This article examines how digital modes of communication serve to facilitate family relations across three generations. Drawing on written interviews with two family chains, three categories of memory co-production are identified: co-construction, sedimentation and recreation. Applying theories of media generations and mediated memory studies, the analysis explores how these memories are shaped and unfolded. The empirical results demonstrate that all family members use digital modes of communication in the constructions of ‘micro-memories’ of family relations, and that the three generations articulate these memories as vernacular archives of their family’s proximate past. The youngest family members represent a ‘here-and-now’ presentism culture, while the middle and eldest family members represent a more classic ‘what has taken place’ culture. In conclusion, it is argued that studies of mediated memories require additional empirical grounding which is contextualized, critical and mindful.
of the socio-technical developments and the affordances of the digital modes of communication.

Keywords: media and memory, family memories, media generations, digital communication, micro-memories, digital archives

Introduction

When digital, mobile and connected media emerged in the 1990s, much scholarly and popular attention revolved around these media as catalysts of a “timeless time” (Castells, 1996: 464) and as harbingers of perceived disrupted interpersonal relationships and oral modes of communication (Rose, 1992). As portable and connected computers, smartphones and iPads have become domesticated in many parts of the world, scholars are increasingly addressing the many ways in which digital media also preserve notions of space and time (Meyrowitz, 2007), while other studies show how digital media are nested into personal relations (Baym, 2015) and everyday practices (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

However, vital aspects of people’s practices with “polymedia” (Madianou & Miller, 2012) are still taken for granted rather than being empirically explored. Notably, the ways in which mediated modes of communication play into family networks beyond parent-child dyads remain underresearched and poorly understood. Therefore, in this article the following research question is asked: How do different modes of digital communication serve to facilitate family memories across three generations? Based on a review of existing research on digital memory practices across generations and drawing on mediated memory studies and on theories of media generations, answers are provided based on analysis of a case study of two family chains: one comprising son, father and paternal grandfather, and one comprising daughter, mother and maternal grandmother.

The advantage of taking a three-generational approach to the study of different modes of digital family communication is that it complements existing research on how media are currently entangled in parent-child dynamics. Drawing attention to the modes of communication across generations supplements the useful illustrations in existing studies of parental mediation and values in child regulation. Furthermore, this analytical lens widens the media frame under study to include living memory, since research on the role of media in parent-child relationships naturally comprises only media experiences that span parents’ and children’s biographical time. In addition, this widened analytical lens minimizes the risk of claiming generational binaries such as Marc Prensky’s contested opposition between young “digital natives” and older “digital immigrants” (Prensky, 2001).

The article is structured as follows: After this introduction, I account for previous research within the field of generational communication and everyday remembering in the digital age, followed by sections on conceptual framework and methodology. The empirical analysis focuses on what the participants memorize and how they handle memorizing across generations. The discussion section links the content of the analysis to
the (false) assumptions of intra-generational homogeneity (Vittadini et al., 2014) and to the potential for perceiving being closer together behind the screen (Chayko, 2017). The conclusion summarizes the most important analytical points in relation to the observed categories of memory practice.

**Previous research**

Studies on digital memory practices across generations form part of a wider body of research on family communication in the digital age. Much of this research takes a psychological approach, examining parental mediation and negotiations of norms and values related to children’s use of particular media (e.g. Eastin, Greenberg & Hofshire, 2006; Valkenburg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, & de Leeuw, 2013). Other researchers adopt a more socio-cultural approach, focusing on contextualized explorations of how media reframe and refract existing discourses and values of family life (Clark, 2012; Gee, Takeuchi & Wartella, 2017; Mascheroni, 2014). Notably, an analysis of Norwegian teenagers’ digital communication with their parents and grandparents combines a values approach with an analytical focus on modes of communication (Nag, Ling & Jakobsen, 2016). It was found that when young people communicate with grandparents, they favour asynchronous communication modes such as email, while their parental communication is a more functional corollary to other activities – or what Christian Licoppe calls “conversational communication modes” vs. “connected presence modes” (Licoppe, 2004, 2015).

