Together or Apart?

A Historical Snapshot of Personal Internet Usage at Home

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a historical snapshot of personal ICT usage in 2005/2006, specifically shedding light on how Australian and German couples (N= 48) had integrated the internet into their homes with a focus on spatial and social transformations. Using a home ethnographic approach, this qualitative study implemented in-depth interviews across two countries. From a spatial perspective, Australian couples had their laptops or PCs highly integrated into the family life usually in multifunctional rooms or open areas, whereas German couples' laptops and PCs were most often found in separate study rooms. From a social perspective, internet use can be related to elements that bring couples together, but also to elements of disintegration. A shift in how couples spent their time together was observed from watching TV together in the same room to going online in the same room at two PCs or one person being online while the other conducted other activities.

KEYWORDS

Domestication, Ethnographic, Gender, Historical, Household, Internet, Social, Spatial

INTRODUCTION

Reports regarding media usage indicate that the internet plays an important role in today's people's work as well as their home life – many people go online daily using a variety of online activities (ABS, 2016, 2017; Koch & Frees, 2016). It is difficult to imagine for the current generation of digital natives who grew up with the internet, that in 2005/2006 it was quite common to go online only a few times per week, with some even not yet going online from home at all (ABS, 2007; Statistisches-Bundesamt, 2006). Heavy users could be considered those who were online for more than an hour per day, which is a striking difference to today where people check their Smartphone several times per hour.

Much research has been conducted into social and spatial inequality in personal internet use (Atkinson, Black, & Curtis, 2008; Gibson, 2003; Holloway, 2002; Robinson et al., 2015; Stern, Adams, & Elsasser, 2009, among others). This research into the digital divide has concentrated on the socially and economically disadvantaged (Holloway, 2005; Hsieh, Rai, & Keil, 2008; Robinson et al., 2015) has examined gender differences (Kennedy, Wellman, & Klement, 2003; Weiser, 2000)

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as well as age (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Lichy, 2011). Less empirical research has been dedicated to how internet usage affects the domestic sphere (Hertlein, 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide a historical snapshot of personal internet usage across two countries and continents (Australia and Germany) in the hope to better understand how internet usage impacted the home life and lifeworld (Geißler, 2006) of couples in those two countries. Qualitative studies such as this one are important to reconstruct a picture of Internet usage and its transformation.

In the next section we provide a brief review of the literature and theoretical models that underpin the integration of the internet into the domestic sphere. Following that, we outline the home ethnographic approach employed in this research. Then the findings are presented prior to a discussion. We finally conclude and provide the limitation of the present study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When media technologies such as TV and internet become adapted and integrated into the domestic sphere, a process of “domestication” of these services occurs. With domestication theory (Leslie Haddon, 2007; Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1991), media usage can be analysed within its context and it can be examined to determine what meanings household members assign to those technologies (Berker, Hartmann, & Punie, 2005; Leslie Haddon, 2004, 2011; Quandt & Pape, 2010; Röser, 2007; Röser & Peil, 2010a; Silverstone et al., 1991; Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1994). As a theoretical background domestication theory allows an understanding of this ‘housetraining’ of new media technology as it distinguishes between four phases - appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion (Silverstone et al., 1994). In this process, a new media technology is brought into the domestic sphere (appropriation), a physical place is found (objectification), the technology is integrated into daily time routines (incorporation) (Leslie Haddon, 2007; Silverstone et al., 1994). The fourth phase ‘conversion’ “represents the symbolic promotion of one’s public image by presenting the new devices to the outside”(Quandt & Pape, 2010, p. 331). These four phases are connected to each other and domestication is seen as a continuous process (Haddon, 2003). Adapted forms of the domestication concept have also been applied to other contexts than the household, such as the integration of the internet into the small business environment (Harwood, 2011).

Integrating technologies into the social and spatial running of the household can be associated with several aspects: placement of technologies can be related to the concepts of individuality and collectivity (Bakardjieva, 2005; De Schutter, Brown, & Vanden Abeele, 2015; Van Rompaey & Roe, 2001), the technologies can be used together with others or separately. Thus, media usage can be linked associated with social integration and also to social disintegration within the household (Röser, 2007). Media technologies can be used by household members to spend time together or consumed content can lead to conversations (Ahrens, 2007; Bausinger, 1983; Livingstone, 2002).

