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## Digital Detox Communities as a Form of Resistance to Perpetual Connectedness: The Case of Social Eating

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**Abstract.** The advent of the Internet and the spread of online communication have represented one of the greatest socio-cultural changes in recent years, also in terms of the dimension of time. While the proliferation of digital spaces and virtual contexts—in which forms of aggregation and social identification processes can be traced—has broadened the range of possible socialization processes for individuals, face-to-face experiences have seen the primacy of the process of constructing intersubjectivity gradually eroded. However, especially in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, there has been a countertrend among some groups of people who have put forward new demands and needs: the reappropriation of face-to-face socialization. The phenomenon – defined as digital detoxification, or purification from social media and the Internet for a temporary period of varying duration—Involves a growing community of people around the world across gender, age, and social class (Syvertsen, Enli, 2020; Ansari *et al.* 2024). Digital detox communities are growing throughout the Western world, according to a study by Radtke *et al.* (2021), which found that in the United States in 2020-2021, approximately 15% of the American population searched at least once on search engines for advice or ways to 'disconnect' from the internet, and that during the same period, registrations for apps or communities increased by 75%. It is precisely this new need that has prompted some dating app developers to start designing a new type of app, seeking to develop a hybrid form that combines the need to '*create opportunities for socializing on the digital side*' with the possibility of meeting and connecting with potential friends, partners, and new acquaintances solely and exclusively through face-to-face experiences. This is, therefore, a new frontier for dating apps, which mixes different features and needs to create opportunities to meet and connect through real and typically 'analog' experiences, such as attending exhibitions, concerts, day trips, or cultural events, depending on one's inclinations and passions. A new dating app called Tablo has recently been launched. It is a true social networking app in that, in order to exchange phone numbers and stay in touch, users 'must' participate in a face-to-face social experience, carving out time in their daily schedules and offline lives. The aim of this research was to analyze the motivations, relational modes, and uses of digital space among users registered on the Tablo app, while also highlighting aspects of perception and representation in the imagination of time and relationships with the need for digital detox. To answer the research questions, a mixed methods research experience was conducted, combining different research methodologies: in the first phase, a digital ethnography analysis was carried out, analyzing 300 profiles, interactions, and 'social life' of the community registered on the app; in the second phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 users who regularly use Tablo.

**Keywords:** social media, social eating, digital detox, disconnection.

## INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Internet and the expansion of online communication have significantly transformed socio-cultural processes, particularly in relation to the perception and management of time. While the proliferation of digital spaces and virtual contexts -- in which to trace aggregative forms and processes of social identification -- has expanded the range of possible socialization processes of individuals, the role of face-to-face interaction in constructing intersubjectivity has been increasingly eroded. However, especially in the post-pandemic period from Covid-19, there has been a countertrend by some groups of people who have advanced new demands and needs: the reappropriation of face-to-face socialization. The phenomenon – referred to as digital detoxification, or purification from social media and the Internet for a temporary period of varying duration – involves a growing community of people around the world across gender, age, and social class (Syvertsen and Enli, 2020; Ansari *et al.* 2024). “Digital detox” communities are growing throughout the Western world, according to a study by Radtke *et al.* (2021), which found that in the United States in the years 2020-2021 about 15 percent of the U.S. population searched search engines at least once for advice or ways to ‘unplug’ from the web, and that in the same time frame, memberships in apps or communities increased by 75 percent. It is precisely on this new need that some dating app developers have started a new design, trying to develop a form of hybridization between the need to ‘create opportunities for aggregation on the digital side’ and the possibility of meeting and connecting with hypothetical friends, partners and new acquaintances only – and exclusively – through face-to-face experience. This represents a new frontier in dating applications, blending diverse functions and users need to create opportunities to meet and connect through real and typically ‘analog’ experiences such as, for example, attending exhibitions, concerts, out-of-town trips or cultural events according to one’s inclinations and passions.

A new dating app, Tablo, has recently emerged, which is a true aggregation app in that to exchange phone contacts and stay in touch, people ‘must’ participate in a convivial *face-to-face* experience, carving out time in their own organization of the day and *timing* in offline life.

The purpose of this research work was to analyze the motivations, relational modes, and uses of digital space of users subscribed to the ‘Tablo’ app while also trying to highlight aspects of perception and representation in the imagery of time and relationships with digital detox needs.

In the first part, the theoretical frame of reference will be briefly outlined, which will try to analyze two salient aspects of the process of *social eating* – which is Tabloo’s main function – and its dual action: on the one hand, it is a phenomenon that insists on a very important human and social action for the people: the communal consumption of food as an aggregative and social action; a sociological review of the main theories on food and social aggregation around the action of “eating,” theories that would resist social and cultural changes, will be presented; on the other hand, theoretical coordinates on the process of *digital detox* will be presented, with a cross-disciplinary analysis of the different disciplines that address the topic.

In the second part, data and results of a mixed methods research experience, conducted by combining different research methodologies, will be presented to answer the research questions: in a first phase, a digital ethnography analysis was conducted by analyzing the profiles, interactions, and “social life” of the community registered on the app; in a second phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 users who regularly use Tablo.

