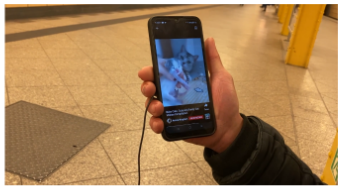
„This phone is like a friend to me."
Appropriation processes of smartphones by homeless people in Berlin



A 57-year-old homeless man, watching a video with cats on YouTube, Berlin 12/2021 (own representation)

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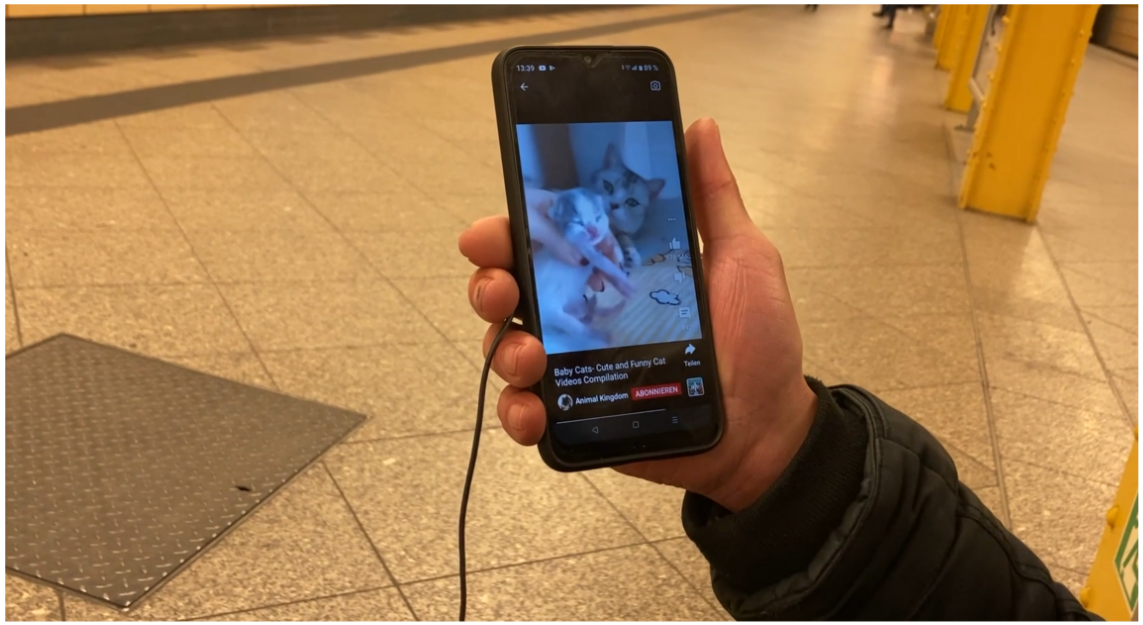

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How smartphones are used to

- create a private space

- organise time

- stabilise social relationships

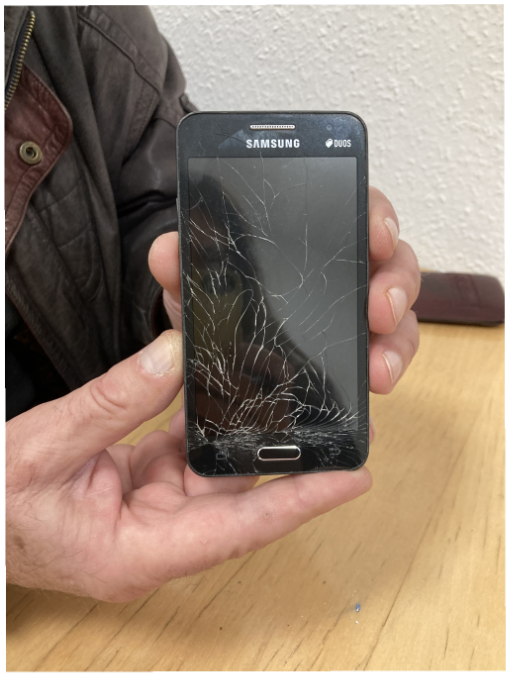
The MOWO Study

The MOWO study investigates whether and how homeless people in Berlin already use mobile media, what barriers they face in doing so, and how the use of mobile media affects their lives.
Part of the study is a survey conducted with over 100 homeless people in Berlin and an ethnographic research.

