

Article

The Affective Triad: Smartphone in the Ethnographic Encounter

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Abstract

“Hanging out” and establishing “rapport” is an essential part of the ethnographic encounter in anthropology. But what happens when the smartphone, seemingly a distraction from the relationship in the making, creates a wall between the anthropologist and the interlocutor? While smartphones have been widely explored as a media technology used by the interlocutors, or as research tools, their affective grip on the researchers themselves has received less attention to date. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with visitors of two youth centers in Vienna, Austria, in 2019, I argue that the moment when the smartphone becomes part of the affective triad, alongside the researcher and the interlocutor, also presents a window on the entanglement of digital technologies with everyday life. Moreover, affective ripples emerging from such irritations also expose underlying assumptions about how ethnographic encounters should ideally proceed and what constitutes rapport and “good” ethnographic relationships, seemingly a prerequisite for successful ethnographies. Hence, affective entanglements and irritations that arise in this context are not disturbances to be discarded or smoothed over in the ethnographic narratives. While the smartphone appears to impair the ethnographic encounter at first, its designed porosity allows the researcher to develop a particular sensitivity to issues of rapport, consent, and privacy, and to negotiate the space of potentiality of ambiguous, door-like situations, thus becoming a methodological blessing rather than a curse.

Keywords

affects; anthropology; digital ethnography; ethnography; privacy; rapport; small talk; smartphone; youths

Issue

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1. Introduction

“As soon as they start using their smartphones, our work becomes really difficult,” was the reaction of one staff member and a common sentiment I encountered during my ethnographic fieldwork at a youth center in Vienna in 2019. After introducing myself and explaining my interest in the usage of digital media technologies among youths, staff members typically shared their concerns that their relationships with youths were disturbed by smartphones. The staff member quoted above continued: “Our work has changed, it’s different now than it was 10/15 years ago. It is harder to reach them and connect with them.” The youth centers, often located near council housing, provided young visitors with access to free recreational spaces where they could play analog and digital games, hang out, or do homework. The staff

managed the space, initiated activities such as excursions, political quizzes, cooking, and sports competitions, but above all sought to build long-term relationships of trust with the visitors. They actively sought contact with the youths, engaged them in casual conversation, and exchanged notes during the subsequent debriefing. Aside from their explicit pedagogical agenda and counseling efforts, their overall goal of building rapport and trust resembled my own role as an ethnographer. Therefore, their frustration with the smartphone as a disruption of the connection we all sought seemed a cause for alarm. Was the object I sought to understand as it entered social relations also the same object that might sabotage my own ethnographic relationships?

The popular imagination still seems caught up in images of fragmented attention and disrupted sociality, especially in relation to young people turning

“smombies” in the face of the irresistible distraction of digital games and socializing. The widespread persistence with which young people, in particular, are subjected to moral panic related to digital media technologies is curious, given that scholars from anthropology, media and communication studies, and related disciplines have long provided ample empirical evidence across the world that such technologies do not corrode sociality by default (e.g., boyd, 2014; Horst & Miller, 2006; Ito et al., 2005; Miller & Slater, 2003), but can also help scale it (Miller et al., 2016) or extend it, resulting in “augmented flesh-meets” (Ito & Okabe, 2005, p. 257) that are permeated by the co-presence of absent friends and (dis)localized communities and networks across transnational flows (e.g., Greene, 2020; Hromadžić & Palmberger, 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2012). The disjuncture between the theoretical framing of smartphone-like technologies and the youth workers’ construction of the smartphone as an enemy was also reflected in my initial experience in the field, imbued with pragmatic concerns about being unable to establish contact with youths immersed in their smartphones. This irritation was particularly curious because although I experienced a smartphone-free period until my early 20s, smartphones are a welcome part of my own everyday experience. Here, I explore affective disturbances that are rarely woven into the sophisticated theoretical framing of smartphone use but are nonetheless an essential part of the messy fieldwork experience. I argue that the entry of an object of awkwardness—a smartphone—into the field on the one hand helps to expand our conceptualization of online-offline spaces, but on the other also sheds new light on the blind spots of the “old” issues of legitimate data collection, rapport, and privacy.

