Variety within domestication research: time, perceptions and interactions

**Leslie Haddon**

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Abstract

The rich variety of domestication research in part comes from choices about which aspects of people’s lives are to be examined and in the detail of how this is managed within particular studies. This chapter aims to demonstrate some of the diversity within this body of literature and the further potential of this framework for those thinking about using this approach. It does so through a focus on three dimensions: time issues that have a bearing upon how the digital world is experienced, the perceptions of people when they are evaluating ICTs and interactions with others both within and outside the home that influence people’s digital practices. Although to varying degrees these dimensions were addressed or implicit in early domestication texts, there is now much more research to support their elaboration. After examining how a range of recent domestication studies have touched upon these three themes, three additional objects of study are considered as think pieces for reflecting on further potential questions. These are wearable electronic devices for measuring fitness, educational apps for very young children and new digital practices that people explored because of the coronavirus lockdown.

Introduction

One starting point for researchers interested in using the domestication framework has been to refer to the ‘classic’ text which first launched the concept and to employ some of the key elements identified in that chapter, such as appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1992). Recent examples would be De Schutter, Brown and Vanden Abeele (2015) looking at how older adults experience digital games and Karlsen and Syversten (2016) examining self-help guides that aim to help people manage the role of the digital world in their lives.

One first observation is that it is difficult for even one classic text to capture all the elements that were being considered by those early researchers when developing the framework. The breadth of their interests is clearer in contemporary domestication writings (Hirsch, 1992), including discussions of the methodology being used (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1991). Hence, some of the richness of the subsequent domestication literature arises from the fact that researchers have had to flesh out some of those early concepts as they attempted to apply this framework.

In this process, such researchers were also developing the whole approach, drawing attention to different aspects of the social context of use that might be considered and posing further questions about what might be investigated. In this light, one can appreciate Silverstone’s later reflection on the early years of domestication research[[1]](#endnote-1): ‘All concepts, once having gained the light of day, take on a life of their own. Domestication is no exception’ (2006: 229).

The first part of this chapter aims to outline some of the diversity within this literature even within more recent research over the last decade. It does so through looking at how a range of studies have considered three dimensions: time issues that have a bearing upon how the digital world is experienced, the perceptions of people when they are evaluating ICTs and interactions with others both within and outside the home that influence people’s digital practices. Time is considered because of the ways in which it has been further explored in research since the 1992 classic text. Perceptions and interactions were implicit in that early work but could be expanded. Of course, all three can interact, e.g. interactions with others can influence perceptions of ICTs, which in term have a bearing on time allocation. The second part of this chapter reflects upon some further potential case studies, think pieces, in order to elaborate the research questions one might ask about these three dimensions.

The final task in this introduction it to clarify further the three dimensions being considered. Although time was highlighted in the initial description of the processes of domestication (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1992), this was in the form of a broad but not so detailed guide as to what type of time questions one might ask within domestication research. In that classic work it was argued that processes of incorporation focused on temporalities and that there are examples of ICTs being used to control time (e.g. time-shifting TV programmes) and accompany existing routines (e.g. a tea break and getting up in the morning), elsewhere described as how ICTs are ‘fitted into a pattern of domestic time’ (Silverstone, 1995: 67). Meanwhile, the first article describing the methodologies being used, explained the importance of the time-diary. It enabled researchers to understand how domestic life in general is temporally organised – i.e. its time structure – and through interviews discussing those diaries, it was possible to appreciate why life is organised in this way, i.e. according to family member’s priorities, values and identities (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1991). Subsequent domestication researchers have further explored what role time may play in how we experience digital technologies.

