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From *Vis-á-Vis* to *Face(book)-to-Face(book)* Interaction.
A Study on Friendship Between Young Students

Abstract: This article presents the main results of an empirical research conducted on two *places* where young students make friendly relationships: school and *Internet*. It is obvious that two different places symbolize two different levels of reality. Are they complementary or contradictory? Are the friends of this real world *equal* to *Facebook* friends? Can we consider school friendship the *same* as the friendship accepted, and removed, by a simple *click*? The author tries to pinpoint the hidden mechanisms through which the virtual reality is actualized. By the social relational ontology, it's possible to understand better and deeper the link between social capital of the young students and the continuum passage from on-line to off-line friendship.

Keywords: Facebook, Social Capital, Virtuality, Actualization, Friendship, Relational Theory.

Introduction

In her last book, *Alone together: why we expect more from technology and less from each other*, the Boston MIT's science sociologist, Sherry Turkle (2011), strictly criticizes FB creator—Mark Zuckeberg—when she asserts that 'privacy' is no more a social rule. On the contrary, probably from an unconscious Simmelian perspective, Turkle cannot contemplate intimacy without *privacy*: privacy is essential for human relationships, whereas it obstructs *social networks*. According to Turkle's idea, the solitude caused by technology depends on the assumption that technology itself causes addiction in people by obliging them to be always online (Turkle 2008). The unread message represents the contemporary symbol of social expectations, of the double contingency quandary and, at the same time, of the hope that something new could happen. It is *compulsory* to reply because the other person knows that his/her message has been read. The identity of the Self finds itself in a 'cycling-through' (Turkle 1995; 2008): thanks to the 'mobile technology', all the roles played by the Self are in a constant co-presence. If in the past it was sufficient to 'change' the physical place to change the role, now, in the digital reality, we *chat*, starting and performing several roles at the same time.

A situation emerges of a non-stop *conversation*, where—Sacks's words perfectly fit—"we need to know what everyone else is doing in an ordinary way. Therefore, we need to have at our disposal everything it is necessary to put it in practice." (Sacks 2007: 37). Twitting, chatting, posting, blogging are not only opportunities to communicate

but they also represent a way to be connected. It is more important to be connected to the web than to conversation: a virtual level of reality, as the *web*, to be reciprocally connected. If in the current world, that Turkle describes as physical, social interaction is what "uniquely transpires in social situations, that is, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another's response presence" (Goffman 1982: 2), in *FB* 'world', or in the Internet one, how can interaction be defined?

In 1982, when Goffman wrote his Presidential Address for the American Sociological Association's congress—which he could not read it because of his early death—Internet virtual reality was just a first attempt and, in particular, it was the privilege of few people. Just three years later, the first 'chat' between two Machintosh computers was created. The founding father of interaction, Goffman, did never experienced the virtual level of interaction, the *potential* order—where it is not felt and experienced the physical presence of the other person—the cognitive relationship—core of the interactional life, as Goffman himself asserts—which occupies a different order from the *current* one. How can the potential order be converted into the real one? In other words, how can FB-FB relations turn into the *vis-à-vis* ones? And, above all, why is it necessary to carry this passage out? It is the basic question which inspires this study.

This article presents the main results of an empirical research conducted on two *places* where young students make friendly relationships: school and *Internet*. It is obvious that they are two different places which symbolize two different levels of reality. Are they complementary or contradictory? Are the friends of this real world *equal* to *Facebook* friends? Can we consider school friendship the *same* as the friendship accepted, and removed, by a simple *click*? There exist countless examples of social capital's implementation through anonymous but interconnected *users*: Barack Obama's win or 'Pirate's Party' in Germany are particularly clear cases. But what we are interested in is the *relation* between these two different levels of reality: the *real* one—the school—and the *virtual* one—the 'web', both from a practical perspective (how *in-line* and *off-line* relationships are managed) and an ontological point of view (what is real and what is virtual). In this respect, all the studies on 'cyber-friendship' have not dealt with the ontological aspect of this phenomenon: just the epistemological side has been examined in depth.

The research is organized as follows. After a brief presentation of the sample, I will illustrate the social and biographical profile of the students, their religion and their associative involvement, their families' social capital. In the fourth paragraph I will analyze students' friendships and how they 'use' school and virtual world to keep and take care of their relations. Finally, in the last paragraph, taking into consideration the obtained empirical results, I will try to elaborate some thoughts on the relationship between those two different levels of reality.

The Sample

The non representative sample of the research is composed of students attending public and private, middle and high school during their last year. The division is the

following: with reference to the middle school, the 28.9% attends a public school, whereas the 26.8% an officially recognized institute; regarding the high school students, the 20.1% attends a public school, whereas the 23.8% the officially recognized option. The sample is represented by the 56.5% of males and the 43.5% of females.

