

**On digital avoidance: updating a classic social practice in an era of (over)sharing. Ethnographic notes from Kinshasa**

**Paper for the EASA Media Anthropology Network E-Seminar Series  
<https://easaonline.org/networks/media/eseminars>**

**October 2022**

**by Katrien Pype**

**Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, KU Leuven University**

August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2022. Several social media pages documenting the public and private wanderings of Kinshasa's celebrity scene, posted a video clip of 20 seconds zooming in on a middle-aged man, apparently in a deep sleep, despite the loud music, that viewers could hear as well.<sup>1</sup> The caption identified the man as Piroger, a spokesperson of one of Kinshasa's dance music bands: "Piroger, spokesman of Werrason in a bar in Kinshasa. The Congolese paparazzi are getting very dangerous"<sup>2</sup> was written above the video. The camera, most probably a smartphone camera, zoomed in and out of the Piroger. He was seated on a white plastic chair next to a blue plastic table with an empty Savannah (cider beer) bottle and a half open bottle of water. Clearly filmed during daytime, the footage showed Piroger in Kinshasa's bar scene. On "Les stars congolaises-DRC", one of the Facebook pages remediating the video, the post received more than hundreds of comments, and got shared 6 times, with 350 emojis of thumbs up and about 200 comments, mainly mocking texts. All of that within an hour. Almost ten weeks later, these numbers have risen to 17 K views, 1,7 K emojis, 391 comments, and 14 shares. Comments ranged from attacking the man for being drunk and not knowing his limits, over

---

<sup>1</sup> One of these posts is on

[https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=5644770465554019&external\\_log\\_id=c1386612-b24e-4672-8087-4c992c1b74c5&q=piroger](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=5644770465554019&external_log_id=c1386612-b24e-4672-8087-4c992c1b74c5&q=piroger) – last accessed on September 23 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Original text (in French): "*Piroger, porte parole de Werrason dans un bar à Kinshasa. Les paparazzis congolais deviennent très dangereux*".

reprimanding the social media administrators for exposing him. One comment stood out as it was repeated several times in various formulations: ‘this man is a Papa. Posting this is impolite’.

The use of “Papa” here is ambiguous: it can refer to an older man, meaning someone who is supposed to be treated respectfully due to his biological age; it can also mean that he is a father. Even if Piroger had no biological offspring, he would still be a classificatory father to others. These commenters reprimanding the social media administrators were engaging in meta-talk about what should be shared online and what should not be shared. They were reflecting about the various audiences this post could reach. These are not only be the anonymous social media subscribers who had liked these celebrity social media pages, but also boys and girls, even men and women to whom this person occupies a role of authority. They should not see their (classificatory) father engaging in behavior that is not worthy of his role, nor that he is being mocked by others, even if only online.

This working paper sets out to study the social possibilities of online shareability. Even though sharing online is sometimes merely a phatic activity (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 35), these are “small acts” of which the accumulative work can have significant social meaning (Chua 2018: 8). This is most clear in discussions about virality, swarming, and, of course, “oversharing,” which has been defined in terms of “[e]xcessive generosity with information about one's private life or the private lives of others” (Persson 2010: 1); or “[o]versharing happens when someone is divulging more of their inner feelings, opinions and sexuality than they would in person” (Phillips 2015: 67). The comments on the exposure of Piroger in a bar, draw attention to the risk of oversharing. They speak to the social space of the circulation of information: the excess the warning commentors refer to, is not so much an excess of *what* is shared, but rather the spill over to audiences that should not receive this content. Indeed, despite the positive qualities attributed to sharing, sometimes *not* sharing is caring. The commentors on Piroger’s exposure online thus suggested that sometimes sharing digital content can lead to “context collapse,” generating (social) harm.

The concept of “context collapse” (Brandtzaeg and Lüders 2018, Costa 2018, Davis and Jurgenson 2014, Marwick and Boyd 2011, Wesch 2009) developed in the study of social media, but it has much purchase for anthropological research insofar context collapse is often related to conflict.

Exposure of private images and comments, or, more general, the uncontrolled circulation of digital content can lead to strife, harm, shame, and loss, while it also sets in motion efforts to curb the social loss incurred by the undesired travel of the digital materials. Gluckman (1973) argued that conflicts are perfect events for anthropological research as it provides us a deep insight in alliances, loyalties, norms, and rituals of repair. The discourses and practices following an instantiation of context collapse – a critical event – provide thick opportunities for the ethnographer to study what is considered shareable, and shareable with whom, and what the social consequences can be, as well as what communities provide as rituals of repair. If we want to study the contours of context collapse in social media worlds, then we need to situate this kind of conflict within a *longue durée* of conflict avoidance practices, and within the non-digital social contexts where boundaries between social groups are discussed, observed, and managed.

The anecdote about the online feedback on the moderators that shared this unflattering image of Piroger comes from “Digital Kinshasa” as I call the digital space in which people perform as “Kinois” (inhabitants of Kinshasa), because they write in Lingala, or dialogue with one another about Kinshasa’s celebrity scene, politics, and social and cultural life. Many of these online commentators may be living in the diaspora (Congo-Brazzaville, Angola, South Africa, France, Belgium, China, the United States etc.). I use this anecdote as an entry into the study of social media and kinship. In particular, I ask how the classic avoidance rules are upheld and find expression in digital practices; and, if, and how they also transform non-digital social interaction.

One of the most exciting questions in contemporary social anthropology concerns the transformations in kinship relationship in the age of digitalization. Questions asked are: How do the electronic communication infrastructures enable, facilitate, and transform kin-related practices such as the distribution of obligations, responsibilities, and privilege, and their social performance? What kind of thickening goes on when relatives (affines and agnates) remain in each other’s lives via digital infrastructures? How do people manage the various levels of proximity and distance that accompany different kin relationships?

