

## Loving over Skype: Tactile Viewing, Emotional Atmospheres and Video Calling

Yvonne Clarke-Salt

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**Abstract:** This article draws on research interviews taken from a broader research project, *The Love Migration Project*, the aim of which is to understand how and why people move for love. Many of the couples interviewed spent much of the early part of their relationship living in different countries, negotiating their relationship and love for each other over distance. This article focuses on how physical intimacy be negotiated over distance, particularly through online platforms such as Skype. My main question in this paper is how can seeing one's romantic partner on a screen encourage emotional connections between romantic partners? More specifically, what are the practices that romantic partners engage in when using Skype which enable them to feel emotionally connected?

In this article I will argue that the answers to these questions can be found by paying attention to the ways in which these couples used Skype. I will engage with Sara Ahmed's idea of emotions being a "thickness in the air" (2004, 10) to examine how couples negotiate emotional aspects of their relationship via Skype calls, and argue that a more visceral understanding of the body can help us understand how emotions are communicated and felt.

**About the Author:** Yvonne Clarke-Salt is a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex. Her current research, *The Love Migration Project*, examines how love relationships influence, or not, people's decisions to migrate. She is interested in what love does in people's everyday lives, and how it is experienced as an embodied and emplaced feeling. Her research also explores how people's love stories can be expressed through material culture.

**Keywords:** distance relationships, embodiment, emotional geographies, emotions, love, online communication, Skype

## Introduction

I meet Camilla and Rolf at an independent café on a weekday morning in the El Portal area of Barcelona. Camilla is a 29-year-old American who came to Barcelona as a student, and who stayed on so that she and Rolf could pursue their relationship. She now works for a web-based start-up in a central part of the city. Rolf, a 27-year-old Swedish man, had recently moved back to Barcelona from Sweden, and was working on his master's thesis. Rolf eats a croissant filled with Nutella, and we all sip our artisan coffees. While Rolf gets on with his much-needed breakfast, Camilla begins to recount some of the early part of their story. As she speaks she glances in his direction continually, as though to check that he agrees with what she's saying. His chewing seems to go in time with reflective nodding, indicating that he has no objections so far. Camilla's glances at her boyfriend's face soon become focussed on something more than agreement though, as unbeknownst to Rolf, the Nutella is slowly spreading itself around his mouth and beyond. She giggles. 'You've got it everywhere,' she says in a gentle tone, laughing as she pulls a paper napkin from the holder to gently wipe it off. He tries to wipe it himself, but without a mirror he can't see what he's doing. She carries on with their story while she wipes, but the Nutella is still making its presence felt: 'You've got chocolate here...it's everywhere!' she laughs. He laughs too. 'Freaking Nutella,' he says. Camilla starts a sentence, 'I just wanna...' then hesitates. 'A wet-wipe?' I suggest. 'Well, that, yeah. And I wanna lick it,' and I then realise we may not be on the same wavelength. Camilla carries on with the story but, croissant devoured, Rolf is free to 'chip in at any time', as Camilla suggests. So he does, 'Well, that's not entirely correct...' he begins.

The above vignette illustrates the physicality of love relationships, how love is embodied, and tacitly understood and felt. Camilla's glances towards her partner and her desire to lick chocolate off his face highlight how proximity, intimacy, and love seem inextricable. Yet this couple, like the others in this study, spent much of the early part of their relationship living in different countries, negotiating their relationship and love for each other over distance. How, then, can this kind of physical intimacy be negotiated over distance?

During periods of absence, the couples I interviewed found ways to foster their love which often involved video calling. Amelie, a French woman living with her Spanish boyfriend in Brussels, said "we talked so much [...] almost every day," and a Belgian woman said that she and her Chilean partner "always try to get the time, always a lot of time in Skype." This contact is more than simply staying in touch. Without being physically close, these couples found other ways to communicate these embodied emotions. As Juan, a Spanish man living in Brussels with his Spanish partner, said: "when I started like [pause] beginning to feel something for her [...] like just for being sure, that I could write her if I wanted to, I took also my Spanish phone like with me to every place..." Using mobile phones as well as video calling allowed them to have both spontaneous contact and more sustained communication. Some couples speculated that being away from their partner

would have been much more difficult without technology. A Romanian woman, Annika, married to Roger, a Belgian man, commented that “we have also [...] we had also Skype and phones I think. Some years ago it would be harder”, and she compared this to his parents, who also had a distance relationship, as she felt that “for your parents was harder for sure [...] they did it like by letters”. Like Annika, other couples commented that a live video connection made them feel closer. The virtual space that video calling creates allowed for visceral connections between the distant partners.

Video communication has its limits, though. Skype might be more convenient than writing letters, but it can still be frustrating, as Annika continued, “when you want to communicate something and you’re not home or [don’t] have internet it’s a bit difficult”, and Roger agreed: “Yeah, and also you had no internet everywhere, 3G was not existing.” To overcome this annoyance, they developed a system of calls. Annika asked Roger, “do you remember the communication system we were having?” and then explained, “we had missed calls. Look one, two, three. Two missed calls – call me, three missed calls – we see each other on Skype [laughing]”, and through this they were able to find ways of getting around technological problems. For couples such as Charles and Emma, however, who lived in Spain and Australia respectively, a time difference of ten hours made video communication difficult. Charles reflected, “Skype, with twelve hours of time difference, I mean, I got up at seven in the morning so that Emma could call – we could talk at eight in the evening, her time.” They eventually relied more on email and text because of the time difference, indicating that simultaneous communication, such as by Skype, might be more suited to similar time zones.

