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(Re)mediation as flourishing: Digital assemblages of care and the everyday biopolitics of claiming asylum

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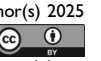

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Abstract

This paper explores what everyday digital assemblages of care do to the spatio-temporal experience of claiming asylum under political landscapes characterised by hostile governance affects. Drawing upon one year of participatory ethnographic fieldwork, this paper reimagines a wide range of smartphone practices – playing online games, using YouTube Kids or making WhatsApp chats – as assemblages of care which disrupt what it feels like to live within the UK's asylum application system. This paper presents these forms of care as practices of *(re)mediation*, highlighting the potentiality that digitally mediated care has in sustaining affirmative forms of living alongside, within, and under hostility. Sketching out three relations of flourishing – *countering isolating urban infrastructure, becoming as a form of selfhood, and shifting cosmopolitan imaginaries* – the paper sets out an account of affirmative living that emerges in an everyday posthuman assemblage between the human and smartphone. Where the intended consequences of hostile affects are disrupted (even where unremarkable, ephemeral, fleeting, or mundane), I suggest we are confronted with an updated reading of political theory – of various attempts to categorise forms of Othered life as bare, unliveable or unvalued – that must take seriously novel forms of digital flourishing.

Keywords

Flourishing, digital assemblage, care, asylum, smartphone, biopolitics

Introduction

In the context of the UK's asylum system, the intention to make asylum 'life' unliveable has been established for over a decade, with multiple foreign secretaries upholding the sentiment of deterrence. In the development of the UK's Hostile Environment in 2012, Theresa May (then, foreign secretary) clearly outlined the purpose of the now sophisticated suite of political techniques to govern the asylum application process: '*…The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal*

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immigrants'.[1] Over a decade later, this approach to governing asylum seekers and refugees has intensified, with almost every aspect of everyday life coming under scrutiny for how *welcoming* the UK is, or appears to be, to both citizens and non-citizens. The term 'hostile environment' thus refers to a specific set of government-led policies designed at governing asylum seekers in the UK *and*, simultaneously, a broader affective atmosphere that has been established and sustained as a result of these policies (Coddington, 2020; Morgan, 2023). Highlighting this distinction, in 2023 Suella Braverman (again, then, foreign secretary) announced in a speech that the British public's '*sense of fair play [had] been tested beyond its limits'* and had '*seen the country taken for a ride'*[2] concerning the number of asylum-seeking individuals arriving by small boat via the English Channel – alluding us not only towards legitimised forms of increased government control, but equally to bringing a sense of justice to a wider public mood: a public mood that has been actively shaped by the normalisation and incorporated back into justifications for harsher controls and governance (Hootegem et al., 2020). From looming threats of being flown to Rwanda, painting over children's murals in detention centres, to making sure that polystyrene plates and cups are used within hotel accommodation, the ever-expanding list of mundane, everyday interactions with the asylum state has been stripped back to their bare function in an ongoing series of political choices rooted in upholding a hostile environment. At its core, hostility is thus a governance practice of pre-emptive deterrence: reducing everyday quality of life in the present, as an attempt to discourage individuals from entering or staying in the UK in the future.

There are an expansive range of accounts within political theory that attempt to capture what forms of life living under systems of hostility, violence or erasure should be named as – bare (Agamben, 1998), bad circulation (Foucault, 2007), unliveable (Butler and Worms. 2023), maimed (Puar, 2017) – all of which attempt to capture particular forms of Othering that are sustained to manage certain kinds of bodies and populations, arising from historical and ongoing legacies of colonial violence. Building upon this seminal work, this paper opens up the possibilities of locating agency and capacity to reclaim power within these forms of Othered life. In a context where those governed under the system of asylum are produced as unvalued life and the everyday experience of the system is characterised by hostility (Butler and Worms, 2023; Coddington, 2020; Morgan, 2024), this paper poses a central question: *what value is there in centring affirmative affective relations – such as care(ing) – within broader systems of harm, suffering and violence?*

At a fundamental level, relations of care are central to the everyday reproduction of life, even in its barest form(s). As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017: 156) argues, '*for humans – and many other beings – to be alive, or endure, something, somebody, must be taking care, somewhere. One might reject care in a situation – but not absolutely, without disappearing'*. For individuals seeking asylum, this sentiment is no different. Scholars working at the intersection between mobility and care studies have long identified the intersections between care (or lack thereof) and the everyday reproduction (or degradation) of life within systems of state control (Coddington, 2020; Darling, 2011; Power, 2019). What is different now though, I contend, is that the smartphone is situated as a key node within novel assemblages of care that sustain individuals throughout the waiting period of their asylum applications (Morgan 2023, 2024). In little under a decade, where structural forms of care at the state level have been withdrawn and rolled back in line with Hostile Environment policies, the smartphone has become well-established as a technological device both central to the everyday process of claiming asylum and its associated forms (or absence) of care (Josipovic, 2024; 2023; Kocher, 2023; Tazzioli, 2022). And, perhaps more importantly, central to alternative networks of care(ing) relations that are sustained through digital lifeworlds (Morgan, 2024). Those seeking asylum now live in complex digital worlds, where relations of care have moved on traditional ideas of what counts as care (e.g. text messaging, video calling or using social media) to nuanced and dynamic practices (e.g. stickers, GIFs, reactions, playing games, creating online groups) (Morgan, 2024).

It may seem strange in an environment where forms of care are unambiguously being cut back and minimised – in a sense of what the state structurally provides to maintain and provide the conditions for life – that we might then pay attention to how digital care may emerge as an affirmative relation. Yet, I contend we must not fall into the trap of assuming that forms of state governance have totalising power over what it feels like to live in the everyday space-times of the asylum system. Building upon the contributions of scholars who grapple with the everyday negotiations of power (Butler and Worms, 2023; Jeffrey and Dyson, 2022; McKittrick, 2013), I suggest that novel forms of digitally mediated care have the potential to destabilise and (re)mediate what everyday lives feel like. Whilst hostile governance in the UK indeed attempts to produce a form of life that is removed from opportunities for flourishing digital assemblages of care that are now part of everyday life for asylum seeking subjects give rise to novel agencies that govern everyday affective life. It is thus in the practice of *digital (re) mediation* where we must locate the potential for affirmative forms of flourishing to emerge and persist alongside hostile state-affects.

