# Facebook influence on university students' media habits: qualitative results from a field research

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## Abstract

*Facebook has significantly transformed the online habits of young Italians. Our research assesses this change through a two-year survey conducted among undergraduate students. The data we collected in 2008 (N=1088) and 2009 (N=1123) allowed us to define profiles of media use based on indicators such as time spent online, consumption or creation of content, and familiarity with digital technologies as compared to analog media. Results have also shown the quick adoption of Facebook: in 2008, half of the students were completely unfamiliar with Facebook, while in 2009 all our respondents were aware of it and 59% of them were also using it on a regular basis.*

*To grasp the magnitude of this change, we conducted a qualitative research study based on 30 semi-structured interviews with randomly selected university students (aged 19-24). Our research questions whether the massive adoption of Facebook, both in terms of frequency and time spent online, is really producing a change in how Italian students are using the Internet, or whether it is merely reproducing old forms of media consumption. To explore this issue, we will focus on how students are appropriating Facebook - in terms of uses and meanings they attach to it - and on the transformation of the relationship between more traditional forms of media consumption (like television) and digital media.*

# Introduction

The Observatory on New Media "NumediaBios" has been continuously monitoring the media consumption and Internet use of university students at the University of Milano-Bicocca since 2008. Alongside our quantitative observations[1], which allowed us to draw profiles of habits and trends in the use of ICT and Internet, we also performed a qualitative research, described in this paper. With this work we offer an insight on the emerging role of Facebook as leader platform in social networking and as preferred (or unique) online environment in which students construct meanings, communicate and share experiences.

Our previous quantitative survey consisted of a questionnaire submitted to a random sample of undergraduate students of all the eight departments of the University of Milano-Bicocca. The last survey was conducted twice, in March/April 2008 and in April/July 2009. We obtained a total of 1088 valid answers in 2008 and 1123 valid answers in 2009.

## Italian undergraduate media habits: the quantitative survey

The life of an undergraduate student in Italy is very different from the life of an undergraduate student in the U.S. First of all, campus do not exists and usually students live in the city, next doors to other citizens. Moreover, not all students necessary move away from their families or home town. Third, fraternities, leagues, clubs are less common then in US campuses and yearbooks do not exist in majority of big Italian Universities. That said, it is presumable to expect that Italian undergraduate students appropriate Facebook and social media in different ways compared to their same-ages living in the US. Moreover, in Italy, Internet use is still not so spread in the overall population, only 52% of families has Internet access at home in 2010 (ISTAT, 2010). Internet use is sensibly more widespread among youth then in the whole population. Anyway, while in 2008, 71% of 20-24 years old were Internet users, in 2010, after "the Facebook boom", they increased and reach the peak of 82%.

The collected quantitative data showed that advanced uses of social web applications were not very common within undergraduates. Nearly all students reported having a computer and using Internet on a regular basis. 70% of them, in fact, connected to the web more than 5 hours per week. Furthermore, we collected data about the web 2.0 applications university students know and usually or regularly access. On this matter, it was interesting to observe that high levels of daily Internet use

do not correspond to high levels of digital literacy. Furthermore, students declared their perceived lack of confidence in the use of ICT and software applications: 63% of the sample defined themselves as "basic level users", 14% as "beginners" and 20% as "expert users".

The percentage of students who upload and share contents was very low. Only 27.2% of students declared to have uploaded contents on Youtube, 1.7% on SlideShare, 3.6% on Flicker and 12.1% on Wikipedia. YouTube and Wikipedia are undoubtedly the most popular and visited websites. 54,9% of our sample declared to visit them "often", while 51.6% declared that they frequently sought information on Wikipedia. The percentage on subjects who have a personal blog went from 42.2% of 2008 to 35.7% in 2009 and the percentage of those having a blog and never updating it rose from 28,2% in 2008 to 43,3% in 2009. The majority of our sample (55.1%) declared they do not post comments on others blogs. Interestingly, some web sites which are considered very popular by new media experts are still not very popular among our students. In particular, the great majority of students did not know about the existence of sites such as Twitter (72.8%), Friendfeed (81.5%), LinkedIn (77.3%), SlideShare (77.3%), Delicious (82.3%) and Flickr (70.2%) in 2009.

