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Breaking out from Constant Connectivity: Agentic Regulation of Smartphone Use

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Abstract

Most of the interruptions caused by smartphones and other communication technologies are initiated by the individuals themselves. Likewise, breakouts from connectivity are enacted by individuals who want to disconnect. The present study examines human agency in the face of material agency, and specifically the decisions that people make to disconnect from their smartphone so as to regulate their connectivity states and the motivations that drive such decisions. We analyze a corpus of LinkedIn comments posted on an article discussing the excessive use of mobile phones and build a typology of motivations underlying disconnection decisions. Individuals in our sample were likely to regulate their connectivity both with a promotion focus, to achieve gains at work and outside of work, and with a prevention focus, to avoid losses in these two domains. Moreover, disconnection decisions are simultaneously driven by the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness. Contrary to the popular depiction of connectivity resulting in work invading the non-work domain, people in this sample were likely to engage in disconnection decisions to protect both the work and non-work domains from potential distractions induced by communication technologies.

Keywords: Smartphone use, communication technologies, constant connectivity, boundary management, disconnection decisions, regulatory focus, agency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Smartphones and other mobile devices such as tablets are a double-edged sword for individuals (Morandin, Russo, & Ollier-Malaterre, 2018). On the one hand, they enable people to be more responsive to work (Turel, Serenko, & Bontis, 2011). On the other hand, these devices contribute to extending the length of workdays (Mullan & Wajcman, 2019), increasing stress (Lee, Chang, Ling, & Cheng, 2014) and lowering well-being (Horwood & Anglim, 2019; Volkmer & Lermer, 2019). Mazmanian, Orlikowski, and Yates (2013) argued that contemporary workers experience a real autonomy paradox: although mobile devices promise to give greater discretion over when and where to work, such devices make it possible to work anywhere and anytime. As a result, people often feel trapped and tied to their work even when they wish they could detach from work (Diaz, Chiaburu, Zimmerman, & Boswell, 2012). In support of these claims, a significant body of research has shown that smartphone users exhibit high levels of psychological dependency and are prone to addictive behaviors (Chen et al., 2017; Gökçearsan, Muncu, Haslamani, & Demiraslan Cevik, 2016; Samaha & Hawi, 2016; van Deursen, Bolle, Hegner, & Kommers, 2015).

Albeit much research focuses on adverse consequences of communication technologies, Wajcman and Rose (2011) noted that constant connectivity, i.e. the condition of being always connected to work and/or family affairs through the smartphone (Kolb, Caza, & Collins, 2012; MacCormick, Dery, & Kolb, 2012; Wajcman & Rose, 2011), represents a normal condition of contemporary life. Moreover, focusing only on the adverse effects of communication technologies ignores the role of human agency (Flyverbom, Leonardi, Stohl, & Stohl, 2016; Leonardi, 2012); in other terms, it depicts individuals as having little or no discretion over their connectivity behaviors, whereas they may be driven by a motivation to exert control (i.e.,

Bandura's definition of agency, 1989), over their smartphone. Complete passiveness of individuals regarding their smartphone has not been verified empirically, as Wajcman and Rose (2011) demonstrated that most of the interruptions caused by smartphones and other communication devices in the workplace are initiated by the employees themselves, who can display a compulsive tendency to monitor their device's screen for new incoming messages, missed calls or social network updates at all hours (Hislop & Axtell, 2011; Thomée, Harenstam, & Hagberg, 2012).

Importantly, in the same way, as individuals consciously interrupt their workflow to check their mobile devices (Waycman & Rose, 2011), they can also deliberately act to depart from their state of constant connectivity through specific disconnections decisions. Disconnection decisions are agentic acts of disconnection that individuals undertake with the goal of breaking out from their state of constant connectivity and of reducing the time spent on their mobile devices (Kolb et al., 2012). Disconnection decisions can be planned in advance, when individuals consciously decide to switch off their mobile phone during certain hours of the day to detach from technology (Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2011), or unplanned, when individuals decide to not answer an incoming call in order to remain focused on a specific task. Research on when and how people regulate themselves and enact disconnections decisions is underdeveloped in comparison with research documenting the adverse consequences of modern technologies. Henceforth, Kolb and colleagues (2012) have argued that "more in-depth fieldwork is necessary to understand the myriad of sociomaterial methods of coping, adapting and excelling within all states of connectivity" (p. 271).

Drawing on these premises, in this article, we examine how individuals manage their states of connectivity both at work and in their non-working hours. More specifically, we aim at

exploring (1) what motivations drive human agency as manifested in disconnections decisions, and (2) which disconnection decisions individuals undertake to achieve their work and non-work roles. We believe that this topic is important as it can advance our understanding of how individuals can use their agency to gain control over their communication technologies. The underlying assumption of our paper is that individuals are not passive users with limited control over their mobile devices but rather are “knowledgeable agents” (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013, p. 17), who know what specific acts of disconnection they need to undertake in order to manage their mobile technologies in a way that matches their preferences, values and/or daily commitments. Answering these research questions is also important to understand when and how organizational members decide to disconnect from their mobile devices on and off the job.

