Technoculture and its Lived Consequences: A Terminal Marketing Approach

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Abstract

This thesis is situated within an ultra-realist vein of marketing scholarship – what has recently been called "Terminal Marketing" or "de-romanticist consumer research" – that seeks to countervail utopian assumptions of an all-empowered consumer subject. Focusing on the intersection of technology with consumer culture (i.e., "technoculture") as an empirical context, this thesis introduces novel conceptualisations of consumer subjectivity, its disempowerment and depoliticisation. Combining the cultural theories of Mark Fisher, Slavoj Žižek, and Steve Redhead with empirical fieldwork involving a 12-month netnography and 21 in-depth interviews with those who seek to unplug themselves from technoculture (i.e., "digital detoxers"), the entrapment and foreclosure that frames technoculture and its subjectivities is conceptualised. Emergent findings are organised into three research chapters (one theoretical and two empirical manuscripts). Altogether, these chapters map out a dystopian, "terminal" stage of consumer capitalism populated by increasingly disenchanted and knowingly helpless subjects whose pro- and anti-market behaviours are barely distinguishable in terms of genuine autonomy or transformative power. In tracing the various contours of consumers' inertia and bleak dissatisfactions with their everyday digital lives, the findings reveal an increasingly unbearable onto-affective atmosphere of inescapability that cannot be discharged in any meaningful way. In the absence of collective hope for genuine alternatives to the existing system, consumers are resigned to accept the perceived unchangeability of the structural conditions that perpetuate their attachment to market-mediated fantasies and market-located solutions. The thesis explores the consequences of living within what Terminal Marketing scholarship classifies as a state of "cancelled futures" under capitalism.

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List of Abbreviations

CCT	Consumer Culture Theory
ICR	Interpretive Consumer Research
TM	Terminal Marketing

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Declaration

This thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university. It is the result of my own work and includes nothing that is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated. A full statement of authorship for each of the multi-authored papers (papers 1 and 2) and the solo-authored paper (paper 3) are outlined in this section and includes signed certification by myself and my supervisors (other authors) of the proportion for which credit is due for each paper.

Excerpts of this thesis have been published in the following academic publications and conference manuscripts. Paper 3 (Chapter 5) is a solo-authored manuscript and is currently in draft form for submission to a suitable journal.

Academic papers:

Hoang, Q., Cronin, J., and Skandalis, A. (2022). High-fidelity consumption and the claustropolitan structure of feeling. *Marketing Theory*, 22(1), 85-104. https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931211062637

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Author Contribution Statement

I initially designed this study, gathered data for analysis, and conducted initial data analysis by myself. My supervisors, Professor James Cronin and Dr Alexandros Skandalis, offered feedback on the analytical categories and themes that emerged from the analysed data pool. Altogether, we agreed upon which themes to pursue. My supervisors are co-authors on papers 1 and 2 (Chapters 3 and 4) in which they substantially collaborated in editing, writing, and developing the papers before they went to review at the targeted journal(s). My supervisors collaborated in revisions and resubmissions of all drafts of paper 1 (Chapter 3) and paper 2 (Chapter 4). Paper 3 (Chapter 5) is a solo-authored piece and my supervisors offered some advice and comments on the first draft of the paper. Feedback and edits were also provided on other chapters as they might be for a monograph thesis.

The proportional breakdown of authorship contribution for each paper is detailed below.

- Paper 1 **(Chapter 3):** Hoang, Q., Cronin, J., and Skandalis, A., (2022). High-fidelity consumption and the claustropolitan structure of feeling. *Marketing Theory*, 22(1), 85-104. https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931211062637

  Quynh Hoang: 70% Contribution

  Professor James Cronin: 20% Contribution

  Dr Alexandros Skandalis: 10% Contribution

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  Quynh Hoang: 70% Contribution

  Professor James Cronin: 20% Contribution

  Dr Alexandros Skandalis: 10% Contribution

- Paper 3 **(Chapter 5):** Hoang, Q., (2022). Giving up the Ghost: Abstinence as Desire Regenerating Forces (*for submission to a suitable peer-reviewed journal*).

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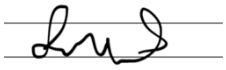
  Signed  **Date:** 31/10/2022

The total word count for this thesis is 65,468 words (including tables, figures, references and appendices) and this does not exceed the permitted maximum word count (80,000 words).

1. Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Origins of the Thesis

As I sit in a café on an unusually hot summer day in Hanoi city finishing the wraparound chapters of this thesis, I cannot help but feel bemused by the group of four young people sitting at the table adjacent to me. When they speak, their voices travel but their conversations appear intermittent; to be stop-and-go; choppy and broken up as if each person is driven to distraction with each passing moment and can neither find their way back to the flow of what had been said nor what might be said next. The experience is surreal; like sitting on the sidelines of an outbreak of some mysterious case of shared aphasia or eavesdropping on a group of enemies whose dialogues are painfully punctuated by awkward silences. The reality is that the four seem like friends rather than foes and, while none are short of words, their conversations are fractured as each one incessantly checks the arrival of new information signaled to them by the audible vibrations and message alerts of their mobile phones. Without trying to sound cliché, each person seems to me to be caught between two worlds but existing stably in neither: one is the material realm where they find themselves seated with their coffees, pastries, and buzz of the city amongst ostensibly "real" flesh-and-blood friends, and the other is the realm of the digital; an ever-moving, ever-changing field of possibilities amongst strangers and fictions; jostling with the lures of social media, instant messaging, email, and a drip-feed of notifications.

Near the big windows to the entrance of the café are some young couples who sit quietly most of the time, contented and positioned next to or across from one another but not talking; the backlights of their screens reflecting eerily on their eyeglasses. The café is filled with gadgets, gizmos, earphones, laptops, tablets, phablets, charging wires, smartwatches, and electronica of all shapes and sizes. I even catch a glance of one of the baristas surreptitiously checking the time from the home screen of his phone in his apron pocket. Some parents are with their children; most hold a smartphone in their hands – posting pictures, chatting, texting, shopping, watching videos, playing games. In this moment, I become highly self-aware of the entirety of this scenario and its closeness to the themes of this thesis, and begin to feel a bit uneasy. Not because I cannot focus on my own work with all of the electronic din, or the simple fact that my research context is playing out around me

in some theatrical but entirely unintentional final Act, but simply because it seems that absolutely nobody really *cares* about the strangeness of this screen-saturated atmosphere.

I have been engaging in this kind of casual observation for nearly three years now since the beginning of my doctoral study. The accelerating digitalisation of our consumer culture over the past few decades – what has been alternately termed *technoculture* or *digital culture* (Kozinets, 2019) – continues to intrigue me, beguile me, and sometimes, disgust me. Since the COVID-19 pandemic broke normalcy with its many lockdowns and social distancing requirements, many people have come to appreciate digital technologies even more, ironically alongside the much-publicised longing for real-life social interactions and a "return to normal". As the acute stages of the pandemic draw to an end and social distancing measures slowly become a thing of the past, those famous desires for rekindling "authentic" human connections have seemingly evaporated. It is as if those hopes were allowed to build to some tremendous crescendo, raising with them all of our expectations for some kind of grand revolution for reinstating "real" contact, and ultimately allowed to implode in on themselves. The world is back to where it was pre-pandemic, fractured by the fallacies, interruptions, fictions, and follies of the internet and information technology. If anything, it's gotten worse.

Now in the post-pandemic times, many people – young and old, rich and poor, producer and consumer – seem willfully tethered to the same digital gadgets they bemoaned and begrudgingly relied on over social lockdowns. Though the lockdowns are gone, many meetings remain held remotely via Teams or Zoom. Though offices have opened back up, remote and/or hybrid working continues to be the norm for many. Though pubs, restaurants, sporting facilities and music venues are all well and truly back open for business, they now must compete with ever-expanding modes of domestic "Esports", mobile gaming, audio streaming, and binge-watching that continue to present themselves as the escapist acts of choice for many. The *hypernormalisation* of society's digitalisation for me, is perhaps expressive of a helplessness to genuinely resist or counter an accelerating complacency, apathy towards, and languid reliance upon the chains of our own incarceration. Most of us have resigned ourselves to what Shoshana Zuboff (2019: 222) calls technology's "*inevitabilism*", the taken-for-grantedness that any future we might have will inevitably contain the conveniences and comforts technology affords but also the inequality, frustration,

disillusionment, and innumerable issues it introduces. For better or worse, it has seemed that we cannot conceive of a future without digital technology.

These kinds of fly-on-the-wall observations, together with my personal reflections on living in the digital age, originally brought me to technoculture as my research area, and "*digital detoxing*" as my empirical context. Before beginning my doctoral studies, I spent a significant portion of my life in the online world. Besides the run-of-the-mill word processing, emailing, instant messaging and so on that have become native to most work commitments, my everyday routine would also entail creating and editing videos, writing web blogs, checking viewership statistics, and engaging with many online groups to gain more visibility and recognition amongst digital audiences. However, as my digitally-centred career progressed, I found myself, truthfully, feeling anxious and dissatisfied most of the time. During moments of distress where I would find myself in the full and naked realisation of my negative position, what Hegel called the "night of the world" (Žižek, 2000: 35), I would actively and desperately look for "digital detoxing" and "unplugging" self-help guides as solutions to my dissatisfaction. Having done countless web searches around this topic and going down Google and YouTube rabbit-holes far too many nights a week in search of solutions, I began to realise that any individual effort to get away from technology seemed to be cruelly indebted to technology. It began to look as though there truly is no easy way off this train.

Digital detoxing started to become a deeply futile, hollow and helpless act in my own mind. If anything, people seek a respite from the digital world ironically so as to *continue* being part of it. Consumers – myself included – intermittently detox from digital consumption, *precisely* so that nothing must change: by cutting out a bit of technology here and there, we can go on "enjoying" digital consumer culture without the need or cause for a more wholesale intervention. This, of course, is utter *fantasy*. The depressing reality that individuals without some collective sense of solidarity and systemic goals can never truly overcome their digital consumption motivated me to critically engage with digital detoxing and the deeper structures and processes that perpetuate it. While previous studies have already investigated the context of digital detoxing, particularly its positive functions and benefits, the personal motivations that underpin it, and its different modes of expression (e.g., Foot, 2014; Wood and Muñoz, 2021), I sought to approach digital detoxing from a more systemic, stratified warts-and-all perspective. For me, a "terminal", ultra-realist, or de-

romanticist (see Ahlberg et al., 2022; Fitchett and Cronin, 2022; Winlow and Hall, 2019) approach to digital consumption and its lived consequences is more effectively placed to help analyst-activists understand and perhaps one day, figure out how to radically alter the status quo for the betterment of humanity's futures.

1.2. Overview of the Thesis

In this doctoral research, I explore and theoretically scaffold the lived reality of consumers who live, work, and play under the hegemony of today's firmly capitalist technoculture (i.e., the intersection of technology with consumer culture). This line of enquiry is largely inspired by a recent and deeply pessimistic vein of thought in critical marketing scholarship – what has been called "Terminal Marketing" (TM) (Ahlberg et al., 2022) or "de-romanticist consumer research" (Fitchett and Cronin, 2022) – that challenges the optimistic assumptions of the all-empowered, hyper-agentic, and sovereign consumer subject long upheld by consumer culture theorists (Brown, 1999; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Ozanne and Murray, 1995; Ozanne et al., 2021). To countervail predominant views of liberal markets and cultures of consumption as fields of meaningful experience, critical agency and emancipatory change, terminal or de-romanticist research accounts for an ultra-competitive, precarious and deeply insecure consumer subject as the result of its entanglement in global consumer capitalism (Coffin, 2022; Cronin and Fitchett, 2021; Hietanen et al., 2020; Higgins and O'Leary, 2022; Lambert, 2019; Rome and Lambert, 2020). Assumptions of consumer freedom are critiqued by TM researchers as peripheral to an ideological *fantasy* that keeps subjects wilfully reliant on the fictions of the marketplace and market-generated materials in their consumerist pursuits of status, identity, productivity and hedonism amongst the brutal "Real" of accelerated resource depletion, environmental degradation, widespread mental illnesses, and rising social inequalities as global consumer capitalism approaches objective limits to its growth (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Carrington et al., 2016; Fitchett and Cronin, 2022).

A nascent body of Terminal Marketing studies have also theorised the increasingly disempowering and disenchanting effects that technocultural fields and networks have on consumers' everyday practices and experiences (Ahlberg et al., 2020; Hietanen et al., 2022; Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018). Within the context of "*techno-capitalism*" – the politico-economic system founded on the fusion of the market-oriented logics of capital accumulation

and the desiring intensities of contemporary technoculture – we witness how the combination of various technological (e.g., algorithmic surveillance) and symbolic forces (e.g., the lure of digital entrepreneurialism and social media fame) can have sinister consequences on how consumers understand themselves, interact with others, and experience the world around them (Ashman et al., 2017; Reyes et al., 2015; Šimůnková, 2019; Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast, 2017). As novel technologies are continually emerging to channel, shape, and automate users' attention, choices and motivations in ever-intensifying ways, the utopian conception of an autonomous, reflexive and creative consumer subject who can draw on marketer-generated materials of consumer culture to construct better worlds for themselves has become less and less credible if not anachronistic (Darmody and Zwick, 2020; Thompson, 2019). In today's always-on digital world where it is publicly accepted that much of our consumption, whether online purchases or online interactions, are the direct or indirect result of targeted exploitation and means of algorithmic manipulation, the idea of a fully constituted, agentic "self" becomes a *myth* at best (Hietanen et al., 2022).

TM studies have discussed an oppressive atmosphere of *"cancelled futures*" whereby any collective optimism for genuinely autonomous, self-originated consumer behaviour or any conceivable alternatives to the hegemony of technologically-mediated interference on human subjectivity has increasingly been lost (Ahlberg et al., 2020; Cronin and Cocker, 2019; Wickstrom et al., 2021). However, empirical work that explores how such a lack of belief in anything better is actually lived and experienced by consumers and how such experiences are structurally, ideologically, and affectively connected to broader contextualising conditions of techno-capitalism is largely *missing*. The stratified, contextualised lived experience – i.e., the *context of context* (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) – is where deep insights perhaps can be gleaned. A critical, comprehensive treatment of such "context of context" can allow us to better understand how the gradual disappearance of collective hope for better futures is materialised and prefigured into the thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and actions of the consumer subject. And while prior marketing studies have revealed how the lack of alternatives to capitalist hegonomy might result in subjects' anti-market behaviours that remain deeply entrenched in capitalist market logics and can be safely commodified (Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002a; Rumbo, 2002), we know much *less* about how consumption and "anti"-consumption practices become conflated, colluded, and co-constitutive within a techno-capitalist society where no genuine escape from technology's inevitabilism is felt conceivable.

In this thesis, I seek to understand the deep sense of helplessness, resignation and foreclosure at the heart of capitalist technoculture and what this means for any ostensible popular resistance to technology and the market. The thesis maps out a dystopian, "*terminal*" stage in consumer culture that is populated by fully interpellated and reflexively helpless subjects whose pro- and anti-market behaviours are barely distinguishable in terms of genuine autonomy and transformative power. The overall thesis is underpinned by the general orienting questions:

- How do consumers experience living within today's capitalist technoculture?
- How are their lived experiences shaped and mediated by the underlying structural conditions of capitalist technoculture?
- If capitalist technoculture allows consumers to enjoy themselves, express their creativity, and pursue identity projects, why do so many consumers want to escape ("detox") from this culture?
- How are consumers' dissatisfactions with technoculture translated into particular pro- and/or anti-market behaviours?
- What might the lack of collective optimism for radically different futures mean for how consumers engage with – and/or resist against – the technologically-mediated marketplace?
- What does all of the above mean for our understanding of consumers' transformative power and potential to effect structural change?

In navigating the above questions, this study undertakes an "*ultra-realist*" (i.e., investigating and representing truthfully the deeply pessimistic yet most authentic aspects of human life-worlds) account of capitalist technoculture and consumers' lived experiences within it. In contrast to marketing scholarship's romanticist and optimistic understandings of technoculture as affording consumers with emancipatory and therapeutic modes of sociality, identity construction and meaningful self-expression (e.g., Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Hoffman and Novak, 2018; Kozinets et al., 2017; Schau and Gilly, 2003) – the thesis shows the very *absence* of genuine critical agency, political social solidarity and transformative power at the heart of technoculture and its subjectivities. Far from delivering enduring fulfillment and liberation, today's technocultural zeitgeist brings its subjects closer to the

paradoxical state of "trouble in paradise" (Žižek, 2015) characterised by the creeping disillusionment with our digital "wonderland" and all of its consumerised hopes, hypes, excitements, and indulgences.

1.3. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis follows an alternative format and is based upon the compilation of working, submitted or published papers (Research Chapters) along with Introduction, Methodology and Conclusion Chapters. The heart of the thesis is its three standalone Research Chapters (one conceptual and two empirical manuscripts) that deconstruct and report on various dimensions of consumers' everyday felt experiences of living within an increasingly deterministic technoculture and how the lack of collective optimism at the heart of technoculture and its subjectivities functions to preserve rather than undermine techno-capitalist hegemony. As the reader navigates this thesis, they will be treated to critical accounts of an individualist, disenchanted and politically-hollowed out consumer subject who remains *entrapped* within their perpetual reliance on the digital marketplace and all its technological amenities, comforts and conveniences. In tracing the various contours of this subject's deadlock – and the ideological fantasies and structures that perpetuate it – the thesis will show how digitalised and consumerised subjects face down their dissatisfactions which they knowingly or otherwise believe cannot be discharged in meaningful, enduring ways. In the absence of solidarity and any collective hope for change, these individuals are ultimately resigned to accept the perceived unchangeability of their claustrophobic structural conditions and remain entrenched in ever more attachments to the marketplace. As capitalism has increasingly become a *totality* that presents solutions to its own problems, consumption is sustained as the only conceivable reality, ensuring that any ability to imagine alternatives to this system is precluded, thus *foreclosing* any possibility of politicisation. Before outlining the specific contributions of this thesis, I now provide a background to the key concepts the work is based upon.

1.4. Background to Key Concepts

In the following subsections, I offer some important orienting information and the broadest theoretical underpinnings for the entire thesis. First, I briefly outline a background to capitalism and its dominant ideology of neoliberalism – within a pervasive cultural atmosphere of what Mark Fisher (2009) terms "capitalist realism". Then, I introduce the

concept of consumer subjectivity and briefly discuss the two contrasting approaches to understanding neoliberal subjectivity within marketing and consumer scholarship.

1.4.1. Capitalism and Capitalist Realism

In general, capitalism can be understood as a political-economic system based upon acquisitive goals requiring society's means of production to be owned and controlled by private actors for profit, rather than by the government (see Harvey, 2007). Under capitalism, consumption is promoted as the canvas upon which society can and should express itself and the means via which individuals understand themselves and interact with the world around them (Shankar et al., 2006a). Through a market economy and marketer-generated materials, subjects of capitalism assume consumption to be the dominant substance and texture of their everyday experiences (Fitchett et al., 2014; Lambert, 2019). Today's current format of capitalism is structured around the dominant ideology of neoliberalism which represents the latest and most extreme form of destructive acquisitive and competitive individualism, what McChesney (1999: 8) describes as "capitalism with the gloves off". While classical liberalism broadly refers to a political ideology centred on the conception of personal freedom in various spheres of life including religion, culture, politics, economics and so forth, "*neo*"-liberalism, which emerged during the late 1970s and crystallised throughout the 1980s (through, among other global shifts, Ronald Reagan's economic policies in the US and Margaret Thatcher's premiership in the UK), reduces all forms of liberty to the base instrumentalism of economics, equates social spheres of life with markets, and places dogmatic primacy on individuals' freedom within these imaginary so-called "markets" (Dholakia et al., 2020; Davies, 2016).

Market fundamentalism emerges as the cultural lived experience of neoliberal capitalism; the rigid unwavering belief that markets and market-based choices, competitiveness, individualism, and self-interest exist rightfully to the exclusion of all other modes of social organisation as the *only* ways of securing comfort and progress for society (Conway and Heynen, 2006). *Any* alternative is dismissed as an unrealistic threat to progress and therefore *any* attempt to interfere with, regulate, or curb consumers' choices is attacked as detrimental to civilisation itself (Dholakia et al., 2020). Neoliberal market fundamentalism was justified by Margaret Thatcher with her single slogan "TINA", an acronym for *There Is No Alternative*, marking a transition from a pluralistic focus on political liberty and all of its possibilities – underpinned by a parallel, but weaker, notion of economic liberty – to a sole,

exclusive emphasis on a totalistic vision of economic liberty (Dholakia et al., 2020; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015). Neoliberalism is founded on a framework of marketisation and competition based squarely on the essentialisation of a strictly "*free"* (i.e., minimally regulated, highly competitive) market and the removal of any clutches of the welfare state and its intervention in market operations (Conway and Heynen, 2006; Hardin, 2014). As Thatcher once put it, "It is our job to glory in inequality and see that talents and abilities are given vent and expression for the benefit of us all" (quoted in George, 1997: 48). In other words, "good" neoliberal subjects need *not* worry about those that are left behind in the market fundamentalist scramble for acquisitive personal objectives because self-interest *itself* is understood to be undertaken for the greater good (Read, 2009). Or, as exuded by the fictitious corporate tycoon, Gordon Gecko, in the Thatcher-Reagan era motion picture *Wall Street* (1987): "Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit". By this social-Darwinist logic, selfishness exists to be rewarded, competition is elevated as a virtue, and self-reliance accorded premiership to the detriment of collectivity, community, and compassion (Brown, 2015; Read, 2009). Sink or swim, kill or be killed becomes the neoliberal order of the day.

As an ideological framework that centres on greed, accelerated competitiveness, selfishness, and expressiveness within a world reimagined as a marketplace frequented by "haves" and "have-nots", neoliberalism mutates and ossifies the classical liberal *laissez-faire* rejection of economic interventionism while imposing a new – "neo" – moral fabric of individualism, base pragmatism, entrepreneurialism, rivalry, and self-regulation (rather than state-regulation) (Veresiu and Giesler, 2018; Kotzé, 2020; Zwick, 2018). Accordingly, personal consumption is elevated, promoted and enshrined as allowing individuals access to the "good life" (Shankar et al., 2006a). In organising life around consumer items, lifestyle symbolism and personal identity projects, neoliberalism redefines and reconstitutes individuals' motivations and values, as described by David Harvey:

> "[Neoliberalism] holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (Harvey, 2007: 3).

Any moves to *bring human action into the domain of the market* (e.g., mass privatisation, free trade, more individual entrepreneurial freedom) are propagated to give people a vision of the best system that people could live in (Fisher and Gilbert, 2013; Shankar et al., 2006a). This results in the enculturation of a particular ontological engagement with the world, wherein the market is perceived as "a legitimate (if not the most legitimate) context through which individuals should seek to explore, identify and experience the world around them" (Fitchett et al., 2014: 497). To these ends, today's dominant version of capitalism inculcates a "business ontology" in which every operation of society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a "business" (Fisher, 2009: 17; Andéhn et al., 2020).

By securing its own market-oriented ontology, neoliberalism ensures that markets, marketing, and consumption are lived and experienced not simply as the rudiments of an economy but as *reality* itself. This conflation of fictive economic structures with some kind of objective "Real" has been dubbed "*capitalist realism*", a phenomenon that cultural theorist Mark Fisher (2009: 2) defines as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it". For Fisher, the sense of *realism* that is infused with capitalism in today's marketised societies functions as "a pervasive atmosphere", which acts as the invisible lens structuring human thought and action, shaping how culture is produced as well as how work, education, and other important aspects of lives are configured (2009: 16). Under capitalist realism, human subjects are often aware of the exploitative and ubiquitous nature of capitalism and the social and personal costs of market-oriented ontology, however refrain from looking beyond the coordinates of the current market system, effortlessly devoting their energies to work and consumption – following capitalism's cultural injunction to "enjoy" (Gilbert, 2013; Winlow and Hall, 2012).

Crucially, the oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism has significant consequences on our collective vision of systemic change and consumers' desire to engage in political solidarity projects to improve problematic structural conditions. As Fisher and Gilbert (2013: 90) stress, "The hegemonic field which capitalist realism secures and intensifies is one in which politics itself has been 'disappeared'". Capitalist realism has infused every facet of the social body with a deep sense of egotism and aggressive competition which has increasingly eroded any sense of collectivism and ethical obligation towards each other (Kotzé, 2020). As Cronin and Fitchett (2021: 3) also argue: "Market

freedoms stifle the felt requirement for individuals to articulate their sovereignty through political demands". In the absence of collective desire for change, true political praxis is substituted by more "goodies", comforts and conveniences offered by pervasive consumer culture.

1.4.2. Consumer Subjectivity

Being a "subject" denotes the possibility of fulfilling a particular kind of role, or being ascribed to a certain position, within a matrix of contextualising conditions (see Ellis and Flaherty, 1992). Under the political economy of neoliberal capitalism, people are typically subjectified as self-interested consumers within the marketplace, however, the nature of this subjectivity has been interpreted by various explanatory frameworks. Accounts of the consumer subject within the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) tradition have been notably coloured by liberatory postmodernism with its de-emphasis of grand projects and rejection of social structures and hierarchies (Brown, 1999, 2008; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Firat et al., 1995; Ozanne and Murray, 1995). Ostensibly unanchored from all universalism, ideologies, truths and traditions, the marketplace is typified through the postmodern lens as contexts wherein demassification and fragmentation of lifestyles, identities and actions are possible for all agents. Within these parameters, consumers are promoted as the de-centred and all-empowered sovereign subject who could creatively and performatively draw upon the symbolic meanings and associations attached to various market commodities in their construction of multiple, fragmented identities (Brown, 1999; Keller, 1992; Lindridge et al., 2004). Being authorised such unrestricted freedom in the marketplace, the postmodern subject becomes the "cultural constructor" of her own life project in the romantic quest of defining, performing, and reifying a "meaningful" self (Firat and Dholakia, 2006: 131).

Departing from such a liberatory view of the consumer subject, a nascent body of work, mostly Žižekian, Freudian or Lacanian-informed, does not assume some index of freedom as the basis for consumer subjectivity, but only the *idea* of freedom (Bradshaw and Chatzidakis, 2016; Wickstrom et al., 2021). Within this body of critical marketing thought, consumers' capacity for freedom to choose and construct an identity is viewed as a mere *fantasy* albeit an important motivating condition for market participation (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021; Lambert, 2019). Within a fantasmatic framework of freedom, one's access to the boundless field of consumption and its appeals becomes "the new opiate" for the consumer subject to vaguely perceive herself as an autonomous, all-empowered actor

(Gabriel, 2015: 25; Rome and Lambert, 2020). The fantasies of freedom, choice and identity offer individuals a defense against the pervasive challenges and discontents that personal development, cultural ideals, and social relationships place on them (Shankar et al., 2006a). The marketplace with its seemingly endless array of options to choose from serves to provide individuals with some solace, but, arguably, by invoking narcissistic and superdesirous urges further expands the discontents for which it purports to offer comfort (Böhm and Batta, 2010; Lambert, 2019).

As mentioned above, although a nascent body of critical marketing studies have re-assessed the nature and quality of freedom when approaching consumer subjectivity, research that explores how consumers' (increasingly limited) freedom is essentially lived and experienced in consumers' everyday digital lives is largely missing. This study sets out to fill this research gap and, before exploring the lived reality of the consumer subject within today's capitalist technoculture, it is important to provide a background to the concepts of digital consumption and "digital detoxing". This is presented in the following subsections.

1.4.3. Digital Consumption

According to Oxford Dictionary (2022), the word "digital" is generally used to connote the state of being "connected with computer technology, especially the internet". Digital consumption, then, is characterised by consumption reliant on electronic tools, systems, devices and resources (e.g., computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones, social media apps, shopping platforms) which provide a variety of information and communication facilities (e.g., news updating, video calling, Live TV streaming) (see Llamas and Belk, 2013). There are, however, various opinions on what digital consumption actually entails. While many authors equate digital consumption with online retail, marketing approaches, Ruckenstein (2017: 466) broadly defines digital consumption as "an expanding field of technological platforms and mobile applications that advance various forms of production, distribution, and consumption". Focusing instead on users' capacity to use new technologies, Vasilieva et al. (2018) suggest, "digital consumption means the ability to use Internet services for work and personal life". Alternately, Kozinets (2017), stresses the need to understand digital consumption in its sociocultural and historical conditions, describing digital consumption as "the inflection of consumers' experiences by technologies as well as the injection of consumer desire and intent into the development of sophisticated devices, their service logics, and their services" (p. 621). In this study, I adopt the understanding that digital consumption

includes: (1) the personal and/or collective usage of technological platforms; (2) the user(s)' conscious and/or unconscious reliance upon, engagement in, and interaction with wider technocultural fields and networks; and (3) the contextualising forces of capitalism and consumer culture that shape and are shaped by the user(s) and usage.

In this thesis, my research is undergirded by the assumption that digital consumption is complex, emergent, and never static due to the continual release, improvement, and marketisation of ever-newer, updated and increasingly mobile and/or virtual products, experiences, and applications (Belk et al., 2021; Ruckenstein, 2017). Digital consumption is a combined result of personal, collective, private, public, sociocultural, political, and historical forces and processes, "ranging from the managerial to technological and artistic" (Ruckenstein, 2017: 466). Other terms used in place of "digital consumption" include "technocultural consumption", "technology consumption", "techno-consumption", and "digital virtual consumption" (Belk et al., 2021; Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010; Kozinets, 2017).

Broadly speaking, the above concepts all refer to the amalgam of human-technology interactions and experiences as well as the broader structural frameworks that mediate them. Therefore, for purposes of this thesis, I use these terms *interchangeably*. As a relevant note, I have chosen to use the terms "*techno-capitalism*", "*semiocapitalism*" and "*surveillance capitalism*" in different chapters in this thesis. While surveillance capitalism (with its specific ontological emphasis on the surveillance logic of market actors) is exclusively used as an important setting for the theorisations in paper 1 (Chapter 3), semiocapitalism is employed as the overall structural backdrop to paper 2 (Chapter 4) and techno-capitalism is the general term that is used throughout the whole thesis (including Chapter 5, Introduction and Conclusion Chapters). Semiocapitalism and techno-capitalism are both broad concepts that denote, most generally, the current technologically-mediated global/neoliberal capitalist formation (within which the logic of "surveillance" is incubated). This will be explained in more detail in paper 1 (Chapter 3) and paper 2 (Chapter 4). But for now, it is important to stipulate that all terms, at least in broad strokes, all designate the same economic, cultural, and ideological conditions that shape, and are shaped by, the technological contexts of my thesis.

Within and outside marketing scholarship, digital consumption has been widely recognised as a source of both empowerment and disempowerment (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022; Ruckenstein, 2017). On the one hand, digital devices, tools, platforms and systems can support individuals in their everyday pursuits whether communications, work, leisure time, exercise regimens, or romance and generally offer "new ways to enchant everyday reality" (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010: 123; Belk et al., 2021; Hoffman and Novak, 2018; Schau and Gilly, 2003). Digital consumption allows for new desires and fantasies to emerge and actualise. For instance, consumers can experience new identities such as adopting an alternative gender, a different social status, or even behaving in manners that are assumed socially "unacceptable" in the physical world (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010). On the other hand, consumer researchers have revealed the disenchanting aspects of consumers' self-presentation projects on social media (e.g., Ashman et al., 2017; Pounders et al., 2016), consumers' obsession over self-optimisation through self-tracking devices and techniques (e.g., Bode and Kristensen, 2015; Mende et al., 2016), or highly controlled, other-directed and dehumanising ways of socialisation that have been intensified in the digital age (e.g., Cronin and Cocker, 2019; Ritzer and Miles, 2019).

Overall, prior researchers have recognised how digital consumption is at the same time liberating and alienating (see Airoldi and Rokka, 2022). Consumers' ostensible empowerment by the power of digital technologies is always accompanied by the stresses, burdens, dissatisfactions and anxieties that have become all the more prevalent in the digital age (Hewer, 2020; Hietanen et al., 2022; Reyes et al., 2015; Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast, 2017). Accordingly, a position taken by this thesis is that digital consumption is better understood as an ambivalence, an ambiguity – a "*paradox*" – that is manageable rather than resolvable; an issue that has been discussed by prior consumer researchers (e.g., Kozinets, 2008, 2019; Mick and Fournier, 1998).

1.4.4. "Digital Detox"

"Digital detox" – a term that captures consumers' attempts to restrict, limit and manage their use and perceived dependency on technology – has become a popular phenomenon over the past decade. Digital detox is defined as a periodic disconnection from digital technologies, as well as the personal strategies to limit digital media involvement (Syvertsen and Enli, 2019). In public and academic circles, various terms – other than digital detoxing – are also used (sometimes interchangeably) to denote such reactions against technoculture such as

abstinence, break, off, time-out, unplugging, disconnection, digital diet, digital minimalism (e.g., Rauch, 2014; Sutton, 2017). For consumers, those practices are understood as practical ways to reduce the negative impact of digital technology use on many areas of their everyday lives including health and well-being, social relationships, self-control and performance (Radtke et al., 2021).

Digital detox has its roots in the term detox or *detoxification* which is generally understood as a cleansing method widely employed for riding the toxic substances and the associated harmful effects from the human body – to improve one's health conditions (Sutton, 2017; Radtke et al., 2022). In medicine, the scientific grounding for detoxification is highly controversial; it is often considered as a marketing buzzword in line with the emergence of new healthcare products (Cohen, 2007). With a popular analogy between food consumption and digital consumption, the term detox is borrowed in the digital consumption context, denoting how the misuse and/or overuse of digital technologies results in the toxification of one's body and mind, thus requiring detoxification or "purified through abstinence" (Rauch, 2014: 239; Sutton, 2017). These practices of purification reflect a commonly accepted understanding among many consumers that, as Woodstock (2014: 1985) stresses:

> "[L]ike detoxing from sugar, our systems will recalibrate, become more attuned, and we will consume more measured doses of media, or at least gain greater self-awareness of the impact, often construed as negative, of a life infused by real-time media".

Importantly, digital detoxing is *not* a total rejection of technology consumption. As Ribak and Rosenthal (2015: 1) observe, digital detoxing can be considered as a practice of "small-scale preferences" of digital consumption in which consumers intentionally embrace certain forms of consumption while rejecting or reducing other kinds. While previous literature has already identified a category of individuals "going completely off-line, or at least adopting severely limited Internet usage, barely minimal phone use, or both", such studies have also recognised how the possibility of total avoidance of technology is nearly impossible (Morrison and Gomez, 2014: 14; Karppi, 2011).

Motivations for digital detoxing vary across individuals and life situations. For example, Woodstock (2014) discusses three key motivations for digital detoxing: to set the boundaries between public and private life; to respond to ways in which digital technologies

undermine human connection; and to focus on immediate experiences and cultivate real presence. Relatedly, Foot (2014) describes five common motivations for users' resistance against social media use, including: the desire for downtime; the desire to connect more in real-life relationships; the desire to limit time spent on online attention-seeking activities; the desire to retain and/or restore a sense of personal privacy; and the desire to create space for one's kids to participate in and enjoy traditional childhood activities. Similarly, Morrison and Gomez (2014) classify motivations for digital detoxing into five major themes: emotional dissatisfaction; taking back control; addiction to technology; privacy concerns; and external values. Thomas et al. (2016: 547) add "me-time" to the list, which they describe as the time for "self-reflection, solitude, and an opportunity to engage in pleasurable pursuits by themselves".

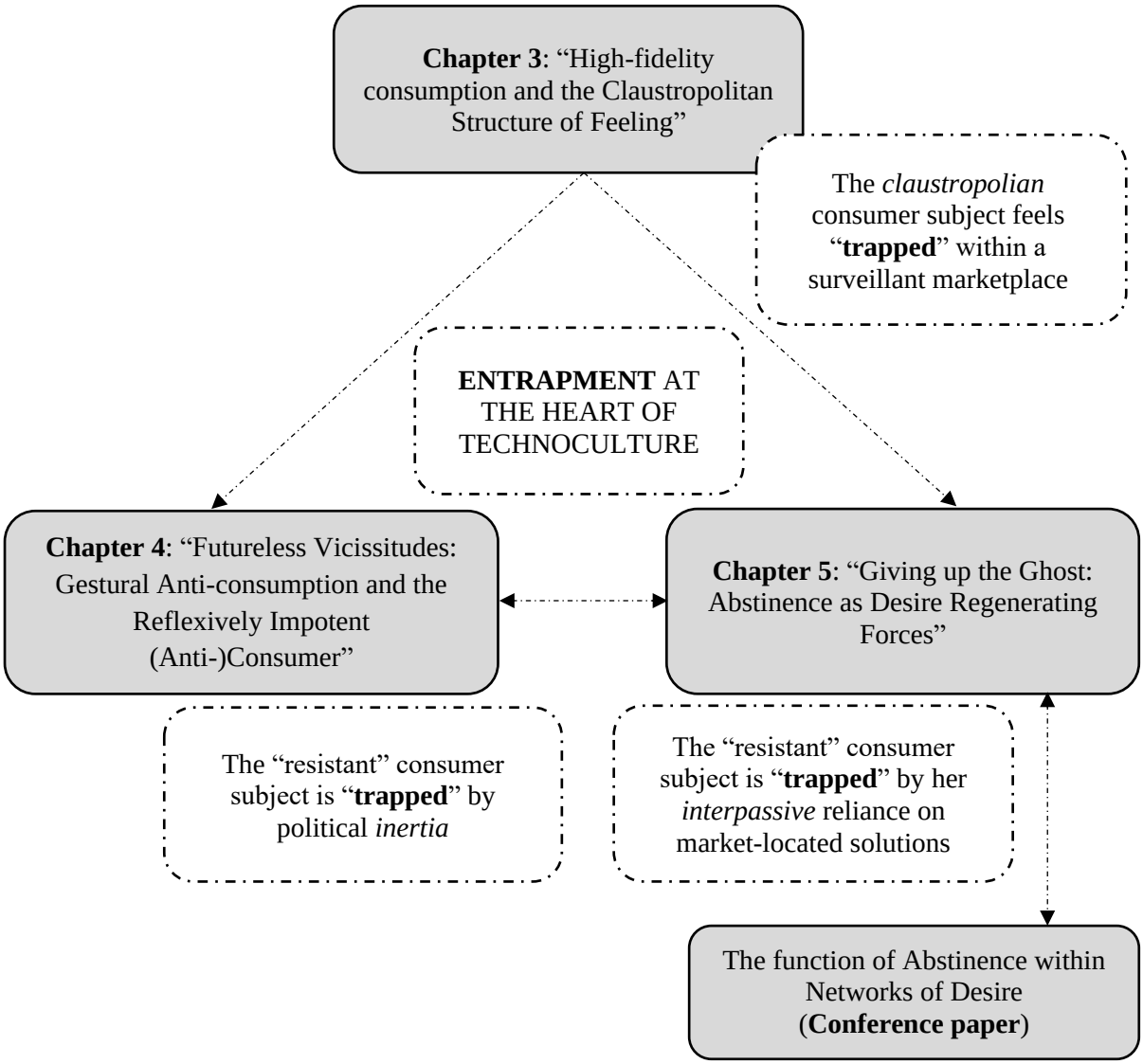
1.5. Contextual and Methodological Foundations

Drawing upon the broad church that is technoculture and digital detoxing (as outlined in the sections above) as the empirical context for this thesis, my naturalistic observations rely upon *interpretivist* methods including a 12-month netnography and 21 in-depth interviews with self-identified digital detoxers (from December 2020 to December 2021). Although initially I planned to observe detoxing in offline spaces and contexts (e.g., detox retreats, people's homes, leisure spaces) where concerted attempts to escape from technoculture might occur authentically, the lockdowns and social distancing mandates of the COVID-19 pandemic prevented me from undertaking such endeavours. Nevertheless, in a socially-locked-down world that suddenly became so reliant on digital consumption (and has remained so ever since), a netnographic approach became highly suitable for gathering observations. The process of observing people's *online* discourses on the topic of their efforts to detox allowed for insightful and rich data that reveal the obscene irony and ambiguity at the heart of their anti-consumption: resistance to technology often takes place and is discussed *through* technology. Importantly, I also conducted 21 in-depth interviews with self-identified digital detoxers to delve deeper into detoxers' everyday experiences of living in the digital world, and to further explore important ideas and perspectives, what might be missing or not fully articulated in detoxers' online discourses. A detailed discussion of the philosophical and methodological considerations underpinning this study is accounted for in Chapter 2 (Methodology and Methods).

