

What is visual intimacy? Mapping a complex phenomenon

Katharina Lobinger, Rebecca Venema, Seraina
Tarnutzer and Federico Lucchesi

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Abstract

Intimacy is a key social goal and the fundamental basis of close social relationships. Current social relationships and the interactions through which they are created and maintained are highly visualised. This visualisation also transforms the way that intimacy is played out. Based on an interdisciplinary literature review, this paper focuses on the concepts of intimacy and visual intimacy, and maps the different roles that visuals can play in intimacy practices. It shows that the content of visuals is not always essential for creating and maintaining intimacy. Practices relating to producing, sharing, and talking about pictures, as well as practices of seeing, also need to be taken into account when discussing the overall concept of visual intimacy.

Keywords

Intimacy, visual intimacy, visual practices, close social relationships

Introduction

Building intimacy is considered an important social goal and desire in relationships, and is also essential for society and societal functioning (see, e.g., Sanderson et al., 2007; Gabb, 2008; Marar, 2012). “Everyone wants intimacy” (Mosier, 2006, p. 34), a “zone of familiarity and comfort” (Berlant, 1998, p. 281), the feeling of being known and understood (Marar, 2012), and a healthy, satisfying, and lasting relationship (Moss & Schwebel, 1993; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002). Jamieson (1998, p. 8) even contends that “it is impossible to conceive a society without intimacy.”

Everyday interactions are not only increasingly technologically mediated and mediated (Fornäs, 2014; Hepp & Krotz, 2014), they are also highly visualised. Due to the proliferation of mobile and networked visual technologies, such as smartphones, cameras are almost always at hand. The most popular social media platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, are primarily based on visual content that people watch, share, and/or comment on. This increasing visualisation has profound implications for close social relationships—which are created, maintained, and repeatedly reconfirmed through communicative interactions (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Duck, 1990; Hardey, 2004; Krotz, 2014)—and how intimacy is enabled and performed. Photographs and photo sharing have become an ever-potent source of intimacy (Lambert, 2013; Thorhauge et al., 2020), as pictures play a paramount role in self-representation, the creation of new relationships, and in negotiations of the kinds of relationships maintained with others (Miguel, 2016, 2018a, 2018b).

This paper conducts a qualitative literature review of the theoretical concepts underpinning visual intimacy, and maps the different roles that visuals can play in intimacy practices. The term “visual intimacy” has been discussed in various studies in the field of visual communication, however, the fact that various studies refer to “visual intimacy” does not mean that they address the same visual practices (Gómez-Cruz & Lehmuskallio, 2016), or are based on the same concept of intimacy. Systematic discussions of these different understandings have hitherto been rare. By mapping these different concepts and discussing the different roles played by visuals in intimacy practices, this paper aims to “unpack” the many meanings of visual intimacy and contribute theoretical reflections for future work in visual studies and communication research.

The paper starts by presenting an overview of existing general concepts of intimacy, from, for example, the fields of interpersonal communication, sociology, and psychology. We discuss general aspects of mediated intimacies that are commonly stressed in the literature, and elaborate on the characteristics of the visual mode of communication. Subsequently, we systematise what previous publications refer to using the terms “visual intimacy” or “visual intimacies.” We thus map how visual intimacy has been examined in previous research, discuss the concept of intimacy on which these approaches are based, and examine the different roles that visuals and visual practices can play in creating and maintaining intimacy in mediated relationships (e.g., sharing, sexting, live connectivity,

taking or looking at pictures). We show that intimacy is sometimes based on the content of visuals, sometimes on *practices of production, sharing, and looking at visuals together*, and that, at other times, even *practices of seeing* can foster intimacy.

Conceptualisations of intimacy

“Intimacy has become a fashionable word in the social sciences and in popular self-help books advising on the art of good relationships” (Jamieson, 1998, p. 1). Nebeling Petersen and colleagues (2018, p. 3) contend that “intimacy is a familiar concept. It rings a bell, though most people find it difficult to define precisely.” Similarly, manifold and heterogeneous approaches have been used in sociology, social psychology, and communication research to define intimacy. In many languages, the word *intimate* refers to a person’s innermost and often hidden qualities (Hatfield, 1984), however, in everyday discourse, intimacy, or being intimate, is often used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse (Miguel, 2018a).

The literature offers a broad definition of intimacy, particularly stressing *closeness and knowledge* as essential components. For example, Jamieson (1998, p. 1) characterises intimacy as a “specific sort of knowing, loving and ‘being close’ to another person” and “any form of *close association* in which people acquire familiarity, that is *shared detailed knowledge* about each other” (p. 8). Similarly, Hatfield (1984, p. 208) defines intimacy as “a process in which we attempt to get close to another; to explore similarities (and differences) in the ways we both think, feel and behave.”

According to Jamieson (1998) and Zelizer (2009), intimacy is based on a shared story, and privileged and deep knowledge that nobody else has. This can include shared secrets and memories, knowledge about routines and rituals in everyday life, knowledge about bodily features or practices, knowledge about feelings, fears, and inner thoughts, or knowledge of having a similar worldview.

In addition to experiential dimensions, spatial aspects of closeness also need to be considered (Walsh, 2014). Zelizer (2009) suggests distinguishing three distinct yet interconnected dimensions of intimacy: *physical, informational, and emotional* intimacy. Jamieson (2011), Gabb (2008), Hatfield (1984), and Chambers (2013) propose further characteristics of intimacy: it occurs *in various types of close connections*, be it between friends, family, children, lovers, or flat mates; it refers to a *pattern of interactions* and connections that are durable over time and that are acknowledged by the people involved; and it has a *processual and fluid character*. Intimacy is created and maintained through a repertoire of practices that enable, generate, and maintain a subjective sense of closeness. Gabb (2008) notes that the definitions, forms, and social organisations of intimacy need to be reflected in the context of broader social transformations that also imply diversifications of categories, such as the family, gender, and intimate relationships (see also Chambers, 2013, pp. 41–49).

