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Identities, Motivations, Social Representations in Information and Communication Situations and Digital Society

The case of Santiago de Compostela Trippers

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Abstract— Compostela Ways constitute a highly publicised phenomenon of our ultra-modern society corresponding to a long tradition. In an information and communication approach insisting on meaning and interactions, we propose to analyse identities, motivations and social representations of the trippers. We focus on the digital aspects of the Compostela Ways, especially identity, traces and interactions on social networks as a new approach of this social phenomenon, analyzing their importance for the trippers as a specific manner to interact and give meaning to their trip in our individualist and consumerist society.

Keywords: - identities; social representations; digital society; social media; Santiago de Compostela.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Way is a highly publicised phenomenon and it is part of a long tradition that goes back to the XIIth century [1]. After a long period of lethargy, for more than three centuries (1650 – 1980), the interest increased for the past forty years. In 1982, John Paul II was the first Pope to go to Santiago de Compostela. Since this visit, the number of people who obtained the “compostela” increased significantly: from 2491 trippers or hikers in 1985 to 7274 in 1991, 277,854 in 2016 and 301,036 in 2017 from 146 countries. The Compostela is an official certificate given by Santiago’s archbishopric for pilgrims who did at least the last 100 km on foot or horseback, or the last 200 km by bicycle. For this purpose, pilgrims have to collect the stamps on the “Credencial del Peregrino” from the places they pass through to certify that they have been there. We use the words trippers or hikers, rather than pilgrims, which has a religious connotation. These hikers come from Spain (44.01%) Italy (16.06%), Germany (13.78%), USA (10.40%), Portugal (7.68%), France (5.24%), etc. [2]. As shown in the last available statistics, Santiago de Compostela is currently trendy all over the world. In addition to the growth rate of visitors and trippers, this interest is also shown by the number of publications: books, films, newspapers, etc. in various countries and languages.

With the ascent of social media, the community of Santiago de Compostela trippers adopted this mediation tools: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. as it was the case previously with websites.

In this paper, which is the first step in a larger project, we will focus on the digital identity of trippers and the issue of the “trace man”, a concept defined by B. Galinon-Mélenec: “the ‘trace man’ would identify the Human of the 21st century, leaving everywhere traces of his passage and activities, likely tracked by merchants, watched to the detail by observers of all kinds, punished for any deviation to the norm... risking to raise legitimate concerns about the respect of privacy, the respect of individual freedoms and of the ethics” [3]. The virtual community of Compostela hikers, by communicating on Facebook, keep traces related to their experience, but also about their life. These traces allow creating the digital identity of the members of this community. Since the invention of the Internet, this issue has been subject to many publications. For Stutzman “the social network community fosters a more subjective and holistic disclosure of identity information” [4] even though it has been demonstrated that “In cyberspace the economies of interaction, communication, and coordination are different than when people meet face-to-face” [5].

In this paper, we study the presence of this community on Facebook. We address this issue in a multidisciplinary approach with a focus on the social representation theory. In fact “social representations provide criteria for evaluating the social environment that enable determination, justification or legitimization of certain behaviors” [6]. Social representations specify a number of communicative mechanisms explaining how ideas are communicated and transformed into what is perceived as common sense and allows the understanding and interpretation of the digital identity of the Facebook Compostela Pilgrim.

II. METHODOLOGY

In this paper, we focused our study only on francophone Facebook pages considered as a public space. We excluded personal accounts as they belong to the private space as well as Facebook Groups that belong to both private and public spaces with closed and public groups. Our choice is also motivated by the characteristic of a Facebook page. It lets the page owner engage with people on Facebook as anyone can follow a page to get the public updates, even those who are not friends on Facebook.

To find relevant pages, we used the keyword “Compostelle”. We have identified 78 Facebook pages related to our topic, the oldest one dating back to 2008 and being still active.

