Who cares about digital disconnection?

Exploring commodified digital disconnection discourse through a relational lens

Abstract

Digital disconnection has risen as a new and necessary act of care that individuals perform to counter the burdens associated with 24/7 connectivity. Resources to perform such caring tasks, however, are known to be unequally distributed. Leaning on feminist theory and digital disconnection studies, this study explores whether this unequal distribution also extends to the realm of digital disconnection by examining who is portrayed to care about digital disconnection in marketing communication of digital disconnection products and services. Through a critical discourse analysis, we find that digital disconnection is foremost presented as an individualized responsibility, meaning that the particular responsibility to (re-)gain control, focus and productivity, lies with the individual user. This responsible individual is feminized in most communications, except for highly masculinized, entrepreneurial-oriented forms of commodified digital disconnection. Overall, our analysis highlights how stereotypical gendered caring roles and processes of individual responsibilization are reinforced in commodified digital products and services. To breach this vicious circle, we argue that it is crucial to bring awareness on the essentialness of digital disconnection care work to ensure that disconnection opportunities and responsibilities are not dictated by social inequalities generated by neoliberal logics.

Keywords: digital disconnection, care, commodification, feminism, digital well-being

Introduction

Digital disconnection refers to the active non-use of digital media and devices (Syvertsen, 2020). With the advent of mobile technology and the internet, this active non-use has risen as a new and necessary responsibility to counter the burdens of 24/7 connectivity (Vanden Abeele, 2020). It has become an act of care directed both towards the self (i.e., self-care), for example when people strategically place limits on communication apps or regulate online activity in order to cope with the pressure of constant availability in everyday life (Nguyen, 2021; Vanden Abeele, 2020; Vanden Abeele et al., 2018; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020), and towards others, for instance, when parents help their children to disconnect by limiting screen time or when employers instill (dis)connection policies or spaces for employees (Fast, 2021; Gregg, 2018).

The emergence of digital disconnection as an act of care raises questions about the position of these new caring practices in society. After all, in neoliberal and patriarchal societies, profit is often prioritized, meaning there is often neither the time nor the space to be able to attend to caring practices, whether for the self or for others (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Fraser, 2017; Müller, 2019). As feminist scholarship shows, the brunt of care work has therefore traditionally fallen on the shoulders of women, weighing heaviest on women of color and of lower economic class (Bhattacharya, 2017; Davis, 1981; Fraser, 2017). Today, the responsibility for care work remains precarious, disproportionately distributed and systematically undervalued, oftentimes functioning as a mechanism that sustains the oppression of women who have to take on caring roles (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Given that just like any other form of well-being, digital well-being necessitates a type of care in order to maintain it, it is important to question whether digital disconnection is taking on the characteristics of care work, falling subject to the same logics (Beattie, 2020; Fast, 2021; Lai, 2021). In this study we examine how digital disconnection is represented and

ideated in marketing discourses on websites selling a form of digital disconnection, as such discourses often reveals which underlying values are ideated in society (cf. Silverstone et al., 1992). If marketized discourses reproduce an unequal responsibilization for digital disconnection, thereby reinforcing existing privileges intersecting along gendered, racialized and classist lines, then it is imperative to generate greater awareness on this issue among the public and stakeholders, so that these can take action to ensure that digital disconnection opportunities and responsibilities are not dictated by the inequalities generated by capitalist and neoliberal societies.

The digital disconnection industry has grown substantially over the past decade, and digital disconnection commodities range from digital detox programs and self-help literature on the one hand, to apps and devices on the other (Beattie, 2020; Enli and Syvertsen, 2021; Jorge et al., 2022; Syvertsen, 2022; Vanden Abeele, 2020). We focus here on three main categories, sold in the northern region of Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands, namely (1) digital disconnection retreats, (2) workshops and courses, and (3) gadgets that aid disconnection, and ask how these digital disconnection commodities are represented and ideated. Guiding research questions for this analysis are who is deemed responsible to care about digital disconnection, why, and which values are associated with doing so.

Before presenting our analysis we first introduce digital disconnection through a relational lens to conceptualize it as care work for others and for the self, and explain how intersectional and Marxist feminist theory situate care work within structural inequalities and privileges that result in unevenly distributed caring responsibilities.

Theoretical Framework

Towards a Relational Lens on Digital Disconnection

In western(ized), industrialized and neoliberal societies, the concept of 'digital disconnection' has come to denote those *motivated*[1] acts of non-use that individuals engage in when seeking relief from 24/7 connectivity (Nassen et al., 2023). Individuals with ubiquitous access to the digital world can have varied motivations to digitally disconnect, ranging from more individual desires for 'non-use' to improve the quality of life through restoring productivity, focus, and well-being, to more political desires to resist or disrupt (Hesselberth, 2018); the latter aligning with broader anti-capitalist sentiments (see Couldry and Mejias, 2019; Mejias, 2013). Although motivations of non-use and resistance are not mutually exclusive in practice, the current study zooms in on commodified practices of disconnection and focuses foremost on acts of non-use that emerge as a response to the burdens of 'relentless connectivity' (Castells et al., 2007). Experiencing these burdens, many individuals implement digital disconnection strategies into their daily activities as a form of coping (Nguyen, 2021). Hence, just as connectivity is part of the everyday (Deuze, 2011), so is digital disconnection, as it has become an essential counter weight to establish a sense of digital well-being (Vanden Abeele, 2020).

