

# Old Skool Spinning and Syncing: Memory, Technologies, and Occupational Membership in a DJ Community

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**ABSTRACT** We show how technology and its temporal instantiations act as material-relational mnemonic devices that provide temporal anchors for collective remembering in occupations and form the basis of what we call an 'occupational mnemonic community'. This is important because how the past is remembered shapes politics, the definition of membership and boundaries within occupations. Empirically, we focus on the occupation of DJing, an occupation that has witnessed major technological transformation. Utilizing interviews, archival research, and auto-ethnographic data, we show how DJs' engagement with material mnemonic devices, here, DJing technology, aligns group members' interpretations of the past, and forms the basis of an 'occupational mnemonic community'. In our analysis, we uncover that imagined perceptions regarding how existing group members assess the material choices of newcomers, as well as, the performative behaviours exhibiting these choices, play pivotal roles in sustaining mnemonic communities. We conclude with a discussion on occupational mnemonic processes and their effect on establishing boundaries within occupations. Our findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the sociomaterial aspects of collective memory and its significance in understanding the politics of memory in work communities and organizations.

**Keywords:** materiality, organizational memory, collective memory, mnemonic communities, occupations, relationality, technology, boundary

## INTRODUCTION

As yet, we do not know much about organizational memory's entanglement with materiality. To address this, we take a relational approach to memory work to offer a novel theorization. Relationality focuses on how memories, or interpretations of the past, are

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the basis for generating affinities among people in ways that tie them together (Foroughi et al., 2020). Importantly, this nascent approach to memory work explains that materiality generates affinities that are not only based on a narrative interpretation of words or symbols, but which can also be based on similar innate reactions to how the past is embodied within objects (Blagoev et al., 2018; Crawford et al., 2022; Cutcher et al., 2019; Eisenman and Frenkel, 2021). These studies point to the idea of ‘material-relational’ mnemonic devices, material artefacts that can bind members of a mnemonic community by evoking innate relational affinities (Eisenman and Frenkel, 2021). We push these ideas forward by asking how the materiality of mnemonic devices ties collective memories and occupational boundaries together in mutually constitutive ways.

Specifically, we study the technological preferences of emerging electronic music DJs (hereafter DJs) – people who produce and play electronic music using vinyl records and digital files at clubs and parties – and who require specialized equipment to do so. This novel empirical focus arose from the third author’s observations while learning to DJ (Parsley, 2022). She noticed that the modern-day digital equipment she was learning to use bore interesting resemblances to the equipment of the past and that she felt pressure to pay homage to these ‘old ways’ in order to establish herself as a bona fide member of the DJ occupation. These observations suggested to us that technologies enabling occupational work might act as material-relational mnemonic devices that create and maintain the taken-for-granted boundaries within an occupation. We therefore study *how newer entrants engage with technology to establish their membership in a mnemonic community tied to their occupation*.

Our study focuses on how technology serves as a mnemonic affordance for the occupational community of DJs and in so doing, reinforces the conceptual ties between collective memory and the social construction of occupational communities. Collective memory encompasses the shared experiences and history of a group (Halbwachs, 1980/1950) and, therefore, memory plays a crucial role in defining an occupational community by shaping its identity, values, norms, and practices (MacKenzie and Marks, 2019). For an occupational community, this includes significant events, milestones, or challenges that members faced as a collective in different epochs (e.g., De Vries, 1997). Over time, a set of norms and values develop within an occupational community based on shared experiences and historical context. Collective memory preserves these norms and values by passing them down through generations of practitioners. These norms and values guide behaviour, decision-making, and interactions within the community, helping to define its character and ethos. As a result, collective memory contributes to the formation of a professional identity within an occupational community (e.g., MacKenzie and Marks, 2019; MacKenzie et al., 2017). By remembering past achievements, struggles, and innovations, members develop a sense of pride and purpose in their work. This collective identity distinguishes the occupational community from others and fosters a sense of cohesion and loyalty among its members. Our study examines how DJing technology is a medium that fosters cohesion by encompassing the shared experiences and history of the occupational group, but also reinforces existing boundaries and hierarchies within the occupation.

We use qualitative data from the third author’s eight-year ethnography, we show how interactions with technology, and its temporal instantiation, shape shared attributions about the past in ways that underpin the maintenance of ‘mnemonic communities’.

We suggest that the mutual entanglement of materiality and its interpretative use *in a temporal context* is central to understanding how mnemonic communities are maintained along lines which privilege certain members' interpretations over others. Our empirical data show that DJs attributed meanings to temporal manifestations of technology and perceived their alignment to these technologies as a political choice that underlies practices of signalling membership in the occupational community of DJs. Although newer technologies are in many ways more useful, in that they require less time to master, are less expensive, and are more portable, many newer DJs nonetheless invest in learning older technologies and developing the skills to master them. We interpret this as suggesting that technology is a mnemonic device that underpins the maintenance of mnemonic communities, particularly in the context of occupations, because it enables members to align toward each other through their technological choices.

Our study makes several important contributions to current theorizing in organizational memory studies as well as research on occupations. First, we extend recent work examining the importance of material-relational mnemonic devices by asking how they might maintain mnemonic communities (e.g., Crawford et al., 2022; Eisenman and Frenkel, 2021). We identify two different mechanisms for material-relational processes of maintaining mnemonic communities: maintaining through (a) *imagining affinities with past technologies* and (b) *performing with past technologies*. In so doing, we further elaborate the potential of articulating sociomaterial dimensions of memory-based processes (e.g., Blagoev et al., 2018), arguing that the endurance and enabling capacity of materiality, as a relational mnemonic device, is also dependent on the underlying socio-political context of a mnemonic community. Yet, while much of the work on sociomateriality has focused on the entanglement of the material and the social, it has not made the temporal aspects of materiality explicit. In this paper, we highlight temporality and explain that the mutual entanglement of materiality and its interpretative use *in a temporal context* is central to understanding how mnemonic communities are maintained.

Second, our paper shows that, like any organizational process, mnemonic dynamics are political and mnemonic communities have boundaries. Those hoping to traverse these boundaries do so by aligning themselves relative to how other, often more established, members of the group interpret the past and its material manifestations. In this way, we theorize the interface between materiality, memory, and mnemonic communities. This contribution, then, allows us to advance scholarly understanding of the politics of memory (Foroughi et al., 2020; Mena et al., 2016; Nissley and Casey, 2002), by showcasing the importance of everyday, often unnoticed, practices, in maintaining current understanding of the past.

Third, our study provides a starting point for theorizing occupational mnemonic processes by introducing and conceptualizing the notion of an 'occupational mnemonic community' – the community that emerges on the basis of imagined affinities between people sharing the same occupation when they engage in memory-based practices of belonging. More specifically, this involves an intersubjective agreement to use past technologies as boundaries that define membership within an occupation community. In this way, we further the development of research that tied collective memory to the maintenance of occupational boundaries (e.g., Daoust and Malsch, 2019; Mackenzie et al., 2017).

## MATERIALITY AND MNEMONIC PROCESSES

'Organizational memory studies' refers to a body of organizational scholarship illuminating how the past is constructed and interpreted within organizational contexts. A central tenet of these studies is that the past – or memories of the past – being interpretative, political, and value-laden, play a crucial role in the formation of social groups and in the maintenance of group attributes, such as identity and power relations, within and around organizations (Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Foroughi et al., 2020; Rowlinson et al., 2010; Suddaby et al., 2010). Within this field, many studies have worked to understand groups by studying the narratives that underlie their formation and ongoing maintenance, particularly through constructs that are inherently discursive, such as storying (e.g., Adorasio, 2014; Foroughi, 2020). Storying affords a logical and often causal approach to the past as a sequence of events whose progression is told and retold. In remembering such stories, members of a mnemonic community evoke their past and its meaning. Doing so re-establishes their membership in the mnemonic community that consists of other individuals telling the same story and interpreting it similarly (Crawford et al., 2022; Foroughi, 2020; Zerubavel, 2003).

