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Article in *Loisir et Societe* · May 2016

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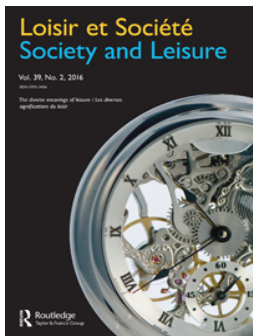
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## Social leisure in the digital age

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**To cite this article:** Laura Rojas de Francisco, Jordi López-Sintas & Ercilia García-Álvarez (2016) Social leisure in the digital age, *Loisir et Société / Society and Leisure*, 39:2, 258-273, DOI: [10.1080/07053436.2016.1198598](https://doi.org/10.1080/07053436.2016.1198598)

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## Social leisure in the digital age

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(Received 24 November 2014; accepted 30 June 2015)

The fact that leisure is a social activity is recognized by individuals in this study as well as by researchers both past and present. However, free-time activities differ in their social dimension. Since digital technologies alter the meaning of leisure activities, they may also affect their social properties. In order to examine, within the constructivist/interpretive paradigm, the social properties of digital leisure activities, the authors analyzed the narratives of 30 users of home-based digital technologies for leisure purposes. Their results suggest that digital leisure activities have social properties which differ from those of traditional leisure activities. The social properties of digital technologies transform the meaning of leisure activities, creating interconnected leisure spaces where it is possible to be socially connected and available.

**Keywords:** digital culture; digital leisure; social leisure; social interaction; social connectivity

Le fait que le loisir est une activité sociale est reconnu dans cette étude ainsi que par les chercheurs aujourd'hui et depuis longtemps. Par contre, les activités de temps libre se différencient par leur dimension sociale. Alors, puisque les technologies digitales modifient le sens d'activités de loisirs, elles peuvent également affecter leurs propriétés sociales. Afin d'examiner, dans le paradigme interprétatif, les propriétés sociales des activités de loisirs digitales, nous avons analysé les récits de 30 personnes qui utilisent les technologies digitales à la maison, pour les loisirs. Nos résultats suggèrent que les activités de loisirs digitales ont des propriétés sociales différentes de celles qu'ont les loisirs traditionnels. Les propriétés sociales des technologies digitales transforment le sens d'activités de loisirs créant des espaces de loisirs interconnectés où il est possible d'être socialement connecté et disponible.

**Mots-clés :** culture digital; loisir digital; loisir social; l'interaction sociale; la connectivité sociale

### Introduction

The adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and growing Internet use in the home are a reality in more advanced societies, with researchers increasingly interested in investigating their impact on the social life of individuals. Although early results suggested that Internet use could have a negative impact on face-to-face social interactions (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002; Kraut *et al.*,

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1998), subsequent research indicates that the impact may be positive or negative, depending on how individuals interact socially online (Boase & Wellman, 2006; Henderson, Taylor, & Thomson, 2002; Kraut *et al.*, 2002; Nie, 2001; Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2002; Swickert, Hittner, Harris, & Herring, 2002).

ICTs and the Internet have specific features that have an impact on the daily lives of individuals in society. ICTs enable individuals to produce and make content available on the Internet, converting consumers into what some researchers call 'prosumers' (Tapscott, 1996; Toffler, 1985). They have also reduced physical and temporal distances, making it possible for people to interact with others located in different physical or temporal spaces (Anderson & Rainie, 2010; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Schroeder, 2011). The combination of these two features of the ICTs means that individuals can, in their leisure time, meet up, interact with, produce and make content available, in collaboration with other individuals online (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006; Schroeder, 2010). Consequently, ICTs have found many applications in the leisure time of individuals.

A second generation of studies regarding the impact of the Internet on the social lives of individuals points to a positive link between email use and the number of face-to-face social interactions. Email facilitates asynchronous communication and the scheduling of social occasions (dinner, theater, sporting activities, etc.). Bryce (2001) suggested that ICTs can change how leisure is organized, accessed, and experienced and can even change the meaning of leisure, yet few studies have described how leisure is transformed through the use of ICTs (see also Juniu, 2009; Mokhtarian, Salomon, & Handy, 2006).

Our purpose was to contribute to an understanding of changes brought about in leisure activities by the use of digital technologies. Our research, situated in the constructivist/interpretive paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), was based on an analysis of the narratives of a group of individuals who use ICTs for leisure activities in the home.

Our research is structured around a discussion of the conceptual framework underpinning the study, a description of our methodology, and the presentation of our results. We conclude by discussing the contributions of our research and explore future research lines within the framework of leisure studies.