### 1. FOOD AS A SOCIAL FACT: SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE FUNCTION OF COLLECTIVE MEAL CONSUMPTION

The need to obtain food, and the preparation and consumption of meals have always been fertile ground for different human disciplines to study the processes of aggregation, socialization and transmission of material and intangible cultural aspects.

Anthropology, history and sociology have dialogued to fully understand the social and cultural function of communal meal eating and have provided interesting theories and interpretations, some of them resisting cultural-historical changes and the progressive modernization of structural aspects of society.

Emilé Durkheim (1912) devotes extensive discussion in his studies and reflections to the social function of food and the communal consumption of the meal.

In the book “*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*”, he identifies religion and aggregative religious rituals as the social framework within which to initiate

and consolidate processes of “mutual solidarity” among individuals and members of a specific community, and among the various social actions, food would be a key vehicle for the aggregative function of communities, from the small family-organized community to large cultural communities.

In fact, for the French author, the collective preparation and consumption of food would represent a fundamental act in creating a twofold bond between individuals: on the one hand in the action of “eating together” a process of “intimacy” would be created between members, the apparent individual and social distances would tend to shrink, increasing the process of “socialization” that is fundamental for the construction of a recognizable and internalizable collective identity.

Durkheim did not address the process of food preparation and consumption in everyday life, in its secular aspects, but his insights are also superimposable on the convivial situations of social microsystems such as family, school, peer group and institutional contexts. For the author, therefore, food and the symbolic universe revolving around the collective consumption of food have a function in the construction and regulation of social norms, norms that are identified, accepted, consolidated and shared.

The social and conviviality aspect of food preparation and consumption is clearly identified by the thought of Georg Simmel, who in his essay *Sociabilitat* ([1910] 1977) defines food as a fundamental tool for the socialization process of individuals, consolidated by “conviviality”. For the author, the collective consumption of food, over the centuries has gradually eroded the functions of “necessity and subsistence” to replace a function of “constructing space for social interaction”.

Simmel in the process of collective food preparation and consumption identifies two peculiar aspects: the “content” and the “form”: the former concerns the set of structural aspects of food (food, nutrients, assembly of the same, preparation and recipes); the latter refers, on the other hand, to the social and cultural aspects that insist on conviviality and sharing, e.g., the way food is set, presented, the spatial organization of the table and diners.

Nobert Elias, on the other hand, sees the evolution of how food is prepared and consumed as the “mirror” of the progress and civilization of human beings. In fact, in his volume *The Process of Civilization* (1939), the author outlines a clear correspondence between the achievements of humankind with changes in the choice of food, the evolution of combinations between elements and the way meals are presented especially in social and ceremonial moments.

Anthropologist Levi-Strauss in 1966 emphasizes a central aspect of Elias’ analysis by focusing on the symbolic and cultural transition of food from raw to cooked: the author in his theory termed *culinary structuralism* defines cooked food as the evolution of modernity in all spheres of human society, definitively breaking down the rigid separations between social classes, and cooked food also becomes a form of “accuracy” in the human action of food preparation, also complexifying the social ritual of the communal meal, which also assumes a social role and structure of “regulator of time”. Indeed, Levi-Strauss highlights how in modern society through the cyclical nature of meals individuals can organize the temporal function of human activities.

In 1979 Bourdieu, in his work *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, devotes reflective space to the topic of taste, food consumption and the cultural processes of food.

According to the French author, taste is not personal or individual but is the result of a complex social process and often reflect “the individual’s social position in the social structure”. As with other distinguishing factors, such as high culture, art and music, food would also contribute to the consolidation of social distinction between classes, creating social differentiations both in food selection and in fashions and modes of conviviality and social integration.

Transposing the key concept of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory, the *habitus*, for the author there would also exist a “food habitus” that is consolidated through family socialization (in the first instance), and extended social experiences (in the second instance).

Bourdieu also devotes reflection to the symbolic and social space of the table, to the social roles reflected within the interactive context of food conviviality.

For the author, it is crucial to distinguish between the different social actors present at the table: those who serve, those who are served, those who speak, those who listen, those who choose the menu, and those who congregate. These dynamics reflect, for Bourdieu, the social status of individuals, the relational modes, but above all would reflect the field of symbolic struggle, typical of the social classes in mainstream society.

The process of globalization and modernization of social reality have profoundly changed these aspects of the social and cultural process of food and communal meal eating.

While it is true that the “table” remains one of the main symbolic and social interaction spaces where social meaning and sharing can be constructed, the modes of preparation and content aspects of food have transformed radically: the proliferation of *fast food* or “easy”

conviviality experiences-such as apericena and finger food-follow a need for individualization and immediacy, typical of contemporary society (Meglio 2017).

The digitization of society and the advent of social media have contributed to the transformation of the relationship between food and the community, reinforcing a true *long-time* interest-that is, interest extended beyond the need to feed oneself-and creating new forms of social gathering through the vehicle of food (De Solier 2013).

