


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Moments to remember: The impact of mediated memory work on live event experiences

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Abstract

The pervasive use of media at current-day festivals thoroughly impacts how these live events are experienced, anticipated, and remembered. This empirical study examined eventgoers' live media practices – taking photos, making videos, and in-the-moment sharing of content on social media platforms – at three large cultural events in the Netherlands. Taking a practice approach (Ahva 2017; Couldry 2004), the author studied online and offline event environments through extensive ethnographic fieldwork: online and offline observations, and interviews with 379 eventgoers. Analysis of this research material shows that through their live media practices eventgoers are continuously involved in mediated memory work (Lohmeier and Pentzold 2014; Van Dijck 2007), a form of live storytelling that revolves around how they want to remember the event. The article focuses on the impact of mediated memory work on the live experience in the present. It distinguishes two types of mediated experience of live events: *live as future memory* and the *experiential live*. The author argues that memory is increasingly incorporated into the live experience in the present, so much so that, for many eventgoers, mediated memory-making is crucial to having a full live event experience. The article shows how empirical research in media studies can shed new light on key questions within memory studies.

Keywords: liveness; live events; memory; mediated memory work; narrative; social media; ethnography; media practices

Introduction

At a party in an Amsterdam park during Pride Amsterdam 2018, I met Isabella (34), who was dancing by herself and taking pictures with her smartphone. She told me that she was instantly sharing these images via various platforms with her friends in several places in Europe. 'Some of them have been here 11 years ago with me' Isabella explains, 'so it's kind of like re-sharing the memory that I am here again.' Isabella describes her live event experience at Pride Amsterdam as being there again. Through the practice of sharing photos with friends, she creates a meaningful live instance – a being in the present – that draws on memory.

Live and *memory* are inextricably connected: strong live experiences are memorable moments, distinct instants that stand out from the stream of daily occurrences. Festivals revolve around these extraordinary moments; we go into these organised live events anticipating intense experiences of the present that will become fond memories. Intense

experiences and fond memories that many eventgoers visualise through photographs and videos, which they often share through various connective platforms and apps.

This study addresses the question of how mediated memories (Van Dijck 2007) are made at live events, with a particular interest in how platformed memories are understood, embraced, and dismissed by festivalgoers. Following José van Dijck's argument that 'memory is not mediated by media, but media and memory transform each other' (p. 21), it considers how changes in media technology over the last decade – and the resulting transformations in practices of media use at festivals – have ushered in altered ways of remembering and anticipating live events. Its focus lies, however, not on the moments of anticipation and memory, nor on the mediated memories themselves, but rather on the impact that the practice of making mediated memories has on the live experience in the present.

This article explores how media practices at live events function as “mediated memory work,” significantly influencing eventgoers' experience of the present moment. It builds on Lohmeier and Pentzold's (2014, p. 778) conceptualisation of mediated memory work as “bundles of bodily and materially grounded practices to accomplish memories in and through media environments.” The analysis deliberately focuses on the practices themselves, rather than the resulting media content or how these posts, photos, stories, and videos are used afterwards. In doing so, it addresses a question posed by Andrew Hoskins (Hoskins and Halstead 2021): ‘if we are not recording [only] to review and to remember, then what are we doing?’ (p. 678). While the ubiquitous filming, photographing, and sharing of experiences on social media are often studied as capturing and showing (off) one's experiences – concentrated on what is captured and shown and people's motivation behind this behaviour – this empirical study shifts focus to the immediate impact of this mediated memory work on the live experience. The analysis develops the argument that – due to the pervasiveness and logic of the media that current-day eventgoers use – memory and anticipation are increasingly inscribed in the live experience itself.

To make this argument, this article draws on a large study (Hammelburg 2021) of three annual cultural events in the Netherlands: Oerol Festival (a festival for location-based theatre and art, June 2017), 3FM Serious Request (a national cross-media fundraising event, December 2017), and Pride Amsterdam (a large Pride festival, July/August 2018). Taking a practice approach (Ahva 2017; Couldry 2004), this study combined a core of ethnographic fieldwork – observations and interviews with 379 eventgoers – with digital and visual methods for researching online and offline event environments. This current article will mainly make use of the ethnographic work, yet its analysis is informed by the full study.

Concerning technology, this study draws on the growing theory on affordances of media technologies (Bucher and Helmond 2017; Hutchby 2001; Langlois 2014) yet argues that people's behaviour is not only the result of technological affordances. Rather, these technologies are also shaped by the way we interact with them, what we expect of them, and how we use them in practice (see Costa 2018; Ellison and boyd 2013; McVeigh-Schultz and Baym 2015; Nagy and Neff 2015). The choice to focus on media practices in this study fits this stance well.

The following analysis will distinguish two types of mediatised experience of live events that exhibit specific realisations of memory in the present: the *live as future memory* and the *experiential live*. Both forms of mediatised live experience involve a rationale for how one wants to remember that instance, and both are established through particular media practices. This will be addressed in four analytical sections, but first, in the next two sections, the theoretical and methodological foundation for this analysis will be delineated.

