Using Digital Methods to Shed Light on "Border Phenomena": A Digital Ethnography of Dark Tourism Practices in Time of COVID-19

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3. Article accepted for publication

Date: January 2021

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Italian Sociological Review
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Using Digital Methods to Shed Light on "Border Phenomena": A Digital Ethnography of Dark Tourism Practices in Time of COVID-19[1]

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Abstract

The *digital turn* urges for a critical rethinking of social research in order to address the new epistemological and methodological challenges that come from the Digital Society. Digital methods offer a wide range of new possibilities, but they also have their own limitations and boundaries that social researchers need to experience in order to make the most of the online research methods. Also, the Pandemic posed new

[1] This article should be considered as collective elaboration especially for the introduction and the main conclusion. However, paragraphs 2 and 3.2 are to be attributed to Felice Addeo, paragraphs 3.1 and 4.1 to Gabriella Punziano, and 4.2 and 4.3 to Giuseppe Michele Padricelli.

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challenges that require an epochal rethinking of social research activities that have dominated the scene so far.

Our paper aims at exploring these boundaries by applying a digital ethnographic approach to study an unconventional and rather unique research object: a controversial social practice, the so-called Dark Tourism during an unforeseen event, COVID-19 pandemic. Our case study starts from the analysis of Facebook groups born in the first Italian "red zones" and possibly eligible as places of potential digital dark tourism. Starting from a completely exploratory analysis, before formalizing substantive results on the investigated phenomenon, this paper brings to the attention of the reader a reflection of methodological order on the type of questions that can be answered by adopting digital methods approach and what limits are imposed to knowledge production and research work on which it is necessary to continue to reflect in order to more fully achieve understanding on the particular phenomenon proposed as a case study.

Keywords: digital dark tourism; COVID-19 Italian's red zone; digital ethnography.

1. Introduction

Research object, research questions and research method are strictly connected: studying a certain phenomenon means mainly framing it through a precise epistemological and ontological frame capable of guiding the formulation of research questions whose answers can be pursued through the most appropriate method (Phillimore, Goodson, 2004). This simple but effective statement has been the core of social research practice since its beginning, and it is still valid nowadays, even in an era characterized by the so-called *digital turn* (Given, 2006).

Every aspect of our life is being continuously shaped by the INTERNET related experiences (Beneito-Montagut, 2011) so deeply that Social Science were urged to develop Digital Methods in order to address the new research questions posed by the current Digital Society. A society in which online spaces are also used by people to build cohesive communities and strong social relationships regardless their geographical, social and cultural belonging. These communities are small-scale communities held together through shared emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs, and senses of justice and consumption practices (Cova, 1997).

As a result of these new shifts, many sociologists think that, to really understand current society, it is necessary to follow people's social activities, including INTERNET and other forms of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). This implies an adjustment to epistemological and methodological stances for doing social research and an adaption of traditional

social research methods to the specificities of online interactions (Addeo et al., 2020).

Digital methods came up as an innovative and reliable solution to address these issues, generating a new enthusiasm and gaining the trust of many social researchers, especially the youngest and those most attentive to technological developments. Moreover, this unconditional confidence in the Digital Methods led many authors to think that a new approach has emerged in Social Science, generating a new research field in which both the epistemological and the methodological dimensions are built upon the INTERNET experience. This new research stream has been named in several ways, and yet there is no convergence on a shared definition: Computational Social Science, E-Humanities, Digital Humanities, e-Social Sciences, Web Science, Big Social Data, and so on.

A common ground among all these approaches is the idea that the digital life has created an unprecedented availability of data about activities, behaviours and social relations that nourished with new life Social Science research in a difficult time (Veltri, 2017; Molteni, Airoldi, 2018), leading to implement new solutions (topic modelling, machine learning, etc.) or to rediscover methods that had been on the side-lines for a while (network analysis, content analysis, sentiment analysis).

This urges for a critical rethinking of social research in order to address the new epistemological and methodological challenges that come from the Digital Society. Digital methods offer a wide range of new possibilities for sure, but they also have their own limitations and boundaries that social researchers need to experience in order to make the most of the online research methods.

The Pandemic posed new challenges that require an epochal rethinking of social research activities that have dominated the scene so far (Dodds, Hess, 2020). Limitations in the proximity, access, accessibility and availability of the research subjects bring to the fore the real need to discuss the link between the research object, the research questions and the method chosen to face epistemic-ontological objectives that guide the whole research.

