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Realizing Virtuality: Tracing the Contours of Digital Culture

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Realizing Virtuality: Tracing the Contours of Digital Culture

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Laurie, who has always been there to push me, trust me and encourage me to achieve greatness. To David, for giving me a friend when I needed it the most and an escape from the monotony of daily life. Finally, to my immediate family, for believing that I could overcome the odds and discover my passion.

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ABSTRACT

People connect digitally through social media, fusing their relationships with meaning in a non-space of relational potential—a translucent and fluctuating enclave where the self becomes elastic. This thesis explores how I have formed bonds in virtual space through ritual interaction. Looking at the ways I learned to use technology through the progression of a close personal relationship, I suggest that social media use is a performance of identity—a *virtuality* that exposes how people negotiate the digital enclosure of contemporary society. My story is one of digital nativity and reclaiming love through virtual performance. I show how these performances have had a profound impact on my understanding of self-in-relation-to-other. Finally, I put forth a theory of Real Virtuality, suggesting that virtual reality has escaped the confines of the machine. Thus, digital conversations penetrate offline social situations in ways that have stirring consequences for people in the digital age.

CHAPTER 1:
A PREMISE FOR REAL VIRTUALITY

When the technology itself grows powerful enough to make the illusions increasingly realistic, as the Net promises to do within the next ten to twenty years, the necessity for continuing to question reality grows even more acute.

Harold Rheingold (1993, p. 257)

This study explores how “virtual”—a metaphor often applied to modes of interactivity in online contexts—can be extended to offline contexts of social interaction. Although many scholars suggest that online contexts reflect a social experience that is quite “real” (Watson, 2007), the goal here is to reverse this logic—to suggest that reality has, in fact, become virtual.

My goal is to explore the ways that so-called “real” experiences of social action are colored by technological interface. This approach is tied to the notion of technological ubiquity (Andrejevic, 2007), a socio-technical perspective that recognizes the prominence of powerful social media, the accelerated development of communication technologies, and the convergent nature of digital culture (Jenkins, 2006). This thesis focuses on how people adopt, adapt, and experience social media as technologies of self identification. I argue that by recognizing how subjectivity has been conditioned by digital culture, scholars are poised to better understand the spatial-temporal collapse that merges “the virtual” and “the real.”

At the center of my inquiry is the notion of “digitization.” As humans continue to connect in revolutionary ways (Shirky, 2008), the spaces they inhabit virtually, much like the language that defines these spaces, become messy, layered, and overlapping. This is because digitization is a phenomenological process of virtual embodiment.

Digitization can be understood as “a coming together, and arranging that brings various and often disparate elements, humans and machines, into a particular constellated synchronicity or ecology” (Castrillon, 2008, p. 16). The claim here is that, as a relationship-centered phenomenon, digitization has become quite the norm for Western social actors. As a result, social media catalyze the development of a digital culture that entails distinct rules, practices, and rituals of communication, interaction, and expression (Van den Boomen et al., 2009).

Although electronic mediation has always entailed a “total disassociation” of the physical from the social (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 115), the recent increase in use of powerful digital platforms shatters the perceptual boundary between what is real and what is virtual (Hillis, 1999; Jones, 1997; Kirby, 2009; Morse, 1998; Sunden, 2003). I argue that, as more users find reasons to communicate across online and offline contexts, the boundaries of what most acknowledge as the “virtual realm” can be called into question. In this sense, “virtual reality” can be thought of as “real virtuality.”

The basis for this study is that “real” and “virtual” denote two distinct realms that are actually coalesced as a single space where culture is created. This is because the expressivity and collaboration achieved through digitization shifts mediated communication from spectatorship to participation, where users “interact with each other according to a new set of rules” for the sake of social connection (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3).

The more that social actors connect with each other via “always-on/always-on-you” technology (Turkle, 2006), the more that the boundaries of different social worlds become liminal (Kazmer, 2007). Exploring the localization of participation-based mediation illuminates the side-effects of technological ubiquity.

In this thesis, I explain how digital culture influences the ways I come to know self-in-relation-to-other. Using narrative to vocalize my experience from a “native” standpoint, I relate my own lived experience to interpersonal communication theory, exposing the ways that my social reality has been virtualized in the digital age. This is to say that I perform “virtuality” as a facet of my identity which is derived from my own unique experiences with social media.

Three main concepts provide a foundation for the premise of real virtuality. They are: (a) virtual embodiment and layered space, (b) the digital enclosure and technological ubiquity, and (c) digital culture and globalization. In this chapter, I draw out these concepts by bridging gaps between virtual reality, social media, computer mediated communication (CMC), and globalization research.

Virtual Embodiment and Layered Space

Virtual space can be thought of in terms of three different layers: *real space*, *interspace*, and *cyberspace*. Sunden (2003) explains how the collision of real place and cyberspace creates an *interspace* or “loops between body and text [that allows users to] constantly . . . cross the boundaries between the material and the textual in a sense that makes them blur and mingle, twist and change” (p. 3). According to Hillis (2004), users represent themselves digitally in an “immersive virtual environment . . . [that] . . . collapses the distance between the subject’s eyes and the screen to almost nothing” (p.

96). In this sense, users “virtually embody” a digital space to communicate with others. Thus, as social actors embody interspace they “*are the text*; the text is superseded” (Kirby, 2009, p. 123).

Social media serve as placeholders for social actors’ identities that become “digital bodies” which are both personally malleable and socially constructed. In these virtual places, notions of public and private collide (boyd, 2008). In effect, *cyberspace*—a digital arena that acts as a repository for a collective cultural memory, leisure, work, knowledge, power, and interaction (Fernback, 1997)—manifests as a “virtual geography” (Hillis, 1999, p. xv) where the self-other dichotomy congeals as a single, textual, visual depiction. As a result, there is a perceived interiority derived from social media use that gives users the impression of a digital non-space where the self is entangled and implanted. This explains why common expressions such as “chat *room*” and “I’m hanging out *on* Facebook” make sense.

Other scholars have hinted at the multi-layered experience of sociality in the digital age. Most notably, they have studied virtual reality machines that simulate the immersive experience of digitization (such as those found in arcades); few have pushed their line of thinking to the social media realm; none have gone so far as extending the virtual metaphor to *real space*. In short, their theories apply to those devices that give users the impression of a digital interior that is always encapsulated by a machine.

Yet, Hillis (1999) asserts that virtual reality can be thought of as “an individual experience constituted within technology [that] draws together the world of technology and its ability to represent nature” (p. xv). Jones (1995) describes it as “the space within which . . . relations occur and the tool that individuals use to enter that space. It is more

than a context within which social relations occur” (p. 16). Thus, a correlation can be made between the social media experience and virtual reality. However, making this connection requires modifying the concept of virtual reality.

When contrasted with theories of social media use, the above definitions of virtual reality describe it as a complex mode of social engagement embedded in, yet always escaping and subsuming, reality. It may be more realistic, then, to think of digitization in terms of “real virtuality.” This reverse logic helps situate social media use in offline contexts where “the virtual” and “the real” come together in the shape of a Klein bottle.¹ The performance of virtuality, then, is a socially constructed mode of communication that is textually expressed through digitization.

Embodying interspace becomes a moment of technological interface that serves as a mechanism of self identification, where users perpetually negotiate the “doubleness that characterizes online modes of being” (Sunden, 2003, p. 3). Currently, technology that enables digital-social agency is always on, always connected and always present, whether visibly observable or not. Thus, the ways users’ digitize is always reliant on different forms of social media present in an offline context. The next section addresses how virtuality, as a mode of being, is normalized by technological ubiquity and a digital enclosure that subsumes social life.

The Digital Enclosure and Technological Ubiquity

Embodying layers of virtual space positions technology users within a “digital enclosure” that is a result of technological ubiquity (Andrejevic, 2007). As Jenkins

¹ A Klein bottle is a bottle that bends back on itself and connects itself to its core. It has a non-orientable surface that is the merging of two Möbius strips. Thus, the inside of the bottle is the outside, and it contains itself.

(2006) asserts, social media use leads to a participatory culture where users are constantly engaged in a means of identity development through the ongoing production and consumption of media (Ito et al., 2010).

Andrejevic (2007) writes about the link between new communication technology and consumer culture, attributing virtual individuation to the emergence of a socio-economic enclave developed and refined by agencies that market social media to “erode the significance of physical boundaries [and] facilitate the de-differentiation of labor and leisure” (p. 107). Thus, it is important to acknowledge that social media users are always technology consumers because it’s development is contingent upon the financial productivity of technology companies.

He suggests that the purported need for social media in daily life incurs the “subsuming [of] all physical space to the imperative of the virtual marketplace” (Andrejevic, 2007, p. 111). Virtual space, then, becomes the territory of venture capitalism, where “the goal . . . is to render interactivity itself invisible” (p.119) through socio-technical innovation. Because capitalist agencies drive new media development, users are always at the whim of a society of control (Deleuze, 1992), where spatial-temporal enclosures are implemented virtually to give the impression of a non-material interiority; as a result, users succumb to the caveats of being “perpetually trained” (p. 3) to inhabit the sociality of virtual space.

Although society has always been saturated with technology of varying degrees of sophistication, the capabilities of social media—continuous connectivity, privatized mobilization, and global identification—modulate the structural dynamics of social life in

revolutionary ways.² Andrejevic (2007) argues that this opens a space for the continuous personalization of technology use:

The digital enclosure . . . is a virtual one, whose limit is not necessarily spatial . . . so much as technological. Entrance into the digital enclosure . . . is not a matter of crossing physical boundaries but of equipping oneself with the appropriate technology: devices that allow users to communicate with the network, to gather information from it, and to supply information to it. (p. 105)

The digital enclosure requires users to equip themselves with new ways to enact fantasies and conjure materially impossible illusions in order to open a space where “make-belief is belief in the making” (Castells, 1996, p. 375). What emerges, then, is a ubiquitous experience of technological interface. This heralds the assemblage of a virtually-contingent digital culture where learned rules, norms and rituals of communication are enacted through digitization in a way that disciplines the performance of identity.

Virtuality, then, is performed by a vast sea of users who embody virtual space to participate in the replication of new cultural norms, “wherein every action and transaction generates information about itself” (Andrejevic, 2007, p. 2). In this sense, performing virtuality is based less on play and experimentation (Ito et al., 2010) and more on necessity and socio-cultural survival. The next section addresses the ways that digital culture is enacted on a global scale.

² Deluze (1992) describes control mechanisms as “a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to another” imagining the ever-shifting nature of control mechanisms as a mesh of power that “transmutes from point to point” (p. 3). Although he draws a distinction between the terms “enclosure” and “control mechanisms,” Andrejevic (2007) uses the term “digital enclosure” as a hybrid of these concepts or an enclosure that is in constant flux.

Digital Culture and Globalization

Digital-cultural enactment can be thought of as a post-structural process of identity performance where knowledge flows between disparately connected users tapped into a global network of relations. Moreover, the performance of virtuality is subject to the intersectionality of other identity markers (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and class). We may think of digital culture, then, as a “culture of hybridization,” not merely the hybridization of culture (although it is that, too).

It involves globalizing “multiple identities and the decentering of the social subject . . . [such that] . . . individuals . . . avail themselves of several organizational options at the same time” (Pieterse, 2004, p. 68). In terms of digital-cultural enactment, this means that social actors experience “diversification and amplification [of] ‘sources of the self’” (p. 68).

Mobile devices allow digitization to occur from anywhere an Internet connection is available. Thus, digitization is a moment of global identification where an “*awareness* of the global human condition, a global consciousness that carries reflexive connotations” is achieved (Pieterse, 2004, p. 69). Although social media are used in infinitely different ways for various reasons, social actors digitize for the common purpose of connecting across time and space from various offline contexts. As a result, virtual embodiment becomes a collective experience that crosses geographic and cultural boundaries and virtuality is performed in a space of fluid and global cultural production. Users equipped with mobile devices become “glocalized” subjects (Brenner, 2008) by bridging connections between real space and cyberspace, mutually experiencing diverse interspaces.

The use of different devices determines unique rules and norms of representing oneself and relating to others and these rules are conditioned by the real space and cyberspace contexts in which they occur. Because the layers of virtual space are culturally linked by a shared social experience, one's virtuality is enacted "supraterritorially," performed in a realm that

substantially transcends the confines of territorial place, territorial distance and territorial borders. Whereas territorial spaces are mapped in terms of longitude, latitude and altitude, global relations transpire in the world as a single place, as one more or less seamless realm. (Scholte, 2001, p. 8)

As a result, users' concepts of self, as well as the way they come to understand relationships, are shaped by their ability to realize the world as one communicatively assessable place. If this is true—if the self turns elastic in a digitized, global non-space of symbolic exchange—an understanding of how digital culture molds identity requires a thorough exploration how social actors perform virtuality. To do this would be to answer Rheingold's (1993) call—to continue to question reality as the illusions of the digital enclosure become increasingly realistic. This call leads to the purpose of my thesis.

