

# DOING EMOTION THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA

## An Ethnographic Perspective on Media Practices and Emotional Affordances

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This article develops an ethnographic approach for analyzing the entanglements of digital media and emotions in everyday life. Using the practice of taking selfies at the “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” in Berlin as an example, it engages in a discussion of practice and affordance theories as well as ethnographic approaches to the study of emotions. In three related sections, it offers a particular conceptualization of “media practices” which builds upon the concept of “affordances,” an introduction to the analysis of “emotional practices,” and a section proposing the ethnographic concept of “emotional affordances.” This concept, the article argues, can serve as a key link in understanding doing emotion through digital media.<sup>1</sup>

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A visitor, let us say a man in his twenties, sits on a large concrete block that is part of the “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” (in brief: Holocaust Memorial) in Berlin. The memorial, designed by architect Peter Eisenman and visited by several hundred thousand visitors each year, consists of 2,711 such concrete blocks, constituting a large field in which visitors can wander around. According to Eisenman, the memorial’s architecture is supposed to “isolate individuals in what is intended to be an unsettling, personal experience.”<sup>2</sup> The visitor sitting on one of the blocks, however, is currently busy holding up his smartphone, activating its front-facing camera mode and watching himself trying out a fitting facial expression for a selfie. At first he tries to smile, in the same way he has smiled on the other

selfies he has made on this sunny day while visiting other tourist hotspots in Berlin. His smartphone almost seems to demand this special kind of smile as he watches his face on the display. As he imagines sharing this picture on his Instagram account (where he has already shared countless pictures from his travels), he cannot resist trying to look good on it – and a smile feels like the most intuitive way to achieve this goal.

However, the smile does not seem to fit what he has read about the memorial in his travel guide. After all, it is “honouring and remembering the up to six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust.”<sup>3</sup> As he reminds himself of this history, a “happy selfie” seems more and more inappropriate to him. Eventually, he tries a more serious expression, reflecting

his knowledge of the place's history and his own sadness in commemorating the crimes of the past. Now the selfie's background does not seem to fit though, since there is too much blue sky in it, and he decides to wander again, deeper into the field.

As he approaches the inner part of the memorial, the concrete blocks seem to grow, suddenly reaching well above his head and simulating the experience of being isolated and lost. Again, he positions himself for a selfie, now expressing a mixture of anger, sadness and pride in front of the background of the intimidating concrete blocks, in which his face almost seems to drown.

After the selfie is made, he quickly uploads it to Instagram, yet hesitating again when being confronted with the option to contextualize his picture with a comment. In the last few days, he had used mostly short texts and emojis with smiling faces (his favorite being the grinning one with the sunglasses), or the symbol of the sun, the German flag and a beer, sometimes adding hashtags, such as #berlin or #travel. Now, none of these options seem to offer an appropriate way to express his experience. He swipes through the rows of available emojis before finally deciding on what he feels is the most straightforward solution: 😊, adding the phrase "Never Forget" – something he has read on comments of pictures made at the former concentration camp of Auschwitz.

He puts his smartphone away to experience the atmosphere of the place again, but only a minute later a buzzing sound leads him to pull it out again. His post has already received a "like," symbolized by a glowing red heart (one of many to come). For a moment he feels that this reaction is weird considering the context, but then again: a "like" with a "heart" might also express compassion – and he settles for a smile.

This imaginary ethnographic vignette serves to exemplify how two kinds of practices are often irreducibly entangled in contemporary everyday communication processes: the use of digital media and the enactment of emotions in everyday life. Based on a still ongoing research project on the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin,<sup>4</sup> this article takes a closer look

at such entanglements and provides conceptual tools for their ethnographic analysis.

In so doing, the taking of selfies at the Holocaust Memorial is used as a recurring example. This example might prompt readers' interest in a more in-depth discussion of specific aspects of the analysis, its methods and the empirical data, however, providing these insights is not the intent of this article. While my research on digital media practices at heritage sites relates strongly to the growing literature on the entanglements of media and memory practices as well as heritage practices, and acknowledges the literature on selfies, including selfies in the context of tourism and cultural heritage,<sup>5</sup> it is not my primary goal to contribute to these fields in the following.

Instead, the article uses the practice of selfie-taking at a specific heritage site as one of many possible examples to elaborate on broader theoretical and conceptual questions concerned with digital media and emotions in everyday life. More precisely, it focuses on how to bring practice theories and affordance theories together with an ethnographic analysis of enacted emotional experiences. The first section, "media practices," lays out a basic concept of media-related doings in everyday life, closely relating it to the concept of affordances. The second section, "emotional practices," introduces the perspective of practice theories on emotions, combining this approach with a discussion of enacted "emotional experiences." This finally allows the proposal of the concept of "emotional affordances" in section three, which can serve as a key link in ethnographic analyses of doing emotion through digital media.

