MEDIATING HOPES
Social Media and Crisis in Northern Italy

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Introduction

In 2008, Italy entered a period of protracted economic crisis that brought profound transformations to the lives of millions of people. Most working adults in Milan, the main economic and productive centre of Italy, would describe their lives as characterised by a turning point: some lost their jobs, others saw their salary significantly reduced, others started experiencing poor working conditions, and many went back to live with their parents because they could not pay their bills anymore. More than ten years after the financial crisis, the lives of many adults in Northern Italy continue to be characterised by high levels of uncertainty, precarity, and unemployment. In 2019, the unemployment rates in Italy were 10 per cent, with youth unemployment in the region of Lombardy at 18.3% (statista.com). In January 2019, the main Italian newspapers reported that Italian industrial production had dropped by 22% since 2007 (D’Aloisio and Ghezzi 2020). This extended economic crisis has been worsened even further at the time of writing in winter and spring 2021, due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This chapter examines the role of social media in shaping hope and visions for a better future among people affected by the global economic crisis that started with the Wall Street crash in 2008 and went on to hit Italy and the world. In Northern Italy, online self-branding has become increasingly common among unemployed and precarious workers and professionals, across a large variety of fields. Against a backdrop of general resignation and pessimism caused by the scarcity of job opportunities and alternative routes out of the crisis, people continue to search for ways to make positive changes to their life, and social media plays a significant role in imagining a better future and coping with present-day uncertainties.

Building on the large body of work in anthropology of hope (amongst others, see Appadurai 2013; Hage 2003; Han and Antrosio 2020; Jansen 2021; Keane 2015; Kleist and Jansen 2016) and anthropology of social media (Miller et al. 2016), this chapter describes how digital practices contribute to shaping hopes for a better future when people feel ‘stuck’. It shows the way in which social media and hope are interconnected and co-construct each other. In this chapter, hope is viewed as practice that occurs within specific social contexts and is mediated by digital platforms rather than someone’s quality or affect (Hauer, Østergaard Nielsen, and Niewöhner 2018). The practices of social media usage enable and shape hope. Building on these principles, this chapter shows that unemployed or precarious workers often do not fully
believe that digital platforms can help them find a job or better succeed in their professions as self-employed workers. Many expressed their doubts about online promotion being the way to find a job. Nevertheless, they engage in online self-branding and persist against reason (Han and Antrosio 2020). They do this, first, because they have exhausted all the other available opportunities to find a way out of their situation, and nothing has worked. There are not many other remedies, but opening and updating an Instagram or LinkedIn account and implementing a self-branding strategy can generate the positive feeling of being active and 'going somewhere' when other opportunities have already been explored without results. Second, self-branding can help maintain social relationships. It can help people make new friends or strengthen ties with old acquaintances and friends. However, if not properly applied, personal branding can also damage pre-existing relations because it follows social norms that are different from those of friendship. Third, by using social media, people conform to new normative expectations of how innovative and creative workers should craft their careers and find jobs, something that makes them feel positive about themselves. In newspapers and at hiring agencies, discourses on the potential of social media for self-promotion position digital platforms as tools to overcome structural problems. Digital technologies create imaginaries of possibilities and shining futures, as exemplified in the stories of successful influencers that became famous and rich thanks to Instagram or YouTube.

In short, the hope mediated by social media is more about surviving the difficulties of the present rather than working towards a better future. In many instances, practices of social media use play an important role in people’s wellbeing, but do not necessarily bring significant changes to career paths. As such, they can become a force for political and social conservatism more than a way to actively transform the present and the future (see also Jakimov 2016). This form of hope helps people better cope with the consequences of structural inequalities in the present, which eventually reproduces precarious workers’ subordinations. Also, by bringing more users to social media sites, this form of hope benefits social media companies. Online branding thus tends to simultaneously reproduce social inequality at two different scales of the neoliberal economies: in the local labour market and in the global political economy of social media.

