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THE COMPLEX SIMPLICITY OF CONTEXT. AFFORDANCES AS FLOWS OF SOCIAL INFORMATION

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Affordances have been understood in a variety of ways, focusing on how they represent possibilities for action on digital spaces, their consequent macro-scale effects (Bucher & Helmond 2018), or their cultural and social embeddedness (Davis & Chouinard 2017). The broad application of affordances reflects, to some extent, broader attempts by a variety of disciplines to mitigate the tension between sociality and technology (e.g., McGrenere & Ho 2000, Evans et al. 2017). However, this foundational tension concurs to obscure some dynamics. Affordances have mostly been employed by considering technical and social aspects, while inextricably linking those dimensions. Considering affordances as flows of social information (see Meyrowitz 1985), that is by focusing on their social, co-constructed, and intersubjective nature, provides a powerful tool to consider social action in digital environments, while at the same time unpacking social and technical components.

This underlines an emphasis on context in two ways. The first relates to the transposition of norms and customs to digital environments (see Marwick & boyd 2011). Considering affordances sociologically allows to give greater weight to social norms and cultural codes, in turn going over situated understandings of the relation between technical features and social action. This emphasizes the contextual nature of the use, understanding, and employment of affordances, as based on individual factors such as proficiency and instrumentality, as well as social and cultural contexts. For example, then, a relatively straight-forward affordance such as metrics can be invested with a variety of meanings based on context. A high number of plays on a song on YouTube might be seen as detrimental, when considering how identities are managed around consumption in specific social niches (such as hipster authenticity, Maly & Varis 2015). Similarly, fragmenting social situations on Facebook might be seen as a normal way of using it, rather than the result of the technical structure of the platform (Costa 2018).

Additionally, underlining how individual factors can affect social action on platforms points at how affordances can aid in structuring social situations on digital environments. In sociology, social situations are based on principles of co-presence that

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put emphasis on the physicality of cues and environments. Said cues transmit social information: that is, they are interpreted by individuals to infer the norms of a specific social interaction, in turn guiding behaviour (Goffman 1974). Several efforts tried to reconceptualize social situations in digital societies, for example considering their intertwining with devices and bits (Knorr Cetina 2009), and even challenging their nature (Marres 2017). Considering affordances as flows of social information, then, contributes to fill this gap by underlining how social media features can act as digital cues and, in turn, structure interaction on digital environments. For example, the emoji of a national flag can acquire a different meaning if used in the United States or Germany, in turn concurring to politically situate the conversation (Kariryaa et al. 2020). The visibility of this cues, and their nature, makes the negotiation and mediation of social norms fluid. Individuals can promote or sanction content based on their individual understanding of what is proper in a specific context, in turn establishing the cultural codes that will drive social action. The number of likes on a selfie, then, can concur to define the standards of beauty of a community on Reddit, affecting how subsequent users will post (van der Nagel 2013).

A sociology of affordances considers how affordances are situated at the intersection between individual, social, cultural, and technical factors. Affordances can be considered socially, as intersubjective and co-constructed features, and individually, as affecting and engendering behaviour. It allows to consider the peculiarity of contexts in two ways: individually, based on how they affect social action as based on individual understandings of platforms and their features, and socially, based on how they affect the definition of a situation based on their intersubjective nature, visibility, and co-construction. Such an understanding has been applied to Reddit and its affordances. Reddit is a content aggregator where users can post a variety of content and comments. The choice is motivated by its affordances: built by user-made communities, Reddit has thousands of subreddits that can vary wildly, as well as present minor variations, such as on moderation policy (Gibson 2019). Additionally, the karma system is a quantification of the reception of a specific piece of content in a given community, in turn regulating its visibility.

The complexity of Reddit provides a privileged ground to explore how users navigate socially and culturally complex digital environments. To do so, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Reddit users from a variety of socio-demographic and geographical contexts, and with various patterns of use. Interviews focused on the navigation of social contexts and norms, social action on digital platforms, and the relationship with the perception of affordances.

Results point at how users lean on individual factors to interpret and define how to properly act in digital environments through affordances, based on intentionality and patterns of use. Affordances are understood and employed relationally to navigate complex social contexts, to infer dominant social norms and cultural codes and, once internalized, are deployed to sanction deviations or promote compliance to them. Expression is modulated based on how social situations are defined: individuals withhold information when it does not suit the context they are currently in, and actively explore new situations to define what and how it is proper to socially act.

This suggests how social situations, rather than being challenged by the complexity of

digital environments, can disentangle social and technical aspects, while emphasizing the social, cultural, and individual factors driving interaction.

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