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Executive summary

This report, commissioned by Kodak, sets out to understand how people use digital imaging technologies within their relationships with friends, families, partners and colleagues. The research conducted in UK, France, Germany, Italy and the US, uncovers a growing mindset towards ‘reconnectivity’ – and technology and digital imaging can play key roles in this. Modern lifestyles are ever more digitally and technologically enabled, and our research shows that this is entirely compatible with the human instinct to connect with other people and create bonds face-to-face. Early adopters are beginning to discover the ways that advanced digital interaction can maintain and sustain interpersonal relationships – and even enhance them. And, in the future, such technologies will continue to support new forms of face-to-face contact.

Reconnectivity drivers – how and why?

: Assumed connectivity

As technology becomes more familiar, more and more people are perceiving it as trustworthy, from the young to the old. Communication has become quick and effortless, and this means that longer periods of time can be spent apart from friends and family, without fear of emotional ties weakening. This is true both for ‘digital natives’, born into a world of instant connectivity, and an older generation that has had to consciously adapt to such a world. While only 4% of those aged 16-24 have never used the internet, numbers of mature users have risen by 60% since 2006.

: Peep culture

Social networks have entered mainstream culture: these never-ending stories allow social networkers to tell others about their lives in a way that is engaging, interactive and, most importantly, real. Social networks and blogs are now visited by 67% of the global online population, and have become the fourth most popular online activity, even ahead of responding to personal email.

: Time is money

The economic climate has made people far more aware of their financial situation and more discerning as consumers. In the UK, for example, 50% of our respondents prioritise earning money. After a turbulent period that has threatened both jobs and bank balances, spending time – rather than money – with loved ones is of real importance. Among our French respondents who prioritise earning money, 65% value seeing family and 43% prioritise seeing friends, placing loved ones above their career (35%). Technology that can capture and preserve time spent together and aid communication when apart is considered a solid financial investment.

Reconnectivity trends – new concepts, new typologies

: The home office

In a culture where time is money, clients and colleagues need an efficient, rapid communication flow where meaning is conveyed and professional relationships maintained. And, as more people look beyond their local area for career opportunities in bigger cities or even different countries, feeling connected to family and friends is becoming increasingly important.

As flexible working hours and virtual environments become increasingly available, the opportunity to reconnect with friends and family through technology such as virtual reality will be open to more professionals who are currently constrained by the bricks and mortar of their office. Being able to work remotely, without compromising efficiency, means that family and friends can be prioritised, with no loss of communication with clients and colleagues.

The power of imagery is already allowing ‘techxecutives’ to attend virtual meetings in the form of avatars. Virtual face-to-face communication can be quick and efficient, to aid the completion of tasks without unnecessary debate and over-complicated discussion. Yet it can also encourage more in-depth communication, particularly between those normally kept apart by distance; there are no worries about time constraints or needing to return to the office. Virtual reality can thus provide a greater freedom to communicate with others, either economically or at a more leisurely pace, to ultimately achieve a better outcome.

‘I can get my staff up and running on a secure connection within ten minutes of them requesting the flexibility to work from home’

*Jane Dewar, practice manager,
Bowman Riley Architects*

: Village people

Broadband internet is now regarded as an essential rather than a luxury and has even been called ‘the fourth utility’. Government schemes and local initiatives in various countries are working towards total connectivity across their regions. As a result, an increasing number of people who live outside areas of urban sprawl are establishing face-to-face contact with family and friends via technology. Over half (57%) of Americans consider living in a remote part of the countryside a key factor that would make them choose technology-based contact over face-to-face contact, especially urbanites in New York (63%), Washington DC (77%) and San Francisco (71%).

: The ‘here and now’ers

Even when people are face-to-face, frequently they are consciously recording the moment for posterity, their mindset already in the future rather than the present. This trend towards preserving the present by thinking of the future means a growing segment is not so much living in the moment but living ahead of it.

The worth of each moment is calculated by how recordable it is. Even when reconnecting face-to-face in the same physical space, people are thinking of those who aren’t there and how they can be incorporated into the reconnection experience. For example, video footage taken at a concert can be uploaded for friends to watch on a social networking page. Executives can send Tweets to update co-workers and shareholders on the success of a business deal, while parents can use webcams and Skype to invite relatives living abroad as virtual guests to a family gathering.

The power of imagery allows people to connect, share and become closer – to feel part of an event even when they can’t be there.

‘There have been far too many family moments that I have missed but I have been able to feel a part of them. I missed the birth of my nephew but Facebook photos and Skype really made me feel I wasn’t missing out completely’

Kris Kim, student, Bay Area, California, US

Reconnectivity futures – key moments

: Reconnectivity comes of age

At present, almost one in five grandparents in Britain (18%) say they never see their grandchildren face-to-face, while 7% see them once a year and 4% see them every few years. There is a similar scenario in other regions, with the majority of grandparents in France (33%), Germany (18%), and the US (31%) seeing their grandchildren face-to-face just once a year. Enthusiasm for increased reconnectivity amongst the older generation, and growing confidence and trust towards technology, will benefit relationships with loved ones who have already embraced technology.

‘The most technophobic pensioner will master Skype in minutes if it means she gets to see her grandchild on screen’

Jackie Thomas, psychologist

: Wish you were here

Holiday memories of exciting activities and stunning vistas are a better souvenir than any gift shop memorabilia. Naturally, people wish to share these memories and relive them with others. This was once encapsulated by the ‘wish you were here’ sentiment scribbled on a postcard; now technology allows travellers to virtually bring their friends and family on the journey.

Even if you can’t travel abroad it is possible to have the experience of discovery. An hour spent in a virtual location costs the bare minimum and can bring people from all over the world together to interact in a way that is immersive, pleasurable and, most importantly, meaningful.

As new technologies evolve, new and exciting ways to not only relive and share life’s milestone moments but to be re-immersed in them will become available to those seeking to reconnect.

: Baby’s first photo

In the future perhaps, baby’s first photo will no longer be static but will capture the moment via all the senses. Multisensory technology could evoke sound and smells, as well as sight. Babies’ first photos may not only show how they look when they are born, but also convey the sound of their crying or the smell of the fresh blanket they are wrapped in. Imagine seeing a picture of a baby in the garden and being able to smell the spring flowers; or a shot of a child baking with their mother that allows you to taste the fresh muffins ...

: The dream car purchase

The pleasures of a dream car include the way it drives, the way it feels, and the gadgets it packs under the bonnet. These features are not always easy to convey to friends and family who aren’t there in person. Augmented reality’s realistic 3-D images allow the experience to be shared with others who need never set foot in the showroom or even join you on the road.

: The magic of live events

World Cup matches, concerts and arena tours generate memories not only of what happened, but of the unique atmosphere of each event. Live shows and sports events are popular across every country we surveyed, and between a third and half of live-event aficionados think technology could enhance the experience, from 36% of people in the UK to 51% in the US. 3-D technology, currently being launched in cinemas, is one way to make the viewer feel much more immersed and part of the live experience – and could soon be found on cameras, home video and maybe even television.