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Virtuality and Solidarity: Exploring the New Frontiers of Social Love in the Sign of Collective Wellbeing

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Abstract: This paper aims to investigate the concept of love and solidarity in human relationships, especially in their manifestation within virtual communities. Solidarity, understood as the highest feeling of connection between individuals, finds new forms of expression in the digital age, where physical distances are overcome by the ability to communicate and share experiences in an immediate and simplified way. The aim is to analyze the renewed sociological perspective on how to explore human interactions as a practical implication of the transition from physical to digital space, which, in spite of divergences, does not seem to reduce the quality of social ties but rather offers new ways of connection and interaction. Indeed, digital technologies can positively influence social dynamics by fostering the construction of community networks that act as catalysts for collective intelligence and knowledge sharing in the pursuit of collective wellbeing.

Keywords: love; solidarity; community; digital

1. Introduction

The present research aims to analyze the various manifestations of love, particularly in its noblest form of solidarity, in relation to what are the changes of the digital age. The investigation highlights how, despite the increasing fusion of reality and virtuality, the human capacity to express solidarity remains unaffected.

This phenomenon suggests that technology can amplify our social interactions without eroding the intrinsic value of human connection and altruism.

Human emotions and social relationships are intricately woven into the fabric of society and profoundly influence the concept of solidarity.

In the context of technological progress, this connection becomes even more evident. Indeed, technology has the power to connect people in previously unimaginable ways, enabling global and immediate solidarity. However, it can also lead to a feeling of disconnection and isolation, challenging our ability to empathize and act in solidarity.

Solidarity, fueled by empathy and understanding, can drive technological innovation toward applications that improve collective wellbeing and strengthen human bonds.

Love is something that, if recognized and valued in society, can help create a more cohesive and supportive community, where individual differences are celebrated rather than suppressed. In a world that often rewards individualism, contemporary sociology through careful analysis of the facets of love as social interaction lays the groundwork for recognizing the importance of each other and cultivating relationships based on genuine caring and mutual support.

This altruistic approach can be seen as a tool for interpreting and improving social reality, encouraging people to look beyond their own immediate needs and consider collective wellbeing.

2. Solidarity as an Expression of Social Love: Variations and Meanings

Emotions and social interaction form the building blocks of human experience, profoundly influencing both the individual and the community.

Sociology, in exploring these aspects, reveals how emotions are not mere internal states, but active components of social life, capable of strengthening bonds, motivating actions and shaping social structures.

Social interaction, on the other hand, is the ground on which emotions manifest and transform, becoming vehicles of meaning and collective identity.

Understanding, then, the relationship between emotions and interactions allows us to grasp the dynamics that govern human relationships and promote a more empathetic and cohesive social fabric, where solidarity and compassion are not just ideals but everyday practices.

In this context, sociology does not merely describe, but serves as a tool for social transformation, aiming for a deeper understanding that can translate into concrete actions for collective wellbeing.

Love, in its purest essence, transcends time and cultures, evolving into different forms and meanings.

Indeed, if at one time the word "philia" represented a deep love bond, today we can interpret love as a supportive interaction, a mutual support between individuals.

In this perspective, solidarity manifests itself not only in personal relationships, but also as the foundation of larger communities, where empathy and mutual support become the foundation for a shared and enriching existence.

Nevertheless, it is true that classical sociology has often neglected this aspect, focusing its attention on broader social structures and issues of order, conflict and social functions.

However, over time, the importance of love as a social force has been recognized and studied more deeply by contemporary theorists such as, for example Zygmunt Bauman (2001) who has explored love in terms of social exchange, affective ties that can influence the structure of society. This shift reflects a broader understanding that personal emotions and interpersonal relationships play a crucial role in shaping the social fabric.

This renewed theoretical interest manifests itself in a reconnaissance of love beyond the traditional sphere of Eros and the couple relationship by extending to the investigation of it as a sociological phenomenon affecting social relations.

In classical sociology, Georg Simmel was one of the few to take an original approach to the study of love, considering it a social phenomenon that contributes to the construction of sociality from the deepest parts of each individual.

Moreover, according to the author, addressing the construction of sociality on the basis of an approach that adopts the feeling of love as a starting point has the advantage of taking into account how the subject relates to the external environment by expanding the scope of human inclinations.

In this respect, he points out how every social fact is the result of relationships, stable or transient, deep or superficial, between individuals. One of the essential points of his thought is the concept of social interaction or the reciprocity effect, which is fundamental to the construction of solidarity within a society (Bagnasco et al. 2004).

