

Mediated Identity in the Parasocial Interaction of TV

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Electronic media contributes toward modifying the self as they shape it as a multivoiced construction. Television talk shows function as a space of parasocial interaction where ordinary people represented on the screen offer involving images of subjectivity for the home viewers. Through interpretative procedures, viewers integrate screen suggestions in the positions' repertoire of their self. This study hypothesized that viewers co-construct identities through involvement in what they are watching and employed focus group discussions and content analysis to investigate this hypothesis. The results demonstrate recurrent comparisons contrasting the screen "other" and the real self. This categorization marks a strong involvement of participants and an interpretative reconstruction of television images. As such, identity is constructed in the dialogical relation between others and selves in a mediated relation whose only result is a self traveling through different repositionings.

Social psychology and mass communication research have always been interested in the study of identity. The most innovative contributions propose a negotiated notion of identity that overcomes an essentialist approach. Identity is the product of social practices in which the individual is involved. This relational and linguistic perspective reflects social constructionism that assumes that

selves, persons, psychological traits, and so forth, including the very idea of individual psychological traits, are social and historical constructions, not naturally occurring objects (Sampson, 1989, p. 2).

These theoretical afterthoughts respond to a change of cultural perspective that conceives reality as interwoven in social relationships and proposes the self as an

integral part of these relationships. Nowadays, social relationships develop toward virtual forms, and mediated interactions contribute to the structuration of identity. Electronic relationships contribute toward modifying the self as they shape it—not as a univocal structure, but a plural construction originating in the technologies of social “saturation” (Gergen, 1991).

The most important dimensions of interaction—self, other, and reality—are constructed in the continuous flow of communicative and relational practices:

What we might call our orderly *person-world dimensions of interaction* ... emerge out of, and are constructed within, a whole *mêlée of disorderly, self-other dimensions of interaction* (Shotter, 1995, p. 165).

The social dimension of the interaction originates in the “joint action” (Shotter, 1984) between the self and the other, between the individual and the world.

ELECTRONIC RELATIONSHIPS AND DIALOGICAL SELVES

Identity is a “process of self definition directed by the connection self/other” (Galimberti & Riva, 1998, p. 437); it is a dynamic construction coming from a multiplicity of people and voices in self-presentation (Hevern, 2000); it is composed of many voices, each voice represents a position inside which the image of the other is reflected (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992). Its nature is dialogic because the self is in constant dialogue with other selves of the sociocultural world (Hermans, 2001). Its nature is transactional because its manifold meanings are distributed in its interactions with others. Bruner (1990/1992) wondered:

Isn't the Self a transactional relationship between a speaker and his receiver ... ? Isn't it a way of structuring its own conscience, position, [and] identity, ... towards another? In this condition the Self becomes dialogue-dependent. (p. 100)

The awareness of the other relates to a practical moral knowledge that precedes each other kind of knowledge. John Shotter and Kenneth Gergen (1994) defined it as a “third type” of knowledge, neither theoretical nor practical or technical:

It is a form of knowledge *from within* a relationship, in which, in its articulation, others around us continually exert a morally coercive force upon us *to be* persons of a particular kind, to assume a particular *identity*, and to exhibit a particular kind of *sensibility*: that is, to be persons who act and make sense of the events and activities studied through the “proper” use of the “proper” terms. (p. 6)

Relational knowledge produces a dialogic reality, a co-construction of meanings made through language. Discourse modulates identity; the social strength of discourse, the existence of the other in discourse, shapes aspects of the self. According to Harré (1995, p. 158), "the self, as the author of public and private discourse, is not itself an entity that can be observed by the person whose self it is (p. 158). To propose the self as a discursive construction means to conceive it as a modality and not an entity, "the characteristics of articulation, dynamism, [and] versatility emerge" (Mininni, 1995, p. 52). The notion of a fluid identity (Annese 2001), built in interaction with the other, finds its apotheosis in the technological society where social relationships are multiplied by spatial and temporal dispersion; and with them, even the possibilities of the self are multiplied.