Technologies can also be implemented as retraction strategies (Bakardjieva, 2005), e.g., physical retraction occurs when someone uses a technology in a separate room. For example in a study on digital games it was found that males used their online games more likely in separate rooms whereas females tended to use it in joint ‘living’ rooms (De Schutter et al., 2015). A person can also symbolically retract themselves e.g. by being online but ‘in one’s own world’ (Van Rompaey & Roe, 2001). The placement of the technologies can indicate how important it is for its household members (Van Rompaey & Roe, 2001). For example, frequently habituated rooms are used for favourite technologies or they are placed in the centre of an area. Quandt and Pape’s (2010) research with 100 German households shows a diverse picture of the placement of computers; approximately one quarter were found in study rooms, one quarter in living rooms and one quarter in bedrooms or bedroom/study rooms (Quandt & Pape, 2010). Through the incorporation of new media into the household however, also the traditional function of a room can change (Hirsch, 1998). Hirsch (1998) describes how a former ‘joint room’ becomes more the area of the male due to his usage of the laptop within the living room.

We still require more knowledge about what happens when the internet is moved into the household, how it affects household members. In particular, more cross-cultural studies are needed (Bolin, 2010). A historical snapshot as presented in this study provides insights into the domestic internet use during a time without Snapchat, Twitter and with Facebook only in its first development stages. The iPhone was yet not born, neither iPads nor similar mobile technologies to access the internet with. In this paper, findings of a qualitative study based on the domestication concept (Silverstone et al., 1994) with 48 participants in Australia and Germany are presented (Ahrens, 2009). The focus is on the spatial and social integration of the internet into the household during the period 2005-2006. The two countries were chosen as the goal was to have a comparison between countries where one was further developed with regard to the status of internet dissemination and domestic internet usage yet at the same time with similar societal gender expectations (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2006) as one of the main emphasis of the study was to shed light on gender and domestic internet usage. Furthermore, for practical reasons, countries were chosen where the lead researcher was fluent in the language in order to execute the interviews. Germany and Australia fulfilled the requirements in regard to gender expectations (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2006) and the internet diffusion and domestication process happened at slightly differing times in the two countries with Australia being ahead of Germany (ABS, 2007; Statistisches-Bundesamt, 2006). In 2005/6 in Germany, 67.5% of males were online compared to 49.1% of females (Van Eimeren & Frees, 2007). During this timeframe, in Australia we saw that 67% of males and almost 65% of females use the internet (ABS, 2007).

This study provides a historical perspective in the half-century of internet-enabled change, and specifically focuses on individual internet usage at home in different countries and on different continents. Hence, this paper addresses a lack of research across different cultures and continents.

The following research questions were addressed in this paper:

1. How, from a spatial and social perspective, did Australian and German couples integrate the internet into their households in 2005-6?
2. How did the introduction of the internet into the domestic sphere effect the couple's relationship and room allocations?
3. Can we see transformations and paradigm shifts of rooms and social interactions?

METHODOLOGY

A home ethnographic approach (Lüders, 2004) was implemented that comprised in-depth interviews in Australia and Germany with 48 people in total (24 hetero-sexual couples). These type of interviews executed at home can be a fruitful approach to gather comprehensive insights into everyday internet use (Bakardjieva, 2005; Lally, 2002; Waller, 2012). Participants were recruited via snowball sampling. Their ages, stratified into young, middle-aged and old, are shown in Table 1.

