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Internet in Everyday Life: Profiling Individual Behaviour in the Field of Online Experience

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Abstract

This essay proposes a study of the activities carried out by individuals on the Internet. Using the data of ISTAT's annual sample survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals, the aim is to explore, through the multivariate methods, its association with the social, cultural and demographic characteristics of individuals. Although the universal image of people always on, tethered and networked prevail, the active and creative Internet usage remains a minority phenomenon, not so much for a physical gap but for a more complex set of values, culture and lifestyles (or habitus). Multiple Correspondence Analysis and Hierarchical Cluster Analysis have shown the impact of the socio-cultural characteristics of individuals, and, above all, the level education attained, in profiling individual behaviour in the field of online experience set both by the degree of digitalization and by the type of online activities carried out.

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Introduction

Cultural paradigm of the *network society* (Castells 1996) goes more and more strengthening thanks to the diffusion of mobile technologies for online connection. The spread of all these technologies has caged us in a Weberian exoskeleton (Schoered 2018) in which, from the micro-level point of view of every day's routines, one of the main effects is that individuals are more and more *tetheredness* (Turkle 2011) to other people and information. This mediatisation of social interaction within and between institutions and in society at large (Hjarvard 2013) is increasingly redefining the forms of sociality and community, so much to suggest the emergence of a new social operating system, the *network individualism* (Rainie and Wellman 2012), and an increase of ways and opportunities for sociability, working, learning, problem-solving of everyday tasks.

In this scenario, however, several studies show that social gap remains and overlaps the digital one. Scholars confirmed the strong relation between social and digital inequalities, both in physical access (*first-level digital divide*; Di Maggio et al. 2001; Van Dijk 2005) and in the Internet usage (*second-level digital divide*; Zillien and Hargittai 2009; van Deursen and van Dijk 2010; Ragnedda and Muschert 2013; Robinson et al. 2015; Hargittai 2018; Gui and Argentin 2011; Mingo and Bracciale 2018; FUB-ISTAT 2018; Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2019).

Furthermore, due to its role in daily life, in work and education, the digital divide can be rightly read also in terms of outcomes (*third-level digital divide*; van Deursen and Helsper 2015; Ragnedda 2017; Ragnedda and Ruiu 2017). Internet usage helps to expand social capital (Rainie and Wellman 2012), facilitates the creation of new pathways for engagement (Hargittai and Shaw 2013). It is associated with earning growth (Di Maggio and Bonikowski 2008). Moreover, activities as info health, e-commerce, e-government, are well estimated for the benefits they give in everyday life (Ragnedda 2017). The use of Internet

> "contributes to the lives of many individuals in the economic, social, political, educational, and institutional fields. Common economic outcomes achieved relate to commerce, such as gaining price advantages. Social gains facilitated by Internet use, include increased contact with family, friends, and the creation of new friendships online that continue offline. Furthermore, the Internet facilitates institutional engagement by providing access to up-to-date public information *(… and can help to)* live healthier due to online information" (van Deursen and Helsper 2015).

In any case, this contribution shows controversial aspects. For our work, the main suggestion comes from the sociology of Weber that helps to understand how in the digital age social stratification is reproduced and transformed online; hence, class, status and power are key factors in people's ability to be included in a networked society (Wessels 2013; Blank and Groselj 2015; Ragnedda 2017). Furthermore, following the Bourdieu's legacy, the link between Internet appropriation and the habitus of the individuals clearly appears (López-Sintas et al. 2012; Zillien and Marr 2013; Ragnedda and Muschert 2013). Therefore, the definition of digital capital embraces the financial resources together with skills and motivations (van Dijk 2005) and constitutes

> "a secondary form of capital distinct from primary forms of capital such as economic and cultural capital. In this view, a person's stock of digital capital corresponds to the reach, scale, and sophistication of his or her online behavior. It is important to note here that there are particular forms of digital capital which are readily convertible into economic capital, such as programming ability, whereas other kinds of digital capital, such as social media activity, can be converted into social capital, but do not typically make the holder more attractive on the labor market" (Ignatow and Robinson 2017).