In articulating an account of human flourishing that exists between the (Othered) human and their smartphone, there are three main contributions that this paper makes. The first contribution is an attempt to highlight how novel assemblages of care work through the smartphone as a technological object central to everyday life. The second contribution this paper makes is towards an engagement with what we mean when we talk about affirmative forms of life, specifically through the Foucauldian language of flourishing (1977; 1978; 2010). Under biopolitical power, forms of flourishing get accessed when '*bad circulation(s)'* (including life) are secured against for '*good [circulations]'* to prosper (Foucault, 2007: 18). In this paper, I aim to destabilise the binary made between good/bad circulation, instead asking how forms of flourishing may become possible for those being secured against, despite being categorised as bad circulations within the liberal order. The final contribution this paper makes is outlining how forms of flourishing are made possible through the work of digital (re)mediation of hostile affects. Centring ethnographic accounts of caring relations, I highlight how everyday digital practices, although often mundane – such as setting up group chats, playing online games, or sending voice notes or videos – have become integral to wider care(ing) assemblages that work to (re)mediate what it feels like to inhabit the spatio-temporal manifestations of hostility within the UK's asylum application process (Morgan, 2023; 2024). I thus put forward an account of human flourishing that captures the difference that novel assemblages of digitally mediated care *do* to what it feels to live within and alongside hostility.

It is important to note from the outset of this paper that the distinction between daily life within hostile environments and affirmative forms of living should not be read as a binary, separate and distinguishable from one another. (Re)mediation is mobilised precisely as a way of capturing the tension inherent within this approach to understanding affirmative flourishing; where hostility is not necessarily radically changed or curtailed (and perhaps never can be) but is disrupted in ways that enable alternative political relations to emerge with and alongside it. The indisputable fact of '*living digitally'* (Morgan, 2023: 409) as an asylum seeker in the UK today is that hostility will always burn in the background of everyday existence; curtailing, minimising and reducing opportunities for life beyond bare human existence stripped – as far as possible – of political participation within society. And yet, I suggest that novel forms of everyday digital life are reshaping how we understand care in its everyday manifestations and the transformative potential it holds for lives subject to state violence and harm, offering new possibilities for an everyday politics of digitally mediated care that can redefine what it feels like to live within hostile environments.

Caring assemblages in everyday digital life

Foundational work within feminist geography – and critical theory more broadly – has highlighted how care is necessary to the reproduction of everyday life in the broadest sense. What we label as

care encompasses a vast range of practices, relations and systems that sustain human and non-human life (Tronto, 1993, 2017). Forming the basis of our current understanding of what care is and how it functions, feminist geographers have long worked to define and map out the intersectional and power-laden complexities of care work (Bowlby, 2011; Schwiter and Steiner, 2020), practices (Conradson, 2011; Puig de la Bellacassa, 2017) and networks (Lancione, 2014; Power, 2019). Care is therefore an inherently relational practice, involving a vast network of actors, practices and emotions: all of which are tied up in contested political landscapes and power relations (Conradson, 2011; Power and Mee, 2019; Tronto, 1993, 2017).

Framing care through the lens of assemblage thinking offers us a framework for understanding the dynamic, relational and often ephemeral nature of care within the UK's asylum system. Assemblage thinking, as explored by scholars such as Power (2019) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), emphasises the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors, spatio-temporal relations, and material and affective forces that are all embedded in care. This perspective shifts our understanding of care as a linear process (e.g. a care giver and care receiver) towards an understanding of care that emerges within complex and evolving networks across everyday life. For asylum seeking individuals navigating hostile environments, such an approach allows us to see how various infrastructures (smartphones, Wi-Fi-networks, charging points), networks (apps, networks, platforms) and actors (human users, AI generation, notifications) are all now embedded within care(ing) assemblages within both the asylum application process and broader everyday life (Morgan, 2024; Tazzioli, 2022). Situating digitally mediated care within the everyday negotiations of what life feels like within hostile environments, this paper takes forward Power and Williams' (2019) call for the need to expand the scope of care-thinking to broader questions of human flourishing.

Assemblage thinking in the context of this paper therefore provides the conceptual framework to examine how digital practices – as mundane as they may seem – can transform the experience of claiming asylum by creating and sustaining novel digitally-mediated care(ing) relations. To understand the affective capacity that practices of (digital) care have on the everyday experience of the UK asylum system, we must first begin with (re)thinking about what constitutes care alongside rapid digital transformation of human and non-human life. Feminist and critical digital geographers offer valuable insights into how digital mediation is reshaping care relations that sustain everyday life. Koch and Miles (2021) and Maalsen (2023) argue that digital technologies are not neutral technological objects but are instead active mediators that are reconfiguring spatio-temporal and emotional dimensions of care. Feminist digital geographers in particular show us how digital care practices are both relational and gendered, highlighting how technologies like smartphones enable both connection and control (Longhurst, 2013; Wilson, 2016). Such work underscores that digital mediation does not simply *replicate* pre-existing care relations, but instead introduces the possibilities of new networks, actors and practices that disrupt previous conceptualisations of care. Care is no longer simply given and received through technological mediation but is inherently embedded within expansive networks of human-posthuman assemblages of care production, maintenance, circulation and mediation (Power and Williams, 2020; Skinner and Herron, 2020). And, whilst advocating for such an approach, we must not forget how, as feminist scholars caution, digitally mediated forms of care are not entirely emancipatory and are still subject to power relations, intersecting with surveillance, precarity and inequality (Josipovic, 2023; Tazzioli, 2022).

