In the Cracks of Attention: ADHD, Vernacular Anthropologies and Communities of Care on TikTok

Toby Austin Locke
University College London

Abstract

ADHD related content on TikTok has seen a surge in prominence, becoming the 7th most used public health related hashtag in October 2021. This growth of content has been accompanied by concern from the medical and psychiatric community regarding self-diagnosis and misinformation. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in online and offline settings with people who identify with the category of ADHD, discourses on the attention economy, and anthropological theories of traps, this article offers a framing of ADHD as a vernacular anthropology: a theory of being human in the contemporary world. ADHD, and related content on TikTok, is understood as an analytic category deployed in the collective understanding of human being and becoming in digitally entangled worlds, and a process of collective pedagogy concerning the conditions and possibilities of life. From this point of view, ADHD content on TikTok can be seen as the formation of pedagogical communities of care which emerge in the cracks of the attention economy and algorithmic agency.

Keywords: ADHD; Attention Economy; Algorithms; Psychosocial Studies; Communities of Care; Social Media.

Introduction

In 2011 track three of Kendrick Lamar's *Section.80* mobilised the analytic power of the category of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as a means by which people come to understand the experiences of being human in the contemporary world. That is, how people learn and teach one another what it means to live in and navigate the complexities of the contemporary world. Long before the explosion of ADHD related content on TikTok, and indeed before the existence of TikTok, Kendrick Lamar deploys the psychiatric category of ADHD as a means of exploring the psychosocial conditions of human being and becoming[1] for the generations born in or after the 1980s, the *Section.80* generations. These are generations which have been required to navigate an increasingly liberalised and individualised economy, mounting levels of debt, increased prominence of medical models of mental health and associated pharmaceutical interventions, the growth of digital technologies, an explosion of access to information and data, new economies of attention, various large-scale crises in politics, economics and ecology and the general loss of security, stability and consistency that is often glossed as the conditions of postmodernity.

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[1] In referring here, and throughout this text, to human being and becoming I am pointing to the conjoining of states of being, and processes of becoming through which transformations unfold and contingent possibilities become actualised. Rather than the everyday use of 'human being' as a noun, the use of 'human being' here is that of a verb, and points to an intellectual lineage in phenomenology which understands human experience as 'being-there' engaged in a process of worlding (see Heidegger 2010; Stiegler 1998) in which both past and future are implicated in the constitution of the horizons of being, that is the limits and orientations of particular conditions within which we experientially find ourselves at a given moment. This notion of human *being* as active worlding is in intentional analytic tension with the notion of *becoming* found in the intellectual lineage leading back to Heraclitus, through Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, and finding more recent expression in the post-structuralist work of Deleuze and Guattari (i.e. 2004). This notion of becoming points to the ongoing process of transformation and flux that is at the base of being. As put by Deleuze when discussing the legacy of Heraclitan thought in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, "we say that becoming affirms being or that being is affirmed in becoming" (2006: 22). In bringing these two concepts of human being and becoming together I seek to point towards the way in which seemingly static analytic categories, such as ADHD, emerge of active process of becoming and entanglement with worlds. That is, the being of ADHD brings with it its own worldings, and these worldings remain inseparable from open-ended processes of becoming and possibility, they are not fixed or static descriptions of objective realities, but creative processes which constitute modes of experience which remain unstable.

Whilst the cultural specificity of Kendrick Lamar's work should not be minimised or erased, that of its emergence from the experiences of dispossessed people of colour living in American urban settings, it also explicitly seeks to speak to the wider human experience of the generations born in the Thatcher-Regan Era. The conceptual frame of the album speaks broadly to the challenges faced by those growing up in the wake of the neo-liberal consensus and the transformation of the technical landscape with the growth of attention economics, whilst retaining the specificity of his own positionality. Carrying echoes of Frantz Fanon's rearticulation of the notion of universality and emancipation, to include those whom the concepts of European political theory had excluded (1967), Kendrick Lamar speaks of the existential conditions of human experience in the contemporary word, the psychosocial conditions of the *Section.80* generation.

This mobilization of the psychiatric definition of ADHD emerges as a mode of anthropological critique highlighting the efficacy of this category in articulating the experience of generations born in and after the 1980s, experiences of feeling overwhelmed, cut loose, unmoored and in need of anaesthetics and coping mechanisms. But, in the cracks of culture, opportunities for emancipation, healing and new formulations of human life can be found.

Through such mobilizations the question of learning and teaching anthropologically is not only a practice of the professionalised academy, the classroom, lecture hall and disciplinary boundaries. Rather, anthropology emerges as a collective process of exploring, expanding, and understanding what it means to be human, a practice of embodied and experienced knowledge co-creation which attends to "possible forms of human social existence" (Graeber 2007: 1) in such a way as to "keep possibilities open" (*ibid*). This framing of anthropological thought, as a practice of collective learning presents anthropology as "a *practice* of education" (Ingold 2018: 62), a practice of attending to the conditions of human life, experience and possibilities in a way which is embedded in the worlds and life processes from which those practices are inseparable. Anthropology, as a practice of collectively discovering the existential conditions of human being and the emergent possibilities of human becoming, extends beyond the university and into the practices through which people come to understand their place in and passage through their worlds.

