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# The Digitally Dis/Connected Asylum Seeker: On the Affective (Re)Mediation of the UK's Hostile Environment

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Geography

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# Abstract

This thesis tracks how the affective capacities of the UK's Hostile Environment (what it *feels* like to live under hostile policies, practices, and systems enrolled within the UK's asylum application process) get mediated and (re)mediated through everyday smartphone lifeworlds. Drawing upon one year of ethnographic data collection in the North-East of England (including twenty-six semi-structured interviews and three participatory mapping workshops), this work offers novel insights into how forms of smartphone subjectivity are remapping affectual state power at the everyday level within the UK's asylum system.

As a body of work, I offer two major novel contributions to geographical thought. First, I develop an account of critical posthumanism that highlights the power-laden nature of taken-for-granted forms of smartphone connectivity. Going beyond mainstream imaginaries of the smartphone subject (read: white, male, heteronormative), I ground the 'digitally-connected asylum seeker' within longer legacies of colonial violence and harm. In doing so, I draw attention to how the integration of the smartphone into the asylum application process — both from the perspective of state governance and everyday life — continues to (re)produce legacies of racialised Othering, whilst simultaneously making possible opportunities to resist and destabilise Otherness through digitally-mediated forms of affirmative life.

Second, I offer a commentary on the value of tracing ambiguous affectual relations within the asylum experience. Through the lens of everyday smartphone practices, I explore how the digital mediation of the UK's Hostile Environment simultaneously intensifies and destabilises what hostility feels like in everyday life. Speaking to current debates within human geography on the balance between negative and affirmative relations, I put forth an account of everyday digital life that holds the tension between more commonly represented affectual relations like exhaustion, and less-visible, alternative relations such as hope or care(ing). In doing so, I build upon the contributions of Black feminist scholarship to question the hegemony of negativity within representations of Othered life: opening up a dialogue of how we research and represent forms of life governed through asylum systems.

# Table of Contents

Abstract .....	2
Declaration .....	7
Statement of Copyright .....	8
Acknowledgements .....	9
 <b>Preface</b> .....	 10
 <b>One: Introduction</b>	
Research Beginnings .....	12
Everyday Smartphone Life in the UK's Asylum System .....	14
The 'Digitally-Connected Asylum Seeker' — Towards Critical Posthumanism .....	23
A Critical Posthumanism for Human Geography .....	25
Which Human(s); Which Digital Assemblage(s)? .....	32
Affect as Governance: On Hostility .....	34
A (Brief) Genealogy of Hostility: Three Key Moments .....	37
Moving Towards Everyday Digital Dis/Connection .....	50
Thesis Contributions .....	53
A Disciplinary Debate: Between Affirmation and Negativity .....	57
Journal Articles .....	59



## **Two: On the (Re)Mediation of Hostility**

Introduction .....	65
(Digitally) Encountering Hostility .....	68
Administrating Hostility Through the Smartphone .....	71
(Re)Mediating Hostility Through the Smartphone .....	73
Towards Everyday Smartphone Geographies: Living (Digitally) Like a Migrant .....	77
(Re)enforced Hostility .....	82
(Re)mediated Hostility .....	86
Conclusion .....	89
Bibliography .....	90

## **Three: The Digital Everyday**

Introduction .....	103
The (Digital) Everyday .....	107
Friction .....	111
Tension .....	117
Conclusion: Sitting with the Limits of Ethnography .....	122
Bibliography .....	124

## **Four: Exhausting Dis/Connection**

Introduction .....	132
Researching Everyday Digital Life .....	136
Geographies of the (Non)Encounter .....	140
(Non)Encounters as Slow Violence .....	144
Pauses, Delays and Voids .....	149

Pauses .....	150
Delays .....	153
Voids .....	156
Conclusion .....	160
Bibliography .....	162

## **Five: Hope(ful) orientations**

Introduction .....	171
What is Hope, Then? .....	173
Naming and Locating Hope: Fieldwork Reflections .....	178
Between Hope and Hostility .....	180
Hopeful Futures Beyond Asylum .....	181
Collective Hope in a Mediated Present .....	188
Hope in Detachment .....	193
Conclusion .....	198
Bibliography .....	201

## **Six: Care(ing) relations**

Introduction .....	209
Care(ing) Assemblages in Everyday Digital Life .....	213
Research Context .....	217
What do Caring Assemblages Do? On (Re)Mediation .....	219
Countering Isolating Infrastructure .....	221
Becoming More Than .....	226
Shifting Cosmopolitan Imaginaries .....	230

Conclusion .....	234
Bibliography .....	237

## **Seven: Towards Conclusions**

Mapping out Contributions to Human Geography .....	246
From Hostility to Care(ing): Between Negativity and Affirmation .....	249
On Dis/Connection: A (Potentially) Transformative Political Relation .....	253
Practical and Policy-Oriented Applications .....	257
Beyond the Thesis: Future Work on Digital Dis/Connection .....	261

## **Appendix: Methods**

Setting up the Research .....	263
Ethnography .....	264
Interviews .....	268
Participatory Mapping .....	276

<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>279</b>
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# Declaration

I declare the material contained in this body of work is solely my own.

## Statement of Copyright

The copyright of this thesis and its publications rests with the author.

# Acknowledgements

First, I would like to give thanks to [*name removed*] for welcoming me into the organisation for a year. In a landscape of ever-increasing demand on organisations providing asylum seekers support, their time, energy and passion was never taken for granted. To the staff, volunteers, and individuals who took time to help me with doing this research — whether translating research posters, helping out in an interview, drawing on a mind map, or simply chatting with me over a cup of coffee — your stories and experiences will always be cherished and continue to inform my work.

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Finally, to Carlo. You've read every word of this thesis, probably more than once —  
it's as much yours as it is mine. You're golden.

## Preface



A mundane reality: charging smartphones and sharing a cuppa at the drop-in

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*“I think what people don’t realise is that the phone, or the smartphone should I say, is so important in the daily lives of asylum seekers, especially like we see here everyday in [city in the North-East of England]. You know, at the most basic level, they can’t even get in contact with their solicitor now without one... and that doesn’t account for the basics of just living a normal life in today’s world... staying connected with family, going out into the city, meeting new people... it is so so important...”*

*... But unfortunately, you know, for a lot of people it is very hard to keep on top of staying connected to their phones. Yes, most people you meet at the drop-ins have a smartphone, but every week we are asked for free SIM cards or money for phone top-ups. It is hard for us as a charity to have a constant supply of them, and when we do have them, they disappear within a week. The demand is so high [...] when you’re living on literally no money as a consequence of the Hostile Environment, I mean the guys in the hotel are on £8.86 per week, it becomes a question of prioritising the essentials, most of which end up choosing their phones over shower gel or proper food.”*

Charity Support Worker — 18/08/2022

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# Part One

## Introduction

On a rare sunny afternoon in the late summer of 2022, I found myself in the office of a major charity based in the North-East of England <sup>1</sup> awaiting my first meeting with the charity's committee. The charity in question had been providing resources, advice, and spaces to asylum-seeking individuals across the city since 2011, and had since grown into a city-wide space of sanctuary for individuals within and beyond the UK's asylum system.

To be sitting here, in this small office on the outskirts of the city centre, already felt like a major first step in the development of this project. In the weeks and months prior to this meeting, I had been sending emails to all major organisations in the region, receiving an almost identical response: 'sorry we don't currently have the capacity to take on a long-term researcher, I wish you the best of luck with your PhD'. Given the aftermath of the global pandemic, prolonged austerity measures affecting third-sector organisations, and over a decade of Hostile Environment policies, the scarcity of resources and limited capacity for long-term research collaborations came as no surprise. Although all major organisations that I had reached out to readily acknowledged the intense demand for smartphones and supporting digital infrastructures — SIM cards, data plans, Wi-Fi connection, charging cables — in the midst of a digitalising Hostile Environment, their capacity to work with a PhD researcher was thin. This was a reality I had anticipated when embarking on this project and one that has been identified by others doing similar work — both in terms of the impacts of austerity of the third sector (MacLeavy, 2024; 2023; Benwell et al., 2023), the methodological challenges of doing fieldwork with charities (Happ, 2021; Wolf, 2021; Leszczynski, 2017), and the unavoidable consequences of Hostile Environment policies that have swept that landscape of asylum governance in the UK since 2012 (Darling, 2022; Coddington, 2020).

To be sat here then, face-to-face with the people who run the day-to-day realities of the charity in question was already a major step in advancing this project. Ironic in the face

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<sup>1</sup> The details of the charity and city have been kept anonymised for the purposes of participant protection due to the in-depth and small-scale nature of this research.

of this project, a collective societal lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic became clear from the outset: our digital worlds, connections, and practices are sometimes simply not enough to replace a face-to-face human connection, but, are nonetheless foundational to our ways of living — especially in systems that have rapidly digitalised in a post-COVID landscape. The time given to me in this office — with three full time committee members eagerly discussing the prospects of developing an ongoing collaboration to develop and shape this PhD research — felt like gold dust to a young PhD researcher. But in retrospect, it also felt like something that couldn't have been possible through email threads, WhatsApp chats, or even zoom calls. These initial meetings — and the year of ethnographic and participatory research that followed — have profoundly shaped this thesis: in its broader framings, methodological choices, theoretical contributions, and empirical findings. I approached the charity with an interest in smartphones, but I left with an incredibly detailed and nuanced appreciation of the complex and entangled digital assemblages that animate forms of life within the asylum system — some of which are included selectively in this thesis as a series of academic publications: together, attempting to capture what 'everyday life' looks, feels like and means for our broader understanding of digital dis/connection within the UK's asylum system.

It's important to note from the outset of this thesis that although most of its contributions are conceptually driven, the arguments that unfold across the chapters emerge directly from a deep engagement with, and commitment to, ethnographic fieldwork with asylum seekers in the North East of England. As a thesis by publication, the details of my methodological approach <sup>2</sup> — including the intensity of care, commitment to relationship building, and bodily and emotional labour that goes into doing this kind of research over a long period of time — can seem secondary to the theoretical arguments put forward in the journal articles. However, *all* of the conceptual questions I explore throughout the thesis were made possible precisely through the design and process of being ethnographically embedded within 'everyday life' in the UK's asylum system. To see, observe, stay with, or say anything conceptually meaningful about 'everyday life' in a digitalising asylum system is preceded by a whole range of important methodological questions that determine (1) how we can access everyday digital life as a researcher and (2) what we can say about the data we end up collecting. Some of these questions are explored in part three <sup>3</sup>, but from the outset of reading this thesis, a reader should be aware that all conceptual claims made about everyday digital

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<sup>2</sup> Specific methodological details can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>3</sup> *Social & Cultural Geography*

life within the UK's asylum system are rooted within, and have been fundamentally shaped by, a deep commitment to exploring the (complex, ambiguous, difficult, joyful, confusing...) range of ethnographic encounters that make this thesis what it is.

Taken together, this thesis presents an account of the everyday affectual experiences of being a digitally-dis/connected asylum seeker in the UK today. Throughout the papers included here, I track how the presence of the smartphone — simultaneously in relation to the asylum system and a broader account of everyday life — has impacted the mediation and (re)mediation of hostile affective governance within asylum governance. Drawing out a larger commentary on digitally-mediated distributions of power and resistance, I explore how the practice of digital affective (re)mediation is simultaneously intensifying and disrupting hostility as a state-produced affect and broader circulating atmosphere. There are multiple threads that I attempt to hold together in this introduction and thesis, guided by the following questions:

- i. How do we reckon with, tease out, and represent the 'digitally-connected asylum seeker' subject?
- ii. How are the affectual contours of the (digitalising) Hostile Environment changing through smartphone (re)mediation?
- iii. How can we make room for ambiguous, complex, and affirmative affectual forms of everyday digital life, whilst staying with the violent realities of upholding the UK's asylum system?

## Everyday Smartphone Life in the UK's Asylum System

In today's ever increasingly interconnected world, smartphones have become our worlds. Our lives are not only lived on our phones; our lives are produced through them, by our interactions with them, with our entanglements beyond them (Miller et al., 2021; Rose et al., 2021; Agger, 2011). In the early to mid-2010s, the smartphone enters our lives, not simply as a technological object that can carry out certain tasks of our lives (Miller et al., 2021), but as an ever-expanding technological device that has taken over, replaced, and introduced new ways of living into everyday existence (Shi et al., 2023; Heitmater and Lahlou, 2021; Miller, 2021). Since, it has become virtually impossible to disentangle the complex interconnections between the human and the smartphone. The apps and platforms that we engage with shape our daily practices (McLean et al., 2023; Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2021; Netto et al., 2021). The algorithms that we interact with shape our worlds and worldviews (Maalsen, 2023; Beer, 2017; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). The people and interfaces we connect with online shape our daily lifeworlds (Koch and Miles, 2021; Hobbs et al., 2017). Simply put, we cannot conceptualise life today without taking seriously the impact that our handheld digital technologies have on our everyday actions, thoughts, or imaginaries (Madsen and Stæhr, 2025; Ash et al., 2018).

In addition to everyday forms of living, smartphones are simultaneously shifting everyday forms of governing. At the level of the state, smartphones are now enrolled in multiple state processes and practices: all the way from citizens' passport renewals to submitting documents for an asylum claim (Schou and Mjelholt, 2019). At the time of writing this thesis, it is clear to say that the smartphone is fully enrolled as both a *tool* of governing (information gathering, communication, tracking case progress) and an *object* of governance within UK asylum (surveillance, data mining, and proof of truth) <sup>4</sup>.

And still, the question of the ubiquity of the smartphone remains provocative when placed in contrast with the discourses that have emerged, circulated, and persisted about

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<sup>4</sup> Further detail about these shifts can be found most clearly in my *Progress in Human Geography* paper [Part Two] which tracks digitalisation within state governance.

the UK's asylum *subjects* over the past decade. Manifold discourses have surfaced about the digitally connected asylum seeker, from signalling fakeness, raising suspicion, to becoming governable <sup>5</sup>. And yet, from the outset of conducting this PhD research, repeatedly I have been prompted with statements along the lines of 'I didn't realise asylum seekers have phones' or 'I didn't even know asylum seekers needed their phones for that'. It is true, often as researchers we get so far into our research topics that the core issues at stake in our work get hidden in plain sight. For me, this was the simple fact that first, asylum seekers owned a smartphone and, second, that they might use their phones in complex and nuanced ways beyond accepted practices such as calling family members or using the internet to gather strategic information. Throughout my PhD, I encountered these presumptions not only in non-academic circles, such as family or friends. But also in conference rooms, offices, and networking events at prestigious institutions. The very notion that individuals claiming asylum might scroll on TikTok or have interests in tracking intimate bodily functions was met with, more often than not, a sense of surprise, shock, confusion or reflection.

These assumptions may seem trivial in the first instance. But it is important to remember that these questions or assumptions do not come from nowhere. Despite a huge expansion of academic work that grapples with the impact of digital technologies on forms of life and subjectivity — particularly within feminist digital geography (Leszczynski, 2021; Elwood, 2021; 2018; Ash et al., 2018; Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018) — I suggest that how geographic work has framed the (rapidly colliding) relation between the 'asylum seeker' and 'digital subject' has fallen somewhat flat; especially when compared with parallel advancements in broader accounts of digital life — in the implications of AI, machine learning, platforms, big data, and smart technologies, for example. Engaging with this line of argument, there are two major departing points that this thesis takes. First, in the isolation of 'asylum seeker' as a specific form of subjectivity distinct from, and in a different relation to, 'the digital subject' (i.e. how the digitally-connected asylum seeker gets produced as a distinctive, and often separate, form of smartphone subject). And second, in

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<sup>5</sup> The details of these three discourses are explored later in this introduction through an in-depth engagement with discursive material.

the distinction often made between the types, intensities, and the transformative possibilities enabled through everyday smartphone practices (i.e. what can be, or is conceived as possible, to emerge through novel forms of everyday digital life).

In the first line of argumentation, I argue that theoretical developments have tended to frame technological advancements as processes which happen *to* asylum-seeking subjects (usually in the forms of intensified governance or control), as opposed to developing a nuanced account of how those individuals are simultaneously complexly enrolled within them. In this thesis, I turn to the level of the ‘everyday’ to draw our attention towards how digital advancements (in infrastructures, modes of connectivity, or imaginaries about daily life) are also now inseparable from individuals’ lives who are governed within the UK’s asylum system. Through this turn, I show how there is an obvious fork in theoretical and methodological advancements: one that often separates what ‘we’ do with smartphones, and ‘they’ do with them. Learning from critical and feminist posthumanism, this claim goes to the root of what this thesis aims to do: to open up, move between, and sit within the ambiguities that emerge out of everyday digital connection in the asylum system — where what ‘we’ do, and what ‘they’ do, are held in tension with one other. Where the ‘they-ness’ is foregrounded (in the very real consequences that asylum governance has on digital life: in upholding exhausting practices, harmful encounters, or confusing mediations) and the ‘we-ness’ is revealed and made clear as being an integral part of living life as a digitally connected subject (from the incredibly mundane practices that animate everyday life and the transformative possibilities that are enabled through forms of smartphone connectivity).

The second line of argumentation — weaved throughout the journal articles included in this body of work — asserts how, in work that *does* centre the asylum subject within digital assemblages, there is a tendency to highlight practices that are directly or indirectly tied to the material and corporeal experiences of being a mobile subject such as bordering practices (Tazzioli, 2021; 2022; Minca et al., 2021; Erel et al., 2016; Amoore, 2011; Vaughan-Williams, 2008), aiding journeys (Gillespie et al., 2018; Latonero and Kift, 2018; Zijlstra and Liempt, 2017) or maintaining social networks (Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2018;

Kutscher and Krebs, 2018). Whilst this work is certainly important, what I aim to tease out within this thesis, are the ways in which these kinds of framings, first, reproduce long-standing binaries that are integral the (re)Othering of the asylum subject as a distinct category of (less than) humanness. And second, how these framings limit the ability with which we can engage with the nuances of everyday digital life, even, and especially, for subjects who are governed through extraordinary means.

Throughout my year of doing research with asylum seekers and their smartphones, I have sat with young men who have giddily taken me through their Tinder profiles and then told me about their depression arising from their living conditions and exhaustion of calling to get it fixed; mothers who have spoken about their curation of Instagram algorithms and then discussed the pressures of allowing their child to use their phone to complete their school homework with limited data; teenage girls who have relayed the importance of Snapchat for maintaining their friendships and joy, and their tactics of ghosting men online; young children who, despite not being able to speak, have shown me their favourite cartoon on YouTube Kids and their digital proficiency of navigating their parents smartphone screen. I have also sat with people who have detailed the harms of social media burnout, the trauma of viewing violent content online, or the guilt of being connected to news stories about their hometowns.

Ethnographic Notes (06/09/2023)

Taking these two threads together, this thesis puts forward a narration of the smartphone subject that is both (a) directly tied to the forms of subjectivity derived from the political categorisation of ‘asylum seeker’, and (b) expansive enough to capture the nuance of being a smartphone subject beyond the politicised consequences of the political

construction of Other. I state this clearly at the outset of this thesis, precisely because the framing of the ‘digital subject’ is core to the set of arguments put forward about the value of centring everyday digital life; precisely because the image of the ‘digitally connected’ subject is refracted time and time again through this logic of European civility and difference (Kumar, 2024; Muldoon and Wu, 2023; Kawsar, 2021). In the emergence of smartphone societies, there has been a tendency (both implicitly and explicitly) to carve out imaginaries of smartphone subjects that are predicated upon pre-existing matrixes of power and subjecthood. Who gets to own a smartphone, what kinds of devices, what forms of connection, what practices and imaginaries get attached are all intimately tied to discourses of legitimacy and deservingness. The distinctions or assumptions we make about what asylum seeking subjects do or do not do with their smartphones (re)produce binary imaginaries about less-than, sub, or partial (human and digital) subjects.

In a UK context, the imaginary of the asylum seeker as a bare category of humanness — one which stems directly back to the UK’s larger global colonial histories and ongoing legacies of Othering (Scheel, 2021; Tazzioli, 2020; 2015) — has been (re)produced and (re)circulated within popular political discourse. There is a vast amount of geographical and social science research that has traced the emergence of the ‘asylum seeker’ as a specific category of human within political imaginaries, both in the UK and wider European and US context (Scheel and Tazzioli, 2022; Tazzioli and De Genova, 2021; Scheel, 2021; 2013; Tazzioli, 2020). Yet, what I aim to do through this thesis is to draw our attention to how these political imaginaries are now seeping into wider discourses of the everyday digital subject — both in imaginaries of how the ‘digitally connected asylum seeker’ gets framed, represented, and circulated among discourse, and equally in the very real material and infrastructural consequences of dis/connectivity that arise through asylum governance in the UK.

When we separate, intentionally or unintentionally, the kinds of digital technologies, practices, or forms of subjectivity that certain subjects engage with in comparison to the rest of ‘mainstream’ society, we necessarily make claims that go to the root of (digital) subjectivity. These questions stem from the historical legacies of Othering that continue to



haunt our geographic imaginaries of what the Other does, is capable of, and can aspire to (Said, 1978). The age of smartphone life is not exempt. *Who gets to be a digitally-connected subject – read: modern, civilised, cosmopolitan, digitally ‘savvy’ – how far and in what ways?* When we imagine the digital subject, whether at the level of discourse or in academic debates, there is a (re)production of a universal digital subject: one that maps onto the classic ‘normal’ subject position of white, male, able-bodied and heteronormative (Rose, 2017). The ways in which we think about digital connection – who is plugged into rapidly evolving digital trends, ways of thinking, or ways of living; the cosmopolitan imaginaries of TikTok trends; playing the latest viral online games; dating on Tinder or Hinge – are largely reserved for this universal subject. This, as a direct consequence, (re)produces the Other as a distinct form of subjectivity: *not quite plugged into latest trends, not able to fully participate in online worlds, couldn’t possibly be able to speak about the latest advancements in AI.*

Coming back to the assumptions I encountered in my research – that asylum seekers do not have smartphones, or might not use smartphones in ways that are similar to the likes of you or I – enables us to begin thinking about the complexities of these statements and the taken-for-granted ways of thinking that circulate within the UK’s political discourse: between the national and everyday levels. For anybody who has worked with, spoken to, or spent time with an individual who is claiming asylum in the UK (or indeed across the wider Western European context) over the past decade or so, it is now undeniable that the smartphone is the *one* object that is considered essential to daily life within asylum systems (see: Alencar et al., 2018; Gillespie et al., 2018; Twigt, 2018; Zijlstra and Liempt, 2017):

“You know... the phone has opened my eyes to a lot of things. I would say my phone is my best friend here. Things people or the government don’t tell you... or make difficult to find out... you can often find out by searching on your phone” (Palesa)

“I lost everything. So we need a phone. The first thing asylum seekers should have is a phone. Data. We need support for data, for phones. Without a phone, being an asylum seeker is like you are not existing... because you’ve lost everything...” (Tamir)

“It is so important because without phone you can’t communicate with other people, you have to have a phone and internet connection to connect with people... without it, how can you do this?” (Ishan)

And, moreover, not only that the technological object of the smartphone is vital, but that the ever-expanding range of nuanced digital practices can be both trivial and life-sustaining:

“They send me information for a lawyer you know... information for dentist, hospital, the health centre. It’s all given through my phone. I talk to my lawyer a lot during some weeks on WhatsApp... I send them questions, documents... things like this.. it is a very easy way to communicate, we video call for our meetings... I think it is good... I have never met them in person.. It’s all given through my phone...

...The first time I come here... you know... when you move to a new city... you have to have your phone, the first time I come to [the charity], I came with my maps app... put the address in the phone and come here... this is so important. If I don’t have phone I wouldn’t know about here or be able to get here the first times. I know that you can use paper, but for me, without phone I can’t get here... so I use it for my maps... a lot of places, you know the beach? The sea, I like it there I go down there with internet a lot of times, and college as well...

... Duolingo is also important for me, it makes me want to learn... I am on level 18... and I use a lot a dictionary app to translate specific words that I want to learn the meaning of... Duolingo is very important... I need the English now I'm here in the UK and I hope that it will be useful for me to stay here... and I use social media everyday.... For Facebook I have a lot of friends on there that I communicate with... I use WhatsApp a lot for my friends here but also my family... so it is very important for me... so good... it is so easy to communicate in this way” (Hafiz)

As a starting point of this body of work, I want to make clear that the question of whether asylum seekers, refugees, or irregular migrants use, share, or rely upon digital technologies has now been well documented and accepted as a normal part of everyday life for those working on the ground both in the UK and a wider European context (Yüksel, 2020). From planning and experiencing journeys across Europe (Kutscher and Kreß, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2018), to navigating new places and languages (Alencar et al., 2018; Gillespie et al., 2018), to maintaining critical social networks across space-time(s) (Dekker et al., 2018; Zijlstra and Van Liempt, 2017). In my own research, where I encountered over one hundred asylum seeking individuals over the course of one year, only a few individuals did not own or have access to a smartphone: often for complex, temporary, or extraordinary circumstances such as battling mental health problems or addiction. Beyond these exceptional circumstances, the place of the smartphone in everyday life — in habits, practices, language, or imaginaries — was as normal as me having mine.

At the core of this thesis is the acknowledgement that smartphones <sup>6</sup> have a place in the everyday lives of asylum seekers just as much as the imaginaries of tech-savvy, digitally connected subjects (again, read: white, heteronormative, male) — across the space-times before taking the decision to claim asylum, along journeys to the place of claiming asylum,

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<sup>6</sup> And increasingly a much larger assemblage of everyday digital technologies (tablets, headphones, watches, trackers, and AI).

and within the everyday space-times of claiming asylum. There is, of course, nuance within this statement and the reality is that dis/connection, in varying intensities and forms, is negotiated on an everyday basis. However, there is overwhelming consensus that much of the world — including subjects whose ‘humanness’ and now ‘digital-ness’ is questioned — is now connected by smartphone technologies:

“The smartphone is my best friend... I could not live without it”

(Nala)

How, then, might we begin to hold these threads together? To bring forth an account of everyday digital life that is expansive enough to open up, rather than close down, the potentialities of digital subjectivity whilst paying close attention to the foreclosing realities that come with being politically produced as an asylum-seeking subject? To make sense of the complex and overlapping legacies of subjecthood and humanness? To hold these politically significant realities of subject formation in tension with rapidly changing forms of digital subjectivity?

The novel contribution of this body of work thus lies in the holding of tension between the foreclosures and potentialities produced through novel everyday digital assemblages within asylum governance. Of course, I am not suggesting that previous work which examines how the smartphone is mobilised directly in relation to applying for asylum, or the broader experience of being within an asylum system, is not necessary for developing this understanding; indeed, it forms an important part of my own work. However, my intention with this body of work is to build upon these foundations and push their boundaries — moving towards an account of everyday digital life that simultaneously opens up the posthuman digitally-connected subject (to the expansive possibilities of digital connection) and situates the asylum subject within dis/connected infrastructures and materialities (to the foreclosures that stem from this specific mode of subjectivity).

I thus begin this thesis with a narration of the broader genealogical background through which the collision, and eventual merging, of the ‘smartphone subject’ and ‘asylum seeker’ has shifted over the past decade or so — tying together the theoretical threads and conceptual frameworks (Foucauldian analyses of power, affectual assemblages, and critical posthumanism) that precede and uphold the work explored throughout this thesis.

## The Digitally-Connected Asylum Seeker: Towards a Critical Posthumanism

As I have already suggested, smartphones have become a contentious technology when framed alongside the political construction of the ‘asylum seeker’ or the ‘illegal migrant’<sup>7</sup> within the UK’s Hostile Environment policies, discourses and approaches to governing. The term *Hostile Environment* is used throughout this thesis to signal two things: first, a specific state practice that includes a range of policies, practices, and decisions intentionally designed to encourage deterrence within the asylum system<sup>8</sup>, and second, a hegemonic affectual atmosphere that determines, to a large extent, what it feels like to live in the UK as an asylum seeker today. Oscillating between the two, I attempt to draw out how forms of everyday smartphone life are both enrolled in upholding the Hostile Environment (in producing exhausted subjects through digital bureaucracy, for example) and challenging, negotiating or disrupting its affectual capacities (in enabling alternative relations such as hope or care).

This section outlines a commentary on why, despite the clear reality that smartphones (and more importantly, nuances, complex, and contradictory forms of smartphone life) are a normal and necessary part of daily life for those governed within asylum systems, their presence in public discourse continues to spark debates about

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<sup>7</sup> The nuance of the switch in terminology used between ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘illegal migrant’ is important to note within the UK context (El-Enany, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Further detail on the Hostile Environment is given in the ‘*Which Human(s), Which Assemblage(s)*’ section of this introduction.

(il)legitimacy, suspicion, or riskiness. The problematic of this thesis is therefore not why the asylum seeker having a smartphone is interesting. Because, to use the words of my participants, “why are you interested in my phone”... (Gamal) “it’s boring”... (Ishan) “it’s common sense...” (Santi). It is, however, the question of why the fact that asylum seekers having nuanced, complex and expansive everyday digital lives continues to confuse, shock, or enrage <sup>9</sup>, and second, how the visibility and representations of this form of life matter in academic and political debates <sup>10</sup>.

In the following sections, I begin to identify how I address these questions throughout the thesis. I start this by articulating the core conceptual contribution of this thesis: a commentary on how we reckon with forms of subjectivity that have been produced as less-than, sub, non-human alongside rapidly expanding posthuman smartphone assemblages. In a disciplinary turn to move beyond the human (Falcon, 2023; Rose, 2017; Whatmore, 2006), I articulate why it is important we stay with the human subject within the context of digitalising asylum systems: to be able to account for, and make visible, the profound forms of historical and ongoing violence inherent to the production of this form of political subjectivity in the first instance (Braidotti, 2024; Puar, 2017; Weheliye, 2014; Said, 1978). One of the core questions that sits at the centre of this body of work is revealed in the very naming of the ‘digitally connected asylum seeker’ — *how far do we stay with the human subject in increasingly posthuman digital assemblages of power?* Tracing out the ‘digitally-connected asylum seeker’, I mobilise critical posthumanism — drawing on feminist and postcolonial, Black scholarship — to introduce both a vocabulary and way-of-seeing the interconnections between each journal article included in the main body of this thesis.

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<sup>9</sup> These relations — particularly shock and rage — are explored later in this introduction, in a genealogical account of the integration of smartphones into asylum governance.

<sup>10</sup> This is explored further in my *Social & Cultural Geography* paper [Part Three].

## A Critical Posthumanism for Human Geography

As Gillian Rose (2017) reminds us, “while geographers have successfully taken up the posthumanist challenge to theorise the agency of the (technological) nonhuman, they have neglected the other, crucial challenge posed by critical posthumanist theory: to rethink the human” (11). Between reworking the human subject or abandoning it all together, this thesis takes a critical midground that aligns with the work of feminist posthuman scholarship — where we create room for critical scholarship around what counts, or has ever counted as ‘human’, alongside an expansive account of digital agencies, forms, and potentialities (Dekeyser, 2024; Braidotti, 2021). Following Braidotti’s (2021) assertion that posthuman feminism is a navigational tool for accessing the embodied, situated, and embedded forms of the present within ontologically digitally-mediated worlds, I mobilise posthuman feminism here to draw our attention towards how the deeply historically-situated processes of Othering continue to shape the ways in which asylum-seeking individuals are enrolled into smartphone lifeworlds: both in how they exist as smartphone subjects in everyday life and the ways in which (often in complex and contradictory ways) this exact kind of smartphone subjectivity is co-opted into surveillance and control by state powers.

My aim in staying with the human subject within this work mainly aligns with the work of feminist, queer, and critical race scholars whom have contributed (in contextually-specific and situated forms) to ongoing debates about how we bring together digital posthuman assemblages, affectual relations, and the intimate forms of human subjectivity that continue to shape everyday experience (Elwood, 2020; Lynch, 2020; Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018; Datta, 2018; Cockayne and Richardson, 2016). This argument builds upon the foundations laid by Katherine Hayle’s (2012; 2004; 1999) call for a critical posthumanism — a turn towards posthuman agency that can account for, and speak to, racialised embodiment and history. This kind of work, in its integration within human geography, is pioneered by the contributions of feminist digital geographers, in the questioning of the universalising effects of posthumanism within political theory:

“For without further elaboration, these persistent invocations of human agency as excessive to – that is, distinct from – the agency of digital technologies run the risk of reviving the humanist figure that posthumanist work of whatever stripe has correctly sought to challenge. Without more discussion, this human becomes an apparently unmarked cipher: the site of undifferentiated ideas, experience and resistance. But, as decades of feminist, postcolonial and queer scholarship has demonstrated, such ciphers of the human are very rarely unmarked. Instead, they are most often coded as masculine, white and straight”

(Rose, 2017: 10)

Unable to word this better myself, the core of this thesis — in the bringing together of the production of the ‘digitally connected asylum seeker’ and forms of everyday digital life that intersect the governance of asylum seeking — is summarised in Rose’s contention here: that without careful consideration of how the asylum seeker is produced through specific modes of power, we cannot say anything meaningful about the smartphone subject in question, precisely because the two are deeply entangled (Rose, 2017; Haraway, 2003; 1991). The ‘smartphone subject’ as we see in the beginning of this introduction is not the masculine, white, or straight subject that discourses and posthuman narratives have presupposed. The human subject in question at the core of this thesis is produced through a kaleidoscope of Othering techniques across — and importantly within <sup>11</sup> — the political category of asylum seeker. The ‘digitally connected asylum seeker’ is never simply a posthuman subject operating within a field of universal affectual relations that can forego an intensely careful analysis of humanness. All elements of digital connection for the

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<sup>11</sup> There is an important range of work that highlights the intersectional power relations within the category of asylum seeker that can be explored further here (Flamand et al., 2023; Chossière, 2021).



asylum seeker in some capacity — from accessing the very infrastructures of the smartphone (handsets, charging cables, SIM cards), to the kinds of practices that are done with it (from the banal to the extraordinary), to the ability of the smartphone to remediate everyday affects (how hostility gets shifted, changed or negotiated through everyday smartphone practices) — *necessarily* hinge upon the political production of the asylum subject as Other.

In bringing together feminist and postcolonial, Black scholarship that explores the production of ‘human’ or ‘man’ alongside technological development, I urge we must stay with the human subject long enough to make visible the everyday lived realities of exclusion, Otherness and violence that continue to shape digital everyday life for asylum seeking subject. To abandon any critical account of humanness in favour of a posthuman subject is to make invisible the intense struggle and violence inherent within the category of ‘human’ in the first instance (Dekeyser, 2024; Warren, 2018); even when we are articulating alternative potentialities or futures that may emerge through novel digital assemblages.

Coming back to work that situates the production of the asylum seeker within racialising legacies of othering, we are presented with the question — one which extends Rose’s (2017) argument — of: what happens to posthuman (digital) agency when the human subject in question is never considered human in the first instance (Dekeyser, 2024; Warren, 2018; Browne, 2015; Weheliye, 2014)? The extent to which we can say anything about posthuman agency requires us to ask two questions: which human(s) and which (digital) assemblage(s). The specificity of both of these questions demands a careful engagement of the digital technologies and human subjects involved. In the context of this thesis, a reading of posthuman agency through smartphone life cannot be achieved without a close engagement with the racialising assemblages that condition both the production of ‘asylum seeking’ (read: racialised Othered) subjects and the system through which they are governed (read: the Hostile Environment). The posthuman experience is necessarily a product of both the digital assemblage (the infrastructures, relations, possibilities) *and* the (lesser, sub, non) human subject in question.

There are two lines of thought that come from this line of scholarship that are critical for understanding the broader project of this thesis. First, that the ‘human’ has never existed outside of technological mediation and therefore any analysis of a posthuman assemblage must not forego a careful engagement of the human in question (Dekeyser, 2024; Stiegler, 1998; Haraway, 1991):

The natural, originary body does not exist: technology has not simply added itself, from outside or after the fact, as a foreign body. Certainly, this foreign or dangerous supplement is ‘originarily’ at work and in place in the supposedly ideal interiority of the ‘body and soul’.

(Derrida, quoted in Dekeyser, 2024)

Going back to the very conditions upon which posthuman agency is made possible, theorists such as Stiegler (1998) have argued that the human experience are made possible through technological mediation such as writing or machines. Put simply, technology has always preceded and constituted the human. In a similar vein, Haraway (1991) argues that the line between human and technology has always already been breached. Haraway (ibid) introduces the figure of the cyborg as a provocation for challenging the dominant narratives of liberal humanism: where the male, autonomous subject becomes the centre for the production of knowledge, power and technological control. In doing so, Haraway and Stiegler open up a space for understanding how humans are *always already* embedded within technological apparatuses and ways of being. The point of this thesis is not simply that human life (as a universal ‘we’) is technologically mediated through smartphone

assemblages, but to pay attention to what kinds of humans are mediated, produced, and enrolled through particular kinds of smartphone assemblages.

This brings me to my second argument drawing from the literature: that human-technology entanglements have always been and are always racialised, gendered, and shaped by other nuanced power relations that depend upon the human subject (Russell, 2020; Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018; Browne, 2015). So much so, that the very production of the ‘human’ (and therefore, those who are excluded from this category: less than, sub, non...) hinges upon technological mediation. To engage with this argument, we can turn to the work of Wynter (2003), who argues that the category of human itself is a colonial invention — ‘man’ is not universal, but is a genre of human that is produced out of European notions of civility. Wynter (ibid) explores how technologies have been instrumental to producing and maintaining this distinction throughout history, including the development of languages or scientific knowledge: the very questions of ‘who is human’ and ‘how does the human get produced’ are dependent upon technological mediation. In a similar vein, Weheliye (2014) argues that Black studies already theorise beyond the human, but in a way that is deeply concerned with the politics of human-as-category. Weheliye’s notion of flesh (viscus) is a counterpoint to posthuman abstraction — insisting on the historical, embodied, and technologically-mediated nature of Black experience and life. Learning from this perspective we cannot think about the posthuman subject without, first, foregrounding a racialised account of the technological marking of certain bodies as Other (Browne, 2015).

Scholars have also moved our attention towards how certain kinds of racialised bodies have always been entangled with technologies that control and govern in extraordinary ways. For example, Simone Browne (2015; 2011) traces a genealogy which links novel forms of digital surveillance alongside the plantation and transatlantic slave trade — illustrating how Black and Othered bodies have always been produced and controlled as data: whether through slave passes or modern biometric surveillance. In a similar vein, other scholars have identified how Othered bodies have always been entangled with digital technologies: whether through racial bias encoded into digital infrastructures

(Benjamin, 2019), platforms (Nakamura, 2008) or programmes (Noble, 2018). Learning from Browne (2011; 2015) and others, we can see how the development and use of digital technologies is never separate from the control of Othered subjects.

Extending these contributions, the enrolling of the smartphone into UK asylum governance is simultaneously embedded within longer racialised histories of technology as control and surveillance. Both the governance assemblage (the digitalising Hostile Environment) and the subject of governance (the digitally-connected asylum seeker) cannot be separated from the violent markings [less than, sub, non] of what it means to be human. This does not make the contributions of mainstream posthumanism less salient here, but it *does* require a re-balancing of how far we take the human into our analyses of digital governance assemblages. Particularly because this has consequences for how we frame agency, power, and resistance. This means considering how the production of the asylum seeker, as a specific category of human, plays into posthuman assemblages but simultaneously acknowledging that this politically produced category of human is one that is designed to produce homogeneity, flattening the intersectionality of the human subject into one category of Other. Here then, we must track between a universal and intersectional experience of being a digitally dis/connected asylum seeker <sup>12</sup>.

In response to Rose's (2017) warning about abandoning the human, I suggest that we can find value in mobilising a critical approach to posthumanism that emphasises the need to stay with the racialised human alongside digital entanglements. We cannot say anything about the digital assemblages of state power, nor their a/effects on everyday life, without a careful engagement with the long-standing histories of Othering that both produce the

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<sup>12</sup> This thesis, and work within this realm more generally, can never fully account for the true intersectional nuance of subjectivity: especially when my broader aim here is to narrate a wider experience of digital dis/connection. Throughout the papers included in this work, 'asylum seeker' or 'asylum seeking subject' is mobilised as a term which speaks towards the political production of a specific kind of subject, and how this political production — within the context of the UK's Hostile Environment policies — has consequences for everyday digital lives of those actively applying for asylum at the time of research. However, it remains important to me personally as a researcher and, for those reading this body of work, to acknowledge that this kind of analysis must be approached from and integrated within wider frameworks of intersectionality that can account for subject-specific positions within multiple matrices of power.

categorisation of ‘asylum seeker’ and make possible the novel forms of digitally-mediated governance that condition those systems today. Novel digital technologies like the smartphone do not absolve the human subject of theorisation, in favour of data, algorithms or infrastructures alone: they intensify the need for a re-engagement with the human subject at hand, precisely because the two cannot be disentangled.

In the following section, I ground my account of critical posthumanism by situating the ‘digitally-connected asylum seeker’ within the key genealogical moments throughout the development of the UK’s Hostile Environment alongside digitalisation of state practices — three key moments that give us insight into the situated and grounded emergence of smartphone assemblages within the asylum system today.

## Which human(s); Which (digital) assemblage(s)? The Asylum Seeker and the Digital Hostile Environment

“The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants”

Theresa May (2012) <sup>13</sup>

“My hands will no longer be tied, by an out of date, broken system. Our plan will reduce the incentives for people to come here illegally”

Priti Patel (2021) <sup>14</sup>

“We’ve got to combine resources. Share intelligence and tactics. Tackle the problem upstream at every step of the people smuggling journey... all of this is providing a real disincentive to people thinking about coming to Britain illegally”

Keir Starmer (2024) <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Original quote given in The Telegraph interview accessible here:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/theresa-may-interview-going-give-illegal-migrants-really-hostile/>  
[05/06/2025]

<sup>14</sup> Speech accessible here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/home-secretary-priti-patel-speech-on-immigration> [05/06/2025]

<sup>15</sup> Speech accessible here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-remarks-at-the-organised-immigration-summit-in-central-london-31-march-2025> [05/06/2025]

Since 2012, under Theresa May's direction <sup>16</sup>, the UK government set out to develop what has now become termed as the "Hostile Environment" — a set of policies, practices and ways of approaching migration governance that made it incredibly difficult to live a 'good life' in the UK for those who were not considered legal or legitimate. From the outset of its development, the Hostile Environment has targeted individuals who were illegally moving to, or living in, the UK. Therefore, those who had an active asylum claim were not (initially) included following the logic that claiming asylum is an internationally protected practice under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Now, however, the net of the Hostile Environment has been cast wider; actively targeting those who have an active asylum claim, and simultaneously anticipatorily categorising certain kinds of mobile subjects (e.g. 'boat invasions') as already illegitimate and illegal <sup>17 18</sup>.

Within the asylum system, the Hostile Environment approach to migration governance cuts across all sectors of everyday life: from restricting access to healthcare and education, reducing state support, making it illegal to find work, enrolling citizens and key-workers (doctors, teachers, landlords) in immigration checking, and expanding data collection techniques (through GPs or primary schools). Over the past decade, the object(s) of governance within the Hostile Environment have shifted and changed — particularly alongside changes in government priorities, parties, and broader public moods <sup>19</sup> — affecting both the targets (i.e., from 'economic migrants' to the 'illegal migrant') and the kinds of measures that have been implemented (i.e., from tightened border controls to the extension of deterrence measures into everyday life). What is clear, though, is that the

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<sup>16</sup> Then, Home Secretary, to follow, Prime Minister [2016-2019].

<sup>17</sup> There is a vast range of nuance that needs to be acknowledged here — especially the converging shifts of pre-illegalisation and the reduction of "safe and legal" routes into the UK to claim asylum.

<sup>18</sup> Moreover, there is a lot to be said about the framing of intended governance subjects here, going beyond the 'illegal migrant' and extending to racialised groups and individuals — such as the Windrush Generation — whom, at the time, migrated into the UK through legal routes, highlighting the intensely racialised and historically-situated attempt at governing certain kind of mobile bodies.

<sup>19</sup> For example, one of the major newer shifts that this thesis cannot consider is the impact that Keir Starmer's Labour government will have on the continuation, or changing, of the Hostile Environment after fourteen years of a Conservative government.

intensity of hostile governance over the past decade has only increased alongside the general rise in right-wing ideologies and feelings of outrage, disaffection, and left-behindness in the fallout of economic crisis, BREXIT, and a global pandemic (Tyler, 2020; Goodfellow, 2019; Virdee and McGeever, 2017).

One of the key evolutions of the UK's Hostile Environment over the past decade has been the enrolment of digital technologies — both in the 'doing' of governance and in the object of it <sup>20</sup>. Now, we cannot say anything about the Hostile Environment without embedding these discussions in how the smartphone is mobilised in governance techniques, practices and policies. In this section, I mobilise the conceptual convergence of posthumanism, affect, and Foucauldian discourses of power to map out the shifts that the smartphone has initiated at the level of state and the everyday. Moving towards articulating an account of critical posthumanism, I offer an explorative account of what the 'digitally dis/connected asylum seeker' offers us in conceptualising novel posthuman assemblages of digital governance.

## Affect as Governance: On Hostility

This thesis works through a Foucauldian perspective of the subject and the state. The core concepts that come from Foucault's contributions — disciplinary power (1977), biopolitics (1976; 2008a), and governmentality (2008b) — have been widely applied to research that sits at the intersection between state governance and digital technologies: from algorithmic monitoring (Zuboff, 2019) to biometric data collection (Cheney-Lippold, 2017), to self-regulation in smart-assemblages (Couldry and Mejias, 2019). However, whilst Foucault articulates an account of the arrangements and modalities of power, his contributions have been productively extended by scholars interested in the emotional, embodied and affective dimensions of (digital) state governance: a perspective that is key to unlocking the contributions of this thesis. Affect theorists have expanded and challenged

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<sup>20</sup> More detail is explored in my *Progress in Human Geography* paper [Part Two].



Foucault's work, arguing that power does not solely operate through discourse and the rational, self-governing subject, but simultaneously through emotion and non-conscious ways of being in the world (Anderson, 2018; 2017; 2015; 2014; Berlant, 2011; Ahmed, 2010; 2004; Massumi, 2007). In this line of work, scholars have explored how affect has become an indispensable configuration of digitalising state power: from forms of anticipatory policing and prediction through AI technologies (MacQuillan, 2018; Amoore, 2013) to emotional self-regulation in online activism spaces (Papacharissi, 2015). Scholars have identified both how affect and emotion have become a site of governance in themselves (Clough and Willse, 2011; Protevi, 2009) and equally how affects get incorporated into, shifted between, and productive of modes of governance (Anderson, 2020; 2012).

The intersections between affective governance (hostility) and the mobilisation of digital-state assemblages (the smartphone) allow us to engage in a productive discussion that draws out the constant evolving nature of mobilising hostility as a governance affect. For example, *who* hostility is oriented towards (the shifts from 'asylum seekers' to 'illegal migrants', or 'small boat' invasions), *what* hostility attempts to animate (public opinion, or the material infrastructures of asylum support such as housing), and *where* hostility emerges from and is circulated within (smartphone interfaces, moving adverts on trailers, official Home Office briefings).

All of this to say, hostility is never (and can never be) one thing: *one* affect of governance, *one* strategic policy, *one* intended outcome. Core to thinking through this line of argument is an engagement with how affectual relations between the subject, state, and smartphone mediate everyday life in ever-evolving assemblages of power. In order to do so, we must approach the relations between the subject, the state, and the smartphone "not as stable things or entities, but rather [as] processes which extend into and are immersed in worlds" (Blackman, 2012: 1). This is especially true in the case of UK asylum governance, where decisions about the everyday conditions of the asylum system are united under Home Office policies, advice and strategic direction, but in practice are implemented by a complex network of internally and externally contracted organisations — not all of which are governed centrally through the Home Office — within the context of neoliberal state

rollbacks and austerity measures (Darling, 2024; 2022; 2016a; 2016b; Gill et al., 2014). This is equally true for understanding how digital technologies are being mobilised across the state as I found in my own research: there is no one clear nor uniform digitalisation strategy that tracks across how state-actors are mobilising the smartphone across their services, resources, or responsibilities; nor how the mobilisation of smartphones intentionally or unintentionally produces mediations of hostile governance.

Thus, in approaching this thesis, what we pinpoint as the state, state practices or state affects can be understood from the perspective of assemblage thinking. Beginning from the ontological groundwork laid by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the UK's Hostile Environment — even in its first imaginary form outlined in Theresa May's initial speeches and policy implementation — is not a top-down structure of exuding power. Instead, the Hostile Environment — and by extension, any form of governance — is always a complex composition of constantly emerging elements: from policies, to infrastructures, actors or affects (Li, 2007; DeLanda, 2006; Roy, 2005; Collier and Lakoff, 2005). Hostility then, can never be a concrete or clearly pinpointable governance affect: it is constantly in the state of becoming alongside parallel shifts within and outside of governance (for example, the global rise of the smartphone within everyday life).