These insights are important for how we think about care in today's digitally mediated asylum application systems. Digital mediation has the potential to transform pre-existing assemblages of care in novel and unprecedented ways (Greene, 2020; Francisco-Menchavez, 2018; Frazer et al., 2022). For example, by extending care networks beyond physical space, enabling asylum-seeking individuals to navigate systemic exclusions and build care(ing) connections in otherwise isolating and lonely environments. Or, by transforming the practices that can be considered as acts or relations of care – liking photographs, sharing reels, reacting to messages, playing online games – and

expanding the range of human and non-human actors that are responsible for upholding care relations in everyday life. As a technological device, the smartphone is no longer simply a digital companion, but an extension of the self: not simply in the corporeality of the body and its capacities in completing tasks, but also in the affectual and imaginative formation of the subject. To think with care here is thus to examine how pre-existing relations of care now get (re)mediated and transformed through the ever-increasing capacities of the smartphone device.

This also means we must pay attention to how everyday digital practices (sending, replying, sharing, requesting, liking, reacting…) might be rethought in their capacity to be considered relations of care. In the smartphone age, relations of care now manifest in forms that have previously not been examined: from more traditional forms of interactions such as text messages or video calls (Longhurst, 2013), we have moved towards a more complex ecosystem of digital life such as sending emojis and gifs, liking and reacting to posts on social media, even in forms such as notifications for mental health journaling or reminding the user to meet their daily step count. Such novel *forms* of care also prompt us to question the temporalities of digital care relations and how they may differ depending upon which digital ecosystem becomes part of everyday assemblages. Within ecosystems of novel smartphone life, care may indeed be instantaneous connection between two human subjects, but it may also manifest differently: in a-synchronous connection, in missed, delayed or lagged connection; even, in some circumstances, no connection at all. Moreover, the question of what constitutes care is intimately tied to the question of which actors are engaging in care assemblages. From a posthuman assemblage perspective, all nodes have potential to engage in caring relations: from the human user to the algorithm, or the physical smartphone device (Maalsen, 2023).

And yet, despite advocating for a posthuman approach to situating the smartphone within assemblages of care, we must not forego a careful examination of the human subject in question (see: Dekeyser, 2023; Braidotti, 2013; Rose, 2017). This question is especially pertinent to this paper, where the human subject in question is actively Othered through varying governance structures and layers of power. We must remember that neither subjects who care nor subjects who receive care are politically neutral: both ends of the spectrum have a long history of gendered, racialised and sexualised norms and expectations (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). The allocation of caring labour is never politically neutral nor separate from historically produced positions of power. This requires us to acknowledge that care is not an inherently positive nor affirmative relation. As Martin et al. (2015: 635) states: 'Care is an affectively charged and selective mode of attention that directs action, affection, or concern at something, and in effect, it draws attention away from other things'. Geographies of care thus emerge through power imbalances of who cares, what is cared for, and when it is cared for (Brodie, 2008; Moosa-Mitha, 2016).

Within previous geographic research, accounts of care in the context of seeking asylum have largely focused on asylum seekers as recipients of care. Research has traced how forms of care and caring dictate policy and governance landscapes at particular times and spaces (Darling 2011; Watters, 2007) – especially when the forms of care required are provided through state apparatuses of welfare within neoliberal market values (Moosa-Mitha, 2016). For example, forms of national care are often constructed through narratives of worthiness or generosity that are rooted in political contestation (Darling, 2009; Derrida, 2000); often to the extent where the very idea of needing to provide care for the Other is dismantled and justified: what some scholars have explored as though the language of 'uncaring' care (Bartos, 2021; 2018; Lopez and Neely, 2021). Part of a broader, volatile political landscape, the asylum seeker – often constructed as the needy *recipient* of care – shifts within changing discourses of who deserves care and when. Tied intimately to racialised discourses of legitimacy, risk and Otherness (Beasley and Bacchi, 2007), the forms of care that those seeking asylum are either offered or able to access are often worse, or harder to access, than that of the legitimate citizen (Coddington, 2020). Within the neoliberalisation of state functions (Tronto, 2017), care for asylum seekers is therefore often the first to erode, fracture or fail (Coddington, 2020; Morgan, 2024).

However, only viewing asylum-seeking individuals as *recipients* of care simply (re)Others the subject into a position of reduced agency (Jordan, 2024, Zadhy-Çepoğlu, 2023). First, this (re)produces the asylum seeker as a victim (Darling, 2011) or as a non-agentic figure wholly controlled (through caring apparatuses) by the asylum state (Gill et al., 2022). And second, in an assemblage approach care is not simply a relation between one human/organisation/object and another. Care is a networked practice that emerges and assembles in varying spaces and times (Power, 2019). For the asylum-seeking individual, care is an everyday practice that is simultaneously given, received, circulated, maintained, and mediated (in various forms, intensities and mediums). Mobilising posthuman feminist work on care (Power, 2019), we must therefore see digitally connected asylum seekers are caring agents in themselves (who simultaneously produce, receive, maintain and circulate care among various relations within and outside of digital space/times). It is precisely from this approach where we can begin speaking back to the everyday experience of living with hostility and the potentiality of subjects engaging in care(ing) assemblages to resist and destabilise hostile environments. Put simply, to remain connected to assemblages of care that sustain everyday life can be a form of political agency; productive of relations and forms of living which go beyond and enable alternatives to the intended a/effects of hostile environments, as in the case of the UK's asylum system.

Research context: Everyday digital assemblages

The epistemological and ontological questions underpinning this paper arise from how we can research assemblages that are constantly in a state of becoming (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Law, 2004; Latour, 2005). Care is often an intimate relation: not necessarily private, but one that involves a specific orientation towards a particular object with a range of intimacies attached to it. Coupled with the intimate digital spaces of the smartphone (Morgan, 2023), attempting to research forms of care through smartphone practices presents us with various challenges of trust, ethics and reciprocity (Pink et al., 2016). This demands a methodological approach that can capture the compounded ephemeral or transient nature of caring relations within smartphone practices; relations and practices that are often so mundane, that individuals can have trouble identifying them as anything other than the normal subconscious rhythms of everyday life. To research care alongside the smartphone is, therefore, to research a large, complex ecosystem of ongoing, multiple and overlapping forms of digital relations between the human and non-human which become everyday: pushed towards the background of perceived actions or events (Braidotti, 2013).