Prior research has already revealed the relevance of adopting temporal and spatial lenses on digital disconnection. The temporal lens focuses on understanding why people experience screen time as 'wasted time' (Syvertsen and Enli, 2020) and counter-react by consciously scheduling disconnection time (Fast, 2021; Jorge et al., 2022). It examines how disconnected time is perceived as a precondition for finding an authentic self (Rosenberg and Vogelman-Natan, 2022; Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen and Enli, 2020), and, especially in the corporate sphere, is tied to perceptions of being or becoming more productive (Fast, 2021; Green, 2002; Gregg, 2018).

[1] It is important to point out that some individuals and social groups still face material and social barriers causing their involuntary disconnection (i.e., a digital divide; see also Bozan and Treré, 2023; Helsper, 2021; Treré et al., 2020). However, it is the understanding of digital disconnection as a voluntary and motivated act that is central to this study.

Parallel, yet also entwined with the temporal lens, is the spatial or locative lens that explores how (dis-)connection is enacted through designated spaces (Beattie and Cassidy, 2020; Fast, 2021). For example, literature on digital detox illustrates how the outdoors and infrastructurally isolated places go hand in hand with disconnection and places of rest (Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen and Enli, 2020). In such spaces, digital disconnection is treated as a reversal method to find a sense of self again, and ideals such as authenticity, or phrases such as 'disconnect to reconnect' are common (Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen and Enli, 2020). Moreover, a type of imaginative temporality is entwined when disconnection spaces are used to grasp a romanticized and simpler past (Satchell and Dourish, 2009; Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen and Enli, 2020). Sometimes, however, locative disconnection tools also end up creating forced disconnection spaces for others (Beattie and Cassidy, 2020), for instance in schools, concert halls, or home contexts.

While the former research reveals the relevance of *temporal* and *spatial* lenses on digital disconnection, a deeper reading of them clarifies that we can also approach the phenomenon through a third, *relational* lens. After all, disconnection stands *in relation to* connection (see Hesselberth, 2018; Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019; Treré, 2021: 1666): Both work together to produce a state of digital well-being. But, this balance must be maintained and cared for, as digital disconnection is not passive, but an active practice in the midst of incessant expectations to be connected (Syvertsen, 2020). Conceptualizing disconnection as a form of care for this relationship means that we approach it as a practice that should not be taken for granted, but rather can be positioned as a form of work, requiring care labor that may (re-)produce or challenge existing social roles, expectations and other structures.

The Social Reproductive Sphere of Care Work: Caring for Others and Self-Care

Care work encompasses both the care for others and self-care. Both acts of care can be considered as distinct, yet related, areas of care work that are part of the social reproductive sphere of society.

With respect to care for *others*, from the practical and emotional labor of cooking to remembering birthdays, caring is a central feature of everyday life that maintains social bonds. People are bound to other living and non-living things through networks of interdependence in everyday life (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Müller, 2019). Care supports these interdependencies, through acts of attentiveness and responsibility, and through competence and mutual responsiveness (Tronto, 1993, 2013). These acts of care may also include care for digital disconnection, for instance, through monitoring a child's screen time or instilling (dis)connection policies for one's employees at work (Fast, 2021; Gregg, 2018). Indeed, even at work, an employer-employee relationship can be assumed to be caring, given that it is in both actors' interest to care about and/or for each other.

However, despite its essence, care work remains systematically undervalued, in a society in which it is increasingly more difficult to find the time and spaces to attend to caring practices (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). Marxist feminists explain this seeming paradox through the inherently relational concept of the social reproductive sphere (Bhattacharya, 2017; Davis, 1981; Federici, 2020; Fraser, 2017): Simply put, a capitalist, neoliberal society centralizes paid labor (*productive* sphere), but ironically largely ignores care work taking place in the *social reproductive* sphere around it, necessary to enable the paid workforce to perform "*productive*" labor. Although the strict spatial divide between *productive* and *reproductive* has somewhat faded in the past two decades, society continues to undervalue the care work it depends on, reinforcing the precarity of the under- or unpaid work (Fraser, 2017). This calls into question whether digital disconnection is labor that falls under the care of others, and if so, reinforces inequality.

In addition to caring for others, people also direct attention to themselves, bringing the responsibility of *self-care*. This self-care can take on more self-preserving and more self-indulging forms (Ahmed, 2017: 239; Lorde, 1988: 131). Self-indulging care tends to refer to a more normative practice aimed at fostering hedonic pleasure and happiness (Ahmed, 2017; Davies, 2016). This type of self-care may stem out of individualistic neoliberal values, rather than principles of interdependence, and typically does not involve collective/public services supporting well-being (Michaeli, 2017). Self-preserving care, on the other hand, refers to the act of caring for oneself out of the sheer necessity to socially reproduce the self in order to be able to care for others or the system (Ahmed, 2017; Lorde, 1988); Think for instance of an exhausted crisis manager who digitally detoxes on the weekend so they can continue caring for their company's PR and their family during the week. In other words, in a society driven by immediate productivity and efficiency, making or claiming such time and space for one's own basic self-care needs, for instance by resting or simply doing nothing, may seem self-indulgent, or appear as an act of resistance against, or disobedience to capitalist logics (see Odell, 2019), but it - perhaps more often so - reproduces them.

In sum, both the care for others and self-care are inescapably tied to the social reproductive sphere, as part of the interdependent networks needed to maintain social reproductive relations. This care work may now also encompass the care for digital disconnection. It is therefore important to examine *who* is assumed to do this work in the already precarious circumstances care work finds itself in.