2. Smartphones and Ethnography

To date, much research has been conducted on how research participants in different global and local settings use, adapt, and appropriate digital media technologies such as mobile phones and smartphones (e.g., Hjorth & Arnold, 2013; Ito et al., 2005; Miller et al., 2021; Slater & Kwami, 2005). Less attention has been given to methodological considerations of smartphone use by ethnographers/researchers themselves, although research has provided growing insights into innovative ways of using the smartphone as a valuable tool, with all its beneficial and problematic sides, for relationship building, data collection, and teaching (Favero & Theunissen, 2018; Kaufmann, 2018; Verstappen, 2021). Few scholars, however, have scrutinized how the emergence of digital technologies in ethnographic encounters affects emerging relationships and the affective labor of ethnographers engaging with spatially and temporally dispersed interlocutors who slip in and out of online-offline environments (Bengtsson, 2014; Mainsah & Prøitz, 2019; van Doorn, 2013). This neglect of affective entanglements in research is symptomatic of historical and some-

times gendered research practices in which emotions have been viewed as disturbances that contaminate scientific data (Davies & Spencer, 2010; Stodulka et al., 2019). However, as some scholars have argued, emotions and various intimacies in the field introduce the essential dynamics to research as they move, motivate, or discourage engagement in the field and must thus be taken seriously (Ahmed, 2013; Fraser & Puwar, 2008; Lutz, 1988; Stodulka et al., 2019).

Especially when research is steeped in technologies designed to create intimacy in everyday interactions (Pink et al., 2017), examining the affective ripples surrounding researchers themselves seems helpful in understanding how intimacy is created across and along screens. As media and communication scholar Bengtsson (2014, p. 863) argues, researchers are rarely discussed as embodied subjects embedded in an offline social and cultural environment, gendered power dynamics, and daily caring responsibilities when conducting ethnographic research online. While Bengtsson explores the difficulties she encountered when doing online ethnography while embedded in family life and affective work at home, in this article I explore how, conversely, my offline presence, as my primary methodological vantage point, became linked to smartphones and online space precisely through affective and embodied entanglements. In particular, I ask what the emergence of such an attention-grabbing object within the ethnographic relationship means for the latter’s formation. How does this affect “connection” or “rapport,” the idealized state of alignment that seems to be one of the major prerequisites for successful ethnographic fieldwork? What questions of consent and ethics does it raise (Palmberger & Budka, 2020)? Before addressing the notions of rapport and privacy, and framing smartphones as part of the affective triads alongside the ethnographer and the interlocutor, I will briefly outline my methodological approach.

3. Smartphones and the Youth Centers

The two youth centers I visited weekly over 11 months in 2019 were inherently social, buzzing leisure spaces, chosen to explore young people’s everyday digital practices through participant observations, documented in subsequently coded fieldnotes according to constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). This research follows previous interdisciplinary work on youths’ situated use of digital media technologies (e.g., Archambault, 2017; boyd, 2014; Ito et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2016). Following the “non-digital-centric” (Pink et al., 2016, p. 9) approach to ethnographic study of digital phenomena, I adopted a holistic perspective and embedded youths’ practices on and around the smartphone into a larger social, cultural, and political context. Here, “hanging out” online and offline soon turned political, as extended scrolling on the smartphone appeared embedded in the chronic boredom and unemployment of youths struggling to

find work and apprenticeships, as the themes of poverty and inequality soon emerged prominently in the ethnographic conversations about issues that many of my interlocutors faced daily (Jovicic, 2020a; Jovicic et al., 2019).

Rather than pre-selecting a particular set of practices, platforms, or communities, I decided to frame the physical field as a site of dynamic sociality, permeated by smartphones and the online spaces they afforded. These places were simultaneously located in physical sensory environments that offered playful corners, warm shelter in winter, or air-conditioning in summer—and the extended, trans-local, multimodal leisure spaces enabled by screens. As researchers of digital phenomena have noted, such an intersection of online and offline spaces of sociality poses a methodological challenge. While some have called for blurring the boundaries between online and offline (Coleman, 2010), others have argued that the online and offline realms can be seen as co-constitutive rather than intellectual artefacts to be blurred (Bareither, 2017; Boellstorff, 2012) and that the blurring of online and offline would dilute the political architecture of often highly commercialized online spaces (Nardi, 2015, p. 19)—an argument I would extend by noting that the blurring of boundaries can be an explicit goal of digital designers who create immersive experiences. However, while such approaches are insightful, they do not always explicitly place *the embodied* researcher in the online/offline continuum. This is where the notion of “digital environments” (Frömming et al., 2017) seems appropriate, as it encompasses the virtual and physical realms, where people, devices, and online spaces are all part of the same complex, rather than blurry, “digital environment.” From such a perspective, the researcher becomes a “dweller” (Ingold, 2000) within the same environment, while the distinction between ethnography and “digital ethnography” fades into the background, except for the “digital” phenomenon at the center of the research inquiry.

