Lifestreaming and the Pressure of Reciprocity: Exploring Practices of Connected Presence among Adolescents from Taiwan and Austria

Margarita Köhl

University of Vienna, Department of Communication
margarita.koehl@univie.ac.at

Abstract. Practices referred to as "lifestreaming" facilitated by networked technologies have become central for the establishment of social embeddedness and acceptance among Taiwanese and Austrian youth. However, the "always on" paradigm is not exclusively experienced in a positive way. Reciprocal action forming the basis for presence in non-co-present situation becomes an uninterruptable and ubiquitous task, which puts the young actors under pressure. This research note focuses on ambivalences resulting from the pressure of reciprocity in converging media environments.

Keywords: connected presence, Taiwanese and Austrian youth

Introduction

Practices relating to converging media technologies have become constitutive for the construction of intimacy in contemporary societies. The increasing "mediatisation of the everyday lives" (Krotz, 2007) of the young urban middle class in highly technologized countries in East Asia and Europe has rendered the boundaries between the online and offline sphere obsolete. A new "in-between" way of being, which Licoppe (2004) refers to as "connected presence" induced by mobile phone use, has re-configured social arrangements of presence and absence. Mobile network technologies enable the users to establish and maintain connectedness with others while on the move. The complexity of this new type of presence is further enhanced as multiple social media platforms and chat applications can simultaneously be accessed via the smartphone. This bolsters "multimodal communication" (Cui, 2016: 19), supplementing co-present interaction. Practices referred to as "lifestreaming" facilitated by network technologies have become central for the establishment of social embeddedness

and acceptance among Taiwanese and Austrian youth. Nevertheless, although this connectedness can be regarded as a basic need of adolescents (Taylor, 1997: 15), the "always on" paradigm is not exclusively experienced in a positive way. Reciprocal action forming the basis for presence in non-co-present situation becomes an uninterruptable and ubiquitous task, which puts the young actors under pressure and stress (Beyens, 2016). This research note focuses on ambivalences resulting from the pressure of reciprocity in converging media environments. In this context, culturally framed social norms of reciprocity as well as technological affordances might play an essential role. The paper refers to an ongoing transcultural study examining practices of digitally mediated intimacy among young people in urban areas in Taiwan and Austria.

Lifestreaming – Connected Presence in Practice

Lifestreaming is a notion referring to practices involving cross-platform mobile messaging applications, which facilitate the closed, private exchange of messages, pictures, texts, videos and audio notes (David, 2013), building the basis for "connected presence" (Licoppe, 2004), basically referring to as a condition where multiple technologies connect various actors transcending temporal and spatial boundaries.

Following the approach of polymedia (Madianou, 2014), media technologies are conceptualized as environments and their consequences for communication practices. Thus, the focus is directed towards how users treat media as integrated environments of affordances. Due to technologically facilitated accessibility and availability, seamless connectivity has become more an imperative than a choice, as being digitally present decides whether an actor is included into or excluded from a community. In contrast to traditional forms, postmodern forms of community are strongly based on affective qualities such as dedication, individual decision, and imagination (Maffesoli, 1996). As common knowledge decreases under postmodern conditions, a community has to be continuously reaffirmed by communication. In other terms: communities of communication replace communities of knowledge, as Knoblauch (2008) stresses. Reciprocity as a basic relational mechanism (Stegbauer, 2011: 24) is gaining importance in converging media environments, as it is constitutive for the actors' existence. It is the mutual flow of information which – besides the individually perceived intensity of emotions – decides how the quality of a relationship is experienced. It will be argued that in the context of multimodal communication reciprocity defined as "mutual exchange" transforms into a mechanism regulating and measuring presence but also emotional connectedness. In the Chinese context, it is the continuum of symmetrical/asymmetrical relationships which frames the norm of reciprocity. This means that the pressure of reciprocity is higher

in asymmetrical relationships than in symmetrical ones (Lim & Lim, 2003: 35). Therefore, this paper addresses the question if practices of reciprocity vary among the Taiwanese and the Austrian respondents.

Currently, Western core concepts of sociality are challenged by new forms of object-centred sociality (Knorr-Cetina, 2001): In advanced media cultures, an increasing number of everyday social interactions take place in "synthetic situations" (Knorr-Cetina, 2009: 69) – "an environment augmented (and temporalized) by fully or partially scoped components (…)". As Karin Knorr-Cetina (2009: 64) points out, co-presence is created by response presence. In this context, lifestreaming is regarded as scopic practice, monitoring oneself and others, anticipating possibly relevant information for interaction, and enabling retrospective observation through a synopsis of information.

Short–Williams–Christie (1976) classify media according to their potential to articulate "presence". While media technologies characterized by high social presence are experienced as warm and intimate (Stafford–Hillyer, 2012: 293), those with low social presence are more adequate for informational exchange. The distinction between informational and affective interaction does not apply to converging media environments as diverse modes of communication merge into multimodal communication. From the perspective of "media richness theory", chat applications and messengers can be classified as "rich" and "effective" as they enable immediate feedback and response (Daft–Lengel–Trevino, 1987). Due to the multiplication of interactional contexts, this might also lead to complications.