In the mobilisation of assemblage thinking, a core conceptual contribution of this body of work is revealed: that state systems are always in the process of emerging and unfolding, therefore, they are always (however extensive) open to negotiation and destabilisation (Blackman, 2021). In framing the Hostile Environment in this way — as a continually evolving system, in the state of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; 1975) — by default we must remain open to how the state is not the sole formation that can exude, maintain or circulate power at the level of the everyday. Part of the major contribution of this thesis lies in developing an account of affirmative biopolitics: where the Othered asylum seeker lays claim to alternative (digitally-mediated) forms of 'making live' (Foucault, 2003) within a system that otherwise 'lets die' or 'makes die' (Mbembe, 2020). What is important to remember in this contribution is that forms of making live are generally, stemming from a Foucauldian perspective, reserved for subjects, bodies and populations

that are good, legitimate or valuable (Weheliye, 2014; Foucault 2008; Puar, 2007). What I provide in this thesis is an alternative reading of what it means to ‘make live’ for asylum seekers governed through hostile governance — where everyday smartphone connectivity becomes a form of life that surmounts to ‘making live’ through a vast range of practices, intensities and spatio-temporal arrangements. These dynamics are explored most fully in my discussions of hope <sup>21</sup> and relations of care(ing) <sup>22</sup>. I argue that such practices cannot be wholly understood through the lens of digital resistance alone; instead, they compel us to consider how entire lifeworlds are created, sustained, and circulated within, alongside, and beyond the continually unfolding and contestable Hostile Environment (Madianou, 2019; Scheel, 2019; Leurs, 2015).

To be able to do this, I mobilise the term *(re)mediation* in an attempt to capture the affectual complexity that is embedded within how smartphones are being used in the everyday lives of asylum seekers today. Building upon the work of Grusin and Bolter (1999), I draw upon mediation to emphasise the iterative and layered forms of digital media that now produce everyday life within the asylum system. For example, in how smartphones involve a constant reworking of analogue media forms (letters, documents, maps, or photographs) within everyday digital practice (e.g. submitting screenshots as evidence or uploading documents to solicitors via WhatsApp). The digitalisation of the asylum system is thus *always already* looped within pre-existing systems of bureaucracy and hostility (Darling, 2014). Moreover, Grusin’s (2004; 2010) work around *premediation* enables us to identify how these ‘everyday digital practices’ are premediated affectual sites: where hostility plays out at the level of the everyday. As a consequence, the ways in which banal digital infrastructures are being mobilised in the asylum system are thus not simply technical reworkings of a pre-digital system but are already embedded within legacies of upholding affective forms of power: in this case, hostility.

Mobilising these two contributions to thinking with mediation, I specifically offer the term *(re)mediation* in this thesis to draw a reader’s attention towards how hostility (as an

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<sup>21</sup> See *Political Geography* [Part Five].

<sup>22</sup> See *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* [Part Six].

affective form of power that pre-dates a digitalising asylum system) continues to shape what it feels like to live within the everyday space-times of digital life. What is different here is the (re): which, although is seemingly a small linguistic change, becomes central to understanding the core contributions I make about centring affirmative relations such as hope or care. Moving away from a Foucauldian language of resistance — where resistance is often discussed in relation to stable or obvious forms of power — I instead mobilise (re)mediation to capture the ambiguous, subtle, and intimate forms in which power is reoriented, negotiated, or challenged in everyday smartphone life: forms that both escape and challenge the Foucauldian traditions of defining what counts as resistance. Orienting towards hope or building networks of care within everyday digital life may never structurally challenge or dismantle the Hostile Environment. These digital practices can, however, mediate – even if only fleetingly, momentarily, or ephemerally – what it feels like to live within the everyday space-time(s) of the UK’s asylum system: *importantly*, even when hostility continues to burn in the background. It is precisely this affectual reworking of hostility, whilst never being able to fully escape it, that (re)mediation allows us to explore in this thesis.

## A (Brief) Genealogy of Hostility: Three Key Moments

Genealogically over the past thirteen years, various renditions of the Hostile Environment have been produced, circulated, and remade. One of the major shifts that has impacted the evolving nature of the Hostile Environment is digitalisation: both in the objects of governance (the digitally connected asylum seeker) and in techniques of governance (surveillance, biometric data collection, big data mining, smartphone screening). What follows in this section is a tracing out of a series of key moments that illustrate the continuously emerging entanglements between the UK’s Hostile Environment, asylum seeking individuals, and the smartphone as an everyday technology. This is not intended to paint the whole picture of the UK’s Hostile Environment, nor can it ever capture the vast range of nodes (actors, infrastructures, technologies, policies, affects, imaginaries)

across the ever-changing assemblage. But what it does aim to do, is to invite the reader of this thesis into a broader background of key moments over the past decade or so of UK asylum governance: paving the foundations upon which the journal articles included in this thesis speak from and towards.

## Fakeness and Outrage: The 2015 Migrant Crisis

The 2015 ‘European migrant crisis’ is one of the first key moments where we — the UK general public — encountered a wide-scale exposure to digitally connected asylum seekers (often labelled under the broader term of ‘illegal migrant’) within European discourse. From the very outset, the visibility of the smartphone alongside the asylum-seeking subject has raised intensely-felt public moods, opinions, and discourses — ranging from outrage, fear to contempt. Despite a vast range of research emerging from the outset of the 2015 ‘crisis’ highlighting how smartphones were becoming indispensable, life-saving tools for making journeys, accessing information or remaining connected to people and places elsewhere — whether in academia (Alencar, 2020; Alencar et al., 2018; Gillespie et al., 2018) or broader commentaries (UNESCO, 2021; UNHCR, 2018; Mercy Corps, 2018) — the discourse circulating in public and popular media took a very different perspective.

In the midst of producing the ‘migrant crisis’ (Almustafa, 2021; McMahon and Sigona, 2020; Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2018), smartphones quickly became framed as a contentious technology, opening up a European-scale debate on what the smartphone signalled when placed in the context of the ‘illegal’ migrant. In the UK context, amidst a background of right-leaning conservative politics and a newly-established set of Hostile Environment policies since 2012, the very image of the asylum seeker, refugee, or ‘illegal’ migrant <sup>23</sup> with a smartphone sparked mass debate: a debate, which at its core, hinged upon

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<sup>23</sup> Commonly conflated with one another during the 2015 migrant crisis, and now increasingly conflated under the broad term of ‘illegal migrant’ in the small boat rhetoric in the UK (despite legal status or claims to rights).

the collision of the apparently opposite imaginaries of both the ‘asylum subject’ and the ‘digital subject’.

## DOMINIC LAWSON: Smartphones are the secret weapon fuelling the great migrant invasion

By DOMINIC LAWSON FOR THE DAILY MAIL

PUBLISHED: 01:06, 28 September 2015 | UPDATED: 07:35, 28 September 2015

The Express from 2015 <sup>24</sup>

### PICTURED: Syrian migrants pose for SELFIE after landing on Greek island of Kos

A JUBILANT group of migrants has been spotted taking 'selfies' as they reached a beach on the Greek island of Kos.

By TOM BATCHELOR

17:00, Tue, Aug 11, 2015 | UPDATED: 17:30, Tue, Aug 11, 2015

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Syrian refugees take "selfies" moments after arriving on an overcrowded dinghy at a beach on Kos

#### Poignancy

This penalty no longer exists for migrants, notably for those many young men who have left countries such as Syria on their own and who we have watched on our television screens making their way in their thousands to their chosen destination in Europe. The reason can be seen in what most of them seem to be holding in their hands: smartphones.

Daily Mail from 2015 <sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/597632/Migrant-crisis-Syria-selfie-stick-Greece-Kos>

[05/06/2025]

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-3251475/DOMINIC-LAWSON-Smartphones-secret-weapon-fuelling-great-migrant-invasion.html> [05/06/2025]

Across popular right-leaning media outlets in the UK and Western Europe, paparazzi style photographs of refugees and individuals seeking asylum were displayed on the front pages of tabloid media, ‘revealing’ images of phone charging points or selfie-taking that were intended to cause outrage through provocative language or photography. The outrage contained within the tabloid headlines hinges upon the apparent ‘unveiling’ of the asylum subject as fake: as though participating in everyday smartphone life — especially in (initially presumed) trivial practices like selfie taking — tells us something about the legitimacy of asylum claiming (i.e. that there cannot possibly be a cross-over between the asylum subject and the digital subject that correlates with mainstream imaginations of the asylum seeker as a category of bare life). Immediately, these kinds of discourses flag the binary ways of thinking that have conditioned ways of thinking and representing the Other for centuries (Kallio et al., 2019). Now, this kind of outrage is underpinned by the association of the Othered subject with the kinds of digital subjectivity that had previously been unassumingly reserved for the universal (read: white, masculine, heteronormative) subject. In this novel manifestation driven by ‘crisis’ narratives, outrage gets expressed through discourses of fakeness, illegitimacy, and illegality.

This is not a new discourse (Griffiths, 2014; Andersson, 2014; Amoore, 2006). The political technology of illegalisation — or the visible naming and marking of illegality — is one of power and control and has been extensively engaged with by human geographers and social theorists more broadly (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013; Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008). In 2015, the visibility of the smartphone amongst ‘crisis’ gave new energy to these already circulating discourses. Driven by the implications that owning and using a smartphone raise for how we conceptualise the ‘digital’ subject, questions began emerging in the space between these two subject imaginaries: *how can a ‘real’ asylum seeker be taking a selfie? Aren’t they supposed to be in a destitute camp? Why would they need to charge their phone? Is it really that important if this is supposed to be a life-threatening situation?*

Even if these questions were never clearly asked in mainstream media, they were insidiously hidden in the undercurrents of tabloid media and right-leaning discourses. Such questions, and the discourses they stem from, hinge upon the Othering of the asylum seeker

as a specific category of human – constructed through, and foreclosed by, specific forms of (pre-emptively illegalised) mobility. Although Foucault (2008) never spoke directly of migration, the distinction made between “*good and bad circulation(s)*”(18) within regimes of governmentality aiming to eliminate risk or danger has informed work on the nexus between biopolitics and illegalised mobility (Andersson, 2014; Bauman, 2013; Nyers and Rygiel, 2012; Bigo, 2002). The UK’s Hostile Environment policies firmly situate irregular migrants and asylum seekers as ‘bad circulations’ and thus a form of risky mobility that must be secured against (Amoore, 2013): where logics of deterrence and pre-illegalisation have deeply informed policy and practices from the outset. The discursive materials in these tabloids mobilise the apparent ‘disjointed’ reality of the asylum seeker using a smartphone as fuel for advancing the discourse that migrants exerting agency (in planning journeys, making informed decisions, collecting information about onward travel or support resources in camps) signal us towards riskiness and illegitimacy: further inciting the spectacle of crisis (El-Enany, 2020).

This in itself takes us to the very core of debates within migration studies in the realm of vulnerability and agency: where imaginaries of the asylum seeker as a neatly packaged category of complete vulnerability begin to break down and fragment — where the *humanness* (and thus the complexity and nuance) of the Othered figure come to the forefront of attention. In 2015, the smartphone then appeared to signal a level of agency or privilege that the stripped back, bare life representation of the asylum seeker, seemed to completely contradict (Darling, 2009; Owens, 2009; Agamben, 1998). This contradiction was revealed, not only in the mass of public media that ensued — ‘revealing’ or ‘outing’ fake asylum seekers taking selfies or charging mobile phones in public spaces — but also in wider public moods towards those seeking refuge as a result of war, destitution, or violence. As De Genova (2016) argues, the fallout of 2015 marked not merely a humanitarian emergency, but a crisis in the European border regime that catalysed suspicion, anticipatory deterrence, and resurgent nationalist sentiment (Goldring and Landolt, 2022; Tazzioli, 2018; Andersson, 2014).



## Surveillance and Suspicion: Project Sunshine

In the years following 2015 and in the settling of ‘crisis’, attitudes towards digitally connected asylum seekers shifted from something represented as an uncontrollable part of daily life that immediately sparked outrage (e.g. asylum seekers using phones to trick government processes or to gain information that was otherwise inaccessible and could help their case), towards something more controllable and tactically beneficial for state actors when processing or evaluating asylum claims (Nielsen et al., 2024). When the initial outrage of digitally connected asylum seekers wore off — as public imaginaries of dis/connection in certain areas of the world and certain subjects’ lives were progressively demystified alongside a growing awareness of the smartphone’s pervasiveness globally — smartphones became an obvious site of extension for increased surveillance and data collection practices. The smartphone, now recognised as a technological device capable of recording the minutiae of everyday life (GPS location, photographic evidence, messages stored on social media, search histories), quickly became a tool that could be co-opted and mobilised for pursuing state interests: in the Hostile Environment, this transpired into upholding deterrence measures and proving illegitimacy. The smartphone seemingly offered a simple answer to a very complicated question: *how do we stop ‘fake’ asylum seekers invading our country?* Simple, check their phones for evidence.

It’s important to note here that the smartphone is not the first technological object mobilised for this end. The smartphone is embedded within longer histories of technological means of marking as distinct: from medical records (Fassin and d’Halluin, 2005), biometric data (Scheel, 2024; Browne, 2010), anticipatory data mining (Amoore, 2024; Coddington, 2020; Grove, 2019); to scientific knowledge itself (Walters, 2011; Mountz, 2010; Bigo, 2002; Malkki, 1995). Yet, in the face of crisis, the smartphone became positioned as the ultimate truth-telling device — one that could potentially prove illegitimacy through its constellation of data points: in messages, GPS data, photographs, social media posts, stored contacts (the list is ever expanding). By 2020, the seizing of mobile phones became common in screening interviews across Europe, with some procedures being more formal and lawful than others (Steinbrink et al., 2021). In the UK,

government initiatives to confiscate and extract data from smartphones became common practice — with the most notable being ‘Project Sunshine’. In a Privacy International (2021) witness statement to the UK High Court of Justice, the following was reported:

“Project Sunshine refers to a dataset to which data was added until September 2020, and the project integrates extracted data. [...] In the region of potentially 50,000 individual phone numbers, email addresses and social media accounts are expected to be processed annually (data collected over a three-month period in early 2020 has 28,000). [...] The purpose of the analysis is to target organised criminal groups...

... In April 2020, [the government] was tasked with developing an analysis approach to utilising communications data to aid the small boats effort. The project ran until September 2020 with the purpose to “combine the communications data downloaded from mobile devices and generate organised immigration crime leads”. It is apparent that, at the start, Project Sunshine involved a system of spreadsheets, which were collated together to create one master spreadsheet...

... From May to August 2020, the project identified associations across the data. This meant that phone numbers present in multiple mobile devices were identified. These associations were then subjected to automated enrichment through Home Office Data Services Analysis technology. The results of this were then assessed by the Sunshine team as worthy of further development and passed to the Gateway Multi-Agency Hub for further action. [...] 100 leads were generated but none resulted in operational activity. [...] A second approach started in August 2020 [...] no leads were generated...

... The Project Sunshine DPIA (completed on 11 November 2020) refers to the enriching and analysis of data collected from migrants’ phones in

order to build up more complete intelligence pictures than would be available from the extraction of data from a single phone. [...] Project Sunshine is designed to perform “crime pattern analysis” and “identify associations and patterns that fit a profile of criminality” using “big association and network analysis techniques”.

In this report, we can clearly see the implications for framing the smartphone as a device of truth-telling, where multiple points of data produced through everyday smartphone life could be combined in an attempt to track patterns, anticipate behaviour or identify criminal groups (Amoore, 2024; 2020; 2013; 2011; Amoore and Hall, 2010): the objectives of doing so are to “gather more intelligence and best evidence in the investigation of organised crime; enhance capability to manage large data sets; identification of criminal association and links to organise crime; ability to share certain datasets with law enforcement partners” (Privacy International, 2021: 86). In the end, over 2,000 mobile phones were seized from individuals <sup>26</sup> (The Guardian, 2022a). Under the guise of stopping criminal activity, asylum seekers’ everyday digital lives were enrolled within extensive, invasive, and violent governance practices of smartphone seizing and screening. Moreover, according to the Home Office in the same report, no leads were generated from the extraction and analysis of smartphone data — and later, in 2022, the whole project was deemed unlawful in a High Court ruling, where asylum seekers gave evidence of “being bullied into handing over passcodes so that officials could unlock personal information including emails, photos and videos and download them” (The Guardian, 2022a; 2022b).

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<sup>26</sup> It’s important to note here that the justification for seizing these smartphones is through the political weaponisation of “arriving by small boat”. Increasingly, asylum governance in the UK is being linguistically defined through small boat arrivals — where the conflation between illegitimate asylum claims (thus, illegal migrants) and arriving by small boat is fuelling current political rhetoric. To note, in the increased closure of ‘legal’ routes into the UK, as an island, arriving by small boat is one of the only viable options for arriving in the UK to claim asylum.

Although the High Court decision led to the end of practical smartphone data collection, the wider discourses that surrounded smartphone seizing and analysis did not. Fuelling and ongoing atmosphere of distrust and suspicion of the asylum subject — particularly in the merging of the ‘(illegal) migrant crisis’ and the COVID-19 pandemic, where asylum processing was put on hold and numbers continued to rise; commonly referred to as a the ‘backlog’ (Cuibus et al., 2024; Griffiths, 2014) — the smartphone continued to circulate as a manipulatable truth-telling device: *You cannot find the photographic evidence? Then it must have been deleted. You don’t see the text messages with the small boat smuggler? They must have erased it. They have a new phone? They must have burned their real phone or destroyed it so you couldn’t access the truth.*

In the rise of far-right rhetoric emerging through the converging of multiple crises in the UK (Brexit, COVID-19, cost-of-living...), the smartphone has remained a technological object that continues to fuel suspicion in increasingly intense political and public debates about the asylum seeker (or illegal migrant) in the UK. These debates are driven by a politics of suspicion that lies at the core of smartphone subjectivity: that novel forms of agency — not quite capturable through current forms of state governance — are generated through smartphone life. From Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats or Telegram broadcasts, the novel agencies to find information, make informed decisions, and plan journeys to the UK that are enabled through smartphone connection are framed as acts that raise suspicion about ‘legitimacy’ — where the public imaginary of the asylum seeker as a totally vulnerable, bare form of life is exposed and demystified.

## Polycrisis and Governability: The Digital State

After the High Court's unlawful ruling and the fragmentation of a singular 'migrant crisis', the UK (and rest of the Western world) has hurtled towards an era of polycrisis; where multiple 'crises' are merging into, and compounding, one another — climate, liberalism, pandemics, economics (Anderson and Secor, 2025; Sultana, 2021; Clarke, 2010). In the era of polycrisis, practices and discourses of deterring illegal migrants and upholding a Hostile Environment have become tightly entangled with parallel and intersecting *crises*<sup>27</sup>. This can be seen acutely in the conjuncture of multiple crises: where, for example, economic crises or global health crises are used to justify housing asylum seekers in ever-increasingly dangerous and damaging accommodations: whether it's the Bibby Stockholm container ship, isolated hotels on the outskirts of cities, or crumbling army barracks (Davies et al., 2024).

Alongside these conjunctures of crisis, one of the core shifts we have witnessed in governance techniques is the rapid shift towards digitalisation of state systems. Statecraft and state welfare have long been in a process of gradual digitalisation; replacing human-to-human services with online portals, applications and phone lines (Van Toorn et al., 2024; Datta, 2022; Collington, 2021; Schou and Hjelholt, 2019). Catalysed by the practicalities of managing a global pandemic, in the age of 'a new normal'<sup>28</sup>, almost all bureaucratic state processes have turned to digital alternatives in the reduction of face-to-face encounters. This digital shift has impacted the UK's asylum system significantly, with almost all steps (from arriving to a receiving a decision) and areas (application support, legal resources, housing, well-being) of the asylum system now being digitally mediated.

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<sup>27</sup> Moreover, at the time of writing this PhD, we have seen a shift from a Conservative government to a Labour Government. The nuances of which go beyond the scope of this PhD but are indeed necessary for future work that traces a genealogy of hostility.

<sup>28</sup> A popular slogan used in UK public announcements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is now undeniable is that asylum-seekers are living within, and having to navigate, an (almost) entirely digital state: or, at least, what they can pinpoint as the state <sup>29</sup> through their everyday digital lives. This has raised novel questions for the future of asylum governance and how the asylum seeker is framed in relation to digital connectivity. What was once considered a form of (suspicious) (disproportionate) (illegitimate) agency is now a taken-for-granted, common-sense way that the state can remain in contact with, and govern, the asylum subject. The smartphone has become an ordinary object that governance simultaneously works through and with. Asylum seeking individuals are now living within a digital asylum system: where the taken-for-granted assumption of being digitally connected is now common sense: it is built into the governance system itself. Even the Home Office — as potentially the most ‘pinpointable’ arm of the state — now relies on digital mediation like emails and text messages alongside more traditional forms of communication like letters. As each of the papers in this thesis show, everyday encounters with the state — from lawyers, support organisations, charities, health support, central hotline services — are all now commonly encountered through the smartphone in a vast array of practices, platforms and apps.

This shift, and its impact on the daily lives of those living through the UK’s asylum system, cannot be understated nor left unquestioned. Five years after the COVID-19 pandemic, forms of everyday digital life might seem like a ‘normal’ occurrence, where certain kinds of digital-mediation within our work, personal, and bureaucratic lives are now taken-for-granted: from WhatsApp group calls with friends, to online government services, to Zoom meetings from our beds. But this circles me back to my previous argument — why we must take seriously the ‘human’ within a digital posthuman assemblage here. Yes, we are *all* living in a post-COVID digital landscape, where much of our lives have taken on digital-mediation in some form or another and can experience certain kinds of affective relations: exhaustion from navigating online government services or boredom of calling an AI chatbot

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<sup>29</sup> This is discussed further in my *Transactions* article [Part Four], but there is an inherently unclear governance assemblage in the UK’s asylum system where what is the state, who is acting on behalf of the state and what is visible as the state come together in a neoliberal, outsourced network (Darling, 2016).

to get through to a government operated call-centre, for example. However, the specificity of the subject (the asylum seeker) and the assemblage (the Hostile Environment) completely shift how we understand the ‘everyday’ that emerges here.

Claiming asylum, by default, is one of the biggest life-altering decisions, processes, or experiences an individual can go through (Meier, 2020; O’Reilly, 2018). This is not a case of a British citizen being annoyed that their passport renewal takes too long on new digital interfaces, or that the online tax return process is too complicated. Applying for asylum is an unconditionally exhausting, violent, and eroding process, precisely because it has been designed and maintained that way by the state (Benwell et al., 2023). The ways in which digital technologies are now embedded within this governance assemblage — and therefore get mobilised and mediated in everyday life — is uniquely tied to the production of the governance of the asylum-subject: as a category of not-yet legitimate human (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021; El-Enany, 2020; Webber, 2019).

Going into the main body of this thesis, this is important to remember. It’s important precisely because, even though the vast majority of asylum seekers do have smartphones and are embedded within complex everyday lifeworlds, the very nature of existing within the asylum system — for example, living in hotels, receiving £8.86 amount of money per week — means that an account of posthumanism can *never* be universal nor homogenous. For the asylum seeking subject, being digitally connected is never seamless nor taken-for-granted: it is a constantly negotiated way of being in the world that is curtailed and foreclosed by the system they are being governed within. At the time of researching and writing this thesis, there is currently no centralised process for sustaining or keeping asylum seekers connected to a newly digitally-mediated asylum system: from the smartphone itself (although, as learnt from my research, most people arriving to the UK are already in possession of a smartphone handset) to being able to sustain connection through SIM cards, data packages, and Wi-Fi networks.

As we learn from the charity support worker quoted at the outset this introduction, a major challenge that asylum seeking individuals face in their everyday lives is remaining

connected to the smartphone. In the conclusion of this thesis, I will spend time working through the realities of everyday dis/connection, and what this means for the everyday experiences of living within a digitally-mediated asylum system: precisely, how far everyday smartphone life or practices can truly offer potential to (re)mediate hostile affects of asylum governance. What is important to note here, in the outset of this thesis, is that asylum seeking individuals are constantly navigating a landscape of dis/connection as a direct consequence of the UK's asylum system. As a reader will see in the progression of this thesis, dis/connection can be identified in two main areas: first, in the infrastructural capacities of remaining connected to smartphone affordances, and second, in mobilising the smartphone to remain connected to nodes of everyday assemblages (anything from the state to online gaming platforms). Both experiences are constantly negotiated at the everyday level and are dependent upon the capacities and agencies of both the human and the smartphone as an enmeshed, emergent, and complex assemblage.



## Moving Towards Everyday Digital Dis/Connection

What followed after my initial meeting with the charity was an extensive year of research spanning a range of ethnographic and participatory methods. From attending twice-weekly drop-ins, making cups of tea, attending women's dance classes, supporting city-wide events in Refugee Week, providing feedback in AGMs, conducting interviews, to running participatory mapping workshops. As already pointed out in the footnotes throughout this introduction, I have chosen to not include a traditional methodology section in this thesis for multiple reasons <sup>30</sup>. First, to avoid repetition as most of the journal articles included in this thesis detail some form of methodological reasoning. Second, the core methodological contributions of my work lie in the epistemological-driven questions about how we research and represent 'everyday digital life', which are carefully considered in the second paper included in the body of this work <sup>31</sup>.

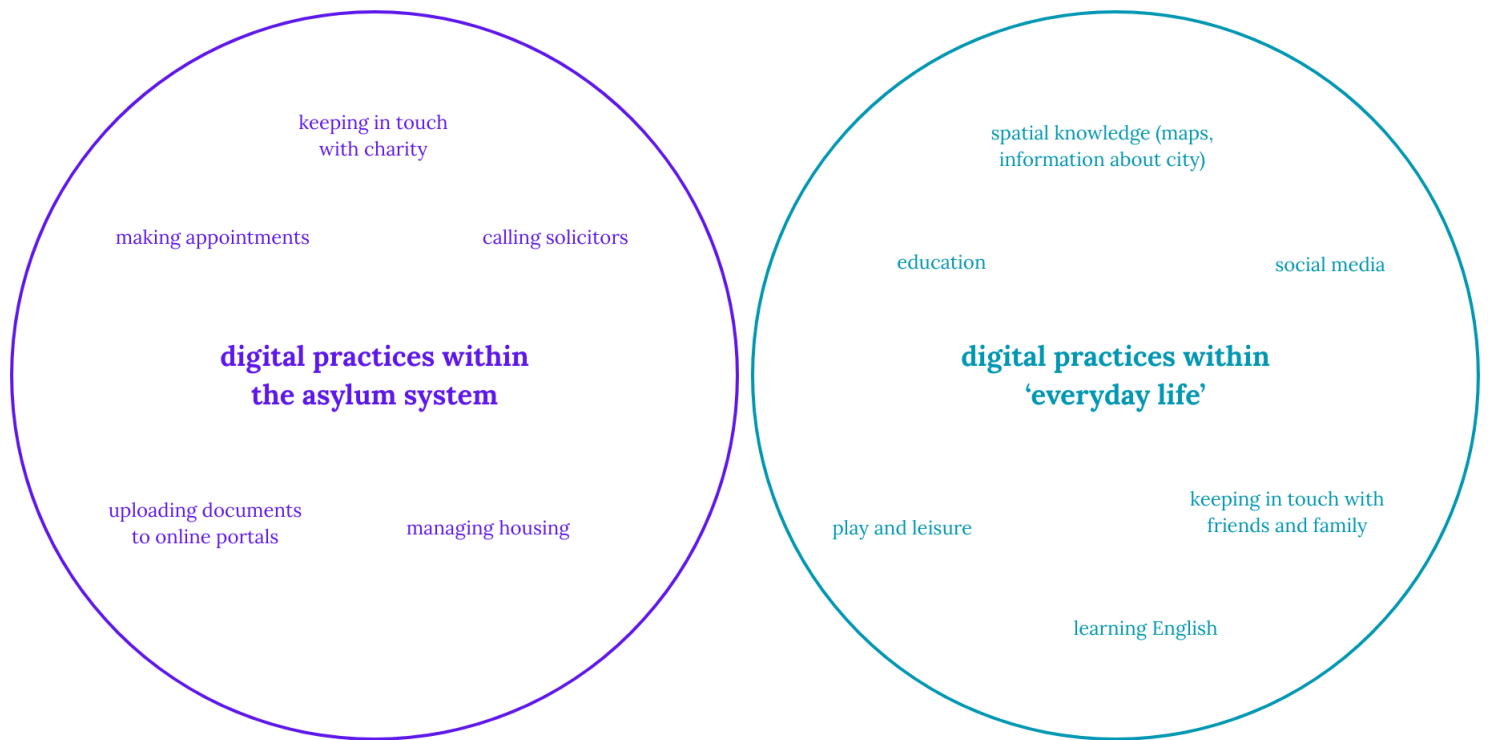
There is, however, a key methodological provocation that I want to draw out here coming to the end of this introduction to bring together this chapter as a whole. From the outset, this project was guided by one seemingly simple question: what role are smartphones now playing in the affectual everyday lives of those claiming asylum in the UK? Upon first consideration, this is an apparently banal question, one that many of us might assume to be neutral or non-political: the smartphone is an obvious, taken-for-granted technology that now animates most of our daily lives; held in our hands, placed near our bodies, used in habitual and unconscious ways. Its place in everyday life (at least, speaking from a liberal democratic context) is unquestionable. But what happens when we do research with digital subjects whose 'everyday' is conditioned by extraordinary forms of governance, like asylum systems? Do the digital practices they engage with on an everyday

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<sup>30</sup> An in-depth account of this can be found in the Appendix. The overall methodological approach is outlined here, alongside detail of specific methods (ethnographic observations, interviews, participatory mapping workshops) that were used throughout the year.

<sup>31</sup> See *Social & Cultural Geography* [Part Three].

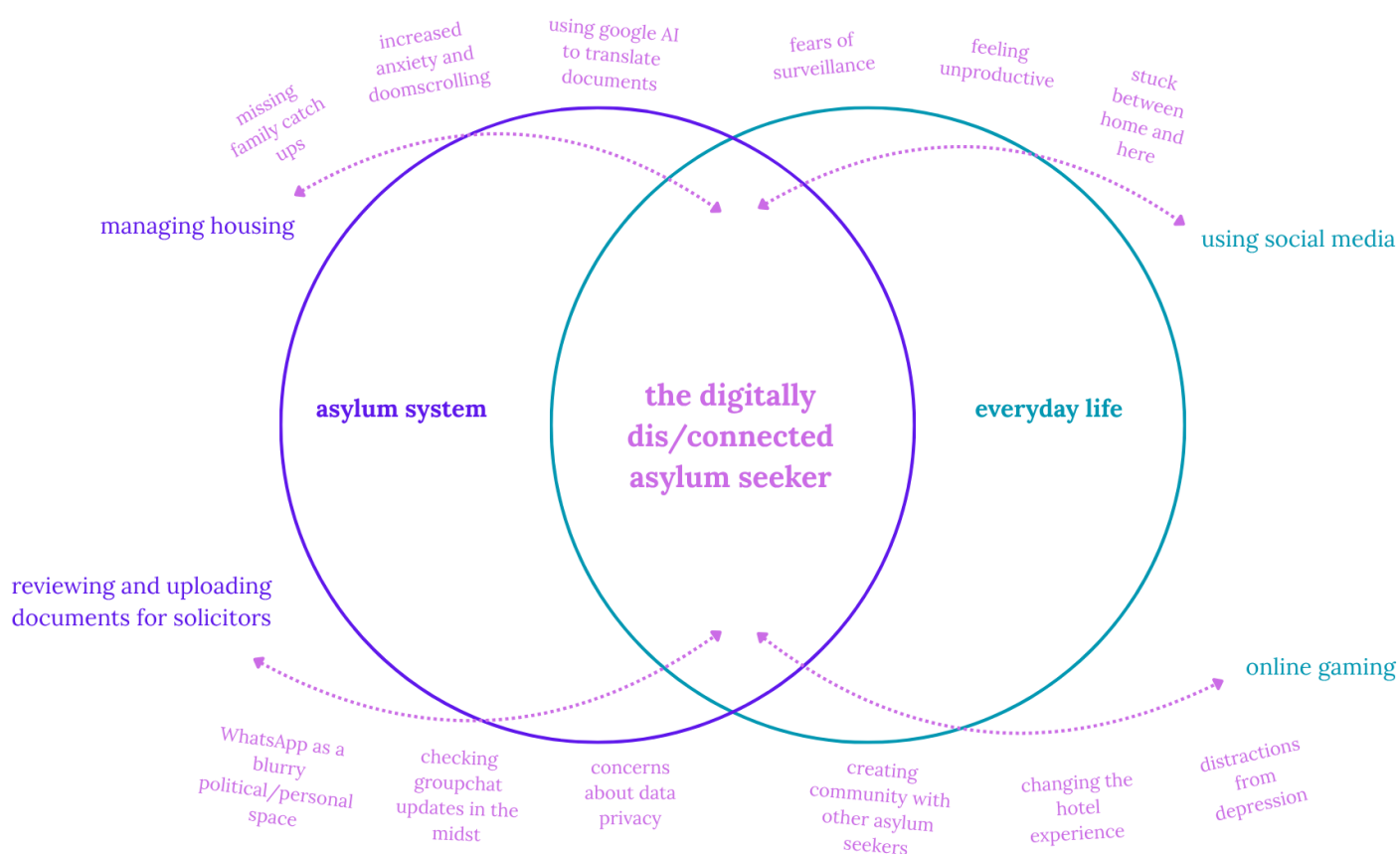
basis change or look different? At the beginning of the research process, my framework for thinking about mapping these questions looked like the following:



And yet, it quickly became clear that this framework looked a lot more like this: <sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> These diagrams are not intended to represent a universal nor total digital experience — the practices included here simply highlight the slippery binaries between digital practices and ‘forms’ of everyday life: whether in relation to the asylum system or ‘daily life’.



As seen in these diagrams, my initial presumed distinction between normal or everyday practices, and practices associated with the asylum system, very quickly collapsed in multiple ways from the outset of doing research: in their spatio-temporality, in their ‘distinctiveness’ as a singular practice, and in the ways people spoke about, or showed me, them. What started as a research project that wanted to map the role that the smartphone plays, first, in the newly digitalised state, and second, broader everyday life quickly opened up the complexities and ambiguities that exist between, across, and in contrast to these neat binary categories. This collapsing of binaries became fundamental to the framing of this project: both conceptually and methodologically. What I put forward here is thus the provocation that everyday smartphone life cannot be disentangled from the kinds of digital practices that are directly tied to, or a result of, being governed through the asylum system. The smartphone, and the forms of digital life that are lived through it, are a geopolitical site

of everyday life within the asylum system — where the line between digital subject and asylum subject are simultaneously at times collapsed, intensified, confused, and conflicting.

As will be explored in the papers to follow, it is extremely hard to categorise forms of digital life; especially because many of the practice we engage with or carry out on a daily basis exist at the periphery of conscious thought or intentional bodily movement. In any given moment, an individual may begin to use their phone by accepting a call from their solicitor (a practice we can relatively easily categorise as being a direct result of smartphone subjectivity). However, whilst on this call, the individual may flick between home screen pages, scroll on their Instagram feed, reply to a message they forgot about yesterday, look through their list of notifications on their phone, double check documents already sent in the WhatsApp chat with their lawyer... the list is seemingly ever expanding and easily slips into practices of ‘everyday life’. I state this here to make clear that first, our smartphone lives are constantly in the process of unfolding: in ephemeral, fleeting and disjointed ways. Second, being able to research and represent this kind of unfolding is, at times, incredibly difficult.

## Thesis Contributions

At its core, this thesis attempts to trace an account that holds together the complexity of smartphone life, practices, and subjectivities which condition what it feels like to live as a digitally dis/connected asylum seeker in the UK today; specifically, the extent to which everyday smartphone practices have the capacity to (re)mediate the Hostile Environment. To attempt to do so, there are multiple layers of theoretical and empirical contributions that must be held together, in tension and intersecting with one another to reveal (albeit always partially) an account of the affectual contours within digital dis/connection within the UK’s asylum system.

The first layer is, of course, an account of the digital practices, imaginaries and lifeworlds that animate life within the period of claiming asylum in the UK. This is perhaps the most obvious contribution that this thesis makes, particularly in relation to the

empirical foundations of the research presented here, but one that should not be taken for granted. Indeed, it is in itself productive to reflect upon the emergence, presence, and circulations of different kinds of smartphone practices. When reading this thesis, it will become clear that I have intentionally included a vast range of digital practices that emerged during my research. These practices range from those that more traditionally documented in academic work and broader social institutions (such as calling, messaging, video-calling, taking photographs) to perhaps more overlooked or trivialised practices that have received less attention (such as using TikTok or Hinge, sharing Snapchat memories, creating Instagram reels). But, the digital practices that are traced throughout this thesis should not simply be read or appreciated in isolation. Instead, I contend that these practices are the very core of beginning to understand a more complex picture of what it feels like to live within the UK's asylum system today and the consequences that novel forms of digital subjectivity have on wider political imaginaries of the asylum seeking subject.

The point of including such a wide range of practices is constitutive of the second thread of contribution that runs through this thesis: the aim of disrupting and destabilising the political imaginaries of asylum seekers through the lens of digital subjectivities and agencies. In doing so I draw attention to both the (re)assertion of heavily racialised political imaginaries through the 'digitally connected' subject, while simultaneously opening up the space for alternative political possibilities to emerge through a careful understanding of what everyday digital life exists as within the asylum system. At the heart of this thesis is thus the acknowledgement, inclusion, and active expansion of seminal work that provides us with a starting point to situate the figure of the asylum seeker within the historical legacies of the UK as a colonial power on a global scale. Political imaginaries of the digitally connected subject are refracted repeatedly through this logic of European civility and difference. As this thesis highlights, the digitally connected asylum-seeking subject is often held in a blurry space between first, a society that is ever-rapidly embracing overhauling technological changes, trends, and practices, and second, a political categorisation of Othered subjectivity which presumes vulnerability, disconnection, and archaic practices. These contesting imaginaries play out repeatedly in the UK's political landscape of

governing asylum seekers, and depending upon the spatio-temporal arrangements of governance at the time, have real political consequences for how the asylum-seeking subject is understood, framed, and governed within wider public discourses.

The third contribution of this thesis thus becomes about relating these digital practices and forms of subjectivity back to the everyday affectual experience of claiming asylum in the UK. In this project, the affective capacities, agencies, and mediations of everyday digital life become the very lens through which I articulate an account of what is at stake politically (also practically, imaginatively, materially...) when we research, disseminate, and write about the everyday digital lives of asylum seekers. Within the context of the UK's Hostile Environment, I suggest that the affective capacities that everyday smartphone practices enable (and foreclose <sup>33</sup>) are core to understanding the nuanced relations of power that are produced through the novel digital assemblages between the state, the asylum subject, and the smartphone. Here, an affectual approach does two things. First, it enables me to trace out how hostility has become an indispensable technique for governing asylum seekers in the UK. Second, it opens up the possibilities for tracing out the coexisting assemblage of affects that arise with, through, and in contrast to hostility. Although hostility offers the foundation for deeply appreciating the harmful, and often violent, realities of living within the UK's asylum system, it is not the *only* affectual relation that emerges or persists within everyday life for asylum seekers. In giving space to the alternative affectual relations that emerge, circulate, and persist in digitally connected asylum life — for example, hope, joy, boredom, or disaffection — I argue we must revisit our understanding of how power is distributed within the asylum system itself. I suggest that by paying attention to how hegemonic, state affects are (re)mediated in the context of everyday life, we open up the possibility of appreciating alternative political relations that destabilise asymmetric systems of governance and subject-making within the context of claiming asylum.

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<sup>33</sup> See *Transactions* paper [Part Four].

This leads us to the final major contribution of this thesis: the tension that arises when attempting to balance the harsh and often violent realities of living within the asylum system whilst holding open the space for alternative narratives, experiences, and accounts to co-exist. This is a tension that underscores every article that is included throughout this body of work. Drawing upon feminist theory and epistemologies, I offer a commentary on how sitting between binaries, opening them up, staying with ambiguity tells us a lot more about the ‘everyday’ experience than attempting to close down, simplify or neaten lived experience (Ruez and Cockayne, 2021; Minca et al., 2021). Throughout my year of doing research — and the subsequent years after analysing and writing about it — it became clear to me that the political cannot be separated from the personal; the everyday cannot be separated from the extraordinary; connection cannot be separated from dis/connection; affirmative relations cannot be separated from negativity. This thesis then is dedicated to exploring the *inbetweenness* of this research, and moreover, what we might learn about ‘everyday life’ as a discipline more broadly when working with ambiguity and between binaries. There are multiple ‘inbetweens’ that animate this project:

- i. The subject and the state
- ii. The ordinary and the extraordinary
- iii. Digital and (non)digital
- iv. Connection and dis/connection
- v. The negative and affirmative

## A Disciplinary Debate: On the Binary of Affirmative and Negative Relations

Sitting with the grey spaces of these binaries and asking what we might learn from doing this as an approach to knowledge production, the aim of this body of work is to present a nuanced account of what it means, and feels like, to live as a ‘digitally dis/connected’ asylum seeker in the UK today. Taken as a whole, this thesis is an attempt to track the emergence of the smartphone as a technological device that has shaped both the asylum system (from a governance perspective) and the experience of the asylum system (from an everyday affective perspective). Moving between these two framings — and in the blurry spaces between them — I put forward an account of everyday digitally dis/connected life that accounts for the rapid digitalisation of claiming asylum in the UK and its serious consequences for how we imagine, represent, encounter and frame the convergence between the asylum subject and the digitally connected subject. The point of doing this work, in this way, is to bring forth an account of Othered life — subject to extraordinary forms of violence, erasure, and harm (so much of which is produced and upheld by affective modes of state governance) — that holds the tension between negative and affirmative forms of life: holding space for forms of ‘letting live’ that are still able to emerge, flourish, and persist within otherwise maiming structures of living.

Crucially, this contribution can only be fully appreciated when the journal articles that form the empirical body of this thesis are taken together in their contribution to the nuances of everyday digital life within the UK’s asylum system. Upon first instance, the papers that form the core body of this thesis seemingly sit on either side of this binary (at least from a brief scan of their titles or abstracts): either detailing the violence that is inherent within digitally-mediated hostile environments [*Progress in Human Geography* and *Transactions*], or, exploring the seemingly emancipatory or affirmative alternative that are possible through everyday smartphone practices such as hope [*Political Geography*] and care(ing) [*Environment and Planning D*]. But, I contend that these papers should not be



read in isolation, and instead, act as pieces in a larger and vastly more complex patchwork of everyday life that emerged throughout my research.

The affective relations that I have chosen to centre in this project, and the order in which I explore them, are not accidental. Those included in this thesis — hostility, exhaustion, hope, care(ing) — sit within a wider geographic project of exploring the tension(s) within our own discipline to privilege or centre certain affects, experiences, or imaginations. At the time of writing up this thesis, it is clear we are in the midst of a negative orientation as a discipline (Dekeyser et al., 2023; Mutter. 2023; Rose et al., 2021; Dekeyser, 2020; MacFarlane, 2020). With negative geographies extending the peripheries of the discipline into engagements with the ‘non’: from incapacities, intertidal, to nothingness, to voids (De Keyser, 2023; Kingsbury and Secor, 2021; Simone, 2018; Coddington, 2016; Mountz et al., 2015; Tsing, 2015; Anderson, 2014). A large justification of the negative turn (Dekeyser, 2020) is a critique or apprehension of the tendency of social science to look for, centre, and (re)produce affirmative relations in our work. As Dekeyser and Jellis (2020: 318) suggest “affirmation [...] has come to shape the parameters of contemporary geographic thought”. Similarly, Philo (2017: 25; 2005) reflects upon the tendency of researchers to want to “heal the wounds”. But, as Dekeyser and Jellis (2020: 322) point out, “[relating] more generously to the world, does not, by default, alter the horrors of that world”. Such provocations about the orientation towards particular kinds of relations are at the core of how this thesis comes together as a body of work — precisely because any form of work that seeks to represent the ‘everyday’ must, as a priority, be willing to account for the complexity, contradictions and ambiguity that animates daily life for individuals (Ruez and Cockayne, 2021).

In practical terms for this work, this means moving between, and often sitting with, the grey spaces that emerge in the daily negotiations between negative and affirmative life: holding the space for both to co-exist simultaneously — where both emancipatory potentials and cruel incapacities constantly inform one another. This is particularly important for a form of everyday digital life that continues to survive, thrive and flourish in spite of violent conditions of existence — where the ability to create and maintain spaces for affirmative

forms of living is part of everyday reality (Byrd, 2014; McKittrick, 2014; Ellison, 2016; McGlotten, 2016, Johnson and Neal, 2017; Wade, 2017). Building upon long histories of work that have centred alternative forms of being and living that arise from (intersectionally positioned) Othered life forms, this thesis becomes a project of articulating the situated and contextually dependent forms of affirmative biopolitics that emerge through everyday smartphone life (Massey, 2004; Elwood et al., 2017). When reading the papers included in this thesis in their entirety, the reader can see how this argument is held in constant tension through the empirical details explored. Taken together, the four papers presented here [excluding *Social & Cultural Geography*] should be read as a wider project to open up questions of what it means to live digitally as an asylum seeking subject in the UK, as opposed to closing off certain kinds of experiences as bad/good, harmful/emancipatory or negative/affirmative.

## Journal Articles

There are five journal articles that comprise the body of this thesis. In this introduction I have teased out the core lines of argumentation that run through them all, tying them together as one body of work. Holding together the arguments presented in this introduction, the progression of these papers takes us through an exploration of what difference smartphone life is making — through the framing of the ‘digitally dis/connecting asylum seeker’ — to what it feels like within the UK’s Hostile Environment. I deliberately put forth an ambiguous account of everyday digital life, one that ultimately forces us to reconsider the distribution of agency and power within posthuman assemblages of asylum governance. Moving towards conclusions, I suggest that the reading of these papers as a whole body of work requires a reader to simultaneously hold both the possibilities and foreclosures enabled through everyday smartphone life in constant tension with one another. The point of this body of work is to think with the novel distributions of power that affective (re)mediation opens up within a newly digitally-mediated governance system. It is important to highlight that (re)mediation as a practice does not, and cannot, radically disrupt or dismantle the existing power hierarchies within the UK’s asylum system.

(Re)mediation does, however, constantly open up a practice of negotiation over what everyday life within the asylum system feels like — where the possibilities of shifting, shaping, or diluting the affective power of hostility become a (potentially) transformative way of living affirmatively alongside the Hostile Environment.

The first paper of this thesis <sup>34</sup> lays the theoretical groundwork for framing the digital everyday as a way in which we can develop an understanding of novel affective governance. This article introduces the concept of ‘living (digitally) like a migrant’ to highlight how smartphones are now undeniably central to the everyday lives of irregular migrants (including asylum seekers) in Europe and the UK. Through the dual framings of mediating and (re)mediating hostility, I explore how smartphones are both now simultaneously tools of surveillance and state control, but also spaces where migrants navigate, endure, and occasionally resist hostile environments. Here, I begin to identify how mundane smartphone practices — such as messaging, social media, or streaming — become an important framing through which we can begin to tease out the practice of (re)mediation within the context of affirmative biopolitics. Moreover, it is in this paper where I first outline the justification for centring non-negative affects: developing the provocation that everyday digital life forces us to think beyond binaries of Othered life forms alongside the contributions of Katherine McKittrick (2011; 2013) and others (Hartman, 2019; Sharpe, 2016; Wynter and McKittrick, 2014). Ultimately, this article calls for a shift in geographic research towards ‘everyday digital life’ and challenges the uncritical centring of negativity within the representation of Othered life.

The second paper in this thesis <sup>35</sup> engages with the epistemological forms in which we can speak about, research, and access everyday digital life. Although this paper is the last to be published (forthcoming), I include it second to draw the reader’s attention towards the politics of knowledge-production in researching (digital) everyday life. In this paper, I reflect upon the limits and possibilities of ethnographic methods for researching the digital

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<sup>34</sup> Morgan, H. (2023) ‘Living digitally like a migrant: Everyday smartphone practices and the (Re)mediation of hostile state-affects’. *Progress in Human Geography*, 47(3), 409–426. 10.1177/03091325231174311.

