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Music Collectivities and MySpace: Towards Digital Collectives

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Abstract

Music collectivities have been changed by the use of digital technologies in terms of more flexibility among participants. This claim is so widely shared, that understanding if and how it makes sense is a difficult but engaging task. Unfortunately, the concepts used to frame music collectivities until now result unsatisfying for their different degrees of fixity. As a theoretical solution, we move to the concept of “digital collective” as considered in reference to the case of music collectivities on the social network site MySpace. We argue that this concept is a starting point for an analysis that focuses on the processes of collective construction, without a priori assumptions on the collectivities. In the example considered, the flexibility of the concept is shown as powerful both in understanding the technological involvement and in relating it to non-technological processes. So, thinking in terms of digital collectives introduces a degree of flexibility, as well as a way to understand stabilized situations, that opens up space for more empirical research.

1. Introduction

Contemporary definitions of music collectivities in the Internet-related world are unsatisfying, so we need to think about them in a more process-oriented way, that is framing them as digital collectives. This is what we argue in this paper, having two starting points: first, the emergence of the Internet in the music world has been associated to claims about deep changes, mainly from a marketing oriented perspective, changes that relate to the enhanced fluidity in the music world; second, the concepts used in literature about music collectivities are unable to grasp the complexity of the collectivities themselves, mainly because those concepts have some kind of (different) presumptions

about the features of these collectivities and on the roles of their members, that make it difficult to understand whether the marketing claims about change are effectively taking place, and through which processes.

The contemporary spread of technologies that are named as “Web 2.0” has been associated by the computer industry to profound changes in the way people relate to the web [31]. The media industry, for example, with reference to concepts as “user generated content”, appears to be one of the most effected by technological change, with particular emphasis on the relationships between music producers and listeners, or changes in the path of fame construction among musicians. As an example of this claims, Wikipedia states, in relation to MySpace.com (hence MySpace), that “The availability of music on this website continues to develop in the foundation of young talent. Over eight million artists have been discovered by MySpace, and many more continue to be discovered daily.” [2].

This paper is focused on understanding which could be the most fruitful concept to understand the ensemble of people sharing music-related interests, such as production, consumption, and distribution, which we preliminary define as music collectivities. Our argument is that the concepts traditionally used to frame music collectivities, as subcultures, tribes, scenes, as well as new concepts, like “networked collectivism”, are not able to grasp the complexities of group construction into the web-mediated music world. Thus, we hereby develop and propose the concept of “digital collective” that can underline the processes related to these collectivities, without taking for granted some of their features. The question becomes then: what does it mean to think about musical collectivities in terms of digital collectives?

To answer this question, we need to proceed according to the following path: first, we will discuss

how literature on music collectivities has framed them, showing why the proposed concepts are differently inadequate to our aim; second, we will introduce the concept of “digital collective” as an adaptation of the Latourian “collective” [27]; contextually, we will show some examples related to the case of Myspace as a way to show the potentialities of the use of “digital collective” as an interpretative and descriptive concept.

2. Literature Review

As mentioned in the previous section, after a review of the terms “online” and “virtual community”, we will consider here the concepts that have been used in literature in order to address music collectivities, and showing why it is not reasonable to adopt them in our study.

2.1. Community, Virtual community, Online community: a problematic starting point

Collectivities of people interacting in a computer-mediated way are usually addressed as digital communities, that have alternatively been called online communities [3, 4, 23, 24], or virtual communities [46].

In sociological literature, the term community goes back to 1887, when Tonnies [35] proposed this concept (*gemeinschaft*) as opposed to that of society (*gesellschaft*). In his opinion, the members of a community share norms and values, and the collective interest is more important than the personal ones [35]. Other classic sociological authors (I.e. Durkheim [14] and Weber [37]) have considered the topic of community, which today is defined as follows: “A collectivity can be defined as a community when its members act both towards other members and non-members as well, by giving priority to the norms, values and interests of the collectivity instead of personal or other collectivities' interests[...]" [16: p. 266].

The term community has been long discussed in literature, so that its meaning blurred. This fuzzy boundaries of the definition became even more blurred with the Internet, when scholars started to consider the development of communities on the web. The term was then revisited, and what scholars mainly underlined was that communities could exist on line, with the only difference of sharing a feeling or interest instead of a geographical space [21 p. 44].