Methods of Data Collection

This on-going transcultural study addresses the practices and meanings of lifestreaming among young people in Taiwan and Austria by examining communicative modes and figurations (Hasebrink, 2004). In the process of data collection, a triangulation of methods comprising qualitative and quantitative methods was applied. A total of 40 narrative interviews (20 in Kaohsiung, Taiwan; 20 in Vienna, Austria) and four focus groups were conducted among students between 18 and 25 years of age from 2011 to 2013 to uncover globalized practices as well as cultural differences with regard to the use of converging media technologies as lifestreaming tools. The sample consisted of undergraduate and graduate students with a homogeneous socio-economic middle-class background. After identifying and interweaving categories in the process of data analysis, the results were interpreted drawing on the theoretical background. Consequently, a standardized online questionnaire (n = 500, Taiwan and Austria) was applied to complement the results of the qualitative study.

Results

As 3G services had already been launched in 2003, mobile Internet is one of the main methods of Internet connection among young Taiwanese users (Internet World Stats, 2015). Similarly, in Austria, it is mainly the young population who is accessing the Internet via mobile devices. As mobile access to online services increasingly dominates communicative practices, mobile-oriented applications such as WhatsApp, Line, and Facebook Messenger gain relevance for young people in Europe and Asia-Pacific. The popularity of chat applications among Austrian and Taiwanese adolescents is also documented by this survey: 75 per cent of the Austrian as well as the Taiwanese population contact their friends via a chat application. While Line is the most frequently used chat application among the Taiwanese population (83%), WhatsApp ranks first among the Austrian adolescents (76%). Using Facebook on the smartphone is still more popular among the Taiwanese population (Tw: 80%, At: 57%).

The results of the current study point to the fact that response presence, which is based on reciprocal action, replaces physical co-presence in converging media environments.

Lifestreaming – referring to practices of sharing and exchanging images, stickers, texts, audio notes, and videos – dominates the communicative modes of young people in Austria and Taiwan. This also points to the general tendency in advanced media cultures of the omnipresence of pictures recoding cultural space with what is referred to as "iconic turn" (Mitchell, 1992). Following an "imperative of visibility" (Hartmann, 2003: 49), presence has to be visualized. Pictures are important for "sharing presence", which is constitutive for "affective communities" or "neo-tribes" (Maffesoli 1996), which build on shared emotional experience rather than geographical proximity.

Da-yo, a 21-year-old student from Kaohsiung, explains what he likes to share via Line:

"I express my feelings using photos and videos. (…) If I visit an interesting place, which impresses me, I take a picture. And then I share it because it shows something I like."

For the Austrian respondents, the speed of reciprocity indicates the level of intimacy of a relationship. The faster the communication partner replies to a message, the closer the relationship is perceived. In close relationships (i.e. romantic partnership), it is expected that the communication partner answers as fast as possible, as a 25-year-old female interviewee from Vienna outlines: "If you are writing, you actually reply immediately, as soon as you see it." This tightened norm of reciprocity increases the pressure of having to respond and leads to a feeling of being under surveillance. Therefore Anna, a female interviewee from Vienna, criticizes the indication if a person is online: "I do not think that it is

good. On the one hand, it is good for me, if I can see it, but not good if someone else can see my status."

The "seen" function, indicating that a (potential) communication partner has read a message, can also lead to feelings of frustration, as an interviewee from Vienna describes: "I find it stupid to see that the other person has read my message, because it can be frustrating."

As the smartphone is carried close to the body and continually interacts with the owner by vibrating, blinking, or sending other signals, it is difficult to escape the pressure of reciprocity.

The results of the online survey show that the Taiwanese respondents expect their communication partners to answer faster than the Austrian respondents.

Most of the Taiwanese respondents said that they would expect an answer to a short message they had sent "within 15 minutes" (22%) or even "immediately" (18%), while most Austrian respondents expected an answer "within 24 hours" (34%).

What further adds to complexity is that individuals simultaneously have to be present and act within multiple contexts of interaction: In physical space, users have to interact with co-present others while at the same time having conversations in "phone spaces" or "chat spaces" with absent others and (inter) acting within "networked publics" (boyd 2007).

Tensions

Technological affordances engender an "always on mentality", as all interviewees describe being fully accustomed to "seamless connectivity" – "to immediately know what is going on and where in every minute. I am not used to not having this (connectivity), I am conditioned to have it!" (male student from Vienna, 23 years old).

As the interviewees pointed out, there is a heavily present tension between the strong need for uninterrupted connection with others and feeling the pressure of having to be available. On the one hand, lifestreaming practices support social proximity based on new modes of emotional expression. On the other hand, the young users experience a loss of privacy ("I am never alone"), peer pressure ("fear of missing out"), growing impatience, and new routines ("checking behaviour" or "fluid dating practices").