Studies conducted in different countries worldwide showed similar tendencies: university students tend to be unfamiliar with the majority of web 2.0 services and the majority of the them still preferred traditional web applications to more recent technologies and formats (podcasts, wikis, virtual worlds). For example, the 2006 report by the University of Melbourne, the University of Wollongong and the Charles Stuart University showed the students lack of confidence in the use of emerging 2.0 applications. "For example more than 80% of students surveyed had never produced a podcast and had never contributed to a wiki. More than 70% had never kept their own blog. More than 50% had never used a social networking site, read someone else's blog or downloaded a podcast" (Kennedy et al., 2009, 17). Margaryan and Littlejohn (2009) and Cross and Jones (2009) provided evidences that the use of innovative technologies is limited. More specifically, 78.2% of students of Cross and Jones's sample had never contributed to a blog, 87.9% had never contributed to a wiki, and 98% had never used a virtual world. The use of more advanced features of Web 2.0 among students of Margaryan and Littlejohn's sample was limited and these tools were used more in the context of personal life and entertainment than in a learning context.

# The qualitative research: methods and strategies of analysis

The research strategy we followed for the qualitative part of our work was based on 30 semi-structured interviews to undergraduate students who participated in our previous survey. We decided to create codings families organized in trees, so that if "Facebook" was the topic of a fragment, it should be followed by a specification of the type of assertion (e.g. "usage" or "meaning") and eventually by a further level of detail. Hence our codings list was composed by codings like "privacy", "tv_usage" or "Facebook_usage_as_email". Whenever a statement clearly expressed a positive or negative opinion about Facebook in general, or about an aspect of it, it was respectively coded as "Facebook_like" or "Facebook_dislike" (we were actually using a typical Facebook language without even acknowledging it). Of course other labels were also used in order to codify particular subjects, events, opinions or practices.

The interview transcripts were collected and coded using RQDA (Huang, 2010), a computer-aided qualitative analysis tool available as an extra package for the R statistical environment (R Development Core Team, 2010). The software allowed us to define a list of codings and to use it for marking each fragment of our transcirpts. We then analyzed the correspondences between codings in the single documents and between texts. RQDA allowed us to calculate different kinds of correspondences between codes and we used this data to verify the existence of patterns among students' media habits. We particularly concentrated on "proximity" relations (i.e. how much two or more codings tended or not to appear in the same interview) and on "exact" correspondences (i.e. how much two or more codings were associated to the same fragments of text).

However, data analysis was conducted according to two strategies: on one side we explored the correspondence between codings as described above, on the other side we built and eleborated categories and concepts through content analysis. The following paragraphs will offer an overview of both these methods of analysis by highlighting what we considered to be the most interesting results and reporting significant quotes from the interviews.

## Overview of the codings

The total number of codings we used is 100, each one appearing an average of 19.77 times (min. 1, max. 101, s.d. 22,38). The average lenght of each coding fragment was of 258,62 characters (s.d. 166,45). Five of the codings had an average length which was higher than *z-score*=1: they were "Facebook_usage_games", "open_source", "Facebook_problems", "Facebook_motivation", "Facebook_meaning_gossip". We then know that the most diffusive answers involved these topics.

On a first look at the coded interviews, it was immediately evident that statements or expressions marked as "Facebook_dislike" were much more common than "Facebook_like" (actually they were in 2:1 proportion. Only in one transcript the "Facebook_like" label appeared without its negative counterpart. This means that respondents more likely complained about Facebook, instead of sharing the reasons why they chose to use it and kept doing it. Looking at the "exact" associations between codings we had a visual and immediate hint about the most discussed topics that relate with criticism or appreciation. In the case of "Facebook_dislike" statements, the most frequently related codings were "Facebook_meaning_frivolous", "Facebook_meaning_relationships", "Facebook_meaning_trendy", which suggest that the majority of complaints about the platform derived from its being informal, not serious, ephemeral and in some way distorting interpersonal relations.

Another interesting couple of codings we used was "Internet_like" and "Internet_dislike", marking positive or negative attitudes towards Internet and the web in general. Particularly, we found out that there was a very high "proximity" rate between "Internet_like" and "Facebook_dislike", which means that the interviews in which Facebook was mostly deprecated were from people who at the same time expressed a positive opinion towards what digital media offered them."Privacy" is also a very common issue named by both Internet enthusiasts and scepticals.

When asked questions about their relationship with old media like TV and newspapers, the most interesting correspondences were between the generic coding "old_media" and "Internet_usage_information", "Internet_usage_download", "tv_dislike" and "books". Internet was seen as a handy replacement for newspapers (which in Italy are read by a very small part of the population) and the downloading of contents was mentioned as a substitution of mainstream TV.