Miller et al. (2016) indicated that people all around the world mobilize platforms, digital linguistic forms, and digital media practices (such as logging in; posting; commenting) differently in order “to

scale their sociality.” “Scaling sociality” means “finding the right distance” (Miller et al. 2016: 3). Indeed, the anthropology of social media opens fascinating analytical terrains to think about social space and time: insofar people reflect on the new intimacies that these social media platforms generate, people also reflect about proximity and distance. Avoidance, whether it is physical or social, is a practice that values distance over closeness.

Scholars have observed that new forms of “fictive kin” easily enter in people’s lifeworlds, and a label such as “friend” in certain instances overtakes the more conventional kin labels (Madianou and Miller 2011, Miller 2017). Social media users articulate kinship ideologies, and assess the affordances of digital infrastructures for the management of their kin relations. New kinship practices have thus emerged, e.g. new forms of surveillance allow absent kin to monitor relatives’ activities and networks (Hannaford 2015), and new forms of carework enable children to perform care duties for their (classificatory) parents from a distance (Ahlin 2018, Hjorth et al. 2020).

The concept of “digital kinship” has mainly been used to reference the organization of care for (fictive) kin remotely (Hjorth et al. 2020: 17). I prefer to extend the notion of “digital kinship” to indicate the performance of kin work, including the performance of responsibilities, obligations, privileges, and entitlements, in and through the digital domain. Avoidance rules, the topic of this paper, are a classic in kinship studies, but also steer digital media practices and social media ideologies (Gershon 2010). Usually, avoidance rules are studied in tandem with joking relationships and ritual labor (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). Linguistic anthropologists also pay attention to the performance of avoidance in speech. Silence (Pasch 2022) and the avoidance of names (Treis 2005, Ball 2015) or taboo words (Stasch 2011) are enacted to respect social hierarchies, and to avoid conflict. Willful ignorance, or the act of pretending not to be informed about a certain behavior or event, also contributes to the performance of respect (Archambault 2017). Furthermore, if sometimes digital sharing practices build on modes of exchange and reciprocity in informal economies (Crowdy and Horst 2022), quid with avoidance rules? How do avoidance rules translate in the digital realm? Can these be upheld between people who are in a relationship of avoidance? Or, does the digital realm transform these, and if so, how?

The fieldsite for this paper is Kinshasa, a city of commonly accepted more than 12 million inhabitants. Since the mid-2000s, Kinshasa society has increasingly digitalized. Telephone companies took

the lead, by offering cheap bundles of mobile data. The social media boom occurred mainly in the mid-2010s when Facebook Lite/Free became available in the city. At the same time, people in the diaspora began to send smartphones to their relatives and friends in Kinshasa. This all has led to a massive usage of social media platforms. Initially Viber, Facebook, Messenger Lite, and Whatsapp were the most popular platforms. Nowadays, Viber is hardly used anymore, but Instagram and TikTok are added to the list. Statistical data about social media usage in Kinshasa are lacking, but overall statistics for internet usage in the whole country, as published by Wearesocial/Hootsuite in February 2021, indicate that 23,2% of the overall population (rural areas included) are online; and almost all (98,7%) social media users do so via a smartphone.<sup>3</sup>

Social media presence and exchange depend on access to electricity, mobile data, and the usage of a functioning smartphone. While mains electricity remains fickle in most parts of the city, people rely on power banks to get online, or they charge their phones at friend's houses, with neighbours, or in (semi-)public buildings, such as bars, churches, schools, and hospitals (Pype 2021). During fieldwork, I observed that most users are between their 20s and 50 years old. Men seem to access social media more often, but for shorter durations than women. Devices are regularly shared, between grandparents and grandchildren (Pype 2016a), between friends (see below) and, to a lesser extent, between siblings. Sometimes these devices contain digital archives of previous owners. The etiquette of "mind your own business" (*kipe ya yo*, Pype 2016b) pushes people to remain discrete about the found digital materials.<sup>4</sup> Even if clusters of mobile phone users appear, meaning people watching their social media accounts on their own but doing so in the company of others, e.g. seated at a table with others, or in another group context, the device itself can easily go around, and digital material can be shown to others who are not

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://cmdafrique.net/2021/02/12/chiffres-reseaux-sociaux-republique-democratique-congo-2021/> - last accessed on September 23 2022.

<sup>4</sup> An exception is when the husband recuperates his spouse's phone. Kinois matrimonial culture allows the husband to have full access to his wife's personal networks, even on the phone, if he would demand so. Yet, it is exceptional that a man gets a phone handed down from his wife as it would counter the masculine ideal of the husband being the provider (also of gadgets such as a mobile phone).

the addressees or are not subscribed to that particular social media page. The commentors on Piroger's image seemed to be well aware of the fact that the posted video would circulate beyond the devices in which the social media accounts are "housed" (see Miller et al. 2021), and they considered it fairly possible that the video would be consumed by Piroger's junior kin sooner or later.

Fieldwork for this paper was carried out for a project on "technology & the city" between 2014 and 2021. I collected data on Kinóis' usages of and discourses about various communication technologies, including social media platforms, and carried out formal and informal interviews with users, operators, and media experts. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I continued to follow digital platforms, and resorted to online interactions only with my interlocutors. Most names have been anonymized for ethical purposes.

