

Reading as a Cultural Repertoire of Disconnection

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Abstract

This paper investigates how consumers mobilize traditional cultural practices to negotiate disconnection from digital hyperconnection. Drawing on a qualitative study of collective reading workshops with young adults in France, we show how reading functions as a reactivated cultural repertoire of disconnection. Findings reveal four dynamics: the internalized constraint of hyperconnection, reading as a legitimate alternative to digital scrolling, the sustaining role of collective infrastructures and rituals, and the ambivalence of outcomes. We conceptualize reading as an entertainment-based, temporal counter-practice, highlighting its potential to combine cultural legitimacy, hedonic pleasure, and digital well-being.

Statement of Key Contributions

This study contributes to ongoing dialogues on consumer resistance, cultural repertoires, and temporal practices by examining how reading, a long-standing tradition, is mobilized as a strategy of disconnection from digital hyperconnection.

First, our findings show that resistance does not only arise from novel counter-cultures or emergent movements but also from the re-appropriation of traditional practices. Reading, a practice imbued with symbolic legitimacy, was reframed by participants as a meaningful alternative to digital scrolling. This extends prior research on resistance by demonstrating how consumers reactivate established cultural repertoires to address contemporary pressures.

Second, the analysis underscores the importance of collective infrastructures and rituals in enabling disconnection. Participants emphasized that they would not have sustained 45 minutes of reading alone. The collective silence, the symbolic ritual of surrendering phones, and the shared commitment of the group provided the scaffolding that made disconnection possible. This finding enriches research on marketplace rituals and infrastructures by showing how collective arrangements can substitute for individual discipline in sustaining resistance.

Third, the study introduces the notion of entertainment-based resistance. In contrast to detox practices framed around discipline and self-improvement, reading was experienced as both pleasurable and legitimate. This highlights how resistance can be hedonic, not only ascetic, and how pleasure itself may be a resource for negotiating digital fatigue.

Finally, the research offers managerial implications by positioning reading as an accessible and attractive tool for digital well-being. For cultural organizations and policymakers, staging reading as a collective and entertaining ritual provides a way to legitimize disconnection while reaching broader audiences.

KEYWORDS

Digital disconnection ; Cultural répertoires ; Consumer resistance ; qualitative research ; Entertainment-based rituals

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Introduction

Digital technologies have become deeply entangled with everyday life. Smartphones, social media platforms, and online services provide infrastructures of hyperconnection, embedding consumers in continuous flows of communication, entertainment, and commercial interaction. While these technologies expand opportunities for sociability and convenience, they also generate fatigue, compulsive use, and anxieties about attention and presence (Alter 2017; Epp, Schau, and Price 2014).

Research in consumer culture has examined how individuals attempt to suspend the logics of hyperconnection. Detox practices such as yoga, mindfulness, or digital-free retreats illustrate responses that present disconnection as a project of self-development, often framed around discipline and personal responsibility (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010; Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017). These studies illuminate how consumers try to regulate hyperconnection, but they also underline the demanding, sometimes ascetic tone that characterizes much of the detox landscape.

Practices such as yoga are themselves long-standing traditions, yet in contemporary consumer culture they have been reconfigured and commodified as explicit tools of detox and well-being (Carrette & King 2005; Kozinets, Patterson, & Ashman 2017). Their meaning and use are thus transformed to address digital pressures through logics of self-discipline and responsabilization (Moisio & Beruchashvili 2010; Giesler & Veresiu 2014). Reading, by contrast, operates differently. The practice itself is not reshaped or reinvented by consumers; one reads today much as one has always read, with the same embodied gestures of sitting, turning pages, and immersing in narrative (Chartier 1992; Manguel 1996; Petit 2004). Its significance lies in the fact that it belongs to a cultural repertoire (Swidler 1986): a familiar, legitimate tradition that can be drawn upon without alteration. What changes is not the practice but its framing and function in the age of hyperconnection.

Our study focuses on reading books as a case of a traditional cultural practice that is increasingly re-signified in contemporary contexts. Reading has long been associated with education, leisure, and cultural legitimacy (Petit 2004). In societies saturated by screens, it can also be understood as a potential resource for negotiating disconnection: a practice that combines symbolic legitimacy, hedonic pleasure, and the possibility of alternative temporal engagement.