The following sections try to go deeper in the explanation of those relationships between tags emerged from interviews. Considering our specific research field and exploring online preferring activities of our students, we wondered what was Facebook's role in the lives of undergraduate students from Università Milano-Bicocca. How do students actually use Facebook in their everyday life? Which meanings they attach to it? To what extent "the Facebook boom" has affected the ways in which they use or think at the Internet? Through our inductive content analysis we identify two broad positive uses and meanings, and four more controversial and negative ideas frequently associated with Facebook.

# Results

## Online preferred activities: the perceived advantages vs Old Media

Prensky (2001) definition of the "Digital Native", worldwide spread and discussed, describes how young people, nowadays, think and learn: "*Digital Natives are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to all serious works.*". In spite of these assumptions that consider new generation students as naturally keen on adopting new technology and social and participative web tools, not only our quantitative data show that students are less enthusiastic than expected in trying new 2.0 applications, but also majority of students declared to not feel represented by "Digital Native" portrait.

Our study's participants, according to quantitative and qualitative data, mainly go online to accomplish three kind of activities

1. check university matters;
2. communicate with friends;
3. consume audiovisual material.

All students, have broadband Internet access in university spaces, and all faculties services and communications are furnished online. Students get used to search online all university matters. They declared that they use to visit official university website and look for news, exams, materials of study, or work on essays or other university related activities. However, about 80% of the sample declared to perceive as to have a low or basic ICT and Internet usage competence.

> "*I access to the Internet every day, almost once a day. I have the Bicocca website as homepage*"
> "*Before starting university I didn't have an Internet connection, I got it because I understood it is absolutely necessary for university activities*"

What is more, a consistent part of our sample feel to be closer to "digital immigrants" than to a "digital native": they don't feel comfortable with digital technologies and, when they can choose, they prefer analogical media or forms of communication.

> "*Our professor let us take notes with computer, but it was effortful. I prefer handwriting*"
> "*I don't like surfing the web. I prefer to have a talk with a friend*"

To communicate, in the academic activity as in their private life students are used to contact friends through email, but, above all, they prefer communicate through IM and Facebook. It is interesting to notice that students show a preference for synchronous online communication instead of mobile-phone text-messaging or calls. This preference is surely related the relatively high cost of mobile services in Italy.

> *"If I need to contact someone, I don't call by phnone, I use Messenger. It's easier"*
> *"Some friends live far away, instead of call them I use Messenger"*

Majority of users, clearly recognize some differences between Windows MSN Messenger, probably the most popular IM application among Italian students, and Facebook chat application. More then half of our sample - 55,2% (2008) and the 50,8% (2009) - declareded to use a IM application almost once a day. Even if Messenger interface and features are preferred to the Facebook chat, Messenger seem to have been replaced by Facebook. Students, in fact, really appreciate the convergence on the social network of different way of communication and self-expression. It is simpler and faster, they say.

Consumption of audiovisual material (movies, tv series, cartoon, videos or music) through streaming or downloading is particularly representative of the current integration between so-called old and new media. Therefore we believe that this matter was worthy to be deeply investigated. Our quantitative data underlined a phenomenon of disaffection with television: 53% of our sample declared in 2008 to not watch television more than 5 hours per day, in 2009 this percentage rise to 65,7%. As other researches underlined (Tapscott 1998; Brown, 2000), almost the totality of students we interviewed, fully criticize the passive attitude television watching induce, and declare to prefer to get information and spend their free time on the Internet.

> *"Tv makes you passive, Internet is different: give you a bigger variety of contents and the possibility to interact with in many different way".*
> *"We use the computer as a television".*

On the other hand, the majority of them firmly declared not to be a prosumer (Teoffler, 1980) but mostly a consumer. They state to not have the attitude to produce or participate, neither the competences required.

*"I never post anything, I never tag no one or nothing, I have not a photo on my profile…Neither I clearly know how to do"*

*"I feel like a digital immigrant, I have a good relationship with technology, but we have just met".*

To conclude, we know, from our quantitative data, that almost one student on ten does not read any book in a year (13,5% in 2008, 11,5 in 2009 survey). The majority of students, declared that they use the Internet as primary information source but, actually, we do not have data on their reading strategies on the web, that could be object of further investigations. We know that they appreciate multimedia features and reliability of web-based information. In addition, books, on the contrary to tv, are still considered a good alternative source of information and reading is perceived as an high-level cultural and as a leisure activity.