The most important author who discussed a computer-mediated version of community was Rheingold [46], that suggested the concept of *virtual community*: “The Net is an informal term for the loosely interconnected computer networks that use CMC technology to link people around the world into public discussions.

Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” [46: p. 5].

Rheingold has been criticized [15] for being too optimistic about the potentialities, mainly in political senses, of these communities. In fact, the author himself takes a less utopian vision in other parts of his work, where he considers some critical aspects [21]. For example, he underlines that not every collectivity takes the shape of a community¹. Also, despite addressing these as virtual communities, the author does not mean to consider them as opposed to real ones: on the contrary, he highlights how close and related online and offline ties are.

Besides *virtual*, collectivities on the Internet have been alternatively called *online communities*.

Main authors that contributed to the debate about online communities are Jones [23, 24, 25, 26], Van Dijk [36] and Baym [3, 4, 5].

Online communities emerge as:

- not sharing a physical place
- identified by a a common interest (cultural, social, etc.
- tied to offline relationships
- having different structures, objectives, participants, relationship, norms, etc. [21: p. 49]

This definition is quite blurred in respect to the amount of literature about this topic, and still there is discussion about whether the original meaning of the term community could actually be represented in its online version [6: p.23].

Besides that, our concern is about the usefulness of the concept of online or virtual communities in order to address the music collectivities on social networking

¹ "When you think of a title for a book, you are forced to think of something short and evocative, like, well, 'The Virtual Community,' even though a more accurate title might be: 'People who use computers to communicate, form friendships that sometimes form the basis of communities, but you have to be careful to not mistake the tool for the task and think that just writing words on a screen is the same thing as real community.'" - HLR (preface of the electronic version, <http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/intro.html>)

sites. Can these collectivities reasonably be addressed as communities? Not straightforwardly.

Indeed, members of a social networking site are part of a community in a broad sense, since they are necessarily registered to the website, and therefore they share a common platform, with its structure and norms. But, if we refer to the community in its sense of strong sharing of feelings and interests, it is difficult to take as a starting point the idea that millions of users go online for a common interest and not according to personal courses of action. Moreover, members of different communities overlap, and it is difficult to highlight the boundaries of all of them.

We are not arguing that communities online do not exist, or that social networking sites do not give rise to these collectivities. We are assuming that virtual communities online must be defined, and they are not good as a starting point for approaching our object of study, since we are looking at music collectivities without the a priori assumption that its members are part of a community.

For these reasons we discharge this term as a starting analytical concept, and we will now propose a review of the concepts that have been employed in literature to address music collectivities, in order to discuss their adoption in a study of social network sites.

2.2. “Subculture” and the focus on hegemony

The first analytical label that was attached to music collectivities is that of “subculture”, a term introduced by Hebdige in 1979 [18], that was framed in the subcultural theory developed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS).

As noted by Bennett [8], the studies developed within this subcultural theory are aimed at understanding deviancy of “style-centered youth culture”, and “subcultures are seen to form a part of an on-going working-class struggle against the socio-economic circumstances of their existence” [8: pp.600-601]. In other words, the Marxist approach that is typical of CCCS shows subcultures as a group of people (mainly men), that share a fixed set of elements as socio-economic class, musical taste, and preferred style. This groups are considered in contrast with the dominant culture, thereby developing a counter-hegemonic attitude and deviant behaviors.

This is underlined also by Nogie and Riley [30: pp. 318], who underlined both how intrinsic the counter-hegemonic element is to the concept of subculture, and how necessary it is to overcome its inherent limits, since the contestation of hegemonic values must not be

taken as granted for all the participants to such a music collectivity. Bennett and Peterson [10] justify their discharge of the term subculture because it “presumes that a society has a commonly shared culture from which the subculture is deviant [...] we avoid “subculture” because it presumes that all of a participant's action are governed by subcultural standards” [10: p. 3].