Students' Description

The Social and Demographic Profile

The family situation where young students live is fairly 'regular': it is the classical family unit (two generations) structurally parted (father, mother and children). Their family is made up by an average number of 3,92 members. The 81.2% of our sample lives with its natural parents, without any other relative, and, at the most, has one brother or sister: the interviewee is the unique child in the 31.4% of the cases, he/she lives with another brother or sister in the 49.4% and there are siblings in the 14.2%.

Summarizing and analyzing parents' educational qualification, it is possible to rate the index of the cultural family background. The 32.6% of the sample has an average level, the 32.4% a high one, while the 20.9% is represented by the lowest level. There exists a particular connection between the choice of the school (public or an officially recognized school) and the percentages above mentioned. Actually, between the students whose cultural level has been considered low, in terms of school selection, there is a significant difference both between those who are finishing the middle school and those who are concluding the high school. In the first instance, the 38% attends public school, whereas the 16% officially recognized institutes; on the contrary, in the second case, the 32% attends officially recognized institutes, whereas the 14% the public ones. Taking into consideration students coming from families with another cultural background, it is also possible to notice noteworthy differences, which have an opposite distribution. Considering the last academic year, middle school students, belonging to officially recognized institutes, are more than the public ones (38.5% versus 25.6%), whereas public high school students are more than the ones attending the officially recognized institutes (21.8% versus 14.1%).

The professional situation, the kind of job and parents' cultural level, are represented by the socioeconomic status. The average of the sample records a standard level (52.3%), whereas the remaining part is distributed between low status (21.3%) and high status (20.9%). Regarding the connection between this index and school's choice (recognized or national school), it is possible to observe that the influence of the family socioeconomic status is really strong at the lowest level and it concerns middle school students. The gap between students attending the last year of an officially recognized school and those attending the national school amounts to the 25.5% in favor of the first ones (43.1% versus 17.6%). The gap decreases taking into consideration the index's intermediate level—it is the 8.8%—and it becomes in favor of the second ones (25.6% versus 34.4%). Finally, the difference becomes minimum at the highest level—1.4%—(28.8% versus 27.4%).

Religious Inclination and Associative Involvement

The question about religion was not referred to the belonging to a specific confession but to the inclination towards religion: in this sense, the label "church-goer" can include believers devoted to different religions apart from Catholicism. Bolognese teenagers, who represent our sample, follow the trend of other Italians of the same age (Buzzi, Cavalli e de Lillo, 2007): from Eighties to the current day, the percentage of young believers amounts to the 30%. Indeed, in the 28.5% our students state to be 'non practicing believers', in the 36.8% are 'practicing believers', in the 16.7% are 'atheist/agnostic', in the 12.1% are 'unconcerned/unresponsive'. There exists then a clear partition between churchgoing believers, simple believers and those who completely refuse the transcendent or supernatural component of human behavior: one student out of three is a believer.

The religious inclination of the young student is connected to the index of the family cultural background and to the kind of school he/she is attending. Among those who come from a family with a low index of cultural background, the average is represented by non practicing believers, whereas the 31.3% is also practicing; in the other index levels, religious inclination dismisses these two tendencies. With reference to the families with a standard cultural capital, the 20.4% is represented by young students who maintain a denial perspective (atheists), the 17.2% groups in those who are not interested in the divine dimension, the 26.9% is non practicing believer and the 35.5% is church-going. On the contrary, in families with a high cultural capital, atheists are the 19.4%, the uninterested ones the 8.3%, the believers the 25% and churchgoers the 47.2%. From these statistical data it is possible to infer that, probably, a cultural context full of stimulations can equally encourage the several expressions of young students' religious inclination: both the denying and the devoting attitudes. Finally, the choice of the school. The choice of the kind of school is connected to the sacred dimension of the young student. We proceed by analyzing the first two approaches: atheist and lack of interest. We observe that, among atheists, the gap between national school students and recognized school students is definitely high (35% versus 5% and 40% versus 20%, considering, in the first case, middle school students and in the second instance high school students during the last academic year); the 'uninterested' ones are distributed among different kinds of school (with reference to the middle school students at the last year, the 20.7% attends national schools and the 17.2% the officially recognized ones, whereas, concerning high school students, the 34.5% belongs to public schools and the 24.1% to the recognized ones). Non practicing believers tend to attend a national middle school (32.4% versus 19.1%) and a recognized high school (33.8% versus 14.7%); the 48.9% of churchgoers attends a recognized middle school and the 17% a recognized high school. It is logical to assume that, regarding middle school students, the school's choice is the result of a parents' resolution, rather than a young child's decision. Therefore, in support of other studies regarding the comparison between public schools and the Third sector (Donati e Colozzi, 2006), we can assert that 'church-going" families mainly choose officially recognized schools, whereas 'atheist' families opt for public schools. With reference to high school stu-

dents, it is more exact to suppose that school's choice is the result of their personal decision. In this case as well, the association leads to a similar supposition, bearing in mind the presence of other factors which could influence the final choice: school's choice of other friends who, from the second educational cycle, become fundamental in the preference expressed by children, the problem of the more expensive cost of private schools, the nearness of the school to the dwelling place of the family, etc.

