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Social Platformisation of the University: Criticalities and Opportunities on the Use of Social Networks by Italian Academies

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Abstract

As in the rest of the world, universities in Italy have expanded their communication channels by adding social platforms to their institutional web portals. Their first colonisation occurred about ten years ago when they entered Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. Today Italian universities are increasingly 2.0. Researchers have already examined academia's use of social media and their innovation of online services and interaction with their 'users.' This article explores this diffusion of in Italian Universities with these objectives: what are the consequences on reputation and socialisation among teachers, students, and people outside the academies? And, also, what are the challenges in education?

Keywords: University, Social Media, Social Platform, Social Network, Digital, Italy.

JEL Classification: A14, I23, L8, L86.

1. Introduction

We find ourselves immersed in a digital society (Lupton, 2015). New digital technologies have significantly impacted daily life, including social relationships, governance, commerce, and the economy. These technologies meticulously track people's movements, shopping habits, and online communications, making us increasingly subjected to digital data, regardless of our preferences or choices. Thus, the Internet and social networks have become integral components of the knowledge economy. The influence of these technologies extends to areas such as diverse patterns of digital usage, digital politics, citizen engagement, surveillance practices,

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privacy concerns, the shaping of individuality through digital devices, and numerous other subjects. Consequently, this transformation profoundly redefines the landscape of university research and education.

Advancement in technology has the potential to foster connectivity and minimise communication and socialisation barriers. While this is true, a significant part of our modern lifestyle tends to disconnect us from genuine human interactions and instead connect us to virtual representations of people. Platforms like Facebook, for example, make it easier to interact with the concept of "human contact" and simultaneously allow us to avoid real-life interactions. As a result, these new tools significantly transform the dynamics of our social life (Couldry, 2015; Turkle, 2011). The consequences of these changes are many and also concern the economic dimension. It is worth mentioning that numerous platforms, initially run by amateurs, have grown into large global enterprises in just five years. These companies now use extensive information and data mining, capitalising on user connectivity for revenue (Van Dijck, 2013).

However, everyone (maybe) knows Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube; some even remember Myspace or Messenger. Nevertheless, defining them is difficult because these social network are constantly changing. However, a brief definition could be: "digital tools or applications that enable the creation, sharing, and exchange of information" (Oppici et al., 2014). In other words, social platforms are spaces where many users produce audio, visual, textual, or multimedia content. These lasts are shared in a public way (accessible to all users of the network or, in any case, to the general public) or privately (accessible only to "friends," "followers," or similar) or something in between (Manca, Ranieri, 2014). Thus, these platforms probably reduce the limits of communication inherent in the "real world," where a significant part is constituted by schools and universities (Jeopen, 2012).

Italian universities are increasingly 2.0. Numerous pieces of research detect this trend. For example, Lovari and Giglietto (2014) analysed the positioning of Italian academies on social media, focusing on Facebook and Twitter. Ten years ago, 80 % and 76 % of universities used them, respectively. Looking at the present day, it emerges that, in particular, in an era in which web users are 73.7 % of Italians and 95.9 % of young people under 30, smartphone users are 64, 8 % of Italians, and 89.4 % of young people between 14 and 29 years old (CENSIS, 2022), universities can no longer do without communicating with their students (and others) through social networks.

In this regard, the CENSIS Report Universities and Social Media 2022 analyses 74 Italian universities (58 publics and 16 private), revealing that many Italian universities are innovating their online services and paying more attention to interaction with their users using social networks. More than 50 % of the universities surveyed respond within a day to messages posted on Facebook or Twitter and use official mobile apps. Almost all public universities (96.5 %) are on at least one social media outlet with official pages, mainly on Facebook and Twitter, followed by Instagram and YouTube. Their topics include institutional events, teaching, research, career guidance, administrative issues, and scholarships (Moran, Seaman, 2012).

Several departments, in particular, manage the channels via the Communication Office, the Guidance Office, the Web Communication Office, the Social Network Communication Office, and the Public Relations Office (Lovari, Ducci, 2022). This last aspect reveals a significant investment in the human resources and capital employed.

Italian universities increasingly focus on mobile devices, incorporating responsive design techniques into their websites and adapting graphic content to various devices. Moreover, they are actively developing official university applications to enhance the mobile experience of their users. As far as state universities are concerned, about 67 % have created an official application made available to students (Oppici, 2013). These applications permit students to consider their syllabus and university transcript, book examinations, search for contacts via the university address book, search for classrooms, and many other functions). Additionally, some universities have created apps for students with disabilities to facilitate their orientation on campus. Others target prospective students to help them choose a university path (Manca, Ranieri, 2014).

