

# Emotional syntax: from social construction to virtual function

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Davide Barba<sup>1</sup>, Daniela Grignoli<sup>2</sup>, & Mariangela D'Ambrosio<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Molise, Department of Economy, Via Francesco De Sanctis, 1, 86100, Campobasso, Italy. ORCID: 0000-0002-0264-5174, Email: [barba@unimol.it](mailto:barba@unimol.it)

<sup>2</sup> University of Molise, Department of Economy, Via Francesco De Sanctis, 1, 86100, Campobasso, Italy. ORCID: 0000-0002-4957-7172, Email: [grignoli@unimol.it](mailto:grignoli@unimol.it)

<sup>3</sup> University of Molise, Department of Economy, Via Francesco De Sanctis, 1, 86100, Campobasso, Italy. ORCID: 0000-0002-8147-5299, Email: [mariangela.dambrosio@unimol.it](mailto:mariangela.dambrosio@unimol.it)

**ABSTRACT:** For a very long time, contemporary western societies and cultures have operated a censorship of emotions (Cambi, 1998, p. 37): indeed, they have been studied especially in the psychoanalytic discipline and as main topic in the investigation of human behaviour (Ivi., 1996, p. 9). More recently, sociology has re-appropriated this “emotional” reflection, focusing the discourse on *Homo Sentiens* or *Homo Patiens*, in a passage from the individual identity to the social one through a circular and self-poietic process: feelings and emotions (both primary and secondary) represent, the fundamental relational connection thanks to which are activated mechanisms of socialization and cultural transmission. The article aims to reflect on the emotions as social construction and linked to technologies with a high emotional connotation (Marmion, 2015, pp. 28-33).

**KEYWORDS:** emotions, social construction, technologies, emotional virtual function

## 1. EMOTIONS AS SOCIAL HERITAGE: FROM INDIVIDUAL TO SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Postmodern individual is afraid to feel his own emotions; he is terrified of being overwhelmed by them and of going adrift socially. On the contrary, he acts out some of them in an extreme, public, blatant way. Emotions, as we will try to demonstrate, are the basis not only of social actions but also of individual identity sphere, in

a circular and self-poetic exchange: passions, feelings and emotions represent a *Homo Sentiens* or *Homo Patiens* (Cambi, 1998, p. 39) fundamental part without which his own rationale in terms of choices, orientations, ideas, values, actions are also lacking.

In particular, the word “emotion” refers to a sense of constant movement that is already traced in the Latin etymon itself: it derives from e—“moveo”, which means “to move”.

First, it is important to operate a distinction of emotions because there is a wide emotional range that needs to be distinguished: there are basic or primary emotions and complex or social emotions. Primary emotions are, for example, joy, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, contempt, disgust and they seem related to specific purposes such as survival, the search and maintenance of a personal relationship, the possibility to conclude actions taken, and they are also common to the entire human species. Social emotions, instead, are strongly linked to the reference culture, to the social relationships, goals and cognitive skills resulting from cognitive and social development. Among the social emotions there are: shame, guilt, envy, jealousy (Plutchik, 2001, p. 25)

Frijda, explicitly speaks of *Laws of Emotion* in terms of expression of those “emotions that arise in response to the meaning structures in certain situations: that is, the different emotions arise and manifest in response to the social container and the type of relationship (more intense or less) in place among social agents” (Frijda, 1988, p. 349). Emotions live in response to events that are important for individuals, to real, tangible, imagined circumstances, motivations, and concerns.

In *Community and Society*, Tönnies precisely sustains the importance of emotions (in particular the sense of belonging) in communities where there is a profound interchange between individual attitudes and collective mentality (Tönnies, 1887).

For Durkheim, emotions are a constitutive part in the social group that shares collective symbols, sharing membership through moral symbols. Rituals and situations in which the group finds itself allows the spontaneous expression of individual emotions but also, they are the result from moral pressure on individuals: they show their feelings according with the situation (Durkheim, 1912, p. 403).

