

“I feel like a peasant among goddesses”

Digital disconnection as affect and process among Norwegian youth

MEHRI S. AGAI

DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION SCIENCE AND MEDIA STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN, NORWAY

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I propose that the concept of affective dissonance is theoretically helpful to account for young people’s sentiments of digital disconnection. This proposal is empirically substantiated through an analysis of qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 17 Norwegian youths, based on the following question: How do young people react to invasive connected media? The findings illustrate that affective reactions to digital impulses appear to be an integrated part of young people’s daily management of digital connectivity. Although these experiences may lead to negative experiences, they do not necessarily lead to disconnection practices. From young people’s perspectives, digital disconnection not only involves being physically separated from connectivity but also encapsulates attitudinal shifts and mental distancing. Based on these findings, this chapter posits that disconnection is also an affective state that does not necessarily transform into action or practice, but is as much about the potentiality to act. This chapter thus recognises digital disconnection as a process based on youths’ perspectives, acknowledging its affective facet, and contributing to a broader conceptualisation of disconnectivity beyond acts and practices.

KEYWORDS: digital disconnection, disconnectivity, affect, affective dissonance, youth

Agai, M. S. (2024). “I feel like a peasant among goddesses”: Digital disconnection as affect and process among Norwegian youth. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 257–274). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-13>

Introduction: Disconnection as affect and process

Attention to affect has been slow to arrive in disconnection studies despite the so-called “affective turn” (Clough & Halley, 2007) in the social sciences and the growing strand of inquiry within the field of audience engagement (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). While the academic literature on digital disconnection may not have a long tradition like audience engagement studies, there is a growing consensus that digital disconnection encompasses a continuum of actions. From social movements to infrastructural obstacles that make disconnecting impractical (see Lai & Cone, Chapter 14 in this volume), a broad spectrum of behaviours can be categorised as digital disconnection. Syvertsen and Karlsen’s exploration of digital detox camps (see Chapter 15 in this volume), as well as micro and mundane actions that may be considered a form of digital disconnection, further illustrate the breadth of this phenomenon. Moreover, such understandings emphasise the spatiotemporality of disconnection, considering it a product or behavioural endpoint with specifics on how, where, and when it occurs. That is not to say that affect has not been discussed in the literature.

The affective dimension of disconnection has been highlighted through depictions of sensations occurring before disconnection, such as discomfort, remorse, fear, and feeling overwhelmed or exhausted (Baym et al., 2020; Maslen, 2022), and reactions after disconnection (Syvertsen, 2020). These entries are considered in terms of preconditions, often unobservable aspects of practices of disconnection, which have illustrated that ambivalence is prominent in users’ sentiments on disconnection (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019).

While not explicated in the literature, ambivalence as a state is probably the closest to illuminating the affective aspect of digital disconnection. The notion of ambivalence illustrates that disconnection practices lie along a continuum (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019), encompassing various practices (Baumer et al., 2015; Wyatt et al., 2002) and attempts to regulate and manage connectivity (Baym et al., 2020). This shift in phrasing reflects the evolution from viewing digital disconnection as binary to recognising users’ efforts to navigate constant connectivity without necessarily severing ties completely. Sentiments of wanting to disconnect but being unable to do so and feeling obligated to disconnect but being unable to afford it demonstrate that digital disconnection extends beyond mere behavioural outcomes. Scholars have noted users’ ambivalence, especially in the face of temporal conflicts between smartphone use and other activities (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). Further examination by Ytre-Arne and colleagues (2020) revealed that users often struggle to balance these demands, resulting in ineffective time-management strategies. This underscores the complexity of navigating digital disconnection and the importance of acknowledging these conflicting feelings.

Still, I deliberately note that ambivalence is “closest to illuminating” because despite acknowledging its importance, the literature often falls short

in delving into the wide range of affects and feelings that ambivalence encompasses. Instead, it tends to stop at merely implying that the online world is complicated. In his classical work on ambivalence, Merton (1976) noted that socially structured roles dispose people to both embrace and reject in parallel, whether it be people, objects, or norms. Building on Merton's line of thinking, Smelser (1998) noted that ambivalence acts as a way for us to describe how it is that people can make sense of seemingly contradictory or conflicting ideas or objects they must relate to. Ambivalence is, therefore, a way to describe the human capacity for adapting to the world around them. Applying Merton and Smelser's thinking to digital ambivalence can help in considering the term so that it is valuable analytically. Moreover, and importantly for this chapter, it provides a foundation for when users' disconnection sentiments are analysed beyond the articulations of ambivalence to dive into the affective aspects and feelings that compose ambivalence (i.e., anger, disappointment, and disgust) and their intertwinement with the relational and social dynamics that make them feel that way about disconnection.

