The London School of Economics and Political Science

Live, here and now:
experiences of immediate connection through habitual social media

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Declaration

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Abstract

This project examines the new dimensions and attributes of the historical construct of *liveness* in the current social media environment. In this scope, liveness comprises both the orchestration of the experiential and the continuous pursuit of immediacy, presence, shared experience, and authenticity in contexts marked precisely by mediation. Liveness emerges as the productively contradictory experience of immediate connection through media.

This thesis deploys liveness both as its central object of enquiry and as a conceptual device to examine mediation as an experiential process in and of itself. Through a diary-interviewing study conducted with London-based social media users, it explores how ordinary experiences of and with habitual social media challenge, reaffirm, or expand our available conceptions of liveness, and assesses the extent to which liveness can be useful to illuminate our understanding of lived experiences with and of social media more broadly. In so doing, the thesis advances a critical phenomenology of mediation, focusing on perceptual processes to examine and interrogate the structures of lived experience without disregarding the social, technical, economic, and political forces that underpin the social media manifold.

In examining liveness through some of the organising principles of phenomenology – temporality, spatiality, intersubjectivity, and embodiment – this thesis explores four existential quests as enacted through technical mediation. They are: the 'real-time' experience, the experience of 'being there', 'getting involved in a shared experience', and the 'authentic' experience. I conclude that the conceptual value of liveness and its relevance and endurance as a key topic of interest for media studies rest in its intrinsically contested, disputed nature of *as-if-ness* – of a mediation that claims also to be immediate – and in how those tensions are renewed, refashioned, and updated with the development and habituation of new technologies of communication.

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Doing a PhD tends to be framed as an intellectual endeavour. Over time, it became clear to me that it is also – and, perhaps, mostly – an *experience*, in which cognition, logic, and reason are always enmeshed in a much wider net of affects, moods, emotions, and encounters. Indeed, I think most of us, doctoral candidates, end up developing a weirdly personal, visceral attachment to this collection of thoughts and tentative arguments we call a 'thesis'. Before starting, I was warned about how lonely and isolating the experience of doing a PhD could be. Thankfully, that was not the case: my personal experience over the last 4.5 years was supported and illuminated by several people, with whom I would like to share my most sincere gratitude:

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The closest thing to teleportation

"Distance and death have always been the two great obstacles to love and two great stimulants of desire. Great obstacles excite great passions".

John Durham Peters (1999:137)

Transcending geographical, temporal, and corporeal constraints has long been one of the main catalysts for the development of communication technologies (Meyrowitz 1985; Carey 1989). By releasing the circulation of messages from their physical boundedness, media fulfil fantasies of expanded experience (Marvin 1988), providing us with access to happenings and people that cannot be reached directly, *immediately*. This thesis was spurred by the belief that the invention and adoption of technologies of communication have as one of their driving forces the attempt to realise this continuing expectation of connectedness with others and with the world beyond the limits of time, space, and of our fleshly bodies – and that whatever we refer to as 'liveness' is one of this aspiration's most enduring manifestations.

Liveness – the quality or condition of being 'live' – has for decades been a topic of interest in media and communications research (Feuer 1983; Bourdon 2000; Auslander 2008, 2012; Couldry 2004; Scannell 2014; van Es 2016, 2017; Hammelburg 2020, 2021a, 2021b). In fact, its persistence as an issue of concern for both media industries and scholars is remarkable, and the observation that it continues to be the object of debate signals not only the term's pliability but also how crucial it has become to this traditionally interdisciplinary and constantly evolving field. Arguably, the use of 'the live' by media institutions as a persuasive point in their promotional strategy is not novel or unprecedented – just think of the range of TV shows that contain the word 'live' in their titles. Nevertheless, liveness seems to have reacquired visibility alongside the pervasive adoption of digital technologies of communication and, more specifically, with the widespread popularisation of so-called social media platforms (van Es 2016). These platforms, in turn, support the emergence of distinctive forms of social

coordination, and function as organisers of perception (Couldry and Hepp 2016; Couldry and Kallinikos 2017; Markham 2020), operating both in our personal lives and on broader dynamics that unfold in the collective sphere.

Bearing this in mind, this thesis comprehends the examination of the new dimensions and attributes of 'the live' in the contemporary media setting, which is understood here in broad terms as the social media environment. Generally, an environment offers the context which we inhabit (Frischmann and Selinger 2018). A media environment is, then, formed by 'the entire body of media available at a given time' (Hepp 2020:86), which includes not only the technical affordances and content of each individual medium but also their interconnectedness and processuality. Within this environment, my aim is to explore liveness, as suggested by Auslander (2008; 2012), not as an ontological property of the thing experienced – the media content itself – nor simply as an ideological discourse used to maintain hegemonic power (Feuer 1983), but rather in terms of its operation, enactment, and negotiation in the milieu of the ordinary lived experience. In this pursuit, I am not necessarily interested in 'live-streaming' applications; I consider liveness to be a vastly more complex articulation that involves media institutions, technologies, and their users (van Es 2016).

In this thesis, I explore the experiences of liveness that emerge in our current media landscape, and I do so by exercising a critical-phenomenological sensibility. That is, I focus on the enactment of liveness in the context of everyday lived experience without losing sight of the forces and dimensions that affect and structure the experiential itself. In short, this project relies on the premise that, through media, we are given access to people, to objects, and to environments that would not be reachable otherwise. However, once we depend on specific platforms and technologies for this access, then our opportunities for connectedness – and for social coordination more broadly – become entangled with these media, their technical infrastructure, their logics, and their commercial interests. What is at stake in the study of liveness, thus, is the very possibility of connection with others and with happenings that matter, and the roles that communication technologies play in these vital social processes.

In addition to centring the examination of 'the live' as an object of enquiry, this thesis also proposes the use of liveness as a conceptual device to observe and analyse empirically people's ordinary experiences with and of social media more broadly. Social media, here, are conceived as manifold, diverse, and continuously evolving technologies, which have myriad dimensions

that spark a range of intellectual interest and foment emerging bodies of scholarship. The dimension that I am particularly interested in, however, is the *existential* one (Lagerkvist 2017, 2019). That is, my interest lies in how these pervasive and naturalised platforms, through their world-building capacities (Frosh 2019) act as infrastructures of being (Peters 2015), enabling but also framing and circumventing our experience of the social world.

In order to support an empirical analysis centred on ordinary experiences, this thesis' theoretical framework combines key concepts from the phenomenological tradition – such as perception, habituation, and orientation – and current contributions from emerging areas of scholarship such as platform and critical algorithm studies. The thesis examines social media by using some of the organising principles (Heyes 2020) of phenomenology – embodiment, temporality, spatiality, and intersubjectivity – as anchoring points, and it argues that liveness is not only a paradigmatic topic for phenomenological inquiry when it comes to mediated experiences, but also that in focusing on 'the live' the core themes of this philosophical school of thought become observable in the multifarious experiences people have with and of social media in the context of everyday life.

That is, the *'Live, here and now'* that entitles this monograph has a twofold meaning: on the one hand, it underlines (if you read the word 'live' as rhyming with 'hive') the fact that this thesis is concerned with current practices and experiences of liveness, and with the manifestation of this historically and technologically contingent concept in the contemporary media landscape. On the other hand, if we take 'live' to rhyme with 'give', then the phrase designates the imperative of living in the here and now, focusing on the moment, and sharing anything, anytime – a rhetoric that supports and sustains the business models of social media platforms, thus conditioning the very experiences one might have with and through them. This dual interpretation reflects the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological decision to pursue a critical phenomenology – or, in other words, a phenomenological disposition that is not blind to the social, technical, and political environment in which it is situated (Couldry and Hepp 2016; Couldry and Kallinikos 2017), nor naïve enough to take the 'experienced' as a pure, decontextualised, or universalising source of evidence (Ahmed 2006; Scott 1991).

Even though the project that resulted in this thesis started to take shape back in 2016, and although the analysis that informs the empirical chapters is based on data collected in 2019, the document that you are reading now was written up during the COVID-19 pandemic. This

has brought some challenges, a few opportunities, a lot of anxiety, and copious hesitation. At times, I thought finishing this doctoral dissertation had become pointless, futile even, compared to the much more urgent and pressing issues represented by a global public health crisis. On other occasions, the compulsory physical isolation in which most of us were confined for extended periods has arguably made the connective, interactive, community-building, and even distractive potential represented by social media technologies significantly more necessary. As a Brazilian living abroad for the first time, the pandemic has made geographical and temporal distances even more pronounced. Therefore, in the name of my own personal interests and professional goals, I argue that my topic of research has become more relevant now than ever before – I hope the reader will agree. With this in mind, the obstacles of 'death' and 'distance' mentioned by Peters (1999) in the opening sentences of this chapter acquire here a new meaning and currency: they are not only about the ephemerality and remoteness typical of mediated liveness; they become also about the inherently transitory nature of our embodied existence, and how aspirations and desires to overcome these burdens are enacted, negotiated, and contested through technical mediation.

1.1 Social media and the matter of experience – or, why a phenomenology of liveness?

Facebook's institutional mission is to *"Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together"*; Twitter *"is what's happening in the world and what people are talking about right now"*. Instagram claims to be *"bringing you closer to the people and things you love"*, while WhatsApp's aim is to *"let people communicate anywhere in the world without barriers"*. Meanwhile, the aspiration of Snapchat's mother company is to *"contribute to human progress by empowering people to express themselves, live in the moment, learn about the world and have fun together",* while the recently discontinued Periscope wanted to become no less than *"the closest thing to teleportation"*. Platform rhetoric, as these examples illustrate, is firmly rooted in the ideals of experiential enhancement mentioned in the previous section – overcoming time and space through immediacy and presence at a distance. Immediacy and presence, in turn, are at the core of mediated liveness in its different manifestations (Feuer 1983; Scannell 2014).

Still, in media and communications research, the examination of liveness traditionally concentrates on television studies and, particularly, on the broadcast of major celebrations, catastrophes, and ceremonies – that is, what is conventionally referred to as a 'media event'

(Dayan and Katz 1992; Scannell 2014). More recently, scholars who dedicate attention to the operation of 'the live' in the current mediascape have focused on its manifestation during contemporary cultural events such as festivals and parades (Hammelburg 2021a) or specific moments of crisis such as terrorist attacks, which are said to configure hybrid media events (Sumiala, Tikka, and Valaskivi 2019). Yet, this thesis is interested instead in a different, and arguably more complex and dynamic, set of phenomena: the operation of 'the live' in the so-called social media environment and, crucially, in the ordinary, mostly 'uneventful' context of habitual, everyday life.

The transition towards our current 'social media era' was the object of study of van Es (2016, 2017), who conceptualised liveness as a socio-technical construction resultant from the articulations of institutions, technologies, and users. Social media, argues van Es (2016), have given rise to new forms of power concentration – and 'the live', which often functions as a device to help sustain media power, takes the shape of different 'constellations'. Drawing on those ideas, which foreground the multifaceted production of the live in the social media environment (and how it differs from televisual broadcast), this thesis aims to offer an equally complex account by focusing on the experiential dimension of liveness. In this section, I will detail why it matters to examine liveness in the context of social media, and what are the main changes and challenges brought about by the popularisation of these technologies. I will also briefly review some of the available attempts to theorise and empirically examine the experiential dimension of social media, whilst establishing the ways in which a critical phenomenology of liveness is a productive topic for academic scrutiny.

Despite the discourse of openness, connectedness, democratisation, and spontaneity that is often foregrounded by the powerful tech companies, in the last decade an increasing body of critical scholarship has been scrutinising the extractivist, exploitative, and commodifying nature of mainstream social media (van Dijck 2013; Zuboff 2019; Beer 2019; Couldry and Mejias 2019). That is, key to this thesis is the understanding that human experience is central not only to social media's rhetoric but also to their business models, and that facilitating and enhancing users' experience is actually "the thing they fall back on to justify and legitimate their every action" (Beer 2019:9). Yet, although scholars generally agree that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram work precisely through the harvesting of human experience (Zuboff 2019; Couldry and Hepp 2019), their experiential dimension – how it feels, and what it means, to be immersed in this technoscape in the context of everyday life

– is often neglected by analytical efforts. In other words, although most of the scholarship agrees that human experience is the primary matter from which social media extract value, the perception (and interpretation) of those who make use of these technologies in the context of everyday life is often deemed irrelevant, or unfeasible, as a matter of enquiry.

Binding together critical and experiential approaches, this thesis starts from the premise that contemporary social media are fundamentally marked by a phenomenological problem: their power is, at least partially, linked to the ways in which they control what and when we see of the world; in phenomenological terms, how the world 'appears' to us (Merleau-Ponty 2012). The starting point of a critical phenomenology of social media, therefore, is the understanding that, within these platforms, 'appearances' are never neutral, natural, or organic, as they always reflect profit-oriented corporate interests (Carmi 2020; Couldry and Kallinikos 2017). A critical-phenomenological perspective aims to address these issues whilst centring specifically what is so often framed as the driver of technical mediation: human experience. 'Experience', in this scope, is both what platforms (claim to) deliver, and the resource they cultivate, extract, and exploit for financial gain.

Yet, in saying that social media bring a whole new layer of complexities I do not mean to reproduce an overly revolutionary or techno-determinist tone; what I mean is to emphasise that – like many other technologies before them (Marvin 1988) – these platforms bring about new forms of social organisation and coordination. These novel layers comprise different ways of experiencing temporality, spatiality, intersubjectivity, and embodiment. In terms of temporality, although digital media have traditionally been framed as privileging instantaneity and real-time interactions, over the past few years scholars have focused on how the algorithmic systems employed to sort the vast bulk of content available on these platforms favour targeting 'the right user at the right time', to the detriment of chronological linearity (Bucher 2020; Carmi 2020). In terms of spatiality, social media add mobility, portability, affect-centredness, and precise, automated geolocative devices to a mediated environment previously said to afford 'no sense of place' (Meyrowitz 1985; Wilken and Humphreys 2021). In terms of intersubjectivity, although initially praised for their opportunities for interaction and sociability from a distance, social media have also been blamed for favouring individual targeting and personal predictability over the creation of coherent groups and a sense of community (Papacharissi 2015; Chun 2017), therefore annihilating the possibilities for the emergence of shared experiences (Kaun and Stiernstedt

2014). Finally, although digital communication was originally associated with postmodern ideals of disembodiment and multiple identities freed from carnal presence, we also have a growing interest in the examination of how the use of social media platforms and handheld devices is invariably permeated by affective, somatic, and embodied dimensions (Karppi 2018; Richardson and Hjorth 2017; Paasonen 2021).

It is also worth pointing out that the term 'social media' itself has been widely contested. While the companies themselves often reject their framing as 'media' in favour of neutral labels such as 'technology platforms' (Napoli and Caplan 2017), critical scholarship tends to manifest scepticism towards the use of the adjective 'social' to distinguish the new technologies from pre-existing ones (van Dijck 2013; Baym 2015; Couldry and Kallinikos 2017; Helsper 2021). In attempts to reframe the debate and move past this conceptual dispute, scholars have proposed alternative terms to social media, such as a 'connective media' (van Dijck 2013) or the 'social uses of ICTs' (Helsper 2021). The former emphasises the politico-economic dimension of the operation of these technologies, particularly the appropriation and harvesting of 'the social' for commercial imperatives; the latter foregrounds certain uses and practices (namely, those focused on social interaction and relationship maintenance) rather than particular platforms, paying attention also to the inequalities inherent to them and to the contexts in which they are situated. While sympathetic to both proposals, and wholeheartedly agreeing with their critiques, this thesis nevertheless adopts 'social media' as one of its central terms not least because this is how such technologies are generally referred to in the context of everyday life.

Still, the 'social' in social media, from this perspective, refers both to the potential for sociality afforded by these technologies which is then translated into particular uses and practices (Helsper 2021), and to the understanding of sociality as their primary source of value extraction (van Dijck 2013). In practical terms, this means that this thesis privileges experiences associated with a handful of popular companies and apps that are part of the participants' own media repertoires (Hepp 2020), and particular social uses and practices within these platforms. This dual stance also reflects my attempt to respond to the demand for a critical phenomenology of social media, which is not blind to the productive and commercial forces that move the development of these technologies "while also tracing the experience of being connected [through them] and its material conditions" (Couldry and Kallinikos 2017:6).

It should be noted, however, that there is no shortage of academic effort focused on examining, explaining, and critiquing social media platforms and their potential implications for mental health, democracy, empathy, and recognition, for autonomy and control, and for our social lives more broadly – not only in media and communications research per se, but also in other related fields such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political sciences. Furthermore, experience-centred topics such as affective computing (Picard 2000) and emotion prediction (Stark 2018, 2020) are also gaining increasing interest, with researchers and tech companies alike trying to solve the mystery of how people feel in certain circumstances, and what is needed for the development of technologies that are more ethical or 'humane'.

In media studies, in particular, we witness an increasing interest in the examination of the topic through the lens of affect theory (Massumi 2002; Papacharissi 2015; Karppi 2018; Paasonen 2021). By focusing on 'resonances', 'sparks', 'jolts', or 'forces' that circulate between humans and non-human actors, these works tend to insist on the separation between affect and intentionality, or intensity and cognition. Whilst I am in principle sympathetic to the idea that the world, its objects, and our surroundings might affect us in ways that often escape conscious acts of signification, I tend to agree with Leys (2011) in her critique of the limits of affect theory, as it seems to me that it is unproductive for most of the applied social sciences – the broader field which media and communications and, as a result, this thesis is part of – to seek some sort of subliminal or pre-cognitive engagement with the world that is prior to, and devoid of, any form of reflection or thought, especially when it comes to empirical research. My decision to embrace a phenomenological sensibility, as I elaborate in more detail in Chapter 3, is motivated by the understanding that this philosophical approach, although focusing mostly on embodied perceptual processes (and on their inseparability from cognitive and interpretive ones), also foregrounds the structures of experience, and considers affects, emotions, and moods as foundational to the experiential itself (Markham 2020).

My starting point is the conviction that in order to examine the experiences we have with and of these technologies in everyday life settings, we need to embrace the generative potential of ambivalence (Lagerkvist 2019; Paasonen 2021). After all, at the most basic level, social media platforms are media companies whose main business model derives from selling advertising space (van Dijck 2013; Napoli and Caplan 2017); but they are also infrastructures of being (Peters 2019), offering some of the basic conditions for our very existence in the world today

(Lagerkvist 2017; Frosh 2019; Markham 2020). I am therefore proposing that these are not incompatible themes for academic scrutiny. In short, this project is centred in human desires, hopes, and dreams, and how those are enacted in habituated practices with media technologies, whilst paying attention to how the negotiation and dispute that characterises lived experience is conditioned by the platforms themselves, their affordances, business models, and commercial imperatives. Although one of the most widespread critiques of phenomenology alleges that it is apolitical and solipsistic in nature, I have worked to offer an analysis that brings together the affect-centred views of the people who engage with these technologies on a daily basis and the factors that guide, orient, and structure these experiences. In so doing, I also offer an empirically grounded critique of prevalent determinist views that conceive of these technologies merely as neuro-behaviouristic addiction machines which could be contained and controlled through a simple individual change of habit.

However, it goes without saying that social media have indeed acquired a central role in many of our social activities today, touching upon a range of realms that comprises our interpersonal relationships, our appraisal of world affairs, entertainment and fun, inspiration, and consumption, amongst many others. Other endeavours to address the centrality, pervasiveness, and manifoldness represented by digital technologies in everyday settings have labelled our current condition as 'life after new media' (Kember and Zylinska 2012), 'media life' (Deuze 2012), the 'mediated construction of reality' (Couldry and Hepp 2016) or, more recently, the 'poetics of digital media' (Frosh 2019) and 'digital life' (Markham 2020). Whilst some of the themes, topics, and ambitions clearly intersect and overlap, I believe this thesis has different guiding questions, and that it offers a slightly different approach to the examination of our allegedly media-saturate existence.

In *Life after New Media*, Kember and Zylinska (2012) push for an environmental approach to mediation, which they conceive as a vital process. In their ambitious 'theory of *lifeness*', "mediation becomes a key trope for understanding and articulating our being-in, and becoming-with, the technological world" (p.xv). Kember and Zylinska's effort in encouraging media scholars to move past the conception of 'new media' as discrete objects indeed resonates with the interests of this thesis, as does their focus on mediation as a process that involves multiple agents, and the role of embodiment within it. Borrowing and adapting ideas from McLuhan (1964) and Bolter and Grusin (2000), they suggest that humans are now part of a complex technological environment, and that it "makes no more sense to talk of us using

[technology] than [it] does of it using us" (Kember and Zylinska 2012:13). The consequence, according to them, is that human users and the used technologies cannot be clearly distinguished anymore, as the latter "have become part of us" (Ibid.).

Enquiring into similar matters, Deuze (2012) offers a comprehensive overview of theories of mediation, which he articulates to argue that, currently, there is no life outside of media: "media are to us as water is to fish. This does not mean life is determined by media – it just suggests that whether we like it or not, every aspect of our lives takes place in media" (Deuze 2012:X). In his explicitly media-centred approach, Deuze emphasises how deeply embedded our relationships with media have become, and how unavoidable and irreversible this condition of total mediation seems to be. In his radical conception of the ubiquity and frequent invisibility of media in everyday life and their role in the construction of our very lifeworld, Deuze proposes "that the ways we experience, make sense of and act upon the world (including ourselves) are always already tied up in media. In this process we become media" (2012:5).

This thesis, therefore, shares a key interest with the authors above – fundamentally, in examining how we interdependently live in a world significantly permeated by technical mediation, and what this means for our social lives more broadly. Deuze (2012), like Kember and Zylinska (2012), seems to foreground some sort of symbiotic process between human beings and technologies, focusing on matters of the pervasiveness and ubiquity of media, and on how their deep entanglement in our lives makes it hard for us to apprehend and examine them. All of those themes are directly relevant to this project. Yet, instead of subscribing to the widespread idea that mediation's power and 'invisibility' originates primarily from its pervasiveness and 'saturation', I have opted here to treat this effacing-capacity of media as a result of processes of habituation – in which our bodies are actively and centrally involved, even if not always at a conscious level. It seems only logical, then, to adopt a phenomenological disposition for this enquiry, for this is the philosophical approach directly interested in the examination of the taken-for-granted, body-world and body-technology relations, and in the scrutiny of the conditions that underlie and orient our lived experience (Ahmed 2006; Ihde 1990; Merleau-Ponty 2012; Markham and Rodgers 2017; Markham 2020).

Such concerns are also of interest to Couldry and Hepp (2016), who develop a theory about the mediated construction of reality through the adoption of what they call a "materialist phenomenology". By that they mean to foreground the material processes that inform the

construction of meaning and of our appraisal of the world more broadly – which, in the case of media, includes objects, infrastructures, platforms, and their respective political and economic settings. Mediation, as discussed by Williams (2020), is understood as a simultaneously symbolic and material condition, in which meaning-making and technical infrastructure are conceived as interconnected and interdependent in their activities of making our lifeworld come into being (Couldry and Hepp 2016). Key to this approach is the belief that "whatever its appearance of complexity, even of opacity, the social world remains something accessible to interpretation and understanding by human actors, indeed a structure built up, in part, through those interpretations and understandings" (p.5) – a premise that this thesis wholeheartedly subscribes to.

In a similar vein, Frosh (2019) emphasises the world-building capacities of media, which he frames as "poetic forces" that "bring forth worlds into presence, producing and revealing them" (p.3) and which, therefore, have an intrinsic existential significance. In his self-proclaimed "pseudo-phenomenological" approach, Frosh engages with motifs and questions that are habitually part of this tradition's domain – such as, for instance, the constitution of our lifeworld and how we come to perceive it and access it through experience (Ibid.). His discussion is anchored in specific digital practices and content – the screenshot, tagging, selfies, and interfaces – through which he argues for the manifold and integrated ways in which the sensorial and the representational operate in constituting the realities we can apprehend.

More recently, Markham (2020) undertook the task of addressing analogous questions, whilst also embracing phenomenology's premise of bracketing the givenness of our lived experiences without aprioristically assuming that mediation inherently brings an experiential loss. As he explains in his appropriation of Heidegger's ideas, "whatever the digital brings into being is just as real as anything else; we always start from an inauthentic present, rather than some pure origin which has come to be contaminated by progressive technological revolutions in representation and communication" (Markham 2020:2). Markham's approach foregrounds the flickering, idle, and continuously moving character of the experiences we tend to have with and of digital technologies. In describing and examining the everydayness of our relations with these habituated artefacts, he discusses the possibilities for recognition, empathy, and ethics not in spite of the distracted, improvisational nature of our experiences with technology, but rather because of and through these very conditions.

The discussions and arguments developed in this thesis are profoundly indebted to many of these ideas – particularly those developed by Couldry and Hepp (2016), Frosh (2019), and Markham (2020). The common point that intersects all these works is a framing of technical mediation as a prevalent, widespread, and significant condition of existence – not as an additional layer that pollutes or corrupts an otherwise authentic life. The matter of experience, then – of how we navigate this highly mediated world, what this means to us, and what are the structures that condition these experiential processes – comes to the fore. Furthermore, most of authors discussed above – from Kember and Zylinska (2012) to Markham (2020) – include a discussion of liveness in their theorisations, however short or marginal it may be. This thesis, however, more than using 'the live' as an example of the depth and extension of mediation, employs liveness both as its central object of enquiry and as a conceptual device to examine mediation as an experiential process in and of itself, as I elaborate in more detail in section 1.3 of this chapter. Before that, however, I want to position my arguments within the extensive and continuously increasing body of scholarship on liveness.

1.2 Reliving the 'live': a brief overview of the scholarship on liveness

It is worth noting that the 'live' is not a well-rounded academic concept cautiously developed with analytical purposes, but actually an ordinary word that has been used both by laypersons and media industries to describe specific types of media content – usually so as to distinguish it from pre-recorded material (Scannell 2014). This distinction, however, seems to make little sense in a context in which the once relatively stable categories of the 'live' and the 'mediated' have become increasingly interwoven (Auslander 2008; Reason and Lindelof 2016; van Es 2016; Hammelburg 2021a). In this regard, scholars seem now to agree that 'liveness' refers to evolving, context-contingent, and medium-specific claims, practices and experiences (Vianello 1985; Couldry 2004; Auslander 2008). Bearing this in mind, in this section I provide an overview of some of the key attempts to define and examine liveness, pointing out the limitations of our available conceptualisations and, in turn, the potential usefulness of a critical-phenomenological approach to the topic.

In performance studies – scholarship focused on theatre, music, dance – liveness is frequently framed as the essential experience resultant from a state of spatiotemporal presence (Reason and Lindelof 2016). That is, we have the physical co-presence between a performer and their audience, in which the lack of technical mediation separating them is said to provide some

degree of ‘realness’. Phelan (1993), for instance, takes the impossibility of reproduction as live performance’s defining trait – the live performance would thus be ontologically based on disappearance and ephemerality, and its claim would be that of an unrecorded, unique, and irreproducible experience. In a similar vein, Aguilar (2014) provides a definition of liveness associated with terms such as authenticity, spontaneity, and excitement. Authenticity is also at the centre of the discussion developed by Dixon (2007), who traces the origins of the issue of ‘the live’ back to the invention of photography – the concern would be the mediatised image’s proximity with a referential ‘reality’, which in turn disrupts the uniqueness in time and space of a given happening.

Auslander (1997, 2008), in contrast, calls into question this alleged supremacy of the live performance in relation to the mediated. According to him, due to issues of reproduction and distribution, the live and the mediated are commonly positioned as mutually exclusive opposites – when, in fact, they are closely linked, as the existence of the qualifier ‘live’ itself derives from the emergence of media technologies. Furthermore, paradoxical phrasings such as ‘recorded live’ support the notion that liveness is not a technologically determined term, but rather a historically contingent one. Liveness, then, would be mostly an affective experience dependent on cultural context (Auslander 2008), or an effect of mediation that designates “a particular way of being involved with something” (Auslander 2012:10).

Nowadays, it is likely that the most popular understanding of ‘the live’ is that related to real-time, instantaneous transmission, especially in the context of televisual broadcast – which has spurred several intellectual endeavours to this date (Caldwell 1995; Dayan and Katz 1992; Davis 2007; Ellis 2000; Kumar 2015; Levine 2003, 2008; Marriott 2007; Meyrowitz 1985; White 2003). In this area, one of the most influential authors is Feuer (1983), who presents a critical argument for the comprehension of liveness not as the ontology or *raison d’être* of TV, but rather as its ideology. According to her, in spite of its self-proclaimed “essence of liveness”, the majority of television’s content cannot even be considered live in the strict sense. She then sees television’s liveness as being built from “an ideology of the live, the immediate, the direct, the spontaneous, the real” (Feuer 1983:14) – anchored on the basic claim that, through the screen, we are given access to what matters, as it happens. Furthermore, she discloses the metadiscourses employed by the TV industry to situate itself and its audience, in which “television as an ideological apparatus positions the spectator into its ‘imaginary’ of presence and immediacy” (Feuer 1983:14), and through which television obfuscates its own

fragmentation so as to, in the process, create an impression of unity. Here, then, more than a neutral state resultant from a (perceived) lack of mediation, liveness is conceived as an intentional, constructed experience brought to life by media industries and technologies in order to support and sustain their business models and their broader ambitions.

Bourdon (2000) also calls into question some of the long-lasting assumptions about television – whose central purpose, according to him, would be located not in the instantaneous transmission itself but actually in providing a sensation of shared viewership. Liveness, in this conception, is never a stable or absolute concept – it is rather a relative question of different 'degrees' produced through a range of socio-technical configurations, and which often represents a technical possibility more than a concrete achievement (Bourdon 2000). Furthermore, Bourdon understands liveness as a matter of spectatorial belief – that is, as an experience grounded in the acceptance of the claim of a given media product as 'live'. This means that people "infer liveness" when dealing with media in their everyday lives – and that liveness, in turn, confers a "coefficient of reality" (2000:536) to the mediated experience. Also, Bourdon (Ibid.) sees liveness as part of a broader history of media, based on a view of communication as speed, and which has at its core the aim to instantaneously connect people and events of the world – while, in the process, creating and reinforcing mass sentiments that are central to the development of the modern state.

The crucial tension permeating different conceptions of liveness in the televisual context is represented by the basic oxymoron that 'the live', despite its aura of spontaneity, unpredictability, and therefore authenticity, has to be intentionally fabricated. Focusing precisely on this fundamental contradiction, Scannell (2014) offers a phenomenological analysis of different types of electronically mediated "live experiences", in which he unpacks some of the strategies for the concealment of modes of production that are behind television's apparent transparency. Through his experience-centred viewpoint, he articulates a contrast between the instances of 'liveness' and 'immediacy': "The surveillance camera captures a soundless visual immediacy. But liveness is something that has to be brought to life precisely in and by the motivations, intentions, care-and-attention that is implicit in everything we get to see and hear on radio and television, and none of which is visible as we watch and listen" (Scannell 2014:99). In this regard, liveness is seen as a construction, a "brought to life" combination of technical capacity, intentionality, and meaning.

Liveness, therefore, has been increasingly framed as associated with media-oriented processes of social order, in which matters such as the centralisation of attention, the concentration of symbolic power, and the very synchronisation of bodies across space come to the fore. Perhaps the first to advance this discussion already taking into account the pervasiveness of digital and mobile technologies, Couldry (2003, 2004) emphasises liveness' role both in the reproduction of certain types of media-centred social coordination, and in their effacement from perception. In this categorical sense, liveness is understood as a resource for the ritualisation and naturalisation of certain power relations. In its different manifestations, liveness "guarantees a potential connection to shared social realities as they are happening" – in which these 'realities' are those that "matter for us as a society" (Couldry 2004:3-4).

The available scholarship also suggests that the emergence of new media did not stop television from using the notion of liveness as a distinctive resource. Ytreberg (2009) discloses how this industry, especially when it comes to reality shows, has transformed existing conventions of liveness and eventfulness in order to increase audience participation in a multiplatform landscape. Multiplatform reality formats produce a sense of temporal co-presence that exceeds the 'actual live moment' of the instantaneous transmission, relying on "looser forms of continuity offered around it on digital platforms" (Ytreberg 2009:479). In a similar vein, Sørensen (2016) examines how British public networks still employ 'the live' in their strategies to maintain their centrality across platforms and devices. She concludes that liveness has been reinvented and reasserted to adjust to new types of media practices. Liveness, therefore, can no longer be defined simply as the real-time transmission of events as they unfold, and "it has to be understood in the context of the entire multiplatform and interactive mediascape that it is part of, and evolving around, as well as in relation to the dynamics between devices, platforms, and content providers" (Sørensen 2016:396).

Already considering the state of 'the live' in the context of the pervasiveness of social media platforms, Hammelburg (2016, 2020, 2021a, 2021b) discusses liveness in digital media-enhanced cultural events, and suggests that temporality, spatiality, and sociality are its central properties. Liveness, then, comprises the potential for participating in a certain event through a hybrid combination of physical and mediated environments, and the possibility of connecting with events and people that matter through technology. Adopting an ethnographic approach that comprised extensive fieldwork which included the observation and interviewing of Dutch event-goers in situ, Hammelburg concludes that liveness is "a historically evolving practice of

establishing instances of 'now here together'" (2021a:216) that allows the emergence of a sense of proximity through the binding of spatial fragmentation, in which experiences of 'being here' and 'being there' become merged and compound each other (2020).

Sumiala, Tikka, and Valaskivi (2019) focus on one particular social media platform – Twitter – for the examination of what they call 'hybrid media events'. That is, media events that are simultaneously experienced through a variety of media, and in which the logics of professional and social media are intertwined and "professional media actors, news media and ordinary social media actors alike contribute to the 'live making and sharing' of the event" (p.203). Using the reactions to the Charlie Hebdo attacks as a case study, they conclude that this multiplatform environment produces an intensification of real-time, which in turn favours stereotypical impressions and immediate interpretations. Consequently, hybrid media events can act both to reinforce social cohesion (as previously theorised in Dayan and Katz's original work, 1992) and to spark conflict and narrative disputes among opposing groups. Liveness, they argue, is intensified by the increased possibilities for the generation of a potentially global sense of connectivity, togetherness, and belonging – even if only briefly (Sumiala et al. 2019).

In short, most of the available conceptualisations orbit around three central views: liveness positioned as (1) a feature of a medium (or of its absence), as (2) an ideological discourse envisioning the centralisation of attention and concentration of power, or as (3) an individual's affective state. In the first group, we have both the works on theatre and music that celebrate live performance's absence of technical mediation, and those within television studies that see the live as the essence of TV as a medium, its most fundamental characteristic, or as its primary technical capacity. The second cluster comprises all the conceptions of liveness as a discursive and institutional construct – grounded in ideas of shared present, collective viewership, witnessing, and direct access to events that matter as they unfold – that intends, ultimately, to forge and reinforce collectivities so as to sustain hegemonic power to favour corporate interests and/or preserve the modern state. Finally, the third one is situated at a more personal level, where liveness is taken as an effect of mediation, a 'sense' of continuous connection, or a particular feeling of being involved with something.

It was precisely in order to overcome the limitations of each of these research approaches – called by her ontological, rhetorical, and phenomenological, respectively – that van Es (2016, 2017) has developed a combined framework for the critical investigation of 'constellations' of

liveness as socio-technical constructions. One of the highlights of the work is the reflection on the proximity (but also the difference) between the commonly conflated instances of the 'live' and the 'real-time' – in which the latter would refer to a quantifiable technical capacity, dependent on aspects such as internet speed and quality of connection. According to her, the 'live' exceeds the matter of 'real-time', and has in 'sociality' its second fundamental axis. Liveness would be, then, "the institutionalised product of the interaction between real-time connectivity and sociality, manifesting itself in a series of different configurations" (van Es 2016:155). Focusing mostly on the constructive role of technologies for the emergence of liveness, van Es examines particular case studies as material and symbolic assemblages, which in turn give rise to specific configurations of 'the live'.

Van Es's working hypothesis, as stated in her conclusion, was that "the term 'live' is used only to describe media through which (symbolic) power is wielded/exercised. In other words, liveness seems to be activated only when particular (institutional) interests are being served" (2016:153). It is to this fundamental contradiction between an appearance of 'rawness', 'directness' and 'immediacy' produced by a lot of purposeful mediative work, that she has referred to as the "paradox of liveness". That is, "a tension between the constructedness of liveness and the idea of direct and 'natural' access to the events relayed" (van Es 2016:15). Crucially, most of the time, "this construction is taken for granted and hidden from view" (Ibid.:36). In this regard, I stress that, in spite of its openly phenomenological perspective, this thesis does not disagree with those who position liveness as a construct employed by media institutions as a way of both reproducing and veiling their commercially driven operation. On the contrary, I see the claims made by companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat as contemporary examples of this longstanding practice. However, I believe that privileging either technicity-oriented or politico-economic perspectives leads scholars to disregard a big part of these complex and dynamic processes, by dismissing the potentially diverse ways people can sense and make sense of these promises – especially when, in the social media environment, they are often subtle and dispersed rather than explicit and categorical (Markham 2020).

Ultimately, the foundational argument of this thesis is that, precisely due to this essentially paradoxical character, liveness could be taken as the paradigmatic manifestation of the tensions explored at the beginning of this chapter – being, potentially, a useful conceptual tool for examining current and future promises of enhanced experience. Liveness is, from this

perspective, the pursuit and enactment of the paradoxical dream of expanded experience and perceptual seamlessness in the context of mediated communications. This pursuit, however, is neither accidental nor neutral – it is indeed always marked by an ideological dimension (Feuer 1983; Couldry 2004; van Es 2016). And yet, as suggested by Markham (2020), accepting that liveness is a construction or even a myth should not imply the removal of some concealing layer in order to unveil a more authentic reality; "rather, we should ask what else it propagates, what it normalises, and what it renders possible in the world in which we live" (Markham 2020:96). To capture these aspects, a critical-phenomenological disposition is needed.

1.3 Aims and justification

By claiming to develop a critical phenomenology I aim to emphasise that I am focused on the examination of lived experiences whilst maintaining a concern for both how the infrastructural, socio-technical, and politico-economic dimensions of social media affect the experiential, and how their habituation is significant to the maintenance of social order. In fact, I am interested in the intersection of those themes – and therefore, as I elaborate further in Chapters 2 and 3, this project treats habituation not as accidental, but rather as deliberately built into these technologies and the logics underpinning them. Ultimately, this thesis is neither simply a study of experiences of liveness in social media, nor purely a study of social media experiences from the perspective of liveness – it is in fact both. In this critical phenomenology of mediation, liveness is treated in different moments as either the object of enquiry or as the analytical, sensitising device for the discussion of the experiential opportunities afforded and constrained by these now ubiquitous communication technologies.

As a *study of experiences of liveness in social media*, this research aims to provide and foster new discussions and insights on a longstanding (and inevitably charged) humanistic issue – the desire and need for connection, broadly defined, as well as for proximity, intimacy, and authenticity. These have been for decades part of the agenda in media and communications, and I do believe that if the aspiration for liveness really goes beyond essentialist, marketing, and ideological discourses, then it is because it is strongly related to these desires and demands. Yet, in examining the operation of 'the live' in everyday experience, I hope to identify and critically examine the 'essential traces of humanity' evoked, presumed, and constructed in these ordinary engagements between people and platforms. Furthermore, through the promise of liveness we are repeatedly told we have an enhanced opportunity of experiencing the social

world ‘as it is’, ‘directly’, and ‘in real-time’. By unpacking liveness and the ways in which it is perceived (if at all) in practice, I seek to contribute to some of the core theories of the social sciences, notably those that deal with the perception (and the construction) of reality and the role that media institutions and technologies play in those fundamental processes that constitute social life.

Moreover, even though I acknowledge the contributions of existing phenomenologically informed studies of social media (Markham 2020; Frosh 2019; Couldry and Hepp 2016) and of liveness (Scannell 2014), I defend the necessity of bringing an empirical, ‘end-user’ perspective to the centre of the debate. My aim in this project is to ground my study in the perceptions, sensations, and interpretations that emerge in people’s everyday entanglements with media in the context of everyday life, anticipating that this granularity will allow me to offer more nuanced theorisations.

At the same time, this thesis also proposes a *study of social media experiences from the perspective of liveness* – liveness, I argue, is a productive conceptual and empirical entry point for a broader phenomenology of social media. Conceptually, it affords a critically informed analysis of experiences; after all, it accounts for the perceivable whilst acknowledging and centring the ‘care structures’ (Scannell 2014) at play – that is, the very conditions of experience. Empirically, focusing on liveness as a sensitising device provides some foundational topics for a more focused exploration of an otherwise immensely vast myriad of experiences – after all, we do many things with social media, and they simultaneously do many things to us.

Liveness, then, provides specific anchoring points to frame an analysis that otherwise would be unmanageably broad. I concur that there is something fundamentally *existential* about the ‘live’ that is not captured by any of the competing concepts (Scannell 2014), and that liveness makes the central motifs of phenomenological theorisation amenable to observation and analysis in practice. This thesis is thus justified by the acknowledgement that the fundamental components of our lived experience are the relations between our embodied beings, place, time, and other persons – and the working proposal that liveness is, perhaps, the paradigmatic manifestation of phenomenological principles and themes when it comes to mediated communications.

On a reflexive note, it is worth pointing out that the emphasis on 'everyday experiences' and 'ordinary life', which I reproduce throughout this thesis, is always at risk of underplaying significant social inequalities, including those associated with categories such as gender, class, race, and their intersectional manifestations. Likewise, in focusing on experiences of liveness – even those that are subtle, latent, or elusive rather than explicit and categorical – I do not mean to suggest that every experience is a *live experience*. Indeed, I am under no illusion that this project would be able to reflect the totality of experiences people have of and with social media technologies. The goal of the project – and, consequently, of the chosen empirical design focused on descriptions and interpretations of experiences rather than on the observation of an allegedly pure experience – is more modest and, I believe, more practical. The analytical aim, then, is not to seek an optimal portrayal of objective reality, but rather to reach an evocative, shared realm of experience (Friesen 2012; Aagaard 2017).

Moreover, in grounding the empirical analysis in the experiences of people who live in London I do not mean to claim their universality or applicability to every context. The aim is, instead, precisely to identify patterns across individual experiences, perceptions, and discourses provided by a small group of people, which then will be used to inform and review wider theorisations. The narratives that inform my empirical analysis are marked by what Mol (2021) called "deliberate provincialism", in the sense that they are specific to the sites and contexts in which they take place. Rather than trying to obtain a 'representative' sample, then, empirical recruitment for phenomenological research is premised on the selection of people "who have lived experience that is the focus of the study, who are willing to talk about their experience, and who are diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience" (Laverty 2003:29). In short, this project rejects conceptions of methodological rigour as intrinsically based on generalisability and universality; it favours, instead, reflexivity, evocativeness, resonance, and recognisability (Highmore 2011; Paasonen 2021), and it argues that this is a valid strategy for academic critique.

Liveness, as I hope the narrative constructed in this thesis will convey, allows me to link my two main areas of research interest: existential, transcendental questions and ordinary, mundane sites of observation. Indeed, one of the foundational arguments that underpins the theoretical and empirical chapters is the idea that liveness helps social media to construct and maintain their very ordinariness. Bearing this in mind, this thesis aims to examine how our conceptions of liveness are refashioned and/or contested in our current social media

environment, and how in turn our understanding of the existential dimensions of social media is illuminated by using liveness as a sensitising device. In so doing, the intention is to advance and contribute to a critical phenomenology of mediation.

1.4 Structure of this thesis

To address these points, this thesis' narrative is organised into nine chapters. Following this Introduction, Chapter 2 – *Conditions of connection: habitual social media and the orchestration of social life*[1] – offers a critical review of scholarship on social media and their logic of platformisation. In doing so, I justify why this thesis, instead of choosing one specific site for empirical examination, embraces an environmental perspective to mediation. Engaging with works on the platform economy of social media, I unpack the logic of connectivity, emphasising in particular two of its supporting devices: the incitement of continuous connectedness and the individually personalised flow of content delivered to each user. I then focus in more detail on the implications of algorithmic-driven organisation on how the world 'appears to us' (a classic phenomenological motif) and, specifically, on how algorithmic systems affect and disrupt what were until then characterised as real-time media. Subsequently, I explore the status of 'in-betweenness' typical of the social media environment, in which platforms are tweaked, mixed, and matched for a range of purposes, representing a complexification of communication's traditional divide of dissemination versus dialogue. Finally, the chapter critiques the framework of addiction for the examination of an alleged generalised, pathologised dependency on social media, offering instead an approach centred on processes of interdependence between bodies and technologies, through the lens of habit. Ultimately, this chapter provides a broad (even if inevitably incomplete) overview of how social media have been theorised as conditioning users' lived experiences – whilst paving the way for the introduction of the theoretical framework based on a phenomenological sensibility.

The elaboration of this critical-phenomenological disposition is precisely the core concern of Chapter 3 – *Live(d) experience: towards a critical phenomenology of habitual social media.* As a direct response to the questions raised in Chapter 2, and in expanding on the reasons why I have decided to embrace phenomenology as a theoretical and methodological approach, I present my evolving conceptualisation of 'lived experience', in which embodiment and

[1] An earlier version of some the arguments presented in Chapters 2 and 3 has been published (Lupinacci 2019) in an edited collection for the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA)'s Research and Teaching Communication series.

interpretation, sensing and sense-making, are fundamentally interconnected. Foregrounding the existential dimension of media, I discuss the reasons why mediation should be treated as a phenomenological matter – and what the differences are in examining communication technologies in comparison to other types of objects traditionally scrutinised by phenomenologists. I offer an updated reading of the key phenomenological principles of embodiment, temporality, spatiality, and intersubjectivity, and summarise how they could be productively approached in the context of social media. Then, I move on to liveness, outlining how the available scholarship has conceived the possibilities for the 'live' to be sensed phenomenologically. This overview informs my suggestion for a conceptualisation of liveness as the paradoxical *experience of immediate connection through media*. Going full circle, the chapter ends by positioning liveness as a paradigmatic experience; that is, as a particularly productive topic for a critical-phenomenological enquiry on the matter of mediation.

Once the theoretical and conceptual foundation for the thesis has been introduced, Chapter 4 – *Methodological framework: capturing the experience,* offers the rationale, tools, instruments, and methods chosen for the empirical portion of the project. Informed by the discussion developed in the first two chapters, it starts with the statement of the research questions and their suggested operationalisation. I focus, in particular, on the reasons that led me to privilege reflexive, discursive methods rather than the 'live' observation of experiences in everyday settings. In describing the conduct of 40 semi-structured interviews and the collection of 100 qualitative diary entries submitted by 20 people who live in London and use a range of social media on a daily basis, as well as the phenomenologically attuned thematic analysis, I provide a detailed, reflexive account of the benefits and constraints of the chosen methodology. The account includes not only a reflection on the selection, sourcing, and recruitment of informants, but also a critical consideration of the biases and ethical implications of the project. The chapter ends with an introduction to the analytical framework and coding, which led to the formulation of the four subsequent empirical chapters, each of them focusing on particular manifestations and attributes of liveness in the social media manifold.

The first empirical chapter, *The time of our lives: liveness, realtimeness, and phenomenal algorhythms* foregrounds temporality. Instead of assuming that social media are inherently about either 'real-time' or 'the right time', I observe the operation of experienced time in these mediated practices as always situated and relational. Arguing that it makes little sense to generalise certain attributes (such as 'nowness' or 'newness') to social media as a whole, I

examine how platforms – and the transit between different platforms, apps, devices, and purposes – are rhythmically experienced in the context of everyday life, and what this means for our understanding and apprehension of liveness. I dedicate attention to the agency of social media's algorithmic systems as perceived by the interviewees, which is framed as producing particular experienced patterns of movement – which I designate as *phenomenal algorhythms* – combining experiences of homophilic harmony and serendipity, repetition and difference, slowness and unsettledness. Instead of assuming that 'real-time' is a stable concept, I break it down in my empirical analysis through the examination of four prominent temporal mechanisms described by the interviewees – instantaneity, freshness, simultaneity, and ephemerality. The chapter ends with a discussion about how these experienced rhythms configure what is the 'actual' live and what 'feels' live – that is, how they give rise to experiences that evoke a sense of temporal liveness even if they cannot be technically classified as such.

Chapter 6, *Being here, there and everywhere: presencing and placemaking in contexts of mediation*, focuses on the role of social media in providing users with particular spatial experiences in situations of remoteness – that is, with how, through technical mediation, we perceive the world and its objects as 'present' in our phenomenal field. This chapter aims to identify the ways in which conventions of mediated spatiality and intersubjectivity are operationalised and negotiated by people in their everyday practices with social media, based on which it goes on to discuss what this means for our understanding of liveness and for our phenomenology of mediation more broadly. Rather than reproducing available conceptions of digital communication as marked by a sense of mediated 'co-presence', in this chapter I explore alternative approaches to, and conceptions of, *being there* in contexts of remoteness. My analysis suggests that, in social media, we are most often looking 'at' (as in, looking at things, looking at the screen, or at Instagram), and eventually our attention is caught so that we end up looking 'through' these technologies (to experience something happening elsewhere, as if you were there). These, I conclude, are different modes of attention, embodiment, and hermeneutical engagement (Denson 2011; Ihde 1990), which afford different opportunities for presencing and placemaking. In this regard, cases in which users find more resources to 'borrow' the perspective of others through the available *tokens of embodiment* are those that are ultimately perceived as the closest to eventually providing a sense of *being there live*.

The particularities of algorithmically personalised media add an unprecedented problem for centralising attention, and for the creation of shared experiences. In Chapter 7 – *Getting involved: impending eventfulness and shared experiences in individualised media*[2] – I tackle this issue. I discuss, in particular, when and how social media afford the feeling of 'being part of something', even if this collectiveness is not always translated into the creation of enduring communities. Rather than focusing on extraordinary 'eventness', this chapter examines the emergence of liveness through habitual anticipation – that is, as grounded on the premise that, in social media, something interesting or attention-worthy is always about to happen. Here, then, liveness is conceived as associated with a latent sense of 'just-in-caseness', in which users feel compelled to scroll the feed one more time, or check their direct messages over and over on the off chance of finding something fresh, exciting, or minimally interesting – despite consciously acknowledging that this anticipation rarely bears fruit. In this regard, while the televised media event is grounded on the centralisation of attention (Dayan and Katz 1992; Scannell 2014), I argue that social media privilege precisely the *centralisation of distraction*, premised on the power of the 'chanced upon' encounter with anything interesting or eventful that provokes affective intensities and reactions. The chapter then closes with a discussion about how social media usage is also impacted by a sense of responsibility towards others who matter, and how habitual anticipation is converted into a duty or burden to remain continuously connected to keep track of things as they happen, whenever they happen, *live*.

The fourth, and final, empirical chapter, *Living in the moment: (im)mediation and the authentic experience,* focuses on the matter of 'immediacy'. The starting point is the understanding that 'the live' is a value-loaded attribute, as promises of liveness are always underpinned by claims of truth, and of trust. From the standpoint of mediated liveness, then, the authentic experience is that which is perceived as a *direct* engagement with what is *really* happening. In this chapter, I examine how technical mediation is often understood by the participants as representing a fundamental obstacle to the concretisation of those reality claims. The core problematic addressed is the crucial tension represented by the yearning for reaching the world beyond bodily constraints and the desire for technological transparency and perceptual seamlessness. In my analysis, I suggest that this idealised pure experience is never fully realised in practice, and that this frustration frequently leads users to try strategies of disconnection as a solution

[2] An earlier version of some of the arguments presented in this chapter has been published (Lupinacci 2021a) in the journal *Media, Culture & Society*.

for feeling *alive*. Bringing together some of the main topics considered throughout the thesis, the chapter ends with a discussion about the conditions of imaginability afforded by our current socio-technical environment, and how the desires and hopes of mediated immediacy – of liveness – once associated with social media seem now to be poured into what is perceived as the next inevitable technological development.

Finally, in Chapter 9 – *Conclusions: the productive contradiction of liveness*, I recapitulate the main findings and arguments presented throughout the monograph, and suggest potential entry points for further research. I argue that the focus on 'the live' allows us to capture the more granular, often trivial ways in which dreams of enhanced experience are incorporated, negotiated, and contested in the context of habitual lived experience with and of social media. I also posit that social media, in turn, in presenting themselves as the solution for a more fulfilling, authentic, and enhanced lived experience, also affect, inform, and to some extent frame the conceptions and imaginaries of human connection and experience that are available to us. I conclude that, even in a data-driven mediated environment that is centred on the 'individual', liveness still represents one of the main fantasies that animates (and, often, justifies) the habituation of technologies of communication. Indeed, social media's emphasis on continuous connectedness and active 'engagement' are both dependent on, and sustain the creation of, a more dispersed, subtle sense of 'liveness'. Liveness is, I conclude, about the productive impossibility of capturing, through technical mediation, 'life itself' – it is, then, *the productive contradiction of mediated immediacy*. The chapter then ends with a critique of recent manifestations[3] of this longstanding and continuously updating techno-dream, by demonstrating how the empirical and theoretical contributions of this thesis could help us in assessing current and future promises of liveness.

[3] An earlier version of this discussion has been turned into a post for the Media@LSE blog (Lupinacci 2021b).

Chapter 2

Conditions of connection: habitual social media and the orchestration of social life

Social media are said to be many things. They are an escape for moments of boredom, a useful pastime for those instants in which nothing is really happening and all you need is a funny meme and a quick laugh. They are a convenient resource to keep in touch with family and friends when physical encounters are not an option (or for when the possibility exists, but you would just rather send a GIF than having a long conversation IRL). They are a gateway to an almost-infinite source of inspiration, creativity, and entertainment. They allow us to be ourselves, to express our feelings, personalities, and interests in ways that we could not do otherwise. They are also very distracting – as some would say, even addictive. They provide us with a limited, biased view of the world. They make us unhappy with our lives and bodies once we compare ourselves to the apparent perfection of others. They are polarising, inflaming, favouring gut feelings over rational deliberation. They make us isolated in our small bubbles at the same time as they induce us into a herd-mentality.

As explained in the Introduction, this thesis assumes that, as a construction that must be brought to life (Scannell 2014; van Es 2016), liveness comprises both the experiential and its organisation. The theorisation of this relationship between what is felt and the structure of these experiences will be elaborated in more detail in Chapter 3. For now, it suffices to clarify that, in embracing a critically informed phenomenological sensibility, I am assuming that even our subjective experiences are organised and oriented in certain ways (Ahmed 2006). This issue is at the core of what Highmore calls "sensorial orchestration" – the arrangement "of what is seen or felt as notable, perceivable, valuable, noticeable" (2011:23). In orienting the experiential, technologies establish some of the most basic conditions for living in the world today (Ihde 1990, Markham 2020). Given that, as I explore further in Chapter 3, I take liveness to be the paradoxical 'experience of immediate connection through media', the current chapter explores what is meant here by 'connection', how this is orchestrated or conditioned by contemporary social media companies, and why it matters.

There are many possible pathways that a story of social media could follow, a multiplicity that is only increased by the fact that these platforms are constantly updating (Chun 2017; van Es 2016; Hepp 2020). Instead of siding with either romantics or doomsayers, I have – as an aspiring scholar and long-term user of these technologies, who is simultaneously mesmerised and frightened by their power – deliberately decided to embrace and foreground the ambivalent, often contradictory relations we establish with them in our everyday lives (Lagerkvist 2017; Paasonen 2021). Bearing this in mind, in this chapter I aim to provide an overview of the socio-technical context in which my discussion of liveness is situated. As I pointed out in the Introduction, liveness is a longstanding topic of interest in the study of media and communications; yet, precisely because of the concept's variability and contingency, it is crucial to understand from the very beginning how it fits into the broader mediascape in which a few companies, apps and 'platforms' are said to dictate our very sociality.

I have no intention here to offer a complete history of social media – especially because, as the social studies of science and technology have taught us (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999), technological development is often a much messier process than revisionist narratives try to make it seem. I should also clarify that my position is not to adopt a revolutionary attitude in which social media are taken as obliterating pre-existing communicative practices, nor a deterministic tone that attributes any social consequences solely to the technologies themselves. Hopefully, the following pages will offer a nuanced narrative of how social media and their logics of 'connectivity' came to acquire such a central status in the ordinary lives of so many of us, and why this is worthy of scholarly attention.

Social media now represent a prolific area of study, and the available scholarship has addressed the implications of these platforms from myriad perspectives. Regarding the operation of these companies and their work in inciting connectedness, perhaps the most influential approach currently is the examination of the political economy of platformisation (Helmond 2015; Nieborg and Helmond 2019; van Dijck 2013; van Dijck Poell, and de Waal 2018), which has been extensively undertaken through the critical scrutiny of platforms' business models, their application programming interfaces (APIs), and their institutional discourse. An underlying motif of this chapter, though, is that the relevance and role of social media logic (van Dijck and Poell 2013) should not lead us to believe that the 'making' of our social media environment can be entirely reduced to a handful of companies and their operation (Hepp 2020). Likewise, as theorised by van Es (2016), liveness is always a construction dependent on institutions,

technologies, and their users. Orchestration, then, is not unidirectional, as we are always both subjected to and active within this process (Highmore 2011). This thesis adopts an experience-centred standpoint to offer a complementary and more complex account of these socio-technical processes that are so crucial to our everyday lives.

Yet, the starting point of this chapter is the conviction that a critical phenomenology of mediation cannot be blind to the technical, economic, and political dimensions of media. In reviewing some of the key discussions on what is now broadly referred to as 'platformisation', I aim to highlight some of the aspects that affect and condition any experience one might have with and through these technologies. In this regard, throughout this chapter I will demonstrate how social media, like television, are premised on the technical potential for immediate connectedness. Social media, moreover, are a particularly interesting case, as they often veil their very operation through a logic of spontaneity and organicity (Carmi 2020). If we take spontaneity to be the lack of organisation (Martín-Barbero 1993), then we can visualise how contradictory this discourse actually is, as any 'appearance' in social media is inevitably dependent on computation, processing, and organisation (Couldry and Kallinikos 2017).

In this chapter, I aim to signpost some of the key tensions emergent from the fact that many of our experiences have become mediated by social media, while paving the way to the presentation of the phenomenological approach I have decided to centre in my empirical analysis. Yet, in foregrounding the issues that are key to my aims and research questions, I will necessarily leave out relevant topics that have been the object of a burgeoning body of scholarship on critical media, data, and algorithmic studies. After all, academic writing also comprises careful processes of curation, filtering mechanisms, ranking, and ordering – processes that are inevitably biased, relatively opaque but always tainted by individual preferences and interests, and limited by the constraints of an already long doctoral thesis.

2.1 The social & the media: defining programmed sociality, avoiding platform-centrism

Social media, which largely generate revenue through data-driven, targeted advertising, try to captivate users' attention and encourage active, quantifiable engagement, which is then employed to produce (and sell) predictability (Chun 2017; Couldry and Kallinikos 2017). During the writing of this thesis, the surveillance-based, compulsion-prompting, and profit-oriented character of social media reached mainstream discourse, as illustrated by the

popularity of Netflix's hit documentary-drama *The Social Dilemma*, released in mid-2020, in the wake of media scandals such as the Cambridge Analytica debacle and Facebook's massive experiment with emotion contagion (Bucher 2021).

Yet, when I first started reading and thinking critically about media and everyday life – which was probably at some point during my undergraduate degree, between 2008 and 2011 – digital technologies like Facebook and Twitter were referred to not as 'platforms', 'apps', 'companies', or 'industries', but rather as Social Network(ing) Sites (SNS). As theorised in boyd and Ellison's (2007) influential introductory article, although the infrastructure of the then most popular examples was fairly consistent – and typically based on the creation, extension and/or maintenance of existing social networks – their uses, audiences, and emerging cultures varied significantly. In short, SNS were based on a (semi) public personal profile and a list of contacts, connections, or 'friends', which were then prompted to activities such as 'messaging', 'sharing', and 'liking' each other's texts and pictures. Their focus, then, was on the organisation of online communities, which could be based on demographic, geographic, or interest-based criteria (boyd and Ellison 2007). Although the phenomenon attracted the attention of scholars from numerous disciplinary backgrounds, perhaps the two main streams of intellectual production revolved around either self-presentation and identity management (boyd 2004; Papacharissi 2010, amongst many others) or the characteristics of the networks themselves, their public display, degree of centralisation and the strength of their ties (Yuan and Gay 2006; Donath and boyd 2004; to name just a few). Privacy, although certainly a matter of concern from the very beginning, was discussed mainly from the perspective of curating and managing other users' access to one's intimate content and avoiding 'context collapse' (Barnes 2006; Davis and Jurgenson 2014; Marwick and boyd 2014).

Over the past decade, though, an emerging body of scholarship has shed light on a less optimistic and empowering side of these technologies, which often approaches privacy as threatened not by imagined audiences but rather by a sophisticated infrastructure of surveillance grounded on the extraction of users' personal data (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013; van Dijck 2013; Couldry and Hepp 2016; Zuboff 2019; Couldry and Mejias 2019). In foregrounding "social media logics"– "the strategies, mechanisms, and economies underpinning these platforms' dynamics" (van Dijck and Poell 2013:3), which often go beyond the boundaries of the sites themselves through the now widespread incorporation of APIs that make the web "platform-ready" (Helmond 2015; Blanke and Pybus 2020), these works tend to

critically approach the political economy that supports and sustains the operability of these now ubiquitous socio-technical systems. In a context of platformisation, 'programmed sociality', then, designates the computational arrangements of social media platforms and the social activities afforded by them, which in turn leads to the emergence of specific power dynamics and politics of visibility (Bucher 2018).

The adjective 'social' historically works to differentiate these applications from pre-existing communication technologies – which, of course, does not mean that media such as radio, television, or the newspaper were a-social. As explained by Baym, "any medium that allows people to make meaning together is social" (2015:2). The logic of social media, though, centres specific attributes that extract value from social interactions themselves ("the takeover of the social by the corporate", as put by Baym 2015:2), such as programmability, popularity, datafication, and connectivity (van Dijck and Poell 2013). I will return to some of these attributes in the following section, but for now I want to focus on one of the often-unaddressed consequences of the academic interest in the so-called platform society, which is platform-centrism.