Mediated memory work and the articulation of live as narrative practice

This study builds on existing scholarship on liveness and the mediated construction of time. It regards media as techno-cultural forms that put forward their own temporal structures

(Bucher 2020; Coleman 2020; Ekstrom 2016; Ernst 2013; Fornas 2016), which thoroughly impact our experience of the present. As several scholars have argued, social media platforms each have their own algorithmic paces and times (Bucher 2018; Kaun and Stierstedt 2014; Weltevrede et al. 2014). Further, digital platformed environments afford users the ability to actively participate in so-called real-time streams (Berry 2011), to join in “what is happening right now” (see Coleman 2020; Hassan and Purser 2007; Rushkoff 2013). Within these platformed environments, the memorable festival moments that eventgoers share are taken up in streams of content of various sorts, ranging from funny cat videos to unfolding news events. Through this notion of the stream – the algorithmically aggregated presentation of content such as the Facebook timeline or Instagram feed or display of Stories – many online platforms construct a promise of liveness.

While both academic and general understandings of liveness often centre on the concept of immediacy and highlight, or rather glorify, the notion that media can bring instant information by displaying events as they are happening, critical scholarship (see, for instance, Bourdon 2020; Feuer 1983; Van Es 2017) has illuminated that absolute immediacy in live media practices is a myth. Live media practices – for example, watching a live broadcast or sharing a live story on Instagram – rather enact a commitment to, or promise of, the live happening. Live media practices articulate the memorable present in relation to what has come before and what will happen after. The practice of watching a live stream or sharing an Instagram Story realises an instance in ordinal time, in relation to a past and a future, or, as Scannell (2014) argues, a moment when the ‘unfolding time of human history and the unfolding times of the living intersect’ (p. 94).

This aspect of ordinal time, or of unfolding time and the notion of history, brings the concept of narrative into play. An instance or moment in itself is not *live*, it rather becomes *live* within a developing story, as a point on a narrative arc that includes events before and implies moments to come. The relation between time and narrative is one well established in narrative theory, with many works building on or responding to that of Ricoeur (1984–1986) who maintains that it is through narrative that humans make sense of time. As Jens Brockmeier (2009) states, “both memory and time, as well as their fusion, only become intelligible in as far as they exist in linguistic form; they are only thinkable and imaginable as autobiographical discourse and narrative time” (p. 117). The rise of digital media, research seems to indicate, has led to an increase in both the production and the everyday consumption of narratives (Coble 2016). Mobile digital media and social media platforms, with their temporal architecture, afford people to continually shape a multitude of unfolding narratives while living their lives; personal stories of how they are living their lives (cf. Couldry 2008; Drotner 2008). In these media practices, narrative, time, memory, and identity are tightly interwoven. Further, social media have established new spaces for social narrative practices – the narrative self as relational identity (Hull and Katz 2006) – as well as collective self-construction and the creation of communal stories (cf. Urciuoli 1995), as we can see happening around the live events that are the topic of study here. The many posts and stories that eventgoers share become meaningful as *live* as they are positioned in various unfolding narratives, often – in line with Scannell’s claim – a combination of event-related narratives and self-narratives. The realisation of *live* can thus be understood as a narrative practice.

The relational temporal configuration of the live instance – it being realised in relation to other times – also becomes apparent when we regard how liveness is technologically articulated in relation to the possibility of recording (Auslander 2012; Scannell 2014), archiving, and storing (Kaun and Stierstedt 2014; Weltevrede et al. 2014). Live media content – whether a television broadcast, Facebook Live stream, or Instagram Story – exists as an instant in relation to times that have been and times to come. The design and functionalities of many media platforms assert and afford the intertwinement of past,

present, and future in live content, each in its own way. In a similar manner as television does memory work through commentators positioning live footage in a historical context alongside endless replays of memorable moments (Scannell 2014; White 2004), digital platforms each have their own ways of featuring old content as meaningful now, often in the form of ‘on-this-date media’ (Humphreys 2020). For instance, Facebook frequently prompts users to share memories by displaying old pictures on anniversary dates. Even Snapchat, which is characterised by its ephemeral content, introduced Memories (in 2016) so that users can save their snaps and easily access and share them at a later moment. The live is technologically constituted, to paraphrase Kaun and Stierstedt (2014, p. 1159), through the dialectical combination of immediacy and durability. This article examines the differing blends of immediacy and durability in live media practices at the three studied events, with a focus on practices of producing media content by eventgoers.

Studying these live media practices – the creation and sharing of photos, videos, posts, messages, and stories within the unfolding event – enables examination of the impact of mediated memory work on the live experience within the unfolding events. It is important to clearly demarcate these practices from those of sharing “old” content before or after an event, as these are also very prominent in online platforms. Particularly Instagram and Facebook are known for their nostalgic user cultures such as “throwback posting” (Leaver et al. 2020; Niemeyer 2014), a common way to express longing for the past and rekindle the excitement, positive feelings, and laughs of past moments. Whereas these nostalgic user cultures are not examined here, they do play a role in live media practices as, as the analysis will show, they shape eventgoers’ habitus: eventgoers’ live media practices at events are often guided by the logic of these online cultures. This is also the case for the aforementioned algorithmic features of “on-this-date media” and “memories”. The importance of re-living within the logic of many online platforms leads to an interesting interplay of present and past in live media practices.

