

Gender differences in Italian immigrants' online interactions

FRANCESCA ROMANA SEGANTI

Abstract. This paper analyses the impact of gender differences on online interaction dynamics. I will expose the related findings from a qualitative study about the social and cultural role of Italianialondra.com, an online community created 2003 to encourage communication among first generation Italian immigrants in London. From the analysis of the respondents' in-depth interviews – nine women and eleven men – variations in attitudes towards technologies, and online communication patterns based on gender, emerged. Findings cover the following: 'gender and access', 'gender and general attitudes', 'gender and mutual support', and 'the reconstruction of gender stereotypes'. These topics are all interrelated. I conclude that implementing the Website in a women-friendly style could widen the boundaries of electronic space and bring about changes in existing hierarchies of power and privilege.

Keywords: gender/online communication/immigrants

Gender online, an introduction

According to utopian visions, communication in the absence of the body would have mitigated male power dynamics and favoured female voices creating a space where gender relations are equalized. Further studies on online texts argue that in the virtual environment, gender differences continue to influence the interaction, replicating offline dynamics. It has been demonstrated (Herring, 1994; Ferris, 1996; Brayton, 1999) that in CMC, on the one hand, male and female behaviours are recognizable by the writing style and expressions and that the absent body is reconstructed through the written word, thus reproducing ordinary gender stereotypes (O'Brien, 2000; Stone, 2001).

Ferris and Herring claim that online communication mirrors face-to-face differences in speech acts and use of politeness markers in male–female conversations. They ascertained that such differences exist online as they do offline: online, men have been found to use an adversarial style, while women utilize a more supportive and “attenuated” style. This means that men are more critical, sarcastic, self-distancing and self-aggrandizing than women, making lengthier and more frequent postings. Women, on the other hand, are more apologetic, expressive of doubt, suggestive and appreciative, and enjoy building community (Herring, 1994; Ferris, 1996). Thus, online gendered behaviours are recognizable and gender, age and body type and size do not seem to lose saliency as a basis for the evaluative categorization of self/other. O'Brien analysed online gender-switch-

ing and demonstrated that deception in the majority of cases fails because users, in the attempt to portray themselves as one of two genders, perpetuate common binary gender forms rather than stretching or altering these forms. O'Brien argues that, despite the fact that the body is not obviously discernible in cyberspace, participants tend to ‘wear’ gender features that replicate conventional gender stereotypes of sexuality and desirability: “In other words, they reproduce themselves as Barbie and Ken” (Katz, 1994¹, in O'Brien, 2000:87).

Differences between male and female behaviours have also been analysed according to participation rate. Many (Pitkow & Recker, 1995²; Gilbert & Kile, 1996³, in Brayton, 1999) agree that women are not as quick to become involved with the Web. The research, conducted by Chen & Wellman from the early 1990s to 2002, which examined trends and patterns of access and use of computers and the Internet in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, China, and Mexico, confirms that men are more likely than women to access and use the Internet. Chen & Wellman (2003) found that, with the exception of the U.S., the share of female Internet users is lower than their share in the general population in each of the countries surveyed. Yet, they argue, this gender divide is narrowing, except in Germany and Italy, and sometimes the divide is small. Changes are taking place but it is a slow process. Reasons are complex and often interwoven with cultural barriers. First, women's ability to be actively involved with the Web is hindered by the financial costs associated with the Web

(purchasing equipment and software, paying monthly Web server costs). Since women on average earn less than men, they may be more disadvantaged as buyers of computer services. In addition, women who do have a Web connection may not have access to all aspects of the Web. As Brayton argues, depending on the server, the connection provided may include only certain features, such as email, but no access to Usenet groups. In these instances, women may have Web access, but may have little or no control over the knowledge, information and resources that are available. Moreover, as Brayton claims, having access to all the “babe” or sexist pages will not increase women's desire to be a part of Web culture. Thus, in general women were found to be less familiar than men with computer technology.

Finally, many scholars, opposed to utopian visions of the Web, demonstrate that gender differences online persist and influence communication, and also that they jeopardize access to new technologies.

