

Public Intimacy on social media -extimacy as connected presence

Intimidad pública en los medios sociales -extimidad como presencia conectada

Samuel Mateus

Universidade da Madeira | Labcom | Campus Universitario Penteada, gab. 1,101, 9020-105 Funchal | Portugal

 0000-0002-1034-6449 | samuelmateus@uma.pt

Fechas: Recepción: 09/06/2023 · Aceptación: 17/02/2024 · Publicación: 15/04/2024

Abstract

The modern experience of intimacy and sociality is being radically transformed, impacting not just the quality of social relationships but also the experience of the self and the borders between private and public expressions of the self. Social media are prime aspects of today's intimacy practices. They fulfil a need and desire for (remote) communications and a feeling of (mediated) connection.

The contemporary transformations regarding intimacy are presented in this paper. It is stated as a hypothesis that a reordering of the private and public realms has been happening since the 20th century, requiring a new theory of publicity and publicness. Only a reconceptualization of the modern notions of "public" and "private" enables us to fully understand the mutations in public intimacy provoked by social media. The objective is to demonstrate that media modulates intimacy, and concepts such as extimacy and connected presence are needed to fully comprehend and evaluate it.

This work begins by recounting the transformations in modern intimacy and its contemporary redefinition. Then, a characterization of the contemporary articulations of intimacy is drawn, and the implications of extimacy for the individual in the context of highly mediatized societies are presented. It is argued that extimacy involves a complete reformulation of modern intimacy in direction or a malleable, fluid, and negotiated, public intimacy. It is even more important today as growing differentiation and performativity in social life demand the management of social relations.

Keywords: *extimacy, public intimacy, connected presence, social media, digital rights.*

Resumen

La experiencia moderna de la intimidad y la socialidad se está transformando radicalmente, afectando no sólo a la calidad de las relaciones sociales, sino también a la experiencia del yo y a las fronteras entre las expresiones privadas y públicas del yo. Los medios sociales son aspectos primordiales de las prácticas de intimidad actuales. Satisfacen una necesidad y un deseo de comunicación (a distancia) y un sentimiento de conexión (mediada).

En este artículo se presentan las transformaciones contemporáneas de la intimidad. La hipótesis es que desde el siglo XX se está produciendo una reordenación de los ámbitos privado y público, y que es necesaria una nueva teoría

de la publicidad y lo público. Sólo una reconceptualización de las nociones modernas de “público” y “privado” permite comprender plenamente las mutaciones de la intimidad pública provocadas por los medios sociales. El objetivo es demostrar que la intimidad está modulada por los medios de comunicación y que necesitamos conceptos, como extimidad y presencia conectada, para aprehenderla y evaluarla plenamente.

El artículo comienza relatando las transformaciones de la intimidad moderna y su redefinición contemporánea. A continuación, se traza una caracterización de las articulaciones contemporáneas de la intimidad y se presentan las implicaciones de la extimidad para el individuo en el contexto de sociedades altamente mediatizadas. Se argumenta que la extimidad implica una reformulación completa de la intimidad moderna en dirección o una intimidad pública maleable, fluida y negociada. Su importancia es aún mayor en la actualidad, ya que la creciente diferenciación y performatividad de la vida social exigen la gestión de las relaciones sociales.

Palabras clave: extimidad, intimidad pública, presencia conectada, medios sociales, derechos digitales.

1. Introduction

It is not news that there is blurring between the public and private spheres, led by the communication technologies. In fact, it dates from the first forms of communication: vocalisations, painting, or writing presented an opportunity to publicly share one’s own (private) thoughts with others. These communication forms may be taken as a relational mediation of the world, trying to fill the gap between the inner and outer selves. Once, there were other vehicles in this process of connecting the private and public realms, like the personal diary of the 19th century. In the 20th century, media continued this trend: television exposes intimacy (Mehl, 1996), either in fictional (movies) or reality (reality-shows) contours, such as digital media and social networks, which are based on different articulations of this tensional molecule of private-public. In effect, a great part of contemporary media reworks the traditional frontiers between public and private, between one’s inner and collective lives. They enable a remultiplication of working identities to be created, sustained, partaken, and experimented along with by the public eye, as if one’s sense of self is dependent on the public approval of others (Jamieson, 2012). Social media made this very clear while enabling the articulation of multiple points of view about the self. Klein (2010, p. 159) describes this as a case of “mediated identity,” where the self discovers itself through the eyes of others. A self-identity that is inhabited by other selves.

