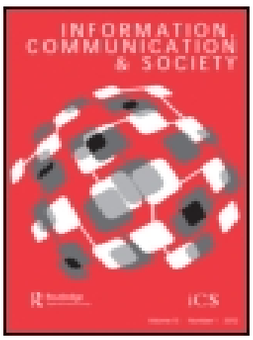

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Networked intimacy. Intimacy and friendship among Italian Facebook users

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe the results of a qualitative study conducted with 120 Italian Facebook users to investigate how Facebook enables people to achieve a mutually constitutive intimacy with their own friendship network: a negotiation of intimacy in public through self-disclosure, where the affordances of the platform are useful to elicit significant reactions, validations and demonstrations of affection from others. We observed that, in order to achieve various levels of intimacy on Facebook, people engage in various strategies: *Showing rather than telling, Sharing implicit content, Tagging, Expectation of mutual understanding* and *Liking*. These strategies produce a *collaborative disclosure* that relies on others' cooperation to maintain the boundaries between private and public space. Based on these premises, we developed a framework of collaborative strategies for managing public intimacy that both systematizes and extends the findings identified in previous studies of intimacy on Facebook. We describe this framework as *networked intimacy* and we discuss the consequences of it in the light of already existing research on online self-disclosure.

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Facebook; intimacy; self-disclosure; social network

Since its creation in 2004, Facebook has become a truly pervasive technology, embedded in one's personal, everyday life. Rather than a substitute for other media such as email, telephone or face-to-face (FtF) interaction, Facebook should be regarded as a supplement to other ways of interrelating (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison & boyd, 2013). Although social network sites (SNSs) offer the potential to deal with a vast number of contacts, many scholars have noted how users resort to Facebook mainly for staying in touch with friends from high school (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007) as well as for learning more about individuals they have already met offline (Haspels, 2008; Joinson, 2008; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006). Nevertheless, there is evidence that SNSs offer opportunities for individuals to increase the number of their loose ties or to turn *latent ties* – defined as connections that are technically possible but not yet activated socially – into weak or strong ties (Haythornthwaite, 2005), thereby increasing the social capital of their users (Ellison,

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Lampe, Steinfield, & Vitak, 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007, 2011; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). It is worth noting that, as these aspects of social connectivity are now often taken for granted, their consequences in redefining personal relationships and sociability are nonetheless important.

Of the personal relations that are reshaped by SNS, a growing volume of literature has focused on Facebook's potential to strengthen close friendships and intimate relationships, especially among adolescents and emerging adults (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008; Weiqin, Campbell, Kimpton, Wozencroft, & Orel, 2016). A lot of research has pointed out how Facebook's communication features allow people to post pictures of themselves in romantic situations (Clark, Lee, & Boyer, 2007), comment on their partner's updates and make public displays of affection (Bryant & Marmo, 2009), broadcast requests for and offers of support (Vitak & Ellison, 2013; Vitak, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2011), express affection and send positive messages to other users (Mansson & Myers, 2011) in an attempt to maintain and develop a certain level of relational closeness (Ledbetter et al., 2011) and attitude similarity (Craig & Wright, 2012). Following this line of research, this paper investigates how Facebook allows its users to achieve a *mutually constitutive intimacy* with their own friendship network: a negotiation of intimacy in public through self-disclosure, where the affordances of the platform are useful to elicit significant reactions, validations and demonstrations of affection from others (Lasén, 2015).

Intimacy and friendship in modern society

Intimacy is at the center of meaningful personal life. However, the way it is experienced, its opportunities and limitations depend on the cultural and social infrastructure in which it finds nourishment. Early sociological research on intimate relationships focused on the perspectives of family and kinship in Western society, emphasizing the role of necessity, obligation and social contract. After the late 1980s, social theorists extended the term 'intimate relationship' to denote a broader and more fluid concept, encompassing numerous different associations between friends, sexual partners, family and kin within and outside the moral framework of the family (Gillies, 2003). According to Giddens, the transformations of intimacy were the result of a *post traditional society* in which men and women were progressively freed from roles and constrictions associated with traditional social ties of kinship and marriage. Men and women were obliged to respond to the altered circumstances by reinventing themselves and becoming authors of their own lives. Moreover, the fragmentation of established social structures created the premises for 'pure relationships': people only staying together as long as the relationship fulfills the needs of the partners (Giddens, 1992). A pure relationship depends on the commitment of the two partners to a shared existence that upholds the primacy of their relationship. It implies an openness to the other, which is dependent on equality and mutual confidence (Simmel, 1950). Therefore, mutual disclosure becomes a marker of intimacy as a form of reciprocity and trust: a demonstration of love and affection through shared secrets (Archer, 1980).

