Social media use and generational identity: Issues and consequences on peer-to-peer and cross-generational relationships – an empirical study

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Abstract:
The article illustrates some main trends in the field of generational audiences resulting from a study which explored social media use in intra and inter-generational communicative practices among four different generational cohorts. Furthermore, the research was focused on investigating how peer-to-peer and cross-generational web-based communicative practices could affect the three main sociological categories of reflexivity, space and memory. In addition, another research question was whether the social media use has any implications in peer-to-peer and cross-generational relationships. Across an ethnographic approach, twelve focus groups were conducted (N=72) taking into account age and gender variables. The findings of the study suggest differences among the generational audiences in relation to the personal and collective aspects of reflexivity. Furthermore, the findings suggest that, also with generational differences, social media communicative practices play an important role in supporting inter-generational communication, affecting both the social space category and memory sharing. Finally, the research results suggest that, depending on the generational cohort investigated, social media practices play an important role in generational identity building or re-configuration.

Keywords: generational audiences, generational identity, inter-generational relationships, parental role re-mediation, web-based communicative practices.

Introduction

The theme of the paper is social media use among generational audiences as it has been explored through a research project with the aim of investigating whether and how the peer-to-peer and cross-generational web-based communicative practices affect the three

main sociological categories of reflexivity, space and memory. More specifically, the study was conducted with the aim of getting an answer to a few research questions: which are the generational differences regarding both the personal and collective side of reflexivity? Do web-based communicative practices affect inter-generational relationships, above all those between parents and children, adults and kids? Do social media practices play an important role in generational identity building or re-configuration? Finally, do social media practices affect the social space category and memory inter-generational sharing?

The research has adopted the generational point of view because it has been considered as a relevant key for analyzing an audience as it allows the investigation of public members which are not only clustered together by means of social class, gender, ethnicity or other social categories. Starting from a generational standpoint it is possible to explore social changes, cultural processes and media use of an audience under observation while being linked to a shared set of meanings, a sense of belonging and a same birth cohort. Generational audiences share repertoires, symbolic material and cultural meanings which affect their generational identity. This identity, which is based on a 'shared cultural identity' (Edmunds & Turner, 2002), is constructed but also re-configured through social media use. As Aroldi (2012) stated, the generational perspective exceeds both a mediacentric perspective, focusing on 'people in relations', also an audience-centric one, observing cultural practices. Above all, it focuses on collective identities from a *multidimensional* point of view, avoiding any determinism. In addition, this perspective seems to help in analysing the generational groups in a time that is characterized by the crisis of traditional forms of social belonging and collective identity (such as the concept of class or that of national identity). Thanks to its multidimensionality, the generational approach simultaneously takes into account different factors, in addition to the historical and economic ones, from media diet to the position in the lifecycle, from shared narratives to the shared values of each generation, from the phases of development of media system to technological and cultural changes. Taking into account this point of view, the generational paradigm turned out very useful in order to observe social media use and communicative practices among audiences and the differences related to generational belonging.

Theoretical Framing

The generational belonging

"Generationing" is a process (Siibak & Vittadini, 2012) which has its inception during the formative years, but which is constantly enriched during the successive stages of life. The experiences, the historical conditions, the environment and the media experienced during formative years and early socialization are all crucial because they constitute a kind of perspective from which individuals observe other events and occurrences. Following Mannheim's theorization (1952), the chronological contemporaneity is a kind of 'structure of opportunity' which forms a shared *milieu* where individuals form themselves as

'generational units' (Mannheim, 1952). As for Mannheim, this contemporaneity refers to a generation as *location* that is not enough to detonate the potential of the generation. Mannheim talks about social and intellectual changes and discontinuities that promote the formation of generational *units*. These changes and discontinuity are not necessarily related only to historical events or reversals: the significant changes may in fact invest other spheres of experience. This is particularly true when using the generational paradigm to observe social practices and having to draw a line between one generation and another. In fact, criteria for the identification of generation boundaries and of the specific characteristics of each generation have been the subject of numerous and often conflicting theoretical reflections. In an attempt to establish the boundaries of theoretical concepts of generation and cohort, Judith Burnett (2010) observed that the division of cohorts into clusters is an operation carried out by researchers. In fact, on the one hand generational belonging is self-assigned by members of the same generation, or acknowledged by members of other generations and its boundaries are not fixed as in the case of cohorts: scholars may not even recognize the distinction between generations. On the other hand, Burnett (2010) underlines that the differences between one cohort and another are determined by the use of key variables, which are useful for the purposes of each research. Indeed, generational differences characterize the way in which each generation reacts to change, to generational awareness of identity and to shared narratives. In fact, the sharing of life stories or cultural phenomena are crucial in the process of generational identity formation, while they cannot be inferred in the analysis of specific cohorts if this is not necessary for the purposes of research. As a result, there are still some difficulties in identifying the extent of cohorts (Corsten, 1999; Wohl, 1979).

However, the use of the multidimensional point of view for the generational paradigm is useful for considering the boundaries as being not fixed between one generation and another, and for not thinking only in terms of divisions between cohorts. As has been seen, other factors are important in the building process of generational identity belonging, and in this process the media, and specifically the social media, play a fundamental role.

As suggested by Corsten (1999), narratives and shared memories experienced during the formative years propagate into adulthood; it is important to adhere to the development of shared memory and narratives to enforce the 'generational unit', as the shared memory and narratives distinguish one generation from another (Eyerman, 2002) rather than the contexts or the events experienced, since they can be shared by multiple generations simultaneously. As mentioned, studies now tend to consider generational identity as an ongoing process; sharing a particular year of birth is only the starting point for belonging to a generation (Assmann, 2011) as other factors must contribute to the formation of an entity such as the identity of the group. This entity allows generations to consider themselves primarily in terms of mutual delimitation and in terms of differences from other generations. As Assmann writes, not only forms of common sense and experience constitute the core of generational identity, but also the way in which historical events are re-

elaborated by memories. Memory plays, in fact, an important role in building generational identity, broadening its temporal horizon in the generational dimension and intergenerational dialogue. Concerning this detail, the media are important in memory structuring and in the building of generational belonging.