The second focus of this chapter in on people’s perceptions of different aspects of the social world and of themselves that inform their actions during the domestication processes. Such perceptions are implied in the original discussion of the moral economy, referring to family values (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley1992) and in relation to choices about the organisation of time, as outlined above. A more specific example of a perception was also provided in the first case study that demonstrated domestication analysis in action, when the parents being interviewed thought TV viewing was too passive and worried that their children would be tempted to watch more if they bought a VCR (Hirsch, 1992). Another example would be in the early days of the internet parents worry that their children would be ‘left behind’ if they did not have access to the online world (Haddon, 1999). A broad range of perceptions that might be considered within domestication analysis is outlined in the articles reviewed and think pieces explored later in this chapter.

The third dimension is the various interactions between people that can be considered as a part of the domestication process. One example of this is the classic process of conversion, where the technology is used as part of self-presentation to the outside world (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1992). Another very different example from that first domestication case study was the battle between the children of the family studied as regards to who could use the computer to play games. This was to the dismay of their parents, who then chose not to repair the device when it broke down, in order to avoid such conflicts (Hirsch, 1992). Later studies have looked at the role of social networks, for example, the help of ‘warm experts’ to support internet use (Bakardjieva, 2005), or in relation to the domestication of the mobile phone (Haddon, 2003) and more recent work has discussed collective domestication (Ask & Sørensen, 2019).

Time issues in recent research

One theme from the domestication literature has been the time limitations sometimes imposed upon ICT use. When, however, are they experienced as external constraints, and when do they reflect user agency, the choices of ICT users themselves? Such issues are illustrated in Haddon’s (2018) research on the use of smartphones by children aged 9–16 in the European *Net Children Go Mobile* project. In part, these children experienced imposed time constraints in the form of rules about ICT use reflecting parents’ concerns about the amount of ‘screen time’ the children experienced. Parents often felt that digital activities were taking time away either from homework, learning to be sociable, engagement in physical activities or from other more ‘worthy’ pursuits. Sometimes, the children argued against such rules, sometimes they agreed with them. But, of interest here, the same children also had their own priorities (e.g. hobbies) and they sometimes saw certain online communications as being a diversion from their interests, or as being a waste of time. This led some children to make an effort to control both the time spent on and the timing of their engagement with the online world.

The issue of priorities was explored in Matassi, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein’s (2019) Argentinean study examining why WhatsApp was domesticated in different ways across the life course by ‘young adults’, ‘mid adults’ (middle-aged people) and ‘later adults’ (over 60s). Younger adults were more inclined to make time for WhatsApp messages, to try to be available all the time, because of the importance placed on socialising with peers at that stage in their life and fears of being socially excluded. For middle-aged participants, it was family- (and to an extent work-) time commitments that took priority. Hence, WhatsApp communications sometimes had to wait. For older people, there was more flexibility because many had fewer time commitments than the mid adults, but while the use for socialising was appreciated, it was not so vital as for the youngest group. This study highlights the considerations that influence time priorities, which, in turn, have a bearing upon the effort people of different age stages make to control time for digital communications.

Some of the earliest domestication studies looked beyond the initial adoption of technologies to when they were sometimes re-domesticated (Lie & Sørensen, 1996). One example of a more recent study looking how technology is being reassessed is Huang and Miao’s (2020) research on young Chinese adults. This study examines use of the ‘Moments’ facility on the WeChat social networking site, partly in response to contemporary reports that some users were giving up the use of Moments, at least for a period of time. The researchers found that the chief problem was the expectation that WeChat users should be reachable at all times for work, which was creating a sense of time pressure and disrupting non-work life. In other words, patterns of usage had developed that interfered with these people’s preferred time structure. Like the European children, the Chinese participants in this study then made an effort to re-establish control over that use, including the timing of use. That meant setting new rules for themselves about the frequency and duration of checking Moments, creating new rituals like taking breaks from WeChat and establishing new temporal norms about how soon they would reply to messages (i.e. not straight away) – which included warning colleagues about this change in practice.

