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Analysis of Photo Sharing and Visual Social Relationships. Instagram as Case Study.

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Abstract

This article discusses how visuality, through the mobility of Instagram, modifies individuals' mediated lives. In particular, it examines how Instagram transforms individuals' perceptions of their interpersonal relationships. It advances a critical re-reading of the concept of mobility (smart mobile devices) and the new approach to sociality. Conducting an empirical examination, this article delineates the changing dynamics that digitality determines within contemporary life experiences. Findings show that the ubiquitous use of smart mobile devices leads individuals towards the development of new forms and conceptions of mobile mediated visualities. In order to understand the rise of new visual practices based on Pink's (2007) ethnographic work, this article considers how relationships develop among individuals, visual technologies, practices and images, society and culture.

A qualitative approach informed by netnography (Kozinets, 2010), computer-mediated interviews and visual analysis (Rose, 2007) is employed in this study. The critical analysis of 44 participant interviews and their photo sharing behaviour presents the transformations that the mediation and mobility of Instagram bring into everyday relations between humans and technologies. The increased use of social media shows how sociality is affected and mediated by new mobile technologies. Although the social potentiality of (visual) social relationships itself does not offer a variety of verbal communication mechanisms, it encourages offline meetings or the relocation onto other social media. This shows that every alteration in the structure of societies has influence on individuals and on their means of expression.

1. Mediation and Connectivity on Instagram: Sociality within Online Communities and Social Networking Sites

Smart mobile devices are extremely widespread, and social media platforms are taking the place of previous means of communication. Undeniably, phone calls are decreasing dramatically and text messages are becoming more contracted. In other words, it seems that the time spent on communication is shorter and easier than before. Within this context, visual communication arises as one of the most widespread means of interaction. The popularity of online social media is growing, considerably affecting human social relationships. In contemporary society, the pervasive use of social media represents a new phenomenon in which social networks are (almost always) mediated by new mobile technologies.

Considering this context of technological mediations and human interactions, this article investigates theoretical and practical aspects of online social relationships. It considers the formation of online communities, and how mobile communication affects the creation and the maintenance of mediated social relationships. The article discusses the notion of online and offline communities and social networking, including the implications that the mediation of the Internet (social media platforms) and smart mobile technologies bring into account. Through these considerations, this article examines in detail the experience of mediated sociality. Interwoven within this the practice of photo sharing on Instagram is analysed as a case study to investigate the modifications that new media generate in social sciences, focusing, in particular, on the understanding of how the platform is used to create and manage social relationships. In doing this, Instagram online communities and offline meetings (InstaMeet, InstaWalk and spontaneous encounters) are analysed. Similarities and differences with traditional face-to-face social interactions are discussed. Moreover, this article shows how Instagram creates new expressions of social connections and visual communication, demonstrating with empirical examples how images are shaping individuals' social lives. Instagram is analysed considering the behavioural alterations that leads individuals to employ photo sharing in online social relationships, highlighting how the platform affects the experience of sociality.

Smart mobile technologies set sociality into a perpetual interconnection among family, friends, and technologies. Following this perspective, the theoretical construction of contemporary social relationships is re-thought through the mediation and connectivity afforded by new social media and smart mobile technologies. The analysis of these affordances guides toward a new theorisation of sociality through new mobile visualities.

2. Mediation and Connectivity: Online Communities and Social Networking Sites

Since the arrival of the Internet a particular interest of social sciences research has focussed around the effects that the development of this media has on online social relationships. Considering that social theory is to explain social life (Hesmondhalgh & Toynbee, 2008), the fact that unprecedented forms of social relationships are generated in the presence of media leads contemporary research to seek to determine how certain phenomena rise in combination with these media.

One of the most evident changes can be recognised in the fact that the Internet and new media (through the use of mobile devices and platforms) foster the loss of proximity in human contact in favour of mediated contacts. Thanks to the technological advancements of new media, the growth of social networking websites and online communities has emerged as a key theme. One way individuals benefit from the Internet is through the increased number of potential social connections it allows users to establish and maintain. In this new context of communication and interaction the notion of sociality needs to be rethought, with consideration given to the rise of virtual, alternative worlds, and the development of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1993).

The enormous changes that the Internet brought to previous social habits are observable throughout the history of the Internet, particularly as they expand into social networking websites (Menduni, 2011). Social networking websites (such as Facebook) figure as an empowerment of social relational capacities, in particular because they offer the possibility to interact simultaneously with a multitude of subjects via different platforms. Social networks are a valuable resource for users who share the same interests, enabling connections, discussions, and exchanges that can converge towards the establishment of online communities with their group-specific forms of expression and normative conventions (Baym, 1995). The human tendency towards social aggregation and comparison is not a new practice (communities of interests are one example of these practices), however social networking websites can be seen as the contemporary widespread and ubiquitous representation of this tendency.

The arrival of smart phones in 2006 led to an increasingly pervasive use of social media platforms that enable individuals to interconnect with others while benefitting from the mobility afforded by the devices. Regarding this, Lugano (2009), examining mobile social networks argues that the use of mobile phones is affected by the nature of relationships. It is true that social networks are inherently multidimensional (Lugano, 2009); however, it is undeniable that the presence of mobile

devices, with the new conditions of mobility and ubiquitous connectivity, alters the traditional perception and management of social connections.

