Interaction with strangers on *Omegle.com*: sociability, relationship and identity

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Abstract

In light of the method proposed by Simmel, centered on the concept of sociability, in this article we investigate the ludic dimension of the conversational site Omegle.com, aiming to apprehend the form of their interactions. For this, we problematize the two differential characteristics of the site. First, based on the social phenomenology of Schutz, we discuss the formation of relationships through the use of a random system. Secondly, based on the dialectic of identity of Ricoeur, we reflect how the site constitutes an anonymous subject, designated as "stranger." In conclusion, we believe that the social game played on Omegle is characterized by equilibrium, dynamism and ephemerality, being used for many different purposes, such as simple talk, virtual sex, autonomous learning and social observation.

Keywords

Social interaction. *Omegle*. Sociability. Relationship. Identity.

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1 Introduction

Omegle.com is an American website launched in 2009 that, like many other websites, provides free chat services enabling the exchange of messages between two users. However, it has features that taken together differentiate it from most chat websites. The first feature is the use of a system popularly known as *chatroulette*,[1] in which the website randomly assigns pairs for conversation: thus, users cannot choose their chat partner. The second one is the dissolution of the identity of users, who do not have the choice of writing profiles or choosing nicknames that allow others to recognize them (the service does not even require registration). For this reason, *Omegle* summarizes its functionality in the following sentence displayed at its homepage: Talk to strangers.

Three chat modes are offered at the website, each with its own dynamics: the Text mode, in which users exchange only written messages; the Spy mode (question), in which users ask a question (also in writing) that starts the conversation between two other users and the user who asks

the questions just observes what is being said without intervening; and the Video mode, in which in addition to written messages, video and audio input can be exchanged with the use of webcams, microphones and speakers. In the three modes, the user can end the conversation any time by clicking on the "esc" key on the keyboard or on a button on the graphic interface, thus being directed to a new partner in two seconds.

The expression "interaction between strangers" used on the title of this paper to characterize the social relationships established on *Omegle* is a reference to Georg Simmel (1983, p. 173), a sociologists who formulated the concept of sociability as an "interaction between equals", the purest type of interaction, symmetrical, balanced and playful. According to Simmel (1983, p. 47), the domain of study of social interactions is found in the investigation of the "forms taken by groups of people united to live side by side, for each other or with one another". The author says that social forms exist in themselves, resulting from the phenomenon of sociability and not from its own ends and contents. The basis of his method is, therefore, a separation between form and content (SIMMEL, 1983, p. 168).

We think that this separation is proficuous for the observation of interactions based on conversation, as is the case with *Omegle*.

According to Simmel (1983), we may start a conversation with the purpose of understanding a specific subject, but our objective may well be talking just for the sake of talking. In the former case, form is a function of the communication of a given content; in the latter case, it is "in the service of countless contents and purposes of human life" (SIMMEL, 1983, p. 176). It is in the second example that conversation acquires the playful dimension of sociability, because the most important thing becomes the game that is shared between individuals. We understand that interactions on *Omegle* should be viewed from the point of view of sociability, following the idea that its users are not seeking communication of a specific content, being rather driven by the pleasure of the game itself.

This does not mean that contents are not important for the study of social interactions. In our observations of *Omegle* throughout the year 2012, we found that most conversations in the Video mode were driven by sexual contents (nudity, masturbation, particularly between males). However, the website changed its operating rules in early 2013: firstly, it started monitoring the conversations and forwarding users who were naked to a chat room reserved for people older than 18; secondly, it made available on its homepage links to websites specialized in sex video chats with the following

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[1] The use of this expression is the result of the popularity of the chatroulette.com website, one of the first to use the random chat service. The use of the term roulette is related precisely to its random character.

sentence: *Here's a free adult site, if you're after that*. Thus, to keep the form of its game and not run the risk of institutionalizing it as a function of one single purpose, *Omegle* started encouraging users who were only after sex content to leave the website; thus, it considered more important to maintain its mode of interaction than to maintain a given number of visits provided by a popular content. From this example, we can see that the investigation of a social form also required knowledge of its content, since the interaction is constructed on the basis of a dynamic relationship between both. What Simmel (1983) advocates is that we should not consider social life as the object, but rather sociability; the movement being proposed is a new approach of interactions that have different purposes, so that precisely that which they have in common can be released.

