Virtualizing the Past: Re-connecting on Facebook and Emerging Social Relationships

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Abstract

Reconnecting with past relationships is documented as one of the main motivations for using Social Network Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook. Numerous studies underline the ways SNSs may support social interactions in the broad context of the offline-and-online seamless web. However, in the author’s knowledge, no studies have been conducted to link these two aspects, and very little research addresses the personal and social value of reconnecting experiences. This paper presents a pilot exploratory study with in-depth interviews. A small sample of Italian users were asked to tell a significant reconnecting experience they had during the Facebook tipping point in Italy, and how the re-acquired relation developed into the present. It emerged that the interviewees appropriate Facebook’s social architecture and social archive for re-thinking past relationships, bridging past and present self-narration and, most interestingly, cultivating new kinds of social relations that remain at present largely undefined both in common language and social research.

1. Introduction

Social Network Sites (SNSs) are increasingly used as ‘supernets’ [4] and ‘social archives’ [30] to navigate one’s social biography. They are increasingly appropriated to keep up with past relationships. If this will become an ubiquitous ingredient of social life, and past relationships will generally be revived and re-actualized in different ways along one’s life, the present is a very peculiar moment of transition that it is worth being narrated and documented by scholarly research: here is when we started virtualizing the past.

Since the very beginning of its popularization, the Internet has been appropriated to support the development of distant contacts [21] [29] [34] [40]. "Distant" can have several meanings: distant in a physical dimension, e.g. faraway strong ties [21], spatially distributed affinity groups [29] and spatially distributed communities of practice [40]; or distant in a sociocultural dimension, i.e. people and information belonging to very different sociocultural contexts [34]. The present study attempts to observe the appropriation of the Internet and SNSs in particular to develop distant contacts in another dimension: time.

Facebook is a SNSs that has reached an unprecedented international success: according to the company’s statistics [8], at the end of June 2012 it counted 955 million monthly active accounts, 57.8% of whom log on to Facebook everyday. The number of subscribers keeps increasing rapidly; in September 2008 they were 100 millions [33] and they rose to 500 millions last year (June 2011) [7]. The phenomenon approached its tipping point in Italy toward the end of 2007. In a few months, Facebook became a popular topic even among non-users [16]. Italian users have grown by 763% in 5 months, from 572 thousands users in July 2008 to 4.9 million in December 2008 [23]. As discussed later in this section and in Methods, the Facebook tipping point in Italy constitutes a sampling frame for this study.

After a fad of critics, following in particular Kraut and colleagues [18] footsteps, numerous recent studies [5] [6] [3] [4] [20] [30] [32] have analyzed social and psychological benefits experienced by the users of SNSs, and Facebook in particular, as a ‘social supernet’ [4] and a ‘social archive’ [30] to navigate their seamless web [21] of online and offline relationships. Kraut [19] has reviewed the model as well, although affirming that the beneficiaries of SNS are those who already have a strong social support.

Another line of research analyzes online social interactions as self-explorations that may result in elaborating unsolved aspects of oneself or exercising alternative possible selves [1] [10] [38]. These studies have influenced the preliminary interview guide of the present work (see section 4.2), focusing on whether and how SNSs support the re-interpretation of past
relations and their fluid re-integration in the self-narration.

The reconnecting experience is well documented [6] [17] [20] as one of the motivations that bring users to register and to keep using Facebook. However, there are no studies known to the author linking the reconnecting experiences and the possible personal and social benefits just discussed, enquiring how Facebook supports these experiences, and what kind of social relations this process may enable.

Several online social networks are created or used to re-connect with past contacts, e.g. in France it is popular to find old friends and classmates via the web site copainsdavant.linternaute.com. Generalist social networks are also often used for this purpose, particularly Facebook. As it will emerge from the preliminary findings of the present study, Facebook enables re-contacting a strong tie from the past in a very casual way, without having to re-commit to the relationship in any specific way: it is not necessary to meet face-to-face (FTF), it is not necessary to reestablish the same relationship; it is possible to reconnect in a new way.

This phenomenon has been particularly visible and striking for users over 20 in Italy during 2008, when Facebook reached the tipping point and many have experienced a sort of "blast from the past".