In context of these underlying questions, an ethnographic approach – informed by participatory research approaches – was mobilised as a method for this project to engage with the grounded, complex, and often messy realities of everyday digital life. This paper draws upon a year-long ethnographic project co-designed and conducted with a major registered charity providing support to asylum seekers and refugees in a major city in the North-East of England between September 2022 and 2023. Within the research period, over one hundred asylum-seeking individuals became involved in this research. Most data drawn upon in this paper comes from ethnographic observations and conversations as a quasi-volunteer/researcher. Ethnographic data was also produced through 26 formalised interviews that were co-designed with the collaborating organisation and 3 participatory mapping workshops that were conducted throughout the dissemination period in collaboration with Vodafone's 'Charities.Connected' SIM distribution project.

To research everyday smartphone lifeworlds is to research highly taken-for-granted forms of everyday life. What people do on their phones, how long they spend on them, why they engage in certain practices are all questions that in practice are incredibly hard to pin down or answer. Smartphone use and its place as a technological object in our everyday lives often exists on the periphery of conscious action or thought (Morgan, 2023). Mobilising an ethnographic approach and spending time with individuals in their everyday lives thus became an opportunity to explore what role the smartphone plays

within practices such as giving or receiving care. To be with somebody when they pick up their phone, laugh at their screen, swipe a notification off the screen and lock it, is to both witness and delve deeper into these (often) involuntary or subconscious experiences. Attuning myself towards these moments meant that the everydayness of smartphone use could be captured in detail – allowing the mundane, routine, habitual, non-conscious practices with the smartphone that become part of 'everyday life' to be brought to the forefront of interest. Being with allowed me (with care and when appropriate) to follow through on these actions when they happened, questioning why certain notifications would be answered, or ignored, for example. In this way, ethnographic methods allowed me, not to intentionally intervene in the everyday 'doing' of digital life, but to ask people questions retrospectively or momentarily about these practices: in ways that recounting what people did with their smartphones through interviews often struggled to capture. It is this richness of 'everyday digital practices' that I attempt to bring to the forefront of analysis here: in its complex, messy, and often contradicting form(s).

I draw upon the narratives and experiences of individuals actively seeking asylum in the UK by centring ethnographic extracts and transcripts. All quotes used throughout this paper are fully anonymised, with pseudonyms given to individuals: alternative names that were chosen by interviewees. This is a deliberate choice in this research to retain the humanness of each individual, resisting the tendency to reduce the asylum experience to faceless numbers.

What do digital caring assemblages do? on (re)mediation as flourishing

I now turn to exploring how digital (re)mediations of hostility, through assemblages of care(ing), may be considered as forms of flourishing, in a biopolitical sense. It is crucial to qualify here that within the context of the UK's asylum system, it is incredibly difficult to say that any form of living under conditions of intense hostility can be captured as *flourishing* (at least, in the traditional sense that may be applied to forms of valued life). And yet, I contend this project is still worthwhile for developing nuance within our academic portrayal of everyday experiences of affirmative living. Shifting the imaginaries of what we might traditionally conceptualise count as flourishing for valued forms of life (the 'legitimate' citizen), we must instead be able to account for shades of flourishing that might exist in alternate forms, spaces or temporalities than we anticipate. Flourishing in the context of this research may well be experienced as an ongoing series of digital practices that form temporary or transitory communities, such as in the case of online gaming or in the creation of WhatsApp groups. Flourishing may also emerge through individual practices of self-care, where disconnection or alternative networks of connection (such as connecting a child to digital worlds) can enable forms of selfhood to develop. As researchers, we must remain open to what flourishing may present itself as within biopolitical governance systems that intend to inflict modalities of violence or harm. And, moreover, working from the context of asylum seeking in the UK or an alternative system of hostile governance, it is thus important to distinguish between a general form of human flourishing – which may indeed be said to exist with digital encounters or caring relations for all forms of life – and the flourishing of human life that gets actively Othered through various modes of governance that seek to harm, erode, and inflict violence.

Indeed, for those living with hostile affects and within hostile environments, hostility will always burn in the background of everyday life; it is inescapable as an intended effect of governing the Other through this logic (Morgan, 2023). And yet, I suggest there is value in staying with what individuals can do, and often actively pursue, within these systems do to go beyond the contours of what everyday life feels like alongside and under hostility. Moving between three everyday spaces that feature prominently in my ethnographic research – the hotel, the drop-in and the football pitch – I aim to draw out a sense of what affirmative forms of living can emerge alongside the explicit and implicit workings of hostility. In what follows, I want us to think carefully with the question: *what difference do digital*

care(ing) assemblages make to the everyday experience of claiming asylum in the UK? I suggest that digitally mediated assemblages of care tell us something about how care has the power to destabilise asymmetric power relations within the asylum system. Whether more visible and persistent (such as setting up WhatsApp chats or sending out broadcast announcements) or quiet and ephemeral (playing an online game or parenting through handing your child a smartphone), digital relations of care have the potential to transform how it feels to inhabit everyday space-times as a subject governed through the logics of hostility.

We must also be aware of holding the tension inherent within the potentiality of (re)mediation. There may be moments of great happiness or joy produced through a relation of care, but experiences of flourishing can quickly be subsumed back within the broader fabric of the hostile environment itself. Digital practices of care may take the subject away from hostility, distract or distance from it, but the subject is always inevitably retuned to it: returning to the lonely hotel room, or grappling with the weight of lone parenting throughout the application process. These qualifications do not negate the fact that the e/affects of hostile governance are being (re)mediated in these experiences and what we may identify as forms of flourishing. But they do carry with them implications for how we define and grapple with the question of affirmative living through the Foucauldian language of flourishing within assemblages that, at their core, are defined by Otherness, violence and harm.

