Digital geographies of austerity: young men's material, affective and everyday relationships with the digital.

Abstract

The ways that people must now manage and negotiate the uncertainty of austerity involves access to the internet, digital devices and the skills to use them. The Universal Credit welfare system in the UK, for example is now online, however access and skills can be uncertain or sporadic for some. At the same time, digital technology is not simply a 'way out' of precarious situations and many people have ambivalent relationships with 'the digital', including some of the 40 young white working-class men we interviewed living in physically isolated coastal towns in England, after a decade of austerity policies have added to their socio-economic exclusion. Here, we explore how the digital is folded into patterns of uncertainty and insecurity through an examination of the material, affective and everyday relationships that young men have with digital technologies. We add to arguments about the geographies of austerity by exploring the spatial and temporal patterns that emerge as young men attempt to access the internet. We also contribute to the growing field of digital geographies by exploring the contradictory emotional and affective relationship young men have with digital technologies, to highlight how the digital always emerges in relation of power, producing new forms of inequality and identities. We argue that geographers must remain sensitive to these complex and contradictory relationships with digital technologies if they are to be used to disrupt processes of marginalisation, exclusion and uncertainty.

Key words: austerity, digital geographies, young men, masculinity, coastal towns.

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Introduction

The affective and material conditions produced by austerity are devastating for many people in the United Kingdom, with working-class people living in deprived places most adversely affected (Hall, 2018; Horton, 2016; Jupp, 2017; McDowell and Harris, 2018; Stenning, 2018). Unemployment, a shortage of secure paid work and cuts to state services and welfare leave people without a secure financial income, work and home, creating atmospheres of uncertainty where anger, fear, frustration and depression become the norm and many can only hope or wait for a better future (Berlant, 2011; Hall, 2018; Jupp, 2017; McDowell et al., 2020; Pettit, 2019). Young working class people are some of the worse impacted, transitioning to adulthood in an era defined by precarity (Karamessini and Rubery, 2014; McDowell, 2012; van Lanen, 2018). At the same time, people in the UK are reliant on digital technologies to navigate access to the services and networks that are crucial to their everyday life, The Universal Credit system, for example (combining job seekers allowance, welfare support and housing benefit) is now online, where people must record a digital journal of their work searches to qualify for financial support. There are also increasing numbers of apps and Facebook groups where job adverts are circulated and applications for work must be made on line. Conversations around digital poverty are coming into the mainstream, yet too often it is assumed that provision and skills training will be sufficient and, as we argue, there are more complex relations of power at play. To date, however, few studies examine how digital technologies are folded into patterns of everyday uncertainty and insecurity. We take up this challenge, combining understandings of austerity as emotional, intimate and relational with digital geographies to examine the ways uncertainty is negotiated by young white working-class men living in English seaside towns. We argue that digital technologies and austerity co-constitute experiences of uncertainty and inequality.

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Our focus on young white working-class men in seaside towns is deliberate. They often leave school without qualifications or marketable skills and have some of lowest employments rates in the UK (Hughes et al., 2014; Reid and Westergaard, 2017), living in towns where employment typically is seasonal and dependent on the possession of customer-facing feminised attributes such as deference or empathy, and so often excluded from what vacancies there are (Reid and Westergaard, 2017; Wenham, 2020). This was the reality for the 40 young, white, working-class men (aged between 17 and 24) who we interviewed across four English coastal towns - Hastings, South Shields, Southport and Ilfracombe. It became apparent that ways of accessing support – both from the state and from friends and family – was done through digital technologies.

For these men, however, reliance on digital devices was uncertain. Their phones were sometimes stolen, other men sold them as a source of additional income, and some could not afford to own them at all. The notion of a digital divide (Gilbert et al., 2008; Graham, 2011) – or having/not having access and skills – however did not fully explain the complex relationship between young men, digital technology and austerity. When young men spoke about material, emotional and everyday relationships with the digital, it became clear that access and skills might not fully resolve inequalities. These men's emotional and affective relationships with digital technology were complicated and contradictory, prompting responses of anger, frustration, shame and paranoia, as well as pleasure, relief and a sense of belonging. Further it seemed using specific digital technologies conflicted with versions of working-class masculine identities. The combination of material and affective conditions resulted in uneven and sporadic access to internet-enabled technology, where everyday mobilities were defined by reliance on devices owned by friends or through the use of computers and data in public spaces. These material, affective and everyday relationships

with the digital reveal the constant exclusions and inequalities negotiated by young men, but also the ways that these relationships constitute and (re)produce young working-class, masculine identities. It these complex relations of power we examine here.

Doing so, we make two contributions to geographical literature. First, that austerity and the digital co-constitute experiences of precariousness. Scholarship on austerity should more carefully consider how digital technologies have become part of the uncertainties and inequalities that the most vulnerable experience. Secondly, that digital geographers must examine how relations of power and identity always shape how the digital emerges in everyday lives. These complex relations of power, we argue, must be considered if academics and policy makers are to utilise the potential of the digital to challenge social and spatial inequalities. The argument that follows is in six parts. First, we explore the current literature on digital geographies, focusing on inequalities and power relations, before a brief review of work on austerity and youth. We then outline the empirical research strategy that informs the argument, followed by three discussion sections exploring in turn the digital as material objects that may be sold and traded, affects and emotions that technologies mediate, and the everyday routines and rhythms that must be negotiated as a way of securing connections.