This literature also acknowledges the important role of materiality in providing an anchor for meaning-making about the past (Rigney, 2015). Storying is often evoked through material artefacts. Management scholars have shown that material artefacts can enable organizations to put forth a narrative to serve the strategic needs of a firm (e.g., Hatch and Schultz, 2017; Ravasi et al., 2019; Schultz and Hernes, 2013). In the above studies, material artefacts are understood as semiotic representations of key ideas within the narrative. For instance, Hatch and Schultz (2017) described how a particular historical artefact, the Latin phrase *Semper Ardens*, carved above a doorway at Carlsberg's original premises, enabled rhetorical construction of its history and renewal of its identity as a craft beer producer. Similarly, when Foroughi and Al-Amoudi (2020) used the example of a commemorative bench to demonstrate collective forgetting of epic tales within a British charity organization, they looked for indications of whether such mnemonic devices are used as symbols aiding storytelling. In this sense, these mnemonic devices are conceptualized as representational artefacts that are interpreted semiotically (i.e., as symbols). Any negotiation about the meaning of the artefact is about its narrative interpretation, which may or may not get settled within the group interpreting the device.

More recently, scholars have suggested that material artefacts have a mnemonic effect beyond semiotics (Eisenman and Frenkel, 2021). Here, the emphasis is on how people also understand their affinities toward each other by reacting innately to material mnemonic devices. For example, when members of a social group see an old technological machine, their innate sensation of the machine's age can demarcate group members into those that were present when the technology was new and those present when it was no longer new. This emphasis on affinities advances how we understand the maintenance of mnemonic communities as a process of noticing how we react to objects or places (Allen and Brown, 2016). Therefore, memory also takes on forms that are more material and may elicit innate, non-verbalized responses (Bell and Taylor, 2016; Crawford et al., 2022). The presence of both material and discursive

forms of memory allows group members to bind together through shared articulations of, and associations with, these memory forms in ways that may be innate and unintentional as well as more conscious and intentional (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Schultz and Hernes, 2013).

Emphasis on the materiality of mnemonic devices suggests that the act of performing the interpretation can be innate or 'instinctive' as well as cognitive, forming relational affinities that tie together those responding to a mnemonic device in similar ways. In this sense, we can talk about 'material-relational' memory processes which create possibilities for collective remembering not through the ideas the artefact represents, but through the affordances it has when people engage with it. This is an important insight as it raises the profile of the materiality of mnemonic devices. Material-relationality can therefore help us understand how materiality contributes to maintaining mnemonic communities by examining how people engage with it. For example, Eisenman and Frenkel (2021) suggested that mnemonic devices that are durable or that have a very classical artistic design – such as bronze statues depicting a particular individual – do not merely represent a person from the past (and evoke meanings associated with the works of that person), but also bring to the fore a particular era, a past time – such as a time when classical bronze statues were erected as forms of commemoration. Thus, the mnemonic device brings together members of a mnemonic community by aligning them with past times and imagined members of their social group, who were either present then or have an affinity to this period vicariously.

Empirically, relatively little work has explored how material-relational processes allow members of a mnemonic community to remember the past and enact it. Crawford et al. (2022) showed how participants in guided dory expeditions formed relationships among themselves through relating to the materiality expressed by the Grand Canyon in its entirety, and the specific materiality-based evocations they experienced while travelling through it. These engagements with the materiality of the Canyon were simultaneously interpretative, performative, and experiential and they allowed participants to form a relationship with the Canyon's past. Additionally, Allen and Brown (2016) showed how a commemorative space acquired meaning through the material enactments of those engaged in memory work *and* the material substances of the commemorative space. Their study highlighted how such spaces are open and experienced in ways that allow a variety of relationships to form in the context of commemoration and why this form of commemoration could resonate as more engaging.

The idea that a mnemonic device can tie present members of a social group, such as an organization or an occupation, to an imagined past, and the sensations of that past, is a form of historicizing (Coraiola et al., 2023). Historicizing is about reinserting the past in the present through a particular evocation. In the context of material-relational mnemonic processes, the past is made present by evoking past materials, that were created in a past period, such as bronze statues, or by using past materials and technologies to express past ideas and ideologies, for example (e.g., Hatch and Schultz, 2017; Schultz and Hernes, 2013). When present members of an organization interact with and respond to such material mnemonic devices, they are engaging with the past and interpreting it in ways that address their present goals. The important distinction in this case is that they are not only interpreting the meaning represented

by the device, in a narrative, semiotic sense, but also reacting to how they understand the broader social context of the past of their organization in the context of their present.

To advance these ideas, we draw on concepts aligned with *sociomateriality*, a conceptual perspective highlighting how ‘humans and technologies exist only through temporary emergent constitutive entanglement’ (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008, p. 457). These constitutive entanglements are based in how people and machines enact and use them to construct social boundaries. Thus, technologies, and materiality more broadly, have no pre-determined characteristics that can be attributed to the material separate from its use and its ability to constitute a given social interaction (Orlikowski, 2007). We build on this to suggest that materiality, in particular technology, might maintain mnemonic communities.

## TECHNOLOGY AS A MATERIAL-RELATIONAL MNEMONIC DEVICE

There is a long history of research exploring the material and the social in occupational studies, which has gathered apace in recent years (see Davies and Riach, 2018). The focus for these ‘materiality studies’ is often the technologies that occupational members use. For example, Barley’s (1986) classic study of the adoption of CT scanning machines, the introduction of computer simulation technology in the automotive industry (Leonardi, 2011), and the ‘spillover’ effects from forensic science’s adoption of DNA profiling (Bechky, 2020). These studies explained how people make sense of new technologies by drawing on existing interpretative frameworks tied to how they have worked in the past within their occupational group. On the basis of these studies, we understand that technology sets in place scripts for action and that technological changes disrupt these scripts and subsequently change structures and practices within organizations (Barley, 1986). Furthermore, these ideas are often used to explain resistance to the adoption of a new technology or the political struggles that accompany adoption (Leonardi and Barley, 2010).

Subsequently, these studies highlight that technologies have a symbolic and interpretative dimension that draws from a cultural reservoir of ideas about how the technology should be used. In other words, technologies have both functional utility and a set of affordances based on the ways the technological features interact with how the technology is interpreted, how it is used, and how it feels to use it (Bell and Vachhani, 2020; Leonardi, 2011). Moreover, the ways people engage with technology and its materiality determine how members of a social group construct which practices are legitimate (Cnossen and Bencherki, 2023; see Leonardi and Barley, 2010). Legitimation emerges when people adhere to expectations of particular entanglements of people and machines.

Here, we suggest that an overlooked aspect of relating to technology in sociomateriality literature is its inherent temporality. This temporality is evident in work exploring the effect of having a few parallel manifestations of an evolving work-related technology tied to different eras in the occupation’s history (Grodal et al., 2023). For example, a complex relationship emerged when new oil painting technology created new affinities within artist groups, leading to new occupational identities. These identities formed

when some painters used new technologies to paint outdoors and relate to nature in new ways, highlighting how work, interpretations, technologies, and identities are entangled (Sgourev, 2021). Our paper builds on these ideas by suggesting that studying these entanglements through their temporal instantiations helps us understand memory-based processes.

To expand, technology is always the product of a particular socio-historical context – it is inherently temporal as it is continuously evolving. It is the basis for performing particular tasks and enabling social practices, and this performativity is temporally dynamic because the manifestation of how it reproduces action changes over time (Bechky, 2020; Nelson and Irwin, 2014). Therefore, technology, as a material object that endures through space and time, is instructive for understanding memory-based processes (e.g., Blagoev et al., 2018; Sgourev, 2021). In particular, Blagoev et al. (2018) highlighted that the interpretation and constitution of the past as entangled in the material substances that carry it over space and time and that these entanglements limit and direct the ways the past can be enacted by members of a mnemonic community.

This position raises the complex issue of how we might best think about materiality (and specifically material technologies) and social life in an occupational setting more conceptually. A full discussion of sociomaterial thinking is beyond the scope of this paper, however, it is important to briefly discuss here because we contend that technology works as a material-relational mnemonic device. Classic studies of materiality in occupations take a fairly deterministic view of this relationship as we allude to above – technology happens to people, who act in response, albeit in various local and contextual ways (e.g., Barley, 1986). Leonardi (2011) takes this a stage further with his concept of ‘imbrication’ whereby social and material relations are seen as enmeshed with one another in various ways – yet, ontologically they remain distinct. Developing these ideas, scholars argued that there is no such thing as separation between the material and social worlds at all, in occupations or anywhere else, that they are entangled inextricably, and should be studied as such (Barad, 2013; Davies and Riach, 2018). This perspective particularly emphasizes the relationality of phenomena that cannot be broken down into their constituent parts (either material or social) since they are both one and the same thing, and it is broadly this position that underpins our thinking in this paper.

