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Mapping the discourse on digital disconnection: a computational analysis on #disconnection Instagram posts from 2018 to 2023

Sarah Geber , Sina Horner, Tilia Ellendorff , and Minh Hao Nguyen 

ABSTRACT

Digital disconnection—the deliberate and temporal nonuse of digital media—is gaining traction as a response to the challenges of permanent connectivity in digital society. We examined the discourse on digital disconnection on Instagram using posts tagged with #disconnection from 2018 to 2023, encompassing the significant period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing from a dataset of 38,170 posts on digital disconnection and using a data-driven method of topic modeling (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) based on the hashtags, we identified five topics in the social media discourse around digital disconnection. The topics highlight how disconnection is negotiated as a pathway to authentic experiences in connection with the world outside and with oneself.

KEYWORDS

Digital disconnection; permanent connectivity; digital media use; Instagram; topic modeling

Digital media affords users the ability to be permanently online and permanently connected (POPC; Vorderer et al., 2017). This does not only imply opportunities but also confronts people with challenges associated with permanent use, such as reduced psychological well-being (e.g., in the form of stress; Freytag et al., 2021) and decreased productivity (e.g., Meier et al., 2023). Therefore, the idea to deliberately and temporarily disconnect from digital media is becoming more popular in society (Nassen et al., 2023, Nguyen, 2021), and the term “digital disconnection” is gaining traction in the public discourse (Moe & Madsen, 2021). As such, digital disconnection is also a prominent topic on social media, particularly on Instagram (Jorge, 2019). The fact that users discuss the topic of digital disconnection while being online and connected with others reflects the paradoxical relationship they have with the ubiquitous connectivity in their everyday lives (Agai & Vitak, 2022; Hesselberth, 2018; Vanden Abeele, 2021).

Against this background, social media discourses are particularly informative for understanding digital disconnection. They show what topics the users themselves associate with digital disconnection and thus provide authentic insights into contexts and motivations. At the same time, they reveal how

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social media users negotiate digital disconnection as inherent part of their digital lifestyle. There is surprisingly little research dedicated to the social media discourse on digital disconnection. One exception is a qualitative study of the disconnection discourse on Instagram of Jorge (2019). While this study provides important insights, it considered—due to its qualitative nature—only a limited sample of #disconnection posts, and, more importantly, was conducted 6 years ago (i.e., in 2018). In the meantime, the discourse around disconnection has likely developed and changed, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when many turned to digital media to remain in touch (Nguyen et al., 2020). There is a need for large-scale, quantitative research to examine the broader coverage of digital disconnection on social media. Such an approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dominant topics in public discourse and, from a media effects perspective, offer first insights into how this discourse may influence the formation of (conflicting) social norms surrounding digital dis/connectivity (Geber et al., 2024).

We aim to provide a quantitative analysis of the discourse on digital disconnection on the social media platform Instagram over a five-year period (i.e., 2018–2023) applying a computational approach. We refer to Instagram for two main reasons: First, although Facebook remains the most widely used social media platform globally (Statista, 2025), Instagram is more popular among younger adults (Pew Research Center, 2024), who are generally more concerned with the question of digital disconnection (Nguyen & Hargittai, 2023). Second, Instagram's affordances—particularly the use of hashtags—are similar to those on other platforms like TikTok, enabling users to categorize and find content and thereby contribute to topic-related discourses. Our goal is to identify and map the topics that are associated with disconnection on Instagram and that reflect different contexts and motivations of digital disconnection. We thereby pay special attention to changes in the discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Topics around disconnection

Digital disconnection refers to “a deliberate form of non-use” of digital media “with the aim of restoring or improving one's perceived overuse, social interactions, psychological well-being, productivity, privacy and/or perceived usefulness” (Nassen et al., 2023, p. 1). The social media discourse on digital disconnection offers unique insights into how users navigate disconnection as an inherent part of their digital lives (Jorge, 2019). While there is substantial survey research on individual motivations to disconnect (Nassen et al., 2023), the present study approaches social media users as a community to learn how they collectively engage with digital disconnection. This approach is particularly relevant from a media

effects perspective, as social media discourse conveys normative messages of “what is done” and “what should be done” and likely influences other users’ attitudes and normative perceptions of digital disconnection (Geber & Hefner, 2019).