*"A book is always a book, I believe I always keep on reading. It has a different meaning, and I love books so much".*

## The Facebook Boom

The Facebook rise is, undoubtedly, the most interesting trend that emerges in this panorama about undergraduate Internet uses. The Facebook boom, as it is often refferted to by the press, among students is confirmed by our quantitative data and reflects the national trend. Additional data provided by ComScore in August 2008, in fact, showed an annual increase of 961% in the number of visits to Facebook and Italy headed the list of countries with the largest increase in the number of users (+135%). This phenomenon can be followed thanks also to the Facebook Observatory (http://www.vincos.it/osservatorio-Facebook/), according to which Italian members of Facebook were 216.000 in January 2008, 622.000 in August, 1 million and 294 thousand in September and up to 5.587.000 in December 2008. The students of our sample clearly confirm this tendencies. The percentage of those who even do not know about Facebook at all drops down from 48.2% in 2008 to 2.2% in 2009. Additionally, there was a radical increase in the number of students who have a Facebook account (from 7.9% in 2008 to 59.4% in 2009): 37.2% of our sample declare to use Facebook mainly to meet new friends, while the 15.8% for generic entertainment purposes, and 9.5% declare to use it as an instant-messaging tool.

What was more interesting in our data, and what is more surprising is the fact that such a big and fast increment of popularity of this web application is totally isolated. In fact, other 2.0 services and websites that were largely ignored in 2008, remain still unkown in 2009 and 2010.

**It is useless, but I am using it**

There is not even a single student in our sample that joined Facebook because he or she was interested in trying a new web service. Just a small minority of students (maybe in the field of media or informatics) say to be fascinated by a technology *per se*. All students interviewed in our research are in fact interested in going online based on what they can do on the Internet. However, only a minority of students, especially among who was introduced to Facebook by friends living abroad, value and recognize the potential of this website for their everyday life from the beginning. At the contrary, majority of students state that before registering, and sometimes also after that, they *didn't have a clue* about what Facebook was made for. Registration to the website was often done - with some reluctance - due to peers' continuous and persistent insistence.

In the following pharagraps Facebook uses and meanings for Italian students are going to be deeply investigated.

## Facebook benefits: a functional mind-set

**1.I like that it helps to stay in touch with people who you couldn't otherwise**

Participants of our research share the belief that Facebook is a tool that helps to stay in touch with friends who live far or are not part of their routine anymore. Facebook fills a void, offering the students a service that helps them to maintain relationships with people with whom they don't have the desire to talk deeply (for example on the phone), but of whom they don't want to lose track permanently (such as with an email contact that can change or be forgotten). For example, students who first joined Facebook usually adopt the social network in order to stay in touch with friends living abroad. In many cases they say that they became Facebook users before "the Facebook craze" started in Italy and that it is a very efficient way of staying in touch.

> *"I started using Facebook a long time ago, before it was trendy in Italy, since I received some requests to join the social network from foreign friends. Since we didn't see each others any more it was absolutely good to stay in touch. Especially for pictures, as I said, lots of my friends got married and for me it (Facebook) is useful to see pictures of marriage I couldn't go to"*

Anyway, even more widespread is the inclination of using Facebook to get in touch with old friends from previous school periods (starting from primary schools). This is a source of enjoyment and pleasure for many students, who basically say that they thank Facebook for giving them this opportunity, that can't be fulfilled by other media.

> *"That is the good to thing about Facebook, I became friend of people from junior high or that I met on holidays".*

> *"I really liked it. It was nice to be able to get in touch with people I didnt see anymore I was happy to have this opportunity".*

However, many of them recognize that this kind of relationships are not going to reborn thanks to Facebook and that, after an initial enthusiasm, the excitement and conversation usually stop or diminish.

Students explain that they particularly liked how easy it is to find on Facebook somebody you already know (for example from your past): you just need to remember first and last name. This was a huge novelty for many respondents. Students believe that this feature explains, at least partially, Facebook success. On the contrary the same opportunity was missing in MSN messenger or MySpace, for example, where you have to know e-mail address or the pseudonymous.

> *"If I need to find somebody in Facebook I just type name and last name like in Google and I got her Facebook contact. It was not so easy before".*

One of our respondents says that Facebook is "the simplest" because it is the one in which she thinks it is easier to find people she knows.