Our research question is therefore: How do consumers mobilize traditional cultural practices to negotiate disconnection from digital hyperconnection, and what does this reveal about the collective and cultural infrastructures of consumer resistance?

By addressing this question, our study contributes to dialogues on consumer resistance (Kozinets & Handelman 2004; Thompson & Arsel 2004), cultural repertoires (Swidler 1986;

Kates 2002), and temporal counter-practices (Rosa 2013; Karababa & Ger 2011), highlighting how long-standing traditions may be reactivated in response to contemporary pressures.

Literature Review

Consumer Resistance and Marketplace Cultures

Consumer research has examined how individuals negotiate, appropriate, or resist dominant cultural logics (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Marketplace cultures provide arenas where such negotiations unfold (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Kozinets 2001). These cultures are not necessarily oppositional; they may reinforce, creatively rework, or subvert market logics (Arsel and Thompson 2011). Beyond oppositional movements, research shows that resistance often takes subtle forms, such as reinterpreting cultural resources under conditions of constraint (Üstüner and Holt 2007) or creating temporary spaces of escape (Canniford 2011).

In the digital domain, practices such as mindfulness, slow living, or detox retreats articulate collective rituals and symbolic frameworks that challenge hyperconnection (Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017). Yet such detox practices are frequently framed as projects of self-development, requiring discipline, willpower, and the cultivation of personal growth (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010). They resonate with broader governance regimes that encourage consumers to take responsibility for managing their own well-being and attention (Giesler and Veresiu 2014).

Cultural Repertoires and the Reactivation of Traditions

Sociological work on cultural repertoires highlights how individuals draw on established practices, symbols, and narratives to navigate contemporary challenges (Swidler 1986). Rather than inventing practices ex nihilo, consumers mobilize traditions that carry cultural legitimacy and symbolic value. Consumer research has illustrated this through lifestyle studies (Holt 1997) and examinations of how authenticity and legitimacy are sought in consumption practices (Arnould and Price 2000).

Empirical work shows that repertoires range from emergent subcultures such as fandoms (Kozinets 2001) and festivals (Kozinets 2002) to enduring traditions such as cooking, religious rituals, or community celebrations (Kates 2002; Thompson and Troester 2002). This perspective foregrounds the capacity of longstanding practices to be reactivated as resources in new contexts. Activities associated with education, leisure, or symbolic distinction—such as reading—can thus be understood as repertoires that consumers mobilize to negotiate the pressures of hyperconnection.

Temporal Counter-Practices and Resonance

A complementary dialogue comes from the sociology of time. Rosa (2013) argues that modern societies are characterized by acceleration, producing alienation and a sense of disconnection from meaningful experience. Against this backdrop, practices of resonance create moments of immersion and engagement that counter dominant temporal logics. Consumer research has also examined how temporal regimes shape consumption (Karababa

and Ger 2011) and how consumers coordinate competing practices within limited time resources (Southerton 2003).

Reading has long been associated with immersion and attentional depth (Petit 2004). As such, it can be considered within broader discussions of practices that suspend acceleration and create alternative temporal rhythms. The sociology of time suggests that such practices hold particular significance in contemporary contexts of hyperconnection, where consumers seek ways to restore balance and presence (Rosa 2013; Southerton 2003).

Entertainment and Resistance

Much research on consumer well-being has emphasized practices rooted in discipline or asceticism. Yet scholars have also highlighted the role of pleasure in shaping practices of care and resistance. Holt (1995) shows how cultural practices generate meaning through both utilitarian and hedonic dimensions, while Goulding, Shankar, Elliott, and Canniford (2009) demonstrate how festivals combine entertainment with collective transformation. Resistance can therefore involve playful and hedonic dimensions, as illustrated in contexts such as Burning Man (Kozinets 2002) or brand communities that combine enjoyment with empowerment (Cova and Pace 2006).

This perspective opens the possibility that entertainment-oriented practices may serve as viable avenues for negotiating contemporary challenges such as digital fatigue. Reading, in this sense, contrasts with detox practices marked by discipline, offering instead an accessible form of disconnection that aligns care with enjoyment.

Methodology

Data were generated through a workshop conducted in France in 2025 with eight young women aged 22–25. A preliminary workshop with older adults (45–65) had been organized but was not retained for analysis, as participants resisted the framing of reading as a disconnection practice, notably due to wrong information shared with them before the exercise, by the organizer (library).

