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To Scenes Through Screens? A Study of The Offline Club Digital Detox Community

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Abstract

As daily life, social relations, and labour increasingly unfold through digital media, users seek to regulate their digital engagement by adopting dumbphones, uninstalling applications, or participating in "digital detox." In high-connectivity contexts such as the Netherlands, digital disengagement has gained traction among middle-class citizens and expatriate professionals. This article examines how digital disconnection is commodified, socially valorised, and collectively experienced through a case study of The Offline Club (TOC), a Netherlands-based initiative offering curated digital detox events. Drawing on a netnographic approach, we analysed 35 posts on TOC's Instagram page, conducted participant observation at two events, and carried out nine semi-structured interviews with attendees. We argue that TOC constructs digital disconnection as a curated, temporary practice that unfolds within urban contexts where the role of digital technologies becomes increasingly ambiguous. While TOC markets disconnection as resistance to digital saturation, its own reliance on social media and platform infrastructure for outreach and legitimacy reveals a paradox of disconnection-through-connection. Our findings demonstrate how such initiatives both respond to and reproduce platform logics, simultaneously cultivating community while inadvertently reinforcing cycles of commodified digital non-use. From a digital humanist perspective, we critique the limitations of initiatives like TOC that offer symptomatic relief without addressing the structural conditions of digital dependency. While participants may temporarily reclaim attention and presence, the broader socio-technical systems that underpin digital overload remain unchallenged, raising critical questions about the efficacy and politics of commercialised digital detox movements.

Keywords

digital dependency; digital detox; digital disconnection; the Netherlands; The Offline Club

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, the everyday use of digital devices has become an integral aspect of both public and private life. With an internet penetration rate of 99%, one of the highest in the world alongside Norway and Denmark (Statista, 2025), digital engagement is deeply embedded in societal routines. This widespread adoption is both a driver and a consequence of government-led digitalization initiatives such as the *Values-Driven Digitalisation Work Agenda* (Digital Government, 2024), which is part of the broader Dutch digitalization strategy. However, in response to the pervasive nature of digital technologies and social media, some individuals actively seek temporary disconnection through "digital detox" (Syvertsen, 2022).

What is also referred to as voluntary digital disengagement takes place as a temporary withdrawal on an individual level (Syvertsen, 2022). However, recent forms of digital disengagement reflect initiatives in the form of corporate action on a collective level, hinting at an emerging trend in the market of self-growth, self-optimization, and well-being (Syvertsen, 2022; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). The Netherlands-based initiative, The Offline Club (TOC), is a prime example of such practices. While TOC mirrors an already existing trend in the tourism industry where digital disconnection is an actively sought experience (Stäheli & Stoltenberg, 2022), it is the initiative's persisting high-profile social media presence with over 400 thousand Instagram followers (data from November 2024) that creates tensions around the role and meaning of technology.

Multiple studies in digital disconnection research highlight "authenticity" as a desirable benefit, one increasingly packaged and sold as a commodity through digital detox retreats, camps, textual guides, and self-growth literature (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). Whereas initiatives like TOC also seem to transform the individual aims for digital disconnection in hyperconnected digitalized societies into a collective experience, little has been studied on the content of these initiatives' activities as well as their seemingly paradoxical commodified role on digital platforms, which they in principle oppose (Syvertsen, 2022).

The present study explores contemporary collective practices of digital disconnection through a case study of a growing high-profile digital disconnection initiative by asking: How does TOC frame digital disconnection in its discourse and practices of "digital detox"? "Discourse" here is understood as a social practice consisting of semiotic and linguistic figures pertaining to social processes and problems (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, as cited in Gölbaşı, 2017, pp. 7–8).

A significant transformative point in digital disconnection research stems from resisting the outdated habit of perceiving digital non-use as fully constitutive of one's identity as either a user or a non-user, but rather acknowledging that non-use is a constantly negotiated and fluid process that individuals engage in, which involves both (Baumer et al., 2015). This means that research on digital non-use requires a new approach studying other phenomena or practices that substitute the absent interaction with technology instead of focusing solely on the motivations and strategies of technology non-use (Baumer et al., 2015). With the approach proposed here, we not only examine why people practice digital disconnection but also explore the content of their TOC experiences, focusing on how they engage in and experience "digital detox" practices.