Before moving forward, it is important to acknowledge that the word 'platform' itself is the subject of intense debate. This is mostly because the term tends to be publicly employed by many big players within the digital market as, thanks to the term's appearance of neutrality, it conveniently works across multiple venues and audiences (Gillespie 2010). Nevertheless, these technologies should not be seen as mere facilitators or intermediaries but rather as mediators with agency to shape the social activities that emerge from their use (van Dijck 2013). Therefore, by 'platform' I am generally referring to contemporary mainstream digital media companies and technologies, which have deep reach and embeddedness within people's everyday lives. In their dual nature, or "double articulation" (Langlois and Elmer 2013), these institutions and technologies assume apparently contradictory roles as both propellants of creativity, expression, and agency, and as reproducers of power relations that support commercial interests (Plantin et al. 2016). Key to this chapter, and to the arguments of this thesis more broadly, is the understanding of social media platforms as capable of establishing "the technocultural conditions within which users can produce content and within which content and users can be re-channelled through techno-commercial networks and channels" (Langlois et al. 2009). Social media have world-building capacities, as they provide part of the

infrastructure that produces the social worlds we inhabit and explore (Frosh 2019; Langlois et al. 2009).

In this scenario of increasing 'platformisation', in which the platform has become "the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web" (Helmond 2015:1), a common analytical approach has been the examination of discrete applications, their interfaces, affordances, and the interactive practices enabled (and constrained) by them. As defended by Langlois et al. (2009), platform-based methods help make "visible the ways in which protocols are articulated so as to channel information in specific ways and thus enact specific economic, legal, and cultural dynamics". Yet, I would argue that if the web should be approached as an assemblage of protocols (Langlois et al. 2009), then social media should be seen as an assemblage of platforms, an environment or ecology that users are thrown into and navigate in complex and relatively unpredictable ways (Markham 2020). Indeed, even the content produced on a particular platform tends to be easily replicated and reposted on competing ones, in an intricate cross-platform interplay.

In this regard, and precisely because this thesis' focus is on how social media are experienced in the context of everyday life – which is invariably marked by a messiness and interconnectedness that exceeds the confines of specific platforms – I feel more aligned to the body of scholarship that claims that media cannot be seen in isolation, but rather as in constant relation to the other available possibilities. One of the attempts to understand and explain this phenomenon is the theory of polymedia, developed by Madianou and Miller (2013) to describe the combination of different applications in the context of interpersonal communication at a distance. Key here is the shift from discrete technologies or platforms to their conception as a relational, "integrated environment of affordances" and communicative opportunities that users navigate depending on their suitability to specific social and emotional needs (Madianou 2015:667). In this conception, choosing which platform to use at a particular instance is assumed to be tactical and intentional, and "becomes increasingly a matter of individual agency" in which "the moral weight of communication" is accentuated (Madianou 2015:672).

Whereas I wholeheartedly agree with the argument that, more than merely a matter of technological convergence, we are witnessing the emergence of a different set of relations and attachments to technology marked by a myriad portfolio of communicative opportunities (Madianou and Miller 2013), I am not entirely convinced of the centrality designated by the

theory of polymedia to deliberate choice and unlimited agency. As I will discuss in the following sections (and demonstrate through my empirical analysis), in practice many of these 'decisions' are naturalised, habitual, driven by convenience rather than by emotional needs, and always-already constrained by the technological environment itself, in which we have not only a handful of dominating platforms but also their continuous merging, incorporation, integration, and discontinuation.

In this regard, like polymedia, "media manifold" (Couldry 2016) draws attention to the fact that people often manage their relations with and through media by choosing and combining an array of technologies, platforms, and apps. However, contrary to Madianou and Miller's concept, which seems highly focused on emotional factors, Couldry foregrounds the structured complexities of these interrelations between people and media options. Media manifold, thus, seems to address both the position of situated actors in the highly institutionalised media environment and the complexity that is intrinsic to choosing specific media for particular situations in everyday practices (Couldry and Hepp 2016). Media manifold then refers not only to the obvious plurality of media possibilities, but to the fact that they are many-dimensional and deeply interlinked (Couldry and Hepp 2016). If we agree that "a phenomenology of media without a grounding in political economy is blind" (Couldry 2016:38), then our environmental or ecological conception of social media should account for the fact that any selection or choice is therefore already embedded in a complex technological and economic structure.

Relatedly, another common blind spot of platform-centric scholarship is the attribution of power solely to the discrete platforms themselves, ignoring the wider infrastructural context in which they (as particular applications or as an environment of options) are accessed in everyday life (Willems 2020). Technologies are always assemblages, part of broader technological systems (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999); in the case of a phenomenology of social media, perhaps the most obvious aspect is the invariable need for a hardware component for their materialisation at the interface level. As I will further explore in section 2.4 of this chapter, experiences with social media are now often experiences with 'mobile social media' (Humphreys 2013), and therefore it becomes imperative to acknowledge and address the relational (and often taken-for-granted) character of software and hardware in their everyday uses once the affordances of the devices and those of the platforms are increasingly intertwined.

In this section, I have emphasised the transition from what was once called social network sites into what is currently labelled social media. Broadly put, we can notice a shift in which applications like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Snapchat, once theorised mainly as *communication technologies*, have become widely understood as *media platforms*. That is, despite the fact that the platforms themselves insist on framing their operation as merely 'technology companies', scholars have increasingly dedicated critical attention to their role as media – a semantic change that has crucial regulatory ramifications (Napoli and Caplan 2017). For the purposes of this thesis, the implications that matter most are those that reach the level of the experience they provide, and of the scholarly treatment they receive. In this regard, a fundamental distinction seems to be the acknowledgement (and critical examination) of the fact that social media are, ultimately, data-driven advertising companies (Ibid.). Their business is to grab audiences' attention and then sell it, while matching in real-time the advertiser's interest with the 'right' target, through 'real-time bidding' (Carmi 2020). And even though that does not mean that Facebook and co. are not employed for interpersonal interactions anymore, we have generally the transition from an approach to the topic as an issue of communication (as a practice) towards its understanding as, primarily, an issue of mediation (as a process). This means an increasing emphasis on "the ongoing process of institutionalization and materialization of communication" (Hepp 2020:12), in which the processual, dynamic, and continuously evolving character of commercially driven technologies and companies (and their role in shaping the communicative practices that arise through them) is highlighted.

Furthermore, in foregrounding the environmental state of platformisation – that is, the conception of social media as an integrated, related assemblage of communicative opportunities – I do not mean to take them as a monolithic bulk of applications, but rather as a multidimensional and continuously updating one (Hepp 2020). Underpinning this discussion is the conviction that any experience of and with technology (and, consequently, any phenomenological attempt to examine it) is contingent on the material, structural, political, and economic dimensions of these artefacts and systems that compose our current 'culture of connectivity' (van Dijck 2013), which is precisely the focus of the following section.

2.2 Unpacking connectivity: continuous connectedness and the personalised media flow

This thesis is grounded on the assumption that social media have become some of the main infrastructures through which many of us organise our lives, connect with others, and exert

sociality (van Dijck 2013; Couldry and Hepp 2016), while also working in the "automated production and circulation of meaning" moved by commercial goals (Langlois 2014:18). That is, behind the rhetoric of participation, interactivity, and connection that is so commonly found in their promotional discourse, platforms' interest is centred in the quantifiable by-product of this engagement: users' data (van Dijck 2013). It is through the capture, storage, processing, and reorganisation of this ever-increasing amount of information that these companies make profit (Couldry and Kallinikos 2017; Zuboff 2019). Human interactions, therefore, "become economic transactions to be analysed in terms of costs and benefits" (Chun 2017:10).

Furthermore, through their computational logic, social media platforms are able to organise and shape if, how, and when people have access to others and to the world – and they tend to present such processes as organic, transparent and natural, although they actually depend deeply on calculative infrastructure and data-sorting (Couldry and Kallinikos 2017; Carmi 2020). In this section, I will delve deeper into the logics of connectivity, and how it is closely linked to, and supported by, the incitement of continuous connectedness. This is relevant to the extent that, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, 'the live' has been long associated with media industries' attempt to centralise audiences' attention through the promise of immediate connection to the social world and its happenings (van Es 2016), especially in the context of broadcast. In this section, then, I explore some of the key continuities and disruptions in the strategies for constructing a sense of connection in the social media environment.

As pointed out by van Dijck and Poell (2013), some of the key elements of the social media logic are programmability and connectivity, and both of them are directly dependent on datafication. Programmability, here, refers both to the ability to spur certain kinds of engagement that privilege standardised formats which are then (de)codable, and to the manipulation of this content to shape users' experience. From a critically informed perspective, connectivity "refers to the socio-technical affordance of networked platforms to connect content to user activities and advertisers" (van Dijck and Poell 2013:8). And although a simpler version of the story explored in the previous section would lead us to assume there has been a mere shift from connection (the capacity to stay linked to the social world and build and maintain social ties through technology) to connectivity, this section discusses in turn how the mechanism of connectivity is afforded precisely by the enactment and incitement of (continuous) connectedness and the promise of individual personalisation. From the platforms' perspective, personalisation becomes one of the crucial persuasion points employed to ensure

users remain engaged (Kant 2020), avoiding potential disconnection through "keeping value, attention, and desires within the system" (Karppi 2018:7).

To understand this process, let us step back for a moment. If audience's attention is a scarce resource that must be cultivated and harvested, then it should be easy to understand why media industries have for decades developed strategies to ensure people will stay tuned for long periods of time despite the increasing range of possibilities to choose from. In the case of social media, one of the key strategies to grab attention refers to the continuous and individually personalised presentation of this always-increasing bulk of content. In this regard, in what previously came to be known in the context of television studies as the "planned flow" (Williams 2003), media "fills time by ensuring that something happens" (Doane 2003:251), turning fragmentation into continuity. In the planned flow, through editorial work, discrete segments of content are organised in a logical and coherent manner. The point, then, is that with social media the idea that the flux is the constant is reproduced at increased scale and pervasiveness (Berry 2011). However, while television programming is based on segmentation and scheduling, programming networked media involves producing "a series of stored instructions that supposedly guarantee – and often stand in for – a certain action" (Chun 2008:153). Here, the 'editorial' work depends heavily on algorithmic systems that promise to free the user from the burden of deciding what to see (Frischmann and Selinger 2018), being employed to sort and organise the vast amount of content available and, in so doing, playing a "powerful role in producing the conditions for the intelligible and the sensible" (Bucher 2018:7).

Yet, more than grabbing the audiences' attention, it is necessary to convert this attention into value – which, in the lexicon used by the platforms themselves, is extracted through active engagement (Docherty 2020). Engagement, in this context, describes "becoming involved with something, but importantly, it does not define an activity (such as participation); it merely ensures that there will be an activity. Engagement creates a field of intensity" (Karppi 2018:33). More pragmatically, in social media, engagement refers to the conversion of this field of affective intensity into computational inputs and outputs that generate data footprints (Ibid.). In privileging engagement, "the type of content that is more likely to generate an interaction or prompt users to take action is made more visible and given priority" (Bucher 2018:79).

One of the animating hypotheses of this monograph, then, is that this emphasis on continuous connectedness and active engagement – which, in turn, are deeply entangled with (the promise of) individual personalisation – are both dependent on, and sustain the creation of, a sense of 'liveness'. In this regard, television's liveness, and therefore its overall commitment to the representation of social realities as they are happening, is traditionally based on the premises of interruption of the ongoing, steady informational flow (Bourdon 2000; Couldry 2004), and the consequent disruption provoked by a 'crisis' (Doane 2003; Chun 2017) or by a meaningful event (Dayan and Katz 1992; Scannell 2014). Crucial to this thesis is the assumption that social media's liveness is not necessarily characterised by intermission: these platforms thrive on continuous connectedness, not on imminent interruption. Significantly, then, the proposition of social media's constant unrest is not to disrupt per se, but rather to generate active engagement and, finally, predictability – or, the capacity to anticipate users' preferences and behaviour for targeted advertising purposes (Chun 2017). In short, "If mass media produced consistent forms to create consistent, coherent audiences, new media thrive on differences to create predictable individuals" (Chun 2017:18). Bearing this in mind, I argue that a consideration of 'liveness' in the social media environment should dedicate special attention to the fact that, within this scope, any sense of 'connection' is also premised on (even if in constant conflict with) the delivery of individual personalisation.

As explained by Tanya Kant (2020), when it comes to mainstream platforms in western societies, personalisation is framed as a function of the technologies themselves, which conveniently and computationally infer people's expectations and customise the delivery of targeted content, matching users' preferences to what is deemed 'relevant' on their behalf, thus acting on their experiences (Kant 2020). Relevance, of course, is a loaded value with elastic connotations (Gillespie 2014), which has increasingly been employed by platforms to designate not what is of general interest but rather what is supposed to be important, exciting, or meaningful to individual users. That is, "whereas popularity is generally about recommending items according to a global notion of relevance, personalisation is about satisfying members with varying tastes" (Bucher 2018:105). Still, the attribution of personal relevance offered by social media is deeply "premised on the idea that your future preferences can be inferred from your past interactions" (Kant 2020:34). Crucially, though, personalisation should be understood not as an add-on resource benevolently offered by platforms with the improvement of users' experience in mind – "instead, the user data relinquished as part of the exchange are *the* driving economic resource of the contemporary free-to-use web" (Kant 2020:6). Precisely

because it purportedly interferes in users' experiences, individual personalisation is marked by, as Kant (2020) puts it, epistemic uncertainties and struggles for autonomy. The former refers to the fact that users cannot ever be sure with clarity of what is known about them, and how this knowledge informs opaque computational decisions; the latter, to the negotiation over agency and control once preferences, identity markers, and subjective decisions are delegated to algorithmic systems. In this process, subjectivity is continuously renegotiated, and therefore personalisation also represents an ontological concern in which one's own sense of selfhood is algorithmically co-constituted (Kant 2020).

Personalisation, it is worth noting, is part of a broader set of initiatives that are framed as the platforms' response to already existing needs and desires for filtering and sorting the vast amounts of content available – which also includes frictionless sharing (Payne 2014) and programmed happy accidents (Karppi 2018). The former refers to the automatic sharing of every action (posting, liking, commenting, tagging) taken by a person with other people who are part of their network, which intends to reinforce community feelings (Payne 2014). In the latter, algorithmic systems are employed to present personalised content that the user has not searched for or does not necessarily expect to stumble upon (Karppi 2018). 'Happy accidents' produce a sense of randomness through computability and programmability. Crucially, then, "these happy accidents are hardly accidental; rather, they are based on patterns and data" (Karppi 2018:57).

As another vital component of this strategy of inciting continuous connectedness, digital platforms that profit from social data fuel an imaginary of *aliveness*, of 'pulsating life' – of excitement, anticipation, and freshness (Beer 2019). Perhaps the most obvious ways in which this sense of vibrating life is encouraged by social media is through notifications and trending lists – which actualise the promised significance of content at individual and societal level, respectively (or the 'relevant' and the 'popular', as discussed above), although these two often overlap. Moreover, there are numerous stimuli used by different platforms to foment the desire for continuous connectedness, including textual prompts with varied degrees of subtlety, such as "happening now", "watch before it ends", "while you were away", and "tell your story to people as you live it".

The continuous flow in itself – most obviously materialised in the now widespread structure of the infinite 'stream' – foregrounds this idea of incessant movement that requires constant

attention and participation (Berry 2011, 2017). Social media streams have traditionally been organised in reverse chronological order and are constantly updated, a process which has been theorised as creating a "spatio-temporality of immediacy and privileges real-time engagement" (Gerlitz 2012). Precisely because immediacy and real-time are so closely aligned to liveness (van Es 2016; Coleman 2020a), in the following subsection I will explore in more detail how the available scholarship has so far examined the messier temporalities afforded by these algorithmically curated streams of content that promise us 'personalised' experiences.

2.2.1 In case you missed it: fluid temporalities in the algorithmic media manifold

As discussed above, in the context of social media the term 'algorithm' is usually employed to designate the (often obscured) formulas that guide the content curation and organisation of these platforms, which claim to offer what is relevant to us individually while veiling their very operation behind a discourse of impartiality and objectivity (Beer 2017; Bucher 2017, 2018; Gillespie 2014; Carmi 2020). Generally, algorithmic personalisation could be defined as the "computational tracking and anticipation of users' preferences, movements, and identity categorisations in order to algorithmically intervene in users' daily experiences" (Kant 2020:10), which comprises the attribution of varied degrees of meaningfulness to specific activities and content (Langlois 2014). Under this scope, what is deemed 'relevant' or 'meaningful' is contingent on human and nonhuman agencies which operate in sustaining the activities of social media platforms (Karppi 2018). In this section, I discuss how this 'algorithmic' turn that seems so central to social media affects the temporal experiences that emerge in their use – and what this shift represents for the study of liveness and for a phenomenology of mediation more broadly.

In this regard, for at least a decade, social media time has been mostly conceived as privileging real-time, in which the "reliance upon user-generated 'newness' and the emphasis on always-becoming" (Gehl 2011:1233) are taken as the central temporal motor of online infrastructures. Most of the discussion on the realtimeness of social media focuses on the structure of the 'stream' of 'feed' – the self-updating 'timelines' (once called 'newsfeed') that are now part of most platforms. Of course, real-time has a much longer tradition in the history of computation and automation (Chun 2011). In social media, though, it generally encapsulates the promises of newness and nowness, both in terms of content presentation and user interaction (Gehl 2011, Weltevrede et al. 2014). And in spite of the obvious stickiness of the term – evidenced by its use in the promotional discourse of, probably, every social media platform nowadays –

Weltevrede et al. (2014:127) rightly suggest that, analytically, real-time "does not explain, it needs to be explained". In critically examining the concept, they argue that "media do not operate in real-time, devices and their cultures operate as pacers of real-time" (Ibid:127). 'Pace', then, designates an information-based view of temporality with focus on the speed of change of the content presented, which aims to pay attention to how 'realtimeness' is organised through various infrastructures. Weltevrede et al. (2013:143) conclude by defining realtimeness as "an understanding of time that is embedded in and immanent to platforms, engines and their cultures". I argue that it is precisely in capturing this immanence that a phenomenological sensibility is needed – a point I will elaborate further in Chapter 3.

The structuration of temporal experiences by social media is also the core concern of Kaun and Stiernstedt (2014), who focus on the technological affordances of the most popular and powerful of these applications. Examining one specific page as a case study, they explore how Facebook's business model – focused on speed, immediacy and newness – is reflected in its technical affordances, which, in turn, (re)structure temporalities. According to them, as part of the now widespread strategy of engaging users for extended and continuous periods of time, Facebook's flow emphasises newness – even if, in practice, the order of the stream is also heavily influenced by factors other than mere currency (Kaun and Stiernstedt 2014). In summary, Facebook's immediacy relies on the fact that the flow is characterised by rapid change and that, therefore, each post or interaction is made visible for a short period of time (Kaun and Stiernstedt 2014:1161). Also, they argue that what differentiates Facebook's flow from that of television – as famously conceived by Williams (2004) – is an annihilation of simultaneous experiencing: "the lack of collectivity and of shared experiences. Every single user gets in his or her newsfeed a personalised and individually assembled flow of information and entertainment, which is based on relations, interests, and personal configurations (such as privacy settings)" (Kaun and Stiernstedt 2014:1161). In this thesis, I would like to dispute this claim by offering an empirically grounded alternative characterisation – and I argue that liveness is a productive sensitising device for the examination of this apparent contradiction within the seeking of collective experiences in personalised environments.

Another scholar to prolifically engage with the apparent dominance of immediacy in digital media is Coleman (2018a, 2018b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). By examining how specific platforms use the rhetoric of real-time in their own promotional materials, Coleman (2018b:601) reiterates the manifoldness of this temporality – digital media's time, although mostly marked

by the now and the immediate, "is also on-going and open-ended". The 'present', then, is active, flexible, multiple, and changing (Coleman 2018b, 2020a). Her extensive work on temporality also raises the question as to "whether 'the now' is (or is becoming) a dominant way in which temporality is constituted and organized in today's digital societies" (2020a:1696). Particularly relevant to my discussion is the conclusion she draws about the centrality of pre-emergence – "that which is in the process of emerging" and can be felt even before it becomes fully articulated (Coleman 2018:601) – in this fabricated present. Pre-emergence, therefore, designates the affective latency of the future in the present – in the messy temporalities produced by algorithmic media, the future can sometimes 'be felt' and anticipated within the present (Coleman 2018).

The contributions offered by Gehl (2011), Weltevrede et al. (2014), Kaun and Stiernstedt (2014), and Coleman (2018a, 2018b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c) are all highly valuable for expanding our understanding of digital media's temporality, and for the detailed scrutiny of how each platform constructs its own time, which often (but not always) privileges realtimeness. One of the identified gaps, however, is that the structure of the stream (although still dominating) is increasingly competing for space (and users' attention) with other modes of engagement, such as ephemeral stories and instant messaging systems. Likewise, while a device perspective is useful for specifying the operation and temporalisation of certain platforms, sites, and apps, the reality is that platforms are not often experienced in isolation, and their content frequently 'flows' beyond and across specific interfaces and apps. While this separation is certainly helpful in making the analyses manageable – and for the examination of particular interfaces or affordances (Bucher and Helmond 2018) – it does not reflect how these platforms are actually experienced in the media manifold context of everyday life. Also, while we have fertile contributions focused on either the politics of pacing in computational media or the affective dimensions of digital time, the theorisation and empirical observation of their intersection and entanglement is still largely unclear.

Furthermore, recent discussions have been suggesting a shift from the 'real-time' to the 'right-time' web (Bucher 2018) – and 'the algorithm' is to blame. Crucially, if algorithmic media have world-making capacities – if they can order and arrange our being in the world in different ways – then they are inherently political (Bucher 2018). In other words, "in ranking, classifying, sorting, predicting, and processing data, algorithms are political in the sense that they help to make the world appear in certain ways rather than others" (Bucher 2018:3).

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer an in-depth discussion of algorithmic infrastructures, one specific aspect of their technical performance is of central interest to my purposes: namely, the fact that they are said to represent a disruption to this until-then 'chronological' social media. As indicated by Bucher (2018:80), the algorithmic logic means that platforms' content presentation is no longer ruled by real-time: "Algorithmic media (…) are more about 'right-time' than they are about real-time". She describes a shift from focus on 'nowness' or 'recency' to one that privileges reaching the right user in the time in which this content will be more relevant or 'engaging'. While the real-time web was governed by chronology, argues Bucher (2020), the algorithmic one is focused on the most opportune timing for a given encounter. According to her, the logic of 'right-time' does not completely displace the real-time, but rather incorporates it "as a function of relevance" (Bucher 2020:1712). Therefore, algorithmic media are said to focus not on a steady temporality guided by universal events but rather on "a series of individuals that (cor)respond in their own time to singular, yet connected events" (Chun 2017:27).

In this section, I focused on some of the main theorisations of digital time. Although I explore the issue of temporality – traditionally, a topic of interest for phenomenology – more broadly in Chapter 3, for now I wanted simply to provide an overview of how the matter of realtimeness has been conceived (and challenged) by the available scholarship. Crucially, this alleged shift from chronological linearity to a messier, algorithmic-sorted organisation has profound consequences for the study of liveness – after all, if 'the live' were to be conceived as the objectively immediate, real-time experience, then we simply could conclude that the emergence of the so-called algorithmic logic (Bucher 2020) of social media meant its obliteration. Yet, as previously discussed, I consider liveness to be a vastly more complex articulation (van Es 2016), and therefore the empirical examination of this alleged disruption of realtimeness is precisely the focus of Chapter 5. In short, algorithmic ordering makes it difficult for users (and, to a large extent, for scholars) to understand the actual operation of the platforms, and to know when and where to find the content that is technically 'new' or happening 'now'. This alleged shift from chronological linearity to a messier, computational organisation has profound consequences for our experiences of the social world – for how, ultimately, the world 'appears' to us through social media – which in turn has significant implications for a phenomenological investigation.

2.3 From town square to living room: broadcast, interpersonal, and in-betweenness

'How the world appears' to us is a fundamental motif of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 2012). As I have covered in this chapter thus far, in the context of social media, what 'surfaces' (Jacobsen and Beer 2021) to our perception is significantly affected by the selection, organisation and presentation of content to meet the (alleged) personalised interests of given individuals and keep them continuously connected, which in turn is informed by the economic motives that guide the operation of these profit-oriented companies. Importantly, though, social media promise not only a connection to the 'world out there' but also the possibilities of interacting immediately with those who matter most, beyond para-social engagements (Baym 2015). They are, at the same time, platforms for mass and interpersonal communication – or, *masspersonal communication* (O'Sullivan and Carr 2017) – blurring even further the boundaries between what matters at societal and individual levels.

In this regard, there is a tendency amongst social media platforms to tweak their rhetoric, their interfaces, affordances, and their algorithmic systems to privilege content that generates the aforementioned 'engagement' – and what is deemed 'engaging' might change from time to time, often being framed as a response to users' desires and needs (Beer 2019; Jacobsen 2021; Karppi 2018). In other words, platforms "and their ways to capitalise on users are constantly evolving" (Karppi 2018:68). Importantly, though, this dynamic nature of social media is not taken here as a unilateral development; as put by José van Dijck (2013:5–6), "as a medium coevolves with its quotidian users' tactics, it contributes to shaping people's everyday life, while at the same time this mediated sociality becomes part of society's institutional fabric".

In this section, I focus on how this in-betweenness typical of social media – platforms that combine dissemination and dialogue, the world of 'news' and the small things of ordinary life, the broadcast and the interpersonal modes – has developed and been examined in the academic literature, and what some of its potential implications are. For liveness, I argue, this is of central importance, especially if we consider how often the concept has been associated with big events of wide-ranging significance, such as national celebrations, coronations, and other types of public ceremonies (Dayan and Katz 1992; Scannell 2014) – which now appear side by side with personal, everyday life content posted by friends and family, and which would probably not be particularly meaningful to anyone other than that specific user.

In this regard, a significant dimension of the platformised sociality that emerges through the enactment of social media logics (van Dijck and Poell 2013) is what Couldry (2015) has labelled the *myth of us* – the idea that social media platforms give rise to the formation of natural collectivities, and therefore were developed simply to respond to and facilitate a popular desire to be continuously connected to those who matter. As Couldry (2015) further explains, there is no natural *us*, since the mere existence of this collectivity depends heavily on the actions of the platforms themselves. Of course, it is imperative to recognise that media claiming to offer shared experiences and "natural" collectiveness while obfuscating their very role as mediators is not a recent or unprecedented strategy. As previously addressed by Feuer (1983), Bourdon (2000), Ellis (2000) and Scannell (2014), for decades television has been employing an analogous scheme (which, though, deploys different mechanisms). In fact, it is worth noting that social media platforms borrowed from television's broadcast the promise of connecting people to what matters at the same time as these events unfold, with the additional feature of providing potential multiple options and sources from which the audiences can choose. However, instead of relying on the mobilisation of national or mass sentiments, or on the access to events that matter in a more general or societal level, connective platforms tend to emphasise their capacity to give people access to what is significant for them individually (Chun 2017).

In the unceasing flow of content that characterises the social media manifold, a key component is the mixing of communicational practices and rituals, in which the broadcast mode and interpersonal interaction appear in coupled and, often, scarcely perceptible ways. In social media, the amalgamation of dissemination and dialogue (Peters 1999) is manifested in a number of ways: when it comes to the aforementioned 'stream' or 'feed' that is typical of platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, the small things of ordinary life – quotidian updates of everyday happenings, food pictures, cat GIFs, and selfies – often appear interspersed with what we would generally refer as 'news'. This combination of different types of content – personal news and politics, world events and celebrity gossip – is far from accidental; it "is not an unfortunate aspect of new media and digital culture, but the point" (Chun 2017:13).

Moreover, these same platforms, until not long ago focusing mostly on public sharing, have increasingly incorporated features and tools that foreground one-to-one or one-to-few interactions, which tend to take the shape of direct messaging systems (Twitter's DM, Instagram's Direct) or even entire apps dedicated to private exchanges, such as WhatsApp and Messenger. Although the latter would not generally fit the definition of social network site

presented at the beginning of this chapter, in this thesis they are conceived as a fundamental part of our current environment of platformised sociality, and therefore are classified here as part of the social media ecosystem that is of interest to this discussion. From the users' point of view, as I will illustrate in my empirical analysis, although there is indeed an intentional choice to be made between 'posting' something publicly or 'sending' them directly to someone, these practices are not mutually exclusive, stable, predictable, nor entirely detached. We have not only the flux of content from one platform to another (through screenshots or links, for instance) but also interpersonal exchanges in platforms that might favour dissemination (such as, for example, establishing a long conversation with friends through comments on Instagram) and mass distribution of content in apps that were originally designed for private conversations (such as the share of links and news on WhatsApp via Broadcast lists), or even the performance of 'public intimacy' through the staged performance of interpersonal ties in front of other users, as described by Kaplan (2021).

It is also worth noting a recent transition, in which some of the most powerful social media platforms started to increasingly shift their ambitions and resources away from 'publicness' (Artieri et al. 2021) towards the more intimate interactions and private environments of everyday life (Bayer et al. 2016). Such a strategy is particularly interesting if we consider that, until not long ago, the biggest of these companies – Facebook – had been scaling up their discourse so as to abandon its original focus on local communities to embrace instead ideas such as "building a global community" in a "a journey to connect the world", as mentioned in a manifesto released by founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg.[4] Yet, in a new phase launched in 2019 (not accidentally, right after the Cambridge Analytica debacle), designated by Zuckerberg himself as "a privacy-focused vision for social networking", their interest seems to have swiftly moved to a new direction. According to his own words, Facebook intends to cease trying to be the digital counterpart to the 'town square' to become the equivalent to the 'living room' (Bucher 2021). The public square, as described by Martín-Barbero (1993:5), is a "socially ambivalent space, open to the movement of daily life and to a kind of theatre that makes no distinction between actors and spectators". It is, therefore, traditionally considered to be 'the natural' space for the emergence of popular culture (Bakhtin 1968). And yet, Zuckerberg argues, reserved spaces are now the ones that allow people to 'naturally connect'. In order to achieve this, the company traced six key strategies, amongst which are the focus on private

[4] https://www.facebook.com/notes/3707971095882612/

interaction and the reduction of temporal permanence of the content posted or shared, so that people can feel more comfortable 'being themselves'.

Obviously, this is just one single example amongst a wide range of available platforms. Yet, due to the central position that Facebook – and its affiliated platforms Instagram, WhatsApp, and Messenger – occupies in the contemporary media landscape, I believe this accentuated transition deserves further discussion. What this rebranding – and its consequential tweaks such as the emphasis on ephemeral content and the push of livestreaming through notifications and privileged positioning on the feed – represents is a broader turn towards content that is ordinary and purportedly fleeting, and to our more private, intimate and personal lives. In this regard, the emphasis on 'temporary' content – that is, material that needs to be consumed in the here and now – is far from accidental (Bayer et al. 2016). Actually, in social media, the very brevity of so-called ephemeral affordances is usually transitory: platforms like Snapchat and Instagram have employed the term to encourage 'spontaneous' sharing, allowing people to 'post anything, anytime'; months later, they incorporate archival and resurfacing tools – such as Memories and On This Day – despite maintaining the aura of informality, naturality and authenticity (Jacobsen and Beer 2021).

In this section, I have characterised the intermediate state of our present social media ecology. In this context, the distinction between until-then separate communicative modes such as the 'broadcast' and the 'interpersonal' is fragile, permeable (O'Sullivan and Carr 2017). This porosity is only accentuated by the fact that users themselves tend to mix and match apps and modes in relatively unpredictable ways. It is to this messier status of the social media manifold, which challenges pre-established binaries, that I refer to here as 'in-betweenness'. If we are to exercise a phenomenological sensibility to understand the operation of these platforms in the context of everyday life, then bridging these historical divides seems to be a more fertile solution than trying to make our messy practices fit into the available boxes grounded on enduring, but too rigid, assumptions about specific media or certain platforms serving to particular uses. Furthermore, as I have been exploring throughout this chapter, the key aspect that differentiates social media from pre-existing communication technologies (employed for either dissemination or dialogue) is the widespread (and usually convincing) claim that they can provide people with what matters to them individually. What is deemed significant or relevant, though, can change from time to time, and in this section I have also highlighted the intrinsically dynamic character of social media: rather than steady, unchanging platforms, what

we have is a communicative infrastructure that is constantly evolving, adapting, and updating (Karppi 2018; Hepp 2020; Jacobsen 2021) – even if always guided by the same profit-oriented, engagement-friendly ideals (Chun 2017).

2.4 Always-already there: living with habitual social media

There seems to be in popular discourse the consensus that people (especially the young) spend way too much time on social media: these technologies are said to be "atrophying our attention spans, eroding our capacity to focus and think, addicting us, boring us, and stealing our time, as well as stopping us from truly relating to one another, engaging in critical thought, or contributing to public life in a meaningful way" (Paasonen 2021:1). Social media platforms' stickiness, of course, is not accidental – as discussed in this chapter so far, encouraging uninterrupted connectivity is a crucial component of their strategy for guaranteeing users' quantifiable engagement which, in turn, is key for their targeted-advertising driven profitability (Chun 2017; Karppi 2018). The widespread narrative, though, tends to frame our relationship to these technologies as a simple, but undisputable, matter of addiction – we have all become *tech junkies*, dependent on artefacts and software that make us sad, lonely, and bored by design (Lovink 2019; Paasonen 2020, 2021).

In this final section, I focus on this idea that social media use has become pervasive, almost ubiquitous, and apparently natural. Yet, instead of subscribing to prevalent discourses of addiction and dependency (Holmgren and Coyne 2017) in which we become passive victims of an increasingly media-saturated society (Deuze 2012), I argue for an understanding of the *interdependency* of socio-technical relations through the lens of habit – which in turn is directly linked to the phenomenological approach I will detail in the following chapter. While the framework of 'addiction' sees the phenomenon as personal and pathological, 'dependency' foregrounds its infrastructural dimension (Paasonen 2021). Yet, both seem to imply an inexorable loss. Alternatively, by focusing on habituation I intend to foreground, as Chun (2017) suggests, both the deeply personal and the social aspects of our attachments to media technologies – after all, "habits are things we learn from others, and they make us 'like' others" (p.xi). It is also worth pointing out that the idea of habituation has been appropriated by the platforms themselves, as in our current neoliberal context any harm attributed to tech is often framed as potentially solved by a simple change of habit (Pedwell 2021) – be it to turn off your notifications or to monitor your screen time.

Having said that, the use of social media is to a large extent characterised by repetition. Scrolling, tapping, clicking, liking, sharing, skipping, commenting, refreshing, scrolling a bit more (Coleman 2020). Habituation is enacted when these narrow forms of sociality engendered by the platforms become self-evident, ordinary, and naturalised (Couldry and Kallinikos 2017). Habituation, then, is ultimately the sensorial orchestration of freeing of the body from the burden of continuous decision-making (Highmore 2011; Leder 1990; Pedwell 2021). Indeed, digital technologies are constantly promising to liberate us (by giving us more time, or more headspace) through the outsourcing of cognitive labour to devices and software (Frischmann and Selinger 2018). I clarify then that focusing on the habituated, taken-for-granted does not mean that these experiences are 'automatic' or unresponsive' – on the contrary, they are conceived here as an embodied response to the world we are thrown into (Moores 2017; Ingold 2011; Markham 2020; Pedwell 2021). Whereas the matter of embodiment will be fleshed out in more detail in the following chapter, for now it suffices to say that it is this process of bodily habituation – this incorporation – of technology that I am interested in, rather than in neurobehaviouristic accounts of addiction or compulsion.

Yet, by rejecting the general pathologisation of everyday experiences of social media, I do not mean to neglect that some people might in fact become clinically dependent on these technologies, nor discard the possibility that such technologies might have in their very design certain components that hook us in and trigger compulsion. On the contrary, I agree with the understanding that "just as certain individuals are more vulnerable to addiction than others, it is also the case that some objects, by virtue of their unique pharmacologic or structural characteristics, are more likely than others to trigger or accelerate an addiction" (Schüll 2012:17). And, indeed, the interfaces and affordances of social media surely privilege repeated movements and short-term rewards. As happens with gambling machines (Schüll 2012), social media are also designed to favour continuous exposure and repeated movements so as to "mine a new phenomenological substrate" (Thrift 2006:282) of capitalism.

There is a point to be made that although the rhetoric of addiction is indeed very prevalent in current popular discourse, most people do not tend to see and frame themselves as addicted, in what seems like an updated version of the third-person effect (Davison 1983). Yet, as questioned by Lovink, "What does it mean when we all agree that there is an addictive element to today's social media use yet none of us is apparently addicted?" (2019:24). I argue that

habituation, by focusing on movement, repetition, and embodiment rather than on neurobehavioural imbalances, paves the way for a more generative analysis of what exactly social media offer to those who willingly (even if not always gladly) engage with these technologies in ordinary situations – while also paying attention to the structural role exerted by technologies in these processes (Pedwell 2021). As suggested by Lovink (2019:26), I want to address empirically and analytically questions such as "Which desires do they appeal to? Why is updating a profile such a boring, yet extremely seductive habit?".

The lens of habit also centres another crucial element of social media in the context of everyday life – namely, their taken-for-granted, self-evident, often background status. If these platforms' power can be attributed to their very banality (Chun 2017; Lovink 2019), then it becomes imperative to examine more closely how their very convenience and naturality is achieved in our ordinary routines. The chosen framework allows me to reject some longstanding assumptions about ordinary encounters with digital technology, such as, for instance, the conception that people's behaviour is predominantly premeditated and goals-oriented (Aagaard 2020). By refuting these claims, I also do not mean to conceive of these practices as 'unthinking' or entirely impulsive or distracted – a media-panics discourse that has become increasingly popular, and comes often associated with an emphasis on compulsive short-term rewards prompted by dopamine release (Ibid.). The option for centring habituation comes precisely as an alternative to pathologising misconceptions, by shedding light on (often pre-reflective) embodied practices (Pedwell 2017, 2021). As I will demonstrate over the next chapters, often the appeal of social media is not located in their capacity to offer access to socially significant, remarkable events (Dayan and Katz 1992), but rather on their ability to provide what has been previously theorised as an affective zone of 'suspended animation' (Burchell 2015) in which continuing the experience and staying in the flow becomes an end in and of itself (Schüll 2012; Berry 2011).

Furthermore, as stated in the first section of this chapter, my conception of social media encompasses the devices through which these platforms are accessed in the context of everyday life; in this regard, social media are increasingly *mobile* social media (Humphreys 2013), as it is frequently through smartphones that these platforms are made present, habituated, and put to use in our lives – or, to use a pun in line with the Heideggerian terminology, they are made *ready-to-hand*. This, of course, does not mean that people do not make use of other types of gadgets – laptops, desktops, tablets, smartwatches – for interacting with social media. Yet, the

pervasiveness of smartphones (which is confirmed by my empirical data) is certainly one of the key aspects of our environment of communicative possibilities, which is marked by "constant attention to and engagement with a variety of devices and platforms" (Burchell 2015:37). The convenient, consistent, and ubiquitous use afforded by mobile devices has helped the usage of social media – and the embodied actions that comprise repeated movements and continuous (even if often background) attention – to become habitual, naturalised in the fabric of ordinary routines (Burchell 2015).

Yet, as explained by Beer (2019), this naturalisation brings its own comforts and discomforts, and people's attachment to their mobile phones tends to be both somatic and emotional: "We slide them out, check them, hold them and place them back. When we think about the impact of phones, we usually just think about what it is that they can do. But they also have a material presence in our lives. Our relationship with them is tactile and physical" (p.56). In using the lens of habituation to examine people's attachment to social media, I aim to foreground both the frequent taken-for-grantedness of these technologies and the more distributed, normalised, naturalised power structure in which they are embedded (Markham 2019; Pedwell 2021). A critical phenomenology of social media, therefore, should pay attention to the embodied and material conditions of their contested use in everyday life, and the (complex, perhaps ambivalent) experiences that emerge in these contexts (Couldry and Kallinikos 2017).

In short, focusing on habituation should not stop us from acknowledging (and critiquing) the fact that these habits are often intentionally prompted, orchestrated, and oriented by the technologies themselves. While any experience with and of social media is individual, it is also 'architectural' (Lovink 2019), as these technologies provide some of the foundational building-blocks for the conduct of our social lives. It is this structural layer, embedded in profit-oriented and data-centric logics, that I have been referring to as *conditions of connection*. As I have been discussing throughout this chapter, the operation of social media – and the forms of sociality or 'connection' conditioned by them – are directly informed by their commercial interests, which are then reflected in their interfaces, affordances, and rhetoric.

Crucially, then, privileging the lens of habit should not mean the dismissal of a critical stance – indeed, social media's business model relies on habituation (Chun 2017): their logics and habit are intrinsically intertwined. As stated in the Introduction, this thesis is grounded in the conviction that political economy and phenomenology are not incompatible; in fact, as I have

demonstrated, the political economy of social media depends on its experiential potential, as well as on the beliefs, imaginaries, and the 'affective sparks' (Pedwell 2017) they generate. Finally, as coined by Chun (2017), "habit is ideology in action". Throughout this chapter, I have argued that, in the social media environment and its platformised, algorithmic logics, this is deployed through the naturalisation of continuous connectedness, of an apparently infinite and constantly updating flow of content that merges broadcast and interpersonal communications, and of the promise of individual relevance delivered by sophisticated sorting systems. The examination of processes of incorporation of technologies into everyday routines, therefore, should involve paying attention to "how habits are (re)produced through complex relations of power" (Pedwell 2021:xvii). It is precisely in understanding this enactment between habit and ideology, and the contested experiences resultant from it, that a critical phenomenological disposition is useful – as I explore in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Live(d) experience: towards a critical phenomenology of liveness in habitual social media

For many people today, social media are a fundamental (even if oftentimes background) part of daily life. Even though these platforms can indeed be the site of eventful moments – be it following incoming news from an incident in your hometown on Twitter, or sharing that you just got engaged on your Facebook status – most of the time their uses are very much attached to routines and small moments of our day-to-day existence (Brabham 2015). In this regard, although the study of liveness is frequently focused on so-called media events (Dayan and Katz 1992; Scannell 2014; Hammelburg 2021a), this thesis proposes instead the examination of the operation of the live in the banality and ordinariness of everyday life. Embracing the generative potential of ordinariness and habituation, this project is, theoretically and empirically, adhering to a phenomenological sensibility.

By that, broadly speaking, I mean a commitment to the examination of mediated experiences that might seem at first self-evident and taken for granted, and an interest in "investigating under what specific conditions that experience of self-evidence is possible" (Markham and Rodgers 2017:2). The taken-for-granted, here, is understood as "that particular level of experience which presents itself as not in need of further analysis" (Schütz 1967:74). Phenomenology works precisely by transforming the taken-for-granted into an object of examination. Although much of this chapter will be concerned specifically with a discussion about the phenomenology of technology, I clarify from the very beginning that I see technology itself as one, but not the only, condition structuring any possible experiences of and with social media. 'Experience', it is worth mentioning, is a broad and quite vague term, frequently employed in an elusive manner. In an attempt to unpack the concept, this chapter introduces a social understanding of lived experience. Acknowledging the pervasiveness of the term in both scholarly and everyday language, I clarify that my aim is not to make an in-depth dive into the philosophical roots of the word, but rather (and even under risk of oversimplifying complex and eventually contradictory traditions) to offer a theorisation of experience that can be useful for empirical explorations in media and communication research.

Even though the elicitation of a phenomenological perspective in the interdisciplinary field of media and communications is still somewhat timid and scattered – and often lost amidst our recent 'affective turn' – this thesis follows the lead of authors such as Moores (2015, 2017), Scannell (2014), Peters (2015), Frosh (2019), Markham (2020, and with Rodgers 2017) and Lagerkvist (2017, 2019), who call for analyses of mediation that are attuned to perceptual processes and to their observation in the context of everyday lived experience. The reader should not, however, expect to encounter in the pages that follow schematic diagrams with lines and arrows that supposedly illustrate the perceptual process, nor an exhaustive overview of how Husserl's ideas inspired different streams of theory and how these competing perspectives intersect and/or diverge. Acknowledging the multiplicity of theoretical lineages within the broader umbrella of phenomenology (Aagaard 2017), the much more modest purpose of this chapter, and of the selective reading that it is based on, is to introduce the critical-phenomenological disposition that informs my analysis.

In what follows, I will present a discussion of the evolving theorisation of *experience* in order to reach a crystallised conceptual understanding that is useful both for broader theorisations and empirical purposes. In doing so, I will justify my adhesion to a phenomenological sensibility for the examination of everyday socio-technical practices that are marked by a "simultaneously environmental and acutely personalised nature" (Frischmann and Selinger 2018:122). Subsequently, I will present a brief review of current perspectives on experiences of liveness, while trying to offer a revised conceptualisation for this long-lasting term. Finally, and going full circle, I will position liveness as a paradigmatic topic for the study of mediated lived experiences, using the theoretical trajectory here presented to raise critical questions for empirical enquiry.

3.1 How does it feel? on sensing and sense-making

The chapter starts from the premise that experience, even as an ordinary term, is employed to designate processes of different orders – as explained by Highmore (2011), it can refer to the very sensorial registering of lived moments (an experience as something that is perceived by the body and its consciousness), or to accumulated knowledge (to be 'experienced' in a given task, for instance). He then adds a third definition, which seems aligned to the habitual framework that this project is adhering to throughout: "this is the sense of experience as 'lived

through', experience that is eventful for the subject without being retrospectively acknowledged as such through processes of reflection" (Highmore 2011:23). In this regard, the matter of the (in)separability of perception, interpretation, and articulation – of sensing and sense-making – is central to this study, both theoretically and empirically. This tension is the focus of this first section. Over the following paragraphs, I will elaborate more fully what I mean here by the 'phenomenological sensibility' that I have been advocating since the Introduction, and what this means for an investigation of everyday experiences of and with social media. By revisiting some key ideas of different streams of phenomenological thinking, I intend to foreground with more precision the contributions that this thesis aspires to make.

Phenomenology, as a philosophical stream, pushes for a return to "the internal, direct and intuitive experience of the subject, to his own awareness, and makes the latter a condition for access to external experience" (Depraz et al. 2003:169). In *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), Merleau-Ponty defines the tradition as the study of the essences, which seeks to describe the experience of the lived world as perceived by situated subjects. The world of perception is, according to him, the world that our senses reveal to us (Merleau-Ponty 2012). Phenomenology is, therefore, about the 'feltness' of life to us (McCarthy and Wright 2002) – feltness being "about the habitual, not the shocking" (Markham 2020:62) – and it claims that it is through the senses that embodied subjects can grasp the social world and its objects (Merleau-Ponty 2012). In this fundamental definition, experience would be the awareness of the world once it is made present to us (Landgrebe 1973), and therefore phenomenology is "the study of how things – objects, ideas, events – emerge to consciousness, or more generally to tacit experience of the world" (Markham and Rodgers 2017:3).

Key to phenomenological thinking is the question of embodiment, considered the crucial component of the sensory experience, through which external elements can be accessed (Ihde 1990; Merleau-Ponty 2002; Romdenh-Romluc 2014). In this direction, an *experience* would be precisely the communication of the body with the world, the objects, and other bodies. Under this view, the body is "the absolute zero-point in the system of coordinates in which each acquires an experience of the world that, at the same time, is experienced in a world shared in common with others" (Landgrebe 1973:12). That is, experiences are always situated (Merleau-Ponty 2012). Although one of the most common critiques of phenomenology is its (often, self-claimed) 'subjective' character, this philosophical stream also understands experience to be a referential process – after all, "all experience is experience of something"

(Ihde 1990:22). Likewise, even though phenomenology is often critiqued for its alleged solipsism, its ideas are also based on the premise that our lifeworld, although experienced bodily and, therefore, subjectively, is the world experienced by 'every body' (Landgrebe 1973; Wilson 2009). The focus should, therefore, be on "the taken-for-granted stream of everyday routines, interactions and events that constitute both individual and social experience" (Markham and Rodgers 2017:5).

Importantly, most of classical phenomenology's conjectures are based on face-to-face interaction. Therefore, another layer of complexity is added if we consider the increasing dependence of our fundamental social activities on technologically mediated communications. In this direction, Couldry and Hepp (2016) offer an updated, media-informed approach, which they call a *materialist phenomenology of the social world*. By proposing a materialist phenomenology, they aim to account not only for how the world appears to subjects in situated contexts, but also to the material infrastructures and the technologically based processes through which social life is developed nowadays – an idea that seems very fruitful for media and communications scholarship in general, and to this project in particular. An experiential account of contemporary life should therefore dedicate special attention to the fact that our existence today is vastly and increasingly technologically textured (Ihde 1990). For some, this might represent a threat to the pure experience of a utopic non-technological Eden (Ibid.); as previously stated, though, this thesis rejects purist conceptions of immediate experience, and aims to unpack precisely the *mediated* aspect of everyday life once social media use has become pervasive and, to a large extent, naturalised.

Yet, it is precisely the familiarity and habitualness that is created in ordinary encounters with technologies that might make them be overlooked. Key to a phenomenological sensibility is therefore the breaking – or "bracketing", in the words of Husserl (2010) – of the taken-for-granted status of technologically mediated phenomena. Indeed, phenomenology "asks us to render our experience strange so that we are no longer immersed in it without critical reflection, and can trace its conditions of possibility" (Heyes 2020:134). Although the supposed neutrality of technology has been long debunked (e.g. Winner 1980), from a phenomenological perspective the fundamental root of its non-neutrality is the fact that, through technologies, experience is transformed – and background, taken-for-granted technologies, in particular, can affect our experience of the world in subtle but critical ways (Ihde 1990). Indeed, as argued by Ihde (1990), body-technology relations have an intrinsically fluid dynamic, as the technology

can be both and either the *object* of experience – the 'thing' that is being experienced – and the *means* to an experience.

In addition to acknowledging the role of technologies in the experiential, inspired by critical scholarship – especially by the work of feminist theorists such as Joan Wallach Scott (1991) Sara Ahmed (2006), and Annemarie Mol (2021) – this thesis assumes experiences to be also context-contingent, socially shaped, and discursively constructed. Therefore, although my starting point is the assumption that individuals do perceive in sensorial terms their relations with and through media, I demonstrate a willingness to understand the significance of such practices and the value attributed to them, as well as how these meanings are operated in the first place. In these terms, experience "becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced" (Scott 1991:780). According to this viewpoint, phenomenology could and should pay attention not only to what is available, visible for apprehension but also to what is in the background, "by giving an account of the conditions of emergence for something, which would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness" (Ahmed 2006:38).

In short, my position here is to assume that even an 'immediate' experience can never be conceived as some sort of unmediated contact with a pure given reality, precisely because the very registration of experiences as experiences – as well as their articulation – is already informed by social and cultural formations (Highmore 2011). That is, phenomenology here is understood to be concerned with the examination of both the experiential process itself and the structures of experience – and this structure has, as pointed out by Ihde (1999), myriad dimensions that must be accounted for. If, as put by Mol (2021:58), perception "is not the natural effect" of a given encounter but rather "a possible event occurring as part of a complex socio-material practice", then paying attention to the experiential and its orchestration becomes imperative.

Pure sensations should therefore not be naively taken as the only source of evidence (Scott 1991), mostly because the directions – the orientations – that our bodies take are not necessarily casual, as they can actually be organised in certain ways (Ahmed 2006). To be oriented, as put by Ahmed (2006:1), is "to be turned toward certain objects". And, indeed, it is precisely because these processes of orientation and orchestration – or 'distribution of the sensible'

(Highmore 2011; Jacobsen and Beer 2021; Rancière 2005) – affect our experiences of the social world that a critically informed phenomenology is productive for the examination of habituated practices. Whatever we feel, notice, perceive, *experience*, despite its apparent naturalness, is also orchestrated in certain ways – we are, constantly, "both subjected to a specific distribution of the sensible and active in apportioning sensorial actuality" (Highmore 2011:23). Things are not simply 'out there' for our apprehension and consciousness, which means that whatever one experiences is shaped and constructed by, and therefore dependent on, social forces, dynamics and structures. Under this conception, saying that experience is an embodied process means not only that it happens viscerally, but also that it is situated in time, space, and perspective, and exists only under certain conditions.

Rejecting the claim that phenomenology is inherently and inevitably apolitical, this thesis subscribes to the idea that a phenomenological framework is useful precisely because these conditions of experience are never neutral, and even our 'inner experiences' are considered to have a social dimension, although felt to be 'private' or 'internal' (Highmore 2011). In other words, even though this thesis argues that it is of primary importance to maintain a phenomenological sensibility in trying to capture and discuss how people deal with and perceive social media in context of everyday life – which implies accepting that the apprehension of the social world is, still, accessible to situated individuals (Hepp 2020) – on the other hand I want to avoid assuming that any experiences identified correspond to a pure, self-evident, and de-contextualised truth, or are restricted to one universal and straightforward interpretation. Therefore, even though sensorial perception is still of chief importance for this project, it is seen here as socially contingent and always supported by memory, imagination and, generically put, acts of signification (Depraz et al. 2003). This is, in summary, an attempt to overcome the often-established separation between experience as sensory perception and experience as produced by discourse, acknowledging that experience depends on embodied senses as much as on symbolic and technological structures, which shape and inform how each of us gains access to, and ultimately *exists in*, the social world today.

It is worth noting, though, that this thesis it is not interested in each and every kind of experiences but, rather, in those mediated by so-called social media platforms. In this regard, at the phenomenological level, technologies offer intentionalities and inclinations – orientations – as they provide a condition or framework for action (Ihde 1990). As explained by Ihde, "communications technologies are as powerful as they are because of some of the

multiple sets of dimensions they incarnate. They can be technologically complex, can or cannot be close-linked to an equally complex set of instrumental involvements, and yet remain hermeneutically simple" (1990:155). As added by Silverstone (2005), although the edges and boundaries around media can be visible when we take them as objects or devices, they have become deeply incorporated into the routinisation and ritualisation of everyday life. On a basic level, media are constantly informing the ways we imagine our lives and that of others, what is out there to be seen, and how one can access it (Orgad 2012; Haupt 2021). If phenomenology is indeed the study of how the world and its things 'appear to us', then we should not ignore that fact that media technologies' work is precisely to "to make other things (symbols, texts, images, sounds, entities, beings, worlds) appear to us 'in', 'through' and 'on' them, often making themselves disappear as media when they do so" (Frosh 2019:26).

A critically informed phenomenology of mediation cannot ignore the fact that media experiences are, therefore, always already entrenched by beliefs, imaginaries, representations, and discourses – discourses very often produced and reproduced by media themselves. Embracing this complex understanding of experience, the phenomenological sensibility that I have been defending presupposes the questioning of the habitual and taken-for-granted through description and interpretation as a means to producing critique, and a focus on perceptual processes to examine and interrogate the very structures of lived experience.

3.2 Experience machines: mediation as a phenomenological matter

As demonstrated in the Introduction to this thesis, the rhetoric of 'experience' has become increasingly prevalent in the platform industry. The adoption of such discourse as part of the mainstream corporate vernacular usually comes framed as a benevolent response to existing popular demands and aspirations – a common strategy that can also be seen, as suggested by Schull (2012:37), "as part of a larger effort to *guide* those needs and desires". This section is interested in foregrounding how at the core of social media there is an existential dimension marked by the promise of the delivery of experiential enhancement – a matter that, I argue, is ripe for critical-phenomenological enquiry. In empirical terms, phenomenologists tend to employ objects such as the hammer, the walking stick, chairs, or pens as examples in their analyses. Social media, as discussed in the previous chapter, are a much more complex technological environment, and thus require a more layered analytical effort. An experiential analysis of media should, as I have been arguing, account for both the sensorial and symbolic

dimensions of our engagements with these technologies. After all, "media are not fixed natural objects; they have no natural edges. They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication" (Marvin 1988:8).

The promise of experiential enhancement, it should be noted, is not an exclusivity of social media. Indeed, the development of media technologies, since at least the invention of the telegraph, could very much be framed as the continuously updating historical pursuit of expanded experience (Marvin 1988). At the core of media are, therefore, "their wonderful abilities to extend messages effortlessly and instantaneously across time and space and to reproduce live sounds and images without any loss of content, at least by the standards of the day" (Marvin 1988:191). Crucial to different communication technologies seems to be this idea of enriched transmission (Carey 1989), which in phenomenological terms could be conceived as the quest for the paradoxical stance in which "more and more of the world could be 'experienced' in an increasingly familiar and restricted space and time" (Marvin 1988:200).

Of course, this is not to say that mediation is always merely a matter of information transmission – media also have a key ritual function, through which these technologies and institutions act in the organisation and preservation of the ordinariness of everyday life (Carey 1989; Dayan and Katz 1992; Silverstone 2005; Scannell 2014). In doing so, media support distinctive forms of social coordination and act as "agencies of order", providing the basic structures of everyday life (Peters 2015:1,7). It is this broad and dialectical notion, "which requires us to address the processes of communication as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded" (Silverstone 2005:198) that I have been referring to as mediation. Mediation is conceived here, then, as a process that is technological and institutional but also always affective and experiential – a "fundamental process of human and nonhuman existence" (Grusin 2015:125)

Under this view, media technologies become not only the channels for the exchange of messages and the sharing of 'content' but also the providers of, in phenomenological terms, our very conditions of existence (Peters 2015). "Questions concerning digital technologies", argues Lagerkvist (2017:97), "are thus questions about human existence". Such claims might sound dramatically exaggerated – or, as neatly expressed by Peters (2015), at the threshold between the profound and the pretentious – and I reiterate that by that I do not mean to reduce experiences with and of social media to the spectacular, life-changing, almighty. On the

contrary, I assume that it is exactly due to their habituated banality that these technologies acquire this status of some of our most basic 'infrastructures of being' (Peters 2015). My interest in this project lies precisely at the intersection of these ongoing existential philosophical issues and their enactment and negotiation in the mundanity of everyday life, in which the ordinary and the extraordinary confuse and confound (Lagerkvist 2017).

Emphasising the existential dimension of (social) media means foregrounding their world-building capacities – their contribution to the construction of the very 'givenness' of our lifeworld – and their role in providing us with a "sense of physical and social being in a shared world with others" (Frosh 2019:2). They allow us, as Frosh (2019) puts it, to simultaneously feel the world present and feel present in the world. Borrowing from Heidegger (2008) the idea of *thrownness*, scholars concerned with the existential dimension of media tend to emphasise that mediation is always-already part of our lifeworld, a world that we inhabit and experience as self-evident – a world "into which we continuously find ourselves thrown" (Markham and Rodgers 2017:5). That is, we live with social media not through contemplation but rather through habitual inhabitancy; thrownness means accepting lived experience to be often affective and pre-reflexive – "an experience of profound disorientation" (Markham 2020:30). Media, then, are taken here as having "a uniquely existential burden, resonance as well as potential" (Lagerkvist 2017:99).

The depth and complexity of social media come not from reflective contemplation or from punctual moments of breakdown, but precisely from the basic, elementary role they have acquired in different realms of our social life – roles that we might not always consciously apprehend precisely because we are too busy inhabiting those realms in an improvisational manner (Markham 2020). Key to an existential approach is therefore the pursuit of an ethics of ambiguity (de Beauvoir 2015), which rejects simplistic instrumental or deterministic views in favour of exploring the intersections of human desires, uncertainties and vulnerabilities and these now ubiquitous technological artefacts (Lagerkvist 2019).

Precisely because of their centrality to everyday experience – as put by Lagerkvist, they "deeply inform our world-views, lives, embodied sense ratios, affective responses, structures of incentive and leeway for action" (2019:3) – social media call for an update of the traditional organising principles of phenomenological enquiry. In this regard, this thesis is to a large extent spurred by the conviction that our current media manifold requires new ways to think about

the mediations of the body, as well as the "communicative affordances of presence" (Peters 2015:6). I have chosen to foreground four themes – embodiment, temporality, spatiality and intersubjectivity – which I examine in more detail in the following subsections. Although the four dimensions certainly overlap, I have opted for fleshing them out separately to render each fully intelligible. Through the consideration of these four themes, the latency of liveness as a topic of interest for a phenomenology of mediation, as well as the guiding questions and respective analytical devices proposed for the empirical examination, will become clearer.

3.2.1 Embodiment

The foundational premise of the phenomenological sensibility this project is adhering to is that human experience is always embodied, incarnated (Leder 1990; Merlau-Ponty 2012). This conception is also based on a rejection of the Cartesian dualism between body and mind. The embodied self, then, is not taken here as a sensorial receptacle for an 'inner spirit'; it simultaneously "lives and breathes, perceives and acts, speaks and reasons" (Leder 1990:7). In other words, cognition is not an extra layer to complement raw sensorial experience, "with thought making sense of affect. Each is equally of the world, neither is prior to the other" (Markham 2020:46). Although embodiment is the very basis for every experience – being, therefore, a crucial component for temporality, spatiality and intersubjectivity as well – in this section I want to focus on two points that are central to the study of mediation and, I argue, for liveness: the dilemmas of attention/distraction and of extension/transparency.

Our intrinsically visceral existence is marked by a paradox – as explained by Leder (1990:1), "while in one sense the body is the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives, it is also essentially characterised by absence. That is, one's own body is rarely the thematic object of experience". In our state of perpetual thrownness, we do not stop to apprehend every discrete bodily affect; our lived experience (at least in conditions of able-bodiedness) relies on our body's capacity to self-efface, as some of its aspects, organs and functions recede while others come to prominence (Leder 1990). The body, then, is taken here as a dynamic site of experience, marked by passions, feelings and moods that are constantly in flux, and which also provide orientations in our continuous attunement to the world (Highmore 2011). Under this conception, moods and feelings are taken not only as a reaction or response to the experienced, but also as foundational contingencies to the experience itself (Markham 2020).

In this dynamic movement that constitutes embodiment, particular modes of attention are put forth. In this regard, media consumption in general – and, more recently, the use of social media in particular – has been widely framed as distractive (Paasonen 2020, 2021). Distraction, for many, is conceived as a state in which the mind is seen as empty, vacant – it is the very opposite of attention (Highmore 2011). Yet, phenomenology, through its emphasis on the fluid and self-effacing natures of body-world and body-technology relations, allows us to conceive of distraction as a particular form of attention marked by movement, which relies on habituation to achieve the self-effacement of the already-known, and the opening up to the unfamiliar and new (Ibid.). Distraction, then, is intrinsically connected to routinisation, habituation, and contingency (Frosh 2019). As put by Highmore (2011:124), "Distraction is the test of habit's accomplishments, and successful habituation marks out a space for distraction". Our existence in the world, then, presupposes our capacities for being distracted.

