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The analogue diaries of postdigital consumption

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ABSTRACT

Even in a world that is saturated with the digital, we still seek out analogue objects. Drawing on concepts of postdigital aesthetics, we examine the use of analogue objects to escape the omnipresence of the digital realm. Based on consumer narratives from interview, archival, and netnographic data involving the use of analogue notebooks and film cameras, we derive the notion of postdigital consumption and analyse the ‘digital’ as a background object foregrounding the analogue. Our findings reveal ways in which consumers use these analogue objects to escape controlled consumption, to enchant their consumption with their labour, and to seek continuity and permanence, in navigating paradoxical relationships with the digital world.

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Introduction

We leave traces of ourselves in our posts, tweets, and the timelines of our lives on social media (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Whether it is an image of eggs benedict shining in the morning light, radiant flowers on the table, or a well-crafted selfie – all are honoured with a status update implying that profound meaningfulness exists in our daily lives (Belk, 2013, 2014b). Through our data we continuously churn the engines of surveillance capitalism (Lanier, 2014; Zuboff, 2015, 2019). As Baudrillard (1983, p. 148) argued, ‘we live everywhere already in an “aesthetic” hallucination of reality’ where we are constantly creating and consuming. Our digital world encourages a sedentary form of flaneurship where we scroll past various windows into the lives of others.

While once social media and the internet represented novelty and transcendence, today they have become a part of the background or the digital banal (Dinnen, 2018). As Negroponte (1998) presciently forecast: ‘Like air and drinking water, being digital will be noticed only by its absence, not its presence.’ This complacency persists despite recent evidence of the fragility of our digital lives that come into focus with data breaches, fake news, biases in major social media websites, and recognition of the awesome/awful power of algorithms.

And yet, in this deeply digital age where ‘all that is solid melts into air’ we are seeing a resurgence of analogue consumption (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015, 2016; Berman,
1982–1988; Borgerson, Schroeder, & Miller, 2017; Magaudda, 2011; Rokka, Rousi, & Hämäläinen, 2014; Sax, 2016). Consumers are seeking to escape the relentless march of the digital through the use of non-digital analogue objects. We might even be living in an era that could be referred to as ‘postdigital’ (Cramer, 2015; Humayun & Belk, 2017).

That consumers seek escapes from their daily lives is well-established (Cova, Carù, & Cayla, 2018). They go on pilgrimages to lose themselves (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018), they disappear into the mountains to relive the past (Belk & Costa, 1998), make the hajj to Burning Man to find their creative souls (Kozinets, 2002), they surf waves to find themselves at one with nature (Canniford & Shankar, 2013), or turn to Ayahuasca retreats to cleanse their addictions (Dean, 2019). They even give themselves pain in order to feel more alive (Scott, Cayla, & Cova, 2017). However, for many escaping entirely to find these ‘oases of deceleration’ is not always a possibility (Rosa, 2013, p. 83). There are more mundane forms of escape that sometimes go unnoticed and which ‘ultimately remain located within the everyday’ (Skandalis, Byrom, & Banister, 2016, p. 49; Cova et al., 2018).

In this paper we focus on one such form of ordinary escape through analogue objects. Analogue objects fall more on the solid consumption end of the liquid/solid continuum and as Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017, p. 590) argue: ‘we lack systemic empirical research that examines the value consumers derive in liquid versus solid consumption.’ Previous accounts of analogue consumption have often viewed it through the lens of nostalgia, authenticity, or innovation (see Borgerson et al., 2017; Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Fernandez & Beverland, 2019; Grainge, 2000; Magaudda, 2011; Rokka et al., 2014; Sax, 2016). However, the role that objects play in contradiction to digital ephemerality has been neglected thus far.

Drawing on ideas from the ‘postdigital aesthetic’, we develop the concept of postdigital consumption and analyse how analogue objects such as film cameras and paper notebooks can provide avenues of escape from our digital world. Based on interviews about using analogue film cameras and notebooks and a netnography from 2013–2016, we analyse how consumers use objects to escape digital forms of controlled consumption, re-enchant consumption with their labour, and seek a sense of continuity and permanence through these branded objects. The next section outlines the concept of postdigital consumption followed by our methods and findings.

**Postdigital escapes**

The need to find the real has been a longstanding quest (Baudrillard, 1983; Jameson, 1979). The desire to ‘yank ourselves out of this world’ and to escape society or the anxieties that plague us is constant, especially during times of rapid technological change (Cloudsley, 1990; Cova et al., 2018, p. 459). In our digital age with our liquid lives, this quest has become all the more pressing (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Bauman, 2000). As these scholars point out, modernity means living precarious lives and the constant acceleration of life adds to feelings of alienation (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Rosa, 2013). In recent times, we have seen a resurgence of spirituality among consumers, the return of tribalism, a deeply felt nostalgia for an idealised past (Bauman, 2017). We have also seen the return of analogue consumption in a deeply digital world.

While there have been various conceptualisations of escape in consumer research (see Cova et al., 2018), a great deal of prior research has focused on escapes that involve physical and temporal immersion, be it at music festivals, pilgrimage sites, or perfect
surfing waves. As Cova et al. (2018, p. 450) put it ‘a vast body of work’ positions escapes as entering various ‘romantic dreamlands.’ But more mundane forms of escape have received less attention. There has been little focus on how objects can serve as everyday media of escape. Escaping the digital realm through postdigital consumption offers one such form of mundane resistance.

While the ‘postdigital’ may be viewed as yet another ‘post-ism’, it does not imply the death of the digital. Rather it represents a disenchantment with pervasive digital forms of being. The term ‘postdigital’ has been used in various fields, including art, architecture, music, design, advertising, and photography (e.g. Taffel, 2015). It describes ‘the messy state of media, arts and design after their digitization’ (Cramer, 2015, p. 19).

As Berry (2015), describes it, the postdigital is:

both an aesthetic and a logic that informs the re-presentation of space and time within an epoch that is after-digital, but which remains profoundly computational and organized through a constellation of techniques and technologies to order things to stand by.

The concept of postdigital allows for a form of hybridity that is reminiscent of postmodernism (for more on postmodernism and post-postmodernism, see Bauman, 2000; Brown, 1995; Cova, Maclaran, & Bradshaw, 2013; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) and allows for a subtle resistance to the constant acceleration of life (Rosa, 2013). Today, it is difficult to escape the clutches of the digital, or to undo certain technologies such as the laptops, cell-phones, social media and the internet, which for many are a source of livelihood. The digital thus can be viewed as the background to our daily lives.

As consumers we may have crossed what Sterling (2005) called the ‘Line of No Return,’ or as Belk (2014a) put it, ‘digitization is a genie that cannot be put back in the bottle.’ We are so fully and constantly immersed in the digital that we can view it as a conceptual object or thing in and of itself. It is an unavoidable, but not inescapable, reality even if our escapes are only temporary or partial. Newport (2019, p. 103) in his manifesto for digital minimalism argues that we live in a constant state of ‘solitude deprivation’ where we spend minimal time alone with our thoughts and are rarely ‘free from input from other minds.’