Karppi and colleagues' (2021) recent contribution advocating for reformulations of disconnection illustrates that disconnection also takes on an intrapersonal dimension. In response to critics of disconnective practices, such as political potentialities that challenge digital capitalism, Karppi and colleagues (2021) depicted how disconnection commodities allow users to attune to connectivity. They proposed understanding disconnection not as an exclusively "hard break", but also a *mood* to disconnect. Aligning with this perspective, in this chapter I propose a conceptualisation of disconnection that encompasses affect and acknowledges the preconditions of disconnection as much as the observable product itself. Recognising the affective facet of digital disconnection becomes essential for understanding the spectrum of attitudes towards connectivity and individuals' mental efforts to distance themselves from constant connectivity. Accounting for these more abstract and "silent" ways of disconnecting is necessary, especially because such intrapersonal processes and changes might be the only ones available when connectivity, for most of us, in one way or another, is not escapable.

With this chapter I thus aim to offer an affective facet to conceptualisations of digital disconnection, recognising the preconditions of user practices promoting the *process* of disconnection, an area deemed understudied as opposed to the observable *product* of disconnection. To illustrate this point, I draw on qualitative interviews with 17 Norwegian youth, documenting their digital disconnection experiences in everyday life and capturing affective sentiments surrounding their encounters with invasive connected media. Affective sentiments are focused on by asking the following question: How do young people react to invasive connected media?

The concept of affective dissonance is helpful as a theoretical stance to justify my argument that disconnection is closely linked to qualitative, felt

aspects of life, particularly affective experiences. Hemmings (2012) described affective dissonance as a perceived disconnect or discrepancy between the experience of self and society's normative knowledge, which creates a space for action and can "move us". Hemmings emphasised that to know differently, one must feel differently. Therefore, understanding the disconnection process involves recognising its affective experiences and dissonance as they drive individuals to act and initiate the shift toward disconnection. Disconnection thus also concerns the potential to act, making the disconnection process and the affective experience that initiated the shift pivotal to understanding disconnection as a concept.

Approaching affect from a philosophical standpoint, this chapter emphasises the impersonal nature of affect. Specifically, it follows Spinoza's understanding of affect and readings of his work by Massumi (2015). According to Spinoza, affect refers to the energies transmitted through bodily encounters and the body's strength and capacity to "affect and be affected" (Massumi, 2015). This perspective melds seamlessly with the notion of affective dissonance, establishing a conceptual framework that accentuates the latent potency of affect.

The chapter proceeds to engage with affective theory and affective dissonance, portraying disconnection as potentiality. Following a presentation of the methods and the dataset, the analysis presents informants' sentiments on affective encounters with digital content, their questioning of the connectivity trend among their peers, and their changing values and attitudes, illustrating disconnection as a process with affective dissonance as its outset. In the final section, I demonstrate the inclusion of affect in conceptualisations of disconnection. I recognise disconnection as a process – a balancing act understood as occurrences of heavy dissonance or turbulence that may require efforts to regain balance in order to continue the mode of "being with connectivity".

Theoretical framework: Defining the affective and affective dissonance

Defining the affective

In this theoretical framework, I aim to conceptualise the affective dimension of digital disconnection, drawing upon the philosophical ideas of Spinoza as interpreted by Massumi (2015). In this context, affect refers to energies transmitted between bodies, encompassing human and non-human entities, including inanimate objects like technology. Spinoza's perspective of bodies as entities with inherent potential to affect and be affected provides a sensible understanding of the affective dimension in disconnection (Massumi, 2015).

To ensure clarity, it's important to understand the distinction between affect and feelings. While feelings are commonly understood as individual emotional experiences, affect is fundamentally relational, generating an atmosphere that

circulates in the interstices between bodies. This apersonal understanding of affect challenges traditional psychological views that often consider affect as solely embodied in individuals (Hipfl, 2018).

Spinoza's differentiation between sad and joyful encounters sheds light on how affective meetings can diminish or strengthen a body's power to act (Massumi, 2015). In sad encounters, bodies do not coincide, reducing strength and hindering one's capacity to act. In contrast, joyful encounters resonate between bodies, enhancing their ability to act (Deleuze, 1992). It is essential to acknowledge that affective encounters can elicit a mix of affections. As such, the separation between sadness and joy in the context of digital disconnection becomes more complex and less binary, often resulting in an ambiguous and messy mix of emotions.