1.6. Contributions of the Thesis

The three Research Chapters (i.e., manuscripts) of this thesis are motivated by the overall orienting questions outlined above in Section 1.2; more specific research questions and objectives are crystallised in each manuscript. Altogether, the emergent findings, conceptual explanations, and new theorisations developed in these manuscripts contribute to our overall understanding of consumer subjectivity within capitalist technoculture. The specific contributions are addressed in detail in each manuscript (Chapters 3–5) and synthesised in the Conclusion chapter. A loose conceptual roadmap of the connections between the papers and how their separate contributions align is provided below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Logical connection between the manuscripts (Research Chapters)



First, Chapter 3 presents a conceptual paper based upon Steve Redhead's (2009, 2017a, 2017b) concept of "*claustropolitanism*". The purpose of this first paper is to theoretically map out the overall mood of living in the digital age, and more particularly, the pervasive sense of entrapment or "no escape" that consumers collectively feel in their everyday digital lives. The paper introduces the new concept of *high-fidelity consumption* that is expressive of consumers' entrapment and is central to the functioning of a surveillance-driven, technologically-mediated marketplace. Overall, the paper makes two important contributions to marketing theory and helps to "set the scene" for my thesis. Initially, the paper provides the conceptual scaffolding for understanding how consumers' (increasingly limited) freedom is *affectively* lived and experienced within an increasingly surveillant and automated technoculture. Drawing on a review of relevant literature, the paper maps out an increasingly disillusioned and helpless subject whose choices and experiences are perpetually shaped, altered and realtered in ways that compromise some of the most basic assumptions of personal agency. The paper also shows the crucial role that *affect* plays in the structuring of subjectivity. All of this lays the groundwork for understanding technoculture and why its subjects might want to escape/detox from it.

Second, Chapter 4 presents an empirical paper that draws upon Mark Fisher's (2009, 2011, 2014) conceptual toolbox to interrogate consumer subjects' political inertia and disclination to effect durable change. The paper contributes to critical marketing scholarship in two important ways. First, the paper provides an important update to the subject positioning of "the reflexively defiant consumer" (Ozanne and Murray, 1995) through the concept of "the reflexively impotent (anti-)consumer". Instead of the critically self-reflexive and rebellious subject as long portrayed by consumer culture theorists (see Ozanne and Murray, 1995), the paper instead paints a more pessimistic picture of a *reflexively impotent* and politically-hollowed (anti-)consumer subject endemic to today's techno-capitalist hegemony. Moreover, the paper challenges predominant understandings of anti-consumption as functioning as ideological acts of antagonism (see Kozinets et al., 2010). Here, the paper reveals how the reflexively impotent (anti-)consumer incorporates and integrates a kind of *gestural anti-consumption* – a performance of resistance that is largely devoid of any sense of genuine transformative power at its core – into their everyday consumption.

Third, Chapter 5 – a single-authored working paper – continues in the spirit of the preceding chapter to explore the pervasive sense of powerlessness that permeates and structures consumers' relationship with the digital marketplace. Drawing on Žižek's (1998, 2006) explanatory material and the concept of "interpassivity", Chapter 5 presents an empirical account centred on consumer subjects' unwillingness to actively overthrow technoculture because they remain satisfied with allowing the digital marketplace to *interpassively* "do" resistance for them. The paper contributes to marketing theory in two important ways. First, it extends our understanding of market reproduction processes by which resistance helps to sustain rather than subvert the capitalist market system (Ahlberg et al., 2022; Cronin and Fitchett, 2021; Holt, 2002). Second, as a supplement to the central arguments of Chapter 4, this paper reveals how "resistance" does not actually signal any ideological opposition per se (*cf.* Kozinets et al., 2010). Chapter 5 locates interpassive acts of abstinence, such as digital detoxing, within rather than outside of the market. I argue that abstinence ironically results in *more* passion to consume, and this has important implications for the consumer research concept entitled "networks of desire" (see Kozinets et al., 2017). This chapter theorises how consumers' ostensible resistance against these networks largely functions in favour of "*para-capitalist*" markets which work to perpetually reconstitute consumer desire and further forms of consumption. The paper also helps to reinforce some of the points made in Chapter 3 concerning the functioning of ideological fantasies within today's techno-capitalist markets.

Each Research Chapter also is supplemented with an introductory and reflective note that contextualises the piece within the whole thesis and how it fits within my overall doctoral journey. Before presenting the Research Chapters, the next chapter will provide a full and detailed breakdown of my methodological operations.

2. Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods

2.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design and methodological procedures undertaken to inform the empirical portions of my thesis. First, I discuss the philosophical stance that underpins the thesis. Second, I provide an overview of my research design and follow with specific accounts of my data collection activities. Finally, the process of data analysis and interpretation is presented, followed by a discussion of the evaluation of the trustworthiness of this qualitative research, and relevant ethical considerations.

2.2. Philosophical Stance

The deployment of suitable research methods for any research project is dependent on the researcher's philosophical stance. A researcher's assumptions about the nature of reality and what constitutes valid knowledge about that reality inform the types of research practices that are employed and how they are operationalised. In broad strokes, the research paradigm – "the philosophical framework that guides how scientific research should be conducted" (Collis and Hussey, 2013: 43) – that I am most aligned with in my investigation of technoculture and digital detoxing is *interpretivism* (Crotty, 1998; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Across the social sciences, interpretivism is generally accepted as a paradigm that emerged in contradistinction to positivism in researchers' attempts to understand human and social reality (Crotty, 1998).

In contrast to a positivist approach that would assume value-free, detached explanations of precise phenomena via controlled means, an interpretivist approach recognises the subjective, oftentimes impassioned, and value-laden nature of "getting close" to *human* affairs in the social world (Crotty, 1998). Crotty also points out, interpretivism is not a single unifying way of exploring the social world of human subjects but is underpinned by various methodological approaches. In this regard, I fully appreciate that interpretivism is a broad church and has been framed and repackaged in various ways from author to author, thesis to thesis, and across innumerable texts published in the entire gamut of the social sciences. But the fundamental lynchpin of the paradigm – that "the overriding goal of interpretivism is the deeper understanding of a phenomenon rather than explanation under universal laws and predictions" (Maclaren and Brown, 2001: 370) – maps entirely onto my base position as a doctoral researcher undertaking a thesis that might be best situated in the

general camps of Terminal Marketing (TM), critical marketing scholarship, and de-romanticist consumer research.

Ontologically, interpretivist researchers recognise that neither the researcher nor the research participant, as humans, can get close to some single objective reality or "Real" that exists independently from the human mind. The best we can hope for is accessing the series of intersubjective realities that are socially co-constructed through social interactions, relations, and processes (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). The socially constructed "realities" are, as such, contingent upon and mediated by the beholder's agency, experiences, and ways of understanding, making sense of, and narrativizing the happenings in their built and social environments (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Mills and Birks, 2014). In investigating the human complexity that plays out within the context of digital detox, I accept that the social world of the consumer (i.e., digital detoxer) is co-constructed by various personal and social forces including the subject's personal backgrounds, their life histories, the meanings they attribute to their own and others' behaviours, the material and social contexts they are embedded in (i.e., techno-capitalism), and so forth.

With regard to my *epistemological* stance – or the beliefs about how to approach knowledge or how to come to know the social reality – I recognise that interpretivism affords researchers a more inventive, creative, and critical outlook that need not be hostage to rationalist and instrumentalist assumptions that underpin more positivist-leaning research. Whereas more positivist-leaning research with its deductive approach and in-built nomothetic emphasis on managerial implications rather than critique tends to have "a performative intent" (i.e., "the intent to develop and celebrate knowledge which contributes to the production of maximum output for minimum input; it involves inscribing knowledge within means-end calculation" – Fournier and Grey, 2000: 17), interpretivist work does not advocate the subordination of knowledge and truth to the production of efficiency. On the contrary, interpretivism advocates knowledge generation no matter how complex, intensive, or open-ended the means of enquiry might be, as Smith (1993: 120) pointed out: "there is no particular right or correct path to knowledge, no special method that automatically leads to intellectual progress". By undertaking what I consider to be "critical", "de-romanticist" or "terminal" consumer research, I choose to break with the standard performative practice-oriented view. Whereas positivist marketing management research ultimately aims at

uncovering universal principles that might inform and contribute to the effectiveness of managerial practice, interpretivist critical consumer research is *not* performative. Instead, as Morris Holbrook (1985: 145) suggested nearly 40 years ago, consumer researchers might better discard any performative intentionality and managerial orientations in favour of studying consumption phenomena "in their own right". For Holbrook, "consumer research should be as useless to managers as possible: it should be intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated. We should pursue consumer research for its own sake, not because of some managerial function that it performs" (1985: 148; also Hackley, 2009). Critical consumer research undertaken through an interpretivist lens provides us with a license to *pull no punches* and to engage holistically with the data unbound and unbiased by the spectre of practical relevance for managers (also Ahlberg et al., 2022).

Relatedly, while interpretivist consumer research long ago advocated for and extensively focused on highly individualised, experiential accounts of consumers' lived experiences with attention given to consumer agency and how consumers draw upon marketplace resources to construct personal identities or other meaningful universes for themselves (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), authors such as Askegaard and Linnet (2011) have questioned the limitations of such individually focused perspectives on consumer culture, calling for "an epistemological positioning of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research beyond the lived experience of consumers" (p. 381) and the need for "investigating the social institution of consumption and how it shapes our lives and choices beyond our individual identity projects" (p. 399). In doing so, the authors urge those studying consumer culture, critically or otherwise, to combine and integrate the contextualisation of consumers' lived experiences within a broader contextualisation, the "*context of context*", that is one of the macro-social influences of political economies and other representational systems – the structures, forces and processes that are not necessarily felt or experienced by consumers in their day-to-day lives and thus might not be discursively expressed (p. 381).

By aligning my enquiry of digital detoxing with this epistemological positioning, my doctoral thesis is underpinned by the overall aim to not only describe and report on consumers' experiences of digital consumption and digital detoxing practices (through their own descriptions and revelation) *but* also to include insightful interpretation of how such experiences are deeply influenced and shaped by broader structural forces (also Holt, 1991).

2.3. Qualitative Research Design

Following the interpretivist approach, an inductive research design based on discourses, language, and affects became the *de facto* mode of producing knowledge for this thesis. As suggested by Maclaran and Brown (2001: 370):

> "Research methods within the interpretive paradigm are primarily qualitative and inductive, instead of quantitative and deductive, seeking explanations of social phenomena from a firm grounding in observation and experience, and allowing theories to emerge from the data".

An inductive qualitative research design is particularly suitable for the purposes of this study which are to build theory around the lived consequences of techno-consumption on consumer subjectivity and (resistant) consumption practices within the context of capitalist technoculture. Rather than seek to generate time- and context-free generalisations by hypothetical means through a deductive quantitative project, a qualitative study is time-bound and context-dependent in which the researcher studies a particular phenomenon in a specific time and place (Tadajewski, 2006). A qualitative study does not focus on identifying reductivist causal "linkages" via immutable universal measurement (e.g., statistics) but aims to provide a detailed and descriptive account of "how" things happen via idiosyncratic expression (e.g., words, images, affects, moods) (Belk et al., 2012; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Tadajewski, 2006).

There are three orienting principles of qualitative research that I followed for my thesis. First, I aimed to maintain my *immersion* in the field during the process of data collection and analysis (Tadajewski, 2006). This meant that I developed a close association with the cultural life of digital detoxers in their online interactions and aimed to maintain a consistent, prolonged presence in the digital field to allow for the generation of rich, thick descriptions of their behaviours and experiences (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003; Arnould, 1998).

Second, I aimed to balance the incorporation of both *emic* and *etic* perspectives in the process of data collection and analysis (Goulding, 2005). Adopting an emic perspective ("getting closer to the insider") enabled me to provide rich descriptions of the lived reality of digital detoxers. Simultaneously, an etic position ("relying on explanatory theory") allowed me to interpret the collected data in more depth and to offer multi-dimensional and

culturally-rich insights, something that is perhaps not discursively expressed by research participants (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). To do so, as Askegaard and Linnet also explain, I aimed to "combin[e] grounded observations and recordings of market-mediated and mediating practices with social theorization" (p. 382).

Third, I aimed to maintain a level of *reflexivity* throughout various stages of data collection and analysis. At all stages of this doctoral journey, I strived to be clear and reflective about my own values and belief, assumptions and pre-understandings of the phenomenon, as well the relationship between me and my research participants.

2.4. Data Collection Techniques

2.4.1. Observation Netnography

I adopted netnography (Kozinets, 2002b, 2010, 2015, 2020) as a key data collection technique for this research. As a form of online ethnography, netnography is a naturalistic approach to studying social experiences and behaviours in the technologically-mediated context, which aims at "obtaining cultural understandings of human experiences from online social interaction and/or content" (Kozinets, 2015: 54). In employing a netnographic enquiry in this study, I followed an ethical imperative not to dismiss as confused or inauthentic the obvious paradox of people *posting online* about trying to *reduce being online*. Importantly, this process allowed for the generation of rich data that is demonstrative of the very real messiness, irony, and contradiction that characterise the phenomenon of digital detoxing.

Although there are versions of netnography that are heavily focused on the interaction and immersion of the researcher in the day-to-day activities of the online community (Gabel, 2015; Wilkinson and Patterson, 2010), I adopted a non-participatory approach i.e., "*observation netnography*" (Orsolini et al., 2015), or what has been termed "lurking" (Fisher and Smith, 2011; Langer and Beckmann, 2005; Mkono, 2011; Tribe and Mkono, 2017). For my observation netnography, I non-intrusively and surreptitiously investigated the wealth of digital detoxers' conversations and interactions made publicly available on online sites of discussion over an approximately twelve-month period (see Addeo et al., 2019; Bertilsson, 2015; Canavan, 2021; Cronin and Cocker, 2019; Loanzon et al., 2013). Kozinets (2020: 194) describes the method as follows:

> "There have been a large number of so-called 'observation netnographies […] in which investigative data operations are the sole type of data collection utilized in the research. *I have always been a big proponent of unobtrusive online observation*, and often use it myself" (emphasis added).

In terms of its main advantages, an unobtrusive and non-influencing presence in the online fora allowed me to non-disruptively "get a feel" for the field and to peruse publicly-available discussions and interactions of community members without imposing any of my values or introducing disturbance to those proceedings. Maintaining a respectful distance helps to preserve the flow of naturally-occurring discourses and minimise my "outsider" influence on consumers' disclosure of their experiences (Langer and Beckmann, 2005; Fisher and Smith, 2011; Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2012). Non-participant observational netnography provided me with a window into the most natural stories, experiences and reflections of consumers' practices and experiences of digital detoxing that, with my presence, may not have been revealed in the same way.

Observation netnography, it could be argued, "transcends the 'limits of asking' through observation of people's talk" (Hewer and Hamilton, 2010: 118). Moreover, as Kozinets (2020) himself affirms, it has become increasingly acceptable and normal for the netnographer to remain lurking without declaring him or herself. Prior authors have argued that the very act of posting something on a public site indicates the poster's informed consent, and thus it might cause unnecessary extra work for the netnographer to obtain consent from members of public sites (Sudweeks and Rafaeli, 1996; Eysenbach and Till, 2001). To ensure that the postings conform to this tacit notion of consent, I only collected all data from *public* sites, that is, online spaces that are free to access without any restrictions (i.e., no registration and passwords required for the public to view) (Langer and Beckmann, 2005; Salzmann-Erikson and Eriksson, 2012).

As an added level of concern for online posters, I refrained from reproducing any original posts that I deemed to be of an overly sensitive nature. Although what exactly "overly sensitive" might denote is appreciably a subjective and rocky terrain, this is an issue that Kozinets (2020: 176) himself struggles with but offers a useful guideline, "I try to think like the person whose data I am interpreting. I try to use my empathetic organ, activating the mirror neurons in my head and heart". In relation to that last point, as I navigated online

posts, I followed the ethical principle of "listening" which meant taking account of the wider context of each post including *how* and *what* people chose to share.

Listening-as-participation allows the netnographer to go beyond the observation of online texts and counter surface-level misconceptions, "to engage completely with posts, by avoiding removing these from their embedded context", and to actualise "the ethical imperative of hearing the emotions behind participants' words" (Winter and Lavis, 2020: 59). Here, it is also recognised that online platforms are spaces for people's ideas, opinions, feelings, thoughts to be listened to, and truly cared for. To a certain extent, digital detoxers' experiences, practices as well as their concerns, emotions and feelings are shared online to be listened to, not only by other digital detoxers but also by researchers (myself being included). Listening-as-participation, or paying attention to the entirety of those conversations, behaviours, practices and experiences, formed a great part of ethical practice in this netnographic enquiry.

I adapted relevant aspects of Kozinets' (2000, 2010, 2015, 2020) general descriptions of steps and procedures involved in a netnographic enquiry for this research. My netnographic approach included the following key operations: research planning, data collection and immersion in online sites, data analysis and interpretation.

2.4.1.1. Netnographic Sampling

This netnographic enquiry followed a purposive sampling approach in which I selectively chose relevant sites for netnographic observation based on the key objectives of the study. In selecting relevant online spaces for netnographic observation, I followed a number of criteria recommended by Kozinets (2002, 2020) namely, sites needed to be directly relevant to the topic under question, have higher "traffic" of postings, offer larger numbers of discrete message posters, offer a sense of interactivity and liveliness, and are characterised by recent and descriptively rich data. Google was enrolled as my primary sorting tool for identifying and considering potential sites for inclusion across these criteria. Search terms including "digital detox" and other topic-related keywords (such as "log off", "unplug", "disconnect", "dumb phone", "phone detox", "quit tech", "digital minimalism") were inputted to Google and results screened for relevance. Reducing the most relevant results according to Kozinets' criteria allowed for several initial online discussion forums to be identified including Reddit, Nofap, Digitalspy, and Quora.

Upon visiting and spending time on each of the four sites, Reddit – which functions according to a bulletin board system and can be publicly browsed without an account – soon revealed itself to be the most active location for mostly anonymously posted discourses, debates, discussion, and general traffic pertaining to digital critique, resistance, and detox most generally and became my primary data source. In particular, four key "subreddits" (i.e., user-created message boards dedicated to a particular topic) were identified on Reddit ("*Nosurf", "Dopamine Detox", "Digital Minimalism", "Offline Day*"). All subreddits are free and open to the public – anyone can view the postings on them without registering. Though Kozinets himself identifies access and a good sense of anonymity that Reddit provides for netnographic enquiry, the website remains relatively unexplored within consumer research. "Although one might think that Reddit, with its many topics, convenient public access, and muted commercial presence, might be a key site for locating a variety of contemporary netnographies," Kozinets (2020: 77) muses, "netnographies of Reddit are still rather uncommon".

Although Reddit emerged as the key site of interest, I also frequented the other discussion-board-based sites (Nofap, Digital Spy, and Quora) I considered to be useful. I also screened for public groups on social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) where important interactions might occur, however, only small groups with low levels of engagement and few substantial (i.e., not lengthy, quite short) posts were found. The irrelevance of social media sites groups and pages for my study could be explained by detoxers' general opposition to the addictiveness and consumption of mainstream platforms. Emerging data on Reddit began to confirm to me that Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are some of the first things that are cut from consumers' digital lives when on a detox. Accordingly, I decided not to include posts from these sites in my investigation.

As an online group with more than 150,000 registered users at the time of writing, the "Nosurf" (or "*Stop spending life on the net.*") community on Reddit – subsequently became my main source of netnographic data. As published on its noticeboard, Nosurf's philosophy "is one of healthy, mindful, and purposeful internet use, so that our devices serve us – and not the other way around" (Nosurf, 2022). Created in 2011, Nosurf continues to grow and attract thousands of new members from all over the world each month. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of group members seemed to rise significantly (for example, the number increased by around 30,000 members during the first five months of

2021). The Nosurf community has been active every day over the duration of my doctoral research and the years preceding, marked by a high frequency of postings with a total of more than 15,000 threads (between January 2018 and November 2021) and an average of about 119 new threads each week (at the time of data collection in 2021). This all demonstrates a significant level of activity, interaction and a sense of a living and active culture, elevating Nosurf to be a rich site for me to access the lived world of digital detoxers. Focusing primarily on this site of investigation rather than a more open-ended sample across the internet also allowed me to keep the data corpus to a manageable level (Kozinets, 2015).

2.4.1.2. Netnographic Data Collection

My data collection began alongside the sampling process. Two important components of my data collection include: (1) the online data continually created by public members and can be captured and downloaded by the researcher (what is referred to by Kozinets as *archival data)* and (2) *fieldnotes* (the data that is produced by the researcher – the researcher's firsthand observations, as well as reflections on his/her interactions and experiences related to the research) (Kozinets, 2015). In terms of online archival data collection, my main source of data came from Nosurf and, when relevant, was supplemented by additional insights gathered from Nofap, Digital Spy, and Quora.

Keeping with the netnographic principles recommended by Kozinets (2015), online postings were carefully evaluated and chosen for their rich content, descriptiveness, relevant topic matter, and conversational participation by a range of posters. In practice, I sought out substantial – or "chunky" – paragraphs of text which were interactional (with other posters' material) and/or in-depth, descriptive, and insightful. Most one-liners or small discrete postings of only a few words were excluded except when deemed pertinent or supplementary to important emergent insights (Kozinets, 2015). All external links attached to posts were excluded from the data gathering to avoid the researcher being led away from the main data (Salzmann-Erikson and Eriksson, 2012). Other irrelevant data (i.e., not deemed to be helpful in addressing the research questions or not directly relevant to the topic) were also excluded from the final corpus. For example, subreddit "threads" (i.e., discrete conversations that occur within a subreddit) such as "No instagram for 60 days" were included while threads such as "A new and innovative focus training program" were not included. Having said that, most of the threads on Nosurf seemed to be relevant to the topic at hand and the data collection

required me to scan, read and thoroughly assess the content of new posts to sort and collect relevant data.

To make the process of data collection more manageable, I would sometimes apply the "Top" (i.e., the most popular posts in a subreddit) filter in the Nosurf group. All pertinent data were subsequently downloaded, reduced and saved in a Microsoft Word Document for sorting. Images were also screenshotted and saved to my data pool where relevant (Appendix 6). In addition to the textual information, some relevant audio-visual material such as YouTube videos were watched and interrogated for insights, but to keep the process of data analysis focused and manageable, the content of these videos was not transcribed. In total, 124 forum threads (originally posted between 2019 and 2021) from the Nosurf group and relevant supplementary content from other sites including Nofap, Digital Spy, Quora and YouTube were selected for further examination, resulting in 690 pages (double-spaced, 2-point) of texts, images and annotations. The primary sources for the netnographic data corpus are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Primary sources for netnographic enquiry

Discussion forums	Other (supplementary) forms of data for content analysis

• Reddit (Forum)
  ○ Nosurf (subreddit*; created in 2011; 150,000 members).
  ○ Dopamine Detox (subreddit; created in 2020; 35,000 members).
  ○ Digital Minimalism (subreddit; created in 2012; 19,000 members).
  ○ Offline Day (subreddit; created in 2019; 8,000 members).
• Digitalspy (Forum)
• Nofap (Forum)
	• Online articles and comments to online articles.
	• Blogs (e.g. Are You Living a Digital Life Instead of a Real One?; An Architectural Photographer's Social Media Detox; Digital Detox: Disconnecting from technology and reconnecting with others; Five ways to do a digital detox; Unplugged: doing a digital detox).
	• Youtube videos (e.g. Digital detox: This is something you really need!; How to disappear completely and never be found; I quit my cellphone for 30 days & it changed

• Quora (Forum) **Nosurf SubReddit was the main focus of data collection for this research.*	my life; How I reduced my screentime in the lockdown).

Following Kozinets' (2010: 283-284) guidelines, I utilised an immersive journal ("a personal record, a temporal narrative, a wide-ranging diary") (see Appendix 5) to contextualise, audit, and reflect on my emerging observations, ideas, and breakthroughs. My reflective notes were useful in allowing me to systematically "detect what is going on, what is connected, what is new, what is meaningful" (Kozinets, 2010: 284), which supported the overall process of theory development.

Initial ideas and themes that emerged from my netnographic enquiry became the foundation for planning in-depth interviews, which are discussed in more detail in the next subsection.

2.4.2. In-Depth Interviews

In parallel with the netnographic enquiry, in-depth interviews were utilised to probe and develop emergent observations and uncover new ideas and perspectives that might be missing or not clearly articulated in online discussions or content (Kozinets, 2015). According to Kozinets (2015), the netnographer has the option to recruit interview participants from both online and offline sources to supplement and triangulate with netnography. Firstly, I recruited participants from the Nosurf group on Reddit by placing a poster on the site to initiate my "*Call for interview participants*" threads. Individuals who were interested in the topic contacted me via email. Secondly, I approached other interviewees through my networks of friends and acquaintances in and outside the UK, and posters advertised around a university campus. While interviews with participants from Nosurf helped with the generation of important insights that added more context and analytical depth to my netnographic immersion, interviewees that came from other sources allowed for broader and less-entrenched opinions to emerge, thus enhancing the reliability of the conclusions drawn from the research (Denzin, 1978; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Following the snowballing sampling technique, initial participants were kindly requested to nominate other potential individuals who meet the sampling criteria.

All interview participants were purposefully screened based on the following criteria: they needed to be (1) adults aged 18 and over; (2) admitted to having developed a level of dependency on digital technologies and (3) were interested in, and have or were undertaking digital detoxing practices. Potential interviewees were asked if they had been attempting to restrict or reduce their consumption of digital technologies (i.e., smartphones, social media, online games, etc.). After screening, participants were sent a detailed participant information sheet (Appendix 2). My sampling approach resulted in a total of 21 informants comprised of 15 women and 6 men, aged from 19 to 39 years, with varied educational levels and occupations, living in different countries. This sample size was considered diverse enough to fulfill the purpose of this research. Table 2 provides some brief information about these participants.

Table 2: Participant information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Living location
Mike	19	Male	Mixed martial arts practitioner	Sweden
Jane	24	Female	PhD student	USA
Thomas	22	Male	English language teacher	Vietnam
Jason	33	Male	PhD student	UK
Lucy	31	Female	PhD student	Cyprus
Michelle	21	Female	Undergraduate student	Vietnam
Rosa	24	Female	Undergraduate student	Netherlands
Matthew	29	Male	Non-profit worker	UK
Emma	24	Female	Graduate student	UK
Chloe	21	Female	Undergraduate student	USA
Caroline	20	Female	Undergraduate student	UK
Anna	30	Female	HR manager	Vietnam
Alice	26	Female	Graduate student	USA
Amy	22	Female	Food manufacturing specialist	Canada
Julie	27	Female	Secondary school teacher	Canada
Amelia	28	Female	Nursing assistant	USA
Rachel	26	Female	IT specialist	USA
Jack	25	Male	Software engineer	Brazil

Paul	27	Male	Non-profit worker	UK
Sophia	29	Female	Software engineer	USA
Sarah	39	Female	Retreat coordinator	USA

Due to the geographic dispersion of the sample and the lockdown mandates related to COVID-19, participants were asked to undertake their interview digitally or via telephone. Of the 21 participants, 20 were comfortable to do an interview via video calling software and only 1 opted for asynchronous email exchange.

All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured style wherein a loose interview guide was used to ensure consistency across the conversation, but all questions were open, flexibly mutating in relation to the specific person being interviewed, and the ordering of topics and themes were decided on the basis of the discussion flow (Banister and Hogg, 2004; Rapley, 2004). An example of the loose interview schedule I followed can be found in Appendix 7 although each interview varied in scope and substance. Here, I relied on Rapley's (2004: 20, original emphasis) suggestion for qualitative interviewing: to *"just get on with interacting with that specific person*" instead of being overly worried about whether an interview schedule is followed regimentally or whether I was too self-disclosing.

Each interview typically began with a series of grand tour questions (McCracken, 1988) such as "What types of digital technology do you use?" or "How do you spend time on your digital devices?" or "What are your earliest memories of using the internet?". These questions allowed me to build a "stock" understanding of each participant's lifeworld, their relationship with technology at the broadest levels, and to locate them within some identifiable socio-cultural milieu to guide the interview until more telling and idiosyncratic information emerged (Kozinets, 2015). Following this, I initiated a series of open-ended questions to naturally guide the informant towards opening up about their experiences, thoughts, feelings around themes of their experiences of living in the digital world and their digital detoxing regimes (Legard et al., 2003; Rapley, 2004). Further probing and clarifying questions were also employed to explore their thoughts and feelings in more depth.

Techniques of "self-revelation"– in which I revealed some of my personal information and thoughts with the informant – were used during the interview whenever needed (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). This allowed me to naturally build rapport with the participant, to create a climate of trust and empathy for the individual, and ultimately to

enable them to share their thoughts and feelings about the topics in question (Rapley, 2009; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989).

The interviews lasted between 1 to 2 hours on average and were audio-recorded with each informant's permission. From the audio recordings and email exchanges, verbatim transcripts were generated resulting in 464 pages (double-spaced, 12-point) of textual data. To anonymise interview data, pseudonyms were applied to the transcripts. Right after each interview, notes were taken in which I wrote down interesting ideas/quotes and any potential themes that were emerging. The interview process ended when it reached a point of theoretical saturation, that is, when I felt no new analytical insights could be obtained from additional interview data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Ritchie et al., 2003).

It is also important to note that, besides the 21 formal interviews, I had some further follow-up, informal conversations with a few key informants which I regarded as opportunities to add more context and authenticity to my data (see Swain and Spire, 2020).

2.5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

All interview and netnographic data were brought together and treated as a combined data pool for recursive analysis and interpretation. The base-level analytic procedures were informed by Spiggle's (1994) seminal guidelines on intersecting operations including iteration, categorisation, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalisation, integration, and refutation.

First, with regard to *iteration*, the process of data analysis and interpretation in this study firmly adhered to iterative, cyclical procedures whereby I consistently went back and forth between data collection and analysis in such a way that preceding operations shape subsequent ones (Spiggle, 1994: 495; Thompson et al., 1994; Kozinets, 2015). Following Thompson and colleagues' (1994) suggestion that hermeneutics form the process for interpreting qualitative data, each "part" of the data (text) was interpreted and re-interpreted to create the sense of the "whole", and a holistic understanding of the data developed over time as I went back and forth between small parts and the whole dataset.

Second, in terms of *categorisation* or "coding", I read, re-read, identified and labeled chunks of data (i.e., a passage of text that can be a few words or many pages long) based on their coherent meaning and relevance to the research questions; parts of the text with no

meaningful information to me as the analyst remained uncategorised (Spiggle, 1994: 493). Some chunks of data had overlapping meanings and were given two or three codes before these codes were revised or dropped subsequently as the data analysis progressed. I coded all netnographic and interview data manually. Like Kozinets, I also believe that manual coding allowed me to feel creative, inspired, and much closer to the data (2015: 221). The whole process of coding by hand was supported by what Kozinets (2015) calls "cyborgian practices" in which I also used the search function to conduct text searches and other functions (e.g., highlighting important chunks of data) on a Microsoft Word document – these effectively helped me to save time in the process of categorisation. As such, I decided not to rely on specialist softwares such as NVivo and Atlas.ti.

Third, with regard to *abstraction*, I sought to connect my empirically-located categories with the academic literature to produce higher-order conceptual constructs (Spiggle, 1994: 493). In tandem with my iterative process of going back and forth between the library and the field, I identified useful explanatory constructs, labels, and enabling theories to ground and organise my emic data (e.g., concepts such as "inevitabilism", "ambivalence", "ironic distance", "fetishistic disavowal", "escapism", "voluntary simplicity"). This identify-and-explain conceptualisation process was ongoing and not a discrete stage but rather played out throughout data collection, categorisation, write-up of the findings, and the peer review process of some of the Research Chapters (Chapters 3 and 4) in this thesis. Abstraction helped me to adjust, problematise, and extend existing theory. In this process, I remained immersed in relevant literature even as I conducted my fieldwork. Balancing the library and the field proved invaluable in allowing me to explain contextual ideas emerging from various categories in my data.

Fourth, in terms of *comparison*, I constantly explored the similarities and differences across incidents within the data pool as well as across emergent categories (Spiggle, 1994: 493). The operation of comparison occurred through various stages of the research and underscored my data collection, categorisation, and abstraction operations. While collecting data, I would compare emergent materials with older stored material, whether that meant comparing the ideas reported in a new interview versus older ones, using previous data to inform questions and ideas to explore in subsequent data collection, or seeking out disconfirming observations for what was already found. As I categorised my data, I noted the similarities in particular instances across the data and labeled them as representing the

same category. While abstracting data, I compared various dimensions and expressions of phenomena in search of how they came together as one or a few conceptual explanations. Moreover, field notes from my netnographic investigation were compared against interview transcripts to support me in the processes of categorisation and abstraction. As I identified provisionary categories, constructs and conceptual linkages in the initial stages of data analysis, I refined the research questions that guided later stages of netnographic enquiry as well as adjusted the questions in subsequent interviews.

Fifth, in terms of *dimensionalisation*, I identified various dimensions of the categories and constructs (Spiggle, 1994: 494) where relevant. As Spiggle (1994) suggests, dimensionalisation aids in abstraction and comparison operations, supporting the formulation of concepts and the delineation of their relationships. By systematically examining empirical variations across incidents that I assumed to represent a construct, I challenged myself to clarify and enhance its conceptual meaning. As an example of dimensionalisation in my study, I identified "focus on functional values", "focus on small successes", and "focus on personal benefits" as different but interlinked dimensions/attributes of the one overall notion of "pragmatism" which ultimately became one of the central themes of paper 2 (Chapter 4) in this thesis.

Sixth, in the operation of *integration*, I combined the emergent ideas and themes into a conceptually woven, integrated narrative (Spiggle, 1994: 494). Here, I focused on "the mapping of relationships between conceptual elements" and the delineation of a core category/construct around which other categories or constructs revolve (p. 495). In such process, I constantly looked for the relationships and common patterns across different categories and sought to integrate them into one coherent theoretical "story" (also Arnould, 1998; Kozinets, 2015). For example, the integration of the categories of "privatization of stress", "pragmatism" and "self-indulgence" allowed me to come up with "reflexive impotence" as one overarching conceptual explanation for detoxers' (anti-)consumption behaviours that are largely atomised, pragmatic, and politically ineffective in nature.

Last, in terms of the *refutation* operation, I deliberately subjected my emerging categories and conceptual linkages to empirical scrutiny (Spiggle, 1994: 496). This process was employed to modify my ongoing interpretation and to drop any emergent ideas/themes that were not (to a certain extent) confirmed or confirmable. As an example of this operation in my study, etic concepts of "active rebellion" and "social movement" initially emerged

from my engagement with the anti-consumption literature and were drawn upon to support the process of categorising naturalistic data, however these labels were soon dropped as most of the collected interview and netnographic material contrasted or disconfirmed them.

Overall, a number of emerging thematic categories, constructs and conceptual linkages were formed, challenged, modified, and further developed over time as I continually read, re-read, coded, categorised, abstracted, and integrated the data while consulting and engaging with relevant literature to support the understanding of emerging themes (Spiggle, 1994). My supervisory team collaborated on seeking out conceptual explanations for emerging themes and the write-up of findings, ensuring the robust interpretation of the data (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989).

2.6. Evaluating the Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research

Beyond Spiggle's analytic procedures, I followed five criteria for assessing and ensuring the trustworthiness of my emerging interpretations: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and integrity (Lincoln and Guba, 1986; Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

In terms of *credibility* assessment, that is, the extent to which the researcher gives credible and accurate representations of the constructions of reality study, Wallendorf and Belk (1989) emphasise the need for a prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field. I entered the netnographic sites in early December 2021 right after obtaining the ethical approval and my exit from the field was in December 2022. During this 12-month period, I maintained a persistent presence in the field through my continuous observation of the Nosurf group and other online sites. During my persistent presence in the field, I attempted to keep my data collection rich and meaningful by not simply "harvesting data" but also constantly engaging myself in detoxers' thoughts, feelings, opinions, ideas, contexts and stories to represent their stories in the most accurate and significant way possible (Kozinets, 2015). In addition, member checks were conducted to enhance the credibility of the findings in which the transcripts and initial findings and interpretation of data were given to the key participants whom I could reach out to via email after the interview. In some informal conversations with a few informants, I also discussed with them the ideas that emerged from the findings in order to collect their reactions and gain any further insights into the phenomenon at hand. Lastly, member checks were also done during the process of interviewing in which I constantly checked my emergent interpretation by asking my

informants questions such as “Does that seem accurate to you?” or “So what you’re saying is that….” or “Is it true that….?”.

Concerning *transferability* assessment, that is, the extent to which the findings are likely to be applicable in other contexts or to other research subjects, this study was largely focused on bundling new concepts and theories of relevance to consumer research beyond digital consumption. Arguably, the findings and conceptual explanations that are reported in this thesis could potentially be transferred to other contexts in which various forms of “gestural” and depoliticised consumer resistance occur (Chapters 4 and 5), for example, dopamine detox, alcohol detox or sugar detox. Key theorisations developed for this thesis could also be applied beyond the context of this research. For example, the conceptualisation of the “claustropolitan” structure of feeling developed in paper 1 (Chapter 3) and the concept of “reflexively impotent (anti-)consumer” developed in paper 2 (Chapter 4) are transferable to other contexts of consumer culture where subjects experience the dismal prospect of cultural irrelevance or lack of autonomy. The theories developed in this thesis are intended to be applicable and discussed in multiple contexts of capitalist hegemony *not* just the digital realm.

Regarding *dependability* assessment, that is, the extent to which aspects of the research findings can be replicable, to some extent, if the enquiry is repeated with the same (or similar) subjects in the same (or similar) context, I followed Wallendorf and Belk’s (1989) technique of “observation over time and explanation of change” in which I routinely returned to several interview informants and had informal conversations with them about digital detoxing to learn what had changed and whether these changes were still consonant with emergent theoretical insights. Moreover, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), I attempted to give (in this chapter) as detailed an account of my methodological decision-making for this research as possible so that future researchers can potentially revisit or repeat the work and re-explore aspects of its findings (also Creswell, 2002).

In terms of *confirmability* assessment, that is, the extent to which one’s constructed interpretation can be traced and confirmed by other researchers, Wallendorf and Belk (1989) suggested techniques for enhancing confirmability such as triangulation across researchers and methods, reflexive journals, and auditing. First, as already discussed, triangulation across methods was employed, which allowed me to bring multiple viewpoints to the research project and enhance its confirmability. Also, the triangulation across three members of the

research team (including me and my two supervisors) allowed for the generation of findings with a higher level of confirmability. Second, I kept my immersive journal during my prolonged immersion in the field which aided in establishing the confirmability of my findings. Third, two out of the three Research Chapters of this thesis have been through blind peer review at a key international journal (Marketing Theory) and the third (working) paper has been presented to peers at a key international conference, the Interpretive Consumer Research workshop. My interpretations have been confirmed and accepted already by a large body of my peers.

With regards to *integrity* assessment, that is, the extent to which the interpretation was unimpaired by informants' misinformation or misrepresentations, I followed Wallendorf and Belk's (1989) suggestions to enhance the integrity of naturalistic research including the construction of rapport and trust, good interview technique, and the safeguarding of information identity. Before and during each interview, each participant was promised that their identity and anonymity would be protected. Such reassurance allowed the informant to no longer worry about their personal or sensitive information being disclosed, thus removing one inherent reason why they might mispresent or distort information reported to me as the researcher.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

This research was initially approved by the LUMS-FASS University Ethics Committee on 04 December 2020 (reference FL20022) and the revised ethics application form (in which I requested further approval of publicly recruiting participants in online forums) was approved on 10 March 2021 (reference FL20103).

Regarding the confidentiality of netnography, to minimise any potential harm, I only observed online discussions and content that, according to my careful evaluation, were intended for public consumption and were meant by the content creator to reach a wider audience. Any data on any online sites that was intended to be private (e.g., posts intended for a restricted number of friends, or posts intended for group members in a private group) was not collected. All usernames as well as sensitive/personal information were deleted before the data was included in the final corpus. Any posts of which related information could violate principles of anonymity and confidentiality or harm people, were removed. In the

process of data analysis and interpretation, I also carefully evaluated what data to be included or excluded, and I specifically aimed to filter data based on critical reflection and ethical research standards (Thompson et al., 2021).

Regarding the vulnerability of interview participants, all efforts were made to ensure that the interviews were undertaken in a mindful, sensitive and careful way. I was also aware of the small potential for these exchanges to trigger distress and was well prepared to offer information regarding sources of emotional support to participants. To further ensure against distress, interview questions were carefully designed to avoid potentially uncomfortable or upsetting issues. Participants were reminded before undertaking the interview – and at any emergent points of concern during the interview – that they did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to and had the option to discontinue the conversation at any time with no consequence to them. I emailed participants after each interview as part of normal practice to thank them for their participation. I also asked their thoughts on their interview and reminded them that they had the option of recounting any statements or content, however, no participants wished to do so.

3. Chapter 3: High-fidelity Consumption and the Claustropolitan Structure of Feeling

3.1. Introduction to Chapter 3

The first paper, I felt, needed to play an important role in setting the scene for a study of digital detoxing. Accordingly, my supervisors and I produced a conceptual paper that explores the general mood of living in a hyper-digitalised world with particular attention to why it might encourage consumers to want to retreat from it. To provide the foundations for that exploration, I set about building an understanding of the shared structures or circumstances that underpin consumers' day-to-day entanglement with digital technologies and their felt experiences of such entanglement. Both within and beyond the marketing literature, it has been widely recognised that digital technologies can be empowering and desirous but also alienating. As I tried to pin down what exactly this duality amounted to in terms of a shared comprehensible mood amongst consumers, I soon realised that the extant literature offers little by way of explanation.