I now move to analyze the associative involvement of our young students. In line with national data and IARD studies on youth, in this sample as well, the most popular type of associative involvement is represented by sport. The 63.6% of the interviewees state to take part in this kind of association and it proves to be the experience most appreciated by males. Concerning the connection to the interviewees' gender, it is possible to observe that more than the half of males tend to take part just in one association (57.1%) and the rest is almost equally distributed among the attendance to more than one organization (24.8%) and none (18%); females tend to be distributed in a more regular way: the 26% does not have any associative involvement, the 36.5% takes part in one association and the 37.5% in more than one organization. Finally, the relation between religious inclination and associative involvement shows how the trend to take part in more than one association at the same time is higher among churchgoers (50.6%).

Family Social Capital and Relationships with Relatives and Friends

To try to calculate the family social capital, I asked the students to report:
1) how many times their parents receive relatives at home or go to visit them;
2) how many times their parents receive friends at home or go to visit them;
3) how many times their parents take part in meetings or gatherings connected to organizations (associations, parishes, clubs, etc.)
4) their opinion concerning the quality of communication and mutual support between the members of their family (including also non cohabiting relatives).

I have obtained, in this way, three concise measures: the index of relational level within the family or family social capital, the index of external relational level towards relatives and the index of external relational level towards friends.

A first data analysis concerns the distribution of our student sample among the three indexes.

At a first reading, it is possible to make two observations. The first one: the students involved in the research come from families characterized by rich social and parental capital. The second one: if the distribution of our students among the three levels of the first index and the distribution of the second one follow a similar trend, the social capital formed by friendly relationships is high exclusively for one-third. These families, then, tend to create a network of relationships centered around the parental structure rather than friendships.

The second and the third index have been encapsulated in a further indicator which calculates the external relational level of the family on the whole. The following table reports the distributions:

Table 1

Index of family social capital, index of external relational level of the family towards non cohabiting relatives, index of external relational level of the family towards friends (values in %)

	Index of family social capital	Index of external relational level of the family towards non cohabiting relatives	Index of external relational level of the family towards friends
Low	8.5	11.7	14.6
Medium	17.2	21.3	37.2
High	59.4	53.1	33.5
Totale	83.7	86.2	85.4
Missing	16.3	13.8	14.6

Table 2

Index of external relational level of the family (values in %)

	Index of external relational level of the family
Low	12.6
Medium	14.6
High	49.8
Total	77.0
Missing	23.0

Almost the half of our sample lives in families which cultivate their external network of relationships and exchanges with particular attention and care.

There exists a significant connection between the relational index with non cohabiting relatives and the family socio-economic *status*: this means that families which constantly cultivate their parental networks are the majority and they do not only belong to the wealthy status (73.9%), but they also pertain to the medium (66.4%) and low (46.5%) status. The care of parental relationships characterizes all the families: they represent not only a way to cultivate and strengthen blood ties, but also to receive and give help and support. It would be absolutely unfounded to conclude that visits from and of relatives are just representative acts for the high status families, whereas, for the low status ones, they represent important functional opportunities to give and get more material and necessary aids. On the contrary, I believe it is more correct to assume that, *independently* from socio-economic status, *independently* from representative reasons or material needs, the care of the parental network characterizes the family culture (Widmer e Jallinoja 2011).

An additional connection, which is significant from a statistical point of view, is the relation between the external social capital of the family and the index of young student's associative involvement: the less the family is involved in a good friendly and parental network, the less the student takes part in the social associative life.

Moreover, parents' tendency to be engaged in associations' activities is an excellent example followed by their children. The correspondence between parents' frequency to participate in group community events and the associative involvement of their children shows two interesting results. The first: although parents do not have any

specific commitment within associations, the 63.2% of young students is member of an association even so. The second: as the monthly frequency of parents' involvements increases, the percentage of young students engaged in more than an association rises as well. The model offered by parents, both in terms of consideration towards friendly and parental relationships and civic and social commitment, represents then an essential element for children socialization in this kind of pro-social experiences. If the family manages to function as an active junction of a more extended social network than the one it belongs to—parental, friendly and civic network—the young child seems to develop a superior civic pride (Donati 2003).

Virtual Friends, 'Real' Friends?

Considering the definition of 'friend' as 'a person who knows you in a very deep way, you can really trust in, who helps you when you are in troubles', I asked to the young student to specify the numbers of friends he/she has. In line with the other national studies (Donati and Colozzi, 1997; Di Nicola 2003) and Iard's statistical data, our young students have the same number of friends, neither more nor less: the 33.1% can rely on 4–5 friends, the 24.7% on 3 friends at the most, the 21.8% between 6 and 10 friends.