Digital geographies and inequality

Over the past 30 years or so, research into the digital has changed its focus, developing from cyberspace studies (Bell, 2009; Kitchin, 1998) through virtual geographies (Crang et al., 1999; Kinsley, 2014), to engagement with digital and new media studies to establish the field of digital geographies (Ash et al., 2016; Kinsley, 2014). Unsurprisingly, geographers have paid attention to the ways the digital is transforming spatial experiences (Hardill and Olphert, 2012; Longhurst, 2017; Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2019), including employment (O'Grady, 2015; Richardson and Bissell, 2019), debt (Ash et al., 2018; Langley et al., 2019) and

emotion (Longhurst, 2016), beginning to illustrate the significance of the intersection of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and nationality in how the digital is used and experienced (Hardill and Olphert, 2012; Longhurst, 2017).

The term or concept 'the digital' includes material technologies and devices, socio-techno cultures and everyday practices that emerge from engagements with technology, as well as the discourses and logics that produce and shape 'the digital' (Ash et al., 2016). This understanding of the digital means that attention is given to more than just devices and spaces, but to the myriad flows, networks and affects involved in shaping how digital devices are designed, manufactured, distributed and used (Amoore, 2016; Cockayne, 2015; Richardson, 2016; Rose, 2017). Digital worlds and platforms then are not simply ways to view the 'real' world, nor are they 'separate' entities (Sandover et al., 2018). They are essential parts of the way in which social relations, power and discourse unfold and so 'it is crucial to focus on the ongoing exchanges between human and non-human objects as key to understanding new forms of power in relation to digital interfaces' (Ash et al., 2018, p. 1150).

The notion of a digital divide initially provided the conceptual tools to expose the relations of power that produce unequal access to digital technologies and the resulting inequalities (Castells, 1996; Crang et al., 2006; Velaga et al., 2012). Graham (2011) argues that there are multiple divides, both material (software and hardware needs) and virtual (skills to use and contributions to the internet) that are shaped by the places people are in – for example, rural or the global south. The digital 'divide' therefore is manifest through connections between social identity, class position, localities and the nation state (Dodge and Kitchin, 2002; Graham et al., 2014). As identities, places and spaces are complex and mutable, 'divides' also shift, emerging in different ways in particular times and places

(Gilbert et al., 2008). Drawing on this work, we might assume that if marginalised people, suffering from austerity cuts, are provided with devices and internet access, they will easily be able to access, for example, the state benefit system or to find work - we argue this is not the case. Halford and Savage (2010) critique digital divide scholarship for too often assuming that digital technologies are either 'neutral' objects or inherently 'good'. The implication of this assumption is that widespread access to technology and skills will 'fix' inequalities. Rather they argue that research should pay attention to the 'processes which link them together or the ways in which each might shape what the other becomes' (Halford and Savage, 2010, p. 940). The digital is not a set of lifeless devices, data and networks, but a set of relations and materials producing unstable affects as people engage with them (Ash et al., 2016; Rose, 2017; Rose et al., 2020).

Whilst there are material inequalities between people, for example the increasing shift to online services may add to financial pressures as people need to purchase data and devices to access the internet (Humphry, 2019), the relationship between inequality and the digital is more complex. In Jaynes' (2019) work with young people (aged 15-18) and youth workers in the UK for example, youth workers blamed young people's use of mobile phones and movement of parts of their social life online as one of the reasons for the uncertain futures of youth centres, even though many young people continue to find youth centres important places to socialise, disguising the impact of government cuts in youth services. The issues in Jaynes (2019) work are less about access and skills, and more about the ways digital technologies become part of the everyday discourses of austerity that draw on particular narratives about young people. The stereotypical views of how young people use digital technologies – as 'addicted' to their phones, for example – are co-opted into discourses that blame young people for their 'failures'. So, while access might be important, the use of

digital technologies may also reaffirm certain (damaging) understandings of already marginalised groups. Digital technologies then are part of arrangements of austerity that produce, shift and remake meanings – for example, youth identities - depending on the contexts in which they are present. We are interested in how practices and meaning connect to identities, embodied feeling and everyday negotiations among young working-class men whose connections to digital technologies are not straight-forward.

Living with austerity

Austerity is an economic and political process based on the rolling back of the welfare state. In the UK, it was implemented by the Coalition and Conservative Governments elected from 2010 to 'manage' the recession after the 07/08 global financial crisis. The lives of those most affected by austerity are currently receiving scholarly attention (Di Feliciantonio, 2016; Hall, 2018; Horton, 2016; Jupp, 2017; McDowell and Harris, 2018; Stenning, 2018). Recent case studies have included the lived experience of care (Hall, 2018; Power and Hall, 2018), young people and family relations (Hall, 2018; McDowell, 2017; McDowell and Harris, 2018; van Lanen, 2018), debt (Dawney et al., 2018; Stanley et al., 2016) and changing urban landscapes and services (Johnsen et al., 2005; Johnson-Schlee, 2019; Nayak, 2019; Shaw, 2019). Many of these studies have highlighted the precarious conditions that austerity creates, where such conditions are becoming a common feature of urban life on a global scale (Thieme, 2017). Whilst austerity is an economic process, it is also personal, intimate and relational (Hall, 2019) and results in emotional, symbolic and material violence in people's lives (Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Hall, 2019; O'Hara, 2014) that can often feel ongoing, overwhelming and inescapable. As Hitchen (2019, p. 21) notes:

> … individuals who are living and feeling austerity are never quite free from it. This is why austerity as lived matters: it lingers in people's lives in a way that can become profusely oppressing.