To address these two research questions, we analyzed a corpus of comments that LinkedIn users posted in reaction to an article discussing the risks for social relationships associated with the excessive use of mobile phones. Electronically-collected data, such as comments that are publicly available online or in virtual forums, are increasingly used in qualitative research for several reasons. First, they are deemed to be more credible and authentic than data collected through interviews or focus groups (Pendry & Salvatore, 2015). Second, sharing sensitive information, such as information on when and how individuals decide to disconnect from work, is emotionally easier for users online than in face-to-face forum groups or traditional interview settings (Smedley & Coulson, 2018). Third, electronically-collected data presents the advantage of being collected over a longer time frame and of covering a larger pool of potential participants, which reduces the burden of participation and time pressure (Im & Chee, 2006). Last, “online interaction can foster offline engagement”, as demonstrated by Pendry and Salvatore (2018, p. 211), making such an approach promising for the current research. The

LinkedIn article we examined in the present endeavor received 168,864 views, 2,928 likes and 975 comments over a period of more than 12 months from users located in several countries and employed in different roles and professions. We read all comments and focused our analysis on the 242 comments that specifically described disconnection decisions that users engaged in with the goal of regulating their smartphone use.

We used a mixed approach started inductively, as we began by immersing ourselves in the data at the closest of informants' own terms and expressions (informant-centric approach; Gioia et al., 2013), and then transitioned to an abductive approach when we iterated between our first-order codes and the literature (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994) in order to analyze these decisions in more abstract and theoretical terms leading to second-order codes (researcher-centric approach, Gioia et al., 2012). Building on self-regulation theory (Higgins, 1997) and decision-making theories (March, 1994), we were able to analyze the LinkedIn users' disconnection decisions as being driven by a promotion or a prevention focus, and by a logic of consequences or of appropriateness. Based on these two oppositions, we classified the LinkedIn comments in a typology of four categories that we detail in the findings section.

With this study, we contribute to the connectivity literature (Kolb et al., 2012; MacCormick et al., 2012; Wajcman & Rose, 2011) as well as to the work-non-work boundary management literature (Allen, Cho, & Meier, 2014; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009; Rothbard & Ollier-Malaterre, 2016). First, we contribute to current research by shedding light on the motivations sustaining human agency in the face of material agency (Flyverbom et al., 2016; Leonardi, 2012). Prior research has shown that individuals' disconnection decisions were mainly driven by the desire to experience greater work-life balance (Sturges, 2012) and to promote

greater consistency between one's preferences regarding the management of work and nonwork boundaries and the preferences of the other family stakeholders (Kreiner et al., 2009). In this paper, we examine whether additional motivations beyond the goal of achieving work-life balance (Newman, 2011) drive human agency towards material affordances. For instance, individuals may be motivated to disconnect from their smartphone to enhance their focus and complete their work (Derks, Duin, Tims, & Bakker 2014), to strengthen their professional identity (Piszczek, Pichler, Turel, & Greenhaus, 2016), and/or to implement their own digital philosophy (Powers, 2010).

Second, we extend prior research by elucidating what specific disconnection decisions individuals are likely to perform at work and/or at home. This is an important contribution as prior research has mostly documented the acts of disconnection that individuals engage in to protect their home domain from potential intrusions coming from their work domain (Kreiner et al., 2009), leaving out individual strategies aimed at protecting the work domain. However, given the ubiquitous nature of smartphones (Flyverbom et al., 2016; MacCormick et al., 2012), mobile devices can enable intrusions of the home domain into work as individuals can receive hundreds of notifications from their relatives or personal contacts, generating distractions and errors even when employees wish to ignore them (Matusik & Mickel, 2011).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The self-regulatory theory is particularly insightful with regards to our research question, as it sheds light on whether individual decisions are driven by a motivation to promote a positive gain or, by contrast, to prevent potential losses (Higgins, 1997). This is consistent with prior research showing that self-regulation is an important individual process that can mitigate the risks of smartphone addiction (Gökçearsan et al., 2016; van Deursen et al., 2015). This

framework, in turn, may help to classify motivations to enact human agency and disconnect, according to the ultimate goal that individuals have in mind when consciously engaging in disconnection decisions. Drawing on this framework, we contend that individuals may approach disconnection decisions with either a *promotion focus* or a *prevention focus* (Higgins, 1997). Individuals driven by the pursuit of gains, such as accomplishment and fulfilment of personal aspirations, may proactively decide to regulate their use of the smartphone to accomplish such goals. For example, a manager who aspires to build a reputation of being a mindful person may choose to avoid bringing his or her smartphone during business meetings or lunches in order to reinforce this image. Alternatively, individuals who focus on preventing losses may approach disconnection decisions in order to meet safety, obligations and minimize losses (Higgins, 1997). An example of a prevention-based disconnection decision could be a bus driver who decides to not consult the smartphone when stopped at traffic lights in order to avoid the sanctions applied to violations of safety rules.