To conclude, if US undergraduates state that Facebook helps them to sustain relationships with their hometown and family and to fit in the campus social life (see Patrick, 2010), Italian students instead see Facebook much more as a tool to sustain weak ties (from the past or of other countries)[2]. Nevertheless, as it will be explained in the next paragraph, Facebook has some relevance in optimizing daily communication with strong ties, such as friends.

## 2. It's easy and it's cheap

Facebook use is now an established component of students daily routines of communication. Its introduction brought changes among uses of other more traditional forms of communications such as e-mail and texts. Facebook is frequently used to communicate with friends, but its conceived in a highly instrumental way. First of all, students often admit the economic advantage of using Facebook instead of texts or calls with mobile phones. Using Facebook (messages or chat) is often perceived as free, given the fact that the Internet connection costs are usually covered by parents.

> *"I use Facebook to stay in touch with my friends, because, ehm, it is not a nice thing to say, but I save money. Because using your mobile phone to send texts such as "see you tomorrow at university at that time" once, twice, three times... you spend money!"*

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[2]Just a single student, a girl, said that she joined Facebook also because her older sisters moved out of the family house and she wanted to stay in touch with her.

This quotation is relevant not just as an example of conceiving Facebook as a way to save money, but also because it gives a sample of the kind of typical contents of students' conversations on Facebook. Many students are in fact particularly adamant in saying that they use Facebook in a functional way: mainly to organize meetings with people or to accomplish tasks, and not to have deep conversations or to express profound concerns or emotions.

One of the most common ways in which users employ Facebook messages is, as a metter of fact, through "group discussion". Facebook messages (or e-mails, as some students call it) work satisfactorily to organize group activities in many diverse areas by different kinds of crowds: sport people (soccer tournament, athletics gather), hobbyists (photographers), study groups, company of friends and so on. Facebook is favorite to other more traditional ways of communication such as e-mail, because it is faster, quicker, it will be read sooner (*"People read Facebook first").* Many students say they choose Facebook to organize their activities because it is more efficient.

> *"We are doing a group research for university issues and I write on Facebook to all my group".*
>
> *"I have done until this point" or "I have concluded my part and I have sent it to your emails".*
>
> *"I am organizing a soccer championship. It (Facebook) is a fast way to get subscriptions".*

## Facebook negative influences: (a moral judgement?)

### 1. It is all about exhibitionism and curiosity

Exhibitionism and "people's curiosity" are continuously mentioned by our respondents as two mechanisms behind Facebook success. To this respect, a widely shared negative perception of Facebook emerges. Even if students generally admit the positive functions of Facebook in helping them to get in touch with old schoolmates or to stay in contact with friends, they are very severe in condemning certain Facebook's uses related to over-exposure of personal matters, on one side, and to the amount of general curiosity that it brings, on the other.

Many students are very annoyed by those users who share a lot of personal matters through Facebook. They distance themselves from these exhibitionist practices, affirming that they are not *that kind* of Facebook users, those who show off or share every minutia of their daily life. Concerning this, many students believe that people use Facebook to the sole purpose of expressing their own exhibitionism and show a deceptive version of their personalities. To this respect, no one seems to appreciate the positive effect that playing and working on identity (through Facebook) can have on self-esteem (Hancock, 2011) and self-enhancement (Zywica and Danowski, 2008). On the contrary Facebook heavy users are labeled as narcissists, "in a need of attention" and fake. Discourses about these *kind* of users express severe judgment and detachment. In few cases this attitude is analyzed and associated with other forms of exhibitionism typical of our society. Some

students in fact compare Facebook with TV Reality Shows, such as the "Big brother", emphasizing the narcissistic attitude they both inspire.

> *"Why do you think people fill in these spaces [Facebook] continuously? Because they want to show off, they want to be protagonists, and in this way it is much easier then managing to go on Tv for example... Just look at how many people try to participate in the Big Brother... Facebook is like a small version of the Big Brother"*[3] *".*

Some students also recognize that Facebook has a role in facilitating these behaviors: the way in which it is built encourages and supports exchange of attentions and social protagonism *("Actually Facebook is a bless for people in need of attention")*.

On the other side students, during our interviews, recognized and discussed about the voyeuristic practices that Facebook seems to encourage. In fact many of them, often joking, state that Facebook is precisely designed and developed to foster curiosity about other's people life (*"After all Facebook is made for doing everybody else business, I mean, this is the main thing about it")*. While Facebook exhibitionism is widely and harshly criticized, the curiosity that Facebook supports is in some cases described as a natural and positive feature. It is interesting to observe in some students' discourses how relevant is to be able to *see* (in italian: vedere, in french: voir) what other people do. Students don't watch or look, they directly *see* what their friends or acquaintances are doing.

