



# Disconnectivity synced with identity cultivation: adolescent narratives of digital disconnection

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## Abstract

This article elucidates adolescent digital disconnection through the lens of narrative identity development to answer the research question: “How do adolescent disconnection experiences play into ongoing identity development processes?” The study draws from qualitative interviews with 17 Norwegian adolescents. The findings indicate that adolescents are ambivalent about their relationships with social networking sites, producing ripple effects on their motivation and disconnection practices. The findings are explained through the cultivation of narrative identity. Thus, this article proposes that adolescent digital disconnection is aligned with identity formation, reflected in narrative themes and corresponding features. By detailing how ongoing identity construction processes underpin the *need and ability to disconnect*, this article contributes a developmental perspective to the digital disconnection literature.

## Lay Summary

Adolescents only know a connected world, but they admit that they disconnect from the disadvantages of constant connectivity. This study offers an inside perspective regarding the *what*, *why*, and *how* of digital disconnection. The findings illustrate that some adolescents “log off” spontaneously to recover from the emotional distress triggered by social media, while others endeavor to reduce their screen time in favor of personal growth. These differences seem to sync with the question, “Who am I really?” Adolescents with a sense of identity can better withstand pressure from peers to stay online, choosing disconnection or connection independently rather than because of their peers.

**Keywords:** digital disconnection, social networking sites, adolescence, psychosocial development, narrative identity

Adolescents in contemporary societies come of age in a media-saturated reality, with social networking sites (SNSs) integrated into their everyday lives (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Accordingly, contemporary media scholars have discussed the close alignment between the affordances of SNSs and the developmental needs of adolescents (Palfrey & Gasser, 2016), arguing that new online spaces have engendered opportunities for adolescents to embark on the constructive journey of identity formation (boyd, 2008). Based on the salience of identity formation in adolescence (Erikson, 1968), the concept of identity is an important foundation from which to examine adolescents’ attraction to SNSs (boyd, 2008; Singer, 2020).

Although adolescents are intertwined with connected media, they also express that connectivity has disadvantages that they would like to mitigate (Neves et al., 2015). Experiences of ambivalence toward connected media represent a key finding in studies emerging from the growing field of digital disconnection research, which applies different levels of analysis to investigate the causes, implications, and reactions to the connectivity norm of contemporary societies (Hesselberth, 2017; Syvertsen, 2020). This article focuses on the user perspective and on voluntary changes in users’ relationships with online media. These changes commonly encompass various practices, such as switching to flight mode, deleting apps, and implementing comprehensive lifestyle changes (Brennen, 2019; Syvertsen, 2020). Adolescent digital disconnection now likely extends beyond attempts to disconnect from SNSs. Nevertheless, this article focuses on this specific aspect of the online realm because empirical data—my own as well as

others’—has revealed that conflicting experiences related to SNSs tend to surface as primary reasons for the relevance of disconnection among young people.

Identity negotiations are an established topic within disconnection research focusing on adults, both as a theoretical interest (Markham, 2021), as an explanation behind motivations to engage in disconnection practices (Portwood-Stacer, 2013), and as part of analytical frameworks (Tiidenberg et al., 2017). These works suggest that disconnection can be understood as a performative practice that involves expressing aspects of one’s identity (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Another recurring phenomenon in the scholarly literature concerns how continuous connectivity induces conflicting needs as connectivity norms coincide with needs for self-restriction, leaving users mired in a state of digital ambivalence (Baym et al., 2020; Syvertsen, 2020; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020).

Digital ambivalence is most likely challenging for media users regardless of age. Regardless, digital ambivalence might particularly apply to adolescents who are deeply immersed in the online realm and who jeopardize their access to important spaces of identity construction and social relationship management by disconnecting. In this manner, ambivalence can potentially serve as a sensitizing concept that can elucidate the intersection between identity formation and disconnection, and thereby how disconnection might manifest differently among adolescents.

Given how much has been written about young people’s connected lives, it is remarkable how little is known about

adolescent practices of digital disconnection. Furthermore, the particular life phase of adolescents appears to warrant a stronger focus on the cultivation of identity and disconnection, and not solely on the enactment of identity through disconnection practices. A relevant point of inquiry thus concerns whether an identity cultivation perspective may prove valuable in understanding disconnectivity practices.

This article rests on the premise that adolescence is an age of becoming. To access such processual aspects of identity, this article elucidates adolescent digital disconnection through the conceptual lens of identity development, mainly represented by narrative approaches (McAdams, 1985), which is especially suitable for describing identity *cultivation*. The article thereby addresses the following research question: “How do adolescent disconnection experiences play into ongoing identity development processes?” The analysis draws from in-depth interviews with Norwegian adolescents. As a highly advanced digital country where digital and online media are deeply intertwined in daily life (Brandtzaeg & Haugstveit, 2014), Norway presents an interesting context for research on adolescent digital disconnection.

As presented by McAdams (1985), narrative identity theory posits that individuals construct their identities by incorporating significant autobiographical memories into an internalized and evolving story that provides a sense of inner sameness and continuity, aiding in answering the question “who am I?” Key aspects of individuals’ current identities can be revealed by studying how people relay their life stories and connect past events in a coherent storyline. Accordingly, narratives are often examined to evaluate how and to what extent they contain various markers of identity processes.