## Literature review

### *Social digital leisure*

Leisure activities imply social interaction (Kelly, 1981, 1994), consequently when there is little or no interaction during an activity, the meaning changes and leisure is converted into entertainment (Rojek, Shaw, & Veal, 2006). Researchers such as Gunter and Gunter (1980) consider that a relationship exists between the social organization of time and the configuration of leisure activities, because through leisure we make social contacts that may generate social capital (Van Ingen & Van Eijck, 2009).

Given the capacity of ICTs to facilitate social interaction, we asked ourselves how these technologies may have transformed leisure activities in the home. Cummings and Kraut (2002) argued that the Internet used for pleasure means that contact can be maintained with larger numbers of friends. Swickert *et al.* (2002) examined how individuals used ICTs in social relations according to the social support available to them and their personality, suggesting that individuals with greater social support make greater use of instant messaging and participate more in multiuser online gaming. Robinson (2011) reviewed several studies of ICT use, concluding that the more individuals participated in

recreational activities, the more they used the Internet; Robinson also indicated that the greater an individual's ICT activity, the more they participated in leisure activities. Research by Hamill (2003) regarding the adoption of ICTs in the home suggests that people invest in technology more to make better use of their free time than to save time on household chores.

The social dimension of technology is also highlighted in gaming. Research by Ducheneaut *et al.* (2006) into the social aspects of games like *World of Warcraft* suggests that the social environment of gamers is related to the time spent participating in online games, given that such games foster social interaction and experiences. Schroeder (2010), meanwhile, suggested that participation in virtual environments (online games, social media, etc.) develops skills that facilitate interpersonal relationships.

As for mobile phones, Katz and Acord (2008) suggested that their use creates opportunities for interaction either through time-killing activities or hobbies, concluding that people who use mobile phone gaming technologies socialize more, even though the activities may initially be intended to kill time.

Given the relationship between digital leisure and social interaction, we asked ourselves the following question: how do digital leisure activities differ – if at all – in terms of the resulting social interaction?

### ***Social interaction in a technological context***

According to Simmel (1972), society exists wherever people act reciprocally, and when individuals, whether alone or in groups, have the ability to create social structures that facilitate interaction. Wherever individuals interact, groups develop in which social exchanges take place, and this, in turn, produces sociability. Thus, different kinds of interactions lead to different types of social exchanges and to different kinds of sociability.

Researchers have consequently developed an interest in the phenomenon of social interaction in itself (Mead, 1962/1934; Simmel, 1972), in the social contexts where face-to-face interaction occurs (Giddens, 1984; Goffman, 1982/1962) and where social interaction is mediated by technologies and para-social interaction occurs, – like in social media that offer opportunities for two-way interactions (Hoerner, 1999) –, or to a lesser degree in radio and TV, where there is not reciprocity, but para-social interaction is possible between celebrities and other known figures and their audiences (Horton & Strauss, 1957). An interesting issue is to understand how the digital technologies as used to create structures, can impact on social interaction. The fact that digital technologies can be two-way enables the illusion of face-to-face social interaction, thereby facilitating the expansion of social networks and affecting social practices.

Thus, the different social structures – based on digital technologies such as the Internet – form to facilitate social interaction, affect the properties of the selfsame structures, and provide a growing menu of means and ways for individuals to socially interact in different ways. Thus, unlike interactions that are para-social or face-to-face, the interaction in social structures created on the Internet allows individuals not only to choose the social structure (where there is no physical presence) but also the form of digital interaction that may eventually replace face-to-face interaction (Turkle, 2011).

### **Technology-mediated social interaction structures**

According to Simmel (1972), a social structure is the form adopted for the system of relationships between individuals in a society. Therefore, the choice of a social structure

for interacting with others may be related to the type of interpersonal sociability being sought by the individual. Licoppe and Smoreda (2006) considered sociability to be the flow of exchanges between people who link up and interact. According to these authors, sociability is the result of three poles: (1) the social network of people and organizations which the individual is connected to; (2) the exchanges that occur during interaction; and (3) the various technical means that allow an interaction via signs between individuals exchanging information. Sociability is therefore the result of message exchanges in conversations between interrelated individuals.