On social media, for example, the last few years have seen a proliferation of IG and Tik Tok profiles that have food, recipe sharing, healthy cooking or ethnic recipes as their "*core narrative*".

This phenomenon is known as "digital foodscape" i.e., virtual spaces where food is shared, narrated, immortalized, commented on, interacted with, and joined together in communities that have as their main narrative and identity theme a food style, passion for food or a specific traditional cuisine (Johnston and Goodman 2015).

Lupton (2017) pointed out that within the digital foodscape, a need has arisen over the years to create experiences of "hybrid interactions" that is, to associate digital sharing experiences of food-related content with the use of this aggregative expedient to organize physical and offline experiences such as events, workshops, and tastings.

## 2. IN SEARCH OF "DISCONNECTION": THE CONCEPT OF DIGITAL DETOX

The digitization of society has profoundly changed the concept of space and time, giving people access to the ability to be always connected and in all places.

While digital hyperconnectedness has made it possible to create new possible relational exchanges, virtual contexts in which to trace possibilities and experiences of self-determination, identity construction and possibilities to expand the spheres of interaction, it has also had negative effects on the perception of individuals' psycho-physical and social well-being, generating new forms of social exclusion, psychological malaise, pathologies and health-related issues (Brown and Kuss 2020).

In a 2015 Markowitz survey, replicated by Amez and Beart in 2020, time spent using digital devices, connecting and accessing social media increased from 70 minutes in 2015 to 360 minutes in 2020.

This prolonged exposure to the use of digital devices represents a new perspective of analysis with respect to the individual's all-round health issues: a) from a psy-

chological perspective; b) from a physical perspective; and c) from a social perspective.

From a psychological perspective, several studies have tried to highlight the psychological effects of exposure-in a long-term perspective-to digital devices and social media by identifying several negative side effects on sleep, mood, and stress (Leverson *et al.* 2016; Wilcockson *et al.* 2019; Hunt *et al.* 2018; Vally and D'Souza 2019).

Leverson and collaborators (2016) analyzed the quality and quantity of sleep of 1732 U.S. college students in relation to their habits with respect to the use of social media and digital devices in the six hours preceding the falling asleep phase, showing that students who stopped using digital devices earlier than others had different quality and quantity of sleep hours than the same students who also used the devices prolonged in the stages immediately preceding the falling asleep phase. The quantitative differences were reflected in a greater number of hours of sleep of people who stopped using digital devices 2 hours before falling asleep (about 45 percent) than students who continued to use the same devices until sleep; from the perspective of sleep quality, the authors showed that students who stopped using digital devices before others had fewer nightmares, less fragmented sleep and a greater feeling of refreshment upon awakening, this difference is attested in a percentage of 30 percent.

Regarding the effects of prolonged use of digital devices and mood and anxiety disorders, important contributions have been the studies by Wilcockson *et al.* (2019) and Hunt *et al.* (2018)

Hunt *et al.* (2018) directed their focus of analysis on anxiety disorder in relation to digital hyperconnectedness. The authors investigated the anxiety levels of 143 individuals in relation to hours of digital device use and type of use, showing that the level and type of anxiety correlated with the hours and types of digital device use, as the hours varied the level of anxiety was significantly higher, and also the type of anxiety (specific or generalized) correlated with the use of digital devices on the performance side, i.e., for work, study, and academic purposes.

Wilcockson and coworkers (2019) also conducted a study to empirically measure the levels of depression, alertness, emotional lability, and cyclomia of 49 psychology students in relation to the number of hours and habits with respect to digital device use, social media access, and other forms of connection in cyberspace. The results, in line with Hunt *et al.* (2018), showed that alertness and emotional lability were directly proportional to the number of hours of use and the type of use: significant differences were found when the number of hours

spent in front of devices exceeded two hours, while negative effects on emotionality were shown when use was related to performance (work, study, writing) versus leisure (posting photos, viewing other digital content, interacting with other users, etc.).

Perceived stress level would also seem to be a parameter strongly correlated with digital hyperconnectedness, Vally and D'Souza (2019) conducted a study of 68 people, analyzing stress levels under conditions of usual use of digital devices and re-measuring the same stress levels (through a purpose-built survey) after a 4-week period of use restriction. The authors found that perceived stress levels systematically dropped in all participants by about 40 percent with a general improvement in other dimensions also considered important such as hours and quality of sleep, anxiety levels, and irritability.

But where the greatest impact of digital hyperconnectedness can be highlighted is on the social side, on socialization processes and forms of social isolation.

Several studies (Brown and Kuss 2020; Stieger and Lewertz, 2018; Hunt *et al.* 2018, Coppola and Masullo 2021) have shown that excessive exposure to digital devices can have effects on socialization in terms of the need to be connected, voluntary social self-isolation, and social support and pressure.

Brown and Kuss (2020) tried to study from a social point of view the impact of digital hyperconnection on the need to be connected through social media by involving 45 people aged 18-45, analyzing through a self-report questionnaire, in which participants had to "map" digital consumption habits (in quantitative and qualitative terms) in relation to different dimensions such as sociability, the need to check social and to be connected with other people. The scholars found that younger people (cohort 18-29 years old) had greater needs for digital hyperconnection and fear of being "isolated" (+35%) than people in the 30-45 age cohort.

