

# Posting as a Form of Storytelling: The Sociolinguistic Analysis of a Sample of Pregnancy Narratives on Facebook

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## ABSTRACT

Based on the cultural and linguistic analysis of a sample of posts written on Facebook by twenty Italian mothers-to-be, this article discusses the practice of online posting as a form of storytelling, this being considered one of the privileged human ways of processing and assigning a meaning to experiences by weaving them into plots and formulas. Facebook is defined as a narrative device that promotes not only the production of user-generated content but also its framing according to typical narrative patterns. Pregnancy is a beloved theme on Facebook because it lends itself to a reiterated formulation in the form of a personal story. Developed against the specific background of the Italian sociocultural context, a narratological consideration of the sample identifies the most recurrent plots through which pregnant women shape and share the phases of their experience, stressing both their similarities to, and differences from, offline stories of pregnancy. A closer look at the semiotic and rhetorical dimension of the posts finally allows us to explore the continuous interplay between verbal and visual codes and the semantic fields exploited to tell about pregnancy on Facebook. The combination of these two analytical perspectives in the study of online pregnancy narratives constitutes the theoretical and methodological purpose of this article.

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This article aims to discuss the praxis of posting—considered here as the act of configuring and sharing contents on, and through, social media sites and platforms—as a narrative praxis: a semiotic process by means of which sociocultural meanings are constructed and experienced as well as reiterated. As will be argued, posting proves to be essentially an operation through which the individual is able to weave his/her experience consistently with the customary forms of the sociocultural context he/she belongs to: in this sense, it unveils as a process of resemantization of that experience into reliable plots, roles, and patterns, that is, as a practice of narrative reconfiguration.

In the first section the epistemological framework of such a discussion will be outlined and the term *storytelling* clarified as the essential modality of construction of a human sense of the world, that is, as the convergence between the constitutive tendency of human semiosis to assign a meaning to experience in the form of a plot or interlacement of regular threads, and the ability to use symbolic instruments in order to shape and experience this same plot: such convergence shall of course be continuously contextualized within the specific culture that produces it, since the sociocultural dimension influences not only the content but also the form of stories.

The identity of social networking sites and platforms as storytelling devices will be more closely examined in the following section, with specific reference to the case of Facebook. The discussion will focus in particular on the structural and structuring characteristics that foster the human inclination to configure experience in the form of recursive frames of contents, that is, of narratives. The inputs the platform offers to its users to reiterate and reconfigure interpretations of the self and of reality that roughly reconfirm the common sense of their offline experience will be analyzed: among them, the biographization and temporalization of memories and the narrative structure of content sharing. The role of Facebook as an environment devoted to the promotion of a typically narrative discourse regime and the construction of “good stories” will be clarified on the basis of such elements, at the same time underlining the aspects by which online storytelling diverges from the offline one, that is, the narrative and linguistic possibilities it offers and the forms of agency and creativity it stimulates.

Among the most beloved themes recurring on Facebook, we have chosen to analyze pregnancy narratives as the object of the case study presented in the third section. Physiologically developing as a succession of events, pregnancy is the perfect source for a prototypical story since it is an exquisitely narrative thread of perceptions: how is the experience of “becoming a mother” told on, and precisely through, Facebook? How does the platform allow for both an in-

dividual and a cultural construction of such an experience? How do its subjective and collective dimensions combine through the possibilities offered by such a social media device?

The analysis of pregnancy narratives on Facebook has been carried out on a sample of 300 posts written by twenty female, mainly Italian users between 2010 and 2015. Within the selection of posts presented here, some specific aspects will be analyzed in order to understand how pregnancy is typically told on Facebook within the sample considered: these will include both the contents of the narratives, that is, the recurrent plots selected by the mothers-to-be, and the semiotic peculiarity of the tales, that is, which codes activate the different semantic fields involved within the narration, as well as which sociocultural meanings are configured by them. The analysis will mainly focus on the role played by the visual and the verbal codes, as well by as their hybrid forms. The analysis of these aspects aims to highlight the rhetorical profile of such pregnancy narratives, that is, how they are used in order to construct and share “good stories.”

The sociocultural dimension and outputs of the same narratives will be further discussed in the fourth section: Which idea of pregnancy do they convey? Does this somehow relate to the offline representation of pregnancy typical of the local cultural context? To what extent can it be extended and/or compared to that emerging from other cultural contexts? And how does it replicate or differ from the stories spread offline? While leaving some of these questions open to future research, the final discussion will also entail some conclusive remarks on posting as one of the most recent and interesting modalities of storytelling and sense making.

### **The Theoretical Framework: On Storytelling as a Way of Inhabiting Reality**

The term *storytelling* is understood here as the human semiotic praxis that consists in constructing, interpreting and experiencing reality by weaving it into habitudinary<sup>1</sup> plots of content.<sup>2</sup> The tendency to categorize perceptions, actions, and events into consuetudinary sequences, which can thus be predictable, seems in fact to emerge since the earliest forms of consciousness of the human species. One of the first routines focused on by children is represented, for instance, by the “joint attentional frame” (Tomasello 1999, 2003; see also Massa and Simeoni 2014, 81), within which the child can direct and share his/her gaze toward an

1. The adjective *habitudinary* derives from the term *habit* and is thus to be understood as qualifying anything that is the output of a regular praxis. Other terms that will be used in this article as synonyms for it are *consuetudinary*, *customary*, and *usual*.

2. A survey of several of the topics discussed here is in Massa and Simeoni (2014).

object with (in most cases) the maternal figure. The earliest contents of consciousness that can be retrieved from memory, and thus reconfigured or reexperienced, are therefore scripts of habitudinary connected actions,<sup>3</sup> these being carried out by some agents within a shared physical and social environment.

Repetition—that is, each generalized, intersubjective form of behavior and of thought—is a fundamental aspect to define each cultural object, and in fact the inclination of the human species to repeat formats of interaction and symbolization of the shared reality pervades any dimension of social life (Brown 2001, 313).<sup>4</sup> As human beings we are inclined to create connections of facts—to create stories (Ricoeur 1984)—in order to give a peculiar, and thus a socially and culturally determined form to the continuum of perceptions and actions we are presented with by the world in which we are immersed.

Processing data in accordance with a story frame, which in its basic form includes an initial situation, a complication, and a solution, is therefore a cognitive operation that can be understood as “narrativity” (Massa and Simeoni 2014, 72) and consists in organizing experiential data according to a causal order by means of which such data acquire a meaning (73). As stated by Bruner (1991, 4), this narrative modality of thought mainly intervenes in the sphere of “human happenings,” that is, as a strategy of construction and knowledge of the self and of the sociocultural world he/she belongs to. Similarly, “It deals with human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course. It strives to put its timeless miracles into the particulars of experience and to locate the experience in time and place” (Bruner 1986, 13).<sup>5</sup>

Thinking through stories proves to be, in fact, an essential strategy of control, reorganization, and expansion of experiences, that is, as a tool for understanding the meaning single events have for one another, making hypotheses about these same events and their agents, and integrating new information with older data. In other words, thinking through stories is a tool for attributing a plausible meaning to the world, for constantly configuring an understandable version of it as well as for imagining further possible worlds (Massa and Simeoni 2014, 74–75).<sup>6</sup>

3. Indeed, “memories are repetitions” (Halbwachs [1925] 1992, 47).

4. On the crucial role played by the phenomenon of repetition within the human semiotic processes, see also Johnstone (1994); and Haiman (1997).

