# Feeling togetherness online: a phenomenological sketch of online communal experiences

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## Abstract

The internet provides us with a multitude of ways of interacting with one another. In discussions about how technological innovations impact and shape our interpersonal interactions, there is a tendency to assume that encountering people online is essentially different to encountering people offline. Yet, individuals report feeling a sense of togetherness with one another online that echoes offline descriptions. I consider how we can understand people's experiences of being together with others online, at least in certain instances, as arising out of their *feeling together as a we*. Using Walther's phenomenological framework of communality, I explore whether the following might take place online: (i) habitual communal experiences and (ii) actual we-experiences. While neither of these sketches amount to a full account of how we find ourselves with others online, I suggest that they reveal how insights from the phenomenology of sociality can be used to deepen our understanding of online communality. What is more, I suggest that the strength of this approach is that in some cases it allows us to circumvent tricky questions about embodiment online and, in others, prompts us to ask to what extent a fully-embodied interaction is really required for we-experiences.

**Keywords** Communality · Sociality · Togetherness · Online · Phenomenology · Walther

## 1 Introduction

The internet provides us with a multitude of ways of interacting with one another: via Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Twitter, Tinder, Reddit, email, comment sections, in multi-player games and so on. Online we encounter one another in a variety of guises: as support groups, as fellow gamers, as already established friends, as colleagues, as opponents, as potential dates. Online sociality can no longer be considered a minor facet of interpersonal experience. Indeed, for many of us, it is becoming an increasingly

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significant, if not central, way of encountering other people. As Miller remarks, "the space of networked digital technologies are no longer liminal since they are now part-and-parcel of the experience of everyday life" (2012, 266; also see Miller 2016). Since the birth of the internet, there has been a raft of literature discussing how technological innovations impact and shape our interpersonal interactions. However, whether optimistic or pessimistic about the nature of online sociality, there has been a tendency to assume that encountering people online is essentially different to encountering people offline. Indeed, this assumption has a certain common-sense appeal as we tend to think of offline sociality in terms of direct face-to-face interaction and online sociality as mediated through devices. It is this assumption that I want to agitate by exploring whether we find we-experiences, typically discussed in the realm of offline sociality, online.

Individuals often describe certain online interactions as involving a sense of togetherness with other people (e.g. Ducheneaut et al. 2006; Gies 2008; Eklund 2015; Scriven 2018), echoing descriptions of offline interpersonal interactions. Following a growing recognition that offline and online sociality are not wholly separable spheres (e.g. Baym 2015; Eklund 2015), I want to investigate whether a specific type of offline interpersonal interaction, namely we-experiences, can be found online. The notion of shared or we-experience has received a considerable amount of attention in the realm of phenomenology of sociality. However, such discussions predominantly focus upon face-to-face interactions (see Salice and Schmid 2016; Szanto and Moran 2015). In this paper, I will consider how we can understand people's experience of being together with others online, at least in certain instances, as arising out of their *feeling together as a we* online.[1] I will suggest that Gerda Walther's framework of communal experiences can be used to illuminate how it is we find ourselves with others online, how we can experience an affective sense of togetherness when we are not together in physical space.

My motive for applying Walther's framework is two-fold: (i) unlike many theorists (e.g. Schutz 1967), Walther argues that a felt sense of togetherness as a we can occur even when the individuals are not spatially (or perhaps even temporally) together, making her account particularly suitable for discussions of online experience; and (ii) her fine-grained taxonomy of communal experiences allows us to contemplate a number of different ways they might emerge online (both in the broad sense of habitual communal experiences and a narrow sense of actual we-experiences). By showing that, at least in some cases, these experiences of affective togetherness do occur online, I will conclude that this supports the argument that we should not take it for granted that because online encounters occur in a different medium to offline ones, that they must always be deemed an essentially different kind. I will argue that by interpreting at least some instances of togetherness online in terms of a habitual, affective sense of togetherness, we are absolved of the burden of demonstrating that we engage in embodied interactions online. Furthermore, by considering whether actual we-experiences occur online, we are forced to scrutinize the extent to which fully embodied interaction is necessary for actual we-experiences and, in turn, put pressure on what embodiment means in the face-to-face encounter.

In section 2, I will briefly describe how online and offline interpersonal experiences are often treated as different kinds of sociality, even when it is accepted that online life

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[1] This is not to say, however, that feeling *a sense of togetherness as a we* exhausts all forms of togetherness experienced online.

is embedded in offline life. In section 3, I will provide an outline of Walther's account of communal experiences (in both the narrow and the broad sense). In sections 4 and 5, I will use Walther's account to provide a sketch of how we might:

(i)    find ourselves feeling a habitual sense of togetherness with others online (online habitual objectual communal-experiences and online habitual personal communal-experiences); and

(ii)    experience actual we-experiences with others online (online actual we-experiences).

While these sketches do not amount to a full account of how we find ourselves with others online, I suggest that they reveal how insights from the phenomenology of sociality can be used to show overlaps between offline and online interpersonal experiences of feeling togetherness.[2]

## 2 Online interpersonal interactions: Questioning the assumption of difference

Many of us find ourselves spending an increasingly large amount of time online; a significant part of which involves interacting with other people. Since the advent of the internet, there has been much interest, particularly in the social sciences, in the nature and value of online interpersonal interaction. Within this debate, a broad dichotomy has arisen between those who are optimistic about online communities and those who are pessimistic. An optimistic view of online communities is found most prominently in early theories about online sociality, such as that put forward by Rheingold (2000). Rheingold (2000, 10) professes that the internet, by freeing us from the constraints of physical location and our bodies, creates a never-before experienced level of freedom for interaction and sees the internet as democratizing our communities. While Rheingold's work has rather fallen out of fashion for being overly utopian, the idea that the internet grants greater freedom for interpersonal interaction and community-formation still has some advocates (e.g., Benkler 2006; Hampton 2016; Margolis and Moreno-Riaño 2016; Rainie and Wellman 2012; Wellman and Rainie 2013). Such views often stress that the internet enables new styles group interaction:

[T]he Internet has begun to offer us new ways of connecting to each other in groups small and large. As we come to take advantage of these new capabilities, we see social norms and software coevolving to offer new, more stable, and richer contexts for forging new relationships beyond those that in the past have been the focus of our social lives. (Benkler 2006, 376)

The internet provides opportunities to create innumerable virtual communities in which people can take charge of various aspects of their own lives and work out their collective fates…People can control aspects of their personalities in online communities that were never thought subject to individual choice. (Margolis and Moreno-Riaño 2016, 8)

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[2] While I am seeking to pull out similarities between online and offline interpersonal experience, this should not be mistaken as an assertion that there are *no* differences between online and offline sociality.

The internet, here, is seen as creating new types of communities with emphasis given to the ability to overcome geographical restrictions and to find people who we share interests with (Benkler 2006, 364). This new way of connecting with others is sometimes cashed out in terms of "networked individualism", where individuals are not constrained to merely finding themselves part of a community (e.g. the town they live in) but benefit from being able to create and nurture their own, more fluid, personal networks (Rainie and Wellman 2012; Benkler 2006; Wellman 2001).

On the other end of the spectrum are those who fear that the internet erodes community; a narrative that has gained increasingly popularity of late. Turkle (2017), for instance, claims that technology is becoming a substitute for connecting with others in person, and that technological connections, while numerous, are ultimately less substantial than face-to-face interactions. This has led her to state that while we may encounter other people online, we increasingly find ourselves alone and isolated:

> Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. (Turkle 2017, 154)

Such views often suggest that individuals encounter each other online in a predominantly instrumentalist way, resulting in the erosion of deeper forms of togetherness (ibid.; Dotson 2017, 34). Technology use is also frequently linked to increased feelings of isolation, loneliness and depression. The conclusion is that technology is changing the way we encounter others and changing it for the worse.[3]

While these two camps respectively herald and condemn online sociality, they have one thing in common: they make the assumption that *how* we encounter each other online is markedly different to how we encounter each other offline. Indeed, as Eklund notes, the very terms 'online' and 'offline' are "often used when the aim is to distinguish between types of activities…with different social implications and meanings" (2015, 527). In part, this division between online and offline sociality has occurred due to the association of 'online' with the 'virtual' and 'offline' with the 'real' (ibid). This is most likely due to the fact that online interactions are mediated (and often deemed disembodied), while offline interactions are deemed direct (and embodied). In light of this, it seems hardly surprising that these two spheres of social interaction are frequently treated as being *different ways* of encountering others.

Interestingly, though, when describing their interpersonal experiences online, people often do so in ways that resemble descriptions of offline experiences. For instance, online gamers talk about sharing worlds and experiences with other players (e.g. Ducheneaut et al. 2006; Scriven 2018), people talk about sharing interests or beliefs together in online communities (e.g. Gies 2008), and people talk about how online communication helps sustain a sense of togetherness with people they already know (e.g. Dotson 2017; Eklund 2015). What emerges from these descriptions is that, just as in offline sociality, people appear to experience a sense of *being together with others*

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[3] Indeed, according to Turkle, it is not only that our online experience of other people is different and inferior to offline interactions with others, but that our increasing preoccupation with online connections is having a negative impact on our ability to connect with people meaningfully when around them in the 'real' world. Thus, on this view, technological connections are a double-edged sword.

online. Even Turkle and Dotson, in decrying the *quality* of togetherness found in online interactions, implicitly concede that there is a sense in which we can be together with others online, even if it is deemed depleted in some way.

Indeed, there has been an on-going push to recognise that online and offline social life should not be seen as neatly split off from one another (e.g. Baym 2015; Eklund 2015; Willson 2006, 2012). For instance, Baym (2015) highlights that although there is a tendency in academic literature to focus on online interactions between strangers in an anonymous setting, this only accounts for a small percentage of most people's online interpersonal encounters. More commonly, people use the internet to correspond with those they already know, and these encounters are "are richly contextualized in their offline social networks" (Baym 2015, 68). However, noting that online encounters are *embedded* in a wider context that incorporates our offline lives is not, in and of itself, incompatible with the claim that offline interpersonal encounters, due to their mediation through the internet, are essentially different to online encounters; they could simply be two different kinds of sociality that take place within the bigger whole of our lives. What I want to consider in the following is whether the kind of togetherness that people report having online with others might be the *same kind of togetherness* that can feature in offline encounters.

Clearly, when saying that individuals are together online, we are not literally saying that they are physically together in the way that I am in the same spatial location as the others in the café I am currently sitting in. So, what do we mean by together here? Theorists such as Dreyfus (2008) have approached this notion predominantly in relation to questions about how being together is impacted when we leave our bodies behind and interact in disembodied online space; looking at how it is we find ourselves together in online space (spoiler alert: his conclusion is that when together online something is always missing compared to our embodied offline lives). Once again, we find the view that online life (in being disembodied) is essentially different to offline life (with its spatial implications). Rather than starting with an analysis of whether we can attain a sense of *being* together with others online (with its embodied implications), I want to approach this question by asking what it is to have a *sense* or *feeling* of togetherness with others.[4]

In phenomenological literature, the notion of togetherness often arises in discussions about we-experience (e.g. León et al. 2017; León and Zahavi 2016; León and Zahavi 2016; Szanto 2017; Zahavi and Salice 2016; Walther 1923). We-experiences, as I shall expand on below, are experiences where "I ascribe the experience or action neither to an I, a thou, a they or an it but to a we" (Carr 1986, 525). This is not to say simply that two or more individuals happen to be having the same kind of experience at the same time; it is not just shorthand for saying 'I experience x' and 'You experience x'. Rather, the term we-experience is used to capture an experience where the individuals involved are sharing an experience *together*. In this sphere, there is increasing recognition that this togetherness is something that is *felt* by the individuals involved, it is an *affective feeling of togetherness with others as a we*. As we will see below, Walther (1923) goes so far to claim that this affective feeling of togetherness does not always have to take place when the members are physically (or even temporally) together. I suggest that this affective notion of togetherness might be a good contender for the kind of togetherness individuals are referring to in relation to their online interpersonal interactions.