These three examples start to illustrate a range of time-related questions that can be considered in domestication research. The European study demonstrated time constraints on ICT use, how the time spent using ICTs can reflect external pressures (here, from parents), but also one’s own decisions (in this case, of children). In keeping with those early writings trying to understand why people allocate time in certain ways, the second (Argentinian) study showed how much different age groups try to control the timing of communications depending on priorities in their time commitments. Meanwhile, the third (Chinese) case indicated how ICT usage, here communication with others, can develop in such a way that it can give rise to time problems that then have to be managed.

Perceptions issues in recent research

McDonald’s (2015) ethnography conducted in China first noted the general national discourses in that country about the internet being both addictive and bad for education and morality. It then looked at more specific representations that appeared in Chinese-language news and health portals, depicting internet cafés as places for contracting infectious diseases. In addition, a popular meme *‘Jia Junpeng your mother is calling you home for dinner’* referred to children missing (socially important) family meals because they were spending so much time in these cafés. Both the internet café representations and the meme sentiments influenced the decisions of the family he studied to adopt broadband, so that children would at least be at home when going online.

One factor that can influence perceptions of ICTs is their historical legacy within a country. Leong (2020) first explained the recent history of Myanmar, where for many years the military government had strongly controlled all media, including websites. Reforms in 2011 allowed some press freedom, but also enabled the sale of smartphones that made the internet more accessible. Facebook, viewed on these, then became popular mainly as a potential source of information, rather than a medium through which to socialise. Burmese users developed a range of tactics to find and share information on Facebook such as ‘friending’ strangers in order to access the newsfeeds from their wall, using the ‘Like’ function to try to influence Facebook’s algorithms so that it shared more news, and copying and pasting news articles as posts.

Changes in the technology itself can have a bearing on how it is evaluated. Sujon, Viney and Toker-Turnalar (2018) in their UK longitudinal study from 2013 to 2017 were interested in why young adults’ Facebook experience changed over that time period from one involving more compulsive checking to having a mundane relationship to the service. While there were multiple factors at work, part of this transition arose from changes in Facebook itself as more and more features were added to the platform making it much more than a medium for managing social connections. Hence, the participants referred to the changes in their overall perception of Facebook as it became the ‘Walmart of social media’ (Sujon, Viney & Toker-Turnalar, 2018: 8).

Lastly, there can be conflicting perceptions that have a bearing on how ICTs are evaluated. Harvey’s (2015) US study revealed the multiple considerations at work behind parents’ decisions about how much and how to mediate their children’s use of the internet in general and of digital games in particular. These parents were often critical of the ‘demonising’ public representations and ‘discourses of fear’ (Harvey, 2015: 77), rejecting some of these claims. They nevertheless felt obliged to take some responsibility for mediation. At the same time, some parents could see that their children might be socially missing out if they could not participate in activities like game playing while their peers could. Lastly, the parents were aware that the school expected children to develop a certain degree of digital competence when at home, and that other parents were promoting such skills.

This section illustrated a broad range of factors that affect understandings of the digital world and hence how people engage with ICTs. Others have discussed how public discourses themselves influence the domestication process (Hartmann, 2013; Mascheroni, 2014) and the Chinese study provided examples of both broader and more specific discourses about representations of technologies, the spaces where they could be found and their consequences. The Myanmar research indicated how historical legacies can affect decisions leading to digital platforms being used in alternative ways. The UK study reflected on how people’s evaluation and characterisation of a technology could change as its functions evolved. And the US material revealed how perceptions from different sources could be in conflict, including perceptions of what others (here, other parents) were doing and what institutions expected.