To be able to evaluate the activity of the selected pages, we used the online tool Likealyzer developed by Meltwater that measure 5 criteria:

- *Frontpage* which gives the first impression concerning the Facebook page.
- *About page*, which should contain milestones that give context of the page and contact information.
- *Activity* which gives the information type (text, photos, or videos), the number of posts per day, events, etc.
- *Response* which measures the interaction with visitors.
- *Engagement* which related to people talking or liking the page.

We will consider the “Compostela phenomenon” in a double perspective: search of meanings and analysis of the interactions between actors: “trippers”, inhabitants and the role of information and communication technologies and social networks in the new sociability of the Compostela Ways. We also have a position of “engaged” or committed researchers [7] because one of the authors accomplished the Santiago de Compostela walk in 2011 and continues his observations and discussions with other walkers, interviews with Tourism Office members, with people in charge of Compostela Walkers’ Associations, by specific documentary resources and by Websites and social media networks.

III. A PUBLICISED PHENOMENON ILLUSTRATING THE CONTRADICTIONS OF OUR SOCIETY

A. *A privileged field to capture social representations and identity*

Compostela Ways constitute a privileged field to clarify two key concepts in human sciences: social representations and identities. As defined by D. Jodelet [8], “social representations constitute an ‘ordinary knowledge’. They describe, explain and recommend. They provide a method to interpret the reality, controlling our environment and driving us in society”. For J.-C. Ruano-Borbalan [9], “we interpret the world continuously in the form of representations that the brain accumulates... they constitute reference mind systems to understand the world around us. The social representations constitute a key concept for Human Sciences that allow the interpretation of the mechanism of intelligence, the ideologies and mentalities.”

B. *The modern individualism crisis: a multiple and burst identity and questioning the sense of existence*

Modernity, which has gradually been affirmed since the beginning of the sixteenth century in the West, has largely corresponded to the development of individualism to the detriment of collective institutions and traditions.

Having become an actor of his life in a secularized society, man has become responsible for his successes, as well as his failures [10]. In a “communicating society, but where people

meet less and less” [11] the individual of social networks corresponds to a “connected individualism” [12], but where the ultra-connection does not prevent loneliness. It is in this context of a crisis of meaning, of “tiredness of being oneself” and of “connected individualism”, that has developed, progressively since the 1980s, the “Compostela phenomenon”, with a lot of ambivalence. This ambivalence corresponds to those of contemporary individualism that we are studying in our work.

IV. DIFFERENT MOTIVATIONS AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS FOR DIFFERENT TYPOLOGIES OF TRIPPERS

According to Santiago’s Archbishopric (2017), the motivations of the hikers obtaining the “Compostela” were religious 130,831 (43.46%), religious and cultural 142,662 (47.39%), only cultural 27,543 (9.15%). The majority of hikers are mainly “cultural hikers” more than pilgrims in the strict sense of the term, that is to say, with mixed religious and cultural motivations and, often the challenge of a personal experience to better understand oneself in interaction with others.

The motivations may be extremely diverse. It is often a willingness to review a turning point in life: divorce, bereavement, retirement or entering the active life for younger adults, especially Spanish. There are also various dimensions of a group trip or an individual trip: to be able to meet others and oneself, walking on a known and valued road linked with past, traditions and cultural heritage.

More generally, motivation is above all a search for meaning, in the ambient materialism of the consumer society. In addition, the motivation is a search for authenticity. We can cite the overworked executive director who forsakes his role, his social and hierarchical positioning for a period. Some may do the Way in response to a wish or for a sick person (intention).

There may also be cultural motivations: the Compostela Ways are a magnificent book of art history: Romanesque, Renaissance (Spanish “Plateresque”) or Baroque, discovery of diverse landscapes, contact with nature, etc. Alternatively, there are also historical and traditional motivations: to walk the routes of thousands of pilgrims who have travelled these paths for more than a millennium.

Up to a certain point, Compostela Ways put the hikers, regardless of their social standing, on an equal footing, dealing with the challenges of a long-distance walk. However, some clues can be significantly revealing. There are those who sleep in the overcrowded refuges, those who prefer private inns and monasteries (more expensive but more comfortable), the various categories of hotels, those who carry all their necessities in their bags, those who have support cars (“coches de apoyo” in Spanish) from family’s support or have received the services of transport companies step by step, etc.