### **Media Practices**

Anthropological disciplines, from folklore studies and (European) ethnology to cultural and social anthropology, have been interested in everyday doings long before terms such as "practice theory" and "practice turn" (Savigny, Knorr-Cetina & Schatzki 2001) gained momentum in academic discourse. Theories by authors such as Pierre Bourdieu (1990), Michel de Certeau (1984), Anthony Giddens (1984) or Theodore R. Schatzki (1996), however, have sharpened the ethnographic toolset for thinking

with and through the paradigm of practice. Some scholars apply practice theories to develop a “praxeographic” approach (in relation to the study of media, see Koch 2015: 186–187). In a similar spirit, a special issue of *Cultural Analysis* has recently emphasized the analytical value of practice theories for ethnographic analysis, highlighting the

central need for practice orientations in folklore, ethnology, and other cultural studies that can link together our understanding of the individual and social, synchronic and diachronic action, and marked performance with everyday tactics. (Bak Buccitelli & Schmitt 2016: 3–4)<sup>6</sup>

Using practice theories in ethnographic analysis does not mean determining whether a specific activity is or is not a practice. The concept of practices is not particularly valuable as a definitional category. Its ethnographic potential is inductive, meaning that it emerges through the kinds of questions it raises. While this article is not the place to provide an exhaustive introduction to the full scope and variety of practice theories (see e.g. Ortner 1984; Reckwitz 2002; and regarding folklore studies, Bronner 2012), it will reflect briefly upon their core interests.

One of the phrases used most frequently for describing the concept is Theodore R. Schatzki’s description of practices as a “nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki 1996: 89). This includes more than doings in the sense of visible and audible phenomena. Thinking, sensing and feeling, for example, are practices as well. When analyzing such doings, practice theories are not interested in unique and isolated actions or events. Instead, they are searching for routines or, more specifically, for doings routinely enacted in everyday life. These doings are not seen as results of intentional decisions made by individual subjects. Instead, they are always understood as complex situated processes emerging in a variety of contexts influenced by many different factors.

Take, for example, the taking of a selfie at a heritage site. It is certainly not an isolated act happening independently of its social and cultural context. First of all, practices always have a history; they are

based on historically shaped cultural knowledge and habits. This is true for taking selfies as well. Not only do they build upon a long history of visual self-representation (see Belden-Adams 2018), but every actor taking a selfie (except perhaps animals, see Eckel, Ruchatz & Wirth 2018: 2–4) has a sense of its potential social implications and how this practice responds to other actors. When taking a selfie, an actor is not only enacting these social expectations but shaping them in the process according to her or his habits. In other words, practices are always embedded in social processes (see e.g. Klückmann 2016), meaning they are negotiated continuously in their appropriateness and, thus, constantly transformed (see e.g. Noble & Watkins 2003).

The human body is in the center of these negotiations (see e.g. Hirschauer 2004; Bedorf 2015). It serves as storage for and a source of embodied everyday knowledge and, thus, constitutes the links between history, social processes and situated everyday doings. The body accumulates what Pierre Bourdieu famously called the “practical sense” (Bourdieu 1990), that is, a sense for how to handle everyday life situations through applying embodied knowledge (see e.g. Hörning 2001). Visitors of memorial sites, for example, have a practical sense for how to use and experience these sites. However, this practical sense is not homogeneous. Various actors find different behaviors appropriate and, respectively, they act in different ways. In the case of the Holocaust Memorial, some wander through the field in silence and contemplation, others jump around on the hundreds of blocks, kids often play hide and seek, some visitors just sit around while looking into the distance of the field – and while doing all these things, many of them use digital media.

Independently of practice theories, researching everyday doings related to media has a long history in European ethnology. Hermann Bausinger argued prominently in 1984 that “the media are an integral part of the way the everyday is conducted” (Bausinger 1984: 349). Ethnographers have used various concepts to describe media-related socio-cultural processes as part of the whole complexity of everyday life. A focus on practices has proven help-

ful exactly because, as Bausinger points out, media are not merely *in* everyday life, but are enacted *through* everyday life. Many scholars in media and digital anthropology, thus, highlight the importance of researching media-related doings (see e.g. Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin 2002; Horst 2012; Hine 2015; Koch 2015; Schönberger 2015; Pink et al. 2016). As Mihai Coman and Eric W. Rothenbuhler put it: “Media ethnography attempts to tease out layers of meaning through observation of and engagement with the everyday situations in which media are consumed, the practices by which media are interpreted, and the uses to which media are put” (2005: 2).

Some media anthropologists place an even stronger emphasis on media practices in the narrower sense implied by practice theories. Generally speaking, practice theories try to understand the body in its complex entanglements with material and technological artifacts (see e.g. Beck 1997; Schatzki 2001; Reckwitz 2012; Morley 2017) as well as infrastructures (Niewöhner 2015; Koch 2017). This interest has expanded significantly with the rise of digital media, leading to a discussion of the particularities of the concept of “media practices.” The authors of Birgit Bräuchler and John Postill’s volume *Theorising Media and Practice* (2010) build mainly upon Nick Couldry’s concept of “media-oriented practice” (Couldry 2010: 39). Couldry writes about this concept:

The aim [...] can be stated directly: to decentre media research from the study of media texts or production structures (important though these are) and to redirect it onto the study of the opened range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media. (Ibid.: 36–37; see also Couldry 2012)

While the decentering of media texts and the focus on doings in relation to media is not a genuinely new approach for (European) ethnology, folklore studies or cultural anthropology (as Bausinger’s 1984 example shows), Couldry explicitly highlights the advantages of using practice theory and, thus, offers a productive starting point for further discussions

about more specific aspects of media practices (see also the contributions in Bräuchler & Postill 2010; Pink et al. 2016; Dang-Anh et al. 2017).