5. Likewise, Ricoeur (1981) has discussed the crucial role of narrative as a procedure through which human experience acquires its temporal collocation. The intimate relationship that links the condition of being human to the narrative dimension is especially highlighted by the definition of “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity” (Dennet 1992). In the Italian research tradition the pervasiveness of narrative within the processes of human identity construction has recently been aptly discussed by Jedlowski (2007, 2010, among others).

6. In this respect Bruner (1986) refers to the possibilities offered by the narrative thought exactly in terms of the construction of “actual minds” and the creation of fictional “possible worlds.”

The narrative construction of human reality is therefore indissoluble from the peculiar faculty of our species to use symbolic instruments and systems, these turning out to be devices by means of which the habitudinary plots of experience can be constructed, reiterated, and constantly reconfigured. It is no accident that the very semantics of narrative refers to the repetitive activity of weaving, of interlacing threads to form a fabric or material, which in turn seems to be ethnographically connected with the recursive symbolic praxis of cadencing these same regular gestures through verbal forms (Sanga 1995, 110–11).<sup>7</sup>

Repetition and habit are indeed the very condition for the human semiotic processes to make sense, as the suggestions by Wittgenstein (1953) exquisitely highlight. Thus, “I am not used to measuring temperatures on the Fahrenheit scale. Hence such a measure of temperature ‘says’ nothing to me” (sec. 508).

In his previous works, Saussure’s observations had been directed precisely toward the consequences of the constitutively arbitrary character of verbal languages, which can be understood as their necessity to be embodied in the familiar attitudes of the speaking mass in order to make sense ([1916] 1959), 104; see also Massa and Simeoni 2014, 86; Massa 2016, 132). First habits are represented, among others, by so-called muscular memories, which are an essential requirement for the development of the verbal ability: the process of language acquisition by children can be seen as a progressive symbolization of their first routinized formats of experience, that is, scripts of habitudinary gestures and actions within which the roles of the agents, the actions performed, and the goals achieved are distinguished (Bruner 1983; Bruner and Haste 1987; Tomasello 2003; see also Massa and Simeoni 2014, 80–83).<sup>8</sup> Saussure’s notion of “associative relation” ([1916] 1959) and the idea of “associative field” proposed by Bally (1940) seem to refer to the mental organization of vocabulary as the form of “thinking habits,” so that “the lexemes that belong to the same plot, or that allow to reconstruct one, are more easily associated and associable to one another” (Massa 2016, 131); likewise the ordinary spoken use of language, in particular, can be understood as the modality through which the most central paths of a shared reality are experienced (Massa and Simeoni 2014, 83–86; Massa

7. The first demonstrations of such a practice can be understood as some kind of “chanting,” which has then progressively evolved into more stable rhythmic-melodic forms: the medieval genre of the *chanson à toile*, women’s amorous-erotic lyric performed at the loom, can be seen as its codified form; its initial proofs are, however, retraceable in Greek and Latin antiquity (Sanga 1995, 110).

8. The gestural theory of language (Leroi-Gourhan 1964; Donald 1991; Corballis 2002) suggests that the evolution of the of the human verbal ability is to be understood as the result of the adaptation of cerebral structures to the management of sequences and combinations of bodily movements.

2016, 130–34): as our “habitudinary form of life,” as Wittgenstein’s perspective would put it (1953, sec. 23).

The constant human praxis of assigning a meaning to the shared habitudinary world by means of symbolic systems leads to what Bourdieu ([1979] 1984; see also Massa 2016, 134) has defined as a “socially embodied order”: a habitus intended as a way of being, as a general appearance, as what we are used to being within the “narrative community” (Massa and Simeoni 2014, 86–91) we belong to. Drawing on the statements by Ricoeur (1984; see also Massa and Simeoni 2014, 76), the most significant result of storytelling can be understood as the configuration of a cultural form, this being in turn, finally, an inter-subjective story.

Given such a theoretical framework, the next steps of this work will investigate how all the aspects interwoven so far can be interpreted in relation to social media sites and platforms, whose characteristics seem to suggest the possibility of a distinctive kind of semiotics or communication, at the same time partially incorporating and exploiting the dimensions of traditional storytelling: To what extent can such sites be considered as narrative tools? How is the human tendency to continuously assign common sense to experience stimulated and then expressed within such recent virtual environments? These issues will be illustrated and discussed in the next section.

### Facebook as a Narrative Device

The reason we chose to concentrate on social media in general, and on Facebook in particular, has to do with the narrative structure of Facebook as a social media site.<sup>9</sup> Even if characterized by specific features (Parks 2011), virtual social networks are, under many aspects, quite similar to the offline social and linguistic networks we are all part of, in that they allow users to develop relationships by means of two socionarrative practices—telling (mainly in the form of posting) and sharing.

Yet, if compared to other social networks, Facebook displays specific features that make it a particularly powerful narrative device,<sup>10</sup> that is, a platform that, on one the hand, is narratively constructed and, on the other, fosters the telling of shared stories. As will be specified later on in this section, through its interface this site structures in fact precise grammars of action, gesture, and use, thus

9. For a definition of “social media,” see Boyd and Ellison (2008); on the value of studying social media from different perspectives, including cultural and linguistic, see Silverstone (1999).

10. “Device” is being used here in the Foucauldian sense as reelaborated by Deleuze: a machine to make see and make speak, orienting thought and imagination, disciplining our actions and perceptions (Deleuze 1989).

guiding the production and fruition of the semantic information that circulates (Zinna 2004): far from being just a juxtaposition or collection of texts, then, it is a system with agency effects, a systematic proposal of practices.<sup>11</sup> As a device, it inhabits the body and mind of its users to a degree that raises several questions on the extension to which we actually decide and are the authors of our actions and posts on the platform itself (Ghidoli 2010, 70).

Facebook is a space of action (Volli 2003) organized according to precise narrative programs in the form of scripts/sceneries (Ghidoli 2010, 194): since the very beginning of any user's experience, in fact, it requires the creation of a personal profile (either authentic or fictitious) wherein to build an identity; it permits the user to carefully select what personal information to share; it invites users to explicit their interests and preferences and stimulates the creation of a social network by suggesting one makes connections with "people you may know."

The user is gradually introduced to a narrative environment framed by a specific aesthetics (the blue and white color scheme and the font, together with a textuality characterized by fragmentation, discontinuity, and yet recomposability), while the perceptive experience of vertically "scrolling down" other people's pages is a first, strongly chronologizing experience offered by the platform, which soon turns into a visual and gestural habit for the user.

Such first narrative allowance is then progressively reinforced through the recursivity of the practices the site promotes. As the user begins to inhabit (in the sense of both dwelling in, and developing a habit to) the platform, in fact, the basic narrative programs turn into complete narrative tracks (Ghidoli 2010, 91) that are woven by the user him/herself as he/she continues to visit the site and repeat the same actions again and again: through siconarrative practices such as posting, reposting, uploading, sharing, captioning, liking/unliking, and commenting, every user progressively weaves his/her own story. On Facebook, all of us can actually become "storytellers" to a certain extent, because our narrative competence is supported by a narratively oriented context and framed by a specific discourse regime.