This study contributes to debates on the commodification and paradoxes of digital disconnection by examining TOC, a "digital detox" initiative that operates at the intersection of online visibility and offline

experience. Unlike previous research that centres on commercial digital detox tourism or individual disconnection practices, this empirical study highlights how disconnection is collectively produced within an urban, platform-dependent environment. TOC's reliance on social media for marketing and coordination exposes a central paradox in practice: Participants seek distance from technology through infrastructures that simultaneously sustain and commercialise their desire to disconnect. By tracing how users and organisers navigate this tension, the study shows that digital disconnection is not merely a temporary withdrawal but a mediated practice shaped by platform logics, commodified authenticity, and collective negotiations of meaning.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Digital Disconnection Research and Critiques

Within academic debates on non-participation in digital media and practices of digital disconnection, scholars have explored users' motivations and strategies for disengaging from technology, often framed through the notion of "digital detox" (Nguyen et al., 2022; Schoenebeck, 2014). Foundational ethnographies, such as Fish's (2017) critical analysis of commercial digital-detox camps, reveal how withdrawal from connectivity has been commodified, transforming disconnection into a purchasable experience of authenticity, mindfulness, and moral renewal. Related work in tourism and leisure studies has conceptualised "digital detoxing" as a form of wellness or slow tourism, where temporary disconnection is marketed as emotional repair within capitalist logics of productivity and self-optimization (Quaye, 2025).

A recurring argument across this scholarship is that digital dualism, understood as the assumption of clear boundaries between online and offline realities, is no longer viable as users inhabit hybrid technological assemblages where complete withdrawal or genuine disconnection is neither practical nor desirable (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019; Schoenebeck, 2014; Syvertsen, 2022). Building on this, Kuntsman and Miyake (2019) articulate the paradox of dis/connection, arguing that disengagement exists on a continuum shaped by privilege, mobility, and infrastructural access.

Yet, most analyses still treat disconnection primarily as an act of individual withdrawal, a luxury commodity for the privileged or a population governance tool (Beattie & Cassidy, 2020), rather than a potentially activist or transformative practice embedded in the everyday urban public spaces. This article advances the debate by situating disconnection within the framework of digital humanism, understood not as a moral prescription but as an analytical lens through which to examine how "humane technology" discourses repackage digital well-being within neoliberal ideologies of self-management and personal responsibility. In doing so, it contributes to critical scholarship that reframes disconnection as a site of social negotiation and political expression rather than a mere escape from technological life.

2.2. Digital Humanism

As an interdisciplinary framework, digital humanism focuses on the intersections between technology, power dynamics, and human values. This approach advocates for recognizing the constraints of technological power structures while emphasizing the critical importance of human-centered principles in guiding societal development (Coeckelbergh, 2024; Prem, 2024). Digital humanism, thus, underscores the

need to integrate ethical considerations into digital innovation, emphasizing the preservation of human dignity, agency, and equity as central to technological advancement. However, depending on the communication tools that digital humanist projects utilise to take part in the initiative, one may still have to engage with larger digital platforms passively, advancing "a political, economical, or organisational agenda set by someone other than the participant" (Casemajor et al., 2015, p. 856). In a case of such online engagement labour, efficient data are produced for sustaining platform economics and technology monopolies (Casemajor et al., 2015; Prem, 2024). Here, Casemajor et al.'s (2015) framework of mediated political action allows for understanding political action in digital humanist initiatives more concretely. It extends traditional forms of participation by illuminating the potential risks of surveillance capitalism and the disempowering forms of interaction enacted through digital disconnection. The framework does so by acknowledging the impact of digital media's sociotechnical ecology by perceiving political action in passive and active engagements, revealing an under-theorised area in media studies and the empowering nature of non-participation in the political action dimension.

Similarly, Syvertsen (2022) recognizes this platform-dependent process of mobilisation as dilemmatic since it requires participants to spend more time online instead of less. She observes that most digital detox initiatives' social media profiles are "low-profile" (Syvertsen, 2022, p. 665), containing only logistical information on attendance and promised benefits of a detox.

An attempt to counter this paradox through an analysis of a similar case aims to contribute to discussions of digital humanism by identifying where power is constituted—particularly in the form of technological engagement that Baumer et al. (2015) describe as "less categorical and more fluid in nature" (p. 54). This perspective then highlights the nuanced ways individuals navigate their digital interactions.

2.3. Neoliberalism, Escapism, and Commodification of Disconnection

Hesselberth (2017) and Natale and Treré (2020) argue that critique of and resistance to digital capitalism in the form of digital disengagement and disconnection from technology fails to act as political action and ultimately contributes to the neoliberalist project of privatizing solutions to societal problems. As a product of consumer activism that only creates new market opportunities, this phenomenon relates to the neoliberalist model of governmentality where "individuals are unapologetically held accountable for their own (mis)use of technology, and therewith for their time-waste and burnouts, as if these can be divorced from the newly emerged economy of attention and the technological milieu that sustains it" (Hesselberth, 2017, p. 1998). Through a case of a detox camp, Natale and Treré (2020) note how participants often come from a middle or high-class background and engage in digital disconnection only temporarily. Such a practice is usually followed by a return to a technology-sustained lifestyle in a "re-charged" state that increases one's productivity, thus maintaining the capitalist status quo. They conceptualise the activist and emancipatory potential of digital disconnection within escapism and nostalgia, arguing it is frequently undermined and absorbed by the mechanisms of digital capitalism which present disconnection as a harmless retreat associated with authenticity, mindfulness, and nostalgia (Natale & Treré, 2020, p. 628).

