Article

Growing out of overconnection: The process of dis/connecting among Norwegian and Portuguese teenagers

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Abstract

Young people struggle with permanent online connection that is associated with their generation. This article looks at teenagers' affective relationship to connectivity and disconnectivity, and how it is socioculturally influenced by the media, family, and peers. It reports on an interview study with 36 teenagers between 15 and 19 years of age from Norway and Portugal. Our findings evidenced how disconnection may arise out of a latent feeling of "disaffect" generated in the experience of the ambience of connected and platform culture as well as the media; or of the unavailability created by how teenagers spend their leisure time, which is influenced by families' moral economies. Teenagers have to perform affective labor in managing the different, sometimes contradictory, forces that converge in the experience of connectivity. Managing digital disconnection appears as an individual—but socially produced—moral obligation to self-govern, to which teenagers have unequal conditions.

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Introduction

In the cultural environment of the "techlash" (Zimmer, 2019), young people are often shown as special victims—at both psychological and social levels—of the vicious design and abusive economic functioning of social media platforms. Popular discussions on digital well-being, before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, have turned "addiction" into a (too) easily used term, especially in relation to teenagers.[1] Despite considerable media panics concerning youth, studies on digital disconnection among young people have mostly considered university students (e.g. Paasonen, 2021; Tiidenberg et al., 2017), who for the most part stem from advantaged sections of society. Particularly, there is little understanding of how the culture of connectivity (van Dijck, 2013) is affectively experienced by teenagers in different parts of the world, and how teenagers' disconnection occurs in their situated conditions.

This article brings together a perspective on the affective process of connecting and disconnecting (which we refer to as dis/connecting throughout the text) and on sociocultural influences for such process among teenagers. On the one hand, scholarship on digital disconnection has increasingly considered the emotional and affective dimensions of dis/connectivity. Such research has analyzed motivations that lead up to disconnection (e.g. Aharoni et al., 2021; Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021); the sensations contained and elicited while disconnecting (Karppi et al., 2021; Paasonen, 2021); or the emotions encapsulated in such act(s) (e.g. Maslen, 2022). Such perspectives acknowledge the complex process of dis/connecting, where conflicting and contradictory forces play out and situate small individual actions within broader macro-societal forces. Gangneux (2021), for instance, frames small acts to circumvent scrutiny over instant messaging as tactics instead of assertive resistance to technological corporations.

On the other hand, digital inequalities have been studied in relation to young people's digital engagement, at the levels of skills (Gui and Argentin, 2011; Hargittai, 2010) and uses (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; Peter and Valkenburg, 2006); and social stratification and the logics of distinction have been looked at in relation to disconnection (Fast et al., 2021; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). However, the digital disengagement of teenagers has not been researched from a social inequality perspective.

In this article, we draw attention to how those practices socially come to take form in individual teenagers' minds: what precedes actions themselves and particularly about how the interest in disconnecting arises, what the results of this interest are, and how (re)connecting occurs. We turn the focus "from ends to the means of disconnection" (Karppi et al., 2021: 1599) and pay attention to how bodily and consciousness levels are integrated. We follow Bourdieu's (1984) sociological approach to investigate how habitus, as a reference frame to how people navigate the social world, conditions the relevance of dis/connectivity in teenagers' everyday lives. In looking at teenagers' affective relationship to connectivity, we pay particular attention to the social influence of the media, family, and peers. The article reports on a study

conducted within the scope of a comparative project between Portugal and Norway that focused on youth and dis/connection. Our data reflect situated experiences of dis/connectivity for a diverse, yet not representative, section of youth in Northern and Southern Europe, going through a disruption such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The differences in national contexts are thus an additional element of problematization on the sociocultural influences for disconnecting.

We draw on studies on youth and digital media, sociology of emotions and affect theory, and the literature on digital disconnection to unpack the affective labor involved in the relationship with the culture of connectivity, revealing how it is socially informed and can lead to further inequalities.

From digital media use to disconnection

Sociocultural influences on dis/connectivity

The permanent use of digital media appears as a marker of generational belonging (Fernández-Ardèvol et al., 2022, a study on teenagers 16–19), defined by an "information-heavy, fast-paced, multitasking, 'always-on' lifestyle" (Murumaa-Mengel and Siibak, 2019, p. 269). For instance, message-based communication (through apps such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp) affords teenagers and young people convenience, coordination with others, and permanent connection (Gangneux, 2021). Nevertheless, if most users are learning how to cope with how overwhelming the digital world can be, encompassing digital risks and excessive use (van Dijck et al., 2018), young people have also been found to struggle with being permanently online and permanently connected (Schneider and Hitzfeld, 2021).

