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## **#Listeningtomediatedmothers: Reflections on the Performative Shelfie at the Digital-Material Nexus**

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# #LISTENINGTOMEDIATEDMOTHERS: REFLECTIONS ON THE PERFORMATIVE SHELFIE AT THE DIGITAL-MATERIAL NEXUS

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## Introduction

The lived experience of being at home radically shifted during rolling COVID-19 restrictions throughout 2020, with significant impacts on genderised working and parenting practices. This photo essay draws on creative practice ethnography (Hjorth et al., 2020), mobile media studies and new materialism to critically unpack the performative shelfie as a digital-material assemblage that literally *displays* these effects. As part of a PhD research project entitled *Digital Parenting Listening: A Gendered Mobile Media Creative Practice Ethnography*, the participatory encounter #listeningtomediatedmothers (2020–2021) enacts the shelfie as a qualitative digital ethnographic probe to creatively explore work-life balance in the lives of 13 participants located in regional Victoria, Australia. It reveals mediated shelfies as complex, multidimensional, and dynamic representations of the mothering self. Lively experiences of digital materiality come to the fore with far reaching socio-technical and creative implications for ethnographies of social media selfie motifs—as a practice of participatory engagement, digital archiving and *in situ* research.

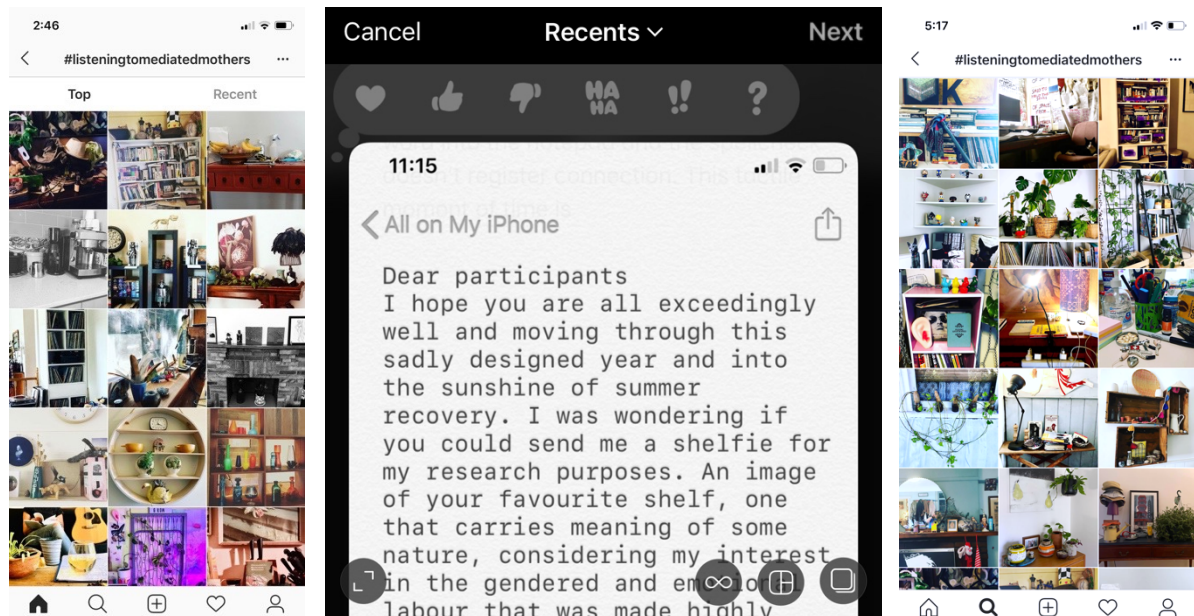


Figure 1: #listeningtomediatedmothers—mobile-based creative digital ethnographic encounter

## The Self in the Shelf

This shelfie encounter highlights the quotidian, creative, and participatory dimensions of mobile media. It aimed to disrupt reductive arguments of the selfie as a form of networked narcissism (Senft & Baym, 2015) where gendered performatives come to the fore, in line with the repetitive act of gendered societal norms (Butler, 1990), in this case, within the home. Recent reporting by the [United Nation based Women's Policy and Programme Division](#) has highlighted the pandemic's negative impact on economic and gender inequalities. Through the entanglement of the selfie and the shelf we consider the digital-material presence of the hashtagged shelfie as an everyday encounter that coalesces curated domestic space with the networked platformativity of Instagram (LaMarre, 2017).