This paper presents an exploratory pilot study of three cases of users who experienced re-contacting via Facebook with a strong relationship from the past after having lost contact for several years. A "strong relationship" is defined experientially as a relationship that interviewees considered relevant in their life.

The reconnecting experiences happened during Facebook tipping point in Italy. This time frame has been chosen as it seems more likely for users to have encountered their first Facebook-mediated reconnecting experiences in this period. Indeed, since Facebook reached critical mass, reconnecting experiences via this site became more likely to happen; at the same time, it was still a quite novel technology, and so were the experiences it mediated.

First experiences of mediated reconnections are of particular interest here as they might offer unique insights. Indeed, if the phenomenon grows more common, peculiar aspects of the experience may become naturalized and therefore invisible to interviewees and harder to observe for researchers.

The research followed an interpretive approach, as it is particularly suited for exploratory studies. Users were asked to tell a significant reconnecting experience and how the re-acquired relation developed into the present.

Preliminary research questions were related to the re-comprehension of past, unsolved questions in relationships re-enacted via Facebook. However, new themes and questions emerged: preliminary findings suggest that the reconnecting experience doesn't necessarily accompany a re-comprehension of past interpersonal issues, but a more general reconfiguration of the relationship enabled by the new context/medium.

The emphasis on benefits in this work should not obfuscate possible downsides in the uses of SNSs, i.e. threats to privacy [13], the development of participatory surveillance [41] and escapism [19]. Some of these themes will be considered in more detail in the Finding and Discussion sections.

2. Related Work

This study inscribes itself in the broader area of technologically mediated relationships; related research on SNSs is reviewed below in order to understand the relevance of this work and the gaps in the literature it attempts to address.

As Licoppe [21] and Licoppe and Smoreda [22] suggest, while different media are appropriated in different ways according to the kind of relationships, they also mediate and influence the mutual perception of the relationship itself. This study aims to understand how interviewees appropriated Facebook as an opportunity to re-comprehend and renegotiate a past strong relationship after having lost contact.

As mentioned in the Introduction, many recent studies analyze how users benefit from the use of Facebook. Among scholars there is a certain consensus about the fact that SNSs [5] and Facebook in particular [6] allow to maintain a higher number of weak ties [12] more efficiently than previous media and provide new ways to generate social capital [27] [28]. In particular, they support a more efficient way of (a) social signaling (expressing one's condition to others) [4], (b) social grooming (small talk and phatic communication...
for social interaction rather than information exchange) [39], and (c) activating latent ties, turning them into weak ties [6] as the cost of these social activities is reduced thanks to "a new way to organize and navigate an egocentric social network" [4].

While the use of a new medium "is likely to extend communication among strongly tied communicators, reinforcing the existing strong tie network", weak ties are generally more susceptible to change based on changes of media uses [15] and social frequentations. Facebook is becoming the main 'supernet' where people tend to archive all weak ties and potentially never lose them [4] [30] in spite of their "weakness".

It has been observed that Facebook represents a social archive and enables capitalization on both social memories [30] and positive emotions [32] [33]. As Richardson and Hessey [30] put it: "SNS may change the way we associate at a very fundamental level – it will mean as one journeys through life these associations can be captured and up-to-date information about our former relationships is ready to be recalled and revived along the way." Keeping up with an unprecedented diversity of individuals from one's personal life path "offers people more choice in how they do continue relationships" [30].

New types of relationships are already emerging within SNSs. The first new type of bonding studied in literature is the 'friendster', that is, the person known only in the context of an SNS (boyd, 2006), but new ways of bonding and the kind of ties that can be supported by supernets remain amply unstudied.

Few studies address the reconnecting process more in depth [35] [36] and underline how it constitutes a deeply emotional experience and establishes connections not only with each other but also with one's own personal past. However, it seems that reconnected ties are rarely re-integrated into the present life [35] [36]. This study looks specifically into cases where the re-acquired relationship developed into the present. Indeed, although currently rare, SNS mediated re-bonding experiences may offer unique insights into social relationships and new possible ways they can be supported with SNSs.