- The project is funded by the German Research Foundation and is based at the Berlin University of the Arts.
- Duration: November 2019 - November 2022
- Director: Prof. Dr. Maren Hartmann

Ethnographic study
- between October 2021 and June 2022
- Part of the research is a smartphone distribution
- 15 smartphones and sim cards were distributed to people in order to explore processes of media appropriation

Smartphone Ownership as a Part of "Survival Infrastructuring"



A 69 year old man shows his broken smartphone. Berlin, 02/2022 (own representation)

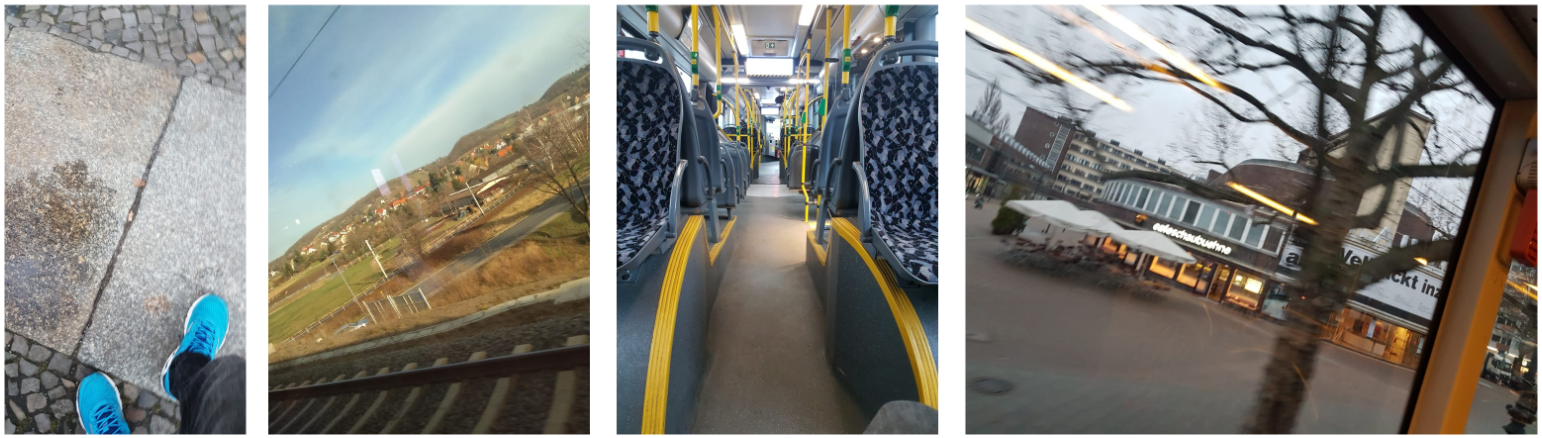
“Survival infrastructuring is the term I use to describe the repertoire of practices that arises from the inter-related demands of needing to save costs and secure digital access when homeless”

Humphry, Justine (2019). Looking for Wi-Fi: youth homelessness and mobile connectivity in the city. Information, Communication & Society,1–15, p.10 doi:10.1080/1369118X.2019.1670227

Handing out smartphones

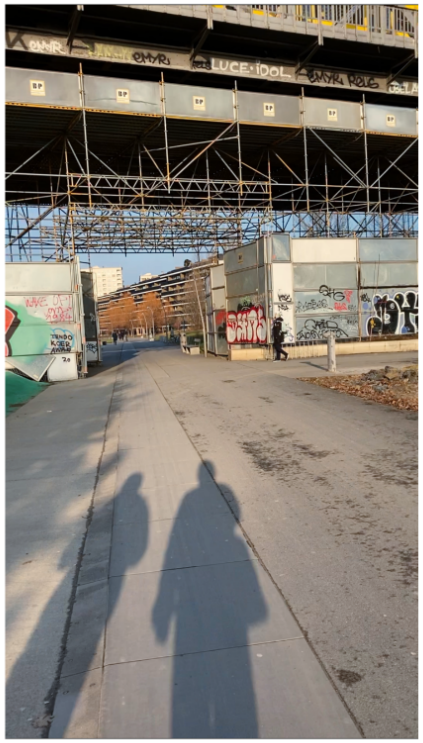
Besides the devices, sim-cards with credit for three month were handed out. Berlin 11/2022-05/2022 (own representations)

Homelessness as being "fixed in mobility" (Jackson 2015)



Photos, send to me by an homeless man, via WhatsApp. Berlin 02/2022 (own representation)