Through mediated processes, remote people and situations enter everyday social worlds by unhinging the nature of social interactions and altering the type of experience, the intensity of involvement, and the depth of familiarity in them. It is clear that alteration in social relationships drives the individual to interact with substitutes for the real other, visible but "notional" people, "absent others" (Giddens, 1990, p. 19). The concept of identity—what individuals are for themselves and for others—becomes problematic because relationships are denaturalized and give life to a plurality of social worlds. The continuous change of social situations produces a multiplicity of positions that generates the characteristic of mutability in the self (Hermans, 2001).

The communicative function of television is a particular form of mediated relationship, which can be defined as "parasocial interaction" (Horton & Wohl, 1956) or mediated "quasi-interaction" (Thompson, 1995/1998, p. 126). In it, the roles of production and reception are separated; their relationship is an exchange of symbolic forms that takes place in disparate contexts and in different times. If physical co-presence is not an essential condition, then the "mediation/representation of subjectivity through TV simulacra" (Galimberti, 1994, p. 144) is required.

Television production plans for the representation of the ordinary person who produces conversational interactions suitable for public circulation. This representation offers meanings that are only potential because it can provoke discussions in varied contexts that build effective meanings very different from the potential ones. Audiences use TV meanings in a relational way: "They participate without passive identification, they blur boundaries between viewing and living by endless 'what happened then' discussions and by bringing their everyday experience to judge the drama" (Livingstone, 1990, p. 2).

Viewers can carefully process information, contextualize their elaborations in the shared symbolic order, and so they can contribute to the process of TV production. Through reception they can construct meanings rather than simply exchange information. As Jensen (1991) remembered, "a discursive or interpretive conception of reception is a necessary constituent of a comprehensive theory of the audience" (p. 138). Viewers employ interpretative procedures to reconstruct meanings

of television programs; they order information received by television through schemes or representations that allow them to appraise, select, complete, and reorganize the perceptive material. They elaborate television texts through interpretative mechanisms that recall their mental schemes.

According to research in audience studies (Anderson & Meyer, 1988; Ang, 1991; Jensen, 1991; Lindlof, 1988), viewership is a process of negotiation "between a set of structured potentialities 'out there' and the person's repertoire of knowledge representations and processing strategies (Livingstone, 1990, p. 32).

By means of interpretation, viewers negotiate the information in television texts with other factors such as their previous experiences of reception, gender, and social disposition toward the received information. In other words, reception is an active process creating a parasocial interaction with production.

The TV genre of the talk show offers such a space of parasocial interaction to the active audience. Ordinary people represented on the screen serve as a kind of simulacrum for the audience on the other side of the screen and offer images of subjectivity for their viewers. Through interpretative procedures, viewers integrate screen suggestions in their self schemes; they mix symbolic "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) with individual ones, so that TV representation of subjectivity drives them to continuous processes of identity construction.

RESEARCH WORK: FLUID IDENTITY IN THE MEDIATED INTERACTION OF A TALK SHOW

This research adopts a socioconstructionist perspective, the emerging field of audience studies, and a qualitative methodology to explore the television construction of identity. It seeks to point out ways by which viewers construct identities as a comparison between real selves and screen others. Television programs drive viewers to co-construct, in cooperative or conflicting ways, TV meanings through their involvement in what they are watching.

This research work employs focus group discussions and content analyses as methodological tools. The data are collected by in-depth interviews conducted as group discussions. These are subsequently transcribed for content analysis by software such as *NUD*IST* (Nonnumerical Unstructured Data FOR Indexing Searching Theorizing). Focus group discussions respond to the need (a) to consult viewers directly as suggested by audience studies; (b) for interaction between participants and researchers according to qualitative research tenets; and, (c) for the purpose of negotiating possible worlds, according to the socioconstructionist approach. Content analysis responds to the need to create semantic nets connected to both discursive context and the wider sociocultural context through an operation of interpretation. By emphasizing interpretative steps and qualitative results, content

analysis serves descriptive and correlational purposes because it is not possible to hypothesize causal links in the relationships under review.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

If "through their responses to television, people generate social identities" (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994, p. 91), then the working hypothesis of this study is that audience participation in talk shows produces identity positioning through involvement. Studio and home audience involvement engages participants in the negotiation process of TV-based identity construction.

