

Who cares about digital disconnection?

Analysing discourses of websites selling digital disconnection through a relational lens

Abstract

Digital disconnection has risen as a new and necessary act of care to counter the burdens associated with 24/7 connectivity. Resources and available time to perform caring tasks are known to be unequally distributed. Leaning on feminist theory and digital disconnection studies, this study explores whether this unequal distribution extends to the representation of care in the discourse surrounding digital disconnection commodities. Through a critical discourse analysis of various types of commodified digital disconnection products and services, and how they are marketed, we find that digital disconnection is foremost presented as an individualised responsibility, meaning that the particular responsibility to (re-)gain control, focus and be productive, lies with the individual user. This responsible individual is feminised in most communications, except for highly masculinised, entrepreneurial-oriented forms of commodified digital disconnection. Overall, our analysis highlights how stereotypical gendered caring roles and processes of individual responsabilization are reinforced in commodified digital products and services. To breach this vicious circle, we argue to value caring work and further question the gender inequalities present in digital disconnection discourses.

Key words: 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, disconnection has risen as a new and necessary responsibility to counter the burdens of 24/7 connectivity. Placing limits to connectivity has, as such, become both an act of self-care and an act of care for others. With respect to the self, for example, disconnection as care can be recognized in the myriad ways in which 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; M. Vanden Abeele et al., 2018; M. M. P. Vanden Abeele, 2021; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). With respect to others, disconnection as care occurs, for instance, when parents help children to disconnect through limiting screen time or when workplaces instil (dis)connection policies or spaces for employees (Fast, 2021; Gregg, 2018).

However, in neoliberalist and patriarchal societies that prioritise profit, there is often neither the time, nor the space to be able to attend to caring practices (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Fraser, 2017; Müller, 2019). Historically speaking, in a patriarchal society sustained by gender inequalities, the brunt of caring work has fallen on the shoulders of women (Bhattacharya, 2017; Davis, 1981; Fraser, 2017). Not only is this responsibility disproportionately distributed, but it is also systematically undervalued, and oftentimes recognized as a mechanism that sustains the oppression of those who take on caring roles in society (Bhattacharya, 2017; Davis, 1981). Given that just like any form of wellbeing, digital wellbeing necessitates a type of care in order to maintain it, it is important to question how digital disconnection may increasingly take on the nature of care work, becoming subjected to the same logic that fosters unpaid, undervalued and feminized responsibilities (Beattie, 2020; Fast, 2021).

In this study, we explore to what extent this perspective on digital disconnection is present in the marketing discourse surrounding digital disconnection products and services. The digital disconnection industry has grown substantially over the past decade, offering the user commodities ranging from digital detox programs and self-help literature on the one hand, to apps and devices on the other (Beattie, 2020; Jorge et al., 2022; M. Vanden Abeele, 2020). Particularly, in this study we focus on three main categories of commodities, namely (1) digital disconnection retreats, (2) workshops and courses, and (3) gadgets that aid disconnection. Marketing discourse surrounding these commodities is relevant to explore in the current context, as how products and services are commodified in the public domain can reveal what underlying exchange values are ideated (see Silverstone & Haddon, 1996).

By pinpointing which users are (and are not) targeted in the discourses and how they are valued, the goal is to form an understanding of who these disconnection commodities deem responsible to care, and for which purpose. To start off, in our theoretical framework we will first frame the perspective of care more thoroughly. Secondly, we present our discourse analysis and explain the relational approach. In the result section, we delve into who is especially targeted, the gender relations and hierarchies, and the feelings of empowerment and forms of (self-)governance. In the discussion, we show parallels with mechanisms of care in a neoliberal society and how the dynamics take part in reinforcing the status quo.

Theoretical Framework

Digital Disconnection as a Temporal, Spatial and Relational Practice

Digital disconnection has emerged as a response to the ubiquitous connectivity of mobile technology and the internet. People are increasingly confronted with the

embeddedness of digital (mobile) media in everyday life. Experiencing the burdens of ‘relentless’ connectivity in their lives (Castells et al., 2007), many individuals implement digital disconnection into their daily activities as a counterforce to these burdens (Nguyen, 2022). Hence, just as connectivity is part of the everyday (Deuze, 2011), disconnection has joined in to establish a ‘digital wellbeing’, which then refers to an experience of balance between connectivity and disconnection (M. Vanden Abeele, 2020).