Although there are many ways of knowing a person, the roles of *self-disclosure* and *mutual disclosure* have been emphasised. In social psychology, self-disclosure is defined as the process of revealing information about oneself to another person (see, e.g., Greene et al., 2006). This usually means private or sensitive information intended to be shared exclusively with a certain group of people, such as information about certain emotions, feelings, uncertainties, or thoughts (Duck & McMahan, 2015). Several authors consider self-disclosure a general precondition for building intimacy in a relationship (see, e.g., Reis & Shaver, 1988), which results in a form of intimacy called “disclosing intimacy” (Jamieson, 1998, p. 1). It is essentially an “intimacy of the self” (p. 1), a form of “emotional intimacy” (Miguel, 2018a, p. 32) based on deliberately revealing inner thoughts, feelings, and emotions to another. In order to create intimacy, self-disclosure thus needs to be a *mutual* act (see, e.g., Marar, 2012; Reis & Shaver, 1988). The role of mutual self-disclosure becomes even more important in the context of theoretically egalitarian and “pure relationships” (Barker et al., 2018; Giddens, 1992). Overall, achieving intimacy involves a degree of exposure or vulnerability that can lead to betrayal, with humiliation and shame as possible consequences (Berlant, 1998). This can be hurtful and can create fears (Hatfield, 1984), so it is often tempting to play safe and avoid intimacy (Marar, 2012). Faith that privileged knowledge will not be misused is, therefore, one of the bedrocks of intimacy (Jamieson, 1998). Moreover, engaging in intimacy is a complex process that requires *intimacy skills* (Hatfield, 1984).

Nevertheless, not everything is shared in intimate relationships. There are always some private, discrete aspects that individuals keep to themselves for various reasons (Simmel, 1908/2003), and the information shared differs from relationship to relationship, with implications for the degree of intimacy. People both keep and share secrets within intimate relationships, and create their own “intimacy communities” (Imhof, 2019, p. 14), with selective collective privacy boundaries (Caughlin et al., 2000; Durham, 2008; Masur & Scharrow, 2016; Morr Serewicz & Canary, 2008; Petronio, 2002, 2010) and multifaceted processes of relational information control (Crowley, 2017; McStay, 2017).

Some authors argue that the sharing of information and mutual self-disclosure are not always required for building intimacy (Berlant, 1998; Jamieson, 1998; Reiman, 1976) and that certain “intimate” knowledge about another can also be developed in seemingly trivial everyday situations and encounters by spending time together, getting used to routines, and physical contact that may not be of a sexual nature (see, e.g., Gabb, 2008).

Overall, informational intimacy, emotional intimacy, and physical intimacy can be disclosed separately, but these forms of intimacy are entangled in many ways. For example, proxemics (Hall, 1966) explains that emotional or disclosing intimacy usually makes people feel more comfortable with close physical proximity (Hatfield, 1984). The study of proxemics attends to the human use and organisation of space and how relative distances between people affect interpersonal interactions. When we talk about *physical intimacy*, we mean intimacy based on physical closeness, ranging from proximity to sexuality (Moss

& Schwebel, 1993). *Sexual intimacy*, then, is just one of the many forms of physical intimacy. Importantly, according to Reiman (1976), it is emotional caring that makes a sexual encounter an intimate one. Otherwise, it is just physical contact.

Taken together, this overview shows that intimacy can be seen as a bundle comprising many different dimensions, such as disclosing intimacy, physical intimacy, emotional intimacy, and the different kinds of knowledge involved. To address this multiplicity, we would rather speak of *intimacies* in the following section where we discuss mediated forms of intimacy and the role of visuals.

Mediated intimacies and practices of visual intimacy

With the mediatisation of everyday life, media and communication technologies have come to play an increasingly important role in intimate relationships. This “mediation of intimate life” (Barker et al., 2018, p. 2) involves two perspectives, the first of which concerns the role and implications of mediated representations of intimacies. The second perspective, which is our point of focus, is the use of media and communication *for establishing and maintaining intimacies* in close social relationships. We focus on the micro level of close social relationships, because the changing conditions on this level can have important consequences for the way people live and how they understand the world (Krotz, 2014, p. 82). We first briefly outline general aspects of mediated intimacies that are commonly stressed in the research literature. We then further elaborate on the characteristics of the visual mode of communication, and discuss the different roles that visuals and visual technologies can play in creating and maintaining intimacies. To this end, we map what previous studies examine when they refer to “visual intimacy” or “visual intimacies”, and which visual practices they focus on. Based on this categorisation, we highlight that creating intimacies is not always solely based on the *contents* of visuals. Rather, we stress that visual intimacies need to be examined within the *practices* in which they are created. We show that intimacies are sometimes based on the *contents* of visuals, and in other instances, intimacy is fostered through the *practices of production, sharing, and looking at the visuals together*. As we outline later, even *practices of seeing* are related to intimacy. Certainly, this does not suggest a clear separation of visual contents from their uses. Rather, we propose this as a heuristic-analytical map that allows the identification of the aspects of a given practice that can contribute to fostering intimacy.