The emergence of pure relationship is part of a broad reorganization of intimacy which supplanted pre-modern relations centered on familial ties of obligation. In contrast to previous models that emphasized gender roles, responsibilities and obligations, 'pure relationship' describes subjects as able to renegotiate the terms of their own commitments with other people, on the basis of sustained personal reward. This new ethos of mutuality

and equality among partners and families emphasizes principles of agency and choice, opening up a widespread democratization of the interpersonal domain.

In this process of reinventing intimate life, friendship as a social relationship of significance becomes one of the powerful metaphors of our cultural consciousness. More than a simple relational paradigm, friendship is regarded as the purest and most widely available instance of personal relations. While relationships with relatives and neighbors rest on externally given conditions, friend-like relationships are voluntary, developed over time and based on a higher degree of individual choice (Pahl & Spencer, 1997). Friendships are voluntary and lack the genetic and institutional ties that may exist in many romantic and family relationships. This conceptualization of friendship implies that friendships are dynamic and must be managed over time. In this sense, friendship is the archetypal form of the pure relationship, a dyadic and individualistic enterprise prompted by the search for self-expression and disclosing intimacy. Nevertheless, this idea of an *individualized* relationship underestimates the value of friendship in building *social* connections (Chambers, 2013). As Jamieson (1988) states, 'actual friendship is often closer to stereotypes of kin and community relationships (for example, based on mutual obligations, kept within careful predefined boundaries) than to the ideal of friendship' (p. 88). Rather than having to do exclusively with mutual *self-disclosure* and *disclosure of intimacy*, friendships are guided by more practical concerns such as reliability, availability of social resources, trustworthiness, respect for privacy, readiness to act as confidantes and the pleasure of company. Although many commentators see friendship as expressing a form of intimacy which supplants the social integrative work of 'community' (Crow & Allan, 1995), Jamieson (1988, p. 174) points out how 'few people sustain relationships, even friendships, which are based exclusively on disclosing intimacy separated from mutually negotiated practical assistance'.

The modern concept of intimacy derives from the mutual construction of private and public dichotomy (Sennett, 1977). But, the reality of this thesis does not take into account other ways of being intimate which can be distinguished from private self-disclosure. The concept of friendship has the potential to challenge conventional notions of intimacy. Indeed, with studies now recognizing the *community-like* properties of friendship (Wilkinson, 2010), the concept of friendship can be used to transcend the boundaries between intimate, personal relationships and public, networked community. As discussed in the next section, by using the idea of *friendship* to describe all social connections, SNSs allow a kind of intimacy that is not necessarily based on the private sphere, but can have a semi-public, co-operative or community nature (Lambert, 2013).

Public intimacy on digital age

For many scholars, the use of online communication – text-based computer mediated communication (CMC) such as email, computer conferencing and chat systems – is positively correlated to significantly higher levels of spontaneous intimate disclosure compared to FtF interactions (Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002), affecting the psychological feeling of nearness (Walther & Bazarova, 2008), closeness (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) and reciprocity norms (Crystal Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011) that regulate the interpersonal dynamic of friendship. Henderson and Gilding (2004) pointed out how people experience a sense of agency and control that is based upon an active and ongoing

negotiation between users: in CMC, keeping in contact with friends is an individual's responsibility that recalls the processes of mutual trust and disclosing intimacy of pure relationships. Hu, Wood, Smith, and Westbrook (2004) detected a positive relationship between the frequency of Instant Messaging and the degree of perceived intimacy, demonstrating that participants feel closer to their Internet partner as time progresses. Crystal Jiang et al. (2011) demonstrate how the receiver's *attributions* regarding self-disclosure contribute to relationship intimacy online.