The Necessity of Exploring Virtuality

Over time, the need to explore the impact of virtuality will recur again and again because each new generation, thrust into a uniquely mediated surround of social life, must discern for themselves what it means to live entrenched in the digital enclosure.

Although it may be difficult or even impossible for me to generalize about my generation's experience of digital entrenchment, the best I can do is produce a localized narrative of my unique experiences as a "digital native," a technology user who may have a greater stake in and different understanding of the technological historical moment. My

hope is that my account resonates with a larger audience. By examining the local impact of technological ubiquity, I draw theoretical conclusions about performing virtuality as it relates to my own experience. Although many scholars have conducted research with the intention of mapping the digital experience, what is missing is the foregrounding of a voice native to digitization—one that is always already implicated by digital culture as a precursor to social life.

To assert this voice, I rely on narrative—a conceptual mode of meaning making that endorses the creative construction of history (Guignon, 2004)—for starting a discussion about the digital native experience. I do this because the digitized self is always entangled with an imagined concept of self (Laing, 1970). Recreating my lived experience in narrative allows me to expose how the self—digitized, mobilized, and glocalized—lies at the intersection of layers of virtual space.

A well constructed narrative, a good story, can make sense of past events as they relate to future consequences, configuring a sequence of intelligible actions that render the present conceivable (MacIntyre, 1984). Thus, narrative can be used to draw conclusions about the current moment in technological history as it has been experienced by a social actor native to digital culture. Moreover, narratives can always be revisited in hindsight, yielding different conclusions for readers as their subsequent beliefs, attitudes and values change (Freeman, 2010).

I argue that a discussion of the subjective performance of virtuality sheds light on how digital culture is realized by social actors in the digital enclosure. In summary, the primary goal of this project is to understand how “life is being lived...in the weird, dense network” (Frank, 2010) of digitally mediated social life. I hope to document this through

a narrative study of my own digital-cultural conditioning. In the following sections, I discuss relevant theoretical frames and methods associated with existing studies on social media and narrative inquiry.

The Digital Native

Social media research spans a wide array of disciplines and draws together different socio-technical perspectives. Although much research has been produced by scholars with varied professional backgrounds (e.g., computer science, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and communication), rarely has a study been produced by a digital native. Palfrey and Gasser (2008) define the digital native as “a person born into the digital age (after 1980) who has access to networked digital technologies and strong computer skills and knowledge” (p. 346).

Lacking in academic discourse are contributions from those socialized with digital utilities and oriented to virtual space since their youth. Although research reflects that the predominance of social media users are of the millennial generation (Horrigan, 2009; Jones & Fox, 2009; Lenhart et al., 2010; Smith, 2010), their voices have yet to be seriously heard and considered when it comes to digital culture; that is, we have yet to be informed about social media by digital natives.

Much time, effort, and money has been devoted to the study of youth experience with social media because they are pinnacle participants in digital culture (Buckingham, 2008). Although these studies render useful data for drawing conclusions about digital culture, it is unclear how useful they are at voicing youth perspectives. Although digital natives have been “given” voice in academic inquiry, their stories and personal narratives

are always registered through the lenses of scholars who are ontologically removed from native perspectives.

Indeed, the label “digital native” is problematic. At what point do digital natives become “out of touch” with the current technological moment? Although some scholars suggest that the idea of a digital native is ageist and discredits older users’ ability to adapt to technological change (Hargittai, 2010), the implications of an age-linked perspective have yet to be thoroughly explored. To make this terminology operational, I recognize the ephemeral nature of technology user demographics. This is to say that digital nativity—if there is such a thing—is more an indication of the current moment in technological history than a permanent designation of user abilities.

Perhaps the most useful way of understanding digital nativity is to think of it as a generation-linked experience of technological availability. From this perspective, the current moment in history is paramount because the experiences of digital natives in the “here-and-now” are of the first generation born into a digital enclosure. For today’s youth, digitization was a precursor to social agency. Perhaps it is more rational, then, to consider digital nativity less in terms of birth and more in terms of self-awareness (Lacan, 1949).

In this sense, the digital native does not have an unchanging experience with technology, although their perspectives are unique to the digital-cultural conditioning of their generation. As technological development renders some technology archaic, so does it make the native-ness of virtual performances obsolete. This is because digital culture is a postmodern phenomenon characterized by “onwardness, haphazardness and evanescence,” or what Kirby (2009) explains as the lack of any clear ending, predicted

direction, or repeatability of experience (p. 52). Mutually engaged in digitization, it becomes clear that digital natives share a social experience that influences how they imagine self, maintain relationships, and understand others. Hence, it is important to highlight trends in social media research that point to the continual modulation of identity.

My own use of social media is customized to my personal tastes. I grew up using Microsoft products, so I do not own an iPhone or an iPod, nor do I use iTunes. I have never particularly liked Macintosh computers or accessories. Although these more popular forms of social media are common to my friends and family, I have stayed true to using the media platforms that are most familiar to me: I grew up using Windows and “off brand” gadgets, so I stick to what I know. Beyond preferences of the type of technology I use, I have owned a cell phone since high school, learned how to build a computer by the age of 12 and have had a desktop PC as long as I can remember.

Since coming to graduate school, I’ve begun carrying a netbook with me nearly everywhere I go, taking advantage of free wifi Internet connection offered by my university and my apartment complex. I check my Facebook page about 10 times a day, am a frequent participant in discussions on my fraternity chat board, play fantasy sports with friends from afar, maintain Blackboard accounts for both classes that I teach, and send at least 1000 text messages a month. Furthermore, I am an avid music listener and rely on social media to access different artists and fan reviews.

As all of these digital forms of social engagement are low in cost, I can safely say that I might participate in digital culture to a greater extent if my income permitted it. Thus, my economic status and social class have had an impact on my exposure to and use

of different digital technology. As a digital native, then, there is most certainly a difference in my performance of virtuality compared to others of my generation who have greater financial means. However, this does not curtail my need and desire to connect with others virtually.

In actuality, I feel a greater pull toward using social media because it allows me to participate with others in a socio-political sphere with the illusion of equality. There is no indicator of social class or economic prowess via text messages or on Facebook profiles beyond what users “read” into messages. For me, virtuality is a part of my identity that I perform constantly and consistently throughout my day in order to remain abreast of the important and mundane moments in the lives of others.

Identity and Social Media Research

Few social media scholars have sought to experiment with different methodological approaches. Even fewer have explored the ways that the digital enclosure has problematized traditional approaches to qualitative research. To date, few agreed upon guidelines direct scholars’ efforts as they work with and within virtual space (Ess, 2002). As advocated by some, there is a need to “incorporate the Internet and CMC into . . . research to adequately understand social life in contemporary society” (Garcia et al., 2010, p. 53).

Most scholars have sought to explore causal relationships among users by focusing on CMC dynamics, relying heavily on sociometric measurement and quantitative techniques (Walther et al., 2009). Others have considered the complexities of self-representation in cyberspace, narrowing their focus to the manipulation of digital content (Buckingham, 2008). More explorative studies have relied on interview data and

observation to capture the lived experiences of young users (Ito et al., 2009; Livingstone, 2008; Tufekci, 2008). Others have explored the ways users construct narratives online (Rettberg, 2009; Williams, 2008). Finally, some have examined issues of “authentic” representation in cyberspace (Zhao et al., 2008).

Therefore...

Even though scholars, time and time again, suggest that users come to represent self and perform identity in ways that profoundly influence presentations of self in everyday life (Goffman, 1959), none have recognized the layering of virtual space, the implications of digitization or performances of virtuality. Furthermore, scholars have yet to develop an approach that recognizes the fluidity of identity amidst the salience of digital culture. This may be a result of thinking in terms of “virtual reality,” where social mediation is thought of as trapped within the machine. My approach reverses this logic, exploring the ways “real virtuality” plays out outside the machine in offline contexts of everyday life.

Rheingold’s (1993) seminal piece on virtual communities juxtaposes his personal experiences with different philosophical and cultural theories. What is needed is a similar study that takes into full account the transformed media landscape, digital-cultural conditioning, and virtual performance. By examining my personal experience as a digital native, I show how I perform virtuality, linking real space to cyberspace through digitization. The next chapter discusses my method of inquiry and the primary research questions I address in this thesis.

CHAPTER 2:
SOCIAL MEDIA AND NARRATIVE INQUIRY:
AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH

The focus on identity in social media research, combined with the marginalization of digital natives' voices, makes an autoethnographic approach viable for this thesis. Autoethnography joins "ethnographic and fictional writing, the personal and the social, autobiographical and sociological understanding, and literature and social science" (Ellis, 1993, p. 724) and, in this case, provides a means of exploring how social actors maintain relationships in the digital age. Producing a narrative "unique enough to provide comparisons, yet universal enough to evoke identification" (Ellis, p. 725), I recreate my personal experiences to show how interpersonal communication theory relates to episodes of my life. Thus, I connect social media research with narrative inquiry, giving the authorial voice to the digitally native scholar.

By telling the story of a relationship I have maintained via social media, I trace the contours of digital culture by exploring episodic moments of my life where I embody virtual space to establish a romantic bond with my partner. This exposes how my concept of self is entangled with the relationship, how digitization gives me an understanding of self-in-relation-to-other, and how virtuality influences our ability to feel close to one another.

Also, as my narrative is the story of maintaining a relationship over a long period of time, it should be noted that I have consistently used both text messaging and Facebook as a primary means of staying connected with my partner throughout the development of the relationship. This leads to questions that address how digital-cultural conditioning bears on the way I enlist an imagined concept of self while maintaining a close relationship via digitization.

Telling the story of our relationship with an eye turned toward our different performances of virtuality reveals how social media use contributed to vast changes in my understanding of relationships, and consequentially, my concept of self. The following sections of this chapter discuss my approach and method of analysis. This experimental method, which combines analytic autoethnography with cyberethnographic observation (i.e., exemplars taken from our actual text-message and Facebook conversations), helps me address the following research questions:

RQ1: How has digitization allowed me to maintain a close personal relationship?

RQ2: How has the maintenance of this relationship influenced my understanding of self-in-relation-to-other?

Analytic Autoethnography

Anderson (2006) uses the term “analytic” to conceptualize a form of autoethnography that differs from other “evocative” approaches (see Ellis, 1993). He urges scholars to remain concerned with symbolic interaction as they construct personal narratives. By doing so, they can focus (primarily) on the tacit nuances of self-centered experience and meaning making and be less concerned with the exploration of “emotional recall” (Ellis, p. 726). This disciplines the focus of narrative, placing more

significance on processual dynamics of symbolic exchange and less on the emotional renderings of interaction. In this ideation, the researcher becomes the subject of the study and their lived experience yields the primary data for analysis (Jackson, 1989). The goal is to move beyond some examinations of emotional recourse to show how technology and sociality mechanistically function in the lives of digital natives by mediating patterns and rules of relationships.

Adopting an analytic approach keeps my study committed to “rendering the social world under investigation” and to “transcending that world through broader generalization” (Anderson, 2006, pp. 387-388). By telling stories familiar to other social media users, readers can make sense of my experience in relation to their own lives. By deconstructing the process of my own use of social media throughout a relationship, I illustrate the ways I participate in digital culture by contextualizing my personal experience.

Furthermore, since autoethnography is primarily the study of the self, it should be noted that my take on what constitutes a self is that it is always already entangled with the selves of others. As Gergen (2009) asserts, it is from relationships that individuals emerge, not necessarily the other way around. In this sense, my use of autoethnography to make sense of my performance of virtuality within the context of a close relationship assumes that I am my relationship and my relationship is me. Any story I tell about my relationship is inherently a story of the self. Moreover, any data I draw from cyberspace is always shared between interlocutors. As a result, my narrative exposes a certain facet of my identity: my self-in-relation-to-other. My hope is that this approach—which favors

analysis over evocation (but strives for both)—will work to create moments of inter-subjective identification that resonate with other digital natives.

Because autoethnography keeps the focus of research on self-centered experience, narrative analysis sheds light on the ways I negotiate relational indeterminacy during digital interface. Social media are convenient because they archive conversations between social actors for later viewing. Because of this, I am able to use text message conversations and Facebook messages that I have had over the past 6 years to help illustrate my narrative. This lends a certain air of “authenticity” to my thesis because these conversations occurred well before I became a graduate student. In a sense, then, what makes my method “experimental” is the combination of social media (as an ethnographic resource) and the creative process of writing a personal narrative. Beyond recreating episodes of my life, I am able to access actual conversations that transpired in cyberspace. This lets me draw conclusions about myself, others, and relationships that would be otherwise inaccessible.