TikTok, ADHD and Public Health Concern

On TikTok, the same psychiatric category that Kendrick Lamar mobilises in coming to understand and express the experience of the *Section.80* generations has become operative in the emergence of an online community who share experiences, information, and knowledge on living with and learning about ADHD. In October 2021, #ADHD was the 7th most popular public health related hashtag on the platform with 7.1 billion video views. This, along with the circulation of other health related content, has given rise calls from clinicians and public health focused scholars for urgent research into the implications of the use of the platform for health-related content (Zenone, Ow & Barbic 2021). One study which responds to this call raises concern that over half of the videos on TikTok on ADHD contain misinformation, and there is a potential danger of over utilization of clinical resources due to self-diagnoses resultant of the consumption of TikTok content (Yeung, Ng, & Abi-Jaoude 2022). Alongside this the newly forged concept of 'cyberchondria' (Doherty-Torstrick, Walton & Fallon 2016) is mobilised, as a potential danger and newly emergent behavioural disorder or psychopathological malaise through which over consumption of digital content pertaining to symptoms, pathologies and conditions leads to health anxiety and service overutilization. The same problematics are expressed, varyingly in positive or negative light, in various media outlets (Biggs 2022; Boseley 2021; Williams 2021).

Let me be clear early on, I am not here to undermine the work of medical professionals, or even to critique their findings. As an anthropologist and ethnographer, one with a partial leaning towards psychosocial studies, I am interested in how people deploy and utilise the category of ADHD to better understand their humanity. The seeming popularity of the category of ADHD cannot solely be attributed to the emergence of TikTok as a platform, or to the work of black boxed algorithms, or cyberchondria. Something must resonate more profoundly in order for it to be circulated so widely and become so operative in people's understandings of their daily lives and our collective experience of the digital worlds we inhabit. In short, in classic Geertzian style, what I am interested in are the webs of meaning and significance (1973) which TikTok users create, communicate, transform, and express; how and why the *Section.80* generation seems to find so much resonance with the category of ADHD. Such an understanding, far from being antagonistic to the attempts of medical professionals to ensure the appropriate diagnosis, treatment and dissemination of information concerning ADHD, is complementary to such an endeavour. Statistical analysis and medical definitions, such as those of the DSM-5,

can be useful components of understanding ADHD, but they tell us little about the daily lived experience of ADHD at an ethnographic level, nor are they final or absolute, nor do they allow us to understand why such a category appears to have so much resonance with so many people. To better understand this, we must turn to questions of meaning, lived experience and daily life.

I also do not doubt that misleading videos concerning ADHD are a problem, especially for medical professionals. The problem of misinformation online is by now firmly established. But it is not my place as an anthropologist to determine the validity of such content, or to schematically categorise such expressions of experience. What I can offer is an attempt to better come to understand why and how so many people seem to identify so strongly with this category, and to understand this we need to turn to the fine-grained detail of collective and individual experience and understandings of the contemporary condition of being human immersed in digital worlds.

I am more concerned here with how categories such as ADHD are deployed by collectives and individuals than with the critique of the validity of information or categories. My focus is on the meaning making and pedagogic processes in which people engage in order to overcome obstacles to their flourishing in the contemporary world, and how people make use of TikTok to teach one another about ADHD and the challenges of navigating the contemporary world. With such powerful resonances being expressed, the category of ADHD emerges here as a vernacular anthropology, a theory of what it means to be human in the contemporary world.

As such, I do not question the validity or clinical accuracy of people's claims to ADHD. Rather, I take these at face value, as modes of self-identification and subjectivation. The identification of individuals and collectives with the category of ADHD, on TikTok or elsewhere, from an ethnographic perspective rather than a clinical one, are expressions of personal and collective identity. From this perspective the interesting question is not –'do people have ADHD?', but rather – 'how and why do people interact with the category of ADHD in order to bring meaning to their lives, sense of self, and form communities?'. This shift in perspective from the clinical to the ethnographic allows me to better approach the issue of why this particular psychiatric definition appears to have so much purchase and influence on people on TikTok. To this end, I work with people, accounts and content who have self-identified with the category ADHD as seriously as those who have attained formal clinical diagnoses. This approach can also have insights that will be useful to the clinical perspective which understandably focuses more on the appropriateness of formal diagnoses and the maintenance of the boundaries of diagnostic categories.

