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“Maybe I should get rid of it for a while...”: Examining motivations and challenges for social media disconnection

Minh Hao Nguyen ^{a,b}

^aAmsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; ^bDepartment of Communication and Media Research (IKMZ), University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

This study explores the motivations for why people disconnect from social media and the challenges they experience in doing so. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews with current and past social media users aged 21–39, the study finds that people discontinue, take breaks from, or change their use of social media for various reasons (e.g., lack of interest, overuse and overload, privacy concerns, social influences, keeping a work-life balance), but disconnection experiences vary greatly across individuals as well as within individuals over time. Notably, disconnection does not always follow negative experiences with social media, but can also be triggered by important life transitions or broader lifestyle choices. People also experience various practical, social, and societal challenges, making disconnection not always desirable or possible. Ultimately, this study gives insight into the factors that contribute to people’s complex and ambivalent relationship with social media. Thereby, it extends our understanding of the ever-evolving uses and perceptions of social media in a time where digital media is omnipresent.

KEYWORDS

Digital detox; digital disconnection; digital well-being; media disengagement; social media

Introduction

Despite the widespread use and undeniable popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) around the globe, some reports have actually shown that social media use has plateaued or even declined in many countries over the past few years (GlobalWebIndex, 2019). One possible explanation for this decline is that users have become better aware of their screen time, as well as the potential negative effects associated with social media use, and desire to limit screen time or take a “digital detox” as a result (Franks, Chenhall, & Keogh, 2018a). Such awareness may be reinforced by built-in features on people’s digital devices that quantify and

CONTACT Minh Hao Nguyen  m.h.nguyen@uva.nl  Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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present screen time data to users, such as iOS Screen Time on Apple devices, and Digital Wellbeing on Android devices.

Despite limited scholarly evidence of clear negative associations between digital media use and well-being (for a discussion, see Orben, 2020), recent reports show that public perception is otherwise. For instance, 93% of Chinese social media users believe it negatively impacts their sleep quality (47%), time management (45%), and concentration (33%) (Kantar, 2018). Moreover, 89% of users have taken active measures to prevent this perceived negative impact, such as limiting social media time (54%), turning off notifications (35%) and removing apps (23%) (Kantar, 2017). In Switzerland, three in four adults occasionally “disconnect,” or take a break from digital media, while one in three say they would like to do so more often (Comparis, 2018). Finding “digital well-being” – that is, a personal balance in one’s digital media use (Vanden Abeele, 2021) – seems to be a goal that many people strive toward in today’s digital society.

Intended technology disengagement – such as notions of “disconnect to reconnect” and “digital detoxes” – have gained much attention in the media (e.g., Ghaffary, 2019), and related scholarship is on the rise as well. This study contributes to the growing body of research on digital disconnection, which is more relevant than ever given the increasing pervasiveness of social media and mobile technology. Drawing on in-depth interviews with adults aged 21 to 39 who have taken a break from or stopped using social media entirely, this study explores the motivations for such disconnection, as well as the challenges they face in doing so. The findings of this study will provide insight into people’s changing relationships with online social spaces in the digital society.

Social Media Disconnection in a Technology-Saturated World

Scholars have suggested that disconnection “is rarely a binary case of either-or, but instead part of dilemmas, ambivalences, and practices of media use” (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021) with the goal of achieving a “balance” in one’s digital media use (Vanden Abeele, 2021). As such, in this study I conceptualize social media disconnection as the intentional self-regulation of one’s social media use, varying from explicit or permanent nonuse to the less absolute ways where one places limits on their social media use (Nguyen, 2021). This can range from users who decided to refrain from using certain platforms indefinitely, to those who occasionally take breaks or limit their use various ways.

Previous research has identified a range of reasons and motivations for why people disconnect, or desire to disconnect, from social media. With respect to the ubiquitous platform Facebook, studies have shown that a lack of interest in the content (e.g., irrelevant posts about people’s everyday life activities) as well as the perceived inauthenticity of online social connections can motivate people to leave (Baumer et al., 2013). Concerns about online anonymity and data privacy may also explain why people wish to disconnect (Baumer et al.,

2013). A study comparing Facebook quitters and continued users found that quitters were more cautious about their privacy (Stieger, Burger, Bohn, & Voracek, 2013). Moreover, the abundance of information and communications in today's digital environment, as well as social pressures to engage in such communications (e.g., provide social support, respond promptly to messages), can lead to perceptions of overuse and overload, and consequently intentions to disconnect (Cao & Sun, 2018; Gui & Büchi, 2019; Maier, Laumer, Weinert, & Weitzel, 2015). These stressors can also have perceived negative impacts on well-being, resulting in people disconnecting to cope with perceived stress in general (Aranda & Baig, 2018; Franks, Chenhall, & Keogh, 2018a).

Another reason for disconnection relates to unintentional, habitual social media engagements. People may find themselves distracted by digital media or mindlessly scrolling through content, feeling guilty afterward for spending their time unproductively and disconnect as a result (Aranda & Baig, 2018; Baym, Wagman, & Persaud, 2020). In social situations, "phubbing" – the act of prioritizing one's phone over face-to-face social interactions – is generally considered inappropriate and socially undesirable (Vanden Abeele, 2020). Relatedly, pressure from friends and family, who may consider one's social media use excessive and problematic, can also explain why some want to disconnect (Luqman, Masood, & Ali, 2018). Finally, other work has described people's conscious decision to step back from social media (i.e., "media refusal") as a lifestyle practice to express one's social identity or ideology (Portwood-Stacer, 2013).