Establishing and maintaining intimacies with media and communication technologies

Mediated intimacies are forms of closeness that ensue when personal connections “are made possible through the sorts of digital platforms designed to network people” (Attwood et al., 2017, p. 250). In other words, media and communication technologies are used as means for building and maintaining intimate relationships (Barker et al., 2018; Cefai & Couldry, 2019; Chambers, 2013). This is a transformation that some authors see

rather pessimistically, although others highlight the advantages (for an overview, see, e.g., Su, 2016). Some argue that technology might disconnect humans from “real-life” interaction (see, e.g., Bauman, 2003; Turkle, 2011). Others stress that digital media can foster intimacy by allowing people to bridge geographical and physical distance (Broadbent & Bauwens, 2008; Su, 2016), and by creating spaces for the disclosure and display of emotions, relationships, and connections (Chambers, 2013).

Mediated intimacies are relevant in both co-present and remote situations. The latter, i.e., *intimacy at a distance*, has been the subject of considerably more scholarly attention. Due to the increasing mobilisation of people in Western societies, relationships are now more often characterised by the geographical distance of the individuals involved. In remote relationships, media and communication technologies play an important role in the intimacy experience (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018), and in reducing spatial and relational distance (Gómez-Cruz & Miguel, 2014; Prieto-Blanco, 2016; Wang & Lim, 2018). New media practices, such as the sharing of various kinds of content via social media and networks, loosen the intimate realm from its bond with a common physical place to a state of relational presence. They also allow for a kind of continuous closeness and proximity (Andreas et al., 2016), a *continuous connected presence* (Licoppe, 2004, p. 153) and perpetual contact (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). Madianou (2016, p. 1), speaks of “ambient co-presence,” which essentially means a “peripheral, yet intense awareness of distant others made possible through the affordances of ubiquitous media environments.” To maintain an “always on” connection with a loved one, some devices or communication channels are either constantly active (e.g., Skype) or prominently positioned. From these examples, we can see that being in the same moment can be an important way of reducing relational distance. Mediated intimacies thus encompass temporal and spatial components, and can allow for *remote closeness in real time*. Intimacy, then, is no longer linked to physical co-presence; rather, we witness the development of individualised “mobile patterns of relating” (Elliott & Urry, 2010, p. 87).

This relating also allows for constructions of intimacy across distances between individuals who are not familiar with one another (Nebeling Petersen et al., 2018). Numerous studies stress the role of mobile media, social media, and social networking sites (SNS) in starting new relationships, boundary work, and creating, managing, and remembering intimacies (see, e.g., Hart, 2018; Miguel, 2018a, 2018b; Møller & Nebeling Petersen, 2018; Robards et al., 2018). Several authors also describe intimacy as a strategy and genre in the relationship of micro-celebrities and their followers on YouTube, Twitter, or Instagram (Abidin, 2015; Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019; Marwick, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Raun, 2018). Importantly, physical distance and anonymity can both hinder and enforce mediated practices of intimacy and closeness (Nebeling Petersen et al., 2018, p. 6). It must also be emphasised that the general characteristics of digital communication and the affordances and audiences on social media play an important role in how intimacy can be achieved and played out—a point described in the Social

Cues Filtered Out Approach (Walther & Parks, 2002). Consequently, Paasonen (2018) describes networked connections as infrastructures of intimacy and sociotechnical affordances that modulate intimacy. In the same vein, Miguel (2018b) and Tiidenberg and van der Nagel (2020) describe social media platforms as intimacy mediators whose technological affordances are adopted and adapted by users to create and display personal relationships and (public) intimacies.

In the context of SNS, it is often said that public and private life are increasingly blurred (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018). Intimate information and practices that were once hidden from the public are now inextricably intertwined with the public sphere. Bazarova (2012), Dobson and colleagues (2018), and Hart (2018) define publicly shared disclosure on SNS as *public intimacy*. Intimacy practices played out on SNS are often criticised (see, e.g., Bazarova, 2012) in what can be called “moral panics” (Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020), which emphasises that the visibility of intimacy is also a highly normative question (Dobson et al., 2018). Contrary to this criticism, several studies have found that the public performance of social relationships can contribute to strengthening and maintaining social bonds (Livingstone, 2008; Pearson, 2009), the nurturing of relationships and identity management (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018), and elicitation of feelings of safety and commitment (Schwarz, 2010a).

Media and communication technologies also play an important role in *co-present encounters*. For example, people in intimate relationships develop shared routines regarding media use, such as watching television series together, looking at photographs together, or going to the cinema (Linke, 2011; Müller & Röser, 2017). These shared routines also allow people to develop knowledge about each other’s media and communication preferences, which can further foster intimacy between interactional partners. In fact, media preferences have been identified as important identity markers, both within relationships and as a distinction from others (Duck & McMahan, 2015).

In summary, previous research has demonstrated that media and communication technologies can play an important role in building and maintaining intimate relationships, in intimacy at a distance, in creating connected presence and closeness in real time, in public displays of intimacy, and in creating intimacy in co-present encounters. In what follows, we focus on the role that visuals and visual practices can play in these contexts. To this end, we first highlight some characteristics of visual communication.

Characteristics of the visual mode of communication

Generally, the visual mode works differently from other modes of communication, such as verbal communication. Visual communication is considered to be closely linked to intimacy, not least due to its associative and holistic character (Müller, 2007; Nöth, 2011). Visuals are perceived quasi-simultaneously, while verbal messages are captured sequentially. Moreover, it is a particular strength of still and moving images to precisely depict places or people, and display and elicit emotions (see, e.g., Müller & Kappas, 2010). These

characteristics and potentials are highly important for communicative interactions and social relationships.