This theory provides both vocabulary and sensitizing concepts to understand why digital disconnection is particularly challenging for adolescents. One such concept is turning points, which refer to life experiences that individuals attribute to changes in behavior and attitudes. Considering leaving a sphere where friends are located is perceived as a critical juncture in identity formation. In this article, I therefore first argue that digital disconnection is a turning point for adolescents. Additionally, the theory provides analytic tools to examine how adolescents’ disconnection experiences might be embedded in their ongoing identity cultivation process. It does so by calling attention to granular details of young people’s narratives of disconnection, focusing on how they construct a story rather than what they explicitly share.

In this manner, the theory transcends the explicit, instead examining the process of articulations and focusing on markers that signify identity negotiations. Second, I therefore argue that the way in which informants handle the challenge of disconnection can indicate ongoing identity processes, specifically emphasizing *how* they construct ambivalent experiences in a narrative form. In my study, I thus utilize narrative identity theory both as a theoretical framework and as an analytical approach to understand how the informants’ narratives regarding digital disconnection are embedded in ongoing identity processes.

The following section presents previous research concerning digital disconnection and the adjacent literature regarding adolescent media use and developmental processes. It then presents the theoretical framework, including key principles of narrative identity theory. Following a presentation of the empirical approach, the analysis illustrates how informants’ sentiments regarding ambivalence, motivation, and

disconnection practices correspond to narrative themes and features that support adaptive identity formation. Finally, the article concludes with closing remarks about how disconnection among adolescents relates to narrative identity formation, offering suggestions for future research.

## Theoretical framework

### Digital disconnection, adolescent development, and digital media use

Discourses regarding digital disconnection that challenge the conceptual normalization of connectivity and problematize the implications of mediated everyday life have gained momentum in several realms of society. Expressions of disconnection in scholarship have taken on different forms, with critical voices framing disconnection as a societal dilemma (Syvertsen, 2020), as a political movement (Casemajor et al., 2015; Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019), as mindful connectedness (Baym et al., 2020), as the daily management of connectivity (Ytre-Arne, et al., 2020), as practices of performative lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer, 2013), and as distinction (Fast et al., 2021).

Amidst the broader “disconnection turn” (Fast, 2021) and the field’s growing horizon (see Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021), the phenomenon has been the subject of empirical interest, and questions have been raised about media users’ daily management of disconnection as an inextricable aspect of connectivity (Paasonen et al., 2015). Accordingly, scholarship regarding what drives media users to disconnect has revealed that motivations for disconnection are manyfold (Baumer et al., 2015; Syvertsen, 2020) and that practices assume different forms ranging from lifestyle changes to tactical acts (Gangneux, 2021).

There are clear indications that identity negotiations are a salient topic in research on digital disconnection among adults. For example, Portwood-Stacer (2013) stated that resistance to Facebook is a performative practice that expresses one’s political identity. Similarly, Kaun and Treré (2020) presented digital disconnection as a lifestyle performance in their articulation of a typology of disconnection activism. Underlining the process leading to mobile phone non-use, Rosenberg and Vogelmann-Natan (2022) depict how ideological refusers’ disconnection practices are intentionally performed and constituent of a non-consumption identity-building process.

Similarly, Beattie and Cassidy (2021) also note that practices of disconnection serve as a means for the “bourgeoisie” to distinguish themselves from others. Disconnection has also been proposed to be a component of representing oneself on social media, and it has been portrayed as embedded in one’s lifestyle, as Ana Jorge (2019) demonstrated in her analysis of Instagram posts on disconnection. Rather than focusing on the performativity of disconnection, in her proposed theory of social echolocation, Markham elaborates upon how the echoing response to our online presence deeply influences our self-identity, stressing that a lack of responses to interpersonal interactions online potentially creates ontological insecurity (Markham, 2021).

While these works on identity and disconnection do not necessarily concern adolescents, but rather young adults, they provide insights regarding how social identity pertains to disconnection. Although the literature can aid in informing

studies with adolescents, disconnection may manifest differently in this group precisely because adolescents are more likely to be in a life phase where identity cultivation assumes an even more prominent position. Empirical research that foregrounds adolescent identity formation and related developmental needs is limited in the disconnection literature. However, this does not mean that the topic is not discussed, as exceptions exist, such as a study of digital-free travel among adolescents (Floros et al., 2019). Additionally, drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical perspective of social life and "the arts of impression management," Neves et al. (2015) observed that the rejection of SNSs was related to constructing and expressing identities, thus signaling specific identity and lifestyle choices.

Additionally, concepts emerging from the disconnection literature, such as digital ambivalence, can arguably shed light on the connection between adolescent disconnectivity and identity formation. Although not explicated in scholarly literature, digital ambivalence illuminates the inverse aspects of the natural flow of information that characterizes adolescent culture and the costs of the immediate gratification of relational needs facilitated by SNSs. For example, digital ambivalence encompasses relatively new concepts that describe a well-known phenomenon in the lives of adolescents, such as the fear of missing out (FOMO), which is "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having a rewarding experience from which one is absent" (Przybylski et al., 2013, p. 1841).

Moreover, other scholarly contributions emphasize self-control processes, highlighting the friction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations in mobile communication (Halfmann, 2021). One extrinsic factor is young people's coping with peer pressure to avoid being socially sanctioned (Riesmeyer et al., 2021). Unease triggered by digital media is also identified in phubbing research, in which young people defy their moral convictions (Aagaard, 2019). Furthermore, scholars have stressed the importance of being aware of children and adolescents' daily management of data overload, pointing primarily to adolescent efforts and competencies to balance their digital diets—managing the coexistence of "noise" from social media and the tendency to be glued to their mobile phone (Garmendia et al., 2017).