In this article, I analyse issues pertaining to the role of gender and its influence on online communication. My aim was to ascertain whether democratic theorizations of the Web can be applied in the context of Italianialondra.com⁴, an online community created 2003 to encourage communication among first generation Italian immigrants in London. From the analysis of the respondents' interviews – nine women and eleven men – variations in attitudes towards technologies, behaviours and online communication patterns based on gender, emerged. In this article, I analyse episodes from which stereotypical male or female attitudes can be identified. I

found the related data from in-depth analysis of the interview texts because awareness of the influence of gender dynamics on online communication did not emerge spontaneously in the interviews themselves. Moreover, since I did not directly observe online performances, references to linguistic style in online communication come only from the respondents' accounts. Findings cover the following topics: 'gender and access', 'gender and general attitudes', 'gender and mutual support', and 'the reconstruction of gender stereotypes'. As analysed, these topics are interrelated. I conclude this article with some comments on peculiarities that make the Italianialondra.com virtual community an original observatory for the study of online dynamics⁵.

Methods and Participants

With the aim of disarticulating the virtual environment and identity strategies, I employed a qualitative methodological orientation that relies on the interpretation of how people understand themselves and which favours the particular over the general. The aim was to develop an understanding about the meaning of experiences for individuals. So, between October 2004 and April 2005, I conducted in depth, face-to-face interviews, which were followed by follow-up by e-mail, with a sample of web-navigators. The sample was drawn from members of Italianialondra.com. Before contacting the users, I asked the manager of the community for permission to post an announcement on the website's Forum explaining the details of the research. The manager agreed and replied that he would directly forward the announcement to the entire community. Among those who answered the message sent to the Italianialondra.com, I chose twenty volunteers according to sample selection criteria. My aim was to select highly educated participants since the literature suggests that earliest transnational-style virtual communities have elite memberships or are often promoted by well-educated, upper-middle class, technologically proficient people who work in computer, academic, or other professional fields (Appadurai, 1997; Hanafi, 2001; Mandaville, 2003; Tsaliki, 2003; Georgiou, 2003). Eleven were males and nine females^{vi}, aged between twenty-five and thirty-six years old (thirteen out of twenty were aged over thirty and

seven under thirty). Three of them were students and the rest were employed. The transcripts were analysed according to the conceptual scaffolding to which Ritchie & Lewis (2003) refer: the analytic hierarchy. This hierarchy relates to thematic analysis based on interpretations of meaning.

Results

Gender and access

As mentioned, the respondents participated in this research after they answered a letter sent to all the members of Italianialondra.com. Therefore, since they were already members of a virtual community, they all had access to the Web. They confirmed that they accessed the Web during working hours or from the university and/or at home. Only two respondents (Antonio and Tom) had access only from Internet cafés because their jobs did not require them to work with the Web.

Thus, there was no clear evidence of access issues in relation to gender. Most of the Italians under study were working daily with computers or, at least, could afford to pay public Internet point rates, if required. Four of them also had access from home.

I established with the sample their habits, routines and why and how often they logged on. Although the respondents had the same level of access, it emerged that the majority of the women, especially those aged between thirty and thirty-five years, began using the Web for socializing purposes only after they knew of the existence of Italianialondra.com. For instance, Gina said that, before joining Italianialondra.com, she had never participated in any other kinds of virtual communication except private emails, because she was "reluctant". Like her, Maria stated:

"Honestly I do not trust this kind of communication at all."

Laura argued: *"I am not very technologic."* Marinella said: *"I shop via the Web, but, for what concerns virtual communication in general, I am scared that someone could make fun of me. I am very shy and honest. Nonetheless, I joined Italianialondra.com."*

Hence, while the women in the sample use negative connotations to analyse their relationship with the Web, it should be noted that words like "fear", "shyness" and "reluctance" were never mentioned by the men in reference to the

same argument. On the contrary, all the men joined other virtual communities or newsgroups before the Italianialondra.com virtual community.

Therefore, female respondents confirmed studies about the relationship between women and Internet technologies, which Morahan-Martin (1998) summarizes as follows: compared with males, females are more likely to be technophobic, less likely to be technophiles, perceive fewer advantages in new technology and have less experience with technology. Morahan-Martin argues that fear of technology increases resistance to adopting new technology.

Female respondents, even after joining Italianialondra.com, still believed that in virtual environments they might be cheated or become the object of desire or of fantasies of someone unknown. They were scared. Laura said:

"I think that Italianialondra.com is not like other communities where you can appear to be a desperate person who absolutely needs to communicate because of loneliness. On the contrary it is a soft way to meet new people. Often many contact me just to pick me up, but I do not consider them. I select mates to meet and exclude those who make advances."

Laura thought that participating in public events organized by the virtual community was a "soft" way to approach people, avoiding directly saying that she was looking for company. Maria, for instance, after a brief online message exchange, encountered a man whose offline behaviour made her even more scared of virtual communication. She said that this man who, online, seemed very nice and polite, behaved strangely when they met face-to-face. She did not want to tell me the story in detail, but she said that it was the reason why she was not logging in any more.

