

## Digital narratives. Investigating the affective dynamic of digital objects using projective techniques

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**ABSTRACT.** – Digital devices, initially considered simply as amazing technical tools, are assuming the role of true ‘digital companions’ that accompany the dynamics of everyday life. The present study aims to analyse how devices influence affective representations of intersubjectivity. The 22 subjects who participated in the research were asked to narratively interpret four projective cards inspired by Murray’s Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), into which representations of technological devices were introduced. Leaning on psychoanalytic and interpersonal theory, the content analysis of the 88 narratives made it possible to investigate how four foundational experiences of subjectivity are influenced by technology: Childhood, Couple, Self-image, and Traumatic event. The exploration of the dynamics related to the digital object took into account affects, the relevance given to the digital object in the narrative, and its function in relation to interpersonal life. The results show that technology is an aid insofar as good communication exists on the real interpersonal level but is in no way sufficient as a substitute for the love object. In the life of a couple, the digital object becomes a source of conflict, on which the female protagonist, in particular, develops an intrusive dependence, or it is used as ammunition to break up the relationship, generating potentially traumatic experiences. However, there is no shortage of narratives in which devices have been used to immortalise positive aspects of the self, maintaining a genuine relational openness that is not dependent on narcissistic dynamics of external recognition.

*Key words:* digital influence, psychoanalysis, Thematic Apperception Test, content analysis, qualitative research.

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## How digital technology shapes subjectivity

### *Digital challenges in childhood and adolescence*

Children today seem to have an innate predisposition to use digital devices. In their homes, they have access to a range of digital media in addition to television, allowing them to stream content, play games, browse the Internet, and engage in other kinds of virtual activities. Growing up among and with media has a number of positive and negative effects on the physical health and psychological well-being of not only children but also adolescents (Strasburger *et al.*, 2010; Vandewater *et al.*, 2007): new and old media can lead to the imitation of aggressive and sexual behaviour as well as eating disorders; on the other hand, some benefits cannot be denied such as promoting acceptance of diversity through pro-social behaviour patterns encountered online. Above all, it is the technological habits and attitudes of parents that have the greatest influence on the child's digital behaviour (Lauricella *et al.*, 2015); in fact, technology is often used in a shared way among family members. Technology in the home is referred to as 'talk-in activity', an interactive space that involves children on several levels: they use interactive tools, discuss topics of interest with adults, and ask the latter for information when needed (Danby *et al.*, 2013). This type of interaction between child and parent, intertwined with technology, leads to interrupted and resumed conversations, thereby fostering the child's relational skills. However, the "opportunities quickly turn into risks when parents perceive technology not as a vehicle for children's texts (which are to be enjoyed – like all other texts – with adult mediation), but as a tool at the service of their parenting, a kind of babysitter to whom they can entrust their child in order to carry out other activities in peace" (Di Bari, 2015, p. 8).

It is clear that attitudes towards the Internet evolve over time, based on the internal and external needs of the user and their ability to take advantage of the opportunity and to step back from an entangled adaptation. When family members are not physically close, the digital tool is undoubtedly useful, a chance to stay in touch with loved ones, to share experiences despite being online; on the other hand, it can become the source of intense family conflict in large families (Mesch, 2006a), or when time at home is not used for family interaction, but rather to be connected, to be involved in online social activities, in games, in discussion groups (Mesch, 2006b). This is true for both adolescents and parents, who sometimes exhibit ambivalence when the stated norms contrast with their actual digital behaviour (Snyder *et al.*, 2015), rendering parental guidance ineffective (Gugliandolo *et al.*, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2012). Although the impact of technology on family life is still controversial, and family governance must inevitably face new digital challenges (Aroldi, 2015), active mediation is strongly recommended: parents who use mediation

strategically, combining trust and supervision with discreet monitoring that adolescents pretend not to notice; a feigned, reassuring naivety that allows them to evade parental control at will, while keeping their privacy intact (Mascheroni, 2014). Rather than appearing as passive recipients of norms and control strategies, adolescents appear as skilful negotiators or escape artists, as the case may be, walking a tightrope between the desire for emancipation and the need for protection, the latter derived from continued contact with significant others.

### *Digital romance: encounters and breakups*

The new media also have a significant impact on romantic relationships. If, on the one hand, it allows a couple to document the stages of their relationship and to share their romantic life with friends and acquaintances, on the other, it can fuel jealousy, encourage controlling tendencies and negative affects, especially in females (Muscanell *et al.*, 2013; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011), leading to increased surveillance of a partner's profile (Muise *et al.*, 2009). However, it is in breakups that, given the necessary distance to process the loss is not maintainable, social platforms risk becoming, at least initially, a source of great emotional stress (Herron *et al.*, 2017; Lukacs & Quan-Haase, 2015). Publicly sharing elements of one's love story helps to intensify involvement in the relationship, increasing the duration of the romantic attachment (Toma & Choi, 2015). A bond perceived as satisfying will be expressed by good online intimacy and the use of digital media to restore communication after an argument; in contrast, flirting online, using manipulation and control tactics, and resorting to online communication strategies to express anger or problems to the partner correlate negatively with relationship satisfaction (Sánchez *et al.*, 2017). The number of couple selfies reflects the level of commitment in the relationship, both on the part of girls and boys. In the latter case, it is also indicative of the level of passion perceived in the relationship. (Sabiniewicz *et al.*, 2017). If, however, individual selfies abound, perception is turned around: selfies can be used to promote one's body and can negatively impact the romantic relationship (Ridgway & Clayton, 2016). A shared use of technology that involves interaction between partners is associated with a positive perception of the couple; however, should technology be used in the other's presence at the expense of interaction, this can lead one to perceive feelings of reduced control and risks compromising one's sense of security with negative repercussions on the relationship (Leggett & Rossouw, 2014). In relation to this, Amichai-Hamburger and Etgar (2016) highlighted how, during moments reserved only for the couple, smartphones can be seen as a kind of intruder: intimate romantic sentiment seems to fall when one partner directs his or her attention to the smartphone and a more private than shared use of the digital device. Among couples, the use of a smartphone is

generally associated with a growth in communication between partners, and communication through digital devices proves to be more affectionate. On the other hand, the satisfaction and affection a couple feels seem to decline when smartphone use begins to resemble a dependency (Lapierre & Custer, 2021). In some cases, then, mobile devices can limit the quality of communication with others and can damage interpersonal relations. If we look at the affective aspect it seems that modern forms of social technology might represent a further tangible resource for couples to feel involved and reassured, enhancing couple satisfaction (Schade *et al.*, 2013), we must not forget that a loving relationship which relies too much on the online world runs the risk of crumbling between chats and social networks unless supported by an experience and communication firmly rooted in reality; this is what allows us to develop the interpersonal skills to resolve conflict and disagreements (Nesi *et al.*, 2017).

### *Protagonists or directors?*

It is very common in everyday activities to see people using their smartphones constantly, whether as their main activity or when multitasking. Young people in particular seize the opportunity; they use smartphones and online platforms as anaclitic support for their schoolwork and extra-curricular activities (Pediconi & Urbani, 2016): we find virtual reality “‘embedded’ in everyday life, clothed with new meanings and transformed into a habitual presence” (Qualizza, 2012, p. 640). In this way, the narratives on *social* platforms like Facebook and Instagram show various content, ranging from the superficial to the intimacy of daily life, to the deepest and most genuine affections. The nature of online narratives as ‘*daily micro-narratives*’ (Simoniello, 2014): tiny pieces of experience ‘tossed’ onto the net reveal an overwhelming need to be recognised, to exist, to *be-with*. We can think of the online digital experience as having two poles: Identity and Otherness (Zanelli, *n.d.*). To speak of identity inevitably means speaking of the subject’s experience, of their image and of how this image can be either valued or rejected by the gaze of the Other: an Other who is a parent in childhood, friend and partner in adolescence; an Other-user in virtual space. A seeking out of a mirror image and recognition in which the Other is therefore present as the third party, between image and subject, able to hinder or support recognition of the individual in his image. This dynamic is not exclusively offline; it inhabits the real world as much as it does the virtual world, allowing us to better understand the roots and functions of new digital habits, such as fashions like selfies, which conceal and perform more complex functions, especially for young digital natives. The metacognitive activity used to construct one’s narrative is not confined to the inner workings of our mind; it is largely influenced by symbolic resources and ‘identity’ materials, especially digital ones, through which subjects constitute themselves in relation to others (Di Fraia, 2012).

Several studies have examined the psychological and contextual factors underlying impression management in virtual reality; Lee and Jang (2019) highlighted how individuals who make the greatest efforts to impress others tend to have a greater public self-consciousness; they attach greater importance to others and are more concerned about negative evaluation. Online feedback can shape users' self-esteem: often, adolescents receive positive feedback that increases their levels of well-being and self-esteem (Valkenburg *et al.*, 2017; Valkenburg *et al.*, 2006); also, the opportunity to refine their image on *social media* platforms contributes to enhanced self-perception (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011), enabling greater selectivity of content and control over others' impressions, mitigating feelings of shyness and inhibition (Stritzke *et al.*, 2004). On the other hand, negative experiences are not uncommon, such as when positive feedback decreases, or becomes negative, triggering distressing and self-deprecating thoughts (Valkenburg *et al.*, 2006) or fostering rumination on how one is perceived by others, social comparisons and feelings of insecurity about one's social position (Lim & Yang, 2015; Vogel *et al.*, 2014). The need for approval can, in some cases, lead to a fear of both positive and negative judgements, and anxiety about not keeping up to date with what is going on online (Przybylski *et al.*, 2013; Wolniewicz *et al.*, 2018).

“So that every time a photo of oneself is posted, it becomes a kind of lottery in which the young user hopes for the maximum number of ‘likes’ possible to gain widespread approval for that self-representation, reinforcing a narcissistic, illusory identification with that image. Vice versa, if the Others-of-the-Net fail to recognise the image, neither do they recognise the subject, who passes as just another unnoticed piece of content between one post and the next. Thus, we can see how even in new technologies it is the mediation of a third party, the Other-of-the-Net, that determines (or not) the recognition of that image through which the young person represents himself and presents himself to the digital community.” (Zanelli, n.d., p. 10)

Photo editing, filters, and meticulous curation of content to post seem aimed at generating a self-image that is as much idealised as it is illusory, disembodied, in an effort to avoid not being recognised. In some cases, while older individuals may sometimes still clumsily navigate online spaces, adolescents move skilfully and confidently among apps and platforms, easily adopting a third-person perspective and deliberately sharing content to appear attractive in the eyes of others (Jang *et al.*, 2015; Yau & Reich, 2019) – behaviour that does not necessarily indicate dissatisfaction with their appearance (Chae, 2017). Social media seem to represent that imaginary audience (Steinberg *et al.*, 2011) to whom adolescents direct their urgent need to be accepted (Birkeland *et al.*, 2014; Brown & Larson,

2009; Rubin *et al.*, 2008). The self-representation entrusted to the internet is only a plausible projection of one's self-image, in a play of projections that leaves in its wake an imaginary virtual being, existing only potentially (Stramaglia, 2015). Today, virtual reality allows users to exist online, not simply as passive receptors of information but as active creators of content. Thus, digital devices configure as true "technological-cognitive prostheses of the self, carrying highly significant identity value" (Di Fraia, 2012, p. 4). The emergence of *cyberspace* among younger generations, with millions of users accessing and using online services throughout their normal daily activities, raises new questions for psychological research.