Within existing research on digital family communication, studies on memory take a time-based perspective. For instance, many researchers explore the importance of mediated memory negotiation for diaspora and migration families (Jakubowicz, 2009), while others examine how media shape family memories of particular events (Zelizer, 1992). Here, Ingrid Volkmer’s comparative study is of particular relevance, since it takes a comparative approach across three generations in nine countries, thus adding a much-needed depth of nuance to local or national research (Volkmer, 2006). Unlike these trends which study particular events and minorities, this study retains a focus on everyday memorizing across generations, rather than on special groups or events, and it takes an interest in the networked nature of memorizing, rather than in the memory practices of individual family members.

**Conceptual framework**

The analysis presented here is underpinned by theories that conceptualize the relationships of media and memory and media and generations, respectively. Both types of theory offer relevant frameworks for understanding how mediated interactions play into the customary practices of family life while co-producing the family’s time-based understanding of itself across three generations. Inspired by Bolin (2018: 34) the concept of generation should here be understood as a combination of the synchronic generation as social formation, and a perspective on generation as succession, here while co-existing. Co-existence is an important difference, distinct from other studies. As Rantanen (2005:}
points out: “Two generations may co-exist for about 50 years, but three generations probably share only about 30 years. This is the time when generations can interact”.

Since media are technologies that shape, reproduce and store communication across time and space (Thompson, 1995), these technologies support public and private practices of constructing, negotiating and sedimenting memories. Whether the focus is on public or private dimensions, the relationships between media and memory are studied along two key lines of research. The first line addresses how particular media are focal points in the shaping and sharing of memories, be it in relation to cinema going, listening to the radio or shaping a memory website (Kansteiner, 2018; Kuhn, Biltereyst & Meers, 2017; Drotner, 1998; de Kreek & van Zoonen, 2013). The second line studies how media offer contexts for memorizing practices and performances at an individual, interpersonal or community level (Licoppe, 2004; Myles & Millerand, 2013).

José van Dijck’s Mediated memories in the digital age (2007) offers one of the most thorough examinations of media as both a focal point for memorizing and a communicative context. José van Dijck defines mediated memories as: “(...) the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of past, present, and future of ourselves in relation to others” (van Dijck, 2007: 21). Demonstrating the dynamic mesh of media and memories, van Dijck argues for a cultural understanding of this mesh. Such an understanding requires an analytical approach to “(...) how we store and reshape our images of self, family, and community in the course of living” (van Dijck, 2007: 25). Moreover, extending the approach to form and function when studying the co-production of media and memories is advantageous because this approach recognizes that media are more than neutral conveyers of fully-fledged personal remembrances. Furthermore, this approach is amenable to studying families’ co-production of memories, because the focus is on how this co-production is practiced in networked interactions.

Drawing on van Dijck’s cultural approach, Andrew Hoskins reflects on the impact of digitization on mediated memories: “The very condition of remembering is not only increasingly networked but also actively and re-actively constructed on the fly, notably memory is characterized by its mediatized emergence through a range of everyday digital media” (Hoskins, 2014: 666). Hoskins’ emphasis on the fleeting and provisional nature of digital memorizing is useful to a study of current memory practices across generations because it invites an understanding of these practices as contextualized and mundane processes of micro-managing, not as separate modes of engagement or practices related to distinct events (Volkmer, 2006). Moreover, studies of memory practices, reception and archiving in a digital media and Internet perspective are also important to undertake as they pose methodological challenges in comparison to other studies (Wüstenberg, 2017).

A generational perspective on media is equally important for a nuanced understanding of the different contexts within which digitally mediated memories evolve across generations. Scholarly and popular interest in this perspective has been sparked by the fact that in modern societies of the global North, young people are often early adopters of new media technologies and patterns of use (Drotner, 2000). This pioneering position has been the starting point for research on the relationship between generations and media.
For instance, in what has become a classic article, Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart (1985: 29) argue that “the early acquisition of a particular media consciousness continues to shape people’s world view even though they later acquire literacy in new media.” Youthful experiences of particular media colour generational memories and perceptions of new media in later life are taken one step further in marketing. Popular labels such as “the net generation” (Tapscott, 1998), “Cyberkids” (Holloway & Valentine, 2003) and “the Google Generation” (Günter, Rowlands & Nicholas, 2009) indicate that particular media technologies define particular generations.