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[4] Whether this *feeling* of togetherness requires an embodied interaction, however, will surface in section 5.

Instead of weighing in on the debate about whether online communality is better or worse than offline communality, I want to take the notion of experiencing something *together as a we* and consider whether the requirements for such an experience can be met in the context of online interactions. If we are able to answer this in the affirmative, which I will argue that at least in some cases we can, I will suggest that this can be fruitfully appealed to as one way in which we can understand how individuals feel together with others who they are not spatially (or perhaps even temporally) with. This conclusion will also support the argument that we should not take it for granted that because online encounters occur in a different medium to offline ones, that they must always be deemed of an essentially different kind.[5] In the final section, I will show how such questions also put pressure on we-theorists to clarify exactly how the conditions of an actual we-experience are met (i.e. to what extent the individuals have to have a fully embodied encounter to meet said requirements).

## 3 Walther, communal experiences and the sense of togetherness

The phenomenology of sociality seeks to tackle questions such as: "What is it to belong to a 'We' or an 'Us'? What is the nature of interpersonal understanding, social interaction and social participation?" (Szanto and Moran 2015, 3). As such, I suggest it is a promising place to start for looking for clues about how we might find ourselves together with others online. This may initially seem like a surprising move to make. The phenomenology of sociality typically emphasises the "affective and embodied nature of socio-cognitive engagements" (ibid., 7). Many of the examples used to discuss being together with others focus almost exclusively on face-to-face interactions (e.g. people in conversation (Schutz 1967), people building a wall together (Walther 1923), people grieving over a lost child together (Scheler 2008)). It might, therefore, appear odd to appeal to a body of work that emphasises the importance of embodied face-to-face interaction to find insights into online sociality. Indeed, in Szanto and Moran's 2015 compendium on phenomenology of sociality there is no mention at all of interpersonal experience online.[6]

Enter Gerda Walther. Walther's dissertation, *Ontology of Social Communities* (1923), has received a flurry of interest in recent years due to her *affective* notion of togetherness (Calcagno 2012, 2018; Caminada 2014; León and Zahavi 2016; Szanto 2017; Zahavi and Salice 2016). Like other phenomenologists, she suggests that being part of a community involves experiencing oneself as part of a group, as part of a 'we' rather than simply as an 'I' (also see Husserl 1989; Scheler 2008; Stein 1989; Schutz 1967). What Walther, though, emphasises is that an essential component of experiencing oneself as part of a we is an affective "sense of togetherness" or "unification" (1923, 23) with the other members.

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[5] Another interesting line of research might be to critically assess Turkle and Dotson's claims that while technology allows us to connect with ease, the quality of those connections is reduced compared to offline interactions. In relation to this, it seems important to scrutinize the quality of various offline interactions. There seems to be a risk of over-emphasising the quality of our offline interactions with one another. We should, for instance, consider the full spectrum of our offline interactions, including, for instance, my interaction with the person selling me coffee or the small-talk I make with my neighbour. That online interactions may also include loose or weak forms of togetherness does not, per se, demonstrate that it is essentially different to offline social life which is also littered with such interactions.

[6] Nor do other recent books on the phenomenology of sociality and collective experience make reference to online sociality (e.g. Guerrero 2016; Salice and Schmid 2016).

Moreover, Walther claims that not only can one feel a sense of togetherness or *we*-ness with others in a narrow sense involving a genuine shared experience that takes place in a face-to-face encounter (which I will refer to as an actual we-experience) but also in a broader sense involving a more implicit or passive sense of being together, which is not restricted to face-to-face situations (which I will refer to as a habitual communal experience) (ibid., 84). This is not to suggest that Walther presents a disembodied or cognitive sense of togetherness. Indeed, Walther argues that togetherness as a *we* is experienced as something bodily and affective and as such is something experienced by embodied subjects, not disembodied minds. *Contra* Dreyfus, I do not think we should accept that "when we enter cyberspace [we] leave behind our emotional, intuitive, situated, vulnerable, embodied selves" (Dreyfus 2008, 6). Certainly, it is up for debate whether we can or do ever encounter one another *in cyberspace* as embodied subjects (a debate I will turn to in section 5) but I think it important to note that when I logon to the internet, my body does not evaporate; I still feel myself typing, as situated in the world, as a feeling body. As we will see below, on Walther's account, it is possible to maintain that individuals experience an embodied, affective sense of togetherness, without having to say that they are engaged in an embodied interpersonal encounter. This has clear advantages when discussing the possibility of communal or we-experiences arising online, for it allows us, at least in some instances, to circumvent tricky questions about whether online interactions can themselves be said to be embodied (although we will explore in more detail in section 5 how the issue of embodiment raises its head again when addressing whether actual we-experiences arise online). What is more, this is a move that is prohibited if we were to appeal to other we-experience theorists, such as Schutz (1967, 163), who limit we-experiences to face-to-face interactions.