Instagram's visual aesthetic becomes a key form of ethnographic analysis (Pink, 2013), enacting the process of visual listening. Whilst researchers such as Lev Manovich's [2012–2016 study](#) converged art history, media studies and big data science to contextualise the cultural and historical affordances of Instagram, here a qualitative approach is undertaken to analyse the nuances of the *Instagramable* shelfie. The hashtag itself can be understood as part of the new materialist process of intra-action (Barad, 2007)—residing at the nexus between infrastructural platform affordances and collective quotidian experience—also enabling more enhanced understandings of digital labour within the networked home. By utilising the selfie as one of the most pervasive barometers of popular culture today, motifs such as the shelfie enables extended networked listening and multisensorial forms of gendered 'voice'.



Figure 2: Researcher shelfie: invitation callout for shelfie participants

The selfie trope of the shelfie is socially networked and layered with multiple meanings. Using mobile media messaging and asynchronous social media platform listening, over six months, working mothers posted mobile media shelfies using the hashtag (See Figures 1 & 2). Through analysis of participants' creative shelfies a nuanced form of digital ethnography emerged, mingling issues of parenting, and gendered, domestic, and emotional labour.

Visual and computational layering of information and hashtagged metadata archiving occurs through ubiquitous smartphone usage. As Paul Frosh argues, tagging is ‘a profoundly poetic procedure for populating and disclosing worlds’ (2019, p. 95). The poetic affordances of hashtagging became part of the manifestation of participants’ sense of the pandemic self, where the role of the performative shelfie as a digital-material assemblage recalibrated as a collective form of meaning-making through *#listeningtomediatedmothers*.



*Figure 3: The networked shelfie as mediated embodiment of self-care*

### **Shelf-care**

Framed simultaneously as a participatory mobile probe and creative encounter, research revealed the material properties of the shelfie as digital creative artefact, which often empowered a form of reflective self-care for participants. In Figure 3 (above) whitewashed circular shelving holds culinary objects, a tiny house, ornamental plants and ample negative space. The image performs as a stylised assemblage of care and belonging and reveals a love of past design aesthetics.



Figure 4: Kitchen shelfie, late afternoon (left); Bedroom shelfie, early eve (right)

Many of the shelfies enacted a collective sigh for the blurring dichotomies of public/private and mothering/working practices, where the home became an entangled space of paid work and unpaid domestic labour. One participant accompanies a shelfie in Figure 4 (above, left) with the text: ‘I keep the cask on the kitchen shelf, easy access for both cooking and a quick tipples’. We can hear continuity in the bird’s lament—or even the paradox of ‘being free as a bird’—mediated as framed art, remediated on greeting card, and re-made as a hand-painted remote learning project. Another participant continues the thematic with the burlesque feather cloak (Figure 4 above, right). This working mother notes the irony of the Devil’s Ivy and the ‘Mother’s Ruin’, to melt away the highly competitive parenting and working demands of the day.



Figure 5: Two participants harness sound and growth for their home shelfies

The affordances of the emerging shelfie extends networked self-representation further into the curated ordering of shelved objects, such as intermingling plants with vinyl record collections (Figure 5, above). As noted by Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, with Instagram photos of selfie tropes such as the shelfie, there is a stylised sensibility that captures individuated “inspirational and affective appeal” (2020, p. 62). Curatorial practice occurs as shelves are colour coded and thematised (see Figure 6) and when this mode extends into the everyday experiences of domestic spaces it becomes a practice of affective self-care, a location of restfulness and potential recovery.

