



Dialectics of the household: technological objects as a social mediator

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine a few issues concerning social relationships in (and with) the household. In this context, these relationships take on a specific characteristic: they are mediated by objects, especially technological ones. The importance these objects have for the household of the interviewees will be substantiated throughout this paper, also keeping in mind the way they are chosen, which depends on the role they will have for people. The narratives that provide the basis for this study were collected in Porto (north of Portugal) between 2011 and 2013, during the research for my doctorate in Anthropology of Technologyⁱ. Having these narratives as a starting point, the material culture of the household will be regarded as a way to understand some of the structuring processes of identity and social relationships within the timeframe of modernityⁱⁱ.

Keywords: technology; household; social relationships; material culture



Full Paper

Introduction

Giddens conceptualizes space in modernity as a place where relationships with absent "others", distant from the immediate physical presence, are increasingly taking place. This conceptualization is opposite to what happened in times past (in pre-modern societies), when there was a correspondence between space and time (Giddens, 1990). Everyday life is also affected by events that are set in a more or less remote physical space. Giddens deems that mass communication through electronic media causes a striking development of the interaction between the self and the social systems. Experiences are no longer always connected to physical spaces and some constructions of identity are based on "mediated" materials. However, a powerful "compulsion of proximity" still subsists (Boden and Molotch, 1994), which is relevant to family relationships, friendships and also relationships between colleagues.

These are the relationships that still define the notion of what we are and they also express part of our subjective vision of the world (Moore, 1997). On the other hand, in this paper, some of Daniel Miller's conclusions concerning his work bear wider relevance, namely in the book *The comfort of things* (2008). The concept that will be discussed in this paper is the correlation between choosing objects with their mode of use (in this case, technological objects) and the functions they have in social relationships. In other words, the claim that each individual chooses to buy a certain object mostly motivated by the function it will have in a relationship with other people (Miller, 2008).

These issues are examined in this paper by using, as analytical data, the narratives I collected while researching for my doctoral thesis in Anthropology, entitled *Memories of domestic technification: three generations in narrative*. The ethnographic methodology was adopted for collecting the narratives, and the participants were asked to communicate them as life stories. Four generations of

four families were interviewed, a total of 14 people. In this paper only parts of the narratives of four of the interviewees are analysed, namely: Matilde (64), Luísa's mother; Luísa (36); Tomás (37), Luísa's husband; Clara (15), Luísa and Tomás' daughter. When the generations are alluded to in this paper, the first will be the older one and so forth down to the last one, the youngest generation.

The interviewees were chosen because they belong to the upper middle class of Porto (using economic and cultural criteria), and I got in touch with them through people we mutually knew who recommended me to them. The interviews took place between 2011 and 2013 at the participants' homes. The methodology adopted for conducting the interviews made it necessary, in order to address the contents of this paper, to occasionally provide some historical background. Also, for methodological reasons, issues concerning the representation of identity are interconnected with the use of technologies and their physical and moral implications for home life in domestic spaces.

The option of presenting the issues that are being dealt with this way has the purpose of making evident the close relationship the participants felt and feel with these different aspects of everyday life. The aim of this paper is to carry out an integrated analysis so as to validate a multiple perspective of the social uses of the spaces that were examined. Objects, especially technological ones, are central to the narratives and also to the analysis of households in this paper. Since objects are usually bought to be put and operate in specific spaces, they become important instruments to understand the way those spaces are used.

Finally, it is important to notice that some of the practices referred to in this paper are not exclusive to the *status* groupⁱⁱⁱ that generated the narratives. The analytical approach that is taken here takes into account the *status* group that originated these narratives.

Context: the *status* group and their modes of inhabiting the household

The spaces inhabited by the participants express the social position of the occupants/owners. They are located in Foz, one of the most reputable

neighbourhoods in Porto as far as urbanization and quality of the environment are concerned. The houses and apartments are on the waterfront, are spacious and bright, decorated according to the *status quo* of the dwellers' social category. Some of the objects that classically define the integration into a social group are mentioned in the interviews: silver decorative objects received as wedding gifts, collections of works of art and books. Other items were observed by the interviewer: oil paintings, period furnishings (English in the older generations and restored Portuguese Art Deco in the younger ones), sofas and curtains made of neutral colour fabrics.

