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# “Where 2.0.” Exploring the Place Experience of “Hyperconnected” Digital Media Users

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## 1. Mediated Space

According to Simmel [1978] there is a reciprocal interaction between social relations and the significance of space. Therefore the fluid social relations that characterize modernity influence the use of space and the experience of limits, borders and distance. The diffusion of mass media and the vast adoption of new means of transport notably have affected human perception of proximity and distance; at the same time these innovations fostered a mediated access to distant places and social experiences [Kern 1983].

In the last three decades scholars from different disciplines (human geography, urban studies, and media studies) have focused their attention on the social construction of spatial practices,<sup>1</sup> analyzing the role that media play in this process.<sup>2</sup> The emerging picture is that, in a connected world, social interactions lose their exclusive connection with physical proximity [Meyrowitz 1985; Thompson 1995; Wellman 2001]. As Meyrowitz pointed out, electronic media are “reorganizing the social settings in which people interact” [1985, VIII-IX]. As Carter states:

<sup>1</sup> In the social sciences a milestone is the English language publication of Lefebvre’s seminal work proposing the idea that “(social) space is a (social) product” [1974/1991, 26].

<sup>2</sup> We observe a reciprocal shift that has been described as a “spatial turn” in sociology [Soja 1999, 261] and in media studies [Falkheimer and Jansson 2006], and as a “media turn” in geographical sciences [Thielmann 2010].

As our experience of the world is increasingly mediated by communications technologies our relation to place and to place-bound identities becomes fundamentally changed [1993, 323].

The current scenario confirms that an extensive media use does not imply the vanishing of places [Rainie and Wellman 2012]. On the contrary, it seems to produce a "doubling of place" [Scannell 1996, 172]. Mitchell [2003] observed that in the "network society" [Castells 1996] the use of ubiquitous devices could even lead to an intense dialogue between individuals and (urban) places. Moreover, as Couldry and McCarthy [2004, 8] noted:

The emerging picture is not the collapse of place [...] but instead the more subtle integration of our interaction with other places and agents into the flow of our everyday practice and experience.

On the whole, the notion of place ceases to be coherent and fixed and instead becomes open and dynamic. As Massey [1993, 66] observes:

Instead of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings. [...] And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extraverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local.

Moreover, empirical research has explored the dialogue between online and offline social interactions, noting an ongoing mutual superimposition of physical spaces and online realms [Castells 2001; Varnelis 2008]. In particular, several studies [Hampton and Wellman 2003; Ognyanova *et al.* 2013] have revealed that online interactions do not seem to weaken the offline civic engagement in local activities; on the contrary, through Internet use, social activities become even more intense, as they connect the local realm to the global one.

## 2. Digital Media and Place Experience

Following the human geography approach we consider place experience as a social and relational experience. Considering that social interactions are frequently mediated by the means of digital media we analyze how this intense mediation of social relationships shapes the contemporary place experience.

Digital media use, in particular the adoption of always-on wireless devices and the production of location-based user generated content, affects place experience<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "Place experience" as a concept has been explored within the subject of cultural geography.

in many ways [Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011]. Nowadays an immense amount of information referring to physical places is transferred online in the form of location-based data. Users on the move can search through databases according to their particular needs and locations. These resources are used to support coexisting “purpose-driven” and “social-driven” activities [Cramer *et al.* 2011] across the physical and the digital world.

The emerging dialogue between networked-based media and physical places has driven the attention of many scholars.<sup>4</sup> Some years ago, Weiser [1993] introduced the concept of “ubiquitous” and “pervasive” computing and prototyped the first tools to explore the relationship between digital technologies and physical space. Later, some computer science researchers proposed the notion of the “Internet of Things,” to describe digital environments where objects and physical places diffuse ubiquitous information. Later again, Manovich [2006, 223] introduced the notion of “augmented (urban) space” – namely the “overlaying of the physical space with dynamic data” – to describe the world in terms of superimposed layers, a scenario that Kluitenberg [2006], Rheingold and Kluitenberg [2006] and Sassen [2006] called “hybrid space.” Recently, Zook and Graham [2007a, 468] suggested the idea of “DigiPlace,” that is the

fusion of digital and physical space as networked individuals navigate through increasing dense clouds of information about a local environment.