Similarly, when consumption becomes the central organizing principle of modern life, individuals are positioned not only as consumers of products but also as managers of their own risks and well-being. Within this framework, social and structural pressures, such as technological overload, constant availability, and

information fatigue, are reframed as matters of personal responsibility rather than collective concern. As a result, users are encouraged to engage in forms of self-regulation and behavioural optimization, internalizing the neoliberal logic that well-being and balance can be achieved through individual discipline and mindful consumption (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). Technological fixes such as social media limitation apps, self-help literature, or tools that minimize online engagement (e.g., "dumbphones"; Ghita & Thorén, 2021) perpetuate the neoliberal notion of a capitalistic society, commodifying various facets of the less technological past. Instead of user empowerment, the need to cope with technology oversaturation is constructed by economic actors and its solution becomes possible through consumption of commodities, resulting in individuals' self-regulation of digital use (Ghita & Thorén, 2021). Such practices relate to modes of self-optimization (Moe & Madsen, 2021) and responsibilization (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019) where temporary digital disconnection for cultivating one's authentic self through a consumer experience analogous to a self-growth seminar becomes a risk and a responsibility of an individual, not the state.

Lastly, commodification similarly represents a crucial part of the contemporary discourse on digital disconnection, since it allows for seeing digital disconnection as business opportunities and brings commercial appeal to packaged phenomena of authenticity and nostalgia (Syvertsen, 2022). Perceiving events organized by TOC as experiences of digital disconnection through the lens of commodification allows for identifying various layers of their commodified role (Syvertsen, 2022) as well as how their influence on individuals' identities manifests in their everyday life expressed beyond platform-mediated discourse of #digitaldetox on Instagram (Geber et al., 2025; Jorge, 2019) and Reddit (Parry et al., 2025).

Therefore, it is also the goal of this article to investigate the temporal, spatial, social, and technological contexts in which TOC's digital disconnection events take place and similarly question the underlying ideologies embedded in these practices.

3. Methodology

The study first studies TOC's virtual spaces through critical discourse analysis combined with participant observation. As the community expands into physical settings, event ethnography and semi-structured interviews serve as primary methods of data collection, with the resulting material analysed through inductive thematic coding. Such liquidity and multiplicity of field sites are crucial for netnography, which seeks to capture phenomena that unfold across dispersed arenas, tracing the meaning of communities not confined to a single spatial setting (Kozinets & Nocker, 2018).

Netnography is a methodology rooted in ethnographic principles of participant observation, adapted to online environments (Kozinets, 2015). This study provides the overarching framework through which diverse methods are mobilised, offering a nuanced lens on how individuals and communities interact, share narratives, engage in exchanges, follow online norms, participate in rituals, develop discursive styles, collaborate, and express creativity (Kozinets, 2015). Complementing this, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and online research enable a deeper exploration of attitudes and perceptions that shape worldviews and social meanings (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014). Within this inductive approach, methods such as event ethnography are applied flexibly and reflexively as the research unfolds with the iterative process of data collection and analysis opening new avenues of inquiry (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014).

3.1. Data Collection and Sampling

Virtual communities as social groups can be defined by their network nature constrained by audiovisual sites, social networks or platforms, mailing lists, gaming environments, or instant message spaces (Kozinets, 2002). In this project, data is collected from two field sites (both online and offline environments constructed around TOC events) through participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews as tools of netnographic methodologies. These data accommodate online content produced by TOC organizers such as newsletters, online event invites, posts, descriptions, and videos on Instagram (a primary platform and marketing tool to spread awareness about their activities and grow their audience). Discussions by online users in comments under TOC content are also considered.

Concentrating individuals from different societal layers in one place increases interaction between infrastructures and people; thus, with event ethnography as a form of ethnographic method, we also explore the power and prestige economies between higher class and ordinary people in TOC's physical events (see Table 1) as well as the prevailing norms or specific ways participants negotiate their identities, belonging, and matters important to them (Koch, 2023).

Table 1. Demographic information about interviewed participants from two TOC events in the Netherlands (in Utrecht on May 7th, 2024, and Amsterdam on May 22nd, 2024).