This paper draws on research interviews taken from my PhD research on love migrants. The aim of the broader research project is to understand how and why people move for love, and is comprised of 51 narrative interviews carried out in Barcelona, Brussels, and London in 2015 and 2016. The couples that took part were interviewed together, usually in their homes, but sometimes in a coffee shop or café which the participants chose. Most interviews lasted around 90 minutes, though they ranged from 40 minutes to four and a half hours. For this paper, I focus on comments made by a number of the couples about their use of Skype.

Skype has become popular since it was first developed in Estonia in 2003. Microsoft bought it in 2011 for US\$8.5 billion, and it is estimated that there are 40 million Skype users online at peak times (Miller and Sinanan 2014, 2-3). Most, if not all, of my participants used Skype, and often they used this interchangeably with “video calling” in general, regardless of whether they were using the platform of Skype or not. My aim in this paper is to focus on one specific aspect of how romantic partners communicate via Skype: the negotiation and maintenance of emotional closeness.

A decade ago, commentators who focused on the use of internet communication spoke of the dangers that disembodied communication could have for identity politics (e.g. Hardy 2002). The concern with technologies such as email, texting, chat rooms, and Facebook then was that they allowed people to adopt online identities which were not specific to their material body. The video calling between the romantic partners which I look at in this paper is quite distinct from this, as they are already known to each other, and because Skype “conveys something of the materiality of bodies” (Longhurst 2013, 665). Nevertheless, while video calling is primarily about seeing, emotional closeness is not limited to that. As the vignette which opens this paper highlights, small, intimate acts are

intrinsic parts of love relationships. My main question in this paper, then, is how can seeing one's romantic partner on a screen encourage emotional connections between romantic partners? More specifically, what are the practices that romantic partners engage in when using Skype which enable them to feel emotionally connected?

In this article I will argue that the answers to these questions can be found by paying attention to the ways in which these couples used Skype. I will engage with Sara Ahmed's idea of emotions being a "thickness in the air" (2004, 10) to examine how couples, such as Camilla and Rolf, introduced above, negotiate emotional aspects of their relationship via Skype calls, and argue that a more visceral understanding of the body can help us understand how emotions are communicated and felt.

Arguing for an embodied, visceral understanding of how couples use video calling might suggest that there is a need to enhance the technology used for this with physical body substitutes. Computer engineers who have developed products intended to be held, kissed, or felt in lieu of the partner's physical body have explored this idea. "Sleepy Whispers" (Gooch & Watts 2012) is one example of this sort of technology, which is a way of sending recorded sound messages to one's partner. The device is a pillow with a speaker inside and a photo frame with a button to play the messages. This device's intended use "is that people record and send messages during the day to be listened to just before their partner goes to sleep", (Gooch & Watts 2012, 61). Once each message has been listened to, it is deleted automatically.

Another example of this sort of technology is "kiss messaging" (Saadtian et al 2014), an apparatus which apparently "provides a physical interface for transmitting a kiss between two remotely connected people" (Saadtian et al 2014, 736), named "Kissinger" by its developers, a combination of kiss and messenger. The developers describe the process of how it works thus: "Each device is paired with another and the amount of force and shape of the kiss by the user is sensed and transmitted to another device that is replicated using actuators" (Saadtian et al 2014, 736). In trials, respondents said: "Once we kissed each other by Kissinger interface, we laughed a lot because we suddenly heard an unexpected sound of motors which was funny" (Saadtian et al 2014, 744). Others said that they became emotionally invested in the object, as it was particular to the couple. There were some reservations about it however, such as the "lips" being too hard, it being embarrassing to use in public, or it provoking doubts about fidelity – as one respondent said: "I was feeling guilty kissing a robot and suggested my partner, to stop using it. This sparked a conversation between me and my partner, but at the end, we were convinced that there is nothing wrong. I could consider Kissinger as a tool to reach to my partner, not a kiss machine."

However, these, and numerous other devices like them, fall short of the experience of a real body, and become more unnerving the closer they get to replicating human appearance (Saadtian et al 2014). These devices focus on filling in the lack of the other's physical presence and attempting to replace it with another object, namely the device itself. But what I want to draw attention to, by thinking through the visceral nature of emotions, is how emotions and the body are inseparable. This means understanding that the body desires to touch and be touched, but also that our bodies are integral to our own understanding of how we feel.

## Theorising Emotions

Emotions have been subject to varying definitions over time and across disciplines, ranging from them being functional evolutionary systems (e.g. Darwin 2007/1872), to culturally distinct, internal states communicated through language (e.g. Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990), to relational and embodied ways of being (e.g. Ahmed 2004). This final position, that emotions are relational and embodied, is the one I adopt in this paper. This raises interesting questions when considering how emotions might be embodied through the virtual medium of Skype. How does it create virtual spaces which link geographically separate ones?

In her influential work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed (2004) is convincing in her call for emotions to be seen as social, embodied and context dependent. Emotions “stick” to bodies that they “make and shape”, as well as circulate between them (Ahmed 2004, 4). Rather than dwell on the origins of emotions or distinctions between the bodily and “intellectual” aspects of emotion, Ahmed focuses on what emotions do, thinking through both how emotions have an affect on us and how we have an affect on others. She uses the idea of “impression” to “avoid making analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion and thought as if they could be ‘experienced’ as distinct realms of human ‘experience’” (Ahmed 2004, 6), thus emphasising that the body and emotions are not separate. Her conceptualisation of emotions in this way is useful as it incorporates bodies which act upon each other.

