

# Intensification, discovery and abandonment: Unearthing global ecologies of dis/connection in pandemic times

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## Abstract

This article explores how people have reconfigured their dis/connective repertoires during COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdowns. Relying on a media ecology approach and on 45 interviews carried out in different parts of the world, it tackles two limitations of the digital disconnection literature, namely social media reductionism and universalism, advancing a theoretical and empirical contribution. Firstly, it explores and unfolds dis/connective practices in relation to an intricate multiplicity of old and new practices, technologies, platforms and formats, foregrounding three key dynamics in the reconfiguration of dis/connective repertoires: intensification, (re)discovery and abandonment. Then, it critically drills down into the uneven power relations, divides and inequalities that traverse these three dynamics. This article demonstrates that dis/connective practices are carried out across variable configurations of devices, formats and platforms and shaped by privileges and imbalances that are particularly severe in the context of the Global South. In doing so, this article complexifies taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the meanings of dis/connection, establishing a dialogue with digital inequality and labour studies, hence unfolding new horizons of inquiry for digital disconnection studies.

## Keywords

COVID-19, digital disconnection, Global South, media ecologies, over-connectivity, self-regulation

## COVID-19 as critical juncture: Introduction and outline

‘A depression fed by overload

False perceptions, the weight of the world

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A universe in the palm of your hand  
The artifice of endless strands  
Distraction flows down an obsessive stream  
Rejection grows into oppressive screams  
The hardest hour, the cruellest sign  
I'm waking up from this wretched lie  
I fight it the same, do not waste this day  
Wake up, wake up, wake up  
Memento mori  
The regression of advancing modes  
And Imperial corrosive nodes  
A prime directive to disconnect  
Reclaim yourself and resurrect'

Lamb of God–Memento Mori (2020)

In 2020, renowned American metal music band *Lamb of God* released their eponymous album along with their second single 'Memento Mori'. This obscure, powerful opening track represents a stark critique of how, during the COVID-19 crisis, the deluge of information that flows through our hyperconnected devices (with explicit reference to the smartphone described as 'a universe in the palm of your hands') has numbed us, distracting us from giving meanings to the things that really matters in the face of a global, life-threatening situation. The corrosive voice of vocalist Randy Blythe urges us to wake up, to fight to reclaim ourselves in the face of uncertainty and to disconnect from these 'endless strands', 'distraction flows' and 'obsessive stream' of digital information and noise.

I have chosen this song as the *incipit* of this work because it so openly establishes a connection between the COVID-19 crisis and the topic of digital disconnection. This article too conceives the COVID-19 as a critical juncture that allows us to appreciate with a particular intensity the meanings, dilemmas and manifestations of digital dis/connections at a global level. By moving most activities carried out in the physical world into the digital realm, the pandemic has profoundly altered the delicate balance between connective and disconnective practices. The massive acceleration and intensification of digital activities and the abrupt shift to forced forms of over-connection is impacting our wellbeing, our work, our leisure time, the news ecosystem and the meaning of our autonomy contributing to redraw the boundaries and the limits of digital disconnection (Lupton, 2020; Treré et al., 2020). Like few phenomena before, COVID-19 is revealing the scale and severity of online inequalities that our societies face and the profound injustices in relation to the implementations of digital infrastructures and data systems (Sarkar and Korjan, 2021). It is exposing how the possibility to connect and the ability to disconnect are both determined by socio-economic and cultural factors including status, class, nationality, gender, (dis)ability, etc.

This scenario seems particularly appropriate to address some of the most pressing issues that digital disconnection research is facing. Indeed, in the last 6 years, the field has entered a new stage

of effervescence that has seen the proliferation of new insights that are adding more nuances to the conceptualisation of this phenomenon. In particular, the field is progressively emancipating itself from seeing disconnection as something predominantly linked to detox camps, social media and a white middle-class population, recognizing instead the complexity, diversity and mundanity of the dis/connective experience. Following along this line, this article pushes the boundaries of disconnection studies beyond social media platforms and retreats and ground instead dis/connective practices into the lived experiences of people in diverse parts of the world. Relying on research carried out during COVID-19-related lockdowns, I shed light on the strategies that people develop to adapt to this new, often forced regime of hyper-connectivity. This includes looking at the ways in which they balance the boundaries between connection and disconnection, work and leisure, and the tactics they perform to cope with the growing tensions and pressures of this emergency. This article drills down into how people generate, merge and adapt old and new platforms, media and technologies in creative and unexpected ways in their everyday media practices. In doing so, it illuminates the benefits and dark sides of hyper-connectivity, while zooming in on the new divides and types of disconnections that emerge in relation to poor technological infrastructure, media skills, care responsibilities, social inequalities, etc. In doing so, it will provide a multifaceted image of the social implications of hyper-connectivity and dis/connection in times of forced isolation, explaining how this emergency works as a magnifying lens for the many ambiguities of our digital society.