Based on an ethnographic approach (Lüders, 2004), the interviews were conducted in the households of the couples. Each visit within household lasted on average between three to four hours, which provided insights into the setting of the household and allowed a joint walk-through

Table 1. Number of participants

Age range	Germany	Australia
18 -29 years ¹	6	6
30-45 years	10	10
46 years plus ²	8	8
Total	24	24

the house with the couple to get a picture of the physical placement of media technologies. At the beginning of the visit, questionnaires on general demographic data were completed by participants, then each partner was interviewed separately, and at the end of the interviews, the walk-through of the house was conducted together. The interviews were transcribed and analysed with a qualitative content analysis approach (Mayring, 2004) and with the support of the computer program NVivo. Code categories were created in a deductive (derived from theory and previous literature) as well as inductive way (derived from the interview material).

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The results for Australia and Germany will be discussed in two main sections: Firstly, light will be shed on the spatial placement of PC and laptop. Secondly, the focus will be on the couple's relationship with regard to internet use.

Placement of PC and Laptops

From Integration Into Family Life to Exile

At the time of the interviews in 2005/6, most of the 12 Australian couples were sharing at home one PC or laptop, with the exceptions of two couples with two or more PCs in one room and one couple with two separate 'PC' rooms (Ahrens, 2009). Other than laptops no mobile internet devices existed. If more than one computer was available in the household, then they became personalized technologies, e.g. it was then preferred that only one partner used the device. Looking at the domestication of the internet from a spatial perspective, most Australian participants had the laptops/PCs with internet access greatly integrated into their lifeworld (Geißler, 2006) as the rooms were usually shared, multi-functional family rooms with several couples placing the technologies within open spaced areas such as living, kitchen or dining rooms (Ahrens, 2009). Reason for this choice of placement into open living areas, often related to the supervision of the children's internet use and interaction possibilities with other family members and/or the partner (Ahrens, 2009). Four couples placed the PC in study rooms as they worked frequently from home.

At a first glance, we see a similar picture with the German participants when it comes to joined internet access as most couples were sharing one PC. Three German couples had each their own PC or laptop, yet often using them in the same room (Ahrens, 2009). The placement of the technologies in Germany, however, was quite distinct compared to the Australian couples. Almost all German couples had put the computer into a separate study room (Ahrens, 2009). Only one couple and one female used the internet in the living room, and had allocated a designated 'working' area, which was clearly separated from the rest of the room, e.g. by pulling a curtain as room separator (Ahrens, 2009). Furthermore, these participants would have preferred other locations yet restricted spatial arrangements did not allow alternative placements. At the time of the interviews the German participants associated the placement of the computer clearly with work (Ahrens, 2009). Placement and content however were not necessarily the same. In other words, looking at what people were actually using the internet for, leisure activities such as online-auctions also played a role (Ahrens, 2009). A difference between the genders existed however. Most German females did not use the internet to relax, but saw the internet as a practical device, that saved time. Only three females commented on using the internet also for relaxation. More interviewed German males went online without having a specific purpose in mind (Ahrens, 2009).

Transformation of Rooms

In Australia some couples moved living room furniture such as couches and TV's into the study so interaction with other family members was still possible (Ahrens, 2009). Through this refurbishment

of the room, a transformation of the main room function seemed to happen, with one male describing how the evenings are spent together in the 'study'.

For German participants who used the internet only for a short period of time per day, the separation between living area and PC area seemed not to be a problem. However, if one partner was using the internet a lot, also a shift could be observed: participants were trying to accommodate and integrate the heavy internet use of their partner into the daily running of the household by moving other activities into the room (Ahrens, 2009). For example, one woman placed the TV into the 'study' room to spend more time with her husband and another couple sat in the evenings together in one room, watching TV and going online. Thus, German couples, with one heavy internet user, showed similar patterns compared to many of the Australian couples – ways were being found to spend time together with study rooms losing their work-related connotation and being transformed into living areas with 'work' elements.

Aesthetics

From an aesthetic viewpoint, for many Australian couples PCs or laptops were acceptable within the living area (Ahrens, 2009). The technologies seemed to blend in with other furniture and most couples were not bothered if a PC was placed next to couches, TV sets or other living and dining room elements. However, as an exception to the integration of the internet into the daily running of the household, one Australian couple strongly opposed having the PC in the living room, nor in any other room since they felt the technology would dominate the room. As a solution, they placed the technology into a closed cupboard. Neither of the partners however, used the internet often (Ahrens, 2009).

