conflict between autonomy and regulation should be understood as a continuum instead of a binary contraposition. Indeed, the experts seem to advocate for a hybrid approach to digital disconnection policy that reduces the burden on individuals through some degree of involuntary disconnection while still allowing for the personalization of broader regulations. Moreover, the findings suggest that the level of (in)voluntariness may depend on context-specific factors surrounding digital media use and non-use. Finally, the conflict in the experts' discourses might also reflect evolving attitudes regarding the (in)voluntary enforcement of disconnection. As more citizens report difficulties in autonomously managing their (dis)connectivity due to the neoliberal logics underpinning digitalization, the urgency to develop and implement effective digital disconnection regulations is growing. As such, we suggest future research to further address this conflict between autonomy and regulation in at least two ways. First, qualitative research is needed to continuously map whether and how preferences for more autonomy-oriented versus regulatory solutions may be contingent on cultural-contextual and temporal norms, expectations, and problems regarding (dis)connectivity. These insights can help to organize and implement policies and regulations conducive to the specific (cultural) context. Second, media-effect studies hold the potential to test the effects of voluntary, involuntary, and hybrid approaches to digital disconnection on individuals' digital well-being, across and within (organizational) cultures.

Regarding the conflict between autonomy and regulation, we uncovered a *digital disconnection policy paradox* in our participants' accounts. Although the experts seemed to be advocates for regulations at the macro and meso level, they ultimately resorted to solutions on an individual level. Consequently, they tended

to—unwillingly—reinforce narratives of individual responsibilization and, thereby, uphold the dominant neoliberal order underpinning constant connectivity in Flemish society (cf. Enli & Fast, 2023; Syvertsen, 2023). Seemingly being caught within this neoliberal framework, the experts found translating digital disconnection as a collective responsibility into an encompassing regulatory approach challenging. This can be problematic for the further development of policies and regulations as previous research has already shown the limitations and the risks of exclusive self-regulation in the context of digital well-being (Enli & Fast, 2023). In particular, it has been argued that individual agency does not automatically engender individual empowerment, as structural factors over which individuals have little control can complicate one's ability to establish (dis)connectivity effectively (Chib et al., 2022; Van Bruyssel et al., 2023) Therefore, we urge researchers and policymakers alike to hold (big) technology companies accountable, to develop systemic and societal interventions that address not only digital technologies but also larger sociocultural values, and to raise awareness among stakeholders about the unintended consequences of individual-level digital disconnection solutions.

The results of our study should be interpreted with caution as our sample included Flemish stakeholders who are part of the advisory board of a larger project on digital disconnection across work, school, and family contexts. This implies they all had a pre-existing interest in the topic of digital disconnection, making them potentially more informed and opinionated on the subject than the average citizen. Moreover, our findings may not be universally applicable. While they may be relevant to other neoliberal countries in the West, different local policies and cultural attitudes towards digital disconnection as well as differential patterns of digital media use might give rise to specific challenges and opportunities. We also acknowledge that digital disconnection is a socially stratified issue (Enli & Fast, 2023). Our participants, being part of a middle-class population themselves, might be less cognizant of the realities of vulnerable groups in society. Finally, we did not fully engage with the specific theories and concepts pertaining to the work, school, and family context due to the design of our study. While our goal was to uncover commonalities in the challenges organizations face across these contexts, we suggest future research to study the particular nuances of digital disconnection policy in each setting.

Despite these limitations, however, the interviews reveal how digital well-being and digital disconnection are being socially constructed through the perceptions, experiences, and practices of Flemish experts in work, school, and family contexts. We hope that our study inspires policymakers and politicians to take up their responsibilities regarding unburdening and protecting citizens in our digitalized societies. It is important, however, to not contribute to paternalistic technopanics and to not be unmindful of the various benefits afforded by digital media. Nonetheless, in the words of one of our participants, we cannot expect people to achieve digital well-being without policies and regulations that enforce "brakes, seat belts, and airbags" being built into digital technologies. The challenge for the scholarship on digital disconnection now lies in identifying effective, balanced, and multi-dimensional approaches that move beyond individual responsibilization.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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ARTICLE

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From Individual Disconnection to Collective Practices for Journalists' Wellbeing

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Abstract

Journalists are increasingly experiencing the negative consequences of online news transformations, such as trolling and harassment, as well as audience distrust. Despite acute need, intra-organisational efforts to support journalists' online wellbeing have so far been limited. More recently, research has explored how journalists have turned to individual practices of disconnection, such as blocking, muting, or small breaks from online media to mediate the impacts of their everyday online labour (Bossio et al., 2024). Building on this research, this study explores how these individual practices are moving toward collective practices of disconnection. Using interviews with 21 journalists, this study traces how emergent collective practices might contribute to systemic change in journalism. We argue that in lieu of intra-organizational support, journalists seek to disconnect through informal sharing of experiences and support as well as collective efforts toward inter-organisational training and intra-organisational formalization mentoring programs.

Keywords

disconnection; journalism; journalism practice; online connection; professional identity; social media; wellbeing

1. Introduction

The impacts of constant online connection with audiences through social media platforms have been seen in journalists' reports of exhaustion or burnout due to long hours spent mediating the consequences of increasingly complex forms of online connection (Bossio & Holton, 2021; Reinardy, 2011). These negative

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consequences have been exacerbated by the lack of organisational support for journalists to avoid or manage online connections (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023; Bossio et al., 2024; Holton et al., 2023; Martin, 2018). As a result, journalists have reported developing individual disconnection practices to counterbalance the demands of remaining connected online (Bossio et al., 2024).

Disconnection refers to the ways connection to a particular platform can be negotiated through temporary refraining from social and technical affordances. These practices include blocking profiles or muting specific online interactions (Karppi, 2018). Journalists, like other media professionals, have developed disconnection strategies that allow more autonomy over the forms of professional connection used in their online work (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022). However, journalism differs from other professions in the information economy in that online production and more importantly, online presence has become imperative to journalistic labour. Journalistic work has changed in response to the opportunities brought by online connectivity and related cultures of collaborative, transparent, and engaged communication (Bossio & Holton, 2021). This has meant that journalistic labour is framed by organisational and institutional logics that demand increasing connectivity through practices of online engagement. In this context, disconnection is not simply a matter of turning away from individual social media use, but rather developing professional strategies to manage the material impacts of the "always on" imperative in journalism. These individual disconnection practices have contributed to understanding the rapidly transforming online practices, values, and competencies that constitute contemporary journalistic practice and professional identity (Hayes et al., 2007). In particular, they have been linked with improving journalists' professional wellbeing by allowing more autonomy over the interactions journalists need to manage in their online work (Šimunjak, 2023).

Previous research on disconnection has focussed on strategies media users have developed to improve their wellbeing by managing or avoiding forms of online connection. Critiques of the tropes have framed this work as an individual responsibility and self-optimisation aligned with online connection (Syvertsen, 2020). For example, studies have shown how these tropes are enabled by principles of digital capitalism and exploitative data collection practices framing utopian models of ubiquitous social connection (Bucher, 2020; Natale & Treré, 2020). Several disconnection studies have prioritised the self in studies of online abstention, meaning how individuals use disconnection practices to challenge the forms of ubiquitous connection promoted by living and working online. However, such an approach can sometimes obscure the opportunities for collective advocacy for broader application of disconnection strategies. As Light (2014, p. 155) suggests, while individuals often understand disconnection through social and technical practices, it also emerges as "a collection of lenses, which allow us to understand who or what is involved [in disconnection], where it occurs and how it is enacted." Light's perspective has given space for research highlighting forms of disconnection that move from an individual responsibility to a collective focus on changing the structural frameworks that contribute to professional wellbeing online (Lomborg, 2020; Natale & Treré, 2020).

Following this conceptualisation of social forms of disconnection, this study focuses on how journalists have collectively developed systems of disconnection to support their wellbeing. We argue that focussing only on journalists' individual practices of disconnection risks reifying the tropes of individual responsibility for online practice, and obscures more social practices that move toward collective knowledge and approaches to online labour. Using semi-structured interviews with 21 journalists based in Australia and the US, this study traces the emergence of collective practices of disconnection that are beginning to contribute to systemic change in journalism. We identify four elements of collective disconnection in journalism.

Contextualisation of disconnection strategies, which then move toward "informal" collective supports, such as sharing disconnection practices socially, and then finally, attempts to move individual strategies towards intra-organisational training and mentoring. While we position these as nascent practices, they are significant as they identify how journalists are beginning to recognize forms of disconnection beyond individual responsibility and moving into more collective approaches to wellbeing in online spaces.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Wellbeing in Journalism

In psychological research, achievement of wellbeing—the state of being comfortable, healthy, and happy—is described according to three philosophical approaches: the ability to balance emotions; the satisfaction that elements of lifestyle, such as work and pleasure, contribute to overall satisfaction; and a sense of autonomy, purpose, and opportunity to achieve mastery (Alexandrova, 2015). Workplace wellbeing is defined similarly as achieving a balance between physical and mental health maintenance, and individual satisfaction with workplace processes (Leiter & Cooper, 2017). Workplaces like newsrooms that require emotional labour from journalists, such as connecting with audiences online based on maintaining a professional persona, can affect wellbeing (Thomson, 2021). For these workers, the perception of social and organisational support and demonstrations of care can mitigate the negative effects of this labour (Brunetto et al., 2014).

In media and journalism studies, elements of wellbeing have been described in negative relation to media tools. As Enli (2015) suggests, elements of wellbeing have been used to prioritise offline interaction as more authentic, real, or healthy than online media tools. Journalism research has referred to wellbeing as a casualty of journalists' interactions with war (Feinstein, 2013), crises (Backholm & Björkqvist, 2010; Brambila, 2024; Tandoc et al., 2022), social platforms (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022), and the increasingly difficult work environments produced by a struggling news industry (Abeykon et al., 2023; Monteiro et al., 2016).

More recent research has focussed on the individual, organisational, and structural elements of achieving wellbeing in journalists' different work environments (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023; Mabweazara & Matsilele, 2023; Šimunjak & Menke, 2023). Defining wellbeing in this context has balanced both balances of "mastering" (meaning working effectively online and "satisfaction") and balancing the positive and negative impacts of online and social media connection (Bossio, 2017; Crilley & Gillespie, 2019). Organisational approaches to online and social media journalism have rarely supported online wellbeing. Instead, such approaches have forwarded punitive consequences for social media missteps (Bélair-Gagnon & Holton, 2022). Thus, online wellbeing for journalists has frequently focussed on managing emotions online (Šimunjak, 2023) and managing negative interactions online often through disconnection (Bossio et al., 2024).

2.2. Online Connection and Disconnection

Public discourse on online connection advocates for disconnection strategies including "digital detox" (Syvertsen, 2020), "digital minimalism" (Newport, 2019), and "wellness practices" that would allow for "authentic forms of connection" (Enli & Syvertsen, 2021; Jorge et al., 2022). These practices rely on individuals to exercise restraint or set boundaries, suggesting that remedies for social media burnout are not social but individual. In other words, if a person feels exhausted by the social expectation of constant

connectedness online, they can self-regulate (Newport, 2019; Treré et al., 2020) and optimise their participation (Moe & Madsen, 2021).

Research on disconnection constitutes a response to the increasing role of digital technologies and communication in daily life. Such research reflects normative discourses in which (over)use of digital technology is problematised (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). As such, research suggests that we should be concerned with the effects of digital and social media on users (e.g., privacy, lack of autonomy, and wellbeing; Lim, 2020; Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). Research on disconnection argues that connection–disconnection constitutes a continuum of mutable individual practices users deploy (Chia et al., 2021; Light, 2014). For example, Lindell and Båge (2023) discussed the ways disconnection from digital news comprises many factors including the multi-dimensional character of social inequality, the symbolic value of different types of news genres and outlets, and social inequalities in the normative problematization of how people decide to avoid the news. Less-resourced groups, for instance, have been seen to be more likely to be disconnected from information online (Bossio et al., 2024; Zhu & Skoric, 2022).

Kaun (2021) argues that disconnection has thus emerged "as a civic virtue that puts the individual users' responsibility at the forefront" and the identity of the "good citizen" forward. That is, even if we know that disconnective practices are informed by inequalities including socioeconomic status, access, gender, and race (see Hargittai, 2007; Treré et al., 2020), a good citizen would be someone critical of their own media consumption and able to adopt balanced practices. Kaun (2021) refers to the role of responsibility for engaging and disengaging from online information. Essentially, users need to assume a position of responsibility and question their level of connection. Similarly in journalism, online connection is both a social and professional expectation. This poses several challenges to journalists' which the literature on digital disconnection has started to address.

2.3. Individual and Collective Approaches to Disconnection in Journalism

Research in journalism studies has found that disconnection coping mechanisms are based on virtue (although the concept used is "individual"; Bossio et al., 2024; Šimunjak & Menke, 2023). Kaun (2021) argues that "highlighting the relevance of digital disconnection on the epistemological, ontological, and political level will allow for [a] deeper understanding of how sociality emerges nowadays including all its unresolvable contradictions and ambiguities."

As such, journalism research has implicitly explored the ways disconnection may be characterisation through ontology (what is journalism), process (what does journalism do), epistemology (what do journalists know and how do they know it), and ethics (what is good journalism; Bossio et al., 2024; Miller & Lewis, 2022; Molyneux, 2019). For example, journalists added disconnective safety practices (e.g., adding two-factor authentication, blocking trolls, taking time off, etc.) all on their terms to the process of journalism (noting that two-factor authentication or more largely safety measures may be integrated into large organisations through safety cultures approaches such as in investigative journalism teams; Henrichsen, 2022). As another example, journalists have been disconnecting from journalism norms and practices to adapt to the needs of social media. These include adopting Instagram personas to be more authentic or relatable to audiences, among other ways of blending personal and professional identities (Bossio, 2023). Research suggests that these approaches emerge as coping mechanisms within journalism because of the industry's lack of

organisational or institutional support (Holton et al., 2023). This could be the consequence of specific established norms and practices, such as that journalists must protect their independence by eschewing collaboration, or that journalists must be "always on" and work at non-traditional hours. At worst, the individual-focused approach to disconnection represents a lack of acknowledgement by organisations that those practices now contribute to journalism's ontology, process, epistemology, and ethics.

In response to these observations, scholars have advocated for adopting a collective approach to disconnection. These approaches may include creating intentional spaces for strategic forms of connection and disconnection or rethinking journalism practice with these emerging forms of journalism (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023). Bélair-Gagnon et al. (2023) suggested such a collective approach needs to go beyond individualisation mechanisms (e.g., seeing a therapist or taking a break; see Martin, 2018; Posetti et al., 2022). Research also points to the challenges of individual approaches, including stigmatisation attacks on journalists as consequences of individual weakness, or failure to recognise and account for the substantial effort journalists expend to protect themselves (Bossio et al., 2024).

2.4. Conceptualisation of Collective Practices of Disconnection

This study explores how journalists have begun to collectivise forms of knowledge and experience around disconnection. Disconnection research often prioritises autonomy and control over individual connectivity. Disconnection has often been centred as a mode of individual agency over the ways users connect online. Even in the context of journalism and other media workers, who are often compelled organisationally to consistently engage online, forms of disconnection are often framed as an emancipatory choice of self-regulation or choice.

One issue that emerges from this framing of disconnection is that it is limited by the individual's choice of action and its focus on individual productivity and wellbeing. That is, individual forms of disconnection, especially in journalism, often focus on optimising future connections to be productive at work. This subsequently ignores social and collective actions that contribute to changes in the structural elements of connection. Thinking about collective disconnection practices re-centres the question at the heart of disconnection studies: What are autonomy and control in these spaces?

To sum up our argument, the dominant model of disconnection studies defines media non-use as an individual pursuit (Figueras & Britas, 2022). Individual disconnection strategies are often seen to provide users with autonomy over the socio-technical affordances and limitations of online spaces. Yet this research frames individual users' disconnection practices with the organisational and social trends toward online self-optimisation and connectivity. Self-choice and negotiation of connectivity are often related to self-regulation for productive digital economies (Karppi, 2018). Albris et al. (2024) have argued the forms of individual wellbeing prioritisation by disconnection strategies are also becoming more commodified, as digital economies forward user accountability over collective action or governmental and organisational regulation of online intervention into private time. Thus, individualisation strategies risk reifying personal responsibility for digital culture, to the detriment of more social forms of disconnection as collective resistance to it (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022).

Conversely, collective disconnection is conceptualisation as a social process, constituting personal choice, and collaborative work (Figueiras & Brites, 2022). Collective disconnection also frames how resistance to

the structural impacts of these socio-technical affordances emerges. These forms of disconnection aim to collectively reject the "affective bonds" (Karppi, 2018) of connectivity. Collective disconnection is a process of tracing how individuals begin to challenge the premises of ubiquitous connectivity on social media (Syvertsen, 2020, pp. 7–8). However, these individual users' disconnection practices are guided not only by the impact of organisational and social trends towards productive online self-optimisation and connectivity. Users also seek to resist the increasingly ubiquitous examples of exploitative digital data practices and capitalism that underpin these social network models (Bucher, 2020). The conceptualisation of collective practices of disconnection provides a framework of resistance that moves away from the individual practices of disconnection that would otherwise risk reifying the self-optimisation and productivity techniques inherent in the principles of digital capitalism (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022).

Collective disconnection can be theorised following Light's (2014, p. 150) assertion of social states where something other than connectivity can exist. This framing of collective disconnection as a social state considers four elements. First, it considers the contextualisation of disconnection practices within particular times and spaces. This means, as Karppi, Chia, et al. (2021) suggests, framing different forms of connectivity and disconnection as dynamic processes. These processes respond to cultures of use—the ongoing techno-socio changes that accompany its changing use—and the wider cultural and political implications of these changes.

Second, shared experience is an important element of collective disconnection (Lomborg, 2020). Sharing does not always denote agreement but rather a shared realisation of the impacts of connectivity and the ways this has been individually negotiated. Third, informality is often at play in the collective sharing of individual realisation of the impacts of connectivity, underscoring the messy and unplanned sharing of disconnection, and that these collective practices are rarely part of formal regulation, policy, or any other formalised recognition of collective resistance. Lastly, the most important aspect of these collective practices is ultimately the aim of challenging digital cultures of connectivity, framing these impacts not as an individual problem to be fixed but as a collective challenge (Lomborg, 2020). Disconnection does not require collective consensus or formalisation through policy, etc.; the mere act of sharing experiences and knowledge is already an act of resistance (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Finally, collectivising knowledge about disconnection is thus a social state of resistance that prioritises what Karppi, Stäheli, et al. (2021, p. xi) frames as the "embeddedness of ubiquitous connectivity…and how it can be challenged and denaturalised from within." These speak to specific issues journalism as a profession is dealing with, such as digital embeddedness (Blumell et al., 2023). Martin and Murrell (2020) proposed the concept of collective care to support acts of resilience in contexts of online harassment. Salamon (2024) also proposed adding support to collective bargaining. Collective states of disconnection still often culminate in individual acts—putting the phone away after work, not answering work calls, etc.—but it is the shared experience and acceptance of these forms of resistance that changes the structure of connectivity of everyday work life.

3. Methods

Using a grounded theory approach, this study conceptualises emerging collective approaches to support journalists' online connective and disconnective practices. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews with journalists were conducted to explore how journalists characterise individual and organisational practices of

disconnection that contribute to professional wellbeing online. The interviews included 15 US and six Australian employees of news organisations, in roles including reporter, editor, and staff writer, which in this study we refer to as "journalists." The sample included broadcast, print, and online journalists working in commercial, nonprofit, and public service media organisations. An Australian interviewee was employed outside of journalism, in the office of the Australian eSafety Commissioner to support journalists' online safety and was identified in the analysis. One US interviewee is an academic who has founded an online support network and resources to support journalists online. Of the US journalists, eight identified as men, six as women, and one as non-binary; among Australian interviewees, two identified as men and four identified as women. We focussed on both US and Australian journalists to provide a broader approach to a research area that has often focused on single-nation studies. Although Australian and US journalists follow similar professional models of journalism, there are several organizational differences in scale and population that we surmised might reveal some market-driven differences in journalistic individual and collective practices of online disconnection. Of note is the highly concentrated news media ownership in Australia. Just three newsgroups—News Limited, Seven West Media, and Nine Entertainment—dominate mass media ownership in Australia ("Australia media guide," 2023). Australia also has a relatively small number of journalists working in permanent, full-time positions; less than 10,000 across the country compared to nearly 40,000 in the US (Stanford, 2021).

The study used purposive sampling to draw on the knowledge and experience of journalists working in collaborative approaches. Such a sampling tactic helps develop an exploratory approach to understanding an emerging area of journalism research and practice. Recruitment was conducted through a social media call for journalists who had either developed, led, or received mentoring or professional development in the newsroom or from an external organisation regarding any aspect of online or social media wellbeing. We did not specify the type of organisation or medium in the call for participants, as all the organisations had significant online presence, regardless of the primary publication medium. We have delineated the difference in mediums in Table 1. "News" indicates a digital-first publication, whereas "newspaper" was the primary medium, this indicates a traditional print organisation, with a mirrored online presence. Instead, we wanted to reach a broad range of journalists, especially as the number that had received or led development for professional wellbeing was small.

Researchers contacted journalists who met the criteria and invited them to complete interviews about their social media work and disconnection practices. Ethical approval was sought and approved, with stipulations for anonymity due to discussion of organisational policy and professional wellbeing. Interviews were conducted from February to mid-April 2024 in-person and using Zoom video conferencing technology (see Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Following respective institutional review boards, responses were anonymised and given a unique identifier code in the analysis (see Table 1). The interviews took up to 60 minutes and were digitally recorded, transcribed, and for some de-identified. Data from the interview responses were analysed using a grounded approach, where themes were hand-coded and discussed between researchers as they emerged and finalised once saturation had been reached (Given & Olson, 2003).

The authors first conducted open coding in an ongoing and iterative manner to allow for dynamic comparison between the responses from the participants (Given & Olson, 2003). This focused on close reading of transcripts, which allowed researchers to capture emerging themes. Then, the authors conducted iterative axial coding to conceptually group the responses (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). The interview questions

Table 1. Interviewees.

Identifier	Area of journalism	Medium	Seniority
J1	Sports reporter	Local digital news	Early-career
J2	Breaking news and business reporter	Regional newspaper	Early-career
J3	Science reporter	Regional newspaper	Early-career
J4	Platform editor	National digital news	Early-career
J5	Social media editor	National digital news	Early-career
J6	Commerce reporter	Regional newspaper	Mid-career
J7	Data editor	Regional newspaper	Mid-career
J8	Director of social media	Regional newspaper	Mid-career
J9	Editor	National digital news	Mid-career
J10	General assignment and arts reporter	Local nonprofit news	Mid-career
J11	Reporter	National nonprofit news	Mid-career
J12	Science reporter	Local nonprofit news	Mid-career
J13	Political reporter	National nonprofit news	Late-career
J14	Director of collaboration	Local nonprofit news	Late-career
J15	Reporter	Local newspaper	Retired
J16	Digital reporter	National digital news	Cadet
J17	Reporter	Metropolitan newspaper	Mid-career
J18	Journalist turned content creator	Freelance	Mid-career
J19	Reporter	Metropolitan digital news	Mid-career
J20	Lifestyle journalism	Freelance	Mid-career
J21	Reporter	National broadcast	Junior

focussed on: (a) whether interviewees had particular individual and collective strategies for online wellbeing; (b) their approaches to online labour, and whether these had changed over time; (c) whether they had received mentoring or professional development in the newsroom around online wellbeing; and (d) whether they had ever provided advice or mentoring to others about how to create strategies to protect online wellbeing based on their experiences.

4. Findings

The interviews conducted with Australian and US-based journalists are presented along the four key elements of collective disconnection: contextualisation, informality and shared experience, and finally, collectively denaturalising or changing digital cultures. The themes that emerged from the interviews showed how collective disconnection was contextualised in journalism in responses that indicated (a) individual strategies for maintaining wellbeing while working in online environments and (b) a lack of organisational support for journalists' online wellbeing. Shared experiences and informality were described in interview responses that suggested how (c) informal sharing strategies for collective support and online wellbeing had been created and finally, (d) collective action for change in digital cultures emerged from interview responses that showed how journalists had worked together to foster (d) online wellbeing cultures and development opportunities in newsrooms. While the first two themes confirm existing disconnection

research, the second two themes speak more broadly to the emerging collective practices occurring in mainstream journalism.

4.1. Contextualisation of Emerging Collective Disconnection in Journalism

The development of collective disconnection practices in journalism can be contextualised according to aspects of journalism's traditional newsroom work cultures. The context for many of the disconnection practices that individual journalists subsequently implement is based on the increasing demands of online work in already busy newsrooms. Increasing frustration, anxiety, and reports of burnout have been commonly reported among journalists working online and on social media. A journalist reflected on the always-on culture of the newsroom: "What looms most large for me—and a lot of the working journalists here—is that separation of when to turn off if you are always expected to be on. When do you stop?" (J19).

The consequence of this newsroom culture is that journalists did not have methods for managing their wellbeing. For some journalists, this had several physical and psychological impacts. For example, a journalist said:

> I don't get much sleep. There is a significant amount of labour, particularly in producing the videos and managing the communities....Unfortunately, I don't have a strategy long-term. At the moment I'm just going to keep going until I burn out—that's the plan. (J20)

Other journalists perceived an always-on culture in the newsroom that had led to their development of individual disconnection strategies. For example, journalists reported strategies including setting online profiles to silent, turning off comments, and only creating content on work phones as their methods for balancing work and home life. While much of the research around disconnection practices in journalism has outlined some of these successful strategies, other journalists interviewed suggested that their strategies of disconnection were no longer relevant in a post-pandemic newsroom. For example, a journalist said that the pandemic made journalists feel as though they are "always on a kind of standby mode. It was already happening, but this kind of turbocharged it" (J17).

This journalist (J17) said they developed disconnection strategies to combat the pitfalls of living a professional life online. But during extended Covid-19 lockdowns, they watched as newly online colleagues fell into the quagmire of 24/7 connection, overwork, and burnout that they could now easily avoid. Another journalist also mentioned the Covid-19 lockdowns as a time of both enhanced pressures, but also the realisation that this was unsustainable:

> When we all worked at home for a couple of years it embedded this culture of always being available, always on-screen, your phone always in your pocket. Because we weren't together, we weren't realising how much our jobs asked of us. (J19)

Journalist J19 was reflecting on how the increased individualisation of their work concentrated during the pandemic lockdowns and turned into overwork without the balance that the newsroom's collective labour can bring.

Despite this "always on" culture of online work, many journalists suggested that there was little to no organisational information or support to protect journalists' online wellbeing, before or after lockdown. One Australian journalist reported feeling an increased sense of safety risk reporting due to the anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown protests during lockdowns in Victoria: "One of these people must have worked in government because the protestors had managed to find some politicians' home addresses. I realised pretty quickly that it would be pretty easy to get my personal details too" (J17).