<sup>35</sup> *Social & Cultural Geography* (forthcoming), in peer review.

everyday, particularly in the context of UK asylum-seeking. Building upon foundational theorists that have grappled with how we produce knowledge about everyday life — from George Perec (1989) to Sara Ahmed (2004; 2010) — I highlight the novel challenges that digital life present to doing this kind of research: changing, challenging, and intensifying research practices of ethnographic observation and representation. I introduce the dual themes of friction (practical limits of observation) and tension (ethical and affective challenges), arguing that researching smartphone use involves navigating moments that are often fleeting, embodied, or beyond conscious articulation. Ultimately, I aim to highlight that the extent to which any theoretical engagement with ‘everyday digital life’ is entirely dependent upon a researchers’ ability to get close to the ‘everyday’: in practical and ethical terms. I thus offer a commentary on the epistemological possibilities of researching or representing everyday (digital) life through ethnographic methods.

Taking this forward, in my third paper <sup>36</sup> I turn towards the empirical driven contributions of this work. To begin this, I offer a conceptual and empirical analysis of how asylum seekers in the UK experience the Hostile Environment through everyday digital practices. Here, I trace how hostility is mediated (felt, embodied, and intensified) through forms of smartphone life. Using my ethnographic research, I develop the concept of the (non)encounter to describe the repeated experiences of pauses, delays, and voids that asylum seekers face when encountering with the state through smartphones. These digital (non)encounters — experienced through mundane and routine digital practices — produce a distinctive form of slow violence, exhausting individuals through endless waiting, uncertainty, and bureaucratic loops. The paper shows how the intersection between neoliberalisation and hostile governance regimes render the state simultaneously omnipresent and absent: producing digital landscapes of exhaustion. By focusing on the smartphone as both a tool of connection and dis/connection, I reveal how digital infrastructures mediate, magnify, and intensify everyday violence, calling for geographies of

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<sup>36</sup> Morgan, H. (2024) ‘Everyday digital dis/connection: Locating slow violence in (non)encounters with the UK asylum state’. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 49, 1–16. 10.1111/tran.12674.

migration and digital life to pay closer attention to the affective and embodied costs of the integration of smartphone technologies in hostile state assemblages.

Moving towards my main argument of holding tension between hostility and alternative affective relations, in my penultimate paper <sup>37</sup> I then explore how hope operates alongside hostility in the everyday digital lives of asylum seekers in the UK. I examine how banal smartphone practices — like learning English on YouTube, sharing photos on WhatsApp, or playing mobile games online — can become sites where individuals generate, circulate, and sustain hope amid the slow violence and affective harms of the UK's asylum system. I argue that these practices constitute a form of affirmative biopolitics, where hope is not merely a cruel attachment to an uncertain future, but a tactic for existing beyond bareness within hostile environments. The article challenges dominant narratives that frame asylum seekers only through suffering, urging political geographers to attend to the ambiguous, ephemeral, and often overlooked everyday digital practices that allow for the expression of agency, community, and subjectivity. I ultimately call for a rethinking of how digital technologies and affective attachments shape political life under conditions of exclusion and control — I do this through centring the practice of (re)mediation and the ability of individuals to exert digitally-mediated agencies over what everyday life within the asylum system feels like and the potentiality of what might be oriented towards.

Building upon these contributions, in the final paper <sup>38</sup> I explore how asylum seekers sustain life and resist hostility through digitally mediated care(ing) relations. Developing the practice of (re)mediation further, I explore how everyday digital practices — like gaming, consuming popular media, or setting up WhatsApp groups — form assemblages of care that (re)mediate the affective intensity of state hostility. Building upon my previous paper's argument, this paper presents care(ing) as a grounded relational practice that enables alternative forms of living, as opposed to an orientation towards alternative spatial-

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<sup>37</sup> Morgan, H. (2024) 'Between Hope and Hostility. The Affirmative Biopolitics of Everyday Smartphone Geographies'. *Political Geography*, 114, 1-11. 10.1016/j.polgeo.2024.103192.

<sup>38</sup> Morgan, H. (2025) '(Re)mediation as flourishing: Digital assemblages of care and the everyday biopolitics of claiming asylum'. *Environment and Planning D*, 0(0), 1-18. 10.1177/02637758251332535.

temporal arrangements. I continue to develop the idea of (re)mediation as flourishing, arguing that even ephemeral and ordinary digital interactions can disrupt hostile affects and offer alternative ways to engage in an affirmative biopolitics. Rather than framing asylum seekers as passive recipients of care, I position them as active participants in posthuman assemblages that include nonhuman actors like smartphones, apps, and algorithms. This reconceptualisation invites a rethinking of care, political agency, and flourishing under conditions of precarity, suggesting that fleeting, digitally mediated moments of joy, connection, and selfhood can offer alternative ways of living within and against hostile state systems.

Taking these papers together, at the end of this thesis I reflect upon the tensions that are inherent in putting forward these provocations about affirmative life and a (potentially) transformative politics through a complex landscape of digital dis/connection. Namely, in the infrastructural and material limitations that continue to shape the extent to which individuals can engage with modes of flourishing. In drawing our attention towards the digital infrastructures of daily life within digitally-mediated assemblages (charging points, power banks, internet access, data signal), I highlight how the possibilities of engaging with an emancipatory politics is foreclosed, anticipatorily shut down, or prevented by the infrastructural realities of hostile governance and its consequences for the material environment of the asylum system. Contributing to the same vein of work that tracks alternative and/or affirmative forms of living outside of hegemonic structures (Cooper, 2014; Muñoz, 2009; Parla, 2019), I suggest that this does not mean that the potential or realised forms of flourishing are no less important for how we articulate an account of the affirmative within systems of hostility. Instead, we have to continuously reflect on the nuances and complexities of (foreclosed) (in)capacities within systems of power — affecting both how we conceptualise these relations and how they are lived through at the level of everyday life.

## Part Two

### On the (Re)Mediation of Hostility

Morgan, H. (2023) 'Living digitally like a migrant: Everyday smartphone practices and the (Re)mediation of hostile state-affects'. *Progress in Human Geography*, 47(3), 409 – 426.

Over the last decade, geographical research has documented how digital technologies are changing experiences of (im)mobility into and within Europe. For irregular migrants in the European context, the smartphone has become a vital digital tool for mediating everyday experiences of hostile environments that have become characteristic of mobility landscapes. Building upon novel work in Social Media and Media studies, which explores the entanglements between smartphones and mobility, this paper aims to bring forward a geographical research agenda that centres everyday smartphone practices as a central object of inquiry in work on irregular migration and broader work around everyday life: specifically in the context in which hostility has become one of the main affective experiences of mobility governance throughout Western Europe. Introducing the concept of living (digitally) like a migrant, this paper highlights how we can no longer conceptualise irregular 'migrant life' without consideration of the way in which life, in a biopolitical sense, is productive of and enmeshed within, everyday digital practices. This paper thus offers an agenda for geographic research concerned with forms of the everyday: demanding we can no longer conceptualise the everyday, nor experiences of irregular migration, without serious consideration of the digital—specifically of everyday smartphone practices. We must, therefore, take seriously the forms of digital agency or experience that (re)mediate encounters with state-administered hostility, whilst remaining open to the affirmative forms of living or flourishing that may emerge through everyday engagement with the digital.

## Introduction

In this article, I chart a conceptual path towards a geographic research agenda which directly considers the increasingly central role that everyday smartphone practices have in (re)mediating experiences of increasingly hostile environments across Europe. Through the concept of living (digitally) like a migrant, I propose that geographic research must take seriously the everyday digital practices that animate asylum seekers' and refugees' lives: specifically in their affective, imaginary, or material encounters and (re)mediations of state-produced hostility. In doing so, I aim to emphasise that we can no longer collectively work on irregular 'migrant life' within the geographic discipline — and beyond — without a direct engagement with how life transpires through, and within, smartphone screens.

The focus on smartphones in this paper aims to draw attention to the centrality of this specific technology in current everyday living (Miller and Matviyenko, 2014; Nemer, 2018). Although exact numbers of how many refugees or asylum seekers own or use smartphones are difficult to establish, Casswell (2019) suggests that over two-thirds of refugees living in camps across Jordan were active mobile phone users, whilst Latonero et al. (2018) reports that over 94% of men and 67% of women in a migrant camp in Greece [unnamed] owned a mobile phone. Both academic and non-academic research has highlighted the unprecedented demand for smartphone infrastructure such as sim cards and data access (Gillespie et al., 2018; Latonero and Kift, 2018). Moreover, we must acknowledge that, in the context of irregular migration, the smartphone has become a highly controversial technology: one that often elicits doubt and mistrust of claims to sanctuary (Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2018). Questions around legitimacy usually accompany discussions of smartphones in popular media — especially when they are used directly in mediating journeys to Western states, or in helping subjects navigate increasingly complex laws or regulations (see: Zijlstra and Liempt, 2017).

In the everyday context of asylum, smartphones have thus become indispensable technological tools for living in a new place: from completing mundane tasks such as making hospital appointments, to submitting evidence for asylum claims (Dieter et al.,



2019). Yet, smartphones are also mobilised for an ever-expanding range of everyday tasks including managing social networks (Alencar et al., 2019; Borkert et al., 2018; Gillespie et al., 2018; Leurs and Smets, 2018; Twigt, 2018), creative pursuits (Gillespie et al., 2018), self-tracking (Lupton, 2018; Rose et al., 2020), finding love or companionship (Koch and Miles, 2021), completing bureaucratic tasks (Dekker et al., 2018), political organising (Emmanuel, 2018), or simply distracting from boredom. In sum, the smartphone has become the one distinct technology through which ‘everyday’ life now gets lived through. In the aim of this paper, it is important to note from the outset that it is what users do with smartphones, not the technology in itself, that is of theoretical and empirical interest. The smartphone is not a pre-given technological object (Miller et al., 2021). Instead, what makes smartphones ‘smart’ is how they are curated, mobilised and used for particular aims or purposes by their users. Although it is important to recognise that digital divides do exist within Western liberal democratic societies (Ash et al., 2016; Zijlstra and Liempt, 2017) — and that access to owning or using a smartphone among irregular migrants is also unequally distributed — it is crucial to acknowledge that the current context in which smartphones have become central to everyday life.

Smartphones are thus changing how the irregular migrants across Europe are navigating the everyday lived realities of increasingly hostile border regimes (Coddington, 2020; Diminescu and Loveluck, 2014; Mayblin, 2019). There is a wide range of geographic work that focuses on the digitalisation of mobility: mainly focused on bordering practices (Minca et al., 2021; Amore, 2011; Vaughan-Williams, 2008) and the role of digital data in surveillance (Tazzioli, 2021, 2015; Erel et al., 2016; Engbersen and Broeders, 2009). Very little work, however, has focused on explicitly exploring or conceptualising the everyday context of digital technology use: specifically, the central role that smartphones play in the everyday lived realities of migrants, both in relation to state-related practices of governance (Tazzioli, 2022; Tazzioli and De Genova, 2021) and more broadly in the everyday context of living within hostile environments across European states.

Centring everyday smartphone practices in this paper, I aim to draw attention to how the affective experience of living in hostile arrangements is now almost always digitally (re)mediated. With this in mind, I propose that the everyday lives of migrants can no longer be theorised without explicit consideration of the entanglements between and within everyday smartphone practices. In this context, the spatio-temporal geographies of everyday smartphone use demand attention — how subjects are using them for what ends (if any), and the subsequent effects of these practices. In paying attention to the smartphone and its use in the everyday context, we thus enable the opportunity to engage critically with how state affects are translated, refracted and remade in the (digital) everyday encounter.

Mobilising everyday digital practices as an area of inquiry, I aim to build upon a rich array of work that has traced the intensified effects of hostility — as a specific affective experience of mobility governance regimes — across European states. Hostility has become, as I outline in the ((Digitally) encountering hostility) section of this paper, one of the main affective impacts of European migration controls in the legacy of the 2015 ‘migrant crisis’ (Allsopp et al., 2015; Coddington, 2020; Tazzioli, 2020). Primarily enacted as a form of anticipatory action (Amoore, 2013; Baldwin, 2012; Smith and Vasudevan 2017), hostility is manifested and encountered through forms of risk governance: where ‘risky’ migrants, asylum seekers, or refugees are slowed, situated and controlled through specific governing apparatuses (Griffiths, 2014; Weheliye, 2014). Whilst a vast range of work identifies specific impacts of hostile policies and legislation across the European context, I suggest geographic research must also consider how hostility is increasingly encountered or (re)mediated through everyday digital practices: particularly that of the smartphone. As I outline in this paper, the everyday smartphone practices of irregular migrants living in and through hostile environments can provide novel ways through which we might theorise subject formation or agency — where affective atmospheres of state governance get (re)mediated or (re)distributed through everyday interactions with digital technologies.

As I will discuss in the (Towards everyday smartphone geographies: living (Digitally) like a migrant) section, we as geographers must remain open-minded to what this may look like theoretically and methodologically; smartphones are simultaneously technologies that

compound experiences of hostility and (re)mediate them through an ever-expanding range of mundane, routine or habitual practices: some of which may be intentional or prolonged, whilst others may be fleeting, ephemeral or unconscious. Paying attention to everyday digital practices and their subsequent (re)mediation(s) of state-administered hostility becomes a lens through which we may be able to (re)conceptualise, or (re)imagine, an affirmative form of biopolitics that exists in everyday engagement with the smartphone.

Developing the concept of living (digitally) like a migrant, I thus aim to position an approach to researching everyday contexts that takes seriously the forms of digital agency (even if fleeting or temporary) that change or mediate encounters with state-administered affects, whilst simultaneously remaining open to the affirmative forms of living or flourishing that may emerge through everyday engagement with the digital. Working with the broader demand for tackling issues of methodological nationalism (Tazzioli, 2020; Huysmans and Pontes-Nogueria, 2016; De Genova, 2013), I aim to trace a geographic research agenda towards a feminist approach to everyday digital practices: one which traces the complexity of digital intersectionality and subjectivity. Bringing geographical work on irregular mobility and experiences of hostility into conversation with novel smartphone practices, I therefore ask, how might hostility be encountered and (re)mediated through everyday smartphone practices?

## Digitally Encountering Hostility

Over the past decade, increasingly hostile policies have been developed across European states to manage, prevent and deter illegitimate migrants from European territory (Coddington 2020; De Genova, 2018). The thread that unites many recent European policies is the clear hostile nature of them: the intention to either deter, or if unsuccessful, create conditions of non or bare livability (Darling, 2022). No longer insidious or subtle in their intention, policies across Europe — particularly those concerning smartphones or other digital technologies — now mobilise hostility directly as a normalised form of mobility management that prioritises creating and sustaining hostile environments

for those seeking sanctuary outside of ‘legal’<sup>39</sup> or recognised routes (Mayblin, 2019).

Geography has been at the forefront of documenting the shift towards the hostile effects of governance (Scheel, 2021; Zampagni, 2016; De Genova, 2013; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013).

From externalised and internalised borders (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018; Scheel, 2013), to increased and intensified surveillance (Aradau and Blanke, 2017; Erel et al., 2016), across the European context, states are continuously developing governance frameworks that reduce their obligations towards helping or providing sanctuary to irregular migrants (Almustafa, 2021; Coddington, 2020). Forms of violence can be simultaneously visible or fast — images of lifeboats and dead bodies on the shores of South-East England, France, or the Mediterranean — whilst being slow or habitual: such as the increasingly extended periods of waiting in asylum application systems (Hyndman 2012; Tazzioli, 2021) or in detention centres (Stoler, 2013; Vaughan-Williams, 2008). Both forms of violence (in their spatio-temporal intensities) can be mobilised to think about how hostility has thus become a specific affective mode of mobility governance that burns in the background of everyday existence for illegalised or irregular migrants across Europe: not entirely characteristic of migrant lives, but that which conditions the possibilities of it in the everyday context.

What must be explicitly recognised is that hostility is neither administered nor felt equally. As Coddington (2020) argues, processes of racialisation must be central to charting shifts in migration policies over the past decade. Mobility regimes and the attachment of risk to certain kinds of mobilities (irregular, illegal, suspicious) are always already radicalised (Coddington, 2020; Davies and Isakjee, 2019; Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2019). Hostile policies — most explicitly in the UK, but increasingly so in other European contexts — firmly situate irregular migrants and asylum seekers as ‘bad circulations’ (Foucault, 2007: 18) and thus forms of risky mobility that must be secured against (Amoore, 2013; Burrell and Schweyher, 2019; Tazzioli 2021). In this context, hostility serves

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<sup>39</sup> The discussion around ‘legal’ or ‘recognised’ routes to European countries is now a highly contentious topic, with some states such as the UK largely reducing any ‘legal’ routes to asylum that will be recognised as legitimate.

as a specific affective effect of governance, aimed at gradually eroding the risks that racialized subjects pose to the state (in relation to the nation, population and citizens).

Such racialised effects of hostility might be found in the visually immediate experiences of irregular migration across Europe: perhaps the headlines of floods, swathes or masses of non-white bodies arriving at European borders (Danewid, 2017; Anderson, 2017; Seiler, 2016). Or, it may be found in the everyday, mundane and often slow forms of violence that animate the everyday lived realities of migration governance regimes. For example, if we turn to the experience of bureaucratic application processes, hostility might be found in the active confusion or disorientation of subjects (Tazzioli, 2020, 2021). With the aim of deterrence, subjects are slowed and suspended through forms of exhaustion (Darling, 2022). This experience of exhaustion is a specific affect of hostility administered through state-led governance: forms of anticipatory governance that seek to minimise, slow and diminish ‘risky’ subjects based upon nationalistic ideas of borders, territory and difference. Hostility has, therefore, become a specific form of tempo-spatial governance through which racialised individuals are gradually slowed and situated: through enduring the lived realities of European mobility governance in everyday life.

Yet, what has yet to be carefully considered are how hostile state affects are now increasingly digitally administered and (re)mediated. What might change in our current understanding or conceptualisation of the everyday lived realities of hostility if we re-centre digital everyday experiences? As previously stated, everyday digital technologies — particularly smartphones — have become novel ways in which the hostile effects of state governance can both reach individuals and be (re)mediated and (re)negotiated through everyday practices. As a discipline, we can no longer aim to develop theoretical accounts of the everyday without an engagement with the digital entanglements (often complex, messy and contradictory) that characterise the everyday. In charting a geographic research agenda towards the relevance of smartphones for mobility studies, there are two main touch points of governance we might consider.

## Administering Hostility Through the Smartphone

As Diminescu and Loveluck (2014) suggest, all aspects of the (irregular) migrant experience are now impacted by the almost omnipresent existence of digital technology (Alencar et al., 2019; Leurs and Smets, 2018). In the European context, the state is almost always now digitally mediated, with the smartphone now becoming one of the most significant touchpoints of digitally encountering the state. From border control (Amoore, 2013), to application portals, to bureaucratic government communication (Tazzioli, 2020, 2021), smartphones have become central technological objects through which the state mediates the everyday lived realities of subjects.

In the background of hostile policy development, the smartphone has become mobilised with the objective to obtain truth or evidence of (il)legitimacy from subjects. Across Europe, there is a growing trend of locating the truth, or legitimacy, of the subject in lives lived online: in digital traces of social media, contacts, or applications used on the device. An array of reports now identify how the mobile forensic industry is currently booming across Western states, as a means to obtain and extract smartphone data (Pieterse, 2020). In most states across Europe, smartphones are now commonly confiscated at borders or recalled by the government for inspection. Although a vast range of research addresses the nature of surveillance (Skinner, 2020; Vaughan-Williams, 2008, Lyon, 2001), the dynamic(s) that the smartphone now plays in this form of everyday surveillance remains largely unexamined — particularly how this technology is changing the nature of ‘truth’-seeking. For example, it is now common practice in both Germany and the UK for governments to use smartphone data to cross-check claims made by individuals seeking asylum.

Data in the form of messages, social media interaction and location history are now commonly assembled and used, in many cases, to interrogate the legitimacy of claims to sanctuary. Echoing Browne’s (2010, 2015) work on digital epidermalization, lives lived through the smartphone screen are increasingly extracted as data: collated, merged and assembled to serve as evidence of the subject themselves (Amoore, 2011, 2013). Truth is

now located in the digital traces of the subject: from biometric traces (Maguire, 2012; Wevers, 2018) to, more recently, traces of the subject that exist in and through smartphone data. Moreover, more than just simply extracting smartphone data, states are simultaneously embedding smartphone capacities in the wide range of processes used to govern subjects. In the specific context of asylum and refugee experiences, the smartphone is now used in the process of submitting evidence for claims and communicating with subjects about the status of their claim: from emails to apps accessed through the smartphone.

Although the digitalisation of the state is often justified through discourses of efficiency, scholars such as Tazzioli (2021, 2020) have highlighted how the integration of everyday digital technologies like smartphone messaging apps have become primary means through which asylum seekers and refugees are disoriented and disempowered through state communication. Tazzioli (2021, 2020) outlines how in camps across European states, mobile apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Viber are used to communicate government advice or messages — particularly distributing health advice during COVID-19. Here, Tazzioli (2021) outlines how the smartphone has become a technology of obstruction: where changing rules, controls or advice administered through smartphones result in difficulty navigating the already hostile landscape of Western states.

In such instances, we can see how digital devices have now become a key part of the technological assemblage of governing irregular mobility. If part of administering hostility can be found in the experience of slowness or suspension, then smartphones, and their accompanying affordances (such as social media, web messaging, emails, video calling etc.), are thus becoming increasingly weaponised by European states as a way of administering hostile affective experiences of governance. Exposing the myth of seamless connectivity (Nguyen-Thu, 2021), the digital affordances offered by the smartphone are now increasingly mobilised for gradually wearing down subjects in the everyday context: accumulating and compounding experiences of hostility through the smartphone itself. In this context, the role that the smartphone plays in state administration of hostile effects must be an ongoing area of geographic focus, where the role of the smartphone in state governance is centred as

an object for geographical enquiry. When considering the role that the state plays in controlling mobility, we must pay attention to how this is now digitally mediated. This raises important questions about how we conceptualise the state in, and through, its digital encounters and mediations.

## (Re)Mediating Hostility Through the Smartphone

Despite the increasing incorporation of smartphones into hostile governance practices, I suggest that we must also pay close attention to how these hostile practices of state governance are felt, (re)mediated and (re)circulated among smartphone users. Yes, smartphones are becoming technologies of the state: used to control, survey or identify subjects. However, we must also remain open (conceptually, theoretically and methodologically) to the possibilities that everyday smartphone practices enable outside a direct relationship to the state. If we are to genuinely aim to expand current understanding of the everyday lived realities of irregular mobility regimes and commit to undoing forms of methodological nationalism that continue to be insidiously embedded within forms of geographic knowledge production (Cresswell, 2010; Huysmans and Pontes-Nogueira, 2016; Scheel and Tazzioli, 2021), I suggest we must turn our focus to the everyday (digital) lived realities of subjects themselves.

Whilst this means taking seriously the negative, harmful or damaging role that smartphones play in the lives of subjects, it also means looking beyond a state-centric lens of irregular migration: to begin to identify how lives lived on, off and between smartphone screens may be productive of subject formation processes that exist outside of state-centric accounts — expanding our current understanding of everyday life in its messy, grounded and contextualised forms. Contributing to work within the geographical discipline, being aware of the forms of control and power that emerge through the smartphone is critical, but we simultaneously might find insight into how lives continue to live, form, or flourish through a multitude of digital practices that are part of this everyday experience of governance effects.



Current contributions to the role of digital devices within everyday experiences of irregular mobility are important (Tazzioli, 2021), but can, at points, open up tensions of (re)producing subjects as non-agentic figures, (almost) completely answerable to the state through digital touchpoints. As noted, this element of digital life is crucial to understanding the everyday experience of irregular migration in Western states. However, navigating this tension, I argue that in the everyday context — beyond a theoretical framing that limits conceptualisation of the subject to their material conditions — smartphones are also mobilised in a much broader sense than only simply navigating regimes of mobility governance through actions such as uploading documents in online portals or setting up digital financial flows. My purpose here is not to dispute or negate the increasing role that smartphones play in surveillance, control and data collection. Smartphones are indeed becoming one of many technologies through which states can control and harm subjects (Tazzioli, 2020, 2021). Instead, it is to ask what might happen when we consider how smartphones are used, and what they are productive of, when we conceptualise their use in a broader sense: beyond a narrative of complete control or exposure to hostility (Greene, 2020; Wynter and McKittrick, 2014).

Mobilising McKittrick's (2011) work on the formation and development of Othered subjectivities, I suggest we must look beyond the limits of state-produced categorisations of irregular migrants (Scheel and Tazzioli, 2021), towards a broader sense of the affective, imaginative and material realities that are productive of everyday (digital) lives. This is not to romanticise the experience of irregular mobility. Instead, to broaden our current conceptualisation of migrant subjectivity, opening up the question(s) of how subjectivity emerges through alternative (in this case, digital) formats outside the framing of the state. What might become known when we expand the current scope of what smartphones can do in relation to irregular migrant life? When we look at the broader, often habitual, mundane or routine, use of smartphones, how might novel ways of theoretically tracing the realities of forms of life within the asylum system become known when we take seriously the digital entanglements that animate the everyday?

Drawing upon work within geography that draws upon the affective, ephemeral and often habitual elements of digital everyday practices (Haber, 2019; Hartman, 2017; Handyside and Ringrose, 2017; Chun, 2016), I thus aim to highlight how, as geographers, we no longer contribute to the discourse of everyday lived realities of irregular migration within liberal democratic societies without careful consideration of its digital entanglements. Of course, hostility burns in the background of those going through the asylum application process (Anderson et al., 2019; Smith and Vasudevan, 2017; Weheliye, 2014), but how might forms of administered hostility get (re)mediated by users of smartphones, or indeed, other digital devices? What happens to the deeply affective experience of waiting or suspension (Bissell and Fuller, 2010; Greene, 2020; Griffiths, 2014; Omar, 2022) when it is mediated by the ever-expanding possibilities of smartphone use? In the remainder of the paper, I outline how geography as a discipline may be able to contribute to these questions, tracing a pathway to geographic research on the digital everyday.

To be able to move beyond state-centric accounts of technology use, the first thing we must consider is how we are framing the smartphone itself. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the interest here lies less in what smartphones are as a technological object, but more in what they are productive of when subjects use them. Thinking with the concept of smart from below (Miller et al., 2021), I propose that we begin with the simple question of what subjects do with the smartphone: how they are organised, what is on them, how they are used in the everyday context. By engaging with the everyday — the habitual, repetitive, mundane or experimental — we have the opportunity to explore how users themselves are productive of [smart]phones and, therefore, how hostility (that which burns in the background) gets (re)mediated through these very practices in complex and often contradictory ways.

Smartphones are used in an ever-expanding range of practices in the everyday context: from scrolling on social media (Kutscher and Kreß, 2018), consuming popular culture (Smets, 2017), contacting family (Longhurst, 2013) or tracking personal data such as exercise or menstruation (Lupton, 2018; Trnka, 2016). Highly individualistic, smartphones

have become extremely personal and often intimate, devices that animate everyday life. Although smartphones can support highly specific uses such as asylum application interfaces or third-party apps — many of which support particular kinds of practices such as accessing finance, resources or legal knowledge — I also suggest it is equally important to consider the other, more general, uses of smartphones in the everyday context. If we are interested in understanding the everyday, this means casting light on those practices that often fall into the background of everyday living: the mundane, routine or habitual. Although in this paper these practices may seem of less importance than those directly involved with mobility control, I argue that paying attention to the broader practices that animate everyday smartphone use offers important insights into how state affects are digitally (re)mediated by individuals.

This is not only important for rethinking the current scope in which we frame the ‘everyday’ in geographic research, but also equally important for engaging critically with the underlying assumptions that are embedded in how users mobilise specific technologies. For example, echoing long debates around the vulnerability/agency dichotomy (Illiadou, 2019; Danewid, 2017; Gilson, 2016), Smets (2017) argues, assuming that certain subjects do not use digital devices in ways that are similar to Western preconceptions (binge-watching TV shows, for example) can be equally dangerous for (re)producing irregular migrants as distinct from the citizen. Beyond characterising irregular migrants through a state-centric lens — which may get (re)produced if we only ever focus on the role of smartphones in direct relation to forms of mobility themselves we must instead consider genuinely everyday digital use: from the specific to, often, the highly mundane or familiar. Without consideration of both uses, our understanding of the entanglements between the digital and lives lived off screens will only ever be partial: framed through the nationalistic binaries that continue to characterise mobility research within geography (Scheel and Tazzioli, 2021).

Looking at everyday smartphone practices, what might we find in scrolling on social media, sending photographs, or video calling friends — particularly when thinking about the context of the hostility that animates and characterises forms of life? I suggest that when we shift our lens to focus on the imaginative, affective and material geographies that are

produced through such everyday actions, we can begin to understand how hostility – as a direct and intended effect of state governance: felt in different ways — gets (re)mediated through digital practices. The administration of hostility no longer becomes an asymmetric power relation between state and subject as often imagined in the public sense, instead its intended and unforeseen impacts on the everyday realities of subjects in the asylum system become (re)mediated through everyday smartphone practices.

## Towards Everyday Smartphone Geographies: Living (Digitally) Like a Migrant

In the final section of this paper, I outline an approach to researching the (digital) lived realities of irregular migrants in Western liberal democratic states: in the everyday, mundane and often ephemeral experiences of everyday smartphone practices. If recentring everyday experiences within geopolitics is a genuine aim of geographic research, we must move beyond a state-centric account of irregular migration and digital practices. The digital everyday exists as one element of everyday experience we may turn to if we are to engage in the question of what it means to live (digitally) like a migrant in the cumulative effects of hostile governance across Western states. I introduce this concept here — living (digitally) like a migrant — as a means of emphasising an epistemological shift of what it means to live through actively produced hostility: centring the embodied, imaginative and affective ways in which hostility percolates the spatio-temporal experience of simply existing.

The concept I propose here builds upon the work of scholars such as Tazzioli (2015) and Kalir (2013) who emphasise the importance of an epistemological shift in geographical ways of seeing the world: of seeing forms of mobility. As a discipline working towards a more nuanced understanding of everyday migrant life, we must be acutely aware of the practices and theoretical positioning that may inform this kind of research. Previous work within critical geography has outlined the importance of actively undoing forms of methodological nationalism which have become prevalent within the discipline — particularly those focused on irregular forms of mobility (Huysmans and Nogueira, 2016;

Scheel and Tazzioli, 2021). Emerging from this line of thinking, scholars such as Tazzioli (2015) and Kalir (2013) have suggested that we must employ the approach of ‘seeing like a migrant’ (Kalir, 2013: 312). If methodological nationalism is embedded in a particular mode of seeing the world – as one of naturalised border regimes, nation-states and inherent differences between modes of citizenship (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) – then it is a radical shift in this practice of ‘seeing’ that is suggested as a way of beginning to grapple with geography’s long history of naturalising particular modes of organising world(s). To see like a migrant is to destabilise and de-naturalise the theoretical framing of what constitutes ‘migrant life’: learning from below, as opposed to naturalised legacies of colonial Othering that continue to shape mobility discourse(s) and practice(s) in the West (Davies et al., 2017; Davies and Isakjee, 2019; Hakli and Kallio, 2021).

Tazzioli’s (2015) and Kalir’s (2013) seeing like a migrant approach thus centres how people who become categorised as migrants constitute themselves in ways that are not (re)productive of Western fetishisation (Mayblin, 2019; Tazzioli, 2015). Moving beyond the mainstream discourse of ‘irregular’ migration upheld across the European context, the active conceptual and/or methodological practice of seeing like a migrant aims to move beyond framings of irregular migration that are not constrained by Western imaginaries, narratives, or theories. Instead, shifting the focus onto how those subjects who come to be named as ‘migrants’ live in ways that are suggestive of ‘alternative political [relations]’ (Tazzioli, 2015: 2) in the everyday context. This move to re-centre the everyday experiences of asylum is integral to the argument put forward in this paper. In the following paragraphs, I develop this concept in two ways. First, in a shift from ‘seeing’ to ‘living’ in both a conceptual and methodological sense and, second, in centring the digital within ‘everyday’ life.

First, I argue that, for geographic research to be able to conceptualise the everyday (albeit always partial), we cannot do so by simply ‘seeing’ like a migrant in our conceptual or methodological positioning. We must push this concept even further if we are to genuinely re-centre everyday experience: particularly through the lens of an increasingly digital context. ‘Seeing’ has a particular epistemological framing which ultimately works towards

reproducing the migrant subject as Other: as positioning lived experience as secondary to 'geographic' knowledge of everyday life. The move from seeing to living signals a shift towards embracing everyday lived experience as already-geographic knowledge: in its messy, complex and often contradictory forms. Beyond simply 'seeing', we must move towards an understanding of what it means to live (materially, affectively, imaginatively...) in ever-increasing hostile environments; where the specific affective modes of hostility seek to percolate into almost all aspects of everyday life. The move from 'seeing' to 'living', may perhaps seem like mere a lexical change in the concept, but if geographic research is aiming to genuinely re-centre everyday experience in the geopolitical (Pain, 2015), we cannot do so without prioritising the lived and embodied experiences of the mobility regimes we aim to include in academic research. This means we must be ready to encounter forms of everyday (digital) life that do not fit neatly with preconceived notions of digital practices. From the temporality of digital, use to the wide and complex interactions between digital and non-digital spaces, geographic researchers must be willing to start, and learn from, these practices themselves. The move from seeing to living thus signals a move to prioritising everyday lived experience as geographic knowledge: in its messy, complex and often contradictory forms.

Second, beyond the shift from seeing to living, I argue that embedded within this concept must exist an appreciation of how this 'living' is now, almost always, digitally mediated. A re-centring of the everyday experience of mobility — particularly within the Western context — can no longer be achieved without a nuanced understanding of the digital forms of living that are now enmeshed within everyday experience. To conceptualise the everyday means to engage critically with forms of living that exist with, between and through the assemblage of digital interactions: of which the smartphone has become a clear central component. Without a nuanced engagement with the entanglements between irregular migrants and digital devices, we cannot work towards any sense of what it means to live or exist in hostile environments. Understanding what it means to live (digitally) like a migrant therefore creates opportunities to contribute to ongoing discussions within critical geography about affirmative forms of living (Koch and Miles, 2021; Negri and Esposito,

2017; McKittrick, 2013). As discussed in this section, the ‘digital’ is not a pre-given egalitarian space to be romanticised here. The lived realities of subjects are, in multiple and compounding ways, reproduced through online practices (Nguyen-Thu, 2021). However, there are simultaneously ways in which digital technologies are used to develop forms of living that are more closely aligned with flourishing life (and thus forms of life that are associated with citizens: valued populations) than not.

Taking both propositions into future geographic work on everyday migrant life, this signals that our research design, practices and methodological approaches must also be embedded in the overall aim of learning from below and de-naturalising legacies of Othering. Beyond ‘seeing’ which, methodologically and conceptually speaking, is steeped in historical legacies of geographic practices (Bejarano et al., 2019), we must be committed to developing holistic approaches to research that allow lived experience to be centred – conceptually and practically – in our work. This means thinking carefully about how methodological approaches can be mobilised to enhance our theoretical aims, since the two are never separate (Tazzioli, 2020). We must therefore be committed to methodological design(s) that both centre and are able to express ‘everydayness’. Methodological choices are not simply a ‘tool’ to uncover or reveal aspects of everyday (digital) life, but to create spaces for participatory forms of knowledge production about the value of the framing of the everyday within academic work.

To achieve this, we must be enabling our [participants, co-producers, co-researchers] to shape geographic research agendas of everyday life — without this participatory engagement, geographic research continues to produce knowledge about Othered populations rather than with and for. Geographic research agendas must be open to creating space for taking seriously individual expertise and knowledge of the (digital) everyday. This is particularly important when we consider the nature of everyday digital life — an array of practices that are often habitual, routine or even nonconscious (Awad and Tossell, 2021) — where language or discourse, relied upon heavily in many areas of geographic research, can limit possibilities of knowledge production and representation.

We must, therefore, think carefully how we can create the space within academic work to genuinely centre alternative political relations: and the consequences of how we end up doing so — how they are produced, circulated and represented. In the context of irregular migration and digital practices, we must be willing to incorporate participatory elements to our research design: prioritising individual experience of everyday smartphone practices. This does not mean abandoning ‘traditional’ methods, but thinking about how they can be adapted or changed to engage with the everyday lives of irregular migrants and how this shapes the questions we ask, or research agendas we develop. For example, ethnography is perhaps one of the best suited methods to capture everyday experience: but the design and implementation of which must be carefully thought through if it is the match-up with the aim of challenging knowledge production about Othered populations (Bejarano et al., 2019). Geographers may equally be well positioned to embrace newer, creative methods within this wider research agenda. Either way, the focus must remain on learning from everyday experience first, and developing methodological and conceptual aims second.

In the final section of this paper, I aim to propose two ways in which we might take the concept of living (digitally) like a migrant forward into a geographical research agenda: aiming to fold the centrality of everyday smartphone practices into accounts of everyday lived experience. These two pathways, intersecting more often than not, outline how we might conceptualise the affective, imaginative and material geographies of everyday (digital) life and, furthermore, how the specific governance effect of hostility is (re)mediated through this interaction with the smartphone. Hostility and other affective mediations of the everyday must be held in tension with one another: not collapsed into the binary mode of thought that is often characteristic of geographic knowledge (Hinger, 2022; Pinelli, 2018; Pain, 2015). Both the affective experience of hostility and its (re)mediations work together in experiences of the everyday — blending into various modes of living (debilitated, suspended and affirmative) for the subject.

Moreover, what is crucial to acknowledge at the very beginning of this section is that the digital cannot be separated or disentangled from ‘off-screen’ life (Coleman, 2018; Karpf,



2020). Any attempt to capture the spatio-temporal experiences of smartphone use (or other digital devices), must be ready to deal with the messy, and often contradictory, reality of lives lived online. Although digital spaces may offer the opportunity for affective, imaginative or material change, we must not forget that digital spaces are not inherently egalitarian: where subjects are relieved of their precarity, disadvantages or systemic oppression (Nguyen-Thu, 2021). Instead, such prepositions are created, sustained and compounded through the digital (Browne, 2010; 2015; Nguyen-Thu, 2021; Witteborn, 2015, 2018). If we are attempting to theorise how state affects are experienced and (re)mediated through everyday digital practices, we must not automatically assume that the subjectivities of individuals are radically changed, nor homogenous among users of, and within, the digital realm. Instead, we must remain open to the complex, and often messy, entanglements between subject and screen(s).

## (Re)Enforced Hostility

Mobilising the living (digitally) like a migrant approach within geographic research demands a (re)conceptualisation of what counts as geopolitical — re-centring the everyday experience of those governed by the state. Learning from the work of digital feminist scholars, we must move away from the Western-centric idea that modernity is equal to speed or forward momentum and begin to engage with alternative experiences of digital temporality that form everyday experience (Awad and Tossell, 2021; Nguyen-Thu, 2021). Working towards a grounded account of digital everyday experience, I suggest we might benefit from centring work that questions the intricate and complex questions of how subjectivity becomes digitally mediated. In this case, we must move beyond the narrative of an uncritical celebration of seamless connectivity or speed that we find in Western geographic accounts of digital experience (Duclos, 2017). Instead, we must work to situate the specificities of everyday digital practices (Rose et al., 2020, 2017).

Returning to the argument made in the ((Digitally) encountering hostility) section of this paper, we must question how temporal experiences are formed through everyday

smartphone practices and how this might be productive of (re)enforcing hostile effects of Western state governance. Learning from Nguyen-Thu (2021), we may find value in centring slowness in the digital as an area for meaningful research. If we take the characteristic experience of slowness as a specific affective experience of hostile governance regimes (in waiting, suspension, uncertainty...), we might find multiple ways in which being online or using smartphone devices compounds this experience; affectively, imaginatively, or practically. Turning towards how digital devices are used in the everyday context may reveal to us how this specific experience of hostility (in this case, as slowness) has the potential to be (re)mediated, or simultaneously (re)enforced, through the specific temporalities that emerge from being online.

Hence, one example we might re-examine might be the increasing digitisation of the state in relation to communication. Whether in migrant camps across Europe (Tazzioli, 2020) or in the everyday experience of relocation for asylum seekers (Darling, 2022a, 2022b), the smartphone has now become one of the central touchpoints for the state to reach individuals and communicate information. Whilst being chained to conditions of slowness in everyday (non-digital) life (Griffiths, 2014; Mbembe, 2019; Weheliye, 2014), owning or using a smartphone has become one of many technologies where slowness can get compounded. One clear example that illustrates this experience is the UK Home Office's current position on the role of smartphones within the asylum application process. The use of text messages and emails to communicate with individuals about asylum-related issues has now become commonplace. From outsourced organisations dealing with housing problems, to maintaining contact with immigration lawyers, the smartphone has become one of the most central technological objects in the process of claiming asylum: enabling connection, communication and knowledge — even if often sparse or infrequent. Although this contact with the state and governing institutions is not exclusive to the smartphone (many asylum seekers rely on an assemblage of digital infrastructure(s)), the temporal experiences of smartphone use are unique. Information is accessible, most often, at an individual's fingertips: almost instantaneous. In such cases, the anticipation and

uncertainty that gravitate around waiting for information become characteristic of everyday experience.

Waiting for information such as text messages or email updates thus becomes a specific digitally induced spatio-temporal experience that emerges through the state's engagement with the smartphone. Waiting is not an empty process nor indication of absence. Waiting is a highly affective experience (Turnbull, 2016): one filled with multiple temporal experiences — from (re)living the past, being paralysed by uncertainty in the present, to attaching hope or fear into projections of the future. Waiting thus is an exercise of power (ibid). In mobilising smartphones as part of the asylum application process — whether that be through contact with various state actors, or in direct contact with state departments — the smartphone becomes one technology within the wider assemblage of administering hostility. Here the smartphone is uniquely positioned as a technology through which the illusion of the state being closer through immediate access or contact — an experience often associated with digital interactions (Koch and Miles, 2021) — gradually realised (Tazzioli, 2015). Digital practices become part of the spatio-temporal dimensions of everyday life: refreshing emails, waiting for phone calls and updating online portals. Although not all elements of the process are digital — for example, in the UK communication about interview dates are still often sent via physical letters — the blending of (non)digital forms of contact with the state amplifies the anxieties and suspension that were already produced through non-digital processes. The smartphone thus becomes a technology embedded in the assemblage of state administered hostility. Now, Hostile state affects are thus encountered through the smartphone screen. As geographers, we must take seriously the role that everyday digital practices are playing in compounding uncertainty or anticipation of encountering the state. To live (digitally) as a migrant is to live in anticipation of everyday smartphone encounters with the state: through the text message, email or digital interface.

Moreover, we must remember that this specific form of hostility is administered through the same technological object where other forms of living (what we might call everyday life) continue. What results is an inseparable distinction between the two: where

individuals are constantly exposed to the ability to check on portal statuses, refresh communication chains, or check if their WhatsApp has two blue ticks. The infrastructure of the smartphone becomes part of a digital assemblage that produces and contains individuals within hostile tempo-spatial arrangements. The contrasting temporal experiences of digital subjects also play into a digitally produced affective condition: where the gap between expectations of digital connectivity (fast, rapid and seamless) stand in stark contest to that of digital contact with state actors (slow, irregular, delayed and asymmetric). Working towards a research agenda for geographical knowledge, we must therefore be open to exploring how our current understanding of geopolitical assemblages of mobility governance are now, almost always, digitally mediated: in the very sense of the everyday geopolitical experience in how the state is encountered, often in mundane or habitual ways. To gain a deeper insight into how hostility works — both as an object of policy development and the experience of such policies — we must be open to integrating and re-situating the material, affective or imaginative spatio-temporal experiences of everyday smartphone use into our examination of surveillance or control. At the same time, we must remain open to how the experience of hostility reverberates through everyday experience of digitally mediated lives.

Exposure to waiting or slowness through digital interactions with the state is not necessarily exclusively productive of negative material or affective experiences: we might find boredom, detachment or space/time made otherwise in the same practices. Nor is slowness the only spatio-temporal digital experience where hostility is administered. When we begin to trace the complexities of what it means to live (digitally) as a migrant, or more broadly to imagine the imaginative, affective or materiality of what now constitutes the ‘everyday’, we must be ready to accept the messy reality of everyday life.

## (Re)Mediated Hostility

Taking this one step further, I argue that when we interrogate what it means to live (digitally) as a migrant, we must also pay close attention to how lives lived digitally are productive of (re)mediating hostility. More specifically, how everyday smartphone practices animate everyday spatio-temporal experiences of mobility that exist outside (at least partially, momentarily or ephemerally) of state control. The question I raise here is: in the experience of prolonged waiting, how might we recentre the mundane, habitual or fleeting digital practices as ones which work towards (re)mediating the hostile effects of mobility governance? In the momentary checking of social media, prolonged binge-watching of TV shows, or weekly family calls, what happens to the experience of hostility (affectively, imaginatively or materially) — in its various forms — that are administered by various state actors? In shifting the lens of what we consider the smartphone to be, or what it is used for beyond a state-centric account, we might be able to find moments or experiences of (re)mediating the hostile effects of governance.

Here, I suggest we might learn from the contributions of Black feminist scholars like McKittrick (2011, 2013) who caution against (re)producing dominant narratives that confined Othered forms of life to negative forms, processes or existence. In the case of irregular migration, if we only ever conceptualise this form of living in terms of death, injury or control, what might we miss in the everyday lived realities of different governance regimes? I argue this conceptual move is important for geographic research which aims to capture the everyday context of digital migrant life. In place of state-centric narratives, we must instead work towards developing contributions of the everyday, both in its constraining and life affirming aspects. Indeed, extended or prolonged periods of waiting can be debilitating for irregular migrants suspended within this form of spatio-temporal control. However, how else might we reconceptualise everyday digital practices as part of periods of waiting that are, as Tazzioli (2015: 2) prompts, ‘suggestive of alternative political [relations]’? Where might we find alternative forms of living within such experiences: of connection, community or detachment? In this case, I suggest we start with those very

practices to understand alternative political relations – once again, prioritising knowledge of the everyday from those who are living it.

If we stay with the affective experience of hostility through waiting, considering how smartphones are used in the everyday context can indicate how hostility gets (re)mediated. For example, we might consider Smets' (2017) work that found irregular migrants spend a large amount of time using smartphones to consume popular media such as TV shows. Smets (ibid) found that these actions — although highly mundane and banal — allowed individuals to both connect to a sense of 'home' and enable them to distract or distance themselves from material conditions of mobility governance. By immersing oneself in popular media, both practically and affectively, the temporal experience of waiting is disrupted: it blends into the background, forgotten, even if only momentarily. Similarly, we might consider the impact of digital transnational connections on individual users. When connecting with family or friends online in different places across the world (Greene, 2020), what might the act of connecting — of messaging, calling or even sending a GIF — allow subjects to navigate the often violent (even if invisible, slow or encroaching) conditions of their existence? Such practices may be productive of alternative spatio-temporal arrangements that enable individuals to continue living (in an affirmative sense) despite the overriding subjection to hostility: time-spaces of care, connection, distraction, mundaneness.

For geographic research, those everyday smartphone practices that often fade into the background of everyday life have profound impacts on the spatio-temporal experience of (im)mobility. Paying attention to these practices provides important insight into the experience of the everyday lived realities and how the effects of such governance get (re)mediated through digital entanglements. In a context where temporality becomes a form of control, the novel ability to alter, distract or disrupt forms of waiting through the smartphone offer exciting insight into examining the relationship between the state and Othered subjects.

In attempting to capture these affirming everyday practices with the smartphone, we must be ready to re-think the relationship between forms of state control and biopolitics:

specifically the conditions under which life is made to flourish (Foucault, 2008). In hostile migrant environments across the European context, it is clear that irregular forms of migrant life are subject to necropolitical regimes (Davies and Isakjee, 2019; Mbembe, 2003, 2019) – actively produced as unvalued life (Butler, 2006) – where the conditions to flourish are practically eradicated. And, yet, when we re-centre the everyday lived realities of lives lived digitally, we can identify moments – even if only temporary, fleeting or ephemeral – of affirmative flourishing: in connection, distraction or distancing. Such moments have serious implications for thinking through the space-time arrangements that are produced: altering, changing or becoming productive of alternative modes of everyday life within the wider background of hostility. Modes of hostility are transformed and (re)mediated in everyday digital practices. For example, spaces of care and connection are often sought through a variety of mundane digital practices – in connecting to local communities through Facebook, using WhatsApp groups to keep in contact with friends or family or using specifically designed apps to access services or resources in the local area.