In brief, fear of the unknown, of being exploited and of expressing the sincere desire for friendships emerged among the women but was never mentioned by the men.

Morahan-Martin, among others, analyses that female technophobia is due to the fact that the Web culture was developed and used by primarily male scientists, mathematicians and technologically sophisticated computer hackers. Consequently, the Web culture can be disconcerting and alien to females. Morahan-Martin argues that an analysis of Netiquette norms found that tolerance

of free speech extended to flaming (uncensored hostility) and even to sexual harassment, which women may find offensive. Moreover, Ferris (1996) analyses that a large number of Web users report that they have witnessed or been subject to offensive language and/or harassment online. O'Brien (2000) argues that many women often appear online as men to prevent unwanted advances. My study demonstrates that the general attitude of females towards technologies was influenced by the perception of barriers that can be linked to male control. As a result, a paradox emerged: female respondents logged in to meet new people and socialize, but they were scared that they could be cheated or exploited. They were also scared to say openly that they were looking for company on the Net, exactly as the men were. Female respondents often got annoyed because of male attitudes, which effectively, as analysed further on in this article, inhibited them.

In addition, it emerged that the male respondents were also all more familiar with the Web before discovering the Italianialondra.com virtual community, than were female respondents. Again, gender composition affects communication, reinforcing rather than erasing social conventions.

Finally, female respondents had the same access possibilities to the Web than men, but it cannot be undervalued that they access the Net less than male participants. Women said that they changed their mind about digital media when they registered with the online community, but their way of employing Italianialondra.com was still found to be different from that of men. An outline of the differences between female and male attitudes in interaction via Italianialondra.com follows.

Gender and general attitudes

The respondents scarcely described interaction dynamics and the contents of virtual conversations, in which many of them were never involved. Trying to understand why the sample generally did not enjoy virtual chats, data about the relation between gender and virtual communication emerged. On the one hand, scarce female presence in the Chat-room or in the Forum was due to the fact that most of the members used the virtual community to date people they had already met. On the other hand, it meant

that some respondents did not enjoy online conversations because they were discouraged. All users who had difficulties with interaction were female. Barbara, Maria and Giorgia mentioned particularly the Chat-room where synchronous conversation, as they said, was often monopolized by characters who seemed to know each other and, as a consequence, used this to exclude new participants. Barbara said:

"I cannot help you to learn more about the Chat-room dynamics since I do not know any of the "chatters" and consequently they do not read my postings. I am not very active online. I log in and they do not consider me at all. You log in and they ignore you. I think it is a matter of age. I am thirty five and conversations are especially lead by younger subjects who are just looking for fun."

Barbara told me that she would have talked about culture or problems of topical interest. Like her, the remaining six women said that they had never been interested in joining a Chat-room session since the contents of conversation were trivial. Thus, female respondents manifested the desire to express themselves, reflect, examine their thoughts and ideas, and compare themselves with others.

Difference emerged also in the frequency of surfing. For instance, Gianni and Dario, who accessed the Web from work and home, said that they were connected during the whole working day but that at home they did not switch the computer on. On the contrary, Nicoletta and Marinella said that they preferred to read emails at home because it was private and a more relaxing space.

However, some of the men also wanted moments of "mediated" introspection. For instance, Gennaro established a newsletter to communicate his experiences, sensations and feelings to his friends in Italy. According to Ferris (1996), women online usually display a greater personal orientation than men, focusing on the self, revealing thoughts and feelings, and interacting with others. Ferris claims that women use conversation primarily for negotiating and expressing relationships, while men use it as display.

My study does not confirm an exclusive female attitude to introspection, but, on the other hand, it reveals that trivial and vulgar discourses in the Italianialondra.com virtual community were exclusively performed by men. Furthermore, an overwhelming male

presence in the Chat-room and the female preference for email or asynchronous communication in general, corroborated the idea that, whereas women used a kind of communication which favours reflection on the self, men were more interested in having a break and had no other purpose than to play with others or picking up girls.

One of the interviewees reported an episode in which in the Chat-room of Italianlondra.com, he monopolized the online conversation, talking in northern dialect to exclude a girl from the South. This is further evidence that democratic visions of the Web cannot be applied to the context under study. That episode not only suggests reflections on the influence of regional provenance on interaction, but also represents a typical case of online harassment where power dynamics between male and female are reproduced. Harassment happens online when words or virtual actions tend to annoy, alarm and abuse (verbally) other people. Many studies demonstrate that in the virtual environment interference and intimidation are carried out in the main by males against females (Herring, 1994; Ferris, 1996; O'Brien, 2000). Generally, it is shown that the online communication of males is status enhancing and adversarial, whereas the online communication of females is supportive and tentative. According to Herring (1994), these differences lead men both to flame more and to tolerate flaming, while women reported that flaming intimidated them and drove them from discussion and news groups.