As has been seen, generational identity implies the dialectic of self/hetero-definition: how (and whether) a set of individuals considers itself as a part of a generation, and how this generation is represented by other generations. This dialectic is of course always full of shadow zones and conflict. In fact, some generations run the risk of becoming entrenched in rhetoric of self-representation, which may have a possessive drift (Pasquali, 2012) and which is likely to exclude its members from cross-generational dialogue.

In the generationing process (Siibak & Vittadini, 2012) the so-called "generational *glues*" (Aroldi & Ponte, 2012) come into play. These are a sort of thickener or binder, which help to settle the generational link, and which pertain to repertoires, semantics and discursive practices – the *habitus* of a generation. Obviously, these *glues* have strong links with the cultural industry and the media, as they are involved in the process of the building of identity and generational belonging and consciousness (Corsten, 1999; Wohl, 1979).

Media and generations: related works

The present research work, as will be better explained below, also takes into consideration research started since 2001 by Italian scholars of OssCom (Catholic University of Milan) which focuses on the category of generation linked to media. Media are in fact involved and cooperate in the identity-related process of individualization and identification, even though the relationship between media and technology rekindle the eternal debate about determinism which is intertwined in this case, with the generational issue: as for many scholars, digital media shape the cognitive structure of individuals (Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 1998).

However, research work has had the tendency to avoid this approach. In fact, according to many scholars (Herring, 2008) the deterministic point of view is risky and often ignores some important findings from other perspectives which are useful for our approach, such as that of re-mediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) or those which reflect upon the digital divide or the trivial use of new technologies (Buckingham, 2008) and the power issues (Couldry, 2005).

Avoiding the deterministic point of view, many authors therefore question the role of media in the process of identity building. As has been seen, the *shared cultural identity* (Edmunds & Turner, 2002) helps to shape the identity of generations. In this mechanism, media are both agents and products: they work together with other social forces in structurally redefining society, changing the language, the passing of time, and the environment around social agents. Therefore it has turned out very useful to use them as a tool for the grouping of generations.

Furthermore, many scholars have been interested in analysing web-based communicative practices among teens (boyd, 2008a, 2008b; Livingstone, 2008, 2009), and

in-between members of different generational cohorts (Vittadini, Siibak, Bilandizic, & Carpentier Reifova, 2013), focusing on the usage of social web inside a family: research suggests that social web communicative practices play an enormous role in supporting intergenerational communication and in strengthening family bonds (Gonçalves & Patrício, 2010; Siibak & Tamme, 2013), as these new media environments play a role as new platforms for fostering intergenerational relations (Tamme & Siibak, 2012). In addition, other research suggests that nowadays members of older generations attend and take advantage of the communication opportunities offered by social media (Zickuhr, 2010). For instance, studies have reported that adults appreciate the chance to learn more about the lives of young people by reading their posts or browsing through their images (Gonzalez, Jomhari, & Kurniawan, 2012, referred to Siibak & Vittadini, 2012). Finally, other research focuses on the mutual influences between ICT and generational identity (Aroldi, 2011). Reflecting on this relationship, Aroldi (2011) proposes that there has been a change in three dimensions: memory, space and reflexivity. These categories have been used for this research as a guide along the query path, comparing them with the suggestions that emerged from the focus groups and the exploratory phase.

Method and Sample

The Present Study
By means of the previously mentioned theoretical framing, the present research has investigated the use of social media by generational audiences and the implications in terms of construction and re-configuration of generational identity, as well as the changes in relation to the three conceptual categories of reflexivity, memory and space (Aroldi, 2011). Qualitative research has provided an exploratory phase with the observation of the practices within social networks, forums, blogs and social data that emerge from User Generated Contents (UGC), and a field phase with the use of the focus group technique.

Participants: During the research, twelve focus groups were conducted (N=72), from April 2013 to November 2013. The focus groups' participants, which were all *heavy users* (Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2002) of social media, were recruited by means of the snowball technique and were chosen according to the variables of gender and age: the focus group were gender-specific and there were six participants for each group. The first contacts were located through a student group from the University of Salerno and through a middle school teacher; the following sample chain was developed from those contacts.

Four generational cohorts were therefore observed; the cohorts' clustering followed the same pattern proposed by the above-mentioned OssCom scholars: the present research refers to their outputs (Aroldi & Colombo, 2003, 2007) regarding the description of the context in which the socialization of each cohort took place. The OssCom Research Institute has in fact conducted a considerable amount of investigation into the relationship between

media and generations over the past two decades, and on the basis of this research a subdivision of publics in generational cohorts has been prepared. This clustering work takes into account the Italian context, both from the point of view of media offerings and those from the historical, political and economic context, also making reference to the Italian ISTAT data on population (Aroldi, 2012; Aroldi & Colombo, 2007).

This research has identified the moments of rupture and discontinuity related to different aspects occurring in everyday life for each birth cohort, especially in the transition period of adolescence. Of course, the segmentations identified and the consequent clustering should be considered dynamic and non-prescriptive, since the generations are "non-rigid forms of collective belonging" (Aroldi, 2007, p.33). The taxonomy followed was that one proposed by generational marketing (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Prensky, 2001; Smith & Clurman, 1997; Tapscott, 1998).

Therefore, the following generational cohorts have been considered: that of Baby Boomers, born between 1953 and 1965, that of the X Generation (X Gen), with individuals born between 1966 and 1978, and that of Y Generation (Y Gen), with those born between 1979 and the 1991. As for the Z Generation (Z Gen), and using the same range of twelve years proposed by the above-mentioned OssCom research, it would include those individuals born between 1992 and 2004 who are now between 10 and 22 years old. Actually, the specific focus group participants were between 11 and 19 years old; also, this cohort was divided into three other subgroups: *late* Z Gen: 11-13 years; *middle* Z Gen: 14-16 years; *early* Z Gen: 17-19 years old. The criterion for this subdivision would be commensurate with a generational approach since it follows the Italian school organization (middle school, the first two years of high school, and the last three years of high school), which is typically a tool for the identification and differentiation between kids of different ages. However, these features are very fluid and the generational emergencies should be further investigated in future. For each cohort identified two focus groups consisting of six participants each were conducted. For Z Gen members two focus groups for each subgroup were conducted.