Moreover, we must remember that such practices don't necessarily have to be radical for there to be a (re)mediation of hostile governance: the affective experience of hostility may be forgotten, unattached from, held at a distance through a range of digital interactions: from playing games with friends online to scrolling through online dating apps. These everyday practices are still important for understanding the affective everyday experience of digital subjects. As geographers interested in the framing of everyday life and/or irregular mobility, we must therefore remain open to developing theoretical or methodological approaches that are able to account for the messy and complex realities of what it now means to live (digitally) like a migrant. We must remain attuned to the often hidden, slow or ephemeral implications of everyday smartphone use that can enable, or sustain, alternative ways of making life live against a background of ever-increasing hostility.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that geographic research can no longer claim to be working on irregular ‘migrant life’ without clear and nuanced considerations of how everyday life is now lived digitally. Centring everyday smartphone practices as one element of this digitally assembled ‘everyday’, I have argued that we can no longer conceptualise the state, nor state encounters, as separate from the assemblage of digital technology that is part of, and formulate, everyday life.

Building upon geographic work that aims to tackle methodological nationalism and whiteness that exists within research around the everyday experiences of mobility (see: Tazzioli, 2020; De Genova, 2013), I have proposed living (digitally) like a migrant as a concept that future geographic work in this area might take forward: emphasising the value in digitally embodied knowledge about tempo-spatial experiences of hostile environments. Turning to the digital everyday, I have outlined how we may be able to (re)imagine or (re)conceptualise what it means to biopolitically exist, live or flourish under conditions of state-administered hostility. The focus of this paper has primarily explored this argument through the lens of Western irregular mobility governance: particularly in the context of European asylum governance, where smartphones have become mobilised as key technologies through which hostility — defined as a specific affective mode of state governance — is simultaneously administered and (re)mediated in a wide range of everyday smartphone practices. This context has been important for holding the set of arguments made throughout this paper about the specificity of European migration governance. However, it is important to signal here that the arguments made in this paper are applicable to other geographies of the digital everyday and offer a conceptual and methodological template for how we might conceptualise encounters with state governance.

Taking this forward as a discipline, we must remain open to the messy, grounded and complex nature of digital everyday lives: creating the conceptual spaces and methodological innovation for these elements of everyday life (slow, fleeting, ephemeral and momentary) to come to the surface of geographic knowledge production.



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## Part Three

### The (Digital) Everyday

*In Review for Social & Cultural Geography.*

This paper explores how far ethnographic methods can go in researching and representing the (digital) everyday. Working with long-established concerns about being able to access, research and represent the ‘everyday’ — from Perec’s (1989) exhaustive listing to Ahmed’s (2004; 2010) phenomenological critique — I explore the novel frictions and tensions shaping geographic attempts to research everyday digital life. Drawing upon research with digitally-connected asylum seekers, I highlight how, in attempting to research the ‘digital everyday’, we are simultaneously confronted with: first, core epistemological questions at the root of ethnographic practice about how we access and represent the level of everyday life, and second, the novel forms, intensities, and temporalities that the ‘everyday’ is lived as through smartphone devices. I bring these together through two core themes — friction (where the practical doing of ethnography reaches its limits of what it can capture) and tension (how much we should attempt to access or represent of everyday life). Sitting at the limits of my research data can say, or might never be able to say, I offer a commentary on the (in)capacities that we as researchers have in capturing, or representing, the richness of everyday digital life today.

## Introduction

At today's drop-in, I'm stood with five men all awaiting a game of dominoes. Many of them do not speak English, but I join in at the request of Gamal. The game is fast-paced, and the men are clearly experts at tactical play, often leaving me to simply guess the best move to make. Each man eagerly watches the other make a move, planning their countermove with each turn. And yet, simultaneously, despite being engrossed in the game, at some point each man flips their phone over and checks their home screens and notifications in between goes. Many of these brief checks happen seamlessly in the fabric of the game. But in other moments, a glance too long at a phone screen means that another player is able to catch the other out. At one point, one of the men begins to scroll through his Instagram reels and YouTube homepage, causing a commotion when he delays taking his turn by having to catch up on the previous moves.

01/02/2023

I begin with this vignette to highlight something we already know: that smartphones are now woven into the fabric of our everyday movements, thoughts, and ways of being in the world — often beyond intentional practice or conscious thought. Smartphones blend seamlessly across bodies, spaces and practices (Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018; Pink et al., 2017); becoming visible only when they disrupt: a glance too long, a scroll too far. This is true for almost all of my ethnographic research with asylum seekers in the North-East of England: the smartphone — when we are not explicitly drawing attention to it in a research capacity — blends into the background of daily existence. So much so, that it is incredibly difficult to overstate its presence within our everyday lives. Even when not being used, the smartphone is constantly near us; tucked in pockets, held in hands, placed on surfaces, plugged into a nearby wall, at the bottom of our bags. It has become an extension of the

human subject; one that is necessary to include in any attempt to research everyday (digital) life (Morgan, 2023; Pink et al., 2017).

The smartphone's seamless integration into daily life raises new epistemological questions about how we, as researchers, access this level of everydayness (Hitchings and Latham, 2020; Morley, 2017). In the rapid digitalisation of everyday life, calls have been made that any research attempting to frame the 'everyday' — an emerging theme within geographic research: especially those emerging from intersectional feminist frameworks (Leszczynski, 2019) — must engage with the affectual power of the smartphone device (Liu, 2024; Morgan, 2023). Recent work has begun to grapple with the question of how we can both account for and research the unprecedented digitalisation of human life at the level of the everyday (Ash et al., 2018). The 'digital everyday' has become both the subject and object of research (Liu, 2024) demanding new epistemologies and methodologies to account for its unparalleled overhaul of human activity, embodiment, and relations (Przybylski, 2021; Leszczynski, 2019; 2020). This does not necessarily mean that traditionally established methods such as ethnography or participatory research are redundant in this new digital age. On the contrary, they remain valuable for capturing the richness and complexity of human-technological relations and the blurry lines (if any still exist) between online/offline and digital/non-digital lifeworlds (Zhao, 2024; Membrive and Mino-Puigcercos, 2024; Sandberg et al., 2022). It has meant, however, that what we attune ourselves to, and orient ourselves towards, as ethnographers continually morphs in relation to the subtle (and non-subtle) shifts that unfold within smartphone relations: in behaviours, practices, movements, attachments, imaginaries, and attitudes.

As the vignette shows, ethnographic methods can enable researchers to explore the nuances and minutiae of everyday digital life: capturing mundane, ephemeral, and often taken-for-granted moments that may otherwise be overlooked. Where we put or hold our smartphones, how we consciously and non-consciously interact with them, when we pick them up or shut them down (if we ever do) are all deeply entangled within the fabric of our everyday existence: entanglements that often exist beyond the capacity of language to describe them, or provide reasoning for, either in retrospect or the present moment. Such momentary actions or fleeting thoughts can tell us a lot about how individuals occupy,

maintain, create, or resist spatio-temporal arrangements: both in digital and non-digital spaces (and everything in between). This is particularly important for subjects whose digital lives and subjectivities have historically been obscured, ignored or framed through processes of Othering (Morgan, 2023; Tazzioli, 2021; 2020). In the context of my own research, even the smallest moments in everyday digital life can be incredibly important for developing an understanding of how individuals seeking asylum navigate both the asylum system and broader affective relations that determine what it feels like to live as an asylum-seeking subject. Even the most banal digital practices — this could be anything from checking family group chat notifications to ‘doom scrolling’ through TikTok — can give us detailed insight into how structures of power are mediated and (re)mediated in the everyday context (Morgan, 2024; 2025).

But this does not mean that we as researchers can simply apply pre-existing approaches or epistemologies and ‘reveal’ the (digital) everyday. Partly because, as I will explore in the second section of this paper, there are already well-established concerns and critiques over attempts to access the ‘everyday’: both in how we do it (constant observations, exhaustive listing, focusing on rhythms or patterns, phenomenological engagement with affect, following objects) and what we can say about what comes out of these research practices (how to represent them: if we can at all). Researching the (digital) everyday simultaneously retains these problematics and proliferates them into a new world of rapidly changing digital connection. Much like Georges Perec’s concern around listing everyday life (1975; 1973), Fortunati (2023: 20) argues, “there are so many pieces of everyday life and dimensions of [...] existence that are encompassed by the smartphone that it is difficult to list them”. The same question remains today then: how can we attempt to access, research and represent the everyday as researchers, and what novel frictions and tensions emerge when attempting to do this kind of research?

Reflecting upon my research experience, there are distinct moments where the promises of ethnographic approaches failed, fractured or raised unavoidable ethical questions. This paper brings those limits into view, thinking not just about what we know of the ‘everyday’ but how we come to know it (Latham, 2020). I do this through two thematic perspectives. The first of these perspectives is friction: where the practical doing of



ethnography reaches its limitations of what it can access. For example, being able to record and represent everyday digital practices that exist at the edge of consciousness or bodily control. Here, I draw upon my experience of doing ethnographic research and the moments of friction I encountered in the field whilst attempting to access some form of the digital everyday. I explore this, first, through the basic practicalities of doing research with smartphones that present moments of friction for an ethnographer attempting to observe them: the position in which people are holding their phones, or the speed with which certain practices are done, for example. Second, I come to reflect upon the ability of both ourselves and our participants to draw meaning from these kinds of practices that are so embedded within our everyday habits, movements and forms of embodiment. Working at the limits of non-representation (Thrift, 2008; 2004), I consider the moments of friction that arise when ethnographer or participant attempts to discuss or attribute meaning to practices that hold such intensity in the everyday doing of daily life, but happen through the edges of conscious thought: working through habit as apposed to intentional practice.

The second thematic section considers the tensions that emerge in the midst of doing research on everyday digital life. This section highlights the question of how much we should capture of everyday life — or centre in our work to reveal to a public audience in the process of dissemination. Here, I reflect upon how the ethical questions of subject privacy and power relations must continually be negotiated alongside the motivation for developing a sense of the ‘everyday’. This section speaks to universal tensions that can arise in any ethnographic research, and equally to research that is done with subjects situated among multiple, overlapping forms of power and control. I reflect upon the importance of creating ‘good’ modes of relating within everyday digital lifeworlds which I contend is particularly important for subjects whose ‘everyday’ is conditioned by assemblages of extraordinary governance. Taking into consideration that the line between everyday/extraordinary, personal/political and digital/non-digital are in constant flux and negotiation for digitally-connected asylum seeking subjects (Morgan, 2024), I sit with the reality of how simple a question such as “What are you doing on your phone right now?” can raise multiple tensions within our research encounters: highlighting universal tensions about privacy

within our digital lives, but simultaneously raising more serious tensions depending on the subjects we are doing research with.

Taken together, I offer a commentary on my own experiences with friction(s) and tension(s) as a way for human geographers to bring forth a more engaged critical approach to how we integrate methodological reflection into knowledge-making processes and discussions. Responding to Latham's (2020) call for a more enriching engagement with methodology within the discipline, I reflect upon my own research experience that, in order to say anything about the (digital) everyday in a theoretical capacity, we must first get 'there' (i.e. in the everyday) as researchers first; how we get there, how long we stay there, in which capacities we are able to stay/return/access there, are all methodological choices we constantly negotiate in an ethnographic capacity — and in turn, must be reflected in the kinds of knowledge we produce as a secondary step.

## The (Digital) Everyday

Both the friction(s) and tension(s) that are being raised in this paper are legacies of work that has long historically questioned the study of the everyday. Although work on everyday life has experienced an increased uptake alongside the growing rise in intersectional feminist work (Leszczynski, 2019), political and social theorists have long been asking the question of how close we can actually get to the everyday in a disciplinary capacity (Latham, 2003). The digital raises new problematics for this kind of enquiry into everyday life — as I will explore later in this paper — but many of them are firmly tied to a broader genealogical appreciation of how we can access, research and represent the everyday (Herbert, 2000). Across the disciplines of geography, sociology, cultural studies and philosophy, the scholarly interest in 'everyday life' has induced varying epistemological and methodological approaches that attempt to capture the seemingly banal and habitual aspects of life. Many of these approaches centre two core questions: first, how can we access the mundane without rendering it extraordinary, and second, how can the minutiae of everyday habits, routines and practices be adequately represented in our work?

The study of the everyday is marked by distinct tensions across (in)visibility, documentation and experience. In attempts to ‘get at’ this question of the everyday, scholars have developed diverse methodological approaches to make the ordinary perceivable. For example, Perec’s (1989) exhaustive listing, de Certeau’s (1984) tactical performances, Ahmed’s (2004; 2010) phenomenological critiques, Lefebvre’s (1947; 1992) rhythm analysis, Miller’s (2008) object-oriented approach, or Latham’s (2003) diary keeping. Each approach here speaks to the two questions posed previously in their own ways — and indeed raise additional questions around what can be said about the everyday, how documenting the everyday in certain ways might alter it, how researchers can remain attentive to the fleeting or ephemeral nature of everyday life — but each, in one way or other, is based upon a methodological approach that has its roots in ethnographic observation and research practices. This is partly because, at its core, the promise of an ethnographic approach has always been the promise of accessing the mundane, boring or ordinary (Hitchings and Latham, 2019; Latham, 2003). The very roots of ethnographic approaches are tied to the practice of making the ‘everyday’ (ordinary, taken-for-granted, routine, habitual) a site of research in itself (Pink, 2009; Wacquant, 2004; Garfinkel, 1967) through thick description (Geertz, 1973) and thus being able to take ordinary everyday routines, habits and practices and place them into wider processes of power, politics and structures: an approach to research that tells us something about how the everyday is always embedded within these larger phenomena (Stewart, 2007; Taussig, 1980).

Indeed, ethnographic approaches have shifted alongside the rapid digitalisation of everyday life: netnography (Ardèvol & Gómez-Cruz, 2025; Ghodoussi and Page, 2020), (non)media centric ethnographies (Pink et al., 2016; Boase and Humphreys, 2018), socio-technic approaches (Hobbis and Hobbis, 2024) and ‘follow the thing’ approaches (Liu, 2024). The practices, routines and habits that we are interested in researching might have changed; what people are doing with their smartphones, why people are wearing smart devices on their wrists, how people engage with AI assistants in their homes, for example. But what remains at the core of this research is still the question of how far we as researchers can really access the ‘everyday’. It is this question that remains at the core of ongoing research about the (digital) everyday, and continues to shape contemporary

debates around methodological choices, epistemological framings and the ethical challenges of doing research of this nature. This paper, and the ethnographic research that is based upon, does not necessarily solve or answer the question of how researchers can best, most effectively, or most ethically research everyday digital life. Instead, its contribution lies in the reflection upon how long-standing questions that influence this kind of enquiry both persist and are changed by the novel context of digitally mediated life. I thus bring forth the novel challenges — practically and ethically — that doing research with everyday smartphone life presents to a researcher attempting to grasp any sense of the everyday in the rapidly changing technologies, platforms, interfaces, practices, imaginaries, languages or attachments that are produced and sustained by the smartphone device.

A large part of doing this relies on critically reflecting upon my own research practices and approach to understanding the (digital) everyday in the context of asylum-seeking in the UK. I mobilised a range of ethnographic methods over the period of one year in an attempt to understand what role smartphones are playing in the everyday affective experience of claiming asylum. In collaboration with a local organisation in the North-East of England, a decision was made between myself and the collaborating organisation that ethnography as a primary methodological approach promised to get as close to the everyday experience of being a digitally-connected asylum seeker as possible: both in the capacity to build trusting research relationships over the course of the one-year period (which were necessary for doing research both with this population (Halilovich, 2013) and with such intimate practices), and in the practicalities of being with people when they were actually using their smartphones (in drop-in spaces, for example). I combined classic ethnographic techniques — participant observations, informal conversations, and snowballing research encounters across organisations and places — alongside a range of methods influenced by participatory action research such as creative mapping and co-designed interviews.

As a research project, everything could be said to have gone smoothly: from timings, practicalities to end-goal data collection. And yet, despite the successes of this project and the range of data that was collected that speaks to the digital everyday experience of claiming asylum in the UK, there are still frictions and tensions I encountered both in the midst of doing research and in hindsight that I believe deserve further reflection:

particularly in the context of geography's shift towards the 'everyday' as a research framing, and broader debates around how methodological choices are intrinsically tied to knowledge production about the everyday. Instead of attempting to offer an answer to the question of how a researcher can most effectively access the 'everyday' through a distinct set of methodological choices — a question that is simply unanswerable in the sense that any methodological choice will inevitably reveal and occlude different elements of the everyday; even in triangulation or methodological overlap — I instead use this paper to reflect upon instances where the promise of ethnographic approaches to access the everyday failed, fell short or were fragmented in the field of my own research. I highlight that the shift towards researching everyday digital life — especially in the context of individuals who are already governed by and thought intensified systems of hostility and harm — has intensified long-standing concerns with the ability to access the 'everyday' in our research. Sitting with the limits of my role in the field as a researcher, what I was able to access, or where I drew the boundaries at what I felt entitled to access I highlight how the promise of ethnography is sometimes broken down in the everyday doing of the method, either in the practicalities of documenting everyday life or the ethical/moral responsibilities of the researcher in being able to access or represent <sup>40</sup> everyday (digital) life.

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<sup>40</sup> There is equally an interesting discussion to be had around the linguistic choices we make when framing our research on the everyday: *access, capture, get at, evoke, witness*. The consequences of these linguistic choices go beyond the capacities of this research paper but certainly have impacts on how we frame our research and our relation to it as a researcher.

## Friction: How far can ethnographic methods grasp the digital everyday?

Vadin, Okot and I are working through my interview questions, they are taking it in turns to answer; sometimes working together to produce a singular contribution. Whilst one takes the lead in answering, the other often — and almost immediately — picks up their phone from the table, turns it over and quickly moves through movements of tapping, swiping, and holding their finger over the screen: often still listening to the other speaking and quickly locking their phone and placing it back when they come back into the conversation. I cannot see what either of them are doing on their phone, but their movements are fluid and habitual, making their way around their hand-held device without totally removing themselves from the interview in the physical space we are in. Sometimes they appear half in and half out of the interview, at other times, they are seamlessly in both.

28/06/2023

One of the strongest moments of friction when researching smartphones is the extent to which the technological device is embedded within our everyday lives: both in the sense of intensity (how much of our lives are now lived on, through and with this device) and habit (how much of our practices, relations, thoughts, and imaginaries are now entangled with the device). Arguably no technological device has been so entangled with the everyday. Yet ethnographically, the smartphone is paradoxically everywhere and nowhere at once: always present yet hidden from view.

One of the long-established promises of mobilising an ethnographic approach to research is the ability to notice tiny details that have become inherent to our everyday lives: beyond the level of perception or consciousness. Perec's (1974) 'infra-ordinary' and de Certeau's (1984) 'tactics' both highlight the significance of these micro-practices. However, one of the frictions that emerged through my own research with smartphones was that we

can often only go so far in recording a practice, observing an action, or being witness to an encounter when it the very device we are interested in making an object of research interest is deeply embedded within our non-conscious ways of being within the world now as human beings. As we can see in the encounter with Vadin and Okot — where an ethnographic approach to research contributes to the data collection of an interview — both men move in and out of their (digital) everyday lives, practices, and habits seamlessly, all whilst remaining (semi)present in the physical space of the interview. As an ethnographer trying to access the everyday, the tiny details we observe — such as where individuals place their phones, what they do with it, what is happening on the screen — tell us something about the intersection between subjects, spaces, power relations and beyond. But even exhaustive listing or focusing on intricate details may not get us to the ‘everyday’: especially since so much of (digital) everyday life happens on, through, and with screens that blur the boundaries between digital and non-digital space-time(s).

Friction here thus manifests through how the human body is deeply entangled with the smartphone (Chen, 2016; Jenzen, 2017). So much so, that the embodied practices that we now engage with have become pushed to the background of the normality of everyday existence, often without us even thinking or reflecting upon them. In the example of Vadin and Okot, we can see moments where having the ability to observe their screens or a narration of what they are doing on their screens could have been incredibly insightful into understanding what is happening when they are taken away from the interview: what they are using, what their movements are linked to, how what they are doing makes them feel in the moment (ease in place of anxiety, interest in place of boredom, or simply a habitual practice in the present moment of doing the digital practices). For ethnographers, this creates friction in four key ways:

- A. Where practices happen too fast to observe (swiping between, on, with apps)
- B. Where practices unfold in spatial arrangements that block visibility (being opposite a person in a conversation)
- C. Where practices operate on a non-conscious level (habitual gestures such as checking notifications)

D. Wheres smartphone use is layered onto other events or practices (mid-interview or during a conversation)

In today's spatial-temporal arrangements of everyday digital life, the fundamental questions that are highlighted by the likes of Perec (1974) or Lefebvre (1947) are complicated in the digital age through novel intensities, bodily capacities and levels of consciousness. Moreover, sometimes it can be hard to pay attention to the minutiae of everyday (digital) life as an ethnographic researcher in our fields precisely because we are also enrolled within them ourselves. We are not outside of the digital worlds that we research. Consequently, being able to draw attention to the 'ordinary' digital practices, relations, imaginaries and ways of being within digital-nondigital worlds involves a partial undoing or unmasking of the self and the everyday lifeworlds that we also exist within and are productive of. This means as researchers we simultaneously become hyperaware and often actively resistant to the habits and practices that are integral to our everyday lives outside of the 'field' of research. For my own research experience, this most obviously presented itself as intentionally turning my phone on silent, ignoring social media notifications, or keeping my phone in my pocket in an attempt to be present in the field. But these practices (or lack thereof) were learned or intentionally unlearned over the course of a year of fieldwork:

Today there are distinct moments where I feel the urge to reach for my phone... in moments where awkwardness or the unknown become apparent. I have only been to this drop-in a few times now, but it still feels like I am not fully part of the volunteer group, nor the wider range of people who come to the drop-in. I try and keep myself busy and getting to know people here, although this does not come naturally to me outside of doing research. My first instinct in these situations is to gravitate towards my phone — mindlessly scroll on a social media app as a way to ease tension or anticipation of something else happening

07/09/2022



The frictions that emerge for us in the field of research as digitally connected subjects are real and can have real impact for the ways in which we produce our ‘field’ of research and interact with the people within them. As far as possible, I felt the need to unlearn my conscious and (most of the time) non-conscious habits to move towards my phone in times of unease: both as a good research practice and way of being present as an ethnographic researcher in the field. But even with the best intentions, the field of research is never neat, indeed it can often be incredibly slippery; especially when our own everyday (digital) lives are at stake, even when in the role of researcher:

This week, due to ongoing personal health issues I am myself in and out of the drop-in space: making phone calls, checking online portals and completing health questionnaires in apps for a GP appointment. This engagement with my own phone takes me away from the field: distracts from other things going on; creates missed opportunities for engagement. This week I was supposed to be interviewing Hafiz and Amir, but due to me not being able to stay within the drop-in without waiting for a call or email this was not possible: delayed. My ‘researcher’ body is both in and out of the field though my own digital interactions.

01/02/23

These moments of friction are borne out of, and tightly tied to, the reality of the smartphone being an integral part of our everyday lives: both in relation to intensity and habit. Such a reality can make it incredibly difficult in certain scenarios to do the work of ethnographic observation; raising tensions that directly stem from the level at which smartphone use exists (non-conscious, bodily habit, intensely entwined with our everyday lives).

Even when we can observe smartphone practices, interpreting them presents another layer of friction. Much of what we do with our phones — where, when, and why — happens outside intentional reflection. We rarely think about why we check our phones in queues or while waiting; these are now normalized routines. Ethnography invites us to dwell with such details (Brankamp, 2022), but participants often struggle to explain them. This friction lies in our attempts to interrogate non-conscious practices. Non-representational theory —

particularly in the work of Nigel Thrift (2008; 2004) — offers a way to understand this friction. This approach emphasises the affective, embodied, and pre-cognitive dimensions of everyday digital practices. Rather than viewing smartphone use as a consciously meaningful or representational act, a non-representational approach highlights how such behaviours emerge through habit, bodily repetition, and environmental cues. For example, the act of instinctively checking a phone while waiting in a queue can be understood as an embodied disposition (ibid), shaped by affective and sensory rhythms rather than rational decision-making. A tension arises, however, when we attempt to explain or justify these habitual actions — practices that are felt and enacted rather than consciously deliberated (Vannini, 2014).

In mobilising a non-representational approach, we can see how the smartphone becomes an extension of the body, integrated seamlessly into daily life, yet this becomes difficult to critically analyse because its use is not always an intentional, meaning-making act. For example, I heard repeatedly during my research “why are you interested in my phone? It’s boring” or “it’s not important” or “it’s silly”, especially when participants struggled to recall why they might have done certain things like picking up their phone when feeling anxious in interviews or mapping workshops. This kind of tension is inherently linked to our incapacities to retrospectively explain, at least through language (or any other representational form), what we are doing with our smartphones or how we relate to them:

Whilst in the middle of the mapping session this week, Salar writes on a post-note “drop your phone and enjoy real life”, using Google Translate to write this in English, and sticks it near the corner of the page amongst a collection of other comments that are seemingly more positive about digital connection. By the end of the session, there are multiple emoji ‘reacts’ stuck to this post-note by other individuals, signposting agreement or solidarity. I ask Salar what he means by this, shrugging his shoulders, he tells me “This is common sense... the phone is bad for you, you know... its not real life”.

02/08/23

This kind of reaction emerges partly because a large part of our smartphone lives — or everyday (digital) lives — exists in the realm of non-representation (Lu, 2023; Miller, 2021). What our smartphones practices make us feel, affectively position ourselves within, produce or ease outside atmospheres, is incredibly hard to explain through language (or any form of representation, for that matter). This often poses moments of friction for us as ethnographic researchers. Even when we get the perfect circumstances to ask further about something we've observed in the field and ask the classic question of 'why', we are often met with a simple 'I have no idea' or 'I've never thought about that' or 'why are you even asking me that'. Even when people try and explain, they can struggle to elaborate upon their reasoning: this is a pretty universal claim (one that speaks to both the researcher-researched relationship and the awareness of the actual user) but one that is acutely relevant for research where subjects are engaging in predominantly their second, third, fourth language — even when translated. This raises forms of friction that emerge as a consequence of the limits of explanation: one that, at its core, is rooted in wider discussions around the non-representational (Miller, 2021).

This does not mean that capturing everyday (digital) life through language or other forms of representation is impossible. Sometimes simply being with people during doing something with their phone (or shortly thereafter), can provide rich insights into certain practices or their relations to a subject's everyday life. For example, in standing with Gamal holding his phone up to his ear whilst listening to WhatsApp voice notes in a busy drop-in centre, I asked him about what he was doing: "it's my sister and my mother... they like to send me their voice so I can hear them... it helps us feel connected... like not that far... usually I listen with my headphone but here it is too busy, too loud... but I still like to know the gossip [laughs]". Being with Gamal in the moment, and in this capacity, enabled me to work through habitual embodied relations with the smartphone in ways that recalling them retrospectively (in any richness or care for detail) often fails to do. But being with research subjects in these intimate moments cannot be taken for granted — to be in a position where Gamal felt comfortable listening to his voice notes with me present was not by chance; it was built up over months of building trust, familiarity and reciprocity. Here, we see how friction is not necessarily always a boundary that keep us from accessing forms of everyday life, but is something that is constantly negotiated through our research encounters: and something that can be potentially eased by the methodological choices we make in approaching our research projects (through choices like taking time to build trusting relationships or embedding ourselves within the everyday space-times we aim to research).

## Tension: Where do the boundaries of ethnographic lie?

As I set up the two chairs to begin the interview, Roda comes over with her phone in her hand, places it face down on the chair's arm and waits patiently for me to set up my transcript document on my iPad. We chat about how busy it is today in the kitchen (where she helps to volunteer by making cups of coffee) and whilst doing so flips her phone over. Continuing to talk, Roda taps the screen with her finger to illuminate the lock screen, drags her finger up, taking a brief glance at the long list of notifications she has yet to open: all marked by distinct logos of Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram that I recognize instantly. A momentary action, but one that reveals the habitual nature of checking and rechecking the phone. I consider asking her about it, but the moment passes. More importantly, it feels like I'd be crossing a boundary. If someone asked to see my notifications, I'd feel exposed too.

07/06/2023

For any ethnographic researcher, the questions of 'how far should we go, expect to go, or imagine we can go' when doing research with the everyday are intimately tied to wider conversations about power relations, ethics and reciprocity. Enrolled within a feminist ethics of care through ethnographic research practices (Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018; Schuurman and Pratt, 2002), tensions are always inherent within our position as researchers; balancing a fine line between gathering additional, more in-depth, novel forms of data alongside a genuine ethics of care for the people involved in our research projects. This can be tricky to balance when in the midst of a research encounter, especially when we are often required to make split-second decisions in a constantly evolving 'field'. These tensions are inherent to any research project that looks at everyday life but are intensified for forms of research that engage with already vulnerable or precariously positioned individuals.

This kind of tension is immediately apparent in my encounter with Roda. Ethnography offers access to the intimacy of smartphone use — yet interpreting them risks exposure. Her phone's placement, the quick glance, the unopened notifications: each could

offer insight. But asking about them felt intrusive. Two things shaped this: first, naming mundane acts can make them feel strange or overly personal; second, the context of who Roda is and the systems she navigates as an asylum seeker.

In one sense, we know that picking up or scrolling through our smartphones has become a way of navigating uncertainty, boredom, anxiety or indeterminacy in our everyday routines and practices in liberal societies (Hu et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023). Picking up a phone in a quiet moment — to fill time, ease awkwardness, or feel connected — is something most of us do. I might check my phone while brushing my teeth or waiting in line. Yet asking others to explain these same habits in a research setting transforms them into something else. These gestures are ordinary, but pointing them out makes them feel intimate, even invasive. Explaining them requires more than trust — it needs the right moment, the right relationship. To ask about the why(s)/ when(s)/ where(s) of those embodied practices is a different level of research encounter that demands not only trust and reciprocity, but a full range of circumstances related to the encounter that make it possible.

The second reason is the consideration for who the research subject is in this encounter. Conditioned by the political categorisation of ‘asylum seeker’, Roda is already exposed to invasive forms of data collection and surveillance (Steinbrink et al., 2021; Zilkstra and Liempt, 2017). There are thus a vast range of background experiences (harmful data collection practices, continuous forms of tracking and surveillance, interviews and interrogations with various actors) and affectual relations (exhaustion, despair, detachment) that predate Roda showing up in this research encounter about her, perhaps at first glance, seemingly ‘banal’ everyday digital practices. The point of her entering this research encounter in the first place, was not to have her non/sub/beyond conscious digital practices marked as different by me and then asked to explain them. We had already established that this encounter was going to be an interview (which for context, was a set of pre-agreed questions that were co-designed with the collaborating charity partner). In this encounter, it would have been incredibly easy for me as a researcher to begin asking Roda about these practices or decisions, as a way of leading into the ‘real’ interview. But, again, the subject who participates in this research encounter cannot, and should not be taken for

granted, especially if we are doing research with vulnerable individuals<sup>41</sup> governed through extraordinary measures.

For individuals like Roda, even hearing the word ‘interview’ can already raise a range of anxieties, worries or apprehensions when showing up in an interview encounter (Häkli et al., 2020). In this specific example, where Roda had agreed to participate in an interview (of which the questions had already been co-produced with the charity partner), to ask further questions about the place of the phone in this encounter felt like I was over-stepping the line and perhaps intruding upon Roda’s privacy. This kind of care(ful) engagement with the boundaries of our research is necessary: both for the ethical protection of our participants and also maintaining levels of trust and reciprocity that are necessary for conducting research like this in the first place. The questions that we ask, as well as when and how we ask them are intensely political and embedded within already-existing networks of power and control (Fritzche, 2024). We cannot forget that although often framed as trivial and unnecessary, smartphone life is now enmeshed with our inner intimacies and political lifeworlds: especially for subjects who are governed through these very devices and subject to extraordinary forms of data collection (Morgan, 2024; Tazzioli, 2021).

Washing the dishes alongside Solin in the drop-in today, I notice she has placed her phone standing up on the counter with the screen visible. It sits among other everyday kitchen items, not looking out of place. I ask her why she is placed her phone here. Her immediate reaction is laughter, quickly followed by “I have no idea”. I give her a few moments to collect her thoughts and still she tells me “I guess so I can see it if anything happens”. I follow up and ask if she is waiting for anything specific to happen (like receiving a call or a message from somebody specific), “No” she tells me “Just in case, right? Maybe my solicitor or somebody calls me, I have to answer”.

26/07/2023

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<sup>41</sup> Vulnerable in the sense of an individual’s relation to the state and/or procedures of legitimacy, not as a human subject.

The age-old question of how long we can stay with the ‘everyday’ as a researcher is also an important one to consider when doing research with subjects whose ‘everyday’ is conditioned through extraordinary structures of control, power and harm (Noxolo, 2014). As I touched upon in the previous section, there are experiences and relations that exist within the digital everyday that are shared across almost every smartphone subject — the apps or platforms we use, the practices we develop, the imaginaries that are sustained through our engagements with the device — and yet for individuals whom are governed within systems like the asylum system, a simple question such as ‘why do you have your notifications turned off’ might flip from a perceived framing of the digital everyday to an engagement with experiences of violence, trauma, and harm. In this context, where research is being conducted with individuals governed through systems of suffering, there is an impossibility of staying with the banal or mundane directly because the ‘everyday’ is deeply entangled and produced through these very systems (Morgan, 2023; 2024).

For example, Solin in the extract above initially has no idea why she places her phone in the kitchen space like this. Amongst the chaotic scene of the kitchen in the midst of the drop-in session, Solin’s phone was placed upright, against the wall, where anybody who was in the private kitchen space could see the screen. To anybody who owns a smartphone, this is something we are likely to relate to: both as an embodied practice where the smartphone has become an extension of our own bodily capacities and in an affective sense of the feelings of support and/or connection that come with having the smartphone close to our bodies. But for an individual who is simultaneously governed through the asylum system, it becomes almost impossible to disentangle these (almost) universal experiences of keeping our smartphones close to our bodies from a wider understanding of the political arrangements that produce the digitally connected asylum seeker to act in this way.

For individuals like Solin, whom are subject to extraordinary lengths of waiting (De Backer et al., 2023; Liptova, 2022) which are now mediated by forms of digital encounters with state and non-state actors (Morgan, 2024), the feelings of needing to be close to smartphone devices and connected to their various infrastructures are intensified. For Solin, this manifests through the feeling of needing to see her smartphone just in case somebody like her solicitor calls. The feeling of needing to be connected and close to her smartphone is thus not simply a question of a universal digitally connected subject, but a question of the broader systems of power that she is embedded within as a result of being an asylum seeker in the UK. Both cumulate and produce a constant state of low-lying anxiety of

being digitally connected – resulting in the non-conscious decision to always keep our phones in sight or near our bodies.

This raises specific tensions for us as researchers interpreted in researching everyday digital life, as it becomes frequently tricky to stay with the ‘everyday’, without moving into questioning the broader forms of violence, harm or erasure that condition the everyday for our research subjects. In Solin’s case, for example, the discussion quickly moves between a seemingly banal question about why the smartphone is placed within a certain space in the kitchen, to a discussion centred around being ‘on’ in relation to an anticipatory state encounter directly tied to her precarious position within the asylum system. Again, this does not mean that these tensions stop us from doing the research we want to do. They should, however, raise specific questions for us as researchers about the responsibilities and care(ing) relations that we must uphold when doing research. This might mean that when we are in the field, digital practices that we might take for granted as banal or everyday, can very quickly become trigger points for bigger or more complicated discussions than we had previously anticipated. We must, as researchers interested in the (digital) everyday, realise that practices can simultaneously appear explicitly banal (e.g. looking at a photograph on social media) and highly intimate (e.g. a photograph on social media that might be of family members left behind). To simply ask somebody – especially an individual who has experienced, often harmful and violent, displacement – about why, when, or how they communicate with their family (or any other digital practice for that matter) is not a neutral nor simple act.

Both in the example of Roda and Solin, there are clear tensions that can be brought out in hindsight around the blurriness between marking out everyday (digital) practices as distinct and worthy of research – such as where we place our smartphones, how we interact with them when our minds are elsewhere, how we use them in anticipation of something else – and in the line between everyday and extraordinary – where practices we take for granted as being banal or mundane are actually embedded within wider power structures of harm and violence. As ethnographers interested in the (digital) everyday, we have a responsibility to acknowledge these tensions and work with them, as a way of moving towards care(ful) research relationships with our participants – both in terms of building trust and reciprocity, but as a way of not inflicting harm and intensifying already-existing structures of violence.



These reflections raise a key question: what counts as a good mode of relating in the ethnographic field? Some habits we share with participants; others we cannot. Being a digitally-connected subject does not mean we understand the stakes for someone living through the asylum system. We must be aware of what we assume to be ordinary, and how that shapes what we see, what we ask, and how we ask it — especially when working with those already exposed to intense scrutiny and surveillance. (Steinbrink et al., 2021; Zilkstra and Liempt, 2017).

## Sitting with Limits and the Everyday: The Value of Methodological Reflection for Human Geography

In way of conclusion, this paper's main contribution lies in the value we can take from sitting with, and reflecting upon, the frictions and tensions that emerge in doing human geography research through ethnographic tradition. Written in response to Latham's (2020) claim that human geography as a discipline continues to aggrandise theoretical intervention over care(ful) and meaningful engagement with the ways in which we produce this theoretical knowledge, this paper is written as a way of reflecting upon the ability of ethnographic methods to access, observe and represent the (digital) everyday. Having written extensively about everyday digital life within the context of UK asylum-seeking, this paper should not be seen as an add-on contribution to that body of work. Instead, this paper is deeply intertwined with those theoretical findings: the basis upon which I have been able to say anything about what everyday digital life signifies.

Part of this contribution lies in the bringing together of work that grapples with the question of how far we can get at the 'everyday' and the novelty that smartphones now bring to a geographical perspective on everyday life. This paper, then, stands as an updated commentary on the limits to which we can truly get to, or represent, everyday (digital) life in the age of the smartphone. In doing so, this paper presents friction and tension as two ways of engaging directly with the challenges (both already established and novel in the context of the digital everyday) that arise through research on the everyday. Both thematic sections of this paper speak towards the novel challenges that doing research about everyday digital life present to us: where the entanglements of digital technologies such as the smartphone are so intensely tied to the human subject (temporally, spatially, bodily, affectively, imaginatively) that doing research about their everyday use consistently brings us back to

the question of ‘how can we, as a researcher, get to or produce knowledge about the everyday?’. Friction offers a way of thinking about the practicalities of getting close to everyday life — whether that is through observation, presence, transparency, or spatial-temporal arrangements. Tension, on the other hand, draws attention to the question of how close we should get as researchers (or later represent in public-facing outputs) — navigating questions of privacy, ethical responsibilities, and reciprocity.

Any research taking these reflections forward alongside friction and tension might think with the following questions. How do we, or indeed can we, research practices, relations or imaginaries that exist, very often, at the edge of language, understanding, or consciousness? How do we access the truly intimate, fleeting and ephemeral things we do with our smartphones in the everyday? Things that might speak to what it feels like to live in the UK’s Hostile Environment (like anxiously scrolling through TikTok; mindlessly re-reading messages; tapping the screen so it lights up in the middle of a conversation...) but are often overlooked or dismissed as trivial (Morgan, 2024a; 2024b). And even when we do access them through ethnographic or participatory approaches, how can we speak about them or represent them without over-imposing them? And, moreover, when might we want to cease to speak about them or represent them, especially in contexts where the individuals involved in our research are vulnerable to extraordinary state control and broader affective environments of hostility?

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## Part Four

### Exhausting Dis/Connection

Morgan, H. (2024) 'Everyday digital dis/connection: Locating slow violence in (non)encounters with the UK asylum state'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 49, 1–16.

Encounters with, within and between digital technologies have become characteristic of life in the contemporary moment. This is, often, no different for displaced individuals seeking asylum across European states. Smartphones have become part of the everyday 'doing' of life for individuals governed through asylum systems which now includes routinely encountering the state. Whilst smartphones are commonly said to offer the promised affordances of increased connection or communication, this paper aims to explore how everyday encounters with the UK asylum state fall short of these imagined expectations. In its place, the paper identifies how a series of ongoing (non)encounters—encounters that fail to manifest in expected ways; characterised by pauses, delays or voids— become characteristic of the everyday experience of being a digitally connected asylum seeker in the UK. Drawing upon a year-long ethnographic research project with people actively seeking asylum in the UK between 2022 and 2023, this paper thus explores how the increased uptake of smartphone affordances within the UK asylum system contributes to the ongoing administration of state slow violence: experienced as exhaustion through everyday digital (non)encounters. Developing the concept of the (non)encounter for geographic research, this paper outlines how forms of dis/connection become characteristic of the state encounter for asylum-seeking individuals. These modes of dis/connection are traced as slow violence along the contours of neoliberalisation and hostile assemblages of asylum governance within the UK context.

## Introduction

Smartphones have become technological objects of everyday life in societies across the globe. Being and becoming a ‘digitally connected’ subject, however, is neither straightforward nor simple. Today, it has become commonplace for individuals seeking asylum within the European context to be or become ‘smartphone subjects’ (Morgan, 2023; Gillespie et al., 2018; Twigt, 2018). In this paper, I draw upon the UK context to highlight how smartphones have become part of the everyday ‘doing’ of life for individuals governed through the asylum system. Paying attention to everyday smartphone practices, I outline how smartphones are now routinely mobilised in encounters with the state (or, more precisely, with neoliberal non-state actors). Throughout this paper, I thus aim to articulate how the uptake of smartphone affordances in the governance of asylum now has implications for how we conceptualise the novel digital state (non)encounter and its impact on the everyday lives of those seeking asylum in the UK. Specifically, I will outline how the (non)encounter has become part of wider assemblages of neoliberal state-making and hostile forms of governance which seek to exhaust the asylum seeking subject through everyday digital dis/connections.

As will be argued throughout this paper, the UK asylum state is now encountered, imagined and known through the cumulation of everyday digital practices. Although it is hard to quantify how many individuals seeking asylum in the UK own or have access to smartphones—for context, in my research of encountering over 90 different asylum-seeking individuals, all owned or had access to a smartphone in their daily life — the reality is that the vast majority of displaced subjects arriving in Europe and the UK are now what we might term digitally ‘connected migrants’ (Diminescu, 2008, p. 572, 2010). The smartphone is thus situated as one of the central technologies of the ‘doing’ of everyday life within asylum systems. Encounters with the state or state actors are no longer (only) at an immigration office, detention centre or interview room. Now, the UK asylum state is encountered through a constellation of everyday smartphone practices: in WhatsApp messages, calls, email chains, voice messages, digital documents, webpages, portals, links. Drawing upon research in the context of the UK, I suggest that smartphones have now become the default technological form of contact that is relied upon for communication and governance of asylum-seeking

individuals and communities after initial screening interviews. Everyday digital practices such as contacting national advice helplines, maintaining contact with solicitors or housing managers, or outreaching to local charities are now taken-for-granted practices that come with being a digitally connected asylum seeker.

In centring the mundane, unspectacular or routine everyday digital encounters with the asylum state in this paper, we can shed light on how forms of state-administered violence are now digitally mediated. Going beyond clearer geopolitical moments where the smartphone is enrolled in governing irregular migrant subjects such as surveillance or data collection, I suggest that if we are to understand how the contemporary state is encountered in the everyday context, and how violence is produced through these encounters, we must look to the more mundane, routine, normalised ways in which the state is embedded and enrolled within everyday digital life. Considering everyday digital forms of encounter that are now enrolled within the asylum application period, I mobilise the concept of the (non)encounter to explore the impact of (non)action in novel digital space-times of the asylum application process.

After tracing my contextual and methodological grounding in Section 2, in Section 3, I will directly engage with the concept of the (non)encounter. Situating my arguments within wider geographical debates of the encounter, I suggest that Straughan and Bissell's (2022) pioneering work on the (non)encounter within geography offers valuable insight for how we theorise the novel digital state encounter in the context of asylum governance. Straughan and Bissell (2022) suggest that (non)encounters are characterised by experiences of loss or absence: where encounters once marked by their formative affective capacity (Wilson, 2017) have changed or shifted: where there is a distinct 'disappearance of sociability, rather than merely its non-appearance' (Straughan & Bissell, 2022, p. 537). Building upon this, I outline how — in the context of neoliberal state-making, and the increasing logics of hostility within asylum governance assemblages more broadly — modes of encountering the asylum state are best characterised as a form of (non)encounter. Despite a notable increase in the frequency of forms of digital contact with the state through the smartphone, I argue that the forms of dis/connection which characterise these (non)encounters — in pauses, delays and voids —

are productive of a loss of accountability, continuity and progression through the logics of neoliberal state-making and hostile logics of asylum governance. In the context of this paper, the (non)encounter not only results in a loss of sociability, but is actively enrolled in producing and maintaining structures of violence.

Beyond the immediately visceral, material or embodied forms of violence that these forms of state (non)encounter produce, I locate violence in the novel digital mediation(s) of these problems: in chasing up emails, calling unknown numbers, being put on hold, refreshing portals, navigating broken links. Drawing attention to the juxtaposition between the hopes and/or expectations of what being a digitally connected asylum seeker brings, and the realities of being put on pause, delayed or subject to voids by the state, I argue we are presented with a particular novel kind of slow violence (Nixon, 2011). A mode of slow violence that is produced through the novel (non)encounters that occupy daily digital life for those seeking asylum in the UK; (non)encounters that ultimately exhaust the individual through their repetitive, cyclical and often ambiguous role within the asylum application process. Specifically, I highlight how the (non)encounters that occupy everyday life within the asylum system exhaust individuals through the constant negotiation between the hopes of what smartphone connection brings and the reality of how smartphones are mobilised within the asylum application process by state actors.

Throughout this paper, I draw upon the wider argument that these digital modes of slow violence are novel in form, but less novel in wider logics and norms of asylum governance. The digital (non)encounter is necessarily embedded in the constellations of neoliberalisation of the state (Darling, 2016, 2022) and assemblages of hostility that are distinctive of European mobility governance (Ibrahim, 2022; Morgan, 2023). This manifests in this paper in two ways. First, in the experience that individuals encountering the 'state' in the everyday context never quite get to the state itself: at least, in the most traditional sense of the term. In the context of the UK's asylum system, this would be the Home Office. And yet, the Home Office is distinctly absent in the everyday ongoingness of the digital (non)encounter. Individuals may talk about, or refer to the Home Office, but it is very rarely a part of the everyday (non)encounter outside of the final interview. Instead, the digital

(non)encounter is distinctly shaped by the neoliberalisation of state forms: of outsourced organisations acting on behalf of the state but are not quite the state itself. Second, the (non)encounter is simultaneously shaped by assemblages of hostile governance that have dominated the UK and wider European landscape over the past decade. In this paper, this is present in discussions around the role that waiting plays within the asylum application process. All three empirical sections in this paper — pauses, delays and voids — draw upon, and contribute to, this ongoing area of research; waiting becomes a specific tempo-spatial form of power that actively seeks to exhaust asylum seekers within broader systems of harm and violence (Griffiths, 2014; Kallio et al., 2021; Lipatova, 2022; Turnbull, 2016).

In the final section of this paper, I trace how forms of exhaustion are now produced, maintained and circulated through the digital (non): in missed connections, delayed emails, asymmetric communication, broken links. In the contemporary asylum state, hostility as an operational mode of governance permeates digitally through absence more than presence (Davies et al., 2017). In being subject to digital pauses, delays and voids, I argue that the wider legacies of hostile asylum governance seep into the seemingly mundane and taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life, where (non)encounters with state actors are actively productive of exhausting individuals. Developing the emerging geographical concept of (non)encounters, I therefore argue that paying attention to the (non) — what doesn't happen, is missed, delayed, slowed, is disconnected or detached from — can provide us with novel insights into how the contemporary asylum state is both encountered, and in the characteristic forms of these (non) encounters, violent affects are created and maintained through wider assemblages of hostile governance (Coddington, 2020; Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2019; Morgan, 2023).

From the outset of this paper, it is critical to foreground that although the mundanity of these kinds of encounters is perhaps known or experienced by almost every smartphone user—in encounters with the state, or otherwise — it is the specificity of the forms of subjectivity that come with being politically categorised as Other (through various constellations of irregular mobility governance) that we must pay attention to here. This matters because indeed, citizens may encounter the state through a variety of digital

interfaces commonly accessed through smartphones, and these encounters may be slow, asymmetric or delayed (Sebald, 2020). However, the consequences of these non-encounters do not have the same generative force in producing or compounding forms of violence as those with highly precarious rights to be in the UK legally (Alencar et al., 2019; Greene, 2020; Twigt, 2018).