The qualitative study of Jorge (2019) explicitly examined the discourse around digital disconnection on social media and provides initial insights. This study uncovered three topics of the discourse about disconnection on Instagram. The first and predominant topic on Instagram captured the motivations to disconnect and reveals how users disconnect temporarily to regain control over time, social relationships, and well-being. The second topic went beyond reflecting on the motivations of digital disconnection to convincing others to look for offline experiences. A third, significant group of posts referred to disconnection as a lifestyle choice, with products and practices standing between the offline and online world. This reveals how digital disconnection is increasingly reintegrated as lifestyle choice and that this is done sometimes “in cynical and ironic ways” (Jorge, 2019, p. 1).

While these qualitative insights are valuable, systematic reviews show that current disconnection research lacks quantitative and longitudinal analyses of the discourse around digital disconnection on social media (Altmaier et al., 2024, Nassen et al., 2023). With our study, we aim to detect the topics that users construct when they discuss digital disconnection on social media by applying a computational approach to a data set of posts tagged with #disconnection. Our first research question is:

RQ1: Which topics are associated with digital disconnection posts on Instagram?

Covid-19 as a significant time of (dis)connection

Social media discourses are continuously created and updated by users (Highfield & Leaver, 2015). When it comes to digital disconnection, specifically the Covid-19 pandemic presents a caesura (Nguyen & Hargittai, 2023) which likely has affected the discourse around digital disconnection and might have changed the agenda of topics associated with digital disconnection. The closing of public spaces and stay-at-home guidelines during pandemic led to the reorganization of substantial parts of everyday life through the use of digital media; encompassing information, work, leisure, and social connection (Nguyen et al., 2021). Digital media therefore offered the opportunity to continue important aspects of daily life that would otherwise not have been possible. At the same time, people felt overwhelmed by the abundance of information and the high amount of digital communication in the professional and private domain (Nguyen et al., 2021). This fundamental shift in the

organization of everyday life toward digital solutions may have had an impact on the discourse on digital disconnection.

Complementing the aforementioned study by Jorge (2019) that was conducted before the Covid-19 pandemic, we aim to learn how social media discourse of digital disconnection has changed over time and, especially, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our second research question therefore is:

RQ2: How have the topics of digital disconnection developed over the last five years (i.e., 2018–2023)? Which role has the Covid-19 pandemic played in this regard?

Methods

To answer these questions, we examined posts on digital disconnection on Instagram over a span of 5 years, that is, from July 1, 2018, to July 1, 2023, including the Covid-19 pandemic. The goal of our analysis was to identify the topics that form around digital disconnection. To this end, the analysis is based on all hashtags associated with posts related to digital disconnection (cf., Loukianov et al. (2023) for the analysis of #goodlife hashtags). Hashtags have a unique status as they function as linguistic markers and hyperlinks (Giaxoglou, 2018; Zappavigna, 2015). As linguistic markers, hashtags contribute to the establishment of a “folksonomy”—a term made up of the words folk and taxonomy, reflecting the collective social organization of content at a metadata level (Highfield & Leaver, 2015). As hyperlinks, they facilitate users’ engagement with content and “weave together connected and unconnected narratives” (Giaxoglou, 2018, p. 13). Analyzing hashtags related to digital disconnection thus reveals how social media users collectively structure this concept providing an insight into *their* understanding.

Because of disabled access to Instagram’s API and restrictions in alternative ways of scraping data (McCrow-Young, 2021), we followed the approach of other computational Instagram studies (e.g., Chinn et al., 2023) and used CrowdTangle to sample the relevant Instagram posts, a tool provided by Meta (i.e., Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit). We collected the data in July 2023 (as of August 14, 2024, Meta has closed CrowdTangle).

As a starting point of the sampling procedure, we used the same seed hashtags as Jorge (2019), that is, #disconnect, #digitaldetox, #offline, and #unplug. To further account for the user perspective, we identified the 10 most co-occurrent hashtags of these seed hashtags: “#scrollless,” “#disconnect-toreconnect,” “#digitalwellbeing,” “#screenlifebalance,” “#digitalminimalism,” “#phonebreakup,” “#switchoff,” “#socialmediafast,” “#phonedetox,” and “#howtobreakupwithyourphone.” We used both—the seed and most popular co-occurrent hashtags—as sampling hashtags. This resulted in a sample of

75,851 Instagram posts. We downloaded the posts from CrowdTangle in a csv-file including information about the username, the date of post creation, interactions (likes, comments, and views), and text (including description and hashtags). For data cleansing, we did not filter out bot or brand accounts, as they also contribute to the discourse on digital disconnection; however, we removed duplicates of posts (often generated by bots) so that exactly identical posts are only included once. Furthermore, we removed posts that did not contain at least one of the initial seed hashtags or any hashtags at all. This resulted in a final sample of 38,170 posts.

