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The Identity of Consumers in Social Networks Italian Internet Users and New Experience of Consumption

Abstract: Recent technological innovations (Web 2.0) in today’s society mean that a major socio-anthropological change is occurring. On the net, audiences can experience new forms of participation, share information and entertainment practices, and establish new relationships. This paper describes the main characteristics of Web 2.0 with specific reference to the Italian context and categories of users who use social networks (and their motivations), using the latest national survey data.

This paper analyzes changes in the identity and culture of consumption, which thanks to social media are today expressed according to the logic of experience and performance. Through social media, performative consumption represents one of the most suitable way to describe the multiple aspects of the contemporary consumer’s identity.

Keywords: identity, consumption, social networks, experience, performance.

New Technologies and Participatory Culture: Preliminary Observations

Looking again at the changes in the concepts of identity and consumption in current communication, involved as they are in profound technological changes, gives cause to reflect on some facts: firstly, we live in a period of intense social and cultural changes, and secondly, the use of new technology is tantamount to assuming new forms of communication and social relationships.

Today’s younger generation (but also adults, although the elderly less so) surf the internet, “chat” on Facebook, multiply their virtual identities, play online with friends, browse the net, download music and movies... because “relatedness” in cyberspace has become an everyday occurrence. On the Web, thanks to recent technological innovations (Web 2.0), this new media allows users to co-produce most of the content they enjoy and share it with other users [Jenkins 2007, Boccia Artieri 2009]. This creates social networks in which consuming information becomes both a way of building a recognizable identity and expressing visible membership, and of creating relationships.

The pervasive presence of “mediated” relationships in today’s society means that a major socio-anthropological change¹ is taking place. On the net, the audience can—through user-generated content (UGC)—individually create mass production;

¹ There are divergent theoretical positions concerning whether it should be considered a Mediaeval period [Morcellini, eds, 2005], or conversely, a Digital Renaissance (Jenkins 2008). It has certainly changed

thanks to social networks, they can “experience the forms of participation around the sharing of information and entertainment practices, multiplying and innovating the production and reproduction of social capital” (Boccia Artieri 2008: 8). The changes introduced by the communication network are therefore a complex phenomenon, which has to face an “adult humanity” (Granieri 2009), not only because of increased technological capabilities, but also as a result of cultural change and communication.

But what is Web 2.0? And what are the social networks? How many Italians use new technology to become involved in new forms of social relationships? And these relationships—what transformations do they involve? Above all: what changes do these relationships encourage in consumer culture? Such questions are the guidelines of the following considerations.

The “Italian” Web 2.0: Widespread Awareness and Participatory Use of the Net

Sociological studies now agree that the Internet is much more than a medium: the Network of Networks is a genuine communicative environment, within which several different types of communication are developing, as well as new forms of online socialization.

Initial research reveals that the Internet is often used by people to establish new social ties and strengthen existing ones (Boase et al. 2006). This is that part of the internet which has in recent years been called “Web 2.0”. The term, coined by Dale Dougherty and popularized by O’Reilly (2005), generally indicates the technological environment in which communication interfaces are developed, which facilitate very active attitudes among surfers, such as:

- a) production and exchange of text content;
- b) displaying self-produced audio/video material;
- c) participation in debates and even individual choices of civic, social and political involvement.

Presenting the first report to Nielsen/NetRatings Web 2.0 Italian, Somavilla says (2007: 7) that it is an “environment where content-controlled websites and applications have been developed, generated directly by the user or not, in the hands of the consumer.” The transition from Internet cyberactivity to participatory Internet, then transformed into social networking, seems to be the most interesting development of Web 2.0.

Today, in Italy, the space offered by Web 2.0 is crowded with sites: there are over 70, 27 of which are among the most visited by Italian surfers (Martelli 2010). Some people surf for instrumental use, such as finding information on various subjects or exchanging tips and advice, particularly on technical matters—specific examples are Google, Yahoo! Answers, Wikipedia or WindowsLiveSpace. Other people visit for communicative purposes, such as exhibiting their photos or videos on MySpace,

the status of communication on the net: audiences are increasingly equipped with “means of mass production for the masses” (Boccia Artieri 2008: 8), tools that allow you to highlight social relationships and content that people produce and share.

