

"One, no-one, one hundred thousand..." and the *virtual* self:
The *nickname* as the indicator of the multiple identity of the members
of two Italian chat lines.

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SUMMARY

On the occasions of International Conferences, held in 1998 and in 2000, I organized two round tables aimed at drawing attention to the topic: "Re-building the Social World in Cyber-space: Social Representations in Action on the Internet". It is evident that over these four years this topic has increasingly become a relevant issue to be placed in the agenda of social psychologists.

The previous round tables introduced issues of more general interest with the aim of focusing the attention of researchers on the social processes emerging and leading communicative actions and interactions within cyber-space: how the social world re-builds itself in cyber-space, positioning individuals and groups within the apparently invisible social structure, the apparent absence of social roles and communicative constraints, in a space where theoretically any person, group, company and institution in the world may reach and be reached by any person in the world. The main theses were based on the observation that:

- ❑ The peculiar "mediated" nature of interaction in virtual reality cannot only concern the producers of its technological infrastructure and its objects (hardware, software, etc.) or services (technological interfaces), but should become a privileged field of study for social scientists interested in communication studies. They should abandon the traditional linear theories of influences, focused on a source influencing a specific target, and try to identify new paradigms useful for understanding how communication develops within the nested nature of the World Wide Web, the hyper-textual character of its contents and the flexible strategies of their users-co-producers, who are in most cases self-ought.
- ❑ The Internet has radically changed not only the categories of "space" and "time" in communication, but also the categories of "public" and "private". For this reason it is extremely interesting to study how representations, social influence and interactions among individuals, groups, institutions and enterprises occur in cyber-space.
- ❑ The Internet is a global world, covering many aspects of human social life: knowledge, business, work, leisure and reproduces multiple approaches to these fields (scientific, commercial and social in all their facets, including deviant or criminal use and abuse of this tool). Its pervasive role in social life cannot be ignored by social psychologists.
- ❑ At the same time users/producers are anchored in their local cultural contexts. The different technological and social impact of the Internet throughout the world makes its growth and development vary by continent, country and social setting. Because of its dynamic nature, world building "on" and "by" the Internet is very interesting for study at different stages of development from social psychological, cross-national and cross-cultural perspectives. Included within the variables "culture" are factors such as: the level of expertise of users/producers in controlling communicative strategies and leading the flow of interactions among individuals, groups and virtual community, or the level of functional complexity of the web sites, which have rapidly evolved from an individualistic and autonomous structure towards a poly-functional organized hyper-structure.
- ❑ The World Wide Web is also a space for individuals, groups, companies, and institutions to express identity or multiple identities (real or virtual). It is extremely interesting to look at the communicative patterns and roots for establishing contacts among the "virtual communities" on the basis of affinity evoked by the expressed identities.

For all these reasons, the Internet dominates not only as tool for communication among researchers, but as a new observatory for research itself.

In this particular contribution, I will draw attention to the last of the above-mentioned issues, dealing with the phenomenon of multiple-identities allowed by the mask that cyberspace offers, where individuals and groups may feel free to express their multi-facet self-images or to generate a "virtual self". For this purpose I will present data derived from an exploratory study realized in co-operation with a graduate student for his master's thesis. In this investigation, the use of nicknames chosen by members of two Italian virtual communities was explored in terms of categorical taxonomy as sign of identity.

As Moscovici (2000) shows in the chapter entitled "What is in a name?", the study of names and proper names can provide important insights for many social phenomena. Stressing the difference between a word and a name, he affirms: "The word is always less defined than the concept it represents, whereas the name always gathers a more defined and wider content than its manifest meaning. In addition among names, especially proper names, the most important ones are not individual but social, both in their origin and value (...) Nothing in the use of a proper name is without an effect or meaning. This is unavoidable, as, one supposes, the name is not distinct from the person (...) One ceremony about which every parent cares, the

ceremony with which everyone's life begins, is that of name-giving. It is preceded by a choice and negotiations between the parents. Once the name is given to the newborn baby, it is fixed for the whole lifetime of the person."

Internet has broken this rule, introducing a new ceremony: the *self-baptism*. Once a person is projected in cyberspace, whatever his proper name, he may choose a *nickname* and, as in the Pirandello's play, he may decide to become "One, no-one, one hundred thousand...". I will try to show how this happens in the two chosen virtual communities, with respect to the different communicative contexts.

Using nicknames chosen by members of two virtual communities inside computer mediated communication (chat lines), this purely exploratory research project was guided by the aim to investigate several categorical modalities, indicators of the actors' identities, which, as is well-known, can undergo a process of "rarefaction" on-line. (Galimberti, 1997)

In addition to the description and analysis of the two virtual environments, the research conducted on 1010 members of two Italian virtual communities (Chat line C6 and mIRC32 charroom #Italia) has allowed us to:

- generate a taxonomy of nicknames present, as indicators of the identities of the members of the two chat lines;
- on the basis of the classification that emerged, compare Chat C6's nicknames with those of mIRC32 and analyse the differences;
- analyse the nickname distribution of chat line "C6" on the basis of variables: sex, age and profession.

For the virtual community "C6" (whose population in general terms is around 10,000 units, about 4,000 of which are regular users), the sample consisted of 900 subjects - all Italian citizens. Of these 301 were male, 300 female and 299 we will define as "neuter" as they voluntarily chose not to declare their gender.

The subjects were divided into four groups by age: up to 27 years, 28-35 years, 36-45 years and 46-65 years. In addition, they were subdivided into two classes by occupation: workers or students. Subsequently the age classes were re-categorised into three equally distributed groups: very young (up to 27 years); young(28-35); adults (36-65).

For "mIRC" we used a sample of 110 subjects, consisting of the entire population of the #Italia chatline.

A C6 program function was used as an instrument for researching nicknames. The nickname classification that emerged allowed the generation of 19 mutually exclusive categories. The data underwent analysis for frequencies and the CHI test, allowing for a level of significance less or equal to 0.05.

Given the "general" significance of the results at cross tabulation and the sensitivity of the statistical test, we thought it wise to further elaborate the data, transforming it into "Z scores". This was done with the objective to highlight the single "cells" that generated the general significance. The intersections that carried out concern age, sex and professional categories.

The results relative to cross tabulation of nickname categories by socio-demographic variables, show a significance equal to 0.002 relative to the intersection by age in four classes and equal to 0.001 by age in three classes, a significance equal to 0.001 relative to the intersection by sex and a significance equal to 0.004 relative to the intersection by profession.

Despite the exploratory nature of the investigation, the CHI2 test results show that the variables mentioned above influence the choice of a nickname in chat line "C6". Nicknames vary in significant measure according to variables for sex, age and profession that culturally mark the gender, generational and professional identities of our subjects.

From the results it emerges that men prefer to utilize "fantasy" nicknames or those identified as "abbreviations/acronyms". These are totally absent in the case of women, who give preference to nicknames from the nature category. The result obtained for "neuter" subjects, i.e. those that did not choose to define their sex, was interesting. A significance in favour of nicknames that fall into the technology category was registered, implicitly underscoring interest in the possibilities offered by new technologies to hide one's own sex.

In comparing the two chat lines, the differences that emerged should probably be ascribed not so much to the disparity in sample size as to the different communicative nature of the two virtual communities. In the "mIRC"

chat line there is a preference for "many to many" communications while in the "C6" chat line there is a preference for "dual" conversation, as a couple or private "one to one".

The results show interesting differences. The "C6" chat line registers a larger percentage of subjects that prefer a personal name accompanied by the year of birth or age and self-descriptive terms of personality traits. (This reveals a greater adherence of the virtual self to the chatter's presumed social and personal data, who probably feels more secure with dual-type communication.) However, they can also indulge in fantasy nicknames or ones which are allusive plays on words. In the "mIRC" chat line, however, a larger percentage of subjects preferred nicknames that fall in the Abbreviations/Acronyms and TV/Caroons/Film categories, leading us to presume a greater distance between the "self" and the nickname as indicator of the virtual self and the self image created on-line.

In conclusion, nicknames can tell us something about the way a chatter presents himself to a virtual community, to position himself with respect to his interlocutors. If one accepts a dynamic and non-static vision of the identity based on the "possible selves" about which Markus and Nurius (1986) speak, far from being reduced to casual strings of letters, nicknames can perhaps be indicators of the very identities sought by the subjects.

In addition to work on larger populations, this research could usefully be extended to the study of virtual communities that have specific associative targets as reference points as well as to other nationalities with differing development speeds in the social use of the Internet; empirical in-depth studies of the dynamic which, even in relation to the theme of on-line identity, is establishing itself among the cultural dimensions at the dynamic intersection of global-local scenarios.

Furthermore, it is certainly interesting to study how the narrative and explanatory fabric develops in relation to various conversational contexts (assuming the concurrent presence of binary, triadic or simultaneous multiple interlocutors) and the articulations that more or less explicitly recur between the self and the nickname chosen by the subjects. (For example: the recurrence of the first name in response to the question, "What is your name?" or declaring one's personal professional situation, personal interests, etc.)
(cf.: annexed transcribed extracts of conversations among chatters)

1. The Internet and Its Digital Worlds: Towards an Ever More Specialized Literature

The work at hand is related to the new current of research called Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). This is a topic of interest even in nations like Italy where the phenomenon of the development of on-line virtual communities came later than in the North American cultural reality. Consequently, there is also a lag in specialized literature with psycho-social inspiration.

This lag is, in part, symptomatically evident in the prevalence of books on CMC dedicated to technological and ergonomic aspects or that have a "generalist" orientation, dealing with various aspects of the Internet as separate chapters of books rather than dedicating specific theoretical and/or empirical works to them. Even so, this tendency is evolving rapidly towards a growing specialization in the literature, with respect to the various disciplines interested in CMC. These are no longer only engineering and computer science, but also economics, sociology, communication studies, ergonomics, psychology, pedagogy, etc. Within the continuously expanding body of works we can identify various currents:

- 1 Books marked by sociological reflection on the macro-cultural aspects inherent in the development of new media, and in particular, the Internet, new economic scenarios in a society "living on thin air" (inter alia: Leadbeater, 1999; Thompson, 1995, 1998; Castells, 2000; Flichy, 2001)
- 2 Works on phenomena inherent in the diffusion of e-commerce, e-business, web marketing and the creation of new markets. (inter alia: Scott, Matula & Stecco, 1999; Watson, Berthon, Pitt & Zinkhan, 2000; Morelli, 2000; Greenwald & Demoi, 1998; Fascini, 1998; Hagel III & Armstrong, 1997; Miceli, 2000; Martignago, Stagliano, 1996; Ferraro 2000)
- 3 Works more concerned with the epistemology of knowledge inherent to the new "Cognitive Ecology". (cf. inter alia, A.A.V.V., 1994; Breton & Probst, 1996; Levy, 1996, 1997, 1999; de Kerckhove, 1993; Cadot, 1994; Clout & Roscaglia, 2000; Falter, 1997; Gioia, 2000; Brand, 1987, 1988; De Carl, 1997; Negroponte, 1995; Meyrowitz, 1985; Jones, 1997)
- 4 Research centred on a so-called "epidemiological" perspective, focused on the social uses of new technologies in the context of computer mediated communication, on the socio-demographic characteristics of their users, the typology of media use and on the didactic-pedagogic implications of multimedia possibilities offered by the Internet. (cf. inter alia: Levy, 1999; Crespellani Porcella, Tagliamonte & Usai, 2000; Carlini, 1999; Ahem, Peck & Laycock, 1992; Colley, Gale & Harris, 1994; Drinn, 1999; Dyck & Smither, 1994; Har, Book & Angeli, 2000; Kiesler & Sproull, 1992; Lea, 1992; Magli, 1997; Mantovani, 1996; Roberts, Foehr, Rideout & Brode, 1999; Mettineri & Manera, 1997, 2000; Lowyck, Barchechath, Cresson & Flynn, 1998)
- 5 Research focused on psychological and correlated psycho-social dimensions that come into action in computer mediated communication such as new forms of social interaction, the construction of the identity, processes of cooperation, long-distance decision making, etc. (cf. inter alia, Wallace, 2000; Mantovani, 1995; Bilotta, 2000; Brennan, 1991; Bruckman, 1992; Caswell, 1988; Curtis, 1996; Dubrovsky, Kiesler, Sethna, 1991; Klein, 1994; Lea & Spears, 1991; McKenna & Bargh, 1998, 2000; Nass, Tauber, Reeves, 1994, 1994; Parks & Floyd, 1993; Rheingold, 1993; Spears & Lea, 1996; Turkle, 1995, 1996, 2001; Walther, 1992, 1993; Walther, Anderson & Park, 1994, 1994; Wiesband, 1992; Roversi, 2001).

