



Losing Our Grip on Digital Media?

Tem Frank Andersen, Peter Vistisen, Thessa Jensen

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Theme: Digital life and digital detox

Background

The background for this paper presentation is an interest in how we live our everyday lives with digital media. This domain is defined digital leisure.

Digital leisure indicates that what we do with digital media in our non work time every day is “easy” or “fun work”. Our activities *with* (creation of content), activities *through* (social media interaction) and activities *in* (computer games, simulations) produce a sense of being (identity, recognition, meaning). In this sense we have a firm grip on digital media. Or at least we believe that we have this firm or competent grip on digital media. But is that the case?

Interest

This paper presentation is based on a collaborative study by:

- Tem Frank Andersen (digital leisure, reception, domestication, creation)
- Peter Vistisen (design fiction, science visualization, user studies)
- Thessa Jensen (fanfiction, fandom, fan ethics)

This paper presentation is aimed at publication in the domestication project lead by Maren Hartmann (2022): Perspectives on Domestication. *The Dark Side of Domestication: Individualization and anxieties created in the use of media technologies.*

The insights are considered to be used to inform a study on domesticating digital media in lifestyle sports in collaboration with Jens F. Jensen (2022)

Observation: Fear of Missing Out (FOMO or FoMO)

A condition of constant anxiety for not being where the action is or being in the loop or missing a potential positive social interaction. This anxiety can be reflected (acknowledge by the individual).

A condition that compels users to overuse technology (social media, apps) measured both in quantity (screen time) and quality (attention).

A condition that can lead to just-in-time behaviour and overbooked itineraries.

A condition that leads to a sense of loss of (self)control and low self esteem.

A condition that stoic (conservative) scholars believe to be handled by “standing fast” and accepting limits.

Observation: Notes on symptoms of FOMO

Always online (on your smartphone) checking apps and messenger.

Constantly checking apps and communicating.

Having a hard time making a buying decision, because something better might show up.

Avoiding to commit socially until you know what is the most exciting opportunity.

Feeling anxious and inadequate after reading friends' updates or notifications.

Observation: Digital lives - Users, Platforms and self presentation (Andreassen, eds, 2020)

This anthology presents cases of how the affordances of digital media and information technologies shape users interactions and understanding of what they are doing.

Some of these cases demonstrate how user agency is challenged. But none of the cases claim that this is “toxic”. The claim is that if you know the agenda and the game of the code (algorithms) you can take precautions and guard yourself.

Problem

Due to reports on phenomena like FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) it is reasonable to ask some questions:

1. Are we losing our grip on digital media?
2. How are we to understand this “loosing of grip”?
3. How can we - from a user perspective - understand this?
4. How can we theoretically explain this loosing of grip?
5. How are we - as researchers - supposed to inform users about the other side of our pleasurable leisure use of digital media?

Method

The study consists of the following methodological elements:

1. Literature review based on insights into the field of FOMO.
2. Autobiographical data and peer discussion of these data.
3. Consulting lecture materials on the subject.
4. *Group interviewing with students from high school and early bachelor semester.*

Theory

The theory used to frame this study consists of different approaches:

1. The domestication approach (Silverstone)
2. The medium theory approach (McLuhan)
3. The computer evocation approach (Turkle)
4. The cultural modernization approach (Ziehe)

Reflection: Why not the reception analysis approach?

It is quite possible to conceptualize FOMO as a form of decoding praxis, and it could be argued that FOMO is a strict dominated decoding mode because opposition and negotiation is not active.

An argument for not including the reception analysis approach is that this approach focus on the conscious level of users' understanding and attitudes.

The text (“meaningful discourse”) is the individualized “super” flow of notifications, news and social screen interactions.

Are you FOMO?

No, but I know that some of my friends are.

FOMO: The First Wave - what a terrible feeling

In late 2000s reports on physical unrest, attention difficulties and experience of anxiety were published.

At that time FOMO was not a clinical diagnosis, but at term trying to identify something new in relation to user attitudes to and behavior with both online media and social media. FOMO is linked to procrastination.

An early semi-academic report on FOMO indicates that this psychological tension can be useful in strategic marketing communication. Meaning, the users themselves will hunt market information (advertisements, brands, products), not because they are relevant, but because users are afraid of they could be relevant.