In preparation for the topic modeling, we removed the original sampling hashtags from the final text to ensure that these pre-selected hashtags would not determine the topic modeling process, as the goal was to identify the topics that form *around* them. We preprocessed the text (i.e., the hashtags) by applying tokenization (i.e., splitting the text into words) and removing punctuation as well as symbols and separators. Furthermore, we lower-cased all tokens. We used Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) as topic modeling technique as this turned out to provide the most interpretable and reliable solution for the text type at hand (i.e., text consisting of hashtags) compared to other techniques such as structural topic modeling. To determine the optimal number of topics, we referred to a set of multiple evaluation metrics¹ (Murzintcev & Chaney, 2020), which suggested a range of four to six topics for closer analysis. We finally opted for the five-topic solution based on a combination of interpretability of the word lists (according to our qualitative interpretation) and fit statistics, specifically, coherence and perplexity scores across the different solutions (Ying et al., 2022).

The stability of topic assignments was evaluated through repeated LDA runs ($n = 200$), with the final five-topic model (seed 46) showing an average similarity of 0.15 ($SD = 0.016$; 95% CI [0.118, 0.174]) to the replications. These values indicate moderate topic stability, suggesting that 15% of top words remain consistently assigned across model runs. While this indicates some variability in exact topic compositions, the key thematic structure emerged consistently. Topic names were first derived from analyzing the most prominent hashtags associated with each topic. As an additional step to validate our interpretations, we reviewed a sample of posts from each topic to ensure that the meanings inferred from the hashtags were consistent with the content and context of the posts themselves. All analyses were performed in the software environment R. The data set, a set of sample posts for each topic, and the R script are available here: <https://researchbox.org/3912>.

Results

Regarding *RQ1*, the topic model reveals five topics that focus on different aspects of the discourse around digital disconnection (Figure 1). Topic 1

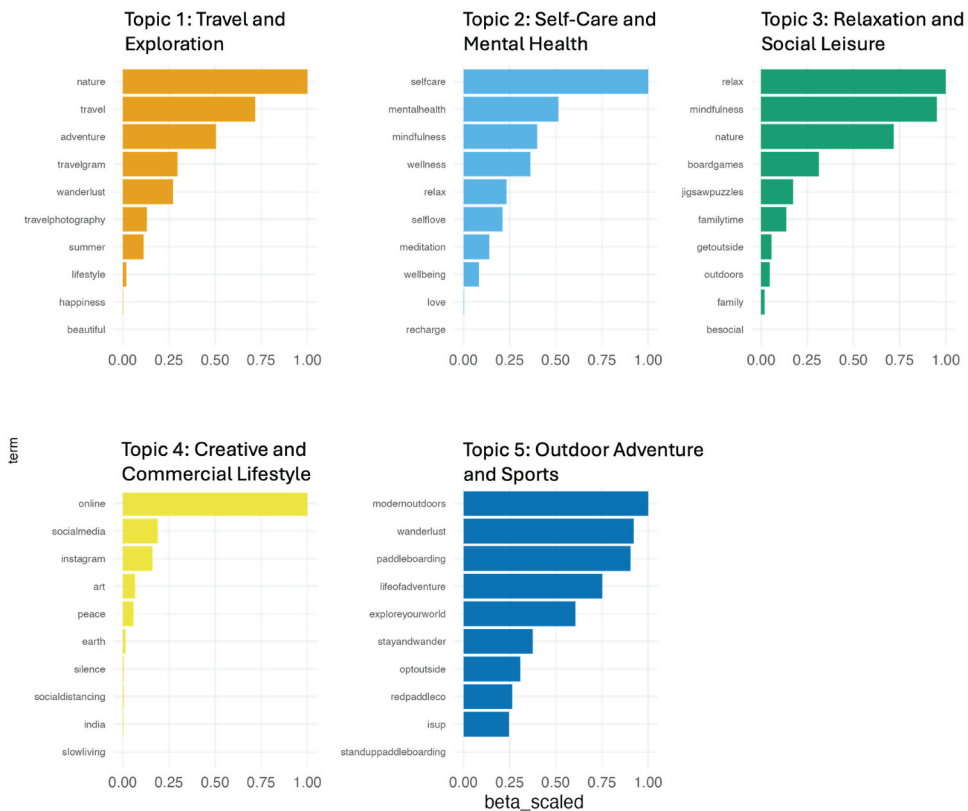


Figure 1. Topics of the disconnection discourse on Instagram from 2018–2023. $N = 38170$ Instagram posts including at least one of the sampling hashtags (e.g., #disconnect); Latent Dirichlet Allocation.