However, dwelling in the same environment does not mean that access can or should be granted to all spaces, be it among a group of friends engrossed in a private conversation in the youth center or private online messages. Considering that most of my interlocutors were minors, I saw consent as an ongoing dynamic process (Sveningsson Elm, 2008) and only engaged with youths’ online profiles when they explicitly granted access in real-time rather than following them online. Ethical reasons aside, my interest was primarily in the embodied in-between moments when their fingers touched the screen, somewhere between intention and content. While the content of online practices or the intricacies of specific online platforms or communities have been studied frequently in scholarship over the last two decades, embodied, seemingly trivial, and “in-between” (Hjorth & Richardson, 2014; Ito & Okabe, 2005; Juul, 2010; Kinder-Kurlanda & Willson, 2016; Kuittinen et al., 2007) “small scale practices” (Møller & Robards, 2019), such as scrolling and swiping, are still ethnographically under-

researched. Hence, I primarily focused on the moments in which online and offline intersect, as the thumb scrolls through the Instagram feed while passing the time, and not necessarily because the person is interested in its content—i.e., mundane practices reminiscent of what Ehn and Löfgren (2010) have called “non-events,” barely perceptible, yet imbued with complex meanings and social choreographies. Within the “digital environment” in its entirety, conversations went in and out of the smartphone, as some spontaneously shared online content as part of our conversations, or when I asked if they wanted to share what they were doing at a particular moment. I did not conduct walkthroughs, as I was mainly interested in “naturally” occurring, “embedded, embodied and everyday” (Hine, 2015) instances of digital/online interactions, rather than the log of past activities or totality of digital networks or practices.

These ongoing on-the-spot negotiations about entering and leaving a private online/offline space took place not in the context of spectacular events, such as the signing of a consent form or the final establishment of trust after a transformative event that fostered intimacy and connectedness, but in the unspectacular “non-events,” in the barely perceptible disruptions and affective ripples crossing online/offline boundaries. To further develop this argument, I will take a step back and first explore the underlying ideas behind rapport, before examining the role of smartphones in the process of rapport development.

4. The Holy Grail of Rapport

For more than a century, the concept of rapport has been an obligatory presence in methodological textbooks advising novice ethnographers on interactional rules for establishing rapport (Rampton, 2021). However, although rapport has become an indispensable part of the ethnographic vocabulary, it still remains undertheorized, somewhat vague, and embedded in an air of mysticism, much like “*en rapport*” as “in communication” was used to describe mesmeric states in 19th-century spiritualism (Goebel, 2021). The term, which stems from the French word *rappor*ter—to carry something back—describes how a relationship is formed between two people who come into contact. According to the Collins Dictionary, “If two people or groups have a rapport, they have a good relationship in which they are able to understand each other’s ideas or feelings very well” (Rapport, n.d.-a); while the Cambridge Dictionary describes rapport as “a good understanding of someone and an ability to communicate well with them” (Rapport, n.d.-b). This promise is no less attractive to ethnographers who strive to understand “emic,” often unfamiliar and distant perspectives. Failure to make such a connection seems to indicate failure on both a personal and professional level, leaving students under institutional time constraints at an impasse despite methodological formulas (Rampton, 2021).

Recently, scholars such as the authors of the edited volume *Reimagining Rapport* (Goebel, 2021) have argued that the concept of rapport—which Malinowski (1922/2020) regarded as a desirable side-effect of “being there” and building long-term relationships with interlocutors—reproduces problematic assumptions about fieldwork in general. As a “warm and fuzzy” feeling, it remains a positively connoted affective state that is rarely challenged and only seemingly emerges after a series of significant transformative events that establish a solid bond with individuals and entire communities. Only then does the immersion in the field appear to be complete, and rapport serves to legitimize the researcher’s data and claim “understanding, authenticity and authority” (Goebel, 2021, p. 404) after the doors opened for in-depth data collection. The problem with this common narrative is that it freezes the community or individuals in a fixed bond that denies the “co-evalences” (Fabian, 2014) of the interlocutors, a bond that, once it has emerged due to certain preconditions, is hardly mentioned afterwards, and often remains removed from the context in which rapport is situational and performative (Goebel, 2021, p. 31). Goebel, like the other contributors, offers solutions stemming from linguistic anthropology. Rather than constructing a perfect narrative of overcoming the challenges of fieldwork after initial conflicts and frustrations, the authors advocate a closer examination of the discursive means and dynamics involved in the production of rapport (Goebel, 2021). While attention to discursive devices has its limitations outside of linguistic expertise, the emphasis on critical readings of rapport, how it is constantly (re)negotiated by all parties rather than produced by a researcher, how it is carried out and, equally important, how it fails and is disrupted is a valuable lens to better understand how rapport emerges in digitalized circumstances.