Expanding on Spinoza's ideas, Massumi (2015) delved into the process of affective meetings, proposing two overlapping aspects. The first involves a particular sense of the quality of the experience, followed by an increased or decreased capacity to act. Understanding this process is crucial for grasping the concept of disconnection, as it involves a momentary encounter with digital content that creates potentiality and triggers an affective shift. These ruptures in the daily flow of digital impulses, which Massumi (2015: 50) referred to as microshocks, accumulate and direct the body towards different tendencies, resulting in deviations from habitual ways of being.

A philosophical approach to affect provides valuable insights into the disconnection process. It facilitates an understanding of how various aspects of connectivity generate these microshocks and, consequently, how individuals adapt their ways of being within the digital realm. Hemmings (2012) took this line of reasoning further, offering a feminist reading of Spinoza's concepts and introducing the notion of affective dissonance.

Affective dissonance

Affective dissonance, articulated by Hemmings (2012), denotes an experience of the disjunction between one's understanding of self and the socially expected self. This dissonance prompts an affective shift, creating a space for action. Hemmings argued that this space of opportunity lays the foundation for critical thinking and contemplating alternative realities. Feminist approaches, as presented by Hemmings, aim to challenge normative ideals that are often taken for granted as "common sense". This understanding of affective investment in normative ideals can be applied to other contexts, including disconnection, where such investment influences how individuals perceive and experience digital interactions.

In the realm of digital media, users undergo a process of domestication, habituating themselves to the use of technology and navigating within the context of connectivity (Silverstone et al., 1992), implying that disconnection occurs within users' everyday norms. However, disconnection also occurs

when users consciously engage in mental efforts to mobilise actions that deviate from the norm. Observable practices, such as participating in detox camps, downloading apps, or deleting personal profiles on social platforms, exemplify these deliberate disconnection efforts.

Hemmings' conceptualisation of affective dissonance allows such seemingly contradictory aspects of disconnection to coexist. By embracing discomfort as a precursor to curiosity and a challenge to the status quo, affective dissonance aligns closely with the process of disconnection. From this perspective, disconnection represents a challenge to an objective way of being, involving an attempt to break free from the naturalised connectivity experienced in everyday life and potentially adopting alternative practices.

From a feminist perspective, the recognition of feeling ill-fit with social expectations of connectivity marks the moment when normative ideals are questioned, and disconnection practices are initiated. Including an intrapersonal aspect in understanding disconnection emphasises how users can be affectively engaged, reacting to content on social and connected media at a broader level, manifested as an internal monologue, affective dissonance, and a precursor to observable disconnection practices. Moreover, disconnection entails a felt experience that creates potential for change, not solely limited to external actions but encompassing an affective dimension.

Methods

This chapter presents the findings from a doctoral project that delved into the experiences of young people in navigating connectivity and their efforts to disconnect digitally. The study involved semi-structured interviews with 17 young individuals (4 male and 13 female) who discussed their daily media usage and experiences of digital disconnection. The primary focus of this section is to explore their affective reactions and emotionally charged relationships with connected media, and how these affective dimensions may influence their creative momentum, potentially leading to changes in their relationship with connectivity.

The informants, aged 16–19, were selected from high schools in and around a Norwegian city. The chosen age range reflects a stage in life where young people become more autonomous and coherent in their identities, undergoing significant social and relational transitions as they become more integrated with their peers. Additionally, this generation has grown up in a world heavily influenced by digital connectivity, making their perspectives particularly relevant to understanding how people negotiate (dis)connectivity in contemporary society.

The recruitment process initially targeted public schools, and later, snowball sampling was employed to expand the pool of informants. Data collection followed the principle of saturation, ensuring that new information ceased to provide significant insights before concluding the interviews. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, most of the interviews were conducted digitally. The

interviews, conducted in Norwegian, lasted approximately 45 minutes, were audio-recorded, and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Only the quotes referenced in the chapter were translated into English. Before participating in the study, informants were provided with a detailed project description and informed about the research ethics involved. Consent was obtained from each informant before proceeding with the interviews.

Ethical considerations adhered to the guidelines set by the Norwegian Centre of Research Data (NSD) to protect the rights and privacy of the participants. Data analysis began with a descriptive and thematic approach to identify recurring patterns aligned with the study's objectives. Subsequently, a more in-depth analysis of the interviews was conducted, and the emerging themes were clustered and situated within a theoretical framework to offer meaningful interpretative perspectives.

For this chapter, the analysis primarily adopted an abductive coding approach (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022; Peirce, 1965), which involves iteratively moving back and forth between data, emerging concepts, and existing theory to develop new theoretical insights. Unlike imposing a predefined theoretical framework, the relevance of affect and affective dissonance surfaced from the initial analysis, revealing critical trends in the data. This approach allowed the informants' perspectives to speak for themselves as authentically as possible. The following quotes are attributed to the informants using pseudonyms, followed by their ages.