What is the nature of this involvement? It may be "hot" or "cool" (Liebes & Katz, 1990), symmetrical or asymmetrical in relation to the screen representations of identity. It can vary in relation to the way viewers perceive and appraise screen identities; these can be accepted or refused by the viewer. Acceptance or refusal mark viewer involvement, whereas assimilation to or contrast with TV representation reveals the modality of involvement. Therefore, focusing on the kind of involvement is crucial and verifies whether and how viewers categorize television simulacra of subjectivity. The more viewers are involved, the more they categorize; they perceive more differences and similarities (Sherif & Hovland, 1961); they reveal their positions in this double modality of categorization. The search for similarity or disparity between representations produced by talk shows and meanings produced by participants' in-group discussions may reveal categorizations. In their turn, such categorizations mark the strong involvement by viewers as signs of indirect participation and serve to explain the television construction of identities, the process of social negotiation of "audience discussion programs" (Livingstone & Lunt, 1992).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design studied the meanings produced by four focus group discussions composed of four or five participants per group. Each group was composed of participants having the same social role: students, housewives, employed persons, and retired persons. Different social roles were chosen to provide different psychosocial contexts and ways of reception among participants. Choosing heterogeneity between groups required homogeneity within groups for the purpose of avoiding inequalities or inhibiting processes in conversational interaction. Choosing participants who played the same social role was useful "to maintain a reasonable amount of homogeneity within groups to foster discussion (Morgan, 1988, p. 46). The study included a total of 18 participants, men and women, aged 21 to 77 years.

Participants first watched a November 1997 episode of a commercial net (Canale 5) Italian talk show "Men and Women." The show's name underscores the intention of its producers: letting ordinary men and women speak. There are no experts; the host alone interacts with guests and the studio audience. Second, the participants in the focus group setting answered some open questions in an informal discussion directed by an interviewer. The four group discussions were recorded and transcribed for subsequent content analysis. Coding was performed by two analysts to establish reliability. The content analysis employed NUD*IST software, which allows the coding of different parts of the text through a scheme of categories organized in a tree-like system. The outcomes—the emergence of some categories and the relations among them—were tabbed in qualitative vectors.

DATA COLLECTION: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

The decision to collect data through focus group discussions responded to the need to investigate the social construction of meaning in the experience of reception, the social action of making sense of television programs, and the discursive practices by which the social action of reception takes place.

Each focus group discussion lasted 70 min, and every participant spoke. In two groups (the housewives and pensioners), participants were friends who knew each other prior to the study; in the other two groups (students and employed persons), participants did not previously know each other. Interviews were conducted in varying locales: the students at the university and the other groups in familiar places of meeting; the housewives and pensioners in their association centers and the employed persons in one of their homes. Recordings of each interview were supplemented by field notes written by the interviewer after the session. These were helpful in identifying group dynamics such as strategies of interaction or conflict-resolution processes.

Interviews began by discussing the main theme of the target episode and then expanded to include the receptive structures of the program, the genre of "talk shows," and television in general. A flexible interview protocol of six items was used. At times, the interviewer simply decided to follow the flow of the conversation and either omitted or crafted new questions according to the direction of the discussion. More specific requests and more highly structured questions were employed only when a more interesting matter was raised or it became necessary to explore the topic more deeply.

The interviewer had two types of interventions: "launches" and "relaunches" (Blanchet & Ghiglione, 1991, p. 103) or "main research" questions and "leading" questions; the former launched a theme, and the latter returned to specific themes by using the same words of the interviewee. Other kinds of intervention included:

"Feel questions" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 83): The interviewer directly asks an opinion or an experience of the interviewee.

“Anonymous questions”: The interviewer makes general requests to not directly involve an interviewee.

“Steering questions”: The interviewer focuses attention back on the main theme, after digressions.