These conditions invite an interpretation of contemporary sociality as a combination of online and offline life, where the use of online social media platforms function as an extension of the offline networks (boyd & Ellison, 2007), implementing McLuhan's (1964) pioneering theorization of media. Thus, the interconnection between on- and offline life figures as a state of mixture that overlap physical and ephemeral mobility. The intersections between these two spheres foster the conceptualisation of 'life mix' (Turkle, 2011:160) that describes the passage from the online life to the offline one. The nebulous boundary between on- and offline experiences afforded by smart mobile technologies produces an overlapping condition. This indicates the development of a unique state that is the result of the dynamic combinations of both.

The status of permanent social connectivity moves toward the status of 'virtual togetherness' (Bakardjieva, 2003), a notion suggesting that online social networks are mainly based on existing contacts, acquaintances and friends. It follows that users compile these networks in order to maintain and reinforce social ties with people they already know. Within this construction, online social relationships move progressively towards an increased employment of imageries (images and exchanges of photos) to generate and manage connections. The arrival of Instagram (October, 2010) made a clear change in this practice. The affordances inherent in the mediation of Instagram changes users' understanding and use of the medium, demonstrating that social and cultural behaviours can be read through the employment of social media (Hochman & Manovich, 2013). Therefore, visual social media narrations about individuals considering spatial, temporal and visual levels can be traced. This line of interpretation identifies socio-cultural patterns and reflects individuals' interpretations, considering individuals and images as equally important for a qualitative analysis of the phenomenon.

3. Methodology: Netnography, Computer-mediated Interviews, and Visual Analysis

This study uses a multi-methodological approach that included a netnographic analysis (Kozinets, 2010), the (embedded) multiple-case study research method (Yin, 2009: 46), qualitative interviewing techniques (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), and visual content analysis (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2000). A qualitative mediated interview research method and visual data analysis formed the fieldwork. A sample of 44 Instagram users took part in this study. 29 participants have been

interviewed via Skype and 15 participants responded to an open-ended question that has been sent via email. The questions were as follows:

Skype Interview

1. What is your conception and use of Instagram as social network?
2. Do you use Instagram to maintain social relationships? How?
3. How do you use Instagram to keep long distance relationships?
4. What is your relationship with the online community? (Hierarchies, powers etc etc)
5. Have you been part of an InstaWalk or InstaMeet? Can you describe your experiences?

Open-ended Interview

1. How does Instagram change your social relationships? (Examples are encouraged)

Contents analysis followed, combining participants' responses with the observation of their photo sharing.

To stay current, this study adapted the traditional ethnographic guidelines to a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2010), which includes the mediation of the Internet for the examination of online social practices. This approach was used to consider the mediation that Instagram determines for the practice of photo sharing. 'Analysing visual contents is almost impossible without taking into account the context in which the visual was produced and finally received' (Bock et al, 2011:272). This study identifies mediation as a crucial variable that determines social relationships and affiliations. The research method design follows notions of visual ethnography that Sarah Pink (2007) advances in relation to qualitative social research. Pink argues that 'social scientists often complain that photographs alone do not represent, for example, emotions, social relations, relations of power and exploitation, but they need to be contextualized with verbal discourses or other knowledge in order to invoke such experiences' (Pink, 2007:125). In this regard, this study used Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar to analyse the images. The combination of interviews and visual materials that this article articulates draws attention to the importance of this aspect.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) see images as resources for representation and thus will display culturally produced regularities. Images together with colours and music, for instance, are similar to language and they can fulfil communicative functions as language does. It follows that images can

represent objects and their relationship in the world. This is why images are communicative instances. Besides, images are able to represent the existing social relationships between the producer, the viewer, and the image. Without advancing a semiotics analysis of photographs, this filter of interpretation is used in the study of Instagram to enrich the data analysis through an incisive comparison between the interviews and the images used in the practice of photo sharing. Visual content analysis, as an empirical (observational) and objective procedure (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2000), quantifies visual representations using reliable defined categories.

It is important to emphasise that images are not the only data taken into consideration in this study because an image does not necessarily reflect that image's meaning. Key aspects of interpreting photographic images are not limited to the qualitative analysis of visual contents; social behaviours before and after the photo exchange are also key to meaning-making. In the age of the Internet, visual messages travel through different spaces. Photos are made in one place and displayed in another one. They are very easy to capture and send, and their value and/or significance often changes over time and across platforms. Because of this, photos' meanings are constrained by several socio-cultural contexts in which they are located, and these vary by places and periods. It follows that contexts of experience (the mediation of the platform) are decisive in shaping the value of images.

The sampling technique employed in this study was accomplished entirely online. Since Facebook bought Instagram (April, 2012) the number of Instagram users has increased significantly on a global scale and, because of the visibility afforded by Facebook, a variety of Instagram communities Facebook pages have emerged. Members of Instagram community Facebook pages can be divided into two categories: Active users and Instagram online communities' members. Since the goal of data collection was to gather photographs and information as well as to understand individuals' behaviours, Facebook groups were recognised as engaging platforms on which both categories of users' converse. Therefore, the call for participants was disseminated among Facebook pages (Instagram online communities' pages). After the first approach through the social networking websites, participants who have responded positively to the call were approached via private email. Those participants received a document contained a general description of the study, the researcher's contact details, and a consent form with an explicit explanation of the treatment of personal data, which were detailed in the ethical considerations.

The target population of this study was formed by the group of subjects that met the set of criteria required to participate in the technical aspects of the fieldwork. That is, it confined the investigation to Instagram users and owners of a smart mobile device. Within these groups, there were no restrictions with respect to gender, race, and education imposed on the target population. Given the abundance of visual materials present on the platform, the visual data collection was limited to two months for the 29 participants who responded to the in-depth computer-mediated interviews (the other 15 participants were considered only with respect to the visual examples that they mentioned).

