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# *Prohibitions, Pleasures, and Disasters: Entering the Online “Red zone” as an Experience of Digital Dark Tourism in Time of COVID-19*

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## **Abstract**

On February 2020, the Sars-Cov-2 reached Europe striking in Northern Italy. On February 21<sup>st</sup>, the police began to set manned checkpoints around quarantined towns: *Codogno*, *Vo'Euganeo*, and other 9 municipalities near Lodi district borders were renamed as “*zone rosse*” (*red zones*), and heavy mobility restrictions were applied”. The situation consequently has shaped the social media discourse: Facebook groups originally describing the peaceful daily life of the red zone became privileged arenas to understand the *lockdown* experience. This paper aims at understanding if *dark tourism* activities, defined as tripping to «places that either witnessed or represent death, destruction, suffering, or calamity (McDaniel, K., 2018, p.2), took place on the Facebook pages of the red zone cities, by analyzing the online behaviors and the interactions of out-of-towner people who joined these groups at the beginning of the lockdown period. Research design adopts a Digital Ethnography approach using unobtrusive techniques to test the paradigmatic application of digital methods. The results of our research aim to recreate the history of the action practiced through the Social Networks and will shed light on the culture and social implications of behaving and interacting online during an unforeseen event, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Digital dark tourism, Facebook group, Italian red zone.

## **1. Digital social groups in times of pandemic: philanthropic purpose or a renewed interest in the tourism of the disaster?**

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 21<sup>st</sup>, the police began to set manned checkpoints around quarantined towns: *Codogno*, *Vo' Euganeo*, and other 9 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, named after expressions like “You are from (name of the place) if...”, originally created to describe the peaceful daily life of the red zone towns, suddenly became 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, when we stepped into these groups while analysing the social media discourse on COVID-19, we found that several out-of-towners joined some red zones' Facebook groups. This event has inspired our research interest to discover who are the out-of-towners who joined these groups at the beginning of the lockdown period and what drives them to enter these virtual spaces and if this process: a genuine and selfless sense of solidarity and closeness, or an unhealthy attraction to a place where there is suffering and pain, also known in literature as Dark Tourism.

## **2. Theoretical framework: 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), in fact, 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, that differs from an epidemic because does not involve only a country or a continent, but the entire world, can 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 the places affected by other disasters, such as the natural ones, however with a noteworthy difference. The places of the disaster that classically have a physical practicability (think, for example, at a place involved in an earthquake and the fact that people

can walk through the rubble once they were made safe), during a pandemic government restrictions to the mobility make these places physically inaccessible. Therefore, just as the places of the pandemic become places of disaster, the impossibility visits them leads people to find other ways of accessing them: the digital places.

Following the vision of Urry, this interest in visit 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, p. 2). Other scholars (see among Brown, 1996; Bruner, 2005; Cohen, 2007; Kaussen, 2015; MacCannell, 2011; Reisinger and Stetner, 2006) agree to this considering tourism as a practice that search for the authentic spectacle in ‘other’ places and concerning the tourist’s experience diversified by mass communication in different vocations, i.e. educational tourism, ecological tourism and as well, 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.

Among the other scholars, McDaniel (2018, p.2) defines the theoretical frame 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 not physical tourism experience enhances the illusion of authenticity through techniques adopted by users and permits their interactions with environments (MacCannell, 1976): disaster and dark Tourists encounter with 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 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'» (2011, pp. 5-8), 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, p.42).

Internet, in this way, has drawn spaces and languages for relations, actions and practices: the digital scenario without doubts has been very significant in last 20 years 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) adding the virtual power to the experience repertoire actually no more physical-exclusive. It is precisely for these reasons that we propose a new transition from disaster or dark tourism to disaster or dark digital tourism in pandemic era.