Most importantly, the visual perception of facial, bodily, and physiological expressions of emotions (for a discussion of the components of emotions, see, e.g., Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981; Scherer, 2005) is the core basis of communicative interaction between individuals and groups. More generally, images are closely tied to bodies. For example, Coleman (2008) considers bodies not as static entities that can be affected by, for example, media representations; rather, she focuses on how bodies are known, understood, and experienced through images, arguing that bodies need to be considered in relation to images and representations of bodies, with implications for physical and emotional intimacy. To build intimacy, the possibility to “see” a person and their physical and facial traits is particularly important in enhancing closeness, learning more about inner feelings, and in terms of sexual intimacy.

Visual depictions of human emotions can elicit strong emotions, both consciously and subconsciously. They can also trigger a cascade of complex and context-dependent intrapersonal and interpersonal communication and regulation processes (Müller & Kappas, 2010). Showing non-verbal emotional expressions such as crying, laughter, or fear in a picture holds great potential for empathy and identification with those portrayed (Pfau et al., 2006).

Images and videos, therefore, allow for bridging spatial and temporal distances and creating a sense of presence. It is a century-long assumption that photography is thought of as an index, trace, or imprint of the real that represents an absent signified, be it a place or people (see, e.g., Lister, 2007). Photographs and video footage can, thus, create the illusion of seeing something without actually being physically present at the actual scene.

Taking photographs, showing them to others, and talking about them have always been means of collaborative meaning-making (Keightley & Pickering, 2014; Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011). Photo-sharing practices (for a systematisation, see Lobinger, 2016) have important social functions that remain relatively stable over time and that are important for intimacy. They serve the purposes of, for example, building or strengthening relationships, creating or recalling individual or collective memory, self-expression, or the representation and performance of the relationship. Photographs are also used in the organisation and micro-coordination of everyday life (Ling & Yttri, 2002; van House et al., 2004).

Finally, pictures of, for example, important events in relationships often serve as (material) emotional resources that are vital for feelings of closeness. While photographs have always played an important role in communication within close social relationships, the spread and portability of communication technologies have expanded the possibilities of visual communication in terms of immediacy and proximity (Lee, 2005). In particular, the fact that cameras are integrated into many networked devices has transformed everyday photography (Pauwels, 2008; Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008). Researchers have used the terms

“networked cameras” or “networked photography” to refer to the fact that mobile camera devices, such as smartphones, enable an immediate online connection and the sharing of pictures or videos immediately after capture via instant messaging tools or SNS (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008; Lobinger, 2016). This remote sharing leads to the increased synchronicity of visual interactions in terms of reducing relational and perceived geographical distances and contributing to a sense of togetherness. Photographs and photo sharing have thus become an ever-potent site of intimacy (Lambert, 2013; Thorhauge et al., 2020). The same holds true for sharing videos, paintings, emojis, or gifs (Venema & Lobinger, 2020).

The term “visual intimacy” has been discussed in various studies in fields such as visual communication and online research. We were particularly interested in what previous publications actually examined when they referred to “visual intimacy” or “visual intimacies” and the role that visuals played. To this end, we conducted a qualitative interdisciplinary literature review¹ and found seven practices with respect to how intimacies can be created and maintained through the use of visual communication and visual technologies: (1) visual self-disclosure, (2) ritual photo sharing and “banal” images, (3) synchronous gaze and visual (remote) co-presence, (4) synchronising “ways of seeing,” (5) taking pictures together and performing in front of the camera, (6) looking at pictures together, and (7) public performances of intimacy. For each category, we point to selected exemplary studies to better illustrate similarities, determine which of the definitions of intimacy mentioned earlier in of the present paper they can be linked to, and the role that visual communication and visual artefacts play in the given category. This means that we will give an overview and bundle similar approaches, but we cannot cite every paper in the sample that touches on visual intimacy in a detailed way. Importantly, as we will discuss below, the practices and categories in our heuristic-analytical map are not always disjunct; they are interrelated.

Visual self-disclosure: Sexting and “uglies”

We begin with a discussion of sexting, for it is often the key reference point when “intimate” pictures and visual intimacy are discussed (see Thorhauge et al., 2020, for an overview). In usually highly controversial debates, sexting is often described as a fundamentally risky practice (see, e.g., Hasinoff & Shepherd, 2014; Thorhauge & Bonitz, 2020). What makes it so fundamentally ambivalent is that it can imply explicit, visual bodily self-disclosure and provide information about (intimate) bodily features or practices. Sex-

1 We started the sampling process with a keyword search using “intimacy AND visual OR image OR photo” on Communication and Mass Media Complete (CMMC). The same keywords were used in a Google Scholar search. Based on the results, relevant authors and further references cited in selected papers were identified, after which the “snowballing” procedure was performed. We included and examined theoretical and empirical papers and mapped the practices and concepts of visual intimacy until theoretical saturation was achieved and no further conceptual insights and categories were being generated.

ting is predominantly defined as the exchange of erotic self-produced messages, mostly through instant messaging tools (Chalfen, 2009; Hasinoff, 2014; Crofts et al., 2015). Often, these “sexts” consist of sexy self-produced images that can range from photographs taken in swimwear to images or videos depicting sexual activities (Döring, 2014). Importantly, scholars have stressed the rich variety of sexts and their sometimes humorous character (Albury, 2015). Sexts can be described as a form of disclosing intimacy or of mediated physical and sexual intimacy.