Participant	Gender	Age	Occupation	Nationality	Participation in TOC events
Sophie	Female	22	University student	The Netherlands	Twice
Gabriel	Male	35	Data scientist in a non-profit organisation	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Once
Mila	Female	34	PhD student	Croatia	Once
Rose	Female	26	University researcher and lecturer	International (non-Dutch)	Once
Tim	Male	40	Wedding photographer and spiritual coach	The Netherlands	Three times
Hana	Female	30	Shop owner and business development manager	Taiwan	Once
Emilia	Female	33	Process engineer in a biopharmaceutical company	Poland	Eight times
Jennifer	Female	22	University student	The Netherlands	More than four times
Tara	Female	34	Salesperson and music producer	North Macedonia	Twice

Through participant observation and event ethnography, the main author engaged directly with participants, gaining deeper insight into their experiences, emotions, and perspectives by taking part in the same events (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014). This immersive approach provided a broader contextual understanding and helped mitigate potential biases during in-depth interviews while enabling triangulation across ethnographic methods, allowing for more flexible research approaches (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014).

Interview data from TOC event participants were collected through convenience sampling as time and space constraints of the two TOC events allowed for limited interaction. Participants were approached in person during the events, informed about the project's aims, and invited to take part in a voluntary interview. Additionally, some participants were contacted via LinkedIn with their details accessed through the guest list on Luma, the event-hosting platform TOC used for ticket sales.

The interview questions explored participants' digital use and non-use habits as well as their motivations and attitudes toward TOC's activities. Particular attention was given to the role of TOC's promotional materials and language in shaping participants' perceptions of digital disconnection and technology as a broader cultural force.

3.2. Data Analysis

The data analysis process was divided into two parts—critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis, from which larger themes were derived.

For critical discourse analysis of online content created by initiative organizers, van Dijk's (1993) framework of critical discourse analysis principles was applied, commonly used for analysing media discourses. This framework helps understand how the discourse present in this online content is formed by the broader social, political, and economic context in which the company operates, as well as the way ideology, social power, and dominance are produced through social practices and institutions. Apart from political, military, and legal bodies, Simpson and Mayr's (2010) interpretation of power as a way of coercing control over values and ideas allows for recognising businesses as legitimate actors of dominance and power.

The discourses created by TOC (their social media profiles, newsletters, posts and videos, as well as comments by other users under TOC's posts) were subject to critical discourse analysis. In addition, data collected through event ethnography were analysed simultaneously. Finally, an important part of this analysis required identifying the present framing techniques that shape participant mobilisation as proposed by Snow et al. (1986) through determining the problem, the values embedded in the problem, and the proposed solutions by the framing agent.

In the second half, the interviews data were analysed using thematic analysis based on two TOC event case studies. This data-driven, bottom-up approach involved identifying meaningful codes and constructing themes as recurring patterns and relationships between codes emerged. The analysis followed the widely used framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), which entails familiarising oneself with the empirical data, generating initial codes, searching for and reviewing themes, and refining them into a coherent narrative that captures the essence of participants' experiences.

3.3. Ethics and Positionality

To gain access to the TOC events, the main author purchased two student tickets with her own resources. She recorded data for participant observation through handwritten note-taking of observed actions and social interactions to maintain the participants' anonymity. Interactions with participants-interviewees for this research originated through consociation as an incidental association with a nearby person during the

author's participation in TOC events. Still, participants involved in this research were aware of her positioning as a researcher as conversations advanced and their data was anonymized by allocating pseudonyms. Confidentiality and privacy of all interviewed participants were respected by securing signed informed consent forms during the interview process and storing the collected data in a safe environment.

4. Findings

4.1. The Paradox of Anti-Tech Narratives and TOC's Online Content Curation

Since February 2024, TOC has organised digital detox events in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, Denmark, Spain, Italy, and the United Arab Emirates, reaching over 10 million users on digital platforms. Their online presence is distributed across various virtual spaces: on Instagram and their website, on the event-hosting platform Luma, and LinkedIn. In June 2024, TOC's Instagram held 35 posts with videos or photographs featuring their past and future events. Approximately half of the posts were in the form of a "reel," a short vertical video containing a short text in the frame accompanied by a small description about the event's details such as the venue or anecdotes from participants. It is precisely in these descriptions as well as TOC's other promotional materials like newsletters, founders' LinkedIn posts, and podcasts where certain recurring phrases and words construct an overarching rhetoric of crisis and anti-technology radicalism, framing the role of technology as a source of distraction.