### 3.1 Actual we-experiences

The notion of a we-experience is intended to capture the kinds of experience had by an individual with someone as a *we*, rather than just an *I*. Take, for instance, the following situation:

> I go to the cinema to watch *Call Me By Your Name* with a friend. My friend is sitting on one side of me and on the other side is a stranger. All three of us are watching the film. However, there is a sense in which I am watching the film *together with* my friend that does not seem to hold with the stranger.

To describe this situation as involving simply a conjunction of my watching the movie and my friend watching the movie seems to miss out on something essential about the experience, that the movie is something that we experience *together* (Zahavi 2015, 90). Here, my friend and I are having a we-experience of watching the movie together that does not include the stranger. In the following, I will set out a brief overview of the conditions that Walther specifies are required for an actual we-experience.

i)   common intentionality

Walther notes that the individuals must have something *in common*, they must be having an experience which has the same intentional object, content or focus (1923,

22). In our cinema example, the individuals involved are all intentionally directed to the movie. However, this alone is not sufficient: we could happen to be watching a movie *alongside* each other without being aware of what the others were up to (say, if we were sitting at opposite ends of the cinema out of sight from one another).

ii)   reciprocal awareness

There must also be a mutual, reciprocal awareness between the individuals (ibid.). I must know you are watching the movie and you must know that I am watching the movie and be aware that we both have this awareness. Note that this awareness is not supposed to be an onerous requirement, it can be a pre-reflective awareness of one another. However, at this point we still do not have a we-experience. Indeed, we could still be said to be merely watching alongside one another, like the strangers in our example.

iii)   interdependency

Walther adds that the experiences of the individuals involved must be interdependent (ibid., 20); part of being integrated with another person as a *we* is the idea that one's experience is intertwined with the other's experience. While I might have reciprocal other-awareness with the stranger in the cinema, our similar experiences are simply a matter of coinciding experiences. In contrast, my experience might be said to be intertwined with my partner in the sense that my experience of the movie is enriched by my partner's experience; the jokes might seem funnier, the plot more engaging. However, at this point Walther says that there still is not a we-experience. The cinema-watchers in our example do not yet feel *unified as a community.* What is required is that they *feel a sense of togetherness as a we* (ibid., 33).

iv)   affective requirement

The integration required is a special kind of integration, one that involves what Walther calls an 'inner bond' (ibid.). What Walther is referring to here is the experience of coming to feel a bond or unification with the other members of the community, *feeling oneself to be part of a we.* She emphasises that this unification is affective, it is a feeling, rather than being some kind of cognitive judgment. This affective component is the 'glue' which binds a community (Szanto 2017). Crucially, in the case of a we-experience this affectivity must also be reciprocated by all the members involved. There is not a genuine we-experience where I feel a sense of *we*-ness with you but you do not; we must all feel mutually unified as a *we*.[7]

Due to the requirements that an actual we-experience must involve mutual, reciprocal awareness, unification and interdependence, it is generally thought that such an experience requires "spatial proximity and temporal simultaneity" (León and Zahavi 2016, 230) between the members. The reason for this is that what gives us a mutual and reciprocal experience of one another is based on the phenomenological notion of

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[7] For a more in-depth discussion of Walther's conditions for we-experiences see Szanto 2017 and León and Zahavi 2016.

empathy. Empathy is the term used for the way in which another's experience is given to me. In an empathetic encounter, I grasp the other's experience through their bodily expressions (ibid.). As an actual we-experience relies on this empathetic apprehension of the other's experience (and theirs of mine), it is claimed that actual we-experiences can only take place in direct, face-to-face interactions. This concept, then, may seem of little use when talking about whether we can have experiences of togetherness with others online where people are not physically present with one another. However, Walther suggests that feeling *togetherness as a we* does not necessarily require face-to-face interaction.

### 3.2 Habitual communal-experiences

Walther states that actual experiences of togetherness are often vivid and intense but tend to "dissolve quickly" (1923, 48). However, she argues that not only can one have a lively, active sense of togetherness with others but also a habitual sense of togetherness which amounts to a communal experience (ibid., 48, 66). Indeed, she goes so far as to say that habitual unifications are more common and important than actual ones (ibid., 46). But what does Walther mean by a habitual sense of togetherness? Here, she is getting at the idea that we can feel a sense of togetherness with others that is not explicit but more of an implicit feeling. By introducing this concept, Walther allows for a feeling of togetherness as a *we* that does not need to meet the stringent requirements of an actual we-experience.

Walther claims that there are two ways in which a feeling of togetherness can be habitual: first, where an actual we-experience becomes sedimented and, second, where no actual we-experience is presupposed. Zahavi & Salice (2016, 521) illustrate the first kind of habitual unification as follows:

> To see this, think of the difference between the feelings of unification or togetherness characterizing a friendship – fervent, lively and constantly rein-forced at the beginning, they eventually become sedimented background-feelings. Unification, in this case, is first explicit, but becomes habitual over time.

Drawing upon Husserl's notion of habit, Walther talks about how our experiences do not simply disappear after we have them but can become sedimented. These passive experiences no longer occupy the foreground of our experience but rather sit in the background as something that the individual may not be actively aware of. An active we-experience involves a feeling of togetherness that the members of the group are explicitly aware of, whereas a passive or habitual experience of togetherness refers to a sedimented, background feeling that the individual may not be explicitly aware of, yet still structures their experience. Calcagno (2018, 7) describes this habitual feeling of togetherness as a "wider form of belonging". This style of habitual communal experience is likely to occur in personal communities, where one's relationship to a specific person (or people) is a key component of feeling together as a *we*. Such personal communities include romantic couples, families or friends.