The respondents told me (source of data: follow-up email exchange) that participants in the Chat-room were mainly male and that among them stronger personalities led the conversation. On the other hand, it turned out that women were afraid of being deceived. Maria said: *"Honestly I do not trust this kind of communication at all."*

Maria's disappointment was caused by the impossibility of predicting the other person's bad behaviour because their previous online communication had been brief. Indeed, I also assume that aggressive attitudes were played down online with the aim of obtaining a face-to-face date. Then, in Maria's case, aggressiveness, which was hidden online, emerged in the offline environment.

Finally, real-world biases and power relations do not simply disappear on the Web. These social relations still exist and

organize the relations on the Web. Men still shape and determine the culture of the Web in their own interests. However, in the case under study, harassment and hostility online were generally discouraged because the aim was to achieve face-to-face meetings.

Gender and mutual support

It is said that, online, women are more focused on positive interaction and cooperation, and are thus more socially supportive. Brayton (1999) argues that the Web is a space that can be used by women for connecting, networking and sharing information with other women. The higher presence of women in e-businesses started by women and the proliferation of women-oriented Websites in recent years (Sassen, 2002) confirms the view that women can take an active role in Web culture. Brayton argues that women not only have a presence and a voice, they are spinning new ideas and thoughts through their web pages, making connections with other women and organizations.

For instance, communication technology has given Marinella and Nicoletta the chance to find support for setting up a kindergarten. As explained in a previous article (Seganti, 2007), their aim was to provide Italian education to the children born and brought up in London. The Italianialondra.com online community gave Marinella the chance to find agreement and support for the kindergarten on a wider scale. So, women benefit from the potential opportunity to communicate with others sharing similar experiences and situations (Brayton, 1999).

Men, on the other hand, did not form groups with any particular intention apart from socializing, but it has to be emphasized that many, especially newcomers in London, highlighted the importance of the Italianialondra.com community as a tool for gathering information and support. The community was thus a tool for facilitating mutual support and communication to both men and women.

Reconstruction of gender stereotypes

According to the respondents, face-to-face encounters were often disappointing. If often disappointments occurred, it was because, in the online space, people described themselves using misleading gender stereotypes. Only one respondent seemed to be aware of the dynamics where, as Stone (2001) argues, a deep

need to create detailed images of the absent and invisible body re-emerges. Emanuele said that when he was living in France, he joined a Chat-room dedicated to role games. He frequented it for one year, and then he went to the meeting held every year by the website. He said that he suddenly realized that the ideas he had of his online mates did not match them in reality. Online, as he said, *“bad looking people do not exist”*, *“everybody is tall, beautiful and blue eyes”*. In other words, Emanuele came to realize that virtual worlds are populated by characters who reproduce stereotypes of physical perfection, rather than reflecting people as they might actually be (O'Brien, 2000; Shaw, 1998):

“Most of the people you are chatting with give you an idea ... you imagine how they could be and, when you meet, they are completely different. It happened to me. I got annoyed with Chat-lines. In the Chat-room bad looking people do not exist. It is the same for me, when I describe myself. I am tall, slim and green eyes ... when I tell you this, how do you imagine me? A handsome guy ... but I am not. I prefer to see the other face-to-face. I think that only face-to-face you can understand what the other is really thinking.”

Emanuele was scared that his appearance could disappoint the expectations of others. Moreover, as argued elsewhere (Seganti, 2008), on the Italianialondra.com Website, approach is facilitated by the fact that, on the one hand, behind the computer the screen members overcome visual prejudice linked to stereotypical images of other Italians, and, on the other hand, because they try to attract others by describing themselves through the use of stereotypes. The hidden body, described by the suggestive power of language, re-emerges online, but transformed by the allure of sexual stereotypes described in the *profiles*.

Indeed, it has to be specified that episodes of gender switching⁷ were not mentioned. This was because participants did not recognize deception since, as they said, their participation was occasional, or because the aim to arrange face-to-face encounters through the Italianialondra.com community automatically discouraged gender switching.

