SOCIAL NETWORK SITES AND UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATION. IS FACEBOOK A NEW OPPORTUNITY? AN ITALIAN EXPLORATORY STUDY.¹

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Abstract
Even if university web sites have become the fundamental crux in the relationship design between universities and their stakeholders, most students have started to use social network tools to acquire and share information and impressions about colleges. This exploratory study, after a literature review, analyses groups created within Facebook related to an Italian university, to understand the kind of information and contents shared and whether this new digital arena can impact on students’ choices or on the perception of university experience. We will also examine the possibility that universities have to use Facebook to manage and improve the quality of relationships with their stakeholders, in particular with students.

Keywords: university communication, social network sites, new relationship models, listening activities, Facebook

1. Introduction
In recent times social network sites (SNS), and especially Facebook, have become a prime topic of conversation, whether as a new social phenomenon on the Internet (Menduni, 2009; Nielsen, 2009) or because of the legal and privacy problems they create; because firms and institutions are divided on their use during working hours or on adopting them for business; because young people spend a lot of time on the Web with dangerous social consequences (Conley, 2009; Keen, 2007). But social network sites are just the last, and surely not the least, tool made available by Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2005). Web 2.0 refers, following Tancer (2008) definition “to those sites that allow users to generate their own content and share that content among other users”. It includes not only social network platforms, but also blogs, wiki and member-driven news sites, virtual places where people “become co-author and co-producer of the final result” (Pannozzo, 2009), contributing to create what Li and Bernoff (2008) call the “groundswell”. They define the groundswell as “a social trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other, rather than from traditional institutions like corporations”. So what is clear is that, even if technology contributes to reshape the communication forms at any level in society, it is a ‘facilitator’ and not the sole ‘change engine’. “The groundswell [, in fact,] comes from the collision of three forces: people, technology, and economics” (Li and Bernoff, 2008). This happens because people have always desired and needed to connect to each other, and today digital technologies make it possible and immediate as never before. This matters “because software that connects people can now assume that masses of people are there to connect” (Li and Bernoff, 2008), and Internet traffic can easily generate money, as shown by the increase in online advertising expenditure - $ 14.6 billion in the U.S.A. alone in 2007 (VanBoskirk, 2007) and approximately $ 7.5 billion in Europe in the same year (Jennings, 2007).

In this new scenario every institution, from firms to universities, should consider what will change in its method of managing customers, brands and relationships, conscious that it is impossible not to take into some account this epochal change, creating new marketing and communication successful strategies.

¹ This paper is the shared work of Barbara Aquilani who wrote § 1, § 3, § 4 and § 7 and Alessandro Lovari, who wrote § 2, § 5 and § 6.
Starting from this premise, this paper seeks to understand if social network sites, and especially Facebook, can offer a good opportunity for universities to better manage and improve their relationships with students. To reach this aim we first focus our attention on university communication changes, and then to social network sites and Facebook. We then choose ‘Sapienza’ University as a case study, and after formulating some research hypotheses and explain the methodology used, we discuss the findings collected consulting Facebook groups created around this Italian university. We then conclude our paper providing an answer to the main research question, also thanks to other authors’ contributions.

2. The changes of university communication: from ‘publicity’ strategy to the multi-channel one.

Italian university communication has deeply changed in the past 10 years: in particular these changes have been accelerated by the institutionalization of communication in the public sector (Mancini, 2003; Marchione and Pattuglia, 2007), by the development of new models of governance, cause and effect of legislative processes of reform in higher education (Morcellini and Martino, 2005; Morcellini and Vittorio, 2007; Morcellini and Masia, 2009); by the presence of new media and cultural consumptions (Censis, 2007; Istat, 2009) and by the pervasive growth and the increasing role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in postmodern societies (Castells, 2002; Contini and Lanzara, 2009).