All these notions refer to the habit of using digital devices to access different kinds of location-based information in real time such as: news; ads; updates on public transportation localization; friends’ availability to social interaction. Conversely de Souza e Silva differently defined “hybrid space” as a space

built by the connection of mobility and communication and materialized by social networks developed simultaneously in physical and digital spaces [2006, 265].

This scenario has been greatly extended by the rise of locative media<sup>5</sup> and by the diffusion of location-aware mobile media [Sutko and de Souza e Silva 2011], a broad

The term refers to personal feelings for a specific location, with representations coming from direct spatial experiences, and personal and collective imagery.

<sup>4</sup> The Internet itself has initially been created as a space organized in many private and public information spaces (sites), among which it is possible to navigate [Dourish and Chalmers 1994].

<sup>5</sup> As Wilken [2012] notes “locative media” is a term proposed by Kalnins [2003] from the field of new media art that has been used over the last ten years to describe several applications realized by visual artists, media activists, architects, and urban planners, prevalently in urban contexts [Tuters and Varnelis 2006; Thielmann 2010]. All these applications have been created to collect, organize, visualize, and share location-based data referring to specific places experiences (e.g. personal emotions, annotations, urban trails, audio tracks, environmental data, stories, etc.).

definition that includes locative mobile social networking applications (LMSN) also known as location-based social networks (LBSN) (e.g. *Foursquare*, *Loopt*) [de Souza e Silva and Frith 2010], the release of location-based versions of well-known applications (e.g. *Google* applications, *TripAdvisor* etc.) and social network sites (SNS) (e.g. *Facebook*, *Twitter*, etc.). Nowadays people can easily annotate a large amount of information referring to different place experiences (comments, reviews, narratives, photos and videos), visualize them as "attached" to digital maps and share them with other users. Those tips "attached" to a location become "an intrinsic part of the location" [de Souza e Silva 2013, 119]. As Zook, Graham and Boulton observed [2013, 1] "crowd-sourced augmented realities" shape our "engagement with and understandings of place [...] engendering particular ways of conceiving of and interacting with place."

Moreover digital media reshape place experience by functioning as mediated environments for social interactions. The intense use of mobile communication is a clear example of this process. In particular, mobile media connect "two there's" [Schegloff 2002, 287] and transform our sense of presence and the perception of proximity and distance, amplifying and transforming social practices produced by other "electronic media" (e.g. telephone, radio, and television). Expressions such as "present absence" [Fortunati 2002], "absent presence" [Gergen 2002] and "connected presence" [Licoppe 2004] have been used to describe the shifting between "a context that is created by the spatial proximity of people" and "another context that is created by the cell phone" [de Souza e Silva 2006, 269]. This scenario significantly affects patterns and meanings of social interaction taking place within specific locations; at the same time, the use of mobile phones extends the links with distant others [Ito 2003] and redefine the experience of absence and presence [Farman 2012]. To describe the new spatial organization based on networks Castells proposes a theoretical shift from "space of places" to "space of flows" [1996], pointing out that the space of flows is not a "placeless space;" on the contrary:

It does have a territorial configuration related to the nodes of the communication networks. The structure and the meaning of the space of flows are not related to any place, but to the relationships constructed in and around the network [Castells 2006,171].

According to Ito and Okabe [2005a] the use of mobile communication in everyday life enables an "integrated 'technosocial' framework" that combines technology, social practice and place. Those social practices taking place within the space of flows are based on a "networked sociability" that is, a sociability "breaking the organizational and spatial boundaries of relationships independent of spatial constraints"

[Castells *et al.* 2007, 143] where – moving from communities to networks – each user creates an “‘individual-centered network’ based on choice and affinity” [*ibidem*, 143-144]. Therefore the emerging picture is a networked place experience that varies according to each personal social network composition. As Sutko and de Souza e Silva claim, “we can best observe connections between the social and the spatial in practices of communication and coordination” [2011, 812]. In their paper these authors clearly illustrate that location-aware mobile media reshape urban sociability, showing how place reputation and social interactions mutually influence each other.