The same idea comes from MacIver that investigated community feeling as the practice of sharing norms, values, traditions and institutions, considering three basic elements: the “we” feeling, the “role” feeling, and the “dependence” ones (MacIver, 1917, pp. 772-774). The “we” emotions concerns identification with others; the latter highlights the functions that social actors perform in the community and the ways in which they express themselves; dependence, finally, is a feeling that refers to socialization, to staying together while avoiding social isolation. The issue, both on an individual and collective level, therefore, recalls the emotional sphere applied to behaviour and action (Cattarinussi, 2000, pp. 18-19).

Particularly relevant is the paradigm of the emotions sociology that suggests, specifically: 1) emotions are socially constituted; 2) they are directly activated by the relationships established among actors; 3) each society has its own emotional rules on which the same emotions are focused and manifested; 4) emotions and their expression change throughout history; 5) emotions and its expressions must be distin-

guished; 6) emotions have a very important conjunctive function (Cattarinussi, 2006, p. 34).

Therefore, according to this approach emotions are built in the relationship and social exchange in which there is a constant dialogue with other individuals. In addition, emotions are culturally oriented because they are affected by the cultural and historical context in which they are embedded, becoming practices and behaviours; emotions have also expressions that often emerge differently or are manifested differently than we would imagine<sup>1</sup> and, finally, they are cognitive mental states, a complex construction of brain areas.

Specifically, emotions are defined as “emerging social” (Hochschild, 2013) that intervene in the functioning of practical rationality, making it possible to reason and, therefore, to “make the most appropriate choices and to adopt the most adequate behaviours in terms of personal utility and well-being, as well as in terms of social compatibility” (Di Giovine, 2009, p. 71).

Indeed, as Donati argues with his relational paradigm, social evolution depends on the possibility of circulating emotions in all social life sphere. From the intimate to the impersonal one (Donati, 2011).

Modern individual is very “emotional”, but the emotional expression depends also by social contexts, by others and by the different situations between real and virtual.

## 2. EMOTIONS AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION. THE SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

Emotions are “socially constructed” (Averill, 1980; Harré, 1986; Hochschild, 1983; Lutz, 1988). Specifically, emotions are socially constituted as ideas, perceptions, beliefs and behaviours; they depend directly on the link established with the other/others. Each society has its own emotional culture which prescribes and controls expression types to allow and share them. Also, they change historically as well as changing relational practices and they, finally, have a cognitive function very important at the social level (D’Andrea, 2005, pp. 77-78).

Feelings develop in relation to knowledge forms created by the social class or historical period, or the universe of discourse of the time.

Therefore, emotions are the result between the combination of a generalized physiological activation and sociocultural factors (Gordon, 1981; 1990) such as situations and cultural contexts definition: “social forces shaped the biological, they converted it into an experience fragment with a name, a history, a meaning and certain consequences” (Hochschild, 1995, p. 159).

Through the “emotional congruence” concept, Goffman anticipates and demonstrates that there can also be a difference (in this case, emotional incongruence) between emotions and rules governing interaction: in this regard, he argues that the entire emotional system is guided by social rules, through its empirical manifestation and cultural “frames” that are semantic representations, institutionalized in social life (Goffman, 1969). In this emotionally and culturally oriented context, also identity becomes social, composed by two dimensions: a virtual one, based on his appearance,

<sup>1</sup> This is the concept of emotional *deviance* in Thoits, 1990; 1995.

and the other real.

According to this theoretical orientation, emotions aren't a natural responses set but expressive and experiential patterns linked by the socio-cultural context (Cattarinussi, 2006) in order to maintain the moral order and values.

Thoits emphasizes the emotions importance in terms of type, intensity, duration, and target expected in certain situations. The main adjustments are (Thoits, 1995): evaluation rules that allow you to assess and guide the situation; behaviour rules that indicate where an emotion should be expressed; prognostic rules concerning the right length of an emotion; attribution rules that legitimize emotion based on the social system (Ibidem; Cattarinussi, 2000, p. 29)

Lutz who argues that «emotional experience is not precultural but pre-eminently cultural» (Lutz, 1988, p. 5)<sup>2</sup>. In other words: «emotions are cultural objects; they have meaning within a system of relations» (McCarthy, 1994, pp. 270-271).