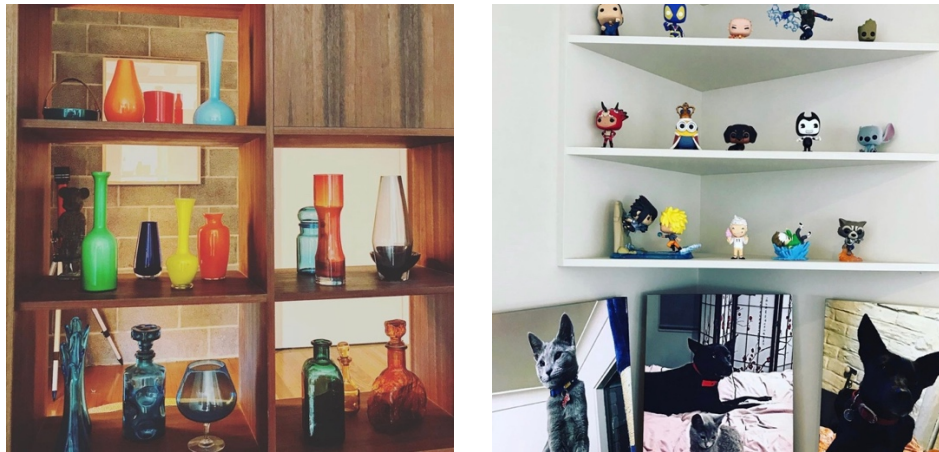


Figure 6: Carving out the temporality of careful contemplation and moments of wellbeing

To curate (*cura* in Latin) is to help, to care, to cure. The shelfies in Figure 6 (above) embody spatial and temporal moments of contemplation to evoke meaningful feelings of well-being; the careful curation of colourful glass bottles (left) and a tween child's Pop! Vinyl figurine collectibles arranged above companion animal portraits (right). Remarking on mother subjectivity and a comment regarding the 'designed' approach of posting, the participant who shared the shelfie in Figure 6 (left) to both Instagram and Facebook comments, "most of my collection is from op shops. I'm a mother, I'm busy, I just like coloured glass. If you look closely you can see the dust... are you going to judge me?" (See Figure 7 below).

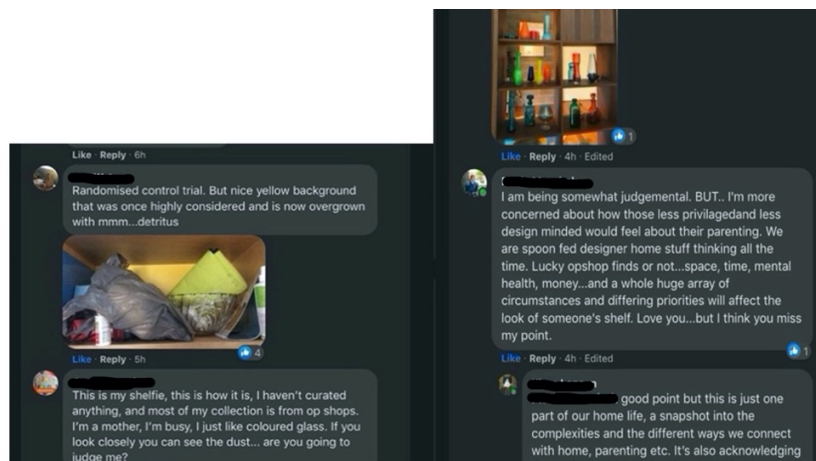


Figure 7: Extended social media dialogue of simultaneously shared shelfies on Facebook

The sensitivity of object placement and its relation to subjectivity can also be seen in Figure 8 (below), where participants position photographs of familial value alongside the creativity of art and decorative plants. As the contributor of the shelfie on the left stated, "I create these calm spaces in my home that I can tend and meditate over to escape from the craziness of it all. So, it is a part of my parenting and a part of me". The phenomenon of the shelfie afforded a form of extended listening, revealing working mothers' dynamic negotiation of the home as a site of work and playful curation, and the significance of meaningful objects in the construction of hybrid online-offline identity and networked locality (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011).