Methodological approach

This empirical study operationalises media practices at the studied events as composites of three elements: what eventgoers do with media technologies, the materials they use and make, and their understanding thereof. This deconstruction is inspired by Ahva’s (2017) tripartite model of activity, materiality, and discursive reflexivity, which she grounds in the work of Barnes (2001), Schatzki (2001), Stern (2003), and Couldry (2004). This study thus examines eventgoers’ media behaviour; the objects, content, tools, technologies, and places they use, consume, and produce at the events; and how they interpret and evaluate this.

Taking a practice approach has advantages at several levels. It enabled me to look past a single media technology or type of content and instead consider the range of media practices encountered during fieldwork. Further, it also allowed me to study the choices that eventgoers make to not use media in certain ways or at certain times (Couldry 2004). By centralising media practices as ‘entwined fabrics of technologies and people’ (Lingel 2017, p. 7), it breaches the digital/non-digital divide and steers clear of technological determinism and instrumentalism. Moreover, as practice thinking undermines ‘the traditional individual-nonindividual divide’ (Schatzki 2001 p. 14), it acknowledges the thorough entanglement of people and technology without placing agency exclusively in one or the other. Open enquiry into what people do with media, the materials they use, and how they reflect upon this takes the studied people seriously without claiming that their choices and actions are always conscious, reason-driven, or free from techno-cultural or socio-economic structuring.¹

¹ See Hammelburg (2021) for further reflection on this approach, including the grounding of it in phenomenology and in what Pierre Bourdieu (1980/1990, 1979/1996) has described as the ‘logic of practice.’

Table 1. Datasets from the three studied events

Oerol	Serious request	Pride
Observations online and on the ground	Observations online and on the ground	Observations online and on the ground
	14 media diaries	7 media diaries
Interviews: 58 short in-situ 11 in-depth	Interviews: 59 short in-situ 19 in-depth	Interviews: 74 short in-situ 14 in-depth

The study was designed as a multi-sited field study (Marcus 1995) tailored to three live events that took place in the Netherlands in 2017 and 2018: Oerol Festival 2017 (Oerol), 3FM Serious Request 2017 (Serious Request), and Pride Amsterdam 2018 (Pride). Oerol is Europe's largest festival for location-based theatre and art. The festival has been organised every year, since 1982, for ten days in June on the Dutch island of Terschelling and attracts over 50,000 visitors per edition. 3FM Serious Request is an annual fundraiser for the Red Cross organised by the Dutch national radio station 3FM in the week before Christmas. This event is inherently a media event: three radio DJs are locked up in a Glass House studio for a week to make radio shows 24/7. Thus, the main event is the radio show, and people are invited to join in this event in several mediated ways. Serious Request 2017 reached approximately 10,000,000 people through the event's own media channels and 500,000 visitors on the ground (Van Stuivenberg et al. 2018). Pride Amsterdam is one of the most popular Pride events in the world. Since 1996, it has been organised for 9 days at the end of July/beginning of August in the city centre of Amsterdam, and the latest events have attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors. This combination of selected events provides research material that is comprehensive concerning media use, covers various event types, and is internationally relevant.

This article presents an analysis of extensive ethnographic research material from these three events: online and offline participatory observations, media diaries, and semi-structured qualitative interviews (see Table 1). Two types of interviews were carried out in all three field studies: 192 short in-situ interviews (averaging 3.5 minutes) held at event locations and activities with 1 to 6 persons at a time (a total of 319 participants); and 44 longer in-depth interviews (averaging 30 minutes) carried out during and shortly after the events with 1 to 4 persons, but predominantly individually, (a total of 60 participants) at the periphery of event locations or at home via video conference. Where the short in-situ interviews provide unique insights into the multitude of live media experiences in place and in the moment, the longer interviews offered room for a more in-depth exploration of these experiences. A total of 379 people participated in the interviews: 120 in the Oerol study, 128 in the Serious Request study, and 131 in the Pride study.

For the design of this ethnographic research and the first phase of analysis, a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014; Strauss and Corbin 1998) was taken. While clustering initial codes and finding my way into what people had shared with me, I continuously aimed to work with my datasets iteratively, going back and forth between my developing ideas and the data (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Each event had a customised research design for its field study that was flexible and open to revision. This enabled me to follow the unique characteristics of each event – align with its publics, locations, and content –, tweak the research design based on experiences in the field, and go back and forth between theory, fieldwork, and analysis, each time bringing insights and questions from one area to the next.

Memorable moments and live storytelling

When asked about their live media practices, eventgoers consistently emphasise that these concern moments that are extraordinary and memorable. As Kyle (25, Pride) voices, 'It is a special moment to be here.' Although this is a seemingly obvious observation, the prominence of this theme in my interview material led me to further scrutinise the construction of the live instance as a special moment. Live instances are memorable moments: noticeable experiences that are singled out because they will be commemorated as a distinct temporal unity – as an event – standing out from the stream of daily experiences. These instances become part of the narratives that eventgoers construct of their own lives, which intersect with communal narratives of the event. These are the moments that we anticipate and that will become our memories.

Although we might call them “happenings,” festivals and cultural events do not just happen; rather, they are created to be extraordinary moments. As Scannell (2014) argues, we ‘arrange to give ourselves experiences in order to have them’ (p. 187). ‘The event WANTS to be a historic occasion,’ as Elihu Katz (Katz and Dayan 2017, p. 9) maintains. Eventgoers are involved in this construction of the event as special moment. They know what they are stepping into; moreover, they go to festivals expecting to experience memorable moments. As Scannell (2014) writes, these ‘occasions always come with an ontology of expectations’ (p. 181). Festivalgoers’ experiences at live events are augmented by this ‘ontology’ of expectations and their understanding of these experiences as memorable moments within their self-narratives.