In fact, sociologist speak about the “emotional socialization” (Soufre, 2000) as an instrument and a process whereby some individuals introject institutional and normative (hence, social) rules into their own identity and personal structure, while others tend towards an impulsive behaviour. The first group, respect prescribed rules and to control their emotions to adhere as much as possible to the community and to the shared feeling; the second one, act in a counter-normative way (Turner, 1976, pp. 989-1016).

In summary, “emotions are constructed in the context of relationships with others” (Boiger & Mesquita, 2021, p. 225) and “furthermore, the most prevalent emotions in a given cultural context appear to be the ones that fit the culturally preferred relationship arrangements” (Ibidem; Mesquita & Leu, 2007).

The real challenge today, even for sociology, is to understand the real relation between emotions and cultural technology in its virtual manifestation and possibilities: sociology must try to investigate the Internet of Emotions (evolution of the Internet of Things), a system of algorithms capable to interpret the physiological signals of human body, facial expression, proxemics, etc... and translate them into emotions, feelings, perceptions. It's a world where we already are.

If it's true that the «“social” element is provided more precisely by the culturally shared and socially enforced rules for the correct use of words, which can be termed, for short, the grammar. The “construction” element visualizes emotions not as given sealed units but as the outcome of active processes of assembling lower-level components according to those rules» (Aranguren, 2017, p. 248), it's also true that different language construct emotions. How emotions are shared it's important: communication, new languages, relationships, emotions are all part of new ways for individuals to experience themselves on social networks and internet.

The same available computer language (visual and not visual) is linguistically impoverished: as Heidegger claimed, the word belongs to man's action and not to his being (Heidegger, 1976, pp. 107-108).

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<sup>2</sup> See McCarthy E. Doyle, *The Social Construction of Emotions: New Directions from Culture Theory*, (1994). Sociology Faculty Publications, 4, p. 269.

Today, we write in a few tweets, in a few words; making short comments and using hashtags. While using smartphone, for example, we recognize part of emotions, in the difficult to regulate the emotional states, unable to reproduce in a consistent and coherent way what we would normally feel in certain situations. We reproduce a non-self-regulated behaviours that, paradoxically, have immediate gratifying and positive effects, leaving out feelings related to personal control. Think of the hate speech phenomenon.

In this context, emotions are experienced and acted in different ways; receiving more likes or less likes is symbolic of being happy, gratified, appreciated, considered and popular with psychological implications related to self-esteem, self-perception, personal value, and identity also social identity. In this regard, Galimberti speaks of “enunciative intersubjectivity” to indicate that the identity and individuality strongly depends on others. Internet and social networks made this process more immediate (Galimberti, 2011, pp. 73-127).

Very interesting is the recent study dedicated to emotional contagion, with specific reference to the study carried out by Facebook on almost 700,000 users: they were manipulated news feeds and then, evaluated effects on individuals at an emotional level. The results show that, depending on feeds with positive or negative emotional content, users share their emotions according to the stimuli received and shared, impacting on their actions and online searches (Schoenewolf1, 1990, pp. 49-61).

This research opens new scenarios that totally overturn the belief that emotional contagion must necessarily be accompanied by non-verbal interaction.

### **3. RULES, CULTURE AND EMOTIONAL WORK IN SOCIAL FEELING “ONLIFE”**

Emotions are social and they are socialized; at the same time, they produce feelings and actions. In addition, they are woven into the cultural network of ideas, values, practices, norms, and shared law (Hochschild, 1995).

Sociologically, emotions are social observation and understanding tools (Hochschild, 2013, p. 14). This is a reflection from social reality to the emotional rules and feelings in connection with different social contexts: the aim of this investigation is to study the possible links between social structure, rules of feeling, emotional experience in the reality that surrounds us.

In particular, Hochschild proposes a distinction between “expression rules”, which prescribe the external manifestation type, the public display of emotion; the “feeling rules” that prescribe what should be felt in a situation and, finally, the “display rules” that establish when and how they should be shown (Hochschild, 1990, pp. 122-124).