Licoppe and Smoreda (2006) argued that technology facilitates a form of sociability that is unique because there is what they call 'connected presence'; furthermore, unlike what happens with face-to-face interaction, we are 'always on' and 'always connected' (Licoppe, 2004). These authors also argue that sociability varies depending on the social relationship existing between people: if the relationship is close, the ICTs enable reciprocal and immediate personal exchanges – through chats and video conferencing – that are similar to face-to-face contact. In more casual relationships, however, more asynchronous interaction technologies – such as email – tend to be used.

### *Properties of sociability in technology-mediated interactions*

According to McKenna and Seidman (2006) – and Keenan and Shiri (2009), who also explored sociability in social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Twitter –, digital structures facilitate sociability because they enable users to share, express, explore, and resolve social needs. These authors suggest that interaction, exchange, and sociability vary according to what each platform offers and how they are used – particularly in terms of differences in privacy, public visibility, the kind of exchanges, and the rapidity of sharing. They further sustain that sociability in these online social networks depends on content; in Facebook, for instance, interaction is fostered by social affinity, whereas in LinkedIn it is fostered by reputation and professional achievement. Thus, digital structures each have functions and properties tailored to the user's motivation for interacting with their social network. The connection to a network of people communicating via machines, defined by Allen (2010) as social connectivity, differs from face-to-face interaction because digital technologies multiply the opportunities for social interaction. Green (2002) used the concept of mobility to explain 'social time' when people can be 'present' at any time and anywhere and live the same experience no matter where they are physically located.

The perception of being available is another characteristic of digital social connectivity. According to Zhao and Elesh (2008), individuals perceive digital connection as facilitating interaction at any time. Even if individuals are not physically in each other's presence – that is, co-located –, they can link up and socialize online, whether with family, friends, and known and unknown other contacts. Online gaming in multiuser virtual environments takes matters further since, according to Schroeder (2010), players have a genuine feeling of presence, of actually being there and of being there together; they thus simultaneously experience co-presence when they participate in a game.

### **Implications of digital interaction for leisure**

Studies that have addressed the impact of ICTs on sociability suggest that this depends on the person and their context; thus, if individuals are socially active, their use of ICTs further enhances their sociability (Nie, 2001). Researchers who have addressed this issue

conclude that it is simplistic to say that the ICTs have a negative or positive impact; rather, their impact depends on the people who use the ICTs and how they integrate them into their social relationships (Boase & Wellman, 2006; Henderson *et al.*, 2002; Nie, 2001; Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2002). Shklovski, Kiesler, and Kraut (2006) presented more detailed findings in this regard, comparing the findings of 16 studies to determine whether any relationship existed between Internet social structures and the social interaction to which they gave rise. They concluded that, since interaction with friends is different from interaction with family, the relationship between the Internet and social interaction is weak when this fact is not taken into account. However, the data suggest – once both the type of social relationship and the research methodology are taken into account – that Internet use is associated with a higher level of social interaction with friends. The same authors argue that this association is largely due to the fact that social interaction on the Internet facilitates the monitoring and coordination of leisure activities.

Below we describe how our informants use digital technologies for leisure activities in the home, demonstrating differences in terms of sociability and the social interaction taking place. We asked ourselves the following question: how and why do individuals use digital technologies to perform leisure activities in the home in their free time?

## Methodology

Due to the fact that we were interested in describing how individuals use digital technologies during their leisure time and interpret why they use technologies in that way, we needed to frame our research design in the constructivist paradigm (the nature of the phenomena studied is socially constructed) and use interpretive methods (the way we get to know about the meanings that people attach to their and other actions).

### *Epistemology and theoretical framework*

Our research is framed in the constructivist/interpretive paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), which tries to make sense of the activities of individuals, taking into account how meanings are constructed as individuals interact with the world where the activity takes place and with other individuals and objects. Because individuals construct meanings and associate them with other individuals or objects when performing an activity, they are intentional subjects (Schwandt, 1994). It is quite possible that the same people construct different meanings for an activity performed in different contexts, or that different people construct different meanings regarding the same activity and context (Crotty, 1998). Our research aim was to describe and understand both leisure activities performed for social purposes and activities that become social due to the nature of the technologies used. The study is framed in the hermeneutic tradition, which treats narratives as strange texts to be interpreted (Crotty, 1998); it also assumes an affinity of some kind between the set of texts and the interpreter that makes it possible to interpret the texts and share and communicate meanings among people, and, in so doing, situate the interpretation within history and culture (Schwandt, 1994). The purpose of interpreting a set of narratives is to gain an understanding that goes further than the interviewee's own interpretation.