The way the participants look at the spaces is distinct. Luísa and Tomás renovated a house built in the 1950s, whose style is clearly from that period, and tried to maintain the original features. Aesthetic contemporaneity was granted through the interior decoration and the materials used in the restoration, but this modernization is neutral. The decoration used pastel shades, which respect the built-up spaces. Despite the fact that some structural adjustments had been made during the renovation of the house - so it could meet the demands of the composition of the family (father, mother and two children, one of each sex) - they sought enduring architectural spaces. In this case, elements of flexible architecture, in which internal spaces can be continuously redesigned according to the needs, were not employed.

A functional arrangement was chosen, grounded in an experience of space that replicates the one their parents and grandparents enjoyed. Luísa, in spite of having hired a domestic helper or "maid", felt the need to clean tile grout herself^{iv} in houses where she had lived previously, and considers it very hard work. Thus, for the new house she chose an interior wall cladding with no grout, to remove this additional time-consuming energy-draining task from her routine. The materials used in the reconstruction are durable, so as to extend their lifespan.

The furniture was bought at IKEA (it is predominant in the bedrooms), but the hallway, the kitchen, the living room and the dining room have neutral colours and Portuguese furniture from the first half of the 20th century, restored and adapted

to new functions. Choosing this type of furniture actually constrains the overall structure of the house as it cannot be flexible, because some pieces of furniture are large, which means they not only need reasonable space but also a context. The choice of the place where each piece of furniture is placed reveals the importance of those pieces to the owners^v. The old furniture, restyled in a fashion that highlights the education for cultural sensibility Luísa and Tomás have, also evidences their stance against waste and in favour of recycling. In the same way Luísa stores glass jars, a durable material, for prospective future use, and tries not to bring shopping from the supermarket in bags unless it cannot be helped, this choice of furniture not only makes it clear that reuse can be aesthetically iconic but also up to date. By confining the IKEA furniture to the private rooms the owners are able to maintain the contemporary aesthetics at a lower cost, and that attitude does not mean that their visitors will connote them with mass production consumer goods.

British architects Alison (1928-1993) and Peter (1923-2003) Smithson supported that spaces have to activate the senses so that people might seize them and thereby establish a bond between the space and its inhabitants^{vi}. Considering the house or the architectural space as a whole, for the Smithsons architecture would never be complete without this "art of inhabitation", i.e. the individualization of the space each inhabitant performs with his own personal choices in decoration, furnishing, etc. (Smithson and Smithson, 1994).

Sharing the household with the "other"

The *status* group of the interviewees had habitually shared the household with maids, throughout different generations. These maids could live in the house (which was the most common arrangement between the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century) or not, and the latter prevailed since 1975. Currently, none of the participants have live-in maids due to the costs. However, they do not complain about it because many of their statements underline the

difficulties arising from sharing the household with people who represent otherness. In this regard, it is important to note what Bauman identifies as the main purpose of civility: interacting with strangers without reacting fiercely or demanding that they yield their idiosyncrasies (Bauman, 2000). Concerning public spaces, he actually states::

“If physical proximity – sharing a space – cannot be completely avoided, it can be perhaps stripped of the challenge of “togetherness” it contains, with its standing invitation to meaningful encounter, dialogue and interaction. If meeting strangers cannot be averted, one can at least try to avoid the dealings. Let strangers, like children of the Victorian era, be seen but not heard or if hearing them cannot be escaped, then, at least, not listened to. The point is to make whatever they may say irrelevant and of no consequence to what can be done, is to be done, and is desired to be done (Bauman, 2000: 105)”.

If these perspectives are put into a specific context under the scope of the statements made by the participants, the will to make the "other" – with whom one is forced to share the living space – invisible and obedient is clear. This conduct is more evident in the narratives concerning housemaids. Sharing the household with the maids does not seem to have been a problem in the first decades of the 20th century, when domestic helpers were naturally integrated both in the activities and in the daily memories of interviewees. This data was collected through ethnographic research, even though echoes of it can be found in written records of that period. Housewives in the late 19th century and early 20th century enjoyed:

«A prestige similar to that of the aristocracy, which, during the *ancien régime*, would refrain from any form of manual labour that was destined to non-nobles. The upper class housewives were also not suited for manual labour, which was completely unimaginable. In the words of Julie de Fertault, in a book which was reprinted several times in Portugal during the 19th century, “To do without maids? That would be impossible! What would

become of us, what would we do? Being forced to do the hardest, lowest and most unpleasant work in a house... God forbid such a thing!»^{vii} (Vaquinhas and Guimarães, 2011: 201).