Compared to the sparse literature regarding adolescent disconnectivity and the identity construct, there is a large body of research concerning adolescent development and digital media use. Previous literature has identified how adolescents shape the affordances of mobile media technology to align with their developmental needs (Vanden Abeele, 2016), including perpetual contact as a means of relationship formation and group belonging, universality allowing autonomy, and the freedom to personalize space and social networks (Vanden Abeele, 2016). Furthermore, by exploring the communicative affordances of smartphones, Mascheroni and Vincent (2016) have discussed how enhanced opportunities for communication with peers enable agency, allowing proximity, intimacy, and belonging while simultaneously constraining agency, inducing anxiety and insecurity. In addition, Schnauber-Stockmann et al. (2021) adopted an agentic perspective that holds that mobile media is vital for establishing new relationships through self-socialization processes in which adolescents co-create their own socialization. Furthermore, mobile media promotes self-disclosure and perpetual contact (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009), which are essential adolescent needs.

Hence, these lines of research outline a picture in which the link between identity and adolescent connectivity is prominent, while digital ambivalence is potentially more challenging for adolescents. However, the discussion has not applied an identity cultivation perspective to adolescents' disconnection experiences. Rather than examining self-representation or ontological uncertainty related to disconnection, this article attempts to aid in initiating and engaging this discussion by more closely examining how digital disconnection is embedded in young people's identity *cultivation* over time and thereby exploring the process of disconnection rather than the *performativity* of disconnection. Narrative identity theory is particularly relevant in this endeavor because it lends itself well to a cultivation approach to studying disconnection among adolescents by providing a perspective on transitions and the meaning-making mediating such transitions.

### Narrative identity theory

Within the psychological discipline, the notion that identity is constructed through storytelling has been a topic of interest for decades (McAdams, 2001). Narrative approaches to identity maintain that individuals construct their identities by incorporating significant autobiographical memories into an internalized and evolving story that provides a sense of inner sameness and continuity, aiding in answering the question of "who one is" (McAdams, 1985, 2018). This process of retrospective self-reflection and of integrating the vicissitudes of life into a coherent narrative has also been referred to as autobiographic reasoning (Habermas & Köber, 2014), originally argued to confer upon the individual in adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

Empirically, researchers interested in identity narratives might ask participants to share significant autobiographic memories, such as turning points in their lives, and then to code these accounts according to certain narrative features, categorized into *constellations*, that are presumed to reflect ongoing identity construction processes (McLean et al., 2020). In a recent study, McLean et al. (2020) presented three such constellations: affective themes, motivational themes, and autobiographical reasoning, respectively.

The first constellation is affective themes, which encompasses the role of emotions in the overall tone or components of the narrative. This constellation includes themes such as redemption, which refers to stories that progress from negative beginnings to positive endings and that convey a sense of emotional resolution or closure (McAdams et al., 1997). For example, an event can be perceived as negative but may represent a positive life change in the long term. However, as McLean et al. (2020, p. 42) stated, "To really redeem a negative event requires some reasoning." Therefore, redemption sequences necessitate a self-distanced perspective on the narrator's behalf (Kross et al., 2005), as opposed to a self-immersed perspective that complicates reconstruction and closure related to the past event (Römisich et al., 2014).

Second, the motivational constellation concerns goal orientation. A common construct of this constellation is *agency*, which refers to the autonomy and motivation to influence one's own life. Highly agentic narratives describe protagonists who can initiate change in their lives, to some extent controlling the course of their experiences. In contrast, less agentic narratives describe powerlessness at the mercy of circumstances (McLean et al., 2020).

Third, the autobiographical constellation of narratives concerns variations in the narrator's exploration, with reflections

and sense-making regarding their experiences and sense of self. A regular structure within this constellation is *meaning-making*, which refers to a reflective process that involves making sense of and connecting past events to the self to establish temporal continuity. In addition, meaning-making often refers to the narrators' experience of growth in self-understanding (McLean et al., 2020).

In their overview of different factors that affect identity development, especially narrative identity, Granic et al. (2020) highlight the balancing act between agency and communion needs for optimal development at an intrapersonal level. In early adolescence, the need for social acceptance and belonging precedes personal psychological needs. During adolescence, however, agency becomes more critical to assert as the adolescent reflects and attempts to act following their values. Gradually, the needs of the agency and communion will be equally valued, with the goal of achieving a relative balance between them and the emergence of coherence of their narrative identity.

In the context of digital dis/connection, these intrapersonal identity processes will potentially be both actualized and opposed. Communion needs that young people fulfill by engaging in social media are challenged by a need for distance from the same platforms and a desire for disconnection. The cultural norm among peers, namely the master narrative, is challenged by an alternative narrative that is more compatible with young people's personal values. In this context, disconnection can be viewed as values and needs that do not fit the master narrative of connectedness, wherein the individual adopts an alternative narrative.

In the following analysis, some of these theoretical links, as identified by Granic et al. (2020), are illustrated through the youths' articulations of their disconnection experiences to demonstrate how these are embedded in their ongoing identity cultivation processes. First, their redemptive sentiments are illustrated through their retelling of ambivalence. Their experiences of the agent resisting the pressure of connectivity are exemplified by their motivations for engaging in disconnection. Finally, their efforts to draw meaningful connections between disconnection practices and self-development illustrate meaning-making and the informants' experiences of narrative coherence.