Discussion and Conclusion

In line with O'Brien's argument (2000), I would argue that despite the hyping of

cyberspace as a territory unmarked by gender, place, age, class, race or nationality, we are nonetheless mapping this frontier with the same social categories of distinction as we have used to chart modern reality – which we tend to code as based in a state of nature. Gender is foremost among these lines of distinction. For instance, it emerged from my study that interactions in the Chat-room or Forum of Italianialondra.com seemed to tend to reproduce gender stereotypes. Some of the participants were aware that written descriptions of the body were reconstructing conventional gender stereotypes of sexuality and desirability. Since the amount of face-to-face contact that the respondents had did not diminish with Italianialondra.com use, but increased, they had the opportunity to meet and thus test whether online descriptions of the body corresponded to reality. That they did not was revealed by the high rate of disappointments reported by the respondents following face-to-face meetings, thus demonstrating that, in the online space, gender differences are not only reproduced, but also exalted through the replication of ideal models rooted in the pre-formulated cultural scripts that people bring with them into cyberspace.

There is a social and cultural world outside the Web that plays a role in determining both who has access to cyberspace, and their behaviour within it. Online gender differences are reproduced. From the analysis of the respondents' interviews it emerged that it was generally women who were scared of virtual communication. They thought that it could be dangerous, that they might be harassed, and that the Web is a space for lonely people who log in because they do not have other social alternatives. On the contrary, I found that men were not affected by any of these considerations; in the rooms of Italianialondra.com, men talked of trivialities, and approached women, who, in contrast, referred to feelings of exclusion. One of the main issues that research into gender and computer mediated communication has addressed (Herring, 1994; Ferris, 1996; O'Brien, 2000) is online harassment. Researchers noted that women are often harassed (usually sexually), and have found that, at times, women get “flamed” (receiving hostile messages from male Internet members), often feeling so intimidated by such harassment that they no longer participate in online discussions. In the

interviews, episodes of sexual harassment were not mentioned (as said, an episode of flaming was reported but it was provoked by a desire to emphasize regional identity), and I argue that, as with gender switching, it was discouraged because the aim of the men was often to arrange face-to-face encounters. Sexual harassment would have prevented women from meeting men face-to-face; whilst gender switching if disclosed would have caused frustration, discouraging attempts to continue the relationship in the "real" dimension. On the other hand, the general feeling of exclusion and fear that the women felt confirms, as Olinto (2008) argues, that technology is inscribed with gender power relations and that electronic space is a gendered culture favouring its male members. Olinto argues that technological preferences reflect men's power and are also, to a certain extent, influenced by men's control over technological development. In line with this argument, I found that women were generally not familiar with new technologies, while men were frequently familiar with the Web before knowing of the Italianialondra.com community. Olinto's assumptions are based on Wajcman's studies. Wajcman says:

"Feminists have demonstrated that the marginalization of women from the technological community has a profound influence on the design, technical content, and use of artefacts. This is not meant to imply an essentialist or dualistic analysis in which men and women are treated as homogeneous groups. Rather, a gender analysis shows how preferences for different technologies are shaped by a set of social arrangements that reflect men's power and resources in the wider society" (Wajcman, 2002:357).

The women I interviewed did not feel at ease in cyberspace. They claimed that men only use Italianialondra.com to approach women; they were intimidated, and worried that they might be taken for a ride. In line with Wajcman's argument, my observation is that the design of the community favoured women's "exclusion": women complained in particular about the fact that they were unable to interact via the Chat-room which, in contrast with the men, they avoided using. Women said that they preferred email and the Forum, which they considered the ideal tools for carrying on serious, reflective discussions. The analysis presented therefore has interesting implica-

tions regarding Italianialondra.com for women. If women are not as confident in using it as men are, can we assume that Italianialondra.com adequately serves female Italian immigrants? Can the online community offer adequate support and services, if women are communicating and gaining support primarily through email and discussion lists and not via the Web? This is a vital question, especially now that the community design has changed dramatically. In 2005, the manager (who is also the designer of the Website) has shut down the Chat-room and the section of the Forum dedicated to discussions. The design of the Website has changed, allowing, via the Blog, more space for introspection, which is certainly something women would have preferred, but on the other hand, the changes to the Website were not made intentionally to provide women with a friendly space for communication. I believe that the Website design should be consciously aimed at being more women-friendly and the manager should ask female users for their suggestions: I believe that designing the Website in a women-friendly style could widen the boundaries of electronic space and bring about changes in existing hierarchies of power and privilege, that, as Sassen (2002) argues, are inferred from the fact that existing cyber segmentations can tend to override women-oriented agendas.