However, sharing the space conformed to rules which might, or might not, correspond to class concepts. Understanding the importance attached to the geography of the car seats emerges from Matilde's (64) memory, in a mockery of the way social norms were perceived by children and adults. The physical separation of the *chauffeur* and the maids from the whole family, their employers, as car passengers, extended the detachment generated in the household. Nevertheless, the children, who usually occupied the same living space as the maids, perceived the options regarding car occupancy differently: the most prestigious seating was determined by objective conditions concerning best view, more space and the extension of a physical distance from the children. The same participant had, within the household, a feeling of intrusion from the maids that became particularly worrying when the 1974 revolution broke out.

Sharing the domestic accommodation with the maids in that period of social and personal friction became a power game in which the employers were feeling they were at a disadvantage, after generations of an established and reproduced *habitus* (Cf. Bourdieu, 1992). The change of this *habitus* caused insecurity and fear, feelings which, as Matilde and her husband emphasize, had been exploited by the maids/housekeepers/cleaners even from an earlier period (1960-1973), a time when the rising Gross Domestic Product (GDP) generated the migration of the domestic workforce to factories in rapid growth. The demand for domestic appliances is related to this shift in the bargaining power. On the one hand, a position as a maid was becoming less and less alluring to the professionals that had those jobs instead of working in factories or in services, which offered, comparatively, better job benefits and less personal contact with the employers. On the other hand, the employers started to appreciate a different experience of the domestic space, more intimate, which no longer had to be shared with human beings outside the family and radically "different", but was only experienced with



inert technological devices. These objects (washing machines and tumble dryers, vacuum cleaners, kitchen appliances) carried out tasks that until then had been exclusively performed by maids, even though using those technological devices required some effort from the owners.

The car and the domestic appliances have, in these narratives, a function similar to the one architecture had when the family shared their house with those who waited on them: they perpetuate the spatial distance and also soften the interaction between different *status* groups.

The telephone and the fluidity of space

The use of the telephone (especially the mobile phone) can be perceived not only as a tool that helps overcoming physical distance, but also as something very opposite to that: the desire to keep a gap between people. The telephone is, in this structure, a tool which makes it easier to create private, intimate areas with their boundaries, and it also helps overcoming the aforementioned "challenge of proximity" expressed by Bauman (2000). The preference demonstrated by the younger participants for texting instead of making phone calls (a preference which was also outlined by their parents) matches the desire to tame and use technology in order to clearly fix boundaries around their space. Written communication softens and prevents the impact of voice communication (which is still physical).

Nonetheless, participants of other ages also pointed out their "battle" against the mobile phone's supremacy over their lives. They felt their private space and time had been invaded and decided to control the impact of the device. It was a long, difficult process, but the outcome was satisfactory. The next degree in this desire to tame technology, identified in some participants', was the fear of technology's power. Will it become more powerful than the individuals? Will we all be controlled by non-human systems? The fear of dehumanization was present, associated

with personal data collection in the cyber world and also technology as a way to ease the physical experience of the environment.

In the narratives collected for this paper, both dimensions mentioned before of the use of the telephone were referred to. Matilde (64) recalls how a cousin of hers tried to reduce the distance from her boyfriend by using the telephone, and she did not use the telephone casually or for short periods of time, as the other participants refer in their own personal experiences, but without any time limits. The content of the conversation might have been little or none, but what mattered most was the sense of proximity to the other party. It was an ironic misfortune, according to Matilde, that her cousin's marriage to this boyfriend had been disastrous^{viii}.

By telling this memory, Matilde reveals the dual attitude that different societies adopted since the proliferation of telephones in households: should the telephone's primary function be utilitarian or should it be used to socialise? This question also worried the phone companies, as attested by the commercial ads seriously warning female readers that the telephone should only be used to talk briefly about useful matters. Understanding the roles the consumers might want to give to the telephone was a seemingly complicated process, not free from conflicts arising from different perspectives from both sides.