Italian universities have understood that they need to innovate their communication strategies in order to reach new stakeholders or to create and better manage relations with them. By starting and maintaining dialogues, universities can tune existing relationships and proactively build new ones with their publics creating immaterial resources such as reputation and loyalty (Invernizzi, 2001; Grunig, Grunig and Dozier, 2002; Muzzi Falconi, 2002; Mazzei, 2004; Grunig, 2006). Some scholars (Morcellini, 2002; Bracciale and Martino, 2002) have pointed out how the colleges’ communication mix was still too traditional and paper based, with a relevant use of publicity. However recently there is growing evidence that universities are setting up innovative and digital media, such as campus radios, webtv, blogs and social network sites (Aquilani and Lovari, 2008). Several Italian universities are investing resources and efforts in building new tools of participation and platforms of communication with students and other stakeholders: in particular the most innovative media implemented by colleges are forums, web 2.0 sites, mobile services, blogs and chats (Lovari, 2009; Marchione, Martino, Pattuglia and Scioli, 2009). These universities represent just a small percentage of the entire Italian university system: few colleges are building these participation tools by themselves, other institutions are using existing websites and private online networks, such as Second Life, Facebook and LinkedIn, to implement their interfaces with stakeholders. These universities are pioneers that have decided to innovate their communication mixes adopting a ‘user centred perspective’. This new strategy is particularly important because the choice and selection of communication tools and their use has become a strategic element for the identities of institutions and how they are perceived by the stakeholders (Grandi, 2007).

The 2009 Aicun research (Marchione, Martino, Pattuglia and Scioli, 2009) highlights a relevant diversification of university communication supply with a repositioning of media mixes in comparison with previous studies (Marchione and Scioli, 2003; Mazzei, 2004; Boldrini and Morcellini, 2005), a reduction of communication expenses and big cuts on advertising budgets; a strong investment in technological and multimedia tools.

Italian universities are not only adding new tools to their existing portfolio, but they are implementing global strategies that can help them manage communication in a different way. The key is adopting a multi-channel strategy (Lovari, 2008) giving the public the opportunity to access information and services through differentiated media, in different contexts according to their needs, behaviour and media consumption habits; this is a systematic approach to manage communication activities assisted by the implementation of ICT (Forghieri and Mele, 2005). Information and communication technologies become fundamental not only to create technological
platforms in order to store, manage and deliver institutional messages, but also to generate, in a multi-channel strategy, new forms of contact, dialogue and listening with stakeholders. Internet has become a crucial tool for colleges (Pook and Lefond, 2001; McAllister-Spooner, 2008). The Internet website popularity among university stakeholders shows how these institutions should invest in order to strategically use this medium as a communication tool (Kang and Norton, 2006; Will and Callison, 2006). Indeed, it has been analyzed that prospective students, who consider a college website inadequate, connect their e-experience with the quality and functioning of the university itself (Abrahamson, 2000; Will and Callison, 2006).

Internet and Web 2.0 in particular, are the most appropriate environments in which to create dialogic relationships with stakeholders in order to generate participation, build loyalty, satisfaction and reputation (Kent and Taylor, 1998; Shirky, 2008; McAllister-Spooner, 2008). These tools are particularly appropriate for university students who belong to the so called “Net generation or generation Y” (Tapscott, 2009). They are “digital natives” (Presky, 2001) and they live technologies as part of their body because they have “grown up digital” (Tapscott, 2009). As Presky (2001) underlines “it is now clear that as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors” (Presky, 2001).

In the convergence culture (Jenkins, 2007) students can be defined as “networked publics” (Varnelis, 2008) because they use the web and social network sites to maintain relations with peers, to acquire and share information and comments about universities with their college-mates and other people belonging to their buddylist. Often, students, instead of searching for information and contributing to the institutional web sites of universities, prefer to create and manage their own discussions and information exchanges within social network platforms, especially in Facebook.

3. Social changes, social network sites and new communication strategies

After considering changes in university communication, it is now important to focus our attention on the impact technology has on today’s form of communication and relationship; before examining social network sites more closely, Facebook in particular.