Many other elements concur to such a narrativization of user-generated contents. The very history of Facebook's interface reveals a clear tendency toward the biographization of experience: born as a "wall" (conveying the idea of a public space of sharing, commenting, discussing), it was later reconfigured into a "diary" (this term conveying a much stronger sense of intimacy, personaliza-

11. This kind of perspective on a medium can be understood as a kind of "semiotics of the project," a discipline studying the relationship between people and devices, in particular the a priori planning strategies of communicative artifacts (see Bianchi et al. 2010).

tion, and historicization of identities), while the precise indication of the date and time of each post organizes every action, thought, and picture into a timeline that others can visualize. Over time, Facebook seems to have gradually reinforced its insistence on memory building: through the offer of ready-made narrative modules, it recalls to the user memories and photos he/she has posted “exactly one year ago” (“because your memories are important for us”), it facilitates the summary of “your year,” reminds the user of other people’s birthdays, anniversaries, and so on, and gives other users the chance to navigate their memories, accessing them by year of publication.<sup>12</sup> In short, if the Web never forgets (Rosen 2010), we can say that Facebook goes even further: it remembers for us.

On the passive user’s side, Facebook is a persuasive, captivating, and often addictive device because it promises to provide “good stories”: every time he/she visits the platform, the user gets a positive reinforcement<sup>13</sup> represented by the satisfaction of reading the update of someone else’s life story, thus developing the desire to come back again and again to see how it will go on: while this can sometimes lead to the development of depressive reactions, with time, this continuous returning to the platform easily develops into a sort of habit or automatism, if not addiction (Kirkmayr 2010; Mapelli 2010). Repetition is indeed typical of cultural life itself and permeates every aspect of our sociality, including conversation and the transmission of knowledge: by assimilating experiences into individual and common memories—that is, into common stories—it helps us manage the new and accommodate it in our everyday life (Smorti 1994; Duranti 2001; Jedlowski 2007).

As in the cultural world we inhabit, and exactly by means of the same mechanisms, Facebook becomes for the user a comfortable, familiar, and recognizable environment wherein to act with a minimum of cognitive effort (Shank 2000; Herman 2005): constantly performed on the border between writing and orality (Martini 2005), the written and the visual (Alexander and Levine 2008), thus hybrid and complex, the actions we perform on the platform partially reproduce the conditions of everyday conversation and storytelling,

12. This particular way of structuring the perception of the past in a very linear and chronological way is, of course, a distinctive cultural trait, typical of the Western context from which Facebook itself, as a platform, was originally born. A discussion of the cultural differences in conceptualizing the past and memories is beyond the scope of this article (see, e.g., Hall 1959; Thompson 1967; Lauer 1981; Kern 1983; Johnson 1987; Levine 1997; Bluehorn 2002; Brislin 2003; Ligi 2011); but, precisely because Facebook is also now used in non-Western countries, a comparative study of the cultural differences characterizing such usage could constitute an interesting development and further contextualization of our analysis.

13. “Positive reinforcement” refers to the development of a kind of compulsive need to return to the platform: being mainly a cognitive mechanism, anyway, this does not imply that the effect of reading such stories be always “positive,” as the recent emergence of phenomena such as Facebook depression demonstrates.



and, by doing so, they contribute to the building of a narrative community of practice (Wenger 1998; Papacharissi 2011; Massa and Simeoni 2014) and the weaving of what we might consider as a “tradition” (Van Dijck 2007).

If Facebook is a narrative device, then posting is a narrative practice. The product of our “being on Facebook” is in fact very often a narrative, either explicitly told or implicitly unfolded by the site itself through its interface: each post—be it in the form of a sentence, an image, a picture, a quotation, a link, or a mixture of all these—constitutes a further node in the texture of a story and can thus be understood as a “narrative unit.” On this social network the “verbal” and the “visual” interact in very interesting ways: even though they might require a lot more contextual information in order to be “read,” images (in this case, mainly memes and pictures) entail in fact a great narrative potential because they are allusive, highly condensed, and easily sharable, even though most of them are culturally connoted.

By facilitating the construction of meaningful personal stories, Facebook allows us to set every experience—even the newest one—within a network of routines and formulas, thus making it easier for us to cope with it. Through the diary framework we are able to make our livings enter the flow of common sense, of shared knowledge, of a community of feeling and interpretation, and it is exactly in this recurrence of forms—and, with them, of meanings—that we are interested here.

To sum up, Facebook is the prototype of a social narrative network wherein experience can be constructed as a story. Since a radical and continuous re-semanticization would be too costly for our mind, by inducing users in the production of recognizable and predictable contents, Facebook’s narrative structure proves extremely functional on a cognitive level: it offers in fact a recognizable frame that invites users to strongly biographical behaviors resulting in a kind of habitus, that is, a content influenced by both the platform and the use people make of it. In fact, as users we are never totally passive in interacting with the site: on the contrary, we constantly contribute to the shaping of its functions, transforming it exactly through our routinized actions. Yet at the same time we must accept the rules of its game, a game that takes place within a space established by others (Jedlowski 2007, 48–49). As recent studies on social media seem to suggest, then, form/platform and content/meaning are not always so easily separable.

As in everyday life, Facebook storytelling privileges themes that are either part of our everyday life or peculiar and new events. In the study presented here we decided to focus on what we shall call “pregnancy narratives”—personal

stories of pregnancy as told and shared by a sample of Italian mothers-to-be on their Facebook profiles. In their case, the site allows them to make sense of their intense experience by weaving it into a plot and to share its steps through a recognizable code/language. As we shall see, pregnancy is in fact a beloved theme on Facebook exactly because it is an intrinsically narrative experience that finds in Facebook an exquisitely narrative medium.

### Analyzing Pregnancy Narratives on Facebook: The Corpus

#### The Storytelling of Pregnancy on Facebook: Research Questions

As a narrative device, Facebook allows us to set every lived moment—even the strangest or the most trivial one—within a network of routines and formulas, making it easier for us to make sense of it: through the diary frame we are able to make our personal happenings enter the flow of common sense, of shared knowledge, of a community of interpretation and practice.

Even though the contents posted—which are necessarily organized according to a temporal and visual sequentiality—are often very different from one another and not always characterized by a thematic *con*sequentiality, there are some cases in which a structured biographical experience unfolds through different posts over time, thus developing as a story: pregnancy is precisely one such case.

The human experiences of pregnancy and giving birth, which have long been studied as a sociocultural process and in a comparative perspective by anthropology,<sup>14</sup> are typical examples of strong content that must be woven into a common framework in order to be understood, mastered, and included in a woman's life story (Peterson 1987; Sbisà 1992; Staton Savage 2001; Miller 2005; Cossetta and Caliandro 2013). Here is where the constructional power of Facebook as a social network comes in: the platform contributes in an essential way to the building of its individual and social sense.

Two main perspectives have driven our analysis: a general interest in the forms the praxis of storytelling acquires on Facebook and a closer attention to the cultural meanings these stories convey through the language they use. The interlacement of these two perspectives constitutes our main focus in this article because, as far as communication—and, with it, narration—on social networks is concerned, form and content, significant and meaning are never entirely separable, if not for merely analytical purposes. By exploring the main

14. See, e.g., Mead and Newton 1967; Rich 1976; Chodorow 1978; Jordan 1978 [1993]; Kitzinger 1980; MacCormack 1994; Ammaniti 1995; Davis-Floyd and Georges 1996; Jennings and O'Malley 2003; Ivry 2009; Bonfanti 2012; Pellai 2013.

structural, linguistic, and cultural dimensions of these stories, the approach we propose here should work as a methodological starting point for the analysis of pregnancy narratives on Facebook and is, in this sense, only germinal.

As far as the narrative analysis is concerned, the research questions are:

1. What temporal framework is adopted to narrate pregnancy?
2. Can any common or recurrent plots be identified in the posts?
3. Do any prototypical roles emerge from the stories?
4. How is the “pregnant body” narratively shaped?
5. What do these stories have in common, and not in common, with traditional/oral ones?
6. What idea of pregnancy do they convey? How does this relate to the Italian cultural context?