Thus, my thesis situates the subjectivity of the researcher at the intersection of the layers of virtual space. Conclusions drawn from analyzing my own lived experience are calcified in a naturalistic setting of digital nativity. Because performing virtuality is contingent upon digitization, my efforts remain focused on generating a theoretical text attentive to the phenomenological processes of virtual embodiment and relationship maintenance. By opening social media research up to writing about the self, evoking the narrative paradigm has its use in “demonstrate[ing] that the stories we tell reflect the values held” (Cragan & Shields, 1999, p. 99) by digital natives.

Self as Research Site

The site of my research is the self—or rather—it is my notion of self that emerges from my relationship. As Tedlock (2003) suggests, “ethnographers should demonstrate how ideas matter to them, bridging the gap between their narrow academic world and wide cultural experiences” (p. 184). Autoethnography forces the researcher to focus on that which is “outside” the self as well as that which lies “within.” Thus, the solidarity of this approach comes from demarcating the boundaries between past and present in order to write a narrative that may resonate with other digital natives. Reflecting on the process of virtual embodiment and performances of virtuality separates the *past*-self from *present*-self. To reflexively assess my participation in digital culture is to inhabit the spatial-temporal “in-between” that sets my lived experience today apart from yesterday; it also helps separate that which lies “within” apart from the which lies “outside” the self.

Reflecting on myself and my interactions, I claim the self as a fieldsite because the process of data collection is refocused as the phenomenon under scrutiny. This puts a space between my *self as social actor*—who is thoroughly embedded in different performances of virtuality—and my *self as narrative author*—who is empowered to recollect experience via hindsight.

Analyzing episodes of digitization placed in the context of a relationship, I am able to discover patterns of meaning-making that give definition to my own participation in digital culture. These discoveries allow me to apply theory to personal experience by weaving interpretive explanations around narratives. In summary, locating the site of research as the self lets me draw theoretical conclusions about my own digital

conditioning as well as retrace my experiences to construct a narrative from a digitally native perspective.

Journaling and Digital Texts

I recorded my experiences in journal entries and used text message and Facebook conversations saved from the past 6 years for analysis. These texts not only helped me to recreate my experience but provided an opportunity to examine how I learned to perform virtuality as the relationship progressed. My journal entries were both analytic and reflexive in nature and, as I previously mentioned, text message and Facebook conversations took place well before the planning of this thesis.

In the spirit of generating a story that other digital natives may connect with, I remain focused on my use of more popular forms of social media. In summary, I use journal entries, text messages and Facebook conversations as stand-alone data sets for analysis. Journal entries allowed me to reflect on my own recollection of how the relationship played out, and text message and Facebook conversations served as temporal portals to my social world as the relationship was developing.

Data Analysis

Prong one: Reading social media as texts. In cyberspace, processes of communication transpire in asynchronous time (Gallant et al., 2007). Thus, interaction is quite literally “readable” because social media double as texts of collective social inscription and historical databanks of communicative acts. Examining social media as data sets allowed me to code digital content for patterns of self expression. Furthermore, treating them as “digimodernist texts” (Kirby, 2009), where the binaries of author-reader,

producer-consumer, and static-continuous communication collapse, sheds light on the ways virtual relationships are maintained in a space of flow.

The challenge here was establishing the boundaries between discursive bodies that intermingle in different contexts of cyberspace. These bodies included: (a) my messages, (b) others' messages, and (c) frames of shared content (i.e., my Facebook wall). Recognizing these different bodies as entities of cultural ascription/inscription focused this prong of analysis on examining how virtual embodiment creates a cyberspace landscape for symbolic exchange. In short, I was concerned with the processes of online meaning-making in terms of both form and content.

Prong two: Understanding offline contexts. Hine (2000) captures the importance of understanding offline contexts of interface as quintessential for understanding the practices of different social media users: "Clearly, while we might be comfortable talking about 'the Internet' as if it were one object, it is going to mean very different things to different people. The technology is going to have very different cultural meanings in different contexts" (p. 29). Thus, the second prong of analysis focused on describing the different real space contexts where my partner and I performed virtuality.

Empirical observations of real space were coded for the place of social media use and identity of social actors. Thus, reading data sets required a high degree of reflexivity that forced me to engage with the meaning and quality of my interpretations. Reflecting on data allowed me to examine myself as an observer of virtuality with a unique digital-cultural conditioning. This led to conclusions about how I interpret socially constructed rules, rituals, and performances of digitization. Using hindsight as a tool of analysis, I

explored how I and others were caught in a web of offline contexts where virtual space was embodied and virtuality was performed at different times.

Prong three: Recognizing unique types of interspace. Users digitize in numerous ways. Indeed, each social media user enlists different forms of technology to bridge cyberspace and real space. These different forms of interface set limitations on users' abilities to represent self and perform identity across contexts. Thus, users' abilities to embody different layers of virtual space is predetermined by which mix of social media they engage with and how they choose to engage with it. In this sense, different forms of digitization create unique interspaces between humans and technology.

For example, the mix of devices that I encounter in real space (e.g., specific brand of mobile phone, netbook, desktop computer, etc.) and the sites that I access with them (e.g., Facebook) determine the social dynamics of my virtual performance; likewise, Facebook makes certain types of digital content available that text messaging does not. As a result, I am able to express myself in different ways at different times with different types of social media. These different types of mediation entail different degrees of virtual embodiment that come to bear on the depth and breadth of participating in digital culture. Moreover, varying types of social media are subject to socio-economic status, usage preferences and the personalization of messages. These conditions influence one's performance of virtuality, disciplining users' abilities to tailor messages and conceive of the self to different degrees of complexity.

Recognizing the various ways users digitize exposes how interspace is performatively negotiated. Thus, this prong of analysis was concerned with the ways I

and others constructed a personal media enclave that determined how virtual space was embodied by different social actors.

Ethical Implications

Because my narrative involves actual conversations held between me and my fiancée, I have asked for permission to print her exact words. Furthermore, because narrative writing entails a certain amount of creative liberty and re-imagining one's life can only be so "authentic," I have allowed my fiancée to review the manuscript, provide criticism of my representation of her and offer pertinent suggestions.

Although text and Facebook messages are derived from a mediated public space, the content of the messages I used were of such a personal nature that it seemed necessary and responsible to include her in the development process. Since I hold that maintaining relationships via social media is a shared experience, it seemed appropriate that the development process should be. By exposing myself through narrative, I run the risk of exposing the other who is always entangled with my notion of self. This means the other always has a stake in narratives of the self that focus on the progression of a relationship because self and other are inextricable.

Therefore...

In this thesis, I seek to explain how digital culture has come to shape my understanding of self-in-relation-to-other. Through narrative inquiry, this study voices the digital native experience as I register it through my own lens. By bridging gaps between theoretical and methodological perspectives that have yet to be employed in social media research, I suggest that reality is really quite virtual in the digital age.

The next chapter tells a story of how I maintained a close personal relationship via digitization. I trace the contours of digital culture by using interpersonal communication theory to interpret episodes from the development of the relationship. Furthermore, I show how social media use became a defining feature of the relationship. The final chapter draws broader implications from my story, stressing the necessity to rethink the ways we study social life in the digital enclosure.

CHAPTER 3: LIGHTING THE VIRTUAL CAMPFIRE

In this chapter, I focus on one of my closest relationships in order to draw out some of the performative dimensions of digital culture. As is clear from my approach, I am not particularly keen on issues discussed in the body of academic literature pertaining to social media. However, I do acknowledge that romantic relationships—a hot topic in social media research for over a decade—do seem to provide a good basis for a discussion of virtual substance. As Ling (2008) states, “mediated interaction is also a form of contact through which social bonds can be nurtured” (p. 118). This is especially visible in close romantic relationships.

Close relationships, which are often romantic in character when formed between peers, seem retrofitted to virtuality. That is, they are influenced so greatly by the notion of glocalization, constant connectivity, and ongoing dialogue that even the passive user can observe new possibilities. Beyond “sexting,” many conversations with significant others include some mention of social media. “I’ll text you when I get there” and “Did you see my post on Facebook last night?” have slipped into the common vernacular.

By now, it should be apparent to the common technology user that social media are designed, marketed, and implemented in a way that targets close relationships, always with the promise of making friendships better, closer, and warmer. I argue that a narrative

of a digital native, framed as a story of the development of a romantic relationship, can shed light on the ways virtuality plays out in everyday life. I bring my personal relationship into this thesis not to thrill readers with a pseudo-storybook romance. I tell this story because it contextualizes a relationship that I've (re)established and maintained via digitization. This lets me explore the different dynamics of virtual space by illustrating virtual embodiment in relation to real, meaningful ties. The goal is to show how digitization stands as a catalyst for emotional, interactional, and social cohesion.

In this chapter, I draw connections between my personal experience and different facets of interpersonal communication theory. Doing so, I discuss ways that I come to know self and perform identity as a native social media user situated in a thick web of relationships. As Bateson (1972) attests, each communicative act carries with it a double function: a "report" and a "command." Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) have translated these functions in a way that helps to define the "content" of the message and the type of "relationship" between interlocutors. From either perspective, we can understand that all messages between social actors carry with them two levels of communication, one explicit (or connotative) and one implicit (or denotative), a meta-level that determines who gets to define the relationship.

In this way, all messages passed between social actors are identity defining, establishing the boundaries of self, other, and self-in-relation-to-other. But in the digital age, social actors mediate *themselves* as they carry out conversations via digitization. This means that the technology put between self and other has a profound impact on the ways we understand identity and form bonds. In this chapter, I attempt to reveal that knowing self-in-relation-to-other is *imaginatively* linked by virtuality. The goal is to

show how digital culture can act as, in Ryan's (2007) words, "a virtual campfire" where stories are told, interpreted, and rearticulated in a meaningful way that focuses interlocutors' attention on the other, entraining them with a common mood that leads to social cohesion.

A Brief Note on Stories and Theories

Perhaps the narrative strategy of this chapter is best explained in a metaphor: weaving stories around theories creates an expositive landscape of valleys and plateaus that the reader can traverse on a journey of discovery. By drinking from the tributaries of lived experience that flow through this elaborate landscape, the engaged intellectual may be sustained while contemplating theoretical perspectives.

My hope is that such a journey will encourage the reader to ponder her or his own life in relation to mine. It is in this way that I seek to "trace the counters" of digital culture. From this approach, I hope readers can better understand how they perform virtuality in relation to others.

I recently got engaged to a woman I lived with through my undergraduate years. Beth and I had a falling out nearly 3 years ago, and since then have been through a lot of ups and downs. At first, we were both devastated by the split—probably a result of sharing the same social circles and shocking everyone with our break-up. Then, a few months later, we briefly got back together and tried to make things work. Unfortunately, she didn't feel I had changed enough and I sensed she was with other men. Needless to say, we quickly broke it off and I held a pretty stiff grudge. But over the course of the years since, we've rebuilt our relationship, realizing things about each other that are

different from before. And we've found that the changes we've made in our personalities, styles, and goals complement quite nicely. To make a long story short, we've rekindled an old flame.

This would not have been possible without maintaining a virtual connection. The oddity of my relationship with Beth is this: At one time we saw each other every day, sharing real space, material possessions, and intimate social circles in a very deep and serious way. This was both the source of our love and the circumstance that led to our demise. It wasn't until we both discovered virtual connectedness—the maintenance of a relationship in a non-space where the self becomes elastic—that we were able to reconfigure our patterns of interaction, reframe our perceptions of each other, and re-establish feelings of trust and reliance.

In the paragraphs that follow, I trace the important moments in the development of our relationship. I reveal the ways virtual embodiment helps to forge and foster deep social cohesion in unlikely circumstances. Using theory to interpret episodes of our relationship illuminates how my understanding of self and other is brought about through digitization. In essence, by exploring the ways I have come to know self-in-relation-to-other, I can paint a vivid picture of how life in the digital age is reconfigured by social media use.

A few years ago, Beth graduated from college and took a job in Oregon as a social worker. At the same time, I had been accepted to graduate school and moved to Florida. Just before we parted ways, we realized what good friends we still were,

verifying our mutual feelings in a few late-night encounters. Unfortunately, the future was set in stone: We'd both decided to move away from our college community and begin a new life somewhere far away. We knew that this might mean the end of our relationship. But after having some laughs, shedding a few tears, and disclosing our heart-felt condolences for leaving, we vowed always to stay in touch, no matter the circumstances.

For the first few months, we talked on the phone quite a bit—but nowhere nearly as much as we would text message and chat on Facebook. In fact, as the digital conversations became more complex and meaningful, and our amount of intimate self-disclosure uncovered deeply ingrained feelings for one another, we noticed that we were able to communicate things digitally that we couldn't bring ourselves to say vocally. It's safe to say that, in retrospect, our lives would be incredibly different now had we not taken the "digital turn."