The narrative of this paper will mostly be told through the vantage point of two thirty-something Kinóis interlocutors, for whom I use pseudonyms. Matshombe is a married mother, with three children, of whom the youngest is born in 2020. Trained as a journalist, and after numerous discussions with her husband, who felt that his wife had to remain a housewife, she found a part-time job at one of the state institutions in 2018. With her meagre salary of 150USD a month, she can contribute to the household and the rent, when her husband fails to bring any money home from an ever-extended internship as an electric engineer at one of the international telephone companies, and for which he merely receives some *primes* (bonification). Matshombe and her nuclear family live in Matete, one of Kinshasa's crowded municipalities known for its youth gangs and wrestlers. Her social media presence is irregular, as it depends largely on the operability of her cheap smartphone (Chinese brand). She mainly uses WhatsApp, Facebook Light, and Messenger. As for many others, frequent power cuts make it difficult for Matshombe to have a charged phone battery. Between 2016 and June 2022, she could access Facebook Light (or "lite"), a feature that Facebook (now Meta) rolled out in many countries in the Global South, for free. Fiston, a bachelor in his mid-thirties, is born and raised in Ndjili, one of Kinshasa's largest municipalities, notorious for its SAPEURS (subculture of fashionistas) and for its culture of *mikilisme* (people moving to Europe). Several of his siblings and former girlfriends live in western Europe, through whom he receives remittances, but also used smartphones, laptops and designer clothes. In 2017, together with one of his brothers residing in Paris, Fiston set up a modest taxi company. He

manages two cars that circulate in and around Ndjili with a driver. This provides him some modest earnings. When in 2018 his cousin Pitshou moved to Matete to rent a studio, Fiston joined him. At the age of 34, he left his mother alone in the family compound in Ndjili. As a car entrepreneur, Fiston is almost constantly online, managing not only his economic but also his romantic life via social media. His social media accounts are on Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Signal.

In the first part of this working paper, I set the scene, by situating the social performance of “sharing” within urban society. Then, I move on to the social realm of friendship, and explore the ideology of sharing among male friends. In the final part of the paper, I characterize the Kinshasa urban world as a space where “context collapse” is rampant, and draw an analogy between digital oversharing and forms of urban social disorder. In the conclusion, I try to weave all themes together.

## **Sharing**

Fundamental to the idea of oversharing is that the practice provokes discussions about shareability in society. Instances of observed oversharing push people to reflect on the appropriate contours of what can and what should not be shared; why or why not? Avoiding sharing, an invisible action usually, is as central to social life as sharing itself (Berman 2020).

In the literature, the practices of sharing of food, objects, opportunities, and information are intrinsically related to kinship (Widlok 2017: 64). This also accounts for fictive kin. Accepting that a Facebook contact calls you “my husband” or “my wife”, suggests that certain claims about money, commodities, and affect can be made to a significant digital other (Pype 2020). Devices easily travel between siblings, and between parents and their children. In 2016, I had brought a Wiko smartphone for Gerard, a fifty-something radio host. A year later, he was using a mini-tablet with SIM card, received from one of his closest friends (a *mutu na kati*, a “person from the inside”, see below). The Wiko phone had found a new user in Gerard’s older sister. He regretted this soon as she was using it as a dumb phone, and was not at all interested in the social media applications.

Also SIM cards, digital archives, and even passwords are shared, though rarely between parents and their children, or siblings. Rather, the dictate of sharing passwords thrives in matrimony, especially

among *fiancés* and newlyweds. Young married couples and their counselors (such as Christian godparents in the Pentecostal church) ascribe to the “best practice” of sharing their *shéma*, the figuration of lines, or numbers that needs to be made with a finger on the smartphone’s screen in order to unlock the phone. Sharing or not sharing the *shéma* has become a metonym of the partner’s honesty and fidelity. When Matshombe and Dora got married in 2012, they too had begun sharing their *shéma*. Though, not even four years later, Matshombe had noticed that Dora had changed the *shéma* of his smartphone without informing her. They had reverted to individual online lives. “I get jealous when I see him laughing about something he is seeing on his phone. But, I cannot ask him,” expressing that they had gone back to a classic matrimonial relationship, in which the husband enjoys a private life beyond his matrimony. According to that social rule, Matshombe’s husband is allowed to know her password, and to have access to her online accounts. However, Dora did not ask her. So Matshombe assumed, he did not dare to as it could easily lead to instability in the household. “I am not “a submissive wife” (*femme soumise*),” she continued. He knew she would start a quarrel. Matshombe interpreted the lack of sharing the new *shéma* as an expression of a change in their matrimonial interaction. More abstractly, her experience suggests changes in ideologies of shareability within the sociality of matrimony in Kinshasa.

Discussions about sharing of digital devices, passwords and digital content are closely related to the phenomenon of “*partagisme*”, a kiKinois<sup>5</sup> linguistic invention drawing from the French “*partager*” (to share), but indicating first and foremost the necessity of *collaborating* in economic, social and political life. *Partagisme* is a very much an urban phenomenon, and thrives outside the kinship realms. It speaks to the social activity of sharing experiences of lack, distress, suffering, and poverty. In such context, also experienced elsewhere in urban Africa, people are expected to share ideas, resources, opportunities, and networks when these are available. It is part of a *debrouillardise* culture. For the Capetonian context, Nyamnjoh and Brudvig (2014) have indicated how the collective experience of distress turns fellow urbanites into “intimate strangers,” leading to conviviality and a shared sense of

---

<sup>5</sup> kiKinois is the name for the informal Lingala mainly spoken in Kinshasa’s households, streets and other popular spaces. kiKinois is based on Lingala, but integrates words and sounds from French, kiKongo, English, and other languages. It is spoken, and is found on social media as well.



belonging. A whole vocabulary has emerged in Kinshasa in order to assess if someone is prone to share or not: Someone who does not share with others (kin, neighbours, friends, fellow church-goers, etc.), is commonly called a “[person with] hand that are difficult [to open]” (*maboka makasi*)<sup>6</sup>; while the phrase “*apesa atala te*”, literally translated as “s/he gives without looking,” refers to people whose sharing practices do not have any limits. It is often expressed with much enthusiasm and in admiration. Showering others with money is a public performance through which the donator confirms social seniority (“bigness” in the Africanist literature).

