

# Santiago de Compostela Hikers and Facebook: Digital Identities and Social Representations

Christian Bourret and Joumana Boustany

DICEN IDF

Université Paris Est (UPEM)

Marne-la-Vallée - France

e-mails: {christian.bourret, [joumana.boustany](mailto:joumana.boustany@u-pem.fr)}@u-pem.fr

**Abstract**— The Compostela Ways correspond to a strong and heavy tradition in the Middle Ages. But it was quasi-forgotten during three centuries. In the last forty years, they have constituted a highly publicised phenomenon of our ultra-modern society. In this paper, we analyse digital identities, motivations and social representations of the hikers from information and communication approach with a focus on meaning and interactions. We concentrate on the digital aspects of the Compostela Ways, especially identities, traces and interactions on social networks as a new perspective to this social phenomenon. We analyse the importance of this communication media for the hikers as a specific manner to interact and give meaning to their trip and all their life in our individualist and consumerist society.

**Keywords** – digital identities; social representations; digital society; social media; Facebook; information; communication, situations; hikers, Santiago de Compostela.

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the ascent of social media, the community of Santiago de Compostela hikers adopted this mediation tools: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. as it was the case previously with websites. The aim of this research is to study the digital identities and social representations of the Compostela hikers by analysing their Facebook posts. In a previous paper, published in the proceedings of HUSO 2018 Conference [1], we presented the first results. This paper consequently extends the previous results to an analysis of interactions and feelings on social networks especially on Facebook.

In fact, Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Way is a highly publicised phenomenon and it is part of a long tradition that goes back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century [2]. It reached its peak in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, times of affirmation of Latin Christianity in Western Europe and the Reconquest of Muslim powers in Spain. In this context, monasteries federations such as Cluny and Citeaux, Military Orders (Templars, Hospitallers, etc.) played an important role. After a long period of lethargy, for more than three centuries (1650 – 1980), the interest in Santiago de Compostela Ways has increased for the past forty years. In 1982, John Paul II was the first Pope to go to Santiago de Compostela. Since this visit, the number of people who obtained the “compostela” has increased significantly: from 2491 hikers in 1985 to 7274 in 1991, 277,854 in 2016, 301,036 in 2017 and

327,378 in 2018 from 177 countries. The Compostela is an official certificate given by Santiago’s archbishopric to those pilgrims who did at least the last 100 km on foot or horseback, or the last 200 km by bicycle. For this purpose, pilgrims have to collect the stamps on the “Credencial del Peregrino” from the places they pass through to certify that they have been there. We use the word hikers, rather than pilgrims, which has a religious connotation, not shared by all the travellers. These hikers come from Spain (44.03%) Italy (8.25%), Germany (7.73%), USA (5.68%), Portugal (4.40%), France (2.68%), etc. [3]. As shown in the last available statistics, Santiago de Compostela is currently trendy all over the world. In addition to the growth rate of visitors and hikers, this interest is also shown by the number of publications: books, films, newspapers, etc. in various countries and languages.

In this paper, which is the second step in a larger project, we will focus on the digital identity of hikers in the specific issue of the “trace human”, a concept defined by B. Galinon-Mélenec: “The ‘trace human’ would identify the Human of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, leaving everywhere traces of his passage and activities, likely tracked by merchants, watched to the detail by observers of all kinds, punished for any deviation from the norm... risking to raise legitimate concerns about the respect of privacy, the respect of individual freedoms and of ethics” [4]. The virtual community of Compostela hikers, by communicating on social media, keeps traces of their experience, but also of their life, their thought, their feeling and of the villages, towns and cities they visit. These traces allow creating the digital identity of the members of this community. Since the invention of the Internet, this issue has been subject to many publications. For Stutzman “The social network community fosters a more subjective and holistic disclosure of identity information” [5] even though it has been demonstrated that “In cyberspace the economies of interaction, communication, and coordination are different than when people meet face-to-face” [6].

Below, we explained the method used (in Section II) to study the social representation and the digital identities of Compostela hikers. Then we focused on the theoretical foundations of this study (in Section III) and explained why Compostela ways constitute an interesting field to track interactions and digital identities (in Section IV). Afterward, we presented the results for both quantitative and qualitative methods (in Section V) before discussing them (in Section VI) and concluding (in Section VII).

## II. METHOD

In this paper, we study the presence of the Compostela hikers on Facebook. We address this issue through an interdisciplinary lens with a focus on the social representation theory. In fact “social representations provide criteria for evaluating the social environment that enable determination, justification or legitimization of certain behaviors” [7]. Social representations specify a number of communicative mechanisms explaining how ideas are communicated and transformed into what is perceived as common sense and allows the understanding and interpretation of the digital identity of the Facebook Compostela Pilgrim.