For example, TOC's posts describe the status quo through a rhetoric of "today's rushed and ever-connected society" where "the world is screaming for more connection and less time spent on our phones" as included in the introduction paragraphs of many of their posts, which construct a rather pessimistic image of the current climate. As a result, TOC's symbolic language creates a sense of urgency and dramatically highlights the problem's acuteness. TOC also often returns to an idealized past in their posts, resonating with many who, in the comments, yearn for a time when limited technology use was the norm. This nostalgia then mirrors in TOC's posts: "People in Amsterdam are reliving the 90s," it says under one of their reels.

Through the rhetoric of crisis, adopting an authoritative role of saviours and responding to nostalgic feelings evoked by users, TOC instills a need in its audience that can be fulfilled through a commercial purchase of a ticket to one of their events. As a result, it is furthermore the "break from technology" rather than a long-term lifestyle that dominates TOC's discourse when describing digital disconnection and in a *301 Podcast* episode "Ilya Kneppelhout—The 100 Million People Offline Club," TOC's founder Ilya says: "We're not for a fully offline lifestyle. We aim to inspire an offline lifestyle for people to do it more often and mainly to become conscious of it, of your own behaviour and your relationship to your screens" (Engel, 2020–2025). Similarly, the boxed container where phones are put and locked during the events is referred to TOC as a "phone hotel" which reinforces the idea of surrendering one's phone for a temporary period (de Kievit, 2024).

Not advocating for a phone-free lifestyle but promoting a temporary possibility for digital disconnection purchased through commercial means contradicts another dominant aspect in TOC's discourse. A rhetoric of anti-tech radicalism is present in most of the reels and their description, demonizing phones and social media and often in a style that misleads the user about the true course of their events. There, participants distance themselves from their phones only to reclaim them after a few hours.

By frequently using phrases such as “bloody phones,” “bloody app,” or a no-phone zone emoji, the authors present technology negatively. These rhetorical strategies contribute to TOC’s image as strong anti-tech radicalists, which allows them to build on existing global radical discourse against technologies. Moreover, they instil a sense of controversy in users online, especially when such discourse is mediated by technologies that are criticised, thus building greater user interest and engagement on the platform (Kim & Ihm, 2019).

The use of resolution language demonstrates how TOC frames the way participants relate to technology use: “Over 1000 people have dumped their phone and gone offline with us,” “people in Amsterdam are done with their phones,” or “we aim to inspire people to unplug from digital devices.” Phrases like “dump,” “unplug,” or “to be done with” evoke a sense of resolution and radical non-use of technology rather than the idea of a “break from technology” that TOC organisers promote. However, digital disconnection practiced during the TOC events is always temporary and ends with the moment of returning phones to the participants, which suggests that TOC’s rejection of technology through language functions deceptively as it is never followed by phrases of “replugging” or “going back online.”

Considering the fact that TOC’s anti-tech radicalism rhetoric is published through a social media platform and mediated to individuals through a computer or a smartphone, there are other dilemmatic contradictions. An extensive use of hashtags that often refer to purely online communities (e.g., #bookstagram), a Spotify playlist created by TOC and promoted on their Instagram that can be played only through interacting with a smartphone or a computer and sentences like “follow @theoffline_club for tips and inspo to spend less time on your phone” become all an object of critique, as they encourage phone interaction and contain ambiguous language that is both against and reinforcing of technology use.

By engaging in preemptive self-critique, founders reflect on their position and content curation practices to gain control over their own narrative; they give unverifiable solutions to critiques regarding their own positionality (through statements such as “we have a rule for ourself to bulk our Instagram usage to max 30 minutes a day”) or respond diplomatically with the “break from technology” rhetoric (through messages such as “thank you for your valuable input! It’s a difficult subject. We hope to inspire people to go offline more often and change the relationship they have with social media and their phones, rather than stopping to use those completely”).

Moreover, the way TOC founders acknowledge this dichotomy of “promoting digital disconnection events on social media” themselves is by adopting it as part of their marketing strategy embedded in their rhetoric of success. What founders label as “irony” becomes incorporated into their branding narrative whenever they talk about their growing success and reaching people online: “We can’t believe that in just three months, we (ironically) went viral around the world” (The Offline Club, n.d.) or “it’s absolutely insane what’s happening right now but also ironic how the offline club is going viral online” (Engel, 2020–2025). As a form of self-serving bias, such rhetoric is only reflected through emotional language of astonishment that emphasises the positive effects of social media presence, such as user engagement, while omitting criticised implications like contributing to the attention economy of social media platforms and their parent companies (Zulli, 2017). Though such rhetoric contradicts their anti-tech radical stance, the presence of technology in their content curation becomes normalised and accepted by many users as a necessary compromise in statements such as “it’s ironic to have this online but totally necessary 🙏” or “ironic, but glad the message is out.”