For Hitchin, these 'atmospheres of uncertainty' seep into everyday places and lives where despair, shame, anger, hopelessness, anxiety, boredom and insecurity can become the norm for many. Nevertheless, the impacts of austerity are unstable, and new patterns of care, togetherness and hope may also emerge as people learn to live with uncertainty (Berlant, 2011; Hall, 2019).

The impacts of austerity are uneven – the affects and responses differ across the axes of gender, class, race, ability, age and sexuality (Karamessini and Rubery, 2014; Power and Hall, 2018). In the UK, women are bearing the brunt of austerity, as typically they are the providers of both informal and formal care and are more reliant on state welfare services (Elson, 2012; Hall, 2018; MacLeavy, 2011; Pearson and Elson, 2015). At the same time, men's unemployment rates have increased faster than women's (Razzu and Singleton, 2018) and young working-class men in insecure employment are particularly badly affected. The impact on young people is exacerbated by cuts in the financial support for public services - almost 20% by 2019 (Unison 2019) leaving many working-class families struggling to support young people (Hardgrove et al., 2015; Jupp, 2017; Kretsos, 2014; McDowell and Harris, 2018). In 2020, the effects of the pandemic have been especially severe for young people, who dominate the types of customer-facing jobs in, for example, hospitality and retail, that have seen the largest decline in employment.

Some young people must deal with transitions into adulthood without secure families, homes and work (Karamessini and Rubery, 2014; McDowell, 2012; van Lanen, 2018), undertaking demanding emotional labour to cope with the precariousness (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). Others may be forced to leave home, becoming homeless or sofa surfing with relatives

and/or friends (Jupp, 2017; McLoughlin, 2013; van Lanen, 2018). In the UK, young people are dealing with the generational impacts of austerity, where poverty and hardship are the norm, and where cultures of drug abuse may become a way of coping (Anonymous ref, n.d.; MacDonald et al., 2020). Young people, across the globe, are learning way to deal with this uncertainty, becoming reliant on informal avenues, or hustling, to make money (Thieme 2017)

With a shift to a service-led economy in the UK, young men with few qualifications, compared to young women from similar backgrounds, struggle to secure and sustain paid work in the low-paid customer-facing part of the service sector. The reliance of these jobs on embodied characteristics of deference and servility do not neatly map onto the 'hard' or protest masculinities associated with many young white working-class men's sense of themselves (Farrugia et al., 2018; McDowell, 2019; Nixon, 2009). At the same time, young white working-class men are constructed by right-wing media and the Conservative Government as 'troublesome', violent and/or idle bodies in need of control by the police and other authorities (MacDonald et al., 2020; McDowell, 2019, 2014; Skeggs, 2004). In this discourse, their behaviour and practices are adduced as the reason for their workless and socio-economic deprivation. Young men may feel there is not hope for the future, or given false hope, which can be devastating when men are expected to and expect to become workers and earners.

Hope and hopelessness (Berlant, 2011) then are intimately tied to gendered identities, weaponised against those who are most insecure, told to 'stay hopeful' about future opportunities that may not exist. 'Hope' may transform into boredom, shame and frustration (Mains, 2011; O'Neill, 2017), where gendered practices are used to distract and sustain selves (Pettit, 2019). Young men in Swindon and Luton, England, for example, imagined

futures of stable working lives where they can 'provide' for future dependents despite turbulent and precarious relations with their families and restricted labour market opportunities (Hardgrove et al., 2015). Other young men, however, may turn to 'protest' behaviours or turn to drugs and alcohol refusing to believe in hope about the future and find the demands put on them by the state – the welfare system – to be a form of control than help (McDowell, 2002; McDowell and Harris, 2018 anonymous).

It is clear that the impacts of, and responses to, austerity are intimate, affective and mundane in ways that shape how identities are formed and everyday life is experienced. Digital technologies are becoming part of these mundane experiences, where material and emotional support is found and practiced through phones, screens and the internet. It is this approach that we take to explore the relationships between young men and digital technology to highlight how the digital is integral to the way austerity is experienced and responded to. We now turn to our own work in four seaside towns.