## Researching Everyday Digital Life and The Uk Asylum System

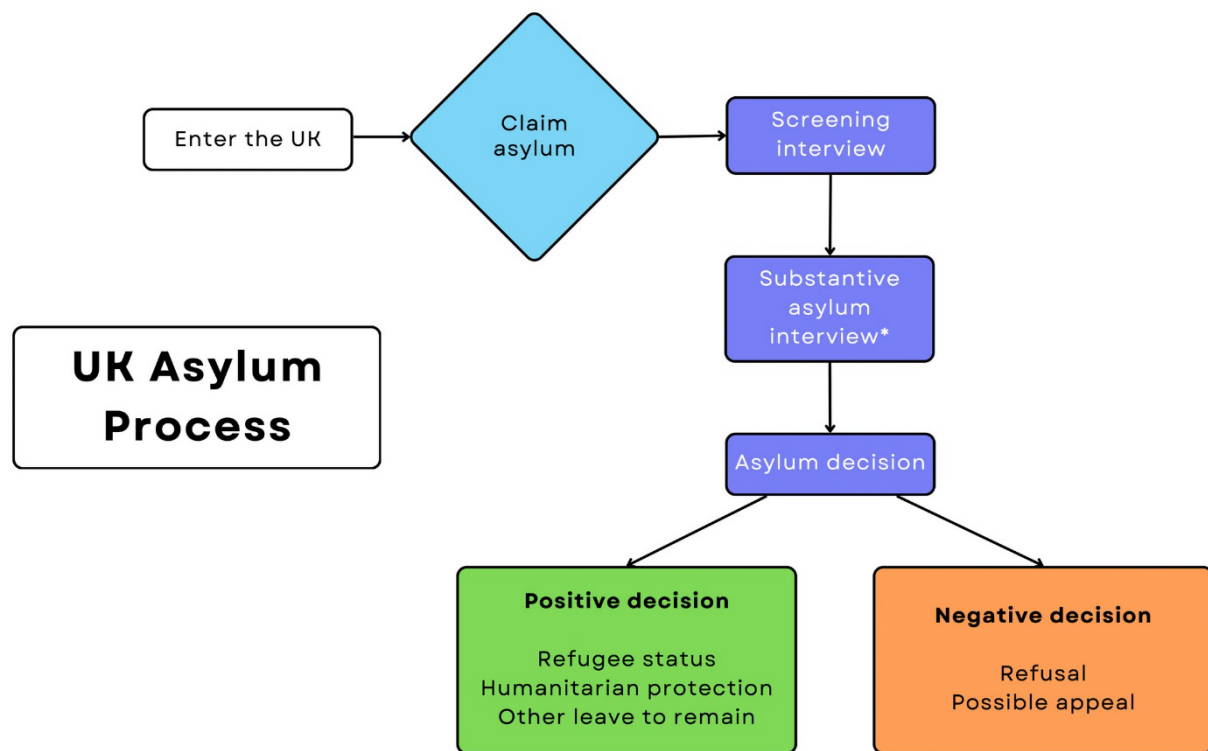


Figure 1: The UK's asylum application process as of December 2023. \*As of March 2023, the UK's Streamlined Asylum Process introduced a new questionnaire in place of an interview.

This policy applies to adults from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Libya, Syria and Yemen who claimed asylum before 28 June 2022 and who have not had substantive asylum interview.

From May 2023, this scheme was extended to adults arriving from Iraq and Iran.

This paper draws upon ethnographic research with individuals actively seeking asylum in the UK between September 2022 and August 2023. Although frequently changing or being amended in the context of current affairs, Figure 1 outlines the current major simplified steps in the process of claiming asylum in the UK. It is important to note that there is no time frame provided in Figure 1. With extended periods of waiting becoming inherent to the asylum application process, many of my research participants had been in the UK over 2 years without being given a date for their substantive interview. So, although Figure 1 sets out simplified steps of the process, the actual experience of being inside this system is often not clear, defined by confusion and the unknown (Tazzioli, 2021).

The individuals involved in this research had (1) completed their screening interview and were either (a) waiting for their substantive interview or questionnaire response, or (b) the final decision of their case. After having completed an in-person screening interview with an immigration officer (most commonly in South London), individuals are dispersed throughout the UK into cities and towns. In this period of the asylum application process, individuals have no right to work and often face multiple barriers to integrating within communities: from being moved around in short time frames, to language barriers, to simply carrying the stigma of seeking asylum (De Genova & Roy, 2020). The impact of such measures has extensively been examined by scholars interested in the experience of waiting (Kallio et al., 2021; Lipatova, 2022; Rotter, 2016; Turnbull, 2016). It is in this context of extended waiting (and the uncertainties that necessarily come with it) that the smartphone — amid wider assemblages of technological connectivity — becomes crucial to living out daily life as an asylum seeker in the UK.

Carrying out research that has the smartphone as a central technological object of inquiry may seem straightforward. The smartphone has become so central to everyday life — at least within the Global North context — that it is now almost impossible to distinguish between on/offline forms of life. What we do, or how we use smartphones in our everyday lives can often be taken for granted or become common-sense as a mode of living. For individuals seeking asylum in the UK, this is no different. Yet, it is exactly the production of ‘common-sense’ digital forms of encountering the state that this research aimed to capture.



With the aim of this research being to engage with individuals' everyday digital lives — forms of life that are often taken-for-granted, mundane and routine, but also highly intimate and private (Haber, 2019; Koch & Miles, 2021) — building trust and rapport with asylum-seeking individuals themselves became the foundations of this project.

This paper draws upon a year-long ethnographic project co-designed and conducted with a major registered charity providing support to asylum seekers and refugees in the North-East of England. The ethnographic research was carried out between September 2022 and June 2023, with a dissemination period between July and August 2023. Ethnography was mobilised as a method for this project to engage with the grounded, complex and often messy realities of everyday digital life. Simply being with individuals over the period of research — getting to know them within and outside of the research focus — became critical to creating the space for individuals to open up and share their digital practices. Any ethnographic project must have periods of trust-building and rapport (Brankamp, 2022; Halilovich, 2013). However, this is acute when working with well documented over-researched groups or communities (Scheel, 2019) who are frequently exposed to (often exploitative) research or data collection (Omata, 2020).

Between September 2022 and June 2023, I took on a quasi-volunteer-ethnographer role within the organisation. During this time, over ninety different individuals became part of the research. At the start of the project, this was mainly through informal conversations and interviews at drop-in sessions. Yet, after December 2022, the 'field' of research expanded more broadly into spaces of everyday life: in homes, shopping centres, cafes, football pitches, theatres. It is important to acknowledge when working with a precarious population like asylum seekers—at least in relation to their position with the state—research methods will always have to be adaptable to ongoing changes that happen to individuals' lives with very limited agency. Participation in the ethnographic element of this study thus varied: some individuals stayed with the research project over the entire 11 months (approximately thirty individuals), being involved in multiple aspects of the research, including a formal interview. Other individuals participated only partially for a variety of different reasons — being moved

onto another city, receiving decisions on their cases, no longer attending drop-ins for personal reasons.

Additionally, twenty-six formalised interviews were conducted in collaboration with the organisation. These interviews aimed to allow individuals the space and time to narrate their experiences of digital life in the UK in a deeper and more focused form, but also to create an actionable evidence base for future participatory action within the organisation during July 2023–September 2023. A range of individuals were invited to interview: twenty men/six women, an age range between eighteen and fifty-six, and a wide range of home countries across the MENA region, South Asia and South America. Most of the interviews were conducted in English (twenty) with six being translated by volunteer interpreters from the organisation. Interview questions were co-developed with the collaborating organisation and were focused on two main themes: how smartphones were used in the asylum application process and how smartphones are important technologies of broader ‘everyday life’ in the UK.

In the following sections of this paper, I draw upon the narratives and experiences of individuals actively seeking asylum in the UK by centring ethnographic extracts and interview transcripts. All quotes and ethnographic extracts used throughout this paper are fully anonymised, with pseudonyms given to individuals: alternative names that were chosen by interviewees. This is a deliberate choice in this research to retain the ‘humanness’ of each individual; resisting the tendency to reduce the asylum experience to faceless numbers.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the experiences drawn upon here are always going to be situated and grounded for individuals through the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and caring responsibilities. There is too little space to elaborate in this paper; however, I mobilise these extracts to speak to the broader ways in which digital state (non)encounters are cumulative in producing exhaustion through everyday digital practices. This too speaks to the affective and material implications of curated hostile environments in which asylum seekers now live in the UK. Digital (non)encounters with the UK state are embedded in wider assemblages of violence, harm and erasure that this paper cannot fully articulate in one homogenous account. Rather, this paper

aims to trace these assemblages through the testimonies and stories of the individuals included.

## Geographies of the (Non)Encounter

Before detailing the role that the (non)encounter plays in contemporary asylum governance, it is first critical to examine the encounter itself. Drawing upon the contributions of affect, the encounter is a formative experience; where bodies are changed in their ‘capacity to affect and be affective’ (Wilson, 2017: 463). Wilson (2017) argues that geographical research, in a sense, has always engaged with the concept of the encounter and sets out three ways that geography has traditionally worked with the encounter: first encountering the Other in a postcolonial tradition (Said, 1993), second in encountering strangers or difference in urban contexts (Massey, 2005; Thrift, 2008; Valentine, 2008), and third encountering more-than-human geographies of everyday life (Darling & Wilson, 2016). Tracing its appearance in seminal geographic work, Wilson (2017) thus shows how the encounter is a core concept within geography today, despite our tendency to take it for granted in the background of geographical debates. I suggest here that the encounter is critical for digital migration scholars who are interested in grounding the everyday experience of relations to the state. Moreover, it is important to note here that the specific mode of digitally encountering the state centred in this paper is one among many that individuals have in their experience of claiming asylum in the UK.

When engaging with the concept of the encounter in this paper, I suggest we might also look to novel work across digital geographies and digital social theory more widely, where the concept of the encounter has experienced renewed theoretical interest with the rise of everyday technologies such as social media (Bork-Hüffer & Yeoh, 2017; Koch & Miles, 2021). Echoing the concern of Wilson (2017), scholars working with the digital have equally expressed the need to direct attention to the concept of the encounter: ‘the ways in which the politics of cultural difference and encounter are played out across digital spaces have remained understudied’ (Leurs, 2014: 253). In previous examinations of the

encounter, encountering the Other has been presumed to be face-to-face; spontaneous; mediated by the public. And yet, in the rapidly changing digital world in which we now live, how we theorise the encounter must be able to evolve with these changes where encounters with strangers are now a normal part of everyday life: in higher frequencies, normalised digital practices, and novel ephemeral temporalities (Koch & Miles, 2021). How novel digital technologies affect the traditional conceptualisations of the encounter are thus critical for this paper, and future work taking this forward.

Moreover, novel modes of digital encounter have serious implications for how we might attempt to conceptualise the contemporary state encounter. Gupta and Sharma (2006, p. 11) suggest that everyday encounters with the state become the ‘primary arena in which people learn something about the state’. The forms that these encounters take are thus critical affectual experiences that shape how individuals learn about, know and imagine the state as an entity mediated through everyday experience (Jones, 2012). In a genealogical account of digitalised asylum governance in the UK, we have moved from a system almost entirely dependent upon in-person communication, paper communication and basic mobile phone calls (Darling, 2014), to now a system in which the novel affordances of the smartphone are enmeshed within the experience of applying for asylum itself. For example, over the past 5 years, there has been a transition to app or platform-based interactions such as WhatsApp, Viber, or IMO across a wide range of processes and services that are present within the UK’s asylum system. In the post-pandemic context of the UK, smartphones have now become the default technological form of contact that is relied upon for communication and governance of asylum-seeking individuals and communities after initial screening interviews. This, therefore, has profound implications for how we conceptualise the state encounter and its everyday mediations of the UK asylum application process.

An external force that we must consider when conceptualising the novel state encounter in this context is the impact that neoliberalisation has had on state forms. In the background of neoliberal state-making and rollback of the ‘big state’ forms (Darling, 2016, 2022; Martinez, 2023), how asylum seekers now encounter the state has

been significantly changed. In the UK context, processing asylum applications and providing support throughout this process is now governed through a complex web of organisations at the national and local scale, private and public bodies, alongside non-state organisations such as NGOs or charities. As Darling (2022) warns us, it would be a mistake to characterise the ‘asylum state’ as one homogeneous entity, either united through a sole vision of administering a ‘hostile environment’ or mobilising smartphones in particular ways. Therefore, shifts to digitalising existing forms of communication or processes must also be contextualised within broader shifts to neoliberal state forms.

It is precisely the combination of the neoliberal fragmentation of the state and the mobilisation of novel digital practices in state communication that leads me to introduce the concept of the (non)encounter in this paper. The concept of the (non)encounter is relatively novel within geographic research. Translated by Straughan and Bissell (2022) from work engaging with disability (Bigby & Wiesel, 2019; Blonk, 2021), the authors argue that geographic work has focused very little on the *loss* or *reduction* of encounters. Using research focused on the bodily capacities of food delivery drivers in Australia, the authors explore how (non)encounters with customers have intensified the affective experience of boredom.

In the context of this paper, I am interested in drawing our attention to instances in which in-person encounters with the asylum state have been replaced by modes of mundane digital encounters. And, moreover, not simply replaced, but disproportionately expanded in novel spatial–temporal digital experiences. Despite an increase in frequency and perceived ease of encounter with the modern digital state, I argue that in the sustained neoliberalisation of the asylum state form(s), individuals can no longer clearly pinpoint where they are and where they are not encountering the state (for example, having communication directly with the Home Office in a letter [Darling, 2014]), but are instead exposed to a wide variety of organisations acting on behalf of the state: externally contracted housing officers, hotel managers, case workers, solicitors, charitable organisations, volunteers — all of which are now encountered through a wide range of everyday digital practices. This landscape is one of confusion and obstruction

(Tazzioli, 2021); where the state lies, what counts as the state, and who, and in what capacity, is acting upon the state is unclear, and in constant flux.

The (non)encounter for this paper is thus not exactly the loss of sociality as Straughan and Bissell (2022) suggest, but found in the juxtaposition of what smartphone encounters are expected to bring (such as increased connection or ease of communication) and what they can do in the context of applying for asylum in the UK. Embedded within wider assemblages of hostile mobility governance, where inaction becomes a form of governance (Davies et al., 2017; Davies & Isakjee, 2019), I highlight how distinct spatial–temporal experiences of waiting characterise the (non)encounter for asylum seekers in the everyday context. It is in this dynamic, where the imagined affordances of smartphone communication are broken down, disassembled and (re)built through the everyday state (non)encounter that I suggest we can locate novel forms of slow violence that become present through the cumulation of everyday digital practices.

In this case, the (non)encounter is not simply a case of reducing face-to-face contact with the state (Straughan & Bissell, 2022). In the current asylum system, individuals now have more frequent contact with and (perceived) access to various state actors through their smartphones. Rather, the modes that this kind of contact takes place within have their own relation to producing violent effects. Specifically, how these encounters characteristically play out (often with delays, slowness, asymmetry, voids, pauses) are illustrative of the disappearance of personal contact (ibid.). The (non)encounter becomes critical here to highlight that what is missing, or what has been lost, is the *expectation* of how everyday digital encounters routinely transpire outside of state relations. Practices that were once part of a constellation of digital life-affirming practices — keeping in contact with family, documenting new lives via photography, searching the internet — now are entangled with, and muddled within, state encounters.

## (Non)Encounters as Slow Violence

As many have highlighted before, violence from the state is not always fast, visible or instant: the forms of slow violence that characterise certain forms of Othered life are gradual, encroaching and often barely recognisable in the ongoing doing of everyday life (Christian & Dowler, 2019; Nixon, 2011; Weheliye, 2014). Extending the traditional geopolitical register of what counts as violence (Bickerstaff, 2022; Davies & Isakjee, 2019; Laurie & Shaw, 2018), slow violence demands a re-examination of the hidden, accumulative forces that harm, erase or kill (Davies et al., 2017). Within research on asylum, waiting has been examined as a specific form of slow violence (Hyndman & Giles, 2011; Kallio et al., 2021; Lipatova, 2022). Actively suspending subjects in the space–time(s) of the asylum system has become a mode of governmentality that seeks to suspend, slow and drain Othered subjects of potentiality (Lipatova, 2022; Van Houtum, 2010). Waiting has thus become a common-sense governance technique within asylum systems; mobilised as a technique of control (Tazzioli, 2021). In the context of the UK and the ever-increasing hostile affects that are rooted within Hostile Environment policies (Morgan, 2023), almost all areas of life for an individual seeking asylum are drained of potentiality or hope through the experience of prolonged waiting. In experiences of prolonged waiting within the asylum system—where the material and imaginary attachments of what ‘life’ in the broadest sense should be lived like are gradually eroded—exhaustion becomes a specific affective embodiment of slow violence (Darling, 2022; Tazzioli, 2020).

Despite seminal work highlighting how waiting is not empty time (Ramachandran & Vathi, 2022; Rotter, 2016), it is still clear that forms of waiting are a result of an absence of action on behalf of the state itself. For example, the increasingly extensive periods of waiting that are inevitable whilst waiting for a case decision to be made. In this paper, I am interested in drawing our attention to how smartphone practices get embedded within wider power-laden structures of waiting through state (non)encounters: where pauses, delays and voids compound and are productive of slow violence. Extended periods of waiting that are traditionally associated with applying for asylum in the UK are now mediated by everyday digital practices. Smartphone practices have affective capacities that

both mediate the experience of waiting itself (detaching from boredom or anxiety, for example) and produce novel forms of waiting themselves (through novel [non]encounters). In the navigation of both forms of waiting, what is evident is the (non)presence of the state, at least in its highly visible form. The enrolment of smartphones into the everyday systems of asylum processing has produced a system in which individuals rarely encounter the big state (in this case, the Home Office), but instead frequently encounter the organisations that act on behalf of the state in their everyday digital lives.

Here, I argue that it is what is not happening in digital space/times of the (non)encounter—in delays, pauses or voids—which provides insight into the kinds of violence that have now become characteristic of everyday life under the conditions of seeking asylum in the UK. The kinds of exhaustion that are produced through everyday digital encounters are therefore not new themselves, but rather represent novel ways through which slow violence is administered, compounded and altered in a digital age of claiming asylum. What it means to be a digitally connected asylum seeker in the UK is to be enrolled in routine (non)encounters with the ‘asylum state’. In this experience, the slow violence already inherent in waiting is compounded through everyday digital practices. This violence is slow, almost invisible, as it is these very practices that give a sense of moving forward, or getting somewhere with an asylum-related case, and yet simultaneously reveal that individuals remain stuck in the sticky present-ness of this kind of manufactured Otherness. Practices like calling, emailing or searching mediate the affective embodiment of waiting under systems of asylum (boredom, stillness, disaffection, frustration ...), yet simultaneously intensify them through (non)encounters that are characterised by slowness, repetitiveness and circularity.

It is in this context, I argue, that slow violence is produced precisely between the hopes that get attached to the imagined affordances of smartphones, and the affective capacity they have in the context of the UK asylum system. There are two novel ways through which slow violence permeates everyday digital life for asylum-seeking individuals living in the UK: first, in imaginaries of the digital state and, second, in the practices that become part of the (non)encounter. In order to illustrate these two arguments, I mobilise



Sammie's experience of seeking legal advice. In an interview, Sammie tells me: 'I talk to my lawyer a lot during some weeks on WhatsApp ... I send them questions, documents ... it is a very easy way to communicate, we video call for our meetings ... I have never met them in person ... It's all given through my phone'. Later in this interview, Sammie\* also tells me how WhatsApp is important for staying in contact with their family: 'everyday we use WhatsApp ... we have a group chat with my brothers and sisters and sometimes we will do a group video call, maybe one time a week. This is so important for me to be able to see them and catch up'. During the interview, Sammie\* shows me examples of these encounters in the form of group chat threads: both those with his lawyer and his family include 'similar digital practices such as reacting to messages with emojis, sending/receiving voice notes, or sending GIFs'.

The first argument here is how the state is now imagined or known by individuals is now almost entirely dependent upon everyday smartphone encounters. The state is no longer (only) encountered in an interview room, solicitor's office or council building: it is in your hand, at the end of your fingertips—in emails, WhatsApp messages, voice notes, videocalls, GIFs, stickers. What we might term the everyday state (Painter, 2006) is now encountered in everyday digital practices in the most banal sense; the majority of which are already familiar, so normalised and routine to daily life that their mobilisation in the context of applying for asylum has become a common-sense shift in state governance today. The state's novel mundane digital form(s) in a post-pandemic context has thus been productive of particular kinds of banal state imaginaries. Imaginaries that hinge specifically upon the forms of digital encounter that individuals are having in their everyday lives: forms of encounter that are highly intimate—bodily, physically, affectively—due to the kinds of practices that are now mobilised. Being a connected digital subject comes with a vast range of expectations and norms that users have been exposed to, and trained by, in their everyday digital lives.

In making this argument, it is important to note that many asylum-seeking individuals are digital subjects (in varying and complex ways) before becoming classified as an asylum seeker. This is important, precisely because individuals become accustomed to everyday digital practices, interactions, cues that are now an integral part of the asylum application process. Taking WhatsApp as an example, users are accustomed to responding to a variety of digital cues that produce forms of online intimacy: ranging from the ‘number or colour of ticks’ (Gamal) attributed to sent messages, to being labelled as ‘online [or] not to saved contacts’ (local charity worker). It is specifically these forms of digital intimacy that are now being translated into state encounters, and thus productive of particular kinds of intimate state imaginaries through the banality of the (non)encounter itself. From seeing state-sponsored adverts on personal social media feeds, receiving update emails from the Home Office, or having regular contact with solicitors through WhatsApp instant messages, the state has become personal, intimate even; encountered as part of the normal digital space/times that are part and productive of everyday digital life. The banality of the everyday state has therefore been compounded specifically through the mobilisation of digital platforms mobilised in this period of the asylum application process.

Second, these digital encounters enrol particular kinds of digital practices of users. The novel everydayness of the state is perpetuated by specific digital practices that are being mobilised by a multitude of UK state actors. In the digital (non)encounter, the lines between asylum application (political) and general everyday life (private) get blurred: the same practices that one might associate with family intimacy, care or even love through the smartphone screen (Ellis & Tucker, 2020; Longhurst, 2013), are also now being mobilised with state actors. Beyond phone calls, which are traditionally perceived as being a formal mode of contact that is disconnected from the person on the other end, video calls, instant messaging, scrolling through social media all elicit a particular kind of intimacy through the practice itself (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Longhurst, 2013; Witteborn, 2015). Being digital subjects before being produced as an ‘asylum seeker’ when arriving in the UK, individuals are, once again, accustomed to the multitude of digital practices that are cumulative towards the doing of everyday life (Morgan, 2023). The informal nature of these

kinds of practices provides individuals with a sense of familiarity or closeness that arise from the nature of how these encounters are mobilised. For example, sending stickers, GIFs or voice notes over WhatsApp are two of the ways intimacy with different state actors was identified by my participants in interviews. In such intimate digital practice, the banal imaginary of the state is compounded further: where an affective sense of closeness in different digital spaces is produced and maintained.

In both dynamics, the digital state thus becomes a normal, mundane part of everyday life for individuals seeking asylum: a presence on their smartphone screens that can be as common as friends or family. However, the imaginaries of the state that are elicited through the everyday encounter—and thus, the hopes and expectations that get produced about the digital state as easily contactable, intimate, even caring—get broken down and fragmented through the very practices that construct the imaginary in the first place. It is precisely this dynamic (the affirmative promises and various forms of hope that get attached to smartphone use for asylum seekers but are inevitably gradually eroded through everyday (non)encounters with state actors) that produces a novel form of digital slow violence. In the everyday experience of living through the UK asylum system for months, if not years, the (non)encounter becomes increasingly normalised for individuals through the cumulation of waiting, repetition and circulation. It is in this context that the smartphone becomes critical infrastructure to remaining connected, whilst equally becoming a technological object of governance which exhausts and harms: exhausting individuals through the (non)encounters that characterise everyday life within the system.

## Pauses, Delays, and Voids

I now aim to substantiate three specific ways through which slow violence in the UK asylum system is produced through the novel digital (non)encounter. These three manifestations of slow violence are traced along broader experiences of waiting which are endemic to the current UK asylum application process. Pauses highlight the modes of short-term waiting that accumulate within the everyday digital practices, building up frustration and resentment. Delays are indicative of the longer-term experiences of waiting characteristic of the asylum application process: delays in decisions made about housing, or cases, for example. And finally, voids draw attention to the extended forms of waiting that are intensified by the distinct (non)presence of the state.

In the background to the modes of (non)encounter presented here, it is critical to acknowledge the highly visible lack of encounters with the 'big state'. In the UK's case, the Home Office. Instead, what is evident in the transcripts and ethnographic extracts is a series of (non)encounters with non-state organisations that have been contracted by the state to fulfil various everyday functions within the asylum system (from housing to case management, to well-being or health). The absence of the 'state', or indeed the visceral presence of neoliberal state actors, pushes us to consider the role of the (non)encounter within broader assemblages of neoliberal state-making practices and wider logics of hostility that underpin asylum governance today.

The extracts centred in this section highlight the highly banal role of the (non)encounter in everyday life for digitally connected individuals. Based in a city in the North-East of England, the organisations and non-state actors referred to are often highly localised, dependent upon local government contracts and broader contractual arrangements through the Home Office. For clarity when reading this section, Migrant Help is a national telephone hotline service that offers advice on most areas of life within the asylum systems. Additionally, MEARs is a national organisation that is contracted locally in the city of study, providing and managing housing at the time the research was conducted.

Hafiz: 'I contact Migrant Help many times about my house or case ... but sometimes you have to wait over an hour or two hours for them to answer your call. You end up just waiting around. This happened last week, I was very agitated ... I had been waiting for them to call me back about my case and they didn't. It is annoying waiting around, wasting my time. I was ... on edge waiting for them to call me back, it was important to me to get it sorted that day'.

One of the most frequent experiences that individuals spoke about was being put on pause in their various encounters with state actors during their asylum application process. Distinctive in its shorter-term temporal nature, being put on pause was a core, and often expected, mode of the (non)encounter. Much like Hafiz—a man in his late 40s from Syria—explicit moments of short-term waiting, particularly being 'put on hold' (Hamid) when attempting to contact organisations via phone calls or 'waiting for responses to WhatsApp messages' (Yad), were brought up in day-to-day conversations or interviews. These forms of waiting may appear extremely banal, perhaps even expected in any form of encounter with the state, for citizens and non-citizens alike. Despite mainstream narratives of digital encounters that focus predominantly on speed, velocity or instantaneity (Duclos, 2017), shorter term forms of waiting are almost always part of digital encounters with other (non)(post)human subjects—from waiting for your WhatsApp message to be delivered, read, and replied to, waiting for another person to 'open your Snapchat [or] wait[ing] for your Instagram story to be viewed by other people' (Gamal). As digital subjects, we become accustomed to these forms of waiting in our everyday digital practices. Yet, when these everyday practices of waiting become incorporated into how individuals now encounter the state in the everyday context, the boundaries of what acceptable forms of waiting include are unsettled; where the imaginaries of a caring or responsible state emerge through the

digital mode of contact (using a familiar app such as WhatsApp, for example) but are simultaneously juxtaposed with experiencing the (non)encounter of being put on pause.

Although short-term forms of waiting are perhaps characteristic of any bureaucratic encounter with the state, the repetitive nature of having to do this work of complaint, of being held in limbo for hours or days—with the added material impacts of having no heating, electricity or broken appliances—is productive of particular modes of enduring forms of quiet, gradual or slow violence within the asylum system. For individuals seeking asylum in the UK, one of the only ways of making complaints<sup>2</sup> such as Hafiz's is through everyday smartphone practices: calling, messaging, scrolling through websites, filling in forms. It is in staying with these everyday forms of digital dis/connection—through mundane experiences of repetitive and circular waiting—that we can locate the violence of the (non)encounter. The violence here is in the gradual wearing down of individuals. Individuals are forced into positions of accepting less-than-human living conditions and being expected to continue engaging in the digital encounter as a connected subject. This is not only a temporal form of violence, but spatial too: in the experience of being made to wait, individuals are often spatially suspended: either to infrastructural networks of connection (public Wi-Fi, good data signal ...) or more commonly in their space of living. For days, people I interviewed described being 'stuck at home for many days' trying to get through to Migrant Help or Mears (Solín).

It's also important to note that it is not only organisations such as Mears or Migrant Help that are involved in producing exhausted subjects through digital (non)encounters:

*Do you ever use your phone to stay in contact with organisations that help asylum seekers here?*

Gamal: Yes WhatsApp mainly ... I volunteer at one of them fixing bikes for asylum seekers in the city.

*Does using WhatsApp make it easier to stay in contact with the organisation?*

Gamal: Of course, how would I without it? Sometimes it can take a while for them to get back to me ... sometimes they say 'I'm really busy today I will call you back later' or 'I can't answer now' because they are busy ... busy all the time.

In Gamal's experience—a man in his early 30s from Syria—volunteering with a local organisation can also be productive of forms of waiting that can be characterised as a pause. In cases such as these, although organisations are genuinely interested in the health and well-being of asylum seekers, the capacity to be 'digitally connected' at all times is simply not possible. Local charitable organisations and NGOs are already known to be filling the gaps of the asylum state (Darling, 2016, 2022), particularly in the context of increasingly hostile rollbacks of state responsibility (Morgan, 2023). Now, local organisations have the added task of maintaining digital communication with individuals and groups. When speaking with individuals who worked for organisations, they frequently mentioned getting 'WhatsApp messages from people in the middle of the night' (19 April 2023) or having to coordinate group chats to 'send out information about different things going on this week or month' (9 January 2023). In such instances, forms of dis/connection in digital encounters are not being used in ways to intentionally harm or cause stress to individuals seeking asylum, but are more broadly connected with and embedded within the wider impacts of decades of hostile forms of governance that these organisations are now stretched to fill.

Being put on pause then, is a highly common experience for asylum seekers in the UK who digitally encounter the state: one that can often be taken-for-granted as a normal part of everyday life. However, if we are to consider how we might locate forms of violence here, it is in the repetition and circulation of mundane digital practices: calling, searching, being put on hold, waiting, doing it all over again. Individuals are exhausted through the cumulative and repetitive practices of this kind of (non)encounter: short-term issues may

indeed be solved, but the emotional and physical work—in terms of digital practices—of getting to that point takes its toll on individuals. Often to the point where waiting is pre-empted by individuals, ‘planning their day around’ it (Solin) or ‘dreading [having to] do it again tomorrow’ (Ishan). Being put on pause as a form of (non)encounter, then, is a direct result of first, the neoliberalisation of state forms, where the capacity to act or provide continuity to individuals is reduced; even where this is not intentional in the case of local charities. And second, in the logics of hostile governance, where the continuous exposure to harmful material living conditions forces individuals to engage in exhausting digital practices which are also simultaneously harmful in themselves.

## Delays

Yad: I called Migrant Help because my bed broke, it was very painful ... they sorted out the problems, but you know ... sometimes they are very slow to fix things, for the bed I was waiting 21 days ... on the last day I called them again and I was told to call Migrant Help ... I called them and I was on hold for almost two and a half hours ... eventually ... picked up and told me to go back to Mears ... hours on the phone, waiting ... when you are waiting for them to pick up the phone, it drives you crazy listening to the music they play [laughs].

A second characteristic experience of the digital (non)encounter is that of being exposed to prolonged delays distinct from simply being put on pause in the short term. In the conversations I had throughout this research project, delays in the context of the digital (non)encounter can be more obviously tied to violence produced through neoliberalisation of state forms. Individuals seeking asylum in the UK become accustomed to the experience of being moved between multiple organisations or within organisations for one particular



problem or concern. The result of externalised contracts that draw boundaries between where different actors' responsibilities lie (Darling, 2022), one single issue that an individual seeking asylum has—whether that be related to living conditions or their asylum claim—often requires back and forth between multiple contacts within and between multiple organisations.

The impact this had on individuals in the everyday context was that of life being put on hold, or suspended. As can be seen in Yad's experience of a broken bed in his room—a young man in his early 20s from Iran—the issue does not simply end at the physicality of the bodily pain caused by sleeping on this furniture but extends to the exhaustion of the repetitive and cyclical digital (non)encounters that are produced by the limits of responsibility by both Mears and Migrant Help. Due to the highly specific roles of each different face of the state involved here, many problems that individuals raise therefore demand individuals to 'go around in circles' to solve the problem (Gamal). Yad's account, and the experience of being passed around between different organisations and different forms of digital encounter, is reminiscent of Tazzioli's (2021) analysis of governing through disorientation. The temporal experience of being passed around between different touchpoints of the state—in calls, messages, digital limbo space-times—has detrimental effects on the health and well-being of individuals having to engage in this kind of encounter on a regular basis. Specifically, Yad spoke about being physically tired: commenting on their lack of sleep and emotional tiredness of having to live with broken furniture in the one space they felt at 'home' (Darling, 2011). Even though individuals working for larger organisations or institutions often do not intend to cause harm or delays to individuals' cases, the cumulative effect of being passed between different touchpoints of the state is productive of a particular kind of digital disorientation: one in which the individual has little knowledge about who to contact, when to contact them, or how to contact them to effectively resolve their problems or concerns.

In a similar vein, Asad—a man in his late 20s from Afghanistan—tells me:

A couple of weeks ago ... it was snowing very bad ... our heating stopped working. It was so cold. We went four days without any heating ... we were using our blankets in the living room to try and stay warm ... we called Mears ... our housing manager... on the first day many times and sent messages on WhatsApp ... all of us [talking about the three other men living in the house] were on hold, calling Migrant Help for one, maybe two hours each time for three or four days to get it fixed.

Again, here Asad highlights his and his housemates' frustrations that arose in being exposed to delays when contacting Mears and Migrant Help about their heating and electricity: in this case, being put on hold on a phone line for hours at a time (similar to previously discussed experiences of pauses) and going multiple days without access to heating in the middle of winter. Beyond the obvious forms of violence actively produced through non-action, Asad stayed with the frustration he felt when being paused and delayed. In our interview, he told me that 'this is normal ... any time you call you expect to be waiting for an hour or two, it is very annoying because you cannot leave or do anything else because if you miss the answer you have to do it all again ... and then they tell you to call somebody else on a different number'.

We can see here how multiple modes of the digital (non)encounter compound one another within the everyday experience of being an asylum seeker. It is not simply a case of being paused or delayed occasionally, but instead an ongoing active process of being worn down, and exhausted, through the intersections of digital dis/connection. Much like pauses, delays are characteristic of the everyday state (non)encounter. Yet, beyond the highly visual and material consequences that being delayed has on the body (broken beds, lack of gas or electricity ...), the additional toll that chasing up, moving between, and pursuing these issues through smartphone affordances produces exhausted subjects enrolled in ongoing digital practices. As we can see in the case of Yad and Asad, the prolonged ongoingness of these issues (both in terms of the materiality of the problem and the modes of digital

contact they have been enrolled within) are productive of disaffection that is a typical manifestation of exhaustion. Delays as a form of (non)encounter thus suspend individuals within the constellations of hostile assemblages: where (non)action becomes an active form of maintaining prolonged harmful conditions (Davies et al., 2017) and a tactic of exhaustion; wearing down individuals to acceptance or expectations of less-than-human conditions.

## Voids

Today at the drop-in, Kaamil is holding his phone in his hand and unlocks it, and begins to swipe through photos of his flat, where his kitchen roof has collapsed from damp ... he shows me a long chain of emails, and a series of WhatsApp messages, from Mears which tell him a plasterer will be coming to fix it. He is given a date for four months into the future ... he simply laughs, locks his phone and shrugs his shoulders.

A final spatial–temporal manifestation of the (non)encounter I wish to centre in this paper is the experience of voids. The account above with Kaamil—a man in his late 20s from Syria who arrived in the UK in 2019—begins to track a series of (non)encounters he had with Mears about ongoing problems with his kitchen roof. To speak of violence here, again, the most obvious debilitating issue in this account may be the corporeality of living in and through substandard, and in some cases dangerous, accommodation. For many individuals, the material conditions of broken homes <sup>42</sup> are directly connected to experiences of violence (Glorious et al., 2016). Whether that is through leaking roofs, ‘broken appliances’ (Nala),

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<sup>42</sup> The term ‘home’ is not used here without acknowledgement of its political implications. For many individuals living in the UK, hotel rooms or rooms in shared houses can never fully be associated with a sense of home—even if the accommodation is occupied individually or as a family.

‘damp walls’ (Gamal). Many asylum seekers I spoke to, and all who were interviewed, had lived through these kinds of material issues throughout their time in the UK. Yet, what I am interested in drawing our attention to here is how we might also locate violence in the less obvious sense of how this form of encounter—or series of (non)encounters—manifested through everyday smartphone practices. With smartphone practices becoming the norm for state encounters, those applying for asylum in the UK are expected to do the work of complaint through taken-for-granted practices such as phone calls, WhatsApp messages or filling in online forms. For Kaamil, the issue of his roof was reported and dealt with entirely through mundane forms of encounter in email chains and WhatsApp messages with regional housing contractors Mears.

Kaamil took me through a connected thread of (non)encounters with Mears in our interview, directing me towards two experiences of voids: the first where no encounter manifested (emails or WhatsApp messages with no replies, for example), and the second where an encounter did occur, but where the agent on the other end of the encounter changed (a series of different Mears contractors answering an email, for example). Both experiences of voids are emblematic of the (non)encounter within a neoliberalised asylum state: where emptiness or non-continuity between state and (non)subject is commonplace (Kingsbury & Secor, 2021). Not only are there multiple non-state organisations acting on behalf of the state (the consequences of which can be found in pauses or delays), but neoliberal reforms within organisations have direct impacts on producing precarious workforces that have discontinuous workstreams in the name of efficiency. In the UK asylum system, this often impacts individuals like Kaamil\* who have no clear point of contact with a named individual who can be held accountable for tracking complaints.

Now it is important to acknowledge here that there are situations in which the state cannot always respond to every email or message, the labour of doing so is stretched in the context of neoliberal rollbacks and welfare reform (Dajani, 2021; Guentner et al., 2016). However, the common experience that stays with individuals seeking asylum is that these (non)encounters are often unnecessarily prolonged and disjointed. For example, Nala—a woman in her 50s from Pakistan—tells me, ‘you have to be patient because you will wait a

long time sometimes to get things done ... either when you call them you have to wait, or then you have to wait for the problem to be fixed ... weeks it takes sometimes with lots of calling and messaging’.

For Kaamil and Nala, as much frustration and tiredness were located in composing, sending, and replying to email chains or WhatsApp messages as the physical issue itself. The experience of filling in extended periods of nothingness—either physical action or digital mediation—with attempts to resume or reignite the digital encounter became a common way of dealing with the uncertainty and anxiety that comes with being exposed to voids. In the months between raising the complaint and it being dealt with, what was absent—in this case, email responses and more detailed information about the decisions that were made—was productive of anxiety and frustration, resulting from periods of (non)action in the form of voids: both in the sense of physical issues being fixed, but simultaneously in waiting for the digital encounter to resume, reform or resolve. Over the course of the email correspondence, Kaamil's responses took on a more emotive tone, directly highlighting the stress and anxiety caused by this form of (non)encounter:

Kaamil: I am psychologically because of this, you will tire me ... and my heart is tired a lot.

Mears representative: I am sorry to hear the situation is causing you distress. I have spoken with the plumber who attended and he has advised the leak isn't a plumbing matter, he will refer to his manager with regards to the next steps. Regards.

In the following conversations, Kaamil continued to talk about how he would ‘constantly check for a reply’ or ‘always [be] thinking about the reply’. For those routinely encountering the state in this way, as much anxiety and frustration can be located in the exhaustion of engaging with the digital (non)encounter(s) as physical issues themselves. In

this mode of encounter, everyday life is subject to voids—suspended both in waiting for responses to digital forms of communication and in the physical fixing of the material issues. Forms of being put on pause are thus productive of wearing down individuals—both in the ability to deal with the realities of living in debilitating conditions, and to simultaneously continue chasing up the problem through further email chains, calls, or WhatsApp messages.

Moreover, experiencing voids was also spoken about by those relying upon official government websites for information about their asylum claims, rights or expectations of the UK asylum system. Formal and informal websites have shown to be critical resources for asylum seekers to strategically source information (Gillespie et al., 2018). Yet, this is not always a straightforward form of digital connection. In their interview, Palesa—a woman in her 30s from Ethiopia—spoke about the voids or broken or missing links when attempting to source information on government websites:

Palesa: The phone for me it doesn't always mean positive things ... for example, one time I was trying to renew my identification card, but ... it can sometimes be very difficult to find the answer you are looking for, especially on websites like the Home Office, sometimes the links don't work and you cannot find a simple answer. What they have on there is ... very basic ... or sometimes too complicated to understand.

For Palesa, the experience of searching and scrolling on different official government websites, following invalid links, or attempting to find answers to her questions was productive of exhaustion through confusion and disorientation in these digital spaces/times. Although these government websites are the main trusted source for individuals seeking reliable information about their case or life in the UK, the everyday experience of using them can be exhausting: moving between pages and links to find answers; many people, like Palesa, instead 'gave up'. The experience of voids as a

manifestation of the digital (non)encounter—which can be tangibly traced to the direct impacts of neoliberalisation of state forms—is thus productive of forms of exhaustion: of either attempting to fill the void (ending the non[ness] of the encounter) or detach from it entirely (then with implications for either mental or physical health).

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to draw attention to the novel forms of digital slow violence that characterise the contemporary UK asylum application process. Centring the experience of the (non)encounter within everyday digital life, I have drawn our attention to how experiences of pauses, delays and voids in everyday (non)encounters with the state are productive of exhausting subjects through everyday digital practices. This paper has highlighted how the novel uptake of smartphone affordances within the everyday roles and responsibilities of the asylum state has had significant impacts on individuals governed within these very systems. Despite the imagined affordances of smartphones bringing increased connection, speed or ease of contact, the reality is often that these imagined affordances stand in stark juxtaposition to how smartphones are now enrolled within the state encounter. Taking this paper forward into future work, work within geography must take seriously the digital mediations of everyday life for subjects: particularly those who are disproportionately exposed to violence on behalf of the state. Without careful consideration for how violence is now produced and accumulates in the constellations of digital dis/connection, we risk obscuring the everyday consequences of what it means to be a digitally connected subject.

One of the major contributions of this paper is mobilising the concept of the (non)encounter for a geographical understanding of digital slow violence, allowing us to carefully trace where forms of inaction—in pauses, delays and voids—become characteristic of how states now govern Othered populations. Embedded within wider assemblages of hostile governance and neoliberalising forces, I have traced how asylum seekers in the UK are actively exhausted through their everyday (non)encounters with the state through

everyday smartphone practices. Despite more traditional accounts of slow violence being present throughout this paper—the impacts of inhumane living conditions, broken appliances or confusing state communication for example—I have drawn our attention to how these already-existing forms of violence are now compounded through novel everyday digital practices such as reporting problems via WhatsApp, calling national helplines, or navigating information on government websites. Although distinct in their individual affective capacities, the experience of pauses, delays and voids that are present in this paper direct our attention towards the mundane forms of violence that are now regularly produced through taken-for-granted everyday digital practices. For geographers to fully appreciate what it means to be exposed to hostile forms of governance or violence, taking note of the digital geographies that condition everyday life on, with and between smartphones will become crucial.

Finally, I have highlighted how forms of exhaustion are acutely felt by individuals claiming asylum, precisely due to the reliance on smartphone technologies for the doing of everyday life outside of the asylum application itself. Smartphones are critical technological infrastructures through which asylum seekers can remain connected to other parts of everyday life: family, friendships, communities, resources. However, being enrolled within contemporary forms of governance that mobilise smartphones, means that individuals are constantly being exhausted—even if the (non)encounter has not yet happened, or has happened in the past. In the extracts drawn upon throughout this paper, individuals are so accustomed to experiences of digitally encountering the state, that many are caught within a cycle of anticipating future, or staying with past, forms of the (non)encounter. Suspended within a system that is characterised by forms of waiting, the digital (non)encounter becomes part of this wider technique of power that holds Othered individuals within the stickiness of the present. In this experience, the smartphone itself serves as a constant technological marker of the dis/connection(s) that tie the Othered individual to the state. This tension between the simultaneous affirmative affordances of smartphones and the ongoing subjectification to forms of violence must be taken seriously when attempting to engage with the everyday context of what it means to live digitally (Morgan, 2023) today.



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## Part Five

### Hope(ful) Orientations

Morgan, H. (2024) 'Between Hope and Hostility. The Affirmative Biopolitics of Everyday Smartphone Geographies'. *Political Geography*, 114, 1-11.

This paper explores what it means to hope under, within, and through everyday modes of affective hostile governance. Taking the empirical landscape of everyday digital life within the UK's asylum system, this paper outlines how smartphone practices are entangled with an everyday politics of hope. Holding the tension between hostility and hope, I centre an array of taken-for-granted everyday digital practices that have become central to hope production, circulation, and maintenance within periods of waiting for asylum seekers: from online gaming and lock screen photo choices to the creation of WhatsApp group chats. In the context of banal digital practices, I argue that what hope enables — defined as alternative attachments to life otherwise (materially, spatial-temporally, imaginatively) — is a form of agency that cannot simply be dismissed as cruel or futile within the broader context of systems that harm, injure, and erode. Instead, I highlight how the ability of hope to emerge alongside hostility in the UK's asylum system challenges us to reconceptualise everyday forms of digitally mediated agency and power.

## Introduction

Opening up the space for an engagement with the politics of hope in this paper, I explore the difference that hope makes in the everyday lives of those living within affectively (alongside materially, spatially, imaginatively) hostile environments. Building upon work within political geography that considers affective relations between the state and everyday life (Militz & Schurr, 2016; Shrestha, 2022), this paper directs attention towards what happens to state produced-affects when they are mediated by Othered subjects in the everyday digital context. Put simply, I pose the questions: how does it feel like to live within the UK's asylum system, and, how can digitally-mediated relations of hope change (or have the potential to change) this affectual experience?

Building upon work that destabilises the notion of bare life within the categorisation of 'asylum seeker' (Agier, 2014; Owens, 2009; Turner, 2016), I suggest if we, as political geographers, are interested in researching and narrating the everyday experience, then we must aim to capture this everydayness in its complexity, contradictory and often ephemeral nature. The affective workings of the everyday are neither simple nor easy to map: both hope and hostility as everyday affects are ambiguous and woven into complex assemblages of the everyday. Tracing this messiness and attempting to speak from it is, therefore, as important as defining neat categories of hope, or establishing binary distinctions between what is and what is not hope. As will be explored through ethnographic accounts embedded within the fabric of this paper, hope is neither wholly an oppositional relation to hostility, nor is hope solely either cruel or emancipatory: the lines between these realities are complex, ever changing and, often ephemeral in their digital manifestations. Through the ethnographic research set out in this paper, I suggest we must stay with the tensions that arise out of centring hope as an approach to mapping the nuances of power and agency that emerge, circulate, and are contested on an everyday basis.

To this, an assemblage approach is mobilised to trace the emergence of hostility (as an affective form of governing) within the everyday lives of those in the UK's asylum system. Hostile forms of state governance are always in emergence, and thus, are in constant

negotiation at the level of the everyday and the subject; where possibilities for alternative political relations, such as hope, can emerge, persist, and circulate. Within this, I aim to hold tension; exploring the balance we must hold as researchers when introducing affectual relations like 'hope' into a theoretical landscape otherwise dominated by the negative effects, affects and materialisations of oppressive regimes. Inspired by the work of Katherine McKittrick (2013), I follow that opening up the space to (re)think and (re)imagine the capacities of Othered forms of life to live, aspire to and create lives outside of negative<sup>1</sup> affects is a critical task in: first, being able to centre the everyday lived experiences of those living through hostile governance regimes — which means making space for the ambiguity of emotions and affectual attachments across a scale — and second, unpacking how we (re)produce the figure of the asylum seeker in academic work (Tazzioli, 2020).

In section two of this paper, I explore what hope might mean; a question that has troubled philosophers and geographers alike in the 21st century (Hodge & Hodge, 2021; Kallio et al., 2021; Stockdale, 2021). Taking hope as an affective relation or attachment to a different form of life as lived in the present (often hinging upon being or becoming a form of valued life), I explore how everyday smartphone practices are now enmeshed within everyday forms of hope-making that enable negotiate the realities of living within hostile environments. I take hope, then, as a strategy of (re)mediating the everyday hostile affects that are actively produced and maintained through simply being within the UK's asylum system. If hostile affects attempt to produce the asylum seeker as less-than-human — through varying assemblages of state governance — then how these affects get (re)mediated in the context of everyday digital life through forms of hope become an important tactic of living in the everyday: beyond bare life and towards alternative modes of living; a form of living where the bareness of everyday life within the asylum system is destabilised by the potentiality that hope enables.