Decision-making theories also aid in understanding individuals' acts of disconnection and underlying motivations. In particular, the distinction outlined by March (1994) between the *logic of consequences* and the *logic of appropriateness* is particularly relevant for this endeavor. We contend that individuals may make knowledgeable disconnection decisions based on the estimation of the pros and cons associated with each decision (March, 1994). An example of a disconnection decision based on the logic of consequences would be an employee who decides to disconnect when working on an important project to meet a deadline that cannot be postponed any further. However, individuals may also decide to disconnect based on the logic of appropriateness, based on what they judge as appropriate and consistent with their socially constructed personal and professional identities (Greenhaus & Powell, 2017). For instance, a

manager may consciously decide to put the smartphone away of sight when interacting with a subordinate asking for advice, so as to appear respectful and convey a feeling of presence and attention.

These two lines of arguments, that disconnection decisions may be driven by a promotion or a prevention focus (Higgins, 1997) and by a logic of consequences or of appropriateness (March, 1994), guided our second-order analysis of individuals' motivations and disconnection decisions in work and non-work domain, as we explain below.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Data

Data for this article were gathered by collecting and analyzing a corpus of comments published online on LinkedIn in response to an article posted on the same social network on February 5th, 2013. The article, entitled "The 21-day challenge - no phone in the company of others", described the risks related to excessive use of mobile phones. In the article, the author narrated her encounter with a taxi driver who was complaining about the lack of conversation with customers because of their incessant use of smartphones during rides.

At the moment of data collection, the article had received more than 168,864 views, 2,928 likes, and 975 comments and had been shared 9,419 times by LinkedIn users, who described their personal experiences with information and communication technologies and decisions made to tackle this issue. Among the 975 comments, some were simple praise of the article for raising the topic ("This is an excellent post!"); others were authored by enthusiastic followers who communicated their benefits from regulating the use of smartphones ("...my eyes hurt less at the end of the night"). From our reading, we noticed that 242 comments (24.8%) describing specific disconnection decisions. These comments constitute our final dataset.

Comments ranged from short sentences describing the individual decisions to disconnect and stop using smartphones at all (e.g. “I have deliberately avoided getting a smartphone at all”) to longer and more detailed descriptions of actions taken to regulate their smartphone use both at work and at home. Using the LinkedIn account of one of the authors, we were also able to associate the available demographic information (i.e. gender, job position, and industry) with each comment.

The total number of words for the 242 comments in our final dataset was about 14,500. Gender was fairly evenly distributed, as 47% of the comments were authored by men and 51% by women, whereas 2% of the comments were anonymous. Respondents lived in numerous countries: given that the author of the LinkedIn article is American, many comments were authored by Americans, but others were written by people living in the UK, Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia, India, and Australia. Commentators were representative of numerous industries, including marketing and sales (18.5%), information technologies (17.5%), telecommunication and internet services (6.1%), counselling (5.6%), education (5.6%), consulting (5.1%), publishing (5.1%), human resources (4.6%), healthcare (4.6%), tourism, and leisure and entertainment (2.0%). They also held a range of positions, including CEO, vice-president and other executive positions (18.5%); senior manager (7.7%); middle manager (e.g. product manager, project manager, design manager) (19.5%); executive assistant (7.2%); consultant (21.6%); IT specialist (e.g. IT engineer, system administrator, programmer) (11.5%); counsellor (3.6%) and other positions (10.4%) such as lecturer, nurse, or self-employed.

3.2 Data analysis

The comments posted to this LinkedIn article are publicly viewable onlineⁱ, so no particular action could have been taken to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the

commenters. Numerous research ethics committees, such as the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanitiesⁱⁱ, indicate that researchers can use material from open forums without obtaining the consent from the parties, provided that they inform the company hosting the forum.

Data were analyzed using Dedoose, an online software for qualitative data analysis, and independently coded by two researchers. Following indications by Gioia and colleagues (2013), data analysis consisted of two main phases: first, we read the comments to capture their meaning and coded them using the informants' language as much as possible (first-order codes); second, we iterated with the literature to analyze the informants' terms in more abstract and theoretical ways, discerned response patterns in the data, and grouped the comments into theoretically-relevant categories (second-order concepts/themes). In the first stage of data analysis, we analyzed the comments to generate themes capturing (1) the motivations underlying the decisions to disconnect and (2) the actual decisions. This process generated hundreds of statements. Sample codes for motivations were "to increase situational awareness", "to avoid being interrupted", and "to avoid appearing rude", while sample codes for decisions were "turning mobile phone off", "ignoring it", and "keeping it away of the sight". In the second stage of data analysis, we paid particular attention to nascent patterns that could help to explain the phenomena observed and that were not referenced in the existing connectivity and boundary management literature. Using an iterative process of going back and forth across the data and the literature (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994), we looked for commonalities among the emerging themes to collapse the number of themes into "a more manageable number" (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 19). As an example, we collapsed the decisions "putting the smartphone on silent mode" and "turning it off", as they described two similar

decisions. Then, during this iteration, we saw how self-regulation and decision-making theories helped make sense of the decisions reported by informants and of their motivations to disconnect from their smartphone. We classified the disconnection decisions as being primarily driven by a promotion or a prevention focus (Higgins, 1997) and by a logic of consequences or of appropriateness (March, 1994), which gave rise to a 2x2 typology of individual motivations underlying disconnection decisions, presented in the next section.