YouTube, LiberoVideo, MetaCafé and GoogleVideo. However, it is in the social networking field that Web 2.0 offers cybernauts the greatest opportunities to interact and offer up their own identities—such sites are numerous: Habboo, Virtual Life, Neopets, Blogger, Bebo, Xanga.com, etc. (Somavilla 2007).

But how many Italian Internet users are there? The most recent Audiweb data (December 2011)² show that, compared to 2010, an increase of 6.9% Italians aged 11–74 years old accessed the web, or rather 35.8 million Italians said they had access to the net, regardless of the place and the means used. Online audience in 2011 reached a daily average of 12.7 million users (registering a 9.9% increase compared to the average in 2010)—in other words, users in 2011 who spent an average of 1 hour and 23 minutes per day online. Furthermore, according to the same source, there was a steady growth compared to 2010 in all types of network access, especially as regards access from a mobile phone, a growth of 55.4%, with 9.7 million people declaring internet access from a mobile phone (20.2% of cases).

The most recent ISTAT “multipurpose” survey entitled “Citizens and new technologies” (2011) confirms the widespread demand of the “media” society in Italy. The portrait that emerges shows the remarkable inclination of Italians to seize the opportunities offered by the web, considering the well-known differences between the various territories of the country: Internet use exceeds 56% in Central and North Italy, while it stands at 48.6% in the South and 49% in the Islands. We also noted significant differences between generations: the peak usage of personal computers and Internet is among young people between 11 and 24 years old (respectively more than 82% and over 78%), and it then rapidly decreases with the rise in age (35 to 44 years old: respectively 70% and 69.4%), while the share of users drops below the threshold of 50% after 54 years of age.

It is important to note the significant rise in the number of Italians who connect to the internet *to take part in social networking*. In fact, active participation in blogs, social and professional networks, wiki, etc. is increasingly popular. In 2011, 53.8% of Italian Internet users consulted a wiki to collect information, 48.1% created a user profile, or used Facebook or Twitter for texts or other messages. Social networks are not only used as a means of maintaining relationships in their network of friends, but also as a means of information or communication of social and political issues (22.8%). Young people aged 15–24 are the most active in this area: in particular, over 76% of them created a user profile, sent messages or other forms of communication on Facebook or Twitter (compared to the national average of 48.1%), over 63% consulted a wiki (compared to the national average of 53.8%) and over 29% read and expressed opinions on political and social issues through blogs or social networks.

In this context, the news presented in the most recent report by Nielsen (2011)³ is of particular interest. Nielsen monitored the development and dissemination of

² See Audiweb Report (2001), *Ricerca di base sulla diffusione dell'on line in Italia*, available at the website: http://www.audiweb.it/cms/view.php?id=6&cms_pk=245.

³ See the Report (2011), *State of the Media: The Social Media Report*, available at the website: <http://www.nielsen.com/it/it.html> (last visit: 12/04/12).

social networks in several countries,⁴ also considering access to social networks from mobile phones—smartphones and the latest generation of mobile phones—which in the U.S.A. represent 40% of social network users. In Italy as well, this phenomenon has had a rising trend: the percentage of Italians in 2011 who used these devices to connect to the web in fact increased over the previous year by 55.4% (Audiweb 2011).

This confirms the fact that being online is now an integral part of our daily lives dominated by a keyword: *sharing* (Jenkins 2007). This happens not only in Italy but also worldwide. It is clear that more and more users want to try being content producers, creating and enabling new forms of reciprocity of communication (Russo 2009). This is understandable, considering that communication itself is a form of social relationship (Donati 1993², 2010), one of the most important prerogatives of social networks. In meeting the other, in the ability to aggregate people around specific interests, affinities and beliefs, it turns out to be the essence of the social bond. Through our use of network interactions, we produce new connections and new relationships. The technology of Web 2.0 thus becomes an “enabler,” capable of creating spaces for communication, whose value is generated by “persons” (Spe 2007).