The school is still the more favorable place for making friends: the 41.8% have friends among the classmates or school mates attending different courses of study or classes (13.8%). Also childhood represents an opportunity to create long-lasting relationships during the years: the 28% of the students met their best friends especially when they were children.

Our interviewees tend to have more groups of friends (68.2%) rather than just one (16.7%). Only the 12.1% asserts to have isolated friends. The half of our sample meets its friends daily, whereas the 17.2% meets them 4–5 times per week and the 18.4% 2–3 times.

Where do friends meet each other? The following table answers the question.

Table 3

Usual meeting place apart from school (value in %)

	Where do you usually meet your classmates apart from school?
Public place	33.5
Parish Church	4.1
Home	11.8
Associations	0.5
Café, pub, cinema, disco	27.6
Shared friend's place	9.0
Facebook and the Internet	13.6
Total	100.0

The more 'traditional' places where friends use to meet each other apart from the school are confirmed: a public place or a convivial public location. The third position, however, corresponds to a place which is neither private nor public, a non *real/actual* but immaterial (*potential*) and virtual space: the *Internet*. The virtual world of the information technology represents the third usual place to 'meet' friends and it is even preferred to friends' house. Although the percentage of this third choice is smaller than the first and the second for several points, it is important to notice it in any case.

Internet virtual world is frequently attended by our young students to *meet* friends and *be together*.

If we match the usual meeting place with the attended class (table 4), we can obtain a series of interesting information.

Table 4

The attended class marched with the place where usually students meet thei classmates outside the school (Who-square = 84.966; df = 24; p = 0.000) (values in %)

Where do you usually meet your classmates apart from school?	Attended Class: final academic year			
	National middle school	Officially recognized middle school	National high school	Officially recognized high school
Public Place	54.0	36.5	11.6	23.5
Parish Church	4.8	9.5	0.0	0.0
Home	12.7	20.6	4.7	5.9
Associations	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Café, pub, cinema, disco	3.2	12.7	55.8	52.9
Shared friends' place	9.5	7.9	11.6	7.8
Facebook and the Internet	14.3	12.7	16.3	9.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The main meeting place of young teenagers (students attending the last academic year of middle school) is a public place (a park, for example) whereas post-adolescents (students attending the last academic year of high school) meet each other in a *recreational* public place. The second adolescents' meeting location is *their home*, private space par excellence, prepared and controlled (by parents), whereas post-adolescents choose the public place, open and anonymous. All these places reflect the needs, the freedom and autonomy of the different age range which differentiate the two friendship 'styles'. On the contrary, Internet, the most immaterial space, represents, both for the adolescents and post-adolescents, a common and extra-scholastic arena to meet their mates. In other words, if in the first two cases, it is possible to notice a frequency distribution which changes along with the age, in this specific space, or level of realty, it is not.

We obtain a further interesting result by matching the usual extra-scholastic meeting place and the external relational level of the family (table 5).

Table 5

Index of external relational level of the family matched with the place where usually students meet their classmates outside the school (Who-square = 35.210; df = 18; p = 0.009) (values in %)

Where do you usually meet your classmates apart from school?	Index of external relational level of the family			
	None	Low	Medium	High
Public Place	0.0	36.0	9.7	36.5
Parish Church	0.0	8.0	3.2	5.2
Home	33.3	4.0	19.4	9.6
Associations	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9
Café, pub, cinema, disco	0.0	40.0	25.8	28.7
Shared friends' place	0.0	0.0	16.1	13.0
Facebook and the Internet	66.7	12.0	25.8	6.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Those who come from closed families which do not have any contacts with the external reality of relatives and friends tend to take refuge in the Internet or in their 'nest' (Petrosino 2007: 51 ff). Students belonging to families which show scant regard for parental and friendly relationships tend to choose public places or recreational location as their extra-scholastic meeting place. Few students (12%) meet their classmates on Facebook and in the Internet. The ones who have a medium index of external relational level of the family equally prefer both the option 'cinema, café, disco, pub' and the alternative 'FB or the web'. The half of our sample is perfectly divided in real entertainment places (organized public locations) and chattering places, which are 'real but in a different way'. On the contrary, one-third of the students choose to meet each other at home: even this time, there is almost an exact distribution between who prefers meeting friends at his place and who likes more going to someone else's place. Finally, over the 60% of the students, whose family plays an active role in the solid network of relatives and friends, chooses a public place or locations to meet classmates after school. The 13% chooses friends' house whereas the 6.1% prefers *FB* and the Internet. A strong family tendency to be open towards parental and friendly relationships is then connected to the predisposition of the student to choose public and free spaces (organized or not), without 'taking refuge' in the *web galaxy*. This one, on the contrary, is preferred by those whose families have a stout inclination to *avoid* relationships and ties.

We proceed by investigating on the habit of chatting of our young students. The following table shows how often it happens.

