**Belonging Online:**

**Rituals, Sacred Objects, and Mediated Interactions**

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**Introduction**

Social interaction in the online sphere is a common (if not outrightly dominant) part of people’s day to day lives. We use our laptops, phones, and tablets for an ever-expanding roster of online social interactions across various online platforms and tools. We go online to text and call old friends on Zoom, WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram; make new friends on Twitter,[[1]](#footnote-1) Instagram, and Facebook; join interest groups found through the Twittersphere; use outlook, Zoom, Slack, and Teams to communicate and collaborate with work colleagues; watch movies together on Netflix and Mubi; attend live-streamed concerts and performances through streaming platforms; play massive-multiplayer games such as Elder Scrolls in virtual spaces; watch livestreamed shows on Twitch and YouTube. Online we can find people like us, who share the same interests, politics, sense of humour, and attitudes to life. Online or virtual space is undeniably a social space (Smart et al. 2017; Osler & Krueger 2021a). While the phenomenology of sociality is a rich and increasingly prominent philosophical sphere for analysing the structures of our encounters with others, the phenomenology of *online* sociality[[2]](#footnote-2) is still in its infancy (although see: Bortolan 2023; Friesen 2014; Osler 2020, 2021; Osler & Zahavi 2023; Kekki 2020; Leder & James 2023; Stokes 2021).[[3]](#footnote-3) The most prominent use of phenomenology in the context of online interactions is found in the analysis of online gaming (e.g. Hardesty & Sherados 2019; Berger 2020; Ollinaho 2018; Ekdahl & Osler 2023; Ekdahl & Ravn 2021). While online gaming is a popular activity, one I am partial to, these worlds have specific characteristics that many online encounters do not share (e.g. a controller operated avatar, a fully graphically-realised virtual world). As such, the phenomenology of online sociality still has much ground to cover in terms of analysing how we engage with others online, across various platforms, and in the context of various different types of social activity and interaction.

In this chapter, I explore how experiences of social belonging might emerge and be sustained in online communities. As this book demonstrates, the word belonging is used in a variety of ways. Colloquially we might talk of belonging to a family, a friendship group, a club, a profession, a nationality, a religion, or a feeling of belonging in a certain place or space. In phenomenological research, we also find the word belonging used to designate a variety of experiences. In discussions of existential feeling, the feeling of belonging is used to describe an affective world-structuring experience that secures the world as one full of possibilities (Ratcliffe 2008). In Heidegger (2010 [1927]), we find a similar use of the word belonging to refer to the deep sense of belonging to a shared world, a world which we experience as not just for ourselves but for others.[[4]](#footnote-4) Recently, there has been a growing conceptualisation of belonging as synonymous with feeling- or being-at-home (e.g. Harbin 2014; Ahmed 2007; Lajoie 2019; Jacobsen 2009).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Here, I focus on a specifically social notion of belonging in terms of feeling a sense of belonging to a group, collective, or community. This is an affective sense of belonging, a felt sense of being connected or unified with the other members of the relevant group, of being “one of us” (Walther 1923; Wilde 2021). While not frequently discussed in the phenomenology of sociality, I draw on Randall Collins’ sociological work on interaction rituals to explore ways in which a feeling of belonging and group membership can be created and cultivated. My motivation for doing so is two-fold. First, Collins’ account of rituals not only considers how belonging might be created through group interaction but also explores how a feeling of belonging can be dynamically sustained over time. Second, Collins explicitly considers the question of whether rituals can occur in mediated interactions, concluding that mediated interactions make a poor substitute for face-to-face interactions and asserting scepticism about the possibility of online rituals.

I argue that rather than viewing mediated interactions in terms of whether they are suitable substitutes for face-to-face interactions, we should consider mediated encounters in their own right. This allows us to recognize the creative ways that people can create rituals in a mediated setting and thus support and create a sense of belonging with others online. I also highlight how some online platforms not only support online rituals but that they are well-positioned to create and circulate collective symbols (or sacred objects) of groups and, thus, can continue to scaffold and sustain on-going feelings of belonging.