“*Partagisme*” is hailed as a positive, socially rewarding practice. It directs sociality within specific social groups, among friends, among people who share an ethnic affiliation or political or other affinity. All in all, *partagisme* steers the flow of goods, money and information within relationships characterized by proximity and trust, though sometimes also indebtedness. These relations are rarely established on blood ties, e.g. from a father or uncle to a (classificatory) child; an older brother to a younger sister; or on agnatic ties, from a husband to a wife; but more on affects, between lovers, and between friends. Despite its positive connotation, the word “*partagisme*” may can lead to mild envy, e.g. as I noticed when an older sister observed how her brother donated his used smartphone to one of his friends, while she had been craving for one for a few weeks. She called out “*partagisme!*,” thus expressing her experience of exclusion and marginalization. Her exclamation illustrates the restricted, and individualized channels of Kinshasa’s sharing culture.

---

<sup>6</sup> In a stereotypical representation of ethnic-related behavior, baKongo people (whose region of origin is located in the Central Kongo Province; but who have a large representation in Kinshasa) never share. Another asocial characteristic attributed to them, is the suspicion that baKongo people like to use witchcraft and sorcery (*kindoki*). For the Abidjan context, Newell (2012) has noted a similar morality of sharing. He quotes one of the thugs saying “People who are proper, who know how to share, we leave them alone.” (Newell 2012: 65). Abidjanais have a “moral obligation to share one’s earnings with one’s friends and family” (2012: 68). Boulton (2021: 142) observed a similar emphasis on sharing among male friends in Nambian Swakupmond.

## Friends share

The male friendship (friend: Sg. *masta*, Pl. *bamasta*) realm is defined by “sharing”. This sharing is first and foremost related to an exchange of money and opportunities and is mediated via secret, coded language, Hindubill, only understood by male peers with intimate connections (De Boeck and Plissart 2005: 36-39, Nassenstein 2022). The phonetic structure of these variants thrives on linguistic creativity that varies from one group to the other, e.g. one group adds a suffix (e.g. “-inera”) to every word; another group adds a prefix (“kolo-); and yet another group can switch syllables in a word (e.g. well-known now is “mifa” instead of “famille”). Hindubill speakers thus linguistically create patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Two friends can be speaking their version of Hindubill in the living room, without anyone around understanding a single word of the conversation. Explaining the linguistic parameters of the slang to an outsider is literally phrased as “open the code” (*kofungola code*); or “unlocking (as in unlocking a phone) the code (*déverouiller code*). The intimacy of the male *bamasta* world likewise includes the sharing of emotions, of dreams, of commodities, and even of sexual partners.

The importance of “sharing” within this *bamasta* world is most clearly vocalized by Fiston, when comparing his relationships to his two best friends, Marco, who had migrated to France two years earlier, and Rodrigue, who was living in Angola at the time of our conversation: “A *masta* is “un ami avec qui on partage” [a friend with whom one shares]”),” said Fiston. Among those friends (*bamasta*), there are subcategories: a *pire masta* is a friend with whom there is not only a deep friendship, but also a “*grande partage*” [a grand partnership]: we share clothes. A regular friend will never feel entitled to ask some of my clothes; but if Marco asked me, I could not even refuse. Between me and Marco, as *pire masta*, there are no secrets. He is really “*moto na ngai na kati*” [one of my men, from the inside]. Nothing happens to him, without me knowing, and vice versa.”

All in all, the *mutu na kati* [one of my men, from the inside] is a very intimate person. Fiston reckoned he only had two in his life, Marco and Rodrigue. Unfortunately for him, both had migrated abroad. Due to the expensive phone economy in Angola, Fiston was not in touch anymore with

Rodrigue. Even when Facebook Light became available in Angola, contact was not reactivated.<sup>7</sup> Early 2019, Fiston was trying to figure out whether there were other men who could move from a *masta* to a *moto na kati*. Although he acknowledged that it was difficult for others to access the *masta* world: “if you are facing problems, your *bamasta* help you to arrive at a solution; if you are bereft, those who come to the mourning, and sleep over, they are a *mutu na kati*. However, those who only arrive at the last day of the mourning ritual, especially when food and drinks are shared among the mourners, ... then these are not even *bamasta*.” It was no coincidence that consolation during the mourning ritual was considered as a marker of differentiation between various categories of friends given the importance of funerals in Kinshasa’s social life (see De Boeck 2009).

By late 2019, Fiston seemed to have found a new *mutu na kati* in the person of his cousin, Pitshou. They had moved in a studio in Matete together a few months earlier. Pitshou belonged to the same generation as Fiston’s elder brothers. While Fiston grew up, he considered Pitshou as a classificatory *yaya* (older brother). They regularly met and greeted each other, but did so in a rather distant manner, as younger and older (classificatory) brothers would do. “Sharing intimacies among brothers is not *propre* (“not correct”),” Fiston explained. As a child or teenager, he had never been able to ask Pitshou for advice regarding school, coops, or girls. “*Yayas* ((classificatory) elder brothers) do not even protect their *leki* ((classificatory) younger brothers) in the house,” he continued. Until they were co-habiting in the studio, Fiston took recourse to his own circle of *masta* for emotional and social support. That changed when Fiston and Pitshou started cohabitating the tiny studio of three on two square meters. The intimacy of sharing a mattress, of splitting the bills for rent, water, and electricity, and of managing the household, as in cooking and cleaning the house and laundry, had turned them into *mutu na kati*. There were no secrets between them anymore.

The transformation in Fiston and Pitshou’s relationship indicates how the (fictive) sibling relationship is not the first space of sharing of information, support, and opportunities. Yet, (fictive) kin can move into the *masta* realm, as Fiston and Pitshou did. In Kinshasa, a “friend” relationship (*masta*, and certainly *mutu ya kati*) is particularly thick: it is characterized by intimacy, equality, loyalty, trust,

---

<sup>7</sup> Facebook Lite was available in Angola in 2017 until June 2022.

and a high degree of sharing (*partagisme*), e.g. of secrets, of objects, and even of networks. Even if people have a convivial relationship, and they exchange gossip and jokes, they do not necessarily partake in the *masta* universe. A question one often hears during quarrels is “are you my friend?” (“*oza masta na ngai?*”). On this rhetorical question only a “no” is the right answer. It serves as an indirect form of redress as it communicates to the addressee that they have taken certain liberties either in forms of speech or in behavior with the Speaker.