In a culture of permanent connection, attempts to use digital media less pose their own set of challenges, for example, FoMO (Fear of Missing Out), or negative outcomes on health and well-being caused by digital detox experiences, which may lead to on/off cycles (Franks et al., 2018). Reporting on parents disconnecting, Maslen (2022) documents the discomfort and anxiety people feel for not being able to see "or police" what others are doing on social media when they disconnect or seek to maintain an appearance of connectedness while adopting tactics to disengage to avoid exhaustion and conflict. Nevertheless, digital detox or sabbatical periods can also be an opportunity for young people to reflect and realize how the overuse of social networking sites is negatively affecting their lives (Baym et al., 2020; Murumaa-Mengel and Siibak, 2019), and female users were found to implement strategies to attain a healthy balance between online and offline when returning to social media (Franks et al., 2018).

Moreover, social influence can hinder or favor disconnection. A study with adults over 59 years old (Nguyen et al., 2021) found that social influence combined with other motivations (lack of interest, convenience, unavailability of time, perception of overuse, privacy concerns, and technical barriers) explained the replacement of digital devices and practices. When young people attempt to disconnect, peers cannot but play a role. Neves et al. (2015) found that the non-users of social networking sites aged between 18 and 26 years shared a mutual feeling of being understood and accepted by their friends, despite their rejection. Furthermore, those non-users invest in social strategies and efforts

to compensate for their absence on social media. Non-users of social media feel reassured when their offline social group also refrains from using (Franks et al., 2018).

In addition, teenagers' practices are likely to be informed by circulating discourses, not least those in the media. Tiidenberg et al. (2017) found that university students negotiate their personal feelings and sensations in relation to grand narratives that they have become addicted, that the digital world is not authentic (enough), or that they ought to be productive, which often results in tensions and struggles. "Addiction discourse was prevalent" also among Israeli young adults (Aharoni et al., 2021: 53), referring to both news and entertainment consumption. Addiction seems mostly associated with the smartphone (Aharoni et al., 2021; Drusian et al., 2022) and social media usage (Murumaa-Mengel and Siibak, 2019).

As (young) people grow up, media habits are also expected to evolve, which may mean they disconnect from (some) media. Life circumstances—for example, "as users move to new contexts, meet new friends and their priorities change" (Birnholtz, 2010: 1427)—may mean that people grow out of some of the digital services as they become interested in others. External circumstances might also result in swifter transitions in the uses of digital services, for example, Covid-19 lockdowns brought a quick turn to new needs meaning new services like Zoom were adopted, while some existing services were abandoned, and some more intensively used (Treré, 2021). Treré (2021) also found that the hyperconnectivity of this caused sensations of "overconnection," which we will turn to in the next section.

Disconnection as affective process

Scholarship on digital disconnection has increasingly considered the emotional and affective dimensions of dis/connectivity. Affect is "at once pervasive and ethereal and not necessarily linked to any one single individual's psychology" (Petit, 2015: 179). It precedes, and is more diffuse than, emotions; nevertheless, affect is detectable in the form of "affective states" (Petit, 2015). Emotions can be understood as situated and more or less "identifiable states grounded in our embodied life histories" (Ahmed, in Paasonen, 2016) and as "motivational systems with physiological, behavioral, experiential and cognitive components" (Brody, in Bericat, 2016: 492). Emotions can be more prolonged, yet still individual, in the form of moods, conceptualized as "lasting affective states, not very intense and lacking a specific object" (Bericat, 2016: 493), and can come with a certain degree of contagiousness (Karppi et al., 2021; Paasonen, 2016). Emotions can even take up a more organized and collective pattern of sensations and cultural meanings (e.g. pessimism). It is also important to acknowledge the role of media and cultural products in socializing emotions (Illouz, 2008).

Regarding digital culture, Michael Petit (2015) speaks of "digital disaffect" as "a kind of hypnotic, engaged disengagement with the miasmic qualities of boredom, detachment, ennui, and malaise" (p. 177). Digital culture promises satisfaction but always falls short to deliver. Susaana Paasonen (2021), in turn, underlines "the intertwining and mutually constitutive dynamics of affective flatness, interest, and enchantment" (p. 101). Analyzing boredom as one of the prevailing affective formations when discussing experiences with digital media, Paasonen illustrates, for instance, how social media is

simultaneously "offered as a solution to boredom" and one of its causes (pp. 99–100). The author also calls attention to the micro-events in everyday life, such as the use of mobile phone games to wait or fill (kill) time, which should be seen as more than escapes to boredom, rather as "minor enchantments [. . .] that make lives more livable" (pp. 130–131). Karppi et al. (2021) explored how commodities in the disconnection segment can provide "differential ways for individuals to respond to the challenges of connectivity" (p. 1599); commodities marketed as providing or inviting disconnection do not afford "complete break[s] but are different ways of attuning to connection" (p. 1609) and should thus be seen for what they open space for, rather than as a negative force.