### *The foundational experiences of subjectivity*

Growing up with social media brings several positive and negative effects on fundamental relationships, transforming the way the younger generation grows up. However, attitudes towards technology shape life's pathway according to the internal and external needs of those who use it and a person's ability to either learn and exploit the opportunities it offers or back off in the face of a stifling adjustment. Given the relevance that digital experiences assume in developmental pathways, it is important to reflect on the foundational experiences of subjectivity impacted by technology, which may also serve as protective factors.

#### Digital object

The use of social media from childhood has positive and negative effects on the physical health and psychological well-being of children and adolescents (Strasburger *et al.*, 2010; Vandewater *et al.*, 2007). The digital object plays a significant role in an individual's psychic life and formation of subjectivity, starting from the relationship with primary figures who shape the individual's connection with reality. If "the ego owes its origin, as well as its most important acquired characteristics, to its relationship with the real external world", the loss of a sound constitution is due to the "weakening or disruption of this relationship with the external world" (Freud, 1938, p. 628) that the digital object could silently endorse. The more the digital object replaces other realities, the more the internal affective drive is without any shared processing mechanism, compromising one's healthy development. Investigating the digital object enables us to configure it either as a means to an end or as an obstacle to our instinctual satisfaction: an instrument used by the ego to process excitement or to withdraw from the influence of the other, complicating the paths towards gratification. Both personal ambitions and relationships with primary figures are thus brought into play.

### Digital object as a mirror

According to Winnicott (1974b), the capacity to be alone implies having internalised an attachment with the other. The experience of the Self is linked to the continuity of being and threats to it. In the early stages of life, the infant does not distinguish the self from the surroundings; its Self *is* the environment. The self is illusorily projected onto the external environment, which allows the infant to believe that external objects are of its own creation. As external reality increasingly clashes with this process, a bit of the illusion dissipates, initiating the child's embedding in the body of their 'subjectivisation', supported by experiences and transitional objects. However, children who do not experience adequate mirroring and a sense of security in significant primary affective relationships will be unable to develop an integrated and cohesive self, capable of both being alone and sharing experiences. They will instead have to confront 'unthinkable' areas of the self, developing a sense of identity based on compliance with others' demands, and eventually leading, by adolescence, to a repeated need to 'be seen'. When the digital world meets this need – an insatiable one – for mirroring, the boy or girl will attempt to reclaim something of themselves from the environment. The device is assigned to be the bearer of this appeal: something that was initially their right to receive but was denied. It is thus useful to study how the digital object is invested with the mirroring function and how the self-image is constructed and reproduced to be shared, whether for narcissistic or relational reasons.

### Digital object and the couple

Breakups in romantic relationships allow us to observe the specific impact of social media platforms, which fail to provide the distance necessary to process the loss. They risk becoming places of despair and a source of emotional stress (Herron *et al.*, 2017; Lukacs & Quan-Haase, 2015). Falling in love, love, and separation – crucial moments in the build-up and breakdown of a sentimental relationship – require a general reorganization of one's mental state (Attili, 2004; Bowlby, 1999). We may find trust and autonomy balanced with intimacy and independence, or, instead, ambivalence and conflict that mask an unresolved bond with parental relationships (Allen *et al.*, 2018). The experience of breakups, however, is more revealing in terms of controlling adhesiveness, which masks the devaluation of the loved other, revealing a grandiose and affectively inaccessible false self. Does the digital experience confirm (or refute) the tendency to choose a partner who reinforces our expectations, as studies based on attachment theory claim? Partner choice and forms of attachment that shape romantic relationships can be influenced by the dynamics and models mediated by digital

objects within the couple relationship. In particular, it could be decisive in identifying which intimate emotions – conflictual or mediated – are supported by digital objects.

### Object-cause and access to traumatic experiences

Unwanted separation and loss may lead to many forms of emotional distress, such as anxiety, anger, depression, and emotional distancing. Freud in his work *Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety* states that “Absence of the loved – longed-for – person (...) opens the way to understanding anxiety” (Freud, 1925, p. 284). Anxiety is how we react to the risk of losing the object, grief is how we react in the face of the true loss of the object, while defence is how we deal with negative emotions. The catastrophic experience described by Bion (1981), recalling the somatic experience of breast-feeding – love, security, anxiety – it is impossible to understand what we are and what we feel, both internal and external reality become unrecognisable. The trauma reawakens, often in a tragic way, the original experience of the first contact with reality: our entire subjective world is upset by it (Bion, 1977/1998). In those moments, we attribute the cause of our substance to trauma, which surpasses language and challenges the mind’s capacity to contain it. At the moment of traumatic impact, it is the experiences intimately tied to corporeality that, precisely because of the intensity with which they manifest, prove to be utterly indescribable. In these moments, the individual is indistinguishable from the inner sensations and emotions that inhabit them. When the subject wishes to give them voice, they will have to be transformed, *i.e.*, retranslated, even though no word (memory) can equal (*i.e.*, fully replace) the experience (Civitaresse, 2020). Further to this, it may be useful to study the role played by digital objects in traumatic breakups or separations that give rise to anxiety. In particular, how digital objects support causal ideation to the extent that they nullify the subject itself.

### *Qualitative research and the advantages of projective tools: recent uses of the Thematic Apperception Test*

Very often, quantitative research delivers only a partial reading of virtual reality, barely outlining the underlying dynamics of new digital habits, limiting itself to a dichotomous study of healthy use *versus* addiction. Qualitative analysis is sometimes accompanied by quantitative research in order to examine findings more closely, or it may be used in the initial stages of a project to formulate a hypothesis, to be subsequently verified using quantitative methods (Blasi, 2010). Quantitative analysis includes qualitative aspects, as it both originates from and culminates in qualitative considerations. Conversely, strictly qualitative analysis often requires quan-

tification in the interests of comprehensive treatment of the phenomenon under investigation (Kracauer, 1952). In one way or another, the two methods prove to be complementary, and their integration allows for a detailed account of the subjects' experiences, including the analysis of the most subjective nuances, also involved in the phenomenon, and the examination of behaviours which have become established habits (Fassi *et al.*, 2023). Psychoanalysis provides conceptual and methodological tools that focus attention on subjectivity, and in particular on the affective dimension of subjectivity (Young & Frosh, 2018). In the uncharted field of psychic dynamics underlying adolescents' use of social media, the qualitative method would allow for the conceptualisation of latent models and structures within the area of interest through a constant process of comparison between research hypotheses and gradually gathered data. Among the most well-known qualitative tools is the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) (Murray, 1943), a projective instrument used by clinicians to obtain a psychodynamic understanding of the characteristics of a person's subjectivity through an analysis of the narratives elicited by viewing ambiguous image cards (Aronow *et al.*, 2001; Nissley & DeFreese, 2020). Through stories they tell, individuals provide an account of what is happening in their emotional world, thus making visible their experiences, ways of thinking, and perceptions (Teglasi, 2021). In particular, the narratives allow us to observe their thought patterns, the most significant interpersonal and intrapsychic conflicts, their feelings and emotions, explicit and latent needs and desires, their conception of the physical and social environment, prevailing defence mechanisms used by them in difficult situations, and the kind of anxieties and fears that populate their internal world. Most recent TAT applications are dedicated to investigating the disorders and psychopathologies of contemporary society (Dipaola *et al.*, 2023; Jenkins, 2023; Jinying *et al.*, 2024; Lebedeva *et al.*, 2022). The experience of grief was also investigated through the use of the TAT, revealing significant gender differences in the main needs emerging from the stories told (Vladislav & Drăghici, 2019). There is no shortage of research evaluating the effectiveness of artificial intelligence in defining individuals' personalities through automated analysis of written texts, using pre-established inventories (Camati *et al.*, 2021), nor of studies that have attempted to gamify the TAT by turning it into a narrative game (Fatehi *et al.*, 2019). Other authors have examined the role that the TAT can play in the psychoeducational assessment of children (Calderon & Kupferberg, 2022). The findings showed that the TAT and standardised intelligence and personality tests measure several aspects of cognitive and emotional domains, encouraging clinicians to include the TAT in comprehensive psychoeducational assessments to evaluate contextual cognitive processes and implicit emotional functioning not otherwise measured by standardised tests. Several studies have adapted TAT cards by

modifying the clothing and facial features of the characters depicted in the images to support identification within the relevant cultural context (Ali & Zeb, 2023; Chowdhury, 1960). Other researchers have shown how virtual group discussions featuring avatars with different characteristics – such as black or white cloaks, clothing resembling doctors or members of the Ku Klux Klan – can influence participants' narratives by promoting either aggression or feelings of affiliation (Peña *et al.*, 2009).

A psychodynamic reflection that takes into account aspects of contemporary society, integrating new practices associated with technology in the relevant social context, while avoiding considering now widely shared habits as pathological, could enrich our understanding of emerging digital phenomena. Using the TAT in a way that focuses on the influence of technology on relationships, whether online or offline, may support a deeper understanding of individuals' emotional investment in cyberspace, fostering new awareness and a sense of social responsibility (Ciccone, 2023).

#### *Our application of the TAT cards*

Our research involves adapting certain TAT cards to contemporary digital practices and creating new images to explore social aspects of modernity. In particular, to pursue the objectives of the current study, drawings of modern digital devices were incorporated into the original TAT cards; in some cases, these replaced objects already present, while in other cases they were added from scratch. All mentions of the original cards refer to Imbasciati & Ghilardi's *Manuale Clinico del TAT - La diagnosi psicoanalitica*, 1994 (*Clinical Manual of the TAT: The Psychoanalytic Diagnosis*). From among the image stimuli, the three most emotionally salient were selected and are listed below:

**Card 1** – Corresponds to original card 1, suitable for both genders and all ages. The original card shows a picture of a child contemplating a violin on the table in front of him. In our case, a tablet takes the place of the violin. Bellak considers this card the most significant image in the TAT as it allows for comprehensive assessments of personality. In adolescents and adults, it indicates feelings of reverie; identification with the boy in the image usually occurs, revealing the relationships with primary significant figures. Rapaport believes that this card shows the subject's attitude towards duty and provides insights into their aspirations, difficulties, hopes, and achievements. Anzieu defines it as the card of the idealized Ego, interpreting it as the extent to which the individual has fulfilled or has been frustrated in relation to their ambitions.

**Card 2** – Corresponds to original card 4, suitable for both genders and all ages. In the original card, a woman is grabbing the shoulders of a man; the man's face and body are turned as if to get away from her. In the dis-

tant background behind the couple, a semi-nude woman can be seen. Generally, card 4 gives information about the male and female roles and highlights the sexual attitudes of subjects based on consideration of the woman in the background. However, for the purpose of this study, the woman in the background was removed, and the 'third' element was provided by a smartphone in the hands of the woman in the foreground. Bellak considers that this card highlights the various needs and feelings relating to man-woman relationships. Themes of infidelity frequently emerge. Holt also believes that this card highlights male-female conflicts, facilitating the expression of attitudes towards male and female needs and impulses that are difficult to control.