As emotions are directed at something, be that another person, an object, a memory and so on, “they involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’” (Ahmed 2004, 8). As such, they are relational. Highlighting the relational qualities of emotions does away with both the idea that emotions are internal states which are expressed “outwards”, or that they are cultural practices which influence the individual, which creates an “outside in model” (Ahmed 2004, 9). Ahmed argues for an understanding of emotions which does not presume they are “something that ‘we have’” (2004, 10), and invites us to think that “it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others” (2004, 10). Thus, emotions are not objects which we possess internally and express externally. They are what “create[s] the very effect of an inside and an outside” (2004, 10). The objects of emotions circulate and emotions surround us like “a thickness in the air, or an atmosphere” (2004, 10). Ahmed’s view that emotions are orientated and can thus be near or far away from an object, and that they can move, is useful when thinking about how space and distance play a role in romantic relationships. In the context of this paper, the stickiness of emotions can create connections between bodies which are geographically separate.

A view of love as embodied and related to sexual desire suggests that it is highly physical and therefore proximal, requiring the touching of “real” bodies. Contemporary understandings of intimacy as about disclosure (Giddens 1992), and of sex as “an expression of intimacy” (Giddens 1991, 164), suggest a “coming together” of two people to become one, where distance between romantic partners, both intellectual and physical, is eliminated. In the context of couples who live in different countries, it is interesting to consider how physical and emotional closeness might be achieved. Within the rhetoric of

disclosing intimacy, partners in romantic relationships must reveal every aspect of themselves until there is no space between them. Yet despite the need to reduce distance, and the embodied, physical nature of love, research has shown that intimate relationships can be negotiated and maintained over distance.

This research shows that while some live apart because they have to, others live apart through choice. Deciding to live apart can mean that neither partner has to give up work or move away from intimate relationships with friends or family. Decreasing social pressure for women to move into the man's household has afforded some women greater independence (Levin and Trost 1999), but it does not necessarily relieve them of their gendered duty to care (Holmes 2004) or alter normative gender roles. Relationships over distance can be facilitated by technology (Levin and Trost 1999), although not for all couples, as technology is unequally accessible to those with low financial means (Parreñas 2001). However, as the stories in this paper demonstrate, technology can be a useful medium to open up virtual space and foster emotional exchange and connection.

Proximity does not necessarily equate to intimacy (Thien 2005). Thus, physical closeness does not always bring about emotional intimacy. The idea of intimacy as disclosure and the "pure" relationship (Giddens 1991) has been critiqued for the romanticised view of equality that it entails (Jamieson 1999) and the fact that it assumes a stable view of the self (Thien 2005, 201). However, if we understand intimacy "to involve unstable and/or strange selves 'as others', it can be read differently such that distance does not separate in the same way, and neither does proximity (simply) bind" (Thien 2005, 201). This is useful when thinking through how emotions are experienced over video calling as this means, then, that we can understand people as emotionally desiring bodies, who need closeness, emotional and physical, sexual and non-sexual, for emotional fulfilment.

The idea of emotions as oriented has inspired Morrison et al (2013) to think in more detail about the spatiality of emotion: in particular, love. As Morrison et al (2013) point out, while there may be "emotional geographies" (e.g. Davidson, Bondi and Smith 2005), there need also to be specifically "geographies of love" because love "like any other notion needs to be held up to critical scrutiny" (2013, 506). Morrison et al speculate that specific and sustained academic engagement with love has not happened perhaps "because love continues to be a feminized topic, associated with 'private' spaces and feelings, and it is discursively constructed in, for example, popular culture as 'women's gossip'" (2013, 506). For Morrison et al, love should be considered in its own right, because "[h]ow, where and what one loves is deeply political" (2013, 506).

Ideas about emplacement, proximity, and embodiment are particularly pertinent here as ideas as to how love might be geographically emplaced and then how it might transcend geographical boundaries underpin this paper. Practices which couples engage in to show their love for each other and create closeness should be understood as emplaced, whether in a physically existing environment or a virtual one. Engagement with this might further understanding of the life-world of love in both virtual and non-virtual space. Furthermore, more attention needs to be paid to the array of everyday practices which couples use to express their love: the sexual aspects of love relationships should not be seen as privileged instances of physical demonstrations of love. Wiping Nutella off your boyfriend's chin is as important to understanding the physicality of love as the sexual realm.

This echoes earlier calls from scholars who criticised the tendency for researchers to engage with practices surrounding love but to ignore love itself. Toye (2010) suggests that it is “the logic of synecdoche” which has hampered academic engagement with love; by substituting it for other terms, researchers have not fully engaged with critical reflections on love. In the field of social science, work which focuses on love has tended to this logic of substitution. For example, work which focuses specifically on love and the Internet has sought to understand parental care and authority (King-O’Riain 2015; Longhurst 2013; Miller & Madianou 2012; Parreñas 2001), sibling support (Coe 2013), intergenerational family care (Longhurst 2013), and maintaining families ties across distance (e.g. Oduor & Neustaedter 2014). Work which focuses on romantic love has looked toward sexual practices (Baker 2000; Ben-Ze’ev 2004; Meenagh 2015), infidelity, coming out, dating sites, and how sexual relationships are found and maintained over the internet (Valentine 2006). But, if, as hooks argues, “care does not mean we are loving” (2000, 8), then sex does not always mean love either.

Research on love may also have been neglected because “topics that are associated with rationality and reason” (Morrison et al 2013, 507) are more widely recognised as suitable for research, or because as Toye (2010) reminds us, “Unlike the discourse of sex, which evokes the risqué and the transgressive, the topic of love suggests a conservatism or even a denial of politics, not to mention an aura of naïvete , sentimentality and religiosity” (40). But this focus on sexual practices and a lack of attention to love suggests that love and sex can be separated. Emotional life has certainly been overlooked in academic research, but the binary opposition which has been set up between sex and love is also unhelpful. In particular, if desire, which is an important part of sex, is an emotion, then sex is part of emotional life. Interrogating sex and sexuality may originally have been intended to destabilise and unsettle heteronormative views of sex, but in the context of migration this has meant that “sexuality tends to be mapped onto the bodies of migrant sex workers, rather than being understood as something that all migrants enact” (Walsh, Shen and Willis 2008, 575), so “ordinary” sexual intimacy has been neglected. Questioning the academic separation of love from sex allows us to think through the ways that the two are related and contingent, and to develop a critical understanding of love.