Defining Virtual Connectedness

Not unlike Ling's (2008) text on mobile communication in the digital age, this story is about discovering how technology use contributes to social solidarity. However, there are two important differences in our respective approaches: (a) Ling narrows his focus to ways that the *mobile phone* has impacted social relations, and (b) he draws from impersonal, hypothetical situations. My approach uses "real" experiences that I have had in my close relationship with a romantic partner to further contextualize the use of a variety of social technologies. Despite these differences, Ling and I both take the position that virtual connectedness can strengthen communication between interlocutors

by “support[ing] better contact with the personal sphere” and “tying tighter bonds via various forms of ritual interaction” (p. 3).

A consistent theme of virtual connectedness is that it “extends the opportunities that we have to know each other” (Ling, 2008, p. 156). This is a result of “ambient accessibility” or “a shared virtual space that . . . do[es] not require the opening of a channel of communication but [is] based on the expectation that one is in ‘earshot’” (Ito & Okabe, 2005, p. 264). Because social media are always on and always on you, the interspace brought about through digitization sits “midway between interaction and noninteraction” (p. 264). This means that inherent to virtual connectedness is the ability for social actors to reflexively engage with others, where time may elapse between interactions, leaving a space for an *imaginative* contemplation and construction of meaningful messages.

Furthermore, the context of virtual connectedness succumbs to a loose and indeterminate idea of time and space. Unless explicitly stated, there is no way for social actors to know where their interlocutor is and when a response will be received. In this sense, virtual connectedness is “like fashion . . . it never ends.”³ As a result, ever-open channels of communicative exchange can be viewed as social situations in themselves, where human and technological elements are brought together in a relational setting for the common purpose of maintaining a bond.

³ I pull this phrase from the recent film, *The Social Network*, which creatively adapts the actual story of Facebook’s founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg. In it, the character of Zuckerberg makes the statement that Facebook needs to allow users to participate in a social network that is ongoing and constantly reshaped by different “Friends” included in one’s social network. I find this explanation quite useful in highlighting the difference between “connectedness” and “connection.” It exposes the *onwardness* of digital expression.

As Goffman (1972) explains, “a social situation [is] an environment of mutual monitoring possibilities, anywhere within which an individual will find himself accessible to the naked sense of all others who are ‘present’, and similarly find themselves accessible” (p. 63). When we take into account the ambient accessibility of virtual connectedness, the experiential “here and now” of offline social life can be understood as entangled with the “there and then” of online interactivity (Ling, 2008, p. 161).

Ling (2008) points out an important modification of Goffman’s theory: mediated interaction exists in tandem with co-present interactions which can be “‘stand alone’ events that take place in the broader flux of everyday life” (p. 89). This is to say that the social situation of virtual connectedness *coexists* with social situations in real space that both interlocutors are respectively embedded in. Here, we can see the overlap of real space and cyberspace via digitization. As a result, the ecological setting is one of blurred contexts, where meaning derived from interaction may be mobilized supraterritorially. Thus, “the interaction between material and non-material culture can influence how social cohesion is played out” (p. 46).

Neither of us used text messages when we were together in college. In fact, it was the moment I noticed her texting—constantly buried in her phone and typing away in a fury—that I sensed our relationship was coming to an end. For me, Beth’s decision to join the “texting world” signaled that she was looking for new ways to talk to others while we were spending time together. Looking back, I realize it may have been the first time I recognized her as having an agenda that didn’t include “us.” As it turned out, she

was talking to friends who were advising her to put our relationship to an end. She was also talking to other potential lovers. This noticeable change in her demeanor was more than uncomfortable; the ambiguity of her digital conversations became infuriating. I can remember the first time I realized this.

We were supposed to be talking about why we were having so many problems. I had been at my fraternity house every day for 4 weeks because of pledging, and I felt like we were becoming distant from one another. As I sat in her room watching her send text after text, I wondered what she was talking about, who she was talking to, and why she had a scowl on her face that seemed to worsen with every message.

I spoke up. “I swear to god, you spend so much time on your phone that I feel like we don’t even speak when we’re together. We talk, but I feel like we don’t actually *say* anything. Who are you texting all the time!”

“Hang on a minute,” she says. Her typing gets more furious and sporadic. “I’m talking to my little.” She means Bernice, her new pledge in her sorority. “She wants to get together for lunch, so I can’t stay long.”

I wondered if she was lying to me. She’s lied before, but only about things that she thought would have an impact on the way I felt about her. As I had been sitting there, she hadn’t moved, hadn’t put the phone down, and hadn’t looked me in the eye. I also noticed that she had her coat and shoes on the entire time—very unlike her. Did she make these plans with Bernice before I got there?

“What’d you want to talk about?” she asks, almost as if she’s forgotten that we’re having problems and had made a special effort to meet between classes. I’m flabbergasted.

“You have GOT to be kidding me! Were we not gonna talk about what’s going on between us? Don’t you want to try and find the source of the problem? It’s not just the lack of sex, pledging season, or the fact that we live apart right now. There is something else going on. I can tell you’re not *here* with me right now. Maybe if you weren’t on your damn phone all the time, texting away, we would have a *real* conversation once in a while!” I started to get angry. She hated it when I yelled. I did it on purpose, trying to get her attention focused on the lack of communication between us.

Her phone beeps with another message, interrupting my tirade.

“Hold on,” she says.

I hold.

Longer.

Longer.

Still waiting.

Finally, I break the silence. “I can’t take this shit anymore! I’m going back to the fraternity house. You tell me when you’re not too busy to look me in the eye and have a conversation with the person you claim to love so much.” As I jumped up to leave, I saw her lift her head in confusion, still scowling, still angry. She let out a passé sigh of discontent, and out of the corner of my eye I caught her shaking her head and sending another text as I walked out the door.

My heart began to shatter as I walked across the street. I didn’t realize that her heart was *already* broken and being mended by someone else over the phone. I didn’t know that she was texting her soon-to-be lover. I like to tell myself that, had I known

who was *really* on the other end of her text messages, I would have felt better about the situation. Somehow.

I don't know what I could have done or how I could have intervened, but I can remember that feeling of helplessness. As I opened the door to my fraternity house and greeted my brothers, I felt more alone than I ever had. The distance between Beth and me was real. The walk across the street—between her place and mine—was only a few steps, but it seemed like I had walked for hours.

Ritual and Response in Offline Contexts

Ling (2008) draws from Erving Goffman, Randall Collins, and Emile Durkheim to explain the ways that ritual interaction can foster cohesion among social actors.⁴ His premise is this: Virtual connectedness opens new channels for cultivating bonds; these bonds work into mundane interactions that are maintained partially through co-present and mediated contexts alike; and corresponding levels of attention and mood between interlocutors leads to relational solidarity (or lack thereof).

Ultimately, his theory of ritual interaction via mobile mediation boils down to this:

We get the small-scale talk and the embroidery of everyday events. We get the planning of and the recapping of other, perhaps major catalytic rituals. In addition, we get the exchange of endearments and insults. We get the planning of social interaction and we get the machinations of commercial activity. In short, we get the stuff of routine life. (Ling, 2008, p. 92).

⁴ See Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of Ling's text for a detailed explanation of ritual and social cohesion on both large and small scales.

Put in terms of temporal patterns, Heim (1993) observes that normalized digitization signals that “networked communication is in our bones. Our life rhythm moves to the tempo of the computer” (p. 7).

In the context of my and Beth’s relationship, her decision to join the “texting world” reveals that digitization can be used as a self-correcting mechanism of the relationship. By immersing herself in “another world” as I was trying to carry out a conversation, she sends signals that control the rules of the relationship and circumscribe my behavior (Haley, 1963); her lack of attentiveness and dissonant mood give rise to a response in me that she most desired—the momentary rejection of our relationship *as romantic*.

From this “texting” episode, we can see how digitization (and consequently, virtual connectedness) can be an important factor in a negative feedback loop that helps regulate the systemic qualities of a relationship, working to correct deviance that one perceives in the other’s behavior. This can also be thought of as a new form of civil inattention (Ling, 2008).

In the end, I find myself in a “double bind” as I walk away from the situation, unable to make sense of our relationship (Haley, 1976). I have no way of acting rationally but I must act. Because I was “out of synch” with Beth’s virtuality, it is clear that technology use is not merely a caveat of the digital native—it is a regulating factor of their daily social lives. This is because the act of performing virtuality carries with it levels of messages that demarcate the boundaries between self and other. Thus, virtual connectedness can be thought of in the same way that Hine (2000) thinks about the

Internet: it is both culture and cultural artifact. This is to say that meaning is not only made through digitization but it is “given off” (Goffman, 1959) by it.

In this way, the different technologies that a social actor uses to embody virtual space become symbolically laden objects that give insight into personal taste, style of communication and allegiance to relationships (Ling, 2008, p. 96). Thus, it is through our attention in and to virtual connectedness, as well as our resultant mood, that the meaning and structure of relationships can be organized and interpreted. We see here that virtual actions can have significant consequences for real life circumstances; whether for good or bad, those actions that surround digitization play a critical role in social cohesion.

After Beth and I parted ways, I came to embrace digital culture but not before I cut all of our digital ties. Once I realized that I was single and could “put myself out there” as an eligible bachelor, I signed up for an unlimited text message plan. I frequented Facebook several times a day, making a conscious effort to keep tabs on friends and “Friends,”⁵ looking for potential romantic partners. I started to post videos and comments to YouTube. I played fantasy sports online so I could brag about my winning record at parties.

In reality, life sped up quite quickly. Some of my closest friends asked me why, after years of expressing my utter discontent for social media, I had decided to become a “guru” overnight. My answer was always the same: “I’m single now. Texting has changed the game!” One of my potential romantic partners mentioned this on Facebook:

⁵ The term “Friend” is used here to refer to a person that a Facebook user is connected to via their online social network. Facebook friendships tend to differ from more conventional, offline friendships as they do not necessarily indicate relational closeness (boyd, 2006).

Julie April 16, 2008 at 9:35pm via Facebook
Thought you weren't a facebook guy!?

Nicholas April 18, 2008 at 1:11pm via Facebook
Im not, but unfortunately everyone else in the world is, so
therefore I must be

I found that there was a ring of truth to this. The prospect of having any semblance of a love life after ending a deep, domesticated, three-year relationship was enough for me to jump on the digital bandwagon. Like a gateway drug, the very thing that keyed me into Beth's intentions came to define my future relationships. And it paid off, for a little while. I soon learned that being in touch with one's virtuality meant understanding who one is.

Imagining the Self-in-Relation-to-Other

Gregory Bateson made popular the idea that we can only perceive the products of our perceptions (Bochner, 2009). This suggests that there is no pure objective reality; all we come to know is rendered by and registered through our subjective frame as sense making beings. Another way of thinking about this is to consider humans as "governors" in a cybernetic system of the "mind" (Bateson, 1972). In this sense, we can understand "mind" to be "an outwardly perceptible event which is a part of the physiological process" (p. 178). Hence, mind equals person plus environment. In relation to virtual connectedness, the mind exists somewhere in a translucent and fluctuating network that, at different times, manifests in communicative acts that maintain relationships.

Furthermore, Gergen (2009) asserts:

Reason and emotion, for example, are not possessions of individual minds, but of relations. Figuratively speaking, they are not features of the individual pigments but of the larger picture of which they are a part. The horizon will then explode as we realize

the relational base of virtually all “mental phenomenon.” Memory, motives, and intentions will be incorporated into the relational process, along with our sensations of pleasure and pain. We move, then, from individual being to relational being. (p. 32)

From this perspective, we can see that moods of social actors can be involuntary responses to social situations, and vice-versa. This suggests that, as relational beings, all possible ways of making sense of oneself are rendered through a frame of what we know about ourselves in relation to others. Such knowledge is entrained with shared moods and emotions that are often times created through digitization. As a result, our concept of reality is not wholly determined by ourselves: “Somewhere between objectivity and subjectivity is a region where you are partly blown by the winds of reality and partly an artist creating a composite out of the inner and outer events” (Brockman, 1977, p. 245). This “somewhere,” as Bateson puts it, *is* interspace where the self becomes elastic and transitory.

When technology is thrown into the mix of social relations and we embody interspace, we actively condense all layers of virtual space and take control of our communication—we individuate our virtual connectedness to better communicate with others. The cybernetic system of the mind is cyborgized, to a certain degree, because the environment (read: virtualized social situation) would not exist without digitization. Thus, when we attempt to discern the meaning of our relationships, we must take into account that social actors not only personalize their technology preferences and practices, but are empowered to customize their messages.