Of particular interest here is how "affective formations" (Paasonen, 2021) of networked media tap into current tropes. Besides boredom, Paasonen analyzes dependence or addiction, distraction, and nostalgia, which circulate in popular culture, memes, hashtags, and so on. The author explores how any of those are riddled with "complexity, contradiction, and ambiguity" (p. 7) and argues for a perspective that sees simultaneity and potentiality. Individual bodies express affective formations in mundane actions as specific patterns of sensations that not only translate the broader societal and cultural perspectives but also can allow building space for individuality.

Several emotions have been identified as motivations to disconnect. For instance, Ytre-Arne and Moe (2021) found that fatigue and weariness deriving from exposure to news about the Covid-19 health crisis led to tactics of intermittent news avoidance, to self-preserve but still be informed. Similarly, Aharoni et al. (2021) found that "digital technologies can heighten negative emotions and can in turn motivate user disengagement" (p. 45), for example, social media's seemingly uncontrollable notifications and form of functioning. Perceptions of content as irritating, disturbing, or overwhelming motivated deliberate avoidance, by bypassing or limiting particular contents, media, or users. Avoidance could also "result from over-interest, or in other words, a fear of overuse and of addiction" (p. 53). Instant messaging communication was often felt by urban middle-class youths interviewed by Gangneux (2021) as "overwhelming" and as creating "anxieties and stress" for the accountability and scrutiny they put in place. Among young people (18–30), accounts of "ambivalence and struggle" were found among savvy and adept users of social media (Gill, 2021: 1388). Pressures to create a perfect, yet realistic image online, as well as feelings of being watched and scrutinized manifest in "embodied and visceral" experiences (p. 1390), yet create a world that is inescapable and in which "detox" appears as a (the?) way out. To date, the articulation of affect, emotions, and moods has not been analyzed in the context of teenagers and not in different cultural contexts in a comparative way.

Methods

As the field moves into more nuanced understandings of the phenomenon of disconnection (Treré, 2021), we ask: how are teenagers' practices of digital disconnection embedded in affective and emotional processes, and what are the sociocultural influences of those processes? In line with Nguyen et al. (2021), we approached digital media as a whole, even though the respondents might concentrate on specific platforms or devices.

Our study is cross-national, addressing a gap in qualitative research on youth as well as disconnection. Besides the cross-national scale, Treré's (2021) study in six countries of the Global South also called attention to the urgency of paying attention to the experiences of less privileged populations. While digital disconnection relates to a global culture of connectivity, we agree that "experiences of disconnection are contextually situated and defined by the specific social circumstances that people face in their local settings and by their status, social class and access" to technology (p. 1674). The countries in our study, Norway and Portugal, being parts of Northern and Southern Europe, respectively, are very different: Norway is an affluent country ($76,793 as annual average wage, 2021), has a media welfare state, and has a low population density and low levels of inequality (Gini index of 25.3% in 2020), whereas Portugal is a poorer ($24,366 as annual average wage, 2021) and more unequal society (Gini index of 33% in 2020) with a higher population density.

The data collection of our study consisted of individual interviews with young people aged between 15 and 19 in Portugal and Norway on digital media disconnection. The semi-structured interview guide addressed the following domains: background and socioeconomic status; media use in everyday life; associations with and opinions of social media; digital disconnection, including how the participants define and describe it and why disconnection is relevant in their lives ("what do you understand by digital disconnection?," followed by probes such as "have you ever considered stop using social media, the phone or other?"); and how the participants have attempted to disconnect. The protocol, first developed and implemented in Norway, was translated and adapted into Portuguese. All participants provided informed consent. Regarding ethics, the study follows the guidelines of the Norwegian Centre of Research Data (NSD).

Interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021, with the pandemic—and all the disruptions it caused—starting during the study. In Norway, informants were initially recruited from public schools and, later, through snowball sampling. Most interviews were carried out digitally, but in four cases they were conducted via a telephone call. In Portugal, recruitment occurred through wider personal contacts with young people in associations, youth clubs, and youth centers and then through snowball, and recruitment online. Interviews occurred over videocalls (Zoom) during Spring and Summer of 2021. Our final sample consisted of 36 participants, 16 of whom were from Norway and 20 of whom were from Portugal, with an average age of 16.9 years old, and a median of 17. In Norway, 12 participants were female and 4 were male; they were predominantly from an urban middle-class background. In Portugal, 10 participants were female and 10 were male; they came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, but despite efforts to recruit lower-class youths, these were only a minority (3).

All interviews were transcribed, and a summary of each interview was produced and translated to allow for a discussion of the two datasets. A common codebook was generated deductively (on agents, practices, processes, motivations) as well as inductively (on emotions, vocabulary, pressure, pandemic, lifestyle) (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). One researcher per team coded the data (in original languages) using MaxQDA and NVivo 12 software, using multicoding whenever relevant, while any doubts about coding were discussed among all the researchers. The coded segments were translated via Google Translate and cross-checked by researchers from each country. Quotes in the

next section are identified with pseudonyms, followed by a code indicating gender (F = female, M = male), age, and country (NO/PT).

Findings

Following Bourdieu's (1984) approach on how habitus intersects with the affective process of disconnecting, and through iterative discussion, we reached four themes in response to our research question: the affective ambience of connected and platform culture, including formations of boredom, unauthenticity, and conflictuality of the digital environment; the appropriation of (media) discourses on addiction and victimhood; and the formation of the value of disconnection influenced by parents and by peers.

Affective ambience of connected culture

A dormant sense of disenchantment (Petit, 2015) regarding the digital environment, particularly social media, was present among the participants. This often led to a self-reflective realization about the consequences of digital practices. In some cases, they perceived that excessive digital media use results in deteriorated well-being; or that some of their digital practices brought varied negative outcomes. These practices crystallized around social media platforms that are popular with youth. Instagram is first associated with disappointment with one's life or image, which seem worse when one sees the content posted on the platform. For example, 18-year-old António from Portugal decided to uninstall Instagram because he thinks "it is all about false images":

> Mainly about our physical appearance, we see other people online and we wish we were good-looking like them, and we end up not seeing what is good about us because we are only focusing on others. (Filipa, F17PT)

Norwegian participants articulated this sense of inauthenticity as constituted of bragging culture, FoMO, and the presentation of a false reality on social media (Gill, 2021). Susanna, a 17-year-old girl, says she gets "so upset!" when she sees how people use social media to "compete to show who's having the most fun"; Rebecca, 19, tells us she feels "like many people my age use social media to assert themselves. That you kind of show how much you have and how many fun things you do in a very superficial way."

A similar process is detailed about Twitter, which is described as a setting for violence and conflict rather than a debate on current affairs, for which people would prefer it were used. "Twitter is all about talking and getting into fights," says Isabel, a 15-year-old Portuguese girl; it is a space where "people are easily influenced and they like to denigrate and offend others," according to Bárbara, 17, also from Portugal. Bárbara suggests that there is an affective ambience of the platform that is contagious and that one might not want to be a part of so as not to have their mood affected.

These instances often lead to disappointment, lack of identification (e.g. Manel, M17PT), perception of uselessness, and frustration about being a part of this digital realm. For some of our interviewees, participation in social media is rendered as "very pointless—you spend time on things you don't have to spend time on" (Kai, F16NO).

Oftentimes, these narratives contained experiences of the meaninglessness of ending up in a flow state due to scrolling excessively through social media (Drusian et al., 2022). Boredom is frequently referred to as a trigger both to use and not to use social media (Paasonen, 2021): "Sometimes I wonder why I spend so much time on my smartphone. It's because I don't have anything to do, so I use to check things out," Raul (M16PT) reflects.

Interestingly, the most common narrative paradoxically connects boredom and time efficiency. On the one hand, most of the Portuguese and Norwegian participants say that a very alluring feature of digital media—playing games, watching videos, interacting with others—is filling dead time, thus providing immediate satisfaction. They adhere to an ideology of efficiency, whereby idleness is something negative—rather than necessary or inspiring—and it is believed that one should make the most out of every moment, either by being productive or having fun (Tiidenberg et al., 2017). Frustration and boredom arise when they use digital media more than intended; they also evaluate the rewards they gain according to the same ideology and conclude that it is not efficient (enough). Rebecca (F19NO) eloquently evaluates her experience of spending time online:

> I feel like I've been very unproductive. Not that I necessarily haven't done anything, but that I haven't done anything that I've found very pleasant. So, I think that you have to use the time sensibly, for example, if you do schoolwork or if you work and stuff. You can still use your time sensibly when doing something you like, like going for a walk, reading a book, or being with friends. But when I spend a lot of time on the phone, I feel like I'm not doing anything. I kind of fall between two stools: it's not productive, and it's not that much fun either, and it feels wasteful.