Thinking through love as relational, spatial, political, and visceral, and focusing on what love does, opens up the discussion of love to critical debate. Increasing the scrutiny that academic research on love is subject to will reduce the possibility that love is essentialised or held to be placeless, mysterious, and disembodied. This in turn will enrich scholarship on intimacy, emotions, and love.

## **Long Calls and Emotional Atmospheres: Cohabiting Through Skype**

Couples in distance relationships sometimes use Skype as a way of cohabiting. Rolf and Camilla, for example, met while they were both students on an exchange in Barcelona; however, they met at the very end of Rolf’s stay and only spent a couple of weeks together before he had to return to Sweden. They were living in different countries for much of the initial part of their relationship, and used Skype to get to know each other and develop their relationship. They took turns to visit each other approximately once a month, and

despite missing each other and wanting to be together they found using video calls useful at the start of their relationship.

Camilla: It was actually, I thought it was really wonderful for the beginning of our relationship to be honest.

Rolf: I think you get to know each other in a different way.

Camilla: Absolutely. And we had to be creative and, um, it was I think it was wonderful. I think it was much easier that we lived apart than we would have been dating for a long time and then separated to be honest, um, because I was used to being alone and I was used to sleeping alone and so it wasn't anything out of the norm other than missing him and not being able to share experiences with him which of course I wanted but, it wasn't so difficult as it would be now probably that we've been living together like in the same city and everything.

As well as the information about cultural differences which they exchanged, they also shared more personal information through their Skype calls:

Camilla: In the very early stages of our relationship we shared some very vulnerable things with each other which again, we were not physically in the same place and we were sharing these things and it really helped both of us feel like we could trust the other person and that it wasn't something that we were just like in it for like fun.

These calls, though, were not short focused conversations, despite their planning for topics of discussion. They used Skype for extended periods of time, which allowed them to see each other going about their everyday lives. Camilla said:

Camilla: We started having Skype calls and our first Skype call was seven hours. It was insane, and I say [...] 'as if like that was long!' The first one was seven hours, the second one was six hours, the third one was like eight hours. I don't even know [...] what we talked about.

They described how, on these calls, they would not stay in front of the camera talking all the time, but would get on with their everyday activities.

Camilla: They were so crazy epic long because we just like carried about our lives with Skype on and I was working from home so we could do everything and just leave the computer on – 'I'm gonna go make tea', come back 'oh, I'm gonna go make a tea too.' I mean, just you could live with that person through the computer. I mean it's crazy [...] I mean it's incredible. It's so incredible we did that, I mean, we just lived with Skype on really, I mean that's the best way to put it. Like, we lived our life with Skype. I would even be giving telephone



classes sometimes and it was on. He was studying, listening to me correct English [laughs] and things like that.

This use of video calls is sometimes called ‘always-on’ communication (Neustaedter et al 2015), which refers to a video connection which is left open for long periods of time, often becoming a background presence rather than a focused phone call. This type of connection has been used in work environments to assist colleague communication (Mantei et al 1991; Bly et al 1997), as a means for transnational families to stay in touch (Oduor & Neustaedter 2014), and has been documented as common practice by couples who live apart (Neustaedter et al 2015; Gooch & Watts 2012; Saadtian et al 2014, Miller & Sinanan 2014). In terms of domestic use in homes among family and people with intimate relationships, always-on communication is said to support emotional connections between participants.

For example, King-O’Riain goes as far as to call always-on video “emotional streaming” (2015, 256), such is the poignancy of the emotional connectivity for the families and couples in her study. The couples she interviewed often used Skype to capture “the ebb and flow of daily life” (2015, 10). The visual channel was particularly popular with young children as it made relatives who were geographically distant more “real” and emotional ties to them were felt “more deeply” as seeing their family members smiling and so on would change the children’s behaviour. Similar ideas about visual connections and emotional closeness were highlighted in Longhurst’s (2013) study of mothering over Skype in which she explores “how *seeing* one’s child or children affects mothers’ feelings towards their children” (664, emphasis in original). The mothers were able to reassure themselves of the child’s wellbeing by seeing them running around, smiling, laughing and so on. Thus, the image on the screen of the mother or the child can “promote different feelings of proximity (distance and closeness)” (2013, 667) for each.

Longhurst draws on Ahmed (2004) to show how the image of the child on the screen and the computer itself are signs which have become “sticky” with emotion and affect, “‘sticky’ with everydayness, with missing and reconnecting with family members and friends” (Longhurst 2013, 672). Children would take great delight in showing their drawings to grandparents, who enjoyed watching the children playing and doing day-to-day activities. For particularly young children who are unable to articulate themselves, visual cues are clearly important for the adults who care for them. Vision has been privileged as superior to other senses in Western cultures, and as such, seeing provides “something of an epistemological guarantee” (Longhurst 2013, 671), and exchanging visual information like facial expressions could encourage trust and intimacy (King-O’Riain 2015, 6).

However, despite increasing visuality in some parts of life (Rose 2001, 2), it remains unclear what the relationship between the visual and the material is. Thus, as Rose and Tolia-Kelly (2012) suggest, importance should not only be given to the visual, but also “to attend to the relationships *between* the ‘visual’ and the ‘material’, and to explore what kinds of new thinking might emerge in that intersection” (1, emphasis in original). This is particularly poignant if we are to consider emotions not simply as discourses or practices, but as embodied and relational.