One of these discussions is concerned with the question how the materiality and technological (in-)structure of media shape the practices in which these media are involved. In this context, practice theories avoid both technological determinism and social constructivism, meaning they neither assume that technology determines human action, nor do they assume that human action is based on entirely autonomous, undetermined choices. Instead, the doings of human actors and technological actors in media practices are seen as deeply entangled. This also becomes obvious in the case of taking selfies at memorial sites. Here, actors are not only mediating their actions and experiences through digital devices, but they include their bodies as part of their mediated experience of the world (see also Villi 2015).

A key concept to analyze such entanglements is that of affordances. While it is a rather well-established concept in various interdisciplinary fields, it surprisingly only plays a minor role in texts explicitly discussing practice theories in relation to digital media. In the following, therefore, I apply a particular concept of media practices that includes the notion of affordances as a central element.

The term “affordances” was originally introduced by psychologist James Gibson ([1979]1986) to describe how various environments or objects provide particular action-capacities for animals, depending on their physical capabilities. According to Gibson, when we think about the relation of living beings and their material environments, the latter cannot be reduced to a fixed set of properties that determine the actions of the former. Instead, they offer potentials and restrictions for various kinds of actions in or with them, which may change according to the relation between the animal and the environment or object in question. Highlighting the relational nature of affordances, Gibson concludes that the “possibilities of the environment and the way of life of the animal go together inseparably” (ibid.: 143).

While Gibson’s approach has been widely used in psychology and design studies, scholars interested

in human-technology relations also apply it as an analytical tool: “to account for the ways that technological artifacts or platforms privilege, open up, or constrain particular actions and social practices” (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym 2015: 2). Here, the concept has proven useful to describe how technology both enables and restricts specific practices enacted through it. Ian Hutchby argues in an influential article on the concept:

The affordances of an artifact are not things which impose themselves upon humans’ actions with, around, or via that artifact. But they do set limits on what it is *possible* to do with, around, or via the artifact. By the same token, there is not one but a variety of ways of responding to the range of affordances for action and interaction that a technology presents. (Hutchby 2001: 453; see also Hutchby 2003)

Coming back to the Holocaust Memorial example, this means thinking about how media technologies shape the visitors’ actions. The technologies people use at the memorial site include various devices, from tablet computers to professional cameras, and, of course, smartphones. From the perspective of practice theories, smartphones afford a large variety of media practices directly related to visitors’ experiences of the memorial: taking pictures (including selfies), shooting videos, uploading pictures and videos to Facebook, Instagram or other platforms, receiving comments on these pictures from friends, answering comments, etc. – all this is possible even while still being present at the memorial site. At the same time, however, the smartphone not only enables but also restricts particular practices. When taking a selfie, for example, the camera angle will often be too narrow to include both a face *and* a significant part of the memorial as background. In other words, a regular smartphone simultaneously both enables selfies and limits how selfies can be taken. Some visitors respond to this problem by literally expanding their smartphone’s affordance for taking selfies by using a “selfie-stick,” a device that enables actors to position the smartphone further away from their body.

Using the concept of affordances in this way to think about relational action-capacities and restrictions of technology has inspired various studies on digital media (see e.g. Larsen 2008; Boyd 2011; Hutchby 2014; Kaun & Stierstedt 2014; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym 2015; Costa 2018). Daniel Miller and Mirca Madianou introduced the concept of polymedia to account for the complexity of affordances of digital media in comparison to simpler technologies (Madianou & Miller 2012a, 2012b: 170; Madianou 2014). “In conditions of polymedia,” Miller and Madianou explain, “the emphasis shifts from a focus on the qualities of each particular medium as a discrete technology, to an understanding of new media as an environment of affordances” (2012b: 170). They emphasize that we need to think beyond single technologies affording particular sets of action-capacities to understand digital media. What matters is also the relation between the varying affordances of different media that are accessible to their users simultaneously. What a medium affords depends on what other media afford and on the role that people assign to each medium in their everyday lives.

The smartphone particularly includes a broad variety of affordances (Madianou 2014), all of which can be closely entangled within media practices. For some actors, a smartphone’s affordance to take a selfie is closely entangled with its affordance to upload pictures onto social media platforms, which is itself entangled with each platform’s affordance to include the picture in a conversation with friends or a public audience, and also entangled with a variety of affordances for textual expression or the exchange of meaningful symbols (such as emojis and likes).

Combining this affordance perspective with practice theories allows one to address a problem connected to the original Gibsonian concept. This problem was recognized by cultural and social anthropologist Stefan Beck (1997), who formulated a critique of the concept of affordances from the perspective of practice theories in his book *Umgang mit Technik* (Enacting through and with Technology, my translation). His concern is with a possible reduction of affordances to the merely physical, failing to account for the social and cultural dimension it

implies (ibid.: 242–246). What technology affords in human-technology relations, Beck argues, is always shaped by complex socio-technological systems and cultural contexts.