**Card 4** – Corresponds to original card 3 and is suited to all ages. Although Murray reserved this card for children, adolescents, and male adults, several authors, including Bellak and Anzieu, have reiterated that card 3 is well-suited to the female gender, especially as regards the analysis of depressive feelings. For this reason, the card was administered to both men and women indiscriminately. Originally, card 3 showed a figure slumped on the floor, near a settee, with head against the right arm; on the floor was a revolver, not clearly visible. The gun provides information about the individual's aggressiveness. In the image-stimulus based on the TAT card 3, a smartphone is now in view on the settee.

The analysis of the collected stories focused on the subject's recognition of the presence of the technological stimulus inserted within the images, on the general emotions that characterised the narrated story, and on the function that the stimulus assumed within it. Finally, some general observations are reported regarding the aspects that emerged more clearly and/or more frequently within the stories.

The three selected cards were flanked by a fourth one created from scratch, with the graphic style of the TAT (differentiated for males and females), in order to investigate the habit of taking photos with a mobile (selfies).

## Hypotheses and objectives

The current work is a pilot study in which a specifically created projective instrument is applied to explore, in a dynamic perspective, the affective-relational aspects of digital technology use. The 88 collected stories were analysed using *content analysis* methodology, which made it possible to explore qualitative material extending beyond the conscious and declarative level, touching on the more personal, intimate, and emotional aspects related to technology, and to address the research questions that guided this study:

### *How do digital devices influence the affective representations of intersubjectivity?*

Very often, research in quantitative terms provides only a partial understanding of the digital experience, defining in statistical terms the dynamic underlying new cyber-habits, and is limited to a dichotomous reading of healthy versus addictive usage. The current work aims to deepen our understanding of the subjective dynamics involved in the phenomenon – those consolidated, habitual behaviours that have come to affect most of the population – while considering the affective imprints that shape online life and the distinctly personal meanings implied by this new way of communication and experiencing oneself. In particular, four foundational experiences of subjectivity were analysed – Childhood, Couple relationships, Self-image, and Traumatic events – aimed at understanding the influence of digital devices on the intersubjective affective representations that characterise them.

Table 1 summarises the observed affective dynamics related to the digital object present on each card.

*Table 1. Themes and affective complexes of projective cards.*

<b>Card</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Affective complex</b>
Card 1	Digital object	It investigates the digital object as a medium for drive satisfaction, a tool the ego uses to process excitements or to receive pleasure or gratification. Relationships with primary figures and personal ambitions are called into play.
Card 2	Object in the couple	It investigates the influence and use of the digital object in the couple relationship. In particular, which intimate, conflicting or mediating affects are supported by the digital object.
Card 3	Digital object as a mirror	It investigates how the digital object is charged with the function of mirroring. In particular, in what terms the self-image is reproduced to be shared for narcissistic or relational purposes.
Card 4	Object-cause	It investigates the role attributed to the digital object in traumatic situations of break-up or separation. In particular, in what terms the digital object supports causal ideation.

## Method

### *Study participants*

The 88 stories were obtained from a sample consisting of 22 subjects aged 12-52 years (mean=28.32, standard deviation [SD]=9.901). With respect to gender, the subjects were distributed as follows: 12 females (mean age=28.08,

SD=10.36) and 10 males (mean age=28.60, SD=9.87). Each participant was guaranteed absolute anonymity.

### *Tools and methodology*

From the stimulus images of Murray's Thematic Apperception Test (Murray, 1943), three cards were adapted by inserting representations of digital devices within them as previously described.

The three selected cards were flanked by a fourth one created from scratch (differentiated for males and females) in order to investigate the habit of taking photos (selfies). The four cards were administered to each participant so that each card could be processed in story form (a total of 88 stories were collected) to obtain an in-depth reading of the relevance and affective position the new digital tools occupied within the mental representations concerning the link between technology and life settings. Figure 1 provides some details of the four cards used, described below:

**Card 1** – Corresponding to original card 1, contains an image of a child contemplating a tablet in front of him, placed on the table. In adolescents and adults, it indicates feelings of reverie, highlighting relationships with primary significant figures, who may present themselves as understanding, authoritarian, protective, or aggressive. The subject's attitude toward duty, aspirations, difficulties, hopes, and success emerges.

**Card 2** – Corresponding to original card 4 – depicts a man being held by the shoulders by a woman, who is holding a mobile phone in her hand. The image offers insights into male and female roles as influenced by technology, which enters the couple's dynamic as a 'third' element. Infidelity, jealousy, conflict, impulsive behaviour, protection, power, and control are the affects that frequently emerge.

**Card 3M/3F** (*SelfieF* reserved for the female gender; *SelfieM* reserved for the male gender) – These two tables were created specifically with the graphic style of the TAT; they depict a girl and a boy, respectively, engaged in the activity of taking a picture of themselves using a cell phone held at face height. These two cards draw attention to a very popular activity, especially among young people, referred to as taking a 'selfie', which involves taking pictures of oneself and sharing them with others online. Focusing attention on one's image brings together narcissistic feelings and a desire for mirroring in the peer group (Zanelli, *n.d.*).

**Card 4** – Corresponding to original card 3, which Bellak and Anzieu assigned to the analysis of depressive feelings. Near a sofa, a person is sitting slumped, head resting on right arm; next to the person, on the floor, is a revolver that is not clearly visible. Resting on top of the couch, a smart-phone can be seen. The card captures emotions associated with both self-directed and other-directed aggressive tendencies, demonstrating the power of the Superego as complicated by the digital dimension.



**Figure 1.** Details of projective cards.

In the administration of the stimulus images, the following instructions were given:

“Now we are going to test your imagination; for each of the cards you will be shown, invent a story related to the image, having a beginning, an unfolding, and an end. Say: what happened before and what led to the current scene; what happens now; what the characters feel and think; how it will end.”

*Content analysis* was conducted on the transcripts of the 88 stories and was carried out in several stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kracauer, 1952; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). First, the handwritten stories were transcribed into Word documents and were read numerous times by two researchers to gain maximum familiarity with the stories and to annotate initial ideas. An initial coding was then carried out, which included analysis from a psychodynamic perspective: i) of the affective connotation of the narratives (positive or negative); ii) of the relevance that the technological stimuli assumed within the narrative (foreground, background, absent).

Secondly, the contents were analysed taking into account the more subjective and dynamic aspects, noting the specificity of the function that the digital element fulfilled within the narrative.

In particular, four functions were noted:

1. *Substitution of the Other* – The Other offers the subject the technological object as its substitute; the subject relates to the technological object instead of the real other.
2. *Obstacle in the relationship with the Other* – The subject loses himself in the digital component, which thus becomes an obstacle, an impediment for the development of a real relationship.
3. *Support-mediating the relationship with the Other* – The digital element is used as an anaclitic support, reinforcing the relationship with the Other or mediating as a transitional space between the subject and the Other: a space of intrapsychic exploration that mediates between demands of the external world and desires, fantasy, and reality.
4. *Neutral* – The digital element is not mentioned in the stories.

### Statistical analysis

Thus, coding of the 88 stories enabled the identification of three dependent variables for each card for statistical analysis: i) *affects* (positive/negative); ii) *relevance* (digital object in foreground, background, absent); in Card 3, relevance consists of the type of shot that the narrative highlights in each story (selfie shared online, selfie not shared, photograph of surroundings); iii) *functions* (digital object as a substitute for the relationship with the other, obstacle to the relationship, support for the relationship).

The psychometric analyses were conducted through the statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics version 25.0. The agreed statistical significance was  $p \leq 0.05$ . Comparison between dichotomous categorical variables was performed by Fisher's Exact Test. In other cases, the  $\chi^2$  test was used. In cases where the count in certain cells was less than five due to the small sample size, the corresponding chart derived from the contingency tables was nonetheless included to facilitate a descriptive analysis of the results.

## Results

### Digital object

#### Card 1: child with the tablet

Figure 2 shows that the image-stimulus of the child with the tablet elicited mostly negative affects within the stories (81.8%), only a minority connoted their stories with positive affects (18.2%).

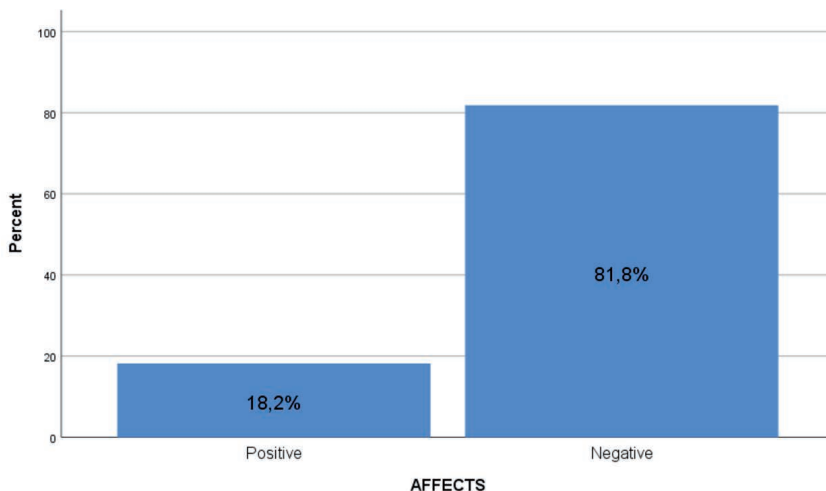


Figure 2. Affects within narratives related to Card 1.

Taking into consideration the place that the digital stimuli occupied within the narratives (Figure 3), it can be seen that the majority of participants attached strong relevance to technology (77.3%) by assigning it to the foreground of the story, while only a minority gave it a secondary role or did not detect the digital stimulus at all (13.6% and 9.1%, respectively).

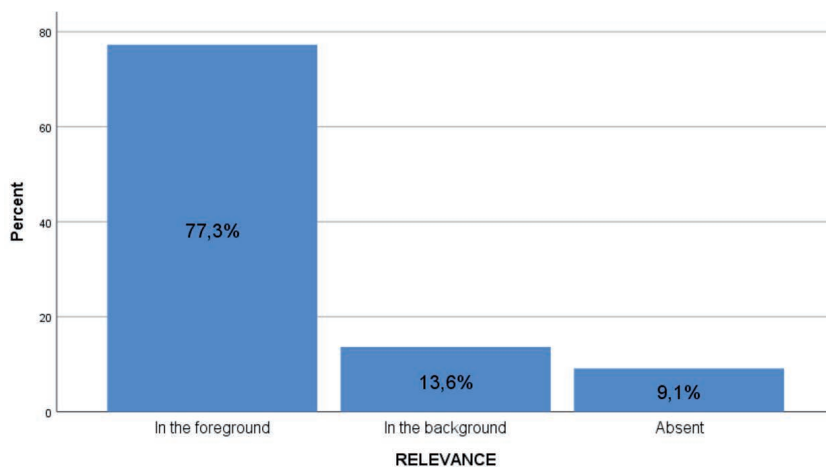


Figure 3. Digital place within narratives related to Card 1.