“Web 2.0 technologies and the masses of people who connect to them allow for rapid prototyping, failure and adaptation” (Li and Bernoff, 2008) which impacts on the way people connect and interact, creating social learning (Leary and Wiley, 2008), social capital (Valenzuela, Park and Kee, 2008) and rapid changes of mind and behaviour. However, the important thing is not concentrate on technology, which changes rapidly, but on relationships, because “relationships are everything” (Li and Bernoff, 2008) and the important thing to focus on is people. In fact, as Shirky (2008) says “a revolution doesn’t happen when society adopts new technology, it happen when society adopts new behaviors”. And even if it is true that people change the way they interact thanks to different technologies, attaining what we can call “perpetual contact” (Wellman, 2001; Katz e Aakhus, 2002), it is important that people have the motivation to connect and overall participate, renewing contents and creating conversations and new discussion arenas, joining new people to share with and opening the online network even more. Participation and motivation to exchange become such major themes in Web 2.0 studies recording a “participation inequality” (Nielsen, 2006) and the emergence of the “90:9:1” rule, which means that 90% of people just read online contents - the so-called “lurkers”-, 9% occasionally participate in the conversations and only 1% actively contribute to the online discussion. Another way of looking at the same scenario is the ‘ladder’ built by Li and Bernoff (2008), which puts the ‘creators’, the most active people in the groundswell (they represent the 18% in the U.S.A e 10% in Europe) on the top rung, followed by the ‘critics’ (25% in the U.S.A. and about 20% in Europe), the ‘collectors’ (10% both in the U.S.A and Europe), the ‘joiners’ (25% both in the U.S.A and Europe), the ‘spectators’ (48% in the U.S.A. and 37% in Europe) and the ‘inactives’ (41% in the U.S.A. and 53% in Europe), even if it is clear that these groups overlap because most ‘creators’ are at the same time ‘spectators’. To be a ‘creator’ – for example, one who writes a blog - and at the same time a ‘spectator’ – someone who reads
someone else’s blog or forum – creates “prosumers” (Toffler, 1984). But it is also true that people not only put public content online, but even more personal data to be shared, making it difficult to clearly distinguish between the public and private sphere and opening the debate on the publicity of the private sphere and the privatisation of the public one (Menduni, 2009). So the link between “symmetrical participation” (being simultaneously producer and user of web contents) and the “amateur production”, which is only a temporary activity like ‘online consumption’, are changing not only our way of communicating and interacting with each other, but also the entire information system (Shirky, 2008).

In this scenario perhaps social network sites more than other tools play a primary role because they enable the ‘listening’ of the audience and they promote the understanding of how opinions emerge and discussions are carried out by people grouped around a main interest or an organization.

3.1. Social network sites and their success

Boyd and Ellison (2007) define “social network sites 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 users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. The same authors point out that what makes social network sites so different from other Web 2.0 based tools, is that “they enable users to articulate and make visible their social network” (boyd and Ellison, 2007). In this context it is important to focus on some insights: (1) “people bring constraints and opportunities from their offline lives with them to their online interactions and activities” (Hargittai, 2007); (2) there are differences between social network sites (e.g. Griffith and Liyanage, 2008; Menduni, 2009); (3) “one’s existing offline network influences which site one embraces” (Hargittai, 2007) and “while there was potential to build social movements out of online communities, success was highest in those networks that had pre-existing offline relationships” (Diani, 2000; Byrne, 2007), even if it is true that “the connective power SNSs provide will not translate easily into civic engagement, without this purpose being clearly articulated” (Diani, 2000; Byrne, 2007); (4) many people use online social networks to maintain and enhance existing offline relationships, rather than as a tool to contact new ‘friends’ (Ellison et al, 2007).

This implies that a successful social network site is the result of peculiar characteristics and services it includes, the history and initial design it has and the mainstream media coverage about it (Hempel, 2005; Magid, 2006; Stafford, 2006). But it is also important to pay attention to technical difficulties in using it, in some social collisions which can emerge from it and be careful not to generate a rupture in the trust between users and the site (boyd, 2006; boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Obviously it is not easy to study social network sites because it’s not straightforward “to understand who does what online, why, and how this influences the rest of people’s lives” (Hargittai, 2007) and also because a shared methodology to be used for ‘community listening’ does not yet exist. But listening is one of the most important activities an institution has (Boldrini and Morcellini, 2005; Lovari, Mazzei and Sala, 2005) and social network sites can help going “beyond the bias of surveys and the limitation of focus groups”, revealing new insights into the audience’s real thoughts and behaviour, which especially in social network sites are “actionable insights” (Li and Bernoff, 2008). It is also important to pay attention to: (1) who to listen to, focusing attention only on people who will really talk; (2) not assuming people you listen to are absolutely representative of your entire audience; (3) the “volume” – because so much information must lead to some valuable insights and mustn’t be considered as a flow of information having the same weight for the institution’s purposes (Li and Bernoff, 2008).

