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MAJOR STUDIO 1 FINAL
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DOMAIN: Relationships, Devotion & Intimacy
in the Age of Social Media

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For my final project, I wanted to explore Social Media centred "rules and rituals" that we have imposed upon ourselves, and that govern our daily behaviours and personal relationships. I wished to explore how these behaviours may be negatively impacting our real-life social interactions and emotional connections in relationships. I came to choose this topic as a result of my personal life experiences. I recently began to notice those around me, sometimes even myself, exerting a significant amount of emotional and mental energy on things that are, in my opinion, quite trivial in the larger scheme of things. In fact, I often find myself in a heated conversation about someone being blocked from another's snapchat story, or sitting with a friend in a bad mood because their boyfriend "left them on read". These are examples of a phenomenon that seems to be inescapable, yet often goes unnoticed. Users don't appear to be aware that the design of these online social platforms have in turn designed their everyday actions and reactions. We've become so attached to our phones that we expect others to be constantly available to like, comment and reply to us. Simultaneously, our future social interactions seem unavoidably determined by computer-mediated-communication methods.

During the research process, the central questions I hoped to explore or simply pose were:

1. How does an increasing dependence on computer-mediated communication and social-media led behaviours contribute to the demise of social relationships, with a focus on romantic relationships and intimacy?

2. How has the adoption of social media led to an "etiquette" & new unspoken "rules" for social relationships and interaction, which in turn complicate our intimate relationships & how we go about them?

I started with a secondary research process exploring what the internet had to say about Social Media & Relationship behaviours. Luckily, there has been a notable number of psychological studies, as well as creative work, that addressed this domain. In fact, a vast majority of articles and studies bring up some specific issues that Social Media creates in romantic relationships:

• In one notable article, this quote stood out "I made the mistake many do; I equated my insufficient presence on his page to insufficient love for me." (greatist.com, 2017).

• Another article from Psychology today addresses a study that proves that social media inflames jealousy "For some millennials, a relationship isn't official until it is declared on Facebook.This relationship history exists both in memories and on Facebook, the difference being that the latter is always visible and stored forever. Once it is a relationship on the Internet, it's always a relationship on the internet." (psychologytoday.com, 2015). This statement also feeds into the notion of how Social Media is used to re-affirm relationships with visible tags, comments, and social statuses.

• According to a research paper on Social network sites, marriage well-being and divorce in the United States "At the state-level, Facebook penetration is associated with increasing divorce rates."(Valenzuela, Halpern and Katz 2014).

• There are also multiple articles that address how to handle a breakup on social media (highsnobiety.com, bratotv.com, theindependent.co.uk to name a few), even some about whether

you "Should Break Up With Someone Over Their Social Media Behavior?" (Emery 2018). These bring into question the kind of behaviour that would incite dramatic reaction.

- An episode of a podcast discusses how comments are sometimes considered a social obligations one would naturally expect from friends and people in their social circle. They fuel a sense of validation and affirm relationships. (This American Life 2015)

One could argue that the proliferation of articles and studies surrounding this topic indicate that this domain is inarguably one worth discussing, and reflecting upon.

Then, with an initial concept of an all inclusive "SM Data-Deletion Breakup Kit" in mind, I conducted primary research in the form of an online survey, asking people about their social media re-actions to breakups (fig.1). This prompted me to look deeper into the meaning and weight behind these online "memories" in the form of bits, tags and likes.

Meanwhile, I looked into precedents of projects that could contextualise my own, and create a basis for inspiration and perhaps a foundation to build upon. In terms of practitioners that work in this topic of work, a designer worth mentioning is Lauren McCarthy, who creates work that analyses and questions human interaction in the age of technology. For example, her project PPLKPR (fig. 2), uses technology in the form of an application, a wearable and a machine learning algorithm, as a means to dictate who to keep and who to exclude from our lives, essentially giving the reins over to technology to impact our lives by influencing us to pick & choose our social circles. Alice Wang has
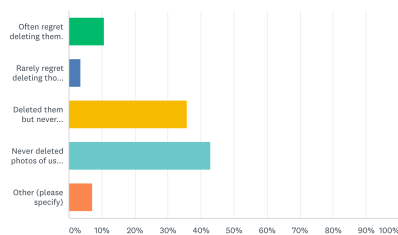
fig.1   Do you think seeing them on Social Media makes it harder for you to move on?