2. Background Data

2.1 #SocialUniversity

The trend has been growing for more than a decade; in particular, it emerges that for several years, Facebook has been the most used social network for forming opinions and gathering information (Pearson, 2011).

The #socialUniversity research by the Nexa Center on Internet & Society of the Polytechnic of Turin fits this scenario that analysed the presence of 96 Italian universities on social networks, focusing on two at the moment leading platforms: Facebook (the first network by popularity, with 75% of Italians with Internet access registered, equal to 45 % of the population) and Twitter (8 % of Italians with Internet access, equal to 5.4 % of the population) (CENSIS, 2022). The data collection for this research revealed the first phase of the census of the social profiles of the universities, followed by a phase of analysis of the communication choices of the universities on social networks (Fini, Cigognini, 2009). The #socialUniversity research is the first mapping of the panorama of the 'university 2.0' in Italy and also intends to highlight both good practices and aspects that can still be improved, allowing each University to deal with similar realities (Aquilani, Lovari, 2012; Arata, 2012, 2013).

2.2 Focus on Instagram

Instagram is one of the most popular social networks in Italy, with Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. There are 19 million users, of which just over half are women (51 %). Furthermore, the most represented age group on Instagram is between 19 and 24 (20.6 %). The design is intuitive and essential and immediately reflects fashion, holidays, and lifestyles. It attracts young people because there are

young people, not 'old people,' like on Facebook (Lovari, Ducci, 2022; Lovari, Giglietto, 2013).

Universities use Instagram extensively because it fits various needs: spreading information about the University and courses, or even about related events and initiatives taking place inside or outside the academies; improving visibility and 'brand'; furthermore, for education goals, inspire students. It is also a channel of institutional relations and communication (Jeopen, 2012).

Three essential Italian academies, such as Alma Mater University of Bologna, Politecnico di Milano, and Roma Sapienza, use Instagram massively. Regarding the official profile of the oldest University in the world, we note that it is set up from an 'institutional' point of view (Wilson et al., 2012). In the foreground are stories, chronicles, images of ceremonies, and prominent personalities; IGTV is active; the images published on the home page are very suggestive (Ivala, Cachago, 2012). The Instagram profile of the Politecnico di Milano stands out for a mix of institutionality, lightness, and creativity. It is a relatively active profile with a lot of interaction, thanks to a dynamic use of featured stories, such as the one dedicated to the hashtag #askastudent (mini-interviews with international students). Interesting IGTV and the column #POLIMIrisponde in which teachers answer students' questions. Finally, the Instagram social profile of the Sapienza University of Rome has many posts, a sign that it intends to give an idea of the daily proximity to students (Oppici et al., 2014). The themes are varied, from service information to the celebration of graduates; a precise communicative style often uses texts accompanied by non-trivial images.

3. The Use of Social Networks by Italian Universities: First Results of a Mapping

In the summer of 2023, we conducted a first direct exploratory survey on the use of social media by 96 Italian public and private, traditional, and telematic universities. Precisely, we have navigated the institutional homepages and verified whether the Universities indicate their positioning on social platforms via direct links on the homepages themselves. This first survey shows that Facebook is the most used social network (18.4 %), followed by Instagram (18.2 %), YouTube (17.4 %), and LinkedIn (17.2 %). Interestingly, some universities are also starting to use and promote the Chinese TikTok (3.2 %) and Weibo (0.2 %). The next phase of this research will concern the collection of data referring to users belonging to each platform and the related traffic of information and digital content, as well as the distinction between the types of universities about the variables: Size (minor, medium, large University); Governance (public, private); Category (traditional, telematic); Geographical positioning (North Italy, Centre Italy, South Italy).

Figure 1. The use of social networks by Italian universities
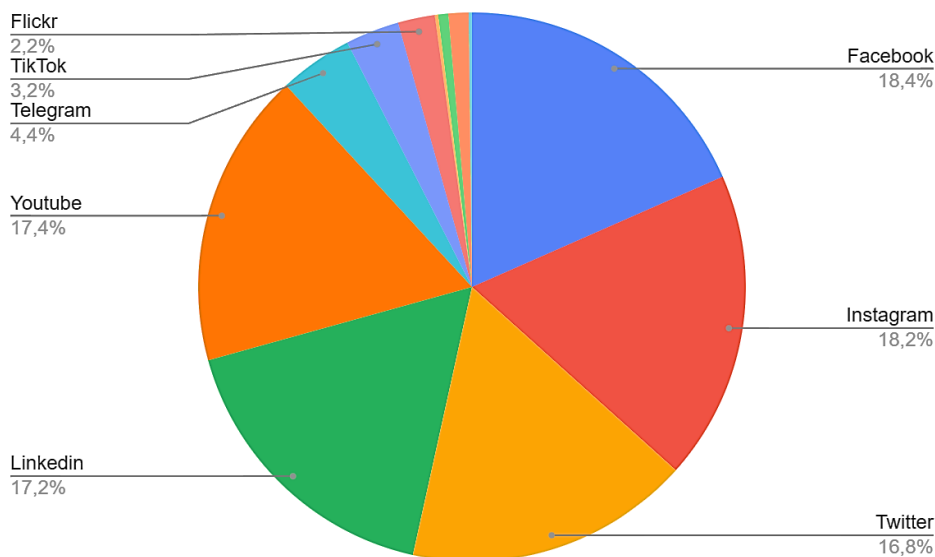
Source: Our survey, 2023.