FOMO: The Second Wave - institutionalization

In the middle of the 2010s the word and the discourse of FOMO has become part both of news media practice (In Case You Missed it) and of research attention (ad diagnosis or a “new normal” for the individualized other-directed person.

In this wave the research attention was observed especially in the field of psychology, linking FOMO to stress and problems with motivation (linked to ADHD). In some studies FOMO is compared to addictive behavior like ludomania and to conditions of phobia.

FOMO: The Third Wave - normalization?

In late 2010s FOMO became a household name and a concept working like a selfhelp “diagnosis”.

Software developers and SoME businesses incorporate features in the digital designs (screen time, break notifications), but these features are in the control of the users, and not presented up front.

News media incorporate the feature “expected reading time” to almost all media texts (this text will only take so much of your precious time and attention).

Scholars identify that the driver of FOMO is the experience economy (the competition for the consumers’ attention).

Scholars hypothesize that FOMO is the experience of loss of control despite the promise that digital solutions can support and enforce personal control (“just one place to look”, “easy access and overview”).

Reflection

This Wave model is an interpretation, and represents no strong valid claim. But if we accept that it is not some media specific modality, feature or affordance that causes FOMO (or facilitates it), we need hypotheses to help us inform the identification of FOMO as toxic or even a necessary evil (if we need connectivity, we need to accept certain risks).

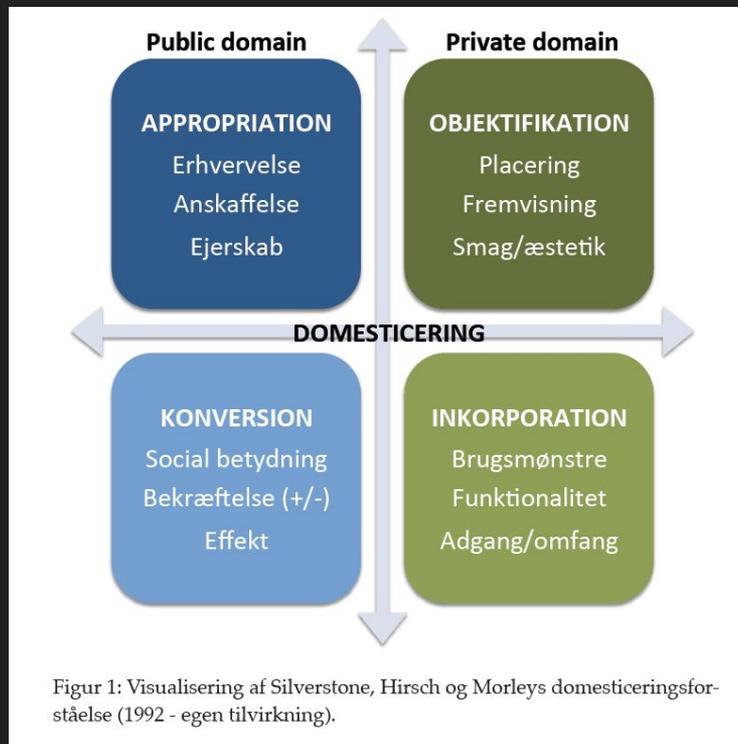
The basic claim of the follow presentation of theoretical pieces in order to create the jigsaw puzzle: Are we losing our grip on digital media?

Domestication theory: Negotiating the grip of digital media “at home”

As Silverstone (2006) points out, the power of the process of domestication is contested both from institutional presence and technological ubiquity. As a consequence the boundaries become “second order” negotiable.

“(..) the new information and communication technologies, will find its definition in the consequences that their innovation has for our positioning in the world, and in the redefinition of the boundaries between the personal and the communal, the intimate and the shared, the self and other.”

(Silverstone, 2006, p. 243)



"It involves human agency. It requires effort and culture, and it leaves nothing as it is. Perhaps therein lay an early error in its formulation: the impression that somehow only the technology was transformed in its appropriation into the household, the impression too that such a process was uncomplicated, linear and without its own contradictions. This is not just about failure: the dying PlayStations on the roof of the wardrobe or the advanced functionality of the telephone lying dormant, or the video recorder becalmed in a sea of blank tapes: nor is it, as it would later become, the hyper-intensity of instant messaging or file sharing, examples of the great triumphs of spontaneous media consumption."