With this in mind, our focus here is on newer entrants to an occupation, who may have a choice as to which technologies they adopt in the course of their work, and on how these choices allow them to relate to extant occupation members by enacting legacy ways of doing things and collective memories associated with them. More broadly, we ask *how do newer entrants engage with technology to establish their membership in a mnemonic community tied to their occupation?* We explore this question in the context of DJs, as we next explain.

## METHODOLOGY

The data on which this paper is based are drawn from an ethnographic case study of the electronic music industry focusing on the career experiences of club DJs and electronic music producers, carried out by the third author between 2014 and 2022. Data were generated through a combination of semi-structured primary interviews,

industry blogs, and autoethnography aimed at ‘... illuminat[ing] the relationship between the individual and the [occupation] from the inside-out’ (Sambrook and Hermann, 2018, p. 223). Immersion in the analysis of secondary sources has been ongoing throughout the project as befits an ethnographic strategy. The autoethnographic component involved drawing on dimensions that emerged as the third author was learning to be and perform as a DJ, then learning to produce and release electronic music.

Access to the primary interview sample was initially secured through third author’s personal networks in 2013–14, and grew through snowballing. Later, third author’s professional networks from her role as an industry body co-chair were leveraged to add interviewees. Interviews were an average of 90 minutes with the shortest being 45 and the longest 120 minutes. Participants’ ages ranged from early 20s through to mid-60s. The average age for the newer entrants our analysis particularly focused on was late 20s to mid-30s. In line with the ethical approval granted, where data from primary interviews is included below, real names have been replaced with pseudonyms. Table I includes further information about the range of ethnographic methods, data sources, the timeframe of data collection for each source and their contribution to the ideas developed in this paper.

To retain the richness of the ethnographic approach, following Kozinets’ (2021) strategy of ‘post-analogue ethnography’, the empirical sections below present a pastiche of the different data sources: interview data, field-diary entries, ethnographic observations from social media, and online sources. Since we are particularly emphasizing the relationships between DJs and their technologies, we have also included photographs that illustrate the embodied and material dynamics described in the excerpts from interviews and field-diary entries. It is important to note that the photographs were not subject to visual analysis themselves, but are included with our analysis of interviews and the words of participants to create an ‘image-text’ which enhances the evocative and ‘presentational symbolism’ of our empirical material (Warren, 2002, p. 235).

## Data Analysis

We followed a recursive analytical approach: ‘a dynamic process [where] researchers constantly match information previously collected with new information’ (LeCompte and Schensul, 2012, p. 63), or ‘zooming in and zooming out’ (Nicolini, 2009, p. 121). This abductive approach (Van Maanen et al., 2007) began with a discussion among the authors, recognizing the importance of historicizing in the DJing occupation. We became aware of the significance of materiality, and its temporality, within these historicizing processes through third author’s ethnographic observation that older technologies – and the skills to use them – appeared to be important in generating feelings of belonging among newer entrants to the occupation, despite the prevalence and use of modern DJing equipment. This observation prompted us to engage in ‘zooming in’ to the interview and field-diary data to examine more closely the effects technologies were having in this occupation and its mnemonic processes. In line with our research question, we explored how new entrants to the occupation engage with technology and how



Table I. Summary of ethnographic methods and data sources used in this paper

<i>Method</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>	<i>Data analysed for this paper</i>	<i>Main learning in relation to the past</i>
Primary interviews (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2014</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14 semi-structured interviews with DJs/Producers about their jobs and careers, typical length 90–120 minutes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technology/equipment and professional identity intertwined</li> <li>• Formats of the past important in DJs stories and practices</li> <li>• Occupational membership is rooted in historical narratives</li> <li>• Sense of belonging important as recognition in occupational networks</li> <li>• Ongoing storying and historicization in the occupation</li> </ul>
Analysis of podcasts (secondary data)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2014–17</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 60–90 min discussions between DJ/Producers (host and guest) in each of 26 episodes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significance of equipment and formats of the past.</li> <li>• Importance of demonstrating understanding of history of occupation</li> <li>• All the above observations more important to newer DJs</li> </ul>
Primary interviews (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2019–22</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 59 semi-structured interviews (average length 90 mins) with 50 DJ/Producers and 9 others in industry roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Importance of performative gestures and embodied capital relating to older forms of technology</li> <li>• Pressure to use ‘industry standard’ equipment that emulates older technologies</li> <li>• Desire to learn older formats and skills</li> <li>• Sense that digital DJing skills with modern equipment not the ‘real deal’</li> </ul>
Autoethnography (1) <i>Third author learning to DJ</i> Hours of practice, watching online videos and other DJs (live and recorded), third author’s own public performances (parties, bars, clubs, festivals), purchasing of equipment, attendance at one DJ course in 2019, membership of DJ collective 2018–22.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2015-present</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal diary, photographs of learning process, and posts on social media as ‘Artist’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing reverence for analogue equipment and pressure to own ‘outboard hardware’ in digital music making</li> <li>• Inclusion of ‘old skool’ sounds in digital compositions</li> <li>• Discourses of longevity and time-served, against ‘musicality’ afforded by new technology</li> </ul>
Autoethnography (2) <i>Third author learning to produce electronic music</i> Solo practice, receiving mentoring/feedback on tracks, participation in live online classes/seminars, YouTube tutorials, in-person meet-ups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2018-present</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As for Autoethnography (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing reverence for analogue equipment and pressure to own ‘outboard hardware’ in digital music making</li> <li>• Inclusion of ‘old skool’ sounds in digital compositions</li> <li>• Discourses of longevity and time-served, against ‘musicality’ afforded by new technology</li> </ul>

its historicization affects them. (Of note, we do not engage in narrative analysis as our focus was on the sociomaterial effects of engaging with past technologies rather than on explicitly discursive elements of historicizing).

The data fragments from newer entrants were distilled into seven first-order codes based on how DJs talk about using technology and relating to it. These codes were then grouped into three second-order codes, which we use to structure our presentation of the material below as representing what DJs believe their technological choices signify in a political sense and what they do performatively to demonstrate these choices. From there, we began the process of ‘zooming out’ again to theorize how technologies are used by occupational members to make sense of their membership and boundary practices within the mnemonic community of the DJing occupation and to relate our observations to extant theory. This data structure is shown in [Figure 1](#) and its derivation is explained next.

### **Empirical Context: The Occupation of DJing and its Remembering Processes**

In this section, we first familiarize the reader with the DJing occupation. We then explain the relevance of our context for studying the maintenance of mnemonic communities. Specifically, we highlight how, in this occupation, considerable resources are devoted to keep collective memories alive in ways that reinsert the past into the present and that are easily accessible to new entrants to the occupation.

To begin, the role of a contemporary DJ involves at least two intertwined elements: creative performance of recorded electronic dance music in clubs and festivals as well as writing and producing original music for performance (Butler, 2014; Emmerson, 2018). The original job of a DJ was to play vinyl records to create seamless music for dancers in clubs. Unlike radio DJs who generally played them one after the other with breaks in between accompanied by the DJ talking, the purpose of the club DJ was (and is) to ‘mix’ them together creatively with the intention of building energy on the dance floor. Mixing two or more simultaneously playing vinyl records together rests on the much-revered skill of beatmatching, something that was undertaken mechanically by DJs as they sped up and slowed down the rotation of the records. Once records were playing at the same speed with their beats perfectly in time, the DJ could begin to blend the music from each record, changing the frequency bands of each on their equalizer to make new harmonies, or cutting sharply and rhythmically between each record with the crossfader (Brewster and Broughton, 2022).