One of the toolkits I arrived at was one that my supervisor, Professor Cronin, had mentioned in one of our meetings – the recently deceased theorist Steve Redhead's *claustropolitanism*. Although largely underdeveloped due to Redhead's unfortunate passing, its underpinning conceptualisation of subjects of late-stage digital consumer capitalism as "claustrophobes" – who have access to almost everything they could want *yet* also want to escape the planet as they feel so foreclosed – resonated with me. Although Redhead alluded to how claustropolitanism, as a *structure of feeling*, was the result of the combination of the forces of globalisation and digitalisation, he had *not* fully expanded on that idea before his passing. This motivated me to adapt and import his base principles of claustropolitanism to the critical marketing space – a domain I identified with and could see Redhead's material contributing effectively to. Besides the appeal of adapting such a niche lens for a critical marketing audience, there was also something particularly haunting and, to me, *profound* about studying the dark side of technoculture using a theoretical tool that had been "developed by a dying man at the end of the world" (as described by Redhead's colleague Tara Brabazon – in Brabazon, 2021: 5).

Invoking claustropolitanism as a useful lens as I re-read important texts on the duality of techno-consumption, I realised that it was perhaps not sufficient to just theorise a simple juxtaposition between consumers feeling both empowered and disempowered by technology. There was the possibility that the juxtaposition is co-constituting and mutually affirming. I began to sketch out an idea with my supervisors that it was exactly the sense of liberation on the one hand (with technology being a source of productivity, convenience, efficiency and pleasure) and disempowerment on the other (with technology causing constant stress, burden, depression and loneliness) that engineer digital consumption most generally. I saw technoculture as something that many consumers had to put up with – a kind of *limbo* that they are trapped in for better or worse. Using that base principle, I could work out the precise coordinates where that limbo is perpetuated for consumers.

Adding Zuboff's (2019) theorisation of "surveillance capitalism" to contextualise technoculture and its relationship with consumers, we submitted a paper for peer review at *Marketing Theory*. As the article was revised over the review process, an earlier idea of "emotion" was dropped and replaced by the more appropriate concept of "*affect*". Delving deeper into theories of affect (e.g., Massumi, 2015; Thrift, 2008), we believed that the concept of affect could help us to better shore up the absences in Redhead's oeuvre. Affect, as a concept, provided us with a robust way to conceptualise the pre-cognitive moods and sensations that occurred before emotions – the pervasive oppressive atmosphere of foreclosure that largely shaped consumers' lives (though often evaded their conscious awareness and discursive expression). This also helped to explain why Redhead himself positioned claustropolitanism as a "structure of feeling" which – according to Williams's (1977, 1979) original conceptualisation – is pre-emergent and not fully articulated in language.

With an affective framing of claustropolitanism emerging over the peer review process, we theorised three key *affective* contours of living under the logic of surveillance capitalism. This theoretical endeavor also allowed us to respond to recent calls within marketing theory for "non-representational" ways of understanding of consumption, markets and digital consumer culture (e.g., Hill et al., 2014; Hietanen and Andéhn, 2017).

In this first paper of my thesis, I also connect my work with recent critical marketing work that questions the idea of an agentic consumer subject (e.g., Lambert, 2019; Rome

and Lambert, 2020). My position is that if consumers increasingly feel trapped by living in a surveillant marketplace, the idea of consumers' genuine autonomy is illusory at best (also Gabriel, 2015). This idea is developed through our new concept of "*high-fidelity consumption"*, which means that through various affective deadlocks, consumers conform faithfully to the algorithmic predictions of surveillant market actors.

This paper is important for the thesis as it provides important contextualising perspectives as they imbricate and fold together with lived experience – a broad level "context of context" (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) view of technology, capitalism, consumption and how people feel about it all. By setting the scene with this context of context, readers are given my perspective on the conditions that allow for digital detox to emerge in response to. As for me, a researcher on a larger journey, this initial scene-setting prepared me for situating digital detox in a larger theoretical tradition for the later empirical Chapters of my thesis.

High-fidelity consumption and the claustropolitan structure of feeling

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3.2. Abstract

This paper invokes Redhead's concept of *claustropolitanism* to critically explore the affective reality of consumers in today's digital age. In the context of surveillance capitalism, we argue that consumer subjectivity revolves around the experience of *fidelity* rather than agency. Instead of experiencing genuine autonomy in their digital lives, consumers are confronted with a sense of confinement that reflects their tacit conformity to the behavioural predictions of surveillant market actors. By exploring how that confinement is lived and felt, we theorise the collective affects that constitute a claustropolitan structure of feeling: incompletion, saturation, and alienation. These affective contours trace an oppressive atmosphere that infuses consumers' lives as they attempt to seek fulfilment through digital market-located behaviours that are largely anticipated and coordinated by surveillant actors.

Rather than motivate resistance, these affects ironically work to perpetuate consumers' commitment to the digital world and their ongoing participation in the surveillant marketplace. Our theorisation continues the critical project of re-assessing the consumer subject by showing how subjectivity is produced at the point of intersection between ideological imperatives and affective consequences.

Keywords: Surveillance capitalism; technoculture; affect; subjectivity; fidelity; claustropolitanism; structure of feeling.

3.3. Introduction

> "The world feels […] as if it is on the brink of terminal disaster […] Living in the present feels like it is an opening scene from Danny Boyle's 2002 zombie apocalypse film *28 Days Later* where 'the last man' finds himself surveying a totally empty deserted city as the 'undead' Manchester metropolis beckons up the motorway" (Redhead, 2017a: 34-35, original emphasis).

Fostered by the instabilities of economic crises, environmental degradation, climate change, political disenchantment and pandemics, commentators have alluded to a pervasive atmosphere of anxiety, precariousness and overall dread in contemporary consumer culture (Ahlberg et al., 2021; Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018; Lambert, 2019; Zwick and Denegri-Knott, 2018). In what Žižek (2015) has aptly termed the "new dark ages", a litany of alarming events indicate the increasing strains and potential breaking points of global market-oriented capitalist hegemony. In almost parodic reflection of Frederic Jameson's maxim "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism", modern forms of apocalyptic thinking pervade popular culture through omnipresent disaster genres in cinema, TV and videogames (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016: 278). The spread of fake news and conspiratorial, radical views rapidly institute cultures of misinformation, group polarisation, extremism and "post-truth", suggesting a lack of trust in expert systems and a loss of faith in mainstream institutions (Kozinets et al., 2020).

Collectively these incidents coalesce under the suspicion that some "invisible power" is eagerly reversing extant institutional orders and orthodoxies, altering our social relations, and disturbing our ways of being in the world (Rome and Lambert, 2020; Šimůnková, 2019;

Wickstrom et al., 2021). The impression that we are powerless to such traumatic change is usefully addressed by the seldom deployed concept of *claustropolitanism* introduced by sociologist Steve Redhead (2016: 831) to denote "the feeling that we want to escape the planet because we are now so foreclosed". In contradistinction to the forward-looking optimism of cosmopolitanism, claustropolitanism suggests a stifling anxiety towards liberalisation, globalisation, digitalisation and narratives of progress (Redhead, 2009, 2017a, 2017b). Redhead's concept functions as a collectively shared and largely unspoken cultural mood – what he considers to be a "*structure of feeling*" (see Williams, 1965, 1977, 1979) – at this historical moment.

In this paper, we extend Redhead's under-theorised claustropolitan structure of feeling to understand the experiences of consumers within their digital lives under "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019). As the latest development of global consumer capitalism, surveillance capitalism centres on the functioning of "behavioral futures markets" that use predictions to better target consumers and direct their behaviour within preestablished parameters (Zuboff, 2019: 8). It hinges on data-driven intervention in and manipulation of individuals' social relations, personal interests, preferences and choices at a scale that far exceeds previously known marketing information systems. The spread and influence of surveillance capitalism has been made possible by consumers' dependence on internet-mediated ways of living and advances in networked information technologies that situate individuals in a particularly *fidelitous* subject position to the market. By invoking claustropolitanism as a dominant structure of feeling under surveillance capitalism, we flesh out the affective reality of the consumer subject whose experiences have been routinely acted upon and altered in ways that compromise some of the most basic assumptions of personal agency. We ask: How is consumer subjectivity collectively lived and felt within the context of surveillance capitalism?

This paper continues "the critical project of interrogating the consumer subject form" (Lambert, 2019: 329; Rome and Lambert, 2020). Although previous studies have critically re-assessed conceptions of consumer freedom in the marketplace (Beckett and Nayak, 2008; Gabriel, 2015), we further problematise accounts of an agentic consumer subject by focusing on how consumers' (increasingly limited) freedom is *affectively* experienced. We theorise the main affective contours of the claustropolitan structure of feeling that emerges from consumers' self-originated experiences being supplanted by their anticipated conformity.

Drawing upon insights from studies of technocultural consumption, we reveal how consumers' commitment to the fantasy appeals of technology tends not to result in their unconditional fulfilment but instead works to keep them *faithfully* locked into predictable patterns of behaviour. Here, we show how consumer subjectivity is produced at the intersection between the ideological imperatives of surveillance capitalism and their affective consequences. We introduce the concept of *high-fidelity consumption* which is located within this point of intersection and is fundamental to the surveillant market project of seeking total certainty through securing consumers' conformity.

This paper contributes to recent marketing scholarship that seeks "[t]o further theoretically ground the looming affective atmosphere of contemporary times" (Ahlberg et al., 2021: 164) and considers "how 'late capitalist' subjectivities have increasingly abandoned their optimism about [the] future" (Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018: 546). By discussing the transindividual and non-representational dimensions of consumers' experiences, we explore the sense of confinement and foreclosure that permeates the contemporary digital world and how fidelity rather than agency constitutes the lived experience of consumers under surveillance capitalism. In doing so, we show the role that affect plays in the structuring of consumer subjectivity.

In the following sections, we provide first a brief overview of affect, then a background to surveillance capitalism followed by Redhead's concept of claustropolitanism. Next, we map out what we consider to be the three major affective contours of claustropolitan life under surveillance capitalism and close out with a conceptualisation of high-fidelity consumption.

3.4. Theoretical Underpinnings

3.4.1. Consumer Subjectivity and the Importance of Affect

Subjectivity can be broadly understood as "human lived experience and the physical, political, and historical context of that experience" (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992: 1). Following non-representational approaches to understanding consumers, markets and consumption events (Hill et al., 2014; Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018), the concept of affect can help us to better understand how the subject position of "consumer" continually emerges and is

experienced at the level of pre-conscious feelings or moods. Affects are not the same as personal emotions – sadness, happiness, fear and so forth – which can be recognised, identified and articulated through language (Anderson, 2009; Hipfl, 2018). An affect is an embodied, transindividual tone, impulse or intensity that "comes before emotion" (Hill et al, 2014: 387) and "only retrospectively can it be 'owned' as the content of an individualized experience" (Hipfl, 2018: 7). An affective reading of consumer subjectivity implies attending to sensations, moods or waves of sentiment which sit at the margins of people's consciousness about their relationships to the market and their experiences of themselves within it as consumers. Hill et al. (2014: 388) clarify that "affect is often our first window through which we encounter the environments of consumption". Affects are understood to be transindividual as they pass between individuals or members of groups (Massumi, 2015) and register as a vague atmosphere that infuses a particular situation or moment (Anderson, 2014).

It is here that Raymond Williams' concept of "structure of feeling" can provide some depth and texture to the atmospheric nature of affect. For Williams, a structure of feeling can best be likened to an emergent culture; a "not yet fully articulated" way of living and being that is sensed collectively "at the edge of semantic availability" (1977: 134). His concept conveys "the culture of a period" (1965: 64) as it is lived through "affective elements of consciousness and relationships" (1977: 132) before such things can be properly recognised and classified. Crucially, structures of feeling can inform, delimit and direct experience and action in parallel with the prevailing ideologies of the period. Accordingly, Williams (1977: 132) contrasts a structure of feeling with what he considers the "more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology'". On this understanding, Thompson (2005: 238) suggests a structure of feeling can be thought of as "an ineffable, experiential residual that cannot be reduced to the rational aspects of ideological belief". Here, we define a structure of feeling as the reservoir of collectively lived and shared feelings that exist in *complex* (and sometimes oppositional) relation to the articulated beliefs and ways of being, which structure and organise life but are not reducible to them. The shared feelings, what we call the affective contours of a structure of feeling, may materialise differently and to varying degrees depending on people's circumstances but should be thought of as "pervasive" (Anderson, 2014).

In relation to subjectivity formation, it should be recognised that pervasive affects that pre-consciously structure a person's experiences and ways of being are a crucial predicate to how one interacts with and relates to the prevailing ideologies that interpellate and ultimately create subjects (Anderson, 2014; Lara et al., 2017). Affects "occur *before* and *alongside* the formation of subjectivity" (Anderson, 2009: 78), constitute "non-conscious processes with relevance for the emergence of subjectivity" (Lara et al. 2017: 36), and, as such, unpacking affective contours is important for understanding how subject positions emerge. In this paper, we understand consumer subjectivity as entangled in the affective contours of a particular structure of feeling that emerges in complex relation to surveillance capitalism. Before drawing upon Redhead's claustropolitanism to help conceptualise that structure of feeling, we first provide some contextual background to surveillance capitalism.

3.4.2. Surveillance Capitalism: No Exit from "Big Other"

Zuboff (2019: v) defines surveillance capitalism as "a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales". Extending the classic Marxist visualisation of capitalism as preying upon the surplus value of workers, Zuboff suggests that the surveillant logic of today's technoculture audaciously lays claim to the surplus value of consumer experiences for the production of behavioural-prediction commodities. This is made possible by consumers' zealous participation – whether through smartphones, wearables, social media, game consoles, and other digitally-mediated ways of living – in activities and experiences that are punctuated with market-coordinated behavioural monitoring and prediction (Ball, 2017; Belk et al., 2021; Kozinets et al., 2017). For Zuboff (2019), the accumulation of "behavioral surplus" (p. 8) from consumers' lives functions through the rise of *"Big Other"* (p. 376), a ubiquitous networked computational system "that renders, monitors, computes, and modifies human behavior" for more accurate data. The crucial point for Zuboff (2019: 378) is that the most certain way to predict human behaviour is to intervene in it and ultimately shape it towards "*guaranteed outcomes*". Big Other's reach across the Internet-of-things allows for a plethora of day-to-day human experiences to be reduced to observable, measurable, predictable and ultimately manipulable behaviours which are fashioned towards more accurate results. The prediction imperative (and its deliberate conflation with manipulation) is engineered through machine learning that forever improves at shaping and tightening the online and offline contexts in which consumers make choices (Darmody and Zwick, 2020).

The means of behavioural modification sought out does not function through impelling compliance with social norms or rationalities. In contrast to the governing-through-freedom logic of neoliberalism (Shankar et al., 2006), surveillance capitalism is much more deterministic and brutal in its production of subjectivity. For Zuboff, most artefacts of surveillance capitalism (e.g., search engines, social networking sites, self-tracking devices, online games) centre on *automating* consumers through continually tightening feedback loops and reward/punishment mechanisms not available for personal introspection or immediate evaluation (also Otterlo, 2014). Reflexivity, criticality, inner thoughts and capacity for balanced judgement are not required for surveillance capitalism to function, thus "human persons [are reduced] to the mere animal condition of behavior shorn of reflective meaning" (Zuboff, 2019: 382). This, we argue, leads to the substitution of *fidelity* for agency whereby individual behaviours can be configured, rationalised, de-risked and herded towards market opportunities while consumers themselves remain none the wiser.

Consumers, by keeping to the behavioural parameters established by market actors, function according to a fidelitous subject position whereby their self-originated experiences are subordinated to market anticipation thus producing high levels of anticipated conformity. This subject is analogous to an *automaton*, confined to living in loops, purchasing, behaving and interacting in ways that confirm Big Other's guaranteed commercial outcomes. Such fidelitous behaviour is made possible and, in many cases, acceptable (or even desirable) to consumers by the allure of "hyper-relevance" (Darmody and Zwick, 2020: 1). The better surveillant market actors become at manipulating choice environments and decision-making, the more relevant, convenient and appropriate the end-result becomes for the consumer subject, ironically allowing him or her to perceive of oneself as empowered. "[I]n the age of surveillance marketing", Darmody and Zwick (2020: 2) suggest, market actors engineer "a fairytale vision of marketing where the algorithmic manipulation of consumers and consumer autonomy and empowerment become one and the same". Consumers come to *accept* ever more updated computational interventions that can "know" and "serve" them better as an inevitable part of social progress. Under this "full-blown ideology of *inevitabilism"* (Zuboff, 2019: 222), the latest technological conveniences – and the fidelity they require from users – are welcomed into consumers' lives as "prophetic" and celebrated along the coordinates of a kind of "fantasy foretelling" of an inescapable future to come (Belk et al. 2021: 32).

While discussions around surveillance capitalism and its inevitabilism have centred mostly on ideological imperatives and the various systems and techniques used to achieve them (Zwick and Denegri-Knott, 2018; Ball, 2017), its effects must not be decoupled from lived experience and the affective dimensions of daily life. Zuboff's analysis provides us with a useful apparatus for contextualising our digital present though it is largely bound to expert insights and representations from industry insiders; offering limited space for an account of how users actually experience their digital lives (Whitehead, 2019). This is where a closer reading of the affective and non-representational aspects of consumption – how our technoculture is *affectively* lived – would prove useful. As put aptly by Belk et al. (2021: 42), "culture has been notably absent" in treatments of technology adoption and consumption. Behind arguments about surveillance, decision-guiding techniques, behavioural prediction and modification are streets, trains, parks, homes, restaurants, classrooms, and offices in any given city brimming with people instant messaging, scrolling through newsfeeds, streaming music, playing games, or immersing themselves in endless content. Surveillance capitalism is not just a discrete economic order hinged on a regime of behavioural certainty but is a culture of radical digital dependency (Šimůnková, 2019; Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast, 2017).

Here, any discussion of consumers' dependency on digital devices and media would appear incomplete without mentioning "semio-capitalism" which has attracted attention in recent critical marketing and management scholarship (Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018; Hietanen et al. 2020). Like surveillance capitalism, semio-capitalism relates to a technologically-mediated mode of global capitalism that channels desires and enables consumer subjectivities to emerge on a pre-cognitive level. Not limited to digital spaces, semio-capitalism encompasses how media in general has allowed for the unconscious exchange of signs (rather than material things) to pervade all spheres of human life. That ethos can be channelled in various ways not least through surveillance capital which is considered "the ultimate instantiation of the logico-mathematical trap of financial semio-capitalism" (Berardi, 2021: 37). Though semio-capitalism provides the wider ecology within which surveillance capital is incubated, for the purposes of parsimony we will restrict our commentary to Zuboff's conceptualisation.

In a Zuboffian reading, surveillance capitalism has redefined and displaced many aspects of social life, locking free will down into carefully curated commodity forms whereby

the consumer subject, Darmody and Zwick (2020: 10) suggest, "become[s] manufactured via incessant, iterative interactions with cybernetically intelligent systems". Under surveillance capitalism, "[a] condition of no exit" pervades almost all aspects of consumers' digital lives (Zuboff, 2019: 471). With this "*no exit*" condition in mind, we now present Redhead's claustropolitanism as a useful lens to view consumers' affective reality under surveillance capitalism.

3.4.3. Claustropolitanism

Redhead's (2009, 2017a, 2017b) concept of claustropolitanism was developed from urban theorist Paul Virilio's claim that our twenty-first century world is fast moving from "cosmopolis to claustropolis" (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008: 211). Instead of accelerated globalization and liberalization opening the world up into a utopic cosmopolitan melting pot of ideas, styles and discourses, Virilio observed an opposite reaction based on the contraction and confinement of social life. Redhead, reflecting on the false intimacy of market developments particularly in the era of digitalization, advances Virilio's observation in his formulation of claustropolitanism as "the structure of feeling of the modern world" which he defines as a shared sense of confinement and compression, an inclination that "we are starting to feel 'foreclosed', almost claustrophobic, wanting to stop the planet so we can get off" (Redhead, 2015: 1).

Though Redhead's claustropolitanism lacks substantive application or expansion by others in extant critical theory, his invocation of a Williamsian structure of feeling allows us to ground the concept to a wider field of thought. Taking forward Williams' (1977) conceptualisation of a structure of feeling as the collection of those affects which unfold often in complex or oppositional relations to the formal ideology or worldview of the period, a claustropolitan structure of feeling reflects the mixture of thought and feeling that people have about the prevailing social reality around them. For Williams (1977: 132), feeling is not divorced from thought, rather "thought as felt and feeling as thought". Accordingly, Williams (1977: 130) identifies structure(s) of feeling as "*practical consciousness*" (i.e., the practical, lived experience of a period) in response to the "*official consciousness*" (i.e., the dominant subjectifying ideology of a period). Moving beyond the formally codified ideals, beliefs and fantasies of the official consciousness, a structure of feeling contends "not only with the public ideals but with their omissions and consequences, as lived" (Williams, 1965: 80). A

claustropolitan structure of feeling might thus be understood as the imbroglio of collective affects that emerge in addition or counter to the dominant ideological beliefs of a society that foreclose alternatives, restrict agency and shrink the space for critique.

Claustropolitanism might reasonably be deployed in helping to observe and understand the practical consciousness held by consumers in response to the dominant system of surveillance capitalism with its ideological creep of "no exit" inevitabilism. Within critical marketing scholarship, a range of disquieting feelings associated with contemporary technoculture such as anxiety, fear, precarity, and meaninglessness are reported (e.g., Lambert, 2019; Šimůnková, 2019, Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast, 2017; Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018), which potentially provide some of the affective texture and tones of claustropolitanism. Most explicitly, Ahlberg et al (2021: 168) make a compelling case for our current affective horizons being "plagued by a slow ongoing cancellation of the future" and "a contemporary lack of utopian thinking".

Importantly, Redhead never had the opportunity to formally crystallise the key affective contours of his concept. As Brabazon (2021: 5) reports, Redhead died before a more complete scaffolding of claustropolitanism could be assembled, leaving us with a "shard of theory, an intellectual stub". Nevertheless, that stub remains important to reach for and extend because of its potential to provide an appropriate, timely and affectively charged "theory for the end of the world" (Brabazon, 2021: 6). From Redhead's writings, the claustropolitan structure of feeling relates closely to the encroachment of human experiences by digitalisation and global capitalism. The possibility that claustropolitanism emerges in complex relation to the logic of surveillance capitalism is clearest in his following passage:

> "This structure of feeling I am alluding to is due not just changes in the examples of new digital leisure we see all around us, brought about by global phenomena like Nintendo's Pokémon GO, updating the analogue treasure hunt for the digital age. It is more of a conceptual change, riding the tectonic shifts brought about by globalisation, digitisation and neo-liberalism in the last 20 or 30 years, leaving us bereft of satisfactory resources to explain what is going on and where we are all heading" (Redhead, 2017a: 226).

Redhead's suggestion that we are left "bereft" of answers elevates uncertainty to a master role in claustropolitanism. Uncertainty is also picked up in treatments of surveillance

capitalism that emphasise how technologically-enabled behavioural prediction and modification of consumers' choices are now leaving them "dazed, uncertain, and helpless" (Zuboff, 2019: 406). At one end, surveillance capitalism and the hyper-relevant, largely hedonistic technoculture that it presides over, sweep consumers up in "chaotic vortices of desire, extreme images, and outlandish acts" (Kozinets et al., 2017: 678) that outpace their capacity to truly understand – let alone, *resist* – what is happening. At the other end, the radical behaviourism instituted by surveillance capitalism to engender predictable outcomes ensures that consumers are largely ignorant to the types and quantities of information they share, how it is used, and what their own preferences are versus those that are the result of manipulation. Between both Redhead's conceptual efforts and wider conceptualisations of technoculture, we can expect a level of interaction between surveillance capitalism and claustropolitanism that we shall now explore.

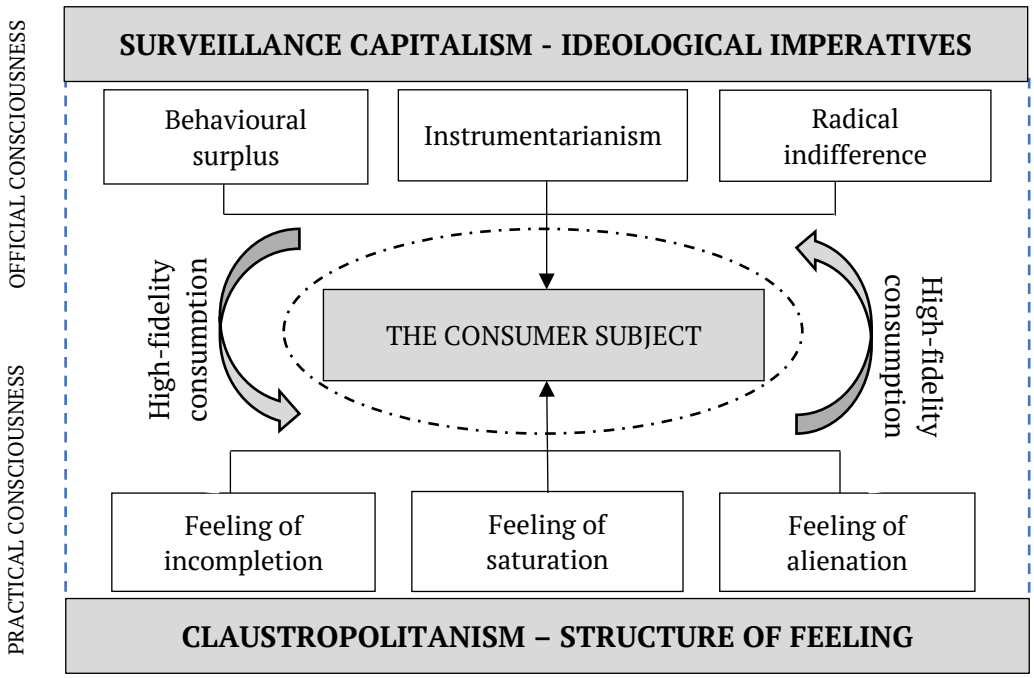
3.5. Mapping Claustropolitanism: Affective Life under Surveillance Capitalism

In the following sections, we draw upon insights from studies of technocultural consumption to identify what we consider to be three dominant affective contours of claustropolitanism under surveillance capitalism. Much of the extant research emphasises consumers' dynamic, ambivalent and nuanced relationships with their technocultural consumption (Eikey and Reddy, 2017; Kozinets et al., 2017; Kristensen and Ruckenstein, 2018). In each of the three affective contours, we outline how consumers' reports of positive and negative experiences of technology nurture a state of *limbo* where the impact of surveillance is far from utopian but rarely perceived as problematic enough for them to reject their digital lives completely. Thus, consumers feel *locked in* to the surveillant market – neither completely fulfilled nor dissatisfied – simply foreclosed. The first contour – the *feeling of incompletion* – centres on a mood of obsessional and compulsive self-introspection under what Zuboff refers to as the behavioural surplus regime. Through the legitimacy of the "quantified self" and everyday self-tracking practices, an affective excess of "incompletion" is perpetuated which pushes consumers to never-ending loops of behavioural data production. The second contour – the *feeling of saturation* – focuses on the affective pressures attached to instrumentalism in today's technoculture. Behind surveillance capitalism's "instrumentarian" appeals is a self that is overburdened with relentless competition, pressure, and performance. The third contour – the *feeling of alienation* – centres on the pervasiveness of indifference, detachment,

and disconnection that stems from consumers' estrangement from truths, from one another, and from their authentic selves. These three affective contours provide the conceptual parameters for claustropolitanism as a *structure* that contextualises consumers' lived experience in a digital age.

Ideological imperatives of surveillance capitalism come top-down from market actors whereas claustropolitan feelings emerge bottom-up as consumers' lived consequences (Figure 2). At their point of intersection, we see the functioning of anticipated conformity through what we call high-fidelity consumption. This is a type of consumption that sits between autonomy and manipulation whereby consumers' behaviours are anticipated and largely predetermined by market actors while experienced and lived out by consumers through their dissenting feelings. Ironically, those feelings of dissent often function to *ensure*, rather than dissuade, consumers' reliance on digital technologies and their ongoing participation in the surveillant market, thus keeping them in a behavioural "loop". Before elaborating more on the concept of high-fidelity consumption, we now map out each affective contour of claustropolitanism in more detail.

Figure 2: The Shaping of High-fidelity consumption



3.5.1. Behavioural Surplus and the Feeling of Incompletion

A significant part of consumers' affective reality under surveillance capitalism centres on a mood of perpetual incompletion provoked by the ideological imperative for consumers to seek more control through personal data generation. This is bound up in a behavioural surplus regime that drives consumers to obsessively record and introspect upon their behaviours across their digital lives so as to produce commodifiable, predictive insights (Zuboff, 2019; Zwick and Denegri-Knott, 2018). In parallel with the official consciousness of datafication and the mainstream legitimacy of datapreneurial consumer identities, consumers are exposed to generalised feelings that their existence is forever incomplete, unfinished, or "not just right".

The mood of incompletion that the behavioural surplus project engenders is perhaps best evidenced by previous research that focuses on individuals or groups who self-elect to generate and curate data from their day-to-day activities – a phenomenon that has been referred to as "dataist" lifestyles (DuFault and Schouten, 2020), "self-tracking" (Charitsis et al., 2019), "everyday analytics" (Pantzar and Ruckenstein, 2015), "lived informatics" (Rooksby et al. 2014) or "lifelogging" (Räikkönen and Grénman, 2020). For example, in prior ethnographic engagements with members of the Quantified Self (QS) community – an international collective that shares insights from personal data – we see how self-tracking technologies are welcomed into consumers' lives to enhance self-knowledge and optimise the self, despite self-trackers' recognition of surveillance capitalism's privacy threats (Bode and Kristensen, 2015; Kristensen and Ruckenstein, 2018). By engineering their own voyages in self-discovery through advanced calculative metrics, the self-tracking consumer potentially forecloses on a free-thinking, naturalistic and adventitious life in favour of a "laboratory of the self" (Kristensen and Ruckenstein 2018: 3624).

The metaphor of a laboratory is significant, affectively, because of its associated imagery of a sterilized, highly monitored and artificial space free from rogue emotion or occurrence. This suggests subjectivity of the self-tracking consumer is comparable to that of a *clinician's*, who is more at ease with observing, testing and planning than natural, impromptu experience. The clinical self-tracking subject submits herself to "scientific" experimentation, constantly evaluating and adjusting aspects of her life that deviate from her plans. In trading off the aleatory for certainty, the consumer subject is "transforming life, in all its ambiguity and messiness, into controllable "life slices"" (Kristensen and Ruckenstein,

2018: 3629). Numbers, metrics and patterns are viewed as a value-free hermeneutic, ensuring symmetrical and accurate behavioural results.

Ideologically, the normalisation of strict monitoring and regulation of every aspect of life centres on a fantasy of ever-more control achieved through symmetry, order, and accuracy that consumers can curate for themselves through surveillant means (Bode and Kristensen, 2015). Affectively, however, the self-tracking lived reality for many consumers has been described as closer to experiences of obsessive compulsiveness, dysfunctional meticulosity and precarity (e.g., Eikey and Reddy, 2017) that we can surmise to be claustropolitan in tone. As the ideal self being pursued is "always in becoming" (Bode and Kristensen, 2015: 123), the self-tracker constantly feels the urge to "work" on the self to attain an improved existence. The feeling of being in control through digital technologies is impermanent, fleeting, and perpetually incomplete (Bergroth, 2019). The need to obsessively take sedulous care and address nagging feelings of incompletion, which sits at the heart of obsessive thought and compulsive behaviour, is encapsulated below by an informant in one of Kristensen and her colleagues' accounts:

> "What happens with your blood sugar after you have eaten, and when you are eating? Do you get tired? What is happening? Do you feel any tickling? Any coating on the tongue? Without the loop with the instrumentalization, those things would have never happened." ("Thomas" in Kristensen and Ruckenstein, 2018: 3632).

Here, the informant is initially excited to welcome "the loop" into his life as self-tracking urges him to constantly ask ever-more specific, albeit perhaps obsessive questions about himself. There are both positive and negative consequences to self-tracking which is a highly dynamic process. Because self-tracking can provide consumers with what they perceive to be life-changing benefits, there is justification in place to remain committed to surveilling themselves which can come with its own stresses and consequences (Eikey and Reddy, 2017). In claustropolitan terms, chasing the benefits of discovery and control can eventually *suffocate* one's self-experience resulting in an atmosphere of discontent and foreclosure. After their initial eagerness had worn off, Kristensen and Ruckenstein (2018: 3633) discuss how self-trackers reported that "tracking restricted their lives" or that "tracking feels burdensome and restricting". The authors refer to such affects as "dead ends" or "hitting the wall". While these dead ends risk disturbing or terminating self-tracking for many consumers, for those who are particularly invested in their digital lives, feeling restricted

serves only to "fuel a sense of agency, inspiration, and creativity" (Kristensen and Ruckenstein, 2018: 3633). Feeling restricted can catalyse entrepreneurial efforts to adjust, augment, circumvent or otherwise surpass the limits of their current digital devices and habits – what we can consider to be a deeper level of obsession. For some, facing their dead ends means embracing particular habits while dropping others. For others, it means consciously relaxing the regularity of one's interactions with self-tracking devices *yet* continuing to collect data by other means. Though the rate of abandonment for particular devices can be high (Lazar et al., 2015), research suggests not all instances of abandonment are motivated by dissatisfaction or declining motivation to self-track but can be driven by consumers acquiring newer technological upgrades or opting for alternatives that better service one's current needs or expectations (see Clawson et al., 2015). Clawson et al. (2015) emphasise how commitment to lifelogging must be understood in light of the complex interplay between the continuous development of self-tracking technologies themselves and the mercurial nature of consumer practices.

Elsewhere, Mende, Scott and Nenkov (2016) observe a particularly depressive consequence of self-tracking: increased mortality salience. The increased awareness of one's own vulnerability that comes with self-tracking devices reveals a distinctly claustropolitan tonality to what Zuboff (2019: 450) refers to as the "closed-loop architecture of obsession". Compulsions at this level reflect consumers' foreclosure to the most distressing and haunting artefact of life: *death*. Everyday statistics of heart rates, blood pressure, steps taken, calorie intake and so forth perpetuate the feeling that one's efforts to bring the spectre of death under total control will always be incomplete.

In terms of understanding how feelings of incompletion contribute to high-fidelity consumption, we can surmise that consumers' obsessive-compulsive urge to obtain a complete picture of themselves *complements* rather than contradicts the surveillance system. Rather than motivate wholesale resistance to their dataist lifestyles, feelings of incompletion can ironically drive some consumers deeper into their digital lives. Being trapped in a pathological loop of obsessive self-completion, consumers may remain fidelitous to the functioning of a surveillant market system that requires never-ending data flows from human experiences. Importantly, their fidelity may not equate with absolute faithfulness to the system but can include various ways that they resist the system at a kind of half-capacity while in-part remaining committed to it. Of significance here is the negotiation of "dead

ends" wherein the consumer subject attempts to limit his or her engagement with self-tracking technologies but in practice, still lives within and supports the logic of surveillance.

3.5.2. Instrumentarianism and the Feeling of Saturation

Another affective contour of claustropolitanism under surveillance capitalism is the feeling of saturation whereby the consumer subject feels overburdened by all of the opportunities, responsibilities, and obligations of her existence. These opaque pressures are instituted predominantly through the *"instrumentarianism"* imperative which centres on a culture of instrumentality and the normative instrumentalisation of consumers' activities and lifetyles for the goals of behavioural prediction, modification, and commodification (Zuboff, 2019: 376). Consumers are conditioned by a suite of ideological appeals to lead entrepreneurial lives: to be ever more productive, efficient, and useful. With the omnipresence of digital tools, devices, and platforms centred on measurable action – what Humayun and Belk (2020: 650) call "saturation of the digital" – ever-increasing avenues are opened up to enable the consumer subject to habitually engage in, datafy, and communicate their enterprising patterns of behaviour.

The ideological injunction to partake in entrepreneurial, observable action is alluded to in consumer research that discusses the technocultural intensification of "instrumental rationality" in which consumers' lives are subject to the logic of producerly, value-creating and efficient enterprise (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast, 2017). Instrumental rationality, or instrumentality, is understood as "the mode of thought and action that identifies problems and works directly toward their most efficient or cost-effective solutions" (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017: 583). The consumer subject feels that almost all activities and artefacts of life can and should be instrumentalized towards providing some purpose and function which could potentially reap them returns:

> "Manifestations of instrumentality can be seen in the commodification of the intimate space of the home, such as in renting one's home to strangers on Airbnb; or in the dominance of the quantified self, where quantification systems hold people accountable for their professional, consumer, and personal performances, such as in online ranking and reputation systems and academic quantification systems" (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017: 584).

Consumers' attempts to extract value out of anything and everything exemplify a dominant culture of excessive busyness, productiveness, and effectiveness. They set up concrete objectives and targets, calculate solutions and consequences, and employ the most efficient apps, platforms, and gadgets to achieve the best results (Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast, 2017). The official consciousness underpinning instrumental rationality centres on vaguely demotic appeals of value and gain i.e., *everyone can be a surveillance capitalist.* The ideological fantasy being that success is self-made: simply by making smart decisions with your digitally-mediated life, you too can extract value from your home, your body, your whatever. However, the practical consciousness, or consumers' genuine lived experience of trying to live that fantasy is marked by a claustropolitan character.

In opposition to the allure of an entrepreneurial life for everyone everywhere, marketing theory reveals a consumer subject paralysed with meritocratic pressures, doubts, opportunity costs, and social comparisons (Lambert, 2019; Rome and Lambert, 2020). The "overcalculated life" replete with multiple sources of value to exploit (Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast, 2017: 1322) points to what Gergen (1991) calls "the saturated self", which denotes the dramatic expansion in the range of relations within which the individual is immersed. In an era of digital ubiquity – with expansion and complexification of relations, obligations, expectations, and social roles – the self has become saturated more than ever. Furthermore, it is not just the number of pressures that result in a state of saturation, it is also the *instantaneity* by which consumers are met with these pressures. For Redhead (2017a: 57), it is "an instant present which is catastrophic and claustropolitan". In an internet-mediated society wherein "immediacy, instantaneity and ubiquity rule" (Redhead, 2011: 96) and "everyone has to keep moving and accelerating" (p. 135), consumers are saturated with opportunities to extract value but also time pressures to seize them instantaneously. The expectation to extract value from consumption is alluded to by an informant's statement presented in Kozinets and colleagues' discussion of digital food image sharing culture:

> "As an avid food-pornographer, I pretty much take pictures of all and any food I eat. But I guess the reasons differ - when I instagram my oatmeal I'm displaying a vastly different set of capitals (health, culture) than when I share albums of elaborate dinners at The Fat Duck or El Celler Can Roca (economic, and perhaps a bit of culture - especially regarding the latter). Mundane meals are mostly instagrammed, while the more coherent experiences get their own albums on Facebook" ("Rhianna" in Kozinets et al., 2017: 668).

For this informant, a simple pleasure in life such as sitting down to a meal becomes saddled with a cacophony of value-creation considerations. In claustropolitan terms, value-creation becomes all-consuming, shrinking life down to instrumentally-oriented activities and *foreclosing* opportunities for more contemplative time. Food is sublimated to fodder for social currency – virtual Instagram and Facebook "likes" – and operationalised towards achieving specific goals. Kozinets et al. (2017) draw upon another informant, "Leonardo", who wrestles with nagging pressures to retreat into image-sharing social networks. These pressures he feels "can distract [him] from real life" (p.671) and take a toll on his relationships with those around him. Rather than go cold turkey, this consumer tries to curtail and rationalise his digital engagement by limiting it to dull days spent at home instead of when he is out with others. Success for him is found in the modest result that his smartphone "does go away more often than it used to" (p.671). Arguably, restricting smartphone usage to justifiable occasions gives credence to those occasions thus enhancing the fetishism around the device. The act of delimiting one's digital engagement gives purpose and license within those limits thus further feeding the logic of instrumentality.

In terms of nurturing fidelity, feelings of saturation, we suggest, may function to tether consumers to the surveillant market system. For some, the nagging sense of saturation paradoxically does not drive them to leave technology completely behind and seek respite through non-digital areas of life. On occasion, the consumer subject becomes more entrenched in seeking purpose and value in the digital world even as he or she reduces their exposure to it. Imposing limits on social media use and sequestering it to justifiable occasions by extension renders social media justifiable. Instrumental circles of cost-benefit calculation, value creation, and goal achievement potentially lock consumers into a fidelitous subject position that reacts predictably and faithfully to the instrumentarian project.