Media are a crucial aspect of this identity process but especially social media. Social media refers to new forms of media that involve interactive participation. With the rise of digital and mobile technologies, interaction on a large scale became easier for individuals than ever before; and as such, a new media age was born where interactivity was placed at the centre of new media functions (Manning, 2014).

There is a growing number of evidence that people use social media in creative ways, not only to perform daily tasks, seek information, or share ideas, but also to obtain social support and feel connection with others (Ellison, Stenfield, & Lampe, 2011; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Of course, the nature of support afforded varies according to the intensity of social relationships. The levels of social support sought on social media are related to emotional closeness in existing social relationships, while the intensity of social media use seems related to the degree of intimacy in social relationships (Hsu *et al.*,

2011). One study even concluded that the intensity of social media use facilitates emotional support (Baker & Moore, 2008) and perceived social support (Kim & Lee, 2011). Other studies report that the number of Facebook friends has indeed improved positive affect and social satisfaction (Oh *et al.*, 2014). There are other studies that did not confirm these very results (cf. Pollet *et al.*, 2011), although a common trend among the several studies conducted on this subject stresses that social media (and Facebook in particular) supplement rather than supplant offline social relationships (Sutcliffe *et al.*, 2018, p. 227). Social media are an important source of psychological support for people, including emotionally. They are held to promote relationships with different levels of intensity or emotional closeness (Oswald & Clark, 2006).

These findings point to the fact that existing offline friendship networks tend to be replicated online rather than new relationships being formed. Even so, forming and maintaining weak relationships may be a key motivation for social media communication (Donah & Boyd, 2004; Pedruzzi *et al.*, 2021). The conclusion is not surprising if one puts the emphasis on increasing “friends” and “followers” in on social media. There is a tendency to cultivate social connections and add them massively to the personal profile. Weak ties dominate social networks in terms of the overall volume of contacts. Therefore, social support is primarily given from by the many weak ties with individuals that can fulfil diverse needs (Sutcliffe *et al.*, 2018, p. 229). Because they reflect greater heterogeneity than strong ties, weak ties facilitate varied support for a wider range of issues. Furthermore, weak ties seem especially suited to provide social support since feedback is more objective and given their reduced intimacy (Adelman, Parks, & Albrecht, 1987), which opens the path to a reduced discomfort from communicating sensitive information.

Social media fulfils a need and desire for (remote) communications and a feeling of (mediated) connection. 88% of respondents mention they use social media for social interaction purposes (Whiting & Williams, 2013, p. 366). Intimate co-presence (Hjorth *et al.*, 2015) of social media, from a psychological standpoint, describes the relational pressures of sustaining relationships through digital technologies. By enacting intimacy and sociality (Watson *et al.*, 2021), social media alter the ways people affectively manage their private and public lives and supplement the psychological need for social support in new and creative ways.

This paper explores the meaning of these changes and shows how intimacy has become a problematic concept on social media. Not only those problems arise from the way intimacy is practiced publicly, but several degrees of intimacy can now be recognised (Lambert, 2016). This work uses the term “extimacy” to characterise the public disclosure of intimacy in the media, especially, social media. Following previous studies on intimate disclosure on social media (Lomborg, 2013; Pedroni *et al.*, 2014), it describes the modulation of intimacy introduced by digital media.

“Extimacy” is here understood as a movement outward where intimacy becomes public. “The public intimacy shapes an extimacy due to the individual’s pretention to communicate his interior and express his deep thought to a vast audience. There is a wish to divide intimacy equally between people and share what used to be a well-guarded secret” (Mateus, 2010, p. 64).

The term was first coined by psychoanalyst George Lacan in the 1960s as an “intimate exteriority” and adapted by Serge Tisseron (2003), to whom “extimacy implies a double posture: At the start, in order to trust one’s self to another, it requires a partake of values between individual and other; on

the other hand, in order for an individual to be oriented, it is obligatory that the other be different so he may identify with him (Tisseron, 2003, p. 53). It is developed in the section with the same name.

I use the expression “digital media” in a quite similar way to social media. It “refers to the media that are encoded in machine-readable formats. Digital media is one that can be created, viewed, modified, communicated, and preserved on digital electronics devices, which include software, digital videos, images, web pages, databases, digital audio, and eBooks. Digital media is the opposite to of print media and other traditional or analogue media.” (Abraham, 2020, p. 2742).

Contrasting the modern grasp of the public sphere and a secret intimacy, the paradoxical disclosure of intimacy worked in this paper suggests the coexistence of public and private as a composite unit: a public intimacy (Mendelson, 2023).