Digital Disconnection as Care Work: A Gendered Responsibility?

Gender is a central structural factor to consider in relation to the question of who is deemed to care for digital disconnection. Care work is historically women's work (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2020), and this remains true in the digital age. For example, Fast (2021) introduced the rhetoric of the *Post-digital housewife* who is intentionally

gendered and "predominantly occupied with watching and manipulating the (imagined) boundaries of "the web" (2021: 1622). Similarly, through the concept of 'relational communication' and her notion of the 'digital shift', Lai (2021) showed the historical continuity of (gendered) social roles and expectations within digital labor, highlighting the unequally distributed digital care work necessary to maintain relations. Those that carry this responsibility may not even have the freedom to disconnect or may need to invest much more effort and resources to do so equally (Portwood-Stacer, 2013).

Quite to the other end of the gender spectrum, Beattie (2020) identifies the ideal digitally disconnected subject as the "Man Alone" who occupies a space of masculine hegemony, allowing him to be "an independent and unencumbered figure who is free to disconnect at any time to make autonomous decisions or move closer to nature or work. He has ample social mobility, not in terms of class mobility but the agency to cut social ties at whim" (Beattie, 2020: 186). This unbounded male figure experiences no responsibility to maintain social relations that fall outside work, and lives within the lines of a self-centered mindset (Beattie, 2020).

In sum, prior work links both femininity and masculinity to digital disconnection but suggests that these links come with different connotations in gender roles. This suggests a historical continuity of gendered sociality upholding assumptions and expectations that women embody a caring nature (Bhattacharya, 2017; Müller, 2019). This may result in women taking up the greater burden of ensuring a digital well-being for themselves as well as for the communities they feel responsible to care for, whereas the archetypical man on the other hand may be socialized to fall outside of the responsibilities of digital disconnection care work.

It is important to note here, that social identities, and therefore social inequalities are co-constitutive, meaning that racialized, classist and other identities also shape the abilities

and possibilities one has in everyday life (Bhattacharya, 2017: 17; Crenshaw, 1991). For instance, the time-poor but capital-rich can afford to externalize care work but leave others to do double work (Huws, 2019; Schwiter and Steiner, 2020). Therefore, when exploring representations of *who* performs digital disconnection care work, we always consider gender as intersected with other social identities that together, shape *how* and *why* the practice is (supposedly) done.

Commodifying disconnection

Adding to the above assemblage are processes of commodification in which fields, things, and social relations are attributed monetary value and integrated into a market economy (Harvey, 2005). Marketing plays a significant role in commodification: By representing commodities in certain ways towards targeted consumers, it shapes their (perceived) purposes and meanings in daily life (Chambers, 2020; Silverstone, 2006).

Care work has not been spared from commodification and other market logics, with non-waged forms of care having been privatized and outsourced into waged labor (Bakker, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Schwiter and Steiner, 2020). Digital developments have become implicated in the commodification of care work, altering the ways of communicating, monitoring and allocating care labor (Huws, 2019; Schwiter and Steiner, 2020: 7). Think, for example, of digital platforms used by care workers to organize their work more efficiently. Paradoxically, however, while the commodification of care gives greater (use) value to the care work by making it more profitable to the seller and/or owner of the care service or product, it often keeps the labor force itself undervalued and exploited..

Digital disconnection is also subjected to processes of commodification, and often also involves digital developments to support it, for instance in the form of screen time monitoring apps. Ironically, these digital developments often stem from the same tech-industry that pushes hyper-connectivity (Beattie, 2020; Jorge et al., 2022; Kuntsman and Miyake, 2022). A

recurring critique of these developments is that increasing responsibility and expectation is put on individuals to take care of their own (digital) well-being, even though their individual free choice is constrained by the structural (Kaun, 2021).

With the paradoxical relationship between care work and commodification in mind, this study aims to explore digital disconnection specifically as a form of *commodified* care work. It explores how the care labor of digital disconnection is organized to understand who is deemed to benefit from it, and whether benefactors are also the ones responsible for executing the care. In sum, the overarching aim of this study is to answer the research questions who is deemed responsible to care about digital disconnection, why, and which values are associated with doing so.

Method

Sampling Strategy

For this study, we focused on Dutch-language websites selling digital disconnection products and/or services to customers in Flanders and the Netherlands as our main unit of analysis. Although geographically Flanders and the Netherlands represent a small region of Western Europe, both are welfare states that have evolved with neoliberal reform over the years. The aim is to pin-point global dynamics, and how they trickle down to the most local of contexts. Both Belgium and the Netherlands rank above average on the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI, 2022), but recent statistics show that half of these nations' workforces report being under severe time pressure or work overload. Moreover, despite being digital societies, challenges still persist in terms of internet access and digital proficiency, particularly among low-educated and income individuals. For instance, on average, 8% of households in Belgium lack internet connectivity, and 39% of Belgians exhibit limited digital skills (Anrijs, 2023). The data collection from March to May 2022, started with a general search using the following keywords in Dutch: "digital detox", "digital well-being", "digital disconnection"

and “screen time”. The search results were collected and manually filtered to leave out reviewing pages or informative pages on the keywords, as well as excluding all journalistic content. Additionally, all pages necessitating a login were left out (e.g. Facebook groups and subscription pages). In the end, the web pages selected were websites providing commodified digital disconnection in the form of courses, workshops, trips, camps, tools and gadgets.

