

Reconciling the Digital Subject in Psychotherapy

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ABSTRACT

RECONCILING THE DIGITAL SUBJECT IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Digital culture, online communication technologies and social networking sites are actively changing the 'subject' of psychotherapy. This research analyses data generated from real-life psychotherapy sessions to examine phenomena associated with social media emerging within the therapeutic discourse and to situate the reported online entanglements of clients within broader networks of culture, capital and social practice. While psychotherapeutic and sociological research has historically focused on the relationship between the use of online platforms and specific behavioural or psychic responses, what is underdeveloped is a more holistic understanding of how mediated communication technologies produce affects within the 'psychotherapy-assemblage'. Informed by the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1972), 'assemblage' refers to the multiplicity of materials, devices, discourses, algorithms, emotions, and relations which comprise the social networks of therapy clients. Utilising the therapy encounter as a 'site' of sociological inquiry, data collection was longitudinal and consisted of field notes and audio recordings of psychotherapy sessions with ten clients recruited from my private practice. The resulting data was used to form narrative case studies and a 'rhizomatic' discourse analysis guided by Deleuzoguattarian thought. Analysis centres around three social media platforms - Instagram, Tinder and Facebook - each of which are shown to produce a range of complications and possibilities in the self-formation of clients. I explore how the design of online technologies holds implications for clients' sense of self-worth, reinforces hegemonic notions of gender and entrenches heterosexist sexual discourses. Mediated technologies are demonstrated to have the potential to produce new relational networks, liberatory forms of self-expression and sources of emotional support between users. I conclude by reflecting on the need for the field of psychotherapy to be more inclusive of discourses around the digital 'lives' of clients and more attuned to how online technologies produce new modes of social exchange and subjectification.

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Abbreviations

BACP: British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

BwO: Body Without Organs

CBT: Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

ESRC: Economic and Social Research Council

GDPR: General Data Protection Regulation

PCT: Person-Centred Therapy

PDA: Paralinguistic Digital Affordances

SNS: Social Networking Systems

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Chapter 1: Introduction

‘It’s, like...it’s always last summer’

It was towards the end of one of our sessions when Rachel said exactly that. They¹ had been my client for over a year and consistently brought a particularly challenging set of personal – and relational - difficulties to our work. Barely twenty years old, they had already lost both parents; Dad from a heroin overdose when they were just a new-born and Mum by suicide a few years later. Their indulgence in drugs and alcohol was a constant fixture in our discussions, as were their ongoing financial anxieties. They were chronically under or unemployed and had exhausted most of the inheritance they had received following their mother’s death. In addition to their crippling panic attacks, they had a history of self-harm and twice during our work had attempted to kill themselves by taking an overdose of paracetamol. Each attempt had resulted in protracted stays in the hospital, from which they would call and leave sheepish, apologetic messages that, despite their best efforts, they would not be making our session as planned.

Desperately thin and nearly six feet tall, they resembled a Diamond Dogs-era David Bowie and – much like the man himself – wildly altered their makeup, hair colour and clothing from week to week. Their sense of identity seemed to be in a similar state of flux. Rachel was genderfluid and depending on the day, was equally comfortable with the being referred to as ‘she’, or ‘he’ or ‘they’, though the latter designation was the one we agreed upon for our work together. They were also polyamorous and mired in a series of fraught sexual relationships with multiple partners, nearly all of whom identified in a similarly amorphous manner. Despite this constant shapeshifting, their affect in therapy was remarkably uniform. No matter the chaos in themselves or their relationships, they remained quiet during sessions, rarely even moving except to slowly rustle their hair.

We had ended one session talking about a recent breakup. Two of their former partners – one male, one female - had both suddenly left them and begun their own relationship. In their distress following their rejection, Rachel poured over the pair’s Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat accounts looking for evidence of the pair’s new life together and – as they relayed with some embarrassment – clues that their new love might be under strain without them. They reported that this obsessive checking and rechecking of accounts was consuming more

¹ As Rachel identified as genderfluid, the pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them’ were how they asked to be referred to in therapy, as well as within this work.

and more of their waking hours and had even found its way into the therapy space, as on several occasions they stopped in mid-sentence to open a notification on their smartphone. This preoccupation had peaked in recent weeks as their former lovers had been ‘trolling’ them online, sending pictures of themselves in various stages of undress, along with comments mocking them as the odd man out. Despite being the target of such sustained cruelty, Rachel went to great pains to describe how much they missed the pair and quietly cried as they scrolled through a library of Facebook photos of the trio taken the previous summer.

After a silence, I asked them if it was in their best interest to keep in contact with people who seemed so determined to ridicule them. Perhaps they could unfollow them on Instagram and Snapchat, or de-friend them on Facebook, I suggested. ‘Why would I do that?’, they replied, staring at their phone. ‘It’s like they never broke up with me. It’s, like...it’s always last summer’.

Despite my initial shock - I rarely feel so old than when I’m talking to clients under twenty five about their digital lives – it struck me that their logic was not without merit. What social media afforded Rachel was a means to curate a sense of self – and a network of virtual relationships - without the trauma of the past or the alienation of the present. In maintaining a link to the online worlds of their former partners, they were sustaining a worthwhile, if not essential, fantasy; that the people they loved had not left them and that things were as they wanted them to be. My concern was not their desire to shape a more satisfying version of their life, but that the content of their online world – the endless streams of photos, the trails of text, the likes and favourites and checks and stars that augment so much of digital correspondence - made it nearly impossible for them to move beyond these past relations. After all, how could they forget the pain that had come before when they were re-presented with it on a second-by-second basis through their smartphone? In a sense, Rachel couldn’t forget. And why would they want to? No matter how turbulent the storms in their analogue life might be, in the eternal sunshine of social media, it was *always* last summer.

The Digital ‘Subject’ in the Consulting Room

As evidenced by the brief case description of Rachel, digital culture and social networking sites are actively changing the ‘subject’ of psychotherapy (Sweet 2014). Within my own private psychotherapy practice, I have observed that when I enquire into the lives of my clients, I am not exclusively dealing with coherent, co-present identities, but with an extensive network of online experiences, discourses and personas mediated through social media platforms (Pontes et al 2015). Having maintained a caseload of clients ranging in age from 18 to 70, I

have witnessed the ways in which ‘the Digital’ (Berry 2015) – that is, the social media platforms and networked devices that define the modern internet age – are not just a preoccupation of the young or the technologically minded, but are an increasingly constant presence within the therapy dialogue, one which brings about affects *within* the self-formation of clients and *between* the members of therapeutic dyad. This continued appearance of online technologies has motivated this research to explore digital practices as constitutive of the ‘selves’ encountered in psychotherapy, and to examine online activities as processes through which the contemporary digital ‘subject’ is assembled.

This thesis is located equally within the fields of psychotherapy and social sciences. I have chosen to adopt theoretical and ontological positions from both traditions as research has established that digital technologies not only facilitate distinct forms of social exchange, but that these practices are actively transforming the classical therapeutic view of the ‘self’ through the creation of technologically-generated ‘objects’ and new mediated forms of subjectivity (Lemma and Caparrotta 2013). It is well rehearsed that an increasing amount of both public and private life is conducted online (Elwell 2014). Smartphones and wireless internet devices allow for endless opportunities for connectivity, while the expansive ‘internet of things’ (Ashton 2009) has embedded computing and mediated communication within the material world itself. Despite this, most seminal psychotherapy texts were written long before the advent of the Internet (Swartz and Novick 2020), leaving practitioners of all counselling modalities unprepared to assist clients in navigating the psychic and relational realities that emerge within online spaces. As ubiquitous computing and the mobility of new electronic devices transcends distance and manipulates time, this work argues that new paradigms are needed to conceptualise how identity is produced, sustained and dissolved between the digital and analogue realms, as well as how digital engagement affects the psychotherapeutic discourse.

The Psychotherapeutic-Assemblage

This research makes meaning of the therapy meeting as both subject to, and the product of, assemblages of discourses, actors, technologies and algorithmically-mediated social exchange. As such, it endeavours to outline how digital culture, social media platforms and mediated communication function as components within what I am terming the ‘psychotherapeutic-assemblage’ (Appendix 1), that is, this the dynamic swirl of components and affective relations at play in the contemporary therapy dyad. This project suggests that the digital worlds of clients – their smartphones, social media accounts, and reported online behaviours - are not antithetical to the analogue communication of the traditional therapy

meeting, but instead represent new forms of expression and relationship that must be understood and integrated into the contemporary practice. Thus, this work attempts to explore how clients bring their digital lives into the space, how they discuss their social media accounts, how they conceptualise their online relationships and patterns of behaviour and how their smartphones – and the digital artefacts contained within – assert themselves within the therapy work.

As will be displayed in the analysis chapters, each of which drawn from a combination of narrative case studies and a discourse analysis of recorded psychotherapy sessions with clients from my own private practice, this project is not interested in separating the 'real' from the 'unreal', or the 'analogue' from the 'digital'. Nor is it particularly concerned with the role of the therapy process as an effective means of pushing clients towards a more 'authentic' or 'true' version of themselves, or to posit that the 'self' which enters the therapy space is any more or less performative or seeking of cohesion than those which appear online. Rather than advance a specific technique or intervention, this research seeks to sit – much like the psychotherapeutic act itself - 'in-between' several worlds, so as to consider the Social Networking Systems (SNS) that have come to define so much of modern social exchange not with blind enthusiasm or uncritical contempt, but to wrestle with the digital's ambiguities and contradictions, its pitfalls and possibilities, its ironies and inner tensions, its affordances and possibilities.

Formulating A Research Question

As previously noted, the appearance of client material around social media – and of the mediated communication that occurs on electronic devices more broadly – has become increasingly commonplace in my professional practice. For years, I have observed a shift in the way that individuals of all ages and socio-backgrounds discuss their online entanglements. The relationships, behaviours and technologies encountered in the digital are no longer spoken of as the stuff of novelty or as subordinate to that which occurs through traditional, face-to-face modes of communication. Rather, my clients refer to what occurs in their social media account as if they were describing any other facet of their past or present experience. Within their online worlds, they fall in love and have their hearts broken. They talk to their friends and 'block' their enemies. They flirt and fall out and network and bemuse and befriend and engage in all manner of connection – and disconnection - with the digital 'other'.

What happens online, my practice has taught me, rarely stays online, but instead spills directly into the therapy meeting. The conduit for this appearance is the almost always the smartphone. No longer confined to front pockets or handbags or rucksacks, the electronic devices of clients have become part of the everyday architecture of the therapy room. Often my clients will arrive in my office and immediately place their phones on the coffee table that sits between us or gently balance them on their laps. Even if such devices are muted, the smartphone is rarely a silent partner in therapy, but a fully-fledged, co-presence member of the therapy discourse, one demanding of a near constant level of attention. Without hesitation, clients will check their screens for notifications. They will answer texts and even take calls in mid-discussion. They will show you pictures of their holidays, their children's birthday parties, their parents and even their pets. They will, as has happened on multiple occasions, hand their devices over to me, so that I might be able to decipher a message from a significant other or interpret a picture on their social media feed. The questions are always the same. 'What do you think she meant by that?'. 'Why would he post this picture?'. 'Can you make sense of this text from my mum?'. Such experiences have revealed to me that the smartphone, and the digital worlds contained therein, is not an inert object, but a *force*, one which creates a multitude of affects within the therapeutic subject and between the therapeutic dyad.

My formative training – which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three – left me woefully underprepared to address the ubiquity of social media and its place within modern psychotherapeutic practice. From Freud to Rogers, Kohut to Bateson, Stern to Yalom, the thinkers that have come to define the field were making sense of the 'analogue' human, one whose relation to others might have been mediated by the printed word and the telephone, but was ultimately defined by the constraints of time and geography and negotiated through the immediacy of touch and talk. What my practice has displayed – and what has motivated my interest in the research topic – was not to attempt to reassert the superiority of those 'traditional' means of communication, but to reckon with the realities of a what online technologies 'do', both to our subjective experience of ourselves, to our sense of others and to the therapy meeting itself. Looking further afield, I also wanted to consider what the therapy discourse might be able to illustrate about the place of digital technologies within contemporary culture. Social media platforms are, after all, commercial entities. Thus, the 'value' of Facebook or Twitter or Tinder is dependent our continued engagement as active consumers in the digital marketplace. This begged the question: what measures, what features, what design choices might be made by the designers of SNS to ensure that our gaze remains affixed to our phones? Furthermore, how might the functionality of specific digital

technologies be shaping our experience and our expectations of the 'analogue' world and of psychotherapy itself?

I concluded that any attempt to understand the digital subject in psychotherapy had to be as inclusive of subjective experience as it was of digital artefacts, as open to the intricacies of the therapy discourse as it was to the flows of desire and capital that occur in 'the social', as concerned with the intra-psychic as it was with the inter-relational and as critical of the technological as it was of the discursive. In short, I was struck by a desire to see the digital worlds of my clients through the lens of *multiplicity*. Considering these diverse research interests, I ultimately arrived at the decision to explore the possibilities of psychotherapy as a sort of ethnographic 'site' of inquiry, one which might be able to address the following research questions:

- How does subjectivity emerge through engagement with digital technologies, specifically through social media platforms? How does the digital 'subject' experience a sense of identity, of relationship and of desire?
- How do psychotherapy clients present and negotiate their digital practices within the therapeutic encounter?
- What role, if any, does the therapeutic process play in investigating the identities, relations and affects that take place in online spaces? How might the therapy encounter help to illuminate broader patterns of social exchange and self-formation that emerge in the digital?

As will be demonstrated in the following chapter, these questions were formulated to not only explore the phenomena around social media which I had witnessed in my own therapy practice, but to attempt to address an underdeveloped area of inquiry: how the individual 'components' of 'the digital' – including, smartphones, algorithms, actors, discourses, affects and flows of capital – emerge in the psychotherapy meeting, and what the appearance of this material can reveal about self-formation and social practice in the networked age. My review of the relevant literature will show the ways in which these topics have been the subject of both psychotherapeutic and sociological research, but are often treated as intellectually discrete or independent of one another. What this research endeavours to explore – and what the above research questions point towards – is a study of the digital 'subject' as it appears

in the therapeutic setting as a *contingent* entity, one which emerges as the product of the interaction between a range of phenomena, materials and relations.

The above questions also speak to dual orientation that guide this study. First, to consider how social media technologies influence patterns of social practice and self-formation within the psychotherapy meeting, and second, to investigate the potential role of psychotherapeutic practice in reconciling the myriad of discourses and identities that occur in online spaces. The inclusion of the word ‘reconcile’ within the final research question – and in the title of this work - demands some clarification. Rather than denote ‘harmony’ or ‘unification’, this work takes inspiration from Calvin’s reading of reconciliation as the end of the ‘estrangement’ between God and man caused by original sin (De Gruchy 2002). The desire to ‘reconcile’ the digital subject was not to establish the ‘truth’ of what clients did or did not do in their online worlds, nor is it to advocate a return to a simpler analogue past. Rather, this research seeks to utilise the language, rationales and justifications that clients use to account for their mediated assemblages in therapy to critique social exchange and self-formation in the digital, to situate the analogue *within* the digital – and vice versa - so as to consider how the field of psychotherapy might respond to clients engaged in practices of ubiquitous computing.

The Psychotherapy-Research Machine

The therapy discourse contained in this work evidences the notion that psychic development of the digital ‘subject’ is not solely a product of unconscious drives or an innate thrust towards self-actualisation², but is an emergent, dynamic entity, one mediated by the multiplicity of digital apparatus and algorithms. In the language of Deleuze and Guattari (1972), whose work will underpin data analysis, this engagement - and its appearance within the consulting room - points to ‘the digital’ as a type of *machine*, through which new forms of expression, self-formation and relationality are continually produced, revised and destroyed. Such an approach is rooted in the assumption that this project – much like the practise of psychotherapy - is fundamentally *interdisciplinary* in nature. Put another way: it exists ‘in-between’ several research paradigms. To conceptualise this complexity, I will highlight the three distinct theoretical and methodological intersections contained within in the project’s unique research-assemblage, each of which will be briefly explored below.

² Within psychotherapeutic literature, the concept of self-actualisation is most notably associated with the Person-Centred Therapy of Carl Rogers (1951), who, in his reading of humanism, asserted the human subject is natural pre-disposed to growth and harmony.

To the first point, this study is situated between the research cultures of psychotherapy and the social sciences. As such, it could be deduced to be 'caught' between two frames of inquiry: a psychotherapeutic acuity towards the subjective experience of the individual and a sociological orientation towards the wider systems of power and affective relations which clients are situated. The bridging of this disciplinary divide reveals the second point of 'in-betweenness', the project's reliance on the psychotherapy meeting as an emergent 'site' of data collection. This study contains elements of both narrative case studies and - as will be explored at length - my development of a *rhizomatic* approach to discourse analysis, one underpinned by the work of Deleuze and Guattari. These methodological tools were selected as each reflected my acuity towards therapy – and the production of knowledge - not as a science, but an *art*. Psychotherapy is, in my experience, about the construction, destruction and re-construction of *narratives*, of stories, both those we tell ourselves and to others. The Deleuzoguattarian task, as will be continually pressed within these chapters, is to not see these 'stories' – and the 'selves' who voice them - as immutable trajectories, but as multiplicitous becomings of corresponding and conflicting flows of affect and self-formation. Thus, the dialogue that occurs within these chapters is an object to be analysed through the textual implications of discourse, as well as a component within a field of assembled techno-social relations.

This modulating methodological framework speaks to the final and most personal point of intersection within the project: my own role within analysis. As will be articulated within my methods chapter, I sought to fulfil two distinct positions during this research: first, that of a therapist devoted to the support and interests of my clients and second, that of a researcher, hoping to use the therapy discourse to generate knowledge of a wider social phenomenon. The tension between these two 'I's' informed several decisions as to how the analysis was presented. On one hand, it seeks to use the psychotherapeutic encounter to understand the affective relations that emerge within the digital. In this sense, I as a researcher have sought to embed myself as an ethnographic 'observer' within a much broader 'culture' of online relations. On the other hand, these 'field' observations occurred through the psychotherapy-assemblage, of which I was an active component. To remove my own experience from the work – and my own voice from the therapy discourse - would disavow the ways in which I shaped the dyad, and thus, the process of data collection and analysis. For this reason, while this work is not explicitly autoethnographic in nature, my contribution to the therapy dialogue is presented and examined as part of analysis.

The intersection of these three frames upon which this study is conceptualised reveals a unique research-assemblage. Between psychotherapy and the social sciences, one may reconcile the complexity of the individual subject within digital systems of organisation and power. Between narrative case studies and a 'rhizomatic' approach to discourse analysis, one may find the tools to document the complexity of the therapy dialogue and investigate the implications it holds for the emergence of digital 'subject'. Finally, between the roles of therapist and researcher, one may utilise the therapy experience as a type of two-way window: one which faces *in* towards processes of self-formation of the individual, while simultaneously facing *out*, towards the production of emerging techno-social realities that occur in the digital.

Thesis Structure

The struggle to theoretically reconcile 'the digital' within psychotherapy will be explored at length in a literature review in chapter two. Chapter three will provide a detailed overview of methods, epistemic stance, qualitative study design, ethical considerations and sample recruitment, as well as my development of a 'rhizomatic' approach to Discourse Analysis as a methodology, a justification for my decision to employ a New Materialist epistemology and my promotion of the work Deleuze and Guattari as an appropriate framework for understanding digital life as it appears within the psychotherapy-assemblage. The most substantial chapters of this thesis – Chapters four, five and six – will contain an analysis and discussion of accounts taken from the psychotherapy setting. Lastly, Chapter seven presents a summative conclusion to the work, including the limitations of the project, a suggestion of topics for future inquiry and its implications for practice.

Chapter 2: Review of Current Literature

Given the complexity of the social exchange that occurs in the digital and psychotherapeutic settings, an overview of the relevant literature from multiple traditions is required. This chapter reviews research into the relationship between online technologies and the processes of subjectification and relationality that occur within the therapeutic encounter. Following a brief accounting of the limited research emanating from the field of psychotherapy, the remainder of this review will be based around four themes of sociological inquiry: first, the effects of digital engagement on psychological well-being, second, how contemporary notions of sexuality and sexual discourse have evolved within mediated spaces, third, the processes of social cohesion and inter-relationality that occurs between online actants, and, finally, the ways in which the digital alters the subject's perception of time. These categories have been chosen as they speak to the primary topics of psychotherapeutic and sociological inquiry into 'the digital' and provide an appropriate footing to explore the affective capacities of digital technologies within processes of self-expression and self-formation that this research seeks to address.

Psychotherapy and The Digital

It is important to distinguish between how digital technologies are conceptualised within each of the two research cultures that underpin this thesis. Psychotherapeutic inquiry into 'the digital' is largely focused on the effects of 'e-therapies' – that is, therapy conducted through videoconferencing services. Several authors (Callahan 2020; Wells et al 2020; Swartz 2020; Vostanis and Bell 2020; Smith et al 2021) have attempted to document how this turn-to-technology has been accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the ways in which mediated services like Zoom and Skype³ are actively changing the therapeutic process. However, there is a small, but growing body of work exploring the effects of online communication – and, more specifically, social media platforms – on subjectivity and self-formation. For example, a number of authors have rejected a historical tendency within the talking therapies to judge mediated communication to be inferior to that which occur in face-to-face settings, and instead have argued for the promotion of 'the digital' as an essential site of relationship and identity worthy of increased attention in the therapeutic discourse (Manring et al 2011; Campbell et al 2013; Creaner 2015; Balick 2018; Weitz 2018; Kronengold 2019; Kaluzeviciute 2020; Peeters 2020; Swartz and Novick 2020). Elsewhere, research has

³ According to Bieringa et al (2021) video conference systems such as Zoom and Skype operate as 'cloud' services, allowing hundreds of millions of users to communicate online with audio and video streams.

considered the ways in which the mutual visibility that occurs in online spaces— including the therapist’s own publicly visible digital ‘footprint’⁴ – is producing new ethical considerations to be managed during contracting process (Macdonald 2013; Pope and Vasquez 2016; Wilder and Wilder 2017; Barsky 2018; Wu and Sonne 2021). The inclusion of what digital technologies can ‘do’ within the dyad is reflected in a host of studies exploring how the affordances of the digital, particularly those of online gaming platforms, might positively contribute to the personal development of clients when incorporated into the therapy work (Coyle et al 2005; Ceranoglu 2010; Silverman 2013; McLeod et al 2017; Hojman 2020).

Despite the post-COVID acuity towards incorporating online technologies into the therapeutic encounter, there exist very few examples of psychotherapeutic inquiry into the effects of the digital on subjectivity. The scholarship which did emerge during the literature review amounted to 12 pieces of research, all of which emanated from the field of psychoanalysis. As will be discussed below, all of this inquiry was conducted by researcher-practitioners, all used case studies as a methodology and all focused on one of two facets of digital experience: first, how online engagement affects the *inter*-relational – that is, relationships between users – and second, how it affects the *intra*-psychic, that is, those conscious and unconscious elements within the individual subject.

Concerning the former, Ballick (2013) asserts that the absence of relational reciprocity and physical co-presence that occurs in online meeting places produces a fertile ground for phantasy, projection and splitting between the subject and its digital peers. Sweet (2014) considers the ways in which enmeshment within computer-based technological spaces – particularly those associated with online gaming - may prompt the development a series of ‘manic defences’ (p.180), including states of narcissism, omnipotence and grandiosity to defend the damaged or fragile parts of the ego which go without empathic reciprocity between users in mediated environments. Drawing upon the wealth of Freudian – and post Freudian - thought into sexuality, scholars have also sought to understand how mediated environments negatively influence the subject’s expectations of intimate relationships (Sabbadini 2018), the ways in which the ‘techno-perversions’ that occur in networked spaces between humans and machines are actively changing sexual mores and notions of kink (Knafo and Lo Bosco 2017) and how the capacity of SNS to allow users to permanently remain ‘online’ and ‘available’

⁴ According to Fretik and Thompson (2015), the digital ‘footprint’ refers to the posts, text, posts, images that are produced and stored across social networking sites.

produces a libidinal online economy that is engineered around the modulation of the arousal of enjoyment and frustration (Johanssen 2021).

Looking towards the *intra*-psychic capacities of the digital, case study research (Toronto 2009; Schimmenti and Caretti 2010; Frankel 2013; Lingardi 2017) has attempted to reconcile how online environments function as psychic ‘retreats’, ones that allow the individual subject to circumvent painful memories, feelings of helplessness and experiences of loss encountered in their analogue worlds. Efforts have also been made to understand how the ‘unrealness’ of internet communication – and the capacity of mediated communication to serve as a conduit for dissociation - holds a series of implications for the analytic endeavour, including; an exploration into how mediated communication between analyst and patient can complicate the dyadic relationship and leave practitioners feeling intruded upon (Gibbs 2011), how the psychoanalysis’ historical aversion to emerging technologies can render analysts unwilling to discuss their patient’s involvement in virtual spaces (Essig 2012) and Lemma and Caparrotta’s (2014) assertion that the ‘virtual immediacy’ (p. 575) of online engagement can produce a false sense of embodiment, one that can hinder analytic efforts to integrate split off, or disavowed, parts of self.

The fact that all the above work emerges from psychoanalytic researchers is worthy of consideration. As noted by Pilgrim (1997), ever since Freud’s (1930) turn-to-the-social in *Civilisation and its Discontents* and the advances of the Frankfurt School, psychoanalysts have long been interested in applying therapeutic concepts as an interpretive framework, one orientated not just towards research into the inner life of the individual, but towards broader patterns of social and cultural exchange. Alongside this intellectual interest in the social is a longstanding commitment within the field to developing theory through practitioner-led research (Pilgrim 1997). This willingness to call upon one’s own caseload to produce knowledge stands in contrast to contemporary integrative, humanistic and existential training, which, to safeguard client autonomy and protect against the sexual boundary violations of early psychoanalysts – not to mention the modality’s historical reputation as indifferent to human suffering – have largely abandoned case research in favour of randomised controls trials and mixed method studies into the efficacy of specific facets of psychotherapeutic practice (Bornstein 2001). Despite the richness and intellectual coherence of the psychoanalytic research tradition from which they emerge, I contend that the above scholarship is underdeveloped in four respects, each of which will be addressed below.

First, while all the above authors frame the digital as a sort of ‘analytic third’ – that is, an external entity capable of affecting the subjective experience of the individual – their analysis, as demonstrated above, is often confined around intra-psychic or inter-relational capacities of virtual technologies. As such, none of work described above fully considers how mediated technologies shape broader patterns of *social* exchange that takes place in online affective and cultural economies, including those that occur in techno-social spaces and within digital capitalism.

Second, the above work largely critiques the digital as a singular, unified body, and rarely makes detailed mention of specific online platforms. As such, it misses the opportunity to examine the ways in which the design of SNS – that is, the algorithmic and visual interfaces, the method and appearance of notifications and the gestures required to control specific functions – produce unique psychic and relational affects. Given this underdevelopment within the existing literature, this thesis seeks to analyse how the construction and layout of social media platforms might channel, constrain and even liberate the desires and processes of self-formation of individual users and facilitate the production of new modes cultural, sexual and relational exchange between users.

Third, like their psychoanalytic forebearers, all the above authors employ narrative case studies as a methodology. However, the resulting clinical material is utilised in a limited and often underdeveloped manner, normally taking the form of short case vignettes. As such, the information drawn from real-life cases makes only brief allusion to the wealth of information at play in the dyadic discourse, including; client’s personal histories, attitudes, desires and reasons for entering psychotherapeutic treatment, as well as insight into how these intimate discourses might influence their engagement with the mediated cultures and techno-social relations in which they are situated outside of the therapeutic setting. As will be discussed in the following chapter, while nearly all therapeutic modalities have developed through the production of case-based knowledge (McLeod 2010), what is missing from existing psychotherapeutic analysis into the effects of the digital – and what this research seeks to address – is an inquiry that directly utilises the discursive richness of therapeutic dialogue as a means of critiquing the assembled intra-psychic, inter-relational and social relations that emerge online.

Finally, this project seeks to adopt a more expansive, neo-materialist view of digital engagement, one that is not bound by psychoanalytic orthodoxy, but remains open to the

study of the multiplicity of materials, apparatus, discourses, affects and actors which produces contemporary online social practice. By framing the engagement of clients in mediated spaces as more than mere by-products of transference or defensive mechanisms or signification, this work is orientated towards an analysis of what online technologies ‘do’, both within the digital ‘subject’ and as productive sites of social practice.

Social Media and Psychological Well-Being

In contrast to the limited research from psychotherapeutic sources, there exist a wide body of sociological inquiry about the relationship between social networking systems such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn and the psychological well-being of individual users (Diener 2009; Verduyn et al 2017; Pang 2018). Much of this research asserts a connection between digital engagement and negative psychological outcomes, including: heightened levels of anxiety, or ‘technostress’ (Brooks et al 2015, p.32), decreased perceptions of self-esteem (Ehrenberg et al 2008), feelings of malaise about life expectations (Morozov 2011) and relational anxieties (Burke et al 2010; Papacharissi 2011). While some (Zilberstein 2015) have asserted the potential for users to derive a sense from close digital associations, a preponderance of work (De Choudhury 2013; Frankel 2013; Baker and Algorta 2016; Miller 2016) has framed online technologies as facilitating increased levels of obsessional thinking and compulsive behaviours, the accumulation of which may influence individuals to favour virtual relationships over traditional modes inter-personal contact, such as face-to-face conversation.

Perloff (2014, 2021) contends that most adverse effects of social media usage are delineated along the demographic lines of gender, age and sexuality, as does Verduyn et al (2020), who states that different subsets of the population utilise online spaces for distinct modes of social exchange. This type of ‘sorting’ between users in the digital is echoed by numerous studies demonstrating the ways in which the functionality of specific online technologies appears to cater to certain personality traits (Orchard and Fullwood 2010; Ryan and Xenos 2011; Best et al 2014; Park et al 2015; Gerson et al 2016). For example, users who identify as introverts may prefer the anonymity of chat rooms or discussion websites (such as Reddit), whereas more extroverted individuals might be drawn to the image-based exchange of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or, more contemporaneously, TikTok.

Perhaps the most highly studied demographic within contemporary sociological research into the psychological effects of digital engagement are young adults and adolescents. Of this

research, numerous authors (Woods and Scott 2016; Ho et al 2017; Twenge et al 2018) have explored the relationship between elevated levels of 'screen time' amongst users in their teens and twenties and poorer sleep quality, lower self-esteem, higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Other studies (Matook et al 2015; Varga 2016; Yang 2016; Hunt et al 2018; Liu and Wu 2019; Liu and Ma 2020) have asserted that the consumption of information that occurs in online spaces promotes feelings of envy, emotional withdrawal, and loneliness. Such negative psychological effects are particularly acute in studies of populations of young men and teenage boys, which suggest an association between online pornography and the development of depressive symptoms (Willoughby et al 2014; Perry 2017; Willoughby, Busby and Young-Petersen 2019; Wery et al 2019; Perry 2019), as well as in reports on the adverse effects of online life on female users highlight feelings of fears of 'missing out' on friendships or social occasions (Freitas 2017; Franchina et al 2018; Scott and Woods 2018; Wiederhold 2018; Reer et al 2019).

A number of cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys (Ghaznazi and Taylor 2015; Nesi et al 2015; Vogel et al 2015) claim a connection between the engagement of young women and teenage girls on image-based platforms – such as Pinterest, Tumblr and Instagram – with feelings of body dissatisfaction (Hargreaves and Tiggemann 2003; Levine and Murnen 2009; Tiggemann et al 2018; Bak and Priniski 2020) and patterns of disordered eating due to the internalisation of 'thin body' ideals perpetuated by 'thinspiration' images, that is, content associated with the promotion of thinness and extreme weight loss (Harrison 2001; Harrison et al 2006; Ging and Garvey 2018; Griffiths and Stefanovski 2019; Yee et al 2020). However, the relationship between image-based SNS and feelings of bodily dissatisfaction in the literature is not solely a phenomenon specific to female users. Recent research examining the effects of 'fitspiration' images has argued that depictions of idealised, muscular male physiques – often taken during or following workouts in the gym – can lead to pronounced feelings of inadequacy amongst young men (Tiggemann and Zaccardo 2018; Tiggemann and Anderberg 2020; Dignard and Jarry 2021).

Despite the wealth of studies speaking to the association between online engagement and negative psychological outcomes, numerous researchers have asserted that there is *no* direct correlation between the frequency of technology use and general psychosocial well-being (Gross 2004) or any increase in depressive symptoms (Davila et al 2012; Jelenchick et al 2013). Westerlund and Wasserman (2009) refer to the ambiguity of inquiry into the effects of the digital as the 'internet paradox' (p. 222), claiming that SNS platforms possess the potential

to be an equally positive and problematic apparatus of connection and self-formation. This is confirmed by the work Burke et al (2010) and Zhan et al (2017), each of whom demonstrates that while short-term SNS usage can evoke feelings of social comparison and jealousy between users, more frequent online engagement can be a predictor of increased levels of perceived social capital and elevated feelings of overall well-being. Such research is indicative of a growing orientation in the literature away from examinations of the quantity or frequency of exposure to SNS platforms, and towards the *quality* of electronic interactions and behaviours that occur in mediated spaces (Park et al 2011; Hollenbaugh and Ferris 2014; Sheldon and Bryant 2017).

Mediated Sexuality

Whereas early internet scholars (Rheingold 1991; Turkle 1995; Meyrowitz 1997) explored the possibilities of the internet – particularly networked virtual reality technologies - to re-configure notions of embodiment and sexuality, modern inquiry into the mediated sexual practices centres around the ways in which sites such as Facebook, Snapchat⁵ and Instagram - officially marketed as ‘social networking’ sites – are producing new forms of sexual expression and new modes of socio-sexual exchange. This includes studies addressing the psychological effects of the sexual ‘economies’ that emerge in digital space around the production and consumption of sexualised messages – otherwise known as ‘sexting’ – or suggestive images on social networks (Manago et al 2008; Patchin and Hinduja 2010; Ringrose et al 2013; Ringrose and Harvey 2015; Englander 2017; Klettke et al 2019). The changes to sexual practice brought about by the exchange of sexualised discourses and digital artefacts on platforms like Plenty of Fish and Match.com – and more recently on Bumble and Hinge - have been denounced by some theorists as not only evidence of the ‘marketisation’ of romance (Frank and Klinecicz 2018), but has signalled an emerging ‘moral panic’ (Richey 2016, p. 398) and a ‘dating apocalypse’ (Riley 2015) which has regressively shaped notions of sex and sexuality across generations, genders and socio-economic divides by facilitating an increasingly coarse and transactional mode of sexual exchange.

One SNS that has garnered considerable attention within the literature – and will be the subject on an entire data chapter in this work - is the dating app Tinder. Considered by many to be

⁵ Snapchat is a social app that allows users to send and receive time-sensitive photos and videos known as "snaps," which are hidden from the recipients once the time limit expires (images and videos still remain on the Snapchat server). Users can add text and drawings to their snaps and control the list of recipients in which they send them to.

the vanguard of ‘hook up’ apps (Ahlm 2018), the platform has simultaneously been presented as a conduit for callous, commitment-free sexual encounters (Sevi et al 2018; Jonason and Bulyk 2019) and as a futuristic tool to initiate all types of romantic entanglements, including long-term commitments and even marriages (Balbi 2016; Stoian 2019). Numerous feminist authors (March et al 2017; Kennedy and Phippen 2018; Thompson 2018), have asserted that the aggressive flirtation and sexualised image-making that takes place online – particularly, the unsolicited sending of pictures of ‘dick pics’ by men to female users on Tinder and other mobile dating platforms – has entrenched old patriarchal norms and accelerated new forms of objectification, harassment and misogyny towards women. Others claim that the ‘slut shaming’ which women are forced to endure on dating applications – through aggressive ‘heterosexist’ (Herek 1990) performances of their male counterparts – align with the historical efforts of men to regulate normative notions of femininity and female sexual agency (Johnson and Moran 2013; Ringrose and Renold 2012; Webb 2015; Tate 2016; Thompson 2017; Jane 2017). Similarly, numerous studies have framed the rise of ‘revenge porn’ – in which male users post recordings of sexual encounters to punish or shame their female partners - as a by-product of the ubiquity of online pornography and a coarsening of sexual politics within the wider culture (Englander 2016; Langlois and Slane 2017; McGlynn et al 2017; Nixon 2017).

Despite the often-scathing assessment of dating apps in the literature, Albury (2018) and Nayar (2018) assert the potential for digital technologies to function as a type of ‘sexual laboratory’, through which new forms of sexual practice might emerge amongst those sexual communities – such as queer, BDSM and kink subcultures - which exist outside of conventional boundaries. Within this body of inquiry, Dowsett (2010) and Kreps (2009) have considered how the hyper-sexualised discourse that takes place between gay men on ‘hook up’ apps like Grindr and Manhunt influences new modes of sexual exchange, while others (Mowloabocus 2007, 2010; Miller 2015) have explored how the culture of image exchange can facilitate creative processes of sexual identity and the non-verbal negotiation of sexual encounters. This has led some theorists to frame dating apps as facilitating a type of ‘cross pollination’ between historical distinct sexual communities, including Lasén and Garcia’s (2015) claim of heterosexual men on straight dating sites exhibiting the kind of ‘self-pornification’ (p. 719) practices long associated with gay culture, the production of ‘posthuman’ representations of gender and sexuality (Lunceford 2009; Zizek 2016; Renold and Ringrose 2017) and the deviations to notions to sexual play and pleasure produced within heteronormative dating spaces (Brook et al 2015).

Digital Belongings: Social Isolation, Social Cohesion and Inter-Relationality

According to Verduyn et al (2017), nearly all SNS platforms afford users the ability to produce publicly visible lists of the relations within their online social networks. This capacity to inventory 'friends' or 'followers' allows SNS users to sort themselves into groups and factions, the members of which can be instantaneously connected across distances that would have historically precluded by traditional modes of interpersonal contact (Vogel et al 2015). A wealth of study (Manago et al 2012; Utz 2015; Marlowe et al 2017) has demonstrated how social media technologies facilitate a range of different types of relationships, including connections between acquaintances, intimate and familial relations and even strangers. The resulting 'customised sociality' (Manago and Vaughn 2015, p. 187) produced in online spaces affords users the ability to maintain a multiplicity of connections, as well as to curate and edit these relations through the functionality of different social media platforms.

According to Ellison et al (2014), the sprawling relationality that occurs in the digital might be facilitated through the architecture of SNS but is ultimately contingent on the efforts of individual users to engage in strategies of traditional relational maintenance, including displays of empathy, kindness, and commiseration towards others. This is echoed by Kanai (2015), who asserts that social cohesion and social capital in digital spaces is sustained by overlapping acts of self-disclosure, through which individual users can relay a sense of authenticity or 'realness' to others through their production of visual and textual content, which, in turn, prompts other users to contribute their own personal content. This reciprocity corresponds with Van Dijck's (2013) suggestion that SNS are emblematic of a fundamental societal shift from a 'participatory' culture to a culture of connectivity, one in which SNS serve as essential engines of everyday social practice. SNS have also been credited in the literature as a vital social resource for marginalised groups that are often subject to high levels of social isolation, including LGBTQ teenagers struggling with suicidal ideation or crises of sexual identity (Silenzio et al 2009), 'neurotribes' of users on the autistic spectrum (Silberman 2015) and new political movements (Bennett 2016).

While the hyper-connectivity of the digital has long since been viewed by techno-futurist scholars (Reagan 2017) as a source of hope for the future, a host of research has posited that the pervasive integration of online technologies into everyday life has contributed to endemic levels of social isolation amongst young adults. Some (Kingsley et al 2017) have gone as far

as to say that the current generation of digital actants are perhaps the *loneliest* in human history, while others (Phillips 2015; Westerlund et al 2012) assert that digital ‘natives’ (Prensky 2001) – those too young to remember pre-Internet society – have been socialised into mediated modes of social practice uniquely centred around aggression, hostility and a desire to dominate others. This is confirmed by Batool et al (2017), who claim that the ‘bullying’ nature of online discourses contributes to decreased academic performance, emotional and psychic turmoil and relational struggles amongst young adults and Phillips’ (2015) suggestion that the anonymity of the digital has produced a wellspring of verbal abuse – otherwise known as ‘trolling’ – and grooming practices. Suler (2004) asserts that the lack of physical co-presence in online environments contributes a ‘disinhibition effect’ (p. 97), which can just as easily promote acts of kindness – what he terms ‘benign’ disinhibition – as it can abusive and even threatening discourses, or ‘toxic’ disinhibition (p. 321). Claims of the ‘toxicity’ of the digital align with research (Williard 2007; Chang et al 2015; Kwak et al 2015; Cotler et al 2015) into the acute aggressivity that takes place in the male-dominated realm of online gaming. Numerous studies have also reported a correlation between increased engagement on mediated gaming spaces with addictive behaviours (van Rooij et al 2017), a rise in techno-social dominance behaviours, or ‘cyberbullying’ (Bowler et al 2015), trolling (Buckels 2014), sexist displays (Fox and Tang 2014) and what Fox and Rooney (2015) refer to as the ‘The Dark Triad’ (p. 161) of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy.

Temporality, Memory and Attention: Perception in the Digital Space

According to McDonald (2015), any investigation of the digital must contend with how online engagement affects the subject’s experience of time. This is echoed by Hansen (2012), who asserts that the atemporality of mediated spaces places users in a constant cycle of transition, and Kittler (2013) and Halpren (2005), both of whom claim that the incessant relay of signals and artefacts that occurs in the digital have rendered the process of memory as a ‘technical’ exercise, one which constrains the immediate awareness of time and blurs together past remembrances, present experiences and future imaginings. Looking beyond the individual subject, Coleman (2009) argues that visual content such as memes and digital photos facilitates a type of social, or ‘collective’ memory which transcends spatial or temporal boundaries, while Garde-Hansen (2013) frames the content production that occurs in social media as a type ‘syncing of memories and a tagging of emotional connections’ (p. 89) that ultimately obscures the boundaries of public and private experience.

The psychic effects of this digital manipulation of time have been considered by a host of research (Lemma and Capparotta 2014; Sweet 2014; Candy 2015) claiming that the permanence⁶ of content on SNS holds the potential to foster a type of developmental 'stuckness', in which fundamental delineations of personal experience – 'past'/'present', 'child'/'adult', 'back then'/'now' - are compromised. Burkell (2016) contends that the immutability of the 'digital shadow' – that is, the accumulation of photos, posts and various other electronic artefacts produced through SNS communication - stands in stark contrast to the pliability of biological memories, which allow for accounts of events, relationships, and occurrences to be manipulated for the purposes of emotional security and personality cohesion. This is echoed by van Dijck (2007), who asserts that fragmented nature of digital content threatens the stability of an individual's personal narrative, as such mediated remembrances cannot be augmented or discarded altogether.

Drawing on advances in neuropsychology, Carr (2015) contends that the flood of visual stimuli, memories and personal content that emerges in SNS platforms produces a cognitive 'load' so high that it impacts an individual's ability to devote a sufficient level of attention or concentration to a given task or consideration of experience, while Bergen et al (2005), argues that continued exposure to mediated communication renders traditional 'working' memory exhausted and unable to discern between relevant and irrelevant information. Others (Jackson 2008; Firth et al 2019; Neophytou et al 2021; Van der Stigchel 2021) have attributed the 'divided attention' that occurs as a result of digital usage to shorter concentration times and a rise in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in younger users. Similarly, Turkle (2016) posits that this fragmented nature of attention has negative implications for the development of empathy and reciprocity in everyday conversation, while Lanier (2014) claims that the inflexible formatting and data retention policies of social media pages deny users the chance to engage in more creative, spontaneous modes of experience and identity experimentation.

Conclusion

This chapter has endeavoured to layout the major themes within contemporary research with respect to the effects of social media technologies on subjectivity and inter-relationality. This overview has demonstrated the complex factors – relational, psychological, technological,

⁶ According Blum and Beyer (2019), digital permanence refers to the expected lifetime of information – text, photos, video - that is produced and stored in digital spaces. Unlike physical communication devices like paper, the storage of digital information is not subject to the constraints of scale or fragility and can therefore be retained for an infinite amount of time, even when deleted by individual users.

affective – at play within this project, and within the wider body of inquiry into the digital. What is not fully realised within the literature - and what this research seeks to explore – is how SNS technologies produce affective realities within diverse assemblages of materials, discourses, and social relations, including those internal ‘self’-assemblages of psychotherapy clients. This includes the ways in which the design features of individual social media platforms produce patterns of social exchange, as well as the capacity for such digital affordances to channel, constrain and liberate desire within the individuals who use them.

To this, this research seeks to understand the affective potential of a host of under-researched phenomena that may influence social practice and processes of subjectification within digital spaces, including; how social capital and interpersonal value is expressed and transacted through online technologies, how the layout and appearance of SNS influences discourses between users, how gestural demands – i.e., the physical movements required to navigate certain platforms – impact user experience and how mundane functions such as ‘blocking’, ‘likes’ or ‘friend requests’ can have implications for both the psychic and relational development of users. Perhaps most pressingly, this work seeks to make a novel appropriation of the intimacy and discursive complexity that occurs in the therapy meeting to understand how *all* those components function within - and are affected by - larger techno-social assemblages. To this, the next chapter provide an extensive accounting of the methods and methodology employed to explore these phenomena, my justification for my decision to employ a Neo-Materialist ontology and my decision to use the work of Deleuze and Guattari as a theoretical framework to analyse the interplay between the ‘analogue’ and the ‘digital’ that emerges within in the psychotherapeutic-assemblage.

Chapter 3: Methods, Theoretical Framework and Methodology

How can the digital ‘subject’ be studied within the psychotherapeutic setting? How do I as a practitioner-researcher gain access to – and make meaningful analysis of – the experiences, attitudes, and desires of my clients? The answer to these questions requires a description of how I arrived at a research method. Following this, I will explain my adoption of the ontological and epistemological orientation of Neo-Materialism. A complete overview of the project’s design will be then provided, including: an overview of the psychotherapeutic setting, an explanation of sampling and recruitment, a commentary on how my own Existential/Nietzschean approach to psychotherapy aligns with the chosen theoretical framework, my efforts to manage tensions and possibilities of the role of therapist-researcher and the steps taken to ensure my commitment to ethical practice, ethical research and the overall well-being of my participants. Finally, I will account for how a ‘rhizomatic’ understanding of discourses – one informed by the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari – aids in the analysis of data emerging within the ‘psychotherapeutic-assemblage’.

Epistemic Stance

Selecting A Research Method

The charge of inquiring into the digital ‘subject’ in therapy presented me with an almost endless set of methodological options. The first point of consideration was to establish a rationale for recruitment: who, exactly was this digital ‘subject’ and in which psychotherapeutic setting might I find them? This first required a decision as to whether I would use my own clients, or the clients of another therapist, to obtain a sample. Initially, I had feared that the ethical pressures of the dual-role of therapist-practitioner – which are outlined in detail later in this chapter - would be too great for me to mitigate and might pose a threat to the agency and well-being of my clients. To this, my first attempts at designing this project focused around gaining consent from other therapists to make audio recordings of their sessions with clients, the transcripts of which would provide the basis for an analysis of the therapy discourse. This approach was quickly abandoned after several fellow practitioners expressed concerns in pilot interviews about how any research effort – particularly the recording of sessions - might negatively affect their work with clients. Such exploratory discussions also confirmed a wealth of literature (Lees 2010; Bazzano 2019) examining how the shift within psychotherapy

research away from practice-based studies and towards randomised control trials has left many therapists uneasy about using live sessions as a site of qualitative data collection.

If recording the sessions of other therapists appeared to be too intrusive, I deliberated as to whether I might minimise the impact of the research by conducting separate semi-structured interviews with practitioners and their clients exploring the issues around how social media technologies emerged in the therapy space outside of the dyadic discourse. As a means of analysing accounts that resulted from these interview encounters, I considered the use of Narrative Analysis (Reissman 1993) and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith 1996), due to the primacy each method affords to the meaning-making processes of individuals, as well as their shared popularity within psychotherapeutic research. Whilst interviews would have mitigated the ethical pressures associated with collecting data in the therapeutic setting, such an approach obscured a fuller exploration of how ‘the digital’ appears within and directly shapes the therapy discourse. Furthermore, while both approaches afforded a framework to consider the experiences of individual clients, neither mode of data analysis provided a theoretical means of situating the therapy discourse within broader systems of technology, capital, and culture.

As the design process continued, it became evident that the most straightforward – and potentially fruitful – way of understanding what emerges in the therapy encounter was to use my professional practice as both a means of recruitment *and* of data collection. This methodological acuity towards the myriad of discursive and affective information that occurs in the therapy space was bolstered by numerous psychotherapeutic scholars (McLeod 2001; Gabriel and Casemore; 2009; McLeod 2010; Longhofer 2017) who asserted that the contemporary shift towards quantitative methods – illustrated by the ubiquity of Core-OM survey form⁷ – may have bolstered its claims to efficacy, but has come at the expense of the knowledge generated by the everyday practice. Furthermore, the reliance on scaled data runs counter to the case-based knowledge – particularly theory-based in the form of case vignettes and single case studies like that psychoanalytic work described in the literature chapter – that has underpinned the intellectual development of nearly *all* therapeutic modalities (Bazzano 2019).

⁷ Since its introduction in 1998, the CORE-OM is a 34-item self-report questionnaire has become a widely-adopted tool of psychotherapeutic inquiry (Lyne et al 2006). Designed in conjunction with mental health service providers, the measure was developed as a means of tracking domains of subjective well-being through the collection of scaled responses, including symptoms at intake and the reduction in symptoms or improvement in psychological functioning because of therapy (Barkham et al 1998).

Following this, I began to consider making use of my own caseload, though, like my colleagues, I remained concerned about the potential ethical implications that accompany the dual role of the therapist-researcher. Considering these misgivings, I contemplated the use of two alternative methodologies. The first was analysing data taken from semi-structured research interviews with my existing clients outside of our regular sessions. While qualitative interviews would have circumvented any concerns about how the research process might directly affect the therapy dialogue, it still required me to occupy a cumbersome dual role, one that would have demanded two distinct modes of engagement with my clients, first as a therapist, then as a researcher. The complexity of these overlapping roles felt too incoherent and potentially damaging to the therapeutic alliance with my clients and, more importantly, centred the project *outside* of the therapy dialogue I hoped to explore. The second approach I considered was autoethnography, which would be derived from field notes taken after sessions. While this method would have afforded a great deal of creative freedom during the writing up process and would have avoided having to directly record sessions, this approach was abandoned for two reasons: first, due to the long-standing criticisms of the method as self-indulgent and narcissistic (Mendez 2013) and second because any research based on field notes would have come at the expense of audio data and verbatim transcripts, the absence of which would have also prevented me from making knowledge claims based on discourses taken directly from the therapy meeting.

Despite this clarity, I still had to consider *which* clients within my caseload would be suitable research participants. I debated whether I would purposively recruit clients who had sought therapy to specifically address issues around online technologies, or alternatively, if I would offer free therapy sessions for individuals centring around issues pertaining to social media technologies. As will be explored in an overview of the inclusion and exclusion criteria employed during recruitment, I deduced that in attempting to explore the interplay between the analogue and digital, this research would be best served not by focusing participants on discussions of online life, but by allowing such material to emerge in the overlapping, free-flowing manner in which clients document other aspects of their identities, desires and relations in therapy.

I also had to consider the practicalities of what information I would attempt to access. While it would have been relevant to analyse the social media pages of my clients, I thought any attempt to occupy the specific sites of their online entanglement to be a direct threat to the therapy work, one which might potentially make clients feel over-exposed or spied upon. It

became clear that the best way to utilise the therapy encounter was to document it as it happens in real life, with real clients, and the real discourses that emerge in the unstructured therapy dialogue. The rationale for this decision was twofold. First, such an approach was thought to provide access to the rich information – about ‘the digital’, about individual subjects and about specific online technologies - that emerges in the dyad. Second, as confirmed by McLeod(2011), it would also allow me to make ethical decisions and manage the complexities of dual role of therapist-researcher with clients in real time, thereby protecting the dyad from any negative effects encounters as a result of the research process.

Following my engagement with this range of considerations, I concluded that this research would make use of two distinct methodologies: first, narrative case studies and second, a discourse analysis of transcribed therapy dialogue. Data collection would consist of naturalistic recordings of therapy sessions and anonymised case studies of individual clients from my own private psychotherapy practice and would seek to identify how the online worlds of clients emerged in the therapeutic setting. The therapy encounters contained within this project were conducted to facilitate candour and improvisation between the dyad, to manage ethical considerations implicit in my role as both therapist and researcher and to maintain the agency and anonymity of clients.

This twin orientation was selected for three reasons. First, it was thought to allow access to a variety of data, including both ethnographic field notes and verbatim extracts taken directly from the audio recording of sessions. Second, it afforded a creative flexibility to draw upon the narrative elements of case study research, while maintaining an analytic acuity towards the significance of the talk and language that comes out of the psychotherapeutic discourse. Finally, this methodological combination presented a complimentary means of bridging the theoretical divide between psychotherapeutic and sociological research, through which I could not only explore the psychic, relational and discursive processes of clients produced within real-world therapy cases but could also situate the rich information that comes out of therapy dialogue within broader techno-social assemblages of digital artefacts, algorithms and mediated relations. As the case examples are longitudinal in nature, they also afforded a view of how understandings and attitudes of a representative population – in this case, psychotherapy clients – evolved over time (Whiffin et al 2014).

The flexibility of this theoretical framework reflects, in part, my assertion that the complexity of the digital ‘subject’ that appears in the psychotherapy meeting cannot be comprehensively

addressed by a single discipline or intellectual construct. As such, this project sought to make use of a methodological ‘toolbox’ (Guattari as cited in Stavile 1998), borrowing different approaches to understand the multiple sites of discourse – as well as the multiple subjectivities – which emerge within the psychotherapeutic assemblage. Echoing the work of Bondi (2005), I also sought to utilise the richness of psychotherapy as a shared *symbolic* domain, one where the distressing and the problematic ‘might be worked with in ways that generated new meanings and perceptions’ (p. 504). This approach enabled a multi-faceted analysis of the discursive strategies deployed within the therapeutic setting and as well as a ‘new vocabulary for designating ... experience’ outside the limitations of discursive determinism and structural paradigms (Gilbert 2004, p. 12). In another correspondence with Bondi (2005), this research asserts that the psychotherapy encounter can be understood as an ‘interface’ between the meaning-making attempts of the dyad and the wider context – social, discursive, political, technological - in which psychotherapies are situated.

Ontological and Epistemological Stance

Neo-Materialism

The project is situated within a New – or ‘Neo’ - Materialist ontology and epistemology (Fox and Alldred 2015). This approach informed the orientation towards how the identities of clients assemble from component parts and how subjectivities emerge both online and within the psychotherapy space. Taking influence from a diverse canon of theorists, including Nietzsche, Spinoza, Marx, Latour, Braidotti and Deleuze and Guattari, neo-materialist inquiry is concerned with the ways in which subjectivities, discourses, feelings and meanings self-organise through assemblages of both animate and inanimate entities (Gamble et al 2019). Through this conceptual framework, relations between assembled heterogeneous components might be drawn from separate orders or categories of existence – materials, human actors, technologies, behaviours, institutions - but are assessed based on their productive, interactive capacities (Anderson et al 2012). Thus, a neo-materialist ontology is one which ‘understand(s) materiality in a relational, emergent sense’ (Coole and Frost 2010, p. 29), with a focus that extends from issues of globalisation and capital to issues of interpersonal relationships and identity.