The values of shared meaning and the quality of the relationships that fostered the rise of Christianity twenty centuries ago are reflected in the success of the Compostela

Ways. They create shared meaning and a certain solidarity, often underlined, of people who do not know other people help each other and learn to walk together towards the same goal and sometimes stay together (couples form on the Ways).

The quality of relationships depends on the search for a certain authenticity. The language barrier is often easily overcome, as English has become the common language for the majority of trippers. For P. Nadal [13], “The Way... is not a simple walking way... (it is) an initiatory journey to the interior of oneself that would change the perception of many things... the disconnection with the superfluous, the communion of the body with nature... The pilgrimage can then be assimilated to a “semiotic machine” for the construction of a meaning to its existence.

V. SOME TRACKS FOR INTERACTIONS AND DIGITAL IDENTITY ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

The Compostela Ways may both favor a collective approach or a search of loneliness but also often connected to a certain extent and especially with the development of mobile Internet. Like brotherhoods and chapels in the past, then websites, social media allows hikers to give advice, provide addresses, express feelings and emotions, and to surround themselves with their impressions and pictures. We found 78 francophone pages on Facebook, the first one dating back to 2008. Since then, the number of pages has grown every year (See fig. 1)

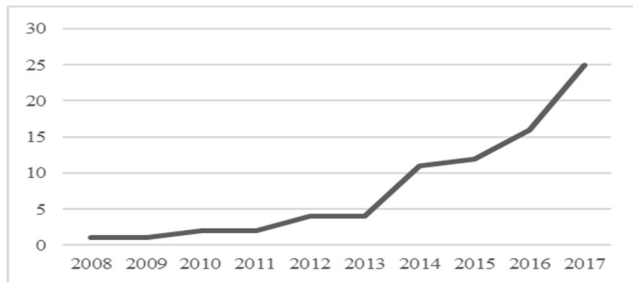


Figure 1. Number of page created per year.

Compared to similar religious phenomena like Ladies of Fatima in Portugal or Lourdes devotees in France, the presence of Compostela hikers is significant on Facebook, but compared to the number of francophone hikers, it is not. Less than 1% of the hikers have a Facebook page for the year 2017. We found 25 Facebook pages for 8,835 hikers. These pages have been classified by the creator as shown in Table I:

TABLE I. TYPE OF FACEBOOK PAGES

Type	Number
Non-profit organisations (NPO)	7
Websites & blogs	14
Communities	44
Travel agencies, Guides	6
Others (Books, Films, Sports, Events, etc.)	7

The Camino de Santiago – the Way of St James – has always been an identity phenomenon. In the Middle Ages, pilgrims were belonging to various religious brotherhoods, benefiting from their assistance system (such as organization of groups to avoid the high level of insecurity of the ways) or a chapel in the parish church. Communities on Facebook reflect these two dimensions that we can measure by the number of likes in each page. These virtual communities vary between 27,775 for the largest one, which is defined as a community, and 8 persons for the smallest one, which is a Non-Profit Organization (NPO). These figures have been updated on February 15, 2018. The difference could not be explained by the longevity of the page. The oldest one, *RadioCamino* [14], has been created on August 28, 2008 and capitalizes 3 563 likes and the newest one, *Mon chemin à Compostelle* [15] has been created on December 29, 2018, and capitalize 44 likes. The aims of both pages are quite similar. For the largest community, we can read on the *About* section: “All the information to enjoy the experience of Compostela Ways: advantages of each way from France, where to stay, monuments, landscapes...” and the aim of the smallest one is to help those who make the way to Santiago de Compostela in “Touraine”. As these figures show, brotherhoods and chapels can also be found on Facebook.

Today motivations have become secularized. NPOs and communities replaced brotherhoods of the past. Interactivity is the magic word. This is done in two ways, by commenting on a post or by posting a message on the page if this function is available. This was the case for 69 pages from the selected corpus and 45 had a response rate higher than 90% that may reflect the desire to share with others. In general, hikers share their feelings, thoughts, progression, experience, photos, video, etc. and the community reacts, reassures or encourages. Sometimes they thank hikers for the shared information. NPOs provide assistance and advice.