The growing field of digital disconnection studies shows how people organize disconnection into their daily routines. In terms of what motivates disconnection, it is both practically and analytically meaningful to differentiate digital disconnection as non-use from disconnection as resistance or disruption (Hesselberth, 2018). Digital disconnection as non-use takes place on the individual level in that it serves to improve the quality of life of the person enacting it, for instance by restoring one’s productivity, focus or well-being. In contrast, resistance and, even more disruption, result from a more political and in the latter case, stem specifically from broader anti-capitalist movements (see Couldry & Mejias, 2020; Mejias, 2013).

Seeing as this study zooms in on commodified practices of disconnection that are sold to individual users, its focus lies largely on acts of non-use. Non-use motivations translate into the many shapes and forms of digital disconnection, taking on various temporal and spatial forms.

Temporally, it has been shown that a temporal overload occurs when one lacks self-awareness of time spent online (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). The result is a counter-reaction that materializes in the increasingly various ways one can consciously schedule digital disconnection times (Fast, 2021; Jorge et al., 2022). On the one hand, in literature on digital detox, this often goes hand in hand with finding an authentic self (Rosenberg & Vogelmann-Natan, 2021; Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020), on the other hand, the corporate sphere

ties it to ways of becoming more productive (Fast, 2021; Gregg, 2018). For example, the gamification of the Forest application which rewards focus and the time one spends offline, or the now rather standard parental practice of marking out screen-free time for children; not to forget the many ways workers divide their work time from non-work time, often enough respectively representing connected and disconnected time (Fast, 2021).

Parallel and yet also entwined with the temporal, locative or spatial disconnection is enacted when spaces are designated for connectivity or disconnection (Beattie & Cassidy, 2020; Fast, 2021). In the digital detox world for example, the outdoors and infrastructurally isolated places go hand in hand with disconnection and places of rest (Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen, 2020). In such spaces, digital disconnection becomes a reversal method to find a sense of self again, where ideals such as authenticity, or phrases such as ‘disconnect to reconnect’ emerge (Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Moreover, a type of imaginative temporality is entwined when disconnection spaces are used to grasp a romanticised and simpler past (Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Besides voluntary locative disconnection, however, many locative disconnection tools end up creating forced disconnection spaces (Beattie & Cassidy, 2020), for instance when disconnection gadgets are used to enforce disconnection on others in schools, concert halls, or home contexts.

The former *temporal* and *spatial* lenses on digital disconnection clarify that we can also approach the phenomenon through a *relational* lens. Foremost, disconnection stands in relation to connection, and as mentioned above, both work together to produce a state of digital wellbeing. Such a relational lens then questions *how* they work together and *what it is* we are disconnecting for.

For instance, in a neoliberal capitalist society, upholding a status quo and conditions necessary for productivity and financial growth does not simply happen. By taking on a relational lens we open up the analytical field to what and who it takes to maintain this. An

example of such necessary work, is care work. Just like digital disconnection functions to uphold a digital well-being, care work generally fulfils the same role. Conceptualizing disconnection as a form of care centralizes the relationality between individual motivations to disconnect, and structural socio-economic expectations to disconnect (e.g. productivity), and bridges the gap to understand their interdependence. Feminist Marxist theory (e.g. Bhattacharya, 2017; Davis, 1981; Federici, 2020; Fraser, 2017) has situated the broad spectrum of care work to help understand the contradiction of how a capitalist system is dependent on care, and yet marginalizes those that do care work. With a relational lens, we aim to build on the argument that disconnection does not just happen (Syvertsen, 2020) and look into who exactly is putting in the work to disconnect, or more precisely if some individuals are being targeted to do so more than others, and for what wider values. The following section will situate practices of disconnection within care to understand how this may provide the footholds to further explore what it takes to maintain a digital wellbeing.

Towards a relational lens on digital disconnection with a focus on care

Relationality is central to the concept of care, as it rests on the assumption that people are bound to other living and non-living things through networks of interdependencies 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) Concretely, this goes from helping your child getting dressed in the morning, to being attentive and responsive to friends when checking-in on them. It also entails self-care, meaning all necessary tasks that preserves one's own ability to care for others.