Many of the German participants distinguished between a TV and PC in terms of visual amenity (Ahrens, 2009). Whereas the TV did not trouble them from an aesthetic viewpoint, the PC seemed not to be accepted in living areas. Going online in the living room was not something most of the German participants wanted. In this context links to societal expectations were made by some participants, e.g. that society would currently not accept a 'working' machine within the living area.

Physical and Symbolic Retraction Strategies

The internet was also used by the Australian participants as a retraction strategy (Bakardjieva, 2005). Through going online they were 'separated' although being in the same area as other family members (Ahrens, 2009). Whilst some internet users who engaged in some 'alone time' via internet usage accept that other people were in the room, they did not want to be interrupted. However, there seems to be a gender difference when children were living in the household. Whereas it seemed easier for fathers to go online, many mothers used the internet only very late at night so as to have a chance for uninterrupted internet time (Ahrens, 2009). The retraction strategy was evaluated differently. Some interviewees acknowledged that people need alone time, whereas others complained if one partner was spending too much time on the internet.

Due to the placement of the internet in separate study rooms, German participants could go to different rooms and physically separate themselves from their family or also symbolically go into their 'own world'. The internet was used as retraction strategy by some German participants, especially males (Ahrens, 2009). That is not to say that females did not also engage in internet use for retraction; however, we found that there were less females than males (Ahrens, 2009). Women seemed to prefer other media technologies such as TV. For some couples the amount of time one partner spent online caused issues in the relationship. However, it was also pointed out that the time alone was executed via the internet and before other retraction strategies have been used (Ahrens, 2009).

The Relationship

With the internet integration into the household, most male participants went online either for more than one hour per day (Australians) or between half an hour to an hour (Australians and Germans).

Most female participants used the internet between five minutes and 30 minutes (Ahrens, 2009). Thus, some partners were using the internet for a large proportion of their time at home. How did this affect the couple's relationship?

Transformation of Relationships

By combining the internet usage of one partner with the other partner undertaking other activities in the same room such as watching TV, reading, housework or also going online via an additional PC, most couples seem to have arranged that time as still being spent together (Ahrens, 2009). The time being spent 'together' online at two PC's is perceived differently. Some described that whilst they both go online at the same time in one room, they see it more as an individual activity. Others even compared the time spend online via two PC's to watching TV together.

Compared to the German couples, less Australian couples used the internet at only one PC sitting beside each other (Ahrens, 2009); it was more an exception if something did not work or if the content affected both partners. Some couples, however, showed each other what they were currently doing online or talked about their online activities.

For some couples it seems that the amount of TV that was watched together has been reduced, and instead more time is being spent online, next to each other using two screens in one room (Ahrens, 2009). Some were also trying to use the internet when their partner was not home. Couples did also mention a possible decrease of quality of communication and possible negative effects on relationships. Interestingly most participants in both countries did not relate negative effects to their own relationship but were talking about dangers for relationships in general (Ahrens, 2009).

Some German couples did see time being spent in front of one PC as time together. Whilst the German couples sat together in front of one screen more often than the Australians, the majority also used the internet more individually. Reasons for going online together were usually to investigate or conduct activities that affected both partners, such as looking for real estate or booking holidays (Ahrens, 2009). Some participants tried to go online when their partner was not home, so as not to allow the internet to affect their relationship. Others acknowledged that the time spend online might reduce time that can be spend together as a couple. However, most participants discussed possible negative effects on relationships in general but not with regard to their own relationship (Ahrens, 2009). If the male was a heavy user, the female partner often tried to spend time in the same room. Some women even moved other media technology into the room with the PC to be able to spend more time with her partner, e.g. placing a small TV right next to the PC where the partner was frequently playing computer games with his headphones on (Ahrens, 2009).