The article is organized into the following sections. Firstly, a critical review of the evolution of disconnection studies is provided and two of its key limitations are outlined. Then, the conceptual approach and the methodologies are introduced. Subsequently, the findings are presented. In this section, dynamics of intensification, (re)discovery and abandonment emerged from the data are discussed. Further, a critical assessment of the uneven power relations, divides and inequalities behind these dynamics is provided. In the conclusions, the article outlines the key contributions of the research and reflects on how they contribute to expand and disclose new horizons for digital disconnection studies.

## **Disconnection studies: Aberration, appreciation and limitations**

Two decades ago, the non-use of digital technologies was framed as ‘an aberration’ and frequently seen as ‘an irrational and ultimately disadvantageous position to adopt’ (Selwyn, 2003: 107). The refusal to connect was generally addressed as a problem, an abnormality that should be solved (Bauer, 1997). Much has changed since then, but 7 years ago many scholars were still complaining that discussion on the non-use of communication technologies was scarce, weak and fragmented (Kaun and Schwarzenegger, 2014; Morrison and Gomez, 2014; Roberts and Koliska, 2014). It has been really in the last 5 years that the field of digital disconnection has witnessed an unprecedented intensification in the number of contributions, entering into a new mature phase where more nuanced reflections and approaches to the topic have been showcased. Theoretical reflections and empirical studies on digital disconnection has started to flourish across a plethora of disciplines including media and communication studies (Hesselberth, 2018; Karppi, 2018; Jorge, 2019; Portwood-Stacer, 2013; Syversten, 2017, 2020), psychology (Vanden Abeele, 2020), tourism (Cai et al., 2020), data and algorithm studies (Bucher, 2020), and social movement studies (Kaun and Treré, 2018). This new critical phase of the field has coincided with the rise in discourses around the need to disconnect from our digital devices and to take a break from our data-saturated lifestyles. These issues are now recurrent topics of interest in a variety of media outlets, reflecting an increasing societal preoccupation about the consequences that the constant use and overexposure to digital technologies is having on our health and wellbeing, the quality of our education, and our very capacity to act as free and autonomous human beings. Diverse domains of society are developing

initiatives focused on the need to disconnect, pushing us to rethink the conceptual normalization of the digital in our lives (Baym et al., 2020).

The recent eruption of digital disconnection studies has seen scholars examining how dis/connective practices are able to rebalance the overemphasis on the virtues of digital connectivity in a context where the ability to control our digital lives is progressively dissipating (Karppi, 2018). Studies have also addressed the ‘politics of disconnecting’ as both a personal/individual and social/collective problem (Syversten, 2020), examining historical continuities and disruptions in collective methods of media refusal and media resistance (Syversten, 2017). Other authors have convincingly criticized the dynamics of digital detox (Fish, 2017; Sutton, 2017) and the commodification of disconnection (Treré et al., 2020), including the ways in which discourses about disconnecting from digital platforms often act to legitimize the digital capitalist system that social media epitomize (Hesselberth, 2018; Jorge, 2019). There is now a general consensus on conceiving the relation between connection and disconnection not as a binary opposition between two distinct poles, but as a multifaceted and contradictory phenomenon, something that is frequently expressed in the use of the slash in the dis/connection term which is also adopted in this article. In recent accounts, digital disconnection is thus seen and congruently analysed as a ‘continuum of practices, motivations and effects’ (Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019: 902).

Yet, some limitations still afflict this area of research, as it gradually expands its critical horizons and become more consolidated. In this article, I will address two of them. The first limitation can be referred to as *social media reductionism*. As it has been convincingly argued by Kuntsman and Miyake (2019), the field is still problematically defined by an excessive prominence of social media and the correlated conflation of the ‘digital’ with these specific platforms. Moreover – as noted by the same authors – within this type of social media-focused research, scholarly attention has been overwhelmingly captured by Facebook, even if more recent research on other platforms such as Instagram (Jorge, 2019) and WhatsApp (Gangneux, 2019) signals an expansion to different digital environments. The strong focus on social media is understandable, considering the relevance that these platforms have in terms of diffusion and cultural impact, and the controversies that traverse them at the political level that render them the perfect environment for critically addressing disengagement, refusal and disconnection.