According to Ling (2008), in mediated rituals, social actors not only affirm a shared mood but “participate in engineering it” (p. 87). The capability to engineer our

relationships is enhanced by digitization, providing enough time and distance from interlocutors to reflect on the situation and tap the recess of the imagination before crafting a message. In the context of a social situation digitally mediated between two potential romantic partners, the rules of interaction do not succumb to that which is materially apparent. “Voice” begins to matter in a big way. Later in this chapter, I discuss the ways that “voice” is used in virtual connectedness to fill in the missing “gaps” of specific signals that help to frame messages.

What is important to note here is that digitization allows us to act as governors in our own system of relations with an added utility of creative message construction. This encourages the playing-out of imaginative ideals of the self-in-relation-to-other. In this sense, as we enact our virtuality, we are extended new ways to take control of the perceptible frame of our interactivity. In a sense, the digital pen is handed over to the digitized social actor, allowing her or him to choose which literary genius he or she would like to personify when crafting messages at different times. As romantic exchanges develop, these different “geniuses” that are “acted out” come to make up one’s “real” identity that the other comes to know as authentic. Ultimately for digital natives, the “game” of dating is played by rules of poetic self-attribution and injunction (Laing, 1970, pp. 151-173).

I met Beth late my freshman year and was a senior when we split up. This meant that, for the first time, I was open to experience the excitement of collegiate single life. While I stayed heartbroken and gravely depressed for a few months, my friends and

family gave me the support, guidance, and motivation to pick my head up and move forward with my life.

Eventually, I cast my romantic eye on other people. Like many of my friends, there was more than one love interest in my life. And I found that, because my co-workers and friends were in separate social networks, I was able to juggle more than one romantic relationship at a time. Three, it seemed, was a manageable number. In a sense, I discovered that I was the connecting node in my own unique social network. Mixed with my newfound resolve to have fun, I found myself constantly having multiple conversations with different partners via text messages and Facebook.

I was always on my phone, typing away at the thumb-sized keyboard. I would turn to Facebook for longer, more “serious” messages because it seemed fun to communicate in a semi-public setting. It was a way of flirting in front of my friends, but with the ability to think about what I said before I said it; any fear of rejection seemed to be left behind the screen because I knew that my friends and Friends were only there to help me find a new love interest.

Most of my time was spent responding to messages, making evening plans or carrying on light banter. I discovered that my writing skills paid off when connecting digitally. Over a text message, flirtatious messages evoked a certain poetic ability I was unaware that I had. Digitally, I could put my best foot forward as I had time between texts to craft beautiful, personal, evocative prose. I would paint a portrait of myself with my words. At moments, I would imagine I was Fabio; at others, I was Kanye West; I was in a constant battle to not sound like e.e. Cummings. The hardest part of this virtual

juggling act was trying to keep track of different conversations with multiple people at the same time.

Eventually, I slipped up.

Each time I checked my phone (which was about once every 10 minutes), I found myself trying to remember which conversation applied to which partner. The hardest moments were times when I was expected to keep the conversation going: “Who was it that I just told to meet me at 7? Better be safe and say meet me at 10.” I found myself constantly searching for meaning in conversations, always emotionally complicated. I would scroll through my inbox, looking to piece together the puzzle of my many relationships: I navigate my inbox “up” and “down” to read different messages, separating different partners and calculating the meaning of the conversation along the way; I move “left” and “right” to check on my replies, ensuring that I didn’t repeat my words or flirtations, or misinterpret anything.

One Saturday night, I mistakenly took one partner to a party after telling two others meet to me there at the same time. Needless to say, they quickly put the pieces together and left me high and dry. The game was up and I lost: It was as if my virtual doppelganger finally broke its digital veil, holding me accountable for all of the imagined roles I tried to play. I was left with a valuable lesson and no one to be but myself—whatever that meant.

Maintaining Coherence in Conversation

What makes this way of communicating unique is that digitization incurs textual expression as a form of self-representation entangled with the perceptions of the other. As Sunden (2003) states, virtual connectedness entails “mediation between an embodied self

and a textual I, simultaneously divided and intimately connected through typed-in enunciations” (p. 3). This reveals an important difference between virtual connectedness and traditional social interaction: As I interact with others, I am also engaged in a dialogue with myself, which I am aware of and able to manipulate.

I negotiated too many conversations, too many situations, and too many characters. I learned the hard way that when different nodes of one’s social network collide, the ties between them often become crossed. In this case, my tie was cut (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). Different sensitive conversations that played out over a period of time, ripe with necessary interruptions, made it a challenge to show the side of myself that different partners were used to “hearing” in our conversations. In a very real way, the “game” of dating had changed and virtual connectedness made it an ever going battle of anticipation, consistency, and creativity—of maintaining coherence in the relationship.

This correlates with Zhao et al.’s (2008) idea that social media users perpetually create a “hoped-for possible self” through digital representation. The “voice” that social media users choose to assert digitally resembles that which they find most relevant to the social situation. In terms of relationships, we might attribute a change in “character”—that is, the type of voice—as a result of relational dialectics, where “voices interpenetrate one another and thereby constitute and change one another” (Baxter, 2009, p. 186).

Baxter (2009) explains that “parties can create a fleeting moment of wholeness in which competing fragments and disorder are temporarily united. These . . . create momentary consummation, completion, or wholeness in what is otherwise a fragmented life experience” (p. 186). Having the time and means to creatively construct messages via

digitization allows social actors to better tailor messages for the other in a way that seeks to successfully anticipate their interlocutor's perception of them. In this sense, the "wholeness" that one achieves through virtual connectedness is a merging of three entities: one's understanding of self, one's imagined self, and the anticipation of the other's ideation of one's self.

In the episode above, flirtatiously seeking a romantic partner left me continually engaged in a conversation with myself about which "character" to personify—what kind of imagined self to be. This constant minding of self serves as a reflexive source of virtual performance. At the same time, the other is involved in the same process (to varying degrees) that pulls them into a cohesive situation. In this sense, virtual connectedness serves as a conduit of relational potential where "interpersonal life is conducted in a nexus of persons, in which each person is guessing, assuming, inferring, believing, trusting, or suspecting, generally being happy or tormented by his phantasy of the others' experience, motives, and intentions" (Laing, 1970, p. 174).

Because digitized interlocutors are given time to assess and creatively construct messages, they are open to imaginatively interpret and respond with one of a myriad of "voices." But these voices are not necessarily interpreted by the other as inauthentic because the social situation is materially disembodied. In actuality, the style and "flare" embedded in messages are acknowledged as "genuine." This means there is a certain amount of responsibility tied to virtuality where people in close relationships hold one another to their word.

Thus, virtual connectedness lets one authentically "be who one is" in an interpretive fashion that is only limited by the extent of one's imagination and perceived

potential of the relationship. As Penn (2001) writes about using different voices in conversation:

We all [have] the potential to develop many voices; further, we could learn to co-exist with these other voices, and not replace them. We would not necessarily work toward a replacement story using our new voice; rather, we could develop other stories/voices that would co-exist with each other. Traveling with that thought, we could tolerate parts of our self that we criticized and at the same time be reassured by other voices surrounding it. (p. 39)

As Baxter (2009) suggests, “Selves and relationships are constituted in the jointly enacted communication events of the relationship parties” (p. 184). This, too, is true about virtual connectedness since the purpose of digital exchange is to establish and maintain social cohesion. But when technology is thrown into the mix of sense making and correspondence—that is, when a digital device is positioned between the mutually experienced subjectivities of interlocutors—the need to avoid any interruption in the ritual of virtual connectedness takes on an aesthetic relevance. Creativity comes to color the relationship because of the ability to call upon different voices and characters in conversation.

Especially in the context of a social situation with a potential romantic partner, social actors work to show that they remain interested, attentive, and invested in the conversation. This helps them convey that they are attracted to the other. Furthermore, it signals that they have imagined a possible future for the relationship that is shared to a certain extent (Bochner, 1982).

Virtually, then, one is driven to avoid sending signals that indicate a breach of attentiveness and mutual mood because the rules of the relationship are in the process of being established by different logical types and levels of messages (Haley, 1963). The

“game” of dating becomes a fight for social cohesion, a creative tri-lectic between oneself, one’s imagined character of self, and the other.

Soon, I found myself single and lonely. Moreover, I found myself thinking about Beth. Then, somehow, we unexpectedly ran into each other at a party. All night long from across the room, I kept tabs on her, watching who she was talking to and reading her body language. I watched the guys that she was flirting with and paid attention to her mood (and level of intoxication) as she moved in and out of conversations. I was waiting for my chance to get her in a room alone, in a good mood and rich with “liquid encouragement.” I decided that tonight was the night I was going to get some answers about what happened to us. To be honest, I couldn’t get past my hurt feelings—the thought of her being with someone else drove me mad.

The last time we spoke was months before: she was leaving my room with a group of her sorority sisters after a game of Euchre. At that time, we had decided to get back together, just to “try it out.” But when she abruptly left for the night without saying goodbye (or seemingly caring about what my plans were), I assumed she was headed to meet up with some other partner—the guy she had been dating since we broke up.

Confused, frustrated, and paranoid, I sent her an impersonal text:

Nicholas May 23, 2008 at 11:17 pm
Whyd u leave?

Beth May 23, 2008 at 11:30 pm
I’m going to a friend’s house

Nicholas May 23, 2008 at 11:31 pm
Your going to HIS house, aren’t you?

Beth May 23, 2008 at 11:35 pm

He told me that he has a surprise for me when I get there

Nicholas May 23, 2008 at 11:36 pm

So, your staying with him then?

Beth May 23, 2008 at 11:45 pm

I dunno. Why do you care? Don't you have other girls that you can call? Who were you texting all night?

Nicholas May 23, 2008 at 11:46 pm

U know what, FUCK THAT! I was trying to get a hold of my roommate. If you wanna be with him, be with him. I can't do this shit anymore.

Beth May 23, 2008 at 11:47 pm

Sound good to me!

Nicholas May 23, 2008 at 11:56 pm

That is sooo fuckin shallow. Nice knowin ya! GO FUCK URSELF!

I see that my window of opportunity has opened. Shrugging off painful memories of hard feelings from our last chat, I found her alone. After strategically bouncing around the room and striking up conversation with unlikely people, I got my opportunity to approach her when she disappeared out to the deck of the house. Both of us being smokers, I followed. As I walked out onto the deck, I knew she had recently ended her relationship with the other guy. I wanted answers. I wanted her back. But most of all, I wanted some sort of connection.

We both had had some drinks. Perhaps that's why I decided to open up to her, to tell her that I was still confused and unsatisfied with what had happened. Perhaps that's why she didn't blow me off like she had so many times before. I had no way of knowing and said to myself, "Just go for it."

I told her I was sorry to hear about her break up (I was lying, but I thought it was the right thing to say). She told me that she was sorry for what had happened to us. As she spoke, I started to zone out and freeze up. I couldn't look her in the eye; I couldn't challenge her perspective; I couldn't do anything but listen. And all that I heard was a self-centered diatribe about how hard her life was, how much I had screwed everything up and how little she cared about anyone or anything.

Frustrated, I walked downstairs and outside. Speaking to her did nothing—in fact, it only made things more unclear, more confusing. Who was this person that, at one time, I thought I knew so well? What happened to the person that was so honest and open, always willing to have conversations?

Making Sense of Missing Signals

Each message sent by a social actor is qualified by a certain logical type (e.g. textual, vocal and physical), which helps to make the context of the social situation more concrete (Bateson, 1972; Haley, 1976; Nachmanovitch, 2009). But virtual connectedness (with the exception of Skype and video chat) is carried out without any physical indicator beyond the timing of responses (e.g., quick response indicates high attentiveness and potential for a mutual mood between interlocutors). This means that the physical signals of any message is absent. This sets virtual social situations apart from those in offline, material contexts by opening the floodgates of imaginative interpretation. Although physical symbols in offline social situations are always ambiguous and open to interpretation, digital expression leaves the interlocutor room to imagine and interpret a “hoped for” physical representation that *could* be present but is not necessarily there.

In my personal experience, text or Facebook messages are received and interpreted with an assumption of the message sender's nonverbal signals. I know that when I receive a text from Beth saying "I love you ☺" or one from a fraternity brothers saying "Suck It! 3:)" I imagine their facial expressions, demeanor, pitch, volume, and surroundings, which helps me formulate an appropriate response. Although the interpretation of "gaps" in the message are sometimes tagged with emoticons (which may, in fact, be a suggested interpretation), one's personal history with the interlocutor is always a more potent factor in interpreting a missing physical signal.

If physical signals are not inherent to the message yet have an impact on an interlocutor's response, their interpretations must stem from the imagined idea of the other's physicality. As Laing (1970) explains, imagination is a mode of the social experience that lies somewhere in the unconscious. In this sense, the imaginative interpretation and construction of messages is always at play within communication. But virtually—left without any indication of physicality—the "gap" is filled in a creative way that is tied to one's prior physical experiences with the other. Memory comes to factor into how one creatively constructs this mental "image" which stabilizes the context of the situation. Since digitization is a reflexive and participatory process of interfacing, this imagined potential comes to influence the relationship. As a result of digitization, imagination rises to the surface of the conscious experience for both interlocutors.