Subsequently, data analysis considered the co-presence of the concept of 'mediation' (Kember & Zylinska, 2012) with the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller & Urry, 2006) in order to advance a qualitative investigation that acknowledged the interconnection between the two different areas. The emphasis on movement, mobility and travel sheds new light on the purpose of research in social sciences bringing into account these new implications. Through this combination, data analysis introduces new ways of evaluating the existing relationships between theory, observation, and engagement. In relation to the focus of this article the following section quotes only those responses that better exemplify participants' general tendencies, aiming to give particular emphasise to key aspects and common trends.

4. Analysis of the Mediation of Visuality on Instagram: Online Communities and Offline Sociality

The emphasis that this article has on images does not intend to advance a semiotic analysis; it rather follows the principle that 'each individual produces meanings by relating the image to his or her existing personal experience, knowledge and wider cultural discourses' (Pink, 2007:82). Words can explain motivations and visions while images can communicate what words are not able to describe, such as emotions. This mixed approach produces narratives to describe connections and existing constants between individuals and the mediation of their smart mobile devices. The qualitative analysis of participants' responses and photo sharing illustrates how the increased use of Instagram produces alterations in the everyday experience of sociality. An investigation of the concept of sociality on Instagram reveals two macro areas of social interactions: individuals' roles in the online Instagram communities and general users of the Instagram application. Online Instagram communities present an additional inner subdivision between community managers and community members.

The chronology of Instagram is marked by two moments during which the platform transcends its original identity as a mere photo sharing application into a new form of social network. The first important moment occurred on April 9th, 2012 when Facebook bought Instagram. This partnership allows Facebook, through the mobility of Instagram (geo-tags, for example), constant access to users' data and metadata. From users' perspective, the resulting ability to share images across the two platforms simultaneously fosters the practice of photo sharing. The cross-mediality drives a substantial modification of the initial Instagram identity; as one says: 'It is different in relation to the other [socials networks], but even on Instagram can be created this relation of participation in someone else adventures' (#2). He is an enthusiastic Instagramer in his late 30s. He actively collaborates with the no profit association Instagramers Italia as news editor and community manager (IgersPiceni). His response contradicts the general belief that the digital age has initiated a loss of community. In this case, social relationships and online communities are a constructed idea (not necessarily embedded in physical instances) in which the term 'mediated relationships' (Poster, 2001) replaces concept of imagined ones (Anderson, 1983). It follows that the conception of mediated communications is not based on everyday face-to-face social interactions, rather on mediated connections created by individuals who feel themselves part of specific networks, thus emphasising the idea of 'being-as-mediated' (Kember & Zylinska, 2012). This concept affects how we approach visual communication, since mobile phones have in some way affected individuals' lives and the ways in which they relate to each other (Green & Haddon, 2009). The social exchange of photographs, called 'visual objects'(Kember & Zylinska, 2012), is thought of as a point of departure for critically re-reading the structuring of forms of communicative media, because this social exchange can potentially elicit new theoretical patterns and unconventional cross mediations.

Regarding this last notion, the majority of participants consider Instagram an unordinary social network that shapes social relationships mainly on visual communication, unlike other verbal-centric networks. For example, one (a male German in his early 30s working as an Assistant Manager) particularly believes in the social aspect of Instagram. He is the Instagram Berlin local manager. He defines his photo sharing under the category of urban photography. This is mainly because his photo stream is formed entirely of images captured in urban environments, where the human element is always juxtaposed by architecture. He describes his use of the platform in this way: 'Today, I always take the camera with me and I can always watch what other people are doing and I can comment, and people can see what I am doing and I can interact, and it's really nice' (#4). As can be seen from this response, Instagram is perceived as a mobile extension of the traditional concept of social networking that once rooted individuals in front of a fixed computer screen. The

mobility afforded by mobile phones allows a constant possibility of social interaction that, in this case, becomes visual. Mobile phones make it possible to visually experience sociality online 'on the move' (#4). This condition determines the perception of the pervasive sociality online.

The introduction of the 'Geotagged Photo Maps' on August 16th, 2012 is another important moment in the development of Instagram that changes the conception of locality and social connectivity. Photo Map can showcase where users take photos and can be used to explore where others have taken photos on a map. The geo-tag allows the sharing of precise positions. This feature does not allow the adding of unreal or false locations (i.e. location distant from where the user is actually located) as the geo-tag associates the latitude and the longitude of individuals' current location with their photo through Wi-Fi or data signals. The GPS device collects this data as long as the user selects this option on their device. This feature is important because it is recognized as a useful tool to create social connections, as can be seen through one experience: 'we shared some shots in the same moment and they were 500 meters away from me. So, then we met and we said hello to each other. We were taking that shot 10 minutes before... yes... basically the place was the same' (#2). This participants response shows how the mobility of mobile phones and the mediation of Instagram can create social connections that, afterwards, are experienced offline thanks mobility allowing a type of sociality 'on the move' (#4), and thereby breaking the boundaries of physical distances. The development of geolocations introduces the geo-tag as a facilitator of social engagement. This condition emphasises how the concept of portability is a central element within this discourse with respect to the modalities in which 'taking our media with us allows us to be completely independent of locality' (Siapera, 2012:199).