When situating care within the neoliberal context, we make a distinction between self-preserving and self-indulging care (Lorde, 1988). Self-indulging care refers to a more

superficial practice of care, aimed at fostering hedonic pleasure and happiness (Davies, 2016); self-preserving care, on the other hand, refers to a more radical act of caring for oneself out of sheer necessity in a society that often obstructs it. In the form of digital disconnection, for example, a paid digital detox camp for the sake of finding authenticity can be self-indulging, whereas removing work emails from non-work devices can be an act of self-preservation.

This broad understanding of (self-)care work emphasises its significance, and even inevitable part of everyday life given the numerous interdependencies that exist between people. Yet, despite its essence, care work is oftentimes undervalued. Marxist feminists explain this seeming paradox through the concept of the social reproductive sphere (Bhattacharya, 2017; Davis, 1981; Federici, 2020; Fraser, 2017). They argue that our capitalist, neoliberal society centralizes paid labour, but excludes the social reproductive work that allows the paid work force to perform this labour. Such work of caring nature ensures for example that an employee can be maximally productive by attending to the needs to care for their health and well-being.

However, paradoxically, under such dominant capitalist logics, care work and those performing it are systematically undervalued, leading to precarious, underpaid or unpaid work. As a result, systemic oppression based on gender, class and race takes shape, targeting and marginalizing the feminized workforce behind it. Acknowledging the centrality of the social reproductive sphere situates digital disconnection beyond an individualistic task that can 'just be done' and centres *who* is doing the work. It exposes the structural challenges and contradictions that make digital disconnection, like any form of care work, easier said than done in a society that puts so much responsibility and accountability on the individual in spite of persistent systemic neoliberal inequalities.

These inequalities emerge in that it is everyone's right to balance out the constant availability and connectivity that mobile digital media affords us; however, the role of social

identities derived from one's gender, age, ethnicity, race and other structural factors that cannot be ignored, as the brunt of care work in society is not equally distributed. Historical continuity of (gendered) social roles and expectations results in unequally distributed care work to maintain relations that exist through digital connection. Those that carry this burden may not even have the freedom to disconnect, or may need to invest much more effort and resources to do so equally.

Tension between individual agency and structural challenges related to digital disconnection practices have been problematized before by considering the historical baggage of care work in our neoliberal capitalist society and the gendered role of disconnection. For example, Karin 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” (Fast, 2021, p. 1622). The historical roots of social reproductive work as women's work finds its continuity in the underlying socialization of gendered roles in society that still upholds the assumptions and expectations that women embody a caring nature (REF). This rhetoric emphasises that affective work is no longer explicitly reserved for a female workforce, but shows that in disconnection a continuity in the socialization of gendered roles ultimately results in women taking up the greater burden of ensuring a digital well-being for themselves as for the communities they feel responsible to care for.

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, p. 186)

This unbounded male figure experiences no responsibility to maintain social relations that fall outside work, and lives within the lines of a self-centred mindset (Beattie, 2020). Following the relationality of care, this archetypical man is socialized to fall outside of the responsibilities of care and therefore has the tendency to reinforce its gender opposite of a socially-domestic bound and caring woman.

Commodifying and outsourcing disconnection

Over the past decades, neoliberal reforms and governance have resulted in the commodification of care work (Bakker, 2007; Harvey, 2005). Commodification refers to a process within neoliberalism in which fields, things, and social relations are integrated into a market economy in order to be attributed a monetary value and extract direct profit from it (Harvey, 2005).

Care work has not been spared from commodification and other market logics, as non-waged forms of care are privatised and outsourced into waged labour (Schwiter & Steiner, 2020). One such example is the switch from intra-familial household chores such as cleaning, towards the employment of domestic cleaners through a for-profit institution. Such a shift is also highly gendered and racialized as it starkly emerged with the start of women entering the paid workforce; creating significant time constraints and leaving many (women) to either do double work, or make sure they can afford external help (Davis, 1981; Huws, 2019; Schwiter & Steiner, 2020). The latter scenario carries with it the paradox that something so systematically undervalued as care work is given new value through the profit gained from the commodity, yet leaving the labour itself undervalued and exploited (Fraser, 2017).