To push this statement to the limit, we have chosen to overcome these boundaries by analyzing a controversial and uncommon research topic: the tourism of pain, also known as dark tourism of which disaster tourism is a specific expression (McDaniel, 2018; Sharpley, Wright, 2018), a hidden and stigmatized social practice, subjected to moral judgment, that occur when people trip to "places that either witnessed or represent death, destruction, suffering, or calamity" McDaniel, 2018: 2). In a Pandemic time, when the government and health restrictions do not allow to develop this practice in the real places, dark tourism activities were held in a digital scenario (Kaussen, 2015), i.e. the online communities of places – that in a certain sense represent

and are fully identifiable with the communities generated after the *digital turn* recalled in the opening of this paper – suffering from any sort of calamities. In our case these places are Codogno, Vo 'Euganeo, and nine other municipalities near the district of Lodi in Lombardy, representing the Italian pandemic epicenter: these towns were the first to be set under the "red zones" measure at the beginning of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020. In order to enter the digital narrative of these communities, Facebook groups connected to these towns were chosen as the starting point of observation. These Facebook groups originally created to share information about the daily life of the red-zoned became privileged arenas to understand the *lockdown* experience. People from different, often very far, places began to subscribe to these online communities acting as dark tourists (Bolan, Simone-Charteris, 2018; Stone et al., 2018)

Starting from this statement, we elaborate a main research question as: how much Digital Methods can be effective in studying such a sensitive and almost hidden phenomenon? This means, first of all, to pose a question of methodological order to study something on which literature and previous research cannot come up against us if not to offer examples, methods and practicable ways. Among the set of available research methods, we thought that the most appropriate one was precisely the ethnographical one in its online incarnation. Only in a second moment, by reasoning about the advantages and limitations of an ethnographic approach entirely based on digital methods, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses, it will be possible to substantively reason about the knowledge that can be produced with respect to the particular object of study chosen as a case study, digital dark tourism. Therefore, the heart of this paper will be precisely this methodological reflection.

What we will try to do in the following pages is to find an answer to the methodological question in order to highlight the possibilities and limits of online social research when working at the limits of social phenomena and within the limits of viable approaches. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, we will explain the theoretical framework from which we started to bring to attention developments and limitations of the ethnographic approach digitally transited (paragraph 1). Subsequently, we will discuss the framing of the research object and its physical dematerialization as assumed by our research design (paragraph 2). Finally, we will focus on the methodological reflections emerged from our research experience and results, specifying if and how it is possible to reconnect the experience-method-object of study to the epistemic-ontological matrix.

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2. Theoretical framework

2.1 What's really new? Ethnographic observation methods and digital scenario

Today, the complexity of social change is approached facing with spaces, languages for relations, actions and practices tied to a new scenario: the digital context. It has gained relevance in last 20 years for Social Science because of "its power of identity building, information and knowledge sharing in the architectures of relations and network made by users via Computer mediated communication (CMC)" (Padricelli, Punziano, Saracino, 2020: forthcoming).

In 1990 INTERNET studies located the turning point for social research: the society that finds its natural prosecution on the net becomes an object of study that to be approached can no longer use the classical methods. As a consequence, the distinction between online and offline social life has become more and more blurred losing its usefulness, and the online "reality" came out as something no more distinct from other aspects of human actions and experience (Addeo et. al., 2020; Costello et al., 2017; Hallett, Barber, 2014; Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Kozinets, 2010; Garcia et al., 2009). In other words, digital spaces are embedded in our culture so to change social practices (Hallett, Barber, 2014). Therefore, it makes space a proposal of virtualization of the classical methods advanced from Hine (2005) that adopts the net like new field of study for himself.

However, it soon becomes clear that the digital scenario is far from being framed simply as a new context or field of study. It is a new system of opportunities and constraints, a new social structure that requires the appropriate research methods to be analyzed. One of the most interesting proposal is the one by Rogers (2013) who considers that the best way to do online social research is through the digitization of methods rather than simply transposing the traditional methods on the Web.