The paradoxical disclosure of intimacy in this paper suggests the coexistence of public and private as a composite unit: a public intimacy (Mendelson, 2023). I present some of the contemporary transformations in intimacy that social media has introduced. My hypothesis is that a reordering of the private and public realms is has been happening since the 20th century, and a new theory of publicity and publicness is needed (Mateus, 2024). Only a reconceptualization of the modern notions of “public” and “private” enables us to fully understand the mutations in intimacy provoked by social media. The objective is to demonstrate that intimacy is modulated by media and that we need new concepts, such as connected presence, to apprehend and evaluate it.

I start by recounting the transformations in modern intimacy and its redefinition. Then, a characterization of the contemporary articulations of intimacy is drawn, and the paper ends by pondering the implication of extimacy for the individual in the context of highly mediatized societies (Dobson *et al.*, 2018).

2. Modern Intimacy and its redefinition

A slow but steady process, modern intimacy had its climax in the 18th century. The body is made into an object of substantial value as self-portraits and mirrors proliferate, toilets become gender-specific, and individual tombs turn up (Ariès *et al.*, 1987). At the same time, individuals tend to retreat from public space and shelter themselves in their *home, sweet home*. The practice of introspection has become as banal as lonesome leisure, where silent reading signals the increasing privatisation of life (Sennett, 1992). The domestic architecture changes: the number of rooms rises in damaging of the big and social dining room, while the courtyard shrinks and is placed at the house’s rear.

The importance accorded to intimacy was interpreted by the moderns in two ways. Firstly, the outside expressed the diversity that confused and bruised the self. Secondly, interiority acquired the meaning of an inner space of self-definition and moral value. The public world of the streets was seen as harsh, complex, and cold, while the domestic intimate realm was identified as the realm of order, tranquillity, self-evidence and clarity. The modern intimacy rested upon the idea of a warm place where subjective life flourished because it was not exposed to the threats outside represented. Thus, the modern branch aspires to improve subject’s personality through closeness. The “public domain was identified in the 18th and 19th centuries with necessity, politics, and society, as the

private sphere contained a dimension of intimacy seen as the sphere of individual freedom, self-fulfilment, and shelter from the sourness of the world outside. So, it has appeared in individually he idea of a dichotomy between an exterior that is public and shared with everyone and a private interior that is only accessible and understandable by the subject” (Mateus, 2010, p. 59).

The modern intimate society expressed a strong individualism, articulating the great investment in privacy and the erosion of public life (Arendt, 2001). The measurement of society in terms of personification implied a tyranny of intimacy (Sennett, 1974, p. 264). According to Sennett (1974, p. 264), without civility, sociability retreated, and narcissism flourished. Modern narcissistic intimacy manifested the emptiness of the private domain, which deflated collective life and destroyed public life. “Narcissism only discovers its true meaning on the historic scale: he coincides with the process that carries individuals to reduce the emotional load invested in the public realm or in transcendent realms, increasing the private realm’s priorities” (Lipovetsky, 1989, p. 14). The intimate society brought a narcissist self into play while the world was but a self’s mirror. However, the more a narcissistic individual tried to live and feel vivid experiences, the more difficult it became. He turned into a frigid person (Lash, 1991, p. 11).

The late 20th century brought a fundamental evolution in the modern borders of the public and private realms as well as in the meaning of intimacy, which proved that man’s modern insight was too negative. In both the public and private realms, as well as in intimacy, the same phenomenon is observed: a growing porosity and interconnection between modern dualisms. Gradually, these clear and stable frontiers between private intimacy and the public individual begin to dissolve.

We distinguish *modern intimacy*, which is physical and psychological intimacy from *contemporary intimacy*, which is emotional intimacy. The former intimacy underlined a spatial and psychological dimension, whereas the latter highlights a relational dimension and the establishment of intersubjective involvements. While modern, liberal intimacy was understood in terms of autonomy, self-control, and ownership (over one’s own time and space), this contemporary fluid intimacy debases property as the ultimate basis of privacy. Contemporary intimacy develops in fluid relationships with people with weak ties and is based on mutual disclosure (Bazarova, 2012), and accessibility according to a collective sharing of expectations. “The understanding of the social implications of digital practices, such as the use of selfies, for privacy and its contextual integrity needs to take into account this complex articulation of mobility, autonomy, and attachment” (Lasén, 2015, p. 76).