Opting out of social media may also present challenges that make it demotivating or more difficult to disconnect. In today's technology-saturated world, disconnection is rarely permanent (Aranda & Baig, 2018; Baumer, Guha, Quan, Mimno, & Gay, 2015; Franks, Chenhall, & Keogh, 2018a; Hesselberth, 2018; Jorge, 2019; Light & Cassidy, 2014). A main reason for people to use social media is connection (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Thus, completely opting out may pose challenges for one's social well-being and is therefore not always desirable (Hargittai & Marwick, 2016; Pennington, 2020). In a study that asked people to abstain from the Internet for a week, participants reported facing several challenges such as feeling excluded from information, communication, and society in general (Kaun & Schwarzenegger, 2014). The benefits of being connected might explain why many do not abandon social media permanently but instead take breaks from social media or engage in less explicit disconnection practices (e.g., adjusting privacy settings, unfriending people; Franks, Chenhall, & Keogh, 2018a; Jorge, 2019; Light & Cassidy, 2014). Studies on Facebook disconnection showed that many who quit found it difficult to maintain their nonuse and thus reverted to using the platform again (Baumer, Guha, Quan, Mimno, & Gay, 2015; Franks, Chenhall, & Keogh, 2018b). Research on other ICTs, such as mobile devices, shows similar

findings: limiting digital media use requires breaking patterns of habitual use, which many find difficult to do (Aranda & Baig, 2018). Scholarship has thus highlighted the ambivalent relationship people hold with digital media (Davis, 2012; Vanden Abeele, 2021; Ytre-Arne, Syvertsen, Moe, & Karlsen, 2020): there are many benefits to using digital media, but sometimes technology interferes with someone's everyday life activities and responsibilities, prompting disconnection.

The Current Study

While previous literature has identified various reasons why people disconnect from social media, this work often focused on single branded applications (e.g., Facebook; Baumer et al., 2013; Franks, Chenhall, & Keogh, 2018b e.g., Twitter; Schoenebeck, 2014), ignoring how disconnection takes place in the larger context of people's digital media uses. Given that people often use multiple social network sites (Tandoc, Lou, & Min, 2019) and may switch from one service to another instead of completely opting out (Nguyen et al., 2021), this study considers people's entire social media repertoire in their disconnection experience. The contributions of the current study are twofold. First, while previous research has noted the ambivalence in people's relationship with digital media, this study will shed light on the factors that contribute to this ambivalence by examining the motivations and challenges people experience in disconnecting from social media. Second, by providing an overview of the factors that shape people's social media disconnection experiences, this study will offer methodological guidance for future research on digital disconnection. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What are the motivations for people to disconnect from social media?

RQ2: What are the challenges that people face when wanting to disconnect or wanting to stay disconnected from social media?

Method

Data Collection and Sample

In-depth interviews allow for participants to share their lived experiences in their own words and for the researcher to be flexible and ask follow-up questions. This makes it an appropriate method to inquire about people's underlying motivations to disconnect from social media, the challenges they face in doing so, and most importantly, the important nuances in these motivations and challenges that are not possible to unravel with other methods, such as survey research. For instance, in-depth interviews have been

helpful in unraveling older adults' motivations to disconnect from or switch between various social media platforms (Nguyen, Hargittai, Fuchs, Djukaric, & Hunsaker, 2021).

I conducted one-on-one in-person and telephone interviews during July-September 2019. I created an advertisement that I shared with people from my own network, and I asked them to share it with their networks. Through this method, I was able to recruit several participants (none of whom were in my own personal network). I then continued with snowball sampling through participants. I interviewed thirty Dutch adults aged 21 to 39 years ($X = 29$) who had taken a break from social media at least once or had stopped using it entirely. I focused on this age group, as they are more likely to engage in “digital detoxing” than people of other ages (GlobalWebIndex, 2018). I aimed for a variety of users and nonusers, as well as a gender-balanced sample with diversity in age and education level. Slightly more than half of the sample was female ($n = 17$). Most participants held a college degree ($n = 23$), six finished no more than high school education, and one completed elementary school only.

I considered social media in the broadest sense, as both SNSs and IM apps, but for the scope of this paper I will focus on disconnection from SNSs as this was most prevalent. During the semi-structured interviews, I first asked open questions about which social media they use(d) to obtain a general sense of their social media repertoire (e.g., Do you currently use any social media? What role do these social media play in your life?). I then followed with open questions about their experiences leading up to disconnection to get an understanding of their motivations and reasons to disconnect (Are there any social media platforms that you do not use anymore, or use less often than before? What were your motivations for this change in social media use?), and the challenges they face in doing so (e.g., Was it your plan to disconnect temporarily or permanently? Was it easy or difficult for you to stay away from [social media platform] during your intended break? Was it easy or difficult for you to not have access to [social media platform]? After your break, did you return to using [social media platform] – and if so, why?). At the end of the interview, I asked if participants had anything else to share regarding their social media disconnection experiences. The length of the interviews ranged from 20 to 72 minutes. Participants received a compensation of 15 EUR for their time. Ethical approval for this study was cleared by the regulations of the University of Zurich.

Coding and Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed and translated to English for coding. Together with a research assistant, I began with open coding to identify emerging themes and create coding categories (Corbin &

Strauss, 2015) based on a set of four interviews. Next, we – the author and research assistant – held a consensus meeting to determine an overall coding scheme. Throughout the coding process, we discussed general observations of the data through written memos to document the coding process and refine the code book. We wrote a case summary of each participant to describe their overall disconnection experience. The iterative process of coding and consensus meetings ensures the reliability and validity of the findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I – the author – then analyzed the data based on these codings, going back and forth to the data and case summaries to ensure my analysis reflected people’s experiences accurately.

