

Communications and relationships: changing with new technologies. An explorative study on a thematic facebook group.

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Abstract

With new technologies, new relational spaces have been configured. Virtual communications, characterized by exchange mediated by virtual devices, have given rise to modern forms of communication, also creating new social contexts. The latest ISTAT survey (2015) shows that web is an important tool for social interaction; for more than half of Internet users (56,1%) it's mediated from *social networks*.

This work wants to open a reflection about communication and online relationships mediated from *facebook* groups. In particular, an ethnographic observation of a thematic facebook group has been realized.

Introduction

“Totally regardless of the mere exchange of information, it seems that men should communicate to have self-awareness.”
P. Watzlawick

With new technologies, new relational spaces have been configured. Virtual communications, exchange mediated by virtual devices, have given rise to modern forms of communication, also creating new social contexts. In any type of human community the interpersonal relationships are very important. In the past, contacts between members of the community took place primarily in a shared physical environment, which gave the opportunity to communicate, on the basis of common interests and knowledge, with clearly defined partners. The physical meeting between people is still the basic tool to create a community. But there are forms of communication likely to give birth to real communities apart the visual contact between individuals. An example of such a communication is the international scientific community: people who have in common purposes, research methods and a cultural and cognitive heritage and who communicate mainly through scientific papers; in that case, physical meetings (meetings and conferences) are only occasional, even if they are essential in providing the individual a sense of belonging to the community. The aim of this peculiar communication tool is not to communicate in general, but the opportunity to do so in a truly continuous and natural way: there is no place or set of places shared and universally recognized by the community members.

Today a meeting point of this type does not necessarily have a physical reality: it can be a virtual place available by computer. People from all over the world meet in a newsgroup, in an IRC channel or in their preferred MUD; they discuss both personal and practical problems of work, having a chat, or simply playing together. These people, by taking advantage of these online

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tools, come to know each other well, with a strong emotional and affective involvement; and this takes place, in most cases, without a face to face meeting.

Social relationships in cyberspace are still mainly based on written communication. This surely implies a deep conversion of normal interpersonal relationships based on direct knowledge of the interlocutor. Sociological studies that have so far been carried out on virtual communities agree that cyberspace has towards its consumers an uninhibiting effect.

So, apart from the indisputable risks, many are the extraordinary potentiality offered by the network: the capability to communicate in real time with people all over the globe, to extend the number of contacts, to have access to an endless source of information.

Some people believe that this new world requests an increase of investment in the intellectual aspects of performance rather than in its affective features and responsibility. Certainly, surfing the Internet allows us to alleviate, at least to some extent, the loneliness and anguish of abandonment and emotional collapse, as for those games in which there is an avatar representing us, because, as Tisseron noted, it does not collapse ever (Tisseron, 2008). However, we have to keep in mind the advantages of anonymity, thanks to which also timorous and insecure people can avoid painful feelings such as humiliation and shame. Furthermore, from an emotional point of view, is less expensive to create a knowledge in this way, even if the conversation contents in the Network are far from anonymous and unfriendly. Actually, the person reveals much of his hidden personality by all explicit and implicit features of chatting.

Virtuality, with his specific characteristics, can be considered a space of common sharing for collective and also a "mind refuge" for individual (Steiner, 1996). In this age, marked by more and more social imperatives of success, hyperactivity and stroke efficiency, adherence to these worlds, placed between the intra-psychic and the interpersonal dimension, it appears motivated by the need to find comfort within a charming "refuge of the mind" (Steiner, 1993), a complex dimension where the real and the virtual can overlap for barging each other: the Internet can be like an island of fantasy and imagination from which to draw new meanings to the complexity of reality. Such potential can, however, result in a limit, a trap, if such non-performance site and the search for meaning to preclude contact with the real and preventing the regular flow to the planning, characteristic of the processes of change.

The tendency to gradually replace the real with the virtual dimension, is more frequent in those subjects who feel the need to rediscover a shelter that can hold their own existential problems, their somewhat conflicting emotional experiences.