It is this mixture of anticipation, experience, and memory that leads to extensive media use at live events. Whereas the term “live media practices” seems to imply that these are centred around the live experience in the moment, I argue that it is not the experience in itself, but *memory* that is pivotal here. Throughout my interview material, memory is mentioned far more often than experience. The anticipation of the memorable moment creates the desire for eventgoers to capture it, to create “mediated memories”. I am building on Van Dijck’s (2007) work here, who introduced the term mediated memories to describe ‘the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies for creating and recreating a sense of past, present, and future of ourselves in relation to others’ (p. 21). Eventgoers, I argue, are involved in live storytelling practices that do exactly that: through their live media practices at the event, they construct narratives that position them in time, most often for the eyes of others.

The intertwinement of past, present, and future in these live storytelling practices is not only established by the ontology of expectations of the event but also by the media technologies that eventgoers use. As discussed in the first section of this article, media as techno-cultural forms put forward their own temporal structures, which are then inter-playing with the anticipation, experience, and memory of eventgoers who use them. Eventgoers’ in-the-moment experiences are increasingly accompanied by the awareness of a variety of other moments in which their mediated memories will be meaningful: the moment their WhatsApp message is read by a friend; the algorithmic time that makes their post re-appear as a memory on Facebook; the moment that they stumble upon their pictures of the event when scrolling through the photos on their phone. Their live media practices – their act of creating posts, stories, and messages within the live experience – are always connected to the idea of re-living these moments at a later time.

Further, the media platforms that festivalgoers use afford the way they anticipate, experience, and remember live events. Those media environments familiar to them – such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Snapchat in this study – shape their mental imaging of themselves at the event. My interviewees tell me that they already know beforehand what their Instagram post from the event could look like. At the event, carrying their smartphone

means that each moment of experience provides them with the choice to capture or not, to share or not. And even when not captured with a camera or smartphone, these technological environments shape eventgoers' memory work through (mental) imaging of their experiences, as Sue (31, Oerol) explains:

when we don't have a camera or something, we just kind of [moves fingers as if operating a camera], you just like, remember it, you know, just to take that kind of [pause] pause. So, we're more about the taking of the photo than the photo itself.

Media technologies thus thoroughly shape eventgoers' memory work at live events, and the smartphone in their pocket leads them to continuously weigh how they want to remember the event and thus experience the moment. Through analysis of my research material, I have distinguished two distinct forms of *live* experience as mediated memory work: the *live as future memory* and the *experiential live*. I deliberately use the term "live" here to emphasise that these are mediated ways of experiencing. Moreover, "live" refers to commonly used language at the studied events and thus also the language that my interviewees used when they described their experiences there. By delineating these two forms, in the following two sections, I aim to explicate how mediated memory work is carried out in the studied events, with different temporal foci entailing different media practices.

Live as future memory

'I always try to capture memories. That's what it's about for me.' (Joyce, 19, Pride)

Many of my interviewees speak of their need to capture their live experiences, referring to a desire to keep tangible memories of these moments. Generally, this capturing is done visually, in photographs or videos made, most commonly, with camera applications on smartphones or camera functionalities within connected applications such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook. As Lucia (52, Oerol) explains, 'It's to keep the things that you have experienced. The moment will never return, but it was a moment that you really enjoyed, so this [photo] is like a memory with visual support.' This reflects van House's (2011) argument that 'images are seen as memories made durable' (p. 130). Moreover, for many of my interviewees, platformed images are crucial memory tools. As Eduard (42) says, pondering what it would be like if there had been no photos or posts or other social media content from his attendance at Pride, 'it would feel like [pause] like I missed it. ... If the only thing that remains is my memory and there is nothing beside that, then [pause] well, then it is [pause] less being there than when sharing it on social media.' Eduard's words, stating that having 'only' his own memory of the event would feel like missing it, exemplify how essential these durable mediated memories are for eventgoers' sense of being there.

At Pride, Maroline (33) posted this picture (Figure 1) of Diane (28) on Instagram just before embarking on a boat for the Canal Parade, the high point of the event. Maroline: 'It is a moment that you want to eternalise forever.' Maroline and Diane were very excited to be part of the parade. As I spoke to them, it became apparent that they knew very well what they were stepping into. In previous years, they had been witnesses to the Canal Parade, standing on the shore, watching it live on television, and seeing the many social media posts of it come by. Now they were part of it. Eventgoers know what events look like on Instagram and Facebook, how mediated memories of them are shaped on various platforms, and how different perspectives are articulated through media content. Through this knowledge of events and platforms, they can have a helicopter view of the event while experiencing it; they can witness themselves at the event, see their personally experienced live instance as



Figure 1. Instagram post by Maroline at Pride.

part of the event, not uncommonly leading to various degrees of scripting their own event practices to tell the story of themselves at the live event.