DeLanda (2006) asserts that assemblages are multi-scaled and interlocking, with smaller assemblages functioning as components within larger assemblages, each of which are engaged in ceaseless processes of *becoming*. As flows within assemblages come to together

(or *territorialise*) and fall apart (or *de-territorialise*) over time, they produce affective capacities and properties that, in turn, simultaneously enable and constrain its components and enable new connections and material transformations within and between new assembled relations (Fox and Alldred 2015). Put more plainly, neo-materialism advocates a mode of inquiry that is not concerned with what a given assemblage 'is' – so as to examine its essential identity – but, rather, what it 'does' (Fox and Alldred 2016). Not only does this approach challenge the mind/matter presupposition that dominates 'transcendental humanist thought' (van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010), but represents a transversal of the dualisms which dominate much of western social theory; 'structure'/'agency', 'reason'/'emotion', 'human'/'non-human', 'animate'/'inanimate' and 'inside'/'outside' (Fox and Alldred 2015). As such, no individual element – human or otherwise - within a given assemblage should be reduced to the sum of its parts, since every level of assemblage contains 'emergent' properties from those preceding it (Fox and Alldred 2014).

With this orientation towards multiplicity, the analysis of 'psychotherapy-assemblage' put forward by this project will not only seek to identify elements of discourse, but the *affective* capacities within human and non-human relations that emerged within the therapy encounter. As articulated by Taylor and Iverson (2013), neo-materialism provides a way of conceptualising the capacity of all entities to affect and be affected by other entities, taking the view that matter in assemblages – whether human or inhuman - 'is conceptualised as agentic' (p.666) and should therefore be evaluated based on its affective *capacities*. Of equal relevance to this research is the materialist understanding of subjectivity, which asserts the identity of the human subject not as a configuration of constitute 'parts of self' (Mearns and Thorne 2000), but as composed of a host of fluctuating elements that are transformed in their relations with other entities (Price-Robertson and Duff 2016). In another rejection of humanist theory, a neo-materialist approach also de-centres – and de-prioritises - the agency of the human subject, orientating research away from human action and towards relational – and in the case of this research, the techno-social - assemblages in which humans are situated (DeLanda 2006). This includes the relations between a number of material and mediated assemblages at play within accounts taken from the therapy discourse; the relationships and subjectivities within the therapeutic dyad, the algorithmic processes of social media, the discourses around multiple identity, the emotionality of the therapy dialogue, the physical presence of a client's smart phone at the therapeutic encounter and the micropolitics of institutions, culture and class, all of which are viewed as components in scaled assemblages

of identity and inter-relationality, each of which are constantly interacting and becoming (Clough 2004).

Research-As-Assemblage

Fox and Alldred (2016) state that qualitative methodologies illuminate and contextualise relations within assemblages and that the research process *itself* should be viewed as an assemblage. Thus, neo-materialist studies should be orientated towards dynamic processes of power and resistance that occur during every level of research (Fox and Alldred 2016). Unlike the spontaneous formation of social assemblages, 'research-assemblages' are a product of *design*, one in which networks and affects are engineered to fulfil a specific task (Fox and Alldred 2014). Thus, every aspect of research process – or research 'machine', as detailed below - including design, methods and methodology, evaluation of evidence, dissemination of validity of findings and even the institutional forces at play within academic departments - are separate assemblages, each of which are contingent on the relations in which they emerge (Jackson and Mazzei 2013):

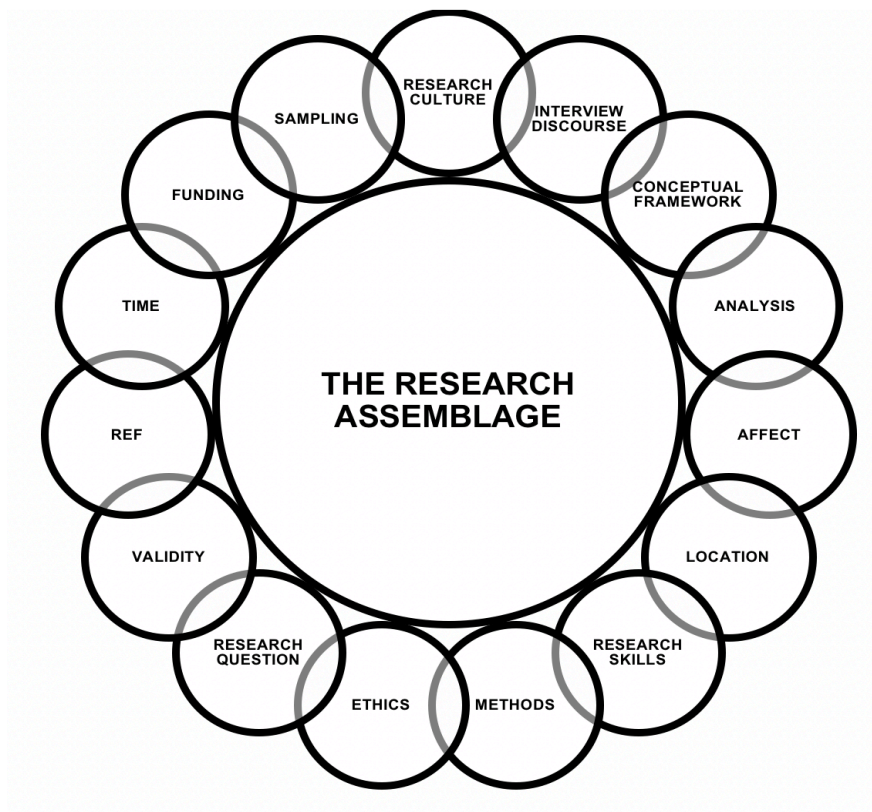


Figure 1: The 'Research Assemblage'

Through a neo-materialist lens, this project comprises its own unique research-assemblage, one contingent on the complex interplay between a wide range of components and relations. Attention turns to the much broader and more complex ‘research-assemblage’ of ‘the bodies, things and abstractions that get caught up in social inquiry’ (Fox and Alldred 2015, p. 400), which includes researchers as knowledge-makers. Thus, a neo-materialist approach to research is not only orientated towards an analysis of the affective flows within accounts, but the affective economies, micropolitics and territorialisations that emerge through the research process, including the institutional and professional cultures in which individual researchers are situated (Fox and Alldred 2014).

This orientation is not without its limitations and in recent years has been challenged for its conflation of the scientific study of matter with matter itself (Willey 2016), its unwitting reinforcement of the binaries it seeks to subvert (Hands 2015) and its inflated claims to ‘newness’ (Ellenzweig and Zammito 2017). Despite these critiques, I contend my decision to explore conduct this research using a neo-materialist ontology and epistemology is appropriate for three reasons. First, its close intellectual alignment with the assemblage-thinking that underpins an Existentialist/Nietzschean approach to psychotherapy *and* Deleuzoguattarian framework which will guide data analysis. Second, the materialist treatment of subjectivity – both online and in therapy - not as an ‘essential’ expression of a ‘true’ or even ‘inauthentic’ self, but as the product of assemblages of interacting, heterogeneous materials, discourses and techno-social affective relations (Price-Robertson and Duff 2016). Third, its acuity towards the multiplicity of forces at play in the ‘research-assemblage’, including – as will be explored in detail in the next section – the numerous ethical considerations to manage the process of recruitment and my own complex positionality within accounts as a researcher-practitioner (Fox and Alldred 2015).

Data Collection

Method Of Data Collection

Two sources of data were gathered: audio recordings of therapy sessions and reflexive field notes. The recording of sessions was conducted using a digital audio recorder which was concealed so as to not disrupt, alter or negatively influence the therapy discourse. Field notes were generated immediately after sessions and were identical to the ‘process’ notes I keep for all of my clients. The information detailed in these notes included, but was not limited to; a general summary of what was discussed, extracted quotes taken from the therapy dialogue

and recorded from memory, reflections on the general trajectory of the therapy work and a list 'unfinished business', or relevant topics of discussion to be considered in the next session.

Whereas a 'normal' day of therapy would allow for 15-minute breaks in between clients, during data collection, I scheduled sessions so that I would have at least a full hour to make notes after meeting with participants. This strategy was employed for two reasons: first, to provide enough time to record an in-depth documentation of what occurred in the preceding hour while my recollection of events was still vivid (Sanjek 2019) and second, to engage in what Okely (2020) refers to as 'free passage' of ethnographic writing, in which my own embodied responses and reactions were given space to drift in and out of conscious awareness, facilitating a more creative, dynamic consideration the themes and concepts that had arisen in the session.

Location Of Data Collection

Data collection, including the generation of all of field notes and digital audio recordings of hour-long psychotherapy sessions were conducted at my private therapy office in Canton, Cardiff. This research venue was selected as it ensured anonymity, comfort for participants, privacy and personal safety.

Sessions

Sessions consisted of hour-long psychotherapy sessions with my private clients.

Fees

It is important to note that I am a qualified psychotherapist in private practice and have been accredited by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). As such, participants recruited from my caseload were fee-paying clients. At the time of data collection, my hourly rate as a practitioner was £45. As per my working agreement, clients pay in instalments of £135, so as to pay for three sessions in advance. Clients who agreed to be a part of the sample continued to pay their session fees throughout the research process and were not offered any sort of discount or remuneration for their participation in the study.

Approach To Sampling

Participants were recruited via opportunistic and purposive sampling and were drawn from my own private psychotherapy practice caseload. While I began the research with the hopes of recruiting between 15-20 participants, it became clear that the sprawling nature of the psychotherapy discourse would be too complex to be distilled to accommodate such a large

number of cases. Thus, an ‘information-orientated’ approach was taken (Ragin and Becker 1992). This involves the legitimacy of a sample being assessed through the capacity of its cases to produce what Stake (1980) refers to as ‘naturalistic generalisations’. As noted by Gomm, Hammersley and Foster (2000), case study research is often criticised on the grounds that, unlike quantitative measures like RCTs or surveys, its findings are not generalisable across wider populations. In response, Stake (1980) asserts that the purpose of case studies is not produce scientific generalisations, but to facilitate learning amongst those who read them and to generate hypothesis within specific research disciplines.

Essential to this process is the notion that the findings of case research are valuable in so far as they *resonate* with the reader’s experience (Gomm, Hammersley and Foster 2000). Put another way, the charge to the case study researcher is to present an adequate level of contextual information so that the reader might assess whether any particular case can reasonably be generalised to their own specific field of practice (Melrose 2009). This ‘democratisation’ of knowledge aligns with Lincoln and Guba’s (1986) notion of generalisation as a process of ‘transferability’, in which case study researchers should not concern themselves with establishing the external validity of an inquiry, but rather seek to provide only the ‘thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility’ (p. 316). Case study inquiry, Elliott (1990) asserts, should be constructed in such a way as to resonate with the reader’s prior experience, thus inviting them to employ their own tacit expertise as ‘projective models’ in evaluating the validity and usefulness of research.

While the concept of naturalistic generalisation is not without criticism, particularly that it provides no guidance for researchers about *which* cases to study (Gomm, Hammersley and Foster 2000), the novel aspect of this method of case selection is the potential depth of information it yields about the interplay between the ‘offline’ and ‘online’ assemblages of clients. Furthermore, this ‘small-N’ approach to sampling provided the methodological freedom to not have to authenticate what clients claimed to *do* in the digital and instead develop assertions and generalisations about the multiplicity of phenomena that emerged in the therapy discourse.

Inclusion Criteria

The sample was obtained from clients for whom online-offline ‘selves’ were relevant to the therapy were invited to take part in the study. Those deemed to be suitable for inclusion in the

study were approached *after* they introduced personal material into the therapy space around issues of – or difficulty with - digital ‘life’, including:

- Engagement with social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, et al)
- Online gaming apps
- Dating platforms (Tinder, Grindr, Bumble, Match.com, et al)
- Mediated communication (WhatsApp and textual communication)
- A network of relationships facilitated through the use of online technologies

It is important to note that to be considered for recruitment, clients needed to meet three criteria *within* sessions. First, the appearance of the above topics within the therapy discourse had to not only be client-led – as in, initiated by the client themselves - but *sustained*. For example, it was not enough for clients to briefly mention a conversation about Facebook or making a passing comment about a picture they may have seen that day on Instagram, but to make consistent mention of what or who they may have encountered online. Second, discussions of the digital needed to provide a sufficient level of *depth* into the life and/or difficulties of clients, so as to highlight an area of psychic or emotional importance for the client and to provide enough richness of information to address the research topic. Third, such material needed to display a certain amount *breadth* within the therapy discourse, that is, their accounts of their digital entanglements needed to be relevant their other social relations and patterns of social exchange.

Discussing Exclusion Criteria With My Clinical Supervisor

Prior to approaching clients for their participation in the study, each case was discussed with my clinical supervisor. According to Barnett and Molzon (2014) clinical psychotherapy supervisors fulfil a number of roles in ongoing development of practitioners including imparting wisdom, suggesting ideas and interventions for practice and maintaining high ethical standards. The following questions were discussed at length with my supervisor:

- What is the potential effect of the study on the client and the efficacy of the therapeutic work? Can the goals of the study run in parallel to their expressed goals for therapy?
- Is the client in a place of crisis or pronounced psychological difficulty? If so, might inclusion in the study complicate, or even worsen such symptoms?

- What is the nature of the material around digital life which the client entered into the therapy work? Would a focus on these experiences help or hinder a wider exploration of their identity and pattern of relationship?
- How can I best manage a client that might seek to 'perform' or provide discussions 'useful' to the study at the expense of their own therapeutic goals?
- Even if their inclusion in the study would not prove to be a source of psychic difficulty, would it be a distraction to the therapy work?

In addition to this evaluation of how the work might affect individual participants, consideration was also given to how the study might impact the therapeutic relationship. Participants were strongly – and continually - advised that they are not expected to 'bring in' specific topics for discussion, nor were they to feel compelled to explore digital activities to appear to be a compliant or 'good' participant. Equally, they were made aware that declining to participate in the study would not compromise my commitment to their expressed desires for engaging in therapy. This process – including seeking consent and all discussions with my clinical research supervisor - was recorded in a research journal and included in findings for analysis.

Exclusion Criteria

Throughout the sampling process, priority was given to the maintenance of the therapeutic relationship and the protection of client autonomy. If inclusion in the study was deemed by myself or my supervisor to negatively impact the self-development of individual clients or the building of the therapy alliance, any attempt to initiate recruitment was immediately abandoned. It was important to note that despite the clarity of this criteria, no such action was required and no participants were excluded from the sample out of concern for their well-being.

Number Of Participants

Ten participants were deemed to be suitable candidates for recruitment. All ten were approached and, following the obtaining of consent, all ten were included in the final sample. It is worth noting that Rachel – the client whose brief case study began this thesis – is not included within the data chapters. Their absence is due to two factors. First, the digital entanglements they brought to therapy were not centred around a single platform, making any meaningful assessment of the design features of specific SNS cumbersome. Second, Rachel and I agreed that the taping of sessions might be problematic and that their inclusion in the study would be best realised through case study material, composed using my own practice

notes. As will detailed later in the chapter, my commitment to their well-being precluded any further involvement on Rachel's part. An overview of the remaining participants, including their assigned pseudonyms and relevant demographic information, can be found below:

Client Pseudonym	Age at the time of consent	Gender	Sessions Recorded
Paul	34	M	6
Chris	26	M	3
David	27	M	8
Rebecca	32	F	2
Gwen	39	F	5
Jess	36	F	10
Fran	29	F	3
Rachel	20	Non-binary	None – case study developed from practitioner field notes
Matt	42	M	4

Figure 2: Overview of Research Participants

The Research Setting

Defining Psychotherapy

Given the unique position in which it finds itself on the 'boundary' of traditional social science research (Pilgrim 1997), it is important to address how this research defines therapeutic practice. A multitude of contemporary approaches to the practice of 'talking' psychotherapy exist, including; cognitive behavioural therapies (CBT), skill training therapies, behavioural medicine/health therapies, humanistic therapies, psychoanalysis, psychodynamic orientations, interpersonal and sociocultural therapies, and pluralistic and integrative therapies (McLeod 2013). Despite holding various ontological and epistemological assumptions, these disparate traditions operate under the assumption of an *interior* 'self' within the human subject, one imbued with feelings, cognitions and affective sensibilities and best understood as the emergent product of intra-psychic and cultural processes (Parker 1999).

An Existentialist/Nietzschean Approach To Psychotherapy

Given my position as an essential component within the psychotherapy discourse – both as it occurred in the therapeutic setting and within accounts - an overview of my own approach to

therapy is required. My formal training would best be described as ‘Relational Integrative’ (Faris and van Ooijen 2011), in so far as it sought to provide a conceptual footing through which various modalities, interventions and intellectual lineages might be incorporated based on the needs of clients. Through my training, I was primarily exposed to three therapeutic traditions: Humanistic, specifically the Person-Centred Therapy of Carl Rogers (1951), Psychodynamic practice (DeYoung 2003), which seeks to apply a more ‘relational’ frame to the constructs of classical psychoanalysis (Freud 1953) and Object-Relations (Klein 1952) theory and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (Beck 1993). While each of these approaches played some part in my early development, my private practice eventually came to be framed by two philosophies that did not feature within my training: Existentialism and Nietzscheanism, each of which will be briefly described.

Drawing heavily from Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus and Heidegger, a psychotherapy rooted in Existentialism looks beyond the subjective experience of the individual – including any notion of an ‘essential’ or ‘core’ self – to consider the ‘whole’ of the human *condition* (Winston 2015). This approach holds that human beings experience anxiety due to their interaction with certain conditions inherent in the human existence, or ‘givens’ (Cooper 2016). While an existential psychotherapy is concerned with a range of human experience, it gives primacy to the phenomena of existential ‘dread’, that is the feeling of anxiety that stems from one’s confrontation with the four primary ‘givens’ of human experience: freedom and responsibility, death, isolation and meaninglessness (Yalom 1980). While the existential canon continues to influence my approach to the therapy work, my exposure to this tradition eventually led me to the work of Nietzsche, whose work has made an indelible impression on my practice and understanding of the human subject.

At the core of Nietzsche’s philosophy is the assertion that life occurs not through linear, deterministic processes, but is the emergent product of the interaction between dynamic, often opposing, multiplicities of actors, discourses, forces, affective states and materials (Deleuze 2006). Hence, a Nietzschean approach to psychotherapy is grounded in the knowledge that *knowing* – of one’s own internal and external worlds - is provisional, perspectival, and subject to constant flux (Bazzano 2018). When applied directly to practice, at any given point in the therapy process the dyad may agree that an element of a client’s narrative aligns with a specific accounting for past and present dynamics. That storyline may give way to a cascade of different, even opposing narratives, rationales and explanations. Similarly, components of a client’s persona – their sexual desires, relational needs and modes of self-presentation –

may emerge in ways both complimentary and oppositional, depending on the context in which they appear and company in which they are triggered. Consistent with Nietzsche's assertion that there are no absolute, enduring 'truths', the charge to the therapist is not to assume that they possess an unconditioned level of perception, or privileged access to the patient's psyche, but to examine the human subject as a competing and conflictual assemblage of dynamic flows of instincts, tendencies and embodied phenomena (Bazzano 2012).

It is important to note that while Existentialism and Nietzscheanism provide an *intellectual* foundation for my practice – and indeed, for my understanding of humans beings and their relationships with one another - my engagement with clients is rooted in what Wampold (2019) refers to as the 'basics' of psychotherapy: a respect for client autonomy, a primacy afforded to the therapeutic relationship and the responsibility of the therapist to facilitate an emotional secure, supportive and confidential setting. Put another way, a 'Existential' psychotherapy session does not 'look' or 'sound' that much different than those framed by other modalities. As will be reflected in accounts, my clients do most of the talking, me most of the listening. At times, the interventions I offer could be seen as identical to those administered by a Person-Centred or Psychodynamic practitioner. What is distinct about a psychotherapy orientated towards Existentialism and Nietzscheanism, and what I hope is apparent within this project, is an acuity towards *interpretation* - not only of the arrangement of the world, but of the assemblage of events, actions and affects which comprise the 'self' (Bazzano 2018). With this, the 'truth' of one's life, relationships, persona, etc is not a *fact* to be uncovered, or a phenomenon to be explained, but a dynamic *process* of multiplicity, creation and deconstruction. The existential therapy task is not so much to explain, but to *attune* the therapeutic act towards the complexity *and* the contingency of existence.

Research-In-Practice: The Clinical Case Study Within Psychotherapy

According to Flyvberg (2001), the clinical case study and the knowledge it produces exist somewhere outside of the canon of 'respectable' social scientific method, a curious position given the place of the methodology across virtually all research disciplines, including those associated with the natural sciences. Contemporary debates around the case study highlight the intellectual tension between those who posit that the value of knowledge mirrors how generalisable findings are across wider populations and those who contend that knowledge is only valuable insofar as it is *exemplary*, that is, applicable to everyday practice (Smith 2003). Such debates are of particular relevance to the development of psychotherapy (Lees 2010). Beginning with Freud and Breuer's case study of Anna O, there has been a well-established

tradition of psychotherapists drawing on their own case examples for the purposes of research (McLeod 2002). Both modern psychotherapeutic researchers (Fleet et al 2016) and my own regulatory body – the BACP – consider the role of the therapist-researcher an essential conduit for contemporary inquiry within the field. According to Stiles (2007), when taken directly from clinical experience, theory-building case studies provide convincing evidence as they ‘capture the miracle of therapy in a way that statistics and randomised controls cannot’ (Dallos and Vetere 2005, p. 131), gives a ‘voice to clients to tell their stories in their own words’ (Grafanaki 1996, p. 336) and bridges the gap between therapeutic research and the actualities of psychotherapeutic practice (Rennie 1994).

Despite the centrality of the case study within the development of the field, contemporary scholars have criticised the methodology as undisciplined, ungeneralisable, and subject to researcher bias (Lees 2010). As a result of this neo-positivist turn, survey data and randomised control trials (RCTs) have not only become the method of choice for practitioner research, but have emerged as the primary evaluative metric through which policymakers and governing bodies – like the National Institute for Clinical Excellence – allocate and fund mental health services (Green and Latchford 2012). According to Smith (2003), this nomothetic approach makes the false assumption that scientism may reveal the general laws of human nature and, in the process comes at the expense of a deeper understanding of the emotional, affective, and psychological forces at play in the psychotherapy setting (Smith 2003). As RCTs are not reflective of this level of complexity, Beutler (2009) asserts that there exists a need for naturalistic studies that reflect the collaboration between researcher and client, as well as the interplay between the dual roles of therapist-researcher. Similarly, Lees and Freshwater (2008) implore a new mode of inquiry, one orientated away from the traditional notion of researchers as ‘thinkers’ and practitioners as ‘doers’, and towards a ‘storied’ approach that seeks to integrate reflexive and narrative techniques alongside broader critiques of both the subject and the social. This is echoed by Flyvbjerg (2006), who asserts that while in-depth cases may not be generalisable by traditional standards, the theory they produce is context-dependent and of great relevance to the development of practical expertise.

The Therapist-Researcher

According to Fleet et al (2016), the value of occupying the roles of both therapist and researcher is that such positionality produces knowledge with a high degree of relevance to practice. Case study inquiry generates knowledge ‘in context,’ which is essential for

understanding ‘practice expertise in action’ (McLeod 2010, p. 7). This benefit is not limited to therapists, but to those clients who chose to participate in research. Evidence suggests research can also be of benefit to client-participants, fostering a sense of empowerment as make therapeutic progress is made (McLeod 1999, 2002). In addition to contributing to the process of understanding wider phenomena, the involvement of clients in research may also bring about personal insight, emotional relief, and improved coping skills, not to mention a sense of personal satisfaction in helping to build knowledge that might benefit others (Fleet et al 2016).

Examples of case study research by therapist-researchers in both private and institutional settings include: Zaletel’s (2010) study of schizoid features and ego splitting within psychoanalytic practice, the work of van Nest (2019) on the use sensory integration theory to highlight issues around embodiment within relational psychotherapy, Clement’s (2007) inquiry into the therapeutic treatment of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, a study of the efficacy and method of sand tray therapy by Fleet et al (2016), the case studies of Etherington (2000) in her application of narrative therapy to adult male survivors of child sexual abuse and finally, Helps’ (2017) longitudinal study of diagnostic assessment of autistic spectrum disorder family systems therapy. Despite the wealth of study conducted by therapist-researchers, such research is not regarded as unproblematic. Gabriel (2005) holds that the dual-role of the therapist-researcher generates conflict between the goals and focus of therapy and research, while others (Kitchener 1988; Beauchamp and Childress 1994) go even further, stating that the two roles are fundamentally incompatible, due to the unresolvable obligations and expectations of each role.

Chang et al (2008) point out that such challenges have influenced a climate of trepidation in the field, pointing out that most private, fee-for-service psychotherapists engage in little, if any, practice-based research. As a result, most practitioner-research is performed by a small minority of counselling psychologists, many of whom are removed from clinical practice (Norcross and Karpiak 2012). This stratified ‘culture’ of research is confirmed by McLeod (2011) who asserts that as the preponderance of clinical case studies are conducted within academic and institutional settings, there is an increasing need for research arising from *routine* counselling and psychotherapy practice, including from private practitioners. Such inquiry not only provides a platform to explore ‘grassroots practice’ (McLeod 2001, p. 8), but makes use of the creativity and resourcefulness of individual therapists in the production of knowledge.

In recent years, considerable inquiry suggests that with sufficient reflection, the difficulties of practice-based research can be overcome (Castonguay et al 2010). For example, Gabriel (2005) identifies a set of requirements for the therapist-researcher to manage such role conflict, including providing clear information for contributors and forming an effective research alliance, while others (Wosket 1999; Etherington 2000) advocate having a clear policy on confidentiality and cultivating self-reflexivity. LeJeune and Luoma (2015) propose that, if managed properly, research arising from fee-for-service settings affords therapist-researchers an opportunity to directly integrate theory into practice, as well as the intellectual freedom to produce knowledge outside of the bureaucratic constraints and funding preoccupations of university-situated research programmes.

The Issue Of The 'I': Managing The Dual Of The Therapist/ Researcher

Prior to initiating recruitment, I confirmed with the BACP the ethical and practical precedence for engaging client research as a private practitioner. To maintain an ethical standard of psychotherapeutic practice and promote a self-awareness of any theoretical, epistemological and ontological assumptions that might impact the therapeutic inquiry, I was aware of the considerable need for reflexivity (McLeod 2001). This included attention to how the research process might potentially create affects within the therapeutic work, as well as how it held the potential to negatively impact both members of the therapy dyad (Fleet et al 2016). In accordance with the BACP Guidelines for Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy (2018), several steps were taken to bolster the validity of the project, protect clients from boundary violations and maintain my probity as a practitioner, each of which are explored below.

Additional Clinical Supervision

In addition to my normal monthly clinical supervision – which, in line with BACP protocols, required 1.5 hours each month to discuss my caseload - I engaged in an additional hour of supervision with a BACP-accredited supervisor to ensure research rigour, promote an adherence to ethical practise and highlight issues of participant well-being. According to McLeod (2011) the purpose of supervision in the research process is to maintain the therapist-researcher's focus on client agency and to provide a ballast against any urges to steer the therapy dialogue towards discourses which might prove exclusively 'useful' to the study. My supervisor was made aware of all aspects of the research and was willing to challenge specific issues that they perceived to be intrusive into the therapy work or potentially harmful to clients.

Keeping A Research Journal

In addition to this supplementary supervision, I maintained a detailed reflexive research journal, which allowed me to document my affective and cognitive responses during all phases of the research process. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) hold that such reflexive efforts are essential micropolitical components in the research assemblage, the recognition of which provides researchers with insight into their own needs and motives and helps to develop a heightened ethical awareness. The process of writing was done in order to sustain a conceptual clarity throughout the project; both in how the therapy work was being managed, and how the complex dynamics at play in the therapy space were being analysed (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). To add another layer of rigour and reliability, my clinical supervisor was also invited to read and comment on these reflexive journal entries.

Non-directiveness

Throughout the research, I worked to facilitate a collaborative relationship with clients around issues relevant to the study. As previously discussed, it was essential to the validity of the project that any discussion of digital life and social networking be initiated into the therapy *by the client*. This included the discussion of sensitive topics, feelings, and responses that clients may not have been able to explore in their everyday lives. Thus, the recruitment of participants in the study – as well as discourses of how the research might impact the therapy space – was conducted with transparency and a respect on participant autonomy and safety (BACP 2018). While I hold that the creation of meaning is ultimately in the hands of the individual, the therapy space provides a uniquely collaborative meeting, through which an intimate investigation of one's life may be shared and mutually explored. Here, one can see a symmetry between the success of this study and the ethical viability of my work as a researcher-practitioner. I contend that both are contingent upon my willingness not to force clients to speak about their digital lives, but to allow topics to freely emerge and be discussed in such a way to be therapeutically vital *and* useful to the research effort.

Leaving room for interpretation

I approached this research with the knowledge that despite the dialogical nature of psychotherapy, any analysis of my clients is exclusively from my own perspective. Given the incompleteness of my own perception of events – and my own fallibility as a practitioner – I worked to acknowledge the inherent 'unknowing' of the research process. In leaving room for uncertainty – for the 'incompleteness' of my own understanding – I feel I avoided the trap of assuming that every occurrence of the research process should be interpreted and fitted into

a theoretical framework or that every moment of the therapy encounter held the potential to produce actionable data. Just as an Existential/Nietzschean psychotherapy is inclusive of the contingency of the individual subject, so too is this project open the 'loose ends' which occurred throughout the research process (Willemsen et al 2017). Colombo and Michels (2007) contend that an acceptance of this uncertainty not only makes case study research scientifically valuable but mirrors the process of negotiation and reflexivity that occurs throughout the therapy meeting. Continuing, they assert that relieving the researcher of the pressure to be clinically and epistemologically 'faultless' may bolster an openness to the possibilities and challenges present in each stage of research (Colombo and Michels 2007).

Role-fluency

Another major challenge of this research was to ensure that the involvement of clients did not undermine the therapy work or the therapeutic alliance. To manage the intersection of research and practice, my clinical work was guided by Thomas' (1994) recommendation that practitioners prioritise the role of therapist when acting in a research capacity. This effort involves the therapist empathetically 'staying alongside' the client in their exploration during sessions and transitioning towards the role of researcher after the research encounter – in this case, the session - is completed (Thomas 1994). While Gabriel and Casemore (2009) acknowledge the challenge of conducting research in practice settings, they assert the need for therapist-researchers to adopt an acuity towards 'role-fluency', that is, the reflective negotiation of the different positions and motivations at play in the clinical setting to satisfy the demands of a given study to collect data, whilst upholding their moral, ethical, and professional responsibility to the client. To this, I worked to be transparent with clients about the two roles I would be occupying and that these different positions might change as the research progressed. For example, I explicitly stated that at certain points in their involvement – including, recruitment, the obtaining of consent, data analysis and dissemination - I would be acting as a researcher, while during our sessions, I would predominantly take the role of therapist. In line with Wosket (1999), the rationale for this openness with clients about the realities of researcher-assemblage was twofold: first, it ensured that my clients-participants were aware of my ethical duty to put their therapeutic needs ahead of the requirements of the research, and second, it empowered their active participation within the research process, as well as within the therapeutic work. This adherence to ethical practice and research will be expanded upon in the next section.

Ethical Considerations

Assessing Risks

Unique within research methodologies, the role of practitioner-as-researcher involves a range of personal experience to be explored at great depth, including an awareness of the well-being of the client-participant (Grafanaki 2012). This study sought to understand analyse discursive and affective phenomena which occur within the therapeutic setting. Like the emotional and psychic 'risks' incurred by engaging in any form of talking therapy, this research was conducted with the knowledge that the exploration of personal information during this study could have been emotionally difficult for clients to discuss. Given the intimacy of therapy discourse, a high level of client self-disclosure is inevitable, warranting a heightened awareness to the ethical implications of research design. To manage this risk, I was guided by the BACP ethical framework (2018), which lays out a systematic approach to protecting client agency and well-being at all stages of the counselling process.

Approvals

The project was given approval by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number SREC/3212), which required the submission of relevant ethics review forms, risk assessments, as well as the additional information and consent materials that were to be disseminated to potential participants (see Appendix 2).

The Sequence Of Obtaining Consent

Following a consultation with my clinical supervisor – in which, as previously noted, the appropriateness of approaching individual clients for recruitment was discussed - clients were invited to join the study during our next scheduled session. As I commonly use the final few minutes of a session to evaluate what occurred during the hour and what the client might be leaving with, this summative portion of the work marked an appropriate time to present clients with an invitation to consider joining the study. Prior to any discussion of the details of the research, clients were advised that their involvement was completely voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time. Special emphasis was given to the fact that despite their involvement in the study, my primary duty was to maintain a safe, productive, and confidential working relationship. Clients were reminded that the purpose of therapy is one that *they* define for themselves and that nothing - including my own research interests - should compromise their own therapeutic goals.

Upon their agreement to consider taking part despite these admissions, an information sheet and consent form (see Appendices) were distributed and discussed, which clients were advised to consider outside of the session. As I see most clients weekly or fortnightly, clients were invited to discuss their potential involvement at the beginning of our next scheduled meeting, at which time they were encouraged to raise any questions or concerns they had about the study. It was at this point that I inquired as to whether my request to participate in this research had raised any emotional, psychological, or relational issues that needed to be addressed in the dyad. While no client expressed any distress or reluctance to take part in the research, I informed each participant that should such negative feelings arise, the consent process would be immediately abandoned and no mention of the research would be made again. Upon agreeing to participate in the study, I strongly advised clients that they were under no obligation to engage with the research and that their inclusion in - or absence from - the study would not bring about any change in our working relationship. Following an affirmative response, the information sheet and consent forms were discussed for a second time. Upon gathering the appropriate signatures, the completed paper forms collected and securely stored, and the session carried on as normal.

The reason for discussing the client's participation at the beginning next scheduled session was twofold. First, if the client *declined* to be included in the study, such timing provided the dyad with an opportunity to quickly repair any potentially negative feelings that may have arisen from recruitment process. Second, if the client *agreed* to be included in the study, it allowed the research to begin as soon as possible and for the therapy work to be re-focused towards the material *they* desired to bring into the encounter.

Duration Of Digital Recording

After obtaining consent, the recording of sessions continued until discussions of the digital had been exhausted of their therapeutic potential within the dyad, or until an appropriate corpus of data had been accrued. In this, data collection was guided by ebbs and flows of the therapy discourse. Some clients filled entire sessions with talk of their digital entanglements, often carrying on intensive discussions over multiple, consecutive encounters. Others brought such material into the therapy dialogue in a more sporadic fashion, bringing up specific aspects their online assemblages as part of a broader dialogue about their lives and relationships. Despite these fluctuations, I remained committed throughout the research process to ensuring that audio recording was unobtrusive within the therapy setting. A digital recording device was placed out of view of clients to not negative influence or direct the

therapy work. A comprehensive outline of the sequence of consent is represented in the figure below:

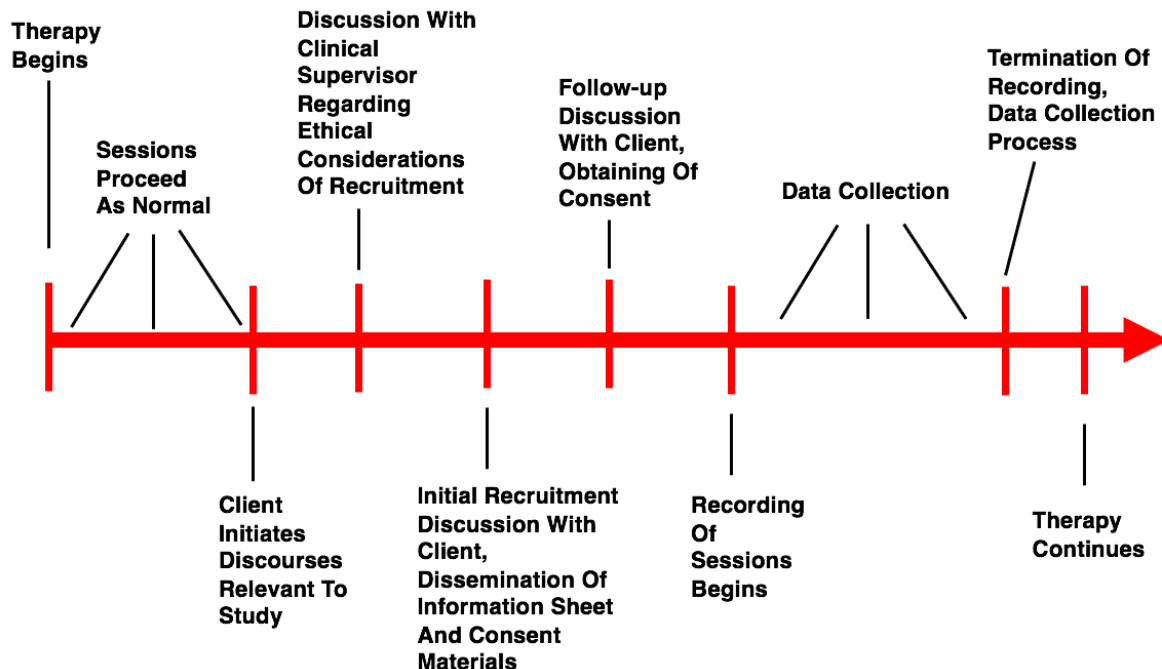


Figure 3: Timeline of Consent and Data Collection Process

The Concealment of the Digital Recording Device

As previously stated, during data collection I positioned a digital audio recorder in my office to be out of sight from both myself and my clients. The decision to conceal the recording device was to ensure that the research process did not negatively impose itself on the therapeutic discourse and, more importantly, upon the therapeutic needs of my clients. Despite this desire to protect the agency and well-being of my clients during the research process, it is important to note that contemporary modes of sociological inquiry have conceptualised the process of digital audio recording not as an inert or inconsequential detail of the research process, but as a potentially vital component within the research machine, one worthy of acknowledgement and consideration within the research encounter itself.

For instance, Nordstrom's (2015) Barad-informed reading of audio collection asserts that digital recording devices are not 'mere laboratory instruments [or] static instrumental embodiments of human concepts' (p. 334), but are 'diffractive apparatuses', ones which hold the potential to produce 'intra-activity' between assembled relations. To conceal the means through which an interview or discursive 'happening' is documented is to reject the

subjectivities, affects and identities that might emerge as a product of a recorder or other audio device being visible within the research encounter (Nordstrom 2015). This orientation towards the affective potential of recording devices is echoed by Back (2012), who asserts that the assumption within sociological research that of recording devices 'capture the real' (p.254) reflects a 'naïve realism' within the field, one which neglects the ways in which recording instruments function as 'imaginative objects' that give the 'false illusion of being there' (p.254), thereby presenting the interview encounter as a static entity, rather than a singular, contingent event.

While one could assert that the overt presence of a recorder might have produced new affective and discursive realities within the therapeutic discourse – and subsequently, within the subsequent analysis of the accounts emerging from the therapy meeting – I contend that the choice of keeping the method of data collection out of view aligns with the BACP's ethical guidance for research within the counselling professions (2019), which states that the presence of recording devices might produce an unhelpful power imbalance between the dyad and even initiate an unhelpful sense of dependence prompting clients to produce research-worthy material within sessions.

'Relational' Ethics

The sequence of consent described above was followed to provide clients with a comprehensive understanding of the study and to ensure them that the therapeutic relationship – as well as my own commitment to client-led practice - was not compromised by the pursuit of data relevant to the research topic. Given the unpredictable nature of psychotherapy meeting, Ellis (2007) contends that the commitment to client autonomy during the research endeavour is not so much a single decision, but an ongoing process of negotiation. McLeod (2010) explains that such an effort is not just about implementing appropriate ethical *procedures*, but engaging in moment-by-moment ethical decision *making*, including those choices around the management of the implicit power imbalances at play within the dyad. To redress this uneven positionality, Hecker and Murphy (2015) advocate for a type of 'relational ethics', through which the contextual factors at play in the research setting - including the setting, values and power relationships – are mutually expressed and negotiated by both members of the dyad. Whereas traditional ethical frameworks assume applicability across all contexts, 'relational' ethics rejects the assumption of single, uniform set of criteria for assessing the ethics of any particular action and de-centres individual actors within ethical dilemmas, instead affording primacy to *processes* of relating (McNamee 2009).

Similar to the reformulation of ethics within feminist research (Jaggar 1995), the dynamism of this framework encompasses the moral obligations practitioner-researchers have to their clients, as well as the improvisational and dialogical qualities of the therapeutic relationship (Gergen 2015).

Participant And Researcher Well-Being

Throughout this process of consent, clients were reminded of my dual role as both therapist and researcher and that their involvement in the study must not compromise or interfere with therapeutic goals. Consistent efforts were also made to signpost clients to relevant support services, including access to counselling and professional support services such as www.counselling-directory.org and the BACP website. To mitigate any risk to myself, I followed Cardiff University's Lone Worker Policy and alerted my PhD supervisors – and my clinical supervisor - about the location and circumstances of my data collection efforts.

Transcription

Transcription of audio recordings occurred through the data collection process. As noted by Skukauskaite (2014), transcription is an essential element of research, as it constitutes 'a logic the researcher creates as she listens to the recording(...) and makes decisions about what to transcribe, in what ways, for what purpose, and with what outcomes' (p.5). This is confirmed by Seidman (2006), who contends that the process of verbatim transcription affords researchers the opportunity to revisit the researcher encounter, thereby facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the content of qualitative data. In correspondence with Fox (2009), audio recordings were transcribed as close as to the session encounter as my schedule allowed. This process was aided by Express Scribe software, which allowed for recordings to be slowed down and transcribed more quickly.

In accordance with Lapadat and Lindsay (1999), the process of transcription was treated as a process of *interpretation*, one as concerned with the accurate documentation of what was said during sessions as with the '(co)construction of the narratives' (p.72) that arose from accounts taken from the therapy discourse. Latour (1986) refers to transcripts as 'immutably mobile' objects, asserting that any record of an interaction is subject to an endless level of variation and partiality. This interpretive endeavour was aided by my extensive field notes, which, as noted above, were produced immediately after the end of sessions. As promoted by Mulhull (2003), these observations were systematically 'mined' to locate moments of the therapy discourse which held particularly relevance to the research effort. Once these passages were

transcribed, I then began to review the recording in a more comprehensive fashion, listening to other portions of the audio to ensure that no contextual or qualifying information was missing from my verbatim accounting. This was not only to ensure that I had accurately represented the words and sentiments of my clients, but to confirm that my field notes provided an accurate reflection of the dyadic interaction (Halcomb et al 2006). This process of *selective* transcription (Poland 1995) was initiated for two reasons. First, given the sheer volume of audio generated by data collection – more than 41 hours in total - and the extensive time demands of transcribing complete therapy sessions, it represented a pragmatic approach to selecting accounts for analysis. Second, given the breadth of the psychotherapy dialogue – in which discussions could veer between aspects of the client's relationships, personal history and affective states – it protected against my being overwhelmed by the complexity of material documented in the audio recordings.

Maintaining Participant Anonymity

For psychotherapy research, BACP (2004) states that 'honouring any promises about confidentiality carries special weight because this is central to practitioner and researcher trustworthiness in field of work' (p. 7). During transcription, I endeavoured to remove or alter any information that might identify clients, including names, appearance, political affiliation, employment and nationality. McLeod (2002) argues it may be more challenging to maintain confidentiality in clinical case study research due to the volume of rich data accumulated from the client's disclosures.. However, this can be addressed by a commitment to ethical mindfulness and a willingness to discuss ethical dilemmas with clients (McLeod 2002). Hence, upon negotiating consent, clients were asked what – if any – information they might want to excluded or de-personalised from the transcripts.

Data Management

In accordance with the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (2017) on recording interviews, managing, and destroying digital audio and the accepted protocols regarding the secure storage, usage and ultimate disposal of transcribed interviews, all data – including recordings and transcripts - were digitally stored on Cardiff University's OneDrive Network and will be retained for no less than 5 years or at least 2 years post-publication and then destroyed in accordance with GDPR.

Managing The Possibility Of Participant Withdrawal

Clients were informed throughout the process of gathering that if they decided to withdraw from the study, any data relevant to their involvement would be immediately removed from the

sample and all digital audio recordings would be immediately destroyed. They were also informed that, following their removal from the sample, no further data would be collected and no previously collected data would be retained for any future use of any kind. It should be noted that no clients elected to withdraw, nor did any voice concerns about the management or eventual usage of their data.

Trustworthiness

Morrow (2005) claims that 'trustworthiness' in qualitative research requires an acuity by the researcher towards a range of ethical issues that appear at different times and configurations, including; an awareness personal biases, a willingness to challenge assumptions during collection and analysis and a general commitment to reflexivity throughout the research process. Koch (1994) asserts that a trust in research is facilitated through an accurate and comprehensive accounting of the methodological and analytical decisions taken by the researcher. To uphold an appropriate level of trustworthiness, I kept what Noble and Smith (2015) term a 'decision trail' (p. 3), which included a reflexive journal documenting my personal responses to my concerns around sampling, my motivations during data collection and detailed account of methodological judgments during analysis. This record was referred to throughout transcription and, as noted, was shared with my clinical supervisor to demonstrate the intellectual processes which guided my analytic interpretations (Noble and Smith 2015).

Data Analysis

Selecting The Method Of Analysis

This research is orientated towards a multiplicity of analytical considerations. First, it seeks to examine how clients conceptualise and problematise their digital assemblages within the therapy dyad. Second, it utilises the resulting psychotherapeutic discourse as a means of understanding the ways in which assemblages of capital, social exchange and desire that are produced, sustained, and channelled through online technologies. Given the complexity of these overlapping modes of analysis, it was decided that accounts taken from the psychotherapy meeting required an equal diverse methodological footing to be effectively examined, each of which will be explored below.

To the first aim, this research investigates the discourses on which speakers draw from, the situated versions of reality they construct and the subject positions they deploy within a particular context and using particularly meaningful language (Gee 2014). In a broad sense, 'discourses' – speech, utterances, and deployed language - are considered a means of

constructing reality, not just mirroring it. Because of this, discourses are more highly scrutinized than psychological phenomena - attitudes, memories, emotions, etc - which are traditionally presumed to be revealed through talk (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates 2001). An analysis of discourses also affords an understanding of the potentially defensive positions taken by clients to justify or excuse their digital behaviours and entanglements (Scott and Lyman 1968). The thought that clients might seek to defend themselves and their decisions within accounts was informed by my own professional expertise, as well as Scott and Lyman's (1968) distinction between 'excuses' – in which one rejects responsibility - and 'justifications' – in which one accepts it – as essential elements of accounts (Arribas-Ayllon, Sarangi and Clarke 2012).

As pointed out by Zorman et al (2008) the psychotherapeutic meeting is a natural site for discourse analysis as it is constituted through the exchange of mutual dialogue, one in which new meanings and identities emerge, but remain anchored to historical forces and societal expectations. This sensitivity to positionality was extended to my own contribution to the accounts of the therapy discourse, as my own contributions were acknowledged to be situated within unique social, theoretical, and professional structures and processes (Wodak and Meyer 2009), including my own implicit authority as a practitioner (Nye 1998). Spong (2010) advocates an 'inclusive' understanding discourses in the therapeutic dialogue, one that is as interested in the granular use and construction of language – including talk originating from the therapist - as it is the social power relations in which those discursive practices occur. Similarly, Roberts and Sarangi (2005) assert that discourse analysis affords a means of considering how language constructs professional practice, including the ways in which detailed features of talk - intonation, vocabulary, inferences - might affect clinical interactions and decisions. Through this lens, one can consider the role of macro factors of 'big 'D' discourse – those which categorise or channel behaviour or identity - alongside the 'small d' discourse of the psychotherapeutic encounter, with each area contributing meaningfully to the research topic (Gee 2004).

While this study was designed to be attuned to the language-in-use that occurs in the therapy setting, it also sought to situate the therapeutic discourse within wider assemblages of technology, capital and culture. The following section will account for the process through which I selected a theoretical framework – one that culminated with the work of Deleuze and Guattari – to explore the multiplicity of factors at play in the psychotherapy-assemblage and to underpin data analysis.

Choosing An Appropriate Theoretical Framework

My initial attempts to find a theoretical framework through which to analyse the therapeutic discourse first centred around making use of Freud's (1930) *Civilisation and Its Discontents* and, later, the work of critical theorist and psychoanalysis Erich Fromm, particularly *The Fear of Freedom* (1941), both of which mark early scholarly attempts to understand 'the social' through concepts related to the 'talking cure'. This led to an assumption that the best way to analyse data from the psychotherapy setting was to adopt a theoretical framework that mirrored my approach as a practitioner. To this, I sought to appropriate both Yalom's (1980) reading of existentialism and the whole of Nietzsche's canon as an analytic footing. This was due to the immense influence both figures have had on my model of psychotherapeutic practice, as well as the Nietzsche's criticism of early mass media and 'the herd'. Despite my intellectual debt to the above thinkers, I deduced any approach rooted in psychoanalysis, existentialism or Nietzscheanism would risk confining my analysis to the intra-psychic processes of the individual; a footing that, while professionally familiar, would have precluded a more wide-ranging critique of digital cultures and capitalist orders.

Turning towards the sociological, I then considered framing this work in post-structuralist thought, particularly Baudrillard's analysis of media and technological communication in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) and Foucault's *Technologies of the Self* (1988). I also considered using Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 2013) as a means of exploring the therapeutic discourse, due my familiarity of using the approach on a previous dissertation, as well as the assumption that such an approach might aid in considering how power relations and institutional authority are constituted online. While all three of these approaches would have afforded a more expansive view of social practice and power relations, I felt the primacy of discourse within post-structuralist thought would have come at the expense of a fuller exploration of the material, technological and affective realities at play within accounts. Following my consideration of these factors, I concluded that what I was seeking to understand in this research was not just how the digital effects the way we speak or write, or how it shapes our relationships or emotions, or even how it changes the psychotherapy meeting, but the ways in which all of these orders of existence function when taken accumulatively, that is, in relation to other systems, relations and affects.

This realisation ultimately led me to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, to which I was introduced through Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962). While I was appropriately befuddled by my first reading of *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), I was struck at how well their work

aligned with my interest in the unpredictable forces that emerge within the individual subject. Further study continued to demonstrate how the pair's work provided a way to conceive of the multiplicities that appear in the therapy discourse – human, unconscious, social, political, algorithmic, etc – not as any sort of conceptual unity, but by their relations of *exteriority*, that is, defined by the degree to which they interact with other multiplicities (Smith 2018). For example, I considered the following questions: Do the digital affordances of SNS facilitate new relational connections – sexual, emotional, political – between the digital subject and other users? Does the ethereality of the digital image allow clients to produce new identities and subjectivities that might not have been possible in their face-to-face assemblages? What affects, emotions and feelings are produced between the interaction between the myriad of 'on' and offline relations, including those which occur in mediated spaces?

On one hand, I sought to demonstrate how the digital affordances of social media hold the potential to not only push the boundaries of what is 'possible' in interpersonal communication, but to facilitate new modes of subjectivity and desire *within* the individual subject. On the other, this work was attuned to how these mediated capacities might produce their own set of categories, definitions, and evaluative metrics with which the subject – and the dyad – must contend. Bearing both goals in mind, Deleuze and Guattari afforded an analytic frame to consider the extent to which our social worlds – including those produced by digital apparatus and networked relations – shape our understanding of the capacity of our own bodies, our relationships and ourselves and, ultimately, how those understandings might be *transformed* (Fox and Alldred 2013). With this rationale in mind, I concluded that data analysis would entail a thematic analysis of data taken from the therapeutic setting, which would then be subject to a discourse analysis guided by the Deleuzoguattarian philosophy.

Given the centrality of Deleuze and Guattari to this project's design, a *selective* introduction to the pair's philosophy is required. As an inventory of Deleuze and Guattari's individual and collective output could easily warrant multiple theses, this accounting is not intended to be a comprehensive study of the pair's canon. Rather, the following section will demonstrate the appropriateness of applying a 'Deleuzoguattarian' analytic frame to the processes self-formation that occur in the psychotherapeutic assemblage and, more broadly, to the flows affect, social exchange and capital produced in online spaces. While this work makes use of several Deleuze and Guattari's (1972) concepts, I will provide a more detailed explanation of two corresponding ideas – the 'rhizome' and the 'assemblage' – which are essential to the process of data analysis. Following this, I will explore how these expansive ideas will be

incorporated into an understanding of the digital as it emerges through talk in the therapeutic setting. Finally, I will articulate the sequence of and rationale for a 'rhizomatic' approach to discourse analysis.

The Rhizome

As previously mentioned, my intent for this project was not to solely address the particularities of the therapy discourse, nor the subjectivities that emerge on or offline, nor even the functionality of individual digital technologies, but, rather, to consider the ways in which all these elements hold the potential to be interconnected and mutual affecting of one another. This acuity towards the heterogeneity at play in the psychotherapeutic assemblage is informed by Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the *rhizome*. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari put forward an ontology centred around the dynamic multiplicities which they assert occur in all entities. Central to this conceptualisation of reality and matter is the *rhizome*. Within Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) philosophy, the rhizome denotes the relations and connectivity of all things. Reflecting the pair's deep interest in botany, the figure the pair use to illustrate this complex idea is the tuber. Invisible from the surface, the tuber exists in an 'assemblage' of parts, its underground mass of roots always pushing towards growth in disparate directions. If one part of the root is broken off, it will simply carry on growing and expanding from – or to – any other point its structure. As result of its *acentred* construction – which Deleuze and Guattari (1980) refer to as the principle of '*asignifying rupture*' - the root can both multiply and form new connections within the system in which it is situated.

As a figure for thinking, the tuber-rhizome stands in stark contrast to the image which Deleuze and Guattari (1980) claim has dominated Western rationalism since the Enlightenment: the tree. Unlike the centralised trunks and unproblematic linear roots systems of the tree, the construction of the tuber has no fixed origins or hierarchal structure, but instead possesses; 'no roots, no starting place, no sequence, no ending place; only multiple sources, interruptions, interceptions, foldings, mergings, partings, multiple entry ways' (Tuck 2010, p. 638). Through the concept of the rhizome, the therapy meeting – as well as the subjectivities of both members of the dyad – is not reduced to a singular notion of the 'self', a set of unconscious drives or even an exchange of discourses, but is seen as a *multiplicity* of actors, forces and affects, all of which are in a state of flux. Thus, the goal of a Deleuzoguattarian analysis of accounts taken from the therapy meeting is to consider the digital subject as a dynamic, *rhizomatic* entity, one that emerges from the relations in which they are situated.

Assemblages: Content, Expression And Incorporeal Transformations

Given the extensive scope of Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) rhizome, the pair's notion of 'assemblage' is helpful in bringing greater specificity to the multiplicities that emerge and interact in the therapy setting. In the Deleuzoguattarian sense, bodies – that is, things, people, organisations, systems - are 'assemblages', or a gathering or grouping of things whose '...function or potential or 'meaning' becomes entirely dependent on which other bodies or machines it forms an assemblage with' (Malins 2004, p.85). The emphasis is not only defining a body by its internal relations – or *interiority* - but by its capacity to combine and interact with other assemblages (DeLanda 2006). Each of the domains at play in the assemblage are subject to forces of variance, or what Deleuze and Guattari term, '*becomings*', processes of change or movement in which entities possess the potential 'to affect and be affected' (Mercieca 2010, p.86). An assemblage should not be understood as fixed entity because it is always in a process of becoming. As such, assemblages are *open* systems, ones that inseparable from the forces that stabilise or increase its internal homogeneity – which Deleuze and Guattari (1980) term processes of 'territorialisation' - or those 'deterritorialising' forces, which change or even transform it into a different assemblage altogether.

Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) ontology draws between two types of assemblages which occur within social fields: 'machines' - or machinic assemblages - and 'collective assemblages of enunciation' (p. 7). As exhibited in the diagram below, assemblages are comprised of two distinct planes, or continuums: *expression* and *content*. Deleuze and Guattari (1980) are careful to argue that these two domains are independent from one another and, thus, function according to entirely different principles:

embodied sense of feeling experienced between the therapy dyad, or exchanged between digital relations), *social-machines* (the interpersonal relationship at play in the therapy room and online), *physical-machines* (the room's geographic, spatial, environmental location) and *psychological-machines* (the unconscious phenomena or emotions emerging during the therapy act, and during online engagement). A Deleuzoguattarian analysis of a given assemblage is not to assess what its constituent machines can 'do' as separate entities, but the intensity of the capacities and affects produced because of their connections to other assemblages. When applied to the therapy meeting, such an orientation is not interested in *what* the 'psychotherapy-assemblage' is made of, but the interpersonal communication, the actions or passions, the material transformations and the affective capacities that emerge from its assembled relations.