### *Sampling criteria*

We used selective sampling to identify informant experiences with digital leisure activities. Sampling started at an ICT training center and informants helped us access further informants through snowball sampling. Maximum variation sampling was used with the

aim of capturing and describing the shared dimensions of digital activities and cutting across informants in terms of sex and education. We stopped with theoretical sampling (Patton, 2002) when additional informants did not add any further analytical category to those described in the findings section (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### Data collection

The interviews were conducted over a period of six months, in two stages coinciding with the ICT center semesters (March to June, and September to November). Informants were interviewed in their homes in Barcelona using a protocol of 20 topics (sent on request) in order to help them produce a top-centered narrative (Riessman, 2008) and to foster theoretical sensitivity (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Semi-structured interviews, lasting an average of 60 minutes, provided the necessary narratives about leisure activities in the home. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim with voice recognition software. Informants were guaranteed confidentiality and informed of the aims of the research.

### Informants

The sample consisted of 30 informants, 15 women and 15 men. Education levels varied from postgraduate studies to vocational degrees (see Table 1 for further information). Data on

Table 1. Interviewee profiles.

Name	Sex	Age	Education	Occupation
Adela	F	23	Postgraduate (audiovisual documentaries)	Documentary maker
Adriana	F	17	Vocational (computers)	Student/data entry clerk
Albert	M	30	Postgraduate (economics)	Clerk/student
Alex	M	35	Postgraduate (engineering)	Doctoral student
Andrés	M	18	Vocational (electronics)	Warehouse worker
Antonio	M	22	Graduate (audiovisual communication)	Student/blogger
Camilo	M	23	Graduate (journalism)	Student
Carles	M	29	Vocational (business studies)	Freelancer
Carmen	F	22	Postgraduate (public relations)	Public relations
Clara	F	27	Graduate (accounting)	Accountant
Daniel	M	42	Vocational (pharmacy)	Unemployed
Eli	F	19	Vocational (beauty consultancy)	Student
Felipe	M	36	Graduate (systems engineering)	Systems engineer
Goyo	M	32	Vocational (image and sound)	Disc jockey/bookshop assistant
Isa	F	58	Vocational (auxiliary nursing)	Unemployed (cares for mother)
Jaime	M	34	Graduate (telecommunications)	Telecommunications engineer
Javier	F	23	Postgraduate (journalism)	Sports journalist
Juan	M	29	Graduate (audiovisual communication)	Audiovisual technician
Juliana	F	26	Postgraduate (advertising/marketing)	Marketing agency employee
Manuel	M	29	Postgraduate (statistics)	Analyst
Marcos	M	23	Graduate (psychology)	Student
Maria	F	37	Postgraduate (communication/ education)	Trainer (Teachers Without Borders)
Mariana	F	23	Graduate (communications)	Community manager
Martina	F	26	Postgraduate (project management)	Designer and student
Miquel	M	29	Graduate (architecture)	Student
Samuel	M	33	Graduate (engineering)	Industrial robot engineer
Sandra	F	24	Postgraduate (travel journalism)	School trip coordinator
Sara	F	21	Graduate (architecture)	Student
Sonia	F	27	Secondary	Home worker
Teresa	F	46	Vocational (art)	School monitor



informant employment and occupational profiles were also recorded: full-time paid work (17), students (10); unpaid work at home (2); and unemployed (1). Most informants were aged 20 to 30 years (range 17–58 years old); this was a result of the sample having been selected from among technology users and individuals who stated that they engaged in digital leisure.

### ***Analysis***

We applied narrative analysis, an approach based on personal narratives regarding life experiences in their context over an extended period, as narrated during interviews. Any analysis of narrative implies the construction and interpretation of texts (Riessman, 2008) and we applied thematic analysis in order to identify patterns in the texts. Our interest lay in what interviewees said they did at home in terms of digital technology-mediated leisure. We then created thematic categories and identified properties related to segments of texts and explored how themes and categories were distributed among interviewees in order to locate common themes in the narratives.

The qualitative analysis was assisted by an ethnographic editing program (EdEt) and by Cassandre's qualitative analysis environment (Lejeune, 2011), both computer-aided qualitative data analysis software designed to support collaborative analyses. We constructed a simple set of themes in order to group narratives according to the activities performed, the technologies used, the places and times of the activities, and the topic that grouped the changes observed in leisure experiences. In order to improve the validity of the categories, the researchers held several meetings to share and discuss their interpretations of texts, codes, categories, and properties (Polkinghorne, 2007). After coding, simple and conditional searches of co-occurrence of categories showed that ICTs as used for leisure at home were used for social purposes.