Based on the study of the lived realities of middle-age adults who share a vulnerable and precarious working path under a multiplicity of legal working statuses and professions, this chapter sheds light on the important role of social media in shaping people’s hopes and aspirations for better lives in the context of protracted crisis in neoliberal Italy. It argues for a media anthropology that addresses wider anthropological debates, while at the same time making use of all the rich conceptual and analytical tools that come from almost three decades of research on media-related practices (amongst recent examples, see Ardevol and Gomez-Cruz 2013; Bird 2011; Bräuchler and Postill 2010; Costa 2018; Couldry 2004; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, Larkin 2002; Hobart 2010; Miller et al. 2016; Peterson 2004). Particularly with the rise of digital technologies in the last two decades, media have become central to and entangled with many more aspects of people’s everyday life that were not part of the traditional foci of media anthropology. A closer dialogue between different subfields in anthropology has the potential to enrich current research on the ways in which media are intertwined with people’s everyday experiences and social inequality.

Crisis in Northern Italy

After rapid industrialisation and economic growth in the second half of the 20th century (Molé 2012), in the mid-1990s, Northern Italy entered a period of economic transformations characterised by a significant increase in the number of temporary, precarious, and
sub-employed workers (Molé 2012). In the new century, transformations of work and production under a variety of globalised production strategies have created what Victoria Goddard (2017) described as a ‘complex landscape consisting of different forms of production and particular concentrations of economic activity’. D’Aloisio and Ghezzi (2020) show that the variety of precarious forms of labour in the industrial north of Italy can be associated with two main transformations: the crisis of the traditional manufacturing system and the emergence of highly skilled self-employees in the growing service industries. The individuals I describe in this chapter have been affected by the long-lasting crisis. As children and young adults in the years before that financial crisis of 2008, they did not face significant economic insecurities. However, at the time of my research in 2019, they had to cope with unemployment, a precarious working life, and the consequences of austerity that have generated lower standards of living and consumption (Knight and Stewart 2016). While a longing for protected labour in the new precarious economy has been reported to be part of Italian workers’ aspirations in the first few years of the new millennium (Molé 2012; Muhelebach 2011), my research participants lived with a general acceptance of workforce casualisation and lack of job protections. They instead looked for possibilities to increase their income and wellbeing within the neoliberal framework of temporary jobs and scarcity of employment.

The ethnographic material for this chapter was primarily collected from April to July 2019. I conducted fieldwork in Milan, combining in-depth interviews and life-history narratives with observation of online platforms. I conducted ten interviews with job seekers/underemployed people in the age range of 30 to 55 and ten interviews with human resources professionals and trade unionists in Milan. Some of the ten job seekers/underemployed people were interviewed again during the course of 2020 and 2021. The research participants were selected through multiple channels: an announcement on a local Facebook group, personal contacts, and snowball techniques. I also observed two local Facebook groups, four WhatsApp groups, and the social media accounts of the people I interviewed. The chapter is also informed by my participation in social events, gatherings, parties, and informal conversations with adults living in Milan during my regular visits to the city over the decade 2011–2020. The effects of the crisis on people’s working and private lives has been a never-ending topic of conversation and concern throughout these years, across multiple social circles. Unemployed and precarious workers’ conditions were worsened by the lack of community centres, charities, or municipality projects providing support. This also means that my research was primarily situated in private spaces and online, rather than in a public physical environment.

Online branding and local forms of socialities

The idea that social media can help people find a job is a frequent theme among hiring agencies, career counsellors, and employment agencies. In 2019, Adecco organised several courses on how to find a job or change career with the help of LinkedIn and other platforms, and Adecco webpages provide guidelines on how to find jobs through social media. Job seekers attend these courses to learn how to better promote themselves, fashion their own brands, and connect with people. And many branded themselves on social media. While freelancers and employees in many highly skilled and creative professions often successfully engage in social media branding, this is not always the case. When there are no jobs, people tend to express scepticism about the efficacy of online branding.