The concept of assemblage also affords an expansive framework to study the *affective* flows of discourse, technology and self-formation that occur within the psychotherapy-assemblage. When applied to this research, a 'social media-assemblage' is mediated through a client's smartphone, which acts as a container for flows of digital algorithms and artefacts, such as 'likes', 'comments', 'follows' and 'shares'. As a result of their digital engagement, clients might express a heightened motivation to receive and exchange those same artefacts in response to an unmet need for validation from others. That same client's reception of such digital 'gifts-giving' might not only be contingent upon their historical pattern of relationship, but on their socio-political context and the normative codes that govern their social assemblages, including those regimes of discipline that occur in online spaces. Finally, their understanding of these discourses around the digital are mediated through the affective economy – of embodiment, unconscious processes, discursive material, etc – that emerges between client and therapist. Deleuze and Guattari's ontology avoids reducing any of the complex flows that appear in the psychotherapy-assemblage to simple products of algorithmic processes, SNS design features, discourses, or interpersonal communication. Instead, it affords a view of online platforms – and the digital subject who engages with them - as *contingent* on the interplay between digital and analogue relations and provides a flexible set of tools to address the flows of affect, discourse and subjectivity that occur in the digital and within the therapy setting.

Discourses Within Assemblages

There is an implicit challenge in establishing an analytic method which is as incorporating of machine-oriented thinking as it is signs, discourses, and memories. Consider the sheer volume of information contained within a single therapeutic exchange. As will be detailed

throughout the data chapters, clients' descriptions of their digital engagement function as inventories of 'what' they did online, providing *their* understanding of which applications they used, the frequency or nature of use, who they corresponded or interacted with, and so on. It can also be seen as a record of justification, both of 'why' they chose to engage with certain applications -and corresponding behaviours – over other digital technologies. Going further still, accounts relay a multitude of affective and emotional information; not only how they purported to feel about past experiences, but how they processed and even transformed their own emotions during the therapy encounter itself.

The complexity of accounts taken from the therapy discourse presented several immediate potential avenues for analysis. For example, following a discussion of Tinder, research focused on theories relating to the social construction of technology (Bijker 2008) might examine specific aspects of the application's design or functionality. Conversely, a purely post-structural analysis of a session transcript might overcover the specific discursive elements – word choices, explanations, subject positions, problematisations – through which the subject represents their online experience and constitutes an identity. In correspondence with Feely (2020), I contend what is missing from both of those analytic approaches is an acuity towards the ways in which discourses can illustrate the *affective* relations – including material and non-human forces - at play within the modern psychotherapy meeting. This research is not solely interested in the discourses used by clients to account for their online engagement but seeks to consider those discourses as components within wider, more complex assemblages of objects, actors, technologies, interpersonal relationships, memories and embodied experiences. As such, within analysis, discourses are not privileged over other aspects of existence, but 'flattened' and treated it as *material* within a plane of immanence. This rejection of any distinction between the materiality of the natural world and the social constructs of human thoughts and desire affords an exploration of how discourses around technologies can function – within the subject, the dyad or in digital cultures – as social 'agents', capable of making things *happen* (Lather 2016).

To this task, Deleuze and Guattari (1980) introduce the idea of assemblages as context-dependent *machines*, one whose capacities to affect and be affected change as it enters in and out of relations with other entities. Such a 'turn to matter' emphasises the *materiality* of the world and everything – social and natural – within it. As such, entities at all levels of scale, whether natural or cultural, physical or artificial, animate or inanimate, material or semiotic are afforded an equal ontology footing, with none given more primacy or significance than the

other (Fuglsang 2006). Within this ‘flat’ ontology emotions, discourses, statements, and feelings are not mere screens for human signs and intentions, but are themselves full-blown actors, ones capable of creating affects in the material world (Fox 2014). The Deleuzoguattarian collapse of the material/discursive divide is a direct rejection of both social constructionist and poststructuralist traditions, both of which presuppose that language *produces* existence, including the worldviews on which individuals act (de Freitas 2013). This de-privileging of human agency re-focuses attention away from structural or systemic ‘explanations’ of how societies work and towards the relational character of ‘events’, that is how the fluxes and ‘becomings’ between assemblages – of bodies, of material objects, of technologies, of emotions *and* of discourses – produce the world around us (Fox 2014).

This is not to over-emphasize the importance of discourse, particularly language, within this contingent process. In Deleuze and Guattari’s break with the discourse-orientated thinking of post-structuralism, language is but a singular component in this field: it does not represent, reflect, or create, states of affairs, but rather, it is made possible by them (Feely 2020). Equally, language does not make – or create - sense; it is only one element in the process in which events occur (Bogard 1998). For Deleuze (1990), human language is contingent on events: ‘events make language possible’ (p. 181). Thus, language, embodied sense, and representations are ultimately the transformational result of a *mixing* of bodies (Fox 2002). When applied to this research, this ‘flattening’ of discourse applies to my own contribution to the discursive events that occurred within the therapy meeting. Despite my status as a researcher-practitioner, my own presence in the therapy dialogue is not viewed as lesser or greater than that of my clients but is analysed as mere component in the economy of discourses and affects that emerge within the psychotherapy-assemblage.

Initially, I planned to address these complex themes through Feely’s (2020) Assemblage Analysis, which draws together a wide range of Neo-Materialist theory to analyse qualitative accounts. While this approach provided a basic rationale and an analytic sequence, I thought it to be insufficient in two areas. First, while Feely attempts to reconcile the material/discursive divide, both myself and my supervisors found his theoretical framing of the materiality – and affective capacities - of discourses within assemblages to be underdeveloped in relation to Deleuzoguattarian theory. Second, his three-step approach to analysis conceptually integrated *all* processes of territorialisation, which I felt constrained a fuller examination of ‘lines of flight’, which, as will be subsequently explained, are moments within the therapy setting when the assembled relations of the psychotherapy-assemblage *broke down*, thereby

creating new personal and relational possibilities. In the following sections, I will put forward my attempt to rectify these two points of concern and put forward a 'rhizomatic' approach to discourse analysis.

Language, Discourses And Incorporeal Transformations

This 'turn to materiality' within my methodology is aided by Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) concept of language. As discussed in the previous chapter, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the function of language is not simply to convey information, but to *repeat it*. This notion, which they term *redundancy*, refers to the way language is reiterated throughout a social field, such that the individual subject is unaware of the origin of a given discourse (Patton 1997). Second, the function of language within these social assemblages is not to represent or refer, but to performatively enact what Deleuze and Guattari (1980) call 'incorporeal transformations'. As this project endeavours to understand the affective economies in which clients are situated online, it is essential that analysis remain open to the possibility of *redundancy* within accounts, particularly the idea that clients might be performatively echoing the discourses they encountered online within the analogue therapy assemblage. Equally, this work is attuned to how the heterogeneous components of the psychotherapeutic assemblage –human, technological, affective, or discursive - interact and are entangled with one another. Hence, any examination of the therapy dialogue must not reduce the exchanges between the dyad to the status of symbols or signs, but rather, should explore the intertwining and mutual influence that occurs between components.

Returning to Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) philosophy of the rhizome, their notion of assemblage illustrates the ways in which expressive-machines allow content-machines to become *creative*, to initiate transformations between material and expressive bodies (Anderson 2012). As will be evidenced throughout the data chapters, the digital technologies discussed by clients will be shown to have brought about material changes to their social assemblages that they are not fully able to articulate through linguistic means. Conversely, applications like Instagram, Facebook and Tinder afford users a plane of expression so advanced that they might develop internally-held fantasies or concepts of value – not to mention establish mediated relations with a global audience – far beyond their own material capacities. With this, one might assert the paradox at the heart of Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) transformational process: that expressive machines must be mediated through a *corporeal* or material body. The expressive – a memory, a feeling, an attachment - must be *repeated* through activities of material inscription – speech, text, neurological activity,

physicality - to exist (Stratford 2002). To Deleuze and Guattari (1980), reality – that is, the ways in which things and phenomena come into being – is not a fixed exchange between senses and entities, but an emergent property, one which *emerges* out of the interplay between a vast field of bodily relations and individual moments. Thus, a ‘rhizomatic’ approach to discourses is not only concerned with the ‘reality’ of the construction or features of talk, but of the affective capacities of a given discourse – whether online or in the therapy meeting – to bring about transformations in other bodies.

For example, a female client who has been subject to hyper-sexualised discourses from her male ‘matches’ on Tinder has not undergone a physical change to her corporeal body, but may experience all sorts of changes in the ways that she perceives her relational needs or sexual desires as a result of her exposure to such textual discourses. Her felt sense of what she can and cannot do with her actual, physical body might be affected by the expressive discourses that occur online. Nothing may have changed physically – beyond chemical responses due to anxiety or pleasure - but her social relations may have been transformed through the signs and signifiers she encountered online. Going further, the incorporeal transformations brought about online technologies may bring about change to the expressive processes of relationality and self-formation that occur within the psychotherapy meeting. The language habitually encountered in the digital might be repeated in the therapy discourse. Turning to other platforms, clients might present in sessions with the same sheepishness with which they navigated a Facebook group, or the same brashness that helped them to attract followers on Instagram. As result of this *redundancy*, clients might make certain assumptions or discursive choices which, in turn, might affect my embodied response to them or perhaps the way they interacted online after the session, thereby producing a series of transformations between various assembled relations.

Such examples speak to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980) central thesis: that existence itself is comprised of all sorts of intertwined corporeal and incorporeal objects mutually informing one another in a variety of ways. Thus, the language that emerges in accounts of therapy sessions – including discourses around psychic ‘material’ such as dreams, fantasies, desires, etc - is simply another interactional element at play within a vast field of complex relations. In ‘mapping’ these affective entanglements – that is, in attempting to understand their appearance and movement as they emerge within the psychotherapeutic setting - one might not only examine how the planes of content and expressive affect one another, but how the

digital subject might develop potential alternatives – or lines of flights - in existing assemblages.

A 'Rhizomatic' Approach To Discourse Analysis

The work of Deleuze and Guattari is perhaps best conceived of as a 'tool-box', that is, as a collection of machinic concepts that can be plugged into other machines or concepts and made to work (Malins 2004). Building on the work of Feely (2019), this work sought to develop a rhizomatic discourse analysis, one underpinned by four Deleuzoguattarian elements within accounts, each of which are briefly detailed below. Special attention will be paid to two concepts – desiring-production and lines of flight – each of which will be used throughout data analysis.

Stage One – Identifying Components

The first stage of this rhizomatic analysis of discourse will entail the identification of the disparate components, entities and relations that make up a given phenomenon within the psychotherapeutic assemblage. Given the breadth of the material generated within the therapy meeting, this may include; affective and bodily capacities, the physical materials and subjectivities at play in the therapy dyad, the algorithms of electronic media, discourses, the unconscious forces within the subject, the presence of the smartphone and micro-politics of institutions, culture and social positioning.

Stage Two – Mapping Flows

Deleuze and Guattari (1980) contend that assemblages comprised of and are acted upon by 'continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented' (p.5-6). These flows may be semiotic, material, algorithmic, social, interpersonal, or – in the case of the psychotherapy meeting – unconscious and grounded in past experience. The charge of this mode of rhizomatic analysis is not to ask what a given body 'means' or signifies; but rather, to 'map' the affects produced in assemblages produce, or, in Deleuzoguattarian terms, the 'flows' that emerge between its components. This research focused not only on the discursive flows within the dyad, but seeks to situate the affects of the therapeutic relationship within the techno-social assemblages as reported by clients. In this, the 'offline' psychotherapy assemblage is able to be 'plugged into' the online worlds of social media, thereby highlighting the continual flow of energies, codes and attitudes between a multiplicity of interacting planes, including the digital and the analogue, the conscious and the unconscious, the subjective and the intersubjective.

Perhaps there is no more important ‘flow’ within Deleuze and Guattari’s ontology than that of desire. In a rejection of Lacan’s commitment to the unconscious as a space where individual desires are ‘staged’, the pair assert the idea that the longing of the subject was more like a machine or factory, one engaged in the cyclical ‘production’ of desire (Tascano 2006). As such, dreams and fantasies are not simply evidence of the subject’s longing for a lost object or the archetypal trauma, but are treated as components within a dynamic multiplicity of conscious and unconscious forces (Watson 2016). To Deleuze and Guattari (1972), the *desiring-production* of the subject is not bound by the sexual, but rather, is the ‘production of production’ (p.4), a process that is seeking of difference and newness within the ‘desiring-machines’ through which it exists. As Parr (2008) points out, desiring-production is *social* production. As will be applied throughout analysis, the concept of desiring-production allows the flows of desires and identities that emerge through the therapy meeting to be situated within broader techno-social assemblages without any reduction of the subject to an essential ‘I’. Equally, it affords a framework through which online technologies might be analysed in terms of the desires they facilitate or channel – by what they ‘do’ - not by any notion of their essential technological *character*. Thus, one might consider the passions and contradictions of the unconscious as a singular component within a social field mediated by digital devices and network platforms, whilst also examining the ways in which those online technologies shape and produce new flows of desiring-production within the digital subject.

Stage Three – Exploring Processes Of Territorialisation

Essential to any rhizomatic analysis of the digital in psychotherapy is an understanding of the regulatory processes which serve to stabilise – or *territorialise* - order in and between the disparate flows and forces in assemblages. Within accounts produced within the therapy meeting this might include: the processes by which clients form and maintain a sense of identity, the discourses and emotions which emerge in the dyad and the social codes, market forces and technologies that govern desire in online spaces. Within Deleuze and Guattari’s ontology (1980), processes of territorialisation are not viewed as the result of human action, but rather as the emergent product of complex interactions amongst material and semiotic assemblages. When applied directly to accounts, the concept is a clear rejection of the teleology⁸ that features so heavily in humanistic psychology. Instead, this rhizomatic frame orientates this research towards the notion that the identities and desires of clients – that is,

⁸ According to Paterson (2021), a teleological approach to human psychology is best illustrated by Roger’s (1951) Person-Centred Therapy (PCT), particularly his concept of the ‘actualising tendency’, which holds that all forms of matter – including the human subject – as inherently moving towards positive growth, harmony and coherence.

the 'I' they describe online and in therapy - are contingent on dynamics and flows, on potentialities, and of that 'what is to come' (Fox and Alldred 2013).

Stage Four – Identifying Lines of Flight

The Deleuzoguattarian acuity towards the macro and micro forces at play in digital spaces not only affords a view of the process by which the digital subject might be constrained by the categorisation that occurs online, but how SNS users might produce relations and identities *outside* such definitions. This process of 'going beyond' is informed by what the pair term 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). If multiplicities are defined by relations of *exteriority* – that is, their relation to and between other external assemblages - the line of flight represents a path of *detritorialisation*, through which the nature, or character of a given assemblage is changed through its interaction with other assemblages. To Deleuze and Guattari (1980), the line of flight, is the 'revolutionary' line – a line of *escape* – one signalling the production of new arrangements, connections, and affective capacities between machines. While the pair take great pains to point out that lines of flight 'always risk abandoning their creative potentialities and turning into... a line of destruction' (p. 558), they contend that this 'revolutionary' action occurs at every stratum of life, including at the level of the psychic, where lines of flight afford an escape from the oedipal tyranny of the family, thereby releasing the productive and creative capacities of desire.

Deleuzoguattarian logic of becoming is not only interested in processes that regulate assemblages, but those lines – or lines of flight - that reach outside of the structure of which they are situated. In seeking to analyse these lines of *escape*, this research was orientated towards the movement *away* from systems of control that striate the subject and *towards* the possibility of the creation of new relations between new assemblages. Whereas Feely (2019) integrated processes of de-territorialisation within the previous stage of analysis, I contend the *ruptures* that occur within the therapy space – and within the individual subject - are deserving of their own systematic consideration. After all, the practice of psychotherapy in nearly all its forms is the practice of *disruption*, of looking beyond the old methods of navigating the world so that *new* ways of being, relationship or behaviour can be produced (McLeod 2011). This corresponds with Deleuze and Guattari's (1972) assertion that the line of flight is the line of *destruction*, the one which reveals the open spaces beyond the limits of *what exists*. An analysis of the therapy meeting may hold the potential for a host of such escapes, including from the segmentary forces that constrain action and impose codes in the digital in the wider society, in and between the dyad and within the subject itself. The inclusion of this final analytic

stage affords a view of the regimes and relations that regulate assemblages, as well as the processes by which such control is *subverted*, that is, the processes by which the digital subject might escape habit and segmentation and seek out new creative becomings.

As will be applied to an analysis of accounts taken from the therapeutic meeting, the notion of the line of flight aids in examining those moments when the structures that govern categorisations – about the self-concept of clients, about normative behaviour, about expectations of the other – are transformed into something *new*. While this research – and my own therapeutic orientation – is interested in the moments when the old orders of the family or of capital are broken down, one should be, as Deleuze and Guattari (1980), weary of assuming that nomadic acts are linear or static. Conversely, the concept of the line of flight points to a study of the body – whether political, intellectual, social, sexual, psychological – that is orientated not towards that which is cohesive, but rather, those forces which are fluid and flexible. Thus, this research begins with the assumption the ‘tools’ of the digital are not inherently domineering, but are, like any assembled relations, subject to a myriad of changes and are producing of a myriad of affects and identities. The goal, as will be evidenced in the data chapters, is to attempt to trace these fluctuations so that the therapy dyad might make meaning of the limitations *and* the possibilities of networked technologies.

Appropriateness Of Deleuze And Guattari As A Framework For Data Analysis

As evidenced by the brief overview above, the work of Deleuze and Guattari affords an expansive lens through which to study the affective flows of discourse, technology and self-formation that occur in the psychotherapeutic-assemblage. The pair’s notion of assemblage provides a way to conceive of the multiplicities that appears in the therapy discourse – whether human, unconscious, social, political, algorithmic, etc – as fundamentally *rhizomatic*, that is, defined not by any sort of conceptual unity, but by their relations of *exteriority*, or the degree to which they interact with other multiplicities (Smith 2018). Using this acuity towards the interactional elements at play in accounts, one might ask: do the digital affordances of SNS facilitate new relational connections – sexual, emotional, political - between the digital subject and other users? Does the ethereality of digital content allow clients to produce new identities that might not have been possible in their face-to-face assemblages? What intensities arise in the subject when certain assemblages – of affect, of apparatus, of actors - are territorialised online or in the therapy assemblage?

In taking a *rhizomatic* view of the digital subject, this research will attempt to situate the multiplicity of desires and identities which emerge through the therapeutic discourse within broader techno-social assemblages without any reduction of the subject, nor the technologies in which they are engaged. Thus, a Deleuzoguattarian theoretical framework is well-suited to explore both pitfalls and possibilities of the ‘selves’ and social exchange that occurs in the digital not as essential expressions of selfhood or causality, but as interacting, mutual components within a field of immanence. Given the theoretical commitment to multiplicity and assemblage that runs through every aspect of the project – including my approach to the therapy work – it is appropriate that this orientation towards *rhizomatic* thinking be reflected in my development of an equally assemblage-minded, or ‘rhizomatic’ approach to discourse analysis as my methodology.

Methodological Relevance

The application of ‘incorporeal transformations’ as a basis for exploring the affective capacities of discourse within the psychotherapeutic assemblage and its appropriation of Feely’s (2020) Assemblage Analysis, I contend that my choice of methodology affords an analytic lens to consider the overlapping, multiplicity of factors and phenomena in accounts, ranging from: the *micropolitics* of talk that occur within the therapy dialogue, the intersubjective communication between the members of the dyad, the regimes of technological control that structure online space and the *macropolitics* of value, accumulation and economic precarity that define ‘digital capitalism’ (Schiller 1999). Thus, the formulation of the rationale and method of this rhizomatic approach to discourse analysis represents an appropriate tool to understand the research topic and makes a relevant contribution to the ongoing efforts of Neo-Materialist theorists to reconcile the materiality of discourse in assembled relations.

Structure And Sequencing Of Data Analysis Chapters

The following data chapters are structured around three individual digital social networking sites: Instagram, Tinder and Facebook. The rationale for organisation was four-fold. First, as my approach to sampling was opportunistic (Rapley 2014) – in so far as it was dependent on clients to introduce discussions relevant to the research topic - these platforms represented the digital spaces most consistently discussed by participants and within my overall therapy practice outside of this project. Second, as will be demonstrated, the material that emerged around these specific technologies held unique implications for the personal development of individual clients, as well as the broader emergence of new mediated forms of social, sexual and relational engagement. Third, clients’ descriptions of their digital practices evidenced the

idea that SNS platforms were not only *sites* of these new techno-social entanglements, but of affective ‘cultures’ of coded discourses, behaviours and relational expectations. Fourth, this research contends that the normative codes produced through certain design elements that were unique to each platform. While there is an obvious commonality between some of the features across all forms of social media (O’Leary and Murphy 2019), this research contends the construction and design of online platforms not only facilitated distinct forms of mediated communication between users, but produced distinct processes of self-formation *within* the digital subject.

Each chapter begins with a short overview of each platform, including its structure and functionality, a brief history of its development, the demographics of its users, and its general position within the digital ‘marketplace’. This is followed by a brief narrative case vignette of an individual client, which will include: relevant information about their personal, professional and relational backgrounds, their reasons for seeking therapy and the ways in which they brought their digital ‘lives’ into the therapy space. In keeping with the classical approach to case study research in psychotherapy (McLeod 2010), my own thoughts and feelings about our work together, including my own personal experience of clients are also discussed. Like the case studies that will follow throughout each data chapter, these sections will also serve to illuminate and problematise specific aspects of the digital technologies and to situate the online engagement of clients within their historical patterns of relationship and identity. Following these introductory case studies, extracts taken directly from the psychotherapeutic dialogue will be analysed using a ‘rhizomatic’ approach to discourse analysis.

The rationale for this shift in the mode of analysis is two-fold. First, it provides an initial ‘insider’ view of the therapeutic meeting, one which relays a comprehensive understanding of the lives and desires of clients, whilst foregrounding the online technologies with which they reported to use (Unluer 2012). Second, it affords a way to incorporate information about clients generated by the therapeutic dialogue *prior* to the obtaining of consent. As part of my general working agreement (see Appendices), clients are made aware that I take extensive ‘process’ notes during our work, including verbatim extracts of our exchanges. They were also informed that in addition to aiding my reflective understanding of our work together, these anonymised insights may be used for the purposes of my own research. Upon being approached for recruitment, clients were informed through the information sheet and consent form that their involvement in their study would not only entail my recording and analysing *future* sessions, but would include my reflections about our historical work together. Hence, the inclusion of

such information is ethical due to the specificity of both our initial working contract and the information sheet provided - and consented to - clients during recruitment.

The Researcher-Therapist Within The ‘Data’

Given the complexity of the forces, attitudes and affects at play within accounts, my own role within analysis could be described as modulating in two opposing, yet complimentary directions. The first is not towards the *resolution* of crisis or the assuaging of individual clients’ emotional upset, but towards the utilisation of the therapeutic encounter as a site of *emergence*, through which a critique of social media technologies – and of the techno-capitalist orders, more broadly - might be put forward. To this, my own role within accounts differs from that in subsequent chapters. As will be evident throughout the extracts taken from sessions, there are instances when my discursive presence within analysis is not that of an agent of characterological change, but of a *reactive* ‘fellow traveller’ (Yalom 1980). As a result, interventions like, ‘*what do you mean?*’, ‘*could you say more?*’, ‘*what’s it like?*’, are in service of co-creating meaning around the flows and forces at play within the digital entanglements of clients, rather than pressing those insights into any specific psychotherapeutic end. The second mode of engagement which I adopt in accounts is that of a more discursively *active* practitioner. To this, certain exchanges are not in reaction to the accounts of clients, but are the direct result of my own *pursuit*, that is my self-initiated inquiry around specific issues, relational patterns and discursive devices and words choices discussed by clients. At times, such interventions take the form of clarifying questions, at others they are direct challenges or probes for clients to elaborate on a certain idea or theme.

The purpose of drawing attention to my two affective postures within accounts is not intended to demarcate between moments where I ‘may’ or ‘may not’ have affected the therapy discourse. As a practitioner, I cannot extricate myself from the flows and intertwinings that occur within the dyad. While it would be impossible to frame myself as a neutral ‘ethnographic’ observer, a more useful – and certainly a more Deleuzoguattarian – conceptualisation of my role within accounts is that of a *de-centred* component in a complex, dynamic assemblage. Just as my manner in sessions has historically modulated along with the rhythms and flows of the therapy relationship – resulting greater or lesser levels of authority, intervention, analysis, and self-disclosure on my part – so too does my contribution as a researcher remain fluid throughout the therapy discourse.

This work is informed by a growing body of post-qualitative scholarship (Masny 2012; Lather 2013; Cumming 2015; Wolfe 2017; St. Pierre 2021) which advocates for the reimagining of data – and subsequently, of data analysis – not as representations of ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ experiences of others, but as interconnected components within assemblages of experimentation through which the creation of the ‘new’ emerges. In light of this orientation towards *virtuality*, this project rejects the idea that I, as a researcher, hold a detached, objective point of view from which to study my clients, their relational worlds, and the techno-social assemblages in which they are situated. Hence, the analysis of session recordings will be referred to not as ‘data’, but rather as ‘accounts’, ‘events’ and ‘occurrences’. Such a distinction aligns with what MacLure (2017) refers to within post-qualitative research as the ‘decentring of the humanist ‘I’ of the analyst’ (p.51). that is, the ontological assumption that *all* elements of the research-machine – including those which emerge through the analytic process – are products of particular moments in time and space, each of which are contingent on the convergence of assembled relations between social, cultural and material components.

Conclusion

This chapter has accounted for the rationale and design of this research, including a description and critique of a neo-materialist ontology and epistemology, an overview of sampling, the methods employed, ethical considerations and a detailed accounting of my development of a rhizomatic approach to discourse analysis. I have addressed how an understanding of the materiality of discourses along with the utilisation of the narrative case study can serve as the basis of an inquiry orientated towards interplay of affects, technologies and relations that occur in digital assemblages. While one should be in no doubt of the intricacies of appropriating the psychotherapy meeting as a research ‘machine’, I contend the approach I have laid out in this chapter presents a novel means of examining the affective economies – techno-social, interpersonal, therapeutic - in which the digital ‘subject’ is situated. The next three chapters will present an analysis of accounts, each of which - as previously discussed - will be organised around the platforms of Instagram, Tinder and Facebook.

Chapter 4: Instagram - Masculinity, Aesthetic Entrepreneurship and The Male Neo-Liberal Body Online

The following chapter contains the accounts of three clients – Paul, Chris and David - each of whom described at length their engagement on Instagram. As will be explored, the experiences of these three men in therapy points towards the exploration of the platform as a multiplicitious assemblage of materials, actors and affects. In the language of Deleuze and Guattari (1972), the Instagram-assemblages described by clients will be shown to function as a type of ‘machine’, through which discursive, technological, and relational flows are produced, organised and exchanged within a distinct affective culture. The acts of digital self-formation described by clients on Instagram point to a type of *rhizomatic subjectivity*, in which identity, processes of becoming and even the felt sense of the individual appear as emergent products of the ‘intercultural communication’ between the analogue and the digital (Ferri 2020). While a Deleuzoguattarian ontology asserts that reality itself is an immanent field of differences and multiplicities, this work seeks to consider the unique ways in which digital technologies – specifically those within Instagram - create new ‘circuits’ of desire as well as apparatus of psychological repression.

Out of this dynamic swirl of technologies and affects emerges an almost *uniform* cycle of crisis. While the three clients in this chapter represent a range of ages, sexual orientations, and socio-economic backgrounds – as well as varying levels of economic security – each will be shown to have articulated a similar sense of disillusion at their professional and financial prospects. Furthermore, each man will be shown to have articulated a fear that they had *stalled out*; that they had desired *something* – a job, a wage, the opportunity, a type of success - in their prospective career paths that they did not seem to be able to realise. Analysis will suggest that, in response, clients turned to Instagram to produce the type of value – and as will be shown, of *beauty* - in the digital that seemed so elusive in their analogue relations. Analysis will also focus on the primacy of the body – that is, of the physical form of clients – within their mediated desiring-production.

Within data taken from the psychotherapeutic-assemblage, clients presented their bodies as an apparatus of achievement, and thus, as worthy of type of curation largely associated with the experience of women within Western cultures (Hakim 2019). While this management will

be shown to have taken different forms – psychic, physical, social – accounts will display a consistent motivation to produce content on Instagram that showed how well they ‘*cared for*’ or ‘*looked after*’ or ‘*worked on*’ themselves and their bodies. It is this *curation* of male form that will be informed by Hakim’s (2019) concept of the ‘feminine axiomatic’, which claims that, following the widespread economic precarity of the financial crisis of 2007/2008, the digitally mediated male body practices have re-organised the conditions of value for men around the demands of beauty and sexualisation that have long governed the lives of women within capitalist and hetero-patriarchal structures.

As previously discussed in the Methodology Chapter, given the complexity of the forces, attitudes and affects at play within accounts, the analysis contained in this chapter will be orientated not towards the *resolution* of this crisis of worth within the cohort, but towards the utilisation of the psychotherapy assemblage as a site of *emergence*, through which a critique of masculinity within digital capitalism (Schiller 1999) might be put forward.

Defining Instagram

Given the importance of Instagram in each client’s time in therapy, a brief overview of the platform is warranted. Instagram is an online photo sharing application and social network platform that allows users to edit and upload photos and short videos through a mobile application. It is a commercial product, a brand which has been marketed and taken up by both individual users and businesses. As of June 2021, its most active users are those between the ages of 13 and 34, a demographic that comprises over 71% of its 1 billion worldwide active accounts (Nurnafia 2021). Instagram provides users an instantaneous way to capture and share their life moments with friends through a series of – filter manipulated - pictures and videos.

In addition to its photo capturing and manipulation functionality, the platform provides a level of social connectivity. Individual users can follow any number of other users, creating what is termed a ‘friend’. In following others, one is termed a ‘follower’. The resulting social assemblage is fundamentally asymmetrical: if a user A follows B, B is not required to follow A in return. Additionally, users can adjust their privacy preferences to ensure that posted photos and videos are only made available to their community of followers. Photos and videos are primarily viewed through a home page, which displays a ‘stream’ of the latest photos and videos from a user’s friends, listed in reverse chronological order. From this stream, users may view, ‘like’ or comment specific posts of others. Each of these actions appear alongside

the original posted photo and are also referenced in the user's 'Updates' page. Users are allowed to add captions to posts through the use the # symbol and may mention – or tag – fellow users by using the @ symbol. Both gestures provide a link between the posts from one user to the referenced user's account prior to posting. As a result of this functionality, Instagram constitutes a complex affective assemblage, allowing the profiles of its users to operate as component parts that 'plug into' a wider, multiplicitous digital community of users and groups.

As noted by Mackson et al (2019), while Instagram is a relatively novel social media application, it has become as pervasive in the lives of social media users as more established platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Despite this ascendance within the digital marketplace, little research has examined its influence on psychological outcomes and has instead addressed topics such as the nature of user-produced content (Hu et al 2014; Miles 2013), the general motivation for use (Lee et al 2015; Sheldon and Bryant 2016), including 'problematic' social effects (Jackson and Luchner 2017; Kircaburun and Griffiths 2018). Drawing on recent inquiry into the platform as a prime disseminator of 'idealised' body images (Tiggemann and Zaccardo 2016) and as an engine of social comparison (Lup et al 2015), this chapter will seek to add to the growing body of understanding around how the Instagram affects, shapes and channels the desire of the contemporary male subject. Before such a critique can be put forward, an introduction is required to Paul, a client whose Instagram engagement typified the efforts of this cohort to call upon the platform as an engine not only of self-expression, but of a commodifiable and quantifiable self-value.

'I'm trying to put myself out there': Paul and the Digital Production of Authenticity

Paul was, in many respects, the 'perfect' therapy client. He had been in and out of therapy since he was a child, including prolonged stints of treatment in CBT, PCT and Psychoanalysis. In addition to this time in talk therapy, he reported to have done 'a lot of work on himself'. Based on the granular inventory he offered of his attempts at self-improvement - an accounting that took nearly half an hour to complete - he was not exaggerating. He had, he explained, attended yoga and meditation retreats, dabbled in Buddhism, taken a range of anti-depressants and mood stabilisers, competed in Crossfit, Ironman and powerlifting meets and built an impressive library of self-help manuals and depression memoirs. Not content to be a mere consumer of such *objets psychologiques*, he informed me within minutes of our first

meeting that he was a qualified yoga instructor, had recently completed an introductory counselling course and curated an online blog around issues of 'mental health awareness'.

Now aged thirty five, his speech overflowed with mental health jargon. In a single exchange, he could reference concepts of congruence, 'hot thoughts', self-actualisation and projection, before turning to an endless litany of buzzwords gleaned from the self-help gurus of TED Talks and YouTube. The deftness with which he used the rhetoric of therapy was made even more striking by his physical presence. 6'4" and powerfully built, his arms and legs were covered in tattoos. This already large figure further inflated by a wardrobe of flowing t-shirts and baggy skater shorts, attire which seemed to be borrowed from a much younger man. Despite his imposing stature, he was soft-spoken, engaged in near-constant eye contact and appeared to be open to any challenge or intervention with which he was presented. He was, in short, a self-improvement *machine*.

Paul had come to therapy to control what he described as severe bouts of anxiety and a life-long struggle with binge eating. Within minutes of our meeting for the first time, he relayed how destructive these afflictions had become, citing his reluctance to meet up with friends and his increasing reliance on his girlfriend for reassurance of his self-worth and physical attractiveness. Despite his description of these behaviours as increasingly problematic – something he claimed to have sought out therapy to better control - it became clear by our next meeting that Paul was far more interested in discussing other matters, particularly those which occurred online. He began our second session by articulating the case of writer's block that had prevented him from publishing a podcast or blog post for nearly six months. Both projects, he pointed out, had been building in popularity over the years, a trend he was convinced could only continue by a keeping to a consistent production schedule, hence his concern over his lack of creative output.

This stasis also affected the amount of content if was able to post on his Instagram feed. He described how the platform had become an essential means of publicising his own writings on mental health, as well as a variety of inspirational memes full of pop psychology tropes around resilience and self-acceptance. It was a delay that was filling him with dread, he said, a feeling compounded by the drudgery of his day job. Paul worked as accountant in a respected international firm, a position he had held for nearly 10 years. It was, he said, the only 'real job' he had ever had and was – in his words - an 'extremely' well-paid one at that. Despite the sizable pay-packet, his days unfolded at a snail's pace. He would arrive promptly at work,

install himself at his desk, put on his headphones and emerge some eight hours later in what he called a ‘zombified’ state. Conversely, when Paul was online, he was a man with both a mission *and* a message. The idea that such a vital conduit like Instagram would lay dormant seemed intolerable to him.

‘Any idea why you’re struggling to get new material out?’ I asked.

‘I just can’t seem to find a subject that feels right’, he replied.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘You know, something that really felt like it was *really* me. Every time I try, I just can’t get to something that’s... something that’s really *authentic*.’⁹

This idea of what was or was not ‘authentic’ was a concept to which we would return throughout our work. It was apparent that this pursuit of ‘realness’ – another of his favourite expression – was fundamental to his creative life. His podcast centred exclusively around his own struggles with anxiety and depression. If he wasn’t being authentic in discussing his own experience, he claimed, it would *show* and ‘they’ - his readers, particularly his Instagram followers - would *know* it. His approach to content creation was informed by a curious mix of influences. Paul would, in a single exchange, wax poetic about the unflinching – and largely self-destructive - work of Charles Bukowski and Hunter S. Thompson, before referencing the vulnerable memoirs of Matt Haig and Robert Webb. His writing, he explained, was somewhere between the two, a portrayal of ‘mental health’ that straddled the gap between cynical and earnest, aloof and thoughtful, comic and tragic. Like his idols, Paul claimed that what people responded to – what they liked the most – about his own work was its *depth*.

Despite this insight, new ideas simply weren’t coming. Paul was – in therapy and in life – stuck. I feared that in my desire to acknowledge the distress of his writer’s block - and to support him through the upset of feeling trapped in his day job – that I risked entrenching his ongoing

⁹ It is worth noting how material taken from therapy sessions is presented in the data chapters. Within the case vignettes that appeared throughout each chapter, exchanges between myself and my clients are presented in a narrative fashion like that of therapist like Yalom (2020). During sections in which I engage in a discourse analysis, exchanges are presented as verbatim extracts. This stylistic shift is done for two reasons. First, to uphold the story-telling elements of ethnographic research in psychotherapy (McLeod and Balamoutsou 1996) and second, to delineate between material generated from case notes and the material taken from the audio recording of sessions.

preoccupation with ‘authenticity’. I was also wary that such a fixation – when coupled with his reliance on the digital recognition of others - would constrain any broader examination of his life and relationships and limit his opportunities for growth.

‘Help me understand,’ I said. ‘On one hand, you talk about this feedback loop between what you’re putting out online and the praise you get in returns. It seems to be satisfying for you, yet you continue to look for ways to put off doing it. On the other, you won’t even consider the possibility of leaving your job, which you seem to have nothing but disdain for.’

‘I just want to put out something *genuine* on Instagram,’ he answered. ‘I’m trying to put myself out there, to create things that are a part of me, because they came from me, you know? Long term, I can see this podcast becoming a mixed media thing about mental health awareness. It can be all sorts of things - illustrations I’ve done, writing, the podcast. It’s a brand that can grow, but if I’m not honest, that’s not possible. The social media stuff gives me a way to promote that.’

Paul’s struggle to effectively and ‘authentically’ *brand* himself on Instagram is indicative of the stories of the other two clients – David and Chris - who will be explored in this chapter. To understand the Instagram-assemblages of clients, one must first engage with the affective flows of ‘likes’, ‘follows’ and ‘comments’ that structure and constrain their digital engagement.

Data-Analytics, PDAs and ‘Aesthetic Entrepreneurship’ in the Affective Economy of Instagram

Any Deleuzoguattarian analysis of the digital within psychotherapy must begin with the question: what does the digital *do*, both online and within the therapy dyad? To this, one must contend with the functionality of Instagram as a SNS centred around the sharing of visual content. Throughout our sessions, clients described using Instagram to produce and distribute specific types of images. Each of these represented a type of exchangeable commodity in the Instagram-assemblages of clients. In the case of Paul, this centred around images containing quotes and memes about emotional resilience, self-care, and vulnerability. His efforts to produce, publish and curate such images could be framed as a ‘human-branding performance’ (Eagar and Dann, 2016). It could be asserted that, like all brandmakers, clients were motivated to produce images that would be recognisable to their audience of fellow users, ones that would be accepted as ‘good’ or as ‘interesting’. As evidenced by the event below, Instagram

could be credited as affording Paul both a means of *production*, as well as a precise metric for how his content was being received by others:

P: It's amazing how people respond. The lengths people go to tell you how much they appreciate what you're doing. I've had people make response videos talking about how brave I am for sharing and how I've changed their life.

T: So...How do you experience this appreciation? You seem pretty sure that what you're doing matters... you also seem really moved by what they say. How do you gauge their response?

P: Well...people will like something you put up. Or send you a DM (direct message) or follow you. Sometimes people leave comments. Then you get a notification....

T: Really? Every time someone likes something you put up your phone buzzes?

P: Yeah (laughs)....

T: That would drive me completely insane! (laughs)

P: (Laughs) No... it's alright. You feel like people are responding...to you, you know. Validating what you're doing. Literally, as their consuming what you're putting up... It makes you feel like you're really making a difference, like you've put yourself out there and they responded.

T: You speak of your audience with a lot of warmth, a lot of intimacy...

P: I suppose... I guess, it is like that, you know. You feel like you get to know people, maybe not person-to-person, or, you know, proper details about them, but it's you're having a back and forth with them. Like, for example, you can do a poll (through Instagram Stories) and have instant feedback about what they want to hear more of.... Or maybe you do one about a mental health issue, like if they're struggling with something.

Just as capitalism employs a spectrum of analytics – profit, growth, earnings per share, etc - to assess exchange-value, one could assert that the flows of ‘likes’ and ‘follows’ within Paul’s Instagram-assemblage provided him with a clear indication of what Faucher (2018) refers to as online social capital, that is, what was deemed *worthy*, or valuable about his posts by others. What is interesting is the dual methodologies at play, both of which speak to the entrepreneurial way he approaches his Instagram relations. While a traditional marketer might assess the performance of a product by footfall or ‘clicks’, Paul was able to know what was desirable about content by the number of new followers, comments and ‘likes’ he accrued. The accumulation of these digital cues – often referred to in the literature as ‘paralinguistic digital affordances’ (or PDAs) in the literature – are emblematic of quantitative tools of assessment afforded to social user media users (Hayes et al 2016). Conversely, a qualitative analysis of affirmation he received in the form of positive comments – or ‘reaction’ videos – providing insight into *what* his followers liked about his posts, *why* they liked it and *how* it affected them (*‘How I’ve changed their life’*). As he alludes to at the end of this happening, one could interpret his utilisation of the polling function embedded in Instagram Stories as another means of assessing the desires of his audience. Confirming the work of Silalahi (2021) and Kay et al (2020), who assert that such interactive features have become essential in establishing engagement between Instagram ‘influencers’¹⁰ and their followers, Paul’s polling of his audience appeared to serve two functions: first, it provided another means of connection, by which ‘they’ might stay engaged with his ‘content’, and, second, it provided him with a precise analytic tool to gauge the preferences of his followers, or, as he puts, an apparatus that let him *‘get to know’* his audience.

When taken cumulatively, these corresponding metrics not only alerted Paul to the value of his work – that is, *what* he was producing online - but to the value of *himself*. After all, he wasn’t just putting up images, but posts that articulated something about his own personal struggles and vulnerabilities. The more others ‘liked’ what he was doing, the more they ‘liked’ him. As I jokingly pointed out, he could quite literally *‘feel’* this appreciation on his person in real time, through the vibrations of his smartphone. His response is telling. Whereas I offer a sense of annoyance, one could see the sense of pleasure Paul experiences through this accumulation – and subsequent transmission - of what Lupton (2015) terms ‘self-tracking’ technologies, or the evaluative metrics of the digital. To experience the positive reception of

¹⁰ According to Zhang et al (2018) online ‘influencers’ are influential users of social media platforms who, due to their consistent creation of content or large number of followers, possess the ability to affect the behaviour or attitudes of a broad population of platform users.

others, as he puts it, is '*amazing*'. Thus, the alerts and notifications on his phone aren't an imposition, but a welcome reminder of the connection he has with others. '*They*', as he puts it, are '*responding*'. How does he know? The data analytics— that is, the sums of likes, comment, followers, etc — instantaneously tell him.

One could assert that the analytics of Instagram represented what Espeland and Stevens (2008) refer to as forms of 'commensuration', or 'the valuation or measuring of different objects with a common metric' (p. 408). More than the mere numerical 'marking', this process establishes relations — and evaluative metrics - between previously unrelated qualities and entities (Lupton 2015). The classification and comparison of 'objects' of commensuration renders 'all differences into quantity' (Espeland and Stevens 2008, p. 408), thus producing data — that is, of the individual characteristics of an object— that are 'decontextualized, depersonalized numbers that are highly portable and easily made public' (Espeland and Sauder 2007, p.18).

The rationality and starkness of digital objects within the Instagram assemblages of clients could be seen as having merged with their own individual assessments of self-worth. The result is an evaluation, or a *ranking*, of self — and of digital self-performance — which is as *oversimplified* as it is robust. It is interesting that the way in which Paul 'gauged' the response of his audience was not through a qualitative critique of 'what' they wrote but the speed and the frequency in which such accolades came in via his smartphone. While my self-disclosure ('*that would drive me insane*') was meant to invite him to consider a mode of social exchange outside of the constant harassment of the digital, his response ('*No, it's alright...*') not only reveals the gulf between our different levels of tolerance for vibrating digital devices, but speaks to the implicit *authority* of the quantifiable Instagram notification. Whereas I recoil from the thought of the relentless pursuit of the app and screen, he *leans in*. And who could blame him, given what both apparatus could provide? To understand '*how*' he was doing online or the '*difference*' he was making, Paul didn't have to judge, or evaluate, or weigh up evidence about 'who' he was, or 'who' was watching: he just had to *count*. He might not be privy to '*proper*' or '*person-to-person*' information about his followers, but he could know how *often* they got in touch and how *many* of his posts they liked.

From this exchange, one could argue that the seduction of the digital is not its complexity — that is, the ability of online technologies to transcend geography, temporality or even identity - but rather, the remarkable *simplicity* it affords its users to assess the value of their relations

and of themselves. While it could be posited that such a responsive connection to one's audience is evidence of the participatory – or even 'democratic' – nature of digital cultures promised by early internet theorists (Lanier 2017), the metrics of Instagram described by Paul are more accurately situated within what Perthuis and Findlay (2019) refer to as the 'direct-to-consumer' style of marketing that dominates commercial relations between 'influencers' and followers on Instagram. Following on from Elias et al (2017), the affective visual economy of Instagram appears as contingent on a unique form of 'aesthetic entrepreneurship', in which value is established not through the action of individual actants, but is co-created through the exchange of relational and embodied processes between a multiplicity of producers and customers.

Paul's attention to the commodified metrics on 'likes' and 'follows' mirrors any other brandmaker's utilisation of customer surveys as proxies for quality and mechanisms for feedback: they alerted him not only to what his audience found aesthetically valuable about his past content, but what production they desired from him in the *future* (Elias et al 2017). Such receptivity to the ebbs and flows of the digital marketplace stand in stark contrast to Paul's account of his professional life. Whereas as his days at the accounting firm were described as an exercise in tedium and clockwatching, Paul's description of his engagement on Instagram fizzles with the activity of acquisition, growth and validation. As is explored later in the chapter, if at work he was bored and rudderless, on Instagram Paul embodied the traditional 'masculine' executive. While he may have been 'trading' in self-care instead of cars or commodities, like the two other clients in this chapter, his account reflects his efforts to self-consciously present himself as a man who managed his appearance, his emotions and his relations in order to succeed in the 'win or die' (Acker 2004, p.29) atmosphere of the contemporary digital marketplace.

A Deleuzoguattarian analysis of Paul's quantifiable connection to his online relations is aided by the pair's concept of *desiring-production*. When applied to Paul's account of his Instagram engagement, one could assert that his desire is motivated towards production of connections with others, to not only move others with his displays of authenticity and insight, but to himself be affected by the confirmation of his power to affect others. From the above exchange, one could argue that he is equally moved by the '*change*' he has brought about in the lives of others, as he is by own reception of their '*appreciation*'. This process of commensuration between the analytics of digital technologies and self-experience is further highlighted by Paul's disillusion when the desiring flows within the Instagram-machine are disrupted by his

creeping writer's block. As evidenced by the happening below, his inability to express himself on Instagram not only impacted his capacity to produce new connections with others, but his own understanding of himself:

P: I just feel so stuck at the moment. I've got all these ideas and I want people to see them.

T: And what's it like not being able to reach them?

P: It's frustrating. You feel powerless, you know? I just can't get started. It becomes a part of your day, making those connections and seeing what they write.

T: And when that part is taken away?

P: Well, it's not very nice, is it? (laughs). You go from having all of the people get in touch to nothing...

T: It sounds like a pretty lonely place to be in...

P: Yeah...

T: Have you ever thought about writing about feeling the way you do now?

P: Who would want to read that? I'm trying to do something positive, something authentic...you know, content, a brand that's helping people.

T: You keep using that word, 'authentic'. How would know if you were really being you? How do you know you had done it, created this authentic 'brand' as you call it?

P: That's a good a question, I guess I wouldn't. You'd still have to take a chance on it and hope that what you posted was authentic. It's like a feeling, I suppose...

From the above extract, one could interpret that, for Paul, to be un-productive on Instagram is to be '*powerless*' and ultimately - as he confirms following my intervention - '*lonely*'. In his powerlessness to produce 'ideas' that others could see and appreciate, it was as if he had descended from a position of almost endless receptivity - through which he could continually exchange flows of feeling and affirmation with countless other users throughout the day - to quite literally '*nothing*'. This '*nothing*' he alludes to could be surmised as having existential *quality*, insofar as 'he' - or at least his online 'identity' - does not 'exist' unless he is consistently producing content that can be received by his followers. Equally, it could be viewed as a measure of *quantity*, insofar as the metrics of Instagram rendered Paul's social relations, and indeed, his desires, calculable. While they may be derived from different methodologies, one could assert that both measures provided him with the same disconcerting output: *zero*.

This data-driven emotionality in the above exchange is informed by the Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *affect* (1972). To Deleuze and Guattari, unlike the predictability of emotions, affects are autonomous, bodily forces, ones continuously flowing outside of bounded territories to connect within and between machines (Tamboukou 2003). Thus, any exploration of the affective 'economy' of Instagram must be inclusive of patterns of individual emotion, but ultimately map those embodied feelings within the power relations and flows within and between bodies (Read 2016). The territorialisation of Paul's Instagram-assemblage could be framed as contingent on his capacity to 'plug in' to new bodies - or new machines - through the repeated production of and reception of feeling. The sequence of this mutual affective exchange could be seen as beginning with the crafting and posting of 'content and followed by the reception of likes, comments and notifications from his followers. Accounts evidence the ways in which the affective capacities of such self-tracking technologies organise value within techno-social assemblages and channel affective connections between users. From this, one could also assert that such analytics described aren't just components in a 'production line' of content creation and affirmative comments, but a relational *lifeline*, linking individual users - and corresponding flows of affect - to wider assemblages of mediated relationships.

What is striking is that the flows of Instagram artefacts not only connected Paul with other digital assemblages, but organised new affective possibilities within his own *self*-assemblage, that is, within his own understanding of himself. It is little wonder that his crisis of desiring-production held implications for his own sense of identity. His account evidences that his experience of himself within his Instagram-Assemblage as 'authentic' could be seen

contingent upon the repeated production of a 'self' that could be recognised as valuable by the digital 'other'. In this, his self-regard had become indistinguishable from his online self-*performance*. Once again, his account reveals the ways in which he conceptualises his online engagement through language of markets, of commodities. As evidenced by the two previous exchanges within the therapy discourse, Paul rarely referred to what others found valuable about his 'pictures' or his 'posts' or his 'quotes', but rather what they liked about his '*content*' and his '*brand*'. Just as 'he' was only as valuable as what he could *produce* and exchange with others, his production of 'authenticity' appears to be a means of engineering further relations of affective affirmation and connection, not as a component with the construction of substantive, embodied self. Thus, the digital content described by clients could be framed not as personal or emotional artefacts, but marketable, *social* entities designed for the consumption in the metrics-driven 'reputation economy' (Gandini 2016).

One can trace the high expectations Paul placed upon this social production of self. First, his content needs to be visible so that '*people can see*' the ideas he is producing through the screen of the smartphone or the laptop. Second, the production of ideas needs to be conducted at a regular enough interval that it becomes '*part of (one's) day*'. Third, this content needs to be expressed in an uplifting tone, or, as he puts it, '*something positive*' and which might '*help people*'. Finally – and perhaps most crucially – Paul expressed a desire to produce digital material that might prove to be congruous with the '*best*' of himself, in so far that it would be *authentic*. It is this final condition of production which reveals a distinct tension in Paul's account. How does Paul know if he is being 'himself' or 'authentic'? As he points out, the 'self' he presents to others must not only be felt internally (*'It's a feeling, I suppose...'*), but articulated in such a way to convey the deepest facets of his lived experience – to *move* others. In confirmation with Duffy and Pooley's (2019) assertion of the 'awkward commingling' of authenticity and self-promotion in the digital, one might consider the 'value' of Paul's desiring-production on Instagram to be derived from a type of entrepreneurial, co-development, one in which idealised images and emotional experiences were exchanged between a range of stakeholders within his digital assemblages. Put another way, as he moved his audience, so too did they '*move*' him in return through the notifications of likes, follows and comments he received on his smartphone.

This embodied aspect to Paul's online-assemblage is informed by the intensity that Deleuze and Guattari (1972) associate with their body without organs (BwO¹¹). Within Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, the human subject is considered a rhizome-in-itself, an assemblage of desiring-machines (cited in Bogard 1998, p.53). The 'body' can be understood as a type of container, a surface, upon which disparate patterns of lines of flight are produced, recorded, interrupted and re-directed (Watson 2016). In its most elastic form, the BwO can be taken to mean – literally - anything: a physical space, a political body, a material object, a feeling. It is also the site of the entire schizophrenic and paranoid drama within the subject (Bogard 1998). However opaque, the BwO is central to Deleuze and Guattari's (1972) rejection of the analysis of entities – biological, political, social, anatomical – as well-formed and constructed from clearly delineated component parts. It is an apparatus of depth: one concerned not with the unity of essences – of mythology which defines the thing-in-itself - but of a more obscured, fragmented view of the world (Smith 2018).

Borrowed from Artaud (1947), the pair's reading of the BwO is one comprised of 'pure intensities', the body of which is 'outside any determinate state, poised for any action in its repertory' (Massumi 1992, p. 70). On one hand, Paul's Instagram-assemblage could be framed as a mediated space in which his 'body' *becomes* intense and is able to act and affect in new ways. On the other hand, his becoming-intensive seems to run counter to Deleuze and Guattari's assertion the BwO implies a 'repulsion of desiring-machines' (Deleuze and Guattari 1984, p.9); a process by which the 'schizophrenic'¹² finds their own desiring-machines or organs so problematic that they are better off without them. Rather than be *liberated* from other 'organs', Paul could be seen as continually seeking to refresh his desiring-connections within his Instagram assemblage. As a result, his account displays his entrenched awareness of the market relations that had come to define his sense of internal value, as well as his growing sense of disillusion when those affective connections – of PDA's, of emotion – ceased to produce predictable returns.

¹² According to Deleuze and Guattari, an acuity towards the 'schizo' – or the state of schizophrenia – is not one which points towards mental illness in its classical sense, but rather the understanding of human beings as an expression of the interconnected state of all things and of systems of things (Lippens 2010). The schizophrenic 'subject' is conceived as being situated at the fluctuations between one thing and another, including the affective dynamics of unleashed by capitalism and the reigning institutions of society (Massumi 1992).

In response to the tapering off of these ‘returns’, Paul could be seen to be even more motivated to create posts that would garner the volume and intensity of PDA’s of his previous work. In this, the accounts of clients confirm the work of Hayes et al (2016) who assert that the underwhelming reception of content on Instagram rarely encourage SNS users to discontinue or lessen engagement on the platform, but conversely, drives them to post more often or to more carefully evaluate what content might be received with the desired level of likes. While such a reading speaks to the compulsions that emerge in SNS, it fails to recognise the *relational* aspects of Paul’s crisis of production. For all the dynamism and intimacy that the metrics of Instagram afforded Paul, his quantifiable understanding of his relations – including of himself – could be framed as a futile effort to ‘keep up’ with the productive forces in the digital. In keeping his likes and his comments and follows coming in, he mitigated a fear of being swept away, or at least of being digitally *alone*. As a result, Paul’s Instagram-machine emerges not as an apparatus of liberation – of potential, of relationship, of being one’s ‘true’ self – but of *repression*, in which the ‘best of ‘who’ he was had to mediated, confirmed, rejected, and internalised through an analysis of digital artefacts originating from vast, external assemblage of digital actors whose tastes had to be continually satisfied. On Instagram, Paul’s ‘body’ had become one comprised *only* of organs.