Interactions issues in recent research

The ethnography of a Chinese family (McDonald, 2015) also indicated how the place of ICTs within family life can be repeatedly renegotiated over time through the interactions of its members. McDonald made the point that rather than asking how families try to fit technologies into everyday lives, here the parents were trying to use the presence of a technology to influence their child’s other behaviours. Because the parents did not want their younger son to go to the internet café, they took out a home broadband subscription. However, even then he still spent little time at family meals and watching TV with the family, instead rushing back to his room to play games online. When the parents cancelled the broadband subscription, their son went back to the internet café, so they once again reinstated the internet connection, this time trying to lay down rules whereby the son should spend more time at family meals. The twist in this particular saga was that the parents themselves eventually developed an interest in using the internet: the mother because of the particular TV programmes that could be streamed, the father because of the card game he could play online when it was often difficult to find offline playing partners. In both cases, the sons in the family would also occasionally take an interest in what their parents were doing, viewing TV with their mother or watching their father play, thus reintroducing communal family time.

The actions of family members who have left home can also be influential. Harvey (2015), in her US study, gives one example of a mother who initially tried to control her younger son’s computer use by locating the family device in the living room so that she could monitor what he did and how long he spent on the device. When the son was 14, his older brother, who had left home and was working, sold his old laptop to the younger sibling. Since the latter now had his own device, he wanted to use it in his own room. Given that it was difficult to follow the previous strategy of parental mediation, the mother relented, but for a period still asked her son about his activities and experiences online, until she had feedback that convinced her that her son could be trusted.

Two studies demonstrate the complexity of the influence of peers. In Cooper’s (2016) research on the US teenagers’ domestication of mobile phones, one of the norms young people discussed was whether one should respond to incoming text messages when socialising face-to-face with peers. This was an unresolved issue. One of the girls pointed out that in an all-girls group the general etiquette was that one should not, while noting that in contrast boys often felt obliged to respond. But at another point in the study, one boy received a good-night text from his girlfriend while in the company of his male friends. The boy explained to the researcher how he recognised the pressures not to respond to texts when out with his peers, but had replied anyway. This illustrated how even though he resisted this group norm, the boy still thought about it.

Finally, Bertel (2018) explained the decision of a girl from his 2013 Danish study to adopt a map application on her smartphone. In the past, she had on occasion become lost when going to a meeting of friends and so had had to phone them up to ask for directions. They always helped out but also teased her about this, which made her feel awkward. When the map application became available, she could more easily find her way to the destination without seeking help. Clearly, the influence of peers may not just be through their current negotiations but reflect past interactions.

This section first illustrated with the Chinese study how the actions and reactions of family members can affect choices about access to technologies. The second (US) study shows that this can include the influence of those no longer living in the family home. The third (US) study demonstrated how interactions with peers could have a bearing on decisions about how to interact with technology, while the fourth (Danish) study revealed how previous interactions with peers could also influence the assessment of a new technological feature.

Think pieces

The second part of this chapter aims to expand this appreciation of time issues, perceptions and interactions by speculating about potential questions relating to three case studies. These think pieces are wearable electronic devices for measuring fitness, educational apps for very young children and new digital practices that people explored because of the coronavirus lockdown.

The wearable fitness device was chosen as a discrete technology, just as televisions and stand-alone computers had been the objects of study in the earliest domestication research.[[2]](#endnote-2) The second case study is of educational apps on tablets, where the focus is not on technology but on functionality (like the Danish map app). While this case is based on actual research carried out by the author, framing that material in terms of time issues, perceptions and interactions is novel. The third case study emerged from personal experiences posting folk dance videos during the coronavirus lockdowns. This is an example of a new digital practice, where the technology and functionality were to some extent already familiar, but their use under particular circumstances is the innovative element. Time, perceptions and interactions are explored in different orders in the different think pieces whichever best suits the narrative.

A technology: the fitness wearable device

The body of literature on self-tracking provides one wider context to understand people’s perceptions of healthiness and of the body. Historically, devices such as weight scales were sold with the message that it was important to develop more self-knowledge (Crawford, Lingel & Karppi, 2015). Then more contemporary discourses about obesity, and concern for body images, have prompted the surveillance of the body more generally, including the ‘quantified self’ movement that involves knowing oneself through measurements (Ajana, 2018). Lastly, there are studies of how people use and evaluate fitness trackers (Depper & Howe, 2017).