Interviewing young men

The overall research project examined how working- class young men, with few qualifications or skills coped in times of hardship and uncertainty that have had a serious impact in English seaside towns. We decided to interview young working-class men as they are a group with the lowest levels of participation in post-school education and training. Additionally, their skills are becoming less valuable in seaside towns that are moving towards a service-based economy. Furthermore, there are assumptions that digital technologies are seamlessly integrated into the lives of young people, yet for those living in poverty, this is not always the case due to low finances and lack of education and skills. Between October 2017 and April 2019, we interviewed 40 white British men aged between 17 and 24: ten in each of the four coastal towns -Hastings, south east; South Shields, north east; Southport, north west;

and Ilfracombe, south west. After ten interviews in each place, it was sufficiently clear that the participants' experiences and stories were very similar and so their narratives were reliable representations of their lives.

These towns are all relatively isolated where tourism, fishing and imports and exports have declined significantly, and where employment in the service sector is often seasonal. Young people's unemployment rates have consistently been two or three percentage higher than the national average in these places and austerity measures in the UK have resulted in cuts to youth services and education as well as shifts in the welfare system. The decision to include an investigation of digital access and exclusion arose because, at the time of the field-work, the UK was moving to a single 'Universal Credit' system from separate welfare support for different needs (for example, job seekers allowance, housing benefit and disability allowance). This shift in welfare support is difficult for many people to navigate, as it is dependent on familiarity with screen-based on-line systems and it has been widely criticised for its impact on the most deprived (Dean, 2012; Millar and Bennett, 2017).

Among the 40 men to whom we talked a significant number lived with mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, as well as autism and ADHD. At the time of the interviews, 14 of the 40 young men were unemployed, 4 had formal contracted employment, 8 attended a form of college course or training on a part-time basis and the remaining were in precarious, cash in-hand or temporary work, including gardening, manual labouring and bar work. All participants were paid £20 for their time, to compensate them for their time and energy. We had insufficient time and funding to provide longer term support (Hall, 2017). To recruit participants, we spent time in local pubs, colleges, food banks, youth and drug and alcohol services and on the streets leaving flyers and speaking with local people. We had meetings and phone conversations with local colleges and youth services to explain the study

and to provide reassurance that we would not harm the young men. We also recruited 8 of the 40 young men from Facebook community groups. Social media is becoming increasingly common recruitment tool in the social sciences, enabling us to access young men who were not involved in charity groups and organisations, as well as those who used these digital platforms to find work (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Kerr et al., 2018; Miles, 2017). After obtaining permission from Facebook group administrators, we posted an advertisement on local 'looking for work', 'selling stuff and 'gossip' groups that contained details about the study, a contact number and details of who we were. Parents and friends, for example, would in some cases 'tag' young men in the comments section of the post to alert them to the research. As a way to provide anonymity, we did not comment on any posts made by young men of their families, and only communicated via Facebook's private messaging, phone call or text. We always spoke honestly and openly about who we were and our intentions throughout all the recruitment. All the interviews were recorded, with permission, and analysed using NVivo.

To explore the everyday digital inequalities in these men's lives, we asked questions about their mobile phones – if they had one, what type they had, if they lost it, what they used it for, where they used it and how they accessed the internet. Like Crang et al (2006), we found that sometimes questions about mobile phones, the internet and technologies confused people as they were uncertain as to why were interested in their phones and internet access. However, the importance of technology was frequently mentioned in discussions of finding work and spending social time. In the next three sections, we explore the material, affective end everyday geographies young men have with digital technologies, addressing first the ways in which the materialities of digital technologies are folded into uncertain lives.

Materiality

Digital devices, such as smart phones, laptops, and tablets, were central to internet access for these young men. However for many, these devices were bought and sold during times of relative financial security moments of financial hardship respectively. Even when in their possession, for many men the ability to use and maintain them was an issue.

Most of the men we interviewed explained their intermittent ownership of had previously owned phones and consoles. Like Callum, they were often to sell their device and unable to afford a new one:

> Callum: I've only had this for 2 months, I didn't have a phone for 3 years
> (18, Ilfracombe)

> Kieran: [I last had a phone] just before Christmas, I sold it though. I needed some food and weed, got rid of it like.
> Interviewer: do you [still] have access to the internet?
> Kieran: yeah, yeah… on console on Xbox, I'll probably have to buy another phone in a week…I had to sell it [Xbox], so I'll probably buy it back again in a couple of days.
> (22, Southport)

> Mason: [I have not had a phone] since I've been homeless, I sold it [his smart phone] for food, that's the first thing I did.
> (20, Southport)

Digital devices do not have a stable materiality for these young men, but rather emerge as a way to raise funds for survival, and therefore a become an exchangeable temporary item, rather than a permanent possession or necessity.

As well as selling their phones and consoles, some of the young men lost their phones, either at home on in public places, as Sam explains: 'I've probably had it about three

months. I'm forever losing them or breaking them'. Mason also talked about losing his phone, just one day after he had been offered some casual manual labour:

> Mason: I've actually lost me phone, so he [new employer] can't even ring me for work can he? So I'm gonna try and sort that out. Hopefully I've mis-placed it in me bedroom somewhere.
> ….. so I've got a little rubbish one, a little Sony, but I don't know where I've put that now, so.
> (20, Southport).

This cycle of losing and/or selling and buying a phone, often being forced to buy a less 'advanced' or 'cheap' phone with little or no capacity for internet connection, was not uncommon. As Mitchell said, perhaps ironically or defensively:

> Mitchel: I'm a £10 phone-man as well, £10 brick phone. Shit…
> (23, South Shields).

