

The Double Virtual Citizenship of (Some) Young Immigrants in Italy

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will describe part of an ongoing study on the communication habits of adolescents in Italy. Following a comparison of native and immigrant high school students, based on their responses to 1400 questionnaires, we began a series of interviews that led us to propose and use what we call the concept of *immigrants' double virtual citizenship* as a key to understanding some of the data about the use of social networks among young immigrants.

Author Keywords

Social networks, young immigrants, virtual citizenship, educational tools, Web 2.0

ACM Classification Keywords

H.4.3. Information systems applications: Communications applications – *Computer conferencing, teleconferencing, and videoconferencing*. H.5.3. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Group and organization interfaces – *Web-based interaction*. J.4. Social and behavioural sciences – *Sociology*. K.3.0. Computers and education: General. K.4.0. Computers and society: General.

General Terms

Design, experimentation, human factors.

INTRODUCTION

In its relatively short history, Italy has experienced a very long period of large-scale migration, from the unification of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861 until the so-called Italian economic miracle in the 1960s. It has been estimated that this process involved approximately 28 million Italians (the Italian population in 1861 was estimated at around 25 million). Currently, about 25 million Brazilians are of Italian descent (15% of the total population), as are 20 million Argentines (50%), 17 million Americans (6%), five million French people (9%) and 1.5 million Canadians (4.5%). More recently, Italy became a destination for mass immigration, mainly from Eastern Europe, South America and Africa. According to recent estimates [3], there are currently around five million immigrants in Italy (about 8% of the

total population), while 10 years ago there were fewer than two million immigrants. Approximately 670,000 students in Italian schools (about 7.5% of the total number) are immigrants or "second generations".

This large and sudden wave of immigration is creating problems in terms of social acceptance and inclusion, as immigrants often generate feelings of anxiety, insecurity and fear [2], emphasised by a society in which the well-knit communities of the past have been substituted by networks of independent individuals [4]. From an educational perspective, we have decided to investigate whether modern communication and information technologies, which are often inherently structured as networks of various elements (computers, clients, users), might offer tools and opportunities to foster inclusive processes [5], to help foreign students to participate freely in the transformation of their new community [6], and to encourage reciprocal understanding and mutual enrichment for immigrants and natives.

THE COMMUNICATION HABITS OF ADOLESCENTS IN ITALY

Our research began in 2008, using stimuli from groups of both teachers and parents who were interested in understanding modes and loci of communication among adolescents. The first stage of this research was developed between autumn 2008 and summer 2009 using a mixed methods approach involving different techniques, ranging from large-scale questionnaires to long individual interviews. This stage involved about 4000 respondents [8].

At the core of the data gathering process was a questionnaire of 107 questions which was administered to 1402 high school students in Bergamo (aged from 14 to 18 years old), 101 of whom were foreign (first generation) students (7.2%). The composition of the statistical sample, with regard to characteristics such as sex, nationality and enrollment in different types of school, was significantly similar to the composition of Italian secondary schools in general, according to official data provided by the Italian Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Statistics (<http://www.istat.it>).

The questions, which were mostly closed-ended, aimed to focus on: (1) personal data; (2) the usage of communication instruments (mobile telephones, mp3 players etc.); (3) usage of spare time; (4) modes of communication with friends; (5) Internet usage and (6) Internet usage by parents.

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The data analysis highlighted some interesting issues. Some of our findings confirmed our expectations and/or the results of other studies, while others were rather surprising (evidence supported by χ^2 tests, $p=0.05$). For instance, according to our respondents, they were still exposed to television more frequently than the Internet. With regard to Internet usage, in agreement with other studies (such as [7]), we can say that gender predicts usage: even if boys and girls use the Internet at more or less the same frequency, males spend more time online. Surprisingly, we found no evidence that access to the Internet was positively correlated with the economic status of the families, in contrast to what has been suggested by previous studies in similar areas ([1]). We did not ask our respondents about their family budget, but it is well known that in Italy there is a non-uniform distribution of students' socio-economic status across different types of school, and the highest levels of Internet usage were found in vocational schools, in which the majority of students traditionally come from the lower classes.

Immigrant students are mainly enrolled in vocational schools (60%) and are, in fact, frequent Internet users, with longer usage sessions than their Italian peers: 39.6% of them use the Internet for more than two hours per day, compared with 28.5% of natives. Considering this general framework, we were rather astonished by the figures regarding the use of social networks, as immigrants seemed to use Facebook less than native students. Therefore, we embarked upon a second stage of the research, with the aim of providing new evidence for (or against) this phenomenon and interpreting it. From a methodological point of view, we decided to change the tool used for gathering data, and scheduled a series of long semi-structured interviews with a narrower target group. A grid of approximately 80 questions was prepared and administered to a group of several dozen adolescent immigrants. The series of interviews is still in progress, but the preliminary evidence seems to be enough to shed light on the issue of immigrants' relatively low usage of Facebook.

In fact, we now understand that the problem was not in the answers, but in the question, which was misplaced: when asking about the length of time for which students used Internet tools, we gave them a list of the most popular services (Facebook, MySpace, Second Life, Netlog, etc.) which had been selected according to the feelings of the research team and confirmed using feedback from discussions with students, parents and teachers, as well as by a pilot study using preliminary versions of the questionnaire itself. Unfortunately, all of our testers were natives, and therefore nobody raised one important issue: although services such as Facebook and Twitter are widely used worldwide, in some countries, the dominant social network is not on the list of the most popular services in Italy (and in many other Western countries). For instance, when we gathered our data in 2009, social networks such as Orkut and Hi5

were dominant in India and in many countries in South America.

Our interviews revealed that many of the immigrants who came from countries where the dominant social network was not Facebook tended to *develop two different social networks* (i.e. social structures or networks of contacts) *using two different social networking services*: Facebook for their Italian relationships, and another service for relationships in their country of origin. This is the reason for the reduced use of Facebook, and it also means that young immigrants develop two separate virtual communities and what we call a *double virtual citizenship*.

This discovery is important from an educational viewpoint, as the reduced usage of mainstream social networks, which have recently been identified as a possible vehicle for inclusive teaching strategies, could prove to be problematic for the design and implementation of such strategies. On the other hand, this double virtual citizenship allows strong ties to be maintained with a cultural milieu which may have a positive influence on the identity-building process of our students. How to transform this constraint into an opportunity is the main challenge which will form the basis of the next stage of our research programme.

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