One even stronger critique to the term subculture comes from a very insightful article by David Hesmondhalgh [19], who is himself trying to find a proper concept in order to address music collectivities. Hesmondhalgh agrees with Bennett in criticizing this concept, but he provides different arguments. In fact, while the latter objects to the contradictory use of the term and highlights the supposed fixity of these groups, Hesmondhalgh suggests that “We need to know how boundaries are constituted, not simply that they are fuzzier than various writers have assumed” [19: p. 24].

Standing to what mentioned so far, the concept of subculture implies a set of elements that would characterize the considered music collectivity, and these elements are fixed. In order to overcome these limits, two alternatives are presented in literature: that of “neo-tribes”, and the more spread out concept of “scene”.

2.3. “Neo-tribes” and the issue of fixity

The most famous argument in favor of picking the idea of “neo-tribes” instead of that of subculture is represented by the above cited article by Bennett, “Subcultures or Neo-Tribes? Rethinking the relationship between youth, style and musical taste”. [8]

As the title suggests, the author is here engaged in showing how Maffesoli's [29] idea of tribe could better fit the idea of a music collectivity that is not tied to the idea of a “coherent” and “fixed” subset of culture and society. Indeed, what Bennett suggests is that, by referring to a “certain ambience” and “state of mind”, the idea of a neo-tribe (mutated by an adaptation of Maffesoli's work proposed by Hetherington [20]) that re-interprets and re-constructs solidarity and identity, would better fit those music-related collective associations that develop in the contemporary consumer-oriented society. In line with that, Bennett suggests to adopt the notion of *lifestyle*, in opposition to the “structuralist interpretation of social life” that conceives the *way of life* of a collectivity as settled by class conditions. On the contrary, he argues, *lifestyles* refer to a more autonomous action by individuals who,

thanks to their active role in consumerism can more freely negotiate the construction of identity.

Bennett's argumentation presents some problematic points. First, as suggested by Hesmondhalgh [19], it settles its roots in the misleading idea that neo-tribes and subcultures can be straightly cut apart from each other depending on their respective (and presumed) *fixed vs. fluid and unstable* nature. Also, another opposition is mobilized, that between *lifestyles*, related to determination through active consumerism, and the structuralist idea of being bounded by class conditions. What is pointed out in Hesmondhalgh's work is on the one hand that the concept of tribe intrinsically carries that idea of settled boundaries that was actually supposed to overcome, and besides that it is misleading to straightforwardly adapt pre-modern symbols and concepts to the study contemporary phenomena.

In regard to this, it must be pointed out that the sharing of totems and symbols, that is outlined by Maffesoli [29] as one of the defining elements of a tribe, can not be taken as a starting point in approaching a music collective. Indeed, similarly to Gelder and Thornton's argument [17] that the term subculture must be discarded since not all its members share a counter-hegemonic attitude, we can argue that there could be members, or better, actors involved in music collectivities that are not sharing with the others the same exact "totems" or precise symbolic representations.

On the other hand, Hesmondhalgh highlights that considering active consumers is not a successful attempt of overcoming that focus on class dimension that characterized subculture studies.

Indeed, Bennett's endeavor to switch the focus from imposed and fixed class dimensions to an increased amount of agency in negotiating lifestyles and identities due to consumerism seems quite problematic. The reasons of our (and Hesmondhalgh's) perplexities are quite straightforward to grasp: can we actually state that consumerism, just by helping expressing individual styles, is a set of free behaviours that permit to overlook all class-related socio-economic factors? If not, also this latter point of Bennett's argument in favor of "neo-tribes" is weak. And we should therefore look for a more appropriate concept than that to refer to music collectivities.

2.4. "Scene": a concept unable to overcome ambiguity

We just left the vague and problematic concept of "neo-tribes" to reach the even more complicated case

of the "scene". This would sound quite ironic if we add that, as noted by Nogic and Riley [30], the concept of "scene" was taken adapted from Straw [25] by Bennett and Peterson [10], who state that the concept of scene better fits the fluid and interchangeable adoption and discharge of collective identities and scene's standards. In other words, the scene is here set against subculture the same way and for the same reasons "neo-tribes" was. This means that:

1. More and more evidently, the concept of subculture is shown to be inadequate to address these types of collectivities
2. The term neo-tribe, proposed by Bennett is here went over by the same author's (first in [9], then together with Peterson, in [10]) counter-proposal of adopting the term "scene". Therefore, the term neo-tribe can be considered inadequate also in light of a subsequent reflection of the author

The term "scene" would then look as the ultimate solution in order to address those "situations where performers, support facilities, and fans come together to collectively create music for their own enjoyment" [10: pp. 3].

