

Making Space, Making Place: Digital Togetherness and the Redefinition of Migrant Identities Online

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Abstract

Immigrants have played a fundamental role in shaping the life and form of urban public spaces for generations. Their efforts, as many scholars have observed, mostly aimed at creating places of comfort in new and sometimes hostile receiving countries. In recent years, the combined contribution of the built environment and screen-based experiences have shaped migrants' sense of community and belonging, thus making the concept of online community central to ideas about space and public life. Drawing upon a 3-year online ethnography, the article discusses to what extent new media constitute spaces of *digital togetherness*, where diasporic experiences and transnational identities are constructed and negotiated. It presents a transnational model of creative media consumption, which helps give insight as to how diasporas and ethnic minorities contribute to the transformation of public space in the Digital Age.

Keywords

Italian diaspora, digital togetherness, online community, public space, transnationalism

Drawing from a broader doctoral investigation (Marino, 2013), this article reflects on the role of the Internet in enhancing migrants' participation and engagement in a host society. At stake are not only relationships between the transnational lives of migrants and their new home, but also how diasporic subjects are becoming crucial protagonists in the transformation of the idea of social space. As Morley (2000) argues, "traditional ideas of home, homeland, and nation have been destabilised, both by new patterns of physical mobility and migration and by new communication technologies, which routinely transgress the symbolic boundaries" (p. 3). In this newly formed landscape, cyberspace has been widely recognized as the new example of a space where groups and organizations live horizontally differentiated and polycentric lives and where old cohesive hierarchies are substituted by strategically significant "nodes" in the networks, thereby disrupting the conventional understandings of space, place, border, and territory (Khan, Gilani, & Nawaz, 2012).

The recognition of the existence and role of parallel and competing global networks, across and in-between different sites of exchange and communication, invites a number of key questions, which are taken up by this article: (a) How is Italian transnational *identity* created and maintained within online communities? (b) How are the processes of identity and community formation online contributing to migrants'

visibility offline? (c) How can we re-conceptualize the transformation of *social spaces* in the Digital Age?

The analysis is centered on issues of identity and visibility for both interpretative and operational reasons. Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the emergence of new transnational spaces where exchanges and communications take place (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). These spaces need to be connected somehow; either in terms of mobility (physical movement) or by looking at how communications and interpersonal relationships develop. It is therefore imperative to apprehend these concepts of space and place with new empirical and theoretical approaches that look at the contamination between online and offline, or in other words the "mix-and-match" of intimate and public sides of web-based communities (see also Featherstone, 2007). With this perspective in mind, the term "diaspora" that I use here to refer to Italian migration has become a key element in cultural exchange, reflecting the mobility of ideas, sounds, and people in time and space, but also redefining the contours of interpersonal relationships, cultural formations, and political

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connections, spanning across multiple locations and forms of belonging (Aksoy & Robins, 2000; el-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2002; Georgiou, 2001; Georgiou et al., 2007).

The following section will discuss the theoretical background against which the analysis is set. I will then discuss the ethnographic research conducted on the web forums of *Italians of London*, *Italiani a Londra*, and *The London Link*. Online ethnography proved very productive in studying what migrants do with media, how they live their lives, and what constitutes interaction with others. As part of the analysis, I propose the concept of *digital togetherness* to explain how identity formation and public visibility together enhance the “consumption” of social spaces by migrants.

Transnationalism and Web-Based Communities

In a well-known definition, Basch, Schiller, and Blanc (1994) defined transnationalism as “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (p. 8). This geo-cultural approach was further complemented by explorations highlighting the multiple transnational flows of capital (Sklair, 1998) and an emerging transnational political system (Held, 2003). Most of these approaches agree on the assumption that the nation becomes *relativized* as one of the multiple locations that people—and migrants in particular—can experience, rather than the central unit of analysis. Loretta Baldassar (1997), in her study of Italian migrants in Australia, similarly points out that “transnational migrants sustain multi-stranded networks of social relations which link together their old and new homelands, as part of the same social and communicative field” (p. 74).

