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Locating 'Digital' in Ethnographic Practice

Non-gradual Dynamics in LGBTQ+ Group Chats

Abstract: I draw from experiences with WhatsApp group chats used by Milanese LGBTQ+ organisations to study a peculiar point of interest, for ethnographers in digital contexts: the non-gradual dynamics of digital spaces. I employ Science and Technology Studies concepts to explain two 'oddities' about group chats: the instantaneous act of 'adding' someone to a messaging group, and the ability to sort participants into neatly separated ones. These instances of group chat non-graduality are scarcely representative of the social dynamics happening among participants. Therefore, I argue for not approaching group chats as representations of offline groups, but as tools of non-graduality employed by them. I suggest a parallel between digital media and symbolic social categorisations, arguing that they both offer to society particularly clear tools for non-graduality and boundary drawing.

Keywords: analog, chat, digital, gay, LGBT, messaging, non-continuity, queer, social media, WhatsApp

One Too Many Group Chats

I have been mingling with LGBTQ+ communities in Milan, Italy, for many years now: previously as an activist and now as a researcher. As with many people who became involved in grassroot political movements, my WhatsApp and my Telegram[1] are riddled with semi-redundant group chats from a diverse array of activist groups and organisations, many of whom include the same individuals or refer to the same events. Right away, I have to note how wildly contemporary this ethnographic setting is: old, forgotten digital messaging groups, in which I was included years ago as an activist, had become an easy way to reconnect, as a researcher, to spaces I have little to no ties to anymore. This warrants an explanation.

Queer organisations, in Milan, exist in a spectrum of formality, size and public recognition. A lot of my previous activism work was done among the queer student organisations of my universities:[2] these were social groups without an official list of members, devoted to the organisation of public events on campus and to the discussion of political perspectives about queer lives. Events (especially before the Covid-19 pandemic) were mostly held in person, but these associations relied heavily on digital media to organise. A WhatsApp (and sometimes Telegram) group chat, if not many, always provided a way for members to keep up with the happenings of the organisation, and a way to reach out to members when an empty hour on the student schedule

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provided the opportunity for a quick chat, a coffee or a cigarette. When I was engaging with these groups and their media as a peer, group chats were mostly used as an informal communication avenue: jokes and memes were shared and the general tone was light-hearted, except for the occasional political discussion or request for advice around typically queer interpersonal issues. It was not uncommon, however, for active members to be far fewer than the actual contact list of the group chat: the turnover rate for university organisations is extremely high and students might choose, due to graduation or due to a particularly intense exam season, to limit their involvement with the organisation. As it happened with me multiple times, one might gradually stray away from the group, while other known faces on the digital group chat might also start to interact less and less. After a while, just like I had done with some of my group chats, a student might 'temporarily' mute the chat, only to eventually forget about it. This, I came to realise, was my situation at the end of my Master's degree, after the Covid-19 years[3] exacerbated the already fast turn-over rates of university students and I ended up losing all in-person ties to my former organisations.

I dare to say, however, that being part of many group chats on a digital messaging app is hardly peculiar to queer socialites. Being added to the workplace WhatsApp where everybody else seems to already be friends, having a long log of forgotten iMessage groups, lurking around the old neighbourhood chat, are all experiences that have become common, even trivial. All of these are experiences where digital spaces seem to inconvenience or contradict our life trajectory: they stay there, at our fingertips, when we have 'already left', or we're added to them before we're truly 'in'.

In this piece I will take my autoethnographic data, as well as my recollections from my time among queer communities, as a jumping off point to discuss digital spaces themselves, and how we should understand them in ethnographic contexts. Queer organisations might be one of the contexts where the features of digitality I am going to focus on emerge more clearly. As I mentioned, however, these features do not present themselves only for queer people or in queer contexts, and therefore I am going to draw from my fieldwork only to extend my analysis to digital media in general.

Entering the Group Chat: Am I 'In' Yet?

