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‘Disconnecting from my smartphone is a privilege I do not have’: Mobile connection and disconnection practices among migrants and asylum seekers in three migrant reception centres of Sicily

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Abstract

This article investigates online connection and disconnection practices among migrants and asylum seekers. It draws from an ethnography of three Sicilian reception centres that hosted migrants and asylum seekers between September and November 2020. We show how migrants, driven by different migratory motivations, enact different mobile connection and disconnection practices. We argue that these are characterised by the different affective meanings that migrants and asylum seekers attach to mobile connection and disconnection and by the different value they place on the public and private dimensions of their lives. By offering a multifaceted portrait of the mobile connection and disconnection practices of different categories of migrants, this article also contributes to: (1) media and migration studies, by showing that there are substantial differences in online connection practices and smartphone use between asylum seekers and migrants and (2) to disconnection studies, by highlighting the nuances that exist within disconnection practices among non-privileged social groups, such as migrants and asylum seekers. We show that they cannot afford to practise typically Western,

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urban and elitist forms of disconnection; however, they too are able to practise specific forms of disconnection, paradoxically afforded by staying connected. The article aims to contextualise and situate disconnection studies within different social, political, cultural and geographic contexts.

Keywords
Disconnection, migration, mobile connection

Introduction

The field of disconnection studies is multifaceted and diverse, characterised by different subject areas and research directions dealing with many paradigms. We should first distinguish disconnection from other earlier forms of media rejection, such as media non-use, which refers to 'individuals who intentionally and significantly limit their media use' (Woodstock, 2014: 1983), or forms of media rejection and resistance, which, according to Syvertsen (2017), includes 'negative actions and attitudes towards media [and] describe refusal to accept the way media operate and evolve' (p. 9). Disconnection practices also entered media and popular culture as positive responses to hyper-connectedness: today's public discourses of digital disconnection frame it as an antidote to the stress produced by being online all the time, or as cool period of Digital Detox (Mirbabaie et al., 2022; Syvertsen, 2023). However, there is also a strand of disconnection studies that is highly aware of digital inequalities (Hargittai, 2021), which advocates for the need to explore disconnection in all its possible declinations.

This is therefore where this article comes in.

We provide further insights for disconnection studies by introducing new forms of disconnection-s, far from Western and universalistic concepts, by looking at the case of migration and arguing that disconnection research should have a more inclusive and contextually sensitive approach.

In the case of migrants and asylum seekers that we will take into account, it is the practices of mobile connection that take on a positive value and play a vital role in their deeply mediatised everyday lives. In this sense, we could say that disconnection, as a Western way of life or an ideal to be achieved, is only one of the many possible ways of being practised. On the contrary, drawing on different studies on the disconnection practices of precarious social groups such as gig workers or healthcare workers (Bonini and Treré, 2022; Nguyen and Hargittai, 2023), we will show how disconnection as life style and well-being is a privilege that migrants and other social class groups that find themselves in conditions of oppression or precariousness cannot afford.

Migrants represent an under-studied and at the same time very interesting case for disconnection studies because, unlike Western users who have developed forms of disconnection to improve their state of well-being, they forcibly live in a hypermediated context. Migrants equip themselves with everything that can help them on their journey: smartphones, sim cards, battery chargers; all of these represent a fundamental infrastructure for mobility (Hannam et al., 2006; Latonero and Kift, 2018) that they cannot renounce. Smartphones take on different meanings and roles during or after the journey (Awad and Tossell, 2021; Georgiou and Leurs, 2022; Gillespie et al., 2018), as do mobile

connectivity practices. Migrants are in a non-privileged condition, characterised by precariousness and uncertainty, not only for their future but also for the present. Moreover, what often characterises migrants is their condition of 'being in between' (Georgiou, 2010; Ponzanesi, 2020) the host country and the country of origin. This condition also implies that they are never able to fully enter one society and, at the same time, completely leave the home country. This could be particularly interesting in a reflection on meanings and possibilities of disconnection.

During the fieldwork we developed the following research questions: what significance does disconnection acquire in the everyday lives of people like migrants for whom online connection is as important as bread? And what kind of disconnection tactics do they develop? We believe that these questions are productive for media and migration studies because they allow to better understand the nuances of migrants' media practices, including the ways in which migrants use connection to disconnect from their respective public and private spheres and, also, for disconnection studies, as they bring the disconnection practices of migrants, and more generally a reflection on the practices of non-privileged people, into the disconnection debate.

We will proceed with a brief review of the literature in the field of disconnection studies and in the field of media and migration studies, highlighting the points where a dialogue between the two could be established.