Generally speaking, diasporic communities have always relied on networks; nevertheless, the Internet is now the central framework for such networks, taking on a central function in many migrants’ day-to-day lives. The central element here is *mobility*, which has become an integral part of migrants’ life strategies. Transnational migrants do not leave their country with the aim of settling in another country and no hope of coming back—either physically or virtually—as it was for previous generations of Italian migrants (Fortier, 2000; Sprio, 2013), but tend to stay mobile in order to maintain or improve their quality of life. Within this scenario, the Internet as a meeting point reflects different levels of migrant transnational interaction, through which dispersed diasporas gain political and community visibility (Georgiou, 2001).

What I am focusing on here is the production of identities and discourses. From this perspective, the importance of the Web is even more crucial as a medium that defies geography. Italians creatively consume the digital, imagining a new life away from the crisis that Italy is facing¹ and re-creating a community of comfort, which is real in its emotional and “political” consequences.

Italians in London

Interactive websites, web forums, and social networking sites (SNSs) are all spaces through which the Italian diaspora is imagined and recreated in London. This online topography speaks Italian in many, interesting ways, from commercial platforms specialized in selling authentic Italian food to online postal services promoting cheap dispatches from the United Kingdom to Italy; from platforms promoting the best of Italian culture in Britain to restaurants and cafes using the Internet to recruit a workforce. The massive use of online media has to be associated with the large-scale migration of Italians, often referred to as the *Italian diaspora*, which re-emerged consistently in the 2000s after a drastic drop in the 1970s (Seganti, 2008). According to recent data, the number of people registered with AIRE in the London Consular Constituency in December 2014 was 234,084 (53% males and 47% females), with around 52% of these resident in the Greater London area. More statistics inform that 74% of Italians are under 34 years and coming from the North of Italy (55%), with Lombardy and Veneto as the most representative regions. Among these, 89% of Italians have a high school diploma, 58% hold a degree, and one in five holds a doctoral degree (source: AIRE²).

London is said to be the “Promised Land” for young Italians in search of work, possibly something that is in line with their educational background. According to a document published by the Italian Embassy in London, “mobility fluxes have changed and are mainly linked to the characteristics of London as an international financial and commercial hub” (AAVV, 2006, pp. 1–2). Italians are mainly experts in the economic-financial sector; they are medical doctors, researchers, scientists, and artists. Yet, a flow of Italians involved in the catering sector still exists, particularly among the youngest that arrive in Britain with no English language skills.

Taking into account how Italy’s economic and political crisis has affected youth migration, we can argue that there are not great differences between today’s and past diasporas since this “social/brain-drain” phenomenon always emerged as a consequence of political, economic, and social causes. Unlike the past though, international migration does not mean a radical detachment from one’s community of origin anymore, as new mass media act as social glue connecting migrants and non-migrants all over the world (Faist, 2000; Vertovec, 2004). All aspects of the migrant experience are now affected by the ubiquitous presence of digital technologies. Even before she or he has left, the would-be migrant now usually forms her or his project after a careful search on Google, rather than after hearing the stories told by those who have returned from emigration, as in the past. Before crossing any geographical borders, the transnational experience involves going “through the screen” in order to collect all the necessary information and possible support from those already settled in the destination of choice. This reliance on the Internet does not end once migrants relocate; on

the contrary, as Diminescu and Loveluck (2014) suggest, upon arrival in a new country, migrants tend to buy a mobile phone and gain access to a computer in order to find work, but also to remain connected with family and friends wherever they are. Italian migrants make no exceptions. As a migrant myself, I remember surfing the Web in order to find useful information such as places to stay and career opportunities; in some ways, these preliminary searches constituted the “physical evidence” that I was about to leave my country once and for all.