After filtering, the data collection resulted in a total of eight websites, divided into three categories (see Table 1): (1) digital detox retreats or vacations (2) digital detox or digital balance courses, and (3) digital disconnection gadgets. Table 1 gives further information on each digital disconnection service or product.

Table 1: Summary of data collection material (as accessed between March and May 2023

Website	Product group	Context/about	Prices at the time of analysis
Digital detox vacation (Bijzonder Plekje)	Retreat (lifestyle)	Isolated vacation spot for disconnective purposes - recommendations and booking site	€110/ night to €355/weekend
Retreat for professionals (Re-treated)	Retreat (work)	Oversees retreat without digital devices: distraction free setting to focus on entrepreneurial goals Luxurious and exclusive for ambitious entrepreneurs	Unknown – exclusive access
Digital detox course (Happlify)	Course (lifestyle)	Year-long digital detox (through weekly e-mail) for everyday life	€47

Digital Balance Program (Better Minds at Work)	Course (work)	(1) Workshop for employees to manage digital activity and availability* (2) Workshop for managers to assemble digital policy* General goal of all workshops is to improve employees' work abilities (productivity, efficiency, focus, …)	
Digital Detox Academy	Course (work)	(1) workshops for smartphone use*; (2) digital detox for employees* or (3) for professional leadership position*; (4) digital stress management for entrepreneurs Digital disconnection to manage well-being and prevent burn out	(4) €249 (online - 2h); €799 (4 sessions); €1199 (intensive 1-day)
Digital detox workshop (Wellness for Business)	Course (work)	Awareness-session for employees through disconnective practices* Achieving digital comfort instead of stress	
Connectivity Switch (Myndr)	Gadget (school; home)	For children at school and at home. Limits internet access in five settings. The higher the setting, the less internet access. The teacher or parent operates the switch. The aim is to make sure children are focused when it comes to school work	€129 (hardware and installation) + €36/year per Myndr button
Stolp	Gadget (home)	Mini designer gadget that works as a faraday cage for smartphones. Used in familial context e.g. dinner table. The message is: the ability to be present as a person by eliminating digital distractions	€49 - €79 per Stolp

* Price received upon quotation by workplace as displayed in fall of 2022

Analytical Approach

In our analysis, we focused on textual and contextual discourses, as well as visual representations to answer three questions: *who* is disconnecting, *how* is this disconnection

practiced and *why*? We first employed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore the websites' textual and visual discourses within the wider commercial, marketing and neoliberal context (Carvalho, 2008). Following Carvalho's (2008) framework, the textual and audio-visual analysis took a closer look at, among other criteria, the objects, actors, and linguistic components of the websites. In combination with the contextual setting, the analysis aimed to pinpoint the various actors within the selling, buying and using process of the commodity. Together, they helped reveal *who* is being targeted to care about disconnection and their positions in relation to the context in which the commodity is sold.

Overall, as language and semiotics are never neutral but rather a reflection of the time and place they are embedded in (Mullet, 2018), a CDA serves as a snapshot for the ideological discourses on disconnection. Therefore, in relation to the historical characteristics of care work, and understanding digital disconnection as care work, we paid particularl attention to intersected gendered, classist and racialized relations. We deliberately delineated the socio-economic values embedded within commodified forms of digital disconnection and focused on how social inequalities that persist in everyday life, may translate into the marketing discourse. However, this is not meant to simplify or create a good/bad dichotomy. On the contrary, we see value in unpacking the complex place that practices of disconnection take in existing social fabrics.

As further methodological footing to understand *how* digital disconnection is practiced, we took inspiration from media domestication theory. Following Karlsen and Yrte-Arne (2021) we see that domestication theory sheds a light on the "physical placement of people, activities and technologies in the materiality of everyday life" (Karlsen and Ytre-Arne, 2021: 5). Hence, this translates to focusing on how the commodities in the websites are represented to be used in everyday life. Furthermore, it brings in a spatial aspect. This is quite

useful through a lens of care which analyzes how spaces of care tend to be marginalized or outside of 'productive' spaces (Bhattacharya, 2017).

In the results section below, we first draw out a description of who is targeted to care about disconnecting in the various websites and the associated discourses. Then, with consideration for the power relations among the various actors and the consequences of commodification, we highlight how, much like care work, the different processes of outsourcing disconnection raise questions of privilege, as well as tendencies that reproduce the status-quo of an always-on and profit-driven society.

Results

Who is disconnecting?

Across all websites, the assumption reigned that everybody is (over-)connected. The fact that there is still a digital divide (Helsper, 2021), in that some groups still lack material resources and/or the skills to connect in the first place, is simply not acknowledged, and indicates that 24/7 connection is presented as the norm.

A first look at who was targeted as the consumers and users of digital disconnection products and services revealed that, for products and services situated in the leisure domain (e.g., individual detox programs or retreats), the end user was targeted directly. For other products and services, however, often, the targeted consumer was not the intended user. More specifically, some of the products and services in our sample focused on institutionalized contexts such as the workplace, the family home and the school. The discourse surrounding them thus targeted persons of authority (i.e., managers, parents, and teachers) as intended buyers, whereas the intended day-to-day users were represented as being under their care.