“*Travel and Exploration*” refers to hashtags such as “#nature,” “#travel,” and “#wanderlust” and thereby reflects a desire to explore nature and new places. Topic 2 “*Self-Care and Mental Health*” is centered around personal well-being, selfcare, and mental health with most important hashtags like “#selfcare,” “#mentalhealth,” and “#mindfulness.” Topic 3 is labeled “*Relaxation and Social Leisure*”; hashtags like “#relax” on the one hand and “#boardgames” or “#familytime” on the other hand show that this topic represents relaxation and spending time with relevant others. Topic 4 combines hashtags such as “#online” and “#social media” as well as “#art,” “#silence” and “#peace” suggesting that digital disconnection is related to a lifestyle centered around content creation and contemplation that is realized online. The review of the sample posts further suggests that this topic also includes a commercial component with companies and content creators promoting their (offline and online) services, products, or creative content, therefore we labeled the topic “*Creative and Commercial Lifestyle*.” Topic 5 “*Outdoor Adventure and Sports*” shares with the first topic the orientation toward outside;

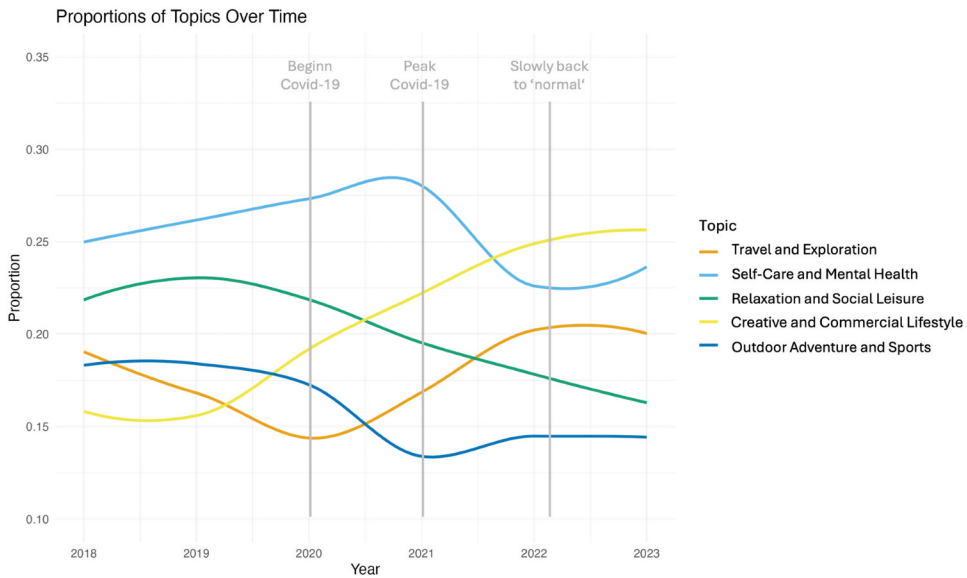


Figure 2. Proportional development of topics of the disconnection discourse on Instagram from 2018–2023. $N = 38170$ Instagram posts including at least one of the sampling hashtags (e.g., #disconnect); Latent Dirichlet Allocation. The critical pandemic phases marked on the chart represent simplified reference points of global trends of the virus spread and measures implemented.

complementary, however, it focuses on outdoor adventures and sport as indicated by hashtags such as “#modernoutdoors,” “#paddelboarding,” and “#lifeofadventure.”

Concerning the development of the disconnection discourse, as inquired in RQ2, Figure 2 reveals the relative frequency of the topics over time and highlights some interesting differences across the topics. The most striking difference is the one between “*Travel and Exploration*” and “*Outdoor Adventure and Sports*” on the one hand and “*Self-Care and Mental Health*” on the other hand. The latter topic on mental self-care clearly dominated the disconnection discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic, the former ones on traveling and outdoor adventure experienced a decline in relative frequency during the pandemic. While the topic on traveling has been re-gaining significance since then, the topic on outdoor adventure has remained on a low level. The topic “*Creative and Commercial Lifestyle*” has become more prevalent over the course of the 5 years, with a boost during the Covid-19 pandemic. Complementary, the topic of “*Relaxation and Social Leisure*” has constantly decreased in relative frequency over the 5 years.