As it will be discussed below, re-acquired relationships might constitute ties that cross the traditional boundaries of sociological classifications (weak/strong; kinship, friendship, romantic relationship, work relationship, etc.). Specific affordances in Facebook seem to facilitate the cultivation of these ties. Although there seems to be similarities with the concept of weak ties [12], their relevance doesn't appear to lay in higher chances of productiveness in one's life (e.g. jobs opportunities and occasions for social actions) but rather in a deeper awareness of personal and emotional aspects, offering new opportunities for elaborating self-narratives in relations to the persons who played a role in one's life.

3. Research Questions

The general objective of this study is documenting and analyzing some of the first cases of reconnecting experiences among Facebook users. Pilot in-depth interviews have allowed the author to pre-test and define the main themes of the interview guide.

The preliminary research questions were: (a) How does Facebook mediate the re-bonding? (b) What are the possible outcomes? (c) What design recommendations could be made to support these experiences?

4. Methods

This study follows an inductive approach, which is particularly suitable for exploratory research [37]. Semi-structured in-depth interviews have been conducted in order to elicit the emergence of personal and diverse experiences in each case. This approach permitted to keep the interview guide open to unpredicted themes that indeed emerged in the course of the analysis.

A small purposive sample of three cases of reconnecting experiences has been selected within a convenience population of Italian Facebook contacts in the author's network. Drawing from convenience populations can be justified at an exploratory stage of research, particularly when a purposive sample adds a framing dimension to it [2] [31]. Purposive sampling allows to select information-rich cases of the studied phenomenon [2]. A small sample can facilitate a continuous and profound involvement of the researcher with each respondents and a deeper inquiry of specific aspects [2] [31]. In this way, a small purposive sample can enhance the validity of qualitative research [2] [31]. Although findings from such non-probability sample are not generalizable to a defined population, each case offers unique insights to formulate relevant concepts and indicate themes for future research [2] [31].

The Recruitment paragraph below expands on the sampling process and its criteria.

4.1. Recruitment

The interviewees have been recruited by posting the following as the author's Facebook status: "I am looking for someone who reconnected on Facebook with a strong tie from the past" (translated from
Italian). Among six responses, three cases have been purposefully selected as they corresponded to the phenomenon under study and for their phenomenal variation [31].

In the three excluded cases the reconnecting experience didn't develop in the present life of the users. As mentioned above, it seems currently rare that reconnected ties are re-integrated in the daily life. This study looks into reconnections that have been re-integrated for at least one year. Uncommon cases can indeed be particularly information-rich [31]. The three cases offered some phenomenal variation in terms of appropriation of Facebook affordances and type of past relationship; one of them was a past romantic relationship, while the other two weren't.

The recruitment strategy targeted Italians as Facebook tipping point in Italy was recent enough for users to be able to recall relevant details, such as which Facebook features they used to reconnect. Moreover, the author is fluent in the language and her network includes several Italian users.

As discussed in the Introduction, the tipping point timeframe has been chosen as reconnecting experiences became more likely but were still novel, which might yield to unique insights into the phenomenon before it possibly becomes naturalized.

In-depth semi-structured interviews have been conducted via VoIP and recorded using a streaming audio recording software.

4.2. Interview Guide

The preliminary interview guide leaned toward the re-comprehension of past, unsolved, questions in relationships re-enacted via Facebook. However, new themes and questions emerged during the interviews suggesting that the possibility to bridge with the past doesn't necessarily follow from a re-comprehension of interpersonal issues, but may be based on a more general re-comprehension of the relationship. A general re-comprehension that seems enabled by Facebook as a medium that broadens the available opportunities to cultivate the relationship.