The following years, technological and digital developments only added to this as they “[brought] about new modes of communicating, monitoring, and allocating care labour” (Schwiter & Steiner, 2020, p. 7) that have nurtured the ‘always-on’ lifestyles. When it comes to social reproductive work, these new digital technological affordances added to the economic, cultural and social factors that shape and reshape care work (Huws, 2019, p. 10). In her review of domestic work in particular, Huws (2019) notices the paradoxical effect commodification and digitalization have on one’s available time, as outsourcing of an increasing amount of caring tasks means saving one’s individual time but, increases the time needed to gain the financial resources for it. One such example is the digitalization of self-care through health trackers in smartwatches.

Today, a post-digital era (Fast, 2021) settles as counter-movements against connectivity have brought along a whole new load of commodified disconnective (care) work. This is contradictorily visible in the tech industry attempting to counter the backlash of hyper-connectivity giving way to a new digital disconnection industry (Beattie, 2020; Jorge et al., 2022). However, the recurring critic of these developments points out the increasing responsibility and expectation put on individuals to take care of their own wellbeing (Kaun, 2021). In this light, digital disconnection becomes a marketable and luxurious instrument to maintain this wellbeing even though commodification and privatization make it increasingly more difficult to do so.

Lastly, an unmissable part of commodification is the role of marketing and how it gives meaning – and thus value - to the newly commodified good or service (Chambers, 2020; Silverstone, 2006). Marketing processes play a central role in the initial representation of an object or service’s affordances and shape its (perceived) purpose. Situating the marketing as part of the commodification process highlights that it is also a product of the socio-cultural

neoliberal context it exists in (M. Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021). Furthermore, the rise of this new industry, and its products and services, begets the question how the commodification of care and that of digital disconnection may overlap and intersect.

As such, the eight websites in this study which include both goods and services that sell digital disconnection in various contexts (leisure, work and education) serve to explore and illustrate how commodified practices of disconnection within a consumer culture and the discourses they omit function as a mirror to our society. At the intersection of digital disconnection and care, as work that does not simply happen, we aim to understand more about the circumstances in which someone is expected to care for their own/others' disconnection in different contexts, and if it reproduces patterns of privilege and inequalities rooted in an oppressive neoliberal system.

Method

Sampling Strategy

For this study, we focused on Dutch-language websites selling digital disconnection products and/or services as our main unit of analysis. The data collection started with a general search using the following general keywords: “digital detox”, “digitaal-welzijn”, “digitale disconnectie” and “schermtijd”¹. 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 log-in were left out (e.g. Facebook groups and subscription pages). In the end, the web pages selected were websites providing

¹ Translates respectively to “digital detox”, “digital wellbeing”, “digital disconnection” and “screen-time”.

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. The following table gives further information on each digital disconnection service or product.

| Website | Product group | Context/setting | About the website | Prices |
|---|---------------------|--|---|-----------------------------|
| Digital detox vacation (Bijzonder Plekje) | Retreat (lifestyle) | Isolated vacation spots | | €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 for everyday life | | €47 - through weekly e-mail |
| Digital Balance Program | Course (work) | (1) Workshop for employees to manage digital activity and | General goal of all workshops is to make better | |

| | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|---|---|--|
| (Better minds at work) | | availability (2) Workshop for managers to assemble digital policy | workers (productivity, efficiency, focus, ...) | |
| Digital Detox Academy | Course (work) | (1) workshop for smartphone use; (2) workshop for employees. Workshop (3) and (4) targeted at professional leadership positions | Digital disconnection to manage wellbeing and prevent burn out | |
| 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 | |

| | | | | |
|-------|------------------|---|---|--|
| Stolp | Gadget (home) | Mini faraday cage for smartphones. Used in familial context e.g. dinner table | The ability to be present by eliminating digital distractions | |
|-------|------------------|---|---|--|

Analytical Approach

In our analysis, we focused on the textual and contextual discourses, and visual representation that answer three questions: who is disconnecting, how is this practised and for what reasons?