However ‘listening’ is not only an important activity, it is also the basis of talking to the audience in the right way and building the relationship step by step. Also because the choice of just ‘listening’ online and communicating offline, participating in a social network site or just creating your own, making your presence and main interests clear on the web, depends on the listening activity.
Nowadays social network sites surely represent, in the Web 2.0 scenario, not only one of the best ways of ‘listening’, but also of ‘talking’, even if institutions must carefully evaluate the opportunity they have to use it and the strategy to create successful relationships, as we will examine (see § 3.2).

Talking about social network services, which are today the fourth of the fifth most popular sectors online (Nielsen, 2009), Facebook must surely be the most popular one.

### 3.2. Facebook, its features and the ‘university world’

Facebook is now the fifth web site of the most visited in the world (Alexa in Pannozzo, 2009), the total amount of time spent on it between December 2007 and December 2008 increased by 566%, and put this social network site in the first position among its peers (Nielsen, 2009).

It was founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg and its features include: “the wall”– a space where messages can be posted on profile pages; the “discussion board”, to share topics; “pokes”; users “status” – information about what a user is doing; “news feed”, “groups”- to connect people, and “photo” – to upload and share images - and chat.

Facebook allows its users to control the content they want to share with all members of the social network site, with all ‘friends’ or just with some, but there are still some privacy issues not fully resolved (Hodge, 2006).

The above information could be enough to explain why we chose Facebook to do our survey, but it seems relevant to say that other scholars before us have chosen the same social network service to study important issues related to universities.

Hewitt and Forte (2006), for instance, say that “Facebook seems to have become a pervasive element of students’ lives; as such, the potential exists for it to have a significant impact on social practices in academic environments”. Authors focus their attention on the impact interactions on Facebook have or not on student/faculty relationships and tried to find out which reactions students have when a faculty goes on Facebook directly. All results showed Facebook interaction had a positive impact on the perception students had of the professor, but also that there was no concluding data concerning the perception of direct faculty participation on Facebook (Hewitt and Forte, 2006).

At the same time, Stutzman (2006) took into account another issue related to social network service and colleges and analysed whether sharing identity information on social network sites redesigned identity sharing behaviour in a campus. He discovered that, effectively, more personal and identity information is disclosed thanks to social network sites and so it would seem urgent to take into account issues related to identity information protection within colleges, as institutions have to protect student identity data. On the same subject Stutzman, interviewed by Joly (2007), said that Facebook “is not a public service, it is not a utility. There are no guarantees what may happen to the Facebook, who may buy it, or what may happen with its data. Colleges must keep this in mind before they base any strategy too squarely in the Facebook. The Facebook is the virtual mall – and colleges must remember their control only extends to a certain extent over the “public” space”. Even if he agreed that Facebook is a virtual space where students build their social life and it can make sense to meet them on it, keeping in mind that it can be useful for certain things like campus messages, but not for others, like important institutional messages and academic information (Joly, 2007). For these reasons Stutzman (2006) suggests ten rules on how university administrators should approach Facebook encouraging a balance between advantages and threats of its use, paying carefully attention to its peculiar characteristics.

Griffith and Liyanage (2008) explored a different subject concerning social network sites. Starting with a comparison between Facebook and Myspace, they tried to find out which benefits and limitations social network sites have in teaching and learning. The main insights regarding benefits are that: (1) “the “social spaces” available to people can enable a more personalized experience for learning in an online environment” (Griffith and Liyanage, 2008); (2) students writing a post or participating in a blog have to take time to reflect on the consequences of what
they are writing and on what the responses might be (Tynes, 2007); (3) the more personalized is the presence of university in social network sites the greater is students’ motivation to participate and learn course material (Mazer, Murphy and Simonds, 2007; Griffith and Liyanage, 2008). On the other hand, the main limitations are related to: safety of contents shared in social network sites (Griffith and Liyanage, 2008); some applications which allow students to write discrediting or defamatory messages with negative impact on professor’s credibility (Mazer, Murphy and Simonds, 2007); contents put online by teachers that can be manipulated and whose ramifications must be avoided; the students’ perception of “marketing level”, which can be considered too intrusive or inappropriate, as they disclose contents directly through social network services (Griffith and Liyanage, 2008).

After this brief review of the literature on social network sites, especially Facebook, and the main issues related to universities, we can now outline our research hypothesis, the methodology used and the empirical results.

4. Hypothesis

Our main research question is about the evaluation of Facebook as a new opportunity for universities to build and to manage relationships with students.