As far as the investigation of the semiotic and rhetorical profile of the narratives is concerned, the following questions will be considered in more detail:

1. How, and to what extent are the different codes (verbal, visual, photographic, etc.) used?
2. In the case of photos: Are they selfies? Who took them? Who/What is portrayed?
3. How are the verbal posts structured (e.g., as sentences, as chunks, etc.) and qualitatively configured (e.g., the use of the biomedical language of pregnancy or of the nonspecialized one)?
4. What is the relationship between words and images in the stories? For example, do words comment on images? Images illustrate posts? Posts explain images?
5. What semantic fields are particularly exploited by this interlacement of semiotic codes? To what extent do they correspond to the narratives told offline?
6. What use is made of further semiotic resources (emoticons and/or other icons, quotations from other users, sites, Facebook pages, etc.)?
7. Does “silence” have a role in the narration of one’s own pregnancy?
8. The rhetoric of comments: Are there recurring formulas? Repetitions? Patterns?

As regards the internal composition of the sample investigated, it includes 300 posts written by mothers-to-be on Facebook between 2010 and 2015. Its dias-

tratic (sociocultural and demographic) level embraces women around ages 30–40: almost all of them are employed (even if within a range of various professional profiles and conditions) and have a husband or a partner. Most of them are pregnant with their first child, some with the second. The diatopic configuration of the sample is based mostly on the Italian cultural and linguistic context: indeed the highest percentage of the Facebook users involved in the survey live in the area of Rome and Venice, whereas only a few live abroad. The original version of the posts, written in Italian on the profiles, will be provided here in the footnotes.<sup>15</sup> Even though marked by important differences between the North and the South, the contemporary Italian culture of pregnancy seems to be supported by some crucial characteristics: pregnancy is often associated with the idea of waiting and expecting forming a background against which the online narratives we are going to analyze should be, even if only briefly, confronted.<sup>16</sup>

### The Narrative Analysis

When considering the corpus as a whole, some recurring aspects can be spotted out that constitute what narrative analysis refers to as a “plot,” that is, the particular arrangement given to the constitutive elements of a story that make it something different from a mere chronology (Scholes and Kellogg 1966; Polkinghorne 1988). In order to be interpreted and made sense of, in the offline culture pregnancy generally activates many potential, always culturally rooted, narrative frameworks: the religious and/or ritualistic, the moral and subjective, the kinship-related, the economic and the biomedical one, just to mention a few. As we shall see, some of these models seem to clearly influence the online telling of pregnancy as well.

Almost every online story of pregnancy, in fact, weaves a plot constructed through a beginning, a development, and a (possibly happy) end. On such a global level some traditional temporal frames emerge that seem to implicitly guide the narration: in particular, the two extremes of pregnancy announcement (the incipit) and delivery (the epilogue) can be traced in most of the profiles considered here. It must be noted that in the offline life the announcement of pregnancy, in Italy, is usually given to parents and friends at the end of the

15. When quoting from their profiles we will mention our informants by their first names, which have been changed in order to preserve their privacy (even though all the contents analyzed here were posted with the privacy set to “public”).

16. For an overview of the main aspects characterizing the past and the contemporary situation, see Ammaniti 1995; Braidotti 1996; Angelini 2000; and Lombardi 2009. Fiume 1995 and D’Amelia 1997 offer a good historical reconstruction of the history of motherhood, also with some attention to the Italian case.

first trimester: this precaution is mainly, but not always, respected in the cases we have analyzed; on the other hand, the very fact of being behind a screen also allows women to sometimes avoid announcing the pregnancy until quite late. In any case, pregnancy can be explicitly announced (as by Tatiana: “Me and E. . . . have got pregnant!”<sup>17</sup>) just hinted at (Rosa, e.g., posts a meme that pictures a stork carrying a bundle, with the caption: “Waiting for the stork . . . ”<sup>18</sup>), or visually communicated either through a picture of the growing belly or by posting the first ecography that sometimes even replaces the mother-to-be’s profile picture. Other secondary announcements—at least that of the just-discovered sex of the baby and that of birthing—are typically posted and structure the overall storytelling of pregnancy: Cristina, for instance, posts the image of two big paper clips from which a third and smaller one comes out, while Sara shares a picture of three hands: hers and her husband’s holding their new child’s.

The course of pregnancy (corresponding, on a narratological level, to the internal development of a story) is often narrated resorting to other specific subplots. In the analyzed profiles we found, among others, the count of time already gone by (“5 months of you,” as in Valeria’s case<sup>19</sup>) and the countdown to giving birth (which, for instance, almost articulates Ludovica’s entire narrative). Such framings tend to emphasize the temporal development of pregnancy, which is typical of the Western view, and give it a recognizable, sharable structure within the community of interpretation the mother feels part of.

Although she clearly mutates many of its elements from the everyday, offline telling of pregnancy, by transmitting her story on Facebook on one side the mother-to-be benefits from a much bigger potentiality of sharing and receiving feedback than when spreading the news by word of mouth; on the other, she can somehow select the community of practice and feeling she wishes to be part of, since only other mothers or mothers-to-be will easily understand her specific codes. Within the above-mentioned temporal structure, the stories of pregnancy told on Facebook tend to shape the content of this experience according to clearly recognizable narrative patterns.

We have, first of all, the already-mentioned plot of pregnancy as an “expecting process” (the so-called *dolce attesa* ‘sweet waiting’): the whole family management is projected into the future while the woman seems to stop cultivating any other aspect of her life to prepare for the child and make herself up as a “mother.” A very important dimension of this plot is the nesting process, that

17. “Io ed E. . . . Aspettiamo un bambino!”

18. “Aspettando la cicogna . . . ”

19. “5 mesi di te.”

is, the progressive construction of a domestic environment dedicated to the coming child: many women post pictures of, or links to the furniture for the baby's future bedroom, the clothing, the equipment for the baby's transportation, and the related accessories: Ludovica, for example, posts the new items as she and her husband buy them, typically during their Saturday-afternoon shopping; both Lucia and Valeria share pictures of baby dresses, shoes, and bibs, while Jenny, for instance, advertises the web page of the natural-style products for childhood she has chosen to use, coherently with her wanting to be an "ecological mother." Both versions of the nesting process show tendencies that deeply characterize the local representation of pregnancy: on one side its continuous, widespread commodification and fetishization, on the other the growing countertendency toward its renaturalization. The platform offers mothers-to-be a great possibility not only to display their socioeconomic status and their perspective on childcare but, first of all, to share as well as show off the step-by-step construction of the material side of their future motherhood.

A second, very widespread narrative pattern is that of pregnancy presented as a path of personal disclosure and growth: the woman discovers her real nature, whereby "becoming a mother" comes out as the ultimate sense of "being a woman": she cultivates her interiority, comes to terms with her bodily transformation and imperfections, explores new stages of awareness and is finally "reborn as a mother," in a sort of double or parallel gestation. This is precisely what Jenny stresses when she writes, "The final truth is only one: we, as Women, we're born ready to give birth . . . it doesn't matter whether we do fear it or not!" In later posts she insists, "What a widespread ignorance on the world of babies o\_O. One of my greatest goals is to bring more awareness to as many moms and dads as possible!" and "Delivering was the most revolutionary act in my life. Doors have shut that I feel will never open again. I came out of it totally transformed."<sup>20</sup>

Related to this narrative, we also have the model of pregnancy as a mission and/or its celebration as a gift or a blessing. This is usually expressed by means of a religious language or imaginary, very much consistent with a cultural context that is deeply influenced by the Christian tradition and the related representations of pregnancy as a marital duty, the fetus as a person since its very first days, and childbirth as a holy moment, as is evident in some of the posts we analyzed:

20. "Alla fine la verità è una sola: noi Donne siamo nate pronte per partorire! Paura o non paura!"; "Quanta ignoranza sul mondo dei bambini O\_\_o Un mio grande fine è quello di portare più consapevolezza in tal senso al numero maggiore di mamme e papà!"; "Partorire è stato l'atto più rivoluzionario della mia vita, si sono chiuse porte che sento non si riapriranno mai più. Ne sono uscita trasformata."