Findings

In the sections that follow, I draw on interview data to explore participants’ wide-ranging motivations for disconnecting from social media before similarly attending to the various challenges they faced in doing so. As people’s disconnection experiences are often shaped by their everyday life context, which is constantly in motion, I argue that motivations and challenges for disconnection are fluid and constantly evolving, even over relatively short time spans in people’s life. Participants’ narratives also reveal that they often experience an ambivalent relationship with social media, aligning with previous scholarship (e.g., Davis, 2012; Kaun & Schwarzenegger, 2014; Ytre-Arne, Syvertsen, Moe, & Karlsen, 2020): While users would like to disconnect, disconnection can also be demotivating as they perceive various social, practical and societal challenges. To illustrate which factors contribute to this complex and ambivalent relationship with social media, in the next sections I will first discuss the motivations for why people disconnect from social media. Next, I will discuss the challenges that arise that prevent people from disconnecting, or staying disconnected. Note that participants often mentioned various motivations in tandem, as well as challenges in doing so, but for clarity purposes, I describe them separately.

Why People Disconnect from Social Media

Many participants had repeatedly disconnected and reconnected, confirming previous work that disconnection is often not permanent and can happen in cycles (e.g., Franks, Chenhall, & Keogh, 2018a). Participants’ time off social media could last as short as several hours (“usually only half a day;” P105, 27, female) to several months. After reconnection, some encountered similar issues as before which led them to disconnect again, while others disconnected for varying reasons at different occasions over time (P129, 29, male):

I have tried or done it [disconnecting] several times. The reasons were different, one time because I felt like I was spending a lot of time on it. Another time was because I felt unsafe on Facebook [due to political discussions about a social identity group this participant belongs to, with sometimes comments targeted directly at him].

This example also reveals that the severity of different situations may play a role in one's decision to disconnect. In situations where there is more at stake (e.g., feeling unsafe vs. losing interest over content), disconnection may be externally forced upon someone rather than internally motivated, and further impact one's future social media experience (e.g., disconnection may be longer lasting).

Participants often believed to have developed a better relationship with social media through their disconnection experiences. One participant who worked for social media agency took a break after quitting her job, as she felt overwhelmed by using Instagram intensively. When she reconnected after one month, she cleaned up her contact list and found herself using it in a way that enriched her life (P111, 30, female):

At one point I thought, "Maybe I should get rid of it for a while . . . ," to get another relationship with social media that wasn't related to work. [. . .] That period offline did help me to take it all a bit less seriously. [. . .] I look at it [social media] in a more positive way now, I like it and I like the people I follow.

Overall, this shows that people's experiences with social media are fluid and always changing, as are their reasons for disconnecting from social media.

Participants described a plethora of reasons and motivations for disconnecting from social media. These reasons were related to the (1) content, communication, or features of the platforms and apps they disconnected from (e.g., a loss of interest, perceptions of overuse and overload, privacy concerns), (2) driven by social influences (e.g., social pressure, preferences, and norms around digital media use), or (3) motivated by the situational context of people's lives (e.g., work-life balance, important life transitions, and well-being and lifestyle considerations).

Platform uses and features

Lack of Interest

People often disconnected because they lost interest in the content on social media. Many talked about how their feed on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram had changed over time. When they first started using these social media, they saw posts from their family and friends, but over time they got more news, advertising, and entertainment not relevant to their interests (e.g., "useless memes" and "viral videos"). Some believed that the changing content was a consequence of changing platform-algorithms (P126, 34, male):

When I had Instagram at the beginning, it just showed me at the top the videos and pictures that were last uploaded by people you follow. And I really liked that, because then you could see exactly what people were doing. But after a while and when I started to follow more people and stuff, then the algorithm changed and then I got everything with the most likes and stuff. That was the reason for me to actually stop looking at the posts and only view the stories.

Others thought the content had become boring and repetitive. One participant explained why he disconnected from some platforms, while continuing others (P113, 28, male):

It was not very innovative. You've seen it once and then you've seen it. For example, I use Twitter as news, every day there is something different. But Instagram, every day you see pictures of the same people and they look slightly different.

Participants also felt that the content shared by their network was trivial, such as “that people had done some shopping or something, or had a round of cycling, mostly so-called social things” (P126, 34, male). Moreover, many perceived that personal posts on social media did not reflect reality – “there are often too many beautiful things on it, it's not real life” (P102, 29, male). Perceptions of inauthenticity could also pertain to people's responses (e.g., likes, comments), as illustrated by this participant who actively posted pictures when he was single (P107, 35, male):

Those likes give you satisfaction. It gives you some kind of prestige. It sounds very strange, but the interests are not real. It's all fake. I had a feeling it was all fake. Other people post all kinds of stuff on it and then you look and give it a like. And then you see how beautiful and how nice everyone has it. And then you want that, too. But it's not reality.

Participants also described platform-specific differences in how content could be organized and filtered, leading them to disconnect from certain platforms but continuing others. For instance, one participant explained how he disliked Facebook's newsfeed, but preferred Instagram as it allowed him to “filter between seeing what friends, family and acquaintances are doing” instead of his feed being “blurred” by other types of posts (P129, 29, male):

What made the difference is this: on Facebook you have a timeline and everything is on the same page, from friends to entertainment. And with Instagram it's still separated. There's a home [page] where you really only see what you want to follow. And there's an “explore” page where you'll be bombarded with all the entertainment, videos and articles. But the distinction here [on Instagram] is so good. And by good I mean that you can choose what you see.

Overall, a lack of interest in certain content on social media, whether this related to the type of content (e.g., news, entertainment, advertising) or the perceived (in)authenticity of the content, could prompt disconnection.

Moreover, specific platform features, such as the option to select and filter through content, could explain why some preferred some social media over others.

Overuse, overload, and time constraints

Participants widely shared experiences where they had mindlessly scrolled through social media and felt this to be a waste of their time. In some cases, overuse could lead to seeing the same content again, as one participant explained by saying: “You think there’s something, you think it’s [feed] refreshing, but it’s not like that at all. If you looked once a day, it would be enough. Or once every two days” (P103, 29, male). Another participant explained how she felt overloaded by automatic, habitual use, while it had little value to add (P109, 35, female):

It’s more the overload that I look at it every time, but it doesn’t really satisfy me, that it no longer had any value at a certain point in time. But that you still do it. So I made a conscious choice – a while back – to stop using Facebook.