3.5.3. Radical indifference and the Feeling of Alienation

A third affective contour of claustropolitanism centres on the feeling of alienation, marked by the separation of consumers from one another, from the depths of their own selves, and from reality itself. These points of separation are catalysed by the ethos of "*radical indifference*" (Zuboff, 2019: 377) that characterises the nature and quality of relationships under surveillance capitalism. Surveillance capitalism being "a fundamentally asocial mode

of knowledge" (Zuboff, 2019: 505) means the value of all things and people are judged by volume, exposure and outcomes – "clicks", "likes", "shares", "views", "impressions", "followers", "comments" – requiring little interest in the more complex, moral and inherently human stories and contexts that underpin such things. As consumers become fidelitously tied to this "asocial" culture of radical indifference, they increasingly experience a sense of disconnection and disengagement in many important spheres of life.

Radical indifference operates first and foremost through a normalised lack of concern or nonchalance consumers hold towards their personal information, which is perhaps best evidenced in contemporary technocultural practices of self-disclosure. Consumers, despite recognizing minimal privacy is afforded to them in online spaces, continually share, post, update, Tweet, and stream almost every glimpse of their private lives for public consumption (e.g., Belk, 2013; Šimůnková, 2019; Ball, 2017). The official consciousness underpinning the willingness to lay oneself bare to strangers centres on a fantasy appeal of *social connectedness*: by increasingly participating in an internet-enabled world of strangers, one vaguely believes that she can offset her insignificance, expand her social connections, and become part of wider communities (also Wickstrom et al., 2021). The felt experience that consumers have in response to this fantasy is, however, characterised by an atmosphere of estrangement, desocialisation and loneliness.

Commenting on the digital culture of sharing, Belk (2013: 484) observes: "For those active on Facebook, it is likely that their social media friends know more than their immediate families about their daily activities, connections, and thoughts". Being swept up in sharing photos online, instant messaging, notification checking, and so forth, consumers become excessively dependent on their connectedness with digital others and risk experiencing a claustropolitan sense of *groundlessness* and disengagement with tangible connections and meaningful relationships in the material world (Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast, 2017). "The accelerated communication of the twenty-first century (Twitter, iTunes, iPad, Facebook, Google, Snapchat, Pinterest)", Redhead (2017a: 57-58) suggests is "truly a world devoid of 'solids'". Importantly, the absence of "solids" for Redhead does not equate with the entrepreneurial dematerialised fluidity of liquid consumption, but signals the loss of robust, more authentic and less market-coordinated social relations (also Hewer, 2020).

The weakening of social bonds and the sentiment of groundlessness is illustrated by Cronin and Cocker (2019: 292) in their analysis of a "postemotional" YouTube fandom where consumers channel and adjust their online behaviours such that "all emotion is socially filtered and meticulously appraised before it is carefully communicated". The tendency toward carefully calibrating emotional expressions according to online others' expectations or responses blurs the distinction between rationality and sociality. In acts of cynical disavowal, online publics are fully aware of the weakened sincerity of their bonds but go along with their activities. Other-directed emotional management and the absence of solids are further evidenced in the realm of the self-presentation project whereby consumers pursue the fantasy of becoming online influencers or "micro-celebrities" (e.g., McQuarrie et al., 2013). In seeking out "attentional capital", the consumer subject engages in the manipulation of one's self and others by adopting celebrity-like appearance, taste, fashion, and lifestyle, increasingly at the expense of personal authenticity. McQuarrie et al. (2013: 140) in their study of ordinary consumers reaching mass audiences note that the persona of a fashion blogger on the internet is often "far removed from her "real" self, a persona she can rehearse and rewrite until she gets it right" and one that "seems ill suited to the construction of an authentic self".

The pervasive mood of alienation from one's "real" self is also evident in Pounders, Kowalczyk and Stowers's (2016) analysis of the motivations for selfie-postings. Under real or imagined pressures of their audience's expectations, consumers intentionally regulate and carefully craft their emotions in line with what is desirable, as captured in the below statement from one of the authors' informants:

> "No one really posts sad stuff on social media; it's all about only posting happy moments, and when you compile all these happy moments and people look at your Instagram, they think you're happy all the time" ("Jane" in Pounders et al., 2016: 1885).

By conforming to the "closed loop between the inclination toward the social mirror and its reinforcement" (Zuboff, 2019: 464), consumers fidelitously curate a particular representation of self for online worlds while maintaining *distance* between it and their actual states of being. For some consumers like Pounder and colleagues' informant "Jane", a representation of self is achieved by presenting exclusively positive images. Contrarily, for others, their representations are marked by the very absence of positive imagery. For instance, Kozinets

et al (2017: 669) refer to "Zeynep" who admits to sharing a "communal feeling" that posting images of enjoying one's life online is "something to be ashamed of" because it ignores the plight of those who are less fortunate. Where newsfeeds are often punctuated with tragic stories and reports of death, pandemics, and crises in our claustropolitan times, the choice to express one's personal happiness can be marked by hesitancy, shame, or even foreclosed altogether. Subjectivity as it is lived under surveillance capitalism requires the careful calibration of one's self and relations with others which limits bandwidth for spontaneity and encapsulates Redhead's (2017a) idea of feeling as though the world itself is *closing in* (or being foreclosed, in many conceivable ways).

Alongside the foreclosure that accompanies the imperative for impression management are feelings of detachment from reality as consumers grow ever more indifferent to the truthfulness of things (Kozinets et al., 2020; Brabazon, 2021). This shared sentiment is evidenced in consumers being affected by accelerated disinformation whereby lies, falsehoods, conspiracy theories, and "alternative facts" rapidly spread across digital environments. The proliferation of fake news is perpetuated by the ideological fantasy that, in the age of "post-truth", *truth can be whatever people decide for themselves* regardless of factual evidence, reasoned analysis, empirical verification or recourse to experts (Berthon and Pitt, 2018; Kozinets et al., 2020). Under this fantasy, personal opinion and beliefs can be and are conflated with truths and absorbed by others as *reality*, so long as such views can appeal to people's emotions and ideology. Truths give way to what can gain popularity in the digital milieu, as Berthon and Pitt (2018) observe:

> "Search results from engines such as Google, DuckDuckGo and Yahoo do not prioritize knowledge in terms of accuracy, truth, quality or depth. Rather, search results are based on simple popularity […] On social media, where individuals select both the stories they read and the people they interact with, opinions and views are reinforced in an echo chamber driven by positive feedback loops […] Truth more and more becomes 'my' truth" (p. 221).

Information technology with its principle of neutrality towards the truthfulness of information has promoted the culture of "truth as my truth" – truth as being judged and accepted by mostly whatever people like, vote, share – at the expense of verity. Being confined to echo chambers that distort and insulate the range, veracity and quality of knowledge available, consumers function as *"Homo imitans",* predictably imitating one

another's views and attuning themselves to social pressures (Zuboff, 2019: 437). Critical here is the pervasive mood of confinement and alienation whereby consumers are ever more bound by their own epistemic worlds of knowledge, isolated and alienated from different viewpoints, voices, and even the shared reality around them.

Crucially, feelings of alienation function as a foundation upon which surveillance capitalism binds consumers to its closed loops and ethos of anticipated conformity. Rather than leading them to give up the digital in search of authentic truths, relationships and ways of being, the pervasive sense of groundlessness, foreclosure and separation from the material aspects of life potentially motivates consumers to further entrench themselves in the comfort of their echo chambers.

3.6. Discussion and Conclusion

By adapting and extending Redhead's under-theorised concept of claustropolitanism as the overall affective backdrop to our digital age, we offer an image of the consumer subject as constituted by and experienced through a lattice of transindividual feelings characterised by a pervasive sense of being *closed in*. The result for consumers is the primacy of high-fidelity (hi-fi) consumption which we define as the suite of acts, choices, intentions and attitudes that reproduce, to almost a level of total conformity, the predictions determined within the behavioural futures markets of surveillance capitalism. In a living present where emergent experience sits in complex relation to the dominant system of surveillance, hi-fi consumption occurs at the *juncture* between the consumer subject's fidelity to ideological imperatives for rationally-derived manipulable behaviours and the affective outcomes of their manipulation. In Williamsian terms, we have proposed a manner of consumption that exists at the *intersection* between "the official consciousness of an epoch" and "the whole process of actually living its consequences" (Williams, 1979: 159). Though consumers are perhaps attracted to the fantasy appeals of the official consciousness, they find themselves feeling disenfranchised and "closed in" when attempting to live those fantasies. Ironically, any efforts that consumers undertake to overcome their disenfranchisement by further entrenching themselves in their digital lives only play into the imperatives of surveillance capitalism, thus ensuring a *closed loop* between ideological structuration and the structure of feeling that emerges in relation to it. It is within consumers' ambivalent and nuanced experiences with technology that the stock-still deadlock of claustropolitanism becomes

apparent: digital lives are neither good enough to be fulfilling nor bad enough to be rejected. Because technology presents solutions as much as it introduces problems, consumers remain in the *limbo* of accepting the status quo without any impetus to imagine alternatives. In line with the ideological inevitabilism that Zuboff identifies, technology is cemented as an incontestable certainty in consumers' futures, constraining thoughts and behaviour to ultimately secure their conformity.

Importantly, ensuring the fidelity of consumers does not represent a wholly new logic. Market actors have long sought consumers' faithfulness through forms of customer relationship management, collaborative marketing and other techniques (Beckett and Nayak, 2008). However, what we see with the emergence of hi-fi consumption is the functioning of *affects* in securing the consumer subject's anticipated conformity. In exploring how consumers' fidelity to the market is (re)produced at a preconscious, transindividual level by a range of collective affects, we contribute to the critical project of "dismantling conceptions of an agentic consumer" (Rome and Lambert, 2020: 19). Hi-fi consumption reveals to us how shared feelings of incompletion, saturation and alienation are an outcome of living predictably within behavioural parameters but also function to keep consumers faithfully *locked* into those parameters. Although dispiriting and discontenting, these collective affects do not seem to invite resistance from consumers but instead secure their submissiveness whereby it "feels" impossible to even conceive of life outside of the digitally-mediated marketplace. Hietanen and Andéhn (2018: 547) usefully liken this no-exit submissiveness to "the masochistic pleasure of a commodified Stockholm syndrome" where the subject-as-hostage bonds with, relies upon, and even perversely enjoys his or her relationship with market captors (see also Hietanen et al., 2020). Consumers' digital lives under surveillance capitalism invoke fantasies of seeking more control over one's self, achieving an entrepreneurial lifestyle, and having more opportunities for social participation. But the pursuit of these fantasies promotes rather than reconciles burdens, anxieties and dependencies, thus keeping consumers forever reliant on digitally-mediated ways of living and committed to prescribed courses of action, foreclosing all possible routes out and guaranteeing their fidelity.

Appreciating affective contours as enduring structural parameters to consumer subjectivity complicates our theoretical understanding of the autonomy and power that consumers hold within today's technoculture. While Darmody and Zwick (2020) posit that

consumers may perceive a sense of empowerment by participating in behavioural futures markets that better predict and cater to their desires, our view is perhaps more pessimistic. We highlight a consumer subject who might *think* of his or her life as ostensibly empowered but is enveloped in an atmosphere of obsessive compulsiveness, over-calculation and groundlessness. Though we have focused on three fairly interrelated affective contours of claustropolitanism, future research should consider alternative or contrary affective consequences of today's technoculture. As digital consumption has both positive and negative results for consumers, it is entirely possible that life under surveillance capitalism lacks an affective unity and may be experienced more complexly and dynamically than what we have theorised here. Structures of feeling are never static and always *in statu nascendi*. Williams (1977: 132), in recognising structures of feeling as "practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity", argues for the importance of an ostensibly open and fluid present to his concept. Future research might explore how a single broad-reaching structure of feeling such as claustropolitanism may be characterised by different feelings than those identified in this paper or how they may be incongruous across consumers, across circumstances, and over time.

A particular consideration for future research is how claustropolitanism can be diffused and lived with differently across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Class has been a notable absence in Zuboff's treatment of surveillance capitalism (Fuchs, 2021; Morozov, 2019) and remains an area that is relatively underexplored in studies of digital consumption. For instance, Denegri-Knott et al. (2020: 951) acknowledge that accounts of social media usage are largely "de-coupled from wealth and class; consumers of any background can create online personas". Nevertheless, we cannot ignore that divisions in wealth mean some consumers will have greater access to digital amenities and the lifestyle accoutrements that are fetishized on social media platforms. We also must not ignore the vulnerability of consumers with poor digital literacy skills to data-driven discriminatory classification and unfair forms of algorithmic exploitation (Cinnamon, 2017; Yeung, 2018). In a networked age where entrepreneurial marketplace engagements and digital savviness are valorised, "class inequality is reproduced" rather than elided (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017: 592). Moreover, views and feelings towards surveillance and digitalization may vary depending on where people locate themselves in terms of the various forms of digital labour and "data-classes" that have emerged (Cinnamon, 2017; Fuchs, 2021). Exploring how the affective aspects of surveillance capitalism might be experienced differently or to varying

levels of intensity across diverse class groups should form the basis of a sustained and critical pathway in marketing theory.

In conclusion, by answering calls for more theorisation of our consumer culture using "affectively charged concepts" (Ahlberg et al., 2021: 169), we brought Redhead's concept of claustropolitanism to marketing theory as a useful lens to view and deconstruct how ideological and affective forces are *simultaneously* at work in the co-constitution of consumer subjectivity. Focusing theoretical attention on the affective make-up of the consumer subject emphasises the importance of transindividual feelings as inseparably bound up in the functioning of dominant systems and their consequences. In an increasingly post-normal world where theorists constantly grapple with conceptualising how consumers' sense of time, space, and self is disrupted and distorted in many ways (Humayun and Belk, 2020; Šimůnková, 2017; Kozinets et al., 2017), understanding the emergence of subjectivities *beyond* conscious and rational activity and being able to simply label a certain tone in the air become more important than ever. This is where we believe a claustropolitan frame is significant. To look at contemporary consumer culture through a claustropolitan lens is an effective way for us, in Redhead's (2017a: 99) terms, to practice a kind of *"post-theory"* – "a form of extreme thinking for an even more extreme world which we now somehow still manage to cling to as the desire to leave the planet becomes compulsive" – which is, we must contend, all the more important in these new dark ages.

3.7. References

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4. Chapter 4: Futureless Vicissitudes: Understanding Gestural Anti-consumption and the Reflexively Impotent (Anti-)Consumer

4.1. Introduction to Chapter 4

While the first paper focused on setting the scene for the thesis, the second paper centres much more directly on the phenomenon of digital detox itself and how it plays out. Following on from the first paper's conceptualisation of how general feelings toward technoculture collate as an overall oppressive atmosphere, this second paper explores consumers' attempts to retreat from that atmosphere as emblematic of a form of anti-consumption that is devoid of any transformative effects.

Many of the detoxers' comments I read throughout my netnography seemed to centre on personal addiction to digital technologies, and though these individuals recognise this is a problem shared by many others, their sentiments are presented as deeply individualised and atomised. Many of their posts did show some awareness of the systemic issues I explored in my first paper such as surveillance but for the majority of posters – and later those who I spoke with in interviews – there was little advocacy for undertaking collective action as a way of communally bringing about structural, durable change. Most seemed to conceive of restricting, rejecting, or managing digital consumption in terms of personal entrepreneurial efforts rather than any kind of solidarity organised against "Big Tech" or the wider digital economy.

When reflecting on prior literature to explain what was going on, I found that consumer researchers tended to assume that anti-consumption is in some way counter-cultural, ideologically extravagant, or infused with significant political dissensus or values that are oppositional to the dominant market systems and, as such, oriented toward structural change (see Kozinets et al., 2010). Digital detoxing, by contrast, appeared to me to be a pedestrian act squarely within market systems, a popular mainstream phenomenon – widely practiced and seen as acceptable – rather than marginal, political, or ideological. Digital detox seemed to be much more commonplace and pragmatic than any kind of anti-consumption practices I read about in the literature.

At this point of data analysis, I visited critical thought outside of marketing theory such as the commentaries by critical criminologists Simon Winlow and Steve Hall who, in turn, draw upon Fisher and Žižek, to frame resistance *without* politics as just another form of consumption. Their arguments about the absence of genuinely transformative political agendas in late-capitalist consumer culture and how eruptions of resistance therein remain in the spirit of base individual pragmatism seemed to resound with my emerging understanding of digital detoxing. It was here that my supervisors and I coined the term "*gestural anti-consumption*" to denote a form of restriction or rejection of consumption that gesticulates personal frustrations with the market as part of some personal project and not in the service of any meaningfully durable effect on the market. Gestural anti-consumption, as my supervisors and I saw it, is little more than an *acting-out* by consumers who feel "trapped" (see again Paper 1) by their market conditions but have no genuine desire (or ability) to change anything about those conditions. The acting-out is done strictly in the service of securing more comfort for oneself rather than anything bigger.

As I explored deeper, it became clearer to me that within an individualist market society where the market remains unchallenged, individuals often find pragmatic ways to cope with, adapt to, and continue living within the marketplace instead of engaging in any collective political projects to bring about durable change. This brought me to Fisher's (2009) idea of "*reflexive impotence*". Reflexive impotence – the sense that one is aware that capitalism is bad but is equally aware that one is unable or unwilling to do anything to change it – really captured the pervasive sense of powerlessness that pervaded our data. Reflexive impotence thus became the key concept for us and helped us to ground gestural anti-consumption as an expression of the "*reflexively impotent (anti-)consumer*". As we developed the paper and compared our conceptualisation against previous understandings of anti-consumption practices, we positioned the reflexively impotent (anti-)consumer in contrast to the more traditional subject position of "the reflexively defiant consumer" (Ozzane and Murray, 1995). Our theorisation provides a useful expansion of how the subjectivity constructed under the structural conditions of technoculture perpetuates itself.

Futureless Vicissitudes: Understanding Gestural Anti-consumption and the Reflexively Impotent (Anti-)Consumer

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4.2. Abstract

In this paper, we challenge the prevalent idea that anti-consumption functions as an ideological act of antagonism. We enlist the work of the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher to account for the reflexively impotent (anti-)consumer, a politically hollowed-out and knowingly helpless subject endemic to the *futureless* vicissitudes of semiocapitalist consumer culture. Drawing on netnographic data and interviews with "digital detoxers", we explore how *gestural* – rather than transformational – anti-consumption emerges through individuals' reflexive awareness of their political inertia, the lack of collective spirit to bring about improved conditions, and their perpetual attachment to market-based comforts and conveniences. Our analyses reveal three features that underpin the reflexively impotent (anti-)consumer's resigned acceptance of the reigning political-ideological status quo: magical voluntarism, pragmatism, and self-indulgence. In the absence of any unifying and politically-centred solidarity projects, mere gestures of resistance are undertaken towards managing personal dissatisfactions with – instead of collectively transforming – their structural conditions.

Keywords: Anti-consumption; semiocapitalism; technoculture; futurelessness; Terminal Marketing; digital detox; reflexive impotence; Fisher.

4.3. Introduction

With the resurgence of public interest in political movements and the impact of a global "return to politics" on consumer culture (Cronin and Fitchett, 2022: 134), renewed attention has been directed to political ideology as a crucial motivator for anti-consumption (Cambefort and Pecot, 2020; Ulver and Laurell, 2020). In the case of ideological progressivism on the political *left*, anti-consumption practices often appear in demonstrations and protests related to addressing environmental issues, unethical corporate behaviours, and social injustice (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). In the context of re-emerging social conservatism on the political *right*, anti-consumption activities such as brand rejection and corporate boycotts are a mainstay of new rightist groups' efforts to challenge liberal business practices and influence civil debates (Cambefort and Pecot, 2020). Moreover, while anti-consumption has long been impelled by anti-imperialist movements to signal discontent with globalisation and the neoliberal model of global capitalism (Varman and Belk, 2009), socio-economic populist groups have also made political use of reducing and rejecting consumption to protest unfair domestic market forces (Hershkovitz, 2017). Many of these cases underline that anti-consumption practices can reflect ideological attachments that are oppositional to the perceived structures of power that underpin today's socio-economic life. However, despite the revitalisation of antagonistic politics across consumer culture, we should not lose sight of those forms of anti-consumption that function *apolitically* and, in doing so, potentially reproduce and perpetuate the status quo.

In this paper, we set out to conceptualise how anti-consumption practices, when lacking discernible political alternatives at their core, are incessantly assimilated into the circuitry of *semiocapitalism* and its desiring forces (Hietanen et al., 2022). In the absence of any genuinely transformative politics, we identify what we call "gestural anti-consumption", a performance that works to relieve individuals' personal dissatisfactions with, rather than to collectively transform, the underpinning semiocapitalist hegemony and its *futureless* vicissitudes (Ahlberg et al., 2021; Fisher, 2014a). When undertaken in a ubiquitous market-society where market fundamentalism[i] reigns supreme and all beliefs in some kind of post-capitalist future are slowly being "cancelled", anti-consumption functions as a mere *gesture* of resistance rather than a genuinely antagonistic force. Consumers and anti-consumers, we argue, become conflated and integrated as the *one* "(anti-)consumer subject". This singular and amalgamated (anti-)consumer subject position remains deadlocked in its actual effects

while only *appearing* differentiated in superficially experiential and symbolic terms. Without unifying political alternatives underpinning them, this subject's gestural anti-consumption practices remain tied to self-expression and self-fulfilment which are fully commensurate with market logics and can be safely commodified. By adapting and extending the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher's (2009: 21) concept of "*reflexive impotence"*, we unpack how gestural anti-consumption unfolds via the intersection of the (anti-)consumer subject's reflexive awareness of her political inertia, inability or unwillingness to bring about structural change, and perpetual attachment to the desiring forces of capitalism itself. This paper is underpinned by two interrelated research questions: What are the main features of gestural anti-consumption?; and, how is the perceived impossibility of structural change prefigured into practices of gestural anti-consumption?

To address these questions, we reflect on netnographic data and in-depth interviews with people who engage in "*digital detoxing*", that is individuals who limit or temporarily abstain from the consumption of digital technologies. Digital detox, while classifiable as a form of anti-consumption, has become, as Syvertsen (2017: 96) emphasises, a mundane and routine act of consumption itself – a "part of everyone's toolbox" in coping with digital overload and dissatisfaction – rather than a collective action to address the root causes of consumption-related problems. For many individuals, digital detox practices are not motivated by political solidarity against a shared adversary, whether "Big Tech" firms who ostensibly manipulate their consumption or the liberal capitalist structures of power that make such manipulation possible. Crucially, digital detox does not function according to the typical formula of collective ideological resistance – "a clear-cut case of 'us' and 'them'" (Syvertsen, 2017: 96) – rather it is often a case of disorganised individuals undertaking ephemeral and practical attempts to make their consumption better work for themselves.

Our paper makes two important contributions to the emerging strand of "terminal" (Ahlberg et al., 2022) or "de-romanticist" (Fitchett and Cronin, 2022) writing within critical marketing scholarship. First, in line with this strand's calls to revisit and de-romanticise the institutionalised concepts of our discipline, we offer an update to the subject position of "the reflexively defiant consumer" (Ozanne and Murray, 1995). Under semiocapitalism, we suggest that resistant consumer subjectivity is better understood as "the reflexively impotent (anti-)consumer". In contrast to the celebratory view of an autonomous, self-determining postmodern rebel who, through critical reflection, "choose[s] to defy or resist traditional

notions of consumption" (Ozanne and Murray, 1995: 522), we offer an image of an increasingly helpless subject who, with reflexive awareness of his or her utter embeddedness in commodified desiring flows, is disinclined to genuinely defy dominant market forces. In this regard, we challenge the prevalent idea that "anti-consumption must be an act of ideological extravagance – wandering beyond the accepted limits of cultural acceptance" (Kozinets et al., 2010: 226-227).

Second, our analyses provide clarification for how any potentially energising relief from capitalism ultimately capitulates under what has been theorised as a cultural atmosphere of "no hope" or *futurelessness* (Ahlberg et al., 2021; Fisher, 2014a; Hietanen et al., 2020). By tracing how the reflexively impotent (anti-)consumer is as much aware of the problems of technologically-mediated consumer capitalism as she is of her own powerlessness to confront them, we illustrate how living with the slow cancellation of the future impairs any efforts of resistance. The value of identifying the lived effects of this "futurelessness" is not simply in offering a pessimistic perspective on subjects' potential for resistance, but is in the implication for fellow (anti-)consumer researchers to think more "futuristically" about where our critiques could – or should – land. For the analyst-activist to genuinely challenge the futureless vicissitudes of consumer culture, it becomes necessary to locate ongoing epistemic enquiry not just at the level of the structural but also at the level of the experiential. This means taking into account capitalist subjects' own justifications for pursuing personal interests and pleasures rather than any kind of political praxis when faced with systemic problems.

4.4. Theoretical Underpinnings

4.4.1. Anti-consumption and Political Ideology: A Brief Background

Anti-consumption can be defined as "*intentionally* and *meaningfully* excluding or cutting goods from one's consumption routine or reusing once-acquired goods with the goal of avoiding consumption" (Makri et al., 2020: 178). Anti-consumption practices are expressed through three non-exclusive forms: *rejecting* (i.e., refusing or avoiding); *restricting* (i.e., reducing); and *reclaiming* (i.e. changing or co-opting the meanings of) goods, services, or experiences (Lee et al., 2011). Although the drivers and manifestations of rejecting, restricting, or reclaiming consumption are manifold, the motivating role of political ideology

has been underwritten by a significant stream of research (Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Ulver and Laurell, 2020). Political ideology denotes a fantasy framework of beliefs, aspirations and aversions concerning the proper functioning of society and how it might be achieved. At an elementary level, political ideology can be mapped out on a continuum with liberal progressivism on the left and conservativism on the right (Cambefort and Pecot, 2020). Although many cases of anti-consumption detected in consumer research are motivated by leftist ideology – for example, liberals' "anti-unethical" and "anti-colonialist" rejection of global brands that offend their moral shibboleths – antagonisms have also been detected between social conservatism and the market. Examples of rightist anti-consumption include boycotts of supermarkets that sell Halal products by nationalist groups in England (Lekakis, 2019) and Christian-conservative groups' rejection of Disney products following the brand's corporate decision to better represent gay employees and consumers (MacDonald and McDonald, 2014).

Recognising that anti-consumption is neither an exclusively left- or right-wing activity, Pecot et al. (2021) suggest that political extremism in general should be understood as an important predictor for anti-consumption. Individuals positioned at either extreme of the left-right political spectrum are more likely to be suspicious of consumerism and to engage in anti-consumption compared to those in the centre-ground. It is the political centre – or "mainstream" – that is understood to function as "a constant adversary" for politically extreme individuals to fight against (Ulver and Laurell, 2020: 490). Whether extremely leftist or rightist, those who undertake anti-consumption in opposition to this real or imagined mainstream adversary are assumed to have committed to a form of lifestyle activism within a movement of like-minded political subjects "pos[ing] a viable alternative" to the existing system (Izberk-Bilgin, 2012: 678; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004).

Nevertheless, a "viable alternative" that can truly supplant the existing system is rarely, if ever, taken seriously or considered achievable by lifestyle activists whose practices are typically undertaken in the individualist pursuits of self-expression, social distinction, therapy, or hedonism (Kozinets, 2002). Although lifestyle activists may share political beliefs that deviate from the mainstream, it is rare that these beliefs are mobilised in ways that lead to authentic and durable change. For example, Moraes et al. (2010: 293) argue that individuals and groups who "share their own notions of the good life" engage in oppositional practices that, while potentially aligned with extremist views, are undertaken "not with a

view to change society at large […] but with the aim to restructure the meanings of their own lived experiences as seductive alternatives". High-profile anti-market or anti-marketing events such as Burning Man have long provided us with illustrations of an anti-consumption that is largely deskinned of any revolutionary potential; serving to provide weekend-trippers with a short-lived, experiential sense of respite from (rather than reformation of) dominant market structures (Kozinets, 2002). For Kozinets, consumption might fall under scope for extreme criticism at such events and alternative modes of exchange are encouraged, but they are "not about major social change" (2002: 36); instead, they are more about personal growth and expression, and thus denuded of the political narratives that might motivate enduring and genuinely transformative solidarity in wider cultural life. Similarly, Mikkonen et al. (2011: 99) illustrate how online cadres of lifestyle activists who reject the hyper-consumerised ways of celebrating Christmas engage in mischievous anti-consumption discourses as a way of pursuing a cynical and playfully self-aware identity project, "the Scrooge", rather than to genuinely educate and rescue seasonal shoppers from marketers' manipulation. Even commercial brands sometimes seek to incite consumers' rejection of – and resistance against – dominant market institutions, not in the pursuit of any kind of post-market politics but simply to achieve legitimacy for their own offerings (Koch and Ulver, 2022).

Central to the above anti-consumption projects is the absence of earnest political demands and the subordination of meaningful critique to individual conceits and self-interest, what has been referred to as "the hollowing-out of political subjectivity", resulting in a subject positioning founded on "base pragmatism and instrumentalism work[ing] in the service of the dominant ideology" (Treadwell et al., 2013: 4-8). Moreover, the pluralisation of politically hollow anti-consumption projects works to ossify the status quo by aligning resistant energies with individual-expressive rather than collective-transformative logics, ensuring that no single anti-consumption position is consolidated enough to become a genuine threat. No matter how cynical or dissatisfied anti-consumers are, without social solidarity and popular political dissensus, their behaviour is better understood as an alignment to the unrelenting individualism and diversification of consumptive capitalism, rather than as "reflexive defiance" (Ozanne and Murray, 1995: 516) to it. The result is, we argue, a form of anti-consumption that remains gestural and, for the most part, *objectless*. However, while it might be devoid of collective political *objectives*, gestural anti-consumption is not without *objects*, as it constitutes a series of "alternative" consumption choices rather than the refusal of consumption altogether (Chatzidakis et al., 2012; Cronin

and Fitchett, 2021). To help us to better understand the political objectlessness of gestural anti-consumers and what underpins their inability or unwillingness to pursue genuine transformation, we now turn to Fisher's (2009) onto-affective concept of "reflexive impotence".

4.4.2. Reflexive Impotence and Semiocapitalist Horizons

A common theme of critical marketing scholarship is that consumption today functions within a culture of disavowal whereby consumers are fully aware of their own complicity in systems of power and domination yet maintain an ironic distance to their actions (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Cronin and Fitchett, 2021). Under these circumstances where consumers can disavow yet nonetheless participate in and reproduce the problematic aspects of dominant systems, an incontestable status quo is maintained through what Fisher (2009: 21) refers to as "reflexive impotence" i.e. "They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it". Reflexive impotence denotes a state of being fully aware of one's dissatisfaction with today's increasingly technologically-saturated consumer-capitalist zeitgeist but acquiescing to it under the belief that it is unrealistic and near impossible to change the system. Even when undertaken on mindless autopilot or without significant meaning, day-to-day consumerist preoccupations such as routinely logging calories on digital self-tracking devices (Kristensen and Ruckenstein, 2018), keeping smartphones charged for idle scrolling on public transport (Arnould and Robinson, 2020), posting content to social media (Kozinets et al., 2017) or binge-watching the latest "trending" TV series via streaming services (Jones et al., 2018), all remain deeply entrenched regimes that many of us cannot imagine no longer doing.

Collectively these vortices of digital artefacts and signs ("*semios*") – and the resigned acceptance that perpetuates their consumption – can been located within the parameters of "*semiocapitalism*", a technologically-mediated global capitalist formation reliant on identifying, influencing, and automatising consumers' informational and semiotic flows, techno-cultural activities and modes of personal stimulation, expression, and meaning-making for its regime of accumulation (Hietanen et al., 2022; Hoang et al., 2022). Under semiocapitalism, consumers remain plugged into what Fisher calls "the drip-feed of digital stimulus" because of: (1) the pervasive lures of an always-on digital culture that is seductively (and competitively) desirous, indulgent and egotistic; and (2) the naturalisation

of ritualistic compliance that works to neutralise any opposition to it (Dean and Fisher, 2014: 30). Importantly, semiocapitalism reproduces itself through the mixture of "perpetual pleasure" and "an endless insomniac drift" which always happen simultaneously (ibid.). Although its subjects almost never feel wholly *present* when consuming under semiocapitalism, its endlessly rotating carousel of pleasures keeps the majority committed. The result is reflexive impotence – a deep sense of inertia – that is ontological–affective*: what is felt becomes what is lived,* and what is felt is that there is no popular impetus for change.

There are three critical aspects to reflexive impotence's onto-affectivity. First, Fisher's (2009: 21) concept has an *intellectual* dimension centred on "marketplace metacognition" – a subject's social intelligence about his or her positioning as a consumer and marketers' operations upon them (Wright, 2002: 677). Within a networked, gadget-driven, and computer-literate consumer culture, subjects are often not ignorant to market actors' attempts to surveil and influence them but are also appreciative of the many indulgences and conveniences on offer (Hietanen et al., 2022). Consumers are painfully aware of the benefits that their digital consumption provides, resulting in a state of ambiguity that is conceived of as manageable rather than resolvable. This is seen in what Fisher (2009: 25) calls an "ahistorical, anti-mnemonic blip culture" wherein time becomes fragmented into "digital slices" that allow consumers to treat their relationships with technology as discrete, momentary encounters and thus negotiate the cumulative costs of semiocapitalist subjugation (e.g., addiction, targeted advertising, algorithmic manipulation, etc.) (Hoang et al., 2022).

Second, reflexive impotence has an *attitudinal* dimension best described in terms of "post-pessimism", "the understanding that neither an optimistic nor pessimistic attitude is justified due to the lack of alternatives" (Gonnermann, 2019: 27). Gonnermann describes post-pessimism as an attitude "meandering between resignation and stoic acceptance" (p. 37). Reflexive impotence, for both Fisher and Gonnermann, is not the same as apathy. Instead, it mirrors closely the idea of "disaffected consent" (Gilbert, 2013: 18) whereby subjects feel that they have no choice but to accept that the existing socio-economic world they live in, while deeply problematic, constitutes the *only* viable form available to them. Experienced as "a penumbral burden of suppressed meanings and closed-off social possibilities that cannot be completely eliminated or denied" (Gibson-Graham, 1995: 25), the post-pessimistic attitude is characterised by recognition that today's capitalist zeitgeist is

here to stay for better or worse; all other possibilities are cancelled (Ahlberg et al., 2022). The result is a cultural atmosphere of *futurelessness* (Fisher, 2014a) where any conceivable futures that are radically different to the semiocapitalist present have evaporated. The prevailing assumption is that "capitalism can only be resisted, never overcome" (Fisher, 2009: 28).

Third, reflexive impotence has a *behavioural* dimension centred on a kind of play-acting whereby consumers "*act* as if" they are unaware of what they already are well aware (Fisher, 2009: 13), namely that their consumption may have negative effects on themselves and others, and that any anti-market behaviours they pursue will likely not result in any significant changes. An example of this is Bradshaw and Zwick's (2016: 278) account of the sustainable business field under "sustainable capitalism" which allows subjects "to act *as if* they are doing something of significance in the face of clear evidence to the contrary". This logic is exemplified by e-commerce websites selling "ethically sourced" products with eco-friendly shipping options and promises that each online purchase supports environmental causes thereby ensuring the very consumerist act buys one's redemption from being a consumer, negating the felt need for any radical change (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021).

Taking these key dimensions together, reflexive impotence might be reasonably deployed in helping us to identify the main features of gestural anti-consumption and how the perceived impossibility of structural change is prefigured into its performativity.

4.5. Research context: Digital Detox

In today's semiocapitalist culture of technological dependency, practices of digitally-oriented anti-consumption have become hugely popular (Syvertsen and Enli, 2020). Digital detox, as a blanket term that captures this trend, was added to the Oxford dictionary in 2013 and is defined as "a period of time during which a person refrains from using electronic devices such as smartphones or computers, regarded as an opportunity to reduce stress or focus on social interaction in the physical world" (Strutner, 2015). Although this definition exclusively emphasises temporary rejection, digital detox encompasses diverse and much less rigid forms of restricting and reclaiming digital consumption also.

Far from being a renegade, fringe act of disruption, an entire cottage industry has developed around digital detoxing including health care, travel, tourism, and hospitality, as

well as a social media trend amongst influencers and micro-celebrities (i.e., *"#digitaldetox*"). Scores of self-help guides, websites, apps, tools, devices, and training have emerged to assist consumers with unplugging from digital culture (Syvertsen and Enli, 2020). A cursory browse online reveals hundreds of digital detox retreats, camps and holidays offered by specialist operators. For example, a major international service provider, eponymously entitled "Digital Detox", arranges for-profit summer camps ("Camp Grounded") and "unplugged" nights out and mystery trips (http://digitaldetox.org). Microsoft, Apple, and Google have all incorporated "Screen Time" or "Digital Wellbeing" features into their operating systems to assist users to detox. Demand for "dumb phones" such as the Light Phone, the Punkt Mp01, and the rebooted Nokia 3310, which are marketed as antithetical to smartphones, further reflects a commodifiable desire amongst consumers to reduce digital distractions.

Neither politically leftist nor rightist, there nonetheless exists the façade of vaguely anti-market and anti-corporate sentiment to digital detoxing. For example, the manufacturer of The Light Phone proclaims on their website: "Light was born as an alternative to the tech monopolies that are fighting more and more aggressively for our time & attention. Light creates tools that respect you" (The Light Phone, 2022). Comparably, the Mental Liberation Front (MLA), a spinoff group of *Adbusters*, espouse critiques of Big Tech's corporatism and privacy issues but, despite the group's vaguely militaristic discourse, does not advocate the total rejection of technology. Instead, the MLA encourages their "true warrior[s]" to "[s]witch to an alternative, open-source email service, like Tutanota, that exempts [them] from relentless surveillance", to "[u]se a search engine other than Google", "to use my smartphone with a little more discretion and thoughtfulness" and so on (Adbusters, 2022). As aptly described by Hietanen and colleagues:

> "[W]hat we usually see are approaches to 'fight' technology with, of course, more technology […] We fight Google with Google-esque alternatives, and we fight Facebook, and proclaim its death, of course, with Facebook-esque alternatives that are what it was in its 'early days'" (Hietanen et al., 2022: 174).

In the absence of articulate political demands, digital detox appears to be less about transforming the digital marketplace and more about redeeming and reinvigorating one's own consumerist tastes and preferences.

4.6. Research Methods

Two main sources of data are drawn upon to inform our analyses of digital detoxing: a 12-month netnography and 21 in-depth interviews. First, non-intrusive observational netnography was conducted by the first author who collected data from online conversations and interactions centred on digital detoxing over an approximately twelve-month period (Beckmann and Langer, 2005). This observational form of netnography has been advocated by prior researchers as an effective mode of allowing the researcher to access naturally occurring data while minimising any influence on consumers' disclosure of their experiences (Canavan, 2021; Cronin and Cocker, 2019). After obtaining ethical approval for the research, the first author collected data from public sites, that is, online spaces that are free to publicly access without any restrictions (i.e., no registration or sign-ins required) (Beckmann and Langer, 2005).

Following Kozinets' (2020: 227) five criteria for selecting suitable netnographic sites (i.e., relevant, active, interactive, diverse, data-rich), the Nosurf Reddit page ("*stop wasting life on the net.*") was chosen as the primary site for observation. As an online group with over 150,000 subscribers at the time of data collection, Nosurf is designed for individuals to exchange ideas and support each other in cultivating "a healthy, mindful, and purposeful internet use" (Nosurf, 2021). Reflecting a wide spectrum of lived experiences centred on rejecting, restricting, or reclaiming digital consumption, the site attracts thousands of new members each month, having a high frequency of postings with a total of more than 15,000 threads (between January 2018 and November 2021) and an average of about 119 new threads each week (at the time of data collection in 2021), showing a significant level of activity, interaction, and a sense of a living culture.

In working our way through the Nosurf Reddit page, we were conscious of the paradox of people *posting online* about trying to *reduce being online*. We recognise this paradox as illustrative of the very real messiness, ambiguity, and contradiction that characterises gestural anti-consumption. Maintaining an appreciation of the makeshift and imperfect concessions that "real" people rely upon when they are knowingly constrained by

– yet reliant upon – digital culture afforded us what Kozinets (2020: 288) calls, "an intuitive grasping of the reality of another real-seeming person". The principle of "listening" which means taking account of the wider context of each post including *how* and *what* people chose to share was also followed. Listening allows the netnographer to counter surface-level misconceptions, "to engage completely with posts, by avoiding removing these from their embedded context", and to actualise "the ethical imperative of hearing the emotions behind participants' words" (Winter and Lavis, 2020: 59).

Keeping with netnographic principles recommended by Kozinets (2020), pertinent data was identified based on rich content, descriptiveness, relevant topic matter, and conversational participation by a range of posters and was subsequently downloaded into a Word document. A collection of high traffic threads with a large number of response postings was identified by applying the "Top" filter on the forum. In total, 124 threads (originally posted between 2019 and 2021) were selected for further examination. As recommended by Kozinets (2020: 136), verbatim posts were supplemented by the first author's reflective fieldnotes, resulting in 528 pages of textual data. Out of respect to the posters, we have not reproduced anything that we considered to be overly sensitive. Only publicly-accessible posts that are visible to everyone were collected. All usernames have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Following a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, the first author reached out to the Nosurf group and to her social circle to recruit participants for undertaking in-depth semi-structured interviews. A recruitment poster was placed on Nosurf with an invitation to contact the first author via email. The combined sampling measures resulted in a total of 21 participants including 15 women and 6 men, ranging in age from 19 to 39 years and living in different countries. Due to the geographic dispersion of the sample and COVID-19 lockdown restrictions at the time of data collection, all interviews were conducted remotely and, *ironically*, by digital means. Of the 21 participants, 20 interviews were conducted via video calling software and 1 via asynchronous email exchange.