The main workshop was structured in four phases:

1. Participants were first welcomed into a quiet room where soft background music was played to establish a relaxed atmosphere. A short introductory conversation allowed the facilitator to build rapport, clarify the purpose of the workshop, and invite participants to share their expectations and habitual reading or digital practices.
2. The core of the workshop began with a symbolic ritual: all participants were asked to place their mobile phones in a common box. This act marked a collective commitment to disconnection and created a liminal break from the digital environment.
3. Participants then engaged in 45 minutes of silent reading. Each had brought or was provided with a book, and while the activity was carried out individually, the shared presence of others generated a sense of collective engagement.
4. Finally, the session concluded with a group discussion in which participants reflected on their experience. They were encouraged to describe the challenges of concentration, the feelings of immersion or calm that emerged, and the contrast with

their usual digital routines. This debriefing produced rich narratives on both the affective and symbolic dimensions of reading as a disconnection practice.

Immediately after the workshop, participants completed a short written questionnaire on immersion, relaxation, and distraction. Within one week, each participated in a semi-structured interview (45–60 minutes), exploring their experience of the session, their relationship to reading, and their broader practices of connectivity and disconnection.

The dataset thus consists of eight short written questionnaires completed at the end of the workshop, eight in-depth interviews transcribed verbatim (45–60 minutes each), and recorded observation from the workshop.

Data were analyzed using an interpretive, hermeneutic approach (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). We engaged in iterative readings of the transcripts and written responses, moving back and forth between emerging themes and literature, particularly research on consumer resistance, cultural repertoires, and temporal practices. This process allowed us to refine the thematic categories into four central dynamics developed briefly below: the internalized constraint of hyperconnection, reading as a reactivated repertoire, the role of collective infrastructures, and the ambivalence of outcomes.

Findings

Internalized Constraint of Hyperconnection

The first theme emerging from the data is the persistent presence of hyperconnection as an internalized constraint, even in moments of forced disconnection. Participants described mixed emotions when handing over their phones: a sense of lightness and relief, but also anxiety, restlessness, and fear of missing out.

As shown in Table 1, Mélanie (24) captured this ambivalence, describing how she felt both relieved and pressured by thoughts of missed calls and messages, ultimately rushing to check her phone immediately after the session. Camille (22) described the absent device as a “phantom limb,” noting how her body seemed trained to reach for it without conscious decision. Thomas (23) also admitted to reflexively turning toward the place where his phone would usually lie, realizing with embarrassment how ingrained the habit had become.

These accounts illustrate how hyperconnection operates not only as an external habit but as an internalized reflex, shaping emotions, gestures, and expectations even when devices are absent. The contradiction between bodily relief and mental anxiety underscores the grip of digital infrastructures. As Giesler and Veresiu (2014) argue, governance regimes produce responsible subjects who internalize norms of responsiveness. In our data, even when participants were “freed” from their devices, the discipline of connectivity remained inscribed in bodily reflexes and anxieties.

Reading as a Reactivated Cultural Repertoire

The second theme concerns the role of reading as a reactivated cultural repertoire. Many participants emphasized that the workshop reminded them of an older practice, gradually displaced by digital habits.

As shown in Table 1, Clara (23) explained that she initially struggled to concentrate, but eventually became absorbed in the story and rediscovered how much she valued reading. Julie (25) contrasted reading with Netflix or phone use, describing it as an “investment in the mind,” though she admitted she rarely found time for it. Thomas (23) compared the guilt he felt after using TikTok or YouTube with the sense of worth he attached to reading, which he described as socially approved.

These narratives show how reading is mobilized as a cultural repertoire (Swidler 1986): an enduringly legitimate practice that consumers reframe as a counter-practice against hyperconnection. Unlike yoga or mindfulness, reconfigured as detox solutions, reading retains its traditional form; what changes is its framing and function.

Collective Infrastructures and Rituals

A third theme is the importance of collective infrastructures and rituals in sustaining disconnection. Participants insisted that they would not have managed to read for 45 minutes alone.

As shown in Table 1, Sophie (24) explained that the shared silence “felt almost sacred” and that being with others carried her through the session. Camille (22) described surrendering her phone as a “ceremony,” transforming a small act into a meaningful collective break. Élodie (26) emphasized that the group setting, the music, and the atmosphere made the experience possible, contrasting it with her solitary reading attempts that quickly collapsed.