For instance, the three work-oriented disconnection programs targeted the company, as represented by the person in charge: a manager, team leader or CEO. Possessive language

use such as "we can help you and your employees" or "make your employees and managers more proficient" emphasized hierarchical relations. This was further supported by passive or 'non'-representation of the end users, for instance, with top-down language use such as a "policy" and a "charter" to make digital balance plans for employees, suggesting that such a plan is to be made by the top level of the company but not *with* the actors it concerns. In the context of the disconnection switch (school context) and the Stolp (family context), the buyers were the school, personified in the teacher, and the parent, while those subjected to the digital disconnection were children. The children's subordinate position in both the school and family context suggests passivity, reflected in the promotion videos showing how they must adhere. This raises the question concerning (in)voluntariness of digital disconnection and the complexity of individual versus structural agency to practice digital/technological (non-)use (Hesselberth, 2018).

Several observations were made in relation to gender. Overall, the examined discourse on products and services in the leisure domain, which targeted the end user directly, was highly feminized: The designs of the leisurely holiday retreat website and the digital detox lifestyle website, for instance, could be labeled as "girly", using bright colors such as pink, yellow and orange, in combination with symbols such as hearts and flowers.

For both these commodities, users were depicted as feminine figures, and the creators of the program or retreat were also women. This dominant feminine discourse together with mentioning the gender of the content producers of the websites indicated that the disconnective practices promoted and sold were made by feminine figures for feminine figures, and promoted discourse on self-care that was partly intended to empower the ability to care for others.

When considering the work-oriented disconnection products and services, targeted *end users* were represented both with a masculine and feminine discourse, mainly through images

of people. However, in these cases, the buyer being addressed was often someone in a leadership position. These 'leaders' were typically represented in masculine terms. For instance, in the work-oriented websites in which the managerial position was represented by masculine figures, phrases such as "leaders with authentic intelligence" and "leaders with courage" were paired with images of a manly figure. Similarly, the website selling offline retreats for entrepreneurs reinforced a stereotypical discourse of masculinity and success, pairing images of men with topics such as "business and money", "leadership", "peak performance" and "resilience", whereas more feminine depictions were paired with topics such as "mindfulness and meditation" and "health and wellness", the latter for instance showing a picture of a white feminine figure using fitness weights and consuming what resembles a frothed trendy hot caffeinated drink.

Lastly, we found what is not represented in the discourse to say just as much as what was: throughout all websites, commodities were targeted towards a white audience, implying a severe lack of diverse ethnic representation. Therefore, the places that these services or gadgets are intended to take use, are consciously or unconsciously represented to be predominantly white spaces. Together with the insights that digital detox discourses often target capital-rich and time-poor users (Beattie and Cassidy, 2020; Fast, 2021; Portwood-Stacer, 2013), and that gendered, racialized and class identities are co-constitutive (Bhattacharya, 2017), this observation shows how forms of digital disconnection representation reproduce exclusive images of who is even considered as a targeted buyer and user of the commodity.

Summarizing, among the examined disconnection products and services the responsibility to care about disconnecting was presented as a gendered practice, seeing as the representation of targeted users throughout the websites were a mixture of feminine and masculine figures, where gender intersected with other identity markers revealing how

professional (employer-employee) and consumer (buyer-user) hierarchies played a role in who holds the power to say who should disconnect: First, white, affluent women in circumstances of self-care; second, a majority of white affluent men in leadership positions; and lastly, employees or children under such leadership.

Responsibility shift: Outsourcing digital disconnection

It is worthwhile to further examine the discourse from commodities to be bought and used by different actors. Such was the case with Myndr, the connectivity switch for children at home or at school, the faraday cage gadget Stolp, two of the digital detox/balance programs for work and at work, and one of the workshops in the third work-related website. When looking at the relations between the ones depicted as practicing or undergoing digital disconnection, and those with the decision power to buy the commodity, a double dynamic emerged:

First, the actors in a leadership position, were addressed to take responsibility to outsource the labor of digital disconnection to those under their leadership (i.e. employees or students). In these websites, prominent discourses around connectivity emphasized "distraction", "digital fatigue", an "always-on" culture, as well the "negative impact on one's own time" and how employees/students need help to manage all of this. However, there was a lack of discourse showing an acknowledgement for the potential structural causes of these issues such as work overload or long working hours. There was also an inconsiderateness for non-work responsibilities that may spatially and temporally overlap with paid working hours, and that may complicate disconnection, seeing as digital - and especially mobile - devices blur boundaries between social roles of 'play' and 'labor' that bear caring responsibilities, such as parenting (Kuntsman and Miyake, 2022).

Rather, discourse on addiction was present in three of the four websites in question, implicitly setting the stage to make problems with over-connectivity the result of the child's or employee's susceptibility (Vanden Abeele et al., 2022), and therefore a moral

responsibility of the employer, teacher or parent to help create the circumstances for them to address the issue. For example, the work courses framed the intended users of the course as "digitally intoxicated", having the wrong habits and being unknowing of how to use their digital devices correctly. Another course website framed it as users having a clouded consciousness which they must fix through an 'awareness course' to understand their digital unease at work. In turn, the last work course website acknowledged the difficulties of living within an attention economy, but in the end, also framed it as a need for individuals to regain the control they lost. From this first dynamic a tension thus emerged between agency and responsibility: although initiated by a superior (employer, teacher or parent) out of caring and helpful intentions, those who were presented to have the least agency to tackle the root causes of a problem, were ultimately those with the responsibility to fix it by creating and maintaining long term circumstances to digitally disconnect.

