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SUMMARY

THE INFLUENCE OF THE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES ON THE FORMATION AND TRANSMISION OF THE FAMILY MEMORY IN ROMANIA

SUMMARY

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The thesis examines how digital technologies have influenced individual practices of forming, preserving, and transmitting memories, and how these memories aggregate into what is known as "family memory." Maurice Halbwachs, as early as the 1940s, developed a theoretical framework demonstrating the social nature of memory – be it individual, group, or collective memory - and the way in which the memory of individuals and groups (with the family being one of these groups) "feeds into" (and also feeds itself out of) the collective memory, which ultimately shapes what we call "history."

Until recently, historians were able to decipher the way of life of past societies based on material artifacts, including writings, that had survived through hundreds of years. The advent of the printing press and the spread of written forms, followed later on by the development of state structures as societal administrators, led to the institutionalization of efforts to collect and archive mnemonic artifacts, either for control or from a recognized and self-assumed "duty to the future". National libraries, archives, and historical artifact collections exist, and ideologies derive from this well-documented past.

The digital paradigm we live in seems to overturn some of these practices without providing any clear alternatives. In the context of the spread of digital formats, even the term "document" needs to be revised and adapted to forms that are seemingly immaterial. Acadmics suggest the closing of the Gutenberg Parenthesis, that brief (in historical terms) period during which print was the main vehicle for knowledge transmission (Pettitt, 2010). Along with it, Pettitt argues, we are witnessing the closure of the intimacy parenthesis (2013) and the "rebirth of rumor" (2019). This represents a return to a model of communication more akin to that of the Middle Ages, but mediated by digital technologies.

Researchers of the digital realm have noted the rapid penetration of digital technologies, especially media and communication technologies, into people's everyday life, to the extent that they speak of "a life lived in media" (Deuze, Blank, Spears, 2012) or call tem part of "human nature" (Kozinets, 2015).

One novel aspect brought by the digital paradigm is the hope for the immortality of information, with the Internet promising perennial memory. On the other hand, researchers fear the return of a "digital dark age" (Winters, 2017), where valuable information will be lost for future generations. Caught between an abundance of information, societies undergoing profound changes - including at the level of fundamental institutions such as the family -, digital competencies that are more often than not "picked up on the go" rather than formally taught, and minimal deliberate efforts to conserve and archive memories that will become "the

past of the future," we are warned by Laermans and Gielen (2007): "We are surrounded by a digital history for which we do not have an eye yet". Hence the question: how will future generations find us? What will they know about us?

The present research has documented the manifestations of this "digital blindness" and sought to identify its social, technological, or individual causes. It has looked at how mnemonic practices are shaping up and adapt themselves to what the digital has to offer: accessibility, affordability, mobility, user-friendliness and virality. It has also examined how the roles in preserving autobiographical and family memory are affected by digital technologies and what factors determine this impact.

The research is structured around four key questions: two of an exploratory nature, aimed at identifying practices; a comparative one, looking in parallel to analog and digital practices; and an introspectiveone, searching for the reasons behind the identified differences.

Q1: What are the most common artifacts and practices in the formation and preservation of the individual and family memory?

Q2: What are the most common practices for intergenerational transmission of individual and family memory?

Q3: How do digital practices differ from the analog ones in this area, and what induces these differences?

Q4: Are there differentiators (such as gender, age, parental status, or digital competences) at work in the adoption and performance of these practices?

The novelty of this work lies first and foremost in its theme. Scientific studies on digital mnemonic practices are rather rare, and I found nothing similar for the Romanian population. Memory research in Romania tends to take a historical perspective, focusing on themes related to exile, deportations, and the Holocaust, or on certain ethnically or regionally defined populations (such as the Jewish community or the archives of the Sezekely region). Studies analyzing people's digital practices are focused on (dis)information and communication or the use of various devices. The topic is unique, and the scientific literature surrounding it is sparse, making this research a potentially fruitful contribution in the long term.

A second element of novelty is the application of the netnography, as proposed by Kozinets (2010, 2015). He suggested recognizing the digital domain as a legitimate research field, with online communities being groups that can and should be studied using netnography—an adaptation of classical ethnographic methods to the specificities of the digital realm. Netnographic research is still rare in Romania, and the expansion of the digital domain

will soon make such studies not only acceptable but necessary. From this perspective, this work tests its methodological boundaries and speaks for the practical potential of netnography.