While Beck dismisses the concept of affordances altogether, his critique can also be used to strengthen the concept of affordances and make it compatible with practice theories. In this perspective, affordances are always enacted by actors following the routines of everyday life and applying their embodied knowledge about appropriate ways of being in the world and interacting with others. In a similar spirit, Elisabetta Costa recently proposed the concept of “affordances-in-practice” to “stress the idea that *affordances* are not intrinsic properties that can be defined outside their situated context of usage, but ongoing enactments by specific users that may vary across space and time” (2018: 13). Since this concept formulates the same necessary critique as Stefan Beck’s approach, while not dismissing the concept of affordances altogether, it holds a strong potential for ethnographic studies of such affordances. However, in Costas’ approach, the connection to practice theories is not fully explored. I suggest building upon the concept of affordances-in-practice by particularly highlighting practice theories’ sensibility for actors’ practical sense (embodied knowledge). From this perspective, the multiple affordances offered by digital (poly)media do not only depend on situational contexts, they are also relational regarding the practical sense that actors apply when using them.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the taking of selfies at the Holocaust Memorial caused a heated public debate about the appropriateness of such practices for exactly this reason: For some visitors, using a smartphone at a memorial site to take pictures of oneself does not feel appropriate, while for others, the very same practice feels just about the most normal thing in the world. When a *Washington Post* journalist, who had picked up on this particular topic, asked a 27-year-old tourist who was taking a selfie with a selfie stick if he considered his actions appropriate, the young man replied: “I totally agree. This is a place that people should respect – I apologize” (Faiola 2017). What makes this example particularly interesting from

the perspective of practice theories is how the young man suddenly “changes his mind” once confronted by a journalist, who was apparently acting as the voice of moral standards in this encounter. It demonstrates how the practical sense for media use is highly relational. It can change according to the situation actors find themselves in, thus, provoking very different media practices depending on the context. It is exactly this intuitive yet situational sense for what is considered a normal media use that practice theories are hoping to grasp to understand social and cultural routines or conflicts better. From this perspective, an actor’s practical sense plays a key role in how affordances of media technologies unfold in practice.

### **Emotional Practices**

The recurring example of taking selfies at the Holocaust Memorial does not only exemplify a media practice, but it also illustrates that the rise of digital technologies shapes and transforms how we enact emotions. Independently from debates related to digital media, the ethnographic analysis of emotions – building upon works by scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine Lutz (1990), Arlie Russell Hochschild (1979, 2003) or Sara Ahmed (2014) – has attracted much scholarly attention in recent years. While there is still a lot of debate about the definition of the concept “emotion,” especially in contrast to “feeling” and “affect,” ethnographic approaches to researching emotions have worked toward bridging the conceptual gap between bodily emotions, on the one hand, and emotions attributed to the mind, on the other. Instead, they aim to develop new concepts beyond such dualistic models.

One of these is the concept of “emotional practices,” as it has been developed by Monique Scheer (2012, 2016). The concept has already been used to discuss how emotions are enacted in relation to digital media, for example, by Alexandra Schwell (2015) regarding the hashtag #muslimrage, by Ove Sutter (2017) regarding voluntary work with refugees, and by myself regarding virtual violence in video games (Bareither 2016, 2017) as well as video reception on YouTube (Bareither 2014). Scheer argues (2012, 2016)

that, from an ethnographic perspective, emotions should not be thought of as something located solely *inside* human subjects. Emotions are rather inherently bound to bodily practices. She phrases this through the expression that we (as human actors) do not *have* emotions, but we *do* emotions. By speaking of *doing emotions*, she refers explicitly to the groundwork laid out by practice theories. In doing so, the concept does not aim to generally redefine what an emotion is. It also does not try to make a strong distinction between emotions, feelings and affects. All these terms can be included in this approach – the term emotion is used as a primary term only for heuristic reasons. Instead of trying to establish such clear-cut categories, the theory of emotional practices aims to provide an analytical toolset that makes emotions (or affects, or feelings, etc.) accessible for ethnographic approaches. In this perspective, emotions are analyzed with ethnographic methods, such as participant observation or ethnographic interviews, as something that is routinely done through and in between bodies. This also means that emotional practices cannot be isolated from their context to be studied ethnographically:

To study emotions as practices means never to isolate them analytically. Like all practices, they are always connected to other practices. They are embedded in complexes of doings and sayings, including language, gestures, memories or the handling of artifacts, the perception of spaces, smells and sounds and, most importantly, the emotional practices of other actors. (Scheer 2016: 29, my translation)

Note that this requires us to distinguish between two related arguments regarding emotional practices: First of all, emotions themselves can be understood as practices. From the perspective of practice theories, emotions are bodily practices shaped essentially through the practical sense (embodied knowledge) of those enacting them (Scheer 2012: 202). Second of all, emotions-as-practices are simultaneously bound to other practices in which they are explicitly or implicitly shaped and mobilized. The latter are called

emotional practices and Scheer offers four categories to distinguish among them (Scheer 2012: 209–219, 2016: 29–34): 1) emotional practices that *mobilize* emotions of one's own body or of other people's bodies (e.g. praying in religious contexts); 2) emotional practices that *name* emotions and, thus, take on the function of *emotives* (see Reddy 1997, 2001), meaning they inherently shape the emotion they are meant to articulate (e.g. shouting out "wow!" when enjoying a spectacular event); 3) emotional practices that *communicate* emotions to other actors (e.g. smiling at others or saying "I love you"); and 4) emotional practices that *regulate* emotions by demanding explicitly or implicitly that a person feels according to certain emotional norms (e.g. a young boy fighting back tears so as not to appear unmasculine).

Just as practice theories do not generally aim to establish deductive categories, these four kinds of emotional practices are not meant to be seen as strictly separate. An emotional practice does not *either* mobilize *or* communicate emotions, etc. These distinctions simply offer complementary analytical perspectives that allow ethnographers to focus on various aspects of emotional practices. More often than not, these various aspects are closely related and dependent upon each other in everyday life (Scheer 2016: 29).