Finally, in order to describe how digitally mediated interactions reshape users’ place experience, it is important to remember that each tool users employ to organize, search, and visualize spatial data is not neutral; on the contrary, it proposes an automatically produced, individualized, and temporally dynamic spatial representation [Zook and Graham 2007b]. As Dodge, Kitchin and Zook claim, “software can, quite literally, make space” [2009, 1285] given that the sociospatial interactions are mediated by the characteristics of the software. Specifically, regarding the role of search engines, Graham, Schroeder and Taylor [2014, 191] affirm that

as information and physical places are increasingly intertwined, search mediates not just our access to information, but also the ways in which we interact with, learn about, move through, consume in, and enact physical and material places.

### 3. Research Questions and Methods

According to Meyrowitz’ idea that electronic media “challenge the ‘situational geography’ of social life” [1985, 6] the research describes patterns and features of digitally “mediated encounters” [1985, 37]. In order to explore how digital mediation modifies place experience, we have been inspired by Adams’ proposal to consider places, “as either the contents of communications or the context of communications” [2010, 2].

Therefore, the research hypothesis is that digital media use affects place experience in two ways: on one hand, it transforms place-related representations into digital content; on the other, it creates new contexts of communication between online and offline realms. At the same time we follow Moores’ invite [2007, 2012] to conceive “media uses as place-making practices” [2007, 1], given that “places are formed through repetitive, habitual practices that give rise to emotional or affective attachments to environments” [2012, X]. Relying on this perspective we explore the place experience of digital media users looking at the place-making practices occurring within digital media environments.

Instead of analyzing the interactions between the use of a single application and the emerging place experience, the single social actor is considered to be the observational unit. Indeed, considering that media are frequently used in conjunction with other media, we believe that each single application or device would only partially highlight the phenomena we want to observe. A similar systemic approach has been described by Jenkins [2009, 7]:

Rather than dealing with each technology in isolation we would do better to take an ecological approach, thinking about the interrelationship among different communication technologies [...] the same task can be performed with a range of different technologies.

We have presumed that the influence of digital annotations on place experience is not particularly shaped by a single device or application. On the contrary, this phenomenon can be adequately understood only by looking at the large set of internet-based digital media as a whole. Consequently, the empirical research in this paper explores the daily use and motivations of usage of different online applications and devices, all of them supporting some place experience. In particular, instead of analyzing the use of a single location-based service or SNS, as the great majority of the empirical studies have done, we focus on the conjunctural usage of different media (SNS, photo and video sharing platforms, chat, maps, locative media, LBSN, etc.) that can provide location-based information.

Moreover, as several authors have observed [Massey 1993; Green 2002], empirical research cannot analyze changes in spatial experiences through adopting a standard method for any cultural and social group. Therefore, in order to explore how digital media continuously negotiates place experience of individuals living in urban Western societies, the research focuses on a specific target group of users, the "hyperconnected" ones. The *ICD White-Paper* [2008, 2] defines the hyperconnected user as "a person who is always on" and "always available" and that makes an "intense use" of networking devices for both personal and business purposes, managing "at least seven devices to access the network and nine connectivity applications".<sup>6</sup> We believe that, in 2010, according to technology adoption trends of the Italian population [Censis-Ucsi 2011], this definition effectively described a heavy use of mobile devices and applications. Moreover, we think that this intense use of networking technology may reveal some emerging traits that characterize digital media users' place experience. In conclusion, our research questions are as follows: 1) What are the main social

<sup>6</sup> The report is a global study of almost 2400 working adults in 17 countries. It found out that 16% of the global workforce is already hyperconnected. Two third of the hyperconnected users text or instant message for both work and personal use.

uses of digital representations of physical places?; 2) What, for hyperconnected users, are the spatial characteristics of social interactions taking place within environments supported by digital media (i.e. Instant Messaging applications)?

Adopting a qualitative approach we administered 19 in-depth interviews with hyperconnected users (9 males and 10 females) living in the city of Rome (Italy), age range 18-60 years ( $M = 35$ ;  $SD = 11$ ). The interviews were carried out in October 2010. They possessed a strong familiarity with digital media to access the Internet; moreover, they used several devices and applications in order to accomplish either business or personal activities; all used a smart phone with a flat rate charge.<sup>7</sup> According to the hypothesis, the users' place experience was analyzed taking into account two different topics: the use of digital contents referring to physical places; and the spatial features of the digital environments where these users interact.