As covered in this chapter thus far, as human beings we incorporate tools – technologies – to transcend and overcome our carnal constraints. In phenomenological terms, this means that the body's sensorial repertoire has the ability to extend beyond its physical limits by the incorporation of objects and instruments, and by the acquisition of new habits (Ihde 1990; Leder 1990; Merleau-Ponty 2012; Highmore 2011). Habits, as I have already discussed, are practices or movements that, through incorporation, become taken for granted, and disappear from view (Highmore 2011; Leder 1990; Pedwell 2021). From a body-centred perspective, habituation could be defined as the orchestrated internalisation and "accommodation of the human sensorium to the rhythms of external life" (Highmore 2011:110). Consequently, for technology to become 'ready-to-hand' (Heidegger 2008), it should be incorporated in a way to withdraw or recede from perception (Ihde 1990). That is, through incorporation – when becoming part of our ordinary sensory experience – technology becomes 'transparent' (Grusin 2015), barely noticed. As theorised by Ihde, body-technology relations are fundamentally marked by a twofold aspiration, which is central to this thesis' main topic of interest:

> It is the double desire that, on one side, is a wish for total transparency, total embodiment, for the technology to truly 'become me'. Were this possible, it would be equivalent to there being no technology, for total transparency would be my body and senses; I desire the face-to-face that I would experience without the technology. But that is only one side of the desire. The other side is the desire to have the power, the transformation that the technology makes available. (Ihde 1990:75)

In other words, body-technology relations always involve an ambivalent negotiation between the extension or magnification provided by this incorporation and the invariable partiality of its transparency or withdrawal. It is, fundamentally, a desire for a technical mediation that

provides experiential change while at the same time erasing itself from perception (Ihde 1990). In media studies, this has been previously theorised as a fundamental component of the logics of remediation, in which "our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation" (Bolter and Grusin 2000:5). In a broader sense, an ongoing dilemma in existentialism and the philosophy of technology is represented by the pursuit of an authentic sense of being and technology's alleged obstruction of this achievement (Lagerkvist 2019). As I will subsequently explore in more detail, liveness is perhaps the paradigmatic manifestation of this historical desire and its contradictions.

Considering all of this, some important problems[5] arise: if we centre embodiment, what does an ordinary, everyday experience of and with social media look like – and can the mediated experience be taken as an 'authentic' experience? How are the aforementioned tensions of incorporation and distraction actualised and manifested in the social media environment? How can the historical construct of liveness help us make sense of these dynamics, and in what ways does it push us towards the refinement of a critical phenomenology of mediation?

3.2.2 Temporality

As extensively theorised in different academic strands, time is a central dimension of social life (Couldry and Hepp 2016). It is not my ambition here to offer an exhaustive overview of how time has been disputed by philosophical traditions over the centuries. This section focuses on elaborating on the relationality of temporality that is foundational to a phenomenological approach, and on proposing the use of phenomenal rhythms to examine the multidimensional character of time in everyday experiences with social media.

In continental philosophy, two of the most common metaphors for temporality are those of the string of pearls, in which time shows itself as a sequence of 'nows', and of the fluvial flow (Leong et al. 2009), in which time is taken as a successive stream – "coming from the past into the present and then flowing on into the future" (Hoy 2012:xvi). At the core of this debate are the different stances adopted by theorists regarding time's relationality. In this regard, I subscribe here to the phenomenological view that acknowledges that temporality, as an *account* of past, present and future, is always *relational*. Anticipation, for instance, is the present

[5] Please note that the queries introduced in this section are not yet my Research Questions – those will be properly formulated in Chapter 4.

awareness of an incoming future (Heidegger 2008). Due to this relationality, "how long the present lasts will depend on the goal and the origin of the interpretive practice" (Hoy 2012:91). This means that temporality is seen as dependent on other aspects, including affective states – how we find ourselves in a given situation, and how we feel, conditions what and how we can do and perceive (Highmore 2011; Hoy 2012). By exploring sentiments of fear, curiosity, anxiety, and boredom, Heidegger (2008) demonstrates the association between experiences of time and particular emotions, and how moods are revelatory of our perceptual potentialities. It should not be difficult for the reader to understand this relationship – when we are going through something exciting, time tends to pass by really fast; in a context of waiting, however, sometimes it feels like each minute lasts for an eternity.

The examination of the relationship between technology and time is a vast area of enquiry (Wajcman 2008), which dates to at least the emergence of industrial capitalism and the quantification of time (Thompson 1967). Still, this stream of scholarship has acquired a new traction since the popularisation of digital and mobile communication artefacts, which are frequently said to have drastically transformed the human perception of time (Wajcman 2018). In this regard, this thesis fully subscribes to the standpoint that, despite the richness of available theoretical and philosophical endeavours investigating the interplay of time and technology, it is only by looking at their concrete application in the context of daily life that we can fully grasp the multidimensional character of temporality (Wajcman 2008). Regarding social media more specifically, if we consider the disruptions provoked by algorithmic sorting (as covered in Chapter 2), then embracing this multidimensionality of temporality becomes imperative.

Bearing this in mind, one potentially productive strategy for a phenomenological inspection of social media's temporality in its situatedness and relationality is to use *rhythm* as an analytical device. After all, in pragmatic terms, "if one's theory of perception holds that temporality is such that one can hear only what is in the present, and the present can include only one note at the time, then one would never hear the melody (…) how does one otherwise hear the rhythm?" (Hoy 2012:51). Rhythms are understood here as patterns of movement resultant from sensorial orchestration; systematic arrangements of continuities and discontinuities that produce a flow, and which are composed by the cyclical intercalation of rapidity and slowness, repetition and difference (Lefebvre 2004).

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Carmi (2020:1) has recently named *rhythmedia* the practice in which "media companies render people, objects and their relations as rhythms and (re)order them for economic purposes". Carmi's work illuminates the processual, orchestrated character of relations that are presented by the platforms themselves under a foggy rhetoric of 'transparent', 'organic' and 'natural' ordering. Crucially, she examines how a platform "understands people's behavior as rhythms, and orders their mediated experience according to an economic rationale" (Carmi 2020:2). Under this scope, *rhythmedia* is conceived as a vital component of contemporary social media logic (as defined in Chapter 2), and refers to the intervention of platforms in the ordering of people and their relations, which also comprises the exclusion of unwanted forms of sociality (Ibid.). Carmi (2020) also highlights the recursive character of *rhythmedia*, in which the rhythm of use of a given platform by individuals allows the company to create particular rhythms of content to optimise profitable engagement.

A rhythmic account of temporal experiences focuses not on an abstract, singular tempo but on the assemblage of different beats where manifold temporalities collide (Crang 2001). Rhythm is, in short, about both perception and its arrangement – it is, in phenomenological terms, the "organisation of time in parts accessible to the senses" (Sachs 1952:387). Focusing on rhythms and their orchestration also implies the rejection of generalist accounts of technology-driven timelessness, which suggest that we live in the era of the 'present shock' in which everything has been reoriented to the 'now' (Rushkoff 2014), and that this "hallucination of presence" produces "a time extracted from any material or identifiable demarcations, a time without sequence or recurrence" (Crary 2014:29). I argue that observing the experiential rhythms produced in everyday encounters with these technologies seems more generative for foregrounding the manifold and contingent character of temporality. In observing the rhythms, we might be able to identify different modalities of mediated 'synchronisation' and how they arrange social order (Jordheim and Ytreberg 2021). In this regard, as explained by Jordheim and Ytreberg (2021:7), "Because they are tool-dependent and site-specific, all acts of synchronisation are contestable and contested, by competing acts of synchronisation as well as by desynchronising activities". Key here is the understanding that temporality is subjected to ordering and yet also susceptible to instability and contestation, which seems fruitful for an empirical analysis centred on lived experiences, especially because it opens avenues to explore the struggles for agency and control that characterise the ordinary.

This raises further potentially fruitful interrogations: if we start from a rhythmic account of temporality, how are the previously theorised ideas of realtimeness and algorithmic ordering perceived in everyday encounters with social media – and what does it mean for a phenomenology of liveness? How are those rhythms impacted by affective, emotional, and technological contingencies? When and how does this complex and contested sensorial orchestration that characterises the social media manifold afford acts of synchronisation that are experienced as 'live'?

3.2.3 Spatiality

One of the central themes of this chapter is the discussion of how our bodily existence is expanded and extended through the incorporation of technological artefacts. This means that a fundamental concern of technical mediation is with the malleability of spatial distance through this instrumentation (Ihde 1990). Phenomenologically, if part of our condition of thrownness is always-already being in the world (Heidegger 2008), navigating and dealing with it as we go (Moores 2015; Markham 2020), then our very *presence* in this world is a given. Media technologies, however, have long been theorised as affording the possibility of *being there* – in which *there* represents a remote place or event that is not immediately *here*. In this subsection, I will elaborate on a phenomenological critique for the widespread idea of a 'death of distance' (Cairncross 2001) provided by technical mediation, discussing also the types of 'proximities' that can be experienced through media in situations of physical remoteness.

Although phenomenology takes the fleshly body to be the site and anchor of every experience, it also accepts that through habituation and incorporation our embodiment is susceptible to modification. In this regard, the overall narrative that underlies the development of media technologies also centres their ability to produce the so-called 'collapse of distances': through media, distant places, people, and happenings become experientially much closer than they actually are. That is, technologies are said to have transformed our 'situational geography' (Meyrowitz 1985), in what is often framed as the 'time-space distanciation', and frequently assumed to be a key condition of modernity (Giddens 1990; Moores 1995). A central idea of this perspective, which was particularly popular in the 1990s and early 2000s, is that once these limits are overcome through technology, they become obsolete (Farman 2015).

However, I would rather echo Moores (2004) in arguing that this alleged perceptual collapse does not make space and place irrelevant, as spatial relations are continuously negotiated and renegotiated in everyday mediated experiences. Space, under this conception, is not marginalised but rather complexified and pluralised (Moores 2004). Recently, and especially due to the pervasiveness of mobile digital technologies, the interest in distance and proximity has returned to the fore (Farman 2015; Moores 2017; Wilken and Humphreys 2021). A phenomenological perspective, therefore, rejects ideas of disembodiment and disembedding, and should pay attention to the orientations of our bodies in space even in conditions of mediation (Farman 2015). Place – which could be taken as space made meaningful – is, therefore, still relevant to the study of mediated experiences (Wilken and Humphreys 2021). This renewed interest has also been prompted by mobile technologies' capacity to afford different forms and modalities of placemaking, or the practice of making, transforming, negotiating, and cultivating a sense of place (Wilken and Humphreys 2021).

Through body-technology relations (Ihde 1990) such as those typical of media experiences, we are given the capacity to witness events remotely, and thereby have access to what is taking place from a distance. A witness, in general, is someone who 'has' (and therefore owns) the experience of 'being there' through direct, immediate presence (Ellis 2000; Peters 2001; Frosh 2019). Yet, in providing a second-hand sense of being there, media are said to make us "witnesses of the ways of the world", which "raises questions of truth and experience, presence and absence, death and pain, seeing and saying, and the trustworthiness of perception" (Peters 2001:707) – questions that, I would say, are foundational to phenomenology more broadly, and to liveness in particular. The point is that, in extending our access to distant events, social media become 'electronic elsewheres' (Papacharissi 2015). That is, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter afford to their users the possibility of observing and "affectively tuning into" distant happenings and events, "imagining what these might feel like for people directly experiencing them", which "makes us feel like we are *there*, wherever *there* may be" (Papacharissi 2015:4).

Overall, this phenomenal sense of being there has traditionally been addressed in the available scholarship through the broad concept of (tele)presence (Bourdon 2019). It is worth mentioning that different areas have varied versions for what presence consists of and how it can be measured. Lombard and Ditton (1997) provide a comprehensive review of the literature on the topic, which in turn leads to their own conceptualisation: presence would be "the perceptual

illusion of nonmediation". According to them, such illusion "occurs when a person fails to perceive or acknowledge the existence of a medium (...) and responds as he/she would if the medium were not there" (Lombard and Ditton 1997:6). This means presence is taken as a subjective capacity of perceiving media as invisible, which would then provide the sense of 'being there' even when you are not. This conception of presence, then, seems directly premised on the ideal of technological transparency (Ihde 1990), as discussed above.

Other than focusing on this idea of technology's perceptual withdrawal, it is also productive for a phenomenology of mediation to conceive of presence beyond these traditional and allegedly objective markers (Hong 2015). Presence can, as proposed by Hong (2015), be more fruitfully conceived as a broader set of conventionalised ways of experiencing proximity, intimacy, and sociability from a distance, which in turn requires us "to naturalise what is initially 'inauthentic' or fanciful". From a phenomenological approach, this process of naturalisation occurs precisely through embodiment and habituation. Regarding social media in particular, presence can refer to "a felt sense that I am part of something, a shared space/time of communication, even if, right now, I am alone, and I 'see' nobody", and be achieved even through asynchronous, faceless, or indirect interactions (Hong 2005). Furthermore, another common manifestation of the *presencing* capacities of mediation is represented by the practice of using technologies as a proof-of-presence (Lovink 2019). Through popular activities such as the taking and sharing of selfies, for instance, the body is inscribed into mediated interactions, affording a sort of 'kinaesthetic sociability'– the awareness and communication of one's physical location (Frosh 2019). In so doing, "The selfie's locative claim ('I am *here*') also entails a strong existential dimension ('*I am* here')" (Chouliaraki 2017:85).

With this in mind, the following queries emerge as fruitful empirical entry points: in what ways does the social media manifold afford a sense of 'being there' through technology? Do these modalities of placemaking and presencing evoke a sense of liveness (and, if yes, how so)? Which practices and conventions of experiential proximity are foregrounded, habituated, and naturalised in this mediated environment in the context of everyday life – and to what extent can they be theorised to afford the experience that you are actually *there*, live?

3.2.4 Intersubjectivity

A key (and, so far, unaddressed) component of our experience of the social world is the fact that we are sharing it with others. Other people, therefore, are experienced not only as part of the 'environment', but also as other beings able to have their own experiences (Schütz 1967). In this regard, one of the biggest obstacles for the concrete application of phenomenological enquiry in social research is the obvious impracticality of direct apprehension of the other's subjective perspective (and, consequently, experience) of the world, from the other's viewpoint. As put by Taipale (2015), a crucial phenomenological problem is that other people's feelings, thoughts, and lived experiences cannot be fully grasped. Considering this fundamental issue of the impossibility of a transfusion of consciousness, the most productive path seems to be subscribing to the premise that the other's experience of the world can only be grasped, in phenomenological terms, 'as it appears to us'. In this section, I will focus precisely on evolving theorisations of how we can feel other people as beings who are present and experiencing the world, and on (if and) how we can experience, through social media, what they experience.

The foundational dream of communication, after all, is that it would represent a 'communion of souls', which "evokes a utopia where nothing is misunderstood, hearts are open, and expression is uninhibited" (Peters 1999:2). Yet, a basic premise of phenomenological enquiry is that part of the human condition is the 'mutual insulation' of consciousness – "our sensations and feelings are, physiologically speaking, uniquely our own" (Peters 1999:3). As argued by Peters (1999), though, more productive than pursuing a telepathical dream of sharing of minds, is focusing on communication as having the potential for cooperation, agreement, and understanding. Such concerns were the core themes of Schutz's *Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967), which discusses the very possibility of intersubjective understanding. According to Schutz, there are crucial distinctions between self-interpretation and the understanding of experiences lived by others: "When I become aware of a segment of your lived experience, I arrange what I see within my own meaning-context. But meanwhile you have arranged it in yours. Thus I am always interpreting your lived experiences from my own standpoint" (1967:106). That is, even though we can to some extent grasp other people's experiences through observation, in practice they are never directly evident, nor can they be inferred through mere intuition – often, we presume and project others' experiences based on our own.

Crucially, then, our interpretation of other people's experiences cannot rely solely on observational understanding – as put by Schütz (1967:27), "these are questions of subjective meaning and cannot be answered by merely watching someone's behaviour". For intersubjectivity depends not on a wireless connection of brains (Peters 1999) but on shared interpretive schemes, it is through symbolic representation and reflection that we can apprehend the lived experiences of others (Schütz 1967:27). Yet, phenomenologically, whatever one witnesses immediately – purely, without mediation – is the ultimate, primary form of experience, and this first-hand experience can never be completely reproduced or transmitted to others – as put by Peters (2011:710), "no transfusion of consciousness is possible. Words can be exchanged, experiences cannot". At stake here is therefore the veracity gap (Frosh 2006): the translation of sensorial, visceral information into discursive articulation.

It would go beyond the scope of this chapter to develop an extended discussion on language as the public transmission of inner ideas. What I want to emphasise here is that technical mediation brings about even further layers of complexity for intersubjectivity. After all, through mediation, the very absence of the other's body in the same space and time represents additional challenges for recognition, understanding, empathy, and collectiveness (Markham 2020). Going back to the key themes of this chapter, as summarised by Peters (1999:83), "media matter to practices of communication because embodiment matters. The body is our existence, not our container". Mediation, by extending the body's reach beyond its boundedness, affords new possibilities (and challenges) for intersubjectivity. Yet, according to Peters (1999), regardless of its different modalities and formats, the ultimate aspiration of communication is precisely to capture 'life itself', and media are constantly trying to find ways to compensate for this embodied distance by constructing new markers of proximity, authenticity, and intimacy (Peters 1999; Scannell 2014). In short, the possibility of technically mediated intersubjectivity requires us to reconsider the phenomenological premise that one can only participate and have an experience through being there in the flesh (Peters 1999).

Electronic media – radio and television, in particular – have long developed strategies to convey (and simulate) intersubjectivity and collectivity from a distance. As argued by Highmore (2011:133), broadcast media "are collective phenomena, even if that collectivity is often virtual". Media technologies also have been theorised to have an inherent potential for 'transmissability' – the medium itself enables and symbolises the prospect of available connection to distant others and remote events (Meyrowitz 1986; Frosh 2019). In a similar

vein, recent theorisations of social media (Berry 2011; Frosh 2019) have pointed out that, often, more than viewing or reading specific posts that might appear in the ongoing informational flow, participating in the 'stream' becomes an experience in and of itself. Furthermore, through these technologies, we develop new ways to convey and perceive 'vital signs' that aim to make up for the lack of embodied co-presence and of available bodily movements. As exemplified by Frosh (2019:91), "symbols such as ✓ are no longer simply remediated tokens of message delivery or task accomplishment: they have been delegated with existential powers" and serve, therefore, as intersubjective indicators of life.

Back to broadcast media, from the production side, the goal often is, as posed by Cantrill and Allport (1935), to create "a lively impression of universality. Each individual must believe the others are thinking as he thinks, and sharing his emotions" (cited in Peters 1999:216). In this hybrid communicative entitlement, conceptualised by Paddy Scannell (2000) as a "*for-anyone-as-someone* structure", electronic media address their audience both as (a) a mass, highlighting their usefulness for anyone, anywhere, and (b) as particular persons for whom the content is made: 'The *for-anyone-as-someone* structure expresses 'we-ness'" (Scannell, 2000:10). In the case of social media, however, it is not only (or necessarily) the content that is carefully crafted to be perceived as individually significant – it is, as already discussed in Chapter 2, the very organisation and presentation of this content in a personalised but continuous flow that, according to the platforms, has your best interest in mind, delivering what is relevant not to a generic 'anyone', neither to 'someone', but to *you* (Chun 2017).

Within this techno-political landscape that favours individuality, social media have been theorised as producing intense (even if often flickering) affective intersubjective attachments that might not necessarily be characterised as "collective action" but rather as "connective action" (Papacharissi 2015). The personal, emotionally charged, phatic character of networked interactions – and the very constant and ephemeral rhythms of the informational streams and feeds – convey a sense of participation in networked publics (boyd 2014) that does not necessarily sustains 'communities' per se, but which may eventually produce 'feelings of community' (Papacharissi 2015; Dean 2006).

Bearing this in mind, when it comes to intersubjectivity, it seems relevant to ask: is it still possible to have a sense of shared experience in a technological environment marked precisely by personalisation and individuation? How can one grasp other people's experiences through

social media technologies in the context of everyday life? What are, in social media, the common signs of vitality that provide a sense of being in a shared world with others? When and how does the social media manifold afford opportunities for recognition, community, or collectivity that could be characterised as an experience of 'liveness'?

3.3 Liveness, or the experience of immediate connection through media

Having introduced the theoretical foundation of this thesis – based on a critical-phenomenological approach to mediation, which includes paying attention to both the experiential and its orchestration – it is time to focus more explicitly on its central concept of interest: liveness. As elaborated in the Introduction, 'the live' contains multifarious attributions and elastic, context-contingent definitions (Vianello 1985; Auslander 2008; Couldry 2004; van Es 2016). With this in mind, and considering the topics covered throughout this chapter so far, I will now review the different possibilities for experiencing liveness as theorised in the available academic literature in our field. Drawing on this review, I will propose a definition of liveness that is productive for an empirical analysis focused on lived experience – liveness, I argue, is broadly the paradoxical *experience of immediate connection through media*.

Although, as previously discussed, a large body of research is centrally concerned with the ideological and/or the rhetorical use of liveness and its implications, my focus here will be on the feelings, affects, and sensations traditionally linked to 'the live'. Thus, more than introducing competing perspectives on liveness, I am interested in mapping how scholars have framed the possibilities for the 'live' to be accessed through experience. In line with the four organising principles of phenomenology as discussed in detail in the previous section, I have organised the available perspectives as foregrounding the dimensions of temporality, spatiality, intersubjectivity, and embodiment (although, I clarify once again, they often overlap).

3.3.1 The temporal 'live'

If we approach liveness from the angle of temporality, the concept is usually taken to designate either a matter of speed (the fast transmission and/or access to what is happening elsewhere), duration (or lack thereof, which in turn prompts us to pay attention in the 'here and now'), or contingency (based on situations or events that are still 'in state of becoming', unfolding and, therefore, are relatively open-ended).

Indeed, nowadays, it is likely that the most popular understanding of 'the live' is that related to real-time, instantaneous transmission, especially in the context of televisual broadcast – a matter that has spurred a number of intellectual endeavours to this date (Caldwell 1995; Dayan and Katz 1992; Davis 2007; Ellis 2000; Kumar 2015; Levine 2003; Scannell 2006, 2014; Marriott 2007; Meyrowitz 1985; White 2003). Generally, this perspective emphasises a given medium's technical potential for instant diffusion – that is, for connection without perceptible delays (Vianello 1985; Scannell 2014; van Es 2016). Yet, as highlighted by Evans and Lundgren (2016), even this apparently unproblematised conception should be unpacked, as the existing global hierarchies – and the underlying unequal distribution of material resources and infrastructures – make it technically impossible for a transmission to effectively be universally 'instantaneous'. The temporal liveness of real-time television, therefore, usually focuses on a more confined – local or national – context (Vianello 1985).

Another relatively established trend in television studies positions liveness as directly related to the technical and material qualities of the televisual image (Zettl 1978; Davis 2007). For Zettl (1978), for instance, television's essence is that of incompleteness and unfoldingness, as its technical feature of the 'scanning beam' configures an experience based on continuous presentness. Under this perspective, liveness precedes the real-time capacities typical of broadcasting mentioned above, being understood as "a techno-material effect of the technical principles that allow episodes and objects to appear as television images" (Davis 2007:46), which (contrary to film), cannot be reduced to single frames. The source of liveness, here, would be the difference produced by the electronic image, when compared to analogue film, in the observers' eyes.

Ellis (2000), in turn, adds that the sense of liveness generated by television relies not only on the operation of the televisual image itself nor on the content being transmitted, but actually on the flow or organisation of this transmission, in which even "recorded programmes are able to claim the status of liveness for themselves simply because the act of transmission attaches them to a particular moment" (Ellis 2000:31). As summarised by Marriott (2007:50), this perspective that emphasises ephemerality and contingency views television as perpetually live, as its image is "constantly coming into being". Electronic media would, under such conception, provide liveness thanks to their technical affordances that allow the flow of information to be continuously on the move.

Indeed, the impending disappearance of a given experience is at the core of many theorisations of liveness in the field of performance studies. Oftentimes, theorists of liveness concerned with performance arts make use of Walter Benjamin's (1969) work to discuss the primacy of live performance (and its corresponding aura of singularity) over the mediated (Phelan 1997; Aguilar 2014). Such a tendency is well summarised by Auslander (1997): "In these formations, live performance is identified with intimacy and disappearance, media with mass audience, reproduction and repetition" (1997:51). In this regard, the qualities frequently used to attribute liveness to a given experience are simultaneity, uniqueness, and non-reproducibility (Phelan 1997; Reason and Lindelof 2016).

Relatedly, another type of temporal experience commonly associated with liveness both in television and performance studies is that of a continuous sense of unpredictability (Levine 2003). In this regard, because the content (of the TV show, for instance) is being watched while it unfolds, there is constantly the potential for something unexpected to happen (Couldry 2004) – the continuous risk of spectacular failure (Morris 2015), which is fuelled by a sense that "something could go wrong at any moment" (Atkinson 2017:704). The potential interruption of the live transmission – even when whatever is being watched is explicitly recorded – contributes to the conception of television as the essential live medium up to this day. As summarised by Peters (1999:218), "'Live' means that contingency is still possible, that the energy is actual, and that a new and singular event can take place". Finally, in emphasising unpredictability, uniqueness, movement, and nowness, the temporal live also represents a claim of truth – that whatever one sees is *really* happening.

3.3.2 The spatial 'live'

If, instead of temporality, we focus on the spatiality of 'the live', then the term is frequently deployed to characterise practices of mediated witnessing, presencing, or experiential 'teleportation' – the potential for 'being there' even when you physically are not.

The possibility of accessing the world *en direct*, through 'first-hand' experience (in spite of its mediated character) is at the core of many studies of liveness. Authors that follow this stream of thought tend to position electronic media (and, particularly, television) as responsible for the emergence of new forms of witnessing and testimony, once we gain the possibility of experiencing the world immediately beyond our bodies' physical reach (Meyrowitz 1985; Ellis

2000; Peters 2011). Nonetheless, as clarified by Ellis (2000), acknowledging the expansion of our perceptual field by the introduction of particular media does not equate to saying that the witnessing experience provided by these technologies is the same as being present at the actual event or happening – not only because much of the sensory evidence is missed (as discussed above in section 3.2.3), but also because the impression of social involvement is often only partially achieved. In turn, however, mediated witnessing provides an enhancement of the experiential once it allows for the observation of the thing or happening from different angles, at different distances, through different rhythms (Ellis 2000).

Closely aligned with the idea of witnessing a given event through technological mediation is the notion of being there, participating in it as it unfolds (Scannell 2014; Hammelburg 2021a). Yet, even if we accept that mediated encounters are able to somehow provide a sense of 'being there' (Scannell 2014), it is hard to imagine that, in pragmatic terms, one would actually mistake them for teleportation, as this would require us to "believe ourselves to be relocated to some other locale" (Marriott 2007:35). Notably, then, any sense of 'being there' afforded by mediation relies not only on actual perceptual geographical transportation but also – and perhaps mostly – on trust. As theorised by Bourdon (2000), media consumption – and, in the case of his analysis, television in particular – presupposes a contract between the audiences and whatever is being watched on the screen. Contract, here, designates the implicit agreement between both parts and its resultant expectations, and could be exemplified by the general belief that whatever is being broadcast under the label 'live' is actually unfolding at that specific moment. This possibility helps us to understand why, as already explored by several different scholars (Feuer 1983; Caldwell 1995; Ellis 2000; Davis 2007), television tends to maintain an aura of liveness notwithstanding the fact that the vast majority of its content could not be classified as 'live' in the first place. Yet, this belief is not universal nor should it be taken for granted, as it "varies according to the text, to the characteristics of the viewer (education, generation, social milieu), to the situation of the viewer (attention brought to 'liveness' or not) and, last but not least, to the moment when one is viewing" (Bourdon 2000:535). In short, Bourdon opens the possibility for the inference of liveness by audiences – usually based on the media text itself but also on the audiences' assumptions, previous experiences, familiarity with specific genres, belief, and so on – and pays attention to the situatedness of 'the live' rather than claiming its universality.

Auslander (2012) also emphasises the mutual character of the relationship between media and audiences when exploring liveness in the context of digital technologies. From this standpoint, the simple promise of offering a live experience made by a given technology must be met by the readiness, from the audience side, to accept this claim: "In other words, liveness does not inhere in a technological artefact or its operations – it results from our engagement with it and our willingness to bring it into full presence for ourselves" (Auslander 2012:8). Liveness is, then, about a perpetual potential for connectivity to a remote social world and its events (Meyrowitz 1985; Bourdon 2000). It is, as theorised by Scannell (2014:67), an everyday act of faith and hope: "I turn on the TV set (my laptop or mobile phone) with faith in the technology (it will do what I expect it to do) and with hope that it will meet my expectations of it".

3.3.3 The intersubjective 'live'

'Being there live', however, is rarely only about a perceptual relocation; it is, usually, the experience of being part of an experience with others who are also experiencing it (Hammelburg 2021a). When it comes to intersubjectivity, then, liveness comprises ideas of togetherness, collectiveness, and participation. As explained by van Es (2016:6) "the lure of television is not just about media connecting people to a social centre, it is also about giving them the chance to be part of an experience". Liveness is, under this perspective, more than a matter of simultaneity or perceptual proximity, an issue of potential connection to remote situations or events that matter, as they unfold (Couldry 2004; Hammelburg 2016). Importantly, whatever is taken as socially significant – whatever 'matters' and, consequently, whatever 'feels live' – results from a negotiation between the interested parties: the technologies, the institutions, and the users (van Es 2016).

In media studies – and, likewise, in the scholarship centred on 'liveness' – the idea of an emerging sense of shared experience is traditionally observed through the examination of punctual 'media events' (Dayan and Katz 1992). As already clarified, an 'event' is something that disrupts the ordinariness of the regular flow of content, either because it is an urgent shared happening or because it is a ceremonial proceeding conferred with social significance (Dayan and Katz 1992; Scannell 2014; Frosh and Pinchevski 2018; Sumiala et al. 2019). Thanks to their status of exceptionality, media events represent intermissions in the routine, creating a sense of 'sacred time' (Dayan and Katz 1992:195) that occasionally excludes everything else from attention (Frosh and Pinchevski 2018). These events, then, mobilise 'collectiveness'

through the centralisation of attention and the production of shared experiences – that is, they are perceived as 'shared' because they are somehow socially noteworthy; as in, meaningful beyond individual preferences or interests.

In this regard, it might be the case that, even if there is no belief that whatever is on screen is happening in real-time, audiences deliberately opt for watching the content 'live' (that is, at the same time as others), and recent platform-native and add-on features such as Facebook's Watch Party and Netflix Party evidence the increasing interest in, and popularity of, the practice. Live watching, therefore, expands the original temporal definition based on the correspondence between happening and its transmission, and focuses on the creation of a sense of shared viewership (Bourdon 2000; Ellis 2000; van Es 2016) which supports the emergence of experience communities (Atkinson and Kennedy 2017) or, in other words, co-experience (Lim et al. 2012). Under these terms, liveness refers, not to simultaneity between the event and its mediated diffusion, but rather to the creation of a sense of collective, communal presence (Lury 2012; Marriott 2007).

In the context of digital media, one of the first scholars to spur the reconceptualisation of 'the live' was Couldry (2004), who stated that the central idea behind the claim of liveness would be that of "a potential connection to shared social realities as they are happening" (p.3) and, further, "to the 'realities' that matter for us as a society" (p.4). Considering the implications of digital technologies, he proposed two other competing forms of liveness. That is, two new and "emergent ways of coordinating communications and bodies across time and space" (p.4). These would be *online liveness* – based on the idea of a new form of public sociality characterised by decentralised social co-presence, which would be possible thanks to the Internet and its infrastructures – and *group liveness* – which designates the co-presence of specific social groups whose members are constantly connected, to a great extent thanks to mobile technologies (Couldry 2004). In the context of social media, liveness has also been attributed to a general sense of presence and participation, in which "markers of one's hereness and one's activity are validated – at least algorithmically – by others" (Markham 2020:94).

3.3.4 The embodied 'live'

Finally, if we foreground embodiment in the examination of liveness, then its definition becomes closely aligned with ideas of authenticity and truth – the representation of a given

reality, as it is. As put by Peters (1999:218), at the core of the live is the idea of a "prosthetic form of life, something that announces its authenticity against potentially deceptive substitutes. Its fundamental sense is contrastive: 'live' means 'not dead'". Under this conception, when (and if!) we feel liveness, we feel the *aliveness* of something; we feel something as animated, provided with life. Mediated liveness, therefore, does not presume disembodiment – indeed, it often relies on the mediated use of the body as a marker of authenticity (Peters 1999).

As summarised by Vianello (1985:36), "the live is the gateway to the real" – and the underlying claim of 'live' media is therefore that of the access to reality as it unfolds (Couldry 2004). In this regard, ephemerality, non-reproducibility, exclusivity, singularity, are all manifestations of this primacy of the status of presence – of being there, in either time or space – in a specific happening or event: "Liveness serves as an assurance of access to truth and authenticity" (Peters 2011:719). If, as previously discussed, the majority of the mediated content we have nowadays could not be defined as 'live', in the strict, instantaneous, sense, then the value is not necessarily in the correspondence between happening and transmission (or transmission and reception) but actually on the way that content appears true to life (Duffett 2003) as it unfolds.

From the media production side, there is a multitude of studies that explore the different ecologies (Kumar 2015), or 'care structures' (Scannell 2014) of liveness available. That is, the ways in which a sense of liveness is produced through the use of tokens such as handheld, 'raw' footage, the presence of a live audience on site, "genuine" performances which create para-social intimacy (Atkinson 2017), often employing affective strategies such as eye contact and direct address from news anchors (Vianello 1985; Scannell 2014), and, of course, the explicit use of the label 'live' per se (Scannell 2014; Kumar 2015). Liveness becomes, therefore, a specific mode of communication, a particular style of address, or ambience.

In his close examination of the care-structures that produce liveness in television, Scannell (2014) argues that, indeed, deliberately concealing the mode of production itself is a key component of the live – if not necessarily to deceive or falsify, at least to generate experiences that feel genuine. He emphasises the planning and labour, as well as the technological infrastructure, that support and sustain the production of 'the live' as an effect of mediation. In this regard, as pointed out by van Es (2016), this paradoxical combination of constructive, thoughtful, mediative work and an appearance of naturality, spontaneity, and directness is at

the core of 'the live' in its different constellations. Acknowledging and incorporating this paradoxical stance, my suggestion is to examine liveness – and its articulation across the four dimensions of temporality, spatiality, intersubjectivity, and embodiment – as the experience of immediate connection through media.

3.3.5 The paradoxical experience of immediate connection through media

As discussed in this long (but inevitably incomplete) review of the trajectory of liveness, some of the 'live' experiences attributed to media are: the sense of presence in contexts of remoteness, of togetherness in contexts of separation, of intimacy in contexts of distance, of embeddedness in contexts of domesticity, of universality in contexts of fragmentation, of nowness in contexts of recording, of simultaneity in contexts of asynchronicity, of collectivity in contexts of solitude, of genuineness in contexts of fabrication, of directness in spite of mediation. In this scope, the 'live' is both about the orchestration of the experiential and the continuous quest for authenticity, presence, shared experience, and immediacy in contexts marked precisely by technological, institutionalised mediative work.

Bearing this in mind, and incorporating the theorisation provided by van Es (2016), I argue that, phenomenologically, liveness could be generally described – and empirically scrutinised – as the fundamentally paradoxical *experience of immediate connection through media. Immediate*, here, can be taken in its twofold meaning (Tomlinson 2007; Bolter and Grusin 2000): as what is (or appears to be) happening now, at this precise moment, simultaneously, or extremely recently; and immediate as non-mediated, a process perceived as devoid of intervention, as if it were directly experienced here/now. *Connection* comprehends different types of perceived body-world and body-technology relations, and can provoke various kinds of impressions – proximity, (co)presence, intimacy at a distance, collectivity, instantaneity, and so on. *Media* refers here to both the material objects through which these connections potentially take place, and to the institutional forces and apparatuses that shape these artefacts and platforms.

In short, my theoretical argument is that the concept that most fittingly encapsulates key phenomenological dimensions and concerns in the scope of mediated practices is 'liveness'. From the angle of temporality, the live is the real-time, but also the unpredicted, spontaneous, ephemeral and unfolding; through spatiality, the live can be framed as the sense of 'being

there', feeling present and witnessing from a distance; in terms of intersubjectivity, liveness is attached to a sense of mediated intimacy but also to a shared, collective experience, and to the sense that everyone is paying attention to the same thing as you. If we foreground embodiment in itself, then the live is the mediated experience that somehow evokes the atmosphere of the irreproducible, authentic, 'real experience'.

Moreover, as discussed throughout this chapter, body-technology relations are marked by the ambivalent stance represented by, on the one hand, the dream of experiential enhancement (Marvin 1988) and, on the other hand, the desire for technology to recede from perception through transparency, seamlessness, and habitual incorporation (Ihde 1990; Bolter and Grusin 2000; Highmore 2013). Acknowledging and embracing this ambivalence, I posit that liveness represents the paradigmatic example of this historical desire in the context of media and communications.

3.4 Mediated *as-if-ness*: liveness as a paradigmatic experience

What we have, therefore, is a strong correspondence in the conceptual trajectories of the two terms of interest for this chapter – namely, *experience* and *liveness*. From a phenomenological standpoint, "to be present in the immediate vicinity of an object, then, is to have the fullest possible sensory access to it" (Marriot 2007:7). Phenomenological experience, as liveness, presupposes directness and immediacy, the (perceived) abolition of any mediation. Both terms (and their definitions) are complex and dynamic, and in a constant state of struggle in which embodiment and discourse, materiality and meaning, are entangled and interconnected.

As demonstrated by the literature review presented in the previous section, liveness is, fundamentally, the mediated experience that somehow feels like the actual, *en direct*, non-mediated experience. In this context, if we take liveness as the experience of immediate connection through media, as I have suggested, we can see that central to this elastic concept's attributions is the idea of *as-if-ness*. As theorised by Vaihinger (2021), our existence presupposes the acceptance and adoption of certain 'fictions' *as if* they corresponded to an objective 'real'. *'As-if-ness'*, therefore, is often a necessary instrument for our navigation in an otherwise chaotic world (Vaihinger 2021; Mulvin 2021). In this regard, the mediated 'live' is what is not, what still appears (or claims) to be: experiencing it means feeling *as if* you were there, seeing it first-hand; *as if* you were together; *as if* whatever is happening is unfolding

right here, right now. As the mediated experience that 'stands in' – represents, but also, tries to emulate the immediate experience – 'the live' depends on habituated 'reality practices' (Mulvin 2021:22) constructed and maintained through technology.

This matters, I argue, because it is deeply entangled with processes of orchestration, orientation, and with the decision as to what appears (and what does not) to our phenomenal experience. From a critical-phenomenological perspective, in other words, the live is about media technologies' world-building capacity and its politics. Bringing the past two chapters together, if media represent some of the most important reference-points for shared experiences, for our sense of time and space, and for how the world appears to us (Frosh 2019; Lagerkvist 2019), then the fact that these dimensions have become deeply articulated with the logic of connectivity demands critical consideration. Moreover, if the unpacking of our increasingly digital existence calls for the mobilisation and reworking of phenomenological themes (Lagerkvist 2017), then a study of liveness within this framework seems pressing.

Furthermore, liveness seems to be a significant theme for the exploration of several significant tensions that are central to the realm of the experiential. Because of its different conceptions and attributions – both in academia and as a vernacular word – 'the live' seems to touch upon paradoxical stances towards the personal and the collective, the individual and the social, the mundane and the remarkable, the ephemeral and the memorable, the unpredictable and the meaningful. I explore these empirically, supported by the theoretical reflections developed throughout this chapter. This thesis then is less concerned with a confirmation or dismissal of the possibility for experiencing the social world 'immediately' or 'authentically'. Instead, it seeks to interrogate: how is the very idea of immediate experience constructed, enacted, and negotiated between people and habituated media technologies and institutions in the first place?

The development of this thesis was informed by the conviction that understanding how digital media are designed to obfuscate or conceal their own operation "is not a matter of standing back in order to get some perspective – it is a matter of diving in" (Markham 2020:6). In short, at stake here are the very possibilities of grasping the social world – of *existing* – with and through media technologies. Starting from the premise that the core claim of media is, generically put, to make the social world accessible, *liveable*, I am interested in exploring empirically the enactment of these conditions of connection in everyday lived experience.

Chapter 4

Methodological framework: capturing the experience

"The phenomenon always escapes". This is one of the six methodological rules conceived by David Silverman (1989:220) in his "post-romantic" critique of the application of qualitative methods to reach an assumed unmediated, pure, or raw experience. In short, acknowledging the situated, textual, and contextual nature of the research process, he argues that the account of any identified phenomenon always embodies certain practices and forms of representation – and that, when involving human participants, those people might not even recognise their own practices and experiences as the idealised phenomenon of interest to the researcher. Research matters, therefore, are not self-evident phenomena immediately available for analysis; this naive, authentic conception of 'experience' can never be apprehended in practice, as any results, findings, or 'truth' are only accomplished through cultural and discursive forms.

The acknowledgement of the lack of a methodological shortcut that leads us to the unmediated inner experience might be at odds with the phenomenological tradition's principle of going back to the 'things themselves', seeking to identify and describe the essential structures of human experience. Furthermore, this project is also marked by an additional methodological concern – namely, the impossibility of the *live* observation of experiences of liveness, as they occur, considering how volatile and dispersed these might be in the context of habitual, ordinary social media. With those challenges in mind, in this chapter I offer a more detailed account of the methodological decisions that led to the empirical portion of the project.

Empirically, rather than focusing on objective or allegedly impartial depictions of a given phenomenon, phenomenology as a stream of enquiry focuses precisely on individual, granular subjective descriptions, from which it "asks 'What is this experience like?' as it attempts to unfold meanings as they are lived in everyday existence" (Laverty 2003:22). In line with my evolving understanding of experience as presented in Chapter 3, the chosen instruments, techniques, and tools for generating and analysing empirical data are premised on the inseparability of sensing and sense-making – and, therefore, I embrace and focus precisely on this complex nature of the experiential. In practical terms, the methodological stages for this

project, briefly put, consisted of eliciting accounts of concrete lived experience, organising these accounts into themes and subthemes that elucidate the questions of interest – as elaborated in the following section – and then presenting these themes in a detailed, evocative, and consistent narrative, from which I draw critical conclusions and raise questions for further enquiry.

4.1 Statement of research questions

Based on the theoretical framework presented in Chapters 2 and 3, and considering the previously introduced aim to use liveness both as the key object of study and as a productive anchoring point for a broader phenomenology of social media, the empirical portion of this project was designed so as to address a threefold research question:

(A) How (and when) do ordinary experiences with and of habitual social media challenge, reaffirm, or expand existing conceptions of liveness?
(B) In what ways, and to what extent, can the historical construct of liveness be useful as a conceptual device to illuminate our understanding of lived experiences with and of social media platforms and the structures or conditions of these experiences?
(C) How can the examination of liveness – as object of study and as a sensitising device – help advance a critical phenomenology of a heavily mediated social world?

Together, these interrogations should allow me to shed light on broader theoretical queries, which I will go back to in the Conclusions: if we start our critical phenomenology of mediation from the concept of liveness, what perceptions, understandings, and imaginaries of (human) connection are mobilised? How are longstanding dreams and ambitions of enhanced experience enacted, negotiated, and contested in the context of ordinary, habitual lived experience with social media? What kinds of critical discussions about the historical pursuit of technological immediacy – which, as we have seen, is central to both phenomenology and to mediated liveness – are fostered by this theoretical and empirical enterprise?

4.2 ‘What’s on your mind?’: methodology and rationale

In order to address these research questions, a consistent empirical design was needed. The fundamental premise that guided the methodological decisions was that any techniques of data collection and analysis should be linked to the research questions by coherent assumptions and

epistemological perspectives (Hesse-Biber 2014; Groenewald 2004). Considering the set of theoretical assumptions explored in the previous chapters and their underlying epistemological position, this project adopts a qualitative empirical approach. By that I mean to highlight that I am mostly concerned with the interpretation of potentially multi-layered social realities, privileging subjective lived experiences (Hesse-Biber 2014) rather than generalisability and numerical representativity.

In the translation of the theoretical framework into a feasible set of methodological decisions, I would consider my project to be aligned with the flourishing field of 'embodied enquiry'. Embodied enquiry, as defined by Leigh and Brown (2021), foregrounds reflexivity, exploration, and attention to the experiences of oneself and to those of others. Offering a new layer to the narratives provided through traditional discursive methods, embodied enquiry aims more closely to understand – and, to an extent, recreate through evocative description – the participant's lived experience (Ibid.:23). In other words, a body-centred approach to research on lived experiences "needs to ensure participants are able to reflect on their embodied experiences and are given the tools to then communicate these often-unconscious processes" (Leigh and Brown 2021:37). A body-centred approach adds to discursive methods an emphasis on *feltness*, on corporeal awareness, and on situatedness and contextuality (Ibid.).

Moreover, the understanding of experience as having inseparable embodied levels (such as the sensorial and the interpretive), as discussed in Chapter 3, gives me theoretical underpinning to overcome a crucial methodological tension – how to capture liveness *'live'*, when the very experiences I am trying to apprehend are to a great extent unpredictable, volatile, and dispersed. Arguably, conducting a phenomenologically attuned research project on experiences of liveness has its own paradox: the inventiveness and creativity of the present experience is always inevitably fragile and ephemeral – it "dissipates as soon as one tries to formalise or explain it" (Markham 2020:134). After careful consideration of methodological options focusing on 'live methods' (Lury 2012) – including participant observation through ethnographic approaches, either through 'being there' in situ (Hammelburg 2020, 2021a; Richardson and Hjorth 2017) or through the recreation of lived experiences with the assistance of platform walkthrough methods (Light et al. 2018) – I have decided that my research questions would be better addressed through the diary-interview method, as I will detail in the following section.

In this regard, it is worth recalling that one of the starting points of this project is the acceptance that experiences are contextually contingent – that is, how anyone feels in a given situation depends on a number of factors, including the individual's mood. If the research is interested in habit and taken-for-granted practices, then it would be unfeasible to observe those through 'being there' (as my presence would disrupt this habitualness) nor through platform walkthroughs (which do not reflect the everyday use of these same technologies). More fundamentally, though, I have concluded that direct, 'live' observation would not offer me the necessary tools to reach the understanding of other people's experiences, as 'what is on their mind' (to borrow the status-update prompt used by Facebook, and also going back to a key phenomenological motif) is not available to me other than through language-mediated intersubjectivity, which imposes a further level of mediation between 'the experience' and its analysis.

In view of this, I opted for an empirical design that focuses not on direct observation of the phenomena in the context of everyday life but rather on analysing people's accounts, descriptions, and interpretations of these phenomena obtained through retrospective articulation. Still, pushing for a more critical version of phenomenology, I have attempted to go beyond "naturalising 'experience' through a belief in the unmediated relationship between words and things, to one that takes all categories of analysis as contextual, contested, and contingent" (Scott 1991:796). As part of the critical-phenomenological approach I have been following, I understand that, rather than representing a pre-given reality, empirical analysis – as well as the very operationalisation of the concepts – produces particular versions of reality (Mol 2021).

It is also worth mentioning that there is an increasing, and much needed body of scholarship examining how any experiences of and with technology are contingent on one's gender (as demonstrated by Jarrett 2016; Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017, amongst many), race (e.g. Brock 2020 or Hamilton 2020), sexuality (Szulc and Dhoest 2013), class (Skeggs and Yuill 2019), and (dis)abilities (Bitman 2021), amongst other social categories. Whilst I recognise and appreciate the efforts in foregrounding the role of these matters, especially from an intersectional stance, one of the limitations of this thesis is that it does not focus on these classifications and their role in shaping people's experiences – unless explicitly mentioned by the interviewee. Despite the nuances intrinsic to each of these categorial distinctions, a phenomenological take on mediation is premised on the idea that there is an experiential

situation that is available to us all. The aim, then, was to investigate liveness as a broader category (Couldry 2004) that is potentially shared across the population despite demographic differences; indeed, 'the live' offers a vantage point from which to explore how experience is shared in the first place. In closely examining the particular, granular experiences of a few people, my analysis is ultimately interested in apprehending social media as a "common worldly phenomenon grounded in common human experience" (Scannell 2014:103).

As a philosophical and methodological approach, phenomenology has been critiqued for its focus on problems of the past – and, particularly, with only those problems directly relevant to mid-20th-century, white, European, academic, cisgender men (Mol 2021). While, as stressed by Mol (2021), many of these existential problems are still pertinent today, the terms and the practical methods employed back then are not necessarily attuned to contemporary issues, including those related to digital technologies which are, in the end, the central concern of this project. In this regard, in my analysis, I have tried my best to pay attention to the colloquial vernacular, the metaphors, and the ordinary articulations produced by the respondents in the hope that this grounded approach would help me in revisiting the theoretical models that inform our understanding of lived experience – theories and concepts, after all, "help to shape the ways in which realities are perceived and handled" (Mol 2021:1). In other words, although the organising principles of phenomenology, as stated in the previous chapter, have guided the ways I approached my dataset, I have also left space for inductive analysis whenever possible – and I go back to some of the issues encountered in this thesis' conclusions.

Inspired by the idea that, although often reaching a high level of abstraction, good scholarship should have the capacity to bring experiences forth through their description (Highmore 2011), this project rejects positivist conceptions of methodological rigour as intrinsically based on generalisability and universality; it favours, instead, reflexivity, evocativeness, and recognisability (Highmore 2011). Since its foundation, phenomenology's basic enterprise has been that of the description of lived experiences from the perspective of the people involved with the phenomenon of interest. In this direction, "the aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts" (Groenewald 2004:44). Perhaps the most controversial, and frequently contested, aspect of Husserlian philosophy is the premise of phenomenological reduction, or 'bracketing'. Bracketing, as summarised by LeVasseur (2003:411), "suspends one's natural assumptions about the world [and it] is done so that what is essential in the

phenomena of consciousness can be understood without prejudice". Yet, if we assume that our existence in the world is marked by thrownness (Heidegger 2008; LeVasseur 2003; Lagerkvist 2017; Markham 2020), then setting aside all prior knowledge, impression and interpretation becomes an unfeasible task. When it comes to experiences of mediation, in particular, it would be practically impossible to suspend one's previous experiences and the imaginaries, metaphors, and beliefs that inform those – as discussed in Chapter 3, they are very much part of our involvement with the world. Therefore, this project deliberately abandons the aim of 'suspending' pre-existing assumptions and conceptual frameworks; it aims, instead, to explicitly acknowledge and critically interrogate and unpack these assumptions and frameworks according to accounts of relevant lived experience, whilst being open to alternative perceptions and interpretations.

4.3 Making data: the diary-interview method in practice

Whilst common phrasings such as 'data collection' evoke the idea of data as something that is given and concrete, ready to be extracted, alternatives such as 'data-making' and 'data generation' aim to foreground the active role of the researcher in producing the datasets of interest, and in making sense of this data in a situated, contextual (and, admittedly, inevitably biased) manner (Leigh and Brown 2021). With this in mind, the research design I chose for generating empirical data appropriate to addressing the aforementioned research questions consisted of the combination of individual interviews with qualitative diaries – the "diary-interview method" (Zimmerman and Wieder 1977).

In line with embodied enquiry (Leigh and Brown 2021), I elaborated the questions on the semi-structured interview topic guide and the prompts for the diaries to encourage and support participants to self-reflect and report on both how they use media technologies and social media platforms to access others, the world, and its events, and on how they perceive and describe the affordances, constraints, and the overall imaginary of such platforms as affecting the mediation process itself. Table 1 offers a summary of the justification for each of the three stages of data-gathering, which I elaborate over the next subsection:

THE DIARY-INTERVIEW METHOD: a trajectory of understanding experiences	
Exploratory Interview	Establish rapport; General questions, introduction to the topic, overall impressions about the use of social media; Briefing for the diaries

Qualitative Diary	Concrete examples and descriptions of experiences, which then served to anchor the discussion in the elicitation interview
Elicitation Interview	Detailed account of lived experiences; Interpretations and meanings attributed to the reported experiences; Expand and situate the mentioned experiences in relation to others.

Table 1: The diary-interview method

4.3.1 The diary-interview method

Interviewing is the most traditional and widespread method for the collection of qualitative data in the social sciences, largely due to its capacity to provide rich information about the respondents' lived experiences and "a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in particular social contexts" (Gaskell 2000:39). As put by Kvale (1996) and Groenewald (2004), such a technique postulates, literally, an *inter-view* – that is, the possibility of understanding the world from the perspective of the other. Nevertheless, it is fundamental to emphasise that an interview is not a spontaneous, casual, and uncommitted conversation but rather a purposive interaction arranged to deliver information on a specific topic. Going back to the opening theme of this chapter, interviewing should not use the participants' verbalisations as a direct proxy for an assumed unmediated, pure experience (Silverman 1989).

Some of the main strengths of the method are the prospect of obtaining rich and detailed information, and the chance of placing follow-up questions to cover any unexpected topic that emerges during the conversation or to encourage the respondents to develop further their thoughts on a specific issue (Berger 1998). Additionally, the interview is particularly useful for when the research's objectives involve the comprehension of meanings attributed by others to their lived experiences – or, in phenomenological terms, "intersubjective understanding" (Schutz 1967) – which would be more arduously apprehended through alternative techniques such as observation, experimentation, questionnaires, or the examination of personal and institutional documents (Seidman 2006). By making people reflect on their personal experiences and select relevant details to construct their narratives, the interview turns the activity of telling stories through language into a meaning-making experience (Ibid.).

Interviews can follow various types of organisation, and tend to be categorised according to their flexibility, in a scale that goes from open-ended, "ethnographic" or unstructured ones to

structured, pre-set questionnaires (Gibson and Brown 2009; Seidman 2006). In the middle range, semi-structured interviews are those in which the researcher prepares a topic guide with pre-defined key themes, but there remains considerable scope to change the order and the wording of the questions according to the flow of the conversation and to particular or unforeseen matters raised by the respondent (Gibson and Brown 2009). Semi-structured interviews, therefore, even though guided by the researcher's interests, are more open to negotiation and improvisation – which is why I chose this technique for the project. Furthermore, although admitting that phenomenology and focus groups are not inherently incompatible (Bradbury-Jones et al. 2009), because my research questions are more interested in detailed, subjective lived experiences than in a synergy or comparison of experiences across participants, the individual semi-structured interview was the method of choice.

However, the qualitative interview is not a method without its limitations: it usually consumes a great deal of time and resources, as it cannot be reduced to the moment of the interaction itself but rather consists of a whole process involving establishing access, recruiting and contacting participants, transcription, and analysing data (Seidman 2006). Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise the limitations of a method that depends fundamentally on somebody else's account of the phenomena of interest – and a common problem to arise is that interviewees often "tell what they think the researcher would like to hear" (Bauer et al. 2011:5). Recognising this possibility and therefore avoiding questions that offer too much guidance are an important reflexive part of the research process. I will discuss these issues in more detail in section 4.5 of this chapter.

Perhaps the main weakness of the interview method is the impossibility of direct observation of the investigated lived experiences (Silverman 2015). For this reason, interviewing might seem, at first, an illogical choice for the exploration of 'live' experiences. Still, the interview offers the possibility of, through detailed exploration, obtaining rich descriptions of the relevant phenomena (Ibid.). And, because it consists of reconstructing an already elapsed lived experience, the interview seems a good solution for obtaining the reflective glance necessary for interpretation, as defended by Schutz (1967). Nevertheless, it was precisely because I acknowledge the constraints of interviewing as a method to capture 'experiences' that I decided to include an additional resource for generating empirical data – the diary.

A diary is a document in which someone inscribes daily, weekly, or monthly activities and/or reflexive thoughts, usually following a chronological order. As defined by Bolger et al. (2003), diaries allow for the examination of on-going lived experiences and the contexts in which they unfold. By doing so, "diary research offers a unique window on human phenomenology" (Ibid.:600). Some of the most fertile possibilities of the technique are its capacity for capturing detailed, context-specific descriptions of the phenomena of interest (Hyers 2018:28), and for accounting for the investigated experiences while maintaining a sensibility to "the detailed spatio-temporal organisation of daily life" (Couldry et al. 2010:44). Furthermore, as stressed by Hyers (2018:43), phenomenological research's aim of apprehending the processes of sense-making and immediate lived experiences can find in diary methods a fruitful solution, especially because the instrument enables the capture of the participants' everyday experiences in their own words, at or near the time of the experience. Moreover, through the activity of self-tracking, informants are encouraged to list and reflect on even the most mundane and volatile activities, those that are difficult for other methodologies to capture. By encouraging self-logging and introspection, diaries help to raise awareness of unconscious and taken-for-granted phenomena (Elliott 1997; Hyers 2018). Perhaps more important to my research is the prospect of obtaining detailed information on everyday experiences in contexts where the events could not be accessed or observed by the researcher at first-hand (Zimmerman and Wieder 1977; Elliott 1997) – or, in my case, in which the presence of the researcher could significantly distort the observed phenomenon. 'Researcher-absent' data collection tends to offer the emergence of different processes of introspection through individual practices of recording and reflection (Couldry et al. 2010; Elliott 1997). In summary, diary methods allow for dense information-gathering without the interference of the investigator's presence.

Nevertheless, diary methods have their shortcomings – such as the necessity of training sessions for the participants, the requirement to select participants that are literate and reflective (which makes it a technique more apt for an educated elite), the dependence on the participants' commitment and dedication in a relatively demanding process, the likelihood of low participant-retention precisely due to these demands and, also, to the burden provoked by either boredom or by intrusive and continuous requests for contribution (Thiele et al. 2002; Bolger et al. 2003). Additionally, in the case of unstructured or semi-structured diaries, another common difficulty is that the researcher has less control over how dense, granular, and detailed the participants' accounts of the events of interest will be (Hyers 2018). Moreover, it is important to avoid empirical naivety, as the self-tracking itself might change or influence the investigated

experiences (Thiele et al. 2002). Which means that, just like with any other methodological strategy, the researcher's reflexivity is a fundamental part of the process.

The diary-interview method (Zummerman and Wieder 1977), then, comprises the combination of qualitative diaries and semi-structured interviews, a methodological strategy that helps the researcher not only by facilitating the confirmation of the informants' accounts but also by allowing the discussion to "move beyond events recorded into more general experiences and attitudes" (Elliott 1997:7). In this set-up, a follow-up interview enables the researcher to focus on the interpretations and meanings attributed by the participants to the reported experiences, while in turn giving the interviewees the opportunity to reflect on and to actively participate in the categorisation and analysis of their described experiences (Elliot 1997).

I would also like to point out that asking informants for the completion of a diary – not a form, a report, a memo, or notepad – was an intentional decision. Diaries constitute a genre that is familiar to many people, and which has specific symbolic properties; diaries are personal, individual, and invite intimacy and reflexivity (White 2021). Yet, rather than seeking to unveil hidden, profound layers of 'authentic experience' through self-contemplation and introspection, my use of diary methods has more practical aims: precisely because many of our experiences with and of social media are ordinary, trivial, they might be rarely noticed. Asking for a diary was, then, a methodological strategy to make informants more phenomenologically aware of, and attuned to, their everyday experiences with and of technology.

Research diaries can acquire manifold formats, styles, frequencies and duration (Hyers 2018). Based on the research questions of interest, I was less concerned with gathering a 'representative' log of the participants' everyday life, and more with obtaining punctual, precise examples from which the discussion could evolve. Bearing this in mind, the process of data-gathering for this project required participants to submit a five-day qualitative diary and attend two conversations, a pre- and a post-diary interview (Zimmerman and Wieder 1997; Couldry et al. 2010): one at the beginning of the study, in which the participant was introduced to the topic in a more abstract and general sense and briefed on the requirements of the self-tracking activity, and a follow-up interview in which the material submitted by the interviewee was used as an anchoring resource for elicitation, then encouraging self-reflection and the exploration of processes of meaning-making (García et al. :2016). The diaries, in this case,

were used as observational logs, and served as the basis for the interviewing, where the participants acted as both observers and informants (Zimmerman and Wieder 1977).

The purpose of the initial interview was threefold: to establish the first contact – and a good rapport – with the respondents, to obtain general, exploratory information about their uses of digital technologies of communication and social media platforms, and to brief them for the next empirical stages, including instructions about when and how to submit the diaries. Because of this exploratory and open-ended nature, even though I used a topic guide and a list of probing questions (both available in the Appendices) to offer general direction to the interaction, there was still flexibility to adapt the conversation according to the interviewee. Still, based on pilot interviews conducted for this project, I realised that a certain degree of structure was needed to avoid having conversations that were so broad in their scope they would make the description of the phenomena of interest too scattered, which would require a lot of time and labour from both the participants and the researcher.

With this in mind, as indicated in the topic guide, I decided to use this thesis' theoretical framework – in this case, the organisational principles of phenomenology, as described in Chapter 3 – as the basis for the conversation. The open-ended questions, therefore, revolved around the topics of temporality, spatiality, embodiment and intersubjectivity (addressed, of course, through colloquial rather than theoretical or philosophical language), and how those are perceived in ordinary experiences with and of social media. Moreover, along with the informed consent form, which was read and signed before the beginning of the actual interview, the participants were asked to complete a brief structured questionnaire on demographic data: age, gender of identification, nationality, occupation, and a list of social media platforms they (had) used, which then also informed the unfolding of the first interview.