4. Discussion

4.1 Social Platforms and Consequences of Reputation and Socialisation of Universities

The empirical investigation shows that universities are often afraid to manage the critical voice of students on public platforms, as well as the need for specialised personnel for strategic communication management of these digital media (Oppici, 2013).

The process of colonisation of the social web differs from University to University. Each one has experienced the "domestication" of the social web differently from the others, with innovation paths characterised by complex and articulated assembly practices between digital technologies and communicative cultures of each University (Jordan, 2014). In some cases, we witness a proliferation of social presences of the University itself: institutional pages, profiles of offices and departments, and facilities managed by personnel outside the communication offices highlight the wild west climate of social media that characterises the early stages of the process institutionalisation of social networks in an institutional setting (Mergel, Bretschneider, 2013). Thus, we note how the official social presences are not visible in the official university portals, almost as if some universities were afraid to show a strategic investment in social media to communicate with students. Except for a few cases of excellence, we note how the use of social media by Italian universities

is still purely one-way, focused on image promotion, without trying to activate engagement and relationships (Jeopen, 2012).

For academies using social media, it is vital to identify the office managing the official social media presence and to ensure the consistent positioning of the institution from the earliest stages of the project development. For them, it is vital to choose the appropriate human resources and professional figures (for example, social media managers) to form a social media task force to oversee the platforms and feed institutional storytelling. Managing this activity internally rather than outsourcing it to external agencies is preferable (Kinal, Rykiel, 2013).

Outsourcing communication on social media could lead to difficulties / dystonias regarding image coherence and accuracy of the information, especially in cases of crisis where intense supervision of the institution is necessary. Therefore, to better manage the strategy, universities should adopt a social media plan and harmonise it within the University's communication strategies in dialogue with the communication and information offices (McAllister--Spooner, 2012).

Second, the strategic use of social media implies the choice of objectives and the editorial strategy for institutional safeguards. Among the possible objectives: Improve the University's reputation; Build and consolidate a relationship of loyalty with its users; Collect feedback from connected audiences; Develop a sense of pride and belonging in students; Listen to their needs to improve and optimise service management.

From the strategic planning side, defining a policy to optimise the University's presence on the social web is essential. For example, it is crucial to define the ways and times of response to users to guarantee these platforms' dialogue and engagement potential. It is also necessary to decide whether or not to open the official page to user posts and comments and to identify the actions in the event of critical or even offensive messages toward the University (Oppici et al., 2023).

Third, to avoid possible confusion with fake university profiles, the social media communication manager should carefully draft the description section, confirming that it is the official presence of the University also through the use of the university logo. However, more than these actions are needed to determine if a page is official: for this reason, it is crucial to insert a social media bar on the institutional portal so that students can easily recognise and connect to the official social networks by clicking these icons (Griffith, Liyanage, 2008). Furthermore, it is strategic to provide feedback to users to improve the dialogic relationship or the quality of services. For this reason, universities should first focus on channeling student voices by clearly explaining how digital voices have been used in university decision-making processes and by creating ways to visualise, distribute, and disseminate this feedback, including infographics (Moran et al., 2012).

These actions help build trust, demonstrate careful listening to user needs, and facilitate the development of dialogical relationships. At the same time, cyber-scanning could help collect feedback and comments on the University's reputation from other social network, not only for calibrating communication strategies but

also for monitoring the perception of the university-student relationship on the social network (Lovari, Ducci, 2022).

4.2 Social Media and Challenges in the Educational Field

We are always connected and always in communication, both teachers and students. And so are colleges and universities: in the United States, for example, one hundred percent of institutions offering four-year degree programs have been on social networks for several years (McAllister--Spooner, 2012). However, social media have integrated teaching, and their integration into curricula in any field needs to be improved. We are not techno enthusiasts; we comprehend that technologies have significant limits and many dark sides (Clayton, Macdonald, 2013). We also know that there are many barriers to access and that digital inequality and digital poverty (Attewell, 2011; DiMaggio, Hargittai, 2001; DiMaggio et al., 2001; Dutton, Reisdorf, 2020) afflict many students and teachers in many parts of the world.