Despite the safety risk presented by what the journalist (J17) described as a group "hostile to journalists," no support or training was produced to help journalists navigate these risks. The journalist independently took steps such as purchasing secondary mobile phones and SIM cards to protect their location and personal details.

Another cadet digital journalist (J16) suggested that wellbeing and safety were not part of their training. They instead described compulsory training focussing on physical safety in the workplace, and when working from home, such as reporting hazards in the workplace and using proper lumbar support. This type of formal safety training content is provided by all large Australian organisations as part of compliance with Australian workplace health and safety legislation. Similar regulations are in place in the US and elsewhere. They said:

> I don't think there have been any conversations about work–life balance…when I first joined there was a lot of online learning I had to do, almost 13 training sessions. They go into safety, but online safety? They didn't go into it. (J16)

Other journalists said organisations provided very little information or support around online safety regarding negative online experiences. For example, one journalist (J19) said their news organisation said "use common sense" if faced with online harassment or trolling.

With no formal professional development or support for online wellbeing in the news organisation, journalists spoke about offering information to recruits, supporting struggling colleagues, and sometimes, beginning to normalise sharing supportive practices for wellbeing in the newsroom.

4.2. Shared Experience and Informal Sharing of Practices of Disconnection in Journalism

The last two themes emerging from the interviews were journalists' descriptions of informal sharing and support for online wellbeing amongst journalists. These are nascent themes emerging in research around disconnection in journalism. However, several journalists interviewed described practices focused on informal knowledge sharing to support online wellbeing. They spoke of informal strategies, which had begun to move into more formal opportunities for sharing experiences, knowledge, and strategies among groups of journalists meant to address the difficulties of online work. These were framed as part of supportive practices for wellbeing in the newsroom.

Journalists reported noticing that they were not the only ones in their profession feeling overburdened by pressure to maintain a constantly updated online presence. Sharing this concern with colleagues led journalists to offer solidarity and problem-solve together. A late-career journalist remembered one-on-one conversations with a colleague serving as a social media editor who permitted them to adapt individual practices: "Everybody can carve out something different" (J14). They noted that adaptations in online media

work had always travelled by word-of-mouth and other peer-to-peer channels, because even "in the early days, you totally just had to figure it out for yourself, right?" (J9). Facing a lack of organisational support, journalists began to turn to each other to address their concerns. For example, a journalist said where they once believed their disconnection practices were personally curated to match their professional persona online, they realised they could share what they knew about managing online work: "It wasn't until we all started coming back to the newsroom, we all started to realise how much our jobs ask of us. But now, the difference is—we talk about it" (J17).

Also, a journalist said that they gained more understanding of the risks associated with online reporting from the everyday behaviour modelled by their senior peers. For example, they said the small team of senior journalists they worked with informally checked-in to ensure they were working appropriately online:

> When we were reporting on a controversial story about the election in Indonesia, they [senior peers] made sure I had all the right privacy settings on my phone. They said that I should turn my profile "off" when the story came out. (J16)

Similarly, a senior journalist had suggested that they had considered, or even attempted, developing these informal connections into normalisation journalistic practices. They attempted to persuade junior colleagues that obtaining a second phone was standard professional practice. Though this was not an organisational requirement, this journalist noted that many senior journalists did this to provide a physical separation between work and personal life. The journalist felt others should understand "one of the very few tools for coping mentally with this job" (J19).

These practices were considered informal because they occurred without the sanction, or often even the knowledge, of senior editorial staff or the organisation itself. In this case, the direction of influence is from journalist to journalist as peers rather than within any hierarchical leadership structure. As another journalist described:

> We do small talk about the content and the stories all the time. We basically go to each other: "Oh my god this thing happened [online] what should we do?" Because my seniors have a lot of experiences, and they've received a lot of hate for their past stories, I'm pretty lucky that if I have one of those instances, I can go to them to get advice. (J19)

Journalists described how informal support networks grew on the social media platforms they felt conflicted with, further complicating their relationship with digital media. And yet, now that Twitter has been renamed X and much of its functionality has changed, the thing journalists said they miss most about it was not the self-promotion or audience engagement: "It was a way for me to connect with people like me" (J7). Journalists reported that these informal support networks have recently moved to other spaces. Rather than forming and maintaining connections on publicly visible platforms, journalists report using closed systems (such as the workplace chat software Slack) to connect with their peers and receive support. This means that while journalists continue to seek and offer disconnection strategies collectively, the support networks are not institutionalised and maybe even less visible: "It's going to be in their Slacks and group chats. I think a lot of the conversation has just moved to those more private settings" (J11). Another journalist (J7) suggested this was because Slack communities can be but aren't necessarily tied to workplaces, enabling people with

similar jobs at different organisations to connect and support one another in communities of interest. This practice shows that disconnection practices require connection to develop and spread.

4.3. Emergent Practices of Collective Disconnection in Journalism

Journalists mentioned forms of informal sharing and support to be collegial in the newsroom, to offer information to recruits, to offer support to colleagues who were struggling, and to begin to normalise practices of support for wellbeing in the newsroom. In this way, journalists engaged in collective approaches to develop and spread better practices of online wellbeing. A journalist said they sought to ensure that more individualisation disconnection practices were normalised into collective approaches to cultural change in the newsroom. This was described as a process of senior journalists modelling professional behaviours prioritising wellbeing. Rather than "hard-and-fast rules" dictated through formal organisational policy, collective behaviour modelling was identified as a way of changing newsroom culture:

> I am trying to make it culturally "not cool." It's not cool to call people on their day off. Or to call people in [to work] on their annual leave. It's not as functional to make this idea like a "hard-and-fast" rule because of the industry we're in, but if we can culturally make it like a worst-case scenario to pick up the phone when they are not supposed to be working, it can be a reflection of how much we are meant to give in this job. (J19)

Our interviews also highlighted how these emerging shared practices had begun to filter into organisational efforts to support journalists' online labour. For example, a cadet journalist said they had benefited from a mentoring program provided by their news organisation as an optional form of professional development for junior reporting staff. The program allowed cadets to request mentoring from specific senior journalists based on their professional focus—a program fostered by the organisation due to continued cadet journalist requests for mentoring that extended the cadetship program. They said they had chosen a senior journalist based on their shared background as international students living in a culturally and linguistically diverse community:

> I got paired up with this person who works on the TikTok team and is originally from Hong Kong. I've met up with her twice [in the first three months of work] and I asked how they adjusted to [the organisation]. (J16)

While wellbeing was not a specific focus of the mentoring sessions, the journalist said they talked about balancing work and personal life in adjusting to a new cultural context.

Another interviewee suggested that some of these informal modelling behaviours had filtered into wider institutional practice. For example, in Australia, some work has begun to formalise organisational processes for promoting journalists' online wellbeing. A collaboration between the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the office of Australia's eSafety Commissioner has piloted the employment of a social media wellbeing advisor role. The role centres forms of "digital allyship" in training junior journalists for online work. Digital allyship prioritises collective modes of support for online wellbeing, working within teams to develop best practices models for online safety, and strategies to manage and mitigate negative social media interactions. This includes the normalisation of managerial responsibility for supporting journalists' online work, including creating risk assessments for possibilities of online abuse when

commissioning news reportage and creation of moderation planning for organisationally owned social media accounts. The social media advisor role has since been formalised at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, with protocols now established for open discussion of the types of online abuse encountered by journalists working at the organisation, formal training and resources to maintain and normalise individual and newsroom-wide boundaries for online work, including disconnection strategies such as removal of social media handles and bylines from stories considered a risk for abuse. Similarly, US academic Michelle Ferrier's work with Trollbusters has advocated for formalised processes to ensure journalists' online wellbeing. These initiatives reflect a growing recognition of journalists' collective effort at advocating for wellbeing to be an everyday part of newsroom procedure.

Despite knowledge of these broader initiatives, journalists reported little through the development of organisational or institutional norms around wellbeing in journalism. More collective frameworks for maintaining wellbeing in journalistic work have been apparent in some newsrooms, as reflected by a small number of our interviews, though newsroom efforts and wider organisational changes to prioritise online wellbeing in journalism should be considered emergent rather than established.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In response to the lack of intra-organizational effort to support journalists' wellbeing, this study explored how journalists collectively supported online wellbeing through disconnection. Interview data shows this emerging collective approach may be conducted primarily in collaboration—among groups of journalists, or between them and inter-organisational actors. In terms of informal support, journalists said this occurred by coming up with their strategies, the presence of intra-organizational networked approaches, and the normalisation of network approaches. Our findings showed that journalists still use individual strategies to maintain their wellbeing through practices of disconnection. For example, journalists referenced a trial-and-error approach to finding disconnection strategies that "work" for them to manage the demands of online connection. Journalists also indicated a professional movement towards sharing knowledge and experience of disconnecting as informal mentoring from senior to junior journalists.

We also found that movement toward collective disconnection practice was apparent, and driven along four identified elements of contextualisation, sharing informal practices and movement toward wider collective action. Journalists shared informal strategies to support one another's wellbeing and online disconnection. For example, communities of practice that once thrived on X have now moved to less-public group chats and Slack channels. Journalists suggested that they had given or received informal mentoring (e.g., collegiality, information sharing, and supporting colleagues such as through problem-solving, etc.). Informal, practical advice on coping mechanisms served to build solidarity and counterbalance organisational demands for connection. These connections may blossom into broader efforts. In this way, findings show that journalists are akin to online users as they need to assume responsibility and question their level of online connection (see Kaun, 2021). The interviews showed a lack of understanding of peer/employer support for the need to disconnect and the consequences of what journalists think they are and what they are doing constitutes obstacles to journalists' wellbeing.

Even if journalists recognised the absence of intra-organisational support for their wellbeing and support for their practices of disconnection (see Henrichsen, 2022, on the lack of safety cultures), in terms of collective

support, journalists emphasised inter-organisational training and intra-organisational formalisation mentoring programs. Journalists described professional development for online practices that focussed specifically on online connection. This approach came with little discussion of how to deal with trolling, harassment, or other negative impacts of online work. However, journalists recognised that their newsrooms began offering professional development opportunities to learn how to negotiate online practices through disconnection. Evidently, there is potential and appetite for collaboration between journalists and external organisations, such as with the work of the eSafety Commissioner.

Journalism studies literature suggests that inter-organisational collaboration may be challenging to journalistic normative constructs. Values, norms, and assumptions that such actors bring to journalism may conflict with journalists' conception of what journalism is and how it ought to be carried out (e.g., working long hours, having a thick skin, etc.; Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023; see Bélair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018; Eldridge, 2017; Hanusch & Löhmann, 2023). Rather, a focus on intra-organisational climate may be a fruitful path forward for news organisations. There were very few examples of a supportive newsroom climate, which would otherwise acknowledge that there are determinants to wellbeing over which the organisation has some control. A supportive organisation would demonstrate willingness to structure journalists' work to reduce exposure to unnecessary stressors and offer both preparation and respite when journalists must face necessary stressors (noting that examples of this exist but are scarce). The precise approach and remedies will vary based on journalists' gender and beat, the type of organisation, etc.

There are some limitations to this study. The findings from this small sample size may not be generalized to the overall work practices of all journalists. Similarly, while we found similar experiences recounted by both Australian and US journalists, the small sample, and broad selection of reportage areas covered is not generalizable overall. Further studies could begin to account for how particularities of reportage rounds, like lifestyle or political rounds may account for the types of impacts journalists experience in working online, and their specific practices of disconnection. Further studies could also begin to account for the differences in online labour and their impacts within countries and organisations that operate differently from Australian and American Western liberal traditions.

Overall, however, we found little support for journalists within news organisations, and journalists have turned to each other and to external organisations to support managing the demands of online media work. This constitutes an opportunity for the industry to build on these developments and establish new collective cultural constructs such as "collective care" (Martin & Murrell, 2020). As such, news organisations should pay attention to this problem as it is a human resource issue central to the "institutional crisis of journalism" (cf. Reese, 2020).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Diasporic Cosmopolitanism and Digital (Dis)Connectivity Among Turkish Women in Rome

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Abstract

This study advances the field of disconnection studies by examining how digital (dis)connective practices intersect with diasporic identity construction and the articulation of belonging, focusing on the experiences of Turkish migrant women in Rome. Based on in-depth interviews and participant observation with 10 Turkish women, the research highlights the central role of social class in the emergence of a "diasporic cosmopolitan" identity that is culturally and socially detached from, or even opposed to, their national identity. It further shows how this "cosmopolitan" identity intersects with the performance of specific digital (dis)connective practices and explores the cultural, political, and social dimensions of these dynamics. Particular attention is given to the influence of contemporary Turkish politics on online and offline diasporic sociality, which fosters tensions and segmented solidarities. Through this lens, the study identifies emergent forms of digital (dis)connective practices among Turkish women in Rome, which shape transnational and local social alliances and disruptions.

Keywords

cosmopolitanism; digital media; disconnectivity; Italy; migrant women; Turkish diaspora

1. Introduction

"It is hard to define it as a diasporic *community*." This was one of my initial observations during my fieldwork in Rome, investigating Turkish migrant women's digital practices for diasporic networking. Turkish migrants in Rome were scattered, difficult to locate, and largely invisible both in public and digital spaces. At the outset, I found only a few local associations linked to the Turkish embassy in Rome and discovered two private Facebook groups for Turkish migrants residing in Italy through my first respondent, Selda. When

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asked if she knew many Turkish people in Rome, she replied, "I am telling you, I have just a couple of friends." Despite this, her social network was wide, consisting mostly of Italians and internationals. Through our conversation, it became clear that her disconnection from the Turkish community was due to its small size and internal division, with most Turkish migrants residing in Rome moving there because of their marriage to Italian citizens.

The Turkish women in this study, like Selda, shared several common traits: They were predominantly skilled professionals with affluent backgrounds and high levels of education. As I show, social class (Crossley, 2014) played a key role in shaping their everyday diasporic lives, identities, and digital practices, influencing both the nature of their relationships and their limited connections with other Turkish migrants in Rome. My objective is to highlight how this offline disconnection articulates women's online forms of sociality, or lack thereof, specifically looking at the implications for their identity construction as diasporic subjects.

The research intervenes in the field of disconnection studies at its intersection with digital migration studies, offering a fresh perspective on the study of migrants' (dis)connective behaviours. While digital migration research has rarely focused on disconnective practices among migrant women (Cascone & Bonini, 2024; Dhoest, 2016; Ogan & d'Haenens, 2011), existing research on disconnective practices has predominantly examined the political and psychological consequences of such behaviours (Bozdag, 2020; Zhu, 2023) rather than their role on identity formation and belonging. This article aims to address this gap by asking:

> RQ: How do digital (dis)connective practices shape the construction of Turkish women's diasporic identity and sense of belonging?

In order to answer it, I draw on findings from in-depth interviews and participant observation with 10 Turkish women residing in Rome. Using the term (dis)connection, I highlight the contested and often ambiguous nature of disconnective practices that, as Light (2014) points out, frequently interplay with connective ones. I demonstrate how the paradoxical and, at times, contradictory character of such practices emerges, whereas disconnective behaviour leads to alternative forms of digital sociality. The study begins with a review of the debates about (dis)connective practices, and how they relate to cultural cosmopolitanism. Following this, I outline the unique character of the Turkish community of Rome and its recent migration history. I use empirical data to explore the socio-political tensions that brought Turkish women to articulate a cosmopolitan identity in the diaspora. Finally, I present two empirical cases that show this dynamic focusing on Turkish women's digital (dis)connective practices: The first examines Turkish women's digital practices within Facebook groups such as İtalya'daki Türkler | Turchi in Italia | Turchia & Italia, and Italyada Yasayan Turkler, as mirroring the socio-political tensions previously identified; the second explores the use of WhatsApp by Turkish women for local and transnational political activism, revealing how digital (dis)connectivity is shaped by concerns over state surveillance and political divides.

2. Methodology

This study is the product of a one-year ethnographic fieldwork study conducted in Rome from October 2017 to September 2018. It comprised participant observation and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 10 (N = 10) Turkish women living in Rome, reached through snowballing sampling. Most of the women interviewed were skilled migrants or graduate students who had moved to Rome during their university

years and whose ages ranged from 23 to 44. Most participants were from Istanbul and came from middle-class or upper-middle-class families.

It was not uncommon to hear how their educational background was characterised by being former students of private international schools and universities. They were exposed to a highly international environment and taught European languages such as French, Italian, and German before their experience of migration to Europe. They were fluent in multiple languages, including Italian or English, making communication easy and the interviews rich in content. The research participants resided in Rome mainly because of their relationship with Italian men, their profession, or for study reasons. Their residency in Italy spanned from 13 to five years before the interview.

Snowball sampling might be considered responsible for the homogeneity of the sample, which does not allow it to represent the whole diasporic community (Hennink et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the reduced size of the Turkish community of Rome and the even smaller number of Turkish women residing in the city was such that this technique allowed me to reach a sample that was quite characteristic of the community. The Turkish diasporic community of Rome is relatively small, with a total number of 1,106 registered migrants, of which only 419 are women (Comune di Roma, 2023). At the time of fieldwork, in 2018, these numbers were even lower. The Turkish population in Rome comprised 720 residents, of which only 167 were women (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2018). The homogeneous social positioning of the female population is linked to Rome's economic unattractiveness for low-skilled migrants (Marinaro & Thomassen, 2014), which makes the city appealing mainly to those who already have financial means and social connections or who moved there to pursue higher education.

A topic guide was employed for the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The guide tackled two main areas of inquiry: First, Turkish women's personal history of migration; second, their digital practices. Within the large umbrella of these two sections, a series of other sub-topics were approached during the interview. The first section aimed at building rapport by asking general questions about the participant's background. This was followed by topics more focused on participants' experience of migration, their opinion and experience of living in their neighbourhood/city, their social embeddedness in the city and their relationship with people left behind, ending with possible experiences of discrimination concerning their gender and ethnicity. The second part of the topic guide focused on exploring respondents' level of digital literacy, their ordinary digital practices, out-of-the-ordinary experiences through digital tools, and preferred social media platforms and apps. The topic guide further inquired about the websites they consulted and the digital platforms primarily used in communicating with friends, family, and people from their community, locally and transnationally. The signing of informed consent preceded all interviews.

My ethnographic research was not confined to interviews. I coupled it with participant observation (Slater, 1998) to capture the behavioural nuances of my respondents before, during, and after the formal interview, paying attention to how they behaved and interacted across these different phases. This helped me capture elements not emerging through the spoken word and provided insights about their performative behaviour during the interview and during more informal social interactions (Hennink et al., 2020).

At a later stage, I conducted a discourse analysis of the interviews, first by coding the data through NVivo and identifying patterns and themes emerging from it. In a second moment, I identified the linguistic

patterns emerging in those themes, finally interpreting the process of signification that Turkish women discursively formed about their diasporic everyday life. It is at this stage that the "diasporic cosmopolitan" discourse emerged. I further approached the analysis of my participants' narratives and the emergence of particular discourses from an intersectional perspective (Hill-Collins & Bilge, 2016), looking at how language was entangled with gendered, classed and racial power dynamics. In disentangling the grid of power relations emerging from the interviews, it has been essential to critically reflect on how my positioning as a researcher influenced the research process.

Interestingly, certain aspects of my identity have positively influenced my rapport with the participants, such as my age, gender, class, and education, which were similar to theirs. In this sense, my "ethnic" belonging as an Italian researcher was blurred by other elements that created different scales of proximity and distance defined by "interactive processes that construct what are more fluid social locations" (Suarez-Delucchi, 2018, p. 199). Meanwhile, my role as a researcher was, at times, a source of anxiety. Some participants were cautious when not overtly suspicious in our first interactions. The use of the consent form was felt as a form of reassurance, allowing them to open up more freely at a later stage. All participants' personal information and names have been carefully anonymised, including the name of the party in which some are politically active.

3. Disconnective Behaviour and Cultural Cosmopolitanism: An Overview

The realm of digital media studies has often focused on "connectivity," investigating how digital media allows the emergence of new forms of communication and relationships, revolutionizing our way of building communities and articulating our identity. Mediated communication is, in fact, an "essential dimension of contemporary experience" (Silverstone, 1999, p. 2) and even more so for diasporic communities. Indeed, letters, the press, radio, television, and telephone have always been part of migrants' everyday lives (Georgiou, 2006), helping migrants to develop a sense of belonging in a condition of uprootedness and reformulation of a feeling of homeliness and identity in the new context of arrival (Georgiou, 2010; Hegde, 2016). Different forms of mediated communication are employed to build and maintain old and new social relationships at a local and transnational level through different forms of co-presence in physical absence (Alinejad, 2019; Madianou, 2016), now strengthened even more thanks to digital technologies. Indeed, the novelty of digitally mediated communication does not lie in the human need to build and maintain a network of social ties through media. Its novelty lies in the unprecedented scale on which this happens, particularly in terms of time/space compression and ease of access to information and connections, thanks to the relative accessibility of these technologies.

Meanwhile, most digital migration scholarship has focused on diasporic connectivity practices (Leurs, 2023) and their affective dimension (Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2020). Only a few studies have investigated public disconnective behaviour intended to "socially disconnect from others by dissolving or suspending digital ties after they have been established" (Zhu, 2023, p. 5355) among migrants and refugees (Cascone & Bonini, 2024; Dhoest, 2016). Practices of "disconnectivity"—such as unfriending, unfollowing, blocking, and silencing on social media—have often been studied mainly concerning political polarisation, as a form of self-protection and selective exposure to contents, social resources, and interactions that do not pose a threat to one's well-being. These practices allow filtering or disengaging with people not in line with one's values and political ideas (Bozdag, 2020) but also for social movements to tactically resist political repression and retaliation (Kaun & Treré, 2018; Lim, 2020). Nevertheless, the literature has rarely tackled how

disconnection from online public spaces (Light, 2014) is also functional in articulating diasporic subjects' identity construction and sense of belonging. This is made through the subjects' digital detachment from other social groups of the diasporic community, which often mirrors the social and political tensions in the homeland that are transposed in the country of settlement. In this article, I analyse practices of disconnectivity from that angle. I show how these strategies are functional to diasporic individuals and groups to construct "a world of *critical proximity*," and to articulate their diasporic identity as "multi-positioned in symbolic and geographical spaces" (Georgiou, 2010, p. 31), in a complex and often ambiguous way. Indeed, disengagement opens up new ways of engagement whereby connective practices play alongside disconnective ones (Light, 2014).

In this endeavour, I explore practices of disconnectivity in their interplay with connective ones among Turkish women living in Rome. I use the lens of cosmopolitanism to explore how articulating a cosmopolitan identity leads to specific forms of (dis)connective behaviour through digital means. The concept of "cosmopolitanism" is a hotly debated one, as the exponential growth of scholarly interest in this concept has been the result of contemporary global processes and the unprecedented scale of interconnection between social actors beyond national borders (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Ponzanesi, 2020). This concept has often found fertile ground in migration and diaspora studies, which have challenged classic studies of diaspora that supported the idea of diasporic connections as merely defined by national belonging (Georgiou, 2010; Gilroy, 1997). Furthermore, digital migration research has produced in the past decade a significant number of studies that show the cosmopolitan and multiscale character of diasporic identity formation and connectivity through digital practices (see Diminescu, 2008; Nedelcu, 2012; Nessi & Guedes Bailey, 2014; Ponzanesi, 2020; Smets et al., 2020). Here, I expand this field of research, approaching "cosmopolitanism" and its articulation through digital practices in its "cultural" dimension, hence as a "lived and practiced empirical phenomenon" (Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018, p. 131) that is appropriated as a personal and social identity. More specifically, I draw on Ong's (2009, p. 452) definition of cosmopolitanism as an identity and an everyday performative act that "lies in a continuum, whereby individuals weave in and out of different expressions of cosmopolitanism according to particular contexts." I am interested in "who performs this orientation and how this orientation is performed" (Ong, 2009, p. 453). From that perspective, a cosmopolitan identity implies, as a core value, a sense of openness to the world and universalistic orientation towards the Other and, more generally, towards differences in people, places, experiences, and cultures (see Beck, 2002).

One of the most interesting implications of cultural cosmopolitanism has been highlighted by Nava (2002), who notes how the rootedness of cosmopolitan aspirations is entrenched in a "political and intellectual critique of nationalism but also a sense of psychological dislocation and non-belonging" (p. 89). Indeed, openness towards otherness is coupled with opposition to any personal and social identification based on national or ethnic particularism so that "an imagined inclusivity…transcends the immediate symbolic family or nation" (Nava, 2002, p. 90). Nava sees cosmopolitanism as a form of non-belonging, no home and no country, and an active form of revolt and desire to escape from one's home or country. Nevertheless, openness and non-belonging do not leave a void. Instead, they create the basis for formulating a cosmopolitan identity with specific articulations of cultural and social belonging (Calhoun, 2003) that often involve multiple affiliations rather than none (Appiah, 1997). This aspect emerges also in Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt's (2018) work. In their study of cosmopolitanism as a cultural identity among transnational professionals in Amsterdam, they show how cultural identities and belonging are formulated "in relation to a

range of Others," and are "socially and relationally accomplished through acts of internal definition and external differentiation drawing on shared cultural resources'' (Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018, p. 135). The analysis of Turkish women's narratives of their digital practices explores these dynamics of internal differentiation, as articulated through segmented forms of social affiliations and divisions resulting from a sense of cosmopolitan openness to the world and ambiguous escapism from one's national identity. Section 4 frames the historical context and history of Turkish migration to Europe and Italy, representing the basis for understanding the emergence of such an identity articulation.

4. Framing the Context: Turkish Politics and the History of Turkish Migration to Italy

Turkey's recent history and political developments are central to grasping the motivations for the emergence of specific digital disconnective practices among Turkish women in Rome. As the following sections will show, these developments strongly impacted women's sense of self, inside and outside the diaspora, pushing them to use digital media in particular ways. The rise of Erdogan to power is one turning point that has been recurrently mentioned in the interviews. Indeed, it was referred to as the beginning of a broader political and social change in Turkey that began in the early 2000s, when the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP—Justice and Development Party) led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was established and came to power. The party developed a political agenda that went through two different phases. The first phase was between 2002 and 2007 and it was characterised by the AKP's willingness to gain the EU's membership, the desire to reduce the power of the national army over internal politics, and an interest in expanding minority civil rights (Rabasa & Larrabee, 2008). This phase can be considered its "liberal phase." The AKP's political agenda, based on a mixture of conservatism and liberalism, also impacted the sphere of gender relations: Coşar and Yeğenoğlu (2011) claim that the AKP's patriarchal ideology was characterised by a mixture of traditional gender norms and neoliberalism, that led the scholars to define it as a "neo-liberal conservative patriarchy." Indeed, while requiring "women's participation in the now flexible labour market," it also posed "a warning about the hardships in intertwining [women's] working life and familial responsibilities" (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011, p. 568).