As I was about to begin my PhD programme with a project on queer communities and digital media, I started reaching out to queer organisations again. I had lost contact with many of them during the Covid-19 years, and many new ones had just sprung up. Queer organisations are not hard to find in Milan, however proposing interviews, focus groups or even a co-organised event as an anthropologist was for me a new experience. In my previous endeavours as an activist, suggesting group activities felt affirming and exciting as my peers discussed details and further possibilities: I was performing my 'activistness', I was becoming more and more part of the group by soliciting action. This time, as an outsider trying to gain access to my research field, I felt inconsiderate: who was I to even contact these people, and why would they agree to star in my nosey fieldnotes?[4]

For most of these local organisations, I decided to attend one of their informal gatherings or assemblies in person, to introduce myself to them as a fellow queer – just

one who happens to have a doctoral thesis to write. Reactions were of course varied: it was often unclear the actual extent of their engagement with my research, and I struggled in gauging my subjects' actual commitment to participating in it. Might they be acting interested just out of kindness?

These questions are difficult to answer, and many anthropologists new to their field might agree with me: when dealing with the inherent murkiness of human relationships, one is often unsure about whether they are following a potentially productive ethnographic route or are running into a dead end. Caught in this dilemma, I found myself looking for a clearer step each time in my relationship with every new group I was contacting: being added to a group chat.

Becoming a member of a group chat, I thought, meant a clearer commitment to my project and, most importantly, it meant that from then on I had clear and unambiguous access to other people in the group. Spoken words are easily forgotten, even if said in an assembly, but a group chat afforded me the ability to intervene and keep up the attention towards my plans, so that they could, eventually, come to fruition. In a sense, entering these digital spaces was like dropping anchor: I was 'in', I could send a message anytime, I could negotiate more clearly our collaboration, without the inconvenience of only being able to do so in the rare in-person organisational gatherings.

It looks like digital messaging groups 'bypass', even 'simplify' in a sense,[5] the shifting shades, the graduality of human relationships. Just like I was explaining earlier, 'being in' a group often fails to represent our actual position towards a social context: we're in the group chat, but do we already know all the other members? Did we 'leave', at some point?

In this article I would like to discuss these observations about digitality, and I will do so by going over how digital messaging groups factored into my approaching two LGBTQ+ student-activist organisations, as I was contacting them in order to find research participants. As I mentioned earlier, I believe these organisations make features of digital media particularly visible to my inquiry, and my positioning towards them allows me to see these dynamics in context with years of insider experience.

Starting From a Place I Knew

One of the first groups I engaged with was a university activist organisation I had been an active participant in, around five years earlier.[6] Allow me to give a deeper description of this specific context. As I mentioned before, this 'organisation' was highly informal: people 'joined' and 'left' constantly, and there was not an official list of members. No statute or official documentation about the aims of this group existed, and its activities mainly revolved around small gatherings and talks about LGBTQ+ experience.

When I was involved in it, the group had gone through a recent 'rebirth', and its activities were often animated by around twenty people. After years of dealing with student organisations, it is quite clear to me that most of them go through cycles of inactivity and activity: most people are only students for three to five years,[7] and the liveliness of campus organisations depend on the quickly shifting numbers and levels of involvement of their members. Not many years after I joined, my schedule grew

busy and I started to gradually drift away, as many of my peers did. Before Covid-19 hit northern Italy, I had already stopped participating in the 'official' gatherings of the organisation, and while I maintained some ties to former members, I had none with the subsequent 'new generations' of activists animating the group.

Now, years after (about four), I was planning on reaching out again. This time as a researcher.

I started by contacting some previous members: people who shared that space with me in the past and who, I hoped, had kept some kind of ties to it. Unfortunately, none of them were able to give me any access point: they had all stopped attending meetings years before, and did not know who the active members were now. I had to restart my relationship with this space from scratch.

Still figuring out my next move, I was browsing the Instagram page of the group when I saw that they were announcing a meeting open to the public. I decided I would go to this in-person event so that I could introduce myself as a researcher interested in organising a focus group about LGBTQ+ people and their use of the internet.

I am, however, probably to the detriment of my skills as an ethnographer, a fairly shy person. Wouldn't it be a bit presumptuous to just show up and, unprompted, make a speech, trying to win their interest, where I would describe myself as a researcher (the gall!)? Since that event was made for students, new members who might want to join, would I come off as a nosy outsider? An objectifying 'scientist' who was there to 'gather specimens'? I wanted to at least be announced.

It was at this point that I remembered about the WhatsApp group chat. I had stopped engaging with it years before and had forgotten about it, but when I scrolled way back in my phone I discovered that that same chat was still being used by current members of the organisation. This was not new to me at all: the digital spaces of student organisations, in my experience, often 'survive' their 'founders': new members are added constantly, while old members leave (or gradually stop interacting) and there is never a traceable boundary between 'the old group' and the new. Making a new group chat, thus marking the temporal line between 'the new group' and 'the old group' is something that rarely happens.