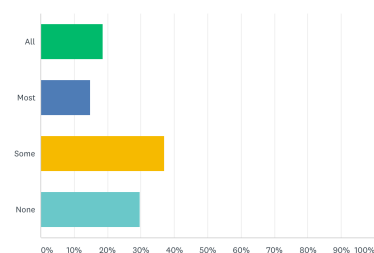Answered: 28   Skipped: 0
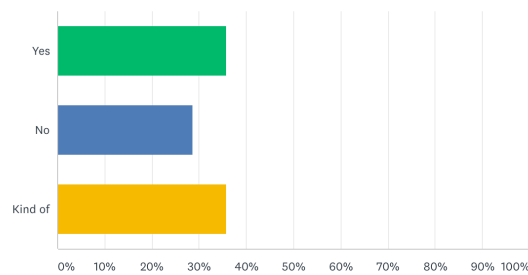
How often have you deleted pictures on your phone of you two together, then regretted it?

Answered: 28   Skipped: 0

How many of your exes have you blocked/deleted off Social Media, even if only temporarily?
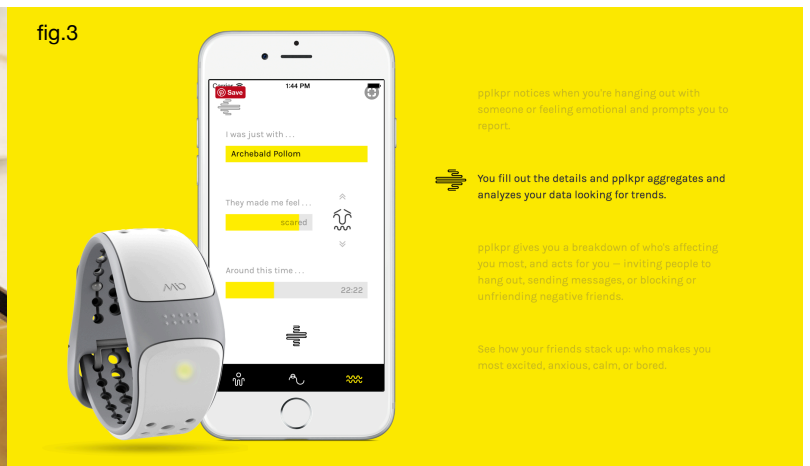
Answered: 27   Skipped: 1

also used a speculative approach to this topic, creating designs for future marriages (fig. 3), one of which includes a table that would turn off phone service to incite better communication. Miranda July's 'Somebody' App (fig. 4) is also interesting in that it responds to our decreased face-to-face contact, and detachment from emotion due during screen-based interaction. The Somebody mobile application enables its user to hire someone to deliver a message towards their intended receiver "personally". All three of these examples are projects that take a somewhat satirical twist to these topics, creating products that stand right on the line between absurd and desirable. Finally, a notable source of inspiration also comes from the Netflix show Black Mirror, and the dystopian yet pretty foreseeable scenarios of future human interaction.
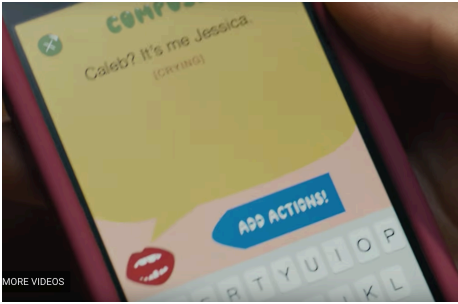
With this approach in mind, I posed two questions to guide my concept for this project:

1. How is social media used to re-affirm relationships, create a sense of validation, & reflect an unrealistic representation of love and devotion, ultimately fuelling jealousy and drama?

2. How can a romantic relationship be measured by the pattern or quality of the online interaction between the partners? And what could this look like for future relationships?

However, with the mindset that these statistics and issues may not be relatable to everyone, I established that my audience were individuals with a high dependency on their social media presence. I am examining and targeting those who blur the line between their reality and their social-media/"virtual" reality. This audience happens to be among a Generation X and Z demographic.