But, as Hesmondhalgh once again highlights, there are problems with adopting this term, as well. he especially focuses his critique on how confusing it has become to talk about "scenes". The term has become very widespread and adopted by the vast majority of scholars in Popular Music Studies, but its meaning is ambiguous. This, also because the progenitors of this term were the above mentioned Straw [25] and Shank [24] who themselves invested the term of (quite) slightly different meanings. In particular, the first would have adopted a Bourdieu-an vision of music as involved in processes of legitimation and prestige, unleashing the term from that relation to a locally-circumscribed physical space that was instead important for Shank.

Besides that, despite the fact that "scene" was proposed as an alternative to the not-appropriate-anymore "subculture", some scholars have confusingly continued to use them interchangeably, or even together, as in the case of Nogic and Riley [30], who argue that, standing to their empirical data, it is has been possible to find both people interpreting their music collectivity as a subculture (focusing on political contestation of hegemony), but they "also found evidence of conflict within the scene itself, and that latter conflict concerned precisely the struggle for definition of the scene and its meaning to participants" [30: pp. 318]. This would mean that, depending on the

case considered or on the aspects highlighted, it is appropriate to talk about subculture or scene, or -as in the case of the mentioned authors- “subculture/scene”. Actually, some pages later in the same article we find the authors engaged in an advocacy for facing that “we are in a period “after subculture” and need new and more sophisticated tools to make sense of what is happening in contemporary youth culture”. [30: p. 326]. And the term “scene” is the suggested solution, because of its ability to represent a “more partial sense of attachment” to the collectivity.

The ambiguity shown in this article is an example of what Hesmondhalgh argues against the adoption of “scene”: this term came to light in the early '90s by two authors that already put some different nuances in its meaning. In the years to come, the term “scene” was adopted in almost every Popular Music Study involving youth, but the meanings attached to the term were different, contingent, and therefore confusing, and sometimes overlapping with “subculture”.

Indeed, as Cohen [13] underlines, what emerges from Bennett and Peterson's famous book about *Music Scenes* [10] is that these “emerge from specific contexts related to tensions between hegemonic structure and subcultural resistance [10, 25, 27]”. Here again we see how difficult it is to think of scenes independently from a subcultural point of view, and it is then shown how unsuccessful was the effort of adopting the first in place of the latter.

Finally, the concept of “scene” was declined by Bennett and Peterson [10] in “local”, “translocal” and “virtual”, addressing respectively: geographically-located, more scattered, and Internet-based scenes evolving around a “distinctive form of music and lifestyle” [10: p. 6].

Despite our attention to Internet-based music collectivities, it is for the aforementioned reasons that we discharged the adoption of the term “scene”, also in its “virtual” version, for our study.

2.5. “Networked collectivism”: almost there, but not there, yet.

We will take here into account the insights offered by a very interesting and well written article by Nancy Baym [7], in order to highlight a set of concepts and arguments that get closer to our view, but that are still unable to fit our approach.

The first, strong, argument expressed by Baym [7], is that music fans that take part to online communities are not merely involved in on line activities, but they are

also engaged in off line activities like “local fandom-building in their hometowns” [7: p.8].

The co-existence of these two dimensions was underlined also by Nogie and Riley [30] that proposed to talk of a mix of local and virtual scenes that they named “loctual”.

In other words, it is not reasonable to approach on line activities of music collectivities despite considering the off line side of the coin, an argument that we share.

Later on in her work, Baym puts forward the expression “networked collectivism” for addressing the set of practices, exemplified by the Swedish music fans she studied, “in which loose collectives of associated individuals bind networks together”[7: p. 9].