Looking at the function that the technological stimulus played within the stories told by the subjects (Figure 4), we see that in a relative majority of stories (36.4%) the device was depicted as an *object-obstacle* that produces displeasure and does not facilitate drive satisfaction, stimulating in the child of the image unpleasant feelings or memories related to relationships with parents or distracting from daily commitments, ambitions and duties.

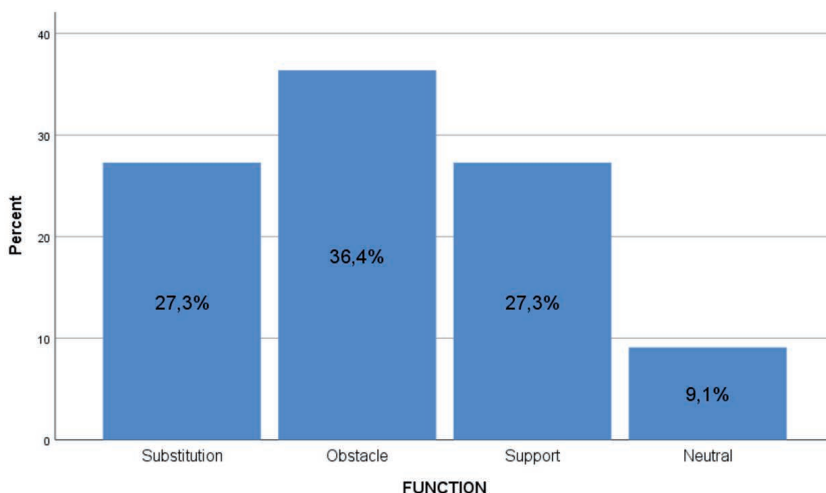


Figure 4. Digital function within narratives related to Card 1.

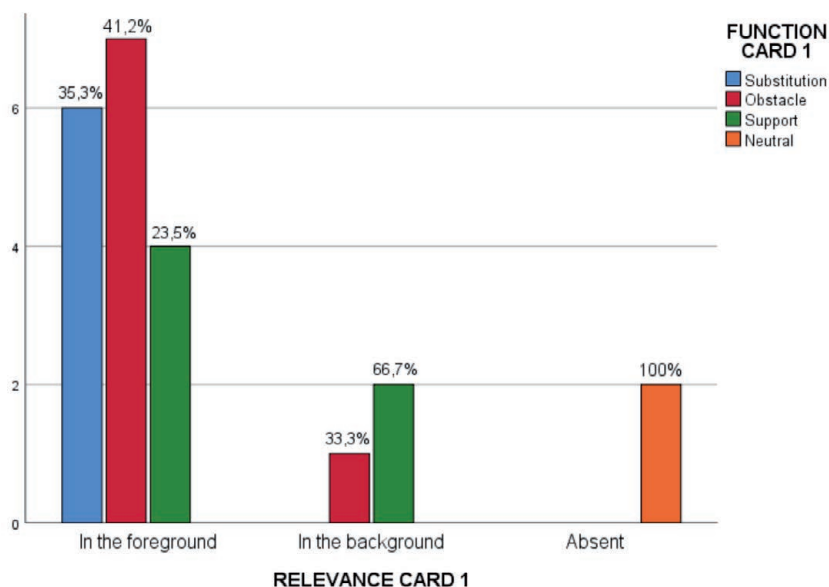
Instead, in 27.3% of cases, the tablet took on a *substitute* function with respect to the satisfaction of more affective needs that are not accommodated within the real-life context, yet returning only partial or no satisfaction at all. Instead, it became a *support* for the relationship in 27.3% of the stories, as it bolstered the subject's ego and facilitated a deeper connection with others. Lastly, in 9.1% of the stories, no function was attributed to the tablet.

Table 2 presents some examples of the functions fulfilled within the stories.

Table 2. Significant vignettes about the functions of the digital object within card 1.

Card	Function		
	Support for the relationship	Substitute the relationship	Obstacle the relationship
Card 1: Digital object	<p>“Franco has been grounded. He remains alone in his room until his friends write to him.”</p> <p>“The child manages to follow the lesson, albeit with some difficulty, but he is happy to have succeeded.”</p>	<p>“Even though they often saw John absent in front of a screen, his parents were happy to buy him any echnological gadget or console to keep him at home and safe.”</p> <p>“A child has just been scolded by his mother and sent to his room, isolated from his family. He is left with only one thing: the tablet, which is perhaps his mirror, helping him to understand the world around him.”</p>	<p>“Instead of doing his homework, he takes the tablet to play on, even though he knows it's wrong.”</p> <p>“Mummy was watching TV, so sadly he had to go to his room and watch his programme on the tablet's much smaller screen.”</p>

In Figure 5, on the other hand, it is possible to observe how the functions attributed to the devices in the narratives are significantly distributed based on the relevance given to the digital element,  $\chi^2(6, N=22)=24.95, p=.000$ : in the stories where the tablet plays a prominent role we find that technology is experienced either as an obstacle (41.2%) or as a substitute (35.3%) for the relationship; in the stories where the tablet is placed in the background, technology plays a supportive function (66.7%) to the self and relationships with significant childhood figures. Considering that all the stories set the narrated events in the context of primary parent-child relationships, Card 1 proves useful in focusing on the role that technology is gradually assuming in constituent relationships in developmental age.



**Figure 5.** Matching among digital functions and digital place within narratives related to Card 1.

#### Interpretive notes on the image of the child with the tablet

In continuity with the original card 1 of the TAT, the stories elicited by the stimulus image often revealed an identification of the narrator with the boy depicted, frequently exposing emotional dynamics toward primary attachment figures and feelings of reverie. In some cases, the subject's attitudes toward duty or frustrations in relation to personal ambitions were highlighted. In subjects who told positive stories, playful aspects clearly emerged. We may infer that the image evoked pleasant memories linked to technology, recalling childhood experiences that are increasingly shaped by the use of digital devices. The device appears to take on the meaning of a safe space – an escape – recalling the function of the transitional object as described by Winnicott (1974a): a space that offers refuge through fantasy and comfort. A representative excerpt follows: “[...] with his ears closed so as not to hear any noise, he imagines himself in that fantastic land”.

Gabbard (2001) was a pioneer in interpreting online space through the lens of psychoanalytic categories, identifying the paradoxical nature of virtual reality: on one hand, it distracts us from ourselves; on the other, it offers new forms of self-expansion. In effect, the virtual world projects us into a transitional space in which external reality and internal world are redefined inter-subjectively, far beyond the notion of privacy. Our narratives confirm that, although the image of the child with the tablet evokes intimate stories and inner feelings, the most frequently represented emotions are relational, if not explicitly conflictual. The stories recount *punishments*, *conflicts*, *shortcom-*

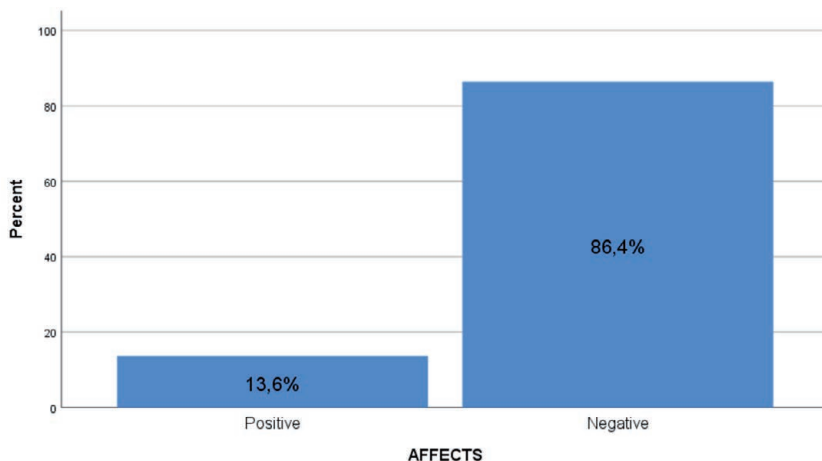
*ings, and absence* on the part of parents. They speak of a lack of communication between the child in the image and the figures who are significant to him, of an unmet desire for closeness, and solitude in the face of punishment. When the protagonist is punished and is often left alone, the tablet acts as a refuge, but in it, there is only partial comfort. When parents are absent, they attempt to compensate for their shortcomings by offering a technological device: a compensatory and substitutive object that, however, fails to meet the child's emotional need for closeness.

Themes related to punishment and the quality of the parent-child bond also frequently emerge from original card 1 of the TAT. The digital device is certainly a tool for maintaining contact and strengthening relationships with significant others; however, it can also become a source of frustration when the Other in the relationship withdraws, using it for their own purposes as a compensatory object. In the protagonist of the story, who is forced to cope with the absence of the Other, the desire for emotional closeness persists. In some cases, the subject uses digital technology as a form of narcissistic regression into an escapist fantasy, while in others, it serves as a resilient analytic support. While technology can function as an aid when real-life communication is healthy, it is not sufficient to replace the love object or its emotional closeness.

### *Object in the couple*

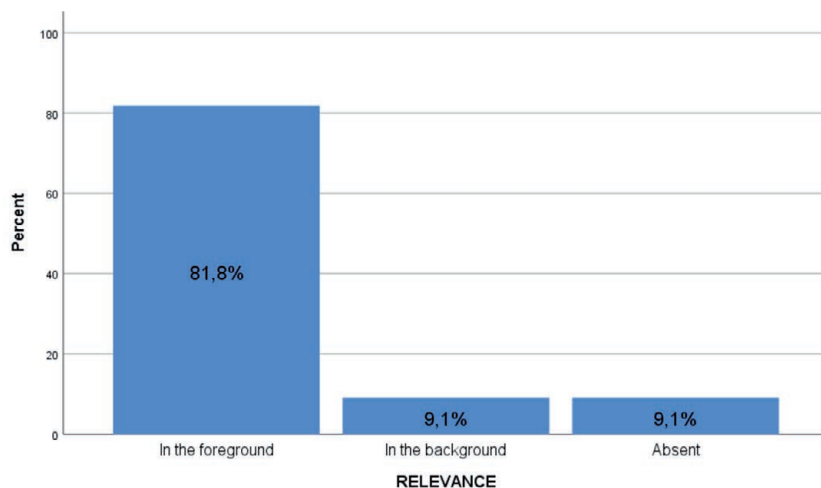
#### Card 2: couple with mobile phone

As shown in Figure 6, most stories were marked by negative emotions (86.4%), including anxiety, fear, and tension, whereas the stimulus image of the couple evoked positive emotions in only 13.6% of cases.