Hunt *et al* (2018) and Stieger and Lewertz (2018) investigated the level of social support and social pressure in relation to digital hyperconnectedness. Hunt *et al* (2018), specifically, conducted a study to investigate the *social support perceived* by 124 college students in relation to digital consumption and social media connection and found that people who are hyper-connected feel they have more support in quantitative terms (about 32 percent) than people who use social media more sporadically, an aspect that is reversed when analyzing the quality of the support network, which is considered more robust by "occasional" social media users. Stieger and Lewertz (2018), on the other hand, analyzed the social pressure perceived by 230 college students in rela-

tion to the way they use social media and digital devices, highlighting how often the digital device can be an escape route from social pressure, a pressure perceived to be greater by younger people (cohort 18-25 +45%).

The possible correlation between hyperconnection and voluntary social self-isolation – or the hikikomori effect – was also highlighted by Coppola and Masullo (2021) in a netnographic work conducted on Italian online community – Hikikomori Italia – highlighting how hyperconnection would actually represent a "digital migration" of offline socialization without a real perception of malaise on the part of some individuals, who would see, instead, online socialization as a resource to counteract the social pressure and phobia of face-to-face contexts.

In relation to the phenomenon of digital hyperconnection recently the term *digital detox* has taken hold in Western countries (primarily in the United States and Canada), that is, the need to "detoxify" for a varying period of time from the use of digital devices and from social media (in this case we can also speak of Social Detox) in order to "rediscover face-to-face socialization" (Felix and Dean 2012).

Following the *Hierarchical Computer-mediated Communication Taxonomy* (Meier, Reinecke, 2020), the concept of digital detox should not be limited exclusively to a period of abstaining from the use of electronic devices. On the contrary, it should also include intervals in which people avoid using (a) specific applications (such as social media), (b) branded media (e.g., logging off Facebook), (c) functions (such as chats), (d) interactions (e.g., active use of WhatsApp), and (e) messages (e.g., voice messages).

Meier and Reinecke (2020) point out that distinguishing these "six levels of detoxification" is critical to understanding different aspects of electronic media use in a systematic way.

In this perspective, the emerging concept of "digital well-being" or a state of psychophysical balance that arises from the healthy and conscious use of digital technologies is introduced.

An example of an organized digital detox community is the case of *Camp Grounded*, a summer camp for adults in the Mendocino Forest, California in the United States, which offered its guests the opportunity to totally disconnect from technology and actively participate in face-to-face experiences such as yoga, writing, hiking and art workshops. Sutton (2019) conducted an ethnographic study of the Camp Grounded community and found 360-degree well-being effects on dimensions such as: a) desire for technology renunciation; b) creations of temporary identities divorced from references to everyday life identities and digital identities found on social

media; c) rediscovery of play and recreational experiences and aspects of one's creativity; and d) enhancement of social and communication skills.

### 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The Tablo app was created in the spring of 2019 with the aim of creating a "bridge" between classic apps for dating, i.e., dating apps for romantic and sexual encounters, and the ability to socialize through one of the main activities: convivial meals.

Tablo is an app included in a list provided by the official Facebook group of the Italian Digital Detox community. For this reason, it has been selected as the analysis community for the following research project.

Since 2022-the year from which pandemic restrictions have been progressively reduced until they have been totally abandoned-the number of downloads of the app has grown with an annual average of +150% until it has spread like wildfire especially in large Italian cities.

How does Tablo work? For one thing – like almost all apps for dating – it works on both iOS and Android, and to sign up you need to create a particularly detailed profile, in which you need to make explicit your gender, age, residence, profession or field of interest, you must, in addition, provide a photo that is considered authentic and a detailed biographical sheet in which you list interests, hobbies, passions and psychological and character traits.

In the second stage, based on residency or the possibility of geolocation in the case of travel or commuting, a series of specific sections appear on the home page offering nearby dining experiences to which one can add oneself and subscribe, on a special map, marked with yellow-colored pointers (in line with the social color of the Tablo brand).

By clicking on one of the yellow pins on the map, you can find out the date, time and all the details of the appointment: how many people can be invited, what age group is involved and the profiles of those who have already joined the experiment. Also available is a list view, with appointments in order of distance from your geographical location, and also a handy agenda function where you can keep an eye on all the events, past and future, that you have decided to attend.

The Tablo app also gives you the ability to "organize" your own event and set the "selection criteria" for participants in your experience.

Like many other apps, it is possible to "review" the experience both in terms of the "location," i.e., the restaurant, bar, or venue where the experience was organ-

ized, and in terms of the "diners" giving feedback on the participant's enjoyment and reliability.

Users, thus, can play an active role in participating in and creating events and build and consolidate their own "credibility" as Tablo users.

Tablo would, therefore, also represent an important opportunity for commercial establishments that host experiences, as through subscribing to the app they have the chance to advertise themselves and make themselves known perhaps to potential users otherwise not intercepted by other communication channels.