To understand this main issue, we formulate three different hypotheses allowing us to verify some of the most important elements literature suggests for deciding whether or not and in which way Facebook can play a positive role in the multi-channel strategy colleges should continue to implement (Lovari, 2009).

The first hypothesis is about people who actively participate in creating contents and in raising new topics for discussion, considering the “inequality participation” rule (Nielsen, 2006), the strategic role of active participation in building dialogical relationships (Taylor, 1998; Shirky, 2008; McAllister-Spooner, 2008) and also in keeping a web site alive (Leary and Wiley, 2008). We expect to verify the correctness of this rule also in the ‘university world’ represented by ‘Sapienza’ even if students are “digital natives” (Presky, 2001) or “grown up digital” (Tapscott, 2009).

Hypothesis 1: The “inequality participation” rule is true also in the ‘university world’.

The second hypothesis is about contents shared on Facebook. We wonder if this Web 2.0 tool is mostly used to connect people and share information ‘around’ the institution or directly ‘about’ it. In fact, following Stutzman (Joly, 2007), we expect to find contents most related to students social life, who connect ‘around’ the institution, rather than topics discussed by students about academic life and activities. In this way we could imagine the university as a ‘first interest connector’ that effectively allows and facilitates the ‘meeting’, but which then leaves the major role in conversations to contents about social life. To understand if our insights are factual it would appear very important to create and manage a good ‘listening strategy’ (Li and Bernoff, 2008), consistent with the amount of shared contents and the relevant information which eventually can be found on Facebook for university purposes.

Hypothesis 2: Information shared on ‘Sapienza’ Facebook groups is mostly about students’ social life rather than about academic life.

The final hypothesis is related to the direct participation of ‘Sapienza’ on Facebook as perceived and/or desired by students. Approaching this subject it is important to consider that universities are still timid to clearly implement a social network strategy, like using some other web 2.0 tools (Aquilani and Lovari, 2008), even if it is true that some Italians colleges are already on Facebook. So we can hypothesize that students’ attention is not so focused on having this ‘type’ of relationship with colleges and on paying so much attention to this opportunity. Even if it’s true that this came out in previous research, with mixed results (Hewitt and Forte, 2006). This direct participation could appear, on the one hand, as ‘normal’ considering the frequent use of social network sites by students and their consideration of internet as an essential part of their lives as if it
had always existed in this form (Presky, 2001). But, on the other hand, meeting the university on Facebook can be perceived by students as a ‘marketing intrusion’ (Griffith and Liyanage, 2008), thus negatively, resulting in a threat for colleges instead of an opportunity to build and maintain a good relationship with their most important stakeholders.

**Hypothesis 3: Students desire direct contact and interaction with colleges on Facebook.**

To validate our hypothesis we use the following methodology, as our first step in this new field of research.

5. **Methodology**

To check the above hypotheses we analyzed the groups created in Facebook around the Sapienza University of Rome, a public university located in Roma. We chose Sapienza because it is the biggest college in Italy for number of students enrolled, one of the most ancient in Italy and one of the best universities in international college rankings. All these elements gave us important reasons to test our hypotheses within this institution.

We typed the keywords ‘Sapienza Università di Roma’ and ‘Università di Roma La Sapienza’ in the “Search for groups” section within the Facebook’s personal homepages a user sees on the screen with his or her profile. The first string of words is the new denomination of this institution, while the second one is the old name that was changed in November 2006. We collected this data at the end of March 2009, conscious that it was just a snapshot of the phenomenon, since the contents produced within these Web 2.0 tools changes continuously.

We analyzed each Facebook group creating a grid that collected the name of the group, the “basic info” (“type”, “description”), the “contact info” (“website”, “location”), the “administrator”, the number of “members”, the “discussion board”, the “wall” and the “links”.

After a quantitative data overview, we focused our attention on the “discussion topics” showed in the “discussion boards” and on the “wall posts” published on the “walls”. First of all we counted the “wall posts”, finding the number of people who edited messages to verify the participation rate within the groups. This task was important to validate hypothesis 1. Secondly, we analyzed the messages published on the “discussion boards” and collected within the “discussions topics”: our aim was to understand if these virtual spaces were used by students to raise discussions and debates around the university–student relationships or if they were just used to talk about personal and private interests and to maintain relations with peers. This analysis was related to the validation of hypothesis 2. Moreover, we analyzed the contents of every message edited on the “walls” and “discussion boards” to search for arguments related to 3 different topics we expected to find in Facebook conversations within the groups: the reputation of the ‘Sapienza’; the perceived quality of university services delivered to students; the relations with university and the supposed desire to have Facebook pages or groups directly managed by ‘Sapienza’’s central communication bureaus or Faculty communication offices. We used this data to validate hypotheses 2 and 3.