### 3. Tourism moves to the Net

The digital era enforces the idea of connection between internet and territories, thanks to tailor-made information produced by user's history, geolocate and available online. To better understand this change, and specifically if it can be actually contemplated the online switch of the tourism experience, is necessary to adopt a methodological approach related to the Net logic and useful to retrace the users movements and their actions (Marres, 2017; Lupton, 2014). To this purpose, it is useful to adopt the vision of Rogers (2009) that overcomes the idea of *cyberspace* and Virtual methods, because they are limited to the transposition of classical research actions and techniques on the web (in the way that e.g. the survey becomes the web survey, the interview becomes the web interview, etc.). Considering the Web also as a source of meanings in the only perspective of web native elements that, adequately analysed, permit to recreate a new internet story from the inside of the device and its own agency, «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, p.14).

The digital experience can be so 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 relations not concerning the subjects only in a place as the virtual world (Consolazio, 2017, p. 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). 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<sup>1</sup> perspective. The social practices and actions shown through multimedia platforms in terms of 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. For more scholars (Murthy, 2008; Postill & Pink, 2012; Rogers, 2013) the digital vocation of the ethnographic method is usually applied for social media analysis purposes referring to posted contents in a double categorization (Lupton, 2014; Marres, 2017). The collectible material can in fact be placed on a *continuum* featured by the users' role and contribution in terms of sense production: *provoked and user generated data*. The former concern all the information needed to understand a social setting in a fieldwork switched to online (web survey responses, web-interviews reports, non-participant observation fieldnotes and so on) or all those information that comes from any sources such as books, TV programs, movies which further become useful for online content analysis. The latter, also known as *digital native data*,

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<sup>1</sup> Post-demographics could be thought of as the study of the personal data in social networking platforms, and, in particular, how meta-profiling (Rogers, 2004) is, or may be, performed with which findings as well as consequences ([https://digitalmethods.net/Digitalmethods/PostDemographics#Post\\_45demographics](https://digitalmethods.net/Digitalmethods/PostDemographics#Post_45demographics) 63).

concern traces left by users during their online activities which produce original empirical elements not attributable to previous approaches, but produced by the natural structure and dynamics of the net and thus connected to the new idea of grounded web<sup>2</sup> (Padricelli, Punziano and Saracino, 2021). In the case of our research activities we 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, p. 25).

Post-demographics and Digital Ethnography allow us to focus on contents rather than individuals, so the main research question aims at shedding light about how dark tourism is experienced online, 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. The final aim is to understand if social media are places where the practice of dark tourism could be performed in its digital form in the way of «be in a place without being in a place» (MacCannell, 2011, p. 2)? In order to address our research questions, we selected three Facebook groups focused on daily life of two towns that on March become the first Italian red zones: “Quelliche a Vo’...” (Those who in Vo’...), “Sei di Vo’ se...” (You are from Vo’ if...), “Sei di Codogno se...” (You are from Codogno if ...).

#### 4. Results and discussion

The observation of the selected Facebook groups began jointly when the first red zones were set-up (on March 10<sup>th</sup>) by requiring access to these groups, without revealing our identities as researchers, because we do not want to spread in the groups the idea of being observed. If this may pose some ethical concerns and has limited access to the various existing groups (initially the registration requests were made to many more groups - to be exact, a dozen - but only three accepted the registration of a person not resident in the towns), on the other hand, allowed us to carry out a first statement: even access to the digital tourists of the disaster could be inhibited by not belonging to those communities, unless they present themselves as citizens.

*Tab. 1 – Research steps*

Research steps	
1	Finding pages
2	Access request as soon as the red zone is established
3	Identification of out-of-towner subjects
4	Identification of practices/actions/tracks to be observed
5	Research questions formulation on digital dark tourism

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rogers (2013, p. 46) proposes a «research practice that can learn from device methods, reworking it for new purposes in order to confirm the assertions about cultural change and social conditions throughout web data and introducing the expression of online groundedness».

The subsequent phase of research consists of a first recognition of the presence of out-of-towner people who joined these groups at the beginning of the lockdown period attesting the plausibility to find people how practice digital dark tourism.

During the recognition we found and selected 37 users responding to these characteristics for the Facebook group “Quelli che a Vo’...”, 32 for “Sei di Vo’ se...” and 44 for “Sei di Codogno se...” for a total of 113 individuals duly detected inspecting the subscription lists of each group. The non-probabilistic sampling involved all the users who deliberately featured their profile with the dwelling information and who joined this group from the day Codogno and Vo’ Euganeo qualified as *Red Zones*. Among the observed groups we found only 3 mutual out-of-towners simultaneously subscribed on at least 2 of them. All the users selected come from different Italian regions: in terms of spatial coverage, in fact, the out-of-towner subscriptions of each group are well balanced among North, Center and South of Italy.