In the second instance, Walther claims that one can have a habitual sense of unification where there has been no previous explicit unification (1923, 44). For

instance, one might grow closer to other members of a group and have a pervasive sense of togetherness with them that, nonetheless, sits in the background. Walther suggests that this may be the kind of belonging that commonly arises in communities that form around a shared object (what she calls an objectual community). For example, an interest in a shared object might produce an implicit sense of unification with others with the same interest. As Zahavi and Salice (2016) highlight, it might be better to think of this second instance as a kind of *implicit* (rather than habitual) sense of togetherness; as it is a togetherness that has never been experienced as part of a genuine, active we-experience and is not so much sedimented into passive awareness so much as a more low-level feeling of belonging together.[8] Walther highlights that objectual communities that are centred around sharing the same interests or beliefs do not need to be spatially or temporally present with one another (1923, 81). For example, one might come to identify oneself as part of the Christian church and experience a sense of togetherness with other non-present Christians, without there being a direct, face-to-face interaction between the members. In objectual communities such as these, the members themselves are more replaceable and the sense of communal unification can take place even when membership is in flux (see Table 1 for a summary of Walther's communal experiences).

By providing an account of communal experiences that can be actual, habitual, personal and objectual, I suggest that Walther provides us with a flexible framework for understanding sociality that can account (at least in some instances) for how we find ourselves feeling a sense of togetherness with others online.

## 4 Online habitual communal experiences

As detailed above, Walther introduces the notion of an affective sense of togetherness that, at least in some circumstances, can take place without the need for a face-to-face interaction (1923, 81). This offers us a potential way of understanding how individuals experience togetherness online with others, without relying on a demonstration that subjects can have embodied interactions online. Walther allows for an affective sense of togetherness that is bodily, it is had by a flesh and blood subject, but that does not necessarily involve an embodied interaction. By recognising that we still have affective experiences when we engage in online interactions, we may escape Dreyfus' conclusion that something must *always* be left behind when we are online together.

### 4.1 Online habitual objectual communal experiences

One example of habitual non-face-to-face togetherness Walther gives is in relation to objectual communities, where the members are bonded through their mutual interest in the same object or beliefs. Many online communities crop up that are centred around shared interests, beliefs or pursuits. For instance, the internet is littered with online communities

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[8] It is worth noting that Walther is not always entirely clear by what she means by habitual togetherness, sometimes seeming to mean something akin to Husserlian passive experience and at other times implying something that simply denotes a less intense feeling of togetherness. Due to space, I will not explore this potential ambiguity here. It is sufficient for our purposes to employ Walther's idea that a sense of togetherness is not limited to actual we-experiences but can and does feature in broader communal experiences.

**Table 1** Table of Walther's communal experiences

|  | Personal | Objectual |
|---|---|---|
| **Actual** | An actual we-experience where one's relationship to a specific person (or people) is a key component of feeling together as a *we*, e.g. feeling together as a we with a friend. This seems to require face-to-face interaction. | An actual we-experience where the feeling of togetherness relates to having a shared interest or object, e.g. watching a movie together as part of a film club. This seems to require face-to-face interaction. |
| **Habitual** | A habitual communal experience where the feeling of togetherness from an actual we-experience has become sedimented e.g. the feeling of togetherness that marks a long friendship. This does not necessarily require face-to-face interaction. | A habitual communal experience where the feeling of togetherness has not been preceded by an actual we-experience but involves a growing together due to a shared interest or object e.g. feeling part of a *we* as a member of a religious community. This does not necessarily require face-to-face interaction. |

for people who have the same cultural interests, political views, sexual preferences, etc. Name an interest and you can find a community somewhere on the internet that shares that interest with you; Ferreday (2009, 17) refers to such online groups as "'like-minded' communities". The need for interpersonal interaction to establish a sense of togetherness is diminished where there is a shared object around which a community can gather. One's sense of togetherness arises out of an implicit sense of being like one another, sharing the same interests or values. It does not matter that the people on the relevant blogs, reddit sites, websites, have not met each other in person; a feeling of belonging can still implicitly mark these kinds of communities. Employing this habitual sense of togetherness that does not require face-to-face interaction to have taken place may well account for why individuals feel a sense of togetherness on, say, websites with those who share common interests but not physical location.

What is interesting about this analysis is that if we accept that objectual communities can exist online, what this seems to reveal is that these kinds of online communities do not appear to be a *new kind* of community despite the new medium through which it is carried out. Rather, the internet simply provides a new means for us to discover objectual communities that we come to feel a sense of belonging to.

## 4.2 Online habitual personal communal experiences

I now want to explore the idea that it is not only habitual *objectual* communities that might exist online but also *personal* ones as well. As noted in section 2, although anonymous online interactions often take centre stage in the discussion of online communities, many of our online interactions take place with people with whom we already have relationships in our offline lives. Think, for example, of the friends we stay in touch with via Facebook, our family group chats on WhatsApp, the partners we keep updated throughout the day on Instagram. Although these interactions do not take place face-to-face, I suggest that they can be permeated with a habitual sense of togetherness.

As Zahavi and Salice (2016) note, our friendships, family and romantic relationships can come to be characterised by a habitual sense of togetherness as a *we*. When we first meet someone, we might undergo an actual, explicit we-experience. Say, for example,

that I go to a lecture and the speaker makes a sexist comment. I glance at the person next to me and meet her eye. I see her disgusted expression and she sees my equally disgusted expression (common intentional object and reciprocal other-awareness). I identify with her as a fellow feminist, feel that my reaction is validated and intensified by her reaction (interdependent experience) and feel a sense of disapproval at the lecturer that we are having *together* (reciprocal feeling of unification). Here we have an illustration of an actual we-experience arising between me and the woman at the lecture (let us call her Judith).