The fuzzy vagueness of rapport, beyond the binary of established or unestablished, is complicated enough without the presence of smartphones creeping into the emerging relationships—relationships that rely on the bidirectional loop of “rapporteur” when the third actor, a smartphone, is included in the equation of attunement, and the interlocutor’s gaze turns away from the researcher. As Springwood and King (2001, p. 410) noted, Marcus’ (1999) substitution of rapport for collaboration was a result of the increasing problematization of rapport, but this approach reaches its limits as soon as we ask “how to collaborate with a significant practice or sociocultural landscape” or, to extend this question, how to collaborate with a smartphone, especially when “sticky screens” turn the gaze inward (Richardson, 2010) and face-to-face interaction seems displaced.

5. Smartphone as a Disturbance

I usually entered the youth center in the afternoons, when the mostly male youths, aged 12 to 21, gradually arrived after younger visitors left. The colorful space was

dominated by eclectic sofas and posters on topics such as homophobia, brochures on local activities, or youth artwork. Afternoon visitors usually listened to rap music that alternated between local slang or Turkish songs, varying in style and volume depending on who happened to be passing by the youth center’s old computer with the YouTube webpage open. Sometimes the “bar” area, where snacks and non-alcoholic beverages were sold or where donated food was prepared, appeared enveloped in the steam of Turkish chai tea, while a group of youths nearby threw their arms dramatically in the air and danced to a popular song. Staff members were scattered around the room, occasionally joined by ever-changing interns. My emergence on the scene was unremarkable, as I was identified as just another “unpaid intern” or, when the youths learned of my interest in digital media technologies, turned into “the internet woman,” as one visitor introduced me after forgetting my name. Unlike the regular staff, whom some visitors had known for most of their lives, the interns were a fleeting presence. It was usually the established staff that the young people turned to for help with apprenticeships, job applications, private family matters, as well as police and court appointments, while the mostly younger interns served as companions at table tennis or Mario Kart. At 30 years old, I was perceived as lingering somewhere in the middle: old enough to understand the struggles with the job center, and digitally capable enough to participate in the Mario Kart races on the Wii console, although usually coming in last. Having immigrated to Germany from Bosnia and Herzegovina as a teenager, I was also “foreign” enough to relate to the concerns of the youths, most of whom had some sort of migration or asylum-seeking experience. Although research with young people frequently involves a “wariness of adult authority” (Campos-Holland et al., 2016, p. 226), I was occasionally able to tap into the established role of youth workers, who emphasized a non-hierarchical approach to their work and were usually seen as trusted confidants on issues not normally discussed with other adults. Moreover, I also benefited from the numerous opportunities to playfully “be there.”

However, the space was not always buzzing with sociality and play. Sometimes, for reasons even the most experienced staff could not foresee, few visitors showed up; no one played songs on YouTube, and scattered individuals could be seen leaning on the sofas, engrossed in their smartphones. On such occasions, time passed slowly, as I fought the urge to fight my own boredom and discomfort of staring into space by reaching for my smartphone. Initially, I wondered if I should interrupt those who seemed to be busy chatting online. Dismissing it as rude, I patiently waited for a moment when the person looked up and seemed disengaged enough, before disturbing the intimate relationship between the person and the smartphone. At times, this imaginary wall that began to manifest in my perception was reinforced when a group of all-male friends who spoke only Turkish

to each other were passionately playing a then-popular PUBG mobile game and not paying much attention to the silent observer/researcher nearby, wondering what the “participant” aspect of “participant observation” actually meant. It seemed as if the pre-existing barriers of age, gender, my inability to play such games, or language were further cemented by the protective wall that the smartphone erected around the interlocutors. In this context, the smartphone acted like a black box that was not only impenetrable itself, but also exuded an air of warmth and intimacy towards the user, while remaining cold to the researcher.

In these situations, there was a dual pressure to build rapport. On the one hand, I tried to mimic the staff’s efforts to constantly engage the visitors in conversation and activities. Although such expectations were not imposed on me, our collective failure to engage the youths and keep them from leaving out of boredom was discussed in the debriefing as something that needed to be changed. Second, the ethnographic mantra of constantly establishing relationships was ever-present in my mind, as I tried to make contact and engage in small talk, wondering how relationships are established and how the researcher’s agenda affects their nature. While manuals of anthropological and ethnographic methods abound with advice on interviewing, small talk, a quintessential aspect of ethnographic fieldwork, is still rarely treated explicitly as a methodological concern, despite the fleeting theoretical discussions of “phatic community” and the importance of casual greetings, gossip, and passing conversations for social cohesion (Driessen & Jansen, 2013; Goebel, 2021).