Intimacy appears now as an individual choice that lacks a concrete and immutable form. It is a socially shifting notion. “Intimacy appears now as a subjective appraisal, more and more a subject’s decision than a social norm. His definition comes to be a more personal decision than a collective one, and it is less dependent on society’s moral authority. Intimacy is an individual choice that lacks a concrete and immutable delineation. It is a socially shifting notion. There are neither specific limits nor established frontiers” (Mateus, 2010, p. 62). There are neither specific limits nor established frontiers. From the deepest intimacy to the most visible and common publicness, prejudices, affections, and intimate sentiments come to the surface. Intimacy becomes a discursive space of public engagement (Keightley & Reading, 2014).

I argue that public disclosure of intimacy does not mean a complete shutting down of intimacy but, more importantly, a chief restoration and renovation of the modern notion. Therefore, intimacy should not be seen as being diluted in the public realm or weakened by social indiscretion. It is simply redefined, as it is only conceived in conjunction with its exposure (Mehl, 1996, p.163; Lásen, 2015). Nowadays, people's private lives are deliberately exposed. I agree with Berlant's idea of intimacy, as strict privacy is a liberal fantasy since it is always joined by a public dimension (Berlant, 1998).

My main difference with Berlant's (1998) argument has to do with the fact modern media (especially social media) brought an intensification of the public content of privacy, which represents a new kind or collective form of experience intimacy.

In the next section, I investigate the meaning of this reordering between the private and the public. I also examine the changing, modulated, and notion of intimacy brought about by social media.

3. Modulation of Intimacy

The spread of social profiles and all the mediated forms of narrowcasting (as podcasts or v-logs) is an active method of intimacy modulation. By this, I mean the creative ways individuals use social media to redefine their identity dynamics through the interplay of the private and public realms. Intimacy modulation is an unavoidable aspect of mediatized societies¹. It must be considered not as the disappearance of the self but as a creative procedure for seeking social connection. It involves publicly recognised social approval of their acts. Paradoxically, intimacy is now understood as a relational, communicative achievement enabling to surpass the dichotomy between the public and the private, intimacy and publicness. The modulation of intimacy introduces the other in the process of being one. Self becomes an under-construction project seeking for public approval through technological means. Since it searches for a kind of communicative exteriorization, intimacy is nowadays media-modulated, a kind of mediated intimacy (Vetere *et al.*, 2005). Mobile, mediatized cultures constitute the condition through which intimacy is being reformulated, bringing individuals into a ubiquitous and an immersive environment in which modern intimacy seems to disappear. Yet, in reality, mediated intimacy sets the stage for new practices of intimacy that are objects of personal and social negotiation. These performative uses of media that reset the frontier between the private and the public describe a presumed intimacy (Rojek, 2015) or an intimacy at distance. Both expressions denote the mediated intimacy society is nowadays facing².

Even though a presumed intimacy may be regarded as a form of para-sociality that plagues democratic societies (Rojek, 2015), I prefer to emphasise how this represents a strong modulation of intimacy based on the triumph of personality over character. Media, and above all social media, facilitate a discursive construction of social connection that feeds the process of personally negotiating the modern frontiers between what is a public and a private issue.

1. This is quite evident in some social media influencers who intentionally expose their family life in what seems to be a strategy of content creation while enabling them to establish rapport and identification with their followers.

2. Some examples are the romantic and date apps (e.g. Tinder), sextexting, Facebook and Instagram, What's up the public display of domestic settings, selfies, etc.

Now, the innermost (the Latin *intimus*) dimension of self is not something private anymore, like in the 18th and 19th centuries. Instead, it is disclosed through the ubiquity, immediacy, and acceleration of connections provided by social media (David & Cambre, 2016; Ellison *et al.*, 2011). Social media make privacy contextual, urging individuals to constantly demarcate its fluid meanings and contours (Sandoval Martín, 2000; Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022). Sharing images across the network (like selfies on Instagram) entails a new media ecology where intimacy is not something pre-given but something that is negotiated in the physical appearance, the background setting, the shooting angles, body parts exposed, etc. (Ardèvol & Gómez-Cruz, 2012). In some extent, the modulation of intimacy means a new articulation between privacy, intimacy, and publicness in which they become flexible. Social media play different ways of shared intimacy (Lasén, 2015, p. 73). Although they may be regarded as superficial and ephemeral, several studies argue that social support is primarily given by the many weak ties with individuals that can fulfil diverse individual needs (Sutcliffe, 2018, p. 229). We must not ignore them, even if they mean a complete reconfiguration of modern traits of intimacy.