Based on the above theoretical considerations, the present research aims to analyze and understand the motivations, relational modes, and uses of digital space of users subscribed to the 'Tablo' app, an "app for experience"-that is, an app that aims to bring face-to-face strangers together around a table for dinner or also trying to highlight the aspects of perception and representation in the imaginary of time and relationships with digital detox needs, as the Tablo app falls within the apps considered "digital foodscape."

Specifically, the following *research questions* were formulated:

RQ1: What are the users who decide to sign up for the Tablo app? What are the sociodemographic characteristics?

RQ2: What is the information, one's own characteristics expressed in the submission of one's membership bio? And what characteristics do you look for in other users to create a possible match?

RQ3: What are the motivations for enrolling in Tablo? Are there peculiar differences in relation to certain variables such as gender and age?

RQ4: How do Tablo's registered users view the digital detox phenomenon?

Aware of methodological limitations, including sampling and non-representativeness of the population, taking into account the complexity of the composite universe of app users taken into analysis, it was decided to use a mix methods approach: in a first phase, a digital ethnography study was conducted (Kozinets and 2010; Masullo *et al.* 2020): which involved a covert observation of 300 profiles of users subscribed to the Tablo app, selected according to a convenience sampling procedure based on a reasoned choice to balance the sample in relation to certain dimensions such as gender, age, and geographic territoriality; in a second phase, a qualitative survey was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 30 people (15 women and 15 men) who use Tablo, sampling was done through spontaneous expression of interest after the publication of posts exposing the research on different Facebook groups in some Ital-

ian cities, specifically Milan, Naples, Rome, Turin and Palermo<sup>1</sup> (Coppola and Masullo 2023).

The covert digital ethnography analysis involved the use of an observation grid examining age, residence, biographical presentation, psychological and character traits made explicit in bios, interests in experiences that could be shared, and motivation for enrollment (if any).

### 3.1. analysis of tablo app users: between the need to "disconnect" and the "complexification" of socialization

300 profiles of users enrolled in the Tablo app in the January-February 2025 bimester until the completion of 300 profiles were analyzed, using as selection criteria: date of enrollment, gender (considered male, female) age (considering 4 different age groups proposed by the app 18-25 years, 26-35 years, 36-45 years, over 45) and biographical presentation, explicit psychological and character traits, interests in experiences to be able to share, motivation for enrollment, if any, were also analyzed<sup>2</sup>.

Table 1 shows data from the analysis of the 300 Tablo user profiles surveyed by analyzing gender, age, education, dominant interest elabor, data are shown for the item that reached the 5% mark. It is important to note that interests are selected hierarchically, from most to least relevant, in a drop-down menu.

Regarding gender, 61.7 percent of the users were female, compared to 38.3 percent of the male gender, while the prevailing age group is the 24-35-year-old cohort (38.3 percent) followed by the 36-45-year-old cohort (28.6 percent) while underrepresented would be the Over 45 cohort (12.1 percent).

Analyzing the data on users' education, 69.6 percent of users who choose to enroll from the Tablo app are college graduates (41 percent bachelor's degree and 28.6 percent Master's degree) while only 2 percent of enrollees hold a high school diploma.

Of interest is the analysis of the dominant interest expressed at the time of enrollment (it is possible to hierarchize interests by entering 5 areas of different intensities) and the main motivation that prompted users to enroll in an app such as Tablo (again, it is possible to express a preference of 3 options, hierarchizing the position according to the sequence chosen).

As for the dominant interest, 17% of the users list Psychology as their first interest, followed at 15.3% by Food and Good Food and 14.3% by Animals and

**Table 1.** Analysis of Tablo users' profile.

	Cases	%
<i>Genus</i>		
Male	115	38,3
Femminle	185	61,7
Total	300	100
<i>Age groups</i>		
18-25 years old	63	21
26-35 years old	115	38,3
36-45 years old	86	28,6
Over 45	36	12,1
Total	300	100
<i>Training</i>		
Junior high school	6	2
Diploma	56	18,6
Bachelor's degree	123	41
Master's Degree	86	28,6
Post graduation	29	9,8
Total	300	100
<i>Dominant interest expressed in the profile</i>		
Psychology	51	17
History	24	8
Animals and nature	43	14,3
Informatics	40	13,3
Theater and exhibitions	33	11
Cinema	35	11,6
Religion and esoterism	14	4,6
Food and good cooking	43	15,3
More	16	4,9
Total	300	100
<i>Main motivation for enrolling in Tablo.</i>		
Getting to know new people	105	35
Finding people with greater compatibility	56	18,6
Fighting boredom	42	14
Fighting loneliness	34	11,4
Disconnection from social media	30	10
More	33	11
Total	300	100

Source: Author' elaboration.

Nature. The data could be explained in relation to the type of app in that Tablo is a social eating, food and cooking would represent the main topics of aggregation; the choice of Psychology and the world of nature as topics of interest that may represent aggregative drives is in line with recent studies in the literature that have mapped the topics and main interests selected by users when signing up for dating apps (find citations).

<sup>1</sup> The Tablo app is mainly used in large cities and is still little used by businesses in inland areas or small towns.