This scepticism certainly comes from the failure of social media in helping them. As explained to me by human resources professionals and labour policy makers, most companies do not take LinkedIn, Instagram, or other social media profiles seriously into account. Yet
distrust towards the role of social media in finding a job also reflects the disrupting role of online branding in local forms of sociality and public presentations of the self. In Northern Italy, professional networks tend to remain largely separated from the larger circles of friends, and, on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, acquaintances from work are often kept divided from friends. For example, Carlotta, a 37-year-old woman who worked as an executive secretary for large international companies for many years, has never added any of her colleagues on Facebook. She doesn’t like it. She is afraid that her colleagues might make fun of her ‘real’ life because she comes from a middle-upper-class family and can afford restaurants and hotels that her colleagues cannot. Above all, she has only had negative experiences of distrust and antipathy with colleagues and thinks that time with them should be reduced. She uses Facebook and Instagram massively with friends and relatives but cannot imagine how these platforms can be used to maintain contacts with former colleagues, or even worse, become branding tools. Anna, who works as a researcher at the university, has two different Facebook accounts. One is used with her larger network of more than 600 friends and acquaintances. The other is her ‘professional’ account that she uses with around 200 people she knows from work. She does not actively engage in personal branding but maintains relationships with colleagues and promotes academic events via this second Facebook account. These two stories show the local tendency to keep professional and social spheres divided and to approach the former with a certain level of mistrust.

Molé (2012) and Muehlebach (2011) described the shifts from an era of protected labour, which provided resources to construct identities, friendships, and sense of self, towards a distinctly Italian post-Fordist condition. In the context of Italian cultural traditions that value solidarity and collective social ties, and have high levels of distrust in institutions (Alessandro Cavalli 2001 in Molé 2011), the collapse of protected labour pushed people to different spheres of their lives to construct their significant relationships, recognition, and belonging. As a result, urban Italy shows high levels of social participation and lively social environments (see also Walton 2021) that are largely divided and independent from the sphere of work. The division between these two spheres does not facilitate online branding. This can lead to the unpleasant situation of ‘context collapse’, the flattening of several social contexts and audiences onto one another (Boyd 2014). Self-promotion is not always welcome in the circles of friends, which are often characterised by registers of informality and collegiality. For example, one day Carla shared in a WhatsApp group a YouTube video made by Mirko, a friend who promoted himself as a pedagogical consultant on Facebook. Carla posted the video, followed by the comment: ‘It cracks me up!’ (mi fa morire) and four laughing emojis. This message was followed by many other comments by all the other members of the WhatsApp group. They were all amused by the video and teased their old friend for presenting himself as a serious and capable professional. One person wrote, ‘He is very good at social media strategies!’ and added several laughing emojis. The video contained nothing funny in itself, but the group thought that the view of their old friend branding himself on Facebook and YouTube was hilarious. Mirko was teased on Facebook too. He opened a new professional Facebook page, a new website, and uploaded several videos on YouTube. When he also changed his profile picture on his old Facebook account, within in a few hours the image received 20 messages from friends who joked about his new look: ‘you are hot!’, ‘you look super professional!’ and ‘The new year is starting with a miracle!’

People tend to consider self-branding unsuitable for the Italian context, as also shown by the statement of a university student in Milan:

In Italy you cannot brand yourself on social media. People will immediately label you as an egocentric, self-centred, and arrogant person. It is not something that you can easily do here.
Another element that contributes to people’s increased reluctance to engage in practices of self-branding is that publicly disclosing to friends and acquaintances the condition of unemployment or under-employment is considered inappropriate. Three interviewees described their friends’ negative reactions at seeing requests for help in Facebook or larger WhatsApp groups. Sara is a 45-year-old social researcher who has been freelancing for several institutes, research centres, and charities all her working life. One day, after a long period with no income or work, she was stressed and angry and posted a message on Facebook to promote herself and ask for jobs. She did not receive any comments on the public wall, but her post elicited several private messages from friends who rebuked her for an inappropriate public post that could have ruined her reputation. Maria, an electronic engineer from Colombia who has lived in Milan for a few years, had a similar experience. She was surprised to see how inappropriate it was to be seen as a job seeker/unemployed in Italy, whereas using personal contacts on social media to find a job was common practice in Colombia. A third research participant told me, ‘It is all about shame! Being publicly seen jobless is shameful here in Northern Italy and you cannot make it public!’