When critiquing such easy correlation, or even causality, between a particular media technology and particular groups of audiences, scholars have recently stressed the importance of taking the entire media ensemble into account when specifying generational experiences. For example, in an overview of the literature, Göran Bolin (2017) follows Andreas Hepp and colleagues who define a media generation as one or more age groups who “(…) share a specific space of experiencing mediatisation as well as a generational self-understanding” (Hepp, Berg & Roitsch, 2015; cited in Bolin, 2017: 42). Hepp et al. and Bolin situate generational media usage within wider theories of mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Others contextualize their empirical analyses in relation to theories of media ecology (Grønning, 2020); and others look into shared life circumstances, for instance “time resources and thematic interest” (Vittadini et al., 2014: 75). Of course, research is influenced by contemporary time and trends. Since the seventies, audience research has contributed to the field with studies about media reception such as television (Hall, 1974) followed by studies about memory-creating in a historical perspective (see e.g. Brennan, 2018). Following on from this, the current research design of this article follows these inclusive and contextualized approaches in the sense that this article specifies how the informants’ memory practice processes are nested within various digital media, genres and platforms. The combination of this perceptual macro level and the everyday micro level perspective is useful to get closer to an understanding of how different digital modes of communication influence the fluid memory practice processes.

Methods

In order to investigate memories across generations this study draws on a case study that includes empirical data collected by the author. As a three-generational approach complements existing research the plan was to interview three generations from two families. As the gender perspective is relevant particularly when combined with the family generational approach in terms of Åström’s concept of reproduction (Åström, 1986; 1990), the data was collected from two family chains: one comprising son, father and paternal grandfather, and one comprising daughter, mother and maternal grandmother.

The rationale for using single gender generational strings was due to the influence of Åström’s single gender generational approach, and partly because the two families who were willing to participate suggested this possibility themselves. I am aware that the
communications could have gone through a mixed gender generational string, which may have brought other nuances to the study.

The two family chains were interviewed via a group email. Data has been manually coded in two phases: an initial open coding without predetermined thematic categories, and a closed coding derived from the open coding. In accordance with Kozinet’s netnographic approach (2015: 119-121), this resulted in the following themes (nodes): contact, medium, recollect, archive, remembrance, community, place and time.

The empirical data materializes at two levels: a direct and an indirect level. Directly, the study draws on the interviews as collected communication between the three generations by means of a digital group conversation by email over a period of time. Indirectly, the family members’ activities on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, which are aimed at a wider audience that includes the family members, have been studied. As the focus here is on how the family members construct micro-memories and not on microanalyses of the content, both levels of empirical data are included but with the main emphasis on the interviews. Hence, the family members’ activities on social media serve as background knowledge for the interviews.

As noted, the interview data consists of two long digital group conversations with the two family chains. In more concrete terms, an ongoing triadic digital conversation was conducted (similar to a digital focus group interview) over a period of time: with the women from the beginning of April 2017 to the beginning of August 2017, with the men from mid-April to the end of October 2017. The interview style was more conversational than classic semi-structured interviews since all participants (the family chain and the researcher) wrote to each other, resulting in an extended digital group conversation with days of silence and days of conversation between the family members and the researcher. The informants are known by the author and through her professional network an open call was passed orally. The following selection criteria were used: three generations, all male or all female, and willingness to participate in a digital conversation over time.

The two family chains have no connection to each other. Both families are Caucasian, middle-class Danes residing in Denmark, whose names are anonymized. Family chain one consists firstly of the son, Christoffer, who was born in 1995 and studies business administration; secondly, his father, Anders, who was born in 1965 and works as a managing director in an international, private company and educated in economics; and thirdly, the grandfather, Poul, who was born in 1937. Poul is a retired general practitioner who lives with his wife in a small town. Anders lives with his wife and their youngest son (Christoffer’s brother) in another small town less than 200 km from Poul and his wife. Christoffer lives on his own in the same small town as his father, mother and youngest brother. Family chain two consists firstly of the daughter, Matilde, who was born in 1994 and is studying to become a teacher, secondly, her mother, Charlotte, who was born in 1962 and works as a municipal health manager and is trained as a nurse, and thirdly, the grandmother, Karen, who was born in 1925. She is a retired psychiatrist and because of a hearing impairment she is a heavy digital communicator. The three women all live on their own and not in the same town.
Empirical analysis

Based on the nodes from my second round of coding, the analysis is presented within the following themes: 1) memory practices and digital communication modes, 2) familial memory, 3) intra-generational perspectives and archiving. Three distinct categories of memory practice emerge from the analysis: co-construction, sedimentation and recreation.