Needless to say, the presented research will not claim that every Italian goes online and therefore that online observation *per se* might account for the intrinsic differences, and nuances, of a global phenomenon such as Italian migration. Nevertheless, it can be argued that cyberspace facilitates the aggregation and formation of transnational diasporic online communities, supporting adaptation and appropriation of physical space by immigrants living in the same city. Analysis of migration networks is therefore key to understanding the dynamics of contemporary migration and its consequence on public visibility in the host society.

Method

The discussion that follows draws from my own doctoral research that was conducted between 2009 and 2012 on seven online communities and related SNSs speaking Italian in London.³ The analysis specifically addressed the following dimensions: (a) inter- and intrapersonal relationships among migrants and the circulation of material and emotional support, (b) the *architecture* of websites and SNSs (technical, aesthetic, and functional criteria), and (c) how online spaces affect the development of offline relationships. While the doctoral research was focused on both online communities and SNSs (Facebook in particular), this article examines web forums only. On one hand, this decision is justified by the fact that, according to my research, Italians seem to rely more deeply on these spaces as a way of sharing solidarity and support, while SNSs are used as entertainment tools. On the other hand, online communities have been identified as ideal locations for analyzing the dynamics of group membership and the circulation of social capital (Hine, 2000). As a final consideration, online communities and SNSs present several similarities that justified an organic approach to the study of migrant presence online, such as the possibility of creating a public profile and of articulating a list of users/friends with whom Italians share a connection (see boyd & Ellison, 2007). For these reasons, I believe that the study of online communities, at least for this case study, allowed me to tackle the mechanisms of community formation and self-representation within the digital environment better and more profoundly.

Following this perspective, online ethnography proved well suited for generating understandings of the significance of the Internet in the experience of migrants. First, because of

the important role that digital togetherness can play, this article will demonstrate that contemporary migration researchers should adapt to the environment in which today’s interconnected migrants live and include online research sites in the definition of their fieldwork sites. Furthermore, for research that takes a complex human phenomenon such as migration as its area of interest, an ethnographic study on the Internet can play an important supporting role. It can raise new questions that orient the offline fieldwork, deepen the understanding of offline events, or lead to unexpected insights into the life of migrants. That being said, online forums where migrants discuss different aspects of their migration experiences, find news and information, and share solidarity on a variety of issues bring our attention to the fact that we have to think about the changing multi-sitedness of ethnographic research (see also Schrooten, 2012).

Sample

Three Italian-language forums were selected for inclusion in this article: *Italians of London*, *The London Link*, and *Italiani a Londra*. These communities emerged during the doctoral research by virtue of their popularity among users (frequency of access) and relevance of posts for the key dimensions explored (identity and community formation). In 2009, the selected forums had 20,580, 30,120, and 37,000 registered members, respectively, which were primarily frequented by Italian migrants pre-, during, and post-migration to London.

The qualitative corpus consisted of publicly viewable posts to the three forums over a 3-year period, with a follow-up in 2014. The analysis consisted of domain ontology and text mining techniques, where transcripts of forum discussions were manually inserted into a dataset containing information about the user, the topic of the post, and the content included within. This dataset was then transferred and analyzed using NVivo software, which allowed a more in-depth observation of content, frequency of words, and recurrent patterns. A total of 300 posts were collected and analyzed. These were selected according to what was considered relevant in order to explore the mechanisms of identity and community formation, such as forms of solidarity and support, emotional connections, and the development of digital togetherness among users.

Negotiating Transnational Identities and Communities Online

My analysis of Italian migrants’ use of the Internet reveals that online activities serve to enhance a sense of diasporic identity and community. I argue that one of the most important drivers to the formation of a sense of transnational identity is participation.