This dynamic has been equally valid for the ethnographic approach that considering the fast development of the online communities, i.e. social aggregations born on the INTERNET characterized by a large number of heterogeneous people having different socio-cultural backgrounds, but sharing at the same time interests, passions and emotions (Addeo et al., 2020). As Costello et al. (2017) highlighted, nowadays, being part of these online spaces is a relevant part of daily routine for the vast majority of people; the social relationships developed within online communities often cross the INTERNET boundaries and affect other aspects of the social life: "This is due to recent technological developments which increase the scope and range of online communities and the forms and time of participation such as the web

2.0 which widened the opportunities for user-generated content, the emergence of an "INTERNET of things" and of ubiquitous mobile devices which make it possible to be always connected" (Addeo et al., 2020: 12). Several studies suggest that being an active member of these online communities may have several impacts on individuals, as an online community may: have identity implications, change notions of the self, become a system of social support, institutionalize power and support activism (Olaniran, 2008; Campbell, 2006; Gossett, Kilker, 2006; Madge, O'Connor, 2006; Carter, 2005; Williams, Copes, 2005).

Ethnography had to took into account these new social forms and face a process of epistemological and methodological re-definition first by reshaping the classical practices of involvement of the researcher in "participating, […], in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts" (Hammersley, Atkinson, 2007: 3). The fundamental of traditional ethnographic approach, in fact, was adapted to the online dimension following Kozinets statements (2010) for which the netnography suggest immediately an approach adapted from the authentic and traditional ethnography technics to the virtual communities studies in the idea of a "Social aggregation that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on […] public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling to forms webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 1993: 18).

Summarizing, mostly of previous works (Hine, 2000; Rogers, 2013) define the web in a double epistemological way. On the first hand, in line with Virtual Methods by which the nethnographic approach arose, the web is concerned as an object useful to develop researches due to an online transposition of traditional techniques. On the other hand, instead, the web is intended as a source equipped of its own ontological objects and oriented towards the hybridization of research techniques to study these objects trough the logic embedded into the devices. This second way, related to Digital Methods by which the digital ethnography arose, is projected to rearrange digital objects, going further from the research that "is limited to the study of online cultures" (Rogers, 2007: 28). Focusing in the dimension related to the web native elements about social actions, relations, and practices, digital ethnography permits to recreate a new INTERNET story from the inside of the device and its own agency (Rogers 2013), "linking the researcher directly to the spaces within the studied subjects move and analyzing every relations cluster not concerning the subjects in a place as the virtual world" (Consolazio, 2017: 81).

A series of breaking points between Virtual and Digital Methods could be brought to the reader's attention in order to understand what are the main reasoning behind the development of this work and the choosing of the digital

side. However, the most importantly can be identified in this particular dynamic of opposition in the ethnographer role. The ethnographers can be active observers and participants in the field even though the field is not physical (as in the virtual way of netnographers); or they could have a passive role of indirect not participant observers of the field, by studying it without the complete immersion but only through extract meaning from existing secondary data on the Net (as in the way of digital ethnographers). These two different ways of being ethnographers in online social spaces also include a choice of the type of data on which to focus attention, thus leading the ethnographer to produce data, on the first side, by soliciting or sharing them with the subjects under observation, or leading the ethnographer to use the digital scenario, its contents, and its affordances as data to be erected as an object of observation in a totally secondary way. This second profile of ethnographer is the one we chose, approaching the study of a phenomenon as sensible as that of digital dark tourism chosen as our case study, in an unintrusive mode and pushing to the limits the research operations that methodologically this choice implies.

3. Concepts, objects and case background

3.1 Places of pandemic as places of disaster and touristic interest

Today we are facing a critical challenge regarding the COVID-19 crisis: in the same way as floods, bushfires and earthquakes, the sociological perspective elects the pandemic as a disaster. According to Quarantelli (2000), disasters are not only an academic rhetoric exercise but respond to specific classification requirements that distinguish it from catastrophes or daily emergencies. The actual pandemic differs from an epidemic because it does not involve only a country or a continent, but the entire world, so it could be elected as a disaster because of:

- the relation to more and unfamiliar groups as government department, public agencies, first responders, etc.;
- the application of different standards of performance of the involved actors in the governance of the emergency;
- the protective operations taken by public and private sector;
- the consequent loss of autonomy and freedom of action related to the emergency powers assumed by local and national government (i.e. the restriction imposed to the mobility or the social distance with its implications on the possibility to give help to other people in the same situation).