While the ‘schizophrenic’ relationship between the reception of PDA’s and the emotionality of SNS users is well-founded within the literature (Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012), what is remarkable is the unique, and often incoherent cultural norms in which this reciprocal exchange is situated. This framing of the Instagram-machine as a ‘intercultural’ (Sawyer and Chen 2012) apparatus is informed by the struggles of another client, Chris, to use Instagram to reconcile his physical and emotional shortcomings.

‘I Was Happier When I Was Fat’: Chris And The Fitness-Selfie

There were certain words and phrases I found myself repeating through my work with Chris. Not a session would go by in which I wouldn’t enquire about how ‘flat’ or how ‘quiet’ he seemed, or how the discourse between us had ‘lost momentum’. These interventions were inevitably followed up with that most benign of interrogations: ‘*What do you make of that?*’ or ‘*I wonder why?*’ However sensitively phrased or well-timed, such invitations always seemed a struggle for Chris. Within minutes of our first meeting, he informed me that he wasn’t particularly good at talking about himself, much less about his feelings. True to his word, our work early together was peppered with silences, false-starts and awkward transitions. He was, to say the very least, a challenging client.

The previous year, his marriage had ended. Following the divorce, which he described as amicable, his ex-wife had taken their newborn son back to her native Spain, at which point, he explained, she had begun to restrict his access to the child. Endless rounds of mediation followed, out of which it was decided that Chris would only be able to see his son provided that his own mother accompanied him on visits. While he asserted that there was nothing in the relationship that should have warranted such a condition, the legal bills were becoming too much to bear, and he acquiesced to his ex-wife's demands.

'What choice do I have? She literally can do what she wants,' he said, adding, 'You don't want to make things any more difficult for yourself.'

I learned more about Chris, particularly his connection with women, the more I began to see how this feeling of powerlessness was emblematic of his other relations. Now in his mid thirties, his dream since childhood was to be a musical theatre actor. There were moments, he reported, that the dream had actually come true. Following his studies at the Royal Academy of Music, he had worked on several West End productions. These were often small parts, he admitted, sometimes just a spot in the chorus. However minor, his early success seemed to point towards a career of which he could be proud. Show business being fickle, such stability was short lived and work quickly dried up. Following years of auditions – and an aborted attempt to join the Army - he had finally found employment in the education sector. For years, he explained, he worked as a course evaluator for musical theatre education programmes, a role that demanded near constant travel across Europe and Asia to moderate curriculums for English-language stage schools.

While I remarked that such a job surely carried its perks in the form of travel, he assured me that it was not without considerable deficits. He was employed on a project-by-project basis, a position which left him unable to plan for next month, much less for the future. As a result, he had struggled to save much money and had recently notified of yet another rejection for a mortgage application. In between trips to Jakarta or Brisbane, he would spend long stretches in his childhood bedroom at his mother's house. When asked what it was like to travel so far, but find himself back where he began, he adopted a defeated posture and muttered slowly, 'It's not what I signed up for, you know'. The more we worked to illuminate this stasis, the more he seemed beholden to feelings of doubt about his professional choices and a crippling sense of guilt over his estrangement from his young son. There was, however, one topic, with which he seemed completely comfortable discussing: his body.

Chris was small, yet athletically built, and gave the appearance of someone who had devoted considerable time to the gym. Despite this, he was plagued by feelings of insecurity about everything from his thinning hair to the visibility of his abs to the size of his penis. It was a feeling preoccupation, he explained that had first emerged in secondary school. He had always been the ‘chubby’ kid at school, for which he had been consistently bullied. All he had ever wanted, he said, was to be ‘normal’, like his peers. If that wasn’t possible, the second-best option was to simply become invisible and avoid the gaze of any would-be tormentors. It was a strategy that he appeared to employ throughout his adult life. During his last physical fitness examination to join the Army – which saw him rejected due to a congenital heart arrhythmia – he admitted to rushing into the communal showers to wash himself before the rest of his cohort arrived.

These irreconcilable forces had come to define his relationship with his new fiancée, Nayla, and was putting increasing strain on the relationship. Nayla was, Chris explained, originally from Malaysia and was, he deduced, culturally disposed to ‘speaking her mind’. When I asked him what he meant, he described the relationship as being subject to his fiancée’s moods, as well as of the range of jokes she made at his expense, including those aimed at everything from his finances to how bloated he might be the morning after a night out. As a result, he had become increasingly dissatisfied with their sexual relationship and was plagued by performance anxiety during sex. He had also begun to doubt Nayla’s willingness to emotionally connect with him and was feeling increasingly isolated in the relationship. When I noted how these seemed to be the same sort of feelings he would have had as a teenager, he paused and quietly replied, ‘(Nayla) means well. It’s just because of where she comes from. She doesn’t mean to hurt me. It’s just tough to feel connected to her.’

Against this backdrop of anxiety and unrealised affirmation, Chris said he was spending more and more time online, specifically on Instagram. At first, it was just a way to escape the boredom of yet another hotel room or airport. He was particularly drawn to pages of what he termed the ‘fitness guys’, referring to the growing community of ‘influencers’ who use the platform to their ‘fitspiration’ pics of chiselled physiques, training programmes and diet plans. Recently, he had begun to post his own pictures, which like those he followed on Instagram, featured him in various stages of undress, normally following a workout. Often, he explained, he would finish his weightlifting sets, take off his shirt and, still drenched in sweat, take a selfie in front of the mirror at the gym. It was, I pointed out, a striking counterpoint to how different he appeared to be in his other relations, particular in his romantic entanglements.

‘What’s it like to show people how strong you are. To show how hard you’ve worked’ I asked.

His reply was telling: ‘I’m not sure I’d put it that way,’ he said.

‘How would you put it?’ I asked.

‘Looking at (Instagram) so often...It makes me a mess most of the times,’ he said. ‘You’ve got all these fit people; these amazing looking people and it just fuels a bit of self-consciousness. It’s awful when people make disparaging comments or compare you to other profiles. You can’t help but get upset about it. It doesn’t help that the people you’re up against are in such good shape. It’s hard not to feel, you know, beneath them.’

Even worse, he continued, was that Nayla rarely commented on the photos he posted. When she did, it was normally to poke fun at him, or to point out how fat he looked.

‘What was it like to have her use that word fat,’ I asked, again inviting him to consider how the relationship seemed to be replicating the ridicule of his youth.

‘It’s not very nice,’ he replied. ‘I’m working really hard and it would be nice for her to notice, you know, to pay attention to that.’

After a lengthy pause, he continued. ‘I was just thinking... I was happier when I was fat.’

‘Really?’ I replied.

‘Yeah,’ he said, peering at the floor. ‘At least when I was fat, I wasn’t checking my phone all day long.’

Chris’s efforts to curate images on Instagram speaks to the ways in which this exclusively male cohort utilised the platform to not only present the ‘best’ of themselves, but to produce content that upheld traditional – or hegemonic - masculine qualities of resilience, strength and the willingness to *suffer* for their own self-development (Connell 1979). As will be explored, the production and exchange of images within the Instagram-Assemblages of clients appeared to be organised around a conflicting pair of desires: one seeking to satisfy the coded

expectations of the social assemblages in which they were situated and another seeking to reassure clients of their own individual worth and progress.

The Suffering-Image and the ‘Drive to Masculinity’

That clients utilised a photo-sharing platform like Instagram to produce and exchange images is hardly novel. What is of concern is not *that* they were sharing, but *what* they were sharing. As evidenced by the exchange with Chris below, clients appeared to utilise Instagram to produce specific types of images within their digital assemblages:

T: So, what sort of things do you post?

C: Do you mean on what....on Instagram?

T: Yeah...

C: I mean... it's a bit embarrassing, isn't? (Pauses). You know, I might finish a workout and feel really good and take a picture of myself. Or maybe... I don't know... maybe I've worked on a certain muscle group or done a specific workout or a lift and I want show what I've done that day.

T: It sounds like you put them up when you're feeling proud, like when you've accomplished something...

C: Yeah... I want to show what I've been able to do and... how my body can change.

The images described by Chris above are known within the literature as ‘fitness-selfies’ or ‘healthie selfies’, in which users post pictures of themselves during or immediately after a workout to display their physical vitality, track muscle growth and relay the intensity of their exertion (Fausing 2014). This practice can be seen throughout Chris’ personal account in therapy. On one hand, his account evidences the selfie as what Hess (2015) refers to as ‘locative’ media, in that it situates him - and his activity - within the setting of the gym. Interestingly, it could be posited that the motivation for Chris’ images was not solely to alert others to the very general fact that he undertook exercise, but to highlight very specific

moments of effort and, ultimately, of the progress he made on a given day. From the exchange above, it's not enough to have done the workout, but to 'show' others the demanding programme he may have completed or even the individual muscles he may have toned that day. In correspondence with De Mar et al (2015) the fitness selfie Chris produced emerge not as a general record of his day, but as *evidence*: that he was not only 'feeling good', and that there was a moment in time in which he – and his body - was successful and powerful.

Of equal note is *when* he purports to have taken these images. As evidenced by the exchange below, clients often situated their digital engagement within a continuum of personal experience:

T: It's interesting how comfortable you seem to be putting yourself 'out there' online when we've talked quite a bit about your insecurities about your body. Why do you think you're willing to be seen - and, you know, have your body seen - by people on Instagram?

C: Well, it's nice to hear the complements, that people notice. It's a confidence boost.

T: How so?

C: To know that people find you attractive. I've not always felt that way about myself. It's usually the same five people who comment, but it's still nice to hear. Plus, I think that exercise, going to the gym, is really important.

T: You've said that before... you seem to really love going to the gym.

C: It's not so much that, it gives you something to strive for. I like training, I like being fit. You want people to know that you're working hard. I've really trained hard over the last few years. I've tried to be focused.

Consider the temporal aspects contained within the above exchange. Chris does not appear to be interested in documenting a moment of tedium in the middle of workout, or perhaps of a moment of failure where he didn't finish a lift, but the moment of *triumph* 'after' the workout was completed. As I point out in my opening intervention (*'It's interesting how comfortable you*

seem...), that he would want to publicly document any aspect of his physical runs counter to his deep-seeded insecurities around his body. His response to my highlighting this conflict in our work is interesting. While he initially attributes this new-found will-to-visibility to the reward of affirmation from his followers (*'it's nice to hear compliments...'*), his closing admission reveals a far more complex motivation: to reconcile the past with the present. Thus, analysis confirms the research of Chatzopoulou et al (2020) who asserts that Instagram users with low body-esteem showed a greater determination to not only engage in more body image 'investment' activities like obsessive exercise, but are more likely to internalise the high body image standard of the toned, muscular 'Instabod' that dominates most online communities.

Unlike Chris' historical account of his body as being a deficit or a target for humiliation, in the language of Deleuze (1968), his fitness-selfies could be seen as representations of a 'body to come', one that is surging towards the progress, difference, and pure *potential* of the future. His posts might have been orientated towards displaying his efforts in the present (*'what I did that day...'*), but they are consistently framed as a device to show his past commitment to training (*'how hard I've worked'*), as well as a means to narrativise the transformational effects of that effort on his future (*'how my body can change...'*). Thus, the Instagram image is one in which the subject's concept of the *actual* passes through and mutates with possibility of the *virtual*. Whereas Paul's hypervigilance towards sustaining flows of PDAs between himself and his followers seemed to have a detrimental, or even repressive effect on his self-understanding, Chris' production of the virtual on Instagram could be seen distinctly *affirmative*, in so far as his content liberated his desire – to feel successful and in control of himself - from the constraints of the anxieties and obligations that dominated his everyday life. The body he produces in his 'healthies' is not beholden the neurosis about his weight or the size of penis or even the congenital heart defect that kept him from admission to the military. Conversely, it is presented as toned, powerful and *unafraid*.

This attention to muscularity within Chris' digital production aligns with what contemporary gender scholars (Pringle 2005; Wamsley 2007; Arxer 2011) refer to as the production of a 'hegemonic' masculine identity, that is, one based around physical strength, financial success, discipline, heteronormative sexuality, and a willingness to dominate others. Whereas his working life, his romantic entanglements and even his time in therapy were plagued by an inability to express himself, on Instagram Chris let his *body* do the talking for him. From this, it could be asserted that the identity he embodied online was bolstered by what de Visser et al (2009) term 'masculine capital', that is, the engagement of men in 'traditional' masculine-

typed activities – e.g., drinking alcohol, weightlifting, aggression, etc - to accrue a type of masculine ‘insurance’ or ‘credit’ to counter their perceived inadequacies (de Visser and McDonnell 2013). The development of this ‘masculine credit’ within Chris’ Instagram-assemblage is illustrative of the primacy of the body – and of physical development writ large - in the efforts of men to acquire status and distinction in contemporary life (Shilling 2013).

Perhaps the most traditionally masculine component of Chris’ Instagram images is his willingness to endure levels of exhaustion and self-punishment in service of his fitness goals (Deighton-Smith and Bell 2018). Note the language he uses to describe his time in the gym. Confirming the research of Laan (2016), who contends that the majority of fitness-centred are designed to relay emotions pertaining to soreness and post-exercise exhaustion, Chris points out how he’s ‘*trained really hard*’ and how ‘*focused*’ he’s been over the year. Going to gym, he points out, is ‘*really important*’ and the physique he’s developed give him something to ‘*strive for*’. Given this, Chris’ ‘heathies’ appear not only as performative ‘enunciations’ (Slack 2012, p.154) of progress, but as representations of *toil*. As displayed in the exchange below, these images emerge as a type of *suffering-image*, designed to display the ways in which he had invited, tolerated, and eventually overcome hardship:

C: You have to be willing to push yourself. The guys I follow, you’d think they lived at the gym. It sounds cheesy, but It’s just what you do these days.

T: What, let people know that you’re spending too much time in the gym?

C: Yeah (pauses), you ought to come to my gym. People spend more time setting up their cameras or finding the right lighting for a selfie than doing sets. I dunno... it’s a bit of a macho thing, but part of it is getting that feedback from people, like ‘Oh, you look amazing’, or ‘Wow, you’ve really been putting in the time haven’t you...’.

T: There’s something here about being impressive... like showing people what you can endure....

C: I suppose, I guess...I now it’s only the same five people I know who comment on photos, or like them or whatever, but I like the thought of being able to present myself as being tough, you know, someone who gets on and not quit.

Within Chris' account, the gym is a site of endurance, a place where one '*gets on*', where they '*push*' themselves and never '*quit*'. While throughout the therapy discourse, Chris framed exercise as a mechanism of well-being and emotional self-care, his descriptions of his Instagram posts seem more orientated towards what Tiidenberg (2018) refers to as the '*valorisation of sweat*' (p.5), in which depictions of workout-induced exhaustion are produced to provide viewers with *evidence*: both of the physical changes brought about by his strength training and his willingness to endure pain in the pursuit of self-development. An analysis of this visual documentation of physical '*toughness*' is informed by Vandello and Bosson's (2013) construct of '*precarious*' manhood, which asserts that within modern societies, manhood is *achieved*. As such, masculinity is not only easily lost or revoked, but is primarily predicated on repeated demonstrations of *proof*. While Chris attempts to differentiate himself from guys who '*live at the gym*' or '*spend more time finding the right lighting than doing sets*', it could be argued that he utilised Instagram for the same repetitive purpose as his obsessive counterparts: *to become a man*. The process of taking '*fitness selfies*' might have been, as he points out, '*cheesy*', but it could be argued that the resulting images allowed Chris to '*show what he could endure*', to '*present (him)self as being tough*'. Given his sexual anxieties one wonders if what he really wanted was to show what a '*man*' he really was, that is, at least before such a feeling of masculinity might be taken away as it had in so many other areas of his life.

While Instagram may have provided Chris with the '*macho*' proof he was looking for, the validity of his manhood was - at least in part - contingent on the public reception and affirmation of other users within his digital assemblages. Despite his small audience of followers ('*it's only the same five people...*'), the digital '*other*' whom Chris came to rely upon for affirmation could be conceptualised as constituting a unique affective '*culture*' or assemblage, one - just like Paul's well-being-assemblage - through flows of validation and acknowledgement could be produced and reciprocated between actors. Thus, Chris' photographic *evidence* of his toil in the gym is not purely for his own consumption - or in service of his own internal evaluation of what does or does not constitute strength or attractiveness - but is intended to be received and responded to through digital compliments ('*you look amazing...*') and recognition ('*you've been putting in the time...*') from others. Returning to the concept of '*aesthetic entrepreneurship*' (Elias et al. 2017), the suffering-image as described by clients emerges not as a private construction, but a social artefact, one embedded within - and evaluated by - affective assemblages of relations, actors, emotions, and technologies.

Contrast such praise with the powerlessness Chris described feeling elsewhere in his personal affairs. Just as Paul's acuity towards his accumulation of 'likes' and 'follows' stood in stark contrast to his tepid career path, the 'unbreakableness' of Chris' Instagram identity couldn't have appeared more at odds with the insecure, adrift 'self' that appeared in therapy and, indeed, within his wider social relations. Put another way, in his 'drive for muscularity' (Edwards et al 2016), Chris was able to push further towards the fulfilment of the masculine hegemonic ideal – including the tolerance of the physical pain of training - that had alluded him in the analogue world. Thus, analysis of accounts supports the capacity of Instagram to function as a tool of compensation – or in the cartographical language of Deleuze and Guattari, of *circumnavigation* - in which the subject might avoid, or even transcend their personal, physical, or financial deficits through the productive image making tools of the digital (Mills and D'Alfonso 2007).

As evidenced by the event below, the importance of striving - indeed of *suffering* - as an affective component within the Instagram assemblages of clients can also be seen within Paul's account:

T: We keep coming back to this notion of 'realness'. That seems really important to you, to be 'real'.

P: Yeah, it's essential for what I'm trying to do.

T: What do you mean?

T: I'm also struck that when we're online, we can edit, you know? We can present ourselves in a certain way. I wonder how that plays into this idea of being authentic or, as you said, being real?

P: That's a good question... I guess it is more comfortable because you can edit yourself. I try not to, though....

T: What, make edits to your content?

P: No, of course you present yourself... you make conscious decisions. It's not always easy either.

T: Easy?

P: Well... when I tell people that I've struggled with binge eating, that's hard to do, to put myself out there like that. At the same time, you're wanting people to know what you've gone through. How difficult it's been. Or my struggles with anxiety. You have to tell people the story.

T: That seems to be a big part of the story, talking about the misery of it all...

P: Yeah... it's also because I'm a man as well.

T: Does that matter?

P: Definitely. I think that people see me, a pretty big bloke, with tats and whatever, talking about resilience and self-care. To be vulnerable about that stuff and to be a man, is not what most people are used to seeing.

T: It's almost like you're speaking for men, adding that voice to the conversation.

P: Sort of... it's more like you're modelling for people that it's not just young girls or women who binge eat. Blokes do it as well... I do it. If I'm going to inform people, I have to be willing to be brave and go deeper and tell the whole story.

T: What's the whole story?

P: How lonely it is. I did a bunch of posts on Insta trying to get real about it: about how ashamed I feel when I'm doing it, that I can't control it. I'm just wanting to go deeper.

T: I wonder... what's it's like to stare into the sun that like, to be confronted by your own upset all the time... it sounds like you never get a break from it...

P: It's not always fun... (pauses) it definitely reminds you of these pretty ugly parts of yourself. It hurts to be in the space all the time. I try and not dwell on it too much, but I just see it as part of the deal.

T: So, if I follow you, if it hurts, if you hurt, then what you are doing is effective, it's working?

P: Well, yeah... I just see it as a cost you have to pay.... I want to be remembered for something.

From the above exchange, the Instagram-image described by clients emerges not as a surface on which to produce representations of *success*, but of pain, upset and self-punishment. Just as Chris was motivated to show how much punishment he could endure in the gym, Paul's production of authenticity seemed to tolerate the pain of an altruistic *descent*, that is, a willingness to face the worst of himself in the service of others. The '*deeper*' he was willing to go into his own experience and the tell the '*whole story*', the more shame and insecurity he was willing to broadcast in an unfiltered manner ('*you try not to edit yourself...*'), the more people seemed to respond. To suffer - and display one's suffering - was, he points out, a '*cost you have to pay*' to be '*remembered for something*'.

Paul's willingness to publicly air his most fundamental insecurities is evidenced by his posts around his struggles with bingeing. Such content was, he explained, the subject of an ongoing series of images and reflective pieces he was producing about resilience and self-care. As he notes above ('*blokes do it as well*'), the fact that he could be so physically impressive – so classically *masculine* – yet speak so openly about a cycle of disordered eating largely associated with women and young girls seemed to have a particular resonance with his audience. His strength, as he points out, was his *vulnerability*. So impressive was recounting of his own upset that he wasn't simply '*adding to the conversation*', he was being *brave*. Just as Chris' visually repackaged his self-consciousness as masculine heroism in the gym, Paul's *negative* attachment to his own body – which one could interpret as a failure to uphold stereotyped masculine behaviour - is repurposed as a *positive* attribute and a source of deepening attachment to his audience.

Despite this digital slight-of-hand, there appears a conceptual difference in how each man produced their hybridised gendered identity. Chris, it could be argued, utilised the platform to 'regender' himself as a 'real man', producing self-representations that upheld the hegemonic masculine ideals of a sculpted body and an iron will. Conversely, Paul described his digital engagement as part of the production of a more *subversive* manhood, one as inclusive of classical masculine traits as the endurance of hardship as it was of 'feminine' displays of sensitivity and care for others (Amaral et al 2020). In this, analysis confirms the work of Caldeira et al (2018) who assert the capacity of the technological affordances of Instagram to both reinforce traditional gender and enable more diverse forms of gender representation.

The Instagram-machine could be framed as an apparatus through which Paul and Chris might produce what Bridges and Pascoe (2014) refer to as 'hybrid masculinities', that is, the symbolic re-formulation of the hegemonic form by adopting a range of elements around sexual and gender identities. This is particularly evident in Paul's utilisation of the platform as a surface on which a 'web of forces, intensities and encounters' (Braidotti, 2006, p. 41) could be produced, yielding content that simultaneously upholding the ideal of masculine strength and fortitude, while fragmenting such highly constrained manifestations. In the language of Deleuze and Guattari, the likes and follows produced within Instagram functioned as molecular¹³ - or *micropolitical* - drivers of de-territorialisation, ones which enabled bodies to resist constraining forces and produce new affective capacities to act, feel or desire (Fox and Alldred 2015).

Irrespective of which normative gender codes Chris and Paul sought to uphold – or challenge - on Instagram, analysis supports the notion that the 'Insta-identities' (Siebel 2019) produced by clients not only allowed them to sidestep their own personal inadequacies, but to repurpose their weaknesses as *strengths* within their respective online communities. As will be explored in the following section, the affective capacities of the Instagram image – and the desiring-production that emerged in response - cannot be extricated from the broader socio-cultural, gendered, and economic realities in which they occurred (Al-Kandari et al 2016). Perhaps no

¹³ Deleuze and Guattari (1980) conceive of objects not as the molar 'wholes' or aggregates, but as dynamic masses of molecules, that is, microscopic processes in which 'particles' and 'emissions' scatter across segmented or binary lines. Molecularity, however, is tied to a 'micropolitics' of 'a whole world of unconscious micropercepts, unconscious affects, rarefied divisions' and even errant conversation (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, p. 220). As such, the pair associate the term with those forces which are 'minoritarian', that is subordinated to operate within a determined arrangement of assembled connection, but without the structure or rigidity of molar formations (Potts 2001).

account of therapy is more illustrative of the psychic effects of navigating the demands of digital than that of the client that inspired this research, David.

‘You’ve got to keep the goal in mind’: David and The Will-to-Curation

My work with David spanned nearly four years and was comprised of two prolonged periods of weekly contact, each lasting between 14 to 18 months. He first presented in therapy in the Autumn of 2016 plagued by creeping bouts of depression, anxiety, and self-loathing. Much of these feelings centred around his own fractious sexuality. He had grown up in a deeply Protestant household, one in which difference of any kind was simply not tolerated, much less discussed. Mum and Dad were loving, he claimed, but utterly uninterested in anything – or anyone - outside of norms of the church. Despite his enthusiasm for football and drama and his high marks, he struggled to make friends at school. No matter how hard he tried with the theatre girls or the lads on the pitch, David claimed he was always on the outside looking in. He just couldn’t seem to connect with others. Even more troubling were the whispers in the hallway that he was *gay*. It was an insult that, years later, still carried quite a sting. ‘I don’t get it,’ he pleaded during one session, ‘When I was at school, I never had any romantic feelings for *anyone*, much less another boy. Why would they say that about me?’.

Aged 23, he spoke of his identity with the same mixture of conflict and confoundedness. In one breath, he would describe himself as ‘homosexual’ or ‘gay’, while in the next he might talk about being ‘bisexual’ or ‘bi-curious’. His affect would modulate as well, as he could present as both effeminate and jockish in a single session. In our first meeting, David was troubled by a series of fraught online relationships with other men, which he conducted through Snapchat¹⁴ and Grindr¹⁵. Despite the knowledge that these men were ‘out’ gay men, he described these online connections as platonic. They were, he explained, just ‘friends’ who liked to text one another. Despite this innocent framing, he appeared to be increasingly fixated on one such ‘friend’, a man several years his senior named Richard. Though the pair had never met in person, or even spoken over the phone, David admitted to growing feelings of obsession. He described in often granular detail the hours he spent each day monitoring how

¹⁴ Snapchat is a social app that allows users to send and receive time-sensitive photos and videos known as "snaps," which are hidden from the recipients once the time limit expires (images and videos still remain on the Snapchat server). Users can add text and drawings to their snaps and control the list of recipients to which they are sent.

¹⁵ A geosocial networking application geared towards gay, bisexual, and bi-curious men that runs on various smartphone technologies.

many 'streaks' they shared or the appearance of 'love hearts' in Richard's replies on Snapchat. These metrics seemed to directly affect his presentation within sessions: If the 'numbers' were good – if the pair's streak had continued that day – he was attentive and engaged. However, if Richard had not been in touch, David would use our sessions as a sort of paranoid forum, one geared towards interpreting what was going on in Richard's head and why the communication between them had stopped. It was in this state of anxiety that he would slide his smartphone across the coffee table and plead with me to decode Richard's last message or look at his latest profile picture. Despite this desperation, I felt a great kinship with David throughout our work. He was affable and diligent in his search to find meaning in the things – and people – he desired.

A month into our work, David entered my office in tears. Through his sobs, he explained that Richard had disappeared overnight. He had blocked him on Snapchat and Grindr and wasn't responding to repeated WhatsApp messages and SNS texts. Following this rejection, David had lost interest in his face-to-face friendships and was beginning to fall behind in his university studies. More troublingly, he had begun to obsessively drive by Richard's house in the middle of the night in the hopes of seeing what he might be doing or, more pointedly, with whom he might be doing it. He was possessed with knowing *why* Richard had vanished. I took a risk and inquired as to whether his suffering was the residue of a feeling he had never felt before: was it possible, I asked, that he wasn't fixated, but *heartbroken*. What's more, was it possible that his longing for Richard was evidence of an impulse that he had spent much of his young life rejecting: that he was not 'bi' or 'bi-curious', nor was he sexually interested in women, but in *love* with a man.

So began the beginning of David's slow, often joyous and often painful process of coming out. Nearly a year and half later, David announced that he had received funding to complete a masters in journalism in London and we decided that it was time to bring our work to a close. At the end of our final session, we shook hands and, both holding back tears, expressed our gratitude to one another. I also thanked him for the education he had given me in digital life and told him that I might put together a PhD proposal on the subject in the future. As he left my office for the final time, I encouraged him to let me know how his studies progressed and offered a parting bit of enthusiasm: 'go be as alive as possible'. He smiled and disappeared down the stairs.

This initial phase of our work together was, upon reflection, relatively straightforward. When David returned to therapy in the Spring of 2019, it was clear that the shy, innocent boy who had taken those brave steps to come out had returned very different sort of young man. He entered my office – five minutes late - with an almost unrecognisable swagger. ‘Sorry haven’t been in touch’, he said, smacking his gum and typing a text message on his phone. ‘Things have just been super busy. I’ve just got way too much life admin at the moment’. His return to Cardiff had been prompted by the offer of an entry-level apprenticeship at the BBC. As the opportunity was unpaid, it had also required a return to his childhood home to save money. It was a life regression he found to be intolerable.

‘I’m just getting through hell at the moment,’ he said. ‘I’m treading water and just about breathing. It’s exhausting, I just don’t feel like I’m getting anywhere. I’m stuck at home. I’m not traveling. I’m going to a job where I’m not really appreciated. I’m still a trainee, even though I can do the job, I have to jump through these hoops so they can learn that I can actually do it. I’m stuck at home with my parents and I just feel stuck and money is stopping me.’

To escape his stuckness, he turned once again to Grindr, only now he was not interested in using the app to make ‘friends’, but to draw upon a seemingly endless pool of potential sexual partners. It was hard to comprehend the change in his tone. The fear and loathing that had defined his sexuality only months earlier was gone. So too was his longing for contact and any semblance of consideration for others. What had emerged was an icy, detachment. ‘Hooking up’, ‘fucking’, ‘pulling’, ‘bottoming’ and ‘topping’: such terms were used in a way that was equally brazen and *bored*. The only thing worse than a ‘crap shag’, he explained, was one that ‘caught feelings’ and wanted more from him than a purely physical encounter. ‘I don’t have time for that sort of thing’, he said. It was as if sex and men and queerness were longer riddles to decode, but parts of a game that he had mastered and which to he had become indifferent.

One subject of which David never seemed to tire was his Instagram page. He described in detail the number of followers and likes he had accrued that week. On Instagram, he explained, he wasn’t just a guy living with his parents or taking an unpaid internship, he was *fabulous*.

‘Insta is a way for me to almost taste that fame;’ he said, his hands gesturing gracefully into the air like an haute couture model. ‘If I’m constantly doing something, then I constantly have something to show. Every time I’m doing something, I’ll think should I post this. Every time.’

‘So’ I asked, ‘How do you decide what to post?’

‘Well, you have to vet yourself, you have to vet what you’re doing. I don’t want to over post.’

I was puzzled. ‘Right...how does one know when they’ve overposted?’

‘That’s easy,’ he snarked. ‘You look desperate. It looks like that (Instagram is) all you’re thinking about. Even though that is all you’re thinking about! You want to make sure that the same people that followed your last story are following the one you just posted. Even more, you want them to like it and share it. But, if you post all the time....’.

‘Sounds like quite a tightrope to walk’, I responded.

‘Well... you’ve got to keep the goal in mind,’ he said, smirking as he picked up his phone off the table to check for notifications.

‘What do you mean, the goal?’

‘To look the best you can all the time!’ David exclaimed, nearly rising out of his seat. ‘You have to look amazing. You have to make people jealous of you, of your life.’

‘That sounds exhausting,’ I replied. ‘What’s it like to have to always look amazing?’

‘Of course it’s exhausting, but you’re missing the point, it’s an environmental thing. It’s just what people do. It’s even worse amongst gay men. They’re the worst!’

His use of the word ‘gay’ struck me as remarkable. In previous sessions, it would have overwhelmed him. Now, he flippantly spat it out as an excuse for his vanity and his manipulation of others. He was unrecognisable and, in that moment I experienced my own heartbreak as I struggled to find much to like about him. At only twenty six years of age, he

appeared to be the living embodiment of F. Scott Fitzgerald's (1925) description of Jazz Age excess, in which there were only 'the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and *the tired*' (p. 174).

As will be explored in the final section of his chapter, the *will-to-exhaustion* that guided so much of David's desiring-production Instagram is evidence of the utilisation of the platform by clients to not only redress deficits of value within themselves, but within their professional circumstances. Analysis supports how clients consistently employed the same visual device in the hopes of producing a new type of social capital: their own bodies.

The Neo-Liberal Body Online: Aesthetic Labour, The Feminising Axiomatic and the 'Cruel Optimism' of the Digital

As displayed throughout David's case study, the affective assemblages of clients were described as geared towards a type of co-created *aesthetic* value, a desirability that was sustained through the production of images that invoked an embodied response from their digital audiences (Dolzan 2017). What is striking is how heavily the aesthetics of the *body* feature in the entrepreneurial efforts of clients. As displayed in the exchange with David below, clients could be seen as possessing a keen awareness of just how best to display themselves – and their bodies - to elicit responses from others:

T: You talk about the 'rules' of Instagram as having to look your best. Are they the rules of play? That's just how it is?

D: Yes. It's like I'm presented myself... as amazing.... Having loads of friends, being successful, constantly out. If you play football, if you go to the store, if you have brunch, it all has to go on Insta. If you buy clothes, or go to the beach or if you're dancing at a club... You want them to see you looking great and having that amazing life.

T: That sounds like a lot of work....

D: I've always felt like I needed to prove myself. I want to look amazing. I want to feel amazing. I want them to see me looking hot...Like I take care of myself. Like, I'm working it, all the time! (laughs)

T: That seems really important, that people notice.

D: Absolutely.... You can't stop, you know...

The above exchange illuminates the importance of representations of the body within the affective economies of Instagram. As per his description above, David's body as it appears on Instagram is one defined by a near-frenzy of activity. Considering the bodily action he describes above: he wants to look '*amazing*' and '*hot*', so that people know he '*takes care of himself*'. He wants to be everywhere ('*the beach*', '*the club*', '*brunch*', '*dancing*'), all the time ('*(being) constantly out*'...) and connected to everyone ('*having loads of friends*'). Perhaps, above all, he wants to document that his is a body that is not only desirable, but is in constant, tireless *motion* ('*you can't stop*'). On one hand, David's described self-curation could be seen as the arrogant exuberance of a young man trying to navigate around his sexual and social insecurities. On the other, such images could equally be framed as his own type of *suffering-image*. He might not, as in the case of Paul or Chris, be suffering for muscle mass or authenticity, but all three all could be seen as suffering for the achievement same thing: a sense of aesthetic value, or *beauty*.

This focus on the body is also present in Paul's digital description of his extensive self-imposed symptomology, including those documenting with his struggles with racing thoughts, panic attacks and health-related anxieties. As evidenced by the exchange below – which begins with a discussion of his recent binge eating - this content may have varied in form, but seemed to always thematically return to his body:

P: I've always done it, since probably I was in secondary school. (Binging) was a way to manage stress. My parents were sorting out their own stuff, so it just became a pattern, I guess.

T: You've made that connection a number of times with your parents, that they weren't particularly attuned to what was going on.

P: They weren't really there. So, you'd just get a bucket of ice cream and just eat the entire thing. I still do it now. Just eat until I'm going to burst and then go to the gym and workout for two hours and then eat 1200 calories a day for a week straight and feel completely ashamed.

T: Wow... that's quite a set of extremes....

P: Yeah, but bingeing is sort exciting in its own warped way.

T: It's exciting? What do you mean?

P: I would think about it all day: where I was going to buy the ice cream, where I'd eat it, how full I'd feel. It was sort of thrilling to chart it all out and then make it happen. The same with the working out. You'd push yourself until you were about to pass out and saw stars. I'd be lying if I said there wasn't something exciting about pushing your body that on that little food. I think those are the parts of it that I try and relay talk about (online).

Whether due to his inability to manage anxieties, or the self-inflicted punishment of his binges, Paul's body emerges as a surface on which a whole spectrum of tragedies and triumphs might occur. It is hard to not to perceive a sense of pleasure, indeed of beauty - in his accounting of bingeing. As he points out, it's '*thrilling*', it's '*exciting*', so much so that, upon completion, he '*(sees) stars*'. His closing allusion to the heavens is particularly striking. Much like David's presentation of relentlessness in the club, Paul's account of bingeing gives credence to a type of ambition, a loftiness, to not only to see how far he could '*push himself*' through exercise and food, but to revel in the wonder of what - however self-destructive - his body could *do*. In this, Paul's desire to eat until he '*burst*', correspondences with the BwO's becoming-intensive, as it suggests a desire to produce flows of 'pure' intensity, ones that go beyond the constraints and categories of the past and move towards new possibilities for becoming.

One could also assert that the processual aspect of Paul's purging aligns with Deleuze's (1994) reading of rituals and rites as a type of cleansing, meaning-making activity. Consider the level of planning that went into his binges. As he points out in his closing comment above, he'd quite literally '*think about it all day*'. In the Deleuzian frame, the purging-ritual as described by Paul could be seen as not only orientated towards the production of force or intensity, but towards the articulation of a new type of *sense-experience*. To Deleuze, every compulsion - no matter how rigidly it is repeated - is imbued with the desire to become-*imperceptible*, to open oneself to difference and change (Inkol 2020). While Paul's strict adherence to the sequence of purging appears to be, one could argue that it is an invocation of a type of

transformation, a revolution of intensity and experience that he could not only control, but through which he could be *'thrilled'* and *'excited'*.

As Inkol (2020) points out, the meanings generated by rituals are always situated within broader systems of organisation. One could liken the 'culmination' of his purging ritual – the moment in which, quite literally, *'burst'* – to the culmination of Chris' exhausting workout-ritual or of David's ritualised depiction of his social triumph. All three could be framed 'events' of transformation, when the pre-existing meanings, capacities and limitations around their bodies were reconfigured. What is remarkable is that all these sensory 'events' – those moments in the lives of clients where their bodies went beyond what was known before – were made *material* by the suffering-image. The images they produced through the Instagram machine emerge not just as photographic evidence of their toil, but as signs within what Deleuze (1994) refers to as 'chains of resonance', that is, communication systems that signify the pure intensity their bodies produced. Thus, Instagram afforded clients an apparatus of what Deleuze's (1990) terms 'counter-actualisation', in which the schizo can 'lead the event to its completion and transmutation, and finally become masters of actualisations and causes' (p. 212). Not only did the digital affordances of the Instagram machine allow clients to circumvent aspects of masculine *molar*¹⁶ of success, power and assertiveness, it afforded them the ability to engage in a type of *world-production* where those previously immutable constraints could be overcome.

The primacy clients afforded to their bodies on Instagram is informed by Hakim's (2019) notion of the 'feminising axiomatic' within neoliberal economies¹⁷. To Hakim (2019), the term

¹⁶ in their tetravalent model of the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari (1980) assert that all entities – whether individuals, groups, events or materials – are connected through assemblages of criss-crossing lines, each of which affect and react on the body. The first of these lines called the 'vertical axis', 'territorial segment', or 'molar line' in the assemblage. Implying a tendency towards unity, or *oneness*, 'molar' in this sense implies an inescapable system of objective 'fact' or 'wholes' about relationships and events in the world which frame reality. Molar lines are, then, those macroforces – social, moral, state, professional, sexual – in a society which divide, define, control or regulate (Potts 2001). The 'forces' of molarity follow patterns of *categorisation*; to be a 'molarised' subject would be to have a category – an image of a unified definition – imposed upon it.

¹⁷ Whilst neoliberalism is subject to a range of incomplete designations, this research aligns itself with two definitions. The first is Brown's (2003) definition of economic order which interjects the 'model of the market' – profit, growth, competition, etc – into all domains, affects and activities – even those where money is not involved, thereby configuring the human subject as a 'market actor', or, as she puts it, 'homo oeconomicus' (p. 31). Second, Hakim's (2016) notion that neo-liberal cultures possess an underlying need for freedom of expression and drive towards individuals seeking to attain 'completion of the self' through endless processes of self-reflection and self-improvement.

‘feminising’ refers to two distinct phenomena. In the first instance, it refers to the ways in which women have had to engage in the ‘aesthetic labour’ of beautifying or sexualising their physical appearance to gain social and financial security within the culture. In the second, it refers to the shift in modern economies from a Fordist¹⁸ system of long-term, unionised employment to a neo-liberal ordering of capital in which labour is constituted by the type of insecure, poorly paid work that women have historically undertaken within service economies and involving affective, relational or emotional labour (Hakim 2019). Thus, the bodily-becomings as produced by clients on Instagram are not just theoretical constructs, but reflective of broader cultural sensibilities, specifically the complexities of gender and subjectivity in the ‘neoliberal era’ (Guthman 2009).

Clients can be seen as producing images of themselves on Instagram that relayed a sense of value by drawing attention to different capacities of their bodies; to be strong (Chris), socially desirable (David), or resilient in the face of emotional hardship (Paul). In correspondence with Hakim’s (2019) *feminising axiomatic*, it could be asserted that the ‘aesthetic’ value derived from these depictions far exceeded what they could materially produce in their analogue worlds. All three clients might have purported to have been in possession of different bank balances – and in Paul’s case, different levels of employment security - but nonetheless expressed the same sense that they had found themselves in professional circumstances that seemed antithetical to their desires. Though from slightly different generations – Paul and Chris in their mid-30s and David in his mid-20s – one can see their sense that the possibility that they presumed would be present in their adult lives and their careers had simply not come to fruition. As illustrated by the exchange by David below, this concern about squandered economic potential runs throughout accounts:

David: I’m £2000 in an overdraft, I owe my parents £1500 and everything I save goes towards my overdraft. I’m on one of the most prestigious trainee schemes for journalism in the world and I know I should be happy, but I’m not presenting Radio 1 Breakfast show and that’s what I think I’m good enough to do. Why aren’t I there yet? It’s not so much what I’m doing, but the level I’m at. If I was 18 doing this, I’d probably be happy with that, but I’m 26 and I should be getting somewhere....

¹⁸ According to Jessop (1996), ‘Fordism’ is associated with principles of production articulated by Henry Ford during his management of the Ford Motor Company and is defined first as a labour process, one centred around the mass production of consumer goods and second, as a mode of social organisation, in which urban-industrial, unionised ‘middle class’ workers comprise a ‘wage-earning’ society.

T: You sound pretty frustrated...pretty discontented. Which, I can understand. As an experiment... If I was able to speak to the most discontented part of yourself, the part that's the most dissatisfied with where you're at, what might it say?

D: That I'm much better than the money I'm better I'm being paid. That I'm worth so much more. That I'm better than the job than I'm in. I shouldn't be at home with my parents. I'm worthy of being in a relationship with something that I fucking fancy, because I think I'm a catch. And...this is hard for me to say, I kind of crave fame a little bit (laughs).

T: Go on.... What might fame look like?

D: Um...There's something in me that wants to be famous. Glitz and glamour and red carpets and people being jealous....

T: People being jealous... wow. Stay with that.

D: Being jealous of me... of my circumstances, of what they'd see, I guess. That I had made it, you know?

Looking to the accounts of other clients, this same level of discontent can be seen in Paul's account as well:

P: I know I shouldn't be complaining about my job, and that a lot of people would love to make the money I do, but I'm trapped in it. I'm making all this money and they want me to become a manager, do the course and trainings, but I really can't see myself doing it.

T: Why not? It seems like a dream job... at least in terms of the money?

P: I never wanted to be an accountant. You ought to see the zombies that walk around the office. They're just zombified all day. I don't want to be that. At the same time, if I leave this job, I don't know what I'd do. I'll never be able to make this much anywhere else....

As demonstrated in the exchanges above, the discontent of clients over their professional circumstances emerged even though each man had reported to have ascended to positions

of relative 'success' in their respective fields. Such extracts credence the language of disbelief, of confusion that runs throughout accounts. David has secured a '*prestigious*' studentship, only to find himself condemned to his childhood bedroom (*'I shouldn't be at home with my parents...'*) and a rising overdraft. Paul may have been better remunerated, but is equally 'trapped' in a job he didn't want (*'I never wanted to be an accountant'*) and in a professional culture he could not satisfy (*'They want me to be a manager...'*). Similarly, Chris reported to fly around the world evaluating theatre schools only to be '*trapped*' inside a never-ending series of gilded hotel rooms. It is as if, despite their different backgrounds and personal circumstances, each client seemed to be beset by the same question: *Is this all there is?*

Even though each client lived through the 2007/08 financial crash as teens or young adults and would have begun their working lives in the decade of austerity that followed, such a query unknowingly articulates a rather old-fashioned Fordist expectation: that in becoming a wage-earner, in becoming a 'good' productive man, their lives, their relations and their finances would be *stable* (van der Berg 2018). Thus, analysis demonstrates a feeling of what Lorey (2006) calls 'precarisation', that is the space within neoliberalism between the ontological 'precarity' of the human subject and the economic 'precarity' which organises material value – and subsequently, the lack thereof – within capitalist systems of order. While conventional definitions of 'precarity' relate to 'precarious' conditions of employment – i.e., low wages, non-unionised workforces, short-term/zero-hour contracts, etc – the disillusion in accounts of clients gives credence to the shift of contemporary scholars towards understanding of the term that includes the general anxiety and dissatisfaction that dominates the 'neoliberal everyday' (Robinson and Rees 2020).

Given this tension within accounts, it is perhaps of little wonder why the Instagram-machine represented an attractive apparatus as it afforded clients a whole range of affective possibilities that were absent in their analogue assemblages. Following on from Deleuze's (1985) reading of semiotics, it gave clients a means of *virtuality* – that is, a means to express potential – which transcended the constraints that defined their day-to-day relations, as well as the insecurities within themselves. On Instagram, clients could move others, and they could themselves be moved. They could produce content that was recognised as valuable and experience the embodied feeling of that value in themselves. In their respective Instagram assemblages, they were no longer members of the 'precariat' (Standing 2014), but were transformed into the living embodiment of Nietzsche's (1883) *uberman*: embracing of change, self-development and suffering in equal measure.

What is striking is that - following on from Hakim (2019) - the 'value' they enjoyed within the digital – and which appeared to stabilise a cohesive sense of self - was not rooted in the production of the material, but of the *expressive*. Instagram couldn't give them money to spend or a new home to live in or a new job to go to or a partner to love. What it could provide is a mediated affective field in which to feel and to be felt, to emote and to receive emotion. For Paul, it was a site of authenticity. For Chris, a space to engage in 'valorisation' of sweat. For David, Instagram afforded a type of '*fame*' that would have been otherwise impossible in his day-to-day life. On one hand, the utilisation of Instagram to create such an embodied sense of value – both *of* oneself and *from* others – could be seen as an act of *desperation*, a last-ditch effort to claw back elements of normative manhood – success, worth, recognition – that had been 'softened' by the demands of a more 'feminised' economy (Walker and Roberts 2018). On the other hand, as confirmed by Reeser (2017), one could see the aesthetic labour of clients on Instagram as uniquely *innovative*, in that it allowed them the entrepreneurial means to produce new forms of desire, social capital and self-worth in an age when work itself is no longer a guaranteed masculine prerogative.

That clients would utilise the digital as an apparatus to escape the limitations of the analogue – to *go beyond* like Deleuze and Guattari's BwO - is well-rehearsed within the literature (Lee-Won et al 2020). What is of greater interest to this project are the moments when that compensatory apparatus *broke down*. Just as Instagram appeared to function as a site of territorialisation – both for the components within the digital 'self' of clients and for the flows of social capital across assemblages – analysis also supports the notion, as evidence by the exchange with Chris below, that the platform held the potential to destabilise those psychic and social formations:

C: You've got all these fit people (on Instagram), these amazing looking people and it just fuels a bit of self-consciousness. It's awful when people make disparaging comments or compare you to other profiles. You can't help but get pissed off about it. It doesn't help that the people you're up against are in such good shape. It's hard not to feel, you know, beneath them.

T: Could you say a bit more? What do you mean beneath them?

C: When you're following all of these fitness guys who look amazing, inevitably you compare yourself to them. And these fitness guys post a lot.

It doesn't help when (fiancee) makes fun of me when I post something. Joking that I look bloated or fat or whatever.

This sense of 'falling behind' runs throughout Paul's account as well:

P: You just look at guys like Hunter S. Thompson or Charles Bukowski and they were willing to really put themselves out there and express themselves. I want to do that.

T: I can appreciate that.... It's interesting that you'd pick two writers who are renowned for being self-destructive.

P: (Laughs) Yeah, but they really lived it and they wrote incredible things and people really love what they do. I love it. It's the same with (Matt) Haig and (Robert) Webb. They're putting out amazing stuff about depression and authenticity. Some of the writing they do is just heartbreaking. They market it so well. You see them everywhere. On tele, in bookstores, all over Instagram. I can't compete with that....

T: Compete? What do you mean, is authenticity a game? An authenticity arms race?

P: (Laughs) It's not a game, but have you seen how many followers they have? I'm not even in the same universe as those guys in terms of visibility...

Just as Chris couldn't compete the 'fitness guys' in his Instagram feed, the above exchange highlights how *overmatched* Paul felt at the success of his fellow content creators. As he points out, the posts of writers Haig and Webb were so 'incredible', so 'heartbreaking' that he quite simply 'couldn't compete'. It was as if they had 'cornered' the market on vulnerable masculinity and, in doing so, they are valued – even loved - for their honesty, pitied for their suffering and, most importantly, they are *remembered*. While one could argue that my attempt at challenging the competitive aspect of content creation ('Match?') was unsuccessful, it did orientate us towards a distinct *neurosis*: that Paul's digital presentations of self were insufficient – or even worse – *redundant* (Uhlir 2016). They simply have too much 'visibility' and too many followers for him to 'compete'. Much like Chris' disappointment when the representations of his sacrifice and suffering went unnoticed – or in the case of his fiancée Nayla, ignored - Paul's production of aesthetic labour appears to be plagued by the same, nagging fear: that someone, somewhere

was suffering more, suffering *better* and they were more *authentically* displaying it to their audience. It could be said that within the 'schizophrenic' affective economy of Instagram, the only thing worse than falling behind, is to fade away.

Conclusion

Accounts taken from sessions point to the incoherence within the Instagram-machine. Clients purported to produce representations of themselves as not only valuable, but desirable in ways that transcended the anxieties and inadequacies of their everyday lives. In this light, the Instagram-image is one of *unity*. It is a work of 'art', one which, as Deleuze and Guattari (1994) point out, is dependent on the affective relationship between its creator and audience. Thus, the artistic space of Instagram is one through which the material and sensual failings of the outside world simply weren't present. As discussed, the hegemonic masculine identities they presumed they would uphold as adults – of success, of power, of security – had been *scrambled*, and, as a result, their previously coherent personal narratives had been rendered incomprehensible. In response to the 'undoing' of this desire, analysis supports that clients utilised Instagram as a site of *recoding*, through which their desire could be *reterritorialised* in the hopes of providing some semblance of stability or solidity that couldn't be accrue in the wider culture (Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017).

One might liken the stability of the Instagram-assemblages of clients to the '*neurotic territorialisation*' of Deleuze and Guattari's (1972) Oedipus, who, when faced with the organisation of *lack* within capitalist structures, attempts to reterritorialise oneself through the deployment of narcissistic structures. Whether Paul's 'realness', Chris' physical power or David's desire to be treated like a star, clients called upon this *defensive* narcissism to not only territorialise relational assemblages in the digital, but to stabilise their own self-understanding. On Instagram that which was fragmented – within their careers, their relations or in themselves - was made 'whole' again. Thus, the most valuable affective capacity of Instagram was not to produce an image of success, but to defend against an image of *failure*. As long as the Instagram-image was freely exchanged within the affective economy of Instagram – that is, as long as the platform organised a flow of intensities and artefacts between actors – clients appeared to be at ease with their digital entanglements. However, when this desiring-production was disrupted – when the likes and comments and follows stopped or were seen to be exceeded by other users – such a unified representation emerged as *fiction*. In response to this deterritorialisation, the sense of precarity – indeed, of insignificance - that haunted the analogue worlds of clients was replicated in the digital.

The conflicting narratives which emerged within the therapy discourse are emblematic of 'schizophrenic' subjectivity outlined by Deleuze and Guattari (1972), who assert that as the contradictions of capital intensify, so too does the sense of incoherence felt by the schizo. In this frame, one could assert that clients were caught between two conflicting 'symbolic' mandates. On one hand, they were situated within a techno-capitalist order which asserts an imperative of individual aspiration, hyper-connectivity, and incessant human branding exercise. On the other, to borrow a phrase from Berman's (1980) Marx-informed critique of modern capital, the apparatus through which they attempted to produce this ascensive self - that is, the artefacts and desires and flows of PDAs they had come to expect within their digital assemblages - melted all that was 'solid' into air.

It could be argued that the 'aesthetic entrepreneurship' of clients on Instagram is underpinned by what Berlant (2011) calls the 'cruel optimism' of neoliberal/post-Fordist cultures. As described within accounts, Instagram appears to facilitate a production of desire – and the human body itself - that is channelled away from the material and towards the pursuit of 'a fantasy, a collectively invested form of life, the good life' (Berlant 2011, p.11), one constructed around the maxims of self-improvement and social mobility that define the neo-liberal order of capital. Whether through the quantifiability of PDAs, the responsiveness of comments or the affirmation of new followers, Instagram afforded clients with affective mechanisms to make meaning of themselves and to *flourish* in a way that was unattainable within increasingly precarious socio-economic conditions. With this, the 'cruelty' of Instagram was not a lack of functionality, but a broken promise: that the subject could not only imagine a better future, but they could also produce it, they could live it, they could 'be' it in the digital present.

Chapter 5: Tinder - The 'Swipe', Heterosexism and 'Game' of Desire

This chapter will utilise data taken from sessions with two clients – Jess and Matt – for whom the dating application Tinder emerged as a complex assemblage of digital artefacts and desiring flows. Special consideration will be given to the platform's functionality as facilitating a type of 'game-ified' social exchange, one stratified around heteronormative gender norms and highly sexualised discourses between users. Analysis also highlights the ways in which the Tinder-machine channelled the desiring-production of clients, and how this organisation often resulted in feelings of shame and disillusion.

Defining Tinder

Tinder is a location-based online dating application enabling its users to connect with potential matches (Sevi et al 2018). Originally launched in 2012, the app boasts over 10 million daily users, located in 196 countries, making it the world's most influential dating application (March et al 2017). The functionality of Tinder is relatively simple. Upon signing up, users are asked to indicate preferences regarding their potential online dating partners' gender, age, and vicinity. These preferences are used when searching for potential 'matches.' The app makes it possible through a smartphone's GPS functionalities to locate potential matches in close range of the user. Following registration, users are allowed a limited number of images (up to six, taken exclusively from their Facebook account) and text – up to 500 words – to present themselves. This information appears on the screen in a card-like form in the centre of the screen. At the bottom, users are presented with two arrows, one pointing to the left and the other the right. The user decides their interest in a potential match based on the profile picture, hobbies, and location that appears on each new 'card'. 'Swiping' one's thumb along the arrow denotes interest between users: right to express 'liking' and left to indicate 'passing on' or not liking. To have a 'match', both users must swipe right. After matching, a pop-up animation shows both users' photographs and enables direct messaging. A swipe to the left discards a user's profile and reveals an image of next user.

Like its competitors Bumble, Hinge and Match.com, Tinder is marketed as a digital conduit for *relationship*, through which users might secure romantic partners or even spouses (Daneback, Månsson and Ross 2007). Despite this insistence, since its inception Tinder has gained a reputation in the popular imagination as a 'hook-up app', one orientated to the facilitation of

short-term, 'no strings attached' sexual entanglements between users (Sales 2015). This focus on producing uncommitted sexual contact has been confirmed by a wealth of research which asserts that Tinder users of all genders knowingly engage with the app for the purposes of casual sex (Carpenter and McEwan 2016), though as pointed out by Sumter et al (2017) a higher portion of male users expressed a higher motivation for 'hooking up' than their female counterparts. Other studies (Hess and Flores 2016; Shaw 2016) posit that Tinder is emblematic of the harassment and misogyny that is increasingly directed towards women and minorities in digital spaces and has become an engine of sexually aggressive behaviours like 'cyber flashing' (Thompson 2016) – which occurs through the unsolicited sharing 'dick pics' by male users - and even sexual assaults committed using the aid of the app's location feature (Hopkins 2016). Such 'heterosexist' (Herek 1990) discourses have most famously been documented on the popular Instagram account 'Tinder Nightmares' which catalogues some of the platform's more salacious exchanges.

The same conceptual collisions – of hegemonic masculinity and femininity, of romantic longing and sexual aggressivity, of freedom and domination - that occur in the literature are reflected in accounts. As evidenced below in the combined case study of Jess and Matt, the contradictions of Tinder not only held implications for the therapy dialogue, but for the self-formation and sexual becomings of clients.