The fact that the online sharing culture of social media platforms is voiced in terms of friendship (see Miller 2017) compellingly speaks to the *partagisme* of the Kinois *bamasta* world. The friendship realm is likewise a space of complicity and mutual protection. After a short trip back to Europe, Fiston called me to have a drink at Ndjili Couloir Kimbuta, one of the new places in town where people spend hours drinking, chatting, and enjoying music in open air bars. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons and evenings, the newly erected road, informally named after the then reigning city governor André Kimbuta, was full with large vehicles parked in the middle of the road. On both sides, pedestrians had to meander between bars and the gutters that were laying open. Fiston knew that my trip to Kinshasa was going to be short, and he asked me a favor. He hoped that I could talk to some of his older *bayaya*, men who were older than him but with whom he had grown up in Ndjili. They were now living in the diaspora, scattered over France, the Netherlands and Germany. In the weeks preceding our conversation, Fiston had already messaged them privately over Facebook Messenger, asking them to be more mindful about their language online. He had observed that they were engaging in insults (*mafinga*). They were belittling others online, sometimes even slandering strangers. Fiston had reminded them that they are also Facebook friends with their (classificatory) children, and these can follow their online insults. “This is not becoming of a father, and they [the juniors] should not observe their father in such behavior,” Fiston told me with great conviction as he was sipping of his Maltina, a soft drink. Even though several of their children who had stayed behind in Kinshasa, did not have a Facebook account, Fiston had reminded his *bayaya* that online communication and exchange can easily spill over in the non-digital world, and thus reach the ears of those who should respect them. What Fiston’s advice meant, was that his *bayaya* in Europe should know better. Their online interactions put them at risk of losing face and authority among their younger kin. Fiston was expressing the same concerns about the risk of the online

sharing culture for people's reputations just like the commentators on the video of sleeping Piroger at the opening of this paper did.

### **Social promiscuity**

Sharing among *bamasta* such as Fiston and Pitshou is intentional. It is the glue of their friendship bond. However, social life is rife with instances of unintended sharing, a phenomenon that has been studied in social media studies and is called "context collision". This occurs when "different social environments unintentionally and unexpectedly come crashing into each other" (Davis and Jurgenson 2014: 480).<sup>8</sup> "Context collapse" is the more general concept to signal the accidental or intended exposure of content and materials to unintended receivers. With social media, the risk for context collapse looms large as users often discover the apps' social radius on the go, and sometimes learn about the publicness of a post when an unintended public has been reached.

Societies have always tried to prevent context collapse, mobilizing a diverse set of avoidance strategies. As mentioned earlier, it is especially in the realm of kinship studies that avoidance rules have been studied. They often appeared in tandem with joking relationships (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, Stefanyszyn 1950): the latter involve expected free, familiar, and sometimes even transgressive interactions between individuals who occupy a particular relational slot vis-à-vis one another. In Congolese ethnographic accounts, classic examples of joking relationships are those between grandparents and grandchildren; between a nephew and his matrilineal uncle; and between a husband and his (classificatory) sisters-in-law. The best-known avoidance relationship is that between a husband and his (classificatory) mothers-in-law. Mothers-in-law should maintain distance towards their son-in-law. Therefore, some wealthier families may house their mother-in-law in a cottage (*annexe*) in the backyard of the compound. The motivation here is that both social categories vie for the affect, attention, and care of the same third party, the wife/the daughter. Yet, most Kinois explain this avoidance rule as

---

<sup>8</sup> "Context collision" contrasts with "context collusion", which occurs when individuals "intentionally collapse, blur, and flatten contexts" (Davis and Jurgenson 2014: 480).

a protection against metaphysical risks that can be incurred when one sees the other's naked body. Families who do not have the luxury of extra space, use other strategies to produce distance. A (classificatory) mother-in-law will wait until her son-in-law has left the house before taking a bath. Sometimes the elderly woman will be sent to another (classificatory) son with whom she can stay. When these housing strategies are impossible, then she may be relocated to a retirement home (Pype 2016c).

Many more avoidance rules are imprinted in Kinshasa's urban space than the one that manages the distance between the mother-in-law and her son-in-law. One could actually argue that avoidance rules in general structure social life in general in Kinshasa, and have even influenced urban planning. Some avoidance rules are literally built into the urban landscape, and thrive on colonial patterns of distancing and avoiding, e.g. the white city center and the townships, where the colonial subjects were housed, were separated by a green belt, consolidating a physical distance (De Boeck and Plissart 2005). Even though the urban demographics have swallowed that in-between space in the meantime, in the mindset of many, Kinshasa's city center remains a space of "white people". In contemporary Kinshasa, a physical and social distance remains observable between "*bato ya mbongo*" (families with money) and poorer families. Villas built during postcolonial times facilitate an in-house housemaid (*a bonne*). Her bedroom is situated next to the kitchen; she shares washing facilities with other workers, such as gatekeepers and gardeners. These aides use separate entrances to access the compound and the house. Less privileged families prefer their *domestique* not to sleep in the house, and pay for the daily commute. The various gated communities that have sprung up in the last decades testify to the increased concern of Kinshasa's elite to combine a physical and social distance. Stone fences emphasize the firmness with which these worlds need to be kept apart. The *bato ya mbongo* are often driven around by private chauffeurs in cars with tinted windows. Their children are not allowed to take public transport, nor to play in the streets, or even to speak Lingala or kiKinois. Similar strategies of avoidance are observable in the social worlds of expats, foreigners working for international NGOs, at diplomatic institutions, and in peace keeping missions and economic enterprises. The first share flats and villas in the white city center, that are too expensive for the average Kinois. Their residencies are very often walled and guarded by weaponed security. Most Chinese workers engaged in the road or building construction works live in workers' camps; just like UN soldiers and administration. Distance is also required within families,