#### **4. Results and Discussion. Exploring Place Experience of "Hyperconnected" Digital Media Users**

##### **4.1. *Places as Digital Contents***

The analysis illustrates a two-fold phenomenon. On the one hand, digital contents referring to physical places are transferred online in the form of location-based data. On the other hand, these digital contents and applications are used as a support for moving and acting somewhere in the physical world and as resources in sharing place experience. The fact that these processes are ceaselessly intertwined confirms that the offline world's materiality and the online world mutually define one with each other. On the whole hyperconnected individuals use digital contents that refer to physical places for three basic purposes: 1) to orient themselves in space; 2) to collect symbolic resources they use in identity building processes; 3) to socially share spatial experiences among other users. However, as they employ different tools and applications at – almost – the same time, their practice may turn out to be remarkably rich and varied. These processes, that often occur concurrently, will be illustrated in detail.

##### **4.1.1 Orienting in Space**

Hyperconnected users daily consult location-based information published in several platforms: generalist and thematic search engines (e.g. *Google Maps* and *Street View*, *TripAdvisor*, *Booking*, *Venere*, *Opodo*); social network sites (SNS); photo and

<sup>7</sup> In Italy, in 2010, these two latter practices were very unusual (indeed, in 2011, only 17.9% of the Italian media users owned a smartphone [Censis-Ucsi 2011]).



video online aggregators (e.g. *YouTube*, *Flickr*). They use these resources for a number of purposes, such as to find out the exact location of a place or to calculate its distance from another place, to be informed about public transport connections, or to receive weather forecasts and traffic report updates. As Varnelis and Friedberg observe "it is progressively more common to navigate two space simultaneously" [2008, 25]. Users mostly consult online maps (i.e. *Google Maps*) in order to visualize the physical characteristics of a place "before being there." *Google Street View* application (showing 360° panoramic street-level views) is used to discover hidden characteristics of a place that a satellite view does not show.

In particular, respondents under 40 years old usually consult info-mobility services (e.g. they consult the list of restaurants located nearby or the real time traffic conditions in order to decide which road it is best to take). Then they adapt their plans according to the updates they receive. Sometimes they virtually explore a place in order to decide if they actually want to go there. For example, an informant (M, 32 years old) stated that while looking for an apartment to buy, before deciding whether to make an appointment, he used *Street View* visualization to see what the surrounding district, building, and streets were like. He even tried to anticipate the feeling of living there, simulating on *Google Maps* the daily trip from his office to the new house. Another informant (M, 27) claimed that during the summer he always looks at web-cams on the beach in order to personally examine in real time the beach's condition and to decide whether to go to the seaside.

Other users report that every day they look at the meteorological conditions in the cities where their relatives or close friends live, and thus imagine how they could feel. An informant labeled this process "emotional meteorological forecasts," claiming:

Every day I look at the weather conditions in Pisa, where my nephew lives. If I see that there it is colder I hope that he is wearing a warm scarf (F, 55).

#### **4.1.2. Creating Identity**

Interviewees make intensive use of the Web to share their personal spatial experiences. They use spatial data to create personal spatial archives (e.g. a *Flickr* repository) and to support a personal storytelling within their social networks. For example, they publish photos taken during holidays and events, or post status updates concerning their presence in meaningful places. Schwartz and Halegoua [2014] introduced the concept of the "spatial self" to indicate that the presentation of the self is increasingly "based on geographic traces of physical activity." An hyperconnected respondent defines "social photos" the images showing the presence of "friends" wi-

thin specific places. Indeed, these images communicate significant social clues, given that reporting our presence in a specific place, and describing the related feelings, contributes to define our identity. In accordance with previous research [Cramer *et al.* 2011; Humphreys and Liao 2011; Lindqvist *et al.* 2011] within SNS the sharing of spatial experience represents an important symbolic resource in self-presentation and impression management practices [Baym 2010]. Actually the majority of the users reflects on the meaning of sharing spatial experiences and, consequently, accurately manages the impression that others might make [Goffman 1959]. Moreover, in order to manage their identity within contexts than often collapse, hyperconnected users attentively share images that refer to spatial experience according to different “imagined audience” [Marwick and Boyd 2011] (e.g. they distinguish between images accessible to parents, acquaintances or work colleagues, and “sensitive” photos that only a selected group of friends can see). All the informants said that they usually look at SNS notifications and focus their attention on status updates published by their close “friends” in order to imagine where they are and thus “follow” their everyday activities: it is a process that supports intimate social relationships among the member of specific networks. Most of the hyperconnected users intentionally publish real-time status updates (texts and images or videos) when they visit places or experience events that express a peculiar meaning for themselves (e.g. “London calling,” “back from Paris,” “Rome again,” “traffic jam”). According to Schwartz and Halegoua [2014, 7] users are “building their online identity through attaching themselves to the specific narrative of a physical place” and, at the same time, they are collectively negotiating with their contacts the meaning of that peculiar experience. Therefore, each spatial update, together with the resulting users’ comments, produces an interactive performance that creates a sense of connectedness and togetherness among a specific group of users.