Some shared that the sum of all social media led to an overabundance of information and communication (P111, 30, female): “I removed all apps from my phone, because it was just too much. I couldn’t handle it anymore. It was quite a few stimuli and too many people that I don’t know about and never see.” Content algorithms could also make navigation on platforms confusing (P106, 33, male): “There was also a huge overload. I also couldn’t find certain information because of algorithms they used themselves.” Others felt overloaded by the unpredictability of what would show up on their timeline, as with the following participant, who mainly uses social media for lighthearted entertainment (P110, 29, female):

If I need to talk or think about serious things, I’m going to watch the news. [...] But sometimes I find that you’re flooded with them on Facebook, so I’m not ready for that at that moment. And then I’m having a hard time processing those kinds of messages.

Notifications from social media apps were also a common source of overload, and many turned these off. In contrast, people also shared opposite experiences of how turning off notifications made them check their phone more often. As this precaution led to undesirable mobile phone behaviors, these participants turned their notifications back on. Several participants mentioned removing social media apps from their mobile phones, while they continued to use desktop versions instead to avoid distraction. For instance, one participant explained that desktop versions were more limited in functionalities, which he found positive as he would be less bothered by notifications (P124, 24, male):

What I do now is often just remove the apps. So I don’t have them on my phone right now. Then I log in on my desktop. These platforms limit you enormously in the

possibilities that you have as a desktop. The notifications you get when you have the app drive you crazy.

Several mentioned that a lack of time or desire to focus on an important activity was the direct cause of disconnecting from SNSs for longer periods of time, although some took shorter breaks with the same goal. For those disconnecting more permanently, it is worth mentioning that the desire to disconnect had often built up gradually due to other reasons already. A common example was wanting to focus on studies or work, such as the following participant (P130, 29, male): “It was a general feeling, but also that I really had to spend more time in my studies and thesis. Because it really took a lot of time. And so it happened.” Another participant who disconnected from Facebook and Instagram shared (P116, 29, male):

It’s also the distraction you get. Pick up your phone at work, watch. . . And then you’ll be addressed by your supervisor. Then you [. . .] feel like a small child who is always put in his place for using his phone. Then you don’t come across as professional either.

In addition to work and studies, participants also mentioned wanting to focus their time on meeting up with people in-person instead of online or other leisure activities (see the section on “Well-being and Lifestyle”).

Altogether, different sources of information overload, experiences of overuse and time constraints explain why people disconnect from social media. Feelings of being overwhelmed by social media could be caused by one’s own perceived overuse, the excess of information available online, the unpredictability of content on one’s feed, and technical disturbances such as message notifications. Moreover, a lack of time and wanting to avoid distractions and focus on activities such as work and studies could prompt disconnection.

Social influences

Social pressure

Social influences, in various forms, were a prominent reason for disconnection. Many experienced pressures to check and answer to messages and replies from their social contacts immediately. As such, they turned off notifications, deleted apps, or restricted their social media use to web browsers only. Several mentioned experiencing a fear of missing out (FoMO) on the social activities of peers that they learned about through social media. While FoMO was often mentioned as a barrier to disconnection, there were few instances where participants limited social media to combat FoMO. One participant explained this by saying “you wouldn’t have had a problem with that [FoMO] if you hadn’t seen it,” which was her main reason to stop using Snapchat and to mute certain Instagram stories (P128, 25, female).

Participants also held preferences regarding online social interactions. Some shielded their online profiles from certain people only, while others disconnected completely to avoid communication altogether. When asking about the reason for deactivating her Facebook account, one participant simply stated “some people I just didn’t want to talk to” (P105, 27, female). Another participant reminisced about an incident when she was a teenager regarding an argument with a friend leading her to disconnect (P110, 28, female): “So I removed Facebook. I thought, ‘You know what? I’m just going to do a little less social,’ that’s what I really needed at the time.” Overall, the social pressure to be available online, experiences of FoMO, and the desire to refrain from social communication, can explain why people disconnect from social media.

Privacy concerns

Concerns about online privacy (i.e., social, networked, and institutionalized privacy; Marwick & Boyd, 2014; Raynes-Goldie, 2010) could also prompt disconnection. Regarding *social privacy*, more than a few did not want people to be able to find information about them, such as on their social media profiles or through Google searches. One participant talked about deleting her account to ensure old pictures were not publicly accessible, but it also helped her to find closure (P127, 31, female):

I didn’t want certain photos to be online anymore and now I also know that once you’ve put them online, they’re part of Instagram and Facebook. So I do know that the pictures on it. . . I feel like they’re gone, but well, I’m sure they’re lying around somewhere on the web. But I thought, “Then I’ll be offline and no one will be able to find my account and no one will be able to find the photos I posted four years ago. And then I’ll really be gone for a while.” Then I could definitely say “I’m done with it.”

Several participants mentioned that they wanted to avoid colleagues or their (potential) employer finding information about them online, which explains their social privacy concerns. When asking why the following participant deactivated her Facebook account, she answered (P119, 25, female):

I actually do it a thousand times a year, but this time I had done it because a lot of my colleagues were going to stalk me and look me up. They went all the way to my [Facebook] page. And I didn’t like that anymore.

Similarly, another participant (P116, 29, male) deleted Instagram and Facebook “for the sake of his privacy” and continued to explain:

With job search and so on, what people do first is see if you can be found on the Internet. And when they see a picture of you going out with a bottle of liquor, so to speak, they think “never mind.” So that’s actually been the main reason for me.

There were also participants who selectively disconnected by removing certain people from their friends lists, such as former colleagues or people from their childhood who “really don’t need to know what [they are] doing now” (P111, 30, female). Overall, concerns about social privacy mainly addressed social media platforms where content is more persistent and shared with one’s entire network (e.g., Facebook, Instagram).