Member participation has been acknowledged as both the key resource and the biggest challenge for online communities to survive (Ardichvili, 2008; Butler, 2001; Wasko &

Faraj, 2005). Regardless of their purpose or type, online communities' survival largely depends on their ability to attract and retain members who are willing to participate. Individuals have the privilege of benefitting from others' contributions while avoiding the costs associated with active participation, with on-off forms of membership that seem to characterize the case observed here. As the life of online communities depends on its members' contributions, an immense body of literature has attempted to understand what motivates people to contribute their time, effort, and knowledge (Butler, 2001).

These studies can be classified into five main categories: (a) individual-related motivations; (b) community-related factors (shared norms, behaviors, etc.); (c) structural characteristics (memberships, online hierarchies, leadership roles); (d) technology-related issues; and (e) context-related factors (Honglei, 2012). In some respects, this outlook echoes Nancy Baym's (2010) definition of community as being characterized by the following features: sense of space, shared practices and support, shared identities, and interpersonal relationships.

People who are involved in online groups often think of them as shared places. "Sharing" has a material and emotional derivation, and it is clearly expressed in the ways these communities are organized. If we look again at the homepages, we can immediately understand how every community shares similar goals and patterns of presentation. The Italians in London homepage states,

Our goal is to meet the needs and demands of our community. We provide suggestions and ideas such as rents, buying and selling, a guide to your favourite restaurants, cinema, theatre, music, and other useful information including how to contact the Embassy, how to access Britain's health system, English courses and Universities, bureaucracy and so on and so forth. (*Italians of London homepage*)

Similarly, the administrators of *Italians in London* describe the community as "part of a greater project that supports Italians visiting the capital of the United Kingdom, by providing useful information such as rents, doctors, English courses, job advertisements" (*Italians in London homepage*).⁴

Online communities act as first providers of a variety of information, including how to find a general practitioner, how to open a bank account, where to find estate agencies, how to write a curriculum vitae, and many other everyday issues that migrants might face (and struggle with) during early stages of the settlement process. This information is public in the sense that every user, whether a member or not, living in London or still in Italy, can have access. While websites provide general and generic information, the collective distribution of knowledge is best shared inside the forums, where the tension between private and public seems to vanish. Users share personal and private experiences in a fundamentally *public* space, as everyone in the cyberspace can read, although membership is required to post comments.

Long-term immigrants are happy to help. Altruistic and instrumental motivations play a crucial role in the definition of a distributed community (Portes, 1995). If assistance is based on altruistic motivations, weak ties sometimes develop into strong ties, and offline friendships can emerge from online encounters, as many confirmed. This is also one of the main reasons why Italians decide to visit these online communities in the first place—material as well as emotional connection:

I moved here, and I was alone. No friends, no family, no one to talk to. My life was just work-school-home, over and over again. Then, I found this community online, and I immediately felt welcomed. It's not just sharing common experiences, but the idea that there is always someone online that is willing to talk, or simply to have a laugh with. It totally changed my life. (P. *Italians of London* forum, October 2011)

Stretching this argument further, it can be argued that these spaces are made public as a deliberate choice for sharing solidarity among the member. Moreover, there is evidence that already settled migrants function as *bridgeheads* (Böcker, 1994), reducing the risks as well as material and psychological costs of subsequent migration. Through the assistance of these new "friends," migrants are able to obtain information and receive active assistance in finding employment and a place to live, as well as in avoiding fraud and illegal conditions of employment.

Online communities not only provide assistance with matters of everyday life but, perhaps more interestingly, they help Italians identify themselves as members of a group of similar people. According to Jenkins (2004), all human identities are social identities. Social identity is an ongoing interplay between how we identify ourselves and how others identify us. To identify with any given group of people, whether it is an ethnic group or an online organization, people look for similarities between the group members and themselves, which is exactly what is happening in the case considered here. The community is fundamental in avoiding the sensation of being alone, as it allows its members to explore their values and beliefs within environments that they perceive to be safe and in mutual recognition of migrants as members of the same diaspora. This, in turn, affects migrants' decisions to return home and contributes in prolonging their stay, as the following quote demonstrates:

I was about to go back to Italy. I mean, what's the point of leaving family and friends behind, if you have to work so many hours, running all the time, living with strangers, and not enjoying my new life? But then I found new friends online, and I decided to give London a second chance. Now it's so much better. (R.S. *The London Link* forum, December 2010)

Thus, the processes of identity and of community formation are strongly interlinked. Users adopt terms such as family, friends, group, and community to signify their degrees of

closeness, familiarity, and belonging, as the following quote demonstrates: “Finally I found a new *family* here! You are my *family* guys, I was so scared about being alone here but this *community* is so helpful and kind that I feel blessed to be part of it!” (L. *Italiani a Londra* forum, January 2010). One of the reasons why Italians feel they are among friends has to do with trust, a feeling that users cannot readily explain, as it is: “just a sensation that you can open yourself, being honest, and you can rely on those people, even if you don’t know them” (G. *Italians of London* forum, March 2011). Nevertheless, this feeling has very important consequences for migrant wellbeing; it is perceived as “a relief. It’s like being at *home* again!” (S.P. *The London Link* forum, December 2009).

From this point of view, a transnational identity not only identifies itself as enclosed within the idea of the home nation, but it is also strongly committed to that community while living in a different country. In this sense, it is not something fixed, as it is reconstructed through memories of texts, pictures, objects, and sounds of the home country, which are often debated as part of the acculturation process. Although identity is under transformation, as migrants need to adapt to different customs, online communities provide this sense of “we-ness.”

Most Italians live with their soul at home and their body abroad. Their emotional life is connected to the origin country, which is recreated and enhanced within online communities, intimate spaces where migrants can nurture—and share—expectations, concerns, difficulties, practical, and social needs.

Transnational Social Spaces

As my analysis suggests, transnational social spaces are a combination of material and emotional ties, forms of collaboration and support inside the network and dynamic social processes that refuse static notions of ties and geographical positions. In order for a transnational space to emerge, accumulation and use of various sorts of capital must take place, such as human capital (know-how, material support) and social capital (resources that allow individuals to cooperate in networks, groups, and organizations). The concept of *space* used here not only refers to physical features (online aggregation) but also to larger opportunity structures, the social life, values, and meanings that the specific place represents to migrants (Faist, 1998).

The case study shows transnational spaces are most of all fed by solidarity. *Solidarity* is an expressive form of social transaction, taking place via shared ideas of what migration means, beliefs, evaluations, and symbols, which can be expressed in some sort of collective identity, or an aforementioned “we-ness.” This is to say that reciprocity (mutual support and collaborations), exchange (of experiences, expectations, successes, and failures), and solidarity (understanding each other’s difficulties while trying to provide a solution) represent the ground where transnational social

space are set, considerably improving the process of integration in the host community:

Before meeting this community, I hated this city. I didn’t have any time, or friends, to go around and see places. I didn’t have the courage to tell my friends that I was living in one of the most beautiful cities and I actually didn’t move from my flat. Now is different, I met new friends here, I go out, I smile, I laugh, I enjoy every single minute. (L. *Italians of London* forum, February 2012)

Transnational social spaces are thus characterized by a high degree of intimacy, emotional depth, and social cohesion, which can then develop into offline encounters and—as many respondents confirmed—into long-term friendships. This observation is an interesting point of departure for the re-conceptualization of the idea of social space online. First, it needs to be connected with a more general consideration of the degree to which these spaces are public (or private). In the observed web forums, the idea of sharing and supporting each other because everyone is Italian, and because everyone is a migrant (identity and community positioning), seems to overcome concerns of privacy and safety. Sensitive information is disclosed (personal addresses or private routines), biographical details are openly shared, and online acquaintances evolve into offline encounters very easily, regardless of who the other might be.

