

Online groups and the use of public space: the case of “hide and seek at IKEA”

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Introduction

In an interdisciplinary perspective, this study aims to link theoretical approaches from Cyberpsychology (Wallace, 1999) and Environmental Psychology (Downs, 1970), analyzing the spatial behavior of “online groups” in characteristic physical spaces as shopping centers. For this reason we studied the case of “hide and seek at IKEA”, a grassroots initiative which typically start from online social networks.

Using online social networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc), it is possible to express your own social identity (Turkle, 1996) and build a virtual community, for example through participation in thematic groups (Ellison et al., 2007). Some of the computer mediated communication (CMC) properties, as visual anonymity and isolation (Wallace, 1999), elicit patterns of “middle-stage” behavior (Meyrowitz, 1985), characterized by the fusion of private (backstage) and public (on stage) situations. On the other side, malls and shopping centers, far from the early definition of “non-places”, could be better described as heterotopies (Foucault, 1984), characterized by original forms of spatial use (Uzzell, 1995), based on a redefinition of the traditional boundaries between public and private spaces (Dehaene & De Caeter, 2008).

Hypotheses

Therefore, we hypothesize that some of these original forms of space use are due to the transfer of online group dynamics (namely: social identity, group membership and middle-stage behavior) to the physical world, through the perception of market space as a middle stage, far from the traditional boundaries between public and private spaces. To explore this hypothesis we focused on the phenomenon called “hide and seek at IKEA”. The first event took place in

Copenhagen in 2009, and then spread in Italy. In particular we chose as case study the event organized in Bologna in 2010, that seems to be a grassroots initiative organized by a users group on Facebook, not directly managed by IKEA online marketing.

Analyses and results

Following a mixed model, the aim is to use both qualitative (interviews with participants and IKEA management, behavioural mapping during observations) and quantitative methods (paths mapping, questionnaire on Facebook users). Data collection is still in progress, preliminary results are presented in support of our main hypothesis. Further investigations would allow to better understand what place features, both physical and symbolical, could favour the described transfer.

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