This is certainly the case for taking selfies at memorial sites. Theresa M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym define the selfie as both "photographic object that initiates the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship" and "a practice – a gesture that can send (and is often intended to send) different messages to different individuals, communities, and audiences" (Senft & Baym 2015: 1589). Understanding selfies as an emotional practice can help to elaborate this argument further by directing our attention toward the various emotional functions the taking of a selfie can imply. Participant observation at the memorial demonstrates that people bringing their bodies into a position for a selfie immediately *do* emotions. What the actors actually feel and want to express through their selfies might vary (some actors are smiling, others are displaying sadness or anger), but, in any case, the taking of a selfie is

a process of *mobilizing* emotional experiences. At the same time, selfies have (while not clearly *naming* emotions) a *communicative* function: These pictures are often shown to others, perhaps uploaded and shared via social media platforms. In such cases, they communicate particular emotions to others, thus, making a statement about how the memorial (and the situation of visiting it) feels to the persons portrayed in the picture. This communicative emotional function is closely entangled with the selfie's tendency to mobilize emotions – the fact that people mobilize emotions when being in the selfie depends on their expectations that the same selfie will fulfill a communicative emotional function at a later stage. In short, analyzing emotional practices means identifying their emotional implications and relational dependencies with other emotional practices.

A problem with this approach becomes apparent when we encounter processes during ethnographic research which cannot be attributed clearly to a *single* emotion. In the case of taking selfies at the Holocaust Memorial, countless examples of this can be found on social media platforms. Take, for instance, a young man at the memorial, looking into the camera with a serious and slightly sad facial expression, while simultaneously displaying a thumbs-up gesture. The selfie, publicly posted on Facebook,<sup>8</sup> is underlined with his comment: “Best way to tribute to murdered jewish people.” Clearly, this selfie does not display *one* emotion, but rather a mixture of emotions, including what we might call “sadness” or “grief,” but also “respect,” “pride,” maybe even “happiness” to be in this place and to participate in the act of commemoration.

Our everyday life is full of such emotional contradictions. To take this into account, I suggest expanding the conceptual vocabulary of the theory of emotional practices and thinking of them not as practices of doing single “emotions,” but as practices enacting “emotional experiences.” The concept of experience certainly comes with its own flaws, but it has proven helpful in various areas of ethnographic research – for example, *The Anthropology of Experience* by Turner and Bruner (1986), the study of aesthetic experiences in everyday life (see e.g. Maase

2008) or approaches to experience in digital ethnography (see Hine 2015: 41–46; Pink et al. 2016: 19–39). Here, ethnographers do not refer to experience as a form of accumulated knowledge, but as a process, including not only a mixture of perceptions, sensual impressions, emotions, feelings, affects, but also cognitive and discursive reflections. An approach by philosopher Robert C. Solomon can complement this perspective. Similar to Scheer, he treats emotions not as single entities, but as open and complex processes.<sup>9</sup> He argues:

A big problem is our tending to think of an emotion as a discrete psychological event, since, after all, we do have singular names for our emotions (“anger,” “love,” “jealousy,” “shame,” etc.). An emotion is a complex process that incorporates many different aspects of a person's life, including his or her interactions and relationships with other people as well as his or her physical well-being, actions, gestures, expressions, feelings, thoughts, and kindred experiences. (Solomon 2007: 6)

Solomon captures this openness and processuality of emotions in his conceptualization of emotional experience. An

emotional experience [...] is a complex of many experiences; sensations; various ways of being aware of the world, our own bodies, and intentions; and also thoughts and reflections on our emotions, all melded together in what is typically encountered as a single more or less unified experience. (Ibid.: 244)

Of course, when using this concept of emotional experience in the framework of practice theories, this can create analytical pitfalls, especially when experience is understood as a solely subjective and passive process. From the perspective of practice theories, it is essential not to treat experience as the opposite of active doings. On the contrary, practice theories overcome the dichotomy between “active” doings and “passive” experiences (cf. Scheer 2016: 24). The pragmatist John Dewey, whose work is highly influ-

ential for practice theories, argued that experiences are always bound to doings: “Every experience is the result of interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives” (Dewey 1980: 43–44). In other words, just as Scheer argued for emotions: We do not *have* experiences, we *do* or *make* experiences.

In short, treating emotional experiences as the entity enacted through emotional practices helps to avoid a style of reasoning that treats emotions as isolated entities. Regarding the example used above, this allows us to think about “sadness,” “grief” and “pride” as part of one singular emotional experience articulated through a selfie. More than that, it allows us to ask whether it is this very contradiction that is particular for the emotional process enacted by the visitor.

### **Enacting Emotional Affordances through Media Practices**

The previous sections now allow for a discussion of the final question of this paper: How can we combine an ethnographic analysis of digital media practices with an analysis of emotional practices? Andreas Reckwitz (2012, 2016) gives some hints in this direction. Like Scheer, Reckwitz does not distinguish strictly between affects, emotions and feelings, but he prefers the term affect for heuristic reasons (Reckwitz 2012: 250). For Reckwitz, affects are “not psychological or mental processes, but they constitute an integral part of the practical activities within which human bodies relate to other objects and subjects” (ibid.: 251). He elaborates on this perspective by adding that

a practice theory cannot conceive the affects as qualities or properties, but must regard them as dynamic *processes* and *relations*. Within a practice, people can be affected in specific ways by other people, by things and ideas. Affectivity is therefore always a relation between different entities. (Reckwitz 2017: 120)

Applying this general perspective more particularly to technology, he further suggests considering

technological artifacts to function as “semiotic-imaginary artifacts” that transport meanings or imaginations and, thus, can become “affect generators” (ibid.: 124–125).