Eluding the two extremes—one daily practice for three hours and once a week or less—more than the half of the sample (51.2%) uses to chat with his friends almost every day. It is exactly what happens with the physical meeting of friends.

The aggregation of some variables, regarding how often young students use to meet friends and chat with them, allows to elaborate two synthetic measures illustrated in the table 7.

If, on the one hand, students *still* look for the real physical contact (material) of their friends—an almost daily contact—on the other hand, they do not show any

Table 6

Students' frequency to meet and chat with their friends (values in %)

	How often do you usually chat with your friends?
Every day, three hours or more	8.4
Every day, less than three hours	27.3
4–5 times per week	23.9
2–3 times per week	13.4
Once a week	5.5
Less than once a week	14.3
Never	7.1
Total	100.0

Table 7

Frequency index of the actualized practice of friendship and frequency index of the virtual practice of friendship (values in %)

	Frequency index of the actualized practice of friendship	Frequency index of the virtual practice of friendship
Low	3.4	26.9
Medium	27.7	37.4
High	68.9	35.7
Total	100.0	100.0

skeptical approach towards the virtual world as the *alternative* way to keep friendly relationships. Obviously, in order to access the *Internet*, it is necessary to have all the technological tools and the young interviewees seem to be very well-equipped: almost the whole of the sample (94.5%) owns a mobile phone, the 79.6% has an account on *FB*, the 57.2% owns a personal *PC* with Internet access, whereas just the 11.3% has a personal *blog* as well. With reference to the possession of these objects and immaterial spaces, it is interesting to notice that there are no significant correlations, from a statistical point of view, with variables such as gender, family social capital and family socio-economical status. On the contrary, the unique connection we can detect is the association to the school class attended by the student (age). How can we explain it? As other researches pointed out (Facer *et alii* 2001a, 2001b; Keri e Furlong, 2001), the possession of new technologies and the access to the virtual and immaterial spaces of the web do not depend on the cultural, socio-economical or relational *background* of the family. By this time, they can be considered ordinary 'goods' which allow a 'fruition' no more limited to particular and specific spaces: it is possible to access to one's *personal FB* account from a public computer, which can be shared with strangers. Having a personal computer and a *FB* account can be significantly connected to the attended class: over the 60% of the middle school students and almost the 100% of high school ones have a *FB* profile, whereas the percentages regarding those who own a personal computer are lower—the 50% of

middle school students and the 70% of the high school ones. The above mentioned data confirm that these young students belong to the generation of*digital natives*: since childhood, many of them are skilled net surfers and, as they grow up, it becomes obvious that they all will become even more proficient (Ferri 2011; Magrassi 2011).

Which kind of relationship exists between the actualized practice of friendship and the number of times students use to chat or they *'actually'* meet their friends?

Table 8

Frequency index of the actualized practice of friendship matched with the number of times students chat with their friends (Who-square = 26.628; df = 12; p = 0.009) and with the number of times students meet their friends (Who-square = 470.000; df = 8; p = 0,000) (values in %)

How often do you usually chat with your friends?	Frequency index of the actualized practice of friendship		
	Low	Medium	High
Every day, three hours or more	0.0	4.6	10.5
Every day, less than three hours	12.5	27.7	28,4
4–5 times per week	0.0	24.6	24.7
2–3 times per week	0.0	18.5	12.3
Once a week	0.0	4.6	6.2
Less than once a week	62.5	12.3	11.7
Never	25.0	7.7	6.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

How often do you usually meet your friends?	Frequency index of the actualized practice of friendship		
	Low	Medium	High
Every day (nearly)	0.0	0.0	74.7
4–5 times per week	0.0	0.0	25.3
2–3 times per week	0.0	67.7	0.0
Once a week	0.0	32.3	0.0
Less than once a week	100.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

It is particularly interesting to notice (tab. 8) that those who rarely meet their friends in the *actual* world, they equally tend to meet them in the virtual world seldom. On the contrary, who meets his friends *face-to-face* uses to chat with them every day, or, at least, 4–5 times per week. Similarly, as it is logical to expect, the *actual* practice of friendship *also* implies to meet friends every day. Indeed, frequent meetings correspond to an high index of the actual practice of friendship, whereas sporadic gatherings with friends represent the low index.

Carrying on with the study, I asked to the students to explain what makes them feel close to the other classmates and to the friends of their group. Frequencies are listed in the table below.

If a "shared sense of belonging to the group" is chosen both with reference to the group as a "class" and as "friends"—the difference of percentage is just the 3.7%—in a collective identity engendered by activities which imply a sense of common participation, the collective identity of 'the class' unifies more than the group of

Table 9

What the young student feels to have in common with his classmates and friends (values in %)

	What do you share…	
	…with your classmates	*…with your friends*
Sense of belonging to the group	37.6	41.3
Shared projects	8.1	18.7
Common destiny	12.2	11.6
Activities to be performed together	42.1	28.4
Total	100.0	100.0

friends. Thus, it shows that the friendship relation implies a sense of belonging to a generation on the basis of 'Us as a group': that is to say, a collective identity structured on the sense of being at the present time rather than a sense 'of doing something together'. On the contrary, the class manages to create a collective identity not only through a sense of "group" but also thanks to the 'tasks' their members carry out together every day.