Ownership cheaper phones, was common amongst the young men, often without internet access, and so their owners were excluded from important online services and communication with friends and family, where such communication can be important in coping with the hardship of austerity (Hall, 2019; ANON).

Even when these young men owned devices for more than a few days, or had access to computers in public spaces such as libraries, the capacities of technologies presented other challenges, they felt they did not have the skills or ability to use rapidly changing technologies, as Mitchell and Kai note:

> Mitchell: I hate phones me, even an iPhone, I wouldn't know how to press back. I like £10 Nokia phones … Like my thing is, I don't know how to apply, I couldn't tell you how to apply for anything [jobs], that's what my main downfall is. Where, if you ask us[1],

[1] 'Us' is used colloquially in the North East of England that refers to 'me' or 'I'.

> do you want a job. I'll be there tomorrow, tell us what time I need to be there, what I need to wear, what I need to bring. But applying, sending all these e-mails, nah. (23, South Shields)

> Kai: Yeah the Jobcentre you, you have to go on computers at least 12 – 15 hours every two days but it's hard because I don't know how to use a computer *and* when its big words (19, Hastings)

It was not uncommon for young men to feel overwhelmed by the technologies that have become necessary for finding work or accessing state welfare support. Mitchell not only feels alienated from the world of professional work, but also a digital world that requires the use of emails and online forms. Mitchell feels more comfortable with a 'simpler' way of working, where paid work was found informally and embodied a type of working-class masculinity, over the nuances of digital technology. Another participant talks about feeling left behind:

> Kenny: I've always had a phone, but not an up-to-date phone … but, yeah, my mum still doesn't know how a phone works, so she expect me to know, But I'm still learning myself, cos I've always had, like a Motorola sort of thing, but now with all this technology coming out, it's like young kids should know what they're doing sort of thing, but some of us really don't (18, Ilfracombe).

Access to more 'advanced' technologies does not reduce inequalities – very much the case for men like Kenny, Mitchel and Kai. Digital devices do not have inherent capacities - their lively materiality emerges in relation to the power dynamics and identities in particular contexts and place (Ash et al., 2018; Rose, 2017). The material conditions produced by austerity inhibits the ability of less affluent young people to develop the skills necessary to use digital devices, which then in turn produces a sense of failure as their lived experiences do not map on to popular expectations. As dominant power relations are not disrupted, the materiality of the digital becomes embedded into the conditions of austerity, exacerbating

rather than relieving inequalities.

Darren's situation provides a further example. He owned a phone but the need to charge his device was a continual issue when he was homeless:

> Interviewer: When you were couch surfing, did you have a phone then?
> Darren: I did, it was almost destroyed, the battery barely lasted, it was always there just for emergencies, on maximum battery saver … I didn't use it … I saw it in a very different way, I didn't need it for media or anything, I needed it to ask for help when I really needed it.
> (21, Southport)

The materiality of the digital here emerges in relation to precarious conditions in which Darren lived. His phone was the only way he could ask for help – for example, in finding a place to stay or once when he collapsed from dehydration. Battery life was his main priority, and so he restricted the use of his phone, using it neither to find work nor to speak socially with friends and family but only for emergencies, and so deepening his marginalisation.

For these young men, the possession and use of digital devices are affected by the precarious conditions set by austerity. Access and ownership does not relieve inequality. Devices themselves are often inferior, ownership fleeting and the skills needed to navigate digital worlds are often a challenge, leaving young men feeling left behind or inadequate – feelings that young working class men in deprived places already exhibit (MacDonald et al., 2020; McDowell, 2019; Wenham, 2020). Materiality is connected with emotions and affects We turn to these next.

Emotions and affects

In our conversations with young men, it became apparent that their relationships with technology were not solely about access and skills, but also involved emotional and affective

dimensions, where embodied feelings emerged, shaping how digital devices and technologies were understood, desired and used. We demonstrate how the ambivalent affects associated with austerity - frustration, anger, boredom, distrust, hope, relief and togetherness – are folded into relationships with digital technologies in complex ways.

As we noted above, for the men without mobile phones, computers and/or regular internet access, looking for work was difficult, and this generated feelings of distress or frustration, as Craig, who had sold his phone, explains:

> That's hard now, cos on my CV I can't put my phone number. I think I've got my mate's phone number, so if anyone rings he'll have to answer, be like 'I'm not with him at the moment, can you leave a message?'… and arrange an interview, it's so hard … I always get dead frustrated like, say if I'm applying for stuff, jobs, or, I think I applied for a new bank card a few weeks ago and it didn't let me do it because I didn't have a phone number and then it was horrible, it's just, what 2019, I suppose everyone's got a phone.
> (20, Southport)

The digital technologies, skills and spaces that are now so important to working life are deeply frustrating for Craig, as he continues:

> Maybe this Friday I'll go and get a cheap phone, but when I've been getting £90 or £150 [from Universal Credit], you can't afford to go out and get a £30 phone, it's not really an option is it. I'd rather put it towards something else, like food.
> (20, Southport)

Craig often spoke about feeling embarrassed and ashamed at his situation. He feels he *should* own a phone, contributing to his feeling of being left behind and 'stuck' with little space to make progress – all too common for young people living in deprived seaside towns (Wenham, 2020). As we argued above, digital technologies have the capacity to deepen a sense of failure and inadequacy, leading young men to feel that there is little hope in challenging their uncertainties. Digital technologies are therefore becoming part of the way (a

lack of) hope is experienced and felt (Jaynes, 2019; Mains, 2011; O'Neill, 2017).