The realization that one is dedicating too much time to digital activities is sometimes associated with missing out on other activities such as studying, spending time with family and friends, or engaging in sports or hobbies. Rogério (M18PT) says social media, especially Instagram, are "a waste of time. I could have been doing other things"; Susanna (F17NO) illustrates how disconnection may allow for self-optimization:

> So, I've just chosen to set [social media] aside and talk to my family and those at home. Or go for a walk. And *work more on me* instead.

Positions on addiction and victimhood

To explicate the difficulties in changing their digital practices and regulating the time they spend online, participants easily resorted to a discourse based on a self-perception as an addict (Aharoni et al., 2021; Tiidenberg et al., 2017), or rather as victims of the technological apparatus. This discourse was formed by popular media and is articulated with young people's use of platforms.

As Rogério (M18PT) tells us, "these apps are made for this, to capture us. So, I got lost in loops of time"; his friend António (M18PT) says it is "that irrelevant stuff are the ones that make me an addict, it's because of them that I lose track of time." In our data, it became apparent that documentaries such as *The Social Dilemma* were appropriated

into everyday knowledge. António says he decided to disconnect after he "watched a Netflix documentary about social media." They have also watched "videos on YouTube" (Madalena, F18PT) or found "research, TED Talks, communities" (Tomás, M18PT) online about the topic. This influence is manifest in their vocabulary, particularly with the idea of the "toxicity" of social media:

> I don't need to uninstall it but maybe quit for a day or a few hours, because social media can be really toxic. (Margarida, F15PT)

Snapchat was one of the social media platforms that was mentioned as a contributor to increased usage by how it encourages continuous contact with friends and peers. In the Norwegian sample, Snapchat and TikTok were identified as particularly problematic. A 16-year-old Kai (F) told us:

> Streaks are very pressuring because you have to send at least two snaps to everyone you have Streak with so as not to lose them, also it is very negative because people get mad at you if you don't send Streak to them

but she also thinks "it's stupid that [a lot of parents] get mad at us because *it's hard not to*." Gaia's account is particularly rich in terms of the struggle she goes through with TikTok, again with a productivity lens:

> I'm on TikTok a lot, and there I look. I'm not doing anything; I'm just looking. Then, suddenly, I've been watching it for an hour, which is a lot! Think of how much I could have done, but I've just been sitting there looking at TikTok. It sounds so *stupid*, but I know I do it every day. And it's really *tiring*. And I *just want to throw away* my phone and just go somewhere. I go to many places, and I try to do it as often as I can. But the phone sticks to me, and I get *dragged* towards it all the time. It's *so hard* to put it down sometimes. (F16NO)

Kai and Gaia express how *hard* it is to either be or not to be on social media. Their negotiation of being victims of the social media design and dealing with pressures from parents to go offline, and from peers to remain in constant connection, is illustrative of the affective toll they experience.

Several participants mentioned the environment created by Covid-19 lockdowns as particularly draining because of its hyperconnectivity (Treré, 2021). Madalena (F18PT) says she "was mentally tired and couldn't look at any more screens" (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021). This external circumstance was also felt as putting an additional burden on the relationship with digital connectivity.

Family dispositions

According to their cultural and economic capital, families affect teenagers' availability to connected culture as part of their leisure as well as through direct mediation of the use of digital media. Among some of our participants, disconnection also occurred as regular or transitional experiences, attached to particular leisure events. This happened when

they had gone on vacation to somewhere without Internet access; scout camps where their phones were explicitly kept from them (Clara, F16PT); or sports competition or practice (e.g. swimming for Kai, F16NO; training for Nikita, F19NO; judo competition for Bárbara, F18PT). These experiences are part of their daily routines, or make an alternation on those very routines, which implied a decrease in their digital media usage and disconnected them, either intentionally (such as scout camps where access to smartphones or the Internet is not allowed) or as a consequence of the nature of the activity, where they are physically away from the media objects. In these events, unavailability to be connected refers to the whole of digital media.