The term ‘digital’ is often used interchangeably to denote the internet, the proliferation of social media in our lives, or anything that can be ‘divided into discrete, countable units’ (Cramer, 2015, p. 17–18). Ergo, anything online may be considered ‘digital’, while analogue is accessed in an offline medium, although not everything offline (e.g. a calculator) is analogue. Our use of ‘digital’ employs a broad definition encapsulating the presence of the internet and social media, as well as digital devices.

Although the postdigital aesthetic does not necessarily foreshadow the re-emergence of the age of the non-digital or analogue, it does often emerge as a form of old-world nostalgia for the vintage and retro (Brown et al., 2003). Everything old is seen to reflect a certain beauty. Marks (2002, p. 152) describes ‘analog nostalgia’ as ‘a retrospective fondness for “problems” of decay and generational loss . . . .’. We also see this in the steampunk movement where technology is reimagined in a more humane way through a Victorian lens and reliance on materials of a bygone era such as steam, wood, leather, and copper (Tanenbaum, Tanenbaum, & Wakkary, 2012).

Analogue objects seem to produce a quality of warmth through their imperfections which adds a sense of humanity to these objects. Even as music becomes dematerialised,
there are still avid vinyl collectors seeking a more material form of music (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015; Chivers Yochim & Biddinger, 2008; Fernandez & Beverland, 2019; Hosakawa & Matsuoka, 2004; Magaudda, 2011; Plasketes, 1992). The imperfections that the vinyl accrues over time for example represent a passage of time: ‘the soiled vinyl album cover and the particular hisses and pops in the recording personalize the listening experience; something that cannot be duplicated in a CD or MP3 file’ (Belk, 2014a, p. 252). It becomes easy to sense which record the owner listened to repeatedly and which paper books have been read and reread (Russell & Levy, 2012).

Postdigital consumption is shown in the fondness for vintage typewriters, audio-cassettes, Polaroid photos, vinyl records, fountain pens, steam punk design, lomography, film cameras, and paper notebooks – all of which were until recently considered ‘dead media’ (Purves, 2018; Sax, 2016; Seltzer, 1992; Sterling, 1995). Rokka et al. (2014) address another form of disenchantment with the digital as they document the alternative skateboarding scene where consumers rely on customised print magazines that provide a sense of authenticity. Print books are also becoming more popular (Price, 2019). As the owner of The Last Bookstore in Los Angeles, described it, the digital age ‘… just made everyone come out of the woodwork who really want to see print books survive. It’s created quite a bit of loyalty, I think, some people prefer physical, tactile objects, and some people prefer clicking a button and having something instantaneously – there’s room for both, I think’ (Raynor, 2016).

Postdigital consumption recognises that the excitement of the digital revolution may have passed, and that there is still some beauty in older forms of consumption. The postdigital allows for an age of hybridity in which both the analogue and digital coexist. Many analogue creations end up being posted online (e.g. film camera photos on Instagram) and connections are enabled by digital networks (e.g. knitting enthusiasts online). In effect, they remain entangled with each other (Hodder, 2012).

Cova et al. (2018, p. 450) define ‘mundane escapes’ as forms of escape that do not seek to necessarily overturn the structuration of life; at times they do not even involve leaving the house; for example, bingeing on television shows. These escapes are embedded within the everydayness of life. Objects often allow for such forms of escape. Therefore, in this study, we focus on two forms of postdigital/analogue consumption objects: film cameras and paper notebooks. Using the contexts of Moleskine paper notebooks and Leica film cameras, we examine consumers who are seeking out analogue objects in a digitally saturated world. We concur with Miller’s (1987) argument that mass-produced objects are representations of current culture, and investigate what these objects and brands say about our postdigital selves.

Film cameras and paper notebooks have largely been displaced by their digital equivalents. However, these objects have managed to survive and have found a resurgence in popularity. The next section provides a brief overview of the context of Moleskine notebooks and Leica cameras followed by our methods and findings.

The analogue objects – paper notebooks & film cameras

Moleskine

Moleskine came onto the market in 1997 and has since been promoted as the ‘legendary notebook’ used by the likes of Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh and
Bruce Chatwin, among others (Horowitz, 2004; Harkin, 2011a, 2011b; Walker, 2012; Poole, 2013). Every notebook comes with a small card detailing the history of the brand. The brand name *Moleskine* came from Bruce Chatwin’s novel about Aboriginals in Australia called *The Songlines*. In the book, he laments the loss of his favourite black oilskin bound notebook. Each time Chatwin would visit Paris, he would buy a fresh supply of these notebooks from a small *papeterie*.

The Moleskine brand cultivates a myth of creative geniuses set in another era working away with a pen and notebook on the path to greatness – adding a sense of continuity to processes of creation that supposedly began with small sketches and notes. This mythic history that Moleskine brings has been a cause of derision in many online forums where sceptics have mocked users for being pretentious. To address such derision, Francesco Franceschi (at one time Marketing head of Moleskine) had apologised, ‘*It’s marketing, not science. It’s not the absolute truth*’ (Saner, 2012).

Yet Moleskine engages actively with the digital, declaring itself a ‘symbol of contemporary nomadism, closely connected with the digital world through a network of websites, blogs, online groups, and virtual archives’ (Moleskine n.d.; Martin, 2015). The brand has expanded beyond its continental European heritage and its original classic black notebook. It now embraces popular American cultural icons with limited Moleskine editions of *Peanuts, Star Wars, Coca Cola, The Simpsons* and even *Game of Thrones* and is a popular tool among techies in Silicon Valley (Sax, 2015). Moleskine follows the pragmatic march of capitalism and uses outsourced factories and became a publicly traded company in 2013. While once Moleskine notebooks were only available at select airports and museum shops; today the company maintains dedicated retail outlets offering a constellation of products that a digital nomad might need. Our focus here is on the analogue ‘black rectangle with rounded corners’ Moleskine paper notebook (Image 1).

![Image 1. Moleskine notebook.](Source: Images by first author)
**Leica**

Leica cameras are legendary for their prestige, quality, and artistic lineage. Henri Cartier Bresson once compared the Leica to a ‘big warm kiss, like a shot from a revolver, and like the psychoanalyst’s couch’ (Lane, 2007). Their small steely metallic bodies and snug weight often invoke comparisons of Leicas to well-made guns. Over the years, they have been loved for their inconspicuous nature, and have been described as ‘indestructible, mechanical, professional, expensive’ (Grudenberg, 1989).

Oskar Barnack, a German engineer, invented the Leica camera lens in 1913 but the first commercial Leica was not launched until 1925 at the Leipzig Fair, coinciding with the Paris Design Expo of 1925 (Reif, 1996). An early slogan for Leica camera was ‘Die Kamera der Zeit’ – ‘The camera of the time’ and it represented the zeitgeist of Europe from the 1920s through the 1990s (Popham, 2015). Even though Leica factories later became a part of Hitler’s propaganda machine, the company helped many young Jewish apprentices escape from a pre-war Nazi Germany to work in Leica showrooms on Fifth Avenue, New York (Connolly, 2007).