In ethnographic studies, this approach is more challenging to apply than the theory of emotional practices, since it remains unclear how “affectivity” in between such “affect generators” and human actors can be studied with ethnographic methods. The concept of affordances, however, allows one to achieve a similar analytical goal in relation to the study of emotions and is more accessible for an ethnographic analysis. I, therefore, propose the concept of *emotional affordances* based on the perspectives of practice and affordance theories as they have been discussed in the previous sections.<sup>10</sup> From this angle, the emotional affordances of a specific media technology are its capacities to enable, prompt and restrict the enactment of particular emotional experiences unfolding in between the media technology and an actor’s practical sense for its use.

Coming back to the recurring example of taking selfies at the Holocaust Memorial, this concept suggests thinking about how a smartphone enables, prompts and restricts the enactment of specific emotional experiences. Many answers to this question are possible, so the discussion will be limited, firstly, to the taking of selfies alone and, secondly, to the use of emojis when a selfie is shared on internet platforms, both being central aspects of the introductory example.

Generally speaking, the option of taking photographs with the integrated camera is the basis for a central emotional affordance of any smartphone, since it affords emotional expression through a specific visual practice. While taking photographs might also simply fulfill a documenting function (with no emotional connotation whatsoever), it is often a practice to mobilize or communicate emotional experiences. This basic emotional affordance of most smartphones is often enhanced through sub-affordances provided by various applications. Users can apply filters to give a picture an aesthetic feel, making it more suitable to transport particular emotional experiences. The popular app Insta-

gram, for example, has become well known for its “old school” filters, giving pictures a decaying look and, thus, communicating a nostalgic feel. Other apps for or features of modern smartphones, such as Face Swap (switching faces in between two persons on a picture), enhance the smartphone’s emotional affordances to mobilize hyperbolic incongruences and, thus, humorous experiences. The list could be continued.

One of these enhancements is particularly significant for the taking of selfies. Modern smartphones usually have a front-facing camera, serving as an “infrastructure for self-imaging” (Eckel, Ruchatz & Wirth 2018: 5) and enabling users to take self-portraits while still being able to check the smartphone’s display. Jonas Larsen has already pointed out the particular affordances inherent in the screens of digital cameras (referring to regular cameras, not smartphones). According to Larsen, the “screen ‘affords’ new sociabilities for producing and consuming photographs” and “can turn photographing into a social and collaborative event because ‘onlookers’ can also monitor the screen when picturing takes place and the result is immediately available for inspection [...]” (Larsen 2008: 148). The concept of emotional affordances enhances this perspective by adding that this “social and collaborative event” becomes an emotional event as well. This does not only apply to selfies, but the emotional affordances of the digital screen become particularly evident in the practice of selfie-taking, since they unfold in between an actor and his or her own device. Once a user activates the function and directs the front-facing camera toward his or her body, the smartphone implicitly prompts a display of emotion. Participant observation at the memorial clearly demonstrates how the bodily movement of bringing oneself into the position for a selfie often immediately leads to a distinct facial expression of emotions.

The results, however, are quite diverse. Unlike other situations, which might prompt rather homogeneous emotional expressions (selfies made at a party will most likely express fun), the situational context at the Holocaust Memorial is far from simple. The place itself carries its own emotional

affordances, independently from the media technologies actors bring along. Emotional affordances are not limited to technology; they can be inscribed in materiality and architecture as well. The architect of the Holocaust Memorial had quite detailed ideas about what particular emotional experiences the memorial is supposed to afford.<sup>11</sup> By affording particular movements and sensual impressions, the field is supposed to inspire a mixture of irritation, isolated contemplation and respectful commemoration (see Bareither 2018 for a discussion of this aspect).

These material emotional affordances of the memorial, however, are relational as well. While some visitors might experience the place according to the intentions of the architect, many visitors do not come *only* as visitors of the memorial, but also come as tourists. For a tourist, the emotional affordances of the place can unfold quite differently. It then becomes an object of the “tourist gaze” (Urry & Larsen 2011), a place that can be *consumed* visually through photography, while simultaneously offering particular possibilities for performative self-representation, for example, through selfies (see Dinhopf & Gretzel 2016).

These very different kinds of emotional affordances collide in the practice of taking selfies at the Holocaust Memorial. Actors find themselves confronted with a broad spectrum of possibilities to enact emotional experiences. Whether they come as a tourist or as a person looking to remember the Holocaust, or both, depends on each actor’s specific practical sense. Participant observation at the memorial and an analysis of selfies posted on Facebook and Instagram shows that many actors are led mainly by their rather touristic practical sense regarding what to express at a tourist site: They smile broadly on their selfies, sometimes posing in a way as to appear attractive (head tilted to one side, eyes wide open, slightly opened lips, smile), or they take selfies with a proud expression on their face after they managed climbing the blocks and standing on top of the field (which is forbidden, and visitors are regularly called upon by the security personnel when doing so).