New Representations of Social Identity and Consumption

In the “networked society” (Castells 2000, 2008), concepts such as identity and community must be reconsidered. The Net is an emerging social structure, enabling new economy methods as well as the organization of contemporary society, according to the Catalan sociologist: it allows people to continually get into and out of *ad hoc* formed groups; the membership of such “communities” is spontaneous, temporary, accessible by a simple “click” of the mouse. Thanks to new technology, people can simultaneously develop multiple affiliations and even experience different identities, although relations are uncertain and precarious.⁵ In terms of the typical vision of the modern long-term life project, the “post”-modern individual replaces the continual justification of his choices, the ability to “maintain coherent yet continuously revised biographical narratives” (Giddens 1991: 5), which become more and more shareable.

In this sense, in the “emerging network society” (Martelli and Gaglio 2004), social uses of technology involve a change of perspective, even in the area of consumption, the experiential area where everyone, without distinction, is involved:⁶ on the web, consumption accentuates its forms, making them more visible, even spectacular. In the words of Codeluppi (2008: 38):

the individual must learn to build and manage their identity in a public space, without borders, in which it is constantly in the spotlight. It does this mainly by using symbolic resources offered by the consumer and the messages that accompany them, but it is also liaising actively with new technology.

⁴ The data refer specifically to the U.S. market, but there is also data concerning Italy.

⁵ See Bauman (2002a, 2002b); Beck (2000).

⁶ In this sense, the different points of view of: Featherstone (1991); Slater (1997); Campbell (2004); Miller (1987); Ritzer (2003), Bauman (1999; 2007).

The relationship between identity, consumption and new technology is therefore important in understanding many aspects of our world, in which the phenomenon of consumption has become a powerful part of our lives. Dropping the ideologies of the 20th century, consumption stands as a sort of grand narrative *sui generis* for its ability to unite people, produce values and generate beliefs (Ferraresi 2008). This means that the transition from an industrial to post-industrial society consisted in the shift from the centrality of production, typical of *homo faber*, to that of consumption. In this sense it is a metaphor of our society, in which we find ourselves in the role of consumers.⁷

But what are the characteristics of the consumer today? While only 30 years ago, to the question “Who are you?” we might have answered in terms of “what I do” or “where I stand,” today we denote identity as a structuring element, what car we own, the credit cards we use, the clothes we wear [ibid, 2008: 21]. It is here—in the pluralistic, ambivalent and contradictory nature of the “post”-modern⁸ experience—that the phenomenon of consumption finds its most fertile soil. Today, in fact, it appears to be the most immediate response, capable of fulfilling the demand for identity, relationships, participation and action that the era in which we live requires, compared to deeply individualizing models and routes, which go hand in hand with apathy, social indifference and the “fall of public man” (Sennett 2001). In this framework, describing the various ideal types of consumer of yesterday and today means considering consumption as one of the languages in which individual identities are formed.

Below are some examples from the classics of sociology.

George Simmel’s (1900) attitude represents an emblematic starting point in dealing with consumption as an ambivalent and conflicted experience for the metropolitan individual who, confronted with models of pluralization and fragmentation of the social, defends his inner relationship by distancing himself from the multiple stimuli to which he is subject, until he can take on the vestments of the restless and indifferent “*blase*” individual. The gray, faded tones of the latter are taken up and resolved in a more deterministic, alienated way by the Frankfurt School scholars: the mass society consumer is seen as an individual lacking inner freedom, manipulated by the system of commercialized mass culture. Here is the “one-dimensional man” to use the famous words of Herbert Marcuse (1964).