Having the video call in the background creates a space which is visual, yet does not rely solely on sight for the “atmosphere” of emotions to develop. As Rolf put it in the

interview, “ adds one extra element, [...] adds another dimension which is very important.” In this case, unlike King-O’Riain’s and Longhurst’s examples, in which sight and visual stimulus were important, for this couple, the emphasis was on what was between the visual and the material. Camilla and Rolf were using Skype as a way to sense the presence of their partner, rather than to read their body language. This seems particularly poignant to romantic couples as it can “effectively reproduce the grounded experience of intimacy as the initial period of living together” (Miller & Sinanan 2014, 57). Always-on use, as well as creating an emotional space, allows the “fit” of social roles to be tried out and “stretches intimacy beyond the boundaries of the domestic” (Valentine 2006, 387). The long duration calls provided a window into the mundane, the everyday, which this couple saw this as an approximation of living together. As Camilla said, “We were co-habiting with Skype on.”

Always-on video calls could also relate to Giddens’ (1992) ideas about disclosure, with confluent love being dependent on complete openness between partners. Yet this need for disclosure could also indicate a desire to monitor the other’s behaviour, to see what they are “really” doing when they are “alone”. Other technologies which have been developed to assist couples who are in distance relationships have provoked jealousy rather than soothed the pain of longing. For example, a mattress which heats up when the absent partner is in bed (Goodman & Misilim 2015) is meant to make the couple feel closer to each other when they sleep apart. However, when the mattress does not heat up at night, or when the entire mattress heats up, suggesting more than one person is in the bed, the technology can provoke problems of mistrust.

While always-on communication could prompt feelings of jealousy or a need to monitor, there is much to suggest that it is used in a more positive way by couples in love relationships. Like the families in Longhurst’s (2013) study, couples used Skype to share their daily lives. Whereas families used always-on communication to demonstrate visually, couples spent much of their time not looking at each other, but simply sensing or knowing that the other was there, experiencing the “thickness in the air” (Ahmed 2004) which the presence of their partner created. This may be because communication between two adults is quite distinct from communication with a young child. Despite this, Longhurst (2013) points out that older children often preferred to have no video connection when speaking to their parents as they found it could be too intense and invasive. I will pick up this idea of the video call being too intense in the next section. For now, I will consider other reasons why not all communication between adults moves toward “always-on” use.

Some couples used Skype more conventionally as “visual telephony” (Miller & Sinanan 2014). This was either through choice or because practical reasons, such as large time differences, compelled them to a more structured use. Other couples also commented that if the Internet connection was not very good they became frustrated as the connection was cutting off frequently. This draws attention to how wanting to use video connections can sometimes limit where people can connect. Needing a fast Internet connection might mean using Skype on a laptop in an Internet café, which may not afford the degree of privacy desired by couples. Being in a public café certainly would seem to inhibit “always-on” communication. So, always-on Skyping seems to require a reasonably private environment.

Skyping also requires time. Another couple experienced isolation from other areas of their life because they were trying to find time to Skype their partner. Faye, a 24-year-old Belgian woman, and Carlos, a 26-year-old Chilean man, were living together in Brussels

when I met them. Over the past few years of their relationship, they had spent much time apart in their respective countries and had used Skype to contact each other. They commented:

Carlos: Almost every day we Skype or by Facebook. We spend a lot of time in front of the computer.

Faye: And sometimes you really, or at least like I had some times like 'OK, I'm going to Skype this evening' and the other evening and people ask me 'oh, do you want to drink something? Or go out' 'No, no because I have to talk to my boyfriend,' and in the end you really feel like and if he's maybe not coming because of some reason and you're waiting there you look 'where is he?' and you really feel like somehow mmm depending really depending on each other and that you maybe lose other things here maybe because of the Skype all the time and that can be hard I think yeah.

This example shows how finding time to speak to one's partner meant not spending time with friends. Their comments highlight how waiting to communicate on Skype can become an isolating influence, as needing to be at home in front of the computer means that socialising with others is not always possible. Despite wanting to talk to and see each other, arranging to meet for Skype calls caused problems when one of them could not connect to the Internet or had been held up and was late for the appointment. This comment also hints at the ways that dedication to the couple relationship can cause the couple to become "social isolates" (Gerstel & Gross 1984, 67-71) because of the work that a distance relationship requires.

As Miller and Sinanan (2014) have also observed, always-on video calling shares "the intimacy of taking for granted the co-presence of the other" (55), and the intimacy is felt most greatly when there is no pressure to communicate explicitly. Therefore, having to make an appointment to see each other on Skype works against this. While for some this method is the most comfortable, allowing them to continue on with their lives in their homes with the felt presence of their partner, for others it is impractical and emphasises their separation. This is in part because using video to connect requires them to be at home where they have a reliable internet connection and privacy. The practical issue of needing a good connection mean that they are separated from other aspects of their lives, such as going out with friends.

Video calling is a visually intense form of communication which is perhaps not suited to a public environment (Miller & Sinanan 2014). Several couples felt that they could only really Skype their partner from their bedroom. The visual intensity and emotional concentration of video calls to a missed loved one seem suited to a familiar, comforting environment. Despite the spatial fluidity of Skype technology – it can be used in an internet café, on a laptop in a coffee shop, on a phone in the street – the need to use it in the privacy of one's own home makes it geographically quite specific and limited. The relationship work which takes place through this virtual medium is embedded in a geographically specific time and place.

## Falling Asleep and Haptic Looking

The immediacy of the image might encourage emotional connections in some ways, but the visual closeness of the experience it might also be too intense. As Longhurst's research (2013) shows, looking can seem confrontational and invasive. Whereas the young children in Longhurst's study might cry at the immediacy of seeing a family member on screen, the couples in this study found their own ways to mediate the magnitude of the experience.