These accounts highlight the role of collective infrastructures (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009). Disconnection was sustained not by individual self-discipline, but by ritualized gestures and mutual accountability, which legitimized it as a meaningful practice.

Ambivalent Outcomes

Finally, participants emphasized the **ambivalence of disconnection**. Reading generated immersion and calm, but these effects were described as fragile and temporary.

As shown in Table 1, Julie (25) described being completely absorbed in her book, but noted that the calm “vanished the second I picked up my phone.” Mélanie (24) described disconnection as a “parenthesis,” a refreshing but unable to solve the underlying problem. Thomas (23) compared reading to “taking a breath before diving back underwater,” highlighting its paradoxical value: both necessary and fleeting.

These accounts resonate with Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004) description of resistance as paradoxical: practices that challenge dominant logics may simultaneously reproduce them. Reading created moments of resonance (Rosa 2013), but these interludes collapsed as soon as digital rhythms returned.

Discussion

This research explored how consumers mobilize traditional practices to negotiate disconnection from digital hyperconnection. Through collective reading workshops with young adults in France, we identified four dynamics: the internalized constraint of

hyperconnection, reading as a reactivated repertoire, the role of collective infrastructures, and the ambivalence of outcomes.

Contributions to research

First, our study shows that resistance does not only emerge from novel counter-cultures (Kozinets 2001; Giesler 2008), but also through the re-appropriation of traditions. Reading, long familiar and legitimate, was described as a way to “reconnect with a forgotten part” (Clara) or as “an investment in the mind” (Julie). Consumers thus mobilize established repertoires (Swidler 1986; Thompson and Troester 2002) to resist hyperconnection.

Second, disconnection was sustained less by individual willpower than by collective infrastructures. Sophie emphasized that “the silence felt almost sacred,” while Camille described surrendering phones as “a ceremony.” These accounts echo research on marketplace rituals (Arnould and Price 1993; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009), showing how rituals and mutual accountability legitimate and enable resistance.

Third, our findings point to entertainment-based resistance. Unlike detox practices framed by discipline (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010; Giesler and Veresiu 2014), reading was experienced as both pleasurable and legitimate. Thomas compared it to “taking a breath before diving back underwater,” highlighting how pleasure and relief can coexist with resistance.

Finally, engaging with Rosa’s (2013) work on acceleration, we conceptualize reading as a temporal counter-practice. Participants described immersion and attentional depth, but these interludes proved fragile. Julie noted that “the second I picked up my phone, it all vanished.” Disconnection created resonance, but only temporarily, pointing to the limits of such practices.

Managerial contributions

Our findings also suggest practical implications. Libraries and cultural organizations can support disconnection by offering phone-free collective reading sessions or hybrid events combining reading with group discussions or light rituals. As Sophie and Camille indicated, the group setting was what enabled them to persevere. By framing reading as a collective cultural practice, institutions can legitimize it as a form of care and disconnection while also attracting younger audiences. Crucially, such events present disconnection not as obligation, but as an enjoyable activity.

Overall, these implications highlight that reading can be strategically positioned at the intersection of cultural legitimacy, hedonic pleasure, and digital well-being. Unlike ascetic detox practices, reading offers a form of entertainment-based resistance: consumers disconnect through immersion in stories and enjoyment, rather than discipline. For managers and policymakers, this requires moving beyond narrow views of reading as merely educational, toward recognizing its potential as a cultural repertoire for negotiating hyperconnection in an accessible and pleasurable way.

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Table 1. Illustrative verbatims sorted by theme

Theme	Participant	Verbatim
Internalized constraint of hyperconnection	Mélanie (24)	“When I put my phone in the box, I felt suddenly lighter, as if a weight had been lifted. It was a strange relief, like finally letting go of something that was pressing on me all the time. But at the same time, my mind kept racing: what if someone needs me, what if something important happens? I kept imagining missed calls, unanswered texts... even emails piling up. Physically, I didn’t have the phone anymore, but mentally, it was still buzzing in my head. And after the session, I rushed to check it immediately, almost without thinking, as if to reassure myself that the world hadn’t collapsed while I was away.”
	Camille (22)	“I kept feeling the urge to reach for my phone, like a phantom limb. I knew it was in the box, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Every few minutes, my hand almost moved on its own, like when you think your glasses are on your head and you reach for them. It really scared me to notice that—I realized how automatic it has become, like my body is trained to check without me even deciding.”
	Thomas (23)	“At one point during the reading, I felt my hand twitch, like a reflex to check my notifications. I even turned my head toward the table where my phone usually lies when I read at home. Then I remembered it was locked in the box. It was a weird feeling — almost embarrassing, like realizing you’re