Facebook in particular is seen as a platform so powerful that it has ‘altered the landscape of everyday life’ (Baym et al., 2020: 9) in a way that ‘even choices like spending more time reading or doing hobbies became ways of not using Facebook’ (Baym et al., 2020: 9). However important, an excessive attention to social media runs the risk of reducing the complexity of disconnection to only ‘disconnection from social media’.

This kind of reductionism is paired by another issue, that of *universalism*. To a certain extent, as a growing number of scholars has started to recognize (Darling-Wolf, 2020; Lim, 2020; Pype, 2019; Treré et al., 2020), so far digital disconnection studies have tended to privilege certain kinds of populations of white, educated people with relatively high purchasing power in the West. This results in the disregard on the one side of the dis/connective practices of the less privileged and on the other side of the manifestations of dis/connection in the Global South. Overall, disconnection studies are still defined by a lack of understanding of how digital dis/connection unfolds in other social and cultural realities beyond the West (where stable connectivity is far from being the norm), and by little attention devoted to the differences and similarities among diverse contexts and experiences in the North and the South of the world. Furthermore, literature largely neglects other conceptual contributions that rely on non-Western epistemological foundations: these approaches could enrich the understanding of digital dis/connection and suggest new ways of deconstructing and reimagining digital disconnection.

Addressing these two limitations of the literature, this article makes a two-fold contribution, at once theoretical and empirical. Relying on a media ecology approach to dis/connection, this article explores and unfolds dis/connective practices in relation to an intricate multiplicity of old and new practices, technologies, platforms and formats, foregrounding three key dynamics in the re-configuration of dis/connective repertoires: intensification, (re)discovery and abandonment. Then, it critically drills down into the uneven power relations, divides and inequalities behind these dynamics, reflecting on the benefits and challenges of dis/connection in the context of the lived experience of people in the Global South and comparing it with those in the Global North.

## Conceptual approach and methodologies

This article applies a media ecology approach to disentangle the ‘communicative complexity’ of people’s dis/connective repertoires by focusing on how and why social actors engage and (re)combine holistically and critically a wide ecology of media technologies and related practices (Foust and Hoyt, 2018; Treré, 2019). Inspired by the media ecology tradition that conceives media as complex environments, the strength of this approach lies in its holistic gaze that does not privilege any specific media technology, but instead investigate how people, in their lockdown-related practices, make sense of, navigate, merge and rethink newer and older media formats and physical and digital spaces during one of the most challenging periods of the COVID-19 pandemic. This lens is particularly appropriate to address the limitations of reductionism and universalism of the literature. Firstly, it displays the variety and complexity of technologies and media practices involved in people’s dis/connective repertoires beyond their engagement with social media platforms. Secondly, it digs into the contexts, lived experience and motivations of people in different contexts including situations with unstable technological infrastructure and limited economic resources in the Global South, complexifying taken-for-granted assumptions about modes of being dis/connected.

This article is based on research carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic through the months of April, May and June 2020. A research team composed by five researchers carried out 45 semi-structured interviews with people experiencing COVID-19-lockdown in the UK (13 interviews), India (6 interviews), China (5 interviews) and in three Latin American countries (Argentina – seven interviews; Mexico – seven interviews; Colombia – seven interviews). The sample was varied and balanced in terms of gender (25 female; 20 male), income, age (12 interviewees between 20 and 30; 10 between 30 and 40; eight between 40 and 50; seven between 50 and 60; and eight over 70 years old) and location (26 urban and 19 in rural contexts). The choice of the sample size was driven by theoretical saturation in relation to the two flaws of digital disconnection research outlined in the literature review. This kind of saturation has now become one of the gold standards by which purposive sample sizes are determined in qualitative interviewing (Guest et al., 2006). Given the limited resources of the research in terms of both funding and time, and the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, the aim was not to fulfil the ambitious (and herculean) task of systematically comparing different national contexts. Rather, the aim was to select a sample as robust and diverse as possible to test and overcome the limitations of social media reductionism and universalism. By doing so, this research has aimed to unsettle conventional understandings and explore new meanings of (digital) disconnection, in order to unfold new conceptual horizons for digital disconnection research.