For Pierre, from France, and Gabby, a Spanish woman, Skype made them very aware that they were apart.

Gabby: We became a bit too sad sometimes cuz... I don't know, you are alone, and I don't know, you hear the other person's voice and I don't know [...] I think, for example we prefer to text [...] we share more by text.

Pierre: ...with Skype, I don't know, I found [it] useless sometimes.

For these two people, Skype was not their preferred medium for intimacy. The presence of their loved one on camera heightened their feelings of loneliness and longing for each other which provoked feelings of sadness.

Pierre: I mean we have lots of memories that we were just laying down on the sofa, just listening to each other breathing or...because we didn't feel speaking, just wanted to be together but then [...] like you don't have the cool part, which is touching each other, and pffff, that's why I found it [Skype] so boring, you know.

It also limited their topics of conversation; They found, as Gabby put it, that they spoke only "about feelings and emotions" on Skype. As Pierre said, they "don't exchange much" via Skype about their daily lives. Pierre commented that Skype was "useless" as it did not allow them to share their lives. It was stifling and stilted. Communicating via text, however, meant that they could send spontaneous messages throughout the day about their activities. They usually needed to plan their Skype calls, and these often took place at the end of the day. This lack of spontaneity and the timing of the calls made them feel routine, uncomfortable, and restrictive.

It seems that the intensity of communicating in this way became a burden, as the visual immediacy was at once intense and frustrating. The presence of one's partner on the screen was "even more in one's face than co-presence" (Miller & Sinanan 2014, 55), and running out of conversation or feeling obliged to stay in front of the camera can lead to "a de-contextualized mutual staring between correspondents" (Miller & Sinanan 2014, 55). It made it uncomfortable for them to have to see each other so intensely. When the Internet connection was bad, the laboured nature of communication also made them both more acutely aware of the geographical distance between them.

Having each other visually present made them feel obliged to sit in front of the computer and discuss intensely emotional feelings. They found they preferred to limit the visual channel to overcome this.

Pierre: Most of the time we don't put the camera actually. The problem is that seeing her face without touching her... then I prefer voice, her voice you know make me other feelings that I prefer, I don't know, it's soft and I can imagine her close to me when with the screen no, I know that she's not close to me, you know they are different –

Gabby: You feel more the distance.

Pierre: – Yeah, actually if I put my headphones and I'm on my bed I can touch my butt and imagine that it's her touching my butt, you know? So it's like... no but that's true... OK. So I prefer to go there and having these sensation than having the Skype.

For Pierre, seeing his girlfriend on the screen led to a heightened emotional experience which he found frustrating. Her voice was ultimately more sensual for him. This couple commented that they had engaged in sexual intimacy over Skype, so it does not seem to be a question of inhibitions or embarrassment in front of the camera. Pierre's comment about intimate self-touching reiterates the point that the line between love and sex is blurred. It indicates how the physical, relational, and emotional aspects are brought together in what Miller and Sinanan (2014, 65) have described as a "transcendent and holistic experience [which] is simply – love". Skype creates a space which is discursive, material, emotional, and visual (Longhurst 2013) which has to be negotiated in ways distinct from the physical world.

Restricting the visual image made the experience of Skype more sensual and emotional for other couples.

Camilla: We watched so many movies on Skype and it was like also like –

Rolf: Not so many.

Camilla: Like, five.

Rolf: [laughs]

Camilla: That's a lot. Well, he fell asleep. So, I watched so many movies. But even still, he would fall asleep and I could see him sleeping while I was watching the movie and it's the closest thing that you can have to being with someone is, is seeing them and at that stage of our relationship I had never seen him sleep during a movie. That was our first time.

In their chapter on intimacy in *Webcam*, Miller and Sinanan (2014) talk about people who would make videos calls in bed. They note the intimate nature of this use, but highlight the practical problems, such as “[not] having enough light” (61), which they say hampers emotional intimacy. Miller and Sinanan imply, then, that not being able to see your romantic partner clearly over the screen is detrimental to fostering an emotional connection with them. But I want to make the case for an embodied, sensuous type of looking which relies on distorted images and might engender emotional connections.

Vision has generally been conceptualised as separate from the other senses and is still mainly studied in isolation (Bacci 2009), yet research has suggested that touch and other sensory experiences “gives richness and meaning to retinal images” (Bacci 2009, 135). Vision, then, is not an isolated channel but one which functions in conjunction with the other senses. Moreover, as Laura Marks, a film theorist, has said, vision can be form of touch (Marks 2002, vii). She argues that by not privileging sight over the other senses and positioning vision within a channel of sensory stimulation, seeing can be tactile and sensuous. This kind of tactile viewing draws on other bodily senses, so the viewer’s body is “more obviously involved in the process of seeing” (Marks 2002, 2). Rather than as the eyes working in isolation, seeing is highlighted to the viewer as an embodied experience

Particular sorts of images provoke this kind of tactile viewing. Images which are distorted, blurred, silhouetted, or dissolving invite haptic looking because the images are not clear: sight alone cannot help us decipher them (Marks 2002). Therefore, other bodily organs are more obviously engaged at the same time as the eyes. These images invite an embodied response, which draws the person seeing the image toward it. When thinking about Camilla and Rolf watching a film together and then falling asleep in front of the camera, the image which they saw of each other was badly lit, perhaps out of focus at times, and maybe obscured by the image of the film. This did not cause frustration or make them put the light on. Instead, what is striking here is Camilla’s feeling that seeing Rolf sleeping felt somehow special. Camilla made it clear that she enjoyed watching Rolf fall asleep, which indicates that rather than looking to see what his facial expressions were, she was looking in order to feel, not to see. As Marks points out, looking in this tactile way “encourage[s] a bodily relationship between viewer and image” (2002, 2), and in this case, Camilla’s bodily feelings were stimulated by a (live) image of Rolf.