**1. Avoiding the binary of techno-optimism and techno-pessimism**

Before we proceed, it should be said that arguing for experiences of belonging and communality online is, currently, somewhat out of vogue. Despite an initial optimism about internet technologies opening up our communal possibilities (Rheingold 1993), attitudes have shifted towards the pessimistic. Perhaps the most well-known voice-piece for concern about mediated social encounters is the sociologist Sherry Turkle. Turkle argues that technology does not offer us real commonality with one another, just weak forms of connectivity that give us the “illusion of companionship” (Turkle 2017, 11-12).

Turkle argues that although the internet increases the quantity of social connections, the quality of these connections is diminished compared to face-to-face interactions offline. The connectivity bred by online interaction is, in Turkle’s eyes, weak and often lacks intimacy and authenticity. While we might imagine that the web expands our communal lives, she argues that, on the contrary, online interaction results in the erosion of rich forms of communal belonging (Turkle 2017, also see: Candiotto 2022; Dotson 2017). If anything, the concern voiced by Turkle regarding online sociality has increased in light of the Covid-19 pandemic with a proliferation of work done recently on the harm of online interactions, e.g. online shaming (Dolezal et al. 2021), Zoom fatigue (Aagaard 2022; Beighton 2021; Collins 2020), the constraints of online teaching (Maiese 2021), and so on.

Without wanting to disregard the potential harms of certain forms of online interaction, I want to acknowledge that many people do experience communal ties and a sense of belonging to people and groups whom they (sometimes solely) interact with online (Ferreday 2009; Eklund 2015). From queer communities (Eickers forthcoming; Philips 2007, Hankel & Morris 2014, Russell 2020), to gaming communities (Pietersen et al. 2018), to K-Pop fan communities (King-O’Riain 2021), to Incel communities (O’Malley et al. 2020; Tietjen & Tirkkonen 2023), to eating disordered communities (Boero & Pascoe 2012; Osler & Krueger 2021b), we find reports of felt belonging to online groups. Indeed, while the ills of technology have been highlighted in the wake of Covid-19, it is also important to emphasize that many of us have been thankful for our electronic devices that have allowed us to stay in contact with our families and friends; devices that have allowed us to chat, watch movies together, play games together, collaborate and make music together. While people might not want to substitute all face-to-face interactions with mediated ones, this does not mean that mediated interactions are necessarily devoid of communal experiences of belonging.

Concern about online communality can be, and I think often is, fuelled by reified views of offline communality. Turkle takes a particularly rosy view of face-to-face interaction, emphasizing ideal forms of being together with family and friends where everyone feels at ease and enriched by the interaction.[[6]](#footnote-6) In a similar vein, Hubert Dreyfus (2013) argues that online interpersonal encounters will always be wanting as we are not suitably vulnerable online; overlooking the fact that we are emotionally vulnerable online, as well as failing to recognize how vulnerability in the face of the other can prohibit any form of safe, let alone enriching, interaction with the other. In these critiques of online sociality, we find little to no reference of the superficial and dismissive interactions we have when we buy a coffee or a bus ticket, of experiences of social doubt and anxiety, of misunderstanding and misconnection, or, more seriously, social exclusion and violence. When considering whether and how we might feel a sense of belonging with others online, we must be careful not to only consider the most fleeting or superficial online interactions and call attention to only the most idealized offline ones.

Rather than attempting to quantify the quality of social belonging experienced offline and online or attempting to reach a conclusion about whether face-to-face or mediated interactions are “better” for us, I explore how belonging might arise and be sustained in the online sphere. To try and brand online communality as bad or good is to oversimplify the discussion. The online world, like the offline one, contains myriad forms of interpersonal encounters (across an ever-expanding number of differently designed platforms) which cannot and, perhaps more importantly, should not be lumped together as one kind of intersubjective experience. My exploration should not, therefore, be seen as a proclamation about *all* online interactions but as a more modest analysis of how experiences of belonging *can* arise in the online sphere. As such, I aim to turn away from the path of techno-optimism and techno-pessimism into the relatively untrodden wilds of the phenomenology of online sociality.