Interviews were generally synchronous and carried out using Jitsi, a simple, open-source video-conferencing software that requires no registration but only a link. The aim was to make the interview process as smooth as possible and do not force people to register to proprietary systems or go through complicated procedures, thus mitigating one of the known challenges of online

synchronous interviewing (James and Busher, 2012). In 12 cases, because of very limited connectivity, the quality of the audio interviews was low and additional methodological strategies were put in place, for instance, asking clarifying questions through emails, texts and audio notes on WhatsApp, Telegram or WeChat. In five cases, the interviews were interrupted and subsequently complemented by autoethnography and the integration of digital diaries (Lupton, 2020b) to provide more extended reflections on lockdown dis/connective practices. Interviews were semi-structured, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were organized into two main sections. In the first section, the overall context and dis/connective repertoires were charted, while in the second the interview dug in more detail into the conditions, choices, motivations and nuances of these dis/connective practices. The excerpts used in this article were translated into English by myself in the case of Latin American Countries and by my Research Assistants in the case of India and China.

Interviews were audio recorded using Jitsi and then transcribed, inputted and analysed thematically (Flick, 2018) using the NVivo software. The three main categories of analysis (intensification, discovery and abandonment) emerged inductively in line with a constructivist grounded theory approach. This approach assumes the existence of multiple realities that are mutually constructed in the interactions between interviewers and interviewees, and underline that researchers enter the participants' worlds and are affected by them (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012). Inductive data were subjected to comparative analysis through frequent online meetings of the research team that went through an iterative process moving from the study of concrete realities to the construction of conceptual understanding from the data.

Scholars have pointed out that online research has predominantly been carried out in English, since 'most research on the Internet is centred in Anglo-American cultural contexts' (Jankowski and Van Selm, 2005: p. 203). This can limit the power of people who do not speak this idiom as a first language to express their views (Madge, 2007). By relying on a multi-lingual team of local researchers, this research has aimed to mitigate this aspect, thus contributing to foster online sociological inquiry beyond the Western world. The names used in the findings section are pseudonyms to guarantee the anonymity of the interviewees.

This research was carried out in a very difficult time for me, the research team and the interviewees. The methodology deployed reflects these challenges and can only be described as 'the best possible methodology under the extreme circumstances of an unforeseen global pandemic'. Continuous adaptations and readjustments took place during the course of the research to respect and always prioritize the mental and physical health of both the researchers and the respondents involved. While the forced move to an online-only environment gave the impetus for this research, it represented at the same time a limitation that prevented researchers to fully interact with the social context that participants navigate and that is crucial for developing a situated understanding of digital disconnection. However, the challenges of the pandemic also ignited our methodological imagination, fostering in particular creative ways to complement online interviews through emails, audio and text notes, digital diaries, text messages, pictures and drawings. The result is a composite, courageous and obviously flawed methodology that tries to use the pandemic moment as a way to push the boundaries of digital disconnection studies.

## **Findings: Ecologies of dis/connections**

Adopting a media ecology approach and anchoring dis/connection into the lived experiences of people during the pandemic helps us to appreciate the variety of contexts and socio-temporal configurations that people inhabit and how this affects the possibilities and varieties of dis/connections. It also allows to see how possibilities and meanings of dis/connection change

depending on different settings and circumstances. For most of the interviewees, COVID-19 has represented a defining moment that has led to an alteration of digital routines and a change in media practices in connection to a forced situation of physical isolation from other people. With various degrees of intensity and through a myriad of types of responses, people have had to reconfigure and readjust their habitual media ecologies and the repertoires of dis/connection which they normally adopted. Data from the interviews illuminate how this has led to processes of intensification, (re)discovery and abandonment of specific kinds of technologies and media practices that will be detailed below. In the following sections, I will examine these three dynamics and drill down into the uneven power relations, divides and inequalities that traverse them. Before digging into these processes, it is important to point out that – perhaps not surprisingly – the smartphone has overwhelmingly emerged from the interviews as the most-cited technological device when referring to dis/connective practices. This echoes other studies (Carolus et al., 2019; Chun, 2017; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020) that have scrutinized the consequences of its central role in an age of constant connectivity. There is a sort of elective affinity between digital dis/connection and the smartphone. As Laura, a greengrocer from Cardiff (UK) in her 50s, perfectly encapsulates it:

‘I think when you say disconnection you just think instantly about your phone, they are just everything nowadays; they do everything. We’ve got a laptop which we still pay for and barely use because everything is on your phone. Disconnection for us is putting your phone down an hour before bed and making sure you’re not on it. But however much of a pain it is, it’s brilliant as well so disconnecting is getting off your phone’.