He analyzes altruistic and unconditional love as a fundamental principle that finds expression in the relationship with others and in building the social fabric. This kind of love is manifested through actions that transcend self-interest and are rooted in collective wellbeing. In this respect, then, love becomes a social action that takes on meaning beyond the individual, becoming a shared symbolic construction that reflects the values and ideals of a community. In this sense it is understood, therefore, as both a personal feeling and a collective commitment as a bridge between the individual and society (Simmel 2001).

Sorokin's innovative approach also offered a methodology that can identify variables that can be observed and measured to understand, examine and interpret human behavior within social structures. Specifically, the penta-dimensional system (intensity, extent, duration, purity and appropriateness) devised by the author, aims to quantify and make empirically measurable the empirical manifestations of love, which is traditionally considered to be an abstract concept and difficult to define, to assess the impact within social structures (Sorokin 1954).

The empirical approach to love offers a lens through which we can observe and classify the different manifestations of this complex feeling. Through the classification of love-related activities and the analysis of those involved, it is possible to discern the behavioral patterns and combinations of relationships that prevail in different human communities. This method not only enriches the understanding of interpersonal dynamics but also provides tools by which to explore how love manifests itself in various social and cultural contexts.

In particular, the focus on the social aspect of love as an interaction between two or more people enables the conceptualization of this feeling as a characteristic related to altruism.

In other respects, the sociology of love is concerned with how love practices evolve in response to social changes, such as new communication technologies that transform how people connect and interact.

In contemporary sociology, the concept of agape has been used to denote relationship and social bonding, emphasizing a sense of community and mutual belonging. This interpretation aligns with the growing search for community and authentic connections in the modern era, where people seem to seek a sense of rootedness and collective identity. In an increasingly globalized and digital world, the need for belonging and meaningful relationships becomes a pillar for building resilient and supportive societies (Iorio 2013).

The evolution of communities and forms of social solidarity is a phenomenon that reflects the complexity of contemporary social dynamics. In response to reactive situations, new community configurations emerge that seek to build social bonds based on principles of inclusive solidarity. These new communities break away from the instrumental and calculative logic typical of many modern social relationships, proposing instead a model of surplus, where collective action exceeds individual expectations and calculations. Virtual communities, in particular, have shown exponential growth, becoming spaces where a kind of collective intelligence is built and common knowledge is shared, thus helping to alleviate the crisis of "real" communities and foster a sense of belonging that is more oriented toward group rather than individualistic goals.

Boltanski, in his sociological approach, explores different regimes of action and identifies agape as a form of social interaction. This type of interaction, characterized by selfless and altruistic love, represents one of the many ways through which individuals can relate within society (Boltanski 2005). Boltanski suggests that agape, while a meaningful regime of action, does not cover the full range of possible human actions, leaving room for a variety of other forms of interaction that reflect the complexity and richness of the social fabric. His analysis is notable for its attempt to move beyond the critical view of sociology, proposing instead a "sociology of critique" that values the critical capacities of ordinary actors in the controversies and conflicts of public life (Lévy and Feroldi 2000).

Agape, in its highest sense, is a form of love that transcends mere reciprocity and extends toward unconditional and sacrificial love (Iorio 2013).

For that matter, Simmel's analysis of forms of social interaction also makes it clear that love is a complex phenomenon that is not reduced to either selfishness or altruism. In fact, love preserves the individuality of the people involved, allowing them to draw closer without canceling each other out (Simmel 1989). This dynamic creates a unique bond that transcends the usual categories. Agape, or selfless love, is positioned outside these dichotomies, being a love that is based on a free and conscious choice to devote oneself to the other without expectations of reciprocity. In this way, love becomes an existence-enriching experience, offering a perspective that goes beyond the mere exchange of favors or unilateral dedication.

Agape, understood as selfless and unconditional love, finds new expression in virtual communities, where social interactions transcend physical boundaries.

Research on homo agapicus explores how this sentiment can positively influence relationships in a technological context, fostering a social bond that feeds on empathy and solidarity (Livolsi 1999).

This shift allows the individual to build his or her own personal community that can provide what traditional communities provide: support, sociability, information, social identity and a sense of belonging.

Sociological studies on the subject have highlighted how the evolution of communication technologies has made it possible to create and maintain deep social relationships even in the absence of physical contact.

On this point, for the purposes of the present research, the expression used by Maria Bakardjieva, "virtual togetherness", is of interest, and draws on her reflections on the ways in which the internet fits into people's daily lives (Bakardjieva 2003; 2005, pp. 165–86; Bakardjieva and Smith 2001).

According to the researcher, the concept of virtual togetherness serves to overcome the normative meanings underlying the idea of community, since the concept of community is only one of the possible ways in which online sociality can take shape.