Finally, I asked to the students to predict how many, among the friends they have at the present moment, will remain so during their entire life and how many classmates will keep in contact with after the end of the school (tab. 10).

Table 10

Friends that will remain so during the entire life and classmates to keep in contact with after the school (values in %)

	How many among the friends you have at the present time do you think will remain so during the entire life?	*How many among your classmates do you think you will keep in contact with after the end of the school?*
None	2.5	5.9
Few	55.5	58.4
Many	34.7	31.1
All	7.2	4.6
Total	100.0	100.0

Our young students seem to be very pragmatic and disenchanted: just very few friends will remain so during the all life and equally, after the end of the school, they will keep in contact with very few classmates. Regarding the reasons which will cause the end of the friendly relationship after the academic year's conclusion, the 64.3% states that there is no interest in keeping friendship—it becomes obvious, then, that relations created during the school are considered temporary but unavoidable until the (scholastic) obligation to meet each other lasts—whereas just the 28.6% indicates reasons which depend on the different schools or universities they will choose in the future. Among those, on the contrary, who express the hope to keep scholastic friendships, the 76.3% wishes to continue the good relationship created during the course of time.

Table 11

Number of friends that will remain so during the entire life matched with the index of external relational level of the family (Who-square = 51.917; df = 9; p = 0.000) (values in %)

How many, among the friends you have at the present moment, do you think will remain so during the entire life?	Index of external relational level of the family			
	None	Low	Medium	High
None	66.7	3.7	5.9	0.0
Few	33,3	63.0	50.0	55.9
Many	0.0	29.6	38.2	37.3
All	0.0	3.7	5.9	6.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The last datum concerns the correlation between the external social capital of the family and the belief that friends will remains so with the passing of time (tab. 11).

The more the family represents a fundamental network of social interactions and mutual contacts with friends and relatives, the more the concern to lose all the current friends gradually diminishes as life passes by.

Now I proceed by analyzing the class as a category of interaction and social capital.

Following on from recent studies, this investigation recognizes the deeply social valence of friendship, considering it not only a value or a virtue, but a very important issue of the social capital (Di Nicola, 2002 and 2003). Friendship is a richness that can we partly receive—as an ability, a resource and an inclination to create social relationships—and that we can partly strengthen, making it grow; or we can just benefit from it even without renewing it. It is possible to identify four dimensions in which friendship can be analytically divided: the usable dimension (mutual exchanges from a material and concrete perspective, the sharing of 'useful' acquaintances or common activities), the expressive dimension (the spiritual nearness, a moral support and personal encouragements), the dimension connected to the emotional involvement, the one related to the personal identity acceptance apart from the established social roles. With reference to the school specific reality, Iard (2007) has recently observed that the class, representing a place of sympathetic relations where students establish and preserve a particular balance—as they have to live together everyday for several hours, month and even years—tends to create homeostatic group dynamics. Furthermore, Iard has noticed that in every class there is at least a couple of students who do not get on well with their classmates. From an overall perspective, the 'bullying' phenomenon, or the violence between teenagers of the same age, does not seem to be an high-priority problem: the school manages to perform properly its function of social integration within students' groups.

Which kind of help do students receive from their classmates and their friends? Which kind of activities do they share with their friends? Is there any difference between what they do with their classmates and their friends? Thanks to the factorial analysis it is possible to identify three different 'styles' or three 'interaction levels' of friendship.

A first level is represented by a friendship which gives usable helps and emotional support; in particular, it is characterized by a strong sense of *community*, sharing

Table 12

Factorial analysis: 'which kind of help you mainly got by a classmate or a friend external to the class/school' and 'which kind of activities students mostly share with their classmates or friends external to the class/school'

	Components		
	1	2	3
Who helped you to study	.012	.756	.097
Who helped you through material exchanges (loan of money, bike, motorcycle…)	.621	.025	.237
Who helped you through advice, moral support, encouragement…	.740	.013	.104
Who helped you to know one or more people who are important for you	.310	.390	.543
Who helped you to find people able to resolve some of your problems	.246	.276	.589
With whom you confess your intimate troubles	.791	−.085	.147
With whom you talk about what happens in the world	.149	.551	.028
With whom you do the homework and study	.047	.660	.219
With whom you enjoy yourself during your spare time	.630	.286	.165
With whom you chat and talk on facebook, messenger, twitter…	.267	.563	−.573
With whom you share your joyful moments	.731	.213	.049
With whom you share your tough moments	.724	.193	.278
By whom you feel accepted for what you are	.708	.242	−.065
With whom you can express yourself liberally	.778	.106	−.099