**2. Rituals, belonging, and sacred objects**

Despite having stated my intention to contribute to a field I am calling the *phenomenology* *of online sociality*, I take my point of departure from sociology and the notion of ritual. Sociologists have long been interested in the way that rituals create and sustain group solidarity and feelings of belonging (Durkheim 2008 [1912]; Goffman 1967; Collins 2004, 2014, 2020).[[7]](#footnote-7) Emile Durkheim is regarded as the father of sociological work on rituals, detailing how collective interactions can work to form groups. Here, I focus on the work of Randall Collins. Collins takes up Durkheim’s work on ritual and produces an extended and systematic account of interaction rituals in everyday life. While Collins work has received much attention (e.g. Turner & Stets 2005; Salmela & Nagatsu 2017; [Weininger](https://scholar.google.co.uk/citations?user=wqamos0AAAAJ&hl=en&oi=sra) et al. 2018), less focus has been given to whether or how rituals might occur in mediated interactions in the online sphere (c.f. Boyns & Loprieno 2013; Vandeberg et al. 2020).

*2.1 Rituals and their products*

The term ritual is typically associated with religious ceremony (such as rituals of sacrament, Bar and Bat Mitzvah, and Salat). However, it has become common in sociological work to label certain forms of collective interaction outside of the bounds of religious settings as rituals (e.g. Goffman 1967; Collins 2004). Collins stresses that interaction rituals take place in our ordinary mundane everyday lives and that these rituals sit at the centre of social life, collective action, and feelings of social belonging. Through ritual interaction, bonds of solidarity between individuals are created. Rituals lead to the integration of individuals into collectives and produce feelings of connectedness among members. Another key function of rituals is to produce “sacred objects” – symbols and signs that represent that group and work to sustain a sense of belonging after the ritual itself has passed.

Rituals are “constructed from a combination of ingredients that grow to differing levels of intensity, and result in the ritual outcomes of solidarity, symbolism, and individual emotional energy” (Collins 2004, 47). They are forms of interaction which encourage the emergence of group experiences and foster a sense of belonging with others. According to Collins (2020, 479), a ritual involves:[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. Two or more people physically assembled in the same place

2. People focusing their attention upon a common object or activity, and mutual awareness of each other’s focus of attention

3. A shared common mood or emotional experience across the participants

4. Rhythmic entrainment across the group, where participants get into the same rhythm with one another, as in dancing, chanting, clapping, kneeling.

An example of a ritual might be of going to a gig where there is a roomful of people, all of whom are listening to the band and mutually aware of one another’s focus on the band, a shared enjoyment of the music, and a common rhythm across the participants as they sway or clap in time to the music. Through on-going feedback, the participants are aware of the commonality of their experience and experience a sense of belonging with those involved.

Rituals can take place on a small scale, such as having a family dinner, and on much larger scales, such as attending a political event or a music festival. They can also be informally structured, such as an impromptu dance in the kitchen with friends, or more formal, such as in traditional rituals found in religious ceremonies or secular equivalents such as prize ceremonies or political party conferences.

A successful ritual[[9]](#footnote-9) produces (Collins 2020, 480-481):

1. Social solidarity and a feeling of belonging to a group and recognition of others as co-members

2. Emotional energy that “buoys up” the individuals who have participated

3. Collective symbols or sacred objects that are imbued with meaning and come to represent the group

4. Moral attitudes of right and wrong in relation to the group, e.g., a sense that rituals should be respected, notions of what counts as a contravention of a ritual, and respect for the sacred objects produced

Given our interest, I focus on the feeling of belonging (1) and collective symbols/sacred objects (3) which are involved in sustaining a continued sense of belonging to a group.

Unfortunately, Collins does not define “belonging” in great detail. However, he describes belonging as something that is felt, it is an affective sense of belonging rather than being propositional or cognitive; it is a feeling that one is included as part of the group and not an outsider. An experience of being “one of us”, a “feeling of belonging together in a common identity” (Collins 2014, 300). When one feels this belonging with a group, one’s sense of one’s identity can be either affirmed or changed. If one excitedly watches a Derek Jarman movie with others, one might feel a sense of belonging with those present as other Derek Jarman fans and have one’s identity as a fan confirmed and consolidated by that experience.