"I am beginning 2015 in the best way because I am receiving the most beautiful gift in a woman's life: the birth of MY CHILD!!!!"<sup>21</sup> (Rosa); "Always bless my family"<sup>22</sup> (Silvia, prayer written on a meme picturing the Virgin Mary); "That's great news! When is the blessed event going to take place?"<sup>23</sup> (a friend's comment on Angela's wall, and the same on Mara's).

The storytelling of pregnancy often borrows its characters and structure from other, already established, narrative models that are quite widespread in the European context. It's the case of what we have chosen to label "The Pregnancy Tale," that is, a story in which protagonists assume prototypical roles and act—consequently telling their actions online—in socially expectable ways, very much entangled with the local construction of gender and family roles (see Forni et al. 2006). In this perspective, the father is often presented as a hero or protector, the newborn as a little prince or princess, the female friends of the mother-to-be are usually assimilated as actual aunts or relatives of some kinds: among many other memes, for instance, Rosa posts the image of a pregnant belly, tied up with a blue ribbon, with the caption "Waiting for a handsome little prince"<sup>24</sup>; under the first picture of the just-enlarged family, Maria writes, "Little prince I. has arrived!!!"<sup>25</sup> In a long post written shortly after the birth of her second child, Angela recommends to her male contacts, "Love your wives. And they'll be great mothers. And this will make you a wonderful father. Your children will grow up happy, smiling at life."<sup>26</sup> The Pregnancy Tale tends to conclude with a happy ending represented by the child's birth and the beginning of a exciting family life wherein the new parental roles are gradually waved and socially constructed through the course of a new story.

Another recurrent narrative pattern is "The Pregnancy Saga," that is, the continuous listing of adventures, misadventures, difficulties, and ups and downs of a mother-to-be: Tatiana, for instance, has to come to terms with some health problems and must thus rest at home ("At rest for two weeks: I have never been absent from school for such a long time but one has priorities now"<sup>27</sup>); Amelia, on her side, struggles with nausea from the very beginning, whereas Giorgia de-

21. "Io inizierò il 2015 in bellezza perché riceverò il dono più bello della vita di una donna: la nascita di MIO FIGLIO!!!!"

22. "Proteggi sempre la mia famiglia."

23. "Che notizia! A quando il lieto evento?"

24. "In attesa di un bellissimo principino."

25. "È arrivato il piccolo principe I!!!!"

26. "Amate le vostre mogli. E saranno grandi madri. E ciò farà di voi un padre meraviglioso. I vostri figli cresceranno felici, sorridenti alla vita."

27. "A riposo per due settimane, non sono mai mancata da scuola per tanto tempo, ma adesso ci sono delle priorità."

velops a sort of counternarrative in which she seems to face every step of her pregnancy as an obstacle and consigns all her frustration to the Facebook wall: “Acidity . . . leave my stomach!”; “Nausea, leave this body!” Touching upon one of the most recurrent themes in the offline narratives of pregnancy, that is, the cravings (around which the Italian cosmology of birth has developed interesting folk interpretations<sup>28</sup>), she returns very often on the food theme: “I’m hungryyyyyyy! Having to be content with boiled spinach and some vegetables is just not fair!”; to a friend commenting on the need to quit smoking: “Fuck you! Besides being hungry I am longing for a ciggy as well!”; “Giorgia, don’t think about food, don’t think about sandwiches, toasts, bruschettas, pizzas and the like . . . don’t think about hamburgers, hot dogs and kebabs . . . just concentrate! Don’t think! Remind yourself that they will harm you, harm you very much, harm you a lot!”<sup>29</sup> For her, even the naming process becomes a problematic effort she needs to share and discuss on the social network: among others, her post “The name I had chosen for the unborn has been rejected by everybody as UNPLEASANT” is followed by a long list of comments in which she explains why her family won’t let her choose the name and declares to be discouraged, while her contacts propose and vote their preferences for other names.

From this point of view, her story of pregnancy actually unfolds as a complex text characterized by a shared authoriality of the contents: the comments following a post do in fact contribute to the story as much as the original post does. As Alexander and Levine (2008, 40 ff.) clearly explain, Web 2.0 storytelling has introduced some interesting changes in the use we make of narrative: “stories now are open-ended, branching, hyperlinked, cross-media, participatory, exploratory, and unpredictable.” With reference to Facebook, in particular, if on one side they are necessarily linear—an aspect that is somehow imposed by the design of the platform—on the other they are also distributed among posts, comments, replies, and quotations and have become “more like environments than classic tales” (46). Such nature of Facebook narratives—permitted, exactly as linearity is imposed—by the site itself, is especially evident in the case of pregnancy when the teller’s story interlaces with other mothers’: as happens with female family members and friends offline, they have already experienced pregnancy and are now ready to give the mother-to-be reassurances, predic-

28. See Angelini and Trinci 2000.

29. “Acidità . . . lascia il mio stomaco!”; “Nausea lascia questo corpo!”; “Ho fameeeeeeeeeeee, altro che spinaci lessi e verdure!!! è un’ingiustizia peròò . . . !”; “Stronza! Oltre che aver fame voria anca na sigaretta!” (in dialect); “Giorgia non pensare al mangiare, non pensare a tramezzini, panini, bruschette, pizze, pizzette e calzoncini vari . . . non pensare agli hamburger, hot dog e kebab . . . concentrati . . . non pensare, fanno male, malissimo, malerrimo!”



tions, and suggestions, the most recurrent one being “Sleep while you still can.” Under a post in which she has asked if it’s okay to feel like doing nothing during the last months, here are some of Jenny’s friends’ comments: “Dear Jenny, as the deadline approaches you will feel more and more like retiring in a private bubble just for you two); “I try to be at least a bit active by weaving my *mei tai* just in order not to feel guilty”; “Ahahah Jenny enjoy the peace, the rest, the sleep: after birth everything will speed up!! You have been very active so far you deserve it even more than others!”; “Jenny, you’d better rest as much as possible: delivering is like running in the Olympics and will require all your energy.”; “I used to alternate between total rest and the nesting syndrome!”; “It’s normal only if you are a wise and illuminated mom: I was not, so for me it was not like that and that’s why I tell you: enjoy every single moment!”<sup>30</sup>

Caught up in the excitement of commenting, some experienced women even take the opportunity to recall their own pregnancy, thus inserting their story into the main one, with the effect of multiplying the narrative levels: “What a great belly. . . . I am reminded of the time when I also had such a belly . . . and the emotions I felt”<sup>31</sup> is, for instance, the comment of a friend of Amelia’s after her announcement.