Being cut off the line results in feelings of being excluded from information flows, which is put on the same level with being excluded from sociality. One interviewee explains why it is so important for her to be "connected":

It depends on where I am. If I visit my grandparents abroad who do not have any Internet at home and you do not have your mobile phone with you… and then you are spending four days there, you do not know anything about what is going on in the world, well, admittedly you know what is going on in the world, but not what is happening within your circle of friends. Communication is missing.

Conclusions

In the context of "multimodal communication", the pressure of being "digitally present" has increased due to the introduction of control features such as the "seen" or "last online" function on messengers and chat applications, indicating whether or not a communication partner is or has been present. On the one hand, these functions enhance the feeling of situational control, which is limited due to the absence of other cues. As users can see if their communication partner(s) is/are online on chat and messenger applications, social presence as well as trust are enhanced. Furthermore, immediate feedback and response afforded by converging media technologies enhances the "richness" of communication, as outlined by media richness theory (Daft–Lengel–Trevino, 1987).

On the other hand, these functions engender feelings of privacy restriction. As presence exclusively depends on response presence and technology affords seamless availability and accessibility as well as control mechanisms, actors are constantly concerned with keeping personal scope and privacy.

While from the perspective of the Taiwanese respondents it is more important to answer quickly in the context of a weaker tied relationship, the Austrian respondents viewed it as a characteristic for intimate relationships to have uninterrupted contact with a high speed of reciprocity. These differences might be interpreted as pointing towards culturally framed norms of reciprocity. While in the Chinese context, the pressure of reciprocity is higher in formal relationships, in the European context, it might be higher in intimate relationships. On the other hand, expectations of fast reaction among the Taiwanese respondents might also be regarded as a reflection of a more advanced stage of hyper-acceleration in Taiwanese society.

References

boyd, d. (2007). Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life. In: Buckingham D. (ed.), *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 119–142.

Daft, R. L.–Lengel, R. H. (1984). Information Richness: a New Approach to Managerial Behavior and Organizational Design. In: Cummings, L. L.–Staw, B. M. (eds), *Research in Organizational Behavior* 6. Homewood, IL: JAI Press, 191–233.

David, G. (2013). The Panorama between Mobile Visual Platforms Is a Sentimental Bond. *Ubiquity: The Journal of Pervasive Media* 2(1–2): 146–163.

Hasebrink, U. (2004). Konvergenz aus Nutzerperspektive: Das Konzept der Kommunikationsmodi. In: Hasebrink, U.–Mikos, L.–Prommer, E. (eds), *Medien-nutzung in konvergierenden Medienumgebungen*. München: Reinhard Fischer, 67–89.

Hartmann, F. (2003). *Mediologie. Ansätze einer Medientheorie der Kulturwissen-schaften.* Wien: WUV Verlag.

Knoblauch, H. (2008). Kommunikationsgemeinschaften/Überlegungen zur kommu-nikativen Konstruktion einer Sozialform. In: Hitzler, R.–Honer, A.–Pfadenhauer M. (eds), *Posttraditionale Gemeinschaften/Theoretische und ethnographische Erkundungen*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften – GWV Fachverlage GmbH, 73–89.

Knorr-Cetina, K. (2001). Post-Social Relations: Theorizing Sociality in a Postsocial Environment. In: Ritzer, G.–Smart, B. (eds), *Handbook of Social Theory*. London: Sage, 520–537.

Knorr-Cetina, K. (2009). The Synthetic Situation: Interactionism for a Global World. *Symbolic Interaction* 32(1): 61–87.

Krotz, F. (2007). The meta-process of "mediatization" as a conceptual frame. Global Media and Communication 3(3): 256–260.

Licoppe, C. (2004). "Connected Presence": The Emergence of a New Reportoire for Managing Social Relationships in a Changing Communication Technoscape. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22: 135–156.

Lim, S. L.–Lim, B. K. (2003). Parenting Style and Child Outcomes in Chinese and Immigrant Chinese Families. Current Findings and Cross-Cultural Considerations. Conceptualization and Research. *Marriage & Family Review* 35(3–4): 21–43.

Madianou, M. (2014). Smartphones as Polymedia. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19(3): 667–680.

Maffesoli, M. (1996). *The Time of the Tribes: the Decline of Individualism in Mass Society.* London: Sage.

Mitchell, W. J. T. (1992). *The Pictorial Turn*. Rowohlt: Artforum.

Stegbauer, C. (2011). *Reziprozität. Einführung in soziale Formen der Gegenseitigkeit.* Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Short, J. A.–Williams, E.–Christie, B. (1976). *The Social Psychology of Tele-communications*. London: Wiley.

Stafford, L.–Hillyer J. D. (2012). Information and Communication Technologies in Personal Relationships. *Review of Communication* 12(4): 290–312.