The early history of DJing, its equipment, and sound-systems, serve as the focal points of storytelling in the occupation. This storytelling manifests in an abundance of popular literature on the history of the DJ and DJing, for example the website DJ History (n.d.) which is described on its homepage as ‘founded in 1999 to preserve dance music history and create a fertile landscape for the DJs of the future’. While many storytelling efforts are inherently narrative, several occupational processes indicate that historicizing – reinserting the past in the present through a particular evocation – is an important force within this setting. These processes of historicizing are inherently material: A thriving industry of parties, music, and other symbolic goods are a significant part of dance music culture, with the intention being to explicitly replicate the music, décor, and atmosphere of the past – so-called ‘old skool’ events such as ‘weekenders’ or ‘anniversary’ parties of famous club nights and record labels. Central to these historicizing practices are the skills

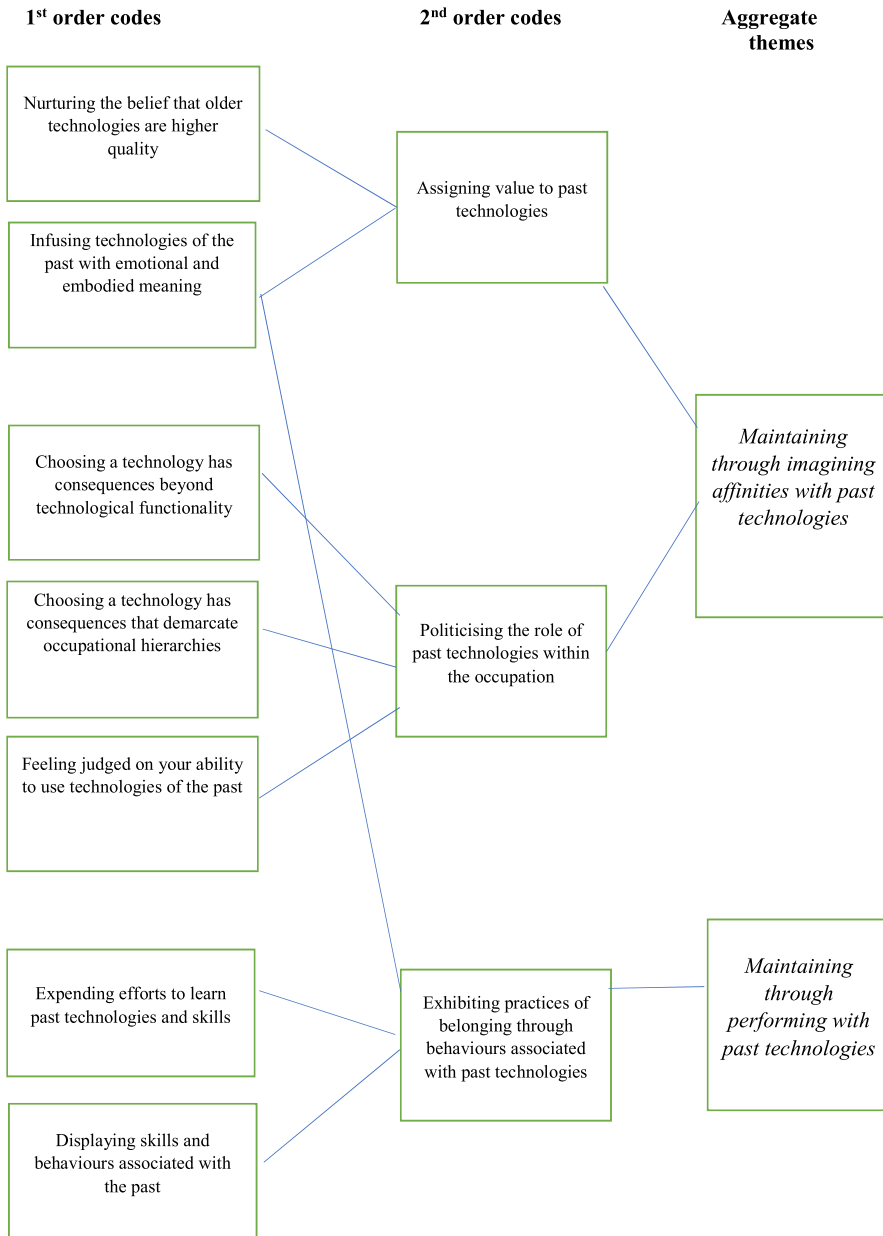


Figure 1. Data structure

and technologies of the DJs – particularly the vinyl record – and the sounds of the music of those eras.

Technologically, there have been many advances in DJing since its inception some 50 years ago (Wikström and DeFillippi, 2016). Contemporary DJ equipment includes features that automate several core processes that were previously undertaken manually, such as the ‘sync’ button which automatically synchronizes the tempo and cadence of

each track in the mix. The sync button, therefore, renders beatmatching technologically unnecessary. Digital music formats (e.g., wav, flac, or mp3) have now replaced vinyl records in most clubs and for most DJs, and equipment to play and mix records has been revolutionized with features that allow in-play manipulation, looping, editing, and creative effects. This ability to ‘mash up’ music as it is played through digitalisation has revolutionized the means to produce music (as well as perform it), and barriers to entry have fallen dramatically (Prior, 2018). This has put music production – actually creating the tracks you play as a DJ – in the financial reach of a much larger number of people (Røshol and Sørbø, 2020). Thus, the production of music, as well as playing music made by other people, has become part of modern-day DJing. It is in this context that we examine how a mnemonic community is maintained in this occupation, by looking at *how newer entrants engage with technology to establish their membership in a mnemonic community tied to their occupation*.

## **MAINTAINING MNEMONIC COMMUNITIES IN THE DJING OCCUPATION THROUGH RELATIONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH TECHNOLOGY**

### **Assigning Value to Past Technologies**

To begin, we found that DJs relate to past technologies in ways that are value-laden and that DJs express beliefs as well as emotional reactions to the technologies they use to perform their work. This was demonstrated in different ways, which are captured by what we term ‘first order codes’ in Figure 1 above and referred to in italics and parentheses throughout the text below. Firstly, DJs often express a belief that older technologies are simply of higher quality (i.e., Figure 1 *Nurturing the belief that past technologies are of higher quality*). Although few participants could objectively quantify what that superior quality was, they often reverted to ‘value’ associated with past technology, as Mark explains here during a podcast conversation with a fellow DJ:

I started playing the same music that I had been playing previously and it didn’t sound good digitally. It [sounded] rough and raw but it sounds great on vinyl. (Lowering the Tone podcast – Mark Pember)

In music production too, the sounds made by past technologies were expressed in diffuse, aesthetic terms that suggested a nostalgic fondness for the past, and which for new entrants acted as a ‘badge of honour’ when others noticed they were incorporating past technologies into their creative practice. In this case, Evelyn and Samantha are talking about analogue synthesizers:

[People loved it] cos you had this really nice solid sound cos you were using something analogue and it was coming in [to the computer] from a different box... (Evelyn)

I felt like a real producer getting such great feedback from the mastering engineer! He liked the nice analogue feel to the track that came from the melody I played from my hardware synthesizer. Just slightly out of time, natural – not quantized like digital usually is. (Samantha, field diary)

Others anchored their perceptions about past technologies more firmly in their materiality and the emotions it elicits. In the following examples, respondents describe an emotional connection to the technology (i.e., [Figure 1](#) *Infusing technologies of the past with emotional and embodied meaning*). Dana talks about an ‘unconditional love’ for a technological format, vinyl, while Sean expresses a sensory identification with his records via their physical attributes:

I teach vinyl as well [as digital DJing] I have an unconditional love for wax, ... in an age where music and arts can be so disposable, reconnecting to the physical aspect of art. It’s so important because it makes you really appreciate it. (Dana)

I prefer CDs because of the physicalness of them. In the old days, you know, we could ... you were flicking through your records and you could identify tracks simply by just the look of it, you know, what’s on the record sleeve and everything. And it’s more the visual kind of connection, really, with kind of identifying the music, not reading if it off a screen, if that makes sense. (Sean)

This highlights how it is the technology-in-use that is of importance, involving human bodily movement through the affordances past technologies engender in entangled sociomaterial ways. Dana notes this in describing why she prefers to use hardware drum machines to create her music, technologies that are very much associated with the early days of ‘rave’ and pioneer DJs:

With [making] drums, definitely hardware, because it allows me to give that, like, natural swing? I’m sure you can achieve it with digital as well but like, for me, if I use the machines it feels different and this is more straightforward, more organic, in a way? (Dana)

What is interesting here is that she sees the past technology as superior because she believes it gives her a more ‘natural’ connection to her music, yet the perception of what DJs consider ‘natural’ in their work is historically constituted and fundamentally shaped by occupational collective memory. We suggest that when DJs describe the sounds and experience of working with old technology as ‘natural’ they do so because it resembles the experience of DJs in a bygone era. This perceived naturalness is not just about the functionality of the equipment but also about capturing the essence of a cultural and technological moment that holds a special place in the evolution of DJ occupation.