When researching perceptions of fitness devices, one set of questions concerns users’ broader awareness of and feelings about discourses concerning health and fitness: for example, whether they think there is a problem of an overweight population, as well their reactions to adverts for workouts and gyms. Next, there are potential questions about self-perceptions, for instance, as users reflect on their sporting activities in the past, their current body images, what they are satisfied with and what they aspire to. Other perceptions include how users evaluate the effectiveness and efficacy of such devices, perhaps reflecting reviews they have read, and their insights into how the technology is being used in practice by others. Finally, a different level of self-evaluation concerns whether different users feel that self-surveillance through having these fitness data will personally support them to achieve goals, whether they feel they are the type of people where having such feedback actually helps.

As regards time questions, one starting point might be to ask about broader time use that in part reflects the importance of being active more generally: before the acquisition of the fitness device, how much time did that person spend maintaining the body, trying to stay fit? This would provide an idea about how much the use of the device is building on existing practices and how much it is being used to stimulate new practices, for example, as part of New Year’s resolution to become fitter. Given the short duration involved in checking outputs from the device, the amount of time spent using the technology may not be so interesting. But there are always questions that can be asked about how much time is initially invested in a new device when first learning how to use it, how it works and what are its functions. Sometimes, the greater investment of time may be in judging when it is useful and how often to check the device. In other words, there is the time hump, a period of effort to first get to know the device and what role it can play in daily life. This may be part of a longer trial period, the time (either planned or de facto) after which there is some reassessment of the devices’ worthwhileness, when the novelty period is over. Either its use is rejected or fades away or else the device becomes a more routine, more taken-for-granted part of everyday practices.

Turning to interactions, how important are wider social circles as sources of information when a potential user is first thinking of acquiring the device? If use involves making comparisons with others, it is possible to ask about levels of involvement with different communities of users or in different communities of practice. For example, this was the approach of a study looking at a smartphone app that measured what had been achieved when riding mountain bikes (Smith & Treem, 2017). These researchers explored how engagement with that community of cyclists had a bearing on motivation and competitiveness but also on norms of practice. In the bike case, the potential community was already in place when the app posted the information online along with the data from other riders, although making comparisons with others may also be a more informal process. Related to participation in communities, there are possible questions concerning display to others, in line with the classic domestication concept of conversion. Here users of the app have a chance to demonstrate what they are doing to an audience, but it is also a way to show what type of person they are (e.g. being determined and methodical). One could also consider the specific case when the device is a gift. The wearable fitness device is the type of stand-alone item that could, for those who can afford it, be expensive enough to be given as a present, either on a Christmas wish list or, say, at a partner’s initiative. This raises further questions about the particular dynamics relating to any sense of obligation to continue using such a gift.

An app: educational apps for young children

The *Toddlers and Tablets* project was a three-year Australian-UK study of how very young children aged 0–5 encounter touchscreen technologies (Green et al., forthcoming). Apart from interviews and focus groups with parents, pre-school staff and grandparents, the project entailed observations and videos made by the researchers and by parents of children using technologies. Sometimes this use took place with parents or siblings present, and in interviews the parents spoke about these moments.

For parents of young children, one key issue is how they think children learn about the world, and here it is important to note some discourses about technology threatening creativity and children’s imagination (Edwards, 2013). Therefore, one set of questions could explore concerns about whether digital options, such as educational apps, are seen as having merit in this process or whether traditional, non-technological activities, such as playing with toys, are preferred, and what thinking lies behind those choices. A second set of perceptions to be examined is whether the parents think children learn best through experimentation[[3]](#endnote-3) or whether parental intervention in the form of help or ‘scaffolding’ is preferred[[4]](#endnote-4) (Plowman, Stephen, & McPake, 2010). If the latter is the case, that implies more parental time should be spent helping and perhaps encouraging very young children in their engagement with the digital world. Next, there are parents’ evaluations of particular digital options, for example, whether they think some apps are better than others. Finally, there is the issue of what type of learning parents feel is taking place: is the main emphasis on skills (such as learning to count), learning about the world (such as naming animals), learning dispositions (such as patience) or learning about culture (such as the meaning of birthdays or Christmas).