Accompanying the progressive disciplinary specialization of literature about the Internet is a growing specialization in theoretical and empirical studies on the composite digital worlds of synchronous and asynchronous communication. This is shown by books on the development of the various communication environments from e-mail to multimedia chat lines (Mettineri, F & Manera, G, 2000) or the one just recently published specifically on chat lines (Roversi, 2001)

Even if the WWW digital universe without doubt represents the most relevant information reality with planetary access and up until now identified simply as a new medium to be utilized, the Internet is not just the WEB. The literature is becoming specialized because of the expansion of the social uses of the diverse digital worlds and not only because of technological expansion.

2. Contrasting vs. Integrative Views About Socialization through the Internet

Dominant not only within the general public but also among experts, the social representations of the Internet are still extremely bi-polarized between negative and positive connotations. As happens with all technological innovations, a schism has cropped up among the inevitable "apocryphs" that associate the Internet with a dehumanized being, alone in front of his computer, lost among web pages in solitary navigation, possibly in search of pornographic sites. Commenting on this usage trend, philosopher Umberto Galimberti (1999) coined a very evocative metaphor when speaking of "mass hermits". These are identified as that growing number of people who remain for hours fixated in front of a screen in their own rooms or in Internet cafés, connected "at a distance" but locally disconnected from the other equally "solitary" individuals in hundreds of occupied workstations. Rather than progress in communication, not a few authoritative voices characterize the Internet as a de-socializing element. However, the ranks of the "integrated" (as expressed by Umberto Eco, 1987) are not less numerous. Especially in weighing social effects and dimensions connected to the relationship between the social and digital universes, even the press reproduces this contrast, sometimes publishing ancient antinomies inherent in the man-machine relationship and reserving the most descriptive and least evaluative tones for the more purely technological aspects.

Offering contrasting answers corroborated by different experimental data, the question that experts are asking themselves was synthesized by Manuel Castells (2000: 386), "Does the Internet favour the development of new communities, virtual communities, or, instead, is it inducing personal isolation, severing people's ties with society, and ultimately, with their 'real' world?". In other terms, Rebecca A. Clay (2000) asks in a special edition of the American journal *Monitor on Psychology* entirely dedicated to the Internet (vol. 31, n° 4, April, 2000) "Is the Internet enhancing interpersonal connections or leading to greater social isolation?".

There are opposite views and a confusing diversity registered in the scientific literature:

- 41 Among positive views: the pioneering book *Virtual Communities* by Howard Rheingold (1993) argues for the birth of a new form of community, more formalized (as in the case of listed conferences or bulletin board systems) or more spontaneous, bringing people together on-line around shared values and interests. (Inter alia see also Turkle, 1995; Jones, 1998; Kiesler, 1997). According to Lévy (1997:126) in virtual communities "one expresses the aspiration to build a social tie that is founded neither on territorial "belonging" or on power relationships, but on gathering around centers of common interest, play, knowledge sharing, cooperative learning, on open processes of collaboration".
- 42 Among negative views, social critics, such as Mark Sloska (1995) have pointed out the de-humanization of social relationships brought about by computers, as life on-line appears to be an easy way to escape real life. The French sociologist Dominique Wolton (1998) called upon intellectuals to resist the dominant, technocratic ideology as embodied in the Internet. A team of psychologists at Carnegie Mellon University showed that a greater use of the Internet was associated with a decline in size of the users' social circle. Other critical voices such as Maldonado (1997) and Roszak (1986) underline the crisis of individual identity and its transformation into changeable masks, *in aliam aenim*, chameleons that even change their gender (Stone, 1997), in accordance with the post-modern culture of simulation. Critical attention to the psycho-social aspects of the communications revolution is found even in some of Paolo Calegari's papers (2000), specifically referring to the theme of identity in transition (Calegari, 1997). According to Madsen (1997), virtual communities are characterized by an excessive fragility and an incapacity to tolerate and manage internal conflict among its members. According to this author, as associations that derive from a free and spontaneous meeting of subjects with unanimous views, virtual communities are communities with few internal dynamics. Because of their level of homogeneity, they tend to be decidedly autoreferential and not infrequently behave like genuine cults...". Other critical voices are, among others, Virilio, P. (1997) and Ramonet (1999).
- 43 Among integrative views, Barry Wellman's et al. (1999) key point is to remind us that "virtual communities" do not have to be opposed to "physical communities": they are different forms of community, with specific rules and dynamics, which interact with other forms of community... Both group and personal communities operate on-line as well off-line. Bridget Murray, in the special issue which the online journal *Monitor on Psychology* has dedicated to Internet (vol. 31, n° 4, April 2000) "As in physical personal networks, most virtual community ties are specialized and diversified, as people build their own "personal portfolios". Internet users join networks or on-line groups on the basis of shared interests and values and since they have multi-dimensional interests, so are their on-line memberships. However, over time, many networks that start as instrumental and specialized, end

up providing personal support, both material and affective, as it was, for instance, in the case of SeniorsNet, for people of old age." (M.Castells, 2000, vol. 3:388). Among the integrative views we could also place the lucid examination of adaptive factors, innovative processes geared to social change, interpersonal relations in the age of global communication and localized actions that was recently presented by Albert Bandura (2000) during a conference on "New Media and the Development of the Mind". The John Suler's online hypertext book, *The psychology of Cyberspace* (<http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psy/cyber/psyweb.html>) is also interesting for further discussion of integrating online and offline identities. According to this Rider University psychologist and web researcher, "the web is a safe place to try out different roles voices and identities. It's sort of like training wheels for the self you want to bring out in real life. (...) Integration can be something people do consciously, or something that happens naturally as online selves seep into the offline self. But in the cases he knows of - the one of the emboldened accountant being foremost - integration leads to personal progress".

Finally to the question: "So, in the end, are virtual communities real communities?" - according to the Castells' integrative views - we might answer at the same time both: "Yes and no".

"They are communities, but not physical ones, and they do not follow the same patterns of communication and interaction as physical communities do. But they are not "unreal", they work in a different plane of reality. They are interpersonal social networks, most of them based on weak ties, highly diversified and specialized, still able to generate reciprocity and support by the dynamics of sustained interaction. As Wellman puts it, they are not imitations of other forms of life; they have their own dynamics: the Net is the Net. They transcend distance, at low cost, they are usually of asynchronous nature, they combine the fast dissemination of mass media with the pervasiveness of personal communication, and they allow multiple memberships in partial communities. Besides, they do not exist in isolation of other forms of sociability" (M.Castells, 2000, vol. 1, 389).

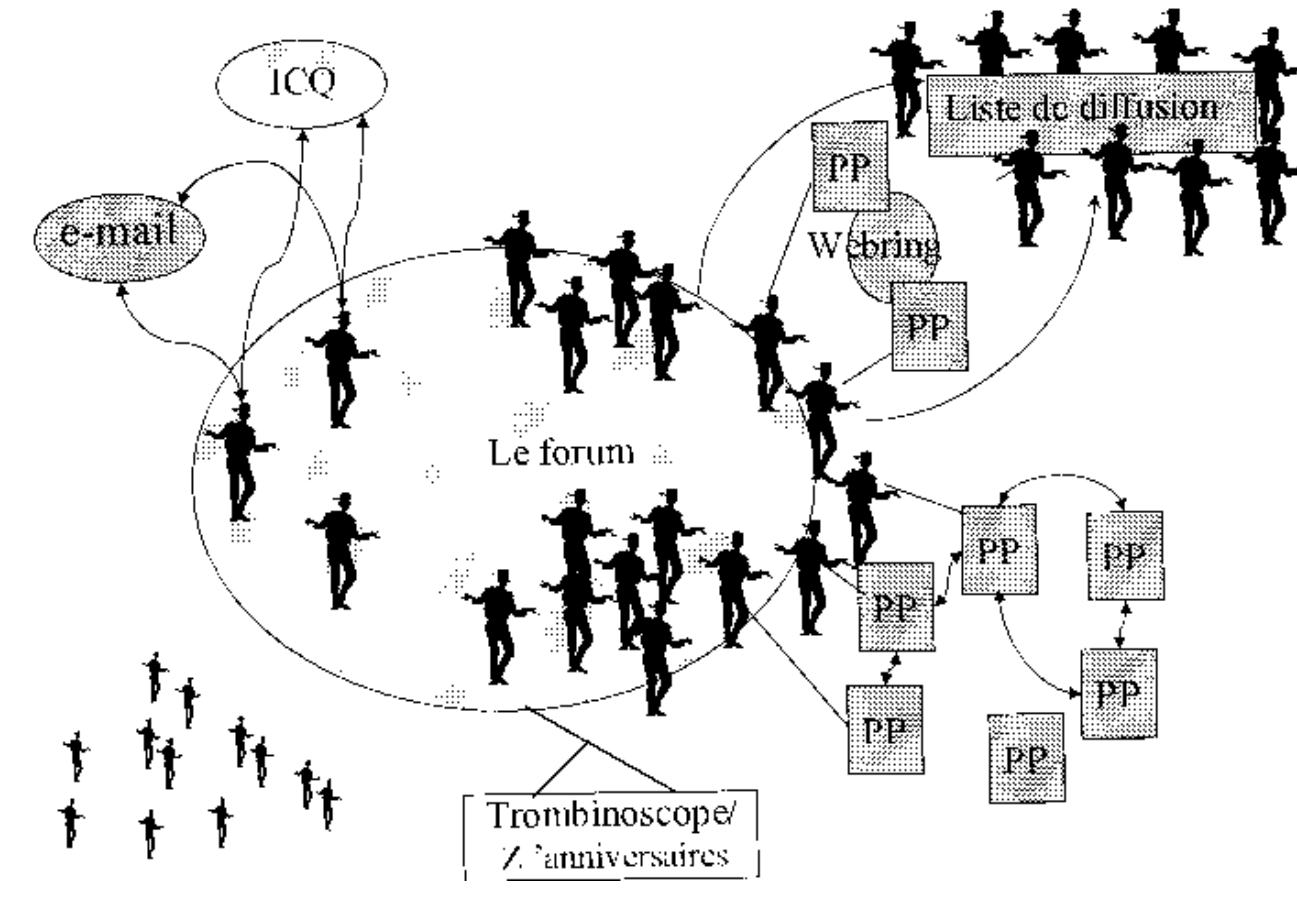
Looking beyond the controversial aspects of the question, one can nevertheless agree with Castells that the socio-cultural patterns of the new multi-media systems as a 'symbolic' environment are:

- 1) First, widespread social and cultural differentiation leading to the segmentation of the users/viewers/readers/listeners. Not only are the messages segmented by markers following senders' strategies, but they are also increasingly diversified by users of the media, according to their interests, taking advantage of interactive capacities. - *"Prime time is my time"* (ibidem: 401).
- 2) Secondly, increasing social stratification among the users. Not only will the choice of multimedia be restricted to those with time and money for access, and to countries and regions with enough market potential, but cultural/educational differences will be decisive in using interaction to the advantage of each user. Information about what to look for and the knowledge how to use the message will be essential to truly experience a system different from standard customized mass media. Thus, the multi-media world will be populated by two essentially distinct populations: the *interacting* and the *interacted*, meaning those who are able to select their multidirectional circuits of communication, and those who are provided with a restricted number of pre-packaged choices. And who is what will be largely determined by class, race, gender and country (ibidem: 402).
- 3) Thirdly, the communication of all kinds of messages in the same system, even if the system is interactive and selective (in fact, precisely because of this), induces an *integration of all messages into a common cognitive pattern*. From the perspective of the user, (in an interactive system, both receiver and sender), the choice of various messages in the same communication mode, with easy switching from one to the other, reduces the mental distance between various sources of cognitive and sensorial involvement. *The issue at stake is not that the medium is the message; messages are messengers*. And because they keep their distinctiveness as messages, while being mixed in their symbolic communication process, they blur their codes in this process, creating a multifaceted semantic context made of a random mixture of various meanings (ibidem: 403).
- 4) Finally, perhaps the most important feature of multimedia is that they capture within their domain most cultural expressions, in all their diversity. Their advent is tantamount to ending the separation, and even the distinction, between audio-visual media and printed media, popular culture and learned culture, entertainment and information, education and persuasion. Every cultural expression, from the worst to the best, from the most elitist to the most popular, comes together in this digital universe that links up in a giant, non-historical hypertext, past, present and future manifestations of the communicative mind. By doing so, they construct a new symbolic environment. *They make virtuality our reality*. (ibidem: 403)

3. New "Rooms" to Meet People Simultaneously or with a Time Lag

Epecially among non-users there prevails a rather indistinct perception of the Internet and its environments, in large part simply identified with the Web. However, as emphasised above, the Internet is not just the Web. The Internet is in reality a body of digital worlds, endowed with a remarkable series of communicative instruments that range from the Bulletin Board System (BBS), to newsgroups, fora, mailing lists, MUD, chat lines, video-conferencing and more. All are environments with various degrees of and prospects for development as well as distinct in access modes: public (forum, IRC), semi-public (distribution lists) or private (e-mail and ICQ).

Valérie Beaudouin and Julia Velkova (1999a) gave an illustration in providing an account of the complexity of the various environments that characterize the multiform space of communication via Internet (see fig. 1). This article proposes an interesting analysis of the composition of a particular type of communication: asynchronous exchanges written and mediated by electronic networks in the context of a public forum. In a subsequent article, V. Beaudouin, S. Fleury and J. Velkova (2000) present a study of electronic interactions in several newsgroups on the internet and on a corporate intranet, as well as via e-mail. They state that in order to understand the electronic interactions, it is necessary to study the global communication space constructed by interconnected communication tools (homepages, newsgroup, e-mail) and discuss some specific issues related to the analysis of homepages.



Reading Guide:
IRC: Internet Relay Chat: system for synchronous written discussion which allows for public or private exchanges.
ICQ: I seek You: system for synchronous written discussion with a selection of partners (contact list)
PP: personal page
The figures in the lower left corner, outside the forum, represent forum readers who do not intervene.

The distortion of spatial-temporal categories makes CMC something rather different from a particular case of written communication, even where the type of language utilized is of the purely textual kind. (Lea 1991)
Understanding communication as the transport of messages along a 'circuit' (Shannon, C.E. & Weaver, W., 1983), the traditional linear-type models that conceived of communication as a simple passing of information from a transmitter to a receiver are now considered obsolete and inadequate to explain CMC's specific communicative processes and phenomena. (Mirghy, K.L. & Collins, M.P., 1997)

Mantovani (1995) emphasizes the need for new explanatory paradigms suitable for explaining the cooperative nature that activates a reciprocal responsibility for the success of the interaction and a series of subtle accommodations among interlocutors and that returns the concept of communication to the processes of common construction of meanings. In contrast with a vision based in technological determinism where the new communication technologies would automatically work to improve organizations, Mantovani not only examines how the new technologies change (mold) people, groups and organizations, but also how people, groups and organizations change and adapt new technologies to themselves. In this point of view, people do not simply adopt new media but adapt them to their needs. This is a conclusion reached by Roversi (2000) among others in evaluating the differentiation in the "Culture of Virtuality" between Italian and English-speaking users.

"In the English-speaking world, those who frequent digital worlds made possible by the Internet are more used to consider "virtual reality" not only as a means to enter into communication with other persons, but also as an imaginary place in which to explore new forms of experiences. In certain cases, this actually can be a way of living a large part of daily life in a world made only of words, in an ever growing transposition of the self and of the personal identity into life on the web. (...) Italian chatters are less susceptible to the charm of "virtuality" and less likely to transform themselves into improbable cyborg beings. For many of them, the computer is rather similar to a cellular phone for writing. With one precise objective: to transform friendships born on-line into real friendships." (Roversi, 2001, 94 and back cover)

An essential distinction to make is that computer mediated communication takes on completely different characteristics and connotations when presented in synchronous or asynchronous modes. According to the technique adopted and the context in which the communicative dynamic is begun, each of the two communications typologies (synchronous or asynchronous) has its own implications, expresses specific potentialities and requires a different kind of participation, a new way of "being" for the user.

The asynchronous mode does not envision interlocutors' simultaneous presence, who therefore do not have to be simultaneously connected to the net. Typical examples are: e-mail, fora, mailing lists, news groups and guest books. On-line asynchronous communication in part highlights specific dynamics and, in part, uses the new medium to re-propose traditional forms of communication. Characterizing aspects of this mode of communication are:

- 1) Sending a written text to users not simultaneously present, either spatially or temporally; therefore, an absence of contextual feedback.
- 2) Separation of the transmission/reception relationship: the reception of the message is delayed in respect to the transmission of the information.
- 3) Sender/Receiver conflict: information overload; the tendency to produce a mass of messages that exceeds the receiver's processing capacity.
- 4) The real identity of both sender and receiver is almost always known, at least concerning salient elements and the context and purpose of the communication.

Valérie Beaudoin and Julia Velkova (1999a and 1999b) offered an interesting analysis of the composition of a particular type of communication, asynchronous exchanges written and mediated by electronic networks in the context of a public forum.

In contrast, in order to communicate, the synchronous type communicative mode requires the simultaneous on-line presence of all interlocutors. However, very often this is not a guarantee that the interlocutors' identity will correspond to the subjects' actual identity. Regulation of the exchange in synchronous CMC must find other modalities, in particular regarding alternating turns which in face-to-face conversations are ably resolved via various social negotiation strategies. (Egido 1990; Wedman 1991) The total absence of meta-communicative

modalities among subjects involved in CMC (facial expressions, posture, proxemics, voice inflection - etc.) renders the interaction process more enriched than that in a normal conversation. (Gallimberti & Riva, 1997) This, in part, is compensated for by instruments, predominantly of the textual type, that seek to reproduce meta-communicative elements, for example, abbreviations and *smiley faces*.

Typical examples of synchronous internet communication are chatting and videoconferencing, which are rather different one from another in their purposes and applicative contexts. The former is typical of the informal universe of daily chatting in the new forms of the digital universe. The latter is more suitable for synchronous communication with the aim of scientific exchange, or long-distance examination of problems of different natures (political, economic, didactic, etc.). The three major synchronous type communication environments on the Internet that share the criteria of a) communication_textuality; b) simultaneous presence of the persons engaged in the communication exchange; c) anonymity, persons identifiable only on the basis of the chosen nickname, are:

- 4) Icy (abbreviation that stands for "I seek you"), based on a multi-user program that with every connection to the Internet signals the on-line presence of other users, each of which is identifiable according to a number automatically assigned by the program and by a nickname chosen by the subject. In this environment, the communicative mode is prevalently of the "one on one" type, that permits a textual interactive dialog that is private in nature, although the possibility of inviting other users on line to share the communicative exchanges is not excluded (analogous to what happens on chatlines).
- 4) MUD (Multi-users' Domain), a form of multi-user communication based on game scenarios developed in virtual environments and in which users, as if in a kind of digital theater, can assume fictitious identities, play roles and create plots and environments. Involvement in this can often be so strong that subjects identified with their characters (inside a plot that has rules and a system of prizes designed specifically for each game) can remain engaged hours or even days.
- 4) IRC (Internet Relay Chat), an environment that is represented by rooms populated only by texts for *babbling by writing* with one or more faceless interlocutors who can be more or less habitual or occasional and who are met along the same communication path; telecommunication roads called "channels". These are often identified according to thematic criterion, with sub-categorical environments that are more or less articulated, or according to a geographical criterion. Even within the globalizing horizon of the Internet, born to connect persons on line from all over the world, channels can build local city (ex: #Rome, #Milan, etc.), regional or national (Ex: #Italy) networks and reintroduce selection criteria or definition of the population of the chatters that frequent them, for example, by linguistic identity. They can disconnect "intruders" who do not respect the criteria predetermined by those responsible for the chat line via the so-called channel operators (op) who, alongside their technological roles, are given the power to act as social regulators of communication, for example, by kicking out, or rather, disconnecting the access of a user creating a disturbance.

Considering the specificity of our research, in this study we will concentrate on chat lines, with the perspective of exploring some aspects of these new universes of production and exchange of social knowledge, in which individuals and groups reconstitute themselves, re-inventing the conversational network in a digital writing format (babbling by writing) and "babbling by speaking" that social representation experts have traditionally identified in real meeting places of daily life: cafes, meeting rooms, clubs, etc.

4. "Babbling by Writing" on Chat Lines

From a psycho-social viewpoint, certain authors consider chatting to be one of the most interesting offerings present in the panorama of the Internet. At least relative to the Italian context, more than studies and systematic data, for the moment the literature is limited to documenting testimonial evidence that this particularly heterogeneous and fascinating environment presents pertaining social relations. This can range from informal knowledge circumscribed to the time of a first and only connection to recurrent and long-lasting meetings with romantic involvement or friendship dynamics that in certain phases lead to relationships that are then transferred from the digital to the real universe. In other cases, they find in that self-same digital medium, the element that legitimates existence and substantiates interest, not as a dimension in conflict with the one that is real, but as the reality that one chooses in order to live new forms of social relations. (Stone, 1997; Wallace, 2000) An area of interest for researchers exploring the Internet's various environments as an opportunity for social relations concerns the levels and modalities of integration, or non-integration, between on-line and off-line social life.

In contrast with asynchronous communications instruments, on-line synchronous communication has, in its own forms and modes, a strong playful and recreational base and a motivation for social relations that researchers are beginning to study. According to Elizabeth Reid (1991), the Internet is a playground, appropriate for experimenting with new forms of self presentation. Among these ways of communicating, the appeal of acting (Clot, 2000), of disguise (Herz, 1995) and of meeting strangers that communicate with us from any point on the planet, acquires a particular power of attraction. For other authors, "Internet Relay Chat is only a synchronous discussion, infinite and often without purpose. In IRC, virtual worlds to be built or enemies to combat do not exist, there are only channels distinguished by a name or topic (not always a significant description), where a variable number of participants chat using modalities very different from those of MUD, even if decidedly more simple." (Mettiers & Manera, 2000, p.93)

From research conducted in the United States on young adolescents by Lynn Clark (1998), it emerges that arranging on-line "dates" represents a playful way to experiment with new, unconventional relationship forms between the sexes. These relations, which although not excluding the possibility of leading to intimacy and friendship, do not require dimensions of trust and commitment. Rather, they are a means of self-gratification via an idealized projection of the personal self, free of reality's limitations, beginning with the personal physical image and/or inhibitory or regulatory patterns of personal social relations in real life contexts.