While trying to deliberately establish rapport, I wondered about the comments of the youth center staff and my own impression of the smartphone as a competitor. Observing from a distance how potential conversation partners were technically present but focused all their attention on the smartphone eventually triggered a vague sense of jealousy toward the smartphone, which was effortlessly receiving the attention I was striving for. Jealousy, typically discussed in anthropology, if at all, in the context of romantic relationships, was described by Descartes (1988, p. 257) as a “warmth that disposes the soul to undertake things that it hopes (or expects) it can attain because it sees other attaining them.” In the ethnographic encounter, feeling jealous of the smartphone indicated a fragile rapport. For if the smartphone siphoned off this warmth, what was left for the ethnographer, seemingly excluded from this dyadic relationship?

“Exclusion,” write Herriman and Winarnita (2021, p. 118), “is not only a reason to be unpopular, but also an indication of our possible failure as anthropologists.” The pair, who conducted research in Indonesia, report instances in which fieldwork relationships were disrupted by exclusions from important rituals and social activities. However, as they also note, participation in daily life inevitably leads to poor relationships at times

(Herriman & Winarnita, 2021, p. 134), which is not uncommon for anthropologists who tend to strive for warm relationships conducive to fieldwork (see, e.g., Beatty, 2005; Briggs, 1970). Nevertheless, as the authors highlight, even hostile rapport can lead to crucial insights (Herriman & Winarnita, 2021, p. 134). In this case, the disruption caused by the smartphone exposed the ways in which I had created a mystical atmosphere of privacy and impenetrability around the smartphone. Initially, I understood it as an intimate and private object that required me to look away rather than pry into its inner secrets. These imaginations, based more on my implicit assumptions rather than on conversations with interlocutors, then reinforced the self-doubt I was experiencing while trying to relate in an unfamiliar environment, further clouding my view. By creating an affective, dynamic web of warmth and distance, smartphones caused disruption; but they also drew my attention to the blind spots that led me to misinterpret the activities of those seemingly engrossed in smartphones as absent from the potentiality of sociality.

6. Smartphone as an Ambivalent Friend

As the authors of the volume *Reimagining Rapport* (Goebel, 2021) write, it would be easy to construct a narrative arc from the awkward beginnings, through difficulties of fieldwork, to the transformative moments of eventually established rapport. However, although the “internet woman” became a familiar sight, the ethnographic relationships were also subject to the ebb and flow of interaction in the various rhythms of the youth center—either when nothing was happening, or when meaningful conversation could take place between two table tennis sessions, or while I was being playfully yelled at by my self-proclaimed coach in Mario Kart, 17-year-old Arnel. Some visitors came regularly, some I saw only once. Sometimes I sat for hours among friends engrossed in Turkish conversations, sometimes the language switched to German as soon as I approached the same group. Some, like Arnel, a charismatic visitor who was popular with peers and staff alike and notorious for immediately engaging with new interns, approached me when he first saw me, announcing: “You’re lucky I’m here today.” Probably unaware of the significance of such luck for ethnographers, he immediately proceeded to tell his life story. He continued to share bits of his biography and everyday life on every occasion, without a long process of overcoming rapport issues and without much concern with my research agenda. Intimacy appeared in passing moments and disappeared in others, while smartphones, with their ability to open up intimate spaces and temporary “magic circles” (Huizinga, 1938) and close them again, enabled the play of a mobile game for hours, scrolling through Instagram for a few seconds, or engaging with absent friends within one’s “telecocoon” (Habuchi, 2005), thus creating opportunities for “scalable sociality” (Miller et al., 2016).

The importance of these shifting rhythms of attention, communication, and intimacy was most evident in the in-between moments and “non-events,” where smartphones creep in through their deliberate design aimed at bridging the dead time while waiting, commuting, or being bored (Hjorth & Richardson, 2014; Ito et al., 2005; Willson & Kinder-Kurlanda, 2021). Occasional scrolls, free of content or specific intent, were sprinkled over casual conversations in the flesh, simultaneously filling “small communication voids” and “gaps in the day where one is not making interpersonal contact with others,” as Ito and Okabe (2005, p. 263) phrased it in relation to early mobile phone use in Japan. There were no clear boundaries between online and offline spaces, between hanging out with or without a smartphone. Instead, multilateral sociality unfolded with peers present and absent, and with me as the researcher, all the while maintaining peripheral awareness (Ito & Okabe, 2005; Richardson, 2010). For example, David, a 16-year-old apprentice gardener once showed me the FIFA mobile game he was playing with his absent friend, while also talking to his friends across the room who were playing the FIFA video game on the PlayStation. He drew a digital card with a FIFA player and then waited for his friend to react while participating in several parallel streams of communication. On another occasion, when a group of friends were playing an analog poker game, 16-year-old Hassan was the first to lose and had to grudgingly move to the periphery of the game’s magic circle. Having lost the attention of the other players, who ignored the interference of other people and vibrating devices, he opened a mobile poker game on his smartphone and joined a magic circle with the machine while talking to me, aware of his friends and their absent attention, ready to rejoin them as soon as they restarted the game.