“Networked collectivism” is used by the author in opposition to those notions of “egocentric networks” [11] and “networked individualism” [38] that are considered typical of the Web 2.0 generation, with special regard to the development and spread of social networking sites. In other words, against the shared idea that the broad use of social networking sites brought people (and music fans) to emerge as “basic units” rather than aggregating in communities, Baym points out that collectivities like on line communities did not disappear, but they “are taking a new form somewhere between the site-based online group and the egocentric network, distributing themselves throughout a variety of sites in a quasi-coherent networked fashion”.

So, in their on line dimension, music collectivities would spread their actions and practices among a multiplicity of sites, becoming some sort of individuals connected to each other in different ways. These connections do not stop to the on line dimensions, but both are carried out as both individual and collective practices offline as well.

Under all these points of view, we completely agree with Baym's arguments. Not only she is able to overcome all those labels like subculture, neo-tribe, scene whose discharge we already carefully motivated, but she strongly argues against newer concepts, that were coined in the light of the relationship of music with Web 2.0 technologies. Nonetheless, we feel like raising a couple of doubts about her work on “the multinational online community of Swedish independent music fans” [7: p.1].

First, given her arguments which we already outlined, it becomes problematic to address that collectivity as an “online community”. Second, and more important to our argumentation, the author focus on “online music fandom” seems to be perfectly

reasonable in a context of fandom studies, but it would not fit our approach.

Indeed, starting to look at music collectivities as “fan communities” would mean both to restrict our object of study to one part of all those music-related actors that use MySpace, and it would also display an assumed belief about the existence of specific roles within the world of music. Indeed, as observed by Baym herself, these roles are becoming less and less defined and more blurred. She states that “To a modest extent, fans have always been publicists, but there were clear lines between those who did so professionally and fans. That is changing. Furthermore, fans are using the Internet to publicize and distribute pop culture materials across international boundaries in ways that reshape traditional markets. The relationships amongst fans, performing artists, and industries are changing. Burnett and Wikström [12] claim that independent record labels are often at the forefront of change. Labels and independent artists in scenes like this provide early models of how roles will be reshaped in this new ecosystem” [pp. 8-9].

One final critique, moved again by Hesmondhalgh [19] to the studies on music collectivities, has to deal with the role of youth. Generally, he argues, it would be appropriate to start thinking of separating these two fields, or at least, not to give for granted their mutual dependence on each other.

In conclusion, in the light of all the critiques and problematic questions raised in this paragraphs, we here argue the need for addressing music collectivities in a new way. Clearly, by discharging the above mentioned terms, we do not mean that they are “wrong” or intrinsically problematic, but rather that they are unable to fit our approach to the case of music collectivities moving in the Web 2.0 space.

In light of all we argued in these paragraphs, it seems then quite reasonable to us to adopt in our research two starting points:

1. There is a collectivity of music-related people interacting with and through technologies, *but*
2. It is not reasonably arguable to refer to this collectivity with those a-priori assumptions that underlie all the above mentioned and criticized concepts.

Thus, in order to both somehow address this collectivity, and at the same time starting to look at it *in action* without taking for granted some of its features, we came up with the term “digital collective”, drawing from Bruno Latour's discourse about the “collective”, which is extensively discussed in the following paragraphs.

3. Digital Collective, or the processes of collectivity construction

In 1999, Bruno Latour's *Politiques de la Nature* [28] introduced the concept of “collective”. The book dealt with the debate about the shape and course of action that political ecology has to take for rebuilding the ensemble of entities that inhabit the contemporary world. Latour considered different lines of thought in respect to the modern distinction between nature and culture as specific domains for the practice of science and politics. That attempt was connected with an ongoing thirty-year old debate in the field of Science and Technology Studies, aiming at revealing the political character of scientific and technological advancement, like testified by the contribution by Langdon Winner, “Do Artefacts Have Politics?” [39] and Joerges “Do Politics Have Artefacts?” [22] to the Latourian “Which Artifacts for which Politics?” [27]. The political role of scientific and technological artifacts seems today quite obvious, but the definition of the characteristics of this role are still part of an ongoing debate.

To overcome the impasse of a distinction between science as the place for facts and politics as the place for value, Latour's proposal is to focus on the development of our common world as it is a collective, or better as it is the continuously changing result of the work of collective construction [28].