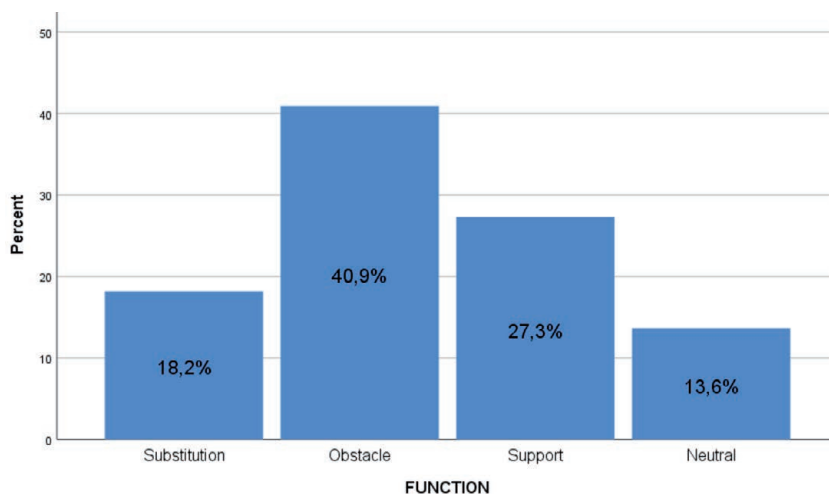
**Figure 6.** Affects within narratives related to Card 2.

On analysing the stories told after viewing Card 2 (Figure 7), it is evident that the vast majority of participants placed the technological stimulus in the foreground (81.8%), while only a small percentage relegated it to the background or did not notice it at all (9.1% and 9.1% respectively).



**Figure 7.** Digital place within narratives related to Card 2

Observing the function that the technological stimulus played in the narrative (Figure 8), we see that in 40.9% of the stories, the mobile device was represented as an obstacle in the significant relationship, a source of problems and conflicts stemming from excessive use that limits shared experiences between partners.



**Figure 8.** Digital function within narratives related to Card 2.

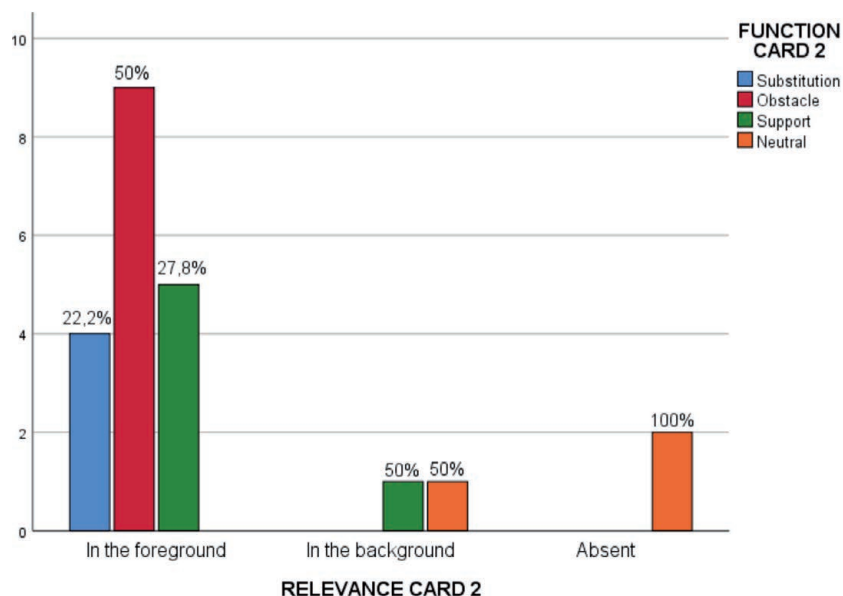
In contrast, when the mobile phone serves as a substitute for the relationship (18.2%), the characters described attempt to show others, through the online sharing of couple-related content, something that is, in reality, lacking or totally absent. This brings into play the potential judgment of external observers – friends, family, acquaintances – and the idea of hiding the dissatisfaction and shame experienced in real life through an entirely digital illusion. The couple’s unmet emotional needs are thus replaced by a desire for social desirability. In 27.3% of the stories, however, the phone in the woman’s hands is depicted as a means of introducing a part of reality, supporting the couple’s desires by capturing pleasant, intimate moments where compromise and mutual satisfaction can be found. In only 13.6% of cases, the stimulus does not influence the interpersonal relationship between the partners, instead taking on a neutral role in the story.

Table 3 presents excerpts from the stories, categorised according to the function of technology identified in the text.

*Table 3. Significant vignettes about the functions of the digital object within Card 2.*

Card	Function		
	Support	Substitute	Obstacle
Card 2: Object in the couple	<p>“The first date of a growing couple, who are increasingly seeking to undress in their intimates. [...] They are taking a selfie, a simple memento of that wonderful day [...]”</p> <p>“This couple were cuddling up, ready to enjoy a romantic dinner together, when a phone call came that broke their intimacy. They had to leave to go and help their elderly parents.”</p>	<p>“It’s a fake love story that looks like a movie. It’s two famous actors who have to prove something; they have to make an appearance and post on Facebook about something that isn’t real. They’re two narcissists, a loveless couple with the same ambitions. Only beauty counts.”</p> <p>“She is always looking for a gesture of affection or love from him [...] However, all her friends have realised that something is wrong between them, so, in an attempt to silence them, she tries to convince him to take a selfie with her.”</p>	<p>“He said, ‘Come on, Sara! We must have taken at least 500 selfies today! I don’t understand what the point is. OK, one or two pictures, but you’re always holding this phone, as if your life depended on taking selfies and posting stories. Don’t you think that’s excessive?’ She said: ‘Come on, don’t be precious. I want everyone to see how perfect, beautiful and happy we are together.’”</p> <p>“A jealous man took his wife’s mobile phone to check it, and his wife tried to take it back as if he had something to hide.”</p>

Whereas the device in the stories elicited by the other cards in this study seems to support pre-existing emotions or conflicts, in the narratives related to the couple image, the digital object acts as a trigger for conflict within the relationship between the described characters. Specifically, Figure 9 shows that overall, most narratives place the digital object in the foreground, telling stories in which the events revolve around the mobile phone held by the female figure. The plot development highlights a highly significant correlation –  $\chi^2(6, N=22)=19.14, p=.004$  – between the foregrounding of the digital object and its function as an obstacle to the relationship (50%). Similarly, the substitutive function is reported only by those who assign maximum relevance to the digital object (22.2%). Narratives attributing a supportive relational function to the technology, unlike those above, are found not only among those who assign a prominent role to the mobile phone but also among those who consider it to occupy a secondary position in the narrative.



**Figure 9.** Matching among digital functions and digital place within narratives related to Card 2.

#### Interpretive notes on the card of the couple with the mobile phone

Taking into account the gender variable, we observe that a minority of male participants told stories in which no negative emotions emerged, and in which the stimulus was not perceived as a disruptive element in the relational dynamics. The majority, however, reported stories in which the man in the image exhibits resentment and/or criticism toward the woman due to her excessive use of the smartphone. In these narratives, the woman is typically portrayed as the more dependent partner, with her attachment to technology

generating conflict within the couple or intruding upon the dynamics of the relationship, thus taking shape as a specifically female intrusive need.

Noting some patterns in the narratives of Card 2, it is possible to observe how age influenced the emotional tone of the stories: it was mainly adolescents and young adults who reported stories free of tension or conflict, whereas adults exclusively expressed negative emotions in response to the stimulus image. When analysing the couple's stories, it becomes quite complex to determine who the 'hero' is, in other words, the figure with whom the participant identifies during the narrative. What seems to weaken identification with the hero is precisely the technological element: in most of the stories, the stimulus image is marked by negative emotions, and the mobile device is portrayed as the intruder, a third party in the relationship, for both male and female participants. Whereas in the original TAT card, the third-party role was played by a semi-naked woman in the background, here, technology retains a similar triangular function, becoming the very source of conflict.

A closer analysis reveals that in many of these stories, it is the female character who introduces the technological stimulus into the relationship as an obstacle, an intruder to which she becomes dependent. Two narrative excerpts illustrate this effectively:

"Leonardo returns home and sees Elisa on the sofa with her phone in hand, like every day. There is a 'Hi' while still on the phone, no more hugs [...]. Leonardo gets angry, tells Elisa he can't stand her behaviour anymore. Elisa tries to stop him, still with the phone in her hands, but by now Leonardo no longer feels equal to Elisa's phone and decides to leave."

"Sofia, increasingly absorbed in what her new phone had to offer, began to neglect her husband, who, unable to tolerate the change any longer, decided to leave."

Another excerpt shows the distressing dynamic that may arise from introducing the digital object as an intruder:

"Marina and Paulo were a very close couple; they shared many habits and most of their passions. There was only one big difference: Paulo, unlike Marina, although quite sociable, was very antisocial. (...) They were having fun, dancing and joking until Marina insisted too much on taking a couple's selfie in the middle of the party."

One might ask whether the woman's digital urgency reflects a need for diversion from pleasure or an attempt to soothe the anxiety of a relationship experienced as too close or binding. If the shared moment were truly satisfying, what would the selfie have added? Would it have captured the moment, or distracted from it? This paradoxical dynamic recalls Freud's (1925) description of anxiety as the threat of losing love.

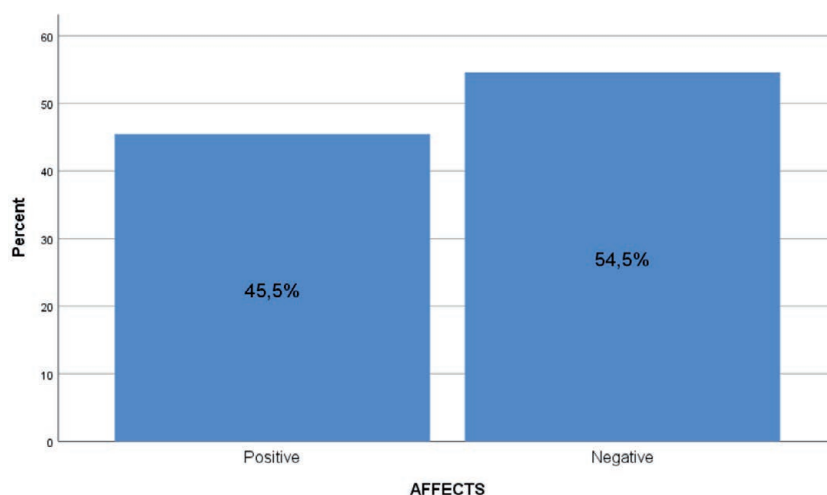
The analysis of the position and role of the digital object in the cou-

ple's relationship allows us to identify recurring dynamics that are also found in offline relationships: i) some narratives emphasise the use of the digital 'public square' as a *stage*: these are stories where the couple seems to rely on the approval or admiration of Others-of-the-Net to validate the relationship, one that may be fake, based on appearance or superficial beauty; ii) other stories describe couples using the digital tool to avoid external *control*: "All their friends had realised something was wrong between them, so she, to silence them, insisted on taking a selfie with him"; and iii) other couples use the digital object to put their partner on display in order to expose undesired or inconvenient traits to the Others-of-the-Net, whether of themselves or their partner. This *overexposure* ends up binding the partner, forcibly placing the relationship into external surveillance and virtual control.