Self-disclosure on Facebook – the revelation of personal information (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993) – has been found to help users elicit social support and improve intimacy with friends: by prompting users to present their positive emotional experiences status update box builds a set of beliefs and expectations that helps to maintain and reinforce the value of every non-hierarchical friendship (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014). As many studies point out, Facebook can help to sustain intimacy between teenagers (Livingstone, 2008), enhance the quality of teacher–student relationships (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007) and improve social attraction, leading to a higher level of interpersonal trust in the person to whom we disclose (Sheldon, 2009). People engaging in a large amount of positive self-disclosures experience a strong sense of intimacy (Park, Jin, & Jin, 2011) and exhibit a more positive attitude toward online relationship making (Attrill & Jalil, 2011). Posting on Facebook would reduce the perceived riskiness of self-disclosure, thus encouraging people with low self-esteem to form social connections with others (Ledbetter et al., 2011).

While self-disclosure and sharing are an important part of this process, it should be pointed out that self-disclosure on Facebook does not conform to the classic idea of self-disclosure as behavior confined to a closed, mostly dyadic, interaction system (Archer, 1980). Although there are several structure options to share intimate disclosures privately – such as using direct messaging or creating content visible only to a particular 'group' or 'list' of Friends much research suggests that certain groups, for example American Teens, choose to use Facebook as a 'semi-public' space, in which to produce public messages with personal content visible to a larger audience, but understood only by a limited audience (boyd & Marwick, 2011). Users adopt complex strategies to signal what is private and what is public, and explicitly or implicitly to target and exclude particular individuals. This combination of directedness and visibility affects the goals and functions of public disclosure behavior. Bazarova (2012) points out how publicly shared communication through wall posts and status updates are used to produce *personalistic effects of disclosure*: that is, to influence an observer's level of attraction toward the individual making the disclosure. According to Bazarova and Choi (2014), what drives people to self-disclose is social validation, the need to validate and affirm oneself by eliciting feedback from others, either directly or indirectly, increasing social approval, social acceptance and general liking. McEwan (2013) states that individuals felt more relational satisfaction, more closeness, and liked their friend more when both they and their friend demonstrate commitment to showing they care about each other via Facebook: taking the time to send a targeted relational message may create inferences about relationship specialness between a discloser and a receiver. For this reason, while the content of public disclosure in undirected messages such as status updates and wall posts may be less intimate than that of directed communication, they may still be valuable for relationship growth and maintenance (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011). This semi-public nature of self-disclosure

leads to a form of *diffused intimacy*, as coined by Bucholtz (2013). This is a combination of trust toward others, self-disclosure and acceptance of the risks and uncertainties associated with sharing personal information with one's social network.

These researches show how intimacy on Facebook is largely based on expectations of others' attentiveness to one's self-presentation, in terms both of how they behave and the interpretations they make. In their research on interpersonal management of disclosure in SNSs, Lampinen, Lehtinen, Lehmuskallio, and Tamminen (2011) found that many participants had never negotiated or even discussed shared rules of disclosure with their friends. Nevertheless, they expected them to know how to act in SNSs. The use of public communication can help solidify a friendship, but it can also raise many problems. Such being the case, Facebook users are likely to come to understand unspoken behavioral norms regarding the appropriate use of Facebook communication tools that would allow them to engage in efficient and cooperative social interaction with their friends (Bryant & Marmo, 2012). The presence of these friendship rules demonstrates how, in order to manage relational tensions, people not only negotiate regulation of their personal boundaries, but also express respect for their partner's boundaries through relational acts (Shklovski, Barkhuus, Bornoe, & Kaye, 2015). According to the Communication Privacy Management theory (Petronio, 2002), every private disclosure is a co-creation between people and encourages reciprocity: when a person confides, the recipient is held responsible for the information and a set of expectations is communicated by the discloser.

Starting from these premises, we hypothesize that Facebook can open the way to public intimacy which remains interpersonal and socially skilled, guided by social norms that help friends to identify and enact the behavioral obligations necessary to maintain and confirm their relationships.