### ***Findings***

Below we describe, as reported by our informants, home-based social digital leisure activities and the nature of the social interaction occurring during these activities, in which social connectivity, the interpenetration of social spaces, and the perception of availability are properties that have transformed social leisure activities.

#### ***Digital social leisure activities in the home***

Our informants tell us that digital leisure activities provide an opportunity to interact socially. Manuel, for instance, describes his use of computers and the Internet in terms of 'doing things together, such as watching movies or listening to music' (paragraph 1892); Juliana also points to the social dimension of leisure activities when she tells us that she participates in such activities with her roommates to 'develop a closer relationship with them and enhance our lives together' (p. 471); Juan also emphasizes activities performed with visiting friends, saying that together they 'watch YouTube videos and movies, listen to music or log onto Facebook' (p. 1759). Samuel, meanwhile, says that as well as killing time online, he keeps up with his social network:

Before I switch off the computer I pop into Facebook and look at photos and comments from friends, to see if there are people I know there or if photos have been uploaded. Facebook brings out the gossip within us. We see how life has been treating others or if it's better for me. (Samuel, p. 62)

Martina also tells us that when she performs digital leisure activities ‘the satisfaction is similar to when you meet friends for coffee, because the same thing happens – you chat’ (p. 377). The fact that these experiences help people keep in touch is probably why Felipe believes that ‘keeping up with friends’ whom he cannot meet due to distance or other circumstances ‘is a form of entertainment’ (p. 1544). Javier also highlights changes in society, relating them to new means of social interaction:

People travel more; move more, so it’s good to be able to keep in touch with those people, talking to them on Facebook, messaging, chats or whatever. And that’s leisure, what else! Keeping in touch with people you no longer meet. (Javier, p. 2937)

Other informants, however, give different reasons for performing social digital leisure activities in the home. Manuel tells us how he shares digital activities with his brothers and sisters: ‘We share things, when we log onto these sites, whether it’s chats or Facebook, they post their experiences, photos, and there we each add in things’ (p. 178). Juliana says that she and her older roommate ‘do a blog together and are friends on Facebook,’ explaining further that ‘we take photos and I show her how to transfer them and post them on Facebook’ (p. 484).

Some informants, pointing to digital technology-based leisure activities performed at home with online strangers, consider that digital leisure activities provide new opportunities for socializing. They use these social interaction structures to make contact with others; as Javier says, ‘technologies allow us to make contact with the world’ (p. 2919). Antonio, meanwhile, points out that ‘kids don’t get to know each other in parks; they get to know each other after conversing in chats, which are a tool for social interaction and exchanges. Maybe face-to-face contact is less, but that’s how it is now!’ (p. 774).

Juliana informs us that her mother began to use Skype because ‘she was so lonely she began dating on the Internet.’ She tells us: ‘I understand this to be leisure too, which depends on a person and their needs’ (p. 480). Carles recommended his mother use Facebook because ‘she’s single, I told her to get online, use social networks, meet people, but taking due care’ (p. 1205). He explains that he uses digital social structures to interact with friends and plan future events:

I don’t lock myself away in front of the laptop and cut off contact with the outside world, I use it [the Internet] to relate to other people, mostly my friends, to chat, see how they are and see if we can meet someday. (Carles, p. 1208)

Social games designed to facilitate interaction between gamers are another leisure option. When playing *World of Warcraft*, a multiplayer online game, Adela considers that ‘although I am physically alone at the computer, I meet people, interact with others. I think it’s the same as being in a bar with lots of people, except we’re gaming while talking’ (p. 235).

### ***Properties of social interaction during digital leisure activities***

#### ***Social connectivity***

Our informants use digital technologies to ‘stay connected’ and available; indeed, Juan believes that email ‘has changed our lives by enabling us to connect instantly’ (p. 1796). Daniel further indicates that ‘I log on to the Internet every single day’ (p. 1417) and Clara says ‘with the Internet I’m connected’ (p. 1265) and adds that ‘I’m a home body and like

being in the privacy of my home, but being connected is a freedom that I find exciting, to tell the truth' (p. 1341).

Connectivity may be associated with different kinds of activities. Mariana tells us 'I connect to the Internet to log onto *Second Life* or Facebook or for gaming' (p. 2160); Juliana says that 'I'm always connected, listening to music and logged onto a social network or watching a movie online' (p. 442). Being connected is a necessary but insufficient property for interaction, as interaction requires a willingness to socialize. Sara describes how she uses the computer 'for connecting up with people' (p. 2442), Felipe goes online 'to chat for a bit' (p. 1584), and María claims that without the possibilities offered by digital leisure, she 'would be disconnected from many people' (p. 2097).