In fact, the opposite of this virtual sociality is not "real" sociality, but rather the isolated consumption of digital goods and services, which as such lacks the characteristics of engagement with the other.

The aspect that comes to the fore is that, whatever form of sociality is adopted, subjects judge any content that is produced by the other members of the relationship, be it social, cultural, or economic, to be of value. In this respect, the digital space is conceived as a process that, depending on how needs are organized, satisfies and the social value attributed to them. This determines different types of digital social relationship according to a continuum between the consumption mode and the community mode.

In particular, the communal (communitarian) model, that is, the use of the internet as a social space, corresponds, to all intents and purposes, with a community with respect to which one can identify oneself or work out a feeling of belonging. In this case, the social and interpersonal aspect is absolutely dominant and identifies why the relationships established online are perceived as absolutely concrete and personal in the same way as any other face-to-face relationship.

Maffesoli (1988)'s reflection moves in the same direction, capable of accounting for the present and focusing on 'the analysis of new forms of sociality according to the dynamics of post-modern society.' His approach does not emphasize the role of technology in social change but on society itself as an engine of change.

This perspective makes it possible to understand social phenomena not only through broad categories, but also in their everyday and "micro" manifestation. He argues that postmodern society is characterized by an effervescence of the imaginary and a tendency toward tribalism, where the sharing of emotions becomes fundamental to social cohesion.

What assumes prominence is not the individualism of mass societies but the collective experiences and human interactions that define daily life, as keys to community dimensions and social change. From this perspective, new forms of community are underpinned by more authentic human relationships that are less mediated by impersonal structures, since individuality is valued within a cohesive and shared social fabric.

In the book *The Time of Tribes*, the author describes various forms of social aggregations that he refers to as tribes. These tribes are based on shared passions rather than feelings of belonging to social class or geographic spaces and are characterized by informal ties and a strong collective identity. In this way, a desire emerges to explore cultural dynamics with greater objectivity, in the manner of the scientific method, in order to fully understand the impact and significance of mass culture in contemporary society. In this context, myths become representations of collective living, "sparkles that illuminate well or ill the path, individual or collective, of which all human existence is made" (Maffesoli 1988).

His vision, then, anticipates a reconfiguration of social ties that could lead to a renewed understanding of being together in contemporary globalized society, the glue of which is shared emotions and interests that nurture new forms of solidarity and collective identity.

He proposes that contemporary society is experiencing a kind of rebirth of premodern values, emerging anew in response to the challenges of the present. A vision this is opposed

to the idea of continuous, unidirectional progress and suggests rather a transition, in which old and new values are intertwined.

The reflection fits into the broader debate on networks and emotional capitalism, and highlights how modern technologies, including the internet, can foster a return to more archaic and communitarian social forms.

In parallel, Eva Illouz (2007) examines the concept of emotional capitalism, a critique of the conventional perception of capitalism as the domain of bureaucratic rationality at the expense of intimate and authentic relationships. Illouz argues that, on the contrary, capitalism has generated an intensely emotional culture both in the world of work and in the family and personal spheres. Economic relationships have become deeply emotional, while intimate relationships are increasingly influenced by economic and political models of negotiation, exchange and equity. This process of intertwining the economic and emotional spheres is referred to by Illouz as emotional capitalism, and it finds expression in different social spheres, to support groups and online dating sites. This highlights an aspect that is not always evident, namely, that of virtual communities, subjects characterize their actions not so much by the selfish dimension, which is also present, nor even the altruistic dimension insofar as they are not bent on helping others as an end in itself. Rather, they are subjects who, although unaware, through their contribution or use of knowledge or services, made available by other users, contribute to creating a virtuous circle of reciprocity of love. The convergence of such reflections offers a multidimensional perspective on our time, where modernization is not seen as an abandonment of premodern values, but as their readjustment and reworking. In this context, networks and emotional capitalism represent two sides of the same coin: on the one hand, the search for belonging and community in an increasingly globalized and technological world; on the other, the growing importance of emotions in defining economic and personal relationships.

3. Methodology and Sociological Analysis: A Systemic View

The concept of solidarity in the digital context presents an intriguing challenge for modern sociology. Solidarity, traditionally understood as a social bond that unites individuals, takes on new forms in virtual communities. Indeed, the latter, despite the lack of face-to-face interactions, can act as catalysts for solidarity, creating spaces for collective intelligence and shared knowledge in the name of strengthening social ties and mitigating individual loneliness.

Digital sociology aims to analyze how the value of solidarity is manifested and transformed in these virtual spaces, considering both positive potential and possible negative implications.