Methods

This study results from the national multi-year project that ran from 2013 to 2015 in Italy. The research – *Online social relations and identity: Italian experience in Social Network Sites* – was funded as Research Projects of National Interest (PRIN) by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research under the direction of Giovanni Boccia Artieri. The research material consists of 118 semi-structured individual interviews conducted during 2013 by a large team of researchers including post-docs, assistant and associate professors belonging to four research units situated in the North (2), the Center and the South of Italy. All the interviewers were involved, to a varying extent, in the development of the interview structure, protocol and questions. A *two-round test* of the interview was conducted by two researchers. The whole team of interviewers watched the initial interviews either live behind a *fake mirror* or later using a video-recorded version. Following this phase, the structure of the interview was revised in the light of the comments and remarks from the team of researchers. The interview procedure benefited from a number of practical suggestions as to how best to conduct them. The two initial interviews are not included in the aforementioned dataset of 118 interviews.

Starting from the broad question 'What is Facebook for you?', the interview addressed the following areas: friends and contacts, users' activities on Facebook, Facebook and other platforms in the new media ecosystem, posting strategies, practice and intended audience, watching profile, commenting news feed and a final thought on the place of Facebook in

the interviewee's life. All the interviews were conducted in the house of interviewees by one or two interviewers. The average length of an interview was 45 minutes and comprised a discussion in front of the computer, while simultaneously going online to visit the interviewee's personal profile and those of other users.

The interviewees were recruited autonomously by each research unit, using a guided snow sample procedure. During the last phase of the interview, each subject was asked to provide up to five names from their list of Facebook contacts. The next subject invited to take part in the study was strategically picked from this list, with the aim of saturating specific age cohorts and gender quotas of a sample based on the penetration of Facebook in Italy (as resulting from the data available in the Facebook advertising platform). The lower limit was set at age 13 (the minimum age to own a Facebook account) and the Italian penetration of Facebook over age 55 was considered too low (around 5%) to include older subjects in the sample (Table 1).

The interviews were evenly distributed between the North (40), Center (39) and South (37) of Italy. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed before being coded, using Dedoose (http://www.dedoose.com) a web-based qualitative coding software. The analysis of the interviews was based on Strauss and Corbin's Grounded Theory (2008), which provides a three-stage process of open, axial and selective coding, progressively identifying and integrating categories of meaning from our text data sample. The aim of this coding procedure was to move from the initial 400 codes to concepts and from concepts to broader conceptual categories. During selective coding, a storyline representing a narrative description of the central core conceptual categories of the study was constructed.

Results

During the interviews we discovered that a main concern of our participants was the need to manage their Facebook visibility and self-presentation, while avoiding the undesired consequences of disclosure (Enli & Thumim, 2012; Hogan, 2010). We thus developed core concepts to conceptualize how participants resolve their main concern, by mobilizing the most important forms of action on Facebook. However, safe and unproblematic self-disclosure on Facebook can be difficult to achieve for many reasons: it requires users to adopt norms of self-censorship or to limit access to certain information and present different information to different groups. Many participants solved these problems by using strategies of collaborative disclosure that rely largely on unspoken mutual expectations and trustworthiness. In order to assess the extent to which other users may be trusted, individuals seek to engage in relationships which encourage reciprocity and mutual understanding.

Table 1. Interviewees' gender and age cohort.

	Male	Female	Total	%
13–18	8	10	18	15
19–24	9	14	23	19
25–34	21	17	38	32
35–44	11	12	23	19
45–54	9	7	16	14
Total	58	60	118	100

The *management of a mutually constitutive intimacy* is thus the basic social process which explains much of the behavior our interviewees engage in. Although this process can be found everywhere in social life, it takes on novel characteristics on Facebook. On Facebook achieving a collaborative intimacy based on mutual understanding and reciprocity appears to depend on the deployment of five practices: *Showing rather than telling, Sharing implicit content, Tagging, Expectation of mutual understanding* and *Liking.* These five practices are not mutually exclusive and can often coexist.

Showing rather than telling

Even though Facebook offers various ways to effect private communication, users often seem to opt for alternative strategies, using publicly visible content posted on their timeline to communicate private or personal messages addressed to very specific users. A clear example of this strategy comes from one of the interviewees – a 22-year-old female – who describes the way she manages to maintain an emotional connection with a friend living abroad:

> a friend of mine gave me a cup with a PacMan image on it. The Pacman changes color when you use it with a hot drink […] My friend is now in London and I cannot speak to her […] so I took a picture of the cup with a hot drink in it, so you could see all the little ghosts and I posted it on Facebook. That picture is worth a thousand words. There is everything in there: 'Thank you for the gift,' 'I miss you,' 'I'm thinking of you'.