After the exploratory interview, each participant was invited (and instructed on how) to submit daily entries for a five-day qualitative diary. Although I encouraged them to submit their entries consecutively, I gave them flexibility to skip one or two days if they wished so, in order to accommodate people with different schedules and needs, and improve retention. In terms of format and modality, in order to make the submission of entries easy, conveniently accessible, unintrusive, and enjoyable for the informants (again, to help with retention), electronic diaries seemed the most suitable solution. I chose the 'experience management' software Qualtrics as the platform for the creation of the diaries, due both to its relatively user-friendly and portable

interface (which could be accessed by the participants on any internet-enabled device, regardless of model or operational system) and its compliance with LSE's data-protection guidance. A screenshot of the diary interface as seen by the participants can be found in the Appendices.

In short, participants were asked to select the date for which they would be writing the diaries; they were then invited to reflect on their personal experiences, with special focus on five motifs (felt closeness to someone who was physically distant; real-time experience of an event or situation happening elsewhere; finding out about something that had already passed; feeling aware of what other people were doing at a distance; feeling connected to the world). These motifs were developed based on three pilot interviews conducted for this project, and informed by the aforementioned organising principles of phenomenology. Nonetheless, during the first interview and in every iteration of the diaries, the participants were reminded that the most important part of their entries was the open-ended question, in which they were prompted to describe their experience in detail. The answers to this question were then used for elicitation in the second interview.

The elicitation interview, in this regard, seemed a method particularly suited for the apprehension of detailed, personal accounts of the unfolding of lived experiences, as it allows for the capture of both emotional or sensory reactions and of processes of interpretation and meaning-making (Hogan et al. 2016). It can involve the use of a range of resources (pictures, objects, documents, memories) that, in combination with iterative questioning, encourage the participants to "describe their experience repeatedly at finer levels of granularity. This includes asking about the (physical) context in which the experience took place and sensory aspects that accompanied it" (Ibid:1). Again according to Hogan et al. (2016), this technique is originally grounded in phenomenological principles, aiming primarily to provide descriptions of how and what something feels like – which seemed directly aligned to my research questions.

In other words, the elicitation interview comprehends the re-enactment of a given experience as a strategy to obtain a detailed, retrospective account of its different aspects – even those that the participant might not have been aware or conscious of in the first place. Some of the essential characteristics of the method are its non-inductive, directive, and iterative approaches: non-inductive because the questions asked should be open enough to allow for the participant to provide descriptions without being guided by the researcher's assumptions and biases;

directive because it involves the constant use of probes and follow-up questions in order to explore the descriptions in a greater depth; and iterative, as the key aspects provided in previous descriptive utterances are examined gradually and repeatedly in the subsequent questions and prompts (Hogan et al. 2016).

Nevertheless, as emphasised by Light (2006), it is important to underscore that the elicitation interviews (like the diaries that informed them) did not aim to capture the experience per se, but rather to gather retrospective and re-enacting *accounts* of experiences. The goal was, then, to obtain *a verbalisation of the action* (Vermersch 1994), which was achieved through a process of reflection, representation, and discursive articulation of the lived experience. Through these interviews, participants were then invited to comment on their impressions, feelings, the significance they attributed to the events registered on their diaries, and the perceived consequences of these experiences. By using the diaries and the artefacts as elicitation resources, this second interview focused both on diachronic and synchronic dimensions of the reported experiences. That means, respectively, exploring how the given experience has unfolded over time, and the rich and "detailed characteristics and key aspects of the experience" (Hogan et al. 2016:5). Although the elaboration of a rigorous topic guide seemed unproductive, since the questions themselves depended on the experiences reported on the diaries, my general strategies involved the probing for the description of the internal logic of the experience and the gradual exploration of deeper descriptive and reflective processes (which can be reached through questions such as "You mentioned doing X. How do you feel when you do X?"), as suggested by Hogan et al. (2016). A list of broad probing questions and notes used for the elicitation interviews can be found in the Appendices.

4.3.2 Selection and recruitment

In addition to defining the methods, techniques, and instruments for generating and analysing data, the elaboration of an empirical design involves another important choice: the decision about who will be the participants, the subjects who will provide the relevant data to address the conceived research questions. This decision is, of course, never arbitrary, as the selection should ideally be based on a set of criteria aiming to provide relevant information for the study being conducted, as well as a clear and feasible plan to locate and recruit these participants (Hyers 2018). In this section, I will detail the process of selecting and recruiting the participants who were interviewed and wrote diary entries for this project.

The selection of participants was informed by Lagerkvist's (2017) call for a change in the choice of subjects for existential media studies. After all, she says, the most common inhabitant of the digital media environment is not the savvy early adopter, but rather "the human being who sometimes stumbles, falls, misunderstands, struggles, is vulnerable, hurting, speechless, and finds no solution; but who may also experience moments of ultimate meaning, community, support, and fullness" (Lagerkvist 2017:107). In accordance with the theoretical commitment to ordinary and habituated experiences, rather than looking for an 'ideal' user of social media I tried instead deliberately to recruit people that could offer greater heterogeneity of experiences with and of social media. The rationale behind the heterogeneous sample, in turn, is that any evidence found would not be specific to a particular group, population or context, but rather likely to constitute a larger phenomenon – or at least one that is observable across diverse cases (Robinson 2014). Importantly, this heterogeneity does not refer necessarily to a demographic variation but rather to a diversity of experiences (Hyers 2018) – even though potential demographic variations were monitored and are discussed where relevant.

Furthermore, the selection and recruitment of participants for empirical research usually involves the delineation of a specific set of inclusion and exclusion criteria (Robinson 2014). In this regard, the most fundamental inclusion criterion was that the participants should have experienced the phenomena of interest – that is, in the case of my project, they should be people who use and are familiar with social media platforms in the context of everyday life, which is of course a very large portion of the population. Additionally, because my research involved the construction of diaries, the selected participants should, at least, have the "the basic capacity to self-reflect on that experience, sometimes after time has passed", as well as the willingness and "ability to thoughtfully write about their experiences" (Hyers 2018:75). Indeed, one participant dropped out for considering the diaries to be too intimate and personal.

Moreover, and based mostly on my previous experience with conducting qualitative research with users of social media, I opted for defining an exclusion criterion. This refers to avoiding the selection of people who directly work, or have higher education experience, with media and communications. I assume that those people, due to their level of 'expertise' in the field, would potentially offer insights beyond the reach of a common or typical case user. My focus is on everyday, habitual experiences of liveness and, therefore, obtaining an insider or expert perspective would deviate from the research goals. In practice, though, this exclusion principle

was not entirely possible to achieve, as some of the participants who have other types of occupation (for instance, illustrators and designers) also mentioned in their diaries and interviews the use of social media for professional purposes. Acknowledging that there is no such thing as a standard or archetypical user of social media – as people can use an array of platforms for a range of purposes and needs – I repeat once again that the aim of the analysis was not to identify statistically representative experiences. It was, instead, to provide granular, illustrative descriptions and reflections that could be useful for the examination of the common structures of lived experience.

Although the recruitment was more concerned with a diversity of experiences (that is, of practices, platforms, purposes, and uses) than with anchoring to pre-existing social categories, I tried to ensure the inclusion of adults of different genders, and age-groups, and who have diverse types of occupation. It should also be noted that, in practice, selection and recruitment are also affected by aspects other than epistemological and methodological positions – I am referring here to pragmatic issues such as the time restrictions for the research, the efforts required to collect, transcribe, organise and analyse data, and the limited resources available to a doctoral project (especially if providing financial compensation for the participants). Rejecting the widespread idea of a 'saturation point' – that is, of an objective criterion for discontinuing data-gathering based on reaching an alleged stage in which there is only repetition (Glaser and Strauss 1967) – the number of recruited participants was defined "on the basis that they were big enough to allow for diversity of responses, but small enough to do justice to respondents' complex, nuanced (…) articulations" (Kant 2020:18). Following the advice of Suri (2011:73), I adopted instead the logic of data sufficiency – in which the end of the data collection depends more explicitly on the researcher's perception of "what constitutes sufficient evidence" for the purposes of the study rather than on a debatable point of saturation.

Concerning the strategies for recruiting and contacting informants, although the most convenient and intuitive option would have been to use social media platforms themselves for reaching potential participants, I focused instead on a multi-sited distribution of research advertisements across London. These graphic materials – posters and flyers, which can be found in the Appendices – were drawn up so as to present the broadest possible description of the research aims, inviting people to "talk about social media", introducing the study simply as concerning the investigation of "how people's lives and experiences are affected by digital technologies and social media platforms" (Appendix I). The purpose of this deliberate

vagueness was not deception, but rather to avoid offering too much guidance for the participants on the actual purposes of the study. In practice, this elusiveness was particularly useful for capturing hints of the 'issues of concern' in the realm of social media according to the users themselves – frequently, they seemed to expect the interview to centre matters of dependency, mental health, privacy, or surveillance.

Furthermore, I acknowledge that this recruitment strategy had an inescapable impact on my data, results, and discussion, as opting for a cosmopolitan capital such as London has its own set of implications – in particular, the difficulty of generalising whatever results to other areas of the world (and even of the UK), and the risk of reproducing a western, 'global north' bias, which is not something I would like to subscribe to, especially given my own background. Even though some of these drawbacks cannot be completely reduced, I have made the selection of informants and the description of their (anonymised) profiles as rigorous, transparent, and detailed as possible.

Ultimately, though, convenience played an important role in the choice, as, given that I was based in London for the work on the thesis, travel costs would be lower (increasing funds available for paying participants), and I would be able to conduct interviews in person. Moreover, the experiences of people who live in London are not only likely to be multicultural but also distributed in terms of connections across the globe. This means that people not only rely on media to communicate with each other and socialise, but also that, for many, social media are the only way they have to reach distant others. I had participants who were first generation migrants with family and friends abroad, some were in long-distance relationships, and others needed digital media to do basic tasks at work that involved communicating with people in different countries. Whilst this project is not necessarily focused on experiences of migration or transnational communication, this constant need for immediacy and presence at a distance made the need for synchronisation even more pronounced, which seemed relevant for a study centred on liveness.

Still, in an attempt to go beyond my personal networks, I distributed the recruitment ads in a range of locations. Posters and flyers were distributed in coffeeshops, co-working spaces, universities, pubs, public libraries in a range of locations across London – Bethnal Green, Brixton, Croydon, Hammersmith, Kentish Town, Mile End, Peckham, Shoreditch, Stoke Newington, Tooting, Wood Green, and adjacent areas – supported by the sharing of a digital

version of these flyers on Facebook groups related to some of these neighbourhoods. The focus on inner city recruitment is justified based mostly on accessibility and convenience for conducting interviews in person. The recruitment was actually more laborious than I had initially anticipated, and I attribute the difficulty in retaining participants to the diary requirement, which many people who were initially interested subsequently said was too demanding or time-consuming. I then started asking the participants themselves to nominate other people who they thought would be keen to take part.

In addition to the inclusion of participants from different neighbourhoods, I aimed to ensure that the sample would include people with a variety of family relations (for instance, those living abroad), and types of occupation, so as to increase the likelihood of obtaining a multiplicity of experiences of, and with, social media. The anonymised profile of the 20 participants who completed the three stages of the study can be found in Appendix VI, and a summary of their social media repertoires (and their definitions of 'social media') can be found in Appendix VIII. The platforms most frequently mentioned by the interviewees were Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Messenger. Other cited social media sites and applications included Discord, FaceTime, Hinge, iMessage, LinkedIn, Periscope, Pinterest, Reddit, Skype, Slack, Telegram, TikTok, Tinder, Tumblr, Twitch, WeChat, Weibo, and YouTube. Across these platforms, there is undoubtedly a vast array of formats, content and uses – for purposes as diverse as interpersonal communication, entertainment, and information seeking. As aforementioned, I deliberately embraced this manifoldness in an attempt to explore what people do, and feel, when in contact with social media, broadly defined.

In order to encourage people to participate in the project, and having in mind the difficulty in retaining participants that is inherent to diary methods (Hyers 2018), I decided to provide a small monetary reward for the participants upon completion (that is, after the second interview). Therefore, participants were offered £20 as compensation for taking the time to attend the interviews and submit the diary entries; the money came from the PhD support fund, provided by the Department, as disclosed in the Research Ethics Review form approved by the School. Most of the participants, though, made clear that the financial incentive was not their main motivation for undertaking the study. Other mentioned reasons comprised curiosity and appreciation for the opportunity of self-reflecting on mediation practices, and contributing to the production of knowledge on a topic that is directly relevant to their everyday lives.

4.3.3 Data management and treatment

The final dataset comprised 40 interviews – two with each of the 20 participants. Each interview lasted for approximately 60 minutes, although some of them were shorter (45 minutes) and others slightly longer (85 minutes), depending on the flow of the conversation. The audio record of the interviews was used for transcription purposes only, and the participants were assured nobody would have access to those recordings other than the researcher (a full copy of the informed consent form can be found in the Appendices). I manually transcribed the recordings with the help of digital transcription audio player software ExpressScribe, and exported the transcriptions into separate Word documents.

The dataset also included 100 diary entries submitted via Qualtrics, which I also exported as text documents. The diary prompt also allowed participants to submit pictures in case they were judged necessary for the researcher to understand the described experience. However, because some of these pictures contained screenshots or images of people who were not part of the study (and therefore had not provided informed consent), I decided to use these resources for elicitation only during the second interviews, and not as objects of analysis.

I then imported all the interview transcripts and diary entries into an NVivo file, where I organised, stored, sorted, and coded them according to certain patterns and themes that I identified and defined. Transcription and several readings helped me in achieving familiarity with the data. Coding was an iterative process, and different categories were tested, discussed with my supervisors, revised, and reformulated before the final codebook was agreed on. In the next section, I offer more detail on the analytical process, the construction of the themes, and the rationale behind them.

4.4 Empirical analysis and coding

As previously clarified, this thesis does not aspire to provide exhaustive or statistically representative findings about the uses and experiences of social media. The aim is, instead, to identify patterns across individual experiences, perceptions and discourses provided by ordinary users of a range of platforms, which then will be used to inform and review wider theorisations. In qualitative research, one of the most widely employed analytical strategies for textual examination is thematic analysis – a versatile method which, in broad terms, designates "the process of analysing data according to commonalities, relationships, and differences

across a data set. The word 'thematic' relates to the aim of searching for aggregated themes within data" (Gibson and Brown 2009:127). A 'theme', thus, apprehends some important aspect within the dataset in relation to the respective research questions, "and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun and Clarke 2006:82).

Since it is not bounded to a specific theory, epistemology, or method of data collection, thematic analysis is considered a flexible tool that can provide a useful and detailed account of patterns within data and be employed across different approaches and research paradigms (Braun and Clarke 2006; Clarke and Braun 2017). Precisely because of its flexibility, it can acquire different versions according to specific research designs and methodologies. As explained by Clarke and Braun (2017), although it is quite common for qualitative researchers to frame coding as an 'organic' approach, it is fundamental to acknowledge the active role of the researcher in the identification of themes. This means that themes do not 'emerge' spontaneously from the data, but are actually constructed by the researcher according to specific interests and theoretical frameworks, aims, and personal interests (Braun and Clarke 2006; Leigh and Brown 2021).

In this regard, thematic analysis' capacity to foreground the meaning of subjective experiences is seen as one of the main reasons for its use (Attride-Stirling 2001). The technique can be applied to the identification of patterns in relation to participants' views, practices, and lived experiences (Clarke and Braun 2017) – which seemed aligned with the aims and goals of this project. Thematic analysis, rather than focusing on measuring the frequency of given themes, privileges the complexity of meanings and patterns (Sundler et al. 2019). Nevertheless, one of the drawbacks of thematic analysis is its potential unpredictability – because the coding process is iterative, the researcher has difficulty in knowing how long the analytical activity will last, and when the time to cease the analysis has been reached (Gibson and Brown 2009). I should elucidate, then, that in this study the thematic coding was concerned not with reaching an ideal satiety of narratives or insights, but rather with raising points and discussions "in ways that open up new opportunities for critical analysis" (Kant 2020:21). Ultimately, thematic analysis is generally considered a well-suited method for the exploration of meanings attributed by people to their lived experiences, and to describe how they feel and behave in a particular context (Guest et al. 2012) – which is exactly what was needed to examine the data obtained with qualitative interviews and diaries following the phenomenological approach I have adopted.

Phenomenology, as a philosophical enterprise, is not particularly prescriptive in its methodology (Aagaard 2017), which makes its empirical application quite challenging in practice. My thematic analysis, therefore, whilst openly informed by a phenomenological sensibility, probably does not constitute a traditional 'phenomenological study' per se; nonetheless, I maintained a commitment to the investigation of the ordinary and taken-for-granted, and a focus on the lived experience as it appears to situated subjects. Rather than attempting to replicate the works of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, or Heidegger, and deliberately combining aspects from descriptive, hermeneutic, and existential approaches, I have concentrated on the principles emphasised by Sundler et al. – openness, questioning pre-understanding and existing assumptions, and adopting a reflective attitude (2019:735). That is, the analysis borrows from different branches of phenomenology in the way I judged most useful to address my research questions.

Common to different attempts to make phenomenology a viable empirical methodology is the collection of "concrete and detailed descriptions from people who have experienced situations in which the phenomenon has taken place. Such descriptions are mostly elicited by conducting interviews" (Aargaard 2017:521). Yet, even in its most descriptive version, phenomenology is not ultimately concerned with the particularities of individual experiences in and of themselves, but rather with extracting the essence or structure of the phenomena of interest (Laverty 2003; Aagaard 2017) – a premise that this project sets out to embrace. The analytical aim, then, was not to seek an optimal portrayal of objective reality, but rather to reach an evocative, shared realm of experience (Friesen 2012; Aagaard 2017). Furthermore, aligned with my conception of experience as context-contingent and always-already embedded in discursive and material structures, I had no ambition to offer a 'pure' depiction of perception as an essential process devoid of presuppositions, and have assumed instead that description and interpretation can be productively combined in analytical efforts.

The coding itself – that is, the identification of patterned clusters of topics which were then grouped into themes – was a long process, which required many iterations and revisions. An initial list of inductively identified potential topics contained 98 codes, which seemed too scattered to be useful for the construction of a coherent narrative. Some of those were then discarded, whilst others were merged, so as to make the analysis more manageable. Faced with

many more codes than I could possibly fit into a doctoral thesis, I then decided to combine this inductive strategy with a deductive thematic organisation.

Using the aforementioned organisational principles of phenomenology, I arranged the themes into broader clusters focused, respectively, on temporality, spatiality, intersubjectivity and embodiment – and these later became the foundation of the four empirical chapters. The idea was to use each of the chapters to examine in more detail experiences related to four different attributions of 'the live' according to the available literature, as reviewed in Chapter 3. Those are: the live as the *real-time experience*, the live as the *experience of 'being there'*, the live as the feeling of *getting involved in a shared experience*, and the live as the *'authentic' experience*. To flesh out these broader motifs, the updated list of codes (which can be found in the Appendices) – and the empirical quotes associated with each of them – was examined, interpreted, refined, and elaborated, at times to emphasise similarities between participants, and at others to highlight divergences and heterogeneities in the dataset.

The accounts of lived experience obtained through the interviews and diaries, therefore, are never examined outside of the theoretical framework constructed for this thesis – even though, as aforementioned, I remained open to insights that would challenge, contradict, or complexify this framework. As previously discussed, the very questions that probed participants' answers were already permeated by the concepts, terms, and issues that I have been mobilising since the beginning of this doctoral project. Furthermore, and based on my research questions as stated in section 4.1 of this chapter, rather than offering an exhaustive analysis of social media use I focused instead on those moments in which the synchronisation of bodies across time and space (even if only as an unachieved potential) seemed particularly prominent.

4.5 Ethics and reflexivity

Before the presentation of the empirical findings and discussion, I would like to address the ethical dimensions of a few of the methodological decisions outlined in the course of this chapter. In this final section, I will offer a more detailed consideration of issues of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, the limitations of diaries and interviews as a strategy for 'giving voice' to the participants (and the very purpose of giving voice in the first place). I will also briefly reflect on my own positionality as a researcher associated with the LSE, and on some of its potential implications for the process of generating and analysing empirical data.

Although this research did not involve, in principle, the exploration of sensitive topics, or the interaction with people in a situation of vulnerability, it did require human participants – and, therefore, some procedures had to be taken in order to minimise any ethical risks. In this regard, before the conduct of any interviews, and after ethics clearance was obtained from the Department, the prospective participants were told the general aims of the project, and received an informed consent form containing all the relevant information. The autonomy of the participants was respected, including their rights to withdraw from the research at any point, which happened in the case of one individual. Also, all the data collected was securely stored on the OneDrive account provided by the School, in compliance with the regulations of the LSE's ethics committee and data management plan.

In qualitative research, two standard procedures to protect the privacy of the participants are the principles of anonymity and confidentiality (Baker and Ellece 2011). Whilst the data collected through the diaries and interviews was not made confidential in this project – after all, verbatim quotations are made public in the analytical chapters – I committed to anonymise the identities of those involved. I therefore chose pseudonyms for each of the participants, and deliberately omitted certain details about their occupation or location so as to prevent their identification.

Furthermore, as made explicit throughout this chapter, the chosen methods for data elicitation and analysis come with their own constraints. Perhaps the most fundamental one is that, although I have reiterated the ambition to analyse 'lived experience' in and of itself, discursive empirical instruments such as diaries and interviews provide, at best, accounts of experience. In this regard, although the distinction between the experienced and its account (Peters 2011) is indeed an important one – as it is never possible to convey completely whatever we feel sensorially through language – this thesis argues, ultimately, that it is counterproductive to insist on this separation between experience as perception and as discourse. There are very few (if any) opportunities for us to experience something purely, without any symbolic meaning attached or informing our sensorial perception. The translation from affect to words is, in these terms, not an inevitable loss of the pure experience, but actually a constituent part of the experiential process itself. A study of experiences presupposes this translation – and phenomenology is, in fact, etymologically, the study, or the discourse of the phenomena

(Scannell 2014). The things we see – the things that 'appear to us', in phenomenological terms – are already embedded in, and articulated through, symbolic forces and discursive structures.

Because social media platforms might give rise to an almost-infinite range of experiences, the questions discussed with the participants – especially in the diaries and exploratory interviews – were informed by theory. This means that, while still committed to the lived experiences and their ordinary manifestation, in order to make the project viable it was necessary to privilege certain types of practices during data-gathering and analysis, even if at risk of tainting the 'pre-categorical' or 'pre-reflective' stance defended by phenomenologists. The very vocabulary I have used, therefore, although developed so as not to offer too much direction that would distract interviewees from their own individual perceptions and reflections, arguably steered them towards a partial account of the things they do with social media and how it makes them feel. The transferability of the results, therefore, relies less on impartiality or experimental replicability, and more on the relevance, recognisability, and usefulness of the analysis and discussion (Sundler et al. 2019).

Moreover, although the use of interviews in qualitative research is often justified based on the ambition of 'giving voice' to those who would not otherwise be heard, this premise also brings its own ethical implications. As I have emphasised in this chapter, there was nothing pure, naive, or inevitable in the methodological steps employed for this project – they were, invariably, guided by deliberate decisions. The perspectives of the participants, therefore, although still at the centre of the narrative, are also already embedded in my own interpretation – which permeates the whole project, from the questions that were asked to the choice of quotes that I highlight, as well as the kinds of themes and topics they are used to illuminate. The overly reproduced premise of 'giving voice' to participants also seems to erase the asymmetries of power that are inevitably present during empirical research, and the ways in which these power relations are entrenched in the resultant data (Briggs 2003). Data-gathering with human subjects is, like any social interaction, affected by structural dynamics such as hierarchies of gender, age, race, class, and status (Warren 2002). The recognition of these social positions is essential, particularly when it refers to qualitative studies as the present one, where perspective and "meaning-making is center stage in the interpretative process" (Ibid.:84).

In this regard, the fact that this project comes from the London School of Economics and Political Science brings its own set of implications. On the one hand, I am confident that the

reputation associated with the institution has helped me in finding volunteers for the empirical data collection. Indeed, the curiosity to 'see the LSE' was used as a justification by some of the participants for choosing to have the interviews on campus, rather than at their workplace or at a coffee shop (which were the three options I presented them with during recruitment). On the other hand, the prior knowledge of the institution might have affected how participants presented themselves, the kinds of experiences they privileged in their descriptions, and their assumptions about what was the actual interest of this project.

As an attempt to mitigate some of these dynamics, and trying to obtain the most everyday, colloquial descriptions of lived experience, during the interactions I maintained an explicitly informal tone, making clear that I make use of the technologies of interest as well, and that the point of the research was not to obtain an expert account but precisely the ordinary one, nor to make any judgement of value on participants' practices and preferences. Furthermore, as a female immigrant who has English as a second language, I cannot reject the hypothesis that my own gender, nationality and ethnicity might have affected my capacities to recruit and retain participants – which might be reflected in the people who eventually took part in the study, in the data I was able to gather and, consequently, in the analysis itself.

It is also worth reiterating that, in focusing on the experiences of people who live in London, this thesis invariably reproduces a focus on the perceptions and interpretations of relatively privileged (and, in the case of those willing to participate in this exercise, mostly white) people living in a cosmopolitan (even if multicultural), highly connected part of the so-called global north. This, of course, does not reflect the situation of most of the world – or of most of London. Yet, echoing Paasonen's (2021) methodological justification, this select group should not be treated as a template of universal experiences – they can, however, serve as sources of resonant, evocative, and illustrative points to inform critical analysis on the common structures of experience; that is, on what is habitually felt and how this *feltness* comes to be.

When it comes to reflecting on the limitations of the methodological strategy employed, perhaps it might be worth returning to what the participants themselves told me about their perception of the research process. When invited during the second interview to give their opinion about the difficulty of writing the diaries, the participants seemed to agree that submitting the entries was technically easy, although describing their personal experiences was not always straightforward. Common concerns included the translation of affects and feelings

into words (which, as confessed by some of the participants, is extremely challenging), the very registration of what one has done with, and how it felt to use technologies that are so habitually incorporated into daily routines, and the fear of coming across as uninteresting or boring due to describing similar, repetitive experiences. The latter illustrates a point made earlier, in which I discussed how research encounters (even those mediated by diaries) are always marked by performativity and their inherent power dynamics.

In this regard, although this project is premised on the idea of investigating the taken-for-granted, in practice any experiences we were able to discuss during the interviews were already filtered by the participants themselves, as they chose what to write in their diaries. Despite being encouraged to write as much and in as much detail as possible – and even about things that at first might seem banal – they inevitably opted to leave certain things out. Self-reflexivity was encouraged by this life-logging activity, and considered a positive, unexpected outcome by some of the participants. Indeed, they seemed to have taken the study as an opportunity for auto-observation and introspection, often envisioning some sort of self-optimisation (which, in turn, implies assuming that social media use is inherently bad) – to the point that one of the interviewees, for instance, thanked me for giving her the opportunity of *"realising how much I use social media"*.

As acknowledged by the participants themselves, the use of diaries as an elicitation instrument to supplement qualitative interviewing facilitates awareness, attunement, and attention to otherwise taken-for-granted practices. This is useful for this project to the extent that, in turning the participants themselves into pseudo-phenomenologists – in observing and describing in detail their lived experiences, their sensations and interpretations – the diaries provided me with specific anchoring points to explore during the interviews, as the participants came to the second conversation equipped with a portfolio of experiences and practices directly relevant to my research questions. Furthermore, the diaries also provided me with a more grounded account of which platforms were more prominent in the lives of the participants at the time – anecdotally, some of them seemed genuinely surprised with their own use of certain apps.

In doing so, however, the diaries invariably affect those same practices, for as in 'breaking their habitualness' the method brings to the fore certain experiences that would otherwise remain in the background of consciousness. Whilst I acknowledge the fact that, especially due to the prompts and instructions, the diaries inevitably offered guidance for the participants'

self-observations, I believe it was a risk worth taking, as a less structured instrument would have made the analysis of the dataset even more scattered and challenging. Crucially, more than capturing an assumed 'representative' slice of participants' routines, the diaries helped them to pay closer attention to their own practices and experiences – which, ultimately, allowed them to observe their own usage patterns and, particularly, how those are affected by factors other than the technology itself. As described by one of the interviewees, submitting the diaries *"felt repetitive in what I was doing with social media, but it didn't feel repetitive because my feelings were not the same each day".*

Overall, then, the recruitment strategy of seeking heterogeneous experiences seems to have been achieved. The participants had a range of repertoires in terms of platforms employed (as discussed in more detail in Appendix VIII), the uses made within these platforms, and previous experience with and of social media. Still, in spite of this multiplicity, I believe it was possible to identify specific patterns – and those patterns are the backbone of the four empirical chapters to follow. Finally, it is worth recognising that the depiction offered in this thesis is inevitably transitory – the social media environment is, after all, a dynamic and continuously updating one (Chun 2017). Whilst this means that the particular examples provided and technologies cited in the empirical chapters might become obsolete relatively soon, the discussion on their experiential dimensions, and on the structures of these experiences, should be able to withstand the fast pace of technological change.

Chapter 5

The time of our *lives*: liveness, realtimeness, and phenomenal *algorhythms*

> *"Twitter is what's happening in the world and what people are talking about right now. When it happens, it happens on Twitter".*

> *"We must build Facebook to give everyone the power to share anything they want and connect with anyone they want. The way we're doing that is to first extend people's ability to connect with everything that interests them, and to give people a way to get updates from all of these connections. Then, we're going to increase the pace of the stream, so you can immediately see what is going on around you".*

Time is a fundamental parameter for the ordering and structuring of social life (Zerubavel 1985). If our sociality is increasingly intertwined with the logics of social media, then the examination of the temporalities immanent within these platforms aims to, ultimately, contribute to the understanding of the very conditions of our existence. This first empirical chapter starts from the premise that, even in a context in which algorithmic sorting is increasingly employed to (allegedly) provide users with what is 'relevant' to them individually at the 'right-time' (Bucher 2018, 2020), the notion of real-time still permeates social media' overall functioning as well as their rhetoric – as illustrated by the quotes above. Notoriously, as a means to produce the social data required for their operation, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter continuously boost a sense of 'presentness' (Coleman 2018a, 2020a) through the employment of myriad time-sensitive prompts and socio-technical affordances.

Recently, there has been a profusion of academic endeavour dedicated to mapping, discussing, and theorising the temporalities of digital platforms and practices (Wajcman 2014), including the fluid state of the real-time, the present, and the now in social media (Weltevrede et al. 2014; Kaun and Stiernstedt 2014; Coleman 2018a, 2018b, 2020a, 2020b) and, alternatively, the prominence of competing temporal regimes emergent from the agency of algorithmic systems (Bucher 2018, 2020; Carmi 2020). My aim with this chapter is to contribute to these debates by tackling an aspect of social media time that, I believe, is yet to be explored empirically – and, in turn, I anticipate that these empirical observations can question and expand our available conceptualisations. Crucially, my focus here is *not* on how an alleged real-time is

constructed (or deflated) by specific platforms, interfaces, affordances, or their rhetoric. It is, in turn, centred on exploring how it *feels* to use social media (as an environment, not as discrete applications), how these platforms *appear* to their users in their everydayness and habitualness, and whether *liveness* and *realtimeness* are ever fully realised in this complex, messy interplay of chronological and algorithmic ordering. In order to operationalise the previously theorised idea of temporality as both subjectively experienced and always organised in certain ways by the platforms themselves, in this chapter I employ the notion of *rhythm* (Lefebvre 2004; Carmi 2020) as an analytical device.

As I have already set out, this thesis' conception of liveness encapsulates more than quantifiable time measurement. Liveness, here, refers to a broader set of ideas which, drawing on the literature I reviewed in Chapter 3, I have summarised – in an intentionally paradoxical definition – as *the experience of immediate connection through media*. My deliberate decision to foreground liveness, and not any of the other competing terms, is further based on the understanding that, as a concept, it addresses both the inner perception of time and its social dimension. As previously theorised by Scannell (2014) and van Es (2016), liveness is not only about technical instantaneity. As I will demonstrate empirically, it is also about perceived unfolding-ness, the coordination of experienced time, and imminent disappearance.

In short, in this chapter I explore how questions of instantaneity, simultaneity, ephemerality, and freshness are encountered, perceived, and articulated by ordinary users, and then reflect on the difference between what is understood as '*actually* live' and what '*feels* live'. I start from the premise that what is distinctive and new about social media in comparison to previous communication technologies is the idea that they provide people with what matters to them personally through algorithmic recommendation (Kant 2020). As put by Bucher, "from a phenomenological perspective, approaching algorithms is about being attentive to the ways in which social actors develop more or less reflexive relationships to systems they are using and how these encounters, in turn, shape online experiences" (2018:61). It is the perceived temporalities of algorithmic media that I refer to as *phenomenal*[6]*algorhythms.*[7] Therefore, in

[6] Please note that I use both the terms 'phenomenal' and 'phenomenological', which are certainly related but should not be assumed to be interchangeable – and that the former is not used here as a synonymous for 'exceptional' or 'remarkable'. In short, I am employing 'phenomenal' to designate that which is perceived (the state observed), and 'phenomenological' to designate the perceptual (that is, the nature of the observation itself).
[7] Miyazaki (2012) coined the term *algorhythm* to characterise the interplay of the computational logic of mathematical formulas ('algorithms') with the rhythmic movement of cultural phenomena. Crucially, Miyazaki's reflections are centred on the measurable temporal effects of technical processing. His use of *algorhythmics*, then,

this chapter I also discuss the potential implications of algorithmic infrastructures for the temporal experience and conceptualisation of liveness, and why this matters.

5.1 Phenomenal *algorhythms*: on the sensorial orchestration of the social media manifold

Central to the phenomenological approach that underpins this project is the conception of temporality as always situated and relational (Heidegger 2008; Merleau-Ponty 2012). It is precisely in the empirical examination of the multidimensional and contingent character of time in the context of ordinary experience that using rhythm as an analytical device seems particularly productive. Rhythms are understood as temporal patterns resultant from the sensorial orchestration produced by and through mainstream social media (Highmore 2013; Carmi 2020). This orchestration, however, is not necessarily a unilateral, top-down intervention; indeed, users' practices, frequencies, and paces also inform their rhythmic composition. Following the theoretical conceptualisation of temporality as both subject to ordering and susceptible to instability and contestation (Jordheim and Ytreberg 2021), this first section focuses specifically on this negotiation, paving the way for the unpacking of the instances in which rhythms are experienced as marked by realtimeness and, eventually, liveness.

While some platforms are more transparent about the way they rank and sort content – and on a couple it is possible to specify a preference to see the latest posts 'as they happen'– for the most part social media promise to tailor their 'stream' to each individual user. Even though the people recruited for this project demonstrated varying levels of familiarity with the technical operation of social media, the consensus amongst them seems to be that, at some point in the past few years, most of these platforms has shifted away from linear chronology: *"They changed the way the feed works, so it's not necessarily in real-time. It used to be, years ago, that you'd go to the top and see new stuff, but now it has changed. Obviously, it displays in a different way"*, explained Iris, who is 24 years old and works as a designer for a software company. When asked to clarify how she came to notice this shift, the respondent then said: *"I see it all the time, you'll get a post that was from two days ago on top of one that was just now. It's just annoying.[…] If I wanted to see stuff from two days ago, I would scroll to that!"*

is based on a software studies approach to computational working. I am, in turn, interested in the experienced, *phenomenal* (as defined above) rhythms produced in ordinary encounters with algorithmic media.

The first dimension of algorithmic systems that interviewees seem to acknowledge, therefore, is their curational character. Participants' comments suggest that any chronological, 'pre-algorithmic' platform was assumed to be unfiltered and exhaustive, delivering everything that was posted and shared, in real-time. In this regard, participants described noticing (through their personal experiences with the platforms and from hearing or reading about it elsewhere) a transition towards an organisation based on either 'popularity' (which is frequently seen as dependent on the quantifiable engagement a given post gets) or 'relevance' – generally understood as the presumed significance of a given content to the individual. Monica, a 25-year-old illustrator from Venezuela, elaborated on this perceived shift, which she observed on Instagram:

> *Before, posts used to be in chronological order. Which means that whatever has come out latest, you would scroll down, and it would be in the order. […] Now I think that has changed slightly. So Instagram has changed it, it is not about how many people… I don't know how to phrase it. They have an algorithm, so it is about how people interact with your account. The people who interact more with your account are going to see your posts more often, and people who interact the least, even if they still follow you, are going to see it least. Which basically means your post is not going to be seen by everybody.*

In short, 'the algorithm' (often designated in the singular) is seen by the participants as this sentient entity that at some point was incorporated by platforms (notably, Facebook and Instagram), and that has specific activities or roles: identifying individual preferences, 'picking up' particular posts depending on popularity, affinity, and quantifiable engagement, thereby selecting what is and what is not seen by specific users, and finally, organising the order of the content stream. Whilst this incorporation was criticised by some of the participants, as illustrated by the points raised above by Iris and Monica, it was also highly appreciated by others, mostly due to the convenience of a personalised content flow: *"It's something that I appreciate. It's what I want. […] I think social media digest information for me according to my preferences. And I definitely know what's happening, the trends, the things that I wouldn't have looked at, but also the things that, depending on the algorithm, I would see. Depending on the information I share about",* defended Simone, a 33-year-old Tunisian-French marketing officer. In terms of temporality, what this means is that one's access to real-time, 'actually live' happenings is perceived as being highly contingent on following the 'right people' – as explained by Anna, a 25-year-old product developer:

> *Some social media – like Instagram – you see what your people, you see what they are interested in. If, say, a news story broke, and you are looking over social media, you would only see what people have interest in and they want to talk about. So I don't necessarily think you see everything that is happening. If something is happening and people don't have interest in or don't have a strong opinion about, you might miss it and not know that it's happening.*

As a result of this 'new' regime of content organisation, temporal notions are disrupted, as the expectation of novelty-driven, real-time chronology is replaced by a more opaque logic that privileges whatever is 'relevant' or 'popular'. Instagram, for instance, according to Iris, "*shows you what the people you're more... well, who they think you're most interested in – which is obviously worked out by some algorithm, depending on how many times you go on their profile or whatever"*. By foregrounding algorithms in the analysis, I do not mean to suggest that they deterministically create specific temporal experiences. The point is, instead, that 'the algorithm' is used in the participants' verbalisations as a crucial device to make sense of social media's temporalities. My interest, then, is not in the speculative character of algorithmic performativity itself – the expertise, folklore, or 'gossip' relating to the operation of algorithmic visibility, as theorised by Bishop (2019) – but rather in how this speculation enacts negotiations over social coordination, temporal control, and agency. After all, as enquired by Monica, *"The thing of social media being about immediacy, is that I want to see what you post immediately. So it is strange that I am not seeing that post now. Why do I have to go to the profile and find out there were five things that I missed?"*

Crucially, the participants' speculation over the operation of social media's algorithmic systems reflects the realisation of a perceived loss of temporal autonomy – which might produce different rhythms and reactions, sometimes criticised for their alienating and reductive nature, and at other times praised for bringing about serendipity and spontaneity. The argument being made here, therefore, is that social media's algorithms (both as imagined entities – experienced through belief, gossip, speculation – and perceived through direct sensorial engagement), produce specific kinds of experienced temporal patterns, or rhythms. These experienced computational-driven rhythms complicate the already messy concepts that are of interest to this chapter, such as liveness and real-time.

My analysis suggests that one dominant characteristic of the phenomenal rhythms of algorithmic media is their perceived *homophilic* (Chun 2021) *harmony* – that is, the content and the people shown to you first are those in tune with your individual preferences and past engagement: "*You will see stuff that you like seeing, and it's easy to keep looking"*, summarised Anna. Such an assessment is echoed by Simone: *"My social media, it shows me what I wanna see, because that's the kind of things I follow, that's the kind of things I like, that's the kind of people I associate with"*. Here, then, algorithmic media are understood to be deeply contingent on one's actions within and across platforms – rather than independent of human agency, they

are assumed to be both driven by and affecting it. As further synthesised by Alyssa (a 24-year-old customer service worker from the USA), in social media, if a given type of content *"keeps you looking at the platform, then they'll keep showing it to you"*.

Overall, the participants seemed pleased – comforted even – when their individual preferences are met by the recommendation systems; when the platforms manage to, as theorised by Bucher (2020), deliver the right thing at 'the right-time'. The perceived harmony of social media, therefore, is not only homophilic, but preferably pre-emptive, anticipatory – as illustrated by the positive appraisal of YouTube made by Joe, a 25-year-old mental health social worker from Ireland:

> *YouTube has the best algorithm, you've got to give them that. Every single time I think about a song they're like "hey, are you thinking this?" […] They're really good at being like "hey, everyone else that's using this service also likes this, why don't you try it? And now that you've liked it, we can now add it to the algorithm as something you really enjoy".*

It is worth noting that scholars of influencer cultures have been calling out the discriminatory operation of algorithmic systems responsible for surfacing certain types of content and deprioritising others, which often reinforces existing inequalities amongst creators (Glatt, forthcoming). Yet, as other participants speculated previously, what is shown to you is whatever will prompt you to keep browsing, clicking, and liking. So what feels like a perfect, harmonious match for the end-user might actually depend on, and promote the advancement of, the precarity of those involved in the production of the vast amount of content available.

The justification given by the platforms – and, apparently, accepted by the participants – always focuses on improving 'the experience'. As explained by Simone, algorithmic curation *"is a bit like in real life. If you walk in the streets and you tend to like some kind of area, because it fits more your lifestyle and who you are, you will tend to bump into the same friends who have a similar kind of interest. So it chooses in the same way, it filters and tries to show people who would be on the same mood, or have the same interests".* However, this alleged equivalence between 'algorithmic platforms' and 'real life' could be disputed, and interpreted as a device employed by the informant in order to ease her own awareness of – and, possibly, her discomfort with – the implications of data extraction and algorithmic ordering for the autonomy of her sociability. Crucially, it neglects the role of algorithmic systems themselves in creating and framing the 'kinds of areas' and the (apparently natural) collectivities of 'people who have a similar kind of interest', which reproduces 'the myth of us' (Couldry 2015).

Sometimes, however, this fabricated, automated, 'personalised' harmony is seen as unfit for the messier, disharmonious reality of people's tastes and preferences. In these cases, people describe an estrangement between their real selves (a topic I return to in Chapter 8) and the narrow, reductive individual predilections assumed by social media. As a result, despite promises of enhanced experience, social media are frequently perceived as providing a rather diminishing, confining, monophonic, synthesised version of reality. When the 'right-time' of the algorithm does not feel like the right time for the user – or, conversely, when it feels like it is *too* right – platforms are faced with suspicion and disappointment. So rhythms are not always harmonious, precisely because they are flows composed by different paces, sequences, frequencies, intensities. Therefore, another prominent quality perceived in everyday engagements with algorithmic media is their repetition: *"I'm also aware that sometimes you see something that you think is happening, but it's actually very old. Many times I find stuff that I have already read, or I see that it's not a new story"*, described Simone. In certain instances, this repetition is understood as a cyclical standardised pattern: as put by Anna, *"you can refresh, and you go on the feed, and the same sort of people come up first. I guess that must be the people they know that the photos you'll like, they must just know who you wanna see and whose photos you wanna see"*. In other settings, the repetition is annoying, entrapping even, as illustrated by Arthur, a 41-year-old education consultant:

> *And also I think there is something about the algorithm. […] the same stuff seems to keep coming round, so like I quite often now [I] don't look at Facebook for a few days, and when I get back after a few days I see the same things again that I had seen before. Because now certain posts that people keep commenting on keep coming back round, and I feel like there is a lot less fresh stuff in there. […] It made Facebook less interesting, less fresh. More repetitive, yeah.*

What this means for our analysis is that people's emotional reaction to platforms' harmony can range quite significantly. Repetition, as illustrated by Arthur's quote above, might cause the rhythms of social media to be perceived as *slowing down*. Confirming the role of moods and affective states in sustaining temporality, 'boredom' appeared frequently in the analysed verbalisations related to this perceived deceleration, especially when associated with the platforms' apparent endlessness (a point that will be further explored in Chapter 7). Yet, although social media flows are generally perceived as 'endless', there is the acknowledgement that, due to algorithmic filtering, their rhythmic experience is also always finite: *"Because of the way feeds work, you won't get all the information chronologically and so on. There are things that you're always gonna miss. You will never be going to read everything […] Social media is not going to give you all of the posts",* said Monica.

If, as previously discussed, temporality is fluvial, flow-like, then the participants seem to be relatively at ease with the fact that "living in an algorithmically mediated environment means learning to live in the moment and not expect to step into the same river twice" (Bucher 2018:81). This also indicates that 'phenomenal *algorhythms'* – the experiential patterns of movement of algorithmic media – are not purely effects of (imagined or actual) technical operation: they are also organised by the human actors involved in the process. Therefore, aspects such as frequency and intensity of use of a given platform – how often and how deep you 'step into the river', to appropriate Bucher's metaphor above – also impact on its rhythmical experience, as rhythms are produced in the interactional assemblage between bodies and technological environments. The following verbalisation from Sophie (a 24-year-old Canadian who had recently moved to London and works as an au pair) illustrates this point:

> *When I wake up, I'm very excited to open up Instagram and see… because it always has the people you view the Stories the most first, so I will always watch the Stories first and I'll get to a point where I'm watching Stories of people I don't really care for anymore, so I'll get off that and I'll go through the posts. And then I'll do that for a little bit, and then I'll refresh it and watch more Stories. And I find that's the repetition I get myself into. The Stories, the posts.*

Harmony, then, emerges when the rhythm of social media – the pace, arrangement, and composition of the content surfaced in the continuous informational flow produced by these platforms – is perceived to be coordinated or synchronised with the 'right-time' (Bucher 2020) of user's expectations (and the latter are profoundly intertwined with habits). Perceived repetition, in turn, usually means that these automated reverberations have either gone too far (the content shown is all too similar) or are too slow, and that the lived rhythms of the user have transcended those of the platform(s).

Despite the prevalence of harmony and repetition, the agency of algorithmic media is also understood as eventually unsettling – when you expect repetition and encounter *difference*, you are faced with dissonance, noise: *"If you refresh it, there's these new ones straight away. But if you look at the dates, especially if you haven't been online so much, you see photos that were posted one, or two days ago, but that it hadn't shown on my feed"*, said Anna. Consequently, although ordering in social media is never really conceived by the participants as 'organic' – as they do indeed seem relatively aware of both the operation and the motivation behind this regime of content organisation – it is in moments of arrhythmia or breakdown (for instance,

when you expect updates and get recurrence, or when you cannot find the tweet that you just read) that the agency of algorithmic systems becomes an issue.

In this regard, while 'algorithms' have already been established as a productive vehicle for unveiling the ways in which the agency of social media (and processes such as mediation and personalisation) are perceived by ordinary users in the context of everyday life (Bucher 2017, 2018; Kant 2020; Bishop 2019), I suggest that understanding social media's temporality through the lens of 'phenomenal *algorhythms*' offers a potentially fruitful vantage point to study the odd temporalities created when what matters at the individual and societal levels, the chronologic and the algorithmic, the popular and the relevant, seems to clash.

5.2 Real talk on real-time: on instantaneity, freshness, simultaneity, and ephemerality

Having clarified what I mean by *phenomenal algorhythms* – and how context and mood-contingent these can be – I will now focus in particular on those experiences understood as evoking a sense of realtimeness (Weltevrede et al. 2014). Real-time, in turn, often overlaps with other competing concepts, such as immediacy, nowness, and even liveness (van Es 2016; Coleman 2020a). In this thesis, however, liveness is comprehended as exceeding the correspondence to a punctual, objective 'now' (Scannell 2014). Crucially, while real-time generally designates a matter of technical performance, liveness has an inherently social component (van Es 2016). Furthermore, this section starts from the understanding that any experience of real-time is always made and managed (Coleman 2020a; Weltevrede et al. 2014), and that 'the present' is, itself, composed of different temporalities (Coleman 2020). Drawing on these ideas, my argument here is that realtimeness is also rhythmic, and can be scrutinised as a sensorial orchestration, an arrangement of different notes, paces, and tempos.

One of the starting points of this thesis was that social media are employed for a myriad of reasons, motivations, and purposes. Yet, often, they are so engrained in people's everyday lives that their use becomes almost reflexive, naturalised. The participants mentioned that, frequently, they do not have a conscious idea of why exactly they are going on certain platforms, or what they expect to find or gain through them. They are thrown, navigating aimlessly (and, in their own terms, often pointlessly), wayfaring without a clear destination in mind (Markham 2020): *"in social media, you just look and then you're like 'oh!', and you keep going"*, said Anna. As described by Maeve (a 27-year-old administrative officer), one of the most exciting features of platforms such as Instagram or Twitter is precisely the fact that they

"deliver messages to you without you having to look out for it. […] You're really like 'oh that's interesting!'– things you haven't really thought of. You didn't even know you wanted that information!"

For temporality – and again appropriating the fluvial metaphor previously discussed – this means that people feel like they are floating on a continuous stream in which *"all sorts of different things might come up. But often it would be someone telling you where they are and what they're doing. […] it's not information I was going to seek out specifically. But that's kind of the beauty of it"*, described Arthur. What this drifting, aimless navigation means for our attempt to identify empirically and theorise the experience of real-time is that there is a messy, often chaotic combination of intended and 'accidental' encounters with media content (or, as many respondents described, "coming across things"), and the very intentionality behind each instance impacts on its perceived realtimeness. That is, real-time access to happenings might not necessarily be the main driver for the use of platforms such as Instagram, but it is perceived as something that is unintentionally encountered during this activity, as put by Anna: *"Well, if I wanted to know what's going on in the moment, I wouldn't go on social media, I wouldn't necessarily go on Instagram to find out. But if I'm on Instagram, I think you sometimes find out stuff. It's more like a secondary way to find out on there"*.

As is now evident, real-time is not a flat, straightforward container – rather, it is a pervasive qualifier that, precisely due to its omnipresence and generality, deserves further analysis (Weltevrede et al. 2014). In relation to media and communications scholarship, and particular in theories of liveness, real-time is most commonly conceptualised as the possibility of accessing, through technical mediation, an event or situation as it happens, and while it unfolds. This implies a matter of speed, but also of duration. Therefore, in order to observe if, how, and when the temporal live is rhythmically manifested in the experiences described by my interviewees, I posit that the realtimeness that underpins it can be more productively examined by foregrounding four specific, although certainly interconnected, mechanisms – which I have categorised as *instantaneity*, *freshness*, *simultaneity*, and *ephemerality*. 'Instantaneity' is used here to designate a lack of perceptible technical delays. 'Freshness' refers to perceived novelty – something that looks original or unprecedented, regardless of its actual recency. 'Simultaneity' designates temporal coordination, or the perceived access to an event while it occurs – or at the same time as it is experienced by others. By 'ephemerality' I mean the understanding that the duration of a given experience is limited, and that therefore it must be

attended to before it vanishes. In setting up these categories, I have aimed to avoid reproducing empty objective measures ('new', 'now') in favour of subjective, situated, and relational accounts.

5.2.1 Instantaneity

Participants' definition of social media was elastic (as per Appendix VIII), with different people emphasising particular features and dimensions. Yet, the possibility for instantaneity was often positioned as *the* defining characteristic of these technologies, as summarised by Monica: *"I guess it's just instant sharing, isn't it? It is the one thing they would have in common. […] Sharing something silly that happened to you, and people responding to that. […] It's bits of information that you can deliver through, and people respond. So, yeah, instantaneity. Immediacy"*. This opinion is echoed by Marjorie, a 25-year-old Frenchwoman who at the time of the study was looking for employment in publishing, having recently moved to London: *"I think it's the immediacy […] it's just something stupid that you found on the Internet, or just take a picture and say, 'look at that'. […] It's just about seeing something, or wanting to share something that happens to me, and being able to share immediately with others"*.

If we take instantaneity to mean a potential connection to the social world devoid of perceptible technical delays and, consequently, the opportunity to know what is happening at that precise instant, right now (even if this perceived 'now' can be stretched out and is open-ended, cf. Coleman 2020a) then perhaps the push notification – a temporary message that pops up on one's screen – is the most common trigger for its manifestation: *"You've got these things appearing on the screen, little boxes of messages coming through. And you then have to readjust your eyes, because you're lying down and it's dark, and then there's the brightness in your eyes"*, described Ian, a 38-year-old self-employed salesman. Still, as further explained by Rosie (a 47-year-old administrator from South Africa), not all notifications feel the same, and the sense of urgency – which in turn prompts 'instant' connectivity – might change significantly depending on, for example, the platform used:

> *I mean, with Twitter and Instagram I don't bother if the notifications stay in there. With Messenger and WhatsApp I do, because I know it's somebody I know. And, yes, I need to know immediately. It's one of those things – even if I won't respond to it until later, I need to know who it is, and what it's about, you know. And I think in my head I just have this thing 'oh what if it's an emergency?' I need to check. Absolutely, on WhatsApp, I need to see it immediately who's messaged me. And I mean, in my head I know it's not gonna be an emergency, but I need to know what it is and what they're saying.*

What this quote suggests is that certain notifications are considered more *momentous* than others, and therefore worthier of instantaneous attention. That is to say, whenever one of these 'little boxes of messages' pops up on the screen, the users make an assessment based on personal relevance. These decisions, however, also seem deeply intertwined with habits and reflexes.

Most of the existing discussion on the realtimeness of social media focuses on the structure of the 'stream' – the aforementioned self-updating 'feeds' that are now part of the vast majority of platforms. The overall 'dynamic' character of these streams, in addition to their apparent endlessness, has been posited as crucial to the perceived 'aliveness' of social media in comparison to the 'static' web of the early 2000s (Berry 2011; Weltevrede et. al 2014). In this regard, infinite stream-based platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, are seen as good vehicles for keeping in touch with whatever is happening in the world. Even when the posts are not consumed 'instantaneously', the overall narrative of the platforms, which in turn is created by the endless, moving flow, is generally interpreted as reflecting current happenings. Likewise, other features and tabs – such as Explore, Moments, and Trending Lists – are seen as helpful for keeping track of recent events as long as you have the required digital literacy, as illustrated by Alyssa:

> *I think it is a pretty good recording of what's happening, the zeitgeist at any certain point. And it is so vast that it would be fairly comprehensive. You just have to know, I guess, what trends to look at, how to search the platform to find what's happening. If I wanted to know what the trends are, in social media you can find that fairly easily. Like, Twitter, with the trending hashtags.*

As stated from the very beginning, this thesis is committed to the study of social media in their everydayness, which in practice means both acknowledging the specificities of each platform, structure, and affordance, as well as their status as a polymediatic 'environment', 'ecology', or media manifold (Madianou and Miller 2013; Couldry and Hepp 2016). Also, because of the myriad motivations, uses, and practices that surround these technologies, the same platform might be experienced very differently according to users and circumstances. For example, although many of the informants mentioned Twitter as *the* primary source for knowing what is happening in the moment (as proclaimed by the platform itself in its promotional materials), Roger, a 43-year-old office worker from Colombia, thinks Facebook is much better for that – not necessarily because of the speed at which content is circulated, but rather due to the ease of use and convenience of Facebook's interface:

> *Facebook keeps… I have nearly all the newspapers on Facebook, and so it tells me straightaway. I used to have Twitter, but I got fed up with Twitter, it was just… just about having to click on tiny*

> *URLs to get more information. So you would just read the headlines and that was it. It's too much effort. With Facebook, I just scroll it down, see this is the one I'm interested in, and that's it, with pictures and everything. So it made it more appealing.*

That is, instantaneity, here, is not only about the potential delivery of informational content at the precise moment it happens, but is also about how swiftly one manages to navigate these always-updating flows in order to find the pieces of information that are considered interesting – and this 'ease' seems contingent on a combination of digital literacy and interface design. As illustrated by Roger's point above, if it requires an additional click, then the experience's instantaneity is compromised.

Moreover, in this polymediatic environment, the rhythms of social media are also affected by the interplay of different platforms – not only because the same person might use a range of applications but also because, often, the content itself fluctuates across them, either through actual links, or through screenshots and screengrabs of competing applications. 'Being on' a given platform, therefore, is not a requirement for seeing what is happening there: *"I don't have Twitter, but I see things that had been posted on Twitter on Instagram. Like reposts"*, said Abbie (a 19-year-old student who lives in London in the summer and moves to northern England during term time), who also consumes TikTok videos on Instagram: *"I'll see TikToks on Instagram, once they've been reposted. […]. There is so much that is actually funny, but I still haven't downloaded the app, I just watch them on Instagram. At least what other people choose to repost"*. This recirculation of content across platforms means that knowing whether something is actually recent becomes increasingly challenging: *"It's hard when whatever I'm seeing on Instagram is reposted from Twitter, because I think you can lose information. If you, like, screenshot and crop something out, or you can edit it"*, assessed Abbie. What this means is that although platform-centric analyses are indeed very valuable for the understanding of the pace produced by each platform separately, they inevitably fall short when it comes to providing a framework for the messier, complex ways in which these technologies are actually brought to life.

Furthermore, as acknowledged by the participants, social media's instantaneity is only ever concretised in practice because of their own continuous use of these platforms: *"I mean, I feel like I spend more time on social media than reading the newspaper or checking the news on TV"*, recognised Abbie. Therefore, and as will be further elaborated in Chapter 7, the possibilities for instantaneous access are contingent on a given user's willingness and capacity

to remain continuously connected – as summarised by Abbie, *"you'll see what's happening as it happens, if you're checking it then"*. In this regard, an analysis of social media's temporality must also consider the intervals in which these platforms are actually used. Although the platforms' business strategy is, as previously stated, focused on encouraging continuous connectedness, in practice there are certain moments of the day that tend to be devoid of connectivity – either due to other responsibilities, by choice, or by technical constraints, as illustrated by Lewis, a 25-year-old bike mechanic:

> *I only check my phone at certain times a day. Like, I check my phone at lunch time because I don't get that much signal at work. Like, in terms of in the moment stuff, I don't really know about 'live' happenings through social media. Maybe if I worked somewhere where I had more signal I would maybe check my phone more, and I'd know more up-to-date stuff. Most of the people I talk to on it would also be at work anyway, so there's not much to post about immediately.*

What this suggests is that when a platform fails to deliver instantaneous access to things as they happen – which, as we have been discussing, is key to their self-proclaimed realtimeness – sometimes it is the user who is considered responsible for not being online 'at the right-time'. Relatedly, there seems to be a sense of 'inevitability' when it comes to the temporality of social media, in which it is assumed that, if anything deemed really relevant happens, the algorithmic systems behind these platforms will, obviously and invariably, promptly deliver it to you: *"If it's like something people I follow are interested in, I probably will see it again and again. I will see more information about it"*, said Abbie.

What my empirical data demonstrates is that the instantaneous 'now' is actually more complex and multi-layered than we usually take it to be. After all, and as illustrated by Siena (a 20-year-old college student) when describing the feeling of instantaneity, whatever one sees *"can be just like a minute away, or 45 minutes away. You can see almost instantly where people are, or what they're doing"*. In this case, 'almost instantly' might be stretched to 45 minutes! In practice, as explained by Maeve, *"even if it's a bit later, it's still very recent […] it still feels very current"*. And, if we accept that 'nowness' is quite a vague qualifier, which in turn suggests that instantaneity (and, consequently, realtimeness) might be a very elastic attribute, then the same critical treatment should be dedicated to 'newness' – which is why I, instead, prefer to focus on freshness.

5.2.2 Freshness

Overall, the analysis of the data I collected through the diary-interview method confirms the prominence of 'currency' as a key aspect of everyday expectations of, and experiences with,

social media. While there is certainly some awareness of the different temporal strategies employed by the platforms, there seems to be concomitantly the underlying, taken-for-granted expectation that whatever one is seeing on social media has happened fairly recently: *"I guess it's a bit weird, because you assume that everything is happening there and then, because you are looking at it there and then"*, said Anna. As explained by Joe, the very fact that most platforms show how long ago a given post was shared emphasises their time-sensitivity: *"So, for instance, I read about the students being caught in Hong Kong on reddit, and the post was from six hours ago. So I was like 'Oh, news being made in less than 24 hours. Holy shit, this is 'hours' recent!' […] Like 'this is really happening!'"*

In this regard, being the first to know about a given topic, regardless of its apparent frivolity, emerged as one of the main drivers of the use of social media. However, and reflecting the multifaceted character of instantaneity as discussed in the previous section, the findings seem to point less to a reliance on a universal 'new' and more to perceived *freshness*– that is, the excitement lies in accessing something that, ultimately, *feels* new to you, regardless of its actual novelty. This means that the reference point for the 'new' is not an assumed shared and external time but rather the unprecedentedness of the experience to the individual – in this case, "its newness is its strangeness" (Scannell 2014:52).

Interestingly, time-sensitivity can also be apparent in the absence of explicit 'temporal' prompts such as the exact time of the publication. In this regard, social media's quantifiable engagement – so far speculated to be one of the main drivers behind algorithmic ordering – is also used as *proxy for perceived freshness*. In this case, the *fewer* people have reacted to a given content, the *fresher* it feels: *"It was, like, less than a thousand hits on this trailer on YouTube when I shared it. And I was like, oh my god, only 1000 likes, this is incredible! We're breaking, we're on the cusp of history"*, said Joe enthusiastically. When prompted to explain why this was important, and how he felt in this specific situation, Joe elaborated:

> *I guess it's maybe that thing in our culture, "oh, we're part of this group and nobody else knows, we knew it before it was cool. We were part of a group of people that cared, and we knew it first". It's like "have you seen the newest trailer? No???" That's an example of that. Or like "have you heard this is happening?". And then you're like "WHAT?" and look for another source or another site to confirm that whispered rumour. Get something early, get on top of it. And there is nothing actually urgent about these trailers, but it still feels nice. It feels good.*

In other words, the number of 'likes' a post gets can also be used as a chronological marker in the otherwise temporally ambiguous setting of *phenomenal algorhythms*. In this regard, during

the first, exploratory interview, all the participants were invited to comment on whether they think social media always reflect what is happening in the moment, and one of the most ambivalent answers was provided by Anna:

> *I don't really think about it too much, I would assume that it has happened fairly recently. Because I guess that's what I think it is. Like a current up-to-date sort of thing… but then the fact that it's never-ending I guess means you might find something that has happened before, or people reposting things, saving up photos and posting them. But in some ways, yes, I think it will give a fairly up-to-date idea of what my friends are doing, what's happening with the celebrities I follow. But I wouldn't say I rely upon it to keep me up to date.*

This manifested lack of trust in social media's freshness is often attributed to the strategic way in which some users treat their own feeds: *"Some people might take a bunch of photos and then post them from time to time. So you think that they're there and then, but they're not. […] It gives a different perception of that person. Or also makes you feel like 'oh my god, I'm so boring'"*, completed Anna. While the respondents manifested concern about the over-performativity of busyness (Wajcman 2015) and the potential implications of this strategic curation of past moments presented as current for people's mental health, they also seemed confident that, when it comes to their close social circles, they would be able to tell whether whatever is shared is indeed 'new': *"I think I know my friends well enough to know when they're bullshitting. I know how their lives look like, so if they posted a picture on the beach in the middle of the afternoon, I would go 'no, you're in Croydon!'"*, said Lewis. That is, social media's capacity for delivering freshness is dependent on (and threatened by) not only their algorithmic systems but also by other users' adherence to the practice of sharing only in the 'here and now' – which, as we will see, is not always the case.