'I can't be arsed with this anymore': Jess and Matt

Jess always was one for making an entrance. Tall, impeccably dressed and prone to speaking a mile-a-minute, she stomped into my office and, without a word launched herself onto the sofa. Throwing her head back, she gritted her teeth and let out a loud 'grrrr'.

'Tough morning?' I asked.

'You wouldn't believe it,' she replied, letting out a protracted sigh. 'The things men say on Tinder. The things they fucking ask you. It's insane... You couldn't make it up.'

'Try me,' I quipped back.

'Guess who's come out of the woodwork?' she said, hands gesturing wildly. 'When I was waiting in the car just waiting to come in, he...fucking *he!*.... just - out of the blue, after three

months of no contact, asked me I wanted to have a threesome with some uni student he just met! The fucking cheek!

The 'he' to which she was referring was named, Aaron, with whom she had been in contact via Tinder for some months. With that, she threw her smartphone on the table and proclaimed, 'I can't be arsed with this anymore'.

Such volatile beginnings had become more common in recent months. Jess was recently divorced and had come to therapy to manage what she called the 'identity crisis' that followed the breakup. Her ex-husband, Roger, had been her first boyfriend and – to her embarrassment - her only sexual partner. She described their nearly twenty years together with a profound ambivalence. The relationship had yielded a four-year-old son, Thomas, about whom Jess, who retained sole custody following the split, spoke of with great warmth. It was also a partnership, she claimed, that been governed by Roger's depression, his inability to maintain employment and his indulgence of online gambling and cocaine. While she had quickly risen up to the corporate ladder to become a well-travelled – and well-heeled - executive at a financial services company, Jess described her homelife as one of domestic servitude. Not only was she charged with the everyday duties of looking after a pre-schooler but was required to manage Roger's continual shifts in mood, libido and self-confidence. As the relationship had drifted into sexlessness, she had been resigned to the role of a 'carer' to her 'two boys'. As is often the case with those who care for others, she had also struggled to articulate her own needs within the marriage and had grown used to the disillusion that came with her emotional and sexual dissatisfaction.

It was a role and a pattern of relationship she was determined to never repeat again. She was, by her own assessment, a 'good' person, with 'good' friends, from a 'good' family, with two 'good' parents, with whom she had a 'good' relationship, who had tried to be a 'good' wife. The disillusion of her marriage had made such the accumulation of superlatives all the more confusing. How she could be so 'successful' in so many domains and so behind in her romantic affairs? Now 36, Jess had turned to Tinder as a conduit to find a long term – or, as she termed it, 'adult' – relationship, preferably one with a partner that did not have her ex-husband's unaccountability and helplessness. She reported to have witnessed several of her friends use the platform and had marvelled at how easy it seemed for them to meet all sorts of men, for all sorts of purposes. It was as if the 'grown up' she was looking for – financial stable, good with kids, eager to enjoy life – was only a few clicks away.

Her own experience on Tinder was not so uncomplicated. She called it her 'rude awakening'. Unlike the halcyon, pre-internet days when she and Roger progressed from strangers to friends to lovers over the course of a year, men on Tinder, she said, wanted sex and they wanted it *now*. To 'date' online, Jess said, was to expose oneself to a torrent of unwanted advances. She reported to face a daily bombardment of hyper-sexual messages from men. It was not uncommon, she said, to be sent a 'dick pic' or an invitation for casual sex within the first exchange following a 'match'. She reported that the casual offer of a threesome she had received only moments earlier was not her first such invitation. However unattractive – or to use her word, 'gross' - such contact might have been, Jess had come to see the sexual politics of Tinder as an inevitable part of the new dating landscape. It was simply how things are done now, so she had better toughen up.

By some twist of fate, my next scheduled client that day was Matt, who arrived with his own Tinder tale to tell. Matt was 42. He had entered therapy to manage a cycle of depressive symptoms, which had begun after the demise of his last romantic relationship some ten years earlier. His former partner, he said, had left without any forewarning. Her exit brought about intractable feelings of hopelessness, which he claimed could beset him for months at a time. An accomplished television producer, Matt described his family background in the same glowing tones as Jess: he was from a loving household, was close to his siblings, had a committed group of long-term friends and a career - and a bank balance - that reportedly went from strength to strength.

Despite this success, he was also the only member of his peer group to have never successfully maintained a long-term romantic relationship, nor to have had children. His perpetual bachelorhood had recently become a bit of an in-joke amongst his friends, one which was starting to wear on him. He'd love to 'settle down', he said, and on several occasions had come close to doing so, but things just never seemed to work out. In quieter moments in our work, he spoke at length about feeling like the odd man out and a growing sense of loneliness. It was not lost on him that he was getting older. He was starting to struggle with his weight and, for the first time, noticed that his hair was increasingly thinner and greyer. He tried his best to be a surrogate uncle for his friend's children but admitted that they were starting to remind him of his childlessness. He had even come to dread walking through the door to his newly purchased and largely unoccupied home, the empty bedrooms only serving to remind him of how quickly time was passing and how he was passing through it *on his own*.

Of course, things weren't all doom and gloom. He was, he explained, regarded as a bit of a 'jack the lad' by the boys, the last of a 'dying breed'. Free from the obligations of the wife and kids, he could go wherever – and with whomever - he pleased. His evenings were spent in nightclubs and pubs in the city centre, often in the company of women nearly half his age. University students were, he explained, 'a good time'. Some of them are 'really clever' as well. Even if they weren't, he liked to go boozing and dancing and going to bed with women who were 'up for anything'. His friends, he assured me, would 'crawl over broken glass' to have the time he was having.

Matt may have been born into the same technological era as Jess but was far more adept at moving with the times. An early Tinder adopter, he claimed that the application offered him access to a universe of willing sexual partners. One just had to know how to use it. 'It's like ordering a pizza,' he said. 'A few clicks and there they are.' The trick, he said, was to never be passive when texting with a match. His time on Tinder was spent looking for 'candidates', ones who could provide a 'return on investment', which roughly translated to quick and casual sex. To deduce which Tinder matches would result in the highest and most immediate 'return', Matt claimed to have devised a relatively simple matrix that would distinguish the willing from the unwilling. Messages, he explained had to be sexualised almost immediately, so as to not 'waste his time'. The sooner he 'got to the point', the sooner he could figure out who he might be spending the night with. On Tinder, one had to be blunt in order to 'get anywhere'. Being forward, even crass, was, he claimed, a matter of efficiency.

What emerges from the following data is a sort of *conversation*, one that occurred over a series of sessions with each client. While Matt and Jess may have never met, their accounts within psychotherapy provide an insight into exchange of roles, experiences and discourses which occur between users in the Tinder-machine. Given that each client identifies as both cis-gendered and heterosexual, this analysis cannot purport to speak to the micropolitics of *all* digital dating sub-cultures. However, Jess and Matt's accounts do speak to the ways in which Tinder produces affects within the digital exchange of intimate discourses. Just as with the previous examination of Instagram, any analysis of Tinder within psychotherapy must consider what the platform *does*, how it functions and how its digital affordances shape modes of social exchange. To begin to examine these phenomena within accounts, one must first contend with Tinder's most recognisable feature: the 'Swipe'.

The Tinder ‘Swipe’: Habit, Affect and the ‘Gamification’ of Desire

From the moment Matt and Jess began discussing Tinder, both clients spoke about their engagement with the platform as a type of leisure activity, something they used to pass the time while being on their own and usually from their own homes. As evidenced by the excerpt from Matt’s sessions below, these descriptions were often presented in a jovial, laughing manner, framing the app as ‘silly’ or a waste of time:

M: It’s just a bit of a game...well, it’s not really (pauses)... It’s a bit of whatever, you know. I think it’s the case for a lot of people. Whether or not it’s a healthy thing to do or not, I don’t know. It’s a great way to waste quite a bit of time doing the old swipe-y, swipe-o thing (mimics movement with hands).’

Note the contradictions in the statement above. As Matt nonchalantly points out, what happens on Tinder is, for him ‘*just a game*’, ‘*a great way to waste quite a bit of time*’ and ‘*a bit of whatever*’. Such comments could be seen as evidence of a ‘minimisation’ strategy, one which confirms research claiming that Tinder users often downplay their digital engagement as harmless or ‘not serious’ (Kallis 2020). He also attempts to generalise this benign usage as being the ‘*case for a lot of people*’, as if to assert that he was not alone in his decision to ‘waste’ time on the platform. On one hand, one could surmise from the above statement that Tinder shouldn’t be taken too seriously. On the other, it could be argued that such a comment could have been deployed for the purposes of *defense*, specifically against the idea that I, as his therapist, might be critical of his use of the app. Despite these efforts to insulate himself from the excesses of Tinder, he admits that he’s not sure whether the platform is a ‘*healthy thing*’, suggesting that something might be *wrong* with the Tinder-machine, or – as will be explored later in this chapter – his behaviours on the platform. This framing of Tinder as part indulgence, part abhorrence, runs throughout Jess’ account as well:

J: I go on Tinder and have a play, but that’s all it is. I know it’s awful (laughs) But you go on, you swipe and you swipe and you swipe (mimics movement with hands) and you never know who will pop up. I’ve got a lot of evenings to fill on my own... it’s better than Tetris, I suppose (laughs)

Like Matt’s previous statement, Jess knows Tinder is ‘*awful*’, but, as newly single parent, she has ‘*a lot of evenings to fill*’. Her admission of ‘*that’s all it is*’, could be read in the same light as Matt’s minimisation, in so far as it appears to be meant as a reassurance; that her use of

Tinder was a type of *guilty* pleasure, one that brought a bit of intrigue to the monotony of everyday life, and, as such, was not to be taken too seriously. This symmetrical minimisation within accounts is striking, given that each client claimed to have near opposite motivations for using the application. As noted in the opening case study Jess was prescriptive in her desire to use the platform to find a long-term partner. Conversely, Matt orientated his usage of the Tinder-machine towards finding casual sexual entanglements. Despite this difference in intentionality, analysis suggests that Tinder was situated within their day-to-day lives in the same manner; not only as something to do when they were alone, but when they were *bored*, that is, when other forms of *amusement* had been exhausted.

Consider the ways in which each client described the ‘pastime’ of the Tinder in the language of contemporary media’s most ascendent form: *gaming* (Griffiths and Pontes 2020). While Matt waffles in his classification of the platform as a recreational apparatus (*‘It’s a game... well, it’s not really’*), Jess more boldly points out that Tinder is something you ‘*play*’ and is so enjoyable that it’s even ‘*better than Tetris*’. An analysis of the ‘game’ of desiring-production facilitated on Tinder is informed by Hunnicke et al.’s (2004) assertion that the enjoyment users experience during *gameplay* is the result of game *design*. The most prominent mechanism within the design of Tinder is the ‘swipe’. As noted above, the swipe is a simple enough gesture. Users move their fingers to the right to accept the image of a potential match, which produces an animated red heart on the screen. Swiping left ‘rejects’ the image, bringing about the sudden appearance – and then, disappearance - of an animated red cross. However simple the functionality of the swipe may appear, the gesture of swiping left or right creates an operational ‘rule’ (Salen et al 2004), which, if followed, accomplishes the primary ‘goal’ of Tinder: to match with another user. As James (2010) asserts, without the endless scroll facilitated by the Swipe, there can be no game. One could even assert, without the Swipe, there could be no Tinder.

Much like the prescribed movement of chess pieces delimit options for free movement so too does the Swipe create an ‘enclosed’ space, whereby the movement of gameplay and the agency of players is restricted to the left/right binary. The swipe, it could be said, *territorialised* the flows of desire in the Tinder assemblages of clients. As Jess notes, on Tinder, ‘*you swipe and you swipe and you swipe*’. Similarly, Matt describes taking part in ‘*the old swipe-y, swipe-o thing*’. Within sessions, both accounts were accompanied by clients mimicking the swipe with one hand while holding an imaginary phone in the other. Even their descriptions of the Tinder-machine were constructed through repetitive hand gestures. The physical reiteration

required by the ‘controls’ of the Tinder initiated a type of *flow*, a movement that propelled clients towards the next image, the next potential match or the next rejection. From this, the seriality of Tinder emerges not as a bug, but as a *feature*. It kept players playing the game. In this, analysis supports Duguay’s (2016) assertion that the ‘repetitive and fast-paced’ functionality of the swipe might be crude in technical terms, but it identical to the mechanics that which one might find in a video game, in so far as it is designed to invoke player participation. While the framing of the Tinder-machine as a recreational device corresponds with Whitty’s (2003) assertion of the connection between dating sites and forms of ‘play’, to relegate the Tinder-machine to a mere pastime would undermine a Deleuzoguattarian analysis of how the seriality of the Swipe produces desire within and between its users. The Tinder-machine is not just a desiring-machine, but a *habit-machine*.

To Deleuze (1991), habits are not simple iterations, but forces that make two types of change possible. First, the acquisition of habits can be framed as a productive, even creative, in so far as difference emerges through repetition. The result of the habitual production of difference is a ‘smooth’¹⁹ space in which the ‘atoms’ of our experience – that is, the flux of perceptions, tendencies independent perceptions – hold the potential to produce something resembling a coherent and organised human subject (Lapworth 2015). As Deleuze (1991) puts it: ‘we are habits, nothing but habits – the habit of saying ‘I’ (p. x). To the second point, habits are within relational circuits of affect and sensation, connecting the subject’s embodied experience to the world around them. Taken together, these two modes of habit not only facilitate the production of a ‘stable’ notion of identity but open new affective capacities for change with other entities and relations (Lapworth 2015). The habitual Swiping described by clients could be framed a type of muscular ‘memory’, one acquired and learned through browsing the overflow of faces and bodies on the Tinder screen, or what Deleuze (1989) calls ‘the incessant stream of images’ (p. 267) that appeared before them. The desire produced by this serial gesture appears as a desire for the *possible*. With each passing image, the ‘flow’ of Tinder was leading towards a potential affective entanglement with the other. As Jess states above, on Tinder ‘*you never know who will pop up*’.

¹⁹ To Deleuze and Guattari (1972), a ‘smooth’ space is one of *exteriority*, where the nomadic subject can distribute oneself and one’s action outside of any external category or division (Deleuze and Guattari 1972). Conversely, ‘straited’ space is associated with the ‘State’ with the imposition of order. It is a space of *interiority*, through which external hierarchies divided and constrain the agency and affective possibilities of the individual subject to associate with others (Deleuze and Guattari 1972). If a solitary individuality is the product of straited space, a Deleuzoguattarian ‘smooth’ space, is a *relational* space, produced by cooperative action between actors and entities.

This dizzying visual production – and corresponding sense of embodied anticipation - of the Tinder-machine stood in stark contrast to how pessimistically Matt and Jess described their future romantic prospects. For example, both clients articulated consistent fears about getting older. Throughout our work together, Jess voiced fears that she would never be young or physically attractive enough to transcend the ‘red flags’ of being divorced and a single parent. Even more disturbing, she worried that, however dissatisfying, her marriage to Roger may have been her only opportunity to experience sexual and romantic fulfilment:

*J: You worry that you're 36... and that 'how are you going to meet anyone?'
I'm terrified that my relationship with Roger was it. Was that my only shot?*

Similarly, James fretted about his weight and his hairline. He talked about feeling self-conscious when he didn't understand the cultural references of his twenty-something conquests. He sometimes jokingly wondered if his friend's wives thought him to be an ‘old pervert’. Each client spoke at length about how their homes, though well-appointed, had become spaces of isolation, one in which they longed for the ‘normal’ lives and families they presumed their friends to have. Time may have been speeding up on Tinder, but - as evidenced the below extract from James' session - in the real worlds of clients, it appeared to be *running out*:

M: I'd be lying if I said it wasn't tough seeing... you know, seeing my friends on the weekend have their families. Or when I go to my parents' house on Sundays... they're not getting any younger and they'd probably like to have grandchildren.

Matt's concern for his parent's longevity (‘*they're not getting any younger*’) – the most stable and mutual relationship he purported to have of any kind - speaks to a fear that both he and Jess articulated: that for all their efforts both ‘on’ and ‘off’ line, they would end up *alone*. His following statement (‘*they'd probably like to have more grandchildren*’), reveals a sense of desperation within the accounts. Just as Jess was ‘*terrified*’ that Roger might be the last man to touch her, Matt talks about how ‘*tough*’ to watch his friends enjoy family weekends. Both, it could be argued, are not only articulating the same loss of agency, but the same concern that the people within their assembled relations – friends, family, lovers, partners, etc – were flowing away from them.

Contrast this anxiety with the veritable feast for the eyes that greeted them on Tinder. On the screen, they were engulfed: by images, by bodies, by artefacts and – perhaps most powerfully – the potential that they might meet someone who would fulfil them. All they had to do to ‘see’ this virtuality – that is, the potential yet to come – was to ‘read’ the *affection-image*²⁰ on the screen. Returning to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1972) notion that the subject undergoes processes of ‘neurotic’ territorialisation as assemblages collapse, one can again see the habitual swiping described by clients produced a series of ‘affection-images’ which reassured them that they were not *alone*. How could they be? No matter how dull or incomplete or stuck their lives may have become, the affective flows that ‘swiped’ across the screen of Tinder were imbued with what Massumi (2011) calls a ‘generative’ momentum, that is, the plasticity of the habitual act to force our thoughts – and our desires – towards unforeseen and creative spaces. In the seriality of Tinder, it could be posited that clients encountered the *possibility* that escaped their analogue romantic assemblages. As will be explored in the next section, the Swipe not only channelled flows of desire within the digital assemblages of clients, but manipulated their experience of time.

Anticipation, Intensity and the ‘Now’ of Tinder

Clients described Tinder as an apparatus of *repetition*, one which presented them with an almost ceaseless stream of images to consider, evaluate and assess through the binary gesture of the ‘Swipe’. Interestingly, both Jess and Matt spoke of this repeated exposure of profiles and artefacts in their Tinder-assemblages in the language of *endurance*. Tinder, both purported, took time. It took effort. As evidenced below by the exchange with Matt, to navigate the visual excesses of Tinder, one had to be willing to put in the *work*:

M: You do get lost in it, I suppose....

T: What do you mean, lost?

M: There’s just so many candidates, aren’t there? Right, there on the screen... (laughs) You can lose a night between the swiping and the

²⁰ Deleuze’s (1986) concept of ‘affection-image’ is primarily associated this with a ‘close up’ of a human face in cinema. In ‘reading’ the face, the viewer might interpret – or project onto – the ‘interiority’ of the connected body and its emotions.

matches and the texting back and forth. You really can. Does that sound like a total waste of time?

T: Well, it sounds like it requires quite a commitment, certainly...

M: Yeah...You just end up staying on it, cause you're doing the math.

T: What, you're doing sums all night?

M: Sort of...(laughs) I go on (Tinder) hoping that by some law of averages, something will come through. I mean, a lot of times, things just fall through and girls just lose interest, but, sure enough, now and again, somebody will pop up and you'll think, 'great, she's attractive and we've got a lot in common'. You've got to sort through them all, don't you...(laughs)

Note the language of labour throughout this exchange. As Matt points out, the images of potential matches on Tinder have to be '*sort(ed) through*'. The process of exchanging messages with these '*candidates*' requires a certain time commitment and might even result in '*los(ing) an entire night*' managing ones matches. Alongside this discourse of expenditure, Matt details the uniquely quantitative metric through which he assessed his efforts of the platform. As he notes, Tinder takes so much time because '*you're doing the math*' and trying to figure the '*law of averages*', which might dictate when a potential match might come through ('*somebody will pop up*'). In correspondence with Virilio's (2012) notion that the patternistic movements of mediated communication devices – such the Swipe – serve to diminish the capacity for self-reflection and deliberation, one could assert Matt's desiring-production had become as oversimplified as the 'yes'/'no' binary that organises desire in Tinder interface. His use of the language of probability points to the assumption that appeared to guide the desiring-production described by both clients: the more effort one puts into Tinder, the more efficient an engine of production it becomes.

Jess also spoke of the immersive, bewildering qualities of swiping, particularly when matches with whom she had been messaging – some for hours, or even days at a time – would suddenly cease communication²¹:

J: It's strange, sometimes you'll be chatting for ages... just the two of you and then they just vanish into thin air. I've woken up exhausted because I spent all night looking at the phone. Then, you also have men who just will stop messaging you almost immediately. You match, you get the thing on the screen that says you matched and you're almost like this team. It's this big moment...

T: What, like you're joined together in some way?

J: Yeah...and then they just disappear. No goodbye, nothing. Then you're left sitting there. It's really deflating. You just think that it's all pointless...

The above happening speaks to the ways in which both clients experienced the ‘*moment*’ of Tinder. In correspondence with David and Chambre (2016), one could assert the swipe is a type of *accelerant*, one which propelled clients in a flow of images and potential encounters. Jess admission that she’s chats to matches ‘*for ages*’ – so much so that she wakes up ‘*exhausted*’ the day – speaks to how dizzying the ‘movement’ created by the swipe is on the subject. Just as Matt could spend entire evenings working through his ‘*candidates*’, so too could Jess get swept up – or perhaps ‘*swiped*’ up – in the torrent of images within her Tinder-assemblage. The culmination of this investment of time and attention, as she points out, is not a real-life meeting, but the ‘*big moment*’ in which the Tinder-machine announces that she had matched with another user. It would be easy to see the desiring-production of clients on Tinder always moving *forward*, that their constant browsing of potential matches produced a state of arousal that was always orientated *towards* something, whether that be the match, next date, or the next romantic possibility. However, the ‘flow’ of desire described in accounts is not a unidirectional, linear process – one moving towards an end state in the future - but appears to be comprised of a multitude of disruptions, discontinuities and disconnections.

²¹ This jarring disappearance of the digital other, is referred to within the literature as ‘ghosting’, which LeFebrve (2017) describes as a relational ‘maintenance’ strategy that entails the discontinuation by one SNS user of all messaging and mediated interactions within a digital relation without explanation or justification (LeFebrve 2017)

For example, the act of ‘Tindering’ may have centred around the gesture of the Swipe, but also included a range of other activities, including texting with matches, consuming repeated visual ‘cues’ - such as the post-match animation described above – editing their own public profiles and analysing the photos and textual biographies of potential matches. In managing the ‘workload’ of Tinder, each client could be said to have been suspended between several temporal frameworks - memories of past, desires for the future – both of which were activated in the ‘passing present’ (Murray 2008, p.202). These operational demands required Matt and Jess to not just move forward, but backwards and diagonally, to not only perform a series of overlapping tasks, but to be subject to a range of overlapping embodied sensations, or in the language of Deleuze (1968) *intensities*. Following on from Deleuze, Massumi (2002) asserts that as intensities produce unique processes of difference and change, they are amplified not through the actualisation of an intended ‘goal’ of desire, but through the potentiality for *disruption*. The more fragmented the formation of sensation, affect and intensity within a given assemblage, the greater the sense of pleasure or frustration the subject may derive from the experience, as they are held in suspense and the anticipation – or even the expectation - of further instances of discontinuity (Watkins 2009).

One can trace this sense of anticipation throughout accounts. Consider Jess’ disappointment at the way in which her matches could just ‘*vanish into thin air*’ after hours of exchanging texts, or Matt’s assertion that his matches could ‘*lose interest*’ at a moment’s notice. Both exchanges evidence the *ethereality* of the Tinder machine. It was as if both experienced ‘the moment’ of culmination – in which their desires were actualised – as arriving on the screen, only to then immediately wonder when that desire might *disappear*. In response, the only choice left to either client was to continue to ‘labour’ on Tinder, thereby exposing themselves to more disruptions, more anticipations, and more intensities. As Massumi (2002) points out, these moments of ‘excessive affect’ are folded into the body of the viewer, the result of which is an absorption of impulses too overwhelming to fit ‘the conscious requirements of continuous or requirements of continuity and linear causality’ (p. 29). In confirmation of research into the ways in which the instantaneous action of the swipe disrupts the subjectivities of users (Wygant 2014; Gillespie 2017) analysis suggests that the accumulation of artefacts, actions and intensities experienced on Tinder held the potential to disrupt Jess and Matt’s experience of the linear passage of time, thereby obscuring their awareness of the duration of time they spent on the app.

Thus reveals the contradiction of the desire that clients describe as emerging on Tinder. The intensities described by clients are in what Massumi (2002) a 'state of suspense', awaiting the potentiality of disruption. However, they are not inert, or passive, but rather are imbued on the screen of Tinder with motion and the desire to reach some sort of practical end, which, in the case Jess and Matt, would be a potential romantic or sexual entanglement. This tension between the different intensities – one passive, one active - is informed by the Deleuzian notion of 'flow'. While Deleuze (1985) applied the term to his critique of the cinematic image, its application to analysis of Tinder frames the platform not as a domineering structure, but as a 'surface' of creation, one in which flows of images, gestures and sensations were constantly interacting and producing new intensities. The 'now' of Tinder is not so much the discreet product of one digital affordance or design feature – the Swipe, text, images – nor is it the end goal of a production of desire. Rather, the immersive, even distorted, temporal experience described by clients on the app is a processual *becoming*, one contingent upon the interaction between a multiplicity of technologies, affects and intensities.

While Tinder's seriality facilitated a mode *desiring-production* that found clients 'lost' in an infinite number of relational opportunities, the next section will explore how by swiping right, clients were *swept into* a sexual economy defined by heteronormative notions of gender and displays of male-orientated, or 'heterosexist', behaviours.

Hetero-Sexism: 'Cyber-Flashing', Tinder-Speak and the search for a 'Return on Investment'

Any analysis of Tinder would be incomplete without a consideration of the discourses and social exchange that clients encountered because of their engagement on the platform. As pointed by Hess and Flores (2018), since its inception Tinder has earned a notorious reputation for its facilitation of a 'misogynistic' culture, one in which women are subject to 'toxic' masculine expressions of hypersexuality. The phenomenon within the literature (Sales 2015) is confirmed by Jess' claim that her matches would almost immediately sexualise textual interactions, normally within the first one to three exchanges. Within sessions, she described this sexualised discourse as taking several different forms. At times, male matches would offer compliments cloaked in innuendo, while at others, they would send clips of pornography or self-shot 'dick pics' of their own genitals, often immediately after receiving notification of a 'match'. Whatever the initial form, Jess asserted that once her matches had sexualised the textual interaction, conversations which veered into non-sexual content – that is, topics around

work, home life, family, hobbies, etc – would be returned to the aforementioned mode of sexualised communication.

According to Jess, this process of discursive re-orientation appeared to occur without any provocation and was largely facilitated through the language of flattery – for example, pointing out how ‘sexy’ she looked in one of her profile pictures – or, as evidenced below, by direct and often unexpected proposition of sexual contact:

J: One guy, straight off the bat sent a message going ‘Jess, that’s such a sexy name’. Jess is a sexy name? Are you kidding me. It’s awful. Then you’ll have guys who you just matched with who’ll send through pictures of their...um....

T: Their?

J: Their cocks! (laughs) As if I’m going to jump out of bed and drive across town with Thomas in bed. What would make you do that? If you did that in a bar, you’d be arrested!

The speed with which sexual material was introduced into the post-match exchanges corresponds with Hess and Flores’ (2018) framing of Tinder as a space dominated by crude performances of masculinity. As Jess points out, such suggestive advances were entirely unsolicited and occurred ‘*straight off the bat*’. While some of these exchanges may have begun – for instance, in trying to sexualise her commonplace name - the culmination of this forced discourse appeared to be what is known within the literature as an act of ‘cyber-flashing’ (Freeman 2020), that is, the sharing of unsolicited pictures of ‘*cocks*’. Her point that such behaviours would risk the threat of incarceration²² (*‘you’d be arrested’*), speaks to Suler’s (2004) notion that the lack of social reciprocity of the digital produces the conditions for heightened disregard for social politeness – which he terms ‘toxic’ disinhibition. Whether *clumsy* – such as the sexualising of her commonplace name – or outright *aggressive* – such as the unsolicited ‘dick pic’ – Jess articulates an assumption that seems to bubble underneath the intrusions from her male suitors: that she’ll not only be receptive to such advances, she’ll

²² As of August 2021, only Scotland has adopted laws criminalising acts of ‘cyber-flashing’, leaving legal systems in England and Wales to adopt what McGlynn and Johnson (2020) refer to as confusing and ‘piecemeal’ approach to existing law, which has led to thousands of claims of harassment not being prosecuted.

like them. What's more – as she points out - she'll drop what she's doing and come running to show her approval ('As if I'm going to jump out of bed...'). While Jess' laughter could be interpreted as an attempt to 'laugh off' the crudeness she encountered on Tinder, it also corresponds with research (McNeill 1987; Kelly and Radford 1990) claiming that women will often frame acts of public flashing as *amusing* – or even banal - for the purposes of minimising the emotional pain caused by such behaviours.

Only an hour after Jess lamented at the barrage of 'cocks' she'd had in her Tinder-assemblage, Matt candidly described the lengths he went to sexualise his interactions with female matches on Tinder. In a remarkable confirmation of Jess' account, he detailed how he introduced sexual language early and often within interactions, a manner of discourse he referred to as 'Tinder-speak'. His rationale for approaching his female matches in such a way was striking: he simply did not want to waste his time. As evidenced below, Tinder-speak afforded Matt a means of *operationalising* his sexual advances, as well as a metric by which he could judge which matches would give him a satisfactory '*return on investment*':

M: People are busy, I work long hours. If I'm going out, particularly if I'm with other people, I don't want to be anti-social and spend time doing the 'muff before mates' thing. (Laughs....)

T: (Laughs...) Wow...okay (Laughs). There sounds like there's a bit of strategy involved here....

M: It's just more efficient. If you done the 'advance' thing (makes air quotes with fingers), then and you've had a bit of online banter and you know a bit more about somebody and know what they're doing and broken the ice, you're not beating around the bush, you know? You can end up chatting to somebody at a bar and then it's like 'alright, what's happening here', or they could turn out to not be interested.

T: I'm confused... what do you mean that you plan ahead? What's the 'advance thing' (mimics air quotes)

M: I was in Munich and met up with this girl and had a great night and it was great. And I set that up in advance of going. So, it's not without its perks (laughs)....

T: You're laughing....

M: Yeah, I know....(continues laughing) Let's say I'm going to Portugal... I'll change my details and see what happens. Say I meet someone there, that's not sustainable, is it? Also, you can't spend all day on the thing. I can't really be bothered. If something comes about, that's great, but I can't be arsed to put the time in to make it come to fruition.

T: Fruition? What are we talking about?

M: Well, yeah... you know, it could be meeting up for a day, or more (laughs). But, half the time you meet up with people and you go 'how old are these photos?' (Laughs) Oh dear me...

T: So the return on the investment of that time isn't quite what you thought it would be?

M: Exactly... It's false advertising! (laughs)

Confirming the work of Parisi (2004), accounts suggest that Tinder may be viewed as a site of masculinist, 'heterosexist' performances, where men are described as aggressive, to value dominance and control, and to position women as inferior. Note the allusions to 'hegemonic' masculinity (Pringle 2005) in Matt's account. He '*works long hours*' and doesn't want to have an evening with his mates soured by '*muff*' that doesn't '*come to fruition*'. He's a man that has things to do, so much so that he needs work ahead and do the '*advance thing*' by utilising Tinder's GPS function to change his location and potential matches within the Tinder algorithm. This digital affordance to '*plan ahead*', he points out, ensures that trips abroad wouldn't require any '*beating around the bush*'. As evidenced by Matt's aggressive pursuit of a '*return on investment*', these displays seem to be in service of confirming often conform to dominant stereotypes about men's sexual prowess—of being on the hunt and seeing sex as a competition (Bird 1996). Ever the neo-liberal' male (Hakim 2016), the '*hunt*' Matt appears to be on within the Tinder-machine is not solely one of conquest, but of *consumption*. The platform, he states, is simply more '*efficient*' than the old-fashioned process of meeting up at a bar. Perhaps it is of little wonder that he gets so upset when the 'efficiency' of Tinder – as an apparatus to deliver the experiences and willing sexual partners he desires - breaks down, resulting in the '*false advertising*' of a match living up to promise of their profile pic.

While he attempts to pass off this ‘malfunction’ as a humorous inconvenience, his frustration is informed by Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) connection between the human face and desire. Faces are not, the pair argue, concrete or even individual entities, but *abstract machines of faciality* (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). Like all machines, the face not only produces affects, but are surfaces, ones divorced from the body, onto which others inscribe subjective meanings, intensities, and prescribed identities. While this chapter has shown the primacy of the Swipe within the Tinder-machine, one could argue that the act of Swiping is contingent on the profile pictures it allows users to evaluate. These pictures may have displayed bodies in various stages of motion or activity but would have all featured the faces of potential matches. In the Deleuzoguattarian frame, the faces of the Tinder ‘other’ represent the surface through which clients connected their desires and attitudes to the outside world.

Consider the meanings and attributes that Matt territorialised onto the faces he encountered on Tinder. As he notes, the physical appearance of his matches is often at odds with what he had presumed them to be (*‘how old are these photos’*). While one could attribute his exasperation (*‘oh, dear me...’*) to the host of literature (Olivera-La Rosa 2019) exploring the tendency of dating-app users to make flattering presentations of themselves through out of date or artificially enhanced profile pics, a Deleuzoguattarian reading of response the *‘false advertising’* on Tinder is in reaction to the de-territorialisation of the meanings he had inscribed upon the faciality-machines of his matches. His use of the word *‘old’* is striking, as it points towards his desire for newness, for youth, and for difference. Such attributes may have been mediated through the Tinder-machines, but were inscribed onto the faces that appeared on its surface. In confronting the concrete face of his ‘old’ matches – not the abstract ones towards which his desiring-production was orientated - it could be argued that Matt was confronted with ‘shock’ of having this symbolic meaning torn asunder. Given his previous comments about the passage of time, it is difficult not to wonder if behind the misogyny of his desire for a *‘return on investment’*, lies the desire to hide from an even more uncomfortable reality: that like those of his matches, his own face was not as new, nor as desirable as he hoped it might be. However defensive Matt’s misogyny may – or may not - have been, his treatment of his matches speaks to, as will be explored in the next section, the hegemonic notions of male supremacy, heightened sexual appetite and virility that emerge on Tinder (Gwynne 2021).

Posthuman Phallic ‘Touch’

What emerges is a mode of sexual discourse between Tinder users that is territorialised around the molar of traditional ‘heterosexist’ codes. Sexualised advances – both written and visual – were reported to be put forth by male users within the first few exchanges of text. Sexualised topics could be returned to at any time, irrespective of how they were greeted, how they were ignored, or the expressed consent of female users to continue such exchanges. Even more striking than the formulaic quality of these discourses is the profound sense of resignation articulated by both clients: that the aggressive sexual discourse on Tinder was not only expected, but entirely ethically permissible within the codes of the platform. Just as Matt’s nonchalant description above could be seen as attempt to present himself as embodying the qualities of traditional manhood, so too could Jess be seen to have navigated the platform through a narrow set of gender roles. As Jordan (1987) points out, notions of traditional femininity require girls and women to be complicit with the desires of men. This willingness to engage in interactions that were perceived to be unappealing – and fundamentally ‘un-sexy’ – runs throughout Jess’ account. As evidenced by the exchange below, she consistently framed the advances in her Tinder inbox as the types of ‘*come-ons*’ that she would have never have responded to in the ‘*real world*’:

J: I’ve got this guy on Tinder who keeps messaging me, saying things like ‘You’re so sexy, any chance you’re going to message me back?’. It should fill you with the thought that ‘oh, this is nice, they’re after me...’ but it doesn’t. It’s an annoyance.

T: What do you mean?

J: The wrong people are liking me! (Laughs). All of these guys, even the posh looking one’s, talk like builders. It’s nothing but ‘sexy’ and ‘darling’ and ‘cutie and ‘babe’. It never stops, but you feel like you have to do it... You start to think... Where else am I going to meet someone? At a bar on the six nights a year I go out with my friends? This is how people meet nowadays, right? And anyway.... you just have to go with it. If I blocked every match who texted something offensive, I wouldn’t have any matches!

By her own admission, on Tinder, Jess is bombarded with sexualised advances from the ‘*wrong people*’, men who, irrespective of their backgrounds, all talk ‘*like builders*’. Yet, she claims to continue to expose herself to such interactions. Her rationale for tolerating this sustained ‘*annoyance*’ is telling. Not only is there a sense that Tinder is the only game in town (‘*Where else am I going to meet someone*’), but it is a game populated with undesirable players (‘*If I block every match....*’). Such resignation to the ‘networked misogyny’ (Banet-

Wieser and Milter 2017, p. 171) Jess encountered on Tinder aligns with research (Evans and Riley, 2014) asserting that dating apps constitute new ‘technologies of sexiness’, ones which orientate sexual exchange *towards* the male orgasm and the phallus, thereby obscuring notions of consent and agency for girls and women.

Within accounts, Tinder emerges as an apparatus of what Renold and Ringrose’s (2016) term posthuman phallic ‘touch’, in which the digital affordances of SNS create modes of sexual exchange and non-consensual *phallocentric* becomings within assemblages. Consider affective flows produced on the screen of Jess’ smartphone. As she previously pointed out, male matches not only thrust unwanted ‘dick pics’ into her inbox, but repeatedly evoked a discourse that featured come-ons like ‘sexy’, ‘babe’ and ‘cutie’. While framing the ‘dick pic’ as a phallic gesture takes little imagination, the flows of Tinder-speak in Jess’ digital assemblages, confirm research claiming that dating apps continually recode power relations around the pleasure and sexual agency of *men* (England et al 2008; Hess et al 2015). For all its futuristic digital affordances - its hyperconnectivity to others, its transcendence of distance and time – analysis aligns with Fullick’s (2013) assertion that the sexuality of Tinder is coded around the most regressive existing cultural and gender scripts.

Jess’ willingness to tolerate the coarseness of the Tinder-machine runs counter to her consistent framing of her desires as being ‘*old-fashioned*’ and ‘*old-school*’. On Tinder, she claimed, she was a fish out of water. The only choice she had was to continue to swim, in the hopes of finding someone - or some experience – even if that entanglement was unsatisfying. Going further, one could argue that – in the ultimate gesture of female submission (Dovi 2018) – she even learned to *enjoy* the misogyny she encountered online. As evidence by the exchange below, in which she articulated the challenge of managing Aaron’s advances – including his out-of-the-blue offer of a threesome only hours earlier - one can see Jess’ efforts to reconcile her own desires within the hypersexualised flows of the Tinder-machine:

J: Oh... sometimes, it's gross, but because it's nice to feel sexy, to have some fun. To be pursued by someone... even if it's not always exactly the way I'd like it to be... At first, I was happy to go along with it, because it was the first... he, rather... was the only person who was given me some attention in a long time.'

J: When (Aaron) originally messaged me, in the beginning, it was exciting, and I felt like I needed someone to give me attention. And you run with it,

because you think 'that person likes me, they're giving me a bit of attention and I reasonably like him, so let's just see how it goes'. But that's not enough! You have to set your boundaries and be strong. You have to feel comfortable that if you don't like someone, it doesn't matter if they like you. You can't get lulled into that high of the attention. You just have to know what men are after and not let them get too carried away.

T: We keep finding ourselves at this point... it's difficult to square the way you talk about these experiences with the relationship, the type of man, you say that you want.

J: I know... you just....at first it's nice to feel sexy, to have some fun. To be pursued by someone. I've heard from other friends, that this is just how it happens. You hear all these stories about people meeting husbands and wives, right? You just start to think that this is what you have to put up with to have that.

The above exchange highlights a tension within Jess' account of her Tinder-assemblage: her entanglements on the platform might have been imperfect, they might even have been 'gross', but they were not entirely without benefit. As she states, to be 'pursued' on Tinder was not only validating ('*It's nice to feel sexy*'), but exciting. And who could blame her? Her marriage to Roger had required her to be more of a carer than a lover. Perhaps then, it is of little wonder that she derives pleasure from being in a new sexual space, albeit one mediated through the smartphone. Note how quickly things change. As displayed above, the enjoyment that occurred '*in the beginning*' and '*at first*', quickly transformed into a series of relations that required an almost constant level of management. Not only did Jess have to '*put up*' and '*go along*' with the worst excesses of the platform, she had to remain vigilant so as to not get '*lulled*' into the '*high*' of being an object of desire.

It wasn't enough to control her desires. Nor was it enough to be complicit in 'his'. As she clearly states, Jess was aware that to successfully navigate the coded flows of Tinder, one needed to '*know*' what men wanted and make sure they weren't consumed by those passions ('*not let them get too carried away*'). Her efforts '*set boundaries and be strong*' could be framed as a type of digitalised 'sexual labour' (Dutcher and McClelland 2019), the practice of which is designed to make intimate interactions – both physical and discursive - feel safer. However, while such a reading illustrates the 'schizoid' conditions at play within the Tinder-machine, it comes at the expense of an examination of the *self-blame* that runs throughout her account. In correspondence with Veletsianos et al (2018), who assert the tendency of professional

women to modulate their own behaviours and minimise emotional distress following instances of sexual harassment, Jess appears to be accepting sole responsibility for the tenor, the style of the relations within her Tinder-assemblage. In this light, her efforts to accept culpability for failing to insulate herself from the 'grossness' of Tinder (*'That's not enough!'*) - either through enjoying it or cutting it off before it became overwhelming - emerges as a type of *coping* strategy designed to ameliorate the stress and upset associated with managing sexual harassment (Mason and Magnet 2012; Vera-Gray 2017).

Returning to the work of Renold and Ringrose (2012), Jess' attempts to reconcile the schizophrenic contradictions of Tinder highlight the *coercive* capacities of the phallic touch that occurs in the digital. While my intervention (*'We keep finding ourselves at this point...'*) attempts to point out this incongruence by asking that most basic of questions: *why put yourself through this?* Her answer is telling. One could assert that, just like Matt's analysis of the faciality-machines in his feed, Jess' Tindering was also in the service of securing viable '*candidates*'; not for a one-night stands, but for a long-term commitment. As she points out, Tinder is '*how it happens*', it's the site of '*those stories you hear about*', where man-and-woman become husband-and-wife. Thus, she points to the way in which the intimacy of Tinder is not only 'gamified', but 'marketised.' In correspondence with Palmer's (2019) notion of 'emotional capitalism', both Matt and Jess could be seen to have commodified the relations within their Tinder-assemblages. The value of the 'match' was not in 'who' they were, but in the desired attributes they represented. In the case of Jess, the aggressive sexuality of Tinder appears an acceptable market *condition*, a territorialising force which was simply part of her pursuit of a stable romantic partnership. Thus, all the unwanted 'dick pics' and messages telling her how 'sexy' she was, or asking if she was 'up-for-fun' at 2am, or wanting a threesome at 8:30am in the morning, was, as she stated in her closing comment above simply '*what you have to put up with*'.

In the mediated economy of Tinder, Jess' desiring-production could be seen as territorialised around the imposition of binary sexes and the assertion of masculine authority, but, more specifically, around the unidirectional orientation towards the fulfilment and management of male pleasure. From Jess' account, one may regard such pleasure as a means of organisation, in which her own senses and desires were coded into a closed cycle centred around that climactic moment when 'he' might get '*too carried away*'. Given this entrenched assumption, one wonders if the pleasure she initially derived from the phallic 'touch' of her matches was not so much the product of genuine erotic excitement, but from the *relief*, that

such heterosexist performances were evidence of *progress*, that the Tinder-market was functioning *properly*.

Digital Disinhibition and The Shame of the ‘Intolerable’

Interestingly, the real ‘climax’ of the flows of the heterosexist desire on Tinder appears not to be physical, but *discursive*. Both Matt and Jess remarked about how rare it was that fellow ‘matches’ actually wanted to meet up. This was particularly true for Jess, who asserted that even phone conversations with matches were difficult to arrange. When men did make contact, she claimed, it was normally for the sake of what she called ‘phone fun’, which she defined as either erotic texting or conversations conducted over the telephone. As evidenced by the extract below, the unwillingness of matches to connect in person contributed to a growing sense of disillusion with her Tinder usage:

J: I have lots of likes and matches. I have these men messaging me all the time. I just don't understand it... All I want is for someone to take me out for a glass of wine and attempt to have a conversation with me and no one will do it! if you're going on a dating site, surely you're in pursuit of a partner, or at least going to make efforts to find a partner.

Even though she had ‘lots’ of matches and messages coming in ‘*all the time*’, Jess’ comment again speaks to the ethereality of the desire-production on Tinder. Matches danced across her screen only to quickly disappear. Thus, the phallic touch of the Tinder-machine appears to be a *phantom* phenomenon. While her exasperation (‘*no one will do it!*’) certainly appears to be an indictment of the laziness of her male suitors, it also is directed at the Tinder-machine itself. As she points out, the platform is an ‘dating app’, that appears to not produce any dates. Interestingly, only an hour later, sitting on the same sofa upon which Jess had voiced such frustration, Matt provided the following retort:

M: Yeah, whereas with Tinder, you can be a bit more discriminatory and not put all of your eggs in one particular basket. British girls are the worst with their little games and their little... you know, it's like is this going to happen or not? I can't hang around all day.

T: That seems important. Something around control.

M: Well, if you're not careful, you ended up perpetually in the 'friend zone'.

T: What's it like in there, the friend zone?

M: Well, just a 'nice' guy who they can pick up and put down as they want to. If it's not going to happen, I'm not going to hang around, you know?

What emerges from both accounts is a sense of weariness that the 'other' of Tinder was acting in bad faith. Just as Jess could be seen as bracing herself for the disappointment of her disappearing matches, the above exchange displays just how duplicitous Matt thought his female matches to be. The women within his Tinder-assemblage – specifically '*British girls*' – were prone to playing '*little games*' with a '*nice*' guy like him. The best approach was to not put all of one's '*eggs*' in one basket. It is interesting that all his '*discriminatory*' use of Tinder appears to be in the service of a single goal: not ending up in the '*friend zone*'. Contrast such a statement with the way in which Jess – despite the glut of messages she received from different matches – appeared to focus on individual '*candidates*' like Aaron. The way to navigate Tinder, it would seem from the above exchange, was to keep moving, to not get interested in one person for too long and – more importantly – not get messed around ('*who they can pick up and put down as they want to....*').

While it would be foolish to presume that Matt spoke for *all* men on Tinder, one could assert that Matt unknowingly answered Jess' question. Why did her matches keep disappearing? Perhaps, like him, they didn't want to risk being rejected as 'friends' or – as I attempted to interject – they didn't want to end up in a situation they couldn't *control*. While his unsolicited deployment of 'Tinder-speak' aligns with Hess and Flores' (2016) assertion that digital displays of 'toxic' sexuality are designed to establish the power of men over women, it also highlights another, more subtle phenomenon. The 'power' Matt could be seen to yielding is not one of domination of women, but of *withdrawal*. As he points out, one could spend days chatting with matches that either had no interest in meeting up ('*is this going to happen or not*') or – as previously noted – were not as attractive as their profile pictures presented them to be. One wonders if, for Matt, the real utility of Tinder was not its capacity to generate sexual liaisons, but the ways in which it allowed him to *disappear*, or 'ghost'²³ matches which he thought might

²³ Safronova (2015) defines ghosting as 'a verb that refers to ending a romantic relationship by cutting off all contact and ignoring the former partner's attempts to reach out.'

disappoint him. Thus, analysis aligns with LeFebvre (2017), who the ‘technique’ of ghosting affords individuals a sense of autonomy over their mediated relationships, which in turn, bolsters an increased perception of personal safety and well-being. On Tinder, it could be argued, the best defence is a good offense.

It is interesting that despite the authority – and specificity - with which Matt laid out his strategy for using Tinder, he consistently referred to his behaviours on the app as just a bit of ‘*online banter*’. Consider the exchange below:

M: It doesn't feel real, a lot of the time....

T: What do you mean? Like it's not actually happening?

M: Yeah, it's just a phone and you're... (laughs, then pauses) using the phone.... (laughs)

Here, Matt appears to be asserting that what occurred within his Tinder-assemblage, wasn't real. It didn't count. After all, it's ‘*just*’ a phone he was using. Returning to Suler's (2004) ‘toxic’ anonymisation, one could assert that in placing his discourses ‘*out there*’, they stopped being of any consequence to himself or to others. This sleight of hand also aligns with DeShong's (2017) claim that men who engage in acts of sexual aggressivity – including acts of physical violence – often deploy complex discourses to distinguish between their own ‘core’ virtue and the acts of misogyny they perpetrate on women. Given this, it is interesting that throughout Matt's time in therapy, for all his bravado, he never once talked about ‘pulling’ or ‘fucking’ his matches, nor did he ever concede that his efforts on Tinder were exclusively about ‘sex’ or in service of getting a ‘shag’. While this discursive restraint could be reflective of the implicit politeness of his middle-class upbringing, I assert that in ‘toning down’ his description of his Tinder entanglements, so too does he minimise the sense of *shame* that runs throughout his account.

Within Deleuze's ethics, shame is associated with powerlessness and, more specifically, with failure, not just in falling short, but in the end of possibility for *something else* (O'Donnell 2017).

Part of this failure is to 'see', or to reckon with what Deleuze (1986) calls the 'intolerable'. While Deleuze's (1995) framing of what is 'intolerable' ranges from severe 'injustice' to 'daily banality' (p. 169), he asserts that the subject feels ashamed when they become aware of their own complicity in their suffering. Shame, therefore, is the experience of 'seeing' that which was previously invisible, the 'sight' of which is 'intolerable' (O'Donnell 2017).

While Matt's account does little to make him a sympathetic character, his description of his Tinder engagement is riddled with flows of shame and powerlessness. Consider the exchange below:

M: It's funny isn't it? You find women that seem great and then it just...things just peter out for whatever reason. That's quite well known, by the way. Particularly, women are more likely to do that, because the dynamic is different either way. Women generally like to look at their phones and have someone paying them attention. That is definitely more of a, I know it's a sweeping generalisation, but it's known phenomenon, you know. You know this, right?

T: That's a pretty bold statement about all, literally, all women....

M: It's true! I don't mean to be cruel...It's not that they're leading you on, but they're more likely to engage in a bit of phone banter knowing that it won't go any further than that. Whereas if I knew that, I be like, 'alright then, I'm not wasting my time there'. Does that sound terrible?

T: It's a point of view, certainly...

The above exchange demonstrates the entrenched misogyny that underpinned Matt's description of his behaviour on Tinder. He might not want to be 'cruel', but his declarations speak to his assumptions about women as being possessed by vanity and a desire to dominate men. Note the power Matt attributes to his female counterparts. Despite spending most of their time chasing attention and staring at their phones, his matches held the authority to know exactly how far they were willing to 'go' during 'phone banter'. It was his matches – not he – who held the cards. *They* were the ones who could decide when an interaction 'peter(ed) out'. While the question he poses ('*You know this, right?*') could be read as an attempt to gain my collusion – if not my professional confirmation – it also functions as a type

of justification (Scott and Lyman 1968). Unlike him, the women of Tinder were powerful and irresponsible and, as such, *they had it coming*. This desire for retribution aligns with Kimmel's (2017) suggestion that men's harassment towards women rarely occurs when men's power is intact, but when their power 'breaks down', when the power of men is weakened and insecure. Thus, the misogyny in Matt's account is *retaliatory*, or imbued with what Deleuze (2006), channelling Nietzsche, refers to as the 'spirit of revenge'. As Kimmel (2017) points out, 'when the entitlement of men is aggrieved, they don't get mad, they get even' (p.183).

Interestingly, for all of Matt's bravado about his mastery of Tinder-speak, he consistently spoke about his digital misogyny with a sense of embarrassment. I contend that behind such self-consciousness lies a sense of shame. One could frame his closing comment above (*'Does that sound terrible?'*) as a request for my therapeutic absolution, my forgiveness for his perpetuation of views which he knows are social unacceptable. As our session continued, these attempts to get me 'onside' continued:

M: Well, you've got to work with what you've got, don't you? (Laughs). I know you have to do that with Tinder, but because there isn't the context there, and you don't have any background information on them, you've got more work to do. Generally, someone will pop up and they'll have...(laughs) really good credentials....(laughs)

T: Credentials? What do you mean?

M: God this sounds terrible.... (Laughs). You must think I'm an asshole. (Laughs)

T: Let's stop for a minute... you're giggling throughout this session. You're giddy, even. What's going on talking about this?

M: It's not the most comfortable thing to discuss...

T: Do you feel like I'm judging you?

M: Well, yeah...

This event highlights the psychic precarity on which his assertion of masculinity, of sexual authority is built. Note his incessant laughter. For a man in his forties, one could argue that his giggling was evidence he had been caught and he knew it. Returning to Deleuze's (1989) reading of shame, one wonders it was easier for him to feel judged 'by' me than to acknowledge what was 'intolerable' about his own behaviour. As the session continued, the fragility of Matt's macho desiring-production on Tinder became increasingly evident:

M: You just wonder, if you're kidding yourself... Don't get me wrong, I've had a lot of fun (on Tinder), but of course I'd like something more consistent. I'm 42 years old... it's not much fun watching milestones pass you by...

T: You mean getting older? Birthdays?

M: Yeah.. but you know, the kids and the house and the wife and the rest... you can feel that moving away from you...

The above exchange speaks to the conceptual distinction Deleuze (1989) makes between shame and *shamelessness*, the latter of which he defines as insensibility - or indifference - to life and others. Given this his admission that he might be '*kidding*' himself is particularly striking and could be framed as a process of *becoming-ashamed*. While it would be foolish to assume that he was feeling a sense of shame over the *morality* of his behaviours, in a Deleuzian frame, one could argue that within the therapy dialogue, Matt was confronted with an 'intolerable' thought: that for all the power he wielded and the conquests he amassed on Tinder, not only was he getting older, but he had failed to facilitate the life and the connections to others that he desired ('*the kids and the house and the wife*'). His closing acknowledgement ('*You can feel that moving away from you*') could be read as a product of the shame associated with 'seeing' the contingency - if not outright precarity - of his circumstances. It also aligns with Rubin et al.'s (2020) notion that male displays of aggression and 'toxic' disinhibition towards women are rarely evidence of masculine empowerment and are instead illustrative of amasculine '*anxiety*', particularly the fear of men that they unable to uphold 'hegemonic' norms of success, self-determination and sexual power.

Matt was not alone in articulated a sense of shame about his Tinder entanglements within the therapy discourse. Consider the following exchange, in which Jess details the humiliation she felt after Aaron had immediately hung up on her following a phone sex session:

J: I was waiting around all night waiting for him to call after we matched and texted a bit and then he just hangs up. It's dehumanising. You just feel like such an idiot. And I was keeping myself up all night to fool around with him. He didn't want to have a conversation ...(pauses) or take me out or even get in touch until he was horny at 1 in the morning. You just keep feeling like you're a total fool...

The above extract is illustrative of a strange confluence between accounts. Even though Jess and Matt described their experiences of Tinder – and their motivations for using the platform – in almost antithetical terms, the desiring-production that occurred within their digital assemblages of both clients could be said to have culminated in the same sense of shame. As she notes above, the moment of anticipation brought about by the swipe – and resulting textual exchange with her match – ends with her feeling like an *'idiot'* and a *'total fool'*. While Jess claim of the 'dehumanising' effects of Tinder is certainly well-grounded in the literature (Sohail et al 2019), it highlights another type of the *negation* that runs throughout both her digital engagement and her time in therapy: that of her own desires. One could argue that, for Jess, Tinder was a site of *re-territorialisation*, a relational assemblage through which she could continually produce an identity based around subservience to men and an erasure of her own sexual-becomings. Just as she had tolerated Roger's punishing mood swings and sexual indifference in the hopes that their relationship might survive, so too did she manage the mediated misogyny within her Tinder assemblages with a curious mix of masochism and *optimism*. Not only did she have to subject herself to the clumsy, *'gross'* advances of men, but she had to translate this coarseness as evidence of a love of *ascent*, one that might move her towards the ideals of romance, family and security. One could argue that the hope mobilised by the Tinder swipe quickly soured into her own 'intolerable' vision: that the connection she desired might not be possible.