The picture is posted on the public profile and thus visible to the larger Facebook network, but the user delimits a semantically private space with the photograph of a *specific* object that carries a special emotional meaning invisible to the larger audience. From this standpoint, pictures seem to have a special status within Facebook. Since Facebook is never perceived as an environment guaranteeing anonymity (Wittwoker, 2014), words are often considered to be too revealing. Writing a status update is inextricably tied to an explicit intent: 'I share more links rather than placing new updates: I don't even do it once a month, only when an intelligent sentence comes to my mind' (Female, 17 years old). Respondents prefer to construct their own Facebook presence by *Showing rather than telling* (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008) and using implicit visual cues (Bales, Li, & Griwsold, 2011), as stated by a 21-year-old female: 'I like the timeline cover image because it shows the personal side, though without being explicit.' Despite the fact that personal images are functional in providing access to certain aspects of private lives (Hand, 2012), they are considered less explicit than written text, due to their potential for carrying multiple messages below their public surface which can be acknowledged by those who know the relational context existing *behind* the picture. Showing a photo of the Roman Colosseum posted on her wall, the interviewee – a 21-year-old female student from Rome – explains: 'the information that is contained in that photo is known only to me and a few others, perhaps those who took the photo with me […] for those who see the picture, there's just the Colosseum, not much more'. The activity of posting photos (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011), while undoubtedly connected with the central role that visual dimension plays in contemporary culture (Murray, 2015), seems able, as shown before, to create a communicative space carrying multiple meanings, thanks to the intrinsic ambivalence of visual content. This explains why, in the context of Facebook,

images are categorized as intimate, although users rarely upload pictures that they consider to be intimate (Miguel, 2016).

Sharing implicit content

A similar principle is also found in the regular use of metaphorical and suggestive text: 'I sometimes write cryptic messages because I don't want them to be understandable. I do it for myself. In the sense that I want to express myself but I do not want anyone to know' (Female, 29 years old); 'if I write about things, these things are "strange," I mean that if you really want to understand them, you need to know me' (Male, 21 years old). Often this level of ambiguity is obtained by using famous quotes, lyrics, poems or music videos. A 22-year-old university student from Rome said:

> Some personal status has more meanings … I do not write 'I'm happy because I passed an exam with this grade', maybe I write a line from a poem about happiness, maybe I upload the song that I was listening to while preparing the exam. Most of my posts are about things I am familiar with, rather than being explicit.

Several respondents stated they share implicit content with the expectation of a reaction from their intended audience. Despite the public nature of this content and the size of the *potential* audience, the *intended* audience can be rather small and often unidentified:

> whenever I post something I have a couple of people in mind that I know will like it […] I already know they'll like it and they'll probably agree, or maybe when I write something funny I know they'll laugh and might leave a nice comment… at least I hope so…perhaps they won't do it but it's true that when I post something I think of a relatively small group of people. (Female 28 years old)

Users exploit the *equivocality of CMC communication* (Walther & Parks, 2002) to stimulate their intended audience's ability to understand, as stated by a 16-year-old boy: 'I write a thing, and another person knows that it refers to him, although I do not explain it to him'.

In other cases, users provide hidden clues for those friends who are able to decode them:

> the Facebook contact that I know only by sight, and who does not even know me, must not understand the meaning of a song which ties me in a special way to my friend: the contact reads the song, but does not understand what's behind it. (Female, 22 years old)