The second dynamic that emerged among the cases in which buyer and user differ, was the outsourcing of 'teaching digital disconnection' itself, in the form of courses or programs. Organizations and companies that can afford to buy these services have the privilege of outsourcing the work, time, and effort necessary to teach individuals about how to cope with increasing digitalization and connectivity. Here, especially the websites selling work-oriented digital well-being programs framed their marketing through a seemingly caring approach that is visible through discourses of "well-being" that bring forward the need to take care of employees. However, following the definition of care as interdependent actions and relations between *giving* care and *needing* care, the incorporation of a commodity sliced this relationship in two: The act of care as teaching digital disconnection for well-being and discipline, is outsourced to an impartial actor (the sellers of the commodity) who stands outside of the caring relationship. Moreover, the sellers are part of a for-profit business and must cater to the buyer's needs to make a profit out of their service or gadget. In one of the

detox workshops, for example, this translated to more longer-term advantages being listed for the corporation buying the workshop than for the employees taking it. From a marketing and commercial point of view, this is a logical strategy seeing as those with the purchasing power are those who need to be convinced. However, it further reinforces the corporation's superior position with their interests preceding those of employees and their digital well-being. This also means that a caring task such as digital disconnection is mediated through capitalist relations and logics, resulting in care as task- or goal-oriented rather than relational (Müller, 2019: 7).

Building on Lai's (2021) analysis on the digital and free labor it takes to maintain relations through digital communication, here, digital disconnection as a response to over-connectivity shows similar tensions between responsibility, agency, and also alienation. After all, persons in leadership positions can remove themselves from their responsibilities and essentially alienate themselves from the digital labor and effort it takes employees to tend to the increasing demands attached to the digitalization of places of work. In the end, the company then contributes minimal effort and can brush off and shift responsibility to take action. The proposed solutions, such as "establish response times, communicate your availability, have an email policy and manage your focus times", imply the problem ultimately lies with the employee. As such, we observe a double alienation process that may distance employers and employees: those buying the commodity are alienated from the work it takes to care for a sense of digital well-being, and those put in a position to practice disconnection are also alienated from a structural responsibility that lies higher up than the agency they possess to care for a balance between connection and disconnection.

Whereas the above mentioned work-related workshops and courses can be said to be practiced with a certain sense of voluntariness, the Myndr button, a technology to limit

children's internet accessibility in households and classrooms, verges onto involuntary disconnection.

In the education context in particular, the Myndr button was presented as a tool in digital classrooms that brings calmness and concentration, helping teachers "to gain a grip on their class again". While there is an added identifiable relation of care here between the teacher/parent and the child (seeing as the former is fulfilling the necessary task of education which the child cannot provide for themselves (Yeates, 2004: 371)), it is important to also situate schools as social institutions, that perpetuate social structures, and in doing so, inequalities (Collins, 2009). Noticeable, here, is that the marketing discourse emphasized discipline and control through techniques of punishment that resemble Foucauldian power mechanisms, and transform into forms of self-governance (Foucault, 1977), in this case pushing children to digitally disconnect when they need to 'produce' as students. For instance, the audio-visual content demonstrates that the switch should be used as a tool to rectify undesirable behavior such as video game playing when focus is lost, rather than working preventively.

The discourse here reflects the notion of "careful surveillance" (Richardson et al., 2017: 110), highlighting the paradoxes of care in a neoliberal society and how digital technologies become embedded in and reinforce existing power relations: On the one hand, the Myndr button protects and relieves children of the responsibility to regain focus, leaving that digital labor to the teacher/parent who controls the button. On the other hand, the controlling and surveillant nature of the button's use conveys long term messages that children are under pressure to be in control of what they give their attention to, as well as adding a rather taken-for-granted type of digital labor for educators through surveillant practices. Moreover, although "careful surveillance" of children's connectivity releases the burden of responsibility over (dis-)connection from these young persons' shoulders, at a

larger institutional scale, it evokes the question of how social institutions such as families and schools play a role in socially reproducing class societies through the (unequal) distributions of these underlying (individual) responsibilities. After all, through discourses referring to control and punishment, the Myndr button marketing, on the one hand, holds a moral undertone on what is the right and wrong use of connectivity; on the other hand, it intensifies educating, as parents and teachers are expected to take on another caretaking responsibility regarding (their) children (see 'Discipline power' Foucault, 1977; Huws, 2019; Lai, 2021; Strengers et al., 2019).

Looking at the represented chain of actors in these cases and how they interact, we see that actively buying a commodity does not automatically translate to voluntary disconnection. Rather, the idea of voluntariness starts to blur, or is even erased, when unfolding the web of relations, and the roles each actor plays in function of the commodity and its attributed values. Situating digital disconnection within existing sociality that carries inequalities shaped by intersections of privilege and oppression (Lai, 2021; Portwood-Stacer, 2013), we follow the argument that a digital divide rests within practices of disconnection as well as connection (see Kuntsman and Miyake, 2022).