Although our sample was not as socially diverse as we intended, it became apparent that these unevenly distributed, active, and social leisure alternatives among teenagers had an impact on their connectivity practices. The social contrast was starker in Portugal, a more unequal country than Norway; Portuguese participants Raul (M16) and Andreia (F16), for example, whose parents have undifferentiated jobs, tell us about their daily routines and leisure options revolve around videogames, for Raul, and television, for Andreia. The learned lifestyle from the family home influences the relevance of disconnection in teenagers' lives in terms of how they structure time but also for how these express moral choices by the family.

These events or micro-events generated awareness about the impact of one's digital practices and were reflexively presented as beneficial. As Drusian et al. (2022) found, although—or because—young people can show themselves as addicts of digital media, they enjoyed these transitional offline experiences. A 16-year-old Clara (PT) says she "enjoys it" at scouts' camps on weekends when "the leaders take away our smartphones, so we can enjoy the experience better and be with the group." These experiences then triggered a digital disconnection process of either moderation or abandonment of the use of certain apps and services.

When it comes to direct mediation by parents, consistency between their discourses toward their children's moderate media use and their practices was key. Some male participants in Portugal questioned their parents' authority on imposing rules about time spent online or advising to reduce digital media use, as themselves were avid users of smartphones and social media. In middle- to upper-class families, work was often given as an excuse by parents. Pedro (M16PT) says his father "is so ridiculous that sometimes he messages me on Discord to come down and have dinner." The coherence between discourse and practices seemed to be recognized as more influential among the Norwegian participants (mostly composed of girls), and some of the female participants in Portugal. If they are credible and especially if enforced smoothly, they become internalized:

> My rules are more social: I don't use a smartphone if I'm with someone. I think it's super rude to use your phone if you're with me. I don't use my phone at the table, especially when I'm having lunch with my family. [. . .] When I'm alone I don't have those rules, no. [. . .] Those rules were also imposed by my mother, technically. (Inês, F17PT)

> I think that my parents play a certain role. They themselves are not on any social media, and have, I'd say, a slightly strained relationship with it [. . .] Perhaps that from the beginning they have been quite consistent with the fact that the mobile should not be used at night, or that it

should be turned off. But I can control that myself now. Yes, so in a certain way they have been consistent, but I wouldn't say very strict either. [. . .] It is kind of like I have the same mindset that they have now: I feel like meeting a person face-to-face is kind of important, much more important than being on social media. For example, when you are actually with someone it is rude to use a mobile phone or to talk to others. There's something like, I don't know. It sticks somehow. (Dragana, F17NO)

Inês' and Dragana's accounts show how the family's moral influence builds up from the norms and habits in the home. In particular, how quality time with the family is valued and how practices that allow more social community with the family are carried out, such as putting away phones during dinner and at family gatherings, or prioritizing other media over the mobile phone in the evening (e.g. Kai, F16NO; Amalia, F17NO). This social community aspect seemed especially relevant for the female informants, again indicating their gendered role.

Peer forces

Peers place contradictory pressures on our respondents. On the one hand, those who are most connected pressure their peers to remain connected and make them feel left out of the group and activities if they do not follow them online. So, not adhering to a culture of connectedness means a likely risk of not taking part in the fun with friends, old and new, both in online interactions and offline encounters, which again feeds into social media. Kai (F16NO) explains, "at least among us young people, if you meet new people, it's like this: 'can I have your Snapchat?' So, I feel like there's an expectation that you must have social media to be able to communicate." Several of the informants brought up discourses about the weight of the connectivity norm among peers, where they are socially sanctioned if they failed to adhere to it. Online sharing of having fun together, which was seen by Norwegian participants as bragging and superficial, can be precisely what teenagers are allowed to take part in or miss out on:

> On social media, when my friends go out, they post stories—of someone falling off a bike, someone fighting, everyone laughing and having fun. And you want to be part of it. And then they message you and invite you to join them. And you feel amazing. (Tintim, M17PT)

> I can't completely cut because then you're out of it. (Susanna, F17NO)

Furthermore, digital communication was, for many, a way to keep in constant contact with friends (Fernández-Ardèvol et al., 2022; Gangneux, 2021), and thus, there were close relationships at stake if they were not connected. Several expressed sadness at seeing friends change because of their lack of presence in the digital world, while some felt more frustration at superficial relationships that broke down because they were not nourished digitally. This, along with the pressure to be available to friends permanently through social media, was especially vocalized by girls, thus indicating that there is a gendered position for girls that is more exposed to the expectations of maintaining such social ties to not sever them:

A friend complained that I wasn't online. She sent me 40 messages and I didn't answer. She needed me. I felt pressured. She wanted me to answer right away. (Margarida, F15PT)

It's a bit silly too because now that I'm not so much on social media I notice that people don't talk to me as much. I don't have the same relationships with people I had before. And I think that's *very tough* because it shows how much of the friendship is based on the contact that's on social media, and you lose it when you're not on social media. (Susanna, F17NO)

Susanna goes on to talk about another way in which peer pressure might deter disconnection: she says that people who delete Instagram or Snapchat are seen as "just making a statement and getting attention, and to be different from everyone else" and might thus be judged by peers. This example shows the flip side of the distinction mechanism of disconnection (Portwood-Stacer, 2013), which in teenage culture might be sanctioned instead of valued. Disengagement is thus preferred to more visible and radical ways of disconnecting.