Materials: The purpose of this research was therefore to investigate the process of generational identity building and the emergence of the generational *we sense*, noticing any difference between the cohorts. To these ends, a schedule with two kinds of open-ended questions (one for the cohorts of the adults and one for the cohorts of the youngsters) was used to help to conduct the focus groups. All the questions referred to three main themes: the role of social media communicative practices in generational identity building and in generational *we sense* strengthening; the role of social media in peer-to-peer and cross-generational relations and communicative practices; the role of generational belonging in web-based communicative practices and in media consumption. Each focus group held took approximately two hours. The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed and then processed line by line. As the transcriptions were compared to each other, some issues become dominant and were collected upon macro-categories which will be discussed below

in the paper. Finally, all the focus groups were conducted in Italian, the mother tongue of the participants. Extracts from the focus groups were translated into English to illustrate the analysis.

Procedure: As has already been stated, the macro-categories' development has been traced with a reference to the three main topics of reflexivity, space and memory. As previously mentioned, if it is clear that the media play an important role in the construction of a generation, the social web as a *connected space* allows the growth of individual and collective *reflexivity* (Boccia Artieri, 2011). Following a certain epistemological tradition (Giddens, 1990; see also Archer, 2003), this topic has been investigated as the social web allows an efflorescence of self-presentations and narratives, and an increase of social visibility towards the *Other*, because it is a cultural device that triggers the mechanisms of self-observation. In addition, the collective size of reflexivity was analysed, since the social web allows meta-communicative potentialities and the awareness to be part of a public while being *in* public. As for the category of space, we can notice another kind of change: the social web permits the sharing of materials, repertoires and practices without having to comply with traditional national and linguistic boundaries, also subverting the concept of 'niche' culture. In this research work, as it will be explained below, the category of space has mostly changed at the 'local' dimension. In fact, the online environment allows a strengthening of ties, including cross-generational ones, and a re-configuration of the generational identity. Finally, memory. As has already been seen, and in accordance with Aroldi's claims (2011), the media have an undisputed role in the sedimentation of a collective memory, which feeds the generational *we sense*, working as a layering of experiences, events and symbolic material. The research work has therefore tried to retrieve repertoires and cultural products that have contributed and are contributing to the identity building of each generation observed. Media imprints leave traces in the identity and biography of audiences filling their symbolic repository. These repertoires, in the case of analogical media, work primarily as something that is layered in memory, acting as a resource to reprocess those memories or reflect on the contemporary experiences. Conversely, the relationship is complicated and made problematical when media become 'public' (boyd, 2011) as in the case of social networks. Social media facilitate a simultaneous and infinite replicability of memory material, acting as 'external memory' to the collective imagination, at the same time making generation repertories that previously outlined and symbolized clear generational boundaries available to any generation. Each generation draws from almost the same material, which therefore loses a generational connotation, or more likely changes it – in the sense that the material is transformed into 'classic' material and is appropriated and re-mediated by each new generation.

Results and Discussion

Reflexivity: Self-narration practices of the networked publics and the building or re-mediation of the generational identity

As for the reflexivity topic, the macro-categories developed have been:

a. The self-narration and the imagined audience
b. Reflexivity in networked spaces
c. The digital intimacy and the re-mediation of the parental role
d. Generational identity

a) *The self-narration and the imagined audience*

In the construction and re-configuration of generational identity the members of different generations carry out an *enunciative* project (Cosenza, 2004), whose *ideal readers* are, at the first instance, the members of their generation who share the same portion of the imaginary. The results suggest, however, that some specific cohorts, particularly those of the Baby Boomers, feel more strongly the desire to turn to members of other generations. Moreover, the present findings suggest that the social web is, above all, something like a "huge box of personal stories", self-narration, stories behind the mirror, recordings and transcripts of stories. It is therefore a vast platform full of autobiographical stories, in which people talk about themselves as individuals or generations of individuals. As has been noticed through research work, the social web allows a proliferation of ego-writings, memories, travel stories, memories of experiences, maybe when younger, maybe in the classroom: it is in the re-emergence of faded class pictures or old tickets of concerts or trains, in which the story of a generation takes form and expands on the web. The social web, then, offers countless opportunities of identity textualization. All generational cohorts observed confirmed, though with different levels of awareness, to work towards an optimized self-presentation. The multiple Selves displayed on digital stages reflect the logic of performance that Goffman considers at the basis of everyday life (Goffman, 1959): they do not refer to any interior or unintelligible Self, but they are the perfect outcomes of the interaction itself, and only the aim of the impressions management acts on it. As for the imagined audience, there is no doubt that each individual, through an optimized self-presentation, displays himself to the peer-to-peer and cross-generational glance. But there's something more. Thanks to web 2.0, the spectator point of view is so internalized that from that same perspective, individuals are able to observe their own lives, their own experiences and they *become the media* (Boccia Artieri, 2012). Individuals think of themselves as being watched by an audience, using the set of tools and criteria of judgment they get when they were only the audience for their own narratives and communication practices. On these performative stages, the performance is technically advanced even though the 'performer' is often unaware of this.

Imagined audiences may also be very different from the true one (Marwick & boyd, 2011). The audience cannot be simultaneously present at the time of the performance: however, by virtue of the properties of persistence, searchability, scalability and replicability

(boyd, 2008b) that audience may be present at any other time. The *context collapse* mentioned by boyd, following the path marked by Meyrowitz, in fact implies that it is difficult to maintain the boundaries, except in the case of the setting of privacy. During research work, certain segregation among the imagined audiences has been observed, depending on the cohorts investigated. The clearest differentiation appears among adolescents. For the latter, the findings suggest that the universe of the audience is made up almost entirely by their peers. Each *like*, each *post*, each *tag* helps to seal the belonging and strengthen the group. Any question of the survey aimed at investigating their awareness in sharing their network among publics belonging to other generations, typically adults, and at investigating the importance given to this possibility, has given rise to a widespread indifference if not even closure.