#### 4.1.3. Sharing Spatial Experiences

Almost all the users consulted generalist and thematic search engines, SNS and online forums; predominantly, they look for user-generated information and advices about places they want to visit (e.g. accommodation, restaurants, shops, and touristic sites). They consider online resources more useful than traditional guidebooks, which were perceived as “heavy, expensive, and outdated.” Furthermore, the great majority of users considered “valuable and factual” the user-generated data published on websites such as *TripAdvisor* and affirmed that they may change their minds according to this information. Most of them examined other users’ comments with a critical approach and assessed the reliability of each comment in relation to the general traits

of the author who wrote it. Only two interviewees out of the 19 said they occasionally published comments or pictures to review their experiences in a place (hotel, restaurant, tourist site, etc.). This finding is in accordance with the "participation inequality rule."<sup>8</sup> Three users mentioned that they used the *Google Maps* tool to keep track of their personal spatial experiences and to annotate their favorite places within a specific urban area. Similar to Humphreys and Liao [2011] findings some users share these "personal travel guide" with close friends. An informant describes this use:

I have created a *Google* map for each city I visited. I have maps of Paris, New York, Venice... and all the time I go there I add addresses of restaurants, shops, bars that I like the most. Then I share the map with friends that I know are going there. I like creating notes that I can update and share with close friends (F, 50).

In addition, several online platforms (SNS, such as *Facebook*,<sup>9</sup> forums, blogs, and location-based apps) are to ask for advices before or during a stay in a specific place. The overall experience is a mix of mainstream narratives produced by media outlets with suggestions coming from different audiences, where tips from friends co-exist with indications given by users who are strangers. An informant (F, 21) said that through *Google* she gains access to selected spatial information, filtered by what she called "a collective intelligence." Another user defined the same process as a "jury panel" and explained:

Given that people like to shoot the most important attractions I know that the first 20 images on *Google* Images represent the must-see places (M, 27).

Moreover users search for spatial information published by the members of their networks in order to get updates about their ongoing activities and consequently coordinate social movements with them [Ling and Haddon 2003]. At the same time SNS users affirm that knowing that a member of their network went into a specific location, or that he positively evaluated it through a location-based application, influences the overall place reputation; in that way they are transferring to a specific venue the characteristics of the people who frequent that place. It emerges a social construction of place through location-aware technologies [Sutko and de Souza e Silva 2011]. These findings confirm that user-generated content published in SNS, together with their affordances and technical functioning (e.g. *Google* ranking algorithms, *Facebook* News Feed algorithm), affect the overall reputation of places.

<sup>8</sup> According to Nielsen [2006] in most online communities "9% of users contribute from time to time" while "90% of users are lurkers who never contribute".

<sup>9</sup> In Italy *Facebook* is the most diffused social network site. According to *Facebook* Statistics in January 2010 it counted 14 million users.

## 4.2. *Instant Messaging (IM) Applications as Contexts of Communication*

In addition to the features explained above, digital media reshape place experience by functioning as mediated environments for social interactions. To better examine this phenomenon, we selected a specific set of communication technologies, considering Instant Messaging (IM) applications as contexts of communication. Therefore, instead of analyzing the use of a specific service or SNS, we analyzed the social use of several textual and audio-video IM applications: stand-alone IM (*Skype, Google Talk, MSN*) and IM integrated within SNS (*Facebook Messenger*). The majority of under-40-year-old hyperconnected interviewees perceive these platforms as deeply rooted in their everyday life. On the whole, beyond conveying resources referring to physical places (texts, images, videos), the social use of IM produces “spatial” effects because it affects sociospatial indicators, such as the perception of presence/absence and proximity/distance, in three main ways: 1) it gives users the opportunity to derive inferences about the localization of each single member of their networks according to their online behaviors; 2) it elicits different strategies for signaling availability/unavailability to social interactions; 3) it mediates these social interactions creating an environment for “digital intimacy.” We will illustrate these processes in detail.