Physical proximity is no longer a crucial condition either for human connections or for the development of social relationships. Before the proliferation of the Internet, individuals' daily social life was determined by the connections that the immediate space could provide. Friendships were sustained through 'regular face-to-face contact, although telephone calls and letters were used to keep in touch with those living elsewhere' (Siapera: 2012:191). However, as technical advancements drive social change, elements of sociality evolve alongside it. Today, the notion of social relationships is profoundly affected by the mediation of new media, because they produce new environments (platforms) upon which individuals manage their sociality. Although 'social relationships have always been at the heart of sociological understanding of the world' (Pescosolido, 2006), social networking websites only recently achieved a relevant position in sociology. This progression in the field aims to investigate social structures and social interactions in parallel within

the advancements in digital technologies. This development leads to an understanding of new ways of socialization within the rising culture of connectivity (Van Dijck, 2013), which draws a new perspective within the mediated scenarios.

In addition to the mediation of the platform and the device, the visual mediation of photographs is a main focus of this study's enquiry into social relationships. One comment on this phenomenon notes 'what is happening is that people daily are sharing their cappuccino. It looks like photography, it smells like photography, but it is not photography. I make a clear distinction. That is not photography!' (#22). Thus participant is an assistant professor in new media at UC Berkley Graduate School of Journalism (USA). He is also well known as a Multimedia Journalist and defines himself as a professional photojournalist and storyteller. From his response a clear statement emerges in contrast to the basic structure of Instagram. Following this the McLuhanesque interpretation of the mediation of the medium comes again into account, conducting the analysis to combine the knowledge of media objects with individuals' sense of mediating processes (Hochman & Manovich, 2013) as a key combination for rethinking sociality through the practice of photo sharing.

His response summarises the innovative interpretation of visualities as social networks. Analysing the statement 'that [Instagram] is not photography' (#22) leads to answering the question 'what is Instagram?', since the comment that it should not be considered a succession rather than a gallery of images is noteworthy. The social desire driving the practice of photo sharing is evident; sharing photos of cappuccinos provides an excellent example of this tendency. The motivations that prompt Instagram users' participation in the practice of photo sharing online mimic existing practices on social networking sites. Emphasising the principles of reciprocity and recognition (Lakhani & Wolf, 2005), the practice of photo sharing on Instagram figures as the common interest fostering the online social connectivity of its members. This is especially the case in communities of interest because a common artistic practice brings together participants who interact extensively about specific topics of interest (Armstrong & Hagel, 2011). Indeed, photo sharing on Instagram attracts users whose interactions are generally focused on a specific topic or area of photography.

The following sections analyse Instagram considering the expression of sociality within Instagram communities. The analysis is divided into online and offline creation and management of social relationships. This subdivision aims to define similarities and differences in social approaches (mediated and face-to-face), focusing on understanding the role of photo sharing.

4.1 Sociality within Instagram Communities Online

The Internet presents innumerable diverse opportunities for the socialization and the creation of communities. Analysis of Instagram shows that the platform provides its users with the opportunity to interact socially with each other, and create relationships of interest on topics such as photography. This is the main reason the majority of participants consider Instagram (and other specific communities of interest) as belonging to the family of social networking platforms; it allows, through the principle of connectivity, users to interact and share contents. As one participant states: 'it is a real social network. It is not just a photo gallery. It is a social network based on photography, and I like it exactly because of this, there is interaction and so users' engagement with each other. Indeed, I use it for this reason, to share and to try to socialise with other people' (#7). He is an Italian university student in his mid-twenties. His passion for Instagram stems from his passion for photography and developed through his involvement with the Instagram Italia community. He is an active local community manager who uses the platform mainly for its social aspect and the sense of community it yields.

Members of the two different participant groups (general active users and online communities' members) report distinctive conceptions of the experience of mediated sociality. For participants who are not part of the Instagram online community Instagram is considered a potential social network, but they declare that they do not use it as such. From their personal experiences it is instead considered simply a platform for sharing visual contents and observing others photo sharing. Nevertheless, these users report that Instagram can be used as an effective ice-breaker in the establishment of new social relationships. Conversely, for those who are part of Instagram communities, Instagram is considered an actual social network that uses visuality as social "currency" and as a valid point of engagement.

Among those who are not part of Instagram online communities' photography represents a fair means of social interaction that transcends linguistic barriers. This group are a diverse group from a number of different countries. For example, an American guy in his early twenties living in Germany and working for a Bible school finds in Instagram (as an expatriate) a potential means to create community and gather people. Throughout the interview his strong interest in using the platform to communicate positivity and to engage with people is evident. Indeed, he says that his primary aims in using the platform are to share positive messages through images that mainly

capture landscape, nature and other people. He describes his experience in this way: 'I'm so very engaged in Instagram [...] I've recently moved from America to Stuttgart, Germany, and I'm trying to use the platform of Instagram as a way to build community with people and get to know people who in the city are also working with Instagram' (#3, see fig. 1). Fig. 1 is an example of how the practice of photo sharing is used in social contexts. Since he moved to Europe he has started to organise walks through nature (woods, hills, mountains and so on), combining his love for landscapes and photography with his desire for community life. His walks through the woods, as can be seen from fig. 1, capture and share social moments. He has found Instagram to be an effective ice-breaker; in this example the platform is employed as a way to create social connections and to engage with new people using photography as a common interest and topic of exchange.

Figure 1. Nature and togetherness.
Instagram, 2014. SOURCE: https://instagram.com/bandwagoneer

In addition, another response underlines the importance of using the common interest in photography as a valid social ice-breaker. The participant is a press photographer and he takes photographs for work and for pleasure. He uses Instagram primarily as a means to promote himself and his photographic works. For this reason, he alternates between using a professional camera and a smart phone. He says: 'you connect with may be new Instagramers that you didn't know. […] When you go on Facebook and you want to meet new friends. That's kind of awkward to just poke someone and say: "Hey, what do you do for living?". The fact that there is the photography thing in common fosters the social connections because users have excuses to approach other users' (#11).