First, we employed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore the websites' textual discourses within the wider commercial, marketing and neoliberal context (Carvalho, 2008). Following Carvalho's (2008) framework, the textual analysis takes a closer look at, among other criteria, the objects, actors, and linguistic components of the websites. In combination with the contextual setting, these two levels of analysis aim to pinpoint the various actors within the selling, buying and using process of the commodity. Together, they helped to illustrate *who* is being targeted to care about disconnection as well as their social role (i.e. gender and profession) and positions in relation to the context in which it is sold (i.e. the work or school context). A critical discourse analysis allowed us to map out the various actors involved and their relationships, including power relations and possible social inequalities (Carvalho, 2008; Mullet, 2018). In relation to the historical characteristics of care work and understanding digital disconnection as care work, we paid particularly close attention to gender and class relations.

We continued to use CDA's textual analysis and further paid attention to the ideological discourses among disconnection. The language and semiotics used are never neutral but a reflection of the time and place they are embedded in (Mullet, 2018). Hence, the

underlying ideological discourse sheds light on the socio-economic values embedded within commodified forms of digital disconnection.

Lastly, and in relation to both the *who* and *why* inquiry, we employed media domestication theory to understand *how* digital disconnection is practised. Following Karlsen and Ytre-Arne (2021) we argue how the development of new media technologies have blurred boundaries between social roles and spheres, and calls for a more flexible framework that “highlights physical placement of people, activities and technologies in the materiality of everyday life” (Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2021, p. 5). Hence, this theory as methodological footing translates to focusing on how the commodities in the websites are represented to be used in everyday life. Furthermore, the spatial aspect also shifts the focus to *where* digital disconnection is practised. This is quite useful through a lens of care which analyses how spaces of care tend to be marginalized or outside of ‘productive’ spaces (Bhattacharya, 2017). In parallel, it is therefore interesting to analyse how the disconnection commodities are spatially represented and how disconnection should be practised accordingly.

In the result section, 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?

We first looked into who is targeted as the consumers and users of the product or service and practising disconnection. A first observation that we make is that the targeted consumer of the digital disconnection product or service is not always the intended user; some of the products and services in our sample focus on institutionalized contexts such as the work place, the family home and the school. The examined discourse oftentimes targets persons of authority (i.e., managers, parents, and teachers) as intended consumers, whereas the intended day-to-day users are represented as being under their care. For instance, the three work-oriented disconnection programs target the company, as represented by the person in charge: a manager, team leader or CEO. In these cases, the intended users are the employees of said leader. Moreover, possessive language use such as “we can help you and your employees” or “make your employees and managers more proficient” emphasise hierarchical relations placing the buyer/leader superior to the end user. This is 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. In its original sense, a charter is “a written grant by the sovereign or legislative power of a country, by which a body such as a city, company, or university is founded or its rights and privileges defined” (Oxford Dictionary, 2022) With this connotation in mind, the discourse illustrates 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 are the school, personified in the teacher, and the parent, while those subjected to the digital disconnection are children. The children’s subordinate position also suggests passivity,

reflected in the promotion videos showing how they must adhere, and raises a question in relation to the voluntariness of the digital disconnection (see also below).

Within each of the three categories of websites analysed, we made several observations in relation to which gender is represented under which circumstances. Overall, we found discourse about digital disconnection products and services in the leisure domain to be highly feminized. The designs of the leisurely holiday retreat website and a digital detox lifestyle website, for instance, can be labelled as “girly”, using bright colours such as pink, yellow and orange, in combination with symbols such as hearts and flowers. Moreover, the users are also all depicted as feminine figures, and the creators of the program or retreat are also women. In both these cases, this dominant feminine discourse together with the content producers of the websites illustrates that the disconnective practices promoted and sold are made by feminine figures for feminine figures.

When considering the work-oriented disconnection products and services, targeted *end users* are represented both with a masculine and feminine discourse, mainly through images of people. However, in these cases, the consumer being addressed is oftentimes someone in a leadership position. These ‘leaders’ are often represented in masculine terms. This goes for the work oriented websites in which the managerial position is represented by masculine figures, and where phrases such as “leaders with authentic intelligence” and “leaders with courage” are paired with images of a manly figure. Along the same lines, the website selling offline retreats for entrepreneurs and ambitious individuals reinforces a stereotypical discourse of masculinity and success, as they pair images of men with topics such as “business and money”, “leadership”, “peak performance” and “resilience”, whereas more feminine depictions are paired with topics such as “mindfulness and meditation” and “health and wellness”. This last category is particularly interesting seeing as it associates digital disconnection with health and wellness, two topics necessitating care, using a picture of a

white feminine figure using fitness weights and consuming what resembles a frothed trendy hot caffeinated drink.