This connection places the online activities at the turn between the *second* and the *third-level digital divide*, right because the digital capital is the *set of internalized ability and aptitude* (digital competencies) as well as *externalized resources* (digital technology), accumulated and transferred from one arena to another (Ragnedda and Ruiu 2017; Ragnedda 2018; Ragnedda

and Ruiu 2020). To this point of view, the aim of the present study is to describe the characteristics of the online experience of individuals and to analyse the link with social and cultural inequalities.

The Data on Italian Regular Internet Users

The online activities carried out by individuals, such as seeking information, communication and social networking, e-commerce, and so on, are the focus of the present study. The attention is on the people gone beyond the *first-level digital divide* and, in particular, on the individuals of 6 years old and older who regularly use the Internet (at least once a week in the last three months before the interview). Through the data of the Survey on "ICT usage in households and by individuals"[1], the aim is to explore the impact of cultural and social background on Internet usage (*second-level digital divide).* In according with literature, we hypothesize that, in spite of the prevalence of the idea of people always on, tethered and networked, "serious" use of the Internet, more linked to human needs, as creative use of it, remains a minority phenomenon (van Dijk 2005; Savolainen 2008). This is due not so much to a physical and material gap, but to a more complex set of values, culture and lifestyle (or habitus). Thus, the impact of a high level of educational and professional status is particularly visible for the more expensive activities as much as for the more sophisticated, and less for those of communication or social networking.

In Italy, the proportion of individuals who use the Internet regularly continues to increase even if the share is low in comparison to other European countries (EUROSTAT 2018). In 2016, the share of Regular Internet Users has been of 59.3% of people of 6 years old and older (about 33 million and 900 thousand)[2]. The use of the Internet is unquestionably a generational issue (see FUB-ISTAT, 2018). In 15 years, despite the generalised increase of access to the Internet, the difference among the generations has remained. Millennials (in 2016 20-34 years old) and youth of the so-called Net Generation (in 2016 15-19 years old) have a higher rate of access that, in 2016, had already exceeded the 80%. The increment seems more significant from 2006 through 2011, coinciding with the spread of smartphones use, tablets and other mobile devices. The spread of these technologies has made possible not only to expand the number of Internet users but also to unhook them from the PC use: until 2011, only about 1% had never used a PC while in 2016 they had already reached the 9%.

Building the Field of Online Experience Through MCA

We considered 34 activities of the questionnaire of 2016, relative to all the different domains of daily life. To summarize the amount of this information, we used the Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA).

This procedure, following the Bourdieu's work, fully expresses the social reality because it thinks in relations (Le Roux and Rouanet 2010). Here, it allowed outlining the structure of space of online activities as a "field of online experience". In the bourdieusian framework, a "field" is a network of relations between social positions determined by the distribution of economic, social, and cultural capital, and it is increasingly used in the digital inequality researches (Ignatow and Robinson 2017). At the same way, from a methodological point of view, the idea of field is in a dialectic relationship with the MCA procedure (Duval 2018) and it can be considered an alternative to 'variable based' accounts of social life that offers the potential for a cross-fertilization with complexity theory and forms of 'descriptive' research (Savage and Silva 2013).

[1] It is part of a European Survey annually collected by the National Statistical Institutes (ISTAT). It is based on EUROSTAT's annual model questionnaires on ICT (Information and Communication Technologies). In Italy, it has a module in the ISTAT Multi-purpose Survey on Households: Aspects of Daily Life and it is conducted on a sample of about 24.000 households and 50.000 individuals.
For further information, see:
EUROSTAT: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/isoc_i_esms.htm
ISTAT: https://www.istat.it/en/archive/129934

[2] Further data could be found on ISTAT website (https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/236920) and EUROSTAT website (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/digital-economy-and-society/overview).

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In our analysis, for each activity, we had two categories-variables corresponding to the binary answer Yes/No to the question “I have used Internet for…?”. In summary, the categories are 68 but we used as ‘active’ variables for the formation of new variables-factors, only those carried out by at least ten per cent of the regular internet users (Figure 1).