On other selfies, however, visitors express sadness, grief or anger in light of what the place represents by intentionally *not* displaying a smile but instead displaying a severe or sad facial expression (frowning, downturned mouth, contracted eyebrows, sad eyes). That is to say, the smartphones' capabilities for selfie-taking afford a particular way of mobilizing and communicating emotional experiences through bodily and facial expressions, but this leads to very heterogeneous emotional practices. *How* the emotional affordances of the smartphone's selfie-taking capabilities unfold depends on other emotional affordances of the material setting and on individual actor's practical sense. In short, emotional affordances of digital media are enacted through situated practices and closely entangled with embodied knowledge.

This leads right into the second example of enacting emotional affordances. After taking a selfie at the memorial, some visitors decide to upload it onto platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. Here, additional emotional affordances come into play. Firstly, these platforms allow the sharing of pictures, such as selfies, with other people, thus, enabling actors to communicate the emotional experiences expressed through them to a broader audience. Secondly, they allow for textual contextualization, offering actors an extensive range of emotional articulation in their respective languages. Visitors comment quite frequently on these pictures, followed by friends or family adding further comments. Thirdly, and maybe most remarkably, social media platforms afford particular emotional expressions by offering specific digital functions for this purpose – “emojis” being the prime example.

Emojis are pictograms, based on the Unicode standard, that allow users of various media technologies to enhance (or even replace) textual communication with little icons and symbols (see Kralj Novak et al. 2015; Stark & Crawford 2015; Danesi 2016; Riordan 2017). The emojis used most frequently represent faces with explicit emotional expressions, for example, happy laughter 😄, fear 😨, or sadness 😞 (other textual descriptions of these expressions are possible, of course). While there are also emotional-

ly somewhat neutral emojis (such as the symbol of a square), most emojis entail a strong emotional affordance as they create a similarity between an actual bodily emotional expression (such as the facial expression of laughter) and its virtual representation (the emoji of a laughing face). In other words, emojis offer “indexical relationships constituting the virtual and the actual” (Boellstorff 2012: 53) to enable their users to express specific emotions in mediated communication (while restricting others). As such, they currently have a massive impact on everyday communication via computers and smartphones. In July 2017, Facebook released the information that there are 60 million emojis used daily on its platform alone and a further 5 billion emojis on its Messenger app.<sup>12</sup>

When users share and contextualize a selfie made at the Holocaust Memorial on Facebook or Instagram, emojis can introduce additional emotional affordances. In many cases, these affordances are enacted in a straightforward way, as they are used to clarify or intensify the emotional expression already inherent in the selfie. Take, for example, a young woman, smiling happily into the camera while visiting the memorial, commenting the following in the public post of her selfie: “Tourist life in #berlin 😊 🌸.”<sup>13</sup> Both the facial expression as well as the use of text and emojis leave the impression that the young woman has either no contextual knowledge of the place or no practical sense for enacting its emotional affordance for commemoration. She appears to follow her practical sense as a tourist completely, sharing happy impressions of the places she visits, communicating an emotional experience of joy and happiness. Among the various comments on this post, one commentator realizes this contradiction and remarks: “that location doesnt sound very happy 😊,” using an emoji to distance himself from the rather cheerful emotional expressions of the young woman and other commentators. The emojis' emotional affordances in this conversation are enacted to implicitly negotiate the appropriateness of taking selfies at the Holocaust Memorial. The first emoji is enacted to support the *communication* of a particular emotional experience, and the second

emoji is enacted by a different actor to support his attempt to *regulate* this particular emotional practice. Once again, emotional practices entangle – only here, emojis and their emotional affordances play a crucial role in how they relate to each other.

As this example has already shown, emojis do not only express joyful emotions. In the context of taking selfies at the Holocaust Memorial, they can also support emotional practices communicating sadness and thoughtful commemoration. Take, for example, two women on a selfie publicly posted on Instagram, looking into the camera with a serious and slightly sad, maybe even angry, expression.<sup>14</sup> The comment contextualizing their selfie is reduced to a single emoji: 😞 (followed only by the hashtags #berlin and #germany a few lines below). The emoji summarizes in a remarkable way an emotional experience of speechlessness in light of the crimes the memorial reminds its visitors of. While the facial expression of the two women is not entirely clear in its emotional expression (they might simply be cold and, thus, “not smiling”), the emoji explicitly clarifies the emotional intent of the picture. Here, the emoji’s emotional affordances do not merely support, they actually constitute the emotional function of the practices they are contextualizing. In return, this means that enacting the particular emotional affordances of emojis can communicate what kind of practical sense the actors apply. That is to say, emojis demonstrate again how closely emotional affordances, embodied knowledge and situated practices are entangled when actors do emotion through digital media.

## Conclusion

This article laid out the basic concepts of practice and affordance theories in relation to the study of digital media and emotions. In the first section, it developed a particular concept of media practices that builds strongly upon the concept of affordances. In this perspective, media practices are always analyzed in relation to specific affordances, that is, action-capacities and -restrictions of digital media. These affordances, however, only unfold in the very practices that enact them; thus, they are bound to the practical sense (or embodied knowledge) of

particular actors. In short, the proposed approach to study media practices focuses on the relation of practices, affordances *and* embodied knowledge.

In the second section, this discussion was complemented by an introduction to the theory of emotional practices, enhanced by the concept of enacted emotional experiences. In this perspective, emotional experiences are complex processes, often including heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory feelings, affects, sensual impressions and cognitive as well as discursive reflections. Such experiences are not purely passive. From the perspective of practice theories, actors do not *have* emotional experiences, they *do or make* emotional experiences (though not always intentionally).