Mediated intimacies (cf. Andreassen *et al.*, 2017) represent the articulation and modulation of the modern framework of privacy and intimacy as techno social relationalities (David & Cambre, 2016, p. 9). At the same time, mediatized societies may be facing a mobile intimacy: “a geographical and physical space [is] overlaid with an electronic position and relational presence, which is emotional and social” (Hjorth & Lim, 2012, p. 478). Intimacy is, literally, in our pocket: in the mobile phone, in the tablet, in the laptop. It accompanies the individual wherever she goes. An innocent commentary on a social network may well expose personal convictions and private beliefs that were not intended to become public. As social media promotes the creation and sustaining of interpersonal attachments (friends, followers), intimacy is increasingly digitally mediated, challenging the modern divide between public and private. It is composed of new actors and categories such as friends, acquaintances, colleagues, strangers, and familiar strangers, all commenting, adding, liking, or following the lives of each other.

The everyday use of social media functions as a collective performance where (...) the attraction of social media in creating a sense of mass community that is far from abstract and anonymous for it is based on growing familiarity between strangers. (Kaplan, 2021, p. 597)

Exposed intimacy on social media does not equate with oppression or a lack of personal autonomy. On the contrary, it is something accepted and appropriated. It is not imposed, but something individuals search for and negotiate in depth. In fact, media play an increasingly notable role in shaping people’s knowledge, practices, and expectations about intimate relationships (Barker, 2018).

The public disclosure of their lives is conducted in order to develop a better sense of intimacy with others, even if their presence is mediated and physically distant. Even if intimacy is disclosed, a sense of togetherness is obtained. Van House (2007), for instance, proposes to see “togetherness” as the main objective of photo sharing through social media in the context of personal relationships. And Malik, Dhir, and Nieminem (2016) suggested that photo sharing on Facebook may be due to six different gratifications: affection, attention seeking, disclosure, habit, information distribution, and social influence.

“Results from our study validate that photo sharing activity on Facebook specifically contributes to fulfilling this gratification. Facebook users engage in sharing their digital photos with others as, over

time, intentionally or unintentionally, they develop attributes of content generators. It becomes one of the habits that they engage in as part of their online activities. In some cases, this habitual pastime might also turn into addictive behaviour, leading to regular photo sharing and frequently checking for received likes and comments on those photos” (Malik *et al.*, 2016, p. 134-135). It is not simply a matter of the media giving advice on intimacy in the form of self-help books or magazine columns. It is about the “wider cultural habitat of images, ideas, and discourses about intimacy that circulate through and across media” (Barker, 2018).

Mediated intimacies were, thus, briefly described. Yet, they can only be fully apprehended when confronted with the social principle it gives rise to: extimacy. In the forthcoming section, I explain and characterise extimacy as the principle orienting the modulation of intimacy in the context of social media.

4. Extimacy

“Extimacy” was first coined by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in his *Seminar XVI* in 1969, when he discussed Freud’s concept of *Das Ding*. While *Das Ding* is a lost object, we want to find something interior but, at the same time, also exterior. Lacan uses *extimité* –extimacy– to refer to something that is simultaneously close but external to us. Then, extimacy is a paradoxical possibility where the self is composed of alterity, some intimacy that one reencounters only through the other. Henceforth, warns Lacan, the most intimate feelings can be strange and other to us, and they can be externalised to objects without necessarily losing their intensity.

Serge Tisseron (2008, p. 39) takes on Lacan’s concept, emphasising that to discover entails two interrelated meanings: it means to remove a cover; it means a discovery (*dis-cover*); something that we did not know until then. These two senses correspond to the desire for extimacy, a will to expose in public the secret parts of the self to have a better notion of himself and have social validation. Tisseron states that extimacy does not need technologies to exist, but we must underscore that social media’s conditions for extimacy are crucial to the enlargement the notion has suffered. Extimacy is, to Tisseron, the exhibition of a part of one’s intimate life (physical but also psychic), or the desire to communicate his inner self. He illustrates extimacy in reality television on programmes such as *Loft Story* or *Big Brother*.

Both Lacan and Tisseron’s views on extimacy are of great help in understanding the extension of intimacy caused by social media. Extimacy designates the desire of common people to enlarge their inner self through the public eye of others while revealing certain parts of their privacy. The modern frontiers of public and private, as well as intimacy, suddenly collapse under the weight of an inner core that is only attained through its exteriorization. Extimacy means, then, a communicative manifestation of intimacy and privacy, where it is its openness that enables them to be achieved. In a sense, it is a concept close to Jamieson’s (2012) concept of “practices of intimacy (...) which enable, generate, and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other”. This idea was empirically tested by “a qualitative study based on a multi-sited approach to understand different kinds of intimacy practices facilitated by social media at several levels: across different platforms (Badoo, CouchSurfing, and Facebook), multi-modal (online/offline), and in different locations (UK and Spain)” (Miguel, 2016, p. 51). The different kinds of personal relationships they

foster and facilitate are key to mapping the different kinds of intimacy practices that users experience through social media. The results suggest that social media function as intimacy mediators and that they foster technical affordances to create and develop personal relationships that users adopt and adapt (Miguel, 2016, p. 65).