What is remarkable, is that even when Jess 'successfully' played the game of Tinder, she continued to voice a sense of disillusion and dissatisfaction in our sessions. In our next session, Jess began by reporting that earlier that week she had ripped off what she referred to as her *'sex plaster'*. Aaron – he of the threesome invitation which began this chapter – had called late last night. Whereas his getting in touch would normally resulting in a round of

exciting, yet disheartening 'phone fun', Jess claimed to have tried something altogether different:

J: I just thought... enough of this and I asked him to come over (laughs)....

T: Wow... to come over? To your place?

J: Yup (smiling)... Thomas was at his Dad's and I was on my own and thought, why not?

T: Good for you...

J: (Laughs)

T: So...what was that like?

J: What was what like?

T: Oh, I don't know... to be intimate with a man who wasn't your husband?

J: Oh, that....(laughs) It was great... It felt good... I felt sexy, I felt in control. It felt grown up, you know? Like I was actually in control of my own body. I don't know why I waited so long...I don't know what I was so scared of...To open myself up sexually to something that exciting. But I was becoming blasé about it all.... The idea of developing something with someone, particularly someone who is exactly like (Roger) is laughable...

T: Laughable? You keep using that word. It doesn't seem that funny. What's so laughable about this?

J: The thing with (Aaron) was a real good thing in a lot of ways. It gave me a lot. I allowed myself to open up sexually, to push myself in a way. But then, you realise that you're opening up based around someone else's

requirements. It was on his terms. I knew I had to be more confident and not let someone else dictate what I doing. I was falling back into the same pattern as with (Roger, ex-husband). It's laughable because I didn't really even fancy (Aaron)! He didn't want to have a conversation or take me out or even get in touch until he was horny at 1 in the morning. That's why it's laughable...

One could be tempted to align Jess' new-found sexual assertiveness with what Renold and Ringrose (2011) refer to as a 'schizoid rupture', as her request for Aaron to '*come over*' for sex appears to be evidence of mode of creative, even affirming desiring-production outside of the man/woman molar that had territorialised her previous sexual-becomings. In '*opening up*' herself to the possibility of a new type of pleasure, one could argue that hers had become the BwO, free of the constraints that previously stopped her from experimenting with a more liberated, molecular sexuality. However, despite the pleasure of '*being in control*' and even '*pushing herself*' to '*open up sexually*', there remains a lament within the above exchange. As she points out, her moment of conquest was still coded by the '*requirements*' of a man. In the end, it appears that her becoming-molecular was only initiated on '*his terms*', specifically when he was '*horny*' in the middle of the night. She might have been playing the game of Tinder well, but it remained a *man's* game, one dominated by the phallogentric prerogatives and passions of her male matches.

On Tinder, the 'crisis' of identity that Jess had come to therapy to resolve had been replicated within the digital. As a result, she was no longer tasked with managing one unsatisfying relationship with a man, but negotiating a *rhizomatic* assemblage of male relations, each appearing to be more misogynistic and sexually demanding than the next. Like Matt's realisation that all the digitally expedited shags in the world couldn't produce a stable analogue homelife, Jess's previous closing comment ('*I was falling back into the same pattern*'), appears to be an admission of *resignation*, an acknowledgement that the relations within her Tinder-assemblages had not only been unfulfilling, but had been territorialised around the same sublimation and isolation that had defined her marriage. Perhaps too, she also unknowingly posits that real 'nightmare' of Tinder isn't the coarseness of its sexual exchange, nor the obsessive usage facilitated by the Tinder swipe, nor even the 'gamification' of everyday intimacy, but the *shame* experienced by its users when the possibility – the difference - it promises comes to an end.

Postscript: The Desire of ‘Diffraction’ and A Shag-to-Come

I contend that the underneath the surface of Matt and Jess’ disillusion and annoyance at the digital ‘other’ lies a far more profound emotion: that of *mourning*. Throughout their time in therapy, both articulated a sense that the world and the relationships they had hoped for – and to which they turned to Tinder to produce - were getting farther and farther out of their reach. Despite this, both continued to invest increasing amounts of time on the platform, only to be further reminded of its shortcomings. As evidenced by the exchange with Matt below, the juxtaposition of Tinder’s promise and the sense of loss that seemed to accompany his engagement on the platform represented a unique challenge for the therapeutic endeavour:

M: I think it’s just because I’m, for long time now, I’ve been ready to meet the right person, but it just hasn’t been happening... so I’ve become quite apathetic about the whole thing. That’s part of it. Just because, there’s been this pattern of nothing coming to fruition. I don’t know... I’m waiting for it to be (snaps fingers) the right person, for everything to go (move hands together).

T: To have all those ‘credentials’, to use your word, to have them pay off in a way that you wanted them to....

M: I reckon I’ve just become a bit hardened. Rejection used to be quite a wrenching thing, but now... you just get tougher. I wonder if this medication I’m on is deadening my sense of emotional feeling (laughs).

T: I wonder if it’s easier to deaden yourself and pursue these relationships that can – by your own description – only lead to one thing, than it is to risk actually knowing someone. To risk them actually knowing you, seeing you, actually learning something about you and you about them?

M: Okay... I’m not sure what you want me to say....

T: Do you not think it’s interesting that you seem resistant to women of a certain age and experience who can do that, who are aware life and difficulty and aging? Do you not think it’s significant that you’re drawn to women who are at the beginning of their lives, not the middle?

M: Oh God, is this the bit where you tell me I'm afraid of dying?

T: You do talk about getting older, you know? You talk about watching your friend's kids grow up and how your parents are reaching the end. Is it possible, and I submit this without some grand theory... is it possible that...

M: What...um...Middle-aged man denying death, that sort of thing? (laughs)

T: Well... that in youth, in young things, experiences that young people have, you don't have to confront the fact that you are getting older? That you are aging and that there is an end to all this at some point?

M: Oh, mate... That's not a fun thought, is it! (Laughs)

The above passage – which occurred nearly six months into our work together - could be read as technical overreach on my part; his curt responses as evidence that I had simply missed the mark. However, I contend that his aloofness – and his incessant laughter – illustrate not only the complexity of utilising the digital as therapeutic ‘material’, but the complexity of what mediated technologies like Tinder ‘do’ to the digital subject. Tinder afforded Matt access to a world of youth, of beauty, of endless energy and nights out and sex and shots and frivolity. Its digital affordances had also allowed him to be liberated from the consequences of his heterosexist advances. Despite this, the platform was making him ‘harder’, ‘tougher’, so much so that pain he would have previously found ‘wrenching’ was now met with apathy. While he attempts to pass this ‘deadening’ quality off as a side effect of his anti-depressants, one wonders if the hardening Matt described not just towards his potential matches, but towards the reality of what his digital engagement had obscured in himself.

My interventions throughout the above event – particularly my inviting him to consider his aversion to dating women his own age - were intended to highlight what I held to be the central conflict in Matt's vision of his future: if he had hoped to find what he called the ‘right person’ and experience a connection based around mutual understanding, he would have to take a distinct risk; not only to be seen, but to accept that all things, himself included, are subject to decay. Compare this starkness of my existential challenge to the never-ending *possibility* produced on the screen of Tinder. While one could debate the ‘success’ of my interventions,

I contend that the potential produced by the Swipe – for new experiences, new partners, new sex, new pleasure – allowed Matt to side-step the pain of the past, as well as his fears for the future. On Tinder, Matt wasn't lonely, or sad, or desperate, he was *free* and he was having fun in the process. In hindsight, the 'line of flight' I was offering – to move towards alternative understandings of himself and others – didn't stand a chance.

His final retort ('*That's not a fun thought, is it?*') is telling. One wonders if the '*fun*' of which he speaks – and of which I was unable to provide in that moment in our moment - was the type he could so easily mobilise within the Tinder-machine. Thus, the desire-production of Tinder he describes appears not as a love of romantic ascent or even demand for customer satisfaction, but of *diffraction*, a desire through which he could avert his gaze away from the reality of his isolation and shame and towards an endless succession of potential conquests. To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari, the above exchange highlights a tension between an existential psychotherapy orientated towards an examination of the 'old' problems – isolation, autonomy, limitation, death – and SNS platforms like Tinder which continually assure users of a new relationship, a new life or a new shag 'to come'.

Conclusion

In stark contrast with Tinder's 2018 promotional campaign entitled 'Single, Not Sorry' – in which the app is portrayed through glossy videos full of young, attractive hedonists living with abandon in exotic locations - the desiring-production described by clients emerges not as liberated and in search of the 'new', but, like Deleuze and Guattari's (1972) schizophrenic, appeared to be constrained by the old molarity of 'man' and 'woman' and territorialised around *phallogentric* flows. While Jess and Matt's accounts should not be presumed to be representative of *all* encounters on Tinder, their descriptions of the platform demonstrate the capacity of digital technologies to channel the desire of its users along narrow and circumscribed definitions of sexuality and, in doing so, reinforce acts of misogyny, sexual objectification and feelings of shame. As such, analysis displays the need for an awareness of how mediated dating technologies, including specific facets of design like the Swipe, not only produce distinct modes of desiring-production and sexual exchange, but hold the capacity to territorialise normative behaviour within rhizomatic assemblages.

Turning to the implications of this research on the therapy encounter, it is remarkable that despite the emergence of these corrosive properties in the Tinder-machine, both Matt and Jess continually reinvested in the platform; not just with their attention, but with their *hope* that

it might deliver them from a life of isolation. While neither client would be the first in the history of psychotherapy to turn to a source outside of themselves – a relationship, a drink, a drug, a purchase, a job, a faith - to produce a more tolerable image of their present and future, their dual account of Tinder demonstrates the challenge that digital technologies present to the ‘talking cure’. Here, one is reminded of Yalom’s (2012) maxim for therapists to never ‘take away something (without having) anything better to offer’ (p.151). The question suggested by analysis – and with which the field must reckon – is how does the practice aid the digital subject in gaining a fuller understanding of themselves and their relations when the ‘offer’ presented by platforms like Tinder is so compelling, so plentiful and so easily renewed by a ‘Swipe’ of the thumb? Perhaps the answer, as evidenced by my closing exchange with Matt, is not to attempt to wrench the possibility of the digital away from clients, but to ask what the seemingly endless desiring-production that occurs on apps like Tinder does *to* them, what it does *for* them, what might it liberate with others and what it might be concealing *within* them.

Chapter 6: Facebook - Self-Writing and Agency in Rhizomatic Digital Networks

This chapter centres around the cases of three clients – Fran, Rebecca and Gwen - for whom Facebook emerged as a source of self-development and social support. Whereas previous chapters have utilised the psychotherapeutic discourse to explore problematic aspects of digital technologies, this chapter considers the Facebook-machine as a potentially productive – and even *affirming* - apparatus, one with the capacity to facilitate creative processes of interpersonal connection, expression and trust between users. This acuity towards the *possibilities* of the digital highlights a tonal shift in this chapter. On the one hand, the following analysis, like those that preceding it, will be orientated towards what clients ‘did’ on Facebook; that is, which of the platform’s features they used and what affective realities those changes produced in their online assemblages. On the other, the accounts of clients around their use of the app prompted a mode of analysis more attuned than previous efforts to what the digital engagement of clients allowed them to ‘do’; specifically, how the platform’s digital affordances aided in the formation of novel, ‘rhizomatic’ networks of social support, from which new modes of desiring-production, relationship and agency emerged. The goal of this analysis is not to attempt to ‘therapise’ the digital subject, but rather, to show how even the most mundane aspects of the digital might contribute to the self-becomings of social media users.

Defining Facebook

Facebook is a popular, free social networking website that allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos and video, send messages and communicate with friends, family and colleagues (Brügger 2015). The site, which is available in 37 different languages, features three primary modes of representation. First, individuals can create a Facebook ‘profile’, through which they can engage in a two-way interaction with other users. Second, using the built-in search engine, members can locate other Facebook members and ‘friend’ them by sending them an invitation to join their ‘friend list’. Third, users can freely form Facebook ‘Groups’ drawn from members of any community. Group administrators may accept all members or reject requests based on the Group’s criteria.

Each Facebook member's personal profile page contains several key social networking components. The most critical of these elements is the ‘Wall’, which essentially serves as a digital bulletin board for the display of messages, photos, videos, and links from members of a given user’s ‘friend list’. Equally popular is the virtual ‘Photo Album’, onto which users can

upload unlimited images from their desktop or smartphone. Once posted, these photos can be then commented upon by others. Another popular profile component is status 'updates', a microblogging feature that allows members to broadcast short Twitter-like announcements to their friends. All interactions are published in a news feed, which is distributed in real-time and made visible to all the member's friends. This interactivity is made even more complex on Facebook Live, a streaming broadcast technology that has become a resident service on the platform since its launch in early 2016 and allows any registered user of this platform to stream videos using a mobile phone camera over WiFi or mobile networks without any additional hardware or software. Clicking the 'go live' button automatically engages the camera and microphone of the digital device used to access the site and instantly begins streaming a live video, which can be viewed by other users. Along with the video, this platform also has a comments section, which allows the host and viewers to post and respond to textual comments during the live feed. Once the live feed has ended, Facebook automatically posts the recording to the user's Facebook page for further viewing and commenting. Streams appear in the user's news feed, where viewers can add comments in real time.

The application tracks the total number of views and fluctuations in the size of the stream's live viewing audience. Once the broadcast is stopped, the user is provided with the option to save the recording to a Facebook wall, where the video can be viewed asynchronously. Any comments made during the live broadcast are saved with a time mark, and asynchronous viewers can add additional comments. The technology, launched to the public in early 2016, takes advantage of the global ubiquity of mobile phone cameras and the market reach of Facebook, a for-profit corporation offering online social media and social networking services (Sheffield 2018). As of March 2017, Facebook listed 1.28 billion daily users, with more than 65 percent of these accessing the SNS using mobile technologies. It has also been touted by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg as a means by which individual users might share their 'most personal and emotional and raw and visceral experiences' (Buzzfeed 2016), such as marriage proposals and childhood development milestones like first steps.

Facebook offers a range of privacy options to its members. A member can make all their communications visible to everyone, they can block specific connections, or they can keep all such communications private. Members can choose whether to be searchable – either fellow users or the wider public – decide which elements of their profile are public, edit the content in their news feed and determine exactly who can see their posts. For those members who wish to use Facebook to communicate privately, there is a messaging feature which closely

resembles email. It is worth noting that the algorithmic mechanisms discussed in this chapter are not exclusive to Facebook and can be found, in some form or another, on virtually every social media technology. What makes the platform unique is the manner in which it facilitates the formation of ‘anchoring communities’ (Bilton 2010, p. 96), or digital spheres of ‘friends, family, news outlets, blogs, and random strangers’ through which users might filter and disseminate information (p. 130). This ‘infrastructure of connection’ (Weinberger 2012, p. 186), affords a range of grouped connections that enable users to establish relations with and within a multiplicity of *idiosyncratic* audiences (Amicucci 2017).

While the platform is regarded as a powerful tool of connectivity, the influence of Facebook does not end at interpersonal communication. This research aligns itself with Monea (2011), who asserts that Facebook is an essential *object* of research into the digital, not only because the platform has been the most stalwart presence in the social network marketplace for the past decade, but because it is ‘indubitably the most expansive and penetrating iteration of the digital cloud’ (p.6). Facebook’s ubiquity is reflected in its usage across all age ranges, socio-economic backgrounds, education levels, gender, and ethnicity (Kaufhold et al 2010). Helmond et al (2019) contend that Facebook’s aggressive expansion strategy – which has seen the company acquire competitors like WhatsApp and Instagram – has seen the platform grow from a boutique social networking site into a ‘digital marketing ecosystem’ (p.123), a ‘leviathan’ (Cooper 2019), which encompasses the fields of finance, marketing, politics, news, entertainment, and all modes of videographic and textual communication. To fully understand the digital as it appears in the psychotherapeutic-assemblage, one *must* contend with Facebook. Prior to this examination, an introduction is required to Fran is required, a client for whom the platform proved an important – and unexpected - conduit for self-expression and reassurance.

‘For Three Minutes, I could think about something else’: Fran and Facebook Live

There were times when it seemed that Fran might never stop crying. We worked together for nearly six months and our sessions had become increasingly emotional. She came to therapy to manage a growing sense of anxiety regarding her immigration status. Originally from a small logging community in Oregon, Fran had moved to the UK on a student visa to be with her boyfriend of nearly two years. Her ‘new life’, as she called it, was by all accounts a tremendous success. Her relationship with her partner was flourishing. A gifted sculptor, her master’s

studies in Fine Arts were challenging, yet satisfying. She revelled in the day-to-day eccentricities of British culture – the weather, the humour, the queuing – describing them with a near-anthropological curiosity. It was a life of wonder that was now under constant threat.

A sudden marriage proposal from her partner had initiated the demand for her to secure a spousal visa through the UK Home Office. It was a process that was as bureaucratic as it was brutal: mountains of forms to complete, endless fees and deadlines, meetings to attend, immigration attorneys to pay. Her life, it would seem, had been completely mobilised in service of staying in the country she had only just begun to figure out. Her nights were sleepless, filled with dark deportation nightmares. Her days were equally restless and almost solely devoted to checking and re-checking paperwork. All it would take to be sent home, she said, would be a single misspelling, or an incorrect reporting of income. She cried often, was subject to waves of panic and was increasingly isolating herself from others, afraid to share the terror that her brave new world might soon be taken away.

It was not Fran's first attempt at surviving moments of difficulty on her own. She had grown up in a large, evangelical Christian family, which she described as deeply traditional and almost solely focused on church activities. It was a culture where matters of emotional difficulty were best 'given to God'. Good grades and even better manners were non-negotiable. Complaining was not an option, nor were expressions of doubt or upset of any kind, about *anything*. By her own description, people were expected to be polite and conversations between them kept positive. It was a world of regiment in which sadness or disillusion rarely gained a public audience. Politics were uniformly conservative, as were the duties of each sex. Her father was a deacon in the church and mum was a homemaker. The girls cooked and baked and gossiped. The boys played American football and gossiped about American football. There were bible studies on Wednesday and Saturdays, youth group on Thursdays, church on Sunday morning and again on Sunday evening. Such was the rhythm of life in the country: very little out of place, and even less out of *sorts*. It was from this well-ordered world that Fran had emerged, only to find herself mired in a chaotic set of circumstances.

She had tried coping the usual ways. She got 'prayed up' and asked Jesus for help. She redoubled her volunteer efforts at her adopted local church in South Wales. She engaged with her studies longer and harder and baked elaborate cupcakes to avert her attention. Above all, she continued her efforts to share as little as possible about her fear and worry and anxiety with others. The results were the same: more terror, more anxiety, more dread. Even her most

trusted coping mechanism, her sculpting, had become an obligation. She was growing increasingly despondent and withdrawn in our sessions and would often greet even my most basic of enquiries – ‘where should we start?’, ‘what’s going on for you now?’ - with as few words as possible. She repeatedly questioned if our work together was ‘working’ or if she was cut out to go so ‘deep’ into her emotions. I started to have my own concerns that the therapy was, in fact, failing and that she might suddenly withdraw from our work.

Nearly six months into our sessions, it was to my great surprise that Fran appeared to be in a recognisably ‘good’ mood, complete with eye contact and full-sentence replies. Despite a recent meeting with her immigration lawyer, she seemed to be engaged with the reality of the visa application process without being overwhelmed by the details. I pointed this out and asked, ‘I wonder what’s different today?’. Her response was puzzling: ‘I got some love on Facebook last night’.

Given the constraints of her upbringing, one could not help but wonder what sort of ‘love’ she may have been seeking online. Was this an act of rebellion? Of perversion, even? Far from any Freudian nightmare, the love of which Fran spoke came in the form of comments from her followers on her Facebook page. Earlier in the week, she had streamed a video of Facebook Live on what she called ‘Country Music Tuesday’. In it, she claimed to appear on the screen in her best ‘Dolly Parton getup’ – high heels, cowboy hat, fake eyelashes, and her best ‘attempt at cleavage’ – and mimed to a full set list of Nashville classics. Alongside her performance, she posted a letter detailing the struggle of the immigration process and her growing sense of despondency. The interest from peers from both sides of the Atlantic was instantaneous, as comments and likes poured in during the livestream. There were even messages of support from total strangers, including from fellow ex-pats who had themselves been victims of the UK Home Office. Her response was striking:

‘It was great’, she said. ‘I did Patsy Cline, I did Merle Haggard. It got progressively more intense, especially the outfits. They got fairly elaborate. It was like (famous country music showcase) the Grand Ole Opry.’

‘Wow,’ I replied, ‘it sounds like you really went for it.’

‘I did’, she said, smirking.

‘I wonder why? Why now?’, I inquired.

‘It sounds stupid’ she replied, ‘but for three minutes, I could laugh, I could be silly. I could think about something else and make myself forget about everything that’s happened over the last six months.

However silly a gesture Fran’s lipsyncing may have appeared, her account is illustrative of three cases detailed in this chapter, each of which details the utilisation of Facebook by young women to not only become visible to their online communities, but to initiate novel - even radical - processes of self-becoming.

The ‘Event’ of Self-Writing and Processual Selfhood

The digital engagement described by clients on Facebook constitute expressive acts of what Foucault (1997) referred to as *self-writing*. While Fran’s production on the platform was primarily through the medium of video, her Facebook Live streams were accompanied by detailed written posts about her emotional state and life circumstances. In this, she produced textual and videographic *representations* of her feelings and desires. Weisgerber and Butler (2016) liken this process of digital self-production to the efforts of a museum curator to arrange works for the purposes of public display. Thus, the selecting, collecting, annotating, storing, and dissemination of content by the digital subject are all essential activities the ‘content curation’ process (Thompson 2013).

Borrowing from Foucault (1988), Sauter (2014) points out that self-writing, particularly that which occurs in digital spaces in ‘psychologised’ culture of the West, is a type ‘technique of self’, through which individuals might talk about and reveal themselves, engage with others and perform one’s identity to an audience. The content produced by clients on Facebook could be surmised as an apparatus to ‘show (them-selves)’ to project (themselves) into view, to make (their) own face appear in the other’s presence’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 216). Writing, whether it occurs online and through analogue means, is one of many mundane ways through which people work on and shape their lives, relations and realities, often in unconscious ways (Hodges 2015). According to Gusdorf (1956), such efforts are related to processes of individuation, adding that only when the subject distinguishes themselves from others as an individual being can they begin to construct a written – or in Fran’s case videographic - understanding of their own unique existence. Through this lens, self-writing is a *reflexive*

engagement with one's experiences that shapes relations to self and others; a 'second reading of experience... (that) adds to experience itself consciousness of it' (Gusdorf 1956, p. 38).

It could be argued that the content that clients claimed to post on Facebook represented a type of autobiographical *literature* (Besemeres 2004). On the one hand, this digital literature-of-the-self is the product of the organisation of utterances and words, one mediated by technology. As such, it is a product of material, discernible processes (Petray 2013). On the other, as Deleuze and Guattari (1997) suggest, the writing described by clients constitute expressive *acts and* contingent processes through which the digital subject initiates a movement away from organisation – that is, through a stable, fixed identity - and towards the 'direction of the ill-formed or the incomplete' (p.1). This notion of *becoming-incomplete* runs throughout accounts. Clients described the 'event' of creation – that is the moment they produced their posts – as an act of spontaneity, one predicated by a minimum of forethought or planning. This notion of 'scrambling the planes, of going beyond' (Deleuze 1988, p. 108) can be seen throughout accounts. Consider how Fran described her production on Facebook.

F: I couldn't really take it anymore.... I just wanted to get that misery out of me or at least get real about it. I didn't really want to sugarcoat or avoid it...I guess I... I needed to say it. It's been unrelenting dealing with (the Home office). It never ends...people have had no idea what's going on. You just can't be expected to deal with it forever. It's always there, it's always hanging over my head.

The above event speaks to the language of *discharge* that appears throughout clients' account of their desiring-production of Facebook. It was as if they were extending outward, taking a leap into the unknown. Phrases like '*I just had to*', '*I couldn't take it*' not only relay an urgency, a bursting forth, but point towards the idea of writing as an *event-in-itself*, an instance in which information about their lives, their opinions, their sadness was animated. One could assert, as Colasante et al (2020) suggest, that these acts of digital writing were organised around the completion of a *goal*, namely the unburdening of sadness or personal difficulty or even garnering emotional support or sympathy. Alternatively, such posts could be framed as gestures of *problematization*, ones produced for the purposes of articulating a conflict, tension, or difficulty in their lives (Baxter 2007). In this, analysis confirms the work of Petray (2013), who asserts that digital self-writing is inherently *agentic*, irrespective of whether the spontaneous process by which such content aligns with or conflicts against externally imposed categories. Thus, the language and images that clients used to produce and organise

information about themselves reflects the uniquely *processual* production of identity that occurs online (Harju 2018).

There is a consistent intentionality through accounts : that clients were aware of ‘what’ and ‘why’ they were writing. What is absent from their initial accounting of this digital engagement – and, as will be discussed, what is of value the psychotherapy encounter – is a lack of awareness as to what these acts of self-writing could ‘do’, both within their assembled online relations and within their own sense of identity. One could surmise that as clients extended themselves into the digital, the content they produced was not just for the purposes of relaying information about their circumstances in that moment, but - whether they knew or it or not – represented articulations of *desire*, specifically the desire to be *visible* to their assembled relations. This will-to-visibility aligns with Deleuze and Guattari’s (1972) concept of desiring-production not as a singular event, but a process that unfolds *in-between* object and subject and searches for new, creative connections with other bodies.

The self-writing of clients emerges not as mere textual representations of desire or emotion, but as products of *becoming*-contingent on a multiplicity of actors, technologies, and unconscious forces. To produce text or videographic content on Facebook is to both produce *through* the digital affordances of the platform and to produce *for a reader or a viewer*. As such, it is the ‘other’ – that is, the *object* of self-writing – with which one must contend to analyse the processual production of subjectivity in the digital (O’Sullivan 2012). As will be explored later in this chapter, the engagement of clients on Facebook not only functioned as part of an *inter*-personal affective economy between users, but served as an apparatus of *intra*-personal production, through which clients produced a sense of themselves within their assembled social relations. This exploration of the ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ politics within the digital assemblages of clients requires an understanding of how their online behaviours – specifically, the acts of self-formation on Facebook described by clients - are situated and territorialised within regimes of normative behaviours. Such an analysis is informed by the account of Rebecca in psychotherapy.

‘Everything Just Might Be Okay’: Rebecca and Facebook Groups

Rebecca had come to therapy to resolve what she described as a crippling, and long-standing, fear of pregnancy and childbirth. Tall, softly spoken, she was nearly 30 years old, and had recently married her long-time boyfriend. She explained that since the wedding, her partner had become increasingly motivated to start a family. As his desire to have children

grew, so too did a very specific fear: that if she ever fell pregnant, she would die during childbirth and no one – no doctor, no family member, no friend – would be able to save her. As I learned, her concern was not without precedent. During her first year at university some 12 years earlier, Rebecca had undergone a routine surgery to remove her gallbladder. Despite being given every assurance that there was ‘nothing to worry about’, during the procedure she experienced a severe reaction to the drugs used to put her under. As a result, her heart had stopped beating, only to resume after a protracted, dramatic series of emergency measures.

In the aftermath of the operation, Rebecca was possessed with the desire to not only know *what* had occurred in the operating theatre, but *why* the doctors in charge of the surgery had allowed something as routine as a gallbladder surgery to go so wrong. In the years that followed, she sought an explanation from several sources; first through mediation with the NHS trust in which the operation occurred, followed by resolution meetings with the nurses that were present for the procedure. She even hired a private surgeon to review the doctors’ notes obtained through a Freedom of Information Request in the hopes that *someone* could tell her why she was in such danger that day. Despite her doggedness, an answer never materialised. As a result, she had become increasingly suspicious, both of medicine and medical professionals. If ‘they’ had missed a potential threat once, they could do it again. Only the next time, she wouldn’t be a healthy, sporty teenager, but a vulnerable, pregnant woman in her thirties, one dependent on midwives and doctors for her very survival. To go through childbirth would require her to once again place her life in the hands of people whose negligence might *kill* her. The choice before her, as she put it, was between ‘a baby and dying’. She simply could not foresee a situation in which carrying a child to term would not result in her death.

In our first meeting, Rebecca claimed that this terror had come to infect nearly every minute of her day. She wasn’t sleeping, nor was she eating properly. She had suffered a series of panic attacks, the most severe of which saw her pass out during a training exercise at work. She had begun to withdraw from her friendships and declared a mounting resentment towards her husband for ‘not even trying to understand’. She had recently been signed off sick from work due to stress, a reality she was determined to withhold from her family. Following a month of fraught sessions, I told her that I had growing concerns of how isolated she was becoming. I also shared my fears that while our work together seemed to provide some relief, I worried that my office was becoming a sort of holding cell for her difficulties, one removed from the

relationships and actors that might be able to help her manage her fears on a day-to-day basis. I wondered if there were *other* avenues for seeking support. Perhaps there were other women 'out there', I suggested, that might have had similar, even identical, experiences?

'Like what', she asked. 'Crazy people?'

'No', I responded, 'Women like you. Women who are scared about pregnancy.'

I admitted that while there might not be many options available, I would do some research into the possibility of a group therapy session or a mental health charity that might be able to provide some sort of additional support. Leaving the session, she assured me she'd consider it.

To my great surprise, Rebecca opened our next session with the announcement that, yes, she had considered my suggestion of seeking further support, and yes, she had found it. When I asked how she accessed such resources, she told me of her discovery of a Facebook group, one that was dedicated to women from all over the world who were battling their own anxieties about pregnancy and childbirth. She had, she reported, simply typed in 'pregnancy anxiety' into the search engine within the application on her mobile. As the group's posts were publicly viewable, she was able to review the exchanges between individual members without officially joining or making herself known.

What Rebecca had encountered in the group appeared to have an almost immediate impact on our ongoing work, which was sustained over our next few sessions. Whereas previous meetings would have begun with several false starts or silences, she began our next session be bounding up the stairs to my office and excitedly reporting that over the last week, she had been exchanging posts and comments in the group. The effect was palpable. She seemed lighter, more at ease. It was the first time I had seen her smile in a session. When I inquired as to what made her directly engage with the group, she said that it was the posts of another user – one so terrified of childbirth that she was considering sterilisation – that prompted her to 'take the leap' and post about her own struggles.

As a result of her engagement in the group, Rebecca reported that her anxieties persisted, but had begun to abate into a more manageable form. She and her husband were talking more regularly and had even booked an appointment with a private obstetrician to consider a

birth plan in the event that the pair conceived. With a great sense of relief, Rebecca announced that she was ready to move on and, shortly thereafter, our work together ended. By her own admission, she continued to be afraid, sometimes profoundly so, about giving birth, but now such terror did not seem to carry the same sting. It was a change she directly attributed to the support of her online peers. They had, she said, imbued her with an insight that no one else in her life could: the sense that however frightened she might be and no matter what may have come before, in the end, *everything just might be okay*.

Rebecca's account of the comfort she encountered on Facebook speaks to the capacity of the digital to produce new, even transformative social connections, particularly between users who struggle to articulate distress in their face-to-face relations (Peterson et al 2017). As will be explored in the next section, the online experimentation of clients is made even more remarkable given a historical assumption across all three accounts: that, however profound, their difficulty, their distress, even their desires, were *insignificant* to others.

‘They’: Defensive Self-Disclosure in Digital Assemblages

To make any meaningful analysis of the technological engagement of clients, one must look at the social assemblages – both digital and analogue – in which those interactions were situated. All three clients called upon specific facets of the Facebook-machine to articulate something about themselves, their lives and their desires that could not be expressed within their other ‘on’ and ‘off’ line assemblages. How innocuous or commonplace the platform’s digital affordances – particularly the connectivity of the ‘group’ -appeared to be, on Facebook one could argue that these clients were able to *say the unsayable*.

Despite their different socio-economic backgrounds, religious leanings, countries of origin and professional standings, Fran, Gwen, and Rebecca all articulated the same internalised sense that their negative emotions – whether worry, pain, upset, confusion, etc – were best *not* shared with others. As evidenced by the exchange with Rebecca below, there is the clear presumption that even her most intimate relations *just didn’t get it*:

R: My friends, they...they try to understand, but they don't know what to say to you. If they've not been through it themselves, they'll just avoid the subject. You don't want to put your friends in that situation... what could they even say?

T: I wonder...How many of your friends know about what you're going through?

R: I've told one and they were like. 'Oh, that's sad'. And I wished I hadn't even brought it up. They just didn't know how to help. I just thought that they've got more on their plate to deal with. That's why I don't bring it up, it just makes people feel awkward.

T: Have you ever considered that they just don't know what to say, but that they do care all the same? That they might want to know about what you're going through?

R: I don't know. I don't think so. No one wants me to just bring up the fact that I'm convinced I'm going to die during childbirth. Or that I don't trust doctors? I work in a dentist's office, for God's sake! (My friends) will think I'm completely insane. They're all off planning babyshowers and who is going to be the godparents for their kids!

T: What about people outside of your immediate family or your friends? Are there...what about colleagues you might be able trust with this?

R: I'm not sure someone off the street is going to hear about this. people have lives, too. They have their own problems, you know. They don't want to hear...

T: What makes you so sure?

R: I've seen it enough times, from enough people. They don't know what to say.

This same assumption that others would respond in a clumsy or unhelpful manner can be seen in Fran's account of her annoyance at the '*platitudes*' offered by her fellow church goers:

F: They try to be understanding, obviously, but very rarely do they say the right thing. Most people say things like, 'it's not your fault' or 'don't be upset'.

T: Who's the 'they' in this scenario?

F: Church people, my friends back home, the people I went to school with. They're always saying things like 'God's got this' or 'he knows'. Some people are real nosey and just keep everything so polite it's like nothing is actually happening. It's not really a place to 'talk hard' about anything. They're not really up for that...

Note the continued allusion in all of these exchanges to *'they'*. Whether the medics who betrayed Rebecca's trust or Fran's polite church family, it was as if both clients had come to group the whole of their relations into one *unified* mass. *'They'* – whether from a friendship group, siblings, parents, co-workers, strangers even – represented an external whole which had no interest in understanding what they were going through, much less helping them through it. *'They'* simply had better things to do. What is striking is that both women reported to experience their digital relationships – those occurring on Facebook and other SNS platforms - as similarly *dissatisfying* and impersonal. Each purported to maintain accounts on various other social media platforms, including Instagram, which they accessed throughout the day on their smartphones. Despite this consistent engagement, each claimed to be just as disillusioned with social exchange that took place in those online spaces as they were with their historical analogue relations. For example, Rebecca spoke about how a survey of the posts of her 'followers' and 'friends' revealed just how uninteresting and *uninterested* she purported others to be:

R: I mean... I use social media, don't get me wrong, but I don't use it to say very much about what's going on with me. Like, any important...

T: What do you mean?

R: Well, it's convenient to be a voyeur and see what people are up to, but most people just present these silly versions of their lives that don't really exist. The times that I've put anything up, no one really posts much beyond 'great pic Becca!' or something like that.

T: That doesn't sound terribly satisfying....

R: No! It's not... the way most people are on the socials has nothing to do with how they are in real life. I do the same thing though...

T: What do you mean?

R: It's like, you just ended up feeling like you have to write something, you know? So then, there you are writing 'Great pic, whoever you are...'

The perceived disingenuousness of Facebook 'friends' is also present in Fran's caustic account of her fellow church goers:

F: You just have to pick your battles... church people are always so sweet, no one is ever nasty, but... it's usually just a bunch of inspirational pictures and pictures of their awesome family on vacation.

T: Is that how you are online, sweet, as you put it?

F: I guess.... I dunno, you've got to talk the talk and, you know... be chipper! (laughs). I don't know... I put things up, I'm always on my phone, it's just not a place where I'm looking to really share things about me.

T: But you put things up about your artwork, you know... you've said you've put up images of your work. Isn't that pretty personal?

F: Sort of. It's different, it's something I've done... something I've created, but it's not exposing. Plus, people are always polite about artwork, even if they don't know anything about art.

Such exchanges reveal just how superficial clients assumed their previous networked relationships to be. Fran's peers at church might be 'sweet', but, as she sarcastically points out, their Facebooks posts were just a 'bunch of' inspirational pictures. The comments 'they' directed towards her artwork were made irrespective of whether they '[knew] anything' about art. Similarly, Rebecca held that the content in her Facebook feed was evidence of nothing more than the 'silly', unreal, self-presentations of others. The 'socials' weren't 'real', nor were

they the places to present important details of one's life. Rather, their Facebook assemblages are social spheres that had to be *managed*. Despite this, it is striking how both appeared to willingly engage in the same sort of disingenuousness of which they accused others. As evidenced by Rebecca's kneejerk praise of her friends '*great pics*' or Fran efforts to remain '*chipper*', the social exchange of both clients could be said to be straited by a type of coded discourse, one in which feedback from others be received and reciprocated with a certain level of *enthusiasm*.

Clients defined the efforts to navigate the normative expectations of their Facebook assemblages almost in spatial terms: one needed to be close enough to observe the online content created by one's digital peers, but not too close – that is, not so emotionally transparent or forthcoming - to be let down by the reactions or responses of others. As displayed by Fran's admission that Facebook isn't a place to '*share*' things, it is as if clients were working to find a sort of 'optimal' distance from which they might be shielded from disappointing interactions. One could assert that it was the Facebook screen - the surface which mediated these digital entanglements - that allowed clients to *modulate* their relational proximity to others. This phenomena of 'defensive' disclosure aligns with research into the rigid strategies employed Facebook users around the online displays of emotions, particularly posts presumed to be 'overly emotional' or expressive of negative feelings (McLaughlin and Vitak 2012). It also aligns with Wang et al (2016), who contend that while female SNS users tend to post more often than their male counterparts, they are more motivated to actively manage the impression that their content might make on their digital peers and will, on average, self-disclose more when the demand for 'positive' self-presentations are lower.

The self-conscious mode of digital engagement described by clients is informed by Hill's (2009) assertion that the voyeurism that occurs online is a reversal of the dystopian dictate: no longer is 'Big Brother' watching us, we are watching big brother. Rebecca points out this phenomenon herself. Though the synoptic architecture of Facebook, clients are '*voyeurs*', spectators lurking at the edges of the lives – or at least in the posts - of others. In addition to being detached spectators – engaging in what digital sociologists (Lupton 2014) refer to as '*veillance*' - clients also reported an awareness that they are also being spectated upon by others. Considering this dual exposure, it could be argued that clients worked to maintain an '*uneasy*' peace which territorialised the relations within their Facebook assemblages: to be present, but not visible; engaged, but not sincere. This aligns with Zizek's (2008) claim that within late capitalist systems, one's tolerance of others is fundamentally motivated by an

‘obsessive fear of harassment’ (p.35). The ‘other’ is tolerable, in so far as they are not *intrusive*. Thus, the use of Facebook by clients could be read as motivated by a desire to *defend*; not only against being trampled upon by others, but of not having to see ‘them’ get it wrong in the form of ill-advised or unhelpful comments.

This desire for protection corresponds with the sense of powerlessness that runs through the accounts of both women. Whether Fran’s helplessness at the hands of UK Home Office or Rebecca’s fear of handing over control of her body to delivery suite doctors, it could be argued that both women were plagued by a lack of *agency* that they did not have the capacity to meaningfully change, challenge, or affect their material or personal circumstances. Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of agency²⁴ not as a product of ‘identity’, but of ‘multiplicity’, is a useful analytic tool to understand this commonality between accounts (Roberts 2012). While the defensive voyeurism of clients may have negated the risk of unexpected – and potentially negative – encounters with others, it could also be seen to have rendered them agentially *impotent* to establish new types of connections, whether between their ‘on’ or ‘off’ line relations or within themselves. As a result of this constrained desiring-production, it could be argued that Fran and Rebecca were captured by a pattern of concealment and self-censorship that may have begun in their historical ‘coupled’ face-to-face relations, but was continually renewed through their Facebook engagement. As will be explored in the following section, no client in this cohort is more emblematic of the struggle of clients to produce new expressions of agency in the digital than Gwen, who utilised the Facebook ‘Wall’ as a means of directly challenging the coded behaviours and relational norms which had historically governed her social assemblages both ‘on’ and ‘off’ line.

Deference and Disorder: Gwen and The Facebook Wall

Gwen had grown up in an impoverished village in North Wales. Her father left when she was less than a year old. In the wake of his departure, her home life was dominated by violence, verbal abuse, and a family-wide reliance on alcohol. Her mother was only 19 when she had

²⁴ Within Deleuze and Guattari’s (1972) reading of affect, the agency of the subject is constituted through interactions between human, cultural, unconscious, and technological forces. As Bonta and Protevi (2004) point out, this corresponds with the Deleuzoguattarian notion of desire as processes of connection – or ‘couplings’ - between bodies in networks of production, out of which patterns of organisation and behaviour are coded and territorialised. Through this lens, the ‘ordering’ processes within territorialised assemblages produce certain propensities, so much so that certain behaviours or desires become salient, while other possibilities are limited and therefore, become more unlikely (Hayles 2001). Thus, agency – of the action of ‘agencing’ - is process by which flows of desire create new affective connections and new desires with other entities.

given birth to Gwen and was capable of fits of terrible anger in one moment and complete silence in the next. In response, Gwen learned from an early age that keeping quiet - if not being *invisible* - was the best survival strategy. As a means of escaping the chaos of home, she began a pattern of risky behaviour which often resulted in, as she put it, 'stupid situations, with lots of stupid boys'. This entanglement of destructive men reached its apex on a last-minute trip to Berlin, when Gwen demanded to have the name of a boyfriend she had met only days before - and who broke up with her only days after - tattooed on her shoulder. It was, she said, a spontaneous celebration of passion. You couldn't blame her, really. As the song goes, she simply 'fell in love too easily'.

Throughout her twenties and thirties, Gwen dated several men in their mid-fifties, each, she claimed, more successful and sophisticated than the one before. One even bought her a house, with *cash*, no less. They were men of taste and travel and style, from which she had much to learn. Now aged 40, there didn't appear to be a man in her life that she couldn't recast as an authority figure. Controlling ex-partners were savvy businessmen. The most consistent source of wisdom in her life seemed to be her 13-year-old son. 'He's so wise, she said. 'I can tell him anything. He'll be amazing therapist one day'. He had, she claimed, been helping her through some really difficult times at work and was particularly good at calming her down when she got too upset. Within our first two sessions, even I was lauded as having the extraordinary, almost supernatural, insight of a wizard, albeit an 'emotional' one.

It would appear that in Gwen's world, wizards were *everywhere* and each one was more worthy of her praise – and her deference – than the next. It was during a session following the 2019 UK Parliamentary Election that this cycle seemed, for just a moment, to change. She had, she announced, spent the weekend picking fights on Facebook. *Lots* of fights, she added. So many, she had hardly even slept. When I asked with whom she had gone to war, she replied 'men, horrible fucking middle-class white men, who post nothing but bullshit and know nothing except their own selfishness'. I could have fallen out of my chair. It was the first time in our work together, that she hadn't qualified an opinion. So, I inquired, where, how had these battles taken place? She explained that the evening had begun simply enough by her posting a message on her Facebook Wall about how upset she was at the outcome of the election. In response, a former classmate, with whom she had years prior carried on a brief sexual relationship – one of those 'stupid situations' – wrote a disparaging reply. 'He told me to stop whining about Brexit and inequality and racism,' she said. 'Then he was saying this rubbish about how he hadn't been given anything in his entire life and that other people should just

work hard if they really want something instead of asking for handouts'. Enraged, she immediately replied, calling him out for his 'obscene privilege'.

Back and forth they went, arguing and counter-arguing, as each reply appeared in her public Facebook newsfeed. Others started to join in as the battle expanded to include not only men she knew, but complete strangers. Some users – including men – voiced strong support for what she was saying. Others offered vitriol. Whatever the response, her strategy, remained the same: no apologies, no clarifications, no deference, no assumptions. She was not only arguing her point, but she was making plain her fears for the future, her anxieties about how the government might affect the struggle for racial and sexual equality, for climate change, for social justice and for her son's life chances. On her Facebook Wall – not in therapy, not in her outside relations - Gwen hadn't so much found a voice, but a *roar*. With it, she had brought disorder to how she conceptualised and engaged with others, particularly with men. On the one hand, Gwen's declaration of war on Facebook is evidence of what Wood (2019) calls the 'irreverent rage' of modern intersectional politics. On the other – as will be explored - one might consider her effort to 'reach out' and assert herself into the digital fray as a 'decisive' moment, one that not only held implications for her own processes of subjectification and self-development, but for the therapy work itself.

The Uber 'Fraulein' Online: Partiality, Mediated Agency and Schizoid Ruptures

An analysis of Gwen's engagement on Facebook is aided by Deleuze's concept of the 'fold'²⁵, or the self-production of one's subjectivity. One could assert that the Facebook machine afforded each of them a *technique* through which they might – whether by a livestream, or a comment, or a group – transform themselves, to alter the way in which they engage with the exterior world. The following exchange with Gwen - in which the dyad explores a series of

²⁵ Taken from Deleuze's (1986) appropriation of Foucault's account of the 'self' as a product of processes of subjectification, the concept of the 'fold' can be summarised as one's relation to oneself. Another way to conceive of the idea is as a type of connection (Kofoed 2010). For Deleuze, all of the universe is a process of folding and unfolding the outside – which creates an interior that is not autonomously grown from the outside world, but represent a doubling of the outside (Bogue 1994). The fold is therefore the relationship of oneself to - and 'over' - ones 'self'. In a clear echo of Nietzsche's *ubermensch*, Deleuze's creative concept of subjectivity is a question of mastery, a kind of new creative control over one's being (Bogue 1994). To 'have', according to Deleuze (1993), is to fold that which is outside inside. Fox (2002) expands on this idea as representing a type of psychic 'in-folding', in which the subject not so much mirrors the images, impressions and forces inscribed on it by its social and the natural environments, but refracts the very physical and psychological nature of the medium being inscribed.

arguments she had on her Facebook Wall - is illustrative of this processual, overlapping production of identity:

Gwen: I just told them where I was at with this entire disaster of a situation (following the election). I've been so upset. And the way in which people have been so privileged and have still asserted their fucking right to vote Conservative and extend it. It's a hard thing to talk about. It's impossible to confront people about, but I've had to say something. I've lost friends over it.

T: Could you say more? How did other people respond?

G: What do you mean?

T: Well... one assumes that if these battles were happening on your wall, then other people saw them. Right? So... What did they say about your posts?

G: Yeah... It was hard to miss. There were some, like, some people agreed. Some got behind and joined it. A bunch of them were really supportive. Then there were two of my friends, both of whom vote Conservative, who were just going nuts. 'How dare you accuse me of having privilege... I came from nothing' That sort of thing. They're the worst type(cries).

T: You're getting upset.

G: Yeah, I've been dwelling on it, because I'm really bad at confrontation. I'd love to say that I don't give a fuck, but I do. I'm not sad that I stood up for myself, I'm just sad that people would believe such horrible things.

T: It's interesting that you say that you're not very good at confrontation, it sounds like you were quite willing to confront these people online.

G: Well... I'd had some gin (laughs...)

As I highlighted (*'other people saw them...'*), she was making herself visible on Facebook in a way that was contradictory to how she had tended to manage her relationships. Historically, for Gwen to be connected, she not so much to be invisible but had to become enveloped, to become coupled, within the *same* of the other: the same ideas, the same ways of being, the same expectations of what is and what is not permissible. Her relational assemblages – sexual, familial, financial, even the therapeutic one between the two of us – had been territorialised around the assumption that her understanding of herself was insufficient and in need of guidance, namely from the men around her. In correspondence with Rebecca and Fran's management of their social assemblages, it could also be asserted that Gwen organised her relationships around flows of *submission* to both the ideas and passions of others.

Unlike the little girl who had survived the chaos of home by staying out of sight, on Gwen's Facebook Wall there was no place for her to conceal herself or escape the wrath of her tormentors. Despite this, she was able to produce a digital representation of her desire, even if that production resulted in compromising existing relationships (*'I've lost friends over it...'*). In this new mode of desiring-production, it was better to be seen and to be heard, even if the cost of that production was the scorn of others (*'(They) were both going nuts'*) or her own discomfort with asserting her opinions (*'It's a hard thing to talk about'*). Her admission about her own visibility (*'It was hard to miss'*), could be read not so much as an acknowledgement of the public nature of her posts, but that the process of self-writing on Facebook forced her to confront her own desires, specifically the desire to be heard and considered by others. Such defiance speaks to the efforts to clients to utilise Facebook as a means of subverting – or de-territorialising - the codes and expectations that governed their historical relationships.

Returning to the Deleuzoguattarian understanding of agency, it could be posited that Gwen's will-to-expression online was the result of a *reorganisation* of her assembled relations and flows of desire. Not only was she building new, affirming connections with her digital audience (*'A bunch of them were really supportive...'*), but through her posts she was re-territorialising boundaries 'within' her own self-assemblage. As a result of this material-discursive relations the identity categories which had previously constrained her persona – being docile, subservient, deferential – had been redrawn, leading to a new sense of empowerment. Gwen's desiring-agency could be seen not as a product of some essential shift in 'who' she was, but rather a reworking – one aided by the affordances of the Facebook-machine - of

‘what’ she could do within her online networks and the assembled relations with whom she could ‘do’ it.

Gwen’s time in therapy highlights the ways in which the digital expression of clients - that is, their willingness to produce something of themselves was incorporating of *difference* - both between their relations with others and within the intra-acting parts of themselves. This creative self-formation is reflected in Fran’s account of her livestreaming country karaoke sessions on Facebook Live. As previously noted, Fran’s church background had framed the concealing of negative feelings from public view as a polite, if not honourable, gesture. Against this intractable expectation, the uncertainty of her immigration status had prompted a wave of fear and doubt that she could not have expressed in her familial and church assemblages. Whereas episodes of difficulty might have been previously ‘*given to God*’ – if not repressed entirely - the exchange below shows the numerous reconfigurations that occurred through her use of Facebook Live. Even more striking are the ways in which this mediated expression brought about a redrawing of elements of her religious faith:

T: The ‘shows’ sound pretty empowering... you know, to be silly in the midst of a very un-silly situation.

F: It was very unsilly for sure, but those two minutes that people saw me on the internet were the most happy I felt in months. I also wanted them to know the truth about what was going on, that’s why I put up the post with the videos.

T: What do you mean?

F: Well...there’s a verse in the book of Romans that say ‘rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep’. That has almost been like a mantra. It’s taught me that you don’t have to rip people to happiness when they’re in a bad place. If I’m happy, it’s okay, join me in that... but if I am sad, don’t try and make me happy. I don’t think I’ve really ever done that before...

T: What was that like, to be frivolous, to be happy even online, in the midst of everything going on? It sounds like you were moving in two directions at the same time...

F: It was really helpful. It was an escape. The last song we did was my favourite, because (her partner) Julian came on and we dressed up and did

Johnny Cash and June Carter. That was such a, like, silly wonderful thing to kind of share what was happening, but in a way that wasn't too real. I also did a series of clay pieces (sculptures)...I would take an hour and relate it to how alone I was feeling, or how isolated it was. I needed to get that on paper. I put those up online, which I never do. I just needed to get something out.

Fran's allusion to scripture (*'There's a verse in the book of Romans'*) is an example of Dionysian²⁶ play that even Nietzsche (1889) himself could support. Previously, such a passage would have acted as a disciplinary component within her church-assemblage, in so far as it would have recoded and enforced the expectation of politeness. Suddenly, the Bible – that disciplinary machine par excellence – is evoked not as a tool of repression, but of *toleration*, particularly of those *'very unsilly'* emotions which would have previously deemed too volatile, too incoherent to be publicly shared within the church. In this reversal, the Facebook-machine emerges as an apparatus to let others know the *'truth about what was going on'* to *'join her'* in a myriad of emotions, not just those that previously would have required being *'(ripped) into happiness'*. As I attempt to paraphrase (*'It sounds like you were moving in two directions at the same time'*), Fran's *'escape'* was multi-directional: simultaneously moving her *away* from the emotional constraints of the past and *towards* a more transparent mode of connection with others.

While it is tempting to see her repurposing of scripture as confirmation of Nietzsche's (1878) charge to the subject to *'outgrow'* to *'become strong enough to see to the bottom of the dark well of your nature and your knowledge'* (p. 292), a more useful analytic tool would be that of Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) *partial* objects²⁷. Fran wasn't casting off the language of the church, she was *reconfiguring* it to make new meanings within new assemblages of relations, both *'within'* herself and *'between'* others. One can also see this embrace of multiplicity, of

²⁶ Throughout Nietzsche's writing, the Greek gods Dionysus and Apollo are used to demonstrate two distinct forces within the human subject: The former representing, creatively, sensuality and emotions, while the latter was used in relation to rationality, order and logical structures.

²⁷ Deleuze and Guattari's ontological commitment to contingency at every level of existence – including that of the intersubjective being – is further informed by their notion of *'partial'* objects (Connolly 2002). Unlike post-Freudian theorists like Klein, Winnicott and Lacan, who situated the desire and well-being of the patient in relation to psychic *'objects'*. Deleuze and Guattari were interested in how desire was the result of immanent relations. Such a view marks a rejection of the efforts of psychoanalysis to trace a patient's desires along an Oedipal grid of *'whole'* objects – *'mom'* and *'dad'* - thereby locking the patient into a fixed developmental trajectory (Holland 2012). In doing so, the pair sought to consider the plasticity – or the *'micropolitics'* – of desire, that is, modes of desiring-production not tied to any inherent constitution of the subject – or to any coherent view of the *'other'* - but emerging from an open, impersonal field of fragmented relations, affects and bodies (Connolly 2002).

partiality, in the exchange below with Rebecca, in which she details how her discussions on Facebook helped her to manage her conflicting feelings about childbirth:

R: There was a girl on (the group's Facebook page) that was so scared that she wanted to get sterilised and was asking for advice. Some people were like, 'go for it'. But I said.. 'I'm sure you've thought a lot about this and done your research, but just make sure it's really what you want. Things might change'.

T: Sounds like you highlighted other possibilities....

R: Yeah, I just remember how trapped I was, not speaking to anyone. People saying 'just do it', doesn't make you really consider what's going on. I just wanted to point out that you need to be 100% sure, because you might change your mind.

T: I wonder if we're talking about the girl of Facebook or you?

R: Possibly.... I mean... I dunno... I do know that the group...It's been so helpful. People have talked about giving birth and having C-sections. No one's put up a horror story. It's been 'here's how terrified I've been and it's been okay'. It made me realise, that I was terrified, but it was fine, that it was okay.

Throughout our work together, Rebecca had consistently remarked how '*unnatural*' it was that, as a woman, she would be afraid of giving birth. Just like Fran's assumption that negative feelings were to be withheld within the church, Rebecca's terror was not only personally intolerable, but assumed to *politically* inexcusable within her face-to-face social assemblages. As a result, she was '*trapped*' into a cycle of repression and isolation ('*I wasn't talking to anyone*'). What is remarkable about the exchange above is that it evidenced the way in which, through her engagement on Facebook, she was able to encounter the fears of others and in doing so, saw her own fears – indeed her own image of herself - in a new way. In seeing her struggles reflected in the posts of other group members, it could be argued that Rebecca's anxieties were transformed into a new way of understanding her own experience. After all, the '*girls*' on the screen, were just as '*scared*' and as '*terrified*' as she was. Despite this, they were able to offer Rebecca a : revelation that her fears weren't evidence of a failure of femininity, they were 'fine'. Thus, the terror of childbirth was de-territorialised into a *flexible* object, one

that could be encountered and potentially managed without the punishment of the past or the coded expectations of the present.