Leica cameras made photography more fluid and made the photographer more of a flaneur. Street photography in fact traces its history back to Leica’s portable nature. As one enthusiast describes it: ‘Suddenly, it was possible to be unobtrusive. The camera fitted in a coat pocket. It didn’t need a tripod and was quick and easy to operate’ (Naughton, 2014). Many Pulitzer Prize winning photographs were taken using Leica cameras and they have been behind some of the most iconic images of history, including the ‘Fallen Soldier’ of the Spanish Civil War and the sailor kissing a woman in Times Square on V-J Day.

They are also the lenses behind famous portraits of artists and world leaders, from Picasso to Che Guevara. Some of Moleskine’s posthumous brand ambassadors such as Hemingway and Picasso in fact owned Leica cameras. Leica’s popularity in serious photography circles almost borders on religiosity where using any other camera is considered blasphemy. Today analogue Leicas are recognised as a collectors’ item with rare Leicas going on sale at Christie’s and Sotheby’s. Some avid Japanese, Chinese, and Russian fans treat their cameras as investments. They remain locked up in vaults as their value soars. Our prime focus here is on the analogue/manual Leica film cameras (Image 2).

Mixing analogue & digital

Both Moleskine and Leica are iconic and classical; they are reminiscent of a ‘time when the world seemed safer, more comprehensible, and much less commercial’ (Brown et al., 2003, p. 20). While the Leica camera traces its history back to the 1920s, Moleskine’s history is obscured by elusive ambiguity (Brown, McDonagh, & Shultz, 2013; Humayun, 2012). Both brands are seen as tied to the golden era of the 1920s and 1930s in Europe, nestled between the two World Wars. The 1920s was a period of great upheaval and advancement. Artists and writers of the Lost Generation, such as Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, Salvador Dali, and F. Scott Fitzgerald among others were rejecting bourgeois values and flocking to Paris for inspiration. Hannerz (1990) described the ‘writers and painters in Paris between the wars’ as archetypes of cosmopolitan intellectuals who could ‘take along their work more or less where it pleases them.’

Post WWI, Europe was the central hub of not only artistic expression but also scientific advancement. It was in the 1920s that the ‘foundations for a post-Newtonian physics’ were laid in Europe together with Einstein’s theory of relativity and Bohr’s description of the hydrogen atom (Bird & Sherwin, 2005, p. 57). While Europe was thriving creatively during this period, it was also the breeding ground for anti-Semitism and racially-tinged nationalism. The stock market crash of 1929 was yet to happen and the atom bomb was still in its embryonic stages. Leica and Moleskine however draw on a more idyllic version of the 1920s. As the formula goes: myths resolve contradictions and paint a positive picture of the past (Barthes, 1972–2011; Lévi-Strauss, 1955; Thompson, 2004).

Methods

To understand the narratives surrounding postdigital consumption, we focused on consumers who have an interest in using analogue forms of photography (film) and paper notebooks. The participants for in-depth, semi-structured interviews were recruited using purposive sampling (see Table 1) (McCracken, 1988). Ads were initially posted on the university student mailing lists and social media groups asking for participants who used either Moleskine notebooks or film cameras. Interview informants also connected the researcher to other participants in their network. Two interviews were conducted via email, while the rest took place in coffee shops around the United Kingdom and Canada. The interview duration ranged from one to three hours and resulted in 89 single-spaced pages (10 pt font). As Table 1 shows, this is an upscale group of informants, which the netnography suggests is consistent with the brands’ enthusiasts.

While most of the informants use Moleskine and/or Leica brands, other brands of film cameras and notebooks were also considered (e.g. Pentax, Lomo, Minolta, Fujifilm, Leuchtturm1917). Interviews were conducted by the first author between 2012 and 2015 and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The netnography of Moleskine and Leica forums continued between 2013–2016 and included websites dedicated to Moleskine/Leica, alongside posts on social media outlets such as Instagram, Flickr, Twitter, and blogs where some of these analogue photos and notebook creations are posted; as well as subReddits dedicated to analogue objects (Analog/Notebooks).
Participant observation of these consumption behaviours continued from 2012–2019.

To understand mainstream perceptions of using analogue notebooks and film cameras, archival data from newspapers including *The New York Times, The New Yorker, Wall Street Journal, The Telegraph, The Guardian*, and online publications and news blogs such as *Wired, The Verge, Quartz, Medium, Slate, The Atlantic, Salon,* and *The Onion* were also monitored. We noted through our netnography that consumers using analogue objects in a digital world often evoke derision and parody online and these media sources provided a more balanced perspective for our study. The data was analysed using a hermeneutic approach and both authors studied the data through an iterative process before finalising the overarching themes (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994).

**Findings & analysis**

**Escaping surveillance through analogue objects**

While it may be tempting to become a true hermit and live a simple life as espoused by Thoreau, it is impossible to truly be disconnected from the digital. This may be partly due to a sense of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) but it is also because many livelihoods necessitate the digital. Ken, a medieval history scholar calls his Moleskine notebook ‘four-years-old.’ It has survived travels to Rome, Paris, and Yorkshire and yet remains sturdy. He sees his notebook – containing sketches of medieval structures and his poetry – as a semi-autonomous protector of his creations. While dismissing the idea that he avoids digital tools pointing out his role as a Macintosh expert in early 80s California, Ken explains why he prefers a paper notebook and why he proselytises this object to others:

Ken: It just seems like – because I have to be a part of Facebook for my class – that I’m getting messages, that are completely utterly trivial and … uh. my time is not as valuable as it could be. But something like a Moleskine does represent setting time aside and that’s a value in of itself – and it’s value – like people reading Dickens all evening, that’s nice. … I try to keep up to date on anything I find useful, and I try to reject – like I don’t tweet because … why would people want to know what I’m doing right now!? (pretends to type) “Talking to you … it’s cool” you know? So I don’t see the use of it. (Interview)

Ken’s narrative highlights the scarcity of time and his loss of a sense of its value in the digital world. Shove, Shove, Trentmann, and Wilk (2009, p. 2) frame time as being about
‘coordination and rhythm, but it also involves material, emotional, moral and political dimensions.’ Ken’s use of an analogue notebook allows him to enjoy the ‘luxury of time’ (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 154). Using an analogue object allows him to eliminate the digital noise of ‘messages’ and focus his attention (Newport, 2019). His rejection of Twitter to announce his coordinates points to a form of self-surveillance that many unconsciously engage in (Zuboff, 2015). For Ryan, a computational linguist interested in world history, using a Moleskine notebook allows him the chance to escape the connected nature of digital devices that distract.