Alongside the enchanting, recreational aspect and expectations that cross the well-known borders of everyday life's personal spaces, a practical function obviously exists, useful in work contexts that make use of groups of personnel located in different geographical areas or for those who travel frequently or work far away from family and friends.

Like few other means of communication, chatting eliminates differences in age, culture, sex and social class: in front of a keyboard (and a monitor) old and young, beautiful and ugly are all equal. (Calvani, 2000)

In turn, chat lines are differentiated both by structural characteristics (distinguishing graphic chat lines, those in letters and those in 3D) and communication typology:

- *One to many communication* (What is typed is read by all participants)
- *Many to one communication* (Various people can, each individually, address a message to a particular person, using the nickname)
- *One to one communication* (One can write a message addressed to a particular person utilizing his/her nickname. That message would be visible to all.)
- *Private one to one communication* (By clicking directly on a subject's nickname opens another window that permits private communication; in this way only the two subjects can read their message exchanges.)

Regarding this last type of communication, made possible by the Direct Client to Client (DCC), or the inquiry call, it has been observed that, "Paradoxically, in an environment created specifically to overcome the limits of one to one communication with the old talk-type commands, the DCC and queries are the most valued instruments. Most DCC's remain constantly connected to two or three of their favourite channels, but follow the conversation in a perfunctory manner only to see if one of their friends or someone particularly nice arrives. Most of the time their attention is dedicated to one or more private sessions. With a little bit of practice, and with a client with windows like mIRC, it is not difficult to be able to simultaneously carry on two or three private conversations, while keeping an eye on a couple of channels. The important thing is never to write from the wrong window, for example, sending via a channel, in public, intimate words written for a single person." (Mettiers, F. & Manera, G., 2000, p.98)

The technical modalities that define the range of dual/multiple or public/private communication are constraints that evidently require subjects to acquire sufficient communicative abilities to guarantee their survival as digital beings without being overwhelmed by rules, modalities and communicative procedures to which they have not been educated since birth via various socialization agents. Therefore, the Internet emerges not only as a technological medium, but as a new agent for socialization which at the same time is potentially multicultural and technologically homogenizing, and has rules and modalities of communicative exchanges imposed environment by environment.

The communicative channel adopted for chatting is the written, textual channel, even if a heavy contamination between the written and oral registers was noted in the first examination of those texts. (Wallace, 2000, Roversi, 2001) The new dictionaries and expressive and communicative grammatical rules guiding these new forms of

textual expression that operate in the disembodied, de-temporalized and de-spatialized universe of the Internet, constitute a new field of study for psychologists and communication sociologists, as well as for socio-linguists.

The chat line medium influences the linguistic register, pushing it towards a highly economical use of written language (Werry, 1996), with extensive use of abbreviations, neologisms, phonetic transcriptions of spoken language and cartoon-type expressive modalities¹. These expressive forms highlight the need to transmit information commonly present in face-to-face interaction, that is, all those aspects of language that are not verbal. (Colombo, Egenti, 1996) Certain authors maintain that chat line users are trying out new linguistic strategies via the creation of communicative registers that are different and adapted to the limitations of the instrument. (Werry, 1996; Wallace, 2000) This medium presents characteristics that distinguish it from writing as we have always understood it, for example in books and the press, as the fruit of multiple revision processes and editing. This is, rather, a way of writing that is very close to the oral character of spoken language that Ong (1982) described as "secondary oral character".

Therefore, this type of digital communication proposes a "way of saying" that is ever closer to "doing", sometimes leaving behind orthographic and syntactic writing rules. These aspects are often voluntarily set aside and highlight the emergence of new expressive codes and of an idiom very different from elaborate literary texts.

When one accesses a chat room for the first time, one has the sensation of having been "dropped into chaos". On the first reading of the text flow, one feels that the textual discourse makes no sense, that it is an artistic collective where everyone seems to speak only for himself. This is due to the speed of the communicative flow and to the fact a user's response may appear only after numerous lines of other messages. Not least, inside the same chat room different arguments are raised and consequently, different subgroups are created. This enhances the perception of confusion.

That which appears before our eyes is a long list of phrases and cross-references, each preceded by a pseudonym. The structure appears very similar to a theatrical script, where a name and colon precede the actors lines.

5. The Theme of the Identity in Cyberspace

Among other aspects, reference literature for the emerging research sector of computer mediated communication has focused on the subject of the identity in cyberspace. Considerable importance has been given to this subject, demonstrated by the fact that the entire second volume of Manuel Castells' monumental trilogy *"The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture"* (2000, 2nd edition) is dedicated to the topic. Following the first volume that was entirely dedicated to the analysis of the rise of "network society" and preceding the volume devoted to the profound historical changes extant in various contexts at the end of the second millennium (*"The End of Millenium"*), this book deals with the formation of the self and the interaction between the Net and the self within a wide cultural horizon. It begins with the crisis of two central institutions of society, the patriarchal family and the nation-state. Favouring a subtle distinction between "information society" and "informational society", the latter based on the ever more pervasive logic of *networking*, Castells maintains that, "The first historical steps of informational society seem to characterize them by the pre-eminence of *identity* as their organising principle" (Castells, 2000, p. 22). Castells means identity as the process by which a social actor recognizes and constructs meanings, primarily on the basis of certain cultural attributes. He drew upon opinions expressed by sociologist Alain Touraine (1994) about the role played by the defence of the subject, his personality and his culture against the logic of the marketplace and systems that substituted the concept of class war in post-industrial societies, where services have replaced consumer goods at the centre of the productive cycle. Castells maintains that:

... identity is becoming the main, and sometimes the only, source of meaning in an historical period characterised by widespread de-structuring of organisations, de-legitimation of institutions, fading away of major social movements, and ephemeral cultural expressions. People increasingly organise their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of what they are, or believe they are. Meanwhile, on the other hand, global networks of instrumental exchanges selectively switch on and off individuals, groups, regions, and even countries, according to their relevance in fulfilling the goals processed in the network, in a relentless flow of strategic decisions. There follows a fundamental split between abstract, universal instrumentalism, and historically rooted, particularistic identities. *Our societies are increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition between the Net and the Self.*

In this condition of structural schizophrenia between function and meaning, patterns of social communication become increasingly under stress. And when communication breaks down, when it does not exist longer, even in the form of conflictual communication (as would be the case in the social struggles of political opposition, social groups and individuals become alienated from each other, and see the other as a stranger; eventually as a threat. In this process, social fragmentation spreads, as identities become more specific and increasingly difficult to share.' (Castells, 2000, 3)

In this optic, the subject of identity is evidently dealt with in macro-cultural terms and has little to do with the specifics of various Internet environments and in particular, with peculiarities derived from the modalities of synchronous and asynchronous communication. Without going over the well-known studies on changes in cultural models and shared social values produced by technological innovations and the *cyber-culture* (P. Levy, 1999), we will limit ourselves to recall two positions concerning the topic of on-line identity:

- on one hand, to underscore the role of telematic innovation in resorting to modalities of interaction and of rules that make reference to the individual's evolutive process and socialization contexts.
- on the other hand, to confirm that the telematic context, producing a social void, favours the emergence of psychological phenomena that are otherwise submerged and cause self expressions that are tententially disengaged from the system of social sanctions.

To avoid falling into stereotypes or, as already mentioned in the introduction, sterile confrontations between "apocalyptic and integrated", i.e. those who line up for or against the Internet as the root of the junceca of all ills, it is better to reflect on certain factors that have characterized the development of the new communication technologies, making the experiences of virtual reality relevant even in the context of daily life. As an attempt to create alternate, manageable, artificial worlds where one can communicate and test and measure oneself, the first applications of virtual reality were born in the 1970's with experimentation in aircraft flight simulators (virtual cockpits). These first applications prepared the ground for new experiences, including artificial reality, which Myron Krueger defined as a technology that consents "whole body participation in computer simulated events so efficient that they force people to accept them as 'real experiences'" (Krueger, 1991). Becoming a reality in virtual communities, the world of electronic communications recently has opened up possibilities for a new sociality, an opportunity to go beyond physicality and directly access symbols and meaning, even at the risk of "auto-referentialization" (Turkle, 1997; Mantovani, 1995)

In relation to social phenomena like "virtualization" and "globalization" and those recorded concerning various interactive micro-contexts and different communicative environments available on the net at the small group and/or individual level, the nexus between changes which have assailed the identity in macro-cultural terms are deep and are waiting to be examined. In a perspective mindful of macro and micro-social phenomena, it would be hoped that the results of empirical research inspired by sociological and psycho-social analyses as well as studies on communication could be brought together. Implications for the process of personal and social identity construction have been dealt with in numerous studies. This is not only in reference to predictable normative changes, for example, the passage from one phase of development to another but also derived from cultural scenarios determined by the diffusion and rapid evolution of satellite and on-line computer communication. They highlight the peculiar process of "reification" and auto-referentialism that the actor's identity undergoes on-line. (see inter alia: Stone 1995; Mantovani, 1995; Galimberti, 1997; Turkle, 1997)

Other types of studies were specifically designed to examine some of the effects "identifiability and self-presentation" (anonymous vs identifiable by source and target) in computer mediated communication and inter-group interaction. Studies of behaviour in CMC were conducted in a variety of settings from work-related behaviour (e.g. Sherbom, 1988; Siegel, Dubrowsky & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), the development of friendships and relationships over the net (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Lea & Spears, 1995) and the observation of higher levels of hostile, uninhibited or flaming behaviour in CMC, relative to face-to-face communication (Chester, 1996; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991; Lea, O'Shea, Fang & Spears, 1992). Douglas & McCarty's (2001) most recent research is collocated in this area of study. In three experimental studies they investigated inter-group properties of "hostile flaming behaviour" in CMC and how flaming language is affected by Internet identifiability or identifiability by name and e-mail address/geographical location, common to Internet communication. They also tested the validity of the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE; Reicher, Spears & Postmes, 1995) in the realm of Internet identifiability. This study "establishes the importance of identifiability to in-group audiences in the expression of group-normative responses about out-groups. Identifiability to an in-group audience is not only useful in enabling group members to resist powerful out-groups, but also in encouraging people to claim and enact their identity in order to be accepted by the in-group" (Douglas & McCarty, 2001: 414).

As for the objective of the study presented earlier, it would be wise to depart from several basic presuppositions identified by Rheingold as specific to the Internet Relay Chat (IRC). The "IRC has enabled a global subculture to construct itself from three fundamental elements: artificial but stable identities, quick wit, and the use of words to construct an imagined shared context for conversation. For a student of virtual communities, IRC is an opportunity to observe a critical experiment-in-progress". (Rheingold, H., Chapter six: Real-Time Tribes: www.well.com/user/hh/kbook4.html).

6. The Nickname and Identity Multitasking in Chat Lines.

In certain ways, chat lines propose a paradoxical social environment. On one hand, given the synchronous mode of communication, they propose as a certainty the physical presence of the interlocutor behind the screen. On the other hand, they offer no guarantees concerning his/her identity, which generate insecurity on the symbolic and cultural plane.

In non-mediated, face-to-face communication, the physicality of our interlocutor possesses both a denotative and connotative weight. Denotative in the sense that there is a reciprocal recognition of the physical aspect, connotative in the cultural recognition of the meaning to attribute to it.

