



# **Together While Apart?**

## **Mediating Relationships and Intimacy**

Edited by

Patricia Prieto-Blanco and Maria Schreiber

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## **Together While Apart? Mediating Relationships and Intimacy**

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# Together While Apart? Mediating Relationships and Intimacy. An Introduction.

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This special issue of *Networking Knowledge - Journal of the MeCCSA-PGN* seeks to explore how interpersonal relationships are mediated in contemporary contexts. Digital technologies and the practices associated with them enable us to interact with our social network of support in seemingly easy ways: we just need to use the touch of a finger on a mobile phone screen to show that we care. It does, however, also take only the same effort and the same fingertips to enact hate. Acts of disaffection, often crystallized as revenge, originate, in nests and corners of intimacy (Bachelard 1958, p.XXXVII), and when disseminated widely can be fatal<sup>1</sup>. Recently, acts of disaffection, or rather hate, - especially against diffuse, imagined collectives such as “the refugees” - have also appeared in the more public realms of forums, comments sections of online news, or social media feeds. A perception of anonymity might result in ‘disinhibition effects’ (Suler 2004) and sometimes quite extreme forms of hate speech (Gelber & McNamara 2016), which poses new challenges for media education and online governance<sup>2</sup>.

Interrogating the pragmatics of mediated affect and disaffection is a necessity. In mediated interpersonal relationships, the intimate and the emotional are often subjected to a set of infrastructures, called affordances by others (Wright and Parchoma, 2011), as well as to set of practices. The contributions that make up *Together While Apart?* highlight the emotive dimension of mediated communication. The common thread of all contributions to this issue is the focus on how relationships, intimacy, and (dis)affect are constituted and negotiated through media.

The concept of mediation can be described as “a fundamental moment in the development of communication as symbolic interaction: its passing through technologically-based infrastructures of transmission and distribution (“media”)” (Couldry/Hepp 2013: 197). How mediation might also be transforming, moulding, or shaping communication and not only “passing it through” is one of the key questions of media and communication studies. Empirically, this question needs necessarily to be answered through contextual approaches

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<sup>1</sup> See a recent example “Italian Women commits suicide after sex tape goes viral” Huffington Post, 16. 9. 2016 [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/tiziana-cantone-video-italian-woman-commits-suicide-after-sex-tape-goes-viral\\_uk\\_57dbb21fe4b05d79136f23c5](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/tiziana-cantone-video-italian-woman-commits-suicide-after-sex-tape-goes-viral_uk_57dbb21fe4b05d79136f23c5)

<sup>2</sup> See a recent initiative by the Council of Europe: <https://www.nohatespeechmovement.org/>

that take cultural, social and technical factors into account. In Media and Communication Studies, affect and intimacy have started to gain more relevance as research areas in their own right.

Significant inquiries into contemporary mediations and the everyday have been carried out by feminist scholars (Fortunati and Taipale, 2012; Hjorth and Lim, 2012; Rose, 2012). Their investigations show the necessity of thinking beyond the dichotomy of public and private when exploring contemporary contexts, processes, and experiences. New media enable the emergence and management of various kinds of networked and imagined (boyd 2011), ambient, and intimate (Hjorth et al. 2012) publics. It is necessary to understand practices of differentiation in regard to what is made visible to whom, who is included and excluded in which publics, and how media structures are an intrinsic part of these practices. 'Privacy' is not a fixed entity; it is always practiced in relation to 'publicness,' and has to be understood as transforming in relation to publics and media (Wagner 2014, p. 124). Today, perhaps more than ever, the personal is political.

Current constellations of people and their mediations navigate between social realms, and the cracks opened by their flow requires an interdisciplinary approach, arguably implemented by default by feminist and queer theory scholars. In Media Studies, a focus on practices over the past ten years has shed some light upon everyday mediations and mediations of the everyday (Postill 2010; Couldry & Hepp 2013; Lehmuskallio & Gomez-Cruz 2016). Lines of inquiry centered on media practices are often about a sense -- a feeling -- that is personal and intersubjective, as well as specific, and that is in constant interplay with the technological conditions in which it arises.

Though the way we communicate with each other, and the way that media co-constitute our relationships, have lately undergone definitive transformations, interpersonal communication has a sustained genealogy of various material and technical mediations (Milne 2010). With digital technologies, convergence, and social media platforms, and through the resulting ubiquity and mobility of devices such as smartphones, the possibilities of mediating relationships have expanded and been transformed. Recent empirical research has identified further theoretical access points. Take, for example, Madianou's study on migrant mothers and their mediated communicative interactions with their children back home. Hers is an important contribution to a relational understanding of new media as 'polymedia': "as an 'integrated structure' within which each individual medium or platform is defined in relational terms in the context of all other media. In conditions of polymedia, our emphasis shifts from a focus on the qualities of each particular medium as a discrete technology, to an understanding of new media as an environment of affordances." (Madianou 2014, p. 670). The contributions in this journal explore how specific constellations of relationships and media play out in cultural contexts. On one hand, this collection highlights the need to understand the social relations, or conditions of

sociability/socialization, underlying patterns and rules or habits of interaction. On the other hand, media pragmatics also attend to specific techno-material rules and structures. Our aim is to understand these intersections of intimacy, sociality, and digital media. How do affordances of mediation relate to practices of the everyday and social life(s) in contemporary times?

By featuring theoretical propositions alongside empirical studies on mediations of everyday life, *Together While Apart* highlights how mediated interactions are nowadays entangled with emotional processes of socialization and practices of connectivity. The contributions integrate traditional approaches, such as ethnography, with innovative methods, such as the visual essay. In their narratives there is an awareness of the temporal and the procedural in emotional communication. From apps, to internet cafes, and monthsaries, the case studies of this issue explore how users manage constellations of emotions, relationships and mediations.

The importance of different kinds of relationship- and individuation processes transforms and changes throughout the course of life, and so does the mediation of these practices. Normative imaginations of who and how one should be as child, teen, young adult, or adult come into play in relation to biographical experiences and developmental tasks (Paus-Hasebrink 2010). We are happy to feature contributions that take these relationalities into account in regard to very different life stages, from childhood (Frolova), to young adulthood (Siilas), and young coupling (Abidin), to adulthood (Lee). These contributions also feature research from a broad variety of cultural contexts: parenting in Britain, backpacking Westerners in South-East-Asia, young coupling in Singapore, Trans-experience in the US, the globally available app and video format Vine, and of course the globally known heart-symbol, which French people apparently dislike.

## The Collection

The collection of articles that make *Together While Apart* explores contemporary mediations of interpersonal and (dis) affective relationships. Within the variety of contexts analysed in this issue, the themes of the digital ephemeral and ubiquitous mediations of the everyday resonate consistently and thoroughly. Intersections of privacies and publics are examined alongside strategies of resistance, from attempts to archive the ephemeral throughout the life course of relationships, to efforts to mediate everyday presence.

How deep is your love? At the heart of **Carolina Cambre**'s contribution is one of the best-known and most-used emojis, the heart-symbol. In the form of a visual essay with accompanying text, she discusses and shows various aspects of the little red sign: historical iconographies, cultural contexts, and complex entanglements with the politics of affect.

Contemporary relationships of affinity and (dis)affect are strongly based on actions, rather than on norms and rules (Plummer, 2003). Interpersonal connections are endlessly reworked by members of networks of social support (Gabb, 2008). The mediation of everyday moments can thus be interpreted as a mechanism of affection and intimacy disclosure (Jamieson, 1998). Recent empirical research has revealed how mechanisms of (dis)affect, such as sending photographs via Whatsapp, a) connect individuals, b) evidence pro-active behaviour, and c) give rise to places of (dis)affect (Prieto-Blanco, 2016). Contemporary places of (dis)affect are digitally, both figuratively and literally, stretched. They might also be users' third places in Ray Oldenburg's sense, namely an environment that enables them to focus on experiences and relationships informally, allowing for social, perhaps even intimate, interactions to take place (1989, p. 23). As **Everiin Silas** (in this issue) suggests, non-places become spaces for mediated communication: "to calm worried parents, make travel arrangements and cure their travel-time loneliness".

Accessing and using various kinds of media is generally perceived as an important developmental task, and a significant amount of research focuses on potential dangers that media use might engender for children. The role of parents in enabling or restricting access is an ever discussed topic. In her article, **Ksenia Frolova** focuses on potential factors that motivate parents to encourage media use in younger children. A striking finding of her work is the added value convergent digital media devices provide as easy-to-use audiovisual interpersonal communication tools. Devices such as tablets, for example, allow even very young children to Skype with their grandparents no matter where they are. Parenting in its remote form remains an important practice also later on in life, as Everiin Silas points out. In her study of the smartphone's role in contemporary backpacking practices, she states that what changes with growing up is not only owning a device, but also being in control over when and where to go online and connect; as well as to decide and curate what kind of connectivity one wants to establish with friends and family back home. Not having connectivity at all, but "being offline" to improve the immersion into the experience of being abroad and embedded in another culture, is another decision that some of Silas' respondents have taken.

Moving on to another stage in the course of life, that of young coupling, **Crystal Abidin** discusses the ambivalence and arbitrary importance of a romantic ritual, the monthsary, in a Singaporean context. She identifies vernacular meanings through internet folklore and enactments of this ritual by microcelebrity couples, as well as affirmation and backlash towards these practices. While monthsaries are a widely accepted and heteronormative practice, **Jamie Lee**'s contribution deals with a more contested issue of discrimination. Her work explores complex and often discriminated-against processes of becoming: "What kind of transgender are you?", is the question posed to interviewees for the Arizona Queer Archives. The overlap of an intimate interview situation and the publicly available archive are discussed in relation to different perceptions of what being trans can actually mean.

Lee's contribution already foregrounds how the moulding force of the camera frames and constitutes the specific interview situation.

Filming is also a central element in **Elke Rentemeister's** article on the ultra-short video format and app 'Vine', which has recently been shut down. She analyses how para-social interactions and intimacy are performed in specific Vine series, and how the format co-constitutes specific forms of narrations and performing authenticity. Through the work of Lee and Rentemeister, specific forms of mediations and the role software, symbols, and algorithms might play, are addressed.

In our view, visual media are of particular relevance in practices of affective communication (Prieto-Blanco & Schreiber forthcoming). They enhance communication in a sense that they add a specific visual way of expressing meaning that goes beyond that which can be expressed in terms of language (Burri 2012; Schreiber 2016). Cameras and digital displays populate domestic settings around the world, allowing individuals to visually mediate their everyday lives in ways that were unimaginable only a few decades ago. Something can be shown and made visible - **therefore, visual media may afford the emergence of shared spaces of (social) co-presence and ambient intimacy** (Prieto-Blanco, 2010; 2016). This becomes relevant in the contributions of strategic performance of couples on Instagram (Abidin), ultrashort videos (Rentemeister), oral history interviews with transgender people (Lee), and the complex meaning- and affection-making of the heart symbol (Cambre). Networked cameras and networked images (Lehmuskallio & Gómez-Cruz 2016) have strongly affected contemporary practices of mediation and the interpersonal relations thereby mediated. Contemporary mediations attend to constellations of polymedia (Madianou 2014) as well as processes of remediation (Grusin & Bolter 2000) and convergence (Jenkins 2004). This context allows users to activate affordances in the service of (dis)affect and intimacy.

Finally, on a non-theoretical and more personal note, we would like to take the opportunity and express our own affect and gratitude via this very specific medium of academic publications: We would like to thank all the reviewers for their time and effort, their inputs and criticism were essential to this issue!

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## Algorithmic love: “Quit playin’ games with my❤️”

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### ABSTRACT

Traditionally intimacy was characterized as closeness, familiarity and privacy from the Latin *intimatus*, *intimare* “make known” or *intimus* “innermost” (“*Intimae*,” n.d.). However, we wonder whether the notion of the intimate as a certain kind of closeness (and duration) has been discursively modulated and disturbed through the ubiquity, immediacy and acceleration of connection ... (David & Cambre 2016)

Together we wondered whether the nature of intimacy had somehow ironically embraced volatility, ethereality, airiness, speed, and featheriness; or *levitas*? Could it be through this *levitas* that intimacy is paradoxically being conveyed? Building on this earlier work interrogating a *screened intimacy* being


negotiated and redefined through online practices, this visual essay traces “discursive juxtapositions between depth and surface, solidity and ethereality, and temporally between duration and volatility, instability and movement” (David & Cambre 2016).



## KEYWORDS

Intimacy, screen, online practices, algorithms, visual essay.

## Introduction

Recently, I overheard some servers in a coffee shop talking about sending heart emoticons when texting, they were serious about the authenticity of their intentions, and how they only sent hearts when they felt strongly and sincerely about sending *love*. Curious I began to ask others when, and for what purposes, they used hearts. Instagram users I spoke to confess to feeling obliged to “heart” images or messages from others as an acknowledgement or courtesy. Approximately 150 million users registered with Instagram around the world have the heart as an icon presented to them as the mechanism for “liking” a post and thereby sending a positive message to the author. Similarly, the Periscope live streaming video platform, owned by Twitter, allows users to tap their screens so that a heart floats up on the screen of the broadcaster. However, in this case users can amplify the representation of their affective response by repeatedly tapping the screen and sending multiple floating hearts to the broadcaster’s screen, which allows a better estimate of the popularity of a broadcast. The anatomically incorrect hearts,  as more or less universalised ciphers for affection/attraction have been around for millennia, and the affective charge they are credited with fluctuates over time and space responding to both the immediate context as well as the larger societal one. Despite the cross-platform variation, social media companies increasingly seem to be honing in on hearts as the visual icons of choice as the (standardised/ing?) indicators of positive sentiment. In a recent article on *Screened Intimacies*, we wondered whether intimacy understood as closeness and duration “has been discursively modulated and disturbed through the ubiquity, immediacy and acceleration of connection” (David & Cambre 2016, p. 1). In an immersive media environment, are mediated ways to indicate attraction, affection, and passion or even desire becoming ever more ambiguous in an ocean of “likes?” And yet, as savvy users, are people not navigating in ways that permit them to make meaningful connections regardless? Feminist scholar Susanna Paasonen (2016) reminds us that affect by definition is always already interpenetrating and in-between bodies, so that rather than being seen as something individually contained, “affect, understood as networked, is that which makes things matter, gathers attention and, possibly, adds to the individual sense of liveliness as intensity” (NP). In other words, affect works through and is manifested in degrees of enmeshment.



In this consideration of cipher oriented affective communication afforded by emojis or emoticons, and more specifically the ❤️, I will *essayer*<sup>1</sup>, or experiment with the visual essay, to create a hybrid semiotic space that provides readers with a visually informed experience by combining illustrative images, with photo-collages constructed as a mode of imagistic theorizing that is in dialogue with the text. The photo-collages do not work in a narrative progression; rather they repeatedly mine certain questions as layered variations on a theme. To examine different aspects of “heart” emoticons as *screened* relations of intimacy means thinking about how “relational and fluctuating fields of affinity ... engage on an informational plane” (Biddle 2013, p. 66) and exploring the sometimes paradoxical tensions and ambiguity of how emojis *matter* discursively and materially in influencing attitudes and behaviors through vernacular uses of mobile interfaces moving toward intimacy.💔 As we observed elsewhere, “at the heart of a screened intimacy, and what differentiates this notion from others, is precisely the ambiguity or ability to encapsulate and present *both options* in an either/or binary mode, the yes/no of possible connection” (David and Cambre 2016, p. 1). Exploring some of the rich history of the ❤️ laced with myths and monsters, reveals this particular cipher is anything but a trivial emoticon: it is loaded with affective weight and an easy target for tampering.

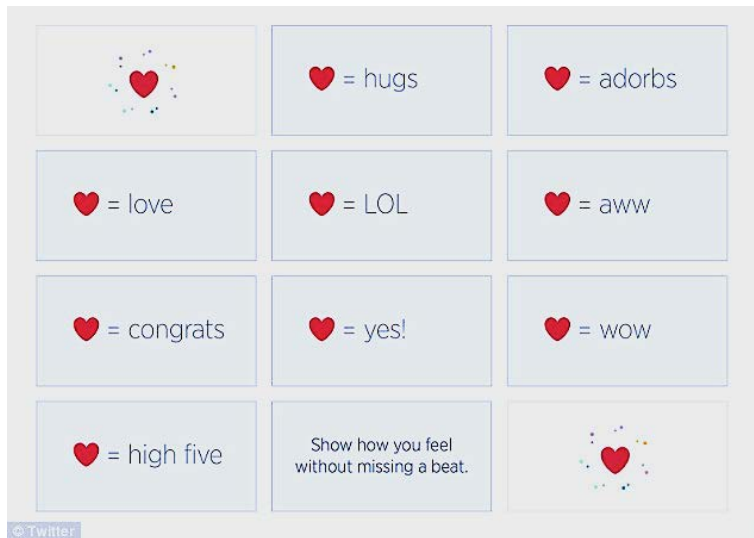
Besides the recent addition of “reactions” to the Facebook platform where the heart is the only non-facial emoji-based icon added to the original thumbs up symbol for “liking,” Twitter has replaced the former star icon used to “favorite” a tweet with a red heart in efforts to boost their user base, and harmonise across platforms. Disgruntled Twitter users immediately expressed their displeasure. The CEO Jack Dorsey could hardly have foreseen the outrage that burst online through “many angry tweets proclaiming the death of Twitter” (Titmarsh 2015). Thomas Ricker, writing for *The Verge* online, expresses his sentiments a bit more forcefully, hyperbolically situating the “battle between stars and hearts” as a struggle that “will define our expression of public digital affection in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Ricker 2015). While initially showing his displeasure, he agrees with Twitter investor Chris Sacca’s claim that a very high bar is set by using the word ‘Favourite’ because it is a superlative and that “the majority of users are baffled by favorites and they don’t end up using the star much, if at all” (Ricker 2015). However, this position ignores the ecosystem of intended messages attributed by users to the star. The range of uses included everything from using it to get followers for one’s Twitter feed; to the passive-aggressive “hate-fav” that sends a message that the tweet has been seen but will not receive a reply (Adams, ND). In a study with over 600 participants, Meier et al (2014) found that “the favouriting button is used for a range of functions and communication mechanisms” (p. 8). Detailing their study in “More than Liking and Bookmarking? Towards Understanding Twitter Favouriting Behavior,” their participants report that “many people associate Twitter’s favourite button with the Facebook’s “Like” button: “Generally use it analogously to ‘like’ on Facebook” [R183], or “almost like “liking” it on Facebook” [R191].” (p. 5) Yet Ricker (2015) insists, “stars and hearts are not synonymous...to change the icon would change the very meaning of a favoured tweet.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Essayer*, French for “to try” situates this paper as a testing of the verbal-visual tension of a visual essay informed both by self-authored photo-collage (non-captioned), as well as illustrative photographs (captioned).

Immune to the furor, the Twitter company statement reads as follows:

We are changing our star icon for favourites to a heart and we'll be calling them likes. We want to make Twitter easier and more rewarding to use, and we know that at times the star could be confusing, especially to newcomers. You might like a lot of things, but not everything can be your favourite. (Gillmor, 2015)



**Figure SEQ Figure \\* ARABIC 1: Helping Hearts? (Woolloston, 2015)**

This statement is a forceful reminder to users that regardless of how they feel about the change, the reality is that they don't make the rules. Companies like

Twitter and Facebook can “curate the shapes that our sociability may take” (Paasonen, 2016) or “change the 😊 nature of 😞 our conversations, because they own the platforms” (Gillmor, 2015). At the same time the Twitter company's decision to make the change may have been influenced by the aggregated data provided by users themselves, in a somewhat creepy feedback loop. When the Swiftkey predictive ‘mindreading’ app company analyzed more than one billion pieces of emoji data across 60 emoji categories to learn how speakers of 16 different languages and regions use emoji, they found the ♥ (12.5%) was the third most popular emoji after the 😊 (44.8%) and 😊 faces (14.33%) out of over 800 possible emojis<sup>2</sup>. Coincidentally, Twitter's senior vice president of product announced that Twitter usage had increased by 6% about a week after the heart was introduced, and after having failed to add any users in 2015 (Woolloston, 2015). Doubtlessly adding fuel to some fires, Twitter also shared a didactic pictograph to assist with the transition.

<sup>2</sup> The findings came from an analysis of aggregate SwiftKey Cloud data between October 2014 and January 2015 from both Android and iOS devices. Notably, French speakers were found to use four times as many heart emoji than other language speakers, and was found to be the only language for which a is not number one.

Nevertheless, the appearance of participation is not identical to participation, and images participate in a relational epistemology that is formed and informed by economics, corporate culture, platforms, codes, devices, and the individuals and cultures of those engaging with the medium. The heart emoji, is part of an ecosystem of images that “ ‘do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation’ ” (Farocki 2004 in Hoal, & Lindseth 2016, p. 177). In *Instagrammatics and Digital Methods* (2016) the authors observe that often emojis will have *other* meanings besides straightforward representational ones. For example:



The eggplant, peach, and taco emoji, for instance can represent their respective foodstuffs, but are also stand-ins for parts of the body not featured in their own emoji: the penis, the butt, and the vagina (Bonnington, 2015). The symbolism here has also meant that emoji are used for content and communication not necessarily endorsed by platforms, with the eggplant being placed on Instagram’s list of banned hashtags and not searchable on the platform (Griffin, 2015); although at the time of writing, this was only the solo eggplant, with multiple eggplants in a hashtag, along with other combinations, still present in search results. (Highfield & Leaver 2016 p. 10)



Despite the algorithmic gatekeeping manipulating the relations between viewers and what and how they see online, or “transmissive control” (McKelvey, 2008) there are still possibilities for interrupting the operation. We don’t *have* to accept information and systems the way they are presented.

As one of humankind’s most ancient signs, whether being used as icon, symbol or index, the heart continues to be a dynamic and salient cipher perpetually renewed in the creative ways people find of using it and remixing it with language and gesture. Now a globally adapted pop-culture icon, despite repeated filing of objections by New York over trademark violations, the 1977 I♥NY logo by Milton Glaser has the heart directly stand in for love in a way that is broadly translatable. As a verb, the heart made the paradoxical move back to language with David O. Russell’s 2004 film *I Heart Huckabees*, so that saying the word “heart” is now the *as-if* of saying love. The artifice, or *as-if* sign category addresses the relationship of “a message which signifies itself [and] is indissolubly linked with the aesthetic function of sign systems” (Allingham 2008, pp. 171-2). The heart as artifice comes full circle in the fractal matrix of sign types and opens up a multiplicity of possibilities. Preziosi (2003) explains that artifice “allows us to deal with the extraordinary complexities –the fluid and open-ended relativities—of visual meaning in a clear yet non-reductive manner” (p. 146).