As a first step, we focused our study only on francophone Facebook pages considered as a public space. We excluded personal accounts as they belong to the private space as well as Facebook Groups that belong to both private and public spaces with closed and public groups. Our choice is also motivated by the characteristic of a Facebook page. It lets the page owner engage with people on Facebook as anyone can follow a page to get the public updates, even those who are not friends on Facebook. To assess our issue we used a mixed method “to achieve a systematic understanding of both the magnitude and frequency of the phenomena (quantitative) under study and the context, meaning, and motivation of those phenomena (qualitative)” [8].

The search for the keyword *Compostelle* gave 75 francophone pages on Facebook, the first one dating back to 2008 and being still active. Two of the accounts publishing these pages were commercial. As they do not allow any understanding dealing with our issue, we decided to exclude them. Since then, the number of pages has grown every year (see Figure 1) also showing the growing interest in the Compostela Ways phenomenon.

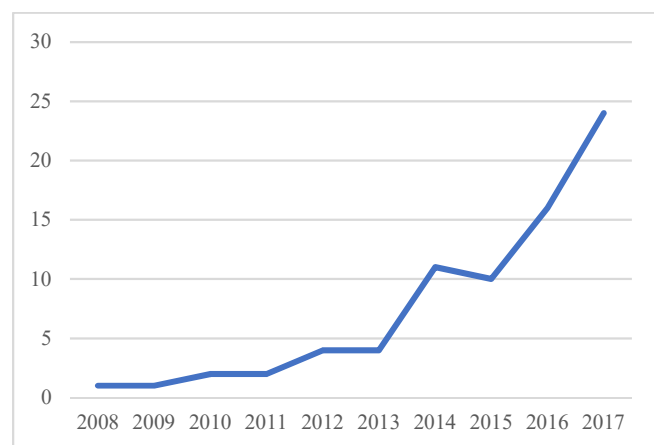


Figure 1. Number of Facebook pages created per year.

Facebook allows classifying pages in different types, more than half (42 of 75) of the pages are designated by their author as a page that brings together a community (cf. Table I). When they create their account, people are trying to federate and create a community to be able to share their interests and feelings.

TABLE I. TYPE OF FACEBOOK PAGES.

Type	Number
Non-profit organisations (NPO)	7
Websites & blogs	13
Communities	42
Travel agencies, Guides	6
Others (Books, Films, Sports, Events, etc.)	7

To conduct the data collection and analysis, we employed different tools.

The online tool *Likealyzer* developed by Meltwater allowed us to evaluate the activity of the selected pages. It provides data according to 5 criteria:

- *Frontpage*, which gives the first impression concerning the Facebook page.
- *About page*, which should contain milestones that give context of the page and contact information.
- *Activity*, which gives the information type (text, photos, or videos), the number of posts per day, events, etc.
- *Response*, which measures the interaction with visitors.
- *Engagement*, which relates to people talking or liking the page.

The Facebook application *Netvizz*, that allows investigating different aspects:

- *Who?* Which explore users' profiles, their relations (friendship patterns and interactions), and the larger social spaces emerging through pages.
- *What?* pages that allow for an investigation into posts, in particular concerning media types and audience engagement.
- *Where?* For all outputs containing information about users, interface language is provided in a comprehensive way, because users do not have the possibility to prevent applications from receiving this information. While interface language is certainly not a perfect stand-in for the locality, it allows engaging the question of geography in interesting ways.
- *When?* Temporal data is limited to pages, but here, a timestamp for each post and comment is provided, allowing for investigating page and user activity over time. [9]

As the *Where* aspect of *Netvizz* is based on the interface language, this criterion has not been accurate for our study. In fact, as we focused on French Facebook pages, it was more accurate to take into consideration the location listed in the posts than the language criterion.

*Netvizz* allowed us to collect 5,782 posts for the year 2018. In fact, as the number of Facebook accounts pages is growing, we decided to focus on the year 2018 which has the most important number of posts related to our issue (cf. Fig. 1).

The qualitative analysis took into consideration 15 accounts with 3,286 posts. This sample represents 56.83 % of the total number of posts for 2018. The qualitative analysis has been done by using *Nvivo 12*.

### III. A HIGHLY PUBLICISED PHENOMENON ILLUSTRATING THE CONTRADICTIONS OF OUR SOCIETY

#### A. *A privileged field to capture social representations and identity*

In this study, the “Compostela phenomenon” has been considered in a double perspective: search for meanings and analysis of the interactions between actors: “hikers”, inhabitants and the role of information and communication technologies and social networks in the new sociability of the Compostela Ways.

We also have a position of “engaged” or committed researchers [10] because one of the authors accomplished the Santiago de Compostela walk in 2011 and continues his observations and discussions with other walkers, interviews with Tourism Office members, with people in charge of Compostela Walkers’ Associations, by specific documentary resources and by websites and social media networks.