According to Walther, this sense of togetherness that has arisen in an actual we-experience can, over time, become sedimented. If this is the case, a habitual sense of *being one of us* might passively structure our experience together without the need to go through the process of establishing an explicit, 'actual' we-experience. As Calcagno expresses it: "Friends, lovers or members of a group may dwell together, without exchanging words or signs. But they know they are together as one" (Calcagno 2012, 100). The more time I spend with Judith, the more our sense of belonging together drops into the background. Over time, our friendship develops into romance and Judith and I habitually come to think of ourselves as a couple. Thus, the sense of being 'one of us' that I experience when I am with Judith no longer relies on a performance of actual we-experiences. When we see our romantic partner, we are already disposed to feeling a sense of togetherness with them.[9]

I think that online interpersonal interactions may also be characterised by a habitual sense of togetherness in this way. For example, if I message Judith over WhatsApp about what we are doing for dinner, our habitual sense of togetherness is still there. This habitual feeling does not only colour our face-to-face interactions but can also feature in our online interaction. Indeed, we can draw out this intuition if we compare how I might experience messaging back and forth with Judith about our evening plans with my messaging the electrician about the best time to come to the house to fix the boiler that night. What I want to highlight here is that the messages between Judith and I take place in the context of our relationship *as a whole*. Simply because our interaction has moved onto an online medium does not seem to warrant the conclusion that our habitual sense of togetherness as a *we* must evaporate. Indeed, I would argue that this kind of online interaction with those we already have a communal bond with offline can sustain a habitual sense of togetherness with those we have personal relationships with. This is not to say that these online interactions are simply contextualised by offline sociality but are structured by the same sense of togetherness as certain offline interactions. Again, what this seems to highlight is that although the medium for interaction might be new, the experience of feeling together with others in this way, at least in some instances, might not be that novel.

## 5 Online actual we-experiences

In section 4, I considered how we might understand how individuals feel togetherness with others online in terms of a habitual affective togetherness. This allowed us to bypass questions about whether individuals encounter each other in an embodied way online as

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[9] Although this is not to suggest that we never feel conflict with our romantic partners, family or friends.

these habitual forms of togetherness are not reliant on face-to-face interaction. I now want to turn to the possibility that we can also find actual we-experiences online. Remember, that in order for the interlocking acts in section 3.1 to be met, the individuals involved must have the same intentional object, content or focus; be mutually and reciprocally aware of one another; their experiences must be interdependent; and each individual must feel part of a *we* and know that the other(s) also feels this. As noted, this requires that the individuals have an empathetic encounter with one another. Based on this, it is commonly claimed that actual we-experiences must be direct, i.e. unmediated, face-to-face encounters (e.g. León and Zahavi 2016, 230; Walther 1923, 68; Schutz 1967, 164; Szanto 2017, 11). But why is this the case? One reason for this, I argue, is that empathy, a constitutive part of actual we-experience, is typically assumed to occur only in direct face-to-face interaction. This is because I grasp the other's experience empathetically through my apprehension of the other's body as a field of expression (e.g. Schutz 1967, 164); I grasp "the other's experiences insofar as they are expressed in words, gestures, body posture, facial expressions" (León and Zahavi 2016, 230). Thus, it is presumed that what is needed is an embodied interaction with the other in the sense that we are sharing the same physical space with one another.

I now want to consider to what extent we can find adequate expressivity in online interpersonal interactions for them to be deemed, at least in certain cases, empathetic encounters and, in turn, meet the requirements for an actual we-experience. The question this raises, then, is do we really need a full-bodied embodied interaction with the other (in the sense of being together in the same physical space) for an actual we-experience to obtain? I think we are faced with two potential answers to this question:

i)   that so long as the other's expressions are given to me, and mine to them, in sufficient detail (even if they are mediated by technology), then we do not need a full-blown embodied encounter to take place online in order to secure the idea that actual we-experiences and an active sense of togetherness can take place[10]; or

ii)  that even though we have a certain level of expressivity available in online interpersonal interactions, either this expressivity is not sufficient for an actual we-experience to be established or something more than expressivity is required (thus pushing for a more refined description of exactly what it is about the face-to-face interaction that is special for actual we-experiences and empathy).

Both these responses point to a need for further research into exactly which aspects of embodied interaction are required for empathy and actual we-experiences. A full investigation of this, unfortunately, goes beyond the scope of this paper. Below, however, I will consider three examples of online interpersonal interactions, each getting progressively less fully embodied, that provide a starting point for this discussion.

## 5.1 Live video feeds

While we may not be geographically together with those we interact with online, this does not mean that we cannot be face-to-face. Live video feeds quite literally put us face-to-face with one another. If any form of online interaction might be said to

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[10] It might still be acknowledged, though, that there could be something missing in this interaction that affects the intensity of the we-experience felt.

be capable of meeting Walther's requirements for an actual we-experience, it seems likely to be this one. Certainly, individuals can meet the intentionality requirement: individuals might have as their intentional focus an action (such as having online sex) or a shared intentional object (such as a book that they are discussing). They can also be having interdependent experiences (think of the difference if the individuals were masturbating or reading alone). Can the other requirements also be met? It is these requirements, of mutual and reciprocal awareness and feelings of togetherness, that rest on the individual's empathetic experiences of one other.

Let us explore this question in the context of discussing a book with a friend over Skype. As we are Skyping, I can see my friend pointing to pages of the book, see her nod and smile when I say something she agrees with, can hear in her tone of voice that she loved the book and her excitement that I also loved the book. What is more, given our temporal simultaneity, I can also see that she is looking at me, listening to me, responding to my points and I am responding in turn. It seems that not only am I aware of her but that she is aware of me, and I can see this and so can she; thus, I think, securing the idea that we can be mutually and reciprocally aware of one another and each other's feelings of togetherness. All of this suggests that her experience is given to me through her bodily expression over Skype (and mine to her). Even though we are not technically in a direct social relationship, as the screen is mediating us, I do seem to have a direct experience of her expressivity in the sense that it is given to me through her body (as I am attending *to her* and not *to the screen*). As such, it seems possible the requirements for an actual we-experience are met. If this is the case, this seems to provide us with another example of offline interpersonal experience that can be found online, bolstering the claim that there is at least one manner in which we can find ourselves together online is as a *we* in an actual we-experience.