To understand the inside of a boundary, the outside and border cases must also be understood. As Derrida puts this issue in *Of Grammatology*, "the outside bears with the inside a relationship that is, as usual, anything but simple exteriority. The meaning of the outside was always present within the inside, imprisoned outside the outside, and vice versa." (1997: 35). The relation cannot be approached in isolation. Further, the fact that people find the category of ADHD so meaningful in coming to understand their existential and psychosocial place in the contemporary world cannot be ignored or overlooked from an anthropological perspective.

The resonance of this psychiatric category on TikTok and beyond provides us with a powerful means of accessing the politics and poetics of digitally entangled human experience, the experience of cyborgism in an age of algorithmic agency. This notion of resonance "is not an exact reiteration. Rather it is something that strikes a chord… It is what makes people say *It all fits together* and *Something just clicked* and *My whole life I just felt like something was going on and this explains it*" (Lepselter 2016: 4-5). Opening my FYP feed and clicking on one of the ADHD related posts presented to me through my algorithmic entanglement with these communities and experiences affirms this widespread resonance, just as they affirm the position of clinical concern. *TikTok has given me 1000 reasons to think I have adhd. i have all these but i'm not diagnosed with it. it looks like we all have ADHD* 💀 💀. *So…… i think I have ADHD.*[2]

Unpacking A-D-H-D

Central to the vernacular anthropology of ADHD is the fundamental concern of attention. Attention is the first component of the acronym. The broader characteristics of this all-important dimension of the category of ADHD will be partially unpacked further in the following section which attempts to explore how we can understand this notion and its relation to digital worlds. For now, we may take a tentative definition from

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[2] These comments posted on ADHD content on TikTok are here reproduced anonymously to protect users' privacy.

William James' *Principles of Psychology* where he defines it, in its common-sensical dimension, as "the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought." (1983: 381). Attention is the mind's capacity to focus upon something, to narrow the field of vision and bring into focus a particular entity.

In the next term of the acronym ADHD we encounter a quantitative economic determiner of attention. We find a deficit, a lack. The normal capacities for attention, in the category of ADHD, are less than those that are found in the neurotypical mind. This deficit is subsequently defined in relation to a surplus, that of (hyper)activity. The deficit in attention is thought in relation to a surplus of activity, a hyperactivity which may or may not be present depending on the particular form of ADHD a person is diagnosed with. Finally, the acronym is completed, rounded off, through the category of disorder. The deficit of attention and the surplus of activity come together to form a disorder, an abnormality thought in relation to the neurotypical standard. An economic framing of surplus and lack come together to characterise a disorder, an imbalance.
The most recent edition of the DSM defines a disorder as follows,

> A mental disorder is a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning. Mental disorders are usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other important activities. An expectable or culturally approved response to a common stressor or loss, such as the death of a loved one, is not a mental disorder. Socially deviant behavior (e.g., political, religious, or sexual) and conflicts that are primarily between the individual and society are not mental disorders unless the deviance or conflict results from a dysfunction in the individual, as described above. (2022: 15)

This is a functional, practical and clinical definition, provided for the purpose of creating a common language between psychiatrists and mental health practitioners. It structures itself around dysfunction and distress—a disorder, from this perspective, emerges when one's capacity to operate within the bounds of social, cultural and economic norms is impaired.

In his book *Scattered Minds*, Gabor Mate offers a different characterisation of disorder as it relates to ADHD. He writes, "What is order? A sense of organization. A consciously planned sequence of activities. Knowing where things are and what you have done and what remains to be done. And what do we call a lack of order? Disorder" (2012 :25). Here, disorder comes down less to the capacity to align ones-self with social norms, although that remains a concern, and more to a capacity to orient one's self in the world, a capacity to organise, to exercise agency over one's activity and attention. Disorder emerges when one finds it difficult to situate their psychosocial being in the world, and to exercise agency in relation to that world, to express and realise plans of action and thought, to know where things are, where they are going, where they come from and how the future may unfold as directed through this knowledge.

In order to approach the question of how this disorder becomes manifest, and why people appear to find so much resonance with ADHD, I here return to the economic framing of the deficit of attention and the surplus of activity and its relations to the contemporary conditions of the attention economy. It is by now fairly common knowledge that many contemporary economic activities structure themselves around what is referred to as the 'attention economy', social media platforms such as TikTok being the archetypal representatives of this shift. In such a framing, "human attention becomes a scarce resource and, hence, an object of economizing." (Pedersen, Albris & Seaver 2021: 310). That the category of ADHD is run through with economistic models of thinking, that of a deficit of attention in relation to a surplus of activity, becomes all the more significant when thought through the dimension of its relation to the attention economy. In both, dimensions of human psychosocial and existential experience are understood through the lens of economism.