### 4.2.1. **IM as a Resource to Derive Inferences about the Localization of Members of the Networks**

Under-40-year-old hyperconnected respondents regularly make use of IM applications through an “always on” modality. The interviews revealed that they daily derive inferences about the localization of single members of their networks according to their online behaviors. The presence or absence within IM applications is used to infer information about friends’ personal movements. As a user observed:

Day by day, even unwillingly, you get an idea of the daily routines of your contacts (F, 28).

In addition to that, the use of mobile or wired IM applications was considered a hint to deduce some spatial information. Indeed, well-known everyday habits were compared with information observed within online environments, looking for coherence between acquainted notions and observed online behaviors. The more they experienced a close relationship with a contact, the more they produced complex inferences that they consider very accurate. These practices can produce significant meanings because the users are familiar with IM technical features and share com-

mon norms and assumption of usage. During one interview, a user offered a fitting example of this process. Giving a glance at his MSN application he claimed:

My girlfriend is still at work. I know that she has no connection at her hotel. Now she appears online. That means she is at work (M, 32).

Another user commented:

My best friend is offline because she is having lunch; she will come back very soon (F, 39).

Other statements refer to the same deductive process:

If she takes a short break from work, I know when she comes "away" or [...] if he is working and he doesn't want to be bothered, he will put himself as "invisible."

This means that actions occurring in physical places and online behaviors are strongly linked. Sometimes hyperconnected users stated that IM applications could even be used as informal control tools. An interviewee stated:

My bosses use MSN as a controlling tool. Through MSN they know when I arrive at work in the morning and when I go out in the evening. I know for sure that they use it as a controlling tool. Accessing to MSN is like badging. If I close MSN I'm sure that, within half an hour, I'll receive a call from my bosses cause they imagine I'm no longer in office. It is an informal mechanism, but it is real! (F, 35).

Some other users admitted they make use of IM applications to secretly monitor the online activity (i.e. duration of the online session, sign in and sign out times, etc.) of some members of their networks (e.g. their former girlfriend) in order to gather additional information about their current activities. In all these cases, information that apparently does not communicate any place-related cues (one could be "absent" from IM simply by signing out) conveys spatial information when it is compared with supposed patterns of someone else's communicative habits. Moreover the findings confirm that, according to Brown *et al.* [2007], knowing the localization of family members and close friends provides relevant emotional support in term of reassurance, togetherness and connectedness.

#### **4.2.2. IM and Emerging Strategies for Signaling Availability for Social Interaction**

The majority of under-40-year-old hyperconnected interviewees reported that they use IM applications during the whole working day. In order to manage their online presence they create different strategies to signal their availability for social interaction. They said that they used the same strategies to infer their friends' behav-

iors. For example they observed their friends' IM latest updates to better realize if they are available for chatting. Half of the users preferred to appear "always on." At the same time they affirmed that is stressful to maintain an always-open communication channel, given that the quasi-synchronous IM "etiquette" implies an immediate response time. Therefore, some informants used different cues, according to the features of the IM platform (i.e. invisible user, away user, busy user), to signal their availability for dialogue and to filter social interactions. An informant explained:

I usually become invisible when I don't want to be interrupted (F, 34).

Therefore, appearing "invisible" offers the opportunity to monitor the members of their network's online presence in order always to know who is online. Most of the users admitted that, when they practiced invisibility for a long time, they always informed their closest friends that they were online in order to be reached in case of need:

I'm here, I don't want to be reached by everybody but in case you need me, please write to me! (F, 28).

An informant described this dynamic:

Now none of my friends appear online. I know for sure that at least three of them are invisible. They know that I'm aware of their presence. If I contact them, they reply to me. They are invisible to avoid to be bothered by others (M, 23).

From time to time, informants declare that they become invisible in order to avoid communicating with some acquaintances they want to keep a distance from. This practice resembles the habit of changing a route in order to avoid saying goodbye to a colleague:

I use becoming invisible to sidestep someone's bothersome discussions (M, 27).

