

Disrupting or Sustaining Networks of Desire? Digital Detox and Technology's Present Absence

In their visionary account of networks of desire, Kozinets, Patterson & Ashman (2017) provide a compelling case for the crucial role of technologies in disciplining, abstracting, and extremifying the human subject's desires. Although these technologically-mediated networks are conducive to subjects' intensifying passions to consume, the configuration of these networks is never static and "constantly in flux" (p. 662). Following Kozinets and colleagues' conceptualisation of technology as just *one* of multiple actors operating together within these networks to territorialise desire's flows, we argue that interpretive consumer researchers' focus should not remain solely with the presence of technology but also with its *absence* or, as we shall discuss, its paradoxical "present absence". Like any desire that is channelled onto market objects, subjects' desirous cravings of and through technology can never be truly satiated, and are prone to be constantly redirected and reformulated into, in some cases, just *other* commodity forms. This constant reshaping of desire oftentimes manifests itself in ostentible practices of abstention (e.g. reducing or abstaining from particular technologies) which, we argue, are not genuinely adversarial to networks of desire but are complementary and co-constituting operations for territorialising and re-territorialising desirous flows. Within today's cultural atmosphere of cynical capitalist realism, where all facets of contemporary life have been brought under the spell of the market, even the passion to exclude consumption becomes animated by consumerism itself (Fisher, 2009; Holt, 2002; Kotzé, 2020). In this paper, we theorise practices of abstention as supplementary "nodes" *within* rather than without networks of desire – what we call *nodes of present absence*. Through these nodes, we theorise that the absence of technology at one part of the network can be conducive to the presence of passionate consumer engagement at another.

As an empirical context for our theory, we explore individuals' "digital detoxing" practices and draw upon data from a 12-month netnography and 21 interviews. Digital detox, when viewed structurally, appears to be an ostensibly countervailing market system which deterritorialises and supplants networks of desire with its own vaguely oppositional, yet ultimately consumable, framework of desirous passions and ideals (see Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). However, when viewed through the lenses of Žižek's (2013) *interpassivity* and de Certeau's (1984) *bricolent "tactics"*, the temporal abstention that underpins detoxing appears fully integrated with technological lives and their underpinning hyper-individualistic ethos. The interpassive, rather than interactive, nature of detoxing is reflected in detoxers' delegation of resistant energies to objects that are expected to critique technology for them – ironically, sometimes even tech products themselves (e.g. website blockers, VPNs, DuckDuckGo, "dumb phones", meditation apps). The bricolent nature of detoxers is characterised by the nominal efforts they make to seek "transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules" (de Certeau, 1984: xiv).

Our findings reveal the ways that detoxers seek to "rematerialize" their desires through diverting the thematic focus of their networked lives away from digital objects to material concerns and embodied experiences. Through a concerted "rewilding" of their senses, detoxers renew and enrich their affective environments by punctuating their digital lives with nature-based fetishes and offline streams of kinaesthetic, visceral, and cutaneous sensations (also Scott et al. 2017). Other bricolent tactics include counteracting the "production" logic of their networks of desire through cultivating offline spaces for "deceleration" and non-productivity via techniques such as meditation and mindfulness. Overall, our account of digital detoxing reveals how networks of desire are expanded and reproduced not just through consumers' unfettered participation and passionate engagement in interconnected machinic frameworks, but also through various forms of counter-machinic bricolage and improvisational critique.

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