

Abstract

At a time when technological innovation continues to break new ground while also provoking increasing criticism, this article-based PhD thesis offers insight into young women's experiences of digital disconnection in Germany and Norway.

Situated within the field of digital disconnection studies, the thesis' underlying project examines how people navigate hyperconnectivity by calibrating their digital media use through practices of reduced use and non-use (Syvertsen, 2022a; Vanden Abeele & Syvertsen, 2025). As the field has increasingly turned its attention to sociodemographics, scholars have also begun to explore the relationship between digital disconnection and women. However, such research has largely focused on women in formalized caregiving roles, such as mothers (Beattie, 2020; Bozan & Tréré, 2023; Fast, 2021; Van Bruyssel et al., 2023; Ytre-Arne, 2023), leaving the experiences of young women without such obligations comparatively underexplored. Addressing this gap, the project is guided by the main research question: *How do young women experience digital disconnection in their everyday lives?*

The project is theoretically guided by the framework of everyday life (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022; Ytre-Arne, 2023), combined with utopian thought as an analytically contrastive and emancipatory lens (Benjamin, 2024; Levitas, 2013), and further informed by key concepts from digital disconnection studies. Empirically, it is situated within a focus on women as a socially constructed category based on self-identification, the life stage of emerging adulthood spanning ages 18 to 29 (Arnett, 2004), and the national contexts of Germany and Norway.

Using a mixed-methods design (Greene, 2002, 2015; Johnson et al., 2007), the project integrates findings from a quantitative and a qualitative study presented across three articles. The quantitative study consisted of a survey conducted among 552 women and 590 men in Norway (N= 1,142). Drawing on a quantitative description of these data, Article I identifies small but statistically significant gender differences in experiences of digital disconnection.

The qualitative study included a creative prompt exercise in which 20 women in emerging adulthood from Norway (n=10) and Germany (n=10) imagined an ideal world

and the role smartphones would play within it, followed by semi-structured interviews. Article II focuses on these imaginings, while Article III analyzes gendered dimensions of the data, abductively drawing on the UN Women (2023) definition of technology-facilitated violence against women (TF VAW).

The thesis makes three key empirical contributions. First, by employing the framework of everyday life, it highlights how young women experience digital disconnection both individually and in ways that reflect broader societal dynamics. On an individual level, digital disconnection was articulated both as an integrated everyday practice and as an aspiration. By identifying preemptive practices aimed at avoiding TF VAW, the thesis further develops the concept of digital disconnection and contributes to ongoing discussions about the involuntary dimensions of disconnective practices (Bozan & Treré, 2023; Hartmann et al., 2025). On a societal level, the findings suggest that public sentiment has shifted toward a longing for reduced device use, with collective action yet to take place.

Second, the thesis offers a nuanced perspective on gender within digital disconnection studies. It demonstrates that, although the quantitative study identified statistically significant gender differences, these differences were generally small. Similarly, participants in the qualitative study often decentered gender in their reflections. At the same time, gendered experiences of TF VAW remained highly consequential.

Third, by deliberately centering women beyond formalized caregiving roles, the thesis broadens digital disconnection studies' perspectives on care. It highlights how caregiving obligations shape lives beyond heteronormative relationships and how care can emerge in more collective and solidaristic forms among women.

Methodologically, the combination of a creative prompt exercise and semi-structured interviews contributes to the development of creative methods within digital disconnection studies and provides a practical example of speculative research more broadly.

Overall, this thesis demonstrates the value of centering young women's experiences in digital disconnection research and contributes to a deeper understanding of digital disconnection in everyday life.