4. FINDINGS

In this section, we present findings using our typology as a guiding structure (Figure 1). We named the four motivations driving disconnecting decisions as follows: (i) improving role performance, (ii) establishing a personal digital philosophy, (iii) minimizing undesirable social behaviors, and (iv) shielding one's priorities in life.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

As shown in Figure 1, horizontally, the first two types of motivations, (i) improving role performance and (ii) establishing a personal digital philosophy, were driven by an approach orientation aimed at promoting positive gains; whereas the two other types of motivations, (iii) minimizing undesirable social behaviors and (iv) shielding one's priorities in life, were driven by an avoidance orientation aimed at preventing losses. Vertically, our framework shows that the motivations pertaining to (i) improving role performance (iii) and minimizing undesirable social behaviors were driven by a logic of consequences, whereas motivations pertaining to (ii) establishing a personal digital philosophy and (iv) shielding one's life priorities were driven by a logic of appropriateness.

It is important to note here that we do not view these categories as mutually exclusive but rather as ideal types, empirically, we have observed that primary and secondary motivations

sometimes drive an individual's specific decision. Hence, some comments neatly fall into one of the categories, while others illustrate overlaps, as in the following quote:

I explain to clients that if I don't answer emails or calls right away it's because I'm in a meeting with someone else at the time. When I explain that I won't pick up the phone when I'm meeting with them either, my clients engage more with me and we get a lot more done. I stumbled over this philosophy of being in the moment when I got my first blackberry and have argued with bosses over it, but my clients LOVE it.

This comment describes a disconnection decision – not answering a call or email during a meeting – which reflects both the motivation of improving role performance (i.e., improving focus) and the motivation of establishing a personal digital philosophy (i.e., living the present moment). Below, we discuss these four categories in more depth.

4.1 Improving role performance

Role performance refers to the attainment of obligations and expectations in multiple roles (Lazarova, Westman, & Shaffer, 2010). The comments included in the first quadrant of the typology describe disconnection decisions that, in our view, were driven by a promotion focus, as individuals were likely to disconnect in order to promote positive gains in their work and nonwork domains, as well as the logic of consequences, as individuals were concerned about the outcomes associated with excessive use of their smartphone, with the ultimate goal of improving their role performance. The following comments, written by Michael, a logistics consultant, and Karen, a real estate agent, reveal that the motivation behind the decisions of disconnecting from their smartphone was to enhance focus and situational awareness:

I have not owned a cell phone...for over 10 years. I run, walk, cycle, shop, vacation, go for coffee or dinner, completely connected with the present...I practice situational awareness. (Michael, #2)

I found that having no data on my phone helps a lot... [it is] somewhat inconvenient, but it makes me look around me more and focus on something other than my phone. (Karen, #15)

These two comments illustrate that those disconnection decisions can range in degree of radicalism, from minor acts consisting of “not subscribing the data plan” on the phone (Karen) to more extreme acts consisting of “not buying a smartphone” at all (Michael). In both cases, the possibility of gaining focus and attention to the present was the main driver of these decisions. Less radical decisions are reflected in the following comments by Anish (an informatics consultant) and Dane (an architect), all of whom described their decisions to put the smartphone on silent mode or to turn it off as a way to devote more attention to their clients:

I usually travel to different countries for work and whenever I am at a customer location, I prefer to keep my phone in silent mode kept safely in my bag...I really feel at peace with nobody able to reach me. (Ashish, #37)

...there are times where I literally turn off the phone and pocket it...it is remarkable (a) how much thinking you can do when not distracted, and (b) you get to the meeting with a clearer head and a much better and client-focused attitude. (Dane, #62)

Another important motivation that drove individuals' agency to interrupt their state of constant connectivity is favoring more active participation both at work and in the home domain, as the following comments illustrate:

I try to do this [disconnect] while in meetings and in conversation with people. I call it active listening/participation. (Gwyneth, #74)

I unplugged to be more present and more effective at work and with my family. I had never realized how being glued to my phone alienated my family. Now, we connect better, have more meaningful conversations and you know what...work [gets] done faster and more completely. (Christieann, #6)

Notably, some commentators described relying on the ‘do not disturb’ function that enables setting specific disconnection time during the day or the night to rest and recover one’s cognitive and physical energy:

I ... put my phone in a “do not disturb” mode, but it will allow phone calls from the contacts that I designate in a group...So now I can focus on being

“present” with no fear of missing a phone call that truly shouldn’t be missed. (Susan, #95)