The present study aims at a comparative examination of the literature on social ties that explores in depth the changes in interpersonal dynamics, highlighting how social, technological and economic transformations have rewritten the rules of human interaction.

The approach of classical sociology still offers vital insights into these phenomena, but there is a clear need for an updated analysis that takes into account new realities. This implies a broader comparative analysis and a focus on the long-term effects of these changes on social ties.

The challenge lies in balancing respect for established theories with the methodological innovation needed to interpret the present and anticipate the future of social relations.

Modern sociology, while drawing on the roots of classical thought, is evolving to understand the complexity of contemporary societies: social life is no longer seen merely as an aggregation of individuals, but as a dynamic process of differentiation and association.

This process is fueled by the distinction between individuals, which in turn creates the conditions for new forms of association. In this context, sociology observes how social relations develop in a circular and relational manner, influencing and being influenced by the larger social context. Thus, from this perspective, it is recognized that association among individuals is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond the mere sum of the

parts, becoming a sui generis mode of being, unique and irreducible to previous models or theories.

Pre-modernity and modernity are characterized by substantially different forms of solidarity. In the first respect, following the scientific analytical method Émile Durkheim introduced the concepts of mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity to describe these two types of social cohesion (Durkheim 1971). Mechanical solidarity is typical of premodern societies, where similarity and shared values and traditions unite individuals. In contrast, organic solidarity emerges in modern societies as a result of the division of labor and economic interdependence, which binds people into a network of cooperation necessary for the functioning of society (Weber 1999). Ferdinand Tönnies developed a similar analysis with his concepts of Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society), where the former is based on personal and affective ties and the latter on more impersonal and functional social ties (Tönnies 1963). These sociological theories offer a lens through which to view the shift from solidarity based on homogeneity to solidarity based on specialization and interdependence.

Modern solidarity manifests itself through the free choice of individuals to join together in associations, which are the beating heart of civil society. These organizations not only perpetuate traditions of solidarity but also renew them, creating new forms of cooperation and mutual support. In this way, solidarity becomes a conscious and intentional act, reflecting social evolution and people's ability to respond to contemporary challenges with collective and meaningful action.

Max Weber, in his exploration of the distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft proposed by Ferdinand Tönnies, explores the complexity of human social action. Weber identifies four types of social actions: affective, traditional, rational in relation to values, and rational in relation to ends. These categories represent the universal capacities of homo sapiens and are fundamental to understanding the processes of rationalization in history. 'Community' (Gemeinschaft) is characterized by personal and affective ties, often rooted in tradition, while 'society' (Gesellschaft) refers to more impersonal and rational ties, typical of modern societies. Weber emphasizes that communal social action is based on subjectively perceived common belonging, which can be emotional or traditional.

The distinction between community and society, formulated by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, remains a fundamental concept in modern sociology. According to Tönnies, community (Gemeinschaft) is characterized by close and personal social ties, where members feel connected by emotional bonds and common traditions. In contrast, society (Gesellschaft) is based on more impersonal and formal relationships, often governed by contractual agreements and laws. This theory highlights how human interactions evolve according to social and cultural context, influencing the structure and quality of social relationships.

The evolutionary reading of classical theorizing has come to the fore in modern society exploring the transition from community structures to the more complex structures of industrial societies, and today all the more so in contemporary society in relation to the prevalence that must be acknowledged to digital/virtual communication that shapes the concept of social interaction and consequently community.

Emerging as a field of study, digital sociology aims to explore how traditional processes are transformed in digital contexts toward a deeper and more nuanced understanding of social dynamics, overcoming the limitations of dualistic approaches that tend to simplify the complexity of human relationships. From this perspective, it is crucial to understand how virtuality affects socialization, moving beyond traditional conceptions of community to embrace more fluid and dynamic forms of social interaction (McLuhan et al. 1967).

The approach to the study of the internet has generated several strands of research, each with its own perspectives and theoretical assumptions. One of the most interesting strands is one that draws on the deterministic tradition of Marshall McLuhan, who argued that media are extensions of humans and profoundly influence society and culture. In this context, the concept of "virtual," introduced by Pierre Lévy (1998), and that of "connective

intelligence," proposed by Derrick de Kerckhove in 1997, represent conceptual keystones. Lévy explores the idea of the virtual as a space of possibility, a place where identity can be redefined and where new forms of knowledge and relationship can emerge. De Kerckhove, on the other hand, focuses on connective intelligence, or the ability to share and amplify intelligence through digital networks by fostering new forms of cooperation and collective knowledge (McLuhan 1992).