This social connectivity means that a person's contacts are usually online and available. Juan believes that – since posting information on social networking sites is to be digitally in the presence of people he knows – Facebook is, in fact, a 'community, but virtual, like being with friends, hanging around to see what they say and looking at photos and videos. Especially to hook up, I think it's useful' (p. 1761). María tells us about a friend who is so connected via digital social leisure activities that the boundary between online and offline dimensions is blurred:

I know a bloke who lives in Facebook, it's like it's his street! [laughs]. He's always there, at home and at work – because I've seen where he works – and he's always logged on, all the time! Even walking! You know how it is, you turn the computer on and always carry it around and then you open it up and carry on with what you were doing. (María, p. 2104)

Social connectivity also enables people to share experiences, as Juliana, a doctoral student, indicates: 'I'm on Facebook and I'm connected, I'm on Twitter and I'm connected.' When she finds something interesting she shares it: 'I mark something using Clipmark, send it to someone who might be interested, maybe a co-worker,' and so she keeps in touch with friends who 'add to the information ... college friends to whom I send information about new videos, new websites' (pp. 440–444). This connectivity leads people to feel that they can transcend their physical limitations and expand their opportunities for interaction. Sara has the 'feeling that you are connected with the world' (p. 2493) and Miquel comments that 'we make contact with other cultures ... it's knowing what's going on in other places' (p. 2271).

### *The interpenetration of social spaces*

Digital social interaction structures overlap and enhance both digital and face-to-face interaction. Javier, who uses ICTs for socializing purposes, tells us that 'since starting with instant messaging my life is richer, because at home, as an only child, I have little contact with other people.' The Internet has enhanced his social skills and now 'I am in contact with others and do things I've never done before' (pp. 2928–2937). Adela considers having access to Internet and its services to be absolutely essential to planning her life:

The computer and Facebook are practically a necessity, I mean; you need to be connected with people. We no longer use the telephone to talk to people; we leave messages directly on Facebook or use email, messaging, or chats. If I want to talk to a friend of mine, for example, I just have to check to see if they are connected and I get to talk to them for free. (Adela, p. 234)

For other informants, the social media facilitate the creation of relationships that develop in the virtual environment and then progress to face-to-face interaction. Andrés

tells us that 'I have a group of friends, some of whom I met through chats on the Internet' (p. 647). These contacts are useful when a person feels alone or lonely. Samuel, who has signed up to computer science and music forums, says that 'there you get to meet people, you add them to the chat and sometimes, at home alone at night with nothing to do, I log on and there are people online, so we chat!' (p. 66).

Lastly, digital and face-to-face interactions overlap for enthusiasts of online gaming, as games lead people both to develop virtual relationships online and to relate in face-to-face exchanges. Adriana says that through gaming 'she always has companionship' because 'there is always someone online' (p. 694). Samuel sometimes plays online 'with Super Nintendo and Play Station and first-person games like *Medal of Honour*, *Resistance*, and *Call of Duty*, often with people I don't know' (p. 62); Jaime plays chess online because 'I like chess and it's a way to play with many different people' (p. 1652). Adela, who considers online role-playing games to be a meeting place, explains that she joined because she was intrigued on seeing her brother on the computer 'talking to people and killing monsters.' It was through gaming, she says, that 'I met my partner, because my brother introduced me to his gaming friends.' So, when gaming, 'I can talk to him [her partner] and to other people in the community.' In fact, she made a documentary about her experience, 'as a diary in which I explain how I try to remain part of that world where I'm with my brother, my partner, and my friends' (pp. 220–228).

### *Perceptions of availability*

When distance, time, or circumstances mean that people cannot meet up regularly, social connections and relationships can be maintained through the use of technology. Isa uses emailing to 'send mails and talk to my family abroad and with friends' (p. 3157); Camilo uses Facebook 'to keep in touch with friends who are far away' and says that, when he logs on to open his email or enter Facebook and finds their messages, 'the feeling I get is one of excitement' (pp. 1060–1095). Samuel, who travels for his work, uses instant messaging because 'it's a way of keeping in touch with my partner, friends, and family' (p. 80). Chatting online allows Sonia to 'communicate with old friends from where I used to live.' She tells us that 'when I see someone has logged on or someone sees that I have logged on, well, it's a way to communicate with my people.' Sonia expressed her excitement at seeing a friend via webcam: 'She's living in Cadiz [1000 kms distant] and it's amazing to see a person who's so far away on the monitor' (pp. 2710–2833). People can thus feel connected to loved ones who are far away. Sara has family in Argentina and she typically uses Skype 'to call once a week, when we all sit around the laptop' (p. 2457). Clara thinks that 'interconnection with the family' is the best aspect of technology because social networking means she can 'feel close to my family in Madrid' and is 'connected with lots of people. I don't see them every day, but I can keep in close touch with them' (pp. 1289–1303).