Between Dominance and Equality

In Australia more often the male partner organised the setup of the internet (Ahrens, 2009). Participants with personalized computers had their own room or own PC-area in a shared room. Those participants with individual internet access did not necessarily think sharing one computer would work, especially when both partners went online at similar times. Couples who had one room with several computers seem to have come to mutually beneficial arrangements and established routines around the internet usage. Most couples who shared only one computer described the area as a joint area, even if one partner did not use the internet as often (Ahrens, 2009). This can be linked to the aforementioned open placement in living or even dining rooms. Although being described as a shared area, more males than females claimed dominance over the room. Interestingly, in some relationships, the male was initially using the internet more often and as a consequence spending more time in the area, however, after a while, with an increase of possible options for conducting household activities online, the female increased her usage (Ahrens, 2009).

Similar to the Australian couples, in Germany it was more often the male who organized the set-up of the internet (Ahrens, 2009). Some males in both countries claimed technical expertise in the relationship and have it assigned by their partner, although help from outside is needed when

bigger problems occur (Ahrens, 2009). In Germany, more often the male dominated the usage of the space. This could be linked to the fact that more interviewed males went online more often and for a longer amount of time than most of the interviewed females (Ahrens, 2009). However, many couples emphasised that they did come to arrangements if both wanted to use the PC at the same time. Only three couples declared the room with the PC and internet as shared area. In one exception, the female dominated the room. Her partner rarely used the internet.

DISCUSSION

This study adds to the historical perspective of individual, personal internet usage by looking at a certain timeframe of 2005-6 in Australia and Germany. The qualitative approach allows a nuanced and in-depth picture of domestic internet usage patterns in regard to spatial and social integration. The Australian couples more often had the PC placed in open multi-functional rooms. More interviewed Australians used the internet for a longer period of time every day compared to the German sample, which could explain its placement in open spaces (Ahrens, 2009). The German participants placed the internet most often in separate study rooms which is in line with initial societal assumptions since the 1980s that the computer simply belonged in a separate study room (Röser & Peil, 2014). In the existing study, the German living room areas were connected with relaxation; however from a spatial perspective the internet and PC were not. The heavy German internet users already showed placements pattern similar to the Australian couples. Some study rooms lost their sole work connotation and TV's and other entertainment devices were moved into the study room (Ahrens, 2009). This movement has been confirmed in later studies if one partner was integrating the internet more into daily routines, and hence, new ways to engage with each other also from a spatial perspective needed to be found (Röser & Peil, 2010b, 2012). Thus, in relation to the internet moving into the household, for some, a transformation of the original purpose of the rooms could already be seen in our study in 2005/6. At the time of the interviews more Australians were online for a longer amount of time and more households had internet access earlier than Germans (ABS, 2007; Statistisches-Bundesamt, 2006). It is interesting to note that a similar development of placements in multi-functional living room areas was confirmed for Germany in later studies. For example Quandt and Paper (2010, p. 338) describe various placements of computers in study, living rooms and bedrooms. With the increase in time being spent online, more ways need to be found to integrate internet use within the daily running of the household. Some participants in the existing study explained the reason for placing PCs in the open living areas was to have the possibility to interact with others while being online, or to be able to supervise their children's internet use.

Given the period studied (2005-2006), we could not include the use of iPhones and iPads as they did not exist at the time. As we have seen in later studies to balance the increased amount of internet time with social interaction of other household members is to use such mobile technologies, which can be carried into other rooms (Müller & Röser, 2017).

Did we see a transformation of the social interaction between the partners due to the integration of the internet into the household? Some participants did not use the internet for a large amount of time when they were home. Other couples used it often and the nature of collective activities changed, but most often the actual time being spent together remained similar (Ahrens, 2009). For example, a few couples reported that in the past they watched TV together in one room, most often the living room. This changed to include one person being on the internet and the other watching TV, both being on the internet on two different PCs/laptops or one person being online and the partner pursuing other activities such as reading or housework in the same room (Ahrens, 2009). The 'co-existence' of new and traditional media in the household seems to continue (Röser, Müller, Niemand, & Roth, 2017). If the set-up allowed it, some couples went online at the same time, in one room via two computers. However, for some couples an increased internet use by only one partner could cause conflicts in the relationship since that time seemed to be taken away from joint activities or household duties

(Ahrens, 2009). Interestingly, most often negative associations with an increased internet usage was pointed out for others but not for the existing relationship.