> I do not care if my mother or my father knows how to use the Internet or if they are on FB. My mother has to be a mother. We talk about other things at home. Not about the web. (Francesco, early Z Gen, male, 17 years)

Moreover, it appears that the younger cohorts share a critical approach to the performativity of adults. Essentially it is a lack of competence; the present results suggest that adults (almost all) are perceived as 'out of place', sometimes even as 'improvised' or 'pathetic'. From a certain point of view, which is quite relevant to the thesis about the existence of digital natives and digital immigrants, younger subjects seem to consider adults as technically incompetent. In the opinion of younger subjects, as findings suggest, adults are not familiar with Internet language and are prone to make 'digital gaffes'; however, adults are not always aware of this:

> I learned to use FB, and then from there I started to do other things… I… like follow the blogs. I enrolled in some forums. And ah…then I always go on Youtube. When my children talk about things, I understand them. I answer; I participate in the conversation with their friends. I think this is important. To avoid the distance /---/ (Laura, Baby Boomer, female, 51 years)

On the other hand, Baby Boomers and the X Gen observed seem to share a different perception of real and imagined public. Among them the present findings reveal a more cross-generational view of the social web, populated by people belonging to their own generation with whom it has been possible to reconnect thanks to the *techno-social* device (Colombo, 2003), but also populated by offline friends and people beloved, who inevitably belong to various generational cohorts. Baby Boomers, with little differences depending on gender, seem to have a more open and democratic use of the social web. The findings of the present research suggest that being able to 'use' the web is seen by them as a generational '*moratorium*': unlike those of their generation who do not use the social web by keeping away from these communication modalities, the *heavy user* Baby Boomers seem to share a

representation of themselves as 'competent' users who therefore do not violate the standards of web communication spilling into the territory of age-related hierarchies, age-related status or parental roles.

According to the present findings, the members of X Gen and Y Gen primarily address the peer public. For X Gen members the intergenerational dimension is only a background detail, which can be retrieved from posted tales and photos. It is related to their position in their life cycle; most X Gen members are struggling with the formation of their own family and the children's care. Often in their stories, elements emerge of their symbolic generational repertoire, which are used, as the findings reveal, as a 'social anchor' in a way of life often swallowed up between work and motherhood/fatherhood.

The research work has found, among the Y Gen members, a greater inclination to a more conscious and effective use of the social web. Similarly to the findings of other scholars (Baym & boyd, 2012; boyd, 2008a; Ellison & boyd, 2013), it appears that the social mediated self-presentation here reaches levels of greater efficiency and effectiveness. Y Gen members talk about themselves, fit into other subject's stories, and they apparently only cater to those who belong to the circle of closer friends. Indeed, investigating their use and their scattered contents, the present findings suggest a massive use for promotional purposes linked particularly to their work interests. Consequently, their generational reflexivity passes throughout a presentation of a technologically and communicatively competent *we*, and a presentation of a generational group that also stands out for the variety of content where personal interests intertwine with professional ones.

Finally, the Z Gen: this is a generation whose members are simultaneously building their individual and generational identity. Here, of course, more than anywhere else, it has been noticed that the choice of content, the performing skills, the constant renewal of profile pictures and the music links are made and result in the spinning of webs of belonging and exclusion. Inside or out. And adult subjects, almost in their entirety, with no distinction, seem to be considered as outsiders. These positions, in a more or less radical manner seem to be common to the members of the Z Gen, which have been above defined as 'early' and 'middle'. Things change for the 'late' Z Gen, for which the parental role and the shadow of the adult world seem to be still strongly cast over these subjects and have a conditioning effect upon them.

> I wanted to say that in fact when we post a 'like' on a photo of our friend, maybe we do this in the hope of getting a 'like' back. Let's say that the majority of the times this is the way it works. However, what I want to say is that if we stop a while to think about this we understand that the 'like' has taken on a ridiculous importance. It's not a favor, it's a 'like' and is something really superficial. (Virginia, middle GenZ, female, 16 years)

b) *Reflexivity in networked spaces*

The social web also affects the "collective" side of reflexivity, because communicative practices and narratives are also carried out with the awareness of being in a wider context. With regard to this, Boccia Artieri (2012) argues that social agents watch and are being watched, and they act with this situation in mind, amplifying the reflexivity that becomes *connected:* the social web also detonates reflexivity *on* the connection, by reflecting on the relationship with others and the way in which to relate the Self to the Other. Therefore, in this way reflexivity becomes *relational*.

Similarly to these findings, it appears that the *sharing* desire is clearly the backbone of all communicative practices, and is cross-generational. It is the 'life-world' of the subjects belonging to the Z Gen, but it seems to be now also acquired from the cohorts of adults: indeed, there is something more than the *sharing* desire. The present findings suggest that the social web allows 'meta-communicative' potentialities, such as the re-configuration of one's position in the network of relationships among peers and with other generations, or the awareness of being part of a public and of being *in* public:

> It's great being able to talk about a trip or a recipe that worked out well for me. Also, being able to say for example, 'I don't like this guy, he'll just cause the government a bunch of problems...' I couldn't care less if I raise a stink /---/ (Franca, Baby Boomer, female, 58 years)

The Z Gen seems to experience this connection as something natural. The boys and girls of all three sub-cohorts investigated revealed a deep mutual involvement and a great deal of attention in the management of their image. Their activities, their experiences, their passions acquire 'sense' because they are offered to be shared and to be elaborated by peers.

Adults cannot understand all of this, they look at it suspiciously or with surprise even by those who communicate and bond with one another through social media.

> Let me give you an example, right, just to … last week it was my daughter's birthday. Two or three of her friends swung by our place. They all hung out together for the day and we had a bite to eat. The really weird thing was that they all just stood there with their smartphones. They were like, right next to me. What the heck did I make of this? They were talking, playing, gossiping … texting, using Facebook. Then I asked them. No pop, we're just talking with our school mates … whatever /---/ (Lello, Baby Boomer, male, 51 years)

Through the focus with the youngest among those of Z Gen, those between 11 and 13 years old, and even the teens between 14 and 16 years, it has been noted however, that they showed greater insecurity linked to the potential distortions of this connection. The 'weight' of the views of parents and teachers is stronger here than among the *early* Z Gen members

and it seems there is less familiarity with relational and communicative strategies that are acquired through experience.