Ryan: When I’m writing in my Moleskine I am disconnected from the rest of the world and I am focusing purely on my own thoughts and ideas. In this very deeply and almost crazily connected world, that seems like a rare pleasure and even indulgence. I mean think about it this way – when you are on a computer if you are connected to your network, everything you do is monitored and tracked, and you are available to anyone who has your email address, messenger ID, or Facebook profile. You have to consciously turn off and avoid all the notifications you inevitably get while you are online, and even if you do that if you use a search engine or any other application your words and even your movements are tracked. There’s something very unsettling about all that, and it’s also a really distracting environment. When I use my Moleskine, there’s no real possibility of someone interrupting me and nobody knows what I’m writing or even where I am. It feels rather liberating really. (Interview)

Despite his technical work, Ryan tries to avoid as many interactions with the digital world as possible not unlike the Green Luddites identified by (Kozinets, 2008). He maintains no social media presence, refuses to buy a cell-phone or instal a phone in his house and for him an analogue notebook’s simplicity allows for a sense of freedom. While somewhat extreme, given the nature of his work, Ryan cannot escape the digital. But for him, being online and distracted corrupts the process of original and creative thought. The analogue notebook allows Ryan to combat what Simon (1971, p. 40) once termed the ‘poverty of attention’ to focus on his own thoughts and ideas without disruptions or distractions.

The digital realm on the one hand is a great enabler, but it also constrains (Latour, 1992). As Ryan suggests, we live in a surveillance society where all our information is monitored, gathered, and processed; it stares back at us in the form of targeted advertisements (Bridle, 2018; Kozinets, Patterson, & Ashman, 2017). In a postdigital era, offline analogue creative objects provide an alternative to ‘controlled consumption’ Striphas (2009, p. 180) like the Google search algorithms that shepherd us towards certain ideas and sources thereby limiting the possibility of truly independent thought (see also Slater 2013; Finn 2017; Noble, 2018). This is even more the case with digital assistants like Amazon’s Alexa and Apple’s Siri that give one answer rather than a list of relevant sources. Recently, we have facilitated self-surveillance through self-quantification and tracking apps as well as Alexas in our homes and are constantly adding more fuel to the data economy (Bode & Kristensen, 2016; DuFault & Schouten, 2018; Hoffman & Novak, 2018; Lanier, 2014; Lupton, 2016; Rettberg, 2014).

Analogue objects such as paper notebooks however are somewhat asocial and untethered. They also allow for avenues of privacy in a world where even the words we utter may be monitored. While for Ken and Ryan analogue notebooks provide an escape from digital slavery, Amanda, an avid Leica fan and Moleskine user, notes feeling disempowered by the digital. She finds that using analogue tools help her focus on the moment and present
others. Consider how she refers to a recent vacation with her husband (see Table 2). That she ‘almost’ pressed delete on her Facebook account, hints at the view that Facebook is our new society and that it is a relationship that is difficult to escape.

This interview was conducted in 2012 well before the privacy scandals and data breaches at Facebook were reported. Amanda’s reference to Facebook as being ‘too much at times’ reflects the media overload that saturates most of our lives. Social media’s constant connectivity ironically also leads to loneliness and depression (Hunt, Marx, Lipson, & Young, 2018). Like Ryan, Amanda feels the pressure of a ‘deeply and almost crazily connected world.’ They both fear that life is what happens while we are consuming others’ social media updates. Amanda’s wanting to take a break from Facebook echoes the ethos of the unplugging movement where consumers engage in ‘#digitaldetox’ to take a vacation from the digital (Baumer et al., 2013; Karppi, 2018). What Amanda describes is not unlike the sense of alienation described by Rosa (2013) in which we feel an inability to live our lives the way we wish – even if we are free to choose.

The digital realm invokes a collective nostalgia for a seemingly non-digital past. For David (Table 2), a dedicated Moleskine fan, the appeal lies in cutting back on digital communication by using an analogue notebook. His Moleskine notebook travels with him throughout Europe and he insists on writing and posting handwritten letters. Fernandez

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<td><strong>Escaping Surveillance</strong></td>
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| Amanda: I was in East Germany last week. We were sitting in a café, and there were these six people sitting around on their Macs. I went upstairs to use the bathroom and I saw four people sitting around a desk working on their Macs and I was like ‘What are you doing? Talk to each other!’ . . . If I had the chance, I would actually get away from all technology. It was really nice last week because I was able to get away from it. I almost pressed the delete button on my Facebook yesterday because it is too much and at times it keeps me from doing things I’d want to do . . .

| **Transcendence Through Objects** |
| Ryan: Moleskine includes a little card with each of their notebooks mentioning that this is very much like what Hemingway and Picasso and Van Gogh used, and I have to admit I find that very appealing . . . In my case, I’ve had a particular interest in the arts and literature of the 1920s and 1930s – it was a rich and vibrant time, and much of the artistic and literary world was centred around Paris, and there was this wonderful salon culture where the great writers and artists of the day would gather and talk about ideas, they would drink, they would write, they would read to each other . . .

| Liz: I don’t think Moleskine represents a world that is more . . . capitalistic? . . . you know . . .
| the fact that we commercialise . . . everything!!! I think maybe – and maybe I’m wrong . . . a totally biased Liz, but (laughs) – I think it’s the company that they’re (Moleskine) . . . and maybe I’m thinking of companies that have been exposed. I really think that a company that makes notebooks is far less – FAR LESS – harmful than others like . . . say Microsoft or . . . let’s not even go there . . . I like you’ve got Goldman Sachs . . . or . . . JP Morgan, and things like the banking side of it . . .

| **Labour of Leisure:** |
| Karen: I find it quite difficult to start a new Moleskine notebook because it’s so pretty . . . and it looks like it should only have . . . important thoughts in it? (laughs) Of course, I start them all the time, but it’s still . . . it’s painful? But then it becomes part of me. Each notebook has some personality in a way.

| Ken: I do have a number of film cameras including a Pentax, Canon, and a Nikon. I still like to use film because – this is utility – not because . . . well nobody comes up to me and goes ‘oh wow what is that?’ But in terms of storage: a film image is 160 megapixels . . . now the best Canons are 1250 and that’s at some cost to quality . . . because to get 120 megapixels in a dark room, it’s very difficult, and you can Photoshop images and get something that is good . . . but since a film camera is doing photon by photon, not pixel by pixel, a close up of say – a rose in film, still has a spectacular quality to it.
and Beverland (2019) also found a similar appreciation by consumers for vinyl records. Despite being a millennial, David tends to keep a low profile on social media like Facebook, checking in only when someone messages him. There was a time when he would post and share more updates and photos, but over the years he has learned to engage less. For him, the use of an analogue notebook provides a reprieve from the distractions of the digital.

Some of these narratives reflect a sense of the digital becoming deeply ubiquitous where the only escape is a revival of analogue objects (McLuhan, 1975). There is a perceived erosion of the value of time and a loss of privacy in a digital world. Interruptions were once seen as invasions of privacy, but with our digital devices we allow the interrupting invasion of notifications to shape us. In contrast, the privacy of analogue objects evokes a certain mindfulness. These narratives reflect a diverse range of ways in which consumers depend on analogue objects to allow them to regain control of their time and privacy, and allow for escapes from controlled consumption.

Transcendence through objects: continuity & permanence

Erik, an Ayahuasca evangelist – German by birth, Californian by choice – covers every Moleskine he owns with different totems, ranging from Native American dream catchers to animal stickers, thereby connecting his notebooks to distant others who seem to him to represent a more authentic way of life.