Analysis

The following analysis explores the affective complexities that shape disconnection practices and priorities among young individuals in the digital realm. It seeks to highlight how affect and affective dissonance play a crucial role in the disconnection process.

Affect and forced availability

A consistent tendency in the material was forced availability and the associated affective reactions it entailed for the informants. A constant oscillation between positive and negative affects characterised the affective encounters with connectivity. The informants experience a mix of joy and sadness, anxiety and curiosity, challenging the idea of a straightforward binary connection. Instead, it shows that their affective experiences exist on a continuum of reactions. Although many referred to social media when discussing this pressure, several also stated that mobile phones were problematic because they violated a private boundary. Many reported that the continuous availability of smartphones fostered an ideal of availability, and statements such as “You feel like you have to live up to something special” (Sarah, 17) and “It’s exhausting to feel that you always have to pay attention and be avail-

able” (Billie, 17) were common. The informants also identified aspects of the digital youth culture that cause pressure and arouse reactions. For example, here is the expression of Arry (17) when referring to posting pictures:

I feel pressured to post mainstream photos, where you have to pose a certain way. It’s really exhausting and negative for me. [...] I wish I could just have one day without the pressure or stress of meeting the expectations set by the media.

Arry expressed despair towards constantly being reminded of the dominant focus on self-representation that characterises her youth culture. Although she had been distraught by the content on social platforms, wanting to avoid the trend, she still posted photos. Her experience illustrates the intricate relationship between her smartphone and social media.

Like other informants, Arry’s statement shows that the affective relationship between smartphones and their content produces a mixed reaction that is not solely sad or joyful. She exclaimed that she wanted to leave; however, she stayed because the affective reactions circulating between her and her smartphone’s content have left her confused, in a messy state of ambivalence.

Another issue emerged from Arry’s comments regarding the constant availability of messaging, which also caused affective reactions among other informants. The fast-paced nature of messaging was highlighted as a stressor, as several informants expressed feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of messages received. This left little room to put their phones down, even if desired. Sumera (18) was one of these informants:

People expect you to post something and be there right away if something’s going on. You’re always supposed to be available. I never really get a break from social media, even though it’s precisely the constant connection that I want to avoid, for sure.

Availability becomes especially difficult to handle when many messages appear simultaneously, and even more so when they are from friends. In such cases, a large proportion of the informants admitted feeling overexposed and nagged: “When you get 11 messages at once, it’s tiring” (Sarah, 17). For example, Billie (17) expressed:

It [mobile phone notifications] can be draining. Once something happens, everything just blows up in there. I get all scrambled in the head when notifications come from every direction and so many friends are waiting for my response. It also doesn’t look good if I’ve seen the message and don’t respond. Yeah, it gets overwhelming.

Based on Billie’s insights, the intensity of reactions associated with relationships, particularly those with friends and peers, increases when the connection feels forced. It can be exhausting to put off responding to messages, knowing

that the sender is aware that the message has been seen. Notifications, which can come in rapid succession from several places, are followed by affective reactions that are tied to our innate need for acceptance and fear of being left out. Hence, despite the desire to disconnect, the informants found themselves entangled with their devices and the content they provide.

Several informants mentioned this idea when sharing thoughts on why ambivalence is so intense even with a great desire to disconnect, as Sarah (17) explained:

Once I've done that [turned off the phone], it feels really good to let go of all the hassle that comes with social media. But, it can get lonely, and I often find myself thinking I need to hop back on to chat with someone. [...] It can get lonely without people my age around. To put it in words, it sort of feels like when you switch off, you're all alone in the whole world. So, while it's nice to drop the hassle, it can also feel quite lonely at the same time.

The affective reactions in Sarah's quotes neither mobilise nor pacify the intensity and power. Instead, they show that the affective encounter with the expectation of availability, manifested in various ways, entails alternating between joyful and sad encounters. At one moment, the informants change from anxious reactions and a desire to disconnect. Then, in the next moment, they are anxious, wondering if something fruitful may result from waiting, being available, and over-exposure. If they do not expect something positive, then they fear the consequences of pausing. Thus, affective encounters with connectivity are characterised by a shuffling of degrees of feeling and in-between and at the same time, rather than a binary either/or connection (Sundén, 2018).

Affect and agency

In this part of the analysis, mutual affective reactions between informants and their connectivity with smartphones are demonstrated, drawing upon Spinoza's theoretical framework of affective encounters characterised by notions of sadness and joy, as articulated by Deleuze (1992). This particular lens helps explain how affective states impact fluctuations in the agency of the informants. Furthermore, the analysis delves deeper into this point, shedding light on the dynamics of affective encounters produced by connectivity and how they manifest as both dissonance and potentiality. To illustrate this point, specific instances are presented wherein informants engage in introspection and initiate the questioning of prevailing connectivity trends among their peers, a process prompted by their contemplation of personal habits and experiences.