<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon, which is still poorly studied in Italy, lacks quantitative data to support comparative analysis.

**Table 2.** Analysis related to the dominant interest in relation of gender.

Dominant Interest	Males	%	Females	%	Total
Psychology	5	4,3	46	24,8	51
History	7	6	17	9,1	24
Animals and nature	25	21,7	18	9,7	43
Informatics	25	21,7	15	8,5	40
Theater and exhibitions	13	11,3	20	10,8	33
Cinema	15	13	20	10,8	35
Religion and esotericism	3	2,6	11	5,9	14
Food and good cooking	12	10,4	31	16,7	43
More	10	9	7	3,7	16
Total	115	100	185	100	300

Source: Author' elaboration.

Further analysis related the dominant interest expressed at the time of enrollment in the Tablo app in relation to two variables: gender and age (Tables 2 and 3).

The dominant interests selected by men are "Computer Science" and "Animals and Nature" with 21.7 percent, much more detached are the other choices such as Food and Good Cooking (10.4 percent) and Theater and Exhibitions (11.3 percent); women prefer Psychology which was chosen as the main interest by almost a quarter of the sample (24.8 percent) followed by Food and Good Cooking (16.7 percent).

The data show an interest in Psychology among younger 18–25-year-olds (25.3%) and in the Over 45s (25%) while Computer Science is chosen by users aged 18–25 by 17.4% and 15.6% in the 26–35 age group. Interest in Animals and Nature, on the other hand, is one of the predominant choices in the 36–45 age group with 17.4%.

Analyzing, on the other hand, the main motivation for users to sign up for an app for social eating, it

is interesting to note that 18.6 percent report the need to set the compatibility level of new acquaintances more closely through an app that has as its algorithmic function precisely that of proposing events on two basic criteria: geolocation and compatibility of expressed interests (Castro and Barrada 2020).

Also interesting is the motivation for disconnection expressed by 10 percent of the users: as we will see from the analysis of the interviews and experience stories of people who regularly use Tablo to meet new people, the choice to use social eating comes precisely from the need to intercept experiences that for a "lapse of time" allows face-to-face socialization and "disconnects" from social and cyberspace.

The reasons for enrollment in the Tablo app were also analyzed in relation to the gender and age variables (Tables 4 and 5)

Analyzing the data on the "User Compatibility" motivation, 24.3% of male users choose to sign up for a social eating app to refine and enhance compatibility with other users, this finding would be interesting as the app presents a very precise algorithmic table proposal technique on interest compatibility analysis, the motivation on user compatibility drops to 15.1% for female users, who instead choose to sign up for the Tablo app to combat loneliness and boredom in 24.7% of cases (aggregate figure): for women, the app can be a way to track down new spaces to meet people but especially to intercept activities to break the daily routine.

Comparing the data of the motivations "Compatibility of users" in relation to the distribution by age groups, it is interesting to observe that the Over 45s indicate as their main motivation for signing up for the app precisely the possibility of intercepting people who are more similar in terms of general interests, a motivation also shared by the 18–25-year-olds (20.6%).

**Table 3.** Analysis related to the dominant interest in relation of age.

Dominant Interest	18-25	%	26-35	%	36-45	%	Over 45	%	Total
Psychology	16	25,3	15	13	11	12,7	9	25	51
History	3	4,7	8	6,9	10	11,6	3	8,3	24
Animals and nature	9	14,2	15	13	15	17,4	4	11,1	43
Informatics	11	17,4	18	15,6	7	8,1	4	11,1	40
Theater and exhibitions	3	4,7	16	13,9	11	12,7	3	8,3	33
Cinema	4	6,3	18	15,6	8	9,3	5	13,8	35
Religion and esotericism	2	3,1	5	4,3	5	5,8	2	5,8	14
Food and good cooking	10	15,8	12	10,4	18	20,9	3	8,3	43
More	5	8,5	8	7,3	1	1,5	3	8,3	14
Total	63	100	115	100	86	100	36	100	300

Source: Author' elaboration.

**Table 4.** Analysis related to the motivations in relation of gender.

Reason for enrolling in the Tablo app	Males	%	Females	%	Total
Getting to know new people	45	39,1	60	32,4	105
Finding people with greater compatibility	28	24,3	28	15,1	56
Fighting boredom	10	8,6	32	17,2	42
Fighting loneliness	9	7,8	25	13,5	34
Disconnection from social media	15	13	15	8,1	30
More	8	7,2	25	13,7	33
Total	115	100	185	100	300

Source: Author' elaboration.

**Table 5.** Analysis related to the motivations in relation of age.

Reason for enrolling in the Tablo app	18-25	%	26-35	%	36-45	%	Over 45	%	Total
Getting to know new people	20	31,7	45	39,1	30	34,8	10	27,7	105
Finding people with greater compatibility	13	20,6	18	15,6	15	17,4	10	27,7	56
Fighting boredom	10	15,8	18	15,6	11	12,7	3	8,3	42
Fighting loneliness	8	12,9	15	13	10	11,6	1	2,7	34
Disconnection from social media	6	9,5	7	6	12	13,9	5	13,8	30
More	6	9,5	12	10,7	8	9,6	7	19,8	33
Total	63	100	115	100	86	100	36	100	300

Source: Author' elaboration.