*Figure 8: Family photos are a steadfast object within the shelfie assemblage*

### **Transforming & Repurposing**

*#listeningtomediatedmothers* repurposes the selfie method and offers divergent readings of the intensified positioning of work/life identity within the home. Feathers appear again alongside the gun-wielding sculpture ‘Doll’ as one participant—part mother, part mobile app developer, part family IT help desk—leans around the computer to take a quick shelfie snapshot (Figure 9). This participant asserts evocatively, ‘We’re not working from home: we’re living at work’.



*Figure 9: Participant takes a quick work break to create a mobile shelfie moment*

The shelf becomes a site of mindful workarounds (see Figure 10, below left), a combinatory expression of labour and well-being where art, familial reminders, stationary items, hand hygiene, health supplements and affective knick-knacks blend function, bodily care and intimate meaningfulness. The bird's nest is here too, the epitome of home (Figure 10, right).



*Figure 10: Mindful workarounds; mediating the home via the shelfie*

Yet what happens to the shelfie during long periods of lockdown and isolation when there are competing demands of remote work, remote school, and everyday domestic labour? Here the shelfie erupts as revealingly uncurated and disorderly (See Figure 11 below), and perhaps evolving as repurposed and highly visible deconstructions of capitalist logistics around gendered labour.

A mop interrupted. A bookshelfie bursting at the seams. Cobwebs in the corner. Random clutter. Nappies and masks at the ready; too many hats and a pile of plates. A tree house home-school project constructed from recycled items. A hanging plant unhung (See Figure 12, left), where a participant represents the hall shelfie as a place she comments somewhat ironically “where daily parenting adventures start and end”.

Housework becomes a site of reaction and random composition, permitting mess and the dust to accumulate defiantly on top of every available surface.