especially among generations. Households therefore observe their own strategies of avoidance in order to maintain the right distance between the various generations in the compound. E.g. a father will rarely join the table with his spouse and children. Not only physical distance is valued in Kinshasa. So is social distance. A phrase one often hears (and reads online) is “*le patron et le domestique ne se mélangent pas*”, “the boss and the houseworker do not mingle”. This idiom, together with the above already mentioned question “*oza masta na ngai?*” (“are you my friend?”), suggests that one needs to know their place in a particular relationship, and that the relationship addressed indirectly in the conversation requires more distance.

Yet, despite these various material and immaterial strategies of avoidance, the experience of context collapse is part of the everyday in Kinshasa. Precarity, often expressed in terms of bodily lack (*nzala*, hunger, and *mposa*, “thirst/desire”), a need for money, or for economic opportunity, but also for gadgets and sexual satisfaction, push people to frequently transgress the boundaries between social spheres that, ideally, should remain distant from one another. The work floor and nightclubs are the spaces where expats encounter Congolese, and where the elite shrubs shoulders with Kinois from poorer areas in town. Social media are digital alternatives to the nightclubs in the city centre. For example, Flavie, one of my key interlocutors, living in Lemba, a community about 30 minutes driving from Gombe, where most expats are housed, has had several sexual encounters with Lebanese, Malian, French, and Belgian expats who she met through various dating apps (Pype 2020). Yet, context collapse is also installed in the education system. Many complain how pupils and students can engage in short or longer sexual relationships with teachers or professors, in exchange for better grades. And, despite the various spatial or temporal strategies of keeping a distance between female household helps (*bonne*) and family members, gossip and jokes circulate about young men having lost their virginity to the *bonne*; or about husbands having impregnated the help.

The above are examples of “context collapse”, or social disorder (*désordre*) that characterizes Kinois society (Trefon 2004). While in the Congolese lexicon, *désordre* usually indicates political and moral confusion (see Trefon 2004), the concept of *promiscuité sociale* is reserved for the *désordre* in the intimate space of the compound. *Promiscuité sociale* means the socially undesired mingling of

generations and genders in the domestic space. Economic precarity leads to overcrowding, which in turn renders it difficult to uphold rules of avoidance.<sup>9</sup>

Fiston and Pitshou found that keeping distance proved too cumbersome. They transformed their relationship into a more intimate one. As mentioned earlier, before Fiston moved in with Pitshou, they had been in an elder brother-younger brother (*yaya-leki*) relationship, which is marked by distance, and lack of reciprocity. A *yaya* can order the *leki* around, can demand the *leki* to cover up for their mistakes or transgressions, and can discipline him. The *leki* is in a dependent relationship towards the *yaya*. A *yaya* and *leki* should not give each other access to his emotional life. In the beginning of their cohabitation, both Fiston and Pitshou were trying to be discrete during romantic phone conversations. They produced distance either acoustically, by whispering on the phone, or physically, by answering the phone call outside. Initially, as the (classificatory) younger brother, Fiston felt he had to make more efforts in order to produce distance. Fiston went to the bathroom, or just sat outside the studio whenever he thought Pitshou needed privacy. However, so Fiston told me, only a few weeks into their cohabitation, he had grown annoyed with these sacrifices, and became more negligent. Pitshou did not seem to be bothered. Fiston did not put any effort anymore in producing that distance, and gradually

---

<sup>9</sup> This may sometimes lead to absurd situations, e.g. while I was having an informal conversation with an adult man who was visiting his mother-in-law, at a certain point, one of the grandchildren whispered in my ears that her grandmother had to go to the bathroom which was located 100 meters from the house. I and the son-in-law were seated on plastic chairs in between the outdoor bathroom and the main house, where the elderly women were watching television. The grand-daughter had been sent to ask me to discretely relocate to the other side of the compound, and to arrange the seating arrangements in such a way that the son-in-law would be turned with his back to the space where they were going to pass. On another occasion, I observed how three (classificatory) brothers were embarrassed to see one of their uncles arriving in a party space which doubled as a brothel. We were celebrating a friend's anniversary in the courtyard, but the toilets were in the backside, close to the rooms where prostitutes were receiving clients. Informed about their uncle's presence, they went at great lengths to avoid meeting him on their way to the bathroom. They paid one of the waiters to keep them informed about their uncle's whereabouts. And, to the amusement of many, they each time ran quickly to and from the bathroom, dramatically performing the risk of encountering their uncle.



Pitshou and Fiston became witnesses to one another's private lives. Sharing a mattress transformed their relationship into a *masta* relationship, even into one of a *mutu na kati*.

The digital world adds a new possibility of social promiscuity, and renders the navigation of the established rules and restrictions within specific sets of relationships even more challenging. For example, elderly Kinois may resist the friendship vocabulary of Facebook when reflecting on whether to accept a Facebook friendship request of their (classificatory) children.<sup>10</sup> In 2017, an anthropology professor in his mid-70s regretted that his daughter had sent him a Facebook request. He opined that "Facebook was forcing him to become a friend with his daughter," a relationship he could not imagine. It took him two years before accepting the friendship request. By that time, he was managing 5 Facebook accounts, with confusing overlaps of contacts. The resistance towards befriending someone virtually to whom a social distance should be kept, seems more pronounced when the potential digital contact lives in physical proximity. For those living abroad, the distance mitigates the social confusion virtual "friendship" could bring about.