In some cases, the trend among peers and the youth culture was explicitly mentioned: "There's this social expectation to stay connected" (Kara, 16);

“There’s a trend you just get pulled into” (Annie, 19). However, most young people’s view of the connectivity norm surfaced when they mentioned specific aspects they had experienced as annoying and frustrating.

Joseph (18) believed that comparisons were one of the worst aspects of social media for young people his age. After considering the personal benefits, he decided he did not want to participate in the comparison culture that made him feel bad. For instance, he specifically mentioned Facebook:

I limit my use of Facebook to avoid comparing myself to others. So, I stay off the homepage as much as possible, where you can just keep scrolling endlessly. [...] It might sound odd, but I react to the interactions between girls. They are, how should I put it, they seem so overly fond of each other [...] It’s just too much, and it makes me jealous. I feel like a peasant among goddesses.

According to Joseph’s depiction of how affects are triggered, there is a correlation with existing literature which suggests that young individuals refrain from using social media to avoid unfavourable comparisons with others. Additionally, Joseph also noticed a connection between this behaviour and the tendency to waste time. Therefore, as an 18-year-old, Joseph concluded that social media offers him nothing of interest:

I feel like I don’t get anything out of it. When you learn a language, like French, you end up being able to speak and write more French at the end of the day. But with social media, you don’t really learn anything new. When you knit, you end up with new mittens – there’s a result to your action. It’s important to me to see some sort of payoff from the time I spend on things. I don’t get much out of social media, and I can’t grasp why others spend their time on it either.

Other informants touched on similar points, but then more related to safeguarding their inner life rather than productivity. Here is a quote from Kara (16):

I’m honestly growing tired of Snapchat, where it’s just photos being sent back and forth. I want to distance myself from it. If friends send something, I’d prefer it to be something they want to share with me or tell me about, not just selfies. It’s ridiculous that we keep doing that.

Joseph and Kara’s statements illustrate a duality between their desire to disconnect and the notion of something beyond themselves. It’s hard to believe that they haven’t initially reacted affectively to the trend they’re involuntarily part of, which they express dissatisfaction with. Their narratives about connectivity reveal two parallel processes: Their affective reactions and their reflections on connectivity as something bigger than themselves, which they can now observe from an outside perspective.

In line with Massumi (2015), the affective encounter between the informants and their mobile phone content constitutes a “microshock” that stores an opportunity for distance and reflection. Inherent potential lies in this reflection, similar to affective dissonance (Hemmings, 2012), initiated by curiosity. This notion recalls the concept of feminist curiosity articulated by Enloe (2004), who stated that curiosity requires energy instead of ideas based on “common sense” that preserves energy because we do not question them. According to Enloe (2004), not being curious benefits someone else’s agenda. Therefore, we can only challenge what is seen as “normal” by being curious.

If combined with Hemmings’ (2012) idea of affective dissonance that sparks reflexivity, feminist curiosity explains what happens affectively when digital content does not coincide with our desired ways of being with connectivity. Thus, without an affective reaction toward the self not fitting into a normative trend, the potential for disconnection would not be available to the informants, nor would change be within reach.

An additional facet of affective dissonance concerns temporality. Numerous informants expressed feeling disconnected from the connectivity trend in which they had previously been involved. Consequently, these individuals spoke as former proponents who were once swept up in the trend but now approach it with greater reflection, understanding, and a feeling of acquired agency.

For example, Fay (16) said she was significantly exposed to the pressure a year previously, but was now in a new position after deleting prime stories on Instagram. She says she got tired of blogging and did not want people to know what she was doing all the time:

Before, I felt pressured to showcase my popularity through numerous streaks and likes. I don’t feel that way now, but when I look around, I see many young people still under that pressure. One of my friends, who lives elsewhere, uses Snapchat heavily. I think she has four stories up. [...] It seems like a need for validation or something – maybe they haven’t gained the confidence they need and seek affirmation from others.

Notably, she referred here to an earlier incident in which she was absorbed by the trend of exposing herself and posting her private life, a well-known issue regarding youth identity and self-representation (boyd, 2015; Mascheroni et al., 2015; Vanden Abeele, 2015). However, she is now distanced from it. She talks about the youth trend and another friend in the position she left behind a year ago. The distanced perspective was initiated by experiences of affective reactions that moved and created the potential for reflection. Fay’s narrative fits well into feminist thinking, highlighting that “what is deemed natural hasn’t been self-consciously created” (Enloe, 2004: 1).