According to Laing (1970), "Some people . . . seem to know, while imagining, *that* they are imagining, and *what* they are imagining" (p. 31). It is this ability that digitization extends to social actors participating in virtual connectedness. During creative message construction, time can be "stretched" to give an interlocutor ample

opportunity to interpret and reinterpret the message, fill in the physical “images” associated with the message, formalize a response, and anticipate another exchange. This is a sort of mental calisthenics that tests one’s ability to accurately idealize the other.

This seems to be the source of much confusion derived from digital communication because, according to Laing (1970), “We may convey something to another, without communicating it to ourselves” (p. 32). But it can also be the source of cohesion between interlocutors. Later in this chapter, I explain how the relational potential of virtual connectedness is contingent upon one’s ability to successfully mobilize an imagined understanding of the other.

The next time I had any contact with Beth was months later, on my birthday. Logging into Facebook to read the onslaught of birthday messages that have always brightened my day, I noticed a message in my inbox. Without looking, I opened it. This is what I found:

Beth August 5, 2008 at 8:24am via Facebook

Nick,

Happy 23rd birthday first and foremost. I hope that you have had a great time (which i am sure you did and will continue to). It's been one exciting ride.

Again, i dont' know when i will see you again. I am always busy and well more than likely i will only see you if i am at Jim's during the school year. SO, i wanna finish this conversation now. I don't care if you wanna hear it or not and if you don't, then just click out of this right now. It's all up to you.

What i did to you was not ok and even my morals were being contradicted completely. Karma will come for me some day. I really wanted some security and common ground because i was so confused that i wanted us to be what it once was. I wanted

us to be lovers again. But that just wasn't going to happen. Things were still different and too weird for them to be the same. I didn't give it time to figure itself out, but I was not ready and my feelings were for someone else. And I wanted to mask that because of what people might think. And now, I really don't care anymore. I did you wrong, and again I apologize. I am sorry that I put you through so much shit and agony. Still, look what came out of it for you.

You have a wonderful girlfriend Nick. She is smart, funny, witty, and so many more things. I always told you that you could find someone better than me. And I definitely displayed that in June. I knew you had a thing for her and I am so glad that you went for it and I wish the best of luck for both of you.

I hope that the good outweighs the bad for what happened to us even though it's sometimes hard to forget. I know I won't. You were special to me at one time and I loved you at one time, and that I know I'll never forget. Please take care of yourself and never forget to stop and look at all the beautiful things around you because that is what is important to remember too. I will always keep you in my thoughts, and I will always keep you in my heart.

Self-disclosure and Bonding

Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory suggests that relational closeness is linked to the depth and breadth of interactions and the mutual reciprocity that sharing entails. The more the depth and breadth of self-disclosure and mutuality of self-revelation increases, so does the perceived level of intimacy. Although Bochner (1982) suggests that self-disclosure is a poor indicator of mutual feelings between interlocutors, we can use social penetration theory to understand the relational potential of cohesion between digitized social actors by considering the impact that the imagination has on virtual connectedness.

As I suggested above, imagination factors into virtual connectedness by opening the interlocutor to a myriad of "voices" which can be evoked while crafting messages. If

we accept that one's shared experience and personal history with the other impacts one's ability to appropriately respond to messages (especially when interpreting missing signals), then we can say that the level of intimacy established via digitization is based on the relational closeness of interlocutors. In essence, the "better" one person "knows" the other, the better the chances that s/he will establish a ritual of interaction by constructing intriguing and appropriate messages.

In this sense, it is not necessarily the content of messages but the signal that there is an active relationship—a meta-message of a maintained bond—that creates cohesion. This suggests that the ambiguity of relational closeness goes up or down based on the cohesion attained in the relationship.

This, in turn, means that my ability to carry on a conversation digitally with my relational counterpart is correlated with the depth and breadth of our relationship, including our history together, mutual interests, and the diversity of situations in which we've interacted in real space. In this sense, the more that I feel I know another person, the easier it is for me to successfully fill in the missing signals of their messages. As is apparent from Beth's deeply emotional message, digitization can be used as catalyst for relational closeness.

A year passed. We were back on speaking terms. I had started another serious relationship. Beth and I realized that what happened to us was for the best. However, she was still single and occasionally dabbled in relationships with some of my fraternity brothers. Sadly, none of her attempts at a meaningful relationship worked out and she

decided to leave town. Both of us, having a plan for the future, began to realize that we might never see each other again.

After moving away, Beth was much easier to reach than my girlfriend. She would send me random texts throughout the day, simply to chat or tell me what she was doing. I was “in-synch” with her schedule in California since I would stay awake until 4 am writing papers, reading countless articles, and always perusing Facebook. My girlfriend and I had stopped “chatting” over texts and Facebook long ago. Soon, I realized that I was able to share more of my deepest feelings with Beth than I ever had before. I allowed myself to be vulnerable to her advice in ways that I never imagined I would be able to. I also decided that my relationship with my girlfriend lacked any real or virtual connection. This led to heated arguments and, eventually, a heart-wrenching, digital break-up.

In text messages, I found that both Beth and I were able to say things to one another that we could not seem to bring up when talking on the phone. When I brought this up in conversation, we both began to wonder just how “real” a future romantic relationship between us could be:

Beth September 9, 2009 at 1:17 pm
even if we always remain friends, i need u in my life

Nicholas September 9, 2009 at 1:18 pm
I agree, i agree.

Nicholas September 9, 2009 at 1:19 pm
Ive learned alot about love- and i know that in order for us to be together wed have to mutually retain our independence to be able to be happy together

Beth September 9, 2009 at 1:20 pm
which we never did. but u cant make urself independent all the time. there has got to be a balance. which i have not had. maybe u have, but i have not

Nicholas September 9, 2009 at 1:23 pm

But the big problem is maintaining that balance, its easy to get at first. For us to do that, we would have to be professionally, financially and spiritually established and well endowed.

Beth September 9, 2009 at 1:26 pm

Endowed! sorry i just think that word is funny. yes, i agree. which who knows if that point would ever come. just like u in my life :)

Nicholas September 9, 2009 at 1:29 pm

Well, that i suppose is left to fate. But i think we can help fate by knowing what could be possible and not denying the way we feel as life goes on.

Beth September 9, 2009 at 1:30 pm

i think that sorta fate sounds just fine. i never thought i would have just had that convo with u

Nicholas September 9, 2009 at 1:32 pm

Lol, sure u did

Beth September 9, 2009 at 1:33 pm

No i really did not. you really thought we would?

Nicholas September 9, 2009 at 1:48 pm

I mean, weve kinda been saying this for a month now, without really saying it

Beth September 9, 2009 at 1:21 pm

How do you think?

Nicholas September 9, 2009 at 1:29 pm

I just know u hun, and u know me. I can tell the way your feeling by the things u say to me and the amount u talk to me.

Beth September 9, 2009 at 1:33 pm

well, maybe once u have been gone u actually realize whats important

Beth September 9, 2009 at 1:36 pm

or who in this case. But what i have really learned is who cares about me

Nicholas September 9, 2009 at 1:37 pm

U ever notice that we never have convos like this over the phone, just thru texting

Beth September 9, 2009 at 1:38 pm

yeah. Why is that?

Nicholas September 9, 2009 at 1:39 pm

I dunno. Nerves I suppose

Beth September 9, 2009 at 1:40 pm

I think so too. If u say it aloud do you feel it would become reality?

Nicholas September 9, 2009 at 1:44 pm

I dunno, whether we say it or write it, I can still hear it coming outta ur mouth

Beth September 9, 2009 at 1:45 pm

lol yes.

Asserting a Digital Voice

The notion of actuating different imaginative “voices” which make-up one’s understanding of a “unified” identity has been asserted by narrative theorists for some time (Bochner, 1997; Freeman, 1997; Hacking, 1995; Nehamas, 1983; Tompkins, 1987). Penn (2001) has written about the development and use of “voice” in relation to articulating the experience of illness. Much of her theory can be used in relation to the use of a digital voice. She writes, “The idea that voices can co-exist in both universal and personal events describes our relationship with ourselves and with others. . . . voice is an embodiment, a connection between body and psyche, as well as a cultural mark. . . . When we recognize the power of our voices in relationships, we can only admire their ability to multiply, to change or to influence us” (p. 40). It is by playing-out our hoped-for possible self, digitally—which is always an elastic process of imaginative and creative message

construction—that we assert a character of our being during virtual connectedness that achieves cohesion.

The amount of relational closeness between two interlocutors is, in one way or another, predicated by one’s ability to “hear” the other sufficiently, interpreting all logical types and meta-levels of messages with co-confirmed success. This means that interlocutors are mutually engaged in a process of anticipating the other’s “being,” maintaining a shared fantasy of the social situation and relationship.

In my case, I was opened up the possibility of disclosing certain feelings and emotions that were vocally unavailable. By letting Beth fill in the “gaps” of the message and choose her own voice, I seemed more apt to pay attention to her, strike a common mood and reveal my inner thoughts. As Castells (1996) eloquently writes about the flow of knowledge in network societies, “the culture of real virtuality [is] where make-belief is belief in the making” (p. 375).

Therefore...

This chapter has traced the important moments in my relationship with my fiancée to show how virtual connectedness can lead to the forging of a strong relational bond. As the story develops, we begin to find a deeper meaning as our relationship was imaginatively enhanced and “opened up” by digitization. There seems to be a certain potential for social cohesion tied to social media use that helped our relationship flourish. This is not to say that technology is, in itself, responsible for our feeling “close” to one another; indeed, much has changed about us and our environments over the years. But

physical proximity had little to do with our coming together today. It was the ability to enact our relationship virtually that led to our decision to get married.

I have covered a wide gamut of theories in order to trace the contours of digital culture. I have sought to explain how virtual connectedness helps to foster cohesion by giving social actors the means to establish rituals of communication, employ imagination in message construction, negotiate multiple messages that challenge dialogic coherence, fill in “gaps” of missing signals, form bonds through deeply emotional self disclosure, and assert a digital voice that is entangled with knowledge of the other. These focal areas, which emerge from my narrative of losing and finding love, reveal that social actors each perform a unique virtuality that is entangled with their knowledge of the other. Because virtual connectedness is inherently social, participating in digital culture incurs a high degree of reflexive action. As a result, “being in touch” with one’s virtuality can make social actors aware of themselves as relational beings on a conscious level.

My story shows that relational closeness factors into relationships maintained virtually because of the high degree of interpretation involved in communicating. It is possible that the source of my and Beth’s problems as a couple living together in real space was the constant misinterpretation of messages. Virtual connectedness seemed to open us up to one another, making us more willingly vulnerable. It gave us a new way to listen and understand one another.

Because digitization entails imaginative and creative interpretation and response, our ability to successfully interpret each other’s messages led to a ritual that resulted in a real, meaningful romantic relationship. How ironic is it that we were able to achieve social cohesion while living on opposite sides of the country? Thinking about this leads

me to re-imagine the meaning of “distance” in the digital age, an idea I expand on in the next chapter.

Virtual connectedness has promoted and enabled the maintenance of a deep romantic relationship in my life. Although it was not the sole reason for my and Beth’s decision to get back together, it certainly was the catalyst for the conversations that got us to that point. My experience has revealed to me that the digital enclosure can open social actors to a translucent and fluctuating enclave of relational potential that has very real, very stirring consequences for their lives. These consequences can have a positive impact on their sense of self-in-relation-to-other.

The argument here is that the more I know someone (or share a past with them) the more likely I will be to maintain some sort of rich bond, virtually. By tracing the contours of digital culture and linking interpersonal communication theories and concepts to lived experience, we can better understand the ways that virtuality is performed and digital culture influences one’s concept of self-in-relation-to-other. Although this may be a unique experience for the digital native, it may be that “non-native” performances of virtuality influence relationships in different ways. Other scholars might explore this line of thinking.

Linking my “native” narrative to the first research question that guides this project, I believe I have documented the ways digitization has become a pivotal part of my daily presentation of self. I don’t believe that I would truly “be myself” without it. I made an effort to show that I rely on virtual connectedness to remain abreast of the important and mundane moments in the lives of those I hold dear to me.

Some conclusions that I have drawn are as follows: I would not feel close to those whom I left behind when I came to Florida without the ability to communicate with them at any given moment; I would not have been able to explore other parts of my identity (primarily, my own sexuality) as I did after Beth and I split up; most significantly, I would not have had the ability to mend and re-forged my relationship with Beth. Without our constant and consistent presence in each other's lives, there would be no *real* premise for our decision to get married.