The following interview guide provides a structure to prompt the conversation. After initial demographic information, the guide is organized chronologically and from general to specific points.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic information</th>
<th>The past relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Can you tell me something about the relationship you had?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook name (if different)</td>
<td>When did the relationship end or fade out? Tell me about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Have you been thinking about this person sometimes before reconnecting on FB? How? Can you tell me about it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Why do you think you reconnected each other?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins (if not or partially Italian)</td>
<td>The reconnecting experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>You have re-connected on Facebook. Can you tell me about it? (Follow up questions: How did you feel? What did you talk about?)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there a particularly “memorable experience” you shared on FB with this person? Can you tell me about it? (Follow up question: How did you feel about it?)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did you talk about [something important that emerges during the interview]? Can you tell me about it?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you think you could have approached these arguments meeting face-to-face, by phone, or writing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there any significant aspect of your prior relationship that you did not discuss, can you tell me about it?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are you still in touch now? Can you tell me about it?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have you reconsidered your relationship with the other as a result of this interaction? If so, how?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why do you think you reconnected each others on FB?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook features used</td>
<td>Facebook features used (Checklist - If they do not emerge during the interview)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Think about the first time you recontacted each other, which Facebook feature did you use?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friendship request (ask who requested the friendship and if the request was personalized)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you interact?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tag each other in images, notes, comments or posts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Navigate each other profiles (photos, wall, notes, info...)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post on each other's wall</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Poke</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Like”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Comment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Share elements from each other's wall</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facebook applications</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Causes, groups, pages</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Send each other private messages, links, or multimedia elements</td>
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<td></td>
<td>IM</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General info on FB and networking technologies use</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Since when are you on FB?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How often and how much you use it?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why did you subscribe?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>For what do you use it in general?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you like/dislike about it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you use other networking technologies?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3. Data Analysis

The interviews have been analyzed following a general inductive theme analysis [37] that is particularly suitable to the exploratory nature of this study. The data has been coded throughout an iterative process of interviewing, note-taking, reflecting, and repeatedly listening to audio recordings of the interviews [14].

The coding process was based on emergent themes rather than predetermined categories [2] [14] [37].

5. Findings

The following are the main themes emerged from the pilot interviews in terms of possible outcomes of SNS-mediated reconnecting experiences and technological affordances that enable them. Rather than definite findings they represent guide themes that should be deepened in the future development of the present work.

5.1. "It Allows Me to Live it": Cultivating New Kinds of Relations

As mentioned above, I was expecting to analyze narratives of relationships interrupted for quite defined reasons that could have been faced post hoc by the two parties thanks to the distance of time and the mediation of a primarily text-based environment. Out of the three cases, one had a narrative structure close to these expectations, but the other two presented past ties lost for more contextual and unclear reasons, included, but not reducible to, physical distance. In these last cases the contact is re-enabled by Facebook, and there the virtual past relationship starts developing new ways of actualizing itself.

It seems that some ties, although charged of personal value and emotional involvement may actually break for not having the right medium/environment to support them. Generally, strong ties are considered to have frequent contacts via different media. Therefore, when the media of communication changes, strong ties are maintained, if not reinforced [15]. However, both Giuseppe and Elisa (names are changed for anonymity) told a story that doesn't really match with these general considerations. They both "warned me" that their stories were not about a strong tie in the "classic" sense, although they evidently valued the respective relations they told me about.

By "classically strong" Elisa and Giuseppe meant ties that are commonly considered important, such as family, close friends or romantic partners. Their warning underlines a struggle to communicate the relevance in their lives of ties that do not seem to have a place in the social construction of relationships. It may be that both contemporary society and general sociology are neglecting valuable personal relationships that may therefore be left uncultivated in people's lives, as their importance is not socially recognized and there is no model for their development. However, meeting people with who we feel a peculiar affinity that cannot be defined in terms of romantic love, friendship, or kinship, is a commonly shared experience. Possibly, because of their lack of social recognition, these affinities do not develop in long-term projects and the contact is rarely enacted. Nevertheless, the feeling of intimate affinity remains and it is revived any time there is a new contact with that person. The existence of this (non)kind of ties is also acknowledged – although considered marginal – by Social Network studies [15]; they are what Nietzsche called "stellar friendships" [24].

Elisa and Giuseppe stories were both about such affinities. As described below, their cases show that Facebook may support new kinds of connected presence, which may give expression to these blurred, undefined ties that till now did not have a social place to develop, nor a model for people to manage them. Although valuable for the person, undefined ties are often abandoned, possibly because there are no traced pathways to deal with them in traditional social structures (friends, girl/boyfriends, husband/wife, nuclear family and so on).