The choice to work with technologies of the past in the context of this occupation is therefore value-laden: these are considered better technologies and considered those that allow for an emotional connection to the occupation. These perceptions of value, expressed through technological evaluations, suggest how the use of a technology is entangled with how DJs enact emotions and sensory reactions to the technology and this

creates a ‘pecking order’ within the occupation by associating the work to be done with technologies of greater or lower quality through an emotional connection to the technology. We also find that they attribute them to other, typically established and experienced, DJs who they perceive as judging them, as we show next.

### **Politicizing the Role of Past Technologies within the Occupation**

We find that choosing past technologies manifests as a political choice: DJs are aware that their interaction (or lack of interaction) with past technologies has meaning beyond their technical usage for performing the tasks of DJing, (i.e., [Figure 1](#) *Choosing a technology has consequences beyond technological functionality*):

The politics of it, oh, arrgh! Its just – if you’re in the limelight and you’re seen to be using [digital DJ software] and not much else, it’s just so nasty, it’s horrid! The people can be just horrid [to you]. (Zane)

What Zane is suggesting is that DJs have internalized the perception that choosing to use older or newer technologies is more than a mere technological choice. This tension is also manifested through the respect bestowed on record labels that continued to release music on vinyl in a digital age. This suggests to James (see below) that a more authentic form of DJing is associated with using vinyl records:

A lot of the bigger labels [release music] on vinyl, they might not necessarily make money on it, but it’s the kudos, it’s the kudos effect, you know? Showing they are serious about the music they put out. (James)

Moving away from the technologies of performance to consider those involved in music production, Jess was asked how she made her music and although she explains she is fully embracing the digital tools of modern technologies below, we can still see the politics of past technologies at play in her self-doubt and hesitancy about whether she is ‘doing it right’:

... with just my laptop, like. I made this with a stock plugin [software emulation of hardware] like there’s actually no need to like spend a fortune on fancy hardware, or whatever, to be able to make track... So I’m thinking, why would I ever... you know, why am I needing to buy other things? [analogue hardware] but then I’m thinking, Oh, you know, maybe I’m, maybe it’s... maybe I’m not doing the right thing by not using external stuff. (Jess)

This self-doubt and internalized judgement about past technologies are what we suggest adjudicates legitimate ‘standing’ within the occupation. That is, technological and social choices are entangled because these choices have political consequences related to self-perceptions about belonging in the occupation and being perceived as belonging by others through decisions to align oneself with particular technologies.

Relatedly, the interaction with past technologies is political in the sense that DJs express the understanding that there is a required level of technical mastery for being

acknowledged as worthy by fellow DJs. In this sense, the selection of past technologies signals hierarchies within the occupation. In particular, skills associated with past technologies demarcate the occupation into those who are more authentic in their craft (because they are able to use past technologies) relative to those who are less (i.e., [Figure 1](#) *Choosing a technology has consequences that demarcate occupational hierarchies*). For example, DJing through beatmatching is often expressed as a skill that is still important to master.

There's the actual skill of DJing and beatmatching, which I still get on CDJs [club standard digital equipment] and I think that it's a skill, and there is an art to that as well... getting the tunes matched up and in time with each other is actually a skill, and you have to do that quickly. (Adrian)

Importantly, and as explained above, beatmatching is no longer *technologically* necessary due to advances in digital music technology. Nevertheless, it is perceived as a skill which would signal membership of the occupation. This somewhat surprising state of affairs is summarized neatly by a post on the Digital DJ Tips website:

The tedious beatmatching step of DJing, which has absolutely no payoff to your audience, can be completely automated with a Sync button, whether it be via software like Traktor or Serato, or even now with Pioneer's advanced CDJ players. This leaves you to focus more mental energy on the creative part of DJing, which is the whole point in the first place, is it not? And yet almost daily, I read disparaging comments from DJs I respect about sync button use.

This perception of desirable mastery is also acknowledged when people suggest that taking advantage of the features of new technologies to the full is considered 'cheating', and something no self-respecting new DJ would openly do.

I was left in no doubt that using the sync button is cheating – we need to show the [DJs who entered the occupation before newer technologies emerged] we are just as good as them. (Samantha, field diary entry after leaving the first session of a DJing course)

Perhaps not surprisingly, a year later, after grudgingly investing a considerable sum of money in equipment to enable hours of practice in beatmatching, we see Samantha's delight in the responses of others to their new-found acceptance as a DJ:

I felt myself beaming with pride when [promoter] realised I was mixing on what he called 'big girl's decks'. Turning up to the party with just a USB in my pocket I really felt like I was a proper DJ using the CDJs and not my [laptop and controller]. Complete strangers came up to say how much they were enjoying my set and for the first time I actually felt like I deserved their praise. (Samantha, field diary)

We can see how this acceptance is a matter of personal esteem for the DJ which demonstrates how the politics of past technologies are internalized by relatively new DJs (i.e.,

**Figure 1** *Feeling judged on your ability to use technologies of the past*). Will's disparaging comment below about DJs turning up and 'pressing play' on a laptop further cements the view that to be recognized as belonging to the occupational community, DJs must have spent time learning their craft in ways that pay homage to past technologies:

Thing that gets me is I've spent, like I said, I spent 13 years getting it and then I just see someone turn up, stick a laptop on and just press play, and say, oh, fuck it, why did I bother? Everyone calls themselves a DJ regardless of whether they are or not. (Will)

Another example comes from third author's field diary. After playing a set to a packed dancefloor at a festival, Samantha was approached by a member of the crowd who proceeded to offer her unsolicited 'advice':

The dude told me how I would be well advised to progress my craft using vinyl because DJing was now so easy with digital equipment that anyone could do it, and so the only *truly* skilled DJ was one who played with vinyl records. (Samantha, field diary)

This advice, as we interpret it, suggests that members of the occupation share a belief that vinyl DJing is a more authentic form of DJing and that there is an implicit value judgement about this among members of the occupation. Accordingly, it seems obvious to the advice giver that Samantha will appreciate unsolicited advice in the service of bettering her career and professional standing.

A final manifestation of the politicization of technological choices appears in **Figure 2**. There, we see that teachers on DJ courses continue to instruct new DJs in the art of vinyl DJing. The two comments from Samantha's DJ acquaintances are of note here. The first one – 'finally!' – is mildly mocking the fact that it had taken until the last day of the course to get to the format associated with past technologies (vinyl), and which is valued as demarcating legitimate DJs who belong in the occupational community from those who do not. The other – 'respect!' – is in a more supportive vein, showing solidarity for what the author of the comment clearly sees as an admirable format to be learning. However, both indicate the politics of what learning to DJ should entail.

In sum, we see through these quotes that DJs view the technological choices they make as political. They internalize a perception that using the technologies of the past is consequential because it is evaluated by others as more desirable and professionally legitimate. Moreover, these ideas show how the past is simultaneously open to interpretation yet constrained by the stickiness of the materiality of the past that keeps older technologies salient. Aligning with past technologies is thus perceived as underlying external evaluations of having the necessary merit to join the occupation's ranks. These technologies of the past are enacted in the present as material-relational mnemonic devices that allow members of the DJ occupation to develop a shared interpretation of their community and its implicit hierarchies. Thus, as this section suggests, DJs engage both in thinking about what the technologies they use mean to others and in identifying occupational boundaries and navigating them through their technological alignments. In the next section, we show what they do to signal these understandings.