Thus, in order to understand the form of social interactions on *Omegle*, we turn to the two previously mentioned characteristics, which differentiate it from other chat websites, examining them in the light of Simmel and other like-minded thinkers. In the first topic of the paper, we discuss the establishment of communicative acts and the types of relationships generated by the random chat system supported by the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (1979). In the second topic, we investigate the process of constitution of this subject called "stranger", based on the dialectic of identity proposed by Paul Ricoeur

(1991). Finally, we turn to Simmel and based on the reflection on the data observed in previous discussions, we describe the elements that compose the game that is shared between users of the website.

2 Random relationship

We have already described *Omegle* in general terms as a system that allows two individuals to interact in a conversation. Following the thesis on interactivity by Alex Primo (2000), we can make this description more accurate defining it as an information technology-based environment for mutual interaction, instead of a merely reactive interaction with the computer. Since Primo's approach focuses the investigation on the computer-based mediation, we think it is important to connect this definition to the conceptual apparatus of social phenomenology by Alfred Schutz (1979), a researcher of face-to-face relationships. With this connection, we try to understand both the intersubjective dimension of the communication process (the different types of relationship, the roles played by individuals, their motivations, and the languages used) as hallmarks of computer mediation (the use of web 2.0 tools).

Established from Edmund Husserl's concept of intersubjectivity, the assumption of Schutz's thought (1979) is that an individual does not perceive his fellow human being as an object, but rather as a countersubject, whom he naturally

confers life and consciousness.[2] The author calls this phenomenon the "Thou-orientation".

> This is a prepredicative experience in which I become aware of a fellow human being as a person. The Thou-orientation can thus be defined as the intentionality of those Acts whereby the Ego grasps the existence of the other person in the mode of the original self. Every such experience in the mode of the original self presupposes the actual presence of the other person and my perception of him as there (SCHUTZ, 1979, p. 181).

Experience leads to the understanding of the other as a subject, the sharing with him of a same time-space, the possibility of intercommunication[3] and the interpretation of motivations, intentions and thoughts behind his acts which Schutz (1979, p. 180) calls the "We-relationship". In this sense, according to Schutz a relationship is nothing but two people who grow old together. However, Schutz states that we are incapable of apprehending the We-relationship in its pure form, since we experience it from inside: we cannot reach the consciousness of the other, his "being there" (*Dasein*). In other words, in its pure state, a relationship is "a mere limiting concept which one uses in the attempt to get a theoretical grasp of the face-to-face situation" (SCHUTZ, 1979, p. 185).

Therefore, relationships can be observed in their concreteness, varying in relation to the points of view, degrees of immediacy, intimacy, intensity, etc.

Regarding *Omegle*, we should notice that, firstly, the random chat system turns relationships into isolated acts. They lack a past, since individuals do not have any previous information about the other, which makes the mutual subjective comprehension difficult. Certainly during the conversation we can grasp the objective meaning of the words directed to us. But without a previous relationship, we do not get what Schutz (1979, p. 183) calls the subjective meaning, which would allow us to infer about the thoughts behind the words and that inhabit the consciousness of the other. *Omegle*'s relationships are also characterized by the impossibility of a future, to the extent that it is rather improbable that chat partners will ever meet again, although users can exchange contact information and continue the relationship in other communication environments. Thus, the random relationship can also be defined as growing old together, although this is about a growing old of an isolated moment, lacking a past or a future, being restricted to a present moment.

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[2] No matter how difficult it is to prove the other's consciousness. Schutz (1979, p. 159) quotes a case in which radical behaviorists pointed to the impossibility of checking the life of the other. The author refutes that ironically by saying to these thinkers that "they should not meet others in congresses where it is reciprocally proved that the intelligence of the other is a questionable fact". And he adds to that, "as long as humans are not concocted like homunculi in retorts but are born and brought up by mothers, the sphere of the 'We' will be naively presupposed." (SCHUTZ, 1979, p. 159).

[3] Helmut R. Wagner, translator of Schutz into Portuguese, explains in a note his choice for the term intercommunication, instead of communication, because it conveys the original thought of the author: "The term intercommunication may sound redundant. However, we insist it be used in order to clearly indicate what Schutz meant with communication, like a two-way road, a true exchange, and not one-directional torrents, as is the case of mass media" (SCHUTZ, 1979, p. 36).