These concepts have paved the way for new interpretations of how the internet can influence and transform society, suggesting that the network is not only a communication tool but also an environment that shapes human thinking and relationships. McLuhan's deterministic view, along with the ideas of Lévy and de Kerckhove, has influenced numerous studies investigating how technology changes social, cultural and economic dynamics, contributing to an understanding of digital space not only and not so much as a medium for transmitting information but as a site of social construction where new identities and communities are formed (Lyon 1988).

The evolution of digital technologies has transformed the concept of community, shifting human interaction from a physical to a virtual context, leading to the notion of classical community being considered outdated.

Several authors have addressed the concept of virtual community, Howard Rheingold, in his 1993 book *The Virtual Community*, explores the concept of virtual community, pointing out that these online communities are as real and varied as physical ones. Rheingold describes an environment in which people communicate, discuss, seek information, and organize politically. This pioneering work laid the groundwork for understanding how digital technologies can foster the formation of social and community ties despite physical distance.

Research indicates that, rather than replacing face-to-face interactions, online communities can enrich the social experience and strengthen existing relationships, and can create new connections that transcend geographic boundaries. In this way, virtual communities can effectively serve as an extension of our daily social interactions. In this respect, it is believed that the concept of virtual community is a false problem, as the internet, while being a different reality from the classically understood one, is not a substitute for community ties but rather a complement to them (Di Maggio et al. 2001).

The distinction between face-to-face and virtual communities emerges where the former are traditionally seen as a source of more direct and meaningful social relationships, while the latter can offer a sense of belonging that transcends physical boundaries. Indeed, according to some scholars, when face-to-face communities grow beyond a certain size, they may begin to exhibit characteristics of virtual communities, where ties are based less on physical proximity and more on shared interests and identities.

In this sense, it has been held that virtual space is a place where members may not establish a community bond based on social proximity but based on feelings of belonging (Wellman and Gulia 1999).

This means that digital and social network communities in digital spaces reveal a complexity that goes beyond the simple distinction between virtual relationships and face-to-face interactions. Indeed, research suggests that online identities are not separate from offline identities, but rather are complex extensions that reflect and influence individuals' real lives. Moreover, social identity theory highlights how individuals tend to form bonds and group identities even in virtual environments, challenging the idea that online relationships are less meaningful or authentic (Di Maggio et al. 2001). This perspective is supported by studies that recognize the internet as a space where organic forms of solidarity occur and where digital networks can positively influence social capital and communities. Therefore, virtual communities should not be seen as separate or less real, but as an integral part of contemporary social experience, which includes both online and offline interactions (Bakardjieva 2003).

In light of what has been said so far, it seems appropriate, therefore, to reconsider the digital space that is not divorced from the everyday dimension of the network (Miller and

Slater 2000), this is because the internet, being a medium of interpersonal mass communication, should be seen as a tool directed to the pursuit of social and cultural purposes (Matei and Ball-Rokeach 2002) and that is capable of combining these purposes from a micro dimension in the social use of the internet and a macro dimension that is typical of the media (De Kerchove 1997).

From this perspective, therefore, a greater opportunity for social interaction and growth can be fostered (Marinelli 2004).

4. From Community to Connection: The Evolution of Solidarity in the Digital Age

The premises of rhetorical analysis have helped provide the basis for understanding social dynamics through a lens that considers the interconnections and relationships among various elements in the renewed guise of "virtual society" by providing a perspective and direction for understanding the new form of interaction and, thus, transition from traditional solidarity, rooted in physical communities, to the modern solidarity manifested in virtual networks.

In addition, the examination of how virtual identities influence and are influenced by social relationships offers valuable insights and a continued focus on staying abreast of the ongoing evolution.

Pierre Levy highlights the potential of new social communities in increasing the collective intelligence of the subject, according to a constant process of construction and deconstruction, a journey through the "Space of Knowledge" that knows no geographical boundaries.

In such a perspective, man does not subject himself to the technological tool but directs it toward social purposes in the service of the community.

In contrast, other authors, point out that physical absence in virtual communities touches a fundamental aspect of human experience: corporeality. Although digital technologies have opened new frontiers in communication, allowing connections that ignore geographical distances, they cannot fully convey the communicative nuances of body language, consequently affecting the depth and authenticity of relationships (Terzo 1999).

Of the same opinion is Bauman, who has deeply explored the dynamics of modernity and post-modernity, highlighting how individualism and social fragmentation have eroded the foundations of traditional communities.

In his work *Liquid Life*, the author describes a society characterized by ephemeral relationships and a pervasive sense of insecurity, where individual identity is constantly tested by the changing conditions of globalization.

There emerges what is now called the loneliness of the modern individual, which now takes on the guise of the loneliness of the global citizen (Bauman 2003). There is an excess of individualism based on the dominant liberal conception of homo aeconomicus.