Such perceptions can have a bearing on how parents allocate both their own time and their children’s time in relation to ICTs. For example, some questions could more generally explore how much parents set aside time to engage with the child in a ‘sustained’ way, for example, in co-activities generally, whether digital or not. Then more specific questions could investigate how much parents were involved with child’s learning to use technologies such as educational apps, in teaching children how to use them, how to achieve goals, how to overcome problems, but also demonstrating the aims of the app, what the children are supposed to do. Then there were questions about time, perhaps better characterised as ‘being available’, as parents are involved in another activity, but may also be monitoring their children’s digital explorations, so that they can engage in short bursts to help sort out with any digital problems, for example, when summoned by the children. Finally, there are discussions of the times when, despite often feeling guilty about it, parents really want to use digital devices to ‘occupy’ the child while they deal with other demands, be they work, domestic tasks or talking to a visitor.

But even young children have agency, and so to understand their time choices there are potential questions about children’s attention spans, especially at different ages, and how this might affect the time spent on different tasks. In fact, in this research a number of parents had initially been worried by the discourses about children becoming ‘addicted’ to technologies, but in practice the youngest children often only engaged in any single activity for a limited time before moving on to other things. This issue of attention span also had a bearing on how much time slightly older young children were willing to invest in trying to make something work, to sort out digital problems as opposed to reaching the point when they were frustrated and either called for assistance or gave up.

Interactions with others can entail face-to-face contact with other parents when taking their children to Toddlers groups or virtual contact networks like MumsNet. This may have a bearing on parents’ ideas about how children learn, but also introduce them to recommendations about particular educational apps. Within the home, there are possible questions about interactions with siblings. For example, in this study there were examples of older siblings taking over the parental role of showing the younger child how to use the app and helping when the younger was not able to proceed. But sometimes that could involve the older sibling simply sorting out the problem without giving the younger sibling the chance to learn in this process, or else using the app for themselves, provoking conflict with the younger child. And then there is the interaction with grandparents. For example, when the child is visiting or stopping with the grandparents – which can happen on a regular basis as a form of childcare – there are questions about the evaluations and household rules of the grandparents. For instance, in this study there were examples where technology use was not allowed in some grandparents’ homes, as the grandparents preferred children to learn through activities such helping to cook or doing arts and crafts together. And like others outside the home, the grandparents are also interacting with the parents, conveying their suggestions and concerns about bringing up children.

A practice: posting videos project

The final example is based on a personal experience. My wife and I organise Hungarian and East European folkdance performance groups. Over many years we have used ICTs related to these activities, including managing websites for our groups and making videos of new dance material and our main performances (mainly for archive purposes). In recent years I had adopted Facebook to see how other groups publicised their activities[[5]](#endnote-5) and I had posted some videos on YouTube with links to enhance our own dance group websites.

The initial coronavirus lockdown in the UK, starting in March 2020, forced us to cancel face-to-face group dancing, although my wife and I continued to practise at home. We decided to make videos of ourselves in our ‘dance studio’ (a multipurpose room with little furniture and a wooden floor), describing and then performing different Hungarian, Romanian and Slovak dance styles. I then edited the videos, published them on YouTube, sent the link to the neighbourhood online network and emailed the link to friends, family and others. Although using videos and posting was not new per se, this whole project also involved a range of new challenges: checking other people’s choreographies on YouTube, working out how to stay sufficiently in shot within a small part of a room, managing appropriate sound levels in this enclosed environment, working out how to present on YouTube and deciding how to make the posts visible.