Through the lens of critical feminist thought, this *will-to-difference* could be attributed to the refusal of each individual client to uphold the ideologically constructed notions of 'hegemonic femininity' (Schippers 2007), which coded their historical relational assemblages. However, such a reading neglects that the production of agency described by these three women was not the result of a rejection of traditional notions of womanhood, but rather, was the emergent product of an iterative process between a multitude of assembled relations. It is worth noting that none of the members of this female cohort *explicitly* framed these relations in – nor the feelings associated with them – in the language of feminist empowerment (Langley and Fox 1994) or as an actualisation of their own 'feminine divine' (Irigaray and Gill 1996). While Rebecca's engagement in her Facebook group was situated amongst a uniquely female audience, analysis suggests that the online encounters of clients were valued not for the absence of male voices – or the promotion of female ones - but rather the presence of a plurality of opinion, insight, and emotional reciprocity between users. This is true even for Gwen, who described sense of comradeship with other like-minded male users, even as she was going to war with '*privileged middle class*' men in her friend list.

This phenomenon within accounts is informed by Renold and Ringrose's (2011) Deleuzoguattarian-inspired reading of the 'schizoid subjectivity' that is the norm of the contemporary, post-feminist female subject. As the pair assert, resistance to the 'resurgent patriarchy' of the neo-liberal era is not constitutive of total 'molar' rejection of norms, but is comprised of 'micro moments' in the which notions of heteronormative femininity are reconfigured, or 'ruptured' enabling new forms of femininity to emerge. Thus, the task of understanding the 'schizoid' conditions of women is not to seek out 'grand' theories to illustrate the constraints placed upon their sexualities and identities, but, rather, to engage in a 'molecular mapping' of the flows of desire through which normative expectations are re-territorialised and new lines of flight emerge (Renold and Ringrose 2011). When applied to accounts, Fran's will-to-frivolity, Rebecca's expression of anxiety and Gwen's online revolt could be framed as 'micro-moments' of becoming, in which they de-territorialised their own internally-held notions of femininity and experimented with transformative acts of expression that would have been verboten in their historical social assemblages.

While it would be foolish to assume that these acts of *molecular* resistance were teleological in nature - in so far as one might progress from state of rupture to another – analysis points to

the Facebook-assemblages as a liminal space, where notions of femininity are multiple and in-movement. One could argue that the subversive re-configurations initiated by these three clients – of performativity, of identity, of relationship – would not have been possible without the digital affordances of Facebook. On the platform, Fran could emote without fear of blasphemy, Rebecca could be afraid without fear of shame and Gwen could challenge the men in her online assemblages without the fear of subjugation. Each of these moments of re-configuration not only displayed the permeability of client's identities and desires but exposed the precarity of the heteronormative molar that had previously seemed so dominant. Put another way, the 'ruptures' that occur on Facebook pointed towards the possible, towards a *woman-to-come*, one who might not have dispatched with *all* of the codes of the past, but could have at least experienced - if only for a moment - a space in which those patriarchal codes were disrupted. More importantly, for the therapy endeavour, the Facebook-machine provided a surface that could be *mapped*, each of its molecularities and intensities plotted out and considered as malleable material in the psychic - or 'self' - assemblages of clients.

As this research endeavours to consider the interplay between the analogue and the algorithmic, any mapping of the Facebook machine requires an inventory of how specific functionalities within platform facilitated the production of new desires and processes of becoming. To this, the next section will explore how some of Facebook's most seemingly mundane features produced a host of affective possibilities for clients.

The War Machine: Blocking, Stalking and the Curation of Access

Facebook afforded this cohort a digital space in which to experiment with new modes of identity. In this, one could argue that the digital assemblages prompted a new awareness within clients towards others, as well as the desires and emotions within their 'hidden selves' (Suler 2002) that would historically been repressed in their social assemblages. While such an optimistic reading aligns with a host of literature asserting the liberatory aspects of digital engagement (Volker 2019), it misses a fundamental tension within accounts. Facebook may have facilitated a turn-to-*openness* within the self-assemblages of clients, but it also gave them a powerful tool to insulate themselves from – or, more descriptively - *close down* unwanted connections. As evidenced by the exchange with Fran below, the function of 'blocking' users proved to be an essential instrument of *curation*, by which clients could assert a control over who they engaged in their digital assemblages:

T: Sounds like there were people who 'got it' without you having to explain it.

F: Well, it wasn't perfect. There was also the kickback of people giving advice... There was this one woman from the church back home who was like 'I have to know... I have to know what's going on with this music'. I was like 'do you? Do you have to know what's going on with my soap opera life, because everyday I can barely breathe and you haven't been that interested in knowing anything about me'. There were other people who were like 'let's listen to this worship song, or let's do this devotional song' and I was like, 'I'm never going to respond to you again!'. Some people needed to be blocked immediately!

T: And did you block them?

F: Of course! I'm taking care of business...(laughs)

Fran's remark in the previous exchange that *'some people needed to be blocked'* could be read as an attempt at humour, but it strikes me as pointing towards a critical relational tool available to clients in the Facebook-machine. In affording her the capacity to block or 'unfollow' other users, Facebook could be seen as an instrument of what Lopez and Ovaska (2013) term 'unsocial behaviour', that is, the ability to exclude others in the digital without the immediacy and emotional consequences of traditional, face-to-face contact. Given the historical difficulty of these clients to exercise agency within their social relations, one could frame such a gesture not as an act of digital cruelty, but as a productive form of *resistance*. In correspondence with research asserting the importance of blocking as a tool of self-formation in online circles (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin 2008), one could read Fran's curation of her Facebook relationships as the granting of *access* of users to her private thoughts, emotions, and traumas. The function of blocking allowed her to *'take care business'* can be read as evidence of a new-found agency to take care of *herself* by administering who could see her posts.

As opposed to her 'strained' spaces face-to-face assemblages, in which she would have had to politely acquiesce to unwanted suggestions for *'devotional songs'* from people who *'haven't been that interested in knowing anything about (her)'*, online Fran was able to initiate a movement towards Deleuze and Guattari (1980) term the 'smooth' space associated with 'nomadic' war machine²⁸. Not only she was able to feel and express a multitude of emotions

²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari (1986) write that the function of nomadic *society* is to assemble lines of flight into unique assemblages known as 'war machines'. Such 'machines' are not meant for combat, but for

– including her disillusion at her ‘*soap opera life*’ – but through the blocking function, she was able to retain some authority about how she would initiate and sustain intimate contact with others online. While the reception her posts received online might not have been, as she points out, ‘*perfect*’, they were of *her* choosing. Unlike her church-assemblage, where platitudes would have been suffered with a smile, Fran’s Facebook-assemblage was not governed by the codes of the past, but of the desires of the present. Her exclamation (‘*I’m never going to respond to you again!*’) could be read in two ways. First, as an expression of *relief* that there existed a space in her life that was ‘beyond’ the institutional expectations that had come before and second, as an expression of *liberation*, that she – not her family, not the church – could control the object and tenor of her social engagement.

Returning to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980) intermingling of affect and agency, the sense of empowerment within Fran’s account could be viewed not as a by-product of her domination of those in her church assemblage, but as the result of a radical discovery: that irrespective of the self-censorship of the past, she had the capacity to link up and connect with new relations, including those various underdeveloped, or undervalued capacities in herself. However, as evidenced by the exchange with Rebecca below, blocking wasn’t the only defensive tool available to clients within their online assemblages.

R: Well...before I posted (in the group), I was scrolling through, seeing what people had posted, just to see how people were responding to everything. I was really careful to make sure what sorts of things people would say and even check out their profiles before I did anything. I thought it would be like every other group, where every comment gets fifty aggressive comments afterwards. I did my homework...

T: That seems to be an important thing for you, that people will respond in a way that’s helpful for you.

the overcoming of spatial boundaries, specifically the signs – of the ‘mainstream’, capital, the ‘regime’ – appropriated by the State (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). It is only through this direct refutation of the state apparatus – through a potential ‘creative line of flight’ – does the war machine takes on a destructive quality (Fox 2002). Once the ‘machine’ has begun to construct and reconstruct smooth into striated, the only choice for the nomadic collective is continue to resist the State, or else risk being assimilated into the hierarchical structures – of the market, of the barracks, of the church - which seek to constrain liberatory movement (Lundy 2013).

R: Before, I would just shut everything down. There wasn't anything for me to do except isolate myself. There was no-one I could go to that felt the same as me. That's been really nice. And it's amazing that Facebook can actually be useful!

Note the multiple admissions of trepidation prior to posting in the group. As Rebecca points out, she *'doesn't trust people'* and in the past such sensitive discussions and details about her life have been *'kept private'*. As a result, she was ready to *'shut everything down'* and isolate herself at the first sign of negativity or unhelpfulness from others. With this, one could assert that her initial engagement on Facebook was no different from her management of other social assemblages. She was, as ever, braced for *betrayal*. What is interesting is how Facebook allowed her to *'do her homework'* on potential relations prior to engaging. She was able to read the profiles of other groups members prior to contributing information about her own experience. My reflection (*'That seems to be an important thing for you...'*) was intended to highlight how the anonymity she enjoyed on Facebook seemed to afford her an essential type of certainty: not only of *who* she might encounter in the group, but of *how* they might respond to her difficulty based on their previous posts and comments. Put another way, the Facebook afforded her the agency to *look before she leapt*. In doing so, one could assert that Rebecca was able to protect herself from the disillusion and upset that had beset her previous relationships. This notion of *confirmation* – of the 'other', of the 'appropriateness' of emotions, of coded discourses – as an act of self-preservation is equally present in Gwen's account:

G: It's different (on Facebook) than on Twitter. On Twitter, I can sit there and waste three hours at a time just scrolling and learning nothing or not even talking to anyone. On Facebook you can at least see the people you're talking to. Whether they're friends or not, you can look at something about them. It feels a bit slower, paced, I guess. It feels like follows aren't as big a deal. I mean, how much can you know about anyone or anything in 140 characters. It's impossible to say anything about yourself in that space that means anything. To me, Facebook, as awful as it is, is more about the people you're, you know, interacting with... or as I do half time, the people you're stalking (laughs).

Gwen's distinction between the relational functionality of Twitter and Facebook is worthy of consideration. Her statements above are reflective of what Bryant and Marmo (2012) refer to as a common 'surveillance strategy' (p.138) within the digital, in which the knowledge gleaned from Facebook profiles helps users to build and maintain social connections with others. As she points out, on Facebook, one can *'see who (they're) talking to'*. This statement aligns with

research (Jaidka et al 2018; Sarkar and Ghosal 2018), which claims that the platform provides a richer public display of personal information than its competitors. While Gwen's self-accusation of stalking ('*As I do half the time...*') could be read as a deflection away from her difficulty in establishing relationships, her previous exchange confirms research (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons 2002) that computer-mediated communication can enable connections and interactions between users that that would not otherwise occur.

While it is obvious that almost *all* SNS technologies allow individuals to monitor their mediated relations in some form, analysis aligns with the work of Boyd and Marwick (2011), who assert that Facebook's requirement of reciprocal following generates a more bounded - and therefore more comfortable - semi-public space than Twitter and Instagram. The positive psychic effects of the 'controls' of Facebook – as articulated by Rebiero (2020) - are also evidenced by the flexibility of the platform's 'follow' function, which allowed Rebecca to view the public profiles of users within her pregnancy anxiety group without becoming 'friends' and thereby initiating a potentially more exposing two-way connection. As will be discussed in the next - and final - section of this chapter, these tools of interpersonal management may have facilitated a new sense of agency in clients, but nonetheless required their willingness to do something that would have been unthinkable in their previous relationships: become *visible* and even vulnerable before the digital 'other'.

The 'Shock to Thought': Rhizomatic Networks, Lines of Flight and the New 'They'

Accounts illustrate the capacity of specific SNS design features to produce new affective realities and new modes of desiring-agency. However, given that the digital affordances utilised by clients were commonplace across almost all social media platforms one wonders: why would these three women – from different backgrounds, of different dispositions, of different desires – *all* use Facebook to reconfigure their social assemblages? After all, each had described their previous social engagement on SNS as dissatisfying and insincere. What has changed? Is Facebook a 'female friendly' apparatus, or even a feminist one? Any Deleuzoguattarian answer to such questions must be less interested in locating Facebook's 'fundamental' qualities and more attuned to the affects that emerge through its techno-social assemblages. One must not ask what does the platform 'do', but what desires does it produce? What intensities and connections does it facilitate within and between actors? What limits does it impose or even liberate?

While the previous section has examined the desiring-affects of blocking and publicly viewable profiles, I contend that Facebook emerged as the 'site' of self-formation not only because its 'controls' afforded the clients the agency to engage in new modes of performing-woman, but because it constituted a space where those hegemonic feminine principles that had been absent in their historical relational assemblages could be produced and exchanged. Just as the three male clients in the Instagram chapter could be said to have utilised the digital to redress a crisis of masculinity by commodifying themselves as desirable digital objects, one could assert that Fran, Rebecca and Gwen's engagement on Facebook productive was because of the flows of cooperation, of non-competitiveness, of kindness associated with 'traditional' forms of womanhood (Hendriks 2016).

Thus emerges an interesting dichotomy. As previously discussed, the Facebook-machine could be seen as a site of 'schizoid' ruptures (Renold and Ringrose 2011) within the feminine identities of clients, as it allow them to access modes of expression that were outside of the heterosexist regulations of their historical relational assemblages. What is striking is not the ways in which clients used the platform to exclude others, but to engage in new, molecular reconfigurations of *affiliation*. It could be posited that through Facebook, clients engaged in processes of becoming-*visible*, as the digital affordances of the platform allowed each client to produce content that articulated different aspects of themselves, their anxieties, and their desires to an audience of digital peers. In turn, the rhizomatic relations that emerged on Facebook could bear witness to these vulnerabilities and respond in kind. Put another way, just as Instagram provided a 'site' of masculine restoration, Facebook afforded an apparatus to produce those hegemonic feminine qualities that had been lost, or that were missing, from their previous social networks.

As evidenced by the happening with Rebecca below – in which she described the relief of seeing women in her Facebook group afflicted with similar levels of anxiety - this new mode of exchange was contingent upon a new, reciprocal engagement with the collective:

R: It made me think that I'm not crazy... that they're are other people out there who feel like me... and that's okay.

T: What things were you reading on the feed?

R: It's from people in my situation, you know... people who are afraid of giving birth, to people who didn't want it to happen at all, to people who were pregnant and were talking about how terrified they were. I guess I might be that person one day. At least they've gotten passed it...

Suddenly, the meaning she had previously ascribed to the words '*they*' and '*crazy*' seemed to have been transformed. '*They*' were not some heavily territorialised force seeking to shame or misunderstand her, but '*people*' that were just like her. As displayed in the exchange below, this shift could be framed as a reconfiguration, as Rebecca transitioned from speaking of herself as resolutely opposed to becoming pregnant to someone that '*might*' be able to endure her fear and come out the other side:

R: Everyone's really positive.... And the girls on there, they text you back immediately, as soon as you put something up. It's really nice. It makes you feel normal. You can even go look at their profiles. It's like, 'this is just a problem, like any other problem. It's nothing you can't fix.' It's been nice to see that other people, other girls, are actually in a worse position than me. I know that sounds horrible, but some of the things I've read have made me think, 'wow, at least I've not got that problem....'. There's a lot of girls who are on medication and I'm reassured that I'm not there yet.

T: It doesn't sound horrible to me. It sounds like it makes it seem like your situation is more manageable...

R: It's made me feel loads better. It doesn't scare me as much as it did. I don't what will happen next, but I can at least consider doing it now. I'm just so glad to not be in that situation where I terrified and not doing anything about it. I'm really thankful to them to sharing so much....they didn't have to do that.

Again, note the continued shift in language. No longer was she referring to '*they*' but to the more intimate '*girls*'. '*They*' were transformed from a faceless, ungendered mass into human beings, ones with fears and hopes and desires, *just like her*. She knew this because she could see them on her screen. She could see their profiles and read their posts and write directly to them. '*They*' could write back, sometimes instantaneously, as if they were having a conversation in real time. If '*they*' could sort through their difficulties – some of which appeared to be far more debilitating than her own - perhaps she could as well.

Whereas Rebecca had previously spoken of her future with creeping sense of doom, it is remarkable how the above exchange displays a newfound openness towards what might lay ahead. One could interpret Rebecca's engagement on Facebook as an apparatus of knowledge about the other, specifically the knowledge that women just like her had suffered and eventually found solace. I contend that her admission of (*'at least I've not got that problem...'*) is not just an exhalation of relief that disaster was not lurking around the corner, but is an expression of *satisfaction*; that the difficulty of some group members was even greater than her own. One could claim that the suffering of others within the Facebook group was a type of mark of *affiliation*, as the paranoia which afflicted her was reflected in the shared experience of the collective. In seeing that pain – her pain - on the screen, it could be argued that such difficulty was made more tolerable. She was one of 'them' now. Just as they survived, perhaps she could as well.

The social exchange of affects and artefacts described by clients aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's (1972) notion of how activity occurs in 'straited' and 'smooth' space. One could surmise that in her production and reception of messages, Rebecca was taking part in the co-production of a 'smooth' space, through which an affective economy of empathic *gift-giving* emerged between users. Not only was she extending herself towards others, through the Facebook-machine, they were extending themselves towards her. These gifts may have been mediated through the comments and replies on the platform, but they had to be extended from one user to the another. As she points out, her online peers had *'shared so much'*. In another example of the classically feminine ideals produced and exchanged within the Facebook-assemblages, these 'gifts' didn't have to be given and yet, despite the emotional and geographic isolation of group member, there they were, creating affects, insights and relational connections. Within Rebecca's account, the effect of this sharing of psychic and emotional gifts is a clear sense of gratitude. To use her word, she was *'thankful'* for her contact she had on Facebook. The affects produced by the generosity of others on processes of self-formation can also be seen in Fran's account:

F: Well, it was good, some friends would check in and just say 'hey'. They were really sweet, people acknowledging that it was horrible, without me having to give too much information.

T: It's interesting that we find ourselves in a familiar place: I'm honoured that you've been able to say that our work has been place where you feel understood. But I don't want to lose sight of the fact, that you've allowed me to see it. You've tolerated the fact that I might respond well sometimes and poorly others, even when you didn't want to be here. You've worked hard to help me understand. I can appreciate that you don't want platitudes or bullshit chit chat, but it sounds like you put yourself out there for people to see....

F: What you're saying really resonates... before I've had this anxiety of how to say things... now it's more that I need to pick which people I can share things. There are certain people that I need to share this with and other people that I absolutely don't. I've given myself this week to be all over the place and to just tell everybody....

T: There seems to be a real need for control in all of this...

F: Yeah... In a weird way.... This whole thing has taught me something about boundaries. Before I might have had a lack of boundaries... or too many of them... But it's made me think a lot about taking care of myself. (pauses) And who I share things with. I don't have to necessary, you know, have to hide away, but at the same time, I can give people a clue if something's going on.

The above event highlights the ways in which the reciprocity encountered by clients on Facebook aided in a unique process of de-territorialisation. One could assert that the result of this mutuality was a distinctly *cooperative* line of flight. Her own videographic and textual self-disclosures could be said to be the action outside of the expectation of self-censorship that defined her church and family assemblages. Much like Rebecca and Gwen, the withholding that had previously governed Fran's social assemblages produced a sense of *ressentiment* towards others. 'They' were an enemy from which she needed to conceal herself. 'They' didn't get it, nor did 'they' want to. Suddenly, despite the intransigence of these assumptions, the way in which she talks about 'they' seems to change. Her online peers were being 'sweet' and 'checking in' without her having to 'give away too much information'. Through their comments in the livestream sidebar, they could acknowledge how 'horrible' things had been said of her.

Here, one could be tempted to frame such digital becomings as illustrative of the feminine 'masquerade' (Riviere 1999) employed by women to manage their own precarious identities or repressed masculine tendencies. This research does not purport that the 'selves' that emerged from Facebook were any more or less 'true' than those that occurred offline or in therapy. However, the 'womanliness' they encountered on the platform did not constitute a *mask* for clients to wear to hide from the retributions of men – church elders, unaware

husbands, 'privileged' white men - but rather, as a type of *armour* through which they were able to territorialise new assemblages of desire and affective connection.

Fran's reconsideration of the digital 'other' is emblematic of the relational *intimacy* that clients described as occurring within her Facebook assemblage. It could be argued that the 'controls' of the Facebook-machine afforded clients the means of asserting *new* boundaries, ones that didn't calcify the divisions and codes of the past, but initiated a 'smooth' space, in which *gifts* – whether that be of candour, acknowledgement or support – could be exchanged. Such cooperation with others could be said to have facilitated more self-disclosure, which in turn formed new affiliations, new expressions of affiliation and so on. My intervention (*'we find ourselves in a familiar place...'*) was intended to highlight how in making herself visible to others in the digital, she put herself in a position to find the support and candour that was missing from her previous relations. Her closing remark (*'I can give people a clue of what's going on...'*) displays an openness to the affects of becoming-visible, not only within her rhizomatic networks of disparate actors and affects that emerged within the Facebook machine, but those within her face-to-face communities. It also confirms a wealth of research (Valkenburg et al 2006) which suggest that individuals with a poor self-image or difficulty managing interpersonal relationships may benefit from the social opportunities provided by social media technologies.

In another indication of the complexity of the feminine-becomings across accounts, the rhizomatic networks of clients upheld qualities associated with molar formations of femininity. Despite this, these groupings did not emerge within – apart from Rebecca's pregnancy anxiety group - explicitly *female* spaces, nor were they solely comprised of female actors. As previously discussed, both Fran and Gwen described receiving support and generosity from a range of male actors. Returning to Renold and Ringrose's (2011) attention towards the *molecular*, one could assert that the becoming-affiliated described by clients was illustrative of the 'messy' realities and multiple struggles of the post-feminist subject. It would be naïve to assume that the platform allowed these three clients to completely cast off the coded expectations that had stratified their social assemblages and, indeed, the ways in which they had historically conceived of themselves. While Fran's blocking, Rebecca's confirmation, or Gwen's 'stalking' may have been outside of those more dominate cultural representations of female empowerment – particularly that of hypersexualised woman (Gill 2007) - each highlights how the functionality of Facebook afforded clients a unique apparatus of *agency*, through which their desire could find expression.

Such an analysis could be conflated with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-woman, in which the feminine must first disappear – must become *imperceptible* – before it can become *distinct*. While one could assert that the digital engagement of these three female clients afforded a line of flight from the molarity of man/woman, this research aligns with a number of authors (Grosz, 1993; Bradotti 1994) who criticise Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor as highly problematic. Irigaray (1985) claims that the pair's nomadic woman 'risks depoliticising challenges that are crucial to the survival and self-definition of women' (p. 140). Jardine (1993) argues that becoming-woman could be framed as a process of becoming-minoritarian *en extremis*, so minor in fact, that women may becoming 'silent, mutable, headless, desireless spatial surface necessary only for his metamorphosis' (p. 217). Considering this criticism, a more detailed reading of accounts is not motivated – as McRobbie (2008) warns against – by the desire to de-politicise their usage of the platform, but rather, to situate the ruptures they initiated on the app within flows of *molecular* identities, desires, and technologies.

While any analysis of the relational re-territorialisations described in accounts must contend with what clients purported to 'do' in the digital, it must also address that the processes of subjectification and inter-relationality they initiated online were mediated through the 'screen' of Facebook. As such, the digital action of clients reflected their laptops and smartphones produced a type of 'image', through which they could be surmised to have encountered themselves and others in a new, if not, transformative way. As Massumi (2002) points out, to provide an image 'is to provide a point of reflection, identification and orientation for the subject in relation to its community and to the world. It gives form.' (p. 4). As much as the Deleuzian (1985) time-image²⁹ 'shocks' the expectations of the cinema viewer out of the ordinary, resulting in a new awareness of previously overlooked elements, analysis supports the notion that the *Facebook-image* presented clients with an apparatus to stand back and notice the structural contours – of themselves and their relations - they may not have ordinarily seen (Pedwell 2017).

It could be argued that the through the digital 'image' of Facebook - their posts, videos, profiles, groups, etc – clients were presented with what Massumi (2002) terms a 'shock to thought'; an

²⁹ Along with the movement-image and the electronic-image, the time-image is one of Deleuze's 'three passive synthesis' of time is part of his analysis of the cinematic treatment of time, memory, thought and speech (Crockett 2005). A 'time-image', according to Deleuze (1985) is infused with time, one which is different from itself, which is virtual to itself, which is infused with past/future.

affective jolt that worked less to reveal ‘truth’ as it did to propel them ‘involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry’ (Bennett 2005, p. 11). The ‘shock of the new’ that clients encountered on their devices could be conceptualised as a shock-of-*contingency*, a series of ‘linked’ moments (Rentschler and Thrift 2015) in which they were affecting and being affected, making and re-making. Thus, the desiring-production initiated online by clients was not a distant destination on the horizon, nor was it beholden to the upset or isolation of the past, but was produced within the multiplicity of relations and flows that appeared on the screen of Facebook. It would be foolish to assume that all Facebook users – particularly female users – experience the platform as a critical apparatus of psychic or relational de-territorialisation. However, the accounts in this chapter support the notion that its digital affordances aided in the production of a *molecular* mode of desire, from which new inter-personal connections and new self-understandings emerged.

Conclusion

The accounts in this chapter display that the connections clients formed on Facebook had direct consequences for their personal development, both in and out of therapy. The interpersonal contact that clients encountered on the platform offered each of them something that I, nor their historical face-to-face relations, appeared to be able to provide. It afforded the affective capacity to engage, to connect and to commiserate with others in a new way. On Facebook, Rebecca could receive first-hand accounts of a world not beset with fear or indifference or isolation but with *possibility*. Gwen could express herself to other in such a way to be reminded that that, despite the years of powerlessness and unanswered questions, she was not without the reliance to stand up for herself. Fran could reach out to other women and not be met with empty platitudes or awkwardness, but with generosity, which she could then return in kind. Accounts suggest that clients experienced a new type of affective connection with the digital ‘other’. Through the ‘tools’ of Facebook – blocking, groups, even ‘stalking’ – this research contends that they were also able to produce something new *in* themselves, to use their mediated assemblages to express new forms of desire and to facilitate new modes of molecularity in their relations.

As this project seeks to explore the implications of online technologies on practice, the positive processes of self-becoming described by clients on Facebook serve as a word of caution for the field of psychotherapy against condemning the digital ‘lives’ of clients – those relations, discourses and affects encountered online – as an *anathema* to the contemporary therapy meeting. The rhizomatic networks described within this chapter credence a type of online

engagement that can be *inclusive*, which is *connective*, that *liberates* desire, and draws positive lines of flight, for both the subject and the dyad. In rejection of Pollet et al (2011) who contend that technologically-based interactions do not appear to confer the same benefits or emotional benefits associated with in-person human contact, the reported digital entanglements of clients serve as a mediated archive of *futurity*, one which offered – even if just for a moment - a new mode of relational connection and the possibility of the digital subject becoming ‘untimely, of placing (them)selves outside the constraints, the limitations and blinkers of the present’ (Grosz 2004, p.117). From this, one could assert that the role of therapy encounter is not to examine what the digital ‘is’ or ‘isn’t’, but rather what it *does*. Thus, speaking to the final aim of this research, the therapy dyad emerges as a site of *consolidation*, one which affords clients an exploratory space to evaluate the affective realities of their different social assemblages and decide *for themselves* what value their engagement – both on and ‘off’ line – might hold.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Future Directions

This chapter concludes the thesis by presenting a summative discussion of the analysis from the previous three chapters in the light of the earlier reviewed literature and the research questions. In relation to this, four points will be discussed. First, I will detail the original contributions of this work to the academic literature within the social sciences, particularly inquiry into subjectivity. Second, the implications of this work will be discussed, both for the practical delivery of psychotherapy and more broadly, on training relating to the effects of digital technologies on the contemporary therapy meeting. Third, I consider the strengths and limitations of the work, with special reference to my own role within accounts and the complications of acquiring a sample from my own private practice. Finally, I conclude with the future considerations emerging from this situated study, specifically the role of digital technologies in shaping subjectivity, sexuality, and inter-relationality in the age of ubiquitous computing and mediated communication.

As pointed out by Kozinets et al (2017), the affordances of the digital – its speed, its connectivity, its circumnavigation of temporal and geographic constraints - produce new modes of social exchange, of self-formation and, most critically, of *desire*. In this thesis, I have explored how the digital engagement of participants – that is, the discourses, relations and artefacts encountered within social media platforms – produce an array of affective realities, including those *within* the individual processes of self-formation of clients, *between* the psychotherapy dyad and *amongst* the social and cultural economies that emerged online. What is relevant to a Deleuzoguattarian analysis of the digital is not to assume that the platforms discussed by clients possess any sort of essential ‘character’, but to consider how these technologies *affect* other bodies. As demonstrated by analysis, the ‘subject’ of the contemporary therapy encounter is an emergent product of this multiplicity of assembled relations. The therapeutic ‘task’ as put forward by work is to consider the experience of clients beyond the determinism of the familiar binaries – ‘*real*’/‘*unreal*’, ‘*digital*’/‘*analogue*’, ‘*success*’/‘*failure*’ – and to initiate a relational space of ‘composed’ chaos, where a ‘complex web of divisions, bifurcations, knots and confluences’ (Serres 2000, p. 51) might materialise and be usefully analysed. Thus, this work displays that the viability of the modern therapy meeting is partially contingent upon the willingness of the field to engage with the chaotic techno-social multiplicities at play in the consulting room. Put more simply, to understand our clients – their desires, their fears, their relational entanglements - practitioners must be

prepared to understand what occurs within and between *all* of the various component 'psychotherapeutic-assemblage', including those which occur in the digital.

Contribution to Academic Literature

The thesis seeks to reveal the situated discourses around digital technologies that arose within the psychotherapy setting. In this, it is a work that is ontologically and epistemologically orientated towards utilising the therapy discourse to explore the affective and relational economies that emerge in online spaces and makes an intellectual contribution to the fields of both psychotherapy and the social sciences. What an analysis of this rich, multifaceted discourse highlights is the ways in which the online worlds described by clients align with Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) concept of the *rhizome*, the criteria of which are summarised, as follows (p.21):



Figure 5: A Conceptual Overview of the Rhizome

While others (Buchanan 2007) have articulated the rhizomatic *qualities* of the 'internet of things' (Ashton 2009), this research demonstrates how the rhizomatic 'networks' of clients are produced through contact between heterogeneous bodies, concepts, thoughts and affects, which, in turn, produce new configurations of expression and normative behaviours (Colman 2005). On a purely machinic level, the online engagement of clients reveals the hyper-connectivity between disparate digital devices and relations that occurs without the constraints of distance, geography, or time. While clients often focused their descriptions of the digital around individual social media platforms, their online engagement was fundamentally acentred, as it was produced in different mediated spaces, through different communication technologies and with a range of mediated relations. The artefacts and affordances of their digital assemblages - textual and video messages, comments, PDAs, etc - could be framed as constitutive of the same type of 'nodes' which comprise Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) rhizome. Each component of 'the digital', from the smartphone to specific design features, holds the capacity to shoot off and establish affective connections – and processes of territorialisation - with other nodes and other bodies. Thus, the form and content of that appeared on the digital surfaces of clients, were, as posited by Pister (2003), components of a *productive* encounter, one which opened new rhizomatic connections as an 'umbilical cord' to the world (p.12).

In calling upon the richness and multiplicity of the therapy dialogue as a window 'out' towards the social, this research demonstrates the unique ways in which the affordances of social media platforms channel, constrain and even liberate modes of social exchange and self-experience within digital assemblages. What is relevant to a Deleuzoguattarian analysis is the different, unique ways in which these technologies *affect* other bodies, including the individual subject within psychotherapy. Perhaps most emblematic of the capacity for the 'tools' of the digital to produce new affective realities is Jess and Matt's account of the Tinder Swipe. As noted by both clients, the Swipe initiated a type of movement, a flow that seemed to be extending out and towards the *possibility* of the digital 'other'. The speed and seriality of a simple flick of the thumb seemed to provide Jess and Matt with a complex set of assurances; that the ceaseless repetition of the Swipe would afford them the *choice* as to who they would meet in the Tinder-machine and the *control* over what sort of entanglement they would have with their 'matches'. The promise of Tinder, it could be asserted, is the promise of *virtuality*, of becoming, of actualising modes of desiring-production that were previously unrealised. Analysis suggests that such a surge towards the future – towards a date, a life, or a shag-to-come – would not be possible without the gestural demands of the Swipe.

Of equal note is way the Facebook machine allowed clients to 'block' or surveil other users. In affording the capacity to exclude others from their digital assemblages – or to observe their behaviours prior to engaging with them - one could argue that the platform provided clients with the security that they could not only distance themselves from unwanted relations but cut off such interactions entirely. From a psychotherapeutic standpoint, it could be argued that this functionality gave clients a chance to 'practise' exercising a new mode of inter-personal agency. In blocking the other, Fran, Rebecca and Gwen were able to engage in a novel, if not revolutionary act: they were able to say 'no'. Whether they were denying the forces of self-censorship, of fear, or the torment of white, middle-class men, the affordances of Facebook provided them with the security to reconfigure their social relations around a reciprocal desiring-production between themselves and others. In being able to say 'no' on Facebook, all three women were able to affirm – at the risk of sounding trite, to say 'yes' - to something new in themselves and their desiring-connections with others.

Finally, the 'informatics' of Instagram – those accumulations of 'likes', 'shares' and 'follows' – presented Paul, Chris and David with a set of quantitative metrics through which they could, quite literally, re-territorialise their desires – and themselves - as a brand for public consumption. While such PDAs are not novel amongst online technologies, when paired with the exchange of visual content that occurs on the platform, Instagram could be framed as providing clients with a full suite of marketing tools to engage with and respond to the demands their digital audiences. Such 'controls' were not only essential to the 'aesthetic entrepreneurship' (Elias et al 2017) clients described as taking place on the platform but spoke to a desire in all three men to use Instagram to achieve a sort of marketised *redemption*; one in which the deficits of the present – whether economic, physical or emotional – could be assuaged by producing and commodifying a new type of social capital that might *become-valuable* in the future.

Analysis suggests that the while the unique architecture of online platforms may have afforded clients a sense of endless possibility, in the language of Deleuze and Guattari (1980), such controls *striated* the affective capacities between their online relations and the desiring-flows within themselves. Within accounts, even the most benign or mundane functions of the digital could be seen to produce a range of affects within the digital assemblages of clients, including how they made sense of themselves and of others. The Tinder '*Swipe*', the '*like*' and the '*follow*' of Instagram, the '*group*' or interactive '*streaming*' on Facebook Live – as well as the exchange of textual and visual 'comments' which featured in the interface of all three platforms

- not only structured the digital engagement of clients, but often defined the affective potentialities that occurred between the therapy dyad. Thus, this work points towards not only a rhizomatic understanding of the SNS technologies, but the subjectivity of individual users. I assert that this 'new ocular reality' (Bartnam 2004) that clients purported to experience through the SNS 'screen' produced affective realities in three distinct areas of subjectivity: desiring-production, relationality, and adherence to coded behaviours, each of which will be explored below.

Rhizomatic Desire

The design of SNS technologies affected the *desiring-production* of participants, limiting and de-limiting both their capacities to produce new affective emotional and relational connections with others. Just because this work has taken a 'machinic' view of the assembled relations that occur in the digital, that should not preclude an examination of the human emotions and relational needs that are produced within the 'host machine'. After all, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) remind, 'assemblages are passionate, they are compositions of desire' (p. 128). What analysis reveals, is that the desiring-production of clients – the movement towards the actors, relations or experiences they wanted – was not the product of *lack*, but rather the *intermingling* of components within assemblages.

Throughout accounts, one can trace the desiring affects brought about by the flows of digital artefacts, algorithmic sequences and technological affordances that occurred in the online spaces of clients. Whether David's craving to accumulate '*follows*' on Instagram, Fran's felt sense of appreciation at the real-time comments she received during her Facebook Live stream or Matt's excitement at what sexual liaisons might come about from a night of the '*ole swipe-o, swipey*' on Tinder, the 'architecture' of the digital provided clients with desiring '*circuits*' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980) that connected them to other networks of desiring-machines. In the immanent rhizomatic framework of the 'screen', one could argue that their desire was not fixed, but was in constant flux. As such, the desiring-production of clients was formed and re-formed by the dynamic relations, affects and artefacts that emerged in the techno-social field of the digital.

Through this lens, the digital rhizomes of clients – their smartphones, SNS platforms, social engagements, and embodied responses - not only facilitated an *intra-activity* of desiring-production within their assembled relations, but between parts of their own self-assemblages, that is, their own internal 'network' of emotional states and relational needs. Many of the

productive connections described by clients appear to be motivated by the desire to defend against the feelings of isolation and disillusion that dominated their historical analogue assemblages. On Instagram, Chris could be acknowledged by others for his physical strength, Paul for his authenticity and David for his popularity. On Tinder, Jess could be sexually pursued, and Matt could be a sexually powerful pursuer. On Facebook, Fran, Rebecca and Gwen, could all be valued. Furthermore, it allowed them to connect with other desiring-machines – both individual and collective – without the constraints of geography, time or financial resource that would have limited previous social engagement. Across accounts, a consistent theme emerges: the digital afforded clients a ‘machine’ to form modes of interpersonal exchange and desiring-production that would have been impossible in their offline lives. As a result, this research speaks to ways in which the analogue and the digital are entangled in new and different ways.

One should be cautious in arguing that the digital provided clients with the tools to cast off – or escape - the psychic distress that had haunted their historical patterns of relationship. Accounts illustrate how the fears and anxieties that clients claimed to feature in their pre-digital lives were nearly always present in their online entanglements. Whether David’s feelings of failure, Matt’s fear of falling behind his peers or Rebecca’s sense of terror around childbirth, the digital didn’t transcend *lack*, but, rather, presented clients with the productive capacity – as assessed by the quantifiable metrics of likes, follows and comments - to transcend the crisis of value that comes with being *alone*. Thus, the ‘superpower’ of the SNS technologies emerges not as the capacity to circumvent space or time, or even to curate a more tolerable or attractive ‘self’, but to produce new *desiring-connections* between users.

Rhizomatic Relationality

The primacy that clients afforded to the metrics of the affective digital economy leads to the second example of rhizomaticism: the *relational* affects brought about by the digital. In correspondence with Deleuze and Guattari’s (1977) assertion that desire ‘is a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it’ (p.26), one could argue that SNS technologies facilitated a desiring-production orientated towards an entanglement with the digital ‘other’. The digital, as it appears in the accounts of clients, is a *relational* machine, one which binds and intertwines users through the analytics and visual cues that appear on the surface of various devices. How were these new affective connections established and sustained? Through the exchange of PDAs, comments and follows.

I assert that these flows of digital analytics provided clients with two essential pieces of information. First, the scope, size, and composition of their digital assemblages (*Who is out there? Who can see me?*) and second, the manner in which that online audience were receiving and valuing their desiring-production (*Do they like 'who' or 'what' I am?*). While analysis supports the notion that clients utilised the digital affordances of SNS platform to experiment with new forms of identity, this production was contingent on how others received and acknowledged such processes of self-formation. Put another way, the digital 'I' produced by clients was only valuable if it was seen and affirmed by others. This research looks beyond the quantifiable 'self' (Lupton 2015) produced by the accumulation of digital markers and metrics and towards a quantifiable *relationality* which emerges through flows of PDAs, affects and mediated gestures.

For example, through the number of likes and follows generated by a post about his anxiety, Paul was alerted not only to the visibility of his work in the Instagram 'authenticity' marketplace, but how much his passion for issues around 'mental health' was affirmed by others. Through assessing the number of the new messages in her Tinder inbox, Jess could deduce how many male suitors might be available to take her out for a glass of wine, as well as how sexually desirable those matches considered her to be. In analysing the responses of Facebook peers during her war against the Tories, Gwen could know how many people supported her, as well as how much – or in what ways - they valued her righteous anger. The 'numbers' of the digital not only told clients something about their assembled relations, they told them something about themselves. *They can see me, they can affirm me and as a result, I am worth something to someone.*

What is interesting is that the digital 'other' that appears in accounts was rarely spoken of as being comprised of discrete individuals and actors, but rather, as a unified, disembodied 'they'. On one hand, this 'opening up' of the social beyond the boundaries of the Oedipal triangle could be regarded as a Deleuzoguattarian line of flight *par excellence*, as it established a mode of identity production that was contingent on assembled relations within a vast, dynamic social field. On the other, as will be discussed in the next section, the 'social' as described by clients – the digital 'they' as constituted by the analytics of SNS platforms – rarely produced liberatory affects, but, rather, seemed to recode the similar, if not even more, entrenched orders of discipline and normative behaviour that those which defined the historical analogue relations of clients.

Rhizomatic Subjugation

That digital relations would hold the capacity to facilitate flows of discipline speaks to the third and final point of rhizomaticism. Just like the relations encountered by clients in their day-to-day lives, the mediated connections established in the digital can be seen as contingent on an adherence to specific orders of normative behaviour. SNS platforms can be seen as 'sites' of affective cultures, each striated by unique forms of normative behaviour, discourse and relationality. For example, through the accounts of Matt and Jess, one can see the social exchange on Tinder as hypersexualised and orientated towards a discursive culture organised by heterosexist notions of masculinity and femininity. Similarly, the informatics of Instagram could be evidence of a culture of hyper-marketisation, as Paul, Chris and David appeared to be motivated by a desire to achieve a level of exchange value amongst their peers through the accumulation of PDAs and to see the markers of that value continually expand and grow. One could argue that the new relations that Gwen, Rebecca and Fran encountered on Facebook groups were positive in part because the support of their new peers was in such stark contrast to the culture of insincerity and indifference that defined their historical online and offline assemblages.

Throughout accounts, clients articulated a consistent assumption; that the modes of social exchange facilitated by these mediated 'cultures' were immutable. Whether it was Jess announcing that 'this is just how it's done' upon receiving a dick pic, Paul citing the 'move' towards authenticity by mental health influencers on Instagram, or Fran's acquiescence to the saccharine politeness of her fellow churchgoers on Facebook, one could argue that accounts reflect the capacity of the cultural demands of the digital to not just constrain desire, but to *capture* it. This compliance to the striations of the digital mirrors the axiomatic structures that Deleuze and Guattari (1980) claim to decode and de-territorialise disparate flows of material and desire within capitalism. As Lundy (2013) points out, the 'axioms' of capital do not provide a set of animating 'ideals', but, rather a formal, flexible system in which a field of relations – even lines of flight outside of the apparatus of the state – are continually decoded and reabsorbed into the dominate order. The SNS platforms described by clients could be seen as transcending the old technologies of confinement – the prison, the barracks, the factory – only to form new technologies of *control*, in which discipline is not administered by traditional institutions, but was continually renewed through the affective flows of artefacts and mediated messaging that can fix 'the position of any element at any moment' (Deleuze 1994, p. 181).

There is perhaps no more illustrative example of the discipline that occurs in the digital than the ways in which hegemonic notions of gender appeared to be territorialised online. For example, it could be asserted that all four male clients in this research – Paul, Chris and David on Instagram and Matt on Tinder – turned to social media to produce the ‘masculine’ qualities of strength, success and virility that seemed just out of reach in their offline worlds. Equally, one could frame Jess’ submission to the coarse sexuality of Tinder or Fran, Rebecca and Gwen’s search for social support on Facebook as efforts to re-produce flows of classically feminine behaviours and attitudes. While the psychic effects of this molarity differ between clients, Instagram, Tinder and Facebook emerge not as sites of new forms of sexual and social exchange, but as *regressive* machines, through which the old man/woman molar was not escaped, but rendered even more rigid and entrenched within the subject.

When one considers the unique digital affordances of each of the three platforms around which this project is structured, it is little wonder why the ‘old’ order of things was re-constituted online. For example, the Instagram-machine allowed the male clients produce a visual ‘record’ of their masculinity, an accumulation of images that stood in stark contrast to the precarity and malaise that defined their personal and professional lives. The ability to block and surveil users on Facebook, afforded female clients the means to develop the classically ‘feminine’ attributes of empathy and reciprocity amongst their networked relations. The ‘controls’ of Tinder – capacity to change geographic location to access new potential female matches, the ability to be perverse without the consequence of facing the ‘other’ - allowed Matt a sense of macho agency, one not only rooted in a sense of dominion over his female matches, but the assurance that a ‘return on investment’ was just a Swipe away. Similarly, Jess’ could be seen to have called upon those same tools to cultivate the sort of deference and agreeability of a maiden-in-waiting. Each platform, it could be argued, allowed clients to be more of a man - or more of a woman - than they had been before. While some of this performativity – particularly that which occurred on Facebook – was undeniably affirming, analysis points to digital technologies as sites in which limited, and potentially restrictive notions of gender are continually re-territorialised.

In contrast to the perpetual open playground promised by early internet futurists (Lanier 2017), the SNS platforms described by clients emerge as acentred, dynamic systems of discipline, which code and recodes desire, discourse and habitual behaviour into regulatory informatic statistics. Thus, the rhizomatic subjectivity that appears throughout accounts, is *subjugated* subjectivity, as the desiring-production of clients could be seen as captured by the striations

of the digital cultures in which they were embedded. As a result, the will-to-freedom in the digital subject becomes a will-to-be-dominated by the prevailing disciplinary order. Consider this passage from *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1972):

'In the subject who desires, desire can be made to desire its own repression—whence the role of the death instinct in the circuit connecting desire to the social sphere. (Desire produces) even the most repressive and the most deadly forms of social reproduction.' (p.31)

To desire, Deleuze and Guattari assert – and as this research demonstrates - is to desire one's own *subjugation*. While it might be overly enthusiastic to frame the social exchange described by clients '*deadly*', analysis certainly displays the willingness of clients to tolerate – if not completely acquiesce to – the normative demands of their digital assemblages. I assert that behind this mediated will-to-subjugation is the same emotional gambit which Fromm (1941) asserts underpins the bond between oppressed and oppressor: to be controlled by the 'other' is to be in *relationship* with the other. The efforts of clients to satisfy the cultural demands of their digital worlds could be seen as driven by the desire to in contact, to be entangled and to be visible to someone else - *whatever the cost*. Given the urgency behind this exchange, perhaps it is little wonder that clients voiced a sense of anxiety when their digital desiring-production was interrupted. Just like Deleuze and Guattari's (1972) schizo fights against the ethereality and precarity of capitalism, analysis reveals the scramble of clients to re-territorialise their online assemblages when flows of PDA's, likes, comments failed to meet previous held expectations, or when they found themselves outside of the normative codes in which their online relating is situated.

The accounts of the ethereality of SNS relations beg the question: if machines don't, as Deleuze (1995) implores, 'explain anything' (p.175) in themselves, why would accounts of the digital assemblages of clients be consistently, almost inevitably, defined by a sense of neurosis? Why would Paul be possessed by fears that he was falling behind the other mental health brandmakers? Why would Jess be so confounded by the idea that a 'dating site' like Tinder was, in practice, little more than a moral abattoir? Why would Fran be terrified at the thought of sharing any personal information about herself with her fellow church goers on Facebook?

The answer, as suggested by analysis, is because the digital holds the capacity to take away just as much as it gives. On the one hand, the SNS platforms appeared to have endowed clients with a sense of *hope*: that new experiences, new relationships, and new versions of themselves were possible. In this, the informatics of online technologies could be said to have provided a more tolerable order to the affairs of clients: on the screen, things could change, *they* as individuals could change. However, when that hopeful order was smashed, when the relations and identities produced through the exchange of the quantifiable assurances of the digital were disrupted, this research demonstrates that clients appeared to be motivated to not only endure the codes of their digital assemblages, but satisfy them more completely, even if that required submission to a fundamentally unsatisfying social order. Thus, the technical affordances of the digital amplified and intensified the desires of the clients – to be seen, to be valued, to be recognised – while at the same time coding that desiring-production within highly striated regimes of discipline. Further demonstrating the intermingling between the analogue and digital that emerges in the therapy space, the precarity and subjugation that defined the off-line relations of clients appeared to be reproduced in their online assemblages.

The implication of these three facets of rhizomaticism is clear: the experience of the contemporary digital subject – of themselves and of others – is an experience that emerges from and is contingent upon a dynamic assemblage of discourses, affects and technologies. In this, this research aligns with the Deleuzoguattarian (1987) image of subjectivity as ‘bodies without organs’ that is, as an emergent property of temporary assemblages, constantly pervaded and re-shaped by the influence of inner and outer forces. Whereas the previous reviewed literature into the psychic effects of the digital – particularly those examples from that corpus of 12 psychoanalytic researchers – had often reduced online engagement to intra-psychic products of lack or projection or transferential responses, this work also resonates with the posthuman assertion of the individual human as a ‘hybridised’ subject, that is, one contingent on the affective connections of different force relations between human and non-human entities at play in digital communication (Barad 2007; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Lenz-Taguchi and Palmer 2013). The SNS described by clients do not just mediate textual and visual communication between users, but constrain, liberate and channel multiplicitous flows of desire, relationship and identity within and between users. Thus, this research evidences the need for sociological – and, as will be discussed psychotherapeutic - inquiry which adopts an equally rhizomatic view of the role of technology; not just its function within broader collective techno-social apparatuses, nor its alignment within theories of subjectivity

that predate the internet age, but as an active, affective component in the self-formation and relationality of the digital 'subjects' in online assemblages.

Mapping The 'Unnameable' Thing in Psychotherapy

In addition to exploring the effects of social media usage on the desires and subjectivity of the individual, this research also demonstrates how the therapeutic meeting is not solely the product of the flows of unconscious drives and intersubjective³⁰ communication between the dyad. It is also contingent upon the discourses, affects and technologies that occur in the digital assemblages of clients. As such, this work exposes the rhizomatic quality not just of subjectivity, but of the therapy meeting itself. The implications this study holds for practice are clear and warrant dissemination within the psychotherapeutic community: the internet technologies in which clients are engaged are not merely media that disseminate meanings or discourses, but are productive 'sites' of interaction and self-formation which both ritualise and actualise new realities, subjectivities and identities. In contrast to the humanistic³¹ and psychoanalytic view of the self as a relatively stable entity, the contemporary digital 'subject' that appears within the consulting room is, as this research suggests, a *contingent* subject, a *multiplicitious* subject, a *technologised* subject. In Deleuzoguattarian terms, it is a *folding* subject, one manipulated by affective economies of digital artefacts and visual stimuli which morph its desire and relationship to others. As such, this project shows that the Rogerian and Freudian orthodoxy that dominates modern psychotherapeutic thought – and training schemes around the world – is woefully underprepared to address the affective realities produced by the digital engagement of clients. This work also uniquely highlights the need for the field to recognise how digital media not only produces new patterns of identity and desire, but new societies of *control* (Deleuze 1994) constituted through the habitual social exchange in online assemblages.

The omnipresence of the digital 'other' in accounts aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's reading of the dark potentiality – which they term the '*unnameable thing*' – within capitalist orders that

³⁰ Originally conceived by Husserl, 'intersubjectivity' refers to the interchange of thoughts and feelings, both conscious and unconscious, between two persons or 'subjects,' as facilitated by empathic contact (Duranti 2010).

³¹ Largely attributed to the work of theorists like Maslow (1968) and Rogers (1951), humanistic psychology arose in the mid-20th century in opposition to the determinism of Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Skinner's behaviourism. Often referred to as the 'third force' in psychology, this practice places particularly importance on the process of realizing and expressing one's own capabilities and creativity (McLeod 2011).

dismantles all existing codes, beliefs and behaviours, only to reconfigure them along the dictates and demands of the market (Fisher 2009). Just as capital repurposes disparate flows of bodies and materials through commodification, the accounts of clients in this research evidences the capacity of digital technologies to recode the desire of the individual subject around the metrics and measurements of the platforms in which they are engaged. Interestingly, while analysis suggests that clients are playing a game of ‘numbers’ - one motivated by the market axioms of accumulation, of marketing, of ‘*more*’ – this research illustrates that behind such a statistical understanding of the social, lies a desire to be connected to other people. Moreover, the SNS platforms described by clients could be said to have not only afforded an apparatus of infinite connectivity, but of endless ways to produce identities that were more tolerable, both to others and to themselves. It would be too easy to frame the functionality of online spaces as mechanisms of *escape* which allowed for the struggles and disharmonies of their everyday lives to be left behind revealing an easier, freer reality. Building on the psychoanalytic studies explored in chapter two this project asserts that SNS engagement of participants is often for the purposes of psychic defense. Where this research adds to that body of work is its demonstration that such productions – of self, of expression, of sexuality – are not so much in service of clients transcending their inadequacies or ignoring experiences of loss, but rather, of digitally re-configuring such psychic material into a more manageable form.

In this regard, the digital engagement of clients could be seen as imbued with the same *hope* that underpins transference longings. Just as clients recast their therapists as punishing fathers or doting mothers to satisfy the unmet needs of the past, this research suggests that ‘digital relationality’ is motivated by a wish: *that someone, somewhere will value them*. For example, on Tinder, Jess wasn’t a bored single mum afraid she’d never meet anyone, but a woman surrounded by an endless – albeit often revolting – cascade of male suitors. On Instagram, Paul wasn’t trapped in by the lifelessness of his professional gilded cage, but bursting with creative authenticity. Even in Fran’s Facebook Live pantomime, one can see a desire to protect from unwanted critiques by utilising the platform’s blocking features. Thus, the digital affordances of SNS technologies are not so much a way to produce a new world or a new ‘I’, but to keep the doubts and anxieties of the ‘old’ world – the analogue world – at bay. One could argue that the real ‘crisis’ of the digital subject is when ‘old’ struggles – of worthlessness, of disillusion, of aloneness – emerge within their ‘new’ digital assemblages. What is troubling to the therapy task is the ways in which the assurances of the digital seem to vanish as soon as they appear, presenting the digital subject with only one option: produce

the 'value' demanded by digital relations or face being *alone*. As a result, clients can be seen as engaging in a desperate scramble to avoid the ethereality of the digital by 'doing' the digital *better*: by more completely upholding its normative demands, by producing more exciting visual representations of beauty and by tolerating its excesses more resolutely than before.

This pattern of 'neurotic' re-territorialisation reveals a remarkable contradiction. On one hand, the SNS worlds of clients – and the 'selves' they produced online – are fundamentally rhizomatic, in that they emerge from a multiplicity of components. On the other, much of the social exchange clients claimed to encounter in the digital appeared to be highly *striated* by the codes and discourses of the digital communities in which they are situated. The digital might contribute to modes of rhizomatic experience, but it is, accounts suggest, a 'binary' machine, one built around a simple series of questions posed by the vast digital '*they*' within their online assemblages:

- *Are you with us or against us?*
- *Are you in or are you out?*
- *Are you sexy or repulsive?*
- *Are you interesting or valuable or are you worthless?*

The incessant bifurcation – of identity, of desire, of the other – in accounts could be seen as presenting clients with a series of representative 'territorialisations' through which the digital subject must pass, and to which Deleuze and Guattari's (1972) schizoanalysis is so opposed. While it could be argued that all relationships – whether on or offline – are governed by some form of binary 'logic' (love/hate, safety/anxiety, acceptance/rejection), analysis illustrates the unique capacity of the digital to produce 'conditions of worth'³² with which psychotherapeutic practice must contend.