Then we will describe the mobile connection practices we observed during our fieldwork, arguing that these practices are both shaped by: (1) an affective dimension and (2) a public versus private dimension. Other scholars (Madianou and Miller, 2013) have emphasised how gendered their media practices are; we, however, shift the focus on the difference between migrants and asylum seekers. The relevance attached to the possibility of being connected and the significance they instead attach to moments of disconnection gives us the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which we understand disconnection today. After describing migrants' practices of connection and disconnection, we will then move on to consider how these practices can contribute to a more socially situated understanding of the complex phenomenon of disconnection.

Therefore, by offering a multifaceted portrait of the needs and practices of mobile connectivity, *adopted and adapted* by migrants and asylum seekers, this work also aims to open up further debates in the field of disconnection studies, aiming at questioning Western and universalistic concepts of disconnection and to situate it within different social, political, cultural or geographic contexts.

Literature review

Disconnection studies is a multifaceted and interdisciplinary field that has emerged as a reflection on the social impacts of excessive connection to digital devices. Although there are some exceptions, the discourses and reflections on this debate have often taken place mainly in relation to the Western world and, above all, to specific groups of people. We will try to provide a brief but comprehensive overview of disconnection studies and point out where these gaps exist and why it would be important not only to broaden the scope of study to include different social contexts, but also to establish a dialogue between different fields of study. For example, so far these studies have

hardly ever taken migrants and refugees into consideration, while, at the same time, studies on media and migration have mainly overlooked the meaning of disconnection for migrants and refugees. Few studies in this field have entered into dialogue with studies on disconnection, apart from rare cases such as that of Dhoest (2020). Following Pype (2021), we advocate for a more inclusive and less Westernised approach to disconnection studies and we hope that our findings could offer: (1) an opportunity to expand the debate on digital disconnection; (2) question Western and universalistic concepts of disconnection and (3) situate it within different social, political, cultural and geographic contexts.

Finally, through our fieldwork we hope to show that there are many forms of digital disconnection and that we should therefore speak of many different disconnection-s, rather than one universal practice.

Disconnection or disconnection-s?

Only two decades ago, digital non-use was framed as 'an aberration' and often seen as 'an irrational and ultimately disadvantageous position to adopt' (Selwyn, 2003: 107, quoted in Treré, 2021: 1665). Much has changed since then, and now we are witnessing an unprecedented increasing in the number of contributions to the field of disconnection studies. The idea of digital disconnection explicitly refers to digitisation as a key development in society, which has created the conditions for a pervasive presence of digital media in social life. However, there is no one definition that can fit all the nuances of this concept (or of its opposites, connection and connectivity) applicable to different contexts and practices.

Scholars analysed how digital disconnection is being framed in popular culture and foregrounded very different tropes: disconnection as a civic virtue based on unfriending' or unfollowing toxic profiles (Kaun, 2021); as an individual strategy against the temporal overload of 24/7 always-on connectivity and as a strategy to regain the lost senses of space and of an authentic self (Syvertsen and Eli, 2020, quoted in Kaun, 2021); as a lifestyle choice (Jorge, 2019); as digital well-being (Moe and Madsen, 2021; Umasankar et al., 2022); as a new business for knowledge workers who want to take a break from the overload of digital labour (Fish, 2017). Mejias (2013), Karppi (2018), Hesselberth (2018), Karppi et al. (2021) positively interpret the 'right to disconnect' from work and the excessive demands of digital capitalism. Here, disconnection is interpreted as a critical, political and conscious response to the excesses of the culture of connectivity (van Dijck, 2013), and the authors emphasise the growing concerns about the harmful social, political, cultural-economic and environmental implications of mass online connectivity. Digital disconnection is also emerging as a new practice that includes digital detoxification practices, and concerns 'disconnection from social or online media, or strategies to reduce involvement in digital media' (Syvertsen and Eli, 2020: 1269). However, Adam Fish (2017) unpacked the storytelling behind one of the most popular detox programmes in the United States, Camp Grounded: he argues that technological retreats depoliticise social media by shifting the responsibility for limiting Internet use to the individual and rewarding limited use with hedonistic and spiritual experiences. In this regard, Natale and Treré (2020) also argue that disconnection is being colonised and commodified by

neo-liberal ideology and that the emancipatory potential of disconnection as a form of critique and socio-political change is subsumed by the dynamics of digital capitalism under the innocuous façade of a temporary escape that in the end is instrumental to digital capitalism, since participants to digital detox camps partially disconnect themselves only to return fully regenerated to the same routines of their hyper-connected, highly paid jobs. The two scholars highlight how disconnection can only be a form of criticism of the overwhelming power of technology companies if it is not understood as a form of individual escape, but on the contrary, as an opportunity to deepen and problematise our engagement with digital media. They therefore speak of 'disconnection through engagement'.