The 'excuse' is the interest that users/Instagramers have in common, and it determines the motivation that pushes them to be part of the community and its social activities. Another experience also relevant here: 'I actually met my wife through Instagram. We were chatting one day and then we decided to meet up, and then we got married' (#29, see fig. 2). He is a British guy living in the USA where he works as in PR managing five Instagram accounts (@andrew_dearling; @crosswalkofNYC; @madeforinstagram; @peopleundertheunderground; @tubeinblackandwhite). In this case, it can be said that the use of Instagram is almost exclusively related to his job. He started his interest in Instagram because of the Instagram London community.

Figure 2. Instagram made us married.
Instagram, 2014. SOURCE: https://instagram.com/andrewdearling

The actual relationship between him and his now-wife was created once the two subjects met offline. This is another element that surfaces from participants' responses. They strongly consider Instagram as a good way to approach individuals and start potential social relationships. However, they report that in order to nurture the relationships they need to move the interaction onto other social networks like Facebook (the most frequently mentioned) or move the interaction offline. The reason for this move is commonly recognized as the lack of a proper private communication system on Instagram. Once again it emerges that images are effective social activators.

However, one participant strongly disagrees with the potentialities offered by Instagram as a social network. She is a young, dynamic, female university student living in Pisa (Italy). She commutes

almost every day to Milan to attend her lectures. She is passionate about social media and has a particular fondness for Instagram. Her photo stream mainly features photographs of her dog and of the countryside landscape surrounding her home. Talking about her use of the platform, she enthusiastically describes how the usability of smart phones allows her to capture scenarios and moments in life that she considers worth sharing online. When asked about the site's usefulness in maintaining social relationships she states, 'absolutely not, even because you cannot talk' (#13) emphasising the verbal communication gap. Another participant takes this conclusion further, saying 'there is always this messaging gap […] at some point you need to get in touch in a real way. Even Facebook is not a replacement. It is just a tool' (#17). He is a Turkish guy in his mid-twenties living in Canada to complete his PhD. He is fairly engaged with the local Instagram community. However, he does not actively take part in its events. He is interested in marketing and the use of the platform as pastime. His photo sharing consists mainly of urban minimalistic landscapes with a well-thought-out composition of colours, lines and forms. Although these participants are both social media lovers they do not believe in the unique use of platforms in social relationships, recalling the concept of 'life-mix' (Turkle, 2011) discussed above. Despite these negative perspectives a, Instagram is still considered by most of the participants to be a fair social activator. Some described their experience of sociality through Instagram both on- and off line (#13, #17).

Participants believe that the connections that they establish on Instagram cannot be considered actual social relationships as long as they are experienced only online. In fact, they report that comments and message exchanges are strictly related to photography, so the level of conversation had on the platform remains superficial and focused on circumscribed subjects of common interest. One participant provided an example of this. She is an Italian girl in her mid-twenties who works as social media manager. Her education in and a personal passion for social media led her engagement with Instagram both in and outside her job. This co-presence shows simultaneous and different uses of the platform. She says: 'On Instagram there is not everybody. There are people with the passion for photography; meanwhile Facebook is a melting pot. […] Yes, I see it as a social network but not that social' (#23). Even though photo sharing can lead to the establishment of social relationships, its capacity in this endeavour is not universally perceived. The reason some participants recognize the social potential of Instagram is that they see in its cross-mediality with Facebook the way to manage relationships. As an effective ice-breaker Instagram guides users to move social conversations onto Facebook's messaging service (Messenger), which allows users to hold the private conversations that Instagram does not.

Conversely, all participants who are part of the Instagram online communities demonstrate high levels of social engagement through the platform. Such engagement is justified by, and rooted in, the direct connection to the common interest in photography that bonds all community members. From the perspective of Instagram community managers and members, an added engagement emerges from the potentialities of being part of a group and the sense of belonging – traits that describe the appeal of online communities in general. The sense of engagement is experienced at two levels: firstly, participants feel engaged with other users. For example, one participant describes this by saying 'there is always an engagement mainly with people who I had a chance to meet in person, but even with those who I had chance to meet exclusively on Instagram, I need to admit' (#2). Another participant says: 'Instagram to me is mostly, as I mentioned above, about getting to know new people, exploring the world, getting around' (#4, see fig. 3).

Figure 3. Instagram and new encounters.
Instagram, 2014. SOURCE: https://instagram.com/brainyartist

Secondly, several participants report a particular engagement in experiencing the platform itself, as can be observed through this response: 'I would miss the people, the relationships, the pictures they take, and the stories they tell. That's something I would really miss, if they were not on Instagram. That is like an emotional moment I would say' (#4). Another participant adds: 'something will always finish on Instagram because I edit the shot I like the most, I share it and, however that may be, it is a means to tell where you are, how you've done it, when you've done it, and why. It is also,

as I said before, it is a social network in the end' (#2). From these responses, social engagement emerges in terms of the specific interest in photography and photo sharing.

Within the Instagram communities there are several ways, promoted in particular by community managers, to engage with the other members. The modalities of engagement are evident both online and offline. Online there is what is sometimes referred to as the "call to action" photo contest, a photographic competition played on the platform. It describes the online activity of posting photographs using a precise hashtag (word or phrase preceded by a hash sign (#), used in social media to identify messages on a specific topic) created, usually, by community managers. Without any need for physical meeting, users post photographs from any geographical location around the world writing in the caption the hashtag previously given. This allows the contest organizer to cluster all the images posted and declare a winner or winners. The organiser declares the contest winner or winners by reposting the photo(s) online. This type of competition determines a winner without giving any material award but it represents a way in which other members get involved in the communities' activities. Participants report that it is a nice activity and they take part frequently with pleasure. They use it to maintain an active presence within the community, mainly because it does not involve any cost or any physical movement.