#### **4.2.3. IM as Environments for "Digitally Intimacy"**

As we have seen above, the majority of under-40-year-old hyperconnected users report that they use IM applications all day long. This strongly affects their perception of presence/absence and that of proximity/distance among small groups of users. In particular, these informants use IM applications to reduce the distance and sustain intimacy between their closest friends; moreover they consider such applications as background interactive channels a form of "always on" communicative chatting option. They perceive IM as an ongoing communication flow, therefore, according to their current needs, they sign in through different devices (i.e. mobile phones, wired PC). Ito and Okabe [2005a] described a similar process. Through the use of mobile

text chat Japanese young people experience an "ongoing background awareness of others;" it emerges a "persistent social space" that supports an "ambient virtual co-presence" among the member of the network. However, users over 40 years old mainly considered IM applications as useful tools to quickly contact friends or colleagues in order to accomplish specific practical tasks. Therefore, they considered multitasking online, chatting while doing something else (i.e. working), as an annoyance and they generally avoided it. This finding points to the fact that in 2010, for most of the over-40-years-old Italian users, multitasking practices do not constitute a recurrent habit. These two dissimilar practices indicate the presence of two different generations [Vittadini *et al.* 2013] among the hyperconnected users. Actually over-40-years-old and under-40-year-old users differently experience IM. For example among young people the use of IM affects the perceptions of presence and proximity. Several under-40-years-old individuals described the experience of *sharing the same physical environment* without actually physically being present in it. As one user explained:

My closest friends are always here, they are always present (M, 27).

Most of these users daily check which of their close friends are online and visibly appear in a good mood when they know that a special person is "there." At the same time, the online "absence" of special person is perceived as an interruption of daily routines. During one interview, a user opened his Skype account and then, looking at his PC screen, commented:

I like to see if my friends are 'green'.<sup>10</sup> It means they are online. They are working. I know that they are *there*. It gives me the idea that we are doing the same things. And even if I do not see them, I think about them (M, 29).

Ito and Okabe [2005b] described similar findings in their pioneering study about the use of mobile photo sharing: the ongoing sharing of visual viewpoints among intimate users creates an "intimate visual co-presence."

## 5. Conclusions

As Bærenholdt and Granås [2008, 7] state, mobile technologies "contribute to material, social and cultural reconfigurations of places and distance." More specifically, in order to analyze the constant process of construction and negotiation of place experience, the research illustrates how digital media are reshaping hyperconnected users' place experience looking at the mutual interactions among technology,

<sup>10</sup> Green is the colour traditionally used in IM interfaces to signal availability to social interaction. Red is used to signal the opposite concept.

social practices and place. The research adopts a qualitative approach, therefore it cannot produce generalizations; however it illustrates emerging users' motivations and perceptions.

Generally speaking the study, according to previous researches, confirms three main traits that characterize digital media users' place experience. Firstly, it is a *hybrid* place experience, in the sense that "the borders between remote and contiguous contexts no longer can be clearly defined" [de Souza e Silva 2006, 269] given that that the network-based practices and physically based ones mutually interact [Humphreys 2010]. Secondly, it is a *negotiated* place experience based on networked individualism and networked sociability [Castells *et al.* 2007]. Therefore, it varies according to each user's communicative competences and the activities carried out by the members of each personal social network [Sutko and de Souza e Silva 2011]. Thirdly, it is a place experience *shaped by code* [Dodge *et al.* 2009] as long as is it mediated by "technological architectures, business models and user practices" [Poell 2014]. We observe a two-side phenomenon. On one hand technological and social affordances of the large set of platforms people use to organize, search, and visualize spatial data [Zook, Graham 2007b] affect the place presentation; on the other hand the features of the applications people use to share spatial information (e.g. search engine ranking algorithms, IM online/offline modality, etc.) contribute to define the social practices among the members of specific networks.

As previously claimed we consider digital media functioning both as the contents of communication in place-making practices and as contexts of communication. These two processes often co-occur.

Firstly digital media use plays a key role in the social production of space [Lefebvre 1991] transforming places' experience into digital representations. The empirical results highlight that most hyperconnected users perform their identity "through place" [Humphreys and Liao 2011] through the everyday sharing of location-based contents within different networks. These practices illustrate how the place experience storytelling contributes to the process of online self-presentation [Schwartz and Halegoua 2014]. Moreover hyperconnected users frequently make reference to the features and the evolving common norms of usage of the media they use to search and share spatial information; indeed both these elements contribute to socially shape place-making practices.