As emerges from the corpus, the choice of Facebook as a medium for pregnancy narratives affects their structure in a very complex way: the platform partly organizes them according to a linear temporalization, thus not allowing the user to rearrange them in an arbitrary plot, and partly leaves the user free to select her audience, the contents posted and code used to post. Posting is a narrative practice, and, as such, it doesn’t just respond to the platform norms but also represents an expression of agency and creativity. In these sense, even the most standardized formulas and traditional narrative patterns—clearly mirroring the usual offline word of mouth that surrounds pregnancy—can be used with personal strategies of resemantization and agency and actually undergo a continuous pluralization, negotiation and dynamic interplay with other—similar or different—stories.

30. “Cara Jenny, più ti avvicinerai al parto più sentirai l’impulso di ritirti in una bolla tutta vostra!”; “Io mi rendo giusto quel poco attiva cucendo il mio *mei tai*. Così non mi sento in colpa”; “Ahahah Jenny goditi la pace, il riposo, il sonno: dopo la nascita tutto andrà più veloce!! Sei stata molto attiva finora quindi lo meriti più di altre!”; “Jenny, riposati ora, ché il parto è come un’olimpiade richiede tutte le tue energie”; “Io alternavo periodi di voglia di far niente con periodi di massima sindrome da preparazione del nido”; “È normale ma solo se si è una mamma in ascolto e illuminata, per me non è stato proprio così e per questo ti dico: goditi ogni attimo.”

31. “Che bel pancione. . . . Mi ricorda quando ne avevo anche io uno così . . . e le emozioni che provavo.”

So how does the storytelling of one's pregnancy on Facebook structure and shape the cultural meanings associated to pregnancy in the analyzed context? In light of our findings, we might say that it partly provides a well-known, and thus reassuring, framework within which to organize and make sense of such a radical experience, at the same time guaranteeing mothers-to-be a community with which to share it: in this sense, it is conservative. On the other side, it provides them with new narrative potentialities such as the ones we have seen so far—the potentially endless expansion of the audience, the multiplication of narrative levels in the continuous interplay between posts, reposts, and comments and the immediate and/or delayed feedback—as well as with interesting linguistic and expressive possibilities, as we shall see in the next section.

### The Semiotic and Rhetorical Analysis

The modality through which these pregnancy narratives are constructed and experienced on Facebook seems to be, as Wittgenstein (1953, sec. 7) would put it, a real “semiotic game”: a modus of constant configuration of meanings accomplished through the procedure of anaphoric reference. The practice of posting resorts to allusions, to the “said” and the “unsaid,” in some cases even to silence: at the same time, it develops through the reception and the sharing of the sense of inputs and, finally, through the reiteration of such practices by the users.

When it comes to the announcement of a pregnancy, for instance, almost no woman of the sample explicitly writes “I'm pregnant”: they rather post photographs or write posts that serve the purpose of spurring, arousing, stimulating the idea of their story of pregnancy in the receiver who sees or reads the post. On one side the pictures that portray the woman's growing belly are the most recurrent visual content used to break the news:<sup>32</sup> such photographs, which can either focus on the belly or the whole figure, usually represent the new—that is, updated—profile picture of the mother-to-be. In the first case they are mostly selfies; in the second they are shot by people close to her, for example, the partner. On the other side the verbal posts announcing the pregnancy usually refer to the same stories told in the offline culture, such as those about “cooked vegetables,” “nausea,” and the “stork”: Arianna announces in fact that “Everything's fine on the Blue Coast . . . but in restaurants they don't serve any dish with cooked vegetables!”<sup>33</sup> whereas Amelia breaks the news of the pregnancy by asking herself

32. For example, in the profiles of Alessia, Marta, Cristina, and Mara. If the narration is brought to the extreme, the picture portrays the ultrasound of the fetal development (e.g., on Lucia's wall).

33. “Tutto bene sulla Costa Azzurra . . . ma nei ristoranti non servono piatti con le verdure cotte!”

and her friends, “Was this nausea ever to end?”<sup>34</sup>, and Rosa, by alluding to the fact that “The stork has knocked at my door as well!!!!”<sup>35</sup> The visual and the verbal content can furthermore intersect, the latter being used to comment, or better to caption, the photographic one: the sentences, not rarely nominal ones, are consequently quite short. Elena, for instance, posts a picture that jointly celebrates the news of her pregnancy and of her successfully working life by captioning it as “A new life in a new office.”<sup>36</sup>

As regards the use of verbal resources, the semantic fields of “novelty” and “waiting,” combined as well with those of “life” and “love,” are particularly exploited.<sup>37</sup> The phatic function of the images and the texts posted triggers an anaphoric process of sharing of the alluded sense by the friends or the contacts who are allowed to see or read the contents: the reactions to the posts often assume the form of stereotyped greeting formulas, that is, of real chunks such as “Best wishes” and “Congratulations,” which are in fact reperformed in a very similar way by different users.<sup>38</sup>

The form the narrative of pregnancy assumes seems then to retrace the different plots and semantic areas that already configure such story in the Italian offline society. The images and the words posted refer to and delimit meanings that are already commonly shared and can be consequently understood as conservative, as the narratological analysis of the sample has also shown. At the same time Facebook discloses itself as a boosting vehicle for building common sense: this emerges particularly through the possibility the social network offers to its users to “show” in order to tell: through its character of immediacy, the picture of the growing belly carries out a particularly powerful function of activating the sharing of an acceptable sense of the events, as proved by the reactions and the comments above. The tendencies shown by the sample in this first phase of the narrative seem to characterize its further steps as well.

During the months between announcement and giving birth, the visual data posted continue to refer on one side to the growing belly<sup>39</sup> and, on the other, to further and newer domains of contents: within them, the most recurrent ones

34. “Ma queste nausee non dovevano finire finalmente?”

35. “La cicogna ha bussato anche alla mia porta!!!!” Only two of the examples (Tatiana’s and Ludovica’s) can be understood to be verbal celebration of the news, rather than a mere allusion to it.

36. “Una nuova vita in un nuovo ufficio.”

37. As already shown by the previous announcement sentence “A new life in a new office” (Elena; see n. 36). Further examples can be seen, among others, in Maria’s announcement post “Waiting for the sweet I.”

38. At most they differ from one another in the use of familiar pet names addressed to the mother (e.g., “Honey, best wishes!”, “Congratulations, my love!”), or for asking the mother for an update (e.g., “How are you?”) or giving her an update (e.g., “I am in . . . at the moment working . . .”) (Alessia).

39. At least one photograph that portrays the belly is posted by more than 60 percent of the profiles investigated.

are pictures showing the couple and/in the “nesting process.” The photographs portraying the belly and/or the parents-to-be provoke reactions and comments that refer to the semantic spheres of “beauty,” such as “Gorgeous!”; “What a great picture . . .”; “You are beautiful!”<sup>40</sup> in Arianna’s, Amelia’s, and Elena’s diaries; sometimes they even exploit the semantics of “wonder” (e.g., in the comment “How wonderful is your belly!?!?!?!?!?” in Valeria’s diary<sup>41</sup>), and then of “love” and “tenderness” (e.g., “Ah . . . what a tender image” in Amelia’s<sup>42</sup>). The pictures showing the first objects and items of the layette, in turn, still tend to evoke the semantics of “waiting” and, connected to it, that of “excitement”: after having bought some items of clothing for her baby-to-be, for instance, Lucia shares a post in which she directly addresses him/her and adds to the picture the caption “Plump little girl I’m looking forward to see you wearing them.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Amelia captions the pictures with “Waiting for the little E.”<sup>44</sup> and involves her husband in the content posted by tagging him. Apart from this, a basic appreciation is often shown and shared by the woman’s friends, in that they only “like” the content posted.