From 2011 on, Erdogan's governance strengthened its authoritarian tendencies (Tansel, 2018), which were now manifested on many levels. The party assumed more marked Islamist and anti-Western positions, pushing for policies that responded to this change. Generally, the period between 2011 and 2013 showed a shift to more Islamist, patriarchal, and authoritarian terms. Erdogan's government played a crucial role in the implementation of the AKP's "neo-liberal conservative patriarchy" (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011) that led to the reinforcement of patriarchal social legitimacy through state politics and the promotion of discourses ruling over women's bodies and sexuality (Cindoglu & Unal, 2017). Another primary concern was the gradual Islamization of educational programmes and the judiciary system, which marked a clear break from the past. Alcohol was also subjected to stricter regulations. The situation worsened even more after the Constitutional Referendum in 2017, when Turkey's political regime changed from parliamentary to presidential, putting even more power in Erdogan's hands. Generally, religion became more visible within society, and so the AKP started being associated more with Islamists' conservative positions than liberal ones. In terms of cultural and social values, this phase in Turkish politics caused much opposition and a sense of bewilderment in the most progressive strata of society, whose values were more in line with the so-called "Kemalist" tradition, based instead on social liberalism and secularism. Most women interviewed in my research expressed these feelings, which included a shared sense of disappointment and detachment when not overt hostility towards the current Turkish government.

My participants moved to Italy during this profound political and social change phase. Their mobility was facilitated by agreements between the EU and Turkey favouring students' transnational mobility (Weibl, 2015) through EU volunteering, university or professional programs such as the European Voluntary Service, and the Erasmus and Leonardo programs. Generally, the beginning of Turkish migration to Europe dates back to the 1960s, when the so-called "guest worker agreements" between Turkey and northern European countries were in response to labour shortages during a tremendous economic expansion (Aydar, 2018). Nevertheless, Italy has never been a receiving country of Turkish labour migration, such as those directed to Germany, Denmark, the UK, or the Netherlands. Instead, it became a receiving country of Kurdish refugees fleeing Turkey only by the end of the 1990s (Armelloni, 2008; Costa & Alinejad, 2020; Puggioni, 2005), while witnessing the arrival of a different and more recent flow of Turkish citizens in the past decade. The Turkish women who participated in my research were part of this latest flow, as part of the "brain-drain" of the Turkish elite population (Aydar, 2018; Cesur et al., 2018; Duru et al., 2019). In Section 5, I unpack the impact of Turkey's recent political history on their migration experience, especially visible through the lens of intra-diasporic relationships that were connoted along the lines of oppositional values to Erdogan's conservatism.

5. Beyond the Nation: Diasporic Identity as Cosmopolitan

According to the UN, an international migrant is "any person who has changed his or her country of residence," and "this includes all migrants, regardless of their legal status, or the nature, or motive of their movement" (United Nations, n.d.). Interestingly, the Turkish women who participated in this research never used the term migrant to describe themselves, often preferring the term "expat." The term "expat" or "expatriate" is long-debated in migration studies. As von Koppenfels (2014) highlights, the term often comes with "implications and assumptions of wealth, privilege and self-segregation" (p. 23), mainly used to refer to people from the Global North moving to another country temporarily and for professional reasons. Even if this was not the case for my respondents, who were mostly long-term residents with stable jobs in Rome, their widespread use of the term was to signal their privileged socio-economic status within the diaspora. The term "expat," indeed, was usually mentioned to differentiate themselves from Turkish migrants who moved to Italy and Europe, according to them, out of a "need" rather than a "choice." By saying that, they were referring to Turkish citizens who migrated because of the "guest worker agreements" or to ask for political asylum such as in the case of Kurdish people with Turkish nationality. As Dilara, a 42-year-old architect, highlighted:

> An "expat" is a person…a *citizen of the world* who lives abroad for work, for reasons….The migrant is a person who left a country because they had to, inevitably, because of their ideas, or because of a war, or because of an intolerable situation [experienced] where they were….I mean, they had to. This is the minimum difference. So, here in Rome there are not so many among those…but there are more people who are here for reasons…let's say, because they married or for work, or other reasons, [but] they were fine in their own country.

Dilara's words stress several interesting elements about Turkish women's diasporic identification that will recurrently emerge in the interviews. First, her words signal a class dynamic within Turkish transnational mobility that sees a contraposition between people with higher socio-economic status—who "were doing fine in their own country"—and a supposed second group composed of people of lower socio-economic status, fleeing from war or political persecution. The second important aspect emerging from this excerpt is

the use of the term “citizen of the world” as descriptive of being an “expat” (Nessi & Guedes Bailey, 2014). Here, the correlation between being expat and cosmopolitan converges in articulating her diasporic identification. The experience of living abroad as privileged subjects was, indeed, not defined by national belonging but instead by the experience of being “vanguards of a new cosmopolitan lifestyle” possessing “a particular set of skills that precociously fostered them to develop transnational mindsets and attitudes” (Nedelcu, 2012, p. 1349).

The convergence between being “cosmopolitan” and being an “expat” must be further explained through the lens of the previously described political and social tensions in the homeland, mirrored by the Turkish diaspora in Italy. The AKP’s rise to power and the socio-cultural and political changes it caused had implications that touched upon Turkish cultural identity and social relations in the Turkish diasporic community. This caused a polarisation among migrants, who recognised themselves as belonging to different cultural, social, and political value systems. Being “cosmopolitan,” then, emerged as a form of identification that overtly contested the ruling socio-political system in the homeland. As it will be shown, “expat” signified a privileged economic status that intersected with a specific socio-political positioning, representing the most progressive part of the Turkish diasporic social fabric in Italy.

Turkish women’s cosmopolitan identification was formulated in two different ways: as the product of a “habit” to “openness” (Beck, 2002) through early exposure to an international environment, or the result of a “revolt” against the family and the homeland (Nava, 2002). Interestingly, a common aspect emerged in all their accounts: Their cosmopolitan identification implied a general process of differentiation and distancing from the nation as representative of what was considered “right-wing,” “conservative,” “nationalist,” and “religious.” My participants discursively expressed this dynamic through the use of binary oppositions to define themselves and what they were opposing: open/close, modern/traditional, democratic/fascist, secular/religious, and feminist/sexist.

The first example of this articulation comes from Tilbe, a 23-year-old student at the Academy of Fine Arts of Rome. When trying to describe her identity, she first claimed that “I don’t use Turkish identity that much to exist here,” highlighting, later on, the impact of her family background in the process:

> I have always felt more international….I haven’t been….I haven’t had a “closed” family. Let’s say that I have always had the idea of something outside of Turkey. I mean, I have always watched many movies…I had the internet, I had a lot of….I mean, I always looked at art books and, in the end, I haven’t had “right-wing” stories, typical, before…yes, my mum used to speak in German, she had her kindergarten, she also had German, Chinese students. I mean, it’s always been very international.

A very similar reflection was formulated by Ajda, a 34-year-old computer engineer, who described herself as coming from a family that did not have a definite national or religious identity. Tilbe and Ajda formulated their identity as the product of openness to diversity and a weaker identification with their Turkish nationality. In both cases, their family background was positively described, implying a difference from the average Turkish family, while subtly positioning themselves on the opposite side of the spectrum as secular, leftist, international women. Instead, Ece, a 35-year-old project manager, had difficulty identifying as Turkish because of her complex relationship with her homeland and family. Interestingly, in her interview, whenever Ece mentioned her family and more specifically her parents, she used different adjectives from the ones used by Ajda and Tilbe:

> We are quite a typical family, like that. I don't know....I have always had a problem with my father and my mother....I didn't have a very good relationship with my father, since when I was a teenager...my father, coming maybe from [a town on the Syrian border], even if he has made much progress and he is a university professor and has many experiences abroad...he is, anyway, a Turkish man. Typical. And....I mean, in the home the power is all his. The economic power, even if my mother also works....Decisions are always made by my father, not in an explicit violent way, but he is very despotic.

There is a clear correlation in her account between her difficult relationship with her father—described as a "typical Turkish man," a formula that was negatively connoting him—and her rejection of identifying as Turkish, expressed through various prejudices that Ece acknowledged she had about Turkish people. The process of disidentification from the homeland seems related to her rejection of patriarchal gender dynamics, which pushed her not only to leave Turkey but also to make the conscious choice not to have many social relationships with Turkish people, especially men, in Rome. Ece, as much as most of the respondents, privileged relationships with partners, friends, and acquaintances who were Italians or internationals, consciously avoiding the Turkish community.

As shown, cosmopolitan identification in a diasporic context emerges among my participants from a space that is not free of cultural and social references to the homeland. On the contrary, it seems the result of specific socio-cultural backgrounds—or resistance to them—that deeply influenced their process of diasporic identification after migration. As Cesur et al. (2018) highlight in their study of highly skilled Turkish migrants and their identification with Europe, identification is influenced not simply by socio-economic background and transnational diasporic practices but by "larger narratives of citizenship and of cultural identity" (p. 129). As shown in the following sections, Turkish women's performance of a cosmopolitan identity influenced the quality of their offline and online diasporic sociality. Non-belonging and disconnection to part of the Turkish diaspora were also performed in their digital practices, mirroring previously identified social and political tensions.

6. Ambiguous Diasporic (Dis)Connectivity on Facebook

Existing research has shown how disconnective practices or content filtration are usually the product of political disagreement, which motivates the unfriending, silencing, and blocking of people, groups, and accounts from social media. More specifically, research shows how opposing political ideologies predict this behaviour on digital media (Zhu, 2023; Zhu & Skoric, 2023). In line with the literature, the socio-political polarisation between two different "Turkeys" strongly emerged from the interviews and was expressed through local offline and online (dis)connective practices. This section focuses on the intertwinement that political polarisation and disconnective practices have with diasporic identity construction. This will be done through the respondents' experience of two Facebook groups of Turkish people living in Italy that were active during my fieldwork and represent that polarization. The first group is İtalya'daki Türkler | Turchi in Italia | Turchia & Italia ("Turks in Italy"), and the second one is Italyada Yasayan Turkler ("Turks living in Italy"). Most respondents mentioned these two Facebook groups in their interviews, describing their differences regarding the kind of users joining and posting on them.

Selda was one of the first respondents to highlight more explicitly how Turkish social and political polarisation was visible on social media platforms such as Facebook. She first highlighted how disengaged she was from

other Turkish people in Rome while being, paradoxically, one of the few who benefited from social media platforms for building a network of professional relationships. Indeed, she worked for many years as a tour operator for Turkish tourists and found her first job thanks to a post that she wrote on the page of one of the two groups previously mentioned, Italyada Yasayan Turkler. Soon after, she was contacted by a Turkish woman who offered her a job as a tour guide. Selda added:

> I think that at the beginning I wrote on…"Turks in Italy," but then there is another group [and] someone told me to join "Turks who live in Italy"…and the difference between these two groups is that in the first one there are philo-Islamist fascists….I mean discussions [with] Arians, racists. Instead, in the second [group] there are artists, professionals, I don't know…medical doctors…not necessarily anti-fascists or anti-sexists, but, anyway.

This excerpt shows how the online space mirrors the cultural, social, and political polarisation within the Turkish diaspora that has been previously described. Meanwhile, it also shows how social class belonging intertwines with the political one in paradoxical and contradictory ways. Indeed, Selda, on the one hand, describes the users on İtalya'daki Türkler | Turchi in Italia | Turchia & Italia as Arians and racists. In contrast, on the other hand, she moves away from connoting politically those who were, instead, active in the group Italyada Yasayan Turkler, describing them as "professionals," even if not necessarily "anti-fascists or anti-sexist." In other words, the implication of joining the group Italyada Yasayan Turkler is mainly defined by the users' social class that, for Selda, signifies, per se, moderate political positionings. For Selda, her sense of belonging to the digital community of Italyada Yasayan Turkler was not simply based on co-ethnic ties, as co-ethnic ties were not sufficient to indicate like-minded people; in that case, an easier predictor was represented, instead, by class, that guided her choice of diasporic social capital that she wanted to have access to.

As much as for Selda, most respondents disengaged from discussions on the group İtalya'daki Türkler | Turchi in Italia | Turchia & Italia, which Ece described as "very nationalist" and sharing "hateful content." Tilbe, instead, stressed a gendered online dynamic among Turks, which pushed her to disengage. First, she described the group as "annoying," adding that she started ignoring it after strangers, especially men, had contacted her, asking privately for information as if she was an "international office." Most of them never left the group even if they overtly disliked it; instead, they silenced it, rarely participated in discussions, simply using it to access "neutral" information about Italian bureaucracy. This dynamic shows how digital diasporic sociality is not merely the product of connections based on national belonging; connectivity and disconnection are motivated by several elements that describe and signify diasporic identifications at the base of the emergence of specific diasporic digital environments (Dhoest, 2016). In Section 7, I explore this dynamic even more. I will show how Turkish women's "diasporic cosmopolitanism" and online disconnection from the diasporic community were momentarily disrupted by the common political interest in opposing Erdogan's government through online and offline activism.

7. (Dis)Connection as a Site of Resistance: Turkish Mums' Activism on WhatsApp

Suna and I were sipping coffee in the yard of her apartment, surrounded by gigantic maritime pines with a gorgeous view of Gianicolense's hills. She started the conversation by saying: "I am very sorry; I don't know if I can be of help as I don't make great use of the internet, and I'm not on social media. I'm not on Facebook;

I don't write my stuff on a platform." I reassured her, joking that we had organised our meeting using WhatsApp, so we had something to talk about. I could not anticipate, at that moment, how prophetic those words were as Suna's use of WhatsApp was undoubtedly unprecedented compared to my other participants. Her use of social media was pretty much reduced to that. Indeed, she deleted her Facebook account in 2016, after a long time during which it was inactive. She considered Facebook a platform used by people mainly as a performative "tool" to show off, and she had no interest in it. Suna also expressed some anxiety related to X (formerly Twitter), which she was not using as a social media platform because it was most subjected to the dangers of state control and repression. It became clear that her disconnective practices were linked to the need to keep her life private and safe.

As Light (2014) points out, disconnective practices work in interplay with connective practices and act as a device to form different types of connections. Indeed, the necessity to feel safe brought Suna to discard specific digital media platforms while preferring others. She profusely used WhatsApp to maintain different relationships: from one-on-one, intimate ties with family and close friends, to those with fellow Turkish political activists. Like most Turkish women who participated in the study, Suna was performing a cosmopolitan identity as a diasporic subject whose social life in Rome was composed of an international and Italian circle of friends she knew at university. She displayed no interest in connecting with other Turkish migrants in her everyday life, neither online nor offline. She admitted that she began to connect with other Turkish people from the diaspora in Italy only many years after she arrived in Rome, and only for political reasons.

Suna started being politically active in one of the leading Turkish leftist parties of the opposition a few years before our meeting when the situation in Turkey was worsening under Erdogan's government. Indeed, she claimed that the republican values of laicism and democracy had been put under threat, with severe consequences, especially for women. Moreover, the changes to public education were among the reasons for her to stay in Italy, as she was worried for her children, claiming that this was also why most Turkish mothers who moved to Italy decided not to return. Paradoxically, her first contacts in Rome with Turkish people were internationally "mediated" through the party:

> I called *them* [people working in the party]...those from Turkey! The headquarters....I said: "I want to work [for you], can you help me? How should I prepare? Is there anyone [here in Rome] that I can contact?"—[they answered]: "No, there's nobody, so, as you are the one calling us, then it will be you. You need to create a group, to look for volunteers"—"Good!" I said. I mean, I had just finished my PhD, I didn't have a social life with them....I mean, I didn't even know a few Turkish people, not even. I had a friend from the PhD but she went back to Turkey, so, zero acquaintances. Then, after half an hour, they gave me the name of a person from Bari, she also called them like me, asking if there was someone who [was volunteering for the party] and so...they put us in contact. She knew one of the "mums" here in Rome. So, she gave me her number, and that mum put me in the group. I joined the mums' group not so much because I was interested in diapers or things like that....I was looking for volunteers!....By the end of the day, I completed the list, that is: them [the mums], their acquaintances, friends....Someone else knew a student, another one here and there...we made a group by the afternoon. So, a little network, but it worked! Yes. So that was [the story], and then I stayed [in the mums' group].

The "mums" group that Suna mentions is a WhatsApp group composed, at the time of my fieldwork, of about 30 Turkish mothers living in Rome. This group had a long genealogy: Initially it was created on Yahoo, then

it migrated to Facebook, finally landing on WhatsApp in more recent times. Initially, I knew about this group thanks to Dilara, who was the first one to mention it among the Turkish participants who had children. It is noteworthy that, for many of them, this group has been the only way to get in touch with other Turkish "expat" women who were living in Rome, so motherhood represented the first and often only common ground that pushed them to build diasporic relationships.

For some of them, the second common ground became political activism. Suna managed to involve many "mums" in the Roman branch of the party where she was volunteering, opening another WhatsApp group intended for conversations whose content was more specifically related to their political activities. In terms of connectivity, the creation of these two groups responded to different needs that these women had on a local level, as not all of the "mums" seemed interested in being politically involved in Suna's activities for one reason or another. The segmentation of their connective behaviour was also due to another motivation, which was their fear of being controlled, as the mums' WhatsApp group was more internally diverse from a political perspective, and sharing certain thoughts and opinions was felt by Suna to be potentially dangerous. As Suna highlighted:

> There are certain things that perhaps we want to say among ourselves…that I don't want *that person* [she refers to a particular woman in the mums' group] to know. So certain issues are discussed on the other side. The fear is about what is happening in Turkey at this moment. There are people who are pre-arrested, put under interrogation, for nothing. Because of two lines that they wrote to someone. *This person* might be a very good one, etcetera, but I don't know that.

Creating a different group was essential for Suna to ensure they had a safe space for political discussion, not exposing their ideas in the mum's group, which provided them with a less secure environment (Zhu & Skoric, 2023). Moreover, fear of control by the Turkish government and possible repercussions for them and their families back in Turkey pushed them to choose WhatsApp over Facebook for political activities, as it was perceived that the platform could guarantee greater protection from external control. In this sense, digital (dis)connection from specific platforms represents a form of political resistance based on acknowledging one platform's vulnerability, which diverts to others (Kaun & Treré, 2018; Lim, 2020). Indeed, the digital practices of Suna and the other women show how "social media activism takes shape in the context of the evolving state efforts to control internet communication" (Poell, 2015, p. 192). In this respect, my participant's accounts are reminiscent of Elisabetta Costa's (2016) research on the digital practices of Kurds living in Mardin, south of Turkey. Costa shows how repression and violence experienced at the hands of the Turkish state, state surveillance, and fear of retaliation led to the emergence of "public secrecy" and silence about political matters on social media platforms, especially on Facebook. Indeed, even if "the State continues to be their main object of fear, both offline and online…on social media, this sense of fear reaches even further because control is more widespread and diffuse than offline" (Costa, 2016, p. 136). The same dynamic seems to be happening to anti-Erdogan Turkish women activists in Rome, allowing the emergence of political (dis)connective practices, where different digital media affordances and platforms were strategically used to protect oneself and other activists from possible retaliation and to resist state control. Fear of control is undoubtedly one of the unfortunate products of Erdogan's authoritarian turn in Turkey, and its consequences for activists' digital practices highlight the scalability of private-public spheres for local and transnational diasporic sociality through digital media.

8. Conclusion

This study contributes to digital migration studies and studies on disconnective behaviour, offering an original approach that aims to unpack the interrelationships between diasporic identity formation and specific forms of (dis)connective practices in the diaspora. Indeed, while digital migration studies have mainly investigated diasporic forms of *connectivity* through digital media, little research has focused on diasporic identity formation in their interrelation with (dis)connective practices. Consequently, this study fills this gap, showing how connective and disconnective practices are two sides of the same coin (Light, 2014), equally important to a process of self-differentiation, which is functional in articulating migrants' identity and sense of belonging. The case of Turkish "expat" women in Rome showcases this dynamic. Indeed, their disconnective behaviour or connectivity with other Turkish migrants seems functional to articulating their own diasporic identity, mirroring the homeland's socio-political tensions transposed to the diaspora in complex and sometimes ambiguous ways. The study shows how their pre-migration socio-political positioning ruled out the quality and kind of sociality that they were willing to have within a diasporic context. Hence, they developed a "diasporic cosmopolitan" identity that they performed through specific forms of digitally mediated diasporic networking or lack thereof.

Moreover, this research intervenes in the field of studies about disconnective behaviour, highlighting its embeddedness in specific socio-political and cultural contexts and subjects' positioning within those contexts along the lines of gender, class, education, and ethnicity. In this respect, I show how disconnective behaviour needs to be understood beyond the mere lens of political polarization and its consequences for the quality of democratic debate. Indeed, disconnection practices among Turkish "expat" women living in Rome prove a more nuanced portrait of this dynamic in its intertwinement with identity formation and its consequences on the quality of diasporic sociality.

First, online political polarization within the diaspora seems to result from a broader dynamic initiated in the homeland and linked to Turkey's recent social and political history. Their experience of diasporic sociality can only be understood by grasping the impact of profound cultural and social changes experienced in the past two decades in Turkey. This means that the quality and motivations behind (dis)connective practices cannot be grasped if not through careful contextualisation, considering the complex intertwining of offline social and political dynamics with online ones. Second, considering this complex panorama, disconnective practices seem to be important strategies that women employ to protect themselves from state control and as a form of resistance (Lim, 2020), opening "safer" (Zhu & Skoric, 2023) spaces for political debate instead of curtailing it.

Meanwhile, this study presents some limitations, such as the small sample size and its focus on skilled professionals from affluent backgrounds, which limited its scope to one segment of the Turkish diaspora in Italy. For future research, it would be important to expand the sample to include a wider range of diasporic groups such as Turkish migrant women having lower income and lower educational backgrounds, who might experience different dynamics of digital (dis)connectivity and identity construction. In this sense, more in-depth inquiries about the agential value of these practices are needed in future research.

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Conflict of Interests

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Digital Dis/Connection as Everyday Boundary Work Among Hong Kong BN(O) Migrants in the UK

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Abstract

While digital media can be seen to keep alive social connections among migrants across borders, the impact of how digital disconnection has redrawn migrants' boundaries has not been adequately researched. Migrants subjected to the dual border-and-boundary work of Western host countries and their non-Western home countries make for complicated self–other boundary narratives. This study explores the everyday boundary work of migrants originating from Hong Kong, a former British colony, who have chosen to relocate to the UK through the British National (Overseas) (BN[O]) visa scheme. The scheme was catalysed by the 2019 political upheaval in Chinese Hong Kong and the UK–Hong Kong colonial affiliation. Through the lens of dis/connection assemblage, we conceptualise digital dis/connections as a form of boundary work and conduct in-depth interviews and thematic analysis of 14 BN(O)s. We demonstrate that digital disconnection can be seen as a socio-political practice related to identity regulation by situating BN(O)s' digital media practices within the political projects of belonging in the UK, Hong Kong, and China. Through a matrix of disconnected approaches, BN(O)s shape boundaries around identity politics in terms of social positions, a sense of belonging, and social relations. The political meaning of digital disconnection is highlighted through its fracture of connected space-time and resilient management of social relationships.

Keywords

borders; boundary work; digital connection; digital disconnection; Hong Kong; migration

1. Introduction

Following the handover from the UK to China on July 1, 1997, Hong Kong has been governed under the "one country, two systems" regime as committed to by the Sino-British Joint Declaration. However, 2019 saw the largest pro-democracy movement, the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement

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(Anti-ELABM), which opposed China's ability to extradite criminals from Hong Kong as an infringement of Hong Kong's judicial autonomy (Tang & Cheng, 2022). In response to Anti-ELABM's challenge to the Communist regime, the Chinese government passed the National Security Law in 2020 (Lee & Chan, 2023, p. 921). Its jurisdiction extends beyond local permanent residents ("Hong Kong national security law," 2022). China's extraterritorial jurisdictions, such as the enactment of the National Security Law, have been seen as a democratic setback in Hong Kong (Fong, 2021), as evidenced by the incarceration of hundreds of pro-democracy legislators and activists and the legalisation of press controls (Hamlett, 2023; Lee & Chan, 2023).

In the Sino-British Joint Declaration, a British National (Overseas) (BN[O]) passport was regarded as merely a travel document (Summers, 2021). However, the National Security Law's perceived breach of commitment to Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and democratic freedoms for Hong Kong people caused the UK to launch the BN(O) "5+1" visa scheme for Hong Kong residents who had filed for BN(O) citizenship prior to June 30, 1997. This enabled them to apply for British citizenship within one year of residing in the UK for five years (Home Office, 2021). The current re-empowerment of the BN(O) visa for the right of abode in the UK states "a 'Global Britain' that has 'taken back control' of its borders" (Benson, 2021, p. 14). By December 2022, 105,200 BN(O)s had arrived in the UK (Home Office, 2023), which is "one of the biggest waves of non-EU migration to the UK in postwar history" (Hawkins & James, 2023, para. 8).

A body of literature has examined the mutual influence of bordering practices and individual boundary-making in Europe (Cassidy et al., 2018; Scheibelhofer, 2020; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). However, they primarily focus on the tensions between Western governments and minority migrants within the EU, such as Roma, or forced migrants like refugees and asylum seekers. Insufficient research has been conducted on a vague category of non-Western migrants that falls between "potential displaced persons," "indentured migrants," and "anticipatory refugees" (Ullah & Azizuddin, 2022, p. 184), such as Hong Kong citizens with BN(O) status. The UK categorises the BN(O) visa as one of the "safe and legal" humanitarian routes that highlights the unique case of Hong Kong people in the context of the UK Conservative government's stringent border and immigration controls (Benson et al., 2024). However, as Benson et al. (2024) point out, the BN(O) visa requires beneficiaries to pay a sum of money to apply for the visa and support a minimum of six months of living expenses, which "sets a precedent in paying for protections" (p. 266), in contrast to other free humanitarian paths. This article situates BN(O) migrants' boundary work within mundane scenarios, focusing on the embeddedness of borderwork performed by people and states in everyday life (Rumford, 2008, 2013). It contributes to critical understandings of migration in the context of identity categorisation (Cassidy, 2020).

As the notion of "connected migrants" (Diminescu, 2008) illustrates, digital media can create a sense of concurrent presence in migrants' home and host countries to maintain transnational relationships. On the one hand, the connectedness of digital technology helps to develop bonding and bridging capital in both places of origin and local communities (Komito, 2011), as well as new attachments, a sense of belonging, and identities (Ponzanesi, 2020). On the other hand, digital connectivity may cause people's fatigue of perpetually online digital devices and privacy anxiety due to context collapse (Figueiras & Brites, 2022; Mols & Pridmore, 2021). For certain categories of migrants, such as refugees, digital connectivity may become "an uncomfortable imposition" (Awad & Tossell, 2021), leading to top-down experiences of surveillance, stress, trauma, and distress (Moran, 2023; Witteborn, 2022).