These concepts apply to and are even more widespread for the system of needs too. Jean Baudrillard (1974), expanding the critique of consumer society from a semiotic perspective, would later define consumption as the language of social differentiation. And the consumer society is also the framework within which Riesman (1950) observes the “other-directed personality,” for which consumption is the primary means of social conformity, a constant temptation for the subject that so threatens his individuality, he can lose himself in a “lonely crowd.”

⁷ See note n. 6. In Italy specifically, see also: Fabris (2003), Di Nallo (1997, 2006).

⁸ In the cultural pastiche of postmodernism (Jamenson 1999), the world is conceived as a stage, on which everything is dictated by the innovation determined by connectivity, by being on the Net, by snapshots of life situations (Rifkin 2000).

The '70s and the considerations of a chaotic, complex society introduced another set of consumers: the new Narcissus, constantly straining to look at himself in his surroundings which confirm his ability to impress others. According to C. Lasch (1984), this new protagonist symbolizes the ambiguity and uncertainty of a "minimal self," forced to live according to the diktats of the contemporary ethics of pleasure and hedonism, which hides a veritable war of all against all, and an inner emptiness. In Lipovetsky's opinion (1983), however, it assumes the rather more malleable tones (but not less dramatic) of a new kind of indeterminate, fluctuating personality, typical of postmodernism. In this sense, he is a wandering consumer, constantly searching for himself and full of desire for pleasure, desire to seduce and "enjoy life, but also keep track, to be *branché*" (ibid).

The aesthetic paradigm is also pursued in the interpretation of Michel Maffesoli (1988), which describes a nomadic individual, lost in an assortment of metropolitan tribes, but above all who feeds his multiple identities built of multiple masks (as Goffman said) in the areas of consumption: a new Dionysius who consumes his life without losing himself, but remaining open to others and to contingency.

Beyond the aesthetic dimension there is instead the thought of Colin Campbell (1997), who glimpsed in consumption an imaginative experience with which the subject associates the representation of his ideal ego, even if the time of possession and consumption results in failure to complete the experience, and the ideal type that emerges is hedonistic and self-deceptive. By contrast, the considerations of the anthropologist Daniel Miller (1987) lead us to reflect on the redeeming potential for the individual attributed to the practices of consumption, because the possession and use of objects serve as a symbolic mode of re-appropriation through which the individual can find himself, his individual and social group identity. We are faced here with a productive consumer, capable, through the rituals of consumption, of activating processes of meaning and of demonstrating, through the use of objects, the ability to tell their own story.

In describing the transformation of the consumer identity from modernity to "post"-modernity, many traits of the contemporary "new consumer" (Fabris 2003) emerge. Zygmunt Bauman argues (1995) that this is an individual who continually reformulates his identity and maintains an ambivalent relationship with consumption: if it is true that he actually expresses himself through consumption, thus helping to stabilize his identity in the absence of other external references, it is also true that the same culture of consumption is quite unstable, giving rise to constantly new configurations. In the insecurity that characterizes the paths of the "post"-modern consumer, a subject emerges who favors entertainment, the gratification of the present, the multiplicity of random encounters ... especially if conveyed by various forms of technology (television, computer, phone, etc...), devices that can propel an individual into an imaginary world.⁹

⁹ As part of the social imagination as proposed by Appadurai (2001).

In the net-society, the wandering identity of the citizen is mixed with the new “post”-modern forms of sociality created by the use of social networks, through which new forms of experience can be experimented.

It is around this notion that there lies, in my opinion, one of the keys to the most current understanding of the relationship between identity and consumption. Thus another ideal type can be added to the continuum described above: homo performans, the protagonist of our times.

The Experience of Consumption

What I will debate in this paper is therefore that identity and consumption are expressed, including through new technologies, in an experiential mode. Indeed, “experiences are the operating conditions of our culture ... they are what give culture form” (Ferraresi, Schmitt 2006: 11). Between culture and experience there is, now more than ever, a deep physical contact, in the sense that it is through the rediscovery and the presence of the body that you can build, experience and remember passions, impressions and emotions.