I unmuted the group chat and started scrolling through it: it was still very active and I could not recognise any of the numbers or nicknames[8] interacting, themselves seemingly oblivious to the fact that, by that time, they represented but a section of a much larger pool of phone numbers and nicknames. Among the many unknowns who were 'technically still in the chat', I might have been the only one eavesdropping, lurking unnoticed from behind my screen.

It was quite easy, from there, to figure out who the main posters were and privately message one of them, explain my situation and ask if it would be appropriate for me to show up to the event with my proposal.

> Me: Hello! Sorry for contacting you out of the blue; we haven't met but I am (and I had almost forgot about it) inside the [name of the association] chat, because I attended some years ago. I reopened the chat recently because I am doing a PhD research project about queer people. I read about today's assembly and I was thinking of coming to propose a group-talk that would be useful for my research. Do you think this assembly is the right space to do this?

> Member of the group: Yes, yes, you can come with no issue. We even have an agenda for today (you can find it on the group chat), so if you don't want to participate in the discussion of every point, you can join us at around 18:00. Anyways, the assemblies are made exactly for this, so don't hesitate![9]

I want here to note the kind of oddity that this field configuration represents to anthropology: I did not know any of the people making up the current active members of the organisation, and neither did they know me, but I had already a space, a digital method of communication, which allowed me the same kind of access to singular members and to the shared chat that each person making up the group had.

In the group chat there is, from a purely technological point of view, no difference between an 'active participant' in the everyday life of the organisation, and a 'lurker' or a long-time absentee. All the people who 'are in' the group chat can, potentially, read the same messages, contribute to the conversation and access information just like every other member. This kind of positionality of the ethnography towards their field is hardly representative of settings that do not employ digital media. 'Lurking' is hard to do in person and, most importantly, does not grant access to a log of all conversations happening in a space, a convenient list of all members and the same possibility of interaction that every other person in the space has. All this because years ago I was 'added' to a digital space from which I never bothered to exit, and that now granted me the same kind of insider access that it did when I actually was an insider.

The person I elected to contact encouraged me to join the next in-person gathering and added my participation to its schedule.

When I met the group, under the spring sun of an early afternoon in the courtyard of the university, I was able to elicit their interest: they agreed to collaborate with me towards a focus group, a shared event where I was welcome to moderate and write fieldnotes. And they added me to another group chat.

Another Group Chat

An *ad hoc* WhatsApp group chat, this time. Made anew to include everybody who would co-organise and participate in the focus group to keep our conversation separate from the general group chat and better discuss the details. A kind of committee-chat.

To better comment on this, I would like to add to my account another episode: my experience with the second university activism group I contacted, which also adopted this '*ad hoc* group chat' practice. This second organisation was the LGBTQ+ social space for another important Milanese university which, however, I never personally attended as a member. Nevertheless, I had ties to some previous members of the group, as my work as an activist often meant collaborating across universities.

Even though I had witnessed the founding of this second group years ago, I had no shared digital space to reach the current members who, just like the organisation I described earlier, seemed to be all fairly new participants who joined it after the Covid-19 lockdown, which again had forced an almost complete turn-over of members by halting university life for some time.[10]

All I had was my Instagram account, which sported the pictures of my former endeavours as an activist as a badge of honour. My direct message to their page was well received, and they agreed to meet in their university to discuss organising a focus group about their experiences on the web.

This time I was more confident: in the experience I described earlier, the age difference between me and the students (I was about six years older than the average university student) meant, to me, an unpleasant degree of separation from a space I previously shared and which now did not recognise me. This time, also due to the fact that the founder of the group (now a close friend of mine) was joining me to reconnect with her roots as an activist, my older age meant a certain level of reputability. Moreover, this second organisation seemed particularly eager to add new activities to their schedule, and a co-organised focus group seemed an enticing addition.

Me and my friend met them, once again, in the courtyard of the university: they seemed eager to get to know me and, especially, their founder whom they had never met before. They took us to a classroom they had reserved for the meeting and we sat, chatting casually about our time as activists.[11]

Our meeting proceeded swiftly and we ended up agreeing that we would co-organise a focus group based on my research questions soon. To keep in touch, of course, I was promptly added to a specially created new group chat.