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
A rotation converged in 7 iterations.

and understanding: the young student feels free to express his identity as it will be accepted, he is aware that his friends share with him joy, difficult moments, secrets and intimate troubles. And, at the same time, it is a leisure relation: they enjoy themselves and spend together their spare time. They *do not* chat or talk on *FB* or other virtual spaces: it is a friendship experienced in a more 'actual', concrete and material way. A second level seems to be portrayed by a friendship more focused on study: they help each other doing homework together. However, the space where they talk to friends is the Internet. The secrets they reveal are related to impersonal events—what happens in the world every day. Finally, a third level is represented by the 'bridge' friendships: a friend helped *me* to meet someone who I have always hoped to meet or who could have helped *me* to solve a specific problem.

I proceed now by comparing what classmates exchange and what friends share.

Obviously, classmates play a fundamental role in the study—88% *vs.* 12%. Our students can rely on their external friends for all the other kinds of help, excepted advice, moral support and encouragements: it is easier to find them within the school or the class. From this perspective, then, friends are 'useful' to solve a concrete and 'material' problem or to act as 'mediators'. If we want to interpret it according to the categories of *bonding* and *bridging* social capital, it is clear that if the scholastic friendships are more projected towards a *bonding* social capital—trust and mutual support within the group –, the friendships made with external friends are meant to enhance the *bridging* social capital—friends perform the function of *broker*, promoting indirect relations with people who the young student would not have the possibility to be in contact with.

Table 13

Type of helps received by classmates or coeval friends not attending the same school (values in %)

	Help to study	Material help (loan of money, bike etc.)	Advice, moral support, encouragements	To meet one ore more people who you have always wanted to meet	To find people able to resolve a problem
By classmates	*88.0*	41.8	*54.9*	42.5	42.6
By coeval friends external to the class/ school	12.0	*58.2*	45.1	*57.5*	*57.4*
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 14

Kind of activities mainly shared with classmates or with friends external to the school (values in %)

	We reveal each other intimate troubles	We talk about what happens in the world	We do homework together	We enjoy ourselves during our free time	We chat and talk on FB, Messenger, Twitter	I feel they share my joyful moments	I feel they share my tough moments	I feel myself accepted for what I am	I can express myself liberally
By classmates	50.9	69.4	90.1	41.4	47.3	49.3	55.7	48.5	46.9
By coeval friends external to the class/ school	49.1	30.6	9.9	58.6	52.7	50.7	44.3	51.5	53.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Even with reference to what they do 'together', there is no particular contrast between what they exclusively share with classmates and what, on the contrary, they exclusively share with friends. However, the activities which characterized the scholastic friendship in a peculiar way are two: on the one hand, study and homework; on the other hand, the tendency to discuss what happens in the world. The first one is represented by the almost entire sample (90.1% vs. 9.9%), whereas the second one by almost the 70%. Apart from that, scholastic friendship and the one external to the school do not seem to differ further. Classmates are (like) friends. Even if classmates are *functional and practical friends* to study with and they represent *circumstantial* contacts (they are the first people met in the early morning) to talk about what happens in the world (so many hours spent with them during school), in the same way their friendship goes beyond the structural expectations connected to the social role (classmate as a colleague of the same organization: the school) (Vanderstraeten 2001). Although the interviewed students spend so many hours with their classmates,

the relation does not stop when they are home, but it continues through the virtual world. Being always on!

The Human Virtual Reality in the Social Dimension: the Relation as Emerging Process of Actualization

This study has pointed out the tendency of the students interviewed to use the Internet as a way of keeping 'off-line' friendly relationships, without considering it as their unique method of experiencing friendship—pure 'on-line' relationships. This validates other researches which have explained the Internet paradox (Kraut *et al* 1998; Kraut *et al* 2002): *on-line* friendship cannot be balanced by the decline of the *off-line* friendship (Park and Floyd 1996; Williams 2006). The Internet virtual reality is used to be *always* connected, to increase relations. (Ellison *et al*, 2007) However, this is not an univocal debate, as other studies have observed that the use of the Internet easily leads individuals to a condition of deep anomie, where social bonds cannot exist because of the closure into an artificial world (Nie and Erbing, 2000). Nevertheless, those who, in early studies, highlighted the potentially antisocial component of the Internet (Kraut *et al* 1998), later on, they reconsidered these conclusions, as the Internet use generally tends to strengthen the social capital and the network of relations created outside the virtual world (Kraut *et al* 2002). In other words, Internet makes bonds stronger, supporting, without replacing, the other 'channels' of interaction (DiMaggio *et al* 2001). In this sense, people have a new way to do the same old things (Tyler 2002), as they tend to convert the Internet interactive modalities into the more traditional face-to-face interactions: people create social bonds *on-line* and these "*on-line* relations" are transferred to the "*off-line* world" (Parks and Roberts, 1998; Kraut *et al* 2002). But—and we are interested in this point—"for the most part, people use the Internet to keep relations made *off-line*, rather than to create new ones *on-line*" (Kraut *et al* 2002, 69). *On-line* relationships prove to be weaker than those created and kept *off-line* (Gross *et al* 2002). The same our young students. This study exactly shows how the students, who already have an *actualized* network of friendships, often use the web not to interrupt the contact, the conversation started at school, the *face(book)-to-face* (*book*) interaction.