In our study, the internet was implemented as a retraction strategy by some. The retraction happened in two forms either physically or symbolically (Van Rompaey & Roe, 2001). Physical retraction could be linked to gendered usage of the internet as men consult online games and go online for solo recreational reasons, whereas women concentrate more on online health information (Helsper, 2010) or use the internet for social reasons (Kennedy et al., 2003). If the PC was placed in a separate room, people went there and physically separated themselves from their family or partner during that time. If the internet access was within the living areas by going online, participants were symbolically separating themselves from their family.

In both countries it was more often the male who organised the set-up of the PC and/or laptop and the installation of the connection to the internet which can be linked to an initial technical and male connotation of the internet (Röser & Roth, 2015). This is in line with research that found that men were more eager to participate online than women (Calenda & Meijer, 2009). Whilst many couples arranged to share the internet area, more often male than female dominance of the room/area could be seen in both countries, but especially in Germany. However we also saw some exceptions, e.g. the case of inverted room dominance due to an increase internet use by a female who was conducting multiple household activities via the internet. The original technical and male connotation of the internet changed during the increasing diffusion and domestication process (Röser & Roth, 2015). This reifies the gendered nature of the internet (Kennedy et al. 2003) and the need for ethnographic studies to better understand internet usage within relationships.

This paper further testifies to the fact that the spatial arrangement of the internet in the household is also linked to the different types of users within the internet milieu (Lutz, 2016). In this study, we have identified what Lutz (2016) refers to as ‘selective natives’ (p.4), i.e. those that exert a selective and purpose-driven usage of the internet, in our case for work use only; ‘entertainment-oriented natives’ (p. 5), i.e. used mainly for consumption and entertainment, here with leisure activities such as online auctions; as well as ‘detached immigrants’ (p.6), who enjoy practical, quick internet interaction and usage.

CONCLUSION

With the domestication concept, the process of integrating technology into daily life of households can be analysed (Quandt & Pape, 2010). As Krotz (2007) points out, it is not the technologies that transform the domestic life, but the way people use these. The study gives a snapshot of how couples used the internet at the time of the interviews in 2005/6 and sheds light on how personal ICT usages worked more than ten years ago, hence adding to the historical perspective and development of the internet. A slight transformation of the private sphere could be seen with regard to spatial and social aspects. Study rooms lost their ‘sole work connotation’ and became joint areas with a ‘living room character’ through the addition of furniture and technology. For some couples the type of activities changed but the pattern of spending time together seemed to remain similar. Whilst in former times, couples watched more TV together, they then went online via two PCs in one room, or one partner engaged in other activities in the same area whilst the other was online. Still some couples however, little used the internet, so there was no effect on spatial or social aspects of the domestic sphere. This usage in 2005/6 stays in stark contrast to nowadays ‘always on’ mobile internet use and how this will further change in the future, and its impact on the quality and longevity of relationships, remains to be determined.

One limitation of this study relates to the relatively small sample size of our study which does not allow for broad generalisation of the results. Nevertheless, the research questions demanded a qualitative approach and interesting patterns were found that the ethnographic method brought to light. Whilst at the time of our study in 2005 and 2006, some couples were using laptops; no one had iPhones

or tablets. It could be assumed that the use of both these newer technologies has influenced how the internet is currently used, e.g. people now go to bed with Smart-phones or tablets in their hands often reading online, skyping or watching videos. Hence, in term of paradigm shift in personal ICT usage this would have happened more after the execution of this study. Furthermore, social networks such as Facebook were not in use during the period of data collection. Future studies should incorporate these appliances and other online activities including twitter, SMS and other push-technology.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The youngest participant was 19 years old.

² The oldest participant was 80 years old.