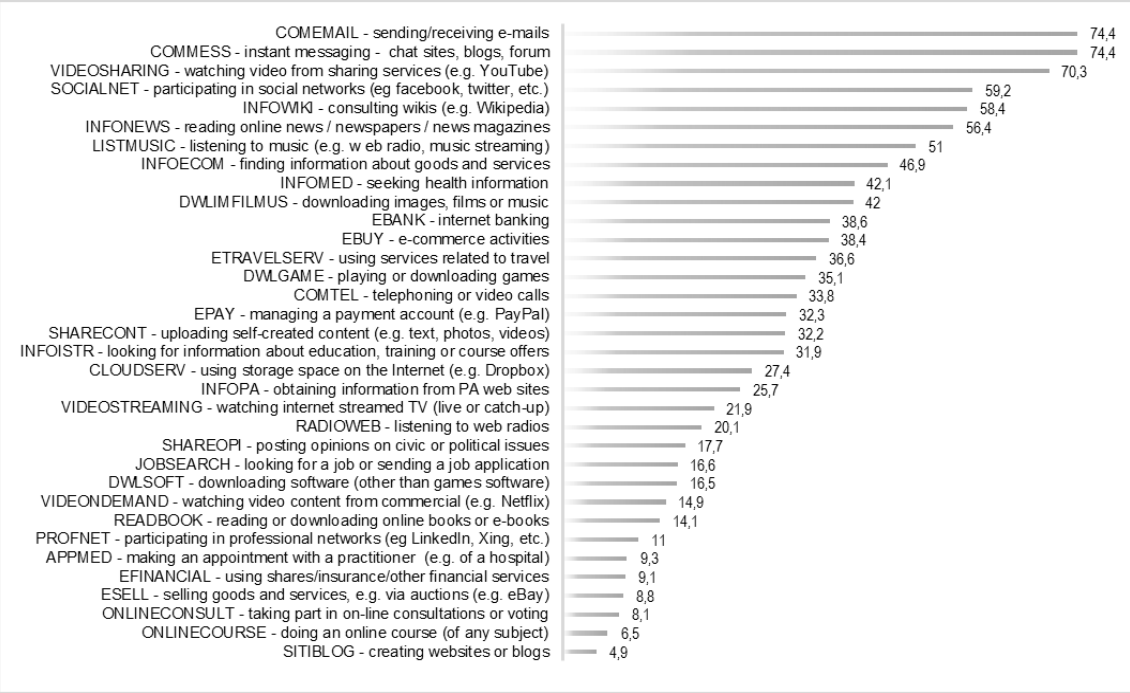

Figure 1. Label, Description and Share of YES active categories. Source: Elaboration on ISTAT, Aspects of Daily Life, 2016. * Activity did in the last twelve months.

We used the main socio-demographic information and some about the use of the devices as ‘illustrative’ variables (in total 59 categories associated): sex; citizenship, age, geographical repartition, educational achievement[3], occupation[4], type of home broadband connection, frequency of internet use, pc use, devices used for access.

Through the analysis of the eigenvalues, we extracted the first three factors that reproduce the almost total percentage of corrected inertia[5]. They are following described.

Degree and Complexity of Digitalization of Everyday Life (From Null to High)

The first factor separates the 'no' categories of all the activities considered (on the positive side) from the ‘yes’ (on the negative side). Moreover, the position of these latter on the axis follows a well-defined degree of complexity: from the more generic and easy, as e-mail, chat, wiki (nearest to the centre) to those most specific or exclusive, such as the professional network or reading online (farthest from the centre). The degree of digitalization follows a clear and distinct age curve: lower for kids, then gradually grows, reaching a peak for 20-24 years old, and after that it begins

[3] High (university), medium (upper secondary school - “diploma”), and low (low secondary school or less). Education had adjusted according to the birth cohort: for those born before 1952 we consider the upper secondary school as high, the low secondary school as medium and only the elementary school or less as low.

[4] Employed or, for retired, employed in the past, are distinguished in three levels: high (higher professionals and managers), medium (employed), low (workers or other non-professional self-employed), then other categories are unemployed (included never occupied), housewives, students.

[5] We use the Benzécri’s formula (1979) to “correct” the percentages of explained variance that take into account the eigenvalues equal or greater than the proportion 1/p (with p as number of variables). In this case, we consider only the first five factors with an eigenvalue higher than 1/28 = 0.0357.
For further details see also Fornari, 2019.

to decrease up to the higher age groups. Furthermore, it shows a positive association with both the high education and professional level of individuals.