In CMC, the body's invisibility and the spatial context impose a task of "representation" of cultural expectations on a symbolic plane, generating an accentuation of all of those characteristics that create a situation by highlighting stereotypical behavior (process of homologation) to guarantee reciprocal legibility of actions and situations. (Mantovani, 1995b)

Used to present oneself on-line and the only clue about the actor present on the chat line, the pseudonym, or nickname, appears to play an important role. On a chat line, the only thing about which we can be certain is the pseudonym that an actor uses to present himself. However that may be, and independently of the role with which he/she presents himself, the nickname will identify only and uniquely that person. In the endless sea of the Internet, each drop has his/her own name.

According to Howard Rheingold "An artificial but stable identity means that you can never be certain about the flesh-person behind an IRC nickname, but you can be reasonably certain that the person you communicate with today under a specific nickname is the same one who used that nickname yesterday. There's nothing to stop anybody from getting a new nickname and creating a new identity, but both the old and the new nicknames have to be unique. The stability of nicknames is one of the few formally structured social requirements in IRCland; an automatic 'Nickserv' program ensures that nobody can use a nickname ('nick') that has been registered by someone else".

In the chapter entitled "What is in a name?" Moscovici (2000) demonstrates that the study of names and proper names could bring important insights in many social phenomena. Stressing the difference between a word and a name, he affirms "The word is always less defined than the concept it represents, whereas the name always gathers a more defined and wider content than its manifest meaning. In addition among names, especially proper names, the most important ones are not individual but social, both in their origin and value (...) Nothing in the use of a proper name is without an effect or meaning. This is unavoidable, as, one supposes, the name is not distinct from the person (...) One ceremony about which every parent cares, the ceremony with which everyone's life begins, is that of name giving. It is preceded by choice and negotiations between the parents. Once the name is given the newborn baby, it is fixed for the whole lifetime of the person".

Internet has broken this rule, introducing a new ceremony: the *self-baptism*. Once a person is projected into cyberspace, whatever his proper name, he may choose a nickname and, like in the Prandello play, he may decide to become "One, no-one, one hundred thousand...", depending on the different communicative contexts. According to Reid (1995), the nickname "mask" constitutes the most fascinating aspect of chat lines because it permits the construction of a multiple series of identities, even contradictory among themselves and free of limits imposed by sex, race and age.

Linked to the wide-spread phenomenon of identity multitasking (*multitasking identitario*) within electronic communities, there is a common tendency to "virtually" embellish personal physical and/or social characteristics and to assume truly *fictitious identities*. These are linked to a temporary name that provides an identity of convenience, mutually recognized as such. A characteristic of that environment, anonymity is considered, in fact, to be one of the motives predicated the possibility of "testing oneself in various roles". This point constitutes another fascinating chapter of "on-line identity".

The Internet, therefore, presents itself as an instrument of computer culture that has contributed to rethinking identity as a multiplicity of possible identities. The net has become a significant social laboratory to try out the construction and reconstruction of the self. (Serpentelli, 1993; Wallace, 2000; Stone, 1992; Turkle, 1995) To give an example, cases of gender swapping or virtual transvestitism, in which one voluntarily chooses to assume the role of the opposite sex, are now well-known.

*I repeat, I still believed that there was only one stranger:
Ripeto, credevo ancora che fosse uno solo questo
estraneo,
one alone for all, one alone as I believed myself to be.
uno solo per tutti, come uno solo credevo d'essere io per me.
But my atrocious drama quickly became complicated:
Ma presto l'atroce mio
dramma si complicò
with the discovery of the 100 thousand Moscardas that
centomila Moscarda ch'io ero
non solo per gli altri ma
I was not only for others but also for myself.
anche per me,
tutti con questo
all with this one name, Moscarda, ugly unto brutality,
solo nome di Moscarda,
brutto fino alla crudeltà, tutti
all inside this my poor body that itself was also one,
dentro questo mio povero corpo
one and no one, alas...
ch'era uno anch'esso, uno e nessuno ahimè...*

Luigi Pirandello, 1928

Pirandello leads us to those existential questions that have made the history of man: the meaning, the significance of being; the identity as the individual's uniqueness and immutability as well as its multiplicity and becoming. Here the name Moscarda seems to be a narrative expedient with the purpose of confining, enclosing, explaining and representing the very essence of the character. Pirandello's "one" is the physical body. The name, as a repository of the definitions and thoughts of others about oneself, is understood almost like a cage or a hallmark. As a troublesome "shell", mysterious and foreign even to its owner, the body is the ground where - even if diachronically - the representations of others and the body's proprietor meet.

For astute chat line visitors, today this experience of "multiplicity" is brought up-to-date as a possibility. Modifying or changing one's own identity "mask" is, in fact, a precondition for access to one of these worlds. This is via the use of a nickname and by adopting co-construction strategies of identity meanings in the space of written conversation with one or more interlocutors. Often participants choose pseudonyms that reveal parts of their real or imaginary personalities. (Stone, 1992; Wallace, 2000)

Even the graphic aspect of chat lines lends itself to being read like a script: names followed by a colon preceding the dialog. This structure, illustrated in the example found below, seems to be shared by all chat line typologies with the exception of the three dimensional.

```
*C6* - Dreams give us the strength to go on.  
smilzo80 - NOOOOO  
creeperxonly - he left the room  
rgn - but you read it, didn't you?  
mysterym - he didn't read it...  
pogta982 - bye all  
mysterym - he's just a party pooper...  
octoberdiarist - who are you talking about?  
decount - he left the room  
smilzo80 - NO INFACT I AM STILL HERE IF NOT I WOULD NOT BE HERE NOW  
rgn - i'm leaving for a moment don't fight!  
pogta982 - goodnight  
smilzo80 - OK!!!!  
smilzo80 - GOOD NIGHT
```


At the University of Jerusalem, Israeli scholar Haya Bechar-Israeli (1996) studied pseudonyms used by IRC visitors for more than an year. She began with the thesis that nicknames constitute a way to introduce on self and to manage one's own on-line image. They perform those "distinctivity" and in some cases "continuity" functions already highlighted in various theories about the identity. Even in the anonymous world of IRC, in the research in question at least half of the subjects chose a "self presentation" that was not far off from their real identity, and rarely changed the chosen pseudonym. They reacted immediately and forcefully to any attempts of nickname "theft" as if it were an assault to the self-image they had constructed on-line. The author presents us with the case of a user, known as "Bombard", who was forced to change nickname because it was utilized and shared by groups of users belonging to promiscuous American gangs. "Bombard" suffered a complete electronic identity crisis which lasted until he was able to invent a new, similar nickname for himself, that sounded like the old one but without the negative connotations. His new nickname "LaNehElM" allowed him to continue to perform his electronic literacy. Beyond charting the variety of nicknames adopted by users and showing cross-references of collective ethnic and religious groups as identifiers of social groups, Haya Bechar-Israeli's research highlighted how the IRC's emerging culture develops both in relation to and despite of anonymity. On one hand it is a culture of linguistic virtuosity, on the other, of content involved in the rules of the other's language.

The predominance of pseudonyms chosen in continuity with the real person (reported at 45% in the Bechar-Israeli's research) is data that must be verified with studies on virtual communities of various nationalities. Certainly, a nickname is never a casual string of marks, but in its essentiality and brevity, denotes the auto-representation of the self chosen by the subject, finally free to baptize himself. One's own name, an integral part of our identity that accompanies us throughout life, is assigned to us without our being consulted, a rite of "naming" that, in the past and in certain cultural contexts, was so constrained by intergenerational transmission rules that freedom of choice was not given even to the parents of the newborn. In many cases, merely by carrying a name that holds particular meaning in the family sphere, that same newborn, is exposed to the name's symbolic and "preordained" weight and the system of family and social expectations tied up with it. This is not just the case of the various "Jamies" in royal dynasties, or with famous parents, and even sometimes with tragic destiny (for example John John F. Kennedy). It is also an experience wide spread among regular people, especially among members of communities that are constrained by rigid rules of intergenerational transmission. (About the symbolic task of giving a name to a child, see: Tania Zittoun, 2001).

If proper names are assigned by the family, nicknames are generally assigned by the more or less "wider" community close to the subject. He/she can often remain imprisoned by the weight of the nicknames social "verdicts", in some cases positive (terms of endearment) but more often, negative (derogatory terms) that use strategies of characterial irony to highlight the subject's defects and physical or personality handicaps. In certain communities, cultural anthropologists have been able to reconstruct the entire map of social power based on the meanings implicit in the process of attributing nicknames to individuals and/or families.

In contrast, the "on-line nickname" is the symbol of an identity (or the mask of one's own identity) chosen by the subject and the auto-attribution of positive or negative weights. If this is true from the point of view of the subject, from the point of view of the interlocutor who share communicative exchanges in the virtual community, there arises the problem of consensual validation of the identity with which the subject proposes himself to the community and the credibility that in some ways legitimizes his very presence. According to Stone (1996), the credibility of a virtual identity is based on sharing a symbolic code of cultural expectations. "In other words, if a male individual wishes to put himself to the test inside a virtual community with a female "double", he must confront the social role, or better, the situation that a woman has inside the real society, independently from the role that she could have in the virtual community. On the contrary, if the assumed identity was not credible, it would be rejected by the community and would not constitute a constructive font of experience for the subject that had worked so hard on it. (Puggelli, F.R. 2001)

7. The Empirical Investigation

Presented in the following paragraphs and purely explorative in nature, this research was guided by the aim to investigate several category terms using nicknames chosen by members of two virtual communities inside computer mediated communication (chat lines), which are indicators of the identity or multiple identities of the "actors".

7.1. Two Italian Chat Lines: C6 and IRC room#Italia

The chat lines under consideration refer to two Italian virtual communities: chat line C6, based in the tin.it server and belonging to the virtual community called Atlantide, and room Italia of mIRC. They were chosen for this

study not only because they are very well-known in Italy, but for the specificity of the interactive contexts that they mediate. The first is prevalently oriented toward dual communication ("one to one"), in which one can choose an interlocutor. The other is characterized by a variety of "many to many" communications among interlocutors who are present together at a certain time in a certain room.

Compared to the development of chat lines on an international scale, it is important to remember that the Italian "scene" has presented some notable delays. The only real take-off in on-line communication in Italy seems to be, at least for the moment, represented by the C6 chat launched by Tin." (Mettisieri & Manera, 2000, p.188)

C6 Multichat (which pronounced in Italian means "You're here.") is an "instant messenger", i.e. a personal communication program that enables the user to:

- Know who, among friends, relatives or colleagues, is connected to the Web in any given moment
- Seek new friends by profile using a search engine
- Communicate with them instantaneously and in real time
- Speak simultaneously with friends, either using the system's rooms or utilizing the possibility to create all kinds of roomrooms, configurable by theme or profile.

In researching by profile, one can note desired characteristics for new on line friends (Netfriend), choosing among numerous areas: hobbies, work, geographical area...

Integrating properties of intelligent web chats, the program includes two ways to conduct research. By clicking on the "find netfriend" button on the left-hand side of C6 Multichat's control screen, a window appears that allows searches by profile and by e-mail. C6 Multichat is designed to provide a maximum of ten people at random, who are on line at that moment, and who possess the specified characteristics.

This chat line gives preference to binary communication, even if it is possible to enter into one of the system's rooms, create a new room or access a room created by a friend by using the "show rooms" button.

This function introduces us into a new environment, in certain ways, completely different from the former. In fact, a list of rooms appears, some public and some private, in which we can communicate with several users. These rooms are organized according to topic, that is, a specific argument that should constitute the "leitmotiv" of the discussion, the purpose of the encounter, even if in reality it is almost never uniquely so.