Participants were also concerned about their *networked privacy* (Marwick & Boyd, 2014), which related to online vulnerability and not being in control over how others can exert influence on your personal image by posting content about you online. One participant shared an example of how a breakup with his partner was exposed on social media, but also mentioned how tagging him in photos threatened his privacy, leading him to disconnect (P106, 33, male):

I decided to keep it [the break-up] indoors and the other party felt the need to share it online. And then I realized “Oh, so anything I do wrong, that can be displayed.” And that made me feel very vulnerable. [...] That did make me decide to quit then. [...] In the past, it was just your character and you had personal conversations that created a certain image. And now it’s what’s being done to you online. And that determines a little how you’re seen. And after that incident, it also started with tagging. And then it sometimes happens that you were online on a photo where you were not very good on it. That was the second reason to quit.

Concerns about *institutional privacy*, relating to the policies of SNSs concerning property rights of content, or the collection of personal data by platforms for commercial use (e.g., personalized advertising), could also prompt disconnection. Overall, institutional privacy concerns carried less weight in the decision to step back from social media than social and networked privacy. When asked how she felt about personalized content based on data collection by social media platforms, one participant replied (P108, 29, female): “I wouldn’t mind that much. I would find it worse if people who don’t know me suddenly knew everything about me, because I put it online,” indicating that her social privacy was more important. Another participant said (P126, 34, male): “I’d rather have no advertising at all, but if there is advertising then I’d rather have advertising that I like.” More than a few were not bothered by institutional privacy at all, as they considered it to be part of the deal when choosing to use social media. Thus, even though many were aware of institutional privacy implications, this did not always motivate disconnection.

Situational life context

Work-life balance

Participants often talked about struggling with keeping a work-life balance, leading them to disconnect. A handful shared that they needed to have an

online presence on SNSs for their job, which could be overwhelming and so they disconnected sometimes to keep a distance. One participant who worked in event organization had become a public figure in her field, but she did not always feel comfortable about keeping an online presence that was for the world to see (P104, 25, female):

Nowadays everyone is on social media and everyone sees everything. And then there's my work, where everyone keeps an eye on everything I do. And I just didn't need it. [...] And there are also people who earn money as influencers. But that's not necessarily something I chose to do, I didn't necessarily want to be in that spotlight. And that's the feeling I got at some point. So I just wanted to cut back.

This struggle to keep professional and private communication separate was also encountered by several others who ran their own businesses and used social media to recruit customers. To avoid having to keep multiple accounts, some merged their business and private social media accounts, but this could make it difficult to maintain boundaries. Other participants decided to remove their private accounts completely but keep their professional accounts. Driven by the desire to maintain a healthy work-life balance while also limited by the fact that they needed to keep an online presence for their job, these participants looked for ways to disconnect from social media on their own terms.

Life transitions

Important life transitions could also trigger disconnection from social media. Such transitions could relate to people's relationship status, children, jobs, or just "growing up" in general. When asking why he stopped using social media, one participant explained (P114, 30, male):

I think it has gone gradually, there was certainly no particular incident. [...] The first is that of course I have grown older and therefore from an insecure adolescent to a more mature one. I am also in a stable relationship and have recently become a father.

Several mentioned that finding a romantic partner reduced the need to have an online presence, as one participant explained (P120, 27, male): "Maybe my relationship also helped in that, because I'd rather keep it to myself than let everyone know. So that way, I'd say my relationship helped remove [Facebook]."

Young parents also considered their children's privacy and decided to deactivate SNS profiles, limit posts featuring their children, or switch to more private channels of communication. One participant first disconnected from Facebook for six months after becoming a mother, but later took up Snapchat – she explained why she preferred some platforms over others when sharing content with her daughter in it (P110, 28, female):

I prefer to use Snapchat, because that's just for my friends. And then I can literally see who watched what. On Facebook I have 200–300 friends, so not a lot, but still more

public than for example Snapchat. So I don't feel very comfortable about that lately either, when sharing things on Facebook and Instagram.

Overall, various life transitions (e.g., new relationships, job changes, having children) can go hand in hand with changing needs for an online presence that explain why people step back from social media.

Well-being and lifestyle

Concerns about personal health and well-being were also a key motivator behind disconnection. Participants often mentioned disconnection as a means of working toward a healthier lifestyle, perceiving breaks from mobile phones as a way of looking out for both physical and emotional health. Several participants talked about how late-night screen use affected their sleep, leading them to disconnect through the do-not-disturb function, eliminating their phone from their bedroom, or by buying a separate alarm clock. Others noticed physical fatigue such as having tired eyes, so they removed time-consuming social media apps and actively put their phones away. One participant explained (P102, 30, male):

It made me think "I'm putting it away now" because I had tired eyes more often. So more physical. So I'll put it away sometimes. That's also a reason why I do not have those apps [Instagram, Facebook] on my phone. It's better when it's as little as possible. Cause you've got a lot on it already.

Other participants shared how they would get tired in general from too much social media use and ongoing notifications, often referring to their phones. For instance, one participant explained (P104, 25, female): "It's just eating up your energy. You're lying on the couch, but it's just consuming energy." When asking why she turned her notifications off, another participant replied (P117, 27, female): "Because it made me feel quite restless. It was too much." The following participant situated his disconnection experience in a broader lifestyle change (P106, 33, male):

It was just a build-up of stress and also a huge urge to change things in life. Like, "It just can't go on like this." And that made me change a number of things. So I started to do more sports and eat differently, have more social contacts and stop using online media. And instead of sitting behind my phone for two hours in the evening, I read a book and did some work, went to work out, I went to a birthday or a barbecue. I was much more engaged in other things. It just gave me energy. And then I thought, "This is good. That's the way it's supposed to be. I have to maintain this."