While none of the people I interviewed fully believed in the efficacy of digital branding, for all the reasons described above, everyone did believe that social connections and networking were key to finding a job. This idea was so widespread and widely accepted that the then-Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Giuliano Poletti (Democracy Party of the Left), stated in a meeting with university students at the University of Bologna in 2017, ‘You have more opportunities to find a job while playing football on Monday evening, rather than sending your CVs to companies.’ This news was on the front page of the main Italian newspapers and elicited heated discussions. If recommending someone for a job is current practice in Northern Italy, why were my research participants sceptical of the efficacy of online branding? Unlike branding on social media, offline personal recommendation is private and is often surrounded by some degree of shame because it is supposedly not done on the basis of merit. And, unlike branding on social media, it builds on long-lasting relationships that are embedded in traditional forms of sociality like family, neighbourhood, or established circles of friends. In addition, personal recommendations imply exchange and reciprocity that maintain relationships over a long period of time, while online branding on social media is meant to meet the need of a flexible job market characterised by short-term relations and frequent career transitions and shifts (Gershon 2017).

To conclude, the scepticism towards online branding should be understood contextually and historically. It is not only structural conditions, such as the lack of job opportunities and low labour mobility, that generate the perception that online branding does not help. Distrust of online branding as a means to find or create jobs is also grounded in its disrupting role in local forms of socialities, presentation of the self, and divisions between different social spheres.

Giulia: Social Media and the Practice of Hoping

I don’t know if self-promotion and personal branding only give people hope or really work. Come back in one year, and I will tell you if it is one or the other!

Giulia, 40-year-old creative director

Giulia, a 40-year-old creative director with many years of experience working in the television industry, became unemployed after her international corporation made her redundant. When I saw her in summer 2019, she had been looking for a new job for almost a year,
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without success, and was living on unemployment benefits that would end in a few months. She described how the job market had changed since the crisis hit the television sector in 2011:

“In Italy there are ten television channels, of which seven are based in Milan. I have already worked with all of them, and I know all the creative directors there. … In the last ten years, the number of jobs available has decreased, but more people are on the job market. It is very simple. There are no jobs!”

Overall, Giulia was optimistic and enthusiastic about the possibility of finding another job as a creative director and strongly believed that luck played an important role in making this happen. Contacts and networking from previous jobs in television were not helpful because the very few temporary positions available were taken by young freelancers who accepted low wages that Giulia did not want to accept anymore. Because she did not want to wait for something to happen, she designed a social media strategy. She had already had a LinkedIn and Vimeo account for around ten years and a website and Instagram account for one year. She had used Facebook for promotion purposes a lot in the past but did not want to do that anymore. Facebook was for her personal life, and she wanted to keep her professional and personal spheres divided. It was time to work harder on self-promotion on Instagram. Although she had little funding available, she planned to hire a professional social media expert who could implement the strategy, create content, and regularly update her Instagram page for a few thousand euros. Giulia had the knowledge and skills to do this herself, but she disliked self-promotion. She thought that it makes people narcissistic and self-centred. It was also stressful for her to draw lines between private and public life and decide what aspects of herself to promote in public. She thought that Instagram was the place to display those aspects of private life that would have contributed to build her public persona. She explained: ‘Instagram is the place where you display what you want people to know about you, like hobbies and interests. But it is better if another person does it on my behalf, or I will become insane.’ She decided to commit herself to online branding even though she did not fully believe it could help and she did not like doing it. Yet online branding was a very good way to actively hope for a better life. Self-branding served the important function of making her pro-active when very few actions seemed to be effective.