Sassen argues that cyberspace should offer new opportunities for women both in business environments and in wider civic and domestic domains. She says that, for instance, in highly-digitalized sectors, women professionals have experienced new opportunities and that in these economic sectors they can fight for greater equality with men, but they do so largely within the confines of existing hierarchies of economic power.

"In this regard it may be naïve to overestimate the emancipatory power of cyberspace in terms of its capacity to neutralize gender distinctions" (Sassen, 2002:377).

I found that only one in nine women used the Italian Website to improve her business. Barbara perceived the advantages of using Italianialondra.com to promote her activity as a therapist, and she intended to advertise her work in the section of the Website dedicated to business. Yet, she was not really satisfied with the manager's behaviour in transmitting the information necessary for carrying out

the project. If managers were to encourage women's participation, this could provide a stepping-stone to Sassen's ideal. Sassen summarizes:

"Where the specificity of cyberspace enables the emergence of new cultures of interaction between cyberspace and the larger social order, there is also specificity in the opportunities and forms of presence of women" (Sassen, 2002:376). Adapting the Website facilities to female needs would have a significant impact especially now that women's presence in cyberspace is increasing. In this study, evidence of the greater participation of women in online communication comes from the fact that the female respondents said that they started using the Web regularly only after they had moved to London, and especially after Italianialondra.com was created (2003), as opposed to men who were participating in online communities before the Italian community was created.

In the case under study, the gender gap manifest in access to and use of the Internet has decreased because the respondents were living in an environment "more technophile" than Italy, and also because their condition as migrants encouraged use of digital media.

Chen & Wellman (2003) found that only five percent of Italian households had Internet access in 1998. So, even if this situation is changing, with the Internet penetration rate having increased by a third in one year (from fourteen percent in 1999 to twenty-one percent in 2000), Italy still has relatively low rates of PC and Internet penetration compared to other western European nations, especially the U.K. where forty-five percent of British households were connected to the Internet in 2002, increasing from thirty-eight percent in 2001. According to Chen & Wellman, the UK is also doing better with respect to female Internet access. Chen & Wellman made a comparison between eight developed countries and it emerged that Germany and Italy seemed to do worse than countries like China and Mexico. My impression is that, living in London where the gender divide is narrowing and where it is in any case smaller than in Italy, and speaking English (according to Chen & Wellman, about three-quarters of all Websites are in English, source of data: World Economic Forum, 2002⁸) are keys to broader access and, as a consequence, facilitate local community building, especially for women.

I refer to “local” and not to “global” community building because the interviewees said that they did not employ Italianialondra.com to contact their parents and friends in Italy since their Italian friends and relations have less access to new media than those who live in the UK. In contrast, they made much use of the telephone. As a consequence I cannot compare my results to those from Kennedy et al. (2003), who demonstrate that a slightly higher percentage of women than men feel that the Internet has brought their immediate family (sixty vs. fifty-four percent) and extended family (sixty-six vs. sixty-two percent) closer together. Kennedy et al., whose study examined gendered differences in Internet by using survey data sets from two sources (one from the National Geographic Society and the other from the General Social Survey), argue that this is consistent with the argument that women are communicators who work harder than men to actively maintain relationships with kin. However, Kennedy et al. also say that these differences are limited to already-existing kinship relationships, because, as emerged in my study, women in general do not feel as much at ease with online communities as men do. Kennedy et al. suggest that women tend not to be as comfortable as men in socializing on the Internet, especially when they are communicating with people outside their families. This assumption is in part confirmed by the fact that the initiative of promoting the kindergarten open to Italian families via Italianialondra.com was mentioned only by women. As discussed in previous article (2007), the Web gave the promoters the chance to seek consensus and support for the kindergarten on a wider scale. The school was established in 2007. None of the men mentioned such a project, which was later completed thanks to a network of people who promoted it via cyberspace. I cannot assume that the completion of the school-project was due only to women. Yet, my findings demonstrate that through Italianialondra.com women organized mutual support groups, while men, despite the fact that they used the network for mutual support, were more individualistic.

Together with the women’s commitment to the school project, this result demonstrates that, as Sassen claims, even as it reproduces masculine cultures and hierarchies of power, electronic space also

enables women to engage in new forms of contestation and in proactive endeavours in multiple different realms.

Furthermore, the women’s appropriation of new media which they used in their various guises of “mother”, “worker”, “immigrant” or “Italian” demonstrates that, as Brah argues, “woman” is not a unitary category:

“The sign “woman” has its own specificity constituted within and through historically specific configuration of gender relations” (Brah, 1996:103).

