

Surveying the LGBTQ population(s) through social media

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The majority of quantitative studies regarding Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer people, carried out worldwide, point out several recurring themes. In Italy, the main characteristics of these studies have been the intensive use of mixed-methods research and the support of the LGBTQ associations towards these studies. In fact, for a long time associations represented the main informative source on the LGBTQ community, promoting and partnering with the most important quantitative surveys about LGBTQ. Of course, the information provided has been extremely useful and informative, but social knowledge should go beyond “associationism” and associations activities.

Today we can exploit innovative data sources, mainly those from social media, which can allow us to reach, investigate and study this population(s) bypassing associations, hitherto unavoidable.

In this context, I have carried out a challenging research project, called ‘Over the rainbow’, during my PhD in Applied Social Sciences. The research project has

involved through a survey all those Instagram users, listed by a web-scraping software, who tag their pictures with some of the most common LGBTQ community hashtags.

Studying the application of big data methods on issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation ensures that this project grounds on two main theoretical frameworks, which are getting more and more intertwined: *Gender Studies* and Digital Sociology.

The survey investigated some of the thornier subjects in LGBTQ people's daily life, such as self-perception of gender identity and sexual orientation, coming-out experience, participation in LGBTQ Pride events, homotransphobia and discrimination experiences suffered.

The survey's results give both methodological suggestions, about the use of social media big data for studying the LGBTQ population(s), but also important informative content, for instance, the massive use of dating apps, LGBTQ's relationship with civil rights associations, and the "sneaky" nature of gender and sexual discrimination.

In this research project, the methodology becomes as important as the studied field, and the attention paid to sequentially conduct, interviews before, and a survey after, led to an acquaintance with the characteristics of the LGBTQ population(s) which could be useful for planning and promoting efficient social policies for LGBTQ inclusion.