The adoption of a media ecology approach foregrounds why and under which circumstances people reconfigure their media ecologies through *intensifying* the use of specific media, *(re)discovering* new platforms and *abandoning* other technological formats. However, while different configurations of these three key dynamics were common to all the respondents, the motivations behind them and the same possibilities to choose them were determined by uneven power relations, divides and inequalities.

### *Intensification*

The main motivation for intensifying the use of media technologies is linked to the need – as one interviewee puts it – ‘to maintain online the connections that we have temporarily lost in the physical world’. This led most people to increase their use of apps and platforms as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Weibo, and more specific instant messaging apps like WhatsApp, Telegram, Messenger and WeChat. Numerous interviewees admitted to being grateful and even excited for – as perfectly captured by this excerpt – ‘the possibilities that these technologies gave me in times of loneliness, isolation and sadness’. However, this intensification led at the same time to new challenges and often amplified anxiety and stress. Hence, along with the increase in the use of apps and platforms to compensate the lack of offline interaction, a significant number of interviewees reported a big surge in practices of self-regulation through disconnective apps or other creative tactics. This resonates with other accounts that examine the ambiguities and implications of self-regulating dis/connective practices (Syversten, 2020). For instance, some interviewees reported to have intensified the use of the ‘flight mode’ or ‘Do not Disturb’ option in their smartphones in order to counteract or compensate the ‘many pressures and the stress resulting from this heavy use of social media’ and ‘remove myself from the interruption of constant connectivity’. Others explain how they started to increase the adoption of specific digital media practices like ‘leaving their phone

away in specific times of the day so not to be overwhelmed by the increasing number of messages and calls'. Especially, the youngest in the sample underlined how they started to pay more attention to previously installed apps that can monitor and provide statistics on their Apps usage. Eliana is a young female student living with her parents in the wealthy neighbourhood of Rosales in Bogotá (Colombia). As she reflects:

'I put a timer on my phone for 2 hours usage on Instagram and I find at midday I'm already at 2 hours. That's bad... Well now I'm on my phone even more than ever. You could even check your stats on your phone and the usage has gone up massively'.

It is also interesting to note that connecting with friends and family through digital technology was referred to by interviewees as both a way of 'connecting' and 'disconnecting' that can coexist and change at the same time. For example, people would connect with their loved ones digitally to disconnect from work or other activities seen as less rewarding. This points to one of the key paradoxes of dis/connection and the need to grasp the meanings and motivations of dis/connective practices in a contextualized way (Hesselberth, 2018; Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019).

However, the choice to adopt forms of self-regulation through dis/connective practices and apps emerged as a practice only for those who take constant and reliable connectivity for granted. For some interviewees living in situations where connection is unstable and precarious (especially in the Global South and often in rural settings), self-regulation was replaced by the inability to count on a reliable connection. Krisha is a woman in her 60s living in the outskirts of Kerala in the south-western end of India. She works in the hospitality sector and has suffered the harsh consequences of the pandemic that have affected her job and living conditions. She talked extensively about the difficulties to rely on stable connectivity and 'the constant frustration of not knowing if I will be able to be connected when I most need it. This has been especially annoying during lockdowns, because connection from my home is not as good as the one I used at work... This has brought additional stress on me and my family'.

Instead of choosing when to disconnect and how, for some of the respondents living in underprivileged neighbourhoods of Mexico City, Buenos Aires and Bogotá, disconnection only manifested 'as exhaustion' and 'fatigue', not as a proactive choice. It arrived when people fell asleep after a long day of work drained by care responsibilities for children or the elderly. This sense of fatigue was perceived also by people in the Global North who had care responsibilities, but it was often counterbalanced by having better job and life conditions or by having a more equitable division of labour within the household. Hence, disconnection during lockdown in various poorly connected settings did not appear as a desire, but as a constant and rather normal hurdle part of everyday engagements with instable technological infrastructures. This resonates with Pype (2019) ethnography of the forms of dis/connection in Kinshasa, where unexpected and undesired disconnection, that is, 'the involuntary logging off of the Internet due to political interference, lack of battery time, or credit time (phone credit)' (Pype, 2019: 1) appears as the only familiar way for people to take part (or not) in the so-called electronic modernity.