Martina has also been able 'to link up with family – outside my nuclear family – and also connect with others I don't know.' She uses email to keep up to date with family members who are scattered: 'You discover you have a cousin in Mozambique or a cousin you never met in Lisbon. I'm putting together my family tree, with people from my father's family' (p. 346). Meanwhile, María – from Mexico but living in Barcelona – says that ICTs have 'greatly helped' her to keep in touch with family and friends, adding that 'there are people who I probably never saw or was not in touch with, and now that I'm away, I see them much more using instant messaging and chat rooms' (p. 2102).

As we have seen, our informants choose interaction structures according to the links they have with their contacts. To summarize, we can cite Carles: 'I meet up with some people in *World of Warcraft* and with others in Facebook or in chats, and email is an easy way to keep in touch and up to date with my uncles and aunts, whom I see at Christmas or occasionally, so it's email, when I say something like, how's it going!, hey, I need something!, let's meet up!' (p. 1208). This has meant keeping up relationships that could have been lost:

I keep in touch with people whom I have no regular contact with, people whom I don't see from one end of the year to the other. Having a cyber-relationship makes it easier for us to find time to get together and see each other in person. (Carles, p. 1199)

### *Transformation of social leisure activities*

Digital leisure activities transform the traditional way of planning and performing face-to-face leisure activities. Interaction, contacts, and scheduling for face-to-face leisure activities are now typically organized using digital means. As Adriana explained:

People are there, my friends know that I'm online, my friends and I make plans by chat and mobile, then we see each other face-to-face. It's like a room where we all meet, but it's virtual. They are there, yes, sometimes we use a nick, but we know who we are. (Adriana, p. 690)

Adriana, when interacting virtually with her contacts, can do so openly or can establish a communication barrier or limit online activity, depending on her social interest. As she puts it:

Those who don't [have permission to access posts] cannot even see me. It works by circles of friends. For example, in Facebook it's only friends, and I can also put them in groups, and, if I do not want them to see me logged into the chat, then I gray out the green button and so on. (Adriana, p. 700)

In addition, social processes are also changing in terms of how to meet people or how they schedule meetings with friends. Martina explains how 'you start using email to share information and even share videos and photos, that varies' and goes on to say that 'how we socialize with people has changed, you now arrange things online.' She further explains that 'chatting is so simple. You connect with people you know socially and add them to your email and other applications. It's really practical' (pp. 338–340). That practicality becomes routine. Javier, for instance, even receives chat messages from his father at home: 'We use instant messaging and chat to arrange lunch or decide if I'll have dinner with him' (pp. 2897–2950).

For Martina, the digital technologies have had an impact on the way she tells her family how she feels, as it changes the content of the interaction:

We communicate more easily. The fact that there is a device in between means you don't let your emotions overflow and don't get into arguments. In an email you can tell and express things sensibly, because you have time to think at the time of writing, but if you say it, you would probably say things you didn't mean to say. (Martina, p. 367)

Digital technologies are changing social interaction and for some that means a change for the better. Adela, for instance, believes there are 'more and more ways to communicate and to do things online. First, we only had Messenger, then we had Gmail, now we have

Facebook, and more if people are connected' (p. 236). Antonio uses his mobile phone because 'I'm away all day, so I can check my email, I can talk to friends and the phone tells me when I've received a message' (p. 613). The technologies also include elements that complement or enhance interaction. Clara says she is much more in touch with her family:

I link up more with them; I have more to do with them. There's more interaction, we exchange photos, we share videos. We can discuss more things in real time than if we were to call, but we aren't much at home. My cousin, for example, sends or uploads photos on her mobile Internet and says hey, have a look! (Clara, p. 1331)

## Discussion and conclusions

We have explored what and how digital leisure activities are undertaken by informants in their homes, with a view to understanding the different social interaction structures that arise and their relationship with sociability. The evidence suggests that social interaction using digital social media shapes interaction structures so as to allow people to keep in touch, maintain relationships, and create new connections; they thus expand their social networks and do this, furthermore, in their leisure time. This is the social property of digital leisure activities that other researchers have also noticed (Boase & Wellman, 2006; Henderson *et al.*, 2002; Kraut *et al.*, 2002; Nie, 2001; Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2002; Swickert *et al.*, 2002).