So, what does one do with the 'unnameable thing' when it appears in the psychotherapeutic assemblage? This research indicates that a Deleuzoguattarian therapy – a 'schizo' therapy attuned flows and fluxes that emerge within and around the digital subject – is a therapy of

³² A central theoretical component in Carl Rogers' (1951) Person-Centred Therapy, 'conditions of worth' refers to the conditions human beings believe they need to satisfy in order to gain acceptance, love or positive regard from parents, caregivers, teachers, friendship groups and society in general. Rogers held that eventually, these 'conditions' become introjected values - internalised ways of behaving based on the expectations of others, which may eventually conflict clash with the internal world view of the individual, leading to feelings of depression and anxiety.

cartography, in which the social fields, bodies without organs, lines of flight and planes of consistencies that occur within online assemblages must be considered, evaluated and *mapped*. In this sense, the ‘mapping’ of the digital assemblage in psychotherapy represents an ‘event’ best suited not to outline the limits of a given territory, but to weigh up the multiplicity of flows – technological, emotional, unconscious - that occur within its boundaries. The ‘cartographical’ question is as ever, not to ask if the digital is ‘true’ or ‘real’ or ‘human’, but rather, to present clients with a series of questions geared towards investigating the productive capacities and emergent qualities at play within their online rhizomes:

- *What does the digital – the smartphone, the SNS platform - do?*
- *What does it do to you? For you? In spite of you?*
- *What forces, what artefacts, what affects are produced online?*
- *Does the digital do what you want it to do? Do you do what ‘it’ wants of you?*

Perhaps most critically for the purposes of a psychotherapy which is orientated towards process of becoming:

- *How might SNS technologies help you to hide from or obscure the pain of the past or the uncertainties of the present?*
- *How could you use the tools of the digital to create new relationships or ways of being?*
- *Is what you are doing online helping you to grow?*

In a Deleuzoguattarian frame, the ‘event’ of therapy produces a space in which the mediated virtuality of the digital – the speed, the ethereality, the connectivity – can be evaluated through the flows and sensations that emerge between the dyad. Thus, a therapeutic encounter sensitive to the affective realities of the digital is a ‘folding’ all of its own, one in which the desires, affects and discourses of the digital ‘outside’ becomes ‘inside’, where the disembodied becomes embodied, where the anonymised becomes personalised and where the ethereal becomes material. It is a space of becoming in which the contingencies, capacities and contradictions of the rhizome can be traced and understood in a new way. It is a dialogue of movement, of curiosity and of creativity, one which upholds Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983) assertion that ‘a schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst’s couch’ (p. 82).

This is not to assume that therapeutic examinations of the digital will automatically produce positive affects, either *between* the members of dyad or within the individual subject's processes of self-formation. As evidenced by the exchange with Gwen below, which begins after I pointed out how unencumbered she appeared to be during her political arguments on Facebook, this research provides a word of caution for therapists – including myself - who might want to frame the digital entanglements of clients in the language of liberation:

T: Do you not think it's interesting how bold you were able to be... you know, online? I wonder why you could do that, in that way, on Facebook, but not in – as you call it – 'real' life?

G: But it's not real! The praise I was getting... I mean, it was great to have people say how funny I was... a few even talked about wanting to meet up. But they don't know how much time I spent thinking about what I was going to write, that I agonised over the words I used and that I was getting a buzz off the likes and the comments and the praise. It's all completely curated.

T: What, you were lying? You just told me you were asserting your core values? Was that bullshit?

G: No, but I was aware of what I was doing and who was seeing it. It's not real...

T: You keep using that word. Let's assume for a moment that, yes, online world... Facebook world is curated. You can't really escape that... The only point I'm trying to make, is that, is it possible that the fire you showed online - curated as it may have been - is evidence of a part of you that doesn't need permission from other people to assert itself? A part that is clear in what it desires from other people?

G: I mean... I get your point.. and you're right... I'm conscious of how I'm coming across, but... at the same time, it is weird that I can be so bolshy online... on my phone.

While, as Gwen points out, I may have been overly enthusiastic about her *will-to-war* on Facebook, the above exchange speaks to possibilities of therapeutic mapping of desiring-production that occurs in online spaces. In 'tracing' the flows that occurred in the digital, the

dyad could be seen to have arrived at a critical intersection of self-formation, a moment of becoming, in which Gwen was, perhaps unknowingly, exploring a part of herself online that had been repressed and restrained since she was a child. Thus, the value of examining her digital discourses was not to posit that 'who' she was on Facebook was a newer, better version of herself, but to consider the ways in which her online engagement was illustrative of her historical patterns of relationship. Put another way, by *mapping* her digital assemblages, Gwen and I found a new way to trace needs that had long been unacknowledged in her analogue assemblages.

In summation of the clinical implications of this research, analysis points towards the need for this more expansive version of psychotherapeutic practice, one not just attuned – as humanistic theory would implore – to the sacred, internal world of the individual, but towards a materialist 'mapping' of the complex embodied, relational, spatial, affective flows which occur within digital assemblages. Returning again to the gap highlighted in the literature review, it also highlights how the digital affordances and design features of SNS platforms are not just instruments of mediated communication, but apparatuses of subjectification. In the SNS machine, on the screen, through the PDAs of others – clients didn't just encounter the 'other', or simply pass the time: they engaged in acts of self-formation and desire that were constrained and channelled by external technological boundaries. While this work is very cautious of framing the parameters of the digital as possessing any fundamental *character*, the suggestion is clear: the talking therapies are not contending with the same forces of human nature laid out by its forebearers. The therapeutic charge, as outlined by this study, is not to continue the subject's gaze further inward towards an authentic 'I' (Bazzano 2018) or the libidinal drives and developmental conflicts within their psyche nor is it to assume that what occurs in mediated spaces online is inferior to that which takes place in the analogue, but to look *outward*, towards the intermingled swirl of 'on' and 'offline' forces which shape the modern subject.

As evidenced by this study, the engagement of clients in online spaces demonstrates how new electronic communication forms new modes of social exchange, of self-formation and, most critically, of desire. These modes of being, of relating and of desiring-production not only affect the formation of the subject, but of the therapy meeting itself. Thus, the willingness to address this complexity is contingent on the acknowledgement of the chaotic techno-social multiplicities at play in the consulting room. In doing this, the psychotherapy dyad might constitute a new sort of Deleuzoguattarian (1983) war machine, a revolutionary body that

might disrupt the return of the 'same' that occurs in digital cultures – of authority, of discourse, of establishing value - in order to consider a nomadic movement of difference, thereby initiating a space where 'something new, sparked by its own exciting innovations, (that might give) voice to new participants and new visions' (Calhoun 2013, p. 27).

Strengths and Limitations

This study presents the narratives, experiences and accounts of therapy clients engaged in online technologies during therapy. As such, it straddles two theoretical traditions, the social sciences and the practice of existential psychotherapy (Yalom 1980). One could argue that the scope and ambition of this project is both its greatest strength and most significant limitation, as each approach could have warranted whole, if not multiple, doctoral projects. This project – much like my approach to therapy – has been orientated towards multiplicity: of the human subject, of techno-social assemblages and of knowledge itself. Thus, I will attempt to lay out three intersections that speak to both the strengths and limitations of this interdisciplinary research-assemblage.

Interacting Analytical Frameworks

First, this work attempted to employ two distinct analytic frameworks. On one hand, it has sought to critique the ways in which SNS technologies shape processes of subjectivity, social exchange, and self-formation. On the other, this novel understanding of the affective economies that emerge in the digital was produced through data taken from the sessions of individual therapy clients. As a result, this work balances an acuity towards *interaction* of artefacts and normative behaviours that occurs in 'the social', with the *intra-activity* of unconscious desire and relational need that take place *within* the psychotherapy therapy subject and *between* the members of the therapy dyad. Through these sociological and psychotherapeutic frames, this work has effectively illustrated how the digital affordances of SNS platforms – from the Tinder Swipe and PDA's to blocking and follow features, etc - shape the social exchange and production of identity that occurs in online spaces. Equally, it has demonstrated the extent to which users of digital technologies are turning to new mediated spaces – and new forms of relationship - to resolve the 'old' anxieties of isolation, powerlessness, and the fear of failure.

Of course, the wealth of knowledge produced by the research-assemblage is complicated by the fact that I had no way to verify the claims made by clients. As a researcher, I had no access to the textual or visual communication described by clients, nor was I able to confirm the tenor

– or even the existence - of their online relations. This research is also contingent on the ‘expressive selectivity’ (Phillips and Mrowczynski 2021) of clients, that is, the expressed content, grammar, emotionality of their accounts of the digital. Just as in any form of qualitative interviewing, clients made choices in *what* they elected to tell and *when* they elected to tell it, leaving me unable to establish the accuracy of the digital engagements reported by clients through any sort ‘audit trail’ of online posts, comments, SNS profiles, etc.

Equally limiting was the fact that the sample was comprised of ten participants and represented a narrow range of ages, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Each participant was able to afford access to private psychotherapeutic services and each possessed the emotional and discursive capacity to discuss their online worlds – as well as the difficulty within their offline lives - with an external, professional party. However, the depth and breadth of the accounts generated by the therapy dialogue could be seen as satisfying Vasileiou et al’s (2018) notion of ‘data adequacy’ and Malterud et al’s (2016) concept of ‘information power’, both of which assert that the validity of small sample research is not contingent on the number of participants, but the quality of data and the transparency of the research process.

Despite these limitations, the confluence of psychotherapeutic and sociological perspectives affords a mode of research in which the *computational* can be considered alongside the *personal*. The clients in this work have provided tremendous insight into how the desires and affective entanglements of the ‘transhuman’ (Pearson 2012) subject are inextricably shaped by the design and functionality of SNS platforms. However, this study has also effectively demonstrated that when one looks beyond the futuristic tools afforded to the digital subject, one finds a uniquely ‘old-fashioned’ set of desires: to be valued, to be loved and to be connected to others. As such, it points towards a *machinic* understanding of subjectivity and desiring-production that is equally relevant to the fields of psychotherapy and the social sciences

The Therapeutic Encounter As A Research Encounter

The primacy of relationship which appears throughout this research leads to the second point of consideration: the innovative use of the therapeutic ‘interview’ as a ‘research’ interview. I assert that the depth of insight this work affords regarding the SNS engagement of clients would have been impossible without the dynamism and the intimacy of the therapy discourse. In this, this research posits a truly novel application of the psychotherapy setting as an

instrument of data collection, one which can, as exhibited by analysis, bridge an exploration of the internal desires of the human subject with broader examinations of social practice, institutional power and technology. The therapy dialogue in this work emerges as a creative process, a becoming uniquely orientated towards assemblages of flows, entities and affects. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that even in its most purist forms – Freudianism, Rogerianism, Behaviourism – the therapy encounter is historically one attuned to a multiplicity of unconscious, relational and historical information, all of which are activated within clients and played out in various forms between the members of the dyad (McLeod 2011). As such, this work has re-calibrated the gaze of the therapy machine to be just as inclusive of assembled relations in external assemblages as it is of the flows – emotional, unconscious, desiring - which emerge *within* the individual subject.

However, this appropriation of the therapy ‘space’ has not been without immense complication. The process of data collection was uniquely constrained by several factors around sampling. Unlike a traditional research interview, I had to wait for my clients to raise issues around the research topic before I could even consider initiating any process of recruitment. Even when clients did bring up issues around the digital, I had to defer any discussion of their involvement until I first made my own assessment of the impact that their participation might have on their therapeutic goals and second, discussed these potential effects with my clinical supervisor for the purposes of client safeguarding. As a result of this ethical restraint, I was not able to record the initial discussions of the digital in the therapy dialogue, much of which contained vital – and highly relevant - exchanges that could not be transcribed and systematically analysed.

After consent was obtained, data collection was also constrained by a central, guiding determination: to never allow this project to transform my clients into research ‘subjects’. The sessions in which accounts emerged – particularly those which were recorded - required me to walk an often-perilous clinical tightrope, one straddling the two disciplines which underpin this study. If I veered too far towards the sociological and imposed my own directive line of questioning into the therapy, I feared I would ‘bully’ clients into discourses outside of their own therapeutic needs. If I veered too far towards the psychotherapeutic and remained overly non-directive, I risked missing the opportunity to gain valuable insight into the research topic. Of equal concern was the worry that my clients might be tempted to be ‘good’ interviewees and force sessions towards discussions of their digital lives for *my* benefit.

In short, the repurposing of the therapy meeting as an information gathering session was riddled with complications. What I came to appreciate is that the ethical concerns that plagued my early attempts at data collection, were no different from the considerations I make in every encounter as a practicing psychotherapist. On a session-to-session basis, I am required to make a series of overlapping decisions: about client agency, about the emotionality of sessions, about the 'trajectory' of the therapeutic work. While I would be foolish to assume that the process of re-orientating sessions towards knowledge production was seamless or without difficulty, I contend that my efforts to manage forces and fluxes within the psychotherapy-research assemblage were successful in maintaining the autonomy of my clients, as well as the integrity and intentionality of this project.

A Creative, Rhizomatic Methodological Approach

To the third and final point, I contend that this work puts forward a new methodological approach to conceptualise the materiality of the psychotherapeutic discourse. My choice of methodology began with the selection of Feely's (2020) Assemblage Analysis. While this concept provided a robust basic analytic sequence, I found its theoretical rationale for the treatment of discourses-as-material to be insufficient. Hence, my application of Deleuze and Guattari's *incorporeal transformations* to the therapy dialogue represents a creative means of addressing the machinic interplay between the therapy discourse and the affective realities which talk produces within a field of social relations.

Future directions

This research showed the capacity of SNS technologies to shape, constrain and produce new forms of desire, identity, and relationship. While it has highlighted the affective potential of individual technologies, what remains to be characterised is a fuller picture of the digital 'rhizome'. In this, I mean one that is not only orientated towards the discrete affective capacities of individual SNS platforms, but towards a broader examination of how the interplay between multiple 'sites' of online interaction might create new forms subjectivity. Further research might consider the following questions:

- Is it possible that clients might embody different identities across different SNS platforms?
- Might they be seeking to reconcile different relational or psychic needs through the different the design features and artefacts that emerge in and across digital platforms?

- How might normative behaviours or discursive codes change between social networking sites?
- How might the permanence of digital content change how human beings grieve or how they produce or retain memories?
- How might the schizophrenic subject navigate a world where all forms of social practice are situated in various mediated, computational spaces, each one of which is itself subject to different forces of capital?

It is also of note that data collection ended in February 2020, only a month before the COVID-19 pandemic forced nearly of all forms 'the social' – including the practice of psychotherapy – to be mediated via internet technologies. Future research should therefore concentrate on the investigation of how the interpersonal isolation required to manage the pandemic might have accelerated or entrenched affective flows within the digital assemblages of clients. Might they have been seeking to reconcile other identities during the pandemic? Other anxieties? Other desires?

For example, how might a client like Matt - whose 'heterosexist' performances on Tinder were almost universally geared towards casual sexual encounters - have used Tinder differently if he could not actually 'meet up' with his matches? How would David attempt to establish new metrics of social cache on Instagram when there wasn't the option to take selfies of himself looking 'fabulous' in nightclubs? Would Rebecca have sought out a new Facebook group for support with her anxiety around the virus, rather than her pregnancy fears? In addition to these more time-sensitive directions, one wonders what other 'stories' – about people, social formations, technologies, power – might the therapy meeting be able to tell. What might the experience of psychotherapy clients articulate about the themes that 'bubble under' the accounts in this project? How might the dyadic dialogue problematise issues of economic precarity, normative sexuality and interpersonal isolation that occur within other social assemblages, not just those which occur online?

It is worth noting that the accounts generated from this research could be repurposed and modified for publication in different peer-reviewed journals or as a book. For example, this work was initially conceived to follow the parallel ethnographic/analytic lens of Mol's (2002) *The Body Multiple*, an approach which might provide an interesting alternative to its present form. Future analysis could also be grouped around broader themes within accounts - 'connection', 'shame', 'sublimation', etc – in order to highlight wider flows of relational or

cultural exchange within techno-social assemblages, not just those which occur in specific online platforms. Irrespective of how this work evolves in the future, ongoing efforts will have to be made to protect the anonymity of the clients who participated in this research.

Like the 'relational ethics' which guided the research process, my approach to maintaining the confidentiality of my clients will be informed by Levine's (2004) assertion that the 'vulnerability' of research participants is not a static designation, but rather, is a category that is context and time dependent. As such, different confidentiality management strategies might need to be employed based on the way in which data generated from the therapy encounter is presented. For example, if I were to pursue my first instinct to emulate Mol (2002), the resulting work would most likely be based on a single case study, one which would require me to discuss an individual client – and the flows of relationship and discourse that emerge within the dyad - at a far greater depth than contained within this work. As such, the reflexive process of altering or omitting personal information – particularly for clients with a higher public/media profile like Paul – would need to be subject to an even more rigorous process of scrutiny in order to maintain the integrity of the data and minimise any potential harm to participants, an approach with Surmiak (2018) refers to as a 'balanced' approach of confidentiality management.

Whatever form future work may take, I contend that an orientation towards assemblage is essential in understanding the conflicts and the capacities of the digital 'subject' and, more broadly, of the electronic communication technologies that produce so much of contemporary social practice. As evidenced by the online technologies discussed by clients, the theoretical boundaries established by the old binaries – real/unreal, organic/synthetic, human/machine – are resulting in a techno-social *intermingling* that holds immense implications for all aspects of social exchange, including that which occurs within the psychotherapeutic assemblage.

Whether it is channelling the desires of the individual subject or re-coding flows of value within broader mediated affective economies, the platforms within this research emerge as flexible, yet immutable apparatuses of identity and relationship. Put another way, *the digital is not going anywhere*. Thus, this work suggests that to reconcile the digital 'subject', the fields of sociology and psychotherapy must first be willing to reconcile *themselves* to the forces and flows that occur in the online worlds of SNS users; to refrain from asking whether digital assemblages are 'real' or 'true' or 'authentic' and instead ask what they 'do'. In doing so, both fields might put forward that most rhizomatic, that most Deleuzoguattarian of questions: not 'what' or 'how' or 'why', but '*and then?.... and then?*'.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Psychotherapy-Assemblage Diagram



Appendix 2: Ethics Approval Application Form

Version 1.0 September 2018

School of Social Sciences Ysgol Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol Head of School, Pennaeth yr Ysgol Dr Tom Hall			
SREC Ref No:			
STUDENT PROJECTS - MASTERS PROGRAMMES/ MPhil/PhD & PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE RESEARCH PROJECTS Ethical Approval Application Form Must be submitted by the due deadline to: socsi-ethics@cardiff.ac.uk			
Note: This form uses check boxes, select the appropriate box, double click and select 'checked' a cross will appear in the box which indicates your response.			
SECTION A: PERSONAL INFORMATION [all boxes can be expanded]			
Please tick relevant project type: Masters Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	MPhil/PHD Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Professional Doctorate Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	
Student Name:	Mason Christopher Neely		Student Number: 1740860
Email Address:	NeelyMC@Cardiff.ac.uk		
Supervisors:	1 Michael Arribas Allyon	2 Valerie Walkerdine	
Supervisors' Signatures:	1	2	
Degree Programme:	SocSi DTP (1+3)		
Title of Project:	Reconciling the 'Digital Self' in Psychotherapy		
Project Start Date:	1/10/18	Dissertation/Thesis Submission Date: 1/10/21	
Student's Signature:		Date: 12/2/19	
Before completing, please now read the Application Guidance Notes at the end of this form			
SECTION B: DISSERTATION SUMMARY			
1.	Below, please provide a concise general description of your dissertation project Digital culture is changing the 'subject' of psychotherapy. When psychotherapists enquire into the lives of their clients, they are no longer dealing with fixed, co-present identities, but an extensive network of online experiences and personas mediated through social media platforms. It is widely agreed that digital technologies not only facilitate distinct forms of social exchange that complicate notions of who and what therapists are dealing with, but are also actively transforming the classical therapeutic view of the self. Exploring the possibilities of psychotherapy as a form of inquiry into 'the Digital', the proposed research seeks to understand how the digital lives of clients appear in and shape the therapy encounter, as well as how the 'interactive identities' that emerge through electronic artifacts represent multiple, fragmented and often contradictory presentations of selfhood.		

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2.	<p>What are the research questions ?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Given the ubiquity of online social networking, how does subjectivity emerge from the diverse materialities of digital culture? How does the 'self' experience a multiplicity of identities? How do clients present and manage these identities in the therapeutic encounter? What boundaries and contradictions are they seeking to reconcile? What role does the therapist play in investigating this multiplicity of identities?
3.	<p>Who are the participants?</p> <p>Participants will be recruited from my own private psychotherapy practice. Those deemed suitable for inclusion in the study will be approached <i>after</i> they introduce personal material into the therapy space around issues of – or difficulty with - digital 'life', including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> engagement with social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, et al) online gaming dating 'apps' (Tinder, Grindr, Bumble, Match.com, et al) mediated communication (WhatsApp and SMS textual communication) The network of online relationships facilitated through the use of such technologies <p>In addition to holding a Masters in Integrative Counselling and Psychotherapy, I am accredited member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy – the nation's largest and most influential governing body – and have been in private practice for 5 years. As per BACP membership guidelines, I engage in monthly clinical supervision and personal therapy and continually undertake CPD training.</p>
4.	<p>How will the participants be recruited ?</p> <p>Participants will be recruited from my psychotherapy practice. Clients for whom online-offline 'selves' are relevant to the therapy will be invited to take part in the study. Participants will be recruited via opportunistic and purposive sampling. A brief description of the relationship between research and therapeutic practice is necessary in order to address concerns regarding conflict of interest.</p> <p>I practice a modality of existential psychotherapy which upholds the tenants of non-directive, client-centred therapy. Participants will only be invited to take part in the study if the topic of social media and digital cultures is first raised by the client. Priority is given to the structure of the therapeutic relationship, of reaching the client's goals in therapy, rather than soliciting their participation in research. There is a long tradition of combining therapy and research within psychotherapeutic practice, evidence of which is provided below.</p> <p><i>Research-in-Practice: The Clinical Case Study within Psychotherapy</i> Beginning with Freud (1915), there exists a well-established tradition of psychotherapists drawing on their own case examples for the purposes of research, including the influential work of theorists/practitioners as diverse as Winnicott (1953), Klein (1949), Searles (1958), Blum (1973), Yalom (1980), amongst many others. Both modern psychotherapeutic researchers (Fleet 2016) and own my regulatory body – The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) – consider the role of the therapist-researcher an essential conduit for contemporary inquiry within the field. According to Stiles (2007) when taken directly for clinical experience, theory-building case studies provide convincing evidence as they 'capture the miracle of therapy in a way that statistics and randomized controls cannot' (Dallos and Vetere 2005: 131), gives a 'voice to clients to tell their stories in their own words' (Grafanaki 1996: 336) and bridges the gap between therapeutic research and the actualities of psychotherapeutic practice. (Rennie 1994).</p> <p>Green and Latchford (2012) argue the psychotherapy's neo-positivist turn has become increasingly reliant on the randomised control trial as the method of choice for practitioner research. Not only does this nomothetic approach (Smith 2003) assume that scientism may reveal the general laws applicable to human nature, but it ignores the assemblage of emotional, affective and psychological forces at play in the psychotherapy setting (Smith 2003). As RCTs are not reflective of this complexity, there exists a need for naturalistic studies to reflect the collaboration between researcher and client, as well as the interplay between the dual roles of therapist-researcher (Beutler 2009).</p>

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	<p><i>The Therapist/Researcher</i></p> <p>The value of occupying both the roles of therapist and researcher is that it produces knowledge with a high degree of relevance to practice (Fleet 2016). Such case-study work 'generates knowledge in context,' which is essential "for understanding practice expertise in action" (McLeod 2010: 7). This benefit is not limited to therapist, but to those clients who chose to participate in such research. Evidence suggests research can benefit clients who take part, as the process is often an empowering one for clients as they make progress with their problems (McLeod 1994). Their participation may bring personal insight, emotional relief, or improved coping skills for a particular problem in addition to contributing to the process of understanding others. While not problematic, Fleet (2016) contends that dual-role research provides participants with the opportunity to not only benefit personally through their engagement with the therapy work, but to actively contribute to helping others through the production of knowledge.</p> <p>Examples of contemporary case study research by therapist/researchers in both private and institutional settings include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zaletel's (2010) study of schizoid features and ego splitting • The work of van Nest (2018) on the use sensory integration theory to highlight issues around embodiment within relational psychotherapy • Clement's (2007) inquiry into the treatment of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder • A study of the efficacy and method of sand tray therapy by Fleet et al (2016) • The case studies of Etherington (2000) in her application of narrative therapy adult male survivors of child sexual abuse • Helps' (2017) longitudinal study of diagnostic assessment of autistic spectrum disorder family systems therapy. <p><i>The Dual Role of Therapist/Researcher Prior to seeking consent</i></p> <p>Prior to approaching clients for their participation in the study, I will discuss the following questions at length with my clinical supervisor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the potential effect of the study on the client and the efficacy of the therapeutic work? Can the goals of the study run in parallel to their expressed goals for therapy? • Is the client in a place of crisis or pronounced psychological difficulty? If so, might inclusion in the study complicate, or even worsen such symptoms? • What is the nature of the material around digital life which the client entered into the therapy work? Would a focus on these experiences help or hinder a wider exploration of their identity and pattern of relationship? • How can I best manage a client that might seek to 'perform' or provide discussions 'useful' to the study at the expense of their own therapeutic goals? • Even if their inclusion will not be a source of psychic difficulty, will it be a distraction to the therapy work? <p>In addition to this evaluation of how the work might affect individual participants, consideration will also be given to how the study might shape the therapeutic relationship. Participants will be strongly – and continually – advised that they are not expected to 'bring in' specific topics for discussion, nor should they ever feel compelled to explore digital activities in order to appear to be a compliant or 'good' client/participant. This process – including seeking consent and all discussions with my clinical research supervisor – will be recorded in a research journal and included in findings for analysis.</p>
5.	<p>What sort of data will be collected and what methods will you use to do this?</p> <p>Data collection will combine naturalistic recordings of therapy sessions and anonymised case studies of individual clients from my own psychotherapy practice. Three sources of data will be gathered: recordings of therapy sessions, reflexive field notes and further reflections taken from research journals and clinical supervision sessions.</p> <p>Data recorded from therapy encounters will identify how the online world of client's are revealed in the therapeutic setting; it will give form to various kinds of digital practices and the opportunities and troubles they present clients. As the case examples will be longitudinal in nature, they will also give form to how client's own understanding of digital experience evolves over time. Thematic analysis of case conceptualizations will be performed. Each case may consist of multiple sessions. Where useful, Discourse Analysis will be used to consider the structure of this material.</p>

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	Given that this study seeks to understand the intersection of digital culture and subjectivity, transcriptions of recordings will not be confined to discussions of online engagement, but may include discussions of a client's identity, their engagement within the therapy space and their wider network relationships.	
6.	<p>How and where (venue) are you undertaking your research?</p> <p>Digital audio recordings of hour-long psychotherapy sessions will be conducted at my private therapy office located at 252 Cowbridge Road East, Cardiff.</p> <p>What is the reason(s) for using this particular location?</p> <p>The research venue for data collection was selected in order to ensure anonymity, comfort for participants, privacy and personal safety.</p>	
7.	(a) Will you be analysing secondary data?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	If YES, does approval already exist for its use in further projects such as yours?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	(b) Will you be using administrative data?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	If YES, how will you be using these data (e.g. sifting for suitable research participants or analysing the data)?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
SECTION C: RECRUITMENT PROCEDURES		
8.	(c) Does your project involve children or young people under the age of 18?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	If No , go to 10	
	(d) If so, have you consulted the University's guidance on child protection procedures, and do you know how to respond if you have concerns?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
9.	(a) Does your project involve one-to-one or other <i>unsupervised</i> research with children and young people under the age of 18 ?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	If No go to 9(b) If Yes , go to 9(c)	
	(b) If your project involves only <i>supervised</i> contact with children and young people under the age of 18, have you consulted the head of the institution where you are undertaking your research to establish if you need a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
	If Yes , and you do need a DBS check, then go to 9(c); if you do not need a DBS check, then go to Question 10.	
	(c) Do you have an up-to-date Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check ?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
	If your application is pending please state the submission date: __ / __ / __ The SREC Office will require you to notify them when it is approved.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
10.	Does your project include people with learning or communication difficulties?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
11.	Does your project include people in custody?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
12.	Is your project likely to include people involved in illegal activities?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

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13.	Does your project involve people belonging to a vulnerable group, other than those listed above?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
14.	Does your project include people who are, or are likely to become your clients or clients of the department in which you work?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
SECTION D: CONSENT PROCEDURES			
Please ensure you are familiar with the updated General Protection Data Regulation (GDPR) guidance when considering consent for your participants.			
15.	Will you obtain written consent for participation?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
16.	<p>What procedures will you use to obtain, record and maintain informed consent from participants?</p> <p>To provide a satisfactory level of informed consent, the following steps will be taken:</p> <p>1. Detailed information sheet: Subjects will be given with a detailed information sheet about the nature of the project, including potential methods of dissemination. Potential participants will also be asked to read and sign a consent form which will detail the study's methodology, the eventual usage of their contribution and the measures taken to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity, as well as a statement about the right to withdraw from the research <u>at any time</u>.</p> <p>2. Non-Directiveness: It will be made explicit that the focus of the therapy work will remain on the material <i>they</i> bring to the encounter and no special involvement, activity or behaviour will ever be asked of them throughout the process. Clients will be advised that they may end their involvement in the project should they experience anxiety, tiredness or discomfort or if they feel the recording to be detrimental to their sense of well-being or the effectiveness of our work together.</p> <p>3. Acknowledgement of Dual Role: Essential to this process of consent will be an acknowledgement of the dual role which I will be occupying and that involvement in the study must not compromise or interfere with therapeutic goals of participants. In accordance with guidelines for good practice-in-research as laid out Willemssen et al (2017), this process of negotiating consent with clients will also be explored and reported as part of data analysis.</p> <p>4. Adherence to 'Relational Ethics': Hecker and Murphy (2015) refer to this ongoing process of consent as part of '<i>relational ethics</i>', in which an openness to the contextual factors at play in the research setting - including the setting, values and power relationships - are mutually expressed and negotiated by both members of the dyad throughout the therapy work. Whereas traditional ethical frameworks assume an applicability across contexts, the focus of relational ethics as to what is ethical practice is twofold. First, it rejects the assumption of single, uniform set of criteria for assessing the ethics of any particular action. Second, it de-centres individual actors within ethical dilemmas, instead giving primacy to processes of relating (McNamee 2009). Similar to reformulation of ethics within feminist research (Jaggar 1992), the dynamism of this framework not only encompasses the moral obligations practitioners have towards their clients, but also helps to build an acuity towards the improvisational, polyvocal and dialogical qualities of the therapeutic relationship (Gergen 2015).</p> <p>In order to facilitate relational ethics within the dyad, a number of interventions will be employed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) I will invite clients to consider the impact of the research at the end of every session. The purpose of this inquiry is twofold: First, it presents the client with the space to exercise their autonomy about their inclusion in the research and, second, it bolsters a spirit of collaboration to serve as a basis to manage the challenges of the dual roles both members of the dyad will occupy as the work progresses. b) Upon this evaluation, clients will be asked if they wish to continue their inclusion in the project in subsequent sessions and will be strongly advised that their continued participation is completely voluntary and does not have to be granted. c) Although this will not be sought routinely, clients will be advised that they can access transcripts in order to validate authenticity and ensure appropriate levels of confidentiality <p>As with all other elements of data collection - including this ongoing negotiation of research in the therapeutic space - this will be reported as part of the findings and data analysis.</p>		
17.	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?	N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

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18.	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
19.	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reasons?	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
20.	Will you give potential participants appropriate time to consider participation?	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
21.	Does your project provide for people for whom English / Welsh is not their first language?	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
SECTION E: POTENTIAL HARMS ARISING FROM THE PROJECT				
22.	Is there any realistic risk of any participants experiencing either physical or psychological distress or discomfort?		Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
23.	Is there any realistic risk of any participants experiencing a detriment to their interests as a result of participation?		Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
24.	Below, please identify any potential for harm (to yourself or participants) that might arise from the way the research is conducted PLEASE DO NOT LEAVE BOX BLANK			
<p>This study seeks to analyse processes which occur within the therapeutic setting. Similar to the emotional and psychic risk incurred by engaging in any form of talking therapy, there is a chance that the exploration of personal information during this study may be delicate for clients to explore. As I will be occupying the dual roles of both therapist and researcher, there is a clear ethical consideration that my facilitation of non-directive, client-led practise may be obscured by the pursuit of data relevant to the research topic. There is also a slight - albeit highly unlikely - risk to my own physical safety, as I will be working with individuals – unknown to myself upon initial consultation - in a private environment. This is not a risk associated with the research <i>per se</i>, rather with the practice of psychotherapy.</p>				
25.	Below, please set out the measures you will put in place to control possible harms to yourself or participants PLEASE DO NOT LEAVE BOX BLANK			
<p>Below, please set out the measures you will put in place to control possible harms to yourself or participants</p> <p>I have confirmed with my professional governing body, the BACP, that this method of data collection has ethical precedence and practical importance. In order to maintain the ethical standards of psychotherapeutic practice and to promote professional reflexivity, a number of steps will be taken:</p> <p>1. Informed consent: To minimize harm and promote autonomy, participants will be provided with an information sheet detailing the research aims and will be subject to a risk assessment, including a discussion of any negative consequences – particularly any psychological distress - of their inclusion in the study. Prior to this engagement, participants will be signposted to support services, including access to counselling through www.counselling-directory.org and the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy website.</p> <p>2. Lone Worker Policy: In order to mitigate any risk to myself, I will follow Cardiff University's Lone Worker Policy and alert my dissertation supervisor to the location and circumstances of my data collection efforts.</p> <p>3. Clinical Supervision: Supervision will be arranged with a BACP-accredited supervisor in addition to the monthly supervision already required by the 2017 BACP Ethical Framework. It is essential that the clinical supervisor be made aware of <i>all</i> aspects of the research and be willing to challenge the researcher on specific issues if and when they arise.</p> <p>4. Research Journal: As part of the special supervision, I will keep a detailed a journal in order to document my affective and cognitive responses to the research and bolster my own reflexivity. The process of writing a research journal is meant to sustain a conceptual clarity throughout the project; both in how the therapy is being managed, and how the complex dynamics at play in the therapy space are being analysed. The clinical supervisor will also be invited to read and comment on the case study manuscript upon completion in order to add another layer of rigour and reliability.</p> <p>5. 'Role-fluency': Shaw (2011) suggests that 'role-fluency' is a factor in dual relationships, as it acknowledges the realities of clinical research, while reflecting the moral, ethical and professional responsibility therapists have for their clients. By taking the role of therapist during therapy sessions, I will be honouring my ethical duty to the client to reach their</p>				

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individual goals for therapy, while facilitating their active participation in the research process.

6. Confidentiality: Identifying information such as names, ages, professional and other demographic information will be editing, altered and redacted in order to ensure participants – and the other parties of which they may speak - cannot be identified. Transcripts will be available to any participant who requests them at any point during the duration of the project and clients will be empowered to communicate what – if any – information they might want to be excluded from the transcripts.

7. Leaving room for interpretation: This work will be conducted with the knowledge that despite the dialogical nature of therapy, case study research is exclusively my perspective. Given the incompleteness of my own perception of events – and my own fallibility as a practitioner – it is essential that I maintain the reflexivity needed to acknowledge the inherent 'unknowing' of the research process. In leaving room for uncertainty I hope to avoid the trap of assuming that every occurrence of the research process should be interpreted and fitted into a theoretical framework. Equally that every moment of the therapy is an opportunity for data collection. Similar to the process-orientated approach of existential psychotherapy, there should be some loose ends with the research process (Willemssen et al 2017). Not only can the acceptance of uncertainty – if not outright confusion - make a case study scientifically valuable (Colombo and Michels 2007), but it may bolster the knowledge that, much like the therapy meeting, the building of knowledge requires constant negotiation. In relieving the researcher of the pressure to be clinical and epistemologically faultless, one may sustain an openness to the possibilities and pitfalls present in each stage the research process.

SECTION F: SECURITY-SENSITIVE RESEARCH & PREVENT DUTY

Cardiff University has established a Security-sensitive research framework which aims to balance the commitment to academic freedom and scope against the need to safeguard researches from risk of radicalisation and/or risk that their research activity might result in a misinterpretation of intent by external authorities.

26.	Has due regard been given to the 'Prevent duty', in particular to prevent anyone being drawn into terrorism? For further guidance, see: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/445916/Prevent_Duty_Guidance_For_Higher_Education_England_Wales_.pdf and http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/public-information/policies-and-procedures/freedom-of-speech	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
27.	Does your research fall within the Security-Sensitive policy? This includes the following:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research concerning terrorist or extremist groups (in particular, those designated by the Home Office as a 'Proscribed Terrorist Organisation'); and Research involving access to materials that may be considered extremist and/or materials that promote terrorism, extremism or radicalisation. For further guidance, see: https://intranet.cardiff.ac.uk/intranet/staff/documents/research-support/integrity-and-governance/Final-V1_Security-Sensitive-Research-Policy.docx If 'Yes' go to Question 28. If 'No' go to Question 29.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
28.	Have you followed the registration procedure detailed within the policy? Please note this must be done before ethical approval can be given.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

SECTION G: RESEARCH SAFETY

Before completing this section, you should consult the document 'Guidance for Applicants' – and the information under 'Managing the risks associated with SOCSI research'.

29.	Are there any realistic safety risks associated with your fieldwork?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
30.	Have you taken into account the Cardiff University guidance on safety in fieldwork / for lone workers?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

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SECTION H: DATA COLLECTION		
The SREC appreciates that these questions will not in general relate to research undertaken in SOCSI. However, for further University guidance and information please see the links below.		
31.	Does the study involve the collection or use of human tissue (including, but not limited to, blood, saliva and bodily waste fluids)?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p>If Yes, a copy of the submitted application form and any supporting documentation must be emailed to the Human Tissue Act Compliance Team (https://intranet.cardiff.ac.uk/staff/research-support/integrity-and-governance/human-tissue-research). A decision will only be made once these documents have been received.</p> <p>For guidance on the Human Tissue Act: http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/govrn/cocom/humantissueact/index.html</p>		
32.	Does the study include the use of a drug ?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes , you will need to contact Research Governance before submission (resgov@cardiff.ac.uk)		
SECTION I: DATA PROTECTION		
33.	(a) Are you collecting sensitive data? [Defined as: the racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious beliefs (or similar), trade union membership, physical or mental health, sexual life, the commission or alleged commission any offence, or any proceedings for any offence committed or alleged to have been committed the disposal of such proceedings or the sentence of any court in such proceedings.]	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>If Yes, how will you employ a more rigorous consent procedure?</p> <p>I will follow both ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (2017) and the 2017 BACP Ethical Framework Research Guidelines in order to provide prospective participants with a clear understanding of the research aims and methods as well as the potential risks and complications of taking part in the study. Clients will be informed that topics relevant to the research are not required to be discussed in any way during sessions.</p> <p>Essential to this process of consent will be an acknowledgement of the dual role which I will be occupying and that involvement in the study must not compromise or interfere with therapeutic goals of participants. Nor should it undermine their sense of personal autonomy over the focus and direction of the therapy work. Consistent with a relational ethics approach, concerns and questions will be addressed collaboratively.</p>		
	(b) Are you collecting identifiable data? [Please note, this includes recordings of interviews/focus groups etc.]	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>If Yes, how you will anonymise these data?</p> <p>The contribution of participants will be anonymized and de-personalized at the point of transcription, with any identifiable data changed and removed.</p>		
	(c) Will any non-anonymised and/or personalised data be retained?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
	(d) Data (i.e. actual interview recordings, not just transcripts) should be retained for no less than 5 years or at least 2 years post-publication and then destroyed in accordance with GDPR . Have you noted and included this information in your Information Sheet(s) ? [The University may request access to this data at any point in this year to confirm your marks. It is your responsibility to maintain it securely]	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
34.	Below , please detail how you will deal with data security. Please note, personal laptops (even password protected) stored in personal accommodation are not acceptable. Storage on University network, or use of encrypted laptops is required.	
I will follow the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (2017) on recording interviews, managing and destroying digital		

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audio and the accepted protocols regarding the secure storing, usage and ultimate disposal of transcribed interviews. All data – including recordings and transcripts - will be digitally stored on Cardiff University's OneDrive Network and retained for no less than 5 years or at least 2 years post-publication and then destroyed in accordance with GDPR.

A step-by-step framework of how data will be collected, analysed and stored is as follows:

1. Client enters aforementioned digital engagement
2. Therapist discusses suitability of client as participant with research clinical supervisor
3. Therapist approaches client and begins negotiation of relational ethics
4. Upon agreement, all subsequent therapy sessions will be recorded via digital audio
5. Recordings, field notes and transcripts will be stored on the Cardiff University OneDrive System
6. Segments of recordings relevant to the study will be transcribed, anonymised to ensure confidentiality
7. These transcribed sections will be thematically organised and used to comprise a discourse analysis
8. All data, including recordings and transcripts, will be retained for no less than 5 years or at least 2 years post-publication and then destroyed in accordance with GDPR.

If there are any other potential ethical issues that you think the Committee should consider, please explain them on a separate sheet. It is your obligation to bring to the attention of the Committee any ethical issues not covered on this form

THE NEXT SECTION IS TO BE COMPLETED BY YOUR SUPERVISOR(S)

SECTION J: SUPERVISOR DECLARATION

The supervisor(s) must explain in the box below how any potential ethical issue(s) highlighted by the student above and via ticked shaded boxes on this form, will be handled. Please also consider if it is appropriate for the information sheet(s) and consent form(s) to be attached to this form.

PLEASE DO NOT LEAVE THIS BOX BLANK

This project is unusual in the sense that it aims to conduct qualitative research on participants who are also 'clients' recruited from the student's psychotherapy practice. The student is mindful of the special consideration that must be given to recruiting participants to whom they also have therapeutic responsibilities. The application is clear in stating that these therapeutic responsibilities take priority, and that research is secondary to capturing processes which are relevant to the topic. The application is also clear in stating that invitation to take part in the study can only proceed after which the client has independently raised issues relevant to the research. This dual role of therapist-researcher is not uncommon to psychotherapy; there is a long tradition of conducting clinical research within psychotherapy, which is condoned by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). The student has provided an Information Sheet and Consent Form to show how they will address this dual role *before* clients give their consent to take part in the project. Issues of anonymity, confidentiality and data security have also been addressed in this application.

As the supervisor for this student project, I believe that all research ethical issues have been dealt with in accordance with University policy and the research ethics guidelines of the relevant professional organisation.

Supervisor(s) Signature:	1. Michael Arribas-Ayllon	2. Valerie Walkerdine
Date:	22/02/2019	22/02/2019

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Application Guidance Notes

Making an application to the School Research Ethics Committee if you are a Postgraduate student

There are five stages in preparing an application to the Research Ethics Committee. These are:

1. Consider the guidance provided in the **SOCSI RESEARCH ETHICS 'module' on the Learning Central**.
2. Discuss any ethical issues you have about the conduct of your research with your supervisor(s).
3. Complete this Student Projects application form.
4. Sign and date the form, and ask your supervisor(s) to complete and sign the Supervisor Declaration.
5. Submit one copy of your application to the secretary of the School Research Ethics Committee – see contact details on Page 1.

PLEASE NOTE THE FOLLOWING BEFORE COMPLETING YOUR APPLICATION:

1. Illegible handwritten applications will not be processed so please type.
2. Some NHS-related projects will need NHS REC approval. The SREC reviews NHS-related projects that do not require NHS REC approval. See guidance provided in the **SOCSI RESEARCH ETHICS 'module' on the Learning Central**.
3. You should not submit an application to the SREC if your research involves adults who do not have capacity to consent. Such projects must be submitted to the NRES system.
4. Research with children and young people under the age of 18.
 - i) *One-to one research or other unsupervised research with this age group requires an up-to-date Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check (formerly called Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) Check).*
 - ii) *If your research is in an institution or setting such as a school or youth club and all contact with the children and young people is supervised you will still need to check with the person in charge about whether you need a DBS check; many such organisations do require DBS checks for all those carrying out research on their premises, whether this includes unsupervised contact or not.*
 - iii) *You will need to have an awareness of how to respond if you have concerns about a child/young person in order that the child/young person is safeguarded.*
 - iv) *You will also need:*
 - a) *permission from the relevant institution*
 - b) *consent from the parent or guardian for children under 16*
 - c) *consent from the child/young person, after being provided with age-appropriate information.*

See guidance provided in the **SOCSI RESEARCH ETHICS 'module' on the Learning Central**.

5. Information on data management, collecting personal data: data protection act requirements, can be accessed via: <https://intranet.cardiff.ac.uk/students/study/postgraduate-research-support/integrity-and-governance>
6. The collection or use of human tissue (including, but not limited to, blood, saliva and bodily waste fluids): The Committee appreciates that the question relating to this in this application form will not in general relate to research undertaken in SOCSI. However, for further University guidance and information on the Human Tissue Act, please see: <https://intranet.cardiff.ac.uk/students/study/postgraduate-research-support/integrity-and-governance>
7. Undergraduate Dissertation Research involving HM Prison Service Employees: students are advised to discuss with their supervisors the SREC guidance note 'Undergraduate Dissertation Research involving HM Prison Service Employees' which can be accessed in the **SOCSI RESEARCH ETHICS 'module' on the Learning Central**.
8. Supervisors are primarily responsible for the contents of information sheets and consent forms. Information Sheets and consent forms are not normally required as part of the SREC approval process, however, the Committee can find them helpful in cases where sensitive issues are involved or where the participants are children or vulnerable adults. Supervisors should consider whether their inclusion would assist the Committee.

For interesting examples of information sheets and consent forms, please see the **SOCSI RESEARCH ETHICS 'module' on the Learning Central**.

11. If you tick a box in the shaded sections of the proforma you should address this in the Dissertation Summary and/or Supervisor's Declaration.

Appendix 3: Consent Form

Cardiff University School of Social Sciences



CONSENT FORM 23/2/2019

Title: *Reconciling the 'Digital Self' in Psychotherapy*

Name of Researcher: Mason Neely

Name of supervisor: Michael Arribas-Allyon/ Valerie Walkerdine

Please **initial** all boxes

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated **23/2/19** (Version 1) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

☐

3. I agree to have my anonymised data being used in study specific reports and subsequent articles that may appear in academic journals.

☐

4. I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of researcher

Date

Signature

Version: 1

Appendix 4: Information Sheet

Cardiff University School of Social Sciences



School of Social Sciences

Ysgol Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol

Head of School, Pennaeth yr Ysgol

Dr Tom Hall

23/2/2019

Dear Participant,

This letter is an invitation to participate in a study I am conducting as part of a Doctor of Philosophy PhD Thesis in Cardiff University School of Social Sciences. My research project is titled *Reconciling the 'Digital Self' in Psychotherapy* and is conducted under the supervision of Michael Arribas-Allyon and Valerie Walkerdine. This letter aims to provide you with essential information of the study's purpose and objectives. It also aims to specify what your involvement would entail, should you decide to participate.

You are being invited to participate in a research project investigating appearance of the 'Digital Self' within psychotherapy. This includes how engagement with social media and online networking applications effect our sense of identity. I would like to ask you to consent to allow portions of our work to be recorded and analysed in order to address these topics.

This research aims to investigate:

- How does our use of social media and the different personas we might deploy through electronic online communication effect our overall sense of 'self'?
- How do these different 'identities' appear in the therapeutic encounter?
- What role does psychotherapy play in understanding our digital 'identities'?

Why have I been invited?

You have been approached to take part in this research because of the inclusion of social, media, mediated communication and digital culture within our work.

Do I have to take part?

No! Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and can be withdrawn, without explanation or consequence at any time.

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Cardiff University School of Social Sciences

What does participating in the study involve?

Your involvement will be to simply attend and engage in therapy sessions as we have previously contracted. *No special involvement, activity or behaviour will ever be asked of you throughout this process.* You will never be required or directed to speak about specific topics. You will never be asked to 'bring in' material around digital life for us to work with. Personal or sensitive subjects, including online activities may be discussed. More specifically, your conduct on social media may be explored. All that is asked is that you allow our sessions to be recorded on a digital audio device or – in the event that sessions are not recorded – that you allow me to call upon my notes of all of our sessions to compile a case study detailing the issues and concepts that emerged in therapy.

You can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.

Furthermore, your withdrawal will in no way effect our therapeutic relationship or the terms of our working agreement. In the event of your withdrawal, the data you provide will be immediately deleted from the data set and all digital recordings will be immediately destroyed that very day. No further data will be collected and no previously collected data will be retained for any future use of any kind.

As part of this project, I will be occupying two roles: first, as your therapist and second, as a researcher. It is of the utmost importance to me as your therapist that your involvement in this study does not negatively impact our work together. My first priority is that you receive the support your need and move towards the growth you desire. I have an ethical obligation to your well-being that I take very seriously. During our sessions I will simply be your therapist. Our work will continue as normal. I will not be 'interviewing' you about certain topics or direct to speak about things you feel are unproductive or unhelpful. Nor will I be asking for forensic information from your phone or your browser history. Our work will be about the things you desire to understand about life and your relationships. That said, outside of our sessions, I will consider the recordings of our sessions – as well as my session notes - and will pay specific attention to how digital culture and technology appears within our work. Should you have a question about that process, you have every right to ask it. As with any other facet of our work, I will always be transparent and forthcoming about what happens during the research process.

IMPORTANT: You may terminate the recording at any time if you experience anxiety, tiredness or discomfort or if you feel your involvement in research process to be detrimental to your sense of well-being or the effectiveness of our work together. It is your fundamental right as a client to choose how, when and if you take part in this study.

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What will happen to the data?

All information and personal details you provide will be kept completely confidential and then stored on my password-protected computer for transcription purposes. As with all the other information we discuss during therapy, the data will not be given to anyone else. **Your name will not appear in the dissertation or any reports resulting from this study.** My supervisor and thesis examiners will have access to the interview transcripts and recordings, but not to your name and personal details. Quotations from your interview may be used in the results section; however, they will be made completely anonymous so that your identity – and the identities of people you may reference within our work - can never be reconstructed. You will have the opportunity to review any resulting transcript, at your request, in order to authenticate its accuracy and to make any changes or amendments you feel might be beneficial. If the results of the study are published, they will not give your name or include any identifiable references to you, nor anyone you may have discussed within therapy.

A printed copy of the final project may be held in the Cardiff University library as part of the university's larger body of research. The audio recordings will be anonymous numbered and securely stored on the university's encrypted online network. When the data is transcribed, all identifying features, both of yourself and our client, will be removed. All the transcripts will be securely encrypted and stored in a similar manner. The data (i.e. actual interview recordings, not just transcripts) will be retained for no less than 5 years or at least 2 years post-publication and then destroyed in accordance with GDPR. All of the data including that collected will comprise a Discourse Analysis, to be published as a part of thesis in completion of a Doctorate of Philosophy in the Social Sciences. I cannot promise the study will help you but the information we get from the study will help to increase the understanding of how digital engagement and social media shape subjectivity within psychotherapy.

What Happens Next?

Should you express an interest in participating in the study, you will be asked to read and fill out a consent form. No remuneration, including compensation or expenses or will be made in return for your participation. If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should ask to speak to myself and I will do my best to answer your questions. I can be reached by calling 0796 495 6725. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally you can do this through emailing my academic supervisor Michael Arribas-Allyon (Valerie Walkerdine (Walkerdine@cardiff.ac.uk) or the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (SOCSI-ethics@cardiff.ac.uk). Should you feel it necessary, you have every right to contact my governing body, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, and make an ethics complaint, either through email at bacp@bacp.co.uk, or telephone at 01455 883300.

Thank you very much for taking time to consider your participation in this study.

Mason Neely / NeelyMC@cardiff.ac.uk / 0796 495 6725

Version: 1

Appendix

5:

Approval

Letter



School of Social Sciences
Ysgol Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol
 Head of School, Pennaeth yr Ysgol
 Dr Tom Hall

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 Glamorgan Building
 King Edward VII Avenue
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• 29 April 2019

Our ref: SREC/3212

Mason Christopher Neely
 PhD Programme
 SOCSI

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Dear Mason,

Your project entitled '*Reconciling the 'Digital Self' in Psychotherapy*' has now been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University and you can now commence the project should all necessary forms of approval been received.

If you make any substantial changes with ethical implications to the project as it progresses you need to inform the SREC about the nature of these changes. Such changes could be: 1) changes in the type of participants recruited (e.g. inclusion of a group of potentially vulnerable participants), 2) changes to questionnaires, interview guides etc. (e.g. including new questions on sensitive issues), 3) changes to the way data are handled (e.g. sharing of non-anonymised data with other researchers).

In addition, if anything occurs in your project from which you think the SREC might usefully learn, then please do share this information with us.

All ongoing projects will be monitored and you will be obliged periodically to complete and return a SREC monitoring form.

Please inform the SREC when the project has ended.

Please use the SREC's project reference number above in any future correspondence.

Yours sincerely



Professor Alison Bullock
Chair of School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
 Cc: Michael Arribas-Ayllon, Valerie Walkerdine



Registered Charity, no. 1136855
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Appendix 6: Private Practice Working Agreement

Mason Neely - Psychotherapist (MBACP Accred)

WORKING AGREEMENT AND INFORMATION

The following information has been written to help guide you through your therapy process. If you have any questions about this or any other matter your counsellor will be pleased to discuss them with you.

Breaks and Endings

If you can't attend a session, please let me know: **TEL: 0796 495 6725**.

If you fail to notify me 24 hours prior to your appointment that you are not attending – even in the event of illness - **you will be charged £45.**

I will try and give you as much notice as possible regarding any absence on my part.

If you fail to attend two consecutive sessions without notice, no further appointments will be offered.

The Therapy Process

I will explain the therapeutic process and my personal approach to it in your first session. In particular, I'll work to explain that therapy is NOT advice giving. Further information about my approach can be found at counsellingsouthwales.com

Health and Medication

Please let me know if you are taking any medication. Some medication may affect the therapy process.

Please let me know if you are receiving any other form of therapy. It is inadvisable to be receiving more than one type of therapy at the same time. Also, let me know if you have previously had any therapy and if that was helpful/unhelpful to you. Therapy will not take place if you appear to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Confidentiality

I work within the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) Ethical Framework for good practice and seek to offer the highest level of confidentiality consistent with the law and BACP codes. An important part of the code of ethics is that counsellors have a supervisor with whom they discuss their work; the main focus of supervision is to help a counsellor look after the best interests of their clients. I may be required to use examples of their casework in training. When doing this they will always seek the client's permission in writing and take steps to protect the identity of the client, for example by changing details of the case and the names of those involved.

Exceptionally, I will involve outside agencies when harm to a client or others is considered a serious risk. In these circumstances, if possible, I will first discuss the situation with you and then agree a course of action. If necessary, you may be asked to sign a 'client information release consent form'.

There are circumstances, however, where the law requires me to break confidentiality without informing you or gaining your consent. These are issues relating to the Terrorism Act (2000), the Children Act (1989/2004), the Drug Trafficking Offences Act (1986- amended by Criminal Justice Act 1993), the Road Traffic Act (1988) and court orders.

If you have any concerns or queries about these restrictions on confidentiality you can discuss them with me at any time.

Mason Neely – Psychotherapist (MBACP Accred)
Email: masonneelycounselling@gmail.com
Phone 0796 495 6725

Mason Neely - Psychotherapist (MBACP Accred)

Note Taking

Factual notes are made regarding each session. The notes are always securely kept and are destroyed 6 years after the last session. It is the client's right to ask to see their notes.

I am occasionally required to use client material for presentation, research, assessments and assignments as part of my professional and academic development. This work normally takes the form of highly anonymised case studies (in which all identifying information is removed) and are only ever done with the client's consent. Should I ever ask you to take part in a piece of research, know that the notes I take throughout our work together – detailing our work together - will be included.

Outside of your Psychotherapy Sessions

Due to the nature of therapy it is important that we have no other relationship during the period we are working together. If we happen to 'bump into each other' between sessions, I will normally follow your lead in acknowledging each other or not, as I understand that you may not wish to explain to the people you are with how we know each other.

Evacuation Procedure

In the event of fire or the building needing to be evacuated an alarm will activate and we will assemble outside via fire escapes or stairs.

Payment

You can pay by cash or cheque at the session, or by bank transfer, **though I request that any electronic payment be made 24 hours in advance of our meeting.**

Payments can be made via bank transfer:

Sort: 40 47 62

Account: 52525518

I have read and understand Mason Neely, Psychotherapist's Information and Contracting form and commit to abide by its terms. I agree to pay £45 per session.

Signed _____ Print _____

Address _____ Phone _____

_____ Date _____

Mason Neely – Psychotherapist (MBACP Accred)
Email: masonneelycounselling@gmail.com
Phone 0796 495 6725