A year and a half after the interview, Giulia was still unemployed and her unemployment benefits had ended. The Covid-19 pandemic did not help in finding a job, nor had the social media strategy. She had stopped investing time and effort in her social media presence and online self-branding. Education afforded more hope. She enrolled herself in a BA program in business and administration at the University of Milan. Eventually, in summer 2021, after three years of unemployment, Giulia was offered a permanent position as senior manager of communication in a large Italian company. When I asked if social media helped her find this job, she replied, ‘Not at all, I found it thanks to previous connections and a lot of luck!’

Social media did not help Giulia to find a job, expand her network, or increase her notoriety. They instead shaped what Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) called ‘hope labour’, ‘the uncompensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow’. At the same time, social media also served the important function of making her feel that she was actively doing something. By viewing hoping as a set of mediated practices – designing a strategy, hiring a social media expert, opening new social media accounts, creating content – Giulia’s story shows that doing is an integral part of the hoping process and gives it a specific temporal dimension. Active hoping, namely active doing, contributes to surviving the present. Following Berlant (2011) and Jakimov (2016), I can also
argue that practices of self-branding on social media tied Giulia to the mainstream lifestyle of the digital era, which helped her cope with present-day insecurities. Jakimov (2016), in his study of hope among marginalised people in India, showed that education is critical to one’s sense of self, and people keep investing in it for this reason, even when it does not help them go anywhere in life. In a similar manner, engaging with online branding gave Giulia the ‘sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world’ (Berlant 2007: 33). In the following section, I explore other rewards produced by social media in the present, which are the creation and maintenance of social relationships. As pointed out by Alacovska (2019) in relation to her study of creative workers from South-East Europe, social relationships are a form of compensation that help people cope with the difficulties of everyday life.

Laura and Luca: Self-Branding and the Crafting of Meaningful Relationships

Laura is a 54-year-old single woman who has been employed in the same company for more than 25 years. In 2011, her company started to struggle. She was put on furlough (cassa integrazioni). She lived for a few months with unemployment benefits and the fear that the company could have fired her for good and she could not enter the job market anymore. At that time, her main hobby was the production of organic soaps and skin creams for herself and few close friends. She thought that she could turn this hobby into earnings and asked a local market if she could sell soaps and creams there. Since then, she has been selling her products at the market every other weekend, while her company went through a long period of crisis and decline that led them to cut a few hundred employees. Laura spent the last eight years alternating months of being laid off and reduced working hours with other periods of full-time employment. The production of soaps and creams thus became a second job. She viewed it as a form of safety net (ammortizzatore sociale) that gave her an extra salary of up to 400 euros a month and the possibility of a higher salary in the future if she lost her current job. Laura sold her products at the local market and not online, but she used social media to increase her visibility and maintain the possibility of turning her small-scale production into her main source of income if she lost her main profession in the future.

She opened dedicated pages on Facebook and Instagram to promote the production of organic soap and skin cream and created a WhatsApp group with around 30 members that she used to keep contact with her most affectionate customers. She explained,

“If I had a secure job until my retirement, I would sell these products only to my friends, and only for fun! And I would stop updating these social media accounts. But social media are a way to keep the possibility of an income open!”

She viewed Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp as the main way to expand her small production. She also enjoyed scrolling through the Instagram accounts of those who became successful skin product influencers or entrepreneurs. Above all, the use of social media to promote her products was a way to meet new friends and maintain relationships with new ‘customers/friends’ (clienti/amici) who did not belong to her old circles. On WhatsApp, she publishes videos of new soaps being made and chats with her most loyal customers about the process of cream and soap production. On Facebook, she remains in touch with many more people, such as a woman who was undergoing chemotherapy who Laura first met at the market. Laura was pleased that this woman felt cared for and loved in a difficult moment of her life, and they kept in contact for months. This and other relationships started or were maintained via social media.
and made Laura happy. Creating new relationships and being part of new groups of friends was an important outcome of her online branding and social media presence.