When groups take part in rituals, various symbols, emblems, and objects are produced that come to represent the group. Collective symbols are defined broadly: “ideas, words, slogans, items of clothing, gestures can be “sacred objects,” social markers of belonging” (Collins 2020, 481). For example, a leader could be the collective symbol for a political group or movement, a catchphrase from a movie could act as the collective symbol of a fanbase, a team strip as the symbol of a sports team, jargon or slang a symbol of a profession, and so on.

Exposure to sacred objects work to scaffold an on-going sense of belonging and can be used to signal group membership. Collective symbols help sustain belonging to a group when individuals are not physically together. Seeing a poster of a Jarman movie outside Cinemateket in Copenhagen might work to reinforce my sense of belonging with my other Jarman-loving friends even though they live in Hastings. Moreover, the use of collective symbols can work to revitalize both the symbol and the group’s sense of belonging together. If symbols go out of use, they can lose their power to sustain a sense of belonging with a group.

*2.2 Randall Collins and the phenomenology of shared experience*

Those familiar with work on collective intentionality or collective emotions will note that the ingredients for a ritual closely resemble phenomenological frameworks put forward for shared experiences. For instance, Gerda Walther (1923, 22-25) describes an actual shared experience (or we-experience), such as watching a movie together or celebrating together, as involving : (i) the participants having an experience that has the same intentional object, content or focus, (ii) mutual and reciprocal awareness between the participants, (iii) a mutual and reciprocal influencing of each other’s experience, and (iv) a feeling of connectedness between the participants.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is also presumed that the participants must be directly available to one another, which is usually interpreted to mean that the participants must be physically present (c.f. Osler 2020). When these conditions are met, Walther describes how the participants experience themselves as bound together as a “we”.

Clearly the conditions put forward by Collins and Walther have significant overlap.[[11]](#footnote-11) Why, then, turn to sociological work on rituals if it parallels work already found in phenomenology? In part because Collins (following Durkheim) emphasizes not just how group experience might arise but what such group experiences might produce. This emphasis on the on-going sense of belonging to a “we” or a group is absent from most accounts of collective intentionality and emotion. Rather, the emphasis is on fleeting, episodic moments of shared experience.

Interestingly, Walther stands out on this point, as she explicitly considers how shared experiences might embed themselves, leaving us with an enduring, habitual sense of belonging with the other, even when we are not in the midst of a we-experience.[[12]](#footnote-12) For instance, she considers how we might experience a sedimented sense of belonging with, say, friends of family who we have previously shared experiences with, outside of an actual we-experience. This is experienced as a background pre-reflective sense of belonging.

However, whilst Walther acknowledges the possibility of temporally-extended experiences of social belonging in the form of background feelings of belonging, her account remains somewhat static. Walther does not elucidate on whether this background sense of belonging waxes or wains, how it might be kept alive, how it might be revitalized and sustained over long periods of time, or consider the role that the repetition of shared experience might play in habitualization. Nor does she specify which shared experiences might become sedimented into this on-going sense of belonging and which might pass away after the fleeting episodic interaction. Indeed, on her account, there is a risk of supposing that all shared experiences generate a sense of belonging to a “we” or a group and that these all sink into the background.

An advantage that we find in the work of Collins is not just recognition that on-going experiences of group belonging can be extended beyond the temporal boundaries of a ritual or shared experience but that this on-going sense of belonging is discussed as a dynamic process. This continued sense of belonging does not simply embed and remain there for the rest of our lives. Rather, this sense of belonging can ebb and flow, can resurface or disappear, depending upon future activities and experiences. Collins’ account, then, brings a much-needed dynamism into the picture through the discussion of collective symbols, repetition of rituals, and revitalisation of belonging.

While I see much congruence between Walther’s account of shared experiences and Collins’ account of interaction rituals, I think Collins’ dynamic account of how belonging can be sustained and materially supported adds an interesting and useful nuance to Walther’s work, as well as to other classic and contemporary phenomenological work on collective experience. My discussion of rituals, then, is intended to be complementary to phenomenological accounts of shared experience, rather than as a replacement or an opposing view. With this in mind, let us now turn to the issue at hand: rituals in online interactions.