This does not mean, however, that the simple provision of digital technologies would be a solution. Many of the young men felt frustrated and angered by their situations that were co-produced by their digital technologies. Kieran, for example, seemed to hate his phone:

> Kieran: I just hate them, I throw it at the wall, pisses me off like.
> Interviewer: What pisses you off?
> Kieran: Just people [getting in touch].
> (22, Southport)

Being connected, for these men, is not always desirable, creating negative affective relationships with technologies. Mitchell tells us that he is suspicious of technologies, because of the very connections they afford:

> Everything is just too advanced, man… they can tell people where you are, telling you mate, that's how I've fucked up in the past, mate. That's what got me sent to jail for me four years…. tracking put me at the place of the crime, then obviously, when I was at the place of the crime, that's when the person stepped forward… Location, location, location, it's not good like.

Mitchell is also wary about the role digital technologies and data may play in deepening his own precarious situation. He suggested that owning less 'advanced' technologies may be preferable, as the possession of a smart phone enabled state surveillance of individuals, leading to, he believed, monitoring and arrest by the police. In a similar vein Tod (22, Ilfracombe) suggested that the government-approved job search app is not as good as others, but its use is required 'cos that's how they can keep track of you'.

These concerns and anxieties about the sharing of, and control over, digital data (Leszczynski, 2015; Pink et al., 2018), are not uncommon for those experiencing the harshness of austerity, perhaps especially for those whose encounters with law enforcement

have made them suspicious of governments, companies and large corporations (Johnson-Schlee, 2019). Whether digital technologies and data can be trusted remains debatable (Lupton, 2018; Pink et al., 2018), and is beyond our scope here. What is important here is the idea that young people, who live already precarious lives, may not feel as though they can avoid, evade or opt out of the surveillance and tracking that is made possible through digital devices and data. When everyday life, routines and habits are shaped by the demands of the state – a welfare allowance that is determined by hours spent looking for work and attending appointments at a Job Centre - young people may wish to avoid any further 'loss' of privacy. However, relinquishing control and ownership of their personal data was a necessary part of continual access to the benefit system. The men whose lives are represented here may decide to abstain from digital living, but as a consequence they limit their access to work and welfare. It may seem that these relations of power feel inescapable for young men, when their hopes for the future are always being limited if they do not allow for lives to be monitored.

Darren, who had left his parental home due to an abusive relationship with his father, told us that he used his phone to access high-cost short-term credit (pay day loans) as a way to manage his financial insecurity, but with serious consequences:

> Darren: Yeah, that was between periods of work, and trying to pay them off, and never managing to pay them off, I ended up depressed, and I was never able to pay them back
> Interviewer: have you still got debts?
> Darren: I got a debt relief order through the Citizens Advice Bureau…. they're written off.
> (21, Southport)

High-cost short-term credit loan apps and sites are continually redesigned, via user data, to reduce 'frictions' in the application process and increase the chances of successful applications (Ash et al 2018). Unlike the majority of the men to whom we talked, Darren's

'skills' with computers helped him access loans, as he told us he is 'big into my computers, it was like I was naturally built to go and get those loans, and I wanted to, so I did'. Darren was the exception both to our own arguments and those of others in the field who suggest that people with low incomes or few prospects typically find it difficult to acquire the necessary technical skills (Castells, 1996; Crang et al., 2006; Graham et al., 2014; Velaga et al., 2012). His skills, however, were not necessarily beneficial. Indeed, in Darren's case it was his digital skills that made him vulnerable to the risks from high-cost short-term credit, increasing his economic precarity and leading him into depression.

At the time we met Darren, he was feeling somewhat more optimistic than previously about his future, having secured temporary, informal work. He was able to buy a smart phone with data access that helped him cope with boredom and feelings of being stuck:

> Since I've had a smart phone, I've always had data, I'm up 20gb now cos I need it… I think without it I would have been very stuck. I rely on it to talk to my boss, to see what time he is picking me up, to find a job, to talk to anyone, cos in this hostel there's no visitors, and obviously from seeing a person in my room [at his parents home] every single day, multiple people, to no visitors … … I play games, on my phone, cos that's entertaining, and if I don't, my brain races off on one (21, Southport).