The presence of smartphones in the ethnographic encounter also created the possibility of weaving images, audio, and video into flowing conversations, while expanding space and time. Sina, whose family left Afghanistan to seek asylum in Austria, showed me her WhatsApp groups after I asked her about her smartphone and told me about the friends she had made in a Turkish refugee camp who were now living in different places around the world. The instant messages shared with me revealed a wealth of biographic links and hopes for the future. The smartphone housed an endless trove of both intimate and superficial, but no less important, content—for example, when Arnel explained the dramas of his new relationship by showing me his girlfriend’s messages, but also the funny memes he had collected in a photo gallery, just because he was bored and felt like having a laugh. For the most part, I did not actively seek out the invitation into the smartphones and online worlds they afforded. Instead, the smartphone became an inevitable part of the multimodal conversations regularly transcending online and offline. Without the need for spectacular events, the shared everyday “non-events” (Ehn & Löfgren, 2010) involving the smartphone had cre-

ated realms of intimacy, drawing me into a temporary affective triad that could be created and dissolved at any time.

Moreover, the sometimes-slow rhythm of stalled conversation and play, or the occasional boredom, were essential to experientially understand what later became crucial research insights. While conversations often revolved around unemployment, discrimination, and a general lack of apprenticeships or employment, the chronic experience of boredom and waiting became emotionally palpable in those very moments of slow hanging out, when effortless scrolling through Instagram feeds did not simply fill a short-lived dead time of lapsed conversation but became symbolic of an effortful state of disorientation and stagnation in the endless feed of rejections and failures. Sometimes, reaching for the smartphone did not signify a deliberate interruption of sociality or even temporary boredom, but was part of “making do” (Greene, 2020), of making the waiting and boredom bearable. While adjusting to the larger dynamics of exclusion from socio-economic participation, window shopping on Instagram meant almost but not quite participating in the commercial flows. Here, the seemingly inefficient boredom of fieldwork, which also plagued Malinowski (1922/2020), or the temporary walls caused by the smartphone were not necessarily a threat to relationships but an unavoidable part of my interlocutors’ lives. Submitting to these rhythms meant gaining understanding through them. Over time, the initial irritation of halted conversations and boredom became political, as hanging out turned into doing nothing, and thus into a symptom of “social suffering” (van den Berg & O’Neill, 2017). The “sweet nothings” of occasional, casual, intimacy-enhancing exchanges among peers, as Ito (2005, p. 14) phrased it, could at times turn into bitter nothings, as some peers were busy at work, while others were stuck in a cycle of unemployment, waiting for their friends to finish work.

Such fluctuating rhythms of rapport, playful magical circles or instant intimacies were part of the ethnographic experience even before the emergence of smartphones. Nevertheless, the affective ripples surrounding the smartphone drew my attention to the ethnographic non-events that made me question the foundations of relationship building. With their vibrant and pulsating presence, smartphones lend themselves to the ethnographic encounter as a solidified projection surface, much like they serve as a popular scapegoat for various ills of modernity. The inherent ambivalence of rapport and the affective turbulence of fieldwork may easily be projected onto a manifest artefact. Perhaps the discomfort I initially felt towards smartphones’ disruptions of sociality was linked to my understanding of dwelling in digital environments as something particularly proactive in the sense of actively seeking rapport to prove ethnographic legitimacy once a “good” connection was established. Rather than waiting for the trust and rapport to turn solid, trusting the shifting rhythms of youth centers

and smartphone-created spaces alike was key to understanding the politics of those rhythms.

As my own preconceptions of smartphones as private objects inaccessible to the gaze of strangers began to crumble, my perception of the role of the smartphone also shifted—again, not necessarily because of increasingly accumulated rapport credit, although some relationships obviously evolved over time. When Sara started coming in with a printed picture behind the transparent smartphone case on the back of her smartphone, I noticed that the pictures changed every week. The picture on the back thus became an outward-facing news bulletin that I used as a conversation starter. Following our conversations, she shared audiovisual clips from her life, whether pictures of her family or her TikTok videos. As Greene (2020, p. 740) noted in her research in Greek refugee camps, images shared in the fieldwork were “not only re-presentations of participants’ photographs but also documentations of intimate research encounters.” Rather than being discrete and private objects creating distance, smartphones could also expand the possibility of conversation, of “phatic community” and intimacy through mundane acts.