The data on the motivation "detoxification" i.e., Disconnection from social media was given as the main motivation by 15% of male users and 8.1% of female users, while the highest percentages when analyzing the data disaggregated by age are 13.9% of the 36-45-year-old cohort and 13.8% of the Over 45 users.

From the analysis of the data, then, it could be hypothesized that, beyond the main underlying motivation for using apps for dating—that is, to meet new people—the other main motivations that direct users to sign up for a social eating app are mainly two: on the one hand the complexification of the socialization process, enhancing as best as possible the possibility of intercepting users with a high compatibility of interests, skimming all other users who from the analysis of the profiles would seem distant in terms of affinity, this process of skimming and selection is enabled by several functions provided by the algorithmic function of the Tablo app; on the other hand the idea of sharing a lunch, a dinner, of conviviality in presence with other people allows a – albeit momentary and situational – disconnection from social and a face-to-face acquaintance experience.

### 3.2. The semi-structured interviews with tablo users: gender scripts and disconnection strategies

In order to answer the research questions and to appreciate qualitative aspects not detectable by profile analysis, in a second phase of the research project, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 (15 men and 15 women) people who are registered and regularly use the Tablo app.

Sampling was done through spontaneous expression of interest, following the publication of posts describing the research on several Facebook groups belonging to various Italian cities, particularly Milan, Naples, Rome, Turin, and Palermo.

Table 6 shows the data for the 30 participants in the second phase of the research.

The semi-structured interview explored several aspects relevant to the research, including: (a) users' motivations for signing up for the Tablo app; (b) media consumption habits, with a focus on the frequency of app use and the regularity with which face-to-face experiences are concluded; (c) users' lived experiences and feedback, with a focus on any differences related to gender, age, and geographic area of residence; (d) perceptions of safety and, at the same time, risk associated with using an app that promotes live encounters with stran-

**Table 6.** Socio-demographic aspects of participants.

City	Genus	Age	Partial by gender	Total City
Rome	Female	24,28,35	3	6
	Male	27,22,38	3	
Milan	Female	25,27,45	3	6
	Male	32,33,55	3	
Naples	Female	30,34,23	3	6
	Male	25,28,39	3	
Turin	Female	21,25,33	3	6
	Male	23,29,38	3	
Palermo	Female	28,29,36	3	6
	Male	33,38,41	3	
Subtotal by gender		Female	15	
		Male	15	
GRAND TOTAL			30	

Source: Author' elaboration.

gers; and (e) views on the concept of digital detoxification and the need for disconnection, analyzed in light of lived experiences through Tablo.

Regarding the motivations that prompted the interjected users to sign up for and use Tablo we can – in line with the results of the analysis of the 300 user profiles in section 3.1 – identify two main motivations: 1) the need to intercept new spaces of socialization with greater accuracy than the compatibility of interests of other users; 2) being able to experience situations and aggregative moments that represent activities of “disconnection” from social media and digital tools, the enhancement of face-to-face experiences.

The following excerpt highlights the first point, which is the search for compatibility of interests among users:

*I think Tablo is really an app unlike any other. You can find theme nights, find new people near you and then absolutely the people you meet are interesting and similar to you! I personally before I sign up for a table I look at the profiles of the people already signed up, but it tends to be that the app offers me tables set up already with my compatibility, I'm really glad I can have signed up and I do at least one table a week, yes at least one... (user, male, 38, Rome).*

The quest for disconnection is reported by many interviewed users, who through the experience of face-to-face lunch and dinner and the various activities offered by Tablo experience the feeling of “taking a break from the social world.” The interview excerpts report the experiences of the two users who emphasize how Tablo is a “social detox app.”

*Tablo is a different app, it's not like Tinder or Meetic, that is, you don't use it to find someone to date or get engaged, or rather not right away. What I like about Tablo is that it gives you the opportunity to meet people very similar to you and then you have to write to these people meet them live first. It feels like a different activity from the others, and like getting rid of chats and social for a few hours, not all apps allow you to do activities (user, woman, 27, Milan).*

*What interests me about Tablo is having experiences outside social, I am 33 years old and have lived in Turin for several years. My friendships have thinned out over time due to various needs; I am single and can no longer go out with my historic friends who are now either married or with children or from other parts of the world. Tablo has given me opportunities to meet new people and make friends easily, with people who are very compatible with me. Food is a passion of mine and so I must say it was very easy. Can Tablo be considered a detoxification activity? Yes absolutely. For two/three hours you forget about the phone, and you feel reconnected with the world (user, woman, 33, Turin).*

Patterns of use, motivations, and perceptions of safety and risk vary in relation to gender, creating actual “gender scripts” that users would enact both as a form of socialization and as a mode of support and social networking with other people of the same gender, a phenomenon present especially in the female gender.