> *"I believe Facebook works in a weird way because it really gets you involved. For example the fact that you can see photos of all of your friends so that you can afterwards tell them".*

> *"Ah I have seen that you have been there[] while MSN it is more close and you cannot see phrases written by others, but you cannot see anything else on MSN".*

> *"I like that you can see all, I mean... That you can see everything about anybody".*

In some cases, students' statements about the fact that they use Facebook mainly to see what other people do could also be a trick to dissociate themselves from those exhibition practices mentioned before. It is particularly evident in one case where a girl, criticizing those over-sharing behaviors, at one point state that she don't participate and that in Facebook she is just an external spectator.

However the curiosity that Facebook brings it is also blamed by many students, mostly male. Some of them also find some cultural affinities between a supposed natural Italian inclination towards gossiping and Facebook or a more general natural human predisposition towards gossiping that Facebook encourage.

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[3]This one is interesting as well, because it criticizes the blogs with the same exhibitions nature: Valentino: " Perché a me non piacciono i vari blog e l'espressione personale sul web… Perché per me alla fine sono una forma di Grande Fratello online, cioè nel senso… hai la possibilità di farti vedere (chiaramente da un numero limitato di persone), ma comunque è sempre una forma di esibizionismo, secondo me.".

*"Italian in general likes gossiping and Facebook is worse than a public square. [...] It is a godsend for people who like gossiping", "I think Facebook will remain also after the hype, because people are curious".*

## 2. It is a place for superficial relationships

Another common critic towards Facebook is that it supports superficial relationships. Students believe that the social network site is not the ideal place in which maintain friendships. Three are the main reasons brought to support this statement.

In the first place, even though some of the students really have had the opportunity through Facebook to resume old bounds, in the majority of cases, the old friends of the past met again on Facebook do not became new friends. In some occasions a short exchange of messages occurs, but it usually lasted only a few weeks, otherwise nothing happened. Our respondents, acknowledging this fake rebounding, complain about the pointless exchange of messages with superficial acquaintances that frequently happens on Facebook.

*"[About Facebook] I don't like the idea of the two millions of friends. I write "Hi, how are you?"*
*But then I don't care at all about what he will answer. I think it is superficial.".*

Moreover, the hunt for old friends, is connected to another widely criticized facet of the social network site: the practice of collecting hundreds of friends. This is a recurrent theme in our respondents discourses. Once again they distance themselves from those who are engaged in such activities, encouraged by the structure of the social network itself.

*"Friends with whom you really have some contact are just a small circle, maybe 10 or 15 people, even with 350 of friends...".*

*"Having many friends it is just about collecting, but then what do you do of your 750 friends if only a very small numbers of friends come to comment on your Wall? ".*

Except a minority of cases, the shared opinion is that a long lists of contacts is totally useless and just stands for superficial relationships. Students seem to be interested in using Facebook mostly to communicate with their strong ties with whom they interact during daily life, in the here and now. Just few voices out of the crowd see the utility of having many friends, for special occasions or particular needs that may appear in the future *("there are a serie of "satellite" people with whom I have contact maybe only when there is an event or something particular").*

Finally Facebook superficiality is associated also to the kind of communications that it supports, like short messages, chat, comments on pictures, likes and so on. Some students' statements are quite radical: in fact they contest that using the Internet, in general, is a good way to maintain friendship and communicate with peers. These opinions, clearly at odds with the digital native

myth, are based on the assumption that face to face communication is intrinsically superior and more functional then the virtual. Even if they say that they don't want to compare real/virtual communication, their discourses often built on contrasts between the two.

> *"It looks like the relationships you can build through Facebook are superficial, there is not a real exchange. It is true that the two things do not exclude each other, but I am for face to face relationship"*

## 3. Content that doesn't matter, but entertainment

Most students agree that Facebook content is mostly trivial and superficial. On one side we have those students who state that they don't want to share with their social network personal or important matters. Therefore, they affirme that their status updates or groups affiliations are pretty nonsense, silly and not really relevant for them (*"I am fan of Spongebob and those kind of things"*). This kind of behavior is usually associated with a high fear of losing control of privacy. They conciliate their wish to be present in the social network and their desire of protecting their privacy with the practice of updating frivolous material.