From this brief review of the literature, digital disconnection emerges as an articulate response to the profound mediatisation (Hepp, 2019) that characterises our societies and permeates our daily lives. Disconnection here is mainly framed as a manifestation of agency and as a right (to disconnect). Often the choice to disconnect, even temporally, is analysed as a re-appropriation of one's time, space and capacity to act. A kind of agency–structure dilemma to which disconnection could provide at least a partial answer. Disconnection is also framed as a right in a society increasingly driven by connectivity, to decide for oneself, one's own well-being, one's own time.

However, this results in the risk of a failure to take into account the disconnection practices of the less privileged, on one hand, and the manifestations of disconnection in the global South, on the other (Treré, 2021). Several scholars have already criticised the neo-liberal rhetoric that often lurks in the search for a definition, portraying disconnection as an intrinsically positive value and an ideal condition to which *everyone* aspires. In contrast, the attention on digital inequalities (Hargittai, 2021) has also placed a focus on the other side of disconnection, that of a 'luxury' reserved only for some (Beattie and Cassidy, 2021; Jorge, 2019). Fast (2021) acknowledges, in her article on disconnected work, that this only applies to knowledge workers, not 'media-entangled health-service workers, truck drivers, or gig workers' (p. 1618). Bonini and Treré (2022) analysed the tactical use of disconnection among food delivery couriers. Nguyen and Hargittai (2023) distinguish between the desire and the ability to disconnect for gig workers who need to be always connected to keep on working, or even for single parents who are potentially the only emergency contact for their children. Beattie and Cassidy (2021) by framing disconnection as commodification, argue that disconnection practices are increasingly becoming a way of distinguishing one part of society from another, as if the digital inequality, at least in some respects, 'is shifting from scarcity to overabundance' (Büchi et al., 2019: 9): thus an inequality that could now be measured in the order of abundance. Pype (2021) conducted an ethnography on forms of disconnection in Kinshasa, where disconnection is unexpected and unwanted: 'involuntary disconnection' appears to be the only familiar way for people to take part (or not) in so-called electronic modernity. It becomes clear, then, that by broadening the horizon to include not only geographical but also different social contexts, disconnection can bring with it entirely different meanings. Thus, the positive and universalistic view of disconnection as a form of individual agency and right is problematised by more recent studies that emphasise how disconnection can represent also a marker of social distinction and a privilege that certain social categories such as gig workers and inhabitants of the global majority cannot afford (Fast and

Jansson, 2019; Gui and Büchi, 2021; Nguyen and Hargittai, 2023). However, these studies on disconnection as a form of privilege and social inequality have so far not taken migrants into account. As this is another one of those social categories that cannot easily afford to disconnect, we believe that a dialogue between disconnection studies and media migration studies is necessary to broaden the disconnection debate.

Mobile connected migrants

The extreme popularity of the smartphone among migrants is no longer news and the scholarly interest in the migration experience and the use of technologies is growing considerably. The relationship between migrants and their smartphones has already been analysed (Alencar, 2020b) taking into account the temporal and spatial structures behind a migration trajectory. Media technologies and the connectivity they allow, are fundamental and present in all the spaces and times that migrants traverse. However, depending on these, they can take on different forms, functions and meanings.

As studies to date have shown, the role of the smartphone along the migration trajectory begins when migrants are still in their own country, using this digital device to inform themselves on the dangers they will face during the journey, to make arrangements for the future travel, to connect with friends and relatives that are on the road or have already reached their destination. The smartphone here affords the planning of their journey. And this affordance continues afterwards, during the journey itself, which is often punctuated of unpredictable events. The smartphone turns into a lifesaver when navigating the deadly waters of the Mediterranean, a GPS when walking or checking the route, a translator when asking for help and information (Gillespie et al., 2018; Sheller, 2016). In the host country it can be employed as a 'home making' tool (Bonini, 2011); it affords them to virtually return home and, at the same time, supports them in finding a new job and accommodation, in learning the culture or language of the host country (Alencar et al., 2019; Awad and Tossell, 2021; Zijlstra and van Liempt, 2017). The smartphone is also a personal digital archive (Georgiou and Leurs, 2022) of each stage of their journey and a digital witnessing (Gillespie et al., 2018). Migrants use it to store and safeguard the stories of conflicts, departures, abuses and settlements, filtered through their eyes and captured through their smartphone cameras. However, it also collects information, data and contacts that could put them at risk, both while travelling and during the screening process at their arrival in the hosting country (Bellanova et al., 2016; Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2020). The critical aspects of smartphone connectivity and its ambivalent nature are acknowledged both by scholars and by the migrants themselves, who show absolute awareness on that, being able to implement different tactics and strategies to pass through certain borders without being tracked or not providing complete acceptance of all information requested at checkpoints (Latonero and Kift, 2018). Disconnection or complete non-use of one's smartphone is the last action chosen if other strategies are not possible, because staying connected is crucial for the outcome of the migration journey.