It may be unsurprising that many Kinois, young and old alike, frequently diminish the social importance of social media by characterizing it as a space of "foolish behavior" (Lingala *buzoba*, French *des bêtises*), even of aimless speech (*bilaloba*). *Buzoba* and *bilobela* are terms also used to indicate antisocial speech in the city. *Bilaloba* contrasts with "la parole" (*liloba*), which has a strong social power: it can reconfirm existing ties between kin and friends, weave ties between strangers, and heal social rifts. As observed elsewhere in DR Congo and its neighboring countries, politeness, respect and reputation management are performed by avoiding quarrels, arguments or fights. Silence is considered the most appropriate strategy to keep face, and to avoid disagreement (Pasch 2022: 103). According to Devisch (1998: 138), writing about rural sociality in Yaka villages west of Kinshasa, "rules of decency governing interaction, speech, and dress are less strictly enforced on the periphery of the village or at nightfall as well as among agemates of the same gender when meeting outside the compounds during

---

<sup>10</sup> Similar dilemmas have been noted elsewhere as well, e.g. Miller and Maidanou (2012) describe the dilemma Filipino children are confronted with, when receiving a Facebook friendship request from their mother, who has migrated to the UK.

the day.” In urban contexts, however, rules of decency have transformed, and insults and quarrels can be heard on street corners, in bars, on markets and even in compounds at any time of the day. This is another instantiation of Kinshasa’s *désordre* (see above). *Buzoba* and *bilaloba* are powerful labels expressing how many Kinois consider social media as disruptive for social life, despite the various economic opportunities and social aspirations that motivate Kinois to establish digital selves.

Social media are said to facilitate different kinds of *bêtises* along genders. Many Kinois hold that girls and women go online to cheat on their partner or husband. Discourse about women’s possible transgressions is about the image of their body traveling to undesired publics. (Digital) Kinois nickname social media as *fessebook*, “Facebook of buttocks”, referring to the dominant aesthetics of young girls’ digital self-presentation: a popular form of digital photography in “Digital Kinshasa” are the pictures in which girls show their backs to the spectators while seductively turning their head and facing the lens. The *bêtises* most often mentioned about men’s online life, is that they insult others, as echoed by Fiston’s warnings about his *bayaya* digital behavior earlier. The concern about men’s online activities is about the lack of control over the circulation of their words, especially disorderly speech. Both accusations are telling about the concerns in Kinois society: women’s sexual life needs to be monitored; related concerns are therefore centered around the possibility of sharing nude photographs; for men, it is not so much their easy access to girls and women that seems to be disruptive, rather their digital speech is considered risky because uncontrolled speech such as insults “inverts or perverts the norms of seniority and is a threat to community life” (Devisch 1998: 143). Restraint in one’s digital interactions is one form of avoidance.

### **Returning to digital avoidance**

In this working paper, I have tried to bring concepts of digital avoidance, context collapse, and urban kinship in conversation. Costa (2018: 3647) has argued that the concept of “context collapse” is too anglo-saxon. In Turkish Mardin, Coasta’s fieldsite, “In the “public” Facebook account, the imagined and actual audience is the online reproduction of a public that has always existed in the non-digital world, whose practices reflect longstanding habits and meanings of public visibility that are quite

different from those existing in Western contexts”. In the ethnographic context of my research, Kinois also reflect on public and private behavior online and in the non-digital world. However, in contrast to the Mardin context, context collapse is part of the Kinois urban everyday.

The ethnographic material pushes us to reflect on the social value of “distance”. New media have been heralded for shrinking distance. While electronic media overcome physical distance; social media can shrink social distance. Proximity and distance are valued differently according to time and space. Miller et al. (2016) have already drawn our attention to the fact that social media users try to manage online distance. In this paper, I have tried to build further on that work, and have situated the discourses about digital distance within the non-digital social world.

I zoomed in on digital avoidance. This can mean many things. It can be an avoidance of the digital in its own right, e.g. by refusing to get an online account. Yet, it can also mean a whole set of tactics in the digital realm through which context collapse can be averted or minimized. Examples are setting up multiple accounts like the older professor did, carefully observing the various contacts/followers/friends one allows for a particular account, or distributing different forms of content over different social media platforms. Other forms of enacting digital distance can be monitoring and restraining one’s social media interactions in order to avoid a particular reaction with the public or a part thereof. Blocking, ghosting, and disconnecting are other forms of digital avoidance. These have not been discussed in this working paper.

Digital avoidance is social work. It speaks to new forms of restricting one’s social navigation. These can build on the ways in which people create distance in the non-digital world. Kinois keep a digital distance among particular (fictive) kin for three main reasons: avoiding conflict; avoiding reputation loss; and controlling the circulation of information. Digital avoidance opens reflections about sharing. Sharing practices (also non-sharing) are prone to negotiation, reflection, agency, and, if required sanctioning and repair.

## References

- Ahlin, T. 2018. "Only near is dear? Doing elderly care with everyday ICTs in Indian Transnational Families". *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. 32(1): 85-102.
- Archambault, J. 2017. *Mobile secrets: youth, intimacy, and the politics of pretense in Mozambique*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Ball, C. 2015. "Avoidance as alterity stance: an upper Xinguan affinity chronotope." *Anthropological Quarterly* 88(2): 337-372.
- Berman, E. 2020. "Avoiding Sharing How People Help Each Other Get out of Giving," *Current Anthropology* 61(2): 219-239.
- Brandtzaeg, P. B., & Lüders, M. 2018. "Time Collapse in Social Media: Extending the Context Collapse." *Social Media + Society* 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118763349>
- Boulton, J. 2021. *Have your yellowcake and eat it: men, relatedness and intimacy in Swakopmund, Namibia*. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien.
- Chua, L. 2018. "Small acts and personal politics: on helping to save the orangutan via social media," *Anthropological Quarterly* 34(3): 7-11.
- Costa, E. 2018. Affordances-in-practice: An ethnographic critique of social media logic and context collapse. *New Media & Society*, 20(10), 3641–3656. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818756290>
- Crowdy, D. and H. A. Horst. 2022. "We just 'SHARit': Smartphones, data and music sharing in urban Papua New Guinea". *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 33(2): 247-262.
- Davis, J.L. and N. Jurgenson (2014). "Context collapse: theorizing context collusions and collisions," *Information, Communication & Society* 17:4, 476-485.
- De Boeck, F. and M.-F. Plissart. 2005. *Kinshasa: tales of the invisible city*. Ghent: Ludion.
- De Boeck, F. 2009. "Death matters: intimacy, violence and the production of social knowledge by urban youth in the Democratic Republic of Congo." In A. Pinto Ribeiro (ed.), *Can There Be Life Without the Other?* Manchester: Carcanet Press.
- Devisch, R. 2018. *Weaving the threads of life. The Khita Gyn-Eco-Logical Healing Cult among the Yaka*. Chicago, Il.: Chicago University Press.
- Gershon, I. 2010. *The break-up 2.0.: disconnecting over new media*. Ithaca, NJ: Cornell University Press.