An inquiry into digital disconnection will thus contribute to contextualising individuals and communities to understand their agency and meaning-making of choosing not to use (certain) media. However, in an age where digital media are increasingly ubiquitous and saturated across the globe, digital disconnection as a tactic of resistance has hardly become prominent (Jorge, 2019). As Figueiras and Brites (2022, p. 838) indicate "disconnection is not the opposite of connection, but a way of establishing boundaries for connectivity in digital life," this suggests that an individual's choice between digital connection and disconnection may not be binary but rather selective and flexible. Drawing from concepts of Lamont and Molnár's (2002) boundary work concerning one's identity and Lim's (2020) dis/connection assemblage, we take BN(O) migrants as an entry point to discuss migrants' digital dis/connection practices as a resilient aggregation in doing everyday boundary work entangled in intricate power and media landscapes. Through interviews with 14 BN(O)s and thematic analysis, we examined how they navigated the tension created by the interactive border-and-boundary work within a transnational context. Our research questions focus on (a) what digitally connected and disconnected tactics are applied by BN(O)s in boundary-making, and, particularly, (b) what meanings of digital disconnection for migration are embodied by BN(O)s' boundary work.

2. Borders, Bordering, and Boundary Work

The notion of borders transcends geographical scope and migratory infrastructure. The discursive construction of a nation relies on the imagined and symbolic spatial understanding of local inhabitants towards "us" and "them" (Anderson, 2006; Fischer, 2020). That is, borderwork has not only been practiced on territorial margins but also permeated everyday life performed by institutions and individuals, which is everyday bordering (Scott & Sohn, 2019; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). Rumford (2013, p. 170) suggests studying individual engagement in everyday bordering, as "borderwork…causes us to rethink the issue of who is responsible for making, dismantling and shifting borders, rather than rely upon the assumption that this is always the business of the state." Concretely, social agents' process of bordering creates "socio-cultural, political and geographic distinctions" (Yuval-Davis, 2013, p. 10) in particular social positions and time-places (Yuval-Davis, 2013). In the political agendas of Western democracies, this bordering construction that classifies "us" and "them" is related to "different constructions of identity, belonging, and citizenship" (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019, p. 7). Thus, in contemporary society with hyper-connectivity and mobility, Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) advocate that rather than seeing borders as "new divisive imaginaries" (p. 18) and discourses, scholarship should investigate the "transformative functions" (p. 18) of borders and the colonised and racialised inclusion and exclusion they embody.

Lamont and Molnár (2002) divide boundaries into social boundaries and symbolic boundaries based on the material and conceptual classification of "objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (p. 168). The course of organising and producing these two kinds of boundaries is defined as boundary work, which refers to "the kind of typification system or interferences, concerning similarities and differences that groups mobilise to define who they are" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 171). Boundary work is achieved by a set of actors, including "nation-states, the media, political parties, and actors in everyday life" (Fischer et al., 2020, p. 480). Given that symbolic boundaries are "at the intersubjective level" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 169), boundary work in this article primarily refers to individual symbolic boundary work. Boundary work is a crucial tool for migrants to position their identities in the host country by leveraging their repertories such as cultural and educational capital (Bygnes, 2022).

Far from seeing borders and boundaries as two isolated dimensions, this text considers them as an interactive and negotiated process embedded in individual mundane lives. Borders regulate and empower social boundaries, while the consolidation of specific boundaries further naturalises imaginary borders in everyday life (Scheibelhofer, 2020). Cassidy's (2020) research on borderwork and boundary work, which Romanians in the UK renegotiate with local citizens and government, indicates that the intersection of border-and-boundary work better articulates the synergistic ordering and othering (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002) of the two towards a specific group. In this sense, we adopt Lamont and Molnár's (2002) boundary work approach, and aim to associate migrants' boundary-making represented in their digital practices with the influence of borderwork (Cassidy, 2020).

3. Digital Dis/Connection Assemblage

Based on the impact of actors and social structures, Kaun and Treré (2020) categorise previous disconnection studies into two types: individual voluntary and involuntary media non-use. On the one hand, the former reflects more autonomy in self-management and political participation. Disconnection may produce positive impacts on personal well-being and health (Figueiras & Brites, 2022). For instance, a digital detox is seen as an authentic lifestyle choice for individuals to reduce stress (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020); digital disconnection allows one to better fulfil social responsibilities in reality (Moe & Madsen, 2021) and to negotiate ambivalent self-identities (Agai, 2022). In terms of political practice, digital disconnection can also be viewed as "a powerful tool for political mobilization and social transformation" (Natale & Treré, 2020, p. 631). People can perform "social media abstinence" (Fish, 2017) to resist the repression of authorities or digital capitalism. Such grassroots lifestyle politics and resistance exhibited as a digital refusal (Kaun & Treré, 2020) may catalyse collective activism (Natale & Treré, 2020) and attain "social regulation" at the moral level (Fish, 2017, p. 366).

On the other hand, the latter demonstrates that historical and material conditions restrict the possibility of individual disconnection. Disconnection exhibits a systematic asymmetry, as it symbolises the privilege of the Global North, whilst the Global South may lack the essential infrastructure to facilitate such disconnection (Treré, 2021). Moreover, digital disconnection can function as a form of repression, in which governments and corporate institutions can suppress the resistance of subaltern actors strategically, such as through a mandatory cessation of digital services (Kaun & Treré, 2020). In response to this power-dominated disconnection, Lim (2020) highlights human agency in terms of resistance tactics from the political activism perspective and the interpersonal dimension. The dynamic of "dis/connection assemblage" (Lim, 2020) stresses that individuals and transformed collectives can leverage tactics of dis/connection across different media platforms and in online and offline sites to generate temporary visible and invisible political spaces to sustain de-territorialised and de-temporalised activism.

In general, the aforementioned studies of digital disconnection appear to show that connection and disconnection are a kind of socio-political boundary work traversing spatio-temporality (Jorge, 2019). We suggest that Lim's (2020) "dis/connection assemblage" framework effectively articulates media tactics by which people selectively differentiate and accommodate the boundaries of particular subjects and others to counter power in contrast to simply adopting seemingly defaulted measures of connectivity (Kaun & Treré, 2020). Temporally, the multiple enactments of this aggregation enable the ability to briefly gain control over self-realisation and social relations from hypermediated digital life and rapid capitalism (Jorge,

2019). Meanwhile, activists orchestrate long-term or short-term resistance through this provisionally established relationship between human and non-human artefacts (Lim, 2020). Spatially, the malleability of this assemblage can help individuals retrieve a lost sense of place and alternative authenticity beyond ubiquitous media platforms (Jorge, 2019; Karlsen & Syvertsen, 2016) and shatter the limitations of activism in territories, realities, and singular platforms for global activists (Lim, 2020). Hence by utilising dis/connection assemblage, this article contributes to expanding the scope of Lim's (2020) digital dis/connection repertoire to include migrants undergoing political turmoil and border and boundary studies.

4. The UK–Hong Kong–China context

The BN(O) context produces an interesting case study. The BN(O) visa enables Hong Kong citizens to study, reside, and work in the UK for two and a half or five years and apply for unrestricted permission to settle in the UK after five years of residence (Lewis, 2024), which has become a unique exemption in the context of the post-Brexit era and the Conservative government's tough words on immigration control (Ullah & Azizuddin, 2022). However, BN(O) identification, nominally denoting nationality status, remains an immigration visa. For example, BN(O) migrants are normally not eligible for the vast majority of public welfare (Home Office, 2021). Further, BN(O)s and their dependents have access to British public schooling (Department for Education, 2022) but are classified as international students in universities who need to pay higher tuition fees (Loi, 2023).

The "5+1" visa scheme has prompted the Chinese and Hong Kong governments to stop recognising the BN(O) passport as proof of identity and travel within China. Hong Kong citizens are restricted from using ID cards or Hong Kong passports for entry and exit into mainland China (Chen & Zhao, 2021). Moreover, to limit the flow of assets, the Hong Kong government prohibits BN(O) migrants from withdrawing funds from the Mandatory Provident Fund, a pension savings scheme in Hong Kong, on immigration grounds ("Hong Kongers who have fled," 2023).

As Dahinden et al. (2020) note, borderwork reproduces systemic unequal governance in "legal, infrastructural and spatial terms" (p. 513); this article argues that the identity and identity politics of BN(O) migrants provide an ambiguous otherness discourse construction that represents images of orientalised and westernised "Others" in dual territorial and societal arenas. The British government's historical justification and incomplete citizenship re-activation redraw the symbolic and social boundary over these Chinese BN(O) migrants, while Chinese authorities legitimise the strategies of excluding this group to counter their threat to the boundary-making of "the political community of belonging" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 204) in Hong Kong. Granted, these border-and-boundary regimes have substantial impacts on this group's boundary work; however, we seek to explore whether their digital practices are subservient to or challenge the normative definitions of us and them by both sovereign countries.

5. Hong Kong People's Politicised Identity and Digital Media (Non) Use

Following the handover, the authoritarian Chinese Communist regime's growing encroachment on Hong Kong's autonomy fuelled re-Chineseisation anxiety, stimulated localism, and fuelled anti-Chinese sentiment. It even revived nostalgic imagery of British colonial rule (Adorjan et al., 2021). Alongside the Anti-ELABM, many Hong Kong citizens increasingly developed a stronger Hongkonger identity, lowering or excluding

their Chinese identity (Lee, 2023). Further, the emerging Hong Kong diaspora has progressively promoted a distinct local Hong Kong identity and shunned their Chinese one in contrast with other overseas Chinese communities (Shum, 2023).

Political discourse in Hong Kong society has affected individuals' digital dis/connection. In the context of the increasingly polarised political stances of the pro-establishment camp (i.e., blue ribbons) and the pro-democracy camp (i.e., yellow ribbons) since the 2014 Umbrella Movement (Song et al., 2023), Skoric et al. (2016) note that while social media can promote citizens' political participation, digital disconnections on social media can also enhance it in periods of political conflict (Zhu & Skoric, 2022). For instance, the Umbrella Movement participants politically appropriated social media with disconnecting practices such as passive engagement and selective expression (Chu & Yeo, 2020). In the post-Umbrella Movement Hong Kong, unfriending on Facebook as a disconnecting practice can create a safe digital space for political expression, particularly for those marginalised in local politics, such as yellow ribbons (Zhu & Skoric, 2022). In order to circumvent the fear and surveillance induced by the National Security Law, democracy supporters and localists are more likely to engage in more active privacy management on Facebook to disconnect from unknown audiences or even from the platform (Mak et al., 2022).

Amidst Anti-ELABM, members of Hong Kong diaspora organisations and overseas activists employ public social media and private messaging platforms as a means of collective political mobilisation to foster connections among like-minded individuals and promote social campaigns, which inspires a sense of remote civic responsibility (Fong, 2022). At the micro-political level, Tang and Cheng (2022) elaborate that in the aftermath of the Anti-ELABM, pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong have persisted in their political resistance and constructed a pro-democracy identity through political consumption and digital activism in everyday life. However, whether Hong Kong citizens with new transitional social membership will sustain or alter everyday activism and their identities through digital dis/connection tactics remains inadequately researched. Studying their cross-platform digital dis/connection can contribute to a broader discussion of the role of digital media in one's boundary work that reconfigures self and collective in a transnational setting.

6. Methodology

6.1. Data Collection and Reflection

A set of semi-structured, in-depth interviews was conducted. Fourteen interviewees were recruited by using snowball sampling between March and November 2023 from the primary author's four different social circles and four respondents' recommendations (see Table 1). This method can facilitate reaching this low-profile group and building internal trust (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). The primary author self-identifies as a Hong Kong female resident and also left Hong Kong with this wave of migration. Despite relocating to the Netherlands due to her parents' not obtaining a BN(O) visa, similar mobility motivated her to conduct this study. We reflected that while being female may have enabled the interviewees to share their opinions more easily, close political positions and identities appeared to be more important in gaining the trust of this group.

Prior to the interviews, we reminded the respondents of the existence of the National Security Law and that it was unnecessary for them to disclose their involvement with social movements in Hong Kong, which was also beyond the scope of this study. We focused on their digital media practices after migration to the UK.

Table 1. Demographics of the respondents.

Number	Gender	Age	Occupation
1	F	30	Postgraduate student, job searching
2	M	54	Gardener in the UK, former company owner in Hong Kong
3	F	51	Nurse in the UK, former social worker in Hong Kong
4	M	51	Handyman in the UK, insurance company executive in Hong Kong
5	F	55	Former civil servant in Hong Kong
6	M	50	Engineer in the UK, former senior engineer in Hong Kong
7	M	20	University student
8	M	45	Company owner in Hong Kong
9	M	23	University student
10	F	60	Former civil servant in Hong Kong
11	F	13	Junior school student in the UK
12	M	58	Banker in the UK
13	M	55	Banker in the UK
14	F	28	Accountant in the UK

As per the research ethics process of the research university in the Netherlands and the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), all interviewees went through an informed consent process. This indicated the purpose of the study and that their responses would be de-identified and referred to by a code. No further data beyond the interview transcripts, such as social network information or connection to Hong Kong nationals, was collected for this research. Their personal information would be stored securely at a Dutch university for 10 years without being sent to Hong Kong. We have requested the interviewees' permission to quote partially anonymised information. In addition, the 13-year-old respondent was interviewed with the consent of her guardian. All respondents are digitally literate in using at least two digital media, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, in line with Hong Kong residents' high social media user share of 89.9% (Kemp, 2023).

The interviews lasted from 50 to 90 minutes and were held in Cantonese, the dominant daily language in Hong Kong (Fong, 2017). The interview questions centred on respondents' everyday life in the UK and Hong Kong, their experiences and perceptions of dis/connection in both places, and their digital media consumption. All the recordings were transcribed verbatim into Chinese transcripts by the native Cantonese-speaking primary author, some of which were translated into English by professional translators DeepL and Google Translate with light proofreading by the primary author for analysis. Another native English-speaking author pointed out some ambiguities in the translation. The recordings were subsequently erased.

6.2. Data Analysis

We coded the transcripts on Altas.ti 23, following the six steps of the thematic analysis indicated by Braun and Clarke (2006). In two stages, we interpreted and collated all the initial codes and categorised them into six sub-themes, ultimately refining three main themes around migrants' dis/connection experiences as the sections below show.

7. Findings

7.1. Articulating Identity in Disrupted Time

Upon migrating to the UK, most interviewees re-adjust their identity to organise their boundary work. Respondent 8, 45, a company owner contracting with the Hong Kong government for projects, says that he no longer updates Facebook after Anti-ELABM. He is concerned that his competitors will track his digital footprint and report that he has left Hong Kong since his industry regulations normally forbid executives to depart; otherwise, he would be fined by the Hong Kong government. Nevertheless, his political dissent towards the government has driven him to resettle in the UK, despite the potential threat of being tracked down by the Hong Kong Immigration Department:

> Even though I have a company in Hong Kong, I don't want to pay tax to such a government anymore. I would rather contribute to the UK. Although there is no welfare in the UK currently, at least I sponsor my child to study here, and we live happily here, right? Why should I stay in Hong Kong, where I would be arrested if I just looked at a policeman a bit longer? Now I keep telling people I'm British and not a Hongkonger. Of course, I don't look white, but I think I'm British. I'm living here, and I'll probably be here when I'm old, sick, and dead.

Respondent 8's comments indicate the impacts of the British and Hong Kong governments' bordering on his digital disconnection from his social network, given that both authorities legally require individuals to stay local. He actively engages in and resists defined border-and-boundary work by violating the Hong Kong industry regulations to remain in the UK. His choice not to update Facebook is conscious of the need to be low-profile and distant from Hong Kong politics. Additionally, Respondent 8 consciously perceives the racialised (white British community) and subaltern (no welfare) connotations of everyday bordering for migrants in the UK, notwithstanding his justification of British identity and a sense of belonging with the economic capital and right to stay.

Likewise, Respondent 5 (55, former Hong Kong civil servant) is "very guarded about social media" and hardly ever appears on social media platforms such as Facebook. She is concerned about the perils of information dissemination and interpersonal surveillance. Her inactivity has forged a long-term discreet and practical virtual self. When *Apple Daily*, the largest pro-democracy newspaper in Hong Kong, was abruptly shut down on the grounds of allegedly endangering national security (Davidson, 2021), Respondent 5 was prompted to respond. She published a post in remembrance of *Apple Daily* when it was shut down, her last Facebook post to date. Just this post made Respondent 5's friend worry about her taking a risk she would not normally take. This connection emerging after a long period of disconnection seems to demonstrate Respondent 5's act as an "activist citizen" (Isin, 2009):

> If I post something, I presuppose that everyone will see it. So what? Is this a crime? Oh, now I don't know if it's illegal, haha. Back then, I posted this; I felt I wanted to voice it, and it was done in a situation where I felt safe to do so.

While Respondent 5 jokingly describes the dangers of the Hong Kong government's national security work, it influences her boundaries on social media, as is clear in her emphasis on personal safety. She says she

would like to inform her friends about the post, despite the possible unfriending by some people. This solitary transgressive act on Facebook both connects her with like-minded friends and disconnects her from people who would unfollow her over her political position and expression. This form of digital dis/connection thus re-anchors interpersonal boundaries for her that are simultaneously safe, not over-informed, and actively self-revealing.

Respondents 8 and 5's proactive disconnection tactics on the timeline of social media also demonstrate the socio-political context of how a home country shapes the identity dissonance, distancing, and negotiation processes of marginal migrant groups (Simon & Behnjharachajarunandha, 2023). While digital technologies facilitate immediacy and co-occurrence of communication across borders, digital disconnection interrupts these temporalities and serves as a mediator for migrants to express self-motivation and locate identity, whether they detach from one or any social platform. Disconnection as a form of resistance, therefore, may break habitus (Isin, 2008) and foster new subjectivities and emotions in acts that define the self and the other.

7.2. Re-Negotiating Belonging in Obstructed Spaces

Kaun and Treré (2020) interpret a form of digital disconnection as everyday lifestyle politics, which is characterised by individualised politics and aims to mitigate the power of technology over the pace of real life and the state of mind and body. As the crossing of borders leads to a shift in living space, BN(O)s reconfigure the sense of belonging in reality through varying degrees of disconnection to the virtual world.

For Respondent 1 (30, postgraduate), she tends to relocate to a place of greater cultural attachment:

> When I was in Hong Kong, my friends thought I was rather British—I mean, my lifestyle. I don't feel attached to Hong Kong's superficial social culture. I've just been relatively comfortable being myself since I moved to the UK.

Respondent 1 compares Britain and Hong Kong culturally, later indicating that Hong Kong's social culture, characterised by overwhelming photo-taking and oversharing on social media, fails to represent her. In contrast, she appreciates British culture's focus on realistic interactions. The resettlement from Hong Kong to the UK through the BN(O) visa allowed Respondent 1 to gain a genuine sense of self and belonging. Her dis/connection with social media establishes a sociocultural boundary between the two places. The pursuit of authenticity in Western everyday life entails Respondent 1 re-scrutinising technology and her social ties. To prevent the detrimental effects of media on the human body, mind, and aesthetics, she takes a critical approach to engaging in social media consumption. She elaborates:

> I don't fancy seeing celebrities' overwhelmingly beautiful pictures [on Instagram]. They somehow affect people's aesthetics when they are so sensational. You know that's not the reality. I am very conscious of what information I want to take, especially when I have to stay alone overseas.

Respondent 10 (60, former Hong Kong civil servant) however, has a blurred understanding of belonging. She only watches court news related to social movement trials in Hong Kong and a channel created by a former Hong Kong news team documenting the lives of immigrants on YouTube, while never following the

entertainment life in Hong Kong and the UK. She recognises that Hong Kong is no longer her place after 2019, yet neither is the UK. Such selective and distant socio-political dis/connection with Hong Kong online has increasingly transformed her sense of belonging. She now sees herself as living with more of a cosmopolitan mindset:

> I think Hong Kong has become less of a home as I used to know it, and I don't want to see the current Hong Kong as a home anymore. Ever since I migrated, I don't feel like the UK is my home either. It is a place where I live, and I have to work hard to get to know it or to get its nationality. There is a sense of belonging when it comes to home. I sometimes have the feeling that no matter how hard I try, I can't make this place my home. So, broadly speaking, I would say that I have a strong feeling of sojourning in this global village.

BN(O)s' situated disconnection reflects their nuanced awareness of belonging and lifestyle in transnational placemaking, such as Respondent 1's references to conspicuous aesthetics on social media and media intake concern. Respondent 1 marks the boundary between reality and digital engagement in ways similar to digital detox approaches, that is, periodic disconnection from digital media to regulate the pace of reality. It mirrors the individual responsibility discourses of pursuing a self-optimised lifestyle, regaining control over the space and time occupied by media, and advancing mental and physical well-being (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Moreover, Respondent 10's digital media practice in a liminal space represents the indeterminate sentimental boundary and agency in refusing to fully integrate and alienate oneself from the host and home countries. Notably, it is also empowered and constrained by the regimes' projects of border governance. Although digital technologies can shorten the distance of information transmission and facilitate borderless integration, the bounded barrier of digital disconnection between BN(O)s and their hometown reimagines and negotiates migrants' understandings of multiple spatial connections and statuses of everyday life.

7.3. Managing Relationships With Contextual Resilience

The National Security Law arguably constructs a discourse of state political borderwork and classed boundary work which intensifies the antagonism of political positions between pro-establishment and pro-democracy in Hong Kong society. In this context, it entails migrants managing incompatible relationships more flexibly.

The technological affordances provide mechanisms for the permissibility or constraint of objects to authorise the behaviour of subjects (Davis & Chouinard, 2016). In this sense, leveraging the visible and invisible affordances of technology helps fine-tune the management of emotions and privacy. Respondent 2 often follows the political dynamics of Hong Kong and China on Facebook, while his "quirk" is that he mutes news videos that affect his mood, such as Yeung Yun-hung's (Hong Kong's former Secretary for Education) views on film censorship in Hong Kong, and only watches subtitles. The Facebook mute function design therefore permits Respondent 2 to detach his political emotions while connecting with topicality in both locations.

Another example is Respondent 4 (51, insurance company executive in Hong Kong), who safeguards his privacy through the geolocation setting. He has two mobile phones that are respectively equipped with UK and Hong Kong SIM cards. The UK number is mainly used for contacting family in Hong Kong and people in the UK, whereas the phone bearing the Hong Kong number is installed with WeChat, a mainstream mainland

Chinese social platform, which is exclusively used for contacting his insurance clients in China. He concedes, "I won't install WeChat on my UK phone. It's undoubtedly under China's surveillance; you don't even need to wonder about it [WeChat's surveillance]." Respondent 4 suggests here that WeChat is the incarnation of power that extends the Chinese government's control over borders to other territories. His technological tactics that both traverse and manage (social) network boundaries act to resolve both his political expressions and professional needs.

Respondent 3 (51, former government social worker) re-weighs the importance of relationships after relocation to the UK. She exclusively uses WhatsApp to make calls rather than texting to connect with her friends in Hong Kong due to political concerns. Her perspectives on democracy caused her to strategise about how best to reconnect with peers who hold a contrary political position and partially circumvent their opinions:

> I think good friends are forever, and they think so too. I may not understand them sometimes because I'm not in their context anymore…but what we social workers are best at is listening. Friends won't stop talking to you just because you don't understand them. The reason I left Hong Kong is because there is no justice. But she [a pro-government friend] doesn't think that way. Then I take it [politics] a bit lighter. I try to see her other merits. Except for her political stance, she's a very nice person. To me, she must also have compromised something. Not just me to her.

Apart from outright or gradual disconnection, Respondent 5 (55, former Hong Kong civil servant) values the function of boundary rules. Facing siblings and friends with opposite political opinions, she underscores respect, as "everyone has a different growth trajectory. You always have other incompatible things." She clarifies, "I don't necessarily discuss politics in a baking group on WhatsApp. It is basic respect. My bottom line is that any group should have some common goals and rules. I will follow them."

These migrants' relational disengagement suggests that digital disconnection is not inevitably a complete refusal or resistance to relationships but rather an intentional exclusion from certain things such as political ideas, behaviours, and inconsistent rules. Disengagement is multi-layered, through which people may step back from "certain normative spaces and forms of sociality and behaviour" (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019, p. 906). Furthermore, digital dis/connection is not one-way and monolithic, which may channel the reconnection or drift apart for both parties in a constant engagement. In this regard, digital dis/connection acts as "a continuum of motivations," bridging online and offline environments through technological negotiation (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019), which ultimately affects their transnational social networking across host and home countries. That is, digital disconnection enables migrants to differentiate and regulate the intensity and depth of connections contextually. However, these cases also show that individual digital disconnections are also under surveillance by power, which resonates with the characterisation that digital platforms do not necessarily lead to equal cross-border connections for migrants but may aid top-down suppression (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2024).

8. Conclusion

This article examines the mediated boundary work of BN(O)s through the lens of dis/connection assemblage. On the one hand, BN(O)s have shaped boundaries around identity politics in terms of social positions, a

sense of belonging, and social relations through approaches such as low profile, sudden use of social media, selective access to media content, and abstinence on social media. Their boundary-making is not entirely segmented and completed at once, but instead consists of flexible situated practices. This answers the first research question. On the other hand, the BN(O) visa is a transitional immigration status to settlement, intertwined with partial deprivation of civil rights, political controversy, and the legacy of colonial history. Reacting to the political projects of belonging woven by the borderwork of the UK, Hong Kong, and China, BN(O)s' boundary work demonstrates that digital disconnection can be politicised as micro-resistance and naturalised as an everyday practice of state–individual interactions. By leveraging digital disconnection's fracture of connected space-time and resilient management of social relationships, BN(O)s attain an agentic governance of the self, which thus challenges, adapts to, or synergises with the institutional governance of politics of belonging. It answers the second research question. Overall, this article illustrates that the synergy of border-and-boundary work towards non-Western migrants contributes to expanding on the "vernacularised transformation" of border studies (Rumford, 2013), which suggests that "borders can be located 'away from the border' and dispersed throughout society" (p. 171), and sheds light on digital disconnection as a political practice of identity regulation.