As emerges from our analysis, the posts that refer to this phase of the pregnancy strongly vehicle a process of personification of the baby: in this case the visual contents are again particularly exploited to start a kind of “game of sense” that mostly concerns his/her naming. For example, Elena launches a process of association by posting the image of a flower whose denomination bears the same initials as the name of the baby-to-be; Angela, instead, posts the picture of a drawing made by herself and her first child, on which the name of the coming baby is reported within stereotyped sentences or, again, chunks, that is, “D. on his way.” As already noted with reference to the overall narrative structure, when the development of the pregnancy is told by writing a post, this often contains references to the scans that frame the temporality of pregnancy: despite such elements, the use of biomedical language doesn’t actually seem to be highly dispersed within the corpus, one of the few recurring words being *ecography*.<sup>45</sup> Such posts serve anyway the purpose of reassuring the pregnant woman and the users who will share the content with her about the good processing of the pregnancy. The meanings that clash with the semantics of “assurance,” like the ones

40. “Splendida!”; “Che bella foto . . .”; “Sei così bella!”

41. “Ma quanto è bella la tua pancia!?!?!?!?!?”

42. “Ah . . . che immagine tenera.”

43. “Piccola paffutella non vedo l’ora di vederteli indossare.”

44. “Aspettando E.”

45. Another rare example is *fetus*: the term appears when announcing the pregnancy in a post that, exceptionally, celebrates the news in a verbal mode.

related to the area of “pain,” recur very rarely in the sample and, when they do, they are mostly used to tell about the phase preceding delivery, which is at this point forthcoming and consequently already celebrated for its uniqueness. In fact different women of the sample post the same poem whose first verses immortalize the delivery as, exactly, a painful happening: “A night of pain [. . .]. A night that [. . .] will change your life. [. . .] that marks the line behind which nothing will be the same and nothing will look like it.”<sup>46</sup>

The meanings conveyed by the second part of the stories are therefore consistent with the ones semantized in their first part and thus are in line with the manner of assigning a sense to the experience of pregnancy in the Western, and in this case Italian, cultural setting. As the analysis carried out above has shown, the stories strengthened and commonly accepted within the offline culture nourish the ones told online: and yet the originality of the latter lies in the function of “expressive enhancement” they carry out, this being enabled by the possibilities the social network offers to its users to constantly manipulate the experience and shape a reassuring version of it. The visual code, and prevalently the photographic one, turns out to be one of the most acute activators of such a configuration: showing both one’s psychophysical wellness and socioeconomic wealth in a picture produces once again an immediate sense that is in turn easily welcomed and reelaborated by the friends and/or other contacts.

The news of the birth is mostly broken on the very day of the delivery.<sup>47</sup> In this case a main role is played by the photographs, which usually portray the baby, the baby and the mother, the first objects that belong to the baby, breastfeeding, and parts of the baby’s body (especially his/her little hands and feet, usually zoomed). Such photos, like the ones of the just-growing belly at the beginning of the story, are used as well by the mother as the cover or profile picture and consequently provoke comments expressing congratulations and welcoming the newborn: graphical aids such as icons, emoticons, and punctuation are again used to emphasize them, thus continuing to carry out the function of ex-

46. “Una notte di dolore [. . .]. Una notte che [. . .] cambierà la tua vita. [. . .] che traccia la linea oltre la quale niente sarà più lo stesso e niente sembrerà com’era.” The poem is posted through the technique of quotation, that is, of reporting content (pictures, memes, texts, or combinations of these elements) from other Internet pages and copying them onto one’s Facebook wall. Further rare examples of meanings related to the semantics of “indisposition” or “annoyance,” are expressed by formulas like “Acidity . . . leave my stomach.” (Acidità . . . lascia il mio stomaco!) or “Nausea leave this body!” (Nausea lascia questo corpo!). If the contents posted refer to concepts perceived as unpleasant, like “overweight,” they are not verbally interpreted as such: they are rather reconducted, once again, to some sort of semantics of reassurance: the woman is not overweight, it’s just her belly that is growing (e.g., Silvia).

47. This is the case of Amelia, Sandra, Alessia, Rosa, Lucia, Maria, Celeste, Elena, Silvia, Angela, and Mara’s profiles. The news is mainly reported by the mother and only in few cases by other people close to her, for example, a female friend.

pressive enhancement outlined above: some examples are “Best wishes!!!,” “Best wisheeeessss . . . ,” “Congratulations!!!,” “Congratulations!!!!!!!!!!!!,” “Congratulations to Mum and Dad ♥,” “Welcome little guy!!! ☺.” Such comments occur homogeneously in the corpus.

This same semantics of “welcoming,” as well as the semantics of “wonder,” is often exploited by the mother who announces the birth of the baby by means of a verbal post, which can also include the paternal figure within the celebration. Amelia writes, for example, “Mum and Dad welcome you E.”<sup>48</sup> and tags her husband; Rosa’s verbal announcement of the birth reads, “Welcome to the world sweet child of mine!!!”<sup>49</sup>; Lucia expresses once again her wonder about the successful delivery: “I just didn’t think we’d do it today. . . . Indeed on 10/17/2013 she has arrived.”<sup>50</sup> The process of personification, which had already started during the development of the pregnancy, comes to an end here so that “little fleas,” “little guys,” and “heroes,” as well as “little girls,” are finally welcomed<sup>51</sup> with their proper name.

Sometimes the same contents already used to celebrate in advance the uniqueness of the moment of the delivery are reemployed, and the event is thus retold for a second time: such posts are usually shared a few days after the birth.<sup>52</sup>

The first months of life of the newborn, and often of the new, enlarged family are told on Facebook as well. One last time, and thus to close the story, the visual code is principally used in order to impress, that is, to charm the public’s attention. Photographs of this stage of the narratives portray, among others, the first appointment with the pediatrician or the baby at home with his/her brothers and/or sisters. Similarly, the verbal posts tell about the first achievements of the baby, such as his/her first smiles.<sup>53</sup> Such a development of the narration is evident even in those rare cases that either don’t tell about the development of the pregnancy but only announce it, or don’t even do that, this leading to a communicative effect that exploits the former lack of information and its consequent density.<sup>54</sup> By resorting again to the common sense of the offline narratives, that is, configuring a happy ending, the story of pregnancy slowly transmutes into the next, and just as exciting, wonderful and fairytale narration about the new status of “being a mother.”

48. “Mamma e papà ti danno il benvenuto E.”

49. “Benvenuto al mondo piccolo mio!!!”

50. “Non pensavo proprio che ce l’avremmo fatta oggi. . . . E invece il 17/10/2013 è arrivata.”

51. See, e.g., the profiles of Alessia, Angela, Ludovica, and Valeria.

52. See, e.g., Amelia’s and Lucia’s profiles.

53. See, e.g., the profiles of Amelia, Alessia, Tatiana, Maria, Celeste, Laura, and Angela.

54. Marta’s and Sara’s profiles, respectively.

### The Storytelling of Pregnancy on Facebook: Some Conclusions and Open Questions

Every time they post a content on Facebook, the women of the sample perform an act aimed at the sharing of its sense. In this perspective, and given the particular affordances proposed by the platform, the very practice of posting develops as a narrative activity, this being mainly driven by the human tendency to share experience. The privacy setting of the posts is significant as well: the whole or the most part of each story of pregnancy is in fact often posted as public,<sup>55</sup> sometimes both public and limited (to friends).<sup>56</sup> Apart from this, however, the sample shows a homogeneous trend to share the posted picture, text, meme, or link at least with the own friends, this leading to a replication of a practice—telling specific aspects of one’s own pregnancy to close friends—carried out in the offline culture.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, Facebook offers the chance to report contents that are shared as “public”: this gives online pregnancy narratives a much greater potentiality of spreading than the word of mouth.