- Gluckman, M. 1973. *Custom and Conflict in Africa*. A Blackwell Paperback.
- Hannaforth, D. 2015. "Technologies of the spouse: intimate surveillance in Senegalese transnational marriages." *Global networks: a journal of transnational affairs* 15(1): 43-59.
- Hjorth, L., K. Ohashi, J. Sinanan, H. Horst, S. Pink, F. Kato, and B. Zhou. 2020. *Digital Media Practices in Households Kinship through Data*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Madianou, M. and D. Miller. 2011. "Should you accept a friend's request from your mother? And other Filipino dilemmas." *International Review of Social Research* 2(1): 8-27.
- Marwick, A. E., & boyd, d. 2011. "I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience." *New Media & Society* 13(1), 114–133.
- Miller, D., E. Costa, N. Haynes, T. McDonald, R. Nicolescu, J. Sinanan, J. Spyer, S. Venkatraman and X. Wang. 2016. *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press.
- Miller, D. 2017. "The ideology of friendship in the era of Facebook." *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7(1): <https://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/hau7.1.025>
- Miller, D., Rabho, L.A., Awondo, P., de Vries, M., Duque, M., Garvey, P., Haapio-Kirk, L., Hawkins, C., Otaegui, A., Walton, S. and X. Wang. 2021. *The Global Smartphone. Beyond a youth technology*. UCL: London.
- 
- Nassenstein, N. 2022. "Lingala ya Bayankee/Yanké". In: P. Kerswill and H. Wiese (eds.) *Urban Contact Dialects and Language Change*. London: Routledge. 19 pages.
- Newell, S. 2012. *The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Cote d'Ivoire*. Chicago, Il.: Chicago University Press.
- Nyamnjoh, F. B. and I. Brudvig. 2014. "Conviviality and negotiations with belonging in urban Africa." In E. F. Isin and P. Nyers (eds), *Handbook of Global Citizenship Studies*. London: Routledge.

- Pasch, H. 2022. "Zande Politeness Strategies and Their Verbal Expressions," in *The Art of Language*, eds. A. Storch and R.W.M. Dixon. Brill Publishers: Leiden. Pp. 100-118.
- Persson, A. 2010. *Front- and backstage in "social media"*. Paper presented at XVII World Congress of Sociology, arranged by the International Sociological Association (ISA).
- Phillips, C. 2015. "Self-Pornographic Representations with Grindr," *Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology*. 1(1): 65-79.
- Pype, K. 2016a. "Brokers of Belonging. Elders and Intermediaries in Kinshasa's Mobile Phone Culture", in *From Media Audiences to Users. Everyday Media in Africa*, eds. Winston Mano and Wendy Willems, Routledge, Chapter 4.
- Pype, K. 2016b. "On interference and hotspots. Ethnographic explorations of rural-urban connectivity in and around Kinshasa's phonic cabins". *Mededelingen der Zittingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Overzeese Wetenschappen* 62(2): 229-260.
- 2016b. "Caring for people "without" value: movement, reciprocity and respect in Kinshasa's retirement homes", in *Ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa. Spaces and Practices of Care*, Jacobus Hoffman and Katrien Pype, Bristol: Policy Press, Chapter 5.
- Pype, K. 2020. "*Bolingo ya Face*. Digital marriages, playfulness and the search for change in Kinshasa," in *New Media Practices in a Changing Africa*. Eds. Jo Helle-Valle and Ardis Storm-Mathisen. Oxford/New York: Berghahn Books. Chapter 3, 93-124
- Pype, K. 2021. "(Not) in sync – digital time and forms of (dis-)connecting: ethnographic notes from Kinshasa (DR Congo)." *Media, Culture & Society* 43(7), 1197–1212.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. 1940. "On joking relationships." *Africa: Journal of the International Africa Institute* 13 (3): 195–210.
- Stasch, R. 2011. "Word Avoidance as a Relation-Making Act: A Paradigm for Analysis of Name Utterance Taboos." *Anthropological Quarterly* 84(1): 101-120.
- Stefaniszyn, B. 1950. "Funeral friendship in Central Africa." *Africa: Journal of the International Africa Institute*, 20(4): 290–306.

- Treis, Y. 2005. "Avoiding their names, avoiding their eyes: How Kambaata women respect their in-laws." *Anthropological Linguistics* 47(3): 292-320.
- Varis, P. and J. Blommaert. 2015. "Conviviality and collectives on social media: Virality, memes, and new social structures." *Multilingual Margins* 2(1): 31-45.
- Wesch, M. 2009. "YouTube and You: Experiences of Self-awareness in the Context Collapse of the Recording Webcam" *Explorations in Media Ecology* 8(2): 19-34.
- Widlok, T. 2017. *Anthropology and the Economy of Sharing*. Routledge: London.