Some limitations remain. We note that BN(O)s are subjected to state- and platform-led visible and invisible everyday policing when enacting digital disconnection. Whether this logic of visibility that emphasises being seen on digital platforms may engender individual vulnerability and precariousness (Talvitie-Lamberg et al., 2022), even if this is only a temporary curation for migrants, and whether invisibility can create a power vacuum of micropolitical resistance, requires further reflection on the empowerment of digital disconnection. In this sense, we acknowledge that there are limits to the agency of digital disconnection. Although Lim (2020) suggests that the dis/connection assemblage provides a channel for people travelling across "spaces of appearance and spaces of disappearance" (p. 624), thereby sustaining the potential for micro-level political resistance, to what extent can an individual's digital dis/connection implement one's free will and be perceived as active political participation (Casemajor et al., 2015), as the surveillance culture is increasingly normalised by sovereign states and commercial platforms? This seems to signal that digital technologies bring solidarity while extending realities of unequal landscapes such as individual differences in media literacy (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2024). In the case of the BN(O) visa, migrants' mediated practices are politically complicated by the intersection of border and boundary work. With the increase of BN(O)s in the UK, digital disconnection may be shaping the diaspora's new political discourse and (sub) socio-culture in response to more hegemonic border narratives that are legitimised by sovereign states. Whether disconnection will be passive, or an active radical political refusal, requires us to rethink the relationship between political engagement and digital technologies. Therefore, while BN(O)s are pro-democracy and digitally literate in this article, future research should consider those with diverse political alignments, media literacy, gender, and sexuality.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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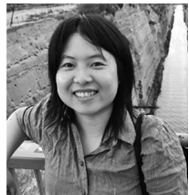

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ARTICLE

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Ghosting on Tinder: Examining Disconnectivity in Online Dating

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Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of ghosting on the mobile dating app Tinder among Slovenia's dating app users. Ghosting is defined as the unexpected unilateral termination of communication in interpersonal relationships exerted through digital platforms. Drawing upon data from the walkthrough of the mobile dating app Tinder and 26 semi-structured interviews with users living in Ljubljana (Slovenia), ghosting is conceptualized as an undesirable but normalized disconnection strategy on Tinder. We argue that choosing ghosting as a communication strategy emerges predominantly from two different contexts. Firstly, from the need to protect oneself from harassment and vulnerability, and secondly, as a reaction to the information overload in an environment that demands perpetual activity, availability, and interaction. Therefore, it manifests as a disconnection strategy on an interaction level or as a consequence of disconnecting from the platform itself. According to users, the desire to disconnect from others and exit the app is as high and ambiguous as the desire to connect and experience an ego boost or the excitement of interactions. Ghosting on Tinder, therefore, emerges as a response to general hyperconnectivity to navigate the increasing information overload and to a feeling of loss of the possibilities for safe and authentic connections in digital spaces.

Keywords

digital disconnection; ghosting; hyperconnectivity; information overload; safety strategy; Tinder

1. Introduction

In the past decade, mobile dating applications (MDAs) have seen a significant rise in popularity and availability. These apps leverage GPS technology to enable immediate, location-based connections, creating an environment that seamlessly merges digital and physical interactions, facilitating fluid transitions between the two. Among dating apps that establish this "hybrid ecology" (Toch & Levi, 2013), Tinder stands

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out as a particularly prominent example, enabling 1.6 billion swipes and claiming responsibility for 26 million matches daily (Lindner, 2023) with 75 million active users, and 10.4 million subscribers in 2023 (Mansoor, 2024). Those high numbers indicate increased access and partner options for Tinder dating app users. The growing user base and the platformization of dating (Bandinelli, 2022) have transformed how individuals initiate encounters and engage in flirtation, as well as how they terminate interactions and exit relationships. One notable practice in this context is ghosting, which has become a prevalent communication strategy on mobile dating apps over the past decade (Collins et al., 2023; LeFebvre et al., 2019; Van de Wiele & Campbell, 2019).

Ghosting is the practice of unilaterally ending an interaction without explanation and avoiding any further communication with the (potential) partner, commonly enacted via one or multiple technological medium(s) (LeFebvre, 2017). This study aims to examine ghosting within the context of disconnection practices. Based on the results of our research, ghosting emerges not only as a mechanism for protection against undesirable interactions but also as a consequence of the overwhelming flow of interactions and the continuous demands for availability and engagement in digital environments. Consequently, this study seeks to conceptualize ghosting as both a method of disengaging from interpersonal connections and how it is more broadly connected to digital disconnection practices. This dual perspective provides a comprehensive understanding of ghosting's role and its implications in the digital social sphere.

Substantial scholarly attention has been devoted to exploring the phenomenon of ghosting and the broader concept of digital disconnection. Research has focused on the adverse emotional consequences experienced by individuals who have been ghosted (Koessler et al., 2019; Konings et al., 2023; Navarro et al., 2020), the coping strategies following the experience of being ghosted (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Timmermans et al., 2021), and ghosting within the specific setting of dating apps (Halversen et al., 2022; Narr & Luong, 2023; Van de Wiele & Campbell, 2019). At the same time, digital disconnection studies have primarily focused on voluntary disconnection from specific devices, platforms, social networking services (SNS), and digital media in general (Altmaier et al., 2024). The latest research by Nassen et al. (2023) supports this finding, defining five levels of disconnection: device-level, platform-level, feature-level, interaction-level, and message-level. Additionally, they identify six core motivations (perceived overuse, social interactions, psychological well-being, productivity, privacy, and perceived usefulness) and various strategies of disconnection (quitting, taking breaks, reducing, switching, and using tools) present in the existing literature. Furthermore, Nassen et al. (2023, p. 13) propose a working definition for voluntary digital disconnection as an intentional non-use of digital technologies or their features at varying frequencies and durations to control and improve perceived overuse, social interactions, psychological well-being, privacy, and productivity.

2. Ghosting on Mobile Dating Apps

In recent years, research on ghosting on MDAs has proliferated, but there has not been uniform agreement on its definition. Kay and Courtice (2022, p. 406) have proposed an empirically accessible definition of ghosting as a "relationship dissolution strategy that requires the termination of all communication and occurs suddenly without explanation, unilaterally by one of the partners." Other research has emphasized the role of information and communication technologies in ghosting, as it is "primarily enacted using mediated communication" (LeFebvre et al., 2019, p. 133). Technologically mediated rejection or relationship dissolution is often used to avoid uncomfortable or negative reactions and is practiced across diverse types

of relationships (Halversen et al., 2022; LeFebvre et al., 2019). Since the present research focuses on Tinder, understanding ghosting as a technologically mediated dating practice that can happen in various stages of relationships is crucial. This article stands in agreement with LeFebvre et al. (2019) and LeFebvre and Fan (2020) that ghosting does not take place only in formal romantic relationships; it can occur within any interpersonal relationship where communication is established. According to Šiša (2022, p. 4), ghosting "requires a one-sided expectation that interaction will happen and continue developing, and that termination then comes as a surprise." In the digital environment of MDAs, there is a mutual expectation among users that communication is directed towards "future horizons" (Veel & Thylstrup, 2021, p. 204), typically culminating in at least one date.

Ghosting on Tinder can be used in a variety of ways, from not initiating an interaction once a match is established, not responding to messages when a potential partner makes first contact, to unmatching mid-conversation, or ending contact after the first or several dates. At the same time, studies have revealed that interface elements such as swiping (left), unmatching, and blocking are common methods of rejection, underscoring the unique affordances of the platform that are not present in offline interactions (Van de Wiele & Campbell, 2019, p. 44). Outside of dating apps, ghosting includes ignoring communication attempts and terminating communication channels, especially unfollowing ex-partners on social media (Collins et al., 2023). Ghosting can therefore occur at any stage of an interaction or relationship and leaves behind a feeling of uncertainty that goes hand in hand with the uncertain environment of gamified MDAs (Isisag, 2019; Mackinnon, 2022). The affordances of MDAs, which prioritize image-based partner selection and enable mobility, alongside the gamification of dating that encourages superficial interactions and the commodity-like treatment of users, contribute to emotional detachment and may facilitate the practice of ghosting. Reports from individuals who engage in ghosting indicate that the action is often unintentional and is not necessarily undertaken with malicious intent. Rather, it is often perceived as a protective measure against aggressive advances (Timmermans et al., 2021, p. 16). Similarly, Halversen et al. (2022) demonstrate that on Bumble, women often utilize ghosting to end early relationships non-confrontationally, especially when the potential for negative reactions is present. The literature also shows that frequent use of computer-mediated communication may contribute to communication burnout or "Tinder fatigue" (Solovyeva & Laskin, 2022) and negatively impact users' well-being (Her & Timmermans, 2021). The study by Navarro et al. (2020) demonstrates that ghosting is common in short-term relationships characterized by minimal commitment, suggesting that technological platforms facilitate easier dissolution of relationships lacking emotional ties, potentially perpetuating a cycle where individuals who engage in or experience ghosting are predisposed to further short-term interactions.

3. Voluntary Digital Disconnection

Connection and disconnection are inherently intertwined and mutually necessary (Light, 2014). In the mediatized (see Couldry & Hepp, 2013) and datafied (see van Dijck & Poell, 2013) world, there is an ever-present mobile connectivity paradox. It encapsulates the dual nature of mobile technology, enhancing autonomy by allowing flexible, anytime-anywhere access to information and communication, yet simultaneously undermining it by diverting attention and control from people's primary activities (Vanden Abeele, 2021, p. 934). The infrastructure enabling individual addressability fosters a global culture of omnipresent connectivity (see Lupinacci, 2021), wherein expectations of immediate availability and response impose constraints on personal freedom, leading to perceived pressures and new responsibilities in

managing one's connectivity and accountability (Vanden Abeele et al., 2018). There is an inclination to alleviate these pressures that correlate with the pursuit of deeper social interactions facilitated by the non-use of mobile media and deliberate disconnection from digital devices (Karlsen & Syvertsen, 2016; Light & Cassidy, 2014).

Disconnection is a fundamental aspect of social media practices, serving various purposes such as maintaining safety and managing relationships (Light, 2014). Light and Cassidy (2014) identify common strategies for interpersonal disconnection on SNSs, including permanently or temporarily removing relationships, suspending engagement with SNSs, unfriending, and altering how SNSs and their users record events, actions, and associations. Concerning the notion of safety, existing research on "interaction-level disconnection practices" (Nassen et al., 2023) primarily focuses on "politically motivated unfriending" on SNSs (Zhu, 2023). Zhu and Skoric (2022) understand politically motivated unfriending as a form of selective avoidance that can sometimes be motivated by psychological discomfort or conflict. In the context of politically motivated unfriending on instant messaging platforms, users disconnect to protect their well-being, protect personal safety, and minimize social risks (Zhu & Skoric, 2023). Barnidge et al. (2023, p. 1032) found that selective avoidance is more likely in larger diverse networks with weak ties, acting as a form of boundary maintenance to manage political diversity. Overall, these studies illustrate that disconnection practices are employed to avoid conflict and ensure personal safety on SNSs.

Digital disconnection encompasses various practices aimed at managing individuals' time and well-being in response to neoliberal demands for optimization (Jorge et al., 2022). These practices address issues like the overuse of digital technologies, low productivity, and imbalance in mobile connectivity (Vanden Abeele, 2021), often suggesting individual responsibility and the use of technology itself as a solution (Jorge et al., 2022; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Nevertheless, motivations for disengaging from digital technologies are influenced by platform or device-related factors, social pressures, and personal circumstances (Nguyen, 2021). Among others, key reasons are personal perceptions of excessive usage and information overload (Franks et al., 2018). For instance, youths in Norway and Portugal report frustration and a sense of meaninglessness from excessive social media use, with boredom driving both engagement and disengagement (Jorge et al., 2023). Prolonged and excessive use of digital platforms can lead to emotional exhaustion and diminished interest or "online fatigue"(Gregersen et al., 2023). Petit (2015, pp. 177–178) speaks of "digital disaffect," a hypnotic state of boredom, detachment, ennui, and malaise, marked by a repetitive cycle of engagement without fulfillment. This author claims that this sensation parallels the Tantalus myth, where the gratification promised by the internet always remains just out of reach, leading to an endless series of clicks. Or as Paasonen (2021, p. 124) describes it: "The disaffected have seen the same thing before—been there, done that, with nothing new left to see." This author claims that despite the promise of immediate gratification, users often face delays in finding and accessing desired content. They embark on a quest for the perfect image or scene, only to find inadequate options, leading to an ongoing, frustrating, yet enticing search that is both boring and exciting.

The phenomenon of disconnection on dating applications represents an underexplored area within academic research. Despite the growing socio-cultural significance of these platforms, scholarly investigations into the reasons and effects of voluntarily ceasing their use are sparse. Brubaker et al. (2016) identified four primary reasons for users leaving Grindr: its time-consuming nature, problematic behaviors, challenging interpersonal interactions, and objectionable app features. Users often perceive Grindr as a distraction, with communication deemed laborious and ineffective. Most users exit by deleting the app, some by deleting

their accounts or anonymizing profiles, with the study highlighting social aspects such as losing access to other users and withdrawing from Grindr's overarching culture. Vares (2023), on the other hand, focuses on users leaving Tinder and is similarly dedicated to showing the termination of the use of Tinder as a gradual process. The most frequent reason for leaving Tinder was "the success in finding the relationship" (Vares, 2023, p. 976) but there was a recurring pattern in which they would delete their dating applications at the onset of a new relationship, only to revisit these platforms if the relationship subsequently dissolved.

4. Methodological Approach

This study formed part of a larger doctoral project on technologically mediated dating practices and intimate relationships on Tinder in Slovenia. In the first stage of data collection, we employed the "walkthrough method" (Light et al., 2018), which involved the analysis of the organizational materials (Tinder's technical blog and press releases, marketing materials including app store information, formal terms of services, the frequently asked questions section, media articles about the app, etc.) to better understand Tinder's environment of expected use. We compiled these documents, focusing on the period from the beginning of 2019 to the end of 2021. Furthermore, the method included a technical walkthrough of Tinder's mobile interface to identify discrete affordances and examine the app's features and functionalities that might typically go unnoticed during regular use. To thoroughly explore Tinder's technical architecture, we created two research accounts, one in March and one in November 2021, taking screenshots and field notes throughout. We synthesized data from these technical walkthroughs and utilized a hybrid approach to thematic analysis, combining deductive a priori coding with data-driven inductive coding to integrate existing research findings while allowing codes to emerge directly from the data. We focused on codes connected to the affordances of the app, for example "unmatch," "ghosting," "safety feature," and "deleting the app."

In the meantime, we conducted the second stage of data collection. From April to July 2021, we interviewed 26 Tinder users with ages between 18–35-years-old living in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Our sample includes 17 women and 9 men. We decided to include semi-structured in-person interviews to better grasp how users engage with Tinder's interface and we encouraged them to interact with the app during the interviews. This approach closely aligns with the "media go-along" method (Jørgensen, 2016; Møller & Robards, 2019), in which the researcher observes and steers participants through their interactions with the app being studied. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and pseudonymized. First, we merged both data sources and, using an already existing template, undertook a comprehensive process of initial data coding. Although certain codes were predetermined, we allowed for a specific degree of flexibility, accommodating inductive coding where the empirical material warranted it. At this point, codes relevant to user experience were formed such as "overload," "boredom," and "harassment." Finally, after axial and selective coding (Boeije, 2010), three overarching themes that captured the phenomenon of ghosting as a disconnection practice as described in the raw data were identified. Themes such as "ghosting as a disconnection safety strategy," "digital overload leading to disconnection," and "ghosting as an outcome of digital disaffect" emerged. These themes were instrumental in organizing our findings coherently and systematically.

5. Ghosting as a Disconnection Strategy for Safety on Tinder

Ghosting on Tinder can occur by using the "unmatch only" or "report & unmatch" features within the "security toolbox," framing unmatching as a safety feature and allowing users to unmatch at their discretion due to

discomfort, safety concerns, or changing their minds. While Tinder does not explicitly link unmatching to ghosting, it provides guidelines where ghosting is appropriate, such as inconsistent communication, consent breaches, safety issues, dishonesty, and general unease (Tinder, n.d.). The "unmatch" feature in dating apps works in the same manner as unfriending in other social media. The user needs permission to be someone's friend, however, no permission is needed to unfriend them (Sibona, 2014). As most of our female participants confirmed, they utilize unmatching mostly when feeling uncomfortable or harassed. Vita unmatched a man who mocked her during a video call after initially matching without a photo. Hana noted that inappropriate vulgar messages are common among Tinder users: "Some of the conversations were awkward, I got many unsolicited dick pics. I really didn't like it. How does a person I just met think it is appropriate to send me a dick pic. Why?" She decided to ghost and unmatch this user, as well as block his number on Viber. The same strategy was used by Maša on many occasions: "If he's bothering me and I don't want to talk to him, I just unmatch him and that's it. I won't put effort into every match that messages me." Female participants mentioned a wide range of "technology-facilitated sexual violence behaviors" (Filice et al., 2022), in-person stalking, and harassment that have mostly been resolved by terminating contact with the perpetrator.

In general, women speak of technologically facilitated and in-person sexual harassment while using MDAs (Douglass et al., 2018) and experience it as ordinary, expected, and normalized (Gillett, 2021). As Sandra describes, women often feel apprehensive about the uncertainty of meeting strangers through Tinder: "When I was in Croatia, I was talking to a guy who wanted to come to my location. After some time, I changed my mind and didn't reply to him, as I didn't know him." Despite the absence of any overt harassment, Sandra chose to adopt these safety measures in anticipation of a potentially unsafe situation, effectively engaging in ghosting by terminating the match. Similarly, Ema ghosted a man who was insisting on "Netflix and Chill": "He didn't understand that I wasn't going to come to his apartment. I don't know who he is or what his situation at home is—there could be another guy there for all I know. So, I ghosted him." Refusing to accept rejection was therefore a common motivation among women who decided to ghost men. Julija explained: "Basically, I ended up ghosting people because guys didn't understand 'no' and explaining that something didn't suit me or couldn't work didn't make a difference." Similarly, Ada described a situation when she felt that ghosting was the only possibility:

> It was a situation where he wanted more than I did. After I explained this to him, he didn't accept it and continued to communicate as if nothing had happened, repeatedly asking when we should meet. In the end, I concluded that the only way for him to understand that I didn't want anything with him was to stop communicating. I'm not happy about it, but I didn't feel like there was any other option.

On Tinder, ghosting is one of the disconnection strategies that women use to protect themselves against risks, harassment, and violence (Freedman et al., 2022), even if they are not directly exposed to danger. Ghosting is a practice with uncertain outcomes (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020), as one cannot always predict how others will react to rejection, which can potentially result in harassment. Halversen et al. (2022, p. 16) found that women on Bumble repeatedly use the practice of ghosting, on the one hand, to avoid confrontations that could cause negative reactions, and, on the other hand, to avoid directly hurting or embarrassing someone. Our findings can be reinforced by the research on politically motivated unfriending on instant messaging platforms (Zhu & Skoric, 2023). Prevailing motivations for unfriending others in uncertain political contexts were protecting personal well-being and safety and reducing social risks. As authors concluded, politically motivated unfriending is "a product of systemic problems, rather than individual choices alone"

(Zhu & Skoric, 2023, p. 11), since the users who see themselves as victims of an oppressive system are more likely to delete or block someone. Similarly, when establishing connections on Tinder, female users are aware of safety issues that stem from patriarchal social relations where gender-based violence is prevalent. In this context, ghosting is about avoiding unpleasant future situations (Chan, 2018, pp. 308–309; Timmermans et al., 2021, p. 16), as fear stems from the possibility that users will be violent or is the response to harassment (Gillett, 2021).

Nevertheless, on Tinder, users aim to connect with a diverse array of strangers for various relationships and connection is central to the use of dating apps. Ghosting as a practice of dissolution of interaction in many cases may therefore feel like a microaggression of being rejected and excluded without explanation (see Wu & Bamishigbin, 2024). As explained by Denis, ghosting affects a person's self-esteem, since "the most unpleasant thing is that people just stop answering your messages in the middle of a conversation." He claims that "in person, no one would walk away in the middle of a conversation. On Tinder, however, this is the most common outcome of the conversation." According to Karppi (2018, p. 24), disconnections arise and evolve alongside connections, presenting as partial, dissonant, and sometimes violent disruptions to the unifying process of connectivity. While these disconnections may appear brief and irrelevant, their effects are substantial. Whereas social media and dating platforms aim to create a connected world, disconnections can reveal the imperfections and cracks in these seemingly cohesive networks. Ghosting on dating apps reveals the impossible mission of everyone meeting a partner and transcending gender-based violence.

Overall, female users have a different understanding of connecting and disconnecting on Tinder from male users. This is not surprising since research on technologically facilitated sexual violence shows that certain groups, including women and girls, sexual and gender minorities (e.g., LGBTQ+ individuals), and people of color, are disproportionately at risk (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Powell & Henry, 2019). Women mostly do not feel the obligation to respond to every message, even though they have matched with someone. Iva is very certain regarding this issue: "I've noticed that men have the idea that if you have Tinder, it means you've signed a contract. I just don't see it that way. I have Tinder for no reason, it's fun and I ghost all the time." This is something Maša also agrees with: "It seems to me that the platform itself…it is not necessary for you to reply to every person who writes to you." Especially vocal on this issue was Meta:

> Some guys include in their profiles: "If you don't want to chat, don't swipe right." They seem to have an attitude about it. I don't feel obliged to respond just because someone messages me. I believe ghosting should be even more acceptable. I'm on the app for my own reasons, not because I owe anyone a reply for messaging me. It happens to me constantly too; if a guy doesn't respond, I don't worry or send him a hundred more messages.

On the other hand, male users think that ghosting should not be as normalized as it is. Luka believes ghosting is overly normalized and feels that a decent profile and respectful conversation should warrant a response. Ghosting even makes users uncomfortable or paranoid. The case of Matjaž is exemplary:

> I'm much more paranoid now and really scared of ghosting. While I understand it—since both guys and girls can react aggressively to rejection and many find ghosting simpler—for me, it's very uncomfortable. As much as it hurts, I'd rather be rejected outright than overthink and create scenarios about what I did wrong.

Male users, such as Max, understand that women on Tinder often ghost to avoid frequent persistent messages from men:

> Some girls have mentioned that if they don't reply for two days, men start bombarding them with questions like "Where are you hiding?" or "Why aren't you replying?"; if the conversation is bad, they unmatch to avoid receiving messages like that.

We can see that users are using ghosting as a digital disconnection from others because of the need to protect themselves from harassment and vulnerability and to establish a safe space for themselves. At the same time, the normalization of ghosting enables users to engage in microaggressions towards others. Once again, users are confronted with systemic issues, since online sexual violence perpetuates (hetero)sexist norms, which assume men's inherent entitlement to sex and expect women to be accommodating and submissive (Filice et al., 2022, p. 13). Ghosting is not the ethical approach we would advocate for, but we can acknowledge this disconnection practice as a "practical response" (Light, 2014) by individuals to the challenges posed by constant engagement with others in the dating sphere. As Light (2014) explains, perpetual connectivity is unsustainable, necessitating selective disconnection to prioritize and manage safe and meaningful connections effectively.

6. Managing Overload and Ghosting as an Outcome of Digital Disaffect

Users claim that after using Tinder for some time, they start to feel overwhelmed and tired of all interactions, both successful and unsuccessful. Matjaž is such an example:

> This year, there was a point where it became overwhelming, and I thought to myself, 'I can't talk to five people at once.' You hope at least one connection will work out, but they all fall apart one by one. I was spending more than two hours a day just typing.

He assumed that a higher number of connections would bring him closer to his goal of finding a relationship but: "It was way too exhausting. I wasn't doing anything else. I bought a new bass guitar and didn't practice it for the first month because I was wasting time on Tinder." In some cases, Tinder was a distraction from obligations. As Petra stated: "Exams were approaching, but I kept going on dates. I couldn't stop." Petra found Tinder to be a significant distraction from her studies ultimately impacting her academic performance, resulting in incomplete exams and not finishing the year.

As noted by Jorge et al. (2023) in their study on dis/connection among teenagers, the realization of spending excessive time on digital activities is often associated with missing out on other pursuits like studying, spending time with family and friends, or engaging in hobbies. Tinder users pointed out they frequently dedicate substantial time and effort to their interactions on the platform. However, these engagements do not consistently yield anticipated outcomes, leaving many users with a perception of inefficacy regarding their invested efforts. This frustration was echoed by Anastasija: "There was so much repetitive small talk—just the initial 'hellos,' 'how are you,' 'where are you from,' 'what do you do?' It became annoying and boring, and I just couldn't deal with it anymore." Similarly, Krištof felt overwhelmed by Tinder's focus on appearance-based judgments, which prevented him from meeting potentially interesting people and led to frustration, since he was objectifying women and swiping based on superficial preferences. Our findings

align with the study done by Brubaker et al. (2016), which found that Grindr users left the app viewing it as time-consuming, distracting, and objectifying—the latter similarly observed with Tinder users, but directed towards women.

Participants reported that the overwhelming nature of Tinder interactions, characterized by repetitive and numerous chats and superficial judgments based on appearance, led to frustration, ultimately prompting some users to reduce or terminate their use of the app. As Ada mentioned: "Regardless of whether I met someone to date, there always came a point of saturation where I couldn't take it anymore. That was the main reason why I deleted the app each time." While Krištof and Ada described how they "could not take it anymore," Ema expressed that she "got tired of it," and Meta told us she "got bored with it." These descriptions indicate online fatigue (Gregersen et al., 2023), where prolonged and excessive use of digital platforms leads to emotional exhaustion and diminished interest. This aligns with Petit's (2015) concept of digital disaffect, a hypnotic state of boredom and detachment marked by repetitive engagement without fulfillment. As Ema pointed out: "I usually get tired of Tinder after 2–3 days, then I delete it or forget about it. After some time, I return to Tinder and write back to people, but until then they mostly think I ghosted them."

Tinder users reported ghosting others as a direct result of terminating their use of the app, as they abruptly ceased interactions with all their matches without prior notice. While not always intentional, ghosting occurs as an immediate consequence ceasing to use the app, even if only temporarily. According to Lucija: "I feel like I'm filling my brain with some unimportant information and people, and in the end, I'm tired of talking to five different people and putting so much energy into it. After a while, I just disappear." She also explained: "Initially, I used to open the app and swipe daily. Gradually, I started using it less frequently. I had a few conversations open, but then I would go a week without messaging anyone before returning to continue the conversations." Users often find themselves in situations where they feel that the interactions they establish are not exciting or important enough to maintain or terminate meaningfully, as this requires additional interaction they would like to avoid. As Ivana explained: "Communication eventually starts to tire me out. I prefer spending time with my old friends, as I find it more comforting. This is why many of my Tinder contacts fail." A telling example is Maša, who even included the following notice in her profile bio: "You must reset Tinder every three months, I didn't unmatch you (probably)." And then an emoji with its eyes slightly to the side and its tongue sticking out. She explained:

> Yes, a fun emoji. It's true; I still reset Tinder every three months, and then someone I talked to for a while who hasn't seen me around asks, 'Did you ghost me?' I've written this notice because I've been here so long that almost everyone already knows me, and we've probably matched before.

Although focused on politically motivated unfriending and avoidance behaviors on social media, Barnidge et al. (2023) offer useful insights into the role of social network structures in selective avoidance behaviors. Their results indicate that selective avoidance is more likely among individuals in larger, more diverse networks with many weak ties, which lack the affective bonds of inner circles. Tinder, as a larger and more diverse network containing weak ties, supports selective avoidance as a form of boundary maintenance to manage its overwhelming environment. Given that ghosting and unmatching have become normalized and expected, users have developed strategies to stay connected and avoid being ghosted. For example, Luka told us: "I realized people often delete their accounts suddenly, which can be a shame. So, if I liked someone, I'd suggest adding each other on social media to stay in touch and possibly reconnect later."