Memory practices and digital communication modes

Despite this being a fluid process, the family members practice memory in two broad ways. On the one hand, the community of memory helps to strengthen the families’ connectivity and feeling of connectedness. On the other hand, the families maintain their memory practice through digital modes of communication. Memory is not merely material images and letters, emails and text messages but also a symbolic layer into which the content of communication is woven and where all kinds of memory products are stored and reshaped by the individual family community (van Dijck, 2007). The actual contact is one thing, but the contact per se is not the only factor in the connection between the generations. Media accounting and the connectivity form the basis which creates the memory layer that is generated by the contact. Drawing on Nick Couldry’s concept of “media practice”, Lee Humphreys describes “media accounting” as “(…) the media practices that allow us to document our lives and the world around us, which can be presented back to ourselves or others” (Humphreys, 2018: 9). The forms of contact thus constitute the foundational layer for the micro-memories of each individual family member. Each of the family members creates his or her own recollection based on the different (digital) modes of communication, and new ways of conducting contact mean new ways of recollecting. Particularly notable is the way in which the family members create, maintain or sediment and recreate memory. This raises the question of similarities and differences regarding gender and generation.

Both software and hardware are used in different ways. In respect to digital modes of communication, emails are replacing letters and traditional asynchronous forms of contact, while Messenger is used more for instant communication (Grønning, 2018). Across family generations, a pattern can be observed whereby the eldest generation uses the computer, the middle generation primarily uses the iPad and the computer, and the youngest generation primarily uses the mobile phone. This follows what Nancy Baym (2015: 413) calls “the narrow reach tools” and are used differently across generations. She distinguishes between “narrow reach tools” used to communicate one-to-one or in a closed group and “wide reach tools” used to broadcast messages to larger audiences (news feeds, blogs). For example, Poul has a mobile phone conversation once a week with his son and exchanges text messages throughout the week with his wife. Apart from that, he does not enter many digital conversations but prefers analogue conversations through physical meetings with friends and family. Anders talks on the phone with his father (Poul) and uses Facebook Messenger and the phone to contact his son (Christoffer). Christoffer uses the phone to communicate with his grandfather (Poul) on special occasions and Facebook Messenger or text messaging to communicate with his father (Anders). All three of them would call each other in an emergency. The email is
used primarily for formalities and when they forward emails from others. All three men have a Facebook profile, and Christoffer also has an Instagram profile. They are not very active on their walls and they rarely comment on each other’s posts. Poul describes his family in this way: “(...) the family is one of few (digital) words. We are probably quite happy with each other, but happiest face to face (...).” From a classic gender perspective, Åström (1986; 1990) argues that men are merged into the centrifugal disposition as individuals, as they are focused on own goals while women take the centripetal disposition, connecting themselves to others in mutual relations. Åström’s ethnological investigation is based on life story interviews with women from nine families and men from 13 families, all in three generations. According to Åström, the centrifugal disposition contains a greater potential (power) than the centripetal orientation (care). Nevertheless, the weekly call from Anders to Poul resembles the female way of caring through contact although these calls are shorter and accomplished less frequently than the female chain.

Karen takes part in many types of digital conversations, such as emailing with friends and family, home banking, digital consultations with her GP and shopping. Her daughter (Charlotte) is available for digital conversation at all times and uses email to contact her mother (Karen), and Facebook Messenger, text messaging, phone and email to get in touch with her daughter (Matilde). Matilde uses email to communicate with her grandmother (Karen) and Facebook Messenger, text messaging, phone and email to contact her mother (Charlotte). In earlier research, frequent contact between female generations has been explained partly as a gender issue, typically from the perspective of care (Rantanen, 2005: 68). In this light, Karen, Charlotte and Matilde seem to care a lot. It may also be of importance that the three women live alone. All three women are active on Facebook with hundreds of friends and an active posting behaviour. But do they save the digital products? Karen does not save as many family emails as Poul. Anders saves and processes much more visual material than Charlotte. Matilde saves, shares and revisits the digital conversations (emails and chat) more frequently than Christoffer. Across generations, all six family members reflect on the loss of documentation, something that can be linked to the concept of nostalgia and nostalgic remembrances directed at childhood media use. Nostalgia and nostalgic remembrances appear in all generations and are directed more towards the content than towards the specific technology (Bolin, 2017: 106ff). In this case study, the family members are aware of the possible loss of memories and documentation about their lives, something they like to reflect upon and discuss with friends and family.