Bringing these two perspectives together led to the proposal of the concept of emotional affordances in the third section. Emotional affordances can both be inscribed into materialities (of spaces, bodies, etc.) and technologies. In the ethnographic study of digital media, emotional affordances are media technologies’ capacities to enable, prompt and restrict the enactment of particular emotional experiences unfolding in between the media technology and an actor’s practical sense for its use.

While the last section referred to the recurring example of taking selfies at the Holocaust Memorial to demonstrate how emotional affordances unfold in practice, I conclude in arguing that the concept holds potential for a variety of further research areas. In the ethnographic study of video gaming, for example (for an overview, see Boellstorff et al. 2012), emotions are of significant interest. Paying attention to emotional affordances in this context, not only allows thinking about how players enact the technologies’ complex capacities and restrictions to experience particular bodily pleasures. It also points us toward the question of how the players develop a practical sense for enjoying specific virtual practices (for example: “killing”) to experience these kinds of pleasures on a daily basis (Bareither 2016, 2017).

Another potential area is the study of media practices on various internet platforms. Here, the concept of affordances is particularly well established and has been used to research social media (e.g.

Boyd 2011; Marwick & Ellison 2012; Kaun & Stiernstedt 2014), work-related social networking sites (e.g. Duffy & Pooley 2017) or platforms such as YouTube (e.g. Postigo 2016). We still know very little, however, about how these platforms shape emotional processes in everyday life. Developing a sensibility for how emotional affordances unfold in practice fosters the strength of ethnographic research to understand the emotional implications of these media technologies.

The same applies to the study of mobile devices and their affordances (e.g. McVeigh-Schultz & Baym 2015; Schrock 2015). Mobile media particularly offer strong affordances for close entanglements of bodies and technologies in the course of everyday routines. Looking at the particularities of *emotional* affordances in this context provides an ethnographic angle for understanding how such “embodiment relations,” to borrow a term from Don Ihde (1979: 6–11, 1990: 72–85), offer specific ways of doing emotion in a process of reflecting one’s own body through media. “Fitness-tracking apps” or “menstrual calendar apps,” for example, have strong emotional implications that can be analyzed using ethnographic approaches.

Finally, some sub-technologies have already diverged into various other technologies and contribute to their emotional implications, for example, the “like,” “share” or “follow” buttons implemented in a variety of apps and platforms. Probably the most significant one among them has already been discussed above: Emojis are a prime example of how particular emotional affordances can diverge into a large variety of other technologies, taking part in the emergence of new standards and routines for digitally mediated emotional practices.

Generally speaking, the transformations of emotional practices enacted through digital media are strong and evident. How we enact emotional experiences in our everyday lives – in leisure and popular culture, in our work life, concerning our health or in political debates, etc. – is changing due to the rise of digital media. Developing a sensibility for emotional affordances supports ethnographic research in taking such transformations into account.

## Notes

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- 2 <https://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/memorials/the-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe/peter-eisenman.html>. Accessed March 28, 2018.
- 3 <https://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/memorials/the-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe.html#c694>. Accessed March 28, 2018.
- 4 The research includes participant observation at the site, ethnographic interviews with visitors and an analysis of computer-mediated practices on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.
- 5 For literature on the entanglements of media and memory practices as well as heritage practices, see e.g. van Dijck (2007); Hoskins, Reading & Garde-Hansen (2009); Garde-Hansen (2011); Giaccardi (2012); Koch (2013); Hajek, Lohmeier & Pentzold (2016). For literature on selfies, see for an overview e.g. Senft & Baym (2015); Warfield (2016); Schönberger (2017); Eckel, Ruchatz & Wirth (2018). For selfies in the context of tourism, see Dinhopf & Gretzl (2016), and in relation to cultural heritage Douglas (2017).
- 6 See also Bak Buccielli (2012) for a discussion of performance theories in relation to digital media.
- 7 There is a noteworthy similarity between this approach and Ilana Gershon’s perspective in her study of the “breakup 2.0,” in which she uses the term “media ideologies” to describe “beliefs about how a medium communicates and structures communication” (Gershon 2012: 18, see also Gershon 2010). Although Gershon does not explicitly refer to practice theories, she argues that people “develop their beliefs about media and ways of using media within idioms of practice,” meaning “that people figure out together how to use different media and often agree on the appropriate social uses of technology by asking advice and sharing stories with each other” (Gershon 2012: 6). This approach shares common ground with practice theories when it comes to the everyday use of media, although practice theories would highlight that what people “agree” on becomes part of a practical sense structuring implicitly how the media’s affordances are enacted.
- 8 See <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1221969594530984&set=a.112184778842810.13512.100001538665270&type=3&theater>. Accessed March 28, 2018.
- 9 Scheer also points us toward the compatibility of Solomon’s concept with the analysis of emotional practices (see Scheer 2012: 194).

- 10 For the use of the term “emotional affordances” in other disciplinary and theoretical contexts, see Cheng (2014) and Vallverdú & Trovato (2016).
- 11 See <https://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/memorials/the-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe/peter-eisenman.html>. Accessed March 28, 2018.
- 12 See <http://www.adweek.com/digital/facebook-world-emoji-day-stats-the-emoji-movie-stickers/>. Accessed March 28, 2018.
- 13 <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10158023727540297&set=a.10150172799375297.405308.726125296&type=3&theater>. Accessed March 28, 2018.
- 14 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bc8Dzcln6pq/?taken-at=213676284>. Accessed March 28, 2018.

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