Secondly digital media use creates mediated environments for social interactions between online and offline realms. The research highlights some relevant generational differences between Italian Instant Messaging users below and above 40 years' old, confirming that media contribute to construct generational identities and practices [Buckingham and Willet 2006]. Indeed, IM use differently affects the "ge-



ography of social situations" [Meyrowitz 1985, 6] of these two different generations. Under-40-years-old hyperconnected users claim that the use of IM applications intensely modifies the spatial features of social interactions: the perception of presence/absence, the belonging to members of their relational network, and the availability for social interactions. Moreover, these users perceive IM as "media environments" [Meyrowitz 1985, 7] where they experience an intense feeling of "co-presence" [Ito 2003] "digital intimacy" [Thompson 2008] and of "being together" [Pessoa Albuquerque and Perkis 2008]. Thus, according to Moores [2012, XI], they feel the sensation of being "at home in this media space" when they establish a ceaseless potential communication channel with significant members of the networks they belong to. As Farman [2012] claims digital media mediation can establish different levels of proximity/distance. On the other hand, over 40-years-old users are not familiar, as the first group, with the pervasive and absorbing experience of what we call "digital intimacy." They tend to perceive the same technologies as resources that merely simplify the solving of practical or working tasks, or as pleasant opportunities to facilitate their social relations, especially with member of previous generations, not as games. While a young user (F, 21) described these tools as "means of communication, rather than games", an older informant said:

I work on the Internet, I do not play!(M, 56).

On the whole we define hyperconnected digitally mediated place experience as a "where 2.0" place experience: a participatory experience intensively shaped by a real-time (intentional and unintentional) spatial informational exchange and by the social interactions taking place among the members of the networks we belong to.

In conclusion digital media use affects hyperconnected users' sense of place provisionally enhancing or diminishing attachment to different places and events; thus temporary personal needs, features of the network and its social composition contribute to redefine the meanings of specific places. Moreover the "doubling of place" [Scannell 1996] produced by mass media is reshaped by the opportunity offered by digital media to temporally modify socio-spatial indicators and the feeling of presence and absence, mixing online and offline social practices. Lastly a plurality of "senses of place" emerges whose common main characteristic is that they are intensively defined by the ongoing connection with networked based spatial experiences. It confirms Castells' intuition that "the key feature in the practice of mobile communication is connectivity rather than mobility" [2007, 248].

## 6. Limitations and Further Research Questions

This paper relies on interviews carried out in Italy in Fall 2010. It explores “early adopters” practices that, in 2010, were very limited among the Italian population. Furthermore the generational distinctions between hyperconnected users in terms of different extents to which mediated environments (IM) affect their sense of place could have changed. Firstly the increasing worldwide use of smartphones with broadband Internet access and flat rate charges, together with the adoption of new IM applications (*WhatsApp* in August 2014 declared 600 millions of monthly active users worldwide [Koum 2014]), is likely affecting the spatial features of social interactions. Moreover, the expanding use of location-aware mobile services to coordinate activities in space and the diffusion of user-generated location-based data reinforce this scenario [Zickuhr 2013]. Further research should continue to analyze how location-based services affect users’ sense-making practices taking into consideration different cultural backgrounds, social contexts and socio-demographic characteristics of the users. At the same time, further research should investigate how the temporal patterns of networked information (e.g. persistence/volatility, synchrony/asynchrony, notification settings) contribute to reshape hyperconnected users’ socio-spatial experience (sense of presence, proximity and intimacy).

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## “Where 2.0.” Exploring the Place Experience of “Hyperconnected” Digital Media Users

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates how digital media are reshaping users' place experience. It relies on 19 interviews with “hyperconnected” individuals and explores two topics: the social use of digital representations of places; the sociospatial features of the communication environments created by digital media. Firstly, hyperconnected individuals use geographically referenced content to: 1) orient them in physical space; 2) manage symbolic resources in the construction of their identity; 3) socially share spatial experiences. Secondly, as the use of Instant Messaging applications shows, digital media reshape place experience by functioning as mediated environments for social interactions and by affecting the perception of presence/absence.

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*Keywords:* Place Experience; Digital Media; Networked Space; Instant Messaging; Hyperconnected Users.

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