6. **Main results**

There were 142 groups in Facebook related to the Sapienza University of Rome: 17 of these were private and they could not be visited by students nor members of the group (“request to join”) and it was only possible to view the type and size of the group. In total there were 33,156 people in these groups, 33,331 are “members” and 1,825 “fans” of a single group called “Mensa Universitaria La Sapienza”; 6 groups had more than 1,000 people enrolled, the most numerous was composed of 6,585 members, while 94 groups had less than 100 members and among them 35 groups counted less than 10 people.

The highest percentage of these 142 groups were classified under the type “Student Groups” (74%) followed by the types “Common interest” (9%) and “Organizations” (8%). This element highlights the strong connection with university student life showed by the choice of administrators to insert the word ‘Sapienza’ in the name of the group. Within the type “Student Groups” there were
many specifications chosen by group administrators to better identify the members. Exhibit n.1 shows how these groups really define themselves as strictly related to university life in all its aspects: indeed most groups were academic (37 out of 105), general (16), alumni (11) and study groups (11).

Our analysis was undertaken on 125 Facebook groups, accessible to every web surfer. Concerning the “discussion board” we found that only 63 groups out of 125 edited the “discussion topics”: this means that about 49.5% of these groups are just ‘empty boxes’ in which arguments are not posted and conversations are not developed. Analyzing the “wall” we saw that 109 groups have messages posted in this section and just 12.8% (16 of 125) of these had no contents published on them. In total there were 16 groups (12.8%) built around “Sapienza” that did not have messages posted on the “discussion board” and on the “wall”.

Focusing on the number of people who posted the messages, which is very interesting for our research purposes, we found that there were 4,131 “wall post” published in the 109 groups, with an average of 37.9 messages posted for each group and 0.13 post for each member. In addition, there were 376 messages posted by the group administrators, with a rate of 9.1% of the total of conversations produced. Moreover, from a total of 30,603 people belonging to these groups only 2,105 were active users who had published at least 1 post: the percentage of active members was 6.9%, which is lined up with the “inequality participation” (Nielsen, 2006) rule that affirms that just a small portion of Web 2.0 users are producers of contents.

To examine this rule more closely, we analysed the number of messages posted on “the wall” of the group having the highest number of posts “Io voglio studiare” (“I want to study”). There were 681 posts on the “wall” and we analysed the number of members who edited the messages, counting how many messages each of them published. In total there were 3,347 members belonging to this group but only 251 users (7.5% of this universe) posted messages on “the wall”, with an average of 2.71 message per publisher. Focusing our attention on each of these content producers, we found that 180 people edited only 1 post, 23 only 2 posts and 9 just 3 messages; in total, as shown in the exhibit below, only 2 members posted more than 30 messages and 13 users published more than 10 posts and less than 30.
The rule of “inequality participation” seems to apply even with university students. Hypothesis 1 seems to be validated.

Following our research aims, we classified the topics developed on the “discussion board” in 11 categories which were collected and were representative of the contents shared among members of the groups and Facebook surfers, as shown in the exhibit n.3.

The commonest topics (92 out of 414) were those belonging to what we defined “Student social life”: this category includes all topics related to the typical interactions students have during their college life, such as exchange of books, class notes and rooms to rent or appointments with other students to study together or to organize parties and events. The second category for number of topics (78 out of 414) is “Didactics and courses”, including messages connected to the relations with faculty and courses; in particular the commonest subjects were: evaluation and comments on courses and professors, information about classes, examinations and books to study, and request of advice related to the choice of classes to attend. Connected to this category is “Cultural events and extracurricular activities” which included 8 topics in which students post messages about presentation of books and cultural events to be held in different faculties.