The 21st century has not yet resolved these conflicts. However, the mobile phone was easier to place in the market as it is portable and thus its function is more evident. Yet, in the narratives collected, the process of acquiring a mobile phone was to a great extent influenced by relatives, friends or close collaborators. Regarding the younger generations, the parents decide when and the reason for giving a mobile phone to their children. Travelling and moving from a controlled space to an unfamiliar one is usually one of the motives, as was in Clara's case, Luisa's and Tomás' daughter. Notwithstanding, this is not perceived as the prime motive by the children of some of the participants, who want a mobile phone for the sake of social positioning.

The way people interact and understand spaces is indeed closely related to owning a telephone and a mobile phone. Tomás (37) thinks about his youth experience setting up meetings with friends and how there was more tolerance to randomness. If a meeting did not take place due to lack of communication, the feeling of frustration was not as strong as nowadays. Technology eventually eliminated the reasonable margin of hazard people deal with on a daily basis, and also the number of people we expect to meet along the way. Apps launched in 2013, such as “Hell is other people”^{ix} (quoting the sentence *L'enfer, c'est les autres* by Jean-Paul Sartre, from the play “Huis clos” (1944; “No Exit”), which uses Foursquare^x to avoid undesired encounters in public places, are significant for the overestimated notion of the connections between people in the multiple types of spaces. Even though this app was designed by the American Scott Garner as a form of criticism against the (over)use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, it also includes the opposite feature as it locates people the user wants to meet so as to warn them of any delay or unforeseen circumstance.

Luísa (36) emphasises the difference between the way people used public spaces much more actively in her childhood and her youth, as well as the number of friends she interacted with, as opposed to her daughter. The notion of physical or cybernetic interaction with friends and the intensity with which each of these modes is put into practice is a topic that the participants have yet to organize in their minds. There is room for questioning: is it better or worse? Which are the advantages and disadvantages of each one?

There is one thing in common; the concern expressed by the older generations about the outcome of using (excessively) digitally mediated interaction at the expense of personal interaction. Physical activity and an intense use of space, which was common in their youth, has been largely replaced by inactivity inside buildings and by dematerialisation of connections, and the consequences of this new paradigm cause some anxiety.



Taking into account the central role social relationships play in the participants' lives, which could be ascertained by their narratives, these dematerialised connections are the consequence of technological devices. These devices are available to the average user in his home environment and they appear one after the other at the speed the consumer market establishes. The possibility that new technologies open up for the extension of the psychological dimension in each individual is luring and seemingly limitless. It is this possibility that is perceived and valued by younger people in society, because they have learnt very early in their lives how to use technological devices. And it is this same possibility that is misunderstood by the older participants, because it was not a part of their chronological development as individuals, not until later in their lives. At this stage in their lives they usually cannot realise any potential for the development or improvement of their identities. This gives rise to one of Tomás' reasons for concern: the widespread lack of information and of criticism in using technology, which results in improper and unsafe use of technologies.

In this section, I focused on some contradictory aspects in the use of landline home phones and mobile phones as instruments that replace physical space. It can make it wider, it can make it narrower, it can replace it and it can reduce the time people stay in certain places (usually public spaces). Even though the participants assumed the role of agents in using the mobile phone, the existence of some conflicting relations is noticeable. There is the need for owners to tame the devices and some uneasiness about the best way to use them, regarding not only each one as an individual but also their children when the parents have the power of decision.

Kitchen dynamics

The kitchen is the space that has special prominence in Matilde's life. At least, that is the way her daughters and their friends perceive it. The preference for using this room even causes conflicts between Matilde and her daughters, and these conflicts arise just because they share the same gender: they are females.

Her husband and her son are both excluded from the permanent occupancy of the kitchen and the tasks carried out there. Her daughters feel coerced into it by their mother's predilection for sharing this space with them, especially during the holiday time they spend with the family. The sense of obligation is also felt when they help their mother prepare family meals, which are big when they get together in their holiday home and also include the family of each of Matilde's daughters. The kitchen, which has always been the women's realm in this house, had Matilde as the person responsible for providing (good) food for the family^{xi}. When her daughters were younger they used to join her using this space, but that changed when they grew up and left the parents' home. Matilde has been living with her husband and their son for some years, so the kitchen is now a more lonesome place. This might be one of the reasons that make her want to share it with her daughters during their holidays, and besides, it allows her to relive the moments and feelings of sharing from the past.