In effect, networked individuals develop new social skills and strategies for problem-solving and meeting the needs of a polymedia environment. These include actively managing self-presentation (Kim and Lee, 2011) and the production of personal boundaries in digitally supported networks such as social media (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). That's why the notion of "scalable sociality"³ (Chambers, 2017) or "algorithmic friendship"⁴ (Bucher, 2012) has become so relevant today. What stands out in extimacy is the reformulation of the "genuine" or the "authentic". Through the externalisation of the inner self, intimate thoughts and sentiments escape the modern private realm and reach the public.

Extimacy describes a public intimacy making interior and exterior concurrent, intimate and public simultaneous.

In fact, the concept of public intimacy contains the structural transition from dyad to triad and from triad to mass community. A tweet or post that becomes viral incorporates a series of triadic interactions in which instant relationships between various actors are performed and made visible to a mass audience. (Kaplan, 2021, p. 608)

This aim in making public modern "private" intimacy is due to an attempt at better self-understanding by integrating others' reactions in order to create a richer intimacy. People's desire to tell everyone their hidden feelings not only abolishes the secrecy of intimacy, but also involves new contours: if modernity states intimacy (from the latin *intimu*, meaning what is secret, interior, or profound), contemporary media societies acclaim a public intimacy that configures a true "extimacy" (from the latin *extimus*, past participle of *exter*, meaning exterior or foreign).

Kaplan (2021, p. 600-601) has identified six attributes of online public intimacy:

1. "A collective space for performing relationships in which two or more actors interact and simultaneously display their social situation to others.
2. This performance is akin to a theater-in-the-round in which the main actors stage their relationship in front of a bounded audience that can engage in interactive exchange as a third party.
3. This performance can be considered "intimate" not in the sense of disclosing some inner feelings or explicit content but because the interactants give off "tie signs" (...) and create an emergent sense of an exclusive bond staged in public.
4. The actors engage in expressive sociability and playful phatic communication that often takes the form of banter and is characterized by ambiguous, partly unintelligible coded gestures.

3. According to Chambers (2017), "The term 'scalable sociality' developed by Miller et al. (2016) explains the varied and poly-mediated nature of user agency. Social media can support intensely public or private modes of communication for exchanges within large or small groups, according to users' needs. Their concept of 'scalability' advances previous research on polymedia by Madianou and Miller (2012). 'Polymedia' refers to the choices individuals make between numerous forms of communication according to their personal circumstances within a wider media ecology, whether Skype, email, WhatsApp, or other channels of communication".

4. Bucher suggests that friendships online need to be seen as the gathering of heterogeneous elements that include both humans and nonhumans. She uses the concept of "algorithmic friendship" "as a way of understanding the ways in which algorithms and software have become active participants in our networked lives and information ecosystems, forming the ways in which users are made to relate to themselves and others" (Bucher, 2012).

5. This exchange can potentially tease and seduce viewers. Select viewers who have better access to this exchange may feel tempted to participate and get involved.
6. Public intimacy has implications for collective solidarity. The horizontal network structure of social media implies that all actors are potential participants, whereas the performative character of third-party interactions extends the affective quality of personal ties to a wider community”.

The psychological dimension of today’s public intimacy rests more in a subjective process, one that is very different from the personalisation process of 19th -and early-20th century modernity (Sennett, 1974). In the modern personalisation process, sentiments were embodied by universal people who shared the same psychological structures. His self’s interest persevered to the extent that he was a society’s mirror.

However, in a subjective process the central question is how to individualise affections (Mateus, 2018). Sentiments arouse interest only if they are lived by concrete personalities and trigger intersubjective relationships (Mehl, 2006, p. 173). Psychological needs go along with social emotions. Extimacy acts are based on a subjective process that demands social acceptance and, at the same time, it calls individuals together for psychological validation, namely in self-validation and self-valorization (Pasquali Falchi, 2023).