In applying the netnographic methodology, a mix of methods was used: participatory observation within my Facebook group of friends (over 3,200 people), a social survey through a self-administered online questionnaire with a convenience sample of 527 people, supplemented by 24 in-depth semi-structured interviews. The sample included individuals aged 18-78, and the interviewees came from various age cohorts.

The thesis is structured into seven major chapters. **Chapter 1** presents the theoretical framework for the two fields of information described above: memory and the changes brought about by the digital paradigm, including at the level of individual and family practices in gathering, organizing, and preserving memories and constructing the family memory. **Chapter 2** describes the research methodology, with a focus on the changes the digital paradigm brings to anthropological research. It introduces netnography as a methodology for studying online communities, using traditional research tools adapted to the online environment. Additionally, this chapter presents and justifies the methodological choices and the ethical considerations involved in the research. **Chapter 3** presents how photographic artifacts, both physical and digital, are created and preserved, offering a comparative view of current practices and those from the families in which the research subjects grew up. A section of the chapter is dedicated to the management of photographic artifacts, including their use and significance in various contexts. **Chapter 4** conducts a similar analysis for family narratives, focusing on topics, organization, and the contexts of intergenerational transmission. **Chapter 5** is dedicated to intergenerational transmission, examining the mechanisms, contexts, and roles of different family members in the formation of family memory. **Chapter 6** explores the "mediated memory" (van Dijck, 2007) and analyzes how digital technologies have influenced the practices of creating, organizing, and preserving personal and family memories. **Chapter 7** presents the research conclusions, contextualizes them, and opens several future research directions.

All these themes are analyzed transversally, seeking potential differentiators such as age, gender, or digital skills. The more or less explicit red thread of the work is the lens of "responsibility for the future" (Giddens, 1999): whether it exists, whether it is felt or recognized, and whether it needs to be nudged, and by which agents.

The research revealed that the most frequent mnemonic artifacts remain photographs, regardless of their medium, accompanied by family narratives. There is a noticeable persistence of practices for recording and preserving memories observed in the homes of parents and

grandparents: the photo album, unorganized forms of storage ("boxes" of photos), or performative ones (display cabinets, shelves, framed pictures). A decline in the popularity of these methods from cohort to cohort is also noted, which can be linked to economic and political developments in society, both during communism and after 1990. Interestingly, there is an apparent return of the youngest cohort (>2001) to methods more characteristic of their grandparents (<1960), with a growing preference for printed photos (seen as "*cool*" and "*very memory-holding,*" as one interviewee put it), an increase in the prefernce for performative display, stimulated by social networks, but also a renewed focus on the home, with printed photos reappearing on shelves and in "display cabinets."

In older cohorts (parent snd grandparents), we noticed a certain *menmonic frugality*, with the memory centered on the family and reserved for things considered truly important, with intentional acts of recording the memories with an eye for the potential intergenerational transmission: the photography was sought after, intentional, and once created, valued and treasured (mainly through display or protected storage).

This frugality mau have multiple explanations. One is technological (the accessibility and affordabiity of photographic technologies were limited, and processing skills were reserved for professionals or a small number of amateurs). Another is historical, with almost all families included in the research reporting episodes of war, deportations, refuge, forced relocations, or fear of the secret police (Securitate) as reasons for the lack of old photographs in their families. Finally, personal preferences also underpin some limited engagement with photography, whether for aesthetic reasons or due to "internal refusal" (resistance to authority).

In contrast, newer cohorts exhibit a pronounced *mnemonic frivolity*, stimulated by the spread of cameras, initially film-based, then digital, and culminating with phone in-built cameras. This led to an inflation of "pictures," stored with good intentions but without methods, in the ubiquitous "boxes," which in the digital paradigm become "virtual boxes". (folders, online storage space). These are true time capsules, meant to be organized in a distant but forseeable future ("someday"). Until then, they are a worksite of the past, serendipitously accessed, occasionally visited, and with a constant reinterpretation of the context they offer. Amateur photography seems to have "democratized" the production of mnemonic photo artifacts, to the point of trivializing them.

An examination of the role of artifacts reveals the existence of some tension lines. The first such divide separates the domestic environment (rather than the "private" one) from the world outside the home. Instances of everyday life within the home seem to be in a continuous deficit of documentation, and in the long run, there is a risk of a shortage of artifacts that serve

as mnemonic anchors in this context. A second divide stems from the precarious balance between the real and the performed act captured and fixed in visual artifacts, which seems to tilt in favor of the latter. The combination of these two tendencies creates the risk of losing the representation of everyday life "as it is."