This observation might be linked to Papacharissi’s definition of private as a connected sphere where the individual negotiates his or her own privacy and safety, depending on the urgency of each situation and, I would suggest, depending on the level of participation and support given and received (Papacharissi, 2010).

Regardless of where the user is, still in Italy or already in London, participating creates a sense of community, a “home experience” that becomes strategic for self-expression and representation. That being said, there is another feature that seems to characterize these transnational spaces, which is the feeling of loss and nostalgia for the past, family and friends left behind, routines and practices that were once familiar. Italians do share these feelings online massively, both in positive (Italian “roots” that cannot be forgotten or set aside one’s identity) and in negative terms, which are clearly exemplified in the following quote:

I just hate everything about Italy, the economical situation, the political chaos, the lack of meritocracy, the lack of jobs, everything. I hate the fact that this system forced me to leave, abandoning my friends and family. It’s just not fair. (I. *Italians in London* forum, January 2010)

Interestingly, online spaces are used to criticize a former cultural identity, the same identity that allows users to perceive themselves as part of a unique diasporic community. On one hand, we can argue that this rejection (“Italy is beautiful only if you are a tourist, but I won’t be able to live there

anymore,” S.F., *Italians of London*) works as glue for deterritorialized identities that need to find a connection for their in-group membership. On the other hand, the fact that users discuss elements of national identity online such as food, music, literature, politics, and religion can account for the need of a displaced belonging, which the online community reflects quite fittingly.

In the following section, I will delve into the concept of digital togetherness to explain how the formation of a transnational identity within a community of people that shares quite an extensive amount of information affects the process of public visibility, and ultimately how it allows us to reflect on the transformation of social spaces in the Digital Age.

Digital Togetherness and Enhanced Visibility

By *digital togetherness*, I intend a specific sense of belonging and identity that is based on sharing personal and private experiences, such as being online, being Italian, speaking the same language, and considering themselves detached from a country that left little other choice but leaving. In this respect, Italians seek, share, and receive support because they consider themselves similar, and because of this similarity, they believe and trust each other, thus overcoming issues of safety and privacy online.

Online spaces, by promoting and sustaining digital togetherness, emerge as comfortable spaces where Italians feel at home, thus legitimizing a *new* feeling of belonging that is premised on sharing the experience of migration and the consequent estrangement (Ahmed, 1999); the “ongoing lived experience” (Fazal & Tsagarousianou, 2002); a contentious relationship with the home country, which produces a generalized feeling of indifference toward an Italian world; and the desire to mobilize the positive common experience of Italian culture (as opposed to the negative political experience) by promoting its tangible components (food, music, culture).

The latter point is also relevant for explaining the relationship between digital togetherness and visibility. I argue that visibility can be considered as an outcome of the inclusiveness and public-ness of these communities; being fully accessible as sites of exchange, knowledge, and support, they bring together Italians living all around the world. As a result, online spaces act as sites of empowerment, allowing Italians to feel part of a larger diasporic community that shares similar feelings and forms of attachments. Moreover, networks work as *gatekeepers* toward different forms of friendship. As mentioned earlier, online acquaintances can evolve into long-term offline friendships, which in turn—as many users confirmed—can expand to include friends of friends, Italian- and English-speaking, thus benefitting from other people’s relations and contacts. In a nutshell, the concept of visibility not only comprises the amount of networks a migrant can activate because of the support received within the community, which seems to make the process of

integration in the local society faster and smoother, but also the social and political “consequences” of integration. In fact, it seems that after settling down, Italians become more aware, and interested, in local affairs: they comment and discuss news online, they read local newspapers, they watch English television, and they tend to become more involved. This shift is evident in the following conversation I extrapolated from *The London Link* forum:

Now that I am settled, I have friends, I go out and I enjoy myself, I have time to read and to stay informed about what’s happening around. I don’t know if you feel the same, but I noticed that, while in the beginning I almost exclusively read Italian newspapers online, now I am also interested in what happens here. It makes sense, we live here, we work here, we are making a new life here. (TT. April 2011)