The Compostela Ways constitute a privileged field to outline two key concepts in Human Sciences: social representations and identities. As defined by D. Jodelet [11], “social representations constitute an ‘ordinary knowledge’. They describe, explain and recommend. They provide a method to interpret the reality, controlling our environment and driving us in society”. For J.-C. Ruano-Borbalan, [12] “we interpret the world continuously through the representations that the brain accumulates... they constitute reference mind systems to understand the world around us. The social representations constitute a key concept for Human Sciences that allow the interpretation of the mechanism of intelligence, the ideologies and mentalities.” The proposed framework for this study subscribes to the perspectives drawn by these two authors.

#### B. *The modern individualism crisis: a multiple and burst identity questioning the sense of existence*

Modernity, which has gradually been affirmed since the beginning of the sixteenth century in the West, largely corresponded to the development of individualism at the expense of collective institutions and traditions as trade unions, religious organisations and even States.

Having become actors of their lives in a secularised society [13], the human being has become responsible for their successes, as well as failures [14]. In a “communicating society, but where people meet less and less” [15] the individuals of social networks correspond to a “connected individualism” [16], but where the ultra-connection does not prevent hard loneliness. The “Compostela Phenomenon” has progressively developed since the 1980s in this context of a crisis of meaning, of “tiredness of being oneself” and of “connected individualism” with a lot of ambivalence. This ambivalence corresponds to those of contemporary individualism and of all our consumerist society. Our work tries to illustrate these situations and ambivalent feelings.

### IV. TRACKS FOR INTERACTIONS AND DIGITAL IDENTITY ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

The Camino de Santiago – the Way of St. James – has always been a search for identity and meaning. In the Middle Ages, pilgrims belonged to various religious brotherhoods, benefiting from their assistance system (such as the organisation of groups to avoid the high level of insecurity of the ways: robberies and also murders) or a specific religious cult in a chapel dedicated to Saint James in their parish church, and also annual meetings, particularly on July 25<sup>th</sup> (St James day). Communities on Facebook reflect some of these two dimensions in the digital area that we can measure by the number of likes on each page.

The Compostela Ways may both favor a collective approach or a search for loneliness, for the inner self, but staying always connected through their mobile Internet. For the collective approach, we can cite the Facebook page “*Chemin de Compostelle*” [Way of Compostela] that gives “All the information to enjoy the experience of Compostela Ways: advantages of each way from France, where to stay, monuments, landscapes...” [17] and for the inner self, we are referring to “*Mon chemin à Compostelle*” [My way to Compostela] where we can read in the About page “I feel like at the crossroads and I have to find the one that is mine. I am looking for myself, walking to find myself ...” [18].

Compared to similar religious phenomena like Virgins of Fatima in Portugal or Lourdes devotees in France, the presence of Compostela hikers is significant on Facebook, but compared to the number of Francophone hikers who achieved the trip and get the Compostela, it is not so high.

These virtual communities vary between 35,444 followers for the largest one [17], and 89 followers for the smallest one [19]. These figures have been updated in February, 2019. The aims of both pages are to help those who make the way to Santiago de Compostela by giving advice, provide addresses, express feelings and emotions, and to surround themselves with their impressions and pictures. As these figures show, like brotherhoods and chapels in the past, social media allows hikers to brotherhoods and chapels.

Today motivations have become secularised. NPOs and communities replaced brotherhoods of the past. Interactivity is the magic word. This is done in two ways, by commenting on a post or by posting a message on the page if this function is available. This was the case for 67 pages from the selected corpus and 45 had a response rate higher than 90% that may reflect the desire to share with others. In general, hikers share their feelings, thoughts, progression, experience, photos, videos, etc. and the community reacts, reassures or encourages. Sometimes they thank hikers for the shared information. NPOs provide assistance and advice.

Today, social networks have become essential to share information about the Compostela Ways and to provide assistance, as the objectives of the pages suggest.

Commercial Facebook pages (around 8%) have the same weaknesses as personal pages: contact information is missing and there are not many followers (There are 2,163 followers for the oldest page created in 2012 [20]. The analysis of these pages shows an obvious lack of professionalism: they are not

very active (less than 30% of interaction), the *About* page is not really enticing. If this weakness is acceptable for a personal page, it is less acceptable for a professional one.

To be successful, the communication on FB pages should be optimised in order to increase user engagement. Posting too little or too much information can damage engagement and interaction with followers. The Compostela hikers post less than one message per day except for three pages that have an average of 6.6 [21], 2.7 [22] and 2 [17] posts per day.

Facebook pages are a part of the identity of the connected Compostela hikers. All of them have a Frontpage in accordance with the standards. However, most of them do not depict the full context that helps to engage people, and they do not give information about their identity, even though, hikers leave enough traces to be able to capture some traits of their identity.

The privileged means of communication remains the text, with the photo being widely used as well and the video, but to a lesser extent. Around 50% of the pages do not use photos, and 73% do not use videos.

Many hikers (22%) did not post any information on their pages. Often, the FB page accompanies the walker on his/her journey and dies shortly after the end of the adventure.