Most of my interlocutors did not pull out their smartphones indiscriminately at moments when social interaction would be disrupted but appeared sensitive to the implicit rules of social conventions and explained that they were annoyed when someone was on their phone when inappropriate, while some described this sensitivity as a matter of “respect” or “upbringing.” At the same time, temporary disruption of sociality could be triggered by someone pulling out their phone and eliciting a wave of smartphones that populated the tables and occupied hands; and conviviality was restored when someone was scolded for answering their phone during a game. The seemingly rude disregard of these rules could also be relativized. Arnel, for example, eagerly anticipated meeting a girl who was to be introduced to him by family friends. However, during dinner with their parents, she kept looking at her phone instead of engaging with Arnel, which dashed his romantic hopes. However, Arnel showed understanding and explained that he later found out that she was having a bad day due to a family incident before dinner and was clinging to her smartphone for comfort.

7. Privacy and Negotiation of “Doorstep Moments”

Such examples of performing social absence and withdrawal through the deliberate act of engaging with the smartphone when physical distance is not possible are reminiscent of research by Hirschauer (2005), who examined how discomfort with physical proximity in elevators is managed through subtle signals of absence. Similarly, Tacchi (2012) has argued that listening to the radio, and later smartphone radio, may actually represent a withdrawal into silence and away from sociality. In his overview of the rare but extant anthropological explo-

ration of privacy within various sociocultural contexts, van der Geest (2018) argued that the urge to signal withdrawal and privacy, no matter how temporary or variously expressed, seems universal, even if it means creating complicated rules for appropriate behavior that form imaginary walls, be it in crowded prisons or Indonesian longhouses. Research in digital anthropology, as van der Geest (2018) also noted, has shown how digital technologies create islands of privacy away from the prying eyes of a surveilling family and peer networks (Costa, 2016; Horst & Miller, 2006), a point also made by my interlocutors. In this context, privacy and protection of data against the predatory players within the tech industry weighed less heavily than circumnavigating family surveillance.

Moreover, as psychologist Gerry Schwartz (1968, p. 743) argued, privacy “has always been a luxury.” Several visitors to the youth center came from crowded households and shared both rooms and digital devices with other family members. For young men, mostly with immigrant backgrounds, hanging out in the yards of housing developments or in shopping malls was sanctioned while they often lacked the means for commercial leisure activities. For some, the youth centers and online spaces were the only sites of free movement and privacy. After all, “home” is not always a safe, secure, and welcoming concept that offers definite privacy and protection (van der Geest, 2018) as the Covid-19 pandemic has shown when domestic abuse cases skyrocketed globally (Piquero et al., 2021). Temporary negotiations of withdrawal, even in the hypersocial context of youth centers, were thus unsurprising, and I as a researcher had to learn to distinguish these signals of withdrawal from the convenience of fiddling with one’s smartphone because one feels excluded or disengaged. On such occasions, smartphones served as an invisibility cloak, as for Arnel’s love interest, who signaled her absence from the table despite his advances.

It was not necessarily only the quality of the rapport, but also my increasing understanding of the affective and effective features of smartphones, as well as my own biases and sensitivities that made a difference when interpreting unfamiliar contexts. These ongoing interpretations of the potential for sociality were critical not only to establishing temporary relationships but also to negotiating my interlocutors’ privacy and consent to allow me insights into their smartphones—both aspects of a “good” connection borne of mutual respect. When it is intimately connected to the relationship, consent is not a one-time legal agreement that is signed and never revisited. However, taking refuge behind one’s own discomfort when unsure whether we, as researchers, should interrupt another person’s affective dyad, would also be a missed opportunity to engage simply because one views the smartphone as a private and non-permeable object. For novice ethnographers, feelings of discomfort and self-doubt are common aspects of fieldwork, but also, like small talk, rarely discussed (Koning & Ooi,

2013). However, taking affects such as jealousy and discomfort seriously helps us to approach these ambivalent moments of rapport with sensitivity, without violating the dynamic boundaries of relational privacy. Such trespassing does not necessarily have to be conscious but can be hidden behind the implicit notion that it is always desirable to be vulnerable and share private matters, while good connection/rapport serves to convince our interlocutors that they should do so (Rampton, 2021)—a notion that is particularly problematic towards minors.