Other media practices that interviewees reported intensifying were binge-watching and video/music streaming. Many participants suggested that they were using variable selections of Netflix, Spotify, Amazon Prime video and/or Sky Cinema on Demand and often relying on them more regularly than normal. Interestingly, this was often linked to a 'need to disconnect' from the stressful routine of the day, but also from other technologies, like for example, the omnipresence of smartphones. Mark is an accountant from London in his early 30s, sharing his flat in Croydon with two close friends. As he recalls:



‘At night, I would finally put my phone down and try to disconnect for a few hours, focussing 100% on watching some episodes of my favourite series: finally alone, not being distracted by anyone, away from all of the demands generated by my phone’.

As Chen, a young female in her late 20s working as a financial advisor in Shanghai recalls ‘I am also watching a lot of stuff. We have more time now. On my weekends for example, I can watch four movies in one go and that’s a relaxing time for me’. At the same time, watching a series with the family was seen also as way to establish a connection, ‘because it brings us all together’, stressing that a specific media practice can be both connective and disconnective, depending on the specific setting that is studied, along with the disposition and the motivation of the social actors involved.

Still, for people with fewer economic resources, purchasing a subscription to a video-streaming platform was not a possibility, and even when it was contemplated it was almost impossible to rely on a stable connection with the bandwidth needed to successfully stream a movie or a series episode. In Mexico, these DVDs are called ‘clones’ and packs of them can be purchased almost anywhere for a very reduced price. Sergio is a man in his 40s working as a fruit vendor in one of the biggest markets of the city of Guadalajara, the second largest city in Mexico. The pandemic has affected the already precarious economy of his family, but with four children to care for, entertainment has remained a priority also during lockdowns. In this situation, Sergio has ‘intensified the consumption of copies of DVDs or USB sticks shared with friends. We would always find original ways to exchange boxes of clones packed with movies, TV series and live concerts’.

This points to the fact that media ecologies and repertoires of disconnection are reconfigured in radical different ways depending on the contexts and the social and economic capital that people possess. While for the educated middle class, rediscovering old tapes and vinyl might have retained an allure of nostalgia, for people with few economic resources, illegally purchasing cloned DVDs represented the only way to have access to forms of digital entertainment during challenging times.

## *Discovery*

Diverse interviewees discussed their ‘discovery’, ‘embracement’ and ‘encounters’ with new apps, platforms and technologies during lockdowns. For instance, technologies as the video-conferencing app Zoom and the face-to-face social network Houseparty – previously unknown to most of the respondents – suddenly became popular and ingrained into their dis/connective repertoires, especially during the implementations of physical distancing measures (generally known as ‘social distancing’). Their audio–visual capabilities were embraced by many to provide an alternative for physical, face-to-face interaction because of the ability to see and hear the participants and read and react to their paralinguistic behaviour. Again, as in the case of the process of intensification, when it came to the discovery of new apps and platforms, the driver was often the need to establish a connection with friends and family. But as most physical activities were suppressed, people turned to Zoom, Microsoft Teams, BlueJeans, Jitsi and other similar apps also for a plethora of activity that were normally carried out offline, such as sport-related sessions, music classes and parties. Susana, a painter in her 70s living in the middle-class neighbourhood of La Recoleta in Buenos Aires (Argentina) commented:

‘I would do a Ukulele class on a Monday using Zoom – there are two classes one after the other with probably around 16–18 people in each. Having gone to physical classes before, you’re now doing it over Zoom. It’s not quite as convenient but it still makes you practise; you have the group experience but there is some banter going on as well’.

Other respondents documented their more or less gratifying experiences with Zoom-related ‘office parties’, ‘meditation’ and ‘training sessions’. Another constant thread was linked to the (re)discovery of old technologies. In some cases, in order to connect with older members of the family who were not so used to video-streaming platforms, various respondents pointed to the rediscovery of calls on landline phones. Others pointed to the joy of rediscovering old music formats such as cassette tapes and vinyl records. Music was often invoked as a powerful means of dis/connection and for some interviewees analogue technology provided a more authentic experience of true disconnection, in particular because of the possibility to being concentrated on the power of the music without being ‘tied to your smartphone’s notifications all the time’.