This is how the pandemic creates places of disaster, similar to those affected by other disasters, such as the natural ones. However, there is a noteworthy difference: places of the disaster usually have a physical practicability (for example, an area involved in an earthquake could be visited by people in the aftermath), while during a pandemic government mobility restrictions make these places physically inaccessible. Therefore, just as the places of the pandemic become places of disaster, they are unavailable for visiting and this have led some people to find other ways of accessing them: the digital places.

Following the vision of Urry (2011), the interest in disaster places could be conceived as a touristic form "not usually associated with leisure […], gazing at particular sites and conditioned by personal experiences and memories framed by rules and styles, as well as by circulating images of texts of this and other places" (2011:2). Other scholars (among the others Brown, 1996; Bruner, 2005; Cohen, 2007; Kaussen, 2015; MacCannell, 2011; Reisinger, Stetner, 2006) consider tourism as the practice of searching for the authentic spectacle in 'other' places, that could be classified according to different vocations: educational tourism, ecological tourism and the disaster and dark tourism. This entails the search for experiences, not definable *a priori*, unique and with strong emotions, especially if they involve places whose restrictions and prohibitions make the tourist experience exciting at the limits of pleasure.

McDaniel (2018) defines the action of dark tourism as the tripping in "places that either witnessed or represent death, destruction, suffering, or calamity: places that can include a wide variety of attractions, some intentionally created, while others appear spontaneously", and that can also not concern a physical travel because not physically connected to the atrocities. The vocation of non-physical tourism experience enhances the illusion of authenticity through techniques adopted by users and allows their interactions with environments (MacCannell, 1976): disaster and dark tourists visit the interested places, but what about the interaction with suffering people who live in those places?

Respecting the assumption concerning the *Information Society* based on "shared knowledge and founded on global solidarity and a better mutual understanding between peoples and nations" (WSIS, 2003, art. 67), the studies of MacCannell (2011, 5:8) argue about the tourism ethics focused on "the subjective, and plural experiences of 'sightseeing', a basic human desire to connect with someone or something 'other'", while Kaussen underlines the models of relationship between the self and the others associating progress with ethics for the development of a "common humanity whose relationships are based on mutual understanding, justice etc." (2015: 42).

Trying to frame the dark tourism as a research object in the digital scenario is a challenging goal as it is moved by two emotional drivers: the 'desire of the forbidden' to enter spaces where access is forbidden because of a disaster and the 'experiential desire' to live a direct transfer in the life of those who experience the disaster and the consequences that result from it.

3.2 Dark Tourism on the Net: the case of the Italian pandemic red zones

The digital era enforces the idea of connection between the INTERNET and territories, thanks to tailor-made and geo-located information produced by user's history. Studying this connection requires a methodological approach related to the Net logic and useful to retrace the users' movements and their actions (Marres, 2017; Lupton, 2014).

The Sars-Cov-2 reached Europe striking in Northern Italy in February 2020. In less than 24 hours, more than 300 COVID-19 cases were recorded in *Lombardy* and *Veneto*, forcing the Italian Government to adopt security and isolation measures to protect the areas and to prevent the spread of the virus in the Country. Consequently, on February 21st, the police began to set manned checkpoints around quarantined towns: *Codogno*, *Vo' Euganeo*, and other nine municipalities near *Lodi* district borders were renamed as *zone rosse* (red zones). Heavy mobility restrictions were applied: Italians began to be familiar with the English word *lockdown*. From that moment, the national agenda setting narrowed in what was going in the Northern red zones and the media storytelling was focused on the quarantine experience and the virus' spreading. This totalizing communication centred on risk, perceptions and decision making processes both in Political and Health fields, and consequently shaped also the social media discourse: Facebook groups with a strong territorial connotation in which originally prevails exchange information on daily life now change them status as place in which it will be discuss the experience of being red zone towns. This suddenly has made these groups privileged arenas to dive in the lockdown experience. The urge to understand how people experienced the forced isolation introduced by the government measures is not just a journalistic curiosity. Facebook groups are social places that may expand the cognitive relevance and the understating of the lockdown experience. This was possible because these groups were born to narrate the daily life of town's people in order to reinforce sense of community developing at the same time an idea of sharing feeling, emotions and points of view, which goes beyond the concept of spatial proximity/neighbourhood. These groups also allow to interconnect people in towns of slightly large dimension with respect to a classical neighbourhood because of these groups born on the net where special limitation becomes more and more irrelevant. And it is precisely the network,

in our case, that becomes the central node: through it and through these social groups, the new daily life deriving from the forced quarantine has generated an interactive social knowledge based on a stream of perceptions, needs, concerns about the innovative ability to create mutual help or the skill to do self-analysis on what happens and on the restriction measures taken. However, these Facebook groups are not an ordinary research object because they are usually closed, i.e. access is conditional on a registration request to those group administrators (access granted generally after confirming you live in the groups' town), thus, not all the knowledge produced in them is freely available to everyone.