“Testing questions”: The interviewer tests the feedback of a concept by pretending not to know or have understood.

Participants always answered spontaneously. On the whole, answers revealed reciprocity and a cooperative strategy. The opinion of one interviewee sometimes dragged the opinions of the others according to a “snowballing” effect (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 19), which displayed the cooperative style of interaction. Two processes were activated to solve conflicts among differing ideas: a process of transparency to arrive at a clear agreement or disagreement after a long discussion; and a process of consent building, by which differences of ideas were explained as disparate aspects of the same phenomenon.

Such a general collaboration of group members in the expression of both agreement and disagreement is what Goffman (1967) defined as a collective “face,” an interactional order aimed at the construction of meaning. In this way, group discussions displayed a social model of reception.

DATA ELABORATION: CONTENT ANALYSIS

Because group discussions were conversations, the focus of the content analysis lay in the conversational turns among participants. The four transcripts were composed of a total of 3,493 such turns.

Data coding employed a hierarchal system of nonexclusive and *a posteriori* categories. The system was organized in a tree structure of five primary nodes (called *parents*) vertically developing across two, three, or four levels with secondary nodes (called *children*) providing a greater degree of specification. As a whole, the tree came to include 73 categories.

Two analysts performed a double coding by classifying all the texts of the transcripts independently. The measure of agreement between coders had a mean of 74%—an acceptable level of reliability.

OUTCOMES

Coding permitted an analysis of the frequencies for both categories and groups, and a correlational analysis was conducted to identify the most meaningful relations among categories.

FREQUENCIES OF CATEGORIES

The *program*, *reactions* to the program, the *social reality* represented on the screen, and the *effects* of television were the most frequent categories in the discussion of participants. Exploring the first category—program—one already notices that TV representation of ordinary persons offers a “screen other” to be compared with the “real self” of interviewees. In texts coded in the program category, there is a recurrent comparison between the screen representation of the other and the real self lived by the participants. This comparison always concludes with a contrast categorization for the screen other. In the investigation of the second category—reactions—one notices again the contrast categorization for the television program and represented identities. In focus group discussions coded as reactions to the program, the contrast categorization indirectly marks the strong involvement of the participants and, above all, displays an interpretative reconstruction of television text by which participants made sense of the screen representations of identity. The comparison between the real self and screen other continues in the third category—social reality—whereas negative categorization continues to appear in the fourth category—effects.

The program category (see Table 1) includes the organization of the show, its actors—host, guests, and studio audience—and the democracy in the show participation. The planning of the program was continually hypothesized and explained by participants as an essential device in both the mechanisms of production and of reception. An interviewee belonging to the housewives group hypothesized a god who “chooses people” in the production strategies to widen the size of the audience as an effect on reception. The producers intentionally construct a screen other to get greater attention from viewers.

The screen other is represented by the participants in the show. Their perception is doubled because interviewees suggest both a *motivation* for and an *evaluation* of the characters of the show. On one side, they try to understand why participants decide to participate in this kind of program; on the other, they appraise their participation according to the reactions and effects they produce on a home audience. In other words, they try to interpret the representation produced by television according to their expectations as home audience members themselves. The interpretative process is a way to participate and to negotiate the construction of identity produced by television.

The interviewees always appraised the participation of guests and studio audiences in the show in a negative way. This is a contrast categorization as they think that no rationale could justify violations of privacy:

MARY: I feel// I feel embarrassed for them/ because I think// but however is it possible to go to a show and to behave like that? (Employed persons-229)