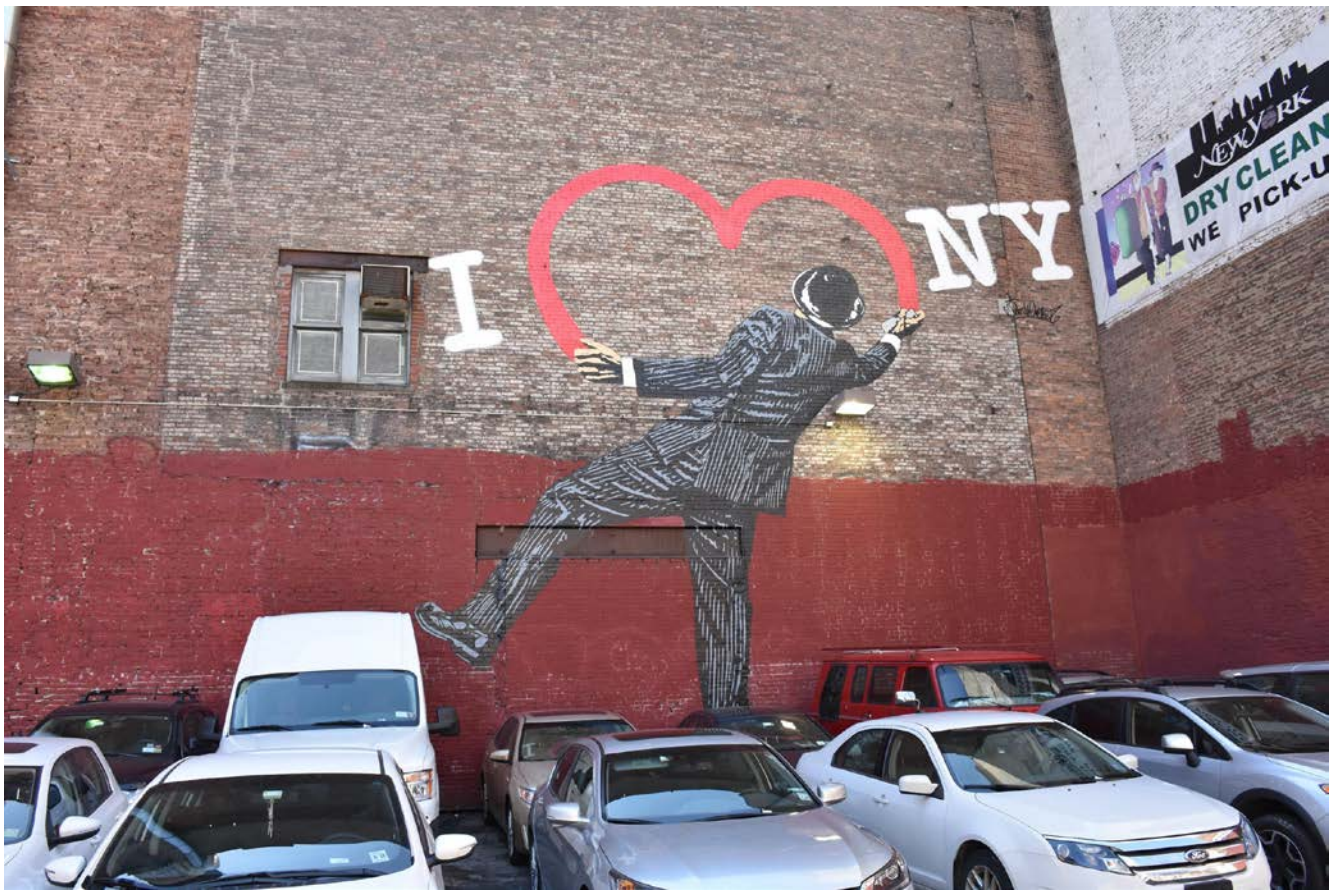


Figure 2. Nick Walker Graffiti in Manhattan, N.Y. Love Vandal at 17th and 6th Ave

Refusing to be confined to screens and text, the heart has also been incorporated in visual bodily communication as a hand gesture where both hands are joined with the fingers curved and together at the top and the thumbs coming to a point at the bottom. Known as the “hand heart” according to *New York Times* journalist Marissa Meltzer (2011), celebrities in various arenas such as sport, music, and film have been recorded making the gesture and companies have associated themselves with it by featuring it in ad campaigns. Of these people, singer Taylor Swift’s use of the gesture is seen by her fans to be a special “code” for communicating with them to the point where a controversy exploded amongst Swiftie fans in response to a photo of Lady Gaga making the gesture (Meltzer, 2011). Interestingly, this proprietary impulse is not an isolated case. On July 8, 2011, Google successfully filed a patent<sup>3</sup> for the gesture in order to use it for Google Glass. The Glass is supposed to recognise the gesture when the wearer makes it and identify that something is “liked” (Vincent, 2013). Elsewhere, a website called PlanetHeart.com announces the trademark heart hand gesture called the *HeartMark* copyright of Tali Lehavi who claims to have named many heart hand gestures: “The poses in which any body parts combine to make a heart are protected by a US patent and available for licensing by Lehavi” as part of her “lifestyle brand of connectivity” (PlanetHeart, 2016). There are far more people in existence that possible gestures, and so we can agree with Milan Kundera’s (1992) fictional character that that no fully original gesture exists, belonging only to one individual (pp. 7-8).

With this in mind, what can we make of these kinds of stories of seemingly bizarre patents for ephemeral and widespread gestures? By now it almost goes without saying that affect is core to value; “affective stickiness is equally intimately tied to the production of monetary value” (Paasonen 2016), but these incidents seem to give an entirely new meaning to the idea of a “performative economy” (Mack 2002, p. 598) where billions of dollars are spent investing, researching, or litigating, vis-à-vis the gestures, both visual and tactile, for navigating the different interfaces in everyday technology like smartphones (Srnicsek, 2015, p. 25). Media philosopher Vilem Flusser (2014) tells us that a general theory of gestures would be appropriately called an *interface theory* (p. 161) because one could identify different conditional, cultural, or social categories through the communicative and phenomenological<sup>4</sup> aspects of gestures and how they are enacted. But are these fleshy interfaces being hijacked by the reconfiguring of the subject-object relationship? Current political economic conditions fertilise particular ontologies: “In a consumer society the body itself becomes the consuming subject and the consumed object, offering itself to change until reaching the transformation” (Palese 2012, 8). Such a transformation is precisely intended to shrink the gap between bodies and the codes governing interfaces. Structuring the field of action in this way, so that it effectively *disappears*, is an expression of biopower in the Foucauldian sense. What happens when the notion of “user” is substituted for that of a “subject”? (Drucker, 2011, p.1) Will the cyborg be domesticated?

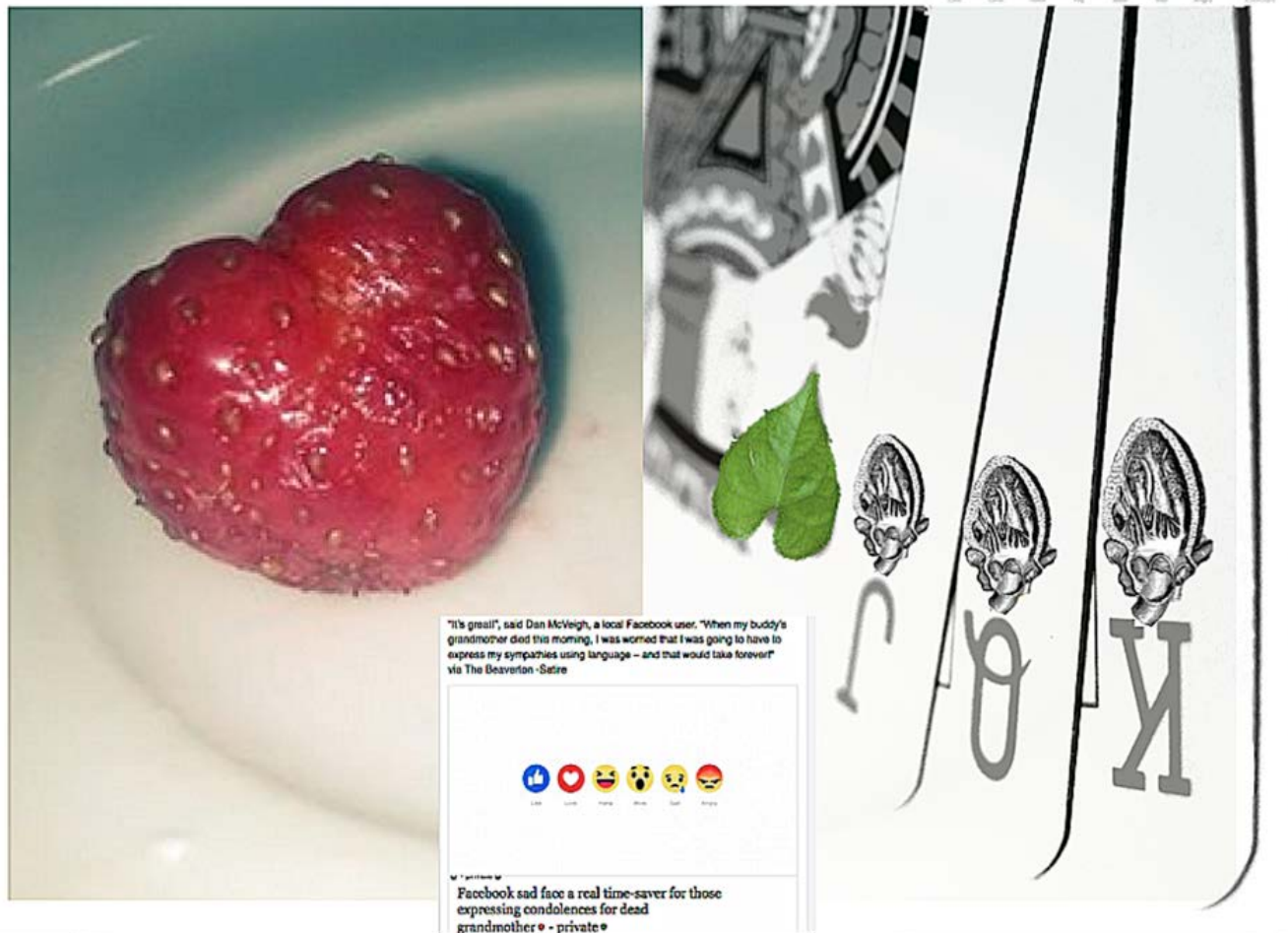
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<sup>3</sup> Google’s patent:

[http://patft.uspto.gov/netacgi/nphParser?Sect1=PTO2&Sect2=HITOFF&u=%2Fnetacgi%2FPTO%2Fsearch-adv.htm&r=45&p=1&f=G&l=50&d=PTXT&S1=\(20131015.PD.+AND+Google.ASNM.\)&OS=ISD/20131015+AND+AN/Google&RS=\(ISD/20131015+AND+AN/Google\)](http://patft.uspto.gov/netacgi/nphParser?Sect1=PTO2&Sect2=HITOFF&u=%2Fnetacgi%2FPTO%2Fsearch-adv.htm&r=45&p=1&f=G&l=50&d=PTXT&S1=(20131015.PD.+AND+Google.ASNM.)&OS=ISD/20131015+AND+AN/Google&RS=(ISD/20131015+AND+AN/Google))

<sup>4</sup> Phenomenology referring to the philosophical field exploring structures of one’s consciousness of direct experience.

When something comes suddenly out like an evidence...



To understand how social power relations are embodied in technologies, being able to distinguish between “subject” and “object” (processes of subjectification and objectification) is, for anthropologist, Alf Hornborg (2015), indispensable because “human relations to things are always about relations to other humans” (p. 36). But it is not easy as intimacy, the drive for attachment, is the most powerful force in human relations: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) so eloquently remind us: “Significance and interpretation are so thick-skinned, they form such a sticky mixture with subjectification, that it is easy to believe that you are outside them when you are in fact still secreting them” (p. 138). None of this is new, and it may be helpful to examine our constructions of technology by looking at different ways people have related to material artifacts in different times and places since, “different peoples have quite different ‘object regimes’” (Hornborg 2015, 45).

## HOC EST ENIM

CORPUS MEUM<sup>5</sup>

Heart shaped signs have always been mediated on an affective register, whether or not they signified the human organ. From the early heart-shaped ivy and fig leaves (symbolizing fidelity) found on pottery from antiquity, to early Christian usage and later Roman Catholic iconography of the heart/soul (sacred heart), of Jesus (usually accompanied by a crown of thorns, a cross or a flame), to the incorporation of the symbol on playing cards, the heart shape associated constellation of meanings have remained remarkably consistent over time. Tracing its history back even further, one of the most ancient origins powerfully linked erotic love, religion and economics: In Northern African area once known as Cyrene (now Libya), numerous 2<sup>nd</sup> century coins were found in the excavations of the sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone (Buttrey, 1992); evidence of collective affective economies (Ahmed 2004). They featured the stylised depictions of the now extinct sylphium plant (often used for birth control), and on the reverse, a seedpod is depicted that is startlingly similar to today's heart symbol. The links to fertility and the goddesses are represented through the many cults and different titles attributed to both Demeter and Persephone, including earth mother, and mistress cults, and for Persephone, protector of marriage. The complexity of the titles and roles for these goddesses reveals a rich multi-faceted relational kind of knowledge capable of holding contradictory ideas together. The duality of the goddesses' connections to life and death, creation and destruction, and different and seemingly contradictory forms, guises or *aspects* is symbolised in diverse ways to reflect beliefs around their ascribed powers that both emerge from and withdraw into the earth.

Amongst the most interesting depictions of Demeter as earth goddess was the wooden icon in a Phigaleian cult depicting her with a horse head and mane with “serpents and other beasts” growing out of her head while one hand held a dolphin, and the other a dove. (Jeffery 1976, p. 23). She is “the monstrum: the object to show” (Palese 2012, p. 2). The frontality, and monstrosity of this snake-haired figure evokes the Gorgon Medusa. Her myth situates vision as power, and the “objectifying gaze as a kind of violence” (Mack 2002, p. 598) who will not be disciplined. Neither will she be seen: as the agent who is known by the petrifying results of for those who make eye contact with her, she is free to occupy the position of seer and is capable of containing irrational forces, chaos, and elements of wonder evoking times, “when monstrosity was the expression of the miraculous power of the imagination” (Palese, 2012, p. 8). In her work on *Cyborgs and Vampires*, philosopher Emma Palese (2012) considers the figure of the cyborg as a post-



Figure SEQ Figure \\* ARABIC 3. Cyrenian coin.  
Available at: <http://i.imgur.com/tsH2MF3.jpg>

<sup>5</sup> Latin for “this is my body.” Tattoo photo By Tony Alter from Newport News, USA - The Sacred (Broken) Heart Uploaded by theveravee, CC BY 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=26943862>

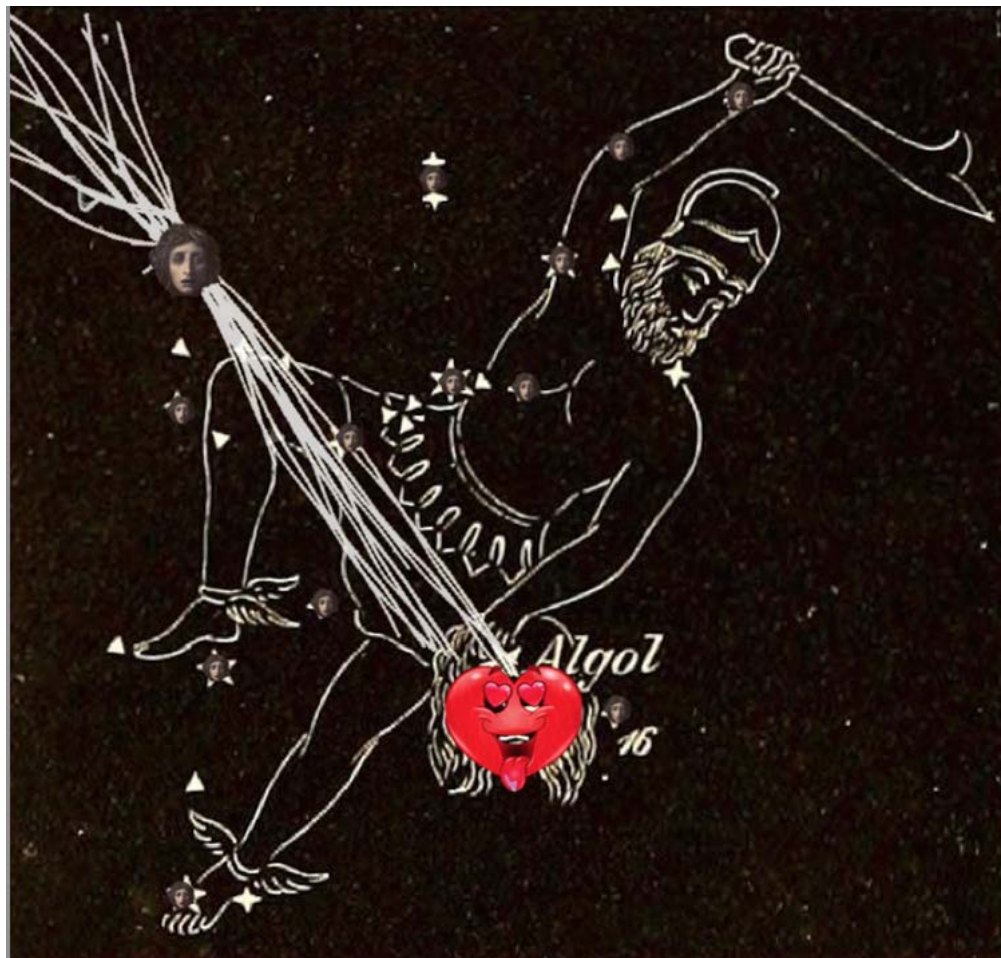
human image of the new monster symbolising the struggle to overcome human imperfectability. The cyborg is overwritten with duality in being both natural and un/supernatural, however the difference or otherness, in the language of monstrosity occupies a strategic position for Palese. In the myth, Medusa loses the struggle for the gaze, falling victim to Perseus—and his mirror. In his insightful piece on *Facing down Medusa*, Art Historian Rainer Mack (2002) also explores the paradox of monstrosity and its “double operation” in its capacity to both “stage *and* resolve a threat” (594), meaning the terrifying face has the affective power to both make viewers turn away, while tempting them to “face down” the threat.

The monstrous exceeds the mechanisms of biopower, yet the paradoxical shift at the heart of the Medusa myth hinges on the device/interface of a mirror (p. 594), an illusionist artifice aimed at avoiding direct eye-contact, while at the same time captivating/controlling the eyes, functioning at this point as image-maker.

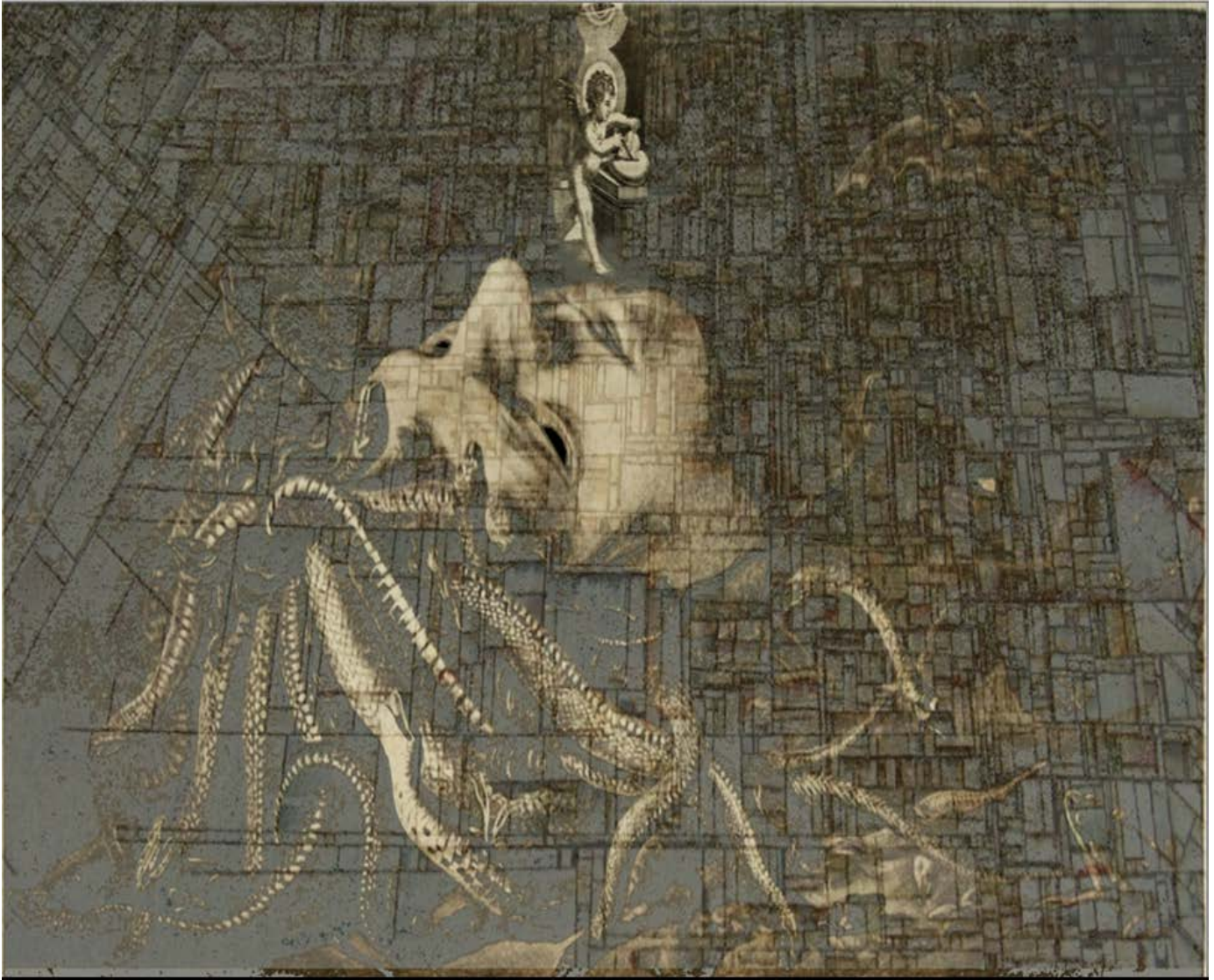


Further exploring how the image behaved for the Greeks, Mack (2002) analyses how Homer attributes affective capacity to the gorgon's head by *not* distinguishing “between the representation and the real” (573). Homer's gesture toward indicating the “transformative capacity of *techne*; the animation of inert materials” (p. 594) locates the masterfulness of the craftsmanship of its representations (that is, artifice) as the source of the gaze's fascination (p. 594) a technology of enchantment where objects were attributed autonomous agency, “obscuring the role of human perceptions and strategies” (Hornbor 2015, p. 36); magic, by definition. Homer's move opened space for any object with the representation of Medusa's face, from cups to vases and columns and decorative items, to exert social agency. Mack (2002) also explains that the face of Medusa now functions as-if a mirror, “a reflective field” in which certain viewers would identify as Perseus, “who controls the paralysing gaze” (p. 589). This performative slight-of-hand allows subjects to consume the image *as-if* re-placing Perseus, the invisible other side of that face, and constitute themselves as subjects.

Thus the hero's struggle with Medusa, a struggle for the gaze that is, precisely, a struggle for control over a certain subject position, a subject position marked by the intersection of gender and power. When Medusa holds this position, when she has the power of objectification, she is the topsy-turvy sign of patriarchy undone. (Mack 2002, pp. 595-6)



Patriarchy reasserts itself through Perseus who colonises the power of Medusa's gaze, her head always in hand, thereby allowing Perseus' becoming subject to occur by his taking power over objectification. Unruly cyborgs beware.



In the case of the image of Medusa's face, agency is distributed "differentially" (Hoal, & Lindseth 2016) across humans, objects, and ritual events vis-à-vis the *operation* of the image. What can we learn about the tensions in the *dual nature* of screened intimacies from assemblages of ritual or symbolic technologies and how they generate moments of social organization that somehow reflect human-object relations? How can we attend to the zone of "cruel optimism" where that which the object makes seemingly achievable is still always moving out of reach (Berlant 2011, p. 2)?

After spending over twenty years working on the question of technological fetishism, Hornborg (2015) asserts that: “Political economy fundamentally concerns the social organization of human-object relationships, and thus ultimately how social agency is delegated to artifacts” (p. 36) and as a result our own cultural constructions of technology are necessarily implicated. He explains how both premodern and modern economies contain key artifacts perceived to have magical agency. For him, “technology is our own version of magic” (p. 43): because “it is a specific way of exerting power over other people while concealing the extent to which it is mediated by human perceptions” (p. 51). To understand the role of human perception in giving things agency and how objects are attributed subjectivity, Hornborg advocates attending carefully to how “objects can be turned into subjects, and vice versa” or, he clarifies, as verbs—as processes of “subjectivation” and “objectivation” (p. 48). One of the keys is to make the political economy of, in this case modern technology, visible and legible. Rarely are global price relations, exchange rates, or financial strategies included in defining technology “even though, by organizing asymmetric resource flows, they are crucial for its very existence” (p. 50).