In other words, they legitimize one emotion over another and prescribe them as appropriate and socially permissible: rules are addresses that allow to orient the behaviour in a concordance between emotion and situation.

In contemporary society, an element that acts as link between emotion and situation is the “Sentient Self”, the ability to feel and to experience emotions in an appropriate manner to the situation where the individual is, because he is aware of doing so (Hochschild, 2013, p. 15).

The Sentient Self it is a kind of accommodation, a possibility that the Ego itself has to adhere, for each situation real or virtual, to the emotional status that is supposed. It is also representing a space that interprets one's own emotions and actions in reference to the conscious-unconscious ego relationship.

The Sentient Self is aware to feel but also to consider the many cultural codes through which it takes place (Hochschild, 2015, p. 74). "It is, in other words, the synthesis between emotion and reason: the capacity to feel emotions according to the social situation where the subject is (...) that mixes emotions and reason in his social action; that he is able to stop and to reflect on his emotionality. He tries to understand feeling sense and the meaning, avoiding being carried by emotional situations created by others and that don't belong to him" (Hochschild, 2013, pp. 23-24).

In other words, the individual in everyday life is able to pay attention to himself, to feel and reflect his real emotions beyond and with the social context. Emotions are included in different social contexts differing by social influence and structure.

The "Sentient self" is a condition regarding subject who manages and delimits his interiority from the objective circumstance in which he is: he is aware that the emotions manifestations are related to the specific expressions linked to the other/others (Hochschild, 2013, p. 14). Individual feels emotions, communicates and acts in society. Once again, there is a combination between reason and emotion, in a continuous positive dialogue among these two spheres.

There isn't a traditional "conscious/cognitive self" and an "unconscious self" that have long characterized the debate around emotions. In particular, in the first case individual is engaged to present himself to the other in the most appropriate and positive way possible to arouse good impressions, beyond the emotional and sentimental understanding<sup>3</sup>. In the second case, are rather impulses and instincts, needs and unconscious motivations that dictate actions and actions<sup>4</sup>.

But emotions are, as Averill (1982) argues, a set of responses that vary in a systematic way; they are not a unitary, not crystallized response but they always change.

Indeed, interactions between individuals, and therefore societies, are also characterized by the implementation of emotional expressions - sentimental often dissonant from our real feeling, because of the emotional work (emotion work) that we all use daily (Ivi., pp. 23-24).

In fact, individual can pass from the Sentient Self to manage one's own emotional states through emotional work, which consists in changing the extent or quality of an emotion or feeling. In other words, are explored alternative response frameworks, other possible behaviours that assume emotions dissonant because they always aren't coherent with individuals would expect to feel. At times, these are emotions that "deviate" from the emotional norm prescribed by the context.

Often, a solution to this problem is technology: modern man delegates to the mass media and especially, today, to internet and social network the possibility of "getting excited" and feeling sensations. In the "on-life" reality.

<sup>3</sup> This is Goffman's dramaturgical model: individual is an actor that plays a role in a public arena.

<sup>4</sup> This is Freud psychoanalytic approach on emotions.

However as happens in reality, emotions are often shared and overloaded with negative stimuli related to the context itself: from family to the virtual context, creating rather an emotional deviance.

Today, there is a sentimental relationships rationalization: the individual can operate a detachment between emotion and the subject who feels it. REmotions are used in a utilitarian way, according to their own advantages and satisfactions (Illouz, 2004). Relationships, and therefore the underlying emotions, become marketable and instrumental objects. Even if exist social or juridical sanctions, these aren't foreseen, they aren't perceived as deterrents or boundaries of negative emotional states. Thus, they aren't considered dysfunctional acts by individual itself: rules feeling violation in adolescence, for example, can have different forms, manifestations, resolutions also dangerous. While considering that they live a delicate and critical lifetime: in fact, they are structuring their personality and their emotional identity.

This approach allows to investigate on several levels and in an interdisciplinary way, the emotional habitus in a dialogue with social institutions (like family and school) and others in community.

