DISCONNECTION AMID INEQUALITY: AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO ETHNO-RACIAL MINORITIZED YOUNG WOMEN'S DIGITAL MEDIA (NON)USE

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Introduction

In Western digitalized societies, youths' well-being is often linked to concerns over excessive digital media use and exposure to harmful content on social media platforms (Agai, 2022; Gath et al., 2024; Karpi, 2018). Public debates on this issue frequently reflect moral panics, emphasizing digital risks while overlooking how offline harms intersect with the complex ways young people navigate digital environments (Valkenburg et al., 2022). In contrast, the emerging field of digital disconnection studies offers a more nuanced perspective by acknowledging the ambivalent relationship between digital media and well-being (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024). Specifically, this field explores digital disconnection as a deliberate strategy to balance the benefits and drawbacks of digital media use (Nassen et al., 2023; Vanden Abeele, 2020). Digital disconnection, therefore, is often conceptualized as a negotiated practice in which both youth and their caregivers actively regulate digital media use in pursuit of well-being (Agai, 2022; Karsay & Vandenbosch, 2021; Nassen et al., 2024).

However, digital disconnection studies have been criticized for focusing primarily on privileged subjects and, thereby, overlooking how structural inequalities constrain minoritized youths' ability to engage in (dis)connection on their own terms (Altmaier et al., 2024; Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019; Kratel, 2023). At the same time, digital media nonuse in the context of inequality and marginalization is often wrongfully assumed to be a mere passive and disempowering condition imposed by suppressing structures (Chib et al., 2021). Recent digital disconnection frameworks challenge these

assumptions by advocating for a broader contextual and socio-cultural perspective—one that considers how intersecting factors like ethnicity, gender, and class shape voluntary as well as imposed digital disconnection practices (Kratel, 2023; Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019; Vanden Abeele et al., 2024; Van Bruyssel et al., 2024).

To date, an in-depth exploration of how minoritized youths actively practice and resist (dis)connection within the context of structural inequalities remains largely absent. This study aims to address this gap by adopting an intersectional approach to the (dis)connection practices of ethno-racial minoritized young women in [omitted for review – Western European country]. By doing so, we challenge the dominant conceptualization of digital disconnection as an individual response to digital overuse and, instead, position it as a practice embedded within broader structures of inequality.

Methodology

This study draws from 15 months of hybrid ethnographic fieldwork (cfr. Liu, 2022), including participant observation and informal interviews across digital and physical spaces. The principal researcher participated as a volunteer youth worker in a community organization supporting ethno-racial minoritized youths from low socio-economic backgrounds. The community organization is located in a traditionally impoverished neighborhood of a medium-sized city in [omitted for review – Western European country]. Over the past 15 years, however, the neighborhood has undergone pervasive gentrification, which has resulted in fewer accessible spaces for minoritized youths to freely hang out.

For this study, we draw from the experiences of 20 young women who frequently visited the community organization. These young women, aged between 15 and 19 years old, identified as Muslim and as having ethnicities from the Middle East and the Balkan region. Ethical integrity was ensured in collaboration with the community organization and according to ethical guidelines of digital ethnographic research. We obtained formal ethical approval of the primary researcher's institutional review board.

Findings

Our analysis identified three key findings that complicate the binary framing of voluntary (agentic) vs. involuntary (passive) disconnection, challenging the dominant narrative that positions digital media nonuse solely as either empowering or disempowering (Chib et al., 2021). We situate these findings within the gendered and racialized inequalities that shape minoritized young women's lived experiences, particularly restricting their mobility in public spaces. These restrictions stem from patriarchal family and community norms, as well as racialized exclusion embedded in the structures of the majority society (Ahmed, 2021; De Cleen et al., 2017).

First, participants appropriate social media platforms as a digital neighborhood (cfr. Lane, 2018), both an extension of their offline interactions and a compensatory space for their limited autonomous access to urban neighborhoods. Participants emphasized the importance of remaining connected to social media, as it provides a space to experiment with aspects of their identities that may be misunderstood or disapproved of by family members or ethnic majority peers. However, their access to social media was

primarily restricted to spaces where family members were not present, such as during class breaks at school or when hanging out at the community organization. A common practice among participants was to delete social media apps and erase conversations from their phones before returning home. They engaged in this practice because parents often inspected their phones for inappropriate content, which could result in heightened surveillance and additional restrictions. Here, disconnection emerges as an ambiguous practice between enforcement and strategic voluntariness, as it serves as a means to sustain long-term and autonomous digital connection.

Second, several participants reported temporarily deleting social media apps or limiting their online activity in response to racialized and gendered harassment in both digital and physical spaces. Over the course of the fieldwork, multiple participants experienced bullying from majority peers based on their online posts, as well as encounters with sexist and aggressive comments on their photos. Although participants saw disconnection as a necessary response to this kind of harassment, they also expressed frustration due to feeling forced to withdraw from digital spaces where they wished to remain present.

Finally, the participants experienced digital connection through the smartphone as both liberating and restrictive. On the one hand, being continuous available to family members affords the ethno-racial minoritized young women greater autonomy outside the household as it reassures parents and family members about their safety. On the other hand, the strict enforcement of parental surveillance through the smartphone made it more challenging for the participants to disconnect from familial expectations and autonomously explore their identity and relationships. We observed how ethno-racial minoritized youths actively managed this ambiguity through creative strategies (e.g. preventively sending parents pictures of what they are doing) in order to maximize the liberating potential of the smartphone.

(Preliminary) conclusion

This study challenges dominant understandings of digital disconnection by demonstrating how ethno-racial minoritized young women negotiate digital media use and nonuse within the context of structural inequalities. Rather than a purely agentic or passive act, disconnection emerges as a negotiated and context-dependent strategy, shaped by gendered, racialized, and socio-economic constraints (Van Bruyssel et al., 2024). By foregrounding the intersection of digital disconnection, structural inequalities, and everyday negotiation, our contribution hopes to expand current digital disconnection frameworks. It highlights how ethno-racial minoritized youths' (dis)connection practices cannot be understood in isolation from the socio-cultural and racialized conditions that shape their lives. In doing so, we contribute to broader discussions on digital agency, surveillance, and alternative internet practices, emphasizing the need for more intersectional, context-aware approaches to digital media use and nonuse.

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