However, I suspect that some might claim that despite being face-to-face with one another over Skype, there is still something missing that might prevent an actual we-experience. While live video-links puts us face-to-face in visual and auditory terms, they do not give us a sense of smell, touch, or taste. We might, then, want to consider whether there is something important in the empathetic encounter that is not visually or auditorily perceivable. Though, in turn, we might also wonder whether empathy really does require a fully-embodied multi-sensorial interaction; it seems we can empathetically encounter someone through a pane of glass (where the sense of touch is removed) and we are unlikely to say that someone who has lost their sense of smell is no longer capable of empathetic experience. To effectively show empathy cannot take place in this context, it seems we need a greater understanding of what the limit cases for an empathetic encounter might be.

Where such considerations might be heading towards is a sense that when interacting over video-link we do not encounter the other in fully embodied *presence*. However, while this shows there to be a difference between video-link and physical interaction, we need to show that this would prohibit an actual we-experience and feeling of togetherness from arising (rather than, perhaps, relating to another way in which we find ourselves together offline). Another objection might be that something that is not related to empathy, that is nevertheless important for an actual we-experience, is lost. We might, for example, look to the work of Levinas (1998) who argues that what is central to the apprehension of the Other is a feeling of vulnerability under their gaze. We might question whether this vulnerability is absent when we are not

physically present with one another (see Dreyfus 2008, 69–74 for a discussion of presence and vulnerability online).

Nevertheless, the question remains whether the physical presence of the other changes the experience in an important way that is required for an actual we-experience. Perhaps so. Although, it does not seem to be based solely upon expressivity, interactive communication or synchronicity (which can all take place via video-link). Certainly, being able to interact face-to-face over live video seems to make a case for some online forms of interpersonal interaction being direct and embodied *enough* to allow for empathy and, in turn, actual we-experiences. In the next two examples, I will push further the question of what kind of interaction might be *enough* to justify talking of an actual sense of togetherness as a *we*.

## 5.2 Avatars

Avatars are virtual figures that people adopt when entering certain virtual spaces. Avatars are controlled by the users to interact with the virtual world around them and, in online multiplayer games, with other people's avatars. Avatars can make a variety of bodily expressions, gestures and players (on some platforms) can type speech to one another or converse over audio-headsets. The use of avatars in virtual realities and online gaming has received a lot of attention in recent years; debates rage about whether one can have embodied, immersive and/or engaged experienced through avatars (e.g. Calleja 2011; Ducheneaut et al. 2006; Farrow and Iacovides 2014; McMahan 2003). Often in studies of avatars in multi-player online gaming, people report feeling a sense of community and shared experiences as a *we* with those that they play with (e.g. Ducheneaut et al. 2006; Scriven 2018). It seems that an objectual habitual community might arise among players online with the game as the shared object. Moreover, Ducheneaut et al. (2006) note that people often make a point of going online to play *with* certain individuals. This hints at the idea that not only habitual objectual but also habitual personal communities exist in online gaming.

However, players do not only meet in a virtual world because they are interested in *it* as an object. They often meet others there to carry out shared activities such as undertake missions. Indeed, games not only allow for social interaction to take place via avatars but often require people's avatars to team up to complete certain missions or quests (Scriven 2018). This suggests that members may feel an explicit sense of togetherness because they are sharing an actual we-experience of the kind '*we* are undertaking this mission'.

The question, then, is whether the kind of interaction that takes place between avatars is sufficiently expressive to create the interlocking acts needed for an actual we-experience. Unlike video-links, we cannot say that avatars literally put us face-to-face with one another. Any interaction between players is mediated through the virtual bodies of the avatars. Nevertheless, avatars do allow for a certain amount of expressivity both visually and, in some cases, audibly. What is more, there is evidence that the way in which social interaction takes place through avatars closely mimics interactions in offline face-to-face conversations (e.g. eye contact, turn-taking in communication, and interpersonal distance) (Yee et al. 2007). However, we should be careful not to overstate the level of expressivity available to avatars. As Scriven (2018, 203) puts it: "More or less gone are unconscious body language, states of consciousness, facial cues,

and so forth". The richness of the expressive human body is not, then, to be found (yet) in avatars. So is your experience empathetically given to me through your avatar allowing for mutual and reciprocal awareness and unification? Mutual and reciprocal awareness might seem possible: if our avatars are interacting, I know that you, through your avatar, are interacting *with me*, through my avatar, and if we are responding to each other it seems plausible that this could be described as an awareness of each other. It might, though, be more difficult to establish a mutual and reciprocal sense of togetherness due to the avatar's limited expressive range. Though, if we are excitedly talking to each other over our headsets, it might be argued that I can grasp your sense of being an us and vice versa. More research needs to be done to establish if this could amount to an actual we-experience, but there seems to be enough expressivity here to warrant such a question being asked.

### 5.3 Chat Apps

Arguing that Chat Apps can generate actual we-experiences may seem like a tall order. The prime function of these apps is not to put us face-to-face like video-links (although increasingly they allow individuals to share photos and short videos). Nor do they provide us with some mediated body in the form that avatars might do. Rather, interpersonal interactions largely take place through text-based conversations, complemented by an ever-increasing archive of emojis. Nevertheless, I suggest that there is some basis for arguing that even this form of online interpersonal encounter can be said to be expressive in ways that could allow for empathy and actual we-experiences to arise.