*2.3. Rituals online*

In his 2004 book*,* Collins expresses his scepticism about the possibility of rituals in mediated encounters. He outrightly rejects the idea that one might partake in a ritual such as a wedding or a funeral over the telephone, professing that “the very idea is inappropriate” (Collins 2004, 54). This scepticism is grounded by the concern that when our encounters with others are mediated, they become disembodied forms of communication, forms of interaction that lack bodily presence.

According to Collins (2004, 54), without physical bodily co-presence “it is hard to convey participation in the group and to confirm one’s identity as member of the group.” For the feeling of belonging and group solidarity to emerge, participation requires a certain amount of “liveliness” (54). Collins’ concern about online rituals is three-pronged. First, that without bodily presence it is difficult to establish mutual awareness between the members and to establish that everyone is jointly attending to the same object or activity. Second, bodily co-presence is necessary to establish that all the members are sharing the same emotion or mood. Third, that when we are mediated by technology, we lose the kind of micro-level feedback that is needed to establish entrainment across the group.

Talking of email, Collins states:

For the most part, these lack the flow of interaction in real time; even if electronic communications happen within minutes, this is not the rhythm of immediate vocal participation, which as we shall see, is honed to tenths of seconds. There is little or no buildup of focus of attention in reading an email, no paralinguistic background signals of mutual engrossment. (Collins 2004, 63)

This leads him to conclude that ritual is “essentially a bodily process” (Collins 2004, 53).

We might be quick to point out that technology has moved on significantly since 2004 and that while email might lack the flow of real time, instant messages can be sent much more quickly. Collins, though, does anticipate such technology but remains doubtful about this altering his conclusion:

A hypothesis is that the closer the flow of emails is to real conversational exchange, the more possibility of a sense of collective entrainment, as in a rapid exchange of emails in a period of minutes or seconds. But even here it is dubious that strong feelings of solidarity can be built up, or the charging up of a symbol with collective significance. (Collins 2004, 63)

Writing more recently in 2020, Collins echoes his doubts about the suitability of mediated interactions for the emergence of rituals, the generation of belonging, and the creation of sacred objects. He argues that even on platforms such as Zoom, where we can interact with one another in real time on a video link, affective synchrony and mutual focus is difficult to establish and appeals to the notion of “zoom fatigue” as evidence of the lack of shared belonging and energy occurring online. Like Turkle, then, Collins is quick to emphasize that we should not turn to mediated forms of interaction and expect them to work as good *substitutes* for face-to-face encounters.

**3. Online rituals revisited**

*3.1. Sacred objects online*

Collins’ assessment of the suitability of mediated interaction for ritual and sacred object creation leaves us with a stark view of online life, where it is doubtful that a sense of belonging can be created online. Nevertheless, we can suppose that the collective objects, symbols, and emblems created through offline rituals can be circulated online. Seeing clips from Jarman’s *Blue* posted on Twitter or Instagram might work to sustain my continued sense of belonging to the fanbase, without requiring that a full-blown ritual is conducted online. Belonging, then, might still be scaffolded by mediated interactions.

Belonging generated offline might find an extended life online, with sacred objects being posted, shared, liked, and commented upon on social media. The symbols of groups formed offline proliferate in online space, gaining significantly more exposure across individuals around the globe. As Collins suggests, through use, these sacred objects are revitalized – retaining their meaning for the group – and work to stimulate and sustain belonging among members. Sacred objects can be circulated as they are but can also be creatively enhanced and modified. We might also gain an indirect sense of belonging with other group members who were not part of the original ritual with us but who, nevertheless, use and coalesce around “sacred objects” online.

We might be reminded of Mariana Ortega’s discussion of belonging as practice, here. Ortega (2019) emphasizes that experiencing belonging (either to groups or places) is not always easy and should not always be taken as a given. Rather, belonging can be something “tenuous, complex, and forged by our practices” (Ortega 2019, 170). Through practices that Ortega calls *hometactics*, we can actively shape our belonging in places and groups. Hometactics are described as “everyday ways in which we attempt to forge a sense of ease, familiarity, and belonging in our everyday spaces” (Ortega 2019, 170). The sprawling world of Twitter might not initially strike us as a place where we can easily feel a sense of belonging; while used by millions of users, it might be difficult to find “‘like-minded’ communities” (Ferreday 2009, 17) and leave one feeling lost in a sea of unknown others. Sharing and seeking out significant sacred objects might be described as an example of hometactics; a practice used to navigate huge online social platforms, helping us find and be found by users who find the same sacred objects meaningful and thus helping us find communities in online space.