Several studies argue that sexting can be part of regular sexual activity, an extension of an existing sexual relationship, e.g., as a pleasant anticipation, a compensation for the physical absence of a partner in a long-distance relationship, or a prelude to a relationship or hook-up (see, e.g., Harder et al., 2020; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011). Importantly, studies also stress that sexting can be an activity between friends, a joke, or a practice used during a moment of bonding or exploring sexuality (Albury, 2015; Albury & Crawford, 2012; Thorhauge & Bonitz, 2020). Albury and Crawford’s (2012) study shows that some respondents send sexts to maintain intimacy and connections in long-distance relationships. They consider sexts as “just a different form of erotica,” while others might take or send nude photos as “more of a joke than the serious sexual type of thing” (Albury & Crawford, 2012, p. 468).

Taking up the theoretical concepts presented at the beginning of this paper, sexting as visual self-disclosure neither automatically qualifies as intimacy practice nor automatically leads to visual intimacy. The infamous “dick pics,” unsolicited photos of genitals, are instead an intrusion, harassment, or just a misperception of sexual interest. As a consensual and mutual practice between trusted interactional partners, however, this act of visual self-disclosure can contribute to creating and maintaining emotional, physical, and sexual intimacy (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011), and can reassert the mutual bond and closeness within a relationship.

Sexting is often seen as a kind of gift-giving, a special, sexy, and romantic present (Crofts et al., 2015, p. 4, 171). Sending a (semi)nude photograph is, thus, an act of giving something highly intimate and valuable to someone else. Sexting and the self-disclosure it implies, can therefore also be seen as a particular investment and “risky opportunity” (Livingstone, 2008). Sexting and the risk it involves can enable, generate, and sustain a specific sense of closeness, and of being attuned and special to one another (Thorhauge & Bonitz, 2020). It is, thus, an important intimacy practice, but it also creates vulnerability due to the highly intimate visual content. The visual content plays a decisive role in this form of intimacy practice, as personal bodily features of the conversational partner (and not generic sexy pictures of somebody else) are visually represented and shared. In this case, the aforementioned connection of visual depiction and bodies is played out.

Importantly, the broader concept of visual self-disclosure is not restricted to “sexy” content, and taking and sharing “out-of-bed” or “double-chin” selfies without makeup after a long night out, or in embarrassing situations, need to be taken into account. In

recent years, ephemeral photo-sharing applications have become increasingly popular for sharing both “sexy” and “ugly” images (see, e.g., Bayer et al., 2016; Kofoed, 2018; Piwek & Joinson, 2016). The fact that images self-destruct after a given time allows people to establish “hyper-intimate” relations (Kofoed & Larsen, 2016) and share “ugly” and “unpolished” pictures, as this lowers self-presentational concerns that play an important role in curated and calibrated aesthetics on Instagram (Bayer et al., 2016; Kofoed, 2018; Schreiber, 2017). Showing ugliness, everyday life, and dull moments implies a latent vulnerability, as Kofoed and Larsen (2016; Kofoed, 2018) stress in their studies on Snapchat practices among teens. These images can serve as proof of closeness, trust, and emotional bonding, creating a sense that friends know each other (Kofoed, 2018).

By sexting and sharing “uglies,” the visual content is highly relevant. In other cases, as we will show below, it is the fact of being in touch through phatic ephemeral photo sharing that can create and maintain closeness and intimacy. In this context, even seemingly unimportant or banal images can be particularly meaningful.

Ritual photo sharing and “banal” images

Photo sharing can be used to create a sense of mediated and “connected presence” (Licoppe, 2004, p. 153), thereby maintaining continuous “perpetual contact” (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). In his study of camera phone photographs and mediated presence, Villi (2015) defines intimacy as a close relationship or closeness between communicators, such as friends and family members. He contends that the desire to create or foster intimacy is an important reason to share images or videos. Everyday snapshots or selfies can be sent just for the sake of keeping in touch, to say “Hi, I am thinking of you,” a practice Villi describes as “visual chitchat” (Villi, 2012, p. 42). In this case, rather than exchanging narrations in longer interactions, individuals exchange frequent short messages that serve phatic communication purposes (Malinowski, 1923/1960). These often quick and short interactions tend to be labelled as “meaningless” or “nonsense” by their creators, however, they “contain ‘relational capsules’ and constitute relational rituals that enact and reaffirm intimacy” (Su, 2016, p. 243), which can foster social cohesion. Accordingly, people often stress their particular value in creating closeness.

“Keeping in touch” and visual connectivity—and not necessarily the contents—are thus vital in phatic photo sharing. As Kofoed (2018) shows in her study of teenagers’ photo-sharing practices on Snapchat, the simple fact that images are exchanged on a daily basis is considered an important indicator of closeness and intimacy. These visual exchanges serve to bridge spatial and temporal distance and create a sense of presence, closeness and relatedness, or ambient intimacy. Visual chitchat is often highly ritualised, with greetings in the morning, pictures of meals, and “goodnight” (photo) messages. It is the ritual connection that makes a banal everyday life situation worth being photographed and shared.

Thus, even seemingly unimportant or banal images shared via messaging services or posted on SNS can be particularly meaningful in intimacy practices (see, e.g., Kofoed & Larsen, 2016; Farci et al., 2017). Here, visual intimacy refers to the fact that the picture can create a particular sense of closeness, as their meaning is inseparably tied to a shared story and a particular (intimate) knowledge of the interactional partner. From an outside perspective, however, the meaning of these images might sometimes be rather difficult to assess (Venema & Lobinger, 2020), as they gain their meaning within the context of previous interactions and shared experiences. In their study on intimacy and friendship among Italian Facebook users, Farci and colleagues (2017) stress that users post photos of specific objects that carry special emotional meanings that are invisible to larger audiences. Their interviewees explained that their pictures served to express “I miss you” or “I am thinking of you” and to maintain an emotional connection with specific people. This meaning, therefore, can only be acknowledged by those who know the relational context that exists behind the picture (Farci et al., 2017, p. 790). Seemingly “banal” images are therefore also a strategy to balance public self-disclosure and maintain boundaries of private and public spaces, which we address below.