Regarding the practices of intergenerational transmission of memories and family history, oral storytelling appears to be a noble but dying art. Even respondents who had access to the memories of previous generations through stories seem less inclined to pass them on to future generations, just as younger cohorts seem less inclined to listen or less capable of absorbing these narratives. Storytelling is triggered by social contexts, such as family gatherings or physical proximity, and is supported by mnemonic anchors such as photographs. Commensality and hospitality, on one hand, and instances of intimacy and physical closeness among family members, on the other, create frameworks that facilitate the storytelling and, through it, the transmission of information among family members. Current preferences among respondents lean towards informal transmission contexts, with a significant increase in the case of cohorts born after 1991, the digital natives for whom "informality" seems a pattern of their lifestyle. There is also a growing preference for social networks as a medium for sharing memories among family members.

Through intergenerational dialogue, facts, values, norms, and practices are transmitted - a process that poses visible challenges in the digital context. Unlike values and norms, with their lower dynamics, digital practices evolve rapidly, affecting the "flow" of knowledge between generations.

In each family there is a "storyteller" and a "listener" (Jones, Ackerman, 2018) that secure the intergernaerationl tranmission. For a succesful, long lasting transmission of the mnemonic heritage, there must be a "shared interpretative framework that makes those experiences meaningful" (Shore, Kauko, 2017:99). The key challenge, therefore, is the construction of this shared framework, beyond age differences, technological barriers, or family structure. In the absence of this framework, memories risk becoming de-memorialized, losing their value for new generations and, consequently, through a process of marginalization and forgetting, becoming lost.

The research revealed several areas of interest where digital technologies have changed the practices of recording, organizing, and preserving memories, and by extension, the process of forming family memory among respondents.

The first aspect has beenalready discussed above: the difference between mnemonic frugality and frivolity. In just 10 years, digital photography has become widely available,

financially accessible, and easy to use. This triple convenience has led to an inflation of artefacts that changed the behaviors related to what is "immortalized," what is kept, how it is stored, and how it is organized. Since digital photographic artifacts lose their "natural scarcity," they also seem to lose their value in the eyes of their creators and owners.

With the disappearance of the materiality of digital photographs, the economic pressure and the need for physical storage space - criteria that previously imposed (or at least encouraged) some restraint and pre-selection before taking a photo - are also gone. The abundance of pixels, perceived as an unlimited and virtually free resource, diminishes the importance of each individual photo and of the digital photographic artifact in general (a process of devaluation). The captured moment is no longer preserved for future immortality, but rather for immediate satisfaction, our respondents said.

This immateriality also induces, as research reveals, a weaker sense of ownership over these artifacts. Even minimal protection measures against accidents are ignored by respondents, not necessarily due to ignorance (people *don't knowing* how to do it), but rather from a complete disregard of the issue (people *not even had considered* it). "I've never thought about it" was a common response during the research when we asked people about long-term preservation and intergenerational transmission of digital artifact collections.

Digital artifacts are perceived as either too fragile or "immortal," making them, in both cases, less valuable and less deserving of protection in the eyes of respondents. Somewhere within this spectrum are those for whom the digital experience is repeatable ("I'll go again next year and take more photos"), a mindset influenced more by the evolution of the social context than by digital technology itself. With Romania opening up to the world, people no longer perceive opportunities as unique and have gained greater autonomy in managing their experiences.

Even though respondents seem to have more control over the creation of artifacts, they still seem to wish to externalize the responsibility for long-term preservation: to social media platforms and their automatic storage systems, commercial services (like cloud storage), or to future generations ("the heirs will take care of it").

Photographic artifacts continue to play several "traditional" roles in shaping individual and family memory: iconic, remembering, documentation, self-recognition, and performative roles. Digital technologies reduce or add new dimensions to these traditional roles and introduce new ones. The evocative capacity of digital artifacts is reduced compared to the physical ones. On the other hand, ubiquitous digital photography expands the role of documentation, covering not only personal life but also the life of the community. Its

performative role is heightened through the use of social networks and the ability to expose one's life virtually to the world. A strong communicative role emerges, as people use digital photos to share news about themselves. Additionally, an intense role in entertainment appears (memes are the easiest example), as well as a new utilitarian role. In the latter case, photography becomes an immediate extension of short-term biological memory and a good reservoir for documenting everyday life "as it is."