I set out two main lines of thought in this paper. First, that there are a vast multitude of banal digital practices that are oriented towards producing hope in the everyday lives of asylum seekers. Second, that these practices are affirmative, enabling individuals to be or become otherwise to the political construction and maintenance of being categorised as an

‘asylum seeker’ through the generative force of hope. In drawing attention to these two dynamics, I outline an account of the politics of hope within the digital everyday context of asylum seekers’ lives that takes seriously the potential that forms of hope enable in living and existing through alternative political relations. Simply put, I want to open the question of what it means to be a ‘digitally connected’ asylum seeker today and what this means for everyday lifeworlds beyond a lens of violence, harm, or erasure. Although this is crucial work (Morgan, 2023, 2024), opening up spaces to (re)conceptualise and (re)imagine alternative political relations (holding the tension between these two areas of research) is equally important. Building upon a rich array of previous work informed by postcolonial-feminist and queer theory, which grapples with alternative and/or affirmative forms of living outside of hegemonic structures (Cooper, 2014; Muñoz, 2009; Parla, 2019), I situate hope, not only as a means of surviving debilitating governance regimes or ‘making do’ with the realities of living under conditions of hostility but as enabling the opportunity to be and become otherwise through the (re)mediation of hostile affects.

## What is Hope, Then?

“One of the major challenges for the philosophy of hope is figuring out the value of hope for people as they navigate the unjust and uncertain world in which we live”.

(Stockdale, 2021, p. 10)

From the outset, I want to make clear that the harm, debilitation, and destruction that oppressive mobility governance regimes have on individuals and collectives cannot be understated nor ignored. Indeed, as it has been written about elsewhere (Coddington, 2020; Morgan, 2023, 2024), hostility has become the main affective mode of governing irregular migrants in the UK and broader Western European context over the past ten years. This is

nothing new to political geographers who have carefully traced the impacts of hostility across varying modes of everyday life (Schaillée et al., 2022; Coddington, 2020; Oliver & Hughes, 2019). And yet, after having spent a year doing ethnographic fieldwork with individuals actively claiming asylum — with over one hundred individuals dispersed through the system into a city in the North-East of England — affectual expressions of hope remains explicitly and implicitly present across my field notes, interview transcripts, and participatory mind-maps. In the contemporary moment, where discourses of asylum systems are dominated by the impacts of hostile affects, this leaves us questioning how we might integrate a politics of hope without erasing the violent everyday realities of hostile environments.

For political geographers, a focus on hope or hopeful affects has received renewed attention in recent years (Anderson, 2006; Harvey, 2000; Hodge & Hodge, 2021). In the background of discourses heavily determined by foreclosure, ends, crises and emergencies, hope has emerged as a concept able to turn attention to forms of emergence or generative power that coexist or challenge fatalistic projections of present and future conditions. Yet, both within the context of this paper and wider experiences of extraordinary harm and violence, to suggest centring hope as a potentially life-affirming attachment may seem dangerous. If hope is an attachment to an object, scenario or life that is not-yet-realised, then how can hope enable flourishing? How can hoping for alternative presents or futures — in the broadest sense of imagining, projecting, attaching to different versions of present or past lives — become a source of alternative political relations? In this section, I situate these questions within wider political debates on the value of centring hope in our research to draw out the ambiguous tensions that arise between a binary framing of hope as either agency-enabling or debilitating.

Geographers have long critiqued hope as being a ‘silver bullet’ solution for informing utopian thinking or imaginations of alternative futures (Herz et al., 2020; Eagleton, 2017), often stemming from Berlant's (2011) seminal work on cruel optimism<sup>2</sup> and the role that future-oriented hope plays in preventing individuals from realising the myth of the ‘good life’ and the subsequent erosion of the present in doing so (Eagleton, 2017). Even where hope has been evidenced, it is controlled, managed, and strategically produced. For example, Herz et

al. (2020) identify how hope is often mobilised by governing bodies as a mode of keeping the individual in line with what it means to be a ‘good’ asylum seeker, with the hope that the future will look and feel different to the present: an accepted asylum application, better housing conditions, access to communities, and so on. Hope in this sense becomes a form of governing individuals within the asylum system (Hodge & Hodge, 2021) — a sophisticated form of cruel hope that keeps individuals attached to a form of the good life after an asylum decision has been made, despite many of these imaginations not being materialised as Sarah Hughes (2023) recently suggested.

For those working within the context of irregular and illegalized mobility, hope has become an important affective orientation for living under precarious forms of mobility governance. Scholars such as Kallio et al. (2021) suggest that asylum seeking itself is an exercise of radical hope. Others highlight how hope in the context of claiming asylum is ambiguous: an emotion used to overcome precarious situations but simultaneously a future-projecting tool that inevitably becomes a hindrance to social change (Herz, Lalander, & Elsrud, 2022). Moreover, mobility scholars such as Twigt (2018) explore how digital home-making practices in spaces of asylum-claiming destinations are important for creating attachments to the future through a re-orientation of home. Others have explored how hope becomes imbricated within the very governance structures of asylum itself; where the control of the ability to hope disciplines individuals in a governmentality sense (Hodge & Hodge, 2021).

And yet, here I open the question of what it might mean to move beyond a binary framing of hope. I position hope as a necessary (yet ambiguous) tactic of everyday life within asylum systems or hostile environments: a strategy for both enduring the realities of these harmful systems, but equally as a strategy for producing, maintaining, and (re)imagining different forms of living that go beyond bare life. This approach builds upon the work of scholars who have explored how hope becomes a form of agency or power, particularly for vulnerable or marginalised groups within societies (Cooper, 2014; Muñoz, 2009; Parla, 2019; Solnit, 2016). I content that, for individuals who are already living under hostile governance regimes, making the space for hope and hopeful affects challenges the very hegemony of

hostile affective atmospheres; providing an alternative sense of what it means to inhabit the space/time(s) of a system that is designed through the logics of hostility (Coddington, 2020; Morgan, 2023). When hostile affects get (re)mediated in the everyday context, there is necessarily a reclamation of power over what the everyday looks and feels like for those living within it.

This line of argumentation is similar to those who have written about reclaiming spaces of liveability within the asylum system (Burrell & Hörschmann, 2019; Griffiths, 2014; Thorshaug & Brun, 2019). This move is not to deny that negative or cruel forms of hope are not present in the everyday lived realities of asylum governance — hope as an affective capacity in the everyday is itself ambiguous and complex (Herz et al., 2020; Parla, 2019; Stockdale, 2021); attached to a wide range of emotions and individual projections that cannot possibly be captured in an academic paper. My aim, however, is to draw our attention to the role that hope plays in navigating the specific space-time(s) of the asylum system: where forms of life, actively reduced to the bare minimum of humanness (Malkki, 1996; Weheliye, 2014), continue to persist, and even flourish, under hostile environments. I contend that hope itself becomes that which enables individuals to go beyond the effects that the political construction of the ‘asylum seeker’ has on the potentiality of living within the asylum system; a collapsed form of subjectivity reduced to the barely, less-than or (non/in)human through discourses of territory, nations and subjecthood (Davies et al., 2017).

Centring hope or hopeful affects within the context of irregular mobility governance is therefore not a-political nor straightforward. To centre forms of hope in this context is a political choice; a choice that speaks to broader questions around how we characterise and represent forms of Othered life. It is in this capacity that I argue centring hope within, often predominantly negative representations of, asylum life is an important political move. Learning from the work of Katherine McKittrick (2011, 2013) — who urges us to carefully consider the frames through which we represent kinds of Othered lives in our work — I argue that not allowing the space for more positive aspects of everyday life such as hope in our academic writing is equally as damaging as only romanticising hope in the place of initiating wider social change.

Building upon this position, I argue that we can understand hope as a strategy for (re)claiming and (re)making subjecthood within the space-times of applying for asylum in the UK and, more fundamentally, what it means to be human under systems of hostility. It is in the practice of (re)mediation that I locate the transformative power of hope (regardless of the intensity or intention of the form of hope itself). Indeed, the everyday forms of hope that are centred throughout this paper may never, and perhaps never intend to, make or trigger structural change. Many forms of hope that are expressed in this paper are temporary, fleeting, ephemeral, short-term. Yet, I argue this does not make them any less important when trying to understand how assemblages of power are destabilised or (re)distributed through the generative power of hope to (re)mediate everyday affective lifeworlds. I thus situate myself within the contributions that many intersectional feminist and queer theorists<sup>3</sup> have made to the question of what role hope plays in navigating the nuanced power structures that govern everyday life: where hope is “seen as a force of change as it makes it possible to survive in the present” (Herz et al., 2020: 225).

In the experience of prolonged waiting in the UK's asylum system, hope is often thin; fragmented, yet scholars persist in finding value in highlighting how glimmers or fragments continue to characterise everyday life (Herz et al., 2020) and participants continue to articulate hopeful attachments in their everyday lives. Staying with these moments of hope that emerge and persist, I suggest we can look to the novel forms of smartphone life that are now commonplace for those seeking asylum (in the context of the UK and wider Europe) to explore how hope continues to (re)mediate hostile affective assemblages.



## Naming and Locating Hope: Fieldwork Reflections

The question of naming and locating hope in the context of this article does not end at its theoretical positioning; it simultaneously begins within the question of how we locate various expressions or articulations of hope within our empirical data. Do our participants have to explicitly verbalise they are hopeful? Does hope have to be a clear emotion that is pinpointable as ‘hope’ in our transcriptions or fieldnotes? Can participants allude to being hopeful (or hopeless) in different ways? Can hope be expressed in non-verbal forms? This comes down to fundamental questions of the discipline of political geography and how we approach hope as an ambiguous relation that is hard to pin down. These questions underpin all kinds of work that must deal with ambiguous affects and assemblages of the everyday (Anderson, 2023a, 2023b; Wilson & Anderson, 2020).

What these questions get at, at their core, is what our role is as researchers in (re)telling stories of hope: which stories do we tell, when do we tell them, how do we frame them? Our role as a researcher becomes a balancing act of tracing affectual expressions of hope that do not always explicitly use the word itself: a move towards tracing affective assemblages and relations to hope that can grapple with the limits of language (Ahmed, 2004). This is an important epistemological question that underpins the work we do as political geographers working on affect and assemblage thinking. This paper does not — and could never — offer a finalised, straightforward, or clear-cut answer to the questions posed here. Instead, I suggest we must open the spaces to explore these questions, and, instead of attempting to solve them, working with the tensions that they present us with, placing ourselves as researchers within the narratives we draw upon, or forms of hope we connect them to.

With these epistemological questions in mind, this paper draws upon a year-long ethnographic study with individuals actively applying for asylum in the UK between September 2022 and 2023. Collaborating with a local organisation providing support to individuals seeking asylum in the North-East of England, the project was co-designed around the role that the smartphone plays in the everyday lives of those in the asylum application

process. The ‘fieldnotes’ of this project consist of ethnographic encounters produced whilst volunteering twice weekly at a local drop in, and later in the project, being involved in the everyday lives of my participants: from shopping, to walking around the city, to eating and cooking. Participatory mind-mapping workshops with drop-in attendees were also part of the ethnographic data collection. Each workshop (three in total) spanned three hours each and participants were invited to respond (materially or verbally) to one of two prompts on a blank sheet of paper: either ‘having internet connection is important for me because ... ’ or ‘problems I have faced staying connected to the internet’. Finally, this research draws upon twenty-six formalised interviews that were conducted in collaboration with the organisation. The interviews aimed to collect further in-depth information about, first, the role that smartphones play within the UK’s asylum system and second, the role that smartphones play in a broader sense of everyday life as an asylum seeker in the UK. A range of individuals were invited to interview: twenty men/six women, an age range between 18 and 56, and a wide range of home countries across the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and South America. Twenty interviews were conducted in English, four in Kurdish and two in Arabic. Non-English interviews were translated by volunteers within the organisation. Across the range of data collection methods used in this research project, all individuals are fully anonymised with pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves (where possible).

The range of individuals involved in this research project (and for those seeking asylum in the UK more broadly) brings us to the critical question of who speaks, can speak, or has the capacity to speak about hope? I suggest these questions need to be approached from an intersectional perspective. Being an asylum seeker does not automatically mean fitting into a homogenous category of human (De Genova, 2013; Erel et al., 2016). Instead, multiple forms of positionality exist within: gender, race, sexuality, nationality, caring responsibilities, being able-bodied. All subject positions have serious impacts on both the experience of claiming asylum in the UK and the ability to express, attach to, or clearly speak about hope. To get at this intersectional approach, this paper seeks to narrate stories of hope through the careful consideration of subject position and its material consequences for the intensity and forms of hope that are present in the data included here. This should remind us

that what, where, and when individuals hope (or can hope) for are always ambiguous (Herz et al., 2022), but simultaneously dependent upon where individuals are situated within overlapping matrixes of power (Parla, 2019).

## Between Hope and Hostility

Salar: “I have been here for so long now, living here for three years ... all I do is stay in my room ... waiting for the Home Office ... what else can I do? I am depressed ... lonely ... we are made to live like this”.

Now, I explore three ways that hope manifests through everyday digital practices, teasing out their affectual capacities in (re)mediating hostile environments experienced through extended periods of waiting within the asylum system (Kallio et al., 2021; Lipatova, 2022). Hope, taken as an affectual attachment to conditions otherwise (rooted in the experience of what it feels like to live everyday life within the UK's aptly self-termed Hostile Environment landscape), plays out in varying ambiguous ways in each extract included: where both the ability to orient oneself towards conditions otherwise, to sustain them, or to mobilise them beyond an affectual attachment are all subject- and context-dependent. Across these differences, the point is to acknowledge that the visibility of hope in these excerpts is not merely futile, cruel, or trivial (although, in moments certainly can be) but, instead, become indicative of alternative modes of living through and with hostility. These everyday digital practices and their hopeful (re)mediations of waiting become that which enable alternative affectual biopolitical arrangements to flourish and sustain amidst an ever increasingly bleak landscape of harm, violence, and erasure. So, although the moments of hope examined in the following section may indeed be banal, ephemeral, or minor, I contend that they still offer the potential of resisting the erosion of subjectivity within the wider governance assemblages which aim to produce life as bare; instead offering a form of agency

for the self to exist (in historical and novel forms) beyond that of ‘asylum seeker’ within the hostile environments.

## Hopeful Futures Beyond Asylum

Today I help Asad (a man in his mid-twenties from Afghanistan) make cups of tea and coffee. I ask him what he would say is the most important thing he uses his phone for. He tells me, “Learning English is a big thing, I use my phone a lot ... sometimes it is better than college I would say”. I question him further on how he does this ... “YouTube videos” he tells me, whilst searching and showing me videos that he usually watches through the YouTube app. The videos he navigates me towards are uploaded by a man with a very strong Yorkshire accent. We both listen to one video together (Fig. 1) Asad tells me “It is a bit harder to understand, you know, with the accent, but it is important ... I hope it will help me learn English faster ... my English is good, but not great ... if I want to work here, maybe, in the future I will need to be better ... so I spend a lot of my time at home studying, for me college two times a week is not enough”.

25/01/2023



Figure 1: Asad's YouTube search for 'Learn English with Greg'.

For individuals seeking asylum, projections of future life become central to sustaining oneself through the presentness of being within the asylum system. Projections are often distinct from the conditions of the present (Kallio et al., 2021), where the affective modes of hostility that are currently being lived through might change or be altered upon leaving the system. Although recent work from Hughes (2023) illustrates the cruelty of these kinds of projections of the future, they are still nonetheless critical in enabling individuals to make choices in the present that are productive of hopefulness about different forms of the future. As we see with Asad in the extract above, hope gets attached to forms of life that may be possible after the current realities of being held in limbo for several years, waiting on a decision from the UK government. In Asad's case, the forms of hope that emerge about what

this future might look like drives specific digital practices in the present. Here, learning English through watching various educational videos on YouTube is positioned as a tactical skill needed to flourish in the spatio-temporal horizon of life after the asylum system. Spending free time watching YouTube videos to develop English speaking skills is tactically aligned to Asad's hopes of what this future might look and feel like. For Asad, going to college a couple of times a week is “not enough” to fulfil his hopes of what life looks like in the future, nor what his idea of what the ‘good’ asylum seeker does with their time in the present (Erel et al., 2016; Secor et al., 2022). Instead, putting in the work to become fluent in English becomes common sense: attaching to a form of the future in which he needs English “to have a job” or “make new friends in the city”.

It is productive to linger here in Asad's idea of what the good life looks like after his asylum application. Especially so, as this is where concerns with hope often stem from; a cruel attachment to a life that may never exist in its imagined form (Eagleton, 2017). This is clear in Asad's case, in the sense that it is uncertain whether his asylum claim will be successful or not. But, at the same time, I suggest that for those governed through the asylum system where imagined versions of the future have already been foreclosed, the moments where hope and hopefulness are still able to flourish are important indicators for understanding where lines of power are both drawn and destabilised (Turner, 2016). To have the ability to hope — and thus orient oneself towards alternative space-times of the future — is a significant (re)mediation of what it means to live under and within hostility as a governance affect (Morgan, 2023). If to hope means creating temporary space/times guided by the affectual relations of achievement, purpose, or joy in the practices of the present that drive the attachment itself, then we must take seriously the potential this has for destabilising hegemonic practices of affectual governance on behalf of the state.

For example, forms of hope in Asad's case are productive of digitally mediated labour practices in the present of language learning. Although watching YouTube videos is a common digital practice that we may take for granted as a normal part of everyday life, how it is being mobilised in this context is similar to a labour practice in the sense that ‘work’ is being done in the present with the intention of creating a change of circumstances in the near

future. Although many people who claim asylum in the UK have a basic grasp of the language, work on behalf of the individual is required to get to a level of integrating within local communities and society more widely (Salvo & de C Williams, 2017). “Learning English is not easy” (Roda) and “I don't like going to college, it is too boring” (Gamal) are common sentiments that were repeated throughout my time with research participants. Many people I spoke to about their smartphones throughout the research process stressed the importance of video content for strategically aligning this everyday digital practice with the future goal of living in the UK and integrating within English-speaking communities. Digital practices such as watching YouTube videos were often positioned as an essential supplement to in-person options for language learning across the city (such as enrolling in ESOL classes at college or taking more informal classes with charities). For example, in an interview, Ishan tells me “... if I don't know something in the college, I will come home and try to learn ... do the same course in YouTube. This helps me improve my English a lot.” For those who positioned this extra work as a supplement to their ongoing education of the English language, it became clear that watching and engaging with these kinds of YouTube videos in the present was necessary work that would “pay off [in the future] when I can speak freely with people like you” (Baba, translated interview). We see here how projections of a future form of life (in this case, residence in the UK where speaking English is required) are rooted within, and productive of, a politics of hope that hinges upon becoming more than the category of asylum seeker.

The entanglements between hope and digitally-mediated learning is particularly important for individuals who have multiple barriers to accessing in-person language classes across the city. For example, Roda tells me that both herself and her mother care for Roda's sister who has serious physical impairment. As a result, “When [Roda is] at college during the week studying for her GCSE English exam, [her] mother cannot leave the house to go to an ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] in class”. Roda tells me “[She] has to help her with practicing her English ... we watch a lot of TV and videos together in English on my phone as this is easier for her”. In Roda and her mother's case, digital practices such as watching YouTube or TV shows in English become critical to negotiating practical barriers

that, without access to smartphone infrastructure, would prevent her from engaging with forms of language learning that are deeply attached to a sense of future. As Roda tells me, “We know that if we are able to stay here [the UK], English is very important for a good life ... my mother will learn slowly, but she needs to be able to speak with people for this”. Hope manifests here as an attachment to an imaginary of a future that exists beyond the present conditions of being an asylum seeker. In attaching to this form of future — despite its obvious precarious nature — individuals within the asylum system engage in digital practices that enable them to (re)mediate common feelings of anxiety or stuck-ness (Turnbull, 2016) that characterise the everyday experience of being within the system. Through these practices, alternative senses of purpose (e.g. learning English) and forms of belonging (e.g. a shared sense of national identity through language) can flourish.

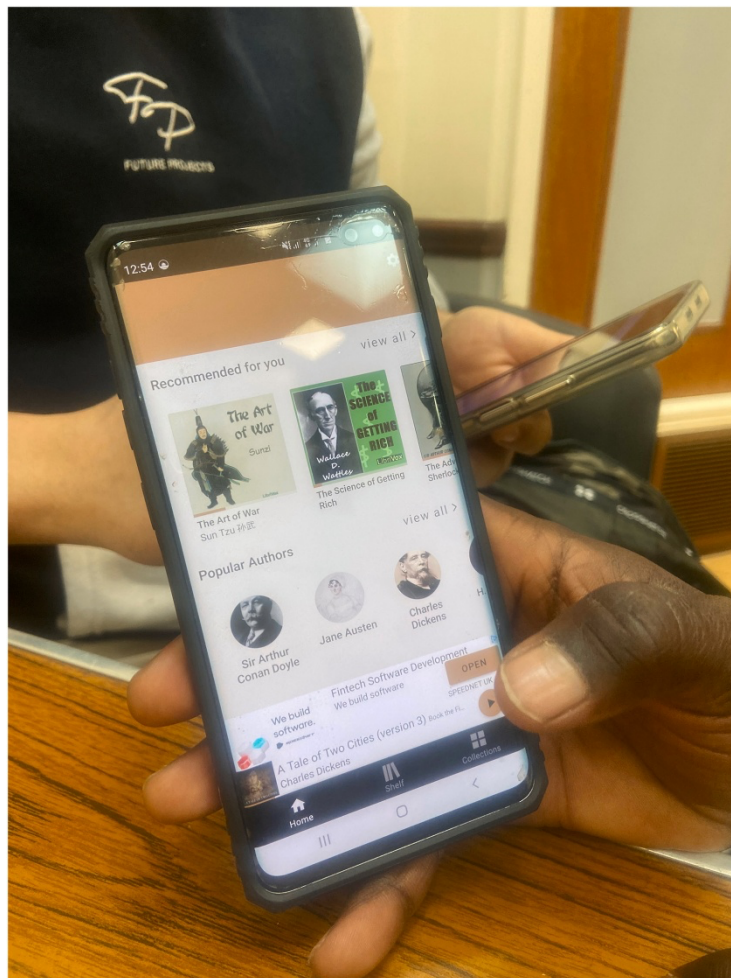


Figure 2: Ishan’s Audio Book Collection



Moreover, forms of hope rooted in certain kinds of future are also played out in practices that blur the distinction between work and play. For example, the gamification of everyday life is a trend that has taken over many labours of everyday life and learning language skills is not exempt (Dehghanzadeh et al., 2021). Apps such as Duolingo and audiobook providers are increasingly popular amongst those attempting to improve their language skills through alternative digital formats. As Santi told me, “Duolingo is important for me ... I use it very much, it is like a game ... I'm now on level 18. The app is very nice, very much popular, and easy for me, sometimes it is better than college if I don't understand some topic or something, you know?”. Despite being a less obvious form of labour, engaging with gamified forms of learning are also important everyday digital practices that get attached to various forms of hope. In its strongest form, hope manifests as a projection of the future within the digital practice itself: “for me Duolingo is very important ... I need the English now I'm here in the UK, and if I want to stay here and work when my application has a decision, it is necessary” (Santi) (Fig. 2). For others, hope gets implied as a subtle attachment to the future, but more as something to occupy the present: “For me, I use library books app ... I listen too much to improve my English when I am in my house alone ... Charles Dickens I like listening to ... it helps my English and wider culture about what is important in books and things like this” (Ishan) (Fig. 3). In both instances, the practice of completing a Duolingo level, or finishing a chapter or an audiobook are always more than the practice itself. When delving deeper into why these digital practices form part of Santi or Ishan's everyday life, it is the potentiality of these practices that matter. In completing a level or finishing an audiobook, a step towards a future that embodies the ‘good life’ after the asylum application period is taken.



Figure 3: Santi's Duolingo Homepage

Although we may be aware of the cruelty in the attachments to a future after the asylum process (Lipatova, 2022), the work that hope is doing in this moment must be taken seriously. Perhaps not in attaching to a cruel or uncertain future, but certainly in the way it provides the possibility to (re)orient oneself beyond the limiting boundaries of hostile environments. Instead of focusing on questions of whether the future that gets attached to will ever manifest or not, here I want us to stay with the potentiality that these practices enable in orienting the self within broader assemblages of hostility that consume and command spatio-temporal attachments. The digital practices covered in this section — from watching YouTube, listening to audiobooks to playing Duolingo — can all be understood as everyday opportunities to (re)mediate the affectual anxieties of suspension in periods of long-term waiting (Griffiths,

2014). The practices themselves act, in the present, as a way of dealing with or detaching from the anxieties that waiting produces; keeping individuals “Busy” (Asad) or “Giving [them] something to concentrate on and take their mind off [their] case” (Santi). Moreover, the forms of hope that orient these individuals to the future (cruel or not) enable alternative spatio-temporal arrangements to flourish and thrive, despite the panoptic power of hostile governance. Hopeful attachments to what a form of life might look like after a successful asylum application are productive of digital practices in the present which have the potentiality to challenge the production of bare life (Agamben, 1998); not least in the forms of productivity that are involved in practices like language learning, but more so in the sense of alternative possibilities that are affirmed through these practices. It is precisely the ability to remain hopeful and continue to establish hopeful practices within an assemblage that consistently seeks to minimise affirmative forms of living, which is itself a form of power that (re)mediates affectual environments, producing and maintaining the opportunity for alternatives.

## Collective Hope in a Mediated Present

Today I am at the drop-in. Nala (a woman in her late forties from Pakistan) asks to take a photo with me. We snap a selfie and she navigates to her Snapchat ‘memories’, talking me through the different communities she is involved in throughout the city. She begins scrolling further down her memory feed. In each set of photos, she tells me about the different groups: the Bangladesh community centre, a local community group set up for women, and the local church food bank. As she swipes, each photograph on the Snapchat app serves as a prompt for a story of her place in the city: “You know ... this is so important for me, these groups, these women ... apart from my husband and my son ... I didn’t know people here in [the city] ... I need to be able to speak to other

women, to share, to be a part of their lives ... it is important ... friendship and support ... I love my husband but [laughs] it is important to also have a life ... to have friends beyond that ... otherwise it is so lonely ... if I sit at home all day, I get depressed, you know? I like sharing the photos I take with everybody, I have a lot of WhatsApp groups ... it gives me something in life”.

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For Nala, we might see hope expressed here as a collective sense of (re)mediating the present. Unlike Asad, Nala does not necessarily attach a sense of hope to the future where alternative conditions have the potential to exist (Bliss, 2015). Instead, Nala expresses a form of hope that manifests in a differential sense of the present; a present that is filled with community, connection, affirmation ... as opposed to the “Depression” that is associated with the spatio-temporal experience of waiting within the asylum system (Griffiths, 2014). Here, we might trace a version of hope that gets produced in the ability to reconfigure what it feels like to live as an asylum seeker in the present through everyday digital practices. Between Nala and the smartphone, an alternative sense of agency (as having power over determining what the everyday feels like) emerges through her use of Snapchat and WhatsApp. Here, the displacement of (or temporary distancing from) negative affects associated with the condition of embodying an asylum-seeking subject becomes a source of potentiality for the emergence of alternative political arrangements to flourish within the present.

The present is a spatio-temporal arrangement frequently associated with those seeking asylum (Dennler, 2021) and the association is often made in cynical sense: where presentness is attributed to a sense of being stuck or incapable of being within the progressive tempo of modernity (Griffiths, 2014; Raynor, 2021). Yet, here I suggest we might consider the present as a temporal arrangement through which individuals can (re)mediate and regain a sense of control over affectual assemblages of the everyday. Instead of being a spatio-temporal landscape that individuals get stuck within, we might instead find it productive to centre what

individuals do with this suspended time: how they frame it, what it means to them, how it gets reworked (Rotter, 2016). How do hostile affects get (re)mediated in this present? What does hope do to the forms of hostility which seek to encompass presentness?

Approaching the potentiality of the present in this way is particularly important for those who — through years of exposure to hostile assemblages of governance — struggle to orient themselves towards a sense of future at all (Dennler, 2021). For example, for Nala and her husband, being in the UK for 10 years with no secure status has had severe impacts on their ability to attach to a future outside the present. In an interview, Hamid (Nala's husband) tells me “We live each day as it comes ... we have been here so long with no answers, our son is now 11 years old all he knows is the UK ... for us we don't know if we can stay or if we have to leave”. For Nala then, forms of hope manifest as a strategic method for mediating present circumstances: finding ways of controlling, or at least temporality altering, the affectual and embodied experience of hostility. As we see in the ethnographic extract, Nala attempts to mediate the everyday experience of living within affectually hostile arrangements, through collecting Snapchat memories that embody alternative affectual relations. When talking about this, she emphasises the powerful affectual experiences of belonging, purpose and even joy throughout the forms of community she tells me about. These affectual experiences do not just exist in the moment of actually doing, but are (re)visited and (re)lived repeatedly. For example, Nala highlights the practices she undertakes to take herself back to these affects after they have happened: in revisiting and sharing her Snapchat memories, Nala attempts to (re)capture the feelings of community that mark a distinction from the otherwise ongoingness of hostility. The Snapchat memory function of the app works for Nala as an archive of hope — there to return to whenever necessary to (re)mediate the affectual workings of hostility in the everyday; taking away from (even if only momentarily) the ongoing bleakness of what it feels like to live through the UK asylum system.

Not only does Nala talk about “Swiping through”, “Looking back at” and “Rewatching” these digital archives: she also shares them across her own networks through everyday digital practices such as WhatsApp chats. We can see from the extract that Nala herself is a key node within these networks: both in receipt of already-existing organisations work to (re)mediate

the workings of hostility, and simultaneously doing the work of (re)mediating hostility herself by capturing and sharing moments of alternative affective experiences through WhatsApp groups. These everyday networks are critical for mediating the presentness of the asylum system and thus the hostile affectual relations produced through waiting. For those who can access such networks, hope exists in the ability to (re)mediate what the present feels like. This is not necessarily a dramatic change, or a strategic movement towards influencing change in the future, but a quieter form of (re)mediation that intercepts the work of hostility in determining the affectual present. However, it is important to note that these networks are not necessarily accessible nor available to all individuals seeking asylum. Many of these networks are either informally set up through social networks, pre-determined by pre-existing community groups that often exist based on identity (ethnic communities, gender association, sexual orientation), or require additional work of volunteering or dedicated time. This reminds us that systems that are manufactured to produce inequality in one form (i.e., distinguishing the Other from that of the legitimate citizen) will always inadvertently (re)produce inequality in multiple other ways (Tazzioli, 2020). This subsequently maps onto the ability to access forms of hope production and maintenance.

For individuals who face barriers in accessing pre-established networks like those Nala refers to, this does not mean that the opportunities to access hope are completely foreclosed. It does often, however, mean that forms of hope emerge through informal networks or ad-hoc circumstances. One example of this can be found in the participatory mapping sessions that I facilitated throughout my research. One of the sticky notes added to the map was playing “PUBG Mobile live 16” 4 with friends. This was both highly popular in the sticker reactions on the map itself but was also frequently mentioned in conversations that I had with people throughout my research. For example, Assan tells me “I play PUBG a lot in the hotel ... it is good to play with my friend also there ... it is a lot of fun”. Playing online games were frequently mentioned by men living alone in hotel rooms as a tactic of negotiating hostile affects of waiting. In an interview, Kaamil shows me his games folder Fig. 4 and tells me “Playing games in the hotel is normal for us ... what else can we do? I play with my friend, this one ... that one ... it is good for me”. The act of playing the game was often spoken about

in its relation to connecting individuals with other people: either friends, people nearby or random players. Although mundane, the act of playing the online game was productive of creating alternative spatio-temporal networks to that of the isolation or loneliness which is often associated with hotel accommodation in the UK (Zill et al., 2021).

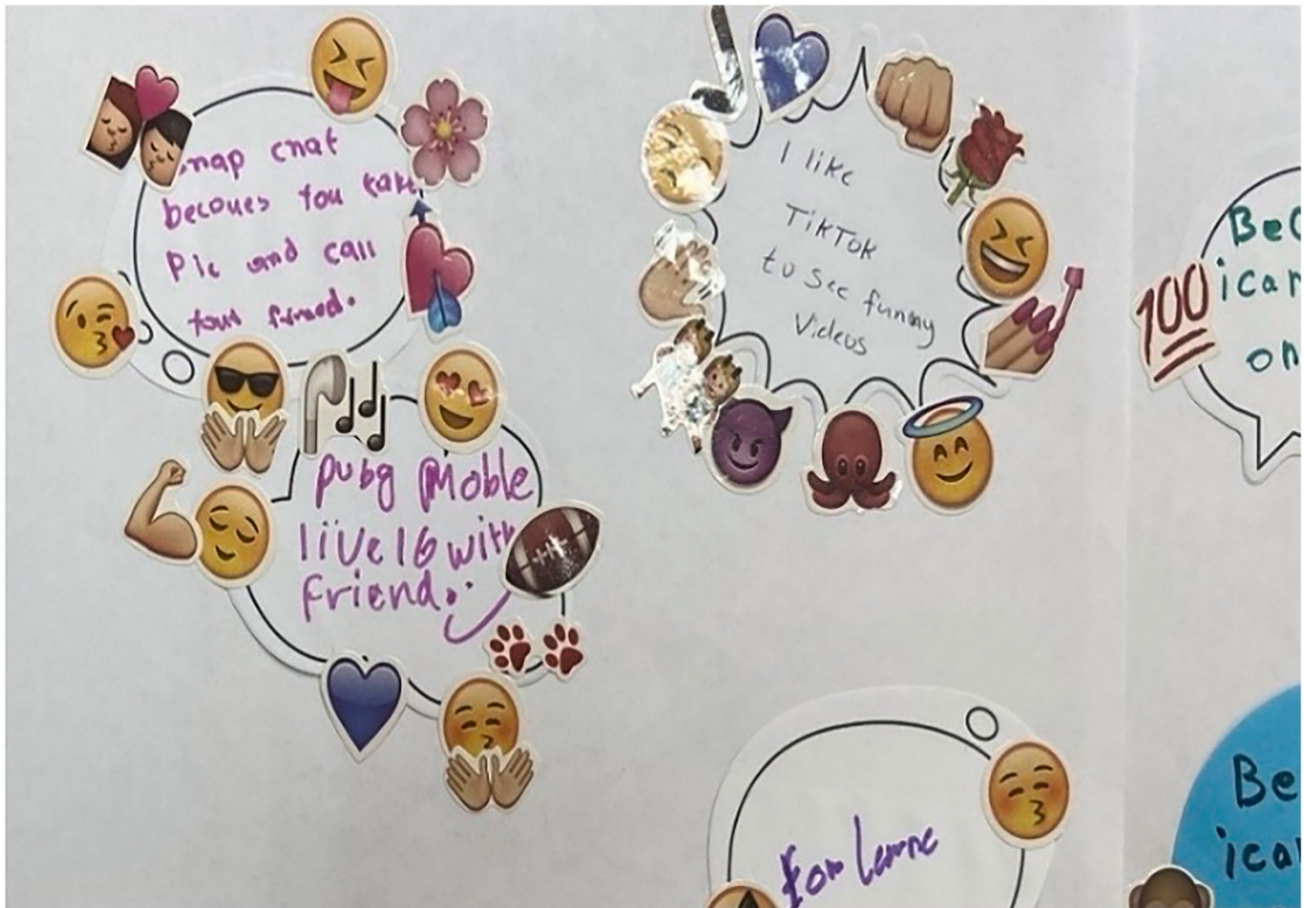


Figure 4: Participatory mapping exercise: PUBG note bottom left.

For those temporarily housed in hotel rooms, Vadin describes a recurrent perspective: “A big problem in the hotel is ... we have very little to do. We cannot work, we cannot just go out into the city because we have no SIM, no connections, little money”. Overcoming the spatio-temporal arrangements of hostility through isolation, young men spoke about joining up in “Each other's rooms to play together” (Assan) or “Agreeing on a

time to play with him in the corridor” (Lablab [translated from Farsi]). In a unique space of intensified hostility (ibid), opening an app and connecting with others becomes a powerful force in disrupting what it feels like to inhabit the present in the spatio-temporal arrangement of the hotel room and producing alternative affectual ways of living within hotel infrastructure. Like Nala, there is little, if at all, orientation towards a future in the act of playing PUBG. However, I suggest we can locate hope in the form of a (re)mediated sense of present that is both temporarily experienced (in the act of playing the game) and sustained within a wider community (through ongoing informally organised practices of game playing). Playing PUBG itself may not be an orientation towards a different form of future that is traditionally associated with hope (Herz et al., 2020), but the ongoing ad-hoc organisation of gaming communities becomes a source of hope for those with little alternative agency over what the everyday feels like; a form of hope that is rooted in staking a claim to a different mode of living within bounds of hotel infrastructure.

## Hope in Detachment

I sit with Madiha (a man in his early twenties from Iran). He takes out his phone and runs his finger over the unlock button. The screen automatically turns on, displaying a lock-screen photograph with a man (who is not Madiha) smiling. Madiha laughs and tells me “This is my boyfriend.” I ask what his name is, “Matt ... he lives back in Turkey ... I put this picture here for the first time today.” I try to ask Madiha other questions, but I can sense that he is getting shy with his responses. From spending almost six months at this drop-in, I know that conversations about sexuality are still highly taboo, especially for those who are not heterosexual. I know that Madiha changing and showing me his lock screen photograph is a big deal in this space. I take the conversation back to the simplicity of changing his lock screen image, asking him how it



makes him feel. He struggles with a few English words, and instead opens the google translate app on his phone (Fig. 5), typing out a statement in Kurdish whilst telling me “Afraid ... not anymore.”

15/02/2023

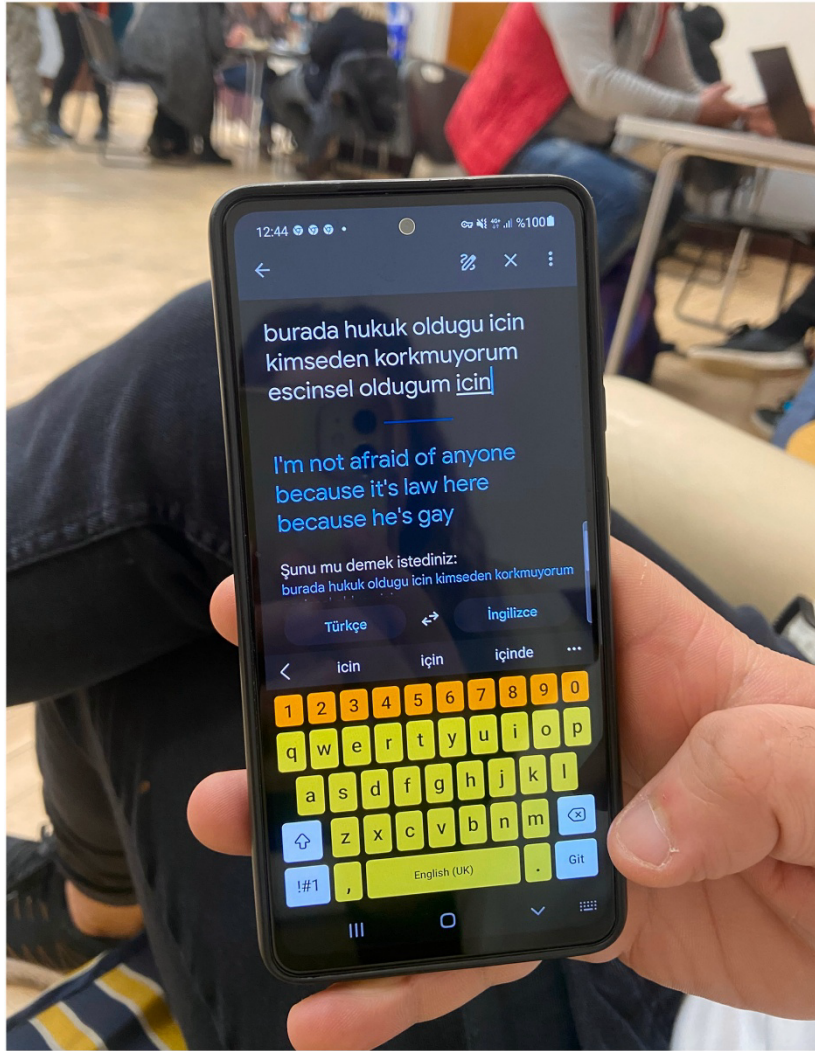


Figure 5: Madiha using Google Translate [translation reads "I'm not afraid of anyone because it's law here because he's (I'm) gay"].

Now, I want to spend time thinking with a temporality not yet considered in this paper: the past. Throughout this section, I centre moments where hope arises through a distinct form of detachment from how life previously was (Omar, 2022). Detachment, like hope, is ambivalent — difficult to pin down to any one moment or series of actions (Wilson & Anderson, 2020). Yet, what I am interested in drawing our attention to here is how hope gets produced through a recognition of change: a recognition that what it feels like to live within or inhabit the present is different than it previously was. It is in this recognition of change — of the suspension of a circumstance, set of relations, or otherwise — that I argue is where we have the potential of locating hope. Although in a temporal sense of orientation, hope itself is still being attached to a sense of present and/or future, what is distinct in the examples included in this section is where hope itself arises from. It is well known that asylum-seeking individuals often have highly traumatic pasts that involve harm, violence, and discrimination (Ehrkamp et al., 2021). The past also features prominently in state-led examinations of worthiness and legitimacy of the subject claiming asylum in the present (Fassin, 2013). It has been less focused on, however, how individuals navigate the ongoing affectual consequences of the past when inhabiting the present within asylum systems.

One of the ways that individuals begin to process or reflect upon their past circumstances is through their everyday engagements with their smartphone (Morgan, 2023). Many of the participants involved in my research spoke about highly banal practices such as “Looking through old photographs” (Vadin) or “Reading old WhatsApp messages” (Gamal) as a method of (re)encountering historical events or forms of the everyday. One example of a banal digital practice in the case of Madiha is the act of changing a lockscreen photograph. A minor act in the digital ecosystem of the everyday, but nonetheless performative and informed by forms of selfhood. Lockscreen images coexist as private-public expressions of the self: not the intimacies of the unlocked smartphone itself, but still a semi-public choice made by the owner (in most cases).

For Madiha, hope is expressed in the simple act of changing his lockscreen image to that of his boyfriend: something Madiha admits he would “never be able to do in Iran” nor has done previously done in the UK. This act of changing a phone lock screen is a

simultaneously private-public declaration of the self: with the ability to show up in the world (digitally and non-digitally) in a way that was previously not possible. When I asked Madiha how this feels to him, he lingered in the feeling of no longer being “afraid”. As we can see in the self-translated text, Madiha draws upon the sense of security and safety that arise for him through the force of the laws around homosexuality in the UK. This simultaneously signals a detachment from the past, whilst also eliciting a hopeful attachment to the present/future in terms of what has changed and what might change. Madiha's narration of his affectual experiences is centred around what it feels like to live and exist in the comparative environments of Iran and the UK as a gay man. In digitally (re)encountering the past through the lockscreen wallpaper, Madiha reflects upon being situated in the present with the ability to detach from that past, or heuristically mark it as separate from the present or future. It is precisely this moment (or multiple ongoing moments within the everyday) of detachment where we can trace the work that hope does in (re)mediation here. Despite being housed in a hotel and facing many of the everyday challenges that others involved in this research project face through the e/affects of hostile assemblages (Morgan, 2023), Madiha often chose to focus on (in conversations and in an interview) the “more positive” aspects of his life here in the UK: often stemming from comparative examples from what his life previously felt like in Iran.

In this case, hope is not necessarily found in the (re)mediation of hostile affects in the present moment of the asylum system itself, but actively created in the space of the socio-political alternative; an alternative that is produced through comparison with the past, as opposed to the projection of the future. Embedded within Madiha's claims is a signalling of the self, and what the potentiality of becoming may hold in a society where the simple, taken-for-granted act of changing a lock screen to a picture of his boyfriend no longer produces fear and anxiety of debilitating consequences. Hope here is doing the work of signalling a change in what it feels like in circumstances of the present; to show up in the world and exist among or within affectual assemblages.

We can also see a similar manifestation of hope emerge through more subtle circumstances or digital practices such as photography (Alencar et al., 2019). For example,

Moiz (a man in his late forties from Afghanistan, who at the time of interview had received his refugee status in the UK and had applied for family re-union) tells me in an interview how “Before applying for family reunion, [he] was living in the UK alone for five years”. He continues “for me, the phone was the only way I can keep in contact with my wife and family during this time ... I have seven children, the little one, I never met”. When I asked him about his children, Moiz instinctively takes his phone out his pocket and puts it on the table between us, navigating to the photo app, beginning to swipe through a series of photographs of his children. He settles on one photograph — a picture taken by his wife in Afghanistan with all seven children lined up in age order that she had sent him on WhatsApp last year — and he begins to take me through each of their names and what they like studying now in school: zooming in on faces whilst talking. When reaching his younger daughters, Moiz pauses and tells me “Now they are here with me in the UK, and they are safe ... you know if they were still back home ... Afghanistan ... they couldn't do anything. Here they can go to school, they study what they want, they can do anything in the future they want ... back in Afghanistan, they can't do this”.

If we take a step back from this example, we can see how a specific form of hope emerges through the detachment from conditions of the past, and the implicit assumption of what this means for changed conditions of the present and future. Here, Moiz signals a form of hope that emerges through the marked difference of what the potentiality of his daughters' lives now hold: in the difference between being “back home” in Afghanistan and now living in the UK. For Moiz, hope is not a grand act of future-making nor an attachment to a radically different form of life. Instead, hope emerges in the recognition that the conditions of the present are now different to that of the past: that what previously may have held his daughters back in life now no longer (perceivably) persist in the present or potential projections of what their futures may look like. In both examples considered here, manifestations of hope show potential in (re)mediating what life feels like in the present conditions of the asylum system through the process of comparison. Various smartphone practices serve as a reminder of a past form of life: often mobilised, intentionally (or not), to produce alternative affective experiences alongside hostility. Looking at old photographs or

using them in the infrastructure of how the smartphone gets used in everyday life (e.g., choosing a specific photograph as a lockscreen wallpaper to see each time the phone is unlocked) are both practices that prompt a reminder that life is now, and continues to have the potential to feel and be different.

## Conclusion

This paper was set out to explore the tension of what it means to draw attention to the multiple forms of hope that animate everyday life under systems of hostility; systems which seek to minimise, harm, and erode the subject into forms of bare life. As has been explored, hope is necessarily ambiguous, it is simultaneously fleeting, prolonged, intentional, on the edge of consciousness, cruel and affirmative. When taken as an attachment to conditions otherwise (rooted in the affectual nature of the hostile environment), this paper asks: what happens when we stay with hope alongside hostility?

In the UK's asylum system, I have traced the forms of hope that become inseparable to what it means to be a 'digitally connected' asylum seeker through everyday smartphone practices. Hope, as an affective attachment to conditions otherwise, becomes a tactic of, first, living digitally under conditions of hostility and, second, a method of orienting subjects towards the imagination, production, and circulation of alternative lives that can exist beyond the bareness of 'asylum seeker'. Staying with hope, I suggest that novel everyday smartphone geographies fundamentally alter the capacity of subjects under conditions of hostility to hope, and the ability of these forms of hope to become affirmative (enabling the subject to destabilise conditions of bare life). Paying attention to where hope emerges, circulates and stays is thus critical for engaging with the complex everydayness of what it means to live under systems of hostility.

Beyond the scope of this paper, I suggest two contentions should inform future work within political geography. First, engagements with the Othered subject, such as illegalized and irregular migrants, must go beyond the tendency to rely on discourses of bare life if they are interested in exploring everyday lifeworlds. Political geographers have much to

contribute to both theorisations of the everyday and of subject formation. Staying with ambiguity and complexity, as opposed to attempting to define, categorise or minimise it, presents us with opportunities to engage with the messy realities of everyday affectual relations such as hope. Working with the tension between hostility and hope, this paper sets an example of how we might work with conceptual and empirical tensions as a method of thinking about the subject itself: opening the space for conceptualising subject formation beyond binaries or hegemonic discourses.

As McKittrick (2013) warns us, to continue (re)categorising Othered life within the boundaries of negativity is to close down the space for alternative theorisations, imaginations, and projections of alternatives. I suggest opening up these spaces within and beyond political geography is a worthwhile endeavour that can enable researchers to coproduce knowledge that can account for, and moreover embrace, the complexity of everyday lifeworlds. As this paper suggests, to stay with the tension between hostility and hope is to stay with the nuanced (re)distribution(s) of power and agency within governance systems that are designed to harm, injure, and erode. Accounting for the production of bare life within the UK's asylum system is an important endeavour; but, crucially, one that fails to account for the nuances of power and agency of subjects themselves. To theoretically and empirically centre hope in an otherwise bleak and incredibly harmful system is both an academic and political choice — a choice that is rooted in ongoing efforts within political geography to destabilise and move beyond long-standing dichotomous framings of Othered life. Hope is neither an oppositional relation to hostility, nor is hope solely either cruel or emancipatory. As found in the ethnographic accounts included, the lines between these realities are complex, ever changing and, often ephemeral in their digital manifestations. By staying with these tensions, I instead suggest we might find it productive to ask questions such as: what forms or intensities can hope take? Who gets to hope, or who gets to talk about or articulate forms of hope? And finally, how does hope co-exist alongside other everyday affects?