1. Countering isolating infrastructure: The ephemerality of online gaming

> Omi speaks very little English, but we manage to communicate through individual words and body language. Today, he shows me a game he is playing on his phone [Clash of Clans: a world-building game with options for multiplayer connection]. He shows me around the world he has built. Once finished, he tells me he 'plays a lot in hotel'. He continues 'it is good to play with friend, you know?… we play online a lot in the room together'.

Online gaming platforms and apps have emerged as significant digital spaces that enable networks of care to flourish – providing moments of connection, joy and connection – amidst the constraints of hostile environments tied to hotel infrastructure. Hotel accommodation has become a normal part of the urban landscape of asylum accommodation in the UK (Burridge, 2023; Zill et al., 2021) and part of a wider political toolkit to produce varying intensities of unliveability through living circumstances. Alongside other forms of accommodation that were once considered exceptional – barracks, warehouses, barges – hotels have become a normal experience in applying for asylum. Individuals and families are often highly isolated within hotel rooms, with 'no access to common spaces' (Moiz), eating alone from 'polystyrene plates, cups and wooden cutlery' (charity worker) or being located 'so far out from the city centre' (Gamal). The experience of the hotel in the UK context is a direct product of intensified hostility, where the bareness of human life (biologically, politically and affectively) is brought to the fore through the logics of deterrence:

> Gamal: In there [the hotel] it's like another country. Because you know if you want a life… you need to have your space, these hotels are made for travelling, you cannot live there… and you must live with hundreds of people from different backgrounds, most are depressed. You cannot be comfortable. Always bad things happening… the hotel is not good…to live with that many people even if they are social, which some people aren't… it is so hard.

Becoming part of the rhythms and routines of everyday life in the hotel, a wide range of online games were mentioned throughout my research – many of which can be commonly described as online, multi-player games. Mustafa, a young man in his early 20s, shared how playing online

games with his mother back home via the Facebook Messenger app helped him maintain a sense of connection with his family:

> *We play simple games like chess or backgammon… she doesn't like losing so sometimes we fight (laughs), but it gives me something to look forward to… and not having to, you know, make small chit chat on the phone all the time.*

Aside from self-care (Wilson, 2016), gaming – especially via a smartphone device – has received little attention in its capacity as a care(ing) relation. I suggest we might find value in thinking about these relations through the lens of care, where the informal networks of game playing hold potential for the (re)mediation of everyday hostile environments experienced within the hotel (loneliness, isolation, depression): where suggestions to play, invites to join a game, physical spaces created to play together (in rooms or corridors) all hold the potential to affect what it feels like to inhabit the space of the hotel within the everyday context. Within a space so highly visible as a marker of Otherness, online gaming offers individuals to form alternative senses of togetherness within communities, only if momentarily, or fleetingly. For many, playing these kinds of smartphone games became a tactic of breaking down the infrastructural and imagined barriers between people within hotel accommodation. As Assan told me:

> I play a game called PUBG [an online multiplayer battle-royal style game] a lot in the hotel… it is good to play with my friend also there… it is a lot of fun.

Overcoming the spatio-temporal arrangements of the hotel produced through logics of hostility, young men spoke about joining up in 'each other's rooms to play together' (Assan) or 'agreeing on a time to play [together] in the corridor' (Lablab). As Omi highlights, online games become technological mediations of making and maintaining friendships in a space that seeks to reduce and minimise social interaction. This is also true for games that are neither played with other people in the hotel, nor another human at all. As Taysir tells me in an interview:

Taysir: One man and me, we play this game in the hotel together… I also like playing another game with my friends back home. There is not much for us to do there, you know? Wasting a lot of time
Hannah: Does it help?
Taysir: It helps… it helps me to be with friends at home. The hotel can be lonely, in my room by myself a lot of the time. It is depressing.
Hannah: …and when you play the game?
Taysir: When we play games like this, it is fun… not serious of course… but it is nice to be with people… people who know you and you can talk to without worrying.

Despite having the freedom to leave the physical infrastructure of the hotel, many of my participants spoke about 'not having the energy' (Mustafa), largely due to the wearing down of experiences of 'depression' or 'exhaustion' (Gamal). Individuals also face multiple barriers that prevent them from doing so, such as 'being so far out of [the city]' (Vadin) or that 'the bus is too expensive to come [into the city] everyday' (Moiz). Both the affective capacity of living long term within an isolated hotel room and the remoteness of being located on the outskirts of a city centre have significant influence over what it feels like to inhabit the city as an asylum seeking subject: producing exclusionary forms of (non)belonging that transcend the infrastructure of the building itself, and seep into the wider urban experience through the process of (re)Othering. In Taysir's account, playing games with friends back home allow him to displace – even if only temporarily – feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Similar experiences were described by those playing games without another human (e.g. the computer or AI). Mustafa tells me about an online pool game:

> I play with the bot… it keeps my mind busy… I know it doesn't matter if I win, but I get competitive (laughs)

For those living in hotel accommodation, smartphone practices such as online gaming become networked forms of care which sustain and enable individuals to keep living, despite conditions that seek to actively exhaust and harm. As Puig De la Bellacasa (2017: 2) suggests, care is not a 'human-only matter' and thus the role that our smartphones play in relationalities of care matter: not simply in sustaining practices of care between human subjects but becoming entangled in relationalities of care itself. Whether the human subject is playing a game with another human subject through their smartphone, or playing a game with a machine learning algorithm, forms of care emerge precisely as an orientation towards the possibility of 'facilitating new ways of being together' (Conradson, 2011: 454).