TABLE 1
Frequencies of Categories

	<i>First analysis</i>	<i>Second analysis</i>
Involvement	—	0.66
Program	2.70	4.80
Planning	7.10	4.90
Host	2.60	2.90
Participants	6.10	3.70
Motivation	4.20	2.00
Evaluation	6.40	11.0
Democracy	5.10	8.40
Other talk shows	2.80	2.90
Other programs	1.80	1.0
Other mediated products	2.50	3.20
Reactions	5.40	3.50
Discussion	3.40	2.50
Emotional involvement	7.10	1.30
Similarities	0.46	3.40
Differences	0.37	0.51
Repercussions	1.90	2.60
Total	59.9	59.2
Social Reality	0.46	1.10
Theme	4.30	5.60
Private	3.80	5.60
Interesting	2.90	3.00
Involving	1.30	2.10
Correspondence	2.50	3.20
Ordinary person	1.80	1.90
Opinions expressed	1.30	1.60
Likelihood	2.70	2.40
Social usefulness	3.10	4.50
Total	24.10	27.80
Effects	6.40	5.70
Persuasion	4.60	1.80
Cause	1.4	2.50
Result	1.6	1.50
Learning	2.80	3.10
Antecedent	2.60	2.90
Consequent	0.46	0.46
Total	19.8	17.9
Uncoded	2.9	3.2

Such a negative evaluation shows a critical attitude toward the participants. This attitude allows the interviewees to identify a captivating strategy: Through strong personalization, by calling each participant in the show by name, the television show activates a familiarity between studio and home audience.

The category of participants produces in interviewees a sense of closeness between characters on the screen and viewers like themselves on the other side of the screen. Further, they wonder about the validity of this proximity and of remote participation. Above all, they wonder about the real democracy of participation in this kind of program. They categorize it by contrast. They show skepticism and a critical attitude because they are aware of an asymmetrical relation in which participation is only pretended. They think that their role as audience is passive because talk shows do not really allow free expression, they only feign to offer it. Interviewees think this because television is not a means of direct interaction, but of mediated communication.

On one side, interviewees' categorization by contrast emphasizes a negative evaluation of both the TV program and its participants. On the other side, interviewees' awareness of the contrived production devices and of their consequent passive role shows their ability to interpret screen representations according to their own intentions, expectations, motivations, and purposes. They show an active role that is their form of participation in the parasocial interaction invited by such talk shows. The same kind of interpretative collaboration also emerges in another category, reactions to television programs (see Table 1).

Interviewees describe their experience of reception as social, because making sense of this TV genre is a collective process. They receive this type of text essentially as members of a group, family, friends, or colleagues. This TV genre generates discussions; it is a chance to construct meanings that go beyond the program itself. It is an elusive text as it does not propose any specific solutions for the topics presented on the screen. The lack of solutions drives viewers to complete their elaboration of the topic by *discussion*. Therefore, they may discuss these issues within the family, especially because the program itself does not offer any practical solutions, but *repercussions* on real life may be negative. According to interviewees, this television genre may have far-reaching and indirect effects on daily life that are harmful and damaging.

Another contrast categorization to both this genre and TV in general implicitly reveals interviewees' involvement. Despite their negative evaluations, interviewees acknowledge feeling involved because they are interested in the symbolic representation of daily life, of social reality, achieved by such programs:

MAURO: I can take for example my fa-/ my family/ my mother and my father/// sometimes he parti-/ my brothers participate too/ however/ but seldom because/ that is to say we are moderators/ when we see that one exaggerates/ one of the two exaggerates we say// but see that you are/ you are at the same [level as] (Employed persons-286)

Interviewees look for causes of their emotional involvement in a metonymic relationship between themselves and people speaking in television or in the personal

subjects discussed in such talk shows. They are perfectly aware that the TV genre aims to secure their involvement, and they accept it.

The attention of talk shows to matters of personal privacy in the lives of guests and the consequent representation of social reality are means by which production strategies create involvement; they are devices to elicit such a reaction. Interviewees perceive representations of social reality, produced by the program, in two steps. Initially, they focus attention on the *private* subject of public conversation, then they widen the focus to consider its *correspondence* with real life. This inductive logic emerges in examining the category of *social reality* (see Table 1). By this logic, interviewees make a comparison between a TV-based everyday world and their real world; basically, they compare the screen other to the real self, which provides a contrast definition of represented social reality.