Type of Activity: Usefulness/Seriousness vs Communication/Leisure

The second factor distinguishes activities such as email, information seeking, services access (on the positive semi-axis) from those such as chat, social networks and download film (on the negative semi-axis). The illustrative variables show us that also this factor has a specific connotation based on age and educational and professional status: young people and lower status for entertainment and communication activities, older people and high status for information seeking and access to services.

Communication vs Leisure Activities

The main contribution to the third factor comes from video streaming (by web TV or on demand services), e-book reading, radio web listening, and software downloading (on the negative semi-axis) and from activities such as social networking, opinion sharing, chatting, and sharing contents (on the positive semi-axis). A low educational and occupational level is associated with leisure activities. This factor is useful also to distinguish the online experience of males and females, with the first group more oriented to leisure, the second one to communication.

In summary, the new factors shape a field of the online experience of everyday life based on the intensity, multiplicity and orientation of the online activities. As mentioned above, how individuals daily use the Net is related to all others own capitals and, at the same time, it constitutes a new capital that reinforces their life chance in multiple spheres. For a better understanding, it is necessary to shift from the macro level of definition of the field of online experience built by the new synthetic factor-variables, to the micro level of clustering individuals into this field.

Profiling Online Behaviour Through CA

The (ideal) type of digitalization of everyday life previously defined constitutes the start point for the Cluster Analysis (CA). Even if in the literature various suggestions about the typology of Internet users exist, we used a Hierarchical method to let groups emerge from the data[6]. After observing the initial inertia got from the cut of the hierarchical tree and the one obtained after the consolidation[7], we chose the partition at seven groups (Table 1). In this way we have a satisfying between/total inertia ratio (0.7595) and a desirable repartition both of within-groups inertia and share of individuals[8]. Only two clusters are unbalanced (the first and the last one), replicating the imbalance of the Italians online experience towards the low-intensity field space: 22% presents a null digitalization of everyday life (cluster 1), while 43.1% low (sum of clusters 2, 3 and 4), 25.4% medium (sum of clusters 5 and 6) and only 9.3% high (cluster 7).

Disengaged Almost-Users

In cluster 1 none of the activities selected emerges as characteristic; people do, on average, only 3 in the 34 of selected activities. In this group, there are individuals who belong to the two tails of age curve line: about a third of individuals of 55-69 years old, over the 40% of 70 years old and older and the 58.6% of 6-9 years old. This cluster also includes a quarter of residents in the South and just under a third of residents with foreign citizenship. The group is characterized for a large presence of housewives (41.6%) and by an increasing percentage of people with a low education

[6] The hierarchy is represented by a dendrogram diagram, which is indexed by the gain of within-inertia (the homogeneity of a cluster) (Husson et al. 2010).

[7] In the Software SPAD, once defined the number of the clusters by the hierarchical tree, individuals are re-positioned and finally retained.

[8] Considering seven clusters, a perfect repartition of within-groups inertia and redistribution of cases should be 1/7*100=14.3%.

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and professional level as we move towards older groups of age; for the 70 years old and more, people with a medium level of (past) occupation and of education are over-represented. This group shows a detachment from digital technologies: 29.5% of them do not have fixed broadband at home, among these ones the 46.7% do not use the Internet every day and the 47.2% never used a PC.

Focused Weak-Users

Three groups have a low degree of digitalization, with an average of 10 activities done at most, and with a specific orientation.

Cluster 2 has an orientation toward playing or downloading games (29.1% of those who use them is here), listening to music (20.6%), watching video content from sharing services (e.g. YouTube; 18.5%) and the download of images, films or music (21.1%). This group includes 60.2% of 10-14 years old and 33.5% of 15-19-year-olds, but also the 39.4% of 6-9 years old. As seen for the less active people, the southern residents and foreign citizenship residents are above the average (respectively about 20% and 28%). At the same way, the share of people who never use the PC is notable (28.2%).

Cluster 3 has an orientation toward social networks, chat, email, video sharing (e.g. on YouTube), Wikipedia, uploading photos, music. It occupies the central space defined by the first and second factor, and it is the most defined by the third one. The illustrative variables show a more representation of women, of young people aged 25-34 and adults 35-49, of people with a low level of occupation.