A desire to be more present in offline life could also motivate people to disconnect from social media. One participant mentioned how he felt distracted from things that were happening in his offline life "right under his nose" because he was "busy on [the] phone all time" (P120, 27, male): "If I don't see it in real life, why should I be staring at my phone and reading

stories that might be 50% true and 50% false?” Similarly, another participant questioned the purpose of his online experiences at the cost of his offline life (P129, 29, male):

I constantly wanted to share things in my life and after a while I wondered what I was actually doing it for. And I started to live my life more by looking through my phone, instead of really through my own eyes.

Some disconnected as a social experiment (P111, 30, female): “I just wanted to see how it made me feel, for a short time. Not with the idea ‘I never want to go on social media again,’ because I think there are also some very nice aspects to it.” Another participant took a week-long break from her mobile phone and the Internet said: “I did it mainly to be able to talk about it” (P127, 31, female). To prepare for her time offline, she shared a post on Instagram with the quote “offline is the new luxury,” signifying that reducing digital media was not just something socially desirable and good for one’s well-being, but also a privilege that not everyone can afford. Altogether, a general desire to change lifestyles and to work on one’s health and well-being, and the belief that this could be achieved by limiting social media, could motivate people to disconnect.

What makes it difficult for people to disconnect, or stay disconnected?

While many found their disconnection experiences to have positive impacts on their relationship with social media, everyday life, social connections, and their health and well-being, participants also encountered social, practical, and societal barriers that prevented or made it difficult for them to disconnect: “I thought it was quite a challenge, though!” (P111, 30, female). Sometimes, such challenges could lead to people reconnecting with social media again, even though part of them desired to remain offline.

Social challenges

Missing out on social connections and updates from their social network was one of the main barriers experienced when disconnecting from social media. One participant shared that her breaks usually only last for several hours, and continued to explain how Facebook was the way to connect with her friends as she lived in a remote area for her studies (P105, 27, female):

Sometimes I want to, sometimes I want to be able to. I want to, but I wish I could. That’s just very difficult. Because it makes you feel like you’re missing something, or I don’t know. [...] Also because I live quite far from everyone. So if I’m not on social media, I don’t know what to do sometimes.

Participants often described that as they grew older, they and people around them became more busy, and so social media were a way to stay in the loop of

what was happening in the lives of friends and relatives they are not regularly in touch with: “The biggest reason why I still use Facebook and Instagram is for family members who occasionally post a picture, I would find it pitiful if I missed that” (P110, 28, female). Others held on to their profiles, even though they wanted to leave certain platforms, to maintain long-distance and international connections. Likewise, several kept their profiles online as “it’s a way for people to find you” (P101, 29, female) – with one participant even saying she was “afraid” that people would not be able to contact her otherwise (P105, 27, female).

Multiple participants experienced a FoMO on social events as a barrier to disconnecting. Invitations to birthdays and events often happen on Facebook, which is why one participant was not “really ready to remove it yet” (P101, 29, female). Others had difficulty disconnecting completely because of a general curiosity of how people are doing (P121, 37, female): “I’ve thrown it off once in a while, and yet it’s [Facebook] coming back again. So somehow I miss it a little, like, ‘How’s everybody doing?’ Very crazy, because I think it’s a fake world, too!” Several talked about how SNSs could broaden their “world” and thus expand their social capital. Not being active on it would mean having to miss out on the knowledge and experiences that go beyond one’s tight social circle “Now is the time for everyone to communicate with each other though social media. And [you can] make your world a little bigger than it actually is. And you’ll miss out on that” (P107, 35, male).

Disconnecting from social media could also affect people’s offline interactions. One participant often used people’s posts as conversation starters when seeing them in person, which is why she could not disconnect completely (P127, 31, female). People also shared that in-person conversations often were about things people saw online – “Have you seen this already? That one and that one had a baby,” and not being in the know could lead to them feeling socially excluded during such conversations: “Because you’ll be the only one who doesn’t know that yet. You’re a little behind” (P117, 27, female).

Participants who quit certain platforms sometimes experienced disapproval, although most said they received no particular positive or negative response. When asking whether disconnecting had led to social repercussions, one participant shared that “the reactions [were] extraordinary” to the point that some people would not tell stories they had posted on social media already, which “frustrated [him] enormously” (P106, 33, male):

A good example is that you come on a birthday, as Mr. No Social Media, because I used to be cool and now I’m suddenly different or funny if you don’t have a phone. And you used to be tough when you did. And now I come to a birthday and you hear things like “Oh, yeah, you don’t know that! You have no social media.”

Such disapproving responses could make people feel like outsiders, as they were not adhering to the norm of “being on social media,” as another

participant relayed (P120, 27, male): “You also often get a reaction like ‘Oh.’ Like you’re not normal anymore, or something.”

Sometimes family and friends would exert pressure and encourage them to reconnect again, which could make people feel uncomfortable, and more difficult for them to adhere to their intention to quit SNSs. Such pressures often came from their social environment’s desires to communicate with them online, such as by sharing posts and photos and tagging them in content on these platforms. One participant who held a social media presence for her job encountered pressure from her peers to be responsive as they saw her work-related activities on Facebook and Instagram, making it difficult for her to disconnect in private messaging (P104, 25, female):

I would still be doing my job, then I’d post things or something like that. And colleagues also took over my account to do it for me. But then my friends say, “Why does she do that and for the rest she’s offline, private?” But I’m trying to separate that for myself.

Sometimes participants missed the social recognition from others when they left social media: the positive responses they would get from sharing content themselves. Some participants occasionally went back to SNSs to share important life updates with their network, as with this participant (P107, 35, male):

In the beginning I went back to post something. And that was purely because I had graduated and I thought “I want to share this with everyone.” [...] And then I got rid of it, too, you know. I haven’t waited for likes or anything, either.

Diminished social recognition could also extend to offline contexts. One participant shared that people were less likely to ask about things happening in her life during a time where she was not actively posting, and how this affected her offline interactions (P117, 27, female):

When you post things yourself, people remember more of you. So then they know you’re on vacation and they also ask, “Hey, how was your vacation?” And if you don’t, there are a lot of people who don’t remember that you’ve been on holiday. And then you notice that [...] there is less interest for things [about you].