While this is very specific example, the purpose of providing this description is broader. Imagine that the research question being posed is about how new practices using familiar ICTs arise, and more specifically how they appear in response to specific events, in this case the coronavirus lockdown, where this dance project was simply one example with which we were familiar.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The more obvious observation to make about an event like the coronavirus pandemic is that it disrupts everyday life, including time structures. For those on furlough[[7]](#endnote-7) during lockdown working time was removed. For those working from home or not working, other activities were blocked or reduced. And for yet others, much more time was spent looking after children who initially could not go to school or who later went through spells of self-isolation. One of the questions often asked in domestication analysis is about how people fit new practices into their (sometimes busy) existing time commitments. In the case of the pandemic, for most people those time structures had changed. For some, this could mean more potentially free time for new activities, including new digital practices and also time to experiment, to learn how to achieve new goals. But for others one might ask if different time use such as projects with children or more use of communications platforms like Skype and Zoom to contact family and friends led to new digital practices (see Chambers in this volume). There is also the issue of being aware of other people’s new time structures. For example, when I first looked at what other people posted in general on Facebook, under normal conditions these posts might not have been viewed so much. But if other people have more free time to fill when alternative activities are reduced, then that can also contribute to the interest shown in these posts. Indeed, sometimes it helped to make them newsworthy in the media, casting light on otherwise less publicly visible small acts of technological creativity. In other words, an awareness of the current freer time of some potential audiences can influence the decision to try out something new.

As regards perceptions, to what extent are those who develop new digital practices aware that other people were taking creative initiatives that they might not normally do in pre-pandemic times? Questions could explore whether those being studied had seen mainstream media coverage of such inventiveness, perhaps at the end of television news as human-interest stories, especially reported in otherwise bleak times. A second set of questions concerns how people arrive at an idea for a particular project. For example, if they play musical instruments or sing, could this be the basis on which to build some new digital practice? Or maybe they could foresee how a new digital activity would engage children at home or provide a new mode of communication with their own isolated parents. Part of developing a new practice also involves a self-evaluation by people of what they can achieve within their digital competence: how much they have the necessary skills, or could develop such skills, to achieve a goal. This might also involve non-digital but relevant skills. Finally, there are questions about how those developing new practices imagine the contexts in which these efforts might be appreciated, both by audiences they personally know – like friends and families – and by ones they do not.

To what extent can the actions of peers provide a stimulus for new digital projects during the pandemic, apart from media coverage of such initiatives? For example, when some of the dancers I knew from other groups could no longer practise dance, they regularly posted photos and videos on Facebook of past performances as a reminder of pre-COVID achievements for themselves and for audiences like me. Then there is the role of feedback from audiences, encouragement from known and unknown others, for example, expressing appreciation of these efforts. Other types of interaction may also emerge, not necessarily pre-planned during the planning of a project. For example, the videos my wife and I produced provided an excuse to get in touch with ex-colleagues whom I only occasionally contacted and whom I could then ask about their lockdown experiences, especially in other countries. Finally, some interactions could once more entail a presentation of the self, including how ones feels about oneself, in the spirit of conversion noted earlier. Digital projects can demonstrate the value placed on being constructive, of looking for positives under adverse conditions, but equally, they can be akin to the form of voluntary labour like going shopping for others who are self-isolating, somehow making a contribution in difficult times.

Lessons from the think pieces

Time

In the case of the wearable fitness device, understanding how it might fit into daily life can be helped by a broader appreciation of time spent on related activities prior to acquiring the technology. And before a device’s role in life stabilises, there are potential questions about the initial process of investing time in learning not only how to use the device but to evaluate its possible role in one’s life. The case of parents of young children showed how it is possible to develop typologies of time use related to their engagement with children’s use of ICTs, and how the attention spans of younger children can have a bearing upon the time they chose to allocate to digital activities. Finally, the case of new practices focused on what can happen when there is an upheaval of existing time structures, opening the way for new practices and time for them to be appreciated.