In these examples the visual becomes almost too much to bear. Rather than allowing the couples to “sink in” (Longhurst 2013) to each other’s emotional atmosphere, it creates a somewhat awkward experience. It is a reminder that the on-screen image does “not deliver a flesh and blood body” (Longhurst 2013, 674), which can be frustrating and emotionally painful. By avoiding the visual channel, some couples found they were more able to relax into communication with their partner. Distorting the image through low light levels and going so close to the camera that only parts of the body or skin textures could be seen was another way of doing this. This kind of looking is perhaps most similar to how the partner’s body is seen during intimate moments, such as during a kiss; the eyes are often closed or so close to the partner’s body that only small areas of skin or hair are in view.

## Dinner Dates: the visceral body and emotion

The final example shows how Skype dinner dates fostered emotional connections. Camilla and Rolf described how when they had dinner together it was more than simply eating at the same time: they planned the dinner together beforehand, shopped for food, and chose a film to watch together. Camilla described one such dinner date:

Camilla: One of my favourite dates was when he decided that, he looked up a salmon recipe and he sent it to me, and then I looked up an Indie film and so he was in charge of the recipe and I was in charge of the film and we went and bought the ingredients separately and then we cooked our meals separately and then we sat down to have dinner in front of the computer, watching the indie film with the exact same meal. And it was –

Rolf: Well, one of us had to turn off the sound.

Camilla: You can tell he's the technical one, right? [all laugh] um but it was, things like that we're really, really nice and magical.

Technical issues of sound aside, the dates on which they prepared and ate the same food stood out in their memories as special. I asked them why it had been important for them to eat the same food:

Rolf: Well, having the same thing makes you feel like the other person is more uh...

Camilla: Like you're there as close as you can be.

Rolf: ...what is the word for it? More present

Camilla: Yes, more present. Perfect. [pause] and so I think that like –

Rolf: That's important

Dinner dates are part of the canon of “romantic” activities which couples often engage in. They are also one of the ways which other intimate relationships, such as family relationships, are maintained and nurtured. As such, dinner dates are a recognisable form of emotional work (Hochschild 1983) and while Miller and Sinanan hastily dismiss Skype dates of this sort as “awkward and not overly successful” (2014, 56), a more considered engagement with this practice might reveal the visceral experience which fostered emotional closeness.

Critical engagement with the notion of “embodied experience” can move the idea beyond the body as a surface upon which emotions are inscribed, to understanding the body as a visceral entity with an interior and exterior. Johnston and Longhurst (2012) are advocates for the inclusion of sensuous and visceral aspects of life into studies of migrant

lives, and they ask us to consider “the senses – sight, sound, touch, smell and taste – which are a mechanism for visceral arousal” (334) in order to understand more about emotional life. Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2008), who Longhurst and Johnson draw on, say that attention to the “visceral realm” can “increase political understanding of how people can be *moved or mobilized* either as individuals or as groups of social actors” (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy 2008, 469, italics in original). In the context of this paper, what is important about that statement is that through the visceral aspects of life, we can understand how people are moved, in terms of feelings and emotions. This is important as it shows that the body and emotional life are inextricably linked.

Preparing and eating food is a sensuous, visceral experience. Camilla and Rolf could imagine what the other’s body might also be experiencing as they ate; the heat, smells, and textures of the food, in this case, oily fish. The sensing of these visceral aspects takes place within the body, that is, the internal cavity of the mouth, throat and intestines. Thus the body is engaged “not just as a surface etched with social messages but something that encompasses surface and depth, outside and inside, solids and fluids, materiality and spirituality and head and heart” (Johnson & Longhurst 2012, 335), which sees the body as a desiring, sensing entity with emotional and “carnal appetites” (Probyn 2000). This couple’s intentional use of eating as a visceral practice is a way of heightening their own emotional experience through the screen. Eating in particular, as Elspeth Probyn has said, “brings our senses to life, it also forefronts the viscosity of life” (2000, 7). Thus, Camilla and Rolf were able not only to see the emotional expressions of the other through the screen, but to understand more about their own bodily experience and feelings when in each other’s presence. Through these intimate uses of Skype, Camilla and Rolf, and others like them, are creating an emotional space to be together. Food is an emotional object (Ahmed 2004), and not only can it help people to feel at home it can also forge emotional connections with a new home.

For Camilla and Rolf, the always-on use of Skype to sense the other’s presence, falling asleep, and the dinner dates were ways of entering into an emotion-filled home space which, via the screen, spanned geographical space. And as Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy point out in a footnote, with the exception of Elspeth Probyn, “few feminist works venture far in illustrating the visceral mechanisms of such regulation; often the body remains ‘docile’, awaiting the efforts of an ‘active’ mind” (2000, 463). Emphasising the visceral aspect of using Skype shows how the whole body is affected and engaged in “feeling” the way.

## Loving in Person

Notwithstanding the ways that Skype helped some couples to feel closer, sharing physical space was still seen by several couples as the most important way of “knowing” their own feelings. Camilla and Rolf noted that despite their positive experiences on Skype, they eventually needed to live in physical proximity. Camilla said, “I wanted to know if it was gonna work in person or not,” and it was this need, shared by both, which instigated Rolf’s move to Barcelona.



It might seem that love requires bodily knowledge both of one's self and of the other. For most couples that expressed such an idea, there was a need to be physically close. This was related to knowing how the two bodies would "fit" in the mundane of the everyday. They needed to know whether their bodies, together, could "sink" into the "comfort" of life together. As one man, Heberto, a 33-year-old Catalan male living in Barcelona, put it:

Heberto: I think that, apart from getting on well with someone, you have to touch them, you have to be next to them, you have to, you know? Give them a hug.