Now I try to lead these considerations to a deeper level connected to the meaning of 'virtual'.

What the virtual order is? Do virtual relationships cause just unease or even well-being from the relational perspective? Web mystification, both in a positive and negative sense, is extremely simple, but also simplistic. In order to avoid ordinary conclusions, I believe it is important to have a referential ontological outline to investigate the social reality. My proposal—that I just mention here—is an attempt elaborated on the basis of the social relational ontology (Donati 1993; 2009). We have to explore, then, what is the virtual order.

We can relate the virtual to two levels: a 'practical' one and an ontological one; they could seem contradictory, but they are actually complementary. The first. The 'virtual

reality' is the hyper-real, the hyper-communicative order (Donati 2006: 127 and segg.), where the communication is not 'relational, namely communicative in an emphatic sense' (Ibidem: 89) , but it is meant to be the purely luhmannian communication. It is a social virtual order, a fictional, deceptive and replicated world: it is a *non-human* reality. In this way, "the human social is misrepresented, causing serious problems of communication and identity" (Ibidem: 127).

It is, then, a virtual reality interpreted as a 'simulation' of reality, 'as if'. But there exists also a deeper virtual level, which is not related only to the world of communications, but it is also connected to the same ontological structure of reality. This second order recalls the society of the human, where

every kind of interactions (technological first of all) grows and becomes complex to the extent that the human has to be intentionally pursued and produced in a context where social relations are no longer immediately human (Ibidem: 70).

What the social in the human and the human in the social are? According to Donati, both the social and the human are not subjects to be investigated empirically, as they cannot be considered *in progress qualities, but potential* (Ibidem: 88). In Donati's opinion, the human, in the social, is the relational morphogenesis of the boundaries the social has with the culture and personality, which both represent the 'places' of the acting subject. The social, in the human, is the relational morphogenesis of the subject's identity, who elaborates his own boundaries towards the culture, the social organization and the psychic system (Ibidem: 142; and Donati 2011). If both the human and the social are potential qualities which need to be actualized, the human in the social and the social in the human, then, are two qualities which need to be actualized as well (the first of the social, the second of the human). Through which? Through the relation: "stating that the human is social means that, unlike the non-human, it 'does exist only in the relation'" (Donati 2009: 88).

How can be defined the virtual then? The virtual is what exists potentially and not presently. For this reason, the virtual and the actual are just two different ways of being. Following the social relational ontology, it is then possible to understand that the virtual and the actual are not in contrast, as this ontology is "principally founded on the assumption that the social reality is the result of the *constant interrelation* between action and potential" (Morandi 2006, 37). In Morandi's brilliant introduction to Donati's book, *La società dell'umano* [The Society of the Human], there is a very important point for our investigation:

the essence of social relations mainly comes from the acknowledgment that the distinction between social/non social is founded on the action/potential relation: if, on the one hand, it is social what is actualized by the relation with the Other, and not by the single subject,—'the social phenomenon' is a 'fact of relational reciprocity'—on the other hand, it happens in a context of social potentials which, in the actualization process of the 'you/I' relations, activate dimensions involving a third party […]. The action is related to the potential, not to the probable: if the relation with the potential fails, its reality is compromised. The potential is not just one, but it is multiple (otherwise, a new determinism may be generated); however, it is essential that the acting subjects, in order to produce reality, freely activate potentials and not possibilities (which exist in their minds) (Ibidem: 38).

The virtual dimension which technology confers to relations is not only a plainly technological quality. If it was so, it would be a purely mechanical-technical-com-

municational social (because there is a relation). An auto-referential closure of the subject—as studies on those who get trapped 'on-line' demonstrate. It is not by chance that one the main researchers of the social capital, Robert D. Putnam, states that "the key, in my view, is to find ways in which internet technology can reinforce rather than supplant place-base, face-to-face social networks" (Ibidem: 411). As Turkle asserts,

virtual reality is not 'real', but it has a relationship to the real. By being betwixt and between, it becomes a play space for thinking about the real world. It is an exemplary evocative object. When a technology serves as an evocative object, old questions are raised in new contexts and there is an opportunity for fresh resolutions (Turkle 1994: 165).

The click to add or remove friends is not sufficient to pass from the virtual to the actual: in its place, it is necessary to switch the connection off, go out and get into relation.

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