On the other side, even more numerous are students who say that Facebook is mostly updated with useless material. These students talk about what *other* people do, underlining that their own behavior on Facebook is much more moderate, both in terms of content published update frequency and silliness. Most of them criticize people who write nonsense stuff on Facebook, and judje it as need of attention and a cause of deterioration of Facebook quality. A few students, prevalently male, in fact express their desire of more serious content to be shared on the site; for example cultural, political or informative (*"I would like a more focused and serious use, but you can't force people..."*).

Given the kind of content available on Facebook, the social network site is mostly conceived by the students as tool for entertainment and distraction. Games, videos, photos and in general status updates are described as a source of amusement by some of the students, a minority of whom positively embraced the kind of activities that Facebook support as a form of entertainment.

> *"[Facebook] is useful, especially for entertainment, while watching friends' updates in the home page you usually see YouTube videos... They are often funny and they entertain me more then TV. If I need ten minutes to take my mind off, I log on Facebook and watch other people videos".*

However, as understandable from the last statement of previous quotation, the kind of entertainment that students experience on Facebook is: very quick, light, simple and not too much absorbing. Facebook is accessed in order to have few minutes of distraction, but nothing more. In some cases it is thought of as a form of evasion, not very dissimilar from the one that comes from watching TV and especially junk TV. As one of our respondents stated:

> *"It is the same story of when you watch TV and there is a useless TV show: you keep watching it even if you don't know why. You have time to lose and want to spend it... You don't do anything that makes you think, it is a filler".*

Finally, within these discourses about futile content that circulates on the site, Facebook is described as useless or not essential. Something accessory in everyday life. Therefore we can assume that the main reasons behind Facebook continuative use are: social inclusion - as we have seen above, since everybody is on Facebook it has become a necessary tool for day to day communications - and evasion - a good place for distraction, to take one's mind off. Few students in fact say that notwithstanding its popularity, Facebook is not so important as Internet or e-mails, which are used to accomplish more serious tasks.

## 4. Privacy, or "I don't write anything personal on Facebook"

Students in our sample are very firm in criticizing Facebook. Together with exhibitionism and superficial relationships/content, there is another issue that is widely discussed in all interviews: privacy. Reasons of discontent about Facebook privacy managements are twofold. First a sense of inadequacy emerges from our respondents statements: most of the students express their feeling of not being at ease with sharing information with many people all together. More reserved or separate spaces or tools of communication are usually preferred. In many cases respondents refer to traits of their personality (reserved, demure) as the reason why they don't like to share information online to be viewable by many or even unknown people, in other cases fear of stalking or similar episodes is also reported. However, most students communicate a sense of nuisance, annoyance, as if they feel obligated to expose themselves without their will on the social network.

> *"I am annoyed of the fact that a total stranger can see my pictures, read my status".*

> *"In my profile I only have photos from behind because I don't like to be traceable online".*

> *"I don't like the idea of putting online my own business"*

On a second note, students are discontent about Facebook as a platform. They don't believe that Facebook take privacy issues to heart. They don't feel save while using the website, as if they don't have total control. Few students also tell some episodes, at the early phases of their Facebook

experience, in which they exposed themselves more then they wanted, because they didn't realized how some features worked.

> "I published photos without even knowing, because I changed my profile picture and I didn't know that all these pictures were collected and published"

> " I was not aware at the beginning that everybody could read what I was doing"

Other students instead are suspicious about the fact that Facebook is collecting and storing their personal data, such as pictures or information.

Given all these skeptical attitudes towards privacy management on Facebook, which strategies do students adopt to cope with this matter? Instead of using privacy settings or managing different list of friends, majority of students generally prefers another solution: be cautious and not share personal matters. It means that they basically limits and moderate themselves in their online sharing to avoid unpleasant situations.

> "I publish very few information and only about university. My standard updates are "I don't want to study today" and so on...".

> "I publish sentences such as "What a bore today", "I am tired", or "It is sunny today" nothing really personal".

Only a minority of students are at ease with the privacy settings and cope with them in two main ways: being open and public, and so they do not publishing anything online that they don't want anybody to see, otherwise they take some precautions such as eliminating unwanted photo tags or creating private photo albums.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have presented results from a research conducted by the Observatory New Media (NuMediaBios) on media consumption practices and Internet uses by Università Milano-Bicocca undergraduate students. After briefly illustrating main results from the surveys (conducted in 2008 and 2009), the paper shift to deeper analyze outcomes of 30 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students. Themes covered range from daily routines of media consumptions, opinions about digital culture relevant issues and, in particular, uses and opinions about Facebook.