Lastly, we find what is not represented in the discourse says just as much as what is: throughout all the websites, the commodities are 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 place in, are consciously or unconsciously represented to be predominantly white spaces (REF). Together with the insights that digital detox discourses usually target capital-rich and time-poor users (Beattie and Cassidy, 2020; Fast, 2021; Portwood-Stacer, 2013), this observation shows how other forms of digital disconnection representation reproduce exclusive images of who can and cannot participate.

In sum, among the examined disconnection products and services the responsibility to care about disconnecting does not solely rest on the shoulders of women, seeing as the representation of targeted users throughout the websites are a mixture of feminine and masculine figures. However, intersecting gender with other identity markers reveals how professional (employer-employee) and consumer (buyer-user) hierarchies play a role in who holds the power to say who should disconnect. Taking the intersection of these identities, those who are then made to care about disconnecting and managing their digital wellbeing are as follows: 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 a certain type of leadership.

Responsibility shift: Outsourcing digital disconnection

As mentioned above, some commodities are bought and used by two different actors. Such is the case with 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. What these have in common is that those who are depicted as practising or undergoing digital disconnection are not those with the decision power to buy the commodity; and vice versa, those buying the products do not have to practice it. When looking at the relations between these actors, a double dynamic emerges.

First, the actors in a leadership position, have the ability to outsource the responsibility of digital disconnection to those under their leadership (i.e. employees or students). In these websites, prominent discourses around “connectivity”, are the issues it causes such as “distraction”, “digital fatigue”, an “always-on” culture, as well the “negative impact on one’s own time” and how to manage all of this. In this framework, the courses, workshops and gadget are sold to be a solution to these problems. However, there is a lack of acknowledgement for the structural causes of these issues such as work overload, long working hours or inconsiderateness for non-work responsibilities. Instead, the discourse on addiction is present in three of the four websites in question, implicitly setting the stage to make it an individual’s problem and therefore also an individual responsibility to fix. For example, the work courses frame 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 frames it as users having a clouded consciousness which they must fix through an ‘awareness course’ in order to understand their digital unease at work. In turn, the last work course website acknowledges the difficulties of living within an attention economy, but in the end, also frames it as the need for individuals to regain the control they lost.

From this first dynamic a tension emerges between agency and responsibility, seeing as those who have the least agency to tackle the root causes of a problem, are those with the responsibility to fix it. Throughout the four websites in question, the discourses that seem to

mask this tension and attach the value to the products are those of “self-improvement” and finding “rest” and ‘wellbeing” for oneself, as well as “heightened efficiency/productivity” that serves the greater good of the team or company. In addition, the discourse around “discipline” is present in the case of the Myndr button in the educational and household context.

The second dynamic that emerges among the cases in which the buyer does not need to practice disconnection, is the outsourcing of the task of teaching digital disconnection itself. In other words, the organisations and companies that can afford to buy these commodities, also have the privilege of outsourcing the work, time and effort necessary to teach digital disconnection and how to cope with increasing digitalization and connectivity. However, the websites in question frame their marketing through a seemingly caring approach that is visible through discourses of “wellbeing” 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 slices this relationship in two: The act of care as teaching digital disconnection for wellbeing 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 their needs to make a profit out of their service or gadget. In one of the detox workshops, for example, this translates to the advantages listed for taking the workshop to be longer for the corporation than for the employees doing the workshop. 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 because the interests of the company precede the interests of employees and their digital wellbeing. Hence, this also means that a caring task such as digital disconnection is mediated through capitalist relations and logics, rather than out of caring relations and actions.

As for the person in a leadership position, they remove themselves from their responsibilities and essentially alienate themselves from the digital labour and effort it takes employees to tend to the increasing demands attached to the digitalization of places of work. In the end, the company contributes minimal effort and can also brush off and shift the responsibility to take action. The proposed solutions such as “establish response times, communicate your availability, have an email policy and manage your focus times”, once again imply the problem lies with the employee and has little regard for more structural dynamics at play.

