The affective and communicative relations of young people in the digital realm

Summary

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Aims: the aim of the research is to investigate the forms of communication and the relations of young people in the digital world. The underlying hypothesis is that the various media are not "instruments" for communication, but "settings" where experiences take place and relations are formed and maintained.

Sample and method: 50 semi-structured telephone interviews lasting between 60 and 75 minutes were conducted with subjects aged between 18 and 24 years old who all possessed a mobile phone and a computer with internet connection and made use of text messaging, email, Messenger (or a similar instant messaging system) and a social network (such as Facebook or Myspace) at least three or four times a week.

The research was conducted on a sample spread across the whole of the country:

Type of place of residence	Number of Interviewees
Metropolitan Area (Milan, Rome, Naples)	18
Provincial Capital (divided into four Nielsen areas)	16
Settlement with less than 20,000 inhabitants (divided into four Nielsen areas)	16
Total	50

Results: The most significant aspects to emerge from the research are the following:

- The **continuity between the offline and online dimensions of relations**: these two dimensions are not constructed as parallel worlds that are in tension with each other (i.e. surrogate or substitute relationships); instead there exists a single "real" space of experience that is internally differentiated and unified by practices and relations. This can be firstly seen in the way *structural preconditions* (such as geographical origin, technological knowledge and whether the individual is a student or worker) influence uses and practices. In other words, the net, as a dematerialized space, is affected by the material conditions that shape subjects' lives. Evidence of this continuity is also detectable in the *management of relations*, in the offline establishment of relational groups, and in the proximity and two-way movement between the two systems of experience.

- The **relation plays a central role** in the way in which the digital world is inhabited. This is revealed at all levels of the investigation, particularly with regards to:

  o The *adoption of technologies*, which for many occurs on an imitative basis, and for the most part is also linked to a fear of social exclusion.

  o *Uses*, which are always strongly oriented towards relations, both when these are geared towards specific and circumscribed or "instrumental" (for example organizational) goals and when they are more "environmental". Although we can note more individual ways of inhabiting the web (as a space of performance, reference or entertainment), the relational uses are the most current, significant and pronounced. In particular, the *phatic* use (chatting simply for the purpose of maintaining communication) proved to be central to constructing and stabilizing the "common place" and the sense of "being with" that transcends both instrumentality and individualism.

  o The *management of identity,* which does not consist in either a narcissistic exhibition of a person's own individuality or their concealment behind phoney masks, but in the meticulous forging of their profile that is attentive to others and perhaps more inclined towards standardization than extravagance so as to ensure a harmonious inclusion within the environment.

  o The *management of the social network*, in which the digital environment allows one to handle complexity, both in the most invested forms (*in depth management*) and in ordinary management (*management of maintenance*). We also discovered that *trust* plays a central role in the *widening of social circles*, often through the mediation of an offline friendship that acts as guarantor.

  o The *meanings of technologies*, which are constructed on the basis of "proximity to the self" and therefore according to the level of "intimacy" (which can refer to the contents of what is said, who can be reached through the different platforms, and to what extent each of these platforms is important for the individual concerned). The research found that the mobile phone, followed by MSN, are the most "intimate", while Facebook represents a low level of intimacy.

From these initial findings, it has been possible to identify four different types, or "profiles" of users. The differences between these profiles reflect how young people position themselves in relation to four axes, two of which concern the type of use of communication technologies (instrumental and environmental), while the other two regard the way in which these technologies interact with young people's social networks (*dynamizing*, i.e. aimed at widening the networks of relations, or *stabilizing*, i.e. aimed at consolidating them). The four different profiles are: *the reserved (*who are distinguished by a use of technologies oriented towards consolidating a few strong offline networks of relations)*; the hypersocial (*whose use of technologies is oriented to improving the management of wide and differentiated networks of offline relations)*; the collectors* (whose use of technologies is oriented to widening online relations mainly in a playful way)*; and *the convivial* (whose instrumental use of technologies is aimed at maintaining and widening friendship networks both offline and online). With the exception of the "collectors", who display a more superficial and self-centred approach to the digital environment, all the other profiles indicate a strong investment in relations and an awareness of the online/offline distinction of their space of experience.
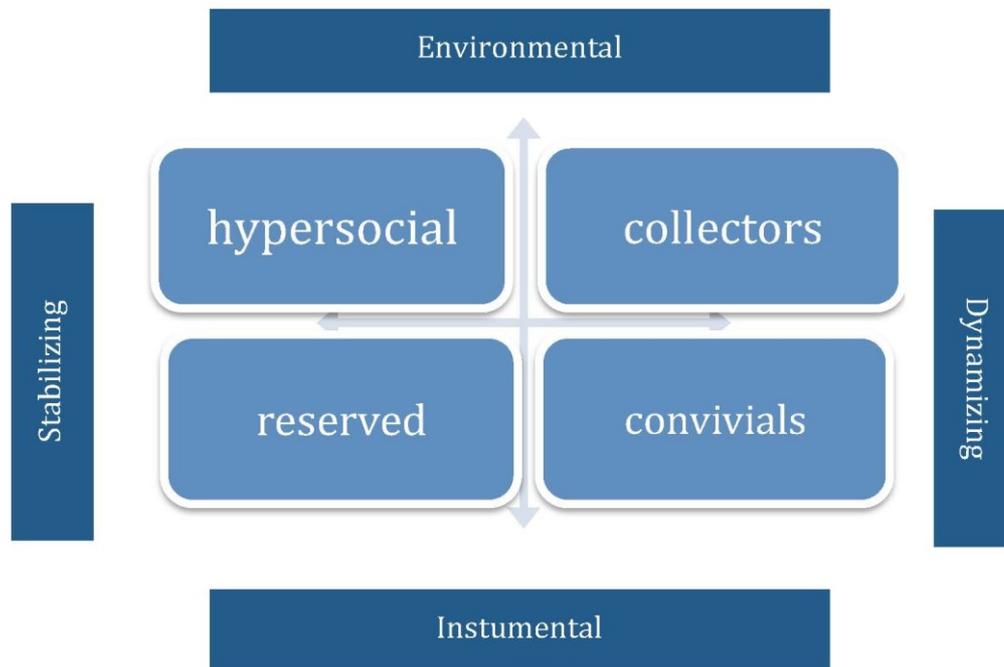
These emerging results allow us to trace a favourable ground for a **new digital humanism**, particularly when we take into consideration the capacity of the young people interviewed to shape this environment and to make the most of opportunities that nurture relations. These relations, in contrast to our expectations, are not ephemeral or tied to circumstances, but are long-lasting and stable. The **maintenance of the common place for meetings and meaningful relations**, that are often rooted in a distant past, is one aspect that clearly comes to light in the research. While there are numerous risks (such as the superficiality of conversation, a degree of conformism that comes with refusing to take sides in order not to disturb the harmony of the group, the predilection for peers and like minds and the simultaneous lack of desire to engage with anything considered to be different, a tendency towards alignment and uniformity, and, lastly, a difficulty to pass from the personal to the public level), there are nevertheless many elements – the recognition of the limits of mediated communication and the irreplaceable experience of co-presence, the centrality of the relation and the ability to make it last over time, the willingness to listen, the capacity to keep company on an everyday basis and during moments of change, to look after and enliven the common place, to consider the behaviour of others and to share one's personal sphere – that are ultimately conducive to the humanization of the digital world.