The latest ISTAT survey about Internet access (2015), reports that in 2015 the most significant increase in the use of web concerned the use and production of cultural contents, especially among young people. Web also reveals as an important tool for social interaction; for more than half of Internet users (56,1%) it's mediated from *social networks*. These are virtual places in which relational networks can be developed, thanks to a high level of active interactions for users (Scalia & Lombardi, 2009). As described by

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Bedini et al. (2013), *social networking* has incorporated some trends usually implemented towards the social groups, such as the supporting of social network, express identity and explore social identity of other network members.

Actually, between existing *social networks*, *Facebook* can be considered a phenomenon of high social and cultural import. Among the possibilities offered by *Facebook* there is the creation of groups, that are forms of aggregation based on common interests. The freedom of expression afforded by it and its possibility of manifesting opinions can foster dialogue and deepening of specific themes of each group. *Facebook* groups, modern social context, can be really considered “virtual communities”: sets of people interested in some matter and connected by a common ideology (Hine, 1977). Hine underlines these characteristics of virtual communities: segmentation, decentralization, the presence of horizontal bones and interchangeable roles, shared values.

It's important to point out that the word “virtual” doesn't exclude typical dimensions of *face-to-face* relations: users of virtual communities, in fact, discuss, compare their ideas, sometimes quarrel, search and find an agreement, like non-virtual groups.

So, virtual group is a social space that can help the birth of relations in contexts socially bonded, but it's also a virtual space, an imaginary space of interaction, created by a common agreement (Pravettoni, 2002). It's a space where users can meet according to a common concern, a sort of “virtual club” in substitution of the real (non-virtual).

Starting from these premises, it seems interesting to open a reflection on the role of new forms of communication in constituting these groups and relationships. In particular, this work focuses its attention on a specific thematic facebook group, born with an European project¹ with the aim of using web to counteract gender discriminations. As can we read in the description of this group (actually composed by 1225 members), it was born <<to say STOP to discriminations, violence and abuses on women and LGBT people; it's also to fight the commonplace that gender violence interested only women>>.

The existence of many groups about this theme on *social networks* like *facebook* underlines the importance of group as a congenial place. Also the group we observed is interested on “gender questions”. In the social sciences the term “gender” refers to identity. It was officially introduced in the scientific speech thanks to G. Rubin (1975), who described “gender system” as all provisions (processes, behaviours, relations, etc.) on the bases of which every society transforms the biological sexual difference in a human activity product, and organizes the division of male and female polices. So, “gender” category derives from the ascertainment of an imbalance between sexes. This concept wants to give maximum relevance to all the elements not reducible to biological in the disparity relation between men and women. In this sense, the *gender* concept would replace the *sex* term, assuming the possibility to indicate each cultural or social construction related to the distinction male/female.

¹ With the objective of ensuring the privacy of group members has been here established to remain anonymous about this project and this group, describing only its characteristics.

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So, over time, the *gender* term has hired the role of analysis category of the social conformation of males and female roles. This sense of gender has been developed thanks to the studies of the feminist movement. Feminism, as movement and as theoretical reflection, constituted *gender studies*. Actually, *gender category* problematize sexual identity in its naturalistic acceptance. So, it indicates behaviours connected or attributed to sexual identity and also conditionings of society and culture about male and female roles.

The virtual group we observed founded its existence and characterization starting from these theoretical dimensions, widening the reflection from women and gender violence to homosexuality, homophobic and transphobic violence, with a common matrix on genderism.

The main purpose of this work has been to “observe”, in a defined period of time, everything that happened in this virtual space, to start a reflection about new communication and interpersonal modes transmitted by the network.