Numerous pilgrim walkers exchange on Facebook about preparation or keep in contact after the trip on the ways. Most of the associations linked to Compostela (Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, Pyrenean Piedmont, etc.), as well as the more official institutions (Archbishopric of Compostela) have their own Facebook page, sometimes in several languages. They provide above all information, statistics, advice, addresses. In the past, their forums were not, in our opinion, very interactive; today, with Facebook, this is no longer the case. Nevertheless, this digital dimension of the pilgrimage becomes more and more important, especially social networks.

#### V. DIFFERENT MOTIVATIONS AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

According to Santiago's Archbishopric [3], the motivations of the hikers obtaining the "Compostela" were religious and others 156,720 (47.87%), religious 140,037 (42.78), non-religious 30,621 (9.35%). The religious fact is not the only motivation for the majority of hikers. They are mainly "cultural hikers" more than pilgrims in the strict sense of the term, that is to say, with mixed religious and cultural motivations and often the challenge of a personal experience to better understand oneself in interaction with others.

Motivations may be extremely diverse. It is often a willingness to review a turning point in one's life: divorce, bereavement, retirement or entering the active life for younger adults, especially Spanish. There are also various dimensions of a group trip or an individual trip: to be able to meet others and oneself, walking on a known and valued road linked to the past, traditions and cultural heritage.

More generally, motivation is above all a search for meaning, in the ambient materialism of the consumer society. In addition, the motivation is a search for authenticity. We can cite the overworked executive director who forsakes their role, their social and hierarchical positioning for a period. Some may walk the Way in response to a wish or for a sick person (intention).

There may also be cultural motivations: the Compostela Ways are a magnificent book of art history: Romanesque, Spanish Renaissance ("*Plateresco*" in Spanish) or Baroque, discovery of diverse landscapes, contact with nature, etc. Alternatively, there are also historical and traditional motivations: to walk the routes of thousands of pilgrims who have travelled these paths for more than a millennium.

Up to a certain point, the Compostela Ways put the hikers, regardless of their social standing, on an equal footing, dealing with the challenges of a long-distance walk. However, some clues can be significantly revealing. There are those who sleep in the overcrowded refuges, those who prefer private inns and monasteries (more expensive but more comfortable), the various categories of hotels, those who carry all their necessities in their bags, those who have support cars ("*coches de apoyo*" in Spanish) from family's support or have received the services of transport companies step by step, etc.

The values of shared meaning and the quality of relationships that fostered the rise of Christianity twenty centuries ago and that of the Compostela Ways in the Middle Ages are again reflected in the success of the Compostela Ways. They create shared meaning and some solidarity, often emphasised, of people who meet new people. They help each other and learn to walk together towards the same goal and sometimes stay together (couples form on the ways).

The quality of relationships depends on the search for a certain authenticity. The language barrier is often easily overcome, as English has become the common language for the majority of hikers. For P. Nadal [23], "The Way... is not a simple walking way... [it is] an initiatory journey to the inner self that would change the perception of many things... the disconnection from the superfluous, the communion of the body with nature... For us, the Compostela Ways may be assimilated to a "semiotic machine" for the construction of a meaning of existence. It is a point to develop in future works.

Do these motivations emerge from the Facebook page's posts? Can we follow the steps of the hikers on the Compostela ways?

To be able to answer these questions, we carried out a qualitative analysis on 15 pages from the 75 selected pages. We have excluded:

- Pages with more than half of the posts containing links. They cause redundancy and they do not add anything new to what is demonstrated in the other pages.
- Pages with commercial offers. The aim of these pages is to sell services and does not contain any information about feelings and experiences of walkers.
- Pages with fewer than 50 posts all over the year 2018. These accounts are not very active.

Only text posts have been analysed, the other form of publications (text, photo, video and link) will be covered at a later stage.

As mentioned previously, we extract data by using Datavizz Facebook application. This data-driven approach enabled us to create a database of 3,336 units extracted from the 15 selected accounts that have been analysed with Nvivo 12.

### A. Facebook Pages Types

When a user creates his own pages on Facebook, he has to classify his page among different categories. The remained 15 pages have been classified as follows: Three Blogs, 8 community, 2 NPO, 1 Website, culture and society and 1 touristic webpage and local attractions. In fact, a close analysis of the content of the pages allowed us to suggest this classification:

- pages that serve as synchronous diary. For some walkers, they share the preparation of the trip, their experience during the trip which village they crossed, what churches they visited and express their feelings and emotions. We can cite “Aller à Compostelle” [Go to Compostelle] [24] or “Mon chemin de Compostelle” [My way to Compostelle] [25]. They continue to publish after the trip sharing their feelings and impressions as well as information about Compostela.
- pages that serve as asynchronous diary. The posts serve to share memories, photos, readings, thoughts... For example, in *Compostelle à l’infini* [Compostela endlessly] [26] Florence [the owner of the page] explained in the *about page* why she is writing after the trip: “I do not know how to do it other than in a delayed mode. Doing it in live mode or online it is not for me. I cannot imagine myself doing 20 to 30 km per stage and make a daily report publishing it “instantly” on the web.”
- mixed pages “*Pèlerins de Compostelle*” [Compostela Pilgrims] [27] managed by Fabienne Bodan who wrote many guide books on Compostela where we can read information about her trip, her personal life like the death of her father. She also shares impersonal information concerning books, events, articles or broadcasting about the Santiago ways as well as information concerning other hikers

*Hubert, 82 years old and his walking companion Thierry from the Châlonnais both visually impaired started their trip to Santiago de Compostela. (1<sup>st</sup> of May, 2018).*

- a real community page that regroup people with a common characteristic interest living together within a larger society. These pages serve to share testimonies and photos of the Santiago Ways. For example “Radiocamino” [28] gathering pilgrims from Belgium that also meet in real life as they organize events and share activities even though this page is not categorised as a community but as a “website, culture and society.”
- pages belonging to associations and promoting their activities (exhibitions, film screenings, conferences, etc.). They relay the information of some walkers and report the publication of an article or the release of a video or a broadcast about Santiago de Compostela. We can mention the page of “*Compostelle 2000*” [29]

which, since 1998, has provided assistance to pilgrims and hikers on their way to Santiago of Compostela and the “*Agence des chemins de Compostelle*” [30] created in 1990 which informs the public and implements actions of cultural, educational and tourist valorisation of the old ways of pilgrimages towards Santiago de Compostela or the local association which aims to promote the way in a specific region, e.g., “*Compostelle Loire Atlantique*” [31].

- photo album pages where more than 80% of publications are photo tokens all the way going to Santiago de Compostela with a short comment on the place where the photo has been taken. It is the case of “*Chemin Saint-Jacques de Compostelle*” [Santiago de Compostela Way] [22]
- pages that could be equated to touristic guides. We can cite “*Chemin de Compostelle*” [Way of Compostela] [17]. It gives advice and information concerning the Ways of Santiago de Compostela: what could be seen or visited, the cities, the monuments, what and where to eat, gastronomy, local products, festivals, traditions, stories and legends... The stated purpose is to help walkers or pilgrims to decide which way to choose and what the best period is to walk way.

In this classification, we split on purpose pages belonging to an association and community pages. In the latter the words used to describe activities are more familiar and warmer:

*26 participants came this Monday to Anderlecht for the first Pilgrim's get-together in Brussels. Thank you for the exchanges, the sharing, the testimonies, the meetings, the listening, the advice... Friendships were woven tonight: nothing can make me happier! See you soon on the Belgian paths and at the next get-together :-)(11/12/2018) [28]*

### B. The most important is not to reach Compostela, but the Way by itself

The content analysis of selected Facebook pages demonstrates that Compostela ways are not usual ways. Many hikers write about its impressive aspect, they spoke about their feelings and emotions before, during and after the trip.

*We left without any certainty. We have stamped our credentials. Day after day we walked without never really imagining our arrival in Saint Jacques de Compostela. (9/11/2018) [24].*

Compostela ways are a kind of mix between a personal challenge, a search of oneself and an interest in arts and history. They are a way of spiritual quest, but not only in the

religious meaning. People who do the trip try to take stock with their life when appreciating encounter and exchanges in an original way to travel as tourists.

1) *A way of spiritual quest, a way to take stock of their life*

Diverse posts have highlighted reasons that push a walker to involve themselves in this adventure, and who go all the way despite the difficulties. The Way is seen like a way of redemption and renewing of the self. As evidence, we can cite two different walkers who shared and commented a newspaper article [32] about three prisoners who, by making the Way, “volunteered to reflect on themselves; they expect listening, friendship and they are searching for a new meaning of their lives and to think about their future.” These comments reveal their opinion and what they think about the Way:

*We never tired of saying  
Compostela is a way for all and also a  
path of freedom for prisoners!  
(17/12/2018) [33].*

*The paths of Compostela as a way  
of redemption for the prisoners?  
(19/12/2018) [27]*

The Way is also seen as a means to bounce back after suffering from a tragic event in life. It could be the death of a beloved person, or after a critical illness. We can highlight the post of this pilgrim who lost her father and who shared a photo of a heart on the floor. She wrote:

*You were a big-hearted dad, I am  
offering you this heart, collected in the  
ways, to go with your so brutal flight  
to another world. Thank you for what  
you did for many people during your  
82 years in this life. You kept your  
legendary dynamism until this serious  
stroke took you in 48 hours. I will keep  
you in my heart forever? (14/6/2018)  
[27]*

Other hikers reported the story of “Julie [who] left all by herself, on the road to Arles, with a camera and some objects that belonged to her deceased mother to make a film and its mourning on the way.” (12/3/2018) [27]

But for the hikers, walking the ways of Compostela is more than that:

*To walk is also to share. One’s  
doubts, joys, sorrows, and life.  
(3/3/2018) [27]*

2) *A Way of Encounters*

Our form of life requires a faith that stimulates us to walk the Way. It can be qualified as a way of encounters and dialogue. This is true, as it is a theme that often comes up in many posts. Interactions with others and sometimes

interactions with oneself are always reported at each stage of the trip.