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With the absence of a past, relationships can be characterized by a reduced degree of intimacy, since it is not common to have intimate interactions with people we have just met (and whom we do not even know personally). On the other hand, the finite nature of the random relationship, which is also based on anonymity (which we will discuss in the next topic), results in a good number of interactions at *Omegle* being characterized by a high level of intimacy, as in the cases in which users practice sex acts. But we should stress that cyberculture studies have already called attention to this contemporary phenomenon, concluding that the Web 2.0 reconfigures the notion of intimacy. As pointed out by Paula Sibilia (2008, p. 60), we currently see a displacement from an internal subjectivity to an external subjectivity. From the terms "external" and "intimacy", the author uses the pun *extimo* (or *extimacy*) to characterize the paradox of this phenomenon. What we can see in the case of *Omegle* is that interactions present varying degrees of intimacy, from simple chats to sexual relations.[4]

In order for a relationship to be intensely and dynamically established, Schutz (1979) concludes there should be reciprocity of motives: subjects should share the same motivations, so that the action of one of them will not lead to a negative reaction in the other, putting an end to the relationship. On *Omegle*, the reciprocity of motives is a key factor for the establishment of the

relationship because, as we have seen, the user himself chooses when to end the conversation. Since it is impossible to choose the person one is going to chat with or previously get to know their motives in a profile, relationships tend to be ephemeral and it takes some time until one finds a good chat partner. In order to make it more dynamic, the website started using two tools that act upon its random chat system in an attempt to direct to the same chat session people with reciprocal motivations. The first of them is called *common interests*, a text box in the interface where the user, before being directed to a chat, writes the contents he wants to discuss. Thus, he is directed to a person who has typed terms related to the same themes. The second tool is *Facebook likes*, which allows the website to access the *Facebook* of a user, with his permission, and cross his data with the data of other users to form chat pairs. In other words, the fact that relationships are randomly established does not mean that the choice is always arbitrary.

In addition to motives, Schutz (1979, p. 199) states that language is a decisive factor for the establishment of a relationship. According to the author, the notion of language is always taken for granted, i.e., in order for a communication act to take place, signs should be shared: one expects a given interpretation by the person to whom the sign was directed. At first, Schutz refers to the

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4 Schutz himself (1979, p. 186) compares the degrees of intimacy between a conversation and a sex act: "What different degrees of intimacy occur here, what different levels of consciousness are involved! Not only do the partners experience the We more deeply in the one case than in the other, but each experiences himself more deeply and his partner more deeply."

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set of rules of the mother tongue of a community. In the case of *Omegle*, a North-American website, until the year 2012 the standard language was English, which limited the access to users who spoke other languages. On the other hand, the results of the experiments made by Soares Silva (2011) on *Omegle* showed that since the website is an environment dominated by one language, it could be used as a support education tool for English as a foreign language, by enabling "autonomous learning, in which the learner seeks meanings through random interactions" (SILVA, 2011, p. 18). It is evident that this educational interaction also depends on the reciprocity of motives: it is established both by a user's desire to learn and by the willingness of the other to teach.

However, in early 2013, *Omegle* introduced another change in its system, which now enables users to select the language for the interaction, from a menu of 50 different languages. On the other hand, this enabled the website to open up to other users, which would supposedly increase the number of visits.[5] On the other hand, the choice of a language splits the universe of participants in smaller groups, which might lead to repeats in the establishment of chat pairs. In our experience browsing the website, by choosing Portuguese as the language for the interaction in the *Video* mode (which allows us to see who we are chatting with), after some time changing

partners several times, they started to show up again. In a way, the choice of the language introduces a risk to the maintenance of the game. This point will be discussed again in the next topic, because the argumentation will be linked to the issue of anonymity.

After observing this level of language as a whole, Schutz (1979) points to the fact that language itself can reach high levels of formalization and have signification that is restricted to a sub community. *Omegle*'s users, in fact, use specific signs related to codification of written language typical of the internet, including some created on its own environment. For example, a good number of chats in English start with the question "asl"?, an acronym that stands for *age, sex and location*. It is a question in which, to begin, the individual asks for information related to the identity of the other, in order to decide whether he is going to form a relationship with the other or not. A new user, who is not yet familiar with the language of the environment, will not be able to establish a communication act from this question.