Deleting Tinder or temporarily pausing Tinder's use were strategies implemented when users sought to reduce their use or optimize their online experience, without intending to disconnect permanently. As Anastasija mentioned: "I just deactivated and deleted the app. So that the next time I want, I can return." When questioned about the likelihood of her return to the app, she affirmed: "Almost definitely." Maša, who has been using Tinder for four years, said: "I have deleted my profile before, but only for a month at most; it was never a permanent decision. I can't live without him; we've been together too long." This example illustrates a common behavioral pattern where users manage their digital presence by alternating between periods of active participation and deliberate disconnection. Kaun (2021, p.1574) argues that "practices of digital disconnection are formed in close association with hyper-connectivity, not as a fundamental critique, but as a way of reproducing and maintaining a social order based on digital technology." Users are thus faced with a contradiction. Dating apps and their users demand constant engagement, activity, and availability, to the extent that the dating process becomes overwhelming. This saturation precipitates a need among users to temporarily disengage from the app only to come back after a while and restore a sense of novelty and excitement. This cycle underscores the complex interplay between continuous connectivity demands and the intermittent necessity for disconnection that users must maintain to balance their online dating life and well-being.

7. Conclusion

Drawing on data from the walkthrough of Tinder and 26 semi-structured interviews with users in Ljubljana (Slovenia), we examined ghosting as a disconnection strategy and its implications for user well-being and interpersonal relationships in digital dating. This study contributes to disconnection studies in three significant ways: First, it broadens the scope of what is considered disconnective behavior, particularly at the interaction level within dating and intimate relationships, a relatively under-researched part of disconnection studies (see Nassen et al., 2023). It contributes to the typology of disconnection strategies by Nguyen (2021), as it includes ghosting and unmatching strategies focused on disconnecting from communication. At the same time, it demonstrates how digital platforms extend their influence on interpersonal relationships, showcasing that disconnection is not merely binary between use and nonuse, but involves nuanced practices to limit connectivity (Light & Cassidy, 2014). The study shows that ghosting and unmatching are forms of strategic disconnection framed by Tinder as safety features used to maintain personal boundaries while enabling an overwhelming number of interactions.

Second, as a disconnection practice, ghosting reflects broader struggles within interpersonal digital interactions, balancing personal safety and ethical engagement. The dual nature of ghosting—as both a mechanism for protection and a potential source of harm—highlights the need for a deeper understanding of communication strategies in digital dating contexts. Zhu and Skoric (2023) have shown that (politically motivated) unfriending as a form of selective avoidance can be motivated by psychological discomfort or conflict and that users disconnect to protect their safety and well-being while minimizing social risks. As they concluded, politically motivated unfriending is driven by systemic issues, not just individual choices. Similarly, female Tinder users, who are cognizant of technologically facilitated and in-person harassment and are aware of safety concerns rooted in patriarchal social relations, are more likely to ghost others to protect themselves. Overall, this study underscores the complexity of ghosting as a response to perceived threats and discomfort while acknowledging its impact on those who are ghosted.

Third, the ways users disconnect on Tinder help manage “Tinder fatigue” (Solovyeva & Laskin, 2022) or “online fatigue” (Gregersen et al., 2023). While disconnection can create stressful and uncertain situations for those being ghosted, it is often a strategy for maintaining personal well-being. Participants indicated that the overwhelming nature of Tinder interactions, marked by repetitive and numerous conversations and superficial judgments based on appearance, caused frustration, leading some users to reduce or discontinue their use of the app. Navarro et al. (2020) show that ghosting is common in short-term relationships with minimal commitment, suggesting that technological platforms facilitate the easy dissolution of emotionally uninvested relationships. Supporting this, Barnidge et al. (2023) found that selective avoidance is more likely in larger, diverse networks with many weak ties, like Tinder, which supports selective avoidance as a boundary maintenance strategy to manage its overwhelming environment.

Ghosting can, therefore, be more explicitly defined as a form of digital disconnection at the interaction level, characterized by the sudden and unilateral termination of communication without prior notice, often facilitated by app features such as “unmatch.” This study reveals that on dating apps like Tinder, ghosting functions as a strategy for maintaining personal boundaries and managing the overwhelming demands of hyperconnectivity. Users engage in ghosting mostly to avoid unwelcome interactions and cope with digital engagement saturation. The cyclical pattern of engagement and disengagement reflects a broader struggle with the demands of hyperconnectedness, where users navigate the complex interplay between seeking meaningful interactions and managing digital overload. While often criticized, ghosting emerges as a rational response within this context, providing users with means to withdraw, reassess their social engagements, and potentially return with renewed interest, maintaining a balance within their digital and personal lives.

Nevertheless, ghosting on dating apps (like Tinder) raises significant ethical implications. While it can be a necessary strategy for personal safety and well-being, particularly against harassment, it also leads to feelings of rejection and uncertainty for those being ghosted. The ability to unmatch and ghost someone without explanation provides a sense of control and protection, especially for women and marginalized groups. However, the lack of closure can be emotionally distressing and perpetuates a culture of disposability in digital interactions, eroding social norms around respectful communication. To address these issues, platform designers should promote safer, more respectful disconnection practices, such as providing predefined messages for unmatching to provide some level of closure while maintaining personal safety. This could encourage more considerate communication strategies and foster a more empathetic digital dating environment.

This study has limitations that should be considered: First, the sample size was limited to 26 participants from Ljubljana (Slovenia), which may not be representative of the broader Tinder user base. Additionally, analyzing the practices of users on a single dating app is insufficient for making generalized statements. Future research should include a larger and more diverse sample of users from different countries and various dating apps to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Second, our study focused only on two contexts in which ghosting appears on Tinder. Since it was not exclusively centered on ghosting and disconnection from Tinder, it lacks data that could provide a more complex narrative. Future research should delve deeper into the various disconnection practices across different dating apps and their impacts on user well-being. Moreover, it would be beneficial to explore how people across different sociodemographic groups, including gender differences, experience and practice ghosting and other forms of disconnection on dating apps. Our results revealed differences by gender, suggesting that more comprehensive studies are needed to understand these

dynamics fully. This study is a step forward in fostering dialogue between the fields of online dating and digital disconnection studies. However, further research is essential to build on these findings and provide a more nuanced understanding of disconnection practices in the digital dating landscape.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Digital Barricades and Blackouts: A Case of Internet Shutdowns in India

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Abstract

Using internet shutdowns as a reaction to civil unrest has become a common response from the Indian state. In 2022, India remained at the top with the highest number of recorded shutdowns in the world, for the fifth consecutive year. Several state and central governments have used this tactic to suspend the flow of information, either to curtail the ability of citizens to organise through social media networks, dominate discourse around an event, or both. Many such instances have increased the circulation of misinformation, leading to polarised online spaces created partly due to the lack of internet connectivity. Digital disconnection then becomes a condition forced upon its citizens rather than a voluntary choice made by individuals. To explore the impact of internet shutdowns on civic discourse, I look at the case of the farmers' protest in India, that lasted from September 2020 to November 2021. The movement successfully led to the repeal of the three controversial farm laws. The protest faced challenges due to internet shutdowns along with other forms of crackdown by authorities. I use in-depth interviews to bring in the voices of the various stakeholders who participated in this movement. In this article, I would like to place the farmers' protest as a vantage point from where one can look at how the Indian state has used internet shutdowns to control dissent.

Keywords

digital activism; farmers' protest; India; internet shutdowns; social movements; workarounds

1. Introduction

Citizen protests have historically played a crucial role in shaping policy by bringing attention to pressing issues and exerting pressure on policymakers. For instance, following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster,

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in March 2011, Japan witnessed widespread protests from anti-nuclear groups, women's groups, and citizens who called for the government to abandon nuclear energy. While short-lived, the protests led to a dramatic change in the country's energy policy, aiming to become nuclear-free, until former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was re-elected in 2012 (Williams, 2012). In 1986, in the Philippines, the People Power Revolution (also known as the EDSA revolution) was a nonviolent civil resistance by the citizens, including students, and religious groups, against President Ferdinand Marcos' regime of violence and electoral fraud. In four days, Marcos was ousted to make way for democratic reforms (McGeown, 2011). The often-cited Civil Rights Movement, in the US, in the 20th century, also used various forms of civil disobedience to bring attention to legalised racial segregation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement of African Americans. This movement not only led to the striking down of the laws that allowed legal discrimination, but also achieved the passage of significant federal legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. It is important to note that each of these movements faced coercive responses from the state in each instance, including police crackdowns and military interventions as well as ideological control through censorship of critical media outlets, restricted access to information, and limiting media coverage.

In India too, there have been several protest movements that have contributed to changing the course of national governance and policy. In 2011, the anti-corruption movement took off under the leadership of activist Anna Hazare and several political figures to alleviate corruption and kleptocracy in the country. The movement led to the passing of the Lokpal and Lokayukta Bill in 2013, making it an act that:

> Seeks to provide for the establishment of the institution of Lokpal to inquire into allegations of corruption against certain important public functionaries including the Prime Minister, cabinet ministers, members of parliament, Group A officials of the Central Government and for matters connecting them. (IANS, 2013)

Similarly, in 2012, the incident of a gang rape and fatal assault of a woman in Delhi sparked widespread outrage, leading to massive protests demanding stronger laws and measures to address gender-based violence and ensure the safety of women. The protests prompted the government to enact the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act (2013), which introduced harsher penalties for sexual offences, expanded the definition of rape, and enhanced provisions for the protection of women's rights ("President signs ordinance," 2013).

In this article, I look at a movement in the recent past that led to the change in government policy—the farmers' protest—which lasted from September 2020 to November 2021, and led to the repealing of the three controversial farm laws ("It's official. Three," 2021). The protestors, who were mainly farmers, held sit-in protests at the bordering villages of the national capital, Delhi at Singhu, Tikri, and Gazipur, for over a year. This civic dissent by the farmers was interrupted by the state at various points, sometimes coercively, through the use of water cannons, tear gas, and barricades; and some other times by disrupting or suspending information infrastructure, through internet shutdowns and network throttling ("Protesting farmers brave," 2020).

The objective of this article is to look at how network disconnectivity is used as a controlling tactic by authorities to suppress dissent and information. In the following sections, I locate the trajectory of network disruptions in India and what factors make the shutdowns unique. I detail the case of the farmers' protest

and the methodology that has been used in this research exploration. In my findings, I examine how protestors and journalists overcame communicative restrictions; find how the meaning of collective action changes shape with changing communicative regimes; and note that voluntary abstinence from communicative networks is very uncommon in the context of India, where large populations are yet to be connected to the internet in any meaningful way.

2. Literature Review

Restricting media and information through internet shutdowns has been a means to control movements in India for a long time (Access Now, 2023). Access Now, an international organisation that defends and extends the digital rights of people and communities at risk, defines internet shutdowns as "an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information" (Olukotun & Micek, 2016). India has been repeatedly called out for human rights violations over the last several years through the imposition of internet shutdowns and restricting the right to free speech, association, and assembly (Access Now, 2023; Kathuria et al., 2018; Woodhams & Migliano, 2021). In 2022, according to Access Now (2023), India remains the country with the highest number of recorded shutdowns in the world—for the fifth consecutive year.

When a government order mandates for telecom companies to shut down access to the internet, it essentially disrupts networks built and sustained over the internet for a long period of time. Many reports (Kathuria et al., 2018; KeepItOn, 2021) have found that the reasons cited by governing authorities for such blockades are to avoid cheating in examinations, to curb rumour-mongering on social media that eventually lead to public unrest, and sometimes to prevent violent protests. A report by Kathuria et al. (2018, pp. 30–31), for the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, reveals that "Administrators admitted the difficulty to keep order when provocative videos and photos were shared on social media. The justification of preemptive shutdowns was in anticipation of a law and order situation that could quickly go out of hand." Another report (KeepItOn, 2021, p. 10) echoes the same findings: "some governments have attempted to justify shutdown orders by insisting they were to stop the spread of "fake news" or hate speech and incendiary or violence-inciting content." In the Northeastern state of Manipur, authorities justified the shutdown by observing that "social media has become a useful tool for rumour-mongers and is being used extensively to incite the public" (KeepItOn, 2021, p. 12), however, the report claims that there is little evidence to suggest that cutting off access has led to stopping violence in these areas.

Internet shutdowns have been categorised into two broad categories based on how much of the network is blocked. According to Access Now (KeepItOn, 2021), governments have in the past used throttling, mobile and broadband internet service shutdown, or both tactics in combination. Throttling of a connection is to slow down the speed of the internet, either to specific sites, apps, or segments of traffic or to all of the internet, affecting both mobile and broadband connections. A complete shutdown, on the other hand, can cut access to mobile or fixed-line internet or completely block access to platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, or Telegram. It has been observed that several sectors get adversely impacted due to these shutdowns, like tourism, e-commerce, IT services, press and news media, education, healthcare, and digital payment gateways (Kathuria et al., 2018).

A report by industry body Internet and Mobile Association of India and market data analytics firm Kantar called *Internet in India Report 2022* shows that the "Usage of mobile phones for accessing the internet stays universal" (ICUBE, 2023, p. 24). This means that all users (100%) who comprise active internet users (AIU) in India have been accessing the internet on their mobile phones. This remains at 100% for both urban and rural areas. PC users measured 17% and 13% in urban and rural areas, respectively. Internet usage on other devices, such as tablets, streaming devices, smart speakers, smart TVs, etc., was at 18% and 9% in urban and rural areas, respectively. Moreover, the same report shows that 85% of all AIUs used the internet for entertainment, 77% used it for communication, and 70% used it to access social media. A steep spike of 14% was observed in using the internet for e-commerce since 2021, making it 52% of all AIUs. Internet adoption is also reported to be increasing rapidly in rural areas in comparison to urban areas.

As observed through the internet penetration data above, along with the usage of mobile devices, the effects of a network blackout have far-reaching consequences. A reason to shut mobile networks could arise from the fact that mobile phones are the most ubiquitously used device to connect to the internet. Kathuria et al. (2018, p. 36) observe that:

> Mobile networks were shut down more frequently than fixed lines. Administrators indicated that mobile networks were more impacted primarily because they are more widely accessible, and therefore potential for damage is higher. Only in very serious cases of agitation did administrators also shut down the fixed-line network.

This preference by the authorities to cut off mobile data networks increasingly endangers mobile phone users' online connectivity.

One can benefit from seeing the flip side of networked communities as well, by looking at those people and places that have not received telecommunication services. In India, it has been reported (Kemp, 2024) that about 683.7 million (or 47.6%) people are not connected to the internet. The digital divide in the country is immense, and several attempts are being made by the government to bridge this gap. Governments and civil societies have highlighted the benefits that citizens can avail through digitised governance and education. Thus, the internet is framed as not only desirable but also necessary in the country as many government schemes and public services are now digitally enabled, with the government pushing for a "Digital India" that presumes the widespread availability of internet access. While this is the case in India, in some parts of the world, people exercise what is known as digital disconnectivity, where one disconnects voluntarily from the internet. This has been observed in workplace situations, where excessive communication can lead to burnout, and among young adults who have grown up as digital natives. In India too, there has been research conducted in this regard (Garg, 2020; Handa & Ahuja, 2020), however, it is confined to the discussion within labour rights and digital divide perspectives. There was an attempt in 2018, through the introduction of a Right to Disconnect Bill in the parliament, which aimed to empower employees to negotiate terms for out-of-work communications. Although, this did not gain much traction in legislative discussions (Mukherjee, 2024).

Within the literature, digital disconnection can be seen to be practised in global North countries where constant and reliable connection has been taken for granted and, therefore, opting out becomes a choice (Bozan & Treré, 2023; Treré, 2021). Disconnection research has largely ignored societies where authorities force disconnection upon their people by lack of policy or through intention, like imposing internet

shutdowns. My preoccupation in this article is to examine this type of disconnective measure, which is not voluntary and is used as a means of control and restriction.

3. Methodology

More recently, it has become frequent for governments globally to clamp down on the internet during social unrest. Historically across the world, communication blackout is not a new tactic (Article 19, 2020; Tufekci, 2017). In late 2019 and early 2020, in India, due to the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests, many shutdowns across multiple cities occurred simultaneously. This severe crackdown on the internet was criticised by many international watchdogs (Amnesty International Australia, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Later that year, we saw the farmers' protest, where a majority of farmers in the Northern part of India dissented from the newly introduced farm laws, through a sit-in protest near the national capital, Delhi. This is one case that can be studied suitably for examining digital disconnectivity as it was a highly targeted communication shutdown undertaken by the state to silence dissent.

To research an event-based phenomenon, it is useful to adapt Clarke's (2003) situational analyses approach to lay out the several actors and actants involved in the event and then find analytical and relational categories from the coded data. Clarke (2003) takes grounded theory literature and renovates, regenerates, and re-articulates it to lay emphasis on its postmodern capacities. Abandoning overarching paradigms and theoretical and methodological metasystems, the grounded theory approach allows for specific, local, heterogenous, and relational categories to emerge from the data itself. Situational analyses can be made by drawing three kinds of maps: First, situational maps, which lay out the major human, non-human, discursive, and other major elements in the research situation of concern and provoke analyses of relations among them. Second, the social worlds/arenas map, which engages in ongoing negotiations of the various collective actors involved, where meso-level interpretations can be made of its social organisational, institutional, and discursive dimensions. And, finally, the positional map lays out the major positions taken and not taken (silences) by actors. Using these maps to interpret data encourages making connections previously ignored or not seen, while also acknowledging disparities, contradictions, and gaps.

For this article, I emphasise the situational map aspect of the situational analyses method. I map out the various actors involved in the situation of a protest that has faced communication blackout at various levels throughout the duration of the protest. In this article, I will be using in-depth interviews of protestors, journalists, and internet advocacy groups to understand how internet shutdowns played out during the farmers' protest. The protest started in late 2020 and went on till the controversial farm laws were repealed in November 2021. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. At the time of the interviews, the protest had just been called off and protesters had vacated the site. All interviews were conducted online, on Zoom, in 2022, between February and August.

In this article, I draw on interviews with protestors, journalists, and civil society activists, who have engaged with the protest to understand how the movement as a whole negotiated through the periods of communication disruption. In my conversations, my focus was to understand in what ways were people dependent on the internet for the purpose of the protest, and how connectivity is understood vis-a-vis shutdowns in the larger context of the country. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity. The transcribed interviews have been coded into similar groups and analysed based on intersecting and

recurring ideas and experiences. In the following sections, I unpack the various themes that emerged in these analyses and lay out the strategies and techniques used to manage communications and sustain the movement over the duration of the protest.

4. The Case: Farmers’ Protest

Farmers from across the Northern region of the Indian subcontinent came together to oppose three farm laws that had been passed by the central government in 2019. Farmers came in large numbers from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Bihar, and Jharkhand. Their initial target was to reach the national capital, Delhi, but were stopped by the police force at the borders of the city. Instead of returning home, the farmers started a sit-in protest at the very borders of these places—which are now well-known areas—Singhu (which is on the Delhi–Haryana border, to the North of the capital), Tikri (which is in the West, on the Delhi–Haryana border), and Gazipur (to the East, on the Delhi–Up border; Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of New Delhi, marking the protest sites.

The three farm laws that were opposed are listed below:

1. The Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act: This essentially allowed farmers to sell outside of the Agricultural Produce & Livestock Market Committee, Mandis (which are regulated market-places for agricultural produce, where farmers sold to licensed commission agents), and enabled intra-state and inter-state trade.

2. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act: This act aimed to provide a legal framework for contract farming, where farmers entered into contracts with private buyers, specifying terms and conditions for the sale of their agricultural produce. It is intended to facilitate competitive investments in the sector, promote better price assurance, and access to modern farming technologies.

3. The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act: This is an amendment to an existing act, which seeks to remove certain commodities, such as cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onions, and potatoes, from the list of essential commodities. It aims to remove stock holding limits on these items so that it can attract private investments in the storage of such commodities (Tiwari & Sharma, 2021).

The opposition to these laws from farmer unions was manifold. The APMC Mandis is where the crop is ensured to be sold at a Minimum Support Price to the licensed commissioned agents from the farmer. Minimum Support Price would not exist if the market was liberalised to allow private players to enter outside the Mandi set-up. This could weaken APMC Mandis, undermining the infrastructure, market regulation, and support mechanisms that currently benefit farmers, particularly small and marginal farmers. They feared that they would be vulnerable to exploitation and find it difficult to secure fair pricing. The involvement of private players like big corporations would, they argued, take away the bargaining power of small farmers in contract-based farming. This would gradually lead to market dominance by large corporations, reduced competition, and limited choices for farmers to sell. These laws were framed and passed without consultations with farmers (Bhatnagar, 2021).

The following sub-section outlines the themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. I look at how internet networks become essential during a social movement for communication amongst themselves, how protestors find ways to work around internet shutdowns, how the nature of protests has changed with the coming of internet-based communication, and finally how journalists have to adapt and overcome disconnectivity while reporting from locations with capricious networks.

4.1. Protest Communication

Internet connectivity for those at the protest site became very important. The protestors started a newsletter called Trolley Times, which initially emerged over social media networks. One of the respondents recalls that they learned they were a part of the newsletter only when they went onto Instagram to find themselves tagged in a post by a friend to send in stories from the different border sites occupied by protestors.

Jaspreet (personal communication, February 5, 2022), a protestor, said that even on "normal" days when there was no official shutdown, they would have to travel for a few kilometres from the site of the protest to attend a video call or to send a multimedia clip over the internet. Protestors sitting at the border had connectivity issues from the very beginning, in November 2020. Trolley Times (Figure 2) was started by some of the protestors as a trilingual newsletter (published in Gurmukhi, Hindi, and English), with the first issue launched on December 18, 2020. There were more newsletters apart from Trolley Times, like Karti Dharti, which is a women-led newsletter that brought diverse voices from the farmers' movement in a fortnightly publication. Jaspreet, who was also one of the people responsible for starting the Trolley Times, mentioned that the content for the newsletter came from many different places, such as videos, pictures, and stories, through a collaborative process that the internet afforded. This initially was published bi-weekly and later became a weekly newsletter because of various other on-ground engagements that the protestors were involved in.

The Singhu border, which was the biggest among the three sit-in camps, had a media centre. This was set up primarily to coordinate information going out to the press because many journalists were coming to this

Figure 2. Website of Trolley Times.

location. Deepinder (personal communication, February 23, 2022), who was at Singhu and was responsible for the media centre, said that their press releases and the information they officially put out were very necessary to counter the mainstream media channels, which he claimed were spreading lies about the farmers' motive to protest. He said that since all the farmers were not literate, it was necessary for a responsible translator to ensure they were not being misunderstood and misrepresented. Most farmers conversed in the Punjabi language which was not understood by some journalists who came to the protest site. Younger protestors would help these journalists translate to Hindi and English languages to further news reportage that carried their voices. Everyday communication was targeted by the authorities, he said:

> Since 27th November, 2020 it (slow internet) was there. Initially, we thought the government had put jammers. And some of them (protestors) identified that they were jammers. But even jammers had their limitation of 1–2 kilometres, and the protest site was 13–14 kilometres. The users increased rapidly, and the internet connectivity got very slow. We spent the first 3 months, with very slow internet. (Deepinder, interview, February 23, 2022)

An important strategy for those at the media centre handling X was to post first-hand accounts of events; i.e., they only posted in the first person and never re-posted. These posts would sometimes be picked up by mainstream media channels as official communication from protestors to report their own stories. Narratives coming from protestors themselves, about why they were protesting, and how they were being treated by police authorities were of immense value. Jaspreet (interview, February 5, 2022) says: "we thought of countering fake narratives...which said farmers were not protesting the three laws, but they were fighting for a separate state." The mainstream media channels and the big news broadcasters were running stories that criminalised the protestors, calling them Khalistanis (a militant separatist group that had acquired notoriety in the 1980s) disguised to cause trouble in the capital (Singh, 2023).

Many reporters and journalists from the mainstream media channels did not come to these protest sites as access to the site was difficult and the threat of a police crackdown was imminent. They relied on

correspondence from the protestors at the media centre, which sent press releases, images, and videos from the protest site to the institutional and mainstream media. It was important for them to be seen and heard, therefore, the protestors at the media centre went to lengths to ensure that it was done. Connectivity to the internet at these locations of protest was quite unreliable and fragile. One of my respondents, who was active at the media centre, referred to these media houses as "NOIDA media," given most of their offices are located in the NOIDA area of Delhi's National Capital Region. Jaspreet narrates a story of what she had to go through to send a short video to the press:

> We recorded that video clip. And then it took us three or four hours to send that one, two minute long video clip. Because, first we tried on the protest side from different internet connections. Then we went to a nearby local hotel to ask them for internet which didn't work. Then we took the metro and went to Bahadurgarh city metro station. (Nearest metro station to the Tikri border) Then we de-boarded the train there and then we went to a mobile shop, there we asked for a wifi connection, it was around 10pm they were about to close the shop. At that time we successfully transferred the video and came back. (Jaspreet, interview, February 5, 2022)

4.2. Traditional vs Digital Activism

Farmers have displayed dissent in the past too, without the help of the internet. For instance, in 2017, farmers from the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu staged demonstrations in Delhi, demanding drought relief and waiver of loans. They brought skulls of those farmers who died by suicide, used dead rats and snakes as food, shaved their heads, and other extreme forms to show their dire conditions. They called off their protest after 41 days, only after receiving assurances from their chief minister and the union finance minister (PTI, 2017). This type of protest may be described as a traditional protest. This article refers to traditional protests as those which do not use the internet as a mode of spreading information or gathering support.

When asked about whether social media support translates into garnering on-ground numbers, Jaspreet said that this support did not sustain. They said that social media does not tell you how many people actually support your cause, but on the ground, you have real numbers. And even the way your own social media feed is curated can deceive you into thinking everyone is with you, giving you a false sense of solidarity. They also note that the people influenced by social media are urban and young. Having been at the protest site since the beginning, they say that:

> Those who got influenced by seeing things on social media were the urban and young generation, who came from major cities of Punjab, or Delhi. They came in large numbers initially, but their visits were not long lasting. When the initial craze died down, it eventually became a traditional protest site. (Jaspreet, personal communication, February 5, 2022)

Most of the protesters who were physically present there from the beginning were farmers and their families who came from the most rural parts of the states. Jaspreet does not dismiss the role of social media entirely, however, they say that these online networks are very useful in keeping the narrative alive. Digital activism generates discourse, but only as long as the on-ground protest continues to exist. They say that online activism can be used as a "tool to aid" the already existing protest. Referring to another citizen-led protest that happened just before the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, they say:

> I feel in this, your campaigning/digital activism can exist as long as your ground activism is going on. Like we saw in Anti-CAA movement, if it was to be sustained digitally, it could have stayed alive through lockdown. But as soon as it ceased to exist on the ground, it was also gone from the digital media spaces. This movement went on for so long only because people actually came out of their homes, and sat on the roads, actually people were fighting and actually people were dying. That's why the momentum was there in the digital space. So in digital space, it cannot exist independently for long. The life of a political or social issue in the digital sphere, is at 1 or 2 weeks maximum, not more than that. On Twitter, it is a matter of a few hours. Did something trend? Ok, it's finished. Just because some news media channels have started doing segments that talk about what's trending on Twitter, it doesn't mean it will lead to a political change. (Jaspreet, personal communication, February 5, 2022)

All three protest sites, at Singhu, Tikri, and Gazipur, had camps that extended several kilometres. Therefore, being connected to the internet was also necessary for everyday communication for those at the protest site. Several WhatsApp groups were created to coordinate the next steps and strategies amongst those at the protest site. Protestors also used VoIP calls to stay in touch with their family, that was back at home. Protestors used the internet for entertainment purposes as well. However, it is important to note that connection to the internet was not constant or strong throughout. More often than not, people would travel a few kilometres away from the protest camp to be able to receive any meaningful internet connection.