It is clear that it is not enough just to create a good women-oriented product without taking into consideration the context in which the woman/user lives and the specific requirements that a woman has. However, producers should also be aware that paying attention to “contexts” may not be sufficient to encourage the presence of women in cyberspace. Brah clarifies that:

“The same context may produce several different collective “histories”, differentiating as well as linking biographies through contingent specificities. In turn, articulating cultural practices of the subjects so constituted marks contingent collective “histories” with variable new meanings” (Brah, 1996:117).

Brah argues that how a person perceives or conceives an event varies according to how “she” is culturally constructed. For instance, Chen & Wellman argue that cultural idiosyncrasy is a possible reason for low Internet use and high mobile phone use in Italy. They mention Leo & Gabriele’s study, in which it is claimed that:

“Italy is a country in which personal relationships form the cornerstone of life and its daily transactions. The Internet is a global communication network for both individuals and business, where the personal loses its priority... the anonymity of the Internet would render them almost powerless and be counter to their culture” (Leo & Gabriele, 2000)⁹.

However, Chen & Wellman argue that no systematic evidence has been produced to assess this assertion. Yet I believe that my research findings constitute further evidence in support of Leo & Gabriele’s argument: Italians in London used the Web to replace the traditional community spaces such as the village square (Seganti, in press). Their aim was to reconstruct personal webs of relationships, and via Italianialondra.com they transformed anonymous cyberspace into a substitute for the family unit. One of

the respondents said:

“It is unavoidable and natural that the more the family extends, the more it lacks personality.”

This sentence is from an interview with a woman, Gina. She was explaining to me that relationships built through Italianialondra.com became depersonalized because the population of the virtual community had increased. Gina was worried about the future of the community since, in her opinion, Italianialondra.com was losing its cohesion and ability to create those intimate relationships that its participants, as “Italian”, “men”, “women”, “immigrants”, and “workers”, were in need of. The very sensitivity and social commitment that Gina as well as Nicoletta and Marinella demonstrated could constitute a resource to prevent depersonalization of the new Italian community in London. To reiterate, women’s presence in this kind of online community should be encouraged, and producers should provide them with the tools that might encourage their potential to “create intimacy and closeness, to communicate thoughts and impressions, to support and be supported, to connect” (Moyal¹⁰, 1992, Online). To this end, it is vital to analyse how collective “histories” are culturally constructed in the process of assigning meaning to everyday social relations.

Having analysed this dimension, the present study hopes to constitute a concrete support for an enrichment of our understanding and for the development of the Web for Italian women in London and to encourage the formation of new types of women’s online networks that have the potential to transform “local” conditions.

Notes

1. Katz, A. (1994) "Modern Butterfly: The Politics of Online Gender Building", *Voice*, March 15, quoted in O'Brien, 2000.
2. Pitkow & Recker, in Spender, D. (1995) *Netting on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace*. Ontario: Garamond Press, quoted in Brayton, 1999.
3. Gilbert, L. & Kile, C. (1996) *Surfer Girls*, Seattle: Seal Press, quoted in Brayton, 1999.
4. It emerged that most of the participants logged in to the virtual community and communicated online only in order to arrange appointments for business or social events such as pizza, Italian cinema and cabaret, or a football match. All these events took place in London. The Web emerges as a tool for reducing distances between the respondents and other Italians in the same city, whom they could see the same day they logged in to the website.
5. Through this analysis, I identified areas that could be further developed. I am aware that, having addressed the issue of gender with a particular aim in mind, the findings are partial and limited to a specific task. So, as the field of Gender Studies is very rich and complex, more questions are likely to be addressed and there might be other methods that would prove more fruitful for analysing online behaviour and gender in Italianalondra.com. As result, I feel that further studies are necessary to verify and extend my findings.
6. I ensured a level of diversity within the defined population. Diversity, as Ritchie & Lewis (2003:83) clarify, optimizes the chances of identifying the full range of factors or features that are associated with the phenomenon and allows some investigation of interdependency between variables such that those that are most relevant can be disengaged from those of lesser importance.
7. Gender switching occurs when in the virtual rooms people assume a gender identity that does not correspond to their biological sex.
8. World Economic Forum. (2002), *Annual Report of the Global Digital Divide Initiative*, Geneva: World Economic Forum.
9. Leo, A. & Gabriele, R. (2000) "Information Technology in Italy - Internet Diffusion". *Kogod of Business*, American University,

([Online]. Available at: <http://www.american.edu/carmel/rg4784a/page3.cfm>, quoted in Chen & Wellman (2003).