Whereas the above mentioned work-related workshops and courses are practised with a certain sense of voluntariness, the case of the Myndr button limiting children’s internet accessibility verges onto involuntary disconnection. In short, the Myndr button is operated by teachers or parents and has the ability to determine the level of internet access in a classroom or household. Specifically, the Myndr button is used in digitalized schools where students have personal laptops as a main instrument. In both the school and home, the gadget serves as a type of forced disconnection in an educational context with the goal to bring calmness and concentration into the classroom and home. For teachers in particular the switch is sold as a way “to gain a grip on their class again”. Out of all the commodities, this gadget is introduced within an easily identifiable relation of care 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). However, in relation to the children subjected to the gadget, the website illustrates a discourse of discipline and control through techniques of punishment. For instance, the audio-visual content demonstrates that the switch should be used as a tool to rectify behaviour when focus is lost, rather than working preventively. More precisely, the

website content targets the issue of gaming, which precisely explains how to recognize a gaming student.

So, although the Myndr button serves as a way of educating children on their digital wellbeing, it also implicitly conveys a double value of individual responsibility. In a Foucauldian understanding (Foucault, 1977), the Myndr button recalibrates the distribution of power in the sense that children in the classroom or at home, when offered a connected digital device, are essentially offered almost unlimited possibilities. Individual laptops have much more affordances than any other analogue medium of learning. In other words students have the power in them, as far as their knowledge of these affordances stretches, to do whatever they like on the digital devices. The discourses identified show that what the button does is change the system of power through “control”, and consequently “punishment” in order to discipline what is a right and a wrong use of connection. Hence, on the one hand, the Myndr button relieves children of the responsibility to regain focus and leaves that digital labour to the teacher/parent who controls the button. On the other hand, this controlling and surveillant behaviour also conveys long term messages that children are under pressure to be in control of what they give their attention to. This evokes the question of whether or not children are taught to be responsible for their own wellbeing despite the agency of others and the affordances that come with digitalizing education.

Consumerism, privilege and empowerment: exceptionality of disconnection

In contrast with the previous focus on the relations on which the buyer of the commodity is not the intended end user, we now shift our attention to the cases in which the intended user is also the targeted buyer of the product. This takes multiple shapes as disconnection is sold for different contexts, such as leisure, entrepreneurial goals or other work functions. For instance,

there is a holiday retreat for pure leisurely purposes out in nature, as well as one for entrepreneurial planning. There is also a digital detox for everyday life as well as three specifically for work-life balance that are oriented to people in a leadership position. Just as the cases above, these commodities carry a discourse of individual responsibility, however, the accompanied values show a difference in why the users should care about practising digital disconnection.

To begin, these websites sell commodities that promote what is, according to them, the best circumstances to cater to a better individual wellbeing in which digital disconnection serves as the medium. The values, and the endeavour to reach them vary across contexts and are visible through the discourse and visual representations. First, what several websites have in common is the promotion of luxury, visible through discourse such as “offline is the new luxury”, or the VIP course category for entrepreneurs and managers who are framed to be especially in need of a way to stay productive and efficient for their business and wellbeing. Another flagrant example is the showcasing of luxurious accommodations from architectural and designer tiny houses (leisure), to glamping tents and speedboats in “breath taking Colombia” (entrepreneurial). Most of all, the latter case is highly exclusive in which the potential buyer of the commodity must request an invite, after which the retreat organisers ‘carefully/rigorously select the most ambitious profiles [...] and professionals’.

Lastly, a reoccurring discourse is one of “authenticity”; one which validates prior research that associates digital disconnection and authenticity in order to counter the inauthenticity linked with connection (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). In our case, we see how the goal of the disconnection determines the value behind it. For instance, the feminized leisurely retreat, as well as the feminized everyday detox are oriented towards self-care in order to also care for others. This comes forward in phrases that promise more creativity and press the importance of reconnecting to the ‘here and now’ and to the people that are most important to

the user. Moreover, paired to this is a discourse of “gaining time” to fulfil this particular authenticity. Together, they frame that the purpose of disconnection stands in relation to making the time to take care of one’s peace of mind, and maintain relationships with friends and family, in a distraction-free context.