Due to their familiarity with the typical content from the events they visit, eventgoers often already envision their live media practices before joining the event. Many interviewees tell me that they hope for, and often stage, a great shot that is telling about their live event experiences. Nina (20), for instance, arranged for someone to take a photo of her with her friend within the beautiful scenery of the Oerol Festival. ‘I really wanted a nice picture... as memory,’ Nina explains. ‘When I step off the boat [arriving at Oerol] I think, it would be nice if we have a good picture.’ These images are made in the moment, to capture the moment, with the forethought of becoming future memories. My interviewees often even refer to their future selves looking back at these live instances. These live media practices at events are thus shaped by a twofold anticipation: that of the live experience and that of the future memory of the live experience.

Being in that anticipated moment – imaging yourself as you have envisioned based on the images you have seen of past editions of the event – enhances the live experience. My interviewees take the pictures that they planned to take: a selfie in front of the Glass House studio at Serious Request, with an extravagantly dressed person at Pride, or dancing in the dunes at Oerol. These live media practices enact the present moment and are concurrently oriented towards past and future. Put in the vocabulary of Ezequiel Korin (2016), these are practices of “nowstalgia” in which the anticipation of future nostalgia motivates the creation of – often visual and platformed – media content. The incorporation of future nostalgia in the live instance widens the scope of the narrative work that is being done: creating these platformed images is not only an act of live storytelling in the sense of sharing one’s experiences with others, but also – or even more so – a practice of self-narration. Anticipated nostalgia informs the narrative by which the eventgoer understands oneself as part of the event and the event as part of their life story.

The entanglement of anticipation, experience, and memory in live media practices at the studied events also becomes apparent in the ways that my interviewees speak of their practices as fostering re-living. Often, the visual practices of creating mediated memories at the events incorporate an anticipated re-living of the event experience; as we share the great moments that we experience, they become treasured memories (see Garde-Hansen et al. 2009; Korin 2016). Many of my interviewees told me that without a picture, their day and event experience would not be complete because they wanted to have something, somewhat like a tool, to relive the event at a later moment. As Milly (51, Oerol) describes, ‘It has been so beautiful, and then you just want to experience that again at home. And not only the week after but also, for example, a year later, that you think: Oh, that time, that was so beautiful!’ Photos as mediated memories are crucial to the live experience of the event, so much so that most interviewees cannot envision the event without them.

Further, media technologies and platforms influence the way eventgoers capture and keep moments for re-living. Many of my interviewees refer to concrete media environments or platforms when they reference re-living: they tell me how they deliberately look up Oerol photos on their phone in the winter to recall a bit of the sunny island vibe or look through their posts of last year’s Pride on Facebook when looking forward to the upcoming event. For instance, Kirsten (18, Serious Request) explains:

I sometimes look at photos in [Snapchat] Memories to look up what I did last year around the same time, and then I share them again. I enjoy looking back. I really like traditions, and I love to look back at fun stuff we did in the past. I find that really important, I don’t know why but I really enjoy doing that.

Social media accounts are often used as curated (photo) archives to provide an overview of personal special moments (see Kaun and Stiernstedt 2014), together shaping a narrative of the undertakings that are meaningful to the self. Not only to share with others but also, as Matthew (34, Pride) says, ‘for me to, just privately, kind of look back on. I have my own private relationship with my archive of images.’ Vincent (38) tells me something similar at Oerol: ‘I also use Facebook for myself to look back once in a while at all the stuff that I have done. And then this will show up: Hey Oerol, awesome, I was there.’ Capturing and posting are often done for the purpose of keeping this kind of log or journal, for telling one’s personal story. This was prominent in my conversation with Kyle and Ally (both 25) at Pride:

Kyle: The reason why I post is ... also I love going back. I’ve travelled to so many countries, I love going back every once in a while, to my profile on Instagram and seeing, you know, just reflecting on all the places I have been to and the memories. Like, that’s what I do. It’s kind of like eh... a time capsule for myself.

Ally: Yes absolutely! It is almost like a [pause] scrapbook on your phone.

The way that Kyle and Ally describe their live media practices at Pride, with metaphors like scrapbooking and making a time capsule, shows that these are active narrative forms of mediated memory-making in which the notion of re-living at a later time is incorporated.

For many eventgoers, their live storytelling practices are afforded by the promotion of re-living in popular platforms. For instance, as described in the first section of this article, by the common nostalgic user culture of throwback posting on Instagram and Facebook, or by algorithmic re-living features of “on-this-date media” and “memories”. While Matthew, Vincent, Kyle, and Ally describe how they use their feeds and profiles as places to keep their memories so that they can look them up every now and then, others refer to algorithmic

remembering afforded by platforms and take the expectation thereof into account when posting in the moment. As Anne-Maud (27, Serious Request) tells me:

Often you get this notification from Facebook of something that you posted a year ago, and then I look at it again. I like that, it makes me go, “Oh, do you remember,” you know? It’s fun, often it’s the fun moments.

From their reflections, it becomes clear that many of my interviewees have grown accustomed to the algorithms of platforms doing some of the remembrance and narrative work of weaving their content into personal and collective cultural memory. For many of my interviewees, this is a reason to post directly, in the moment. As Maroline, with whom this section started, explains: “Next year I’ll get reminders from Facebook of what I did last year around that time, that is great to re-experience it. Like, ‘Oh yeah, last year we were here.’” This influence of the anticipated re-living on Maroline’s behaviour in the present again indicates how thoroughly entangled anticipation, experience, and memory are in these live media practices, and how the *live as future memory* is constructed.