The synchronous gaze, visual co-presence, and closeness

Photographs have historically been understood as time capsules. They depicted people who existed at the time the photo was taken (“then”), and were often used for commemoration. While this remains an important function of photographs, networked visual communication also emphasises the “now,” the connection between people in the present, as new media practices also allow for “real-time” sharing. Several studies have highlighted the importance of sharing moments and experiences through the exchange of photographs (van Dijck, 2008; Villi, 2011). For example, in her qualitative study on photography, experience, and space in transnational families, Prieto-Blanco (2016) stresses that transnational families constantly renegotiate intimacy, and that audio-visual media play a particularly important role in these processes. She characterises digital photo sharing and video calls as intrinsic enablers of interaction between people across space, which contribute to the strengthening of intimate bonding between family members and the socialisation of children into larger family units despite spatial distances. To illustrate, she describes how one of her interviewees used her camera phone to share her daughter’s prom evening preparation in real time with her relatives, thereby enabling their participation in and presence at the event.

Seeing each other, or seeing what the other is seeing, in spite of physical distance, creates a sense of visually shared spaces and visually mediated co-presence (Lasén, 2015; Villi, 2016), and thus a sense of closeness and togetherness (Prieto-Blanco, 2016; Villi, 2012). The act of communicating visually, and thus of being able to synchronously look at visual content or sceneries together (“seeing together” and seeing what the other is doing), then becomes an important intimacy practice. At the same time, this real-time connection

comes with demands regarding the partner's time and attention. Visual "real-time" sharing typically involves the sharing of photographs or video chatting, which some people use to synchronise each other's offline activities, such as cooking dinners, having meals, or even sleeping. Here, the most important aspect is the "simulation of physical closeness, or proxemics" (Su, 2016, p. 237), to be together in the moment, or spending time together. The specific capacities of, for example, the visual mode and the immediacy of the visual experience are especially important in mediated intimacy and closeness. A photograph or video first serves as "proof" of, for example, the beauty of scenery or an event. Even more importantly, images can provide dense, detailed and, at the same time, polysemic information about what a scenery or its particular atmosphere looked like, including decisive aspects such as spatial relations and colours that would be difficult to verbalise (see, e.g., Venema & Lobinger, 2020; Cserző, 2020; Villi, 2012, 2015; Zappavigna, 2020).

Synchronising "ways of seeing"

Visuals can also synchronise "ways of seeing" in a different way. Borrowing Berger's (1972) famous "way of seeing" concept, we note that seeing is a cultural and learned process (Hieber, 2007; Lobinger & Krotz, 2021), a practice determined by knowledge and certain situational and historical conditions (Berger, 1972). In other words, visual sensory perception is at once a cultural and physical act, as it is based on seeing and looking (Classen, 1997; Hieber, 2007). While "looking" is usually described as an optical, mechanical process common to all humans (with just little variation), "seeing" is based on selective perception and interpretation, and historical and cultural variation (Berger, 1972; Chalfen, 2012; Classen, 1993). As intimacy practices, partners or friends can learn to understand each other's way of seeing, which means understanding each other's perspective on the world. By spending time together, partners learn about each other's photographic preferences, such as motifs and photographic styles, a point alluded to in a project on the role of visual communication in close social relationships (Lobinger et al., 2020; for further information on the project see www.vire.usi.ch). In other words, partners can learn to understand each other's seeing techniques and visual preferences, which can create emotional intimacy between partners or friends because all parties feel that they have reached a deep connection and reciprocally aligned understanding and knowledge of how to look at the world. This can be understood as very intimate knowledge about each other, which is difficult to verbalise.

Taking pictures together and performing in front of the camera

The act of taking photographs together can be inherently connected to intimacy. For example, Schwarz (2010a) illustrates that taking a photograph together can be understood as a sign of commitment, a statement and "proof" of being a couple, and of belonging together (see also Venema & Lobinger, 2020). It is for this reason that, at the beginning of a relationship, when commitment has not yet been established, one often requires a justifi-

cation to take a picture together. Special occasions, such as holidays, can be justifications, as they socially legitimise a photographic shot due to the expectations and conventions of photo taking (Schwarz, 2010a). Visually depicted closeness is connected to physical and emotional closeness. It becomes a visual sign, a signifier used in the performance of the relationship, both for the individuals and the audience involved. According to Acedera and Yeoh (2018), taking photographs together can be considered a sign of commitment connected to the feeling of being “safe” or a public display of the relationship.

Moreover, some studies focus on the presence of the camera, which can also be used in the creation of a playful, romantic, and sexy atmosphere, in the sense of performing *for* something, i.e., “doing romance” (Schwarz, 2010a, p. 162). Schwarz does not provide an explicit definition of intimacy but stresses the increasing usage of photography in the “production of intimacy, romance and eroticism” (2010a, p. 152). Being watched by the camera lens also invites performativity (Schwarz, 2010b), such as when couples take photographs cuddling and fooling around in bed. In this case, the very act of taking photographs together and performing in front of the camera fosters closeness and intimacy, including when erotic games are played (Schwarz, 2010a). The resulting photographs can also become intimate objects.