4.2 Sociality within Instagram Communities Offline

In addition to the online photo sharing, Instagram offline social activities are identifiable in the concepts of InstaMeet and InstaWalk. The InstaMeet is a meeting in which community members meet in person and take photographs together. Whilst the InstaWalk is very similar to the InstaMeet but it involves a precise itinerary along which photographs are taken. Participants report that both activities are considered as actual social meetings because, as the names suggest, both are activities that aim to combine the social aspect of the event with the love for photography. Participants say that they enjoy these activities because they provide a variety of opportunities to interact with other users, such as giving and receiving advice and support, as well as casual conversation. Meanwhile, few assess these events as bereft of social contact (as these consider photography to be as a solitary activity). This small group also report that in the majority of cases the obsession for taking beautiful photographs overtakes the main purpose of the offline meetings, which is to offer an occasion to create social bonds and sharing interests with like-minded people.

Participants report that these meetings generally end with a gathering of people in a pub or coffee shop, in order to cement the shared visual experience as a social event. As can be observed in their responses, in terms of social relationships Instagram is widely considered an activator; the functionality of the platform does not allow a valid means for the maintenance of social relationships. The majority of participants report that an intersection between physical and virtual worlds is necessary; a persisting dependence from one world upon the other further strengthens the notion of 'life-mix' (Turkle, 2011). This scenario shows how the interdependence between technological advancements (the Internet and devices) and the network society highlights the multifaceted nature of new expressions of sociality (Castells, 2000).

One the concept of the InstaMeet, participants' positive and negative feedback regarding the sociality of this activity is equal in measure. One participant's feedback is positive: 'It's not like Facebook. You don't get too many messages about dogs, cats, or "see my new baby" and such. You can just scroll pictures and if you don't like them, just scroll away. I can see the new way of communicating with people also because you just meet people you have never met before. You go and do things, and the fun thing is that everybody is taking photographs. So, you go to meet people you want to take pictures with. It's not like Facebook. People here want to take pictures' (#11). He is a press photographer by trade who also photographs as a hobby. He uses Instagram primarily to promote himself and his works, and uses both a professional camera and a smart phone. His positive disposition toward Instagram stems from the application's ability to connect individuals with a common interest in photography, as well as its capacity for photo sharing. In addition, another participant's notes 'Regarding the InstaMeets […] something is "meeting online" and something else is the "meeting offline". The InstaMeet allows the meeting offline that for me is crucial' (#7). He is an Italian university student in his mid-twenties. His passion for Instagram emerges from his passion for photography and, eventually, his involvement with the Instagram Italia community. He is an active local community manager who uses the platform mainly for its social aspects. These two responses provide examples of the importance of face-to-face meetings for those users who emphasise the social aspects of the application. However, these responses need to be weighed against the messaging gap underlined by the majority of participants.

Other participants describe their offline social experiences in a negative way. For example, One reports that 'last year in Florence there [was a] meeting [for] Instagram Tuscany […] we had the pass for a museum underground so [we lost access to our] mobile Internet connection […] two people went out to chat, Instagramming, doing… Then, there was a guy next to me who was taking

and uploading photos, taking and uploading photos. At a certain point I asked: "Excuse me, the Internet doesn't work here…" He had a modem in his pocket! He had an iPhone like mine. "How do you manage to post photos?" (Pause) I was… I swear… These are crazy people!" ' (#13). Comparing this experience with other responses, it is clear that the majority of Instagramers who join InstaMeets and InstaWalks are engaged with photography but, specifically, they are engaged with the platform itself. Similarly, several participants complain about the fact that being part of InstaMeets is not as social as expected, and that people are so addicted to the use of Instagram they leave out the social purpose of the encounter. However, in both cases (positive and negative experiences of offline meetings) Instagram communities bring Instagramers offline in order to enhance social participation and engagement.

In this regard, the experience of a German lady working as a statistical researcher in Berlin is especially relevant. She is a passionate Instagram user. Indeed, she is part of two different communities of Instagramers based in Berlin (IgersBerlin and the Happy Family). She defines her photo sharing under the category of urban photography. The majority of her photos are black and white portraits of people with cityscapes and urban vistas. From the official Instagram community in Berlin emerged a smaller, informal community with the purpose of being even more social and supportive of one another's practices - this, she says, is the group calling itself "Happy Family". It is a nice name for our community. It is family including people with ten followers, private accounts and big shots like @Thomas_K, @JN (#28, see fig. 4).

Figure 4. Instagram and the "Happy Family".

Instagram, 2014. SOURCE: https://instagram.com/uwa2000

'Members just meet and go for a walk. It doesn't matter how many followers you have, what kind of photographer you are, just meet and go for walks and enjoy the company and of course talk about Instagram. […] Living the strictly mobile photography and going about the everyday life'. […] 'At the beginning we went for a photo walk in a park, it was Sunday and somebody said: "Oh! It's just like spending a Sunday afternoon with your family" ahahah "Happy Family" ' (#28). This participant's insights demonstrate that the Instagram users who choose not to take part in official Instagram communities can find alternative ways to meet in order to reach a deeper level of social interaction. In the Happy Family, the love for photography takes the place of what others describe as addiction to perfection and professionalism. For the Happy Family the social aspect of spending time together is the pursuit of taking beautiful photographs; their meetings are centred on photography through smart phone, but the desire of companionship is what drives members to gather. The development of a second Instagram group in Berlin strengthens the response in relation to Instagram meetings in Italy (#13), confirming the necessity of more social engagement.