5.2.3 Simultaneity

In moments of particularly remarkable events or crises – such as catastrophes, attacks, accidents – individual freshness does not suffice, and people find ways of reaching accounts of what is indeed currently unfolding from the perspective of those who are there and then, as illustrated by Simone's story: *"When Notre Dame was burning, I saw it and really felt I was one of the first ones in my network to read about it, because it had been just posted. […] Then I went on Twitter, and Twitter in general you won't really look for the reliability, you just look at what people are saying"*. Synchronisation, as theorised by Jordhein and Ytreberg (2021:11), is a twofold process, which "happens both as individuals are synchronised by some kind of external force and as they synchronise with each other". I use 'simultaneity' to designate the

experiences resultant from the temporal coordination that operates across these two dimensions – the perception that events are occurring as you, and others, are following them.

As I have been discussing, the participants' experiences of instantaneity and freshness change significantly depending on the interactional situation or context – as well as on their mood. Likewise, people's perception and expectation of simultaneity is highly contingent on the platform used – which supports findings by studies that have emphasised a device-perspective on social media time (Weltevrede et al. 2014). Arthur, for instance, manifested his frustration when people would misinterpret his posts on Instagram by assuming they were being shared as they happen, simultaneously:

> *I'll post some photos and they'll be like, "Oh, are you still there?" Or, "Have a good time!" I always think, "Um, I'm not there, I was there two weeks ago". But then why would I put in the post, "Here are some photos..." I normally try to put sort of a funny, sort of witty caption. I don't really want to say, "These are some photos that I took, just so you're aware, I took them about two weeks ago and I've been back..." Yeah.*

Moreover, if social media's phenomenal rhythms – and, presumably, their opportunities for a sense of simultaneity – depend on the frequency and intensity of their use, then it seems important to highlight that these are also heavily impacted by emotional circumstances. Remarkably, although some of the respondents admitted that they are constantly accessing specific platforms to keep track of whatever is happening (*"I probably check it every hour, once an hour"*, said Joe), others adopt strategies such as temporary disconnection (Jorge 2019) and platform curation to circumvent the emergence of certain moods: *"I want to be informed, but I don't want to be informed in a way that is going to upset me"*, confessed Simone. Consequently, simultaneity is not only something that users might not pursue in certain instances, but also that they sometimes actively try to avoid as a practice of self-care, as explained by Anna: *"For example, Brexit, at the moment, I just can't deal with it. I'm not up to date, because it's too time-consuming, too life-consuming. I obviously want to know what is going to happen but… I know stuff is happening, but I don't keep up to date as much as, let's say, other things."*

It is also clear from the analysed dataset that the expectations for simultaneity vary dramatically depending on the feature of social media that is being employed – and the perceived difference between 'the feed' and 'Stories' on Instagram is perhaps the most striking example: *"If it's like a post, you can obviously take a picture, and it's on your phone, and you can post it later. Stories are, like, as it's happening"*, described Abbie. A crucial follow-up question, then, is

whether it matters at all if whatever one is seeing through these platforms is indeed unfolding 'simultaneously'. The answer is, according to Abbie, 'it depends':

> *I mean, if it's just your friend, like, posting a selfie or something, it's not really important if it's from now or from two weeks ago. But with stuff like news, if you're trying to keep up to date with something, then it would be important to know the dates of things, and when things actually happened. I know people could, like, just repost anything on a picture on Instagram, you can just post the headline, and it could be a headline from like a year ago, and you just didn't recognise it. So to be informed, to fully understand a situation, it would be important to know if it's actually happening right now.*

As further elaborated by Simone, *"The real content – the situation in space and time sometimes doesn't matter as much as the implication. There are lots of things that are happening at that time, but the fact that it happened at some point sometimes is enough"*. In other words, the extent to which these experiences are perceived as simultaneous – and whether this synchronisation is indeed considered relevant – depends not only on the affordances and operation of the platforms themselves, but also on the meaningfulness of the existing topics and relationships that are sustained through these technologies.

5.2.4 Ephemerality

As I previously set out, in this thesis I understand real-time to encapsulate not only a matter of speed (the instantaneous transmission itself) but also of duration – or, more specifically, an alleged lack thereof. After all, if the main claim of a given experience is centred on its 'nowness', then we can infer there is an anticipation of a '*then*ness'; a time in which this experience no longer exists, and cannot be enjoyed anymore. In fact, as the theorisations of liveness in the field of performance studies have been telling us for decades, there seems to be something special, almost magical, in being part of a situation that is fleeting or transient, and ultimately non-reproducible (Dixon 2007; Phelan 1993).

Ephemerality is manifested in my informants' verbalisations with different levels of subtlety. More obviously, platforms that have incorporated Stories-like features – in which the content can be consumed for a limited time (or viewed a limited number of times) before it vanishes – highlight the ephemeral as a key component of the experience they provide. As described by Anna, with Stories, the content *"is only there for a small amount of time. And that's, I think, why people enjoy it. They don't want to be recorded* [laughter] *they don't want a history of themselves"*. Due to the lack of permanence, Stories are understood as requiring less effort or planning, which in turn provides an overall sense of 'spontaneity': *"It's just about what you do. It would be in the moment, just stupid stuff that I think is funny, or silly, or something like*

that. A bit more anything and everything. Certainly, different to my posts, which would be about something I really like, or something quite specific", said Iris. Yet, demonstrating their understanding of the operation of social media, some participants manifested their scepticism towards the alleged ephemerality of platforms like Snapchat – although, as they often admitted, this lack of trust does not always stop them from making use of these applications: *"Like, I can send something and then it's gone forever. But, like is it really gone forever? I didn't necessarily trust it, but I also didn't really care"*, stated Lewis.

Beyond Stories, it is noticeable that ephemerality permeates more subtly the activity of sharing links and posts itself – that is, most of the time, the content circulated to friends is considered frivolous, just 'silly', 'funny', and not supposed to receive attention for long: *"If I see something funny, I'll send it to like five of my friends. Like a funny picture, or a funny tweet, or a meme"*, described Siena. That is, like face-to-face conversation, a big portion of what is shared and said via social media is simply 'chit-chat', and therefore inherently, and intentionally, short-lived – particularly, when it comes to messaging systems like WhatsApp and Messenger. Likewise, the constantly updating flows – combined with algorithmic sorting – produce a sense of ephemerality, as it is not only difficult to keep track of things as they are presented in this continuous flux of content, but also the task of retrieving a specific post becomes extremely challenging: *"You'd be like scrolling and then you'll refresh it or something and whatever you were seeing will just disappear. And because it's not chronological, you can't really find it again, because it will be just lost in your feed. Whereas, if it was chronological, you could just scroll down and find it again"*, complained Abbie.

In fact, my interpretation of the interviews and diaries suggests that the *volume* of information available, and consequently the perceived *endlessness* of the flow, creates a sense of imminent disappearance – which in turn prompts the user to attend to the situation 'here and now'. As explained by Arthur, one of the most noticeable elements of social media is precisely the huge volume of content shared through these platforms every second – *"Because it just generates so much content constantly, and because it's democratic, and everybody can have access to it, it therefore naturally, automatically, reflects what is going on".* However, as we have seen, it is precisely due to the vast quantity of content made available every minute that most platforms have adopted a different approach to ordering and organisation, privileging not correspondence with chronological recency but rather what is deemed 'relevant' at a certain time (Bucher

2020). Whatever one sees, therefore, is far from 'naturally, automatically' reflecting what is going on (Carmi 2020).

In short, the perceived 'realtimeness' of social media – which I have examined through the mechanisms of instantaneity, freshness, simultaneity and ephemerality – is heavily contingent on the user's active engagement, on the purpose and mood of this engagement, on following 'the right people', on implicit markers of recency (such as the number of likes, comments, or views), on the platforms as a whole and as discrete features, and on the combinations of and/or overlap between different platforms. While this analysis already suggests that the real-time is much more complex than a matter of quantifiable pace, we are yet to discuss explicitly what are its implications for our possibilities for experiencing 'the live'. This is the topic of the following section.

5.3 Future, present, past: the 'actual live' and what '*feels* live'

I have been arguing that social media are generally characterised by a permanent state of becoming – they are '(a)live' technologies (Berry 2011), as constant movement is key to their 'logic of the update' (Chun 2017) and their overall framing as gateways to an endlessly pulsating life (Beer 2019), which in turn contributes to the manufacturing of realtimeness. This, of course, does not equate to saying that the past and the future have no role in social media – in fact, both anticipation and retrospection are increasingly prompted by the platforms themselves (Jacobsen and Beer 2021; Coleman 2020). Still, for the most part, even their "pledge to future memories" (Beer 2019:52) is anchored in the sharing of current, present moments, 'in the moment'. As I have already discussed, temporality is understood here as always relational and situated. Therefore, the past and the future can sometimes be sensed in the present; anticipated, pre-empted, recollected, *relived*. After all, as postulated by William James, the "feeling of past time is a present feeling" (1950:627). This section examines precisely what constitutes the temporal 'live' when the future and the past can also be felt in the algorithmically mediated present.

Indeed, one of the motivations cited by the participants for posting anything on social media was its eventual 'resurfacing' as a personal remembrance. As admitted by Julia, a 45-year-old post office worker from Australia, *"When I'm out, when I'm at shows, I take pictures and get a lot of memories. Taking photos, posting them up, showing where we've been, knowing they'll*

come back as a memory in a year or two". The practice is the perfect exemplification of what Jacobsen and Beer have called "quantified nostalgia", in which social media's metrics-driven organisation "can figure in the engagement and reconstruction of the digital past in multiple ways, shaping both how people engage with it in the present, how they remember it, and how they feel about those automated memories" (2021:2). When a pleasant memory resurfaces, then, you are able to 'relive it': *"I watched my friends post photos on Instagram today, of them in Rio. I was there in March and really miss it. I felt like I was re-experiencing it"*, described Luc (a 34-year-old graphic designer).

Crucially, then, although the streams and general experience of social media are marked by freshness, ephemerality and dynamism, the participants seem to expect endurance from the platforms themselves: *"Because Facebook keeps everything, it's not going anywhere, it's not gonna be deleted in the future",* speculated Debora, a 25-year-old British-Chilean engineer, when justifying why she chooses to keep her most precious travel snapshots on the platform rather than on her own personal devices.

The quotations above, in conjunction with the analysis presented in the first section of this chapter, also suggest that another crucial component of the experiential rhythms of social media is the acknowledgement of incoming algorithmic sorting. That is, the impending (algorithmic) future is also latent in the present. In fact, if we take into consideration both the 'aimless' navigation that seems to characterise the majority of social media use, and the awareness of algorithmic personalisation as a key component of their temporal configuration, then we can confirm not only that the participants acknowledge the centrality of 'happy accidents' (as theorised by Karppi 2015, 2018) in their experiences, but also admit actively making themselves platform-ready, posting and consuming content, and 'clicking consciously' (Bucher 2020) to feed 'an algorithm' in the hope that, in the imminent future, it will 'surprise them' with something very similar (but not completely repetitive) to what they have engaged with in the past. This, I argue, is deeply intertwined with both the presumed open-endedness, spontaneity and risk that have historically been associated with 'the live' in its different manifestations, and with the recognition of the role of algorithmic systems in organising the experiential flow afforded by these technologies – and reflects broader negotiations and struggles over agency and temporal autonomy.

Returning to the issue of the manifoldness of the present (Coleman 2020a), despite the badge of urgency evoked by 'red things' and 'pop-up boxes', social media's notifications are not always about things happening in the 'here and now'. On platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, it is very common to receive alerts for the aforementioned 'memories' – usually in the form of posts or photos shared on a given day years ago, in a recapitulative fashion. And, indeed, the interviewees really appreciate this feature. As explained by Debora, *"Because so much happens in our lives now, we live such eventful lives, that to be able to try to memorise all of them without a trigger would be really hard. And sometimes you need a physical, or visual trigger to be able to hold the memories"*. You might be asking yourself what this has to do with liveness; I would argue that, in fact, the use of 'memories' is also part of the strategy of social media to prompt people to share in the moment, supported by the latent futurity of the present: if you don't post a picture today, you will have nothing to *rememorate* this day in the years to come. The anticipation of a nostalgic appreciation of the past, therefore, is also deeply anchored in the present – and, thus, every moment becomes potentially eventful. In order to have a lively future experience with social media, the user must act in the here and now.

In this regard, and bringing the topics covered above together, I would like to suggest that the constant documentation and circulation of quotidian moments, 'photo dumps', funny posts and links, memes and reactions through platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook allow the emergence of alternative *phenomenal 'lives'* – as, at some point, whatever one posts or shares instantly or simultaneously (even if initially with ephemeral intentions) might be used for retrospective experiences of liveness. That is, the experience that is technically not 'live' but that, somehow, *feels* as such – as exemplified by Arthur:

> *You still got the same sort of live… the sort of live vibe about it. Then it's sort of the same on Twitter. If you do miss something in the daytime and then you go back through the hashtag or whatever and find the old tweets, or the popular tweet that keeps getting retweeted is still coming up on your feed because more people are retweeting it. It's sort of the same, isn't it? There's still this sense that you're getting the live.*

In this case, the 'live' *vibe* is afforded precisely by media's recording and archival possibilities. The quotation above also illustrates a conceptual point made earlier: that liveness, as previously defined, is more than measurable, quantified real-time connectivity. The term is taken here to designate not only something that one accesses 'in the moment' through social media but also implies *being part of something* (Auslander 2008), which in turn relies on the awareness of others who are experiencing the same, simultaneously (a topic I return to in Chapter 7). If we accept that time is born from our relation to things (Merleau-Ponty 2012), then it becomes

possible to see how such experiences might emerge even when the actors involved are not fully synchronised according to clock time. Moreover, as previously elaborated, liveness is also contingent on other dimensions such as imagination and belief (Bourdon 2000). To a certain extent, this 'contractual' aspect is even acknowledged by the users themselves, as exemplified by Roger: *"I take it for granted. And I hope it's live. I assume it's true until I see other information. But I've seen quite a few stories that are at least a week old, and they keep repeating it, and people assume that is happening in real-time, and it isn't"*.

As synthesised by Simone, 'the live' is whatever feels like the closest thing to the immediate event: *"The more there are elements that make it closer to reality, to life, the more it's live. The more there are intermediaries to that, the less it's live. Like, a reconstruction of something"*. However, as previously discussed, the realtimeness of social media – like the liveness theorised by performance studies – is based not only on perceived currency but also on its ephemerality and non-reproducibility. And, in the articulation between these different (but heavily interlinked) temporal attributes, varied experiences are perceived as having different *degrees* of liveness, as exemplified by Abbie: *"say, a Snapchat Story, they're still posting it more live than like… It wouldn't be 'live-live', but still real-time. It's not like you're posting on Instagram two days later. You're not watching a live-feed, but you'd feel closer to watching in real-time"*.

These degrees of liveness, I argue, are contingent on the articulation of the previously discussed mechanisms of realtimeness: instantaneity, freshness, simultaneity, and ephemerality. The more these dimensions are emphasised, the more convincingly temporal liveness is evoked. In social media, therefore, the past can also be orchestrated to 'feel' live. Rather than necessarily recreating the original lived experience, however, these tend to produce a new, current, *live* affective reaction or response to a content that was previously shared. And yet, I argue, any sense of temporal liveness we get from these encounters is not only about how one perceives the rhythm of content display in social media platforms – which is the focus of pace and realtimeness, as theorised by Weltevrede (et al. 2014) but also of Bucher's (2020) 'right-time media'. It's also about how, in using these platforms, we perceive the rhythms of our social lives more broadly, and how this makes us feel more or less in sync with the social world.

5.4 Conclusions

My aim in this chapter was to describe and discuss not the 'production' of social media time, but rather its lived experience. The temporality of social media is not the time set by the platforms themselves; it is '*the time of our lives'* (Hoy 2012) when we encounter these technologies, and the extent to which these encounters make us feel coordinated or synchronised with the social world and its happenings. With this in mind, in this chapter I have identified some of the existing contradictions, ambivalences, and complexities in the temporal experiences emergent from the sensorial orchestration provided by mainstream platforms.

Rather than aprioristically privileging either the logic of real-time (Weltevrede et al. 2014) or the 'right-time' (Bucher 2020), I tried to observe precisely how their interplay is sensed, perceived, interpreted and articulated by those who deal with these technologies in a habitual manner. In order to empirically operationalise the idea of social media's temporality as both subjectively experienced and always organised in certain ways by the platforms themselves, I employed the notion of *rhythm* (Lefebvre 2004; Carmi 2020) as an analytical device. Rhythms, it is worth mentioning, are as much about space as they are about time (Lefebvre 2004) – they depend not only on the frequency of certain 'notes' and 'beats', but also on the presence (and absence) of specific ones. In social media, this presence is dictated by algorithmic systems; if temporality is indeed orchestrated, my analysis suggests that 'the algorithm' is perceived to be the conductor, the maestro. In this regard, the conception of phenomenal *algorhythms* aims to shed light on the interplay between historically vague notions such as 'new' and 'now' once computational sorting has become widespread, and on the 'perceptual contestation' (Jacobsen 2021) that characterises the use of these platforms in everyday life.

According to my analysis, the temporality of social media platforms is generally perceived as inherently different from that of non or pre-algorithmic media. As I have demonstrated, in social media, the temporal 'normalcy' is often associated with regular, non-stop updates. This creates a general atmosphere of *liveliness*, of animation, movement, dynamism – rhythmic patterns that are encouraged by the platforms themselves (Carmi 2020). Checking constantly and spending a lot of time scrolling, for instance, is not accidental – it is built into the platforms' very design (Lovink 2019; Beer 2019). That is, there is nothing neutral, natural, or organic about the real-time afforded by them (Carmi 2020). Indeed, a purely critical stance would tell us that these platforms are more focused on perfecting their real-time prediction of what you

want to see next and on the real-time engagement resultant from this targeting, than in offering an accurate reflection of what is currently happening (Ibid.).

Yet, following my interest in the experiential, I have proposed that, phenomenologically, the 'realtimeness' of the social media manifold can be evoked through particular orchestrations. These arrangements result in different sensibilities, which I have named instantaneity, freshness, simultaneity, and ephemerality. These, in turn, are heavily contingent on the user's active engagement, on the purpose and mood of this engagement, on following 'the right people', on implicit markers of recency (such as the number of likes), on the platforms as a manifold and as discrete applications, and on the combinations of and/or overlap between different platforms. When it comes to temporality, the social media manifold is not necessarily marked by a correspondence to a punctual 'now' – although the technical potential for this exists, and is eventually put to work – and is instead more frequently created by rhythms that emphasise synchronisation through these different, but interconnected, mechanisms.

Drawing on contributions from scholars focusing on the affective dimensions of digital time (Coleman 2018a, 2018b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c), on the politics of pacing and rhythms in computational media (Weltevrede et al. 2014; Carmi 2020), and on the perceived intervention of content sorting systems (Bucher 2020) to develop a critical phenomenology of mediation, this chapter argues that, in social media, any sense of realtimeness (and, consequently, of temporal liveness) emerges not despite algorithms, but precisely because of their experienced agency. Realtimeness, as a product of sensorial orchestration, is not necessarily replaced by algorithmic ordering; it is, instead, rearranged by computational systems and users alike.

If, following Ihde (1990), we take social media technologies to be both means and objects of experience, then their temporality becomes even more complex. When they are used as a means to an experience – to access and follow something that is happening elsewhere, for instance – then a referential real-time that corresponds to the instantaneous, linear chronology becomes prominent. When they are treated as objects of experience, then an internal realtimeness – one that depends more heavily on the flow of content itself – seems to come to the fore, with freshness and ephemerality being two of its foundations. In the messy rhythms of social media, the 'clock time' and the 'right-time' are often confounded and intertwined.

The analysis presented above also indicates that, more than an objective 'nowness', social media's liveness – the potential for experiencing immediate connection through media –

depends heavily on a perceived unpredictability. As previously theorised by scholars in performance and television studies (Phelan 1993; Scannell 2014), part of the lure of 'the live' is situated in the assumed improvisational and potentially surprising character of something that is still unfolding. In social media, this appears to persist: the interviewees seem to believe in, and desire the concretisation of, the 'happy accidents' through which platforms produce "an affective feeling of randomness of discovery" (Karppi 2018:57). That is, even when acknowledging the role of computational targeting and algorithmic personalisation – which, ultimately, extract data and organise it in patterns to make individuals 'predictable' (Chun 2017) – the temporal liveness of social media paradoxically foregrounds serendipity. In these *algorhythmics*, there is a crucial conflict over predictability and orchestration, on the one hand, and spontaneity and serendipity on the other. My assessment is that this clash represents a contemporary manifestation of the historical struggle for agency in relation to communication technologies – and for maintaining a sense of autonomy even when objectification is needed for the concretisation of media's promises of enhanced experience.

Finally, although algorithmic personalisation is foregrounded as the main feature of social media, I argue that these platforms also work to make people aware (and crave the awareness) of others who are (perceived to be) experiencing the same as them, irrespective of the correspondence of this ongoing event with a universal, external 'present'. In this regard, I understand that these complex rhythms are always a combination of inner processes and social arrangements, being both situated and relational. From an internal viewpoint, they are contingent on our positionality as well as on our affective states; socially, they are dependent both on wider structural forces and on the coordination with the rhythms of others – even in environments that emphasise individuality. Bearing in mind the broader aims of this thesis and the axes of liveness as theorised by van Es (2016), I understand that the endless flow that characterises social media, and the incorporation of algorithmic sorting by them, have complexified not only the potential *realtimeness* of these platforms, but also their capacities for creating sociality/affinity; for the emergence of a sense of togetherness, and for shared experiencing in allegedly personalised environments – and these are precisely the topics of the next empirical chapters.

Chapter 6

Being here, there, and everywhere: presencing and placemaking in contexts of mediation

"Bring your friends and family right next to you
to experience what's happening together"[8]

"Connection goes beyond sharing a photo or video – it's also about sharing what
you're doing, thinking or feeling with the people who matter to you"[9]

"Explore the world through the eyes of somebody else"[10]

One of the manifold attributions of mediated liveness in the available literature is the pursuit of perceptual teleportation – the feeling of being there in time and space to witness and be part of, through technical mediation, distant happenings as they unfold (Scannell 2014; Peters 2001; Hammelburg 2021a). Yet, even if we accept that mediated encounters are able to somehow provide a sense of 'being there', it is hard to imagine that, in pragmatic terms, one would actually mistake them for teleportation (Marriott 2007). In practice, space does not shrink, and geographical distance is not dissolved by the use of media technologies; obviously, then, the relocation that is of interest to this chapter is an experiential one. Liveness, in its previously theorised character of mediated 'as-if-ness', always implies a degree of suspension of disbelief.

As part of the broader aim to examine the ways in which liveness is manifested in everyday practices with social media, in this chapter I will explore the idea of 'being there' in contexts of remoteness. That is, being somewhere else while something is unfolding at a distance and/or being there with someone who is not here, physically, with you. After all, 'being there' usually implies not only a matter of transportation, but also of togetherness (Hammelburg 2021a). Over the past decades, ideas of *being there* and *being with* through technical mediation have usually been viewed through the lens of 'telepresence' (often simply expressed as 'presence', or as one of its derivates, 'co-presence' and 'social presence'). Whilst this chapter inescapably engages

[8] Facebook
[9] Instagram
[10] Periscope

with this concept, one of the underlying themes here is that precisely due to its pervasiveness, vagueness, and polysemy (Lombard and Ditton 1997), applying 'presence' as an analytical category is not particularly useful to illuminate a critical enquiry on liveness.

Rather than mere conceptual purism, my point here is to echo and offer evidence that corroborates Hong's (2015) push for a refinement of the ways we frame sociability in digital environments. The experiences afforded by social media, he contends, are often irreducible to traditional material and semiotic markers transposed from the theorisation of previous mediated practices. Furthermore, if the aim of a phenomenological sensibility is to provide an evocative, recognisable depiction of lived experience (Highmore 2011) so as to examine its conditions and structures, then moving away from certain long-established but elusive terms, in favour of more precise, contextual ones, seems productive. In interrogating if and how the sense of *being there* and *being with* is ever felt in these ordinary practices without agglutinating these experiences under the labels of 'presence' and 'co-presence', I want to contribute here to the identification of what is specific, or typical, when it comes to the use of social media.

In my analysis I suggest, instead, the examination of some of the mechanisms and experiences that are often encapsulated by theories of presence: ideas of awareness (the sentience or sensibility that something exists and/or is happening), proximity (as in, feeling closer to distant others), transportation (feeling like you are somewhere else), incarnation (feeling like you are seeing through the perspective of others who are actually 'there' where the action is taking place), or immersion (not noticing the process of technical mediation itself). That is to say, this chapter, drawing on the recommendations offered by Hong (2015), aims to identify the ways in which conventions of mediated spatiality and intersubjectivity – practices of placemaking and presencing – are operationalised and negotiated by people in their everyday practices with social media, and then goes on to discuss what the ways thus identified imply for our understanding of liveness and for our phenomenology of mediation more broadly. In so doing, I address some longstanding issues in communications research, which are traversed by constructions and ideals of intimacy and transparency, and directly related to the overall matter of media as gateways to the realities of the social world – which, as I have been arguing, underlies the concept of liveness in its different attributions.

6.1 Connected presence? On continuous chit-chatting and 'sending things'

The starting point of this chapter is the postulation that, through media, we are given access to places and people we could not have reached weren't it for these technologies. And, indeed, 'seeing the world' and 'connecting people' are two of the common reasons given by my interviewees for their use of social media. As described by Paul, what is fascinating about these technologies is *"the fact that you can you have, like, global instant reach. That, basically, you know, the world shrank thanks to social media"*. Life without these platforms becomes, therefore, practically inconceivable, for both younger and older respondents:

> *I have a lot of friends who are more distant, and we don't keep up with each other every day, and I couldn't imagine a time when you didn't have social media platforms and you'd only have telephones. And I would have to call everyone to see if they wanted to hang, it would just be weird. Or knocking at people's doors. I guess we're at a different time now, we don't just hang out with people in our neighbourhoods, we hang out with people across cities, across countries, across the world. And you can be more spontaneous I guess, you don't have to have your plans set out, yeah. You can see more people, you can know more people, have a bigger group of friends.*

As described above by Sophie, mobile and social media technologies expand one's potential social networks, and magnify geographically and numerically possibilities for 'spontaneous' social interaction. It is interesting to notice that the alternatives for keeping in touch with distant others presented by the informants – the telephone, knocking on people's doors, writing letters – are all still currently available, although they are generally described as *"the old way"* or *"the old system"* (as stated by Ian). The idea of a significant change, therefore, is very prominent. Yet, while interacting face-to-face, through exchanging letters, and even via telephone calls is often romanticised for its richness, meaningfulness, and inherently authentic character, digitally mediated communication is generally conceived by the participants as intrinsically inferior. This is a familiar narrative, one that is widespread both in the academic literature (Turkle 2011) and in popular discourses alike; it is not surprising, then, that even those participants who define 'togetherness' and 'connecting people' as the most important features of social media, also struggle with the idea that, through these technologies, we are becoming increasingly detached from our dear ones: *"It connects us, but at the same time it distances us. We don't have the personal contact"*, lamented Roger.

What prompts this section, therefore, is setting the scene for the enquiry into if and how 'being there' – through either perceived awareness, transportation, incarnation, proximity or immersion – is ever experienced on these platforms. In particular, I will be discussing in this

section the banal, trivial, vain, ordinary interactions that take place through the exchange of direct messages on social media. In this regard, as described by Christian Licoppe back in 2004, the pervasive use of mobile technologies has allowed the emergence of communicative patterns of 'connected presence', in which relationships can now be managed continuously through the exchange of instant messages, which in turn is said to blur the boundaries between absence and presence. Likewise, Couldry (2004) points to "emergent ways of coordinating communications and bodies across time and space" (p.356), which comprise the potential simultaneous co-presence of audiences thanks to internet infrastructures and the opportunities for continuous peer contact through mobile technologies, and which he calls, respectively, *online* and *group liveness*. What is relevant to my interests here is the idea that, in contemporary social media, this alleged sense of the (co-)presence of distant others is built primarily by interactions perceived as meaningless, idle talk.

According to my interviewees, their general perception is that, through the range communicative affordances that are currently available to them, they are 'constantly talking' to friends and family, although this does not necessarily mean that they are having significant or particularly intimate conversations. What platforms such as WhatsApp, Messenger, Snapchat, and Instagram bring is, crucially, the possibility for frequent availability and casual contact, as described by Alyssa: *"With certain friends, I would do that even if we were close by, I would still talk to them on Messenger even if they were physically close by. It doesn't have to be like 'oh, today I got married'. You know, 'I ate a doughnut that was really good'* [laughter] *and that's interesting"*.

In spite of its pervasiveness, the practice of continuously keeping in touch with distant others is described by the interviewees in belittling terms – it's merely 'chit-chat', sharing 'silly jokes', and often, based on 'sending things'*: "Friends teasing each other, you know what I mean? Like, sometimes the other is going to post me a picture from his holiday or something, and vice versa when I was travelling and I knew he was working"*, described Paul. Or, as put by Rosie, it is about sharing *"random stuff, random pieces of information. It's not necessarily a long conversation about the same thing, it's just she will say this, I'll respond, we'll laugh about it, and then it might be another 10 minutes and she will send me another random message or I'll send her a completely unrelated message".* Remarkably, the participants also mentioned the fact that they might keep in touch via social media even when their interlocutor is physically present, as illustrated by Siena:

> *With my friends I feel like we can be sitting in the same room but if we find something funny we'll send to each other. You know what I mean? We would still send it to each other. So we're all on our phones quite a lot. And it's more showing things to each other, like funny things we've seen. But I say a lot of the time I'd say we're on our phones, even if we're together. But it's mostly to send things. Yeah, so with my friends I do send a lot of stuff. If I see something funny I'll send it to like five of my friends. Like a funny picture, or a funny tweet, or a meme. […] And if they really need to talk then they'll call me. But for the majority of the time it's just, like, funny things.*

As previously discussed, the use of social media in practice tends to be much messier than documented by most of the academic literature, in which platforms, purposes, and modalities are mixed almost reflexively, on the go, to match certain interactional needs and preferences. It should not be surprising, then, that platforms that afford the sharing of 'ephemeral content' (such as the now omnipresent Stories) are heavily employed for exchanges that are perceived as 'unimportant' and, therefore, deliberately fleeting: *"*[Snapchat] *I think it's just so quick. So sometimes, like, my friend will just send me a photo of a face like this, there's no message on it, it will just be her face. And I'll just reply with one of mine. You know what I mean, it's not like we're talking, it's just… have some sort of communication. I don't know what it is*", Siena tried to articulate. That is, the phatic function of communication (Jakobson 1960; Frosh 2019), which of course precedes the emergence of social media, has now been amplified by potential multimodality as well.

Considering the centrality given to habitualness in my theoretical framework, it is worth highlighting that these continuous interactions afforded by mobile social media are not understood by the participants as necessarily separate or inherently different from non-mediated interactions; in fact, these technologies are perceived as solutions for sustaining normalcy and maintaining everydayness – as exemplified by Iris: *"I guess it was just more, like, 'what is he doing?', 'what am I doing?', having a normal kind of conversation that we would have in person. […] I guess it's about maintaining normality, or what you're used to, perhaps […] It's for continuity"*.

Even though the trivialising tone towards these practices was indeed dominant at first glance, upon closer examination the respondents themselves acknowledged that even these banal, frivolous exchanges can also be personally significant. The experiences described in the diaries allowed me to capture some interesting examples, such as the one mentioned by Rosie, who on a given day said her best friend had *"whatsapped"* her a photo of *"someone walking their pet pig on a lead"*. In the second meeting, I then prompted her to elaborate on this experience:

> ***Q: And why do you think your friend sent you a picture of a pig on a lead?***
> *Because she knows it would make me happy. She knows me, and she knows the types of things I'd be interested in. She knows it would make me smile and make me happy in the morning. […] The image of someone walking the pig, and also the fact that she immediately knew that I would appreciate it and find it heart-warming. Absolutely. She was told by her partner and immediately thought of me, and I love that. And that was it, it was just a short burst. Just a random piece of information she thought I would appreciate, and that was it.*

What the quotation above demonstrates is that even these seemingly idle exchanges can also be impregnated with significance – in cases like this, although the content per se is not taken as particularly remarkable or eventful, it is the (imagined) thoughtfulness behind the intentional (even if not necessarily carefully planned) act of 'sending things' itself that is perceived as strengthening bonds and bringing people who are physically distant closer together – even if it is more of an emotional closeness than a physical one: *"And you kind of feel… it is a closeness, I think. You think 'they've actually thought of me', and I wanna share this with you because it will make you happy, make you laugh, bring some positive emotion. Someone's thinking of you. You're in someone's thoughts, and that's quite nice"*, completed Rosie. As reiterated by Siena, *"it's keeping the contact, even if we're not actually together. And it's not a conversation either, it's more like 'I'm thinking of you'".* Therefore, on top of the aforementioned phatic function of media, here we have evidence for the emergence of a sort of 'affective function' as well – that is, one of the purposes for the use of these technologies is for users to *feel* (and make others feel) in certain ways. Unlike the emotive function as described by Jakobson (1960), I understand this affective function not to be focused on the expression of emotions of the addresser, but rather on the generation of affective responses by, or reactions on the part of, the addressee.

In short, in this first section I have unpacked the so-called 'connected presence' (Licoppe 2004) made possible thanks to widespread mobile technologies, now amplified by the pervasiveness of social media platforms. More than simply feeling the presence of others, the phenomenon seems to comprise a continuum of ongoing yet unremarkable interactions through direct messaging. These exchanges, which are marked by a phatic and affective dimension, are also seen as resources for sustaining normality, and for maintaining everydayness. In this naturalised, habitual constant availability to, and contact with, distant others, the intention of 'sending things' seems more relevant than the content sent itself; sharing links, photos and memes in social media is a way of manifesting that the interlocutor is present, if not physically, at least in your thoughts.

6.2 Ambient awareness: on scrolling, stories, and 'passive' connection

Yet, according to the interviewees, the general sense of proximity to distant others afforded by social media comes not only – or necessarily – from the active, direct messaging theorised by Licoppe (2004) and Couldry (2004); often, it results from merely scrolling through posts, feeds, and stories. This section is concerned with the examination of these fleeting, indirect interactions – and with how this complicates even further some of the available theorisations. In this regard, already bearing in mind the current state of 'continuous connectedness' provided by mobile social media, and based on her fieldwork with Filipino migrants living in the UK, Madianou (2016) offered an updated version for Licoppe's (2004) concept of connected presence, which she called "ambient co-presence". That is, the availability of functionalities "such as the 'news feed', combined with the portability of internet-enabled devices and locative services, mean that users can be peripherally, yet constantly aware of the actions and daily rhythms of their peers" (Madianou 2016:183). This new modality of 'indirect' interaction, she argues, "complements other types of mediated co-presence and has powerful emotional consequences" (p.184) for the users.

As discussed in Chapter 5, most of people's ordinary experiences with social media are described not as intentional information-seeking but rather as a casual, habitual, and aimless navigation, through which they eventually end up 'coming across things'. In this regard, the experiences of keeping in touch with distant others and keeping track of what they do in contexts of remoteness are also very much contingent on whatever 'surfaces' in this never-ending flow of content. Some of the interviewees explicitly said that knowing what their friends are doing and where they are is not necessarily what motivates their use of social media: *"I mean, obviously, if somebody posts something and it comes to my feed, then obviously I'll know. But it's not like I would search on purpose where they are"*, explained Paul. In this regard, seeing other people's personal updates is perceived as part of this incessant flow of 'random' content that users encounter in their habitual scrolling through these platforms.

Therefore, what we have is that the constant, direct messaging that was said to characterise connected presence (Licoppe 2004) and group liveness (Couldry 2004) in practice is very frequently interlayered with – and sometimes also spurred by – a continuous exposure to distant others' personal updates through posts and stories: *"One of my closest friends was in Scotland. I'm always texting her throughout the day, and might see stuff on her Instagram, and then this*

makes me feel closer to her", said Alyssa. What this means for our conception of 'being there' (and, to some extent, of liveness as well) is that people might know what others are doing and where they are 'by chance', serendipitously – or, in their words, 'passively':

> *I wouldn't say I actively use it to do that, but I think that that happens through using them. So if I'm on Instagram I might see what they are doing because I've got them on Instagram. […] It's like a secondary thing that I'll know what people are doing or where they are from just using them to look at, rather than my purpose to use them is to know what people are doing.* (Anna)

> *But passively, I suppose, not actively. […] I don't go there looking for that I suppose, no. But I see things, when you go to a social media platform you don't know what you're going to find. And sometimes you find something really interesting.* (Arthur)

The characterisation of the practice of 'seeing things' (to echo Ellis 2000) as 'passive' is curious: although the interviewees acknowledge that the emergence of these 'things' ultimately depends on them scrolling, clicking, and tapping, they still attribute the action (or, in other words, the agency behind this connection) to the platforms themselves. Passivity, therefore, does not refer to inactivity or inertia; but rather to a 'disengaged' browsing – 'engagement', here, borrowed from the rhetoric used by social media to refer to specific types of movement that can be quantifiable, such as clicking, liking and commenting (as discussed in Chapter 2).

It is also worth reiterating that posts that somehow convey the location and activities of friends and acquaintances are in fact part of a much larger pool of informational content – as described by Abbie when discussing her use of Instagram: *"I check it often. Both to see what my friends are doing, and if I'm bored, to be honest. […] I follow a lot of influencers, or make-up artists, or models, and things, and I like to see what they're posting. So it's not necessarily about my friends, it's a mix of friends and random pages".* Nevertheless, this casual, fleeting access to other people's personal updates is also considered a good conversation-starter – which once again blurs the distinction between 'passive' and 'active', as well as the synchronous and asynchronous interaction: *"You need something to talk about as well […] There needs to be something to prompt, other than 'hi, how are you?'"*, explained Maeve. Yet, as described by Sophie, often these interactions prompted by posts or Stories tend to be quite brief: *"You know, my girlfriends sending that fire thing,*[11] *or a couple of my guy friends commenting on it. No one was being like 'what are you doing tonight', more just commenting on like looks-wise and things like that".*

[11] On Instagram, you can 'react' to a Story through different emojis, the fire flame being one of them

Although the concept of 'ambient co-presence' as developed by Madianou (2016) is useful for the overall purposes of this chapter, based on my empirical analysis I would like to advance the discussion in two ways. Firstly, and because the architectures of social media platforms are continuously evolving, the arguments offered by Madianou (2016) miss the fact that, in addition to direct messaging and browsing infinite streams, users also have the chance to follow their peers through Stories-like applications. As pointed out by the author herself, the content presented in then-called 'news feeds' is usually "permanent and thus retrievable", which in turn can "facilitate asynchronous communication" (Madianou 2016:188). Snaps, Stories and Fleets, though, are characterised precisely by their impermanence and ephemerality, which adds a new layer of complexity to the available interactional repertoire. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, my empirical analysis suggests that, overall, "co-presence" might not be the most suitable term to describe the vast majority of these experiences.

For example, most – if not all – of my interviewees mentioned having either friends or family abroad (which is not necessarily surprising, considering they were recruited in a 'global city', London). On the one hand, this might make it more challenging for people to have the synchronous interactions that would characterise the aforementioned connected presence (Licoppe 2004) or group liveness (Couldry 2004); on the other hand, this distribution of contacts across the world also provides to the user an even greater diversity of content to consume (and people to keep in touch with), as described by Sophie: *"Like, I've got Australian friends, and friends in Canada, and in other parts of Europe. So I always have something to watch, so there's not like a dull time. I got all the peaks throughout the world to track* [laughter]*"*. That is, although these casual, 'passive' interactions can be quite brief and fleeting, when presented in continuous informational flows that are constantly updating and are checked recurringly by the users, they help to create a general ambience of connectedness – which indeed resembles the practices described by Madianou (2016) in her examination of transnational families. Yet, designating the majority of these experiences as 'co-presence' would, I believe, be an overstatement.

While appreciating that 'co-presence' is often employed in the academic literature in media and communications in a 'softer' sense as a solution to avoid even fuzzier terms such as 'connection', I find it hard to dissociate the concept from the idea of a (perceived) co-existence or co-occurrence in time and space; mediated co-presence, then, ultimately implies a sense of *togetherness*. The question, then, is whether this continuous but peripheral access to others,

their whereabouts, and activities through social media is indeed enough to create a sense of co-presence. My analysis demonstrates that, generally, this is not the case. Most of the experiences described by my participants in their diaries and interviews do not seem to afford a sense of simultaneous co-existence in the same place, although they do convey an overall sense of *awareness of other people's presence*: *"Just being able to know what's going on with people's lives, it makes me feel connected in a way even when I'm not there. Like, we're not having a physical conversation but… I know what's going on in their lives"*, reiterated Sophie. Based on these findings, I suggest that rather than ambient co-presence, browsing through social media's feeds, stories, messages and group chats affords a form of slightly peripheral, but incessant, insight into remote happenings – which I would rather call a permanent state of *ambient awareness*. This can be illustrated by Siena's verbalisation:

> *If you think of the world and my friends were on holiday, they were in different places, and I could see what was going on in all these places. So in that sense I feel like I am connected to the world. Basically, I know what is going on, I know what is going on around me and my friends, but also in, like, where they are.*

Awareness, I would argue, is centred on processes of perception of, and attention to, the presence – the existence, and position – of other people, places, and settings more than on the impression of simultaneous presence, or togetherness, itself. I actually borrow the term from a different context – remotely operated military technologies – in which "situational awareness" denotes precisely the idea that, through technical mediation, it is possible to know exactly what is happening on the ground, even when you are not physically there where the action is taking place (Suchman 2015). Importantly, this constant 'ambient awareness' is strongly supported by the architecture of the platforms themselves (Papacharissi 2015). My point, then, is that the bulk of the experiences described by my interviewees are less about "the sense of being with another" (which is how Biocca et al. (2003) define 'co-presence') and more about a permanent, even if often marginal, sense of proximity, familiarity, and intimacy from afar. Yet, by foregrounding awareness over co-presence I don't mean to deny the possibility for the latter to ever emerge in these ordinary practices.

Still, the question remains as to whether it is ever possible to feel, through social media, physical proximity in contexts of geographical separation – and if this ever suffices to create an experience of being there together, 'live'. Overall, the respondents seem very careful about claims of perceived 'immersion' or 'teleportation' (which is relevant given that both expressions have been used by social media platforms in their promotional materials for 'live'

applications). As explained by Abbie, what social media provide is a *"layer of closeness"* to distant others, in which *"you feel like you know them a bit better in a way. But I don't think it makes you feel 'close'. Not like geographically"*. It is, for her, a matter of expanded reach or access to distant places and people:

> *Maybe I don't feel closer [to remote people] geographically, but I do feel closer to another part of the world, or another part of the country. I can have some knowledge, I can see what it looks like, I can see what's happening there. So I guess it does make you feel geographically less estranged. I don't really think "oh I feel like I'm there". But it does feel like it can be more accessible to you. […] I don't know if it's necessarily feeling close, it's feeling, like, not far. That kind of sounds like the same thing, but… you just feel more aware of what someone's doing, so it doesn't feel like they're far away from you. I don't know how to explain that [laughter] I guess you feel more aware. Say, if someone's away on holiday or something, but they're telling you what they're doing, you don't really feel as like… even if you're just messaging one day, for that time you're messaging you'd feel that separation… you'd feel close to them.*

The experience of physical proximity from a distance would, in practice, require from the users the impression or illusion of the mediation as transparent, invisible; the perceived withdrawal of the medium itself. Or, in the words of Joe, *"I guess that would suspend disbelief".* Despite this lack of perceived physical transportation, the interviewees seem to agree that what social media provide is, ultimately, a form of emotional and experiential closeness. A 'felt' proximity in spite of inescapable geographical distances. Most frequently, the participants seem to see themselves more as witnesses of distant happenings as they unfold rather than as participants in whatever is unfolding: *"I would at least know what they're up to, but I don't know if I would say I feel like I'm experiencing it with them"*, said Alyssa. Ultimately, though, this constant possibility of becoming aware of what others are doing from afar can have the opposite effect, by accentuating distances even further, as she explained: *"I guess it makes me feel closer than I would feel without social media […] I can find out about what my family is up to and different things they are doing, and if they have family events and stuff like that… but it almost makes me feel like I'm farther away. […] Kind of closer in a way, but still kind of far also".*

Throughout this section, I have focused on a type of social interaction that is widespread in social media environments nowadays, and which precisely due to its fleeting character, is quite difficult to capture and to theorise. Acknowledging this complexity, Madianou (2016) employed the idea of an 'ambient co-presence' to expand our available definitions of connected presence as previously characterised by Licoppe (2004). Yet, as I hope to have demonstrated, it could be argued that this continuous exposure to distant others' personal updates – through posts on feeds and timelines, but also through ephemeral 'stories' and messages continuously popping up – often does not suffice to generate a sense of simultaneous presence (that is, co-

presence), but rather mere awareness, sentience of, or access to other people's activities and whereabouts. Although these are not mutually exclusive – and, indeed, seeing a post or story might easily spark a direct exchange of messages – the analysis seems to suggest that more than apparent togetherness or transportation to remote places, what social media do is to increase our perceptual scope; in the words of Merleau-Ponty (2012), they extend our 'phenomenal field' – the world that is experientially available to us.

6.3 Experiencing *through* others: on 'being there' via tokens of embodiment

Since this is a project about liveness – the experience of immediate connection through media – then a crucial concern is with whether this general ongoing contact and awareness of the existence or 'presence' of absent others is indeed sufficient to make the users feel like they are *there*, experiencing what is happening from afar, 'live'. As I have shown in the opening sections of this chapter, overall, most of the participants mentioned 'feeling closer' to distant others through their everyday uses of social media – yet, this alleged proximity is not as straightforward or self-evident as the rhetoric of platforms tries to make it seem.

In this section, I will unpack some of the precise instances in which this identified habitual 'ambient awareness' creates an experience that somehow, and even if only momentarily, feels like *being there* in the flesh. Yet, rather than the previously emphasised chance of experiencing *with* distant others (which underlies the often-overstated idea of 'co-presence'), my analysis suggests the possibility of experiencing *through* distant others across what I call 'tokens of embodiment' – that is, a tangible representation of bodies that are physically present which in turn act as a proxy for those that are not. As I will demonstrate, these experiences are quite specific, and usually depend on the availability of either multiple perspectives on the same event, an on-the-ground, first-person point of view, or sensorially rich access to people's faces, voices, and movement.

Corroborating the previously stated idea that social media platforms are consumed as 'flows' rather than as separate, discrete pockets of content, the possibility of witnessing remotely the same event from different points of view seems a key factor in the construction of the sense of 'being there' from a distance. My interviewees tend to attribute the emergence of this sense of remote 'simultaneous experience' to situations in which there is access to a high volume of complementary content about the same event, as exemplified by Siena: *"I watched multiple*

stories on Snapchat and Instagram of events in those countries so felt like I knew what was happening there. They showed me photos and videos of what it was like there, so I felt like I was experiencing a little of what they were". That is to say, in these infinite informational flows in which the user eventually 'comes across' certain things, it is when a significant quantity of content – produced by potentially different users, each from their own personal perspective – is available that the sense of *being there* comes closer to its materialisation. The point is further illustrated by Monica:

> *For example, a friend of mine went to Bristol recently – and it's going to sound very lame for me to talk about this [laughter] but in one of the evenings she went to a karaoke night and I actually reacted to her story saying like, "oh my god, I can't believe this". She was only showing her own videos of the karaoke night and she was also tagging the other people who were with her, and she was reposting videos where she had been tagged. So I actually went to the other people who she tagged to see their stories of the karaoke night, and getting all these different viewpoints of the night. […] I definitely wish I were there [laughter] it didn't make me feel better or worse, but it definitely made me feel more engrossed in the situation. I feel like I could get a better sense of the space, where they were, the repertoire of songs…*

Going back to some of the concepts previously discussed, the multiplicity of angles and perspectives provided seems to afford a clearer situational awareness (Suchman 2015) from a distance, providing a better sense of space and the overall ambience or 'atmosphere' – which, in turn, are foundational to the experience of immersion. Rather than the feeling of 'being together', however, these situations seem more likely to generate the experience of seeing what those who are physically there are seeing, as put by Siena:

> *I feel like I'm talking about Snapchat a lot. So there was a festival in Barcelona, and a lot of my friends went there. So a lot of people I know went, and they were all filming. And I saw from a lot of different people, the same thing. So it kind of felt like I knew what was going on, because I could see it not only from one person, but from a lot of people's view of that same event. If I was there I would have my own [point of view], but there were like five different people with different points of view, and they were all filming that same thing. […] And I was obviously not physically there, but I did kind of feel like I experienced it, because there was so much stuff! Like, everyone was filming everything. Like, I can see what is happening in real-time. They would post it from like a minute ago, and I could see it. And it was, like, I can see what is actually happening. I wasn't there, but I could see what they are seeing.*

As emphasised by the quotation above, even if the interviewee acknowledges that, ultimately, she was not *there*, she still managed to feel *as if* she were, as she was able to keep track of things as they were happening, through multiple, personal perspectives. Also, in addition to the multitude of viewpoints, the assumed significance of the happening – *"they were all filming that. So there was nothing else going on at that point, that was the only thing"*– seems to contribute to this sense of experiential proximity. As put by Lewis, in situations like these, *"I don't feel like I was there, but I get a sense of what it was like being there"*. Importantly, then, what social media provide is not necessarily a clearer, richer access to the happening itself, but

rather a stronger sense of what those who are there on the ground are feeling: *"It's mostly about people's own experiences"*, summarised Abbie.

This, in turn, leads us to a related finding – the idea that this sense of *being there* through social media comes only when associated with what is perceived as a personal point of view. During our second interview, I prompted Siena to elaborate on the difference between seeing the aforementioned Stories posted by her friends who were attending the music festival and a hypothetical live broadcast of the concert on TV. Once again, it's whatever is perceived as 'individual' (and, consequently, intimate) that is understood as conveying a higher degree of proximity: *"I think with my friends it's more like… it is focused on the event, but also on what they're doing, on what my friends are doing. […] It's more of a personal thing. […] If I was there, I would be doing and I would be seeing what my friends are seeing rather than the actual event"*, she said. In short, while television-based liveness is understood by the respondent as focused on the event itself – in this case, on whatever was happening on the stage – the spatial liveness of social media emerges from the on-the-ground perspective they afford. Although live music is a particular kind of situation, I do think this description helps us understand what is specific to social media. That is, the appeal of these platforms is not centred on witnessing from a distance the unfolding event per se from the best possible perspective, but rather on detailed, affect-centred accounts or portrayal of the actual experience of *being there*, provided by those who happen to be there physically. Crucially, though, for this sense of remote presence to be materialised, someone who is actually there, on the ground, needs to be experiencing said event with the support of technology – or, as described by Abbie, *"looking through their own phone"*.

Notably, this acclaimed 'personal' point of view refers not only to a matter of singularity or uniqueness provided by a subjective perspective, but also to a perceived individual, intimate connection to the observer. In other words, another crucial component of these experiences is the affection felt towards whoever is there on the ground: *"I know there's a lot of stuff like that* [amateur, first-person recordings] *on YouTube […] But from someone's phone is a different thing. Because you know that someone you know was there. It's still someone's connection, but like, it feels closer to you being there than if you just watch an anonymous video"*, explained Lewis. Also, and bringing together some of the discussions developed in the previous chapter, in which I explored temporal elements such as instantaneity, freshness, simultaneity and ephemerality, the experience of being there appears to be strengthened when the situation is

assumed to be still unfolding – as exemplified by Lewis in recalling a video he received from his friend who was attending a concert: *"when I received it I knew that he was still there, and it was still going on. So it maybe feels like there's a chance I could be there. Like if somehow, through a weird chain of circumstances, I could end up going there and I might still make it"*.

Therefore, my analysis suggests that the eventual sense of 'being there' afforded by social media is less about perceived transportation or co-presence and more about the idea of ambience and mediated incarnation – in other words, you are not experiencing *with* those who are there, but rather *through* them. Incarnation should be understood here beyond its religious origins; I employ the term to refer to the feeling that, even if only briefly, mobile social media allow users to access experiences that are actually affecting other bodies, *as if* they were there in the flesh. As theorised by Scannell, the 'authentic' experience is the experience that one owns – "something that is mine, that belongs to me, that is my own" (2000:406). Multiple perspectives and angles, affect-centred content, and sensorially rich media provide the users with a good sense of what distant others are feeling. Technology, here, allows distant people to feel like they are 'taking over', borrowing, or possessing someone else's experience.

In terms of the technical conditions for the emergence of this alleged notion of presence, mobile phones acquire a central role. More than the mobility or portability in itself, what seems to convey a sense of proximity, according to my informants, is these devices' 'screenness' (Thrift 2005) and their closeness to, and possibilities for seeing, other people's faces. The physical proximity between, on the one hand, the camera and the registered event and, on the other hand, the screen and the receiver, is understood to have a crucial impact on the sense of being there when you aren't, as exemplified by Monica: *"she filmed everything in quite close proximity. In detail, focusing on the food that was being served, and things like that. […] I think, weirdly, for those particular Stories, I did feel like I was more part of the situation"*. The close-up visual, therefore, seems to play an important role in giving people's access to the reactions – the facial expressions, movement, and laughter, for instance – of those who are geographically present. As described by Maeve, *"just physically seeing someone's face, even if they're not there, helps you to feel closer to them emotionally"*. That is, the face here helps to confer a sense of actual existence, of *aliveness*, to distant others – which, in the scholarship of mediated communications, is usually conceptualised as a sense of 'social presence' (Bayer et al. 2016). In the words of Maeve, *"Otherwise these people kind of become like memories, I think. They're*

people that don't exist [laughter] or that just exist in your imagination. So it helps make them real. They exist".

As previously discussed, key to the different conceptualisations of liveness in different areas of scholarship is the idea of (perceived) immediacy – that is, non-mediacy, or the experience that is perceived when the mediation itself is not. In this regard, sensorial richness obviously plays a fundamental role, as it provides an array of resources for people to transpose themselves (even if only through imagination) into a remote place or situation. As described by Simone, the range of platforms and affordances currently available provide us with *"more elements to reconstruct the experience"*. Yet, these possibilities are never considered good or sensorially fulfilling enough to replace the non-mediated experience: *"it's not the same thing. There is no connection you can through a video, a picture, a screen that you would get from, like, holding it [a baby]. […] If it was the same, no one would go on holiday"*, admitted Lewis. In short, although the interviewees often mentioned 'the visual' as the primary factor responsible for the creation of this sense of *being there* – when 'there' is a remote place or happening, accessible only through mediation – my analysis suggests that there is an underlying pattern of sensorial richness and affect-centredness. That is, it is through the access to other people's facial expressions (often through screens that are, in turn, positioned very close to our own faces, and manipulated with our bare hands), voice, individual points of view, movement, and their immediate surroundings – as tokens of their embodied existence – that mediated presence is closer to being a concrete experience.

In this section I have explored the centrality of the body to the emergence of experiences described by my interviewees as being perceived as if they were there – in which *there* is a remote place, accessible only through technical mediation. The findings suggest that, contrary to previous conceptions of mobile communication as inherently 'disembodied', the corporeal, physical materiality of distant others actually plays a crucial role in producing any sense of closeness and, ultimately, of 'being there' when actually you are not. Remarkably, the existing theorisations previously discussed – connected presence (Licoppe 2004), group and online liveness (Couldry 2004), ambient co-presence (Madianou 2016) – all seem to conceive of presence as a matter of companionship; the feeling of being *with* others through digital technology. As I have explored throughout this chapter, this is often not the case. Instead, my analysis indicates that sensorially rich mobile social media, by emphasising other people's embodied existence, eventually affords the sense of experiencing distant events *through* others.

6.4 Being there – where? Location, familiarity, and a precise sense of place

The premise of this chapter is the concept of liveness' longstanding connection with the idea of 'being there' through media – in which this *there* is a remote place or unfolding situation, accessible only through technical mediation. Yet, as I have been examining so far, ideas of transportation, proximity, incarnation, and immersion should not be taken for granted, as they always depend on an ongoing negotiation between users and technologies. Also, as I have detailed in Chapter 3, my conception of experience here, although grounded in sensorial and embodied perception, also encompasses symbolic struggles and issues such as memory, imagination, and belief. In this final section, I will delve into the idea that, through social media, people are given access not to 'no sense of place' (as previously conceptualised by Meyrowitz 1985 in the context of televisual broadcasting) but rather to a quite specific, exact sense of place, which in turn is based on either geolocation affordances or on the previously discussed sensorial richness provided by these multimodal platforms.

In most contemporary social media platforms, it is possible to let people know exactly where you are, while you are there. Through check-ins (like on Facebook or Twitter), location tagging (Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat), and the sharing of 'current location' and 'live location' (WhatsApp, Messenger, Snapchat), it is relatively easy to provide your contacts, followers, and friends with information about your accurate physical position. Yet, and precisely because the users don't necessarily post in the 'here and now' (as discussed in the previous chapter), the tagging of a specific (past) geolocation might create misunderstandings, as told by Sophie: *"I was in Barcelona for the weekend, and I posted a picture. And then a couple of days later I was like, 'oh I really liked this photo', so I posted it and I put the location as Barcelona. And I haven't called my dad for weeks and I called him and he was like, 'are you in Barcelona?' Because he didn't understand how you can just take it and post it later"*.

Still, the point remains that, after decades of what Farman (2015) labelled as the "desktop paradigm" – in which "borders and the material constraints of geography were not only conquered, but were made irrelevant" (p.102) – social media platforms, especially in conjunction with location-aware mobile devices, return place and proximity to the fore (Farman 2015). Snapchat, for instance, which is mostly known as a platform focused on the sharing of ephemeral content, in 2017 launched a feature called 'Snap Map'. According to the platform itself, "on Snap Map you can view Snaps submitted to Snap Map from all across the

world – including sporting events, celebrations, breaking news and more. You and your friends can also share your locations with each other and see what's going on around you". Users can also select the people with whom their location will be shared – as well as opt for the 'ghost mode' whenever they "want to go off the grid" (Snapchat 2017). As described by Siena, *"you can zoom out and just click on a location, and you can see what's happening there for the past day. So, like, we're in East Croydon and if you click on East Croydon you can see some people posting stories and they will put it in the area"*. She manifested concerns about giving strangers access to her exact location and yet, because according to her Snapchat is *"a lot more private"* than competing platforms such as Instagram, she is able to share it only with specific people. The negotiation between, on the one hand, this perceived permanent state of surveillance and, on the other hand, the convenience and the apparent perks of using markers of presence on social media (as I will explore in more detail below), is permeated with ambivalence, as echoed by Abbie:

> *SnapMap. Yeah, I thought that was really creepy when it came out. Then I have it on at uni. It's useful for, like, finding people. It's crazy, but if I want to know if someone's in the flat, I can walk out and sneak my head up, or I can just check Snapchat without leaving my room. But now it's turned off again. I don't like the idea that everyone can see where you are. At uni it's like, I'm living in student accommodation. Whereas at home, I'm like, actually in my house. I'd rather people not being able to see where I live. It's a bit much.*

As further described by Sophie, *"It's just weird, because it's not that it says, 'I'm in London', it says exactly the street, what building I'm in. And I realised it and I was like, 'yeah, I don't really want that'"*. In other words, rather than offering 'no sense of place', applications such as Snap Maps make evident that, on certain occasions, social media might provide a precise, exact sense of place – which is often perceived as *too* personal. Yet, as Sophie herself admits, sometimes the convenience afforded by the platform is enough to bypass privacy concerns: *"I had used it before, to know where my friends were. Like, if you're on a night out, you realise your friend is in the same borough, and you're like 'where are you, let's go meet up for a drink', yeah"*. In a similar vein, Anna mentioned using the location sharing feature on WhatsApp to coordinate actual meet-ups: *"if you're trying to meet up with people, and you can be like 'I'm here' and then they can come and find you"*.

Crucially, though, as highlighted by Wilken and Humphreys (2021:6), in the social media environment any "relationship between boundedness and relationality (between a 'here' and an 'elsewhere') is platform-determined, platform-dependent and driven by commercial imperatives". And another dimension of this ambivalent position on the handiness and the

invasiveness of geolocation-based applications is manifested by their capacity to make distances – not proximities – much more evident. As mentioned by Roger when describing an occasion on which he noticed his wife was 5,000 miles away, physical separation becomes visible once we are given an exact measurement: *"I was like 'oh, that's how far away she is', that's when it clicked in my mind, you know, the big difference. Like, yeah, that's far. I usually think of the time you spend travelling, but when you see it it's like 'okay, that's a big difference'"*.

Overall, the fact that these platforms afford the sharing of one's whereabouts – not only through geolocation itself, but also through other features such as hashtags – is generally welcomed by the respondents, particularly when they feel like they need to know what is happening at a certain place, and want to find a more 'on-the-ground', testimonial version for a given story. Alyssa, for instance, immediately thought of using Twitter – rather than an actual news media outlet – in order to keep informed about strikes affecting her outbound train to Paris: *"I just wanted to see what people were actually experiencing in the moment. I wanted to see the anger, I wanted to see the frustration, I wanted to know what it was like so I could make an informed decision. And people posted pictures of the queues, and stuff like that."* That is, on this platform, she was able to have a very detailed "situational awareness" (Suchman 2015), accessing not only the overall atmosphere but also a thorough, affect-centred account of how people who were there were actually feeling.