One might suppose that Chat Apps, with their predominantly text-based form of interaction, are best described as akin to email. However, analyses of speech patterns in emails versus instant messaging show that such a comparison obscures the nature of Chat App communication. Whereas emails tend towards more formal speech (with terms of address and full sentences), conversation on Chat Apps is more informal, disjointed, and conversational (Ben-Ze'ev 2004; Baym 2015; Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013). In short, conversation here more closely imitates the way that we talk to one another face-to-face. I suggest that this style of communication can increase one's sense of awareness of the other and their reciprocal awareness of you (e.g. through turn-taking and reactive styles of conversing). What is more, even when limited to text-based communication, interaction need not be deemed devoid of expressivity. As Baym (2015, 103) highlights: "even text-based media afford many ways to express emotion. We use emoticons to signal friendliness, we use punctuation and capitalization to insert feeling, we use informal language and talk-like phonetics spellings to create an air of conversationality".

Additionally, Chat Apps have been developed to create a sense of the other as being present online. Let us look at the features of WhatsApp as an example. On this platform, when individuals are active on the app it states underneath their name that they are 'online'. When chatting to someone, the app indicates that a person is typing by displaying 'typing...'. When looking for indications that we can be aware of someone online, this looks like a good place to start. One might object that while this might allow for mutual awareness of each other to arise, it is difficult to account for reciprocal awareness (i.e. for me to be aware that you are aware of me and vice versa).

Nevertheless, being able to see that you are online and that you can see that I am 'typing…' may get us some way to asserting that even this higher bar of reciprocity can be met. A rapid back and forth discussion might also produce an active feeling of being part of a *we* on the app. An objector could point out that we do not know for certain that the other is reciprocally aware of you or your feelings of unification (they might have pottered off to make a cup of tea while you are typing away). This seems potentially problematic. However, it should be noted that full-bodied empathy is not perfect either; I might be looking into your eyes and nodding at the appropriate moments but, unbeknownst to you, be thinking about what I am going to cook for dinner. We must be careful, then, when considering if it is possible to empathetically experience others over Chat Apps not to confuse this for an epistemic question about how well we carry out this activity.

While this does not amount to conclusive evidence that Walther's conditions for an actual we-experience can be met on Chat Apps, it does hint at the idea that being mutually aware of one another, influencing one another's experience, and experiencing an active, lively sense of togetherness with others may be possible even via text-based media. Certainly, more research needs to be done on how people experience being online together over Chat Apps. Nevertheless, I suggest that the interactive features highlighted here give us some ground for exploring the idea further that actual we-experiences can arise in Chat App interpersonal encounters. Crucially, I do not think that the evidence is sufficient to rule, out of hand, that these interpersonal interactions definitely do not allow for actual we-experiences.

# 6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested that we interpret people's claims that they feel a sense of togetherness with others online, in some instances, in terms of experiencing an affective sense of togetherness as part of a *we*. I have argued that this not only supports the idea that online and offline sociality cannot be neatly separated but directly challenges the notion that how we find ourselves together with others online is always of an essentially different kind. I have used Walther's broad account of communal experiences, as constituted by an affective sense of togetherness, to frame this discussion. Walther, in allowing that some communal experiences are marked by a habitual sense of togetherness that does not rely upon face-to-face interactions, lets us, in certain circumstances, sidestep the need to demonstrate that in order to feel together with others online we must be embodied with others online.

In the final section, by considering whether actual we-experiences occur online, I have explicitly challenged the notion that a fully embodied interaction is required for actual we-experiences to arise. I have argued that the need for the empathetic encounter between individuals seems to be rooted in the need for an apprehension of the other's experience via their bodily expressivity. I have suggested that such expressivity might be found in various forms of online interaction, even though these interactions do not warrant being called fully embodied. As such, I have claimed that we are forced to scrutinize the extent to which full embodiment is necessary for an actual we-experience, which, in turn, puts pressure on what embodiment means in the face-to-face encounter. Suggesting that mediated online interactions might sometimes amount to

direct interpersonal encounters seems to muddy the waters about what we really mean when we say that interpersonal encounters are direct and embodied. The investigations of this paper, therefore, call for further research on what the limit cases for an empathetic encounter might be in terms of embodiment. In opposition to my argument, some might respond that even if we can find a certain level of expressivity online, there is an intuitive feeling that there is *something about* physical face-to-face interaction that marks it apart from other interpersonal encounters. However, I hope to have shown that with pressing questions about the nature of online sociality unanswered, what this *something* might be demands greater exploration.

Finally, while I hope to have shown that a habitual, and perhaps even an actual, sense of togetherness as a *we* can occur online, I have made no specific claims about the frequency nor the intensity of such feelings, nor about whether online sociality is desirable or not. If it were to be shown that even though online interactions may be marked by a habitual or actual sense of togetherness, but that these occur infrequently or are felt less vividly compared to face-to-face interactions, this could still support the concern that sociality online is 'thinner' than offline sociality (e.g. as expressed by Turkle 2017 and Dotson 2017); alternatively, if they occur more often than offline or are felt more intensely, this could support the idea that the internet facilitates a sense of community that surpasses that found in offline sociality (e.g. as expressed by Hampton 2016). Such research could, nevertheless, be compatible with my claim that some forms of online interaction are of the same kind as offline interactions, as what is being scrutinized is the intensity, depth and frequency of these feelings of togetherness rather than suggesting they are of a different kind of sociality altogether. Though, as I have suggested, we should be careful when discussing how thin or thick togetherness online might be, not to overstate the quality of all our offline interactions.

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