Digital technologies also affect the intergenerational transmission of family memory. Younger generations, especially so-called digital natives - people who have never known a world without the internet - become, even at a young age, epistemic authorities in this area for their families (more knowledgeable others, MKO, Vygotsky, 1978). This promotion of children as epistemic authorities also influences their general position in the family, emancipating them and increasing their autonomy, as indicated by the respondents. Moreover, more and more frequently, this MKO from which epistemic authority is sought is an inanimate and virtual entity (an app, a video, digital content, or an online community). This could be the starting point for a discussion on the agency of digital technology (devices, software) and the trust relationship established between humans and technology.

One last observation on this topic is related to the relative encapsulation of the two domains - material and digital. The conversion between the two types of media is modest, both in terms of digitizing paper materials and in printing digital artifacts on physical media.

In this research, four segmentation criteria produced significant results: age, gender, parental status, and self-assessed digital competence.

Cohorts have been segmented by birth year, with 10-year intervals. This allowed me to observe the temporal dynamics of certain practices and attitudes related to the creation and preservation of autobiographical and family memory. In the research sample, age was a significant differentiator in the preference for certain memory practices, the manifestation of the "sense of duty" towards family memory, and the development of digital skills.

Thus, older cohorts are more conservative and closer to the practices of their parents and grandparents, while younger ones act more "rebelliously." We can identify technological causes here (the emergence and development of the internet and digital technologies in Romania) as well as socio-political causes (the fall of the communist regime, the opening of borders, labor migration, and its impact on nuclear family structures). New socially accepted family forms emerge (Švaříčková Slabáková, 2021), the balance between different dimensions of self-image shifts (e.g., the growing visibility of the professional sphere), and there is

increased participation in social activities outside the family (such as documenting issues of public interest through photography).

The second point where respondents' age proved to be a meanngful differentiator was in the manifestation of the "sense of duty" to family memory that Jones and Ackerman (2018) describe. This sense acts as a motivating factor in efforts to preserve family memories long-term. Although it is more pronounced in older cohorts, who play the social role of "elders" and guardians of traditions (Petterson, 1998), it is not exclusive to them and does not have a fixed age at which it becomes active. Some respondents associate the activation of this sense of duty not necessarily with the biological age but with the emotional maturity required for the task or with the parental status.

The third point where age makes a difference is in the development of digital skills. Older cohorts were the ones forced to transition from analog to digital, mainly through work-related practices or the need to stay meaningfully connected with the members of their "diffuse family" living in multiple countries (Ivan, Hebblethwaite, 2016; Madianou, Miller, 2011). Older cohorts faced the hardest challenge in adapting to new technologies, and although the technological gaps persists, for simpler technologies (mobile phones, social networks, private messaging systems), it is closing primarily due to the efforts of the "elders." Here we see the illustration of Mannheim's theory (1970), which argues that in times of high social dynamism, older generations tend to align with the values and practices of younger ones.

Gender differentiation was particularly useful in discussing the roles in intergenerational memory transmission, where women predominantly play the role of "custodians of family memory." This position is always self-assumed and may be explained by how women define themselves based on personal relationships and assess their success by their ability to care for others (Gilligan, 1993), as well as their focus on the "home" (Giddens, 2005; Mihăilescu, 2013).

Women consistently self-evaluate lower than others regarding their digital competences, even though European studies indicate a superiority of girls and women compared to men in this area. Additionally, women have been more technologically mobile, overcoming a larger initial handicap than men in adapting to basic digital technologies (see the current rate of smartphone internet access, which is approximately 98% for both sexes, though in 2016, the figure for women was 67%, and for women over 55, only 38%).

The segmentation based on parental status analyzed the differences between respondents with children and those without. The research shows that individuals with children are more active in preserving memories than those without children, with the most active being

those with young children. It's worth noting that people without children are not entirely devoid of concerns in this area, which indicates a recognition of the importance of autobiographical memory for personal identity.