On the other hand, peers might conduce to disconnection, intentionally or not. First, youngsters who have had disconnection experiences or feel negatively about their own digital practices may urge their peers to disconnect. They may raise this recommendation as a topic of conversation and provide motivation and strategies, or just tips, for managing or reducing one's use of digital media, especially social media:

One of my friends disconnected and it felt good to her. I thought I was getting into something bad [excessive digital media use]. It worked for her, so I thought it could work for me. I reached out to her and asked for advice. She was more radical. I manage my digital connection. I disconnected for a while and now I got back, and I feel good about it. (Margarida, F15PT)

Those who have succeeded in reducing digital media use report that acceptance from friends played a central role, either by having friends who disconnected or by disconnectivity being an accepted norm among peers (Neves et al., 2015). In these cases, disconnection was socially valued, and continuous availability was not expected, generating feelings of relief:

People are so used to me not answering because I'm either at training or reading, so they're kind of . . . well, no one reacts to it—that I don't answer the phone for a whole day. . . . Then it becomes *a relief* to me then that I don't have to—yes, I don't worry about it. (Nikita, F19NO)

[A female friend] helped me see that social media isn't so important, that you don't have to be so dependent on it. I have good support from those around me. When we hang out with friends, we're the ones who say we're going to put the phone away. (Kai, F16NO)

A group of friends from Portugal—Tomás, António, Davi, Rogério, and Tintim, all 18—showed how one—Tomás—appeared to be the initiator and leader of this movement. They distanced themselves from their more connected friends—which previous quotes indicated as a risk—and instead became closer to friends who were living or had lived similar experiences of disconnecting (Franks et al., 2018). In this case, the snowball sampling worked to illustrate such an effect of disconnecting socially:

> The disconnection process was easier because I had friends I could talk to, otherwise it would have been tricky. If we want to discuss a point of view, or share our difficulties, it is easier if we are trying to disconnect together, instead of alone. (António, M18PT)

However, disconnection may also arise out of friction and discomfort with others, originating both in online and offline situations. In our data, we found that this could happen with peers or was so imprecise that it could just refer to a fleeting mood to be on their own:

> I must have been upset with someone, or I didn't feel like talking, or I don't know . . . I could be upset, have a bad mood and I felt like uninstalling. And I did. (Sofia, F16PT)

Discussion

Through the lens of habitus, this study gained insight into how teenagers affectively experience the culture of connectivity as it is formed by a relationship with an economic and technological architecture, and influenced by the media, peers, and families. Our findings evidenced how disconnection may arise out of a latent feeling or of the unavailability created by how teenagers spend their leisure time on a regular basis or on holiday. On the one hand, we confirmed that teenagers relate to the affective formations of connectivity circulating as grand narratives (Paasonen, 2021; Tiidenberg et al., 2017). Our data particularly detected the incorporation of media discourses of the "techlash," whereby the architecture mechanisms of social media became an open black box, and "addiction" and "toxicity" became common terms. Media sets the tone for how emotions can be experienced (Illouz, 2008), although it does not determine them. Discourses on addiction and victimhood become positions that teenagers take up—and which can even be turned to their advantage to protect them, for example, in arguments with parents—or reject—in affirming themselves as autonomous—in how they manage their engagement with digital culture. In our participants' accounts, the prevailing popular narrative of addiction is combined with the perception of overuse—which can result in boredom, a sense of being overwhelmed, and exhaustion (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021)—and environmental circumstances (the hyperconnectivity brought about by the pandemic—Treré, 2021).

Our data also revealed how teenagers perceive the affective ambience of specific social media platforms, which may be inviting or repelling considering their particular moods or more broadly their forming self-identity. Although there were different popularity levels of social media platforms among young people—more Snapchat and TikTok for Norwegian youth, more Instagram for Portuguese youth—we found strong similarities across both countries, as evidence of a global culture of connectivity and "digital disaffect" (Petit, 2015) among teenagers. Oftentimes, though, this requires of teenagers an affective labor to deal with a temporally oppressive culture of permanent contact, imposed in particular by social media platforms and smartphones. This generation of teenagers struggles with the "always-on" lifestyle that defines it (Gill, 2021), resulting in states of wanting "to throw the phone away."