The second contribution this paper makes to future work within political geography is engaging with the novelty and unprecedented impacts that everyday digital technologies

are having on the subject and subject formation within broader accounts of alternative political relations. A serious engagement with everyday smartphone practices has not yet been taken up within political geography, despite the pervasiveness of the smartphone within day-to-day life (at least, speaking from the context of digitally connected societies). Moreover, connecting the dots between everyday smartphone practices and tactics of living affirmatively beyond the production of bare life demands attention as smart technologies continue to become increasingly intertwined with the human subject. I suggest that drawing our attention to everyday digital geographies of the smartphone can provide political geography with rich insights into first, what the 'everyday' now means in an increasingly digitalised world, and second, how we grapple with subjects that are in the process of becoming with and through digital assemblages. For those interested in hope, hostility or other everyday affects that become characteristic of Othered life within systems of suffering, the entanglements between subject and technology become a necessary lens to think through how affects get produced, circulated, maintained, or destabilised through everyday forms of life.

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## Part Six

### Care(ful) Relations

Morgan, H. (2025) '(Re)Mediating the Hostile Environment: Everyday Digital Assemblages of Care within Asylum Systems'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 0(0), 1-18.

This paper explores what everyday digital assemblages of care do to the spatio-temporal experience of claiming asylum under political landscapes characterised by hostile governance affects. Drawing upon one year of participatory ethnographic fieldwork, this paper reimagines a wide range of smartphone practices – playing online games, using YouTube Kids or making WhatsApp chats – as assemblages of care which disrupt what it feels like to live within the UK's asylum application system. This paper presents these forms of care as practices of (re)mediation, highlighting the potentiality that digitally mediated care has in sustaining affirmative forms of living alongside, within, and under hostility. Sketching out three relations of flourishing – countering isolating urban infrastructure, becoming as a form of selfhood, and shifting cosmopolitan imaginaries – the paper sets out an account of affirmative living that emerges in an everyday posthuman assemblage between the human and smartphone. Where the intended consequences of hostile affects are disrupted (even where unremarkable, ephemeral, fleeting, or mundane), I suggest we are confronted with an updated reading of political theory – of various attempts to categorise forms of Othered life as bare, unliveable or unvalued – that must take seriously novel forms of digital flourishing.

## Introduction

In the context of the UK's asylum system, the intention to make asylum 'life' unliveable has been established for over a decade, with multiple foreign secretaries upholding the sentiment of deterrence. In the development of the UK's Hostile Environment in 2012, Theresa May (then, foreign secretary) clearly outlined the purpose of the now sophisticated suite of political techniques to govern the asylum application process: '...The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants' <sup>43</sup>. Over a decade later, this approach to governing asylum seekers and refugees has intensified, with almost every aspect of everyday life coming under scrutiny for how welcoming the UK is, or appears to be, to both citizens and non-citizens. The term 'hostile environment' thus refers to a specific set of government-led policies designed at governing asylum seekers in the UK and, simultaneously, a broader affective atmosphere that has been established and sustained as a result of these policies (Coddington, 2020; Morgan, 2023). Highlighting this distinction, in 2023 Suella Braverman (again, then, foreign secretary) announced in a speech that the British public's 'sense of fair play [had] been tested beyond its limits' and had 'seen the country taken for a ride' <sup>44</sup> concerning the number of asylum-seeking individuals arriving by small boat via the English Channel – alluding us not only towards legitimised forms of increased government control, but equally to bringing a sense of justice to a wider public mood: a public mood that has been actively shaped by the normalisation and incorporated back into justifications for harsher controls and governance (Hootegeem et al., 2020). From looming threats of being flown to Rwanda, painting over children's murals in detention centres, to making sure that polystyrene plates and cups are used within hotel accommodation, the ever-expanding list of mundane, everyday interactions with the asylum state has been stripped back to their bare function in an ongoing series of political choices rooted in upholding a hostile environment. At its core, hostility is thus a governance practice

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<sup>43</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/12263/html>.

<sup>44</sup> Home Secretary's statement on the Illegal Immigration Bill – GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)).



of pre-emptive deterrence: reducing everyday quality of life in the present, as an attempt to discourage individuals from entering or staying in the UK in the future.

There are an expansive range of accounts within political theory that attempt to capture what forms of life living under systems of hostility, violence or erasure should be named as – bare (Agamben, 1998), bad circulation (Foucault, 2007), unliveable (Butler and Worms, 2023), maimed (Puar, 2017) – all of which attempt to capture particular forms of Othering that are sustained to manage certain kinds of bodies and populations, arising from historical and ongoing legacies of colonial violence. Building upon this seminal work, this paper opens up the possibilities of locating agency and capacity to reclaim power within these forms of Othered life. In a context where those governed under the system of asylum are produced as unvalued life and the everyday experience of the system is characterised by hostility (Butler and Worms, 2023; Coddington, 2020; Morgan, 2024), this paper poses a central question: what value is there in centring affirmative affective relations – such as care(ing) – within broader systems of harm, suffering and violence?

At a fundamental level, relations of care are central to the everyday reproduction of life, even in its barest form(s). As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017: 156) argues, ‘for humans – and many other beings – to be alive, or endure, something, somebody, must be taking care, somewhere. One might reject care in a situation – but not absolutely, without disappearing’. For individuals seeking asylum, this sentiment is no different. Scholars working at the intersection between mobility and care studies have long identified the intersections between care (or lack thereof) and the everyday reproduction (or degradation) of life within systems of state control (Coddington, 2020; Darling, 2011; Power, 2019). What is different now though, I contend, is that the smartphone is situated as a key node within novel assemblages of care that sustain individuals throughout the waiting period of their asylum applications (Morgan 2023, 2024). In little under a decade, where structural forms of care at the state level have been withdrawn and rolled back in line with Hostile Environment policies, the smartphone has become well-established as a technological device both central to the everyday process of claiming asylum and its associated forms (or absence) of care (Josipovic, 2024; 2023; Kocher, 2023; Tazzioli, 2022). And, perhaps more importantly, central to

alternative networks of care(ing) relations that are sustained through digital lifeworlds (Morgan, 2024). Those seeking asylum now live in complex digital worlds, where relations of care have moved on traditional ideas of what counts as care (e.g. text messaging, video calling or using social media) to nuanced and dynamic practices (e.g. stickers, GIFs, reactions, playing games, creating online groups) (Morgan, 2024).

It may seem strange in an environment where forms of care are unambiguously being cut back and minimised – in a sense of what the state structurally provides to maintain and provide the conditions for life – that we might then pay attention to how digital care may emerge as an affirmative relation. Yet, I contend we must not fall into the trap of assuming that forms of state governance have totalising power over what it feels like to live in the everyday space-times of the asylum system. Building upon the contributions of scholars who grapple with the everyday negotiations of power (Butler and Worms, 2023; Jeffrey and Dyson, 2022; McKittrick, 2013), I suggest that novel forms of digitally mediated care have the potential to destabilise and (re)mediate what everyday lives feel like. Whilst hostile governance in the UK indeed attempts to produce a form of life that is removed from opportunities for flourishing digital assemblages of care that are now part of everyday life for asylum seeking subjects give rise to novel agencies that govern everyday affective life. It is thus in the practice of digital (re)mediation where we must locate the potential for affirmative forms of flourishing to emerge and persist alongside hostile state-affects.

In articulating an account of human flourishing that exists between the (Othered) human and their smartphone, there are three main contributions that this paper makes. The first contribution is an attempt to highlight how novel assemblages of care work through the smartphone as a technological object central to everyday life. The second contribution this paper makes is towards an engagement with what we mean when we talk about affirmative forms of life, specifically through the Foucauldian language of flourishing (1977; 1978; 2010). Under biopolitical power, forms of flourishing get accessed when ‘bad circulation(s)’ (including life) are secured against for ‘good [circulations]’ to prosper (Foucault, 2007: 18). In this paper, I aim to destabilise the binary made between good/bad circulation, instead asking how forms of flourishing may become possible for those being secured against, despite

being categorised as bad circulations within the liberal order. The final contribution this paper makes is outlining how forms of flourishing are made possible through the work of digital (re)mediation of hostile affects. Centring ethnographic accounts of caring relations, I highlight how everyday digital practices, although often mundane – such as setting up group chats, playing online games, or sending voice notes or videos – have become integral to wider care(ing) assemblages that work to (re)mediate what it feels like to inhabit the spatio-temporal manifestations of hostility within the UK's asylum application process (Morgan, 2023; 2024). I thus put forward an account of human flourishing that captures the difference that novel assemblages of digitally mediated care do to what it feels to live within and alongside hostility.

It is important to note from the outset of this paper that the distinction between daily life within hostile environments and affirmative forms of living should not be read as a binary, separate and distinguishable from one another. (Re)mediation is mobilised precisely as a way of capturing the tension inherent within this approach to understanding affirmative flourishing; where hostility is not necessarily radically changed or curtailed (and perhaps never can be) but is disrupted in ways that enable alternative political relations to emerge with and alongside it. The indisputable fact of 'living digitally' (Morgan, 2023: 409) as an asylum seeker in the UK today is that hostility will always burn in the background of everyday existence; curtailing, minimising and reducing opportunities for life beyond bare human existence stripped – as far as possible – of political participation within society. And yet, I suggest that novel forms of everyday digital life are reshaping how we understand care in its everyday manifestations and the transformative potential it holds for lives subject to state violence and harm, offering new possibilities for an everyday politics of digitally mediated care that can redefine what it feels like to live within hostile environments.

## Care(ing) Assemblages in Everyday Digital Life

Foundational work within feminist geography – and critical theory more broadly – has highlighted how care is necessary to the reproduction of everyday life in the broadest sense. What we label as care encompasses a vast range of practices, relations and systems that sustain human and non-human life (Tronto, 1993, 2017). Forming the basis of our current understanding of what care is and how it functions, feminist geographers have long worked to define and map out the intersectional and power-laden complexities of care work (Bowlby, 2011; Schwiter and Steiner, 2020), practices (Conradson, 2011; Puig de la Bellacassa, 2017) and networks (Lancione, 2014; Power, 2019). Care is therefore an inherently relational practice, involving a vast network of actors, practices and emotions: all of which are tied up in contested political landscapes and power relations (Conradson, 2011; Power and Mee, 2019; Tronto, 1993, 2017).

Framing care through the lens of assemblage thinking offers us a framework for understanding the dynamic, relational and often ephemeral nature of care within the UK's asylum system. Assemblage thinking, as explored by scholars such as Power (2019) and Puig de la Bellacassa (2017), emphasises the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors, spatio-temporal relations, and material and affective forces that are all embedded in care. This perspective shifts our understanding of care as a linear process (e.g. a care giver and care receiver) towards an understanding of care that emerges within complex and evolving networks across everyday life. For asylum seeking individuals navigating hostile environments, such an approach allows us to see how various infrastructures (smartphones, Wi-Fi-networks, charging points), networks (apps, networks, platforms) and actors (human users, AI generation, notifications) are all now embedded within care(ing) assemblages within both the asylum application process and broader everyday life (Morgan, 2024; Tazzioli, 2022). Situating digitally mediated care within the everyday negotiations of what life feels like within hostile environments, this paper takes forward Power and Williams' (2019) call for the need to expand the scope of care-thinking to broader questions of human flourishing.

Assemblage thinking in the context of this paper therefore provides the conceptual framework to examine how digital practices – as mundane as they may seem – can transform the experience of claiming asylum by creating and sustaining novel digitally-mediated care(ing) relations. To understand the affective capacity that practices of (digital) care have on the everyday experience of the UK asylum system, we must first begin with (re)thinking about what constitutes care alongside rapid digital transformation of human and non-human life. Feminist and critical digital geographers offer valuable insights into how digital mediation is reshaping care relations that sustain everyday life. Koch and Miles (2021) and Maalsen (2023) argue that digital technologies are not neutral technological objects but are instead active mediators that are reconfiguring spatio-temporal and emotional dimensions of care. Feminist digital geographers in particular show us how digital care practices are both relational and gendered, highlighting how technologies like smartphones enable both connection and control (Longhurst, 2013; Wilson, 2016). Such work underscores that digital mediation does not simply replicate pre-existing care relations, but instead introduces the possibilities of new networks, actors and practices that disrupt previous conceptualisations of care. Care is no longer simply given and received through technological mediation but is inherently embedded within expansive networks of human-posthuman assemblages of care production, maintenance, circulation and mediation (Power and Williams, 2020; Skinner and Herron, 2020). And, whilst advocating for such an approach, we must not forget how, as feminist scholars caution, digitally mediated forms of care are not entirely emancipatory and are still subject to power relations, intersecting with surveillance, precarity and inequality (Josipovic, 2023; Tazzioli, 2022).

These insights are important for how we think about care in today's digitally mediated asylum application systems. Digital mediation has the potential to transform pre-existing assemblages of care in novel and unprecedented ways (Greene, 2020; Francisco-Menchavez, 2018; Frazer et al., 2022). For example, by extending care networks beyond physical space, enabling asylum-seeking individuals to navigate systemic exclusions and build care(ing) connections in otherwise isolating and lonely environments. Or, by transforming the practices that can be considered as acts or relations of care – liking photographs, sharing

reels, reacting to messages, playing online games – and expanding the range of human and non-human actors that are responsible for upholding care relations in everyday life. As a technological device, the smartphone is no longer simply a digital companion, but an extension of the self: not simply in the corporeality of the body and its capacities in completing tasks, but also in the affectual and imaginative formation of the subject. To think with care here is thus to examine how pre-existing relations of care now get (re)mediated and transformed through the ever-increasing capacities of the smartphone device.

This also means we must pay attention to how everyday digital practices (sending, replying, sharing, requesting, liking, reacting...) might be rethought in their capacity to be considered relations of care. In the smartphone age, relations of care now manifest in forms that have previously not been examined: from more traditional forms of interactions such as text messages or video calls (Longhurst, 2013), we have moved towards a more complex ecosystem of digital life such as sending emojis and gifs, liking and reacting to posts on social media, even in forms such as notifications for mental health journaling or reminding the user to meet their daily step count. Such novel forms of care also prompt us to question the temporalities of digital care relations and how they may differ depending upon which digital ecosystem becomes part of everyday assemblages. Within ecosystems of novel smartphone life, care may indeed be instantaneous connection between two human subjects, but it may also manifest differently: in a-synchronous connection, in missed, delayed or lagged connection; even, in some circumstances, no connection at all. Moreover, the question of what constitutes care is intimately tied to the question of which actors are engaging in care assemblages. From a posthuman assemblage perspective, all nodes have potential to engage in caring relations: from the human user to the algorithm, or the physical smartphone device (Maalsen, 2023).

And yet, despite advocating for a posthuman approach to situating the smartphone within assemblages of care, we must not forego a careful examination of the human subject in question (see: Dekeyser, 2023; Braidotti, 2013; Rose, 2017). This question is especially pertinent to this paper, where the human subject in question is actively Othered through varying governance structures and layers of power. We must remember that neither subjects

who care nor subjects who receive care are politically neutral: both ends of the spectrum have a long history of gendered, racialised and sexualised norms and expectations (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). The allocation of caring labour is never politically neutral nor separate from historically produced positions of power. This requires us to acknowledge that care is not an inherently positive nor affirmative relation. As Martin et al. (2015: 635) states: ‘Care is an affectively charged and selective mode of attention that directs action, affection, or concern at something, and in effect, it draws attention away from other things’. Geographies of care thus emerge through power imbalances of who cares, what is cared for, and when it is cared for (Brodie, 2008; Moosa-Mitha, 2016).

Within previous geographic research, accounts of care in the context of seeking asylum have largely focused on asylum seekers as recipients of care. Research has traced how forms of care and caring dictate policy and governance landscapes at particular times and spaces (Darling 2011; Watters, 2007) – especially when the forms of care required are provided through state apparatuses of welfare within neoliberal market values (Moosa-Mitha, 2016). For example, forms of national care are often constructed through narratives of worthiness or generosity that are rooted in political contestation (Darling, 2009; Derrida, 2000); often to the extent where the very idea of needing to provide care for the Other is dismantled and justified: what some scholars have explored as though the language of ‘uncaring’ care (Bartos, 2021; 2018; Lopez and Neely, 2021). Part of a broader, volatile political landscape, the asylum seeker – often constructed as the needy recipient of care – shifts within changing discourses of who deserves care and when. Tied intimately to racialised discourses of legitimacy, risk and Otherness (Beasley and Bacchi, 2007), the forms of care that those seeking asylum are either offered or able to access are often worse, or harder to access, than that of the legitimate citizen (Coddington, 2020). Within the neoliberalisation of state functions (Tronto, 2017), care for asylum seekers is therefore often the first to erode, fracture or fail (Coddington, 2020; Morgan, 2024).

However, only viewing asylum-seeking individuals as recipients of care simply (re)Others the subject into a position of reduced agency (Jordan, 2024, Zadhy-Çepoğlu, 2023). First, this (re)produces the asylum seeker as a victim (Darling, 2011) or as a non-

agentic figure wholly controlled (through caring apparatuses) by the asylum state (Gill et al., 2022). And second, in an assemblage approach care is not simply a relation between one human/organisation/object and another. Care is a networked practice that emerges and assembles in varying spaces and times (Power, 2019). For the asylum-seeking individual, care is an everyday practice that is simultaneously given, received, circulated, maintained, and mediated (in various forms, intensities and mediums). Mobilising posthuman feminist work on care (Power, 2019), we must therefore see digitally connected asylum seekers as caring agents in themselves (who simultaneously produce, receive, maintain and circulate care among various relations within and outside of digital space/times). It is precisely from this approach where we can begin speaking back to the everyday experience of living with hostility and the potentiality of subjects engaging in care(ing) assemblages to resist and destabilise hostile environments. Put simply, to remain connected to assemblages of care that sustain everyday life can be a form of political agency; productive of relations and forms of living which go beyond and enable alternatives to the intended a/effects of hostile environments, as in the case of the UK's asylum system.

## Research Context: Everyday Digital Assemblages

The epistemological and ontological questions underpinning this paper arise from how we can research assemblages that are constantly in a state of becoming (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Law, 2004; Latour, 2005). Care is often an intimate relation: not necessarily private, but one that involves a specific orientation towards a particular object with a range of intimacies attached to it. Coupled with the intimate digital spaces of the smartphone (Morgan, 2023), attempting to research forms of care through smartphone practices presents us with various challenges of trust, ethics and reciprocity (Pink et al., 2016). This demands a methodological approach that can capture the compounded ephemeral or transient nature of caring relations within smartphone practices; relations and practices that are often so mundane, that individuals can have trouble identifying them as anything other than the normal subconscious rhythms of everyday life. To research care



alongside the smartphone is, therefore, to research a large, complex ecosystem of ongoing, multiple and overlapping forms of digital relations between the human and non-human which become everyday: pushed towards the background of perceived actions or events (Braidotti, 2013).

In context of these underlying questions, an ethnographic approach – informed by participatory research approaches – was mobilised as a method for this project to engage with the grounded, complex, and often messy realities of everyday digital life. This paper draws upon a year-long ethnographic project co-designed and conducted with a major registered charity providing support to asylum seekers and refugees in a major city in the North-East of England between September 2022 and 2023. Within the research period, over one hundred asylum-seeking individuals became involved in this research. Most data drawn upon in this paper comes from ethnographic observations and conversations as a quasi-volunteer/researcher. Ethnographic data was also produced through 26 formalised interviews that were co-designed with the collaborating organisation and 3 participatory mapping workshops that were conducted throughout the dissemination period in collaboration with Vodafone's 'Charities.Connected' SIM distribution project.

To research everyday smartphone lifeworlds is to research highly taken-for-granted forms of everyday life. What people do on their phones, how long they spend on them, why they engage in certain practices are all questions that in practice are incredibly hard to pin down or answer. Smartphone use and its place as a technological object in our everyday lives often exists on the periphery of conscious action or thought (Morgan, 2023). Mobilising an ethnographic approach and spending time with individuals in their everyday lives thus became an opportunity to explore what role the smartphone plays within practices such as giving or receiving care. To be with somebody when they pick up their phone, laugh at their screen, swipe a notification off the screen and lock it, is to both witness and delve deeper into these (often) involuntary or subconscious experiences. Attuning myself towards these moments meant that the everydayness of smartphone use could be captured in detail – allowing the mundane, routine, habitual, non-conscious practices with the smartphone that become part of 'everyday life' to be brought to the forefront of interest. Being with allowed

me (with care and when appropriate) to follow through on these actions when they happened, questioning why certain notifications would be answered, or ignored, for example. In this way, ethnographic methods allowed me, not to intentionally intervene in the everyday 'doing' of digital life, but to ask people questions retrospectively or momentarily about these practices: in ways that recounting what people did with their smartphones through interviews often struggled to capture. It is this richness of 'everyday digital practices' that I attempt to bring to the forefront of analysis here: in its complex, messy, and often contradicting form(s).

I draw upon the narratives and experiences of individuals actively seeking asylum in the UK by centring ethnographic extracts and transcripts. All quotes used throughout this paper are fully anonymised, with pseudonyms given to individuals: alternative names that were chosen by interviewees. This is a deliberate choice in this research to retain the humanness of each individual, resisting the tendency to reduce the asylum experience to faceless numbers.

## What do Digital Caring Assemblages Do? On (Re)mediation as Flourishing

I now turn to exploring how digital (re)mediations of hostility, through assemblages of care(ing), may be considered as forms of flourishing, in a biopolitical sense. It is crucial to qualify here that within the context of the UK's asylum system, it is incredibly difficult to say that any form of living under conditions of intense hostility can be captured as flourishing (at least, in the traditional sense that may be applied to forms of valued life). And yet, I contend this project is still worthwhile for developing nuance within our academic portrayal of everyday experiences of affirmative living. Shifting the imaginaries of what we might traditionally conceptualise count as flourishing for valued forms of life (the 'legitimate' citizen), we must instead be able to account for shades of flourishing that might exist in alternate forms, spaces or temporalities than we anticipate. Flourishing in the context of this research may well be experienced as an ongoing series of digital practices that form temporary or transitory communities, such as in the case of online gaming or in the creation

of WhatsApp groups. Flourishing may also emerge through individual practices of self-care, where disconnection or alternative networks of connection (such as connecting a child to digital worlds) can enable forms of selfhood to develop. As researchers, we must remain open to what flourishing may present itself as within biopolitical governance systems that intend to inflict modalities of violence or harm. And, moreover, working from the context of asylum seeking in the UK or an alternative system of hostile governance, it is thus important to distinguish between a general form of human flourishing – which may indeed be said to exist with digital encounters or caring relations for all forms of life – and the flourishing of human life that gets actively Othered through various modes of governance that seek to harm, erode, and inflict violence.

Indeed, for those living with hostile affects and within hostile environments, hostility will always burn in the background of everyday life; it is inescapable as an intended effect of governing the Other through this logic (Morgan, 2023). And yet, I suggest there is value in staying with what individuals can do, and often actively pursue, within these systems do to go beyond the contours of what everyday life feels like alongside and under hostility. Moving between three everyday spaces that feature prominently in my ethnographic research – the hotel, the drop-in and the football pitch – I aim to draw out a sense of what affirmative forms of living can emerge alongside the explicit and implicit workings of hostility. In what follows, I want us to think carefully with the question: what difference do digital care(ing) assemblages make to the everyday experience of claiming asylum in the UK? I suggest that digitally mediated assemblages of care tell us something about how care has the power to destabilise asymmetric power relations within the asylum system. Whether more visible and persistent (such as setting up WhatsApp chats or sending out broadcast announcements) or quiet and ephemeral (playing an online game or parenting through handing your child a smartphone), digital relations of care have the potential to transform how it feels to inhabit everyday space-times as a subject governed through the logics of hostility.

We must also be aware of holding the tension inherent within the potentiality of (re)mediation. There may be moments of great happiness or joy produced through a relation of care, but experiences of flourishing can quickly be subsumed back within the broader fabric

of the hostile environment itself. Digital practices of care may take the subject away from hostility, distract or distance from it, but the subject is always inevitably retuned to it: returning to the lonely hotel room, or grappling with the weight of lone parenting throughout the application process. These qualifications do not negate the fact that the e/effects of hostile governance are being (re)mediated in these experiences and what we may identify as forms of flourishing. But they do carry with them implications for how we define and grapple with the question of affirmative living through the Foucauldian language of flourishing within assemblages that, at their core, are defined by Otherness, violence and harm.

## Countering Isolating Infrastructure: The Ephemerality of Online Gaming

Omi speaks very little English, but we manage to communicate through individual words and body language. Today, he shows me a game he is playing on his phone [Clash of Clans: a world-building game with options for multiplayer connection]. He shows me around the world he has built. Once finished, he tells me he ‘plays a lot in hotel’. He continues ‘it is good to play with friend, you know?... we play online a lot in the room together’.

Online gaming platforms and apps have emerged as significant digital spaces that enable networks of care to flourish – providing moments of connection, joy and connection – amidst the constraints of hostile environments tied to hotel infrastructure. Hotel accommodation has become a normal part of the urban landscape of asylum accommodation in the UK (Burridge, 2023; Zill et al., 2021) and part of a wider political toolkit to produce varying intensities of unliveability through living circumstances. Alongside other forms of accommodation that were once considered exceptional – barracks, warehouses, barges –

hotels have become a normal experience in applying for asylum. Individuals and families are often highly isolated within hotel rooms, with ‘no access to common spaces’ (Moiz), eating alone from ‘polystyrene plates, cups and wooden cutlery’ (charity worker) or being located ‘so far out from the city centre’ (Gamal). The experience of the hotel in the UK context is a direct product of intensified hostility, where the bareness of human life (biologically, politically and affectively) is brought to the fore through the logics of deterrence:

Gamal: In there [the hotel] it's like another country. Because you know if you want a life... you need to have your space, these hotels are made for travelling, you cannot live there... and you must live with hundreds of people from different backgrounds, most are depressed. You cannot be comfortable. Always bad things happening... the hotel is not good...to live with that many people even if they are social, which some people aren't... it is so hard.

Becoming part of the rhythms and routines of everyday life in the hotel, a wide range of online games were mentioned throughout my research – many of which can be commonly described as online, multi-player games. Mustafa, a young man in his early 20s, shared how playing online games with his mother back home via the Facebook Messenger app helped him maintain a sense of connection with his family:

We play simple games like chess or backgammon... she doesn't like losing so sometimes we fight (laughs), but it gives me something to look forward to... and not having to, you know, make small chit chat on the phone all the time.

Aside from self-care (Wilson, 2016), gaming – especially via a smartphone device – has received little attention in its capacity as a care(ing) relation. I suggest we might find value in thinking about these relations through the lens of care, where the informal networks of game playing hold potential for the (re)mediation of everyday hostile environments experienced within the hotel (loneliness, isolation, depression): where suggestions to play, invites to join a game, physical spaces created to play together (in rooms or corridors) all hold the potential to affect what it feels like to inhabit the space of the hotel within the everyday context. Within a space so highly visible as a marker of Otherness, online gaming offers individuals to form alternative senses of togetherness within communities, only if momentarily, or fleetingly. For many, playing these kinds of smartphone games became a tactic of breaking down the infrastructural and imagined barriers between people within hotel accommodation. As Assan told me:

I play a game called PUBG [an online multiplayer battle-royal style game] a lot in the hotel... it is good to play with my friend also there... it is a lot of fun.

Overcoming the spatio-temporal arrangements of the hotel produced through logics of hostility, young men spoke about joining up in ‘each other's rooms to play together’ (Assan) or ‘agreeing on a time to play [together] in the corridor’ (Lablab). As Omi highlights, online games become technological mediations of making and maintaining friendships in a space that seeks to reduce and minimise social interaction. This is also true for games that are neither played with other people in the hotel, nor another human at all. As Taysir tells me in an interview:

Taysir: One man and me, we play this game in the hotel together... I also like playing another game with my friends back home. There is not much for us to do there, you know? Wasting a lot of time

Hannah: Does it help?

Taysir: It helps... it helps me to be with friends at home. The hotel can be lonely, in my room by myself a lot of the time. It is depressing.

Hannah: ...and when you play the game?

Taysir: When we play games like this, it is fun... not serious of course... but it is nice to be with people... people who know you and you can talk to without worrying.

Despite having the freedom to leave the physical infrastructure of the hotel, many of my participants spoke about ‘not having the energy’ (Mustafa), largely due to the wearing down of experiences of ‘depression’ or ‘exhaustion’ (Gamal). Individuals also face multiple barriers that prevent them from doing so, such as ‘being so far out of [the city]’ (Vadin) or that ‘the bus is too expensive to come [into the city] everyday’ (Moiz). Both the affective capacity of living long term within an isolated hotel room and the remoteness of being located on the outskirts of a city centre have significant influence over what it feels like to inhabit the city as an asylum seeking subject: producing exclusionary forms of (non)belonging that transcend the infrastructure of the building itself, and seep into the wider urban experience through the process of (re)Othering. In Taysir's account, playing games with friends back home allow him to displace – even if only temporarily – feelings of loneliness and isolation. Similar experiences were described by those playing games without another human (e.g. the computer or AI). Mustafa tells me about an online pool game:

I play with the bot... it keeps my mind busy... I know it doesn't matter if I win, but I get competitive (laughs)

For those living in hotel accommodation, smartphone practices such as online gaming become networked forms of care which sustain and enable individuals to keep living, despite conditions that seek to actively exhaust and harm. As Puig De la Bellacasa (2017: 2) suggests, care is not a ‘human-only matter’ and thus the role that our smartphones play in relationalities of care matter: not simply in sustaining practices of care between human subjects but becoming entangled in relationalities of care itself. Whether the human subject is playing a game with another human subject through their smartphone, or playing a game with a machine learning algorithm, forms of care emerge precisely as an orientation towards the possibility of ‘facilitating new ways of being together’ (Conradson, 2011: 454).

Although highly mundane, the act of connecting – both in physical and digital space within the infrastructure of the hotel (in rooms or corridors, in online chats, in the game itself, or through Wi-Fi or data networks) – becomes a relational practice of care that (re)mediates the experience of hostility: destabilising loneliness or isolation (even if only until the game ends or the next game begins) and enabling the opportunity to produce and sustain digital practices that hold open the potentiality for alternative affectual relations. The isolating infrastructure of the hotel is overcome, even if only momentarily, periodically or infrequently (especially given the infrastructural realities of remaining connected to care(ing) assemblages such as Wi-Fi reliability or signal strength) and replaced with digitally mediated forms of community and friendship which destabilise the intended living arrangements produced by hotel buildings within the wider infrastructural form of the asylum system.



## Becoming More Than: Mothering as Digitally Mediated Selfhood

Throughout the drop-in, Solin's daughter (Kali) sits in the corner, completely engrossed in an iPhone. Solin tells me 'She loves it... watching cartoons and playing games all of the time'. I try to interact with the young girl, speaking in broken English phrases about what she is doing – 'playing games', 'watching kids YouTube', 'TikTok'. She sits quietly for the full three hours, fully occupied. Solin tells me that it is important for her to be able to 'get on with things' ... 'as well as being a mother, I can volunteer here without having to look after her constantly'.

Highly intimate and gendered forms of care such as parenting are necessary to maintain care-giving spaces such as the drop-in. The community drop-in is often presented as a space of care-giving practices within otherwise careless infrastructures, networks or relations (Conradson, 2011; Darling, 2011). But care in the space of the drop-in is still complex and negotiated (Darling, 2011) and, as we can see in the example above, we must now pay careful attention to how care in the drop-in is digitally mediated by smartphone devices, whilst also being situated within wider pre-existing power relations inherent within gendered care(ing) relations.

In the example of Solin, we see how the ongoing work of digitally mediated parenting is necessary for first, Solin to be present within the drop-in in the first instance as a recipient of care from the charity, and second, as a care giver through her role as a volunteer in the space of the drop-in: such as making cups of tea, or helping to hand out vegetables on the weekly food bank table (Darling, 2011). And, of course, we cannot forget Solin's care(ing) responsibilities as a single mother. Such complex and highly gendered assemblages of care here, and the women that regularly perform them in the space of the asylum drop-in, cannot be taken for granted and must be contextualised within a broader set of power relations that determine what certain kinds of urban space feels like. For example, despite being

conceptualised care-giving spaces (Conradson, 2003), drop-in spaces can often feel highly exclusionary for minority individuals: especially ‘single mothers and those from the LGBTQ + community’ (charity worker). Openly accessible drop-in spaces across cities are often be perceived as ‘filled with a lot of men’ (Palesa) or ‘intimidating’ (Rose) and can be difficult to occupy due to additional care-relations such as arranging ‘picking up children from school, feeling them, looking after them’ daily (Solin) or ‘changing nappies in a disabled toilet’ (Katya).

The introduction of digitally mediated forms of care(ing) into these everyday care assemblages does not necessarily alleviate the dependencies of single mothers, nor do they completely disrupt the pre-existing power relations that determine them. Digital mediation can, however, enable the opportunity for negotiating these everyday realities. Returning back to Solin and Kali, we are able to see how forms of care are being shaped by digital mediation in the space of the drop-in. We might traditionally see the parent–child relationship as a one-way caring relation, but the introduction of the smartphone complicates our understanding of the care(ing) relations between Solin and Kali: care here is a networked assemblage between mother and child, but also between the smartphone, drop-in space and other individuals occupying the space. The smartphone mediates the parental care between Solin and Kali, enabling Solin to temporarily distance her performance of mothering towards something else (a volunteer). The smartphone thus becomes an extension of Solin's care for Kali and enables the opportunity for feelings of exclusion or non-belonging to be (re)mediated.

Moreover, it is not simply the practices themselves that can be considered forms of care, but the act of sustaining forms of connection to digital infrastructure can also be considered care: finding Wi-Fi spots, connecting to data or finding suitable apps for the child to play on:

All the time I am looking for somebody to hotspot data from when I am here (laughs)... they don't give us the Wi-Fi password and I only have a little amount of data. When she watches videos a lot or plays games, it eats my data! (laughs). (Solin)

Digital mediation does not simply enable novel forms of care(ing) practices to emerge, but it opens up the opportunity for individuals to negotiate their roles as a (traditionally gendered) caregiver. Technological mediation often becomes that which enables individuals to detach or distance themselves (again, even if only momentarily) from the caregiving role of mother in the spaces and times of the drop-in; enabling the opportunities to engage in self-care practices that can significantly alter how women take up space and (re)orient themselves to alternative affectual relations of belonging and community:

I'm at the women's group; we are learning a dance for an upcoming theatre performance. I spend some time with Lulu, Maria's daughter who is sat at the edge of the room on her mother's phone. She is watching a cartoon on the YouTube app whilst her mother is engrossed in dance and laughing with her friends here. I ask Maria about Lulu and the phone, she tells me 'Without the phone I cannot be here in this space... she is too young to go to school so I would be in the house or being a mother... here with the phone I can dance... I get to be free'.

In both examples of Solin and Maria, it is not simply enough to suggest that the smartphone is changing the forms that care takes within the space of the drop-in. Instead, these forms of care are having a considerable influence over what it feels like to be within, inhabit and belong to the urban space in question. In both examples, we can identify a

(re)mediation of gendered exclusions or difference that persists within and outside of drop-in spaces. The drop-in can only become a space of caregiving for women like these as far as individuals feel able to engage in the relational nature of care provided in this space. Technological mediation can enable individuals who may have previously felt excluded or on the periphery of care to become an active participant in the circulation of assemblage care within the drop-in space. For example, how Maria tells us about feeling 'free' in the drop-in space, despite still having the responsibilities of her child in the space. Of course, Lulu is still in the room with her, but when engrossed in tapping on a game or watching a YouTube video, Maria was able to spend time chatting to her friends, moving her body, rehearsing for a performance. Both Solin and Maria talk about 'being more than a mother': a 'friend', a 'volunteer', an 'individual'. Despite the children still being with their mothers physically in the space of the drop-in, they both gesture towards the alternative political relations of (re)mediating exclusion and isolation.

The difference the smartphone makes here thus lies in opening the opportunity to become otherwise, to attach to and orient oneself towards, alternative affective experiences of what it feels like to inhabit the space-time of the drop-in. For individuals who experience multiple fragmentations of hostility in their everyday lives in the UK – for example, through childcare, education, health or social services – digital assemblages of care can disrupt and transform what it feels like to live within the boundaries of the UK's asylum system: offering the potential for previously excluded or invisible subjects to develop and sustain a sense of belonging or purpose which contributes to forms of living that go beyond bare human existence.

## Shifting Cosmopolitan Imaginaries: WhatsApp Chats and Claims to Urban Space

After last week's 5-a-side tournament that was organised by two charities in the city, I ask Santi how the team got on: 'we lost... of course [laughs] but it was a lot of fun... it was good to meet some other people in the hotel... we have made a group chat on WhatsApp so we will hopefully arrange to play again sometime... we have been messaging on there and planning a time to meet. It is nice to be able to get out and enjoy doing something not in my room'.

Spaces and practices of 'cosmopolitanism' are often relatively hard to access for Othered individuals which can be said to be a direct effect of producing which is life governed under the asylum system through the logics of hostility. Spaces such as the hotel or drop-in are core spaces of the everyday experience of seeking asylum, but they are not the beginning nor end of the asylum application experience. The asylum experience extends beyond these key nodes that are often part of the urban fabric of a city: destabilising what and who we might think of as cosmopolitan urban citizens (see: Koukouvelis, 2022; Nail, 2015).

Spaces for personal well-being (physical and mental) – such as football pitches or dance studios – are either often hard to access due to factors such as money and/or living location within the city. For example, Amir tells us:

I live in the hotel... the gym we can go to once a week with a voucher from [the charity] is too far... I must pay for a bus to get there. The Pure Gym is around the corner from the hotel, but I cannot pay with cash, and I can't start a membership either.

The forms of isolation that are produced through the spatiality of hotel buildings and housing used for asylum accommodation can have significant impacts on individuals: contributing to a sense of both loneliness and exhaustion (Darling, 2022); where the barriers to maintaining physical and mental health are often too overwhelming to leave the hotel room or the house. Contributing to forms of slow violence in gradually wearing down the body and mind (Morgan, 2024), participants frequently spoke about the forms of depression arising from the spatiality of urban housing:

I know I should exercise, I a smart man... I know about endorphins and things like this in the body... I exercise all my life. But here I cannot leave my house... sometimes it is too hard, you know? Mentally. (Gamal)

However, these barriers which can often shape what it feels like to inhabit the urban are not necessarily fixed. Digital networks of caring relations have now become part of the everyday negotiation of accessing and occupying spaces for physical/mental wellbeing across the city. Amid the hostility of the UK's asylum system, where there is truly little support provided in the way of leisure or physical activity, small informal networks such as a WhatsApp chat have a significant impact on feelings of isolation or loneliness that are produced through the spatio-temporal arrangements of waiting in asylum. WhatsApp group chats emerge as a tactic of creating connections across the city, contributing to a sense of (re)mediating hostile affects felt in the present.

Informal WhatsApp groups such as the 'Team Sports' group chat set up by Santi and Asad are thus the creation of alternative space-times that are not limited to the digital but are instead spread across a network of urban infrastructure that marginalised individuals often have limited access to. A form of everyday care exists here in the creation and maintenance of digital spaces for wellbeing and inclusion. Simply being part of the digital space of the WhatsApp group, receiving notifications or actively engaging in conversations are all banal

digital practices that are embedded within wider assemblages of care(ing) that sustain forms of everyday life beyond hostility:

I like having the group chats on my phone, my husband is always laughing at me with all of my notifications... when my volume is up on my phone its ding, ding, ding [laughs]... but seriously, it makes me feel less lonely, you know? Seeing the messages, laughing in the chat... I have my husband and my child but I like to see what is going on in [the city], where I can go, who I can meet. (Nala)

Moreover, care is not simply tied to the digital space of the chat itself (in encouraging messages, forms of planning or simply sending stickers or GIFs), forms of care are found in the gathering together of Othered bodies to occupy urban space and to negotiate the everyday erosion of what it feels like to inhabit the urban: to move, to express oneself, to experience joy, frustration, anger on the football pitch; to connect with others, to share friendship and experiences. In both occupying, and feeling like they can occupy, spaces across the city to play football, both Santi and Asad express a sense of affirmative belonging. This alternative sense of what it feels like to occupy urban spaces is produced and maintained precisely through the digital networks of the WhatsApp chat and its function for identifying, planning, occupying and (re)circulating forms of information that enable individuals to feel a sense of (re)mediation; to flourish and engage in playfulness or leisure in otherwise hostile forms of living:

Santi: are we playing today?

Asad: 👍

Ishan: we meet after college 🕶️ ⚽

To think with assemblage here is to also acknowledge what other networks support and maintain the networks of care that emerge through the WhatsApp chat. Having the material equipment to engage in sports such as football can be an additional barrier to playing accessing urban spaces (e.g. if playing on private artificial grass pitches across the city). Most individuals seeking-asylum have very few material belongings due to the repetitiveness of being on-the-move (Steigemann and Misselwitz, 2020). Consequently, where other more formal opportunities to engage in sports like football might arise – for example, Ismail spoke to me about a ‘local football team recruiting players from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds’ but deciding not to attend due to ‘not having a pair of boots or shinpads’ – individuals are often deterred due to the pre-emptive perception of exclusion (even if there are opportunities offered to work around these barriers). In such cases, alternative or additional digital networks can become imbricated in assemblages of caring relations; supporting and maintaining the ability of individuals to continue playing (and thus, continuing the ability to (re)mediate what it feels like to take up and exist within certain spaces in the city). In Asad's case, connecting to a Facebook group where he was able to source a pair of boots, an England shirt, and a football donated by a local man transformed his perception of what is possible as an urban, cosmopolitan subject:

At the end of the drop-in, I tell Asad that I've got the football boots for him – I give him the bag and tell him that it was a man on a local Facebook page. He tells me ‘I am shocked, they are new?’ whilst trying them on his feet. He also unpacks the England shirt and shorts/socks that the man included in the package. Asad repeatedly thanks me. Later that evening, he sends me photographs of him playing football wearing them.

Here we see how multiple forms of digital platforms, mediums and subjects converge here into a caring assemblage which sustain individuals like Asad to be able to develop



alternative affectual experiences within urban spaces and the opportunities to engage in political subjectivities like cosmopolitanism are made possible. On the football pitch, Asad, Santi nor Ismail are exclusively defined by their asylum-seeking status: they become more than a homogenous naming technology; a teammate, a player, a fellow human. The assemblages of care through the object of the smartphone here produces and sustains alternative affective experiences which disrupt the workings of what it feels like to live through hostile environments (Morgan, 2023). Indeed, the individual might have to return to their isolated hotel room or house after a training session or game, becoming once again exposed to the harsh design of the asylum system, but reclaiming spaces within the city to express oneself, move their body, or simply connect with other subjects has significant effects on (re)mediating what it feels like to inhabit and occupy urban spaces that are designed and produced through the logics of hostility.

## Conclusion

Taken together, the empirical insights detailed in the sections above highlight to us the ways in which digitally mediated assemblages of care emerge, circulate and (re)mediate the realities of hostility through everyday interactions with the smartphone within the context of claiming asylum in the UK. From hotel rooms to football pitches, I have outlined the potentiality that digital assemblages of care have in enabling and sustaining multiple modes of flourishing within and alongside the material and affectual contours of hostile governance. Coming back to the core questions that guide this papers' contributions, I have argued that the value of centring such digitally mediated care(ing) assemblages lies precisely in the conceptual shift that such assemblages demand when considering how flourishing – or affirmative forms of living – emerge with and alongside hostile environments. The difference that the smartphone makes here in our understanding of what transformational potential care holds (even if only momentarily or ephemerally) is in the increased accessibility and ability to engage in the everyday (re)mediation of hostile affects, with the support of care(ing) digital networks, practices and actors.

Beyond the scope of this article, I suggest two broader implications should be taken forward in future research that grapples with questions of affirmative living and digitally mediated practices of care, prompting us to rethink assumptions about what counts as political agency and affirmative flourishing. First, this paper offers a reading of care(ing) relations and practices that situate them as both forms of political agency and holding the potential for political action for Othered subjects within systems of power and control. If we are to think of care as a practice or relation that is essential to the reproduction of human and nonhuman life alike, we must acknowledge that the ability of subjects to act within care(ing) assemblages – in this case, through their smartphone lifeworlds – is already a relation to the reproduction of life that exists beyond the bare human subject. To respond to Power and William's (2019) call for the need to expand the scope of care-thinking to broader questions of human flourishing, this paper encourages us to think of care as a relation that in itself can take subjects beyond the conditions of everyday life that forms of hostile governance produce: staking a claim to affirmative forms of living within and beyond hostility as a hegemonic affect, and enabling the space-time(s) for alternative (potentially affirmative) relations to emerge and persist. Taking this one step further, I draw our attention specifically to the posthuman assemblages that now make these orientations towards affirmative living more accessible and possible than ever before. As argued elsewhere (Morgan, 2023), we can no longer conceptualise forms of Othered life (not simply limited to those seeking asylum) without serious consideration of digital subjectivities that now characterise everyday life. This raises serious implications for research which directs attention towards how we engage with political categorisations of less-than-human life within the context of novel digitally connected subjects. An updated understanding of digital subjectivity is thus necessary for transforming both our understanding of techniques of Othering (which now are embedded within digital means) and the alternative political relations that can emerge and circulate between the human and the smartphone.

The second implication this paper raises is the forms in which affirmative life, or to use the Foucauldian language of flourishing, can and persist. Here, I mobilise the concept of (re)mediation as an attempt to get at the tension which is inherent in attempts to define and

articulate flourishing within broader fabrics of hostile governance that perpetually burn in the background of everyday existence. The point of proposing we approach this tension through the practice of (re)mediation specifically is twofold. First, as a way of dealing with forms of flourishing that may never overcome or dismantle the broader governance structures that reproduce what the everyday looks and feels like for the Othered subject. And second, to be able to integrate a discussion of posthuman assemblages of care which, in themselves, are often ephemeral, momentary or impermanent. The implication here then, is that we must rethink what forms of flourishing look or feel like within the novel context of digitally connected subjects beyond traditional framings that imagine flourishing as a process likened to ideas of modernity and progress: flourishing as a unidirectional force of improvement. Yet, for subjects governed through hostile environments, flourishing may never be captured through this imagery or narrative. However, this does not mean that flourishing – as a tactic of claiming political subjectivity or agency – is not possible. Instead, we must rethink what we count as flourishing in the context of novel and changing subject forms. Going beyond Western discourse of linear progress that is rooted in futurity, how might we rethink flourishing in alternative spatio-temporal forms: how might flourishing be temporary, circular, fleeting, complex or messy? How might this change how we conceptualise political agency and its (re)mediation of bare, unvalued or unliveable life? How does the omnipresence of digital technologies now change, mediate and radically alter our understanding of affirmative practices.

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## Part Seven

### Towards Conclusions

Taken together, the five journal articles that are included in this body of work articulate an account of the affective contours of digitally connected asylum life within the UK's Hostile Environment. In this concluding section I will make four departing comments. First, I summarise the areas of geographic (and increasingly interdisciplinary) literature that this thesis contributes towards. Second, I draw out two major conclusions that should be taken from this body of work that have not been explicitly explored in the main body: first, on affectual (re)mediation and, second, on dis/connection. Third, I put forth three policy-oriented suggestions that arise from this research that can inform future decision-making processes of the rapid digitalisation of the UK's asylum system. Finally, I conclude with a commentary on how future researchers might build upon the foundations outlined in this PhD — taking forward critical posthumanism, affectual ambiguity, and the conceptual and methodological challenges of researching everyday (digital) life.

### Mapping out Contributions to Human Geography

The work contained within this thesis makes major contributions to distinct, yet often overlapping areas of Human Geography, including political geography (with a focus on the state, subject, and everyday forms of power), social and cultural geography (with a focus on the 'everyday' as a research framing and affect) and digital geography (with a focus on the digital assemblages that emerge through smartphone devices). What a reader will find is that these ties are incredibly entangled with one another, and that in reality, most geographers exist across and contribute towards multiple sub-disciplines simultaneously. Across these three sub-disciplines, there are four core areas of critical research that this work speaks towards.

