

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA MAINTAINED SOCIALITY IN THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to reflect on how, during the digital era, new forms of social isolation have emerged, quite different from the forms we found in other pandemics, before the rise of social networking. Through the use of images and information, this research aims to outline similarities between the Covid19 pandemic and earlier pandemics (specifically the Spanish flu) in terms of containment practices. We will also illustrate how the photos and testimonies that people shared online during this period have led to the interpretation of social networks as a social environment where self-representation and sociability take place.*

Key words: *Covid19, social isolation, relationship, social network sites, digital sociability.*

1. Premise: Epidemics and Pandemics, the Historical Ebb and Flow of Social Exclusion and Isolation

Reasons and the wilful pursuit of the problems related to a pandemic such as Covid19, arise from the perception of a contradictory yet inexorable relationship between epidemic and modernity, inspiring the need for a deepening within our more general reflection. The current Covid19 crisis has brought to light the borderless diffusion of such viruses and prompted institutions such as WHO to enforce social isolation as a way to contain the expansion of the virus.

The way in which citizens re-organise in relation to these interventions, adapting to restrictions on freedom and mobility in national and international territories, has apparently overcome old forms of social isolation in unprecedented ways. We must say apparently, since the effects of certain restrictions, at least for now, cannot be estimated or predetermined. Hopefully soon however, when the virus has been eradicated, it will be possible to readdress the topic through *sociological imagination* (Mills, 1959).

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We are often convinced that the events and manifestations of any particular period in our lives are unprecedented. Even if we can see the historical roots of a situation, we feel that our experience differs from that of the past. This kind of assumption distorts the interpretation of the processes affecting the individual, and this is exactly the case here.

Disease has marked human history over time and can be identified from the onset as fear: fear of getting sick, fear of evil and fear of the disease itself. Disease crystalizes an individual's uncertainty about the future as well as their ability to bear the risk, and the possibility that what has shattered the personal identity and physical health of others could harm them as well. The emotional charge of an epidemic is that it terrifies its subjects even before its manifestation, and it continues to subvert personal freedom by highlighting vulnerabilities and risk. This occurs in a different way than in death, but almost according to the same assumption, which is that when a danger enters the scenario, a series of behaviours (some of which may be specific to epidemics) emerge to reinforce a negative response. This result can shake the rationality of the subject who then abandons himself to the emotion of the situation, or to the anxiety that accompanies it. This fear, manifested on an individual level, is part of a collective behaviour that reacts to threats through questioning, or the lack thereof, to provoke collective rationality. This emotion, the sum of common sensitivities and dramas, is at the root of the current pandemic, as well as every epidemic in history.

Defining a disease is a prerequisite for dealing with it, in its general characteristics and its particular manifestations. Since the term pandemic refers to the collective manifestation of a disease that spreads rapidly by contagion, one can easily understand how the contagion element has an underestimated premise. The subjective or objective behaviours of others and how the disease's potential can therefore be (and has been) countered from the outset through various forms of restrictions and exclusion, of custody and imprisonment, manifested or adopted at this time beginning in Italy with the DPCM³ in March 3, 2020, rules that are gradually being adopted in Europe and around the world. Defining illness is a prerequisite for dealing with it, in its general characteristics and in its particular manifestations, which is why a general definition of illness is significant.

2. Object: Method

In order to formulate general interpretative categories of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemics, we have carefully considered the role of epidemics, and their specificity, throughout history. This is not to reconstruct the history of epidemics, but rather an attempt to find relationships and correlations between them.

Here we would like to reflect on two elements: first, the similarities and differences between the Covid19 pandemic and previous epidemics - in particular the Spanish flu -

³ Italian acronym for Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers.

based on the informative capacity of the images rather than historical analysis. As Secondulfo points out, when we isolate and freeze a fragment of reality, it is subject to subsequent in-depth analyses (Secondulfo, 1993). The second point of reflection is the myriad of new forms of identity and sociality experienced by people during the lockdown and immediately thereafter. For this we have used Photography which can be viewed from two perspectives: 1) a complex of sociological methodology and 2) as a text to be evaluated, analysed and decoded (Banks, 2007; Rose, 2014). Both views imply the assumption that photographs offer a representation of knowledge and a connection to empirical truth.

Photographs have become the most common visual data in a variety of studies using visual methodology. This fact demonstrates their great potential in describing and explaining various phenomena, in our case, in analysing the new forms of sociability during SarsCoV2.