Familial memory
Through their digital communication practices, the family members co-construct a narrative about the perception of each other and the memories of their lives. As with other social groups, the family keeps a shared pool of memories, knowledge and information. This practice complements the way in which they mutually construct their kinship and familial memories, and functions as a reciprocal process between technology and users (Vittadini et al., 2014; Lee, 2005). In particular when the family members meet physically, they refer to and discuss the content of their messages and posts as well as comment on the visual material they have shared digitally. In this way, the family members consolidate their familial memory through mediated discourse and narration.
Vittadini et al. (2014: 71) argue that the younger generations perceive the possible speed of digital communication as a value that is indicative of attention and concentration whereas the middle-aged generations perceive the possible (asynchronous) slowness of digital communication as a value that is indicative of reflection. The empirical material shows a more blurred picture. Karen (born 1925) values saving time and having quick and understandable answers because of her advanced age and her hearing impairment. As she notes: “I save a lot of time, which is better than waiting on the phone […]”. At the same time, Matilde (born 1994) is nostalgic for the days of paper letters and family gatherings where the photo album was passed round after the summer holidays. Despite her young age, she has a nostalgic approach to earlier modes of communication and sharing practices: “When I was small, I distinctly remember how we waited for a couple of weeks for the pictures to be processed and then we passed them around the table when guests were invited so they could see where we had gone on holiday.”

When it comes to linguistic and narrative habits (Vittadini et al., 2014), the male family chain states that they prefer to share shorter and more goal-oriented communications whereas the female family chain mentions that they prefer long and narrative descriptions in their communications. Of course, this cannot be generalized but is nevertheless what the family chains report and can be linked to the centripetal/centrifugal perspective by Åström. Furthermore, several studies (McMillan & Morrison 2006; Edmunds & Turner 2002) have investigated how people produce and look for stories of others who share the same “we sense” (Corsten, 1999). This production of “we sense” through digital mediated discourse enables access to, and re- mediating and sharing of cultural products. A generational identity as “we sense” is produced through narratives about media use (Bolin, 2018). In the data, a similar production of “we sense” is found not only among the youngest family members but also across generations as the six family members individually produce and look for stories in order for the other family members to develop this shared “we sense”. Bolin takes his point of departure in the three-generation photo where “we” in these kinds of pictures are “We, the family”, which demonstrates a diachronic understanding of generations. The three-generation emailing constitutes yet another layer as the family members develop a shared “we sense” through this digital mode of communication. Posting pictures and sharing humorous content such as jokes and memes are other examples.

The digital practices of the family members represent reciprocal processes of co-construction that take place between the generations using the technologies. This is supported by the empirical data which underlines the assumption that digital technologies facilitate family relationships and bring the generations together, strengthening family ties and experiences (Taske & Plude, 2011; Vittadini et al., 2014). However, as mentioned in the introduction, intra-generational homogeneity has been questioned. For instance, friends can also be seen to have a positive influence as well as family members. The generations inform each other about practical issues but at the same time they share phatic communication (social functional communication such as: “what nice weather”), funny stories and pictures from their daily lives, all of which serves to strengthen their relationships. The three generations actively use “narrow reach tools” as well as “wide reach tools” (Baym, 2015), but the youngest family members are more active in using “wide reach tools” and broadcast more messages to larger audiences than the eldest.
family members. The middle and the eldest family members prefer “narrow reach tools” and do not comment much on news feeds and blogs.

**Intra-generational perspectives and archiving**

Intra-generationally, differences can be seen in ways of handling the archiving of everyday digital messages, most of which consist of emails. For instance, Poul states that he has always saved emails from family members on his computer. Karen states that she saves ‘special emails’, and that these emails can be “(...) special agreements or if we have discussed something and arrived at a result. It can then be a good idea to have something in print.” Poul conducts his form of archiving from such physical forms of communication as notes and letters to digital messages such as emails. Karen’s form of archiving has developed over time. She focuses more closely on “the special” and is also aware of what she regards as special. Karen’s development from archiving everything to archiving “the special” may be due to several factors, such as the large amount of digital mail she receives, since she has a hearing impairment and therefore uses emailing as her lifeline. It is very important for her to be part of digital contact with family and friends. “I simply don’t know what I would do without the Internet,” she says, and she enjoys receiving both text messages and images via the computer. In addition, the eldest family members have stored large non-digital archives of 8mm film, newspaper cuttings and photos.