4.2. TOC "Community" and "Movement" as a Marketing Strategy

While it is logical that increased awareness about their events results in more tickets sold, the commercial nature of TOC's activities is not an implicit element in their online discourse and rather blends in with their rhetoric of "community" and "movement." In TOC's Instagram posts, several language choices help create an image of motivated people contributing to an emerging community or a social movement that is driven by values of human connection and smaller technological distractions, yet these images are still based around their brand and activities. With abstract statements like "we all quit our full-time jobs to focus on the offline movement for 100%" or "we're thrilled to take our community and this movement to another level and bring the world more meaning, joy and offline vibes," TOC desires to position themselves as part of a social change rather than a business venture by contrasting TOC with pursuing a full-time career, aiming to create a perception that the two are contradictory.

Furthermore, TOC evades lexical choices such as "company," "business," or "organisation" that elicit an element of maximizing profit, and instead opts for popular phrases such as "no-phone party" or those evoking a sense of religiosity, for instance by calling one of their detox sessions a "no-phone sanctuary." Such phrases make it easier to create an image of a growing community bounded by singular values.

Still, images of a community resonate with experiences of participants like Tara, Jennifer, and Emilia, who attend TOC events regularly to escape loneliness by feeling the presence of other people and make new social connections. Tara and Emilia also share Jennifer's sentiment on joining the events repeatedly: "It really becomes a community after you visit a couple of The Offline Clubs because you start to recognize people." As organisers of TOC events created a safe space for meaningful conversation with strangers, these events also attracted participants with an international background who wanted to make new acquaintances.

For a Dutch university student, Sophie, not having her phone was an obstacle, as it normally allows her to express herself better in conversations: "Not being able to show things on your phone is really annoying because for me, it's such a big part of communicating with people." Although for the majority, such absence of technological distractions facilitated "deeper" and more enjoyable interactions. For Gabriel, making conversation in this context felt pleasant, as it reminded him of the past:

> Before we had internet on the phones and wanted to find out about something during a conversation, it was impossible, so you actually had to think to get along with the amount of information available, which I really do enjoy.

TOC events were also a source of belonging for a majority of the interviewed participants due to the presence of other people with similar values and motivations for attending. Tara, a North Macedonian salesperson and music producer, attended two TOC events because she lacked the feeling of being part of a community: "My whole family is back in Macedonia. And, you know, just being around people is something that I really miss." Gabriel, Emilia, and Tara also described how hard it is to maintain friendships outside of their home countries, especially if one relocates regularly or it is their friends who move away. Emilia, a process engineer from Poland, felt the need to socialise more when five of her friends left the city, and through MeetUp, an app that helps organise events for people with similar interests (MeetUp, n.d.), Emilia discovered TOC. Since then, she attended eight events and was able to maintain newly found social connections: "I'm trying to do it

regularly right now as it gives me a lot of rest from the mental load as well as the connection…and if someone's coming back, we are in touch."

4.3. "Performing Digital Detox": A Ritual for Unique Experiences Without Technology

On TOC events, the main rule states that all participants must surrender their phones for a couple of hours after entering the digital detox space. Furthermore, the event is divided into separate segments of what TOC calls "time to connect" and "time to yourself," accounting for a period for socialising and a period for solitary activities. Such a formal division used in almost all of TOC's events was perceived by most participants through the lens of a performative ritual—a group of people bound by a collective act of surrendering phones and a unique experience, rather than a part of their lifestyles.

Mila, a PhD student, perceived the act of giving up phones collectively as "part of a ritual," especially when she decided to leave her phone at home instead of bringing it to the digital detox event. She felt that not having her phone locked in a phone hotel with other phones was perceived as "taboo" by the organisers, hinting at the paternalistic structure of the events: "Someone has to tell you what to do because it's assumed that people don't know what to do if they don't have their phones."

Perceiving TOC events as unique experiences rather than tools for radical lifestyle change was a shared perspective that also later became digitally mediated, as participants shared photographs from these events on social media to preserve personal memories and connect with their digital social circles.

5. Discussion

5.1. TOC' s Dilemmatic Mobilisation

What Syvertsen (2022) calls "dilemmatic mobilisation" manifests itself in this case study as a larger phenomenon. In an attempt to mobilise support and generate interest from potential attendees of a "digital detox," the presented dilemma stems from the need to access this information online with a certain amount of online time, counterproductive to the goal of digital disconnection. As a practical example, previous studies recorded only low-profile initiatives with minimal social media presence reaching a maximum of 1,000 followers (Syvertsen, 2022). In the case of TOC, their social media presence appears "high-profile"—reaching 250,000 Instagram followers within four months of existence. Therefore, TOC is a unique case of potentially deliberate use of the platform's affordances. Furthermore, TOC's rhetoric of self-serving bias allowed them to maintain dominance in the digital disconnection discourse by framing their online presence as a cost with a suggested benefit of the most ideal marketing strategy that reaches potential attendees through a platform they are trying to 'detox' from (TOC, n.d.).