Even when something is made technically public, the effective 'informative value' of a status update can be differentiated for different groups of people. Participants reported doing this by choosing wordings and tones that would not open up similarly to everyone. This is a way of managing the boundaries between public and private that clearly connects to the concept of *social steganography* (boyd & Marwick, 2011; Oolo & Siibak, 2013). Social steganography is a strategy mainly observed in adolescents to reassert control over privacy (Livingstone, 2008; Tufekci, 2008), by encoding status updates with a wide variety of obscure references, allusions or inside jokes which automatically tend to exclude those who do not have the tools to decode these references, such as parents. While the aim of social steganography is to hide private content from specific groups like parents or relatives, *Sharing implicit content* helps users to maintain and reinforce group identification

and association with specific subjects. The creation of a more inclusive *in-group* identity, we argue, is an essential part of how intimate relationships are redefined in the networked space. As discussed in the opening paragraphs, intimate relationships are exclusively based on the will of both partners to establish and maintain cognitive and/or affective experiences that allow them to participate in the life of the other person and/or allow the other to cross their own personal boundaries. *Showing rather than telling* and *Sharing implicit content* are mechanisms of inclusiveness, used to strengthen the pleasure of belonging among people who share a common history of friendship.

Tagging

Although public disclosure on Facebook may involve large and diverse audiences, ranging from distant acquaintances to close friends and family members, everyone is in a position to renegotiate the terms of their private commitments with their own friendship network. As one of our participants highlights:

> [to be on Facebook] is like being on the streets and saying something directly to another person. There may be many other people around who hear what is said, but they do not care. But the person I spoke to listens and might also interact with me. (Female, 22 years old)

While maintaining the public nature of a status update, Facebook offers several ways to address that message to a single user or set of users. Many interviewees reported that they use tags to show a special relation with one or more users while writing a public status update, as explained by a 37-year-old female worker:

> if you do something and the result is a hilarious joke of epic proportions, then you write it on Facebook, re-tagging everybody, so that everyone can recall that great night and laugh, comment, keep talking about it […] it becomes exclusive.

Tagging friends is, in this context, a way to improve group cohesion between people who share a private and *exclusive* event of their daily life and are happy to remember it on Facebook. A 13-year-old boy from Rome explains: 'I send references to someone, tagging him/her, without explaining the concept to everyone.' Only those who are tagged know why, or at least they are assumed to know. Tagging makes the intended audience for implicit content more clearly identifiable. It is a form of *social contact* aimed at connecting with and maintaining a relationship with some unique and targeted individuals (McEwan, Fletcher, Eden, & Sumner, 2014).

Mutual understanding

So far we have described how this process can come about through multiple meanings layered within the same content. While, as we have seen, tagging is a common practice, many users seem able to address specific users among their Facebook friends without having to rely on more or less explicit attempts to hide content or select a targeted audience:

> It often happens that I update my status by writing something that will hit a specific person. If, for example, I want to write a status and maybe write something bad, I know that my malice is directed towards that person, and that person certainly gets the message. (Female, 25 years old)

Besides the non-explicit nature of the content and of the audience, what emerges here is a common expectation of mutual understanding. Expectation of mutual understanding (Shklovski et al., 2015) is a central part of this process that assumes intimate friends to have the knowledge to access specific meaning and to know when specific content is addressed to them. Content is posted online knowing that an answer will come, in one way or another, from the intended audience: 'There was a photograph that showed a dance. I thought of Simona, who is one of my classmates and she has always danced. I posted it because I liked it, but I thought, "this will appeal to Simo"' (Female, 34 years old). While mutual understanding is expected, it is not necessarily visible. A reaction from the targeted users is not required even if it makes the process that we are describing more visible:

> I was reading this book that a friend gave to me. She is currently abroad as she left a couple of days ago and I wanted to make it clear that somehow she was there with me. I wrote out a quote and she immediately put a like on it. (Female, 30 years old)

Facebook users, as emerges from every quote, are constantly aware of their audience with regard to the content they upload. Thanks to this awareness, people can develop selective public spaces for intimate relationships based on personal attraction and mutual interests. Yet it is worth noting how these spaces can be ephemeral and transient. Friends who are assumed to be able to access a specific message do not represent a stable group but might easily change over time. One respondent clarifies this concept very well:

> it is clear that if I want to use Facebook to express my state of mind I do not need everyone to understand, but it's not that I write with the idea of exercising control: "oh gosh they mustn't understand "Instead I write thinking" ok this is how it is, and those who need to understand will understand"". (Female, 22 years old)