Photos and images take up even more mental space among the middle generation. For instance, Anders emphasizes “visual memory” (pictures) as being stronger than “textual memory” (words). He says that skimming through visual material on his own gives him personal pleasure and that sharing this material across generations offers a great shared pleasure. For example, he has prepared a video made up of many small everyday video clips from his sons’ childhood. His son, Christoffer, comments on the video: “It really was a fun depiction of how children were brought up.” In this way, Anders states that he feels technology has brought the generations closer together. He is very careful to save digital products and is afraid of losing important material: “(...) we must lose something or other in the electronic fora where we have stopped saving what is important, relevant and history-preserving,” he says. Therefore, he has prepared an archive with all the images from his mobile phone, arranged according to year. Furthermore, Anders autosaves all text and chat messages, because “(...) they are fun to return to – precisely because they have that spontaneous feel. But it is more from personal curiosity – not some hope of giving others any meaningful insight. :)”. He also saves the few physical letters and cards that he receives during the year. He says that it “(...) creates a fun form of nostalgia when they are occasionally heaved out of the back of my writing-desk drawer”. Unlike Anders, Charlotte does not save emails for any length of time, only for as long as they seem topically relevant. She autosaves all her chat messages, but seldom re-reads them. Christoffer makes use of an automatic archive for all digital messages and stores images via an online service (cloud). He mainly shares images with his friends via Facebook and Instagram, with his family via email, chat and text messaging. Matilde saves virtually all emails and conversations (text messaging, chat). She draws attention to the importance of her old emails: “I have some really old emails saved – it’s fun to read them. (…) it says a lot about how one sees things when one is a child. So that’s why I save that type of email”.

To sum up, nostalgia is perceived by the family members in at least three ways: 1) through their media choices 2) through the media content and 3) through their media practices. Nostalgia contributes to what seems to be part of strong inter-generational dynamics, something all informants relate to and like to think of as an important and affective part of their co-existing relationships. Moreover, they reflect on what new generations will think about the communication of today.

Three categories of memory practice

The above analysis leads us to the identification of three interrelated categories of memory practice. Importantly, the memory practice processes happen fluidly as they occur in parallel or in interaction and can also overlap each other. Nevertheless, patterns can be observed. Firstly, the family members co-construct memory through the act of communicating and by saving the digital products of communication. In this case study, the youngest family members create memory less restricted (with regard to space and time) than the eldest family members. For Christoffer, there is no typical forum for his communication with his family, and both he and Matilde autosave texts and images simply because it is possible to do so. Secondly, the family members maintain or sediment memory by sharing their digital products not only in their minds, but also through the technology and through their relationships. This is an example of the question of homogeneity (Vittadini et al., 2014). There are differences within the generations in the way in which memory is sedimented in the technology and in the relationship. Christoffer, unlike his female counterpart, Matilde, does not save many images of the family. On the other hand, he has a nostalgic view of the way people used to share pictures on 8mm film and on paper. Everyone except Karen takes pictures – though the youngest generation in this case study does so more than the middle generation. The middle generation, represented by Charlotte and Anders, is the most active when it comes to sharing images and stories with both the eldest and the youngest family members.

Thirdly, the family members recreate memory through the praxis of reviewing. All informants frequently review the images that they themselves create and those that they receive from others. The eldest generation in this case study, represented by Karen and Poul, recalls the past, sometimes going a long way back, via 8mm film and paper photographs. Furthermore, they like to show their photos to others, in particular to friends and other family members. Interestingly, the middle generation, represented by Charlotte and Anders, often reviews visual material and “relives the pulse of history” as Anders says, just as they try to understand the youngest family members by looking through their material, for example on Facebook and Instagram. Charlotte and Anders also imagine one day showing and explaining to their grandchildren how the generations lived and interacted (memory practice within media accounting, cf. Humphreys, 2018: 89). However, the youngest family members do not review their material in the same way as the other family members and therefore are more representative of a ‘here-and-now’ presentism culture, particularly with regards to images. Even so, they document themselves and the world around them, a practice which is key to media accounting (Humphreys, 2018: 76).