According to the focus groups' findings, the concept of *sharing* and the related communicative practices are, however, now also acquired in the daily practices of Baby Boomers (women and men). Going online where they can share opinions and events together with friends is taken for granted, even if it is not seen as the same task-context as with the younger generation, where online and offline spheres have the tendency to mingle together. Here it seems that the expertise to manage the synchronization of the two spheres has not yet been acquired. They are still separate domains, although they are adjacent and communicate with one another. The present findings suggest that social agents live out their experiences, and then eventually think about how to share those experiences online, handling and making comments about them with their network. However, the awareness of having this network as an available entity is very important, especially for women: it seems that the social web is seen as a great opportunity for interaction and communication. The present results indicate that the social web has allowed all of them an opportunity to reflect on themselves even from the point of view of others, to perform and also to analyse their thoughts discerning between what is 'shareable' and what it is not.

c) ***The digital intimacy and the re-mediation of the parental role***

On the social web, the relationship between the public and private spheres changes too. Self-individuality can be made public and become the subject of conversation, a conversation that joins those of other individuals. As has already been mentioned, the social web phenomenon can be investigated through the concept of *becoming the media*, where the *networked publics* (Ito, 2008; Varnelis, 2008) finally embody and learn how to use the language and techniques of the mainstream media to carve out a space of communication, where the performing processes are displayed in Goffmanesque's memory stages that are mostly inhabited by members of the offline network. Therefore the line between online and offline is eradicated, and enables the opening of issues related to privacy. As rightly pointed out by boyd (2008a), space can be public, and therefore shared, as in our case, by different cohorts of age, even though its use and interpretation change. For Z Gen members, the present findings indicate that what really counts is the peer-to-peer relationship. They can even transform a space into a private one, which was previously public or controlled, where they are able to build and maintain their own relationships. Generations of *heavy user* adults, in turn, do not differ from those of younger people concerning the pictures displayed, stories told, memories shared that would be part of the private sphere. Similarly to the findings of others (boyd, 2008b, 2013), the present research confirms that the boundary between the public and private sphere becomes therefore slighter. Users are aware of privacy issues, so that they often make their content accessible only to a limited audience, as it is possible to be public in a private setting, thanks to the ability to maintain a sense of privacy through the control on sharing mechanisms. Nevertheless, the present

findings suggest that users often underestimate both the characteristics of the medium, which could make it possible to let others access your information, and the actual content that they convey. Paradoxically, Baby Boomers and X Gen seem to be the more inclined to disseminate chunks of their private lives, photos of important moments, images of minors taken in many different activities. When asked about their sense of privacy, they basically tend to provide a 'light' interpretation about the kind of contents shared, and tend to avoid the idea that a risky use of their contents may exist. Results of the current study have instead detected a deeper attention to content among adolescents. If from the adult point of view the activities of youngsters is considered as daring and risky, field observation has revealed the image of young people as being very aware of the possible deceptive uses of the shared contents and of the negative consequences on the image, and on the group's belonging for those of them who can't manage their images. The combined action of family and school educational activity, together with the content carried by the mainstream media and first-hand experience, often make young people very careful and cautious. The dichotomous effect that results is a total immersion into an environment, which, however, is perceived as remotely risky.

> I think that … listening to the opinion of my friends, I realized, however, that almost the 20% of our opinions were not our own, but they were rather the opinions of parents or adults, because we … however, in the end do as our parents always tell us, we should not trust the internet, because however on the web you do not know who is there, and I … listening to them while talking … it reminded me a lot of what my mother always tells me. So I think that we, in our opinions, especially in this world, we are very, but very, very influenced by what adults think. (Francesca, middle Z Gen, female, 15 years)

Conversely, despite their weaker technological expertise and skills, adult subjects seem to feel anyway a greater confidence in their own affordances in controlling and screening whatever they spread and disseminate through the web. As a result, and referring to Goffman (1959), they seem to reduce their backstage space, often also massively involving minors. Hence, on the one hand, according to boyd and Hargittai (2010) who reformulated Meyrowitz's thesis (1985), young people can gain access to the typical contents of data posted by adult users. However, on the other hand many Baby Boomers and X Gen members appear to offer a more confusing representation of the role of the adult among youngsters by overexposing their lives, their experiences, their stories, and divulging a lot more than they did before. This happens because on the one hand adults incorporate younger users in their performances, and on the other hand, often through a fictitious avatar, they create inroads into the other generational groups. How would an adult behave towards children? As a friend, a peer, an intruder? The present findings suggest that what happens is that adults, especially those belonging to the X Gen, often open themselves to a reflexivity that is connected, but distorted, because it encompasses children, putting them

at the disposal to the use of others, making them newsworthy according to communication logics that belong to their generation and not to that of their children. Baby Boomer parents appear to be more careful. Considering their age, it often happens that their sons are already teenagers, if not young adults. Moreover, the Baby Boomers' use of social media and their entry into the social networks are two recent phenomena: they are already aware of all the ambivalences, the risks, the joys and conflicts which belong to a parent-child relationship. In most cases, the present findings suggest that they limit themselves to being happy for the new opportunities favoured by the web, but at the same time they try to maintain behaviour of distance and non-interference. Women especially fear the reactions of closure amongst youngsters, and communicate with them through the social web only when solicited and encouraged by their children.