Among the rooms present in C6, there are some that are now landmarks, for example "Leonardo's Portico", "Fall in love on line" or "Naples chat", among others. The number of users in each room varies between 20 and 30 persons, but there is nothing that prohibits the chatter from generating his own room based on the most disparate subject that crosses his mind.

Communication in these rooms is not exclusively binary, which, on the other hand, generally occurs in C6. One of its prerogatives is "many to many" communication.

There are also a series of buttons that allow for different means of integrated communication: the use of a microphone, a video camera, the possibility to exchange files and to record communications that are received. In relation to the common canons of the chat line, all of these integrated functions underline the effort to integrate as many sensory channels as possible in mediated communications. Already present in videoconferencing, the use of the video camera introduces a completely innovative element and, if we wish, somewhat in contrast with the very idea of chatting. This is consistent with the objective of the designers that see this instrument as a pretext for encouraging new encounters and opportunities for socialization among people outside the chat.

7.2. Subjects

The investigation was conducted on 1010 members of two Italian virtual communities (Chat line C6 and mIRC2).

Concerning the C6 virtual community (whose population in general terms is about 10,000 units, regular users are 4,000), the sample consists of 900 subjects. Of these, 301 were male, 300 female and 299 we will define as "neuter" since they voluntarily chose not to declare their gender.

The subjects were divided into four groups by age: 0-27 years, 28-35 years, 36-45 years, and 46-65 years. Subsequently, the four age classes were re-categorized into three equally distributed groups: very young (up to 27 years), young (28-35), adult (36-65). In addition, they were subdivided into two classes by occupation: workers or students. The subjects were all Italian citizens.

For the "mIRC" chat, the sample consisted of 110 subjects, the total population of the #italia room at the time of the study.

7.3. Objectives

Beyond the description and analysis of the two virtual environments, the research was directed toward the goals of:

- ❑ generating a taxonomy of nicknames present, as indicators of the identities of the members of the two chat lines.
- ❑ on the basis of the classification that emerged, comparing chat C6's nicknames with those of chatroom #italia "mIRC32" and analyzing the differences.
- ❑ analyzing the nicknames distribution of chatline C6 on the basis of variables: sex, age, profession.

Departing from the premise that:

- ❑ A nickname is not a casual string of letters, but indeed has a meaning, a specific significance which as a result endows it with heavy communicative weight.
- ❑ Factors tied to the identity of the subject, such as age, sex and profession, influence the choice of a nickname.
- ❑ The nickname constitutes an interface containing personal and contextual aspects.
- ❑ The categories that were generated are consistent with the significance that the "actor" attributes to his/her nickname.

The analysis of nicknames present in C6 led to the generation of a taxonomy whose categories represent the various representational contexts of the "actors".

One presumes, in fact, that - at the moment of choosing a nickname to access a chat line - the user asks himself, more or less consciously, "What do I want to communicate and to whom?". That question strongly highlights how much the representation is indissolubly tied to the communicative environment and how much, therefore, the context constitutes not only the framework, but also the "grammar" of communication, in the sense of defining limits and potential. The way to imagine the context, to prefigure it, that is, - the "what will others see?", "who we will meet?", etc. - in part will determine the choice of a nickname. As an example, this explains why in a chat line organized to discuss bioethical problems, one wouldn't employ a nickname like "nastyshicken2!" or "kommandorlin!". The chatter would probably feel distinctly uneasy in terms of credibility, expressing a communicative intention that would delegitimize him/her. On the contrary, however, the choice of these nicknames would be in sync with communicative contexts belonging to a chat line for adolescents or political activists.

7.4. Research Methodology

A function of the C6 program itself was used as an instrument for identifying nicknames. This was a research engine that has an archive/database containing all the nicknames present in C6's population. Such nicknames can be chosen, if you wish, on the basis of certain characteristics such as sex, age, origins, hobbies, interests, etc. By choosing characteristics that interested us, the program generated 10 responses, that is, 10 nicknames that corresponded to our choice. The research was random and the results obtained were not organized alphabetically or in any other way.

The classification of nicknames that emerged allowed us to generate 19 mutually exclusive categories or classes. Under the hypothesis that the nickname constitutes an interface containing personal and contextual aspects, the categories found in Table 1 will be used to interpret data as "representative" contexts of the "actors" involved in the communicative exchanges.

Regarding the objective to compare the two chatlines (C6 and mIRC34) users' choice of nicknames and to highlight the differences according to the contexts, it must be understood that comparisons will be limited only to the distribution of frequencies relative to the categories. This is because in mIRC it is not possible to sort the nicknames according to variables such as age, sex and profession as it was in C6.

In addition, texts of conversations with members of the virtual communities were recorded. These texts were collected in a way that fully respected the "ecological" criteria of the chat line's own communicative context. The interviewer (already a spontaneous member of the two chat lines in question, using pseudonym like

"bluenote" and several others) interacted with other chatters to find reasons and justifications behind the choice of nicknames.

The texts of on-line conversations were recorded in order to collect the justifications and reasoning of chat line members concerning their choice of nicknames. We thereby investigated the relationship of these to categories generated in the taxonomy we identified and the more or less explicit articulations about conversation sites where chatters refer to their real identities, mentioning their baptismal names, their real age, their professional role, interests or personal traits. The texts were formatted in order to be analyzed using the ALCESTE analysis program. However, later it was necessary to limit the study to a qualitative analysis. Given the typically sparse language of chat lines, the material, in fact, turned out to be insufficient to use the ALCESTE program. The number of on line interviews with the more than 60 chatters (out of the 1010 subjects) that were willing to interact with the researcher working under the nickname "bluenote", did not produce the minimum 1000 "lines" needed to create the text files used in ALCESTE. One must take into consideration that it is not always easy to obtain information from every subject concerning a nickname and that the average time of each "chat" was around 40 minutes, without considering slowdowns or gaps caused by problems with the server. Further development of the research in that direction will have as an objective to reach the number of interviews necessary to satisfy the criteria for the use of the ALCESTE program. (Note: 1000 lines correspond to approximately 300 interviews.)

CLASSIFICATION OF NICKNAMES

PROPER NAMES	Nicknames that appear as a person's own name. EX: Nicola, Marxxxx, Genny, Aldo, etc.
FOREIGN NAMES	Nicknames that are proper names of other nationalities. EX: goingg99, gessigela, murya55
OWN NAME + CATEGORY	Nicknames that combine categories. EX: tomday, wildmancat, richychio, etc.
OWN NAME + YEAR OR NUMBER	Nicknames that, alongside the name, include a birth year age or other identifying number. EX: mini32, lix55, marco36, sermija 58, Ambr1955, etc.
ABBREVIATIONS/ACRONYMS	Nicknames that contain abbreviations or acronyms. EX: dYrTg351, w_hu7h, etc.
GEOGRAPHIC IDENTITY	Nicknames that indicate geographic provenance, in terms of local, regional or national identity. EX: millizesi, gennese24, etc.
SOCIAL CATEGORIES	Nicknames that refer to social categories. EX: monthly, yozem25, soccerplayer34, woman 34
SELF-DESCRIPTION	Nicknames taken from a personal characteristic, a way of being, personality traits. EX: dbraccal85, segnoli, Mytheppri, semgine65
HISTORICAL/LITERARY FIGURES	Nicknames derived from characters taken from History, literature, philosophy, mythology, authors or their characters, or even names of novels or famous quotes. EX: Hesoc29, cogitoergosum, Gregor, Shamu24, Odyssey, Ulysses
CELEBRITIES	Names taken from entertainment and sports personalities, other celebrities. EX: Lashofius, Schmecher, etc.
TV/CARTOONS/FILM	Nicknames taken from television channels or programs, cartoons or film titles. EX: canale4, uffrech, maice77, theodis, etc.
MUSIC/MUSICAL GROUPS	Nicknames taken from the music world and/or musical groups. EX: Rjazzozel, Ironmashn, PinkFLon24, etc.
NATURE (Flora and Fauna)	Nicknames taken from the animal or botanical world. EX: Sanray, Ocean, seagake34, polarbear, littleplant1234, lionflower27, fuzzycat55
OBJECTS	Nicknames that refer to objects and things. EX: bebbbletonneschair34, puzzle, threel1, etc.
TECHNOLOGY	Nicknames that refer to new technologies. EX: Chip, software56, modem11, etc.
PLAYS ON WORDS	Nicknames where the place of the significant component is taken by a playful use of the same, sometimes inverting the spelling of a name or inventing effects. EX: emibhchee, the nation of two, havvenomans, fredolo, etc.
ONOMATOPEIA	Nicknames that recall sounds such as: EX: lantam, driim, zzzzzzz, etc.
SEX	Nicknames that make explicit sexual references. EX: noumlaleb, sebhahies, etc.
FANTASY	Nicknames with fantastic characteristics that are not covered in the above categories. EX: esilver, ipoka, ndam25, strinof, etc.

7.5. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Once the classification had been generated, distribution tables were organized for the frequencies and percentages of nicknames for the various categories regarding the two virtual communities. The results were then translated into graph.

The largest category, with 18% of F, was constituted by those subjects preferring a "proper name" accompanied by the "birth year, age or other number". The appearance of numbers, beyond being a way to present oneself to the interlocutor in terms of age, is also a element specific to the digital world's code. The fact that this category is far more prevalent than those that include nicknames based only on Italian or foreign proper names underscores the need for a good percentage of chatters to compensate for the lack of information about themselves and their age that in a face-to-face relationship would be revealed by their own physical appearance. This result is in line with what had already been seen to an even larger percentage degree in the above-mentioned research conducted by Haya Bechar-Israeli (1995). It highlighted the tendency to anchor the "cyber-self" to elements of one's personal, official identity. This tendency is reconfirmed as well in nicknames included in category indicating elements of "Self-description of personality traits", identity and "way of being" by which chatters delineate their own on-line image. This category was positioned in third place with a P% equal to 11.7%.

An opposite tendency was shown in the data that emerged from the second category that with 13.1% of F includes nicknames that fall in the "Fantasy" category and express a distinct separation between the "virtual self" and the subjects' social-personal data.

The fragmentation in the frequency distribution among the other categories reveals a capacity for the segmentation of the "virtual self" expressed by nicknames chosen from among many category typologies.

In the MIRC (rooms/#italia) chat line, the 110 chatters "auto-present" themselves above all with nicknames classifiable as "abbreviations and acronyms" and "TV/Cartoons/film" with the same P% of 11.8 followed closely by the "proper names" category with 10.0%.

Beyond being tied to the difference in the size of the two samples, the variances revealed probably should be attributed to the diverse kinds of communication (preferentially dual or many to many) and to the relative perception of private-public communicative dimensions which modulate the interaction in these two synchronous communicative contexts.

If more actors simultaneously converse in a room, the communication assumes a less intimate dimension. As in daily life, even in chatrooms, more intimacy is needed to expression dimensions that are more personal.

In C6, the dual "one to one" type of communication is preferred. This probably favours the expression of a virtual self that is more explicitly anchored in one's own personal identity and in auto-descriptive terms of one's own personality, even if (the subjects) can let themselves go using "fantastic" nicknames or allow to "play on words" nicknames. In mIRC, where "many to many" communication is preferred, chatters favour "abbreviations and acronyms" and identification with elements that refer to "TV/Cartoons/film" or "technology", expressing a more significant distance between the virtual self and the actual personal data.

Several categories show no differences between the two chat lines. For example, in nicknames that refer to "foreign names", "proper names with category", "geographical identity", "nature - flora and fauna", "sex".