In the next sections we will try to bridge disconnection studies and media migration studies by addressing the way migrants enact mobile connection and disconnection practices and by understanding how they make sense of them.

Research methods and context

Research context

The reception system in Italy is divided into levels (Avallone, 2021 in Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021: 38): a zero level with the identification centres, the so-called hotspot centres; a first level with Extraordinary Reception Centres (Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria [CAS]) while the second level consists of the Reception and Integration System (Serivizio Accoglienza Migranti (Migrant Reception Service) [SAI], former Sistema di protezione per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati (Protection system for asylum seekers and refugees) [SPRAR], then Sistema di protezione per titolari di protezione internazionale e minori stranieri non accompagnati (Protection system for holders of international protection and unaccompanied foreign minors) [SIPROIMI]). The reception centres analysed in this study are part of the second level: they can be accessed by refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied foreign minors, foreigners entrusted to the social services on reaching majority age, foreigners in administrative continuation and document control. The individuals who participated in the research are asylum seekers and foreigners awaiting document control. According to Douglas et al. (2019), while the term asylum seeker is precisely defined in the 1951 Convention, migrants are a heterogeneous group with no international consensus:

> The International Organization for Migration provides clarity in the definition where a migrant is defined as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of the person's legal status, whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary, what the causes for the movement are, or what the length of the stay is (Douglas et al., 2019: 1).

According to this definition, asylum seekers too are migrants, but for the sake of this article we will distinguish asylum seekers from migrants who have arrived in Italy without the possibility of applying for asylum. The use of these two categories is not meant to label and box complex realities into something simpler, nor is it meant to make a distinction between forced and voluntary migration (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021), rather it stems from direct observation and nuances that emerged in the field.

Research methods

Data for this article are drawn on an ethnography (Kaufmann, 2020; Miranda, 2022; Osseiran, 2017) conducted between September and November 2020 in three migrants' reception centres in Ragusa, a city in the southeast of Sicily (Italy), with participant observation and semi-structured interviews (Flick et al., 2004; Seim, 2021). During the fieldwork, the three centres hosted 57 migrants, among which there were 31 asylum seekers coming from different countries of Africa and Bangladesh.

During the fieldwork, we observed that different conditions (including legal conditions and thus conditions of reception into society) may call for different connection practices and connection needs. In this sense we use these two non-statutory categories. Participant observation covered all of them, while interviews were conducted with 11 asylum seekers and 7 migrants. Participant observation was undertaken for an average of

4 days per week. One of us had lunch several times with the residents of two centres, inside their facilities, so the discussion often moved to a less formal level. To create a supportive environment that made the participants feel comfortable, individual and small group interviews were offered, both inside and outside the facilities, for instance also through walking interviews (Evans and Jones, 2011). It was therefore crucial to build a relationship of trust, following the ethical principles recommended by Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz (2020) and Kabranian-Melkonian (2015). No direct questions were asked that could influence their asylum application process or the acquisition of the necessary documentation to remain in Italy. Topics such as explicit political acts and acts of dissent, or events in which individuals are recognisable, were discussed during the interviews. They served to build our awareness of the context but we then decided to omit these information. In this case, we have not only adopted the principle of doing no harm, but have also tried to pay attention to the question: 'who benefits from the knowledge produced?' (Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz, 2020: 272). For the same reasons, fictitious names were used to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

We also chose not to use a recording device, often perceived as a threat by them. This means that the interview excerpts reported in this article are not exactly a word-for-word transcription of what our interviewees said. It was however a conscious choice and in line with ethnographic principles, to keep a fieldwork diary, in which small notes were jotted down. Immediately afterwards, then, these were enriched with further descriptions, details, and excerpts from the conversation, together with first thoughts or interpretations, thus obtaining reconstructions as close as possible, based on notes taken.

The interviews and field notes were discussed periodically in meetings between the two of us, following an inductive process typical of Grounded Theory (GT) (Charmaz, 2006), whereby the interviews were followed by data discussion and review sessions, which gave rise to new field research questions, in a cyclic and iterative process.

Mobile connection practices

The simultaneous presence of migrants and asylum seekers and the adoption of open coding according to GT principles led us to highlight two main categories and two dimensions of 'mobile connection practices' that we had not assumed before entering the field.