To the eldest and the middle generations in this case study, mediated visual memory represents the classic notion of ‘what has taken place’, while the youngest
generation’s visual memory may rather be understood as a social category that helps them to share an emotional ‘now’ while it happens, which corresponds to the historical concept of the photograph (Sandbye, 2015). Therefore, the perception of technology influences (and the technologies themselves afford) the way in which familial memory is recreated. When Matilde goes through her own old emails, it would appear to be mainly because she wishes to understand herself and her own development (e.g. her capacity to formulate things). When Karen goes through her own emails, it would appear to be mainly because she wishes to understand her own era and the other members of the family.

Cross-generationally, Karen and Anders emphasize the importance of visual material. They both state that they recollect their experiences better if the communication includes images rather than only text. In this way, pictures and images have become an important part of our everyday family communication due to the high-quality inbuilt cameras in most mobile phones, and there has been an explosion of pictures on the Internet, also known as the information and picture tsunami (Lister, 2014).

In short, digital modes of communication serve to facilitate family memories across three generations by affording new possibilities such as volume and speed as well as by practicing new ways of saving, sharing and retrieving their digital content via computer, iPad and mobile phone. This can be done in three ways: 1) The family members co-create memory by communicating digitally with each other and by choosing to save their digital modes of communication (selection phase one). Without storing the material, they would not have the same possibilities for remembering and for sharing. 2) They sediment memory by reviewing and sharing digital communications containing text and images across the three generations. This gives them the opportunity for curating the digital material. 3) They recreate memory by reviewing the digital communications and by taking decisions to further sort the material and to process the material in new ways (selection phase two). This can be done individually or together with others. As an example, the digital modes of communication give the eldest, here the grandmother, the opportunity to communicate with her daughter and grandchild whenever she likes (on her initiative) and about everything she can think of as important in her everyday life. Sharing email, chat and pictures gives the family members a unique possibility to participate actively in their own construction of memory, since they can sediment and recreate contact as they wish.

Discussion

Following Hoskins and emphasizing the fleeting and provisional nature of digital memorizing is useful to a study of current memory practices across generations, as noted in the introduction. However, this approach is a challenge due to the abstract nature of study, we cannot be as concrete and rigid as we wish when it comes to the results of analysing digital memorizing. Nevertheless, it is important to map and analyse how three generations co-construct memories. Other limitations include the fact that the two family chains belong to the middle classes of the global North who have both material and symbolic resources to acquire and apply digital means of memorizing. Moreover, it is difficult to follow the family members’ digital communication modes and activities on
the Internet as an object of study. As described, the two family chains have not been observed constantly but their activities on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn have been registered and they have been interviewed as a group about their memory practices. Importantly, the digital products per se and the more nuanced contextual factors for each of the individual communication modes have likewise not been included in the study.

The analysis underlines that the co-construction of memory is a reciprocal fluid process in which technologies and users mutually construct each other (Lee, 2005: 317). The family members relate to each other when choosing both how and what to communicate and share. For instance, the family chains store and reshape their images of themselves and of the family in the course of living (van Dijck, 2007).

The study can be linked to false assumptions of intra-generational homogeneity (Vittadini et al., 2014:74) and underlines that “(...) it is a synergy of young people’s age, gender, socioeconomic status and type of school that leads to differences in young people’s use” (Vittadini, 2014:70 with reference to Lee, 2005). Vittadini’s focus is on young people’s use of technology, but in fact the same can be said about the informants from the middle generation and from the eldest generation in this case study. Therefore, one can state that it is a synergy of both middle-aged and older people’s age, gender, socioeconomic status and level of education that leads to differences in middle-aged and older people’s use of technology. Consequently, memory studies should include more studies about the range of everyday digital media. As we can see, memory is characterized by its many different technologies and mediatized emergence.