Thanks to the Sentient Self, we recognize our own and other people's emotions, we judge and communicate according to the situations: this is even more important in new media and technology

context where users implement actions and behaviours related to ideas and thoughts, in a cross between rationality and emotionality (Goleman, 2011).

Emotions, even dissonant ones, are acted with intentionality and critical capacity: they are forms of "evaluative thinking" (Nussbaum, 2004) that play an essential role in public and private choice decisions (Cerulo, 2014).

#### **4. EMOTIONS, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY: THEIR ROLE AND FUNCTIONS IN PANDEMIC ERA**

Technology has obvious paradoxes: on the one hand, it allows to communicate quickly and easily, crossing space-time boundaries<sup>5</sup>; on the other hand, it gradually forces individuals to be always connected ("always on"), in a circuit of always-on availability. In fact, there is a complexification of categories such as space, time, corporeity, performativity; all elements that are fundamental also for the social relationships and actions.

In fact, new technological devices are "mediating devices" because they facilitate communication by avoiding face-to-face interaction and replacing relationships because individuals don't physically experience confrontation and (bodily) dialogue.

Emotions, which are embedded in the relationship, in behaviour, in thought and in social presence (Garrison, Anderson, Archer, 2000) are produced through other manifestations, often divergent or damaging. The absence of spontaneous and immediate corporeality online makes people usually polite very aggressive (Zauberei, 2017).

An example is the "hate speech" phenomenon that especially increased in pan-

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<sup>5</sup> See what happened in pandemic critical moment (at the very first time) when social networks granted communication even in cases of social isolation and social distancing.

demic time: those who incite hatred take advantage of the uncertainty and growing tension related to Covid-19 to provoke discriminatory behaviours, using explicit language.

According to “Rising Levels of Hate Speech & Online Toxicity During This Time of Crisis” report, more than 70% teens and children used hate speech and online aggressive behaviours during online chats. There has been an increase even among young gamers about 40%<sup>6</sup>.

In Italy, there is a total negative tweets redistribution: in fact, in 2020, women were the most affected clusters (49.91%) and Jews (18.45%), followed by migrants (14.40%), Islamics (12.01%), homosexuals (3.28%) and disabled people (1.95%). In 2021, six categories are affected by negative and discriminatory tweets. In order: people with disabilities (16.43%) who received more negative tweets than all others; homosexual people (7.09%); Jews (7.60%); women (43.70%) and Islamists (19.57%).<sup>7</sup> These are the main data that emerge from the study conducted by the Italian Observatory of Right.

Additionally, 8.4% of students, in the 2020-2021 school year, have experienced cyberbullying (7.4% occasionally and 1% systematically); 7% have actively taken part in cyberbullying incidents (6.1% occasionally and 0.9% systematically). These are data from the ELISA platform against cyberbullying that show how this phenomenon is present<sup>8</sup>.

According to the Italian Postal Police, in 2021 there was a significant increase in cases of minors sexual exploitation and online grooming: a 70% increase over 2020, 37 people arrested (up about 98% from 2020) and 1400 people charged (up 17% from 2020). Considerable is also the sextortion phenomena increased by 54% compared to 2020 and revenge porn with an increase of 78%<sup>9</sup>.

In particular, data state that online risks especially for children are greater because of Covid-19<sup>10</sup>; but, at the same time, technology has allowed people (children included) physically distant, to stay in touch and to communicate, in a mediated but present social relationship.

This concept, that represents the dichotomy around these aspects, is related to the “SIDE theory”: according to this theoretical approach, in virtual groups normative influence depends on the intensification of contextual signals because of the social signals’ absence (Wetherell & Potter, 1987).