Today, social networks have become essential to gather information for Compostela Ways and for sharing information and provide assistance, as the objectives of the pages suggest. Commercial Facebook pages (around 8%) have the same weaknesses as personal pages: contact information is missing and there are not many followers (There are 2,163 followers for the oldest page created in 2012 [16]). The analysis of these pages shows an obvious lack of professionalism: Pages are not very active (less than 30% of interaction), the *About* page is not really enticing. If this weakness is permissible with a personal page, it is less acceptable from a professional one.

To be successful, the communication on FB pages should be optimized in order to increase user engagement. Posting too little or too much information can damage engagement and interaction with followers. The Compostela hikers post less than one message per day except for three pages that have an average of 6.6 [17], 2.7 [18] and 2 [19] posts per day.

Facebook pages is a part of the identity of Compostela hikers. All of them have a Frontpage in accordance with the standards. However, most of them do not depict the full

context that helps to engage people, and they do not give information about their identity, even though, trippers leave enough traces to be able to capture some traits of their identity.

The privileged means of communication remains the text, with the photo being widely used as well and the video, but to a lesser extent. Around 50% of the pages do not use photos, and 73% do not use videos.

Many hikers (22%) did not post any information on their pages. Often, the page FB accompanies the walker on his/her journey and dies shortly after the end of the adventure.

Numerous pilgrim walkers exchange on Facebook about preparation or keep in contact after the trip on the Ways. Most of the associations linked to Compostela (Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, Pyrenean Piedmont, etc.), as well as the more official institutions (Archbishopric of Compostela) have their own Facebook page, sometimes in several languages. They provide above all information, statistics, advice, addresses. In the past, their forums were not, in our opinion, very interactive, today with Facebook is not anymore the case. Nevertheless, this digital dimension of the pilgrimage becomes more and more important, especially the social network.

C. Bourret [1] proposed a typology of the people met on the Compostela Ways that may be extended to users of social networks:

- Authentic pilgrims (with main religious motivations),
- Semi-pilgrims or walkers pilgrims in different groups including those called by Spanish, “turistigrinos”, a mix of tourists and pilgrims,
- Hiker-pilgrims, above all for the pleasure of the walk and its interactions,
- Sportsmen or sportswomen, often walkers but also cyclists or riders, in search of physical experience and exceeding their limits.
- Cultural walkers, cyclists or riders very interested by various monuments and cultural heritage,
- Minimalists, only walking a few kilometers to collect the precious stamp on the “credential” to finally obtain the precious “Compostela” as the others.
- Strictly tourists.

There are always different degrees of involvement and participation: from a few days (with special organized trips, particularly in May) to more than 2 months, but almost always in a single way, rarely going back by the same Ways, but using cars, coaches, trains or planes to return home.

VI. CONCLUSION

For us, interactions, identities and representations on the Compostela Ways are very revealing ambivalences and questionings of all our society.

The proposed paper constitutes a first step of a work in progress.

We always return transformed by our participation in the Compostela Ways and by our interactions with other people but also by finding. In future works, we would like to try to

consider the evolution of the representations and the identities of voluntary “pilgrims”, at the beginning and at the end of the “pilgrimage” and thus the changes produced by their experience.

The Compostela Ways are a particularly favorable ground for meetings others but also finding oneself, constitutive of the widened “thought,” central in the new humanism advocated by L. Ferry [20], who tries to answer the question of the sense of the existence, which is at the heart of the crisis of contemporary individualism.

The Compostela phenomenon is a good way to investigate one's identity, and more specifically the digital identity, with all the traces left on social media. Through the queries of the “trace man”, we go back to the eternal question of the meaning of life and of our presence on Earth. Humans do not escape their fate, which is to try to understand (or not) the meaning of their lives, regardless of the communication medium or device they use. The identity and existence questions remain as is.

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