Our description shows that digital interaction structures differ in their properties and are chosen according to the way they connect people, as Licoppe and Smoreda (2006) and Turkle (2011) suggested. We have described how social connectivity, interpenetration of social spaces (analog and digital), and perceptions of availability differ between digital interaction structures. These results add evidence to the proposition by Allen (2010) regarding the interconnectedness of multiple digital technologies that allow informants to remain connected with others who may or may not be physically located in the same place. There is thus an interpenetration of analog and digital social spaces where there is availability to interact at any time (see Green, 2002).

These properties vary according to the social media used for interaction and, consequently, also differ in terms of the degree of sociability required in different media (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2006). Individuals, during their leisure time, thus choose social interaction structures according to their motivations and resources and their relationship with their online counterpart(s). For family members, our informants typically use instant messaging or chat, as they are available at any time to maintain their social relationships and can coordinate face-to-face activities. For contacts with whom it is difficult to interact due to time or distance, our informants use video chat to link up, regulating their time as it suits them when spaces interpenetrate. For specific sporadic contacts, our informants use emails, for instance with strangers in forums associated with their hobbies or when sharing similar interests with others.

Online gaming is also characterized by the properties described above (as well as having the properties typically associated with games). Gaming, which is usually featured by notifications, chats, video chats, instant messaging, and email, achieves a degree of sociability that goes beyond the social dimension of gaming itself by appropriating elements of the social networks (Keenan & Shiri, 2009; Schroeder, 2010). Social gaming is, therefore, a social interaction structure that enables social relationships to be maintained with acquaintances with whom face-to-face interaction possibilities may be limited (as suggested by Ducheneaut *et al.*, 2006; Schroeder, 2010). Gaming is sometimes used as a tool to build relationships and even to meet potential partners; in some cases when the

interaction is great, a game becomes the virtual neighborhood in which informants encounter both known and unknown people. The evidence suggests that online gaming is rewarding (Schroeder, 2011), not only for the pleasure inherent to the games (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004) but also because they are considered meeting places comparable to real-life places, such as a bar.

When our informants describe leisure activities based on using digital technologies, they include their contacts made with family, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers. Digital leisure is a recreational activity in itself but its social component stands out even more than the entertainment aspect, as would be expected of a leisure activity (Kelly, 1981, 1994). That people who interact are physically present or absent is not the issue because digital interaction structures make possible the illusion of the connected presence referred to by Licoppe and Smoreda (2006).

Furthermore, the fact that many digital leisure activities are associated with face-to-face leisure activities serves to enhance both. Specifically, our informants say they undertake digital social leisure activities to maintain close or casual relationships and to share hobbies with strangers. They consequently manage their social networks in a way that fosters social interaction that can be developed online or offline, increasing their social contacts and using digital resources as a practical way to remain socially connected.

Digital leisure interacts with and transforms traditional leisure. Individuals can now digitally manage leisure activities, whether in terms of coordinating them, as suggested by Shklovskii *et al.* (2006), or of choosing whether to perform them more or less openly or narrowly. Individuals can also share, express, explore, and integrate additional elements, with the sense of proximity further facilitating interaction (McKenna & Seidman, 2006; Zhao & Elesh, 2008). Finally, leisure is even more social in online gaming. Individuals thus undertake leisure activities with people they meet in virtual online gaming spaces and so socialize with both known and unknown people (Schroeder, 2010).

To conclude, in relation to studies of leisure, the results suggest that digital technologies are transforming entertainment activities into leisure activities with a clear social interaction. This transformation has implications not only for entertainment activities but also for traditional leisure activities, as the worlds, the analogical and the digital, seem to be linked through digital technologies. Digital technologies enhance leisure when the planning and realization of activities converge and transform leisure when elements and features that facilitate social interaction are included. So, further research is needed in order to fully comprehend leisure and social interaction through leisure.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Funding

This work was supported by the Agència de Gestió d'Ajuts Universitaris i de Recerca, Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation: [Grant Number ECO2011-29558-C02-01], Generalitat of Catalonia: [Grant Number 2014-SGR-592].

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