Another relevant decision made to favor recovery consisted of scheduling temporal breaks and/or establishing specific moments during the day to be connected in order to create moments of technology respites, as the following comments indicate:

Starting at sundown on Friday and at least twice a month, I become unavailable via phone and won’t be reachable until sundown Saturday night. It’s refreshing but at the same time challenging. (Sandy, #17)

Much to the disappointment of friends, family, and colleagues, I follow this [rule] religiously with my phone and emails. If I am at work I only return calls or email between 12:30 and 1:30 or during the last hour of the day. (Matthew, #26)

Importantly, not all motivations were reflective of a promotion focus. Many people regulated the use of their connectivity technologies based on a prevention focus, to minimize losses in both their work and non-work domains, as in the previous example by Christieann, whose decision to unplug from technology was also motivated by a desire to prevent feelings of alienation during interactions with her family.

4.2 Establishing a personal digital philosophy

In the second quadrant of the typology, we included the comments that, in our view, were driven by a promotion focus as the main motivation was to accomplish positive gains and the logic of appropriateness as the focus was on managing the mobile devices in accordance with one’s personal identity, preferences, and values. Interestingly, the data analysis revealed that people decided to disconnect through symbolic decisions aimed at establishing, implementing and communicating their personal digital philosophy (Powers, 2010). As the following example by Marilyn illustrates, a personal digital philosophy enables the development of a holistic approach towards communication technologies, which results in “a way of thinking that takes

into account the human need to connect outward, to answer the call of the crowd, as well as the opposite need for time and space apart” (Powers, 2010, p. 4).

[The 21-day challenge] brings to [my] mind a quote [by] Oscar Wilde: “Everything in moderation, including moderation”. I have set discernible boundaries. I usually turn [my smartphone] off when I am in a meeting with someone (if I forget [to do so], I simply do not answer). I have set specific hours when I am “available” by phone. If I go on a vacation, I post a specific message. I rarely use my phone outside of business hours...my cell phone is a helpful business tool – I control it, it does not control me. Today’s technology is incredible, provided you use it wisely to your best advantage. (Marylin, #102)

We believe that Marylin’s tactic was aimed at reflecting on the role and importance of communication technologies in her life. She wrote that, for her, communication technologies are essential but that it is also necessary to maintain control over them in order to fully leverage on their potential and minimize the risks associated with an uncontrolled use. Similar comments were made by other commentators, like Victoria and Blue, who lamented the pervasiveness of smartphones in our society and described the role they felt that communication technologies should have in their lives:

My phone [is] there to aid social interaction [,] not hinder it. (Victoria, #73)

It took me a couple of months to remind myself that the phone is not my master. (Blue, #101)

The following comments are illustrative of other symbolic decisions that people made with the intention of building and reinforcing their personal views on connectivity technologies, such as accentuating their identity as ‘old-school’ people, giving the right example to children, or returning to a basic phone instead of purchasing a more advanced smartphone:

I still refuse to connect to an electronic leash (aka a mobile device)... Perhaps one day I will...but I’m still very much old school. (Mark, #68 – old school identity)

As a family, we agreed that phones should be banned completely from meal times. As adults, we have to set an example for the kids. (Andrew, #83 – setting the right example to kids)

I unplugged about 2 ½ years ago. It was the second-best thing I did to get my life back on track. I keep a very basic standard ‘old-school’ cell phone. (Kay, #92 – using a simple phone)

For some participants, the decision to disconnect was a consequence of a critical incident. As major turning points in one’s life tend to stimulate reflection (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) and counterfactual thinking (Obodaru, 2012), unplanned incidents led commentators to revise their connectivity behaviors, as described in the following comment:

I recently spent two weeks in Greece with my wife and three kids and turned the phone off for the first time in 20 years. It was fantastic...I am now aiming for weekends and reducing my [time spent on] Facebook. (Will, #242)

Another decision aimed at to strengthening their image of “old-school” people, consisted of using landline phones for most of their work time and being completely off the grid once out of the office:

I try to be quite disciplined about my mobile phone use. I have a physical office and I use the landline as my first port of call. That way I can turn off when I go home. (Heather, #114)

Most of the decisions included in this category demonstrate that human agency was driven by a trade-off between the benefits and costs associated with technology use (Matusik & Mickel, 2011). Several commentators who enacted symbolic decisions to build their digital philosophy were also taking additional initiatives and to communicate to their proximal stakeholders about the risks associated with a state of constant connectivity. This aspect will be covered in the fourth category, in which we present the disconnection decisions that people make in response to solicitations from other family members and aimed at shielding one’s priorities in life.