The first round of data coding provided mixed answers and led us to believe that the different meanings associated with mobile connection could depend on the place of origin, the cultural capital or the gender of the participants. At the second round of coding, however, we realised that these categorisations were misleading, while the stronger distinction between migrants and asylum seekers began to emerge. This was also confirmed by subsequent rounds of interviews and participant observation, which also outlined the two dimensions in which this difference was most apparent. This is one of the novelties brought by the present work. Although previous studies have always been careful to emphasise the difference between the two conditions, denouncing the confusion often made by popular (and often political) rhetoric, no differences in media behaviour have emerged from these. What this study instead argues is that the status of migrant and asylum seeker, with all that this entails, can strongly shape the relationship with media technologies. We found that the differences in the mobile connection practices of

migrants and asylum seekers can be traced to two dimensions. The first is affective: here we speak of affection as the maintenance of relationships, but also of an affective relationship with the physical, material device. The second dimension is the different value they attach to the public and private aspects of their lives, which manifests itself mainly through their practices of accessing social media apps, driven by different motivations. However, continuous connectivity, for both of them, does not have the same negative meanings that it carries among Western tech elites and societies.

The affective dimension of mobile connection practices

> «I have everything on my phone. Photos, messages, videos, roads, phone numbers. I kept all the messages I wrote to Mama when I was on the road in Italy. Before I left, I took photos of all the things and places in my country to preserve the memory of them, always. If I lose this, I lose myself». (Waahid, asylum seeker).

Maintenance is the process of preserving a condition or situation, repairing it if necessary. Mobile connectivity preserves affective relationships and 'repairs' distances. Smartphones afford virtual intimacy and the maintenance of transnational affective bonds. But, as we have seen from Wahid's words, smartphones themselves become objects for which migrants feel affection, as if these artefacts would represent for them a synecdoche of their loved ones. This is a feeling that was mentioned by all migrants interviewed. After all, *connected migrants* (Diminescu, 2008) are hybrid beings who seek to reproduce their presence in the places of their pre-migration lives through media technologies.

As already mentioned, we found some differences between the mobile connection practices of migrants and asylum seekers, for example, in the ways they chose to reconnect with their families and home, and to maintain their affective relationships with their loved ones. As Mohamed and Rabindra argue, the only way 'to be there' is by initiating a video call:

> Mama had a fight with my sister. Baba told me to talk to them together. So, I made a video call with everyone, and they made up. (Mohamed, migrant)

> I was always on video call that day. My wife doesn't have much internet on her phone, and we don't have Wi-Fi at home [. . .] Since many people were at my house for my son's birthday, I called them all so that no one would run out of internet at once. (Rabindra, migrant)

'Seeing each other' is a pillar of migrants' mobile connection practices. Photos and video calls represent for migrants real infrastructures for the manifestation of their affection. They are infrastructures of feeling. However, we never observed the same in asylum seekers.

> Talking via text or voice is faster than a video. They can be busy and so can I . . . so we can talk and do other things. Sometimes, we also do videocall, but just for the important things. (Tariq, asylum seeker)

> The first two months we were looking for a way to see each other more often, but now we are used to it. We have different lives, mine is here. (Shihab, asylum seeker)

In this case, the tendency seems to be to opt for the most convenient solution. For asylum seekers, a voice call or a simple text message is already enough to say that they are ok. This is also an aspect that will return in their use of social media: migrants and asylum seekers give a different importance to images of their relatives and families. Another reason could be the economic one, that do not often allow asylum seekers to make video calls with their families: initiating a video call requires more effort, on both sides. Often, those who remain at home, in their own country, may not have a smartphone or an Internet connection, or may share their phone line with other families to save money: who migrate, then, is faced with different connection possibilities and infrastructures.

We also found that migrants and asylum seekers make a different use of videocalls. Asylum seekers, for example, usually make few videocalls. This is because, according to Shihab, his life is now in another country and he wants to look ahead. The Bengali migrants we interviewed arrived in Italy in search of work, with the plan to return home after earning enough money, while asylum seekers often leave their homes knowing they will not be able to return, and they are projected towards the new life they have wished for or been forced into.