## Methods

This study's purpose is to examine adolescents' subjective experiences and reflections on disconnectivity. The analysis draws on empirical material collected via in-depth qualitative interviews, of which the selection process was guided by a broad inclusion criterion that reads as follows: "adolescents in upper secondary school who had either considered or engaged in practices of disconnection from online and digital media."

The informants were initially recruited from four public schools in different districts surrounding a Norwegian city to achieve diversity in the demographic variables. Information about the study was disseminated through an online learning platform and, in some cases, a school social media account. Due to a school closure to reduce the transmission of the coronavirus, informants were also later recruited through personal networks and snowballing. The overall sample included 17 adolescents, including four males and 13 females, all

between 16 and 19 years old, and predominantly from an urban middle-class background.

The interviews were conducted following the recommendations and restrictions at that time. Most interviews were performed digitally, but four of them were conducted via a telephone call. On average, the interviews lasted for 45 min and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Before signing a consent form, informants received a description of the project and the research ethics.

All informants were asked to talk about themselves and to describe their media use in everyday life. They also reflected on the pros and cons of connected media, their perceptions of digital disconnection ("What do you understand by digital disconnection; what does it entail to you?"), the circumstances surrounding the relevance of disconnection in their lives ("Can you share why you have wanted to disconnect from digital media?"), and their experiences when they are disconnected. For many of them, as digital disconnection was not a natural part of their media use vocabulary, there was a need for probes, such as "do you ever feel that being connected can become too much, and you want to put your mobile away?" to initiate reflection on disconnection. In pursuit of adolescent perspectives, the questions were framed to avoid priming the informants to regard digital disconnection as desirable. Additionally, the informants were involved in determining the interview's direction.

The data analysis was guided by an abductive approach, a dialectic process that alternates between inductive and deductive orientations of the data material (Peirce, 1965). Accordingly, the outset of the process was a descriptive and thematic analysis of reoccurring patterns in the material from which ideas were gleaned for further analysis and located in a theoretical framework that provided interpretative data perspectives.

During the interviews, I have aimed to closely listen to informants' narrations regarding digital disconnection from their perspective. Thus, the relevance of narrative identity was not a predefined theoretical framework but was selected after the initial analysis that revealed critical trends in the material. During the analysis, measures were taken to confront the reality that informants and analyses cannot be approached without consideration of preconceptions and theoretical assumptions. Nevertheless, to the best of my ability, I aimed to allow the informants' perspectives to provide the information in this article.

## Findings

The following section addresses the following overarching and primary objective: "How do adolescent digital disconnection experiences play into ongoing identity development processes?" It then presents analytical insights from the in-depth interviews. In conducting this analysis, I draw from affective themes, motivational themes, and autobiographical reasoning, and their corresponding features, as outlined by the narrative identity approach, to describe the relevance of identity processes in relation to adolescent sentiments on digital disconnection.

### Affective features and ambivalence

Concerning affective features of adolescents' stories of disconnection experiences, this section focuses on narrative perspectives and redemption stories related to one of the key findings across the material: ambivalence. Nearly all informants expressed a *modus operandi* characterized by a symbiotic

relationship with SNSs, contextualizing disconnectivity both conceptually and personally. When describing their media use on an ordinary day, the informants provided insights into their rich media repertoires, a vast landscape where most of them resided during their waking hours. Aligning with research on the significance of identity-facilitating processes afforded by connected media, the informants' statements illustrated their experimentation with different identities in search of group affiliation and social support (boyd, 2015; Palfrey & Gasser, 2016). Nevertheless, a theme that crystallized was a connectivity paradox in which ramifications of the affordances of SNSs engendered ambivalence.

On the one hand, informants alluded to a need to evade temporal invasion and overload; however, they discussed the need to conform to the connectivity norms of their friends and peers. Informants described navigating these conflicting needs and expectations as challenging, finding themselves in an ambivalent state. Aligning with notions of a communication metamorphosis from the physical to the digital (Carrington, 2020; Livingstone et al., 2017), sentiments about FOMO, such as "when you switch off (a smartphone), you are like completely alone ... on the whole globe" (Liv, 18), were often expressed as a rationale for such conflicting reactions. The informants' descriptions of their fears revealed a need for friendships and group belonging, which are crucial for identity formation in adolescence (Brown & Klute, 2003).

What particularly stood out was not that the informants all experienced ambivalence but the variations in how they experienced it and their levels of emotional intensity when describing it. In some cases, informants adopted a self-distanced perspective (Kross et al., 2005); thus, the emotional temperature correspondingly diminished when they discussed the ambivalence. For example, Hedda (19) stated that she frequently felt invaded by notifications and decided to put away her phone. However, she admitted that she experienced FOMO and found herself in a state of ambivalence:

There is a trend among people my age that everyone should do idiotic things that do not make sense, like having a streak on Snapchat. But, still, I get sucked into it because all my friends do it. It is like a domino effect—one does it, and then everybody does it. I end up getting frustrated because it is my choice, but it's kind of like if I'm not part of this conversation, then I will be forgotten. Everyone continues as a small gang while I stand on the outside looking in. (Hedda, 19)

Although Hedda expressed resentment over sabotaging her attempt to disconnect, she explored and reflected on her behavior, specifically how it relates to the connectivity norm. Her ability to understand the reason behind the ambivalence, depicting herself as a victim frustrated at peers, might indicate that she has separated from the former protagonist. Her articulation created distance from the event and reduced the emotional intensity, allowing her to reconstruct the experience and make sense of it.