4.3 Minimizing undesirable social behaviors

In the third quadrant of the typology, we included the comments that, in our view, reflected a prevention focus and a logic of consequences, as the disconnection decisions of this category were mainly undertaken with the motivation to minimize undesirable social behaviors associated with a state of constant connectivity. As illustrated in Figure 1, the main motivations mentioned by commenters included in this category were to avoid appearing rude in social interactions, to minimize interruptions, to avoid treating others in a disrespectful way, and to refrain from antisocial behaviors. Different decisions were made to attain such goals. Preventing a conversation from being interrupted by the sound of notifications was frequently mentioned in the comments as an embarrassing situation. To avoid it, some individuals decided to simply ignore the sound of their phones when a new message/call/email arrived. The following comment by Kim, a real estate agent, illustrates the decision of not checking the phone while in the company of others:

When out with family, friends, and clients, I never check my phone. To me, it is just good manners!! (Kim, #121)

More radical decisions consisted of disabling the work email account from the phone to make this potential conversation-disturbing task less accessible, as illustrated in the following comment by Rajan, a consultant in the management domain:

Not only does the mobile phone "absent" you from your surroundings, but it is also most disrespectful [to] the [people] who have chosen to be in your company. I, for one, have chosen to disable my business mail on my mobile phone. (Rajan, #112)

This decision resembles the 20-second rule described by Shawn Achor (2010) in his book 'The happiness advantage', which is often mentioned as an effective remedy to fight negative habits. This rule consists of increasing the time necessary (up to 20 seconds) to access a possible temptation, like chocolate, alcohol or smartphone, so that accessing it would require greater willpower and determination. More specifically, in the case of the decision to disable the work

email account on the phone as done by Rajan, it is a clear application of the 20-second rule as accessing the mailbox only through the phone internet browser, which requires inserting the login and password and typing the email login webpage, is an operation that requires more than 20 seconds and greater willpower than accessing the email on the phone native app. Lars decided to disable the automatic notification system on the phone in favor of manually checking, which was perceived as less intrusive:

One good thing to do is to turn off the alert for e-mails and texts – I can assure you that you look at your phone often enough to get all messages in due time, without being instantly notified as they arrive. (Lars, #106)

We noticed that commenters did not only act to moderate their personal state of connectivity but also intervened when others' connectivity states resulted in impolite behaviors that affected the interaction. For example, several commenters made the decision to directly confront their interlocutors when they were using their phone in a disrespectful manner in the social interaction, such as when they were concentrating on the phone screen instead of talking to them (i.e., a phenomenon described in the literature with the term “phubbing”, Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016):

Just had dinner with a friend and I asked that he [turn] his phone off due to the fact [that] when his phone beeps he acts like there is a fire in his pocket and the whole world around him can just wait a minute. (Cheryl, #60)

Cheryl's comment resembles the communication tactics described by Kreiner and colleagues (2009) in their work on Episcopal priests consisting of confronting worshippers who incessantly called them during their time off. In extreme cases, as the next comment illustrates, some people made the decision to stop interacting with impolite interlocutors; they did so to convey a message and prevent similar situations from occurring again in the future:

I've been known to get up and leave meetings, dinners and other situations when folks seem more preoccupied with their phones than with the people they

are in [the] presence of, unaware of how insulting and rude that behavior is.
(Thomas, #11)

Several comments revealed the introduction of ‘penalties’ in their social encounters, mostly within the family setting or with friends, towards people who were constantly on their phone while having dinner with others. An example of such a penalty may be paying for a round of drinks or washing the dishes at the end of the meal, as this comment indicates:

The movement has started over here by friends socializing. Whoever takes the phone during a get together has to sponsor the next round of food or drink...a bit of an incentive to keep the hands off. (Claudia, #28)

A very effective disconnection decision to refrain from assuming antisocial behaviors, as well as to promote greater focus and attention to the present, consisted of putting the mobile phone literally “out of sight” to resist the temptation to check it all the time, as the comments by Aegir illustrates:

When invited to dinner at [a] friends’ place I leave the phone in my jacket in the [flat’s] entrance. Otherwise, why go and meet others? (Aegir, #154)

The comments reported above confirm that people may have multiple goals when making their disconnection decisions. For example, some of the comments reflect a dual desire to minimize undesirable social behaviors and to promote greater focus and situational awareness to important events of life.

4.4 Shielding one’s priorities in life

In the fourth quadrant of the typology, we included the comments that reflected a prevention focus and a logic of appropriateness regarding the model of decision making, as the disconnection decisions in this category were motivated by the desire to avoid the loss of significant others’ affection and to align one’s behaviors with one’s identities. Several commenters reported that observing their own behaviors as well as those of their proximal

stakeholders helped them to reflect on the interpersonal costs associated with constant connectivity and the risk of losing sight of essential priorities in life. The next comment by Florence reflects a fear of becoming dependent on technology as well as of assuming antisocial behaviors that did not match her values:

Initially, I did not want to get a smartphone because I felt I didn't need to 'be online as much as I am already'. I knew my commute to work would become phone related. I did not really want to become so reliant on something...I still try to tell myself not to become reliant on something that makes me more antisocial. (Florence, #204)

Similar comments were made by Rebecca and Syed, who made the decision to moderate the smartphone use when being with other family members and kids in the attempt to remain focused on the major priorities in their lives:

My employer does not allow cell phones...it's amazing, but I really can survive eight hours without checking everyone's Facebook status. Then I realized, if I can do this for my employer, will I do it for my sons? Who deserves my undivided attention? (Rebecca, #109)

I never answer [my] phone when I'm playing with my daughter, talking to my parents or having a chat with my wife. I call people back when I get free (Syed, #156).