A negative evaluation emerged in the category of effects (see Table 1) too, where *persuasion* was the effect most emphasized. Interviewees explain this as a mechanism focusing on audience tendencies such as their interests, emotional states, previous attitudes, and so forth. Interviewees thought that each program, each TV genre, each character, and every television image actually hides an attempt at mystification. Participants also thought that mechanisms of persuasion and social influence naturally belong to television; thus, they show a natural distrust toward television's contents even if, ironically, they accept themselves as implicated by them:

ANN: It is manipula-// it is manipulative/ that is they want that the/ the public opinion is addressed toward a direction because they have already decided what has to happen/// then they have to direct the masses toward that solution. (Employed persons-802)

This contrast categorization, this critical attitude toward television, makes interviewees capable of monitoring the effects of persuasion. In fact, they think that negative effects are always addressed toward targets different than themselves, toward people who do not have the cultural tools and knowledge to neutralize such effects. Some have called this the "third person effect" (Duck & Mullin, 1995): Everybody thinks that it is the other one who is affected by the strong influence of the media. Therefore, housewives identify the third person effect in children and old people; pensioners identify it in persons who live alone, especially sick people and widows, even if these categories include themselves; finally students, young people themselves, identify the third person in those who are even younger.

The negative effects of screen others on real selves are only the final example of a pervasive contrast categorization made by interviewees in their focus group discussions. The more they perceive negative elements the more they categorize by contrast; the more they show this modality of categorization the more they are in-

volved. Their involvement is the mark of their participation in the TV construction of identity's positionings.

GROUP FREQUENCIES AND CORRELATIONAL ANALYSIS

To participate in the process of social negotiation as an active audience member, the viewer needs to cooperate with TV production; involvement is the best mark of this cooperation. The description of group frequencies essentially focuses on the different nature of this involvement.

Liebes and Katz (1990) distinguished two dimensions in the relation between reception and production: involvement and interpretative framework. The correlational analysis explores the second dimension of interpretative framework. It seeks to identify peculiar readings for the different groups by taking into account the result of group frequencies.

Group Frequencies

Because the category of involvement is the most recurrent category, it is instructive to examine this category's specificity for each focus group.

The housewives group accepts the involvement created by this TV genre but give it a negative value. They find it useless as it does not offer any finality. Such a negative judgment reveals a strong categorization marking involvement.

The pensioners group speaks about a passive experience of reception, one conditioned by inactivity and isolation of the domestic context. They differ with the housewives only in the stronger involvement they feel.

Students try to explain their strong involvement by the representation of ordinary persons and common sense. These elements are essential to explain the involvement of the viewer both directly in the television studio and indirectly at home. The studio audience offers a complete range of possible images of ordinary people to increase home viewership.

A similar negative judgment is expressed by the employed people, but is offered for different reasons. According to this group, talk shows do not produce any kind of empowerment. Although viewer involvement is real, the only consequence is to get the viewer accustomed to watch this kind of program.

In conclusion, there is a general acceptance of involvement, but it is explained in different ways. The groups of housewives, pensioners, and students justify it by the representation of social reality; in fact, their group frequencies identify the following hierarchical distribution: (a) involvement, (b) social reality, and (c) effects. In contrast, the employed persons discuss their involvement according to the ef-

fects provoked; in fact, their frequencies show a different hierarchical distribution: (a) involvement, (b) effects, and (c) social reality.

An overall contrast categorization marks involvement across groups but it is produced within different frameworks. The first three groups relate television characters to real ones, whereas the last elaborates the program as a text whose aspects must still be investigated because of their effects. Using Liebes and Katz's (1990) definitions, the first interpretative framework is a "referential reading," whereas the second is a "critical reading." According to them, it is wrong to match the referential reading with a positive evaluation and the critical one with a negative evaluation; both forms of reading may attribute negative or positive values to the program interpreted. In this study, both referential and critical readings have categorized for contrast the television genre by showing the strong involvement by viewers.

Correlational Frequencies

According to Liebes and Katz (1990), the two dimensions of interpretative framework (referential or critical) and involvement (hot or cool) can be intersected. The result is a range of four types of reception, each type creating a form of opposition to the audiovisual text.