Protestors also used the internet to connect with people and solidarity groups who were outside the country, in Canada and the UK. My respondents informed me that they would use webinars and Zoom meetings to inform those abroad of the situation on the ground and of ways in which they can support and contribute to the protest.

4.3. Workarounds During Network Disruptions

The farmers' protest, which started in late 2020, faced the same problems of internet shutdowns as the protestors in Hong Kong earlier that year. The protestors in Hong Kong, mostly young, worked around shutdowns by using alternative bluetooth-based apps, like Bridgefy, to stay connected under a blackout (Wakefield, 2019). When asked if such apps assisted the protesting farmers, the response was negative. My respondent said that they did not make use of Bluetooth-based apps under conditions of disconnectivity for many reasons: Firstly, most of the farmers came from rural backgrounds and not all had smartphones. Apps like Bridgefy and Signal rely on Bluetooth to work effectively when many people have the app on their mobiles, so the signal can jump from the nearest device to another to reach the intended recipient. To use this app, one has to be technologically literate and skilled, which was a barrier for most people at the protest site. As a result, even for younger protestors, it became very difficult and unreliable to depend on these mobile applications.

Interestingly, although the protestors may not have been savvy to use Bluetooth apps, they were well aware of surveillance tactics employed by the government. A protester shared that one day some placards announcing free wifi connection had popped up overnight, near the Singhu stage area, providing credentials to connect to the network. There was no information provided on who had facilitated the service. Despite people constantly facing poor to no connection inside the protest area, most protestors were aware that they should not connect to unknown networks. There was widespread fear of surveillance and hacking of

phones amongst the protesters, something that often came up in their discussions. In another instance, six people lost their mobile phones in a matter of 15 days, all of them suspected to be stolen. From then on, they started using small dumb phones, without internet connectivity, to avoid "Pegasus-like snooping." The protestors were selectively disconnected, not from digital fatigue but for digital security. Being connected to a smartphone became a weakness in this situation, where the issues of privacy and safety arise.

When people at the protest site could not send correspondence to media persons, they would send pictures and videos to friends in Canada, US, and Australia for safekeeping, who would then send them on to the intended recipients. Protestors further faced obstacles to accessing the internet with electronic hardware stores, which refused to sell adapters and routers to protestors to install new connections by the instruction of police and government officials. Electricity and water supply was also cut off in addition to the internet, as a blackmailing tactic, to pressure protestors into leaving the site.

Jaspreet made an interesting observation about the spatiality of the internet shutdowns. The Singhu and Tikri protest sites were located outside the capital in working-class colonies. The Singhu site was located in the Kundli industrial belt, while Tikri was in the suburban area of Bahadurgarh, in both these places residents did not display a huge outcry over internet shutdowns. She says that people did not have the same kind of dependency on the internet as in the centre of the city. It can be compared with the shorter and more localised shutdowns that occurred within the city limits of Delhi (Express Web Desk, 2021). The digital divide that was present in the suburbs was in stark contrast to the high dependency that more urban areas have on the internet for day-to-day activities. Disconnection and unreliable connection are the norm rather than an exception in these suburbs, where the protest sites were established. It is less out of choice and more out of compulsion that residents in these areas remain disconnected from networks, services, and channels on the internet.

4.4. Reporting Without the Internet

On January 26, 2021, which marks India's Republic Day, the biggest altercation took place between the police and the protestors in the capital, New Delhi. Of all the shutdowns imposed in the country to suppress information from protesting farmers, it was during the Republic Day tractor parade that the most severe and complete blackouts occurred. It was highlighted in the press as well as by the people on the protest site that the network disruption occurred not only on Republic Day but the following days as well. Leading up to Republic Day, a tractor rally was called for by the Samyukt Kisan Morcha, an umbrella organisation of 32 farmer unions (Mitra & Regan, 2021). Thousands of protestors clashed with the police during the tractor parade called by farmer unions on January 26, demanding a repeal of the laws. After several protestors from Singhu and Ghazipur changed their route, they marched towards Central Delhi's ITO and Red Fort, where police resorted to teargas shelling and lathi charges, while some protestors vandalised public property and attacked police personnel. At Red Fort, a section of protesters climbed poles and walls and hoisted the Nishan Sahib flag (Arvin, 2021). This crackdown led to an internet shutdown inside the national capital, Delhi, for the first time during the protest, which was until now only restricted to the bordering villages (Express Web Desk, 2021). The official shutdown was called by the state home secretary, on 26th and 27th January, 2021 (Agarwal, 2021). In Haryana, shutdowns were seen on 31 January 2021, which extended to 1 February 2021 (DNA Web Team, 2021). However, internet network was not back until a few days later. Deepinder says:

> On 26th January, at 4 or 5 o' clock, internet was shutdown at all borders. From 26th January till 6th of February it was the hardest period for us. We were working in the media (centre) and we were sending the press notes, and every minute updates. I used to go 3–4 kilometres towards the Delhi side and send press notes. Many times, it was very hard for us to get published in the next day newspaper." (Deepinder, personal communication, February 23, 2022)

In my interviews with journalists, many expressed that reporting from protest locations comes with a unique set of challenges. A reporter, Aquib, described how he would go to the location to report:

> You prepare yourself for anything that could come to you, come your way in a conflict zone where you don't know whether a gunshot will be fired or not. So, you roam around with your bike's helmet on your head and your bag on your back and another bag in front of your chest with some shield inside the bag so that even if you get fired at, at least you'll be safe….I'm walking with two litres of water, water bottles on both sides of my bag. (Aquib, interview, August 21, 2022)

Such precautions would be useful, they say, in the event of tear gas shelling or if someone is hit by a stone and starts bleeding.

One of the observations that Aquib made was that farmers themselves did not rely on the internet for day-to-day activities. He observed that the panchayat system in Punjab and Haryana is very strong. Panchayat is a local governing body at the grassroots level. Every panchayat leader would communicate with ward members who would relay it to the larger public. The protesters took turns in batches to stay at the site, while some of their families stayed back to look after their farmlands. It was through the panchayats that the farmers knew when to come and go. Most of the coordination work about the farmlands at home was done over regular calls. During the long periods of wait, the protesters would sometimes want to watch movies and listen to songs and news, which was initially difficult. However, the next time they came back to the protest site, they would have downloaded movies to watch at their leisure (Aquib, personal communication, August 21, 2022).

Mukesh, another reporter, said that it was very difficult to capture everything if you were not writing notes at the same time while the event was happening. So, they would take notes and write the full piece before sending an email from a location far from the protest site. On a few occasions, the reporter wrote articles on SMSs and sent a long chain of them to their editors at the office. The reporters I spoke to made a similar observation as the protestors: They would move two to three kilometres away from the protest site to be able to send reports with multimedia files. Many journalists practised going out of the site area to send correspondence to their offices (Mukesh, interview, August 31, 2022).

5. Conclusion

The ubiquity of digital technology and our reliance on it has increased in the last few decades. As reflected in this article, our need for digital connectivity is not only regarding routine civic participation and access to services but also to engage in democratic dialogue and to talk back to the state. In societies where large populations are not connected to the internet in a meaningful way, voluntary disconnective action becomes an exception. Disconnectivity is often imposed by the state to disempower people, in this case, the protesting farmers.

The article looks at the specific case of the farmers' protest in India, during 2020–2021. I discussed the various experiences that people faced at the protest site. The clampdown on dissent by the government occurred at various phases through different means, such as throttling and shutting down networks, and denying access to infrastructure that supports internet connectivity and their daily activities. I examined how protestors and journalists also found ways to work around the restrictions imposed upon them.

The internet shutdowns during the farmers' protest in India can be analysed within the broader literature on censorship and disconnectivity, particularly in the context of state control over information, suppression of dissent, and the impact on democratic processes. The literature on censorship often discusses how governments use various tools to control information flow, including traditional media censorship, surveillance, and internet shutdowns. Internet shutdowns are a modern extension of censorship, where the state directly limits access to information by disabling digital communication networks. Disconnectivity in this context examines how such deliberate measures by the state are used not just to prevent the spread of information but to isolate communities and weaken movements by cutting off their ability to coordinate. The internet shutdowns during the farmers' protest can be seen as a form of enforced disconnectivity aimed at breaking the protestors' momentum by severing their communication channels. Internet shutdowns can be seen as a violation of the right to freedom of expression and access to information, which are essential for informed citizen participation in a democracy. Internet shutdowns often disproportionately affect marginalised communities who rely on digital communication for access to essential services, education, and economic activities. The farmers' protest, largely driven by rural communities, exemplifies how such measures can exacerbate existing inequalities and undermine the rights of vulnerable populations. In India, the use of internet shutdowns during the farmers' protest raises concerns about the erosion of democratic norms and the state's increasing reliance on digital authoritarianism. The Indian case adds to the growing concern about the future of digital activism in an era where states are increasingly willing to use internet shutdowns as a tool of repression.

The internet was not always the subject of state regulation; in fact, its decentralised architecture was structured to discourage control. As Lessig (2006) says, in post-Communist Europe, it was thought of as the opposite of control—it would not and could not be controlled by the state. It was thought that: "Governments could threaten, but behaviour could not be controlled; laws could be passed, but they would have no real effect" (Lessig, 2006, p. 3). In a similar vein, Castells (2008) talks about an international public sphere that is not governed by any particular sovereign nation but is shaped by various states and global non-state actors. Castells (2008) observes that a major part of the public sphere of the 21st century is constituted by media. In the digital era, this includes mass media, the internet, and wireless communication networks.

State and central governments in India continue to restrict media and communication networks rampantly. "Although we counted fewer than 100 shutdowns in India for the first time since 2017, we're not convinced Indian authorities have embarked on the path toward positive, sustained change with regard to digital rights" (Access Now, 2023, p. 18). While the number of shutdowns may have decreased in 2022 that certainly makes up for the increased social media censorship that is rising proportionally.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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About the Author

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Tactics of Disconnection: How Netizens Navigate China's Censorship System

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Abstract

This article explores the complex, multi-layered mechanisms of internet censorship in China, emphasizing its role as both a tool of control over public engagement and a mechanism for elites to disconnect themselves from spaces of public scrutiny, and avoid potential threats such as doxxing by bottom-up populist online movements. Through in-depth interviews with social media users, this study investigates how individuals perceive, assess, and navigate the boundaries of internet censorship, focusing on their awareness of censorship practices, the assessment of sensitive content, and the tactics they employ to circumvent restrictions. We further examine how a sophisticated censorship mechanism—comprising self-censorship, platform censorship, and physical enforcement—works to disconnect netizens from grassroots collective actions. The findings reveal that internet censorship in China not only regulates online populist activism but also serves as a protective shield for elites, allowing them to curate a controlled digital space that suppresses critical discourse. By highlighting the ways in which both ordinary users and elites navigate the challenges of digital engagement in this heavily regulated environment, this study provides theoretical insights into the practice of disconnectivity as an elite privilege. It enhances our understanding of the interplay between connectivity, censorship, and disconnectivity in shaping the digital landscape and its implications for social change and political engagement in China and beyond.

Keywords

activism; China; disconnectivity; internet censorship; populism

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1. Introduction

Digitalization has fundamentally transformed collective mobilization and collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Liu, 2020), which is exemplified by the emergence of Chinese online and bottom-up populism (He et al., 2023b; Zhang & Schroeder, 2024). In Chinese online bottom-up populism, internet users, covered by the semi-anonymous character of the internet and digital platforms, form a connective and collective body (netizens) to express concerns against elites who are perceived as rich, powerful, and morally corrupt. Digital platforms serve as arenas for the amplification of people's voices, which allow them to orchestrate collective activities against perceived corruption, societal inequities, and political injustices in ways that would not be possible offline (He et al., 2023a). However, these digital forms of populist activities have not gone unnoticed by state actors. In response to online and grassroots connective action, state apparatuses and media companies deploy a technologically advanced censorship mechanism that filters, deletes, and curates content (Roberts, 2018), managing "what is or is not visible in Chinese information and communication networks" (Schneider, 2023, p. 1). As a form of "communication governance" (Schneider, 2023, p. 2), censorship in China attempts to disconnect expressions of grassroots dissent to preserve social harmony and political stability.

Censorship as a top-down disconnecting mechanism has been widely discussed (King et al., 2013; Roberts, 2018; Schneider, 2023). However, there is little research on how citizens experience internet censorship and respond to it, particularly in the context of China. We address this gap by studying how citizens perceive the omnipresence of censorship, and how they develop tactics of disconnection to avoid being censored and stay under the government's radar (de Certeau, 1984). Building on in-depth interviews with Chinese citizens ($N = 22$), our research shows how netizens perceive and assess the risks of internet censorship, and how they develop tactics to circumvent it. We further investigate how elites (often the targets of bottom-up populist protests) use these mechanisms to shield or disconnect themselves from online threats, including public doxxing and digital surveillance, thereby safeguarding their autonomy within a highly surveilled and regulated information landscape. We argue that a thorough exploration of dynamic practices of (dis)connectivity and censorship is vital for understanding the lived experience of so-called netizens, defined as engaged internet users in China who operate at a collective, grassroots level.

Situated within the broader context of online bottom-up populism, connective action, and censorship in China (He et al., 2023b), we argue that sophisticated censorship mechanisms, including self-censorship, platform control, and physical enforcement, collectively disconnect netizens from grassroots digital activism in China. Our research offers both empirical insights and theoretical advancements in the study of the dynamic interplay between (dis)connectivity and internet censorship in China.

2. Online Bottom-Up Populism and Online Activism in China

Populism is a concept plagued by conceptual diversity (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Scholars have grappled with its various dimensions, describing a critique of established power structures manifesting itself in a binary appeal to "the pure people" against "the corrupt elite" (Canovan, 1999; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), with a specific rhetorical style (Laclau, 2005) across both left-wing and right-wing orientations (Rama & Santana, 2020). This has resulted in multiple frameworks for understanding populism, including, but not limited to, populism as ideology (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), strategy (Weyland, 2001), discourse (Laclau,

2005), political style (Moffitt, 2016), and social movement (Aslanidis, 2018). This has led some to describe populism as having a chameleonic nature, able to adapt and change its character in different settings (Taggart, 2000). It spans a wide range of political, social, and economic landscapes, resonating within diverse local contexts as a people-centered response to specific grievances (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2000). In democratic contexts, populist parties and populist leaders mostly appeal in the name of "the people" against elites and established systems which are described as no longer representing the general will of the people. To account for this conceptual diversity and ambiguity, this study works with a minimalist definition, proposing populism as "an appeal to 'the people' " against corrupt elites or "the established structure of power" (Canovan, 1999, p. 2).

While a top-down understanding of populism is most prevalent, global grassroots movements such as the global Occupy Movements have also embraced populism. Rather than being orchestrated by hierarchical structures or charismatic leaders, these movements apply a collective, bottom-up populist framework (Aslanidis, 2018). The Occupy slogan, "We are the 99%," for example, strongly echoes the central node of a populist "the people versus the elite" rhetoric. This is also the orientation of populism in China, which can be defined as bottom-up and online (He et al., 2021). In the context of Chinese online and bottom-up populism, netizens align themselves with "the people" and utilize digital platforms to voice their grievances against elites and established power structures they perceive as failing to represent the public's interests. Netizens are a specific category of citizens, defined as digitally engaged individuals who use the internet as a platform to express collective dissatisfaction, critique power structures, and appeal for change (He et al., 2021; Yang, 2009). These individuals are often semi-anonymous, leveraging the relative protection of the digital space to challenge perceived corruption and societal injustices without facing the immediate consequences that physical protests or offline activism might provoke. "The elite," on the other hand, is defined as those who hold political, social, or economic power in China. In the context of online populism, elites encompass government officials, influential public figures, and those at the top of the social hierarchy. Due to their elevated status, they are often perceived as corrupt or disconnected from the general populace (He et al., 2023a). These elites become targets of netizens' protests when they are viewed as benefiting from the established systems while ignoring or suppressing the will of the people.

Bottom-up populism relies on the self-motivated collaboration of individuals united by common grievances or aspirations. Decentralized, online platforms afford this collaboration, facilitating the rapid spread of narratives that critique elites and established power by highlighting issues of corruption, inequality, immorality, and injustice. Under these collective frames, dispersed individuals are rallied, fostering a sense of collective agency among netizens, who see online platforms not only as providing a loudspeaker to aggregate individual and marginalized voices, but also as an emotional resonator (Yang, 2009). This is particularly the case for emotions of sympathy, playfulness (Yang, 2009), and anger (Xie, 2012).

Despite digital platforms' affordances for expression, online and bottom-up populist protests inevitably encounter the formidable barrier of internet censorship in China. Such confrontations are not incidental but a predictable consequence of the disruptive potential that these connective protests hold within Chinese society. In their efforts to maintain control, social harmony, and national security, central and local governments often view the unfettered flow of information and online collective action as threats that need to be mitigated (Miao et al., 2021). This leads to the implementation of various censorship mechanisms aimed at monitoring, controlling, and blocking digital activities associated with bottom-up populist

movements. The question, then, is, when confronted with strict internet censorship, what tactics do netizens employ to maintain connection and ensure the visibility of information related to populist protests?

3. Censorship Techniques and Proactive Discourse

China has developed a complex mechanism of internet censorship and internet governance (Han, 2015; King et al., 2013; Schneider, 2023). According to Miao et al. (2021), China has issued 129 internet policies from 1994 to 2008. This number increased to 229 from 2009 to 2017. Roberts (2018) argues that internet censorship, as an information and communication management strategy, constitutes three mechanisms: policy, social norms, and technical censoring. At the policy level, governments and regulators formulate media policies or legislative frameworks to discipline the practices of media companies and internet users. Social norms represent an informal but powerful form of regulation that complements and extends beyond policy mechanisms of control. By leveraging the weight of social expectations, they influence individuals to self-regulate their information consumption, serving as an effective tool for maintaining conformity and suppressing dissent within societies. Technical censoring describes an array of techniques employed to regulate and control the access, publication, and exchange of information on the internet.

Between 2009 and 2017, China saw a remarkable increase in the scope and scale of censorship technologies. This enabled the government to extend its surveillance and control mechanisms across virtually all digital platforms. This expansion covered a wide array of online spaces, from social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo to live streaming services, online meeting platforms, facial recognition software, and short video applications such as Douyin. The technical development of internet censorship can be broadly divided into three stages. The first stage involved the building-up of a Great Firewall from 1998 to 2008. This serves as a digital panopticon (Crandall et al., 2007), automatically blocking, filtering, and censoring content deemed unacceptable (Clayton et al., 2006; Xu et al., 2011). For instance, Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter/X) blocks content that contains sensitive keywords (Ng, 2013). However, the effectiveness of automated censorship was constrained by its inability to adapt to a constantly evolving set of approaches to circumvent censorship. This led to the development of a second stage of censorship, a hybrid model integrating both automated and manual censoring in which human reviewers who can understand sarcasm, satire, and the shifting meanings of words, images, and videos reinforce keyword censorship (Ng, 2013). Finally, in the third stage, the government adopted a more proactive internet censorship mechanism. Rather than deleting or blocking anti-elite and anti-establishment posts, thousands of "commentators," also referred to as "Little Pink" (K. Fang & Repnikova, 2018) and "Fifty-Cent Army" (Han, 2015), were hired to influence or manipulate online public discourse by publishing pro-government comments on digital platforms (Sullivan, 2014).

Internet censorship in China reflects the combination of two dominant models of control: repression and production (Chen, 2022). The repression model captures active and deliberate efforts by authorities to suppress certain forms of speech that are perceived as undesirable or threatening to prescribed social norms (Freshwater, 2004). The production model, drawing on Foucault (1976, 1995) and Bourdieu (1991), understands "censorship as forms of discourse regulation that are omnipresent" (J. Fang, 2024, p. 5). Also referred to as "new censorship theory" (Müller, 2004), central to this theory is *wenming* discourse (Yang, 2018), meaning both "civilization" and "civility." While *wenming* (as civilization) operates "as an ideological discourse of legitimation," *wenming* (as civility) functions "as a strategic technology for internet governance" (Yang, 2018, p. 1945).

The integration of the repression and production models demonstrates a shift in the government's approach to censorship from exclusively using repressive measures like content blocking, or harassing dissenting voices, to efforts at shaping public discourse. Together, they allow authorities to implement both proactive and preventive strategies that limit critical expressions while actively encouraging the generation of online content that promotes "positive energy" and supports and advances government policies (Yang, 2018). Repression and production models have primarily been studied from the perspective of government authorities' censorship techniques (Ng, 2013) and strategies (Qin et al., 2017), the effect on online activism (Lee, 2016; Roberts, 2018), or how central and local governments reinforce power structures through "selective" (King et al., 2013) online surveillance (Schlæger & Jiang, 2014). Current literature on internet censorship highlights its top-down implementation, exploring how the technological development of censorship allows authorities to implement nuanced control over digital spaces. However, less research has explored how conscious individuals are of censorship, how they assess the risk of internet censorship, and their circumvention tactics. This study addresses this gap by exploring netizens' personal experiences with censorship.

4. Disconnectivity

Disconnectivity, as defined by Hesselberth (2018), refers to "the tendency toward voluntary psychic, socio-economic, and/or political withdrawal from mediated forms of connectivity" (p. 1995). Disconnection can either come as a response to experiences of internet censorship, or alternatively as a means of "shielding oneself from dissonant views" (Zhu et al., 2017, p. 113). Bozdag (2020) distinguishes between visible and invisible forms of disconnection. Visible forms include actions such as unfriending and blocking, which clearly articulate a desire to disconnect. In contrast, invisible forms such as muting, unfollowing, and ignoring allow individuals to disengage without fully severing ties or causing harm to the other party (Bozdag, 2020).

In their examination of intentional practices of disconnection, John and Gal (2018, p. 2971) conceptualize unfriending as "exercising sovereignty over one's personal public sphere while also acknowledging that everyone else has their own personal public sphere too." Their findings suggest that behaviors such as unfriending, unfollowing, and blocking are primarily concerned with disconnecting from affiliation and relationships, rather than content alone (p. 2984). John and Agbarya (2021) examine what triggers unfriending behaviors, positing that such actions are "sometimes about punching up and sometimes about stepping away" (p. 1063). Similarly, Zhu and Skoric (2022), in a study of the implications of unfriending from a political perspective, focus on its effects on political expression and information consumption after social movements. They argue that politically motivated unfriending is a strategy to distance oneself from contentious opinions in order to create a digital "safe place." This space is curated to protect those marginalized by "shielding them from words and acts perceived as threatening and by excluding disagreeing others" (p. 2673).

Previous studies have demonstrated disconnectivity as a mostly personal choice that influences the dynamics of digital interaction and community building. Research has shown how individuals voluntarily disconnect to create a safe space during periods of conflict. This leaves underexplored how elites, particularly in the context of online bottom-up populist protests, strategically leverage internet censorship as a tool to enforce disconnection. This dimension of elite-driven disconnectivity forces disengagement within populist protests while simultaneously allowing elites to retreat from potential scrutiny and public pressure. Addressing this gap,

this study investigates how social media users perceive internet censorship in China. By examining how social media users navigate internet censorship, we explore how elites use disconnection to insulate themselves from grassroots protests. This analysis considers perspectives from both those in power and those who cannot disconnect—such as individuals facing censorship, surveillance, and social media manipulation. In doing so, we shed light on how censorship not only suppresses public discourse but also serves as a privileged tool for elites seeking to disengage from critical online voices and digital collective action.

5. Methodology

China, a country with high internet penetration and a large number of internet users, is an interesting case to study the relationship between practices of connectivity, experiences of internet censorship, and perceptions of elites' disconnectivity. Chinese internet users became even more connected during the pandemic (Hou et al., 2020), when the internet became the principal conduit through which individuals could maintain connections with the external world in periods of isolation. However, this increased reliance on the internet and digital platforms inevitably intersected with China's censorship regime, triggering a cascade of surveillance and control actions aimed at mitigating potential threats to social harmony (Chang et al., 2022). Given the ubiquity of the censorship mechanism, these contexts offer a unique setting to examine the awareness, motivations, and strategies of netizens to engage online, balance the connection and disconnection, and avoid being censored. The following research questions guide this study:

1. How do Chinese netizens perceive and experience the mechanisms of internet censorship, and how do they assess the sensitivity of content within the context of their online activities?
2. What tactics do Chinese netizens employ to circumvent censorship?
3. How do netizens perceive elites' tactics of disconnecting themselves from public scrutiny?

To answer these questions, this study employs semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Kvale, 1996) with Chinese internet users inside and outside China. Semi-structured interviews allow this research to explore the complex perspectives, experiences, and tactics of individuals navigating internet censorship in China. Interviewees were asked about their daily social media use, behaviors of interaction with others, awareness of internet censorship, impacts of internet censorship on their behaviors, experiences of being censored, motivations and strategies of censorship circumvention, and opinions and expectations towards internet censorship. By using a semi-structured approach, follow-up questions were asked when needed to build clarity or further explanation, so as to gain an in-depth understanding of interviewees' awareness of internet censorship and their motivations and tactics to navigate internet censorship. Overall, this method facilitates a nuanced understanding of the subjective realities of participants, enabling the extraction of rich, detailed narratives that are essential for comprehending the multifaceted dynamics of censorship in China.

Interviewees fit within three distinct age groups (18–30, 31–55, and above 55), with individuals residing both within and outside China to gain a broad set of perspectives. We adopted a strategy that combines purposive and snowball sampling techniques that began with identifying initial respondents who met our predefined criteria of age groups by using a "friends-of-friends" measure to ensure analytical distance (Goodman, 2011). These participants facilitated connections to further potential respondents within their own networks. For the interviewees outside China, we asked whether their online behavior had changed compared to when they were in China, and whether they used different platforms when outside China.

The sample size of 22 participants aligns with the qualitative nature of this research and its aim of capturing in-depth personal experiences of internet users in China. The analysis emphasizes in-depth understanding of individual experiences, strategies, and behaviors rather than aiming for broad generalizations. This approach helps identify patterns in users' adoption of specific tactics, which could be tested in future studies, such as through surveys with a representative sample. Given the topic's sensitivity, snowball sampling within a qualitative framework is advantageous, allowing researchers to reach individuals who are aware of internet censorship but may be cautious about participating in research. To mitigate ethical concerns, interviewees are pseudonymized, referred to by I+Number in this study. An overview is presented in Table 1.