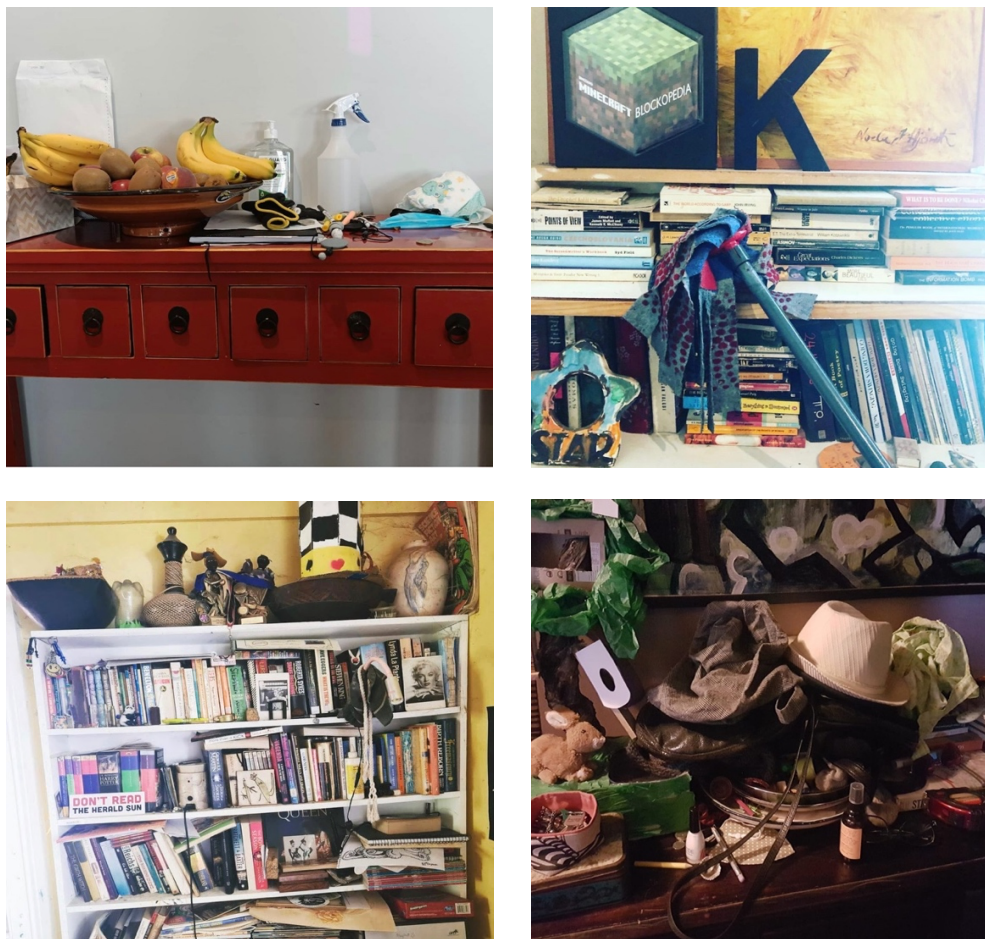


Figure 11: Participant shelfies of domestic labour shortcuts, disorder, chaos and dusty clutter

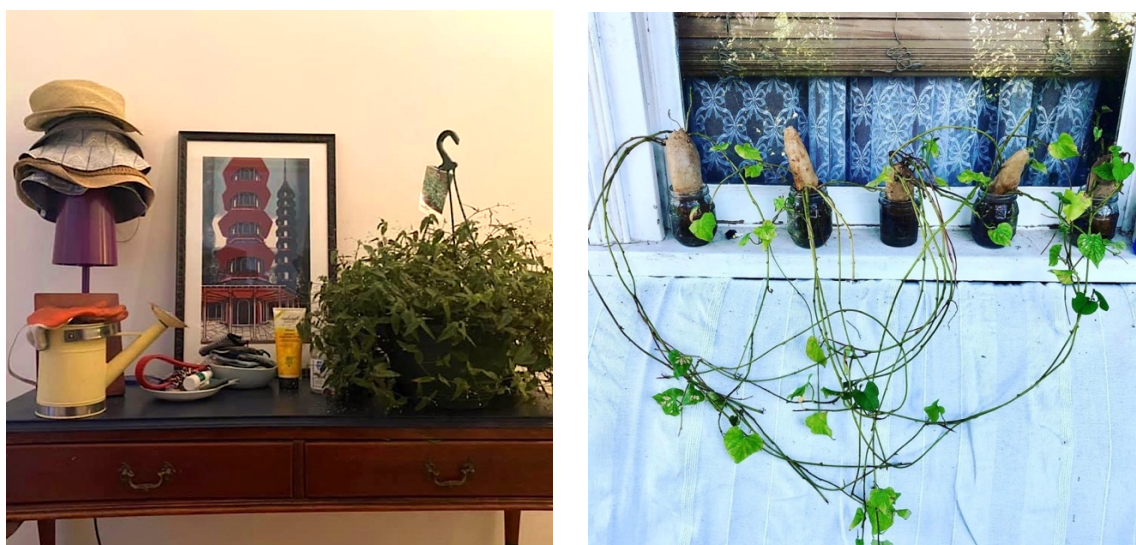


Figure 12: The hall shelfie and the porch shelfie act as home entry/exit point.

This visual-digital-material project explored an alternative trope of the selfie, providing evidence that listening to mediated mothers via the shelfie can generate new understandings around the complexities of gendered labour, further 'reworked' by the pandemic. The shelfie enacts a durational kind of memorabilia that is simultaneously localised and continually unfolding, whilst also performing with and extending into affective network publics through social media platforms. By attending to the shelfie as a socially networked and curatorial form of careful remediation—a collective sharing of networked tropes of self via the act of meditative wellbeing, domestic place-making and embodied being-in-the-world—we can critically perceive how home environments, gendered labour and digital parenting are being recalibrated by prolonged physical isolation and an intensified reliance on technological mediation.

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