The category of “University governance and politics” groups topics (65 out of 414) related to the elections of ‘Sapienza’ University students in the local and national boards and the national debate about the new Italian higher education reform approved after a big struggle in the late fall.
2008. We also found several topics (24 out of 414) about activities managed by consultants, firms, or advertising agencies who promote services or events, inside the “discussion board”, that were not strictly related to the Sapienza University. We labelled these topics as “Marketing and commercial messages”. “Hobby and Sports” was the category that collected 14 topics related to students’ free time, such as going to the theatre and concerts, sailing, playing tennis and joining clubs or associations. The category “University services” was not often posted on the “discussion boards”; it included only 16 topics out of 414 and it collected messages regarding the functioning of university cafeterias, college libraries, university website, free transportation shuttle bus and foreign mobility programmes. “Placement and job market” embraced 12 topics about students’ opportunities for placements or formative and professional courses organized by ‘Sapienza’ offices. There were also topics that are edited to promote “Student’s initiatives”: this category shows how students are active in organizing meetings, events or in creating off line groups or assemblies to discuss university policies and student life within ‘Sapienza’. The “Request of dialogue” was a category collecting 22 topics and identifying requests for information or help of students to other students due to the lack of dialogical communication with professors and university administration in general. The numerous and various topics (60 out of 414) which could not be classified in the above were grouped in the class “Other”.

The interaction among students, developed through posting and replying to messages, was mostly developed in categories “University’s services”, “Didactics and courses” and partly in “Placement and job market”. The exchange of posts between members was indeed very limited in the other categories that collected just messages which did not require any kind of dialogue or response.

To better focus on contents we looked at the reputation of ‘Sapienza’ and at the quality and evaluation of its services within the topics and messages posted on the “discussion board” and “the wall” of the groups. For these first virtual spaces considering a total of 414 topics, we found 20 topics (4.8%) about university reputation, 30 (7.2%) about services’ evaluation and 27 (6.5%) about relations with ‘Sapienza’. Considering all groups with messages on the “walls” (109), we found 12 groups (11%) who posted contents about ‘Sapienza’s reputation, 20 groups (18.8%) publishing messages on the evaluation of services and 23 (21.1%) writing post about the relations with this institutions.

Analyzing the contents of the messages we identified some important elements. First of all the good reputation of ‘Sapienza’ University of Rome is well perceived by members, since they consider being enrolled as a positive thing which they openly share in their conversations. The reputation is extremely positive and there is a sense of pride being enrolled in ‘Sapienza’: these feelings are related to the ancient origin of the institution, its position in national and international rankings and the quality and fame of its professors. This reputation is perceived not only by enrolled students but also by ‘Sapienza’’s alumni. There is also a limited number of messages that criticised the reputation of this university, making fun of the name of this college (‘Sapienza’ indeed means knowledge) and attacking some professors for their teaching skills, competences and behaviour.

Regarding the quality of services the majority of messages express criticism and in general a negative evaluation about the quality and the delivery of some university services. In particular, these weaknesses are perceived in the faculty student secretariat (admission) offices: criticising the difficulty of getting precise and correct answers to questions, the need to visit different offices before having services delivered, the poor quality and rudeness of the front office personnel. Other services strongly criticised by students are the university shuttle bus service, called ‘Muoviti con Sapienza’, the functioning of the wireless network in the faculty buildings, access to the student information system ‘Infostud’ and the locations of the classes spread all over the city and not organized within the same neighbourhood, obliging students to waste time reaching different places during the day. There are also positive service evaluations: in particular the university libraries, the
quality of food delivered in the college cafeteria and the efficiency of some services thanks to the commitment of the administrative staff.

As shown before, the number of messages about these arguments is not really relevant -18.6% of the total topics posted on the “discussion boards”- and it confirms that these social spaces, even if built around a college, mostly concern entertainment and relations with peers rather than university structures. Thus the second hypothesis is partially validated. Contents related to the University-Student relations are not the most frequent ones in the Facebook virtual conversational sphere, but it could be necessary to start listening to what is produced by members in terms of conversations about the functioning of administrative offices and the quality of the students’ university experience.

Coming to our third hypothesis, our results have shown that there is no presence of messages or posts expressing the need for the creation of Facebook groups or pages directly managed by ‘Sapienza’, its offices or faculty. It is clear from the analysis that there is a lack of dialogue and communication in numerous areas: students seem unable to find the right way to communicate with some offices and professors and so they ask for help and advice from other group members who have already found a solution. Resolving problems is not done by contacting institutional web pages or university links, but it comes from student word of mouth disseminated online. From the above it seems clear that the third hypothesis is not validated. However it seems evident, from messages exchanged among members, that the pervasive use of Internet and social media by students may represent a new field of investigation where Italian university communication offices and orientation bureaux should invest.