Feeling stuck often refers to moments where there is little or no paid work, assistance and care available, alongside a lack of financial relief (Anderson et al., 2020). For Darren, a phone makes him feel less 'stuck' as he communicates with work, talks to friends and plays games – everyday connections that may make the harshness of austerity bearable (Hall, 2018; Power and Hall, 2018; Anonymous ref). In his case, access to digital technology was more positive, but even so his feelings were ambivalent. For Darren, digital technology was part of the despair and hope that is experienced when young people have to live with everyday uncertainty. Digital technology, then, has become folded into the contradictory affects of

austerity and, we would argue, should not be analysed independently. Classed, gendered and racialised identities are circulated through digital technology and platforms (Harvey et al., 2013; Harvey and Ringrose, 2015), where technologies intersect with white working-class young men's relationships with paid work, law enforcement and friendships shaping their feelings towards technologies, which may confirm and disrupt their sense of self. As a way to negotiate their relationships with digital technology and austerity, everyday practices and mobilities emerge, which we explore in the next section.

Everyday mobilities and connections

As we have argued in the previous sections, these young men's relationships with the digital are unstable and uneven, but still necessary essential to the search for work, to access the Job Centre Journal (a record of job searching activity), and connect with friends and family. The need for internet access is folded into the uncertain lives of young working-class men, shaping their everyday geographies and diurnal rhythms creating temporal and spatial inequalities.

Many of the men we spoke to did not have access to WIFI in the places they lived, whether at their permanent or temporary address:

> Joe: cos they had nowhere else to put us[2] and they had to put us somewhere [supported accommodation]… I was there for seven months actually, but I didn't like one bit, I didn't have any WIFI or anything, and for our generation it's essential.
> (19, South Shields)

> Interviewer: Do you have WIFI at your parents' home?
> Levi: No, WIFI's expensive… I kind of have a gig of data to last me a month and it lasts me about 20 minutes… not having WIFI is a bit shit.

[2] See footnote 1.

(18, Southport)

The lack of access caused many problems. However several different ways to establish a connection were tried, such as visiting the different public spaces in and around the towns that they lived in which allowed a connection to Wi-Fi, as Steve and Craig told us:

> Steve: I don't have the internet home, so I buy data bundles and that has to last me. Most of the contact from my friends is on the internet.
> Interviewer: Do you run out of data quite frequently?
> Steve: Yeah there's only a limited amount that you get, now and then I get bored and I just watch stuff on YouTube, or documentaries… it's gone within a month or two… I just have to go without, I just go down the library if it's a case where I need to contact friends… My old place has Wi-Fi, so I hang outside the door, and they're like 'what you doing here?' 'Nothing', and a couple of other places that have Wi-Fi, like a few hotspots along the town.
> (24, Ilfracombe)

> Craig: Like, no, I go to a place called the Life Rooms, in town. I think it's run by the NHS, and you can just go on the computers and log onto your e-mails, print stuff off, go on Facebook, contact people, whatever.
> (20, Southport)

Craig and Steve, like many men, use community spaces, libraries, cafes and even previous housing to access WIFI and the internet. This became a routine practice for many, as connection to friends and family looking for work were important. However, these public sites are not necessarily secure or certain, and reliance on their use was sometimes regarded as a source of anxiety or shame.

The Jobcentre was one of the sites where feelings of anxiety or unworthiness were commonly experienced as the centre reminded men of being 'sanctioned' (the refusal of a benefit payment) and/or shamed by staff who worked there. As Mitchell explained 'the Jobcentre don't do nothing for you these days' (24, South Shields). For young men in

Ilfracombe, there was an additional strain on their time and finances as the Jobcentre was a 40 minute bus journey away rather than in the town itself:

> Gary: I don't like going, it's annoying, I'd rather have a job centre here, there used to be a Jobcentre Plus here. Years ago, you didn't have to go into Barnstaple [the nearest town], now you do, it's like why?
> (21, Ilfracombe)

The Jobcentre, then, despite being an essential part of the infrastructure of state support and providing internet access was overshadowed by either the extra strain on everyday mobilities or the emotional and affective experiences connected with the building. Shame is a common emotional and affective product of austerity, especially for working class people who are blamed for their own 'failures' (Jaynes, 2019; McDowell, 2019; Skeggs, 2004), and here it shapes how young men access vital digital services. As we highlighted in the previous section, these emotional relationships are important in shaping the different ways that young men use and engage with digital technologies, and continue to work permeate multiple spaces.

For some men, there were people and places associated with help and support. Mason was fortunate in being able to use a staff 'computer in the hostel, probably once a week if that' to log the hours he spent looking for work, a requirement of receiving Universal Credit. For other young men, patterns of sharing connection had emerged amongst themselves, family and friends:

> Gary: No, my mate's giving me his BT Wi-Fi passwords, so I just use his BT Wi-Fi passwords on the open spots around town, if I need to and if no bloody shops have got Wi-Fi… my other mate, his parents are on BT, but he has got the BT password, and email address so you can connect to the hotspots around and about… If I'm watching a really long film, I'll connect my PS3 up to the hotspot, so I don't have to waste all my data…

(21, Ilfracombe)

Brandon: I mean, when I moved into the flat, the neighbour underneath me let me connect to her internet, so I was mostly using me play station to watch stuff on there, cos that flat had a busted aerial
(20, South Shields)

Kai: Um no I just use my sister's phone. I just copy and paste
Interviewer: How do you find recording and showing them that you're looking for jobs?
Kai: normally you get given a book, but now on Universal Credit you have to do it online and write like who you've texted, who you've sent your cv too, I think they've got my email, but I don't get anything back. So, I give up for a couple of months and then I try again, but then like I don't wanna hit rock bottom like my sister did and turn to the worst, like the worst.
(19, Hastings)