The interviews began with a series of grand tour questions (McCracken, 1988) and were followed by open-ended questions, probes, and prompts to enable participants to explore their digital lives, their understanding of digital culture, and accounts of detoxing regimes. Interviews lasted between 1 to 2 hours, were audio-recorded, pseudonymised, and

transcribed verbatim resulting in 464 pages of text. **Table 3** provides some brief information of those participants.

Table 3: Participant information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Living location
Mike	19	Male	Mixed martial arts practitioner	Sweden
Jane	24	Female	PhD student	USA
Thomas	22	Male	English language teacher	Vietnam
Jason	33	Male	PhD student	UK
Lucy	31	Female	PhD student	Cyprus
Michelle	21	Female	Undergraduate student	Vietnam
Rosa	24	Female	Undergraduate student	Netherlands
Matthew	29	Male	Non-profit worker	UK
Emma	24	Female	Graduate student	UK
Chloe	21	Female	Undergraduate student	USA
Caroline	20	Female	Undergraduate student	UK
Anna	30	Female	HR manager	Vietnam
Alice	26	Female	Graduate student	USA
Amy	22	Female	Food manufacturing specialist	Canada
Julie	27	Female	Secondary school teacher	Canada
Amelia	28	Female	Nursing assistant	USA
Rachel	26	Female	IT specialist	USA
Jack	25	Male	Software engineer	Brazil
Paul	27	Male	Non-profit worker	UK
Sophia	29	Female	Software engineer	USA
Sarah	39	Female	Retreat coordinator	USA

The netnographic data and interview transcripts were brought together as a combined data pool for analysis. The unified analytic approach adhered to a hermeneutical back-and-forth and part-to-whole procedure (Kozinets, 2020; Spiggle, 1994) which involved the first author's iterative movement between constituent parts of data and the emerging composite understanding of the entire data pool. Lists of provisional themes were formed, challenged, modified, and further developed over time as the first author continually coded, categorised, and abstracted data while consulting the literature to support the emerging themes (Spiggle, 1994). The other authors collaborated on subjecting interpretations to scrutiny, seeking out disconfirming observations – what Spiggle (1994: 496) calls "refutation" and Kozinets (2020: 377) calls "troublemaking" – and agreed conceptual explanations for the final themes.

4.7. Findings

Using insights from the digital detox context, we report on what we consider to be the three main features of gestural anti-consumption: *magical voluntarism, pragmatism,* and *self-indulgence*. First, at the heart of gestural anti-consumption, we argue, is the magical thinking that it is within each individual's volition to make their world better for themselves, resulting in "privatised" acts of resistance centred on self-improvement rather than collective change. Second, we discuss the fantasy of pragmatism as supported by acts of "functional stupidity" and "functional alibis" that, in tandem, enable detoxers to situate their privatised resistance within the narrow parameters of instrumental rather than political and communal concerns. Third, by exploring the pleasures that digital detoxers derive from minor symbols of resistance, we highlight the self-indulgent and interpassive character to gestural anti-consumption, in contrast to the active struggles and self-sacrifice implicit to more authentic resistance. Taken together, these three features demonstrate how gestural anti-consumption, while couched in an oftentimes superficially oppositional ethos, functions only to gesticulate and relieve reflexively impotent (anti-)consumers' frustrations with the current semiocapitalist order without challenging it.

4.7.1. Magical Voluntarism: The Privatisation of Resistance

The theme to emerge most forcefully from our data centres on the redirection of attention away from structural issues to oneself, suggesting a strong private character to gestural anti-consumption. Digital detox, for many of our participants, is undertaken exclusively to manage and "correct" the personal problems that they encounter in their digitally-saturated lives rather than to confront the systemic causes of those same problems. Such self-orientation relates to what Fisher (2009: 19; 2011) refers to as the "*privatization of stress*" whereby the growing problems of disaffection, depression and anxiety within our ultracompetitive and image-obsessed consumer culture are often diagnosed as individual pathologies and treated as private issues that are fixable through self-care, responsibility, and personal agency (also Lambert, 2019). Across our data, we see instances of a "privatisation of resistance" that is characterised by a pervasive atmosphere of inner-directed guilt, shame, and unhappiness. In the absence of meaningful alternatives to technologically-mediated capitalist system, many digital detoxers are unable to configure their dissatisfaction or unhappiness in any structural sense, instead thinking of themselves as the only problem they

might conceivably repair. For example, one poster in the NoSurf group discusses how she has come to accept the impossibility of bringing about a "*perfect system*" versus the relief she gains through self-control:

> "Personally I genuinely feel a lot more in control of myself. Last year I struggled heavily with Youtube binges, but I've come to feel a lot more in control of myself simply by starting with accepting myself. Understanding that the reason why I go to these things are because I feel lonely, or because I enjoy the thrill of watching a funny YouTube video, or the feeling that I'm learning something. And in breeding this control over myself, I found it really important to first notice when I was about to apply self judgment. That feeling of revulsion – the frustration that's akin to slapping your computer or keyboard when it's not working the way you want. And to attempt to replace it with a zen acceptance: instead of hating myself for getting sucked down a rabbit hole, to learn to understand its causes, and why I am here. We often blame social media for being addictive, which is ABSOLUTELY true… But what we ultimately need to learn to take control of, is that there is a part of our minds that crave that dopamine to begin with. The ultimate way to breed control is not to find some perfect system of punishment to suck all the fun out of social media, but in fact to learn to find fun effectively in other places." ("Cindy", Nosurf).

Although critically aware of the market causes for her distress, such as the addictive properties programmed into social media platforms, "Cindy" attributes the distress that she's experiencing to her own neurochemistry: *"there is a part of our minds that crave that dopamine".* "[W]idespread pathologies," under late-stage capitalism, as Fisher (2009: 21) suggests, are treated "as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individual's neurology and/or by their family background". Cindy refers to her reflexive impotence as *"a zen acceptance*" through which she comes to terms with her inability to change a system where it is incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress.

Comparably, "Mike", a 19-year-old fitness enthusiast who lives in Stockholm and aspires to make a career out of mixed martial arts, emphasises a need to repair oneself rather than society. Mike who gave us little information about his present employment status or whether he is in full-time study, spoke about his efforts to help a friend to open an MMA-centred gym. Clearly invested in physicality, contact sports, and the non-digital arenas of life, Mike nevertheless shows a broad understanding of technology, social media, Internet companies and their business models. Despite his knowledge, however, he registers his over-reliance on digital devices as his *own* fault and personal responsibility:

> "I've been trying to cut down on my [digital] consumption, but it's still quite high. It's quite embarrassing, but you know first thing in the morning when you wake up, you usually check it [the phone] […] So yeah, I think that people need to take responsibility and that's what I'm trying to do. But I think that it's hard to do that because, you know, when you do that, you have to realise that you're flawed and you're not complete…" ("Mike", 19).

Mike's call for people to *"take responsibility*" and his mission to somehow battle his own "flaws" and "incompletion" suggest his resistance is directed against personal shortcomings rather than any structural problems, thereby privatising and depoliticising his anti-consumption practices. By channelling resistant energies into themselves rather than collective action, Mike and other detoxers exemplify the ethos of "*magical voluntarism*" (Fisher, 2011: 131); an idealist perspective on human agency whereby it is more conceivable for subjects to achieve success and happiness by their own self-directed wish-fulfilment than by collective and political solutions. Under magical voluntarism, any meaningful supportive relation between the collective body and the individual must be abandoned, and we are resigned to accept that the only help we should realistically hope for is from ourselves; "[i]f we don't succeed, it is simply because we have not put the work in to reconstruct ourselves" (Fisher, 2011: 131). Magical voluntarism is sometimes euphemised by digital detoxers as "*mindful*" or "*heathy*" consumption as illustrated by the following Nosurf poster, "Janice":

> "[…] i think there is a way to mindfully consume internet / tv content. [...] i think that there is something beautiful about being able to find online communities and people who inspire you. but the problem for most people, most of the time, is that it isn't mindful. it's a mindless scroll […] in the same way you can have a healthy or unhealthy relationship with food consumption i believe you can be healthy in the way you consume content / movies / articles. surfing or scrolling with no intention is like eating a whole bag of hot cheetos because it feels nice. i want to be the master chef who is cooking people a healthy meal that will make them feel full and good. not empty and craving more." ("Janice", Nosurf).

Janice's desire to be "*the master chef*" who can produce utterly enrichening outcomes from her internet consumption reflects the illusion of *entrepreneurialism* – the principal architecture of magical voluntarism – or, rather, "the belief that it is within every individual's power to make themselves whatever they want to be" – (Fisher, 2014b: n.p.). The illusion of entrepreneurialism is nurtured by the belief that "little mundane utopias" (Bradshaw et al., 2021: 521), like Janice's *"online communities and people who inspire"*, are out there to be

found and connected with through enterprising digital consumption. Through subjects' fetishisation of market objects and little market-located utopias, semiocapitalism is insulated from critique and magical voluntarism is allowed to supersede collective political action. For some digital detoxers, the courage to aspire for systemic change is so obscured by magical voluntarism that even quixotic desires for restoring lifestyles from bygone eras are more conceivable than political solidarity. As illustrated by "Natalia's" post:

> "I was born in the early 80s so the bulk of my childhood was in the 90s. Looking back, that decade seemed to have the perfect balance of technology and life…We spent waaaaay more time offline than we did surfing. We used technology, but today, technology uses us…Like many of you, I fell into the trap day-after-day of pulling out the phone at the moment of idleness or boredom and began mindlessly scrolling. A lot of times, my mind would be completely blank as I scrolled. I was like a zombie. When I noticed my toddler son looking at me to play with him while I ignored him to respond to some asshat on Facebook, I knew I had to change. While it's still an ongoing journey for me to limit my online time, I came up with my own mantra, "live like it's the 1990s," and made a few rules for myself to help me. (I must acknowledge there there [sic] some modern-world demands that necessitate modern-day technology like smartphones, so while we can't completely go back in time, there are a few things we can do to help revisit that lifestyle of yesteryear)." ("Natalia", Nosurf).

Natalia's nostalgic yearning to *"live like it's the 1990s"* suggests that a personal experiment in *simulating* an imagined past is sometimes preferable to striving for a shared future. This aligns with what we might consider to be the "*hauntological*" affectivity of magical voluntarism; the pervasive feeling that we are haunted by our own lost optimism (Fisher, 2014a; Ahlberg et al., 2021). Nostalgia for a pre-WiFi, pre-social media, or pre-smartphone era across our data pool not only reveals detoxers' longing for a "non-digital" past but also their reflexive impotence to change the present or future, resulting in a hauntological tendency to "continuously recycle the old rather than invent any new energizing alternatives" (Ahlberg et al., 2021: 168; Fisher, 2014a).

Whether through recycling older lifestyles, fetishising mundane utopias, or executing acts of self-control, digital detoxers uphold a magically voluntarist illusion that most choices are conceivable *except* for the collective choice to band together and change the basic operating conditions of our consumer culture.

4.7.2. Pragmatism: The Functional Ethos of Resistance

The second theme to emerge from our data centres on pragmatism as a fantasy framework that structures gestural anti-consumption. The rhetoric of pragmatism is a mainstay of the reigning market capitalist ideology and is constituted by the triumph of "hard-boiled practicality" over the "motley of far-fetched and impracticable idealists both within and without the marketplace" (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021: 10). Under the truncated parameters of capitalist meritocracy, those things that can be chosen, evaluated, and consumed for their practical results are enshrined as more marketable and, thus, more "valuable" ideologically than less concrete, less determinate arenas of life like political revolution and social change. Claims to pragmatism are abundant throughout our data. To mitigate digital culture's worst effects, most of our participants incorporate self-described "practical" detoxing routines into their lives and doggedly set up "small wins" for themselves, like successfully minimising their screen time over the week, switching to a dumb phone at the weekends, or deactivating a social media account for a month. Here, practical (i.e. short term and nominal) lifestyle adjustments are favoured over more radical political activities, what many detoxers perceive to be "naïve utopianism" (Fisher, 2009: 16).

Despite many of our participants displaying an in-depth knowledge about – and dissatisfactions with – the functioning of a digitally-mediated marketplace (e.g. many spoke about internet cookies, smartphones listening to their intimate conversations, and social media causing their loneliness and depression), they stopped short at substantively thinking of an alternative, suggesting instead that: "*it's impossible to stop this wheel*" ("Jack", 25); "*to win that battle is not that easy*" ("Mike", 19); "*it's freaking impossible to avoid this stuff […] it's just like such an uphill battle*" ("Sophia", 29); "*there's nothing I could do about it as a single entity*" ("Jane", 24); or *"I'm not advocating complete abstinence, but relegating the internet to being the tool that it was designed to be"*("Kevin", Nosurf). By clinging to the felt impossibility of change, digital detoxers spare themselves the risk of diverting "intellectual resources into 'non-productive' critical thinking, existential anxiety, and other miseries" (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1209). To come to terms with their lack of alternatives, many detoxers uphold a kind of "functional stupidity" (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) that limits their critical faculties and restricts all rebellious efforts to instrumental, narrow concerns. Functional stupidity is understood as the "inability and/or unwillingness to use cognitive and reflexive capacities in anything other than narrow and circumspect ways" (Alvesson and

Spicer, 2012: 1201). For digital detoxers, reflexively exercising their functional stupidity allows them to disavow larger systemic issues that they feel unable to reverse and risk distracting them from nominal gains in their own digital lives.

"Chloe", a 22-year-old environmental science student who had been living with her boyfriend's family during the COVID-19 pandemic and, as part of her detox regime, uses a website blocker and applies a grayscale method (i.e. putting her phone screen in black and white) to reduce her screen time, explains how verbalising her reflection on privacy concerns risks introducing "*unproductive*" anger to her life:

> "I would say on a day-to-day basis it [privacy violation] doesn't bother me so much, but it really bothers me that people are not really talking about it very much, or like if they do, it's in a very like "Oh well, what can you do?" or like "we have no privacy, you know?". I guess that's just the way it is […] I can't like spend all my time, you know, just getting angry about it all. You know 'cause that would be very unproductive. But it's just like if I talk to someone else about it, they're not like, "yeah, you know, we should write a letter to our state legislature" and I ask like "why aren't there better laws around this?" and people would just be like, "well, why are you so worked up about it?" ("Chloe, 22).

To avoid disagreements with others, Chloe keeps her thoughts about digital dependency, privacy issues and so on, to herself. By engaging in a "process of *stupidity self-management*" (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1207-1208) that involves giving up thinking or debating about the system, Chloe prevents herself from getting "*worked up*" and spares herself the trouble of "explor[ing] substantive questions through dialogue" (p. 1208). Comparably, in a Nosurf thread about online fandoms, their toxicity and lack of authenticity, "Patricia" alludes to how she consciously tempers her critical reflexivity when indulging in selected fan activities:

> "I still make time to take care of my mental health and live in the real world first, but the surplus of positivity and artwork (art is really motivational for me) keeps me in two fandoms. I don't argue in ridiculous conflict [sic], but instead I take the time to learn the lessons this story teaches, and draw what makes me happy. That is what a fandom was meant to be about." ("Patricia", Nosurf).

"Patricia" defends her continued fandom by engaging in what Keinan et al. (2016) refer to as a "functional alibi"; a means of reducing any personal guilt by emphasising consumption's functional values such as "*the lessons this story teaches*" or its "*surplus of positivity and*

artwork". Similarly, "Oliver", another poster in the Nosurf group, justifies his digital consumption through elevating the usefulness and functionality of the Internet:

> "I don't think the point is to flat out not use technology at all, i think the main idea is to limit or stop viewing overstimulating content on the internet/tv, its the difference between using YouTube to learn how to play an instrument or learn new math equations and just mindlessly scrolling through YouTube for hours on end, living without tech would be miserable, the idea of this sub imo isn't to really get rid of tech from our lives, but rather stop doing useless stuff like scrolling for hours watching things that will never help you." ("Oliver", Nosurf).

In Oliver's narrative, digital consumption is shielded from critique because of the functions it serves, like helping users to learn a musical instrument or how to solve mathematical problems. His rejection of total digital abstinence does not just reveal a conscious dependence on the digital marketplace but illustrates how functional alibis are relied upon as a matter of "pragmatic survival" (Dean and Fisher, 2014: 27). "Jason", a 33-year-old marketing researcher living alone in Northern England, also exclusively frames digital detoxes in terms of their simple, immediate benefits rather than a weapon of societal change:

> "I'd say I do make an effort to not do as much screen time […] Sunday is a day where I do no screen whatsoever, so I won't watch anything on the television or, you know, I might call a friend, but it'll be OK, it'll be an audio call […] So yeah, on Sunday I'm having a break. 'cause what that means is on Monday morning, I'm kind of really switched on, I wanna check my emails, I want to see what's going on so […] I think also because of the pandemic […] I think having breaks between work life and home life is now really, really important." ("Jason", interview).

Jason's intermittent detoxing solutions entail a clear "application of instrumental rationality focused on the explicit achievement of a given end" (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1200) whereby the primary motivation for his weekend digital detoxes is to enable him to better perform in the digital environment during the rest of the week. The ironies of this process are perhaps not reflected upon or intentionally ignored by Jason. By setting aside loftier ambitions for systemic change in favour of the post-pessimistic rhetoric of small wins, digital detoxers such as Jason will their reflexive impotence into existence. Whether through functional stupidity or functional alibis, digital detoxers dispense with any kind of optimistic or pessimistic social possibilities and commit their disaffected consent to the semiocapitalist present.

4.7.3. Self-indulgence: The Thievish Joy of Resistance

Lastly, our findings reveal self-indulgence to be a key dimension of gestural anti-consumption. For a number of our participants, digital detox functions as a joyous rather than strenuous activity. In contrast to more transformative acts of resistance which are typically marked by personal sacrifice and the deferral of enjoyment (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), digital detoxers seem to derive a kind of perverse pleasure from their abstinence. For many of these individuals, the identity – or "appearance" – of detoxing provides a great level of pride and joy regardless of how much or how little they commit to that identity. In such cases, detoxers often do not directly exercise willpower or interact with resistance per se, but undertake an "interpassive" (Fisher, 2009: 75; Žižek, 1998) gesture whereby the act of resistance is delegated to someone or something else – such as a dumb phone or a blocking app (like "Cold Turkey Blocker" or "AppBlock") – that performs anti-consumption *for* them. Instead of revolutionary acts, some "symbol" of abstinence, usually a commodity form, is enjoyed and fetishised by digital detoxers as a gesture that enables them to roleplay as rebellious actors without needing to do anything of substance. This joy is not unlike the pleasure that "clicktivists" or "armchair activists" derive through the benefit of added good conscience from virtual gestures (such as signing and sharing an online petition) without needing to undertake any real-world sacrifice themselves (Hopkinson and Cronin, 2015). The phenomenon has been referred to as "*thievish joy*", that is, the "joy of having escaped the task implied in the activity as well as the belief that such a delegation is possible" (Walz et al., 2014: 67); or rather, the joy that comes from believing you have gotten away with something for nothing.

Across our data pool, we observe instances of thievish joy experienced through distractions or diversions that, while bringing about some form of abstinence, typically work to redirect detoxers' attentions elsewhere: "*I've been playing like a puzzle game on my phone to not use Reddit…it's not necessarily a huge step above Reddit, but at the very least like it's not consuming content*" ("Alice", 26); *"The best thing I've done has been setting an extremely strict Cold Turkey block on all my computers for a span of several days at a time."* ("Ava", Nosurf); *"Man I just uninstalled and blocked Facebook and instagram on my phone and my phone is SILENT now. I feel like I have more control over my phone than it does to me. The goal is to reduce my phone to a tool that is there whenever I need it instead of a toy."* ("Tyler", Nosurf). In many of these cases, some "symbolic act" (i.e. gesture of

resistance) takes over the functioning and meaning of "the original symbolized activity" (i.e. actual resistance), allowing detoxers to fall under the illusion of being an active resistor (Walz et al., 2014: 68). Detoxers' acts of abstinence, in most cases, do not allow them to achieve distance from the marketplace, but largely lead to the privileging of new commodity forms – whether substitute games, assistive apps, or rediscovery of the now "silenced" no-longer-so-distracting phone as *tool*.

The thievish joy that detoxers derive from the appearance of resistance mirrors what Dean and Fisher call "*little nuggets of pleasure*", moments of levity that allow subjects to distract themselves from, or otherwise to disavow, the "overall dreariness" of their reflexively impotent existence (Dean and T, 2014: 29). For Dean and Fisher, "dreariness and the little nuggets of pleasure are [not] opposed to one another" (p. 30), but are inherently interwoven, resulting in half-measures and bleak prospects, a kind of "entertainment that doesn't really entertain" (p. 33). Whatever abstinence they can accomplish serves only as a gateway for other kinds of consumer desire to emerge and become materialised through new, perhaps drearier, commodities and technologies that function as temporary surrogates for the abstained object.

In the following description of leaving Facebook, a poster on the Nosurf group, "Lucas", reveals how abstinence is only made achievable through working closely with the abstained object and ensuring that substitute commodity forms are in place:

> "[A] couple of years ago I went on a Facebook diet. I started with un friending anyone who had annoying posts, and anyone I didn't want to talk to iRL. That cut the friends down. Then I removed almost all of my photos and previous posts. That took ages, and sometimes posts popped up again. I scrubbed it all clean. Then I unliked any books, movies posts and anything I had commented on. That took a while. Then I turned all privacy settings to maximum. At this stage I was very seldom logging into Facebook and only used it to receive invitations from my college friends. The last thing I did was get in touch with the group of friends, make sure I had all their numbers and email addresses and set up a group text message thread for chat and get together invites. Then I left Facebook for good." ("Lucas", Nosurf).

Here, rather than undertake radical critique or militant political act against Facebook, Lucas enrols a series of incremental micro-processes via action tools and settings available *through* Facebook such as unfriending, unloading photos, "unliking", gradually tweaking privacy

settings and so on to perform his resistance *for* him. Lucas characterises the micro-processes that allow him to *go without* Facebook as "[going] *on a Facebook diet*". By undertaking a personal "diet" rather than participating in some dramatic collective purge, Lucas expresses his will to reject Facebook, but to a large degree escapes the pressure of needing to exercise any willpower or creativity in the process, simply outsourcing his agency to machinic settings within rather than outside of the Facebook system. Only when some substitute (albeit drearier) commodity form (the "*group text message thread*") becomes available, is rejection considered complete.

Comparably, "Rachel", a 26-year-old software specialist, relies on services like the Self-Control app to lock herself out of certain websites, and keeps a special physical lockbox to seal away her smartphone. By delegating her restriction efforts to dedicated commodity forms, Rachel achieves periods of digital abstinence that enable her to pursue more wholesome and less-mediated activities like going to church and spending time with her pet:

> "When I'm working and I don't need my phone, I will often lock my phone in the box, like they sell these little lockboxes that I think were originally designed for people that are like really struggled with losing weight and food […] [I]f you look at the reviews, I mean there're like drug addicts using these kinds of things, but a lot of people use them for phones and stuff too […] Sometimes I'd just like, I locked my phone in a box for Easter and was like I'm not going to look at my computer or anything. I'm just going to have a nice Easter and play with my dog and go to church and you know do all the things that are in person and that was really nice." ("Rachel", 26).

Here, Rachel's smartphone lockbox functions as "an object-thing" that "acts in [her] place" (Žižek, 1998: 5), *freeing* her from needing to exert any control over her consumption. Such gestures of interpassive resistance provide psychic relief and allow her to dedicate her energies elsewhere, assured in the belief that the market *itself* is already undertaking action on her behalf. Although dreary and limited in their effects, the *appearance* of resistance provided by "object-things" negates the felt responsibility for *actual* resistance, allowing for a sense of thievish joy.

4.8. Discussion and Conclusion

Our analyses of digital detoxing have allowed us to conceptualise gestural anti-consumption as scaffolded by magical voluntarism, the fantasy of pragmatism, and self-indulgence.

Considering these three features altogether, gestural anti-consumption can be defined as a performance of dissatisfaction with consumption, characterised by an apolitical and privatised resistance, functionalistic ethos, and interpassive character rather than genuine anti-market efforts and collective pursuits of structural change. Resigned to the unchangeability of their structural conditions, reflexively impotent subjects settle for whatever efficiencies and pleasures they can derive from better coping with the insecurities, instrumentalism, and cynical opportunism prescribed by the coordinates of the existing system. Our conceptualisation of gestural anti-consumption has two important contributions for de-romanticist marketing scholarship (Fitchett and Cronin, 2022) – what has recently been branded as "Terminal Marketing" (Ahlberg et al, 2022).

First, it allows us to update the concept of "reflexively defiant consumer" (Ozanne and Murray, 1995) with the "reflexively impotent (anti-)consumer", a subject position that, we argue, is more closely aligned with the brutal realities of semiocapitalist society wherein any anti-consumption initiative simply represents new consumption opportunities. The original and visionary archetype introduced by Ozanne and Murray in the mid-1990s – and long heralded as the default subject positioning of market-located rebels, resisters, and bricoleurs – was largely informed by the postmodern pastiche and irony that carried through that decade. Ozanne and Murray compellingly made a case for the possibility that post-Cold War, post-politics, post-ideological consumer subjects of the late 20th century were sufficiently decentred, empowered, and self-reflexive to truly defy dominant consumption regimes through "forming a different relationship to the marketplace in which they identify unquestioned assumptions and challenge the status of existing structures" (1995: 522). Ozanne and Murray foresaw that by being critical and creative through reflexive consumption choices and lifestyles, an organised mass of individuals could "become the architects of their own history" (1995: 523). Optimistically, Ozanne and Murray foresaw the potential for genuine freedom – "the idealism of a true democracy" (1995: 524) – in a kind of hypermuscular agency of networked individuals and their capacity to challenge standard meanings and tastes in search of new consumption styles and sign values. That vision, as we can appreciate from our *terminal* standpoint today, can hardly be realised for a generation "whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it had even happened" (Fisher, 2009: 9). The truncated agency and depressive reflexivity of today's (anti-)consumers, we argue, can lead to neither authentic defiance nor Ozanne and Murray's vision of true democracy.

In the ubiquitous unfolding of semiocapitalism, defiance becomes predicted, neutered, and integrated into the marketisation of *more* signs and sign values "to the delight of consumers eager for more immersion, technological gadgetry, and 'convenience' associated with further escalating the automation of consumption" (Hietanen et al., 2022: 172). In this context, the "reflexive act" is not "mass refusal" (Ozanne and Murray, 1995: 523) but is *mass resignation* to accepting digital consumer culture's small "goodies", comforts, and conveniences (Dean and Fisher, 2014: 29). In the absence of any unifying political alternatives to carry it further, the reflexive act can only result in a politically hollowed-out subjectivity, borne not from apathy but from the sobering realisation that any attempts at rejecting, restricting, or reclaiming consumption remains in the service of one's self rather than for anything bigger.

In some ways, gestural anti-consumption relates to – but also differs from – the act of "virtue signalling" (Levy, 2021; Wallace et al., 2020). In terms of similarity, virtue signalling and gestural anti-consumption are both matters of superficial performativity and not political praxis. However, while virtue signalling functions as a communicative and conspicuous act undertaken purely as an act of moral ostentation, gestural anti-consumption as a cynically pragmatic act is undertaken instrumentally, modestly, and not always publicly to make one's personal consumption work better for oneself. Although both concepts function to varying degrees at the levels of self-expression and self-fulfilment, gestural anti-consumption is not about signalling to others the moral urgency that the world must be changed, but is instead about acquiescence to the perceived reality that so little of the world can be changed.

Reflexively impotent (anti-)consumers might also be considered "futureless subjects" which brings us to our second contribution. Our analyses help to trace the lived consequences of a cultural atmosphere of cancelled futures – or futurelessness – that ossifies capitalism and all of its horrors as permanent features of tomorrow (Ahlberg et al., 2021; Hietanen et al., 2020; Hoang et al., 2022). The voices of digital detoxers in this paper reflect the cultural "suspicion" that "the end has already come" and that "it could well be the case that the future harbours only reiteration and re-permutation" (Fisher, 2009: 3). Today detoxers can deactivate their Facebook or Instagram account like they did with their MySpace or Flickr accounts long ago, but tomorrow only brings for them new commitments to Twitch, Discord,

the Metaverse, or the *whatever*. Although they can delight in the minutes they claw back from their digital screens through monitoring and setting goals on Apple's Screen Time or the Cold Turkey Blocker today, those minutes will inevitably be stolen back by the more addicting amenities of tomorrow that will require newer, more assistive, and more invasive tools to suppress. It is almost a point of fact that there are "no breaks" and "no 'shocks of the new'" to come (Fisher, 2009: 3); only renewed, rebooted, retweaked, resolved, reinvigorated commodified objects that are perpetually subsumed and consumed ad nauseam in the marketplace. The resigned acceptance that the latest technologies and their pathways to manipulation are here to stay, for today and for many days to come, reflects a "pervasive sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility" (Fisher, 2009: 7). What our analyses show is that the slow disappearance of any optimism for new and imaginative futures does not just bring about the nostalgic yearning for some less tarnished material culture of our pre-smartphone, pre-Internet collective past (Ahlberg et al., 2021) but also a compensatory hungering for pseudo-resistance that temporarily staves off (or perhaps disguises) the futureless vicissitudes of today's semiocapitalist consumer culture.

In conclusion, we argue for a de-romanticist approach to conceptualising anti-consumption, consumer resistance, countercultural practices, and so on. Here, we depart from the predominant understanding of anti-consumption as grounded to alternative ideological attachments or a comprehensible political dissensus (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Ulver and Laurell, 2020). Our central argument is that consumption and anti-consumption are not poles apart but are increasingly and despairingly linked as two sides of the same coin under the interminable and indefatigable reflexive impotence that pervades the present (Fisher, 2009). Through reflexive impotence, the consumer and anti-consumer become conflated as the *one* (anti-)consumer – a subject that cannot bring into clear relief a conceivable means of moving beyond the capitalist hegemony and its disappointments. This subject looks to *itself* and its own consumption for solutions to shared injustices and systemic challenges, rather than to collective political acts and thus remains entrenched in consumerist individualism.

Beyond the reflexively impotent (anti-)consumer, questions must also be raised about the future(lessness) of the (anti-)consumer researcher. Arguably, any romantic or optimistic accounts of anti-consumption that elevate anti-consumers' market-located transformative power to an idealistic level might simply strengthen the capitalist status quo (see Ahlberg et al, 2022); but what about the lasting impact of a terminal, de-romanticist research tradition

that merely confirms time and time again the ideological first principle that no alternative to consumer capitalism will ever be conceivable for its subjects? This cynical realism or ideological deadlock of consumer culture will surely remain ossified if even those of us who tenaciously critique it contribute to its hypostatisation through repetition, theorisation, and confirmation. Future work might therefore self-reflect on the horizon endpoint of a tradition that concentrates so much on anatomising capitalism's seemingly intractable hold over reality: will that endpoint be one where the (anti-)consumer researcher remains as reflexively impotent as those subjects that he or she identifies as such? As recently discussed by Coffin and Egan-Wyer (2022), the critique of capitalist ideology remains an urgent task, but any interventive potential for the tradition requires analyst-activists to move beyond solely deconstructing capitalism's ills. "Capitalism is problematic, yes," they agree, "but so too are aspects of the human condition, which will be altered in a postcapitalist society but not entirely negated" (Coffin and Egan-Wyer, 2022: 63). What is perhaps needed from future research is a willingness to delve deeper into the reflexive subject's conscious and unconscious processes that underpin, precede, and ultimately calcify the structures that we often find to be so stubborn in their effects. To better understand – and someday overcome – the futureless vicissitudes of today's semiocapitalist consumer culture, it will be necessary to think *beyond* depressing structural horizons and *more about* the human conditions, beliefs, and fantasies that prolong our long, dark night at the end of history.

4.9. References

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5. Chapter 5: Giving up the Ghost: Abstinence as Desire Regenerating Forces

5.1. Introduction to Chapter 5

The third paper furthers the debates of the first and second papers while it also opens up a new strand of discussion. This paper conceptualises digital detox as a form of abstinence that can ironically result in *more*, rather than less, passion to consume. The paper relates closely to the material that I originally engaged with when writing my first manuscript (Chapter 3), specifically Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman's (2017) conceptualisation of "networks of desire" in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. As I found myself further along in my doctoral journey and having returned to Kozinets et al.'s construct from time to time, I grew more captivated by the idea that the technologies around us – our smartphones, laptops, tablets, smart TVs, self-tracking devices, social media, and so forth – function somewhat predictably to enhance our desires to consume. The idea was framed as a significant breakthrough contra to classic Weberian fears that technology might obstruct desire, and indeed, that breakthrough was scaffolded nicely drawing Deleuze and Guattari's alternative theorisations of desire. Yet in my own mind, something was *missing* in this conceptualisation. It was not so much the base idea that the presence of tech products can get us to consume that I had a problem with, rather it was my suspicion that the *absence* (or, at least the idea of absence) of technology could probably get us to consume more.

Writing my second paper (Chapter 4) taught me that anti-consumption does not preclude consumption and that, under capitalist realism, any effort to restrict or replace consumption ends up relying (whether knowingly or otherwise) on an expansive range of market-generated materials anyway. My empirical work suggested that there is a whole cottage industry of digital detox products, services, vacations, apps and wellness programmes out there that are very desirable, commodifiable, and endlessly diversifying. A question I could not shake was: Is there any room for the absence of technology in Kozinets et al.'s technology-centric concept? If the conceptualisation of a network of desire is as complex and assemblage-oriented as the authors suggest, then how does it factor in the effects of absence, abstention, and abstinence? Do activities such as digital detoxing – in which consumers attempt to maintain a distance from their technocultural

networks threaten the functioning of a given network of desire? If so, do such practices of disengaging with networks of desire engender less desire to consume? Or does disengagement just open the space for entirely new substitute activities to fill the vacuum – a whole new network? Does disengagement disrupt or sustain the functioning of the extant network of desire? My ongoing list of questions all boiled down to the quandary of whether abstinence is part of, or works outside of, a network of desire. This fundamental headscratcher for me seemed to be worth chasing up as the Kozinets and colleagues' paper had been mentioned in previous review rounds for the other papers in this thesis and is upheld as a key reference point for digital consumer research.

While previous work within the marketing and consumer scholarship has often focused on how abstinence projects, that is consumers' attempts to abstain from or disengage with dominant consumption norms, can signal consumers' desire to live outside the marketplace (e.g., Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001; Portwood-Stacer, 2012), my analyses of digital detoxing instead revealed that consumers might simply disengage from certain consumption forms while (re-)engaging with the others. Delving deeper into the data, I later fully developed this idea that abstinence functions to engender more desire to consume in which detoxers were largely reliant on other market products (often tech products themselves) to critique, "abstain from", and resist technology *for* them. I recalled the idea of *interpassivity* (Žižek, 1998, 2006) in which the interpassive subject delegates the task/enjoyment of doing something to another subject/object, which for me captured the irony of "abstinence" at hand and the seemingly inescapable reliance that consumers have on market-located solutions. This idea was discussed in one of the themes in paper 2 (Chapter 4) but I believed could be developed much further around a whole new concept. As I critically delved into the paradox of how abstinence (*absence* of consumption) can result in more desire to consume (*presence* of consumption), I later came up with "*nodes of present absence*" which I developed as the central idea of this paper.

This paper is well connected with other papers of the thesis since it allows me to further develop the idea that the techno-capitalist status quo is sustained *not* only through consumers' engagement in it but also through various ostensibly "resistant" acts against the system. This central argument of the paper further reveals the sense of being "trapped" within the technologically-mediated marketplace (the core idea of paper 1) and the

absence of genuine transformative power at the heart of (resistant) consumer subjectivity (the core idea of paper 2). In slightly different ways, these papers allow me to trace the lived consequences of a cultural atmosphere of cancelled futures – one of the main aims of this thesis.

Giving up the Ghost: Abstinence as Desire Regenerating Forces

Hoang, Q. (2022). Giving up the Ghost: Abstinence as Desire Regenerating Forces (*Working paper, for submission to a suitable journal*)

5.2. Abstract

This paper develops Kozinets and colleagues' (2017) "networks of desire" conceptualisation by illustrating the functioning of abstinence within the process of desire regeneration. In exploring the context of "digital detoxing", I show how technocultural networks are sustained not only through consumers' unfettered engagement in capitalist technoculture but also by various modes of abstinence that are incessantly assimilated into techno-capitalist desiring forces. Drawing on Žižek's explanatory material and the concept of "interpassivity", I explore how interpassive tactics of abstinence – and the market-mediated fantasies and solutions that perpetuate them – are enacted as a *false* activity in allowing consumers to ostensibly defy yet ultimately sustain their presence within these networks. I theorise such abstinence through the concept of "nodes of present absence" by showing how the absence of consumption at one part of the network can result in the *presence* of passionate consumer engagement at another. The findings reveal three key ways that consumer desire is regenerated through nodes of present absence: re-autonomisation of desire, deceleration of desire, and re-sensitisation of desire. This paper contributes to the nascent study of the market reproduction processes by which resistance helps to perpetuate rather than undermine the market's existence.

Keywords: Abstinence; resistance; networks of desire; techno-capitalism; technoculture; digital detox; interpassivity; Žižek.

5.3. Introduction

Giving up consumption is big business. The smoking cessation market is a multi-billion dollar industry with audiobooks, specialist apps such as QuitNow!, EasyQuit, Die Smoking and Flamy, and wearable devices – like the QT-Watch – that assist in monitoring, reducing, and abstaining from consumption (Amiri and Khan, 2022). As with smokers, there is also an entire suite of private therapies, treatment programmes, and apps including Abstain!, Manhood, Reboot, and BrainBuddy designed for assisting pornography addicts to curb their consumption, access support networks, and effectively gamify their self-restraint (Blok et al., 2019). Consumers' attempts to ostensibly abstain from consumption seem to open up multiple opportunities for more market commodities to spring up. Within what Kozinets, Patterson and Ashman (2017) conceptualise as *"networks of desire"*, one's abstention from consumption – which is oftentimes facilitated by new technologies as in the above cases – may ironically engender *more* rather than less passion to consume. Following Kozinets et al.'s configuration of networks of desire as the constellation of human, technological and multiple other actors that interpenetrate and interconnect to form systems that function to perpetually produce and channel desire for consumption, I suggest that marketing and consumer researchers' focus should not remain solely with the presence of "high levels of passionate consumer engagement" in these networks (Kozinets et al., 2017: 678), but also with its *absence*, or as I shall argue, its paradoxical "present absence". Such absence, ironically, may not be genuinely adversarial to networks of desire but are complementary and co-constituting activities in the wider territorialisation and re-territorialisation of consumers' passion to consume.

In this paper, I theorise practices of abstention as important "nodes" central to the functioning of networks of desire – what I call "*nodes of present absence*". Through these nodes, I explore how the absence of consumption at one part of the network can be conducive to the *presence* of passionate consumer engagement at another. As an empirical context for this theorisation, I draw upon an interpretive study of "digital detox", that is any efforts undertaken to achieve distance from using electronic devices or consuming digital media, either completely or in part, for variable amounts of time. While falling under the category of abstinence, digital detox often appears to be one's restriction of particular consumption that is characterised by the (re-)engagement in other forms (Radtke et al., 2021; Syvertsen and Enli, 2020). In response, an entire cottage industry has emerged

around digital detoxing including, but not limited to, "unplugged" vacation services, YouTube channels, books, apps, "dumb phones", website blockers, and digital wellbeing kits. Digital detox, as I shall discuss, should be viewed as just another activity to reterritorialise and regenerate desire as it works to promote and necessitate the fetishisation of *more*, albeit different forms of, consumption.

To explore consumers' dependence on these market offerings in their abstinence, I draw upon Žižek's explanatory material and particularly the concept of "*interpassivity"* (Žižek, 1998, 2006). The interpassive, rather than interactive, nature of detoxing is reflected in detoxers' delegation of genuine anti-market efforts and agitated energies to often market-located objects that are expected to critique technology *for* them – ironically, sometimes even tech products themselves. Far from posing a genuine disruption to capitalist technocultural networks, digital detox reveals various ways that consumers ostensibly defy but ultimately adapt to and sustain their presence within these networks. My analysis of digital detoxing is underpinned by two interrelated research questions: How do consumers adapt to and navigate their entanglement in networks of desire? and, how does abstinence factor into these networks?