Elisa met Federico during a conference, they had interesting conversations, they liked each other. Elisa was single, Federico was married, Elisa felt there was an attraction between them that couldn't find expression and after a while began avoiding social occasions where she could have met him. "I avoided seeing him because if we would meet we would have wanted something more". Then she started traveling a lot for work and lost contact with Federico. Three years afterwards she wrote an advertisement on a Facebook group of a neighborhood in Milan where she was looking for a house. Federico saw her add and sent her a private message about housing in the area. They started a Facebook correspondence, following each other's everyday life via public status changes and photo uploads, signaling of presence with the "pokes", and private conversations via private messages, sharing of links and songs via the application The Songs I Like. Then the contact was re-enacted also by phone and FTF meetings.

When asked if she reconsidered somehow the relation after the reconnecting experience on Facebook, Elisa said: "It allowed me to live it." On the one hand she meant that FB offered them the occasion to meet
again, on the other hand Facebook offered her an environment where she was able to manage a relation that she wasn't able to manage before: "I accepted the friendship request and I found a way to manage the relationship." Now they sometimes meet FTF, they have again their interesting and pleasant conversations, they keep up on Facebook about each other lives and share links and songs. Elisa now thinks that the relation is sustainable in this way. What has changed? It is hard to say without deepening the story and the psychology of its personages, but one thing can be said: Facebook offered an environment to manage their undefined relationship, to try it out and develop it in its own way, which actually wasn't necessarily and intrinsically conflicting with Federico being married. They have a different kind of relationship, a kind that has no name and is not sanctioned by a sociocultural institution.

The absence of the medium of the physical body during the first re-contacting experiences may have played an important role in their story: using Facebook's asynchronous communication tools they could develop the nature of their reciprocal exchange beyond immediate and physical attraction. The latter is not an obstruction anymore: re-enacting and developing their connection online they somehow found their way around it, Elisa doesn't feel anymore she has to avoid him. The relation could be developed and experienced in its unique way and Elisa could experience it without perceiving it anymore as a potential threat to Federico's institutionalized relation of marriage. After having cultivated this non-conflicting relationship online, exploring and building shared meanings beside physical attraction, now she feels confident about meeting Federico face to face again.

Giuseppe is from northern Italy. He met Annarita when she lived in a village in southern Italy where Giuseppe's family went to holiday when he was 15 years old, 17 years ago. In seven years they met twice on two occasions, one of them was by chance, as Annarita was traveling near Giuseppe's place. There have been some letters and some fixed line phone calls.

"Is not a strong tie in the classic sense, it is strong in that both of us are pleased whenever we see each other or contact each other […] one of those people you feel well with, you feel well talking to, which is a rare thing". But they didn't have any clear, or socially defined, reason to keep up, they are not classic friends as they have very different lifestyles and no common interest, and they are not lovers. They lost contact for several years until he searched and found her on Xing. They first exchanged Skype contacts and then Facebook contacts. It is particularly in the latter that they shared the joy of finding each other again, mainly via the Facebook IM box. Now she is married, with a child and she lives in Rome. They keep up on each other's statuses and offer emotional support with their presence: "I send her an IM when I see from her status that her son is sick or things like this […] it's one of those ties that even if you hear from each other after years, it gives you something."

5.2. Continuity in Heterogeneity: Bridging Past and Present

Antonio searched for Silvia, his "first love", on Facebook, and there she was. After they broke up 16 years before they met only once and exchanged mobile number, but beside a few greetings by SMS there hadn't been any exchange. Reconnecting on Facebook, catching up by IM about each other's lives, browsing pictures of her after 16 years has evoked a strong emotion. "We also talked about why we left each other, we had been very good back then, there were no resentments, there were just incompatibilities. Probably I had a more conservative mentality and I have done the mistake of enforcing it on her but she couldn't take it." In the relationships he had afterwards he had lost that transparency and honesty of confrontation and dialogue, breaking up after strong fights full of resentment. "I could find other persons from the past too, and could talk about what happen without the rage of the moment, I use it to make peace with the past." He feels covered by a sort of "anonymity", which makes him feels like "looking at a mirror, but also there is the confrontation with the other, who can make you think about things that you wouldn't admit by yourself." Thanks to the distance of time and the "cold" uniformity of the medium he could reflect upon and confront his thoughts with the persons he has been emotionally involved with.

