

Chapter 66

Italian Undergraduates Join Facebook, but Keep a Critical Distance: “It is Useless, but I’m Using It”

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ABSTRACT

Facebook is the most popular social network site in Italy, and its usage is particularly spread among younger generations. This paper explores how undergraduate students use Facebook, and what meanings they attach to it. Research was performed in 2008 and in 2009 at a Italian university, with a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methodology. The authors' survey data show the quick adoption of Facebook. In 2008 half of the students were completely unfamiliar with Facebook, while in 2009 59% of them were using it on a regular basis. Evidence coming from semi-structured interviews with randomly selected university students show that the massive adoption of Facebook goes hand in hand with a general critical attitude. Concerns about privacy issues were common, and they can also lead to a kind of detachment from this site. Implications on the perspective use of Facebook as an educational tool are discussed in the paper.

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INTRODUCTION

Among the many different features of the so-called Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005), social network sites (SNS) have been recently put center stage in the debate on how developments in information and communication technologies are transforming the ways in which people communicate and interact (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Beer and Burrows, 2007). In particular, many contributions are focusing on the potential risks and benefits linked to the growing popularity of Facebook among university students, and to the possibility of using this specific application for educational purposes. Most of the available literature draws on empirical data concerning the Anglo-American context (Roblyer et al., 2010; Kabilan et al., 2010; Kirschner and Karpinski, 2010; Madge et al., 2009; Pasek et al., 2009; Selwyn, 2009; Griffith & Liyanage, 2008; Karlin, 2007). In this paper we will provide some data on the adoption and usage of Facebook by university students in the Italian context, that present many differences from the Anglo-American one. Our general aim is to find if there might be some generalities in the way in which young generations access and use Facebook, and to discuss what this could entail for the perspective use of this social network for educational purposes.

In the first section we set out the general background of our work, including a brief description of the most important features of the everyday life of a university student in Italy. In the second section we present the evidence coming from our research on a sample of students in a large University in the north of Italy (University of Milan-Bicocca). The research design is based on methods triangulation (Hammersley, 2008): a large survey is complemented by a set of semi-structured interviews covering students' Facebook appropriation. This article is mainly concerned with evidence coming from the qualitative research, while survey data are used to set the general background. More extensive

accounts of the quantitative survey have already been presented elsewhere (Cavalli et al., 2010; Ferri et al., 2009). Section 3 provides a discussion of our results, and guidelines for future research.

STUDY BACKGROUND

Following boyd and Ellison, we can define social network sites (SNS) as 'web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system' (boyd and Ellison, 2008, 211). Among the many different SNS, Facebook is one of the most popular worldwide and one of the fastest growing sites in the history of the Internet (Fowler, 2012). The popularity of this social network seems to be particularly high among university students (Petrovic et al., 2012). Empirical evidence shows how Facebook is also adopted by perspectives university students as a way of introducing themselves into the university world (Madge et al., 2009). For incoming freshmen who have to face a completely new context, Facebook is 'situationally relevant' (Stutzman, 2011), as it provides a unique opportunity to keep the contacts with old friends and parents while at the same time entering into University life by getting in touch with other people, finding information about social events and, more in general, enriching and facilitating the socialization process (Madge et al., 2009).

However, as a worldwide phenomenon, Facebook should be considered as something more than an 'offline to online trend' restricted to a 'geographically-bound community (the campus)' (Ellison et al., 2007, 1143). We must try to find reasons that help us to explain why this site is so popular, and that are not specifically linked to the typical situation of a freshmen in a large Anglo-

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