Figure 2. Social media comments showing attitudes to learning vinyl skills

### Exhibiting Practices of Belonging through Behaviours Associated with Past Technologies

DJs engage in practices that signal their perceptions and understandings about the value and politics of past technologies externally. Here too, newer DJs seem to work in the context of an internalized dialogue with other members of the occupation who they perceive are assessing whether they are worthy of joining the occupational community of DJs. In particular, DJs recounted their efforts to align themselves with past technologies (i.e., [Figure 1](#) *Expending efforts required to learn past technologies and skills*):

I'd been playing with a laptop and [software controller] but as I was getting booked for more things and DJing with bigger DJs I just had to step my game up, I was like I want to DJ on CDJs [club standard digital equipment], and then after that vinyl... Playing on vinyl's really, really, really hard... it takes a lot of dedication and a ton of practice. But getting the feel of working with vinyl and the records? I dunno, it's just worth it... (Yvette)

What makes these data particularly surprising is that DJs invest in these performative capabilities even though there is no longer a technical need to use older technologies, as we have noted above. Venues are equipped with digital players that accept USB drives containing the DJs entire record collection (CDJs, or all-in-one ‘controllers’), or the DJ can connect their laptop to the equipment if they prefer to use the software that way. Yet many of the DJs recounted how much time and energy they spent learning to beatmatch anyway:

It’s no good, much as I am happy with my controller and laptop, I have decided to learn to beatmatch properly, bite the bullet and buy expensive CDJs. I want to feel like a proper DJ. (Samantha, field diary)

I was shutting myself in my room and played the same two tracks over and over until I could do it [beatmatch] without clattering the mix. My flatmates must have been sick of it! (Tyla)

Additionally, some DJs pointed to the importance of performance in DJing itself, so that even when using newer technologies, they tried to exhibit the type of performative action that was reminiscent of DJing using old (analogue) technology and felt a joyous sense of accomplishment when they were able to do that:

I use the EQ box quite viciously, rather than slowly tweaking it. I’m quite obviously moving my arm with it and when [my girlfriend] touched the mixer she was like oh, I expected it to be really hard to turn because obviously I’d over-emphasised [that action]... It’s an exaggerated version of doing it normally, so that it shows I suppose. (Simon)

I want to take complete control of my performance, you know, and so using a laptop and a controller was the best way to do that. It was a bit weird at first, making the switch, it felt like there wasn’t as much to do, but then I realised I could still do the same as before, just do a bunch of moves and stuff that meant I still looked like I’m DJing. (Felix)

Relatedly, DJs use the affordances created by new technologies selectively and in a way that mirrors the past technology in a purely performative sense (i.e., [Figure 1](#) *Displaying skills and behaviours associated with the past*):

What I’ve got is I’ve got these two bits of vinyl here, which is specially time-coded and then basically you plug into the laptop and then I use the decks to control the tracks on the computer... so you look like your DJing vinyl but actually it’s all what’s on the computer. (James)

I would always take a bag of vinyl with me [even if I didn’t need to] because I’m like ... if we need to ‘show down’ you give me a pair of 1210s [vinyl turntables], you can take away your fancy mixer... just give me 1210s and a basic mixer and I can mix and I will do that. (Olive)

This performativity was recognized by DJs as largely ‘all for show’ but nonetheless important as Karl explains here in admitting his jealousy, Tim expresses in lamenting the audience’s gullibility, and Esther just sees as simply required for the job:

Granted, [top DJ] is a little bit flamboyant and he’s a bit of a tart, and he does make it look a little bit more than it is, but that’s fine, because he’s a showman and part of DJing is entertaining a crowd, as much as it is making them dance. (Karl)

The number of DJs and performers I see pretending to do things, when in actual fact they’re just letting a [track] play out... it kind of annoys me that so many people are taken in by it! (Tim)

... you’re there at the front, you’re the focus for the crowd’s attention so look as though you deserve it. (Esther)

As noted earlier in the paper, modern CDJs and controllers have a range of features that automate various elements of DJing, for example automatic ‘bpm’ (beats per minute) displays, the ‘master tempo’ button that holds the key of the music stable no matter how fast the music is played, and most derided of all, the ‘beat sync’ button that locks two (or more) tracks in time with one another – in sync – so that the DJ does not have to worry about beatmatching by hand and ear. Yet, new DJs have little choice but to enact at least some of the practices of the past, because despite these technological developments, echoes of past technologies are still present through the design and layout of modern equipment. Specifically, the retention of ‘jog wheels’ in the design of contemporary CDJs that emulate how music was controlled when playing vinyl records on turntables. Evidence of how this manifests in DJs’ gestures and behaviours can be seen in [Figures 3](#) and [4](#). The DJ is nudging the jog wheel to make tiny adjustments to the speed that one of the tracks is playing. Her head is on one side, showing that she is listening to keep the beats perfectly in time with the music already playing. But although the jog wheel resembles a traditional turntable, as we see in [Figure 4](#), there is no physical vinyl disc being pushed

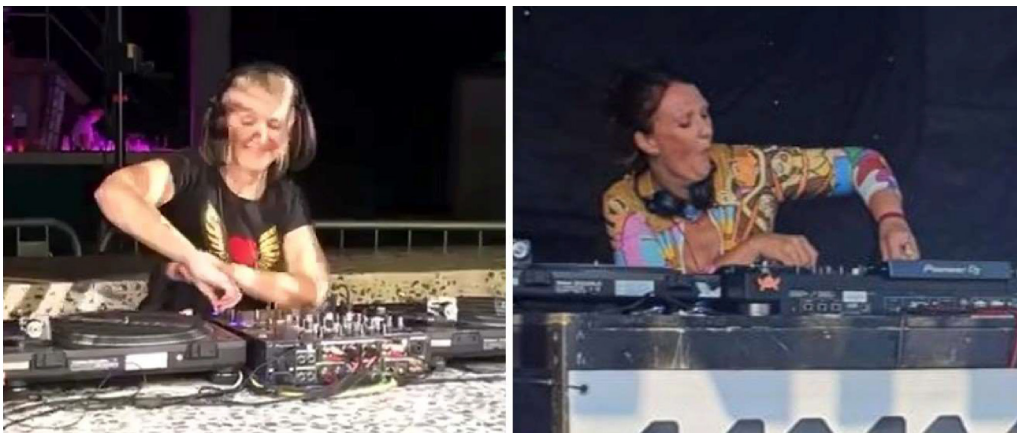


Figure 3. Performative bodily gestures of the DJ (stills taken from videos of Samantha DJing)

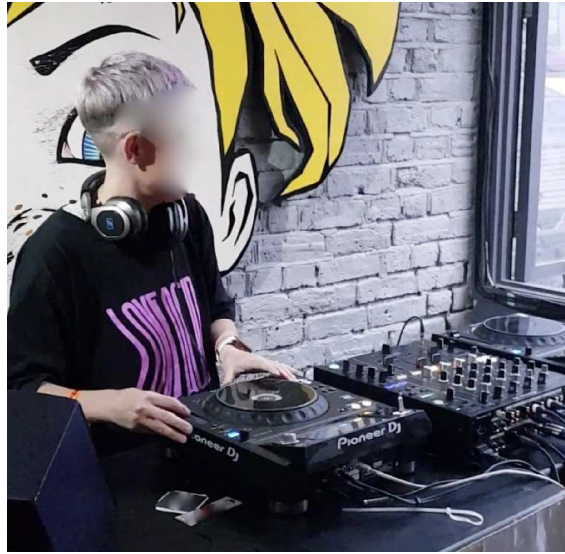


Figure 4. Beatmatching with jog wheels

and pulled past the needle in minute movements as would be the case with a traditional record deck. Instead, it is effectively a big ‘mouse’ manipulating a digital file – an action that could be performed using a touchstrip, knob, slider, or other control.

As these examples suggest, displaying gestures associated with the original skills of DJing with vinyl records and technologies of the past is an important element of modern-day DJs’ skillsets, despite contemporary equipment not requiring them. Indeed, modern technologies are even designed to appear as a material reinsertion of the past into the present. We argue this positions these technologies as material-relational mnemonic devices.

In sum, the material in this section shows how DJs engage in practices that demonstrate they belong in this occupation by expending efforts to learn past technologies and by displaying physical skills and behaviours required to use them (even when these are purely performative). We understand these activities as the everyday interactions, gestures, and expressions through which individuals actively participate in and reinforce a sense of belonging in the occupation through their technological and bodily interactions.

## DISCUSSION

We first explicate the argument we have developed, i.e., how newer entrants’ relational engagement with technology results in the maintenance of mnemonic communities and existing power relations within this occupational group. This is particularly important because so far empirical studies that aimed to explain such maintenance have focused on ways that newcomers can be incorporated in mnemonic communities through aligning their representation of the past with that of a historically dominant perception, through for example, storying (e.g., Ravasi et al., 2019; Sasaki et al., 2020) or historicizing (e.g.,

Hatch and Schultz, 2017; Schultz and Hernes, 2013). Importantly, our findings allow for theorizing two different mechanisms for material-relational processes of maintaining mnemonic communities: maintaining through (a) *imagining affinities with past technologies* and (b) *performing with past technologies* (see Figure 1).