Note, though, that these kinds of interactions do not establish a new sense of belonging to a new group. Rather, mediated interactions through sacred objects simply help sustain an already established sense of belonging. To put it another way, while the medium may be new, the belonging is not.

*3.2 Interaction rituals online*

What about mediated rituals? Like Collins, I think that the recent Covid-19 lockdowns have proven an interesting time to revisit questions of how we experience others online, including the possibility of online rituals. Unlike Collins, I think that there are activities which have blossomed online that might serve as examples of online rituals that talk of work meetings and zoom fatigue does not adequately capture.

As we saw above, Collins describes participating in a funeral ritual over the telephone as “inappropriate.” He argues that the lack of visual cues and feedback “would surely diminish the sense that one is paying one’s respects” (2004, 54). Yet, due to fear of Covid-19 infection, many funerals *have* been conducted in mediated settings in the last couple of years. Where Collins envisions one person calling in to offer their respects to a fully assembled face-to-face ritual, virtual funerals or wakes often involve all participants attending via a video-streaming platform, such as Zoom, Skype, or GatheringUs. Here, people are on screen together, able to see tears and smiles, hear the service and recollections, light candles together, share photos and videos of the deceased, listen to music and even sing together.

Describing their own experience of a Shiva ceremony carried out over Zoom, Bitusikova notes that:

In spite of Shiva ceremony being a virtual zoom meeting, the experience was very personal, emotional, even intimate — perhaps because one could see closely the faces and homes of all participants. Every contribution to the online exchange ended with a usual Jewish wish: “We wish you a long life”. (Bitusikova 2020, 54).

Others have described how a virtual ceremony feels intimate because all the participants were able to focus upon one conversation, rather than splitting into smaller groups (Muturi et al. 2020).

Even though participants are not physically co-present, live-streaming allows for conversation to unfold in real-time, allows participants to see the expressivity of others bodily postures, gestures, and actions, and to share in the mood of the ceremony. By sharing stories and photos, attending to the words of the service, lighting candles, singing and using ceremonial phrases, it seems that the participants can establish mutual awareness and attention, establish a common mood, and even become entrained with certain expressions such a crying, smiling, singing, and taking part in call back refrains.

There is, then, evidence to suggest that online rituals can take place when the mediation is through live-streamed video links. Remember, the argument here is not that virtual funeral rituals are *better* than face-to-face ones, nor even that they should be viewed as suitable *substitutes*. Rather, the point is that live-streamed funeral or remembrance services have been increasingly conducted and that it seems reasonable to describe such collective interactions as a mediated ritual that generates feelings of belonging among the participants.

However, concern might remain about the ability to participate in rituals when individuals online interact via text-based media. Salmela & Nagatsu (2017) express precisely this concern as follows:

without a live video or audio stream between the participants, emotions are expressed and communicated by linguistic and symbolic means that cannot fully replace perceptually mediated processes of affective synchrony.

Vandenberg et al. (2020), however, have recently analysed the experience of individuals who attended live-streamed gigs during the Covid-19 pandemic. Here, the musicians are live-streamed on video, while attendees can interact with one another live through chat functions or comment threads. Although the audience cannot see one another, Vandenberg et al. (2020, 144) suggest that “comment sections provide the engagement needed for creating social ties and feelings of community.” Interestingly, they note that there are ten times as many comments on livestream gigs than under non-livestreamed videos, claiming that the uptick in posting demonstrates how important it is for participants to express their presence to the others involved and arguably creating the kind of interactive liveliness that Collins deems important for ritual.