Legenda of the categories	MIRC		C6	
	F	%	F	%
NAMES	29	26,3	289	32,1
ACRONYMS	26	23,6	230	25,6
MS				
IDENTITY	19	17,1	169	18,8
IDENTIFICATION	36	32,5	212	23,5
TOTAL	110	99,5	900	100

The CHI² test revealed a significance of 0.05% (4,36 Df=1) for the category "identification", showing a higher percentage among the chatters of mIRC compared to those of C6. This result confirms that in mIRC, where "many to many" communication is preferred, chatters favour identification with external elements belonging to the social or natural world (like those related to history/literature, celebrities, cartoons, music-musical groups, flora and fauna, objects, technology) that express a more significant distance between the virtual self and the actual personal data. In other terms, a self closer to that Harre (1999) prefers to define as Self 3 (sometimes called "the presented self" based on the impression that other people form of the attributes of a person), rather than Self 1 (the formal unity of the organisation of experience, logically tied to singularity of the Husserlian "I-pole") or Self 2 (sometimes called "self-concept").

CATEGORY IDENTIFICATION

	m	C	
	i	6	
	f		
	c		
Presence (Observed frequencies)	3	2	2
	6	1	4
		2	8
Presence (expected frequencies)	2	2	
	7	2	
		1	
Absence (Observed frequencies)	7	6	7
	4	8	6
		8	2
Absence (expected frequencies)	8	6	
	3	7	
		9	
	1	9	1
	1	0	0
	0	0	1
			0

In applying the CHI² test, comparing the categories of chatters' nicknames with the variable for their age revealed a significance of 0.002% (CHI² = 88,985; df = 54).

Since the CHI² significance was arrived at by the totality of the variables, generating a "generic significance", we further elaborated the data by transforming it into "Z scores". The purpose was to define with precision which of the variables had generated the "significance" we had found. Only significant values (close to 2 or -2) are presented and commented on.

For the subject group up to 27 years old:

Names + year or number	1.7
Names + category	1.7
Sex	1.7
Plays on words with Z score	-2.7
Nature (flora + fauna)	-1.7
Foreign names	-1.6

For the subject group between 28-35 years old:

Music/Musical Groups category	-1.6
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For the subject group between 36-45 years:

Nature	2.6
Foreign names	1.8
Objects	-1.9

For the subject group between 46-65 years:

Music/Musical groups	2.3
Historical or literary figures	1.9
Own names + year or number	-2.5

In subjects up to 27 years of age, the results show a preference for nicknames tied to proper names plus birth year or identifying number. This was over names that had a descriptive element, as well as for those that had a specific sexual reference and against a significant absence of the play on words, nature and foreign name categories.

However, in subjects included in the age group between 28 and 35, we note only one significant datum, which is related to the significant absence related to the 'music/musical groups' category.

Subjects between the age of 36-45 years, in contrast with younger subjects, show a preference for nicknames that fall into the categories of 'nature' and 'foreign names' and a significant absence related to the 'objects' category.

The categories 'music/musical groups' and 'historical/literary figures' striking in the 46-65 year old group where the preference for nicknames that refer to proper names plus year or number decreases significantly.

By re-categorizing the four age groups in three classes (very young subjects up to 27 years old, young from 28 to 35, and adults, from 36 to 65) the test χ^2 stresses the above mentioned significant differences among the three age groups ($\chi^2 = 67.06$; $df = 36$; $p < .001$), and emphasises the preference among senior adults for nicknames related to nature, musical groups, historical/literary figures and plays on words, compared to very young people who prefer to go straight to their own name, birth year or sexual preferences.

Concerning the cross-tabulation of "Nickname Categories by Profession (students versus workers)", one finds a significance of 0.004% ($\chi^2 = 37.614$; $df = 18$).

The Z scores that determined the significance of χ^2 are:

For the student category:	
Proper name + category	2.0
Fantasy	-2.0
Nature	-1.9
Music	-1.6

No significant value was found for the worker category which would seem to indicate a basic homogeneity in the choice of nicknames.

Concerning the cross-tabulation of "Nickname Categories by Sex", the results showed a significance of 0.001% ($\chi^2 = 67.102$; $df = 36$).

The Z scores that determined the χ^2 significance are:

For males:	
Fantasy	2.8
Abbreviations/Acronyms	1.8
Sex	-2.2
For Females:	
Nature	2.0
Abbreviations/Acronyms	-1.8
Historical/literary figures	-2.1
For "neuter" Subjects:	
Technology	1.8

From the results it emerges that men prefer to use "fantasy" nicknames or those with abbreviations/acronyms. These are completely absent in the women's group, who prefer names from the nature category. The result is interesting for the "neuter" group, i.e. those who declined to identify their sex, which showed a significance in favour of nicknames that belong to the technology category. This implicitly underlines an interest in the possibilities offered by new technologies to hide one's gender.

If we compare the various tables generated according to the variables under consideration (age, function and gender) we can infer that the nicknames included in the historical/literary figures are preferred by males, by workers and by the age group 45-65. Males who preferred nicknames related to historical/literary figures or musical groups mask their "self" behind cultural or musical preferences or use them as an attractive communicative tool.

With closer analysis, these quantitative differences also result qualitative. If you take as an example the nickname group Historical/Literary figures, one notes that differences beyond the quantitative concern the choice of nicknames that refer to different literary periods. For example, for subjects up to 27 years of age there is a preference for 20th century literature while in the 46-65 year olds, we find a preference for epic literature and epic heroes.

Male workers also like to choose fantasy names.

Women between 36 and 45 years of age prefer nicknames in the nature category. In fact, the preference for nicknames of a sexual nature is ascribed to younger women (up to 27 years) and not to males. (Z score 1.4 compared to - 1.8 of males of the same age.)

8. Conclusions

Beyond offering an introductory panorama of several thematic problems in computer mediated communication, most particularly, on identity in the digital universe, this contribution - relative to the empirical investigation - concentrated on the study of nickname choices by the members of two virtual communities, the users of two Italian chat lines, "CG" and mIRC (room Italia).

The results of this research enabled us to illustrate the classification taxonomy of nicknames used by 1010 subjects involved in the study and to reveal their significant relationships with the socio-demographic variables of age, function and gender. Therefore, nicknames vary per centually according to variables such as sex, age and profession, i.e. variables connected respectively to gender identity, generational identity and social function identity. The comparison between the two chat lines studied also allowed for reflection on the specificities of communicative contexts that influence chatlers in the choice of nicknames. These were chosen as a function of the preferred type of communication (dual or many to many) and of the relative perception of public-private communicative dimensions, which modulate integration in the two synchronous communicative contexts. The results show interesting differences. Chat line "CG" registered a higher percentage of subjects who prefer a personal name accompanied by year of birth or age. In terms of auto-description of personality traits, this reveals a greater adherence of the chatter's virtual self to his/her presumed social and personal data. They probably feel more secure with dual type communication, even if they let themselves go and use fantasy or allusive "play on words" nicknames. In chat line "mIRC" however, a greater percentage of the subjects preferred nicknames that fall under the headings of Abbreviations/Acronyms, TV/Caroons/Film and Technology, leading to a presumption of greater distance between the self and the nickname as an indicator of the virtual self and the self image constructed on-line.

Nicknames can definitely tell us something about how a chatter presents himself to a virtual community, with the end to situate himself in respect to his/her interlocutor(s). If one accepts a dynamic and non-static vision of identity based on the "possible selves" discussed by Markus and Nurius (1986), far from being reduced to causal strings of letters, nicknames can perhaps be indicators of the very identities subjects are seeking. In further investigations, it would be interesting to analyse in depth which social and interpersonal identity related functions and characteristics the nickname plays compared to identity, clarifying the dynamics between distinctiveness (which still seems to be important and guaranteed in the virtual world), unity and continuity (dimensions which seem to be more flexible in the subjects play with their identities on the internet).

Furthermore, it is certainly of interest to study how the narrative and argumentative thread plays out in relation to diverse conversational contexts that presume the simultaneous presence of diadic, triadic or synchronous multiples. This holds as well for the articulations that more or less explicitly occur between the self (for example: the recurrence of the baptismal name in response to "what's your name?" or the declaration of one's own professional role, own interests, etc.) and the nickname chosen by subjects. (cf. attached extracts of conversations among chatters)

In addition to work on larger populations, this research could be usefully extended to the study of virtual communities that have specific associative targets as reference points as well as to other nationalities with differing development speeds in the social use of the Internet; empirical in-depth investigations of the dynamic which, even in relation to the theme of on-line identity, is establishing itself among the cultural dimensions at the dynamic intersection of global-local scenarios.

9. APPENDIX : Transcription of some conversations among chatters (The parts of the text strictly related to "nickname" choice have been highlighted in bold)

1st extract
cerbiatta281 - ciao (hi)
10forrest - ciao (hi)
10forrest - hei ciao e buona domenica (hey, hi and happy sundays)
10forrest - mi chiamo Franco e per il momento dgt da Asti (my name is Franco and at the moment I'm typing from Asti)
cerbiatta281 - anche a te, che fai di bello? (to you too, what are you up to?)
10forrest - ora ? (now)
cerbiatta281 - si (yes)
10forrest - sono sul lavoro (I'm at work)
10forrest - sono in collegamento via Internet con il mio corrispondente in Brasile (I'm connected to my correspondent in Brazil)
cerbiatta281 - come sul lavoro? di dom (at work? on sun?)
10forrest - si (yes)
10forrest - purtroppo io lavoro di domenica quando ci sono le gare (unfortunately, i work on sundays when there are competitions)
10forrest - inverno estate (winter summer)
cerbiatta281 - di cosa? (what kind?)
10forrest - Mi occupo di sponsorizzazioni sci e FI (I'm involved in sponsoring ski and formula 1)
10forrest - Ecco perché oggi lavoro (That's why I'm working today)
10forrest - domani invece libero (tomorrow however free)
cerbiatta281 - da quanto tempo chatti con c6? (how long have you been chatting with c6?)
10forrest - circa 1 mese (about a month)
cerbiatta281 - come lo trovi? (what do you think?)
10forrest - da quando mi sono beccato l'influenza (since i got the flu)

cerbiatta281 - N
10/forcent - non avevo cosa fare (didn't know what to do)
10/forcent - e così ho scoperto C (and I discovered C)
10/forcent - Mentre lavoro ho sempre la line CO aperta
(While working I always have the CO line open)
cerbiatta281 - **come nasce il tuo nick?** (where did your nickname come from?)
10/forcent - **da una mia società** (from a company of mine)
10/forcent - **il mio lavoro deve essere sempre al massimo come io nel lavoro devo dare il massimo** (my work always has to be the best just like I have to give my best in working)
10/forcent - **come persona devo dare il massimo** (as a person I have to give the maximum)
10/forcent - **HEALTH** (101%)
cerbiatta281 - **per la salute intendi** (I mean for health)
10/forcent - No se ti piace è piacevole dare il massimo (No if you like it it is a pleasure to give one's all)