This knowledge is much needed in the case of emojis. They embody the efforts of informational capital to “instrumentalise, analyse, monetise, and standardise affect” as Stark and Crawford (2015) put it, “Representations of feeling in general, and happiness in particular, are often painted across the exterior of moneymaking ventures” (p. 8). Emojis are small, ephemeral, ubiquitous and easy to use, as well as extremely convenient to modulate the tone of text, or replace it altogether, and easy to overlook. The heart sign has become more and more significant as a central cipher in the orchestration of the appearance of positive affective gestures. How can we understand them as productive of, and yet products of a constellation of social and power relations in the ever-shifting digital waters?



Many scholars in different ways and in diverse contexts call for what I see as *algorithmic literacies*, which would address the nature of algorithmically enabled images and applications as performative, and processual. Algorithmic literacies would differentiate between discourses that create notions of what algorithms are and do, and the actual computational aspects of algorithms. Hoal and Lindseth (2016) realise that “established representational approaches fall short of accounting for the active roles of digital image applications, and this is why new theorisations of images are needed” (p. 178). Highfield and Leaver (2016) underline the increasing importance of visual elements in digitally mediated everyday life, “addressing the significant research gap in methods for tracking, analysing, and understanding visual social media as both image-based and intertextual content” (p. 2) For Graham, Zook, and Boulton (2013), who explore four kinds of power in the intersections of material and virtual spatialities, what they term “code power” is crucial given its role in mediating content (p. 477).

Acknowledging the challenges of mapping or measuring something seen as “duplicitous, ephemeral and highly personalised” they call for further explorations of diverse issues in this area asking: “What tools, methods and theories should be employed to make sense of the highly distributed ways in which

content and code are shaped and reshaped, enacted and re-enacted (p. 477)? In the field of architecture, Mario Carpo (2011) responds to the changes in the design process due to algorithmic logics by advocating designer engagement in the production of tools to best avoid the embedded limits. In a study on *Algorithmic harms*, Tufekci (ND) warns that “algorithms are able to act as stealthy, extremely potent gatekeepers: gatekeepers unaccompanied by transparency and visibility” (p. 209) and that their functionality is largely unknown by a majority of users. Additionally, they are not discrimination-free. This complaint is taken up in an article on *Machine Bias* where the authors delineate the erroneous and racial bias of algorithm generated risk assessments in courtrooms (Angwin, Larson, Mattu, & Kirchner 2016). In her dissertation on *Search Engine Bias*, Van Couvering (2009) documents her concerns not only that the first few pages in the content of search engines are highly biased, but also that many users’ searches are exacerbated by literacy issues while others cannot differentiate between paid advertising and unsponsored results. In frustration, Edelman (ND) complains about media consumption and the manipulative aspects of the “tech ecosystem” laying the blame squarely at the feet of the metrics at the heart of algorithms. He writes, “when a business like Facebook tries to maximise engagement, ... it treats us as engagement machines. We go over-consumed, but under-fulfilled.”





Figure SE  
Warfield

*“Once metrics are defined,  
they’re like parasites,  
or undead spirits.  
They take over human beings.”*  
Edelman (ND)

Working in the area of education and literacies in digital environments, Aviram and Eshet-Alkalai (2006) describe how digital literacy is presented as a “mindset” that allows users to be agile and intuitive navigators online and to access information effectively. However, when they empirically studied approaches to the concept of digital literacy they

found great variance in how the term was understood and operationalised, from “the purely technical or procedural to the cognitive, psychological and sociological” (p. 1). With the goal of shifting the discourse on digital literacy toward theoretical and empirical research to better found efforts at creating instructional material, they propose a five part framework of literacy skill-types that was well received: “this model is considered one of the most complete and coherent models for digital literacy (Akers, 2005), and it was also included among the pivotal models for digital learning in the Encyclopedia of Distance Learning (p. 2). These scholars have made important steps in integrating the fragmented literature on digital literacy. Despite this they acknowledge that the “definition of digital literacy is still incomplete, and more research on the performance of effective users of digital media is required” (p. 2).

While it is important to be able to decipher graphic user interfaces, it is not just about this. *Algorithmic literacies*, broadly conceived as agility in critically discerning how platforms and algorithms inform how decision-making is presented to the individual, whole-heartedly resists the tendencies to reductionism and simplification often presented in didactic materials. Algorithmic thinking is process focused, and understands that the way to proceed is non-deterministic and driven heuristically. The logic of the kind of algorithmic literacies needed is concerned with understanding in the context of a relational onto-epistemology, like the Inca with their khipu knots capable of infinite combinations. Khipus were not only highly complex with seven possible different binary operations variously remixed, but they were also performative and amenable to repeated reconfiguration. However, they were also considered sacred, following the notion of distributed agency, the creation of possibilities for knowledge generation was deeply embedded in Incan ethics. Algorithmic literacies are nothing new. If we are serious about “exposing the unacknowledged magic of our own ontology” (Hornborg 2015, p. 51), we can learn from the Amazonians who took seriously “the risks inherent in subject-object

transformations” (p. 48).

Pulling petals from a daisy (loves me or not) is a binary decision-making game where an element of chance lets romantics dream, derive humor, or pleasure. When people communicate intimacy using ❤️, algorithmically curating the number of figurative petals and how they are presented, plays games with their ❤️❤️ and amputates their agentic power by objectifying their abilities of imagination and desire.

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# **“It seems like it has always been with us!”: Introducing media technology into children’s lives and family interpersonal relationships**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research on children and media often focuses on the risks surrounding children’s use of media technology and parents’ attempts to control, manage and limit it. However, while our knowledge of parental mediation styles and strategies is extensive, our understanding of what motivates parents and other members of the family to *encourage* children to use media technology is far from being comprehensive. Using qualitative data from an original empirical study of UK families and their media use, this article explores *why* parents and other relatives, such as grandparents, see value in children’s use of media, and *how* they encourage children to use media technology and maintain an ongoing relationship with it, introducing it into children’s lives and family interpersonal relationships from the early months of infancy.

## **KEYWORDS**

Media technology, children and media, parenting, family life, family relationships

## **Introduction**

As Kjartan Olafsson et al. have argued, ‘Internet use, and the use of digital media in general, is thoroughly embedded in children’s daily lives’ (2013, 24). Children do not simply occasionally have access to one or more media technology, rather they *live* in multi-media environments, saturated by media technology (Davies 2010, 172; Goggin 2012, 87; Livingstone 2007, 8; Morley 2003, 448). Contemporary children are often being referred to as ‘digital natives’, ‘natural born net babes’ and ‘net savvy young’, because of their capability of interacting with a variety of digital media platforms and content (Selwyn 2003, 358; Steemers 2011, 160). However, participation for children always depends on *access*, which has to be facilitated and granted by parents or caregivers, who will in turn play a considerable role in children’s exposure to media, attitudes toward media, and responses to media (Davies 2010, 177; Nathanson 2015, 133).

Research on children and media often focuses on the risks surrounding children’s use of media technology and parents’ attempts to control, manage and limit it (Cingel and

Krcmar 2013; Meiricket al. 2009; Schaan and Melzer 2015; Vaala and Bleakley2015). Mediation and monitoring of children's media activities, such as television viewing or gaming, has been established as an important parental responsibility (Faircloth 2014, 30; Walshet al. 1998, 26). Excessive media use (Gentile et al., 2011), inappropriate sexually explicit or violent content (Tomopoulos et al. 2014; Wilson 2008), cyber bullying, grooming and abuse (Olafsson et al. 2013)are just some of the widely researched and publicly discussed dangers that children can potentially face while using media technology, and parents are being actively encouraged by policy makers, journalists, parenting 'experts' and academics to take these risks seriously, and actively monitor and regulate children's media use(Kehily 2010, 175; Lee 2014a, 69; Schaanand Melzer 2015, 58).

While offering some very useful insights into the issue of the contemporary mediated home, childhood and their constant negotiation by parents, these works, however, pose a danger of creating a one-sided picture of children's media use and parental attitudes towards it. The everyday reality, which I had observed while conducting my study with UK families, is that media use is not always seen in a negative context, as risky and harmful, and children's media use is not always restricted by parents. On the contrary, children are often encouraged to use media technology in the home, in the family context. However, while our knowledge of parental mediation styles and strategies is extensive (for a summary, see Chakroff and Nathanson 2008; Schaanand Melzer 2015), our understanding of what motivates parents to *encourage* children to use media technology is far from being comprehensive.

In this article I will therefore share the findings of my qualitative study with families, and focus particularly on this other, less covered, side of the debate, exploring*why* and *how* parents might encourage children to use media technology, introducing it into children's lives and family interpersonal relationships. As it has already been discussed, it is inevitable that contemporary children will be exposed to media, and in the majority of cases, children are introduced to media technology by parents or caregivers. However, it is also worth mentioning that increasingly this first introduction occurs during the early months of infancy. It therefore becomes particularly important to understand why parents begin to expose their children to media technology, as well as how children in the first years of their life engage with media, as there is currently an uneven coverage of children's media use by age, with the majority of research on children's use of media technology being conducted on teenagers (70%), with only a small fraction of studies looking at children under the age of 5 (6%) (Olafsson et al. 2013, 20). The data used in this article will contribute to our understanding of the issue and present findings from families with young children - babies and toddlers - as well as older children.

My aim is to move away from the discourse of 'risk' versus 'benefit', because parental motivations are often so diverse and complicated, that they simply don't fit into this quite narrow discourse. I also want to steer away from the analysis of parental

encouragement of the use of media technology in terms of the lack of parent–child attachment, low parenting self-efficacy, or parental disinterest in childrearing, common accusation of ‘parenting experts’ (Lee 2014b, 8; Nathanson 2015, 134). What it means to be a ‘good’ parent and a ‘happy’ child, what skills and knowledge will be required from the ‘citizens of tomorrow’ are just some of the examples of what can motivate parents to encourage their children to use media technology and maintain an ongoing relationship with it. Similarly, while parents are often seen as the key, if not *the only*, players in the process of facilitation of children’s media use (Bulck and Bergh 2000; Livingstone 2007), I will argue that other relatives, such as grandparents, who often live in geographically or even culturally distant locations, can also play an important role in how media technology is introduced into children’s lives, and in how and why children’s media use is encouraged. By focusing on the positive and encouraging attitudes of parents and grandparents towards children’s media use in the context of UK homes, the aim is to contribute towards a better understanding of the place of media technology in family life and interpersonal family relationships.

Before I move on to the discussion of my findings, I first want to address the issue of definitions. My extensive research on the subject showed that the term ‘media technology’ has been used in various often conflicting ways, and it is sometimes very difficult to figure out what exactly the term incorporates. In the context of this article, I am using the term ‘media technology’ to mean various technologies, on which the media, that we use on a daily basis, rely. The term is used to refer to various *media devices* (television set, PC, tablet, phone, game console etc.), *platforms* (operating systems on these devices, such as Apple OS), *applications* (YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Skype, FaceTime etc.), *services and content* (what is offered by the means of the applications, such as On Demand television programmes). This definition has been informed by the work of David Croteau et al. (2012), as well as the empirical data that I have gathered about the use of media technology in the home.

## Methodology

The data used in this article comes from a survey, in which 152 participants took part, and 12 in-depth interviews with families. Participants were recruited through online media, such as Facebook groups and forums for parents. All participants had at least one child; although parents of children of all ages were invited to participate, the majority of families that took part in the study had young children under the age of 5. The interviews were conducted in participants’ homes, and all members of the family were invited to participate, including children. The interviews lasted, on average, 1 hour and were digitally recorded. All names in this article are pseudonyms.

While the aim was to recruit parents from diverse social, economic, cultural and racial backgrounds, and a large number of online spaces was targeted, it was not always possible, as there was no control over who chooses to fill in the survey or expresses the interest in further research participation. The majority of the participants were white

British middle class, although a fair amount of participants was also working class, and quite a few participants did not have British origin. Due to the geographical location of the researcher, it was also difficult to target vast areas, especially in the interviewing part of the research. The majority of the participating families resided in Norfolk or Suffolk, but interviews were also conducted in Nottinghamshire, Kent and East Sussex. However, as it is the case with most empirical studies, the aim was not to study the 'population', and produce representative and generalisable results, but rather elicit deeper, more personal accounts from respondents, giving them voice, exploring their reasons for media practices and how they are imbedded in their everyday lives (Gray 2003, 16; Olafsson et al. 2013, 23).

### **Introducing media technology into children's lives**

The issue of parents encouraging children to use media technology and to maintain an ongoing relationship with media is not addressed very often in the literature, however, even when it is, it frequently lacks empirical evidence, and is often presented in a limited context, mainly focusing on the reasons and motivations around 'convenience'. It has been widely argued that media technology provides a convenient and readily available way of entertaining and occupying children, when parents do not have another alternative due to economic or time pressures, or have to engage in household tasks, take care of other siblings, or simply take a break (Rideout and Hamel 2006; Zimmerman et al. 2007). In my research many parents have indeed discussed using media technology for entertainment and distraction both inside and outside the home, in situations like going on a long journey, waiting for public transport, at doctor's surgery or hairdresser's. Particularly in the households with young children media technology was often used as a 'babysitter': allowing parents to 'steal' some time to make tea, take a shower, do the cooking or washing up. Using media technology in this way, however, often comes with a huge feeling of guilt. As Tom shared,

*'That's one of the things with kids, everyone says "oh when we become parents we will never do this", but we do use it [media technology] as a tool, because we need to get things done' (25-34 years old, Norfolk, twins aged 5).*

Furthermore, despite being a common reason for parents to encourage children to use media technology, 'convenience' is not, however, the only one, with the motivations behind this varying from family to family, and being quite diverse and complex, including educational benefits, socialization, valuable skills for the future, children's safety and parental pride.

As my study has shown, children are often encouraged to use media technology for its educational benefits. As Megan discussed in relation to letting her children watch television programmes and short videos, and play games on tablet and PC:

*'I think it can be really educational if it's like framed in the right way and I think it introduces them to things that they probably wouldn't see... Introducing topics and concepts'* (35-44 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 5 and 2).

YouTube was often mentioned by parents as being especially useful, informative and educational for children, who were in turn actively encouraged to use it on a regular basis (in most cases purposefully, and under close supervision of parents). Deborah talked about YouTube assisting her son in doing his school homework:

*'Arthur will come home with a project, like find out about Sri Lanka or something, and so he will watch something on there. Like if you need to find out about elephants, and there is an elephant video, that kind of thing'*(25-34 years old, Kent, three children aged 6, 3 and 1).

Some parents, however, find using an application on a tablet or a phone more educational and beneficial, than watching video content. As Abigail explained:

*'...it depends on what they are playing with really. I suppose if they are using an app that was teaching them quite a bit I wouldn't be quite so bothered, than about something that was just... watching videos, you know'* (25-34 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 2).

Many parents mentioned doing 'research' into children's applications and downloading them for their children to use on a regular basis. Megan, whose 2 children are profoundly deaf, talked about how tablets assist her children in language development:

*'Actually with iPads, there are some really brilliant apps for language development, because they are sort of linking the sound and action, and so this screen time is really, really good for their... for them learning to listen and learning to talk'* (35-44 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 5 and 2).

These examples show how media technology is deeply integrated into children's lives, with many parents seeing it as a vital part of contemporary childhood and children's development.

Media technology was also often perceived by parents as an important element in children's socialization process, due to it being '*a significant part of modern day culture*'(Mary, 35-44 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 1), something that can help children learn how to make sense of the world and specific social situations, and how to communicate with others. Emily was particularly discussing how television was an

important part of growing up and socialization with peers for children, starting from an early age:

*'because when they play, I know that they like to act out different characters, so being able to recognize characters is important... and again it gives them something in common with other children, that they have something that they all sort of like'* (25-34 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 1).

In this context television is seen as providing children with talking points among peers, and an opportunity to exercise imagination through role play. Nick and Annabelle used television references to teach their son about social situations, such as going to the dentist, using child-centered examples and language that their son could understand to make sense of what was about to happen:

*'we've often invoked Mr Elephant, who is the dentist in Peppa Pig. We've used it sort of like a social exposure... When he has been anxious about things, we've sort of like referenced back episodes of particular programmes, we'll say like "Oh yeah you know how Peppa Pig is going to the dentist?", so that he knows, he can kind of remember that it's ok'* (Nick, 25-34 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 3 and 6 months).

Another common reason motivating parents to encourage children to regularly use media technology was their concern about children's future in the highly mediated and computerized world, that requires everyone to have good technical knowledge and skills to succeed. As James pointed out,

*'...at the end of the day we all use computers in life, don't we, so if they are learning how to use iPads and tablets, it's got benefits, for the future, you know'* (35-44 years old, East Sussex three children aged 3, 6 and 10).

Esther Dermott and Marco Pomati argue that with electronic media becoming so omnipresent, children's media education has become a major concern for parents, who are now under a lot of pressure to ensure that children become skilled and active citizens of the future, something they start working towards from when their children are still infants (2015, 1). Participants in my study often talked about how important it is for their children to be using media technology, as this will help them develop valuable IT skills. Deborah compared using media technology with crossing the road, something that is very worried about as a parent, but something her children have to learn and cannot live without:

*'I think it's a bit like a road. Yes, it's going to be dangerous, but they have to know how to cross them. So, yes, we are concerned... about the amount of content that is out there... But I don't think that shutting them away from it is any use, they have to learn how to use it'* (25-34 years old, Kent, three children aged 6, 3 and 1).

Deborah's point about the impossibility of avoiding media technology and children having to learn how to use it from an early age leads to the next motivating factor that parents often mentioned, that of children's safety. For a lot of parents, encouraging children to use media technology, while also supervising them when they do so, was a way of teaching their children how use it safely, preparing them for safe independent use in the future. For instance, many parents talked about teaching their children to use smart TVs and DVRs to be able to find 'appropriate' and 'safe' content themselves, and skip through the adverts, which were commonly perceived of as 'risky' and 'harmful':

*'We showed them, and now they can fast forward the commercials themselves...'* (Samantha, 25-34 years old, Norfolk, twins aged 5)

*'On Netflix, they will just use the remote and surf around and will look at something. We've got an account which is set up as kids profile so everything he can look for we know it's like age appropriate content'* (Megan, 35-44 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 5 and 2).

Deborah also actively encouraged her son to search the internet for information, while at the same time *'teaching him that there are safe sites and there are not safe sites'* (25-34 years old, Kent, three children aged 6, 3 and 1).

Children's ability to use media devices and their multiple functions, such as speech recognition, search for information and applications, is also often a source of pride for parents. It became obvious from the way parents talked about their children using media technology, providing detailed description of what their children can and cannot do and at what age. For instance, when I was interviewing Mary and Stuart, their daughter was constantly trying to reach for their phones. One time, when she finally succeeded, Mary pointed my attention to it:

*'You are just about to see an example of... I will just see what she does with it. She knows how to turn it on. She doesn't know the code. But she presses the buttons so you get voice activation, you know? She knows how to do that. Yes, look, she does it!'* (35-44 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 1).

Similarly, William and Megan were describing to me what their young son can do on a computer or a tablet. Megan said: *'He can turn it on himself!'*, to which William

responded: *'More than that, he can Google! He loves computers, it's his favourite thing in school, ICT, so...'*, then Megan continued: *'... he knows how to go to the Google bit on the tool bar and put in "Lego" to find like Lego movies and things like that. Or he chooses something if he likes the look of it... He is really good with technology, he can just find what he wants and put it on'* (35-44 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 5 and 2). In both these families, children's ability to use media technology from an early age was encouraged and celebrated, being seen as an achievement and an important valuable skill for the modern world.

### **Introducing media technology into family's interpersonal relationships**

There is, however, a whole other cluster of reasons for why parents might potentially encourage children to use media technology and maintain an ongoing relationship with it, the one that is closely connected with the issue of family interpersonal relationships. Media technology and family relationships has always been a highly controversial topic. A lot has been written on the potential negative affects of media use on family relationships and communication, for example, it substituting for parent-child interaction or leading to individualization and family fragmentation, in both academic (Groening 2010; Livingstone 2010; Mackay and Ivey 2004; Nathanson 2015) and public (Dunn 2014; Shelleyand Stanford 2013) discourses. A few of the participants in my study indeed had very negative attitudes towards media use in the family context, considering it to be less 'quality' or 'intimate' family time. The vast majority of the participants, however, had much more positive views on media technology, providing diverse and rich examples of it benefiting and enriching family leisure, the side of the debate in media use and family relationships that is once again not covered as extensively, as 'risks' and 'negative consequences' surrounding family media use.

Many of the parents, who took part in my study, talked about the importance of shared family viewing, whether it is broadcast television, on demand television, online short video content or films. As Annabelle shared, *'TV in the living room is a way of insuring that you have some family social time'* (25-34 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 3 and 6 months). My research has shown that television set, which was originally advertised and promoted as a 'force for family togetherness' and a 'new common bond' (Briggs 1998, 110), still holds its position at the center of home entertainment, with the majority of families, who took part in my study, having a television set in the living room and attributing great importance to family television viewing:

*'We like to watch TV with sky, it's in the family room where we can all sit together and watch stuff'* (Bethany, 25-34 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 1); *'We watch TV together on a television set as it is central in the house, so a social environment'* (Hayley, 25-34 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 5).

Participants have highlighted the importance of the television set as a shared, family-oriented media technology, which can be jointly used by the entire family for shared entertainment and spending time together, reinforcing ‘intergenerational family interaction and communication’ (Schaanand Melzer 2015, 60). Some families discussed building rituals and traditions around shared viewing, making it an even more personal, special, bonding experience for the whole family (Lull 1988). As William described his family weekend viewing,

*‘We have movie night on weekends, so we make popcorn and we get all the chairs around the TV set, and maybe we’ll invite some friends over, we just rent a movie off iTunes, like a Despicable Me, or you know, kids movies. And Daniel will make little tickets, like cinema tickets and draw posters, you know, pretend we are at the movies, which is quite cute. That’s good family fun’ (35-44 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 5 and 2).*

Similarly, Nick talks about his plans to have a regular movie night on Sundays, when his children become a bit older:

*‘Yeah, like a movie on a Sunday, that’s what I always remember from my childhood. That was actually a fairly social thing, you know, you kind of get together and then you talk about, it’s a kind of like a shared experience’ (25-34 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 3 and 6 months).*

Similar to Nick, many other participants also nostalgically remembered their own childhood and tried to replicate that family viewing experience, which they once shared with parents, with their children. Devices other than the television set were also used for the same purpose of watching video content together as a family, sharing the viewing experience with each other and generating topics for discussion. A few of the participating families did not have a traditional television set at home and /or a television license, so other devices, such as laptops and tablets, were used for shared viewing of on demand television programmes, films and shorter clips. These findings offer an important context and balance for the works that emphasize individualization of family viewing and time together to the extent of ‘living together separately’ brought about by technological developments (Andreasen 1994; Flichy 2002), showing instead how new media technology, such as Smart TV, PC, tablet, DVR, online television services, YouTube and so on, can still be used for very traditional purposes of bringing the family together.

While the use of media technology in the context of family life is often discussed in relation to parent-child relationships, the question that is addressed less often is how media technology is used to facilitate and maintain relationships with other family members, such as grandparents, who often live in geographically or even culturally

diverse locations. My research has shown that media technology can not only help to connect parents and children, allowing for shared activities and family time together, but it can also be vital for maintaining relationships and connections with grandparents. Many participants mentioned that their children literally grew up with Skype, FaceTime and similar applications, which were used to contact grandparents on a regular basis starting from day one of a child's life, to make sure that they can see their grandchildren and take an active part in their life. As Mary explained:

*'We use the MacBook for Skyping and FaceTime, her grandparents, they live about 3 hours drive away, so we don't see them in person very often but we do Skype regularly, so she is used to seeing them and talking to them on the MacBook'* (35-44 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 1).