In answering these questions, the paper contributes to the nascent study of the market reproduction processes by which resistance helps to secure rather than threaten the market's existence (Ahlberg et al., 2022; Holt, 2002; Rumbo, 2002). With the recognition that "capitalism endures because it "allows" resistance to take place" (Lloyd, 2017: 276) and that capitalism "incessantly regenerates itself through novel forms of desiring-production" (Hietanen et al., 2020: 746; Brei and Böhm, 2011), the paper highlights various processes in which one's abstention from particular consumption allows for the constant reshaping of desire that materialises into *just* other commodity forms. As I shall discuss, nodes of present absence function as "desire regenerating forces" which work in tandem with continually emerging "*para-capitalist*" markets; altogether they allow for the substitution of dominant consumption forms with a vaguely antagonistic, yet ultimately commodifiable, framework of desirous passions and ideals.

Moreover, the paper contributes to recent critical theorisations of a cultural atmosphere of "cancelled futures" by showing its lived consequences on consumers' everyday resistance to technocultural networks (Ahlberg et al., 2020; Hietanen and

Andéhn, 2018; Hietanen et al., 2022). By exploring the lack of genuine transformative power at the heart of abstinence, the paper shows how the ongoing disappearance of alternative futures to the capitalist status quo results in the gradual loss of true politics *itself*. If anything, consumers' ostensible attempts to achieve a distance from the market function as a frenetic *false activity* that provides the illusion of change so that nothing needs actually change (Žižek, 2006). Far from constituting any kind of genuinely Luddite or transformative reaction against capitalist technoculture, such false activity provides for enclavised opportunities to diversify, excite, and revitalise consumption while potentially negating the potential for political intervention.

In the following sections, I provide first an overview of networks of desire, then a background to abstinence followed by Žižek's concept of interpassivity. Next, I present the research context of digital detox before outlining the methods undertaken for this study. Then, I map out what I consider to be three key processes of desire regeneration within networks of desire and close out with a discussion of nodes of present absence.

5.4. Theoretical Underpinnings

5.4.1. Networks of Desire: A Background

Drawing upon and adapting the assemblage theory of Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987), Kozinets et al. (2017) introduce "networks of desire" (NoDs) as a catch-all term for the complex constellation of digital technologies, consumers, their energised passions, and virtual and physical objects that collate to incubate consumption interests amongst interconnected actors, and to reproduce the wider capitalist framework that contextualises those interests (p.667). Kozinets and colleagues argue that technology – including service platforms (such as Google, Facebook, Amazon) and their algorithmic, surveillant tools – far from extinguishing or inhibiting consumers' desire to consume, has the capacity to dramatically transform "raw, passionate energy into a range of general and specific consumer interests" (ibid.). Technology works not necessarily as a single tool for the promotion of any one discrete product, brand, service, or idea but rather as an open, participatory system upon which passions are mediated, captured, and normalised as a commodifiable form. "Often, a brand would appear as part of a network of desire, mingling with many other related products, brands and consumption practices in technocultural

fields," Kozinets (2021: 441) suggests, "[f]or example, Billabong or Hurley might be present much more in networks of desire related to surfing culture rather than through its own specialized brand communities". Using surfing as an example of foci here, Kozinets shows that NoDs are consolidated by their capacity to territorialise, deterritorialise and reterritorialise desire. *Territorialisation* is understood as aligning relevant humans, ideas, and objects that can be inscribed together, forming coherences or assemblages that intensify knowledge, interest and passion for consumption. *Deterritorialisation*, in contrast, denotes the segregation – or "unlinking" – that occurs as desires of subjects and objects are disconnected (Kozinets et al., 2017: 662). Lastly, *reterritorialisation* means a new linkage that happens before, after, or alongside the occurrence of an unlinking.

Delving further into Kozinets and his colleagues' conceptualisation, I can extract three key interrelated features of NoDs. First, they are *assemblative* in the sense that they present technocultural fields for consumers to share and connect their desires with like-minded others; for related products, brands, and experiences to be collated under unified styles, trends, and hypes; and for the offline to be married up with the online. NoDs provide a space for consumers to thematise their passions and ideals whereby they can bring multiple facets of their own lives and those of others together under centralised and communicable themes. For example, Kozinets and colleagues consider the *assembling* theme of "food porn" which brings together diverse human and non-human actors including the food service, the smartphone, the internet, consumers, their culinary capital, real and imagined hunger, food images, social media profiles, digital means of beautifying food (e.g., filters), and so on under one provocative ("pornographic") ecosystem of interests. Within such networks, "[p]ublic and professional participation build new connections between extant desires and a wider network, decentering ties and deterritorializing flows that limit hunger to emplaced bodies" (p.659).

Second, NoDs are *proliferative*. Kozinets et al. map out a wide circuit of desire (re)production wherein consumers, technologies and marketers are entangled in a series of fertile feedback loops. As consumers' desires for consumption are communicated through the network and are accessed by other actors, they are not just integrated but are, indeed, proliferated. Network participation promotes, rewards, and invites contributions from others spurring the emergence of new insights, ideas, and fantasies – which can trigger the introduction of new products, styles, and experiences that are fed back to consumers and

their desirous cravings. As Hietanen and colleagues (2020: 745) also note, desire should be understood as "an unconscious, additive and automatized libidinal tendency, aiming for its proliferation". Within the global capitalist system of desiring intensities, what actually occurs is the "endless desiring-production" (Hietanen et al., 2020: 747) as various consumption-driven affordances of our gadget-driven, networked lives forever bring us to the new territories of consumption (Darmody and Zwick, 2020; Hoang et al., 2022; Kozinets, 2021). The proliferation of desire to consume is achieved, according to Kozinets and his colleagues, by three key processes: disciplining, abstracting, and extremifying. First, technology can discipline passion into a range of consumption interests that are reflective of established cultural categories. Second, technology engenders an abstracting force that works to deterritorialise the desires of the physical bodies from their material surroundings and relocate them to machinic networks. Third, technology promotes and rewards attention-grabbing and passionately devoted activities within the networks, which potentially drives consumption passion to previously unimagined extremes (p. 667).

Lastly, NoDs are *emergent* as they are "constantly being made and unmade by data, meaning, consumption, and innovation" (Kozinets et al., 2017: 676). NoDs draw on the massive resources of the technological, algorithmic, data-driven ecosystem to attract, capture and commodify the attention of consumers: "The most fundamental unit of power in the network is attention, and attention triggers the investment of desire energy – machinic and bodily – into product, brand, lifestyle, and experience forms of consumption interest" (p.667). Configured as vast technocultural fields of multiple interconnected actors and their ever-changing passions and interests, NoDs should be understood as *always-in-becoming*, forever prone to changes and transformations.

Crucially, I suggest, the continual becoming of NoDs is contingent on not only various forms of human-technological connections but also their *disconnections* which often manifest in various counter-technological tendencies and practices of abstention from these networks. Within the entirety of the global capitalist system that forever channels desire for *more* consumption, even the ostensible desire to abstain from consumption becomes just another space for capitalism to reproduce itself (Žižek, 2006, 2009). Abstinence, in such cases, ironically works to sustain – rather than genuinely disrupt – NoDs and the broader techno-capitalist system. I now turn to the concepts of abstinence and interpassivity to explore this idea further.

5.4.2. Abstinence as Desire Regenerating Forces

Jessica Warner, in her book *All or Nothing: A Short History of Abstinence in America*, defines abstinence as "a principled and unerring refusal to engage in a particular activity" (Warner, 2010: xi). She clarifies, "[g]oing without something for a short period of time is not abstinence […] Anything short of total victory is a form of defeat" (xi). As others have countered (see O'Gorman, 2020), the shortcoming of this definition is that it disavows any potential for temporary or episodic forms of abstinence. O'Gorman argues that popular forms of abstinence, such as cutting down or cutting out digital device usage, are "site-specific", "integrated into a temporary ritualistic practice" and thus reflect "contemporary rituals of moderation" (2020: 134). Further departing from Warner's absolutism, there are forms of "situational abstinence" which entail abstaining from certain things in certain situations and for particular reasons while nevertheless consuming those things in other situations (Frank et al., 2020: 1). Frank and colleagues also identify "long term abstinence" (p.5) which encompasses taking a break from a particular type of consumption for prolonged periods that is "not forever, but merely a limited period with more or less a clear end date". Here, abstinence – whether situational or longer-term – does *not* equate with the total rejection of consumption, but is reflective of the bricolent and multiple ways that consumers can negotiate, navigate, and adapt to dominant consumption norms. Contemporary forms of abstinence might even be viewed as tactics or ways of *making do*, in the sense that consumers' abstention is undertaken not to galvanise any durable changes to the dominant cultural economy, but just to "sketch out the guileful ruses of different interests and desires" within it (De Certeau, 1984: 34). However, much of what passes for "withstanding" consumption norms in today's consumer culture is typically just other tribalised, fractionalised, and individualised templates of consumption.

Consumers' attempts to resist, defy, or abstain from the perceived norms of their peer groups are oftentimes co-opted and assimilated into consumer culture and the markets themselves (e.g., Bertilsson, 2015; Holt, 2002; Rumbo, 2002). Even in the production-engaged consumption communities, those who are motivated by radical self-reliance simply divert and channel their desire for consumption away from conventional norms that they deem inadequate or unfair towards their own desires that are no less market-oriented (Moraes et al., 2010). These production-engaged communities act as just another venue for sustaining their consumption desire, a space where they can enact their creative and ethical

self through re-creating and re-engaging with alternative ways of consuming. In such cases, engagement in tactics of abstention may ironically mean the *substitution* of one form of consumption with another form. Oftentimes, one may move away from participating in global and homogenising capitalist forces and instead (re-)engage in localised, traditional and aestheticising (capitalist) spheres (Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012). For instance, by substituting Starbucks with local coffee shops that are akin to retro-brands incessantly repackaged as nostalgic and sold within the marketplace (Thompson and Arsel, 2004), consumers are largely assimilated in the constant marketisation and reconstitution of commodified desire (also Holt, 2002). In Izberk-Bilgin's (2012) account of how the ideological forces of Islamism inform consumption, she also identifies that abstinence from global brands does not dispel consumption desires but simply redirects them towards a (re-)engagement with Islamised products. As she notes, "rather than dethroning market capitalism and consumer culture, Islamists seek to be firmly embedded in a market society so that they may transform it to be congruent with Islamist mores" (p.680). Abstinence, far from genuinely transforming the market, indeed might be better thought of as a *productive* force that sustains dominant market systems and rejuvenates consumption interests through "creating new "opportunity spaces" […], markets, and products while contesting existing ones" (Izberk-Bilgin, 2012: 664).

Here, I suggest, abstinence has the potential to function as *desire regenerating forces,* that is, a catalyst that works to reformulate and regenerate desire for more, albeit different forms of, consumption. As Kotzé (2020: 62) explains: "This is because periods of commodity abstinence simply open up the space for different kinds of desire to emerge and be temporarily satiated by additional commodities that serve as intermittent replacements for the abstained object". Acting as "replacements" for the "abstained object", substitute desirous objects take on an "interpassive" character, that is they take over the actual task/enjoyment of abstinence in the consuming subject's place (Žižek, 2006, 1998a, 1998b). I now explore the concept of interpassivity to understand how abstinence functions through substitution/delegation and thus potentially leads to more passion to consume.

5.4.3. Interpassivity and the Illusion of Not Consuming

The concept of interpassivity was developed in the 1990s by Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek as a phenomenon that is the opposition of "interactivity" (Žižek, 1998b: 11). The

prefix – *inter* is of utmost significance here, which denotes a kind of "transfer". While interactivity allows one to exchange her passive experience for active participation, interpassivity works when one disowns her (passive) experience itself and displaces it onto another (Žižek, 1998a). The point should be made clear: The interactive subject acts through another agent so that she can sit back and remain passive; in contrast, the interpassive subject is "incessantly – frenetically even – active, while displacing on to another the fundamental passivity of his or her being" (Žižek, 1999: 105-106). Žižek's typical example of an interpassive phenomenon is the VCR recorder that records and "enjoys" one's favourite films in one's place – while she is *busy* doing other things. In this example, to maintain the impression of being an active subject, one needs to first "get rid of" – or transpose onto another (the VCR recorder) – the inert passivity of her being. Other examples of interpassivity include hiring weeping women to do the "mourning" task at a funeral, having "canned laughter" in American sitcoms to laugh on one's behalf, or many academics' acts of printing out research papers that are rarely read later (thus outsourcing the task/pleasure of reading to the printer itself) (Žižek, 1997). What the above examples show is how one's (passive) experience of consumption is *delegated* to someone or something else ("the Other"), as Žižek (1998b: 10) notes:

> "I am passive through the Other. I concede to the Other the passive aspects (of enjoying) while I can remain actively engaged. I can continue to work in the evening, while the VCR passively enjoys for me; I can make financial arrangements for the deceased's fortune while the weepers mourn [in my place]."

Crucially, in delegating the activity/enjoyment, the interpassive subject does not really believe that there is another who prays, eats, reads, laughs, cries, plays etc. for them. The delegation is thus operated at two levels: the delegation of the task/enjoyment and the delegation of the *belief* in that delegation itself. While the task/enjoyment is outsourced to another object, the belief that this is possible is also delegated to a (fictional) *naïve observer* (Pfaller, 2014: p.15; Walz et al., 2014). Through this symbolic "double delegation", the individual is released from the actual (passive) experience she is supposed to engage in, thus being able to devote her time and energy to *other* activities. This functioning of interpassivity explains the growing trend and fascination with idle games (e.g., Dreeps, Cookie Clicker, FarmVille) – the games that play themselves or require little engagement from the human subject – whereby the interpassive player can delegate the tasks and enjoyment of playing to the game itself (Fizek, 2018). Interpassivity can also explain the

consumption of ethical brands, a major marketing trend in recent years: just by buying products that are branded as "ethical", one can be *freed* from the actual responsibilities of changing the world through undertaking more radical actions (Walz et al., 2014).

Besides from providing psychic relief, interpassivity also functions to create an illusion – or appearance – of oneself being active. By letting another (e.g., ethical brands) take over the action and enjoyment for us, we can maintain the appearance that we are responsible consuming subjects while having already transferred the experience to another. Here, the illusion of acting ethically and responsibly is staged for the invisible observer (who judges by appearances) (Kuldova, 2018). Another example of such performance is the interpassive phenomenon of "clicktivism": simply by clicking "liking", "sharing" or "tweeting" about a social or political cause on social media, we can actively display our moral values to an invisible observer who believes in such values in our place. As this naïve observer already believes for us, at the level of action, we can behave *as if* we actually believe. We know that those ethical brands cannot change the exploitative capitalist system and we don't actually believe in their ethical messages yet still I act *as if* we believe in them (Walz et al., 2014). Here, interpassive acts function according to a typical disavowal formula: *"*they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it" (Žižek, 1989: 28). We know very well that there is just another profit-making motive behind the new tech products which claim that they can fight against techno-capitalism for us, we still act *as if* we can outsource my political responsibilities to them. Or perhaps, we know that through purchasing substitute market products to aid my temporary abstinence from NoDs we only contribute to sustain these networks *yet* we do it anyway.

Crucially, I argue, the appearance that one stages through interpassive acts perhaps negates the possibility of genuine change. By signing an online petition on Facebook, we stage an appearance of being virtuous heroes who care about the lives of others, which simply gives us the moral license to perhaps more easily behave unethically or immorally in the very next moment (Kuldova, 2018). And this holds very true for various interpassive acts of abstinence. The substitutes that we cling to in the pursuit of abstinence from digital networks – whether a dumb phone, a website blocker, a detoxing app, an unplugged holiday, a "no-phones night out", a *whatever* – display our "abstinence" for us, setting us free to consume digital technologies even more the very next day. Interpassivity, I suggest, is the feature that defines much of contemporary consumer abstinence at its most

elementary level: it enables the consumer to stage an illusion – *the illusion that she is not consuming*. I now turn to the discussion of my research context – "digital detox" – before elaborating on this idea further.

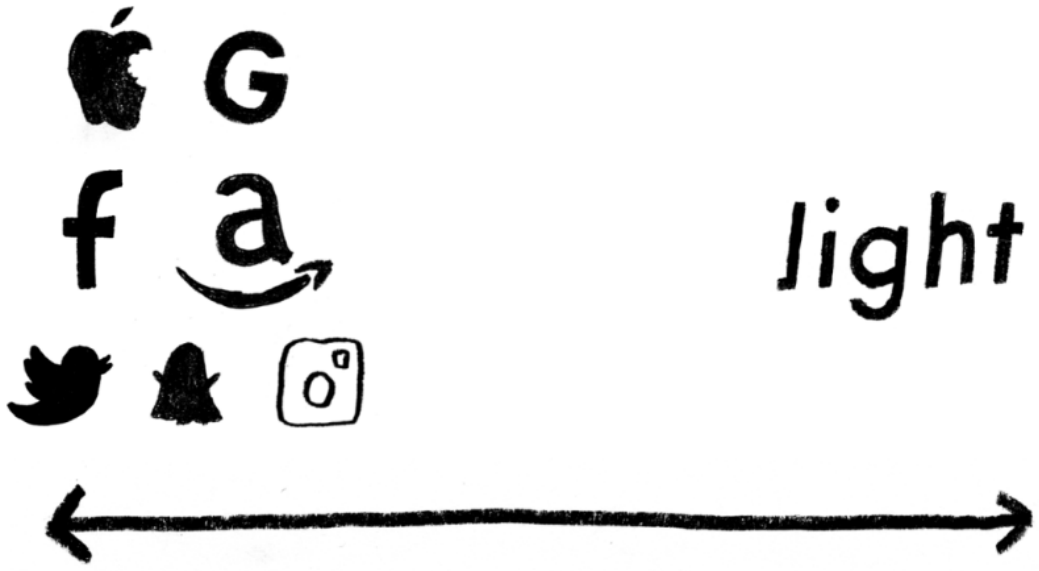
5.5. Research Context: Digital Detox

"Digital detox" is defined as "a time period during which individuals do not engage in using [(a) electronic devices], (b) certain types of applications (e.g., social media), (c) branded media (e.g., unplugging from Facebook), (d) special features (e.g., disconnect from chats), (e) interactions (e.g., active usage of WhatsApp), and/or (f) messages (e.g., voice messages)" (Radtke et al., 2021: 4). Though often understood as taking a break from smartphones or social media, digital detox also encompasses various activities, mindsets and lifestyles ranging from going "scroll free" for a month or turning off email notifications at the weekends to deactivating social media accounts (Syvertsen and Enli, 2019). Understood as the management and restriction of digital consumption in ways that technology works more efficiently for one's life, digital detox has been advocated by millions of individuals across the world over the past decade (Syvertsen, 2020). A 2016 Ofcom survey undertaken in the UK suggests that nearly 15 million British people have tried digital detox at least once (Ofcom, 2016). A recent Mintel report also suggests more than half of smartphone users are attempting to restrict and minimise the time spent on their mobiles (Mintel, 2020). Nearly a decade after being included in Oxford Dictionary in 2013, digital detox has become a talking point, a media buzzword, and ironically, a hashtag (*#digital detox*) (Syvertsen, 2020).

Digital detox can be classified as abstinence. While some detoxers engage in longer-term abstinence in which they abstain from using certain technologies (such as Facebook) for shorter or longer periods of time, many others only attempt to situationally abstain from digital technologies for reasons ranging from improving health and well-being to focusing on interpersonal relationships or gaining back self-control and performance in work and study (see Morrison and Gomez, 2014; Radtke et al., 2021). Whether situational or longer-term, some form of abstinence is generally embraced and integrated into detoxers' everyday toolbox of managing and handling the ever-increasing demands and stresses of an "always on" society – rather than denotes any radical or subversive practice (Syvertsen, 2020).

Common to detoxers' attempts to abstain from technocultural fields and networks is *not* the absence of (desire for) consumption, but can be the redirection and reformulation of subjects' desirous cravings of and through technology into, just other commodity forms. This reshaping of desire often takes a form of consumption *substitution*, such as binge-watching on Netflix instead of scrolling Facebook, playing Pokémon GO in place of using Reddit, or substituting the latest iPhone models with a classic Nokia flip phone. It is at this point of desire reconstitution that a diverse range of alternative market products have emerged around digital detoxing. For example, Camp Grounded (http://digitaldetox.org), one of the most predominant retreat camps based in the US, has attracted thousands of people from around the world who pay a good sum of money to have their "their computers, cell phones, emails, Instagrams, clocks, schedules, work-jargon and networking [traded] for an off-the-grid weekend of pure unadulterated fun" (Digital Detox, 2022). For those adult campers, an "unplugged" detoxing weekend seems to be a valuable – albeit short-term – substitute for the everyday pressures of their networked lives. And for those who feel increasingly disenchanted living in a surveillant, AI-driven marketplace (Darmody and Zwick, 2020), other products such as the Light Phone, Nokia 3310, Punkt MP01 are readily marketed as genuine alternatives.

Figure 3: The Light Phone's Market Positioning



Source: Screenshot of https://www.thelightphone.com/about-us, June 2021.

As can be seen in Figure 3, Light, the manufacturer of premium, minimalist phones branded as "the Light Phone", claims on their website:

> "Light is not just another tech company. We build all of the tools from scratch to ensure there are absolutely no third party apps tracking you. In this time of 'Surveillance Capitalism' and the 'Attention Economy', the Light Phone represents a different option. You are the customer, not the product. This is a phone for humans." (The Light Phone, 2022).

Promised to offer an alternative that can help to shield consumers from the systemic problems engendered within today's pervasive surveillant marketplace, the Light Phone has become a highly desirable market object amongst many digital detoxers. Light allows detoxers to ostensibly abstain from those privacy-invasive tech products that are fighting for their time and attention – and to go on *consuming* their own privacy-enhancing things. A cursory browse online also shows a variety of search engines that are marketed as privacy-focused and not tracking their users (e.g., Startpage, Qwant, DuckDuckGo, Brave Search, MetaGer). DuckDuckGo, a profitable business that is branded as antithesis to Google, has already become a trending marketplace item (Johnston, 2015). Simply by using DuckDuckGo in place of Google, we are promised to "take back [our] privacy now" (DuckDuckGo, 2022).

Digital detox represents a typical case of how abstinence results in more passion to consume within technocultural networks. An exploration of this useful context might allow me to address the questions of how consumers adapt to and sustain their presence within NoDs, and how their abstinence factors into these networks. I now turn to the research procedures before presenting my findings and discussion.

5.6. Research Methods

This research draws upon analyses from two main sources: a 12-month netnography and 21 in-depth interviews with digital detoxers. An observational netnographic enquiry was conducted in which I observed and collected data from digital detoxers' online conversations and interactions around the topic of digital detox (Beckmann and Langer, 2005). Observational netnography, or non-participant netnography – that is, the researcher

does not participate in the activities of the online group or community – has been employed by scholars within and outside the field of marketing as an effective method that facilitates the generation of naturally occurring data (Bertilsson, 2015; Canavan, 2021; Cronin and Cocker, 2019). Additionally, it has been argued that if the site of investigation is *public* – that is, non-members can access it without any restrictions (i.e., no registration or sign-ins needed) – the content available within the site can also be used for research purposes without the need to obtain informed consent (Beckmann and Langer, 2005).

The selection of suitable netnographic sites for enquiry was in line with Kozinets' (2002: 63; 2020) recommendation of six criteria (i.e., relevant, active, substantial, interactive, heterogeneous, data-rich). Several forums were primarily located including Reddit (https://www.reddit.com/), Nofap (https://forum.nofap.com); Digitalspy (https://forums.digitalspy.com); and Quora (https://www.quora.com). Four key Sub-reddits on the Reddit forum were identified including *Nosurf*, *Digital Minimalism*, *Dopamine Detox* and *OfflineDay*. To keep the process of data collection manageable, most observation and data collection was subsequently conducted within the Nosurf ("*stop wasting life on the net*.") group. By the time of data collection in 2021, Nosurf had around 150,000 members who join the group to share their concerns about excessive digital consumption, and to receive advice and/or support in their journey toward "healthy, mindful, and purposeful internet use" (Nosurf, 2022). Founded in 2011, the Nosurf group is fast growing with thousands of new members joining the group every month. The site is particularly active with a great level of interaction and a sense of living culture. It has a high frequency of postings with an average of 119 new threads per week (by the time of data collection in 2021) and a total of 15,000 threads (between January 2018 and November 2021). Reflecting on the discourses and practices around various forms of abstinence from technoculture, Nosurf provides an interesting context for my observation.

Netnographic data was selected based on rich content, descriptiveness, relevant topic matter, and conversational participation by a range of posters (Kozinets, 2015: 170-171). In total, 124 subreddit threads from Nosurf (originally posted between 2019 and 2021) were gathered for further examination. Other relevant and insightful data was also collected from the above-mentioned forums, blogs, online articles, and comments on these articles. Relevant images were screenshotted and included in the data pool. Another key part of netnographic data is my reflexive fieldnotes whereby I continually updated an

"immersive journal" to chronicle emergent thoughts and ideas as the data collection and analysis progressed (Kozinets, 2010: 284). Overall, I immersed myself in Nosurf and other sites over a period of 12 months resulting in 690 pages of texts, images and annotations.

Following a combination of purposive and snowball sampling approaches (Banister and Hogg, 2004), I conducted 21 in-depth interviews with self-identified digital detoxers. Participants were recruited through two main channels: (1) the Nosurf group and (2) my social circle in and outside the UK. A recruitment poster was placed on the Nosurf group with an invitation to contact me via email. The combined sampling approaches resulted in a total of 21 informants comprised of 15 women and 6 men, aged from 19 to 39 years, varied in their educational levels and occupations, and living in different countries (see Table 4). Due to the geographic dispersion of the sample and the lockdown mandates related to COVID-19, all interviews were *ironically* conducted via digital means.

Each interview began with a series of grand tour questions (McCracken, 1988) and later questions were structured around themes of consumers' experiences of living in the digital world and their digital detoxing regimes. Further probing and clarifying questions were employed to explore detoxers' thoughts and feelings in more depth. All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured style in which a loose interview guide was used to ensure consistency across the conversation, but all questions were open and the ordering of topics and themes were decided based on the discussion flow (Dessart and Cova, 2021). The interviews lasted between 1 to 2 hours and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim resulting in 464 pages of textual data. Pseudonyms were employed to anonymise data.

Table 4: Participant information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Living location
Mike	19	Male	Mixed martial art practitioner	Sweden
Jane	24	Female	PhD student	USA
Thomas	22	Male	English language teacher	Vietnam
Jason	33	Male	PhD student	UK
Lucy	31	Female	PhD student	Cyprus
Michelle	21	Female	Undergraduate student	Vietnam

Rosa	24	Female	Undergraduate student	Netherlands
Matthew	29	Male	Non-profit worker	UK
Emma	24	Female	Graduate student	UK
Chloe	21	Female	Undergraduate student	USA
Caroline	20	Female	Undergraduate student	UK
Anna	30	Female	HR manager	Vietnam
Alice	26	Female	Graduate student	USA
Amy	22	Female	Food manufacturing specialist	Canada
Julie	27	Female	Secondary school teacher	Canada
Amelia	28	Female	Nursing assistant	USA
Rachel	26	Female	IT specialist	USA
Jack	25	Male	Software engineer	Brazil
Paul	27	Male	Non-profit worker	UK
Sophia	29	Female	Software engineer	USA
Sarah	39	Female	Retreat coordinator	USA

All data were brought together as a combined data pool which was coded, categorised, and abstracted several times – particularly following a hermeneutical circle approach (Thompson et al., 1994; Spiggle, 1994). Here, each "part" of the data was interpreted and re-interpreted in order to create the sense of the "whole", and a holistic understanding of the data developed over time as I went back and forth between small parts and the whole data (Thompson et al., 1994: 435; also Kozinet, 2020). Through this iterative back-and-forth part-to-whole process, several themes were identified and organised around consumers' tactics of abstention and how those tactics reveal the reconstitution of consumers' desire to consume. Those themes were developed, challenged and modified over time as I constantly engaged with and consulted prior literature to support my understanding of emergent ideas. The process of writing up was also employed as a sense-making strategy that allowed me to understand how various themes were connected and unified under a coherent theory.

5.7. Findings

My findings reveal three important ways that tactics of abstinence are undertaken within the constant process of desire regeneration. First, in countervailing the NoDs' "attention" character, detoxers devise tactics to restrict their visibility within technocultural fields and maintain a distance from market actors' attention-capturing activities. At the heart of such market-distancing attempts is an ostensible "*re-autonomisation of desire"* in which consumers seek to regain some control over their drives and impulses to consume. Secondly, in defying the "production" logic of NoDs, detoxers invent tactics to momentarily disconnect from technocultural networks and the cultural pressures to be productive, and in doing so, to re-engage with moments and spaces of deceleration. Through these tactics, a process of "*deceleration of desire*" is at work whereby detoxers attempt to engage in more pleasurable and slowed-down forms of the consumption experience. Thirdly, in ostensibly resisting the dematerialised and virtualised networks' "disembodiment" logic, detoxers undertake tactics to re-connect with their embodied experiences and various material elements of the physical world. Here, the process of "*re-sensitisation of desire"* is set in motion as detoxers seek to reactivate their sensation-rich and affect-laden consumptive preoccupations. Crucially, these tactics of abstinence are interpassive and depoliticised in nature which are nurtured by market-located fantasies and solutions rather than a collective spirit to bring about durable structural changes.

5.7.1. Defying the "Attention" logic: The Re-autonomisation of Desire

One of the most dominant themes that has emerged from my data is centred around how detoxers seek interpassive ways to disengage with NoDs' "*attention*" logic (Kozinets et al., 2017: 667). In the context of techno-capitalism, one's attention and engagement in technocultural fields becomes a driving force for capitalist accumulation "under near-constant surveillance and monitoring by corporations such as Google, Facebook, Apple, and others" (Kozinets et al., 2017: 676). Across the data, I see many instances of what I call the "*re-autonomisation of desire*", that is the reshaping of desire into more "autonomous" consumption choices, facilitated by consumers' attempts to ostensibly countervail the tendency of their consumption being manipulated and automated by the coordinates of a surveillant digital marketplace (e.g., service platforms, algorithms, Big Data, AI-driven marketing practices) (Hoang et al., 2022). To regain more control over their consumption, many detoxers devise tactics to seek a fairly safe distance from market actors and ultimately not to leave their data footprints – or remain "invisible" – within the

networks (Hartley and Schwartz, 2020: 19). For instance, "Andy", a Nosurf poster, shares how he attempts to resist his urges to be incessantly drawn into social media platforms and in doing so, "revive" some of the authority over his consumption:

> "…[S]even days ago on a whim I committed to not posting anything to Reddit for a week […] The urge to post was strong. On more than one occasion I caught myself actually typing a post out automatically before I managed to stop myself before deleting it […] About four days in and the powerful urge to post faded to a dull and ignorable roar. I found my endless scrolling reduced to a reasonable few minutes at a time. I confirmed with myself that my engagement with a social media platform, Reddit included, is strongly dependent on my *participation*. If you remove the participatory element, you become a passive observer. A ghost. What once locked my attention for countless hours is suddenly only worth a cursory glance before moving on." ("Andy", Nosurf).

In trying to restrict himself from being caught up with by the constant lures of social media platforms such as Reddit, Andy hopes to regain some of his attention which used to be "*locked…for countless hours"* and completely out of his control. However, the route to that *finding-back-my-autonomy* goal is not an absolute giving up of Reddit but instead achieved through a personal compromise that ironically shows his deep fetishisation of this online platform: to "*remove the participation element*" but *still* exist on the site, in a form of what he believes as a "*ghost*" (whose behaviours and experiences can not be seen, tracked and recorded). The illusion of being someone who cannot be seen on the Internet allows Andy to act *as if* he is an outsider who is no longer "part of the game" while in practice, continue engaging in the digital environment (Žižek, 1989).

In a conversation about how Internet companies endlessly capture users' attention and how consumers can retrieve some of "the autonomy of their desire", "Joan", another Nosurf poster suggests her interpassive ways of disengaging with NoDs:

> "You can get app-blocking apps which prevent you from using certain apps - and they also have settings which prevent you from changing the app settings which, if you are comfortable with it, works really well. For my facebook account, I randomly generated a password online which is a string of digits and numbers, then I encrypted that password on my computer. I made the encryption password a code from the first line of a book - basically, it's now a real pain for me to log in to facebook, so I don't. I think it's less about using willpower, which is a precious resource and should be

> saved for actually important things, and more about removing the need to exercise willpower in the first place." ("Joan", Nosurf).

For Joan, the achievement of more control over her techno-consumption is, ironically, made possible through *further* immersion in technocultural fields. Abstinence for her is enacted completely in an interpassive manner – how *other* apps can prevent her usage of certain apps, how *other* within-app settings can prevent her from changing particular settings, or how *other* functions of Facebook can allow her to temporarily abstain from using Facebook. Joan's interpassive abstinence, which is devoid of "*the need to exercise willpower in the first place*", is akin to what has been conceptualised as "decaf resistance" – the kind of resistance that involves no sacrifice and has no actual effects (Žižek, 2002, 2013; also Contu, 2008).

As Žižek (2002: 10) puts it: "On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol". The basic principle here is that one can appeal to "resistance", "struggle", "abstinence", and so forth *so long as* it does not lead to anything truly revolutionary. Through this decaf resistance, detoxers like Joan do not run the risk of radically altering their current digital consumption habits and, the whole host of conveniences and pleasures on offer (also Hietanen et al., 2022). Yet, the sustenance of this decaf resistance might also take up a whole lot of activities – what Žižek (1998b: 145) terms "false activity" – in which one is "frantically active not in order to achieve something, but to prevent something from happening". As the above post shows, Joan appears rather active in her "abstinence" regime (e.g., installing apps, changing app settings, generating new passwords, etc.) – *exactly* so that no radical actions need to happen.

In an absolutely interpassive manner, the frantic activities that many detoxers engage with to achieve a feeling of control over their digital lifestyle are largely located *within* the marketplace and facilitated by substitute market-located objects. In the following post on Nosurf, "Sean" explains how he can *only* achieve some kind of abstinence from technocutural networks through another kind of unrestricted consumption that he spares for himself:

> "So I just finished up dry January and it felt great. I'm going to be uninstalling social media from my phone for the month of February. I was able to cut my screen time down this past month, but I've had a few "relapses". On a bad week I averaged 8 hours on my phone a day, on a good week 5-6. So I'm pretty addicted to my phone, mostly tiktok. I will probably keep Reddit, to avoid relapse I guess, I don't find myself super addicted to this app. But I've uninstalled Instagram, Twitter, and I deleted my Facebook a month ago. tomorrow will be my last day on tiktok. I'm hoping this 30 day detox will help me gain more control over how much my screen time has gotten out of hand." ("Sean", Nosurf).

An ostensible re-autonomisation of desire is achieved for Sean through his step-by-step uninstalling of different apps which happens completely *within* rather than without NoDs. Abstention from some forms of techno-consumption, for Sean, seems impossible without the *presence* of just another form (i.e., using Reddit). In his seemingly inescapable market reliance, Reddit acts as the substitute object that he must embrace to cope with the temporary absence of other objects of desire (e.g., Instagram, Facebook Twitter). The substitute object might also be understood as the "fetish", that is the embodiment of an ideological fantasy which allows one to disavow the unbearable truth (Carrington et al., 2016: 32; Žižek, 2009). Here, I argue, Sean is clinging to Reddit in his ostensible re-autonomisation of desire in order to disavow the truth that he has *no genuine control over his consumption.*

Elsewhere, Sophia, a 29-year-old software engineer, vocally shares her deep concerns about the attention economy: *"I think that the platforms that are really a big problem are the ones that, uh, like need to grab your attention. It's like the attention economy platforms, the ones that their business model depends on us spending more and more time using them because those are the ones that get you. They're deliberately addictive"*. Having worked in the tech industry for several years, Sophia (as an insider) feels that she knows enough about how harmful or dangerous technology can be. Yet, she also stops short of thinking of genuine solutions that are located outside this pervasive capitalist technoculture. Instead of undertaking any radical actions against tech companies and their attention-seeking business models, Sophia redirects her passions toward other tech products that she believes can help to solve the problems for her:

> "I think, I think what I dream about right now, what I think would be like the best thing that could ever happen to me is if phone companies start making those dumb

> phones with the full keyboard again like they had in like 2008 where you could text really easily. I would use one of those for the rest of my life if I could. I think smartphones and social media have been like the worst thing that's happened to the human race in like 50 years and I think like smartphones are going to be looked at the way we look at like smoking in like the 50s when everybody smoked and the doctor smoked and the pregnant women smoked and teenagers smoked and whatever…. And like I wish there was something that was kind of like the Light Phone. It was like a really dumb smartphone but it had a really good camera." ("Sophia", 29).

Sophia's disclosure of her market-mediated fantasy – a "*dream*" about desirous market commodities – reveals the deep irony and ambiguity of the situation: the best cure that one can reasonably hope for the current digital economy is the emergence of *more* digital products. In the absence of collective optimism for systemic change (Fisher, 2009; Winlow et al., 2015), Sophia and other detoxers' desire cannot overcome a deeply market-mediated logic that pervades their everyday digital lives. As the consequence, Sophia's passion for consumption is simply channelled away from mainstream consumption norms (e.g., using the smartphone) towards other market commodities (e.g., "*a really dumb smartphone"; "the Light Phone"*).

Crucially, in clinging to the fantasy that some "ideal" tech products exist out there in the marketplace, waiting to be found and consumed, Sophia and many other detoxers show a commodified desire that, far from bringing them some actual sense of freedom and autonomy in the digital marketplace, only entrapping them in further market engagement. If any, the "re-autonomisation of desire" is embraced like a *fantasy* that allows one to momentarily escape – rather than actually engage in – the tasks of undertaking organic resistance and bringing about actual change.

5.7.2. Defying the "Production" logic: The Deceleration of Desire

The second theme that has emerged from my data is centred around detoxers' attempts to disengage with what I consider to be the "*production*" logic of NoDs. This production character denotes how consumers' entanglement in NoDs oftentimes drives them to perpetually expand their social connections, interact with online others, and produce more content in the digital environments. Being entangled in technocultural networks (e.g., social media platforms, instant messaging apps, online gaming etc.) that are charged with "free-

flowing productive energy" of desire (Kozinets et al., 2017: 661), consumers incessantly feel the impulses and urge to maintain a sense of productivity, efficiency, and generally achieving *more* (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Hoang et al., 2022).

In seeking a distance from such inclination, many detoxers devise what I call "*counter-production*" tactics, understood as their attempts to find time to be temporarily disconnected from all connections, demands, and responsibilities imposed on them within their digitally-saturated lives. Instead, they focus on slowing down the pace of their digital lifestyle, that is, seeking a relative decrease in certain measures associated with their digital consumption (e.g., the time spent on certain apps a day, the number of friends on each social media platform, the number of online tasks being completed). I label this as the "*deceleration of desire*", defined as attempts to momentarily re-discover and re-engage with spaces, moments or ideals of non-productivity. The deceleration one seeks to re-engage with is often discussed in terms of spending some time on personal care and relaxation, as illustrated by "Rori", a poster on the Nosurf group:

> "I think it's very, VERY important you out relaxation high up there. In our modern times we can get caught up in the cult of productivity and busy, which is really the new consumerism at the moment. It's a badge of honour to be perpetually working on many tasks and goals but we're humans, we need to recharge, have time to relax. We can't always be on. Sure, have great, fulfilling and engaging hobbies, please! But also please be kind to yourself and find some ways of chilling out without force feeding yourself garbage content." ("Rori", Nosurf).

While being vocally against from the productivity ethos of capitalist technoculture, Rori's solution is not to completely withdraw from it but rather to insert momentary spaces of non-productivity into his everyday "rituals" of busyness. Small gestures of deceleration – being "*kind to oneself"* and "*find[ing] ways of chilling out*" now and then – work as the symbolic act that takes over the full functioning of the original symbolised activity (i.e., radical resistance), allowing Rori to act *as if* he truly maintains a level of deceleration in his everyday interaction with the network (also Walz et al., 2014). The illusion of resistance that he stages – coupled with his cynical distance toward the market – far from disrupting his unfettered engagement in the culture of productivity, instead allowing for his continual commitment to it (Žižek, 1989).

Such perpetual commitment to the digital world and its logic of productivity is evident across my data pool as digital detoxers, more often than not, rely on more tech products or services to achieve an (illusory or otherwise) sense of slowing down, as illustrated by "Matthew", a 29-year-old non-profit worker:

> "I've done something which kind of relies on tech, so it's probably a good use of tech, is that I got this app called Habit Share. And what it does is basically it gives me a reminder like three times a day and it just says "meditate". And then when I get that reminder, I try to just do a four-minute meditation, which just brings me back into myself and checks in and then normally when I don't come back, I'm more mindful and I'm less like distracted by stuff. So yeah I try incorporating mindfulness and reminding like little bits of mindfulness during the day and I think ideally like I'd like to get to a stage of doing that once in every hour. 'cause yeah, you could lose yourself a bit, don't you when you're intact and time can just go by so quickly. So yeah, trying to encourage that just constantly bringing back into myself and then connecting back in..." ("Matthew", 29).