### *Digital object as a mirror*

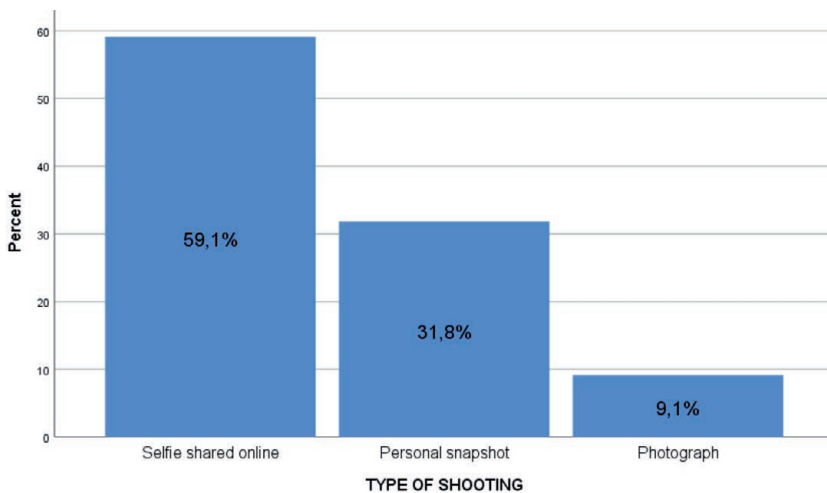
#### Card 3: self-image on the mobile phone screen

Figure 10 shows the distribution of affects related to the stories elicited by Card 3: 45.5% of participants reported only positive emotions in their narratives, while 54.5% recounted stories that included negative emotions, tension, or conflict. Compared to the distribution of emotional content in previous images, it is evident that only in this case are the positive and negative affects almost equally represented. Card 3 thus elicited a higher number of positive stories than the other stimuli presented and analysed, suggesting that the mental representation associated with the act of taking or posing for photographs is more affectively nuanced.



**Figure 10.** Affects within narratives related to Card 3.

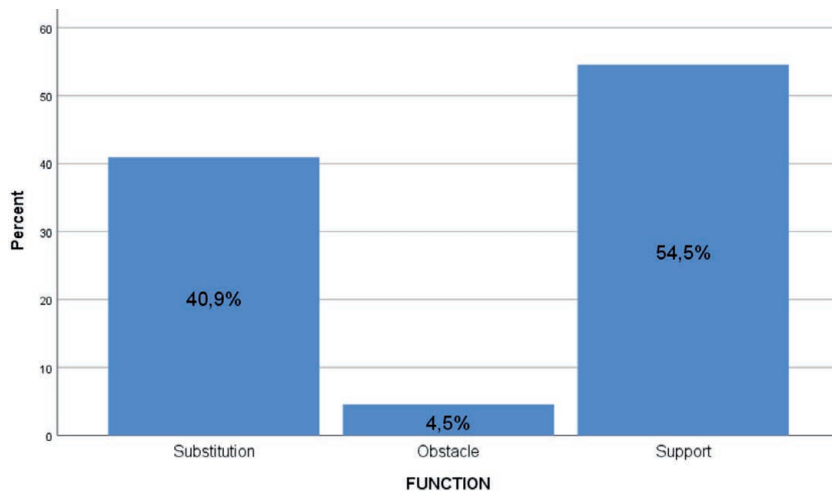
Unlike the other images analysed, the content analysis of Card 3 did not include an investigation of the role played by the device in the narrative, given its already prominent role within the image. Instead, the focus was placed on the type of photograph described in the stories. Following Riva's (2016) framework, we can speak of a 'selfie' when the *social* component of sharing is present; when no such online sharing occurs, it is more accurately defined as a 'personal snapshot'. Finally, the term 'photograph' applies when the object of the image is an element of the external world rather than the subject itself. As shown in Figure 11, the activity of taking a selfie appears most frequently in the narratives (59.1%); in 31.8% of the cases, the main character takes a photo of themselves but does not share it with Others-of-the-Net; and in only 9.1%, the mobile device is used to capture an external element, typically a landscape. We may therefore state that this custom-designed image, suitable for both male and female subjects, elicited more narcissistic aspects of the self, and that this projective tool makes it possible – at least in part – to identify the underlying motivations and emotions involved, as well as the role that technology plays within these subtle dynamics.



**Figure 11.** Types of shooting within narratives related to Card 3.

Figure 12 shows that in most of the stories (40.9%), the stimulus is used as a kind of stage in the virtual world, a place for displaying an enhanced self-image, much like a theatrical space in which to appear and present oneself to others (Goffman, 1959). In these stories, the *Others-of-*

*the-Net* seem to take on the role of *self-objects*, narcissistically experienced spectators useful for the character's 'self-realisation', though lacking genuine recognition (Paparo, 1995). Cyberspace thus becomes a tool for reducing frustration, imbued with the potential, or the illusory certainty, of being able to create multiple realities, to truly become someone other than oneself (Marzi, 2013). Self-presentation is considered *positive* when the user is engaged in showing their 'best face', selectively revealing a socially desirable self-image (Walther, 2007). In the majority of cases (54.5%), however, the device presented in the image-stimulus functioned as a support tool, used to capture a positive aspect of the self: whether it be the achievement of a hard-earned goal or a moment in which one feels attractive, the device enabled the subject to preserve these moments, acting as a kind of reminder for one's self-esteem, a form of self-affirmation that does not rely on external validation. Only in 4.5% of the stories was the digital device depicted as an obstacle, something to withdraw from or avoid, to protect a self already perceived as fragmented.



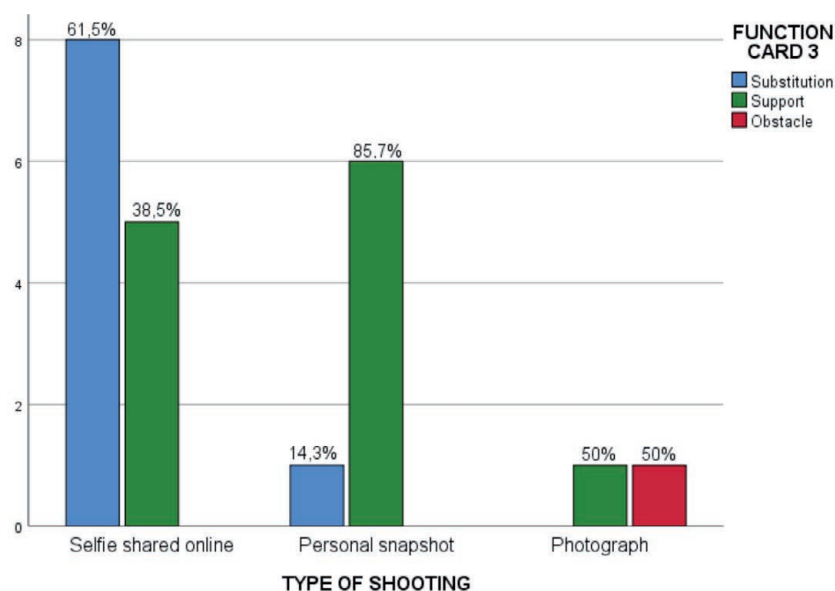
**Figure 12.** Digital function within narratives related to Card 3.

Table 4 presents excerpts from the collected narratives, illustrating the various functions attributed to digital technology within the stories.

Table 4. Significant vignettes about the functions of the digital object within Card 3.

Card	Function		
	Support	Substitute	Obstacle
Card 3: Mirror-object	<p>“After years of hard work and sacrifice, he has finally achieved his goals. Today, when his boss announces that he is to become the company’s CEO, he is happier than ever. He runs home, opens the front door, looks for his wife, kisses her passionately and calls his children over to tell them the wonderful news! To immortalise the moment, he decides to take a selfie with them all and send the photo to his parents.”</p> <p>“She is a woman approaching 40 who still wants to be young; she is afraid that her beauty is disappearing. She takes a photo because he sees herself as beautiful that night. She is going out dancing with friends. When she finishes dancing, she goes home and resumes her normal life.”</p>	<p>“Veronica knows that the perfect photo is necessary to show the whole world just how extraordinary her life is! She has always been good-looking, attracting the attention of boys and girls alike. The thousands of likes and oappreciative comments on social media only reinforce the ideal of the perfect girl that has been created around her. However, no one knows that behind those photographs, there is frustration and anger because maintaining perfection in the eyes of others is not easy.”</p> <p>“Lucy takes pictures because she thinks she is beautiful and wants to be famous at all costs.”</p>	<p>“It’s always hard to like your own physical appearance. You’re afraid to show your face and you’re afraid to find out what other people think. I take pictures of landscapes; maybe that’s the only beautiful thing in the world.”</p>

The results shown in Figure 13 are particularly noteworthy, as they reveal a significant intersection between the type of shot and the function attributed to the digital stimulus within the narrative,  $\chi^2(4, N=22)=15.25, p=.004$ .



**Figure 13.** Matching among digital functions and types of shooting within narratives related to Card 3.

Narratives in which the character takes a selfie are, for the most part, sustained by the function of substituting a relationship (61.5%), highlighting how the Others-of-the-Net and the online environment serve as a space for seeking approval and recognition, a stage for exhibiting carefully curated and selected images of the self, showcasing only the most desirable aspects while concealing more intimate ones. Through *self-presentation*, individuals have the opportunity to present themselves selectively and to manage the type of impression they wish to convey to others (Tong *et al.*, 2008).

By contrast, when the protagonist uses the stimulus to take a self-portrait – a photo not intended for online publication – the function of the digital device primarily serves as support for the relationship (85.7%). Here, the emotional content is closely tied to private moments centered on self-appreciation or the achievement of personal goals. In this context, we might hypothesize that the self-image contributes to *self-disclosure* (Kim & Dindia, 2011). In the stories, the act of taking a self-portrait serves as a tool for expressing feelings of accomplishment, and the need to take one's own photo, even without sharing it online, supports the desire for self-realisation and popularity that have yet to be fulfilled. Some of these narrators also seem to be in search of a stage, but their self-esteem and ambition do not rely on external validation. The preference for the self-portrait offers a good indication of a form of self-acceptance grounded in an anaclitic (supportive and reciprocal) view of relationships with others.

In the stories that described the act of photographing the surrounding envi-

ronment, 50% of participants attributed a supportive function to the technological stimulus, while the remaining 50% narrated stories in which the stimulus took on the role of obstacle. Focusing attention on the landscape may represent a kind of affective neutralisation in relation to one's self-image. On one hand, those who photograph the landscape might be uncertain about others' approval, preferring to be hidden rather than exposed, held back by doubts about the other, as illustrated in this narrative excerpt: "It's always hard to like yourself physically; you're afraid to show your face, afraid to know what others really think of you. I take a photo of the landscape, maybe that's the only beautiful thing in the world." On the other hand, photographing the landscape may represent a pleasant extension of one's own appreciation that can be shared with trusted others.

#### Interpretive notes on the image of the self on the phone screen

As previously noted, in the majority of the stories (40.9%), participants attributed a substitutive function to the technological stimulus. In this regard, it is interesting to observe how, behind the scenes of this virtual stage, stories marked by negative affect allow us to glimpse underlying experiences of frustration and dissatisfaction. Driven by the pursuit of perfection, participants seem to subject themselves to a kind of self-imposed constraint, striving to construct a desirable image of the self while leaving the true self offstage in an attempt to gain affection, attention, and admiration – needs that cannot be sought in the real world due to fear of judgment and negative evaluation (Miller, 2010; Winnicott, 1974b).