What they are partaking in is not really the meal, but rather the food preparation for the meal. It is a gender communion and also a communion with a condition that arises from Matilde's feelings over her married life, which is not shared by her daughters, who have chosen other models for themselves. Married or not, in their households they choose the time they want to spend in the kitchen. They are still coerced by the responsibilities they have taken (to feed their children and husband properly), but they keep the freedom to do it the way they prefer at any given time. They are always decision-makers, and are not limited by a roughly subliminal agreement, which has been perpetuated, and thus became crystallized. Matilde's daughters, who decided neither to regard the kitchen as a place of coercion nor do they feel any particular drive for it, disagree with their mother who wants to fulfil ritualistic social interactions, such as chatting while she is preparing meals.

Luísa, one of Matilde's daughters, had the idea of producing traditional Portuguese sausages ("alheiras") to feed her growing family with quality food. This undertaking was carried out and it also materialized Matilde's desire to cook

with her daughters. The preparation of the sausages became an annual social ritual taking place at Matilde's kitchen. Her husband, António, her daughter, Luísa, one of Matilde's sisters and one of her nieces take part in the event. Sometimes more members of the family join them and thus Matilde has the chance to fulfil or reinstate the social mode for interacting with her daughters she is so fond of.

Associating the countryside with rusticity, tradition and healthy food is a tendency that is increasing in urban centres. In Luísa's case, she wanted to feed a family of two adults and two children with good, cheap and satisfactory food, and this was the solution she found. However, the plan did not work out as she had expected, because, after a very arduous process, there were not many sausages allotted to each participant. The ritual, notwithstanding, was maintained for two reasons: the desire to re-enact, on an annual basis, this sociability, and the intention to gradually improve the quality of the sausages. For someone living in the countryside (let us call him a farmer) used to slaughtering one or more pigs every year in order to use all parts of the animals for consumption over the year, these two reasons are less important. Re-enacting that procedure in a 5 m² kitchen in a city apartment might offer many drawbacks to this farmer. Replicating this procedure in an urban domestic environment would have to respond to different social needs, as it actually did.

The development of the annual procedure of making these traditional sausages discloses, in Luísa's narrative, dual feelings, both her own and perceived feelings, concerning the peculiar moment when the sausage making machine was bought, for it could represent innovation and change in this context. Her concern is heightened because the machine operator is a male and, moreover, he is the owner of the house, Luísa's father and Matilde's husband. There is a notion of power asymmetry that generated from gender and the role it plays in the household. It is the man who buys the machine (being put under pressure from Luísa's aunt) and he is the one who operates it and establishes the requirements for operating it because he was the one who bought it.

The machine was bought with the purpose of lightening the women's workload, but the economic power that allowed him to buy the machine also enables him to dictate the requirements for operating the machine. In this respect, there is continuity of the reinforcement of male prominence arising from economic power, which is present in the participants' narratives concerning the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. The absence of obligation in the production of the sausages, however, has strengthened the relationships among family members, even though this ritual was in danger at the time the sausage making machine was bought and a smokery built at Matilde's holiday home^{xii}. A recreational space was created in the kitchen, without the weight of the daily responsibility of feeding a family several times a day.

This narrative helps understanding that the kitchen is still a place for gender, power and intergenerational negotiation. The trigger point, in this case, was the action of producing the sausages as a way to save money in the management of quality food for the family unit, which corresponds to an attitude towards economic concepts that is connected to the allegiance to the identified *status* group.

Inside space, the outdoors and cybernetic space in the development of the individual

Luísa and Tomás turn their narratives into a form of self-examination on the use of the outdoors according to the way each of their families decided to raise them. Tomás' parents, due to their profession and also because they had a personal tendency for it, used the outdoors to pass on knowledge, experience and different sensations to their children. In order to make that possible, they expanded space by frequently travelling beyond the Portuguese borders. The investment in a motorhome, whose inner space was modified by them so as to match their personal concept of usage, meant increased freedom in the use of outside



spaces by allowing extraordinary movement, which was totally tailored to their wishes.