By intersecting the outcomes of group frequencies—referential and critical frameworks associated with hot involvement—the correlational analysis identified a referential-hot and a critical-hot reading.

In the first type of reading, viewers try to contextualize TV representations in social reality and look for similarities or possible relations. That is why this study looked for a relation between social reality as represented and the involvement produced by overlapping two subcategories of social reality—"theme" and "correspondence"—and the category of "emotional involvement". Percentages of overlapping are higher in groups of housewives, pensioners, and students where a referential reading had been hypothesized in the previous group analysis. For example, in the correlation between the category of emotional involvement and the subcategory of private theme, percentages are respectively 14%, 8.8%, and 15%, versus 7.8% of the employed people group.

This referential-hot reading is based on involvement related to social reality as it operates through two mechanisms: *narrating* and *modeling*. Narrating is a mechanism belonging to television discourse (Ong, 1986) and connects audiovisually narrated experiences with personally lived ones. Modeling is a mechanism of interpretation of private stories told in talk shows where viewers interpret them as examples through which they may elaborate their social reality.

This double mechanism drives viewers to attribute more value to real-life experience and to produce a negative categorization of the screen by creating a moral opposition to television contents.

The critical-hot reading is different because it is interested in the way contents are introduced and in the effects these provoke. This study looked for a relation between the effect of persuasion and emotional involvement by overlapping the category of "persuasion" and those of "similarities" and "differences" with contents of the program. Percentages of overlapping are higher among employed people (14.5% vs. 9.4% of housewives, 6.7% of pensioners, and 9.9% of students) for whom a critical reading had been hypothesized in the previous group analysis.

Interviewees believe that talk show themes create involvement through an identification of similarities and differences with real life and that these effects are dangerous. The most harmful effect is persuasion because it can transform the viewer into a passive receiver of images of the self. This explanation clearly produces a negative categorization and expresses, from the perspective of critical reading, an ideological opposition to the manipulative intent of message construction.

Both referential and critical readings cooperate in constructing the meanings produced by television; they differ in their choice of interpretative framework. They share the social action of identity construction even if the identity positionings produced are alterable because they follow the flow of technological social practices.

DISCUSSION

The TV representation of ordinary persons—the identity built by TV programs—generated a strong level of categorization in interviewees, a mark of their involvement (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Employing a contrast categorization, interviewees perceived the screen other as different from their real selves; viewers constructed their self-positions by contrast with TV identities. In this way, they showed their strong involvement as a sign of an indirect participation that serves to explain processes of identity co-construction (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). The process of social negotiation worked by means of two dynamics: referential and critical. The referential procedure drew a comparison between screen and real identities, the critical stance examined the effects of screen identities on real ones.

Audience discussion programs offer manifold images involving the self: images of "personae" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 216) both audiovisually present and spatially and temporally absent. They can be accepted or refused by viewers whose efforts at categorization imply an involvement as a sort of "quasi-participation" (Thompson, 1995/1998, p. 142). The role of an audience is an active one where "viewers experience a sense of involvement and participation" (Livingstone, Wober, & Lunt, 1994, p. 372). They are social actors engaged in a "parasocial interaction" (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This mediated way of interacting engages viewers by means of indirect participation in the construction of the dominant feature of post-modern identity: fluidity (Annese, 2001).

The contrast between the screen other and the real self emerges because each individual employs a self-scheme in categorizing others. Processes that evaluate, select, and categorize others help individuals define the ideas they have of themselves. Indeed, it is not even important if others are "real or notional" persons (Harré, 1995, p. 146) or if the construction is cooperative or conflicting. In self-awareness there is a motivational direction that drives individuals to perceive others as different from themselves and, above all, to appraise, judge, and categorize them with positive or negative attributes to interpret them according to their own expectations.