Not only was this same procedure used by the LGBTQ+ association of the other university, but it also echoed the digital happenings of the many years of queer activism in my past. As I said before, young activist groups in Milan are rarely formalised: there is no official list of members and they often do not have a strictly defined governing body.[12] Given this context, I understand the two episodes I narrated here as WhatsApp groups being used as a way to build boundaries between communicative spaces and better manage an informal organisation. The main group chat is often a catch-all space for people belonging or simply adjacent to the organisation, and being added to it is crucial to maintain a communication avenue outside of the episodic open and advertised events. Smaller groups are made for coordinating more practical and 'to the point' projects, and they are opened when a selected number of activists need a separate space to focus on a more specific task.[13]

The contrast between the fluidity of an amorphous, non-structured student organisation and the clear-cut nature of a WhatsApp group is stark. A WhatsApp group has a well-defined list of members, it has an automatic 'archive' of itself[14] and it is neatly separated from other spaces, while the wider queer organisation[15] does not have fixed boundaries and is always in flux due to the temporary nature of being a university student, the generally hectic life dynamics of young adults and the absence of formal governing structures.

Non-graduality: Analog Relationships in Digital Spaces

In an article on the nature of 'friending' someone on social networks, danah boyd (2006) describes the spectrum of affects, attitudes and complex reasons that people have around the action of adding someone to their list of 'friends' on social media.

People might 'friend' somebody on Myspace or Friendster for many different reasons and under many different kinds of relationship they might have with that somebody: still, on both sites they are either 'a friend' or 'not a friend'.[16]

In a similar way, I could be 'in' or 'out' of a group chat, but my actual standing with each organisation was always in flux. In the first episode I described, I was 'in' the general group chat of the organisation, but I was completely unknown by all active members, and indeed I had forgotten about such group chat. In the second episode I described, I was added to a WhatsApp group after meeting these people in person. Still, it was clear that I was not at all 'a member': the group chat was specifically made so that I, as a researcher, could coordinate with them, the 'subjects', or the 'queer students'.

Relationships always existed in a spectrum of possibilities: this is arguably not only a standard occurrence in any fieldwork configuration, but also dynamics that might be typical of human relationships in general. On the group chat, however, these nuances were, in a sense, null: the technology that is WhatsApp does not allow users to mark relational hierarchies and qualitative complexities. With regards to a WhatsApp group chat, access to the shared space cannot be partial or incremental: every member can read the same messages and contribute in the same way, regardless of whether they personally know all the other members, or the degree of closeness they have with them.

The act of 'adding' someone to a group chat (or to a list of friends in boyd's (2006) example) is therefore oddly sudden and non-gradual. In ethnography, we might be used to the fact that our access to specific areas and information in our fieldwork varies and shifts in a gradual fashion, according to the multifaceted relationship we develop with the community we are studying. This does not seem the case for digital messaging groups: while it is true that a person might be more or less likely to interact with us online on the basis of their attitude towards us, and that we might be added to a messaging group only after developing a certain level of intimacy with our research participants, from a strictly technological point of view there are only two ways to be with respects to a WhatsApp group: one is either in or out of it.[17] The transition from 'out' to 'in' is a sudden and non-gradual acquisition of access to a shared space and to information regarding members (their phone number, or their past messages, in some cases).

What does it mean, in ethnography, to have sudden access to a discreet and clearly defined group of people,[18] a shared space of communication? Traditionally, the borders of a 'community', the degree by which an ethnographer could consider themselves 'close' to their subjects and the access to communication with members of a community are all parameters that are impossible to clearly quantify. The introduction of media that, instead, can behave so abruptly, so stark in their changes, can throw off our analysis of the relationship we have with our subjects: how do we understand digital access to a group chat if not only we can be 'added' to one in wildly different circumstances and for wildly different purposes, but also there is so little relationship between it and our actual engagement with the (both online and offline) group and our attitudes towards it?

In my first attempts at conceptualising the digital spaces appearing in my fieldwork, I tried to see them as online representations of what was happening offline.

Thinking about the group chat of an organisation as its 'online version', its 'digital representation', is quite intuitive to us contemporary humans, as we are accustomed to having multiple messaging spaces, each dedicated to colleagues, family and different friend groups. This way of seeing digital media (and more specifically digital messaging groups), this 'representational approach', however, seems inaccurate under more focused scrutiny. The fidelity of a group chat as an online representation of an in-person relational space is in question in my fieldwork along multiple lines: is a group chat a good depiction of an activism group if it includes many members who are no longer active (either offline or in the chat itself)? What if the inactive members themselves forgot about the group chat?