Our argument is that, if we do not consider music collectivities as the result of a work of collective construction, we will end up in one of the a priori assumptions that we criticized about the labels previously used to identify and research those collectivities. As we saw, these premises mainly concern some presumed features of these collectivities, and the more or less fixed roles of their participants. Instead, we aim at questioning the same processes through which it happens to have a collectivity in some guise. So, in order to understand the construction and characteristics of music collectivities, we stand in favor of focusing on the processes that Latour pointed out as the processes constructing the general collective.

When inquiring a collectivity, one of the first questions is about “who and what” could be part of the collective, as well as who and what could not. It is a work of boundaries construction and at the same time a work of considering that there is something outside the collective that introduces *perplexities* about the selection of the participants, and their adherence to a principle of realism in looking at the world. So, the first

task required for understanding music collectivities as collectives is understanding which practices enact the processes: of creation of the external, of mobilization of the internal, and of questioning the boundaries.

Let us take as an example the technological inscriptions [1] related to the access to profiles, blogs, or friendships. The homepage of every MySpace profile is visible to all the Internet surfers bumping into it. On the contrary, for viewing all the blog entries, the complete lists of friends (besides those publicly displayed in the “top friends” list), and the uploaded images and videos, people need to be registered to the site and own themselves a profile.

The technical barrier of registration and login has a role in separating members from non-members, but also logged and non-logged ones. This feature of the software infrastructure clearly sets the borders between who is part of the collectivity and who is not. Also, similar features are the different types of profile available: personal and music profile. The main difference stands in the availability, in the latter case, of the opportunity to upload music files, that will be visualized in one's homepage in form of a media player. Once the type of profile is chosen, it cannot be changed. There is then a visible split-up between who is inside the music part of the collectivity and who is out of it.

Another feature of MySpace that helps keeping the members of one collective separate from others, is the mechanism of friendship. Indeed, since MySpace is “a place for friends”, you need to ask and be accepted as other people's “friend” for fully visualize their profiles and interact with them.

The processes enacted by these technological barriers keep the members of the collectivity aware of the existence of a different world out there. In other words, the process of *perplexity* is carried out.

Once we understand who or what can participate, the second step towards an understanding music collectivities as collectives is comprehending which activities the participants are legitimate to carry on, depending on their constructed *pertinence*. This means to understand the practices that organize the way participants could speak, that is understanding how the members of a collective could influence the process of construction of the same collective, depending on how the *pertinence* of the speaker to the decision about the collective is constructed.

The already cited friendship negotiation is another preliminary example of when the process of *pertinence* is at stake. To become formal members of MySpace, a simple registration is enough, no consultation needed.

But in order to decide whether to include new people in a collective, a precise procedure takes place.

First of all, friendship between two profiles is explicitly negotiated: a friendship request is sent, and it can be followed by an acceptance. In this case, the netiquette prescribes that a public comment is posted to say “thanks for the add”. When requesting somebody's friendship, it is also possible to send her/him a message. In this case, the selection of new people is at stake, and it undergoes a precise set of phases.

This procedure clearly involves a set of criteria used to define *pertinence*. The people we are preliminarily interviewing (bands and a music producer) said that they usually use three criteria for deciding whether to add somebody as a friend or to request their friendship:

- appeal of the avatar and webpage (nice picture, good looking person)
- “interesting” profile (meaning by that a profile of someone that can result “useful” for them. Usefulness generally depend on the occupation or network of people related to the one considered. Also, common interests are considered), and reputation (when somebody is common friends with one of our friends or somebody we would like to become friends with).

Once we understand who can participate to the collective, and how the legitimacy to speak about the future development of the same collective has been constructed, a problem of ordering emerges. How do the members of the collective create a *hierarchy* among the possible alternatives in selecting the participants, in deciding which future they want to enact for themselves?

In the practices of friendship we can find an example of the processes of hierarchy at stake. Usually, friends are then put in one specific order. MySpace allows indeed to have a “top friends” list. It started as “top 8”, while today it goes from “top 4” to “top 32”. This is a section of the homepage where some of our friends' avatars are selected and sorted by ranking. This is a very special part of every profile, since it is a place where reputation is simultaneously offered and looked for/gained. Some interviewees declared that they normally use their friends' “top friends” for finding new people to add, but also for deciding whether to accept friendships or not.