Methodological aspects

The methodology used to carry out this work has been virtual ethnography (Hine, 1998 – 2008), also defined “Netnography” (Kozinets, 2000). It transfers the tradition of ethnographic research on social spaces of internet, making possible a study of online relations; here internet is not only a means of communication but also a concrete meeting place that favours the birth of new groups and new forms of socialization. According to Hine (2008) the key principle of virtual ethnography, that is to develop knowledge between participation and data collection, follows that of traditional ethnography. The authoress says the importance of study the web in connection with other “parallel” research contexts, looking it as a “relations camp”. Kozinets (2000) describes virtual ethnography as an anthropological analysis method, tended to understand actual reality. It can be considered a sort of digital transposition of classical ethnography, aimed to describe and explain the sense of social actors’ practices. (Giglioli et al., 2008). From a methodological point of view, a central issue remains “how” to participate to the observed context. The ethnographer needs a prior preparation about the conditions of the studied field, realized between the learning of its rules. To carry out this work, we made an observation being simple members of the group; it allowed a reflexive observation. Using this kind of observation is possible to realize an articulate conceptualization, formulating hypothesis to be tested.

We started our study establishing some indicators, needed to determine our observation field. These indicators, that have allowed the construction of our observation grid, are: date of post, user sex, age, kind of user name (real or fantasy name), kind of a profile image (personal or not personal), city of residence, kind of post (link, video, photo..), post content (event, advertising, news, personal comment, off topic, other), theme of the post (women, LGBT, other), number of comments and number of “like”. We also looked at discussions or some particular interesting arguments.

Results and comments

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During the ethnographic observation realized from 29/03/2012 (date of creation of the group) to 30/09/2013 (date of our first data collection and analysis), 2085 posts have been analyzed. The analysis carried out with a grid built *ad hoc*, underlines that the majority of users preserve his *name* (1778 subjects) and also a realistic personal image (1575 subjects). Furthermore, they live in Campania, in big *cities* like Napoli and Salerno, although there are posts of users throughout Italy (Milano, Bologna, Lucca...). About the *age* of users, it seems to be homogeneous: active participant have different ages, from 18 to 70 years old.

There are many *modes of communication*: the most used seems to be the link (1067 link posted); it is usually used with personal posts (452 times); follows it the simple post (233), that is a text message. Finally, there is the publication of photographs (145). The content of posts is mainly the news (705) that is the transmission on information about everyday, conveyed by articles. Then, there is the sharing of events related to the gender theme (342). Instead, it emerges a reduced use of personal comments (132). Other contents are connected to various elements (437), such as connections with blog, websites and other facebook pages; sometimes it is articles, citations, video, photos, cartoons and references to the same group.

The socio-demographic data and the observations about communications in the group underline an involvement connected to the thematic LGBT area (Lesbic, Gay, Bisexual, Trans). Despite the group's description clarify an interest in gender questions, it seems that the users are mainly oriented to LGBT interests. Indeed, there are 1484 posts about this theme and only 122 strictly connected to violence against women; there are also 75 posts treating both the themes. Finally, 339 posts are about other topics, often related to the theme, such as discriminations, disability, news and associations. We may suppose that the involvement of the group members on these themes is connected to dimensions of identification, like the recognition of own personal characteristics in the group. These aspects may also have increased participation of some members and at the same time delimited the group boundaries. As regard these borders, we can ascertain that *facebook* settings describes the group as "public" (anyone can see the group, its members and their posts), which suggests open borders. Nevertheless, the borders are well defined by the clear description of the group, that "close" it, delimiting the area of interest and also its members. The relations that intertwine between adhesion and active participation to the group are so conveyed by the common interest on gender themes.

Concerning user's communication modes, most of the interventions (1890) don't present comments; the same is for posts without "like" (1079). This choice of communication could be charged to the fact that online groups give the possibility to not respond, unlike non-virtual groups. So, this group presents communicative "choices" connected to sharing contents more than to exchange and interaction. About this emerged data, the choice of a specific "way of communicating" affects. In *Pragmatics of human communication* (1967), Watzlawick and colleagues reflects about human communication modes, their rules and exceptions. The first of their *axioms* of human communication may be useful to begin a reflection about data we collected. It says that "One cannot not communicate", so, even if we decide to not

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communicate, it's really impossible to do. In this sense, the choice of group's member to not comment news may think to a "not communication" characterizing this group, used as a virtual showcase on which share interest and content more than opinions.