Not all the gatherings among Instagramers are organised offline; spontaneous online encounters are inspired by the platform. The only circumstances in which visualities are considered good social connectors pertains to long distance relations. This is because a visual closeness can be achieved despite geographical distance. Participants consider Instagram as a valid connector between individuals from distant places since communication via images can enhance verbal communication. What is said in words can be enriched via images, echoing the well-known expression 'a picture is worth a thousand words'. In relation to this one participant says: 'I got some friends in US, Italy and UK, which I communicate through Facebook, but mainly through Instagram, because I can see what they post, the pictures so I don't need, in some way, think to contact them every month by I can but I can still see what they are doing. […] Instagram is a different look from lives' (#11). Here the interaction occurs not with individuals directly, but instead with their images, so physical locations and distances are not obstacles to potential connections. In fact, the majority of participants report that one of their main interests in using the platform is observing photographs that portray distant places. In this case, the variable of mobility is the element that, in producing new visualities, can establish long-distance social relationships. They also report that Instagram is a good connector for people interested in travelling. Several participants disclosed that they had been approached by other users because of their interest in travelling to places seen on their Instagram photo stream. Furthermore, some added that they were

inspired to take a particular journey after being moved by an image seen on Instagram. In some cases approaches by other users were simply seeking travel advice in terms of hotels, restaurants, and so on.

In conjunction with Instagram accounts dedicated to travels and holidays there are also other popular thematic accounts sharing images of pets. A male Swedish student opened an Instagram account dedicated exclusively to his dog Boss. He describes his experience in this way: 'I met up with two American girls that were in Stockholm two weeks ago. For half an hour/an hour I wanted to meet them. They have been following me for half a year. And they said: "You are better than other dogs on Instagram!" […] It is the recognition and the confirmation that you are doing something good' (#26). This response exemplifies the effects that the concepts of self-satisfaction and recognition (Lakhani & Wolf, 2005) produce on a social level (#26, see fig. 5), showing how the mediation of photography activated the development of the actual offline meeting.
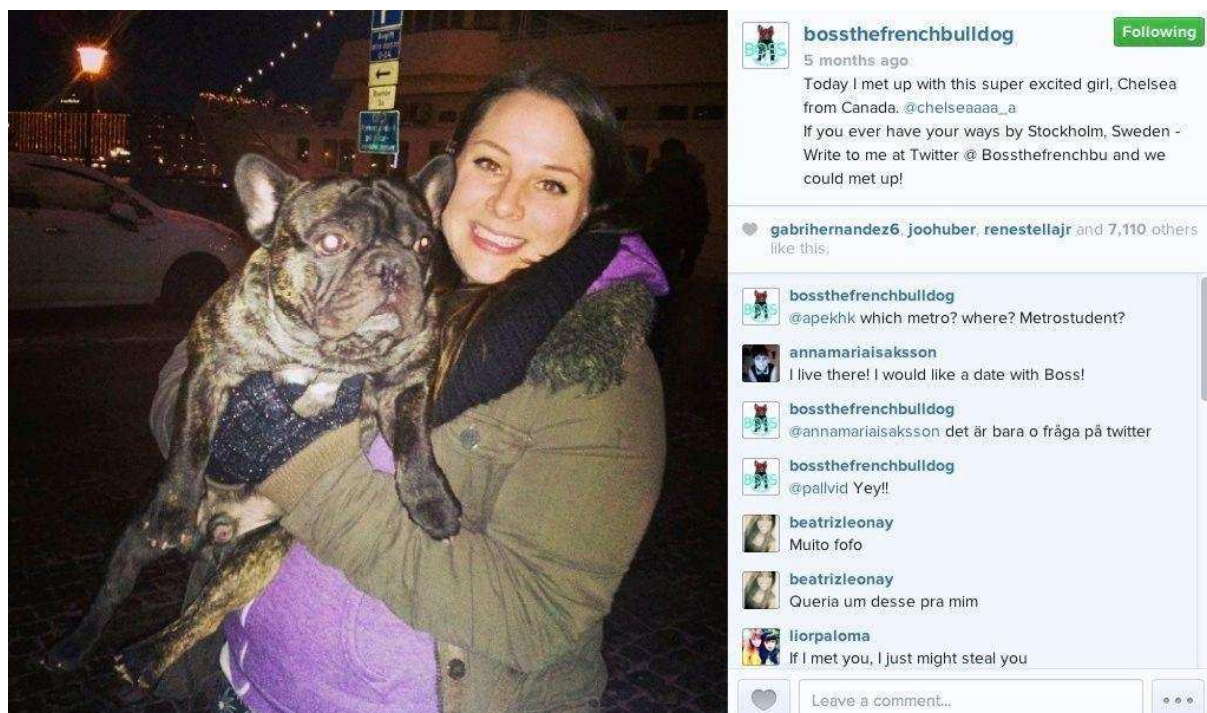

Figure 5. Boss the French bulldog and its American fun.
Instagram, 2014. SOURCE: https://instagram.com/bossthefrenchbulldog

The principle of reciprocity is at the base of the resulting social interaction online. Regarding this one says, 'there is one person who got in contact with me. They are Instagramers and they are from… I want to say they are from Canada or from somewhere in the north of United States and they have, they are in a relationships with someone who is in Stuttgart, Germany. They are there and they message me through Instagram instead... "Where in Stuttgart is your church?" they want to

know where my church was because they want to come to the church whenever they come and visit it. So, they are planning on coming to the church to the actual service time where it's located and it was really cool, really cool' (#3).