By publishing on Facebook, the hikers try to establish a relationship of trust with their followers. They post messages such as “have a good day”, “have a good week”, “best wishes”, etc. They share their experience, their difficulties. They describe each stage of their trip and their followers’ comment and encourage them.

*Day 12 Sainte Eutrope. Another  
long, but beautiful stage through the  
fields and vineyards. A favourable  
weather at the departure from  
Mazeray. Marvelled by the beauty of  
Romanesque churches, the lantern for  
the dead. (21/7/2018) [34]*

In their post, the word *Ultreia* is quite recurrent. “The word ‘*Ultreia*’ (also ‘*ultrella*’ or ‘*ultreya*’) comes from Latin and it means ‘beyond’. *Ultreia* is another pilgrim salute, like the more popular ‘*Buen Camino!*’. While ‘*Buen Camino*’ literally means ‘have a good journey, a good *Camino*’, the meaning of ‘*Ultreia!*’ goes a bit deeper, implying encouragement to keep going, reaching ‘beyond’, heading onwards.

It is also believed medieval pilgrims used to greet each other with ‘*Ultreia, Suseia, Santiago*’, meaning something like ‘beyond, upwards, *Santiago*’. Other sources suggest ‘*Ultreia*’ was used in the same way as ‘*Hallelujah*’, once pilgrims finally reached *Santiago de Compostela*.” [35] By ending their post with this word, do hikers encourage themselves in their trip or does the repetitive aspect of this word suggest that hikers use it as an identity affiliation?

*Ultreia  
Every morning we walk the Way,  
Every morning we go further.  
Day after day, St Jacques calls us,  
It is the call of Compostela  
Ultreia! Ulteña! E sus eia Deus  
adjuva nos !. (2/2/2018) [34]*

The other kinds of interactions are the real-life encounters and exchanges on the Way. Often, the hikers report their encounters with other pilgrims, with *hospitaleras* and *hospitaleros*. They anonymously mention the confidences of the people they meet, such as the one who confides the illness of his wife, or the pilgrim whose heel hurts and so that he cannot finish his stage. The Way promotes sharing as expressed by these hikers.

*After 2 hours’ walking, I came  
across an open barn and house. At the  
entrance, a table is set with fruits,  
boiled eggs, coffee, dried fruits... En  
donativo (we give what we want). A  
great place run by cool young  
people.” (10/6/2018) [36]*

*I have had wonderful encounters, people who stood by me when I went through rough patches. The Way is a great family with a classless society, we are all here for the same reason, reach the end.” (8/10/2018) [25]*

Talking about social classes, much the same can be said when we look at the housing system described by the walkers. In general, they are using cottages, camping and tents. Hotels were rarely mentioned at least by the walkers.

### 3) *An obsessive Way full of happiness and suffering*

Many hikers, in their posts, seem to be obsessed by the Way. Months before, they start to write about their preparation for the walk as we can see:

*Well, there I cannot back off. The camino del-norte is calling me. Departure from Chartres on September 3. The 4th, I will walk in the footsteps of my fellow pilgrims.” (8/7/2018) [25]*

When they start walking, they express their happiness as well as their doubts:

*Sometimes simply some tiny thing makes us happy. Starting our Camino from Madrid, it is with joy that we found our first yellow arrow, so symbolic of a new adventure in the ways.” (6/3/2018) [27]*

The way is a long-drawn-out process, but this does not prevent the walkers from enjoying it.

*D2: Shelter of Orisson – Roncevaux, 16 km. At the beginning the sky was clear, but not for a long time. The difference in level is less important today than yesterday. Cold rain, snow, fog, but I ARRIVED I am so happy. A lot of emotions invaded me today: the freedom to be in this beautiful nature, in the middle of the beeches, the desire sometimes to cry, I do not know why?” (14/5/2018) [36]*

But they are also flooded with doubt:

*When you walk alone, greater is the desire to drop out... but you are here to test your limits even if each step counts.” (2/4/2018) [34]*

Walking the Way of Santiago de Compostela is more than a hike: the body and the spirit are put to the test. This adventure can change a life.