Antonio's and Silvia's story is a story of "weak rebonding" with a strong tie from the past. "I was happy to see that we still have something to talk about, it gave a confirmation that our story was real". According to Antonio, he could see more clearly in his past mistakes, and how he repeated them in other relationships that he could also reconsider on Facebook. The re-confirmation and revivification of the story with Silvia instead strengthened the possibility of honesty in a love relationship. Without this re-confrontation and reconfirmation this possibility would have faded out from his self-narration.

As Giuseppe put it: "If I check who's online now, I will find from people I will see tonight to people I will see in two or five years, they are all there […] it's like a spread chronology of my life […] Like if past things were not passed anymore but there was a continuum in the present"
5.3. A Modular Architecture of Front and Backstage

In all interviews it emerged that Facebook offers a casual environment for conversations with anyone, close or far, in both time and space. Not only does it lower the effort and the economic cost to maintain contact, it also lightens and renders more casual the reconnecting gesture. Superficially one may think that the people we don't keep up with are not important, but sometimes, it is because they are important and valuable, that keeping up with them would require an effort that we don't have time or resources to do (a long chat, a thoughtful email). Then time passes and traditional person-to-person media do not offer an environment casual enough to recontact someone after years of absence. When Giuseppe said that on Facebook he could maintain contacts that he wouldn't otherwise, he says that he was talking about "good acquaintances". Giuseppe was also talking about people with whom there is a relation, some kind of affinity, but there wouldn't be many actual contacts.

This is possible because Facebook affords to combine the lightness of an unplanned casual encounter in a public space with the intimacy of a private conversation. The lightness of casual encounter is possible because SNSs constitutes what Donath [4] calls "networked publics": they support sociability in a way that's very similar to commons and public spaces [4]. On the other hand they support intimate multimodal conversations and, as it emerged in the present study, the development of private relationships. In terms of design this is supported by a modularity of public and private virtual spaces, which becomes a complex architecture of several front and back stages, updating the terms of Goffman's [11] dramaturgical presentation of the self.

Sas and colleagues [32] already observed that Facebook interactions can be classified in terms of roles performed either in the front or the backstage, using public or private communication features; however, the borderline between the two is more blurred than in traditional media and the same persons can pass to and from back and front stages more easily.

The reconnecting interactions narrated by the interviewees took place predominantly in the back stage rather than in front stage, and the latter were mainly in the 'observation of performance' role [32], that is, looking at the public posts. 'Public performances' [32], such as public posts, often offered the occasions for private interactions. Other times, a private interaction inspired a public post. In Goffman's theory [11], backstage interactions prepare for public performances, while on Facebook the dialectic of the private-public dimensions seems less defined in dichotomous terms.

Facebook navigation becomes in this way an exercise of constructing unity in heterogeneity, as Giuseppe says about his list of Facebook friends: "they have nothing to do with each other, I am the common denominator". A stroller in her own egocentric social networks, a Facebook user re-creates her own meanings and narratives through the juxtaposition of large quantities of social information.

6. Discussion

Facebook as a social archive affords a modularity and co-existence of traditionally opposite poles on axis such as time, sociocultural belonging, private-public, and intimacy-distance. Its modular architecture affords this coexistence, however users are not yet necessarily able to modulate it very easily.

Privacy settings about what is shared and with whom are the key features for the construction of the back/front stage modularity. Facebook privacy settings are continuously renegotiated and refined. A higher flexibility and modularity of privacy settings could support a much more complex architecture of "backstages" and "frontstages". A user-friendlier setting interface, supporting higher user control, could enable this modularity in such a way that private and public spheres, although intertwined, would not merge completely. This affords the construction of an alternative architecture with respect to the panopticon-like one [9], eluding the leveling effects of participatory surveillance. The later indeed would suppress, rather than let blossom, the outlying and undefined relationships emerged in this study. Flexible, usable and secure privacy settings on SNSs would support the creation of new kinds of social spaces which seem to constitute a favorable environment to cultivate new kinds of relationships that are not likely to be supported otherwise.

Better privacy awareness and user-friendly interfaces for privacy settings can improve the modular public-private architecture that appears to support reconnecting experiences and undefined ties. At the same time these interventions would mitigate some of the privacy threats that SNSs pose [13].