Cluster 4 has an orientation toward basic utilities such as Internet banking, email, search for information on goods and services, public administration, health and news. It includes about a fifth of adults of 45-59 years old and about a third of those of 60 years old and older. They are mostly northern residents and have a medium or high level of education and profession (even the older groups of age). They are regular users of the PC and show a preference for accessing the Internet by it and less by the smartphone.

Focused Strong-Users

Two in the three clusters positioned in the other side of the online experience field are at a medium degree of digitalization, in which people carry out a more extensive, sophisticated range of activities (mean at least of 15), and show a capacity to use all mobile devices. They have a specific orientation too.

Cluster 5 has an orientation to all leisure activities (e.g. game, video, music, games, movies, and radio) and all communication and sharing activities (e.g. messaging, wiki, social networks, and cloud services). In this group, there is a conspicuous presence of teenager of 15-19 years old (34.3%) and youth of 20-34 (17.8%). About the latter, moreover, we observe the prevalence of those who are still students (1 in 4 are in this group). As all clusters with medium-high level of digitalization, they are online every day with multiple devices.

Cluster 6 has an orientation to usefulness/seriousness. They use all services (e-payment, e-commerce, e-banking, travel service, cloud), seek all info (on goods and services, health, public administration, news, education, wikis) and, even because they are functional to the use of the others, they use the communication activities too. They seem to be less interested in the sphere of gaming. This cluster includes young people and adults until 54 years old. Individuals with northern residents prevail in this group too. The education and professional levels are high or medium (in the group there are about the 30% of young and adult until 54 years old with and high level of education and 25% with high professional level). As the other cluster of serious activities, regular users of PC prevail in this group, but they use the Internet every day through multiple devices.

Very Internet People (VIP)

Finally yet importantly, cluster 7 holds a high degree and complexity of digitalization of daily life with a mean of 23 activities carried out online in the three months before the interview.

It is defined by those more complex and specific activities such as downloading software, e-payment, watching Internet-streamed TV, using storage space, e-commerce, reading or

downloading online books or e-books, but indeed, in this group are present all YES-categories of each activity considered. For its dimension and its characteristics, we consider it the group of VIPs (*Very Internet People*).

It is the smallest group and it "catches" the generation most connected (almost 1 in 5 of 20-34 years old is in the group, thus constituting the 45.6% of the group) and the higher status people for each group of age. The presence of males is more relevant (11.7% of males are in this group and only the 6.7% of females; males constitutes the 65.2% of the group) and also the residents in the metropolitan areas of northern or central Italy. They are always online, also thanks to other mobile devices (the 33.3% of those who use them are in this cluster), confirming the positive relation of the frequency and diversity of devices used with skills, variety of usage and outcomes (van Deursen and van Dijk 2019). The online experience of VIPs is indeed "multi": multi-daily-connected, multi-devices, multi-orientation.

Table 1. Clusters of the online experience of Italian regular Internet users of 6 years old and older: within and between inertia before and after consolidation, distribution of individuals after consolidation. Source: Elaboration on ISTAT, Aspects of Daily Life, 2016.

	Inertia		Weighted cases (After consolidation)	
	Initial (tree's cut)	After consolidation	%	*in thousands*
A) Between-groups	0.2565	0.2701		
B) Within-groups				
Cluster 1 – No particular online activity	*0.0228*	*0.0146*	*22.0*	*7473*
Cluster 2 – Online just for game, music, video	*0.0121*	*0.0127*	*15.1*	*5136*
Cluster 3 – Online just for chat, social, video	*0.0055*	*0.0104*	*15.0*	*5098*
Cluster 4 – Online just for basic utility	*0.0096*	*0.0118*	*13.0*	*4422*
Cluster 5 – Always online for a wide range of communication and leisure activities	*0.0205*	*0.0118*	*11.5*	*3883*
Cluster 6 – Always online for a wide range of usefulness/seriousness activities	*0.0206*	*0.0136*	*14.0*	*4749*
Cluster 7 – Always online doing everything	*0.0080*	*0.0105*	*9.3*	*3153*
C) Total	0.3556	0.3556	100	33915
D) Ratio between-group inertia / total inertia	0.7214	0.7595		