However, in order to position ourselves inside the place of the disaster and to be able to start our ethnographic operation we have proceeded to request registration in these groups. When we stepped into them while analysing the social media discourse on COVID-19 experience of lockdown, we found that several non-local members joined some red zones' Facebook groups. This event has inspired our research interest in trying to know more about the practices and the interactions of those non-local members who joined these groups at the beginning of the lockdown period and what drives them to enter these digital spaces and if this process with the aim to understand if in some form or way they could practice a digital dark tourism inside these groups, but, above all, to understand if this is detectable trough a digital ethnographic analysis, unobtrusive, covered, and by keeping a passive profile.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

Research design was developed in order to address our main research question: to explore the strengths and the weaknesses, the reach and the boundaries of Digital Methods in studying sensitive, controversial and undercover phenomenon like the digital dark tourism during an unforeseen event, the COVID-19 pandemic. The natural field of this social practice are online communities, sites or blog that digital dark tourists visit in order to satisfy their desires. Our research focused on three Facebook groups[1] gathering people from two little northern Italian towns, Codogno and Vo' Euganeo, the first places to be put under Quarantine by National government at the beginning of March 2020.

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[1] The names of the Facebook groups are not reported to keep the privacy of the members.

According to the principles of the Dark Tourism framework, these towns could be considered as a perfect example of "places of disaster" occurred under a Pandemic. The choice of Facebook as online research field is due to the peculiar features of this social media: Facebook relies more on social interactions among members rather than other online social platforms like Twitter and Instagram. Moreover, Facebook seems to have a more generalist approach and a broader and varied audience than the other social networking platforms.

These research objects led us to adopt digital ethnographic method in order to address the main research question. Starting from the vision of Rogers (2009) digital ethnography conceive the web as source of meanings in the perspective of digital native elements that, adequately analysed, allow to recreate a new INTERNET story from the inside of the device and its own agency, in the way that "the digital context become so an additional and integrated social participatory place of people's daily life where the researchers take account not only of the web as the object of study, but as well the role they play in relation with it" (Rogers, 2013: 14).

From a methodological point of view, the digital experience could be directly related to the places within the subjects move to discover the essences of disaster, its modelling, the way in which it changes, impacts and rebuilds the daily experience of people involved in the pandemic; these places now are on social media. Facebook, Twitter, and the other social platforms are capable to enlarge every relation not concerning the subjects only in a place as the virtual world (Consolazio, 2017: 81), but rather in a temporary association of strangers made for mutual purposes in a cooperation that will lose its properties also after few hours of its highest density moment of sharing (Arvidsson, Caliandro, 2016).

This concept has deep consequences as regards the methodological framing of our research object. On social platforms what individuals do is to leave traces of actions that can be analysed beyond the socio-demographic characteristics of individual users, which are not always known, clear and trustable. Not being able to focus on those who perform actions by leaving traces of them but being able to develop a reasoning on what the actors do, the proposed research path goes into a post-demographic[2] perspective. The social practices and actions shown through multimedia platforms in terms of

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[2] Post-demographics could be thought of as the study of the personal data in social networking platforms, and, in particular, how meta-profiling (Rogers, R., 2004) is, or may be, performed with which findings as well as consequences (https://digitalmethods.net/Digitalmethods/PostDemographics#Post_45demographics_63).

reactivity, behaviour, and preferences become the objects of analysis themselves and, by proposing to observe them and understand their implications, the approach within which these affordances can be analysed becomes that of digital ethnography. This means that our research activities will adopt an unobtrusive approach for the collection of *user-generated* data that are "spontaneous and not forced by the researcher requests due to the lack of cooperation between observator and observed" (Cardano, 2011: 25).