ADHD and the Attention Economy

The notion of attention economy first emerges in 1971 from a presentation by Herbert Simon on the topic of *Designing organizations for an information-rich world*. Long before the emergence of Web 2.0 (DiNucci 1999), as the interactive internet where producers and consumers are merged has come to be called, and even three years before the development of the Altair personal computer by MITS in 1974, Simon and others were increasingly aware of the unfolding of the major psychosocial, cultural and economic transformations emerging from a glut of information made possible by new data and computing technologies. These transformations were, for Simon, occurring at an existential level, "it is a change of the most fundamental kind in man's thinking about his own

processes—about himself' (1971: 40). What is changing is not only the sphere of technology, conceptualised as a tool, a neutral appendage over which the human species claims mastery. Rather, what is changing are the very existential and psychosocial coordinates of being human.

The framing of this transformation, whilst partly recognised as a transformation of the psychosocial coordinates of human being and becoming, quickly occurs in economic terms. As with the definition of ADHD, a surplus of something is thought in relation to a deficit of something else. As Simon states on the topic of attention, "in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients." (*ibid*). We are once again in the realm of economism, the domain of scarcity, surplus and wealth, "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" (*ibid*). But a fundamental shift occurs here concerning the role of consumption, and the location of the consumer within the economic sphere. It is not the individualised human actor who is the consumer of goods and services, as in classical economic theory, rather it is information which consumes attention. The source of agency is shifting away from the individual human actor as the centre of the stage, onto a new mode of thinking, becoming and doing—informational systems.

In his analysis of consumption David Graeber points to the etymological roots of consumption with the Latin term *consumere,* meaning to "eat up, devour, waste, destroy, or spend" (2011: 491). Such a notion of consumption draws out the embedded meanings and values layered within economistic thinking, as he continues "to be consumed by fire, or for that matter consumed with rage, still holds the same implications: it implies something not just being thoroughly taken over but being overwhelmed in a way that dissolves away the autonomy of the object or even that destroys the object itself." (*ibid*). It is not merely a matter of free thinking rational autonomous individuals making choices within a marketplace, there is a deeper psychosocial and existential dimension, one's agency can be consumed by rage, an observation that goes back at least as far as Seneca's (2008) study of anger in the European philosophical tradition, or further, to warnings against anger in the Upanishads in the Indian philosophical tradition (Aiyar 1914). What I am seeking to point to here is the way in which existential and psychosocial dimensions of human being and becoming are covered over through the layer of economism. Here, this is the dimension of human experience that we refer to as attention.

To return to Simon and the emergence of the attention economy as a practical reality and analytic concept, the problem becomes framed in terms of an allocation of resources. Simon refers to "a need to allocate […] attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it" (1971: 41). The question is, how can a human individual or collective efficiently allocate their scarce attention in the face of a torrent of information? And what is the cost of not doing so? The cost is not borne here by the informational system, but by the human recipient, "It is not enough to know how much it costs to produce and transmit information; we must also know how much it costs, in terms of scarce attention, to receive it" (*ibid*). It is the human end of the cybernetic informational system which bears the cost of the surplus of information through the overwhelming and destruction of the capacity for attention. It is the cost of *information overload* (Gross 1964), a phrase which has now fully found its place in everyday language, that is born by the receiving end whose attention is consumed.

These problematics have only grown in significance with the emergence of Web 2.0, the rise of the smartphone and the emergence of social media platforms like TikTok. The attention economy in which many of us are now entangled has scaled up in a dizzying way. In his short and timely book *Stand Out of Our Light* (2018), James Williams speaks of his personal journey from working for Google to becoming increasingly concerned with the erosion of attention that was unfolding through the increasing integration of digital technology into our daily lives. He writes,

> one day I had an epiphany: there was more technology in my life than ever before, but it felt *harder* than ever to do the things I wanted to do. I felt . . . *distracted*. But it was more than just "distraction" – this was some new mode of *deep* distraction I didn't have words for. Something was shifting on a level deeper than mere annoyance, and its disruptive effects felt far more perilous than the usual surface-level static we expect from day-to-day life. It felt like something disintegrating, decohering: as though the floor was crumbling under my feet, and my body was just beginning to realize it was falling. I felt the story of my life being compromised in some fuzzy way I couldn't articulate. The matter of my world seemed to be sublimating into thin air. (2018: 7)

The description above is a near to perfect description of an existential crisis. It is not only an 'informational overload', or an inequality of a balance sheet between attention and action, it is not economistic. It speaks to a profound affective and psychosocial experience of transformation, of the ground giving way, of the emergence

of disorder in the sense used by Gabor Mate (2012:25). To be clear, I am not ascribing the category of ADHD to Williams here, I am merely pointing to the resonance of the sense of distraction and disorder, a resonance which reaches beyond the clinical category and out into the conditions of life in a world run through with digital technologies.