You are absolutely right, TT. I feel the same. I think London has a lot to give, and I usually spend my spare time going around, visiting places, watching local television, reading newspapers, and trying to keep myself informed. As you said, it makes perfect sense. I am also interested in politics, I think it is important for us to know more about Great Britain if we want to stay here. It makes a difference, I think. (G.B. April 2011)

Ultimately, I consider visibility—both within the community and offline—as the primary factor responsible for the emergence of a degree of self-awareness among Italians, the recognition that they are part of a group that supports each other. What remains to be explored are the long-term consequences of this renewed process of self-imagination as a diaspora (Tsagarousianou, 2004). On one hand, new media may encourage a more profound political and cultural engagement. On the other, they might also polarize publics, and increase detachment from Italy, or offer a new potential to organize for change to already dis-enfranchised group and to review their position toward one’s homeland. In any case, online spaces, by blurring traditional notions of public and private, provide cues for building, and making visible, shared social and cultural identities that live and consume the local space at large.

A Transnational Model of Media Consumption

Internet use as shown by the Italian community indicates the emergence of a transnational model of media consumption, which refers to the interplay between national, local, and transnational connections made possible by digital media. The focus on consumption is here justified by the fact that Italians massively consume Italian-language media during their daily routines and particularly while they try to settle down. Online communities, SNSs, web forums, and mobile technologies such as Skype are produced—and consumed—in Italian. This is also emphasized by the respondents, who argue that “speaking Italian is crucial for this feeling of being part of a community” (R.S., *Italians of London*, 2014) and

“reading and writing in Italian makes you feel more comfortable, as sometimes we don’t know how to express ourselves in English properly” (G.T., *Italiani a Londra*, 2014). The process of migrant settlement is therefore characterized by an initial stage where Italians use media predominantly to maintain a transnational connection with home and to create “ethnic” relationships with other Italians living in London, online as well as offline. While this process is important for enhancing migrants’ self-awareness as members of a larger diasporic community, it also contributes to widening Italians’ media uses. On one hand, digital media are then used to criticize Italy’s political and economic situation, which is considered to be responsible for the mass-scale emigration of young unemployed and families, thus providing a common territory for deterritorialized identities that need to find a connection for their in-group membership. On the other hand, the process of identity and community formation is what makes Italians more aware of the society they inhabit, thus expanding the use of media toward a more active local engagement with the local community, especially through reading, watching, and commenting on local news in English.

This model of media consumption is characterized by a direct, decentralized, and alternative type of communication, where diasporas can claim their space and celebrate their identity in the national context where they now live, as well as in relation to their *homeland*.

Generally speaking, the relationship between media and migration is crucial for understanding the phenomenon of transnational mobility. The role of media is a significant pull variable in migratory processes (King & Wood, 2001), as the mediation, circulation, and impact of media consumption are what ultimately distinguishes transnational mobility from migration of the past (Appadurai, 1996).

Going online is therefore crucial for the redefinition of what social space means in the Digital Age, as changes brought on by networked technologies are more pervasive than those by earlier media, particularly in terms of configuring social interactions between people who never see, small, touch, or hear each other. Research demonstrates that these interactions can be as supportive and intimate as face-to-face communications, providing ground for migrant visibility in multiple territories and ultimately re-creating a sense of home and connectivity by developing transnational communication networks that use a variety of technologies, while negotiating identity and cultural difference between home and host countries.

Conclusion

The presented research demonstrates that the Internet provides new possibilities for communication, representation, and imagination, as migrants are often otherwise excluded from the public sphere or mainstream media (see Georgiou, 2001). Evidence also indicates that new social media enhance a migrants’ ability to maintain family and kinship contacts

across long distances (Komito, 2011), to create extensive personal networks, and to participate in the debates of their home/host societies.