Post-demographics perspective and Digital Ethnographical methods allow us to focus on contents, actions, and interactions, rather than individuals, so the main research question aims at shedding light about how dark tourism as a way of "be in a place without being in a place" (McDaniel, 2018: 2) is experienced in the digital scenario, considering the social media posting and interacting actions as the keys that can lead to understanding what attracts tourists to these sites, and which meanings they are looking for.

4.2 On the online field

During last decade more scholars have argued about the importance of the role of media for tourism practices, as well for the dark and disaster ones (Ali, 2013; Sharpley, Wright, 2018; Tarlow, 2011): in the moment a disaster is publicized by the media-sphere, following Rojek (1997), it "becomes an attraction to those who, for whatever reason, wish to travel to gaze upon it" (Sharpley, Wright, 2018: 336). Furthermore, Bolan and Simone-Charteris (2018: 731) have also argued about the importance of new media in dark tourism practices, intending the web, and in particular the social media dimension, as "shared spaces online for dark tourists to communicate, share experiences and discuss how such places affect and influence them". The observation of the three Facebook groups began jointly when the first red zones were set-up (on February 22th) by requiring access to these groups. Once gained the membership to the communities, we opted for a covert access without revealing our identities as researchers, and a non-participant observation, because our intention was not to spread in the groups the idea of being observed. These methodological choices were made for two reasons that are widely accepted by scholars when dealing with similar case: 1) the presence of outsiders within these communities would be undesirable and unwelcome (Maclaran, Catterall, 2002: 2). Others consider a covert digital ethnography is particularly suitable to investigate sensitive topics, for which traditional research methods, as a questionnaire, surveys, interviews, and uncovered ethnographic observation, are not useful (Langer, Beckman, 2005).

This may pose some ethical concerns, for sure, but it allowed us to experience the communities like the other members: "in other words,

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researcher could experience the online sites in the same way that participant routinely experience it, gaining access to a field by displaying competence of the norms of the group and adapting their behaviour on the basis of them" (Addeo et al. 2020: 22).

Once gained access to the communities, we began to analyse the communities and the online interactions among the members. We spotted several members that met at the same time two criteria to be considered digital dark tourists: they were non-local residents and they joined these groups at the beginning of the lockdown. In total, among the Facebook groups we found 111 non-local member users subscripted from the day after Codogno and Vo Euganeo were designed as red zone. In term of spatial coverage, the non-local members subscriptions of each group are well balanced among North, Center and South of Italy, while the personal characteristics of identified profiles show an equal distribution for gender and a mean age of 35 years old (looking at figure 1). All of these characteristics are mentioned here for descriptive purposes and are not used as a key to decline the digital dark tourist per se since, as anticipated, we move in this study following a post-demographic perspective.

Since the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Social Media and Social Networking Companies began to implement measures to ensure users' privacy and to prevent data breach, above all the restriction of the API access. This led to the majority of web scraping tools do not allow the inspection of personal profiles of social media users for privacy reasons. In this way the ethics topic related to the web shadowing of individuals trough the adoption of an equally lurking behavior opens the next step to the hardest challenge for the deepening of the case.

Therefore, in addition, the identification of users and their characteristics has been necessary for the *post-demographical* approach in order to identify their traces, practices, and actions.

The observed posting activity of the non-local users is scarce. In 4 months, in fact, there are only 47 posts in total that show a *lurking* vocation with a poor engagement from other users, mostly characterized by like reactions and few comments (look at figure 1).

FIGURE 1. *Digital Dark tourists in Italian red zones.*

After a manual process of categorization of all the retrieved post, we can affirm that the posting activities[3] from potential digital dark tourists are generally short messages expressing empathy while few of them offered help and assistance to the residents. Next figure sums up the degree of involvement of the non-local users considered as potential dark tourists acted during our observation:

FIGURE 2. *A typology of Dark Tourism practices on the Facebook Groups.*

Lurking _____ Empathy expression _____ Assistance offering
Degree of involvement

Obviously the attitude of "lurking" is constituted in the non-participation and passive presence in the Facebook groups, so for this type of users, nothing

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[3] Original posts have been translated from Italian to English.

else can be said that they are observers in the shadows whose motivations for presence in the digital scenario investigated can be close to those of a digital dark tourist. Where we are able to trace content from non-local users enrolled after the enactment of the "red zone" measure, then we can identify two types of expressed content of which, however, we do not know the practices that follow them vis à vis. To the category defined as "empathy expressions" can be traced posts such as:

> Male, from Naples (March 1st)
> *Hello. I'm form Naples. I joined this group to encourage you to resist during these hard days. Your dedication will be an example for the entire Nation. Don't give up. I'm your friend.*
> Female, from Puglia and living in UK (March 1st)
> *Hello. I'm form Puglia and I live in UK. I would to thank you this group admins to let me join here. If you need anything, a solace call or something else, I'm available. Distances don't scare us. My thought for you.*
> To the category named "assistance offering" can instead be traced posts such as:
> Male, from Pescara (February 26th)
> *Hello, I joined this group also if I'm not from Codogno. I would be helpful for in any possible way. I'm from Pescara. Unfortunately, also here masks and lotions flew off the shelves, but any other supply is here available.*
> Female, from Isola d'Elba (February 26th)
> *Good morning to everyone. I'm a first aid volunteer from Isola d'Elba. I joined this group to share you my solidarity. If you need mask or lotion supplies, I will be glad to help you!*

This first observation led us to wonder, however, what is behind the "lurking" in the function of component of dark digital tourism, and to this question we will try to find an interpretation in the following paragraph.

4.3 Behind lurking

Following Bishop (2007) the online communities are based on a shared agreement between users who concern values and beliefs tied to their own virtual existence and related to the (non) actions driven by needs or goals: the online participation is allowed and transformed by the rise of social media and its interactive power, therefore lurking behaviour does not be necessary intended as unequivocal or negative (Sotiriadis, Van Zyl, 2013). The argumentation about new media related to dark tourism literature is mainly interested about the relations between dark tourists and dark places or directed

only towards a research context made by historical and past events on which empirical case studies are conducted. Therefore this background push us to profit of Bolan and Simone-Charteris invite (2018: 743) to direct our research in order to understand, for a present event as the pandemic, "how inhabiting such digital shared social spaces impacts everything from decision-making to experience and shared experience within the realm of dark tourism". For this cause, and to better understand the potential reasons on the bases of (non) participation of members of online communities, comes useful the ecological cognition framework proposed by Mantovani (1996). The best appropriate principle of this framework for the comprehension of the online communities' participation, is the goals-driven one. It concerns the participation characterized by (non)actions made to satisfy a goal in the way that "once an actor has a desire, they will develop a plan to act out that desire, much in the same way that when they perceive an affordance in the environment, they develop plans to interact with the artefact that offered it" (Bishop, 2007: 1886). In our case regarding the non-local members, as just previously recalled, the desire is related to the "connection with someone or something 'other'" (MacCannell, 2011: 5;8) aimed to the goal of share a piece of daily life with the locals of red zones. In our case the (non)action pursued can be intended as useful to "achieve consonance and experience intemperance through taking actions that reflect their desires" and oriented towards several potential non-hierarchical reasons as, i.e. the way by "[…] an actor may have a desire to help someone in an online community and plan to go to the community to seek out an opportunity to help someone, but when they find that opportunity they may have a belief that they will not be helpful by posting. They have to resolve this dissonance by either changing their belief or changing their plan" (MacCannell, 2011: 5; 8).

So, as asses, the results of this first inspection highlight the assumption of the lurking role also in dark tourism experiences and open to a reflection that aim to shed light about this practice, taking account of the authenticity concept in tourism, first introduced by MacCannell (1976). The authenticity question, attested in the sociological paradigm and tourism literature (see among Cohen, 2007; Reisinger, Steiner 2006), has been shaped in different vocations, among which the simulating authenticity. In his critique of post-modernity, Bruner (2005[1994] :149) concerns a tourism reproduction that may be considered authentic either if it resembles in a credible and convincing manner a historical site or if it simulates such a site completely and immaculately. The Italian red zones can be included in the sites suggested by Bruner in a simulation that, following Brown (1996), can achieve the stave of hyper reality where emerges a genuine fake completely real.

Cohen (2007: 77) helps to address this question with the description of the "constructivist approach to the empirical study of authenticity, focusing on the

tourists' perceptions of authenticity, and rejecting any a priori, authoritative definition of the concept" in the way to "to understand why some people claim to experience something as sincere or authentic and others do not, ascertaining the view of the actors and to examine the concrete contexts in which such experiences occur'" (Mehmetoglu, Olsen, 2003: 151).

In this framework of conceptions and in the approach to the concept of the experience of authenticity, lurking also becomes a way of experiencing something, on a par with other ways of experiencing a dark place in its digital transposition.