The experiential live

“I don’t want to see it as history, I want to see it as the moment itself.” (Jesse, 23, Pride)

Whereas the *live as future memory* emphasises a sense of nostalgia and re-living through the creation of durable mediated memories, the *experiential live*, contrastingly, foregrounds the immersive in-the-moment experience. This form of mediated experience is established in live media practices that amplify the experiential memorable moment, such as in-the-moment sharing and livestreaming, ephemeral content, and deliberate non-mediation. Being more transitory and often more impulsive, its focus lies on the sensory experience in the present, as opposed to the above-described focus on future memories. It is, however, important to note that, despite these differences, the *experiential live* is as much a thoroughly mediated experience revolving around remembering. Akin to the *live as future memory*, this is also a mediated realisation of memory in the present, yet it involves a different blend of immediacy and durability, leaning more towards immediacy.

The *experiential live* centralises the sense of being there at that special moment, focussing on the senses, on what it feels like to be there and seeing with one’s own eyes. This brings the notion of witnessing to the fore. Witnessing has been a key concept in theory on liveness and media events for decades (see for example Dayan and Katz 1992; Frosh and Pinchevski 2017; Katz and Dayan 1985; Peters 2001). Scholarship has shown how media technologies extend the possibilities for witnessing; first from being there on the ground to witnessing at a distance through live broadcast media, and later the rise of digital and mobile media established a variety of forms of witnessing (see for example Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann 2022; Kluitenberg 2015; Kumar 2012; Smit et al. 2017). Throughout this existing scholarship, it is argued that witnessing involves and even firmly positions one in an unfolding event. This current study affirms that observation, and, furthermore, reveals new mediated constructions of witnessing at events, encompassing additional layers of witnessing and self-narrative practices.

One observation from this study is how witnessing without media – as a deliberate choice, often for specific moments – has become deeply mediated and an enactment of the *experiential live*. The deliberate non-use of media in specific special moments at the event was a prominent practice at the studied events. Pride-visitor Jesse (23) very explicitly speaks about this practice, explaining why he did not take any photos during the Pride Walk (an activist march for LGBT+ rights that is part of Pride Amsterdam)

[I] wanted to participate for the experience, and [taking] photos is something that you do to remember. This is for the moment itself. ... When I take a photo, it is a memory, and I don't want to see it as history, I want to see it as the moment itself.

Deliberately not making photos helped Jesse to focus on the experience in-the-moment, on being there, he says. This notion of media use as obstructing the event experience is mentioned very often by my interviewees. The eventgoers whom I interviewed commonly say that practices of filming, photographing, and sharing content on social media shift their attention away from the present; deliberate non-use makes them pay more attention to their in-the-moment experience.

Jesse's statement, as an example of many made by my interviewees, clearly distinguishes the *experiential live* from the *live as future memory* by pointing out the temporal difference of focusing on the present as opposed to on a future time in which the live experience is remembered. The use of the terms "memory" and "remembering" in pointing out this difference might seem to imply that memory plays less of a role in the *experiential live*. Yet, I argue, this is not the case. The distinction between these two forms of mediated live experience is not *whether* to remember, but rather *how* to remember. Where Eduard, quoted in the previous section, stated that he wanted more than his memory to remain from his attendance to Pride – referring to tangible mediated memories in the form of photos or lasting social media posts –, others express that extensive media use at events impairs their memory making. Such as Tom and Anna (both 23, Oerol):

Tom: When you wake up [the next day], it's nice to watch your videos, but if you then try to remember what the evening was like [pause], then you don't necessarily remember that moment.

Anna: No, because at the time you were busy trying to capture that cool moment to be able to say 'Look what I did yesterday!' But in the end, I think that you actually just missed it, because you're so focused on capturing it.

Many of the eventgoers whom I interviewed expressed this desire to remember their precious event moments 'as they were' as opposed to remembering through their photos or videos from it. They say that they want to remember the event in their minds or their hearts, as seen with their own eyes and not from a screen. These expressions indicate that their preference towards the *experiential live* is very much connected to how they envision remembering it.

While the *experiential live* as enacted through deliberate non-use of media centres on (the memory of) the in-the-moment experience as it is lived with the people who are present at that time and place, many interviewees also – at times – augment these moments by sharing content from it through social media. Distinct from the practices of posting and making videos and photos to capture and keep future memories, the *experiential live* is established in forms of platformed sharing that centre the transitory immersive experience, such as livestreaming and sharing Snaps, Updates, and Stories. For many eventgoers I spoke to at the studied events, the possibility of sharing live witness accounts from the event on the ground is a prominent part of the *experiential live*, as this affirms their positioning as witnesses on the ground.

Livestreaming is one of these practices, performed through various platforms in slightly different manners (see [Figure 2](#) for an example of content that was livestreamed by an eventgoer at Serious Request). Xander (43), a loyal Serious Request fan, describes himself as 'one of those idiots who livestreams on Facebook even though there is no need for that



Figure 2. Still from an Eventgoer's Facebook Live Stream at Serious Request.

because everyone sees it on TV.' Xander's description here highlights an essential element in this live media practice; he points out that there is 'no need' for the live content that he produces: he does not show anything that the omnipresent television cameras at Serious Request do not capture, his streams are of much lesser quality than that professionally created content, and he does not have a large live audience. For Xander, and many like him, livestreaming at these live events does not revolve around the content that is produced or its reach, but rather around the in-the-moment practice itself that affirms one's positioning at the event.