Although their actions are separated in time and place, the families state that they feel close to each other through their practices. An email and a text message may have the same function as the traditional paper letter and postcard of the past, media which also overcame the separation of place and time. However, digital technologies are overcoming the separation of place and time in new ways, especially because the speed of technology and the potential of the speed have accelerated. It is argued (by Anders) that the family members feel that the technologies have brought the generations closer together. This is not measurable, but nevertheless, his observation is notable and in line with Chayko’s argument that the perception of physical closeness can be deflected through on-screen interaction: “Distance can enhance closeness. Mobile media use allows contact and connectedness to occur at almost any time and in any place; people can be available to one another much of the time and engage in frequent interactions that make relationships more robust and more likely to be continued face-to-face.” (Chayko, 2017: 12). The female family chain reflects more explicitly on the perception of this kind of digital closeness than the male family chain. This may be due to the levels of digital activity or it may be a gender issue (Rantanen, 2005). In any case, the perception of digital closeness is central for individual family memory practice as well as for the networked nature of memorizing but more data is needed to be able to discuss this further. On the other side, Matilde mentions that sometimes she and Charlotte communicate about too small issues and that the sharing of information feels ‘too much’. Furthermore, Poul does not experience digital closeness and mentions that he prefers analogue conversations, mostly because he finds them more authentic.
In accordance with Humphreys’ definition of media accounting, studying their media practices allows us to study how the family chains document their lives and the world around them, the result of which can be presented back to themselves (alone and together) or others. The daily chat message from Charlotte to Matilde, the daily e-mail from Charlotte to Karen and the weekly phone call from Anders to Poul constitute a major part of the fundament for construction of the micro-memories of the family members and for the sedimentation of memory in the relationships. In the networked nature of memorizing, each of the family members creates his or her own memories and part of their recollection is now also based on the different digital modes of communication. New ways of keeping contact mean new ways of recollecting.

Conclusion

This article has examined how digital modes of communication serve to facilitate family relationships across three generations based on a case study of two family chains, one comprising son, father and paternal grandfather, and one comprising daughter, mother and maternal grandmother. Digital communication modes are key elements in bringing generations together. The awareness of this digital memory layer enables us to confirm that for the informants their digital activities are not only a matter of maintaining contact with each other, but also of co-constructing, sedimenting and recreating memory. By applying theories of media generations and mediated memory studies, this study has explored how memories are shaped and unfolded without moving into detailed content or circumstances of individual memories individually which may also have an impact. Theories of media generations and mediated memory offer relevant frameworks for understanding how mediated interactions play into the customary practices of family life while supporting the family’s time-based understanding of itself across three generations. Drawing on written interviews with two family chains, three fluent and overlapping categories of memory co-production are identified: co-construction, sedimentation and recreation. The family members co-construct memory through their communications with each other and by saving the digital products. They sediment memory by sharing the digital products in their minds, in the technology and in their relationships, and they recreate memory by reviewing and recalling the memory products alone or together with others. The empirical results demonstrate that all three generations engage with digital modes of communication to construct ‘micro-memories’ of family relationships, and that all three generations articulate these memories as vernacular archives of their family’s proximate past. These practices contain both inter-generational references (“they sense”) as well as intra-generational confirmation (“we sense”) in a fluid process.

Memory is characterized by its mediatized emergence through a range of everyday digital media (Hoskins). As shown in this case study, the women prefer to use the modes as connected presence modes, in a centripetal direction. In particular, Charlotte prefers to keep up with her mother and her daughter through contact and not content. The men prefer to use the modes as conversational communication modes, in a centrifugal direction. For instance, Poul in particular prefers to keep communication short and precise and has a similar approach to mobile phone conversations. He ascribes greater value to content than to contact. Nevertheless, all generations are careful to save digital products and mention themselves that they are afraid of losing important material that
represents their personal cultural heritage. The findings from this study with regard to the perceived speed and slowness of digital communication extend the argument by Vittadini et al. about the preferences of the younger generations (speed). Also, the younger generation expresses nostalgic feelings for the days of paper letters and family gatherings where photo albums were passed round, whereas the eldest generation values the speed of digital communication as indicative of attention and concentration. Time is short when you are over 90 years old! Being 92 years old, Karen considers time to be very precious and she perceives every early morning a gift and a bonus to her already long life. She does not want to waste her time, because she is aware that time is running out. Her digital communication is her lifeline, and her daughter and grandchild understand the importance of this.

Memory practices across generations should not be seen as separate modes of engagement or practices relating to distinct events but as contextualized and everyday processes of micro-managing. The intention of this article was to get closer to an understanding of how different digital modes of communication articulate memory practices. In this case study, the youngest family members represent a ‘here-and-now’ presentism culture, while the middle and eldest family members represent a more classic ‘what has taken place’ culture. At the same time, all six family members reflect on nostalgia as well as being concerned about their personal culture heritage and cultural understanding. An analytical case study like this is important for the cultural understanding of how we store and reshape our images of self, family and community. Studies of mediated memories require additional empirical grounding which is contextualized, critical and mindful of the socio-technical developments and the affordances of the digital modes of communication.

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