We should add that this specific communicative choice is certainly facilitated from the context in which it happens: in *social* word, not receive comments is a possibility and not some of negative, like could be in *vis-à-vis* interactions. So, to talk about communication, it appears essential keep in mind the context; in this case it appears protective, facilitating the immediacy of communication.

In this regard, it is interesting to point out that there is often talk of computer-mediated communication when two people contact through this technology. The fact that, with other technologies, wasn't nothing sad about mediated communication (from the typewriter, by telephone, by letter) shows us the importance of this medium has taken on its first appearance. The computer, in fact, allows meetings and dialogues of different types.

If we compare the personal communications with the mediated one, we tends to think that in computer-mediated communication people express themselves more freely than in face-to-face communication, so that was even coined the term "flaming" to indicate the uninhibited communication. It is those that Goffman calls "unfocused meetings", that offer to the person a lot of freedom, arising from his own anonymity. In communication with the computer, dissimulation is caused by the fact that the social boundaries, that normally regulates or influences the group dynamics, are lack or mitigated. The de-individualization occurs when people participating lose their individuality and self-control in the group anonymity. This anonymity makes possible a more egalitarian participation and offers more opportunities to intervene.

It seems important to highlight that the fact that communication with computers socialize or isolate depends on the characteristics of the context in which it develops. It must, therefore, bear in mind that in a virtual environment communication and relationship between two or more communicators, are placed in a social regulatory environment, that has no counterpart in the face to face communication. Communication with the computer is a particular mode of communication in which some psychological aspects flow, such as the concepts of reality, tele-presence, simulation and forecasting the possible future impact of virtual reality. The virtual environment reorganization mechanisms and the return to the physical require time and cognitive effort.

Finally, it could be interesting to analyze those posts that generated the interest of users, showed between many comments. The themes of these posts are, for example coming out, LGBT-parenting, public and private manifestations of homophobia. In particular, the discussion about coming out produced 31 comments, enabling users in a heated confrontation. Once again this gave us back on the specific configuration of our group and on its borders.

Another interesting consideration regards the participation to the group, kept constant in time through the posting also during summer or holidays, periods in which we suggested a decline of publications. This may

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be motivated by the use of smartphones, which allow for ease of access and constant connectivity. In this way, new technological instruments favour the creation and maintenance of relationships, even at distance.

Conclusions

The reflection resulted by data analysis bring us to consider internet as a cultural process, in which users have meant that the group would become a “virtual square”, in which they feel welcomed, share thinks and keep updated; this has been possible through the progressive and growing publishing images, videos, links and reflections. This continuity maintained over time could be due to the lack of commitment required from this kind of groups, also thanks to the rapidity of sharing, typical of this kind of channel. In our specific case, context surely facilitated the construction of online relations, mediated by the common interest in gender questions. Our study also place the emphasis on those that can be the limits and potentiality of these kinds of virtual groups, as well as on the use of virtual ethnography. Although the group observed is well defined by this specific theme, it presents the most general features of all virtual groups. In particular, they favour a rapid and advantageous of information, also thanks to the big catchment area they could receive; these groups, focused on specific themes such as those here described, could become a referring point and a sort of “virtual showcase” for interested users. These elements, which show advantageous, may nevertheless present some limits, like the limitation of intimate interpersonal exchanges. This is a specific aspect of online relations. Finally, this first explorative analysis confirmed the starting idea to consider virtual ethnography as an useful, sensible and non-invasive observational web tool, suitable for study language, motivation and behaviours of a new virtual community.

Starting from these considerations, it could be interesting to make a comparison with a similar group of an another nation, or also a comparison between this group and another similar Italian group about another theme.

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