In this set, *pertinence* and *hierarchy* are both at stake. It is in fact negotiated the appropriateness of somebody for becoming part or continue belonging the collective (friends can be deleted). At the same time, the selected friends are graphically displayed in order of importance. Usually, the more friends one person/band

has in total, the more prestigious is to be put in hers/his “top friends” list. Also, there are important interactions going on in music profiles. The interviewed band members told that they use the band profile not as a personal one, displaying in the “top friends” those people that are closer to the band. This means that band profiles are managed in a more public way, becoming sorts of public arenas where, facing the judgment of the profile's visitors, bands use their reputation and supposed competence in order to set a hierarchy of other people's profiles. Personal profiles that belong to a band's “top friends” get then to be accepted inside the music collectivity, and they are given a specific place in a *hierarchy*.

The last process in the collective construction draws on the fact that participants need to make the outcome of all those processes quite stable and durable, reducing the possibility for newcomers to continuously re-discuss what has been achieved via negotiations, arguments, and conflicts. The task of *institutionalizing* the results shows up, to avoid that perplexities undermine the order so difficultly achieved.

Friendship practices are a good example also for this process. “Top friends” can be modified in every moment, and some are actually changed quite often, while others are more stable. One of the interviewees underlined the usability of this website. He said that “the winning element of MySpace is that you can keep it updated, way more easily than with old-style homepages”. Also, public comments referring directly to “top friends” are often displayed: users send public comments to complain about not being in someone's “top” or explicitly asking for inclusion. Users of MySpace perceive the fluidity of this website, and they seem to take advantage of its easy modifiability by negotiating their position and role in other people's pages. This has to deal with the process of *institutionalization*, which we explained as the fourth step outlined by Latour in the procedure of constructing a collective.

What we could draw from our first data is that institutions are quite stable, and negotiated on an ongoing basis. This apparent oxymoron is easy to clarify: belonging to a collective looks like something that can be stabilized and institutionalized, but the hierarchy seems to be not completely fix. It is actually pretty rare to see people deleted or totally set apart of a network of MySpace friends, but for example, being put in a lower position of a “top friends” means losing reputation and therefore a place in hierarchy. Consequently, the institution itself undergoes a

constant process of check and control by the collective itself.

From this perspective, perplexities and pertinence stand as requirements to answer the question: “how many participants are in the collective?”. While hierarchy construction and institutionalization refer to the complementary question: “how could they live together?”.

If we add “digital” to “collective”, we construct a fairly new concept, that of “digital collective”, and we need to frame it into a specific way of interpreting the processes of collective construction. In our definition “in progress”, we consider digital collectives as *the collectives resulting from construction processes that could be, in a first instance, reasonably understood as strongly involving some kind of digital technology*. This preliminary definition reduces the a priori assumption of causal relationships between the social elements of the collectivities and the technological ones, and it simply works as a way to push the researcher towards finding convincing arguments in favor of a reasonable role of digital technologies in the construction of the collective. The same role of the technology should be faced in the analysis of the same digital collective (that could end up as a “simple” collective, with the reduced role of digital technologies). This standpoint is useful in two ways: first, it obliges us, in line with the recent developments in the studies of science and technology, to consider not only the social ties among participants to a collectivity, but to invoke the participation of technological characteristics as possible actors in the construction of the collective; second, it let us avoid any claim of virtuality or technological determinism in relation to collectivities, making object of inquiry the same claim of “digitalization” of the collective.

Starting with these premises, we are researching the relationship between MySpace and music collectivities, trying to understand them as digital collectives. That MySpace is reasonably involved in the construction of a music collectivity is shown by the numbers of music profiles and by the usual practice, at least in Italy, that musicians have to refer to their web page with a MySpace URL. In relation to this, we are interested in inquiring the way through which the practices of a specific music collectivity participate to the construction of it as a collective. This means that our articulation of the research question on the relationships between MySpace and music collectivities undergoes a specification into more defined question: is MySpace enacting new and

specific practices of perplexities, pertinence, hierarchy, and institutionalization?