In addition to that, an interesting pattern that emerged was the mention of familiarity as an important constituent of practices of mediated placemaking. 'Place', here, designates "a space or location that is recognized as individually or collectively meaningful" (Halegoua 2019: 3). According to the participants, when you have previously 'been there' physically, it is much easier to imagine being there remotely – which, in turn, is understood to facilitate the (re)construction of the experience of 'being there' through media. For Simone, *"if a person is in a familiar environment you can very quickly transpose yourself. If you were there, you know. If I see my mother in the kitchen, I almost feel what it feels [to be there] because I have been there. […] And immediately I'm almost gonna feel the smell of cigarette, or things like that"*.

That is, although sensorial elements such as 'smell' are of course not (yet) transmitted by these platforms, having a similar previous experience allows the reconstruction of a given location through memory and imagination – which ratifies the understanding of the experiential as

always supported by, and entangled with, the symbolic. *"I'd already been there, so I can remember what that was like, and I feel the sun on my face, or when someone is trekking in a mountain, I can feel like the wind blowing on me […] I felt like I was re-experiencing the botanical gardens through their photos"*, corroborated Luc. As elaborated by him, through the photos shared by his friends on Instagram, he could *"almost feel the warmth. […] And experienced where they were. I could imagine myself there. […] It just creates, like, little memories or flashbacks"*. As well summarised by Lewis, although social media often don't make you feel physically closer to places and people, *"you feel closer to that memory, so it's the same sort of thing"*.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that, regardless of their ambivalence about the actual concretisation of experiences of either transportation, proximity, immersion or incarnation through social media, the use of these platforms as markers of presence – that is, as a badge that proves that you are 'there' – is a common practice for most of the interviewees. As justified by Siena, *"I think it's just to be like, I was there, I like doing this. This is what I'm into. And also for other people you know who are there. Like, 'oh we can see each other there'"*. When prompted to theorise why he feels the urge to share his whereabouts through platforms such as Instagram, Luc said: *"Being lonely and wanting to tell other people what I was doing. And giving them the opportunity to experience what I was doing and where I was. […] Like, giving people a taste of what is out there"*.

In summary, in this section I have argued that, rather than an amorphous or non-existent sense of place, contemporary social media might afford the emergence of a very precise and accurate access to remote locations. GPS-enabled mobile phones, combined with situational-promoting platforms that constantly encourage users to share where they are, what they are doing, and with whom, allow people to let their whereabouts be known by distant others, immediately. Beyond locative affordances, the very sensorial richness and multimodality of these technologies provides users with enough resources to reconstruct the experience of being there – especially when *there* refers to a place that they have been to before. In this case, it is the familiarity provided by a previous encounter that allows the emergence of this experience – which is, in turn, strongly supported by memory and imagination.

6.5 Conclusions

'Being there' as immersion or transportation would require a perceived full withdrawal of the mediation process itself. Yet, although the rhetoric of social media platforms emphasises this potential perceptual transparency, throughout this chapter I have identified that the suspension of disbelief that would be required for its emergence is actually quite rare. As theorised by Bourdon (2000), the simple promise of offering 'presence from a distance' made by a given technology or institution must be met by the readiness of the users to accept this claim. My analysis suggests that users do not stop noticing the technology itself, although they do often find that the multimodal resources available, particularly when supported by multiple perspectives or familiar contexts, sometimes suffice to (re)create certain experiences of proximity in contexts of absence and remoteness.

Ultimately, though, the insistence by Silicon Valley's developers and marketeers on creating and promoting a sense of presence at a distance – of 'being there' when you physically are not – is informed by the unquestioned assumption that what technology can, and should, offer is the best possible imitation of face-to-face interaction. This imperative of simulated co-presence – highlighted by the quotations included at the start of this chapter, and often inadvertently reproduced by researchers – not only ignores the wider range of communicational mechanisms developed by humans when adapting to new forms of mediation (Hollan and Stornetta 1992) but also has at its core the idea that mediation inevitably implies a communicative loss (Markham 2020). Perhaps, then, we need to treat mediated experiences as more than proxies – objects and practices that 'stand in' for a reality out there (Mulvin 2021) – and take them seriously as producers of a reality in and of themselves.

With this in mind, rather than reproducing available conceptions of digital communication as marked by a sense of mediated 'co-presence', in this chapter I have explored alternative approaches to, and conceptions of, being there in contexts of remoteness – less concerned with any experiential loss, and more with identifying the kinds of experiences that emerge in these settings. As I have demonstrated, a first important aspect is the understanding of the complex interactional infrastructure created in the current media manifold, in which direct messaging is only a fragment of a much vaster (and messier) pool of communicational resources, affordances, and experiences. In this regard, more than privileging perceived physical closeness or simultaneous co-existence, social media seem to favour a permanent, even if often

peripheral, awareness of other people's activities and whereabouts – and 'coming across' this content is, according to my interviewees, merely a passive endeavour. As aforementioned, this is a curious proposal, particularly if contrasted with the inescapable necessity for users to, constantly and actively, scroll, tap, and click in order to navigate these informational flows. My understanding is that, by emphasising an alleged passivity, the informants are attributing the responsibility for the presence of certain types of content to the platforms and their orchestrated rhythm, rather than to their own intentional actions.

In compliance with the phenomenological sensibility I have proposed, my aim in this chapter was to offer a modest contribution to one of the most fundamental questions posed by this philosophical current: "how are we 'extended' beyond our horizons to know the world beyond" (Hong 2020:57). This enquiry, as I have been arguing, is particularly relevant to the study of media technologies – artefacts and systems that expand our reach and, ultimately, work to "bring forth worlds into presence" (Frosh 2019:1). After all, "Every act of mediation entails a kind of witnessing" (Frosh and Pinchevski 2009). Yet, rather than the rational, cold, mechanical 'ideal witness' (Peters 2001), the authentication of mediated incarnation comes precisely from its capacity to convey affective, warm, visceral access to others' experiences. That is, social media allow the emergence of punctual experiences premised on highly personal, often multi-sited, and body-centric perspectives obtained through others who are physically there, on the ground. The 'reality' of this witnessing from afar, therefore, depends not so much on representational accuracy or factuality, but rather on affective and sensorially rich accounts provided by others who are *there* on the ground, as if you were experiencing through them.

My analysed data further suggests that, in social media, we are most often looking 'at' (as in, looking at things, looking at the screen, or at Instagram), and eventually our attention is caught so that we end up looking 'through' these technologies (to experience something happening elsewhere, as if you were there). These are different modes of attention, embodiment, and hermeneutical engagement (Denson 2011; Ihde 1990), which in turn afford different modalities of presencing and placemaking. In this regard, if the 'authentic experience' is indeed the experience that someone owns, possesses, and considers their own (Scannell 2000), then my results suggest that those cases in which users find more resources to 'borrow' the perspective of others are the ones perceived as the closest to eventually providing a sense of 'being there'.

Through mobile social media, then, spatial relations are not made irrelevant – as the idea of a 'collapse of distances' usually implies (Moores 2004; Farman 2015) – but are actually complexified, and pluralised (Moores 2004), and afford varied modalities of placemaking, or "the practice of making, transforming, enacting, and cultivating a sense of place" (Wilken and Humphreys 2021). In this chapter, the identified modalities comprise the permanent awareness of others' whereabouts and activities, the abundance of multiple individual perspectives for the same event or happening, the availability of multimodal and affect-centred accounts provided from those who are geographically 'there', and the geolocative affordances of mobile technologies.

Returning to the concept of orientation, and thinking critically about the claims usually made by media industries, we might conclude that social media ultimately might not make space shrink, but they do change the distance between bodies and the spaces in which they are perceived to dwell. Distance, under the phenomenological perspective we have discussed, is always the distance between reference points (there) and the body (here). So the widely claimed collapse of time and space does not equate to saying that two different places become closer to each other, but rather that, through media, situated individuals might *feel as if* they were closer to specific objects and subjects in the world. 'Being there', in this regard, refers to the perceived expansion of one's phenomenal field (Merleau-Ponty 2012) – the ability to sense as present the world beyond our immediate reach.

Bourdon (2019) defines liveness as a form of mediated presence at a distance. One of my theoretical standpoints is that what the concept of liveness conveys – and that 'presence' does not – is the idea that it is through mediation that we can get access to *unfolding social realities* (Couldry 2004). Mediated presence, then, is one of the potential mechanisms through which liveness can be sustained; yet, although my conception of liveness encompasses too the affective, embodied experience of being there (when you're technically not), it includes a dimension that is not only cognitive and affective but also inherently social (van Es 2016) – the sense of immediate connection to the social world and its happenings, as they happen.

In this regard, it is nonetheless important to notice that, in spite of the self-declared meaninglessness of the use of social media for the participants, these technologies are, somewhat counterintuitively, still framed as potentially eventful. Although this eventfulness is certainly marked by the temporal aspect of anticipation (which builds on previously discussed

ideas such as ephemerality and simultaneity, but is future-oriented), I propose that there is also a crucial element of aspirational 'presence'– of wanting to be present and feeling the world present through technical mediation. The following empirical chapter, therefore, will try to bring together the previous two, in order to address if and how it is possible to have shared, collective experiences through these technological systems that so often emphasise individual personalisation.

Chapter 7

Getting involved: impending eventfulness and shared experiences in individualised media

The Tweet above was posted by the platform's official account, (sarcastically) welcoming the incoming flood of users who were trying to make sense of the ongoing outage[12] of Facebook's servers – all of a sudden, their flagship app, as well as Messenger, Instagram, and WhatsApp, were down. *"Interesting"*, I thought to myself, *"that in this moment of connectivity breakdown – in which the ways we habitually experience the world are constrained, impaired – we rely on yet another platform to assure ourselves that everyone is experiencing the same as us, while it unfolds. When Facebook is dead, we go on Twitter looking for a sign of life"*.

Since long before the rise of 'platformisation', liveness has been theorised as a crucial resource for media industries to centralise attention, keeping people hooked to specific events and, in so doing, generating a sense of shared experience (Dayan and Katz 1992; Bourdon 2000; Couldry 2004; Scannell 2014; Frosh and Pinchevski 2018). The previous empirical chapters were concerned with observing if and how common manifestations of liveness, respectively 'realtimeness' and 'being there', are ever experienced in everyday engagements with social media, given the specificities of these technologies marked by continuous connectedness, individual consumption through mobile devices, and data-driven personalisation. In this chapter, I will focus on a third common attribution of the live: the attraction of attention through the permanent potential for 'getting involved' in a 'shared experience' – the sought-after (and rarely fulfilled) meaningful social connection through technical mediation.

[12] https://engineering.fb.com/2021/10/04/networking-traffic/outage/

Sharing – a term that, as pointed out by John (2017), is foundational to the rhetoric of social media and yet often deprived of conceptual consistency – here designates participation, the act of 'partaking in', and the consequential sense of community. Over the next pages, I examine different ways in which people seek, achieve, and negotiate 'getting involved' through social media platforms in the context of everyday life. By that I refer not necessarily to a sense of fulfilling political action, but to the broader chance of 'being part of an experience' – which is also encapsulated by most definitions of liveness (Auslander 2012, van Es 2016). Liveness, in this conception, is never a stable or absolute concept – it is rather a relative question of different 'degrees' produced through a range of socio-technical configurations, and which often represents a technical possibility (and the expectations that it brings) more than a concrete achievement (Bourdon 2000).

In this regard, in media events (Dayan and Katz 1992), any sense of shared experience depends to a certain extent on the acknowledgement (or imagination) of others who are simultaneously experiencing the same. The particularities of individualised, algorithmically organised media, therefore, add an unprecedented layer of complexity to the process of concentrating attention, and to the creation of shared experiences. In the past decade, social media's reliance on 'personalisation' has raised numerous ethical controversies and potentially harmful implications, including direct targeting, emotional manipulation, and political polarisation. For the purposes of this chapter, though, the central issue at stake is an alleged *experiential fragmentation* provoked by a flow of informational content delivered through individual segmentation and private messaging, and accessed mostly via personal mobile devices. The question guiding my discussion here, thus, is if (and how) social media platforms can concentrate attention so as to generate a sense of shared experience, the perception that you are 'involved' – and how people feel in these situations.

My approach is to examine the issue through the lens of liveness, and focus precisely and deliberately on the absence of actual extraordinary 'eventness' – or, better yet, I am assuming here that underlying the use of social media is the idea that there is so much happening all the time that the 'crisis mode' has become the new ordinary (Chun 2017). Bearing this in mind, I will be mostly concerned with social media's *impending eventfulness*, which is based on the premise that something meaningful, and hence attention-worthy, is always about to happen. Therefore, the locus of my examination is not in the unfolding or immediate aftermath of certain

critical happenings such as national celebrations or catastrophes; it is actually situated in the allure of attention through the habituated anticipation that something remarkable *might* happen any time, all the time, so you need to be able to follow it *as it* unfolds, 'live' – in which social media are positioned as the privileged means for this access. Whilst some of the verbalisations presented over the next pages might resemble experiences described in the previous chapter – namely, ideas of awareness or togetherness – the focus here is not on wanting to 'feel close' to distant others, but rather on wanting to *be part of an experience*.

In this chapter, by privileging eventfulness as a possibility rather than 'media events' themselves, I intend to foreground key contradictions, such as the idea that, on the one hand, social media continuously prompt us to pay attention on the 'here and now' and, on the other hand, the widespread conception of their use as distracted, unfocused, inattentive. Furthermore, in foregrounding these technologies' impending eventfulness, I intend to unpack empirically some of the key tensions of the study of live(d) experience that I introduced in Chapter 3, such as the individual versus the collective, the ephemeral versus the memorable, and the mundane versus the meaningful. In this regard, the ultimate argument here is that liveness is not only an experience that emerges in ordinary uses of individualised social media; actually, liveness helps build and sustain what now constitutes their very ordinariness.

7.1 Being part of an experience: from connectivity to collectivity

As discussed in Chapter 2, long before the rise of stream-based platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, Raymond Williams (2003) famously argued that the experience of watching television is often that of consuming a sequence or flow, instead of discrete units of content. As we have seen so far, with social media, this idea that the flux is the constant is reproduced at increased scale and pervasiveness (Berry 2011). In this regard, Kaun and Stiernstedt's (2014) analysis of how Facebook structures temporality argued that what differentiates this platform's flow from the one of television as characterised by Williams is individual segmentation and, consequently, the death of shared experience. According to them, "The personalized flow annihilates the collective and simultaneous experience and meaning production" (Kaun and Stiernstedt:1165). In this section, I would like to dispute this claim of inescapable fragmentation and solipsism by offering an empirically grounded alternative characterisation – and I argue that liveness is a productive device for the examination of this apparent contradiction: seeking collective experiences in personalised informational

environments. In this regard, Papacharissi (2015) suggests that even the algorithm-sorted flows created by social media platforms allow people to affectively tune into remote happenings, as "they permit meaning-making of situations unknown to us by evoking affective reactions" (Papacharissi 2015:4). Bearing this in mind, in this first section I will explore how my participants describe the feeling of *being part of something* through social media.

As previously discussed, social media are perceived by my interviewees as apparently *endless*. Interestingly, this assumed limitlessness refers not only to the never-ending flow of content but also to a perceived infinite diversity of versions of the same stories. A big motivation for the use of these platforms – both as a continuous habit and in particular moments – is precisely the enjoyment resultant from the possibility of accessing other people's reactions to, and experiences of, whatever is happening, in which the idea of a shared event is constructed by the access to different personal perspectives. This can be illustrated by Arthur's account of his use of Twitter:

> *On Twitter, particularly if you're following a hashtag or a trending subject, you can't help but see different views. That's really interesting. It's also interesting to see the kind of race to say certain things and then the repetition of people saying certain things, and wondering who said it first and if they'd seen the other people who had said it. And how quickly the memes or the GIFs are out there, and I find it fascinating, and that's a real race, to be the first one to think of a joke and make it. So it's both to see what people are thinking and saying, but also to get a sense of the diversity of reactions.*

Arthur's dual relationship with Twitter is particularly insightful, and deserves a more detailed examination. As a self-employed consultant, he uses the platform to obtain professional visibility, a practice that includes live-tweeting relevant talks and conferences so as to craft his 'presence' in the feeds of relevant people: *"and if I'm aware that other people at the event are doing that, particularly if there's a hashtag that people are aware of, then I would search the hashtag and I'd be looking at that through the event and I'd be tweeting and then retweeting other people at the same event"*, he explained. At some point during the second interview, though, he confessed to having a second account, completely separate from his professional one, dedicated to commenting on BBC Radio 4's soap opera *The Archers*: *"I use it when the programme is on, on Sunday morning. I stay in bed on Twitter for an hour, and then I never look at it for the rest of the week"*, he explained. Both these practices of live-tweeting involve not only describing what is currently happening in 'real-time', but also quickly putting a spin on what is unfolding and connecting it with broader themes: *"I'm trying to really get to a number of issues that are happening and to relate it to the wider world and to, for example, make a feminist argument about something that's happening on the programme"*, argued

Arthur. When prompted to explain what the appeal is of doing this every week, he emphasised that *"it's a way of having a community around this slightly weird interest. And it's funny, it's amusing"*. Yet, as Arthur further explained to me, he has never really contacted any of the people who interact with his tweets on *The Archers*, nor has he any desire to do so: *"I don't even bother following people for it because I just literally, I have the hashtag... I'm reading the hashtag once the programme is on, I'm tweeting, I'm seeing other people's tweets, I'm retweeting, liking, commenting, replying, but that's it. Yeah, it's time-restricted"*.

Some of the first theorisations of both liveness as a key feature of televisual broadcasting, and of the Internet as an environment for interpersonal communication, emphasised these media's potential for the creation and maintenance of (respectively, national and virtual) communities. While the interviews I conducted confirmed the importance of the communal potential of social media, in practice it seems as if most of these communities are fleeting, ambient and ephemeral – although, as illustrated by Arthur, they can also be recurring. The sense of 'communal', here, is marked not necessarily by the participation in an enduring group of people or the experience of togetherness (Bakardjieva 2003), but rather by the affective experience of empathetic identification more generally, premised on a common interest or taste, and often absent of complex negotiation over collective identity (Papacharissi 2015). What is fundamental to the experience of community, then, is the awareness of the existence of others who might be experiencing the same, even if only momentarily – as described by Joe when recounting his reaction to Roger Stone's conviction[13] in 2019:

> *Maybe I felt included… in that spectator sense, yeah. Included in what was happening, it was exciting in that regard. I felt like I was part of that group of people, whether I was aware or not, I was part of a group of people that were consciously plugging into this and being like "oh my god!" In the back of my mind, I definitely felt like I wasn't the only person following this. Like, I felt like was part of a community, maybe? I felt part of a community, and yeah, I felt like I wasn't alone in being interested in this. […] It's like bumping into people who have the same kind of niche interest and you're like "oh, I'm also interested in antique coffee cup collections" – it was kind of that similar feeling. Of feeling an unexpected connectedness. The kind of mutual interest.*

There is, therefore, the sense that others might be (even if only fleetingly) experiencing the same as you, even when the stream of content is individually personalised to target your interests, preferences, and tastes. The interviewees provided several examples for the emergence of this sense of perceived collectiveness – not rarely, by describing the associated use of social media and television. 'Live watching' (Bourdon 2000; van Es 2016) is certainly not new, and it has been particularly discussed in the context of so-called social TV (Ytreberg

[13] www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/15/roger-stone-guilty-verdict-wikileaks-hacking-case-latest-news

2009; Sørensen 2016; Levine 2018; Kumar 2019). The appeal, in these cases, is *"to see the reactions. The real-time reactions, from actual people. I don't care about, like, the 'news people', just people's memes and jokes and reactions. […] It's nice to see what other people are saying about and it helps me form my own reactions, I suppose"*, said Alyssa. Once again, it is the possibility of accessing an individual and on-the-ground viewpoint that is perceived as especially attractive: *"If I want more objective, general news, then I go online; if I go on social media it is because I want the personal perspective*", declared Monica. As summarised by Arthur, the lure is *"to get the flavour around it. And to see if something I was thinking was something everybody else, other people, were reacting with"*. In other words, although these practices do not necessarily result in the emergence of properly defined communities, they seem to reflect the pursuit of a communal 'vibe'.

Moreover, other than allowing users to grasp other people's reactions to whatever is happening, social media are also employed for obtaining endorsement and validation – the corroboration that whatever you are experiencing is also being felt by others, at the same time. In these cases, the motivation is not to find out what people are talking about more generally, but actually the search for instantaneous confirmation that you are not the only one having a particular experience, while it unfolds. This is demonstrated by Monica: *"For example, if I'm failing to get tickets [for a concert or festival], then I can go on Twitter and see in real-time if other people are also struggling as much as I am. […] It's so that I can feel like I'm not the only one who is failing"*. In a similar vein, Siena described an occasion on which she realised that Instagram was down – and the platform's inactivity itself prompted her to seek other people's reactions through social media:

> *And I was like "oh, annoying. I want to go on it!" And one of the first things I do, if Instagram is not working, or Snapchat is not working, I would go on Twitter. And see if for everyone else is the same. I think Twitter doesn't really go down very often. So I go there to check that it's not just me, it's everyone. I go there to see if it's everyone's that is not working. And it's funny though, that social media go on another social media to let people know what happened.*

In the last sentence, Siena is describing the fact that Facebook Inc. (now, Meta) generally uses Twitter to address technical failures – which confirms Twitter's status as the go-to platform for sharing and accessing immediate reactions (Papacharissi 2015; Sumiala et al. 2019). What is key here, then, is that the sense of shared experiencing emerges from the confirmation that you are not alone, and that somebody else – if not 'everyone else' – is going through the same, even if only momentarily.

In this regard, the idea that 'everyone' is talking about a given subject also seems to permeate the construction of shared experiences in social media. That is, even in these individually personalised feeds, there might be situations that are perceived as concentrating the interest and attention of imagined 'crowds'– and features such as trending lists are perhaps the most notorious prompts (Gillespie 2014; Kumar 2019). This, in turn, might incite people to post or share in order to be part of the conversation, as described by Julia: *"I think people see stuff on social media and they think 'oh everyone is talking about this, I need to get on it as well'. I think it's kind of a mob, crowd mentality. […]. So I think people sort of follow the crowd and the trends and whatever is popular. They sort of gravitate towards that"*. Although much of this 'participation' is not converted into debates or collective political action – which Dean (2006) has previously included as a motif of communicative capitalism, in which the value of a message is situated in "its contribution to a larger pool, flow or circulation of content" (p.59) – it seems that the appeal is, above all, to feel like you are part of 'the stream' (Berry 2011). Mediated liveness, it is worth recalling, has previously been theorised precisely as a particular way of being part of, or being involved with, a situation as it unfolds (Auslander 2012).

Not surprisingly, several of the examples provided by my interviewees in order to illustrate the sense of shared experience involved happenings of national interest, such as major political speeches, resignations, or a Royal Wedding: *"It's kind of about getting caught up on the excitement"*, explained Maeve. On the one hand, this demonstrates continuity in relation to the televised media event (Dayan and Katz 1992), which is now amplified by the hybrid instant access to the reactions, thoughts, jokes, and opinions of fellow spectators, thickening this sense of participation (Sumiala et al. 2019). On the other hand, as explained by Roger, the on-the-ground, individual perspective provided by social media is perceived as more 'authentic' than those provided by the news: *"I can feel as a participant in that moment. And especially when I can see what people saw, on their phones. […] And I hate to trust the media, like the news, so I prefer to go and look at the videos through other peoples' points of view. Their personal points of view"*. The distributed, personal coverage provided by social media, then, is seen here as superior, or more trustworthy, than the centralised perspective afforded by broadcast.

What my analysis suggests, therefore, is that the algorithmic personalisation that is so typical of what we broadly refer to as 'social media' does not necessarily mean the death of collectivity. Yes, the 'individual' aspect of these platforms is central to their experience, particularly when it comes to newsfeeds and 'streams'. Nevertheless, I would argue that this

does not equate to saying that the possibilities for mediated shared experiencing have been annihilated. Crucially, though, the sense of being part of something through social media depends not only on the general interest in a given happening or event, but also on the perceived relevance of this occurrence to the person involved. Shared experience, therefore, emerges when the user's personal, affective present meets social media's presentation of the shared, historical present. Furthermore, and corroborating the conception of affective publics offered by Papacharissi (2015), my analysis suggests that what social media provide is the chance to be affectively and emotionally attuned to unfolding collective experiences, even if only in passing: *"I mean, obviously it does not replace the real thing, but if you cannot be somewhere it's nice to kind of feel this little… I don't know, attachment? […] It's… kind of an emotional engagement with an event that is happening somewhere else"*, explained Paul. As further illustrated by Rosie, by seeing other people's posts, photos, videos, and status updates, *"you're getting the vibe, the environment, what's going on. And just seeing all the posts on social media, you kind of feel like you're part of it. […] and you kind of feel… for me, I was part of the whole thing. The excitement of it"*.

Yet, on the flip side, this excitement can very easily be turned into uneasiness and anxiety – *"it's a combination of being happy and missing out, yeah, absolutely"*, described Rosie. The conception that social media platforms are the places to be in order to feel part of what happens of importance around the world is an idea that provokes considerable ambivalence in my interviewees, as exemplified by Anna:

> *I sort of hate social media, but I sort of love it. I just think, the Instagram thing, it's everywhere, and if you're not there people are talking about things and you're like "I didn't see that". And it's because you're not in that bubble. So you feel like you're missing out, which I don't really care that much but then I think it has become such a habit […] It's so engrained in everything that we do, that it's just hard not to, on some level, get involved with it.*

So far, I have examined the idea of shared experience by discussing how my informants feel when accessing particular events through social media platforms. Still, a crucial component of my argument is that social media's liveness exceeds these situations of 'eventness' per se. More frequently, platforms prompt a craving in their users for knowing what is going on through a purposeful and continuous sense of anticipation – *"People still want to be the first to know"*, as put by Rosie. In the following section, I will focus on this idea, which I have labelled as a sense of *impending eventfulness*, and its impact on social media's capacity to concentrate attention and provide a sense of shared experience in contexts of fragmentation.

7.2 One more scroll, just in case: impending eventfulness and habitual anticipation

If social media are constituted by ongoing, endless informational flows, then one of the key components of the experiences they provide seems to be the idea that within these streams there might be important happenings – and what is unsettling is precisely that you do not know when they are going to take place or show up. In this section, I will examine these experiences by focusing on platforms' *impending eventfulness*. By that I refer to the idea that, virtually, "every moment becomes pregnant with historical possibilities, even if the overwhelming majority of time is ordinary" (Frosh and Pinchevski 2018:138). Social media's impending eventfulness is, in short, about the latent futurity of the present, and the prospective remarkability of the prosaic. Things are considered 'eventful' when they are perceived as lively, vivid, worthy of interest. The underlying argument, then, is that, in social media, this prospective eventfulness (that frequently does not materialise) prompts people to continuously share and check in the here and now, thus concentrating their attention and 'engagement' for extended periods of time.

This impending eventfulness, in turn, is closely associated with a permanent, even if often mild, state of anticipation. As put by Adams (et al. 2009), anticipation is a mode of orientation marked by the future being palpable in the present. Crucially, anticipation works by keeping "uncertainty on the table" (Adams et al. 2009:250). As I have been arguing, people use social media not only for informational or interactional purposes; they often use these platforms for their assumed affective capacity (Pedwell 2017) – to *feel* something, even if only fleetingly. Therefore, in the examination of everyday experiences with and of social media, I see anticipation as deeply entangled with imagined ideals of imminent affective intensity; people are, in short, prompted to continuously expect the unexpected, in search of (often transitory) 'happy accidents' (Karppi 2015, 2018).

The apparent infinity of social media streams is frequently positioned as responsible for creating a state of constant alertness, which often prompts 'stress-scrolling' (or, to use a term that became widespread at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, 'doomscrolling'). Central to the desire to scroll often and scroll more through these infinite streams of content is the expectation that something important (even if not necessarily 'life-changing') might happen at any time: *"I might still have been on Facebook to check notifications and randomly browsing at the same occasion, to see if there was any particular breaking news"*, said Simone. Likewise, Joe estimated his own use of WhatsApp: *"I probably check it every hour […] there is always*

someone plugging something in one of the message groups, so at least once an hour". WhatsApp, it is worth mentioning, although primarily used for interpersonal communication with close contacts, is also a resource to keep informed about 'news' – which demonstrates the state of in-betweenness of social media, as explored in Chapter 2. And regardless of the accuracy of Joe's estimation, what is crucial here is the evidence for this prevalent sense of possible eventfulness – which, in turn, makes it very difficult for the informants to actively disconnect, even when they wish so.

This means that social media use is marked by a permanent, although mostly peripheral, fear of missing out – even if, consciously, the interviewees admit that the likelihood of something actually important having passed is very small: *"I had little time for social media, which made me a bit uneasy as I wasn't able to check Facebook, even though I know there wouldn't be of much importance that I would be missing"*, described Rosie in her diary. This point is further illustrated by Sophie, who tends to keep her phone close at all times except for the half-an-hour she spends daily at the gym. As she explains, *"there's the odd time I come back and all of a sudden everyone's messaging me all at once. But most of the time, I come back and there's nothing. I mean, it's only 30 minutes, I sometimes will have a whole day with no notifications, so I don't know why I think in those 30 minutes I'll be missing out on everything"*.

In other words, even if rationally the interviewees recognise that there is no practical reason for their concern, they also confess they often cannot help but be affected by the possibility that, eventually, something might be happening when they are not connected, and so they need to check it 'just in case' – as put by Lewis, *"Just to scroll through, just to see"*. As explained further by Ian, *"you feel there is something at loss if you're not with it. […] You do feel, you think you're missing something, that's what it is. Even if you're 15 minutes away"*. Temporary disconnection, therefore, whilst appreciated by some of my informants, can also become a source of anxiety, as illustrated by Sophie: *"And I think it's kind of nice to think that I'm without my phone for 30 minutes, to feel disconnected. But then, like I said, I come home and I'm like 'gotta check my phone!'. You feel lost without it, like 'oh it's just me and my thoughts'"*.

Given the prominence of narratives framing the overuse of digital technologies as 'addiction', it is not necessarily surprising that the interviewees make frequent use of terms such as 'obsession' and 'dependency' to characterise their relationship with mobile phones and social media. Also, and reproducing the pathologised version of this social problem, the assumed

solution to overcome the issue always seems to be based on self-regulation: *"it's also about disciplining oneself. Because it can be… You can become obsessive with it. […] I've started to, even in the middle of the night, like 'gosh, I might send a message'. […] I do tend to sleep with my phone under my pillow, cuddling with the phone"*, confessed Ian. Instead of subscribing to narratives of addiction, I would rather approach this phenomenon as a habit. In the experiences described by my participants, the anxieties and the fear of missing out have become normalised, routinised, habitual. In this regard, one of the common unscripted points of discussion during the interviews was 'the morning routine' – the ritual followed by people at the start of the day. As explained by Sophie, checking your messages, likes, and notifications is *"I guess like someone waking up, drinking their morning coffee, and going to the post box to see if they've got any letters, it's the same thing. It's like it creates a nice little feeling in your heart if someone wrote you a message".* Relevant to my interests here is the idea that this daily ritual is always a situation of ambivalence, in which excitement, anxiety and distraction seem to be very easily conflated.

A similar experience is described by Anna, who mentioned the 'refreshing' cycle (cf. Coleman 2020b) of Instagram: *"You just go through it, through it, through it. And then you refresh the page and there are new things up. Refresh it, refresh it!"* What this suggests, I argue, is that the experience of using social media in the context of ordinary life is marked by the desire to keep in touch with the world and its happenings. This desire, however, manifests itself as less of an intense craving, and more as a habitual, superficial inclination. Paradoxically, people dread being left out even when, consciously, they admit that often there is nothing particularly relevant for them to *be part of* in the first place, and find in these platforms the most convenient resource to, potentially – and 'just in case' – have access to these latent shared experiences. This habituation of anticipation is further exemplified by Rosie: *"at night, my husband and I are lying next to each other on our phones, just in case something happened on Facebook and we need to know right now [laughter]*".

On top of this habitual scrolling, a common trigger employed by social media to demand attention and keep users continuously connected, as I have briefly discussed in Chapter 5, is the use of notifications for incoming messages, comments, and likes: *"Even if I'm not looking at it, just receiving notifications is kind of stressful. I know that I need to do it later, so it doesn't really help"*, says Rosie – which is corroborated by Arthur*: "you can turn off notifications, but they're still there when you go in"*. Yet, at the same time that they are seen as potential sources

of anxiety, notifications are also associated with excitement (even if only momentarily): *"I'm like, 'has someone messaged me?' Or is it one of those things like a memory? There's a bit of that excitement. Until you open it and realise it was not that exciting. Like 'oh, that was kind of a pointless message',* reflected Sophie.

The ambivalence of pressure and pleasure represented by notifications is further illustrated by Luc: on the one hand, he complains about having to check his phone constantly whenever he posts content that grabs people's attention: *"if I post, I'll get constant notifications and then I'm just constantly checking it, it's demanding my attention. I literally have to [flips phone on the table so that the screen is facing down] and then I can concentrate on work"*. On the other hand, when there is an absence of notifications, he becomes disappointed: *"it's just like tumbleweed. Silence, nothing [laughter] I mean, this is the kind of case for most of my personal work, most of the time no one gives a shit [laughter] It's tough, I mean, not many people really engage with it […] It is frustrating*". We have, in these ambivalent reactions to (not) being able to attract people's attention, an emerging theme of (missing) care – as manifested by Luc's verbalisation above, respondents want to feel like they (or, at least, the content they share on social media) matter to others as well. It is other people's reactions ('engagement') to your content that makes the experience of sharing or posting anything on social media feel 'lively', involving, engrossing.

7.3 Liveness and deadness: on boredom, distraction, and 'mindless scrolling'

As defined by Peters (2000:218), "'live' means that contingency is still possible, that the energy is actual, and that a new and singular event can take place" (Peters 2000: 218–219). In the previous section, I focused on the excitement and anxieties resultant from social media's perceived animated – lively, dynamic, incessantly updating – character. Yet, the combination of a continuous, endless flux of information and the pushiness of the platforms' notifications, prompts, and alerts often becomes exhausting, making people feel drained. Indeed, many of the interviewees manifested sentiments of boredom and fatigue about their experiences with these technologies. Whilst updates and movement are often perceived as a 'sign of life' (Stacey and Suchman 2012), boredom results – to reintroduce a concept discussed in a previous chapter – from repetitive *rhythms* (Highmore 2011).

The habitual anticipation that characterises social media is not attached to the seeking of particularly remarkable events; it seems more about wanting to be part of the flow (Berry 2011) and stay 'in the zone' (Schüll 2012). Anticipation, however, can often set you up for disappointment. In this section, I explore boredom both as an incentive for the dedication of attention to social media when looking for momentary affective gratifications and for 'being part of something', and as a loathed consequence of their use. In doing so, I intend to discuss the contradiction emergent when platforms that sustain continuous connectedness through (subtle, tacit) claims of liveness actually deliver dullness, *deadness*.

A recurrent theme in my interviews – and in the analysis I have presented so far – is the idea that social media are used for diverse purposes. Crucially, though, they are seen as good sources of entertainment, being often employed for leisure: *"It's like comfort eating, it's a similar thing. I go on Facebook when I'm feeling a bit bored. It's not that I want to know what is going on, it's just that I see things"*, commented Debora. In this regard, interviewees frequently associate 'empty times' – when you are waiting, commuting, sitting on the toilet, or simply lying in bed – with the use of these technologies. Even when they are not looking for a specific type of content, the general belief seems to be that social media are good sources of distraction. As put by Abbie, *"In these moments where nothing happens, my phone is the first thing I go to for entertainment"*. In moments of nothingness and stasis, social media are the place the interviewees habitually orient themselves to when seeking anything interesting, animated: *"And there are times in which I actually pick up my phone and I'm like 'what should I do in it?' It's not that I'm checking for something specific, I'm just pressing the button and thinking 'what can I do with it?'"*, confessed Rosie.

Yet, and somewhat counterintuitively (considering the widespread concerns over their potential for addiction, depression, and 'doom'), the use of social media is also framed by some of my participants as a practice of self-care: *"I need 'me' time, and 'me' time is spent usually on social media"*, explained Marjorie. Such a perspective is corroborated by Maeve, who describes the practice of scrolling social media feeds as soothing: *"I find it really relaxing to just sit down and not doing anything. Looking at Instagram, you know. For a lot of reasons – some of it is interesting, some of it I just find… yeah, definitely relaxing"*. In these cases, social media use seems to be understood as time well spent. When you have nothing else to do, there is always the expectation that, through scrolling, you will eventually find something funny or interesting to fill this void – even if only momentarily. In this positive framing of distraction,

social media give people the chance of keeping busy and avoiding unwanted hollowness, as illustrated by Ian:

> *There are times when you have little periods when nothing really happens. And that's when you end up using Twitter, to keep your mind occupied. Otherwise, you keep thinking to yourself "oh my god I haven't turned £5 in the last hour". And you could become quite immensely depressed, so you got to have something to focus on during these little patches when nothing happens. So that you don't get bored, and you start wondering "oh my god, will I be able to pay the bills this week?", you know. So these are little things, otherwise you do end up going a little bit mad. It's a diversion during these little periods.*

As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, the phenomenological sensibility I have embraced considers moods to be revelatory of our experiences. In this regard, it is when someone is experiencing boredom that social media become particularly attractive: *"like, scrolling through, killing time. Like I said, killing time, being lazy. And I mean, if I just sit on the bus and I'm bored, I'll probably just have a look at social media. If I'm sitting, waiting for the dentist, I'm gonna be scrolling on my phone"*, summarised Luc. Moreover, the attributes of these platforms that seem to be central to their capacity to 'kill' boredom are their ease of use and their perceived endlessness: *"But it's just quick on social media, you just look and then you're like 'oh', and you keep going. You don't necessarily take the time to read like an article or the full story. It takes time, and on social media it's just like a filling space"*, described Anna. Under this conception, social media are understood as tools for directing or deflecting attention somewhere else – through these technologies, you can *"open a parenthesis […] and take this energy to a place or things that are actually valuable to you"*, argued Simone:

> *My phone is my piece of personal environment, where everything is suited for me. There's no censorship, it's just my own device. And sometimes at work we have unjustified pressures or vibes that we don't necessarily want to have, so it's a bit of an air from the outside, like a window. […] So it's probably a bit cathartic. It's about expressing and about feeling – we spend so many hours at work, well for me it's seven hours a day – and I think that there are things practically that we have to do every day, and the phone allows us to do so. Being able to take care of that or expressing my views in communication with someone that I know. Which is probably a way to connect to ourselves and be close to ourselves in the end.*

As described above by Simone, the distractive potential of social media is useful for self-care, self-expression, identity management and entertainment. Yet, distraction is not always positive, productive, and relaxing. Indeed, distraction is often "associated with a perception that comes and goes, that is attentive one moment but is inattentive and unfocused another" (Highmore 2011:116). In fact, the employment of social media for distraction purposes seems to be very easily converted into a time-consuming absorption – which once again foregrounds the ambivalent, often contradictory nature of our attachments to these technologies. On the one hand, these platforms are used for those *looking for* distraction; on the other hand, they are very

frequently *blamed* for their distractive potential. Iris mentioned this contradiction in her diary entries, when describing a situation in which she spent hours scrolling through Instagram in the middle of the night*: "Spent a lot of time […] sat on Instagram not really doing a great deal just looking through content to pass the time, as I had some rare time alone in the apartment. It made me feel drained and useless for wasting so much time"*. I then invited her to elaborate further during our second interview:

> *A lot of the time, you're not really looking at anything, just scrolling through stuff. You're not really interested, you're just looking for the sake of being able to go in there, whatever it is that makes us do it. Often, it's just a time filler. Because you have nothing else to do, really. It's easier, your phone is always with you, and often there is really no benefit. At least in my case, it might make you feel more frustrated with this waste of time. […] And I don't know what is about it that makes it so appealing. It just happened, and it's funny because in the back of my mind I was thinking about the fact that I would need to say this to you. It's so stupid. I don't know, really, I suppose it is just something to look at. And for passing time, a distraction. And I could have chosen to sit and just watch something or, I don't know, do some yoga… but I just chose to do that!*

Captivated by this description that so clearly illustrates the dual nature of distraction, I prompted Iris to try and provide a step-by-step recollection of how this experience unfolded. She said:

> *At first, it probably starts with something, like looking for something I could cook for dinner next week, a new recipe, then I would probably go and stalk some friends, and then people who aren't my friends necessarily but I know, and then stalking them. Then, like, a rabbit hole of ex-boyfriends and that kind of stuff. Probably, you get to a really weird… like really stupid stuff. And then I get frustrated. But, really, things that you would not choose to look at normally. But for some reason you've gone from that to that, to that, to that. For no particular order or reason.*

That is, the power of social media in keeping people's attention results from a combination of their framing as potentially vivid, eventful – which prompts users to seek these platforms when they have nothing else to do, 'just in case', and 'just to have a look' – and their built-in design characterised by a dynamic, unceasing flow of content that keeps the user hooked in far beyond originally intended. In other words, in the attempt to interrupt the predictable, perhaps boring rhythm of day-to-day life, participants are faced with frustration, emptiness, and even more monotony. As a consequence of this paradoxical arrangement of movement and inertia, using social media platforms for extended intervals often feels like doing nothing at all – the 'experience of no experience' (Scannell, 2014:186). In this regard, the expressions used by the informants to describe this practice are quite striking. Joe, for instance, calls it *"the scroll black-pit" – "Where you scroll through things that might be interesting, but none of them is attention grabbing. You're just scrolling nonsense"*. For Anna, *"It's like a wormhole […] you're just absentmindedly scrolling through nothing"*. That is, when integrated into everyday

life, the claims of excitement and participation are often not met, so users feel drawn into social media, and then sucked in.

As I have clarified before, rather than reproducing widespread claims of addiction, I tend to agree with authors like Aagaard (2020), who argue that a more fruitful lens for examining these practices in their complexity and ambivalence is provided by the idea of habit. Habituation, in turn, always comprises a combination of animation and automation (Coleman 2014; Pedwell 2017; Stacey and Suchman 2012). In this regard, "mindless scrolling" (as it was explicitly called by Luc, Rosie, and Sophie) seems to be the perfect description of this amalgamation. As typified by Joe, *"you're going to bed, then you're gonna set up your alarm and then you're like 'oh, reddit'. And then 45 minutes later you're like, shit, I lost 45 minutes of sleep!"* In short, the practice is described by the interviewees as an almost involuntary reflex or urge to keep browsing – as exemplified by Sophie:

> *And you get to a point in your day in which you've opened Instagram 15 times already, and watched the Stories and now you get to these people that you barely know or care about, to be honest. You're watching their stories just kind of like "why am I doing this?" So I have to tell myself to stop and put my phone down. And then two minutes later I'll pick it back up and I'll do it again – like "ARGH, stop". […] Sometimes I will find myself opening it up, going through it, and then just reopening it without even realising.*

As previously pointed out by Baym, Wagman, and Persaud (2020), the alleged automaticity of the engagement with connective platforms that characterises 'mindless scrolling' can be triggered by particular emotional states or moods, as well as by the very effortlessness or comfort (Beer 2012, 2019; Lovink 2019) of the manoeuvring of said technologies. Nevertheless, the anticipated impending eventfulness and meaningful social connectivity that characterise live media (Bourdon 2000), when met with the reality of insignificant, trivial, or boring experience of platformised sociality, produce frustration. As a result of this perceived pointlessness, the use of social media as a pastime often results in (even more) lethargy. Which means that, paradoxically, in a study centrally concerned with liveness – with what feels (or claims to make you feel) animated, injected with life – one of the commonly observed experiences is that of *deadness*, dullness, lifelessness.

This lack of 'life' within social media is described both as a result of the presence of too much content (as part of the 'infoglut', as put by Andrejevic, 2013), and as the absence of anything interesting at all. For Lewis, the problem is the former: *"I followed so many different pages and people that it's just cluttered. You have to spend time to go through all the stuff. It's too*

much content. So there's a lot of stuff I don't care about on it". That is, because there is too much in there, navigating this endless informational flow becomes a burden: *"I just follow so many people on Instagram that I wouldn't bother watching Stories"*, commented Abbie.

Whilst for some of the participants the main problem is the effort and workload that would be required to make sense of and curate this 'clutter' and find what you really want to see, for others there seems to be a sensation of uncontrollability – which comes at odds with the aforementioned idea that the main attraction of social media is precisely their capacity to tailor content to the user's individual interests and tastes. The issue, according to Luc, is that, ultimately, *"you don't have a choice of what kind of content you're going to be shown […] you are scrolling down, and you know that the content could be total rubbish or it could be interesting"*. In a similar vein, Anna frames her weariness with social media as resulting from their incapacity to deliver relevant content all the time:

> *Yeah, because there is a limit. Like, there is nothing happening. You pick it up and you're like "what's happening?" Nothing, you checked it 20 minutes ago. […] There is probably a limit of stuff that's happening and you are interested in. So, like, there's probably loads of stuff that's happening, but if it's not tailored to what I am interested in then I might be like, "well, nothing is happening". But that's just my opinion of what's happening. I've definitely had days in which I was like "how is it that there is nothing new?"*

The quotation above makes evident how engrained the promise of freshness is in people's expectations and their daily media practices, as discussed in Chapter 5. It also illustrates the relative awareness of the operation of social media's systems of recommendation. And, in fact, the lack of perceived updates is mentioned by the interviewees as one of the main reasons for the abandonment of specific platforms – particularly, Facebook. As described by Ian, *"On Facebook, there are 800 people that I've never met across the world, and who don't share anything. […] You are constantly putting out stuff in there but there are never really comments. So it became very boring, really." "When they started bringing all the ads, I just got fed up with it. And then you had to scroll through sooo many ads, it wasn't interesting"*, complements Roger. As summarised by Abbie, *"I have it [Facebook] but I don't post on it or anything […] It's kind of dead by now"*. In short, the interviewees rely on social media when they are looking to kill time; yet, sometimes, the platforms feel lifeless. On other occasions, though, the user himself feels dead inside (Lovink 2019), as exemplified by my exchange with Luc:

> ***Q: And how does it feel?***
> *Empty.*
> ***Q: You were empty, or the platform?***
> *I was empty. Like, you're just scrolling for a bit, and someone's posted a photo, someone's got married, someone's got a new car. It's like shit content, it's awful. It probably depends on how I feel. Like, if I'm feeling low then I'm not really gonna see any content that interests me, probably.*

> *Or I'm just like going through it really quickly. But if I am feeling good then I probably will look further, and further, and further, and probably find something that interests me. If I'm feeling pressed, then I think I'm gonna look at everything with tainted eyes.*

That is, a common pattern is that the frustration and the sensation of wasted time manifested by my interviewees seem to be directly associated with the lack of relevant, interesting, or 'attention-worthy' material – which is accentuated by certain moods. I believe this represents another key contradiction: after all, as aforementioned, the participants initially described their use of social media as 'aimless', 'purposeless'; yet, comments that express frustration due to the fact that *"You're just not really getting anything out of what you're doing"* (as said by Iris) suggest that there must be an underlying aim or purpose behind even the most wandering scrolling. In this case, people seem to be chasing "affective sparks" (as Pedwell puts it, 2017a). That is, they want to feel something, *anything*, that gets them involved, even if only fleetingly – and they expect that feeling to be delivered by social media platforms.

Therefore, in addition to the twofold character of distraction – as something that is deliberately sought after but also an undesired consequence of extended exposure – I believe it is possible to identify a third layer in this 'mindless scrolling', in which social media are blamed not for deflecting attention but actually for *"sucking in all your attention"* (as summarised by Joe). Distraction, under these terms, is not the opposite of attention, but rather "a form of promiscuous absorption" (Highmore 2011:134). Going back to the fluvial metaphor used in a previous chapter, a common experience of using social media in the context of everyday life, as discussed in this section, seems to be that people frequently go for a quick, shallow dip, expecting it to be refreshing. They then end up being caught up in the whirlpools and eddies of a polluted, murky glut of content that seems to be leading to nowhere.

7.4 Response-ability: the duty and burden of getting involved

As a solution to overcome distraction and deflect from the pressure for 'getting involved' represented by social media's perceived impending eventfulness, the interviewees mentioned trying out self-regulatory systems: *"I've kind of made it a rule – a self-imposed rule – […] that on the train is my reading time, so I read an actual book. Because I used to mindlessly just scroll and spend all my time, just scrolling and looking at other people's uninteresting posts",* explained Rosie. Still, according to my analysis, there seems to be a widespread perception that continuous connectedness and 'getting involved' are also deeply associated with a sense of duty – with oneself and with others who matter. In this section, I will focus on this issue through

the lens of *response-ability*, or the ability to respond or react to things as they happen, when they happen. As discussed in previous sections, the fear of missing out, and the pressure involved in checking and responding continuously to notifications, is central to the experience of social media as described by the interviewees. However, the participants' common answer to questions about whether they would be able to spend a week without accessing these platforms was that it would not be a problem, as long as they could let specific people know that they would be out of reach. The priority, therefore, is to alert those to whom one has some sense of responsibility. In this section, I explore the particularities of social media's impending eventfulness that is perceived as directly relevant to individual users – not because it is a globally significant occurrence but rather because it meaningfully affects that individual, personally.

I should stress that I am focusing here not necessarily on the professional obligation to remain contactable at all times, which is often said to characterise work-life spillover (Wajcman, Bittman, and Brown 2008) – although that, of course, also happens. As described by Joe, when your colleagues, employers, and clients have access to you through digital technologies, there is *"that pervasive element, that you sometimes can't switch off […] I'm like, nope! From 3.45 I don't exist to you people, leave me alone"*. Yet, it is a more tacit, naturalised sense of responsibility that I am interested in here – namely, the sense that people (particularly, family) expect you to be continuously available and therefore you owe this to them, which is also permeated by the assumption that, at any point, something urgent, unpredictable, or important might happen or is about to break in. The point is illustrated by Sophie:

> *I think a big component of what made me more phone-oriented is that I'm not from the UK, and I've been here only for a few years. So if anything bad happened at home with family, the only way I could get in contact with them is through my phone. It's not like someone can come and get me from work or anything like that. So I always feel like I have to be near my phone in case something happens. I would hate to think that some people turn their phones off for a couple of days, I would hate to turn my phone off for a couple of days, that would be horrible. And I think that's what made me more phone-geared recently. I personally, if I would think about that aspect, I'm very reliant on my phone. Like I couldn't go a week without it, I just couldn't. That's like a long time to be out of touch with people, family mostly.*

In this regard, the permanent pressure of being contactable and able to respond in the moment at all times appeared with great prominence in the interviews – even if respondents admit they too have demanded the same from others in the past: *"It's like, 'where are you? Why aren't you accessible? Are you taking a two-hour shower?' So I do find that annoying, but I have definitely been that person"*, admitted Joe. The need to stay reachable at all times has become so naturalised that it is difficult for the interviewees to imagine being away from their phones

– even those who grew up without such technologies. So, while in the previous sections we discussed the aim of (and, often, the frustrations resultant from) using social media technologies to float across a never-ending pool of content, the experiences examined in this section feel more like knowingly exposing yourself to a continuously pouring (and mostly annoying) drizzle, just in case this precipitation might become torrential.

Not surprisingly, though, it seems that this sense of duty involved in maintaining the ability to react or respond to whatever happens at all times is also marked by gender imbalances. According to my interviewees, men tend to be much less reliable in terms of keeping in touch and replying quickly to messages, which then often prompts them *"to, like, ask their girlfriends or wives why they haven't replied. So the normal expectation is, yes, they would reply instantly, but if they're an asshole they probably won't"*, explained Luc. Interestingly, this unspoken expectation of continuous connectedness and attentiveness works both ways – on the one hand, the interviewees confirmed that they would normally expect people to reply immediately to a message, post, or comment; on the other hand, this compulsory availability often becomes too demanding, a point further exemplified by Anna:

> *I for example, feel like I can't get a holiday from it unless I'm on a holiday. It feels silly, because you can think 'just don't go in it if you don't want to go in it'. But I feel like, if I don't go in it, if I don't go on WhatsApp for, like, two days, I can guarantee that my friends will be like 'what's wrong? What's happened? Are you okay?' So I think that it feels sometimes like a duty. […] Even with friends, if someone messages you, you're like 'oh, I need to reply to them'. It could become a bit like work.*

That is, there is the recognition that although, technically, the easiest solution would be to simply disconnect, in reality the peer pressure to stay always on and constantly actively engaged, as well as the possibility of the silence being misunderstood, usually stops them from doing so. Furthermore, in addition to this permanent responsibility towards others, the informants also manifested a profound sense of duty to themselves, their identities, and their citizenship – namely, the onus of keeping informed about everything, every time. As explained by Simone,

> *It's a bit like a duty, in a sense. I feel like a moral duty to stay in touch with your country and with your relatives. I like to go back and feel like I really haven't lost touch. Or you'd feel like you're suddenly a stranger. It's a bit sad. And there is also the fear of missing out, you know. So I do it because I need, and because I have to.*

Moreover, although I have been claiming that I am interested precisely in the non-eventful, routine experiences with and through media, it is worth mentioning that there seems to be the assumption by the interviewees that we are going through particularly uncertain times – which

in turn contributes to keeping people attached to social media. As put by Simone, *"I think these days… it's crazy. Everything that is happening, and you never know when war is gonna start, if something is gonna happen with Brexit, if Trump will do something […] So politically it's an unstable period, and everything can… things could happen!"* The sense of responsibility, then, seems deeply permeated by predictable uncertainty (Adams et al. 2009), which in turn mobilises people into both embracing and inhabiting unsettledness, and trying to be ready for whatever might come up. As summarised by Adams, Murphy, and Clarke (2009:247), "predictable uncertainty leads to anticipation as an affective state, an excited forward-looking subjective condition characterised as much by nervous anxiety as a continual refreshing of yearning, of 'needing to know'". If, in the social media environment, the 'crisis mode' has been habituated (Chun 2017), it is by checking messages and scrolling infinite feeds of content in the here and now that individuals try to prepare themselves for an imminent, uncertain future.

Yet, sometimes this too becomes burdensome, which prompts users to curate their feeds seeking news avoidance in order to preserve their own wellbeing: *"As I said, sometimes I try to stay away from the news when I'm not in a good emotional state. […] I don't know, I use social media for myself, it's personal and I don't want politics to pollute that"*, said Marjorie. Threading carefully across particular platforms (and deliberately avoiding others), for Marjorie, helps keeping her daily scrolling safe from the disruption of unwanted news – in ensuring that her feeds will be a safe-space, she is constantly pre-empting contamination from world events, and making the extended use of these platforms more bearable.

As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, social media manufacture certain prompts, urgencies, and expectations in order to maintain their own centrality and status as profitable companies. In these processes, anticipation becomes "a moral imperative, a will to anticipate" and of "being ready for" (Adams et al. 2009:254), which is vividly illustrated by the verbalisations presented in this section thus far in particular. In this regard, liveness – experiencing in real-time what is happening, as if you were there or as if it was happening here, and being ready for something to 'break in' any time, all the time – is certainly part of an ideology (Feuer 1983), but it is also crucial to the phenomenological experience of using these platforms daily. In this perpetual nurturing of habituated anticipation and the need for 'getting involved', the result is, often, the tacit responsibilisation of individuals whenever something happens and they are not prepared. As summarised by Simone, *"I don't want to be too surprised, actually. If something happens, I want to have seen it coming".*

We can then conclude that if television – particularly in the occurrence of media events – centralises attention by relying on a sense of universality (Dayan and Katz, 1992; Scannell, 2014), mainstream social media, for the most part, offer a different communicative structure. Here, the uncertainty that attracts and concentrates attention is located not only in the possibility of something 'relevant' eventually happening, but also in the attribution of responsibility to people in actively keeping track of things as they happen, whenever they happen. Once the focus moves from the *extraordinary* to the *ordinary*, the work of 'getting involved' becomes an individual duty.

7.5 Conclusions

I have been arguing that people's relations with social media are profoundly marked by incongruity and contradiction. Throughout this chapter, I deliberately embraced this commitment to ambivalence (Lagerkvist 2017; Paasonen 2021). Relying on these platforms – for duty, but also for pleasure; willingly, but also helplessly – brings a whole set of comforts and discomforts (Beer 2019). As I set out in Chapter 2, the use of social media platforms and mobile phones is often described in the available literature as unfocused and distracted, being characterised by a generally fleeting, peripheral, almost numb attentiveness (Lovink 2019). Yet, I believe my analysis challenges the rigidity of some of these conceptions by foregrounding people's eventually positive, soothing, interested usage, as well as instances of intense, visceral (even if not always deliberate) engagement with these platforms and devices. That is, although social media usage is often characterised by a state of attention suspension, in this chapter I have identified that there are different affective modulations being played out, which results in varying, complex modes of responsiveness, thoughtfulness, and care, which in turn afford diverse experiences of (and reactions to) 'getting involved'.

Distraction, under these terms, is not framed as mere 'inattention' or a deficit of interest, but actually as a complex and manifold mode of attention (Highmore 2011; Paasonen 2016; Markham 2020). That is, distraction is about the disorientation and reorientation of attention, not lack thereof. Distraction, in turn, thanks to its fluctuating, promiscuous character, also permits an "absentminded openness for the unprepared encounter" (Highmore 2011:130), which seems to be at the core of the impending eventfulness and the (often frustrated) anticipation of serendipitous 'happy accidents' (Karppi 2015). In this regard, while the

televised media event is grounded in the centralisation of attention (Dayan and Katz 1992; Scannell 2014) so as to create a communal sense of shared viewership (Bourdon 2000), based on the analysis presented in this chapter I would argue that social media privilege precisely the *centralisation of distraction*, premised on the power of the 'chanced upon' encounter with anything interesting or eventful that provokes affective intensity and reaction. These encounters, thus, do not have to be life-changing – just affectively intense enough to keep people in the flow, in the zone (Schüll 2012), for the next scroll, 'just in case'.

According to Berry (2011, 2017), the structure of the 'stream' has become such a key component of mainstream platforms that being 'part of the stream' has become an end in and of itself. Contributing to this endless flux of content becomes itself a fantasy that animates the use of contemporary media technologies (Dean 2006). Unpacking this fantasy has been a concern for this chapter. And indeed, if mediated liveness provides the feeling that you are part of something with others (Auslander 2012), then in this chapter we can highlight a couple of mechanisms through which this experience is achieved (and also, frequently, frustrated).

Despite the algorithmic personalisation that targets content directly to their past preferences, interviewees manifested a sense of collectivity when exposed to affectively rich, personal views and differing reactions to unfolding narratives. Also, the access to others who are feeling the same as you provides validation and a (mostly fleeting) sense of community and belonging. 'Getting involved' in social media is also deeply permeated by just-in-caseness and habituated anticipation – the expectation that, at any point, something attention-worthy might happen, and that therefore you need to remain connected to the same platforms that, more often than not, make you feel like you are wasting your time, scrolling through endless feeds and skim-reading messages that lead to nowhere.

In this informational environment marked by anticipation, uncertainty, and unsettledness, it is worth recalling that a core aspect of liveness is precisely the potential of imminent risk, the unpredictable, surprise effect, combined with technical immediacy (Scannell, 2014; Frosh and Pinchevski 2018). This possibility for the unprecedented is, as framed by Kember and Zylinska (2012), the key to the 'vitality' of media. Sometimes, the result is thrilling, exhilarating. And, in fact, one should not underestimate the affective function of media – after all, we use these technologies not only to keep informed and to contact others, but also to *feel* in certain ways. The frequent possibility of accessing 'relevant' content, and consequently living interesting

experiences, combined with infinite scrolling and an endless influx of messages and notifications, can be very persuasive in ensuring continuous connectedness, as I have discussed throughout this chapter. Often, though, social media use is more a pursuit for stimulation, for 'the experience', than for a deeper sense of connection.

The expectations created by this fuelled sense of ongoing anticipation, however, are rarely met. As verbalised by the interviewees, the use of social media is not always lively or stimulating – and can, in fact, become tedious, frustrating, exasperating. Firstly, because the incessant (even if initially exciting) attempt to keep track of everything that is going on is never really fulfilled in practice, it often produces anxiety. The content presented in these continuous informational flows, in turn, might give rise to boredom, or even to additional stress and the consequent need for reassurance and careful management of social media exposure. Furthermore, aware of the time and energy they spend on these platforms, participants describe navigating aimlessly and pointlessly through an apparently unceasing river of content that seldom delivers anything noteworthy, attention-grabbing, or remotely interesting. If the televised media event provides the audience with "the 'oceanic' feeling of being immersed in it" (Dayan and Katz 1992:197), then perhaps we could say that social media's impending eventfulness often generates the overflowing feeling of being sunk; of drowning in an endless informational flow.

Moreover, although social media offer access to the world out there that seems tailored to your particular interests – and individualised streams might indeed feel a bit like a solipsistic chamber curated both by the user and by algorithmic recommendations – my analysis suggest that they work, at the same time, to make people aware (and crave the awareness) of others who are going through the same. If, as I have argued in Chapter 3, liveness is 'mediated *as-if-ness'*, then it worth recalling that it is through eventfulness (even if only as potentiality) that media achieve the translation of *as-if-ness* into 'a shared perception of reality' (Dayan and Katz 1992:177) – which, even in today's 'personalisation-based' setting, remains extremely powerful. Finally, it is worth mentioning that these platforms' business models premised on data-driven predictability can only work if users accept and subscribe to this permanent state of predictable uncertainty, and if they feel like checking, scrolling, and engaging constantly, continuously. This is a habit that has to be sustained, and a central resource for its maintenance seems to be the potential immediate connection through media – or, liveness.

