'NO MORE BIRTHDAY GREETINGS ON MY FACEBOOK WALL, PLEASE.'
SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM USAGE PATTERNS, USER PERCEPTIONS, AND
IDIOMS OF PRACTICE AMONG YOUNG ITALIAN USERS

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When considered as cultural artefacts, the internet as a whole along with each individual digital platform undergo a complex process of ongoing negotiation of their meanings and of the related usage norms and practices. In such a context, 'proper' usage, as socially perceived, derives from the negotiation between each platform's affordances and constraints (Norman, 2013), and user perceptions and social usage norms. While existing literature on social network sites (SNSs) has mainly focused on single platforms, or on the comparison between different platforms, in order to highlight such perceptions and usage norms, as well as the tactics users employ in everyday life (de Certeau, 1984), we adopt a media ecological approach (Barnes, 2008; Boase, 2008; Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2015) in this paper, and consider the wide variety of platforms that people use in their everyday lives (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

The intersections between platform affordances and constraints on the one hand, and user perceptions and social usage norms on the other, can be understood through the concept of *media ideologies*, as proposed by Gershon (2010). Media ideologies are "people's beliefs about how a medium communicates and structures communication" (Gershon, 2010, p. 21). Media ideologies are not intrinsically true or false, but people are guided by them when using digital communication tools. Media ideologies are often shared among smaller or larger groups of users and are related to *idioms of practice*, as "people figure out together how to use different media and often agree on the appropriate social uses of technology by asking advice and sharing stories with each other" (Gershon, 2010, p. 6). While idioms of practice are built and negotiated collectively, they are not universally shared among a specific population, nor are they explicitly addressed by users, thus sometimes generating misunderstandings among

different users. Moreover, both social media architecture (Papacharissi, 2009; boyd, 2011), and idioms of practice are changing rapidly over time. For instance, by analysing SNSs, boyd underlines that people build their communication strategies both by taking advantage of such affordances and by further shaping this architecture (boyd, 2011).

Exploring user perceptions and idioms of practices: our research project

In order to explore such dimensions, we conducted focus groups with young Italian people living in Rome. We chose this technique given that social norms and usage practices are socially negotiated, and because we aimed to detect not only each individual's perceptions, but also their sharing and negotiating processes. We first conducted 4 focus groups in 2012 involving high school students aged 18–20. Moreover, as norms and practices seemed to be changing rapidly over time, we decided to replicate the study in 2015 and 2016, conducting 6 additional focus groups involving university students living in the same city, and born in the same years as the first respondents.

Our research questions are the following:
– Do young people have a precise representation (ideology) of the peculiarities of different digital platforms?
– Do they perceive some platforms as more appropriate for specific tasks, contexts, or relational patterns?
– With respect to a specific platform, are there communicative practices (tools, actions, etc.) that are perceived as more intimate than others?
– How are such representations built and shared among their peer groups?
– How do they verbalize their representations of different platforms and the motivations for such perceived differences?
– Do such representations change over time? If so, how?

In conducting the focus groups, we offered a set of different scenarios such as birthday greetings (both from/to close friends and acquaintances), the organization of a large party, a huge disagreement with a friend/acquaintance to be faced, etc., and asked respondents how they would act in such different situations. At first, we did not mention any specific social media platform, or digital communication as a whole, letting the respondents freely elaborate on the proposed stimuli. After the respondents spontaneously introduced social media platforms, usage experiences, misunderstandings related to different media 'ideologies', and appropriate/inappropriate usage patterns were also discussed.

Results show that young people both follow group-specific norms and more individualized usage patterns. All of our respondents, however, show that they have a clear picture of what can be defined as an appropriate use of social media platforms in relation to specific purposes, contexts, tie strength, etc. Among the dimensions that have been used to motivate such perceived differences are: publicity, communicative bandwidth, synchrony vs. asynchrony, investment in terms of time and money, etc. Moreover, even younger people seem to attribute a high emotional value to face-to-face interaction, often opposing a critical distance (at least in terms of self-representation)

towards SNSs. Furthermore, the diffusion of 'new' platforms (such as Whatsapp, or Instagram) which were not available or widespread in Italy when we realized the first focus groups, comes with specific media ideologies, and reconfigures the whole (personal) media ecology, sometimes redefining the role of 'older' platforms. Moreover, shared usage norms appear to be a dynamic and constantly negotiated process: what our respondents used to perceive as an appropriate behavior in the past (e.g., birthday greetings on close friends' Facebook walls) is no longer accepted as legitimate.

Moreover, results highlight the specific norms and usage patterns that appear to organize user choices when interacting with friends and family (also) through social media. Far from exerting only oppositive tactics towards a social media platform's desiderata, but also far from passively integrating its *preferred reading,* users show that they are involved in a constant negotiation (Hall, 1973) both with the platform's affordances and constraints and with their peers. We believe that such a framework could be applied in different domains in order to gain a deeper understanding of user representations and practices, and thereby also avoiding any technological deterministic approach.

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