Even though his livestreams do not reach a large audience, the mere notion of others seeing that he is there – as a witness on the ground – augments Xander's live experience at Serious Request. He envisions his Facebook friends thinking 'gosh, Xander is there, and gosh he is truly standing there, and he is there you know,' and to Xander 'that is precious.' Note how often Xander repeats the word 'there' here. Through livestreaming he invites distant others to witness his position as a witness on the ground, creating an extra layer of witnessing that reifies his privileged position at the unfolding live event. Yet, while he envisions the reactions of his friends, this practice, I argue, is more about showing than about being seen. Moreover, it is grounded not so much in actual audiences of these streams, but rather in implied audiencing that in turn relies on Xander's previous experiences with mediated witnessing. He has often seen this event on TV and knows what it looks like from a distance. Further, as he can envision what his presence looks like from a distance, on TV or his livestream, Xander witnesses himself at the event through his livestreaming. Through this live media practice, he constructs a story that positions him at this special event moment; a live-produced self-narrative showing himself as someone who is 'truly standing there,' who is part of the event, a privileged position that is meaningful to him as it touches his identity as large fan of the event. And by doing so, Xander establishes an event experience that he knows he will remember as truly being there.

In the past years, the growing possibilities for "going live" and the rise of ephemeral content on popular platforms have solidified the duality of the *live as future memory* and the *experiential live*. New cultures of use have developed that revolve around transient content and, often spontaneous, in-the-moment posting. The establishment of these online spaces for raw and in-the-moment content led to changes in the character of the Instagram feed

and Facebook timeline. Even though nothing noteworthy changed in the technological functionality of posting, the new contrast with stories frames the feed and timeline as a permanent showcase, making it more important to curate these carefully. This is apparent in Vareen's (20) account of her use of these different features at Pride:

I post [my photos] instantly, well, I share it in an Instagram Story, so it will be gone after 24 hours. And then at home, I will select which ones to *actually* post. Because on Instagram you post stuff that you often want to keep for a long time. ... In Instagram Stories I post anything that I want because it will be gone in 24 hours anyway.

Now that 'actually post[ing]' has become more of a practice reserved for the 'stuff that you ... want to keep for a long time' – the lasting tangible memories fitting the *live as future memory* –, more ephemeral platform features such as streaming, going live and sharing Snaps, Updates, and Stories provide online spaces where the *experiential live* is established.

Realising the memorable live experience: an entanglement of temporal and narrative layers

The weighing of media use that my interviewees describe when speaking of their live media practices at the studied events implies a constant contemplation of what would be the best, truest, or fullest way for them to experience *and* to remember. Whereas this contemplation is constant, it is generally not a conscious activity; it is brought to the fore in this study through interviews, but in the ongoing event it is something that most often resides in the background while eventgoers go through their experience of the event. At current mediated events, eventgoers carry along their smartphones – enabling them to mediate their experiences at any time and sustain contact with distant others – as well as their a priori mental imaging of the events and of their potential photos, posts, and stories, shaped by the multitude of images that they have seen of the events before. This level of mediation leads them to constantly be involved in mediated memory work, fluidly moving in and out of both forms of live experience as described in the previous two sections.

While many eventgoers aim to focus on their intimate and in-the-moment experiences – the *experiential live* – often seizing these through the use of platforms and features for ephemeral content, none of my 379 interviewees walked out of the events without any durable content, as the wish to capture future memories is also strong. Sometimes they use other platforms or features for the more durable memory work, yet often the in-the-moment content created through their stories articulates their event experiences well – similar to the snapshot as compared to the staged photo – and thus many interviewees tell me that they screenshot or otherwise save their stories to keep them as durable mediated memories.² Or, as Vareen (quoted in the previous section) does, share ephemeral content in the moment and then afterwards select the best images to post. Consequently, even when eventgoers decide for ephemeral content for its technological transience and sense of immediacy – establishing the *experiential live* – they later often use the same content as durable memory. This shows us that the two forms of mediated live experience are thoroughly entangled.

Furthermore, restating the argument made earlier in this article, the materialisation of memory in the form of a photo, video, story, or post is not even necessary for media to serve as memory-making tools, nor is it vital that created materials are watched after the event.

² It is noteworthy here that every platform and feature that was originally designed for ephemeral content has later introduced functionalities to store this content.

As the quote by Sue (in the section *Memorable moments and live storytelling*) exemplified, for many eventgoers, photographing is about pausing to mentally capture a moment – shaping both in-the-moment experience and memory – even when the photo is never used or not even taken. As Sue says, ‘it makes you stop and look ... it’s about, like, pausing in that moment ... to really look at something.’ Imaging, even if only mentally, brings awareness to the moment. It ‘makes you more aware of how beautiful it is,’ Dick (61, Oerol) says; ‘it’s an affirmation of the moment’ his friend Theodora (53) adds. Whether making (platformed) images or deliberately putting their phones away to be fully present, for eventgoers, mediated memory work has become essential to having a full experience.