The researchers observe that many of the comments exchanged call back to offline activities, such as smoking, looking for or taking drugs, and finding each other in a crowd. These might be seen as examples not of a new ritual but the circulation of sacred objects that relate to the old ritual of attending a physically live gig together. Yet, new innovative ways of showing mutual awareness, attention, and shared mood are found in the way that participants use emojis to signal their presence, collective engagement, and emotions. Participants not only use emojis to express their own presence and feelings but to signal recognition and awareness of others’ posts. Vandenberg et al. (2020, 147) claim that “emojis used in this manner constitute a new shared ritual that is specific to online collective gatherings around (popular) music.” Again, this should not necessarily be seen as a substitute for face-to-face synchrony and entrainment but a creative way of reaching attunement with others when interacting via mediated means. The aim is not to *replace* face-to-face interactions but to find *novel* ways of performing rituals online and experiencing belonging while at a physical distance; ways to establish presence, mutual awareness, and shared emotion in mediated encounters.

In the case of live-streamed gigs, the music itself works to entrain bodily experience across all the participants. As the music unfolds, it affords certain forms of emotion regulation to the listeners, eliciting emotional responses as well as bodily movement. As Krueger (2014) points out: “musical experience plays an important role in nearly all cultures in part because of its potential for eliciting strong individual and collective affective responses.” The entrainment of the participants’ emotional experience and bodily expression is thus, in part, supported by the music itself. We can see evidence of this in the way that Vandenberg et al. (2020) report that concentrations of emotive expression in the comments occur at pivotal parts in the music, such as when the music “drops” in electronic music, communicating the shared mood and awareness across the audience. As such, the kind of emotional and expressive synchrony and entrainment required for a ritual and the emergence of felt belonging may be, in part, supported by the very kinds of activity that the participants are carrying out. When it comes to online rituals, where it may be more difficult to achieve such entrainment, tools such as music may prove particularly effective for helping the emergence of mutual awareness, attention, and shared mood.

Despite the claim that live-streamed gigs can be viewed as mediated ritual interactions, Vandenberg et al. (2020) express certain reservations regarding mediated rituals. They stress that even though attending livestreamed gigs can be described as a mediated ritual and that they generate a sense of belonging for those involved, it ultimately is grounded in previous offline rituals, and that while they are able to reinforce previously established group membership and belonging, such experiences are not sufficient to give rise to new communities.

Does this mean that online rituals can only *sustain* and not *create* belonging? I think drawing such a conclusion would be hasty. In both the case of virtual funerals and live-streamed gigs we selected cases of offline rituals that have migrated online, taken examples of communal belonging that precedes the online interaction. However, online we find many communities which have emerged online. Pro-anorexic communities, role-playing communities, Incel communities, and internet artist communities are all examples of new online communities. Do members of these groups simply lack a sense of belonging with one another? Do they experience this belonging due to something other than the practice of ritual? Without necessarily ruling out affirmative answers to both these questions in some cases, we might also want to point to communal practices of certain online groups that closely resemble that of the online ravers.

The Critical Role community, for example, is a community (often known as “Critters”) that has arisen around a group of voice-actors who live-stream their Dungeon and Dragons games on Twitch and YouTube. The game is played at the same time every week and the audience can participate in a live chat throughout the game allowing live interaction with other audience members (as well as the cast to a minimal extent) (Dandrow 2021). Like online gigs, the thread is fast-paced, with members using the chat thread as a way to signal presence, attention, and emotional engagement. The ability to respond live to the game as it unfolds allows participants to ascertain mutual attention and awareness of one another, along with expressive comments and emojis which are used to convey shared moods and emotions across the audience. Akin to the example of music, the unfolding story can work to entrain the participants’ experiences, with climaxes and surprises in the game-play affording common emotional reactions and prompting a surge in comments (like the aforementioned “drops”). Given the similarities between this style of interaction and the online music communities, it is not clear why this would not qualify as a mediated online ritual just because there is no underlying offline community that predated the mediated practice.

We also see the creation of sacred objects – the cast members themselves, various catchphrases (e.g. “Is it Thursday yet?”, “How do you want to do this?”), particular emojis (e.g. the bee emoji), memes made from the show, as well as physical objects created by the Critical Role online store – that circulate both online and offline. Interestingly, as the comment thread remains next to the video (which is available to watch after the live-stream), the thread itself might crystallize, moving from a medium for online ritual to a sacred object itself.