Results from quantitative research revealed the massive adoption of a very specific SNS, Facebook, and the lack of knowledge or the decline of other web 2.0 practices, such as blogging, micorblogging and other 2.0 services.. Quantitative data show that majority of students are still not informed about the existence of web 2.0 services such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Slideshare, etc. and that only a very small percentage of them upload content online. This is in line with trends identified in others developed countries, such us the US (Lenhart, 2010). These initial results confirm that "*many*

*young people's actual uses of digital technologies remain rather more limited in scope than the digital native rhetoric would suggest*" (Selwyn, 2009:372). For instance, socioeconomic status and cultural capital are *still* an important predictor of how young people incorporate the Web into their everyday (Hargittai, 2010) and create and share content online (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008). Furthermore, the digital native concept tends to spotlights only the *tech-savy* youth and obscure the fact that a large amount young people are not interested in using new/web technologies, nor in producing and sharing content online, as our study in line with outher researches on undergraduate students reveal (Margaryan and Littlejohn, 2009; Cross and Jones, 2009). Given these results, we questioned whether the massive adoption of Facebook is producing a change in how Italian undergraduate students are using the Internet. To answer, we investigated how students are appropriating Facebook, in terms of uses and meanings they attached to it, and how the relationship between so called old and new media is changing.

First, students prevalent use of Facebook is mainly instrumental, if we exclude the practice of meeting old friends, which is not relevant in most students everyday life. Respondents say that their daily communications within the SNS are mainly aimed at organizing off-line meetings with friends, exchanging few quick information or, when face-to-face encounters are not possible, replacing other forms of socialization (such as IM, texts, phone calls). Bicocca undergraduate students mainly fit into the "genre of participation" defined as "hanging-out" by Ito *et al* (2010) that stands for a minimum engagement with technology. In fact, Facebook is mostly used to "orchestrate face-to-face hanging out" (ibid. 40) and, more generally, students adopt "*new media communication to construct spaces for copresence where they can engage in ongoing, lightweight social contact that moves fluidly between online and offline*" (ibid. 38).

Second, Facebook is usually described negatively by our respondents. As a matter of fact, students discourses about Facebook are full of criticisms. Most discussed issues relate to: online "exhibitionism", content futility, superficial communications or relationships and matters of privacy management. It is interesting to note that many of these complaints has led students to dis-engage with the social network. In particular, to set themselves against those bad reputation practices (such as over-self exposure and superficiality), students state to prefer not participate too much in the social network. Therefore, in contradiction to the Web 2.0 philosophy, on Facebook students tend to limit their sharing or (public) communication activities.

Third, for the majority of cases, traditional practices of media consumption (such as watching TV) seem to have moved into new "containers". Tv, series, movies or video are in fact very present in students everyday lives, howerver they are often consumed online or through the computer. Diverse strategies and platforms are adopted to watch videos or movies: YouTube, Facebook, streaming, download, TV channels official web sites and so on. Students appear to be very *savvy* in finding the entertainments they want, but much less interested in producing and sharing something created by themselves. Indeed they usually state to be consumers or spectators and not producers.

Four, interviews are filled with general statements about not being very expert with technology or being relatively new in some specific online practice. Moreover, when the "digital native" metaphor come up in our interviews, all students told to be (at least partly) a digital immigrant. Technology was not present from the beginning in their lives, many of these students are also a relatively new Internet user or computer owner. So, even if they are at a young age, they don't necessary have many years of web experience: this have an important impact in defining their so-called "gradiation of digital inclusion" (Livingstone and Helsper , 2007).

To conclude, we tentatively state that Facebook adoption doesn't seem to have had large consequences on our undergraduate students' Internet use habits. To be more specific, it doesn't appear to have produced, at this stage, meaningful changes in terms of digital engagement neither on activities of content production or sharing. Notwithstanding, it does have changed rituals of interpersonal communications and it has redefined other media or formats uses (such us cellphone and e-mail). To have a better picture of the Facebook phenomena's dimensions and undergraduate Internet uses, next researches should focus on and compare results from other universities and diverse groups of students (based on their faculties belonging, socio-economic status, subcultures affiliation, gender or area or dwelling).

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