The desire to return home also influences the choice of the type of communication with loved ones. Asylum seekers seem to avoid communication based on photos and videos because they try to distance themselves from their former life. Only by keeping the memory of 'home' at a distance they can focus on the beginning of a new life. In this wake, we found that different life projects also contribute to shape the meanings associated with digital connection. Migrants are more reluctant to exchange their smartphone numbers or contacts on social media, even with those who share the same experience. Thus, getting to know each other always stops at the physical level and is not carried over to the digital one. Among asylum seekers, however, there is a greater desire to establish new networks in the host country as well. While the use of WhatsApp is widely common among asylum seekers, the other migrants living in the reception centres prefer to use Imo because, as they said: 'Nobody (in Bangladesh) has WhatsApp'. The only ones who consider downloading it are those who think they can build their lives elsewhere from their home, as Jaabir:

> I should download WhatsApp on my phone. Here everyone uses it, I think it's important now that I also have WhatsApp. (Jaabir, migrant)

The tendency of Bengali migrants living in the reception centres to use Imo instead of WhatsApp, also in Italy, is explained by the fact that their migration project is geared towards returning to their home country sooner or later. While asylum seekers were interested in building new social networks, they expressed no interest in building new relationship networks in the host country. This finding partially contradicts other studies conducted so far (Alencar, 2020a; Denov and Akesson, 2013; Smets, 2018). These authors argue that the process of (re)locating place, typical of migrants' transnationalism, takes place thanks to the social connections they manage to establish in the new country, emphasising how the creation of a support network is of primary importance.

Finally, we also noticed a different frequency of connection efforts among asylum seekers and the other group of migrants. The Bengali migrants we interviewed were almost always engaged in video calls, even when they were talking or doing something

else. They used to maintain a daily and constant connection with their families, as already noted about the connection habits of Filipino migrants in Italy (Bonini, 2011). The communication channel of asylum seekers, however, was only opened for specific reasons and not every day. However, a different participation and attention to listening transpired during the asylum seekers' call with their homes compared, for example, to those who had the opportunity to virtually see their loved ones every day and several times a day. During the few calls asylum seekers made with their families they were completely immersed in communication. For them these calls were rare and precious events, whereas for the other migrants this kind of communication was ordinary.

The private versus public dimension

Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, Messenger, Imo and TikTok; this is the social media ecosystem in which our interviewees daily move. Facebook is present on everyone's smartphone, and everyone has opened at least one profile and use it more or less frequently. As for the other platforms, however, their presence changes according to various factors. Instagram, like WhatsApp, is not popular in Bangladesh; just as TikTok is only popular among very young people and Twitter only among African asylum seekers. Even though migrants and asylum seekers use the same platforms, we observed a striking difference in the content they publish and the audience they target. We argue that this depends on the different value attributed by them to the private or public dimension of their lives.

The content published by migrants on social media always refer to their private sphere of affection.

Their Facebook profiles are a kind of manifesto of their daily lives: they post content related to their private lives, never talk about public issues, comment on political issues, take part in public debates, or post links to news articles. Their storytelling strategy is aimed at the circle of relatives and families at home. This narrative disclosure of self may take a more nostalgic or more exhibitionist form: in moments of despair they post memories of their pre-migration life, whereas when they are experiencing happy moments in the host country they immediately exhibit them through selfies (Risam, 2018) and photos of joyful situations. Especially the younger ones used to immediately share what was 'new' in their daily routine: a lunch all together, or a walk through the centre of the town. They would take a photo and share it on Facebook, tagging friends and family.

> So I can tell everyone: look, I'm fine, I'm happy. (Jaabir, migrant)

Migrants want to show their best 'façade' to their audience back home, however, these are not always truthful portraits. In some cases they are slightly revised truths, in others outright lies: they do not want to worry those left behind, but at the same time they want to show that they made the right decision to leave. For example, in the case of extraordinary events on a daily basis, more photos were taken and the publication was spread over time as if to show that something good always happens.

> I have no new photos, I was here (at the center) all day today. We didn't do anything, but I don't want to let them think that we don't do anything. (Jaabir, migrant)

On the contrary, asylum seekers always address the public sphere – the diasporic one. They make exclusively private use of a semi-public sphere (Papacharissi, 2010). They comment and discuss political issues and follow the social media profiles of political and social activists. Social media allow them to keep their political struggle alive and to express their criticism of the governments of the countries from which they have fled. Twitter use is also much more widespread among them, especially among political activists. They use it actively every day, they are familiar with how it works and all the possible visibility strategies. They used it before starting the journey and they continue to use it now, even more frequently. Asylum seekers do not use Facebook or Instagram for a self-narrative purpose, they do not post many photos of themselves either; their profiles lack that diary nature that migrants' profiles have. On social media, they prefer not to show the bitter reality of their new daily life:

> I used to post some photos on Instagram Stories sometimes. I used to be in a center near the sea and the building was new. I liked that house. I'm fine here, but it's not beautiful. So I don't post anything anymore. I don't want to show where I live. (Shihab, asylum seeker)

Both migrants and asylum seekers attribute a central role in their daily lives to mobile connectivity. In this section, however, we have seen how this central role is shaped by different meanings they attach to the importance of being connected. While the inhabitants of the global north discuss the positive value of disconnection practices and the toxicity of the condition of being perpetually connected, for the newly arrived migrants in the global north, being connected takes on a whole other meaning, and being disconnected is a problem, as we will see in the next section.