We should also clarify that Schutz does not consider that communication is restricted to verbal signification. The author also observes "the specific functions of the other's bodily movements as an expressional field open to interpretation as signs of the other's thought." (SCHUTZ, 1979, p.

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[5] It seems to us that this was the motivation for the website administrators. However, we do not have information on the number of visits before and after this change.

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203). Thus, the relationship is also established through the use of bodily signs, either deliberate (conventional gestures, such as head shaking in negation), expressive (movements of unintended externalization of feelings) or mimetic (that seek to represent something, like mimicking an animal). In the *Video* mode interactions, as for example in virtual sex, we notice that body language can actually play a key role in the communicative act.

However, so far we have only discussed the cases in the *Text* and *Video* mode, where two users mutually interact. In the *Spy* (*question*) mode there is the presence of a third subject, who only observes the chat. Therefore, we have a different type of "Thou-orientation", in which the user is aware of the other person without the latter being aware of him. According to Schutz (1979, p. 182), in such cases, the orientation is indirect, because it is no longer a reciprocal understanding, becoming a unilateral process based on social observation. As such, if on the one hand the *Spy* (*question*) mode cannot be considered a direct relationship, although it has some of the features of the other modes of interaction of the website, it can be used as a tool that enables the observation of relationships from the outside, thus being closer to their pure form. Thus, *Omegle* provides another way of experiencing the relationship, in which the individual does not play the role of an actor, but rather participates as a kind of audience: the *Spy* (*question*) mode user does not want to play; he just wants to watch the game.

3 The constitution of the "stranger" subject

As previously mentioned, *Omegle* users cannot choose a nickname. They cannot even use their own name for identification purposes. When starting a chat session, the individual is immediately identified by the pronoun *you*, highlighted in blue; the individual with whom he is interacting is given the adjective *stranger*, in red. If we take Émile Benveniste's sentence (1991, p. 286) " it was only in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject", we realize that "you" and "stranger" do not correspond to self-designations but rather to linguistic personae created by the website, in a strategic option of not naming anonymous individuals using personal pronouns "I" and "you". The choice of the terms is clearly related to the website's functionality and highlights the role of environment it plays in the relationships: it is *Omegle* that puts "you" in a chat with a "stranger". Thus, the designation "stranger" is equivalent to the linguistic category of person, having been created by the website in opposition to the pronoun "you", so that the assignment was a result of the otherness: the "strange" is always the other. As Benveniste (1991, p. 286) concluded, "It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of person, for it implies reciprocity".

But the discussion on the constitution of the subject does not end in the category of the person. Paul Ricoeur (1991) framed the philosophical

intent to rephrase the question "who?" and examined the position of the subject who self-designates "I". Following this line of reasoning, one no longer works only at the linguistic level, but starts to examine this issue from the identity point of view. In our case, we ask: who is the subject who gets the designation "stranger"? In order to respond to a problem of this nature, Ricoeur proposes a dialectic between two identity concepts: sameness and ipseity.

Sameness (or idem-identity) confounds the question "who?" with the question "what?" and provides an answer to this issue through the construction of an immutable core of the subject, which guarantees his permanence in time. This construction has a qualitative component related to the features that enable us to distinguish subjects and, likewise, find similarities between them, and also a quantitative component, in the sense that every identity is quantitatively composed of repetitions. According to Ricoeur (1991, p. 141), "these two components are irreducible to one another" and form the substrate of the subject's identification: recognition is nothing but the perception of qualities observed in a given number of occurrences.