2nd extract
setuspeschi - **chi era il tuo nick** (hi, nice nickname)
sgabuzzino - **chi sei...mi viene spontaneo chiederti!!!** (who are youI just have to ask!!!!)
setuspeschi - **È un gioco di parole a sorpresa per un amico** (it's a surprise play on words for a friend)
setuspeschi - **lo farò impazzire prima però** (I'll drive him crazy first N)
setuspeschi - **ma anche il tuo nick è bello strani** (BUT YOUR NICK IS ALSO REALLY STRANGE)
sgabuzzino - **boh** (I know)
sgabuzzino - **è un lunga storia** (it's a long story)
setuspeschi - **ma come nasce?** (where did it come from?)
setuspeschi - **ti va di raccontarmela?** (do you feel like telling me the story?)
sgabuzzino - **è lunga!!!!** (it's kind of long!!!!)
sgabuzzino - **potresti addormentare?** (you could fall asleep?)
sgabuzzino - **N**
setuspeschi - **il primo tempo...N** (the first act)
sgabuzzino - **cercherei di essere il più breve possibile** (I'll try to be as brief as possible)
setuspeschi - **ok**
setuspeschi - **ma non ho fretta...** (but I've got time...)
sgabuzzino - **la stanza che rimane spessissimo chiusa** (the room is very often closed...)
sgabuzzino - **e chi viene a trovarmi** (and who comes to see me)
sgabuzzino - **e lo faccio vedere lo stanz** (I'll let you see the room)
sgabuzzino - **quando passiamo davanti alla porta** (when we pass in front of the door)
sgabuzzino - **dello sgabuzzino** (of the closet)
sgabuzzino - **tutti mi** (everyone)
sgabuzzino - **chiedimi** (ask me)
sgabuzzino - **e lì cosa c'è?????** (what's in there?????)
sgabuzzino - **è lo molto misteriosi** (I, very mysteriously)
sgabuzzino - **ooooooooo** (ooooooooo)
sgabuzzino - **eeeeee...spessi!!!!!!!** (iiiiiiiiif ... you only knew!!!!!!!)
setuspeschi - **NNN**
sgabuzzino - **hai capito...got it...**
setuspeschi - **è tale anche per te?** (and what about you?)
setuspeschi - **I**
sgabuzzino - **si** (yes)
setuspeschi - **quindi in chat rimani... un mistero per gli... "ospiti"?** (therefore, on the chatline you remain... a mystery for the... guests)
sgabuzzino - **devo dire che lo sono abò, sinceri** (must say I am pretty sincere)
setuspeschi - **ma cosa c'è nello sgabuzzino?NNN** (but what's in the closet?)
sgabuzzino - **di tutto!!!!!!!** (everything!!!!!!!)
setuspeschi - **N**

3rd extract

blunote1 • da un'idea di hesse? (from one of hesse's ideas?)
knulp7957 • sì (yes)
blunote1 • lo conosci? (know him?)
knulp7957 • certo sono un suo ammiratore, se così mi posso definire (certainly i'm an admirer, if i can define myself so)
knulp7957 • anche lo ho letto abbastanza di lui (i've read a lot of him as well)
blunote1 • cosa ti è piaciuto di più? (what did you like the best?)
knulp7957 • forse demian (maybe demian)
blunote1 • UN CAPOLAVORO!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (A MASTERPIECE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)
knulp7957 • ma è difficile a dirsi (it's difficult to say)
knulp7957 • molto marxista e beccadoro (very marxistic and sage)
blunote1 • anche il lupo della steppa (also the wolf of the steppes)
knulp7957 • anche quello (that too)
blunote1 • sai Demian per lungo tempo mi ha fatto sognare, diciamo anche credere..... (you know Demian made me dream for a long time, let's say even believe)
knulp7957 • senza ma come hai fatto a trovarti se non sono in nessuna stanza (excuse me but how did you find me if i'm not in any room)
blunote1 • dalla lista (from the list)
knulp7957 • non sono pratico (i'm not good at this)
blunote1 • oltre alle room puoi anche chattare facendo una ricerca per profilo, la comunicazione però è duale (outside the chat rooms you can chat by researching by profile, the communication is dual, however)
knulp7957 • capisco (i understand)
blunote1 • che ci fai in chat? (perdonami la domanda un pò brutale) (what are you doing in a chat room? - excuse me if the question is a little direct)
knulp7957 • niente ho guardato se c'era un mio amico (nothing i looked to see if a friend of mine was there)
blunote1 • immagino di noN (i guess not)
knulp7957 • invece ti sto facendo tutt'altro che chattare (instead i'm doing everything but chatting)
blunote1 • mi spieghi..... (explain to me)
knulp7957 • sto navigando... sul sito unifi.it (i'm surfing ... on the unifi.it site)
knulp7957 • ovvero guardo quando ci sono gli esami (or i look when there are exams)
blunote1 • ok
knulp7957 • poi questo programma mi arte tutte le volte che entro in internet (this program comes up every time i log on internet)
blunote1 • hai la password salvata automaticamente forse (you've got the password automatically saved maybe)
knulp7957 • esatto (exactly)
knulp7957 • ma tanto con il fatto che non c'è una lista visibile a tutti non importa in any case given that there is no list visible to everyone it doesn't matter)
blunote1 • la lista è visibile a tutti (the list is visible to all)
knulp7957 • se poi qualcuno è interessato mi chiama/call me then if someone is interested)
blunote1 • i
blunote1 • come ti chiami? (what's your name?)
blunote1 • chiami? (name?)
knulp7957 • marco
knulp7957 • sì (yes)
blunote1 • stefano e sei di roma? (stefano and are you from rome?)
knulp7957 • no fiorenze (no florence)
blunote1 • bene ma hai scelto questo nick? (why ever did you pick this nick?)
knulp7957 • perché quello che usavo solito in altre chat non me lo prendeva (because it wouldn't take the one that i usually use on other chat lines)
knulp7957 • così sono passato ad un'altro autoreN (so i changed authors)

blunote1 - N
blunote1 - **il primo chi era?** (who was the first?)
knap7987 - **ma non**
blunote1 - **perdoni la mia ignoranza.....** forgive my ignorance)
knap7987 - the card
blunote1 - **ah ok**
knap7987 - **noni famoso di bene?** (not as famous as bene)
blunote1 - **ah lo sono un curioso e vengo attratto dai nick**
(you know I'm really nosy and am attracted to nicks)
knap7987 - **in fondo i nick mi pa devono essere la rappresentazione**
(basically nicks sort of should be the representation)
blunote1 - **benissimo**
knap7987 - **di se (of the self)**
blunote1 - **il tuo nick ti che modo lo fai?** how does your nick do that?)
knap7987 - **senza libero da scherzi** (by being free of shiddles)
knap7987 - **vivere senza pretese** (to live without pretenses)
knap7987 - **senza legami** (without ties)
blunote1 - **senza legami.....mi fa un po' paura e TER** (without ties it scares me a little and YQU?)
knap7987 - **no anzi** (no, the contrary)
blunote1 - **è in che modo knap ti rappresenta (se la domanda non è troppo**
involucrata) and how does knap represent you - if the question isn't too involved)
knap7987 - **l'hai letto il libro?** (you read the book)
blunote1 - **knap, sigh,sigh ho devo ammettere è uno dei pochi che non ho**
letto.....U (knap, sigh,sigh i have to admit it is one of the few i didn't read)
knap7987 - **appunto leggilo e vedrai che quello che ti ho detto prima combacia**
(exactly read it and you'll see that what i told you before fits)
blunote1 - **che cosa studi?** (what do you study?)
knap7987 - **scienze pol (political science)**
blunote1 - **bella materia=heavy subject)**
knap7987 - **!**
blunote1 - **Marco credo che tra poco andrò a mamma.....** (marco i think that i will go home/bye soon)
knap7987 - **anch'io Forà è tardi e domani c'è la sveglia** (me too it's late and tomorrow the alarm goes off)
knap7987 - **anzi ti saluto subito** (ok, I'll say bye now)
blunote1 - **alla prossima allora** (until the next time)
knap7987 - **intanto ormai sai chi sono quindi alla prossima** (since you now know who i am until the next time)
blunote1 - **ciao (bye)**

4th extract
blumot1 - ciao Faust (hi Faust)
faust71 - chooooo (hiiiiii)
blumot1 - carino il tuo nick! (nice nickname)
faust71 - mi chiamo luigi e tu? (my name's luigi and yours?)
faust71 - grazie (thanks)
faust71 - I
blumot1 - Stefano piacere (Stefano nice to meet you)
blumot1 - I
blumot1 - dal mitico Goethe?(from the great Goethe?)
faust71 - sì (yes)
blumot1 - sei dunque uno che ha venduto l'anima al diavolo?N
(so you're one of those that sold your soul to the devil?)
faust71 - eh eh
faust71 - ma senti un pò (just listen to you)
faust71 - chatti molto?(you chat a alot?)
blumot1 - non c'è male (it's ok)
blumot1 - come mai hai scelto questo nick? sono curioso (why did you ever pick
this nick? I'm curious)
faust71 - eh per goethe (ah, for goethe)
blumot1 - sei un appassionato di letteratura: (you're a literature fan?)
faust71 - sì (yes)
blumot1 - ...quando ti è capitato di comportarti da Faust? (...when were you
able to behave like Faust?)
faust71 - sempre (always)
blumot1 - fannulloni un esempio? (give me an example)
faust71 - colle tipe sempre come faust con margherita (with the chicks
always like faust with margherita)
blumot1 - spiegami (explain to me)
blumot1 - sei mai entrato nella stanza "loggia del leopardo"? (ever been in the "leopard's portico" room?)
faust71 - no
blumot1 - non mi spieghi? (won't you explain?)
faust71 - eh
faust71 - ah quanto mi piaci (i really like you)
faust71 - beccata la tipa (picked up the chick)
faust71 - gabbaio lo santo (hoodwinked the saint)
blumot1 - che c'è ti vergogni (what's the matter are you ashamed)
blumot1 - stai comunicando con altri? (are you communicating with others?)
faust71 - sì (yes)
blumot1 - me n'ero accorto (i noticed)
blumot1 - eri per me gabbaio lo santo? (was hoodwinked the saint for me?)
blumot1 - non capisco (don't understand)
blumot1 - sei vivo? (are you alive?)
blumot1 - a presto (see you soon)

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Footnotes:

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1 The most common abbreviations: shown below, give an idea of the text's flow, in almost coded fits and starts
 -> (arrow) (digit) : Where are you (typing) from?
 ->lc (palcosola): something

-cmq (comunque):	anyway
-pv (privato):	private
-pv (prego):	please
-TVB (ti voglio bene):	I love you
-msg (messaggio)	message
-ths (grazie)	from English "thanks"

Among the neologisms: Chattare (to chat), Kickare (kick out), pingare , oppare

Examples of phonetic transcriptions of spoken language: OK, Nonno (non to so, I don't know), Zi, Vabbe' (ok), Mhe' (uh, well), Oia (you over there), Ue!a, Sii (yes!), Bell! (Well!)

Examples of cartoon like language: Aarg, So!, Siff!, Smack!!, Sig!, Grrrrr, Scrook, toc toc, din don, Bang!
Extending out the last letter of a word: Aspecececece (wait.....), Booooooooco, Daiiiiiiiii (come on),
Ciaoosoooo (bye.....), Ahooooooooooooo, Jaaaaa

Phonetic transcription of some kinds of laughter: Ehehehehehe, Ahahahahahaha,
hahahahahahaha

?! is used to indicate incomprehension.
click = to indicate breaking off communication

Other forms utilized concern the use of capital letters as equivalent to yelling and the absence of punctuation.

² Sproul and Kiesler (1991) propose that physical absence and anonymity assist in the production of ideas and free expression as they are not constrained by social rules, for example, alternating "turn taking" in group discussions. The authors, who conducted their research on corporate-type organizations, were concerned with the impact that new technologies have on corporate institutions. The results obtained reflect the technological determinism (defined by the following authors as ingenious realism) discussed by Castells (see: The Rise of Network Society, 1996) and Italian authors like Marzovani (1995b) and Galimberti (1997).

³ For an analysis of terminology, refer to Levy (1995). The author holds that even in etymology, the virtual term does not contrast with the real term. Virtual signifies "potential", that is, what is not yet but will be. It will come into being when the interaction takes place.