'Internet . . . problem': mobile disconnection practices

'Internet . . . problem', the migrants repeated it continuously one day when we arrived at one of the centres. When they woke up in the morning they had discovered that there was no Internet connection. The staff told us that the Wi-Fi had gone out during the night and now they were waiting for a technician to solve the problem.

To be able to purchase a sim card in Italy and obtain an Italian mobile phone number, they must present documents proving their residence in the country, but many of our participants were still waiting for them. So, the only ones who had an Italian sim card, and thus the ability to connect without Wi-Fi, were those who had friends or relatives there who had bought a sim card for them. They had been able to send a quick message via the Imo app to the family to say *they were ok* but had no Wi-Fi connection, the same message was then also posted on Facebook to warn also their social networks on social media. The migrants did not know how long the lack of Wi-Fi would last and did not want their online silence to worry anyone. Even among the asylum seekers the situation was similar, in fact not all of them owned an Italian sim card, but their reaction to the lack of Wi-Fi had been different. No one had warned their family, their communication channel was not open every day, with or without Wi-Fi. Those who had the chance to use their Italian sim cards, had checked Twitter or the various online private chat groups they were in, like they did every morning, to see if there was any news about a protest organised by

their friends and taking place in their home country. They did this quickly, reading the tweets and saving the videos to download for later, when the Wi-Fi connection in the centre would return. After an hour, the situation had still not changed and so one of the two Bengali migrants with an Italian sim card decided to act as a hotspot for the other Bengali migrants in the centre. His mobile Internet subscription had just been renewed, so he had a lot of gigabytes of Internet connection to share with his peers, but he was afraid he would run out of them too soon, since it was the beginning of the month. So he asked his peers not to make video calls, but only send text messages, check Facebook and stay ‘connected’. By late morning, the problem had been solved and everything was back to normal.

This episode clearly shows us how vital being connected to the Internet is in the daily lives of migrants and asylum seekers, trapped in a condition of precariousness in which their agency is constrained. During the journey, their ability to arrive at their destination depends on many factors outside their control. Once they arrive at their destination, their will to build a new life depends on the institutions and bureaucratic structures of the host countries. The agency that remains in their possession, the limited autonomy they can exercise during the journey and in the host country is strongly mediated by the smartphone. Not getting lost during the journey, receiving money from the family, paying the traffickers, translating documents, searching for information, staying connected to their family members, documenting abuse to support the asylum request, looking for a job, all these activities are mediated by the smartphone. Their agency, at least in part, is granted and expressed precisely through connection and digital media, it is reduced almost entirely to what Ytre-Arne and Das (2021) call ‘audiences’ communicative agency’, a capability ‘to effect power potentials through interpretative engagements in everyday processes of communication, in relation to structures that take part in the same communicative processes’ (p. 785).

Our fieldwork shows how burdensome could be for migrants and asylum seekers not to have access to the Internet and social media. It means not being able to be informed immediately if something happens to their family, their friends or the country they continue to fight for, or it may alarm their family members who, not seeing them connected, might worry. However, this condition of continuous connection can also represent a source of stress and anxiety, an aspect we had not adequately considered at the beginning of the fieldwork. If at first glance our interviewees did not attribute any positive significance to moments of disconnection, re-analysing our interviews revealed an aspect we had not initially considered.

Connect to disconnect: disconnection among migrants and asylum seekers

As highlighted by other scholars (Awad and Tossell, 2021; Leurs, 2014), being constantly available to family and friends left behind can be almost as burdensome as not being connected at all. This could mean continuing to be involved in the dynamics and dramas one has fled from, but at the same time never being able to concretely help and this could generate mixed feelings in those who are far away.

This sentiment of ambiguity towards being constantly reachable and online was also present among our interviewees, and by re-analysing the field notes we practise that

migrants experienced two different forms of disconnection: the unintentional one, like the episode described above, which was considered a tragedy; and the intentional one, which generated mixed feelings among them. We had so far only considered the former, and went back to our data to reconsider the traces of the latter form of disconnection that were present in our notes. What migrants cannot afford is a sudden disconnection from the Internet, or the loss, robbery or impossibility to carry a smartphone with them. They cannot even afford a temporary time of 'lifestyle disconnection', like Western digital detox periods. But we noticed that many of them practise, more or less consciously, different forms of disconnection, through their common practice of creating multiple social media personal profiles under different names (Costa, 2018), but for different aims.

Mothers, friends, relatives represent different audiences to whom they tell slightly different versions of themselves, to emphasise or omit certain details of their lives that might be frowned upon at home.