Field Research as a Mode of Following

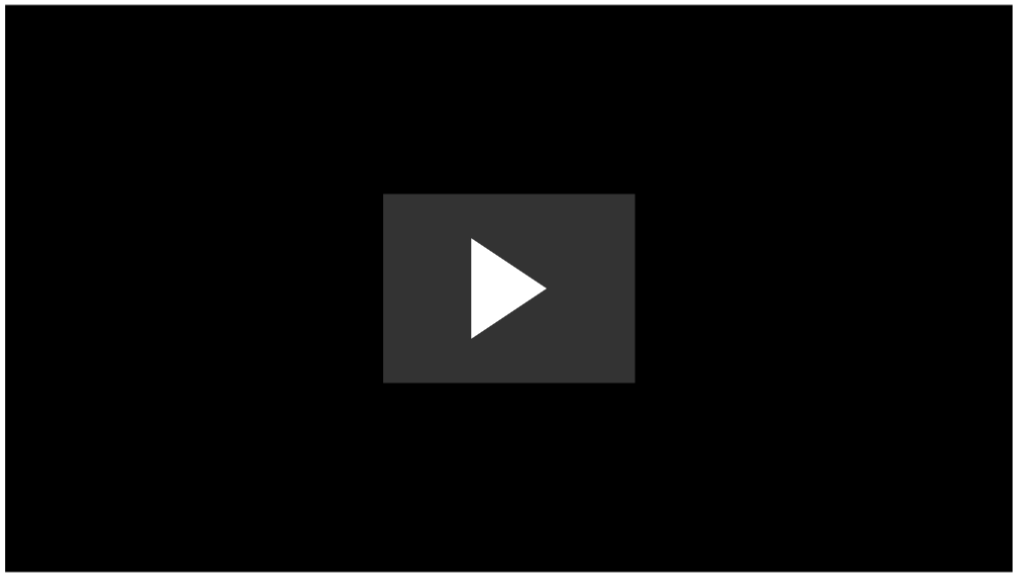


Me, walking together with an informant. Berlin 02/2022 (own representation)

Applied Methods

- Regular meetings and participatory observations (mostly walking)
- Recording and transcription of "ero-epic" conversations (Girtler 2001)
- Field notes and the writing of thick descriptions
- Visual methods (photos, videos, video re-enactments)

Video Reenactments as an Exploration of "going online"



A 57 year old man is showing and commenting on how he goes online. Berlin, 03/2022 (own representation)

How smartphones are used to

- create a private space
- organise time
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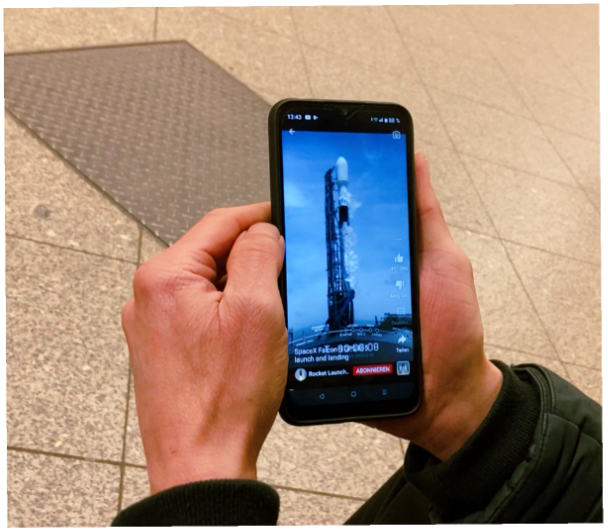
A 22 year old man plays "Call of Duty" on his smartphone, Berlin 02/2022 (own representation)

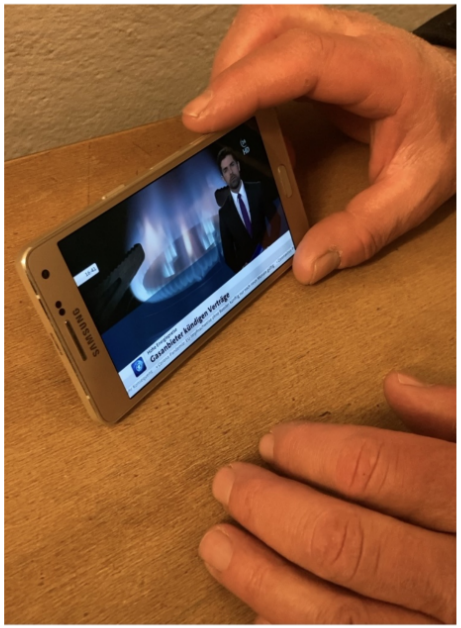
Creating a private sphere by watching videos