Affect and reconfiguration of values

This part of the analysis concerns a later phase in the informants' disconnection process, explicitly dealing with their changed consciousness and attitudes, resulting in new priorities. Their experiences thus reveal how affective dissonance triggers critical reflections and reconfigurations of values and attitudes toward digital media use. One trend in the material was that the informants were more aware of their social media usage and desire after reflecting. Here is an expression by Mathilda (17):

I saw a video about someone who created a distraction journal to boost efficiency. Every time she got distracted, she'd draw a line. She mentioned how each time she picked up her phone, it was out of a perceived need. Since then, I've become quite aware of my aimless mobile use, though it hasn't led to me using my phone any less. The only difference is now I'm quite mindful of the moments when I feel the urge to check my screen for new messages.

As per Mathilda's statement, she recognised her reliance on her phone, but it didn't necessarily translate to reduced usage. However, she has taken charge of her phone usage, which has shifted her relationship with it. Although her mobile usage remains unchanged, Mathilda's newfound self-awareness has given her greater agency, resulting in a more harmonious relationship. The power dynamic in their bond is more balanced, to more advantageous outcomes for Mathilda.

Like Mathilda, other informants shared that they are conscious of their usage. As Arry (17) reflected, "I'm in the bubble, but I have a reflective relationship with it because I'm aware that I'm in it and I know what makes me anxious". This portrayal highlights that disconnecting from connected media does not necessarily lead to liberation from its influence. However, it does cultivate a deeper understanding of the mixed feelings that play a role in regulating our connectivity and making it more manageable.

Closely related to consciousness were informants' expressions that they had changed specific values due to increased awareness of their use. A reappearing sentiment was the importance of being present in physical contact without being engrossed in a smartphone. For example, statements such as "It's rude; you just don't" (Sarah, 17) were reoccurring. In some cases, informants were concerned with safeguarding family relations, while others focused on being present with friends.

Jamila (16) announced that she experienced the smartphone as a disturbing factor and had chosen to put it away when being with family and friends. She expected others to do the same:

Where do I begin? I had a friend over just before Christmas. I thought it'd be nice to catch up, share recent happenings, and have a good conversation. But she just sat on her phone, chatting with friends from other schools.

I felt so annoyed and rejected. It's bizarre how people are glued to their phones even when they're with others, and that's not something I want to subject anyone to!

According to Jamila, being on a mobile phone doesn't equate to being with friends in real life. She believes it's impolite to divide one's attention between their phone and companions. Interestingly, her experiences align with research on phubbing, which shows how young people are adversely affected when others prioritise their phones over social interaction (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016). Several informants, among them Jamila, have undergone a shift in their attitudes and values regarding the use of mobile phones and connectivity. This has led them to re-evaluate their priorities and express a desire to engage in activities that are personally fulfilling, rather than those facilitated by social media or mobile devices. For instance, Annie (19) stated that she wishes to prioritise activities that have a positive impact on her well-being and that are meaningful to her.

Regarding the situation mentioned, the disconnection occurred due to a shift in priorities and energy caused by a change in consciousness and values. Annie's statement aligns with the concept of authenticity, which is commonly cited as a key reason for digital disconnection (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). In other cases, a transformation in values led to a reluctance to use certain platforms.

For instance, Joseph (18) had strong opinions about TikTok, explaining that it was a platform he did not install because it did not coincide with his ideas about what is useful to him. He did not want to be a part of it. For him, TikTok represented the devil:

To be honest, TikTok scares me. It's like it has tapped into our human nature, our herd mentality, and our fear of being left out, and now it's got us hooked. The fact that kids as young as eight are on it is alarming. I think it's the devil.

This statement indicates that informants respond differently as their awareness and values evolve. While some may exhibit slight modifications and occasional "breaks" from their mobile devices and certain aspects of the digital social realm, others may refuse to engage with social platform applications that conflict with their principles. This finding indicates that disconnection occurs as a series of gradual actions, including an inner mental distance and subtle forms of breaks that can occur in everyday situations, rather than drastic actions like deleting a platform.

Overall, the empirical analysis shows how affective dissonance serves as a bridge between theory and lived experiences. It illustrates how affect and affective dissonance can explain and illuminate the affective reactions, reflections, and changed consciousness of young individuals navigating the complexities of disconnection in the digital realm.

Concluding discussion

In this chapter, I have investigated how young people respond to the pervasive presence of invasive connected media, with a central, overarching research question: How do young people react to invasive connected media? Through my empirical inquiry, I have shown that affective reactions to digital impulses are deeply ingrained in the daily navigation and management of digital connectivity for young individuals. These affective experiences hold transformative potential, inciting dissonance as they challenge established habitual interactions with digital media.