Social media helps with the process of extimacy due to the individual’s desire to communicate his interior and express his deep thoughts to a vast audience⁵. Extimacy becomes not just a verbal but also a visual issue. It is the television *talkshows* that lead guests to verbally disclose their intimate lives, as well as the shared pictures on Instagram. The value of social media extimacy assumes three main forms: self-enhancement, self-verification, and self-assessment (Martinot, 2008). The constructed perception of oneself through the lenses of others configures a strategy of self-presentation that can be instrumental: the exposure of oneself, in its public visibility, would be an affirmative form of the self.

Nevertheless, the profound meaning of extimacy in media societies can only be understood if social media is seen as a *phatic* technology. “A technology is phatic if its primary purpose or use is to establish, develop, and maintain human relationships. The users of the technology have personal interactive goals” (Wang *et al.*, 2012, p. 84). Phatic technologies are forms of communication dedicated to personal and social needs and goals. This includes examples of social media but also cybercommunities, such as *Second Life*, and social networking platforms like: *Facebook*, *You Tube*, and *LinkedIn*. Above all, the goal of phatic technologies is relationship building through communication, precisely as extimacy, not information exchanging. They are named after phatic dialogue, which is empty of informative content but rich in engagement, serving to reassure communication and interaction potential.

Actually, phatic technologies are so named for phatic dialogue, which is empty of informative content but serves to engage people with one another in purely social exchange. The purpose of phatic dialogue has been linked to the need of hearing the humming of a machine. The “machine must be ‘humming’ if we are not to think it has broken down. The relationship between speakers is affirmed by the act of communication rather than the content of communication. (Wang *et al.*, 2012, p. 85)

5. Some authors described it as a right. Cf. Gervasoni and Bolesina, and Dias (2022).

The phatic content characteristic of social media is motivated less by «having something in particular to say» as by a desire «to say ‘something’» in order to maintain connections or audiences, to let one’s network know that you are still ‘there’ (Miller, 2008, p. 393). Social media is more important for its form than its content. It does not matter what we say, but if *we have the option and the confidence to say something if we wish*.

In other words, extimacy is highly dependent on phatic technologies.

Self-exposure in social media, at least extimacy, according to this standpoint, would be, above all, relational and not expressive; more broadly, relational identity would allow to understand the presence and the activity in the social media. (Brodin & Magnier, 2012, p. 162)

As Kaplan (2021, p. 608-609) highlights:

The playful phatic communication in the form of banter and ambiguous code language can tease selected outer circle members and prompt them to partake in the conversation. It can also cause non-member viewers (if permitted by the owner’s privacy setting) to join the private social club by simply sending a friend request.

Both extimacy and phatic technologies share the same principle: connected presence. Licoppe (2003) talks about connected presence as the core motivation for networked interactions.

Connected presence allows for the development of a particular pattern of construction of social relationships that of the ‘connected’ management of relationships, in which the (physically) absent party renders himself or herself present by multiplying mediated communication gestures up to the point where interactions of copresence and mediated communication seem woven in a seamless web. (Licoppe, 2003, p. 135)

It strengthens social ties in an ever-expanding network and mediatizes life. Instead of being used to compensate for the absence of individuals, social media is exploited to provide a continuous pattern of mediated interactions in which the boundaries between absence and presence get progressively blurred.

Cabalquinto (2018, p. 248) proposes the expression “ambivalent intimacies” to “articulate the contradictory affective experiences embodied and negotiated by transnational families through Facebook use in sustaining long-distance relationships”. It is related to the transformations in mobile intimacy in the age of social media, unveiling a paradox in a networked society: “Facebook use has enabled separated family members to stay intimately involved in each other’s lives, and yet at the same time, using Facebook also stirs disruptive connections and a feeling of sadness. It is by employing the coping mechanisms described here –limiting visibility of posts and suppressing emotions– that transnational family members ensure the sustenance of long-distance relationships” (Cabalquinto, 2018, p. 259). The connected mode of interaction involves brief, although frequent, exchanges allowing people to stay “online” in periodic contact, fostering a relational link and nurturing the relationship (cf, Pedruzzi *et al.*, 2021).

Connected presence is similar to network connectivity in that it becomes part of our daily lives. It involves frequent and brief exchanges during our routine tasks that maintain the possibility

of communication. Text messaging is a paramount example (i.e., *I'm leaving now; almost there; I'm going to the grocery store*), as connected presence is also crucial in social media, because it is asynchronous. In fact, it is seen as less intrusive, even if its regularity and constancy make it pervasive. The continuous nature of short and frequent exchanges reassures the social relationship. The sharing of pictures on social media exemplifies an update on connected presence. Social media, because they are ubiquitous, provide a continuous sense of connected presence, which enables extimacy processes to take place. The continuous flow of small, casual (verbal, visual, and sonic) messages forms the basis of mediated interaction. And part of the need to exteriorize the inner self depends on this possibility of connected presence with someone else, even if this connected presence may be performed by different people at the same time (or by the same people at different times of the day).