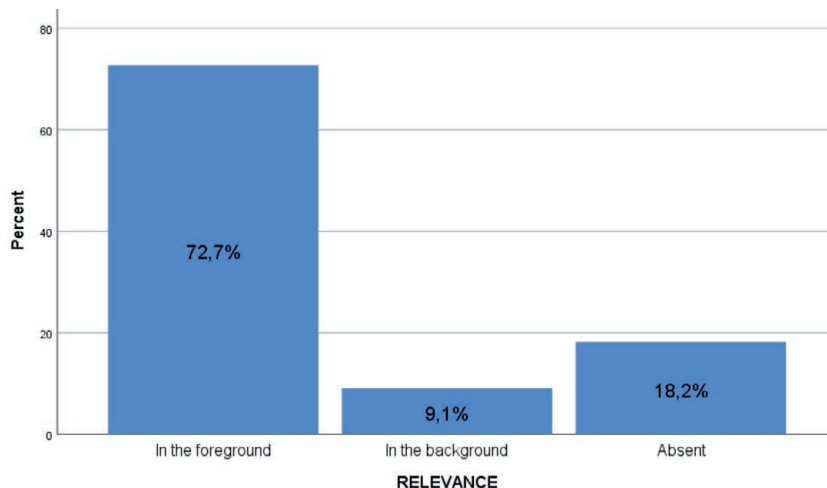
The narratives of female participants are noticeably richer in affective content: they include details, desires, vulnerabilities, and aspirations. By contrast, male participants tended to provide more descriptive accounts that lacked exploration into the subject's inner world. Furthermore, when examining the function labelled 'support', it becomes clear that the stories told by female participants focus more explicitly on the theme of beauty, with the smartphone serving as a tool to support self-esteem. On the other hand, for male participants, beauty is not as strongly associated with self-esteem or satisfaction. Instead, academic and professional achievements appear to be more central to their sense of self-worth.

#### *Object-cause in the traumatic event*

##### Card 4: person slumped with a mobile phone

All participants in the study attributed negative affect to the story elicited by Card 4. Once again, in the majority of narratives, the technological stimulus was placed in the foreground (72.7%); by contrast, 18.2% did not mention

the mobile device placed on the sofa next to the slumped figure at all, while only a small portion of participants assigned it a more marginal role (9.1%), placing it in the background of the narrative (Figure 14).



**Figure 14.** Digital place within narratives related to Card 4.

Figure 15 illustrates the function assigned to the technological stimulus in each narrative related to Card 4. In most of the stories (45.5%), the mobile device is depicted as a substitute for the relationship – a tool used to communicate the end of a relationship, thereby avoiding the emotions and consequences experienced by the other person. In particular, many stories describe a partner who uses technology as the only means to break off the romantic relationship. The slumped figure thus represents the pain of losing the loved object, unreachable and absent. In 27.3% of the narratives, the smartphone was attributed a supportive function: placed on the sofa, it is portrayed as a mediator through which the character learns of something upsetting. The subject is suddenly faced with a potentially traumatic situation – a betrayed friend, the death of a family member, a ‘missing’ child, or confinement measures during the pandemic – news that reaches them through the digital device, which acts as a bridge to an overwhelming reality, yet one necessary to prompt the subject to act in search of a solution. In 9.1% of the stories, the phone is described as an obstacle to thought, becoming not only a source of distressing news but also a hindrance to achieving personal goals. In these accounts, the digital medium does not facilitate communication; instead, it leaves the subject alone, in a relational world only partially understood through the apparitions inhabiting the online world. Finally, in 18.2% of the cases, no specific function was attributed to the technological stimulus, which remained a neutral object within the narrative.

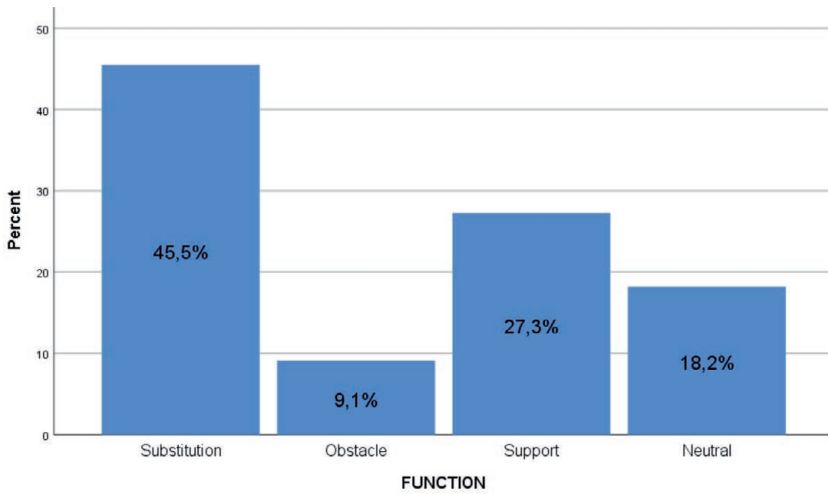


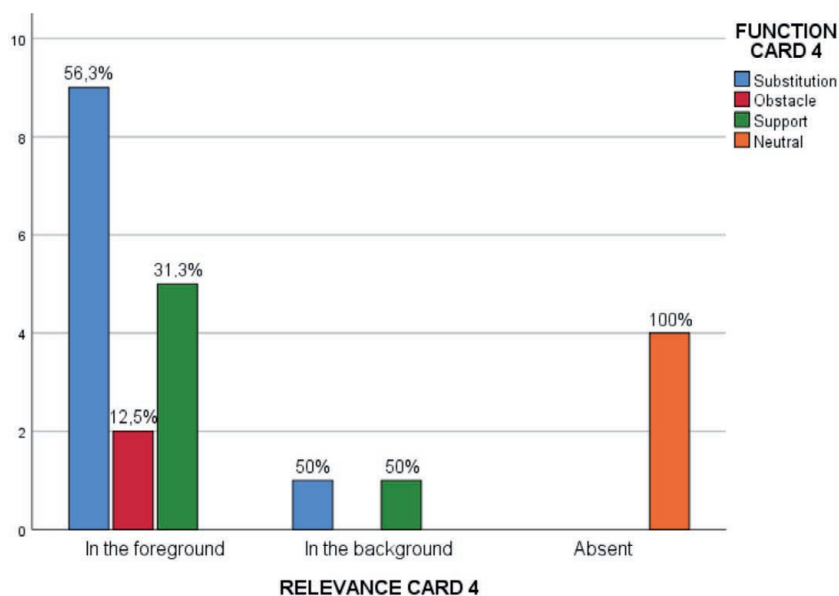
Figure 15. Digital function within narratives related to Card 4.

Table 5 presents selected excerpts from the narratives, categorised according to the function served by the digital device.

Table 5. Significant vignettes about the functions of the digital object within Card 4.

Card	Function		
	Support	Substitute	Obstacle
Card 4: Object-cause	<p>“She looked at her phone to relax, but when she went to check her messages, she saw that a friend had texted her to say that she had seen her partner of 10 years with someone else the previous night. [...] She picked up a knife, intending to end it all, but in the end threw it to the ground because the same friend who had sent her the message said she was coming to her house to be near her.”</p> <p>“She can no longer find her own son. She calls, waiting for an answer, but he gives no sign of life. She cries; she is heartbroken.”</p>	<p>“After dinner, it was the usual ‘see you tomorrow’ kiss, and then she returned home. She had put everything into that relationship, but then suddenly she received a message: ‘I’m leaving you’. Was it a message or a stab wound? Not even the courage to say it out loud and look someone in the face.”</p> <p>“After a furious argument with her husband, who ended the call on her, the distraught woman put the phone down on the sofa, slid down onto the floor and burst into tears.”</p>	<p>“Joan had met a boy on the internet. [...] Everything is easier via a mobile phone. Leonardo continued to deceive Giovanna while waiting to find someone more beautiful to conquer over the phone. He just sent her a message saying, ‘Enough!’. After a long time, Leonardo is reminded of Giovanna, but she doesn’t want to know anymore.”</p> <p>“Disappointments in love are expensive. For goodness’ sake, it was over, and no matter how much I regretted my mistakes, enough is enough. But seeing that image killed something inside me.”</p>

Figure 16 shows a statistically significant relationship,  $\chi^2(6, N=22)=22.55, p=.001$ , between the relevance attributed to the device within the narrative text and the role the digital object plays in the relational dynamics among the characters. In almost all the stories, the technological device is placed in the foreground and assigned a substitutive function in human connections (56.3%). When the overwhelming prevalence of negative affect in the narratives is combined with the decisive relevance attributed to the mobile phone, portrayed predominantly as a substitute and only to a lesser extent as an obstacle (12.5%), this alignment seems to correspond to a sort of traumatic evocation of Card 4. Nevertheless, some stories stand out in which, conversely, the device is foregrounded but is associated with a supportive function within the relationship (31.3%). This suggests that the depressive emotions evoked by the image do not entirely give way to the temptation to blame the mobile phone for the negative event. Instead, the technological object is situated within the relational field, where it more frequently replaces interpersonal connections, but in some cases, it also serves to support them. Even in narratives where the digital device is placed in the background, its function alternates between supporting and substituting the relationship.



**Figure 16.** Matching among digital functions and digital place within narratives related to Card 4.

### Interpretive notes on the image of the slumped person with a phone

Looking at the narratives for Card 4 generally, we observe that all male participants placed the stimulus in the foreground, whereas only half of the female participants attributed the same level of importance to it. The latter tended to perceive the digital object as a means of control – that is, as a tool enabling the main character to obtain information about significant others, usually partners or ex-partners. The description of the digital object as a cause of relationship breakdown and as an obstacle to psychological well-being appeared significantly more frequently in the stories told by male participants than by female ones.

While the original card was designed to be administered to male subjects, the present study's findings reveal a reversal: all participants, including the male ones, described the character in Card 4 as female. The card thus appears to have lost its original specificity regarding information on homosexual tendencies (Imbasciati & Ghilardi, 1994). Another noteworthy observation is that all the stories were marked by negative emotional content. This card, therefore, appears to evoke, much like the original card 3 of the TAT, unpleasant and painful experiences. However, whereas in the original card the revolver was the key element to be analysed, as it provides insight into the subject's aggressivity and is particularly useful in the assessment of depressive individuals, in this revised image-stimulus, the participants' attention focused primarily on the technological stimulus. The mobile device placed on the sofa has, to some extent, changed how the image is perceived, transforming it into a card that evokes experiences of modern-day romantic relationships and separation. The smartphone thus emerges as the 'Other' in the couple – the absent partner is made present in the image through the technology, which acts as a vehicle for bad news: arguments occur through it, and more frequently, the end of the relationship. In some cases, the device itself reveals negative or painful information about the partner or ex-partner, for whom the subject still harbours emotional attachment. Sometimes the theme of Card 4 is tiredness, more rarely illness or death.

In general, in both male and female participants, the stories, particularly those dealing with the breakup of a couple, seem to reveal a mindset related to how individuals conceive and manage relational conflict. Femininity is more readily associated with the expression of emotions, whereas masculinity is commonly portrayed as the party that ends the relationship, often by means of technology as an aid or as a necessity.