Luhmann, too, in his work *The Reality of Mass Media*, explored in depth the dynamics of social systems and the complexity of interactions within modern societies, describing a society in which communication becomes a highly selective process, governed by specific codes and a reduction in complexity, which is essential for managing social relations in increasingly complex and differentiated contexts.

Luhmann highlights how, in a functionally differentiated society, traditional solidarity is replaced by new forms of social ties, which are mediated by communicative systems and media, and where trust is no longer linked to specific individuals or groups, but rather to communicative processes and structures (Luhmann 1996). This leads to an increasing reliance on institutions and the media as mediators of social reality, resulting in increased perceptions of individual isolation and insecurity.

Turkle, who has explored in depth the dynamics of human relationships in the digital age, highlighting how technology has transformed the way individuals interact and perceive themselves. In her work *Together but Alone*, the author describes a society in which constant connection through digital devices has not only changed interpersonal relationships, but also contributed to a growing sense of isolation.

Turkle highlights how, despite the apparent closeness provided by technologies, individuals experience an unprecedented form of loneliness, where the superficiality of online interactions replaces deep and authentic bonds (Turkle 2011). We are witnessing a new form of digital individualism, in which personal identity is fragmented and constantly negotiated within virtual platforms, fueling what the author calls a loneliness in companionship.

Instead, in Cesareo and Vaccarini's reflection on the ideal types of man that, in various ways, have characterized historical–social eras, the one at the center of contemporary society is the homo civicus, as a responsible citizen who gives rise to responsible communities (Cesareo and Vaccarini 2006).

This model presupposes autonomous and responsible citizens who make choices and who act within two social spaces: one of a competitive type and one of a communal type. The latter, for what is relevant for our purposes, represents the place where solidarity between people, of a familial, political and civic nature, is expressed (Sennett 2000). However, the counterbalance is that the hierarchical and pyramidal power structure is replaced by more fluid, less rigid and obvious relationships that are more difficult to deal with (Sennett 2010). This is a consequence of the process of social change in which the hierarchical–pyramidal power structure is transformed into the network model. (Castells 1996). This is precisely the ambiguous and problematic face of globalization.

With respect to the latter profile, Marino Livolsi investigates how digital technologies affect human relations and perception of reality by offering a critical perspective on the social dynamics emerging in the digital age, an age in which "electronic shadows" can both enrich and distort our experience of the world.

In contrast, Rheingold (1993) has described virtual communities as social aggregations that emerge from the web when enough people conduct public discussions over an extended period, with a significant level of emotional involvement, to the point of creating a network of personal relationships in cyberspace.

In this new social situation, virtual space, becomes a characteristic place for the establishment of these new forms of collectivity and thus also a fundamental element of socialization.

As Simmel argued, the nature of space is profoundly human and social. It is not just a physical context, but a place charged with meaning, constructed and experienced through human interactions. This sociological view sees space as dynamic and vital, continually being formed and transformed through social practices. It is an arena where human relationships take place and manifest, and where individual and collective identity takes shape.

This is not to say that change has not generated an inclination toward individualistic rather than collective thrusts, but it does not exclude the idea that values with which to spontaneously identify, such as freedom and solidarity, emerge equally. Such concepts, however, are not new; in fact, Maffesoli pointed out in 1998 how modern society has fragmented into tribal groups. Maffesoli argues that mass culture has disintegrated, and that social life today takes place through fragmented tribal groups, organized around buzzwords, brands and slogans of consumer culture (Maffesoli 1998). This idea fits within the transformation of modern identities, which today we might call embodiment.

The need to consider the internet as an articulated communication tool is a further methodological consequence.

The growth of virtual communities, supported by the expansion of social networks, offers a new dimension of social solidarity and the relationship between virtual and real communities is complex, with divergent views on the effects of technologies on social cohesion. Some see virtual communities as a potential remedy to the crisis of real communities, while others see them as a symptom and a cause of that crisis. On this direction we can certainly also cite the thinking of Illouz, who introduced the theme of emotional capitalism, referring to particular meeting places that were depopulating online in the early 2000s, namely online marriage agencies, where the meeting takes place online but leads to a non-virtual relationship. The element of bodily sensitivity and imagination is

missing, almost commodifying the self and standardizing encounters by making them repetitive (Illouz 2006). Moreover, in his book *Why Love Hurts* he focuses on the notion of choice. The book makes the somewhat counterintuitive claim that one of the most fruitful ways to understand the transformation of love in modernity is through the category of choice. Illouz sees choice as the cultural hallmark of modernity because, in the economic and political spheres, choice embodies the two faculties that justify the exercise of freedom, namely rationality and autonomy.