Although phone conversations, video chat, and other textual forms of digital communication (such as e-mail) serve a purpose in the lives of digital natives, in my case, they seemed to take a backseat to texting and Facebook because reaching each other with these channels everyday was practically guaranteed. Our ability to maintain a virtual presence in each other's daily routines—always available to one another no matter where we were or how we felt about our relationship—made a significant contribution to the likelihood that we would share stories, expose our feelings, and develop a shared vision of the future.

Furthermore, it seems that the time we spent apart—both at an emotional and physical distance—contributed to the ways we performed a unique virtuality. We both enlisted digitization to commingle with other lovers, explore the dynamics of romantic relationships, and learn the rules of dating in the digital age. What we came to realize about each other was that we had both learned to rely on the ritualization of virtual connectedness to quell our fears of abandonment in close relationships. In fact, a mutual friend of ours likes to say that we didn't grow apart during our hiatus; we “grew together at a distance.”

Had I not found good reason to embrace digital culture in order to find another romantic partner, I may not have developed the skills necessary to achieve a sense of cohesion with Beth, virtually. Had she not found solace in being virtually connected to others while we were together at first, our relationship may not have played out as it did. Indeed, many conversations with her now have revealed that, at one time, she felt “trapped” by our relationship. When we were together before, the ability to communicate with others as unpleasant situations arose between us enabled her to re-think the meaning of our togetherness and eventually conclude it should come to a halt.

Perhaps this reasoning is *post-hoc, ergo prompter hoc*; truly, it seems that, after the fact, it is easy to point a finger at digitization as a significant influence in our relationship. Despite this, I believe it is justified to claim that technology has had as big of an impact on our relationship as I have illustrated in this narrative. As I stated earlier, both of us realize that much more than our technological affinity has changed since we were first together. We both, however, acknowledge that virtual connectedness *has* played a significant role in our ability to attain a sense of cohesion and shared imagination of the future. This has influenced my understanding of self-in-relation-to-other, a concept I tried to address in response to this project’s second research question.

As narrative theorists attest, social actors obtain a sense of self by first imagining a possible future and relating that potentiality to past experiences. This allows them to make sense of their lives in the present. This is to say that the past cannot be undone but it can be reconfigured as one imagines new potential futures. When I think about our past as a couple and try to make sense of it, I’m left wondering what role digitization has played in our ability to re-connect. My conclusion is that it has helped to foster our

relationship in a way that gives us the ability to create and share an idea of the future that has more open doors than closed; the feeling of being “trapped” seems to have dissipated because of the creative potential of our communication in the present.

At one time, I couldn't have imagined that our relationship would have turned out the way it did. As Beth states in the conversation presented above, neither could she. Our ability to remain connected and keep the conversation going—always open to dialogic change and reconfiguration—indicates that the constancy and consistency of virtual connectedness had an impact on our perceptions of reality in a monumental way. Our perceptions of ourselves in relation to each other merged in a way that a bond was formed that was similar to the one previously experienced.

As Ricouer (1981) has shown, “to be historical, an event must be more than a singular occurrence, a unique happening. It receives its definition from its contribution to the development of a plot” (p. 167). In the plot of our relationship, being “in-synch” with each others' virtuality was essential for building suspense in the story of our lives together. This led to a climax in the story: our decision to breach the digital veil and maintain a relationship in real space.

The development of our relationship has contributed to both us “being in touch” with our own virtuality; likewise, coming to “be in touch” with our virtuality has contributed to the development of our relationship. Our virtual connection has put in motion a heuristic device for making sense of our social worlds. Without the added element of digitization, which is the quintessential component of virtual connectedness, the ways we have each come to know the story of our lives and share an understanding of

how we feel about each other would be quite different. In fact, it may have been that there would be no relationship to play out in reality.

It seems that what I come to know about myself, as well as others, is anchored by our ability to communicate effectively. Although this is no startling conclusion, it is worth noting that the constancy and consistency of virtual connectedness creates new complex opportunities to participate in relationships. Furthermore, the rules and norms of relational maintenance inherent to digitization—the virtual mechanics of creating patterns, rituals, and bonds with others—influences one’s understanding of self in a way that opens one up to others, ready and willing to co-create a shared reality of imaginary potential.

When technology is wedged between human relationships, patterns and rules change. Social actors can become open to others, freer to disclose things about themselves that they otherwise wouldn’t in offline social situations. This seems to be the reason why so many users choose to digitize without any hesitation or care to discuss their “private” conversations. Most digital natives can attest to being with a friend who will simply not stop texting while standing in line at Starbucks or “checking in” with others as they arrive at a restaurant, club or bar.

We come to pattern our own experience of sociality in tandem with others and digitization adds a level of experience to the ways we perceive our social world. Knowing where someone is, what they are doing and how they may be feeling enriches our understanding of others to certain extremes. In my case, Beth and I were able to hold conversations at such a deep level of meaning that we decided to take on a new, significant role in each other’s lives. I cannot deny that marriage brings with it a whole

new dimension to one's identity that, in many ways, my concept of who I am will drastically change. It will be interesting to see if and how we remain virtually connected in the future. Regardless, in my case, social media use gave me and my partner more reasons to care about each other. As Frankfurt (2004) claims, "It is by caring about things that we infuse the world with importance" (p. 23). Virtual connectedness gives us new ways to care.

The next chapter connects these ideas with Gergen's (2009) idea of relational being, showing that, in many ways, digitization contributes to a "coming together" of not just human and machine, but human and human. This opens the door for a discussion of the larger impact of digital culture and gets closer to a theory of "real virtuality."

CHAPTER 4:
TOWARD A THEORY OF REAL VIRTUALITY

In the last chapter, I traced the events that led up to my engagement with my fiancée in order to show that social media use has a profound impact on understanding of self-in-relation-to-other. The story is one of losing and finding love; just as well, it is a story of exploring one's unique virtuality. In this chapter, I seek to bridge the gap between my local experience and the broader experience of digital culture. My hope is that my story has shown that "being virtual" is a very real part of everyday social life. My viewpoint stems from Gergen's (2009) concept of relational being that "seeks to recognize a world that is not within persons but within their relationships, and that ultimately erases the traditional boundaries of separation" (p. 5).

Without social media—without its constant connectivity—my and Beth's relationship may have disappeared. For me, the issue is this: in our relationship before—the one that had practically no form of virtual connectedness—I was uncomfortable with the ambiguity of not being constantly connected. Morally, emotionally, and integrally, I was not mature enough to handle any sense of real separation. When I started to recognize that she was performing a unique virtuality, I began to sense a "distance" between us.

In our relationship now, the foundation is one of virtual connectedness—the performance of a shared-imaginary relationship that is primarily mediated. We can think of this as the merging of two backstages into one shared frontstage of social performance (Goffman, 1959). Because the relationship now rests on the premise of onwardness—no break from the relationship as a close, personal, romantic one—it seems to have more potential.

The first part of this chapter reviews my experience in order to explore broader implications of virtual connectedness. The latter part connects these concepts to a general theory of “real virtuality” that provides a framework for exploring the ways digital culture is enacted in any social situation. I conclude by discussing why the digital native perspective is essential for producing relevant studies of social life and identity in the digital age.

Implications and Broader Conclusions

Reflecting on my relationship with Beth I realize that social media have opened us up to new possibilities by giving us new ways of making sense of what one another means when we connect. Without being able to operate under an imagined understanding of a social situation, the meanings of our messages break down. Indeed, I foresee that virtual connectedness will have a place in our future relationship, to some influential degree.

Without it, we run the risk of lessening the cohesion we achieve in our togetherness. For both of us, our virtuality makes up a large part of “who we are” both as a couple and as individuals. It’s my mental image of her “saying” what she writes that keys me into the intent of her messages because it helps frame the context of our

conversation. Thus, I narratively (creatively) constitute missing signals via digitization that are colored by the dynamics of our relationship and shared history together. As Gergen (2009) asserts, “we all carry many different voices, each born of a specific history of relationship” (p. xxv). Concurrent with MacIntyre’s (1985) theory of idealizing a narrative self, social media users find themselves to be characters in a story that is not entirely their own making. In this sense, self knowing—partly constituted by one, partly by the other—converges during digitization in interspace.

The significance of virtual connectedness—the difference that makes a difference in social life—is that it allows social actors to operate as relational beings equipped with moments of self evaluation and an ever-active imagination. This leads to a reflexive situation where social actors are constantly and consistently minding their presentation of self-in-relation-to-other. In this way, social media can help us become more responsible social actors. “As contemporary technologies bring us into an ever-expanding orbit of relationships, so do the criteria of self-evaluation multiply” (Gergen, 2009, p. 9).

Through virtual connectedness, relational closeness is felt by social actors to the extent that they act “as if” they were in real space conversation with the other (Heim, 1993). But this “as if” is not subject to actual corporeality, materialism or physicality in the traditional sense. It is imagined in interspace while one embodies the elasticity of self representation and relational maintenance. As Gergen (2009) states, “There is the close relationship, then, between our presumption that we are ‘self-contained’ and the quality of our relations with others” (p. 13).

My inner-most desire to act as different characters—to be the best version of oneself possible—is set free through digitization (Zhao et al., 2008). In turn, my concept

of who I am, who others are, and the kind of relationships we have are greatly dependent on how we use the technology that enables our connection. Much like one's sexuality or spirituality, one's virtuality predicates his or her ability to form bonds with others. If this is true, we might consider that one's unique performance of virtuality is tied to her or his perception of the other's performance of virtuality, to one degree or another.

When we look at the “dance” of human and machine interface, we can see that virtual performances with social media lead to active participation in “ritual interaction, cohesion and mediated communication” (Ling, 2008, p. xi) all at once. In a deep relationship, the act of sending messages each day creates a specific expectation—a necessity of connection that can be relied on for comfort, support, and drive. This becomes a vital part of daily routine life. In my case, I began to sense a “distance” between Beth and myself when I observed a change in her demeanor; this change was a virtual addition to my evaluation of her performance of self.

The irony in this is apparent: How could I have sensed a “distance” between us when we were sitting in the same room? How could we have achieved “closeness” from across the country? Following this line of thinking, we need to understand better what is meant by “distance.” As physical disconnection is inherent to my and Beth's relationship now, “distance” must denote a *relational* dissonance or incongruity of shared experience entangled with digitization. Here, we can see Gergen's (2009) abstract concept of self knowledge entangled with relational knowledge manifest in lived experience:

We cannot specify what exists before there is co-action, because the moment we try to enumerate these fundamentals we are indulging in the fruits of co-action . . . Independent persons do not

come together to form a relationship; from relationships the very possibility of independent persons emerges. (pp. 37-38)

Sometimes Beth does not send me messages when I expect them. This makes me wonder whether I have done something wrong or perhaps she is simply busy. Whatever conclusion I arrive at, I am forced to fill the “gaps” of our physical disconnection by imagining the vocal and visual signals that are missing. What did she “look like” when she received my last message? What about her physical setting could have prevented her from responding to me? Where is she in time and space? Where are we in our relationship?

If I choose to address her absence in a message and if my assumptions are accurate, I am able to (re)establish a mutual mood and attention between us. Most of the time, I flirtatiously ask where she is, what she’s doing and hint that she is “Ignoring me ☺.” This fosters cohesion in a way that allows me to feel a part of a romantic relationship without her physical presence. My ability to do this effectively is correlated with what I know about her, our shared history and the limits of my imagination. If I fail and still get no message in response, I am left wanting and wondering—I have no basis for interpreting her virtual performance. In this sense, social actors that frequently use social media cannot not communicate—even when they choose *not* to participate in digitization!

Indeed, because I am always engaged in filling in the “gaps” of messages perpetually forced to anticipate reactions, I am conditioned to be more comfortable with ambiguity. When are we getting married? How will we pay for it? Who is invited? Where

will we live? When will we move in together? All of these questions seem graspable and open for conversation, debate, and compromise as the frame of our relationship in the “here-and-now” is one of ever-present negotiation and creative idealism.

This means that there must be a sense of future-oriented possibility derived from virtual connectedness—a relational potential that would not exist otherwise. Thus, if my performance and experience of virtuality is “in-synch” with that of my interlocutor, I come to expect our relationship to continue to develop and play-out in my everyday life.

Our joint performance of virtuality is further conditioned by the depth and breadth of our conversations, sending a meta-message that a real relationship is being maintained. In conclusion, we can think about social media use “transpersonally” (Laing, 1970, p. 171) as a process of co-constructing a shared reality through virtual connectedness and an ever going “dance” of digitization. This process is dictated by rules and norms created in conversation between interlocutors who bring together their unique performances of virtuality.