In other cases in which informants talked *from* the ambivalence and adopted a self-immersed (Kross et al., 2005) perspective, the emotional intensity increased, and the informants appeared to re-experience the ambivalence during the interview. For example, when explaining barriers to disconnect, Mariah (17) admitted that even if she tried to take

short breaks from her phone, she felt obliged to use SNSs to mitigate her anxiety:

I have thought quite a few times, "Oh, I don't need Snapchat!" But, it's nerve-racking knowing that I haven't answered. It's kind of, what if something important happened? I often have "what if" thoughts. They are very real and catastrophic thoughts.

When replying to a question about reasons she finds it difficult to disconnect, she continued as follows in a tense voice:

I do not know. I get quite a lot of anxiety thinking of it (disconnecting). But, when so much happens all the time, and I'm so busy in everyday life, I don't want to risk not being prepared for a new crisis. So, it's better to be vigilant ... It's tiring (Mariah, 17).

As the quote suggests, Mariah's account of the ambivalence contains strong feelings that appear to remain highly relevant to her. Furthermore, when she admitted becoming anxious due to the thought of disconnecting, she seemed to merge with the past protagonist in her retelling, reliving the troubling feelings during the interview.

Notably, Hedda's self-distancing reappraisal, which rendered her ambivalence less emotionally intense when recalled in the interview, could be comparable to redemptive sequences (Pals, 2006), which are enabled by exploring and analyzing reactions to the ambivalence at an arm's length. Conversely, Mariah's self-immersed perspective rendered the ambivalence more emotionally intense when recalled in the interview, indicating an ongoing process of understanding and navigating it. Thus, redemption might not yet have been achieved. In this context, a less emotionally intense retelling of the experiences might be a precursor to redemptive sequences, wherein the storyline improves from negative to positive, as articulated by Leonora (16):

Well, it has been pretty tough times, actually, because I feel like I've lost a lot of what I had before. Moreover, that in itself is so stupid. Still, I kind of manage to uphold it because I know that I'm the one who is the strongest when I manage not always to spend time on social media and instead appreciate proper conversations and sort of talk about actual important things. Now, I would much rather see people in real life rather than just sending lots of nonsense to each other on Snapchat and such. I feel it's motivating that I've gotten over it (connectivity).

Leonora's statement is emblematic of a redemptive story sequence in which she retrospectively reports self-growth with a clear sense of her values and goals. The process of critical reflection regarding her media use and the connectivity norm caused the initial unpleasant choice to disconnect to transform into a change that motivates and generates growth. This process resulted in an attitude-related change toward SNSs, with irritation toward adolescent connectivity and a subsequent re-prioritization of time use.

Research suggests that redemptive sequences are an essential part of adolescents' construction of narrative identity (e.g., McLean & Pratt, 2006) by aiding in revealing who they are (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). Redemption is additionally believed to underpin adolescents' autonomy and their

increasing ability to adhere to their stance and resist conforming to the norms of their peers (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). Although all informants described navigating the ambivalence as challenging, adopting different narrative perspectives and the presence of redemptive sequences in their narratives could provide valuable information regarding the informants' cultivation of narrative identity and how it relates to their degree of emotional (dis)entanglement with SNSs, in line with Pals (2006).

### Motivational features and disconnection motivations

Concerning motivational features of adolescents' stories of disconnection, this section focuses on agency in relation to a second key finding across the material: motivations for engaging in digital disconnection. Consistent with the established research on digital disconnection, the experience of being overwhelmed and always on alert emerged as the most negative aspect of constant connectivity that initiated motivations for disconnection (Syvertsen, 2020). For Fiona (17), it manifested as feelings of being trapped and freeing herself: "People expect you to post something and expect you to respond right away. One sort of never gets to free oneself from social media." The motivations generally coincided with wishes and desires about the beneficial outcomes of disconnectivity. Although reaching these objectives for all informants meant that they had to change their relationship with SNSs, the actual disconnection encompassed distinctive qualities and functions. This was reflected in two underlying motivations to disconnect that crystallized across the material: *disconnection to regulate emotional imbalance* and *disconnection to facilitate self-growth*.

First, disconnection to regulate emotional imbalance was articulated by informants who admitted that the disconnection was initiated by unpleasant feelings that arose from using connected media. Therefore, the disconnection was a means to inhibit unease and upsetting feelings, and to regain equanimity. Samuel (18) was an informant who voiced that he felt inadequate and jealous when witnessing others' lives. He explained that he deliberately attempts to avoid the home page on Facebook to avoid exposing himself to interactions among girls his age, referring primarily to comments on photos and birthday greetings: "They are very fond of each other, and it just gets a little too much . . . One feels like a peasant among gods or goddesses." Moreover, Tiril (17) addressed another prevalent topic, namely feelings of loneliness, although she stated that they were self-inflicted:

If I'm at home on a Saturday evening because I want to, I still feel a little lonely when I see that everyone else is out at parties . . . It's like, oh, they are at a party, and it looks like they are having fun without me. It makes me lose focus on where I am. Because even if you are happy with yourself and what you do, you will always want to be where others are or where something else is happening.

The informants who disconnected to regulate themselves shared a desire to disconnect to avoid unpleasant content on the platforms they used. However, this attempt aroused unpleasant feelings. Their narratives often alluded to powerlessness over the content of social platforms and indecision when choosing to disconnect. Similarly, Samuel and Tiril's

experiences indicated a loss of control over their use and uncertainty about their choices, regarded as an expression of low agency.

