Cybertherapy Meets Facebook, Blogger, and Second Life: an Italian Experience

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Abstract. Our project is based on the study of Cybertherapy in the international sphere (USA, Northern Europe) and on the application of this discipline to the Italian psychiatric and psychological reality. CyberTherapy can be used as an “aim”, referring to it as real and proper therapy, which lives on personalized paths created by a qualified staff, conceived as ludic, for recreational, psycoterapic, and educational purpose. Moreover, Cybertherapy can be used as a “mean” (and in this way we want to propose it) with the aim of making the user, who feels a psychiatric or a psychological uneasiness, to become closer to qualified staff; a considerable advantage of this discipline is to reduce to a minimum the initial embarrassment which is created between the specialist and the psychiatric patient, uneasiness stirred up and accentuated by the problem, which is unfortunately not resolved in the Italian sphere of the Stigma.

Keywords. Avatars, Web 2.0, Virtual Reality Applications, Facebook, Second Life, Blogger, Internet

Introduction

The basic idea of our project is to use a computer and the web as a means to approach psychiatric patients; in this way we have tried to apply Italian reality to the subsequent scheme and cybertherapic methods.

Cybertherapy, defined the way in which it will be considered from now on, includes several branches:

- EMAIL-BASED THERAPY, which is based on an e-mail exchange between the service user and the operator;
- VOICE/VIDEO CONFERENCE THERAPY, where the communication takes place through programmes like Windows Live Messenger or through portals like Facebook which assure an instant messaging service, without considering that the first program allows the use of a webcam or a microphone;
- AVATAR THERAPY, which makes use of a 3D virtual reality like that built in Second Life; in this case the communication is more physical and the material is used through an approach by means of an avatar, a figure with human appearance, in most of cases, created by the user based on its personal taste.

Taken into account these concepts, we have organized our project, trying to differentiate it in the programs used and as a consequence in the approach methods to
the user with the purpose to give a greater pliability to the idea and thus, to the contact with the addressee.

1. **Our approach tools**

1.1. **The Blog** [http://psichiatriaecybertherapy.blogspot.com](http://psichiatriaecybertherapy.blogspot.com)

The heart push-button of the entire project is a blog, an on-line diary, an extreme ductile, and a recognizable mean in the hand of the user, in continuous updating, which firstly contains the explanation of the project in the first pages. Moreover, a series of contents is updated daily, which range from the contribution of the users themselves to congressional and cultural events, from the in-depth examination of important people in psychiatric history to the recommendation of web sites of relevant importance like that of NeuroVR or that of the Italian Psychiatric Association (Figure 1).

The idea is to build and constitute a headlight, a reference point in the web for all people affected by psychiatric disturbances or those that are in search for information, discouraging at the same time from making self diagnoses, while trying to make the profane reconsidered from a social point of psychiatric view, a scientific discipline still mistreated and seen suspiciously today.

The blog is enriched with a series of widgets (internet features) that in addition to being of great help also allow the site to gain more “appeal” and notoriety. The site contains a human cd calendar with pictures of common people; a space for news of psychiatric interest; a translator, which allows the reading of blog in several languages (English and Japanese); a logo properly designed, which recalls the group founded on Second Life (to which I will subsequently describe); a series of contacts and accounts to make the contact from the user easier; a chat that offers the chance to the user to leave messages; a playlist with audio tracks updated frequently, chosen with the intention to create an agreeable psychological atmosphere; a collection with monthly partition; a list of key words (labels and tags); the ability to click on news and posts of relevant interest; a visitors counter; a tracker of web pages; and an atlas, tools which give information to the staff of the site of daily accesses as well as the geographic origin of the readers. There is also a list of helpful links, pertaining to psychiatric and psychological interest; a list of comparable sites; and finally a list of readers subscribed by the users themselves, as well as a list of banners at the bottom of the front page that allow the blog’s visibility through the exchange of links with other partner sites and several international search engines, which are tools that makes it possible to alter the placement of the blog at the very first positions of Google (the most relevant search engine of this time).
The blog is connected with a logic mechanism by a series of accounts, created with the aim to give wide choices to the user who approaches CyberTherapy, as well as other various tools.