Other tensions are also observed as related to the heterogeneity of Facebook as a supernet, e.g. tensions between social and professional spheres or jealousy issues in relationships. However, rather than give up this heterogeneity and its potential uses, user control's of the ambient modularity should be enhanced, again, via more usable and flexible privacy settings [26]. Moreover, in the elaboration and exploration of that
tension among different areas of one's life lays the opportunity emerged here to find one's continuity in heterogeneity.

A design supporting a modular private-public social architecture appears to be the main condition in order to fully develop SNSs' potential as enablers of new kinds of bonding and new conceptions of relationships [4].

Another crucial condition is that SNSs become really massively used. Flexible and easy to manage privacy setting, and stronger security of users data, both on the technical and policy level would provide a trustworthy environment that arguably can contribute to the diffusion of SNSs.

7. Future Research

The present work has explored some constructive appropriations of the social archive affordance in SNSs. Far from offering a comprehensive typology, the cases presented here call for further research on other variations of the phenomenon.

In both Giuseppe’s and Elisa’s stories, Facebook mediation seems to have released the pressure to define and force their respective ties into “classically strong” ones. However, there might be cases where cultivating these ties might disrupt pre-existing social dynamics, with less pleasant outcomes. As mentioned above, disruption is not per se negative and it might actually further personal growth; nevertheless, disruptive or unsuccessful reconnecting experience should be analyzed too.

This research would also benefit from the study of experiences using different SNSs and in different socio-cultural contexts. Indeed, some aspects of the studied cases might be specific to Italian culture, while some of the affordances attributed to Facebook features might actually apply to different sites as well.

Moreover, archived contacts and communications are a source of historical documentation that can be abused in different ways. Future research should address possible disadvantages of the uses of SNSs as social historical archive as well. This line of research may find a fruitful theoretical framework in Nietzsche’s [25] philosophical work on the uses and abuses of history, in the life of individuals, communities and cultures. The main idea behind Nietzsche’s [25] work is that we should serve the cause of history "only insofar as it serves living." Indeed, according to the philosopher, "the health of a single individual, a people, and a culture, the unhistorical and the historical are equally essential" [25].

A future study can be conducted comparing online communications as historiography documentations and oral history interviews about relevant events in the interviewees uses of Facebook’s affordance to archive the past. Online communications can be obtained downloading Facebook profiles of consenting participants’ using SocialSafe or similar software. Participants may be asked to provide other archived communications too (emails and others).

Comparing archived communication and oral interviews will hopefully be revealing of how the online historical archive is (or is not) serving the users’ life. Indeed, oral history should reveal something different than documentation, and interviewees "biased" reconstructions will be useful to understand what meaning and uses they confer to the online social archive.

Future interviewees can be recruited outside the direct circle of the author’s Facebook contacts, possibly incrementing the phenomenal variation [31]. Furthermore, asking interviewees who they didn’t reconnect with and how they feel about it, may also lead to interesting results: it is possible to understand if there are "unhistorical" cases [25], unarchived experiences that may or may not serve life and shed further light on the meaning of SNS-archived relations.

Broadening the phenomenal variation within the sample in the ways described here will offer a better understanding of if and how SNS-mediated archivization and navigation of past relationships "serves life” in the ways emerged during this study; that is, supporting a higher awareness of personal and emotional aspects by enabling new opportunities for elaborating self-narratives in relations to the persons who played critical roles in one's life.

8. Conclusions

The pilot study presented in this paper explores new research directions in the investigation of the social aspects of SNSs in the context of online and offline relations. The interviewees appropriate Facebook’s social archive for re-thinking past relationships, bridging past and present self-narration, and cultivating emerging kinds of social relations that weren’t supported by the context and media of their past. If users of SNSs will continue to increase we may expect a parallel blooming of these emerging social relationships that remain at present largely undefined both in common language and social research. This shortcoming of definitions epitomizes the ongoing social transition and calls for further studies.

The present exploratory study suggests that the recent massive wave of reconnecting experiences via SNSs offer an elective pool of cases to study the current changes in the spectrum of social relations that characterize our everyday life. Further studies are necessary to gain a better understanding of these
changes, how new communication technologies support them, and under which sociotechnical conditions they pose threats, such as the actual threats to privacy, or yield benefits, such as those experienced by the interviewees of this study.

9. References