The underpinnings of Spinoza's affective theory and Massumi's ideas on affective dynamics have considerably informed the analysis presented. Spinoza's framework helped interpret informants' mixed affects towards connectivity, reflecting their efforts to regain agency over affective states by changing digital habits. On the other hand, Massumi's conceptualisation of affective dynamics was employed to explore informants' instantaneous reactions to digital interactions, like the influx of mobile notifications. This framework also aided in unravelling the ambivalence the informants exhibited towards digital connectivity and disconnection, viewing such encounters through the lens of affective dissonance. Together, these theories facilitated a deeper exploration and a more holistic understanding of digital disconnection as a nuanced, affectively charged process rather than a fixed state, emphasising the critical role of affect in mediating young people's digital (dis)connectivity.

While affective encounters can undoubtedly have a significant impact, it is essential to recognise that they do not necessarily result in explicit disconnection practices. In fact, as I learned from speaking with young people, digital disconnection encapsulates a process of shifting one's mindset and values, as well as adopting a more intentional approach to usage, reflecting a nuanced affective-driven navigation of digital connectivity. Ultimately, digital disconnection can be considered a chance to engage in critical thinking and explore ideas of alternative realities.

As we have observed, the nature of disconnection practices is not rigidly fixed. It varies depending on individual circumstances and contexts. Sometimes, embracing an alternative approach to being with connected media may manifest in disconnection practices, while on other occasions, it may not lead to explicit disconnection. Based on the findings, I advocate for a nuanced conceptualisation of disconnection as an intricate process, demanding a delicate balancing act to address instances of dissonance and turbulence in the interplay between individuals and their digital connectivity, be it in their mental or behavioural engagements.

Based on the data collected, it is clear that young people cultivate a charged relationship with connectivity, mainly through their smartphones. Interactions with digital media can sometimes result in brief instances of microshocks, when some aspects of their digital experience do not align with

their personal preferences, eliciting dissonance. The frequency and intensity of these microshocks can be influenced by the continuous connectedness, leading some to opt for disconnection. The affective response to these occurrences can be diverse, with some finding them pacifying, and others mobilising. This underscores the intricate role that affects have in shaping disconnection. Connectivity, in its ever-present nature, thus lays the foundation for potential disconnection.

The crux of the matter lies in the empowerment these affective encounters confer upon young individuals – to disconnect and chart their own course within the digital landscape. By becoming active agents, they can customise and mould their experiences with relevant digital media and content, thus engaging in a circular process where being affected by the digital world influences how they, in turn, affect the digital realm. This iterative process alters the equilibrium of the affective bond between the individual and connectivity, ultimately forging novel, habituated ways of engaging with digital media.

Curiously, the notion of “acting” within the framework of disconnection thus transcends mere observable behaviours, encompassing a spectrum of attitudinal shifts and mental distancing. Consequently, the disconnection process culminates in various internal or external acts, each with distinct intensities. Disconnection practices may manifest as profound transformations in everyday digital use. At the same time, more subtle forms of mental distancing and internally regulated relationships with digital media also represent viable forms of disconnection. As such, disconnection materialises as a multifaceted spectrum encompassing attitudes, cognitive efforts, and diverse practices. To fully appreciate its complexity, it is therefore essential to embrace a holistic perspective that recognises disconnection beyond mere visible outcomes.

However, I acknowledge the inherent limitations of this study. Notably, the skewed gender representation within the sample warrants caution in giving the whole picture of the affective dimension of digital disconnection. Including a broader range of male informants and expanding the participant demographic to include diverse age groups, even adults, would undoubtedly enrich the comprehension of the affective aspects of disconnection.

Given the profound impact of digital media on the lives of 16–19-year-olds, it is also essential to consider disconnection as an integral part of their developmental journey. The decision to focus on young people within this age range aligns with their formative stage of identity development. At this juncture, connectivity assumes heightened significance as the quest for identity information and a sense of belonging among peers becomes intertwined with digital interactions, notably facilitated by smartphones. During this stage of life, individuals place significant emphasis on peer relationships and the need for social acceptance, seeking validation and recognition from their immediate social circles (Brown, 2008; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). As a result,

the influence of peers and peer responsibility is heightened, often surpassing other external responsibilities, creating an environment where self-oriented responsibilities become paramount in digital interactions (Livingstone & Third, 2017). This heightened emphasis on peer connections and identity development most likely intensifies their affective experiences and responses to digital impulses (boyd, 2015; Livingstone et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, disconnection as a process holds relevance across age demographics, as affective encounters resonate with individuals from various walks of life. Thus, I advocate for further research that builds upon the multifaceted notion of disconnection, exploring its dimensions as an embodiment of dissonance, potentiality, and a transformative process.