Erik: Black is something I can’t really handle (points to the notebook) … like … I always usually do something to it. Put stickers on it … It tries to strive for balance between – you know – all those four elements (water, fire, earth, air) … at all times which is … sort of one of the more fundamental principles of the Native American traditions … where these cards come from (points to the Eagle). And it’s one of the things I’m studying in the United States … um … going to ceremonies that do that … the Native American ceremonies … (Interview)

As a European, Erik finds a sense of authentic beauty in the Latin American traditions of Ayahuasca and Native American ceremonies in the United States (Dean, 2019). This again reflects seeking an authenticity that is seen to be enmeshed with others in a distant imagined homeland (Belk & Costa, 1998; Boym, 2001). Covering the black notebook with totems reflects his need to strip the notebook of its commercial heritage and give it a more romantic and customised feel that decommodifies it and locates it in a history that is seemingly pre-digital (Holt, 2002; Kopytoff, 1986).

There are similar discourses among Leica enthusiasts who want to connect with distant others through their continued use of an object from the past. For example, Ken mentions that when he visits photography exhibitions the prize-winning images were often taken using a Leica or Pentax camera. Amanda connects her Leica to its German origins and famous photographers. This desire for genuine connection with other prominent humans through a shared brand affinity is also reflected in various subreddits for analogue notebooks and film cameras (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001).

Many professional photographers still shoot in film and connect to an ongoing lineage of other enthusiasts through these objects. For Ryan, the Moleskine notebook is evocative of the 1920s and helps him remember a pre-digital way of being. This is the sense of communal nostalgia in which we remember the idealised ‘golden time’ to which Davis (1979) refers. Our
fascination with tools similar to those used by Hemingway and others of the Lost Generation can be explained by our nostalgic ‘desire to identify with an era, place, or person to which we believe a desirable set of traits or values adheres’ (Belk, 1988, p. 149).

Much like Amanda, for Ryan the analogue technology of a notebook allows him to connect with an older aesthetic in Paris when artists talked to each other in salons, whereas today people are hooked to their digital devices, often ignoring others (Hardey & Atkinson, 2018; Turkle, 2011). In a sense, while the notebook itself remains inanimate, it is enlivened by the social connections it retains to past creative others (Hoskins, 2006).

Ryan also laments how using the notebook helps him remember ‘the world before the web and before Facebook.’ He finds it ‘sad’ that people feel compelled to ‘announce their arrival at some store or restaurant’ by broadcasting through Facebook or Twitter. ‘Why isn’t having the people already there see you good enough?’ The digital environment often compels posting social media status updates constantly whereas an analogue tool allows a chance to escape the need for validation and likes. Social media profiles themselves can become objects that depend on us to be fed daily and to be nurtured with updates, thereby entrapping us in their care and maintenance (Hodder, 2012, 2014). Some have even equated this digital labour with digital slavery (Cova, Dalli, & Zwick, 2011; Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008). In contrast, analogue objects such as an offline notebook may allow a reprieve from the constant hegemony of the digital banal where every ‘new disruption melts into ubiquity’ as an expectation rather than a disturbance (Dinnen, 2018, p. 8). In some ways, these postdigital objects permit a connection with distant others but at the same time allow for asociality as the user engages in solitary acts of writing or photography (Cetina, 1997).

Liz, a student from Greece, was attracted to Moleskine notebooks due to a love for writing and poetry. She reflexively acknowledges that ‘I know that it’s marketing!’ but she still has sought out photos of Hemingway with similar notebooks. She privileges her Moleskine notebook with another form of nostalgic distance and disassociates Moleskine from corporate brands (See Table 2). For Liz, the Moleskine notebook with its discreet brand logo represents a time when the world was not as commercial or capitalistic (Klein, 1999–2010). Miller (1987, p. 215) argues that contemporary objects’ utility lies in how much they ‘may or may not be appropriated from the forces that created them.’ However, this interview was conducted before the Moleskine brand became a publicly traded company on the stock exchange and before it launched its digital notebooks. On Reddit many subsequent users chided the company for selling out because it made the brand seem more enmeshed with the digital age instead of allowing for a total escape from it (Sanburn, 2012).

For Liz, the financial crisis which exposed large banks’ wrongdoing in 2008 represents the harmful nature of contemporary capitalism from which she feels Moleskine is exempt. At one point during the interview Liz stopped to chide herself for putting down more mundane notes about things she needs to buy, ‘you SEE?! How much I’ve betrayed my own self! I have made an entry of... gosh ... things I want to buy! Look! I wanna buy office dresses and a coat ... besides ... like it’s a Van Gogh painting (on the other page rests a note about Van Gogh’s Sunflowers) and I wrote SHOES?!’ For her, the notebook represents a portal to a past that was not as heavily commoditized by industrialisation, a space to be creative; and yet the marketplace has crept in with her desire to buy shoes.
In contrast, Celia, finds that her Moleskine notebook and Kodak film cameras are ways of maintaining memories to her own past (Belk, 1988). Originally from Shanghai and having gone to boarding school in Vancouver at a young age, the Moleskine notebook helps maintain her connection to the sterile notebooks she would receive in school. Her first film camera on the other hand was the one that her grandfather gave to her: ‘It’s a really old one he used to use in the 90s or 80s. He was a relatively professional photographer and I’ve always been interested in film photography – cuz no one uses film anymore.’ An active food Instagrammer, Celia often takes film camera shots to upload to her Instagram feed.

For Steve, a Seattle native and cultural historian, the Moleskine connection is to ‘quality’:

Steve: You know it’s nice to think that those people used them, but it’s not like I think … ‘Oh boy! If I get one of these, I’ll write like Hemingway, or paint like Picasso …” (snorts). No, it’s more like … I trust that those people had good judgment, and so … there is this kind of historical lineage … which may suggest that they’ve kept something going for a long time … Even though I know that the company is not the same company that made them in the 1920s … but there is a connection to a lineage of quality … a lineage to historical depth which appeals … in our current … historical moment – which is more so “ahistorical” (laughs). Things are turning over every minute. There is no sense of the past, and that disturbs me sometimes … (Interview)

Steve actively dismisses belief in the Hemingway/Chatwin/Picasso connection although he admits to admiring Picasso (‘not the person, just his work!’). Like other informants, he focuses on how these branded objects can trace a sense of permanence and continuity ‘a lineage to historical depth’ which he finds lacking in our current world.

Through their analogue objects these informants link themselves to an older tradition of historical figures, both temporally and geographically, allowing for a form of escape that resides in the everyday mundanity of life. It may perhaps be an imagined escape, but it is an escape, nonetheless. These objects provide a distance from the digital world in much the same way that some contemporary pilgrims seek analogue pursuits that allow them to be more mindful (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018). Another appeal of these objects is that they demand our time and labour as we will see in the next section.