Discussion

This study shows that the discourse around digital disconnection on the social media platform Instagram is manifold and refers to various aspects of digital disconnection. Furthermore, the topic-related context of discussions around digital disconnection has changed during the last 5 years, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, the five topics reveal that digital disconnection is regarded as a shift in focus concerning time and attention—a shift toward exploring the nature and the world (Topic 1) and spending more time outside (Topic 5). This is also framed as a possibility to find relaxation (Topic 3). It is striking that across these topics, “#nature” and “#outdoors” are re-occurring hashtags. This finding echoes earlier qualitative work. For instance, Jorge (2019) revealed that disconnection often involves the imagery of nature. Building on the reflections of Syvertsen and Enli (2020), nature seems to symbolize the idea of authenticity in a digital life—the quality of being genuine and real and remaining true to oneself, as opposed to being fake and unreal and adjusting to external expectations or pressures.

While these topics represent disconnection as a reconnection with the world outside, the topic analysis reveals that digital disconnection implies reconnecting with oneself for selfcare and mental health as well, as highlighted in Topic 2. This echoes the prevailing idea in scholarship and the public that digital disconnection is a prerequisite to balance and maintain (digital) well-being (Büchi, 2021; Vanden Abeele et al., 2024). Comparably, Jorge (2019) found that digital disconnection is framed as an attempt to find the place of social media in a life with well-being.

This differentiation between topics that represent reconnection with the world outside and oneself is well reflected in the development of topics over time. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the idea of reconnecting with the world outside (i.e., Topics 1 and 5) has lost importance in terms of relative frequency. At the same time, the idea of reconnecting with oneself in favor of self-care and mental health has gained in traction. There might be two reasons for this shift in the discourse: first, traveling and outdoor adventures were not possible at that time because of public health regulations; second, the heightened pressure for being online and connected in different domains in everyday life (Nguyen & Hargittai, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2021) might have led to a perceived imbalance in relation to digital connectivity and thus to the wish to increase digital well-being.

There is one topic that stands out and in which the ambivalence of digital (dis)connection becomes particularly obvious. Topic 4 explicitly refers to a creative lifestyle cultivated online which is linked to the experience and expression of art, peace, and silence. This might indicate that the online space provides a unique space for experiencing creativity and contemplation. In this context, disconnection may not necessarily mean a temporary withdrawal

from the digital world. Rather, it can be seen as a conscious step back from the pressures of daily life to use the resources of social media and engage in moments of creative presence (Wolfers & Utz, 2022). At the same time, creativity within this context appears to carry a commercial dimension, as artists, coaches, and content creators use social media to promote their services, products, and content. Interestingly, this topic is still gaining in traction which might indicate the increasing integration of digital disconnection into a POPC lifestyle.

The paradoxical relationship media users have with digital disconnection is also reflected in the methodological approach of our study. The study is based on the discourse of social media users on digital disconnection and thereby does not present the discourses of those who have radically disconnected from digital media (Hesselberth, 2018). However, it does present the relationship that most people have with digital media as many do not radically disconnect for valid reasons (Nguyen, 2023). Even if this discourse is performative rather than rooted in actual experiences of disconnection, it still shapes attitudes and social norms around digital disconnection in society, making it a valuable subject of study. To deepen our understanding of digital disconnection as both a practice and a discourse, future research could aim to distinguish user-generated content from automated or commercial sources (like bots and brand accounts) and compare the online narratives of social media users and those who have fully disconnected.

Moreover, we acknowledge certain limitations of a hashtag-based approach, as some topics may be more prominently expressed in images or captions rather than in hashtags. Similarly, topic interpretation might benefit from a more in-depth analysis of individual posts. Therefore, future work might combine topic modeling with qualitative content analysis to delve deeper into how such hashtags are used and understood in context. Nevertheless, the widespread use of hashtags on Instagram and their metadiscursive function (Giaxoglou, 2018) resulting in a “hyperlink infrastructure” (Loukianov et al., 2023) suggest that the topics emerging from hashtags are worthy of investigation.

Finally, the overlap between certain topics (e.g., #nature) reflects the interconnected character of hashtag usage. Based on the stability metrics and the coherent thematic structure, this model provides a foundation for further analyses, while acknowledging the inherent fluidity of hashtag-based topic modeling. Future analyses may apply a comparative multi-platform approach to analyze differences in the discourse across platforms that are hashtag-organized, such as TikTok.

Overall, our computational analysis of digital disconnection posts reveals that, given the challenges of time and attention displacement in a POPC society, disconnection is negotiated as a pathway to authentic experiences in connection with the world outside and with oneself.

Note

1. i.e., Griffiths 2004, Cao Juan 2009, Arun 2010, and Deveaud 2014.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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