**Conclusion**

Although Randall Collins remains doubtful about our ability to participate and enact rituals online, and, thus, produce a sense of belonging with others online, I have presented a number of online interaction examples that I think meet the criteria for interaction rituals. Even though not physically together, lively emotional expression and communication can work to establish mutual attention towards a common object, mutual awareness of fellow participants, shared emotion, and even entrainment of emotional and bodily expression.

While I have primarily drawn attention to online rituals that have their grounding in offline rituals, online rituals might have better prospects for success where we do not simply try and re-enact old rituals in the online sphere. Creative and novel ways of creating a sense of presence online, ways of creating entrainment both through visual and communicative means, as well as using tools such as music to scaffold and support group experience might open up new ways of practicing rituals with others. By moving away from the idea that online social interactions may (or may not) act as substitutes for face-to-face, we free up innovative ways of interacting with one another through our screens and new ways to forge a sense of belonging with others. Legacy Russell (2020), for instance, explores how queer communities use and exploit digital space through art in order to play with expression, self-presentation, self and group identity; such activities precisely take advantage of what is new about online space rather than simply trying to act out old habits in a new space. This can be interpreted as a call for playfulness, creativity, new design, and ways in which we can open ourselves up to different experiences of belonging, rather than substitutes or surrogates of face-to-face belonging.

Before I am accused of falling precisely into the techno-idealism I want to avoid, I am not suggesting that all experiences of belonging are healthy and safe. Experiencing belonging to groups can also promote hostility to other groups, can lead to violence and harm, and to the creation of echo chambers (Nguyen 2020; Osler & Krueger 2021b; Osler 2023). While belonging (usually) feels good, and is often something we strive for, it can lead to harmful practices and there is ample evidence of this occurring as a result of the emergence of online communities. But this is not something that new technology brings. Questions about what we do for and in the name of belonging remain no matter what interaction medium we attend to.

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1. Why Twitter has now been renamed X, most people are still referring to it colloquaially as Twitter. As such, for the purposes of this chapter, I will follow this trend and stick with ‘Twitter’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The term sociality is used broadly here to refer to, amongst other things, how we experience others, how we experience being in and part of social groups, group identity, group action, group experience. As Boesel & Jurgenson (2012) note, this is far more wide-reaching than the Silicon-Valley conception of social in terms of “interactions that are measurable, trackable, quantifiable, and above all exploitable.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Note that a similar lacuna is found in work on the Internet within 4E approaches to cognition (see Smart 2017 for an overview). While much attention is being given to how cognition can be scaffolded or even extended online (e.g. Heersmink & Sutton 2018; Heersmink & Carter 2020; Fabry & Bruineberg 2022), these approaches primarily focus on the informational nature of the Internet and how online spaces augment our information-processing capacities and memory rather than the social, intersubjective aspects (c.f. Krueger & Osler 2019; Jackson 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Recently there has been critical consideration of the normative assumptions that underpin such accounts (Ahmed 2007; Ortega 2016, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As Mehmel (2021) highlights, by considering belonging in terms of the “home”, a pervasive spatial quality is associated with this notion of belonging and (dis)orientation. In contrast, Mehmel presents a temporal account of belonging and disorientation in their own work. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jurgenson (2012) accuses Turkle of being a *digital dualist* due to her “habit of viewing the online and offline as largely distinct.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a discussion of the difference between solidarity and belonging, see Thomas Szanto’s chapter in this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note that these are the ingredients set out in Collins’ most recent work and they differ slightly from what is presented in his book *Interaction Rituals* (2004). Collins has dropped the requirement that rituals involve boundaries to outsiders (2004, 48) and, instead, brought rhythmic entrainment into the main ingredients list. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Collins (2004, 50-52; 2020, 480) explicitly notes that rituals are not guaranteed to succeed, indeed that there are often rituals that are hollow and fail. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Szanto (2018) for a full analysis of Walther’s conditions for an actual we-experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Note, though, that Collins places even more emphasis on the embodied and affective aspects of such experiences, explicitly stressing the role of physical entrainment arising from bodily presence. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Wilde (2021) for a rich discussion of background feelings of belonging in Walther’s work. See Osler (2020) for an application of Walther’s work on both actual and habitual togetherness to the online sphere. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)