Ipseity (or ipse-identity), in turn, puts the "self" before the question "who?" and the answer to the issue is given through a narrative construction. This concept considers the time dimension as a factor of change: the fact that the subject changes and turns into an other. Thus, this is

related to a different type of permanence in time, one that is not "reducible to the determination of a substrate" (RICOEUR, 1991, p. 143). By supporting ipseity in the narrative theory, Ricoeur proposes that its construction takes place based on three components: character, action and plot. In sum, the author's idea is that the plot removes the character from his state of equilibrium and motivates him to turn to the uninterrupted continuity of his life, in a reflection on his own actions. Ricoeur (1991, p. 170-171) accurately describes, in the next excerpt, how these elements connect to compose the narrative identity:

> The decisive step in the direction of a narrative conception of personal identity is taken when one passes from the action to the character. A character is the one who performs the action in a narrative. The category of character is therefore a narrative category as well, and its role in the narrative involves the same narrative understanding as the plot itself. The question is then to determine what the narrative category of character contributes to the discussion of personal identity. The thesis supported here will be that the identity of the character is comprehensible through the transfer to the character of the operation of emplotment, first applied to the action recounted; characters, we will say, are themselves plots.

Considered from Ricoeur's dialectic, we can notice that the constitution of the subject "stranger" in the *Omegle* environment is at first linked to a process of dissolution of the sameness core, both in relation to its qualitative and quantitative components. Since the website does not allow the construction of profiles, the use of avatars, pictures, etc., the subject is deprived of all

qualities and distinctive features that would allow his identification. The only possible component of qualitative identity takes place in the *Video* mode, with the exchange of pictures through the webcam: the "stranger" comes to have a body. Nevertheless, even in this mode of interaction, a good number of individuals choose not to show their face which contains, theoretically, the elements that bring together the bodily features that are key for their identification. It is rather common to find the choice for anonymity even in the *Video* mode with the use of masks or camera framing below the neck. In most cases, hiding the face is linked to nudity, in a self-preservation strategy.

On *Omegle*, sameness is not either constructed through the quantitative component, since the random chat system prevents the repetition of chat partners. If these partners were systematically repeated, it would be possible, to a certain extent, to recognize subjects from the repetition of certain verbal expression, reactions, motives, thoughts, i.e., from the development of the mutual subjective understanding. Based on this argument we previously considered the choice of the language a risk for the maintenance of anonymity: by splitting users in groups and, consequently, generating repetitions in the chat partners, the idem-identity could be reconstructed through it quantitative component.

If on the one hand the constitution of the "stranger" depends on the dissolution of the qualitative and quantitative identity, by establishing a conversation

the subject has the possibility of narrating his life to the other and reconstruct his identity through ipseity. While browsing the website, we could notice that a good number of chats that last longer have narrative of life as their main content. This subject finds on *Omegle* the ideal environment to take on the role of character and narrate the actions resulting from the plot that motivates him, by getting things off his chest or making confessions, seeking counseling from the other. This occurs because ipseity takes advantage of the dissolution of sameness. In other words, the plot is supported by anonymity. Many of these narrative identities are constructed in the website because subjects choose to hide them in communication environments where they are not identified. This guarantee of secrecy in relation to the narrative of the other makes interactions on *Omegle* approach other forms of sociability as, for example, psychoanalytical therapy and the catholic confession.

Therefore, if we look at the subject considering Ricoeur's identity dialectic, he is deprived of his sameness to receive the designation "stranger". However, nothing prevents him from constructing himself an ipse-identity that will not work for his recognition, being formed inside a relationship through narratives of himself.

4 Final remarks: the form of interaction

By observing the interactions between strangers on *Omegle* as resulting from the phenomenon of sociability, we found that, in fact, they have

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multiple purposes. We have mentioned some of them throughout the paper: simple chatting, virtual sex, autonomous learning of a language, social observation, narrative of life. By following the movement proposed by Simmel (1983), we then looked at what had been observed in these interactions with different contents to apprehend what they have in common: their form. The reflection on the two distinct characteristics of the website (randomization and anonymity) led us to understand the fundamental elements of this social game.

The playful dimension of *Omegle* is first characterized by balance. The role of anonymity is to remove differences between subjects. Additionally, they play equal roles in the game, with access to the same interaction tools, except for the *Spy* (*question*) mode, which implies a different form of participation. They can also, as has been mentioned, decide when to enter or leave a relationship, thus having autonomy in their choices.