Communication via various media technology allows to maintain family ties, with parents mentioning that often children don't see a difference between 'seeing' and 'talking' to grandparents online and face-to-face. Mary further discussed that she finds it fascinating that her daughter is so interactive when talking to her grandparents on FaceTime, '*talking and reacting*', showing her grandparents her toys, what she has learned and so on.

Grandparents were also often the ones to buy children their first personal devices, with popular choices being tablets and iPod touch. As Samantha explains,

*'They have a device each [iPod touch]. It's more to use for games and talking to... because my mother lives abroad, back in the States, my mum bought them for them, when they were around 3, and she bought them so that they can FaceTime her and message her'* (25-34 years old, Norfolk, twins aged 5).

This 'gift' was then followed by both grandparents and parents teaching children how to use the device for communication purposes. This was in turn followed by establishing specific routines, when days of the week and times of the day were negotiated and chosen to make 'contact' with grandparents to ensure that communication is maintained on a regular basis.

In multilingual and multicultural families, where grandparents did not live in the UK and did not speak good English, media technology was also often used to make sure that children do not forget their grandparents' mother tongue and culture in order to be able to communicate with them and maintain close relationships. Sonia explained how she is using educational cartoons in Russian found on YouTube to make sure that her boys can understand and speak both languages, to be able to communicate with grandparents still living in Belarus: '*They don't have that much interaction with Russian speaking kids of their own age, and we only speak English at home, and my family lives so far away... so*

*I show them videos in Russian and I think it's important'* (Sonia, 35-44 years old, East Sussex, three children aged 3, 6 and 10). While foreign books or toys that promote language development are difficult to find and are often expensive, YouTube offers an easy to access alternative, as well as being an application, which Sonia's boys already use, like and understand.

My research has shown that children can be very creative in their ways of maintaining relationships with extended family, going beyond 'just' making a call on Skype or FaceTime. Tom discussed how his daughters write to their grandmother and even send her their drawings and crafts. They will either take a picture of what they have created or draw it digitally on the iPod and '*email it to grandma*' (Tom, 25-34 years old, Norfolk, twins aged 5). In this context media technology allows for establishing even closer connections with the family, maintaining geographically diverse networks, making it easier to stay in touch, while at the same time allowing families to experiment with means of communication and find new ways of sharing the intimate and personal details of their lives with distant relatives (Peng and Zhu 2011).

## Conclusion

As Leslie Haddon has argued, it is very important to appreciate how media technology and media practices 'have appeared gradually because there are often claims about the unique experiences of the current generation of children when in fact practices developed... over time by different generations of children and youth' (2013, 89). The aim of this article was therefore not to say that family's experience of media technology in the home is ultimately different from what has been observed before. However, as Maire Messenger Davies points out, 'the swiftness of many of the changes in the development of 'new' digital technology in people's lives has a tendency to outpace the rate of academic research on the phenomenon' (2010, 173), which makes it ever so important to examine and document diverse individual stories about the contemporary use of media technology in the home in the context of interpersonal relationships.

This articles aimed to highlight the importance of broadening the debate around the use of media technology in the family context, to include the exploration of the factors that motivate parents to see *value* in their children's media use, and to *encourage* children to use media technology and maintain an ongoing relationship with it. The article has demonstrated that moving away from the 'risk' versus 'benefit' discourse, as well as the analysis of parental encouragement of the use of media technology in terms of the 'lack' of parental skills, attachment and interest, can allow a deeper, more comprehensive exploration of *how* and *why* media technology is introduced into children's lives and family interpersonal relationships from the early months of infancy. This article significantly adds to the understanding of the facilitation of children's use of media technology in the context of the family, by recognizing the diversity of the motivating factors and the active role of parents and other relatives, such as grandparents, in this process.

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# The smartphone's role in the contemporary backpacking experience

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this ethnographic study is to explore the smartphone's role in the contemporary international backpacking experience. This paper will examine backpackers' perceived changes in mediated relations and personal attitudes towards phone use in co-present situations pre-trip, on-trip, and post-trip. Urry & Larsen's theory on tourist performances as well as Paris et al.'s experiences of technology induced anxieties and tensions while traveling provide a conceptual framework for the analysis. A sample of 11 backpackers were interviewed at youth dormitories in Bali and Malaysia. Post-trip interviews were conducted primarily online through Skype. The findings suggest that there is an ideal of staying offline while traveling. Yet, backpackers report connecting daily with their smartphones and reveal a travel-time legitimacy for sharing updates and receiving attention on social media. After the trip, backpackers perceive a reduction in their own phone use and an increased tolerance for others' phone use in their presence.

## KEYWORDS

Smartphone, Norms, Backpacking, Ethnography, Dependency, Social skills

## Introduction

The practice of international backpacking has for decades been a popular form of tourism for young people. International backpackers are typically characterised as travelers between the ages of 18 and 35 years (Young & Hanley 2010), traveling over the course of several months (Sørensen 2003), and staying at budget youth dormitories instead of hotels (Welk 2004). The act of backpacking has become significantly easier than it was in its early 'beatnik' and 'hippie' days in the 1950s-1970s (Hannam & Diekmann 2010, Paris 2009). Cheaper air-fares, the expansion of guidebooks, the increasing availability of backpacker accommodations, -transportation, and -travel agencies, as well as higher amounts of disposable income of younger people, and the increased representation of backpacking in pop culture have all contributed to the increase in the tourism form of backpacking (Paris 2009). No doubt, the increasing spread of smartphones and internet connectivity in all

corners of the world also contribute to making travel and orientation easier.

At the same time, the ubiquitous presence of smartphones in social settings is a cause for concern for many people, and lead to conflicting ideals regarding the backpacking experience. Young modern backpackers need to negotiate the distribution of time and effort on both their local- and virtual lives (Paris 2009, Urry 2007, Urry & Larsen 2011, Young & Hanley 2010, Van Dijk 2012, Molz & Paris 2013, Paris et al. 2015). With recent developments in communication technologies, and the general availability of the internet, modern backpackers have to be 'fully integrated and maintain a sustained state of co-presence between the backpacker culture and their home culture.' (Paris 2009, 1).

John Urry and Jonas Larsen (2011) argue that tourism can be understood as a modern form of pilgrimage, which involves a travel from home to a sacred place where some kind of uplifting experience takes place. The presence of smartphones may be both a tool and an obstacle for this kind of experience, as it makes travel easier but may also be considered a disturbing element for its authenticity. Backpackers struggle with conflicting ideals to maintain both their local and virtual sociabilities while traveling. In this study, we will use interviews with a small sample of backpackers about their attitudes towards smartphone use before, during and after their travels, to answer the following research question: How do conflicting ideals and attitudes towards smartphone use affect the contemporary backpacker experience?

**Smartphone use and the backpacking experience** Much research has been conducted to shed light on the role of smartphones in society, including social norms and ideals regulating their use (Palen, Salzman & Youngs 2000, Ling 1996, 2004, 2008, Gergen 2002, Urry 2007, Turkle 2011). Circulating widely in media, the topic of smartphone dependency has also become a research interest of scholars (Pearce & Gretzel 2012, Turkle, 2011, Van Dijk, 2012). This topic is brought into tourism research as travel-time challenges in connecting reflect a contrast in travelers' everyday phone use (Paris et al. 2015). At the same time, the authentic backpacker experience is depicted as being offline (Hannam, Butler, Paris 2014, Molz & Paris 2013, Paris et al. 2015), and much like pilgrimages, there is a goal of achieving sacred inner experiences away from the mundane life (Urry & Larsen 2011).

While the society's smartphone use has become ubiquitous, judgments about appropriate use vary widely and phone use in co-present situations is often seen as rude (Palen, Salzman & Youngs 2000). In order to defuse the phone's potential for rudeness, a co-present group must negotiate the behavioural norms in a given situation (Ling 2004). From a more dystopian perspective, Sherry Turkle (2011) describes the phone as a barrier to co-present interaction and warns her readers that the 'always on' society might lock us in as the norms of smartphone use are continuously slipping (145). Kenneth Gergen (2002) also sees the mobile phone as contributing to the expansion of the absent presence in a

co-present situation. John Urry, however, argues that besides promoting mediated relations, 'Communication technologies more generally play a major role in facilitating co-present meetings.' (2007, 172). Rich Ling agrees: 'As a physical object, it can influence and perhaps even enhance co-present interaction.' (2008, 114).

In parallel to the fast technological developments, several scholars have warned about people's dependency on smartphones. Philip Pearce and Ulrike Gretzel (2012) and Sherry Turkle (2011) claim that technology- and internet dependency is connected with people's sensory reactions to communication devices. Jan van Dijk (2012) comments that what is nailing people in front of their screens, is the feeling that life is happening elsewhere and in order to not miss out on it, they need to be there through their phones. The theme of smartphone dependency is also discussed in tourism studies (Paris et al. 2015, O'Regan 2008).

Travelers are increasingly more equipped with portable internet-accessing devices and they use a considerable amount of time keeping in touch with family and friends back home. However, they often experience periods of unconnectivity due to power cuts, 'dead zones', and otherwise poor quality internet or mobile access. Cody Paris et al. (2015) describe that the challenges of staying connected while traveling result, for some, in a recognition of their otherwise excessive technology use. For these people, the travel-time limitations of connectedness represent an opportunity for remedy: 'some tourists are now choosing to be "unplugged" while traveling, seeking an escape from "connectedness" and, in a sense, therapeutic rehabilitation.' (Paris et al. 2015, 804). The authors further discuss that this travel-time 'disadvantage' regarding connectivity has created a new market segment - the 'digital escaper' market. In line with this, Hannam, Butler & Paris (2014), Molz & Paris (2013) and Paris et al. (2015) argue that backpackers are starting to resist mediated togetherness, even coming up with 'strategies to elude their social networks' (Molz & Paris 2013, 34). Paris et al. further describe that 'For some travelers, being disconnected (even unexpectedly) can be beneficial or perceived positively as the often overused excuse "I can't be reached" is actually true.' (2015, 807). With existing literature pointing out that people travel in order to escape their daily routines and to meet other people (Haldrup & Larsen 2010, Paris 2009, Urry & Larsen 2011, Urry 2007, Young & Hanley 2010, Anderskov 2002), there is a sense that authentic backpacking experiences are primarily offline.

However, as travel-life digital behaviour increasingly resembles 'normal life', travelers experience a growing expectation from friends and family that they stay connected (Paris et al. 2015, Haldrup & Larsen 2010, Burns & O'Regan 2008, Hannam, Butler & Paris 2014). This increase partly relates to developments in the availability of wireless internet in spaces that are not home or work places. While Ray Oldenburg (1989) argues that conversation is meant to be the main activity in these 'third places', Urry (2007) suggests that these

'in-between places' like airports, hostels, cafes and means of transportation are increasingly being designed as connected office spaces. Indeed, having a phone raises the issue of connectivity for both business travelers and backpackers (Paris et al. 2015, Haldrup & Larsen 2010, Burns & O'Regan 2008, Hannam, Butler & Paris 2014). Since it facilitates connectivity, the phone also increases backpackers' temptation to fill 'downtime' with phone use (Paris et al. 2015, Urry & Larsen 2011, Haldrup & Larsen 2010).

Urry and Larsen (2011) argue that there is an idealisation of an authentic tourist experience, which is similar to pilgrimages. Several writers (Cohen 1988, Shields 1990, Eade & Sallnow 1991) have previously drawn out the implications of pilgrimage on tourism. 'Like the pilgrim, the tourist moves from a familiar place to a far place and then returns to the familiar place. At the far place both the pilgrim and the tourist 'worship' shrines which are sacred, albeit in different ways, and as a result gain some kind of uplifting experience.' (Urry & Larsen 2011, 22). The sacredness, in this context, is not necessarily something religious, but anything that is new and different.

The authors further argue that the contemporary pilgrimage primarily consists of the anticipation of experiencing pleasures from escaping the daily routine and work schedules at home, shaped by visual and narrative depictions from various media. Backpacking experiences are pre-formed based on the travelers' everyday behaviour and expectations of the backpacker role. The act of traveling is primarily an enactment of that role and it is the other travelers that are seen as the biggest judges and critics of one's performance. Through describing the backpacker experience as an enactment of the expected backpacker role, Urry & Larsen argue that the 'sacredness' of the 'unique objects' that are 'gazed' upon is based on the tourist's anticipation for seeing something new or something different (2011, 22).

**Method** For this study, backpackers' experiences were gathered through localised ethnographic interviews conducted in Bali and Malaysia. With a geographically dispersed sample, the follow-up interviews were collected as digital ethnographic research (Murthy 2013) over Skype. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of eleven backpackers over the course of five months - from March to July 2015. The aim with these interviews was to understand the phone's role in backpackers' everyday- and travel performances, and to examine the perceived effects of traveling on phone use related behaviour and -attitudes post-trip.

The initial interviews were designed to document the informants' experiences with mediated and co-present sociation in their daily life while traveling, and to record their reported phone use behaviour and -attitudes prior to the trip. To start out, we asked about the informants' specific memories of their most recent dinner situation, and to describe the phone's role in it. Progressively, we enquired about general beliefs, motivations and values

regarding smartphone use during travel and back ‘home’. The interviews were conducted with eleven informants, lasting between 22 minutes and one hour, 39 minutes. Most of the interviews took place at youth dormitories. One was recorded at a restaurant, and one at an airport.

The second part of the research took place between three weeks and two months after the informants had returned ‘home.’ The follow-up interviews focused on the informants’ phone use and -attitudes after the trip. The informants’ descriptions of their mediated relations and phone interactions in co-present situations were supported by them reviewing their recent interactions on their preferred phone-based communication platform. Due to practical reasons and time constraints, the post-trip interviews were done only with five out of the eleven informants. These lasted between 21 minutes and one hour, six minutes.

The informants included seven women and four men in ages between 19 - 34 years. The sample composed of individuals from Denmark (3), Holland (2), Germany (2), Scotland (2), England (1) and South Africa (1) and about half were below the age of 22. All of the eleven informants participating in this study were recruited at youth dormitories.

Staying offline while traveling For our informants, similar to the findings in earlier research, the main purpose of the backpacking trip was to get a contrast to their everyday life and to meet new people. Several informants described that they went on the trip to get to know themselves better and find out what life had to offer, and most of them quit their jobs to travel. Mr. B’s (34, South Africa) comment sums up these informants’ expectations: *‘This journey for me is a soul searching one to firstly discover who I am and what I want from life, and also I think a little bit of what life wants to give me.’* Some even expressed feelings bordering on the ‘sacred’ in relation to their travel experiences. Mr. L (21, Germany) describes his encounter at a sunset:

‘Then the sun was busy going down and I was standing at the beach, and there was a – the sun was completely aligned with me; like it was straight ahead and there was a boat on the same line. [...] Then the two joggers; one coming from this direction, the other one from this direction, and they crossed right on my shadow with that line with the sun. That was like oh so – sometimes you just I don’t know – that moment you just ask yourself “Does it mean something, or could it mean something?”’

In the view of the informants, getting away from everyday life also means getting away from smartphones and the Internet. *‘You had this reduction, [...]and I think that’s the nice thing about it.’* (Mr. L, 21, Germany). Close to all informants, in various ways, expressed an ideal that backpacking is meant to be primarily an offline experience, prioritising physical experiences and being in the moment. According to Mr. L, being online takes one

away from the experience travelers go to get:

'The only thing you need the internet for is having contact with the place where you are not at the moment. [...] you don't need that, what do you need that for? Like why should you go to Bali if you want to stay in contact. [...] I think it's just about being there. (Mr. L, 21, Germany)

Similarly, Ms. W (21, Denmark) found that physical experiences are more important than being online while traveling:

'It's like you are more aware of everything. You know, you're just not staring at the phone all the time. [...] you talk about what to do and just watch out the window. And do stuff instead of just watching the phone.'

Ms. HH (20, Denmark) described how using the paper map made her feel like she noticed more things around her. *'I think you see a lot more of the city when you're not looking down [on the phone]'*. She reported a part of this positive experience having to do with it being easier to 'get lost' without a GPS: *'Sometimes we get lost and find amazing places and other times we just keep on trekking...'*

For several of the informants, the desire to stay offline is connected with a general concern that people's co-present social skills are decreasing. They comment that online communication platforms, especially dating sites, remove the confidence needed to meet people.

'It's problematic because it's taken the social aspect of going out and meeting somebody and the confidence that you need to be able to do that, away from. Technology becomes a barrier where you don't have to show your true self.' (Mr. B, 34, South Africa).

As a result, they experience individuals becoming less socially skilled and feeling more awkward and insecure when meeting people in the physical world. In the backpacking context, however, all of the informants describe it being very easy to meet people. *'I could go to two people, sitting at a table and say "hello, how are you doing, can I join you?" They will never tell me "No", never.'* (Ms. K, 24, Holland). Most of them account this on the phone not being 'in the way', indicating that they perceive the phone being to blame for people's decreasing social skills.

'It will make it more easy if people were not looking at the phone, because if people are looking at the phone and have music in their ear, I think that I will feel that I'm interrupting something if I ask the person something. Because it looks like they don't want to speak to anybody.'  
(Ms. H, 29, Denmark).

Excited about the ease of meeting new people while traveling, Ms. S (25, Holland) expressed wanting to experience co-present sociation with strangers in her home environment without the phone 'in the way': 'I want to do more by myself like having a coffee somewhere and didn't sit on my phone the whole time but just sitting there and maybe talk to a stranger.' (Ms. S, 25, Holland).

Going beyond a concern about social etiquette, several informants were worried that other people and themselves may be developing smartphone dependency. *'I think some people are a bit too dependent on it. Like they are a bit addicted to it.'* (Ms. W, 21, Denmark). Some described feeling like travel has provided them a sense of control of what they thought was an internet addiction. *'It's just nice to be your own master of "I don't need it right now".'* (Ms. HH, 20, Denmark). Several informants reported that spending an extended period with limited connectivity during travel has caused them to want to decrease their smartphone use after they return home because they see a lot of their phone use being a waste of time.

'Because of the addictive nature of these devices. [...] Time just goes away [...] – that's what bugs me the most about using the devices, because when you think you're going to spend five minutes looking for something, it takes much longer than it's supposed to.' (Mr. B, 34, South Africa).

Ms. H (29, Denmark) explained that she wants to work on active choices to use social media as she sees it as a waste of time: *'I think that's a waste of time and you fill your mind with a lot of weird things, so I wanna work on active choices to use Facebook and Instagram.'* The need to go online while traveling In spite of expressing ideals for having an authentic, offline backpacking experience, all of our informants reported connecting every day, using the phone as their primary internet-accessing device. Since almost none of the informants reported having mobile data connection at the time of the interview, they needed access to WiFi to go online. Several of them commented on having to spend a considerable amount of time every day to find a restaurant with good WiFi. In this, rather than being a space for co-present sociation (Oldenburg 1989), during travel a restaurant becomes a space for mediated sociation.

When in WiFi zones, the backpackers report spending time online to calm the worried parents, make travel arrangements, and cure their travel-time loneliness. Some of the informants report trying to decrease the time spent online by minimizing one-to-one mediated interactions and posting semi-public updates on their Facebook or Instagram pages instead. Mr. B (34, South Africa) explained how social media can help with travel-time loneliness as it does not change:

'I think in meeting so many people in the last couple of weeks and being sort of a nomad for these three weeks so far, there can be a sense of loneliness and you sort of turn to the technology to find comfort or companionship or familiarity because Facebook doesn't change based on the country that you are in. You'll still see the same friends that you used to see before, posting things up.'

While the informants indicated being bothered by having to reply to messages, their continuous behaviour of semi-public broadcasting indicates that they have a significant need to feel included in the life back home.

Despite reporting an ideal for being offline while traveling, the informants indicated that travel gives them a special legitimacy for self-exposure, which they reported not having back 'home.' Several of the informants emphasise that in their everyday life, Facebook is not for posting things, but rather for watching others. *'I've never been big on posting. I'm not that good at putting myself out there. So I'm more like, watching what other people do.'* (Ms. W, 21, Denmark). However, while traveling, most of the informants regularly post updates and photos on Facebook and Instagram. Ms. S (25, Holland), who reported not using Facebook in her everyday life revealed that while traveling, she posted regular updates to all of her friends: *'I use Facebook so my neighbor can see it and a teacher from high school and also I know that they like to see what I'm doing now in my life.'* They explain this by wanting to reduce the time and effort they put into maintaining their relations back home.

After the trip: Less use, increased tolerance for others' use How has the backpacking experience affected our informants attitudes towards phone use, after they come home? Our informants report somewhat contradictory experiences. Most of the informants reported that the backpacker experience has led to a reduction in their phone use compared to their pre-trip use. Ms. H (29, Denmark) described feeling like she had become more lazy at answering messages:

'I think I'm very lazy with my phone now, it's just I had a text message from my friend yesterday she said "are you not looking at your snaps?", [...] "because I sent you a snap very, very long with big letters, capital letters, long time ago". There's so many...you have to check..'

Ms. K (24, Holland) described having a reduction in the amount of people she interacts with as she does not want to spend the entire day on her phone: *'I think it's annoying to keep in contact with everybody. I don't want to be on my phone all day, so..'* In reflecting on phone use as something problematic in their everyday lives, the informants reporting a reduction in their own use indicates them feeling that there has been a positive change in themselves, therefore their backpacking 'pilgrimage' has been a success.

On the other hand, while consciously reducing their own use, informants also report having become more tolerant towards other people's use of phones in their presence. When initially asked about their attitudes towards phone use in their everyday lives, several informants had described themselves as being very sensitive about co-present phone use. They also described having personal rules for interacting with the device or promoted strategies to be present in order to prevent the potential awkwardness caused by someone's phone use in a co-present situation. Some mentioned the 'phone stacking game', in which the first person to touch their phone receives a punishment, often having to buy the table a round. Additionally, several informants reported insisting on their friends to leave their phones in another room when meeting up at someone's home, or at least not have it on the table. Ms. H (29, Denmark) also mentioned that she would only have her phone on 'sound' when she expected someone to get in touch with her. Besides avoiding the potential awkwardness, the motivation for this behaviour is reported to be the wish to 'really' be together.

'Sometimes we have a rule that we put the phone down to be together so we don't sit with it all the time. [...] It's nice to just talk and not just sit with your phone... you can do that all the time when you are alone so.'  
(Ms. W, 21, Denmark).

However, in their post-trip interviews, several of these informants who earlier had described themselves as sensitive about co-present phone use reported that traveling had made them more relaxed about other people interacting with the phone in their presence. This development is reflected in a comment by Ms. W, a 21 old traveler from Denmark, who reported during the initial interview that she asks her friends to put their phone aside when they meet so they can really be together. She now said: *'it's okay, I think it's still a bit annoying if it's all the time.'* She explained this shift in opinion as taking others' behaviour less personally: *'[if] they want to text, [then] they want to text.'*

As Leysia Palen, Marilyn Salzman & Ed Youngs (2000) argue, personal mobile phone experience can increase one's tolerance for other users. This appears to be true for some of our informants, who attribute their increased co-present phone use tolerance to them having become more familiar with their smartphones. These informants had previously (before the trip) primarily used laptop computers for online communication, but traveling without a laptop forced them to rely solely on their phone. Ms. H (29, Denmark) describes her increased familiarity with her phone during the trip: *'Maybe I will use my phone more when I come home than before, because on this trip I really learned how to use my phone.'* The resulting increase in their use and familiarity with their phones may be part of the reason, why they report being more accepting of other people's phone use after their trip.