Interviews were conducted in Chinese in March and April 2024. They were transcribed verbatim to ensure a nuanced examination of responses, and then analyzed using inductive and deductive coding. The deductive analysis focused initially on determining participants' awareness of internet censorship. We first analyzed the diverse and innovative tactics deployed by users to potentially circumvent the censorship apparatus. Second, we coded for the methods individuals employed to voluntarily and intentionally disconnect or curate safe spaces within the digital environment, as described by Bozdag (2020) and Zhu and Skoric (2022). These strategies include actions like blocking unwanted contacts, modifying privacy settings, engaging in

Table 1. Demographic of interviewees.

Interviewee	Age	Current / highest level of education	Vocation
I1	18–30	Undergraduate	Student
I2	18–30	Undergraduate	Student
I3	18–30	Postgraduate	Student
I4	18–30	Undergraduate	Student
I5	18–30	Undergraduate	Student
I6	18–30	Undergraduate	Student
I7	18–30	Postgraduate	Student
I8	31–55	Undergraduate	Journalist
I9	31–55	Bachelor	Public servant (officer)
I10	18–30	Postgraduate	Student, outside China
I11	18–30	Postgraduate	Student, outside China; previously, publishing
I12	18–30	Postgraduate	Student, outside China
I13	31–55	Postgraduate	Content creator, studied outside China
I14	31–55	PhD candidate	Previously, media worker, outside China
I15	above 55	College	Partially retired, state-owned corporation
I16	above 55	Middle School	Individual business, member of Communist Party
I17	above 55	High School	Retired from state-owned company
I18	above 55	High School	Retired, public servant
I19	18–30	PhD Candidate	PhD candidate
I20	31–55	Master	Lawyer
I21	18–30	Bachelor	Internship at legal firm
I22	31–55	Master	Media and technology professional

self-censorship of speech, and the creation of anonymous "throwaway" accounts to preserve personal security and privacy. Based on this, inductive coding was done to uncover the motivations driving users to navigate censorship barriers, their subjective evaluations of internet censorship, and the broader implications of how the elite in China navigate the challenges posed by widespread digital mobilization and dissent.

While providing valuable insights into the dynamics of internet censorship and user strategies in China, our study also comes with limitations. First, the small sample size, combined with the overrepresentation of highly educated individuals, limits the broader applicability of the findings. Additionally, despite assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, respondents may withhold information or portray their actions in a more socially acceptable light (Bergen & Labonté, 2020), particularly participants who work for the government. Finally, the sensitive nature of discussing censorship and online behavior might lead to a further social desirability bias, where participants modify their responses to conform to perceived social norms or expectations at the heart of the research under study here (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). Despite these limitations, the findings offer valuable insights into how Chinese internet users perceive and navigate censorship, providing a foundation for future research that could involve a larger and more diverse sample.

6. Findings

6.1. The Awareness of Internet Censorship: A Multi-Layer Mechanism

Awareness of internet censorship within China varied across different age groups, further influenced by factors such as educational background, digital literacy, and individual experiences with the internet. Interviewees between the ages of 31 and 55 were particularly attuned to the nuances and evolution of internet censorship. Having lived through the internet's nascent stages to its current expansive and highly regulated state, "as a [child of the] 80s, I am acutely aware of the omnipresence of internet censorship" (I20). Experiences of either being censored or being "invited to drink tea" (an idiom for being asked to report to the police) were common among interviewees in this demographic, who witnessed firsthand the transition from an era of relatively unbridled digital exploration to one of stringent control and censorship. This left little room for dissent or deviation from official narratives, and "letting all people have only one voice, one doctrine, one behavior, one action" (I20).

Younger interviewees (aged 18–30), who became internet users when mechanisms of censorship were already in place, gained a clearer sense of censorship during their college years, because, due to "the heavy study loads in high school, the internet is not too close to our lives" (I7). For most of them, their awareness of internet censorship was first awakened by reminders from tutors in universities: "During the new student orientation, tutors always end with a caution to be mindful of what you post online, illustrated by cases where students have been punished for inappropriate comments on the internet" (I7). Meanwhile, many people are occasionally reminded by family members or friends to caution their posts. I19 mentions that relatives tell them to "not get involved in politics or social hotspots," "not post negativity," "be sunshine, positive," and "spread positive energy." Finally, interviewees over 55 years old reflected a relatively vague perception of internet censorship. Their understanding of censorship is both less defined, shaped more by official discourse of "spreading positive energy" (I17), and more familiar, shaped more by word-of-mouth than by personal experiences with digital controls.

While many interviewees are cognizant of the general presence of internet censorship, the intricate details and specific technologies underlying this extensive system remain largely unknown to the broader public. This is encapsulated in the response from one interviewee, who said, “although I am often censored, I have little understanding of its mechanics” (I21). Drawing on the literature above, and individuals’ practices to navigate the regulation and control of the digital landscape, we found that internet censorship is perceived as a multi-layered mechanism of self-censorship by individuals, automated and manual censorship by platforms, and physical enforcement from the state.

6.1.1. Self-Censorship

Self-censorship refers to the act of an individual voluntarily evaluating, withholding, or moderating information that might be deemed sensitive or controversial by authorities and/or social norms (Bozdag, 2020). Interviewees described a pervasive sense of surveillance which, along with the broad scope of what might be considered sensitive, results in netizens being cautious. All interviewees reported practices of self-censorship before posting online. Although one outlier said they were not aware or knowledgeable about internet censorship, they believe in “following the party” and “spreading positive energy,” a somewhat implicit form of self-censorship. By evaluating and balancing the desire for expression with the perceived risks, individuals who engage in self-censorship describe three choices. The first option, adopted by nearly all interviewees, is withdrawal from participation, and remaining silent (e.g., to read not speak). This was described not only as a strategic retreat based on the assessment of risk, but also a desperate choice because they realized that “it is useless to speak” (I11) because “the authorities do not care about the voices from the grassroots anymore” (I22). The second option is moderation, modifying content to render it less sensitive before posting. In doing so, respondents are able to navigate the thin line between self-expression and compliance with social or political norms, ensuring that their posts do not attract unwanted attention or provoke censure: “You never know when what you post might be brought to light,” I3 said, highlighting the caution people have towards content moderation. The third option is candid expression, expressing one’s thoughts and feelings openly without any modifications. This is done strategically, including by I4, who operates a throwaway account on Weibo. They said, “being banned is an honor,” because “if they are afraid that people know,” then “we are doing the right thing to post.”

6.1.2. Platform Censorship

Platform censorship refers to the actions taken by digital platforms to monitor and regulate the content posted by users on specific sites or services (King et al., 2013; Lee, 2016). This involves automated blocking, filtering, and flow control, or shadow-banning and manual deletion (Roberts, 2018): “All platforms are legally responsible for the content they host, which incentivizes them to enforce strict moderation policies to avoid penalties,” said I22, who has worked on one such platform. Each digital platform employs its own continuously expanding filtering lexicon: “It would astonish people if these platforms released banned words” (I22). From the user’s perspective, keyword banning or filtering is perceived as a rigid and inflexible form of censorship. I22 explained this with a typical example, that the sentence “the night will pass and the dawn will come” (黑夜总会过去，黎明终将来临) could not be published on Weibo for a while, because it contained the blocked keyword “night club” (夜总会). They said that, “for the platforms, their logic is ‘better to be wrong than miss’” (I22). While automated censorship plays a crucial role in the initial identification and flagging of potentially problematic content, it struggles to keep up when netizens adopt circumventing

tactics (Lee, 2016). As noted above, in order to review content that automated censorship missed, or that requires nuanced judgment to interpret, digital platforms hire human censors. The integration of human censors into platform censorship processes signifies a move towards more sophisticated and nuanced approaches to content moderation, explored further below.

6.1.3. Physical Enforcement

Physical enforcement is an indispensable complement to internet censorship, serving both as a deterrent and a method of reinforcing digital controls. This aspect of enforcement involves real-world actions taken against individuals who spread content that potentially threatens the stability of society (Roberts, 2018), such as warnings, reprimands, police visits, arrests, interrogations, and, in some cases, imprisonment. I8 described such an effort, having been visited by local police for forwarding a message from a victim who experienced side effects after vaccination. I20 was also reprimanded for complaining about quarantine policies during the pandemic. Another case of physical enforcement happened after the A4 Movement in 2022, when police requested to inspect mobile phones and delete any photos and videos related to the A4 Movement on the Shanghai Metro. Said I21: “This was the first time I’ve encountered censorship through direct mobile phone inspections.”

6.2. What Constitutes Sensitivity: A Vague Boundary

Interestingly, all interviewees assert that they have a clear understanding of the “boundary” between sensitive and insensitive topics, enabling them to navigate discussions online carefully. However, their definitions of this boundary differ. The interviewees aged over 55 unanimously recognize that “politics” constitutes a highly sensitive subject. As I16 articulated, “for us ordinary people, national politics, general governmental guidelines, etc., are definitely sensitive.” Others in this age group typically refrain from engaging in political discussion, opting instead to “follow the party” (I18) or to post and share content that promotes “positive energy” (I17).

Younger interviewees (aged 18–30), on the other hand, demonstrate a broader understanding of what constitutes sensitive content. Beyond political issues, they are acutely aware of the sensitivity surrounding topics like feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and any narratives that counter the state narrative or threaten social stability. As I7 observed, “in the last five years, topics related to gender have become more sensitive, and platforms have responded with increased censorship.” I13 had a similar observation, saying that, now, “images of two men, even if just a somewhat intimate post, are instantly deleted.” This group is more engaged in discussions on these topics, both privately and publicly, (7 out of 12) seeking ways to circumvent censorship to keep these discussions alive.

The middle group (aged 31–55) exhibits a certain flexibility in their perception and assessment of sensitive topics. They possess the ability to analyze and reflect on the evolving nature of sensitivity, drawing on historical perspectives to inform their understanding. I22, a former manager at a major Chinese social media platform, emphasized that “the vast majority of people have a mistaken understanding of what constitutes a sensitive topic,” which they attribute to the pervasive effects of internet censorship. This group’s experience, including instances where three participants were warned by the police for crossing these “boundaries,” highlights their nuanced engagement with sensitive topics.

Despite all interviewees claiming they know where the "boundary" is, none of them can clearly draw the line, nor do they draw the same line. This results in practices of overly self-censoring their online activity: "A vast majority of people are overly self-censored," I22 argues, when in fact, for most users, "you are not as important to the authorities as you might think." However, because platform censorship is non-transparent, and because there are no clear rules about what is allowed and what is not, over-caution results. For example, when I8's WeChat account was blocked, they appealed to the WeChat team more than 20 times: "They only tell you that you are breaking the rules, but they can't tell you exactly what the rules are, or what I am posting that is breaking the rules."

6.3. Circumvention and Disconnection Strategies

In response to stringent internet censorship measures, netizens have developed a diverse array of innovative tactics to circumvent restrictions and maintain content visible. These circumvention tactics can be broadly categorized into five groups: wordplay, visualization, decontextualization and recontextualization, throwaway accounts, and link-sharing. These tactics were the ones most used by the interviewees or most often observed in their daily media usage.

The first class is wordplay, which represents the most common and culturally rich strategy employed by Chinese netizens. Wordplay leverages the unique characteristics of the Chinese language and character-based writing systems to create layers of meaning that are difficult to be detected by automated systems or even human censors. These methods include:

1. Homophones: Users replace sensitive words with others that sound similar but are not identifiable by automatic censors. For instance, "和谐" (harmony), often associated with censorship, is replaced by "河蟹" (river crab), as when 18 complains about "content posted often being harmonized" (被河蟹).
2. Initialism: Users create abbreviations from pinyin, or use the Latin alphabet to spell out Chinese phrases. A famous example is "YYDS" for "永远的神" (eternal god).
3. Coded words: Used by netizens to establish a shared lexicon with online communities to convey politically sensitive meanings.
4. Language-playing: Other languages are used or combined with Chinese characters to express sensitive topics, particularly English, Japanese, and Korean.
5. Martian language ("火星文"; or brain-disabled characters, "脑残体"): Characterized by combining non-standard characters with numbers, symbols, and components of Chinese characters. This allows users to bypass keyword filters, as unconventional character combinations are not included in standard censorship databases. For instance, the standard phrase "文革" (cultural revolution) can be written as "纹哿."

In addition to the above-mentioned methods, other methods include numeronyms, neologisms, etc., all of which seek to avoid automated censorship.

The second category, visualization, involves converting textual information into visual formats, exploiting the limitations of text-based censorship algorithms. Since textual information is more easily detected, filtered, and banned by algorithms, social media users often convert text into images. Various methods are employed under the category of visualization, such as screenshots (I8), creating text-as-image posts (I5), and

embedding text in images. However, visualized text can still be detected and identified through manual censorship efforts. To counter this, netizens have developed increasingly sophisticated and convoluted visualization techniques that add an additional layer of complexity to the censors' tasks, making the content more difficult and time-consuming to moderate. These methods include 180-degree rotation (flipping them upside down), and watermarking (adding subtle visual elements that disrupt optical character recognition systems while remaining readable by humans). To avoid being censored, "we will convert the text to an image and then watermark it," I4 said. Creating exceptionally long images represents an alternative way of protest that circumvents manual censorship. As one interviewee (I13) reported, "I once created a one-meter-long image."

Decontextualization and recontextualization, as the third category, transforms a sensitive topic into an allegory. It strips a topic of its immediate context (decontextualization) and then embeds it with a new, often fictionalized, setting (recontextualization). While the figures, contexts, and details have been changed, the core storyline and narratives remain the same. This often occurs in discussions involving high-profile figures, such as celebrities and government officials. As I12 noted, "topics involving female celebrities and officials from the top are usually sensitive and are not allowed to be discussed." However, by recontextualizing these figures within an allegorical framework, netizens can subtly critique without directly naming the elites who are involved. For instance, I10 observed that "allegorical stories set against the backdrop of their situations are quite popular online."

Fourth, using throwaway accounts—a temporary or disposable account (Leavitt, 2015) created for a short-term purpose—is a tactic that is often employed by social media users to engage with sensitive topics while minimizing the risk of identification: "When it comes to sensitive topics, I use a throwaway account to post," I6 said. The anonymous feature of throwaway accounts, which reduces the risk of identification, empowers netizens to express themselves more freely: "I can freely express myself without the fear of being identified," I6 further explained. By disconnecting their real identities from their online activities, netizens can push the boundaries of what is discussable.

The fifth circumventing tactic involves sharing sensitive content through the use of external drive links. By storing content on cloud storage services, such as Baidu Cloud and Xunlei Cloud, netizens can bypass direct internet censorship. This approach not only enables cross-platform sharing, but also enhances the resilience of sensitive content against censorship efforts. As I14 explained, "even if a post with a link is removed, the content remains accessible to those who have the link." As those who have the link can continue to view and share, they create a network of information sharing that is less susceptible to interruption by censorship mechanisms.

6.4. Elites' Disconnecting Tactics

Facing online populist protest, netizens highlighted several tactics that they saw elites adopting as they sought to avoid being doxxed. The first tactic is self-anonymization, disconnecting themselves by removing personal identifiers in digital spaces. This includes deliberately deleting online traces of a person's involvement in a news event or activity to limit the exposure of their personal information on social media: "Deleting posts is the most common operation," I21 reported. This tactic was, for example, utilized when the hashtag #DrivingIntoThePalaceMuseum took off after an incident in 2020. Two luxury cars were

photographed inside the grounds of the Palace Museum in Beijing, an area where cars are typically prohibited. The photos were posted on social media and quickly sparked public outrage, as netizens saw this as an abuse of privilege by wealthy elites. Those implicated in the incident deleted all their Weibo posts once they had been doxxed (He et al., 2023a).

However, elites also disconnect by hiring crisis management teams. These teams try to steer public opinion in favor of the elites by contacting platform companies to prevent further public scrutiny, debate, or backlash. This includes persuading those platform companies to ban specific keywords, shadow-ban certain users, and remove relevant hashtags from trending searches. For instance, as I19 explained, "when celebrities face negative publicity, their teams contact platforms to request the removal of the topic from trending or hot search lists." This tactic is especially prevalent in cases where governmental officials are involved, as noted by I12, highlighting a disparity in individuals' ability to disconnect: "The celebrity's team will report to Douban, requesting to delete the posts or block the group discussion," and "normal people do not have that power." By "removing from trending," elite individuals can control the information flow, slow down the dissemination of information, and reduce its impact on public opinion. In some extreme cases, fan groups may serve as informal crisis management teams, acting swiftly when they perceive "their" celebrity to be under threat. Fan groups can try and control the online narrative, and organize online defense campaigns to overwhelm negative posts with positive ones, thereby reducing the visibility of negative content. Nevertheless, as I13 said, despite being an influencer and having their own fan base to defend them from negative criticism online, they began to "place more emphasis on protecting personal information after experiencing several instances of being subjected to 'human flesh search' by other celebrities' fan groups."

The third tactic identified is turning to legal measures, as a response to doxxing and attacks. Celebrities, for example, file lawsuits for invasions of privacy, seeking to compel individuals or platforms to retract or delete harmful information. As I21 remarked, "legal means can act as a deterrent," signaling to the broader public that such behavior will not be tolerated. However, I21 also noted its limitations: "It is not always possible to identify a specific individual." Another tactic is silence, where elite individuals choose to remain silent to avoid further public attention on specific disputes. Since online attention tends to be short-lived, by being silent, individuals allow the controversy to naturally fade away. In cases where elites or established institutions *must* respond to the public, they often use a "low-key approach" that minimizes the impact. For instance, in the case of #DrivingIntoThePalaceMuseum, the Palace Museum responded to the public at midnight, which allowed the museum to fulfill its obligation to address public concerns while minimizing public attention. However, this low-key approach can backfire, particularly when the public feels their voice is being ignored. When this occurs, as it did following the Palace Museum's response, popular resistance can escalate, leading to larger collective actions and greater attention on the negative story (He et al., 2023a).

7. Discussion

7.1. Connectivity and Disconnectivity: A Dilemma

Our findings demonstrate that censorship in China goes beyond suppressing content; it actively shapes user behavior and engagement online. In the context of online and bottom-up populist protests in China, netizens strive to maintain the visibility and connectivity of their protest messages (He et al., 2023a). Despite internet censorship, netizens employ innovative tactics, such as wordplay, coded language, and throwaway accounts

to circumvent restrictions, reflecting their strong desire to maintain connectivity and ensure their voices are heard. As the censorship mechanisms evolve, so do the tactics employed by netizens to bypass them. This ongoing “cat and mouse game” spirals into a technological contest that drives innovation on both sides, resulting in an ever-changing digital landscape, while further intensifying the antagonism between “the people” coordinating at a grassroots level, and corrupt “elites” seeking to avoid scrutiny.

However, the threat of facing real-world consequences discourages netizens from crossing regulatory boundaries. The increasingly broad and strict censorship mechanisms—marked by sophisticated information and digital surveillance and the threat of physical enforcement—instill a climate of fear and uncertainty among netizens. As several interviewees highlighted, “we are transparent” (I4) and under “comprehensive” (I20), “real-time surveillance” (I8), where “eliminating internet traces seems unlikely” and “this pervasive surveillance is horrible” (I4). This climate of surveillance discourages open participation and leads to disconnection and withdrawal from online public spaces where bottom-up populism might flourish.

Disconnectivity, in this sense, becomes a protective strategy, safeguarding personal safety (Zhu et al., 2017) and privacy. But it comes at the cost of silencing potential collective voices against elites, or those perceived as elites. Such withdrawal reflects a loss of faith in the digital platforms’ ability to serve as a free space for democratic engagement and activism. Furthermore, these physical enforcement actions from the authorities often receive public attention and serve as a clear signal to society about the seriousness with which the state views certain violations, as, for example, demonstrated through the case of Dr. Wenliang Li (de Kloet et al., 2021). In essence, disconnectivity in grassroots populist protests highlights a dilemma: the need for self-preservation versus the desire for collective action.

7.2. A Multi-Layer Internet Censorship Mechanism: An Elite Privilege to Disconnect

The multi-layered mechanism of internet censorship in China not only enables state authorities to regulate what is visible and invisible within the digital sphere, especially in relation to online grassroots populist protests, it also functions as a tool for elites to shield themselves from public scrutiny and digital activism. This becomes particularly pronounced when information surveillance is exploited by elite groups, such as celebrities, to disconnect themselves from online doxxing and potential reputational harm.

This privileged deployment of internet censorship by elites, as a strategy of self-protection, reflects a different dynamic of disconnectivity from existing literature. Here these practices are conceptualized as a voluntary and intentional process (Bozdag, 2020; Zhu & Skoric, 2022), curating a safe space through visible and invisible forms (Bozdag, 2020) of blocking, unfriending (John & Agbarya, 2021), and selective avoidance (Zhu et al., 2017). However, our findings demonstrate that elites are perceived as capable of utilizing internet censorship to disconnect themselves from online bottom-up populist connective actions and suppress dissenting voices. They do so, for example, by hiring crisis management teams that contact social media platforms, leveraging internet censorship mechanisms to monitor, suppress, and steer public opinion in a direction favorable to the elites. When netizens see this occurring, it highlights an unequal application of internet censorship. On the one hand, it is applied as an elite tool by those with privilege to shield themselves from critique by disconnecting themselves from negative online attention. On the other hand, it is used against those who might seek to draw attention to abuses of power and privilege.

This allows us to understand the different ways that disconnection is executed. First, through a layered combination of self-censorship, platform censorship, and physical enforcement, enforcing the disconnection of bottom-up populist networked collective actions. These forms of censorship practices strategically and selectively target the digital infrastructures and communications that facilitate collective organizing, thereby hindering the ability of groups to coordinate, share information, and seek support through online networks. This is a source of anger for I8, whose WeChat account has been permanently blocked. They said, "I cannot send and read group messages, and the only remaining function is one-to-one chat." I8 elaborated with personal experiences that if people send a file containing a banned word through WeChat, it will be shadow-banned (i.e., making content invisible to everyone except the user who posted it.) This results in the user being unaware of the extent to which their posts and activities have been tamped down (Savolainen, 2022).

At the same time, for those among the elites, disconnection reflects how they have developed power in their favor by engaging in alternative means of disconnection, including by cultivating *wenming* (civilization or civility) as a discourse (Yang, 2018) or the strategic employment of friction and flood tactics to manipulate public opinion (Roberts, 2018). The effectiveness of this discourse-driven control is apparent: 19 of 22 participants in this study believe internet censorship is necessary. While this finding may not be generalizable, it does provide some insights into the prevalence of the acceptance of censorship. Particularly interviewees over 55 understand internet censorship not only as something necessary, but also as key for spreading positive energy and maintaining national stability.

8. Conclusion

By focusing on users' perspectives of practices and tactics of disconnectivity, this study provides unique insights into the subtleties of digital interactions and how power dynamics that are often obscured in broader analyses are perceived by internet users. This provides further insights into the interstitial spaces where netizens interact, situated between areas of overt control and covert resistance. It is within these spaces where we observe the dual purpose of digital platforms, functioning concurrently as avenues for grassroots connective dissent and as a "pressure valve" that state apparatuses can use to selectively manage discontent and maintain control, doing so in a more nuanced manner than total censorship would afford (He et al., 2023a, p. 13). However, the recent tightening of internet censorship policies has led to a transformation of the role of these platforms. As the policies became more stringent, digital platforms have increasingly lost their capacity to act as a "pressure valve" (He et al., 2023a). This shift is largely due to the disinterest of elite groups in addressing or engaging with grassroots appeals. The elites' disregard for the concerns raised through these platforms reflects a broader move towards more restrictive and controlled digital environments.

To answer our first research question ("How do Chinese netizens perceive and experience the mechanisms of internet censorship, and how do they assess the sensitivity of content within the context of their online activities?"), we found that the awareness and experiences of censorship varied across age groups. For the younger group (18–30), their awareness of censorship was first awakened by reminders from tutors in universities. The middle-aged group (31–55) is particularly attuned to the nuances and evolution of internet censorship. Finally, those above the age of 50 reflect a relatively vague perception of internet censorship. Grounded in users' different personal experiences with it, internet censorship in China can be understood as

a multi-layered mechanism of self-censorship by individuals, automated and manual censorship from platforms, and physical enforcement from the state. While it is broadly understood that censorship constrains the sharing of sensitive content, what constitutes "sensitive" also differs between different age groups. While older participants (above 50) are more familiar with political sensitivities, the younger group (18–30) demonstrates broader awareness of sensitive topics such as feminism and LGBTQ+ rights. The middle group (31–55) exhibits a certain flexibility in their perception and assessment of sensitive topics. They possess the ability to analyze and reflect on the evolving nature of sensitivity, drawing on historical perspectives to inform their understanding.

When faced with censorship or the risk of censorship, netizens interviewed here describe a variety of innovative tactics to maintain their connectivity. In answering our second research question ("What tactics do Chinese netizens employ to circumvent censorship?"), we found users employ wordplay, visualization strategies, recontextualization, throwaway accounts, and the use of external drive links, each of which allows individuals to continue engaging in online activism while avoiding detection or punishment by the state censorship regime. However, the very existence of these tactics highlights an ongoing tension between the need for netizens to stay connected and the looming threat of censorship, creating an ongoing "cat and mouse" game between users and the state.

In response to our third research question ("How do netizens perceive elites' tactics of disconnecting themselves from public scrutiny?"), this study revealed a striking contrast between grassroots netizens' attempts to stay connected and elites' perceived ability to disconnect themselves from digital scrutiny. On the one hand, we found ordinary netizens employing innovative tactics to circumvent censorship and observed how this is driven by their desire for free expression and collective action. These efforts reflect grassroots resilience against top-down control, as has been demonstrated in online and bottom-up populist protests. In contrast, elites are able to leverage their privileged access to power and technological controls. The censorship mechanism allows them to shield themselves from public scrutiny. This occurs not only when elites are able to use these tools to suppress critical voices, but also when they apply these to curate their digital presence, such as by manipulating trending topics and silencing unfavorable discussions. This elite-driven tactic of disconnectivity demonstrates how censorship in China is not just a top-down, state-imposed system, but a nuanced tool that can be wielded by the rich, powerful, and privileged elite for personal benefit.

In closing, this study shows that despite difficulties in navigating the sometimes-opaque regime of internet censorship, a regime that has developed into a privileged means for elites to avoid scrutiny, grassroots netizens continue to engage online in ways that challenge this privilege power by circumventing censorship restrictions through their use of multiple tactics of connecting and disconnecting. This ongoing resistance to control highlights a critical aspect of online and bottom-up populism in China. Future research should delve deeper into how a sensitive consciousness develops among users, how they manage the risks associated with circumventing censorship, or how they balance the need for free expression with the need to minimize exposure to potential risks. By addressing these questions, this and future studies could offer valuable insights into the resilience of grassroots populist protests in the face of internet control. They could foster a broader understanding of the power dynamics between the people and the elites, and the role of digital technology in Chinese online and bottom-up populism.

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