Inspired by the precedents stated above, the approach I aimed to take with this project was similar: one that is satirical, yet thought-provoking. In this case, I did not want to use design as a problem solving tool, but instead focus on creating something debatable, that would pose as many questions as it would hypothetically answer. Similar to the work previously mentioned, my goal was to create something on the edge of satire and desire. Linking back to my manifesto, this project relates to my design values in that it is attempting to address a social issue with playfulness and lightheartedness, especially when imagining scenarios that exaggerated the reactions and behaviours of couples on Social Media.

fig.2

fig.3

My concept considers these questions and this approach, to create a physical product that would collect, and visualise the interaction data in which two partners share on Social Media. This product, named Ero after the greek mythology 'God of Love', Eros, would be tied to their accounts, peering over their Social Media behaviour and its pattern. The satire comes in its marketing as "A physical representation of your devotion", attempting to hint at the fact that we live in a time when much of our once intimate interactions have become sterile, and as superficial as the screens they are based on. Influenced by the methods of McCarthy, July and Wang, I wanted to design Ero to be a visually desirable product, that its target audience could naturally find in the sponsored posts we find on Instagram nowadays. And similarly to PPLKPR, I wanted it to be a physical product that a couple could experience through multiple touch points, and one that might influence their behaviours or reactions even if subtly and indirectly. The multiple prototypes and iterations for this project helped determine both the look and feel, focusing on the desirability of the overall branding and shape of Ero, as well as the role of the final outcome. The goal of the role prototype was to figure out the most efficient way to represent the data that two partners share in a way that is visually simple and straightforward, and simultaneously a little controversial. With the way the data is visualised on the 4 interfaces of the Ero (fig. 5), I wanted to provoke the audience to react to the ratio of interaction, to examine whether it would indirectly influence their social media behaviours, or be used as a tool to fulfil their sense of validation, potentially becoming problematic.

In addition, Ero can also be used to represent the end of a relationship. The idea is that, once broken up, upon following the instructions on the Ero User Guide, breaking this product would delete any trace of their ex on their social media. It would block and delete their accounts, as well as tagged photos together, essentially removing them from their online memory. This feature is a reaction not only to my findings from articles online, but to my survey results also. According to my results, a large percentage of people that remove their exes from their social media pages soon after the end of the relationship. The concept there, however, was to link the permanency of the broken Ero, to the permanency of erasing a memory. Inspired by The Eternal Sunshine of The Spotless Mind, this aspect is meant to suggest a link between your online "memories" and your identity, and questioning what deleting these would entail.

With this project, I ask my intended audience to analyse their own actions and behaviours when it comes to their online behaviours. It was designed

fig.5
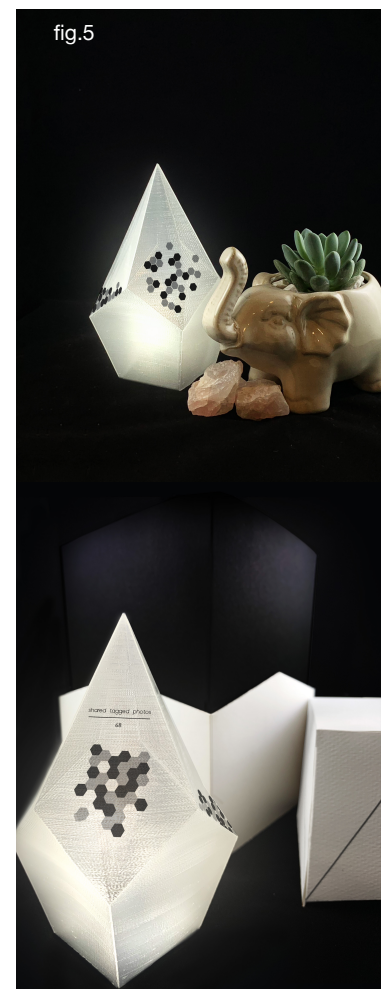
to provoke questions more so, than answer them, and trigger a sense of self-surveillance when it comes to their future Social Media induced reactions.

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