Luísa's parents guided their children on a different use of space, in which they were given absolute freedom to make use of space as they wished. Therefore, the use of space was only for entertainment, for socializing with brothers, sisters and cousins, and Luísa considers, with regret, that intellectual input was missing. That is why she tries to fill that gap and to get closer to her husband's childhood and youth experiences in the activities she provides for their children. These activities involve a more intense use of public places and services, such as libraries and museums, in order to point out that there are places different from the cybernetic world which can be interesting as well. Luísa's experience is that she has not read as many books as she would have liked because in her parents' household there were none that she considered interesting, and she discovered the type of literature that appealed to her only as an adult. Thus, she tries that her household is not as constraining to her children in this respect as her parents' was to her.

Tomás stresses that in his childhood and with his mother's guidance, the use of objects in public places, such as the Telescope in Monte da Virgem, made him realize in a specific way the different reasons for possessing each object. The intense use of the outdoors that Tomás experienced with his family and friends also made him look at objects in a comparative manner. The difference in price and quality between good and very good objects did not prevent the latter from unforeseen and unavoidable situations, and, for that reason, he considered carefully the benefits of each of them. Without the owners' knowledge and specifications for usage, the objects will not prevent failure by their own means. Tomás highlights that the use of public outdoor areas by children and teenagers has changed because of the shift in security conditions. This is a different manner of addressing the issue as compared to other participants, who expressed their concern for the younger generations as they use public outdoor areas less and less because the technology allures them more. Tomás evokes the quiet and safe

neighbourhood where he lived for ten years during his childhood and adolescence, a place where he played with his friends. And, even though he had a TV set at home, he decided to be with his friends because it was more pleasant. Thus, watching TV seems to have gained importance over time, along with the parents' concern for their children's integrity.

The monitoring aspect of the network set up by parents and neighbours, inhabitants of the spaces where the children moved "freely", is absent from the narratives of the participants. However, this was an indispensable condition for the use of outdoor public areas by children, which was imposed in a fairly invisible system. With the decline in the households' daily occupation, especially because of the growing influx of women into the labour market and the increasing tendency to move the elderly to retirement homes, institutions where senior citizens receive proper care according to their specific conditions, there are not many people to keep watch over public places around the houses.

Domestic and public spaces are, therefore, interconnected, and must be perceived as a mutual relationship. Perhaps it is also due to these restrictions on children and teenagers' use of public spaces that Clara (15), Luísa and Tomás' daughter, has a compelling urge for cyberspace. It is a space where she can go around individually and, therefore, build an identity to show her classmates, being able to analyse her classmates' identities as well. Consequently, cyberspace has the same dual function as glass, because it displays things while allowing things to be seen. Clara's choice to use social media, in particular, fits into this perspective, which seems, in her narrative, to perpetuate some kind of classification and conditioning of gender concepts. Her observations about her friends' choices concerning the use of cyberspace reflect these concepts, because she establishes relations between objects (gold trainer shoes that a male classmate wears) and the use of social media, which are used mostly by girls, at least in her world. Internet space is increasingly relevant, in this context, not only because of its use, but in connection with other dimensions.



This aspect is particularly important when we try to understand the contribution of cyberspace to the construction of meaning. Clara reorganizes her Internet space by taking advantage of the tools at her disposal, and they are promoted by social media. These tools and their potential for interconnectivity are one of the advantages users look for as they allow the development of a fluid identity: on the one hand, the complexity users can achieve is almost limitless, so any users who intend to present themselves on the Internet with a high level of reliance concerning their identity are satisfied. On the other hand, users with the opposite intention, that is, if they intend to "fabricate" identities designed according to their wishes and conveniences, they can also do that easily.

Some of the dissatisfaction that sometimes users show is caused by a "wrong" (in their opinion) impression of the identities they project, which then makes them change their attitude towards the Internet, either by refusing to use it or by changing the terms according to which they use it. Nonetheless, this cybernetic process seems part of a pursuit of their situation in the environment provided by the family inside and outside the household. Some of their opinions (which include the linguistic form whereby they convey them) actually agree with those of their parents', while the way they use cyberspace is opposite to the way their parents use it. For instance, the extended periods of time they spend on the Internet if there is no form of parental control, even though eventually parents take a physical action of control: the Internet connection is cut off by the father.