In this study we have chosen to show a series of images that illustrate or symbolize individual daily lives during the lockdown. We have collected a number of visual materials from the Internet. We have maintained the subject's anonymity by eliminating any details that could be used to identify them. We explore specifically the use of self-photography as a participatory visual technique to describe and understand the subject's view of their own space, time and life.

Many of the most important parts of daily life are often left unexpressed, which is why we turn our attention to the lens of social life that occurs just outside the boundaries of daily life. Self-photography allows participants to show and interpret their life worlds. It has the potential to foster involvement (Robinson, 2011), as well as communicate feelings, meanings and understandings. In our reflection, words give meaning to images created during particular emotional states. The images produced offer the researchers an opportunity to analyse them and, as Pauwels states (2015, p. 217), "*...verbal clarification can clarify aspects that not even the creators of the image were aware of during the acquisition of the image*". Recognizing the ability of images to enrich cognitive construction processes, a sampling of images was selected by researchers through a snowball method, focused on specific categories that corroborate what we wanted to reflect in this work. Our sample is therefore not representative or random, but it is precise food for thought.

The main types of social documents collected by the participants in this study were pre-existing visual documents, specifically, images taken from social networks such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram, and the data collected were analysed through discussion. The basic assumption was that in different social worlds or social groups, it is possible to find different constructions of identity, and new forms of sociability despite the absence of a physical presence with others. During the process of encoding and analysing the collected data, we focused on both the content of the photographs and the explanations provided by the subjects. We selected fragments of text that accompanied each photograph, and those are transcribed beside the image in the captions below to give an interpretation of the social transformations taking place.

3. Change in Everyday Life during the Pandemic as Illustrated through Photographs

We divided the photographs taken by our participants into the following categories: *Memory, Taste Rediscovery, Sociability, Describing Daily Life, Celebrations and Irony.*

Since photos have been used as a substantial tool for reflection, a small selection of photographs from each category are illustrated in figures from 1 to 18, accompanied by descriptions of their content.

3.1. Memory

The first category of photos is about memory. These images show different times and settings, but it is interesting that the use of the masks is a consistent theme.



Fig. 1. *Couples wearing masks during the Spanish Flu epidemic versus during Covid19.*

Sources: Italian newspaper "Il Corriere Della Sera" and Internet



Fig. 2. *At the office with protections during the Spanish Flu epidemic versus during Covid19*

Sources: Italian newspaper "Il Corriere Della Sera" and Internet



Fig. 3. *The work of the nurses during the Spanish Flu epidemic versus during Covid19*

These photos of the past are taken from the Italian newspaper "Corriere Della Sera" and depict scenes of the Spanish Flu epidemic in Great Britain. The images reported by the newspaper were retrieved from the site genealogy platform "My Heritage"(2020).

The intent of showing these photos is not for social redemption, but rather to highlight how the current practices of containment of contagions are not new approaches presented in the time of Covid19. The other object of our research is to examine how this pandemic has been experienced "online". For this reason, it is crucial to discuss SarsCov2 in a way to contextualize the pandemic and the consequent forms of restrictions aimed at containing the contagion in an increasingly *digital society* (Lupton, 2015). During the pandemic, new social media provided informative support to citizens, similar to and at the same time greater than that of traditional media, for the scalability that distinguishes them (Boyd, 2010). On the other hand, the primary objective of this work is to highlight how during this dramatic period new social media allowed forms of everyday life determining the shift of some activities previously restricted to the offline field to the online sphere. Studying, working, practising sports, parties and so on were all possible despite restrictions thanks to interactions in digital environments. Through these platforms, it was somehow possible to avoid or at least to mitigate the negative effects of isolation such as anxiety, loneliness, depression, and domestic abuse among others. This interpretation is substantiated by the images we have culled amongst those traversing social media in this dramatic period.

In fact, the second group of photographs included here, show how the effects of social isolation during a pandemic have changed in the era of new social media. The following photos represent the remaining categories, namely: *Taste Rediscovery, Sociability, Describing Daily Life, Celebrations and Irony.*

3.2. Rediscovering the Joy of Cooking

It is interesting to note the huge number of food images shared online today. These do not only describe the activities involved in cooking and serving food, they also manifest sensory perceptions, and specifically a kind of rediscovery of taste and joy in cooking.



Fig. 4. "When you can't go to the cafe to eat a croissant"



Fig. 5. "Thanks to Covid I'm becoming an excellent pastry chef"



Fig. 6. "Sunday's Cake"

Source: WhatsApp, anonymous use

3.3. Sociability

Among the photos we selected, there were particular ones that attracted our attention because they illustrate individual needs for socialization between those living in the pandemic.