Emily, a 39-year-old Irish woman married to Heberto, also felt that physical proximity was necessary to really know if she was in love. She said:

Emily: Um so I think what we've done is really romantic actually and the fact that, how do you know that you love someone when you're doing it through Skype? do you know? I think it's how do you know, how do you know they're right when you're doing it through Skype cuz you can't smell their skin and when they come home from work on a bad day you don't see them you're not part of it.

As Gabriel, a Spanish man living with his French girlfriend in Brussels, succinctly explained:

Gabriel: I had the feeling that like you cannot go, I couldn't go, past a certain point of affection without being more physically close which in my case proved to be right I didn't really feel like I really loved her until [...] I was actually here [...] at a distance I felt like it couldn't be and [...] it felt like, like, like she said... a bit shitty.

Attention to the sensuous and the non-verbal ways which couples use Skype draws attention to how important embodied knowledge is to understanding love. The body and what it "knows" is equally important as what practices and processes shape this embodied knowledge.

This highlights how when discussing love, embodied knowledge should not be reduced to the sexual. While sexual touch is an important part of many couples' lives, it is certainly not the only type of physical contact which is part of the growing intimacy of a couple's life. There are complex relationships between love and sex, both in theory and practice. As Toye (2010) has said, researchers have perhaps too often looked at sexual practices at the expense of researching love. And of course, not all sexual contact is loving or intimate. What the material from these interviews seems to suggest is that sex is not a privileged instance of embodiment. Comfort, proximity, and embodiment are not reducible to the sexual. Visceral experiences and knowledge were sought by these couples, but of types which allowed them to get to know intimate practices of their partner. The habits, gestures, and the rhythms of the partner are part of the knowledge acquired about their body. Having this familiarity shows an intimate and deep understanding of one's partner

and investment in the relationship (Gabb & Fink 2015). Being able to understand one's partner through their bodily gestures is an important part of the relationship work which goes on to sustain relationships.

A certain amount of this work can be done over distance, but as many of the couples in this study say, being physically proximate was necessary. Social pressure to live in geographical proximity to one's partner (Thien 2005) may be one reason why so many couples decided they needed to be close to continue their relationship; such is the extensiveness of this idea it may influence how we understand our own feelings. However, knowledge of one's own body and that of one's partner seem to be essential to emotional understanding and knowledge.

## Conclusion

The ways in which these couples fostered emotional closeness over Skype all seem to involve different forms of bodily knowledge. This knowledge was incomplete, given that these exchanges were after all mediated by an Internet connection, a screen, several hundred miles of geographical distance, and, in some cases, time. What they demonstrate, though, is that, for romantic emotions to develop, bodily knowledge is important.

Bodily longing for the other is not just related to physical desire, but emotional and bodily knowledge. The interviews with these couples reveal that experiencing other bodily sensations while Skyping their partner is one way in which their emotional experience is more complete. Another way that these emotional experiences are felt is that rather than seeing a crisp, clear image of the partner, images which are purposefully distorted and partial, such as through lighting or moving closer to the camera, are crucial to these emotional connections. What does this suggest, then, about the virtual and non-virtual life-worlds of love?

Looking directly at our loved one on screen, it has been argued, might make one or both feel self-conscious (Miller & Sinanan 2014). It might be too confronting for some and too restrictive for others. As Gloria and Pietro found, their on-screen presence was too intense, making them feel obliged to discuss intense, emotional topics. Distorting the image, then, might let the visual to fade into the background, allowing more focus on non-visual aspects such as voice. Blurred, grainy, dark on-screen images "invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way" (Marks 2000, 2) through an appeal to the senses. Thus, with less focus on the visual, emotions might be given more attention. Distortion, then, allows the image to become multisensory. Limiting the visual field allows the loved ones to use "memories of the senses" (Marks 2000, xi) to fill in what is lacking in this virtual space.

Using this distorted form of looking might also be part of the ritual of talking to one's partner. The intention of programs such as Skype is to give a clear image to be able to conduct, for example, business meetings over distance. Using it in such a way that the image is distorted also has a ritual quality to it, which marks this out as a special instance of video calling. It is a way that the only the couple use Skype to talk, distinct from other conversations. Rather than just a visual connection, it encourages an embodied relationship between callers.

Skype stretches geographical space, bringing one's partner into one's own physical space despite geographical distance. But in doing this, it also disrupts our understanding of space. People exist both on and off screen, and video calling allows a more immediate way of communicating which also conveys something of the embodied presence of the partner. Seeing one's partner on-screen when we have not been able to see them in person for some creates a visual immediacy which is out of sync with living apart. Skype allows couples to inhabit each other's private space, which can make them feel emotionally closer. However, it can also highlight the inability to tend to each other physically, resulting in frustration and melancholy. To use Ahmed's term, the images become too "sticky", impossible to get off. For partners in distance relationships, inhabiting both material space and virtual space might become an increasingly common experience. This allows them to share not only the sound of their voice but also images, tastes, and smells, such as when they share meals over Skype.

This article has argued that emotional closeness for couples is fostered via Skype, not just by seeing the other, but also through processes of tactile, haptic viewing, and sensing the presence of the other. Emotional closeness is not only about reading the other's body as a series of signs, but trying to understand one's own emotional experience, and locating oneself in the "thickness in the air" (Ahmed 2004) which builds in everyday encounters. It has also argued that in order to "know" whether one is in love, embodied knowledge is essential. This article has offered some considerations as to how couples go about creating situations which even in a virtual environment, allow their bodies to be present and felt by the other.

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