Our preliminary results highlight that on MySpace can be quite evidently found an example of digital collectives. We adopted this concept from Bruno Latour, who explain also the four phases of construction which we could see at stake in our empirical research. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the final phase, that of *institutionalization*, seem to work quite a lot in regard to participants, but it is less strict for what concerns human hierarchies. In other words, participants get institutionalized, but human hierarchies are more open to flexibility. This does not mean that hierarchies necessarily change often, but that their stabilization do not exclude a constant check and negotiation of them.

This first conclusions are just a starting point for better knowing what is going on this web platform. Clearly, the four steps of construction of the collective, as well as the collective itself, need to be further investigated in the empirical case. We could shed some light on the existence of these processes on MySpace. Now, more research needs to address *how* they are enacted and appropriated by MySpace users, and with what connection to their offline life.

5. Conclusions

In order to address the computer-mediated interactions going on in social networking sites (such as Myspace) with a special regard to music, we hereby proposed a review of both traditional and quite new concepts on music collectivities. We underlined how all the concepts considered are inadequate starting points for a study aimed at looking at emerging practices in the relationships between the music world and Internet-based technologies known as “Web 2.0”, that are supposed, by marketing claims, to bring with them a deep change in the music world.

Indeed, widespread terms such as “virtual community” and “online community”, as well as that of “neo-tribes”, would spot collectivities of users that share some sort of interest or value, and where the collective interest is considered more important than personal ones: it could then be misleading to think of all the collectivities taking place on social networking sites as communities.

The term “subculture”, widely adopted in cultural studies, also concerning music, is intrinsically characterizing its members for sharing supposed counter-hegemonic values which we could not take for granted in our approach to music collectivities.

Similarly, the concepts of “scene” and “virtual scene”, besides being themselves quite ambiguous, are used to address collectivities of people sharing similar music tastes and lifestyles, which *can* be true in regard to Myspace, but that is *not necessarily* true. Whatever the meaning we want to give to the term “scene”, we could suppose that some people on Myspace share similar music interests, but our research is not aimed at pointing out these collectivities. Therefore we discharged the term “scene” as a starting point.

Finally, we considered a newer concept, that of “networked collectivism”. This concept is used by Baym [7] within the context of fandom studies, and therefore it addresses music collectivities as made up by fans. Given the assumption, shared by the author herself, that the roles within the music world are changing, especially in light of new Internet-related technologies, we argued that a study of fandom would focus on an object of study that is aprioristically limited and set, in spite of the changing context where it takes place.

We are not claiming that the considered concepts could not be useful or appropriate in phase of analysis, but in order to address the processes of collective construction of the world of music on Myspace, we proposed a definition of of music collectivities as “digital collectives”.

This concept is a key that lets researchers start a study of collectivities that is free from the different degrees of fixity presented by the concepts we presented and discarded.

In some points of our work we outlined how the focus should switch from “collective” to “collectiv-ing”, as the work of construction of the collective. Then, we briefly showed how a social networking site as Myspace can be reasonably considered a technological element involved in this construction, that is made up of four main processes: ,perplexities, pertinence, hierarchy, and institutionalization.

In light of the arguments carried on in this work, we claim that the concept of “digital collective” could be useful for scholars that aim to address collectivities on the Web without starting from any a priori assumptions about the members of this collectivity. Moreover, the processes of construction of these collectivities can be a useful guide in the analysis of how digital collectives are set and maintained. We are not claiming that these processes take place anytime and in any case, but rather that the same processes at stake could be under discussion, reducing the a priori assumptions that we understood as the main limitations of the concepts previously used.

This work grows up within the limited context of music collectivities within Myspace, and thus it is not meant as a final solution for studying every collectivity on the Internet. Our aim was to propose new tools in the research, and we hope that more work will be done in order to better clarify:

- whether this concept is useful in other contexts as well
- whether and how the processes outlined in this work can be usefully employed in the study of other digital collectives

In any case, we are convinced that, by giving us more insights on the evolving patterns of practical involvement of music collectivities in relation to the technological use, the concept of digital collective helps taking a step to reduce the a priori assumptions that would risk to mislead research on the new sociotechnical scenarios. We hope that more research in this direction will be done.

7. References

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