Overall, various social challenges related to social connection, disapproval, pressure and recognition could make it difficult for people to disconnect from social media, and in some cases this would lead to reconnection.

Practical challenges

Participants also encountered practical disadvantages of disconnecting. Many shared that certain platforms – often mentioning Facebook – made it difficult to delete their account (P112, 27, female): “You had to confirm 100 times if you wanted it gone.” A deleted or deactivated account could easily be undone by logging in again, also making it harder to leave permanently. Others shared that after deactivating their account, they would still receive notifications,

prompting them to login which automatically reactivated their profile. From a well-being point of view, some found that this was not good practice from tech-companies (P112, 27, female): “Social media is quite addictive and if you still have a hard time removing it . . . [. . .] I can understand that it’s hard not to log in for a month.”

Many used their Facebook account to login to other websites and services, as it was convenient to not having to set up an account for different services. The drawback was that it could make disconnecting from Facebook more difficult. A participant who regularly took breaks from Facebook encountered this problem as she often played games that were linked to her account (P105, 27, female):

Sometimes I temporarily block my Facebook account. But I sometimes play a game and that’s linked to Facebook. And then again the problem is that I can’t play those games, because I have to log in. So I’ll have to activate it again in the end.

The integration of platforms such as Facebook with other online services could thus make it difficult to disconnect completely.

Participants also described challenges related to information gathering pertaining to hobbies and interests, such as from music artists, TV shows, and news. One participant shared how certain local artists were only active on Facebook, which was one of the main reasons he remained connected (P122, 39, male). Social media was also a place to look up quick information about a product, brand, or other topic, which made it convenient to use as well. Overall, participants shared that social media was a gateway to information about leisure interests, making disconnecting more difficult and reconnecting more tempting.

While many disconnected to deal with overuse and overload, participants also widely shared that they missed scrolling through social media to pass time or cope with boredom. When asking if she experienced challenges during her time off social media, a participant who was taking a break replied (P117, 27, female):

Yes, I find it difficult sometimes. Also because sometimes you do it a bit out of boredom. So if you don’t have anything else to do, it’s very easy to open an app. And sometimes I find it quite difficult to think of something else to do.

Another explained how mindless scrolling could sometimes work relaxing, which was the reason she kept using Facebook (P115, 30, female): “It’s aimless, mindless, a little scrolling. And that usually just gives me some relaxation. It’s not stressful, it doesn’t give me pressure, that I have to do something or post something myself, not at all.” Even though this participant had contemplated deleting her account for other reasons, she held on to it as a source of light entertainment to fill time. Overall, participants experienced various practical

barriers that challenged them from being able to disconnect in a way they would like.

Societal challenges

Participants widely shared stories on how disconnecting was particularly difficult or impossible in today's world where technology has become increasingly intertwined with everyday life. Technology, and social media along with it, were used for numerous things, including communication, information seeking, learning, leisure, and professional reasons. The overall sentiment was that everyone else was using it, so opting out could make it difficult to participate in today's society: "We're all so used to it that it's a little hard to think without it" (P105, 27, female) Regarding Facebook and WhatsApp, another participant shared (P123, 25, female): "You can shut it down, but that doesn't really work in this world either." Social technologies showed to both enrich and limit people at the same time, as one participant shared (P107, 35, male):

The time now makes you need your cell phone. If people want to reach you, it's on your mobile. [...] It makes it very easy somewhere, but on the other hand I also think it restricts you. [...] But there's nothing you can do about it, because you have to go with it.

This experience also shows that even if people feel it is difficult to participate in today's society without using social technologies, even if one would desire to disconnect.

Participants also shared how online presence could be important for their careers, making it difficult to disconnect. As a photographer and model (P128, 25, female), one participant emphasized how Instagram was an important space to share her work and make professional connections. While she wanted to disconnect privately, her job made this complicated: "With Instagram, it's a bit more difficult where I have friends and work." Another participant shared that she felt relieved when taking social media "detoxes" that could last up to a week. However, alongside several other participants, as a self-employed professional social media was also a way to reach potential clients, preventing her from disconnecting permanently even though she desired too (P127, 31, female). Overall, the importance of social media for professional careers, as well as the use of social media by employers to communicate with employees could be a barrier for people to disconnect.

Discussion

Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews, this study offers an overview of people's motivations to disconnect from social media, as well as the challenges they face in doing so. The study confirms various reasons for disconnection reported by

previous research (e.g., lack of interest, perceptions of overuse/overload, privacy concerns, social influences). This study expands upon previous research by showing that people's disconnection experiences are deeply situated in the contexts of their everyday lives. The conditions which motivate individuals to disconnect from social media, then, are constantly in motion, most often an earnest response to the role(s) social media is playing in a person's daily life at that particular time rather than a blithe or monolithic desire to simply take a break. For instance, some people may disconnect as they navigate important life transitions, while others may choose to do so in order to promote a healthier work-life balance. Moreover, desires to be more present offline, as well as perceptions that social media use, in particular via mobile phones, negatively impacted well-being could also motivate some to disconnect as part of a broader lifestyle practice. However, it is important to note that not all motivations to disconnect stem from negative social media experiences per se – although this is often implied by terms such as “digital detoxing” (Sutton, 2017). Participants also widely reported practical, social, and societal challenges that made it undesirable or difficult to disconnect from social media, even if they wanted to. The results offer insight into the factors that contribute to the into the ever-evolving, ambivalent relationship people hold with social media in today's digital society.