In this context, emotions are experienced in the most intense and real way possible as the physical presence (through pictures, photos, videos, and video-calls): in the extreme, is realized a sort of pathological hyper-sociality destined to frustration, the inability to distinguish between actions, failure, distorted concepts of honour, dignity

<sup>6</sup> The full research is available on: [https://11ght.com/Toxicity\\_during\\_coronavirus\\_Report-L1ght.pdf](https://11ght.com/Toxicity_during_coronavirus_Report-L1ght.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.voxdiritti.it/la-nuova-mappa-dellintolleranza-6/>

<sup>8</sup> ELISA project stands for e-learning teacher training on anti-bullying strategies. This is a project of the Italian Ministry of Education. 314,500 students attending 765 state secondary schools and 46,250 teachers from 1,849 state colleges participated in the survey in 2020-2021 year.

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.poliziadistato.it/articolo/i-dati-2021-della-polizia-postale>

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://www.unicef.de/blob/214292/90b1033cb4a27acf23ce9be6c7951a06/technical-note-covid19-online-protection-data.pdf>

and respectability, social appreciation (Linares, 2006).

This apparent hyper-socialization can also become a social dependence form that emerges strongly, especially in young people; they live in social network, they are immersed in them, they relate to other peers in terms of understand who they are. This is social identity that, in a deviant way, framed in a dominant homologation on a social and cultural level where the process of creating and sharing internalized rules no longer takes place. But today there is more than a modification of one's ego which becomes passive and related to what is established by the market and fashion.

The Me response and the Ego response becomes susceptible to infinite variations (Mead, 1934): therefore, the anonymity and body absence allow to experience the on-line world, including the emotions, in a mediated way where don't feel a real fear because the body is physically absent.

Turkle considers these new languages, also emotional ones, related to a loneliness on web: she speaks about the emotional (dis)connection that happens when individuals build attachment bonds with machines and also when they move further from the authentic social relationships, from the emotional and social learning (Turkle, 2012). Internet and social network give the illusion of directing attention where we want; to be (formally) heard; to never be alone (Marmion, 2015, pp. 28-33).

It's also true that loneliness, or rather being alone, frightens not only children but also and above all adolescents and adults; boredom silence, reflection, slow rhythms are not allowed (Pellicani, 2002).

In continuity, technology and digital media transformed the nature of our lives: new media, as well as traditional media (TV, radio, etc.), don't represent the world but define what the world is, in a "hyperreal" manifestation, more real than real life, consisting of "simulation" but shared with a greater number of people, all over the world. In the virtual communication era, facts disappear and give way to an appearance that is their exact opposite, their simulacrum where the media operate a systematic reversal of reality: the individual is no longer the subject of their information but instead becomes the object.

The multiplicity of environments that an individual can visit online, with different cultures and standards, and many people he can "meet", allow to bypass the traditional social relations rules in order to activate new ones: the same identity is modified by the virtual world where the closest frontier is the "metaverse" as a worlds network that expands in real time creating multiple identities.

We are in the "robotic period" where technological machines are considered preferential interlocutors who are also endowed by emotionally relevant experiences. We trust in progress that allows, idealized communication and information, without apparent risks, disappointment or dangers.

In this sense, emotions and the relationship with new technologies becomes a sociological topic: "emotions don't distort our judgment but rather put it in a position to operate to the best of its ability" (Fuselli, 2014).

Therefore, they allow individual to face contingent situations by anticipating possible choices and presumable future consequences, through the ability to summarize information according to more or less stereotyped models of action.

Today, the challenge is and will be in the Metaverse where even the on-life dimension becomes more clearer and more pragmatic: a worlds made by networks that expands in real time creating multiple identities that allows the individual, through avatar and virtual reality glasses and sensors, to have different experiences. To make purchases, to participate in events, to explore worlds, paths, etc...

Emotions become even more vivid for the viewer that is an active part of what happens in the virtual world, and they can also be very intense. It is the case of a researcher, Nina Jane Patel, in the testing phase of Horizon (a kind of Metaverse), who reported that her avatar was sexually harassed sixty seconds after entering in the virtual world by four male avatars (all with male voices), that have harassed her and touched her<sup>11</sup>.

Sensations are real. Emotions experienced pragmatically are real too, in a body that is connected but distant physically from that context. Yet everything is real.