The paradigm of society as a network, introduced by Manuel Castells, offers an innovative view of social structures and relational dynamics in the information age. This model emphasizes the importance of connections and interactions between individuals and groups, suggesting that networks of relationships can be powerful tools for understanding and intervening in complex social realities. Network intervention, therefore, becomes a means of facilitating collaboration and mutual support, promoting relational insights that reflect the interconnected nature of contemporary society.

His analysis focuses on the impact of globalization and large-scale computerization, highlighting how these forces have created new forms of interaction that transcend traditional boundaries of space and time. Castells has explored how information networks have restructured power, the economy and social life, resulting in a society in which connectivity and the flow of information have become essential. His theory highlights the growing importance of networks as new social morphologies, shaping not only economic and political relations but also individual and collective identities.

Jeremy Rifkin, in his book *The Empathic Civilization* (2009) investigates the relationship between empathy and technology.

Rifkin (2009) discusses how modern technologies, such as the internet and social media, have the potential to amplify empathy on a global scale, allowing people to connect with and understand the experiences of others around the world. He supports the thesis that empathy is a crucial element in progress toward a sustainable and inclusive global civilization. Rifkin (2009) argues that our ability to empathize with others is not only critical for social cohesion but is also an engine for innovation and cooperation on a global scale. According to Rifkin, modern technologies, such as the internet and social media, have the potential to extend our empathy across geographic and cultural boundaries, creating an interconnected network of shared experiences and stories, this global interconnectedness can lead to greater awareness of common challenges and foster a sense of collective responsibility toward the wellbeing of the planet and its peoples. Digital empathy, facilitated by instant communication and shared experiences, can help overcome the barriers of distance and isolation, enabling people to actively participate in solving global problems such as climate change, poverty and inequality.

Rifkin (2009) examines how the evolution of human consciousness and the growing ability to empathize have accompanied the historical development of societies, from small tribal communities to today's complex global network. He suggests that empathy is not only an emotional response, but also a cognitive process that enables us to understand and share others' perspectives, thus promoting collaboration and mutual aid.

Rifkin's (2009) idea of an empathic civilization is based on the belief that, as our capacity for connection expands, so does our ability to act with compassion and collective intelligence. This comprehensive empathic approach could be the key to addressing the challenges of our time, incentivizing positive change through understanding and joint action.

Jeremy Rifkin (2009) takes a novel approach that takes into account the ability of humans to relate to others empathically, perceiving their feelings, particularly suffering, as if they were their own. In light of this new approach, Jeremy Rifkin (2009) proposes a radical reinterpretation of the course of human events, with globalization and the transition to the information age interpreted so as to be based on empathy, or the ability to empathize with another person's state of mind or situation.

Theoretical reflection according to a multidimensional approach allows for the exploration of the complex networks of relationships formed online and for the assessment of the impact of the internet on social capital and the distribution of power in society. Understanding the internet as an integral part of the media ecosystem is essential to avoid a reductive view that separates the digital and physical worlds. This binary perspective has, in fact, limited sociological research by failing to consider the complex interactions between various forms of media. It is essential to recognize that internet use is intertwined with other cultural and media practices, influencing and being influenced by them. In this way, one can take a less alarmist view of the internet's role in society and avoid falling into interpretations that exaggerate its dangers or ignore its benefits. The transformation of social networks through digital technology is profoundly significant, reflecting the shift from a society based on physical and geographically limited connections to a global network. To borrow Wellman's words, computer networks and social networks refer to each other (Wellman et al. 2002, p. 160). As a result, this flexibility has redefined the concept of social space, providing new opportunities for remote collaboration and interaction with a view to forming personal communities that offer support and a sense of belonging. In this respect, the evolution of social networks highlights the importance of technology as a fundamental pillar for socio-economic development. Indeed, innovation stimulates economic growth and offers the opportunity to redesign welfare in a more equitable and accessible way. In this context, therefore, there is an opportunity to create an environment in which technology acts as a catalyst for widespread welfare, promoting the inclusion and active participation of all citizens by incentivizing forms of digital solidarity. An emblematic example of how technology has transformed social and economic dynamics, extending the concept of society beyond traditional geographical boundaries is the phenomenon of so-called crowdfunding.