7. Conclusion

The most important issues concerning the use of Facebook in the ‘university world’ and the results above allow us to make some final considerations about the main research question we focus on: is Facebook a new opportunity for university communication? The answer seems to be positive, but only to some extent.

Indeed, social network sites, and especially Facebook, are a strategic ‘listening’ tool which should be used by universities to acquire new insights about the real thoughts and behaviour of their audience, especially students. In doing so, universities should be aware of the limitations and threats of this listening activity (§ 3.2.), trying to ‘catch’ the important part of the continuous flow of information and use it to formulate a better communication strategy or to solve some previously undisclosed problems. To reach these objectives, universities should carefully consider the “inequality participation” rule which seems even true within the ‘university world’ where less than 10% of people participate in any way in discussions and debates, perhaps also because some conversations on Facebook take place on “chat” which we haven’t analysed in this research. Colleges must also take into account that most conversations are opened ‘around’ the university and concern students’ social life and activities rather than the direct relationship with the college. Even if ‘listening’ to comments arising in conversations could reveal problems and areas where it is possible to intervene, to create better services and improve overall college perception. In fact, students search for information on social network sites as well as among their peers, given that this university isn’t adequately prepared to efficiently provide the necessary advice and information they seek.

Considering the great opportunity social network sites and especially Facebook have for the ‘listening’ activity, the ‘talking’ question still remains open. Our results have shown that students have not expressed the need for ‘Sapienza’ on Facebook, they just prefer to ask other peers for information. This can represent a latent need or not finding this specific need can be the result of the high reputation ‘Sapienza’ has among enrolled students who probably could not imaging talking to administrators on Facebook, a web site on which they meet friends. In fact, the design and characteristics of Web 2.0 tools play an important role in attracting people who use them first, offline interests and features of a social network site influence members who join later. All these
considerations form a mixed image about the ‘talking’ activity a university can have on Facebook and on social network sites in general and they create a real threat for the use of this tool in the communication strategy a college might adopt.

What seems clear is that universities should build a multi-channel communication strategy (Lovari, 2009) and, we can add, a ‘well balanced’ one in using traditional and Web 2.0 tools in order to create synergies between advantages of all these instruments, avoiding their threats. In doing so, they must be aware that new tools, like Facebook, can be successfully used for what the audience expects to find on them; so for example event information, and not important academic announcements or regulations which, today, one would expect to find in traditional communication tools like institutional web sites or brochures. Moreover colleges must realize that Facebook, like other Web 2.0 tools, is presently very successful, but like everything in the Internet era, their future is unpredictable, given that people are already talking about Web 3.0 as “a method to filter all of that information for similarity of viewpoint, reputation, and accuracy” (Tancer, 2008).

For these reasons Facebook provides excellent opportunities for the ‘listening’ activities if it is used carefully considering its features, peculiarities and limitations. To use Facebook for the ‘talking’ activity it seems important firstly to define a good strategy and the right method, taking into account college purposes and audience perceptions about direct presence of universities on it and threats related to social network sites in general. However, this answer also comes from some limitations of our research. The first and perhaps most important one is related to the methodology we created and used for our pilot research, collecting the information which we applied for the first time to this field with some difficulties, taking decisions step by step, when problems arose. The second limitation is related to the data on Internet which changes continuously making it impossible to view the same results in different days. The third one is related to the fact that we only analyse one case. A future step of the research could consider a wider sample of Italian universities or a benchmark between ‘Sapienza’ and some of the most important European universities, to understand to what extent our results are strictly related to this specific Italian case or whether they can be applied to other colleges or countries. This same research can also be enriched studying this phenomenon in more detail and with other qualitative tools. This can be done through interviews using Facebook directly and collecting more data about the hypothesis we already discussed, especially to better understand the student perception of the ‘Sapienza’ directly on Facebook. Another interesting subject for analysis, in the use of Facebook in university communication, which we have not considered at all in this study, is the implication of social network sites use for colleges in terms of people and skills needed to manage this type of communication and issues related to the changing communication mix in college communication bureaux.

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