However, findings showed that the majority of interviewed participants discovered TOC activities either through a different platform, did not have social media accounts, or used them sporadically. As a form of online spectacle, TOC content produces new data for the platform's commercial processes embedded in the structures of surveillance capitalism, where user data is traded for profit as the main mode of commercial operation (Zuboff, 2015).

Furthermore, what contributes to a heightened sense of dilemmatic mobilisation in this case is TOC's act of "nudging" attendees to follow their newsletter, share photos from events, and tag them in their posts, as well as TOC's wide array of additional promotional materials such as music playlists that can only be played through a phone or a laptop. Indeed, critical discourse analysis applied to TOC's offline and online discourse showed that they engaged in "ambiguous contemporary activism" (Casemajor et al., 2015), which describes initiatives that do not counter social change on a structural level but through mitigating the harms of individuals and society.

Highlighting cases that show how non-participation "can also be empowering," Casemajor et al.'s (2015, p. 853) framework of mediated political action considers the socio-technical ecology of digital media, distinguishing between active and passive forms of non-participation that, as a form of political action, contest exploitative ways of digital participation. Because TOC's modes of operation are dependent on Instagram for marketing and communication purposes, our critique centers around the way TOC engages in passive participation as a form of platform engagement that makes one susceptible to activities outside their control. Thus, when TOC produces Instagram content that is liked, shared, or engaged with, they are also "producing data that will be captured, analyzed and utilized toward the company's goals" ("company" meaning the platform Instagram; Casemajor et al., 2015, p. 856). Furthermore, additional online activities encouraged by TOC, such as engaging with email or Spotify, are also pervasively surveilled and create both greater social control and economic profit for these platforms (Casemajor et al., 2015).

5.2. Exchange-Value in Digital Disconnection Experiences: Paradoxical Responsibilisation and Commodification of Authenticity

As a form of late modern governing, responsibilisation counters for self-regulating behaviour of an individual to prevent health and safety-related risks like media pervasiveness (Moe & Madsen, 2021; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). By practicing digital disconnection, one becomes part of a self-regulating society where the mitigation of the pervasive technology's impact is one's own responsibility rather than of the company that designed the pervasive elements into the technology in the first place (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019).

The findings of this study mirrored a plethora of examples for such responsibilisation. These were rooted in the experiences of TOC events as a way of increasing self-awareness about one's relationship with technology as well as outside the TOC events as part of a longer self-improvement journey that the interviewees managed individually. From the perspective of TOC and other digital detox businesses, such a process benefits their aims as their common goals evade birthing grass-roots movements or accomplishing political change, whereas the communicated rhetoric of a movement, community, and socio-cultural change (i.e., TOC's rhetoric on Instagram) becomes merely a self-serving tool to these companies (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). However, for the user who interacts with TOC content, the pressures and risks become multi-layered, hidden, and unaddressed by TOC founders, as they publicly do not critique platforms' commercial processes and merely applaud the engagement these platforms' algorithms help them achieve.

With digital disconnection as a commodified experience, where one usually needs to pay to participate, capital is the lens through which the worth of things is estimated as a defining element of a capitalist culture (Felluga, 2015). In TOC's rhetoric, specific range goals are promised such as achieving productivity, focus, calm, and human connection. Communicated as unique experiences achievable through a commodified practice of a digital disconnection, Syvertsen and Enli (2019) similarly speak of authenticity and nostalgia

which were mentioned by both founders and users as a promise and an object of desire, now a commodified version of an idealised present based on the past.

For the expatriate individuals, the digital detox events became social hubs through a collective performance of a digital disconnection taking place in a common café or restaurant. Isolated from the outside, they create a contrast between the inside and outside world, and so, with such escapism, this "digital detox" is followed by an immediate return to the status quo when all participants retrieve their phones and go back home (Natale & Treré, 2020).

Although the events are based in the city, they are not part of public space accessible to everyone, creating a closed society and an exclusive community. The isolated nature of these events and their temporality brings up another critical point of exclusivity and access. While TOC, as a structured social practice, holds onto specific formats of organisation, there is less space for spontaneity in terms of exploring digital disconnection on collective terms. There is only organised individual experimentation in terms of participation, managed by each visitor separately, while one is ruled by the rigid instructions of self-time and socialising time segments. Thus, the collective impact may therefore appear too superficial and ineffective, as it remains in the form of a unique experience, a commodity, and not a fluid social movement without hierarchy.