Within this context, diasporic online communities and web forums act as nodes of socialization and interaction, as they become repositories and mirrors of texts, pictures, and sounds which make up the singular, but shared experiences toward which diasporas look back upon. These spaces not only provide, as discussed before, material and emotional support but also enhance a migrant’ self-esteem and self-awareness as members of a group, acting as a comfort zone against the phenomena of social isolation and longing for home, thereby affecting the desire to return to Italy.

Returning to the initial research questions, how has the analysis proved that space and place are being transformed by the circulation of digital togetherness among the users of web-based communities? During the last decade, migrants’ digital configurations have been variously examined and observed, described as webs of diasporas (Diminescu, 2008, 2012) or as *networked publics* (boyd, 2010). On the one side, Diminescu (2014) refers to “e-diasporas” as networks formed by diasporic websites and diasporic audiences that resemble the main characteristic of the World Wide Web—“its *networked nature*, and the fact that websites occupy a *position* within this network, which has important consequences in terms of *public visibility*—and therefore the mediation of identity” (p. 25).

Online communities are at the forefront of the shift from traditional ideas of public and private as distinctive realms and toward new grammars of subjectivity and experience. They empower individuals as they interact with each other, increasing migrant perceptions of themselves as a group and making the whole process of integration in the local community easier and less traumatic. While online communities alone might not be responsible for making these individuals visible offline, research demonstrates that Italians feel more confident and willing to engage with Britain’s public life, which is crucial in terms of long-term forms of participation, political or cultural.

Online spaces, by blurring traditional notions of public and private, provide cues for building, and making visible, shared social and cultural identities that live and consume the local space at large. Social spaces are thereby transformed into *transnational social spaces*, transnational exchanges and forms of reciprocity, networks and communities where, ultimately, community and identity formation are a condition for migrants’ empowerment, on and off their digital configurations.

Despite how much has been done in the field, online ethnography certainly enables researchers to make a fundamental contribution to the study of diasporic communities as it sheds new light on many underlying forces that are shaping today’s world, such as multiple feelings of cultural belonging and public visibility. For this reason, I would like to conclude with some notes on uses and limitation of online ethnography for future research. Online spaces have complicated and

enriched our lives because they have made this rapid shift in public life visible, particularly for migrant communities that have been traditionally associated with phenomena of marginalization and exclusion. The study of transnationalism needs to be connected, more deeply and intensively, to the study of virtual and geographical mobility. What appears to be missing is multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork able to include online and offline research, as well as a multi-grounded framework able to connect different media and technologies (mobile technologies, web forums, and SNSs). This article demonstrates that online interactions can improve the processes of participation and engagement when *consumed* within a space that stimulates the circulation of solidarity and ties based on trust and reciprocity. Long-term observations of how online and offline blend, capturing the intimacy and complexity of experiences both in the home and host country, will be increasingly crucial for understanding the mechanisms of transnational processes, and their contributions to social science enquiry.

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Notes

1. Italy is facing an unprecedented political and economic crisis: the economy is not growing, and the general situation of low productivity, fat government payrolls, excessive taxes, chocking bureaucracy, and political uncertainty is undermining Italy's development in the aftermath of the 2008 Eurozone crisis. Within this scenario, one of the biggest concerns is youth unemployment, still settled at an alarming 43.10% (source: Eurostat). In order to avoid the crisis and find a job away from Italy's stagnation, many young Italians decide to leave the country and move abroad, thus contributing to the so-called "brain-drain."
2. http://www.conslondra.esteri.it/Consolato_Londra
3. This research focused on the following online communities specifically designed to gather all Italians living in London or about to move: *Italians of London*, *The London Link*, *The London Web*, *Sognando Londra*, *Qui Londra*, and *Italiani a Londra*. It observed web forums as well as social networking sites in order to return a complete picture of media platforms used by Italian migrants (Marino, 2013).
4. Quotes from homepages and web forums have been translated from Italian to English.

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