The body becomes the main place of sedimentation of experiences, even if those through the media are the vicarious experience of an imagined moment of life, modes of relationships that take place daily with artificial constructs. In other words, the consumer brings about the return of body language through different individual representations: the desire to represent oneself, to stage one’s own passions ... refers to the sensory reality of the body (Boccia Artieri 2006), which the consumer implements through the logic of performance.

The new consumer culture no longer asks “what can I buy that I still don’t possess?” but rather “what can I try that I have not experienced yet.” In a scenario imagined as a stage, thus prepared for access to cultural products which are constantly more and more packaged as a living experience, tied in to physical sensation and the recovery of the embodiment, the concept of *performance* is infused with that of *experience*.

Many authors have argued for a long time that our society is in fact a “performative society” (Keat, Whiteley, Abercrombie 1994), since performance is so common in everyday life that it is almost unaware of being such. “Life is a regular performance, we are audience and performer at the same time, we are all constantly an audience, and the performance ceases to be a discrete event” (Abercrombie, Longhurst 1998: 72).

Interpreting the phenomenon of consumption through the filter of performance means seeing in rituals the possibility of living experiences which are not fictitious, regardless of the relative authenticity that accompanies them. With the consumer being aware that he is the actual producer of the experience he is having, which is expressed not only in the simple act of doing, but rather in feeling, attempting to immerse oneself in things with heart, body and mind from a creative perspective which makes the consumer’s activity an opportunity to produce meaning. The performative dimension of the contemporary consumer, which goes beyond being an actor and spectator, is such as to involve him totally. As performer he is an actor on the stage

of consumption. He is “a consumer of cultural products with skills that enable him to become a producer himself, and, therefore, capable of activating processes of signification” (Sorice 2006: 211). The concept of performance lends itself well to a more broad understanding of the creative nature of consumption, dependable on the maieutic abilities of the performance, for example editing events and recalling past behaviour and then reassembling them in new ways in the present.¹⁰

Performance expresses an important sign of change in the universe of consumption, starting from the concept of experience. The emergence of new elements in the world of consumption¹¹ narrate the changing shape of an age transformed by increasingly advanced information technology and, above all, an age attentive to all the irrational aspects related to emotions, the pursuit of pleasure and feelings. The new tools of consumption thus appear increasingly linked to their spectacular dimension and to experiences of simulation. Think for example of the cultural industry (film, TV, video games ...) whose products are more and more a symbol of the interweaving of fact and fiction that surrounds us.¹²

Consumer culture is expressed in experiential and performative ways, and is characterized by modes and features, products and circuits. The process of dematerialization of goods has now entered its fourth phase of the economy, the so-called “experience economy” (Pine and Gilmore 2000): what is exchanged on the market is represented by signs, images and messages, especially from “live experiences,” capable of catapulting those who receive it into genuine environments. Rifkin emphasizes (2000: 259) that the era in which we live “is a world full of entertainment, fun and very sophisticated representations, performed on complex stages” in which we are particularly concerned with trying to live interesting stories, also and especially through the web. In the “Age of Access,” the individual is a creative performer, capable of moving with “aplomb between plots and stages, reciting the various performances staged by the cultural market” (ibid). So in this context, if it is true that the postmodern individual is constantly looking for new experiences to live, it is also true that the cultural industries, in turn, create endless patterns of experiences to be staged. The important thing for the consumer is to be involved in unique and memorable experiences, after which, Codeluppi writes (2007), we are no longer the same.

It is clear that the concept of experience is the vehicle for major changes in the ways of being and self-expression of contemporary consumption. The innovative features define the expansion of the entertainment and multi-sensory universe, modifying both the contexts in which consumption is expressed and the actors who play a role in it. However, in this transition towards a performative logic, something else can be seen: how the consumer can go beyond his individualising traits and, in his practices, open up to a social dimension that does not simply end in the instantaneity of experiences.

¹⁰ On the concept of performance, see: V. Turner (1986); J. Alexander (2006).