Fig. 7. "Going out in the time of Coronavirus"



Fig. 8. "For those who want to, we can meet here"

Source: Instagram, anonymous user

3.4. Storytelling in Daily Life

Many people felt a need to communicate about how they spent their days.

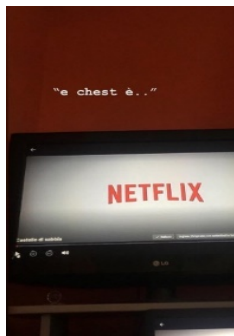


Fig. 9. "And that's it"



Fig. 10. "18.03.2020"



Fig. 11. "Friday 13 March 2020"

Source: Instagram, anonymous user

3.5. Celebrations

Another related category emerged which we have titled celebrations. Among the activities that users shared online, they often tried to organize online celebrations in lieu of the festivities that would have been shared in person if the quarantine were not imposed.

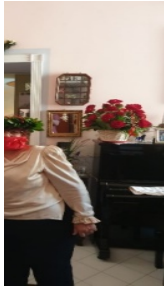


Fig. 12. *“My accomplishment!!!!!!”*

Source: WhatsApp, anonymous user



Fig. 13. *“50th birthday in the time of Covid”*



Fig. 14. *“Birthday in the time of Covi19”*

3.6. Irony

Our last category is not composed of personal photos, but rather images created by social media users. Through the sharing of cartoons, gifs and constructed images, these individuals used irony to describe the difficult situation they were experiencing.

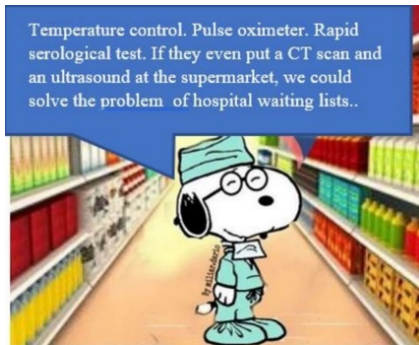


Fig. 15. *“Coming soon, Empty Hospitals!”*



Fig. 16. *“Poor us...my daughter sent this to me”*

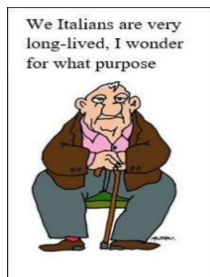


Fig. 17. *“They want to free us! It will not be... we will stay at home”*

Source: WhatsApp, anonymous user



Fig. 18. *“Parents are tired of DAD! ... they tried to defuse a difficult situation”*

As Aristotle (IV B.C.) stated “Man is by nature a social animal” who tends to associate him/ herself with other individuals in order to participate in society. Therefore, without deepening a discussion about sociality as a primary instinct or the result of needs which determine the development of that feeling, as Darwin (1872) termed, *sympathy* towards one’s fellow humans; here we will discern that the human being is a social animal since society is the sine qua non condition for the definition of one’s own identity and sociality during this time.

In the era of interactive, digital and networked media and communication, the construction of personal identity becomes more complex. Digital users probably play a larger role in shaping their own online self-representations, as well as exploiting the ability to co-create common and group identities through narrative, interactivity, and the proliferation of audio-visual content generated by other online users (Cover, 2016). Thus, the nature of our relationship to Internet technologies, allows us to typify and evaluate the "sociality" of a collective through the evaluation of content produced by individual users, collected and distributed online. Similar services are configured remotely and organized as archives of third-party content, or purely social content. In this way, the content produced by individual users is collected and distributed online, allowing users themselves to develop relationships to them, for example by commenting. The content of individual users in fact, has gained additional value thanks to the contributions (comments, notes, photographs, etc.) of others. Nowadays, in the time of "social distancing", Web 2.0 becomes a tool for building relationships between individuals through the production and sharing of content. All current social media such as: Twitter, Tik Tok, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram etc are programs designed to maintain relationships, make video calls, organize virtual parties etc.

In summary, the flow of the images, such as those we have referenced here, demonstrate individuals need to be seen and heard in these times of social isolation (Feldman and Waltham-Smith, 2020). The pandemic created new forms of isolation and intensified the already existing forms of exclusion in which social networks had already been tools for allowing people *to be heard*. Actually, these new platforms offer ways to create representations in line with their own personal identity while building explicit virtual relationships, an online springboard for the activity of new users.