A 'representational approach' of this kind relies on understanding digital media as parallel to physical reality: a separate realm of life that serves as a cast of it, but due to this very nature it is never actually part of it. As a representational tool, a WhatsApp group chat feels quite 'choppy': it can categorise users as either 'inside' or 'outside' the digital space, but it has few ways to actually stick more closely to the nuances of social realities.

The limited analytical power of this 'representational approach' is largely in line with what most digital anthropologists understand digital media as. Daniel Miller and Heather Horst (2012), in the introduction to their volume *Digital Anthropology* (Horst and Miller 2012), restate their long-held view that digital sociality is not to be understood as 'more mediated'.

> In anthropology there is no such thing as pure human immediacy; interacting face-to-face is just as culturally inflected as digitally mediated communication, but, as Goffman pointed out again and again, we fail to see the framed nature of face-to-face interaction because these frames work so effectively. The impact of digital technologies, such as webcams, are sometimes unsettling largely because they makes us aware and newly self-conscious about those taken-for-granted frames around direct face-to-face encounters. (Miller and Horst 2012: 12)

By framing digital media as 'virtual' versions of physical sociality and gauging their effectiveness by how closely they 'resemble' a 'physical counterpart', we forget what Miller and Horst describe as a foundational principle of digital anthropology: digital media are not to be understood as an abstraction of the physically 'real', a mediated depiction of actual human relationships. Digital media are continuous to 'real life' because they are as mediated as any other kind of sociality.

Kate Mannell (2020), in her extensive study of group chat dynamics, notes that communicative dynamics and group belonging rarely respect the neat boundaries of digital group chats. She highlights the importance of episodes similar to those I described about my LGBTQ+ associations: 'members' of group chats can drift away, mute them or not contribute to specific conversations. All of these (and other dynamics), Mannell describes as 'mismatches' between actual human relational dynamics and technological boundaries.

Clearly, understanding digital messaging groups as 'online versions' of offline social spaces is destined to produce little more than perplexities between the seemingly neat structures of digital communication and the evasive manoeuvres of the social groups defying them.

Using Separated Digital Spaces: Scalable Sociality

What is interesting about digital spaces in my field is not their faulty representational qualities for human relationships, but the uses they were employed for by members of the communities I was studying.[19] What is important to note is that, while both activism organisations had 'general' group chats (one of which I was even able to access), they both decided to create a new one for collaborating with my research.

Scholars in digital anthropology have instead demonstrated time and time again that digital media is often used as a way to negotiate a wide multiplicity of social contexts: the concept of 'scalable sociality', coined by collaborators at the Why We Post project (Costa et al 2022; Miller et al 2016; Sinanan 2017), refers precisely to the wide range of social possibilities afforded by digital media to people in vastly different ethnographic contexts. Elisabetta Costa's work (Costa 2018) elaborates on this by providing ethnographic accounts of how people in Mardin, Turkey, take advantage of the settings and privacy levels of digital media as ways to keep different social groups apart and therefore live within a wide variety of contexts. We could see Erving Goffman's seminal work (2021 [1959]) as particularly prescient, as its description of how people embody different self-presentations according to the audience they find themselves in front of anticipates the discussions around how digital media offers ways to create multiple context, multiple different publics for whom to embody a different persona (boyd 2010, 2014; Turkle 1996). In my own fieldwork I described how different WhatsApp group chats are used to maintain different kinds of social spaces, namely, the general chat and the *ad hoc* chat, for different purposes.

The non-graduality of 'being in or out' of a WhatsApp group, of being 'a friend or not' on Friendster, are precisely the kind of features of digital media that users employ to create multiple, non-contiguous, social settings. The concept of scalable sociality offers us a way out from what I described as the 'representational approach': digital media are not representations, they are not ill-fitting depictions of social groups, but they are tools that people can use to create, negotiate and manage communication with others. They are not a parallel 'virtual' world, but instruments already embedded into the 'real' world.