Acquiring social belonging and recognition via online branding while unemployed also characterised Luca’s experience. Luca is a 46-year-old man who was born in Milan and lived there all his life. We met to drink coffee in a nice bar with tables outside and chatted for more than two hours. It was a sunny day with a fresh pleasant breeze, and Luca looked happy. He felt relieved to no longer be working for the employer that had made his life miserable for the previous ten years. Up until six months before my interview, when he decided to quit the job, Luca had worked as a shop assistant in a supermarket for 26 years. In the years before the 2009 crisis, he did not have problems at work. He was able to carry out all his tasks in a peaceful environment and received a decent wage. His working conditions started deteriorating in 2009 and increasingly worsened in the following years. He was continuously re-allocated from one supermarket location to another and forced to work overtime. His workload and that of his colleagues doubled while the salary remained the same, and he did not have any opportunity for career development. Exhausted and frustrated, he started thinking of quitting his job. After a few more years, he woke up one morning and resigned. Following a couple of months of rest and holiday, he actively began working on the project he had been envisioning for a while: launching an e-commerce activity to sell second-hand CDs and vinyl records. Luca is a music lover with an extensive knowledge of indie-progressive rock and underground rock bands. He loved hanging out in second-hand markets and shops, buying and collecting second-hand albums. Years before my interview, he started selling CDs and vinyl on eBay, earning around 300 euros a month. He thought that with a bit more effort and time this could become his main income. He thought of opening a website with a VAT number, linking it to his page on eBay, and increasing the number of CDs that he bought in stores and resold on eBay. His goal was to reach the income of 1000 euros a month. He did not have to pay a mortgage and had no children, so these earnings would have allowed him to realise his idea of a ‘good life’: turning his passion for music into a source of income, while not spending 40 hours a week inside a supermarket.

Luca had never used social media before. A few years earlier, a friend had created a Facebook account for him that remained inactive. Luca did not like social media and did not feel the need to use them. But he heard from friends that Facebook could help him to promote his project. Without a professional strategy or massive investment of time, he decided to use Facebook to brand himself as a music expert and to promote his new e-commerce activity. He friended all his old friends and acquaintances from school and the neighbourhood and started posting covers of CDs and links to videos on YouTube. He explained:

"I don’t exactly know how it can be useful for my e-commerce activity, but you never know. I want to open all the possible channels and contacts available, and then we will see! … I have time now, and I love to share the music I like. I might post rare songs that people do not know. My friends always trust me when we talk music, and I am happy to suggest to them what they can listen to. I don’t have a clear strategy, but I have time now, and I like using Facebook in this way. I am not sure it really helps, but I will wait and see!"

Nine months after my chat with Luca, the Covid-19 pandemic hit the north of Italy. Throughout 2019 and 2020, Luca regularly shared music and music-related posts and images on his Facebook wall. Almost every day, and sometimes multiple times per day, he posted links to music videos on YouTube or images of covers of his favourite albums. For every post, he
received likes or comments from Facebook friends. Unlike Laura, Luca did not use social media to reach out to new people. On Facebook, he branded himself as music lover and expert among his large established circle of friends and acquaintances. And, unlike the other social media users described in the previous section, he presented a self that did not contradict the identity he had among his friends. Both Laura and Luca stated that the main reason for using social media was to increase the chance of having higher income in the future, but on the other hand, social media facilitated the creation of new relationships or the strengthening of older ones. Social relationships were the immediate rewards that motivated them to be active online, and these also compensated for the lack or shortage of social connections brought by an unstable work path and unemployment.

**Social Media and the Mediation of Hope**

Social media practices are hope. They produce promises for a better future life that are not always fulfilled, while at the same time affording present-day rewards. The anthropological study of hope emerged during the first decade of the twentieth century and is now a rich and diverse field of inquiry. In his comprehensive review, Jansen (2021) identifies a large number of studies on the role of hope in upward social mobility and search for better lives, including among underemployed and precarious workers ‘in Egypt (Schielke 2015), Ethiopia (Mains 2011), Georgia (Demant Frederikse 2013), Mongolia (Pedersen 2012), and Iran (Khosravi 2017)’. Ethnographies of hope have shown its relational character, which stresses that past, present, and future are entangled with each other and that hope is always embedded in specific temporal orientation. They also share the idea that hope is always to some extent grounded in people’s present practices. For example, Elliot (2016) describes the ‘labour of hope’ of young women in Morocco and demonstrates that, despite their belief in predestination, women actively engage in activities to increase the possibility of marital success. Alacovska (2018) conceptualises hope among creative precarious workers as the practices oriented to the present that are necessary to coping with precarity. Even Crapanzano (2003), who conceptualises hope mostly as a passive activity – ‘the passive counterpart’ of desires – recognises its embodiment in specific practices. Kleist and Jansen (2016) think that hope always includes agency and can be conceptualised as the moving away from suppressions. Finally, Ahmed (2010) describes hope as something ‘that teaches us about what we strive for in the present’ (2010: 181–182).