Chapter 8

Living in the moment: (im)mediation and the authentic experience

> *"This is tech like it's supposed to be. See that phone? Nothing. Earphones? Nothing. Watch? Computer? Nothing. Tech that improves our lives without getting in the way of it. This has always been the dream. Yet somehow, when we finally could fit tech in the palm of our hands, we were more walled in than ever. More screens, more devices, all just piling up. But, as we slowly learned, there is power in less. Instead of scaling up, we scaled down. Layer by layer, pixel by pixel. Until we were left with the essentials. Tech that looks, feels, and lives like nothing".*

This might at first sound like a quote from Black Mirror, but it is the verbatim transcript of a minute-long advertisement released during the writing of this chapter. The ad, which displays bucolic landscapes and close-up frames of people walking barefoot on wildflower fields, introduces *Nothing*,[14] a self-proclaimed "London-based consumer technology company" funded through resources from Google Ventures and investments from Silicon Valley entrepreneurs such as the chief executive of Reddit and the co-founder of Twitch. Their mission, according to the ad, is "to remove barriers between people and technology to create a seamless digital future", claiming that "technology should fade into the background and feel like nothing". Nothing's primary business, it turns out, is the selling of 'smart' hardware. The discourse, though, is quite emblematic of a key tension in the development of media: when dreams of expanded experience – of reaching the world beyond our bodily constraints – meet the historical desire for technological transparency and perceptual seamlessness. This tension is what this final empirical chapter is about.

So far, I have been examining empirically how key attributions of 'the live' – the sense of 'real-time', 'being there', 'getting involved in a shared experience'– are manifested, negotiated, and contested in the context of habitual social media. This final empirical chapter focuses on what I see as the remaining core dimension of liveness – namely, the correspondence of whatever is experienced through technical mediation with an alleged 'real', authentic experience. After all, key to different articulations of liveness is the promised access to reality as it happens (Bourdon

[14] https://nothing.tech/

2000; Couldry 2004). Social media, in turn, constantly claim to offer 'authentic experiences' by prompting users to 'be themselves' and 'live in the moment'.

It should be noted that the term 'authenticity' has multiple and contested formulations. When it comes to phenomenology, perhaps the most influential version is Heidegger's (2008) conception of inauthenticity as the common mode of existence of being-in-the-world with others – for which a "total authentic existence cannot be achieved" (Mansbach 1991:81). In this chapter, though, I embrace a less metaphysical and more practical understanding of authenticity; based mostly on the works of Scannell (2000, 2014), Grazian (2018), and Hochschild (1983), I am conceiving of the 'authentic' as that which is perceived as genuine, real (even if requiring a lot of mediative work to be concretised). From the standpoint of mediated liveness, then, the authentic experience is that which is perceived as a *direct* engagement with what is *really* happening. That is, the starting point of this chapter is the consideration that liveness, in its different manifestations or 'constellations' (van Es 2016) is generally a value-loaded attribute – and, often, these values reinforce the promise and pursuit of an 'authentic experience' through the reproduction of certain reality claims despite the presence of technological intervention (Scannell 2014).

Bearing this in mind, in this chapter I will explore the contradictions between the dualist claim to 'live in the moment' that, on the one hand, positions technical mediation as something undesired that would defile the 'pure', immediate experience of the 'here and now' and, on the other hand, the fact that social media often promise us a better, enhanced version of our own experiences (Beer 2019). I will also identify the limits and shortcomings of 'liveness' as a concept for the characterisation of some of the common experiences in the social media environment, whilst arguing that, nonetheless, the term still matters and is of continuing importance to the field of media studies. In this thesis – and, even more explicitly so, in this particular chapter – liveness is seen less as intrinsically attached to media formats that would be traditionally referred to as 'live' in and of themselves, and more as emergent, contingent experiences resultant from continuously evolving "ways of coordinating communications and bodies across time and space" (Couldry 2004:357).

Over the following sections, I will discuss the struggles and contradictions that emerge from the interviewees' positions regarding the possibilities of living in the moment both in spite of and because of technology – and examine the disconnection-based strategies mentioned by

them. I should clarify, though, that I am less interested here in disconnection as a moral choice driven by an assumed neo-Luddite (Jones 2006) 're-enchantment' with a world free from technical intervention (Sutton 2017) and more in its phenomenological premises grounded in the historical desire for technological transparency (Ihde 1990; Bolter and Grusin 2000). That is, phenomenologically, it is expected that media will simultaneously increment or magnify our access to the world, be transparent to allow scrutiny of its inner operation, and withdraw or recede from our perception so that we can properly *live in the moment*.

It is also worth clarifying that, beyond the phenomenological canon, 'authenticity' has become a widely employed – and increasingly commodified (Banet-Weiser 2012) – term which can refer to "a variety of desirable traits: credibility, originality, sincerity, naturalness, genuineness, innateness, purity, or realness" (Grazian 2018:168). It is, as defined by Grazian, (2018:169), a performed, fabricated "social construct with moral overtones". If indeed the myth of authenticity is constructed through the legitimation of certain values and their attribution to particular practices or symbols (Ibid.), and considering that the pursuit of authenticity is in itself paradoxical (Hochschild 1983), then the underlying argument that frames this chapter is that immediacy – as in the (apparent) void of mediation – constitutes one of these key attributes when it comes to mediated communications.

The discussion developed over the next pages is supported by the literature review and conceptual framing presented in Chapter 3, which argued that promises of liveness are always underpinned by claims of truth, and of trust. To designate a mediated experience as 'live' generally implies that it is to some extent raw, unplanned, unscripted and, consequently, relatively devoid of intervention, 'unmediated'. The practical association between the mediated 'live' and the 'authentic', therefore, can be anchored in attributes such as transparency (the direct experience), seamlessness (the perfectly consistent experience, with no perceptible problems), truthfulness (the experience that is faithful to what it claims to be), and improvisation (the unplanned, and therefore unpredictable and open-ended experience). As I will demonstrate in this chapter, technical mediation is often understood by the participants as representing a fundamental obstacle to the concretisation of those reality claims – a tension that, I posit, deepens, rather than debunks, the relevance of liveness as an object of study.

I argue that this is still a key discussion for media scholarship, as the perception of mediated communication as 'essentially inauthentic' is a longstanding and continuously updating one

(Markham 2020). Likewise, for phenomenology, the topic represents a crucial matter of interest, as these historically purist conceptions ultimately consider the body as a unique, transparent carrier of meaning and intention (Peters 2000) – a translucence that is invariably tainted by technological interference. In short, this chapter is concerned with if, when, and how certain types of mediated experience can be *authenticated* – perceived as 'real', meaningful, fulfilling – and what this means for our possibilities of accessing and living in the social world with and through habitual social media.

8.1 Fabricating the authentic: on social media's invariable unrealness

Historically, media industries operationalise notions of 'realness' and 'authenticity' in order to advance their own commercial interests. Social media platforms, in prompting users to 'be themselves' and 'live in the moment' whilst simultaneously orchestrating the experiential through sophisticated data-sorting and recommendation systems, are making more explicit the paradox that is at the heart of 'the authentic': the combination of the spontaneous and the formulaic (Ngai 2005; Chun 2021). That is, the 'authentic' is, simultaneously, something that has to be cultivated, manufactured, and yet perceived as natural, organic, genuine (Hochschild 1983). In the literature on liveness, this contradiction is usually examined through the exposure of the 'care structures' (Scannell 2014) of mediation, in which media industries are said to make systematic use of indexes of authenticity to evoke (that is, produce) a sense of 'reality'.

Appropriating van Es's (2016) framework based on the articulations between users, technologies, and institutions, we could say that, at least when it comes to television, the latter were generally the ones responsible for most of those prescriptions (such as handheld footage, direct address, informal tone, and so on). In the social media environment, however, the novelty is that the management of reality claims and the formulas to meet them depends not only on institutionalised producers, but also – and perhaps more importantly – on other users (who, often, are also content creators) and on the perceived agency of the technology itself (van Es 2016). This, in turn, has profound consequences for what is (and what is not) perceived as an 'authentic experience'. In this first section, I examine the struggle for 'the authentic' from the perspective of trust, emphasising how the access to unfolding social realities as they happen that is at the core of liveness (Bourdon 2000; Couldry 2004) is in practice threatened by social media's perceived partiality, deceit, and manipulation.

When it comes to the role of other users in crafting and evoking a sense of authenticity, social media are heavily condemned by my interviewees for not being representative of 'real life'. Their conception of 'the real', therefore, is not compatible with an edited, perfect portrayal of everyday life. The 'truth' or 'reality' is conceived as essentially messy and improvisational, which is unfit for the curated, managed character of mainstream platforms – an opinion that is illustrated by Roger: *"Everything needs to be nice, precise, and perfect. And that is not the truth! […] With photos, some of the photos are glamourised. But the ones I love are just spontaneous. It's about the truth"*. The 'truth', then, is supposed to 'just be', without any external intervention, curation, or framing.

The imbricated relationship between social media and self-presentation is a prolific topic of scholarship (boyd and Heer 2006; DiMicco and Millen 2007; Papacharissi 2012; Wu et al. 2020). Even though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to develop an extended discussion on identity management, it is worth mentioning that underlying these ideas manifested by my interviewees seems to be the conception that each one of us has our own essential and relatively fixed self – "their own real and true (in short, authentic) self which they must nurture and fulfil, and this 'self-fulfilment', not in a hedonistic but in an ethical sense becomes a moral obligation and duty" (Scannell 2000:406). In this conception, this 'authentic' self is disrupted or tainted by technology – either through strategic curation and self-presentation or through algorithmic (mis)categorisation. Such concern is manifested by Iris, who claims that only platforms such as WhatsApp can convey authenticity *"because you're talking to the people directly rather than them fabricating something that they want you to see or think of them"*. Under this conception, while a conversation is taken as an honest, straightforward interaction, platforms like Facebook or Instagram are *"just all about the image that you're putting up to everyone rather than who you actually are as a person"*, as further defined by Alyssa.

In the social media environment, in addition to the potential for deception represented by users' willingness to carefully control their image, as discussed above, another perceived 'threat' to the authentic experience is represented by the platforms' technical emphasis on the individual. In this regard, whilst in the previous chapters the 'personal viewpoint' afforded by social media was praised by the interviewees as a source of authentic, 'flavourful' reports of what happens remotely – in other words, as faithful sources of truth – subjective accounts and algorithmic intervention are also perceived as potentially deceitful, and become worthy of scepticism and suspicion. As explained by Paul, *"The question is how you can trust the information that you*

are getting now. Because, I mean, these days, I think people tend to present the information starting from their point of view, and then just presenting facts that fit their narrative, not being entirely honest and truthful".

Crucially, as further elaborated by Iris, social media are intrinsically and invariably partial in their portrayal of the world and its happenings: *"I think they can give you sometimes a bit of a sense, but I don't think they're a good representation of the world as a whole".* A similar pattern is exemplified by Roger, who criticises social media for their inherent incapacity for conveying 'the full picture': *"You can only see a part of the story, from one point of view. But you won't be able to see the whole thing until you have an interaction, face to face, or at least with voice, with an impartial party. Same with the news, or with photos. […] There's completely different stories behind everything"*. It is worth pointing out, however, that this asserted partiality is not necessarily unique to social media – indeed, these critiques tend to be repeated in reference to every emergent medium (Ellis 2000; Peters 2001), and therefore are perhaps more fittingly attributed to the very nature of mediation.

In the social media environment, then, we have the updated version of those concerns. If we acknowledge that in using social media one's selfhood is also constructed and negotiated with the technical artefacts themselves (Kant 2020), then another potential threat to the fulfilment of social media's reality claims is represented by 'the algorithm'. Algorithmic recommendation – although frequently commended by the interviewees for its convenience, as I have already discussed – is also perceived as biased, partial, and untruthful, especially by those respondents who manifest a better grasp of the commercial interest behind these processes of content curation. As explained by Alyssa, *"they do have an algorithm that is supposed to keep you as addicted to the platform as possible, so it doesn't matter if what they show you is true or accurate. […] So I don't trust these platforms, I don't think they have my best interest in mind"*. That is, the version of the world one can access through social media is always fractional and biased, despite discourses of enhanced experience and organic filtering mechanisms.

Due to this perceived curated, manipulated, biased character, social media seem associated with a fictionalised, dramatised version of reality. As declared by Alyssa, *"I know that it's through social media, it's not real"*. As discussed in Chapter 5, the interviewees are usually at least partially aware of the operation of the systems of content selection, curation, and presentation employed by the platforms. In exploring the topic of subjectivity and self-

knowledge, the participants manifested suspicion towards algorithmic systems' ability to really and truly know what they want to see, when they want to see it – as further elaborated by Alyssa in her critique of Instagram:

> *I don't trust just how the platform is built to show you certain content. I trust that it probably knows me very well, but I don't trust that it shows me everything I want to see. So, however they track the content that I want to see, whether that's hashtags, or things I like, people I follow... yeah. So I know they have that information but also, like, that to me is separate. Like, fitness, food, hobbies, are separate from the news I want to find out. They are just two separate parts of it.*

This supports the theorisation of epistemic uncertainties and struggles for autonomy in algorithmic media provided by Kant (2020). Indeed, the relationship between users and the algorithms that orchestrate their social media experiences is extremely ambivalent and contradictory. In trying to 'guess' what you deeply, intimately want to see next, algorithmic systems also shape and frame our desires and needs; likewise, in determining "who we are, they also make us more materially aware of our own individuality" (Horning 2020). Such a perspective is corroborated by Iris, who recognises that Instagram, for instance, *"knows how long I spend on it, it knows when I spend time on it, it knows what I post, what I spend most time looking at"*. Still, she continues, *"there's also the element that we can never be a 100% certain, you can predict but you can't be exactly right"*.

My assessment is that what both the perceived issues of self-presentation and of algorithmic (mis)categorisation bring about is the suggestion that, for the interviewees, there is, deep down, a true, relatively fixed authentic self, and that people know who they really are – any misrepresentation, therefore, results from either purposeful, deceitful self-portrayal by the person, or limited, superficial curation by the platforms. This, of course, is not accidental: the conditions of connection of our contemporary media environment presume that each of us has an authentic self, composed of an identifiable set of values that can then be appropriated and manipulated to meet the platforms' commercial interests (Frischmann and Selinger 2018). In the case of social media, from a politico-economical perspective, the 'authentic' is the shortcut to the predictable (Chun 2021). And yet, as we have seen, the issues of self-presentation, individual perspectivism, and algorithmic filtering are perceived by the interviewees as largely unfaithful – which damages the trust needed to establish the 'contract' (Bourdon 2000) between media and their audiences and fulfil expectations of authenticity. That is, the fundamental belief that whatever you are getting access to through mediation is actually, *really* happening.

8.2 Seeing through the eyes of the phone: mediation as sensorial obstruction

The association between liveness and authenticity, however, is arguably less explicitly dependent on matters of self-presentation or identity management, and more on the expected correspondence between what is *perceived* and *'the real'*; on a claimed *direct* access to what is happening outside of the mediation situation. Traditionally – and especially when it comes to the explorations of 'the live' in the field of performance studies (Phelan 1993) – the a priori authentic, immediate experience is taken to be disrupted or tainted by technological interference. In this section, I explore the participants' expectation that social media would afford direct, and hence 'authentic' experiences. In practice, as I will demonstrate, this expectation is frequently frustrated by these technologies' perceived incapacity for providing fulfilling embodied, sensorial, 'direct' access to the social world.

Indeed, my interviewees' verbalisations suggest that social media are often experienced not only as partial, biased, and constrictive (as explored in the previous section) but also as detaching and isolating, in which technological mediation is framed as a 'barrier' between you and 'real life'. The point is illustrated by Rosie, who seemed to have a particularly strong view on the potential sensorial insulation provoked by mobile social media:

> *Sometimes when travelling I look out the window to check the scenery, and I look around and no one is looking. Even on the train platform, it's literally a nation of zombies. Even on the lift, everyone is on their phones. And I'm like, 'oh my god, what's happening to us?' Everybody is looking at this rectangular thing and, I mean, I do the same. And all my banking, it's this [taps on the phone with her fingers]. And it's pretty sad, I think. From my perspective, what's happened to humans that we are all sitting there in our bubbles looking at a rectangular piece of… thing.*

This description of 'a nation of zombies' reiterates one of the key points discussed in the previous chapter – the understanding that if you are focused on your phone, you are not really alive, you are just mindlessly scanning through pointless content. When prompted to explain why exactly she finds this so sad, Rosie said: *"you're missing a glorious scenery, you're not appreciating the change of scenery, you know. I've seen an amazing sunset on my way home from the train window. And I think, 'oh my god, it's amazing' – then I look around and no one is seeing. I think it's these little things that people are missing out"*. That is, when attention is focused on technology, people are missing out on 'real life' itself: *"People are too focused on their phones and what's going on inside this device, as opposed to what's actually around you, in the actual world"*, agreed Luc. Technologies (and, presumably, the experiences afforded by them), under such a conception, are not 'of' the world; they are rather an obstruction between the body and 'the real'. It is worth pointing out that these sentences notably reproduce what

Davison (1983) termed 'the third-person effect', which hypothesises that people tend to both overestimate the influence of media technologies on others and at the same time underestimate their own susceptibility to these same effects.

Even if the issue highlighted originates in media discourse, key to my arguments is understanding that it is intrinsically a phenomenological problem: in expanding our phenomenal field, technology also encloses it. Digital technology, so frequently praised for its connective capacities, is blamed by the interviewees for its potential to cause sensorial insulation. The bottom line here is the struggle between the use of social media platforms to access remote experiences and give distant others a taste of what one is experiencing (as discussed at length in the previous empirical chapters), and the concern that, due to these same technologies and affordances, people are missing the opportunity to experience the 'here and now' of their lives. Ultimately, though, as explained by Syverstsen and Enli (2019), a crucial component of this discussion is the historical conception of 'the digital' as a separate dimension of reality, in which 'the offline' is then praised for its assumed pure, immaculate character. My findings confirm the stickiness of this separation, and yet my phenomenologically informed approach offers new insights by emphasising the embodied dimensions of this dispute marked by perceived sensorial obstruction.

When it comes to comparing the experiences one has with and through social media and those that are perceived as 'non-mediated', a common pattern is the characterisation of the former as a bleak, hollower version of the latter. In this conception, social media is always a poorer substitution for the 'real' experience: *"And you're not appreciating the moment you're in, you're just interested in what's happening on your phone",* reiterated Rosie. The problem then, as described by her, is that in dedicating attention to social media people confine themselves: *"you're not actually experiencing things. You're looking through your entire life behind one of these [picks up her phone]. It's always the first thing in your line of vision, and anything else that is happening around you is secondary".*

Social media, therefore, even when explicitly claiming to offer 'liveness' (as in, for instance, live-streaming applications), are still no more than *"seeing through the eyes of the phone"*, as characterised by Lewis. If, as argued by Scannell (2001), for the self to have an authentic experience it needs to be able to appropriate this experience and claim it as its own, social

media's incapacity for authenticity seems also heavily related to their status of inevitable second-handedness; the screen and the camera, even if placed really close to our faces, can never perceive for our senses, and feel for our physical bodies. What this suggests is that the technological artefact walls us in and impedes our direct access to an intrinsically more fulfilling and authentic embodied experience – a point that is further illustrated by Roger:

> *We made kind of a little experiment, last year. So I took [my kids] to this lake that I used to go when I was younger, and I knew there wasn't going to be reception. And all of a sudden, they're around me, like they used to when they were little kids, and they were talking and everything. And I was like 'I love it'. This is the kind of detox I wanted. Like, you've got people here, just enjoy it. Like, enjoy the company you have now. And you're going to find a different experience, a different way of seeing life, without all this technology. And they did. For a time, they enjoyed it. But then as soon as we got back, they went on their phones and all the messages came through [laughter].*

Technical mediation, here, is assumed to provide a different (and, presumably, worse) way of 'seeing life'. Appropriating Ihde's (1990) conception of technology, I want to reiterate here that in the context of everyday life, social media should be understood as both *means* and *objects* of experience. This distinction is not always clear or identifiable in the verbalisations provided by my interviewees, which to me suggests that these perceptual stances vary messily and unpredictably in ordinary engagements with these platforms. Still, mobile social media seem generally taken by the participants in my research as a 'lens' that is between your body and the world, and which, when taken as the means to an experience, frames, distorts, and impoverishes your apprehension of 'reality'; when taken as the object of experience, it deflects your attention, undermining 'actual connection' – *"it can just take away from actually enjoying the moment. It draws away from whatever you're doing"*, said Iris.

If, as argued by Bolter and Grusin (2000), a less naïve conception of immediacy commits not necessarily to a magical correspondence between the representation and the represented but rather to the broader "belief in some necessary contact point between the medium and what it represents" (p.30), then a key tension is that mediation – the fact that there is a technical object *in the middle* of your otherwise direct experience of the 'real' – is generally perceived as inherently corruptive. The only solution to experience 'the live' proper – and to feel *alive* – according to my interviewees, is to disconnect.

8.3 Staying (a)live: disconnection and the idealised immediate experience

In contrast, there seems to be the underlying assumption that non-mediated experiences, interactions, and events are self-evident, sensorially rich, devoid of deceit and, therefore, essentially authentic – a trope that is actually very common when it comes to interpersonal

mediated communications (Baym 2015; Turkle 2011). Under this view, face-to-face encounters and first-hand witnessing are conceived as if through them meaning was always smoothly and linearly conveyed, which in turns erases the need for interpretation. Mediation, in turn, is assumed to be a fabrication that is inherently corruptive of this 'pure' association.

This idea that mediated experiences are poorer, less authentic versions of 'real' experiences often drives people into self-regulatory practices of technological disconnection (Jorge 2019). In this section, I will delve deeper into the widespread idea that the use of social media is perceived as an alienating disconnection from life itself and, consequently, that it is only through disconnection from digital technologies that people feel *alive*. As previously clarified, I am less interested here in the moral prerogatives that drive these practices of (temporary) disconnection, which are usually based on an assumed re-enchantment with a world free from technical intervention (illustrated by the motto 'disconnect to reconnect') (Sutton 2017). My focus, instead, is on the (frustrated) historical desire for perceptual seamlessness and technological transparency, in which media are blamed for their incapacity to recede from perception and to provide a genuine, pure access to the social world – which, I have been arguing, has deep phenomenological underpinnings.

According to my interviewees, 'to live in the moment' generally means enjoying one's life and surroundings without intervention, to feel present in the present, focusing on the here and now without worrying about the past or the future. In this regard, using social media – contrary to platforms' institutional rhetoric – is seen as a potential threat to this sought-after state of mindfulness. This point is exemplified by Arthur, who deliberately switches his mobile phone to airplane mode when trying to enjoy a long hike in the countryside: *"For most of the walk, I kept my phone on airplane mode but used it to take photos to post later on Instagram […] I enjoyed having chosen proactively to be away from my phone and social media, but also looked forward to posting my pictures at a later date"*. Intrigued by this contradiction between temporary disconnection for the enjoyment of the here and now and yet anticipating sharing the pictures taken there and then on social media, I prompted him to elaborate:

> *Let me start again. I, rather than going through and deciding which notifications to turn off... I think it's like when I go on holiday, I think it's good to go through and turn some notifications off for particular apps, but just for a day I'm not going to do that, because it's too much faff. It's a shortcut to that, to just put it on airplane mode. […] So that's why I would put it onto airplane mode. You know, it's the weekend, maybe I get some funny messages from friends, or maybe they suggest doing something that evening and it would be good to get those, but actually, if I'm out in nature getting some exercise, enjoying the views, I don't want to be interrupted from doing that.*

As demonstrated by the long quotation above, the core justification for this act of temporary disconnection is the alleged interruptive character of digital technologies. In this conception, social media require a certain type of (continuous, even if fleeting) attention that jeopardises the appreciation of the moment one is in. The fact that Arthur confirmed that he was not only taking pictures during the walk but also looking forward to sharing them with those who were not there confirms once again the contradictory, ambivalent relationship between users and technologies – and between people and the others to whom they can connect thanks to technologies. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that when asked about situations in which they would deliberately opt for disconnection from social media, the respondents would usually offer an example containing the very same tropes used by the advertisement mentioned in the opening of this chapter: outdoorsy, bucolic scenes, in which the contrast between 'nature' and 'technology' is heavily emphasised. 'Authentic experience', then, seems deeply entangled with the discourse of tech companies, and the loss of humanity that they claim to remedy.

As previously discussed, the participants seem to associate technical mediation with an inevitable second-handedness. In this regard, another motivation for disconnection is the chase for the first-hand experience, without intervention: *"Just watch it with your own eyes, as it's happening. Because you've got that barrier, that thing. So I find it pretty sad that people are like in this fake world they've created [for] themselves"*, justified Rosie. Disconnecting from social media, then, is framed as beneficial and rewarding: *"so really, it felt good to be away from screens and simply catch up with 'tangible' life"*, mentioned Simone in her diary. When prompted to elaborate on what she meant by 'tangible' life, she said: *"being in front of each other at the same place, at the same time […] Not having to wait for the other one to reply to connect, not having to touch your phone. Just share the moment"*.

Key here, therefore, is the understanding of immediacy – the direct access to the social world – as a crucial component for a fulfilling, authentic experience. Social media, whilst promising (and to some extent delivering) instant, borderless connections to remote places, happenings, and people, are blamed for causing a detachment from actual life. I have previously offered an analysis that foregrounded isolation or social insularity – the disconnection from your surroundings, environments, and whatever happens in them; here, however, I want to point out that social media use is also said to generate a sort of alienation effect from one's own embodied living being. As described by Anna, *"I feel like I'm just not in the moment, half of*

your brain is actually concerned with what other people are doing, and keeping up to date". Social media, then, becomes an obstacle for one's own sense of aliveness. This echoes Frischmann and Selinger's conceptualisation that, whilst making technologies part of our habitual lived experience, we are being continuously invited to "dissociate from our physicality and objectify our bodies as mere commodities" (2018:32). Importantly, though, this alleged capacity of social media for occluding affective intensity is also heavily contingent on emotional states and moods – and so is one's willingness to disconnect from them: *"I go through phases where if I'm really living in the moment I won't post on social media, and my messages will build up, and I won't really use it. […] but now that I'm working, single, it's rainy so I can't go outside and do anything, I would probably be 'absolutely not'"*, assessed Sophie.

In this section, I have focused on certain tactics of temporary disconnection to explore the tensions between the mediated experience and the idealised immediate experience, which in turn is said to be marked by authenticity. The pursuit of authenticity is, as discussed by Hochschild (1983), contradictory in itself – if something is genuine, organic, natural, then it should not have to be chased, cultivated, and sought after, it should just 'be'. Yet, and perhaps as a backlash to the appropriation and commodification of authenticity (Banet-Weiser 2012), there seems to be a widespread idea that people should feel better – more in touch with themselves and with the world – when they are deprived of technological intervention. If the habitual reliance (often labelled as dependency or addiction) on social media is attributed to their convenience and the perks of personalisation, then gaining independence from them seems heavily premised on this purist conception of a world that appears to be immediate.

With this in mind, I believe it is possible to advance and reformulate our discussion about the 'authentic experience' – which is seen here, as I have posited, as a key component or dimension of liveness (Peters 1999; Scannell 2014). Whilst in previous empirical chapters I offered evidence for the meaningfulness of experiences with and of social media (even if their significance is still rooted in the habitual and the ordinary), the articulations discussed above in this chapter unveil a different layer of complexity. They demonstrate how the participants reproduce the longstanding separation between the mediated and the non-mediated and the conception of the former as an inherently and inescapably impoverished version of the latter – which has mainly been explored in research on interpersonal interactions (Turkle 2011), digital dualism (Jurgensen 2019) and disconnection (Syverstsen and Enli 2019; Sutton 2017).

Crucially, in the verbalisations examined above, participants seem to conceive of technologically mediated experiences as non-experiences or, at best, pseudo-experiences. As diagnosed by Heyes (2020), not every action is considered productive enough to constitute an 'experience'. In this regard, my analysis suggests that social media use – in its idleness, banality, everydayness – is generally conceived by the participants as either dispossessed of existential significance or as an explicit impediment to more fulfilling experiences. In foregrounding this perceived loss, the interviewees are highlighting a failure to experience – the social world, but also their own sense of selfhood – due to the very nature of mediation. The threat posed by social media is, then, the potential constraint on our capacity *to experience*.

From a phenomenological standpoint, however, "mediatised forms are as generative of the real as what they are said to be displacing" (Markham 2020:11). Indeed, agreeing with the participants and accepting that experiences of and with social media are intrinsically non- or pseudo-experiences would contradict all the findings presented in this thesis thus far: as I have demonstrated through the empirical analysis over four chapters, people actually describe a range of experiential arrangements – which have somatic, affective, emotional, existential dimensions – with these technologies (even if they are often more banal and ordinary than eventful and extraordinary).

Bringing the discussion back to the matter of liveness – which is, ultimately, the central concern of this monograph – it is worth reiterating the hindrances represented by technical mediation as explored in this chapter thus far. For the concretisation of transparency, mediation brings the obstacle of perceived (and imagined) technical interference; for seamlessness, it brings bulky devices and interfaces that do not go unnoticed and their resultant sensorial constraints; for truthfulness, it brings the threat of deception – represented both by other users who are now content producers and by profit-oriented platforms and their opaque technical operation; for improvisation, it brings programmability and overly curated self-presentation.

The identification of those drawbacks can, I suggest, be used to support and deepen our appreciation of why liveness (still) matters. As a concept, and in its different manifestations (and theoretical iterations), mediated liveness encompasses precisely the fundamental contradictory stance on the 'real' and the 'fabricated' (Scannell 2014; van Es 2016), the spontaneous and the formulaic (Ngai 2005; Chun 2021), the 'authentic' and the 'mediated' (Peters 2001). For 'the live' proper to be materialised, we would need the constraints listed

above to be concealed, taken for granted, or actively overlooked through suspension of disbelief (Bourdon 2000). While sometimes people get caught up in the sense and/or desire for liveness – as demonstrated in previous chapters – and thus subscribe (even if only partially) to social media's reality claims, in the instances discussed in this chapter they seem all too aware of the mediative work involved to accept promises of mediated immediacy.

8.4 Reality check: social media and conditions of imaginability

Throughout this thesis, I have been exploring the experiences people have with and through social media platforms in the context of everyday life. Due to their habitual status, the use of these technologies seems so engrained in people's routines that it is hard to conceive of a world devoid of them, at least for extended periods of time. In this section, I will dive into the interviewees' suggested alternatives to solve the issues identified and discussed above, and their ideas for what a better, more fulfilling, meaningful, and sensorially engrossing mediascape could look like. Ironically (or fittingly), the solution offered for the perceived problems caused by technologies – namely, a loss of authenticity, humanity, and connection with our real selves and the real world – is delegated to newer, better technologies.

Perhaps precisely because their use of social media platforms is habitual, the interviewees find it hard to imagine or conceive of a world without them. Even those who have very clear memories of a pre-Facebook existence seem now stuck in the inevitability narrative so often foregrounded by the Silicon Valley ideology: *"I mean, how did we survive 20 years ago? As kids, how did we survive? It's just unbelievable, we didn't have this technology and we coped very well. Whereas now you think you need to be contactable at all times"*, pondered Rosie. Yet, the participants acknowledge that if their attachment to these technologies is no more than a habit, they can employ tactics of self-regulation to grow out of it: *"It's a habit. I think if I put myself out of the habit then… it's just a habit, it's not something that I really need to know what's going on. I could easily get out of the habit, I think"*, assessed Rosie.

Amongst the suggestions to help in this disconnection crusade, a prominent one is the incorporation of screen-time monitors (which have now been adopted by mainstream platforms such as Instagram) so that people can be more conscious of their usage practices and thus exercise their self-control: *"Having like a timer that you'd see either live on the app – say, on Instagram – like a stopwatch of how long you've been looking at it. […] I'd like to think that*

people would take that on board and maybe reconsider how much time they spend on it. But also that could easily be ignored", suggested Lewis. Once again, the responsibility for overcoming the alleged addictive character of technologies is transferred to the individual.

And yet, we might ask: what else could be done? If we are so unhappy with the threat that these artefacts and companies pose to the possibility of our having a happy, fulfilling, authentic existence, then how can we fix it? As put by Haupt (2020), imaginaries and projections of the future are embedded with desirable values, which help the orientation, organisation, and enactment of reality in the present. Therefore, although this is a project centrally interested in the present – in the 'here and now' – during the interviewing process my last few questions were usually about these exercises of imagination. I asked: what would you change? What will the future of social media be? Is there a future in sight without them? If futurism is an "inherently speculative exercise" in which possibilities and necessities are easily conflated (Frischmann and Selinger 2018:41), I thought, then the predictions and suggestions of the interviewees might offer an insight into their perceptions of the current social media environment, its potential and shortcomings.

Overall, the participants declared being generally satisfied with social media as they are, or not bothered enough to ever consider alternative forms of sociality, even if they spend many hours each day interacting with these technologies – perhaps once again proving the naturalised, engrained embeddedness of these platforms in everyday life. Strikingly, then, despite the many complaints, reservations, and criticisms explored in these pages, most interviewees manifested a complete lack of imaginativeness: *"I'm pretty happy. Just happy to go with the flow"*, said Abbie, a point that is echoed by Rosie:

> *I've never thought about it. I've never thought about what I'd like to change. Most things, for my purposes, are easy to do. I think in the grand scheme of things, I don't use… [her phone rings. She says, 'there you go' and laughs]. I never actually thought about it. And you will probably find that most people my age are probably using it less than someone in their 20s. So my expectations of it, or what I want it to do, are probably not as heavy as with young people. I'm quite content with what I can do. I can send messages, I can see pictures, I can keep up to date. That's fine for me.*

There were, of course, cases in which the participant manifested concern over current topics such as privacy issues, misinformation, datafication and surveillance, although they could not think of changes that would aim to tackle or inhibit them. Crucially, though, is that when there was a glimpse of imagination of what an alternative social media could be, it was usually focused not on their business models or exploitative characters – but rather on a perceived

experiential annoyance. By far, the most common suggestion was to reduce the amount of advertising – as put by Arthur, *"Sometimes I think they give us too many ads, too much rubbish"*. Monica echoes the suggestion, adding a new one: *"One thing that I would definitely try and change would be to not have as many ads, to limit the amount of ads. Also, I would try to make things chronological again. Like, in the order that they come in, because I think it is better"*. Another common proposition was the elimination of filters so that people would have to show their 'real' selves, as put by Joe: *"I would insist that you couldn't filter photographs on Instagram. There's a deception behind it, I think. […] The culture of Instagram is to curate yourself out there"*. The participants' suggestions for improving current social media, therefore, would generally comprise the toning down of their mediative work.

More relevant to the aims of this chapter, then, is the heavily techno-solutionist tone adopted by many of the interviewees when proposing ways to solve the social problems allegedly caused by social media. As I have been discussing over the last few pages, a key component of the experience of using social media seems to be its contrast to an assumed pure, authentic, immediate reality. Interestingly, though, the respondents' suggested solutions for social media's asserted incapacity to deliver 'actual', immediate experiences are even more 'mediative', such as mood-tailored recommendation, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) devices, and holograms – which are, strikingly, considered 'more personal':

> *I would try and create something that was actually beneficial, certainly for young people. Something that would be tailored to their mood, or more tailored to what they're feeling and what they're doing. And it would then provide them with useful information rather than just crap about whatever rubbish they're looking at, like Instagram is. Something that is beneficial but has the same effect on you that makes you want to come back and keep looking, keep scrolling through it. It would need to have that hook that draws you into it. Something that was tailored to you but beneficial for either mental health, or perhaps fitness, anything that Instagram does but in a more positive way. Information could be provided by doctors, or fitness professionals, but it would be tailored to individuals, curated and that allows you to choose what you want to see, and how you want to see.*

In the quotation above, Iris suggests that it is through better systems of content curation, sorting, and presentation that social media could deliver better experiences to their users. Under this view, the problem with platformisation is not necessarily in the opacity of the algorithmic recommendation itself (which is what the push for 'transparency' often tries to address), but rather the fact that the content recommended is not usually valuable or positive for the end user. There is, as well, a clear demand here for more control – so that people can choose what they want to have access to. Underlying this suggestion is the assumption that improved technology would ultimately be able to fully anticipate and understand what one feels and

wants, therefore tailoring 'the right content' at the right time – which is precisely what Facebook currently claims to do (Bucher 2020, 2021).

Furthermore, and as another manifestation for this idea that hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin 2000) and tailoring are the solution to provide (experiential) immediacy, the next step for digital communication technologies, according to my interviewees, is the emphasis on sensorially richer media: *"like, this proper virtual reality that you can customise… but that, you know, in the future"*, suggested Paul. That is, whereas mobile phones and platforms such as Instagram and Facebook are condemned for their insulating and alienating capacities, VR headsets and holographic technologies receive a much more optimistic treatment, as exemplified by Roger's enthusiastic suggestion:

> *Holograms! It's more personal. You can see them on the phone, but it's still a 2D dimension. But seeing something that you can participate or feel part of it. Actually, virtual reality – imagine having a phone call in virtual reality! You can still see the person, you could go around it. It would be perfect. The impact of having to travel to that country. And I always wanted, even when I was young, to travel all around the world. So this is why I'm always looking at Instagram videos, trying to participate in other peoples' experiences – which I know I can't do. I want to do it, but economy-wise I can't do it. And I'm kind of a foodie, I'm always looking for different things. And it feels good. And the holograms – apart from the other sensations, the smell, the taste – at least I could go through my eyes. If I can't do it physically, I may do it virtually!*

What we have here is once again the reproduction of longstanding fantasies of enhanced experience, in which newer, better technologies are assumed to solve the problems and limitations of previous ones (Marvin 1988, John 2022). This, arguably, has been the case with the emergence of every new device and platform. The analysis developed throughout this chapter, however, indicates that we should be wary of those prospects. After all, virtual and augmented reality (which rely on even bulkier devices and more sophisticated interfaces that, in theory, enclose and constrain our immediate access to the social world much more than scrolling the Instagram feed, for instance) are probably prone to the concerns of isolation, alienation, and manipulation that seem to be at the heart of social media's attributed inauthenticity.

Interestingly, in this case, it seems that it is only when technologies become habitual – that is, when idealistic hopes and dreams are replaced by comparatively unfulfilling experiences – that their sensorial constraints seem to become noticeable. Once mobile social media have been fully incorporated into everyday practices, the belief or contract (Bourdon 2020) required to sustain their reality claims seems more easily confronted by a 'reality check' – the awareness that no interaction is completely fulfilling, 'authentic'. And yet, expectations once poured into

social media are now transferred to the (assumed inevitable) next big technological development: more connection, extended reach, sensorially rich experience, as if you were there. Better tech, under this conception, is that which can get closer to reproducing the 'real' experience of non-mediation. The experience of immediate connection through media.

8.5 Conclusions

'Living in the moment' means, put simply, focusing on the task at hand. Increasingly, though, our ordinary tasks are permeated, oriented, or even disrupted by handheld devices and social media platforms, which are said to divert our attention and prevent us from enjoying life in its entirety. In this chapter, I delved into the controversies and ambivalences of (im)mediation. I offered a contrast to some of the discussions presented in previous chapters, and provided a new layer of complexity to the enactment (and habituation) of longstanding dreams of enhanced experience, and for the theorisations between media and our phenomenal field (Merleau-Ponty 2012). In the eyes of my participants, there seems to be a lot of questioning about whether mediation can actually feel 'authentic' enough so as to be experienced as if it is indeed *live*. In light of those findings, I would argue that, in practice, what media technologies do is to demarcate – to expand and magnify, but also to circumvent, confine – our phenomenal field, the reach of our presence in the world, and of its presence to us.

The 'live', in its different iterations and theorisations, has historically been associated with the 'authentic' – be it through the lack of perceptible technical mediation, or due to the apparent improvisational, open-ended, spontaneous, 'real' tone of the experienced event (Peters 1999; Bourdon 2000; Scannell 2004; van Es 2016). Authenticity, in my interviewees' experiences, seems grounded in ideas of seamlessness, autonomy, objectivity, improvisation, and naturality, but also in the subjective, sensorially rich, 'actually felt'. Peters (2015:28) argued that "apparatus is the basis, not the corruption, of the world". Yet, my empirical findings suggest that, once become habitual, technical mediation is perceived as an adulterated, fraudulent, and deficient version of 'the real thing'.

As I have been discussing, many of our experiences are now mediated by social media platforms, and habitual mediation is in and by itself understood by the participants as essentially impure – tainting until-then authentic interactions with technical or corporate interference, or overly heavy curation by the users themselves. This impurity, in turn, is taken

as corruptive of an otherwise authentic and fulfilling existence. My interviewees also frame mediation as manipulation – especially when it comes to algorithmic recommendation systems, the respondents feel that they are being skilfully handled by tech companies and their corporate interests. To appropriate the terminology used by Scannell (2014) in his analysis of liveness in the context of broadcast, the participants seem to point to the visible (or imagined) 'care structures' as indicative of the fabricated – and, hence, inherently inauthentic – nature of the mediated experience. As put by Peters (2000:211), the conception that the "morally supreme form of communication" is the face-to-face dialogue is as old as technical mediation itself. At its heart, though, lies the belief that the human body is the ultimate marker of authenticity (Ibid). The authentic experience is the embodied experience, and what is actually felt by the body is fundamentally untransferable – authenticity and mediation are, under this view, essentially incompatible.

This view manifested by the participants seems to be in tension with current phenomenological approaches to mediation, which are not too interested in unveiling inner truths or exploring an assumed hidden existential depth – as put by Markham (2020:92), "the notion that there is no discrete self prior to the corruption of the digital culture into which one finds oneself thrown is in its own way liberating". Under such a conception, there is no fixed 'self' preceding mediation, as the self is not a stable entity but rather something that is constantly coming into being in everyday life. That is, although the participants seem very keen on protecting their assumed inner selves from the threat of inauthenticity posed by digital technologies, perhaps more productive would be to reconsider the idea that a mediated experience is in any way less authentic or 'constitutive of being' (Markham 2020:92) than an experience deprived of visible technical mediation.

As it is so often done by the platforms themselves (Haupt 2020), my interviewees reproduce a rather essentialist conception of what human experience is. Humanity, as demonstrated by my empirical analysis, depends on 'real' connections, which in turn are marked by spontaneity, transparency, naturality, impulsivity, extemporaneity. The power of social media lies, I would argue, precisely in their capacity to shape, frame, update, and respond (even if not in a fully satisfactory manner) to these 'human' needs. These are the values that are legitimised – *authenticated* – by social media; a strategy that, once recognised by the participants, seems to be questioned and treated with cynicism. The analysis I have presented suggests that the perceived threat posed by social media is, ultimately, a threat to *human experience* itself.

The enactment of, and struggle over, these values in the context of a heavily mediated everyday life become then a useful setting to capture, question, and outline what the term liveness ultimately refers to (and, what it does not) in the social media environment. The interviewees usually employed terms such as 'the atmosphere' or the 'experience' – often mentioning an alleged sensorial obstruction – to justify the preference for 'being there' in person rather than through technical mediation. My reading is that they are pointing to the fact that, in a context of physical presence, your body and the environment mutually affect each other – and this experienced reciprocity is what mediated liveness invariably lacks. In the social media environment, mediated liveness seems less about the perceptual withdrawal of technical mediation (which, according to my interviewees, is never really achieved in practice, despite marketing promises) so as to achieve 'immersion' through 'technical transparency' and a 'seamless' integration to a remote setting. Mediated liveness is, rather, about the permanent potential for (and eventual concretisation of) modalities of social coordination that feel random, serendipitous, spontaneous, engrossing, and self-evident, despite being heavily orchestrated – and which, in the context of social media, often feel trivial rather than sublime.

Appropriating the double-articulation of technology proposed by Ihde (1990), throughout this thesis I have demonstrated that in the context of everyday life social media can serve both as *objects* of experience and *means* to experiences. There are, in messy, complex, and quasi-indiscernible ways, the experience *of* the technology itself – that is, the relation between your embodied self and the screen, the always-updating feed of content, the non-stop notification pop-ups – and the experiences one has *through* social media: the access to a remote happening, the feeling of being with a distant person, the sense that everyone is focused on the same thing as you. The frustrations manifested by my respondents throughout the previous pages seem, to a large extent, anchored in a perceived disconnect between these two modes, and in the inevitable conclusion that the expansion of our embodied lived experience can never be satisfactorily fulfilled in practice – at least not in sensorial terms. 'The live' proper, then, seems much more easily conveyed when social media are treated as the object of experience, rather than when they are seen as a (corruptive, tainted, confining) means to an (inherently authentic, pure) 'real life' experience.

The crucial unresolved questions then seem to be: what are the key reality claims of social media's liveness? To what extent are they fulfilled – and does it actually matter? I have

previously argued that when it comes to mediated liveness the authentic experience is that which is perceived as a *direct* engagement with what is *really* happening (Scannell 2014; Bourdon 2000; Couldry 2004). In this regard, according to my analysis, the concrete fulfilment of the reality claims of the social media manifold would depend, in basic terms, on the extent to which a given experience is perceived as (a) actual, factual, truly happening; and as (b) sensorially engrossing enough. And yet, as repeatedly manifested by the participants, these are very rarely achieved. Indeed, the interviewees keep attributing to technical mediation itself the alleged inauthenticity of experiences seen as marked by over-performativity, deceit, manipulation, detachment, alienation, and sensorial insulation.

From a phenomenological perspective, liveness in social media is 'real' insofar as it is felt, experienced – even if only as a possibility, rather than as a frequent materialisation of 'live' situations in the strict sense. In the context of everyday lived experience, liveness, I conclude, is not necessarily about actual fulfilment; it is, as previously suggested by Bourdon (2000), often more about *potentiality*. That is, more than concrete achievement, mediated liveness seems to be about a paradoxical pursuit; a yearning that keeps us going, even if it is in practice rarely fully realised. The centrality of liveness as a concept and topic of interest for academic scholarship, I argue, depends not in solving any apparent conflict between the 'immediate' and the 'mediated', the 'authentic' and the 'fabricated'. Its relevance lies precisely in its intrinsically contested, disputed nature of as-if-ness – of the mediation that claims to be immediate – and in how those tensions are continuously renewed and updated with the emergence and habituation of new technologies of communication.

Chapter 9

Conclusions: the productive contradiction of liveness

This thesis' starting point has been the positioning of liveness as one of the most enduring manifestations of the historical aspiration for media technologies to provide us with broader, deeper, richer access to the social world and its happenings – a continuously updating quest I have been referring to as the dream of enhanced experience. This dream, in turn, is marked by the paradox of mediated immediacy. By this I mean the dual desire that, on the one hand, deploys communication technologies to overcome the limits of time, of space, and of our human bodies and, on the other hand, expects those same technologies to withdraw from perception, to recede into the background, and provide experiences that, although heavily mediated, somehow feel *immediate.* In this scope, liveness is both about the orchestration of the experiential and the continuous (even if often only partially achieved) pursuit of authenticity, presence, shared experience, and immediacy in contexts marked by mediation.

Liveness, in the more subtle, contingent, and dispersed sense I have examined in this monograph, is ultimately about our possibilities for connection with others and with happenings that matter, and the roles played by communication technologies in those processes that are constitutive of contemporary social life. The topic, I argued, has acquired new nuances and manifestations in our current social media environment; a mediascape in which our sociality is increasingly intertwined with the operation of a handful of 'platforms'. It is worth recalling that, in this context, 'experience' has become an over-used term and acquired manifold attributions – a multiplicity I have embraced and foregrounded in my critical-phenomenological disposition. In focusing on the descriptions, perceptions, and interpretations of lived experience as provided by a few selected people, this thesis has centred on the sensations and sense-making processes of those who are directly involved with these technologies in ordinary settings. And yet, I have also maintained that an experience-centred approach should not neglect the infrastructural, socio-technical, and politico-economic dimensions of social media. Indeed, I reiterate, this relation between what is felt and how this *feltness* comes to be is central to both phenomenology and to liveness.

In this final chapter, I elaborate on those arguments, recapitulate some of the premises of this project, and foreground how the empirical findings elucidate the issues and problems I set out to investigate. I focus, in particular, on the contributions of my analysis to answering the three research questions as posed in Chapter 4: *How (and when) do ordinary experiences with and of habitual social media challenge, reaffirm, or expand existing conceptions of liveness? In what ways, and to what extent, can the historical construct of liveness be useful as a conceptual device to illuminate our understanding of lived experiences with and of social media platforms and the structures or conditions of these experiences? How can this endeavour help advance a critical phenomenology of a heavily mediated social world?*

9.1 Findings and contributions to the scholarship on liveness

Starting from the premise that the social media environment offers different conditions of connection in comparison to prior communication infrastructures, a key question for this thesis has been examining how (and when) ordinary experiences with and of these technologies challenge, reaffirm, or expand our available conceptions of liveness. Through technologies of communication, the world is potentially made *liveable*, available to experience at a distance. The concept of liveness seemed to perfectly encapsulate this capacity, as well as the often-concealed mediative work necessary to fulfil it (Scannell 2014; van Es 2016). In focusing on liveness not as a particular type of content, nor as a mere matter of ideological discourse but rather as 'experience', I was able to foreground this apparent contradiction and how it operates in everyday life.

It should be noted that I have deliberately avoided providing a strict, precise definition for 'the live'. I have instead understood liveness as a broader category (Couldry 2004) manifested as different configurations or constellations (van Es 2016) and experienced with varying degrees of intensity (Bourdon 2000). Broadening the understanding of liveness might risk losing the specificity that has made the term so compelling in the first place – and yet, it also allows us to unpack and question the emergence of new modalities of social coordination (Couldry 2004). The usefulness of the concept, I contend, especially for a phenomenologically informed analysis of mediation, is further anchored in the fact that there is something fundamentally *existential* about 'the live' that cannot be conveyed by alternative concepts (Scannell 2014). In this regard, I posit that liveness, whilst encompassing in many of its manifestations some of the competing terms such as the sense of presence and immediacy at a distance, also exceeds

those, and captures the desire to both feel *alive* in the world and feel the *liveliness* of the world through communication technologies.

In using some of the organising principles of phenomenology (Heyes 2020) – embodiment, temporality, spatiality, and intersubjectivity – as the basis of my empirical discussion, I demonstrated both the explicit and evident and the more implicit and subtle ways in which 'the live' is brought to life in ordinary socio-technical dynamics. Whilst in Chapters 5 and 6 I explored how more obvious instances of 'the live' (respectively, the real-time experience and the experience of 'being there') are encountered and negotiated in ordinary uses of social media, Chapters 7 and 8 tackled liveness in a more elusive and dispersed sense – as a productive potentiality more than as a concrete achievement. I focused, therefore, on if, how, and when social media experiences could be understood as affording a sense of 'getting involved' in a shared experience, being part of something that concentrates mass attention despite claims of personalisation, and if such experiences could ever be said to provide direct access to what is really happening in an authentic way. It should be noted that the separation between the 'temporal', 'spatial', 'intersubjective', and 'embodied' live was, of course, a heuristic process. And yet, using these categories as the entry point for the empirical analysis brought to the fore some of the key contradictions that are constitutive of liveness in its different experiential manifestations.

9.1.1 Social media and the temporal 'live'

Chapter 5 – The time of our lives: liveness, realtimeness, and phenomenal algorhythms, contributes to the understanding of the temporalities that are immanent in social media. More specifically, and considering how often the instances of 'the live' and 'the real-time' are conflated (van Es 2016, Coleman 2020a), I concentrated on examining when and how social media's realtimeness is fulfilled in the complex, opaque interplay between the 'chronological' and the 'algorithmic'. The deployment of 'rhythm' as an analytical device aimed to operationalise the notion of temporality as subjectively experienced and yet always oriented – sensorially orchestrated (Highmore 2011) – by the technologies and institutions involved. Previously, in Chapter 3, I had summarised the available conceptions of the *temporal live* as usually revolving around either a matter of speed (the fast transmission and/or access to what is happening elsewhere), duration (or lack thereof, which in turn prompts us to pay attention in the 'here and now'), or contingency (based on situations or events that are still unfolding, 'in

state of becoming'). In this regard, the analysis presented in Chapter 5 corroborates previous theorisations of temporal liveness as containing and yet exceeding the notion of a technical real-time (Scannell 2014; van Es 2016).

Nevertheless, my findings challenge the conception of 'the live' as intrinsically attached to a punctual 'now', and explicitly advance those theorisations to the extent that, through my critical-phenomenological disposition, I was able to unpack how social media's malleable 'realtimeness' is experientially manifested in everyday life. In Chapter 5, I suggested that it would be more analytically productive to break down the nebulous container 'real-time' into different sensibilities – which I termed 'instantaneity', 'freshness', 'simultaneity', and 'ephemerality'. I argued that it is through the articulation of those mechanisms that social media's real-time is brought to life. Those four mechanisms, and the extent to which they manage to create an experience of the 'live' proper seem fundamentally contingent on how technologies are treated in each instance. That is, when social media are taken to be the 'object' of experience – that which is being experienced in and of itself – the sensibilities of freshness and ephemerality seem to acquire prominence; the focus is then on the unprecedentedness of the experience to the individual and on the fact that, due to the rapid movement that characterises the content flow, each 'piece' is fleeting, transient, and hard to retrieve.[15] In turn, when social media are taken as the means to an experience – the medium that gives you access to a remote happening or event – then the mechanisms of instantaneity and simultaneity (the coordination with the time of 'the world' and the time of 'others') become more important.

The analysis presented in Chapter 5 confirmed that, as a construction, liveness depends not only on the technologies and institutions involved but also on the users themselves (van Es 2016). Moreover, my findings emphasised that this refers not only to a matter of inference or spectatorial belief (Bourdon 2000; Auslander 2012), as the rhythms – and, consequently, the potential for the 'temporal live' to emerge – are also profoundly affected by the participants' activities, practices, frequencies, purposes and patterns of social media use, and their mood in particular situations. This centrality of 'the individual' is acknowledged by the interviewees, for instance, when they associate their opportunities for 'knowing what's happening' as contingent on *"following the right people"* (as mentioned by Anna) and also on the frequency

[15] That is, although a given 'post' or 'message' can probably be retrieved, the experience of encountering it in a particular order is in itself unique, short-lived, and marked by a sense of imminent disappearance.

with which you *"check their profile"* (as put by Iris), which in turn produces a sense of homophilic harmony in which similar content tends to surface 'first'.

The analysis presented in Chapter 5 also offered evidence to support the idea that a sense of 'temporal liveness' can be produced through the very dynamism of content presentation. Like the televisual flow (Williams 2003; Ellis 2000; Marriott 2007), the infinite stream of content (the so-called 'feed') contributes to a perceived 'vitality' (Kember and Zylinska 2012; Beer 2019) of media experiences, by emphasising continuous updates, fleetingness, and contingency. Contrary to television, though, the social media environment's self-proclaimed focus on 'personalisation' adds new layers of complexity to this debate. Indeed, I identified that 'the algorithm' seemed to be used by the participants as a key meaning-making device for the understanding and articulation of the more complex, ambiguous temporalities of the social media manifold. The perceived temporalities of algorithmic media – their *phenomenal algorhythms* – I posited, reflect and enact negotiations over social coordination and temporal control, and foreground a dispute between predictability and serendipity.

Despite the prominence of 'the present' in available theorisations of 'the live', in Chapter 5 I further demonstrated how the temporal liveness of social media is also contingent on the articulation of the past and the future. Indeed, I observed that the relational nature of phenomenological temporality (Heidegger 2008; Hoy 2012), when combined with the open-ended, malleable sense of 'presentness' (Coleman 2018a, 2020a) constructed by the complex social media environment, might result in the eventual emergence of the phenomenal temporal live. That is, the experience that is technically not 'live' (as it is explicitly anchored in the past, and afforded by technologies' recording, archival, and retrieving capacities) somehow still evokes a *"live vibe"* (as verbalised by Arthur), and therefore it *feels* as such.

Still, I argued, social media's capacities for both retrospection and anticipation are anchored in the present: it is by sharing, posting, liking, commenting on the 'here and now' that a given user contributes to potentially *reliving* a given experience. Situations like those seem intertwined with both the presumed open-endedness, contingency, and risk that have been historically associated with 'the live' (Peters 1999), and with the recognition of the role of algorithmic systems in organising the experiential flow afforded by these technologies. This also means that, in the more ambiguous *algorhythmics* of social media, the past can also be orchestrated to 'feel live'. Instead of recreating the original lived experience, however, these

'as-if live' experiences tend to produce a new, current, 'live' affective reaction or response to a content that was previously shared.

The temporal liveness of social media, I concluded, depends not only on the perceived rhythm, pace, and tempo of the platforms' content display, but also on how, in using these platforms, we perceive the time of our lives as individuals and as part of a social world more broadly, and how this makes us feel more or less synchronised. As an experience, then, 'the live' always requires some sort of reflexive work. Furthermore, I argued that any experience of temporal liveness in social media, then, is not created despite algorithmic systems, but precisely due to and through them and their perceived, imagined – and, often, anticipated – agency.

9.1.2 Social media and the spatial 'live'

In Chapter 3, I had outlined that when we focus on the spatiality of 'the live' the term is frequently deployed to characterise practices of mediated witnessing, presencing, or experiential 'teleportation' – the potential for *being there* even you physically are not. I also theorised that, in its condition of as-if-ness, the concretisation of 'the live' proper always relies on some degree of suspension of disbelief so that its 'reality claims' can be fulfilled. That is, for someone to really feel like they are there (in which *there* is different from the physical, embodied *here*) through mediation, they would have to either legitimately stop noticing the mediative interference to the experience, or (more likely) subject themselves to a certain contract (Bourdon 2000) in which this intervention would be deliberately overlooked. The empirical examination of those experiences and the negotiations they encompass was the central aim of *Chapter 6 – Being here, there, and everywhere: presencing and placemaking in contexts of mediation*.

It is worth pointing out that, in practice, mediated liveness often tends to comprise a claim of being there *together* (Hammelburg 2021a), as if you were sharing the moment with others. *Being there*, then, makes 'the spatial', 'the embodied', and the 'intersubjective', profoundly overlapping. Reflecting this imbrication, in the available literature *being there* is usually associated with notions of (tele, social, co-) presence. In Chapter 6, rather than centring this often-elusive concept, I have instead examined the experiences manifested by the participants through more precise, contextual terms to designate particular spatial arrangements typical of the social media environment. Social media, I concluded in Chapter 6, precisely due to their

state of in-betweenness as theorised in Chapter 2, comprise a messier, improvised combination of a range of interactive practices – such as direct messaging, scrolling the feed, getting push notifications, swiping through ephemeral stories – which, in turn, afford varied modes of attention, embodiment, and hermeneutical engagement and, consequently, manifold opportunities for presencing and placemaking; for experientially *being there* when you are not.

Accessing the 'social world' (in terms of distant events, but also remote people) is not, then, necessarily restricted to the previously theorised patterns of connected presence (Licoppe 2004), online and group liveness (Couldry 2004), or even ambient co-presence (Madianou 2016) – it is, usually, an arrangement of them. Often, I argued, these experiences of coordination through social media emerge from frivolous, idle talk, and casual sharing of links. In examining those, and expanding available theorisations, I suggested that perhaps rather than a matter of (co)presence, most interactions with and through social media should be rather characterised as 'ambient awareness'. That is, through fleeting, often aimless, so-called 'passive' navigation (a matter I return to in section 9.2.3), social media, although not necessarily affording a sense of simultaneous co-existence in the same place, convey an overall (even if frequently peripheral) sense of *awareness of other people's presence* and of their whereabouts. Awareness, I showed, is centred on processes of perception of, and attention to, the presence – the existence, and position – of other people, places, and settings, more than on the impression of togetherness itself.

In scrutinising the translation of ambient awareness into experiences that evoke a sense of liveness, I noticed that the respondents seemed very careful about claims of perceived 'immersion' or 'teleportation' (as so often promised by platforms themselves) – *"I guess it does make you feel geographically less estranged. I don't really think 'oh I feel like I'm there'. But it does feel like it can be more accessible to you",* as described by Abbie. I argued, then, that more than apparent togetherness or transportation to remote places, what social media do is to increase our perceptual scope; any sense of spatial liveness is premised on their capacities to extend the world that is experientially available to us.

I then focused on precise instances in which their provided 'ambient awareness' is said to create an experience that somehow, and even if only momentarily, properly feels like *being there, live*. Such instances, I concluded, usually depend on the availability of either multiple perspectives on the same event, an on-the-ground, first-person point of view, or sensorially rich

access to people's faces, voices, and movement – which I designated as *tokens of embodiment.* Yet, what social media provide, I concluded in Chapter 6, is not necessarily clearer, richer access to the 'live' happening itself, but rather a stronger sense of what those who are there on the ground are feeling. This reaffirms Ellis's (2000) conception that (televisual) liveness affords the mediated witnessing of a distant event that is significantly different from the experience of those who are actually, physically 'there'.

At the same time, my discussion expands those theorisations to the extent that it claims that, in the social media environment, *being there* is marked less by a sensed 'transportation', and more by 'incarnation' – that is, the feeling that, even if only briefly, mobile social media allow users to access experiences that are actually affecting other bodies, *as if* they were there in the flesh; as described by Lewis, you *"get a sense of what it was like being there"*. In other words, in the spatial liveness of social media you are often not experiencing *with* those who are there, but rather *through* them. In those particular circumstances, social media technologies allow distant people to feel like they are 'taking over', borrowing, or possessing someone else's experience.

9.1.3 Social media and the intersubjective 'live'

According to the literature review presented in Chapter 3, the 'intersubjective live' generally comprises ideas of participation and collectiveness, in which the lure is getting involved in, being part of, an experience (Auslander 2012; van Es 2016). In this scope, liveness becomes a more tacit, latent, and dispersed potential connection to events that matter, as they unfold (Couldry 2004), in which much of the appeal comes from the awareness and validation that others are experiencing the same as you, and the consequential sense of 'community' (Dayan and Katz 1992; Hammelburg 2021a). In *Chapter 7 – Getting involved: impending eventfulness and shared experiences in individualised media*, I empirically examined those issues and their enactment in a mediascape that is said instead to centre 'personalisation'.