From the perspective of usage patterns, the majority of women who use the Tablo app is to meet highly compatible people but mostly to create aggregative and social spaces to make new friends, especially female ones; knowing a possible partner would seem to be in the background, a consequence of the experiences not the main motivation, an aspect that would instead still be very central in the choices of enrollment, usage and experience-seeking for men, albeit with a level of complexification of compatibility of interests.

The experiences of two users, a 38-year-old man from Palermo and a 34-year-old woman from Naples clarify these two different ways of using Tablo:

*I have to be honest, yes ... okay sure one of the first things I think about when I sign up for a table is if there are women and if I can find a girl among them or otherwise an experience. Eh yes ... we are men (laughs) ... of course it's not as sleazy as Tinder or other dating apps, and then it's not a one-on-one meeting ... there are other people ... I mean ... I don't know if you get it, you have to be a serious person. I like it though because they sign up all smart women... (user, man, 38, Palermo).*

*My main motivation for using Tablo is to meet people, mostly friends. It is honestly not the app for meeting men or having dates, if I need to meet a man I try other apps. For*

*me it is an additional tool to fight loneliness, in recent years I always feel very lonely and Tablo, like other apps, can serve to alleviate this sense of loneliness that often attaches me, especially on weekends* (user, woman, 34, Naples).

Women, moreover, for a mode of safety and security about the experience to be had put in place real “protection” strategies based on specific participant parameters before they sign up for the table. First, many women interviewed pointed out that the ratio of men to women enrolled at the table must be equal or at an advantage for women, users would not enroll in male-dominated tables, and another parameter they take into consideration is the age range, preferring the 25-45 age cohort.

The following two interview excerpts, from a 25-year-old woman from Milan and a 28-year-old woman from Rome report their respective ways of protecting themselves before signing up for a table on Tablo:

*Before I sign up for a table I put some protective strategies in place, that is, I look carefully at how the table is composed: first I see how many women there are, I never sign up for tables with a majority of men, and if during the day the initial number of women goes down, I usually unsubscribe. Another thing I look at the age, if too small and if too old I don't sign up. Then of course there are also protective behaviors that I also put in place during the evening, I always dress very casual and unprovocative, and honestly, I don't drink, I prefer to stay clear-headed. So far I have never had any negative experiences, but you never know. Oh I forgot, I never sit between two men at the table, I always choose a seat next to another woman* (user, woman, 25, Milan).

*I always have a lot of anxiety when I go to a Tablo table. I look at who the participants are, I look at the interests, I look at the profiles of the other women, and I also look at the scores of the tables that the other users participated in, in short I profile the profiles! (laughs). I think women necessarily have to protect themselves, with what you hear around, after all, it's still a large meeting between strangers!* (user, female, 28, Rome).

#### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS. DIGITAL FOODSCAPE, DIGITAL DETOX, AND GENDER SCRIPTS

Several authors, such as Morozov (2013) and Zuboff (2019), consider digital detoxification to be an elitist phenomenon that affects only certain social categories and can be used by powerful agencies and media outlets to distract the masses from current issues and public debate.

However, the phenomenon of digital detox is affecting more and more social categories, highlighting, con-

trary to the “elitist” position, that it cuts across all social categories and everyday human experiences.

As observed by Lupton (2017), the digitization of contemporary society and the spread of social media have also influenced the experience of food, the sharing of culinary interests, and the social experience related to food.

Lupton proposed the concept of the digital foodscape, emphasizing how this phenomenon, which was created to provide a virtual social space for food lovers, has over time captured the interest and needs of digital detox advocates, creating “hybridizations” in the media consumption of the digital foodscape. Pages on Instagram, TikTok, or specific apps can now also be used to organize live events, with the aim of “disconnecting” from virtuality.

The Tablo app, analyzed in the present research paper, represents an ideal app for the hybridized digital foodscape proposed by Lupton: it is installed mainly to meet new people, to refine the matching of common interests and compatibility of profiles between users, and to intercept experiences and events related to one's interest or social status. The need for disconnection is one of the motivations for users to install the Tablo app, reflecting a desire to experience situations in which to interact “live,” temporarily detaching themselves from virtuality and “web-mediated” interactions.

As Bourdieu (1979) argues in his theory of social distinction, food and its aggregative modes also reflect differences in social status. It has been possible to observe that Tablo is predominantly used by people with an upper-middle socio-cultural level, a high level of open-mindedness and a high compatibility of common interests.

Finally, a specific gender “grammar” emerged from the research experience, a real behavioral and social script related to gender difference (Simon and Gagnon 1995). Women use the Tablo app to meet new people, regardless of gender, but they are particularly attentive to the composition of the table and the experience. They put in place “protective” strategies to avoid dangerous situations, including highlighting solidarity practices with other users and sharing reviews and comments about inappropriate or unfriendly behavior toward the female gender.

In Italy, digital detox is still a long way from the American model, which involves real face-to-face experiences without necessarily going through a web-mediated selection process.

However, future research could focus not only on analyzing digital foodscape experiences – delving deeper into gender dynamics and trying to extend the analysis of gender scripts to non-conforming identities – but also

on “pure digital detox” experiences, i.e., exclusively “net-free” experiences.

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