APPENDIX: CODING AND QUOTES EXAMPLES

Table 2. Spatial placement Australia & Germany

	Example quotes Australia	Example quotes Germany
Placement of the PC & Laptops		
Shared living areas – Integration into family life	Tanja: "It's a shared room and it's shared by all of us really 'cause if one of the kids and their friends are doing something on the floor here and the other one has a friend here too they might go and set up something in there. I mean as you can see there's 'Lego' and stuff up there (...) yeah it just allows different functions in different spaces which is really good."	N/A [all Germany participants placed the PC or Laptop in studies or working areas]
Separate study room/area – Association with Work	Bob: "No as long as she was working full time away from the house it didn't matter (...) when she retired she was working from home so she had her ... we converted a bedroom to be her office. (...)"	Carmen: "I think, if you have a table where you eat at, then you don't need also the PC ... That is something for a working area. Where you learn, where you write something, without other things ..."
Transformation of rooms		
Changes of room functions	Tim: "(...) in the evening when I'm watching television I'm not lying down on the sofa or something like that. I will watch television and I will look at the internet, I will do my internet, do the New York Times and everything else but there are two desks and one is my wife's desk, one is mine and the desks actually have materials that are shared associated with them, it's just that one is hers and one is mine. If you look at them today and you look at the amount of time we spend sitting at the desk, it's virtually zero. We don't sit at the desk anymore."	Natascha: Well due to the fact that my husband is constantly in front of the PC ... well on average three hours per day, easily. So he then is one or two hours more on the PC than myself. Yes, and so that not one of us is upstairs and the other one downstairs, we now also have a TV in there. (...) Initially it was only a study und then we spent so much time in that room.
Remaining room functions	Kathy: "I bought a cupboard, you know one of those fold away cupboards that's got.... it just looks like a cupboard, but you fold it out and it's got a drop down desk, fold out keyboard and the computer's in there."	Paul: "(...) and when I want to watch tv, then I go downstairs and than I am done with the computer otherwise you might sit there in the evening with your laptop and you wife would watch tv and you would type on the keyboard. Interviewer: "And you wouldn't like that?" Paul: "No."
Aesthetics		
Acceptance of PC or Laptops	Tracy: "(...) we use it for family dining when the grandchildren are here and the other side of the room there's the computer."	N/A [all Germany participants placed the PC or Laptop in studies or working areas]
Non-acceptance of PC or Laptops	Kathy: So you can close the cupboard [with the PC in it] and so it can just go in the corner of the room rather than dominating the whole room with the office type stuff."	Mr Maler: "Previously we had the computer there [in the living room], but it had to go straight away." Interviewer: "Why?" Mr Maler: "Well, that was disturbing. (...) Interviewer: "But you do have the tv in the living room. What is the difference in your view?" Mr Maler: "You can use the tv together, but the pc and the internet you can only use by yourself. Claus: "Well, that [tv in living room] is accepted in society, maybe one day you could combine the screen with the pc (...), if you want to print something, you need the printer, you extend the technology and then you turn the living room into a study room. In the living area you want to talk to your guests and not work."
Physical and symbolic retraction strategies		
Accepted time alone	Tanja: "I mean for him it's like some time away from the family you know, some alone time and we all need that too."	Mrs. Gabler: "(...) everyone has an own area, which I don't see as a negative thing, it is more acted out via the Internet use." Natascha: "Twenty years ago I think they (males) went and played soccer or went to the pub or something like that. And today, there is still a part that does that and the others sit in front of the PC and play."
Other technology use for alone time	Kassandra: Yeah, sometimes it would be television, if someone has given me a good DVD I might watch that otherwise it's pick up a magazine and do some crosswords or puzzles to read.	Natascha: "Just tv. I don't need the "internet for it. That's not how I am, I don't need the internet to have some alone time."