From an intergenerational and interindividual point of view, different use of spaces is evident as the participants get older. For them, what seems to be more disturbing is the change in the nature of the spaces where they grew up as opposed to those spaces their children prefer (cyberspaces). As they try to pursue responsible parenthood, they worry about knowing and conceiving this new space so they can guide their children the best way they can.

Conclusions



Some of the conclusions in this paper include the acknowledgement that there has been a decrease in the use of public spaces in favour of private ones, especially in relation to children and teenagers. Making devices that connect the individual to the outside world and allow the development of nonmaterial relationships available does seem to further greater immobility of bodies inside buildings. The way people spend time inside the household (namely the use of the Internet) eventually becomes, for some of the younger participants, a mode of negotiating their identities as well.

As Miller stated (2008), actually the demand for satisfactory social relationships is one of the main points that guide the choices or practices of the interviewees. The nature of these relationships determines the type of technology people use and the circumstances for its use. This is where the projected identities and the tools that allow their different forms gain prominence, such as the Internet. In this context, we can understand the tendency displayed in some sectors of society for cyberspace, with its unlimited possibilities that stimulate creativity and imagination.

Conventional physical spaces are, as a rule, preferred for social interaction by earlier generations, because they grew up used to them. The telephone, both landline and mobile, has already made a contribution to the mediation of social relationships in living spaces, a situation that has evolved with the development of several tools with that function up until now. At the time the narratives were collected, one of the evidences was the older generations' lack of understanding (and, consequently, fear) of the strong preference for Internet space evidenced by young people. These feelings show that the fact that inhabitants of the household use objects to build relationships in the surroundings and in the outdoors is not free from problems. The kind of sociability in the kitchen mentioned in relation to Matilde (marked by gender inequality) seems to be less and less frequent among the interviewees for this paper.

The analysis of the narratives brought to light the fact that the objects that were mentioned derive from consumer choices that match the class *habitus* of the

status group identified in this paper. The objects that were consumed are not exclusive to this *status* group. The factors that differentiate this *status* group from others are their usage options and the symbolic meaning that is conferred to those objects. These objects, while being important in the structuring of the participants as individuals and their social relationships, are also a source and the cause of conflicts, uncertainty and anxiety. It seems that the chronological development of living between objects and people is a contributing factor for the latter to be able to talk with the former while defining specific roles for them in their lives.

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ⁱ The dissertation is at its final stage (2010-2016) and the doctorate is at ISCTE-IUL. The ethnographic research was carried out with the purpose of understanding the social consequences of the integration of technological objects into the household.

ⁱⁱ The notions of modernity that underlie the drafting of this paper are the ones considered not only by Giddens (1990) but also by Appadurai (1996) and Bauman (2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ In this article the concept of *status group* adopted is the one advanced by Max Weber (1946).

^{iv} She could not pay extra hours to the housemaid to do this kind of work.

^v The disposal of objects in spaces is an issue addressed by several researchers. In this paper only Daniel Miller (2011[2008]) is referred to, and he also noted the localization of objects in the household according to subjective parameters which depend on their meaning for each owner. In the case of Luísa and Tomás, the requirements are mostly aesthetic ones, and they are anchored to a specific cultural education and sensibility.

^{vi} Several researchers focus on this topic, including Alice Duarte (2009, 2011), Marta Rosales (2009, 2010), and Daniel Miller (2006, 2008, 2012).

^{vii} Translated from the Portuguese.

^{viii} Mackay (1997), referring to Ann de Moyal's research in Australia (1992), expressed the following: "[...] the telephone was seen as central to maintaining relationships, providing support and care and, in some cases, alleviating boredom and loneliness. Interestingly, her interviewees reported that they talk *more* freely and intimately on the telephone than face-to-face." (Mackay, 1997: 283).

^{ix} <http://hell.j38.net/> (retrieved May 12, 2015)

^x It is an app which provides users with information (restaurants, shows, coffee houses, etc.) around the place where the person is. Users need to consent to personal registration and to give access to their location.

^{xi} On gender issues in the household, c.f. among others: Cowan (1983), Grazia and Furlough (1996), Carvalho (2008), Rosales (2010), as well as Vaquinhas and Guimarães (2011).

^{xii} It is necessary to point out that the decision to produce "alheiras", a product regarded as "traditional" and, thus, connected with the countryside, is a contribution to strengthen ties between this space and the city.