The deliberative process, in real and in virtual contest, is influenced by emotions that select experiences, images, predictions, choices discarding some of them and applying others: emotions improve the assumption of those prudential decisions (Damasio, 1994, 2003) that allow to make decisions. This is what Damasio (1994) defines as practical rationality that is that type of reason conditioned by the emotional sphere through which the social actor is able to make choices, consider them more appropriate and adopt more appropriate behaviours in a double sense: that of utility and well-being both individual and social (Fuselli, 2014).

This is a new frontier that sociology must analyse and to study in order to provide adequate interpretation keys and specific orientations for users, also for they safety.

## **5. “ONLIFE” EMOTIONS AND NEW SOCIAL BEHAVIOURS: THE RISK OF AN HYPERCONNECTION SOCIETY FOR ADOLESCENTS**

We live in a hyper-connected society. We live in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) society.

Especially during the pandemic, we spent a lot of time online, engaging in work, in training, in different communications and in entertainment activities such as watch tv series, movies, play video games<sup>12</sup>. We tried to reclaim and to maintain that social connection even though we were physically distant.

According the YouGov “International study: how has coronavirus affected people’s personal lives?”<sup>13</sup>, 62% of Italians interviewed declare to have suffered a worsening of their psycho-physical well-being. The main reason is the difficulty of living with one’s family at home, in a continuous present between #homeschooling and #remoteworking (29%). Also, the lack of relationships with friends and the difficulty of social and

<sup>11</sup> The full article is available at: <https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/02/14/news/metaverso-337711044/>

<sup>12</sup> See also the Binge-Watching phenomenon used to indicate the binge-watching act, watching television programs for a very long time, more than usual. For example, to watch episodes series consecutively, without interruption.

<sup>13</sup> December 2020. The research was conducted on more than 21,000 people in 16 different countries in Europe, America and the Middle East. See the full article: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2020/12/10/impact-coronavirus-personal-lives> and <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/fn83kzrj9i/International%20COVID%20personal%20impact.pdf>

sports interactions are motivations for suffering.

These are efforts that technology has allowed us to make but at a very high price.

According to another study published on Scientific Report, during pandemic children who make high daily use of touchscreens are faster at picking up new items when they appear on the screen but also, conversely, less able to resist distraction. In other words, young children who are heavy users of touchscreens are quick to pick up on the novel item, but not to control attention, to stay focused on the activity that occupied them before the new item appeared<sup>14</sup>.

In Italy, data collected by the Osservatorio Nazionale Adolescenza Onlus reveal that almost 3 out of 10 children between 9 and 10 years have a profile on Tik Tok, 1 in 10 of the same age on Instagram and 1 in 10 have their own YouTube channel. Almost 20% of them interact with unknown users, spending a lot of time online in 2021<sup>15</sup>. 3.4% of them are addicted to Internet, reported Telefono Azzurro<sup>16</sup>.

Young people express to suffer especially of loneliness, 93% of them say they feel alone, an increase of 10% from the previous year (2020)<sup>17</sup>: 68% of them say they have witnessed bullying or cyberbullying episodes, while 61% are victims. Boys and girls express suffering for episodes of psychological violence experienced by peers (42.23%) and, in particular, 44.57% of girls report the strong discomfort felt by receiving unwelcome comments of a sexual nature online. On the other hand, 8.02% of girls admit that they committed acts of bullying, or cyberbullying, a percentage that grows up to 14.76% among boys<sup>18</sup>. For Italian adolescents, the COVID-19 consequences related to the social isolation and distancing measures were severe: 93% of them stated that they felt lonely. An even more significant increase if we consider that the percentage of those who indicated that they felt lonely "very often" went from 33% to a dramatic 48%.