Matthew's tasks to intermittently abstain from NoDs are largely *outsourced* to the Habit Share app, another tech product that is supposed to activate and maintain repetitive acts of deceleration (such as "*a four-minute meditation*" and "*little bits of mindfulness*") for him. While Matthew subjectively feels a sense of acceleration when being plugged into the network, momentarily being "unplugged" from it gives him the impression that he is not always "on". However, this sense of slowing down and being detached from technology might be just another fantasy maintained, paradoxically, within and through *the perpetual presence of technology itself* (also Žižek, 2002). Deceleration, for Matthew, as well for many other detoxers, is not underpinned by a wholesale retreat from the network but rather by the reconstitution of desire through a *productive* relationship with technology – whereby one's potential "*good use[s] of tech*" can more effectively serve one's purposes and fantasies.

Elsewhere, "Mike", a 19-year-old mixed martial arts practitioner, despite sharing his deep concerns about problematic aspects of the digital economy, social media, the smartphone, and particularly how he feels incessantly driven to engage in digital interactions and produce more online content during his waking hours, simply suggests a market-based solution to such issues that is utterly commodifiable:

> "Yeah, I don't know. It may be and it may not be. Of all the things I have tried, the dumb phone is the best one. But maybe there is something that I have not tried. Or maybe there is some phone in the future that will come out that will solve the problems. I don't know, but as far as I know, yeah, the dumb phone seems to be the best solution." ("Mike", 19).

What can be seen here is how Mike shows his persistent belief in the market and its *never-ending* solutions to whatever problems that consumers like him might face. A commodified desire is evident in his voice has he passionately talks about some future market product(s) that "*will solve the problems*" for him. His interpassive resistance largely follows the *fetishistic disavowal* formula: I know that technology is problematic *but nonetheless* I believe that more technology can help to solve its own problems (also Cronin and Fitchett, 2021). By cling to this market-mediated fantasy – how further forms of market immersion can solve the problems that the market has caused in the first place – one largely disavows the underlying structural issues that one perhaps feels unable to change (Fisher, 2009).

Like Mike, many other detoxers also show their utter reliance on market commodities that they believe can set a "deceleration of desire" in motion for them, as illustrated by "Gary" and "Pamela's" posts on the Nosurf group:

> "I genuinely believe there is a growing market for 'Focus Phones', and that if Windows Phone was continued it'd be the leader. I need a phone with just a few messaging apps, like WA or Signal, that's slow as shit and permanently in greyscale." ("Gary", Nosurf).

> "I recently bought Nokia 1 Plus. My goal was to get a smartphone that was annoying to use, and in that I succeeded. Everything is slow, the camera is shit, low internal storage, the thing basically sucks. Still, whenever I need Google Maps or any other "smart" features / apps, it's right there and available. I just don't do it for leisure or boredom anymore, because it annoys me whenever I use it. Path of least resistance is usually then best method for me." ("Pamela", Nosurf).

In detoxers' deeply held beliefs in alternative markets and their remedies, such as "*a growing market for 'Focus Phones'"* or *"Nokia 1 Plus",* there is genuinely no solution that locates outside the sphere of the market. No radical political solutions are embraced as consumers like Gary and Pamela cannot look beyond the coordinates of their everyday digital comforts and conveniences, *"Google Maps*", "*other "smart" features / apps",* and

so forth. A decaf resistance is evident in their ostensible attempts to "resist" against technocultural networks' production logic *without* the need for actual resistance: "*Path of least resistance is usually then best method for me."*

Crucially, one's attempts to abstain from a digital culture of acceleration and to engage in slowed-down forms of consumption, as in the above cases, may *not* result in an actual deceleration of desire itself. Rather, what we can see is "the acceleration of cycles of desire" in which abstinence engenders multiple "new possibilities in finding desired goods" (Denegri-Knott, 2011: 373). In constantly fantasising and seeking opportunities to engage in alternative market products with surrogate functions – which they believe can facilitate the slowing down of their desire – detoxers ironically contribute to the ongoing "*acceleration of desire*" within the broader capitalist market (Denegri-Knott, 2011; Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018). Abstinence from NoDs is interpassively dependent on other "object-thing[s]" within these networks (Žižek, 1998: 5), which *forecloses* the possibility of abstinence itself.

5.7.3. Defying the "Disembodiment" logic: The Re-sensitisation of Desire

Lastly, my findings reveal ways in which detoxers attempt to maintain a distance from the "*disembodiment*" logic of the NoDs (Kozinets et al., 2017: 672). Kozinets and colleagues provide a case for how consumers' entanglement in the virtualised, immaterial aspects of NoDs increasingly results in the disintegration and fragmentation of their physical bodies. "Always-on" within NoDs, one's physical existence is "radically decentered and relocated to the network" (pp.671-672), resulting in a situation where one loses touch with her authentic self and embodied experiences (also Hoang et al., 2022). To countervail such inclination, many detoxers devise tactics to renew and enrich their affective environments by punctuating their digital lives with affect-laden and sensation-rich consumption experiences – what I label the "*resensitisation of desire"*.

Crucially, in attempting to revive and rejuvenate the sensibilities, affectivities and meaningfulness of life, many detoxers often *divert* their passions from what they consider to be the inauthentic experiences in the digital milieu towards what they perceive to be

more authentic, or "*real*" experiences in the material world, as explained by "Frank", a Nosurf poster:

> "Consider mindset. The outside and nature is real life, the internet is a human-made construct. You can live in both worlds, even at the same time if you bring your laptop outside. Consider devoting time each week to being in nature. Nature is real life. As an aside, do you have a purpose or mission in life? The eastern religions call it dharma. Follow your mission in life and everything else (internet, social media, etc) all fall behind in importance. Focus on what is real." ("Frank", Nosurf).

For detoxers like Frank, the resensitisation of desire is performed largely at the level of a fantasy: the fantasy of an authentic world – the "*real life*" outside the digital, untouched by all the "*human-made*" forces of the internet. This separation of the authentic world and an inauthentic one is maintained for him exactly so that he can *continue* immersing himself in the digital network – "*live in both worlds", "bring your laptop outside*", and clearly, posting online about his abstinence. Small acts such as "*devoting time each week to being in nature*" allow him to embrace the illusion of maintaining that separation, setting him *free* to engage even more deeply in the immaterial aspects of the network.

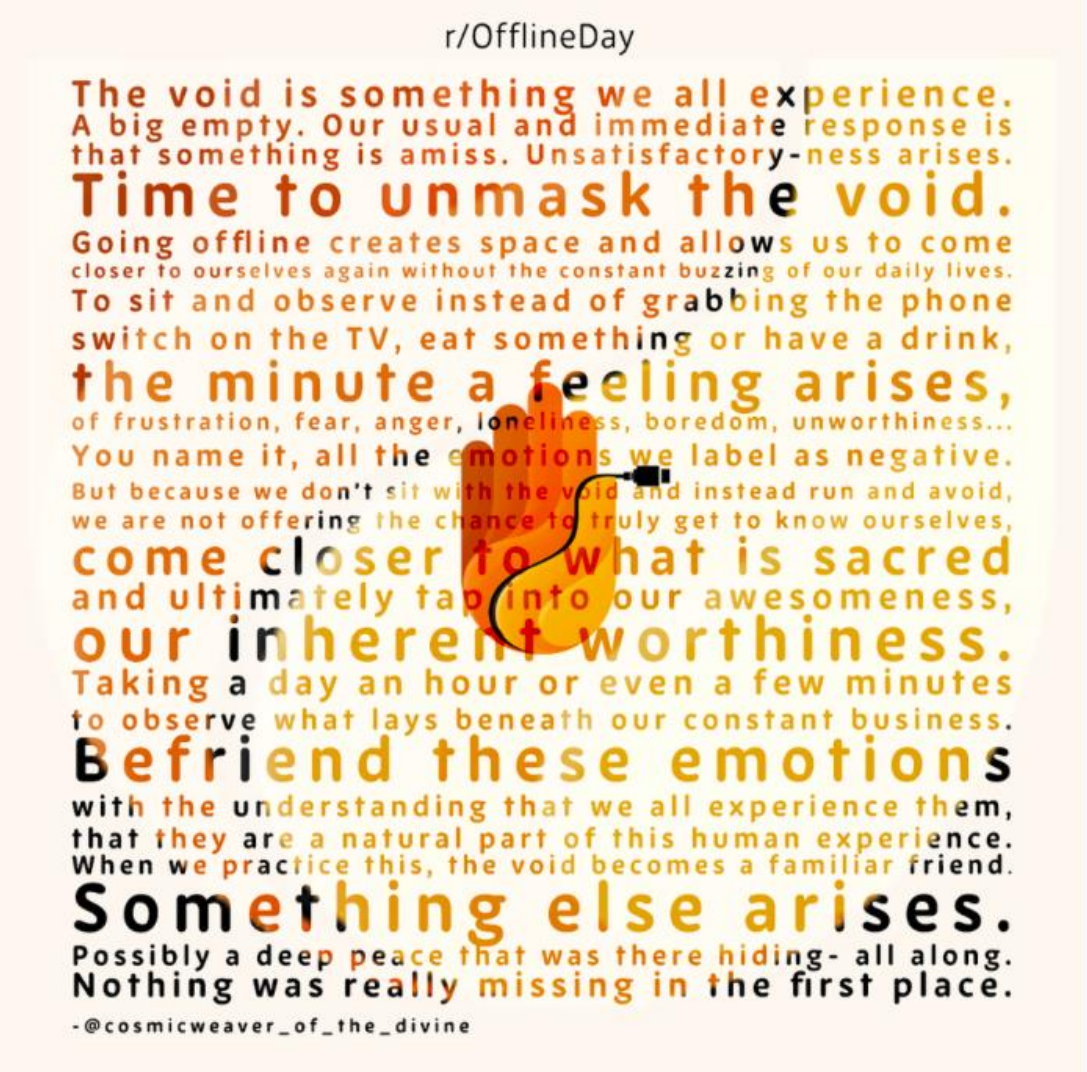
Elsewhere, "Judy", another Nosurf poster, shares what she perceives to be the disappearance of her corporeal experience and how she attempts to revive and rejuvenate her authentic feelings, sensations and affects in her everyday digital life:

> "I've been trying to pull away from these behavioural addictions a bit, and when I like, lay down and try to chill, I realised my thoughts weren't there anymore. I think they got cleared out to make room for the constant stream of information. So from today on I'm trying to invite them back in with a conscious effort to relate to the things around me, to name my sensations and my feelings about it. It kind of feels like I'm talking to myself like I'm a toddler, it's so janky. Like: "These are my pants. I feel weird about them because they're made of synthetic material" ("Judy", Nosurf).

Judy's perceived loss of particular aspects of her body and self reflects what Drew Leder (1990) calls "the absent body" – the corporeal absence in which "one's body is rarely the thematic object of experience". For Leder, corporeal absence is an issue that has been intensified in a digital age where "[t]echnologies of rapid communication and transportation allow us to transcend what used to be natural limits imposed by the body"

(pp. 1-3). In countervailing such disembodiment tendency, Judy embraces the illusion of *little successes* that she achieves in bringing back some of her embodied experiences, such as the ability to name her sensations and the material objects that exist around her. Yet, the route to achieving those small victories is full of struggle and ambiguity, as she further shares: "*On a morning where I haven't engaged with addicting shit, I can have some calm moods if I'm lucky. But as soon as I've engaged with too many flashy notifications or scrolled too far, thats when the anxiety starts for me.".* The constant battle within one's own body to regain some of its lost corporeal aspects reveals her felt powerlessness to change her depressing condition. If anything, her ostensible efforts to temporarily re-connect with her physical body – and the small successes that she clings to – only mask such bleak frustration and helplessness *without* genuinely discharging it.

Figure 4: "The big empty"



Source: Screenshot of
https://www.reddit.com/r/OfflineDay/comments/lqlo8e/the_big_empty/, June 2021.

The felt powerlessness to truly change their digital life conditions is sometimes expressed by detoxers' inclination to fully embrace the absent body, the negative aspects of their existence, the lack of meaningfulness in life, or the "*void*" – instead of avoiding it – as illustrated by an image captured on the *OfflineDay* subreddit (see Figure 4). At the heart of such attitude is not a true revolutionary spirit but rather a resigned acceptance of their everyday disenchanting conditions – the very real *"frustration, fear, anger, loneliness, boredom, unworthiness*" that they deeply experience – the bleak aspects of everyday life that they believe are "*a natural part of this human experience".* The irony of wanting to change things – to "*come closer to ourselves again*", to rejuvenate our "*sacred*" feelings, our "*inherent worthiness*", and "*a deep peace*" – through a decaf resistance that does not require much effort (i.e., taking a day, an hour, or "*even a few minutes*" to go offline), only further reveals their abandonment of the true possibility of change itself.

5.8. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper develops and extends Kozinets et al.'s theorisation of NoDs by showing how these technological networks are sustained not only by consumers' unfettered engagement in the networks but also by various modes of abstinence that are forever assimilated into pervasive desiring forces of NoDs themselves. My analyses of digital detoxing have allowed me to conceptualise "nodes of present absence" through which the constant process of desire regeneration occurs. A node of present absence denotes a point of temporary disconnection between consumers and their networked lives which ironically functions to produce new forms of connection, new forms of desire, and new forms of consumption interest. Through this concept, I show how the absence of consumption is ephemeral, temporary, and fleeting *at best*, which works to open up spaces and opportunities for NoDs to forever regenerate and expand themselves. In this regard, abstinence does not signal consumers' genuine antagonism per se (*cf.* Kozinets et al., 2010) but rather works alongside, and in favour of, the emergence of "para-capitalist" markets within an ongoing commodification of consumers' desires and fantasies. Para-capitalist markets are

understood as capitalism's "parasite"–markets that continually emerge around the re-shaping and re-constitution of consumer desire; ones that constantly offer new objects of desire to those who feel increasingly disenchanted by the market yet are utterly dependent on it in managing such bleak disenchantment. Through such conceptualisations, the paper has made two important contributions to critical marketing scholarship – what has recently been called "de-romanticist consumer research" (Fitchett and Cronin, 2022) or "Terminal Marketing" (Ahlberg et al, 2022).

First, the paper contributes to nascent accounts of market reproduction processes by which resistance helps to sustain rather than genuinely challenge the capitalist market system (Ahlberg et al., 2022; Bertilsson, 2015; Holt, 2002; Rumbo, 2002). In dovetailing with recent critical theorisations of "the *production of desire* in capitalist markets" (Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018: 539, original emphasis) and by considering how "the contemporary zeitgeist is already one where there seems to be no outside to the seemingly endless perpetuation of a commodified consumer culture" (Ahlberg et al., 2022: 12-13), I show how abstinence within today's techno-capitalist markets merely functions as desire regenerating forces that serve to reproduce – rather than genuinely disrupt – pervasive desiring forces of the global market system. Far from constituting any actual oppositional forces against techno-capitalism, consumers' ostensible passions and ideals to abstain from NoDs ironically work enable them to *further* immerse themselves in these networks.

In this regard, the paper shows how abstinence does *not* actually signal consumers' popular desire to "live outside" or maintain a genuine distance from the marketplace (*cf.* Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001; Kozinets et al., 2010). The voices of detoxers in this paper reveal to me how many of them deeply believe in, "dream" and fantasise about the latest or "futuristic" technologies – ones that they hope can offer them *whatever* solutions that make their digital lives more controllable, more meaningful, and more pleasurable. The absence of consumption might therefore be better understood as an act of total *conformity* to capitalist technoculture's logic and ideals (also Cronin and Fitchett, 2021). Indeed, there is no ideological tension between the desires of those who ostensibly abstain from consumption (the desire to engage with one's digital consumptive preoccupations in more autonomous, meaningful, and sensation-laden ways), and what digital consumer capitalism perpetually cultivates (i.e., *there are always new market-located solutions that suit your alternative desires!).* Abstinence from any given network of desire cannot function as a

"surprise" or cause any genuine disruption to the system. If anything, consumers' desires for ostensible deviant practices, lifestyles, and pleasures – "against" the mainstream norms – are largely predicted, shaped, and even largely expected by market actors in the "ever-moving and always-mutable processes of further commodification" (Ahlberg et al., 2022: 13). Abstinence might be better understood here as a pure product of what Fisher (2009: 9, original emphasis) calls "*precorporation*", that is, "the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture".

Second, the paper further reveals the sinister and disenchanting consequences of living within a cultural atmosphere of "TINA" (*There Is No Alternative*) or "cancelled futures" wherein collective optimism for genuine alternatives to capitalism has increasingly been lost (Ahlberg et al., 2022; Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018; Hietanen et al., 2020). By showing how interpassive tactics of abstinence work to channel and reproduce more desire for consumption, the paper illustrates how this cultural mood has translated and prefigured into the very *absence* of true politics and genuine transformative power at the heart of (resistant) consumer subjectivity. Clinging to market substitutes that play out the fantasies of resistance for them, consumers stage an appearance of being active precisely so that they can continue being part of the market as usual: *I have already undertaken action (through the market), there is no need for revolution.*

Here, the paper also contributes to the nascent critical study of the functioning of marketplace fantasies within today's marketized society by showing the deeply depoliticising effects that these fantasies have on the possibilities of organic resistance and genuine structural change (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021; Lambert, 2019). Beyond the "fantasies of omnipotence" (i.e., one could be *empowered* by the market) (Lambert, 2019: 336) and the "fantasies of market-based progress" (i.e., one could *progress* his or her life through market) (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021: 3), I have revealed the "fantasies of resistance" against the marketplace (i.e., one could even resist the market *through* the market) that allow consumers to effectively cope with, and ultimately sustain their presence within these systems. Such fantasies – interpassively enacted through market-located objects – function to "provide illusions of transformation without changing any of the fundamentals of capitalist markets" (Ahlberg et al., 2022: 3; Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Žižek, 2006).

In conclusion, in theorising how abstinence might result in more desire to consume within today's global capitalist NoDs, the paper has revealed "*ultra-realist"* and deeply pessimistic dimensions of a depoliticised (resistant) consumer subject whose actions remain tied to the marketplace and its fantasies and solutions and therefore perpetuate rather than undermine the status quo. In a way, this subject might be understood as what has been theorised by de-romanticist consumer researchers as "[t]he post-sovereign consumer", one that is shaped along the fantastical contours of global capitalist markets (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021: 17; Carrington et al., 2016; Cluley and Dunne, 2012). Beyond "delegating engagement and involvement to market enterprise" (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021: 17), the paper shows how consumers outsource their projects of abstinence – and as such, *surrender their ultimate power to enact change* – to the market itself.

As an important aside, I encourage future researchers to explore other collective contexts (e.g., veganism, freeganism, fasting) where communal or tribal forms of abstinence might also function to increase consumer desire and therefore sustain rather than challenge the global capitalist market system. There is also scope for future research to explore how the process of desire regeneration at the core of such collective abstinence is necessitated and perpetuated by various marketplace fantasies, ones that have not been theorised in this study. Future researchers might also consider how such "resistant" consumer lifestyles are mainstreamed and co-opted by emerging para-capitalist markets in various complex and sophisticated ways – an area of research that still remains under-explored within marketing and consumer scholarship.

5.9. References

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6. Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter synthesises the central ideas and overall contributions of the thesis, presents some societal implications, and identifies limitations of my research as well as avenues for future research.

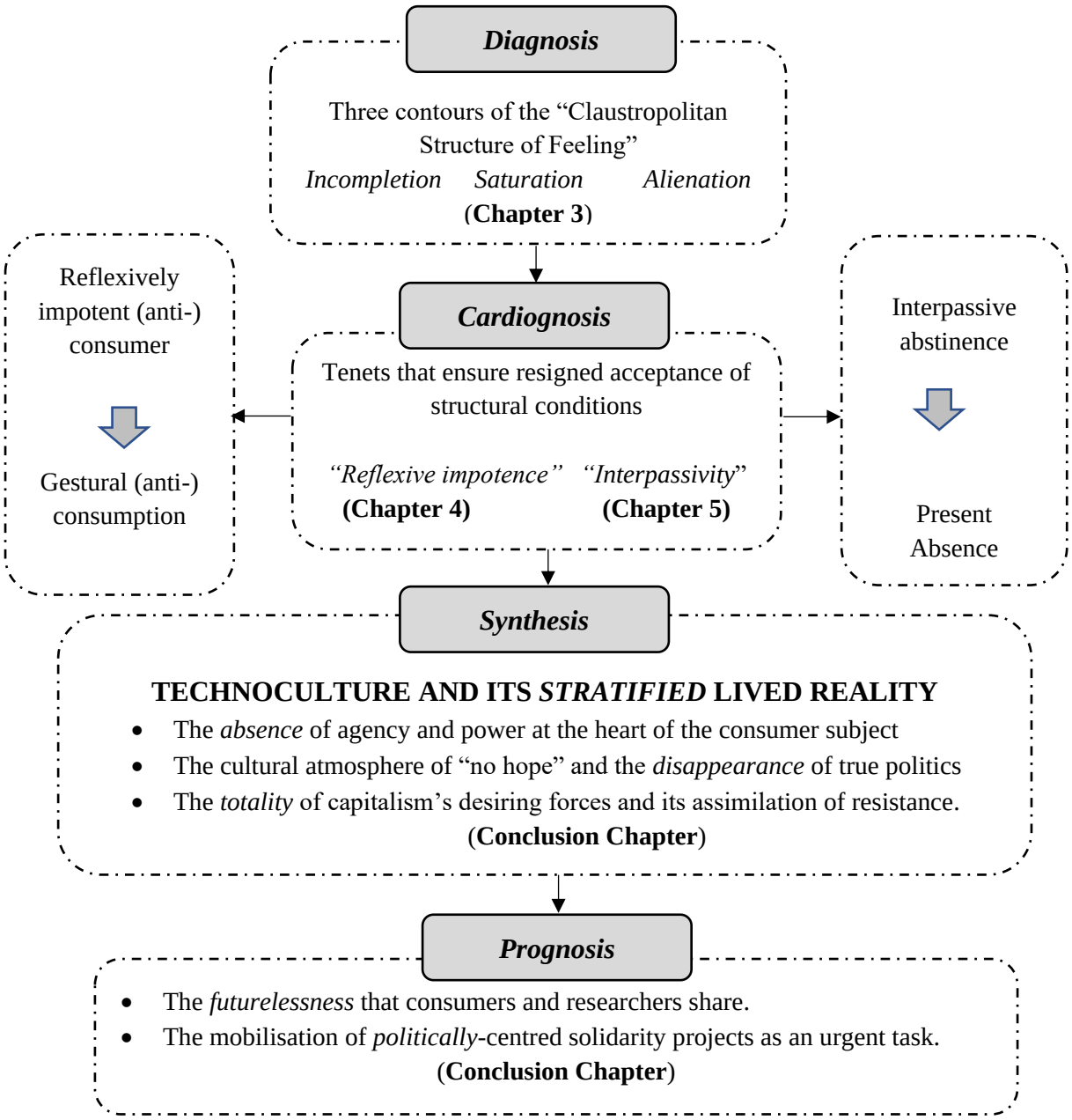
6.1. Summary of Papers and Overall Contribution

This thesis has explored the deep sense of entrapment and foreclosure at the heart of contemporary capitalist technoculture and what this means for consumers' everyday lived experiences. In contrast to predominant views of technocultural fields and networks as hedonistic, carnivalesque and emancipatory platforms for consumers' creative self-expression, meaningful sociality and critical agency (Belk, 2013; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Hoffman and Novak 2018; Schau and Gilly, 2003; Kozinets et al., 2017), this study follows in the footsteps of a nascent body of de-romanticist, "Terminal Marketing" studies (Ahlberg et al., 2022; Fitchett and Cronin, 2022) to radically challenge such celebratory and optimistic conceptualisations. The three research papers that constitute this thesis have sought to explore the various sinister and disenchanting aspects of consumers' lived and (tacitly) felt experiences of techno-consumption characterised by enduring dissatisfaction and unfulfillment, the felt powerlessness to discharge their discontent in meaningful ways, and depoliticised and self-centric ways of living that are perpetually reliant on market-mediated fantasies and market-based solutions.

My first paper, a conceptual piece, presented what Žižek (2015: 4) calls "the *diagnosis* of the basic coordinates of our global capitalist system" (original emphasis) – its underlying structural conditions. It did so by mapping out a claustropolitan structure of feeling, i.e., diagnosing the suffocating condition of entrapment (feeling "*trapped*") that consumers experience within a surveillant digital marketplace that with one hand offers entrepreneurial lifestyles, self-mastery, and social connectedness while enculturing perpetual anxiety, burden and alienation with the other. My other two papers then turned to providing what Žižek calls "the *cardiognosis*, 'knowledge of the heart of this system', i.e., the ideology that makes us accept it" (ibid, original emphasis). By empirically taking apart the meanings and interpretations that consumer subjects ascribe to their structural conditions, I unpacked the ideological fantasies that keep their resigned acceptance locked

in place. The second paper focused on theorising how political inertia and deep beliefs in the impossibility of structural change increasingly *lock* subjects out of collective projects of political intervention while the third paper further explained this field of entrapment by showing how consumers paradoxically rely on market-located object-things and their functions in critiquing and resisting against the market *itself*. This chapter presents a *synthesis* of all three papers but, also, by offering some societal implications and recommendations for future research, provides what Žižek calls "*prognosis*, the view of the future that awaits us if things continue as they are, as well as the putative openings, or ways out" (ibid, original emphasis). An overall mapping of this thesis and its central points is provided in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Overall Mapping of the Thesis



Overall, the thesis has offered us a dystopian, "terminal" understanding of technoculture and subjects' contextualised lived experiences within it. It has done so by combining a *micro-social* approach to the deeply disenchanting dimensions of consumers' life-worlds and a *macro-social* explanatory perspective on the problematic aspects of capitalist structural conditions (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) in order to provide a comprehensive account of capitalist technoculture and its lived consequences. As previous de-romanticist marketing work has tended to focus on either structural processes and mechanisms that underpin technoculture (e.g., Hietanen et al., 2020) or the experiential aspects of consumers' everyday digital lives (e.g., Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast, 2017), the ultra-realist, comprehensive treatment of technocultural fields and its lived parameters offered by this study is of great significance. In the context of capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009) where exploitation, inequality, injustice and suffering are rapidly increasing day by day – particularly for consumer subjects who are entangled in technoculture's inevitabilism and capitalist commodification every step of their way – presenting such a holistic, ultra-realist account of technoculture and its lived consequences has become important more than ever before. However, deconstructing and reporting on capitalist technoculture's fantasies and lived reality is not a simple task; with the deployment of new terminologies and exploratory frameworks (i.e., high-fidelity consumption, claustropolitanism, gestural anti-consumption, the reflexively impotent (anti-)consumer, interpassivity, nodes of present absence), this thesis has attempted to provide the reader with an alternative and deeper understanding of today's capitalist technocultural world – an ultra-realist picture of what is going on in this world and what it means for the commodified subjects who live, work, and play within it.

Looking more closely at this picture, we can see the various "layers" of capitalist technoculture and its *stratified* lived reality. The *first* layer that the reader could discern is the image of a fully interpellated, knowingly powerless and politically hollowed-out consumer subject characterised by its absence of genuine autonomy, political solidarity, and utopian hope for meaningful change. The subject is deeply dissatisfied with his or her digital life, yet finds *no* easy way out of such bleak dissatisfactions. Rather, the subject is resigned to accept the increasingly disenchanting reality that he or she is locked into, further exploring, engaging and "enjoying" other goodies, comforts and conveniences offered by digital consumer culture. One particular result of such resigned acceptance is the brutal intrusion of the digital into every corner of subjects' lives and the intensification of market

actors' operations and control over their everyday affairs. In many cases, consumers might find themselves subjected to increasingly hyper-predictable and conformist ways of living within a surveillance-driven digital marketplace, yet also feeling powerless to genuinely escape from such depressing conditions. In other cases, subjects might aspire or attempt to momentarily "resist" or disengage with a digitally-saturated lifestyle by undertaking everyday resistant behaviours, however, not to change the world around them but to get some sense of respite or to improve their own lives *at best*. Underpinning such "resistant" lifestyles and practices is neither a genuine desire for structural change nor any radical collective attempts to bring about improved conditions for all. Rather, subjects oftentimes ironically rely on market-located objects in order to "resist" technoculture for them, therefore surrendering their ultimate power to bring about any meaningful change to the market itself. The possibility of structural change being activated *through* consumer culture and various forms of consumers' reflexive defiance – one that has been long held by CCT researchers (e.g., Ozanne and Murray, 1994) – might be understood as just an ideological fantasy.

The *second*, less visible yet pervasive layer is the cultural atmosphere of confinement and foreclosure that envelops, shapes and conditions those consumer subjects' everyday thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and actions. It gives us a creepy impression of an increasingly unbearable onto-affective mood of "no hope" that cannot be discharged in any meaningful, durable way. While this collective mood of hopelessness or "cancelled futures" has already been revealed in previous Terminal Marketing accounts (e.g., Ahlberg et al., 2020; Cronin and Cocker, 2019; Hietanen et al., 2022), this study has unpacked how it has significant lived consequences on consumer subjects' everyday engagement with – and/or ostensible resistance to – the digital marketplace. What this thesis has shown is how the gradual loss of collective hope for better futures has increasingly dissolved and terminated any clear boundaries between what means consumption and what means anti-market, anti-consumption. For those subjects who are largely confused, unfulfilled and knowingly impotent, pro- and anti-market behaviours become just one and the same thing. Without genuine political alternatives underpinning them, consumer "resistance" is oftentimes upheld simply as a practical instrument – or a mere fantasy – that allows consumers to further participate in digital market dynamics. The gradual cancellation of any alternatives for the future has resulted in the disappearance of true politics *itself*.

The *third*, near "invisible" yet all-encompassing layer is the totality of techno-capitalism's structural forces that necessitate and sustain such a collective mood of futurelessness. In particular, the thesis has unpacked the various ideological fantasies that perpetuate consumers' everyday entrapment within the digital marketplace and their depressing acquiescence to the hegemony of an increasingly deterministic technoculture. The fusion of capitalism's commodifying logic and the emergence of ever-new, data-driven technologies has increasingly rendered the notion of a creative, autonomous and sovereign postmodern subject (e.g., Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) a less relevant if not obsolete idea. What this thesis has shown instead is how techno-capitalism's desirous forces have become so pervasive, intrusive and encompassing that there is genuine nothing that exists outside its reach, power and control. Capitalism – with its commodifying technological means as a new "powerful hand" – has increasingly become a *totality* that causes massive destruction and suffering yet it is also too good at offering solutions to whatever market problems that it creates. Indeed, this study has revealed how the continual dissatisfactions and unfulfillment that consumers feel in their everyday digital lives are even expected, shaped, and formatted by capitalism, ensuring that consumers forever come back to the market for *more*. In this context, even ostensible efforts to temporarily abstain from the market are simply swallowed up and assimilated, thus further guaranteeing consumers' entrapment and resigned acceptance.

All in all, the ultra-realist picture that I have attempted to paint through this thesis has disclosed to us the gradual disappearance of any agency, politics, solidarity, hope, and future at the heart of technoculture and its subjectivities. In doing so, this study has confronted, objected and challenged any celebratory conceptualisation of a utopian, optimistic, futuristic and progressive techno-capitalist society.

6.2. Societal Implications

The thesis has covered a topic of societal importance: the social consequences of digitalisation and how people feel about it. The feeling of entrapment and resignation that drives people deeper into digital consumer culture while foreclosing any genuine political actions, as revealed by this thesis, raises urgent questions about the future of our digital society and what researchers, practitioners and policy-makers can do to bring about change to the current digital economy that we feel inescapably entangled in. If people

accept digitalisation as the norm, and even those consumers who critique technology ultimately find solutions through more technology consumption, *what is the future for digital society*? What can we do to reverse this accelerating digitalisation? Where is the possibility of genuine resistance if society has already accepted new technological innovations as absolutely a force for good?

One possible solution would be for technology companies to remove the "surveillance" part from the designing of their tech products or services. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) also emphasises, we need to return to the kinds of digital technology that do not surveil, record, analyse, predict and commodify our everyday behaviours and experiences; and only then can we have a more mindful and sustainable mode of technoculture. Similarly, Tristan Harris, the co-founder of *the Center for Humane Technology*, suggests, tech companies can design technology that does not hijack people's psychological vulnerabilities in grabbing their attention. For him, "the ultimate freedom is a free mind, and we need technology that's on our team to help us live, feel, think and act freely" (Harris, 2016). At the most practical level, we need to have the kinds of technology that are designed and intended to be used as *tools* that serve our everyday purposes (e.g., communication, work, study) – without being turned into the means of surveillance, algorithmic manipulation and profit-making. There are important ethical questions that Big Tech and other Internet companies need to seriously focus on, to build more sustainable business models that can benefit individuals and society at large, and without causing a whole host of problems. How can we have the kinds of technology that are not deliberately designed to be addictive or manipulative? How can we have forms of technology that truly respect our personal privacy? This *market-based* solution, however, as Chapters 4 and 5 have shown, can also be problematic in itself as it may simply work in favour of further market expansion.

This thesis points to the urgent need for governments and policymakers to have much better laws and regulations in place to ensure that new technologies are designed in a way that takes serious consideration of important ethical and moral issues. For example, governments can implement radical measures to regulate the operations of businesses that lucratively profit from surveillance-based, AI-driven business models. More serious actions should also be taken in terms of protecting users' personal privacy, safeguarding their autonomy, and preventing their mental health and well-being from the

brutal intrusion of automating, algorithmic technologies. More educational programmes and events should be organised to boost consumers' awareness of the current digital economy and its harms, of the sinister consequences that techno-consumption has on individuals' everyday lives. Even though consumers' knowledge of the problems might not trigger radical actions as the thesis has shown, it is still crucial for people to "become acquainted enough with what the technology can do so that they are less likely to be fooled by it", as computer scientist and philosopher Jaron Lanier has suggested (Adams, 2017, n.p). Most importantly, we need our governments and authorities – those who claim to support, promote and preserve human rights, equalities and societal progressivism – to *seriously* look into the everyday problems that an average citizen encounters in their everyday entanglement in the digital capitalist market (also Winlow et al., 2017). Those authorities would need to truly confront and challenge the disenchanting reality that many individuals – especially the young, the elderly, the poor, the vulnerable, and the disadvantaged – have to face and experience in their everyday digital lives. In doing so, the government that represents us must seriously consider and strive for a genuine alternative to the current problematic technologically-mediated capitalist system that we are all part of. As Winlow et al. (2015) aptly point out, perhaps what we actually need now is the courage to look to something else, something that is radically different from the capitalist realism that we are now trapped in. It is only then that we can expect to have forms of technology that *truly* help us live, feel, think and act freely as Tristan Harris (perhaps just another successful marketer?) has suggested.

For individual consumers, as this thesis has shown, their coping strategies such as digital detoxing function as *pseudo*-activities that can impede rather than engender solidarity and collective actions. As discussed in paper 3 (Chapter 5), digital detoxing, like many contemporary forms of consumer "resistance" that occur in today's neoliberal capitalist society, offers the appearance of change while actually "mask[ing] the nothingness of what goes on" (Žižek, 2009: 183). The very act of investing in pseudo-activity (i.e., the activity undertaken merely for superficial self-expression and self-interest rather than for anything bigger) means that individual subjects have "already succumbed to the fundamental logic of capitalism" (McGowan 2016: 13). Therefore, rather than invest in such pseudo-activities thereby simply contributing to further capitalist expansion, consumers should channel their dissatisfactions into the root causes of the problems – the underlying structural conditions that drive many of us towards

precariousness, disillusionment and unhappiness (also Fisher, 2009). There is, clearly, an urgent task to promote and enhance social and political solidarity among individuals in creating change. In doing so, as the thesis has demonstrated, individuals should engage in collective debates about underlying structural issues, refrain from undertaking privatised acts of resistance (Chapter 4), and most importantly, refuse to rely on the marketplace for the solution to *everything* (Chapter 5). Only when consumers are removed entirely from the "false consolations or misguided hope" (Ahlberg et al., 2022: 14) offered by more goodies, comforts and conveniences readily available within pervasive digital consumer culture, can they confront the hopelessness of their lived reality – and in doing so, to have the courage to overcome the collective problems of our times. There is hope for our digital future, but the route to that future requires much more political energy, time and effort than the intermittent digital detoxes that everyone can undertake now and then.

6.3. Limitations

This thesis is limited to the investigation of personal acts of consumption restriction, abstinence, and/or management, and has not considered existing cases of solidarity and/or radical, collective resistant behaviours (Morrison and Gomez, 2014: 14). On the one hand, an exploration of various collective contexts of digital detoxing, such as *The Slow Media* or *the National Day of Unplugging* (Rauch, 2018; Syvertsen, 2020), might reveal different dimensions of our contemporary technoculture's foreclosure. Would such short-lived, fleeting and rather superficial events also speak to our collective sense of entrapment; and how? How is the felt impossibility of systemic change (and a kind of collective pseudo-resistance) played out through such commodified events? A critical, ultra-realist exploration of such ostensibly communal projects of unplugging might also inform the deeply pessimistic, ultra-realist perspectives undertaken by this research, albeit in a different way. On the other hand, there might exist more radical, collective actions amongst individuals and groups such as boycotting Big Tech brands, destroying technological products, or dropping out from technology altogether and going "back to the woods" (Morrison and Gomez, 2014: 14), thus the findings from this thesis might not reasonably cover the more "hopeful" and "futuristic" everyday contexts where the futureless vicissitudes of digital consumer capitalism are truly resisted by consumers (also Portwood-Stacer, 2012). An exploration of militant solidarity groups who might engage

in radical action against technology and the digital economy (if they do exist!) would perhaps result in alternative understandings of consumers' everyday practices and experiences within technoculture.

Another limitation of this study stems from the fact that a big part of my data collection paradoxically revolved around my immersion in the online world due to the lockdown restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. While this allowed me to get access to detoxers' thoughts and feelings in authentic and natural ways, it somehow prevented me from approaching and understanding other views and voices, ones that might not be fully articulated in the online fora. This limitation was amplified as all in-depth interviews were also conducted via digital means (Teams/Skype/email). The lack of informant identifiers, personal histories and biographies, and other contextualizing information delivered through the digital context – some interviewers even refused to provide any personal information – somehow affected how I interpreted the data at hand, and particularly how I could connect what was said by digital detoxers with the broader conditions that influenced such discursive expressions. Moreover, while the sample of those individuals who detox from technology and post about their digital detoxing allowed me to explore the sense of impotence that penetrates the digital world, such a methodological choice perhaps also excludes alternative understandings of the lived reality of detoxers. The sample of those who detox from the digital world and therefore do *not* post anything online would generate very different research results from what has been presented in this study. Would those individuals experience the shared feelings that are theorised here (Chapter 3)? Would their acts of resistance be radically different from the ones that are being discussed? (Chapters 4 and 5)? An exploration of the offline context in which those consumers' resistant acts occur – whether it be their homes, workspaces, leisure spaces, and so on – might reveal other aspects of consumers' lived experiences of techno-consumption. In addition, while a netnographic enquiry would allow me to collect naturally occurring data, some of the posts collected in online forums such as Reddit could be fabricated, and the nature of the online enquiry made it hard for me to detect such incidents.

Lastly, my personal experiences of digital detoxing and my reflections on living in the digital world, to a certain extent, played a part in this study. Particularly, my personal thoughts and feelings have somehow affected the ways that I approached and explored

the collective mood of our digital present (Chapter 3) as well as how I interpreted the phenomenon of digital detoxing (Chapters 4 and 5). However, I strived to limit my personal influences on the findings of the study wherever possible, and my supervisors played an important role in casting a more "objective" eye to the findings. Also, in trying to maintain a fine balance between two roles, researcher and digital detoxer, I routinely went back and forth between fieldwork and extant literature to find broader theoretical frameworks and alternative explanations. Although it was not possible for me to not let my personal subjectivity influence the emergent findings of this study, I also argue that the very deep feelings and emotions that I experience in my digital life fuelled me with the passion that I needed to keep this study going and to delve deeper into the research problems at hand.

6.4. Avenues for Future Research

This study opens up avenues for more nuanced explorations of the lived and felt aspects of consumers' everyday digital lives. As also discussed in the Introduction section (Chapter 1) and Paper 1 (Chapter 3), because technology has both positive and negative outcomes for individuals, it is possible that life under technoculture is experienced more complexly and dynamically than what has been theorised in this thesis. Particular attention should be given to how other shared feelings or affects infuse and shape consumers' day-to-day interactions with the digital marketplace. Besides the structure of feeling of claustropolitanism (Chapter 3) and the widespread mood of reflexive impotence (Chapter 4) that have been presented here, are there any other alternative or contrary affective consequences of today's technoculture? Besides from the three key affective contours that make up claustropolitan life, are there any other collective feelings that give rise to the deep sense of foreclosure that pervades our digital world? How do such shared feelings or affects function to alter or reproduce consumers' dependency on the digital marketplace? How do they play a role in market reproduction processes?