Berlin 12/2021 (own representation)

"A TV is not appropriate on the street, but a small smartphone display like this is great. I can see what people look like. Not just talking, like on the radio, where I always have to recharge the batteries. But with a small modern display, I can also see people's movements. That's the joy of it." (laughs)

62 year old man, Berlin 12/2021



Berlin 12/2021 (own representation)

"For me, that is being part of society. Up-to-date information. Yesterday, for example, the second European president died and I saw that right away. Otherwise days go by. And this way you have all the information up to date. It's not a device for making phone calls, it's culture and it's society. [...] Here (taps on phone): 3.43 p.m., here's what's happening (scrolls through a news app). That's where I'm informed. For me, this is a great joy. This is my family. This phone is like a friend to me." (laughs)

62 year old man, Berlin 12/2021

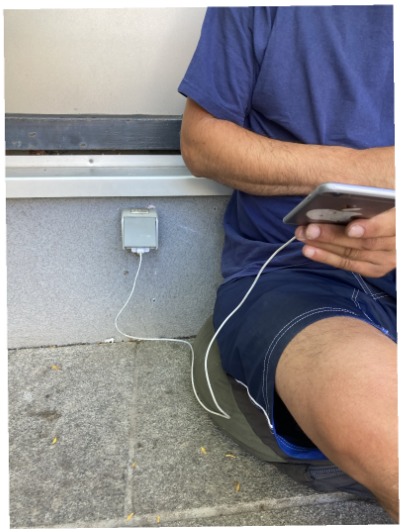
How smartphones are used to

- create a private space
- **organise time**
- stabilise social relationships

I set my alarm clock on my smartphone for 6 o'clock. And then I let it wake me up. And then the first thing I do is reach into my pocket and check if everything is still there. And then the first thing I do is listen to the radio. Luckily my smartphone has a radio receiver, so I don't need the internet. And then I put the earplugs in and listen to the radio. News on Deutschlandfunk. They go on for longer on Deutschlandfunk. They're 10 minutes long. I'm stuck there for a while. And then I get up and start walking.

57 year old man, Berlin, 11/2021

How Smartphones are used to structure the day, or rather: how the demands of the smartphone structure the day



Berlin 07/2022 (own representation)

V: How do you charge your phone during the day?

F: In the morning I directly go to the supermarket next to the bridge, where I sleep. Because through the night the phone looses its power. I charge for 10 minutes in the supermarket and then the rest on the bus and then I'm covered.

V: That means you drive there and back and charge on both journeys?

F: Yes, I get on the X10 busline to Zehlendorf, where I have a chance to see my son at school, and I charge my phone. And back it's fully charged. I do it with this little cable. That's optimal.

62 year old man, Berlin 12/2021

How smartphones are used to

- create a private space
- organise time
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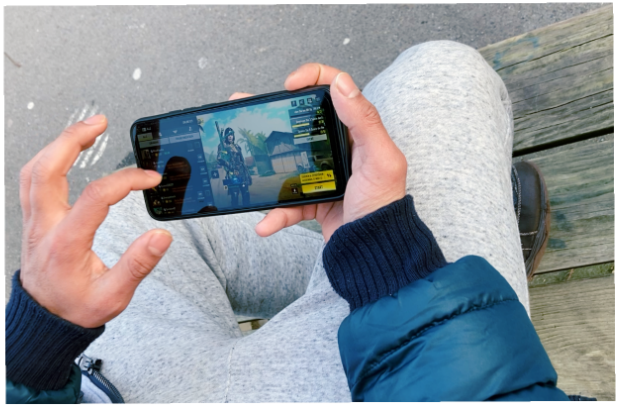
Berlin 08/2022 (own representation)

"I now sometimes take photos with my phone. But only if I like something particularly well. (...) Here a bird had perched on my shoulder. I took a picture of it and showed it to a friend."

57 year old man, Berlin 07/2022

The Smartphone as a Stabilizer for Social Relationships



Berlin 01/2022 (own representation)

"Whenever I lose my phone, the people I play "Call of Duty" with are pissed. They can't reach me and everyone is a specialist in something. When I get a new phone, the first thing I do is download "Call of Duty". And then I say "hey, here I am again“. Some of us have known each other for a really long time."

22 year old man, Berlin 01/2022