The research results revealed that there is no correlation between the level of digital competence and the responsible attitude toward preserving digital artifacts. Either the term "competence" — a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes — is not fully understood, being replaced in respondents' view by "skills," or respondents are overestimating themselves. Both explanations are plausible in a society that emphasizes knowledge and skills to thedetriment of atitudes, where digital competences have been developed rather spontaneously and through personal efforts, even in professional contexts, and which suffers from a lack of authentic MKOs (More Knowledgeable Others), even in educational settings.

The research achieved its objectives and provided relevant and detailed answers to the initial questions. However, there are limitations to the current approach, and overcoming these could enrich the study and provide new perspectives.

One such limitation stems from the way the sample was formed. I started from the idea expressed by Kozinets (2015) that online communities, those that are born and exist primarily or exclusively online, are legitimate research fields. The sample resulting from the dissemination of the questionnaire within my Facebook "bubble" has an overrepresentation of women (80%), and the cohorts are unevenly represented. Being part of the same "consociety," it is assumed that participants share a certain degree of similarity in preferences and lifestyle, preferences that bring them together in this online community. The current research had no statistical representation ambitions, aiming instead to identify and formulate solid hypotheses regarding current practices of creating and preserving mnemonic artifacts. To test these hypotheses, a more diverse, balanced, and representative quantitative study would be needed.

Such a study should extend, for example, to "digital natives," those born after 1990, who were less represented in the current sample and whose practices proved "rebellious" against earlier trends. The research suggests that with these cohorts, the "common interpretative framework" (Shore, Kauko, 2017), which makes intergenerational transmission of family memory possible, seems to be slowly vanishing. As we've seen, intergenerational transmission is not just about facts and events, but also about values and norms, and the devaluation of this segment of memory among younger generations could result in the loss of historical lessons associated with that period.

Another potential expansion would involve individuals with reduced digital competences. As a netnography, the current research was conducted through digital

communication technologies (social platforms, self-administered online questionnaires, online interviews). As such, it included, as the data shows, individuals with at least basic digital competences (or skills). It would be interesting to explore how memory formation, organization, preservation, and transmission function for people without these skills, what other mechanisms and resources individuals and society have to document "life as is" today, and how these non-digital autobiographical memories can be integrated into the larger collective memory of the period.

Another potential research theme relates to the gentrification of the digital. As this study has shown, mediated memory depends on technologies that become vital or even natural, depending on their accessibility and the costs of acquisition and usage. For most participants in this research, the issue of costs is not a problem. But they come from what we like to consider the "middle class" of society, with current living and comfort needs met. It would be worth exploring how things unfold in the poorer strata of society, how the costs of acquiring and using digital technologies are perceived there, and what priority these expenses are given in the family's budget. The risk is that economically marginalized groups may be left out of the "collective memory." In the long run, this could lead to a gentrification of collective memory. Research on groups that are "invisible on the net" not by choice but for economic reasons, could help address this gap, even if partially. Historically, collective memory has been gentrified, and the artifacts from which we construct "history" have come predominantly from economically privileged areas. The digital paradigm offers, at least in theory, the means to ensure a more diverse and inclusive foundation for future "history." Whether such an attitude is morally justified or merely an utopian interventionist effort is a broad topic that deserves discussion.

A theme that was only briefly touched upon in this research is the different positioning of respondents toward material and digital artifacts. The research shows a distinct treatment of material artifacts, considered valuable carriers of meaning and therefore "treasurable," as opposed to digital ones, considered more "disposable." A more detailed study with more nuanced questions might help find valid answers. Such research could be conducted multi-disciplinarily, involving specialists from psychology and neuroscience, to analyze any changes that digital technologies have brought to how we perceive and interpret the world.

The red thread of this research is the role that autobiographical and family memory from the recent period will play, in the years to come, in what will be interpreted as "the past." Thus, a major emerging theme is the idea of an explicit or implicit responsibility towards the "past of the future." Following the model of "sustainable development," can we imagine a duty

towards the future in preserving memories, for a "sustainable", inclusive, and fair history? Is this duty normative? And if so, to whom does the responsibility fall: the state, the corporate entities with broad access to data but with business models based on monetising those very data, or individuals?

Perhaps the most promising potential research topic is the impact of the "digital revolution" on Romanian society. Superimposed with the socio-economic changes brought about by the fall of the communist regime, digital and mobile communication technologies created a "perfect storm" that affected lifestyles, family structures, personal identity, self-image construction, and individual and family habits. It would be interesting to see if this complex context of the early 1990s meets the conditions to be considered a *critical juncture* in Romania's history.