Liking

In this context, the act of *liking* plays an important and visible role as a way of strengthening mutual understanding and reciprocity, from generalized validation to less demanding relational or emotional proximity. 'If I like what you wrote, I do not want to get into your thought, I will not get into it, but maybe I connect it to some of my thoughts and I click "like"' (Female, 21 years old). 'If you post the image of a film that I love, I'll add a "like" to your post to say that I saw it and I know it' (Male, 22 years old). Obviously *likes* work in both directions. The likers express some kind of proximity and the person who receives the 'like' feels the presence of other users: it works as a small 'thinking of you' action. 'When [the song that I shared] is liked I find pleasure in that, because someone might have experienced what I felt, and they might have felt something while listening to the song' (Female, 23 years old). The act of *liking* shows how the maintenance of intimate relationships on Facebook can occur without any particular effort: people can have a mutually shared understanding despite the fact that they are not exchanging a lot of words (Matsuda, 2005). *Liking* is Facebook users' most frequent behavior on the site (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011), most probably because it reduces relational transaction costs for partners (Tong & Walther, 2011).

So far, we have described how Facebook users re-establish various levels of intimacy within the Facebook News Feed. Within this context, intimacy should not be understood as an intimate and secluded relation that exists outside of the public domain; rather, it

should be defined as the mutual acknowledgement of a special status of the relationship. Although our interviewees do not automatically associate the concept of intimacy with Facebook, they continually have to deal with intimate relationships within a networked semi-public space and use the strategies we have identified to make a distinction between the users that are part of this intimate space and those who are excluded:

> I don't link the word 'intimacy' with Facebook, nor with anything related to computers. I think more of physical relationships, something really close. I happen to manage intimacy on Facebook, with my friends…by posting some links that hint at something we talked about in the past…. or if I know my friends are going through something. This could be called 'intimacy', because it refers to something that only my friend and I know. (Female, 24 years old)

Networked intimacy

Outside of the use of private and direct messaging, Facebook communication takes place in a semi-public space, raising questions about how people can achieve any kind of intimacy within this context. We observed that in order to engage in more intimate relationships on Facebook, people are more likely to share content that encourages other users' reciprocity and mutual understanding. As pointed out by our study, users apply a variety of strategies to manage public intimacy, based on the share of information or emotions that can be fully understood only by their private circle of significant others. All these strategies are forms of *collaborative disclosure*, because they rely on others' collaboration in managing the boundaries of privacy and publicness and reduce the risks of undesirable consequences (Petronio, 2002).

Extending prior research and the analysis into how our SNS users discuss their personal disclosure on Facebook, we developed a framework of collaborative strategies for managing public intimacy that both systematizes and extends the findings identified in previous studies of intimacy on Facebook. Some dimensions are derived from other research: (1) *Showing rather than telling*, (2) *Sharing implicit content* and (3) *mutual understanding*. We extended those categories by adding (4) *Tagging* and (5) *Liking* and by connecting these five practices within a continuous set of strategies.

We acknowledge that it is difficult to draw precise boundaries between these categories – for instance, between *Showing rather than telling* or *Sharing implicit content* and the *act of tagging* – since they may be closely related. Furthermore, because all these strategies rely on reciprocity, *expectation of mutual understanding* and the act of *liking* play an important and visible role as a way of affirming partners' understanding and, as such, are often closely integrated with the other categories.

The centrality of concern about the management of intimate relationships on Facebook redefines the concept of intimacy beyond the narrow focus on mutual disclosure (Reis & Shaver, 1988). When they talk about intimacy, our participants still refer to it as something intrinsic to their inner selves, love affairs or domestic life. But when they deal with friendship maintenance on Facebook, many respondents use intimate disclosure as a socially skilled resource – conceptualized as transmissible and, therefore, analogous to information (Rooney, 2014) – to maintain relationships with those whom they choose to contact. We defined this kind of intimacy as 'networked' because it works as a symbolic space in which people can publicly display the private and exclusive qualities of their relationship. Our findings

indicate that people use specific strategies to select from their *networked publics* (boyd, 2011) the intended audience for their own collaborative disclosure and create symbolic spaces in which to express reciprocity and mutual understanding, thereby excluding the general public who could view their content. Networked intimacy is, at one and the same time, a practice of *selective sociality* (Ito & Okabe, 2005) that helps to maintain exclusive private intimacy, and a form of *social inclusion* that arises from the pleasure of belonging to what Nakajima, Himeno and Yoshii describe as a 'full-time intimate community' (p. 137).