The informants' increased tolerance after the trip can also be understood through their experiences of co-present phone use in certain kinds of public spaces. As earlier research into social norms regulating phone use has shown, there is a strong norm against using one's phone in certain kinds of spaces and situations, restaurants being a typical example (Ling 1996). And before going on their trip, these informants would also find it unacceptable to use one's phone in this kind of situation. During travel, however, restaurants are sought out for their WiFi access, becoming spaces for mediated- rather than co-present sociation. Sometimes they even become de facto 'office spaces' for travelers using the Internet to organize their onwards travel and to manage their connections with friends and family back home. For these people, there is a different norm set for using the phones at restaurants during travel. Ms. K, a 24 years old traveler from Holland, explained that before going on her trip she used to be very bothered by people interacting with their phones when physically together with someone. However, having mobile internet connection herself while traveling, she professed an understanding for other people's tendencies to use their phone while at restaurants. She explained that since during travel it is often difficult to know, when will be the next time that there will be access to internet again, it is more legitimate to interact with the phone even when together with people. She describes:

'Most of the people don't have internet, so they use WiFi and if you're in a restaurant or in a hotel, it's a short time [...] you have WiFi, so they take out their mobile. [...] I feel annoyed but I also understand.'

Ms. K reported this increase in co-present phone use tolerance persisting after her trip. She described attributing the same kind of norm set to her colleagues interacting with phones during a dinner situation as she did for other backpackers while traveling: *'Still annoying. But it depends, if I'm with my colleagues and I don't see them much, yeah, I don't care. I understand. That's the same for people I travelled with.'*

For these informants, the necessity of exploiting the WiFi-networks of hostels and restaurants seem to trump the social norms usually associated with co-present phone use in these places.

## **Discussion**

The interviews with our informants reveal the smartphone to be a disturbing element in their attempts to achieve an authentic backpacking experience, causing a tension between their ideals for staying offline while travelling and the need to go online for practical and social reasons. While backpackers reflect that being online hinders them from performing the authentic backpacking experience, they make considerable efforts to connect daily. This reflects partly their everyday phone use affecting use while travelling, being accustomed to managing travel practicalities on their own online, and also their need to cure their travel-time loneliness through interacting on social media, where everything stays the same. Yet, much like pilgrimages there is a goal of achieving sacred inner experiences away from the mundane life. Backpackers seem to fill their travel experiences with a lot of meaning, supporting Urry & Larsen's (2011) argument that the perceived sacredness of objects is based on the tourist's anticipation for seeing something new or something different. With the authentic backpacking experience being depicted as an offline one, backpackers report and take pride in a reduction in their own post-trip phone use compared to the pre-trip levels. Through a perceived reduction in its use post-trip, the phone becomes an element in the backpackers' anticipated narrative of the travel experience having changed their life for the better.

However, while the smartphone is seen as a disturbing element in the authentic backpacking pilgrimage, backpackers report having become more relaxed about co-present phone use due to their increased familiarity with their own phones and unattaching specific norms from particular places. This can be interpreted as their increased skillset for co-present situations having contributed to that development. In modern social relations, where the phone is a part of a co-present social situation (Van Dijk 2012, Ling 2008, 2012), an increased skillset for co-present situations may essentially mean being better at not taking co-present phone use as personally.

The findings in this study reflect our informants' perceptions of changes in their own phone use and attitudes. The interview guide was carefully designed to avoid unduly affecting the informants' focus, starting with open questions relating to a specific social situation fresh in memory. All the same, it is impossible to rule out the possibility of a priming effect in the informants' answers as the interviews did center on their smartphone use, and may therefore have prompted them to connect their overall travel goals to their smartphone use. In future research, the role of the phone in the modern backpacking pilgrimage might be

further explored through observational studies, documenting phone use over time, collecting actual phone use data, and exploring documented behaviours in interviews.

## Conclusion

This study explored the modern connected backpackers' tensions in maintaining both their local and virtual sociabilities while enacting their contemporary backpacking experience. Our most important findings can be summarised as follows: (1) backpackers expect the trip to provide a contrast to their everyday life and attach strong ideals to their travel experiences, including ideals for avoiding smartphone use; (2) unable to stay offline completely, most of the backpackers adopt a compromise solution, staying offline most of the day but dedicating a certain amount of time every day to maintaining their online connections, often in public WiFi-enabled spaces such as restaurants and cafés; (3) while the backpackers report that the travelling experience has led to a reduction in their own post-trip phone use, they also report an increased tolerance towards other people's co-present smartphone use.

Overall, the findings reveal the smartphone to be seen as a disturbing element in the authentic backpacking experience, causing a tension between the modern backpackers' need to be online and the ideal of staying offline while travelling. At the same time, through a perceived reduction in its use post-trip, the phone becomes an element in the backpackers' anticipated narrative of the travel experience having changed their life for the better.

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# Happy #monthsary babe! Vernacular readings and practices of monthsaries among young couplings on social media

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## ABSTRACT

Romantic monthsaries, or monthly commemorations of the date on which a couple first got together, are increasingly practiced by young couples and archived on social media. As a form of visually oriented practice, monthsaries are fraught with vernacular readings, perceptions, and practices. This paper investigates the practice of monthsaries among ‘young couplings’, which I define as the experiences of young people’s partnering practices in their teenage years and/or their initial experience of early partnering regardless of the age of first coupling, in which young couples do not yet have any formal status, are unable to experience domestic living together, and have limited opportunities to be alone and intimate. In the absence of any scholarly precedence and adopting a Grounded Theory approach, this paper is an exploratory study that approaches monthsaries through internet folk knowledge, forum threads and visual displays of monthsaries on Instagram.

## KEYWORDS

Monthsary, Coupling, Instagram, Romantic relationships, Courtship rituals, Dating, Social Media

Romantic monthsaries, or monthly commemorations of the date on which a couple first got together, are increasingly practiced by young couples and archived on social media. The ‘monthsary’ tag is growing by the day on the visually oriented platform Instagram, with over 146,599 posts as of July 2016, in which young couples are publicly archiving mini-milestones in their relationship. Variants of the hashtag – monthaversary (17,141), monthiversary (16,519), monthsaries (757), monthaversery (445), monthsery (342), monthary (318), moniversary (289), and monthsaversary (142) – bring the total number of ‘monthsary’ posts to over 182,000 as of July 2016. Specifically, I look at ‘young coupling’, which I define as the experiences of young people’s partnering practices in their teenage years and/or their initial experience of early partnering regardless of the age of first coupling, in which young couples do not yet have any formal status, are unable to experience domestic living together, and have limited opportunities to be alone and intimate. I use the term ‘coupling’ with reference to the process of pairing, as two individuals consciously and conscientiously demarcate themselves as a romantic unit and

curate displays of their relationship through monthsary practices as an emergent form of digital communication on social media. This includes Public Displays of Affection (PDA) on social media, in which couples communicate their love for each other, expressing longing, or making in-jokes to signpost their exclusivity (Mod 2010: 69). In a distinct but similar vein, Jackson et al. (2011: 630) have defined ‘dating’ as “a form of courtship [that] encompasses social activities between two people assessing the possibility of deepening the relationship over time”. Where ‘dating’ is focused on the courtship aspect of the relationship, ‘coupling’ is interested in the overall progression wherein two individuals come to define themselves as a twosome in domestic and public spaces.

Monthsaries are one form of rituals that are crucial as “dynamic social (re)enactments by which relational partners co-create the identity of a relationship, a shared history, and a pattern of everyday, shared interactions” (Bruess & Pearson 1997: 28). A recurring practice of monthsaries as a dating ritual is “essential to healthy interpersonal relationships” Pearson et al. (2011: 360, drawing on Baxter 1987, Campbell & Ponzetti 2007, Oring 1984) if practiced at an appropriate intensity. Monthsaries can also mark the progression of a coupling, which “may take the form of loosely defined stages marked not by deliberate decisions, but by various actions taken by a couple” (Jackson et al. 2011: 630, drawing on Manning & Smock 2005).

In the absence of any scholarly precedence, albeit drawing on related psychology research on couples’ self-presentation on Facebook, this anthropological study is rooted in the practices of Grounded Theory (Glaser 1978) and adopts a three-prong approach. In the first part, I explore vernacular meanings of monthsaries through internet folk knowledge. Drawing on user-generated word banks such as the Merriam-Webster online dictionary and Urban Dictionary, I disentangle collective definitions of the ‘monthsary’ and its variant neologisms. In the second part, I survey local perceptions of practices of monthsaries among Singaporean couples. Investigating an early forum thread hosted on a Singapore-based internet forum, sgclub.com, in which internet users in Singapore contextualize local readings of the ‘monthsary’, I analyse how monthsaries are discussed and enacted in the Singapore context. In the third part, I survey the visual displays of monthsaries through dating scripts generated by young microcelebrity (Senft 2008) couples in Singapore. Focusing on Instagram as one of the fastest growing visual social media apps in Singapore (Aw Yeong 2013), I thematically code social scripts portrayed by three young, prolific Singaporean microcelebrity couples, in which monthsaries are archived as couple-branding practices, constituted as events, and framed as relationship milestones. Wherever applicable, pseudonyms are used.

### **Internet vernacular meanings of the monthsary**

Based on a Google search of user-generated, crowd-source online databases cataloguing vernacular definitions of emergent neologisms and slang, the Merriam-Webster online dictionary and Urban Dictionary present the highest number of variants on the term, ‘monthsary’. From the main landing pages in both online dictionaries defining

‘monthsary’, I followed related links prompted by the website or examples listed by other users to track variant spellings. With the earliest contributions dating back to August 2006, Merriam-Webster include the variants “monthary”, “monthaversary”, “monthaversery”, and “monthiversary”, while the earlier contributions on Urban Dictionary date back to November 2004 and include “monthsaversary” (undefined), “monthaversary”, “monthiversary”, “month aniversary” (undefined), “moniversary”, and “menthuversary”. In this paper, I treat these related neologisms as the collective ‘monthsary’ and assess their vernacular definitions equally, given that this term has the highest circulation and greatest prominence on both databases and on Instagram.

Broadly speaking, monthsaries are monthly commemorations of an event on the date on which it first occurred, and are most commonly practiced by couples marking small milestones of their dating relationship. Merriam-Webster (2015) defines ‘monthsary’ as “Monthly celebration especially in love relationships”, and Urban Dictionary (2015a) similar defines it as the time in which “a couple has been together for a month. However, crowd-sourced definitions present more distinct folk definitions as a form of oral tradition (Ong 1982) and knowledge of the monthsary. After initial coding of all dictionary entries listed, I grouped similar user-generated definitions together. These groups underwent axial coding before I developed categories through which monthsaries are defined: mini-milestones, cynical brevity, commitment affirmation, exceptional gifting, gendered expectancies, and celebratory excess. In the following sections, I detail each of these themes explicated from key examples.

### *Mini-milestones*

Monthsaries are mini-milestones for relationships in their very early stages, most often those that are less than a year old. Some internet users distinguish only their first monthsary as an exceptional occasion, such as in Merriam-Webster’s (2015) definition as “the date marking when something, such as a relationship... has lasted a month”. However, others account for every month leading up to their first relationship anniversary as a significant cumulative achievement, such as the “celebration of an event that occurs on the same date every month prior to one year” (Merriam-Webster 2015) and “a word cute couples use to celebrate each month until their anniversary” (Urban Dictionary 2015b). The description “cute couples” seems to suggest that an audience perceives a pair that celebrates monthsaries as being ideal, precious, or more loving, echoing research by Coyne et al. (2011: 157) on media use in romantic relationships that “higher relationship satisfaction predicted more media use to express affection”. This also reflects a similar study by Saslow et al. (2012: 411) on Facebook images that “individuals who posted dyadic profile pictures on Facebook reported feeling more satisfied with their relationships and close[r] to their partners”.

### *Cynical brevity*

Monthsaries are also noted for their cynical brevity, under the insinuation that young coupling is precarious due to a lack of loyalty and commitment. One definition in Urban

Dictionary (2015a) postulates that monthsaries are “used rather than anniversary coz couples are playas and bitches enough to be together for only a meagre amount of time”, wherein “playas” and “bitches” are slang words popularized by hip-hop culture referring to people who are unable to commit long-term to a monogamous partner, but who instead engage in a series of short-term relationships. Elsewhere (Urban Dictionary 2015d), monthsaries are evaluated as monthly celebrations for couples who “have not been together long enough to celebrate a real anniversary”, suggesting that most young couples will not reach anniversaries yet wish to partake in the ‘grownup’ experience of a milestone celebration. This cynicism contrasts research on Facebook use during romantic relationships that argues that public assurances of a relationship – such as “Facebook official” status updates – are “one of the primary means” through which “uncertainty” about the “initial stages of relationship formation” is reduced (Fox et al. 2013: 771). Rather, most vernacular readings of monthsaries note them as “usually celebrated by younger couples who are grateful their relationship has even survived a month” (Urban Dictionary 2015c), reinforcing the normative brevity and precarity of young relationships.

### *Commitment affirmation*

On a brighter note, monthsaries are positively acknowledged as events in which couples can affirm their commitment towards each other. As a “monthly anniversary” (Urban Dictionary 2015e), monthsaries are “a measure of commitment between anniversaries” (Merriam-Webster 2015), especially among “newbie relationships” (Merriam-Webster 2015). Monthsaries memorialize the start of a couple’s relationship as a “special event” to be “celebrated” (Merriam-Webster 2015). They also acknowledge the mutuality of the relationship as a social contract marked by one party inviting another into a coupling (Urban Dictionary 2015c), thus favouring the “official” (Urban Dictionary 2015c) start date of the coupling over other ambiguous and fraught beginnings. Similar to that of the mini-milestone discussed earlier, the commitment affirmation in monthsary celebrations also extends to a cumulative achievement in sustaining the couple as a unit across “consecutive month(s)” (Urban Dictionary 2015b). Although social media platforms are usually utilized by couples to communicate inwardly with each other (Rueda et al. 2015: 429), in this instance, couples seem to display monthsaries on the internet as a way to outwardly display their affection. This echoes Fox & Warber’s (2013: 3) research on romantic relationship development on Facebook in which “Facebook official” status updates reflected a couple’s “commitment, intensity, and social response” to each other. As such, monthsaries are one form of PDA that heighten a sense of “possession and territory”, and the constant re-affirmation of commitment is used to “configure a couple’s superiority” (Mod 2010: 61).

### *Exceptional gifting*

Monthsaries tend to serve as occasions at which gifting becomes an expected ritual with exceptional gifts (Bailey 1989, Jackson et al. 2011: 634). Early anthropological research by Levi-Strauss (1969) and Malinowski (1922) note that the gestural exchange of gifts functions to develop and maintain a social relationship. While the monthsary itself may

serve as a communicative gift in which couples publicly display their union and reinforce their commitment to each other, a material gift or shared recreational experience seems crucial to mark the mini-milestone. Monthsaries may be mobilized to account for guilty pleasures such as celebrations with “cake” (Urban Dictionary 2015b). However, they are not merely occasions at which couples have “an excuse” to purchase gifts for a loved one (Urban Dictionary 2015b). While gifting is expected during monthsaries, the value of the gift – whether gauged by monetary value, personal effort, social symbolism, or otherwise – has to be exceptional and more commemorative than the routine and mundane gifting in the daily repertoire of a courtship. Thus while the act of gifting during monthsaries is expected, the value of the action has to be exceptional, wherein couples invest in more distinctive activities or more lavish expenditures (Urban Dictionary 2015b). Such monthsary gifting is expected to be “reciprocal” (Urban Dictionary 2015c) in which both partners demonstrate equal effort or bring a gift of equal value, rather than “altruistic” (Gouldner 1960) in which partners gift sacrificially without anticipation or expectation of any returns.

### *Gendered expectancies*

In other instances, the monthsary practices of exceptional gifting and coupling commemorations may be non-reciprocal; this is not necessarily altruistic (Gouldner 1960) but rather, a failure to reciprocate an expected exchange. Vernacular accounts express that monthsaries are disproportionately an expectancy harboured by the woman – echoing accounts by Areni et al. 1998 and Greer & Buss 1994 in their studies of gifting practices between couples – in normatively heterosexual relationships. Jackson et al. (2011: 634) similarly note that “women view themselves as recipients of gifts rather than as gift givers”. In one account of how monthsaries play out, a user on Urban Dictionary (2015d) catalogues an exchange as such:

[woman]: *Happy 3 month moniversary, Joe! Only nine more months until our one year anniversary*

[man]: *Uh, gee, thanks. Was I supposed to get you a card or something?*

In this example, the unequal importance placed on the commemoration of monthsaries is evident in the non-reciprocal tone of excitement between the woman and the man. This is underscored by the woman’s apparent enthusiasm and vivacious count down to their “one year anniversary”, that was quenched by the man’s understated and blasé response, “Uh, gee, thanks.” Furthermore, he displays his unawareness of monthsary etiquette by asking if he was “supposed to get [her] a card or something”, thus signposting a budding cognizance of unspoken rules of dating in their coupling. Jackson et al. (2011: 632), drawing on Bailey (1989), identify gifting practices in traditional dating rituals as “the economic exploitation of men”. Such gendered expectations of exceptional gifting are reiterated in another example sentence (Urban Dictionary 2015b), in which a presumably

female partner laments: “Ted, where the HELL IS MY MONTHIVERSARY PRESENT, you cheap bastard??”

Additionally, the responsibility of remembering and thus actively commemorating monthsaries seems to be an expectation female partners have of male partners, as evidenced in vernacular definitions such as “The day the beotch never lets you forget” (Urban Dictionary 2015b), and “Something that she might bitch at you for forgetting.” (Urban Dictionary 2015b). In each of these, the subtext is that it is typically the male partners who will fail to reciprocate expectancies of monthsaries, much to the displeasure and anger from female partners. This demonstrates that monthsaries enact a normative dating script in which the quality of dates are evaluated. Curiously, none of the dictionary entries feature overtly homosexual references or other relationship structures such as polygamy, supporting the notion that monthsaries are a highly gendered and heteronormative practice.

### *Celebratory excess*

Lastly, monthsaries are marked by a sense of celebratory excess, in that the scale of commemoration practices exceeds the actual event being memorialized. The derision towards monthsaries is expressed in definitions such as “A ritual annoying to some” (Urban Dictionary 2015d) and “Ani=Year, Month=Month therefore im stupid and came up with this word” (Urban Dictionary 2015b). Others note that monthsaries are an unnecessary extravagance wherein “Another walk of life [is] celebrated by a useless holiday” (Urban Dictionary 2015b).

Most notably, the disdain towards monthsaries seems rooted in a dislike for PDA in which couples “express undying love” (Urban Dictionary 2015b), show “mindless infatuation” (Urban Dictionary 2015b), or are “overzealous about a new relationship” (Urban Dictionary 2015b). In his work on the impact of Facebook rituals on romantic relationships, Mod (2010) asserts that couples post PDA to solicit the public into being “a witness to their love affair” (2010: 69-70), which bystanders perceive as irritating, unnatural, and “falsif[ying]” a relationship (2010: 69). In other words, the self-celebratory and self-branding act of carefully archiving and displaying monthsaries on social media can be read as competition between couples or the need for public affirmation of a coupling, such as in one user’s definition of monthsaries as “A contest to see how many more months you can stand one another than another couple” (Urban Dictionary 2015b).

### **Readings of the monthsary in Singapore**

Turning to a Singaporean example to contextualize local readings of monthsaries, I analyse one of the earliest comment thread on monthsaries, hosted on a popular public forum, sgclub.com. This forum was chosen because it brands itself as a portal for “relationships, self-improvement, love and dating” (sgclub.com 2015b), is among the oldest internet forums in Singapore having debut in 2004 (sgclub.com 2015b), and

contains a thread with a highly focused discussion on monthsaries. The website includes other categories such as “Lifestyle Events”, “Arts & Culture”, “Movies”, “Humour”, “Educational”, and “Lifestyle”, and claims to be “one of the top 10 sites in Singapore for online communities” with an average of 730,000 unique visitors monthly accumulating approximately 3.5 million pageviews (sgclub.com 2015b). Although no information on its reader demographics is currently made public, the website claims that 70% of its traffic is from search engines (sgclub.com 2015b).

On the forum thread titled “Monthsary”, users in Singapore shared their thoughts on couples who celebrate monthsaries. Comments archived were dated between March and May 2012, and can be read as a snapshot of how monthsaries were understood among a small group of local users. 25 responses were offered to this initial post:

*One my colleagues couldn't hide her disappointment. Apparently, her boyfriend forgot that today is their monthsary. I don't know how long they have been together. I have nothing against couples who 'celebrate' their monthsary but personally I don't think I will give such importance to that particular date every month. What are your thoughts on this?*  
(sgclub.com 2015a)

Upon axial coding, each of these 25 responses correspond to my earlier taxonomy of monthsaries derived from my thematic analysis of dictionary entries as follows: Mini-milestones (6), Cynical brevity (2), Commitment affirmation (3), Exceptional gifting (2), Gendered expectancies (4), Celebratory excess (8). Unlike the earlier section in which I relied on user-generated dictionary entries to investigate folk definitions of monthsaries, in this section, I specify how a group of Singapore users perceive and practice monthsaries.

*Mini-milestones are only significant to early couplings, first couplings, or at memorable intervals*

For some forum commentators, monthsaries are commemorated as milestones in the early stages of a coupling, after which couples celebrate anniversaries instead. One user shared that she used to be “quite concerned” over monthsaries, but felt it lost importance as her relationship progressed. Another user shared that she and her boyfriend actively celebrated monthsaries for the first six months, but after that found there was “no point” in such frequent celebrations. In place of monthsary date nights or outings, they now send each other text messages wishing each other “happy monthsary”. Monthsaries thus seem to be of more importance when early couplings are attempting to construct a “shared understanding of experiences, symbolize intimacy, and create a shared sense of the relationship (Pearson et al. 2011: 360, Oring 1984).

For two other users, monthsaries are significant in their first relationships but not so much in subsequent ones. One user in particular shared that he “didn’t have any problem” with celebrating monthsaries in his first relationship because he “thought every couple in the

world celebrate[d] monthsaries”. With his inexperience and in the absence of other dating scripts, he admitted that he adhered to monthsaries assuming it was the norm. He later revealed that in his following relationships he only celebrated anniversaries.

Two other users specify that monthsaries are acceptable during numerically significant intervals such as when “the number is interesting” as in the case of a “100<sup>th</sup>” monthsary. Despite being a multi-cultural society comprising four major ethnic groups, Singaporean Chinese make up the majority of the local population (YourSingapore 1015). In Chinese cultural practice, some numbers deemed auspicious when their homonyms are words with positive meanings (Ang 1997). For instance, the number 7 is valued because the mandarin *pinyin* “Qī” represents togetherness. 7<sup>th</sup> and 77<sup>th</sup> monthsaries may thus be significant, as well as other numerical permutations such as 17<sup>th</sup> monthsaries, in which the mandarin *pinyin* “YīQī” similar represents warm unions. Thus, these selective monthsaries become “homages” to what couples “regard as sacred” (Baxter & Braithwaite 2006: 262).

For these Singaporean users, monthsaries become “governed by a set of rules” (Jackson et al. 2011: 631, drawing on drawing on Cate & Llyod 1992, Knox & Wilson 1981, Waller 1937) between the couple, be it a milestone monthsary after which couples should progress to only celebrating anniversaries, reliance on an assumed dating script, or the selective celebration of exceptional monthsaries.

#### *Cynical brevity is inauspicious and pre-empts precarity*

One Singaporean user noted that monthsaries are “sad thing[s]” as they imply that the coupling is precarious, or that the couple “wouldn’t stay together long enough to survive anniversaries”. Another user shared that she and her boyfriend used to place “a HUGE importance” on their monthsaries for the first two years since it “reminded” them of how they first met. However, they later “decided to drop the whole thing” because they felt “placing a date/timeline” on their relationship seemed to imply an ultimatum.