This chapter complements and adds to this growing literature in the anthropology of hope by bringing to the fore the role of social media in enabling practices that are meaningful in the present. On the one hand, social media practices attach people to imaginaries for a better future, which are also influenced by public discourses on the importance of online branding to secure a job. Social media practices facilitate an imaginative response to insecurity. Building on the work of Berlant (2011), Ahmed (2010), and Jakimov (2016), I view this imaginary as providing a sense of inclusion into the ‘mainstream’ life that enables ‘the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world’ (Berlant 2011: 24). I suggest that precarious and unemployed workers in Northern Italy engage in online branding because they feel that they are doing the right thing. They adjust their behaviours to what is portrayed as being the latest innovative ways to improve life and working conditions. The influence of discourses portraying social media as the more efficient way to find a job emerged in all the three stories described in this chapter. On the other hand, social media enable practices that are rewarding in the present: updating a profile, embellishing the public self through the decoration of a Facebook wall, creating new friendships, expanding older social networks, reading about other people’s stories. Laura, for
example, enjoys being active on Instagram and Facebook. Although she describes her social media use as aimed at building up a new profession, her narrative revolves around the sense of fulfilment brought by her new relationships and the exploration of other DIY experiences in Europe and Asia. And Luca loved becoming a source of inspiration for the few hundred friends who followed him on Facebook. The dual temporal component of hope explains why precarious workers and unemployed people keep investing in online branding even though this rarely translates into better job opportunities and often clashes with local norms ruling sociality and friendships.

In this chapter, I built on a practice approach to hope (Hauer, Østergaard Nielsen, and Niewöhner 2018) and social media (Costa 2018) to describe the experiences of people at the margin of neoliberal societies in Europe. I also took as my starting point the main principle of media anthropology, which is the study of media practices as embedded in people’s everyday life and relationships. These approaches allowed me, first, to shed light on the temporality of mediated hope. Second, they allowed me to show that online branding is not homogenous across places and cultures, but rather grounded in and interconnected with local forms of sociability in multiple and complex ways. Social relationships constitute, at the same time, the main obstacle and the main reward in the use of social media for online branding and explain why people do not lose hope and keep persisting even when the promises of better futures are not fulfilled.

A productive strand of research has described the interplay of material culture, infrastructure, and hope, counter-balancing the human-centric perspective of previous works (Cross 2015; Harvey, Jensen, and Morita 2017; Hauer, Østergaard Nielsen, and Niewöhner 2018; Knox 2017; Reed 2011; Reeves 2017). Yet little ethnographic research has investigated digital media as generators of future-oriented aspirations and desires. In this chapter, I foreground the role of social media in shaping people’s hopes in situations of marginalisation and social inequality. I also advocate for the use of the conceptual tools from media and digital anthropology to investigate a large variety of human experiences. Dominic Boyer suggested that ‘

media anthropology’s most generative moments (like indigenous media research of the 1980s and 1990s) succeeded precisely because they addressed wider anthropological debates on aspects of social mediation such as representation, technology, exchange and knowledge.

2012: 389

Thirty years later, media anthropology continues to play a crucial role in addressing wider anthropological debates. As shown in this chapter, a media practice approach to online branding offered a fruitful perspective to investigate social inequality, hope, and personal relationships in a particular historical conjuncture of late neoliberalism in Europe.

References