Our research shows that the strategies of networked intimacy are not necessarily pondered; rather, they are often employed in an almost automatic manner within users' daily routines. Moreover, Facebook affordances support interaction routines that contribute to develop an expectation of intimacy. Being able to detect which content, within the continuous flow of Facebook information, users need to react to and how is an essential social skill. This mechanism works in both directions. Rather than focusing on the actual content of the exchange, many users learn to understand which routines are regarded as more likely than others to produce a sense of intimacy (e.g., posting a link to a YouTube song and tagging people who fully understand how that song confirms the specialness of their relationship. Since these routines, based on the use of the affordances provided by the platform, become part of friendship maintenance (Bucher, 2013), we argue that Facebook participates in the creation of a new kind of networked intimacy.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that management of public intimacy on Facebook is largely based on collaborative strategies between discloser and receiver. These strategies often create a symbolic space in which the users can maintain both private intimacy, which excludes the more extensive network of friends, and general community friendliness that reinforces their social inclusion. Lambert (2013) claims that every act on Facebook is a private exchange aimed at social gratification through a process of *self-reflexive* public identification (Boccia Artieri, 2012; Boccia Artieri, Giglietto, & Rossi, 2012). Rather than referring to private revelations, networked intimacy acts as a social resource that enhances and maintains Facebook-supported social relationships.

On the theoretical side, this seems partly to contradict the scholars who consider the conditions for public intimacy on SNSs in terms of narcissistic self-concern (Lasch 1979). Turkle (2011), for example, claims that social media are turning intimacy from an interpersonal aspect of friendship into a tool for their self-gratification. Facebook is referred to as a space of *ambient intimacy* (Thompson, 2008) which facilitates our digital narcissism (Keen, 2012), extending the opportunity to treat our friends as a general public whose only function is to confirm the image we wish to present to others. In a culture marked by a collective obsession with identity and self-management (Lovink, 2011), the *public theatricalisation* of intimate life is a feature of the constitution of the self as celebrity (Marvick, 2014). Public theatricalisation is a strategic tool for people to produce a *true public self* in a manner similar to the way celebrities display their individual self in the public world (Marshall, 2010). Public intimacy has been explained as a tool for gathering attention (Rosen, 2007) or a solipsistic tool of self-promotion (Bauman, 2011), a strategy for publicly managing our emotional economy, rather than a means of confirming a social relationship (Farci, 2010). According to Sennett (1977): 'The more intimate, however, the

less sociable' (p. 266). These negative interpretations point to the increased significance of public displays of emotion as a symptom of the self-obsessed, atomized nature of consumer culture (Bauman, 2007; Furedi, 2004; Illouz, 2004; Tisseron, 2001).

Instead, networked intimacy tries to reassess the nature of intimacy beyond the idea of narcissistic ostentation. Our findings indicate that, rather than having to do exclusively with private *self-disclosure*, networked intimacy is more related to the community-like qualities of friendship, social validation, trustworthiness, respect for privacy and expectations of mutual consideration. Celebrating the pleasure of belonging that comes from appropriating private space in a public context, Facebook offers new opportunity to reconsider the concept of intimacy as a strategy for friendship maintenance. This confirms what we said in our theoretical introduction to the paper. The concept of friendship has the potential to challenge every dichotomy between intimate, private relationships and public, networked community relationships. This explains why the employment of the term 'friend' to describe all social connections on SNSs such as Facebook is not only used to underline the informality of every relationship – from family members, to work colleagues, school friends and acquaintances – but also to stress the changing connection between self-disclosure and intimacy and between the conventional dichotomies of public/private that have hitherto governed relationships (Baym, 2010; Chambers, 2013). The practices of networked intimacy seem to confirm the value of friendship in building *social* connections. Every time an individual selects from his network the intended audience for his collaborative intimacy and creates a symbolic space in which he expresses reciprocity and mutual understanding, he is using new ways of making public declarations of friendship, by celebrating its meaningfulness in terms of pure relationship involving family, children and lovers, but equally colleagues, acquaintances and neighbors.

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