Firstly, our empirical material shows that DJs assign value to their technological choices in a way that is based on how the materiality of the technology affords an emotional and embodied connection to the occupation. Importantly, this attachment of value to an 'old technology' is situated in its perceived importance in the occupational history of DJing. Thus, we suggest that when DJs assign value to past technologies, they are engaging with technology as a material-relational mnemonic device. This engagement is a way for them to imagine an affinity with earlier DJs who either became DJs when this was the available technology or attribute value to it in a similar way (*Maintaining through imagining affinities with past technologies* in Figure 1). In particular, affinity is based on an underlying materiality of the technology of DJing that triggers sensory perceptions about sound quality or tactile sensations from flipping through records, for example. We perceive it as relational in that it allows DJs to imagine other DJs hearing sounds or feeling the touch of a record in a similar way.

This relationality is not only based on how DJs attach value to old technologies, but also on newer DJs' beliefs that there is intersubjective agreement about the superiority of old technologies which is then manifested through the politics of engaging with them. The choice to align with these technologies is political because it facilitates acknowledgement from peers and importantly, from more experienced peers. In this sense, past technology, as a conceptualized format, creates affordances for an imaginary boundary within the DJ occupation. It is an imaginary boundary in the sense that it allows DJs to *imagine* in- and out-groups and affinities within these groups and to subsequently make professional choices to situate themselves within these hierarchies. More generally, then, new entrants join extant groups by developing shared interpretations. This process allows mnemonic communities to be maintained because it facilitates the addition of new people.

Secondly, we suggest that DJs' performative use of technology, such as their display of skills associated with older technologies, provides a complementary relational process of the maintenance of mnemonic communities (*Maintaining through performing with past technologies* in Figure 1). Our study shows that a range of performative practices which we refer to as 'exhibiting practices of belonging' are adopted by DJs, but not functionally necessary (e.g., nudging the jog wheel or tilting one's head). They are nonetheless widely adopted in order to display skills and behaviours associated with the technologies of the past or to show off investments in past technology. Performing such 'legacy' ways of doing things, especially for newer DJs who start to revere the old technology, creates relational affinities because they can connect to other DJs who came before them and who exhibited similar performative actions. The salience of the body here builds on Connerton's (1989) ideas of how ritual becomes inscribed in the body, for example through the act of prayer and the bodily postures adopted. And while less demonstrative in nature, DJs also perform their membership by embracing the affordances of past technologies as they imagine them as having higher quality attributes and as they sense emotional and embodied connections to them.

DJ's performative practices of belonging signal to their audiences (real and imagined) that they understand the significance of past technologies and their political heft. Even when they do not necessarily feel an internalized affinity from these performative acts, nonetheless, by engaging in practices of belonging, newer DJs align themselves with an intersubjective agreement that older technologies and ways of doing things are more authentic. Taken together, performing with, or mimicking the use of, older technologies enables DJs to behave as though they 'sense it'. More theoretically, it enables DJs to imagine a relational affinity with other occupational members and thereby share the same understandings about the past. Developing such shared interpretations maintains the mnemonic community by facilitating the addition of new people.

## **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

We now discuss how these findings contribute to (i) developing a novel conceptualization of organizational memory's entanglement with materiality by drawing attention to the inherent temporality of technology and (ii) expanding the purview of 'collective memory' research by developing a novel conceptualization of 'occupational mnemonic communities' as an important explanation of how occupational boundaries and hierarchies are maintained.

### **Material-Relational Mnemonic Processes based on Technology and its Temporal Dimensions**

First, we suggest that the mutual entanglement of materiality and social context and its interpretative use over time is central to understanding how mnemonic communities are maintained because it does not privilege interpretation as separate from the properties of the material that endure in ways that constrain those interpretations. Moreover, we argue that because technology is at once entangled with the past and an object that evolves in terms of how it allows people to perform occupational functions, it helps us understand how occupational groups engage with the past and how they position themselves relative to it. As such, viewing how social actors align themselves with technologies of the past (and of the present) surfaces interactions that help us see how the past works to shape organizations and advances our abilities to identify and analyse these processes. Put differently, taking a material-relational view toward collective remembering, allows us to explain how members of a social group – here, a mnemonic community – define what they perceive as legitimate and worthy to through (their choice in) engagement with the materiality.

Further, our temporal lens on sociomateriality contributes to ongoing efforts to provide a novel conceptualization of organizational memory's entanglement with materiality (Allen and Brown, 2016; Blagoev et al., 2018; Eisenman and Frenkel, 2021). Recent work has shown the potential of this approach, for instance in explaining the dual nature of the past as simultaneously open for interpretation and constrained by the 'stickiness' of the material (Blagoev et al., 2018). However, so far, this stream of research, much like broader sociomateriality scholarship, has not made the temporal aspects of materiality explicit. For instance, Blagoev et al.'s (2018) otherwise remarkable study of computers as 'a technology

of memory' for the British museum, did not theorize how the evolution of technology, itself, can provide anchors for collective remembering among museum professionals.

In contrast, our focus on technology, as a material form with inherent and discernible temporality, enables us to present a novel explanation of how mnemonic communities are maintained in occupational groups. We emphasize that this inherent temporality is entangled with the social. In other words, how people in an occupation engage with work technologies shapes those temporalities. At the same time, the material instantiation of technology provides temporal anchors that provide a reference for the past that can generate 'relational affinities'. For instance, analogue technologies, such as vinyl, while still widely used and even revered today (Wiedner et al., 2024), are reminiscent of a bygone, but special, epoch in DJing history and can evoke innate reactions among members of the community who use them. In highlighting such temporality, we are able to theorize how the mutual entanglement of the materiality underlying a social context and its interpretative use *in a temporal context* is central to understanding how mnemonic communities are maintained.

Further, we advocate a focus on technology as a relational mnemonic device because these entanglements are not static – they evolve over time through modifications to physicality and mechanics. Technology, therefore, generates social contexts in which goals, such as performing occupational tasks, can be achieved using older and newer versions, each of which has particular affordances and meanings (Barley, 1986; Bechky, 2020). Although it evolves and changes formats, technology in its different forms often endures across time and space. Subsequently, new members can relate to extant members of the community through the medium of past technologies, particularly when the old technology remains in use alongside a newer technology, and when the temporal distinctions between technological solutions provide distinct affordances. The continually evolving character of technology means that members of an occupation, brought together by a joint set of tasks they wish to perform, enter into the occupation at different times along this evolutionary vector and can choose between current and older versions of a technology. In this sense, beyond any objective functional utility, a technology is also a material manifestation of a point in time, past or present. In our study, we show that past technologies allowed DJs to imagine an embodied reaction to the technology, such as a sensation of 'swing' or an emotional reaction to vinyl. These imaginations were not perceived as entirely personal, but as shared by other DJs and as therefore having the ability to create unarticulated connections among DJs who used old technology. In this way, our study provides empirical evidence supporting the mostly theoretical explications about how the materiality of a mnemonic device is a way to relate to others in a mnemonic community (e.g., Eisenman and Frenkel, 2021).

Importantly, our focus on entanglement has allowed us to bring a more nuanced way of understanding how and when materiality evokes relational affinity. Previous conceptualizations have yet to theorize beyond a relatively deterministic view of the material-relational mnemonic device. Here, Eisenman and Frenkel (2021), for example, suggested materials with certain properties are likely to *evoke* innate reactions among group members in a cause and effect relationship. Similarly, Crawford et al. (2022) argued that the material substance of remembering creates social interactions that are experienced innately and can therefore be the basis for action. Rather, our study

reveals that affordances created by a material object for relational affinities are also dependent on social practices, such as attaching value to a certain materiality and politicizing engagement with it.

In other words, mnemonic communities are maintained not only through innate reactions to materiality but through members' negotiation of this entanglement. In our case, older technologies prompt relational affinities between different generations of DJs to the extent that newer DJs imagine themselves as members of an occupational mnemonic community who seek to demonstrate that they are experiencing the same kinds of tactile sensations associated with operating the older technology. These newer DJs try to align with older ones by taking on the effort and investments required to use the same technologies that older members used. Importantly, these imaginations are inseparable from the material aspects of the technology because they are tied to a set of very physical dimensions: heavy equipment, that requires working with innate sensory attributes such as hearing and sensory rhythm, that takes physical effort to master and that can be performatively demonstrated with bodily movements. Engaging in these physical behaviours is used to tie newer entrants to older ones.