Perceptions

As regards perceptions, the fitness device example indicated how researchers might consider potential users’ broader awareness of discourses (here about health and fitness) as well as narrower evaluations of whether a particular device might be effective in achieving fitness goals. It also illustrated a variety of self-perceptions that might be considered: of past and present body images, of whether the device would suit this type of user. The young children example indicated the relevance of a variety of perceptions related to learning (about the role of technology in learning, how children learn, and what they learn), as well as, once again, the effectiveness of particular apps. And the case of new digital practices showed the significance of an awareness of what other people were doing, self-evaluations (what people could actually manage to do, but also if their various skills were sufficient) as well as the contexts in which those efforts might be valued by others.

Interactions

Lastly, turning to interactions, the example of wearable fitness devices showed potential questions about the role of social circles as sources of information about technologies and about the influence of participation in communities of practice. The questions about the gift status of such a device show how some objects of study provoke questions that one might not ask of others. The parents of young children example illustrated questions that can be asked about the role of social circles in influencing ideas about learning, as well as, once again, being a source of information about what counts as a good education app. It also points to questions about the positive and negative interactions between siblings within the home and interactions with extended family outside it (here grandparents). Finally, the new practices example indicated lines of enquiry about the actions of others as a stimulus to innovating, unplanned interactions arising from the practices and feedback from others.

Conclusions

The three areas of time issues, perceptions and interactions were chosen as starting points for demonstrating the diversity within the domestication framework and the variety of questions that it is possible to ask. The first stage involved looking at how these dimensions had been addressed in recent domestication research. The second stage involved think pieces where it was possible to speculate about further types of questions one might ask.

However, while they were useful vehicles for exploring the domestication literature in principle, others could have been chosen. For example, another ‘classic’ element from that first text on domestication, captured in the concept of objectivation, entails asking questions about the space in which ICTs are used. Indeed, domestication researchers have subsequently considered the nature of spaces outside the home, as well as the ‘spaces’ where functions are located in the navigation structure of smartphones (Huang & Miao, 2020). Another potential staring point could have been longer-term relationships with the digital world after initial acquisition and the early stages of use. This could have covered the later emergence of practices, as captured in the study of WeChat communication problems that developed over time (Huang & Miao, 2020) and other research that has looked at re-domestication. Or another dimension to demonstrate the evolution of the domestication literature could have been a focus on any changes that the introduction of ICTs had brought to daily life, including what they have enabled or where they had been empowering.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The key point of this chapter is that those interested in using the domestication framework nowadays have a huge corpus of existing studies on which to draw, which can act as a stimulus to research ideas. But there is always scope for further original exploration, further questions to pose when asking about the role of the digital in peoples’ lives.

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1. For a review of research in this period, see Haddon, 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. There are also fitness apps on other devices such as smartphones. But the stand-alone devices considered here include the FitBit Classic, Jawbone’s UP, the Nike+FuelBandSE, Withing’s Pulse and Microsoft’s Band (Crawford et al., 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In the spirit of Piaget. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In line with Vygotsky’s thinking. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. We also dance in a Slovak group and this was the main way to monitor their news, but also monitor developments in another Hungarian group in London and dance groups of colleagues based in Hong Kong. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Here are some other examples collected while writing this chapter. A TikTok music video made and posted by staff in a care home involved clips of the residents dancing or moving to music (BBC News at 13.00 20th October 2020). On his website, someone assessed local benches, posting pictures of himself sitting on the benches and providing a score of each bench (BBC News at 13.00 23rd November 2020). Adult children of older people in a care home used a platform like Zoom to sing carols as a virtual choir while their elderly parents watched on screens in the home (BBC News at 13.00 December 23rd 2020). The ‘Self-isolation Orchestra’ performed classical music together from their own homes while its members listened via headphones and watched a conductor online (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zcpii1AmheM&feature=youtu.be). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This is a scheme where workers stayed home because they could not work while the government paid 80% of their wages. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. As advocated by Bakardjieva, 200.6 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)