Williams is in an excellent position to comment on the problematics of the attention economy and its effects on human being and becoming. As someone who made the transition from working within the tech industry to studying moral philosophy, he can bring unique insights to the problematics these transformations bring with them. One of the points made in *Stand Out of Our Light*, is the gap between the goals, aims and intentions of tech companies and those of the people using their products, "No one wakes up in the morning and asks, "How much time can I possibly spend using social media today?"" (Williams 2018: 8). Such gaps between technical design and the needs and desires of people using technological interventions have also been pointed to by anthropologists working in various settings (i.e. Riles 2004; English-Lueck 2017; Irani 2019). Williams points out that the notion of 'engagement' which is so key to the metrics used by many tech companies and social media platforms such as TikTok is a very particular framing of this concept. When we think of engagement in a broad anthropological, political or psychosocial sense we may think of a sense of meaningful action in the world, a sense of our actions, thoughts and experiences linking up with the world around us, engaging *with* the world, the cause or experience. Political engagement, for example, might refer to a meaningful participation in the organisation of collectives, a substantial and ongoing commitment to a certain mode of politics or cause. In contrast, the notion of engagement deployed in order to measure the success of particular technological platforms and the content hosted on these platforms is measured in terms of metrics such as clicks, time spent on the app, returning visits, or whether or not a video was watched to the end. Such a framing of engagement can "drain words of their deeper meanings" (Williams 2018: 8). These hollowed out terms become coded into the platforms themselves, embedded in the code base of their proprietary algorithms.

The field of attention is one such dimension of human being and becoming that becomes hollowed out through technocratic and economistic framings. As seen above, the constitution of attention as an economistic entity, a scarce resource of an individualised behaviouralist consciousness, places attention within the field of profit and loss, extraction and depletion. This stratum, the layer of the attention economy, is the level at which the problematics of *information overload*, 'attentional serfdom' (Williams 2018) and 'attention theft' (Wu 2016) play out. It is the level through which individuals become the targets of extractive economic forces which seek to monopolise and capture the attention of users, through which their capacity for attention, and so too their agency, becomes depleted in the face of and oppositional conflict with socio-technical assemblages with far greater capacity for action.

What is covered over in such a framing are the experiential, creative, relational, and psychosocial dimensions of attention. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty highlights the creative nature of attention. Here, attention is not a scarce quantitative reserve, or that which brings to light something pre-existent, or attaches onto objects of the external or internal world, but an emergent and relational creative process. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "[t]o pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as *figures*. They are preformed only as *horizons*, they constitute in reality new regions in the total world" (2002: 35). Here attention is transformative and inter-relational, it concerns the existential conditions of becoming, the possibilities of consciousness's transformative experience in entanglement with others, in processes of attending to worlds. Attention concerns the creative and interrelational transformation of anthropological, existential and psychosocial conditions of being and becoming.

Platforms such as TikTok, with particular embedded and stripped back goals run through with behaviourist psychology such as engagement or economistic framings of attention, have become fundamental to many people's experiences of daily life. This entanglement moves us beyond an economy of attention, as "our informational *tools* have rapidly become our informational *environment*" (Williams 2018: 14). It appears that the economistic framing reaches a limit when we come to the question of the anthropological, psychosocial, and existential impact of these technologies and the way they permeate daily life for so many people. Technical platforms such as TikTok, and the vast networks of technical ensembles, infrastructures, discourses, and practices in which they are entangled, are created by and through entanglements with particular milieus (Simondon 2017), in such a way as to also become implicated in the creative transformation of those milieus. The models of attention they develop shape and transform particular modes of attending. They are entangled in ecological relations where the boundaries between the technical object or platform and its environment is porous to such an extent as to become relationally interdependent upon one another. It is this interrelational dimension,

the *ecological* and *environmental* dimension that I would like to now turn and in doing so I hope to better explore the question of why a category such as ADHD seems to be so meaningful to people's lives.

Attentions Traps: TikTok, Algorithms and the Ecology of Attention

The reframing of the question of attention as a matter of ecology has already been significantly advanced by Yves Citton in *The Ecology of Attention* (2017). This work brings to light the need to attend to way in which "*the quality of our existence depends on our consideration of the quality of the relations that simultaneously weave our environment and our being*" (*ibid: 113*). This is in many senses a classic anthropological gesture, the shifting of focus on to the relation *between*, as exemplified and expressed in Marylin Strathern's account of the history of the notion in the discipline and beyond (2020). Such a gesture is also found in a different form in the work of structuralism, where the structural relation between points within a system was foregrounded (e.g Levi-Strauss 1974). As a study of human collectives, and the various expressions of human being and becoming, anthropology has always been acutely aware of our relational interdependence.