*Do not worry! Everything will be alright! The shoes or the backpack do not hike. These are just simple tools. Only you are going to hike in Santiago Not even your legs but it is your brain your mind, your brain, your mind: 20% physical effort 80% morale. The most important thing is to manage the pain, the fatigue to keep the morale.” (25/9/2019) [24]*

When the walkers end the journey, it is not really the end. Walkers are always attracted by the Camino Ways. They have the “Camino blues” and express it:

*This way is not just any way. It becomes a way of excellence, a quest for the absolute. If it is difficult to set out for this journey, how many people think or dream about it... It is also difficult to go back, find the nature, the forest, these plains as far as the eye can see, sown with corn or sunflowers, get up early with a smile and put on the boots. As soon as you get back, you feel the urge to go away from the noise, the pollution, to find that inner peace to the rhythm of my steps and my stick [mon bourdon in the original text]”. Precisely, being down in the dumps [le bourdon in the original text]... let us talk about it or not. This morning, I do not take the Way, so I will not go further. Ultreia” (1/8/2018) [34]*

The Camino can change a life. This could be summarised by the “about” pages of “Compostelle à l’infini” [Compostela endlessly] page:

*This page does not aim to “unpack” everything about why or how. The Way is peculiar to everyone, and I consider that I have no advice to give. The comments that accompany my photos are only my feelings, in view of my sensitivity, my experience. I recognize it, the way has changed my life. Or rather, it transformed me. Due to a long exterior path, and therefore interior.” [26]*

These posts, extracted from different Facebook pages, reminded us of a quote by Lao Tzu, a Chinese philosopher from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.: “There is no way to Happiness, Happiness is the way” and in our case the different ways of Compostela seem to be the Happiness.

### C. Hikers identity from traces left on social networks

Facebook users are said to use “authentic identities” throughout the site’s documentation. Normally, we can identify nominatively people as well as their age and sometimes their address or at least the city where they live. Most of the time people share their photo, their opinion, their way of thinking, which allows the reader to reconstitute the digital identities of the walker. Many indicators could be helpful.

A first clue could be the way hikers express themselves.

In the verbatim concerning the camino blues, we kept the word *bourdon* as this pilgrim is playing with words. In fact, *bourdon* has a double meaning in French. *Bourdon* is the walking stick of the pilgrim which was supposed to chase out infidels and devils, while “*avoir le bourdon*” can be translated as being down in the dumps.

From this linguistic detail, we can infer a humoristic trait of this pilgrim’s character.

There are also those who use a literary style with many quotations:

*Christian Bobin. Life is a gift of which I untie the strings every morning when I wake up (24/12/2018) [26]*

*Walking is not about saving time but losing it with elegance. Auguste Le Breton. (11/7/2018) [34]*

And those who use a telegraphic style:

*Cultural moment. Church of St Thibault 16th 17<sup>th</sup> century at château Porcien. 12/3/2018 [37]*

The vocabulary used is also very revealing: for example, “the way of the cross”, “path of faith”, “way of life” ... denote their religious culture.

Other pilgrims express their faith and religious practices openly:

*A 12 o’clock pilgrims’ benediction at the cathedral. Again, I cannot help crying on hearing the crystalline voice of the nun who sings... I already think of another Camino with my love. (15/6/2018) [36]*

Or when they write about the votive candles:

*I lighted 3 candles in Santiago de Compostela Cathedral: one for my family to be protected, another for my friends asking for the same, one for our dear dead people wishing peace for their relatives. (9/10/2018) [25]*

The way they mentioned a church is also very informative. Many hikers name it by the city name while others use the

patron saint to whom the church is dedicated to designate it. It is a further indication of a religious culture.

In general, we do not enter a church just to admire the statues. For many pilgrims these churches are seen as places of local pilgrimage.

But above all, by the traces left in these posts, backtracking the journey of a tripper becomes easy from a geographical point of view.

*Day 10 From Questembert Halls passing by Saint Clair fountain. We need shells to get to Malansac (10/4/2018) [34]*

All along the way of Compostela, many frames or sculptures of Saint James shells indicate the Way. That is why this tripper is mentioning that he needs many shells to get to his destination.

The towns and villages mentioned in the posts cover almost all the ways from France to Compostela.

As demonstrated by D. Cardon [38] the process of identity construction has found privileged spaces in the social-network services to deploy. It is the case of the Compostela hikers. The Internet offers multiple social environments in which to perform representations of social identity, Facebook is one of them. It is a publication tool offering people original formats for narrating their personal identity. But whatever the reason to set out for this journey and the identity of the walker it still remains a great life achievement:

*Tourist or pilgrim walker or Christian hikers or atheist ... does it matter? (23/3/2018) [24]*

## VI. DISCUSSION: TYPOLOGY OF HIKERS AND INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL WAY

C. Bourret [2] proposed a typology of the people met in the Compostela Ways that may be extended to users of Social Network Services:

- Authentic pilgrims (with main religious motivations),
- Semi-pilgrims or walkers’ pilgrims in different groups including those called by Spanish, “*turistigrinos*”, a mix of tourists and pilgrims,
- hiker-pilgrims, above all for the pleasure of the walk and its interactions,
- sportsmen or sportswomen, often walkers but also cyclists or riders, in search of physical experience and exceeding their limits.
- Cultural walkers, cyclists or riders very interested in various monuments and cultural heritage,
- minimalists, only walking a few kilometres to collect the precious stamp on the “credential” to finally obtain the precious “Compostela” as the others.
- Strictly tourists.