Subsequently, disconnection to facilitate self-growth was conveyed in narrations in which disconnection motivations involved allocating time for endeavors other than SNSs. Descriptions of temporal overload due to the interwovenness of SNSs in their daily lives abounded, resonating with Lomborg's (2015) notion of the disappearance of non-mediated time and spaces. The informants indicated that disconnection was an attempt to regain *authenticity* and free occupied time to *self-optimize* that had been sacrificed for continuous connectivity. The established literature regarding the motivations for disconnection practices has demonstrated that mediated communication is less genuine and that authenticity is promoted through disconnection escapism (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020).

Similarly, the facilitation of authenticity by disconnecting was articulated in statements that emphasized the cost of missing out on "real life" due to connected media: "Everything seems so less genuine on social media and Instagram and Snapchat. I've just chosen to put it aside, and instead, talk to my family or go for a walk" (Eli, 17). Eli's statement proposed that both escapism and the disappearance of non-mediated spaces also pertain to adolescents, although most only know a connected reality.

A general tendency of the informants' sentiments regarding the facilitating function of disconnectivity was revealed by stories describing high agency connected to a critical reflection of their media use. This process frequently resulted in an attitude change toward SNSs, often coupled with an annoyance toward adolescents' constant connectivity. Statements such as "I think it's just a headache just scrolling and scrolling" (Jaran, 16) and reports of being weary of connectivity were abundant. Sofie (16) articulated that disconnection is a process that is more in line with what she desires:

It (disconnection) is sort of a process. You have to analyze yourself and think for yourself and realize that it is unhealthy before you manage to distance yourself. I think that lots of people do not want to think of it because they feel that everything takes place on social media, but deep down, they know that it is not very good when everything is about a facade . . . You focus more on developing yourself and building yourself, your own identity in a way rather than spending time on social media.

Sofie's narrative indicated that disconnecting from connected media is more manageable when the choice is personal. Her highly agentic narrative and intrinsically motivated disconnection behaviors reflected an autonomous protagonist, which makes her more resilient against conforming to the connectivity norm. This finding coincided with the established research on the importance of intrinsically motivated choices and goals for identity development (Waterman, 2004). Moreover, the key to informants' statements about the facilitating function of disconnection was that they were examples of redemptive sequences in which they retrospectively reported self-growth with a clear sense of values and goals due to countervailing peer pressure.

Digital disconnection serves different functions. It shields some from emotional imbalance and provides protection, while for others, it promotes self-development. Differences in agency in the informants' narratives suggest that the former category is characterized by reduced autonomy, while the

latter is characterized by high autonomy. These motivational accounts along varying levels of agency synchronize with Bauer and McAdams' (2004a) notion of narrative orientations, in which "disconnection to regulate emotional imbalance" resonates with safety narratives, while "disconnection to facilitate self-growth" resonates with growth narratives. Thus, the informants' accounts of motivations for disconnecting generated another method to understand the relevance of the narrative identity construct concerning adolescent motivations for engaging in digital disconnection.

### Autobiographical reasoning and disconnection practices

Concerning autobiographical reasoning features in adolescent stories of disconnection experiences, this section focuses on meaning-making and its relationship to a third finding across the material: disconnection practices. Most informants perceived the concept of disconnectivity positively. Nevertheless, disconnectivity practices were mentioned as tricky regardless of how much they were desired. Statements such as "I can't completely disconnect because then I wouldn't have had contact with anyone" (Lotte, 19) were often expressed by the informants, demonstrating how opting out is unrealistic. The captive authority of the connectivity norm, from which one cannot entirely disentangle, exemplifies the well-established notion that digital disconnection involves a continuum of positions rather than merely the binary options of being connected or disconnected (Baumer et al., 2015). Accordingly, most informants generally tended toward disconnection practices allowing moderate connectivity.

A tendency throughout the material was that the emotional valence (i.e., the affective quality of the informants' narratives) corresponded to whether disconnection was perceived as a choice (i.e., high or low agency) and the autonomy of the protagonists. Subsequently, the affective and motivational narrative features resulted in different variants of disconnection practices, including *general* and *focused disconnection*. Informants who engaged in general disconnection reduced their total amount of screen time, as described by Leonora (16):

Digital disconnection is about limiting the amount of time I use on social media and screens in general. I reduce it; I don't totally delete everything. Often, I physically turn off my phone and put my laptop in another room.

Furthermore, general disconnection was a planned action as opposed to an impulsive act:

I was just starting to get tired of using it (a smartphone) during the summer holidays, really. It got pretty boring after a while, so I did not get anything out of it anymore. I had prime stories, which I deleted because I got tired of people knowing what I was doing all the time, etc. Then I deleted another one a couple of months later, so it's been a gradual distancing thing (Henny, 16).

Leonora and Henny's statements suggested that general disconnection, as manifested by reducing total screen time and physical detachment from the smartphone, is a planned action reflecting a *process* of reconsideration of the connectivity norm. The emphasis on the *process* suggests that digital disconnection is not exclusively an "end product" limited to an

observable action. It can also constitute an internal reconfiguration of attitudes with changed beliefs and needs.