Crowdfunding platforms act as a virtual bridge, allowing distant individuals to converge toward common goals, supporting projects and ideas that might not otherwise find fertile ground. This form of economic and social cooperation, mediated by technology, reflects Simmel's vision of an interconnected society "in which individuals act for each other, with each other and against each other," no longer within narrow physical boundaries but on dedicated web platforms that become virtual places of exchange. In the sociological perspective, therefore, a social and cooperative relationship is established by creating a network of mutual support that transcends traditional boundaries. Social crowdfunding is a collective financing system (literally, "crowd funding"), a digital model of fundraising that takes place "from below," through web platforms, aimed at economically supporting socially useful projects, promoted by nonprofit organizations, and via associations as well as citizen committees. The democratic and accessible nature of this model represents a revolution in the financing of charitable initiatives as it allows anyone to contribute economically to projects that can have a positive impact on society by strengthening, among other things, the link between citizens and social causes, promoting greater participation and collective awareness. The development and use of new communication and information technologies (ICTs) are recognized as key elements in achieving the European Union's social and cultural inclusion goals. In fact, according to the ISTAT survey, internet use is increasing, although a significant percentage of users with basic digital skills persists. However, though an official general census by ISTAT or other public institutions on the rise of the crowdfunding phenomenon is absent, it is possible to derive empirical data, relative to donative crowdfunding, on some of the most relevant platforms through independent research. Donation-based crowdfunding represents a paradigmatic example of a solidarity mechanism in digital contexts that can mobilize more resources for socially valuable projects with a positive impact on society. In fact, it is a model that allows citizens (donors or beneficiaries of services) to contribute to social value initiatives that are promoted mainly by nonprofit organizations or businesses that pursue ethical goals to finance nonprofit initiatives (also referred to as social crowdfunding or civic crowdfunding (Esposito De Falco et al. 2015, p. 186)) in function of the common good. The absence of regulation in this

area makes it a preferred tool, one that is particularly suitable for initiatives that have a social, environmental or cultural impact and where the return for the donor is not material in nature but rather an ethical and moral value. Online platforms that specialize in this type of crowdfunding, in fact, offer a wide range of projects to choose from, allowing donors to contribute in a targeted way to the causes they espouse. Crowdfunding in Italy has shown significant growth, with monetary collection increasing considerably in recent years. According to the Politecnico di Milano report, total funding in the crowd-investing sector reached EUR 343.79 million between July 2022 and July 2023, despite a slight, 1 percent decrease from the previous year. This phenomenon has enabled the funding of a variety of social causes, including environmental projects, cultural and artistic initiatives, and the development of business ideas. In particular, donation crowdfunding, which has no monetary rewards, is often used to support social, ethical causes by engaging participants on an emotional and moral level.

The 2023 annual report showed, in particular, significant growth in donation crowdfunding and at reward crowdfunding. Total fundraising for these two types reached EUR 52.3 million in the past 12 months, recording a positive trend reflecting increased trust in crowdfunding platforms and a diversification of funding options available for projects and initiatives of various kinds. Within the numerous donation/reward web platforms, Eppela stands out. Eppela currently has a community of 17,000 people, which far exceeds its competitors in fundraising, who are inclined to utilize the social network with a view to increasing collective participation. Other leading platforms on the Italian scene are established Rete del Dono (www.retedeldono.it (accessed on 26 August 2024)) and BuonaCausa.org (www.buonacausa.org (accessed on 26 August 2024)). The latter, in addition to dealing with fundraising, allows for the possibility of managing membership collections, that is, online petitions or signature collections aimed at promoting and supporting projects with social value.

5. Conclusions

The analysis conducted highlighted how the theoretical approach may indeed present challenges but is essential for a deep understanding of the topics covered. Often, it is the theoretical analysis that lays the foundation for practical developments and future innovations.

This has, therefore, made it imperative to pertinently define the kind of relationship between social interaction and the mechanics of online socialization.

Despite conflicting opinions, it is undeniable that virtual communities have reached a global spread, profoundly affecting our perception of social relationships. This expansion has solidified the belief that there is no clear distinction between interactions in the real world and those in the virtual world. Rather, in many circumstances, virtual communities have acted as social catalysts, promoting changes and connections that are sometimes difficult to manifest in physical reality. This phenomenon highlights how technology can overcome geographic and cultural barriers, creating new opportunities for interaction and mutual understanding.

In this respect, there is no doubt that the interpretive landfalls achieved highlight how virtual communities represent an innovative frontier in the evolution of human relationships, offering fertile ground for the development of solidarity. In an era of increasing digital interconnectedness, these communities provide unprecedented access to mutual support, knowledge and understanding, transcending geographic and cultural boundaries. The solidarity that arises within these platforms is not limited by physical space, thus enabling empathy and practical help that extends far beyond traditional community circles.

Through the sharing of experiences and resources, virtual communities demonstrate how technology can be used to strengthen social ties and foster an inclusive sense of belonging that can address the collective challenges of our time.

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