I posited that, in social media, the notion that you are part of a shared event seems highly contingent on the flow of content itself. That is, rather than corroborating previous conceptions that algorithmic flows are marked by a lack of collectivity and shared experience (Kaun and Stiernstedt 2014), my findings indicate that it is precisely the structure of the flow, and the access to multiple personal perspectives and reactions that surface in it, that give rise to experiences perceived as being 'shared' with others. It is, as verbalised by Joe, about *"feeling*

included" through *"unexpected connectedness"; "a way of having a community around this slightly weird interest"* – even if those communities are usually fleeting or *"time-restricted",* as further expressed by Arthur. Through the relatively unpredictable flows of social media, then, a feeling of recognition and validation emerges from the confirmation that somebody else – if not everyone else – is going through the same as you, even if only momentarily. Rather than requiring the concentration of attention of the masses like traditional media events, though, the collectiveness of social media seems to rely on homophily (Chun 2021). What this means is that the sense of collectiveness, too, is premised on algorithmic individuation.

Rather than privileging the operation of 'the live' in media events (Dayan and Katz 1992), in Chapter 7 I favoured explicit 'uneventful', commonplace situations. I expanded available theorisations by arguing that, in the social media environment, liveness emerges in association with a widespread sense of *impending eventfulness*. That is, the premise and belief that something remotely interesting or attention-worthy is always about to occur, so you must be able to follow it as it unfolds, 'live'. This desire for affective intensity, however, manifests less as an intense craving, and more as a habitual, peripheral, but perpetual inclination. This latency, according to my analysis, produces a lot of ambivalence, in which excitement, anxiety, pleasure, and boredom are often mixed.

Crucially, in this mediated setting in which the focus moves from the *extraordinary* to the *ordinary*, the work of getting involved and keeping appraised becomes increasingly an individual responsibility – which seems significantly different from the liveness of broadcast as theorised by television scholars (Scannell 2014; Dayan and Katz 1992; Bourdon 2000; Feuer 1983). Checking and scrolling social media then becomes, as verbalised by Simone, the *"moral duty to stay in touch".* Contrary to the televisual flow (Williams 2003; Ellis 2000) – which requires the individual to open the 'tap', but which then provides a continuous, nonstop stream of content – I argued that the liveness of social media depends on convincing people to constantly come back to press the 'water valve'. The social media environment, I concluded, and any sense of 'intersubjective liveness' that might emerge from 'getting involved' in it, seems marked by the habituation of anticipation and by the individualised burden of trying to be ready for whatever might come up.

In this imbricate combination of pleasure and pressure, expectation and disappointment, participants admitted that a motivation for their social media use is the dread of being left out

– even when, paradoxically, they consciously recognise that there is nothing particularly important for them to *be part of* in the first place. Moreover, rather than attracting and centralising the committed, intense attention of a crowd or mass of spectators to follow specific events as they unfold, the latent liveness of the social media environment as examined in Chapter 7 seems more heavily premised instead on the centralisation of distraction – of a more 'promiscuous absorption' (Highmore 2011) oriented by this milder inclination to keep track of things as they happen, if they happen.

Still, rather than a matter of inadvertent or 'accidental exposure' (Valeriani and Vaccari 2016) to specific types of content, what is significant here is users' awareness, acknowledgement, and anticipation of the fact that, in social media, they will eventually 'come across things'. Liveness, in this regard, manifests itself as a latency, a longing, resultant from the contradiction of expecting spontaneity to emerge from a mediascape governed by predictive algorithmic systems. Those 'surprises', as described in Chapter 7, don't have to be particularly meaningful or eventful, just affectively intense enough to keep people scrolling, tapping, clicking, liking. What this means is that even though the 'live' is generally associated with the present, the intersubjective liveness of social media, according to my analysis, relies heavily on a built-in future-oriented sense of anticipation, which prompts users to check their streams, stories, messages, and notifications 'just in case'.

9.1.4 Social media and the embodied 'live'

Chapter 8 – Living in the moment: (im)mediation and the authentic experience centred the matter of embodiment and its theorised relation with a phenomenological sense of experiential authenticity. In examining how those expectations are manifested, actualised, and often frustrated in the context of everyday life, I posited that liveness remains a useful conceptual device to help us make sense of those dynamics that are foundational to media studies more broadly. The underlying theme of the chapter was the understanding that liveness is a value-loaded attribute, in which promises of direct, 'authentic experience' are reinforced through the reproduction of certain reality claims despite the presence of mediative intervention. In the social media manifold, I argued, this seems to be articulated through claims of *direct* experience to what is *really* happening. My empirical analysis then focused on both of those pledges, and their enactment and contestation in ordinary settings.

In so doing, in Chapter 8 I also offered evidence to expand conceptualisations of liveness in which the 'authentic' (and any potential threat to it) is taken as contingent mostly on media industries and technologies (Scannell 2014). As demonstrated in my analysis, in the social media environment those concerns are updated and the people involved – that is, the users themselves – are also blamed for contributing to a perceived widespread *unrealness*. As declared by Alyssa, if you are accessing something through social media, *"it's not real"*. This, in turn, contributes to damaging the trust needed to establish the 'contract' (Bourdon 2000) between media and their audiences and to fulfil expectations of authenticity – the belief that whatever you are getting access to through mediation is actually, *really* happening.

Although sometimes people get caught up in the sense and/or desire for liveness and thus subscribe (even if only partially) to social media's reality claims (as per the examples identified in previous empirical chapters), in the experiences examined in Chapter 8 participants seemed all too aware of the mediative work involved to accept promises of mediated immediacy. In this scope, social media technologies are heavily condemned by the interviewees for not being representative of 'real life' experiences, and conceived as intrinsically partial in their portrayal of the world and its happenings. There seems to be a fundamental lack of trust, then, in their capacity to give us access to reality as it is and as it unfolds. My analysis further suggested that, in practice, social media are often experienced not only as partial and confining (rather than experience-enhancing and expanding) but also as isolating and constrictive, with technological mediation framed as a 'barrier' between the experiencing body and 'real life'.

That is, in Chapter 8, it became obvious that there is a tension between the use of social media platforms to 'be part of something', access remote experiences, and give distant others a taste of what one is experiencing 'in real-time' (as I had previously covered in Chapters 5, 6, and 7) and the concern over the fact that, due to these same technologies, people are missing out the opportunity to experience the 'here and now' of their lives. Advancing available theorisations on the conception of 'the digital' as essentially separate from 'the real', my phenomenologically informed approach emphasised the embodied dimensions of this dispute marked by perceived sensorial obstruction. In this regard, mobile social media are largely understood by the participants as still no more than *"seeing through the eyes of the phone"* (as defined by Lewis). Under this view, the physical object required for the materialisation of platformised sociality – usually, the smartphone – is perceived to wall people in and impede their direct access to an intrinsically more fulfilling and authentic embodied experience.

Due to a generalised lack of trust, mediation's status of inevitable second-handedness, and inescapable sensorial constraints, experiences of social media seemed to be frequently framed by the participants as non-experiences or, at best, 'pseudo-experiences'. Social media, under such a conception, are not 'of' the world; they are rather an obstruction between you and 'the real'. Crucially, and restating the double logic of body-technology arrangements as theorised by Ihde (1990), it is when social media are taken as a *means* to access a referential non-mediated 'real' experience that their supposed lack of 'life' becomes particularly evident. Instances of 'the live' proper, then, seem more easily conveyed when social media are treated as the object of experience, rather than when they are seen as a (corruptive, tainted, confining) means to an (inherently authentic, pure) 'real life' experience.

Ultimately, my analysis in Chapter 8 suggests that social media use was frequently conceived by the participants as either dispossessed of existential significance or as an explicit hindrance to more fulfilling experiences. It is worth noticing that this perspective directly contradicts current phenomenological approaches, which take technological intervention to be not corruptive of an otherwise authentic existence but rather as equally constitutive of it (Markham 2020; Peters 2015). In reproducing the idea of an invariable experiential loss, the interviewees reinforced the conception of technical mediation as an adulterated or deficient version of 'the real thing' – the idea that 'authenticity' and 'mediation' are fundamentally irreconcilable. Nevertheless, I posited in Chapter 8 that this tension arguably supports and deepens our appreciation of why liveness (still) matters, rather than discredits it. Indeed, I contended that it is precisely because the concept of liveness captures the conflicts between the embodied and the mediated, the authentic and the fabricated, that it deserves scholarly attention in a context in which, it seems, promises of mediated immediacy will be continuously renewed and actualised.

9.1.5 Liveness as the fundamental tension of mediated immediacy

After summarising the main findings as presented in each empirical chapter, it is possible to identify some of their theoretical implications once taken all together. Expanding on the analysis, I would reaffirm that, from a critical-phenomenological perspective, we should not try to determine fixed mediated experiences as ontologically 'live' in and of themselves.

Liveness here refers less to particular communicative formats or practices, and more to the *experiential tension of mediated immediacy*.

Despite its fluctuating definitions, at the core of 'the live' is the desire for an actual, current, present, shared, and vivid experience. Liveness, then, comprises the permanent potential for the concretisation of modalities of social coordination that feel random, spontaneous, and sensorially engrossing despite being heavily arranged by social media and their logics. Indeed, as suggested by the findings discussed above, liveness in social media seems often associated with a general sense of *orchestrated serendipity* – of expecting surprising, instantaneous, authentic affective intensity to emerge from predictive, curated, programmed communicative environments. The 'live' is, then, in its different manifestations or 'constellations' (van Es 2016), also an 'atmosphere' or 'vibe' resultant from particular arrangements between our fleshly bodies and these now ubiquitous media technologies. Liveness, in this context, is not the opposite of the 'mediated' (echoing the ideas developed by Auslander 2008) – it is rather an emergent experiential response to habituated mediation.

Incorporating this contradictory stance from the very beginning, I had proposed in Chapter 3 that these different dimensions and attributions could be better captured by the phenomenological characterisation of liveness as 'the experience of immediate connection through media'. In its status of 'mediated as-if-ness' – that is, of the mediated experience that stands for, or presents itself *as if* it were the direct, immediate experience in any of its dimensions – the live is, I argued, the exemplary manifestation of the historical dream of enhanced experience, whilst also being a paradigmatic topic for a phenomenology of mediation centred both on the experiential and its orchestration. The contradictions, tensions, and oxymorons that constitute the "paradox of liveness" (van Es 2016), I suggest, are indeed the live's most essential component.

For the scholarship on liveness, then, perhaps the key theoretical contribution offered by this thesis is the proposal of liveness as, intrinsically, an irresolvable paradox – and the postulation that this impossibility of resolution is actually conceptually productive. Echoing van Es's (2016) critiques to ontological and techno-deterministic approaches, I concur that the 'live' experience should not be defined in opposition to a different modality of communication (for instance, 'the live' as the contrary to the recorded material, or the scripted content, the 'static' web, or even 'the live' as the opposite of that which is in the past). Defining liveness as a fixed

experience would miss the point entirely. That is, although the 'meaning of live' (Scannell 2014) has shifted significantly following technological developments (Auslander 2008; Couldry 2004), more than establishing a new preferred definition I would like to uphold its status as an unsolvable conceptual problem; an issue that is relevant not despite, but precisely due to its essentially disputed nature. This crucial tension of mediated immediacy is manifested in my empirical findings through a number of contentions – the disputes between the 'predictable' and the 'spontaneous', the 'individual' and 'the social', the 'ordinary' and the 'extraordinary', the 'embodied' and the 'mediated', the 'authentic' and the 'fabricated'.

If "the history of media is the history of the productive impossibility of capturing what exists" (Peters 2015:11), the history of liveness seems to be about the generative impossibility of capturing, through technical mediation, *life itself*. Liveness is, then, *the productive contradiction of mediated immediacy*. The value of the concept, I argue, and its persistence as a key topic of interest for media and communications research, lie precisely in its intrinsically contested nature of as-if-ness – of the mediation that claims or is inferred to be immediate – and in how those tensions are refashioned and updated with the development and habituation of new technologies of communication.

9.2 Contributions to the broader scholarship on social media

Having clarified the state of 'the live' after the empirical analysis, I will now discuss some of the wider implications or contributions of the arguments developed in this project to social media research. In this regard, this thesis has proposed the use of liveness as both an object of study and as an analytical device – an entry point to study experiences with and of the social media environment. Whilst I admittedly have not examined social media outside the lens of liveness, I am convinced that it is possible to extract some findings and insights that are relevant to the study of platformised communications more broadly, beyond 'the live'. In this section, I discuss in more detail in what ways, and to what extent, the historical construct of liveness works as a conceptual device to illuminate our understanding of lived experiences with and of social media platforms and the structures or conditions of these experiences.

9.2.1 Experience matters

This project was informed, amongst other things, by a twofold dissatisfaction with how social media are often framed in mainstream discourse (and, eventually, in the academic literature).

The first refers to the frequently dismissive tone attributed to ordinary experiences with social media technologies, which is manifested in a disregard for them as a topic of interest in the discussion of philosophical, existential issues due to their alleged banality, or in their demarcation as a pathologised matter of addiction that should be solved by a simple 'change of habit'. In embracing their taken-for-granted and habitual status, as well as the ambivalences inherent to their quotidian uses, I have instead defended that it is precisely because of their trivial nature that experiences of and with social media matter and demand theoretical and empirical scrutiny. This project is, then, supporting and advancing the idea that everyday life is a fertile site for academic theorisation (de Certeau 1980; Lefebvre 2004), and that the ordinary is, too, infused with existential significance (even if this meaningfulness is not always consciously evident to the individuals involved). In this sense, this thesis resonates with and draws on the proposals developed by authors such as Lagerkvist (2017, 2019), Frosh (2019), and Markham (2020), amongst others.

The second discontent that encouraged me to pursue this project was the fact that most of the critical scholarship that considers the entanglement between social media technologies and the 'experience' as worthy of attention tends to conceive of their relationship as a matter of 'saturation' (in which mediation is said to be so ubiquitous and pervasive that there is no life outside of it), and, often, to privilege politico-economic analyses that do not afford a more granular, nuanced understanding of their incorporation in the context of everyday life. A critical-phenomenological lens allowed me to address both concerns. Rather than reproducing the attribution of media's power and 'invisibility' to its pervasiveness and 'saturation', I have examined this effacing capacity of technologies as a result of active processes of habituation (Highmore 2011; Pedwell 2021). Yet, habits, it is worth reiterating, although manifesting at the level of the individual, are also conceived here to have a social dimension (Chun 2017).

This thesis was also premised on the idea that people do many different things with social media – whilst these technologies, in turn, do many things to us. It would be unfeasible for a doctoral project (and, arguably, for any academic endeavour) to try to capture the totality of practices, processes, and experiences that characterise the incorporation of these platforms into our everyday lives. Rather than aiming to offer a totalising account of experiences with and of social media, then, I was able to focus more specifically on those instances that emphasise the potential coordination of bodies across time and space through technology. That is, in deploying liveness as a conceptual device, I have observed and analysed empirically the

existential dimensions of social media – foregrounding mediation as an experiential process in and of itself. My analysis, thus, offered original empirical evidence that supports and furthers our understanding of how these technologies act as infrastructures of being (Peters 2015), enabling but also framing and circumventing our experience of the social world.

9.2.2 Rejecting platform-centrism

My analysis further provided evidence to support environmental approaches to social media in order to complement existing device-oriented perspectives. It became clear that, in the context of everyday life, 'being on social media' does not necessarily mean staying enclosed within the confines of a particular platform. In wayfaring (Moores 2017; Markham 2020) in their 'promiscuous absorption' (Highmore 2011) through this complex digital ecosystem, participants have described a continuous, unpredictable, and improvised transit between interfaces and apps, incentivised also by the sharing of links, screenshots, and reposts, by the appropriation and embedding of one platform's content into another, and by the cross-platform interoperability afforded by a significantly monopolised landscape of media ownership. Corroborating theorisations provided by Madianou and Miller (2013) and Couldry and Hepp (2016), my findings demonstrate how, in everyday life, social media are often not experienced as discrete applications but rather as a complex, messy, and interconnected manifold.

Yet, rather than focusing on the role of particular social, emotional, or interactional purposes in the choice of which platform or device to use in certain communicative situations – which is at the heart of the theory of polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2013) – my critical-phenomenological inclination foregrounded how these choices are frequently driven by convenience and habit, and yet always affected by the conditions supported by the technological environment itself, in which to a great extent social media themselves acknowledge[16] and even encourage[17] 'cross-platform interplay'. A phenomenology of social media, I argue, cannot be platform-centric, precisely because of the environmental, distributed, and dynamic status of these technologies in contemporary social life.

Moreover, the rejection of platform-centric approaches also allowed me to capture the fluid, dynamic, and contingent character of body-technology relations with and of social media.

[16] https://twitter.com/Twitter/status/1466443318003384325?s=20&t=b6Mxqc8gtgnNIpw7dPJ3GQ
[17] https://about.fb.com/news/2020/09/new-messaging-features-for-instagram/

Throughout this project, I have appropriated Ihde's (1990) conception of those associations as marked by at least two different modalities. Based on Heidegger's (2008) differentiation between ready-to-hand and present-at-hand, Ihde (1990) argued that technologies can be treated as the objects of experience and as means to experiences. In the case of media technologies, this dual character becomes particularly evident, and has relevant ramifications. As I have argued, depending on how social media are treated or perceived in each instance, different experiential arrangements come to the fore. Their capacities for real-time connection, for the impression of 'being there' when you are not, for the feeling of 'getting involved in a shared experience', and for claiming themselves as affording 'authentic' experiences – that is, their potential for liveness – is therefore deeply dependent on those wavering, fluid, body dispositions and hermeneutic engagements. That is, as a phenomenon, 'social media' exceed the confines of particular devices, interfaces and apps, and is also marked by manifold techno-embodied dispositions.

9.2.3 Active engagement and passive absentmindedness

The examination of liveness through the lens of habituation has further allowed me to identify another site of struggle for social media; a matter that, I suggest, should also be of crucial interest to a broader critical phenomenology of mediation. Namely, my enquiry into liveness as a latent, pervasive potential and sense of anticipation (which is often not concretised) foregrounded the participants' conception of certain experiences as inherently 'passive' and, often, marked by a state of absentmindedness. Such conceptions, in turn, seem to reflect the normative 'ideal usership' constructed by the platforms through their discursive material configurations (Docherty 2020). In basic terms, 'mindlessness' or 'absentmindedness' imply a (partial) lack of conscious awareness of the context in which one's behaviour takes place (Langer 1992; Nass and Moon 2000). In the case of social media, I argue, this also seems to reproduce a separation between mind (assumed to be lethargically inert, empty, void) and body (which is actively, compulsively engaged, scrolling and swiping frantically). Indeed, Cartesian dualism, as I have discussed in Chapter 3, is actually a foundational problem for phenomenological enquiry – a philosophical tradition that, instead, is premised on the inseparability of the cognitive and carnal aspects of our embodied existence (Merleau-Ponty 2012).

Appropriating from Carmi (2020) the idea that mainstream platforms inform our very conception of what 'sociality' is, I argue that the sensorial orchestration of social media also fundamentally constructs and shapes the idea of what is a *lively*, 'active' experience (and what is not). Scrolling through an endless stream of content, for instance, although requiring active bodily movement and 'work' from the user – in 'jumping' into the flow, swiping, clicking, tapping, scrolling a bit more – is generally assumed to be a 'passive', 'absent-minded' task. This is, in my view, the unquestioned, naturalised reproduction of 'engagement' (as discussed in Chapter 2) as the ideal, valued attribute of social media practices. At a first level, this is a reductive binary, for it does not correspond to how these technologies are put to use in everyday life: as demonstrated by my analysis, interviewees say they curate their feeds through selective exposure and 'clicking consciously' (Bucher 2018) (which would classify as 'active engagement') in order to make it more bearable to spend extended periods of time online ('passive engagement') – which makes both practices intertwined and their division extremely porous. More importantly, this distinction is platform-centric insofar as 'active experience' is reduced to those practices that more clearly generate quantifiable data footprints (Docherty 2020). The lens of habit, I argue, offers us a less 'platform-centric' vocabulary for examining the different modalities of attention afforded by the social media manifold, and allows the examination of how power relations become incorporated into everyday life.

In this regard, based on the idea that habit is ideology in action (Chun 2017), the focus on liveness has allowed me to observe how some of social media's ideologies are enacted (and contested) in everyday settings. Although emphasising experiential enhancement in their institutional and promotional materials – promising to 'bring the world closer together', amongst other techno-dreams – my analysis suggests that mainstream social media are, in practice, associated with much more grounded, trivial, minor ambitions of day-to-day life. To appropriate the description provided by Schüll (2012:113) in a different context, these technologies "are not designed for enchantment; they are designed for convenience and habit". That is, users might be persuaded to download a given app and join a particular platform due to grand promises of accessing the world beyond the limits of time and space. And yet, what makes social media so appealing is their ease of use and their convenient incorporation into our routines and ordinary practices – indeed, often, their incorporation to fill the void and emptiness that emerge between routines and practices.

As discussed throughout this monograph, the continuous potential for experiences of immediate connection through media – that is, liveness – as well as the eventual instances of 'the live' proper help to make the otherwise bleak, boring, repetitive routine of social media use more bearable, meaningful, and justifiable. In this more dispersed sense, liveness, this thesis argues, constitutes a fundamental component to the maintenance of social media's ordinariness – as a pervasive (even if often subtle) potentiality, liveness helps to sustain social media habits. This is, of course, not accidental: the critical-phenomenological approach I have been adhering to accepts and acknowledges that, in social media, habit is built into their very design. This sensorial orchestration (Highmore 2011), however, only works if users subject themselves to those processes of orientation, and if they feel like continuously checking, scrolling, and 'engaging' with these technologies in the context of everyday life.

9.3 Contributions to advancing a critical-phenomenological agenda for media studies

In using the concept of liveness as both the central topic of enquiry and as a sensitising device for a broader examination of the experiences people have with and of social media platforms, this thesis also aimed to advance a critical phenomenology of a heavily mediated world. Bearing this in mind, in this section I will discuss in more detail how the analysis and findings contribute to this advancement, and what some of its implications are.

In proposing a critical-phenomenological approach (Couldry and Kallinikos 2017), I have tried to acknowledge and take seriously the drawbacks of existing phenomenological takes on liveness, as pointed out by van Es (2016). Those mostly refer to the fact that the scholarship that centres audiences' lived experiences traditionally overlooks the ideological functions of media and the power relations endorsed in those settings. And yet, in this thesis I also rejected common critiques that frame phenomenology as inherently apolitical and solipsistic, by emphasising how critical scholarship contributes to understanding lived experience as always context-contingent, socially shaped, and discursively constructed (Ahmed 2006; Scott 1991; Markham and Rodgers 2017). In orienting and inclining our bodies in certain ways (Ahmed 2006) – in orchestrating what it is possible to experience (Highmore 2011) – technologies acquire a profoundly existential dimension (Lagerkvist 2017).

Crucially, a critical-phenomenological approach has granted me the conceptual foundation necessary to pay attention to how the messy, often ambivalent negotiation that characterises

lived experience is conditioned and oriented by the platforms themselves, their affordances, business models, and commercial imperatives. In this context, 'experience', as I have discussed, is both what social media platforms (claim to) provide, and the resource they cultivate, extract, and exploit for profitability purposes. The starting point of this thesis was overcoming this apparent incongruence, and rejecting their presumed incompatibility as a matter of academic enquiry. Indeed, a critically informed phenomenology of mediation, as I have been arguing since the Introduction, allows us to centre and interrogate longstanding desires, hopes, and dreams, and how those are enacted in habituated practices with media technologies. That is, a critical-phenomenological approach affords the examination of how historical promises are actualised, negotiated, incorporated, and naturalised in the context of everyday life.

'How the world appears' to us – and how certain aspects are surfaced to our stream of consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 2012) – is a classic phenomenological motif. Social media's power, at least from the perspective embraced by this monograph, is linked to their world-building capacities – to their abilities to make the world apprehensible, *experientiable*. As we have seen, in the context of platformisation, this 'surfacing' is significantly affected by the selection, organisation, and presentation of content to meet the (alleged) personalised interests of given individuals and keep them continuously connected, which in turn is informed by the commercial drives that guide the operation of these profit-oriented companies. Indeed, I conclude, both phenomenological habituation (Highmore 2011; Leder 1990) and social media's algorithmic recommendation (Bucher 2017, 2018; Frischmann and Selinger 2018) appear to be premised on 'freeing' the body from the burden of continuous decision-making.

The body is, indeed, the very starting point of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 2012) – and this thesis is, then, also a statement for keeping embodiment front and centre in analyses of the entanglements between technology and sociality. Despite frustrated recreations of perceptual immediacy as discussed throughout Chapter 8, I argue that mediation and embodiment are not incompatible opposites; indeed, while the body is increasingly mediated, mediated practices as those examined in the empirical analysis are certainly embodied. Whilst the focus on the haptic and somatic dimensions of socio-technical arrangements seems relatively common in subareas such as mobile media studies and interactive digital games, I argue that media and communications research more broadly would benefit from embracing the fleshly and the

sensorial in order to complement now ubiquitous references to the agency of technical objects and how they affect us through 'more-than-human' perspectives.

Indeed, in social media, 'appearances' – and the experiences they give rise to – are contingent not only on the technology itself, but also on other factors such as the users' emotional states and moods. In this regard, the 'world that appears to us' via social media can sometimes be exciting, lively, dynamic, vibrant. But it is also often perceived as homophilic – repetitive even – partial, confining, and eventually isolating. In becoming attached to technological objects that are incorporated into their sensorium, people feel simultaneously detached and alienated from their authentic selves. These technologies represent, to a large extent, some of the most basic structures for our existence and experience of the world today. As demonstrated by my analysis, the habituation of these devices and software is environmental, 'architectural' (Lovink 2019) but, at the same time, so deeply personal, intimate, and even visceral.

If we go back to the four organising principles of phenomenology foregrounded in my analysis, we will notice that the problems attributed by my participants to, and the threats represented by, social media are, ultimately, experiential ones: from the angle of temporality, social media are fast, repetitive, impermanent, and unpredictable; from that of spatiality, they are confining and constrictive; from that of intersubjectivity, they are isolating and individualised; from that of embodiment, they are highly addictive and fundamentally inauthentic. This thesis started with the premise that platforms' attraction is fundamentally a phenomenological one – and, according to my analysis, so are many of their burdens. The participants' relations with social media seem profoundly marked by cruel optimism (Berlant 2011): they go to these platforms seeking lively, vibrant (even if ordinary) experiences; then blame technologies for preventing them from living in the moment and enjoying 'actual life'. "Neoliberal subjects" – as further posited by Chun (2018:39) – "are always searching, rarely finding".

Throughout this thesis, I explored the contradiction represented by social media's alleged opportunities for reaching out and feeling present in the world beyond our immediate constraints, and the fact that they are, simultaneously, deemed to confine our perceptual field. In this regard, as discussed in the empirical chapters, starting a phenomenology of mediation from the concept of liveness allowed me to capture the mobilisation of particular perceptions, understandings, and imaginaries of (human) connection. Those seem largely premised on the existence of a fixed, authentic 'self' (and the platforms' business model, it might be worth

recalling, requires a 'fixed' set of values to make users 'programmable', as pointed out by Frischmann and Selinger 2018), which is then always threatened by the intrinsic impurity represented by technical mediation. The 'human' traits emphasised by the participants foreground naturalness, spontaneity, the direct access to an assumed self-evident social world. Mediation, then, seems to provide at best a 'pseudo-existence'; a sort of 'being-in-the-world-but-not-really'. What is at stake in the phenomenological study of liveness – the contested, unsolvable experience of immediate connection through media – is the very possibility for us to experience the social world through technical mediation once it becomes incorporated into our sensorium and integrated into our routines.

9.4 On the research process and its limitations

If, as I have been arguing, experiences with and of social media should be accepted and examined for their messiness, complexity, and ambivalence, then perhaps the same treatment should be dedicated to demystifying the research process. After all, writing a monograph comprises making narratives seem much more straightforward than they unfolded in practice. In this section, I will go through some of the reflexive realisations and adjustments that were necessary during the development of this project, and offer suggestions for future scholarship.

Perhaps the most obvious point to address is the fact that the division between the organising principles of phenomenology that have guided my theorisation of liveness and my empirical analysis is much more porous than my narrative made it seem. Indeed, although I had initially outlined the empirical chapters so that each of them would be centred on one of the dimensions of embodiment, temporality, spatiality, and intersubjectivity, in practice the decision on the empirical themes that belonged to each category required some analytical flexibility – which, however, might be the case for qualitative research more broadly. Yet, rather than trying to impose rigid containers for distinctive experiences with and of social media as belonging exclusively to the realm of 'time', 'space', 'body', or 'sociality', I intended instead to use these dimensions as sensitising clusters that would foreground and flesh out particular manifestations or potentialities of 'the live' – which, I believe, has been achieved.

Rejecting the idea that it would be possible for social research to capture an assumed unmediated, pure experience, I emphasised in my empirical work precisely the invariably embodied and representational aspect of the research process. In this regard, I maintain that

although I have focused my analysis on the verbalisation of the experience – that is, on the articulations provided by people who had particular experiences, rather than on their 'live' observation – my mostly discursive methods emphasise feltness, situatedness, and contextuality. Supported by the conception of experience as comprising both sensing and sense-making, I argued that a combination of description and interpretation is a valid means for scholarly enquiry, and for generating critique. Moreover, I restress that rather than seeking generalisability or demographic representativity, my empirical analysis was admittedly 'provincial' (Mol 2021), premised instead on the apprehension of 'common wordly' phenomena (Scannell 2014), and therefore methodological rigour was grounded in reflexivity, evocativeness, and recognisability (Highmore 2011).

When I first started the project, I had anticipated that the materiality of technology – that is, the physical components and affordances of the objects themselves – would acquire a much more prominent role in my theoretical chapters as well as in my analysis. It was only when I started taking notes on the gathered empirical data that I fully realised that my phenomenological sensibility, due to its epistemological commitments, would privilege a much more 'humanistic' depiction of everyday lived experience. Although this might reproduce a certain 'human exceptionalism' (Mol 2021) and to some extent disregard the symmetry and 'nonhuman' agency that have been in vogue in the social sciences in recent decades, I prefer to own the decision of centring my study of liveness on human desires and their enactment, more than on technical performance. This is not to say, of course, that materiality does not matter, or that the objects and institutions involved do not play a crucial role in 'human experience' – as I hope this project conveys, I see this as a very intricate relationship, in which the experiential and its orchestration are fundamentally intertwined.

And yet, I also came to realise that this 'human-centred' approach contains and reproduces certain inclinations and biases. My phenomenological take, I noticed – which is admittedly largely informed by a 'continental' perspective – also privileges a relatively narrow version of the 'experiential'. Particularly, in focusing on the senses and on 'neuromuscular' perception (as designated by Leder 1990), my critical phenomenology of liveness framed mediation mostly as a 'navigational' (Ihde 1990) process. That is, as something that we orient ourselves towards as we move around and traverse the world. This is perhaps made most clear if we pay attention to all the 'water' metaphors that appeared and informed my empirical analysis: I discussed flows, streams, stepping into rivers, surfacing, floating aimlessly, getting absorbed –

getting sucked into, even – sinking, and drowning. Embodied perception, though, is not just gained through the sensorimotor capacities; it is also gained through the viscera (Leder 1990; Peters 1999). Perhaps, then, different experiential approaches to mediation would be able to reverse the poles, and examine instead how it is that, through technologies of communication, the world can navigate inwards and traverse us. Although this is only partially formulated, I hope to pursue in the future a more expanded version of the intricate entanglement of technical mediation and embodied experience – of the incorporation of mediation as a life-sustaining process – and of the modes of being that this perspective would bring forth.

Finally, as clarified in the Introduction, although the gathering of empirical data for this project took place in 2019, the monograph that you are reading was mostly written during the COVID-19 pandemic. If moods are foundational to the experiential – as I have argued throughout the theoretical and empirical chapters – then it is safe to say that the analysis presented and the very writing of this thesis were affected by the uncertainties, anxieties, and fears represented not only by a global health crisis but also by extended periods of social isolation. For a thesis premised on the 'ordinary', mostly uneventful everyday lived experience, the past two years were nothing short of eventful. In disrupting the state of 'normality', the pandemic has made even more complex our possibilities for being in the world with and through technologies of communication, bringing digitally mediated experiences and the overall craving for 'liveness' to the forefront.

The very habitualness of certain media practices might have been affected by the pandemic. Although in the past two years more people seem to have incorporated live-streams and video-calls as part of their media repertoires (even if only because they did not have any alternative), when I conducted my interviews the practice of using these technologies for social and interactive purposes was framed by the participants as extremely unappealing. What I want to convey here is that mediated experiences – especially those contingent on and conditioned by a continuously updating technoscape – are intrinsically changeable, fluid, and accommodating. This should not, however, be enough to invalidate the discussion, the analysis, and the findings of this project. Although, as proclaimed by Hage (2020:663) "the temporality of critique and the temporality of urgent practices are generally incompatible", I am confident that the theoretical and analytical outcomes of this thesis will remain useful to illuminate experiences and practices in a post-pandemic world.

9.5 Epilogue: the future is yours to imagine (or is it?)

"The future is yours to imagine. Join Mark Zuckerberg and other Facebook executives as they share their vision for the Metaverse – a place of new immersive experiences and the next evolution of social technology"[18]

The next frontier of promised experiences of immediate connection through media seems to be right around the corner. After all, as rhetorically asked by Facebook's founder and chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, when introducing the company's vision for an apparently inevitable technological future, "*Isn't that the ultimate promise of technology? To be together with anyone, to be able to teleport anywhere, and to create and experience anything?"*. In the launch of their rebranding strategy, the head of the recently named 'Meta' invited us to imagine and anticipate life without physical barriers, in which devices of virtual and augmented reality are ubiquitous and habitual, and we can finally, according to him, *"experience the world with ever greater richness"*. Arguably, there is nothing particularly original in these pledges and claims of mediated immediacy – indeed, the enduring and continuously updating nature of these promises and dreams has been one of the animating concerns of this thesis from the very beginning. And yet, whilst when this project was first starting to take shape back in 2016 those statements were much more subtle, tacit, and latent, now they have been brought to the fore.

When Zuckerberg delineated his plans for the 'Metaverse', he touched on many of the themes covered in this monograph. Allegedly, the novelty is that this development would finally afford a sensorially richer, more immersive technologically mediated experience – an *"embodied internet"*, as put by Zuckerberg,[19] in which, *"instead of looking at a screen, you're going to be in these experiences".* The miraculous solution is supposed to come from a combination of superior VR headsets, highly customisable avatars, fine-tuned algorithmic systems, sophisticated neural interfaces, accurate sensors to capture voice, gestures, and facial expression, and smooth cross-platform interoperability. Through those artifices, he said, human interaction should finally become more *"natural and vivid"*. In this even more gadget-heavy version of mediated communications, *"devices won't be the focal point of your attention*

[18] https://www.facebookconnect.com/en-us/session/70f2a060-08ef-4aba-a500-3c0495e5519a/

[19] https://www.facebook.com/RealityLabs/videos/561535698440683/

anymore. Instead of getting in the way, they're going to give you a sense of presence, the new experiences that you're having and the people who you're with".

I would like to use this recent, but quite emblematic, case as an opportunity to briefly discuss how the framework developed in this thesis could contribute to shed light on present and future promises of liveness – even when they do not make explicit use of the term. From my critical-phenomenological perspective, approaching this pledged sense of mediated immediacy through habituation has meant focusing not only on seemingly transparent interfaces that (mostly unfruitfully) seek to provide 'immersion', but also dedicating attention to processes of naturalisation of certain types of interactions with technology, and how their status of taken-for-grantedness is achieved in the first place. The habituation and incorporation of VR/AR technologies for socialisation, therefore, is potentially a rich and prolific topic for forthcoming critical-phenomenological research.

It is also worth pointing out that, in presenting the next stage of his company, Zuckerberg called it a transition from 'the social internet' to 'the embodied internet'. As I discussed in the Introduction, there is already a vast body of literature unpacking and appraising the use of the adjective 'social' to distinguish certain types of technologies and practices. Perhaps, then, we need the same dedication and scrutiny in critiquing this attempted possession of 'the body' by Silicon Valley ideology. Embodiment, as understood by the phenomenological approach adopted throughout this thesis, is a basic condition of our being in the world (Heidegger 2008; Merleau-Ponty 2012; Leder 1990) – there is, therefore, no such a thing as a 'disembodied' internet that needs to be fixed, regardless of what Meta might have us believe.

Ultimately, through the introduction of their vision for the next technological wave (in which their companies are, of course, at the forefront), platforms such as Facebook are also informing and framing our conditions of imaginability – the ways in which we can dream and conceive of possible futures (Haupt 2020). In setting the vocabulary and expectations for what the future of mediated communications ought to look like, as well as *"the technology that needs to be invented"* for the concretisation of those fantasies, Zuckerberg and his counterparts are also controlling the narrative of technological development in the direction that best favours their own interests. In explicitly appropriating the matter of 'enhanced experience' as their central business, Zuckerberg is confirming that the ultimate aim of his company's expansion plans is the mediation of every possible realm of our lives. Despite the overly reproduced emphasis on

incrementing ‘the experience’, the plans are obviously also supporting the endurance of their (meta)data-driven operation.

Crucially, these statements and promises confirm that the historical constructs of presence, immediacy, and seamless experiential enhancement are, once again, at the centre of big tech’s vision for the future; a vision that, according to the analysis presented throughout this thesis, users seem easily compelled to accept and adopt as their own. Those are, as I have been discussing, fundamentally desires of mediated liveness – longings and aspirations that are continuously updating precisely because they can never be properly resolved or fulfilled.

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Appendix I – Recruitment advertisement

Appendix II – Informed consent form

Information for Participants

Thank you for considering participating in this research. This information sheet outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant, if you agree to take part.

1. What is the research about?
This doctoral research project investigates typical users' experiences with, through, and of digital technologies of communication and mainstream social media platforms. The focus of interest is on how people perceive distances and proximities – in terms of time, space, and sociality – through their everyday engagements with these platforms.

2. Do I have to take part?
It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you do decide to take part I will ask you to sign a consent form, which you can sign and return in advance of the first interview.

3. What will my involvement be?
You will be asked to take part in two interviews and submit a five-day long electronic diary:

a. First interview: an initial conversation (of 45-60min) covering your uses of and experiences with digital technologies of communication and social media platforms.
b. Electronic diary: a short form (which should take no more than 5min to complete) that you can fill in on your mobile phone, tablet, or computer. You would be expected to submit short entries for five (non-consecutive) days.
c. Second interview: a final conversation (of 45-60min) in which you would be invited to comment and expand on the experiences mentioned in your diaries. Both interviews would take place in a location that is convenient for you, most likely a public coffee shop.

4. How do I withdraw from the study?
You can withdraw at any point, without having to give a reason. If any questions during the interviews make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them. Withdrawing from the study will have no effect on you. If you withdraw from the study we will not retain the information you have given thus far, unless you are happy for us to do so. Please note however that the compensation (of £20) will only be provided to those who complete the three stages detailed above.

6. Will my taking part and my data be kept confidential? Will it be anonymised?
The interviews will be audio recorded for purposes of transcription. The records from this study will be kept as confidential as possible. Only myself and my supervisor will have access to the files and any audio tapes. Your data will be anonymised – your name will not be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study.

7. What if I have a question or complaint?
If you have any questions regarding this study please contact the researcher.
If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the conduct of this research, please contact the LSE Research Governance Manager via research.ethics@lse.ac.uk.
To request a copy of the data held about you please contact: glpd.info.rights@lse.ac.uk

Informed Consent Form

You are about to participate in a study looking at how people perceive social, temporal, and spatial proximities in their everyday engagements with digital technologies of communication and social media platforms.

The data collected for this research project is confidential. Any publication resulting from this study will **not** identify you personally, and no information will be passed to third parties unless you give your consent. You have the right to withdraw at any point, or to ask for your comments to be removed from the data collected.

To confirm that you understand the conditions under which you are participating in this research project, please sign this document after checking the boxes below:

- ❑ I was explained what the research is about.
- ❑ I have had opportunities to ask questions.
- ❑ I agree to be interviewed, and for the interview(s) to be audio recorded for purposes of transcription.
- ❑ I am aware that findings resultant from my interview may be reported in future publications, and that any identifying information (i.e. name) will be anonymised.
- ❑ I agree with the secure storage of the anonymised version of the data collected in this interview.
- ❑ I confirm that my participation in this research is voluntary.
- ❑ I understand that the compensation (of £20, in cash) will be provided after the completion of the three stages of the study (that is, after the second interview).

_____
Name

_____
Date

_____
Signature

Demographic Information

Thanks once again for accepting to participate in my doctoral research.
Before our first interview, please complete the following questionnaire, containing some basic demographic information about you.

Age:

Gender of identification:

Occupation:

Nationality:

How long have you been living in London for?

Do you have any family and/or friends abroad?

Which of the platforms listed below do you use or have used in the past?

- ❑ Facebook
- ❑ Facebook Messenger
- ❑ Forums/chans
- ❑ Google+
- ❑ Instagram
- ❑ LinkedIn
- ❑ Periscope
- ❑ Pinterest
- ❑ Reddit
- ❑ Snapchat
- ❑ Telegram
- ❑ TikTok
- ❑ Tumblr
- ❑ Twitch
- ❑ Twitter
- ❑ WeChat
- ❑ Weibo
- ❑ WhatsApp
- ❑ YouTube
- ❑ Other: _____

Appendix III – Topic guide for the exploratory interview

Warm-up questions
What does a normal weekday look like in your life? And a weekend?

Introductory/general questions
If I asked you to tell me what is going on in the world right now, how would you know?
If I asked you to tell me what is happening with your friends or family right now, how would you know?
[*In case the reply involves social media*] What could [social media] offer you that other technologies and platforms do not?
What is the difference between finding out something through [social media] and through other means?
What is the difference between interacting with someone on [social media] and through other means?
What would you describe as the most important characteristics of [social media]?
What are social media good for? And what are they bad for?
What social media platforms do you use? Why do you use each of them? [see questionnaire]

TIME/REAL
Do you think social media platforms help you to know what is happening in the moment? Is there any specific platform you prefer to keep informed/updated?
Do social media always reflect what is happening now/recently? How do you know it? How do you feel about that?
How do you know if what you are seeing through social media is really happening right now?
Do you have an example of a situation in which you felt like you needed to access social media in order to know what was happening at that precise time?

SPACE/SOCIAL
Do you use social media to access people or events that are geographically distant? If yes, what kinds of people/events? And which platforms do you prefer?
How do you use social media to access or reach something or someone that is someplace else?
Do social media make you feel close to distant others?
Do you use social media to know where others are/were and what they're doing? How?
Do you use social media to let others know where you are/were? How? Why?

Devices/artefacts
How do you usually access the Internet/social media? Where? In which situation(s)?
Is there one device in particular that you use more often? Why?
Do you have a mobile phone? Where do you usually keep your mobile device? Is it with you right now? Do you think you could spend a day without your phone? How would you feel? Would you be missing (or feel like you are missing) anything at all?

Closing questions
If you could create a new social media platform, or improve an existing one, what should it have? Why is it important?
Is there anything I haven't asked about and you feel like you would like to add?

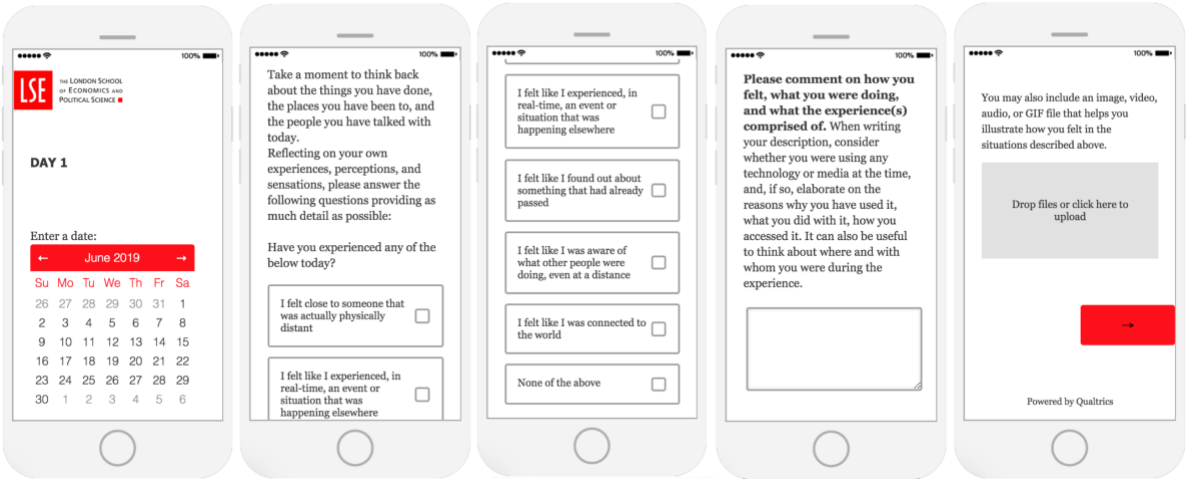
Appendix IV – Instructions and prompts for the diaries

[Screenshots taken from Qualtrics]

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this diary, your participation is highly appreciated. You should try to submit daily entries for five days, and you will receive daily emails with the corresponding links.

The information provided by you through this diary is confidential, and it will be accessible to the researcher only. The data will be anonymized in any resultant publications. By submitting this entry you are agreeing with the terms stated in the Informed Consent document you have previously read and signed.

If you have any questions or difficulties, please write to Ludmila Lupinacci: **L.Lupinacci-Amaral@lse.ac.uk**



Appendix V – List of probing questions for the elicitation interview

Part A: THE DIARY AS A METHOD
- Can you tell me a little bit about your experience with submitting your entries?
- When did you submit? Where were you? What gadget did you use?
- Was it difficult to fill in? Was there any question that you found confusing?
- Was it too much of a burden? Was it too repetitive?

PART B: YOUR PERSONAL DIARY
READ DIARY DAY 1
Re-enactment of a given experience: situate (context, sensations, significance), and expand (generalisability, relation to other experiences)
- The physical context in which the experience took place
- Sensory and emotional aspects that accompanied it
- Detailed characteristics and key aspects
    Internal logic: What was the first thing you did? What happened next?
    Reflective process: How do you feel when you do X?
- Significance of the described events and experiences

Interpretations attributed to the mentioned experiences

DO THE SAME WITH ALL DIARY ENTRIES

Part C: CLARIFICATIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS
In case contradictions or inconsistencies between the diaries and the exploratory interview are identified, explore those during the second interview

Appendix VI – Demographic profiles

Abbie
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 19
Nationality: UK
Occupation: Student

Alyssa
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 24
Nationality: USA
Occupation: Customer Service

Anna
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 25
Nationality: UK
Occupation: Footwear developer

Arthur
Gender: Male
Age at the time of the interview: 41
Nationality: UK
Occupation: Education consultant

Debora
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 25
Nationality: UK/Chile
Occupation: Engineer

Ian
Gender: Male
Age at the time of the interview: 38
Nationality: UK/Greece
Occupation: Self-employed salesman

Iris
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 24
Nationality: UK
Occupation: Designer

Joe
Gender: Male
Age at the time of the interview: 25

Nationality: Ireland
Occupation: Mental health social worker

Julia
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 45
Nationality: Australia
Occupation: Post officer

Lewis
Gender: Male
Age at the time of the interview: 26
Nationality: UK
Occupation: Bike mechanic

Luc
Gender: Male
Age at the time of the interview: 34
Nationality: UK
Occupation: Designer

Maeve
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 27
Nationality: UK
Occupation: Administrative Officer

Marjorie
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 25
Nationality: France
Occupation: Publishing, unemployed

Monica
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 25
Nationality: Venezuela
Occupation: Illustrator

Paul
Gender: Male
Age at the time of the interview: 43
Nationality: Poland/UK
Occupation: Administrative officer

Roger
Gender: Male
Age at the time of the interview: 43
Nationality: Colombia/UK
Occupation: Administrative officer

Rosie
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 47
Nationality: South Africa/UK
Occupation: Administrator

Siena
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 20
Nationality: UK
Occupation: Student

Simone
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 33
Nationality: Tunisia/France
Occupation: Marketing Officer

Sophie
Gender: Female
Age at the time of the interview: 24
Nationality: Canada
Occupation: Au Pair

Appendix VII – Codebook

Embodiment
- Authentic self
- Body
- Non-mediated
- Real-life
- Self-presentation
- Sensorial
- Well-being

Environment
- Cross-platform
- Other media
- Social media

Habit
- Addiction
- Boredom
- Convenience
- Flow
- Mindlessness
- Ordinariness
- Repetition
- Routine

Imaginability
- Alternatives
- Dissatisfactions
- Fears
- Hopes

Intersubjectivity
- Awareness
- Collectivity
- Participation
- Togetherness

Mediation
- Affordance
- Algorithms
- Constraints
- Materiality
- Media richness
- Operation
- Personalisation

Motivations

- Access
- Entertainment
- Inspiration
- Keep in touch
- Mood management
- Personal relevance
- Responsibility
- Sharing
- Time filler
- Updates/information
- Visibility

Outcomes

- Anxiety
- Deadness
- Excitement
- FOMO
- Frustration
- Mistrust
- Pointlessness
- Reassurance

Space

- Being there
- Emotional proximity
- Isolation
- Locality
- Physical proximity
- Witnessing

Tactics

- Disconnection
- Platform-readiness
- Privacy management
- Safe-space
- Self-regulation

Time

- Acceleration
- Algorithmic
- Chronology
- Ephemerality
- Freshness
- Instantaneity
- Live (feel)
- Live (proper)
- Nowness
- Repetition
- Simultaneity
- Slowness

Appendix VIII – Social media: definitions and repertoires

As discussed in the Introduction and in Chapter 2, the definition of 'social media' is often vague and imprecise in the specialised scholarship, and this is probably due to both the difficulty inherent to this conceptual task and to an assumed tacit agreement on what exactly we mean by the term, given that these technologies are now so pervasive and habitual. Still, in talking to people who use these platforms in the context of everyday life, different aspects were highlighted by varied individuals.

The main point of divergence seemed to be with the conflation of platforms dedicated to instant messaging – such as WhatsApp – with multipurpose applications – like Facebook – under the umbrella term 'social media'. Take Anna's view, for instance. At the beginning of our first interview, she interrupted me to ask what I meant by 'social media'; taken aback, I then prompted her to give me her own attempt of a definition instead. Social media, she said, *"would be like a way of keeping in contact with people. In my head it's more of a visual thing. When I think of social media I think of, like, visual things, like photos. Because WhatsApp it's just like texting, just on the internet. And I wouldn't call texting social media… But I guess it is in a way"*. That is, Anna uses both the purpose ("keeping in contact with people" versus "just texting") and the affordances and interfaces ("visual things, like photos") to delineate her conceptualisation. She then concluded: *"I guess WhatsApp is social media, but I just never thought about it that way before"*.

In a similar vein, Abbie explains that she would also not classify WhatsApp as social media, *"basically because it's texting on the internet. You can have group chats, but you still have to have someone's number to contact them, so it's still kind of a closed space. Whereas other social media, they're like open, you can find anyone (…) a platform that enables connection to anyone if they put themselves in that platform"*. In addition to this perceived openness and publicness, she said, in social media "*you can find and see things that you wouldn't otherwise. (…) I personally I guess just use it for entertainment. Like, finding memes and stuff, or videos to watch. Just stuff that I like. Get content but also entertainment in terms of communication with friends and stuff".*

And still, not even this emphasis on 'content' and 'entertainment' as the basis for the definition of social media is a consensus: Marjorie used these very same attributes to delimitate what social media *is not*. The main platform she uses for these purposes is Tumblr – *"but Tumblr is a whole other thing. I don't even consider it social media, it's just dump. You dump things that you like and you discuss about it. It's like a forum".* 'Social media', then, seems to be attached to one's personal social networks and contacts, and resembles the definition of social network(ing) site provided by boyd and Ellison (2007), mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 2. This is corroborated by Joe:

> *I find it funny that you'd categorised reddit as social media – I don't see it as social media. Social media it's like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter. Like… I guess you're still interacting, but on reddit you don't put pictures of your face, and it feels a lot more anonymous. On Facebook you use your real name, on Instagram most people put their name on their biography, on Twitter as well, and they're verified if they're famous. But on reddit people could be whatever they, like… it's anonymous, they don't have a profile picture, there are threads or comments without any repercussions, so they are not held accountable for what they're saying. It's not easy to track, you know. Social media is more personal, and attributable as well.*

Under such a view, the main purpose of using social media *"is to communicate with others at mass scale, and it's an easy way of storytelling your life. (…) Like life logging. For me, social media is a way of storytelling and making points on your life as you go along that's easy and quick"* – said Luc. My reading of the delimitation issue exemplified by those verbalisations is that, overall, when faced with the term 'social media', most of the participants initially thought of Facebook and Instagram, and particularly of the public performativity afforded by these platforms, which in turn directly affects the kinds of experiences made possible by them.

The experience of 'social media', in this narrower conception, would be that of having a personal, public profile, and encountering an endless flux of content – which is often a combination of things posted by one's friends and other sources of information and entertainment – through a 'feed' or 'stream'. In this regard, one thing to consider is how the platforms themselves present and define what they do; WhatsApp, for instance, is described on its institutional website as an "app" that "is free and offers simple, secure, reliable messaging and calling". Yet, as I demonstrate over the empirical chapters, once the participants started to describe their own uses, this definition becomes increasingly porous and elastic. For this reason, in my analysis I continue to embrace a broader definition of social media, which includes also platforms that are mostly focused on "texting on the Internet".

This is not to imply, however, that every platform is used for the same drives. As explained by Monica, *"I just have different platforms that work differently for me. So, Instagram is about artists, mostly illustrators; Whastapp is more for direct friends, family that I want to keep in touch with; Twitter is even more… Either current affairs, like politics, or social things. (…) And also stupid stuff, which I keep liking all the time, like GIFs".* Later during the interview, however, she recognised that this division is not always as crystal clear as it may seem: *"I use Instagram not only to follow my very close friends, and we may even communicate directly through private messaging and so on, but also I follow a lot of illustrators there, and a lot of publications. Also, it blurs the relation between work and personal"*.

One's conception of 'social media' is also invariably tainted by their own practices and uses. In this regard, focusing the recruitment on a heterogeneity of experiences allowed me to capture the perceptions of people with very different types of media repertoires. Whilst some of the participants swiftly combine a range of platforms, others prefer to privilege just one our two applications. This is Ian's case. He mentioned how WhatsApp offers everything he currently needs, as other platforms feel increasingly uncomfortable: *"I'm starting to give up on Facebook and Twitter somehow, I don't feel totally… I feel somehow that what you do is you go through each and you choose. And if you're not satisfied with something and you find something else, you move on. You go through various different things, and it's there for you to choose whatever you feel comfortable with".*

Additionally, mainstream platforms' popularity tends to be quite momentary – when writing this thesis, for instance, everyone seemed to be talking about TikTok, although during the empirical data collection the app was still considered 'niche' and 'silly' by most of my interviewees. Facebook Inc.'s platforms – particularly, Instagram and WhatsApp – were by far the most prevalent amongst the participants, but Twitter, Facebook (and Messenger), and Snapchat were also a significant part of several people's repertoires. Some participants detailed using Chinese platforms – namely, WeChat and Weibo – in specific occasions, when they were either travelling to Eastern Asia or needed to keep in touch with someone who was over there. As described by Paul, *"It was necessity, and since I came back from China haven't used it since, so that was specifically for the purpose of travelling"*. In comparing those apps with Western ones, Joe – who used to live in Japan, and downloaded WeChat to maintain contact

with friends from mainland China and Hong Kong –, established: *"Their stickers are cooler. It's the only advantage of WeChat, if I'm honest with you. And it works in China. It's Chinese WhatsApp, as far as I'm concerned".*

This multiplatform ecosystem is further complexified by their multimodal character – most platforms nowadays offer the possibilities for using, posting, and consuming text, images, videos, and voice notes. When asked to elaborate on how he chooses which communicative modality to use in a given situation, Paul illustrated the improvisational, habitual character of this process: *"I don't think I think, it just happens. (…) It's not like I'm thinking about it, it's not a conscious decision. It's like, maybe I call. It's difficult to say, it just happens. I haven't thought about it, to be honest. It's just whatever you feel like in the moment. It's all on the go".* Thus, the decision of which platform to use is not always a conscious one – and, often, attributed to the preferences of the other interactor. This point is exemplified by Rosie, who uses WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger interchangeably: *"it's just whatever other people… however we started the conversation. And that's how it's carried on. There's no thought that goes into it, it's just whatever they contact me first, or it's less hard"*.

Another important dimension of the social media ecosystem is that it exceeds the confines of so-called social media themselves – or, in other words, that other media such as television and radio, as well as news media outlets' own apps, are deeply embedded in the experiences described by the participants. Abbie recollected an instance in which the boundaries between different mediums seemed to confound. Although she has the Guardian News app on her phone – and receives most of her 'hard news' notifications through that –, she first heard of the Grenfell fire trough Snapchat: *"I saw a Snapchat story from someone who's a nurse, and I realised something must have happened. But I guess that's because it's quite a close event, so it's kind of still about your existing circles".* Whereas in this case stumbling across news was unexpected, other people admit relying mostly on Facebook to keep appraised about current affairs – as illustrated by Sophie: *"I scroll through and I get a lot of The Independent, or they're gonna have their own articles that will be suggested on my Facebook's ads. That's how usually I read stuff, or just seeing friends posting about it. I've never actually gone to the websites to run onto the news page, it's always through suggested articles"*. While also relying on the content presented on the feed *("I usually just scroll…"),* Alyssa mentions yet another possibility for keeping informed – through links sent by other people: *"I did click the other day*

on an article my dad shared, but usually the title is good enough for me to have a sense of what their point is, basically".

Another important aspect to mention is the fact that whatever set of practices this thesis depicts is unlikely to remain unchanged for a long period of time. People's usage of different platforms – and the things they tend to do in the same platforms – tends to shift, not only because new alternatives are introduced, but also because they might lose the interest they once had in a previously existing one. When asked to reflect on these changes, some of the participants pointed out to a generational shift, in which different life-stages are said to favour certain types of interactions, performances, rewards, and platforms. For Sophie, for instance, Twitter and Tumblr "*were just a teenage thing. Like, Tumblr was teenage-angst [laughter] you'd post very emotional things and photos and artsy dramatic, and snippets of this one time you got your heart broken"*. In a similar vein, in justifying why he now spends much less time on Facebook than before, Luc speculated: "*I don't know, probably an age thing as well. You realise that, actually, other people don't care. It doesn't matter. People don't really care about what you're up to and where you're going. It probably was important to me ten years ago, whereas now… I think it's probably a maturity thing. You change as you get older, and you realise that's actually pointless to chase likes".*

And although mapping generational gaps is not within the scope of this thesis, it seems relevant to note that, because of demographic variation, whereas some of the participants have a clear memory of their social lives 'before social media', others don't. As explained by Abbie*, "I guess I'm of a generation where I never experienced not having social media. (…) I mean, I think I got WhatsApp when I was like, 11 or something. And then a YouTube channel when I was also like 11. I got on Instagram when I was 12 or 13"*. Other than the shifting social needs inherent to a transition from adolescence to adulthood, the emergence of new platforms was also part of the participants' theorisations on their shifting relations to social media. Crucially, one's attachment to a particular platform seems to be perceived as intrinsically transitory, as described by Arthur:

> *LinkedIn I think I've had for 12 years, Facebook for 12 years as well. Instagram for maybe 7 years, Twitter for 10 years. And my journey with each of them has changed a lot. As each of them came along, it changed my relationship to the longstanding ones. I was on Facebook for a couple of years before I was on Twitter. And then I wasn't an active user of Twitter for a couple of years after that, and it changed my relationship with Facebook. And Instagram changed my relationship with those as well. (…) And at one point, I was so obsessed with Facebook, now I just don't care. There is*

> *always something that's probably a bit addictive, or a bit toxic. I'm probably at that stage with Instagram, but maybe I won't be in a few years.*

As yet another reason to explain their lack of interest in certain platforms, participants articulated their concern over privacy and surveillance, manifesting an increasing awareness (even if only superficial) of the political economy of social media. In some cases, this awareness could be attributed to the interviewee's familiarity with digital technology – Iris, for instance, who works as a designer for a software company, believes she has recently become *"more critical"*: *"For instance, in terms of my use of apps and things like that, I certainly became more aware of what the designers do in order to make you do. You know, you're looking for ways to engage the user and ensure they're coming back. So as I do that at my job, I'm aware that Instagram will be doing that [chuckle*]". For the majority of the participants, however, their understanding of how social media operates comes not always from first-hand experience, but rather from 'hearing' or 'reading' about it – frequently, through the platforms themselves. Joe, for example, said he has never been aware of his personal data being collected and employed for commercial purposes, although he knows it happens: *"I never experienced data mining myself, but I do know people who use apps that record your age, and height and how fast you are"*.

Maeve mentioned having *"read that social media manipulates its algorithms to continue showing you what you're clicking on, and you end up in these echo chambers"*. Likewise, after Luc manifested his discontent with Facebook – "*I really don't trust it, I think it's all rubbish, all fake*", I prompted him to explain how this lack of trust emerged. He then said: *"I think firstly it has to do with what I read about the American elections. Like, Cambridge Analytica, and how Trump paid the media to kind of sway people's vote. So from that period, now I just don't trust anything that's on Facebook"*. In short, the representations of social media available in the news and popular culture invariably inform my participants' experiences (or at least their articulated accounts on those experiences). *"If you really get worried about something, you need to read it, actually Google the news",* said Sophie – probably unaware that search engines themselves are not neutral tools to the access to a factual reality.

In any case, I take those instances to illustrate a theoretical point made earlier – that one's experience of social media exceeds their individual use of a given platform, as it is also contingent on broader discourses that surround these technologies. These discourses, is worth noting, sometimes come from the very platforms we are talking about – either through press

releases, pop-up notifications introducing updates, or even from the content produced by other users theorising how platforms work. Abbie, for example, when asked about when she first noticed that Instagram's feed was not chronological anymore, said: *"I think I read about it on Instagram, because they announced it. (...) And there were accounts I follow – of make-up artists and stuff – and they complained that because of the algorithm they can't be seen, because famous accounts have more followers and stuff. So, yeah, I found out about it on the platform".* Seeking to apprehend 'pure' experience, then, is indeed an unachievable task