What is happening at the moment, is an acceleration and change in the patterns of Internet use from *prosumer* consumption - assumed within the economy and the process of civilization of the future (Toffler, 1981, p. 5), to *produsage*, an intermediate category between passive production and active consumption (Bruns, 2008, p. 21). This is a process in which everyone can acquire an unprecedented role within the cycle of production and consumption online.

The web is no longer the “web document” of its early days, when it was intended as a transmission channel to provide digital versions of printed documents (Forlizzi & Zimmerman Evenson, 2008, p. 21), instead we have all become a part of its processes - connected and structural - in which individuals and groups build shared meaning, through peer production and produsage (production and use) with the help of content,

community and network technologies (Erkkola, 2009, p. 83). In light of what has been expressed thus far, we cannot help but consider that "the evolution of the web is ... especially a sociological and economic fact", as John G. Breslin, Alexandre Passant and Stefan Decker (2009, p. 23) pointed to.

In fact, the term "social media" is primarily descriptive, aimed at highlighting the social use of technologies, rather than a technical, or technological revolution. The real step forward here is the ever widening access to social areas previously outside communication technologies, as well as their progressively ubiquitous role in the daily life of individuals.

Howard Rheingold (1987, now 2008) described the exchange of ideas through online message boards, coining the term "virtual communities". Consequently, we can argue that emails, chats and message boards are a form of social media. Marshall McLuhan (1964) speaks of media as *extensions of the self* and pointed out that all new technologies are part of it. He also considered speech, electricity and language as media to help people communicate. In this interpretation, media also refers to the tools used for communication, and therefore to online and offline modes. These were well described by Gottschalk (2015), at a time when the subjects were socially distanced for reasons other than a contagion. Today, media has also become a useful tool for maintaining relationships (online parties in the time of covid-19), continuing with work (smart-working), and the continuation of services such as education.

The World Wide Web that was imagined by Tim Berners - Lee (1998), was a proposal for a global hypertext system, not a pure act of engineering. Today, more than ever, we see it realized; that project, that dream, the Internet connection, a space for information to be shared, and a place where relationships are maintained through the sharing of that information. In other words, the primary function of social media is diffusion through social interaction. Its users publish content and consume content created by others and with others. Production and consumption take place as shared experiences through interconnected activities and real-time conversations.

A number of concepts have been used up to this point to describe the processes taking place on the social web, and it is our duty to clarify that in this study we will mostly refer to one of the most famous examples of social media: *Social Networking Sites* (SNS), which allow individuals to maintain their social networks. These were defined by Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison (2008) on the basis of three functions: building (semi) public profiles within a limited system, creating lists of connected users, and the visualization and translation of these link lists, in a very functional description. Despite this explicit statement, social networking sites are implicitly defined by the interactions of the people who use them (Breslin, Passant and Decker, 2009, p. 21). In other words, sociality is the cornerstone which, in social networking sites, is not simply achieved by way of tools able to create individual user profiles the links between them, but rather through the construction of "socio- technical systems" (Coenen, Van den Bosch & Van der Sluys, 2009, p. 620), able to structure and maintain relationships with a specific meaning in the social reality of their users. Social networking systems are web-based

and aimed at creating and maintaining special relationships between people (*ibidem*). Since 2000 the online social network has also been studied as a “social hyperlink” (Adamic, 2008), emphasizing that these connections are not only related to information, but also to people. Technically, the online representation of an individual’s social network is referred to as the “social graph” (Coenen, et al. quoted).

In addition to the networking aspects, more detailed definitions of social media, such as the analysis of Jussi-Pekka Erkkola from 2009 underlines the shift from the link between individuals to the objects of their interaction. Jyri Engeström spread the concept of the "social object", and that it is wrong to think that social networks are composed only of people, also because social networks are made up of people connected by a shared social object such as an interest in animals, or something inanimate like hobbies, music, etc. Today, this object is a virus called Covid19. This new social object is similar to the "boundary object" which Leigh Star and Griesemer described in 1989, that is an object with no fixed meaning, and subject to interpretation by individuals which changes from one context to another.

The social object in a SNS can be a photo or text, but it may also be more abstract or prepared specifically for sharing online. Ultimately, it is the reason why users interact with each other. This is the theory of Engeström and Blackler, an “object - centred on sociality” (Engeström & Blackler, 2005): which highlights the ways that social objects become the most important aspects of sociality in social media interactions. They carry the potential to trigger development activities and the dynamics of interaction, facilitated by technological artifacts designed to communicate, it is the social objects proliferated in this period - in our case study images - closely linked to the theme of Covid19, that initiated our line of research and reflection.