(Silverstone, 2006, p.232)

Når domesticering er en leg med mobil ild

I modsætning til reklamekampagnen for Telenors mobilprodukt viser Hiyam Hijazi-Omari og Rivka Ribaks *"Playing with fire"* et kvalitativt mikrosocialt studie af, hvordan palæstinensiske unge i Israel domesticerer mobiltelefonen (Hijazi-Omari & Ribak 2008). Det interessante ved studiet er, at domesticering ikke nødvendigvis er en ligetil proces, men ofte indebærer skjulte handlinger, der på punkter modarbejder værdier, der er indeholdt i hjemmets moralske økonomi, men paradoksalt også understøtter særlige kulturelle værdier og handlemønstre (fx maskulinitet). For Hijazi-Omari og Ribak er domesticering alt andet end en kollektiv glædesdans, men en intim og risikofuld gemmeleg. Deres analyse rammesættes på følgende måde:

"[...] we are invited to explore both the significance of secretly owning a medium of communication that can ring, that requires charging, that has a memory that can be transferred from one machine to the next, etc.: at the same time, we are invited to study its evolving uses and the practices that are involved in ensuring its availability; the meanings of unprecedented long cross-gender conversations; and the negotiations over gender and cultural identities that are occasioned by the use of the mobile phone."
(Hijazi-Omari & Ribak 2008 p. 151)

(Andersen & Jensen, 2015, p. 221)

Medium theory: The Double grip of our extensions

Marshall McLuhan claimed that media technologies are extensions that we use to grasp the world and help us to project our sense of ourselves.

Medium theory claims that our use of and interaction with media produce a sense of numbness (acceptance of a level of “pain”).

Medium theory claims that if we try to detach ourselves from media this attempt generates a feeling of nausea (or pain). This experience motivates us not to “let go”.

Medium theory can be interpreted in such a way that the incorporation of “new media” is a process of evolution (we get used to certain level of “pains”).

Computer evocation theory: Vulnerability and sense of self

Psychologist Sherry Turkle has studied human interaction with various forms of information technologies and computer based media since the 1970s.

Turkle points out that screen based media are evocative “in their nature”. Our interactions with screens (content, interaction as content, software) generate strong emotions related to subjects and our psychological subjectivity.

Turkle bases her observations on the claim that the reflexive modern individual is becoming more vulnerable, and this vulnerability is the basis for a new existential-like anxiety.

Turkle claims that the evocative power of screens, ubiquitous access to screens for users, the constant reflection on identity (who am I) result in a moral state of “good enough” (or “okay”). And Turkle claims this is not good, and anything but authentic living.

Cultural modernization theory: Individualization and normal discomfort

Cultural philosopher Thomas Ziehe claims that modernization of culture free us from tradition and bureaucratic modernization. This leaves us individualized, not in any political liberal sense.

Ziehe claims that cultural modernization represents possibilities and constraints for the two basic psychological modes of being: Progression and regression.

Ziehe claims that our reaction to “new media” is caught in a game of ambivalence and that “new media” activates a “normal discomfort”. We believe that we progressively can utilize the opportunities of new media, but at the same time we end up regressively trying to deal with something too big for us to handle.

Discussion

How is it possible to synthesize elements from these approaches to theoretically explain the *loosening of our grip*?

Can medium theory help us understand that digital media extends our perception in depth (local) instead of in reach (global)?

Can evocation theory help us understand how norms and expectations of Others are lowered (to “okay”) because we believe we need to be “in deep” and “on beat”?

Can cultural modernization theory help us understand how individualization (and reflexivity) leave us without any “guards” or “guardianship strategies”?

If domestication theory claim that the process of making digital media our own (in institutional settings) can be considered as a basic “guardianship” mechanism, then is there something “wrong” with this mechanism?

Is Third Wave FOMO a result of an “irrational” process of domestication gone wild?

Conclusion

FOMO is a sign of loss of grip on digital media (more specific SoME).

It remains to be documented whether FOMO is a “threat” that has shaken cultural modernized process of domestication, or FOMO *is* a new “normal” condition (a consequence of the other-directedness and individualization).

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