Table 3. The Relationship Australia and Germany

Together with the Internet	<p>Danielle: “Well my husband could be on the internet looking at something [. . .] I’ll watch a bit of telly so [. . .] Well, yeah, we will still chat, unless he’s really looking at something but that’s not often. Yeah, I’ll still be talking with him.”</p> <p>Vicky: “My husband cleans while I come here and use the computer and maybe watch tv here because we have another small tv here and then I would either watch tv or read after he comes and uses the computer [. . .] So yeah, I mean it’s shared time if we’re here watching a show and the internet may be on but he’s not really paying full attention to it.</p>	<p>Mrs Gabler: “Sometimes when I sit here, I get up and look [at what my husband is doing]. Or we talk to each other. Often we do have some kind of ritual, that we sit together for an hour and do something together, so we are not spending our evenings separately. But you do have to plan this. If I am by myself, I would do it [go online for an hour].”</p>
Reduced couples time	<p>Ted: “Well, we’re in our own world. It’s just that she sometimes tries to talk to me when something doesn’t work.”</p>	<p>Mr. Maler: “If I spend the time alone in front of the computer . . . well, then you might do less together. “</p> <p>Mr. Gabler: “Yes, my wife goes and watches a movie at 8.15 pm and then I go online and maybe in earlier days I would have watched it with her. But I don’t have a problem to jump in between. She gets upset though, when I asked her to fill me in what happened in the movie. “</p>
Sharing screen content	<p>Amy: “Yes I’ll show him an email that was sent to me, he showed me one from work the other day. If it’s a problem with the computer software then we’ll work on it together. If we’re doing online shopping or if we’re doing e-bay or something like that then it’s kind of fun to watch the online auctions when the price goes up so we’ll gossip about that.”</p>	<p>Mrs Frei: “When we booked a holiday house, I was looking with him then.”</p>
Effort to use Internet without impacting on couples time	<p>Margret: (...) normally when he [Shane] does use the internet a lot, it’s when I’m in bed or the baby is asleep and it’s during the day and I’m at work so.</p>	<p>Paul: “If we are both together, it is challenging. I don’t use it much then, you restrict it almost to the time when you are alone (...) You try to spend the time together.”</p>
Between Dominance and Equality		
Male dominance of Internet set-up	<p>Interviewer: “And who organised the set up?”</p> <p>Justin: “I did.”</p>	<p>Manuela: “I am not really interested in it, I like it that it is faster now, that was annoying in the past, so that is fine, but I am not really interested in it.”</p> <p>Interviewer: “Did your partner discuss it with you?”</p> <p>Manuela: (nods head)</p> <p>Interviewer: “What did you say?”</p> <p>Manuela: “Yes, go on and do it.”</p>

continued on following page

Table 3. Continued

Shared room	<p>Tracy: “It’s a shared room. (...) as I say, it’s also the family dining room, so yeah, we do use it.”</p> <p>Tim: “(...) So the room is a room that is jointly used, there’s no sense of boundaries that somebody has to ask the other’s permission to go through anything, it’s just all open but in terms of elapsed time I would spend more elapsed time there.”</p>	Herr Gabler: “We talk about it. We never had a fight because of it.”
Male dominance of PC room	<p>Kassandra: “(...) He really likes to think he’s the boss there because he manages the computer, he defrags, he puts the updates on. So he does all the cleaning and maintenance if you like of that area, electronically. And he uses it much, much more than me. (...) It’s still shared family area but if you had to say that someone took control it would have to be my husband.”</p> <p>Interviewer: “Who spends more time in that area?”</p> <p>Shane: “I spend a lot more time. (...) You can’t get on the computer, it’s mine. (...) I bought it for her but it’s mine.”</p> <p>Interviewer: “Would you even say that this is your area more than hers or is it a joint area?”</p> <p>Shane: “As in like the physical space?”</p> <p>Interviewer: “Yes.”</p> <p>Shane: “No, no, it’s a joint area. Yeah, but I dominate.”</p>	Mrs Frei: “It is predominantly my husband’s room, because his books are also in there. Everything I write or do on the computer, I have to do from his room.”
Female dominance over PC room	<p>Interviewer: “Who spends the most time in this area?”</p> <p>Tina: “Now it would be me. He used to use the computer a lot more than I did but now I do the ... our banking and bill paying and all of that on the internet and contact with other people like family overseas.”</p>	<p>Carmen: “I would say, it’s more my room, because he never goes there.</p> <p>Johannes: “For me, it’s more the ‘poor second cousin’ of the apartment. (...) I rarely go there. My girlfriend is there much more often. For me it’s more a guestroom.”</p>

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