Although highly mundane, the act of connecting – both in physical and digital space within the infrastructure of the hotel (in rooms or corridors, in online chats, in the game itself, or through Wi-Fi or data networks) – becomes a relational practice of care that (re)mediates the experience of hostility: destabilising loneliness or isolation (even if only until the game ends or the next game begins) and enabling the opportunity to produce and sustain digital practices that hold open the potentiality for alternative affectual relations. The isolating infrastructure of the hotel is overcome, even if only momentarily, periodically or infrequently (especially given the infrastructural realities of remaining connected to care(ing) assemblages such as WiFi reliability or signal strength) and replaced with digitally mediated forms of community and friendship which destabilise the intended living arrangements produced by hotel buildings within the wider infrastructural form of the asylum system.

2. Becoming more than: Mothering as digitally mediated selfhood

> Throughout the drop-in, Solin's daughter (Kali) sits in the corner, completely engrossed in an iPhone. Solin tells me 'She loves it… watching cartoons and playing games all of the time'. I try to interact with the young girl, speaking in broken English phrases about what she is doing – 'playing games', 'watching kids YouTube', 'TikTok'. She sits quietly for the full three hours, fully occupied. Solin tells me that it is important for her to be able to 'get on with things' … 'as well as being a mother, I can volunteer here without having to look after her constantly'.

Highly intimate and gendered forms of care such as parenting are necessary to maintain care-giving spaces such as the drop-in. The community drop-in is often presented as a space of care-*giving* practices within otherwise careless infrastructures, networks or relations (Conradson, 2011; Darling, 2011). But care in the space of the drop-in is still complex and negotiated (Darling, 2011) and, as we can see in the example above, we must now pay careful attention to how care in the drop-in is digitally mediated by smartphone devices, whilst also being situated within wider pre-existing power relations inherent within gendered care(ing) relations.

In the example of Solin, we see how the ongoing work of digitally mediated parenting is necessary for first, Solin to be present within the drop-in in the first instance as a recipient of care from the charity, and second, as a care giver through her role as a volunteer in the space of the drop-in: such as making cups of tea, or helping to hand out vegetables on the weekly food bank table (Darling, 2011). And, of course, we cannot forget Solin's care(ing) responsibilities as a single mother. Such complex and highly gendered assemblages of care here, and the women that regularly perform them in the space of the asylum drop-in, cannot be taken for granted and must be contextualised within a broader set of power relations that determine what certain kinds of urban space feels like. For example, despite being conceptualised care-giving spaces (Conradson, 2003), drop-in spaces can often

feel highly exclusionary for minority individuals: especially 'single mothers and those from the LGBTQ + community' (charity worker). Openly accessible drop-in spaces across cities are often be perceived as 'filled with a lot of men' (Palesa) or 'intimidating' (Rose) and can be difficult to occupy due to additional care-relations such as arranging 'picking up children from school, feeling them, looking after them' daily (Solin) or 'changing nappies in a disabled toilet' (Katya).

The introduction of digitally mediated forms of care(ing) into these everyday care assemblages does not necessarily alleviate the dependencies of single mothers, nor do they completely disrupt the pre-existing power relations that determine them. Digital mediation can, however, enable the opportunity for negotiating these everyday realities. Returning back to Solin and Kali, we are able to see how forms of care are being shaped by digital mediation in the space of the drop-in. We might traditionally see the parent–child relationship as a one-way caring relation, but the introduction of the smartphone complicates our understanding of the care(ing) relations between Solin and Kali: care here is a networked assemblage between mother and child, but also between the smartphone, drop-in space and other individuals occupying the space. The smartphone mediates the parental care between Solin and Kali, enabling Solin to temporarily distance her performance of mothering towards something else (a volunteer). The smartphone thus becomes an extension of Solin's care for Kali and enables the opportunity for feelings of exclusion or non-belonging to be (re)mediated.

Moreover, it is not simply the practices themselves that can be considered forms of care, but the act of sustaining forms of connection to digital infrastructure can also be considered care: finding Wi-Fi spots, connecting to data or finding suitable apps for the child to play on:

> All the time I am looking for somebody to hotspot data from when I am here (laughs)… they don't give us the Wi-Fi password and I only have a little amount of data. When she watches videos a lot or plays games, it eats my data! (laughs). (Solin)

Digital mediation does not simply enable novel forms of care(ing) practices to emerge, but it opens up the opportunity for individuals to negotiate their roles as a (traditionally gendered) caregiver. Technological mediation often becomes that which enables individuals to detach or distance themselves (again, even if only momentarily) from the caregiving role of mother in the spaces and times of the drop-in; enabling the opportunities to engage in self-care practices that can significantly alter how women take up space and (re)orient themselves to alternative affectual relations of belonging and community:

> I'm at the women's group; we are learning a dance for an upcoming theatre performance. I spend some time with Lulu, Maria's daughter who is sat at the edge of the room on her mother's phone. She is watching a cartoon on the YouTube app whilst her mother is engrossed in dance and laughing with her friends here. I ask Maria about Lulu and the phone, she tells me 'Without the phone I cannot be here in this space… she is too young to go to school so I would be in the house or being a mother… here with the phone I can dance… I get to be free'.

In both examples of Solin and Maria, it is not simply enough to suggest that the smartphone is changing the forms that care takes within the space of the drop-in. Instead, these forms of care are having a considerable influence over what it feels like to be within, inhabit and belong to the urban space in question. In both examples, we can identify a (re)mediation of gendered exclusions or difference that persists within and outside of drop-in spaces. The drop-in can only become a space of *caregiving* for women like these as far as individuals feel able to engage in the relational nature of care provided in this space. Technological mediation can enable individuals who may have previously felt excluded or on the periphery of care to become an active participant in the circulation of assemblage care within the drop-in space. For example, how Maria tells us about feeling 'free' in the drop-in space, despite still

having the responsibilities of her child in the space. Of course, Lulu is still in the room with her, but when engrossed in tapping on a game or watching a YouTube video, Maria was able to spend time chatting to her friends, moving her body, rehearsing for a performance. Both Solin and Maria talk about 'being more than a mother': a 'friend', a 'volunteer', an 'individual'. Despite the children still being with their mothers physically in the space of the drop-in, they both gesture towards the alternative political relations of (re)mediating exclusion and isolation.