5.3. Commodified Digital Disconnection Experiences Through the Lens of Digital Humanism

As digital humanists call for improving the connection between humans and technology through analysing power relations, it might be assumed that regular temporary digital disconnection already allows humans to maintain control over the pervasive media (Prem, 2024). Though with the heightened pressures of responsibilisation that participants become part of through TOC events, it is also key to incorporate the possibility of greater control already into the design of tech companies' technologies such as deliberately designing features that allow people to easily disconnect (Nguyen et al., 2022, p. 17). While some participants of this study called such an approach to a "healthier" human-technology relationship a process of "inventing the solution within the problem" (Gabriel, Mila), it nonetheless conforms to one of the main principles of digital humanism as voiced by Prem (2024, p. 2): "Digital technology should be aligned with human goals and values." This approach accounts for a more human-centric ethical perspective that safeguards human values in the process of producing these technologies, apart from regulating them after their potentially harmful effects materialise through use.

While our findings support the fact that digital disconnection on one's own and in a collective setting significantly contribute to a sense of self-awareness about one's relationship with technology, in its digital humanist approach, this article primarily highlights and critiques the pervasive role of platforms embedded in multiple operational levels of digital disconnection initiatives. When digital detox initiatives depend on social media platforms for their mode of operation, both the company and users interacting with its content engage in passive participation as a form of contribution to the commercial activities of the platform, making them susceptible to activities outside their control. Therefore, we call for greater transparency and efforts to create an environment that deeply reflects on the core of the digital (dis)connection issue and not merely on its symptoms.

Lastly, we should keep in mind how initiatives like TOC reinforce the idea that true human connection is disappearing because of the constant presence of technology. Such a perspective risks accepting the realities that created the problem of connection in the first place, tolerating the design of obtrusive systems in which the attempts to counter media pervasiveness still emerge and operate. To retrace the desired reality of the past, the solution does not lie in new commodified walkarounds that increase the need for responsibilisation and only treat the symptoms through a temporary digital withdrawal while creating new sources of commodified dependency. If we want meaningful connections back, we must seek to change the tools that humanity designed in a meaningless way.

6. Conclusion

This multi-layered study of a digital detox company, TOC, demonstrates how its discourse frames digital disconnection as a temporary practice in urban spaces where the role and effect of technology become ambiguous and unstable due to TOC's paradoxical online presence and its embedded presence at their physical events. Furthermore, an analysis of participants' motivations, attitudes, and experiences of digital disconnection gave voice to diverse personal narratives of digital detox participants and recorded their desires for digital disconnection, such as a yearning for belonging, more authentic sociality, and a space for self-reflection and self-development in a collective setting.

Findings also suggest that digital disconnection is perceived as an isolated ritual and a tool for understanding one's relationship with technology. By building on existing theories of digital disconnection, commodified authenticity, and neoliberalism, the article emphasizes how human control of media pervasiveness is enacted through self-management of technology use, hinting at increased pressures and lack of responsibility when engaging in TOC activities for the practice of digital disconnection.

On a more general level, this work addressed the role and value of corporate action in achieving social change in the case of commodified experiences of digital disconnection with a mode of operation embedded within the dominant digital platforms. It analysed and critiqued power relations manifested in the online and offline environments that emerge in the way digital detox initiatives such as TOC operate, such as through the commodification of social experience and dependency on social media platforms for marketing and branding purposes.

For this project, an approach combining netnography and multiple qualitative methods of critical discourse analysis, thematic analysis of interview data, and event ethnography provided extensive ground for a thorough investigation that countered both the online and offline environment with equal attention. We produced in-depth empirical data on the contemporary popular practice of digital disconnection in the Netherlands and critically reflected on the role of commodified technology non-use in a previously unstudied setting of an urban collective event, highlighting the impact and challenges of the digital modes with which the initiative paradoxically operates while keeping the user's role in the foreground.

However, the study faced several limitations. Despite repeated outreach to TOC through multiple channels and in-person encounters, requests for interviews with organisers were unsuccessful, limiting insight into their attitudes, histories, and strategies regarding digital disconnection. The small sample of nine participants is not representative of the wider TOC community; still, it offers rich, in-depth accounts of lived experience in this

specific context. Future research with a larger and more diverse sample with a broader range of ages, genders, and nationalities would enable more generalizable findings as well as an in-depth study of possible ways to achieve social change through digital disconnection.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

In accordance with the consent forms and ethical approval requirements, the underlying data from this research, such as the informants' identities or their statements, cannot be shared externally.

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