4. Final Remarks

At first glance, it is inevitable to note similarities in the current depiction of Covid19, and the older image which represents the Spanish flu; albeit with differences indicative of medical progress. On the other hand, it is also clear that the photos captured during this pandemic do not represent only the occurrence or the scene, but rather they intentionally highlight the subjects who take and share the images, that is the intersubjective experience of the subject. The visual material that is generated through social media is therefore of particular interest for sociological investigation, as images become a tool for relationships and relationships become images (Boccia Artieri, 2015, p. 15). Moreover, the images circulating on social media, highlight a link between the use of social networks and the traces of individual lives in a process of telling about *self*. This emerges through the publication and sharing of images on these platforms.

Ravi K. Vatrappu (2007) described his more specific construction of *technological intersubjectivity* (TI) as “the experience of being with others through technology supported by interactions” (Vatrappu, 2007, p. 4).

Sociality through interactive artifacts is first and foremost an intersubjective experience, in which services are assigned with meaning based on the individual users' experience. These are subject to a role-taking process as social actors - by framing of the situation, based on the value of the interactions - which mediate the continuous negotiation of symbolic values between the participants, while everything is facilitated by a technological infrastructure that allows the representation of interpersonal connections through which participants can produce and consume social objects and spread that common process of prosumption.

Gottschalk (2015, p. 20) remembered: If manipulation experiments in mass emotional contamination are symptomatic of the future, this new mode of interaction requires prolonged attention and critical intervention. As it often happens, we may build hypotheses about the future without any reflection or communication on the changing conditions of life in the present moment. It is wrong, not to reflect on all the implications and changes taking place before developing recommendations or conclusions. Certainly, it is necessary to continue to think of communication as a form of relationship building between subjects who together construct their existence, but it is equally important to reflect on the solitary processes of interaction between individuals and their media tools. These are more and more often their primary companion, in the solitude of which the communicative process had rarely thought to be a central instrument, assuming, in some cases, its personification.

This argument gives rise to further reflections on the uneven presence of some subjects within these communicative and relational processes. Female subjects, senior citizens, or those in small communities are at the centre of inequality in terms of access to technology, and in some cases, this exacerbates the situation of social isolation that they have already experienced during the pandemic. In the awareness of a deep ambivalence available in these new areas of communication, individuals find themselves in a network of interactions aimed equally at the development of democracy and control. Given the huge number of interactions, many users will send standardized messages rather than personal ones, thus making the entire system similar to telemarketing in the past... "which at times risks giving the conversation and the meeting a repetitive character" (Illouz, 2007, p. 127). The question is open, and individuals are the essential actors in it.

As Takahashi recalled in 2011 "...a complex combination of hope and fear has developed" (Takahashi, 2011, p. 70), describing the ways that people need to interact, to see each other in person after this experience of restrictions on personal freedom and personal mobility. Individuals need to once again share time and space with one another without limits on social relations, hugs and intimate relationships. In the words of Hall, people, while appreciating the opportunities the Internet provides, networks and devices that keep us in relational connection, it is just as important to re-evaluate beauty, opportunities, the need to see each other, to look each other in the eyes, to perceive the smells of others, the moods, a return to normality and the rediscovery of face to face. Therefore, they continue to feel the need for physical contact, encounter,

and gaze. But in times when this is not possible, the instrument that represented the new solitudes of contemporary times, became an instrument to maintain social relations, however virtual. At this point, what we have tried to demonstrate - through photographic support - that although pandemics have always existed, a crucial difference today is the management of isolation and social relations by way of new virtual spaces, and reorganization of networks, as well as the slowing of time, different from the normal frenzy of daily life. Networks have inevitably marked a change in the patterns of social relations. We are alone, but we perceive that we are together.

As we have tried to demonstrate so far, it is clear that online environments during the pandemic have become places of interaction through the representation of *self*, but at the same time it is our responsibility to consider that the lack of access to technology and media outlets has created a new type of inequality and discrimination in which traditional knowledge and relationality are unsuitable and unsustainable. This total or partial estrangement from such socializing mechanisms creates new forms of exclusion, related to unfamiliarity, possessions, and difficulties in using the Net that make the subjects new "marginal individuals" (Park, 1928) within the era of Covid19.

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