Here, the visual technology itself invites a certain performance in front of the camera, a performance of intimacy for an invisible beholder. Focusing on selfies, Gómez-Cruz and Miguel (2014, p. 141) also refer to these performances for the camera as “a techno-mood that not only enables but also drives users in the direction of intimacy and self-awareness, of tactility and sensuality.” Similarly, Schwarz (2010a) describes photography as an instrument for producing romantic moments, eroticism, and playfulness, as he compares the use of the camera to that of candlelight, music, or sex toys. Through the role of the camera as a kind of “third player” (Schwarz, 2010a, p. 162), the whole moment transforms into something special.

Creating visual artefacts and looking at pictures together

Looking at pictures together in co-present encounters can also foster intimacy. For example, photo albums have been found to play an important role in relationships as they are a means of conserving experiences in a durable way (see, e.g., Prieto-Blanco, 2016; Rose, 2010). Jointly selecting photographs for an album, i.e., joint photo-work, can contribute to creating emotional intimacy. Intimacy is then based on engaging in a shared activity of *doing* something with photographs, which has to do with both the symbolic and material elements of photographs. Partners then select the preferred representation and narration to be shown in, e.g., albums or photo books. Looking at the pictures and talking about them during the process of selection and after the album is finished can also trigger emotions and memories of shared experiences and events. The photographs can then serve as important material emotional resources (Prieto-Blanco, 2016; Rose, 2010; van House et al.,

2004; Venema & Lobinger, 2020) whose uses yield feelings of closeness, a point described by Prieto-Blanco (2016) in reference to transnational Spanish-Irish families.

Public disclosure and performances of intimacy

Finally, visuals can also be used to perform and display intimacy or intimate information in different settings, including on social media and SNS. Numerous studies have addressed the role of images shared on SNS in terms of creating and managing intimacies and intimate disclosures within and across audiences and publics of strangers, acquaintances, and friends, several of which focus on challenges or ambivalences regarding privacy, authenticity, and the boundaries of public self-performance and disclosure on platforms such as Instagram (see, e.g., Vainikka et al., 2017). For example, in her work on visual intimacy on social media, Miguel (2016, 2018a, 2018b) delves into the different definitions and dimensions (physical, informational, and emotional) of intimacy. In her empirical study, she explores the kinds of pictures that the study participants see as intimate, and how they negotiate the uploading of these pictures to their social media profiles. The participants in her study described sexy pictures, sexual orientation, and relationship status as intimate. Other studies have focused on representations of couples and friends on SNS when people indicate their relationship status on Facebook (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018), or represent their friendships visually on SNS. Acedera and Yeoh (2018, p. 4132) call this “performative mediated intimacies” and Autenrieth (2015, p. 112) the “theatricalization of friendship.” These studies stress that sharing couples’ pictures on Facebook is linked to several, sometimes hidden, aims. First and foremost, it can be a strong visual statement that shows that partners belong together (Venema & Lobinger, 2020). Similarly, Autenrieth (2015) found that visually illustrating friendship and showing that one belongs to a certain social group is a central communication goal and social use of photo sharing (van House et al., 2004). This can also imply a clear visual message to an intended audience, including strangers: “They are mine, don’t even try.” On one hand, this signals that someone is officially “off the market.” On the other hand, the semi-public representation is meaningful for the couple itself. With this public performance, they present their relationship as something mutually confirmed, stable, and publicly presentable (Schwarz, 2010a), as some kind of “proof” of officially being together (Venema & Lobinger, 2020).

Conclusions

This paper has addressed the multiplicity of visual intimacies in mediatised relationships. Starting from the essential role of intimacy in personal relationships and society as a whole, it has reflected on the role of visual intimacy in the present-day dynamic of highly mediatised societies. To discuss practices of visual intimacy, we first identified different aspects of intimacy, in particular, mediated intimacy. We showed that several authors stress closeness and knowledge as essential components of intimacy. We saw that inti-

macy is characterised by informative, emotional, and bodily components that are based on the different ways in which knowledge about the trusted entity is created. Knowledge can be obtained, for example, through mutual disclosure, by spending time together, or through physical contact. Media and communication technologies play an important role in creating and maintaining these many different intimacies. In particular, due to the convergence of visual technologies with mobile and networked media, visual communication has been increasingly used for fostering intimacy among personal bonds in increasingly diversified ways.

Based on the literature review, we identified and mapped different practices of creating and maintaining visual intimacy. We described these visual intimacy practices against the backdrop of the theoretical section of the paper in order to identify which conceptual aspects of intimacy are most relevant for the respective practices. We also used the term “visual practices” to highlight the fact that the content of visuals is not always the main element involved in creating and maintaining intimacy, and that visual content always needs to be considered with respect to the situational context and practices in which it exists. The meaning of visuals is then established within the context of previous interactions and shared experiences. As demonstrated in the previous section, in some cases, practices of *production*, *sharing*, *talking about* pictures, and *seeing* are more relevant than the *content* of the visual objects themselves.

In visual self-disclosure, particularly in sexting practices but also when sharing uncensored pictures with trusted ties, the visual content is highly relevant as—in the former case—it provides information about (intimate) bodily features or practices and can be used for remote sexual encounters in real time. It represents a form of disclosing intimacy as well as a form of mediated physical and sexual intimacy. However, exactly because the visual content is so sensitive that the very act of sharing is relevant in terms of building intimacy, sexting can be understood as a “gift” or proof of trust in the quality of a relationship or in the specific trustworthiness of the partner. Here, the complex interplay of trust and vulnerability comes to the fore.