A Theory of Real Virtuality

By situating social media use in the context of a close personal relationship, my story points at the theoretical mechanics of virtual connectedness. That is, an “invisible” social phenomenon that occurs constantly and consistently becomes “visible.” The virtual process of relational maintenance and meaning making that slips beneath the surface of epistemological thought are brought to the surface of conscious observation through narrative inquiry. Digital nativity, then, articulated from a local perspective, provides academe with a grammar of experience for exploring and examining the dynamics of digital culture.

When virtuality is seen as a performative dimension of social life, the relational potential of any social situation can be discussed; this exposes the powerful changes in social life that virtual connectedness helps to make a reality. My story of losing and finding love, when framed by the virtual mechanics of ritual and cohesion, opens doors for scholars of all kinds to better articulate and discover the ways digital culture manifests and recursively shapes an understanding of self-in-relation-to-other. This is the playing out of “real virtuality,” the notion that virtual embodiment is an innate part of reality for many social actors.

We need a theoretical framework that makes often hidden and overlooked virtual processes of meaning making more accessible and apparent. From an applied perspective, the best theory is a good story of “communication in practice.” This thesis strives to explicate the communication practices of a digital native who manages to sustain a deep relationship with different forms of social media. I have tried to point directly to virtual connectedness as the difference that makes a difference in the digital age.

Theoretically, then, the main idea is this: Performance of virtuality is tied to one’s imagined understanding of their relationship with another as well as one’s own unique style of digitization. Virtuality emerges as a composite performance of self and relationship maintenance rendered through the process of technological mediation; it is a dance of human and machine interface for discursive, rhetorical and emotional purposes that serve the self and the other. In this way, digitization paves a pathway to the maintenance of relationships that informs social actors about themselves, shaping the way they come to imagine how they are perceived by the other. It keys them into the potential

ways that the relationship could play out in offline contexts, opening them up to new ways of experiencing each other that breach traditional norms of social interaction.

However, a further point is this: When the idea of virtuality is situated in an overarching context of technological ubiquity, the digital enclosure takes on an ethereal form that has unique attributes. These are referentially acted upon in everyday life, yet remain invisible to the naked eye. To some degree, participation in virtual connectedness is mutually understood and enacted by all users; this activity has a real impact on social actors' concept of self-in-relation-to-other and can be accounted for if one knows how to "see" it. Alas, we can make a few primary claims about where and when virtuality is performed and how it gives "shape" to the digital enclosure. I have developed three propositions for observing performances of virtuality:

1. There is a "virtual volume" that can be understood as the sum of the aggregate points of interface in a real space social situation. Clearly, this volume is translucent and in a constant state of flux.

A brief example will help to illustrate what I mean. Each year, I return to my fraternity house to participate in the pledging program. Each time I come back, more and more brothers have laptops, fancy cell phones, and more advanced and contagious computer gaming addictions. When I walk into the house in the middle of the afternoon, it is always the same scene: Six guys sitting in the same room, all of them on a laptop or PC, all of them connected and playing the same game. They are communicating with each other virtually, yet they are not saying anything.

Their attention is fixed on their computer consoles, and they usually don't even notice I've entered the room. Occasionally, one of them shouts, grunts, or laughs in reaction to their game; here and there, one of them may check his cell phone, send a text,

or use the restroom. But there is no vocal communication, no acknowledgment of my presence and no physical interaction—only silence. We can say, in this situation, that the “virtual volume” is rather large—it is enough for each of them to break the rules of “meet and greet” that go along with saying hello to a friend that has not been seen in some time.

2. Virtual volume carries with it a certain “mass.” It is “filled up” with a degree of attention paid to respective points of digital interface. This incurs varying degrees of “imagining” that get in the way of interacting in real space. The “noise” of virtual connectedness is partially determined by one’s unique style of digitization *and* the closeness one feels towards his or her interlocutor. This has an impact on a social actor’s mood.

Visiting my hometown, I had a friend drive me to a jewelry store to pick up a ring I had sized and cleaned for Beth. I was inside the store for only about 10 minutes. When I came out and jumped into the car, my friend turned to me and said, “Jesus man! Since you’ve been gone I got 7 text messages from 5 different people. It’s too much! First my fiancée hit me up, then my brother, then 3 friends from high school asking what I was doing tonight. I don’t feel like answering any of them now! It’s just silly.”

For him, the mass of messages was, apparently, too much to handle in the short amount of time they were received. In this episode, we can see that there is a mass that is always attached to the reception and retention of messages. But it is not simply the amount of messages, as one would assume. It is also the depth of attention it takes to establish a mutual mood in conversation.

Crafting messages takes time and a great deal of effort (depending on the relationship being maintained), and this comes to color the real space context one is sharing with others. In this sense, the “mass” of virtual volume is one part the amount of

messages, one part the attention paid to them, and one part a need to sustain a relationship virtually. In my friend's case, the mass far exceeded the virtual volume so much so that he felt he had to share his feelings about the situation with me. No doubt, this was an effort to help me make sense of his lack of attention paid to our conversation and driving. He was trying to key me into his altered mood.

3. At any given moment, when the virtual volume is considered in relation to the degree of mass, a real space social situation can be understood as having a high or low correlation with the *relational potential* incurred through digitization. That is, virtual performances will be thoroughly embedded in the context of the social situation. Therefore, different performances from different people are either more or less likely to occur. It may be that social actors act *as if* others are present when they are really only virtually "there."

My roommate has trouble with her boyfriend on a regular basis. Being a neutral party (as I am engaged, apparently I'm seen as "neutral" in her eyes), she frequently tells me about their problems and seeks my advice. I do the best that I can to make sense of her stories, piecing together the "drama" that she illustrates to make fair assumptions about her boyfriend's version of the story. It seems that no matter what he does to make her angry, she always chooses to stay in the relationship.

The other day, I realized that, as she was telling me the story of her night and the argument that broke out between them, she was texting. She became angrier as she spoke, all the while writing and receiving messages. I asked who she was talking to and she told me it was her boyfriend on the other end of the conversation. Immediately, I turned around and stopped listening to her gripes. When she asked why I stopped listening, I told her that I was worried that everything I said to her was being said to her boyfriend via text: I was worried about being "pulled into the drama." Her boyfriend and I have a

fair relationship, and the last thing I wanted was to piss-off someone who has a key to my apartment.

In this situation, when my roommate told me that she was texting her boyfriend as we were talking about their problems, I became aware of the relational potential of the situation: My “advice” to her could have been seen by her boyfriend as favoritism or “taking sides” in an argument. There was no way I could have known what my roommate was texting, if she was translating my ideas to favor her, or if she had told him she was talking to me about their problems.

Either way, the mere chance that he could virtually “overhear” what I was saying was enough to turn me away from her story. It sent a signal to me that I should cease giving her advice. Beyond this, her boyfriend’s “presence” through virtual connectedness seemed to make her life more complicated. Still, with him always “virtually present,” the potential for them to maintain a relationship remains likely, despite any squabbles they may have.

Digital cultural indicators rest dormant beneath the perceptual field of observation. Mostly, we only ever imagine there is such a thing as digital culture when it comes up in conversation; many people strike up conversations about their type of phone, share text messages, discuss Facebook-originated discussions, etc. Because virtual activity is fluctuating and translucent, it sometimes seems as though it is not occurring. This, however, is not necessarily the case.

There are as many opportunities to create connections as there are technology users (perhaps more). Furthermore, virtual connectedness exists primarily in the mind. This means that, to varying degrees, different social actors with unique styles of

digitization mutually experience the act of virtual connectedness in a way that corresponds to the close relationships they maintain; this experience is always impacting offline reality.

Adopting the theoretical framework laid out above, we may better identify the moments that virtuality “bleeds through” virtual connectedness and impacts real space relations. In short, the “dance” of digitization occurs where social actors each participate in circling a metaphoric “virtual campfire” to commune with others who are *not* physically present while they share a social situation with others who are. The three propositions of “real virtuality” discussed above provide a schema for recognizing when, where and, in some ways, how virtuality is performed in any *real* social situation.

Indeed, it may seem as though I am saying that there is a vast difference between online and offline contexts of communication. This, however, is not necessarily true. What is true is that online and offline contexts tend to blend as social actors add virtual connectedness to their repertoire of interaction. While virtuality is often performed in silence—out of the observable view of others in real space—acknowledging that it does happen constantly and consistently leads to the realization that reality has become virtualized.

Social life is not just experienced in a material world but in a virtual, fluctuating, and translucent enclave of relational potential. This is much different than saying that virtual worlds, which exist *only* online in cyberspace, are becoming more realistic. From the position of “real virtuality,” we can begin to explore the ways that social actors—connected or not—are at the whim of a digital enclosure. In essence, what was once

thought of as merely “make-believe” has literally become “belief in making.” This gives us a way of mapping the digital-social experience.

Contributions of the Digital Native Perspective

The “dance” of digitization can be understood by exploring the subjective experience of the digitized social actor. Beaming though narratives of digital natives are episodes of relationships maintained through digitization that point toward a necessity of virtual connectedness. The ability to avail oneself with multiple mediated channels of communication becomes so strongly tied to individual identity that it appears to be essential to the understanding of self and other.

Through local vocalization of the digital native, we can better understand how social actors are entrained and enmeshed in a thick network of relations that breach conventional logics of space and time. The elasticity of the self becomes a pivotal part of reality for social actors that communicate digitally. Thus, the above explanation of digital acculturation requires a better understanding of its implications for digital nativity.

By considering digital nativity as a level of awareness—a story we tell ourselves about ourselves that informs and invigorates our performance of virtuality—we can understand the place that technology has in users’ lives. In this way, being a digital native is relative to one’s cultural socialization that is based on different identity categories, memory, and personal history. Indeed, *my* “native” experience of digital culture will always be different than *yours*. However, what we share is a certain moment in history with specific technologies readily and reasonably available for use; these technologies come to color our sense of self and other in a mutually experienced way, despite our different styles of digitization and the types of relationships we use social media to

maintain. We may, then, understand digital nativity as a generation-linked, not a generation-determined phenomenon.

Narratively speaking, this thesis opens the door for social media scholars to turn inward and explore the ways they themselves have been acculturated by the digital enclosure. Very soon, digital natives will begin to populate (and eventually dominate) the halls of the “ivory tower.” As researchers, they may need to take their own digital nativity into account. Since the middle decades of the last century, a predominant theme in qualitative research has been the reflexive nature of field-based studies that seek to illustrate the intricacies of “native” cultures. The ethical premise of qualitative work has been to examine one’s own positionality in order to do more good than harm when making sense of culture and representing the “other” (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1985).

As some scholars have suggested, all communication research needs to account for technological ubiquity in a way that includes virtual connectedness as a significant part of human communication (Garcia et al., 2010). As the digital enclosure expands, researchers would do well to enlist strategies in their work that recognize virtuality as a very real part of everyday life. By doing so, they may be more reflexive about their virtual place in the world and the personal politics that frame their conscious and otherwise digitized perceptions.

A Final Thought on Future Research

In this study, I focused only on a single relationship in my life to draw broader conclusions about how others might experience digitization. Indeed, one study does not a fact make. However, the exploration of a personal narrative seems to be essential for revealing things about the human condition that are often missed in qualitative research.

By making an effort to keep the focus of my story on social media, rather than on emotions or other interesting phenomena, I have tried to show that social media research can enlist analytic autoethnography as a useful strategy for generating new knowledge about communication in the digital age.

My hope is that other scholars will realize that narrative inquiry can and does illuminate new forms of knowledge formation in the context of relationships and social media use. The irony in the academy is that most technology based research—especially which focuses on social media—does not fully embrace methods of inquiry that focus on social issues. Lived experience, framed in a way as it is here, can help enrich our understanding of the massive changes taking place in the digital age. When enough stories have been told—with rigorous analysis and relevant purpose—we may open ourselves up to ideas that not only explicate how these changes impact the presentation of self in everyday life, but how they come to change how we know what we know about ourselves.

Social scientists and humanities scholars may take these stories a basis for their theories and be able to account for those facets of the human condition that are modulated by technological integration. Digital culture is here to stay and will continue to be a major part of everyone's life—whether digitally connected or not—from now on. As Becker (1973) tells us, “One of the things we see as we glance over history is that creature consciousness is always absorbed by culture” (p. 159). The culture that academics have been reluctant to vocalize is a digital one.

But as Becker (1973) also reminds us, there is always a “dark side” to human communication that can instigate chaos. What I have tried to show is one side of this

debate: That people can and will experience virtual connectedness in ways that better their life and the lives of others. My hope is that others may realize that “The most one can achieve is a certain relaxedness, an openness to experience that makes [us] less of a driven burden on others” (p. 259). The questions we are left to ask ourselves border on technological determinism but force us to contemplate humanity’s role in the continued development, advancement and saturation of communication technology. When we think about social media, we must not forget to take the good with the bad.

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