This is also a founding gesture of the newer field of psychosocial studies which recognises the incapacity to think the 'inner world' of traditional psychology and psychoanalysis without thinking the 'outer world' of the collective social sciences such as anthropology and sociology (see Frosh 2019). In such approaches we find the echoes of Jakob von Uexkull's ecological work on the notion of *Umwelt* (2010) that had such a large impact on the fields of phenomenology and post-structural philosophy through the concept that an organism cannot be thought outside of its environment, that it is always an expression of a self-in-the-world. In short, we cannot come to understand life processes without coming to understand the ecological relations in which they are entangled and through which they are formed.

Such an approach is also finding purchase in the world of psychiatry. A renewed emphasis on "a *biopsychosocial* approach: one that recognizes the unity of emotions and physiology, both to be dynamic processes unfolding in a context of relationships, from the personal to the cultural" (Mate 2022: 53) may begin to offer us the tools to move beyond reductive explanations of the experience of ADHD, whether they be excessively biological, psychological or sociological. In coming to understand why and how ADHD appears to have such a powerful resonance with so many people, it seems important to adopt an ecological perspective, one which approaches the human as a biopsychosocial being. Such a biopsychosocial approach is also found, in a more anthropological register, in Marcel Mauss's discussion of *habitus* as emergent of "physio-psycho-sociological assemblages" (1973: 84). As a minor contribution towards such an ecological reframing, I would like to offer an interpretation of algorithms and social media platforms such as TikTok as traps, drawing on the classic anthropological essay by Alfred Gell, *Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps* (1996), recent ethnographic material on algorithms as traps from Nick Seaver (2019), and my own research with people who identify with the category of ADHD, and related content on TikTok explored with the TikTok Ethnography Collective.

Even before the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies and the explosion of proprietary algorithms, persuasive design and social media anthropologists became aware of the affinity between the internet and traps. As Daniel Miller wrote in 2000, "as aesthetic forms websites may be considered artworks whose purpose is to entrap or captivate other wills so that they will come into relationship with them" (Miller 2000: 22). Here, the aesthetics of the design of websites, and their place as "Technology of Enchantment" (Gell 1988:7) is outlined. The web ensnares visitors in the allure of its representations.

Today, in the age of web 2.0 and, according to some, the beginning of the transition to web 3.0, the configuring of digital worlds as modes of traps and modes of entrapment seems all the more significant. In his fieldwork with developers of recommender systems in the US, Nick Seaver encountered an explicit engagement with the framing of algorithms as traps. As one of his fieldwork participants explained to him, "Play the shit you know they're going to love to keep them coming back. Get them addicted. In the beginning, I'm just trying to get you hooked." (Seaver 2019: 422). Whilst conducting fieldwork Seaver regularly encountered metaphors which framed algorithms "which figured users as prey and recommender systems as devices for catching them" (*ibid*). The figure of the trap is not merely an analytic category or metaphor for anthropologists or social analysis in coming to understand the role of the algorithm in the social world, but a self-aware design principle.

Discussions of the anthropology of traps invariably refer back to Gell's famous analysis of the artwork as a trap (1996). Here, the trap emerges as a nexus of agencies and intentions, one which holds an in-built model of the prey's life world, environment and predictive models of their behaviour. For a trap to become effective, it must

hold an allure over the prey. Traps engage with and reconfigure ecological relations, they create worlds through relations. As Gell writes, "Traps are lethal parodies of the animal's umwelt … traps can be regarded as texts on animal behaviour" (*ibid*: 27). From this perspective, that of the algorithm as trap, the popularity of ADHD content on TikTok is a text waiting to be read regarding our behaviour in the contemporary world of algorithmic agency and attention economies. It is a constellation which speaks of our entrapment in assemblages of code and digital devices which draw us into a seemingly new state of being-in-the-world, "the trap is therefore both a model of its creator, the hunter, and a model of its victim, the prey animal. (*ibid*). It speaks to us at once of the agencies at work in the capture, scattering and fragmentation of attention, and of the agencies who experience this capture, who suffer under it, who are ensnared by it, and of the worlds created through these webs of entanglement.

TikTok is ADHD

Sitting in a noisy pub garden in Brighton with one of my research participants I asked him if he'd ever been on TikTok. Quickly he exclaimed,

> TikTok is fucking…
> it gives people ADHD I think! …
> I've been on there once.
> I was like, this is fucking like a scrolling addiction, which everyone has…
> It's like no holes bar just fucking.
> Yeah.
> Keep fucking scrolling.

The life world of those who identify with ADHD is paralleled in the fast-paced infinite scroll of TikTok, and the profoundly addictive nature of persuasive design. Julian was going into rehab the next day, and it had taken us a while to catch up with each other. Two people with ADHD, and one of them in the whirlwind of cycles between recovery and active addiction, seem to find it quite difficult to pin down a moment to meet. There is a sense of disorder, trouble in establishing a "consciously planned sequence of activities" (Mate 2012: 25). Julian was also late, he had gone to the wrong pub, we we're meeting in the *Hare and Hounds,* and he ended up at the *White Rabbit*, a crossover of small fury mammals.   Across the course of our short conversation, Julian and I covered so much material, darting between the intersecting topics of ADHD, social media, music, depression, the world of work, neuroscience, his addictive patterns in relation to crack cocaine, crystal meth, marijuana and other drugs. Halfway through the conversation he asked if we could move, the music in the pub was too loud and he was finding it hard to concentrate, we moved out onto the pub benches on the street on one of the busiest intersections in Brighton, with traffic blasting past, surprised he said "I never thought it would be more peaceful out on Preston Circus than in a pub garden."