¹¹ The eruption of emotion, the emergence of new forms of “social tactility” (Maffesoli 1998), the ambiguities of globalization...

¹² I have written on the transformation of cultural industries from a performative and experiential point of view; see G. Russo (2005, 2006, 2007).

This dimension is linked to the action of the media—specific places of experimentation for contemporary forms of identity (Boccia Artieri 2006).

The Media: Places of Performative Identity

The profile of homo performans that follows the previous considerations is the result of the times we live in. The *Spectacle/Performative Paradigm* (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998), as has been underlined by cultural and audience studies, emerges as a typical aspect of our society, thanks to the strong presence and activities of the media, which provide not only the interpretive frames of the world, but also tools to define the identity of individuals, insofar as they establish relationships with specific media forms (Livingstone 1999). This is why the ideal type of *homo performans* expresses the multidimensionality of the consumer of the third millennium.

As individuals we are in fact constantly in search of new physical, bodily experiences to live here and now, combining this need (paradoxically) with the desire (now the norm) to choose to live them in the virtual network. As consumers, accordingly, we express ourselves through experiential logic, immersed in both new tactile strategies and emotional communities, and in a culture of virtuality—the culture of informational capitalism prefigured by Castells (2002)—in which the proliferation of technological stimuli produces multiple effects. As citizens, finally, we very often communicate the desire to play at being “someone else” or the desire to hide, or, conversely, we express the connection through new forms of activism and/or social roles.

The ability to oscillate between these roles is marked by the evolution of contemporary media which has enhanced the chances of escaping from one’s fictional visions to merge into reality. The result is that the opportunities of daily meetings with media communication technology have multiplied so much as to suggest that reality and media today are the same. Not only do our experiences enter into a screen, a display, but it is reality itself that becomes more and more online, a screen, a screensaver.

In this context, the increasing role the contemporary media play in building the individual is an unavoidable factor, especially in relation to the many implications of digital environments on social media: blogs, social networks, etc. If with these practices, on the one hand “homo consumens” appears, omnivorous, insatiable in his continuous research and technological-emotional exhibition of contemporary society (Bauman 2007), with negative effects in terms of morality and the reinforcement of the individual’s state of solitude, on the other hand, social networks are created (Myspace, Facebook, to cite the most famous examples) which meet ever increasing needs to communicate, carry on relationships and create new friendships. This is a common relational aspect in everyday life, consisting of a colonization of domestic communication technology, which reveals itself in many micro-realities of individual experiences, in which multiple representations of a potential “citizen /consumer/digital actor” come into play, an actor who in the on-line dimension, puts into action his own ability to be a media producer and manufacturer of narratives.

Social media therefore promote an involvement which goes far beyond the visual dimension, which “creates links.” The modalities of participation that connote them act in a frame of spectatorship, in which bodies are put on stage using the language of self-representation. Through these modalities we can recount our experience, our life in the network, and we can alternate between being “in and out” of experiences, as befits those who are familiar with the language of the media which allows us to experience our identities on multiple screens, to build real or fictitious¹³ images, to implement camouflage strategies, through which we take on the form of another person, to seem simply different. Mimesis in this sense becomes a technology of the self for an identity that is deeply performative. As stated by V. Bell (1999: 7): “Identity is the effect of performance.”

In any case, it is a publicly-narrated identity. I believe that many people today are aware that they might appear at any time on You Tube for an everyday event, even something not particularly stunning. It is an identity capable of oscillating between a dimension of representation/imagination and a re-appropriation of individual experiences. The space of participatory media becomes a path (sometimes an escape?) to enact biography responses, individual or collective, which prefer the anthropological dimension of the body.

In this sense, performative consumption through social media and their technological modes represents a style of “alternative consideration” of contemporary identity paths, revealing the wandering condition of the “post”-modern consumer.

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¹³ The strategies are varied: for example the use of images on Facebook, where the game of identities is played out in a game of real and imaginary visions, of appearances from another era or other places, and purely imaginary representations. In this way, the game of the Self can develop along different communication paths.

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