d) *Generational identity*

The social web platforms amplify and enhance the dialectic between the *embodied* self and the *desired* self (Salzano, 2014) and allow discourse constructions of one's identity. The present research hypothesis concentrates upon new texts and identity narratives allowed by the social web which result in not only the identity building of the new generations, but also the 'revival' or partial re-configuration of the identity of adult generations. Especially for Baby Boomers and X Gen members, a kind of "generational identity lift" has been found (Napoli, 2014), a metaphor used to try to evoke what seems to happen: a re-updating and a re-emergence of "symbolic material" through which they open themselves to interrogatives once again. If the building of identity itself is an on-going and almost infinite process, well expressed by the concept of *identitization* (Melucci, 1991), media space, then especially digital media space amplifies the opportunity to enrich this process. Also in this case differences were found related to the cohorts investigated. As pointed out by Livingstone (2008), the youngsters fell foul to the compelling desire to work on the characterization of their own identity, both individual and generational. According to the Author, this trend would decrease during the course of life. The present findings also indicate another aspect: it is true that the weight of peers, from a generational point of view, is lighter when the peers become adults. However, the social web has allowed a reconstruction of the bonds that once connected the individuals to peers. Although from a 'weak ties' point of view, the present results reveal that all the classmates, friends, sports clubs or youth clubs members which people abandoned in leaving the city or the country, even old lovers, now re-appear on the cognitive and relational horizon, changing one's own perspectives.

> I know they're there on Facebook, and I hope that the never-ending story continues and above all this immense world of memories, B.S. and light-hearted wisecracks will continue to keep me Company. (Francesca, Gen Y, female, 33 years)

Normally, adults acquire a more conscious and self-confident 'I' over time; generational peer pressure is replaced by other relationships including professional achievements and emotional ties. The power of their generational identity therefore fades: it remains there as an imprinting from which successive events are decoded (Mannheim, 1952), but this power has few opportunities to actually emerge. The present findings suggest that the social web could change perspective, offering on the one hand the place in which to restore the generational ties, and on the other hand the materials and repertoires through which the generational glues are strengthened. The generational belonging then knocks again unexpectedly at the door, allowing Baby Boomers and early X Gen to manage the peer group and their repertoires:

> We are a small group of people that even after so many years and with different paths, have discovered that we have more in common with one another than you might imagine. (Francesco, X Gen, male, 35 years)

These discoveries, however, appear to be re-inserted into the flow of the closest ties, used to re-position themselves in the cross-generational chain.

> You can start off, we're all friends, we spin tales to each other about what are kids get up to, if one of them gets married … me for example, I posted a pic of my son's graduation, it's cool to share stuff, if not it's as if we were alone there reading stuff about other people. (Rita, Baby Boomer, female, 54 years)

The social web, as revealed by the present research, also plays a role in re-configuring self-perception in relation to cross-generational relationships. Adults appear to find themselves faced with a new opportunity to hop onto the communication wave and strongly re-emerge into the context of mediated communication, which is considered the main prerogative of the younger generation, the generation of *digital natives* (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

> The web and above all Facebook, is fantastic. You feel that, like, you want to kick back, it's evening, whatever … you don't feel so alone. Like, for me, I live alone, right, I can read something that catches my eye, if something comes to mind I write it, right, I make a comment on a photo, see what my daughter is up to /---/ (Paola, Baby Boomer, female, 61 years)

As for the Z Gen members, regardless of the identified subgroups, it comes as no surprise that communicative practices and relationships are all oriented to identity building and affirmation of generational belonging. Since Z Gen members work on an inner conversation in which it is important and fundamental to distinguish the 'we' from 'them', social web communicative practices play a fundamental role in providing both materials and tools for processing this conversation somewhere on the network.

Space: Sharing a dematerialized space, which still has importance in cross-generational and peer-to-peer relations

As has already been stated, the online environment facilitates a strengthening of ties, including cross-generational ones, and a re-configuration of the generational identity. As for the space topic, the present research has focused on its 'local' meaning and network sharing. Of course, in this case it is a de-materialized and disembodied sharing, which nevertheless has a "weight" in relationships among peers and in cross-generational ones. Still, the space category can be analyzed in a generational perspective, as a symbolic place in which to tackle questions related to one's own experiences, and in which each social agent occupies a particular position. Here the macro-categories which are developed, are the following:

    a. The social media inter and intra-generational sharing
    b. The individual's own 'position' in the generational space

a) ***The social media inter and intra-generational sharing***

    In a manner compatible with the reflections conducted so far, the questions of whether members of younger/older generations are part of the online network have been addressed, and also if the convergence of digital media has helped in changing cross-generational relationships. Also under consideration is whether or not responses are determined by the cohort and gender variables.

    As for this macro-category, the present research has shown an analogy between Baby Boomers and part of Z Gen members. In fact, if we consider the late Z Gen (i.e. pre-teens between 11 and 13 years) and, partly, the middle Z Gen (i.e. youngsters around 14-15 years), they seem to be not completely closed to cross-generational sharing. For younger people, the network is mainly used to play or to keep in touch with their friends, or just to 'hang out' (boyd, 2008a), and the presence of parents, teachers and older brothers seems to be accepted, and often perceived as perfectly normal. Of course in this way the social web assumes the form of a controlled space, but, as has already been pointed out, the members of this generation are anyhow able to express their identity and represent themselves without being too influenced by the presence of adults. Indeed, the present findings suggest that in this age group the process of differentiation from the adult is not so radical: the late and middle Z Gen members in many cases are pleased that the related adults are able to communicate and manage relationships through technology. In fact they still perceive the authority of the world of the adults. Of course this approach changes with growth. The early Z Gen members (i.e. 16-18 year olds) declared that they were unfavourable to online space sharing with adults and with children. In this case, as has been previously mentioned, the sharing is in fact read in terms of interference if not even espionage. They are *always on* the social web primarily targeting their peers, and they do not like any manner of interference.

Baby Boomers seem to use the Internet as a public space where anyone is welcome who is part of their offline networks: peers, certainly, but also youngsters, children and students. As previously mentioned, their approach is open: *heavy user* Baby Boomers appear to consider the social web as another opportunity, offered to them by technological progress. The present research found that they feel competent and able to handle different social levels and different degrees of familiarity on the network, as well as offline.

> Simply I can communicate more and better with my daughters. We're all on WhatsApp and we have fun. If I say something out of place it's over. I would be cancelled /---/ (Enzo, Baby Boomer, male, 51).