Connected presence is related to a relational identity.

The notion of relational identity implies that relationships intervene upstream of the person, in its very constitution (...). The current knowledge shows that to exist requires taking part in what is not oneself, to feel interdependence. This relationship is not of moral nature but constitutive of our being. In contrast, Flahaut the feeling of existence (to feel well, in confidence, in a process of transmission, as in the conversation for which the "self-consciousness" harms) to the desire to impress (to stick to an image). (Brodin & Magnier, 2012, p. 165)

Thus, extimacy is part of the process of connected presence and mediated as well as public intimacy. Hence, it is elusive to study the manifold expressions that it renders. However, one must continue searching and understanding its real consequences on social media.

5. Conclusion

As it has been proven, the modern frontiers between the private and the public have to be reconsidered. Public intimacy does not necessarily entail a reduction in intimacy. Instead, it signs a new mediatized configuration of social relations (Schandorf, 2019), in which the reactions of its participants become a collective performance. This is quite well shown by Kaplan, to whom public intimacy "involves replacing the basic performer-audience communication model associated with traditional media with an understanding of the audience as a third party to social relations taking place between actors" (Kaplan, 2021, p. 596).

Therefore, extimacy on social media sites like Facebook or Instagram does not imply a secondary, polluted, or minor form of intimacy. In other words, it is a staged performance of interpersonal ties in which new intimacy grammars are being created. Coded intimacy in public is one of the main ways individuals use to retain familiarity, sociability, and friendliness through extended social media practices. Then, social media has become a collective (cyber) space for performing relationships and the self in interactive ways in which actors engage in expressive sociability and playful phatic communication. As Bazarova (2012, p. 829) remarks: "Facebook and other SNS afford new ways of maintaining relationships that transform relational maintenance costs and rewards for both disclosers and receivers".

In particular, extimacy points to a complete reformulation of modern intimacy in direction or a malleable, fluid, and negotiated light intimacy. It is even more important today as a growing differentiation and performativity in social life demand the management of social relations by turning strangers into friends and followers. The public display of phatic communication creates a sense of public intimacy that extends the affective quality of personal ties to a broader circle.

Actually, it is a reconfiguration of intimacy that gets modulated within social media. We are moving beyond the informational relations of social media communication and starting to explore its expressive dimensions. Selfies are a public performance of personal identity (Ardevol & Gómez-Cruz, 2012, p. 182). They help develop intimacy insofar as they create a partaken social ambiance, driving social media users towards new, postmodern, representations of private life (Hogan, 2010, p. 384). This self-representation entails an original interpretation of contemporary intimacy that may be called a “screened intimacy” (David & Cambre, 2016).

On the other hand, extimacy in social media is closely related to “swipe logic” (David & Cambre, 2016). The concept means there is a public search for intimacy. Consequently, sociality is a key aspect of this extimate movement towards a collective commitment to individual privacy and intimacy. The individual “uniqueness” of the ancient notion of privacy is now a task shared with others in the public realm. The modulation of intimacy that is now other-directed towards extimacy is exactly what becomes “unique”. Intimacy and privacy are what remains across the successive changes, passages, and reformulations that are negotiated on social media.

Ultimately, my proposal points out that one useful way to ponder these reconfigurations is to recognise social media functions as connected presences enabling a digital public intimacy, expanding the traditional place between the inner and outer. My premise states that understanding extimacy leads to the recognition that intimacy is no longer just a matter of autonomy and self-preservation, but of sharing and self-opening to others.

For this reason, extimacy is part of the process of intimacy’s public exposure and the rise of mediated publicness. Future lines of research may address this constitutive duplicity where intimacy is mediated and subject to collective, public, and appraisal. They would disclose the role of media in modulating intimacy into an extimacy form of experiencing intimacy. The public exhibition of intimacy in social media inaugurates a comprehensive model of publicness-related extimacy. This externalisation movement points to the emergence of publicness as a core aspect of the individual intimacy sense.

Semblanza del autor

Samuel Mateus, Phd, teaches Communication at Madeira University and researches on political communication, communication theory and rhetoric domains. He is the editor of *Rhetoriké- Revista digital de Retórica* and *Estudos em Comunicação*.

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