In addition, future research might also pay attention to the relationship between consumers' lived experiences of techno-consumption and their varying socioeconomic backgrounds and lifestyle commitments. As mentioned in the first paper (Chapter 3), social class is an area that remains largely under-examined in prior marketing studies of technoculture and techno-consumption (Denegri-Knott et al., 2020). Those consumers

who belong to different hierarchical social categories may experience living within technocultural fields in varying ways that have not been revealed in this study. There might be even "darker" and more sinister lived consequences for those consumers with lower social statuses and/or poor digital literacy skills who might be more vulnerable to data-driven discriminatory classification and unfair forms of algorithmic exploitation (Cinnamon, 2017; Yeung, 2018). An exploration of such pessimistic and troubling aspects of those consumers' everyday digital lives could form a sustainable pathway for future research.

Another consideration for future research is the interrogation of consumers' escapist experiences within today's firmly capitalist technoculture. Consumers' efforts of temporarily retreating from the online world, such as digital detoxing, can be replete with perpetual struggles, tensions and paradoxes. Future work can delve deeper into such fields of tension, for example, by revealing the ideological fantasies and/or paradoxes that underpin consumers' escapist attempts. While the thesis has shown the felt impossibility of detoxers' living outside technocultural networks, more consideration should also be given to what underpins such *felt* impossibility and/or struggles of escapist experience. Attention could also be paid to how consumers' escapist attempts play a role in market reproduction processes; in other words, how the marketplace feeds upon escapism in its incessant expansion and diversification. Another related consideration for future studies is the exploration of the various affective dimensions of consumers' quest for escapism from technocultural fields. An exploration of the affective aspects of consumers' mundane escapism in other contexts rather than digital detoxing – such as binge-watching (Jones et al., 2020), escapism into the soundscape created through music (Kerrigan et al., 2014), escapism through analogue consumption (Humayun and Belk, 2020), and so forth – could perhaps reveal highly illuminating and alternative insights.

Future work might also further explore the intersection of consumer subjectivity, ideology and affect within today's digital marketplace. Although this study has attempted to theorise how the consumer subject is constituted at the juncture of ideological and affective forces (Chapter 3), there is scope for future research to look into various empirical contexts to delve deeper into such processes. For example, future enquiries might focus on exploring how various pre-conscious, pre-subjective affects – and other non-representational dimensions of life – shape and condition ways that consumers

deeply feel, perceive, and react to techno-capitalism and its ideological fantasies (also Coffin and Egan-Wyer, 2022). Additional useful research methods and techniques – such as ethnographic enquiries (in which the researcher follows individuals' behaviours for extended periods of time as they move through everyday life), researchers' introspection (in which the researcher becomes particularly sensitive to the way that affect moves around environments and creates atmospheres), or videographic methods (in which the researcher captures bodies in action to assess the movement of pre-cognitive affects) (see Hill et al., 2014) – might be employed in such nuanced explorations.

Lastly, as also mentioned in paper 3 (Chapter 5), there are avenues for future research to explore how various forms of consumer "resistance" might also function *apolitically* – perhaps in ways that have not been already theorised in this study. Particular consideration could be given to the relationship between those apolitical resistant practices and the functioning of various symbolic processes or marketplace fantasies at the heart of global techno-capitalism. Also, while this study has revealed ways that personal acts of anti-consumption such as digital detoxing function as "gestures" of resistance (Chapter 4) and "interpassive" tactics of resistance (Chapter 5), there is scope for future research to explore how various collective or tribal forms of anti-consumption might also have depoliticising effects and work to perpetuate rather than genuinely challenge the status quo. Future researchers can also look into other empirical contexts (e.g., veganism, freeganism, mindfulness, bodybuilding, DIY, freecycle) to examine forms and variants of consumer "resistance" that are largely mainstreamed and become a central part of consumers' everyday practices. These contexts might be useful in the exploration of how consumers seamlessly move back and forth between pro- *and* anti-market behaviours in pursuit of particular goals and fantasies. What do such practices mean for our understanding of consumers' subjectivity, contemporary marketised society, and the "futureless" vicissitudes that we are all part of? What does that mean for our understanding of consumers' agency, their transformative power, and the possibility of structural change *beyond* the collective foreclosure of our times?

Again, to answer these questions – and to genuinely overcome the deep sense of helplessness that pervades our digital present – requires much more attention, effort, and courage from researchers, consumers, policymakers, and other stakeholders. With this study, I only hope to have provided some inspiration for such future endeavours.

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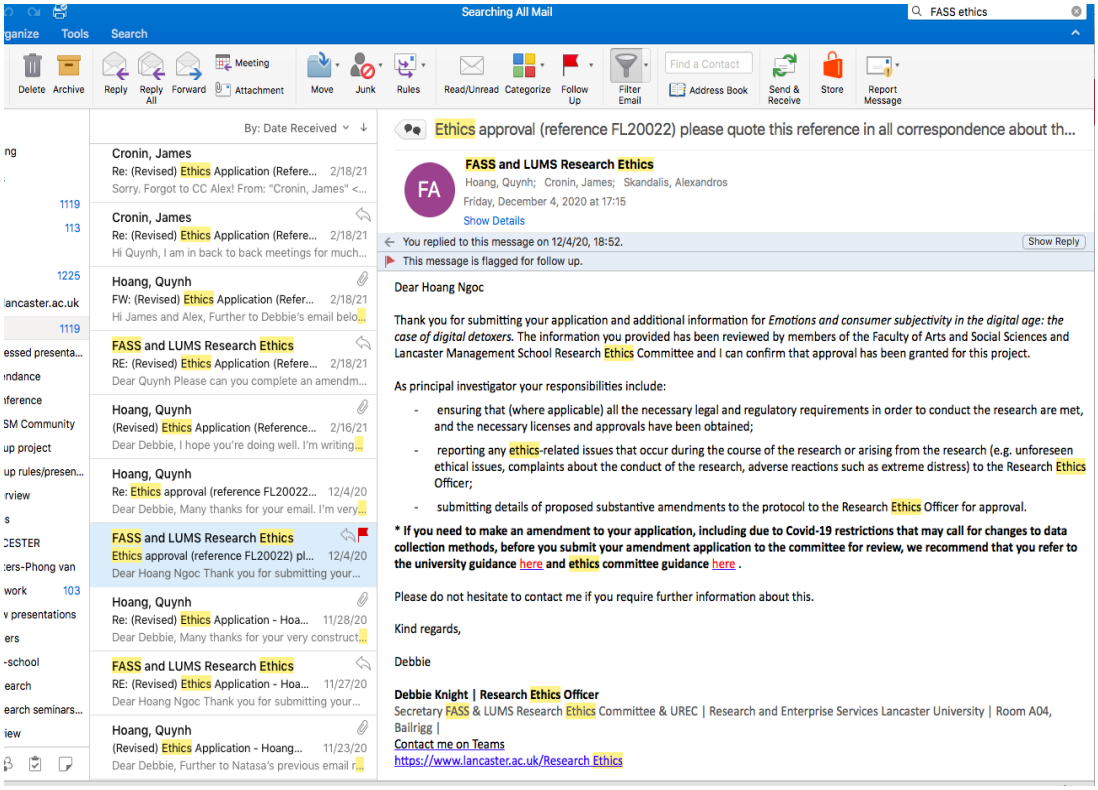
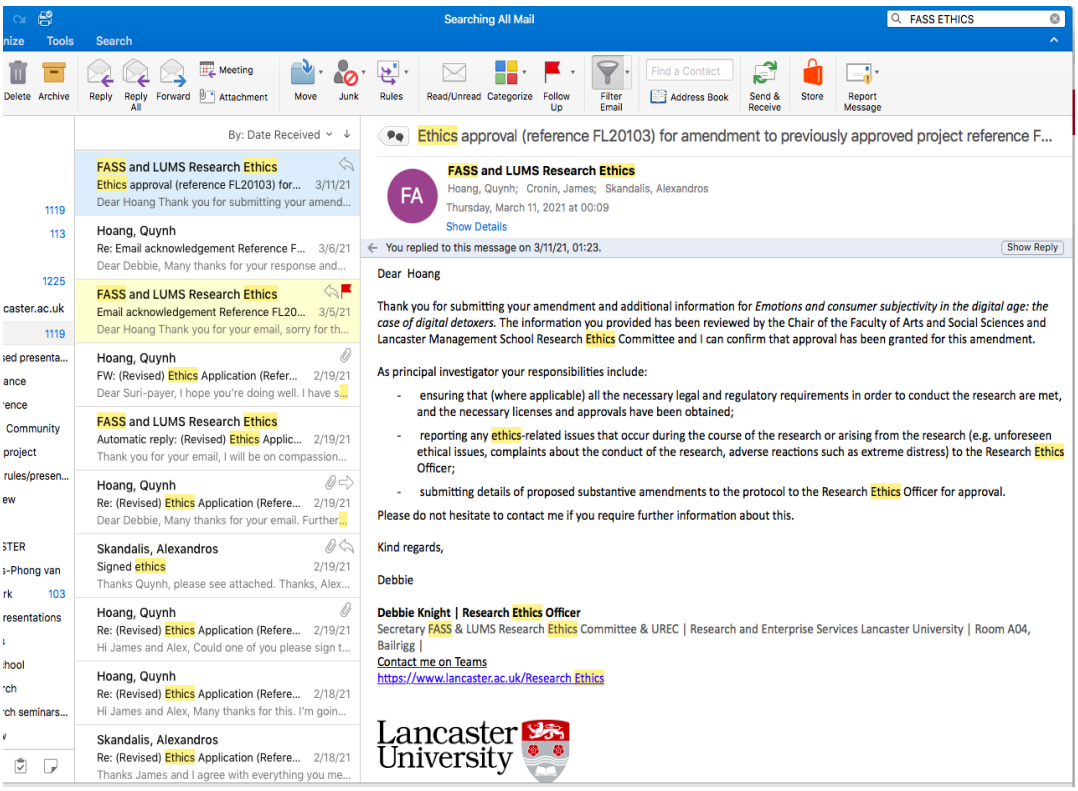
8. Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethics approval by FASS-LUMS Ethics Committee





Appendix 2: Sample of participant information sheet for interviews

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

"Consumer practices of digital detoxing under surveillance capitalism"

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am Hoang Ngoc Quynh, a PhD student at Lancaster University, and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about consumer practices of digital detoxing in the digital age. Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

This study aims to understand consumer practices of digital detoxing (i.e., a process or a period in which one abstains from or limits his/her engagement with digital technology in order to remove the harmful effects of such consumption) in the digital age. It focuses on the particular practices that consumers are engaged with in order to reduce the negative influences of their consumption of digital technology (e.g., social media, mobile phones, computers, video games).

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited to take part in the study because you have identified yourself as a digital detoxer and because you are willing to talk about digital technologies, digital detoxing and other related aspects of your digitally-mediated life. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decided to take part, this would involve attending an interview to discuss your thoughts and experiences surrounding digital detoxing. The interviews will be largely centred on your experiences of digital technologies, your motivations for going through a digital detox, how you undertake a digital detox, and other relevant issues surrounding our digital lives. We suggest that our interview is conducted via Microsoft Teams, which is Lancaster University recommended platform in relation to privacy protection and security control. If you wish to have a Skype or telephone or email interview instead, you need to be aware what this entails as these are not university-recommended platforms. It has been recognised that conversations via Skype or email or telephone may be recorded by the service provider and the data may later be used (by the service provider or by some third party) for different purposes (e.g. targeted ads) thus not ensuring privacy protection. An interview done via Skype/MS Teams/telephone will take about 60 minutes while an email interview will involve a series of email exchanges between me and you (which may last up to a few months). Only with your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded, either by a MS Teams recording (for a Teams interview) or by an audio-recording app on my cell phone (for a Skype/telephone interview). Once the (Skype/telephone) interview is transcribed, the audio recording on my phone will be deleted (after being backed up). However, I cannot guarantee you that such an audio recording stored on my phone will not be used by a service provider or a third party. Thus, a Teams call might be a better choice, however it is entirely up to you to choose the kind of interview that you are most comfortable with. The audio recordings will be stored in encrypted files and on password-protected computers. Each interview recording and its transcript will be kept jointly in an encrypted file. All the audio recordings will be transcribed by me. Hard copies of the transcribed files, at your request, can be sent to you to review. You will have the right to correct errors in the transcript and to remove any data prior to its inclusion in the final analysis.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Participating in this study will allow you to share your thoughts and experiences about our digital lives in general and digital detoxing practices in particular. If you take part in this study, your insights will contribute to our understanding of the relationship between consumer tactics of resistance and the broader structural framework that underpins such tactics.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is completely voluntary.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time before or during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part. Participation will involve one interview, likely to last about 60 minutes. Even though the discussion during the interview will centre around your emotional life, it will discuss both negative and positive emotions and the interview questions will be designed in order, so as to minimise any harm or distress that may cause to you afterwards. However, if something upsets you during the interview, you can ask me to stop the interview at any point, should you decide to take part. Similarly, if you are asked a question which you do not feel comfortable answering, you do not have to answer them, just let me know that you are not in the position to answer the question.

Will my data be identifiable?

After the interview, only I and my two doctoral superviors will have access to any information or ideas you share with me (i.e. access to the audio recordings and interview transcripts). All data will be anonymised – with pseudonyms being used later for citing quotes to make sure that no one can identify you or anyone else who has taken part in the study. I will keep all personal information about you (such as your name and other information that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in this project.

How will the information I have shared be used, and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you have shared with me for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and journal article publications. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences. When writing up findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me, however I will only use anonymised quotes from my interview with you so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in my thesis/publications/ presentations.

How my data will be stored?

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one rather than me and my two doctoral supervisors, will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. Any hard copies of your data will be anonymised, and I will store them securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will also keep data that can identify you (e.g. your views on a specific topic) separately from non-personal information. In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact my supervisors and me in the first instance:

Hoang Ngoc Quynh, n.q.hoang@lancaster.ac.uk
Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster, LA1 4YX

Dr James Cronin, j.cronin@lancaster.ac.uk/ +44 (0)1524 510663
Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster, LA1 4YX

Dr Alex Skandalis, a.skandalis@lancaster.ac.uk/ +44 (0)1524 59482
Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster, LA1 4YX

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact:

Professor Anthony Patterson, Director of Research (Marketing Department),
a.patterson2@lancaster.ac.uk **Lancaster University Management School,**
Lancaster, LA1 4YX

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix 3: Sample of consent form for interview participants

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Consumer practices of digital detoxing under surveillance capitalism
Name of Researcher: Hoang Ngoc Quynh
Email: n.q.hoang@lancaster.ac.uk

After you have carefully gone through the participant information sheet and have all your questions and concerns related to this study satisfactorily answered by me, please either sign this consent form to confirm this, or alternatively you can give me your verbal consent before our interview starts. If you are happy to sign this consent form, please tick the following boxes, sign the form and send it back to me.

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within **two (2) weeks** after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within **2 weeks** of taking part in the study my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	☐

4. I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	☐
5. I understand that any interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____ _____ _____

Name of Participant Date Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____

Date _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

Appendix 4: Recruitment poster

Lancaster University

TAKING A BREAK FROM OUR DIGITAL WORLD?
CALL FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Are you trying to:

- ✓ Give up or limit your social media usage, online gaming, web surfing
- ✓ Restrict your time spent online
- ✓ Limit your smartphone use
- ✓ Spend more time away from screens

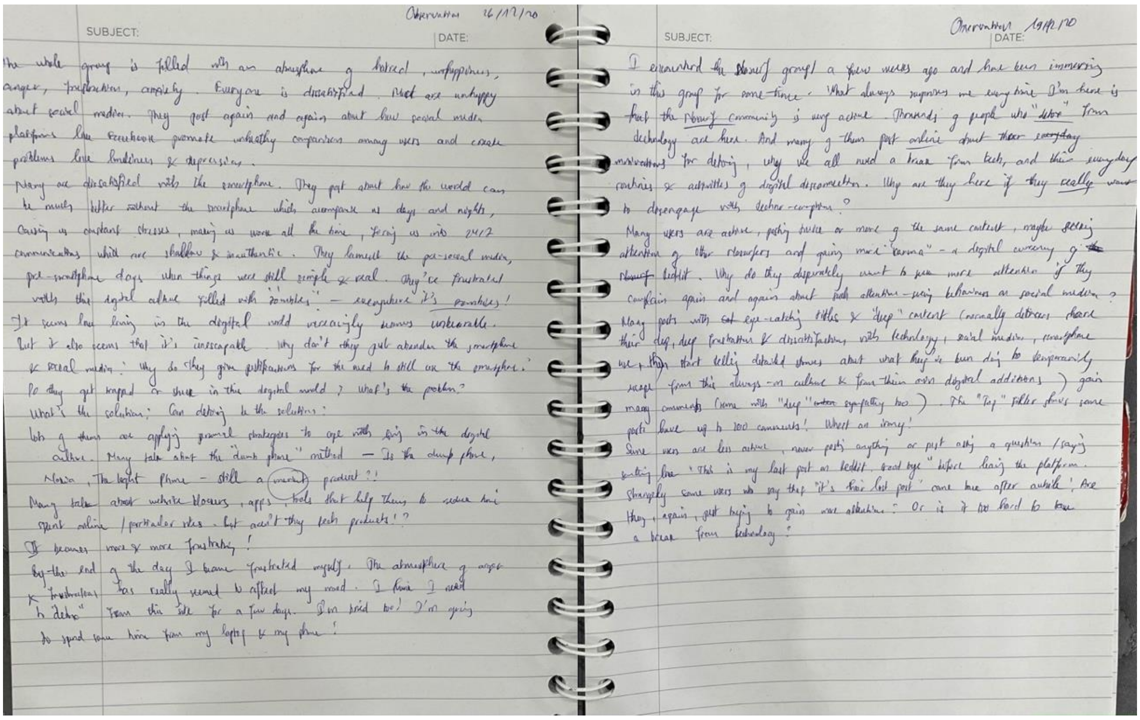
If so… Please talk to me! I would really appreciate hearing your thoughts about your journey

My name is Quynh and I'm a PhD Researcher from Lancaster University Management School. I'm looking to speak with individuals about voluntarily reducing or abstaining from using digital devices such as smartphones or personal computers, and social media platforms. I can arrange a video call with you at a time of your choosing. The interview will last approximately one hour.

Please contact me at **n.q.hoang@lancaster.ac.uk** for more information.

Thank you!

Appendix 5: Sample of immersive journal

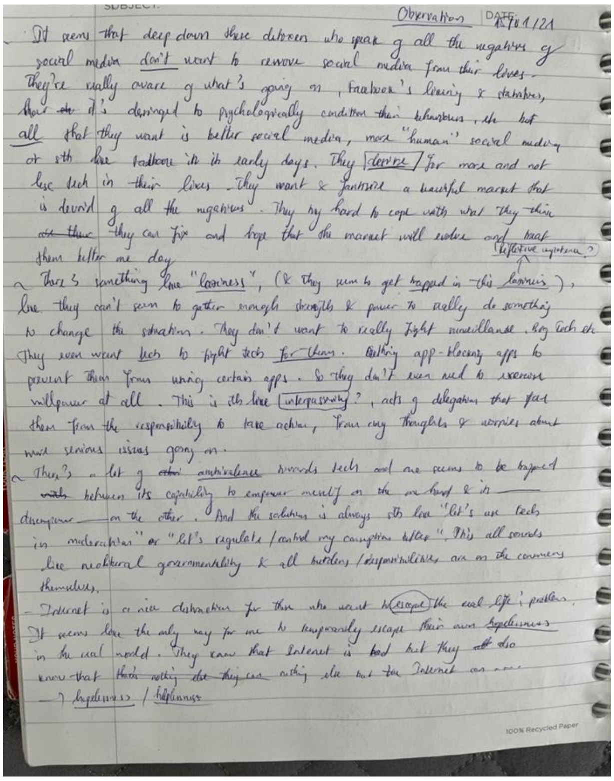


Observation 26/12/20

The whole group is filled with an atmosphere of hatred, unhappiness, anger, frustration, anxiety. Everyone is dissatisfied. Most are unhappy about social media. They post again and again about how social media platforms like Facebook promote unhealthy comparison among users and create problems like loneliness & depression.
Many are dissatisfied with the smartphone. They post about how the world can be much better without the smartphone which accompanies us days and nights, causing us constant stresses, making us work all the time, forcing us into 24/7 communications which are shallow & inauthentic. They lament the pre-social media, pre-smartphone days when things were still simple & real. They're frustrated with this digital culture filled with "zombies" — everywhere it's zombies!
It seems like living in the digital world increasingly seems unbearable.
But it also seems that it's inescapable. Why don't they just abandon the smartphone & social media? Why do they give justifications for the need to still use the smartphone?
Do they get trapped or stuck in this digital world? What's the problem?
What's the solution? Can detoxing be the solution?
Lots of them are applying personal strategies to cope with living in the digital culture. Many talk about the "dumb phone" method — Is the dumb phone, Nokia, The light phone — still a (market) product?!
Many talk about website blockers, apps, tools that help them to reduce time spent online / particular sites. But aren't they tech products!?
It becomes more & more frustrating!
By the end of the day I became frustrated myself. The atmosphere of anger & frustration has really seemed to affect my mood. I think I need to "detox" from this site for a few days. I'm tired too! I'm going to spend some time from my laptop & my phone!

Observation 19/12/20

I encountered the [illegible] group a few weeks ago and have been immersing in this group for some time. What always surprises me every time I'm here is that the [illegible] community is very active. Thousands of people who "detox" from technology are here. And many of them post online about their ~~everyday~~ motivations for detoxing, why we all need a break from tech, and their everyday routines & activities of digital disconnection. Why are they here if they really want to disengage with techno-consumption?
Many users are active, posting twice or more of the same content, maybe seeking attention of other [illegible] and gaining more "karma" — a digital currency of [illegible] Reddit. Why do they desperately want to gain more attention if they complain again and again about such attention-seeking behaviours on social media?
Many posts with ~~[illegible]~~ eye-catching titles & "deep" content (normally detoxers share their deep, deep frustration & dissatisfaction with technology, social media, smartphone use, then start telling detailed stories about what they've been doing to temporarily escape from this always-on culture & from their own digital addictions) gain many comments (some with "deep" ~~[illegible]~~ sympathy too). The "Top" filter shows some posts have up to 100 comments! What an irony!
Some users are less active, never posting anything or just asking a question / saying something like "This is my last post on Reddit. Good bye" before leaving the platform. Strangely some users who say that "it's their last post" come back after a while! Are they, again, just trying to gain more attention? Or is it too hard to take a break from technology?



Observation 10/01/21

It seems that deep down these detoxers who speak of all the negatives of social media don't want to remove social media from their lives. They're really aware of what's going on, Facebook's leaking & data [illegible], how it's designed to psychologically condition their behaviours, etc. but all that they want is better social media, more "human" social media or sth like Facebook in its early days. They [desire] for more and not less tech in their lives. They want & fantasize a beautiful market that is devoid of all the negatives. They try hard to cope with what they think ~~[illegible]~~ they can fix and hope that the market will evolve and treat them better one day. (reflexive impotence?)
~ There's something like "laziness", (& they seem to get trapped in this laziness), like they can't seem to gather enough strength & power to really do something to change the situation. They don't want to really fight surveillance, Big Tech etc. They even want tech to fight tech for them. Getting app-blocking apps to prevent them from using certain apps. So they don't even need to exercise willpower at all. This is sth like [interpassivity]?, acts of delegation that free them from the responsibility to take action, from any thoughts & worries about more serious issues going on.
~ There's a lot of ~~[illegible]~~ ambivalence towards tech and one seems to be trapped ~~with~~ between its capability to empower oneself on the one hand & its — disempower — on the other. And the solution is always sth like "let's use tech in moderation" or "let's regulate / control my consumption better". This all sounds like neoliberal governmentality & all burdens / responsibilities are on the consumers themselves.
– Internet is a nice distraction for those who want to (escape) the real life's problems. It seems like the only way for one to temporarily escape their own hopelessness in the real world. They know that Internet is bad but they ~~[illegible]~~ also know that ~~there's nothing else they can~~ nothing else but the Internet can [illegible]
→ hopelessness / helplessness

100% Recycled Paper

Appendix 6: Sample of visual netnographic material

Appendix 7: Sample of interview schedule

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Project Title: Consumer practices of digital detoxing under surveillance capitalism
Name of Researcher: Hoang Ngoc Quynh
Email: n.q.hoang@lancaster.ac.uk

The researcher introduces herself and explains the aim of the study and how long the interview should take. The researcher reiterates that participants can stop the interview at any time, and that they have up to 2 weeks after the interview to opt-out of the study.

Background Qs

1. Could you please tell me a bit about yourself?
2. What types of digital technology do you use? (e.g. smartphones, social media, online forums, online games, etc.)
3. What do you think about digital technology in general?
4. How do you spend time on your digital devices?
5. Could you please tell me a bit about your relationship with digital technology?
6. What are your earliest memories of using the internet? (how did you access it, on what device, where were you, how old were you, for what purposes?)
7. How has the internet changed over your lifetime? (for better or worse?)
8. How does digital technology have an impact on your life?

Tactics Qs:

9. What have you been doing to reduce those negative influences?
10. Are there digital devices or platforms that you think are more useful than others?
11. If things are that bad, how do you justify your continued use of the internet?

12. On a scale from 1-10, to what extent do you think you are dependent on digital technology?

General awareness of macro/political issues Qs:

1. Do you know much about internet companies' algorithmic surveillance and privacy issues? Does this bother you? Why/why not?
2. What do you think about targeted ads on Facebook and other social media platforms?
3. What are your thoughts on smart-home devices?
4. Why do you think there has been such a huge "smart" movement in recent years? (smart TVs, smartphones, smart homes)
5. There is a web community called "The Mental Liberation Front" that asks participants to make the following pledge: *"I will buy nothing on Amazon. Never allow Alexa into my home. Refuse to install anything to make my home or my life "smart."* -----what are your thoughts on that? Why do you think this group is asking people to swear off brands like Amazon and refuse entry of smart devices to their homes?
6. What are your thoughts on "fake news" and the internet?
7. Do you know anything about Russian cyber-interference in the Brexit referendum or the US Presidential election of 2016? (disinformation spread through social media…) – if so, what are your thoughts?

Digital detox questions

13. Have you ever heard of the term "digital detox"? If yes, what does that mean for you?
14. Have you ever tried to "take a break" from the digital world?
15. How does "taking a break" from the digital world mean for you?
16. What activities do you undertake when you're trying to take a break from the digital world?
17. What challenges do you have when trying to limit your digital technology use?
18. How do you compare the pre-digital times with our digital world?
19. How do you feel about the digital world we're living in right now?
20. How would you imagine a world without digital technology?
21. Are you part of any community where people try to limit their digital tech use together? If yes, what's your motivations of joining such community?
22. How do you imagine our digital world in the near future?

Thank you very much for your information and participation in this study. If you have any concern or any question, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Appendix 8: *Interpretive Consumer Research* (ICR) Workshop, Liverpool, 08-10 June 2022. Quynh, H., Cronin, J., and Skandalis, A., (2022). The function of Abstinence within Networks of Desire: Digital Detox and Technology's Present Absence

The function of Abstinence within Networks of Desire: Digital Detox and technology's Present Absence

Quynh Hoang[1], James Cronin, Alexandros Skandalis
Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster University, UK

Introduction

In their visionary account of networks of desire, Kozinets, Patterson and Ashman (2017) provide a compelling case for the role of technology in disciplining, abstracting, and extremifying the human subject's desires to consume. Although networks of desire are assumed to rely closely on technology, their configuration is open, never static and "constantly in flux" (p. 662) which is suggestive that aspects can be added or subtracted, foregrounded or backgrounded, expanded or curtailed. As technology is just *one*, albeit assumedly central, aspect of these networks, we argue that interpretive consumer researchers' focus should not remain solely with the material presence of technology but also with its *absence* or, indeed, its paradoxical "present absence". In this paper, we explore how practices of abstention (e.g., reducing or avoiding particular technologies) are not genuinely adversarial to the overall operation of networks of desire but are complementary and co-constituting activities in the wider territorialisation and re-territorialisation of consumers' passion to consume. Far from constituting any kind of genuinely *luddite* or transformative reaction against techno-capitalism at large, consumers' self-elected choices to temporarily abstain from technology provide for enclavised opportunities to diversify, excite, and revitalise consumption while potentially negating the potential for political intervention. As we shall discuss, the absence of technology at one part of the network can be conducive to the presence of passionate consumer engagement at another. More specifically, we consider how abstinence opens up multiple opportunities for market-

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enhanced desire to be curated, thus playing right into what Holt (2002, p.89) calls "a form of market-sanctioned cultural experimentation through which the market rejuvenates itself."

As an empirical context for our theory, we draw upon the topic of digital detoxing. Digital detox can be understood most broadly as any efforts undertaken to achieve distance from using electronic devices or consuming digital media, either completely or in part, for variable amounts of time. That distance is sought out for a variety of reasons associated with consumers' desires to improve personal outcomes like health and well-being, interpersonal relationships, self-control or performance for work or study. An entire cottage industry has emerged around digital detoxing including, but not limited to, "unplugged" vacation services, YouTube channels, books such as Tanya Goodin's *Off: Your Digital Detox for a Better Life*, iOS and Android apps (e.g., Cold Turkey, Cleverest, Moment, Calm, Forest, Stay Focused), "dumb phones" (e.g., the Light Phone, Nokia 3310, Punkt MP01), website blockers, and digital wellbeing kits (e.g., Energydots' 'Digital Detox' Kit). To explore consumers' reliance on these market offerings to play out their fantasies of abstention for them, we draw upon theories of abstinence and Žižek's (1998, 2006) concept of *interpassivity*. The interpassive, rather than interactive, nature of detoxing is reflected in detoxers' delegation of resistant energies to often market-located objects that are expected to critique technology for them – ironically, sometimes even tech products themselves.

By deploying the explanatory materials of Žižek and others, our analysis of digital detox is underpinned by two interrelated research questions: *How do consumers adapt to and navigate their entanglement in networks of desire?* and, *how does abstinence factor into these networks?* By addressing these questions, we reveal some of the many ways that abstention from consumption can lead to *more* rather than less passion to consume. The interpassive nature of consumers' abstinence projects – and the "para–capitalist" markets that underpin them – as we shall discuss, are premised securely upon a frenetic "*false activity*" that provides the illusion that change is happening so that nothing need actually change (Žižek, 2006, p.26).

Networks of Desire

By adapting the assemblage theory of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Kozinets et al. (2017) introduce "networks of desire" (NoDs) as a catch-all term for the complex constellation of

digital technologies, consumers, their energised passions, and virtual and physical objects that collate to incubate consumption interests amongst interconnected actors and reproduce the wider capitalist framework that contextualises those interests (p.667). Kozinets and colleagues argue that technologies – including service platforms (such as Google, Facebook, Amazon) and their algorithmic, surveillant tools – far from extinguishing or inhibiting consumers' desire to consume, dramatically transform "raw, passionate energy into a range of general and specfic consumer interests" (p.667). The authors explain that NoDs are consolidated by their capacity to *territorialise* desire. Territorialisation is understood as aligning relevant humans, ideas, and objects that can be inscribed together, forming coherences or assemblages that intensify knowledge, interest and passion for consumption. *Deterritorialisation*, in contrast, denotes the segregation – or "unlinking" – that occurs as desires of subjects and objects are disconnected (p.662). Lastly, *reterritorialisation* means a new linkage that happens before, after, or alongside the occurrence of an unlinking.

There are three main interrelated features of NoDs. First, they are *assemblative* in the sense that they present technocultural fields for consumers to share and connect their desires with like-minded others; for related products, brands, and experiences to be collated under unified styles trends, and hypes; and for the offline to be married up with the online. NoDs provide a space for consumers to thematise their passions and ideals whereby they can bring multiple facets of their own lives and those of others together under centralised and communicable themes. For example, Kozinets and colleagues consider the *assembling* theme of "food porn" which brings together diverse human and non-human actors including the foodservice, the smartphone, the internet, consumers, their culinary capital, real and imagined hunger, food images, social media profiles, digital means of beautifying food (e.g., filters), and so on under one provocative ("pornographic") ecosystem of interests. Within such networks, "[p]ublic and professional participation build new connections between extant desires and a wider network, decentering ties and deterritorializing flows that limit hungers to emplaced bodies" (p.659).

Second, NoDs are *proliferative*. Kozinets et al. map out a wide circuit of desire (re)production wherein consumers, technologies and marketers are entangled in a series of fertile *feedback* loops. As consumers' desires for consumption are communicated through the network and are accessed by other actors, they are not just integrated but are, indeed, *proliferated*. Network participation promotes, rewards, and invites contributions from others

spurring the emergence of new insights, ideas, and fantasies – which can trigger the introduction of new products, styles, and experiences that are fed back to consumers and their desirous cravings. As Hietanen et al. (2020, p.745) note, desire must be thought of as "an unconscious, additive and automatized libidinal tendency, aiming for its proliferation". What occurs through the global capitalist system of proliferating NoDs is "endless desiring-production" (Hietanen et al., 2020, p.747).

Lastly, NoDs are *emergent* as they are "constantly being made and unmade by data, meaning, consumption, and innovation" (Kozinets et al., 2017 p.676). NoDs draw on the massive resources of the technological, data-driven ecosystem to attract, capture and commodify the attention of consumers: "The most fundamental unit of power in the network is attention, and attention triggers the investment of desire energy – machinic and bodily – into product, brand, lifestyle, and experience forms of consumption interest" (p.667). Configured as vast technocultural fields of multiple interconnected actors and their ever-changing passions and interests, NoDs should be understood as *always-in-becoming*, forever prone to changes and transformations. Crucially, we suggest, the continual becoming of these networks is contingent on not only multiple forms of human-machinic connections but also their *disconnections* which manifest in various counter-machinic tendencies and practices of restriction or abstention from these technologically-mediated networks. We now turn to the concepts of abstinence and interpassivity to explore this further.

Abstinence as an object of desire

Jessica Warner, in her book *All or Nothing: A Short History of Abstinence in America*, defines abstinence as "a principled and unerring refusal to engage in a particular activity" (Warner, 2010, p.xi). She clarifies, "[g]oing without something for a short period of time is not abstinence […] Anything short of total victory is a form of defeat" (p.xi). As others have countered (see O'Gorman, 2020), the shortcoming with this definition is that it disavows any potential for transitory or episodic forms of abstinence. O'Gorman argues that popular forms of abstinence, such as cutting down or cutting out digital device usage are "site-specific", "integrated into a temporary ritualistic practice" and thus reflect "contemporary rituals of moderation" (2020, p.134). Further departing from Warner's absolutism, there are forms of "situational abstinence" which entail abstaining from certain things in certain situations and

for particular reasons while nevertheless consuming those things in other situations (Frank et al, 2020, p.1). Frank and colleagues also identify "long term abstinence" (p.5) which encompasses taking a break from a particular type of consumption for prolonged periods that is "not forever, but merely a limited period with more or less a clear end date". Here, abstinence – whether situational or longer-term – does not equate with the total rejection of consumption, but is reflective of the bricolent and multiple ways that consumers can negotiate, adapt to, and withstand dominant consumption norms. Contemporary forms of abstinence might even be viewed as *tactical* or ways of *making do*, in the sense that consumers' abstention is undertaken not with a view to galvanising any durable changes to the dominant cultural economy, but just to "sketch out the guileful ruses of different interests and desires" within it (De Certeau, 1984, p.34). However, much of what passes for "withstanding" consumption norms in today's consumer culture are typically just *other* tribalised, fractionalised, and individualised templates of consumption.

In Izberk-Bilgin's (2012) account of how the ideological forces of Islamism inform consumption, she identifies that abstinence from global brands does not dispel consumption desires but simply redirects them towards a (re-)engagement with Islamized products. As she notes, "rather than dethroning market capitalism and consumer culture, Islamists seek to be firmly embedded in a market society so that they may transform it to be congruent with Islamist mores" (p.680). Tactics of abstention, far from genuinely transforming the market, indeed might be better thought of as a productive force that sustains dominant market systems and rejuvenates consumption interests through "creating new "opportunity spaces" […], markets, and products while contesting existing ones" (Izberk-Bilgin, 2012, p.664). Here, abstinence has the potential to function as a *desire regenerating force,* that is, a catalyst that works to reformulate and regenerate desire for *more,* albeit different forms of, consumption. As Kotzé (2020, p.62) explains: "This is because periods of commodity abstinence simply open up the space for different kinds of desire to emerge and be temporarily satiated by additional commodities that serve as intermittent replacements for the abstained object". By functioning as "replacements" for the "abstained object", substitute desirous objects take on an *interpassive* character (Žižek, 2006). The substitutes that we cling to in the pursuit of abstinence – whether a dumb phone, a website blocker, a detoxing app, an unplugged holiday, a "no-phones night out", a *whatever* – allow us to express ourselves and remain committed to the *fantasy* that we have overcome our consumption desires. Here, interpassive tactics of abstention enable us to remain passive (i.e. not actually abandoning consumption) while

appearing active (i.e. acting *as if* we are against consumption). Interpassivity, we argue, is the feature which defines much of contemporary consumer abstinence at its most elementary level: it enables the consumer to stage an illusion – the illusion that she is not consuming.

Methods

This research draws upon analyses from two main sources: a 12-month netnography and 21 in-depth interviews. *First*, the lead author conducted an observational netnographic enquiry of digital detoxers' online conversations and interactions around the topic of digital detox (Beckmann and Langer, 2005). Over a period of 12 months, the author collected data mainly from Nosurf ("*Stop Spending Life on the Internet*"), an online public site on the Reddit Forum. Nosurf proves to be an ideal site for observation and data collection which meets Kozinets' (2010, p.89) six criteria for selecting netnographic sites for enquiry (i.e. relevant, active, substantial, interactive, heterogeneous, data-rich). In line with Kozinets' (2015) netnographic principles, data was collected based on rich content, descriptiveness, relevant topic matter, and conversational participation by a range of posters. *Second*, 21 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with self-identified digital detoxers to further explore their experiences of living in the digital world and their tactics of abstention from digital technologies. The whole analytical process followed a hermeneutical back-and-forth and part-to-whole procedure (Thompson et al., 1994).

Emergent findings

One of the most dominant themes that has emerged from our data is centred around how detoxers seek interpassive ways to disengage with NoDs' "*attention*" logic (Kozinets et al., 2017, p.667). In the context of techno-capitalism, one's attention and engagement in the networks becomes a driving force for capitalist accumulation "under near-constant surveillance and monitoring by corporations such as Google, Facebook, Apple, and others" (p.676). Across the data, we see many instances of what we call the "*re-autonomisation of desire*", that is the reshaping of desire into more autonomous consumption choices whereby detoxers countervail the tendency for their consumption to be manipulated by the coordinates of a digitally mediated marketplace (e.g., service platforms, algorithms, Big Data, AI-driven marketing practices). In doing so, many detoxers devise tactics to minimize their attention-grabbing activities, to restrict their engagement with other network actors (e.g., advertisements, products, brands, social media users), and ultimately to not leave their data

footprints – or remain "invisible" – within the networks. Such tactics of abstention are oftentimes facilitated by just *other* market products which many detoxers believe – in an *interpassive* manner – may fight against the problems of a surveillant marketplace (e.g., loss of personal privacy) *on their behalf*.

Another emerging theme reveals the ostensible "*rematerialisation of desire*" through detoxers diverting the thematic focus of their networked lives away from digital objects to material concerns and embodied experiences. Through what we call a "*rewilding*" of their senses, detoxers attempt to renew and enrich their affective environments by integrating and punctuating aspects of their digital lives with immersive experiences in nature and various offline streams of sensations.

Discussion & Conclusion

Overall, our ongoing analysis shows that abstinence serves a crucial function *for* rather than against NoDs. While falling under the category of abstinence, popular activities such as digital detox oftentimes operate to reconstitute rather than obviate desire which results in the promotion and fetishisation of *more*, albeit different forms of, consumption. Consumers' accounts of digital detoxing and their tactics of abstinence allow us to consider that NoDs might be 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. In dovetailing with recent critical theorisations of "the *production of desire* in capitalist markets" (Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018: 539, original emphasis) and by exploring how abstinence potentially results in more consumption, our paper contributes to nascent accounts of market reproduction processes by which resistance helps to secure rather than threaten the market's existence (Cronin and Fitchett, 2021). With recognition that "capitalism endures because it "allows" resistance to take place" (Lloyd, 2017, p.276) and that capitalism "incessantly regenerates itself through novel forms of desiring-production" (Hietanen et al., 2020, p.746), our analysis reveals how interpassive tactics of abstention function as *regenerative market forces* that work to largely sustain rather than disrupt the pervasive influence of NoDs. Far from constituting any genuinely oppositional forces against NoDs, abstinence projects – and their concomitant *fantasies* of going against consumption – potentially energise these networks

and the broader techno-capitalist system through allowing consumers to tactically *go on consuming in other ways*, rather than actually challenge, dominant consumption systems.

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[i] Though various definitions exist, we use the term 'market fundamentalism' to refer to the dominant cultural, political, and economic framework that fanatically elevates a belief in markets and market-based choices, competitiveness, individualism, and self-interest as the *only* pathways to securing comfort and progress for society. Our understanding maps onto that of Soares who describes market fundamentalism as "the existing socioeconomic construction of society with an accompanying worldview that bolsters that system. It exists to the exclusion of all else—there is no space for alternative views or dissent" (Soares, 2006: 276)