#### *Commitment affirmation changes in form as couplings progress*

Three users acknowledged that while monthsaries were important milestones to affirm their commitment to their partners, their practices have evolved as their relationship progressed. One male user shared that he used to “buy [his girlfriend] a flower” every monthsary date night. However, overtime their work schedules impeded regular meet-ups and anniversaries have taken over as their primary commemorative event. Another male user said that while him and his girlfriend “don’t really celebrate and keep track of every month”, they organize their schedules to “at least” be able to meet in person on their monthsary to spend time together. The third user admits that while she had her boyfriend “sort of celebrate” their monthsaries with a “nice dinner”, their birthdays, anniversary, and the date on which they first met each other were more “important” and “must [be] celebrate[d]” as “more meaningful” than their monthsary. These accounts of malleable practices echo Jackson et al.’s (2011: 630-631) review of dating literature in which “flexible yet normative ‘scripts’” are a form of “multilevel guides for behaviour”.

### *Exceptional gifting is unnecessary expenditure*

Two users, both male, identified the gifting practices in monthsaries as unnecessary expenditures. The first male user called it “a waste of money and time”, and asked fellow forum users “1 year later being together see you still want monthsary anot”. By this, he implies that monthsaries are an effortful endeavour, and suggests that couples are unlikely to continue celebrating them after their first anniversary. In support of this sentiment and alluding to the excessive expenditure monthsaries entail, a second male user jokes that he misread the title of the thread as “Monthly salary”. In expression of how incredulous he feels towards monthsaries, he admitted that this was his “first time hear[ing] of this terminology”, and included the emoticon (“graphological realizations of facial expressions” using keyboard characters; See Zappavigna 2012: 71) “o.o” to underscore his surprise.

### *Gendered expectancies are a male burden*

Although male users shared some of the earlier positive accounts of monthsaries, three additional male users highlighted the gendered expectancies of monthsaries as a male burden. One user brushed off monthsaries as “boliao”, a Hokkien-Singlish (a creole of Singaporean English; See Forbes 1993) vernacular translated from the Mandarin “无聊”, to mean boredom (adjective) or a silly act (noun). In response to earlier accounts of boyfriends who engaged in monthsaries, he sympathizes with the comment “poor bf” [boyfriend]. A second user similar responded with “how can her bf take it?”, in relation to earlier accounts of girlfriends expecting increasing frequent surprises to commemorate monthsaries and their relationship. A third user, as if acquainted with a personal bad experience, advised other men to “give and take” by accommodating their partners who wish to celebrate monthsaries. He said to “let it be might as well” to prevent “both face black black”, a Mandarin-Singlish vernacular translated from the Mandarin “脸黑黑”, to mean to be in a foul mood.

A female user later remarked that while she and her husband used to celebrate monthsaries, it was only because he could “accept” the practice for her. Her husband now prefers to celebrate only anniversaries as they are “much [more] special” than monthsaries, and she has decided to go along with him. In response to the post that started the thread, she suggests the original poster tells their colleague “dont be sad” as “some guys dun bother abt the monthsary becos for them is not a special date/day but jus any other normal day”. She adds that male partners “will have a hard time rmbing all the special date[s]” and suggests that the woman consults their partner on whether monthsaries are a labour they “can accept [or not]”.

### *Celebratory excess loses meaning from saturation fatigue*

A majority of the thread responses suggest that celebratory excesses cause monthsaries to lose meaning due to saturation fatigue. Monthsaries were deemed too “small” of a “thing” to “worry” about especially since its recurrence causes its significance to erode over time. One user felt monthsaries were an “overkill”, and another candidly painted a slipper slope scenario of monthsaries eventually becoming “weeksar[ies]”. Another male user alluded to fatigue from the repetition of monthsaries with a blunt exclamation: “Monthsary? What the fudge?! I will kill myself if I had to go through every month celebrating the day we got together”.

Pearson et al. (2011: 361) note that rituals are “routine behaviors with special associated symbolic meaning for the couple”. However, amidst saturation fatigue from the reoccurring obligations of monthsaries, rituals become devoid of “symbolic meaning” and are watered down into mere “routines” (Pearson et al. 2011: 361). Other users opined that monthsaries add to the chore of having “too many special days to celebrate”, and demarcated “birthdays” and “anniversaries” as appropriate celebratory milestones. In recognition of the need to reaffirm and celebrate a coupling, users offered that anniversaries were “more than enough”, “more meaningful”, and a “big occasion” that warranted “meaningful” investment.

### **Visual displays of the monthsary**

Having explored how internet folk knowledge discursively constructed the monthsary, and how a group of internet users in Singapore dissected local perceptions and practices of the monthsary, this last section turns to three short case studies of couples who visually enact monthsaries.

The couples were selected from a larger subset of informants in a project investigating public domesticity (Abidin 2015a), in which I adopt personal interviews, content analysis of social media posts, and participant observation in private homes and special occasions such as weddings. In particular, I study how ordinary couples and microcelebrity couples in Singapore negotiate public curation and branding of their relationship, particular hardship such as long distance dating and inter-cultural compatibility, milestones towards marriage such as proposals and engagement shoots, and homemaking and domestic life.

In this paper, each couple is a microcelebrity pair who consistently catalogued their relationship on Instagram for at least three years, and actively curate and publicise the visual displays of their monthsaries. In all instances, the female partner is a microcelebrity Influencer for whom displays of the personal, private, and intimate form the mainstay of social media content in the ‘lifestyle’ genre to engage with followers and promote advertorials (Abidin 2014). While both female and male partners had public Instagram accounts on which they publicized their monthsary escapades, the female partners had significantly larger followings (between 30,000 and 184,000), while the male partners had smaller followings (between 150 and 24,000) usually comprising users who also followed their female partners on Instagram. Although only one of the three male partners

featured has himself become a microcelebrity Influencer, this trajectory is not uncommon among other microcelebrity couples in Singapore in which female Influencers groom their male partners into microcelebrity. Thus, while the Instagram accounts of male partners are (initially) more oriented towards personal friends, the accounts of female partners are (intentionally) directed at large unknown audiences who periodically demonstrate envy of and aspirational towards the Influencer.

Consequently, these microcelebrity couples are unlike ordinary couples investigated in psychology studies on Facebook, in which partners are more likely to “demonstrate similarity on technology behaviors and preferences (Papp et al. 2012: 88), to upload “dyadic profile pictures” as an indication that they were more satisfied with their relationship (Saslow et al. 2012: 411), or to use official status updates to introduce more certainty into a new relationship (Fox et al. 2013: 771). As opposed to user-generated dictionary entries and forum discussions by ordinary users above, the content these couples post about their monthsaries are more likely to include conspicuous consumption as they brand themselves or incorporate sponsorship into their self-presentation. In other words, these microcelebrity couples present exaggerated PDAs that “present their relationship in its most idealized form” to “affir[m] superiority” and to “sell the product of a loving authentic relationship” (Mod 2010: 70); they serve as extreme examples in which the materialism and visibility of monthsary practices are more pronounced and intentional than ordinary couples.

Instagram was selected as the primary medium for this exploratory study given its prominence among users in Singapore (Abidin 2014, Aw Yeong 2013), and among informants in my larger project on social media branding (Abidin 2014, Abidin 2015b). Although all three couples now in their twenties, they each began dating in their teenage years and were among each others’ first few partners, thus constituting what I earlier define as “young coupling”. Kelly & Tony, Nicole & Kevin, and Maggie & Nathan each curate a couple hashtag on Instagram that archives images portraying their relationship in action, as an act of couple-branding (Abidin 2015c). In the interest of maintaining the couples’ pseudonymity, hashtags and images will be omitted from this paper and replaced with summaries from fieldnotes of thick description (Geertz 1973).

### *Kelly & Tony*

Kelly & Tony are in their mid-twenties and have been dating for over eight years. They met in secondary school and are each other’s first romantic partners – neither had ever dated anyone else prior to their relationship. In Instagram images of their monthsaries, more generic hashtags such as “monthsary” and “monthsary celebration” are used in addition to their couple hashtag. Kelly & Tony also hashtag numerically significant or auspicious monthsaries such as their 70th, 77th, 80th, 88th, and 90th monthsaries. On these particularly significant monthsaries, the couple tended to go for short trips in the South East Asian region including Bangkok, Bali, and Taipei. Instagram images of their monthsaries abroad featured selfies of the couple at various landmarks, and in transient

but intimate rooming situations such as rose petals on a queen-sized bed and bubble baths, since the couple do not live together – in Singapore, the norm is for young people to live in their parental home until marriage to a fellow Singaporean qualifies them to purchase government flats from the Housing Development Board – and presumably have few opportunities to be alone and intimate.

The composition and caption of their monthsary posts had two notable characteristics: The first characteristic was the renarrativization of history and memory, with both Kelly & Tony often waxing nostalgia over “how young” they were when they first met, and how their dating practices have shifted – “haha we used to make so much effort for monthsaries but now we are lazy like shit”. However, it is not immediately clear that the couple’s efforts at maintaining monthsaries have dwindled given the evidently effortful overseas celebration plans they regularly hold.

The second characteristic was the emphasis on peer affirmation, or a form of “peer-supervision” (Jackson et al. 2011: 631) with both parties recounting how their “old friends” have watched them “grow as a couple”, and how “all their close friends” could testify to how “crazy fun”, “solid”, or “long-lasting” their relationship was. These sentiments were usually accompanied by images of Kelly & Tony spending time with their fellow couple friends (usually on double- or triple-dates) at eateries or house parties.

### *Nicole & Kevin*

Nicole & Kevin are in their early-twenties and have been dating for over four years. They met in university and each dated three or four partners prior to this relationship – the ambivalence is noted as Nicole sometimes negotiates on her blog whether or not her past relationships during her younger teenage years were mere “puppy love” and considered “not serious” or “unofficial”. The couple have almost continuously commemorated over 50 monthsaries, with a handful of exceptions when they had brief breakups. In each Instagram monthsary post, they publicize details of their celebrations by hashtagging the venue of their celebrations and notable consumptions such as expensive wine, gourmet dining, and branded luxury gifts. On some monthsaries, Nicole & Kevin’s gifts to each other were personalized ‘his & her’ items bearing their names or animated illustrations in the couple’s likeness. Additionally, several of their monthsaries were commemorated through specially organized ‘couple’ photoshoots, in which Nicole & Kevin dressed up in sharp outfits at various venues (i.e. hotel staycations, night time city scenery, tourist destinations in Singapore) and posed for photographs as gifts to each other.

The composition and caption of their monthsary posts had two notable characteristics: The first characteristic was the hyper-visibility of their coupling for security, with both parties repeatedly affirming how they were unabashed about PDA – “people were staring at us like we were crazy, but we were in love so we didn’t care”. Nicole & Kevin also tended to emphasize that they were “unlike other couples” who did not invest in monthsaries as they did, and often implied that their practices affirmed a sense of

exclusivity (Dillow et al. 2014: 105, Rubin 1970) and superiority of their coupling over other couples.

The second characteristic was the continuous remaking and remarking of themselves as a pseudo-family unit separate from their families of origin. Despite the occasional Instagram image of Nicole & Kevin spending time with each other's family such as parents and siblings (and home countries – Singapore and the US), the couple constantly attempts to public mark and normalize their premarital coupling through monthsaries as rituals to signify the status of their relationship. These involved archiving “symbolic activities” during monthsaries to signify their “relationship status and expectations” (Jackson et al. 2011: 630, drawing on Greer & Buss 1994, Hendrick et al. 1988), such as their intermittent cohabitation in Singapore, and making exceptional the usually mundane domestic chores engaged in by married couples such as grocery shopping and sharing the laundry. Nicole & Kevin also tended to reiterated that they felt like “an old married couple”. Nicole & Kevin's monthsaries seem simultaneously extravagant and ordinary in that they toggle between luxurious celebrations and the humdrum of everyday life. However, both ends of the spectrum congruently display their desire to publicize, and indeed stabilize, the state of their coupling in the absence of any formal martial status.

### *Maggie & Nathan*

Maggie & Nathan are in their late-twenties and have been dating for over seven years. They met in vocational school and are each other's first romantic partners. On first look, their monthsaries seem indistinguishable from other Instagram images featuring the couple in mundane settings such as having dinner in one of their homes, or remembering a day of colour-coordinated outfits. The only hint of extravagance of any sort are the occasional hand bouquets that Maggie conscientiously photographs and archives on their hashtags, gifted to her by Nathan during numerically significant or auspicious monthsaries.

The composition and caption of their monthsary posts had two notable characteristics: The first characteristic was the simplicity of their monthsary celebrations, in which Nathan might give Maggie a lift to work, Maggie might spend her lunch break with Nathan, or both parties might meet up for a movie after work – “monthsaries don't have to be special if we love each other wholeheartedly everyday”. While the couple seemed to imply that their monthsary practices were no different than their everyday dating (i.e. “dressing up to go out to dinner, going to the movies or theatre, and giving or receiving gifts”; see Jackson et al. 2011: 632), their monthsary dates were regularly commemorated on Instagram with their couple hashtag, thus implying that Maggie & Nathan placed least some significance placed on the ritual of monthsaries.

The second characteristic was the future orientation of their monthsary posts, in which the couple projected milestones and their future lives together. These aspirational practices are not uncommon among both ordinary and microcelebrity couples who practice monthsaries. On some monthsaries, Maggie would lift (and credit) an image from

Pinterest as a snapshot of how her future coupling with Nathan might look like. This included wedding dresses, interior décor of homes, and honeymoon venues. In his captions, Nathan would post forward-looking sentiments in a similar vein such as “looking forward to many month monthsaries with you!” Maggie has also suggested that she would love for her wedding to take place on a monthsary, so that the date would be “extra significant” and “memorable” for them. Thus, rituals such as monthsaries become a mechanism for couples like Maggie & Nathan to display their coupling values in beliefs (Geertz 1973), which in this example, is focused on a future-oriented imagining of more significant relationship milestones to come, as opposed to the present-oriented, consumption-based celebrations undertaken by Kelly & Tony and Nicole & Kevin.

### **Happy #monthsary babe!**

Studies of young couples’ self-presentation of their romantic relationship on social media have largely been dominated by psychologists (Fox & Warber 2013; Fox & Warber 2014; Fox et al. 2013; Papp et al. 2012; Saslow et al. 2012) and social scientists (Mod 2010; Rueda et al. 2015) focusing on Facebook. While this paper is similarly interested in the new forms of communication afforded by the proliferation of digital media and self-branding on social media, it takes interest in the romantic ritual of monthsaries celebrated by young couplings. As a repeatedly constructed, mutually communicative process that is outward oriented as a Public Display of Affection, monthsaries symbolize mini-milestones, cynical brevity, commitment affirmation, exceptional gifting, gendered expectancies, and celebratory excess.

As romantic interpersonal relationships are being increasingly enacted and archived on social media and the internet (Fox & Warber 2014, Sprecher 2010), this paper turns to the short history of monthsaries through internet folklore and prolific microcelebrity couples to understand why and how these rituals are enacted, and the affirmation and backlash towards the practice. As intentional displays of an intimately private union in public physical and digital spaces, monthsaries are one form of public domesticity that couples conscientiously calibrate to communicate their self-identity and self-branding. Contextualized understandings via an early Singapore internet space reveal that monthsaries are 1) Mini-milestones are only significant to early couplings, first couplings, or at memorable intervals; 2) Cynical brevity is inauspicious and pre-empts precarity; 3) Commitment affirmation changes in form as couplings progress; 4) Exceptional gifting is unnecessary expenditure; 5) Gendered expectancies are a male burden; and 6) Celebratory excess loses meaning from saturation fatigue. Case studies of three Singaporean microcelebrity couples on Instagram were presented as exceptional and hyper-conspicuous enactments of monthsaries, in which couple self-identity and self-branding were taken to the extreme.

In the final section, I surveyed the visual displays of monthsaries through dating scripts generated on Instagram by three microcelebrity couples in Singapore. Kelly & Tony’s monthsaries focused on overseas travels, intimate rooming setups, and couple friendships.

They renarrativized the history and memory of their relationship, and emphasized a peer affirmation of their coupling. Nicole & Kevin's monthsaries focused on luxurious consumables, professional photoshoots, and publicity. They hyper-visualized their coupling for a sense of elevated security, and continuously remade and remarked themselves as a pseudo-family unit separate from their families of origin. Maggie & Nathan's monthsaries were embedded into the rhythm of everyday routines, and focused on the prospects of their lives together. They simplified their monthsary celebrations, and oriented posts to be possible projections of their future milestones.

Future studies may explore vernacular renderings of monthsaries in various localized contexts, compare courtship rituals between monthsaries and anniversaries, investigate the visual displays of monthsaries on various image-oriented social media such as Tumblr and Pinterest, analyse gendered enactments of monthsaries between male and female partners, and across heterosexual and homosexual partners.

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# Mediated Storytelling Practices and Productions: Archival Bodies of Affective Evidences

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## ABSTRACT

Through hands-on work collecting digital video oral histories for the Arizona Queer Archives, bodies and bodies of knowledge in ongoing affective states of simultaneous becoming and unbecoming can be observed and encountered. Both interviewing and storytelling techniques in select oral histories are considered here to stress the salient and affective processes of mediation and (un)becoming that unfold in front of and behind the camera as part of the production of digital archival stories and subsequent access to streaming technologies. In order to explore the details of archival production, the oral history interview is understood here as a space of *both* intimate *and* public storytelling—an affective assemblage. This paper introduces archives as affective multimodalities that work to tenderly hold and structure bodies, technologies, and stories especially as these come together and apart in states of (un)becoming.

## KEYWORDS

Archives, Bodies, Oral histories, Affect, Evidence

‘It may be that here in our provisional world of dualities and oppositional pairs: black/white, good/evil, male/female, conscious/unconscious, Heaven/Hell, predatory/prey, we compulsively act out the drama of our beginning, when what was whole, halved, and seeks again its wholeness’ (Winterson 1997, 6).

The digital video camera rests on its tripod. Legs spread as stable and sturdy surveillance. Wireless microphone receiver perches on top tracing the MHz transmitting sound—breathing and counting and more breathing. Three-CCD camera acquiring and absorbing what it points to. At this moment the world pivots around this one point. Do not call it gravity or even centrifugal force ( $F_c = mv^2/r$ , where  $F_c$  = centrifugal force,  $m$  = mass,  $v$  = speed, and  $r$  = radius). But do recognize that there is a force, a generative force of movement that pulls and pushes simultaneously. At the interstices of interviewer and interviewee, the coming together and coming apart produces and is produced by tensions, powers, and proximities. Intimate and public spaces are stitched together at this pivot. Two seemingly distinct gradations of intimacy that stand opposing but become an in-between space of mediated navigation that creates imbricating affectivities. Pushing. Pulling.

Through hands-on work collecting digital video oral histories for the Arizona Queer Archives, bodies and bodies of knowledge in ongoing affective states of (un)becoming—the simultaneous becoming and unbecoming—can be observed and encountered. Both interviewing and storytelling techniques in select oral histories are considered here to

stress the salient and affective processes of mediation and (un)becoming that unfold in front of and behind the camera as part of the production of digital archival stories as well as subsequent access to streaming technologies. In order to explore the details of archival production, the oral history interview is understood here as a space of *both* intimate *and* public storytelling—an affective assemblage in which the interviewer and interviewee come together and are moved in indeterminate ways. In this article, I first define the key terms and concepts that support my project to introduce archives as affective multimodalities that work to tenderly hold and structure bodies, technologies, and stories especially as these come together and apart in states of (un)becoming. I then consider both interviewing and storytelling techniques in oral history productions to stress the processes of negotiating and mediating histories, memories, contexts, and contemplations that unfold.

The digital video camera stands between interviewer and interviewee. The camera lens points one way. Interviewer sees interviewee through the viewfinder, a rectangular screen containing the human subject in a medium shot slightly left of center with the wall behind out of focus, but with the fuzzy family photos, that distinct painting the interviewer asked the interviewee about upon first entering the room, and the vase of flowers with reds, purples, and baby's breath. A montage of colors propping the human subject up in their seat with all eyes (one camera) on said subject. A distance behind and a distance between. A focal depth of field and a haptic depth of feeling. Bodily convergences and divergences as the interviewer pushes the red RECORD button.

'We are rolling,' the interviewer announces.

## Concepts & Terminologies

To support my argument that mediating storytelling techniques emerging from the oral history interview influence the archives as affective and (un)becoming bodies of evidence, I start with archives and bring together a number of key concepts with my specific focus on (un)becoming.

### *Archives*

Following Chicana feminist scholars Chela Sandoval<sup>1</sup> (2000, 10), Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Adela C. Licona<sup>2</sup> (2005, 11), I know the *archives* as both location and a practice. As location and practice, archives are a place—physical and virtual—where archival collections are organized, contained, preserved, and made accessible. Importantly, for my work as archivist collaborating with communities to collect multiple histories that

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<sup>1</sup> Utilizing *methodology of the oppressed* as a 'deregulating system' is important in this project to radically interrogate the archives because disciplinary boundaries, bodily boundaries, definitional certainties, along with regulatory concepts of time will be challenged and unsettled.

<sup>2</sup> Carrillo Rowe and Licona urge feminist scholars and activists to break free from static identity practices that have served as the unexamined foundation of the feminist alliance base. As I posit, utilizing entrenched traditional archival practices--appraisal and description--without critical interrogation, risks reproducing the same exclusions that archivists seek to remedy by focusing on inclusion in collection policies and strategies.

challenge dominant narratives, my consideration of the *archives*, then, must challenge the traditional archival paradigm as static structures of evidence and proof that continues to permeate archival discourse (Duranti 2007, 449; MacNeil 2011, 176). I recognize that archives are living; therefore, the *archival body* is comprised of bodies of knowledge that shift, change, and are always becoming (Gilliland 2010, 339).

### *Normative/Normativity*

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *normative* is defined as ‘establishing, relating to, or deriving from a standard or norm, especially of behavior’ (OED online). Questioning practices and behaviors to unsettle and unhinge the power structures is key to my work in archival productions. Therefore, I suggest that certain archival practices, as *normative*, have become invisibilized through everyday use. Bodies and bodies of knowledge might also be considered normative through everyday performances. Nation-state formations are reliant on such normative structures and the production of *good* and *bad* citizens in order to keep bodies contained and in their places (Puar 2007, xxv). I am interested in how oral history productions for the archives, then, navigate between and, at times, fit into distinct formations of *good* and *bad* citizens, even *good* and *bad* archives. To consider the mediating that both interviewee and interviewer must traverse, I employ *queer* as a methodology of unhinging and challenging containment into such categories.

### *Affect*

For this paper, affect indicates “nonconscious and unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and intensity that arise in response to stimuli impinging on the body” (Massumi as quoted in Gould 2009, 19). I suggest that the coming together during the interview process affectively moves the participants in a multitude of ways that can influence how archives are produced, organized, and interpreted. Affect matters; its influence reaches through each and every archival engagement and through time.

### *Politics of Respectability*

*Politics of respectability*, especially throughout the LGBTQ communities, represent a particular form of embodied normativizing strategies. According to Deborah Gould, ‘respectability, on a straight society’s terms, was the price for admission’ (2009, 89). The politics of respectability, therefore, become the methods of assimilating differences into what is acceptable by the dominant ‘straight society’ along with self-regulating in order to be considered *good* members of the group. As a form of gatekeeping, it reinforces status distinctions and, within the archival bodies of knowledge where intimate and public come together, vulnerable spaces and silences are recognizable thus urging archivists to actively identify injustices and work with communities to re-imagine possibilities for social justice.

### *Embodiment & Focus on (Un)Becoming*

I begin with the online *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of *body* as ‘the physical structure of a person or an animal, including the bones, flesh, and organs’ while also considering the *body* as the main part of something, which connects to the non-flesh

archival structures and the organization of the bodies of knowledge. By *embodiment*, I mean the ways in which humans know and move in the world. I begin from Nikki Sullivan's and Susan Stryker's engagement with the concept of 'bodily being-in-the-world' (2009, xii). I, therefore, understand embodiment as a process. I particularly attend to those transdisciplinary literatures that focus on the (un)becoming, the simultaneous becoming and unbecoming, that influences the ways humans become culturally legible (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 88). I engage (un)becoming through the archives in order to recognize that bodies are never complete and always in processes of becoming.