There are always different degrees of involvement or participation: from a few days (with special organized trips, particularly in May) to more than 2 months, but almost always



in one direction, rarely going back on the same ways, instead they use cars, coaches, trains or planes to return home.

Actually, two aspects of the Way coexist for and in each tripper in a “walking situation towards Compostela”.

First, the outer dimension, the most visible one: the hikers walking, interacting, living, meeting people on the Compostela Ways. It corresponds to the walking act by itself, visible and tangible: the way with the places crossed, the difficulties, the encounters, etc.

But there is also the whole inner dimension of the ways [39], invisible, intangible. It is about the thoughts, the feelings, the internal emotions that we tried to catch.

We can draw a similar analogy with work situations, where we talk about the invisible part of the human being work. Only a visible part of human activity at work is observed and analysed. Information and Communication sciences as well as Management sciences are studying this hidden part of the whole dimension of feelings, emotions, states of mind, etc. [40]. Trying to make all visible all this invisible and unformulated part of the Compostela Ways experience. It is the challenge that we tried to tackle and to construct the digital identity of the hikers.

Most often, hikers indicate in a neutral way that they have visited a church. They rarely indicate whether they prayed or not. Is this a form of self-censorship in our secularised and highly critical society about values and the religious manifestations, especially in France? But do they walk on the Compostela Ways only by chance? Just for the physical challenge or to roll out and enjoy a beautiful art history book in the middle of striking landscapes? The search for the meaning of existence is often formulated. That of the spiritual dimension, particularly religious, is much less avowed because probably censored in our secularised society.

According to the pilgrim’s posts, the places mentioned are very different. Beside the well-known places (Saintes, Rocamadour, Roncevaux, Fromista, Leon, Sahagun, etc.) they mentioned different other places and often little known that have individually marked each pilgrim. This corresponds well to our constructivist approach as defined by P. Watzlawick [41], according to which each one builds his own reality: each pilgrim builds his own path. In fact, “The way is for everyone, but everyone makes his own way,” as explained by A. Etchegoyen interviewed in a documentary film on Compostelle [42]. The idea that everyone builds his own way is also present in Machado’s poem mentioned in many guide books to Compostela: “Traveller, there is no path, you make the path by walking”. The fact that everyone constructs his way leads us to the constructivism theory as explained by Edgar Morin [43].

Finally, there are three different parts of the Camino, totally complementary, corresponding to a progressive process and the evolution of the experience and representations of the hikers. First, the preparation of the Camino: a few months before or even sometimes for several years before the departure. Second, the Camino properly: walking on the path for one or more periods, which may take several years. And thirdly, the after Camino which is still in it, but too often forgotten as expressed by JM Maroquin, former priest of San Juan de Ortega: “When you are back home,

consider that you will always remain on the way, and that you will always be there, because it is a way which does not know the end.” [44]

## VII. CONCLUSION

In this paper we studied the interactions of the Compostela hikers by analysing their Facebook posts. This analysis brought us to comprehend the identities and social representations of the hikers. The Compostela Ways are a very revealing ambivalence and brings into question our society. Compostela hikers always return transformed by their participation in the Compostela Ways and by their interactions with other people. In future works, we would like to try to consider the evolution of the representations and the identities of voluntary “pilgrims”, at the beginning and at the end of the “pilgrimage” and thus the changes produced by their experience. As formulated by J.M. Marroquin, the “*Camino* will always be part of the walker’s mind.”

The Compostela Ways are a particularly favourable ground to meet others but also to find oneself, constitutive of the widened “thought,” central in the new humanism advocated by L. Ferry [45], who tries to answer the question of the sense of existence, which is at the heart of the crisis of contemporary individualism.

The Compostela phenomenon is a good way to investigate one’s identity, and more specifically the digital identity, with all the traces left on social media. Through the queries of the “trace human”, we go back to the eternal question of life’s meaning and of our presence on Earth. Humans do not escape their fate, which is to try to understand (or not) the meaning of their lives and about their passage on this Earth, regardless of the communication medium or device they use. The identity and existence questions remain.

As the *Camino* always continues, we are only at the beginning of our work to better exploit all the collected data. We want to further compare our results with deeper content analysis and new interviews with people who have walked on the Camino. With the idea to better understand the “invisible” part of the path that takes place inside each tripper. Always in the idea of “informational tracking” [46] approach, we would also want to try to follow the evolution of the digital identity of the hikers all along their way and, if possible, after, for a few years. This is another big challenge.

**Acknowledgement:** Authors are listed in alphabetical order; they contributed equally to this paper.

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