Hall (2018) argues that new forms and patterns of being together may emerge as people learn to live with the harshness of austerity. Elsewhere we have explored new caring practices that are emerging amongst vulnerable young men (anonymous ref). It is clear that reliance on neighbours, friends and family to access to the internet is crucial for many of these young men, where practices of sharing data/connection are becoming common. People in time of need are able to try to support one another, and providing an internet connection – either as data or device - is now becoming an act of care and support among young people with few resources, understood as vital to their survival. However, these support networks are not necessarily sustainable – family relationships may be precarious, as mentioned by Kai, friendships often dissolve and reform, as everyday rhythms in these towns both include and exclude young men from the connection essential to participation in the high-tech world.

Whilst mobile phones, digital technologies and data enable people to transgress geographic boundaries, for many of the young men in this study ways of securing connection

are rooted in the local places where they live – homes, shops, cafes and public services. Their everyday lives, and patterns and practices of sociality are shaped by places where connections exist and may be shared

Conclusions: the digital geographies of young working-class men

We have argued here that the material, emotional and everyday relationships that young men living precarious lives in seaside towns have with digital technologies are shaped by the uncertain conditions associated with the years of austerity. We have documented the complex ways in which digital technologies are accessed and used by young men, illustrating the everyday negotiations that are required as the digital becomes increasingly important to coping and survival strategies. In doing so, we challenged the notion of a simple divide (Dodge and Kitchin, 2002; Gilbert et al., 2008; Graham et al., 2014), revealing a more ambivalent relationship. The physical isolation and the harsh realities of living in declining seaside towns may, at times, may be both mitigated and exacerbated by digital technologies as they become an ever more significant part of everyday lives. This complexity is perhaps most evident, or most significant in the places that are most affected by the austerity policies enacted by the UK Governments since the financial crisis of 2008. In conclusion, we outline two key arguments about the value of combining geographical research about austerity and the digital.

First, we have begun to demonstrate how important the digital is in the lives of those most adversely affected by austerity policies. As the uncertainty of austerity seeps into all parts of people's lives (Hitchen, 2019), digital technologies and their fundamental impact on the everyday are not excluded (Ash et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2020; Sandover et al., 2018). The digital – devices, data and spaces – is clearly important in negotiating austerity. Not only are the most vulnerable required to use the internet to access welfare support, job vacancies are

more commonly found on the internet and their devices are central in communicating with friends and family or coping with the hopelessness that they feel. This is not to argue that internet access and devices automatically resolve inequalities (Gilbert et al., 2008; Halford and Savage, 2010). Indeed, certain inequalities are deepened, when, for example, the digital becomes a further source of failure and shame for working class young people (Jaynes, 2019). As we explored here, the digital is always emerging – materially and emotionally – in relation to the unequal power relations of austerity, shaping everyday rhythms and geographies. It is our claim then, that to fully understand how austerity shapes the lives of vulnerable people, scholars must examine how new and evolving digital technologies become part of unequal relations of power as well as the new power relations and geographies that unfold. Austerity and the digital cannot be understood as separate, but as co-constituting experiences of inequality, uncertainty and precarity.

This brings us to our second contribution: that the digital must be examined in relation to the specific power relations within which they are situated, and to the bodies that use them, to fully understand how it becomes part of existing, and produces new, power relations. By exploring the material, affective and everyday relationships that young men have with technology, we exposed the ways in which the digital is understood and experienced in relation to uncertain and precarious conditions created by austerity. These connections include the financial value devices may provide, both for everyday use and as items to sell when in need; the feelings of being left behind, stuck or hopeless when unable to use or buy devices; the tracking and tracing, especially by the state that men want to avoid; the sharing of data and devices and the mobilities and use of spaces young men might as part of remaining connected to friends and family. These are all ways that the digital co-produces the harsh inequalities of austerity. The hopefulness and togetherness that can be so vital for

coping with austerity (Hall, 2018; Mains, 2011; O'Neill, 2017) is also practiced and mediated by and through digital technologies. Identities are folded into their use, when young white working-class men feel inadequate as they do not seem to be able to 'keep up' with the evolution of the digital or avoid trying to connect because of past experiences and feelings of shame and suspicion. Embodied working-class masculinities, then, shape how young men relate to technology and their responses to these relationships produces new patterns of everyday living and identity formations. Understanding the digital in relation to power and identity then, might mean foregrounding issues of emotion, affect, materiality and everyday rhythms to examine the complicated ways in which the digital is shaping everyday geographies. The digital has a lively materiality, but this is not independent, it is always in relation to spatially specific power relations (Ash et al., 2018; Rose, 2017). The digital emerges differently in and across the spaces, places and contexts in which it is used, and for the people who use it. It is embodied and subject to specific power relations, whilst also shaping how power is (re)produced. Academics and policy makers must take this complexity into account when considering how digital technology might aid those who are the most marginalised, vulnerable and precarious, especially as we move into further uncertain futures.

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