Another participant is the manager of the Instagram community in Bologna, Italy. Her house is part of Airbnb, an online global marketplace where guests can book spaces from hosts, ultimately connecting people who have space to spare with those who are looking for a place to stay anywhere in the world. She reports the experience in this way: 'Through Airbnb you can see if there are Facebook friends in common and it happened to me that I received a request from the manager of Instagram San Francisco 2 (laugh). […] Thanks to Instagram, we had some common friends on Facebook and she came over to Bologna during the ceramics fair so there were events connected to Instagram […] [There was] a photographic exhibition inside a historical building and I brought her and her boyfriend to this event and she was super happy. So now, if I go there would find… I hope to keep in touch' (#16). These experiences are examples of how, outside prearranged InstaMeets and InstaWalks, Instagram can be used as spontaneous social connector.

Participants' responses demonstrate that there are more positive experiences in relation to offline meetings that are not organized by the Instagram official communities. Instagram communities emphasise the importance of photography as communities of interest, rather than the social aspect of gathering people together. Moreover, several participants who are not actively part of the communities, say that they had been part of InstaMeets, InstaWalks and other communities' events, but their perception of social interaction was limited. For this reason, they decided not to repeat the experience. However, it needs to be highlighted that in both cases photography is the core element that creates social interactions, not the content of the photographs. However, even if the community is not recognized as a comfortable social environment, participants report they will find alternative modalities of social connections. At a general level the practice of photo sharing through the mediation of the platform cannot be considered a unique means to manage social relationships because visuality figures as an incomplete means of communication.

5. Conclusions: Visual Perspectives of Social Relationships

This article investigates the presence, development and the maintenance of social relationships through the mediation of photo sharing on Instagram. New media and social networking theories are applied herein to turn the academic debate towards new concepts of the mediation of visualities as social connectors. It examines the dynamics that guide the development of visual social

relationships. It argues that visuality itself does not figure as a social agent, rather as a valid activator for social relationships. This claim does not negate the presence of mediated or virtual social relationships; rather, as findings demonstrate it observes a shift onto different social media platforms. Moreover, this article illustrates the various forms of social connections that Instagram can generate, such as the online and offline activities that online communities promote. Visuality does not seem to satisfy individuals' ways of socializing; rather, it is perceived as an agent of completion. Photo sharing offers a different perspective from which users can know and understand individuals' personalities.

Mere online interactions are not considered among participants to be as effective as face-to-face meetings, particularly for maintaining social relationships. Physical proximity is recognised as a crucial factor for establishing a sense of belonging. Connections formed primarily over the Internet do not usually grow if they are only experienced online, thus confirming the idea that on- and offline spheres need to be complementary (Turkle, 2011; Castells, 2000). The physical meeting is widely identified as a validation of a social relationship, which allows the potential for the relationship to develop.

In relation to this, findings show that Instagram is less effective than other means of communication because of its limited messaging features. However, it is a notable platform for establishing social relationships that, consequently, move onto other platforms (such as Facebook and Whatsapp) or offline (such as InstaMeets and InstaWalks). Findings highlight that, within this discourse, visuality represents an engaging connection point. Indeed, among general users and online community members, photography is experienced as an element of social connection. A growing use of visualities-as-communication emerges at the expense of text messages or phone calls, but without replacing them altogether. The technological convergence represented by the combination of the photo sharing platforms and the use of smart mobile devices show an increasing collective participation toward the 'liquid life' described by Bauman (2003) in different social media experiences.

The necessary dichotomy between physical and virtual worlds pushes the conception of contemporary socialities towards hybridization into the status of mediation. One does not exclude the presence of the other; rather one enhances the presence of the other in a well-rounded social experience. Within this discourse, mobile technologies inspire the creation of new forms of online human interactions through the cross-mediality of social media platforms (Facebook for friendships

and Instagram for images to share with friends). Moreover, visualities introduce an additional layer of connectivity and mediality. Using one's experience as example it is possible to summarise individuals' perceptions of changes that Instagram brought into account; 'for me it has been a great social network. I met people all over the world and I have the opportunity to meet them when I go to New York or I go to a place I have never been. I just go to Instagram and I say: "Hey! I am here who wants to go for a photo walk?" It has been a good, positive thing. I think that photography often forces you outside of your shell you cannot stay in your office, your house and take pictures. You need to get out and move, and look at the world and it forces more social connections' (#22).

In conclusion, Instagram provides countless examples of how visual communication, through the mobility of smart mobile devices and the mediation of social media platforms, figures as a means of pervasive connectivity between individuals from distant places. Visual communication on Instagram represents a valid social connector that can also initiate physical encounters and activate users' curiosity towards the exploration new scenarios. However, the creation of new mobile visualities leads towards the theory that social relationships are affected by the nature and potentialities of new smart technologies.

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List of Images

Figure 1. Nature and togetherness.
Instagram, 2014. SOURCE: https://instagram.com/bandwagoneer

Figure 2. Instagram made us married.
Instagram, 2014. SOURCE: https://instagram.com/andrewdearling

Figure 3. Instagram and new encounters.
Instagram, 2014. SOURCE: https://instagram.com/brainyartist

Figure 4. Instagram and the "Happy Family".
Instagram, 2014. SOURCE: https://instagram.com/uwa2000

Figure 5. Boss the French bulldog and its American fun.
Instagram, 2014. SOURCE: https://instagram.com/bossthefrenchbulldog