On the other hand, the possibilities to *not connect* are often ingrained in their daily routines and lifestyle choices, both facilitated by the family and negotiated with their

peer groups. Offline vacations or sports activities are also opportunities for reflexivity in relation to digital overuse, like digital detox or sabbaticals for young adults (Baym et al., 2020; Franks et al., 2018; Murumaa-Mengel and Siibak, 2019). What our findings reveal is how those possibilities were less available for teenagers in unprivileged circumstances in a less affluent and more unequal country (Portugal), who mentioned fewer and less diverse leisure alternatives. Furthermore, of particular salience was how families influence teenagers' perception of the value of connectivity by the norms they seek to enforce vis-à-vis their own digital media practices, and how they socialize as a family and with others.

Peer influence might extend and confirm the family dispositions, for instance, when participants express that they internalized norms from the home to abstain from using digital media when interacting with someone and follow those when with friends. Conversely, peers can negatively judge visible acts of disconnection and explicitly demand that teenagers remain constantly available. In the developmental stage of teenagerhood, and differently to studies with older participants (Neves et al., 2015), participants avoid being socially sanctioned or excluded, or regret the social impact of missing out on relationships or on the fun that takes place using the digital socially.

What our data also show, then, is how habitus works in complex and contradictory ways. In this respect, our study calls particular attention to the position of girls in the affective labor of managing dis/connectivity, as it illustrates that disconnection seems to be less available for young girls, whose gendered position makes them more connected to their friends on social media, but then also more prone to seeking to spend time with their families without their phones—expectations that may be at odds with each other.

Conclusion

Teenagers in our study were growing out of overconnection: they tried to gain distance from a culture of permanent contact, meaning they did not accept it as an unproblematic marker of a generation. Conversely, they grow into small acts of disconnection and disengagement from digital media, which are subject to negotiation in the different circles in which they live and thus can be reversed and adapted.

The contribution of this article is twofold. On the one hand, it exposes the complexity of affective and emotional processes of engagement with and disengagement from digital media in the situated context of teenagers. Borrowing from Paasonen (2021), we understand the dynamics between the culture of connectivity and individuals' engagement as being riddled with potentiality, in which, for instance, connectivity affects our moods, but our moods also affect our disposition to connect or disconnect. Disconnection might originate from the intention to be unavailable, or from moods about self and others. For teenagers, disconnection from digital media is not just a negation but rather an affective force that opens for something else (Karppi et al., 2021), be it enjoying time with their family or friends, or be it to spend time on their own. The management of the different forces that converge in the experience of connectivity, however, also manifests itself in a labor of affective nature that teenagers are still learning how to master in their autonomy and self-identity.

By looking at two distinct national contexts within the same continent, yet with remarkable socioeconomic differences, on the other hand, this article demonstrated the situated experiences of the hyperconnected culture and of disconnecting from it. Particularly through the Bourdieusian lens of habitus, our research foregrounds how teenagers' reflexive mindset regarding practices of dis/connectivity is shaped socially and, ultimately, how they can come to feel about connected culture. Disconnection takes different values and relevance for teenagers depending on the sociocultural environment they live in, including a moral economy as well as ascribed gender roles in relation to dis/connectivity.

By understanding how habitus informs disconnection practices, and how dealing with the culture of connectivity requires affective labor, we are also in a better position to understand how digital inequalities are reproduced. Taken together, these elements point to an unequal process where managing digital disconnection is an individual—but socially produced—moral obligation (Fast et al., 2021). Through this process, teenagers are called upon to self-govern, which may leave less privileged teenagers more exposed to drawbacks.

As an interview study, our sample was small, with a gender imbalance and partially through snowball—which might have explained some coincidence in referring to specific platforms; participants in the lower class would have been hard to recruit, but that was even harder under the pandemic restrictions on contacting schools, youth centers, or other. Future research might promote focus groups to explore more the imbrication of the fun and pleasurable with oppressive elements of digital culture or conduct digital ethnographies that capture the articulation of digital and face-to-face interaction.

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Note

1. Recent research (Gui and Büchi, 2021) has used the concept of "perceived digital overuse" as less pathological than others of Problematic Internet Use or addiction, and one that allows for a more subjective account of time spent online, rather than a hard-to-obtain objective one.

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