The creation of an *ad hoc* WhatsApp group chat is meant to gather all people interested in a project regardless of their level of acquaintance with the main organiser (namely, me) in a collective communication arena that is to remain neatly separated from both offline and online alternatives (to not 'clog' the more general group chat). Users of this digital technology rely precisely on the fact that a WhatsApp group chat is equally accessible to each member and inaccessible to outsiders (regardless of their relational vicinity to other members) for it to function as a separated social space with a clearly defined list of participants and suitable to being used as an arena for discussing the organisation of an event. The boundaries of such space are clear-cut and there is no sliding scale or ambiguity with regards to who is in and who is out. In the *ad hoc* group chats I was added to in my fieldwork, this was the point: regardless of how closely these people felt towards me or the organisation itself, they were included if they wanted to cooperate for the organisation of the focus groups. The digital boundaries, in my contexts, were simply convenient tools of communication management,

never particularly respected 'community thresholds'. They were not particularly airtight about information either, as when these focus groups ended up happening, some participants came from 'outside', invited in-person by others.

Accounts like Mannell's (2020) warn us against reifying technological barriers, and it is important to observe that even task-oriented short-term group chats (Qiu et al 2016) might not be particularly 'sealed' both with their information management and their group identity. What I am arguing for, however, is not that digital boundaries are usually particularly important as definers of social groups, but that they are particularly convenient for their communication purposes.

It appears from multiple accounts (Bouhnik and Deshen 2014; boyd 2006, 2014; Costa 2016; Knop-Huelss et al 2017; Seufert et al 2016; Turkle 1996) that the ability to clearly define boundaries as to who can and who cannot access certain content is key to understanding the everyday use of digital media by a great number of people.[20] Outside of the fairly simple dynamics of a WhatsApp group chat, users of more complex media like social networking sites, or the now old-fashioned internet forums, still take advantage of these peculiar characteristics of digital media by, for instance, carefully curating their friend groups, managing different accounts (with different levels of anonymity) for different publics and weaving their sociality among private and less private conversational tools (Costa 2016; Turkle 1996).[21]

Digital and Real Life

Some of what digital media seem to contribute to human sociality, in conclusion, are tools of non-graduality: clear space separation and easy communication management through impermeable digital boundaries. These considerations on bits-based technologies should not induce us, however, to understand digital media as the only *loci* of non-graduality, or the only structures offering tools of 'neat separation'. In fact, 'real life'[22] instances of such phenomena are not uncommon.

The idea of a sudden change from one state of social being to another, of stark shifts in the context of society, shouldn't sound particularly new to anthropologists: the 'rite of passage',[23] or the initiation, and the vast body of work related to them, can easily be considered as major examples where a person suddenly shifts from one social role to another without a gradual transition.

Even without citing academic literature, we can easily find parallels with what I described as features of digital messaging groups. When I was discussing this article with a trusted peer, they questioned the specificity of digital 'non-graduality' with a simple example: even in 'traditional' ethnography, one can 'either be inside or outside' a room, and rooms are 'neatly separated' from each other, as long as walls remain somewhat structurally sound. Rooms, one can say, also allow for 'scalable sociality', in the sense that they are usable as multipliers of social contexts, and as managers of different publics. In fact, dividing social spaces might be the very reason why we even bother to have walls inside houses. There is, however, something to be noted about this. Non-graduality, in digital media, is not dependent on how sound-proof the walls are, but it is more radical: it emerges from the very essence of a digital space, its coding.

In proposing non-graduality as a particular point of interest in digital ethnography, I position this article among the attempts that have thus far been made to inspect digital media in their specificity as a form of technology. For example, danah boyd (2010) derives the affordances of digital media from their bit-based architecture (as opposed to the atom-based architecture of physical media); similarly, Miller and Horst (2012) base the definition of their object of study on the binary code as the material basis of digital architecture. In fact, non-graduality is itself a feature of digital media that is derived from bits, binary code, or more succinctly, numbers.

'Digital' means, indeed, 'numerical'. Scholars in the field of Science and Technology Studies agree that what makes media digital, as opposed to analog, is that it consists in the numerical, symbolic representation of data (Dewdney and Ride 2014; Manovich 2002; V. Miller 2020). Lev Manovich (2002) introduces us to the specific difference between analog and digital data: digital data is numerical and therefore 'discrete', meaning that it occurs in distinct units.[24] The idea of a binary code, which Miller and Horst's (2012) definition refers to, is a clear parallel: there are no shades of grey, no continuity, between 0 and 1.[25]

Digitisation, as a process, refers to the transformation of analog data (Sterne 2016) into digital data (Feldman 1997): a common example is the conversion of a vinyl record into a digital file. It involves the filtering of sound waves sculpted into the physical body of vinyl through a grid of distinct values, so that every nuance of sound is sorted into separate and non-contiguous numerical values which become the digital representation of the original track, and therefore easily readable by any calculator. In fact, Science and Technology Studies see digital architectures as numerical, as being constructed by granular, non-gradual intervals of values (Robinson 2008).