## The Interview

Drawing from my hands-on oral history productions, I recognize the bodies and bodies of knowledge—human and non-human histories and structures—that interact and inform one another throughout the oral history event from production through digital archival points of access. Considering the Arizona Queer Archives as the repository for the specific oral history interviews that I am utilizing to instantiate the archival affective multimodalities that work to contain, hold, and structure archival records and collections, the questions in these examples are tailored to initiate storytelling about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities, belonging, and longing for such spaces. The establishment of the Arizona LGBTQ Storytelling Project in 2008 and its migration and ongoing programming through the Arizona Queer Archives at the Institute for LGBT Studies make visible the importance of lived knowledges as historical record. Bodies are positioned to ask questions and answer questions with lived histories and knowledges always informing the interactions. The question and answer movements mediate and are mediated by varying degrees of intimacy between two people and with a video camera recording every detail for access through the archival online repository.

On 3 April 2010, with funding through the Institute for LGBT Studies at the University of Arizona, I conducted a daylong workshop with trans\*<sup>3</sup> identified individuals at Wingspan, the now defunct LGBT Community Center of Southern Arizona. As an archivist and oral historian committed to queer/ed practices, I structured the workshop around a participatory ethos to collectively create the list of questions that would be asked of participants. Eight of us gathered around the conference table. Conversations flowed as we discussed some of the issues faced in our daily lives especially those relevant to living as trans\* in the state of Arizona where legislators passed bills that highly regulated bodies whether brown, queer, and gender non-confirming.<sup>4</sup> We

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<sup>3</sup> *Trans* has identified a trans man or trans woman through the dichotomous lens of gender whereas the term *trans\** is intended to suggest the ways that gender might be understood as incredibly diverse and, for me, something that is ongoing. As someone not interested in 'umbrella' terms to uncritically contain individuals, I remain critical of *trans\** as functioning like 'umbrella,' but am thinking further about its correlation to an aggregating technology used in coding. With this in mind, I will do archival work to reflect how records creators self-identify.

<sup>4</sup> In 2010, the 49<sup>th</sup> Arizona State Legislature started the work of regulating non-normative bodies through bills that have been proposed and passed since, such as SB1070 (the 'show me

organized a set of questions to be understood as starting points in interviews with trans\* identified participants to cover relationships among partners and lovers, families, medical doctors, housing, employers and co-workers, as well as lived histories and desires.

Being committed to sharing the skills and literacies of media production, I trained participants to set up the equipment for the interviews. Cameras were turned on. Headphones plugged in. Participants took their places, whether in front of the cameras or behind the cameras. Here I begin with the most important questions asked during this day of interviews: ‘What kind of transgender are you? How do you define yourself?’

Responses are tethered to this moment in time. Camera timecode is timestamped to the media containing stories of how each interviewee recognized themselves within the spectrum of trans\* identities. When the oral history interviews are accessed through the online digital archives website, this moment’s interview engagement and storytelling is what marks the bodies—to include human as well as bodies of knowledge, histories, contexts, and technologies. For now, however, the responses are the bodily markers of interviewee, interviewer, and this date in history.

Allison, a friend and former co-worker of Michael’s at the Southern Arizona Gender Alliance, SAGA, conducts his oral history interview. Both of them have worked for Wingspan and SAGA in a variety of capacities so they have a history with each other as well as the organization that works to support LGBT communities in the local Tucson area. Having a working relationship and certain intimate knowledge of one another makes the interview conversation seem easy and at times playful.

*Allison: This series of interviews that we are doing is around transgender people. What kind of transgender are you? (Laughter)*

*Michael: Words I use to describe myself are F to M, Female to Male transsexual, trans man. I sometimes use the word queer or hetero-queer. Hetero-queer meaning I’m primarily focused on my interest in women, but at the same time, my life and all my culture and everything I do is pretty much in the queer community. Even if I’m dating women. I’ve also been known to date men. But “bi” doesn’t really work for me. That’s not really about trans, but it’s just about how fluid everything is. Because “bi” is too limiting because that means that there are only two genders, and what about other people? So, transsexual F to M, trans guy, trans man, or just man.*

The interviewee mediates the normative and non-normative in their storytelling techniques, especially in the ways that they understand themselves *in relation to* the interviewer, the camera, and the archives as one constituted by queer histories. Michael describes himself and offers narratives of what certain terms mean to him. He speaks

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your papers’ bill); HB2281 (the ‘ban of ethnic studies’ bill); the bathroom bill through which people must use the bathroom corresponding to their ‘sex’ on their birth certificates; and SB1062 ‘the anti-gay/religious freedom’ bill.

directly to Allison. As he understands gender to be more fluid, he highlights the ways that distinct uses of descriptors might foreclose possibilities of who he is and whom he might desire. Because the interviews take place within Wingspan, an organization that he is comfortable with, I sense a level of confidence in explaining fluidity. I question whether or not I would receive such ambiguous descriptions if I were to conduct the interview in another location that is unfamiliar to Michael. As I sit in the background and observe the storytelling, what becomes more obvious to me is the multiplicity through which people know, move, and exist. According to Nan Alamilla Boyd, queer oral histories have ‘an overtly political function and liberating quality...’ (2012, 1), especially for those involved in the interview process, but also for the archival body. As archivist and in consideration of these recordings for archival preservation and access, I recognize the possibilities that open up for the archives and ask: What influence will multiplicities in relation to time and space have on archival description?

*Diana: Transsexual woman. More on the female side.*

In Diana’s interview, the feminine structures her mediation of the fuzzy line separating the public and intimate spaces of the interview process. She quietly responds to the interviewer while often glancing directly at the camera.

*Diana: I can remember the times when...if somebody had caught me in clothes, I would have been petrified. Now I can’t think of—I can’t—I can’t even think of those days or who that other person used to be. That other person is so far gone...*

As the camera records every question and answer, Diana navigates through the terrain of past and present and her ongoing transitioning from male to female. She holds herself as Diana in the foreground while looking at her past self as ‘that other person’—without a name, gender, and future. ‘That other person’ holds tight to and is tethered to the past that is Diana’s, but unnamed and unmarked as such. However, Diana knows and embodies this past.

As an archival record, her oral history tells of ‘body-based knowing’ and the performative reiteration of gender in the telling and revealing of our bodies of knowledge and bodies of evidence (Butler 1993, 8). Boyd argues ‘the physical presence of sexual or gendered bodies affects the oral history collaboration’ (2012, 1-2) as interviewer and interviewee come together around a distinct set of questions and assumptions that move each separately through their own understandings of what becomes the archival record. The archives as bodies of evidence, therefore, also tells of body-based knowing and through reiterative archival practices. As oral history might be considered a social space with intimate and public potentials, a transformative event occurs as new knowledge is produced and lived knowledges emerge as valuable and valid truths.

Michael in turn interviews Alison. Alison gets comfortable in front of the ‘Together We Are Wingspan’ banner. In her oral history interview, she offers those of us in the room as well as visitors to the digital repository the distinct ways that she makes meaning.

Michael: *So, what kind of T are you?*

Alison: *(Laughs) Well, I'm...I self-identify as a transsexual woman, um. I think that in the way that's descriptive of who I am and somewhat of the journey that I've been on, um, you know. I guess, one of my idols in the Trans community has been Kate Bornstein and one of the things that Kate and I agree on a lot is that, you know, our unique situation is a little different than people who were born to their sex of gender so I don't have all of the knowledge, the wisdom, the experiences that someone who is born female would have. I lived part of my life as a man, so um, I've transitioned with some medical enhancements so I'm transsexual.*

Lived knowledges inform the oral history interview in both directions. In oral history interviewing, a narrative exchange occurs that can no longer be considered static. As interviewer, the ways one listens and pays attention to the queer details highlight for me the importance of developing the list of questions with participants to ensure relevancy to lives being lived. Additionally, the efforts of queer/ed oral history production intended for queer/ed archives must be necessarily critical about the work to be done to recognize and address power in the hands of 'authorized' oral historian and archivist. The oral history interview, in this case, instantiates the assembling parts—human and non-human—that mediate and are mediated during the telling of one's truths.

As the one who carries the oral histories that I have participated in, I recognize my responsibility to interpret and translate the affective states of becoming that each interviewee and interviewer navigate through. Normative social structures shape both interviewer and interviewee; such powerful structures move each into remembering or forgetting particular stories for the oral history recording. My stories and questions prompt distinct affective responses in the interviewee as they begin to respond. The politics of respectability function as a gatekeeping mechanism that nudges interviewees into storytelling that fits or subverts the dominant discourses about what and who LGBTQ individuals are. Stories might change. What remains are those nodes of affixed identity in this moment and in this context.

The oral history interview offers both a seemingly intimate exchange between two people but with a recording device that, through digital editing, compression, and streaming technologies, shares the exchange in an online public setting. With this in mind, I argue that the oral history interview affectively moves interviewees through creating and negotiating self at the interstices of time and space but always contingent and in relation to imagined future public digital dissemination. The oral history interview making its way into the archives for visitors to access also offers opportunities for interviewees to review their own individual stories. Boyd notes 'while the self-understood and often unspoken validation of narrators' subjective perspectives does not entail taking every recorded declaration of factual truth, it does require that researchers commit to listening carefully for what narrators' recollections reveal about their time and place in history' (2012, 5). The interview can, therefore, create a new vision and version of history, identity, and the concepts of belonging to the archival body. As evidences of lived knowledges, the storytelling techniques themselves might be

recognized as the mediated practices that each storyteller embodies in order to move through transformative understandings of the contexts that structure lived histories as well as imagined ways lived histories might resonate in and out of the archives. The oral history interview conducted with non-normative multiply-situated peoples also crosses generational contexts and assumptions by making explicit connection to historical contexts.

*Alison: ...and I got to California in the middle '60s and even at that point, I mean, I had always had the gender kind of confusion, the gender discomfort. I don't know what you...the technical term, disphoria, was always a thread throughout my life and I was aware of it at a core level.*

Alison traces the distinct naming categories as something that she embodied throughout her life but that failed to contain her. The oral history might effectively map the discursive violences that played out on non-normative peoples that were then further embodied by non-normative peoples. Moreover, the oral history 'necessarily disrupts historical paradigms that do not or will not acknowledge the existences of bodies, genders, and desires invisible to previous historical traditions' (Boyd, 5). Jesse, too, shares his experiences with fear of standing out as different and highlights the new experiences he is enjoying.

*Interviewer: So, how has it been for you [...]now being a straight guy and having a girlfriend and going out in public?*

*Jesse: Very comfortable, yeah. I look forward to, um, you know, the little things like feeling paranoid about going to a bed and breakfast. You know, traveling. Going into restaurants and being stared at. It hasn't been happening as much and I don't think that it's as much of a physical change because I'm still a baby. I think it's my confidence and I think it's my attitude, you know, and my peace.*

*Interviewer: And your voice...*

*Jesse: My voice? (Laughs) Yeah, it was kind of deep before, so I got lucky on that. I did do the 'Donald Duck' thing for about two months and my brother loved that. So, I go by Donald occasionally. (Laughs)*

*Michael's question to Jesse: So what makes a man?*

I hold onto this question without giving Jesse's answer. This pause—a temporary suspension—enriches the moment to consider the multitude of responses, especially considering those that may come from a room filled with transgender- and queer-identified individuals. This moment is latent with the urgency to recognize the structures in place that regulate gender—those same structures that have attempted to

contain each interviewee in ways that held them captive in states of affective and unruly captivity. This pause. Oral histories and those made accessible in the queer/ed archives might work as guides for social justice rather than upholding dominant structures. In the archives, how might the oral history interview urge questioning of evidence and truth?

## The Archives

The archives collects, preserves, and makes accessible the records from this day of oral history productions. Each interview offers intimacies experienced between interviewer and interviewee while the camera and recording technologies hold the space for public engagement. Through the archives and archival productions, the stories are tethered to history as a collective body but constituted by multiple histories and truths. Therefore, multimodal storytelling on and through digital video, which elicits perception through visual (seeing), aural (hearing), and haptic (combinations of ‘tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive, the way people experience though both on the surface of and inside our bodies’ (Marks 2002, 2)) modes of human experience, creates a sense of culture and community that affectively moves and connects interviewees, interviewers, as well as those who access the records through the archives. Present and past overlap in the production while future permeates as the digital video begins to record for archival access at a later date. Temporality plays a role in the power of the oral history and function to engage the archives as a space of multiple histories through affective states of becoming that are related to emerging knowledge of the self. I suggest that the affective processes of mediating one’s own story offers numerous detours that make up the many lived truths as part of (un)becoming.

I return to Michael’s explanation of what ‘kind of transgender’ he is.

*Michael: Words I use to describe myself are F to M, Female to Male transsexual, trans man. I sometimes use the word queer or hetero-queer...*

As archivist, I am moved to question how I might most accurately label his interview for easy access through subject headings, keywords, and metadata to offer those access points for visitors to the archives. He offers numerous identities and shares his own clarification. His naming and consideration of fluidity are important for archivists working with oral histories as they instantiate the urgency of a fluid and dynamic archives to hold multiple histories.

The archives is traditionally conceived of as an evidential repository, which requires rigid structures in order to uphold community and bureaucratic trust (Cook 1997; Blouin 1999; and Duranti 2007). Cook suggests that archives work ‘as agents for legitimizing such power and for marginalizing those without power’ (1997, 18). The archives holds power to shape and mold distinct historical formations, often supporting the ideologies of those in power. Although postmodern notions<sup>5</sup> have influenced such

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<sup>5</sup> Historically, archival productions have been structured around paradigms beginning with the publication of *The Dutch Manual* in 1898 as the first widely accessed book of archival

rigidity by questioning the traditional archival structures and offering a more open door experience about what and who crosses into the archives, the modern archival paradigm haunts the archives (Cook 2000). However, archives themselves become storytellers (Bearman 1989). Any understanding of fluidity, therefore, unsettles the archives and the archival paradigm that archivists continue to embody and actively deploy in their work; yet, the archival paradigm is changing (Gilliland 2010; Gilliland & White 2009; McKemmish 2001; and Flinn 2011). With shifting notions of temporality from within the body of knowledge, the embodied archives is in the state of (un)becoming with unsettled and unsettling naming practices and procedures that make room for multi-dimensional histories (Lee 2015). As archivists and archival theorists are increasingly concerned about the adherence to master narratives, I consider temporality and embodiment as integral to challenging archival structures.

Interrogating chrononormativity in archival productions radically opens the archives to multimodal and multi-dimensional truths that challenge linear notions of history. Chrononormativity is ‘the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity’ (Freeman 2010, 3). Take the old playground rhyme, for example, ‘X and Y sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love. Then comes marriage. Then comes baby in the baby carriage.’ As chrononormativity, such a sequence of events should not structure peoples and communities into a certain way of being and loving. In my archival work, I question temporality and my own need to attempt to insert linear or normative ways of knowing and interpreting records and collections. Pushing against chrononormativity challenges archivists and can be unsettling, but will benefit the archives so that it can hold multiple histories from everyday lives. Such an understanding of time, its productions and politics, might elucidate how archivists shape particular collections and bodies of knowledges within greater archival narratives.

As technologies and communities change in relation to one another, archives are collecting more multimodal records, which means that many ‘new’ and emerging media together with ‘old’ media are coalescing in the collections needing to be processed, preserved, and made accessible. Through records and engagements within archives, humans are moved affectively. Moving towards an openness that elicits new lines of questions and understandings of records and their performative nature benefits the archives as bodies of knowledges in order to represent human and non-human records creators in relevant and meaningful ways.

### **The Digital Access Points**

Users of the archives, too, are shaped by their assumptions and the hegemonic self-regulatory technologies as they access collections and make meaning of records through keywords and metadata searches. Utilizing Margaret Hedstrom’s idea of *interfaces* (2002) as the ‘spaces of the loci of power of the present to control what the future will know of the past’ (2002, 3), Cook and Schwartz note that archives have always been at intersections of past, present, and future. Notions of navigating these interstices beg

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standards. Terry Cook traces the positivist/modern paradigm from 1900 to approximately 1995 when the postmodern paradigm emerged through the shifting practices within archives to focus on the processes of archiving rather than the products of archiving. See Cook, 1997.

archivists to be prepared and agile in responding to ‘both continuity and change in society’s concepts of, needs for, and uses of the past, memory, information, knowledge, for ultimately what is at stake is the relevance of archives in society, the power of the record, and the present strength and future vitality of the archival profession’ (13).

The Arizona Queer Archives is accessible through its online digital repository. There one can access at least sixty digital video oral history interviews—all described through Dublin Core elements and some with transcripts still holding misspellings as they wait for member-checking processes. The website’s home page does not give indication of what has been accomplished nor what archival work still awaits. The name ‘queer’ suggests a politics of sorts, especially when connected to ‘Arizona’—the US state where brown, queer, gender non-conforming bodies are continually regulated. The politics of respectability circulate throughout the stories but will be interpreted through the visitor’s own lived experiences and digital literacies. The home page welcomes one into its pages. There are no insides or outsides here, but a nonlinear interface that is porous and shifting (Laine 2006, 93), much like the oral history interview itself in which the fuzzy border between human eye contact and the lens of the camera is permeable and locatable by a glance. Time collapses as the moment becomes recorded as past--the recorded and archived history of life’s histories told as history of this moment.

Mouse clicks pull the visitor into the list—text and image—of oral history interviews. The visual images enhance the descriptive information and suggest the technological emergence of shared spaces through which a distinct co-presence becomes embodied through an distinct intimacy with history. Information-seeking behavior suggests that one sits quietly with computer to experience—again through visual, aural, and haptic perception—the interviewee’s oral history interview. The full body is integral in the engagement of handling archival records in order to connect past, present, and future. Experiencing storytelling through the computer screen and speakers/headphones creates an intimate space of reflection. Push play. One is engulfed in stories and might recognize the affective states of becoming as they unfold through the telling itself. Meanwhile, converging and diverging media and mediations create further listening, interpreting, and translating within the visitor that enable them to engage with affective networks. Body (un)becomes on the computer screen while body (un)becomes through experiencing the story and embodied storytelling processes that are displayed on that screen. Records as digital and material representations of lives being lived overlap and intersect through what one can touch and one can only haptically imagine in its virtual distribution. Multimodal records hold multiple historical evidences and affects. Cook emphasizes that archival research, in order to be relevant within archival theory and practice that is changing, should move the focus away from record and toward the ‘creative act of authoring intent or functional context behind the record’ (1997, 48).

Incorporating heterogeneous concepts of records—all of which can support evidence of processes and living—offers the means for archives to better support diverse worldviews, from those Western linear models of time to those that disrupt the Western model, but are relevant to communities that may already have distinct recordkeeping practices in place. Non-linear thought might open up dynamic spaces and time. Braidotti suggests

‘creativity and critique proceed together in the quest for affirmative alternatives which rest on a non-linear vision of memory as imagination, creation as becoming. Instead of deference to the authority of the past, we have the fleeting co-presence of multiple time zones, in a continuum that activates and de-territorializes stable identities and fractures temporal linearity. This dynamic vision of time enlists the creative resources of the imagination to the task of reconnecting to the past’ (2002, 165).

Questioning time and space in these ways lends the archives legitimacy and relevancy to non-normative multiply-situated peoples, thus challenging the normative structures that have been used to oppress and further marginalize. Social justice prevails in these moments and spaces by promoting multiple historical narratives that subvert and challenge dominant power structures.

## Epilogue

Recognizing and understanding the shifting paradigms and approaches to producing and consuming archives are integral to opening the archives in radical ways to support the ability ‘to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised’ (hooks 1996, 206). Queer/ed oral history productions demonstrate the mediated and mediating technologies and techniques of digital media and, importantly, of individual storytelling. From passive to subjective to complexly and contingently interconnected, the archivists benefit from inquiring into the historicity of the archives. Drawing from Laura U. Marks, I, too, propose that ‘we cannot help but be changed in the process of interacting’ (2002, xvi). Gathering bodies and bodies of knowledges while also being attentive to the processes of (un)becoming will influence the archives and its sustainability as spaces for remembering and forgetting for years to come and for the time being.

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## ‘Let me be your TV’ (Phillips 1996, 1)

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### ABSTRACT

Mobile media enable immediate and continuous connections as well as ubiquitous producing, sharing and consuming of audio-visual material. This article analyses the conceptualisation of ultra-short media forms and media convergence on *Vine*. The article is based mainly on the analysis of examples of the *Vine* users Thomas Sanders, the NBA and the America’s Funniest Home Videos, illustrating the aesthetics and content enabled by ultra-short communications. The term para-social interaction, as applied by Horton and Wohl (1956) in the context of mass media, is adapted to *Vine* as social media, highlighting the performance of intimacy in communication mediated with digital tools.

### KEYWORDS

ultrashort, vine, mobile, intimacy, para-social

### Ultrashort

‘Throughout the year, we’ve connected with each other and shared spontaneous moments, hilarious jokes, meaningful events and, really, our lives.’ (*Vine* team 2014, 1)

24 January 2013 *Twitter* launched the video app *Vine* for the *iPhone* and *iPod touch*; an *android* version followed 3 June of the same year (Hofmann 2013a; Haider 2013).<sup>1</sup> *Vine* allows the user to record, upload and share looped videos of up to six seconds, a very limited duration that expands *Twitter*’s concept for text into audio-visual communication. As a result of technological, social, and economic convergences these mini clips radicalise an already existing media trend for abbreviation: out-of-home displays or urban screens, internet based video platforms, film festivals, advertisement and marketing, wayfinding with digital signage, instructions as well as art and multiple mobile applications use very short moving images with or without sound.<sup>2</sup> The first main char-

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<sup>1</sup> 27 October 2016 *Vine* announced that the mobile app will be discontinued in the next months (Team Vine & Twitter 2016, 1). No further explanation was provided, but at the same time parent company *Twitter* gave notice of general efforts to cut costs among others by restructuring sales, partnerships, and marketing and reducing their number of employees by 9% (TwitterIR 2016, 8). Apparently *Vine* was re-evaluated, too: At the beginning *Vine* was very successful regarding the number of users, posts and overall views, but struggled with stagnant user growth and top users leaving for competitors during the last year (McAlone 2016, 1).