For example, Lilja (16) expressed that she used to be overly dependent on maintaining streaks on Snapchat and receiving "likes" on Instagram but that she is no longer affected by this. She expressed her feeling as liberating, stating she did not care what people think anymore. She described how the processes started for her:

I was with a friend playing Truth or Dare. I chose the dare and was challenged to put my phone away for 30 minutes. None of my friends thought I could do it, but I did. That started the process, the episode there when I was 15 years old. Then, it developed step by step because I got tired of getting validation from social media . . . It's so that among us young people, there is an expectation to maintain streaks and liking photos, but gradually I began to think that a number does not mean that it is a deep relationship. It is really just a number and photos that don't mean much. It made me realize that you, sort of, need more self-confidence and self-respect from within yourself and build that up rather than getting likes, you know (Lilja, 16).

In line with meaning-making as a pivotal element of autobiographical reasoning, Lilja provided insight into a process in which she reflects on previous experiences, specifically underlining a turning point when she was 15 years old that has influenced her attitudes about social media. The change has resulted in her now reducing her use of these platforms. She highlighted this development as positive and described the change from seeking external validation to finding internal validation as an experience of personal growth. Her narrative coincided with the notion that meaning-making often captures a change coupled with growth (McLean et al., 2020).

Other informants engaged in *focused disconnection*, often by deleting apps perceived as invasive. For instance, Ava explained that she took breaks from Snapchat to avoid exposing herself to exclusion experiences, resulting in a checking circle when she felt unhappy. These breaks were spontaneous actions resulting from emotional distress:

It can be exhausting and tiring when I see a picture or conversation that I am not included in. It stirs chaos in my head, and I become overloaded somehow . . . So when I'm then on (social media), I first check Snapchat and then Instagram, and then Facebook, and then I recheck Snapchat. And then, suddenly, there is a vicious circle going on and on (Ava, 17).

Ava stated that she engages in focused disconnection, taking a break from specific social media platforms when overwhelmed. In line with other informants' narratives, focused disconnection is often a spontaneous act initiated by emotional distress. The spontaneous act indicates that, for these informants, disconnection is not perceived as their choice. Consistent with self-immersed perspectives and the agentic features of narratives, the narratives of these informants exhibited high emotional intensity coupled with low agency and loss of control, as exemplified by Ava's quote. In combination, these features made it challenging to make meaning of the experience, thereby hampering growth.

## Discussion

This study endeavored to elucidate adolescent digital disconnection through the lens of identity cultivation, emphasizing accounts from the narrative approach to address the overarching research question: “How do adolescent digital disconnection experiences play into ongoing identity development processes?” First, the findings indicate that adolescents are ambivalent about the connective nature of their reality. Second, they seem to have different motivations for engaging in practices of digital disconnection. Some disconnect to regain emotional balance, while others disconnect to invest time in self-development. Third, practices include focused disconnection characterized as the spontaneous deletion of specific apps and social platforms in response to emotional distress and general disconnection characterized as a planned reduction of overall SNSs usage.

In this study, the informants all reacted to the intrusion of connected media, finding themselves in a state of ambivalence. Nevertheless, they held different perspectives that induced ripple effects related to why they wanted to disconnect and how they did it. Hence, *how* and *where* the ambivalence was perceived corresponded to different motivations for engaging in digital disconnection and how disconnection practices were enacted.

Specifically, concerning affective themes, being immersed in ambivalence fostered disconnection related to regulating emotional imbalance and seeking safety. Moreover, keeping the ambivalence at an arm’s length allowed informants to redeem their experiences of ambivalence, subsequently fostering self-growth. Therefore, the affective features of informants’ narratives were closely connected to their motivations for engaging in disconnection by fostering or hampering agency.

Furthermore, the motivational feature of agency aligned with informants’ disconnection practices. Focused disconnection was a recurring theme for those who displayed low levels of agency, often resulting in focused disconnection when specific apps were spontaneously deleted. General disconnection was a recurring theme among those with high levels of agency, allowing meaning-making and self-development.

This article suggests that adolescent digital disconnection may be a process that aligns with narrative identity cultivation, as illustrated by the presence of affective themes, motivational themes, and autobiographic reasoning. Hence, knowing who one is can produce ripple effects related to adolescent ambivalence, motivations, and disconnection practices. Therefore, this article proposes a possible interpretation: Digital disconnection might be a manifestation of susceptibility to peer influence. In this case, the adolescent manages to resist the connectivity norm of the ingroup with a reduced tendency to follow others without conscious thought, in line with narrative identity cultivation and autonomy. A relevant question concerns whether this might look different for adults, as social influence on the choice to dis/connect can engender conflict regardless of age. However, if peer influence in adolescence is more pervasive, this could also affect disconnection among adolescents.

In this context, the cultivation of a narrative identity appears to influence motivations for (dis)connectivity in that it manifests as a choice, not exclusively as coercion, whether internally or externally controlled. Thus, narrative identity cultivation can result in disconnection or connection, depending on the adolescent’s desires. This finding implies that

digital disconnection is not necessarily an ideal achieved when adolescents attain a narrative identity. However, disconnecting from SNSs is perceived as a choice that adolescents can make.

Disconnection as an expression of identity has also been identified in the literature with adult samples (Kaun and Treré, 2020; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Although this literature demonstrates that disconnection and identity may be linked, this current study has utilized an identity cultivation perspective rather than a performative perspective regarding identity. The theoretical framework of this article thus underlines the notion that adolescents’ disconnection experiences are embedded in a life phase where autobiographic reasoning processes and social pressure from peers (Erikson, 1968; Habermas & Bluck, 2000) both facilitate reflexivity and condition the relevance of disconnection, while simultaneously making intentionality and the self-performativity associated with the choice to disconnect rather complicated or fragile.