In ritual photo sharing, therefore, content is generally less important than the essential act of sharing. Intimacy is mainly maintained through “keeping in touch” and by continually reconfirming the mutual bond with the help of seemingly banal pictures. Here, connected presence and perpetual contact are achieved with the help of visual exchanges.

The synchronous gaze is a visual intimacy practice where both the act of sharing and the visual content matter. It is a form of intimacy at a distance that is based on a near simultaneous “seeing” of what the other sees, which generates an ambient co-presence and fosters closeness and emotional intimacy. Visual content produces shared knowledge that is difficult to convey verbally in such a detailed and powerful way. Here, the idiosyncrasies of the visual mode come into play in terms of bridging distance.

Visuality also plays a crucial role in what we called synchronised “ways of seeing.” It is based on very personal knowledge of the other’s cultural practices of seeing. Once

established, this knowledge about how the other sees the world generates an intense emotional intimacy.

The practices of taking photographs are another example of visual intimacy practices. On one hand, the act of creating visual representations of intimate relationships fosters physical intimacy, as two (or more) people have to physically and bodily engage in the process of production, including posing (with a certain image frame). "Doing intimacy" or the performance in front of a camera itself, can then promote emotional intimacy, particularly when physical or even sexual intimacy is stimulated by the camera situation. Nevertheless, taking photographs can also be considered an intimacy practice in another sense, since it is based on commitment and represents proof of belonging together, reconfirming the social bond, especially when the potential visual representation of togetherness is implied. These are examples where practices of production, of taking photographs together, are the site where intimacy is conceived.

As we have shown, it is not only remote visual intimacy practices that are important, creating visual artefacts (e.g., photo albums) and looking at pictures together can also increase a feeling of closeness. Images thus work as material emotional resources that trigger emotions and memories about shared experiences and events. The visual artefacts then contribute to creating emotional intimacy due to their symbolic and material features.

Usually, photographs are produced with an intended audience in mind, which can be other people, or the intimate interactional partners themselves. Photographs used for public performances of intimacy can contribute to building emotional intimacy and reconfirming closeness and social bonds. Similarly, visual sharing implies a form of commitment. Both the visual contents, including their representational conventions, and the acts of sharing, are important elements on which performances of intimacy and the representation of togetherness and belonging are based.

Most importantly, the present paper has shown that visuals, not least due to the idiosyncrasies of the visual mode, are closely embedded in intimacy practices, which makes visual elements important and meaningful aspects of close social interactions. At the same time, as we have shown, visual intimacy can mean different things, and refers to different concepts of intimacy (e.g., sexual and physical intimacy, ambient closeness) as well as to different practices. As our discussion has shown, the content and practices of producing, sharing, seeing, and talking about pictures can play highly diverse roles. In our view, the role of visuals as symbolic and material objects needs to be differentiated according to the practices in which they are embedded. We hope that this article connects previous studies and bundles the knowledge they have created about the multiplicity of visual intimacies. In particular, we suggest that visual analyses of intimacy should not stop at the level of representation. In addition to what visuals show and represent, the further contextual analysis of how they are created, selected, and used would be fruitful for developing a deeper understanding of visual intimacy practices. This approach, how-

ever, necessitates empirical multi-method designs that combine content analysis with, for example, interview studies, ethnographies, and observations. We are convinced that in an age of increasing visualisation, a close examination of the role and meanings of visuals for close social relationships is essential to understand personal connections.

This paper has some limitations. For example, in order to focus on the many different practices of visual intimacy, we excluded critical and risky aspects of mediated visual intimacy. Whenever disclosure comes into play, trust and violations of trust also need to be examined. Power and control also play an important role in visual intimacy practices, and the persistence, shareability, and searchability of visual data further complicate these issues. For example, while sexting can be a mutually valued intimacy practice, the exchange of sexually suggestive images, especially of girls and women, can also become a relationship “currency” that puts pressure on, for example, young people (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017). Furthermore, while ephemeral photo sharing promises closeness, it can also destabilise relationships and trust when photos are shared outside the boundaries of the trusted entity (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Kofoed & Larsen, 2016; Salter, 2018; Venema & Lobinger, 2017), or it can shift from a practice of intimacy to one of surveillance (Southerton et al., 2019). Future research should therefore focus on the connections between the “positive” concept of visual intimacy with surveillance, control, and risk.

In conclusion, we would like to note that people are often not fully satisfied with the affordances of mediated communication for maintaining their intimate bonds. They may complain about the repetitiveness of such communication and the impossibility of hugging or kissing each other, which might result in emotional distance. Mediated visual communication cannot fully resolve this problem. In other words, mediated (visual) intimacy does not exist in isolation. It must, therefore, be acknowledged that mediated and non-mediated intimacy practices are intrinsically intertwined, and so, too, are visual intimacies and visual intimacy practices.

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Dr. Katharina Lobinger

Assistant Professor

Institute of Digital Technologies for Communication (ITDxC)

USI Università della Svizzera italiana, Switzerland

katharina.lobinger@usi.ch

Rebecca Venema

PhD Candidate

Institute of Digital Technologies for Communication (ITDxC)

USI Università della Svizzera italiana, Switzerland

rebecca.venema@usi.ch

Seraina Tarnutzer

PhD Candidate

Institute of Digital Technologies for Communication (ITDxC)

USI Università della Svizzera italiana, Switzerland

seraina.tarnutzer@usi.ch

Federico Lucchesi

PhD Candidate

Institute of Digital Technologies for Communication (ITDxC)

USI Università della Svizzera italiana, Switzerland

federico.lucchesi@usi.ch