The difference the smartphone makes here thus lies in opening the opportunity to become otherwise, to attach to and orient oneself towards, alternative affective experiences of what it feels like to inhabit the space-time of the drop-in. For individuals who experience multiple fragmentations of hostility in their everyday lives in the UK – for example, through childcare, education, health or social services – digital assemblages of care can disrupt and transform what it feels like to live within the boundaries of the UK's asylum system: offering the potential for previously excluded or invisible subjects to develop and sustain a sense of belonging or purpose which contributes to forms of living that go beyond bare human existence.

3. Shifting cosmopolitan imaginaries: WhatsApp chats and claims to urban space

> After last week's 5-a-side tournament that was organised by two charities in the city, I ask Santi how the team got on: 'we lost… of course [laughs] but it was a lot of fun… it was good to meet some other people in the hotel… we have made a group chat on WhatsApp so we will hopefully arrange to play again sometime… we have been messaging on there and planning a time to meet. It is nice to be able to get out and enjoy doing something not in my room'.

Spaces and practices of 'cosmopolitanism' are often relatively hard to access for Othered individuals which can be said to be a direct effect of producing which is life governed under the asylum system through the logics of hostility. Spaces such as the hotel or drop-in are core spaces of the everyday experience of seeking asylum, but they are not the beginning nor end of the asylum application experience. The asylum experience extends beyond these key nodes that are often part of the urban fabric of a city: destabilising what and who we might think of as cosmopolitan urban citizens (see: Koukouzelis, 2022; Nail, 2015).

Spaces for personal well-being (physical and mental) – such as football pitches or dance studios – are either often hard to access due to factors such as money and/or living location within the city. For example, Amir tells us:

> I live in the hotel… the gym we can go to once a week with a voucher from [the charity] is too far… I must pay for a bus to get there. The Pure Gym is around the corner from the hotel, but I cannot pay with cash, and I can't start a membership either.

The forms of isolation that are produced through the spatiality of hotel buildings and housing used for asylum accommodation can have significant impacts on individuals: contributing to a sense of both loneliness and exhaustion (Darling, 2022); where the barriers to maintaining physical and mental health are often too overwhelming to leave the hotel room or the house. Contributing to forms of slow violence in gradually wearing down the body and mind (Morgan, 2024), participants frequently spoke about the forms of depression arising from the spatiality of urban housing:

> I know I should exercise, I a smart man… I know about endorphins and things like this in the body… I exercise all my life. But here I cannot leave my house… sometimes it is too hard, you know? Mentally. (Gamal)

However, these barriers which can often shape what it feels like to inhabit the urban are not necessarily fixed. Digital networks of caring relations have now become part of the everyday negotiation of

accessing and occupying spaces for physical/mental wellbeing across the city. Amid the hostility of the UK's asylum system, where there is truly little support provided in the way of leisure or physical activity, small informal networks such as a WhatsApp chat have a significant impact on feelings of isolation or loneliness that are produced through the spatio-temporal arrangements of waiting in asylum. WhatsApp group chats emerge as a tactic of creating connections across the city, contributing to a sense of (re)mediating hostile affects felt in the present.

Informal WhatsApp groups such as the 'Team Sports' group chat set up by Santi and Asad are thus the creation of alternative space-times that are not limited to the digital but are instead spread across a network of urban infrastructure that marginalised individuals often have limited access to. A form of everyday care exists here in the creation and maintenance of digital spaces for wellbeing and inclusion. Simply being part of the digital space of the WhatsApp group, receiving notifications or actively engaging in conversations are all banal digital practices that are embedded within wider assemblages of care(ing) that sustain forms of everyday life beyond hostility:

> I like having the group chats on my phone, my husband is always laughing at me with all of my notifications… when my volume is up on my phone its ding, ding, ding [laughs]… but seriously, it makes me feel less lonely, you know? Seeing the messages, laughing in the chat… I have my husband and my child but I like to see what is going on in [the city], where I can go, who I can meet. (Nala)

Moreover, care is not simply tied to the digital space of the chat itself (in encouraging messages, forms of planning or simply sending stickers or GIFs), forms of care are found in the gathering together of Othered bodies to occupy urban space and to negotiate the everyday erosion of what it feels like to inhabit the urban: to move, to express oneself, to experience joy, frustration, anger on the football pitch; to connect with others, to share friendship and experiences. In both occupying, and *feeling* like they can occupy, spaces across the city to play football, both Santi and Asad express a sense of affirmative belonging. This alternative sense of what it feels like to occupy urban spaces is produced and maintained precisely through the digital networks of the WhatsApp chat and its function for identifying, planning, occupying and (re)circulating forms of information that enable individuals to feel a sense of (re)mediation; to flourish and engage in playfulness or leisure in otherwise hostile forms of living:

Santi: are we playing today?
Asad: ? [*thumb up emoji]*
Ishan: we meet after college ⚽ [*football emoji*] ? [*sunglasses emoji*]

To think with assemblage here is to also acknowledge what other networks support and maintain the networks of care that emerge through the WhatsApp chat. Having the material equipment to engage in sports such as football can be an additional barrier to playing accessing urban spaces (e.g. if playing on private artificial grass pitches across the city). Most individuals seeking-asylum have very few material belongings due to the repetitiveness of being on-the-move (Steigemann and Misselwitz, 2020). Consequently, where other more formal opportunities to engage in sports like football might arise – for example, Ismail spoke to me about a 'local football team recruiting players from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds' but deciding not to attend due to 'not having a pair of boots or shinpads' – individuals are often deterred due to the pre-emptive perception of exclusion (even if there are opportunities offered to work around these barriers). In such cases, alternative or additional digital networks can become imbricated in assemblages of caring relations; supporting and maintaining the ability of individuals to continue playing (and thus, continuing the ability to (re)mediate what it feels like to take up and exist within certain spaces in the city). In Asad's case, connecting to a Facebook group where

he was able to source a pair of boots, an England shirt, and a football donated by a local man transformed his perception of what is possible as an urban, cosmopolitan subject:

> At the end of the drop-in, I tell Asad that I've got the football boots for him – I give him the bag and tell him that it was a man on a local Facebook page. He tells me 'I am shocked, they are new?' whilst trying them on his feet. He also unpacks the England shirt and shorts/socks that the man included in the package. Asad repeatedly thanks me. Later that evening, he sends me photographs of him playing football wearing them.