One of the key implications of this study relates to the finding that people's relationships with social media are constantly evolving, as are their motivations for disconnecting, even over relatively short time spans in people's lives. While people's motivations to disconnect clearly differed across individuals, the results also showed that their changing uses and experiences with social media could lead them to disconnect for different reasons at different occasions, suggesting variations within individuals over time. Environmental factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has reshaped people's digital media uses drastically (Nguyen, Hargittai, & Marler, 2021), may also impact people's desires and ability to disconnect from social media. Furthermore, through disconnecting, some learned how to better manage their social media diet and use it in a way that added value to their life, confirming previous research showing that people may come to use Facebook more mindfully after a time deactivated (Baym, Wagman, & Persaud, 2020). Theoretically, this suggests that people's digital media uses and disconnection experiences may relate to each other in a reciprocal way, where digital media experiences may prompt disconnection, and disconnection in turn shapes one's digital media experiences. To better understand how people's digital media uses, disconnection experiences, and outcomes such as well-being relate to each other and evolve over time, research on digital well-being can benefit from longitudinal approaches.

Overall, this study shows that social technologies can enrich people's lives, but limit them at the same time, and disconnection can sometimes be difficult

as people may feel they cannot participate in society without it. While ambivalence in people's relationship with digital media has already been noted by previous research (e.g., Davis, 2012; Kaun & Schwarzenegger, 2014; Ytre-Arne, Syvertsen, Moe, & Karlsen, 2020), this study provides a comprehensive overview of the different factors that may contribute to people's complex relationship with digital media in a technology-saturated society. While the interviews focused on people's motivations for disconnecting from social media, participants also recognized its enjoyments and benefits, such as connecting with friends and family, staying up to date about and sharing life events, and looking up information and news. Participants also experienced various practical, social, and societal challenges, which made it difficult for them to remain disconnected and use social media in a way they would like. Factoring in time, interest, social needs, privacy, lifestyle, and well-being considerations, people may thus take shorter breaks or revisit their social media use rather than disconnect permanently. Thus, digital disconnection involves personal attitudes and experiences, experiences with platform and device-specific features (e.g., Facebook vs. Twitter; mobile vs. desktop), the social environment, and one's situational life contexts. Overall, this implies that digital well-being scholarship should consider people's perceived benefits and drawbacks, as well as reasons for people's uses and non-uses, of which the latter can range from permanent disconnection to more subtle strategies to manage one's digital media use (Light & Cassidy, 2014; Nguyen, 2021). Only then can we obtain a full understanding of the complex relationship many hold with digital media in today's digital society.

The findings imply that in addition to studying people's direct experiences with digital platforms and devices, one should also consider the broader situational life context in which people's disconnection attempts take place. People may decide to change their social media behavior as they go through important life transitions, such as becoming a parent or taking a new job. Such experiences may be more typical for this age group than for adolescents or older populations wanting to change or limit their social media use. Similarly, in regard to older adults' technology disconnection experiences, research has shown that while their motivations for disconnection are largely similar to those that studies on younger populations have identified, there are some factors that are specific to their life stage that explain why they disconnect or take up other technologies (e.g., social influences of children and grandchildren, retirement; Nguyen, Hargittai, Fuchs, Djukaric, & Hunsaker, 2021). A life-span approach to understanding how people connect and disconnect from technology over the course of their lives (Ganito & Jorge, 2017) by examining and comparing people of various ages in their disconnection experiences could be a promising area for future research.

This study also has limitations that deserve consideration. For the sample, I recruited for people who had either stopped using social media or had taken

a break from it at least once. While I managed to gather a sample of users and non-users with varying social media and disconnection experiences, I likely attracted people who had very consciously disconnected and potentially missed those who regularly disconnect without thinking about it deliberately. Moreover, this study solely focused on adults between the ages of 21 and 39, but other populations such as teens and older adults may experience social media disconnection differently (Nguyen et al., 2021). In addition to age, it may also be worthwhile to examine the role of other demographics such as gender (Franks, Chenhall, & Keogh, 2018b), race, education level and job type, in people's disconnection experiences. Overall, future research should further explore people's disconnection behaviors in more representative samples.

Another limitation relates to the mode of interviewing. Most interviews were conducted over the phone, which does not allow for the researcher to gauge facial expressions and body language, as in-person interviews can. While I did not have the impression that this hampered my understanding of the experiences that people shared, it remains important to keep this in mind. Finally, it is worth noting that in translating interviews to another language, there is always the risk of losing the original meaning of people's narratives. As a native speaker in the language in which the interviews were conducted, I carefully considered this to avoid any loss of meaning at any stage as best as possible. During the analysis phase, I frequently returned to the original transcriptions and case summaries to ensure that I accurately reflected people's experiences. With these precautions, I believe that loss of meaning in the translation, coding, and analysis process was minimized.

Conclusion

This study explores the reasons and motivations for why people disconnect from social media, as well as the challenges they face in doing so. In-depth interviews with current and former social media users reveal that they disconnect for various reasons that are explained by platform-related features and content, social influences, and situational life context. Notably, disconnection is not always a response to negative experiences with social media (e.g., overload and overuse, privacy concerns, declined well-being) but can also be triggered by important life transitions (e.g., becoming a parent, entering a romantic relationship) or broader lifestyle choices. While disconnection experiences vary greatly across individuals, this study shows that people's social media experiences and motivations to disconnect may also change within individuals over time, highlighting the importance of longitudinal studies in this area. By providing an overview of the motivations and challenges when disconnecting from social media, this study offers methodological guidance to future research that aims to investigate people's digital disconnection experiences, such as through survey research. More specifically, such

studies could examine how prevalent the motivations for disconnection and experienced challenges in doing so are in society (e.g., Nguyen, Büchi, & Geber, 2022), and how they continue to evolve over time. A next step could be to examine how these motivations and challenges may relate to people's disconnection practices, and the benefits that people derive from such deliberate media disengagement (e.g., in terms of well-being, productivity). Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of people's ever-evolving uses and perceptions of social media in a time where digital media is omnipresent.

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ORCID

Minh Hao Nguyen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8750-3492>

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