Smartphones are “leaking” (Ingold, 2010) and porous, not discrete, impenetrable objects. Yet their porosity reflects the fragility of ethnographic or, for that matter, of all emergent relations that are not established in binary terms. The liminal space of potentiality in which these negotiations take place can be compared to the potentiality of doors (Jovicic, 2020b). Depending on the context, doors and comparable signifiers of sociality and privacy can be interpreted in a myriad of ways (Schwartz, 1968; Vogler & Jørgensen, 2004). Doors can both signify an invitation and transform into a temporary wall, symbolizing a separation that “denies the possibility of the encounter and withdrawal of social exchange” (Schwartz, 1968, p. 749). Lemos Dekker (2019) speaks of such “doorstep moments” in her research on dementia in nursing homes in the Netherlands, where she found herself lingering at the doorstep, neither here nor there, while patients were dying, relying on her ethnographic sensibility to understand the desires of patients and their family to stay away or enter. Rather than mystifying rapport through simplistic narrative arcs, understanding that ethnographic fieldwork is filled with such back-and-forth “doorstep” moments can help normalize discomfort and create respectful ethnographic relationships that are constantly in flux rather than fixed once established.

8. Conclusion

In the ethnographic methodological literature, smartphones have so far mainly appeared as valuable methodological tools and fieldwork companions. However, their unique characteristics also make them a valuable subject of methodological inquiry regarding the affective entanglements of fieldwork relationships and what these entanglements tell us about ourselves, the interlocutors, and the obscure assumptions about ideal fieldwork. As I have argued, smartphones are a unique reflective surface, a solidified convergence of different constructs in a particular space and time, where moral panic meets everyday discomfort and porous design that can be simultaneously conducive and disruptive to sociality, both within the ethnographic encounter and between interlocutors. As affective, intimate, and “wearable” devices with multiple capabilities of “archiving and sharing affective material,” smartphones are “uniquely embodied” (Greene, 2020, p. 733), and, as such, are a shifting subject of fluctuating rhythms of everyday life

and relationships, a symbol of proximity and distance, intimacy and exclusion. In the everyday lives of my interlocutors, smartphones were seamlessly embedded in everyday negotiations of sociality and disengagement, varying time regimes, and in a broader dynamic of sometimes precarious participation in social, commercial environments and labor markets.

In other social and cultural contexts, or with other researchers, the time regimes and specific social choreographies surrounding smartphones may vary, yet the designed in-betweenness and doorway-like nature of smartphones inevitably has the potential to unearth affective ripples and thus bring the strange and the awkward into the familiar—a particularly relevant concern within ethnographies in contexts similar to our own.

Within the ethnographic encounter, smartphones affect ethnographic interactions not only in the sense of discomfort of being excluded or even as drivers of interaction and sociality but through continuous negotiations of the meaning of smartphones in the unspectacular, often invisible “non-events” (Ehn & Löfgren, 2010) of everyday life. These negotiations do not take place in spectacular events after solid rapport and trust have been established but in long hours of togetherness, boredom, scrolling, and swiping, instant and fragmented intimacy, or within the strategies of invisibility and withdrawal. Based on this continuous ebb and flow of ethnographic connections, I have argued that the interruptions and impermanence that smartphones introduce into a vague process of relationship-building offer an opportunity to rethink entrenched notions of ethnographic encounters and, in particular, of rapport and privacy, both of which are deeply intertwined in digital environments. Negotiating “doorstep moments” caused by smartphone interference sheds new light on the old process of relationship-building with interlocutors with whom we need to carefully negotiate access and privacy in an ongoing process, rather than as a one-off event after rapport is finally established. Moreover, attention to affective currents such as discomfort and relational disturbance in ethnographic research situates the embodied knowledge of the researcher (Stodulka et al., 2019). These considerations should be extended to the study of and with smartphones, which are part of an affective triad as uniquely embodied devices.

Finally, this affective thread can help us better understand the entanglements of online-offline digital environments and their dynamics, rather than simply blurring the boundaries, which would also blur the situatedness of a researcher as a situated being. As Bengtsson (2014) noted, even when conducting ethnography entirely online, one is not disembodied. But the opposite is also true—When doing ethnography offline, the vibrating devices are an inevitable part of the intimacies that develop in the field, whether through the shared images as a memento of a fieldwork relationship or through the alternation of distance and proximity, of cold and warmth. Awareness of their impact is another

important reminder of the complexity of digital environments, where inanimate objects and absent others also become part of the fieldwork experience. Ultimately, this is the appeal of ethnography—the ability to instrumentalize sensitivities to irritations and disturbances to better understand the complexity of the (digitalized) world around us.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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