Here we see how multiple forms of digital platforms, mediums and subjects converge here into a caring assemblage which sustain individuals like Asad to be able to develop alternative affectual experiences within urban spaces and the opportunities to engage in political subjectivities like cosmopolitanism are made possible. On the football pitch, Asad, Santi nor Ismail are exclusively defined by their asylum-seeking status: they become more than a homogenous naming technology; a teammate, a player, a fellow human. The assemblages of care through the object of the smartphone here produces and sustains alternative affective experiences which disrupt the workings of what it feels like to live through hostile environments (Morgan, 2023). Indeed, the individual might have to return to their isolated hotel room or house after a training session or game, becoming once again exposed to the harsh design of the asylum system, but reclaiming spaces within the city to express oneself, move their body, or simply connect with other subjects has significant effects on (re)mediating what it feels like to inhabit and occupy urban spaces that are designed and produced through the logics of hostility.

Conclusion

Taken together, the empirical insights detailed in the sections above highlight to us the ways in which digitally mediated assemblages of care emerge, circulate and (re)mediate the realities of hostility through everyday interactions with the smartphone within the context of claiming asylum in the UK. From hotel rooms to football pitches, I have outlined the potentiality that digital assemblages of care have in enabling and sustaining multiple modes of flourishing within and alongside the material and affectual contours of hostile governance. Coming back to the core questions that guide this papers' contributions, I have argued that the value of centring such digitally mediated care(ing) assemblages lies precisely in the conceptual shift that such assemblages demand when considering how flourishing – or affirmative forms of living – emerge with and alongside hostile environments. The difference that the smartphone makes here in our understanding of what transformational potential care holds (even if only momentarily or ephemerally) is in the increased accessibility and ability to engage in the everyday (re)mediation of hostile affects, with the support of care(ing) digital networks, practices and actors.

Beyond the scope of this article, I suggest two broader implications should be taken forward in future research that grapples with questions of affirmative living and digitally mediated practices of care, prompting us to rethink assumptions about what counts as political agency and affirmative flourishing. First, this paper offers a reading of care(ing) relations and practices that situate them as both forms of political agency and holding the potential for political action for Othered subjects within systems of power and control. If we are to think of care as a practice or relation that is essential to the reproduction of human and nonhuman life alike, we must acknowledge that the ability of subjects to act within care(ing) assemblages – in this case, through their smartphone lifeworlds – is already a relation to the reproduction of life that exists beyond the bare human subject. To respond to Power and William's (2019) call for the need to expand the scope of care-thinking to broader questions of human flourishing, this paper encourages us to think of care as a relation that in itself can take subjects beyond the conditions of everyday life that forms of hostile governance produce: staking a claim to affirmative forms of living within and beyond hostility as a hegemonic affect, and enabling the space-time(s) for alternative (potentially affirmative) relations to emerge and persist. Taking this

one step further, I draw our attention specifically to the posthuman assemblages that now make these orientations towards affirmative living more accessible and possible than ever before. As argued elsewhere (Morgan, 2023), we can no longer conceptualise forms of Othered life (not simply limited to those seeking asylum) without serious consideration of digital subjectivities that now characterise everyday life. This raises serious implications for research which directs attention towards how we engage with political categorisations of less-than-human life within the context of novel digitally connected subjects. An updated understanding of digital subjectivity is thus necessary for transforming both our understanding of techniques of Othering (which now are embedded within digital means) and the alternative political relations that can emerge and circulate between the human and the smartphone.

The second implication this paper raises is the forms in which affirmative life, or to use the Foucauldian language of flourishing, can and persist. Here, I mobilise the concept of (re)mediation as an attempt to get at the tension which is inherent in attempts to define and articulate flourishing within broader fabrics of hostile governance that perpetually burn in the background of everyday existence. The point of proposing we approach this tension through the practice of (re)mediation specifically is twofold. First, as a way of dealing with forms of flourishing that may never overcome or dismantle the broader governance structures that reproduce what the everyday looks and feels like for the Othered subject. And second, to be able to integrate a discussion of posthuman assemblages of care which, in themselves, are often ephemeral, momentary or impermanent. The implication here then, is that we must rethink what forms of flourishing look or feel like within the novel context of digitally connected subjects beyond traditional framings that imagine flourishing as a process likened to ideas of modernity and progress: flourishing as a unidirectional force of improvement. Yet, for subjects governed through hostile environments, flourishing may never be captured through this imagery or narrative. However, this does not mean that flourishing – as a tactic of claiming political subjectivity or agency – is not possible. Instead, we must rethink what we count as flourishing in the context of novel and changing subject forms. Going beyond Western discourse of linear progress that is rooted in futurity, how might we rethink flourishing in alternative spatio-temporal forms: how might flourishing be temporary, circular, fleeting, complex or messy? How might this change how we conceptualise political agency and its (re)mediation of bare, unvalued or unliveable life? How does the omnipresence of digital technologies now change, mediate and radically alter our understanding of affirmative practices.

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Statements and declarations

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Data availability

The interview data that supports the findings of this study are openly available in Reshare: Morgan, H. (2025) 'Interviews: Everyday Digital Life' [Data Collection]. Colchester, Essex: UK. The ethnographic data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request due to ethical considerations.

Notes

1. https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/12263/html.
2. Home Secretary's statement on the Illegal Immigration Bill – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).

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