Labour of leisure

Liz: You have this thrill that you want to take the perfect picture? Whereas on a digital camera you just take photos and don’t really mind of what it is … because you’re gonna erase it the next day. But then with a film camera you really have to be careful … you have to pick them, it’s gonna be more expensive. So it’s more special for you than a digital camera. … You can’t take a billion different pictures with a film camera … So maybe it does represent … something … . that pause?! Because everything is so fast now. … but so maybe using a film camera or a Moleskine represents that pause … that you know … THINK before you act, or before you consume …. (Interview)

Liz likens the need to take the perfect picture to an arousal or ‘thrill’ of the unknown. She connects the scarcity of well-made analogue images to the need to reflect and to ‘pause’ in just thinking about a particular moment, a pause that reminds us of our own presence in time and space. This is a rare feeling when we are digitally connected and distracted. The
act of using a film camera is more private and it involves more labour and cost compared to taking an image of yet another sunset on an iPhone to upload to Instagram.

The ephemeral and liquid nature of the digital photograph, according to Liz, promotes unthinking consumption and passivity in a world in which everything is ‘so fast’ whereas using analogue tools requires a pause, a slower, more thoughtful contemplation before producing or consuming. The presence of self in time and space is also seen to lend a deeper authenticity to the final result. Another informant, Karen, a history and law student, highlighted a similar reflective pause when using her Moleskine notebooks where she has a difficult time starting each notebook ‘… it should only have … important thoughts in it?’ (see Table 2).

Both Liz and Karen’s narratives of using film cameras and paper notebooks reflect a need to be more mindful of where they are in the present moment in a digitally flooded world (Badiner 2002). As Liz describes it, with a digital device, ‘you don’t really mind’ whether the shot is perfect or not; your mind itself is distracted. The costless digital photograph takes away the challenge of scarcity and the resulting mindfulness that the analogue object brings back. The permanence of a film photograph or scribble on a paper notebook that is difficult to delete or erase, records the moment more indelibly. Many users on Reddit appreciate the tactile physical elements of using these analogue objects as opposed to their digital equivalents. Consider how Bruce describes his love for analogue film cameras:

Bruce: I always have to be more conscious about each photo. Also surprised, and also the feeling of creating something, that’s physical. I find that shooting film helps me to slow down, think more about what I am doing, and make conscious decisions about the images I want to produce. I also find the process of shooting (and developing) film far more relaxing and rewarding than shooting digital. (Reddit)

Others also point out the ritual of developing film photos which involves time, care, and patience or as one informant put it, ‘you’re imbuing it with a certain kind of ineffable, capital “Q” Quality that you might miss out with other photographic means.’ Some even compare using film cameras to a Broadway musical where it is important to get the first act right. Others also mention the ‘restraint’ in what one can capture. As another Reddit user describes: ‘Having a physical finished product is more controlled than having a digital one, where all you’re really producing is data that’s going to be presented differently depending on the screen it’s viewed on.’ He goes on to describe the happy accidents in the process of developing film and how the effort and labour put into these objects makes them more valuable in turn. Celia, too noted a similar appeal of using film: ‘I think it’s interesting to kind of play around with it, rather than just using your iPhone and knowing what the outcome is.’

The postdigital aesthetic embraces the need for imperfections. For instance, Cascone (2000) suggested that when creating music through analogue means, it is the imperfections, or glitch aesthetics, that become a key part of the end product. The idea of imperfection is not new; in fact in Japanese culture, pieces of ceramics are deliberately left with imperfections. Stamps with imperfections are also highly sought after and valued. Many musicians today deliberately add in white noise to their songs or use low-fidelity (lo-fi) recordings which add a feel of rustic authenticity. And this sense of rustic authenticity often comes through the use of analogue tools in creating works of art –
practicing an organic process imbued with imperfections – or a return to the more primal (Potter, 2010).

For Ken, it is about the quality of a film image compared to the digital which has a different resonance (See Table 2). Ken celebrates the film camera as providing ‘spectacular quality’ rather than quantity. Using an analogue tool necessitates more labour and therefore a deeper attachment to the finished object. Since digital cameras simplify the task and do most of the composition work for us, the end product becomes less valuable. This parallels the production of Leica cameras that are priced at a premium because every lens is handcrafted and comes in a hermetically sealed box. Bernie on the other hand reflects on the lack of upgrades that his analogue film camera requires:

Bernie: They got rid of the photo labs at most chain stores and developing photos yourself can be expensive if you’re a really avid photographer. I think part of it for me is nostalgia; my parents bought me a big film camera when I was five and I had my own little darkroom, and ever since then it’s been a really fun hobby for me. I can see why some people prefer digital, especially if they’re into Instagram and all that, and digital can be more convenient, but if I were to compare the two, I’d say film is better. No charging batteries, no having to upgrade your camera every few years to a better model, more ways to experiment with light and filtered lenses, you name it. (Reddit)

The increased human labour required with analogue objects also means that every product will be different and there will be imperfections and surprises which would make the end product more humane (Ger, 1997). As the world becomes more digitally dominated, many consumers seek out objects over which they have more control, and to which they concede less agency compared to digital devices. While acknowledging that solid consumption may become more elitist in the future, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017, p. 589) also argue that ‘consumers facing economic precarity often turn to solid consumption as a source of security, stability, and control.’ While these consumer narratives mention the need for control, this need is not driven by economic precarity, rather it is driven by an environment in which the digital is making increasing inroads into avenues of life which were once private. We are moving towards an age when we will perhaps depend even more on our digital devices with IoT (Internet of Things). But the analogue tools of postdigital consumption help resurrect rituals and allow for more engaged labour and mindfulness.

Digital devices often invoke a more passive recording of life whereas analogue objects demand a more conscious process as with film cameras and paper notebooks which is nonetheless enjoyable. Celia noted that while she enjoyed playing with film cameras, in time they had become a deterrent to posting photos ‘because when you start a roll of film, you have to finish it . . . so you have to build aside a lot of time to sort of go around and take photos. And then I feel like if I let it sit out for too long then it goes bad . . . ’.

The intense labour that analogue tools call forth is similar to certain consumers enjoying labour-intensive sports such as kayaking, canoeing, cross country skiing, and biking over power equivalents such as motor-boating, snowmobiling or motorcycles which simplify the process of movement and require less labour. The rise of permaculture and urban farming today also point to a re-engagement with our labour. We see similar traits in the zero-waste movement which encourages the act of preparing for grocery shopping by carrying reusable bags, searching out bulk stores, or even creating soaps and toothpaste from scratch. The right-to-repair movement similarly espouses hanging on to
solid objects and renewing and nurturing them instead of discarding them the moment the next new update arrives; the hope is to create a more sustainable and circular economy (Matchar, 2016).