The expressed intention of persuasive design and algorithm development to 'get people hooked', as well outlined in *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products* (Eyal 2014), is a particularly potent trap as reflection when thought in relation to ADHD. Clinical research and analysis have shown those with ADHD have been shown to be more susceptible to impulsive habit formation, and addictive behaviours (Mate 2012; Hallowell & Ratey 2021). Their biopsychosocial being is mirrored in the addictive tendencies of platforms like TikTok which are well figured to trap them. Here we are back with Kendrick Lamar and the lyrical content of the first verse of the track *A.D.H.D* which expresses the tendency of the *Section.80* generation to seek out all kinds of recreational anaesthetics to avoid thought and the overstimulation of the mind[3]. As others have observed (Starkey 2013), the line in the chorus 'fuck that!' is enounced in such a way as to create a sonic blurring between 'that' and 'thought', meaning the chorus can be heard as 'fuck thought'.

The ADHD mind is particularly susceptible to developing addictions that can provide the aesthetic function of slowing down the torrent of mental processes, the endless chattering and overwhelm (Hallowell & Ratey 2021). Dopamine addicting platforms such as TikTok can provide one such source of aesthetic, whilst also providing a sense of social connection, another experience which can be problematic for those experiencing ADHD who often describe a feeling of not being understood. There is an impenetrable sense of being alone. Once again, *A.D.H.D* on *Section.80* clearly expresses these biopsychosocial dynamics.

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[3] Due to copyright reasons these lyrics cannot be reproduced in this article but can be found online.

In the opening verse of this track are expressed many of the elements of the biopsychosocial experience of ADHD for the *section.80* generation. The psycho-emotional experience of pain, of being distanced, impenetrable, unrelatable, of not giving a fuck even if the world is ending. The biological role of endorphins and marijuana making you stronger, shielding from the force of the world which seems on the edge of collapse. The techno-social structures of PlayStation, the 808 drum machine. The socio-technological machine 'bumping soul' with the psychological experience that 'no one can relate', and the wider social forces of a world seemingly gripped in the end of days. The anaesthetic that the ADHD mind can seek out to slow down the flow of information finds a peculiar mirror and parody in the flow of information in short video format on TikTok. A stream of information presents itself. Opening my FYP stream I find videos related to skateboarding, music production, driving, ADHD, politics, conspiracy theory, mild comic relief, finical advice. The diversity of material I am presented with mirrors the unmediated flow of the ADHD mind, and its dampened capacity to sort relevant material and to exercise the capacity of attention as William James described it as the isolating of one thing among many. And here is the analytic power of the figure of the trap in relation to ADHD and TikTok,

> These devices embody ideas, convey meanings, because a trap, by its very nature, is a transformed representation of its maker, the hunter, and the prey animal, its victim, and of their mutual relationship which, among hunting people, is a complex, quintessentially social one… these traps communicate the idea of a nexus of internationalities between hunters and prey animals, via material forms and mechanisms. (Gell 1996: 29)

The predator side of the trap formulates models of the prey's behaviour, just as algorithms function through the construction of models of personality and expected action informed by a behaviourist model of human being and becoming, the models of persuasive design, or as it was briefly and aptly named 'captology' (Seaver 2019). Through this modelling users, by their own actions, become trapped in the flow of information, clicking, scrolling, liking, commenting. The expressed intentions of algorithm developers and designers to 'hook' their users find their ideal subject in the lifeworld of ADHD, creating an *umwelt* which can ensnare, mirror, and develop the experience of ADHD.

In The Cracks of Attention: Communities of Care, ADHD and Learning to Live in the Contemporary World

So far, what we have seen can perhaps be interpreted as a primarily negative characterisation of the interrelation of the biopsychosocial experience of ADHD, TikTok and the digital world. It is of course, far from this simple. As ethnographers and anthropologist regularly like to show, no system or structure is ever as totalising as it may appear. It is important to bear in mind the *umwelts* and milieus that are operative in the interaction of the experience of ADHD with TikTok and the agency of the algorithm, the eroding of capacities for attention, the creation of addictive behaviours, the anaesthetic dimension, the offering of a simulated form of social connection to placate the lonely solipsism of the experience of ADHD. However, this is not the entire picture. There are cracks in the system, and through these cracks emerge practices and cultural formations through which people take command of their lives, find resonances with others, and create communities of care and resistance. Traps, after all, are not merely destructive and violent, they are also creative,

> Traps are bridges between meaning and materiality, human and thing, predator and prey, technology and ecology, ontology and epistemology. Traps assemble bodies, knowledge practices, materials and environments in transformative encounters and consequential infrastructures.
> (Corsin Jiménez & Nahum-Claudel 2019: 384-5)

The trap, perhaps especially in its algorithmic and digital expression, creates worlds and transformative encounters, it opens possibilities. As with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological redefinition of attention (2002), worlds are created. Where attention is directed, the worlds created, and the milieus in which it is entangled, matters.