In the case of adults, to join detox camps or partake in social movements requires a certain degree of reflexivity about lifestyle choices, attitudes, and values. Adolescents are still in the midst of constructing the foundations for their life stories, as identity development takes center stage. Thus, disconnection is not established as a reflexive mindset nor necessarily intentionally performed to express identity to others. Yet, while adults might seem to express already established identities by engaging in carefully selected disconnection practices, they also disconnect in more subtle and tactical ways in everyday life as part of their digital lifestyles (e.g., Morrison & Gomez, 2014; Nguyen, 2021). Furthermore, while the construction of a life story starts in adolescence, it does not end there and is revised throughout the life course (Kroger, 2007; McLean, 2008). Accordingly, the adult media user can come to change her ways of handling connectivity as new experiences are integrated into her self-understanding. To conclude, disconnection among adolescents does not necessarily represent a sharp contrast to disconnection among adults but might be an expression of particularly intensive processes of identity construction.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that adolescents do not passively accept connectivity as a norm but reflect on it, reconstituting their thoughts, attitudes, and actions accordingly. Adolescents may be susceptible to connected media when they are not committed to a coherent storyline. However, in line with the experience of narrative coherence, they question the status quo and are more responsive to their desires. Nevertheless, entirely disconnecting was not an option for any of the informants, supporting the argument that disconnection is not exclusively a matter of personal effort, but reflects how the intertwinement of digital media makes absolute disconnection impossible (Bucher, 2020).

## Conclusion

This study contributes to research on adolescent identity formation and its associated needs, explaining adolescent connectivity and attraction to SNSs (boyd, 2008; Palfrey & Gasser, 2016). However, this study’s novelty is that an identity lens is applied to the apparent inverse of connectivity: disconnectivity. Although aspects of identity, such as social identity and self-presentation, have been discussed in previous research (Neves et al., 2015), this study is the first to draw on accounts from the narrative approach, emphasizing the



cultivation of identity to discuss the importance of what adolescents mean when they talk about disconnection.

Moreover, this study explores how and from where they address the issue—as manifestations of ongoing identity construction. Nevertheless, the inquiry presented in this study does not provide a complete account of adolescent engagement in digital disconnection. Instead, it sets the scene for future research to obtain a more comprehensive developmental and psychological understanding of adolescent digital disconnection.

Important factors not discussed include the role of the context that might explain why some adolescents are more likely to engage in narrative identity processes and disconnection practices than others. For instance, perceptions of digital disconnection and identity development might differ for adolescents in different geographical and cultural settings. The Norwegian context provides a valuable starting point for studying disconnection among young people as studies show that 90% of Norwegian youth use social media platforms, and 68% admit that they spend excessive time on them (Norwegian Media Authority, 2020).

These findings can partly be explained by sound infrastructure and an expansive broadband connection, enabling Norway to be one of the most technologically equipped nations globally and partly because of the normative ideal of being an informed and updated citizen by staying connected (Syvertsen, 2020). Along with the normative idea of connectivity, these technological advantages create a situation where a collision with oppositional values of disconnectivity becomes particularly distinct and challenging in a Norwegian context, providing a valuable context to understand adolescent disconnection processes.

Nevertheless, variations exist within and between contexts, which might be the case in this study. For example, previous research has shown that social background influences how social network sites are used (Micheli, 2016), and some studies have shown that age, gender, and peer relationship quality are connected to narrative characteristics, use, and reactions toward connected media (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009; Twenge & Martin, 2020). These variations can also occur within a high-tech and media welfare country, characterized by slight socioeconomic differences, such as Norway.

In addition, the findings must be viewed in light of limitations concerning sample size and specifically the application of the narrative approach. Saturation was a guiding principle during data collection, consequently affecting the sample size. Hence, I have been open to the potential for uncovering new information during the analysis process. I have also considered that new information not always adds significance to the larger picture I attempt to demonstrate.

In this study, the narrative identity approach has been used as an analytical tool. Even though narrative methods can be used to study all psychologically meaningful phenomena and “narrative can be a powerful tool for studies that are not designed with narrative identity as the primary focus” (Adler et al., 2017), a posteriori application of the approach may have some limitations. Life Story Interview (LSI) is a commonly used instrument for examining autobiographical memories and identity processes (Adler et al., 2017). The use of LSI could conclude with greater certainty that digital disconnection is part of an identity development process because it facilitates self-narration by requesting autobiographical memories, periods of life, and specific scenes. Without such contextualization a priori, it is

essential to apply one’s interpretations with care so that it does not misrepresent that disconnection is an expression of young people’s increasing agency and actions following their values. Applying a narrative approach in this context has produced explanations and connections that would not have been as accessible with other methods. Still, examining disconnection experiences with a predetermined LSI as methodological input may be the subject of future research.

Further research should also examine various factors mentioned and how they manifest in adolescent practices of digital disconnection to highlight that they should not be reduced to a single factor, thereby providing an erroneously narrow picture of the phenomenon. Instead, as Syvertsen (2020) commented, we must examine the big picture to ask how other societal levels of inquiry contribute to the push to stay connected continuously. Therefore, further research should situate adolescent wishes to disconnect from SNSs in the broader contemporary media-saturated society to explore what digital disconnection entails for adolescents in greater depth, not giving an impression of digital disconnection as solely a matter of choice.

## Data availability

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to the privacy of individuals that participated in this study.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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