In his analysis of the Macy Conferences (Pias 2003), philosopher Claus Pias proposes an analogy between the concepts of analog and digital and the Kantian concepts of senses and intellect (Pias 2005). In Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (2009 [1781]), the intellect refers to the faculty of neatly sorting into categories the murky nuances of sensory perceptions, which are themselves too contiguous with each other and gradual to constitute our experience of the world and its objects.

Neat categorisations, under this lens, are characteristic of the symbolic as opposed to the physical, and digital media are 'symbolic' borne out of the computing of numerical symbols.

Going back to anthropological theory, Victor Turner's (2017 [1969]) analysis of rites of passage seems to align with this interpretation: the symbolic order of social categories is suspended when a person needs to shift between them. Symbolic categories are not gradually adopted or abandoned: liminality consists in temporarily renouncing them and inhabiting the murkiness, the ambiguity and graduality of human life before adopting a new social category.

While, in abstract, a room is separate from the next one, physical walls don't offer an abstract or symbolic boundary between them, they offer a physical boundary. Can you eavesdrop on a WhatsApp group chat from the 'next' one? Can you force its doors open with a ram?

The kind of boundaries, the kind of non-graduality that digital media offer to human social dynamics is the one offered by other symbolic structures.

Computing technologies outsource symbolic processing from the human mind. They offer already-made symbols and neat categorisations available for human sociality to use and assign meaning to, and they do so in a clearer way than physicality.

Just like physical 'offers' of non-graduality, however, digital forms of non-graduality are used, valued and reified in different ways by society. In my fieldwork, for instance, digital boundaries were 'useful' but were not 'sacred': information about the happenings of the organisational group-chat for the focus groups were largely shared outside of the *ad hoc* chats. In other contexts, however, a WhatsApp group chat, an online forum or a subReddit could harbour a community of members with strong deference and respect to its own digital boundaries.

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Notes

1. I mention WhatsApp and Telegram because these two apps (WhatsApp to a much larger degree) are the chat applications preferred by people in Milan. Very little communication is done through SMS, iMessage or other messaging services.
2. I achieved my Bachelor's degree at Università degli Studi di Milano and my Master's degree at Università degli Studi di Milano – Bicocca.
3. While 'the Covid-19 years' might be somewhat of a shared experience in many parts of the world, they might have been a particularly felt phenomenon in Italy, the first western country to get seriously hit by the pandemic and that instated heavy restrictions during the emergency.
4. I was approaching these groups to gather participants for interviews and focus groups. These interviews and focus groups would be conducted with clear informed consent and the resulting data reported after anonymisation. In this article, however, I am not discussing the results from these attempts; I will only narrate my efforts in reaching these organisations in an autoethnographic fashion. In this article, I only discuss my inclusion or exclusion to their digital messaging spaces, and to maintain ethical standards I decided to anonymise the organisations themselves as well as individual members. In addition, the specific contents of the group chats I am going to describe are not relevant to and are not going to be discussed in this article.
5. This 'in a sense' is an important qualifier: as it will become clearer, I am not implying that digitally mediated interactions are themselves 'simplified'.
6. The happenings I am describing in this article are set in 2024, and I had been a part of this specific group in the years 2018–2020.
7. In Italy, most university degrees are supposed to take three years, and optional Master's degrees take two years.