In contrast, work related websites frame authenticity by pairing it with discourses on “regaining control” and freeing the user. For instance, one work-related and masculinized disconnection course for entrepreneurs articulates it as follows: “learn how to be the boss of your distractions”; and becoming “a user of technological ingenuity instead of being a slave to it”. The same website also pairs 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 prevails multiple times. However, in the entrepreneurial retreat and the other work websites the angle shifts respectively, as it is about “no time to lose” or ‘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 wellbeing through digital disconnection, intersects with the ability to buy a luxurious or (self-)caring product. As it is a commodity, this purchasing power adds the layer of privilege into the equation, seeing as people who may have similar hurdles but not the 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. This becomes more clear when zooming in on the retreats and the associations between discourses and spatial representations as the service is to curate the ideal disconnection space.

On a first note, both services are 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 is a discourse on escapism in which language use is centred 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 is literally called “Re-treated” and has 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.

Pulling these elements together is the surrounding natural setting and its visual representation emphasised on the websites with photos of greenery, open fields with cattle, beaches and clear blue waters. What makes the imagery association interesting is not only how this coexists with the previously mentioned elements of luxury, authenticity and ‘buying time’, but also a last discourse that eludes to a past time. This discourse is brought forward in several ways. For instance, the entrepreneurial retreat pairs 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 is 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, rendering 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

In this study we investigated who disconnection commodities deem responsible to care, and for which purpose. Overall, our findings show that digital disconnection commodities are marketized and sold differently depending on identity markers such as gender or professional hierarchies. In this sense, with respect to feminine versus more masculine visual and textual discourse, we observe further differences in terms of the values that are centrally portrayed. For instance, the feminised websites target a feminine end user in a way to value digital disconnection in order to focus attention on more social reproductive work. In these cases, the discourse implies that the feminine end user is lacking the time to do so in routine daily life. In contrast, the individual masculine end user is portrayed to be time-poor for professional objectives. Namely, that masculinized actors represented as entrepreneurs, managers or team-leaders who buy a form of digital disconnection for themselves, are encouraged to value the disconnected time to focus on how they can be better professionals or attain entrepreneurial goals. A compelling example is the retreat for ambitious individuals and entrepreneurs, in which the website aims to attract and nurture “omdenkers” – roughly translated to “change thinkers”. This term refers to innovative thinkers and arose in parallel with the neoliberal turn of increased privatization and meritocracy that believes that one can be successful in this world if one works hard and smart enough for it. This type of ideology leaves out any form of broader systemic dynamics that put in place privileges and inequalities between people, their opportunities and possibilities, based on factors such as gender, ethnic background, profession, and so on.

In these particular cases, digital disconnection is externalized in two ways. First, there is the way the ideal circumstances are created through commodification, and the ability to do so which carries privilege with it. In parallel to how commodified care functions, such as externalizing household cleaning tasks to domestic cleaning help, the curated and ideal

circumstances to disconnect in are also externalized towards services that create these spaces, as well as fostering the circumstances in which to cater to a better wellbeing 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, 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 practised by a feminine audience when it comes to commodification. The intersection of gender and a certain level of affluence shows how these social categories are fluid and that one may help gain privileges that are absent in the other. To elaborate on the example of domestic cleaning help, this again is similar to the commodification of care in which emancipation occurred for women or families who were affluent, and therefore privileged enough to afford domestic help. It allowed for these women to enter the paid workforce more easily. Similarly, within the disconnection commodities, the individual targeted user is given a responsibility that resembles what Rose and Miller (1992), saw as a "facet of emerging neoliberal forms of governance that are portrayed by their proponents as enabling individuals' 'independence' and 'empowerment'" (Trnka and Trundle, 2014: 137). Along these lines, in a neoliberal society, the targeted user with purchasing power also has decision power and goes hand in hand with the feeling of merit and deservingness, which in turn masks individual responsabilization with empowerment.

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 physically or conceptualized that way (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 modern,

productive and daily life. On the other hand, disconnection is left to be associated to a marginal and exceptional activity linking it to simpler and romanticised times in the past as well as 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 the same relationality that an imagery of the past serves to elevate a specific type of 'present', disconnection is related to a marginal practice of care that serves to reproduce and leave unquestioned the oftentimes exhausting culture of connectivity and productivity at the centre 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 or more authenticity.

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