Profiles with a fake image and name are often a way to disconnect 'spatially' from certain segments of family affections, as Zayd, explains:

> When you have many profiles, you are freer. If you only have one, you must control it. (Zayd, migrant)

Asylum seekers too are used to creating multiple profiles, but to avoid censorship in their home country and be able to continue to freely expressing their political dissent. Having multiple profiles, they will always have at least one through which they can communicate if the others are blocked. They do not use them at the same time, as non-asylum seekers do to talk to different audiences, but only when one of their accounts has been blocked. In this sense, they lack the spatial disconnection that migrants achieve through audience segregation strategies. Anonymity, for them, serves to avoid state surveillance and/or that of military apparatuses, platforms and so on, as Wadee showed us:

> I have many profiles, but I don't use them all at once. I write a lot about politics, and I am very hard on the government and the military. They close my profile for some time, then I use the other one. They also close that profile and I use another one. (Wadee', asylum seeker)

In this case, the possible forms of disconnection take on a different meaning: migrants do not disconnect from digital media, but through connecting with digital media, they disconnect from specific publics located in specific places or for specific periods of time. As for the connection practices described above, in this case too the private versus public dimension of disconnection is relevant: migrant temporally disconnect themselves from private family issues, while asylum seekers disconnect themselves from the eye of their government to safely reconnect themselves to their diasporic public sphere.

What these practices show is that, although migrants cannot afford forms of disconnection typical of Western users such as digital detox, nor do they attribute the same meanings to moments of disconnection as the urban elites and tech workers of the global north, they are capable of expressing forms of agency vis-à-vis their dependence on connection and have developed tactics of disconnection through the appropriation of the affordances of mobile digital devices (Costa, 2018). While they cannot afford the

neo-liberal take of disconnection, represented by the rhetoric embedded in digital detox claims like 'disconnect to reconnect', they still can afford a 'disconnection through connection', similar to the concept of 'disconnection through engagement' developed by Natale and Treré (2020).

Therefore, the way migrants and asylum seekers practise disconnection shows us how necessary it is to speak not of disconnection, but of 'disconnection-s', of different ways of being disconnected, each of them charged with different meanings, intentions and effects on society and the individual. Connection and disconnection are always situated and negotiated practices shaped by power relations and specific cultural, social, geographical and political contexts.

Conclusion

Migration studies have so far taken little account of the significance of digital disconnection practices among migrants and disconnection studies have overlooked migrants' disconnection practices. More recent disconnection studies have begun to consider non-privileged social groups such as gig workers, but so far these studies have overlooked disconnection practices among migrants.

Our article contributes to both fields of research. For migration studies, we showed that there are substantial differences in online connection practices and smartphone use between asylum seekers and migrants. This aspect had not yet been advanced by any other study in this field, which showed differences in gender (Madianou and Miller, 2013) or age (Olivieri and Alinejad, 2019). However, we found that another feature could be able to shape migrants' use of the smartphone: being a migrant or an asylum seeker brings with it profoundly different meanings for migration and different kind of agency in the host country, and this also seems to be reflected in their media practices. We showed how connection practices enacted by migrants serve both to preserve affective relationships and to 'repair' distances, also reconnecting them to their diasporic public sphere. We emphasised the affective dimensions and the distinction between public and private dimensions of mobile connection practices among migrants and asylum seekers. While, for disconnection studies, we highlighted the nuances that exist within disconnection practices between non-privileged social groups.

On one hand, the lack of connection represents a true tragedy for migrants and asylum seekers: they cannot afford to practise typically Western, urban and elitist forms of disconnection, such as digital detox, or voluntary forms of disconnection from certain platforms to increase their psycho-physical well-being, or periodic forms of disconnection to take time for themselves.

On the other hand, we showed that they are still able to practise specific forms of disconnection, paradoxically afforded by staying connected. Migrants create multiple profiles to temporarily disconnect from the pressures of family demands and assume new identities, while asylum seekers take on new identities to escape state surveillance and censorship of their political views. Both connect to disconnect themselves from one or more private or public spheres in their countries of origin.

These findings are relevant both for migration and disconnection studies. Media and migration studies could broaden their understanding of digital connection practices

among migrants and include the investigation of disconnection practices in their gaze. While disconnection studies could learn to extend their understanding of disconnection practices, framing them as socially situated, and address not only socially non-privileged categories such as gig workers but also migrants. In the case of media and migration studies, they could develop more attention to disconnection practices, while in the case of disconnection studies, they could focus more on migrants.

Practices of connection and disconnection are, like all practices of everyday life (De Certau, 1984), embedded in power relations and in specific cultural, social, geographical and political contexts. At stake is the power, which all people should have, to choose whether, why and how to be connected.

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