The next comments indicate that many people were challenged by their family members to reduce their smartphone use. Like the critical incidents described in the previous section, these solicitations from family members can represent significant turning points for people, leading to a radical revision of connectivity behaviors in order to avoid losing family members' affection and being more respectful of their preferences and needs (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012). Such comments reveal that disconnection decisions were not only proactively made by the commentators but were also undertaken in response to solicitations by significant others, revealing not only an agentic approach towards the management of communication technologies but also a reactive one in response to the contextual solicitation:

I have been accused several times of being married to my phone and not paying attention to others around me. (Paula, #110)

My [six- and three-year-old children] often ask me to look them straight in the eyes when they are talking to me to ensure that I am listening with all my senses. Should I use my cell phone at home in their presence after school, they often question whether my mobile is more important than [them]. (Malak, #187)

Another decision consisted of warning to self about the social and relationships risks associated with excessive use of communication technologies as described in the next comments:

It is not healthy for you that the phone is the first thing you look at in the morning and the last at night. (Gina, #30)

I have often been concerned that we are losing our sense of courtesy by not giving someone we're meeting with (whether business, spouse, children, friends) our undivided attention. (Mike, #84)

In this category, we also included the comments of those people who were willing to enhance not only their self-awareness but also others' awareness regarding the risk associated with excessive use of communication technologies. Illustrative examples include the following comments from commentators who, after having read the article on LinkedIn, decided to share the challenge with their team, spouses and/or friends:

I completely agree [with this article] and have been trying to [advise] people/friends and colleagues to adopt a similar approach not only for their phones but all technology around us. (Ayman, #44)

5. DISCUSSION

Our research questions were: *Why do individuals exert agency and decide to reduce their smartphone use, and what specific disconnection decisions do they make?* In exploring these questions, we drew on the regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) and on decision-making theories (March, 1994) to code, interpret and classify a corpus of 242 comments that LinkedIn users posted in reaction to an article discussing the risks of excessive use of communication technologies. Our analysis painted human agency with regards to material affordances as four

categories of disconnection decisions, driven either by a promotion versus prevention focus or by the logics of consequences versus appropriateness. The analysis of these comments confirms that individuals are agentic in the management of their smartphones (Flyverbom et al., 2016; Kolb et al., 2012; Leonardi, 2012) as they are likely to engage in a series of discretionary behaviors aimed at promoting gains associated with breaks in the smartphone use and/or preventing negative outcomes due to constant connectivity. Interestingly, these comments also resonate with a key argument of boundary management literature (Kreiner et al., 2009), i.e. that there is a reciprocal relationship between the challenges that individuals experience on a daily basis in the management of their work-home interface and the enactment of specific strategies aimed at addressing such challenges. The presence of a challenge, for instance, a boss asking every evening to receive a report regarding the daily meetings with the several clients, stimulates the use of particular boundary management strategies or tactics, for instance, communicating with the boss about one's personal preferences during nonwork time, which, in turn, can contribute to diminishing the interference caused by constant connectivity. This reciprocal relationship can be theorized as human agency changing material agency, that is individuals' goals modifying what material affordances do (Leonardi, 2012).

5.1 Theoretical contributions

Our study primarily contributes to the connectivity and to the work - non-work boundary management literature. First, our study demonstrates that individuals devote time and effort to make decisions regarding when and where to connect or disconnect from their smartphone, so as to break out from their state of constant connectivity both at work and in their private lives. In other words, we contribute to research on human agency in the face of material agency (Flyverbom et al., 2016; Leonardi, 2012) and to connectivity research (Kolb et al., 2012;

Mazmanian et al., 2013; Wajcman & Rose, 2011) by showing what motivates disconnection decisions and how such decisions are enacted. We contend that differentiating between promotion/prevention focus and consequence/appropriateness logic behind such decisions is an insightful contribution as connectivity regulation is becoming increasingly salient and needed in contemporary workplaces (Kolb et al., 2012), and, as such, it is important to understand its underlying rationales. Our findings are relevant because they disclose a new side of human agency, related to the management of communication technologies, demonstrating how its entanglement with the materiality of contemporary mobile devices and the social context (Orlikowski, 2007) can produce a wider spectrum of decisions, including the one to disconnect and resist the pressure coming from mobile devices.

An additional important distinction emerges from our findings, as our analysis highlights two dimensions of connectivity regulation, the individual and the relational. Theorizing smartphone regulation as being both self-directed and other-directed – as in the case of decisions included in the fourth category of our typology, where we grouped decisions to disconnect in response to a solicitation provided by a family member – may also extend our grasp of individuals' efforts to leverage technology so that it remains beneficial to them and their stakeholders. The comments reveal that stakeholders can introduce social sanctions in the case of disrespectful behaviors that violate social expectations (e.g. behaviors deemed to be impolite). As such, our findings extend identity research (Ybema et al., 2009) by claiming that connectivity regulation may align with social regulations pertaining to acceptable social scripts, which remain important for social interactions in old and new technological contexts.