**The postdigital object itself**

Ken: You know this is extremely useful (picks up his Moleskine). It doesn’t have batteries, it has aesthetic appeal, it’s portable, and I mean it has everything that it should. It doesn’t get wet and if it were to get wet, it wouldn’t implode like my computer did when I poured tea on it . . . How would I know that computers didn’t like tea?(laughs) So there is, in a kind of Newtonian universe, for every action, there’s an equal and opposite reaction. This (notebook) will have very little reactivity because this is very low activity. That thing there (points to the researcher’s phone) has a lot of activity . . . and a commensurable amount of reactivity. (Interview)

These analogue objects present finite and visible connections and offer a sense of asociality (Cetina, 1997). With computers and other digital devices, we are often embedded in unseen and complex structures such as the electricity grid, wi-fi signals, and connected to digital others. Even wireless devices may enslave us within ecosystems of rechargers and a constant search for power sockets and wi-fi hotspots. Consider how Amanda describes gadgets that beget other devices:

Amanda: I think of when I went on vacation as a child and then when I think of now: I have to carry my iPod, my phone, my iPad, two Leicas, maybe even a laptop sometimes and I wonder; do you really need all that? I’m debating whether to buy a Kindle or not. I understand the appeal, of not needing to carry around all the books but then it makes me wonder whether I would lose out on the feel of actually holding a book. I know it can be a great enabler but at what point does it become technology just for technology’s sake?(Interview)

Amanda’s unease with carrying all her digital devices on vacation reflects the growing need to escape the obligations of the digital and the resulting ‘unplugging movement.’ People seek to escape technology when on vacation, only to return to a more frantic online life as they try to catch up (Löchtefeld, Böhmer, & Ganev, 2013). In fact, wellness advice columns such as those found on Goop espouse the benefits of #digitaldetoxing making it an institutionalised marketplace offering. While for Amanda, as the ever-expanding tentacles of technologies make further inroads into spaces which were traditionally meant as escapes (vacations), for Ryan, it is the untethered longevity of an analogue object that makes it timeless. He notes that if he could travel back in time and handed his notebook to Hemingway, ‘he’d know what to do with it.’:

Ryan: What if I went back in time with my laptop? He’d have no idea. And maybe if we travelled in time ahead 100 years, my laptop would be just as foreign and probably impossible to use. But I suspect that my Moleskine notebook could be read just as easily in 1400 or 1800 or 2000 or 2200. There’s a kind of timeless and permanent quality to that which I really value. (Interview)

For Ryan, the notebook has the ability to age gracefully and gather patina as time goes by, unlike electronic devices that undergo drastic upgrades and go through bouts and cycles of creative destruction, a concern Bernie mentions as well about constantly needing to upgrade to a better camera model. For Ryan, digital files represent a higher risk of
corruptibility whereas analogue tools remain stable over time. This aligns with the post-
digital aesthetic’s abandonment of the constant ‘fetishization of the new’ (Taffel, 2015, p. 7).

There are certain elements of analogue technology that can stand the test of time. For
example, during the interview, Ken pointed out the old-fashioned QWERTY layout of the
phone keyboard was inherited from analogue typewriters. However, while analogue
objects are disconnected to a degree, they are also enmeshed in other webs of energy,
language, and visual frames of reference. It is a matter of degree but the digital revolution
represents a sharp break.

We not only rely on our digital devices but also on their connected services that make
them function, whether it is an operating system for a laptop or the digital photo editing
software of the camera. We also unavoidably rely on the algorithmic systems that
determine whether the images are viewed or not. When we post our data online, we
expect companies such as Google and Facebook to safeguard our information and
depend on them to maintain their services into perpetuity. We also cede our copyrights
for many of our digital creations as we use these services and become ever more
immersed in them. With analogue objects such as film cameras and paper notebooks,
the relationship with the company is more stable; once purchased, the object’s creations
are not subject to software or hardware upgrades.

Discussion & further research

While previous studies have analysed consumption of retro-objects, they do not take into
account the avenues of escape provided by analogue objects in juxtaposition to our
digital lives. In this article, we have focused on ways in which consumers use analogue
objects to escape the digital by participating in a postdigital environment. We identified
some of the characteristics which structure postdigital consumption such as increased
labour, pause, imperfections, and resonance. These narratives are also reinforced on
a macro-level by discourses of mindfulness, slowness, and sustainable consumption.

Our contributions are threefold. First, we analysed the underlying appeal of solid
consumption in the form of branded analogue objects. Second, we shed light on the
materiality of these objects and how they invoke increased labour (for example, the film
camera forcing the photographer to slow down versus a digital camera that permits
unthinking rapid-fire consumption). Third, our findings reveal how these analogue objects
provide a seemingly mundane form of escape from digital surveillance through their
asocial nature which allows a chance for solitary consumption that is disconnected from
digital others.

The proliferation of the digital has led to a re-appreciation of postdigital consumption
that involves craftsmanship and tangible connectedness. The appeal of analogue objects
lies in their need for care, patience, and skill. There is no instant gratification of sharing
and approval. Marketers are latching on to this postdigital aesthetic as evidenced by Kit
Kat’s ‘take a break from wifi’ campaign, retailers offering the ‘offline shopping’ experience,
Aston Martin’s V12 Vantage promoted as #manuallabour, or the viral IKEA advertisement
titled ‘Let’s Relax’, which taps into the disenchantment of a digital age where Instagram
trumps the ability to consume dinner (Berk, 2019; Frazer-Carroll, 2016; Sneed, 2013). Some
cafes are also removing their Wi-Fi connections and encouraging patrons to ‘pretend that
it’s 1995’ and talk to each other. However, there is also the risk that these branded
analogue objects are not unlike the *McMindfulness* tools that Purser (2019) critiques. He warns against objects that sustain the conditions which warrant escaping rather than provide true escades.

Postdigital consumption invokes a pursuit of silence and tranquillity (Prochnik, 2010). The goal is a more thoughtful consumption and an ethos of living more patiently in a way that situates us in time and place in a world that is increasingly fluid. For example, consider the popularity of cooking home-grown garden produce/farm-to-table, or DIY projects: here the consumer is more directly connected to the final product, which hints at a re-engagement with analogue labour (Campbell, 2005; Moisio, Arnould, & Gentry, 2013). Even the movements for slow food, slow reading, and slow travel – the latter involving sea routes instead of faster flights – reflect a need to engage more with our own labour (Honoré, 2004).

Many of the informants voiced their concerns about the infiltration and saturation of the digital. The escape offered by analogue objects can be considered as a largely ‘asocial’ escape in which consumers reconnect with themselves. One of the interesting aspects involves how some consumers outline the seeming asociality or post-sociality of these objects and their role in serving as ‘an embedding environment for the self’ (Cetina, 1997, p. 24). That is, the objects themselves create a return to the self. This contrasts with the pilgrim’s experiences of a communitas with like-minded others, as documented by Husemann and Eckhardt (2018).

While we note a desire to connect with distant others (for example with Hemingway or Native American traditions), there is simultaneously a desire to isolate oneself. A notebook or film camera allows for a solitude because the products are not instantly shareable or reproducible. The asociality of objects is present in the way in which one hides ‘behind the camera’ or hides their face in a notebook (Sontag, 1977) – it is a chance to be private and to forget oneself in the process.