Consumerism, privilege and empowerment: exceptionality of disconnection

In the above section, we focused mostly on commodities for which the buyer of the commodity was not the intended end user. For the leisurely 'digital detox' and work-related 'work-life balance' programs, however, websites also carried a discourse of individual responsibility, albeit with different accompanying values: First, several websites had in common the promotion of luxury, visible through discourse such as "offline is the new luxury", or the 'VIP' category for entrepreneurs and managers who were framed to be especially in need of a way to stay productive and efficient for their business and well-being. Another example was the showcasing of luxurious accommodations from architectural and

designer tiny houses (leisure), to glamping tents and speedboats in “breathtaking Colombia” (entrepreneurial). The latter entrepreneurial retreat was highly exclusive as the potential buyer of the commodity must request an invite first, after which the retreat organizers “carefully/rigorously select the most ambitious profiles […] and professionals”.

Another recurring discourse was that of “authenticity”, validating prior research that associates digital disconnection and authenticity in order to counter the inauthenticity linked with connection (Rosenberg and Vogelman-Natan, 2022; Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen and Enli, 2020). Especially the feminized leisurely retreat, as well as the feminized everyday detox were oriented towards reconnecting to the ‘here and now’ and to the people that are most important to the user. Moreover, paired to this was a discourse of “gaining time” to fulfill this particular authenticity. Together, they framed that the purpose of disconnection stands in relation to making the time to take care of one’s own peace of mind, and maintain relationships with friends and family (and thus care for others), in a distraction-free context.

In contrast, work-related websites framed authenticity by pairing it with discourses on “regaining control” and freeing the user. For instance, one work-related and masculinized disconnection course for entrepreneurs articulated that you would “learn how to be the boss of your distractions”; and become “a user of technological ingenuity instead of being a slave to it”. The same website also paired it with the means to communicate more authentically at work and making *real* free-time when alone as well as for the family. In addition, a discourse surrounding ‘time’ also prevailed. However, in the entrepreneurial retreat and the other work websites the angle shifted to efficiency, as it was respectively, more about having “no time to lose” or needing ‘time management’ for better professional success, instead of ‘gaining time’ such as in the non-work websites.

This being said, the responsibility put on individuals as buyers of the commodity to be the agents in improving their digital well-being through digital disconnection, intersects with

the ability to buy a luxurious or (self-)caring product. As it is a commodity, purchasing power adds a layer of privilege into the equation, seeing as people who may have similar hurdles, but not the same purchasing power are excluded from this type of care or help. In short, the actors within a great deal of these cases are able to buy the ideal circumstances for disconnection. Moreover, similar to commodified digital developments (Huws, 2019; Schwiter and Steiner, 2020), commodification of digital disconnection adds to the factors that impact who does the care work.

This for instance was also visible when zooming in on the leisure and work retreats as the associations between discourses and spatial representations showed how purchasing the ideal circumstances meant having the privilege to remove oneself from habitual life: On a first note, both services were strongly associated with nature, together with an emphasis on infrastructural 'dead zones' as promoted by the leisure, and entrepreneurial retreat. Additionally, paired with (digital) isolation was a discourse on escapism in which language use was centered on 'getting away', having a break from stress, and removing distractions such as notifications and constant attendance to urgent-like issues. Moreover, the entrepreneurial retreat was literally called "Re-treated" and had an "Iceland Escape" as well as "expedition" which both explicitly and implicitly refer to the need to get out of a current situation, and in the latter case, the need to discover something new.

Interestingly, we noticed not only the co-existence of natural imagery with the previously mentioned elements of luxury, authenticity and 'buying time', but also a discourse alluding to a past time. Hence, involving both spatial and temporal aspects in curating ideal digital disconnection circumstances. This discourse was brought forward in several ways: For instance, the entrepreneurial retreat paired images of luxury with images of simplicity like sitting around the fire, meditation and accommodation in tents in order to curate the best space to focus as possible. Another example was the leisurely retreat offering two

accommodations, a Yurt and a ‘tralaluna’ cabin that are both traditional homesteads originating respectively from central and south Asian cultures. The multiple associations between, on the one hand the escape to nature that implies going ‘outside of’ mainstream society, and on the other hand the marketisation of traditional cultures, render something luxurious and expensive that is otherwise part of a marginalized group in everyday life (c.f. oppression and discrimination of Romani culture and people of migrant background in Belgium) as an exceptional activity that happens outside of daily life.

Discussion

Through an analysis of the discourse on websites selling digital disconnection commodities, this study sought to investigate who is deemed responsible to care about digital disconnection, why, and which values are associated with doing so. In broader terms, we aimed to gain insight on whether (intersected) inequalities that run through the organization and distribution of care work extend towards digital disconnection.

Findings and reflections

Overall, our findings show that digital disconnection commodities are marketed and sold differently depending on identity markers such as gender and professional hierarchies. With respect to gendered visual and textual discourse, we observed differences in terms of the values that were centrally portrayed, aligning with the continuation of gender roles within disconnection strategies (Fast, 2021) (Beattie, 2020). As such, the feminized websites targeted a feminine end-user through a discourse implying that they are lacking the time to do social reproductive tasks in daily life. In contrast, the individual masculine end user was portrayed to be time-poor for professional objectives, requiring disconnected time to focus on being a better professional or attaining entrepreneurial goals.

In both cases, the focus was on an individual user's responsibility to make time for these values, leaving out of consideration the various systemic social dynamics that have an influence on an individual's privileges, opportunities and possibilities, which are determined by, among others, gendered, racialized and classist identities. Leaving out such macro dynamics disconnects individuals from their socio-cultural contexts. Just as social structures reside within technology and reproduce power dynamics (Kuntsman and Miyake, 2022; Vanden Abeele et al., 2018), and parallel to the division of labor in digital and datafied communication (Lai, 2021), responsibilities to practice digital disconnection are woven into existing power dynamics, characteristic to undervalued social reproductive work.