The analysis of the narratives related to Card 4 offers valuable insight into the complex dynamics of mourning, as exemplified in the following excerpt:

“Their relationship had been on the rocks for a while, perhaps due to incompatible personalities or perhaps because there was someone else. After multiple arguments and an increasingly tense situation, he ends it via WhatsApp message.”

If the insidious dynamic of dissatisfaction had long kept the underlying conflict suppressed – without either containment or resolution – the digital object ultimately facilitates the rupture, rendering the mourning subjects themselves indistinct. In this context, aggressive and hateful feelings may fuel the complications of regret and melancholy (Freud, 1915).

## Discussion of the main results

Our study explored the place that digital devices occupy within affective representations of intersubjectivity, with particular attention to the role that digital objects play in the relational dynamic. The analysis of the narratives evoked by each image-stimulus made it possible to access more intimate, personal, emotional, and partly unconscious aspects linked to the use of technology in everyday life.

The image of the child with a tablet elicited stories marked predominantly by negative affect, where technology assumed a central role. When the device was perceived in the foreground or background, most of the stories involved intrapsychic or interpersonal tension and conflict (Mesch, 2006a, 2006b). In contrast, the narratives with positive emotional content seemed to recall the playful, shared dimension integral to childhood, now more than ever associated with digital devices (Danby *et al.*, 2013). In these cases, the smartphone becomes a kind of safe space or escape, akin to a transitional object – a physical object that provides psychological comfort, evoking positive early experiences. Furthermore, the positive stories explored the link between identity and smartphone use (Di Fraia, 2012; Zanelli, *n.d.*): those who narrated positively valenced stories appeared to view the device as a means of supporting their desires and sense of self. For such individuals, Card 1 may have evoked a sense of reassurance, allowing for easier and more spontaneous identification with the child interacting with the tablet. Conversely, the stories involving punishment, conflict, absence, or parental neglect spoke of failed communication between the child in the image and their significant figures. These stories conveyed an unmet desire for closeness and a sense of isolation in punishment. Here, the tablet served as a compensatory object, yet one that ultimately failed to satisfy or fully replace emotional proximity – particularly when parents perceived technology to be at their service for caregiving duties, risking the erosion of parental guidance (Di Bari, 2015; Gugliandolo *et al.*, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2012; Snyder *et al.*, 2015).

Card 2, on the other hand, evoked experiences and emotions related to male-female relationships. While in the stories inspired by the other images, the digital device, frequently placed in the foreground, appeared to support already existing affective dynamics or tensions, in the couple-themed narratives, the device seemed to be the very source of conflict between the charac-

ters. The number of stories marked by negative affect, such as anxiety, fear, and tension, was significantly higher than those with a positive tone.

Considering participants' ages, this card evoked only negative affects among adult participants. One might infer that among younger participants technology is a more shared activity – one of interaction between partners, which we associate with a more positive perception of the couple, enhancing emotional engagement (Schade *et al.*, 2013; Toma & Choi, 2015), however, adult participants' narratives suggested a more individualised use of technology, often to the detriment of partner interaction, with negative repercussions on the relationship (Leggett & Rossouw, 2014).

In negatively connoted stories of both the male and female subjects, the mobile device frequently assumes the role of a third party in the relationship, reflecting the function played by the semi-nude woman in the background of the original TAT card 4. The device thus maintains a similar triangular dynamic, with the source of conflict being the technology itself. The female protagonist often appears to develop a sort of dependency on the device – an attachment that intrudes upon the couple's dynamic and manifests as an intrusive, distinctly feminine need (Lapierre & Custer, 2020; Ridgway & Clayton, 2016; Sánchez *et al.*, 2017). While in some narratives the device hinders the relationship by amplifying doubts and jealousy, thereby relegating communication and the individual's capacity for relational assessment to a secondary role (Minolli, 2005), most of the stories depict the female character as absorbed in digital entertainment. This contrasts with findings from other studies where digital media primarily fuel jealousy, control, surveillance behaviours, and negative affect in women (Muisse *et al.*, 2009; Muscanell *et al.*, 2013; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Instead, our results appear to support the conclusions of Amichai-Hamburger & Etgar (2016), highlighting how, during moments meant for couple interaction, the smartphone may undermine romantic intimacy, especially when attention is directed toward private rather than shared digital use.

Compared to the other cards, the affective tone of the narratives related to Card 3 – depicting a subject taking or posing for a photo – was evenly split between positive and negative affect, suggesting a more nuanced and differentiated emotional representation. The narratives by female participants were markedly richer in emotional content, offering details, desires, vulnerabilities, and aspirations. In contrast, the male participants' stories tended to be more descriptive, with less engagement in the subject's inner world. In most of the narratives, the technological stimulus was used as a gateway to the virtual world, akin to a stage on which to appear attractive in the eyes of others, driven by a strong need for recognition and acceptance (Birkeland *et al.*, 2014; Brown & Larson, 2009; Goffman, 1959; Jang *et al.*, 2015; Rubin *et al.*, 2008; Simoniello, 2014; Yau & Reich, 2019). Interestingly, behind the scenes of this stage, the negatively connoted sto-

ries reveal feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction. Driven by a pursuit of perfection, subjects imposed on themselves a form of self-constraint, excluding the true self from the stage. Instead, they became engaged in a game of projections, constructing a highly desirable image to obtain affection and attention that fear of judgment and negative evaluation prevented them from seeking in the offline world (Lee & Jang, 2019). The stories clearly illustrate the connection between digital media and self-image, pointing to a search for mirroring in which the Other-on-the-Net functions as the third party, positioned between the ideal self-image shared online and the subject, able to either hinder or support self-recognition. This dynamic narcissistically fixes the subject's identity to the posted photograph. The metacognitive activity involved in narrating the self thus appears to be deeply shaped by the symbolic resources and digital 'identity-related' materials through which the subject constitutes itself in relation to others (Di Fraia, 2012). However, some narratives portrayed the device as a means of capturing positive aspects of the self, serving as a personal reminder for self-affirmation that does not require external validation (Chae, 2017). When the photograph is not shared online, the emotions involved are more genuinely connected to private moments. In this context, the central theme in women's stories was beauty, while men spoke of self-esteem and personal satisfaction tied to academic or professional achievements. Lastly, in the stories where the act of photographing the surrounding environment was described, the technological stimulus either played no specific role – leaving the narrative on a mostly descriptive level – or served as a stage that the main character refuses to 'step onto', due to vulnerabilities and fear of negative evaluation by others (Lim & Yang, 2015; Przybylski *et al.*, 2013; Valkenburg *et al.*, 2006; Vogel *et al.*, 2014; Wolniewicz *et al.*, 2018).

Card 4 elicited unpleasant and painful emotional experiences: no participant attributed positive affect to the story. The mobile device on the sofa, next to the slumped figure, took on a central role in most of the narratives, serving as a means for the significant other to enter the story and evoking modern experiences of romantic relationships and separation. The partner appears in the narrative through the technology, which often acts as a vehicle for bad news: it is through the device that arguments occur, more often the breakup itself, or the discovery of information that hinders the detachment necessary for processing loss. This dynamic, particularly among female participants, triggered intense negative emotions and heightened emotional distress (Herron *et al.*, 2017; Lukacs & Quan-Haase, 2015). In most narratives, the mobile phone thus becomes the tool through which one partner communicates relational dissatisfaction, avoiding direct dialogue and opportunities for conflict resolution (Nesi *et al.*, 2017). In general, stories – especially those involving breakups – seem to reveal a mindset regarding how romantic conflict is viewed and managed: femininity is more readily associated with the

expression of emotion, whereas masculinity is commonly portrayed as the side that initiates the breakup, often relying on or requiring technology to do so. Nevertheless, there are also positive aspects linking digital devices to the subject's resilience: in some cases, the device allows the individual to receive support from friends or to access information which, although painful and unavoidable, becomes necessary to activate available resources.

## Conclusions

Despite the widespread diffusion and intensive use of technological devices, the 88 collected digital narratives show that digital interaction remains neither comparable nor preferable to face-to-face interaction. The need to know the person one is speaking with, the ability to draw on all non-verbal cues, and the possibility of establishing a real connection with the other make in-person interaction not interchangeable.

Psychoanalytic reflection can help us better understand new digital practices, to avoid pathologising shared habits that signal significant transformations in individuals' emotional investment in cyberspace (Ciccone, 2023). In particular, the appeal of virtual reality emerges as a privileged subject of study for psychoanalytic science, which approaches it with caution, as it often presents itself as an alternative refuge from relational experience. De Masi (2012) effectively illustrates two interpretative strands that enliven the psychoanalytic debate on the virtual world, both of which are well supported by the findings of our research. Virtual space can be understood as an open *transitional space* in which fantasy and imagination can flourish, while still allowing the possibility of a return to a more grounded reality. A more concerned interpretative strand views virtual space as a separate world, preconfigured by others and largely devoid of imagination, which distances the subject from 'flesh and blood' relational reality.

Our findings show that the digital object is associated with negative feelings and does not foster closeness with significant others when it is linked to ambition and obligation. Too often, digital devices are delegated the task of entertaining children, while experts continue to urge parents to promote shared use of technology.

It is within romantic relationships that the digital object takes on a decisive role: what initially serves as a binding agent in the magical moments of relationship formation becomes a dark instigator of conflict when the relationship begins to deteriorate. In particular, women seem to turn to digital devices, avoiding the processing of relational dissatisfaction. When the digital object becomes the weapon of rupture that enacts the separation, both subjectivities are removed from what had been, up to that moment, an intimate relationship. This withdrawal is even more evident when the digital object is given the role

of the cause in traumatic situations. The other is reduced to a mere ghost, vaguely represented by the phone.

When the digital object is given the task of reflecting one's self-image, it appears to function both as a support for moments of self-realisation and as a narcissistic shifting onto others' admiration, one's sense of self-worth.

What fascinates us about the virtual is the result of a complex interplay of projective phenomena that mirror and give shape to our fantasies, needs, and most intimate desires. It is the imaginative tendency of thought that, whether consciously or unconsciously, goes far beyond the boundaries of reality, adding, digressing, inventing, concealing, or even creating illusions. In this way, everything conveyed through screens, whether large or small, carries something that resonates deeply with our imagination and unconscious, with our desires and our nightmares. Each screen thus easily becomes an extension of our mind, a kind of visual prosthesis capable of activating a new field of experience: a suspended virtual space in which exploration, taking place in a sort of non-place, can facilitate and enable, in seemingly complete safety, any kind of pseudo-digital activity, whether constructive, transgressive, or aggressive (Furin & Longo, 2019).

### *Limitations and future directions*

This research should be regarded as a pilot study and presents several limitations. The most significant limitation concerns the small sample size; furthermore, the non-randomised nature of the sample prevents it from being considered statistically representative. However, while these factors limit the generalisability of the findings, this initial sampling nonetheless allowed for an in-depth exploration of technological uses and habits, made possible through the collection and selection of 88 narratives obtained via the administration of custom-designed cards based on those of the TAT. These cards served as a gateway into the participants' subjectivity. The results obtained may represent a first step toward a qualitative exploration of the affective dynamics underlying technology use and the subjective issues it entails.

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