

## **Algorithms Just Want Attention: Consumers' Resistance through Digital Detoxing**

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### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

We live in a surveillance economy where our attention is constantly being monetized (boyd 2012, Davenport and Beck 2001, Wu 2017, Zuboff 2019). If data is the 'new oil', algorithms are its miners; and they feed off of our attention (Lanier 2014). A rising trend in recent years has been the growing need to "digital detox," whether it is situated in digital/mindfulness well-being discourses, or the recognition that many of our digital tools may be addictive by design (Purohit et. al 2020). Even before the release of *The Social Dilemma* in September 2020 – a documentary about how tech companies monitor and compete for their users' attention – the movement towards a more mindful digital existence had been underfoot (Newport 2019). Scholars have pointed out the need to slow down and take stock in our accelerated world (Honoré 2004, Rosa 2013, Husemann and Eckhardt 2018). For example, there has been a resurgence of analogue consumption in recent years, and a recognition that the digital has infiltrated all aspects of life. As Humayun and Belk (2020, 633) describe: "Our digital world encourages a sedentary form of *flaneurship* where we scroll past various windows into the lives of others."

While we know that digital detoxing or social media breaks can be driven by a quest for authenticity (e.g. Syvertsen and Enli 2019), we know a lot less about consumers resisting algorithmic control over their attention. We do not know how complete this resistance is, or what narratives form these escapes from "the system." What underpins the politics of this technological (social media) refusal? What escapes are truly possible in a digitally saturated world? Drawing on the metaphor of extraction and attention, we examine how consumers manage to meaningfully disconnect. Based on data from 25 in-depth interviews, 23 email interviews, a netnographic study of r/digitalminimalism, people posting #digitaldetox/#offline/#socialmediabreak/#digitalwellness on Twitter/Instagram/YouTube videos, and in-person meetups (pre-Covid) alongside archival data drawn from mainstream news media, we focus on such refusal in the form of digital detoxing by consumers who are letting go of not just their digital devices – but their connections to the new public forums that social media represent.

Rosa (2013) posits that alienation is often caused by the fast pace of technological change, the acceleration of life, and hyper competitiveness in society. With monetization of social media, there is a growing infiltration of a neoliberal mentality where every status update amounts to constructing a brand (Marwick 2013; Ashman et. al 2018). Kozinets et. al (2017) argue that social networks stimulate desire and the passion to consume. The ad-based business models of social media platforms have turned them into virtual shopping malls filled with influencers. There are debates about whether social media consumption will be considered the new smoking – and if alongside the long list of terms and conditions if there should also be the warning about its potentially harmful impacts on mental health and addictiveness. Sutton (2017,

2020) for instance uses a food metaphor to explain how social media is akin to junk food; processed, thereby lacking in authenticity.

We focus on how consumers experience technological deceleration through the practice of giving up their social media. While previous work has focused on extreme instances of such digital detoxing (e.g. going to detox camps, or taking a digital detox vacation), the new evangelical consumers are the ones who are resisting *algorithmic creep* into their daily lives. Unlike pilgrimages, yoga retreats, Burning Man, or going off into the mountains to relive the past (Belk and Costa 1998, Kozinets 2002, Husemann and Eckhardt 2018), digital detoxing represents a new form of consumer emancipation and resistance in times when everything is digitally mediated. As other scholars have noted, it is not always an easy exit either (Karppi 2018, Van Dijck 2013).

According to Rosa (2019), the alternative to alienation is '*resonance*' – the ability to connect meaningfully. Many of these consumer narratives indicate a need to find such *resonance* in their interactions. Connecting meaningfully entails regaining control over one's social media consumption, which involves the interrelated processes of *reflecting, refraining, reconnecting, relapsing*, and eventually *regaining* control of their attention. Some consumers point to the need to curate and edit, be it the algorithmic newsfeeds they encounter or their "friends" list. Others point to how they need to be more extractive when it comes to where they spend their time and attention on social media. They do this by choosing seemingly lesser evils (e.g., giving up Facebook's feed for a more intentional experience on Reddit/podcasts). Even consumers who manage to regain control eventually experience periods of relapse. Our findings suggest that in the world where possibilities of escaping algorithmic control are limited and incomplete, being able to control our own attention has become a virtue; a technology of self. Boym (2001, 351) suggests that "the disease of the millennium will be called chronophobia or speedomania and its treatment will be embarrassingly old-fashioned." Our analysis shows how consumers are taking back control over their time, attention, and emotions through digital detoxing. This research contributes to the evolving discussion around consumers' quest for digital well-being and the desire for new forms of humane technologies that enable rather than entangle us as we keep turning into our digital selves (Belk 2013).

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