		addicted to something without wanting to admit it.”
Reading as a reactivated repertoire	Clara (23)	“It had been years since I sat down to read like that, with nothing else going on. At first, I was restless, I couldn’t focus. My eyes went over the words but my mind was elsewhere — thinking about what I might be missing on my phone. But after maybe ten minutes, it shifted. I got into the story, and suddenly I realized how much I had missed it. It felt so different from scrolling on TikTok or Instagram. There, I jump from one thing to the next without remembering anything. With reading, I felt calmer, and also that I was doing something meaningful, almost healthy. It was like reconnecting with a part of myself that I had forgotten.”
	Julie (25)	“When I tell myself I’m going to read, I always feel it’s something valuable, not like bingeing Netflix or losing hours on my phone. Reading gives me the impression that I’m investing in myself, in my mind. But the problem is I never find the time anymore. I’m always distracted, always checking my phone or doing something else. This session forced me to make that time, and it felt right. I thought: ‘Oh yes, this is what I used to do when I was younger, when I had fewer distractions.’ It reminded me of how reading used to be a normal part of my life.”
	Thomas (23)	“When I spend an evening on YouTube or TikTok, afterwards I often feel guilty, like I’ve wasted my time. With reading, I never feel that. Even if the book is not that good, it still feels like something worthwhile. It’s like society approves of it — my parents, my teachers, everyone always told me that reading is good for you. That makes it hard to compare with other activities, it has a different status.”
Collective infrastructures and rituals	Sophie (24)	“At home, I would have stopped after five minutes. I always find excuses — I check my phone, I get up to do

		<p>something else, I remember something urgent. Here it was different. Because everyone was reading, I kept going. The silence felt almost sacred, like we had entered a different space. And knowing that my phone was locked away helped a lot. It gave me peace of mind and also the strength to continue. It wasn't just me deciding alone; it was like the group carried me forward."</p>
	Camille (22)	<p>"Placing the phone in the box felt like a ceremony. It wasn't just me deciding not to look at it — it was all of us, at the same time, agreeing to disconnect. That made it real. I even hesitated for a second, like I was giving something important away, but once it was done, I felt relieved. It was a small gesture, but because we did it collectively, it had weight. It gave me a sense of belonging, like we were all in this together."</p>
	Élodie (26)	<p>"I try to read at night sometimes, but I always end up with my phone in my hand after ten minutes. Here, it worked because it was organized. There was music at the beginning, we all put our phones away, and then there was this silence that we shared. That whole setup made it easier to really get into the book. It wasn't just about me, it was about the whole situation, the atmosphere, and the others being there too."</p>
Ambivalent outcomes	Julie (25)	<p>"During the reading I completely lost track of time. I was absorbed in the story, and at one point I looked up and couldn't believe that 45 minutes had passed. It felt like I had entered another world, and I was proud of myself for staying focused for that long. But the second I picked up my phone afterwards, it all vanished. My calm, my immersion, everything disappeared. I felt the same nervous, fragmented state as before, scrolling without thinking. It was almost shocking how quickly the feeling went</p>

		away, like the book had opened a door that the phone slammed shut again.”
	Mélanie (24)	“It was great while it lasted. I felt calmer, I enjoyed the story, and I even thought: ‘I should do this more often.’ But I know myself. Tomorrow I’ll be back on my phone for hours. It’s like a parenthesis, a break. Refreshing, yes, but it doesn’t solve the problem. The phone always wins in the end.”
	Thomas (23)	“I loved the silence, the fact that I could focus and read properly for once. But I also knew in the back of my mind that when it ended, I would go back to my phone. And that’s exactly what happened: I checked my notifications, then one thing led to another, and I lost an hour without noticing. It makes you wonder: what’s the point if it doesn’t last? But at the same time, even a short break felt important, like taking a breath before diving back underwater.”