But since longer Zoom calls require a paid subscription, for many of the interviewees that App was not even envisaged, while for others who could either individually afford it or used it at work it became an almost irreplaceable video-streaming technology for connecting with family and friends. Moreover, for almost all the gig workers interviewed, disconnection was never a possible option, but only a ‘very remote possibility’. Forced to work even during the peak of the pandemic, in constant danger for their own lives, these workers saw disconnecting from Apps as Deliveroo or Uber as something impossible, as the work administered through these apps often represented their unique source of income. This category of workers has been hardly hit by the COVID-19 crisis that has magnified the enormous challenges, lack of rights and profound inequalities that gig economy workers face on an everyday basis ([Fairwork Project, 2020](#)). Francisco, a Colombian from the city of Cali in his early 20s, started to work delivering food for the widely diffused platform Rappi a few months before the pandemic. As he recalls, ‘there were weeks when disconnection from my smartphone was only a fantasy, as we saw our orders increase and we were required to work harder than ever in really difficult conditions’.

An interesting new media practice that was embraced by some interviewees to counteract the pressures of over-connectivity was the adoption of dumb phones, in particular older phones without internet connectivity that were either rediscovered or newly purchased. The introduction of these devices within the dis/connective repertoires was again the source of ambivalent reactions. On the one side, some people pointed to the value of ‘(re)connecting to nature without the need to continuously check WhatsApp messages on my phone’. On the other side, the dumb phone produced new tensions in relation to the absence of taken-for-granted apps that many related to a true disconnective experience, like GPS maps ‘to find your way through remote locations in the woods’ and music streaming ‘to relax while running’. In response to that, four interviewees started to use their smartphones and dumb phones concomitantly, carefully choosing to activate or deactivate specific functions on the two devices depending on the context and the pursued activity. In three cases, this finally led to the abandonment of the dumb phone for the additional ‘disquiet of having to deal with another device’. This points to the usefulness of a media ecology lens in exploring dis/connective practices because of its ability to chart the ways in which every new device and related media practices generate an alteration (and a new set of concerns) in the overall balance of the dis/connective repertoire.

Another relevant practice of dis/connective discovery was related to the adoption of noise-cancelling headphones. Many respondents reported being ‘overwhelmed by noise in their houses’ and said they were desperately in need to find silence, calm and relief. One way to disconnect from the constant noise of family life was to purchase noise-cancelling headsets. Kelly is a secondary school teacher from Edinburgh in her late 30s who has struggled hugely with her work–life balance during lockdowns. As she points out:

‘I didn’t know they even existed before Covid, but after two weeks working locked with my two kids, I started to ask around and a couple of friends would tell me why don’t you buy some of this noise suppressing tech, they can really help you focus and isolate from the havoc around you’.

While 15 respondents highlighted the need to have noise-suppressing devices to disconnect from the chaos of everyday life, because of their high prices, only four people who had relatively solid purchasing power could buy them. This was the case also for dumb phones. As in the example of self-regulating practices, acquiring a dumb phone to exert disconnection appeared as a luxury that only people with solid economic resources and who could count on a constant flow of data and a stable connection could contemplate. Some of respondents in rural China and India did not even know what a dumb phone is and ‘why this was even a thing to have two phones’. When one looks at complex media ecologies of dis/connections, many of the practices that are ‘sold’ in the West as the new normality through advertisements, such as purchasing an old phone to disconnect from our over-connected lives, emerges in stark contrast to other realities where most are far from being digitally over-connected and certainly not in need of the same kind of disconnection that is craved in the West.

### *Abandonment*

While some media uses were intensified and new technologies discovered, others were – at least temporarily – abandoned, frozen or placed on hold. The reference to specific apps becoming ‘dormant’ on devices due to abandonment during lockdown was a relevant theme emerged from the interviews. For example, people reflected on the fact that Apps for booking flights, trains and suddenly became ‘unused’, ‘sort of hibernated’, ‘forgotten’, ‘set aside’, ‘in stand-by mode’, or were getting significantly less usage in comparison to the pre-COVID period. A few interviewees mention the irony and reflected on the absurdity of keep getting their Google Maps weekly notifications and travel updates through emails, when in fact they were not moving at all from their places. Some respondents mentioned they had to revise their smartphone data plans because they were not using almost any data outside of their own houses, with internet connection taking place mainly through their private wireless connections.