<sup>2</sup> The *SNF* (*Swiss National Science Foundation*) *Project Ultrashort* considers all these various, extremely short, moving images as a discrete media format, proposing the term ‘ultrashort’ to mark their singularity

acteristic of these ultrashorts is obviously their extremely reduced duration, usually in the range of seconds. The second characteristic is that they are no longer subjected to one media apparatus – film, television, mobile, or computer – but transgress media boundaries and are increasingly present in different contexts and on a variety of displays. The design of the *Vine* application is a reflection of the convergences of media and an attempt to brand it as something new, no longer part of traditional technologies:

‘Vine is a video service without a play button. This was intentional. Old things are beautiful, but new things should look, well... new. That’s why Vine doesn’t have a play button. It also doesn’t have a pause button, a timeline scrubber, a blinking red light, or dials and a brushed-metal finish to give you the impression that you’re using a dusty video camera. There’s only one nod to traditional filmmaking — the create button, which is an abstracted video camera.’ (Yusupov 2013, 1)

Once the create button is activated, the video can be recorded by simply touching anywhere on the screen of the smartphone. Lifting the finger stops and touching again resumes the recording of up to six seconds, when it stops automatically. The same application recording the audio-visual material can also be used to distribute and watch. Additionally, the possibility to embed *Vines* on web pages was offered, starting 29 March 2013 (Hofmann 2013b), thus freeing the material from the limiting frame of the smartphone. While the earlier *Vine* homepage only showed a selection of ultrashorts, since 3 January 2014 all of them can be shared and watched on said homepage even in TV mode – another nod to media convergence – showing videos no longer looped, but in sequence and full screen (Det 2014, 1). Finally, on 20 August 2014 *Vine* added the possibility to import already existing videos, edit them to six seconds and share those thereby further dissolving the former boundaries of the smartphone medium. (Plom 2014, 1)

Although the ultrashorts of *Vine* can now be seen on the web or imported from other sources, the smartphone is still the means of creating them, by either filming or editing. The omnipresent camera, the renewed convergence of a recording and playback device not unlike analogue tape or video recorders, turn recipients into prosumers, caught in-between consuming and producing media content (Jenkins 2006; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). This change from a viewer to a user (Manovich 2001), the convergence of consuming and producing, of interaction and participation are vital for *Vine* as social media. The ultrashorts on *Vine* are a social practice encouraging interaction, engagement and participation by ease of use and the gratification of instant feedback. With both a length of only six seconds and a recording tool that is also dedicated sharing platform even further facilitating use, *Vine* seems unfazed by data and bandwidths limitations. The digital market research company *Tubular Labs*, engaged in cross-platform video analyt-

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as something different from traditional long films or videos. To enhance the uniqueness of their format *Vine* usually refers to its content as ‘vines’.

ics, estimates that by now over three million new videos are published online every day (Watt 2016). Although *Tubular Labs* analyses audio-visual content from thirty different sources, including longer forms on *YouTube*, the increase in the number of online videos and their multimedia-based uses point to a continuously growing and technically optimised market. The proliferation and democratisation of moving images online pursue a tendency previously seen in photography, whose social functions first changed with the analogue consumer cameras and underwent further change with the omnipresent digital cameras. José van Dijck (2008) considers that for digital photography the construction of identity and the communication of experiences got equally important as remembrance. This can be applied to *Vine* as well: Essential parts of *Vine* are not only the possibility to record and share, but to follow others, to ‘revine’ (forward), remix<sup>3</sup> or remake the material of other users (Bauer 2015, 1), or to use *Vine messages* for video conversations with friends. The ultrashort duration is vital for this immediate and continuous exchange, since it lowers the effort of producing material and allows for a prompt and broad dissemination.

### Storytime

A man takes a video shot of himself, looking into the camera he says ‘storytime’. Next he approaches a couple sitting opposite each other outside a restaurant, close to the street. He says ‘This was the moment the lad would propose to the girl.’ While he is speaking the couple turn to look at him. Finally, hand to her mouth, the girl stares slightly shocked at her boyfriend. He says ‘No!’ to her, moving his right hand in a gesture to indicate stop, hold on. Then he repeats the ‘No’ directed towards the man with the camera.

This is the complete plot of an ultrashort on *Vine*, with the caption ‘Narrating People’s Lives: at the Café! (I think I went too far XD) [Emoticon of a Coffee Cup]’ (Sanders 2014a). The man with the camera phone is Thomas Sanders, a user of *Vine* with 1,433 posts, 8 million followers and an overall loop count of 6,673,308,515 (as of 17 August 2016). ‘Narrating People’s Lives’ is a series of *Vine* posts he made, that was shared, revined and remade by other users on *Vine* as well as on different platforms like *YouTube* in the form of compilations.

Sanders always starts the ultrashorts of this series with a shot of himself saying ‘storytime’, then follows with a sentence apparently describing the situation he sees before him, which he simultaneously interprets in a surprising way. The suspense and fun reside in the unpredictable reactions of the people he films and whose stories he claims to tell: Sanders begins with the shot of himself saying ‘storytime’ as usual. Then he proceeds with a shot of two people sitting on a bench, an older man on one end and a

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<sup>3</sup> Since 18 November 2015 it is possible to use the sound of an already existing *Vine* post and add this to a newly recorded or imported video by touching the button ‘Make an audio remix’. This will load the sound of the existing post into the smartphones memory ready to use with the new material.

young woman on the other one further away. While Sanders moves closer, he says ‘The man came to the bus stop every day to pick up hot chicks.’ The woman is reading a book and, although she seems to register that someone is talking, does not relate this to herself or chooses to ignore it, until towards the end. The man turns to the young woman, she finally looks at him and laughs; he turns back to Sanders, raises his eyebrows and makes a thumbs up sign. (Sanders 2014b)

Another ultrashort shows Sanders in a supermarket, in front of a shelf saying the customary ‘storytime’. He approaches a young man standing at a counter with fruit, weighing two melons in his hands. Sanders states: ‘As he squeezed the melons he pictured them as the hearts of his enemies.’ The young man looks at Sanders, back to the melons, returns to Sanders and questioningly says something unintelligible. (Sanders 2013)

A search of *Vine* for ‘Thomas Sanders’ currently produces 21,400 results, 1,433 of which were posted by him. ‘Narrating people’s lives’ narrows findings down to 385 posts, ‘narrating people’s life’ garners an additional 37 results (as of 15 August 2016). The examples described until now are the top three results of a *Vine* search for ‘narrating people’s lives’ repeated in November 2015, February and August 2016. The logic behind the order of the search results remains hidden – it is neither by date nor by loop count nor alphabetical order of title. Not all of the 385 results are ultrashorts made or distributed by Sanders either, some are just revined copies of his posts in the timelines of other users; some are remakes based on the concept of ‘Narrating People’s Lives’ but produced by someone else. One of the latter is an ultrashort by Vincent Marcus that Thomas Sanders revined in turn: Marcus first films a shot of himself, saying ‘storytime’. He then approaches Sanders who is standing with two other men on the street talking. Due to the speed of Marcus’s approach, the sudden closeness and surprise, Sanders jerks away first when Marcus addresses him with the words: ‘How does it feel for the narrator to become the narrated?’ Sanders replies: ‘Very awkward!’ (Marcus 2015)

If an ultrashort lasts only six seconds a classic narrative pattern of exposition, conflict and resolution is often skipped in favour of either a shot of one moment in time or a two act structure of now/then, good/bad, me/you or other similar dualisms. The first shot of Thomas Sanders saying ‘storytime’ introduces him as the author and the concept of this series of ultrashorts: he tells a story, his chosen key word points towards parents reading bedtime stories to their children or story times held at preschools or libraries and evokes associations of fairy tales or fiction, thereby contrasting the title of the ultrashorts ‘Narrating People’s Lives’. The second shot of Sanders’ ultrashorts consists of a description of the situation in one single sentence and the reactions of the protagonists. Analytically, a three act structure might still be applied here – act one: Sanders’ introduction (exposition); act two: description (conflict), act three: reaction (resolution) – but the description and reaction usually merge with each other. The clearer distinction seems to be a dualistic one, like those proposed by Vincent Marcus of narrator and narrated. This is especially so, because the depicted moments are so brief and there is barely time for the development of a conflict other than one of narrator and narrated. Sanders first addresses his audience looking directly into the camera, then while the camera perspective

changes from him to the protagonists, he turns into the invisible, omniscient, third-person narrator. Still, due to the dissonance of what Sanders says about the protagonists' lives with their real lives and perceptions, the viewer has to ignore the offered narration and create his own. The ultrashorts are completed in the mind of the viewer, who hears Sanders' sentence, sees the reaction of the protagonists, and adds his own interpretations and knowledge of social habits to gain a narrative experience that extends beyond the actual moving images.

Thomas Sanders shares on *Vine* not only narrations of other people's lives but also of his own, with ultrashorts of his everyday life, his friends, his family, or his favourite posts of others. Additionally he uses *Twitter*, *Instagram* and *YouTube*, applying a cross platform strategy to increase publicity.

The platform *Vine* does not cater exclusively to either media professionals or amateurs and shows a broad variety of users, skills, styles, interests and themes. In June 2016, Thomas Sanders was the most watched *Vine* user (#1, 250 million views) according to an evaluation of *Tubular Labs* (Marshall 2016), a rank he held several times previously. Among the ten most watched *Vine* users five belong to the category comedy (Thomas Sanders, America's Funniest Home Videos, Lele Pons, Mastodon, Kenny Knox), four to sports (NBA, Bleacher Report, SportsCenter, MLB) and one to people and blogs (Sarah Schauer). NBA (National Basketball Association, #2, 234 million views), Bleacher Report (an American digital media company focussing on sport, #3, 165 million views), America's Funniest Home Videos (an American reality television program on ABC, #4, 128 million views), SportsCenter (a sports news television program of the American cable and satellite television network ESPN, #5, 123 million views) and MLB (Major League Baseball, #8, 68 million views) are companies' representatives on *Vine*. Thomas Sanders, Lele Pons (#6, 90 million views), Mastodon (#7, 76 million views), Sarah Schauer (#9, 76 million views) and Kenny Knox (#10, 74 million views) are independent individual users.

In June 2016, the NBA ranked second among the most watched *Vine* users. A search of *Vine* for 'NBA' leads to 190,600 results, 4,261 of which were posted by the NBA (as of 15 August 2016). The six last postings are tagged as 'flash portraits' and show posed photographs of NBA players with animated flashes in the background (NBA 2016). The flashes and a zoom closing in on the players are the only movements. Further ultrashorts on the NBA's *Vine* channel include instants of basketball games with spectacular shots or passes, making fun while warming up for a game or recreational playing in a park. The focus is usually either on a decisive moment of a game or the depiction of a player. As is the case with Thomas Sanders, the NBA follows a cross platform strategy with content on *YouTube*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*.

America's Funniest Home Videos occupied the fourth<sup>4</sup> place in *Tubular Labs* ranking and is present on *YouTube*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Twitter* as well. A search of *Vine* for 'America's Funniest Home Videos' produces 2,556 results, the abbreviation 'AFV' finds 2,281 posts. 802 ultrashorts were uploaded on the official *Vine* channel of America's Funniest Home Videos (AFV 2016). The posts feature homemade videos submitted by the viewers to ABC/America's Funniest Home Videos. The most recent uploads (as of 15 August 2016) show a woman working out in her car during a stop at an intersection by repeatedly pushing a dumbbell through the open car roof, filmed apparently from the car behind hers. The soundtrack consists of a snippet of the song 'Eye of the Tiger' by the rock band Survivor, referring to the boxing film *Rocky III*, the caption reads 'When you're working out but bae is home alone.' Another ultrashort's first shot is situated at a gymnastics competition. A female gymnast on the balance beam falters and falls. In that moment on the soundtrack a man can be heard saying 'oh!'. The next shot focuses on the face of, presumably, the gymnast, speaking very fast: 'It's really nice, 'cause I feel that all my hard work in the gym has paid off', with a caption reading 'Well...' A third ultrashort shows a woman disguised in a black mask and cloak as Darth Vader. 'The Imperial March (Darth Vader's theme)' sounds in the background while she walks through a living room towards the camera and trips on her cloak, with the caption 'Vader looks different in the new trailer.' To appreciate these ultrashorts knowledge of colloquialisms (to translate the term *bae* to boyfriend) as well as of popular culture is necessary, otherwise a sufficiently fast decoding wouldn't be possible for the viewers.

In all of the cases above cross-platform dissemination and serialisation are prevalent. Serialisation offers the opportunity to tell a story in several progressing instalments, with an overall story arc, or as standalones from different perspectives. 'Narrating People's Lives' consists of several ultrashorts that are linked, only some of them by Sanders, by their title or hashtag, their concept and structure. These ultrashorts work without their companions, but the viewing experience is enhanced by the collation of more than one. First, the viewer understands the media format's logic and knows there are no parts missing, that what they sees is not an incomplete film for cinema or television but meant to be this short and intended for an altogether different viewing situation. Furthermore, the viewer knows what to expect because they recognise the title or style, a huge advantage for ultrashorts because everything that is self-explanatory speeds up the process of understanding and helps to deal with the time limitations. Second, a brand or idea can be established through serialisation as exemplified by the NBA channel, focusing solely on NBA players and games. On *Vine* this branding is possible at minimal cost, since the material used is often produced with little effort, as exemplified by the flash portraits, repurposed or a byproduct of shooting for TV. Third, a topic can be shown from different perspectives, with different protagonists, settings or places, as Thomas Sanders or America's Funniest Home Videos demonstrate. Their many self-

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<sup>4</sup> The Bleacher Report on *Vine* represents a variation of the NBA channel, showing videos of a broader scope of sports and athletes, therefore I will forgo a more detailed description even though the Bleacher Report ranked third in *Tubular Labs* evaluation for June 2016.

contained stories coexist parallel to each other, joined by the context of the respective *Vine* users and a consistent narration based on the implied fun of verbal pranks, strange behaviour or embodied fails. While television series, sequels of films or novels employ serialisation as well, it has special value for *Vine*: The limitations of the six seconds for the stories can be compensated, resuming the narration in several ultrashorts or showing a multitude of related stories. The successful *Vine* channels post new material frequently and with consistent contents, topics or aesthetics. Thus they allow the users to form expectations and entice them to come back, to follow or interact by comments, revines, or remakes.

### Para-social Interaction

Lei Zhang, Feng Wang and Jiangchuan Liu analysed the data of 1,151,938 *Vine* users and one of their arguments concerns the numbers of followers (an average 244,4) versus following (an average 102,4). The disparity of these numbers indicates many users following a few user 'stars'. Zhang et al. conclude that social relations between the follower and the followed on *Vine* don't depend on offline relationships but on the attractiveness of the content offered by the followed user. The attraction might lie in the topic interesting the follower, as indicated for example by the sports channels. Evidenced by the comedy channels, humour can attract high view counts just as appealing or unusual aesthetics. The NBA's flash portraits for example are well composed photographs, with a far better image quality than the majority of the content on *Vine*, distinguished further by the restriction of movement to the animated flashes and zoom. Equally significant as the attractiveness of content is those of participation, since the ultrashorts on *Vine* are intended to provoke interactions. Through a series of recorded and shared posts, comments, the user profile in general, *Vine*'s ultrashorts perform the self or brand of a user, enable expectations, continuous interactions and relations. Apparent by the sheer number of their followers, for the most watched *Vine* users interpersonal two-way communication, although technically possible, is not a reliable option. Likes, comments or shares are too easily missed, when a user has millions of followers and views. Therefore *Vine* seems to fall between tertiary and quaternary media: Tertiary media like the TV are one-way communication still, but both sides use technical devices. Quaternary media use devices on both sides and the interpersonal communication is two-way. (Hipfl and Hug 2006, 22) Although mutual interpersonal communication is possible with *Vine*, it is limited by the amount of users trying to interact, which raises the question, how and what kind of interactions and relationships are established.

In 1956, Donald Horton and Richard R. Wohl introduced the theory of para-social interaction. The emergence of the term para-social interaction questions the interactions and relationships found in mass media and signifies the construction of a slightly biased theoretical framework. If interpersonal two-way communication is what para-social interaction mimics, the latter is obviously considered a substitute for the 'real thing'. According to Horton and Wohl (1956) moderators of TV shows often try to create an

illusion of normal social interaction and an intimate closeness, similar to unmediated interpersonal relationships. Usually, a media persona is more reliable and predictable than a 'normal person' due to the fact that they adopt a role for the show, presented regularly at the same time and place. This stability of a media persona and the repeated perception of their specific serial media form, allow for the development of para-social interactions or even para-social relationships. Tilo Hartmann stresses the fact that this para-social interaction is more than a feeling of kinship with fictional or non-fictional characters, but should be considered as a symbolically interactionist process (2016, 82). During the last decade the concept of para-social interaction has been applied to social media platforms. Lauren I. Labrecque points out that recent research indicates para-social interactions can evolve in isolated, non-serial media forms and that even a persona might not be necessary (2014, 135). 'PSI forms through message cues that increase perceived interactivity' and 'signal openness in communication.' (Labrecque 2014, 136) Fast responses, indicators of direct two-way communication like 'eye contact' and revealing information outside the persona's fixed role increase the feeling of interactivity and intimate knowledge.

With 'Narrating People's Lives' Thomas Sanders offers a para-social persona, the storyteller who ordinarily is situated in the privacy of the childhood home but can be encountered in public libraries, bars or the like. This persona is as stable as the design of 'Narrating People's Lives': his looks don't change, his behaviour stays the same (approaching others by surprise, making fun of them), the overall narrative structure of his ultrashorts is not altered. Thanks to his other *Vine* posts, *Twitter* and *YouTube* additional information is revealed that exceeds the role of his persona, thereby heightening the illusion of interpersonal two-way communication. The design of Sanders' ultrashorts enhances the illusion of a para-social interaction, furthering the impression of an individual persona and viewer and their continuous relationship.

The concept of authenticity becomes highly relevant to indicate signal openness and potential interactivity, although authenticity is not inherent in the media material but the result of an unspoken negotiation. The consumer decides to trust – or not to trust – the authenticity of the presented material based on their experiences and knowledge, the formal means of representation (language, image, sound, body, discourse, immediacy) and its context as signals for authenticity. (Manfred Hattendorf 1994, 75)<sup>5</sup> The detected authenticity is an effect of the representation – the cues to guide the reading of the story – that show this perception as an individual and social practice: A poor quality of the images or sounds may turn into a cue for an unaltered documentation of an important moment instead of an incompetent media production. Immediacy is assumed when the character of the images as 'something made' is successfully repudiated. The apparent

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<sup>5</sup> Roger Odin's *lecture documentarisante* is based on a similar assumption: a film is not a documentary sui generis but because the viewer decides to regard it as one. A *lecture fictivisante* would deny a documentary value of the film. The term documentary for Odin no longer describes a genre but a documentary ensemble, which depends on the perception and knowledge of the viewer, stylistic elements of the film and sociocultural, historical and cinematographic institutions. (2000)

immediacy of a recording adds to the impression of its authenticity. America's Funniest Home Videos or Thomas Sanders' 'Narrating People's Lives', look like more or less spontaneous shots of everyday life, as if they are recorded and shared fast. Cues within the depicted content, like visually intruding into personal space, or hearing allegedly private tales as in Sanders' *Vine* posts or the leisure moments of NBA players, support the impression of intimate closeness. The ultrashorts of basketball games are read as approved documents because of their content – the moment of a perfect shot, highly emotionally attributed with uniqueness – or the audio-visual remains of a former life in TV – like broadcaster logos, text inserts of the score, or sounds of a cheering audience. The overall notion is that these are snapshots, documents, unforeseeable impressions of actuality without editing, thus enhancing the idea of showing people's lives – something unique, personal and private. This is aided by the smartphone offering every user the means to become a prosumer, to produce, store, share or consume their own audio-visual material, thus raising at the same time the expectation of the availability of said personal, private material.

On *Vine*, all forms of material, users and interactions mix. Originally private ultrashorts like fail videos coexist with public ultrashorts like repurposed TV material. *Vine* channels with only a few followers can offer ordinary social interactions by interpersonal two-way communication, but those channels with numerous followers depend on para-social interaction to establish social relationships with the majority of the users.

### **Intimacy**

In 1962, Jürgen Habermas described the boundaries, interactions and interdependencies developed for the private and public spheres from the eighteenth century through to the mass societies of the twentieth century. Shaped in the intimate spheres of domesticity, individuals counteract the political authority of the government through critical public discourse and the emergence of a public opinion. Of course, this is an idealisation, excluding large parts of unrepresented society (women, workers etc.), and already lost with the progress of mass media, entertainment and consumerism of the twentieth century. The public sphere albeit remained – not in Habermas' ideal form of a critical discourse but as the place where private individuals gain and exchange information and interact with each other as well as corporate business and non-business entities. Adrienne Russell et al. currently see the boundaries between public and private blurring for the same reasons as those between the producer and the consumer: 'Combined with low-cost authoring tools, pervasive digital networks have lowered the threshold for producing, publishing, and disseminating knowledge and culture.' (2008, 43) The smartphone's ease of use, pervasiveness and networking capacity encourage elements of personal culture like casual communication, photographs, home movies or ultrashorts to disseminate into the public. It is a dedicated means to stay in touch, and whereas the attraction of gigantic screens lies in the monumental quality of the images, the small screens of smartphones convey a sense of closeness further enhanced by the usual need

to touch the screen.<sup>6</sup> The omnipresent mobile media shape the concepts and practices of intimacy ‘as no longer a “private” activity but a pivotal component of public sphere performativity,’ Larissa Hjorth and Sum Sum Lim claim, underlining the importance to link the analyses of both (2012, 478).

The distinction between the private or public and the development of intimacy is relevant for *Vine*’s ultrashorts on two levels: first, the depicted content, the narrated lives are situated, perceived, performed and negotiated as somewhere in a spectrum of private and public. The protagonists in the three examples of Sanders’ ‘Narrating People’s Lives’ traverse public spaces but judging by their reactions, none of them expected an interaction with a stranger or hearing a story of their life that they would usually be the ones telling. Other ultrashorts by Thomas Sanders are set in private surroundings, a kitchen for example. His concept does not discern between private or public spaces, he acts the same and anchors the clips. Interestingly the sense of an encounter’s intimacy is not changed by the location either. The outdoor public spaces look more open and less harried than the indoor private ones. The investigative quality Sanders achieves through fast approaches and the narrating of things usually left unsaid, dominates the perception of space. While the whole appearance is one of intimate encounters, these are contrasted by the overemphasised narrators voice and the fact that the narration is fictional, therefore pretending a one-sided intimate knowledge of the omniscient, third-person narrator that boils down to a performance of (his) self through others.

Secondly, the ensuing social and para-social interactions within *Vine* also constitute experiences of intimacy and closeness. Even though the term ‘intimate relationship’ is often used as a euphemism for a sexual relationship, intimacy has a far wider and slightly unspecific spectrum. Debra J. Mashek and Arthur P. Aron summarize in their handbook (2013) manifold theoretical positions on intimacy and closeness. They distil two basic commonalities of the collected concepts: intimacy involves the self and is not a passive state but achieved through an interaction led process: ‘Closeness and intimacy build over time as a function of selves interacting, which creates prototypical knowledge of specific patterns of relating to others, the inclusion of others in the self, opportunities to engage with others in a positive, self-revealing way that creates shared understanding, and the possibility of feeling cared for, validated, and understood.’ (Mashek and Aron 2013, 416-417) Lay people and relationship science’s concepts of intimacy and closeness influence the social practices and their interpretations on *Vine*: Closeness is assumed to be indicated by the time invested and various activities conducted while relating to others. The ‘density of interaction’ (417) is therefore conveyed through the amount and diversity of interactions on *Vine* and other platforms. Liking, commenting, sharing or remaking of posted ultrashorts establish mutual attention, exchange and influence. As a tool for the development of a social relationship this

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<sup>6</sup> However, the smartphone may also assume a distancing quality. Susan Sontag wrote that the camera stays between tourists and the world they try to picture, because they are so busy taking photographs ‘converting experience into an image, a souvenir’ (1977, 7). The same may be said for camera phone use today.

instant feedback is invaluable and present in all described contributions to *Vine*. The ultrashorts of the NBA's channel may mostly appear not to depict intimate moments, but the social interactions they provoke can still have an intimate quality.

Ultrashorts on *Vine* may supply private or intimate content but more important is their offer of social and para-social interactions that insinuate closeness and intimacy although some partners in the exchange are mere personae and it takes place in the public sphere. One necessary foundation for this is the pervasiveness of mobile media and networks. It is complemented by the design of the *Vine* application, whose ultrashort key feature further lowers the threshold for production and sharing of audio-visual material, thus easily enabling performances of self and continuous interactions. The aesthetic decisions made for the design of *Vine's* application as well as for the user generated ultrashort content, guide and limit the perception. Since the intended messages have to be fitted into a six second slot, the user depends on their own extension of the sometimes barely implied narrations and the serialisation of the ultrashort form, to allow for more complex concepts. The individual perceptions of, reactions to and interactions with ultrashorts on *Vine* vary greatly, depending on knowledge, experience and the uses and gratifications wished to achieve. Users inclined to approach *Vine* as a possibility for intimate interpersonal communication may find this, irrespective of the actual audio-visual content or the channel viewed, just by interacting. If the users don't actively participate, *Vine* is offering something with a literally more personal touch – tapping on the screen of the smartphone to select channels or playlists – but after all not so different from one predecessor: TV.

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