8. A WhatsApp user shows up, to somebody who does not have their contact saved, as a phone number or as a nickname they themselves decide.
9. At the time of writing this article, I asked this person if I could write down our conversation verbatim. This was not possible for the shared digital messaging groups of the association – formal informed consent is hard to obtain because the number of people involved in them is unclear. I translated the text from Italian.
10. Italy, as one of the countries most affected by the pandemic, had strong anti-contagion measures that interfered with students' ability to participate in on-campus activities from 2020 to 2022.
11. It should be noted that my access to these organisations was probably made easier because of my lengthy contact with the student LGBTQ+ activism scene of Milan: the ability to claim a shared struggle, to chat about the everyday issues for organising political events on campus, made my approaches more credible by lessening the distance between me and participants in my research. Clearly, my ability to relay here my inclusion into the digital spaces of such organisations is also predicated on this, and researchers with no previous ties to Milanese LGBTQ+ activism might have not been 'added' to them. Regardless, this bias in my positioning will not impact my dissertation further, as I will describe features of digital media that arise in any digital messaging group, regardless of how often they might be consequential in a given context.
12. This is sometimes also the result of their politics: informal and non-structured forms of organising were considered more egalitarian and democratic in some of the activist groups I was a part of years ago.
13. These two kinds of messaging groups seem to align well with the typology between 'long-term groups' and 'short-term groups' of J. Qiu et al (2016).
14. I am here referring to the ability of members of the group to 'scroll back' in the conversation and retrieve clear memories of previous exchanges.
15. I am not trying to separate 'online' and 'offline' here. I refer to the 'organisation' holistically, with all of its digital and analog spaces.
16. D. boyd even introduces their article by answering with a binary 'yes or no' to the fundamental question of social networking sites: 'Are you my friend?' (boyd 2006).
17. This aspect of online spaces is briefly noted by Di Wang and Sida Liu (2021) when talking about how accessing a chat room or forum can provide instant access to the social networks of potential informants.
18. The way in which membership in online group chats is neatly defined is also noted in multiple contributions to scholarship on this topic (Han and Tang 2017; Knop-Huelss et al 2017).
19. Available literature on WhatsApp groups depicts a wide variety of uses, from the educational (Alamer et al 2023; Bouhnik and Deshen 2014; Durgungoz and Durgungoz 2022), to the medical (Kamel Boulos et al 2016), to business (Mrad et al 2022).
20. This argument is summarised in the concept of 'scalable sociality' (Miller et al 2016).
21. Managing audiences and using online alter-egos are key themes of queer studies about digitality, as sensitive information about one's sexual identity tend to carry stigma and needs to be contained in many cultural contexts (Cooper and Pullen 2010; Farci and Scarcelli 2022; Gieseking et al 2018; Gray 2009; Johnson 2020; Lucero 2017).
22. I am here using this term somewhat ironically, in reference to 'irl': the commonly used acronym of 'in real life', which refers to offline as opposed to online happenings.
23. This concept, a classic in anthropological theory, has been interpreted in many different ways. I am here referring more specifically to Arnold Van Gennep (1909) and some modern developments on it (Allovio 2014).
24. Influential philosopher Michael H. Heim (1999) refers to this difference as an ontological shift that happened between analog reality, which is gradual and continuous, and virtual reality, which is constructed by bits and is therefore granular.

25. Digital data are often studied not in their current relevance to modern technologies and computing, but as representations of analog realities (Sterne 2016), where the introduction of symbolic thresholds between different numerical values ('before the level, it is 0, after the level, a 1') offers the ability to transform an analog signal to a digital symbol (von Neumann 1951).

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Localiser 'le numérique' dans la pratique de l'ethnographie

Les dynamiques non-graduelles dans les chats LGBTQ+

Résumé : Nous nous appuyons sur des expériences avec les chats de groupes WhatsApp qui sont utilisés par les organisations LGBTQ+ à Milan pour étudier un point d'intérêt particulier chez les ethnographes qui s'intéressent aux contextes numériques : les dynamiques non-graduelles des espaces numériques. Nous utilisons les concepts des études en science et technologie pour expliquer deux 'phénomènes étranges' concernant ces chats de groupes : l'acte instantané d'ajouter quelqu'un au groupe, et la capacité de classer des participants dans des groupes nettement séparés. Ces instances de chat de groupe non-gradualité ne sont guère représentatifs des dynamiques sociales fonctionnant en parallèle chez les participants. Ainsi, nous arguons que nous ne devrons pas considérer les chats de groupe comme des représentations de groupes non-connectés, mais plutôt comme des outils de non-gradualité qui sont utilisés par ces groupes. Nous proposons un parallèle entre les médias numériques et les catégorisations sociales et symboliques, en arguant que tous les deux offrent à la société des outils efficaces pour la non-gradualité et pour l'établissement de frontières.

Mots-clés : analog, chat, gay, LGBT, messaging, non-continuité, numérique, queer, réseaux sociaux, WhatsApp