5. Discussion and conclusions

As will surely have jumped out at the careful reader, our research aimed at depicting the reach and the boundaries of Digital Methods, specifically Digital Ethnography, when dealing with sensitive, controversial, and undercover topic like the digital dark tourism.

Reasoning about what is possible while maintaining a passive, covered and unobtrusive approach, i.e. placing ourself in the digital perspective of the ethnographic research conducted here, a series of evidences can be remarked suggesting as a more profitable way the recovery of classical ethnographic components of different nature.

The first statement reached is that the main advantage of Digital Ethnography is the potential to access and uncover hidden or uncommon online phenomena that could not be intercepted easily by standard methods based on algorithms and Big Data analysis. Moreover, in line with the traditional ethnographic approach, the high flexibility of this Digital Ethnography allows to progressively and continuously shape and redefine research concepts and objects as new information emerge in progress from the exploration and the data analysis. However, nowadays the study of submerged or hidden practices is becoming much more difficult in comparison with the early days of digital studies. First, it is not possible anymore to easily gather data from the Social Networks and the web scraping software are not allowed to extract information from the personal profiles or from the closed communities because of privacy reasons. The narrowing of the available information reduces the gnoseological scope of Digital Methods.

The second issue regards the access to the online communities. Gaining access to a community is one of the most important research steps in ethnography: a strategic moment that may influence the success or failure of the research. As for ethnographic studies, digital ethnography is exposed to the risk of failure because a field may be difficult to be entered or because

researchers are no able to create trustful relationship with members (Hammersley, Atkinson, 2007; Addeo et al., 2020). In fact, the process of gaining access has been not easy in our study: many online social spaces we have targeted did not allow us to enter, because the access was inhibited to those not belonging to the offline communities. And, without leaving out the main issue, with a covered approach in which we do not state our research intent, this kind of claim cannot be achieved presumptively.

Lurking might allow researchers to overcome this problem to some extent, but it is a practice considered by many scholars to be controversial and ethically ambiguous. In fact, according to many scholars (such as Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Hine, 2005; Bell, 2001; Heath et al., 1999; Garcia et al., 2009) lurking is not a "proper" ethnography, it is considered as a one-way process of appropriation does not provide any deep understanding of the investigated phenomena. However, there are also researchers who believe lurking should be the norm for Digital Ethnography as it reduces the danger of biases caused by the presence of the researcher (Paccagnella, 1997; Beaven, Laws 2007; Hewer, Browmlie 2007; Puri 2007; Langer, Beckmann, 2005). According to us, lurking should be used carefully by digital researchers and with an exploratory purpose, especially when dealing with sensitive topics and with hidden or restricted access communities.

The third reflection involved the chosen digital scenario. Multi-functional platforms, such as Facebook, have multiple channels of communication (public posts, but also private chat conversations and private messages). This implies that what is observable on the screen, therefore usable through the digital ethnographic approach, can be misleading, or at least provide a partial image. For example, basing the analysis only on observation, a user may seem inactive or sporadic on Facebook. The same user, indeed, could be very active in sending private messages and chatting with their connections (Varis 2016; Addeo et al. 2020) or, at list with the members of online communities.

This leads to a negative consequence: it is not possible to analyze the motivations behind the practices and interactions in the online communities, unless they are clearly expressed publicly; and this is not common, especially in online communities built around sensitive topics. And this is undoubtedly the greatest limitation in the claim of using the digital approach to enter the complex and delicate object of analysis elected as the focus of this study.

All these limitations when using Digital Ethnography calls for the implementation of a Mixed Method approach as it is the best solution for overcoming the weaknesses and the limitations that all the social research methods have. A mixed method that combines Hine's inspired virtual perspective and Roger's digital perspective into an online ethnographic research experience which essentially means overcoming the limits of intrusiveness and

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unobtrusiveness, of production and collection of data, i.e. by directly interviewing, recovering the fundamental component of feedback from the observed and co-production of meaning in the process of signification of the produced results in the classical spirit of an anthropocentric approach.

For all these reasons, the study presented here cannot be considered conclusive with respect to the field of investigation; it is a first exploratory and methodologically critical approach to the investigation of a complex phenomenon, digital dark tourism, in a multifaceted scenario, the digital one, during a unique historical moment, the COVID-19 pandemic.

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