Furthermore, unlike the members of the Y Gen and of the early Z Gen, Baby Boomers seem to invest a lot in the social web in emotional terms. In fact, the social web is seen as a great opportunity to strengthen cross-generational ties offline. The present findings suggest that being a competent user and frequenting environments crowded by younger social agents gives them the feeling of 'earning points' in the eyes of youngsters, in the main their own children, though they do not use the social web as intensively as youngsters do.

> Some students have asked me to be friends on FB. I accepted. I enjoy using their tools and being involved in their communications. I do not understand my colleagues who do nothing on the web. (Caterina, Baby Boomer, female, 57 years).

b) ***The individuals own 'position' in the generational space***
The present research has highlighted another aspect that relates mainly to Baby Boomers and members of the X Gen. Through the present research this issue has been defined as the 'change of position in generational space'. This change can be seen from two different viewpoints.

On the one hand, an effect of comparison with the lives narrated and which could be read on the social web was noted. In which manner do the narratives of other lives influence the perception of one's own life? The present results reveal that social web platforms, as if they were new gossip magazines, also offer endless opportunities to make incursions into the lives of other people, by browsing through their photos, their travel stories, their reviews, the list of books ordered online and so on. Each social agent appears to be called upon, in spite of himself, to match him to the generational 'other' and to assess one's alignment or deviation compared to the peer group. Scrolling through the "news" on Facebook for instance, social agents are catapulted into a thousand possible narratives. This model is a grass roots one, since it is not produced by professional communicators, writers, journalists, or screenwriters.

On the other hand, the present findings suggest that repositioning oneself within generational space also concerns one's personal history. Adults compare themselves with

peers once again, but this comparison is played out in two dimensions. The first is the past, when the individual had a specific role within the peer group, and the second is the present, which is enriched by the experiences of what the individual has become, and the roles that are being acted out. Again the comparison is between alignment and deviation with respect to the line drawn from one's generational belonging.

> Well yes, in the evening I have my IPhone with me while I read the news. And …
> I feel a bit jealous of the photos of my friends from school who now have
> become important … while … here … I … I still haven't found any stability in life,
> and I've also put on weight /---/ (Paola, X Gen, female, 36 years)

Moreover, similarly to the findings of other scholars (Baym & boyd, 2012), it appears that the issue of the individual's position with respect to peer space also refers to the question of the unknown and expected public: individuals observe the lives of those who are supposedly their audience, and to which they naturally compare themselves.

Memory: repertoires, narratives and the generational "we sense"

Finally, the present research dealt with the *memory* category which has been mainly developed by investigating the management of the same cross-generational imaginary, which is stored on the indelible digital memory. As has been previously mentioned, repertoires and cultural products contribute to the identity building of each generation, filling out their symbolic imaginary. The present findings suggest that social media allow an infinite replicability of memory material, acting as an external memory to the collective imaginary, making repertories that first traced and accounted for generational boundaries available to any generation at the same time.

The investigated macrocategories can be seen below:

a. Memory repertoires and cross-generational impact
b. The role of the social web in strengthening the generational *we sense*

a) *Memory repertoires and cross-generational impact*

As has already been seen, a generation is based on a shared *we sense* (Bude, 1997; see also Boccia Artieri, 2012; Corsten, 1999) made up of repertoires, narratives and practices. All these elements have a close link with memory, which is affected by the impact of the web. As for Z Gen members, for whom the sense of the "generational unit" is stronger and more cohesive, this is the stage of their life where they are building these repertoires and these narratives. Instead, the use of such practices and narratives tends to fade with the passage towards other stages of life, when the opportunities to keep peer ties become less frequent.

Nevertheless, the present findings suggest that the social web may partially affect memory, and one of its effects can reverberate in the extension of the generational *we*

sense and strengthen peer-to-peer cohesion. In fact, if repertoires normally fade with time, the social web lets even the smallest details of the past bounce and resonate. Many groups, for example, have been created in recent years, especially on social networks, bringing together people who have shared important life stages and events.

The gender variable, in the case of Baby Boomers, is once again important. The present research has shown that men among Baby Boomers members maintain a stronger generational memory than women from the same cohort. They search for and approach those with whom they shared the dreams, the music, and the years of school. But the present findings reveal that the comparison with the past that comes back is not often experienced with satisfaction, and recovery is exhausted in a short time.

> (The 'we sense') you lose it, in the sense that you hear from a friend, you ask him, what're you doing, where're you living, what you've been up to, you got married, that's as far as it goes … and it's pretty sad /---/ (Enzo, Baby Boomer, male, 51 years)

In fact, among the men in the cohort of Baby Boomers we came across a certain idiosyncrasy in mixing the past with the present: among them, the desire to share experiences with the younger ones, and also to exploit the cross-generational opportunities offered by the social web seem to be stronger. Except for a few cases, the past seems to simply represent sadness and decay, and their online network is instead a tool, which projects them towards the present and the future. The peer-to-peer approach is quite different depending on gender: the present findings indicate that there is a difference between the perception of time passing and the role given to the past. Baby Boomer women love to renew relationships with people linked to their past and to have time and space to be able to patch up an old friendship. During the focus they have in fact pointed out how the web has allowed them to renew old ties. While a simple meeting with these people on the street would not have been able to offer them the opportunity to go beyond a simple greeting and to superficially exchange information of some event of their lives and some gossip, the online meeting has guaranteed the opportunity to recover the past by fully inserting it into their lives, even if online. Thanks to the social media, these relationships are once again strong and concrete.