The first contribution is towards emerging research on ‘everyday digital life’. Stemming largely from feminist geographers’ engagement with everyday digital technologies — from the integration of smart technologies into bodily habits to the merging of algorithmic thinking into human existence — the work in this thesis contributes to an understanding of how the smartphone is now affectively, materially, imaginatively, and spatio-temporally integrated within the everyday experience of claiming asylum. In this context, I draw attention towards how *smartphone practices* have become a way to access, or get close to, researching the (digital) everyday. Epistemologically, I have outlined how novel forms of smartphone practices, and more broadly ways of being in the world, produce friction(s) and tension(s) that pose challenges for those attempting to research the ‘everyday’. Moreover, another contribution in this thread is the mobilisation of smartphone practices as a lens through which we get to the core of subjectivity (or at least, the imaginaries that get attached to, and circulate through, certain representations of subjectivity). In the provocation that (most) asylum seekers use their smartphones in the same ways that you or I use them, *and simultaneously*, in ways that are tied to the process of being within the asylum system (in the emergence of newly digitalised state encounters), I put forth an account of subjectivity that contests the ongoing divergence between ‘asylum subject’ and ‘digital subject’. Through the lens of the ‘digitally-connected asylum seeker’, I explore the tensions between universal and specific, banal and extraordinary, or everyday and event through the smartphone and how ways of seeing the digitally-connected asylum subject as part of a longer history of (re)producing the Other.

Building upon this, the second contribution of this thesis is the examination of the merging of ‘everyday’ digital life and state digitalisation. Bringing together the framing of the everyday alongside governance practices, the thesis tracks how the smartphone has become a key object of mediation between state and subject. Turning our attention towards a digitally mediated Hostile Environment, I have outlined how affective forms of state power (in this case, hostility) simultaneously get mediated — intensified or magnified into experiences of exhaustion or slow violence — and (re)mediated — negotiated or destabilised through relations of hope or care — through the smartphone. What I do here is provide a

grounded account of the assemblages of power that get articulated and contested within digital forms of asylum governance: where the ability to produce, uphold, circulate, or contest what it feels like to live within the UK's Hostile Environment tell us about where power operates and is (potentially) resisted. In developing an account of alternative political relations — namely, the ability to live a digitally-mediated, affirmative form of life (even if only partial, ephemeral, fragmented, or fleeting) — I put forward a conceptual contribution towards critical posthumanism: one that grounds the digitally-connected asylum seeker within longer histories of violent Othering. The questions of 'which human?' and 'which assemblage?' are consistently revisited throughout my analysis and discussion. This is important precisely because, circling back to Rose's (2017) provocation about the continued value of theorising the human, this thesis aims to situate the digitally-connected asylum seeking subject within a specific form of political subjectivity (the asylum seeker as a category of sub - less than - nonhuman) and within a specific governance assemblage (the UK's Hostile Environment). The result is a nuanced, at times ambiguous, account of what it feels like to live digitally within a system of hostile governance: where we stay with the human long enough to make space for the ongoing intensities of colonial violence that perpetuate asylum governance logics, but simultaneously foregrounding novel smartphone assemblages in ways that enable critical ways of thinking about the everyday constellations of power and resistance.

Through the centring of alternative political relations, the third area of literature that this research maps on to is intensely political debates about how we, as a discipline, continue to research, write about and represent Othered forms of life. This thesis is driven by a commitment to thinking with and beyond the confines of binary legacies within geographic (and wider social thinking) forms of knowledge production. Learning from, and contributing towards, long histories of Black feminist thinking and postcolonial scholarship, the ways in which asylum-seeking subjects are represented throughout this thesis is aligned with a broader political commitment to grappling with the long-standing whiteness and masculinist legacies of knowledge production (Rose, 2017; Braidotti, 2021; 2019). This is found most clearly in the framings of what is made possible through forms of everyday

digital life — not simply practices that are tied to the process of claiming asylum (thus restraining life to the confines of political categorisation), but in practices that exist outside of, contest, and are often positioned ambiguously in relation to the process of claiming asylum. The aim here is to acknowledge that, indeed, forms of life that are made possible through asylum governance structures are always, in some form, constrained, foreclosed and maimed; the very logics of this governance system is to deter, prevent, and wear down the potentialities that are enabled through living an affirmative life. But, in acknowledging this, I suggest we must simultaneously (if we are committed to undoing, or at least as a starting point actively engaging with, the legacies of knowledge production) continue to research and represent that forms of life that escape or challenge the foreclosure of political possibilities. Turning towards alternative affirmative ways of continuing to live amongst hostility — whether that is through relations of hope or care as examined in this thesis, or even broader affectual orientations such as joy, anticipation, fun, boredom, indifference — we continue to actively resist the easy binary implications of researching and representing Othered life.

Fourth and finally, in the commitment to remaining open to alternative political orientations, this thesis contributes to disciplinary debates within Human Geography between negative and affirmative relations. In the following section, I give an in-depth account of this contribution as a way of tying together the papers included within this thesis.

## From Hostility to Care(ing): Between Negativity and Affirmation

In the current orientation towards negativity — particularly the rise of negative relations, potentialities and (in)capacities — an “affirmationist ethos” (Dekeyser and Jellis, 2020: 318) has been cautioned as a romanticisation of researcher practice and broader human nature. As Dekeyser and Jellis (2020: 322) — building upon the work of Philo (2017a; 2017b) — warn us, “to relate more generously to the world, does not, by default, alter the horrors of that world [...] negativity urges the coming-to-terms-with, rather than



the working-away of, a past or present that wounds, disturbs, mortifies, destroys”. This is indeed true, and any research that engages with asylum systems — or more broadly forms of irregular migration governance or other categories of Othered life — will likely understand the weight that this claim carries in the decisions made about research and representation. To engage solely in an affirmationist style would be to romanticise and make invisible the violence that is maintained and circulated at the level of everyday life within European asylum systems. And yet in concluding this body of work, I equally contend that deciding to *not* centre forms of affirmative life within an account of asylum-seeking life simply reproduces the notion that that form of politically produced life is inherently, and wholly, defined by negative relations, orientations, and possibilities.

In the progression of papers included within this thesis, I track across a range of affectual relations: from hostility, to exhaustion, to hope and finally, to care(ing). As pointed out in the introduction, the range of affective potentialities and capacities included throughout these papers is not accidental, but intentionally aligned to the broader political project of thinking critically about how we research and represent Othered forms of life in academic work. Mobilising the work of Black feminist theorists — most predominantly through the thinking of Katherine McKittrick (2011; 2013) — the range of affects included throughout this thesis reflect a choice to open up, rather than close down, the range of everyday capacities, relations, and potentialities that are made possible through novel forms of everyday digital life. It is also important to note here that such a range of affectual relations are not necessarily new, or have only recently been made possible through technologies like the smartphone. There is a range of hugely important work that traces alternative forms of agency, capacity-building, and forms of resistance that are frequently overlooked in accounts of power and everyday life under systems of extraordinary control (Parla, 2019; Cooper, 2014; Muñoz, 2009).

Centring seemingly opposite affectual relations such as exhaustion and hope is not simply a decision made about subject representation, but is equally a method of extending feminist geographers' cautions about reproducing binary modes of thinking within the discipline. Research that engages with the ‘everyday’ — again, largely stemming from

feminist contributions — consistently emphasises complexity, ambiguity and nuance: with a clear steer away from traditional binary ways of thinking about people, places and relations. Moving beyond a binary framing of affirmative and negative affects, I instead offer a more complex representation of everyday digital life within the UK's asylum system: opening up the question of what it means to 'live digitally' within the Hostile Environment, as opposed to closing it down through solely centring orientations towards negativity or affirmativeness.

In the context of asylum seeking, the overwhelming tendency to frame the experience of everyday life through negativity — whether in bodily or emotional (in)capacities, material or infrastructural dis/connections, or in collective power(lessness) — is a direct outcome of the governance logics and structures that condition the system itself (Tazzioli, 2020; Fassin, 2012). This work is clearly foundational for developing an understanding and appreciation of the harm, violence, and continual maiming that have become normalised through everyday forms of governance. In the UK context, as I and others have shown, logics of hostility continue to shape and curtail the possibility of simply existing under the asylum governance system. Negative affects are thus inseparable from any account of everyday asylum life; even in the novel affordances or potentialities enabled by smartphone life — in some cases, even intensified by smartphone practices.

I contend, however, that there is still deep value in decentring negativity as the only range of affectual relations that those governed as asylum seekers are capable of being part of, orienting towards, or producing through everyday practices. I don't suggest that we completely erase negativity from our frame of representation, nor decentre those relations so much that we begin to obscure or make invisible the incredibly real and material forms of violence that condition the possibilities of life within the asylum system. I do, however, argue that holding the tension between 'negative' and (potentially) more 'positive' affective relations <sup>45</sup> becomes a vital decision that reflects two important contributions of this thesis.

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<sup>45</sup> The nuances of this division must be recognised here. The division between negative and positive affects is incredibly slippery — this is evidenced throughout the papers included in this paper. For example, hopeful attachments can very quickly become enrolled back within exhaustion or despair.

First, reflecting on the ambiguity between affective relations enables us to develop an account of everyday digital life that is able to account for nuance, complexity, and messiness. Taking forward key lessons learned from feminist geographies on ‘everyday life’, being able to account for ambiguity and tension is a core challenge of this kind of work. As reflected upon in my introduction, the vast range of emotions, practices, affectual relations, decisions, forms of embodiment involved in everyday digital life for the individuals involved in this research project is impossible to capture or represent in a uniform or linear way. Despite this, there is a very clear tension that emerges throughout this thesis: that not all parts of everyday life are conditioned, nor foreclosed, by the reality of being governed through the asylum system. There are clearly moments, relations, and practices that exist at the everyday level that escape, negotiate, and reject hostility as an omnipresent affectual experience. Despite being governed through hostility, there are simultaneously moments of pure joy, excitement, hope, care, community and belonging that are able to flourish and sustain alongside the ever-encroaching background of hostility: sometimes intentionally sustained, other times fleetingly encountered. This is particularly important when we take the research of ‘everyday life’ into a digital realm: where affectual relations are simultaneously intensified, shortened, detachable, and now ingrained within everyday ways of thinking, speaking, and acting within the world. Being able to account for such complexity between negative and positive relations <sup>46</sup> is thus a core part of this project’s aim of providing an insight into everyday life within a digitally-dis/connecting asylum system.

Second, the aim of exploring the complexity of everyday digital life in this way is directly tied to a bigger political project of undoing the representation of asylum life as wholly vulnerable to forms of state power. In working with assemblage thinking, particularly in relation to how forms of hostility are produced, upheld and circulated at the everyday digitally-mediated level, one of the core contributions of this thesis is the proposition that the practice of (re)mediating state-produced affects is, in itself, a (re)claiming of power — a (re)claiming over what it feels like to live within the UK’s asylum

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<sup>46</sup> For the purposes of building a larger argument here, the division between negative and positive affects is mobilised as a larger way of conceptualising certain kinds of relations and orientations.

system. In thinking with the practice of (re)mediation, I put forth the contention that individuals seeking asylum are not simply powerless victims subject to hostile state governance but continue to hold the potential to (re)mediate forms of power through their everyday digital practices. To reiterate, this does not mean that we should romanticise the affordances of digital connection as a wholly emancipatory experience. It does, however, suggest that we need to (re)think how forms of power and resistance are changing alongside the merging of affective and digitalised governance within state systems.

## On Dis/connection: (Re)mediation of Hostility as a (potentially) Transformative Political Relation

The overall takeaway of the papers included here in combination with one another, is that hostility — framed as a direct affective form of UK asylum governance and a broader circulating affective atmosphere — never quite stays as hostility. The question of what hostility is, or gets manifested as — from the development of intentionally-harmful government policies to the everyday impacts of dis/connection — is complex and continuously responding to societal and cultural shifts in the subjects (asylum seekers) and objects (smartphones) of governance. Although the UK has a clear steer over what the asylum application process should feel like through the affective implications of digital and non-digital encounters with the state — uncomfortable, isolating, exhausting, circular <sup>47</sup> — when these processes actually get felt and lived through in the everyday, hostility is already always changed.

In the context of this thesis, affectual forms of governance are changed, not only by human mediation, but by smartphone mediation. There is a double mediation that occurs for digitally-connected asylum seeker: sometimes where the human subject mediates hostility first (such as in the case of broken appliances in homes or desolate hotel rooms, then resulting in digital communication with state actors) and sometimes where the

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<sup>47</sup> All of which could be, and have been in this thesis, grouped under ‘hostile affects’.

smartphone mediates hostility first (for example, in the rolling-out of targeting Facebook adverts from the Home Office, or in pre-emptive data collection practices). What we are presented with, then, is a complex account of posthuman agency, where the blending of the human subject and the smartphone are necessary for understanding the novel governance landscape of the UK asylum system. In the entanglement between the human and the smartphone, and thus the capacity to mediate and (re)mediate affect, the questions that have driven the thesis as a whole include — *what does hostility get changed into? When does hostility get intensified? When does it get shifted, or resisted? When does it get replaced (even if only momentarily) by a different kind of affect entirely?*

What I provide in this work, then, is a range of affective mediations and (re)mediations of hostility — from hostility being intensified in moments of exhaustion, frustration, stagnation, circulation to hostility being negotiated and changed in moments of hopeful attachments or through care(ing) relations. Taken together, what I argue throughout this thesis is that digital (re)mediation(s) of hostile affects becomes an insight into “alternative political relations” (Tazzioli, 2015: 2) that are enabled through novel forms of smartphone life within the asylum system. Through practices of mediation and (re)mediation, I explore how the everyday negotiations of affective governance becomes a lens through which we can appreciate the everyday workings of power: particularly in moments (however small or ephemeral) where state power (manifested as hostile affects) gets shifted, rejected or negotiated. I suggest, in these moments, we are able to locate alternative political relations that emerge, circulate and sustain life throughout the waiting period of claiming asylum — beyond a bareness that is upheld through asylum governance. As noted in the conclusions of the journal articles <sup>48</sup>, such alternative political relations are not necessarily radical, overhauling or completely destabilising: the reality of living within the Hostile Environment is that hostility will always burn in the background of everyday existence. Yet, this does not mean that such alternative relations do not shift — momentarily, fleetingly, slightly, gradually — what becomes possible (in an affectual sense) alongside hostile affects. Through an engagement with hope and care(ing), what I put

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<sup>48</sup> Particularly in *Political Geography* [Part Five] and *Environment and Planning D* [Part Six].

forward is an analysis of how alternative assemblages of political relations enable and sustain modes of flourishing — presented as an affirmative biopolitics — alongside the material and affectual contours of hostile governance. The difference that the smartphone makes here in our understanding of what a (potentially) transformational politics holds (even if only momentarily or ephemerally) is in the increased accessibility and ability to engage in the everyday (re)mediation of hostile affects.

There is however, a very real and material reality that needs to be acknowledged alongside and in parallel to the development of a (potentially) transformative alternative politics: the infrastructural capacity to remain connected to smartphone infrastructures throughout the asylum application. As has been outlined from the very beginning of this thesis, smartphones are a normal part of everyday life for those within the UK's asylum system. They are present and enrolled within a vast range of everyday practices, habits and imaginaries; from those tied directly to claiming asylum to a more expansive and 'everyday' life sense. We must not forget, however, that the smartphone device itself is embedded within and tied to wider digital infrastructures, materialities, and agencies that enable the smartphone to be present within the everyday: from the most basic elements like charging or changing batteries, to increasingly sophisticated methods of connection like 5g or AI integration within the home.

Although we are witnessing a rapid digitalisation of asylum governance — where the baseline assumption has become that asylum seekers are digitally connected — there is no foundational support system to maintain or uphold these kinds of digital connection: again, neither directly tied to applying for asylum, nor in the wider appreciation of wellbeing in everyday life. Taking this into consideration alongside the other material conditions of being governed through the asylum system (e.g. living on £49.18 per week, or living in hotel accommodation on £8.86 <sup>49</sup>) there are constant forms of dis/connection that individuals have to negotiate in their everyday lives, simply to remain connected to the smartphone device and the affordances it promises.

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<sup>49</sup> Figures sourced at the time of writing this conclusion [23/04/2025].

Throughout my year of doing research, I encountered multiple forms of material and infrastructural dis/connection that limit the capacity of the kinds of affirmative biopolitics I have discussed in this thesis:

sharing phone-charging cables, using electricity at drop-in locations to charge phones, finding public Wi-Fi across the city, informally sharing Wi-Fi passwords, switching SIM cards when free ones were available, navigating phone number changes, being able to afford data plans, broken or smashed smartphones, selling smartphones to be able to afford other necessities.

What this leaves us with then, is a reminder that even in the most affirmative sense, the forms of resistance and political relations that emerge through novel forms of smartphone subjectivity are still always negotiated within the context of infrastructural capacity — which, in the case of applying for asylum, is largely controlled by state decisions. Thus, the extent to which a transformative political relation can emerge is constrained (in complex forms) by a state system that continues to condition what is possible (through money, housing, location, support facilities...). I leave this section with the reflection that there are alternative networks of power and affirmative potentialities found in digital (re)mediation, but ones that are dependent upon the material and infrastructural capacities to connect (and remain connected) in the first place.

With this in mind, I conclude this section with the reflection that (re)mediation remains an incredibly valuable conceptual orientation for us to critically engage with the everyday negotiations of state power. The very presumptions of *(re)mediation* as a linguistic term that I have chosen to use acknowledges that the thing being mediated (hostility) always remains present: in what ever forms, intensities or affectual capacities. As outlined from the very beginning of this work, hostility will always burn in the background of everyday existence for asylum-seeking individuals. However, what is important to point out

is that the ‘re’ (in remediation) orients us towards an exploration of how this specific manifestation of state power gets negotiated, shifted, changed, or destabilised through everyday life; enabling us to account for the novel ways in which forms of smartphone life are enabling alternative matrixes of power at the everyday level.

## Practical and Policy-Oriented Applications of the Thesis

Turning towards the practical and policy-oriented applications of the research findings, I include this section to map out suggestions that can be taken forward into policy decision-making processes involved in asylum support in the UK. This section is included here as an ongoing commitment to the impacts of academic work on the everyday lives of those seeking asylum and organisations involved in making positive change. The following suggestions are both applicable to organisations involved in the day-to-day governance of asylum seekers (particularly those who are enrolling digital technologies into these daily practices), and wider movements (parliamentary or strategically for government parties) for systemic change within the asylum system. There are three areas of future policy development that this research speaks directly towards, and could be considered as evidence towards in, ongoing discussions and decision-making processes.

- 1. Digital connection is no longer a luxury, but a necessity to live a normal life within an increasingly connected and globalised world*

From the state perspective, if the asylum application process is a way of deciphering legitimate claims from non-legitimate ones, then the end-goal of having a legitimate (productive) subject at the end of it who can positively contribute to life in the UK, there needs to be serious consideration given to the impacts that digital dis/connection can have on mental and physical well-being — both at the time of the asylum application and beyond in the lasting impacts dis/connection can have. What is clear is that the UK state does not



simply absolve responsibility for these individuals once they have moved out of the asylum system. Even when receiving a positive decision, individuals continue to rely on multiple areas of the state to establish a life in the UK (from local council support, universal credit, healthcare and education). There must therefore be a bigger-picture way of thinking about time spent in the asylum system and the impacts it can have on individuals who stay in the UK after it. One factor that has now has a major impact on mental and physical well-being during the asylum application is smartphone connectivity. This research shows that smartphones are no longer a luxury, but a necessity for living a normal life within an increasingly connected world — they provide individuals with ways to connect to others, navigate language barriers, increase autonomy in new places, and sustain their physical and mental well-being. Individuals who are subject to disproportionate forms of dis/connection throughout their asylum application might increase reliance upon the state after receiving a decision on their case, creating future reliance and need for increased support. As time spent within the asylum application process is rising (Cuibus et al., 2025), the lasting impacts of smartphone connectivity on everyday life must be taken seriously. This not only impacts individuals within the asylum system, but equally is of interest for government spending on support and welfare.

*2. In the shift towards state digitalisation (in practices, actors, communication and relations), there needs to be serious consideration given to how those in receipt of state-control (e.g. asylum seekers) can remain connected to digital infrastructures.*

The ongoing digitalisation of the UK state promises easy, efficiency and speed. This is especially apparent in state systems that now require additional labour and time (such as the ‘backlog’ in asylum application post-COVID-19). Digitalisation of state practices in the asylum system — from interviews, translation, communication, or support — can offer real benefits both to the state and to the asylum seeking individual when mobilised effectively without delays, pauses or voids in communication. There are, however, clear areas of

support that need to be established in order for this kind of digitalisation to be beneficial. At the time of writing this thesis, there is currently no centralised support for enabling digital connection for asylum-seeking individuals. There is currently an underlying assumption that asylum seekers are able to pay for their own means of digital connection — either as part of the £49.18 weekly allowance for those living in communities or £8.86 in hotels. But as this research has shown, many individuals struggle to include these payments within the current weekly allowances: often resorting to buying less food or personal hygiene products to continue staying connected to data or Wi-Fi. This is intensified when the UK state now relies upon the smartphone as a central technology through which asylum seekers can be contacted by different actors (particularly housing or legal support). The smartphone is no longer solely a personal device, it is one that is also required to participate in an increasingly digitalised asylum application process. In order to truly access the benefits of digitalisation, there needs to be a range of prerequisite forms of support, provisions of connection that enable this kind of digital connectivity. At the state level, this might take the form of centralised SIM card distribution systems (at the point of interview or through regional distribution systems), an increase in weekly allowances that accounts for the need to pay for digital connection, providing free and fast Wi-Fi access in hotel and housing, or taking account of individuals who might be disproportionately affected by a lack of digital connection (for example, single mothers with children in school or individuals with additional health needs). At the local or regional level, this might mean organisations partnering with SIM card distributors, national organisations working within digital connection, or enabling alternative methods to staying connected (financially or practically).

*3. Consideration needs to be given to scale and accountability within newly digitalised services and forms of support for asylum seeking individuals.*

As this research has shown, in an increasingly digital asylum state, lines of accountability, authority and transparency are becoming increasingly opaque — both within and across organisations, and, for individuals who encounter the asylum state. Forms of disproportionate bureaucracy have already been documented with the expansion of the state into a quasi-public-private entity (Darling, 2022; 2016). This research shows how these forms of bureaucracy are often being intensified by digitalisation within the asylum system: increasing confusion, circularity and a lack of understanding of where responsibilities begin and end. What kinds of tasks, practices or systems are being digitalised needs to be carefully considered — both in terms of workload of the organisation and the impacts this can have on asylum seeking individuals. This research shows that being passed around individual workers on different digital platforms (WhatsApp chats, emails, video calls) within one housing organisation is a common experience. This not only causes confusion for an asylum-seeking individual, but simultaneously increases workload of organisations working on behalf of the state, with a lack of continuity and communication across caseloads. For those on the receiving end of state support, there is a clear lack of understanding about the scale of external organisations acting upon behalf of the state and where lines of accountability lie. These kinds of problems are intensified by the increasing incorporation of digital tools into these systems: what happens if an AI chatbot recommends the wrong advice? What if there are glitches in submitting online forms? Where does accountability and agency lie in an increasingly digital state? In the shift towards a digital state, these kinds of questions need to be at the forefront of project delivery and impact.

## Beyond the Thesis: Future work on Digital Dis/connection

As a departing comment, the findings of this PhD research offers up a range of engaging and cutting-edge avenues for future research — both within the context of asylum seeking and broader research around everyday digital life. As a way of concluding this collection of work, I briefly map out the potential future directions of this work: cutting across multiple (often intersecting) sub-sections of human geography including political, social and cultural, and digital geographies.

The first area of future research lies within taking the research agenda of ambiguous digitally-mediated affects forward — especially in empirical research spaces that are traditionally shaped by particular ways of seeing or knowing. Within the context of asylum seeking, this might mean expanding into a range of other affectual orientations — such as boredom or joy — as a method of building upon the underpinning claims of representation. This kind of work could expand the current momentum within affect studies to explore ambiguous and less obvious affectual orientations, contributing towards broader political agendas of situating certain kinds of affects alongside particular subjects. Alongside this, further attention given to ambiguity and/or ephemerality could continue to substantiate practices of (re)mediation and what this holds for analyses of power.

Alternatively, future research might take the form of expanding the framing of this research agenda into different forms of Othered life: working with specificity and nuance — in line with the questions of ‘which human(s)?’ and ‘which assemblage(s)?’ — to develop a situated account of critical posthumanism. This kind of research could continue to build upon the contention outlined here — and the preceding work of Rosi Braidotti (2021; 2019) and Gillian Rose (2017) — that humanness remains vital for detailing any kind of digitally-entangled life form. This work might think with the question of how far we stay with the human alongside digital assemblages to be able to situate and account for incredibly important histories (and continuations) of violence, power and Othering. For those interested in asylum seeking, there is also the opportunity to engage more deeply with the consequences of intersectionality within this kind of conceptual contribution. There is a

clear opportunity for development from this perspective; thinking with the complexities of subjectivity within the political categorisation of asylum seeker.

The third area of contribution future work might take forward is an examination of digitally-mediated subject-state relations — particularly considering the consequences of digital (non)encounters. Future work might take a state-centric view, exploring the implications that the integration of digital technology is having on state forms, practices and agencies alongside broader forces such as neoliberalisation (Tazzioli, 2022). Alternatively, there may be a development of the framing of the ‘everyday’, considering how digitally-mediated states (perhaps specifying a particular ‘faces’ of the state — like the asylum state) are producing and sustaining certain kinds of encounters. This work might pay attention to the novel implications of smartphone integration (perhaps focusing on certain kinds of practices or affordances), or expand into a broader consideration of everyday digital technologies (including AI or ‘smart’ devices).

The final area that future research may take forward is the methodological challenges of doing research with smartphones and smartphone subjects. In line with the novel friction(s) and tension(s) that I explore in relation to doing ethnographic research about the digital everyday, future research with digitally connected asylum seekers might go beyond an ethnographic approach: mobilising a range of new and exciting methodological approaches to doing research in the ‘everyday’ and the ‘digital’. Contributing towards epistemological debates about knowledge production, such methodological innovation would open up new ways of knowing and representing everyday digital life.

# Appendix

## Methodology

This appendix aims to substantiate the methodological approach that was designed and undertaken within this thesis. As an overview, the data drawn upon in this thesis comes from a year-long participatory ethnographic project [September 2022-2023] that was co-designed with an organisation in the North-East of England. The name and specific city-based location of this charity remains anonymous in the public document to retain anonymity. With the support of the charity, I was embedded within the organisation as a quasi-researcher/volunteer for twelve months. For the whole twelve months, I conducted ethnographic observations and research encounters. For the final eight months (January to late August), I additionally conducted twenty-six interviews and three participatory mapping workshops whilst continuing my volunteer role where possible.

### Setting up the research

I was lucky enough to be able to work closely with [charity name removed] from September 2022 to September 2023. In August 2023, I met the organisation for the first time to discuss the viability of collaborating in the research project. I met with two full time employees and the chair of [the charity] on the basis of prior agreement from the Trustee Board. From our first initial meeting, the organisation became involved in the PhD research as a sole collaborator, and played an active role in shaping its focus and methodological implementation. In these first initial meetings, I worked closely with two full-time staff members and the chair of the trustees to discuss the feasibility of my project. I knew that digital inclusion (particularly with smartphones) had become an important area of debate: especially considering the context of only just coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, where in-person contact had been highly restricted, and had taken this in to

our first initial meeting where we discuss a wide range of issues relating to digital inclusion and access, where the focus on smartphones became prevalent through discussions of changes to asylum application processes in the aftermath of COVID-19. This initial meeting was pivotal in shaping the design of the project from the very outset: from planning to volunteer at drop-ins, to being invited to a wide range of events across [city in North-East of England], to deciding when interviews would begin taking place. Essentially, [the charity] became the central point through which a broader ethnographic project of everyday asylum life was able to flourish through. Beyond conceptual framing, [the charity] were highly influential in the methodological design of the project which was an ongoing conversation and discussion throughout the research period. Input and discussions with members of [the charity] became particularly important when I began transitioning from a volunteer role to a quasi-volunteer/researcher role.

## Ethnography

This project is characterised by its long-term ethnographic style. As previously mentioned, I conducted this ethnography across a period of one-year, most often in the position between a volunteer and a researcher. The ethnographic data collection was completed across three main spaces:

### The Drop-In

[The charity's] regular drop-ins provided one of the central spaces through which I was able to begin developing ethnographic encounters, particularly in the first few months of the project. Attending drop-ins on a weekly basis (usually twice a week) formed a large part of my contact with both the organisation and people seeking asylum in [city in the North-East of England]. The drop-ins — both held in different church-owned spaces in [city in North-East of England]— usually ran 3 hours each. The attendance at these drop ins averaged around 80-90 people on a regular week. These spaces were ones where individuals

and families in [city in North-East of England] were able to come to chat, eat, pick up essential items (clothing, groceries, kitchen essentials), or simply linger in a warm space that was not their immediate 'home' space.

At the beginning of the research process, I attended these drop-ins only as a volunteer and ethnographer: mainly helping out where help was needed. For three months (September 2022 - December 2022), I exclusively gave my time and labour in helping to run these drop-ins. This covered anything from serving tea and coffee, manning the vegetable pick up that the City Council started providing after COVID-19 or simply being there to chat to people throughout the drop-in time. After January 2023, my time in the drop-ins was split between volunteering and a more obvious research role (interviewing and conducting participatory mapping workshops).

## Online spaces

Alongside volunteering in physical drop-ins throughout the year, I was also invited to attend multiple events and meetings that were being held in online spaces. In informal conversations with people volunteering or working at [the charity] it was frequently acknowledged that these online meetings were largely a legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the research period, I attended both the organisation's Annual General Meeting and Trustee Meetings that happened at regular intervals throughout the year: both of which were held on Zoom. In the trustee meetings, I was invited as an 'observer' — allowed to listen to details of the organisation's current progress and sent documents including a Manager's Report, Treasurer's Report and previous minutes from meetings. Attending these meetings gave me insight into the behind-the-scenes workings of the organisation itself and an idea of the various forms of funding they receive from local and national grants. The people attending these meetings included the manager, employed staff, and trustees: two of which had lived experience of claiming asylum or refugee status in the UK. The majority of the time, I did not contribute to the discussions, simply observing. Although, there were times where my opinion, or experience was called upon — for example, where something



had happened in the previous weeks where I had been present. Examples include where SIM cards were being given out by a local business in the drop-in (November, 2022), or bus passes were made available to those attending the drop-ins and I had taken multiple people to add money onto the card for the organisation (January, 2023).

Moreover, at the time of this PhD research — a ‘post pandemic’ period where COVID-19 was still a topic of discussion in everyday life, particularly at the beginning of this research in September 2022, but normal activities were no longer limited by government rules or restrictions — [the charity] had transitioned out of online events back into face-to-face activities with those in the community. However, the organisation and running of these face-to-face activities throughout the 2022-2023 research period still relied heavily on online networks: mainly through smartphone apps such as WhatsApp. Regular events such as the drop-in(s) and women’s group were advertised through a constellation of smartphone notifications: both through WhatsApp broadcasts and messages from those working for [the charity] into different ‘group chats’. I was invited to be part of one of these group chats — named ‘drop-in volunteers’ with 35 regular volunteers — where regular updates about events were sent from different people across the organisation. Being in this chat from October 2022, much of the contact made in this group was specifically about volunteering. Although, there were times where conversations were initiated or dominated by outside events — for example Christmas or the 2023 Earthquake in Syria/Turkey — where people came together online to share messages of support or care.

It is also important to acknowledge that, [the charity’s] presence to those in the community spread much further than one group chat: many people were part of multiple group chats affiliated with [the charity] (from different projects, groups and events that were going on at different times throughout the year) and had personal archives of contact with different contacts within the organisation. Most of these group chats I was not part of, nor had access to, but in day-to-day conversations and interviews with individuals they would draw upon.

## Everyday life across the city

From walking to and from events hosted by [the charity], providing transport via my car, accompanying people going shopping, meeting for coffees, cooking for one another, many of these mundane everyday actions were productive of some of the most in-depth and detailed data about everyday life in [city in North-East of England]. Many of these meetings were arranged ad-hoc and arose naturally from relationships built over the year: none of which were intentionally suggested by me as a form of explicit data collection. For me, these kinds of relationships that were able to flourish over the year reflect the time spent at the beginning of my project forming trusting relationships: giving people the time to trust and open up aspects of their everyday life.

It is also important to note that such forms of everyday life transpired both in digital and non-digital spaces: often becoming a seamless blend of the two. Most of the time, online messaging apps would be used to organise these meetings, and would be used again to deal with the aftermath of these meetings: following up on topics, asking questions, saying thanks. My time spent with people ‘in-person’ cannot be disentangled from our connections ‘online’: the two are co-productive of one another. Moreover, many of the research participants would reach out to me over platforms like WhatsApp to share photographs or accounts of their daily lives in [city in North-East of England]: especially when they had attended a particular event or done something they deemed to be out of the ordinary. For example, showing me they had been to college, playing football, spoke at an Amnesty International Event, got involved in cooking at a drop-in session. All of these small, often taken-for-granted interactions in these online spaces became both personal archives of ‘everyday life’ and an attempt at connecting with the research in different ways.

## Interviews

In January 2023, I began interviewing individuals with the support and guidance of the charity. Overall, twenty-six interviews were conducted with asylum-seeking individuals over the course of six months. Interviewing began in January 2023 and concluded in June 2023. The interviews lasted approximately 30-40 minutes on average (some interviews were longer, others shorter). Most individuals were interviewed alone, but there were cases where interviews were conducted in pairs or threes — especially when translation was required for participation.

## Interview Design

The design of interview questions was a process that took around two months and several discussions with members of the organisation (beginning in November 2022). Reflection on interview questions was part of the research design from the outset — especially because the collaborating organisation were wary of institutional guidelines for ethics approval versus on-the-ground implementation of ethics. Additional time was thus given to the design of the interview questions, especially since even mentioning the word ‘interview’ to some individuals claiming asylum can cause distress and harm. The questions themselves were screened for any particular anticipatory issues such as bringing up past-trauma or harmful experiences.

It is also important to note here, in terms of the design of the interview, that it was not only the organisation who shaped the research design and questions. The first two interviews that were conducted became pilot interviews, and the feedback given from individuals at this stage were actively incorporated into the interview design. One issue highlighted at this stage was the format of the interview. Originally the interview was going to be conducted in two separate parts: one focusing on the smartphone’s direct relevance to applying for asylum, and other focusing on more general everyday smartphone use. This was mainly due to time constraints in the drop-in, and not wanting to impinge on individuals’ free time in these spaces that provide safe and free spaces to socialise with

friends. However, following feedback from my first participant — around the experience of waiting for the second half — this was changed to minimise harm or distress.

## Interview Questions

- i. Do you own or have access to a phone? Is it a smartphone?  
How do you normally access data/internet? [SIM, Wi-Fi, other]
- ii. How do you use your phone as part of the asylum process?  
Contact with Home Office/ Solicitor
- iii. How do you use your phone to get support or advice in the asylum process?  
Housing /General Advice/ ASPEN cards
- iv. Do you think that the smartphone being part of your experience of claiming asylum in the UK is helpful?  
Translation/ Getting in contact with people/ Sending emails/ WhatsApp
- v. Do you find having a smartphone is useful to you in your everyday life? In which ways?
- vi. Do you use your phone to stay in contact with [the charity] or other groups in [city in North-East of England]?

- vii. What kinds of general everyday practices do you do using your smartphone?  
[Follow up if not mentioned: What kinds of applications would you normally use to do these things?]  
Keeping in contact with friends/family  
Education (language learning)  
Using social media  
Health  
Leisure  
Play
- viii. Do you think that not having a smartphone would make your life in the UK harder?  
In which ways?

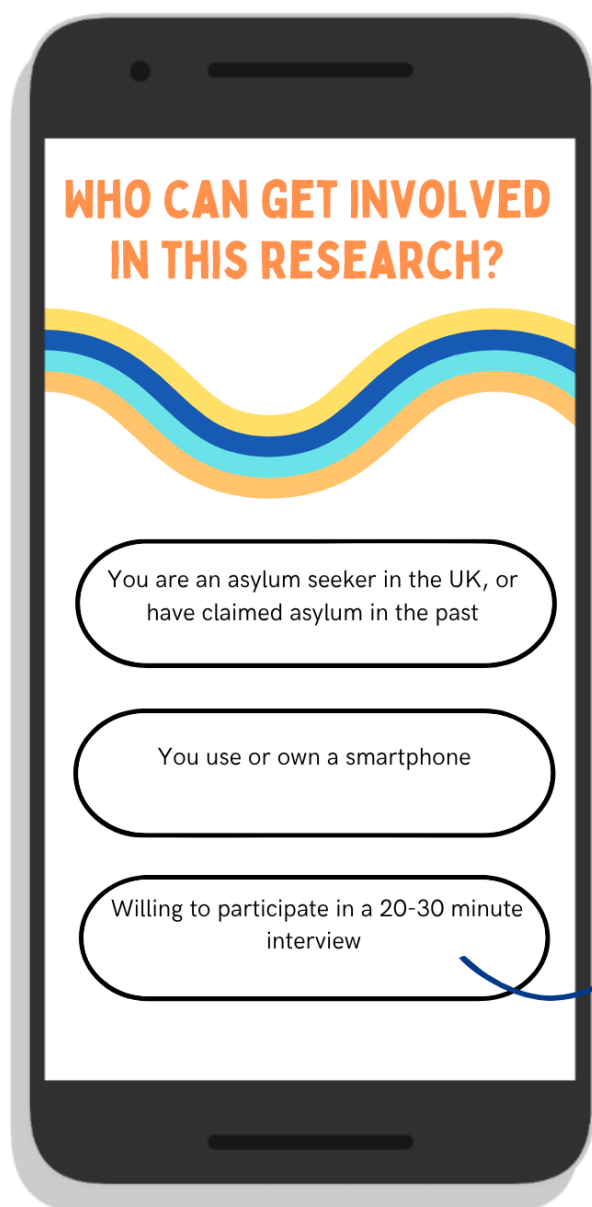
## Interview Recruitment

Recruiting for interviews can be a large challenge for any research project especially so with ‘hard-to-reach’ or ‘vulnerable’ populations such as asylum seekers. Yet, as I had already spent five to six months with [the charity] at this stage, recruiting people for semi-structured interviews started with already-established relationships with people I had already come to know. Many of these people were either active volunteers at [the charity] or came to the drop-ins on a frequent basis; many of whom also served as key actors in recruiting further people into the study through snowballing. In addition to this, key members of [the charity] who attended drop-ins put me into contact with people who they believed would want to participate in the interviews: mainly based on previous involvement with the organisation and English language skills.

Recruiting for interviews involved individuals helping design and translate posters that were circulated among [the charity’s] drop-ins. Many of these individuals were also involved in the process of designing and translating flyers to circulate among the drop-in to

recruit more widely. I spent one session of a drop-in working with a range of Arabic (3) and Kurdish (2) speakers to make sure the translation was understandable, and the wording was correct.

# RESEARCH INTERVIEWS: SMARTPHONES & LIFE IN THE UK



**BUS FARE AND A HOT  
DRINK PROVIDED IF  
OUTSIDE OF NORMAL  
DROP-IN TIMES!**

## WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research aims to explore how, and why, smartphones are important digital tools that help individuals navigate the experience of asylum in the UK

## WHAT WILL BE DONE WITH YOUR DATA?

The data will be used in future policy developments to improve forms of digital access in the UK

## IMPORTANT INFORMATION:

You are not required to discuss anything about your journey to the UK. The questions are only focused on your smartphone use in daily life.

All data remains anonymous and will never be traced to individuals.

You may ask to have your data deleted at any time.

## INTERESTED IN GETTING INVOLVED?

**TALK TO HANNAH AT A  
DROP-IN**

Or Contact:

WhatsApp: +447762126658  
Hannah.morgan@durham.ac.uk

# چاوپیکه و تنی توئیزنه وه: موبایل و ژبانی بهریتانیا



کری پاس و  
خواردنه وهیکی  
گهرم دابین  
دهکریته گهر له  
دهره وهی کاتی  
ناسایی هاتنه  
ژووره وه بیته!  
وهرگیر بو نهو  
که سانهی که  
ئینگلیزی نازان  
به ردهسته

## ئهم توئیزنه وهیه له سهر چیه؟

ئهم توئیزنه وهیه ئامانجی ئه وهیه که بزانیته  
چون و بوچی موبایله زیره که کان ئامرازکی  
دیجیتالی گرننگ که یارمهتی تاکه کان ده دهه  
گهشتکردن به ئهزموننی په نابهری له بهریتانیا

## چی له داتا کانتان دهکریته؟

ئهو داتایانه له پهره پیدانی سیاسهتی داهاتوودا  
به کارده هینرین بو باشترکردنی فورمهکانی  
دهستراگه یشتن به دیجیتالی له بهریتانیا

## زانیاری گرننگ

پنویست ناکات باسی هیچ شتیک بکهیت  
دهربارهی گهشته که ت بو بهریتانیا. پرسیاره کان  
تهنها له سهر به کارهینانی موبایله زیره که کانتن له  
ژبانی روژاندا.

هممو داتا کان به نادیار ده میننه وه و هرگیر  
شوینپی تاکه کان ناکریته.

ده توانیت له هر کاتیکدا داوای سرینه وهی  
داتا کانت بکهیت.

## ئاره زووی به شداری کردنت ههیه؟

له شوینپی هاتنه  
ژووره له گهل هانا قسه  
بکه



Overall, I recruited 26 individuals into the interview process. The distribution of individuals involved can be found included:

<b>Anon name</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Language for interview</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>M/F</b>	<b>Accommodation</b>
Gamal	Syria	English	Asylum seeker	31	M	House
Hafiz	Syria	English	Asylum seeker	30	M	House
Mehar	Iraq	English	Settled asylum seeker	38	M	Hotel
Kaamil	Syria	English	Settled asylum seeker	28	M	House
Moiz	Afghanistan	English	Settled asylum seeker	42	M	House
Aklilu	Ethiopia	English	Settled asylum seeker	28	M	House
Yad	Iran	English	Asylum seeker	26	M	House
Asad	Afghanistan	English	Asylum seeker	26	M	House
Maaz	Sudan	English	Settled asylum seeker	36	M	House
Palesa	South Sudan	English	Asylum seeker	32	F	House
Ishan	South Sudan	English	Asylum seeker	24	M	House

Santi	Guatemala	English	Asylum seeker	25	M	Hotel
Habib	South Sudan	English [with Arabic translation]	Asylum seeker	28	M	Hotel
Tamir	South Sudan	English	Asylum seeker	55	M	House
Nala	Pakistan	English	Asylum seeker	45	F	House
Hamid	Pakistan	English	Asylum seeker	50	M	House
Solin	Iraq	Kurdish	Asylum seeker	52	F	House
Salar	Iraq	English [Acting as Kurdish Translator]	Asylum seeker	38	M	House
Baba	Iran	Kurdish	Asylum seeker	45	M	Hotel
Roda	Iraq	English [Acting as Kurdish Translator]	Asylum seeker	20	F	House
Amira	Iran	English	Asylum seeker	23	F	House
Saif	Iraq	English [Acting as Kurdish Translator]	Asylum seeker	34	M	House
Hajar	Iraq	Kurdish	Asylum seeker	36	M	House
Rasha	Iraq	Kurdish	Asylum seeker	29	F	House
Vadin	Russia	English	Asylum seeker	45	M	Hotel
Okot	DRC	English	Asylum seeker	19	M	Hotel

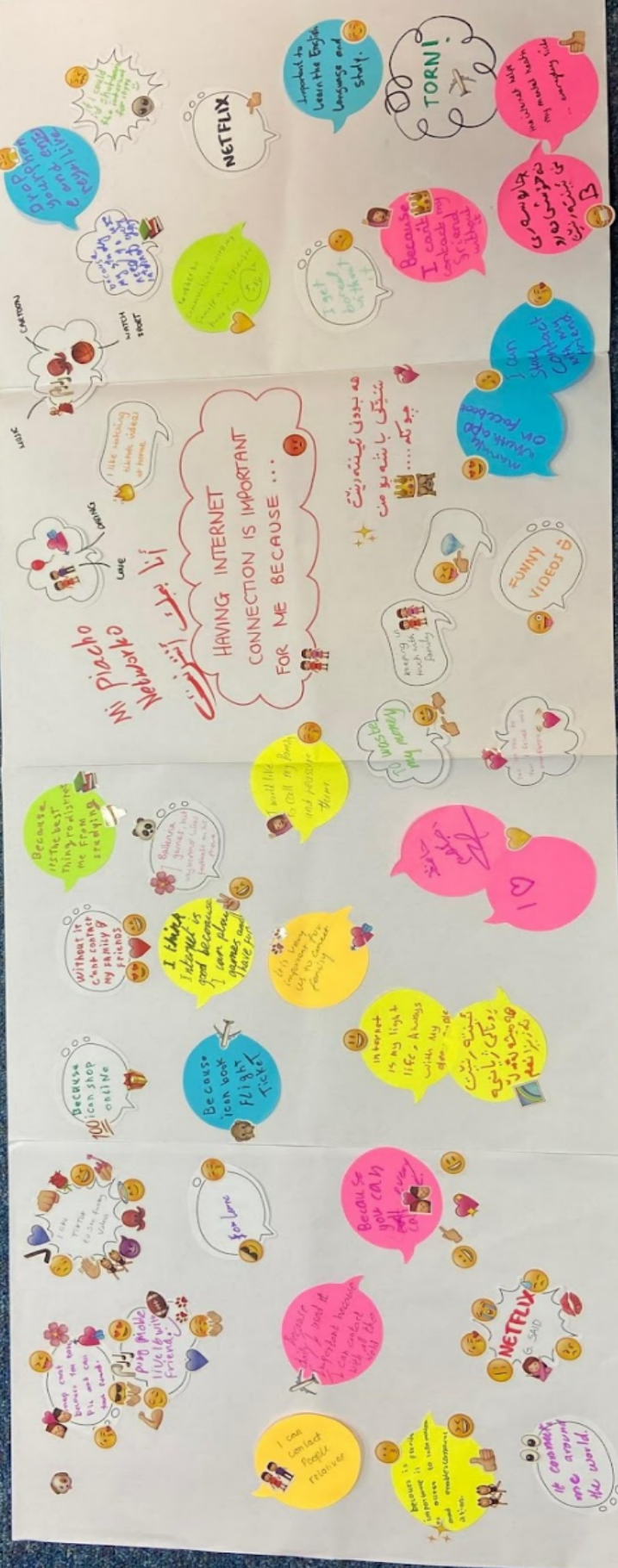
## Participatory Mapping Workshops

Participatory mapping workshops were also used as a research method near the end of the research project. Three workshops were conducted between July-August 2023 and were a direct output of a collaboration with Vodafone's 'Charities.Connected' project. As part of this collaboration, I connected the charity with Vodafone's partnering scheme to source 400 SIM cards for dissemination in the drop-in. These SIM cards were used simultaneously as an incentive for individuals to contribute to mapping workshops (held in the drop-in spaces), to target individuals who needed a SIM card (identified by the charity), and to retrospectively give back to interview contributors. The mapping workshops themselves mobilised a range of creative tools (pens, highlighters, stickers, post it notes) and asked individuals to contribute to two prompts:

Having internet connection is important for me because...

Problems I have staying connected to the internet...

It's important to note that in creative mapping workshops like this, the conversations and decision-making processes that *produce* the map are often more important than the end result. Therefore, I also took ethnographic-style notes throughout the sessions. The results of both mapping sessions can be found below:





ما هي المشاكل التي  
تترقدك من البقاء  
متصلاً في  
الديجيتال



too expensive

المواظبة  
على  
الدراسة

I GET  
SIM FROM  
CHARITY

I want to see you  
 and hear your voice  
 I miss you so much  
 I also love you

Stickers: 😭, 😞, 😔

النشاكل التي واجهتكم  
وانت متصل في  
التقنيات؟

PROBLEMS I HAVE  
FACED STAYING  
CONNECTED  
TO THE  
INTERNET... ?


کامیاب نہیں ہے کیونکہ اس میں  
میتھ ریسٹ ہے کار پمپ



Paying for SIM cards is expensive sometimes

**Remember!** It's important to interpret the problem and decide what the steps are.

Reinhold Wehrhahn  
10/10/2019  
Mystical  
Search



more  
cheaper  
internal need  
than before

توضیح: یہ کتاب فقیرانہ طور پر لکھی گئی ہے۔

Smiles in my  
company we don't have  
well don't... You need  
a place to stay in  
Cebu.

Our children  
have to wear hats  
all day long  
because only  
Hatspott  
can save us!

my phone lost memory

1. I have a question about the first part of the lecture. I don't understand why the first part of the lecture is about the first part of the lecture.

my child needs internet to do their school work

"our neighbours  
let us connect to  
theirs"

ARD CITY

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