Another question worth exploring is whether or not these analogue objects are perhaps better than their digital equivalents? There have been studies which indicate that writing longhand is more effective for memory retention (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). We have not delved as deeply into the functional benefits of these analogue devices – however, it should be noted that in some ways these analogue objects are battling their digital equivalents for supremacy. As one of our informants puts it, since the film camera constructs the image ‘ photon by photon, not pixel by pixel, a close up of say – a rose in film, still has a spectacular quality to it.’ In some respects, these analogue tools are just better performing than their counterparts. Or as Cramer (2013) argues, these analogue objects exist ‘because they compensate for deficiencies of digital files – deficiencies that are both aesthetic and social.’ Further research could address the dimension of performance with analogue objects.

These analogue tools allow a chance to step back from our digital environments and allow a moment of *pause*. Or as Tarnoff (2019) argues for the revival of a modern-day Luddite movement, ‘our built environment is becoming one big computer … if our parents and our grandparents lived with computers, we live inside them.’ From a postdigital or even somewhat postsocial lens (Cetina, 1997; Zwick & Dholakia, 2006), these analogue tools allow for a moment of escape or clarity, the same way that swimmers feel clarity when resurfacing for air. We discuss some the implications of postdigital consumption below.
Surveillance society

Everything we do online is tracked and used by algorithms to target us with advertisements (Crawford, 2016; Eubanks, 2017; Noble, 2018). Our posts and updates are a self-imposed panopticon that social media reinforces (Foucault, 1979–2008, p. 67). Ryan expressed his unease with constantly being monitored online, and saw analogue tools such as an offline notebook as providing him with the ability to escape from that web. Concerns about privacy and being monitored have also become the subject of popular books such as Dave Eggar’s The Circle which envisions a dystopian future represented by a technological giant that is easily seen as a stand-in for Google, Facebook, or Amazon which know everything about what we do, even when we feel that we are not being watched (Scheer, 2015).

The resurgence of analogue or postdigital consumption may be viewed as a means of avoiding ‘controlled consumption’ where all of our data is monitored by marketers, limiting possibilities for purely private experiences. For instance, algorithms only expose us to certain products and sites which people like us may have liked, leading to a high degree of homophily in tastes. Our online data is turned into binary digital cages constantly curated by algorithms (Lanier, 2014).

While the digital realm connects, it also perhaps over-connects. Given that much of our lives is impacted by the digital, there are reasons to be concerned. Much of our consumption and desire is produced online (Kozinets et al., 2017). Many of our informants noted a desire for privacy in using analogue objects. However, it would also be worth exploring how privacy is construed in non-Western contexts (Barendregt, 2012), and if societies will eventually arrive at a postdigital disenchantment where they become more resistant to new technologies. There needs to be deeper probing of the darker side of our online consumption and its entanglements.

The postdigital framework is particularly relevant today given the rise of non-human actors in our lives, from robots, self-driving cars, digital assistants, augmented reality, and the Internet of Things to blockchain technologies, all of which are vulnerable to cyber-crimes and surveillance. Online privacy became a matter of global debate since the Snowden revelations and became a more mainstream concern with the Facebook scandals (Confessore & Kang, 2018; Greenwald, MacAskill, & Poitras, 2013). There have been reports of the Kremlin reverting to the analogue technology of typewriters and building its independent internet in a bid to avoid intelligence leaks (Coldewey, 2019; Irvine, 2013). As Sterling (2005, p. 12–13) cautions: ‘In engaging with a technology so entirely friendly towards surveillance, spying and privacy invasion and ruthless technical intrusion on previously unsoiled social spaces, we are playing with fire.’ To an extent, the more digitised a society, the more vulnerable it becomes (Zuboff, 2015, 2019).

Going offline

Social media in general creates a neoliberal mentality where every moment shared should amount to some value for the self as a personal brand (Hassan, 2008; John, 2017; Marwick, 2013). Contemporary consumers feel the need to be producers even while on vacation. Couples put up pictures of their honeymoon, travellers upload selfies, and new parents start social media profiles for infants before birth. There is a new term circling the internet
called ‘postalgia,’ a playful mashup used to describe posting a social media photo or video that is intended for later consumption. When we get home we will see what we could have seen were we not taking photos or remember the places we experienced only through a lens (Barasch, Zauberman, & Diehl, 2017).

We have noted the trend of ‘#digitaldetox,’ where being private and offline is considered a more authentic way of being. Celebrities are increasingly engaging in social media hiatuses if only to return to prior patterns. Consumers now celebrate their ‘offline week’ at the Coachella festival or ‘social media vacations,’ ironically announced through Facebook and Twitter posts (Cep, 2014; Loehr, 2016). Even at Burning Man which promises the idea that the world will wait while creativity is unleashed in the desert, Burners cannot escape the tyranny of Instagram posts (JWT, 2016). The disconnection of digital detox is seen to reconnect to a romantic spirit of escaping the humdrum of digital life to find real life at its core (Delaney, 2015; Löey & Sayre, 2001).

While these movements ostensibly share the ethos of voluntary simplicity (Schor 1998), they may also create involuntary complexities. For example, there are customised tours and digital detox regimes dedicated to helping travellers escape the figurative chains of their cell-phones and electronic devices (Forgione, 2016; Wilson, 2016). More forms of postdigital consumption have popped up such as Camp Grounded, which target young Silicon Valley techies with a place where cell-phones, laptops, drugs, alcohol, and business conversations are banned (Lee, 2016). The Jewish tradition of Sabbath is now recast non-denominationally as the ‘digital sabbath’ celebrating a withdrawal from digital devices (Rosen, 2012).

Another issue to consider is how much the ability to disconnect is becoming a luxury available to the very few. Digital burnout is felt even more by individuals who have to connect with digital devices because of their livelihoods; a trend which is likely to increase with the constant expansion of the gig economy. Not everyone can limit their screen-time and take off on a 10-day silent retreat in Myanmar like some of the tech elites (Livni, 2018). Silicon Valley tech leaders are in fact increasingly known for rationing their children’s screen-time consumption (Bowles, 2018), which hints at the possibility of growing reverse digital inequality in the coming years. Our informants are primarily drawn from Western nations and it would be worth exploring whether being postdigital is desirable or even possible for many elsewhere.

According to Freud’s Civilisation and its Discontents, civilisation and society suppress us, and in today’s world, social media is the new form of society. Freedom and true expression may lie in escaping it just as consumers temporarily escape to Burning Man or the mountains to find what they hope is more authentic even if uncomfortable or painful (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2002; Scott et al., 2017). Our analysis also raises the question of how much the notion of ‘escape’ from the banal or mundanity of digital life has been domesticated and provided by the marketplace as evidenced by how the brands studied allow for these connections. More research probing these aspects of offline consumption are needed.

**Conclusion**

Bauman (2017) argued that the complexities, insecurities, and uncertainty of our contemporary world provoke a need for reaching back into an ideal past rather than the
hope of building a better future. We have attempted here to lay out some of the ways that consumers seek to escape through these branded analogue objects in a postdigital world. The boundaries between our digital and ‘real’ lives have become porous over time to the extent that there is no longer a boundary between where one ends and the other begins. Postdigital consumption may be seen as a means of reinstating some of these boundaries.

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