References

- Baumer, E. P., Guha, S., Quan, E., Mimno, D., & Gay, G. K. (2015). Missing photos, suffering withdrawal, or finding freedom? How experiences of social media non-use influence the likelihood of reversion. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115614851>
- Baym, N. K., Wagman, K. B., & Persaud, C. J. (2020). Mindfully scrolling: Rethinking Facebook after time deactivated. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120919105>
- boyd, D. (2015). *It's complicated*. Yale University Press.
- Brown, B. B. (2008). Peer groups and peer cultures. In T. Willoughby (Ed.), *The handbook of adolescence* (pp. 74–103). John Wiley & Sons.
- Chotpitayasunondh, V., & Douglas, K. (2016). How “phubbing” becomes the norm: The antecedents and consequences of snubbing via smartphone. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 63, 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.018>
- Clough, P. T., & Halley, J. (Eds.) (2007). *The affective turn: Theorizing the social*. Duke University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1992). *Expressionism in philosophy: Spinoza* (M. Joughin, Trans.). Zone Books.
- Enloe, C. (2004). *The curious feminist: Searching for women in a new age of empire*. University of California Press.
- Hemmings, C. (2012). Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation. *Feminist Theory*, 13(2), 147–161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700112442643>
- Hipfl, B. (2018). Affect in media and communication studies: Potentials and assemblages. *Media and Communication*, 6(3), 5–14. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i3.1470>
- Karppi, T., Chia, A., & Jorge, A. (2021). In the mood for disconnection. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1599–1614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135485652111034621>
- Kuntsman, A., & Miyake, E. (2019). The paradox and continuum of digital disengagement: Denaturalising digital sociality and technological connectivity. *Media, Culture & Society*, 41(6), 901–913. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719853732>
- Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K., & Lemish, D. (Eds.). (2019). *The international handbook of children, media, and culture*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Livingstone, S., & Third, A. (2017). Children and young people’s rights in the digital age: An emerging agenda. *New Media & Society*, 19(5), 657–670. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816686318>
- Mascheroni, G., Vincent, J., & Jimenez, E. (2015). Girls are addicted to likes so they post seminaked selfies: Peer mediation, normativity and the construction of identity online. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research*, 9(1), Article 5. <http://doi.org/10.5817/CP2015-1-5>
- Maslen, S. (2022). Affective forces of connection and disconnection on Facebook: A study of Australian parents beyond toddlerhood. *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(9), 1716–1732. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2027497>
- Massumi, B. (2015). *Politics of affect*. Polity.
- Merton, R. K. (1976). *Sociological ambivalence and other essays*. Simon & Schuster.
- Peirce, C. (1965). Pragmatism and abduction. In C. Hartshorne, & P. Weiss (Eds.), *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Vol. 5) (pp. 112–131). Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Silverstone, R., Hirsch, E., & Morley, D. (1992). Information and communication technologies and the moral economy of the household. In R. Silverstone, & E. Hirsch (Eds.), *Consuming technologies: Media and information in domestic spaces* (pp. 115–131). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203401491>
- Smelser, N. J. (1998). The rational and the ambivalent in the social sciences: 1997 presidential address. *American Sociological Review*, 63(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657473>
- Subrahmanyam, K., & Greenfield, P. M. (2008). Online communication and adolescent relationships. *The Future of Children*, 18(1), 119–146. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20053122>
- Sundén, J. (2018). Queer disconnections: Affect, break, and delay in digital connectivity. *Transformations*, (31), 63–78.

- Syvertsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The policies of disconnecting*. Emerald Publishing.
- Syvertsen, T., & Enli, G. (2020). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence*, 26(5-6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>
- Vanden Abeele, M. M. P. (2015). Mobile youth culture: A conceptual development. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 4(1), 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157915601455>
- Vila-Henninger, L., Dupuy, C., Van Ingelgom, V., Caprioli, M., Teuber, F., Pennetreau, D., Bussi, M., & Le Gall, C. (2022). Abductive coding: Theory building and qualitative (re) analysis. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 53(2), 968–1001. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004912412111067508>
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2020). An emotional turn in journalism studies? *Digital Journalism*, 8(2), 175–194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1697626>
- Wyatt, S., Thomas, G., & Terranova, T. (2002). They came, they surfed, they went back to the beach: Conceptualising use and non-use of the internet. In S. Woolgar (Ed.), *Virtual society? Technology, cyberbole, reality* (pp. 23–40). Oxford University Press.
- Ytre-Arne, B., Syvertsen, T., Moe, H., & Karlsen, F. (2020). Temporal ambivalences in smart-phone use: Conflicting flows, conflicting responsibilities. *New Media & Society*, 22(9), 1715–1732. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820913561>