"You" constitute for me (or the surrogate I constitute in place of you) someone who is like myself, . . . , someone to whom it makes sense to *address* my remarks here, . . . ; in other words, you provide the motivation for my remarks. (Shotter, 1989, p. 144)

Self is a dialogical reality produced by interchange with other selves in social contexts (Hermans, 1996); it is a decentralized construction produced by negotiation in social relationships, and because of this its nature is mutable and alterable. The "joint activity" between production and reception produces identity in the parasocially interactive potential of TV. Self is constructed in the negotiation between "them"—the participants in the show—and "us"—the viewers of the show. Participants in the show are "insiders" sliding from outside to inside the television, "from margin to center, outside in" (Priest, 1996, p. 79), but they are different from "outsiders." The mediated relationship is in the contrast between "them" and "us"; it is based on the interpretation of "them" according to "us". These kinds of social relationships, produced by technologies of communication, cannot generate stable and durable identifications. Self is continually constructed according to different technological discourses. For this reason, self exists not as an entity but as a modality changing positions according to social relationships.

CONCLUSION

Television is a new social space that offers varied images of subjectivity through audience discussion programs, through its participants and through the disclosure of private stories. They are mediated images of "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986), the representations of future selves, what the viewers want or fear to become. The need for coherence in the self-scheme drives viewers to evaluate TV images by choosing receptive readings and strategies that confirm the concept they have of themselves. The need for coherence drives them to categorize TV images so as to co-construct their own identity in the social space of television. Televised simulacra provoke in the audience processes of social categorization that are essential for the formation of social identity (Tajfel, 1972).

Self is a project that individuals build using the symbolic materials they receive and organize them into a coherent story of individual identity; but it is a reflexive project because the individual continually modifies it when symbolic resources change. In technological societies, the resources are diversified; they come from direct and mediated knowledge. Mediated interactions do not work simply "as inspirers of apparent behaviors, but also and more slightly as prompters of those fears, desires and aspirations that enter to constitute the identity of the people" (Mantovani, 1995, p. 204). Therefore, images of the self are formed in a collaboration between personal experience and communication. In this co-construction it is always the individual who decides among the possible alternatives. The constructed self is dialogical and multiple because it is a dynamic repertoire moving among context-related voices (Hermans, 2001); it depends on mediated relationships, on the "joint action" (Shotter, 1995) between different voices in which each voice tries to "warrant" its position (Gergen, 1989).

This kind of role for the TV audience activates a process of "secondary reception" different from "primary reception," which is the freedom for the viewer to choose among varied mediated products. Secondary reception is more than a choice, it is a chance for dialogue, a relational cue. Audiovisual products drive viewers to widen their receptivity to a dialogue with others. In such a dialogue, they can elaborate meanings different from those imagined by the initial production strategy, even in contexts different from those sites in which they are first received. Relational cues, unexpected meanings, and different contexts generate a "tertiary reception." This is the widest type of reception; the meanings elaborated by secondary reception are negotiated with the viewers' broad background of knowledge, competences, and predispositions. Viewers negotiate the material offered by television "in ways that make sense within [their] social and cultural situation" (Ang, 1990, p. 161). They appropriate television texts that extend symbolic resources available for the project of self. This appropriation constantly suggests models and identities to viewers' processes of positioning; it continuously enlarges the repertoire of positions, which contribute to molding the individual self (Hermans, 2001).

The appropriation of mediated experiences produces a different perception of space, of what is near and what is far. Such perception modifies the sense of time, too; it becomes mediated historicity including what is remote, what is not personally experienced. Even the affiliation sense is modified. Contemporary forms of mediated socialization originate in a society that is not based on physical proximity but on the use of the same mediated forms of communication. These alterations take deep root in identity, in the ways individuals categorize the connection between self and other, in the ways according to which they interpret the boundaries of their own identities. Although new symbolic resources enrich the project of the self, at the same time they make it dependent on uncontrollable sources. The consequent effect of disorientation thus produces an identity in continuous construc-

tion, an identity with boundaries as fluid as the social resources on which it draws: "Our addiction from the social communication means that our understanding of the others and ourselves ... is never complete" (Neisser, 1976/1981, p. 215).

Self is thus a never ending construction produced by fluctuation between personal and cultural positioning (Hermans, 2001).

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