The personal characteristics of identified profiles show an equal distribution for gender, with an age that usually is more than 35 years.

The identification of selected users and their characteristics has been profoundly necessary for the *post-demographical* approach in to identify traces, practices, and actions. The observed posting activity of the out-of-towners users is scarce. In 4 months, in fact, there are only 59 posts in total that show *alurking* vocation with a poor engagement from other users, mostly characterized by like reactions and few comments. The poor post features are distinguished as short in length and mainly regarding solidarity, support and charity topics as well the willingness for security supply donations as masks, sanitary lotions etc.

All these reflections together lead us to formulate precise questions that must direct our gaze as researchers in order to be able to understand if, where, how and in what way the digital tourism phenomenon of the disaster/pandemic is configured. Have the physical spaces been replaced by the digital ones, and have, in this case, the digital vocation of dark tourism been carried out? Which are the reasons that push users based outside the red zones to have a shared daily experience with locals? The study of the actions and interactions will be useful to reply to these questions but, in this case, the efforts of our further research steps must focus on the *non-action*. The lurking activity, intended as no (inter)action of out-of-towner in these groups, suggests the exclusion of philanthropic reasons of their tourism practice (as instead shown by few contents posted), and open to any other not yet evident reasons that stimulate their tourism experience. Sotiriadis and Van Zyl (2013) argue about the differences of people who lurk and post, acknowledging the role of not participant behaviour as no negative and unequivocal allowed, influenced and transformed by the rise of social media and its interactive power.

Thanks to Bishop (2007), in fact,, we know how non-actions are needs and goals driven on the base of the share values and beliefs among users. Following MacCannell (2011, pp. 5-8) for what concern Dark Tourism experiences, including the case of digital transposition outlined in this work, we can hypnotize the *lurkers* non-action featured by the desire of «connection with someone or something ‘other’» in the way that «how inhabiting such digital shared social spaces impacts everything from decision-making to experience and shared experience within the realm of dark tourism» (Bolan and Simone-Charteris, 2018, p. 743).

The results of this first inspection highlight the assumption of this 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 in 1976. The authenticity question, attested in the sociological paradigm and tourism literature (see among Cohen, 2007; Reisinger and Stetner 2006), has been shaped in different vocations, among which the simulating authenticity. In his critique of post-modernity, Bruner (2005, p. 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 (2005) in a simulation that, following Brown (1996), can achieve the stave of hyper reality where emerges a genuine fake completely real. How is possible to understand if and how a lurking tourism experience is a genuine tourism experience?

Cohen (2007, p. 77) helps to reply 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, p. 151).

The web scraping tools at the service of digital social research does not allow the inspection of personal profiles of social media users because of privacy reasons. In this way the ethics topic related to the web shadowing of the individual's trough the adoption of an equally lurking behavior opens the next step to the hardest challenge for the deepening of the case.

In conclusion, this first explorative work tested the effectiveness of the exclusive application of the digital ethnographic method, outlining unambiguous limits for the research purposes.

For this reason, a follow-up of this exploration is duly required and needs to follow a complementary application of different ethnographic application both digital and related to the traditional or to the netnographic way as well.

For the latter, the right way to proceed forces the researchers in availing of the classical techniques related to the qualitative approach.

First of all, interacting with the groups admins to comprehend if and how they realized the Dark tourism occurrence in the online spaces they manage and then if and how they detected out-of-towner lurkers.

Later, availing of the admis as gatekeepers, by a snow-ball sampling procedure (Coleman, 1958), we wonder to directly approach lurkers through semi-structured interviews and shed light about needed analytical dimension helpful to reply our research questions as i.e. their most interested features to read, their visiting experience in the selected groups, if and to which other local users they get in touch by a direct interact and finally what they learn about the emergency situation attending this groups.

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