In this way, the study builds on the perspective that affordances of technology are entangled with the social setting in which a technology is used (e.g., Cnossen and Bencherki, 2023; Leonardi, 2011; see Leonardi and Barley, 2010). But, by highlighting the inherent temporality of the materiality, our study advances scholarship showing the potential of not privileging narrative interpretations of the material relative to relational ones to activate memory-based processes (see also Cutcher et al., 2019). This relational understanding of materiality is under-explored in organizational memory studies (Coraiola et al., 2023), but important because of the promise it holds for understanding how mnemonic communities are maintained over time, particularly in the context of developing affinities between new entrants and a past of which they have no direct experience. While our data was from an occupational context, the theoretical argument we developed is relevant to other contexts, for instance, a relational understanding of technology might hold the key to understanding how consumer groups form mnemonic communities (Bell and Taylor, 2016).

### **Theorizing Occupational Mnemonic Processes**

As noted in the call for papers for this special issue, organizational scholars have not yet seriously grappled with the mnemonic component implicit in theorizing about occupational dynamics. Our study provides a starting point for theorizing occupational mnemonic processes by introducing and conceptualizing the notion of an 'occupational mnemonic community'. We define this construct as the community that emerges based on imagined affinities between people sharing the same occupation when they engage in past-based practices of belonging— in this case, by using technologies to perform work. By articulating this construct, we extend our understanding of how mnemonic boundaries are formed within occupational communities and how they affect newcomers. In this way, the study builds on the idea that objects have meanings that create boundaries because objects correspond to meanings people attribute to them (Leonardi et al., 2019; Sgourev, 2021).



Occupational research has established that occupations are structural categories in the sense that they have incumbents who maintain occupational boundaries and new entrants who desire to permeate them (see Anteby et al., 2016; Bechky, 2020; Langley et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2023). Other studies tied the technologies that enable work to occupations and the meanings people attribute to their work (see Bechky, 2020; Nelson et al., 2023; Orr, 1996; Sgourev, 2021; Wiedner et al., 2024). For example, Nelson et al. (2023) showed how the technology underlying synthesizers was laden with a variety of meanings that allowed musicians and music technicians to navigate their membership in their occupational community. However, to date, relatively little work has examined the relevance of mnemonic processes as influential in the formation of occupational identity and occupational boundaries. Here, Daoust and Malsch's (2019) highlighted the importance of mnemonic processes for achieving privileged professional positions among accounting professionals. And Mackenzie et al. (2017) focused also on the significance of technology in occupational context and showed how shared interpretations of past technologies mediated engineers' self-perceptions of their occupational identities.

In this vein, our study furthers the understanding of how mnemonic processes affect structural processes within occupations. We show how imagined relational affinities experienced and demonstrated by DJs who see themselves as members of an occupational mnemonic community shape norms of authenticity and legitimacy among them. Subsequently, the imagined perceptions and performative behaviours come to underlie a taken-for-granted set of shared meanings about what is important in the context of a particular occupation. This shared set of meanings, in turn, impacts how people understand occupational boundaries. In this way, we further research showing how members of occupation organize through evoking an occupation's past discursively, such as Orr's (1996) study of copier technicians, and studies that show how identifying with particular material manifestations is tied to ideas about what is legitimate and valued in an occupational setting (e.g., Mackenzie et al., 2017; Sgourev, 2021).

Moreover, we emphasize the political nature of the relational process instigated by these mnemonic devices. Current research on 'politics of memory' largely interprets it as an active process of selecting what aspects of the past to remember (Coraiola and Derry, 2020; Cutcher et al., 2019; Suddaby et al., 2010). This research, therefore, illuminates practices involved in the inclusion (and exclusion) of certain artefacts and memories to enforce a particular narrative on the past (Mena et al., 2016; Nissley and Casey, 2002; Yanow, 1998). In addition, extant organizational memory literature that examines political dimensions of memory in work settings has focused on explicit 'practices of remembering', such as commemoration, rhetorical history, and storying to represent or re-enact the past in a certain way in line with certain interests (e.g., Coraiola and Derry, 2020; Cutcher et al., 2019; Maclean et al., 2014; Suddaby et al., 2023). Our analysis provides a complementary perspective by highlighting how the maintenance of a mnemonic system relies on everyday, often unnoticed, practices. Such practices might appear innocuous, but have political consequences for how the past is remembered. This is particularly true for those in the margin of a group, such as newcomers (Foroughi, 2020; Hoon et al., 2023).

Further, our study shows that DJs invest time, money, and physical effort in learning past technologies *and* work to make sure that these efforts are seen by other DJs. These efforts manifest in the context of everyday practices such as performing DJ-related tasks such as learning techniques, buying equipment, producing music, and performing at parties. Here, our theorization supports earlier work that argued that non-verbalized and embodied affinities are potentially more powerful than binding that occurs in response to cognitive understandings and that therefore bodily movements are an important aspect of social memory (e.g., Connerton, 1989; Stephens, 2021). As such, our conceptualization of the occupational mnemonic community joins other studies highlighting how occupational expertise is manifested through embodied expertise (Molotch and McLain, 2008; Sennett, 2008; Stowell and Warren, 2018). People who do the same work develop a shared understanding of their occupation through a shared innate sensation of what it feels like to perform the work. However, although the body is one way through which material-relational mnemonic devices operate, to regard their effects as solely embodied would be to downplay the significance of the material features of the technologies themselves – a position that an entangled perspective is keen to emphasize. So, although a fuller exploration of embodiment in occupations – and in DJing in particular – is beyond our scope in this paper, we nonetheless recognize the connections our ideas have to this work. In highlighting that newer DJs imagine reactions to older technological formats as something they love or feel, we show how technological formats – and the bodily skills associated with them – allow people to create affinities with others who share these physical experiences. Therefore, we highlight that these innate sensations can form the basis of the imagined relationship of an occupational group with its past, and thus help maintain an occupational mnemonic community.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The above contributions notwithstanding, aspects of our study design could be further developed in future work. The DJing occupation has, much like any occupation, unique characteristics. It requires no licensing and puts no pre-defined time demands on those engaging in it, allowing them to choose how much time, money, and potential income they allocate. Also, it is tightly-coupled to an underlying technology, and a creative one at that. While our project focused on understanding how DJs use past technologies in the context of maintaining a mnemonic community, other studies might explore how these dynamics pertain to occupations that are loosely-coupled to a technological base or that have rigidities our context did not. Additionally, our study focused on a context that was facilitated by the third author's professional networks. Future work might explore other DJ communities, either in other countries or those that have other characteristics, to see the extent to which our ideas generalize. In particular, it would be fruitful to examine the relational processes of remembering within and between various DJ communities to see whether different occupational communities might evolve and construe their own material-relational mnemonic devices.

Moreover, future work could advance our ideas in several ways. To further advance work on material-relational mnemonic processes, studies could explore how

technological choices are tied to how members of a mnemonic community engage in storying or historicizing the past. These studies could examine how members develop narratives that link the evolution of a technology important to their community with the evolution of the community itself. Other fruitful avenues could be to study how several versions of a technology co-exist in some settings enabling a complex web of relationships between people, technologies, and a shared sense of the relevance of the past to them as a group. To address the importance of mnemonic processes in occupational contexts, studies could be designed to better understand occupational mnemonic communities along the axes we have introduced here. Specifically, studies might ask what happens in contexts in which the political meanings of past technologies are as complex as they are in this paper, but where technological manifestations *can* be assessed as superior in objective ways. Other work can assess whether similar mnemonic processes are relevant to occupations in which the work is not as creative and sensory as in our case study.

## CONCLUSION

Our study suggests that mnemonic communities are not only maintained by retelling stories from the past to future generations, but also by engaging with technologies that are entangled manifestations of material-social-past-present: material-relational mnemonic devices. As technology progresses and evolves over time, newer versions of a technology often make the past obsolete or redundant. In this way, technology is a prism that not only allows for seeing the simultaneous manifestations of mnemonic devices that represent different past periods, but also, and importantly, how technology's legacy lives on despite its assumed obsolescence. Thus, we examine the notion of how a technology can be freighted with the past and what the effects of imagining the technology in this way might be. Furthermore, we suggest that the relationship between technology and mnemonic organizing is likely to be particularly pronounced in occupational contexts given the salience of technology in work. Although previous research has not perceived occupational groups as mnemonic communities, recognizing that they are oriented through a material-relational mnemonic device is important. These mnemonic communities need new members to sustain themselves over time and potential newcomers need to align with extant members and their perceptions about the past to become part of the community. Therefore, studying the mnemonic organizing that forms around technologies, particularly in occupational contexts, stands to illuminate our overall understanding of how mnemonic communities and their hierarchies are maintained.

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