Julian's declaration that *TikTok is fucking …. It gives people ADHD I think*, becomes all the more significant when thinking TikTok as a life world creating trap. He stopped himself midway through his first sentence, that I would imagine would have been completed as *TikTok is fucking ADHD!* This is profound statement on the manner in which TikTok creates a life world which mirrors and models the experience of ADHD. *TikTok is ADHD*. It creates a lifeworld in the image of ADHD. But this is not merely a matter of hapless, agency-robbed individuals falling prey to the all-powerful tech industry, neuroscientific informed persuasive design and the addictive pull of the infinite scroll, there are cracks in the system through which people who identify with and experience ADHD teach one another about what it means to live in the contemporary world, what it means to be human in these

worlds, and how to live, flourish and heal. The attentional milieu of ADHDTok is run through with practices of care and the creation of self-organised therapeutic communities.

In *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, Bernard Stiegler claims that the new formations of capitalism are eroding our knowledge of how to live, our *savoir-vivre* (2010). This develops a line of analysis comparable to those that have been popular in drawing from the models inspired by Italian Autonomism which looks at how the expansion of capitalism into areas of immaterial labour (Lazaratto 1996) or affective labour (Hardt & Negri 2000) or the soul (Berardi 2009) is eroding the coordinates of being human and transforming the biopolitical masses. I propose that in the ADHD communities on TikTok we witness a complex constellation of such erosion, alongside the emergence of therapeutic communities of care which respond to and resist this erosion and develop vernacular anthropologies capable of proposing new models of how to live, how to advance our *savior-vivre*. It is not only an erosion of attention as a standing reserve that is witnessed, an information overload, and the hooking of subjects defined through the lens of behaviouralist models of psychology which underpin persuasive design and economistic framings of the attention economy.

This is indeed, as we have seen, part of the picture, but not all of it. On the very platform that *is fucking ADHD*, there are large networks of TikTokers who share content on their personal experiences of ADHD, strategies for living with the symptoms, techniques for healing, clinical information, advice, and comic material which aids in transforming and sublimating what is often a painful and alienating experience into a source of community and belonging. Sometimes highly emotive, sometimes comic, and sometimes factual and informative, this network constitutes a self-organised therapeutic community who make use of the platform to create community, share stories, build connections, find paths to healing, and new modalities for *savoir-vivre*. Worlds and horizons are created. These are profoundly ethical communities, in the sense that they articulate and express pedagogic practices of developing the *art of living,* with or through identification with the experience of ADHD.

These self-organised communities of care are the cracks within the seemingly totalising structure of algorithmic agency and the ecology of attention. I am here drawing on John Holloway's notion of *Crack Capitalism* (2010), where he argues that whilst capitalism seeks to become totalising and absolute, to continually subsume and integrate that which is beyond its limits and interpret all human activity through the cipher of generalisation, there are always cracks that emerge where the system breaks down and new possibilities emerge. Such an analysis seems to apply powerfully to the problematics of the TikTok-ADHD lifeworld as a trap, milieu and infrastructure—it is in the cracks of attention, in the processes of attention fragmentation, information overload and compulsive habit formation that self-organised networks and therapeutic communities of care emerge. And it is perhaps precisely *because*, TikTok is ADHD, that is TikTok constructs itself as a trap and infrastructure that creates the lifeworld which interacts with and draws in the experience of ADHD that the psychiatric category has so much resonance with its users. To understand this only through the lens of the negative erosion of a standing reserve of attention would fail to recognise to the ecological relations between technical objects and milieus, and the creative world making entanglements between *umwelts* and traps which remain open-ended and resist closure, it would be to remain within the economistic frame.

ADHD emerges here as a powerful vernacular anthropology, a theory of being human immersed in digital worlds and run through with algorithmic agencies, an analytic category which speaks of and gives expression to these experiences, a model of description of the biopsychosocial being of the *Section.80* generation and a technology of individual and collective transformation. In the identification with and expression of the psychiatric category of ADHD on TikTok we find a theory of human becoming in the contemporary world, one which emerges in the cracks of the infrastructures and technical ensembles which exacerbate symptoms and mirrors lifeworlds, and which offers paths for transformation, flourishing and the possibility of forming new ecologies of attention.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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