The interview material in this study prominently demonstrates the desire of eventgoers to seize the memorable moment, bringing it ‘into full presence’ (Auslander 2012, p. 8) by taking that picture or carving out smartphone-free time; to not forsake the opportunity of truly being there live. Recurrently my interviewees mention the notion that a moment can be ‘missed,’ either by not having a photo, video, or post from it to keep as a durable memory, or by being so busy making these durable memories that too little attention is paid to the experience itself. Although these worries are sometimes rooted in their lived experiences of unbalanced media (non)use at previous events, I challenge the notion that it is possible to miss a moment due to a ‘wrong’ choice of media (non)use. Rather, I argue, this concern for missing the memorable moment reveals the significant extent to which mediatisation has led to the integration of memory into the experience itself.

It is precisely in the, sometimes uneasy, negotiation of the dual desire within the live instance – for immediacy in the sense of the unmediated sensory experience of the present and remembering from one’s mind or heart, on the one hand, and capturing for re-living in the future on the other hand – that live experiences in current mediatised events are constituted. Eventgoers are continuously searching for the right mode of experiencing as ever-present media technologies necessitate them to juggle and combine various coexisting temporal and narrative foci.

With the analysis from this study in mind, let’s return to the example of Isabella’s experience at Pride, with which this article started, to briefly unpack the various layers within it. By sharing images with friends who had been with her at Pride Amsterdam 11 years before, Isabella taps into the temporal layer of the past and the shared narrative of her earlier adventures there with these friends. She also shapes her present experience as being there (again), established in a self-narrative that is enacted through sharing images with a broader audience of friends and followers on social media platforms, as well as through her sensory experience of dancing in the sun with all others present at that venue. This experience of the present moment further involves a self-narrative of being an independent woman who, while travelling for work, joins this party by herself. Additionally, her practice of sharing images with the event hashtag writes herself into the narrative of the event, and her use of more general pride-related hashtags adds to the story of the worldwide pride movement and herself as someone who supports this. While mostly sharing through direct messaging and Instagram Stories, with a focus on past and present, Isabella also takes some photos to post on her Instagram feed and keep for herself as future memories. Applying the insights from this study to the example of Isabella makes apparent that the mediatised constitution of the live experience not only entwines experience and memory in the present moment but also entangles multiple temporal and narrative layers.

Conclusion: live storytelling as mediated memory work

Throughout this article, the argument is developed that – due to the pervasiveness and logic of digital media platforms – live event experiences increasingly involve practices of

live storytelling as mediated memory work. Drawing on examples from a large ethnographic study at three cultural events in the Netherlands, this article has demonstrated that eventgoers' live experiences are thoroughly shaped by media technologies, whether used in the moment or not, and memory and anticipation are increasingly inscribed in the live experience itself. Moreover, mediated memory work has become essential for eventgoers to have a full live experience, transforming the nature of cultural memory in the digital age.

Revisiting Andrew Hoskins' (Hoskins and Halstead 2021) question, 'if we are not recording to review and to remember, then what are we doing?' (p. 678), this study reveals that live media practices at events involve more than ritualised imaging or capturing presence. Eventgoers actively negotiate how to seize the live moment, balancing their desire for immediate experience with the anticipation of future nostalgia. Making mediated memories – by creating posts, stories, videos, and photos, or deliberately choosing not to do so – is not just an add-on to the live event experience; it has become integral to eventgoers' construction and understanding of being there live.

This article has identified two distinct yet intertwined modes of mediatised live experience – the *live as future memory* and the *experiential live* – each with its own blend of immediacy and durability. The *live as future memory* involves a reflective stance, where participants anticipate future nostalgia and seize the moment by creating durable media content. It is enacted through practices of taking photos and making videos, often to post on Instagram or Facebook, but also to keep in one's personal archive. In contrast, the *experiential live* emphasises impulsive, transitory engagement with the event. It is established in live media practices that amplify the experiential memorable instance, such as in-the-moment sharing and streaming, ephemeral content, and deliberate non-mediation. These modes are not mutually exclusive but represent a continuum of choices available to eventgoers in each moment, shaping how they experience and remember the event. Further, these two typologies are not about memory as such; they are two distinct ways of experiencing a live event as (self)narrative realisations of memory in the present.

This study contributes to our understanding of how digital media practices are reshaping live experiences. It extends the existing theories of mediated memories (Van Dijck 2007) and mediated memory work (Lohmeier and Pentzold 2014) by demonstrating how these concepts play out in the context of live events. Further, the combination of these theories with scholarship on liveness and on (self)narrative brings out a new perspective on popular media practices. The findings highlight the complex interplay between liveness and memory in the present.

While this research has illuminated eventgoers' contemplations on how to seize the live instance, it also raises important questions for future investigation. For instance, how do these practices affect the quality and longevity of event memories? Is there an optimal or most intense way of experiencing and remembering live events? Has the ubiquity of digital media enhanced or diminished the intensity of live experiences? Further, as ethnographic work is always firmly rooted in a specific context, it remains the question how these findings translate to different cultural contexts or event types, such as personal milestones or unfolding catastrophic news events that might include elements one would prefer to forget rather than remember.

In conclusion, this study underscores the value of empirical, practice-based approaches in developing nuanced theories of media and memory. By examining what people actually do with media and what it means to them, we can better understand the evolving relationship between digital technologies, cultural events, and memory practices in contemporary society. As digital platforms continue to evolve, further research in this area will be crucial for comprehending the changing nature of live experiences and cultural memory in the digital age.

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