1.2. Forum

The first tool is the FORUM, which involves the registration and the free participation of the users through threads published by themselves. The forum is made up of 5 sections and, at present, it is not attended by a lot of people due to an excessive staticity of the tool (this is the reason given by the users, who prefer to speed up the conversation with the project staff); we will deepen on this point in the conclusions.

1.3. Online TV

Another tool connected with the project is an ON-LINE TELEVISION, self-managed and comprising of an integrated chat that broadcasts film segments of psychiatric interest produced by the staff or taken directly from the YouTube platform, an important international video-sharing site.

1.4. Facebook

The users’ favorite tool, however, is their Facebook profile, a platform of great interest in Italy. The “CyberMaster Quan” profile, created especially for the project, relies on more than 400 friends, people who autonomously reach CyberTherapy or have been
contacted by the staff for information or association purpose. Moreover, the mentioned Facebook account leans against two groups: “Psichiatria e Cybertherapy” and “I love CyberMaster,” which collect supporters, persons involved in the work and people that have experienced cybertherapeutic services, etc.


Last but not least is an additional account in Second Life: it has been created as an avatar, which has been subscribed to a premium account that allows the avatar to possess private property on the multimedia platform. This platform has been built on real private practice with furnishings and advertising. Moreover, the “CyberMaster Quan” avatar is the chief of a big group of avatars called “CyberTherapy Italia” (Figure 2).

1.6. Conclusions on the tools

This is in brief, the tool apparatus used for the project. The logic-scientific apparatus involves an approach path conceived to respect the standard of extreme transparency and simplicity toward the user who becomes familiar to Cybertherapy.

The path is this: the user visits the blog, reads the presentation and the informative posts, gains knowledge on the identity of the staff members, and- if the services offered by the project suit its needs- the visitor asks for a preliminary interview with CyberMaster (i.e. the master of the project) who, scheduled the consult and interviews the supposed patient through the explained tools in less than an hour.

The CyberMaster reports the consult in paper or computer format to the other members of the staff, who discuss the clinical case and express their opinions in terms of trying to find the correct dedicated treatment structures.

The CyberMaster, conveys the staff’s impressions, performs another consult with the user, telling him the impressions of the staff.

This method is a very simple and effective mechanism that has been successful in terms of approach and number of users that have used the service.
2. Purposes

Different and various purposes compose of what we have set at the start of this experience: firstly, as we stated before, to evaluate the feasibility of the “CyberTherapy” discipline in Italy, we propose a methodological theory that is consistent with the clinic as well.

Complementary goals, but at the same time with great meaning, have given the chance to collect and analyze the very first Italian record of occurrences of users that approach CyberTherapy, using non-psychiatric means like Facebook and Second Life. Another important goal, born during this experience and easily reached, has been the accomplishment and online promotion of Psychiatric Prevention. Unfortunately an consistent argument still relevant today is that it is not treated with the proper coverage and still struggles with Stigma.

3. Results and Conclusions

The results obtained appear very positive: the blog, in two months of activity has collected almost 3,500 single visits, which equates to a mean of 60 daily accesses from different people every day. We have received almost 40 contacts from people asking for a consult, among which we have selected 13 people on the basis of their needs that have received a total of 25 interviews (some of them needed a deeper study).

The preferred tools have been the blog itself, Facebook, and Second Life.

The blog, besides encountering 60 daily visits, has been used as an example for other projects. It relies on 18 regular readers who have been given support by linking our site in their blog’s homepage. It has been changed into a place or a non-place of cultural exchange and continuous learning.

Our Facebook account, besides relying on more than 400 friends, is visited daily by people who keep track of our work on the web and through our groups, which encounter more or less 100 registrations for one and 150 the other. Moreover, the Facebook account allows active cooperation with other professionals that operate in the national psychiatric sector.

The Second Life account has immediately aroused interest and appreciation for its cultural value and its support. We have received several invitations to participate in online congresses as speakers, but unfortunately we had to refuse them due to the great amount of work needed for this project.

We consider ourselves satisfied and surprised for the results obtained in such a short amount of time. For this reason we are encouraged to go on with the project and open a new field in research, so that as many people can take advantage of the service we offer as possible, in terms of personal interviews and in terms of cultural commitment as a struggle against Stigma.

References