When it comes to the very contents shared, then, the narrative identity of Facebook clearly unveils in that highly conventional plots are proposed and nourished by means of the continuous dynamics of reference carried out by the mothers-to-be and their web of contacts: it might even be said that they share and construct together perfectly “normal” threads of content. As the investigation has shown, these range from the “nausea” to the “growing belly,” from the progressive configuration of the maternal role to the framing of the ones that are usually close to the newborn (e.g., the father, the siblings, the grandparents, the uncles and aunts), from the perception of pregnancy as a process of renewal—not rarely of “blessed rebirth”—of the woman to the delivery as the beginning of a new (family) life. The stories told on Facebook are exactly what one is used to hear of about pregnancy: as such, they are “good stories.”<sup>58</sup> In some extreme cases the construction of a plot serves the purpose of “normalizing di-

55. As, for instance, in the stories told by Alessia, Rosa, Marta, Jenny, Silvia, Mara, and Giorgia. Even though in such cases the public sharing could be understood as an informed choice, several inquiries have shown that the degree of neglect in relation to the “privacy options” on Facebook is very high, so that significant proportions of users might even ignore them (Jones and Soltren 2005; Dwyer et al. 2007; Livingstone 2008; see also Ghidoli 2010, 42–44).

56. See, e.g., the narratives by Sandra, Lucia, Elena, Sara, and Angela. In such cases the posts that are publicly shared could be in fact understood as oversights of Facebook’s privacy settings.

57. See, e.g., the cases of Arianna, Amelia, Tatiana, Marta, Celeste, Silvia, Ludovica, and Valeria.

58. An example of rare exceptionality of the contents told is represented by the celebration of the “lotus birth,” a new delivery technique by which the umbilical cord isn’t surgically cut but falls off naturally some days after the birth (cf. Jenny’s story). It is also worth remembering that those plots that contradict the occurrence of “good stories,” such as being overweight and experiencing more general physical discomfort, don’t seem to be particularly appreciated within the corpus.

versity”: whereas the real experience lies outside the beautiful, and thus usual stories, the contents posted configure a plot that claims, if not even feigns, a condition of normality.<sup>59</sup>

The human inclination to reiterate plausible versions of reality, and by this to inhabit the world, appears to be exquisitely promoted and expressed on Facebook and by Facebook. If the general trend shown within the investigated corpus is to tell usual, common stories, then the very originality of the medium seems then to lie in the fact that it hyperstimulates the replication of experiential forms. The possibilities, among others, of sharing contents with more than one friend at the same moment, of emphasizing the expressive character of reactions by means of emoticons and punctuation, of resharing the same content after a certain time, turn out to be in fact powerful expedients that contribute to maintain constant, and then productive, the resemantization of experience, the search and the reconfiguration of an acceptable version of it. In such a process, which is at the same time cognitive and pragmatic, reiteration and habit constantly interlace with creativity and agency, as in any communicative act.

In this sense the outputs of the possibility of using more media at the same time are particularly significant. If the story, as it happens very often in the sample, starts by means of a visual content like a picture, then this is often received and reinterpreted by means of the verbal code to which, in turn, the users can react by resorting to other visual tools such as emoticons; and these will very probably lead to a further answer—in the form of a comment—being again either of a visual, a verbal, or a mixed nature.

On Facebook the possibility of telling, that is, of constantly reconfiguring usual paths of content and of reacting as well as answering to them, is constant and particularly powerful: in fact the different semiotic codes are involved to say—by writing and/or sharing visual posts—always the same things (Massa and Simeoni 2014, 89): that is, things that are least roughly similar. In the sample investigated here we even find some tentatives to shape a sort of collective memory, as the same post is shared by different users to assign a meaning to similar experiences. It is also interesting to note that the same posts are shared by different women at different stages of their pregnancy, to remark once again the tendency of sense making to proceed through processes of gestaltic agglomer-

59. As told by Valeria, whose child was born with a hemangioma of the skin. Whereas the first images depicting the birthmark on her cheek are posted over a month after the delivery, the comments they stimulate play exactly the role of agencies of normalization: consequently the child is praised as “the most beautiful baby in the world.” Afterward, the mother begins to celebrate the beauty—that is, the “normality of the beauty”—of her child as well. Actually, both the woman and her friends on Facebook act as if the hemangioma isn’t really there.



ation of experience.<sup>60</sup> Posting is consequently a narrative semiotic praxis, and Facebook a medium that extends the production of the common sense of experience (Schutz 1964; see also Jedlowski 2000; Bégout 2005).

One of the ultimate consequences of such a finding can be thus seen in the fact that Facebook tends to unfold at least partly, as a tool of preservation of offline cultural forms, as actual research data on its use in different cultural settings and experiential domains have highlighted (Miller et al. 2016). This is maybe why so many mothers-to-be, whose confidentiality with internet and social media is not particularly high, tend yet to like posting news of their pregnancy on Facebook. As far as the experience of pregnancy is concerned, the study carried out and analyzed in this article confirms such a perspective: Facebook is an enhancer of common stories.

On the other hand, as we have noted throughout the article, new narrative potentialities are offered by this specific medium: among them, the potentially endless expansion of the audience, the multiplication of narrative levels in the interplay between posts, reposts, and comments, the possibility to receive an immediate and/or delayed feedback and use the wall as a kind of personalized discussion forum. The narrative outputs of Facebook are furthermore original because they offer a concrete manifestation of “hypernarrativity.” In this sense, and as shown by our analysis, the central role played by the visual code appears as globally evident: in fact it enables the pregnant women, as Facebook users, to accomplish a real narrative process, or even artifice: “telling through showing.” Both the alternation and the interlacement of the visual code with the verbal resources constitute a homogeneous and innovative aspect of the narrative praxis on Facebook shown by the sample. Further analyses of such tools and potentialities could constitute some first, interesting developments of the study conducted here.

In this sense the sample discussed would be further investigatable under many aspects: even though the narratives told within it appear to be quite homogeneous as their diastatic distribution is concerned (so that posts that express similar contents can be shared by a mother-to-be who is either a psychologist or a secretary), its further exploration from this perspective would be desirable, as well as the widening of its diatopic constitution, and thus of the possible variation of the narrative forms resulting from it. A further research scenario en-

60. For instance, the case of the post that refers to the “pain of the delivery,” this being shared by more women to allude to the meaning of the “necessary pain to be born again as a mother” (cf. the stories by Amelia, Sandra, Rosa, and Lucia).

tailed by online storytelling evidently concerns what has been defined here as the discursive praxis through which the activity of posting develops. On this level the deeper understanding of the semiotic peculiarity of the medium constitutes an essential datum in order to grasp the identity of this original narrative modality. For instance: What sort of writing is performed on Facebook? To what degree can the interplay between visual and verbal codes be understood as an original diamesic variety? And to what extent can it be understood as a discursive form?

Finally, as regards the pregnancy narratives themselves, further contrastive studies dealing with the form they assume on Facebook in different socio-cultural environments would represent a very interesting objective: their relationship with offline narratives and their tendency to preserve and conserve them—as emerged here—will have to be more closely addressed, understood and evaluated against the fluidification of forms that storytelling seems to be undergoing when transposed online. As a new narrative frontier, storytelling on Facebook definitely promises to open up significant and original paths of research.

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