Yet, the abandonment of data plans was driven by different motivations. In the case of interviewees with a more stable economic status, the choice to opt out of these expensive smartphone data plans was motivated by a desire to ‘self-limit my connectivity outside of my now already too connected household’, as pointed out by James, a university lecturer from Bristol (UK) in his 50s. While for other interviewees with less purchasing power, who saw their precarious working conditions aggravated by the pandemic, this decision was determined by ‘the need to save some money where and when possible’. This last excerpt is from an interview with Li, a Chinese farmer from the middle Yangtze Plain who struggled to maintain her expensive smartphone plan while providing for her family during the peak of the pandemic in China.

### **Discussion and concluding remarks**

This article has represented a journey into how people from different parts of the world have reconfigured their dis/connective repertoires due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown measures. It has casted the COVIDA-19 crisis as a critical juncture that allows us to

appreciate with a particular intensity the meanings, dilemmas, boundaries and manifestations of digital dis/connections at a global level. Findings have highlighted the central role of the smartphone and three main mechanisms of (re)configuration of dis/connective repertoires, specifically: (1) intensification, (2) (re)discovery and (3) abandonment of media technologies and related practices. A broad spectrum of meanings and manifestations of dis/connection emerged, infused by contradictions and dilemmas, foregrounding the need to analyse this phenomenon contextually, paying attention to specific configurations of practices and lived experiences. Dis/connection emerges as a multifaceted, ambivalent phenomenon traversed by uneven power relations, oscillating between coerced digital connection (to paraphrase Barassi's (2019) concept of 'coerced digital participation') and the privilege/luxury to choose *if* and *when* to disconnect.

Diverse social and economic factors shape the possibilities, motivations and manifestations of dis/connective practices, as well as the privileges, imbalances and divides inherent in these tactics, along with the inequalities in relation to poor technological infrastructure, care responsibilities and media skills. These issues affect low-income families with precarious job situations in both the Global North and the South, but in the latter, they can be exacerbated by harsher pre-existing conditions. This highlights the 'complexity of individuals' experiences when negotiating digital technology' (Darling-Wolf, 2020: 16) and the need to embrace 'the diversity and complexity of peoples, environments, and cultures where [digital] tools have already migrated' (Srinivasan 2017: 9) in digital disconnection studies.

This article contributes to the dis/connection literature by bringing new insights into its 'continuum of practices, motivations and effects' (Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019: 902). Relying on a media ecology lens, this article has addressed and complexified two of the limitations of the current digital disconnection literature, namely social media reductionism and universalism. In relation to the former point, this article has demonstrated how an excessive focus on social media platforms in disconnection studies can prevent us from appreciating the complexity and richness of this phenomenon, including a plethora of key technological choices beyond the digital. We have seen how the pandemic has generated innovations, tensions and reconfigurations in people's dis/connective repertoires. These repertoires emerged as extremely rich, comprising material (re)combinations of socio-technical engagements with multiple communicative devices and formats (smartphones, dumb phones, TVs, vinyls, DVDs, noise-cancelling tools, etc.), apps and platforms (social media, video-conferencing platforms, disconnective apps, etc.). In relation to the latter point, this article has unsettled universalistic and taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the meanings and motivations of dis/connection. It has illustrated how dis/connective practices are shaped by privileges, imbalances, divides and inequalities that are particularly intense in the context of the Global South (Darling-Wolf, 2020; Lim, 2020; Pype, 2019). 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 reliable technological infrastructure and stable connectivity.

Bringing technological complexity and geographical diversity into digital disconnection studies, this article has aimed to expand its scope and boundaries. As this area of research enters a new critical and more mature phase, it could greatly benefit from a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue with conceptual approaches and insights coming from media ecologies (as shown throughout the article), digital inequality and labour studies. Studies on digital inequality has demonstrated how the COVID-19 crisis has elicited inequality by exposing more vulnerable groups (BAME communities, elderly, marginalized populations) to higher risks of experiencing the most severe symptoms of the disease. Beyond the current crisis, these studies could help to ground disconnection research since they 'document emergent forms of inequality that radically diminish individuals' agency and

augment the power of technology creators, big tech, and other already powerful social actors whose dominance is increasing' (Robinson et al., 2020). The emergent literature on the gig economy and labour studies (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020) could instead bring forward the material conditions that precarious workers must navigate on a daily basis, and the perils of constant and forced connection to algorithmic infrastructures that define the lives of many in our contemporary datafied society.

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