The *Video* mode is a good illustration of the relationship between the autonomy of participants and the balance of the game. When starting a video interaction, the user does not have to open his webcam. On the one hand, this means that the subject's autonomy may lead to imbalance: someone may get the image of the other without having to send his own. On the other hand, we tested this type of participation and soon realized how difficult it is to establish a relationship there. This is the

case because the individual opening his webcam will not accept this imbalance and will immediately close the interaction. Thus, *Omegle* is a balanced social game and participants themselves, exercising their autonomy, will appreciate equality.

The second element that composes the game is ephemerality. Relationships on *Omegle* do not have a past or a future, they are rooted exclusively in the present, since the system does not allow participants to choose their chat partner. People can, if they want to, continue the interaction by exchanging contact information for latter meetings, but these will never take place on *Omegle*, but rather in other environments. Additionally, the establishment of a relationship depends, as has already been pointed out, on a minimum sharing of languages and motives between users. Even with the availability of tools that operate the random chat system according to these variables, such as *common interests*, the *Facebook likes* and the choice of the language, most relationships are short-lived and it may take some time until one finds a longer lasting chat partner. In this regard, ephemerality leads participants to continuously move from relationship to relationship, thus requiring some degree of patience.

On the other hand, the random movement confers an element of suspense to the game. Participants live the expectation of not knowing with whom they will interact next, and motivated by this feeling, they continue to

play. For this reason, it is now a convention on *Omegle* to start interactions with the question "asl?" which brings together three pieces of information related to sameness: it reflects the immediate interest of the participant in the identity of the other, in the anxiety of deciding whether to interrupt browsing and establish a relationship or continue to move on. This is the central choice of the game.

Once users choose to invest in one relationship, they should fully dedicate themselves to it, since the interaction on *Omegle* is shaped in a dynamic circuit of action and reaction. If, for example, someone asks a question and does not get an immediate answer, he will soon give up and proceed to the next relationship. Thus, another element that is part of the game is dynamism. Unlike what happens in other chat websites, the participation on *Omegle* makes it difficult to simultaneously perform other activities, either on-line or off-line, because the game requires concentration.

Thus, it is the connection between balance of participants, ephemerality of relationships, suspense of the random browsing and the dynamism of actions that gives shape to the interaction among strangers on *Omegle*. It is evident that changes in the operation of the website – which we found to be frequent – may reconfigure some of these elements, which would imply a risk to the maintenance of the game as we have described it.

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A interação entre estranhos no *Omegle.com*: sociabilidade, relacionamento e identidade

Resumo

À luz do método proposto por Simmel, centrado no conceito de sociabilidade, investigamos neste artigo a dimensão lúdica do site de conversação Omegle.com, com o objetivo de apreender a forma das suas interações. Para isso, problematizamos as duas características diferenciais do site. Primeiramente, baseados na fenomenologia social de Schutz, discutimos a formação de relacionamentos através do uso de um sistema randômico. Em segundo lugar, fundados na dialética da identidade de Ricoeur, refletimos como o site constitui um sujeito anônimo, designado de "estranho". Como conclusão, entendemos que o jogo social praticado no Omegle se caracteriza pelo equilíbrio, dinamismo e efemeridade, sendo utilizado para os mais diferentes propósitos, como a simples conversa, o sexo virtual, a aprendizagem autônoma e a observação social.

Palavras-chave

Interação social. *Omegle*. Sociabilidade. Relacionamento. Identidade.

La interacción entre extraños en *Omegle.com*: sociabilidad, relaciones e identidad

Resumen

A la luz del método propuesto por Simmel, centrado en el concepto de sociabilidad, investigamos en este artículo la dimensión lúdica del sitio web de conversación Omegle.com, con el objetivo de entender la forma de sus interacciones. Para esto, cuestionamos las dos características diferenciales del sitio. Primeramente, basados en la fenomenológica social de Schutz, discutimos la formación de relaciones a través del uso de un sistema aleatoria. En segundo lugar, fundados en la dialéctica de la identidad de Ricoeur, reflexionamos de como el sitio web constituye un sujeto anónimo, designado de "extraño". Como conclusión, entendemos que el juego social practicado en Omegle se caracteriza por el equilibrio, dinamismo y ser efímero, siendo utilizado para los más diferentes propósitos, como la simple conversación, el sexo virtual, el aprendizaje autónomo y la observación social.

Palabras-Clave

Interacción social. *Omegle*. Sociabilidad. Relaciones. Identidad.

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