However, technologies have greatly assisted learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Di Maggio, 2022). This evidence confirms that social media platforms should be a more massive part of university-level educational provision and practice for teaching and learning at undergraduate and master's levels. What matters, however, is to underline that social media are not alternative systems to traditional ones. They, on the other hand, are tools that increase the learning experience and enhance what a de-visu relationship allows to obtain.

Social media can connect the physical classroom with a broader cultural community than the traditional one because they broaden the training experience outside the typical scenarios (Wilson et al., 2012) of the so-called "four walls." This new hybrid and augmented environment allows students to practice new experiences during and after class. Through social media, he can be immersed in relevant social situations and have authentic and organic exchanges that benefit his learning process. In this new relational space, teachers have a central role. The latter can encourage students to review their beliefs about the language of origin and their own culture and can stimulate students to question their beliefs, filter fake news, to produce authentic content, thus reducing the constant closures ideologies that often exist and contributing to why not, to increase the quality of the contents present on the social networks themselves. Active social presence would stimulate fruitful reflections and comparisons with the direct result of increased creativity and the critical spirit in a convivial and collaborative spirit (Esposito, 2011).

Social interaction is vital in facilitating students' learning, adaptability, knowledge development, and social engagement. Simultaneously, social media platforms allow students to connect, network, and communicate. Some research findings state that they foster social interaction, but can also inadvertently create physical distance among friends during certain situations, such as meetings or specific events (Yohanna, 2020).

In this sense, and in line with Bronfenbrenner's (2006) theory, we emphasise the importance of the 'educability' of social media environments from an ecological perspective. Indeed, it is possible to improve the social media environment through

specific educational activities and innovative tools that help students to analyse the effects of personalisation of web content, understand the algorithms that control social media mechanisms, and comprehend how toxic content spreads on the Web. Universities have an essential role to play in this regard and can support the training of students in the conscious use of social media through specific activities.

Students use social media primarily to interact with their peers and those they already know. Gradually, if properly stimulated, they can grow and transform this existing community into an ongoing learning community. In short, in a natural evolution (Hugget, 2010), it would be possible to structure social communities of digital natives in continuous learning.

5. Conclusions

For several years, universities have adjusted their communication course, with an evident "digital drift" characterised by a mix of institutional communication on official web portals and massive use of Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (Aquilani, Lovari, 2008, 2009). This multi-channel approach confirms that a growing number of university institutions are integrating 2.0 tools and social networking sites in their communication strategies to disseminate information without the intermediation of the mass media, to develop a dialogical relationship with students throughout the life cycle academic, from prospective students to first-year students, from undergraduates to alums (Aquilani, Lovari, 2010; Lovari, Giglietto, 2012).

Using social media for training institutions is crucial to communicating their activities, conquest, and maintaining spaces in the training market and teaching (Capriotti et al., 2023). This second aspect is vital and, at the same time, very necessary because social media are learning contexts that are always in flux. Today, students require a (re)mix of educational models, including social media, and focused on collaborative, creative, and self-managed activities (Oppici et al., 2023). Digital learning mediated by platforms like Facebook and Instagram has become more engaging and effective. However, educators must know how to manage the dual channel (virtual and physical) without stressing too much about one or the other.

To effectively cater to students' needs, educators must grasp their perspectives on social media and the integration of social media skills development. It is common for students to need complete awareness of the implications of social media use, even if they engage with it regularly (Benson, Morgan, 2016). The potential of social media is infinite and equally dangerous to the quality of the content that is also self-produced. Therefore, it is up to teachers to clarify objectives and expectations for using social media in the University (Aquilani, Lovari, 2009) and to know how to identify risks and opportunities.

It is, therefore, indispensable to monitor and measure the impact of social media on university-student relations. In addition to adopting quantitative metrics-related tools (e.g., number of fans, retweets, video views, etc.), universities can use polls and surveys to evaluate specific issues (Lovari, 2013). For example, they can analyse the content of posted messages (even through advanced forms of sentiment analysis)

or experiment with digital ethnography techniques to analyse the communicative behaviour of students in the social spaces colonised by universities. Monitoring and impact assessment then become fundamental not only for the reputation of the University but also for recalibrating the objectives and strategies related to the pursuable educational objectives (Oppici et al., 2023).

In conclusion, to make the most of the dialogical potential of social platforms, universities need to adopt outward communicativè and inward educational strategies that are always up-to-date and well-calibrated; otherwise, there is the risk of promoting mere rhetoric of technological innovation.

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