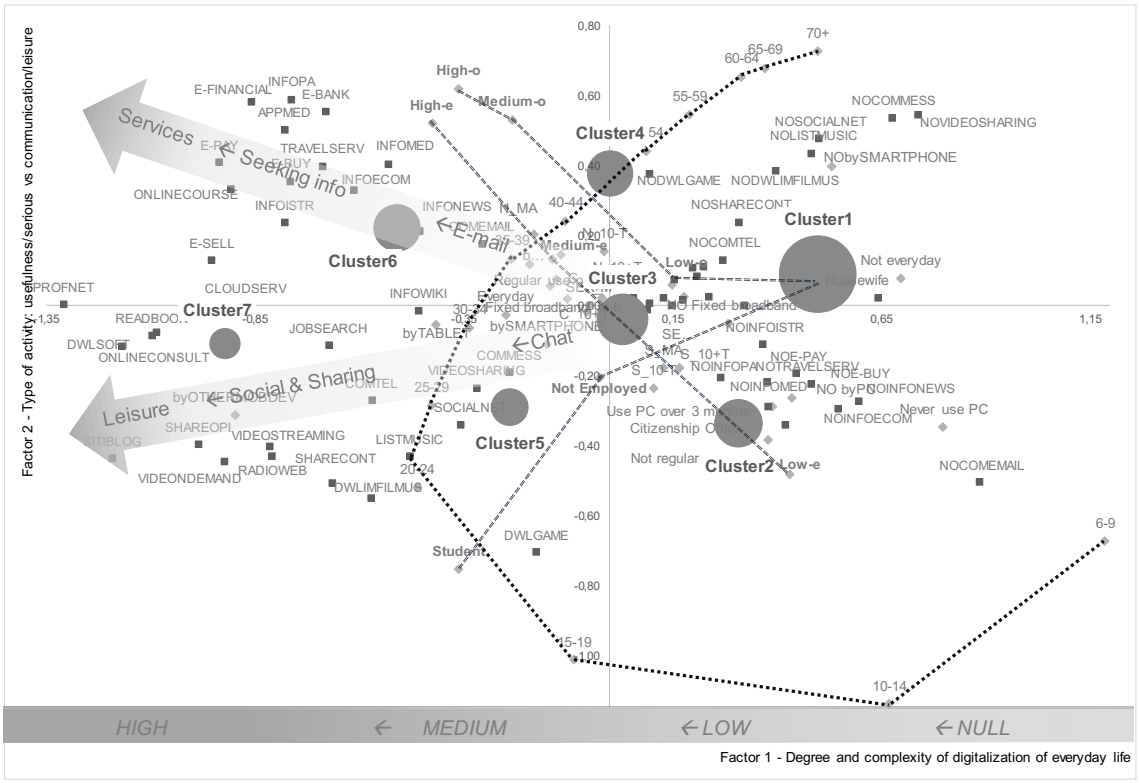

Figure 2. Projections of active and illustrative variables and cluster on the first two dimensions of the field of the online experience. Source: Elaboration on ISTAT, Aspects of Daily Life, 2016.

Discussion and conclusion

The State of Digital Divide in Italy

If much has already been said, and just as much is still to be done in our country, to overcome the *first-level digital divide*, the study about the *second* one is still at the centre of the debate and it becomes more evident with the Internet spreading. Moreover, the attention paid to the online experience and the digital capital, as well as on their link to social inequalities, requires the shift of attention also on the *third-level*, about the outcomes in everyday life.

The clusters of regular internet users emerged in the "space of online experience of everyday life" give us an overview on digital divide in Italy.

First, we can see that one in five people is still *at the edge of the first-level*: people of the first group with an online behaviour detached and still very un-oriented. Even if using the Internet at least once a week, they show a profile similar to people who do not use it or use it more rarely.

Second, one in three people shows a behaviour pattern that allows *riding the second-level* (*focused users*). They do not use the internet just to communicate but also for entertainment, work, or education and so on.

Lastly, less than one in ten (the VIPs) uses the Internet and mobile technologies always and everywhere; they *catch the full positive outcomes of Internet use*. A small group with characteristics well defined: males, young and with high status.