As for X Gen and Y Gen members, the communicative practices and repertoires shared *via* the social web have allowed a more powerful effervescence of memories, ties that have a clear generational taste. The members of these generations are in fact very close to the repertoires of their past and willingly exploit all the tools available to keep memories alive.

b) ***The role of the social web in strengthening the generational* 'we sense'**
Wonderful tools like Youtube, Flickr or Pinterest are allowing people to build a 'giant database of the collective imaginary' (Napoli, 2014). The infinite storage and an easy and

accessible (to everyone) information retrieval are allowing a mutation in the category of memory. The present research revealed that all generations could draw from the same material. The repertoires of the past are interwoven with current ones; the narratives of adults are converted to the uses of youngsters. The present research has found that the members of all the cohorts are aware of this wonderful opportunity of confluence and communication. Adults may retrieve every detail, picture or sound, which has been important in their past (Frezza, 2008). And what they do not find or cannot remember they ask others about it; certainly there are those who have preserved something more or know where to go to locate the fragment or morsel of information. Adults and youngsters are the ones who mostly seem to appreciate this opportunity. The present findings reveal that by means of the social web, adults are aware that their memories, their essence, and their knowledge are not lost forever. In addition, by means of these shared practices they are able to better and more easily learn what is dear to their children, their siblings, their students or their younger colleagues. They now manage the same tools and resources to access those portions of the repertoire from which instead they would normally have been excluded. As for youngsters, they appear to feel happy to (freely) store away pieces of memory belonging to adults. It is their way of dealing with freedom that they would not normally have, and dealing with the hierarchies in which they are trapped against their will. Of course, the present results reveal that the memory risks being almost saturated, but it is also true that the cohabitation of the imaginary and its adaptation to daily life is also an important resource that allows an intra-generational bonding and a new cross-generational dialogue. Maybe it is not the case right now to talk about a new "democracy of the imaginary"; cross-generational boundaries are blurred and divisions will certainly find new forms emerging. However, the present findings reveal that the communication practices allowed by the social web represent an enormous potential for our lives, maybe they are a better way out compared to all the attempts that are often hard to erase or attempts to alter the memory.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore social media use and peer-to-peer and cross-generational communicative practices among four different generational cohorts: Baby Boomers, the X Generation, the Y Generation and the Z Generation. Furthermore, this research was focused on investigating how the peer-to-peer and cross-generational web-based communicative practices could affect, following Aroldi's claims (2011), the three main sociological categories of reflexivity, space and memory. Although this research has provided some interesting findings, the small dimensions of the study sample represents a limitation and does not allow us to make any generalizations from the findings. Nevertheless, the present findings reveal a few trends in line with contemporary research as mentioned in the paper, which anyway can enhance the knowledge of current social web communicative practices.

One of the research questions was: which are the generational differences regarding both the personal and collective sides of reflexivity? Do social media practices play an important role in generational identity building or re-configuration?

The present results indicate that the social web communicative practices enhance both the individual and the collective aspects of reflexivity, and this is true for all the cohorts that have been investigated. As it appears, through social web practices countless opportunities of identity textualization are possible, and all generational cohorts observed confirmed, though with different levels of awareness, a working towards an optimized self-presentation. Nevertheless, certain segregation among the imagined audiences has been observed, depending on the cohorts investigated. The clearest differentiation appears among adolescents, where the audience appears to be made up almost entirely of their peers. Moreover, it appears that the younger cohorts share a critical approach to the performativity of adults. On the other hand, Baby Boomers and the X Gen observed seem to share a more cross-generational view of the social web, populated by people belonging to their own generation but also by people who belong to various generational cohorts. Baby Boomers, with little differences depending on gender, seem to have a more open and democratic use of the social web.

Furthermore, it appears that the *sharing* desire is clearly the backbone of all communicative practices, and is cross-generational: this seems completely natural for the subjects belonging to the Z Gen, but now this has also been acquired by the cohorts of adults. The present findings reveal that the social web allows 'meta-communicative' potentialities and the awareness to be part of a public and to be *in* public. The present results also reveal that social web practices play an important role in building or re-configuring the generational identity. More specifically, this re-configuration concerns the opportunity to amplify cohesion and solidarity among adult generations, causing, it seems, old ties and old friendships to surface, and customs, habits and above all repertoires and narratives to undergo a renewal process. Updating generation themes and their specific feel once again, the present findings reveal that also the temporal dimension of the generation undergoes change, which is in fact forcefully thrown in. In addition, it appears that the possibility to assert a new self-history emerges within that generation sphere. That is to say, it is possible for individuals, as the present findings suggest, to reposition themselves within their own group with renewed characteristics that have been acquired over time, rewriting their biographical story. The audience of these generational narratives is invisible. Individuals tend to seduce the highest number of people with the hope of being intercepted by the ideal reader, and the surprise of receiving unpredictable interceptions.

Another question was this; do web-based communicative practices affect inter-generational relationships, above all those ones between parents and children, adults and kids? The present results suggest, in line with other research (Siibak & Tamme, 2013; Tamme & Siibak, 2012), that web-based communication practices enhance inter-generational relationships, both online than offline. In addition, some changes seem to emerge: adult subjects appear to feel a greater confidence in their own affordances in

controlling and screening their online contents. As a result, they seem to reduce their backstage space, often also massively involving minors. As for the present findings, it seems that many Baby Boomers and X Gen members appear to offer a more confusing representation of the role of the adult among youngsters.

Moreover, another question was; do social media practices affect the social space category and memory intergenerational sharing? The present findings reveal that adults and youngsters among the Z Gen are used to sharing their networks: the online environment facilitates a strengthening of ties, including cross-generational ones. In addition, the present findings reveal that social web practices allow reflections related to one's own experiences, and to the particular position which each social agent occupies. These reflections have been discussed as the 'change of position in generational space', related to the past and the present.

Finally, according to Aroldi (2011), the present findings have highlighted the important role of the social web in the sedimentation of the collective memory, which feeds the generational *we sense*, and strengthens peer-to-peer cohesion. All generations appear to be able to draw from the same material: the repertoires of the past are interwoven with current ones; the narratives of adults are converted to the uses of youngsters. According to these outcomes, it seems worth asking this question; and where is the conflict? Is it correct to talk about a new form of cross-generational democracy where everything is available to everybody and where every place is inhabitable by anyone, all at the same time? Certainly not. The present results suggest that each generation is limited to a transferral process of the same tensions onto the social web and the same mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that are implemented offline. It seems to change somewhat the self-perception of the more adult generations against the potential of the medium, and it appears to change the amount of materials with which it is possible to forge the identity of the group. They change the opportunities for training and strengthening the generational *we sense*. Quoting Maffesoli (2009), there is a new effervescence. Each generation, however, lives it in its own way.

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