Our second main contribution pertains to research on the management of boundaries between work and non-work. Prior research has widely focused on how individuals manage their

work-home boundaries to achieve greater balance in their lives (Kreiner et al., 2009; Sturges, 2012). Boundaries are clearly conceptualized as bidirectional and of potentially asymmetrical strength (Clark, 2000; Kossek & Lautsch, 2012). However, the strategies or tactics that have been identified so far in the literature focused mostly on work intrusions in the private sphere (Kreiner et al., 2009). Our results extend this literature by demonstrating the presence of commonalities in the way people manage their boundaries through coherent decisional patterns across their work and private roles. Acknowledging that individuals also engage in specific tactics to protect their work domain from potential intrusions pertaining to the non-work sphere is an important contribution and it opens up new avenues of research as to what these boundary management behaviors are and how they are diversely implemented across work contexts.

5.2 Practical implications

This study can inspire individuals who seek to reduce their smartphone use by suggesting a series of decisions to do so. While the analysis of costs and benefits associated with disconnection decisions was beyond the scope of the present article, several comments posted on LinkedIn indicated that the enactment of disconnection decisions produced immediate benefits for them in many aspects of their lives. A large group of commenters indicated that they experienced an increasing number of high-quality conversations after reducing the time spent on the smartphone. Others stated that putting the phone out of sight or deciding when to use or not to use communication technologies helped them to concentrate more and to become more effective both at work and at home. A group of people also reported noticeable health benefits. Health improvements were both psychological, due to an enhanced ability to detach from work, and physical, due to the smaller amount of time spent using mobile devices that very often involve an unnatural neck posture and expose finger and eye muscles to excessive effort. We,

therefore, encourage individuals, managers and policy-makers to consider how connectivity states can be regulated following personal orientations and decision styles in order to foster role performance at and outside of work and to promote consistency with one's or a social group's identities.

5.3 Limitations and future research

While our sample was well fitted to our research objectives in the sense that it enabled the examination of specific acts of disconnection and their motivations, there was a selection bias such that the people who commented on this LinkedIn article were interested in the issue of connectivity technology regulation and thus were probably more likely to disconnect than average population. Future research on the prevalence of connectivity technology regulation decisions and motivations should strive to study samples that are exempt from this selection bias. Conducting diary studies (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003) would be an interesting way to capture on-going connectivity regulation decisions, as would critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954) or the experimental vignettes methodology (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). We call for future research looking at the prevalence of the four categories of disconnection decisions that we have outlined, in light of a range of individual factors that may influence them, such as role identification and preferences for segmentation vs. integration of work and life. Likewise, a range of contextual factors may impact individuals' disconnection decisions, such as the degree of control over one's work, which can depend on the relationship with supervisor and the organizational culture, status distance and power difference within relationships (e.g. whether an employee can confront his or her supervisor about their connectivity habits), and cultural beliefs regarding what is right or wrong in interpersonal relationships and work devotion, which may vary across social classes and countries (Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Given the pervasiveness of communication technologies and the importance for individuals, organizations, and society of understanding the different reasons why and the different ways in which states of connectivity can be regulated (Kolb et al., 2012), this study presents a useful framework to theorize specific disconnection decisions and motivation behind such acts as representative of human agency with regards to material affordances, which we hope can enhance awareness and comprehension of this important aspect of contemporary organizational life.

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Figure 1.**Typology of Individual Motivations underlying Disconnection Decisions**

	Logic of Consequences	Logic of Appropriateness
Approach Orientation	<p>1. Improving Role Performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing focus and situational awareness • Resting and recovering cognitive and physical energies • Favoring more active participation in work and non-work roles • Promoting better work and family experiences 	<p>2. Establishing a Personal Digital Philosophy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building and reinforcing a personal view about connectivity technologies • Strengthening self-image • Giving the right example to children (in the family domain) and to colleagues (at work) • Reflecting on the role and importance of communication technologies in one's life
Avoidance Orientation	<p>3. Minimizing Undesirable Social Behaviors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding the appearance of rudeness in interactions • Minimizing interruptions • Avoiding treating others (or being treated by others) disrespectfully • Refraining from antisocial behaviors 	<p>4. Shielding One's Priorities in Life</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warning about (inter-)personal risks associated with excessive use of communication technologies • Curbing a passive use of technology for self and stakeholders • Avoiding the loss of significant others' affection • Making sure to not lose control in personal and work domains

ⁱ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20130205234619-1291685-the-21-day-challenge-no-phone-in-the-company-of-others>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.etikkom.no/globalassets/documents/english-publications/ethical-guidelines-for-internet-research.pdf>