The level of individual responsibilization throughout the websites targeting the end-user directly, points towards an underlying self-care discourse. While the boundary between self-preserving and self-indulging care calls for further exploration, by relating the identities and agency of the represented actors to one another, and looking into the values attributed to the different disconnection practices, we observed that some acts of self-care are a more straightforward continuation of gendered responsibilities: Within the feminized examples, the discourse makes a more explicit reference to the interdependence of self-care and care for others. This is not the case in masculinized discourses. Looking at the bigger picture, this begets the question whether if one social group disconnects to ultimately care for others, and another social group does not, who is then caring for the former?

Furthermore, commodification of disconnection adds certain privilege, as purchasing the commodity often entails buying the ideal circumstances to disconnect. Strongly observed in the retreats and courses, this privilege comes because digital disconnection is externalized in two ways. First, in parallel to how commodified care functions, the commodified services take over the task of curating rather ideal spaces to disconnect in, and fostering ideal circumstances in which the buyer can cater to a better well-being or a more authentic lifestyle.

Moreover, such dynamics of externalizing resemble Beattie's (2020) rhetoric of "the man-alone" in which a masculine individual is more boundless from social reproductive relations or responsibilities, and therefore able to temporarily cut ties with his social surroundings. What we see in the examples here is that this masculine figure, or these masculine privileges, although for very different purposes, can also be practiced by a feminine audience when it comes to commodification. The intersection of gender and a certain level of affluence shows how these social categories intersect and are fluid, and that one may help gain privileges that are absent in the other.

Similarly, within the disconnection commodities, the individual targeted user is given a responsibility to disconnect that is motivated by merit, and situated within the historical neoliberal trends of privatization and (self-)governance that encourage individual independence and empowerment (Trnka and Trundle, 2014: 137). Along these lines, in a neoliberal society the targeted user with purchasing power goes hand in hand with the feeling of merit, which in turn masks an individual responsibility to disconnect, with empowerment.

Interestingly, when a commodity is bought for another individual to practice disconnection (e.g. employee), the responsibility to care about disconnection shifts from the structural level to the individual level, to a form of self-care. In other words, those practicing disconnection are often not given the structural circumstances to disconnect, but are instead taught to create and maintain those circumstances themselves, placing responsibility on individual shoulders. In the case of children's education this is more complex as it also results in an intensification of parenting and teaching, where parents and teachers as stakeholders seem to be responsibilized to develop 'digital wellbeing literacy', both for themselves and in the children they care for. All in all, as pointed out by others (Fast, 2021; Ytre-Arne, 2023), this is often taken further as a way to be more productive for another (e.g. company), and/or

to develop a stronger sense of control in everyday digitized life (e.g. in this study in the school and home context).

The second manner in which these cases externalize digital disconnection, is in the literal geographical distancing of digital disconnection. The disconnection retreats in this study happen far away from normal life, whether it is physical or conceptual (a "hiking Odyssey"). The combination of discourses in the luxurious retreat commodities, connotes digital disconnection to both a temporally and spatially far-away activity, setting up a duality between connection on the one hand, implicitly associating it with a modern, productive and daily life the user should escape from. On the other hand, disconnection is left to be associated with a marginal and exceptional activity linking it to simpler and romanticized times in the past, as well as to the cultures used to portray the imagery (Sutton, 2020). Along the lines of (neo-)colonial thinking, this type of view reproduces conceptions that some cultures do not exist in the desirable 'modern' present (Said, 1978). Within this same relationality, and therefore thinking of disconnection and connection as co-constitutive (Hesselberth, 2018), we argue that disconnection is related to a marginal practice of care that serves to reproduce and leaves unquestioned the foundations of the oftentimes exhausting culture of connectivity and productivity positioned in the center of society. In turn, leaving the status quo unquestioned also exaggerates the way in which escaping or resisting it might be taken for granted, as well as the things it allows the users to achieve, such as entrepreneurial success or a rested state of mind, more authenticity or efficiency.

Concluding remarks and future research

This paper explored whether inequalities within the responsibilization and performance of care work extend towards digital disconnection. By conceptualizing disconnection as care, we examined who is portrayed within marketized discourse as responsible to care about disconnection, for what reasons and following which values.

The qualitative analysis of the websites and discourses in this study is not intended to represent a general experience of everyday life or serve as a direct critique on the organizations in question or the actors involved, but rather focuses on the representation of commodified digital disconnection as care work. From the cases analyzed in this study, we conclude that disconnection and care work share similar underlying dynamics, pointing towards the reproduction of intersected societal inequalities along gendered, classist and racialized identities. Conceptualizing digital disconnection as care work thereby adds to the growing body of academic work critical of the individual responsibilization of managing the pressures of digital connectivity and expectations surrounding digital well-being. Although our study is limited in that it focused on a select number of websites, it complements the diverse set of ethnographic approaches to digital disconnection (Jorge, 2019; Karlsen and Ytre-Arne, 2021; Karppi et al., 2021; Syvertsen, 2022; Syvertsen and Enli, 2020), and encourages further research to compare different regions and types of commodities with a relational approach on disconnection as a form of care work. Above all, however, we hope it represents a call-to-action to stakeholders in the industry and public institutions to address inequality in digital disconnection care work, and the already precarious circumstances of care work in general.

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