In addition, 82% of young Italians are at risk of smartphone addiction in 2021. This is what emerges from the EURES report, which also stresses reasons for this excessive use of smartphones: first of all, young people indicate that they use mobile to "fight boredom" (46.9%), while 22.5% indicate the possibility to be part of a group and to be accepted by others and the explicit reference to addiction, 18.2% of teens say they can't be without their device, and 21.6% of them use their smartphone on average more than 8 hours a day. Smartphone use is also a reason for daily arguments (27.6%)<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> See the full study: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/08/200819110913.htm> and <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/01/210126082718.htm>

<sup>15</sup> See: <https://www.adolescienza.it/osservatorio/bambini-sempre-piu-iperconnessi-il-rischio-di-dipendenza-e-altissimo-maura-manca-ne-ha-parlato-al-tg1/>

<sup>16</sup> Study in: [https://azzurro.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/AC104\\_web2114671.pdf](https://azzurro.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/AC104_web2114671.pdf). Telefono Azzurro is an Italian non-profit organization founded in 1987 with the aim to defend children rights.

<sup>17</sup> The research was conducted on 6.000 teenagers, aged 13 to 23, from all over Italy: <https://terredeshommes.it/comunicati/bullismo-cyberbullismo-parlano-ragazzi-dati-dellosservatorio-indifesa/>

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>19</sup> The study was conducted on 1.800 student respondents, male and female. Full study in Eurispes, 2021: [https://www.benesseredigitale.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Report-1\\_Let%C3%A0-del-lo-smartphone.pdf](https://www.benesseredigitale.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Report-1_Let%C3%A0-del-lo-smartphone.pdf).

For others online risks, see: [https://www.iss.it/documents/20126/45616/18\\_21\\_web.pdf/075d1898-](https://www.iss.it/documents/20126/45616/18_21_web.pdf/075d1898-)

The main topics, in virtual and in pragmatic life, are connected not only to the internet and social media use, and networks but also to the relations and social bond between individuals (especially teens), in pandemic time and after that. In fact, the social relation is also characterized by the “Nomophobia” from the terror of being without phone or internet connection and, therefore, the fear to cannot access chat and social network<sup>20</sup>.

Clearly, this fear is linked to internet addiction also because it manifests itself in some specific behaviours without impulse control, including: using smartphone for many hours a day, always carrying it with, using it at any time, constantly looking at the screen to see if any notifications, messages or phone calls arrived, never turning off devices even at night, always commenting and sharing everything online (Manca, 2016). These are just a few risks: vamping, like-mania and follower-mania should also be considered. The sensation seeking is involved in dangerous circle as a response to boredom and emptiness, as a way to break the rules, as a way to socialize and have more followers, to increase social reputation, as the only way to communicate beyond one’s loneliness (Ibidem).

It’s the “inter-reality” space as an “hybrid social space” thanks to the real world enters the digital that create and modify the entire social subject experience in terms of description and definition of his social identity.

## CONCLUSIONS

New technology and social networks redefine mind architecture (De Kerckhove, 2001) with repercussions on interpretation and relationship with reality (Ferrara, 2016) where emotions play a key role. In fact, most recent researches enhance the logic of adaptivity to the social environment (Bellelli, 2008) that considers emotions as variable, flexible and open elements, shared from the subject to the others. The same theory of emotional contagion explains that, even in the online world, there is a real possibility to feel, to act, beyond the verbal interaction: the distinction between the real and the virtual world, online and offline, does not exist; these two dimensions coexist, overlap, and mingle continuously. Emotions as social emergent that underlie social behaviours also online, into new languages and new frontiers worlds where individual remains “emotional”. Sociology must increasingly interrogate this topic in order to understand the human in-group behaviour evolution, even after pandemic.

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<sup>20</sup> See: Bicen H., Arnavut A., Determining the effect of technological tool use habits on social lives, in *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 48, 2015, pp. 547-462; Schoenebeck S., *Developing healthy habits with Social Media: Theorizing the Cycle of Overuse and Taking Breaks*, Workshop: Refusing, Limiting., Departing. Why we should study technology non use, Toronto, Canada, 2014.

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#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Davide Barba is Extraordinary Professor of Juridical Sociology, Deviance and Social Change at the Department of Economics, University of Molise, Italy.

Daniela Grignoli is an Associate Professor of General Sociology at the Department of Economics, University of Molise, Italy.

Mariangela D'Ambrosio is Researcher in General Sociology at the Department of Economics, University of Molise, Italy.

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