Inequalities and Internet Appropriation

The observation of sequence of the seven clusters gives us a sort of Internet appropriation map: a well-defined use, the first step towards gaming, communication or the essential utilities up to extending towards a more and more complex spectrum of activities.

Imaging a trajectory of clusters (in which, of course, the field of online experience should remain as set up here), a first hypothesis regards the *disengaged almost-users.* It is probably that

the large group of housewives and people with lower education and professional level, now not very active, could gradually move towards the third group, oriented to chats and social media. Kids, on the other hand, probably will earlier develop an orientation to gaming (from which the peer-to-peer communication is increasingly linked).

It results more complicated, instead, imagining the "jump" of the *weak-users* on the other side of the online experience field, as much as the mere shift of *strong-users* into the group of the VIPs. Moreover, even if it happened, a deep concern about the gain already accumulated as digital capital and already well spent in life out of the Net would remain. In our opinion, it is just here that the pre-existing inequalities show their power. This jump or shift requires in fact the ability to "juggle" in the serious activities or to be able to access to material resources like hardware, software and subscriptions (element, the latter, which call back the necessity of the re-configuration of the first-level divide too; see van Deursen, van Dijk 2019).

Inequalities Even in the Most Connected Generations

The analysis show that even if the degree of digitalization follows the course of age and generations, the social inequalities appear even for the most connected ones (Millennial and the Net generation).

For instance, considering people of 15-19 years old, we observe a great difference linked to the type of school. Internet users are 93.5% in the *Liceo*, with a difference of +7.1 points respect to students of the professional schools and of more than +10 points respect to people in the below secondary school or early leavers (accomplished at most the lower secondary education and are not in further education or training).

Similarly, the degree of digitalization (first factor) grows moving towards the highest educational status and from the vocational to the general course of secondary school (*professional*, *technical*, and *Liceo*).

According to the tradition of the critical sociology of education, this link can be read also as the impact of the family background on the full set of motivations, goals, instrument, expectations and so on that affects how people construct their own experience. As it is for the school success, ignore these differences could mean to allow, paraphrasing Bourdieu, *the conversion of the family advantage in personal benefit,* both offline and online.

The same scheme linked to education is visible looking at the choice after secondary school. Considering the young people of 20-24 years old, we can see that the degree of digitalization of those who have completed the secondary school but who are not enrolled in University is much lower than peers who have continued to study (-0.130 against more than -0.380). Likewise, looking at the seven clusters, we see their over-estimation in among weak-users focused on gaming and downloading and an underestimation among Very Internet People.

Going Beyond the Positive Outcomes of Internet Use

In conclusion, the link between the social and digital inequalities emerge from the positive everyday online experience as much as from its link with the positive outcomes offline. Even more so, along with the positive impacts of using the Internet, in further research is increasingly urgent to consider the perspectives on the digital divide more oriented to understand the critical sides of the Internet.

Therefore, if online activities can make existence easier, the delegation to the Internet, almost exclusively, of daily life management could have some unexpected effect. In the case of communication, the Internet constitutes a solution for isolation of the elders (ISTAT 2018; ISTAT 2019) but hides possible perverse effects on the same social interaction (Turkle 2016). Another example is the crescent daily harms of Internet use as the virus, misrepresented products, spam, credit card details stole and so on (Blank and Lutz 2016).

Looking at these negative outcomes, even more than for the benefits, the question about if the universality of Internet use can lead to a reduction of inequalities firmly stand. It calls into question the ability of (disadvantaged) people both to protect one's privacy and to extricate oneself from the vast sea of informative contents, true and false, in which we navigate every day. First researches show that educational background remains one of the most important element to control negative outcomes (Scheerder et al. 2019).

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After all, the risk we are facing here doesn't seem anymore that of exclusion, but rather the over-exposure and quantification of the self and the consequent "imprisonment" or "pushing" in hetero-direct schemes, both by the market and by politics (let us think about the power of algorithms). If we apply the rule "nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed" even in social science, we need to follow the shifts through the new digital divides implied in the technological transformations.

Conflict of Interests

The considerations set out in this text reflect only the authors' thoughts and are not representative of the position of the Organisation of belonging.

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