10. Moyal, A. (1992), "Women Calling! The Gendered Use of the Telephone" *TeleGeography*: 5-11 [Online]. Available at: <http://www.telegeography.com/>, quoted in Chen & Wellman (2003).

Bibliography

- APPADURAI, A. 1997. *Modernity at Large*, Minneapolis: Minnesota Press
- BRAH, A. 1996. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge.
- BRAYTON, J. 1999. "Women's Love/Hate Relationship with the Internet" in Markovic, I. (ed.) *Cyberfeminism*. Zagreb: Centre for Cultural Studies pp.193-202 [Online]. Available at: <http://www.unb.ca/web/> (Accessed: 1 April 2007)
- CHEN, W. & WELLMAN B. 2003. "Charting digital divides: comparing socioeconomic, gender, life stage, and rural Internet access and use in eight countries", in Dutton, W. et al. (eds.) *Transforming enterprise*, Cambridge: MIT
- FERRIS, S. 1996. "Women online: cultural and relation aspect of women's communication in online discussion groups", *Interpersonal Computing and Technology: An Electronic Journal for the 21st century* 4 (3-4) pp/29-40 [Online]. Available at: <http://www.helsinki.fi/science/optek> (Accessed: 1 April 2007)
- GEORGIU, M. 2002. "Diasporic Communities On-Line: A Bottom Up Experience of Transnationalism", *Hommes and Migrations*. Available at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/EMTEL/> (Accessed: 1 April 2007)
- HANAFI, S. 2001. "Reshaping the Geography: Palestinian Communities Networks in Europe and the New Media", *Second Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting*, 21-25 March, Firenze, Italy
- HERRING, S. 1994. "Gender difference in computer-mediated communication: bringing familiar baggage to the new frontier", American Library Association annual convention, Miami, 27 June, Available at: <http://cprs.org/cprs/gender/herring.txt> (Accessed 1 April 2007)

- KENNEDY, T., et. al. 2003. Gendering the digital divide, *IT&Society* 1 (5), pp.72-96 <http://www.ITandSociety.org>
- MANDAVILLE, P. 2003. Communication and diasporic Islam: A virtual ummah? in Karim, H.K. (ed.) *The Media of Diaspora*. London: Routledge, pp.136-147
- MORAHAN-MARTIN, J. 1998. "Women and Girls Last: Females and the Internet", *IRISS International Conference*, 25-27 March, Bristol, UK
- O'BRIEN, J. 2000. "Writing in the Body: Gender (Re)Production in Online Interaction", in Smith, A. C. & Kollock, P., *Communities in Cyberspace*. London and New York: Routledge, pp.76-104
- OLINTO, G. 2008. Gender Differences in Internet Use by Brazilian Students, in Sudweeks F., Hrachovec, H. & Ess C. (eds.) *Cultural Attitudes Towards Communication and Technology*, Australia: Murdoch University, pp.106-116
- RITCHIE, J. & LEWIS, J. 2003. *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage Publications
- SASSEN, S. 2002. Towards a Sociology of Information Technology., *Current Sociology* 50 (3) pp.365-388.
- SEGANTI, F.R. 2007). "Beyond Virtuality: the case of the latest generation of Italians in London and its use of cyberspace", *Altreitalia, Rivista internazionale di studi sulle popolazioni di origine italiana nel mondo*, 35 (July-December) pp.125-148
- SEGANTI, F. R. 2008. "Understanding the Role of the Web in Supporting Identity Construction Strategies of the latest generation of Italians in London", in Sudweeks F., Hrachovec, H. & Ess C. (eds.) *Cultural Attitudes Towards Communication and Technology*, Australia: Murdoch University, pp.431-445
- STONE, A. R. 2001. *The war of Desire and Technology at the close of the mechanical age*. London: MIT Press
- TSALIKI, L. 2003. Globalisation and Hybridity, the construction of Greekness on the Internet, in Karim, H.K. (ed.) *The Media of Diaspora*. London: Routledge, pp. 162-176
- WAJCMAN, J. 2002. Addressing Technological Change: The Challenge to Social Theory *Current Sociology*

Francesca Romana Seganti is PhD candidate in Communication and Media Studies, Department of Applied Social Sciences, "London Metropolitan University". She has recently completed her dissertation research titled "Building the Italian Diaspora online: the case of the latest generation of Italians in London and its presence on the Web". The author is carrying on a research itinerary began with her degree thesis in Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Human Sciences, Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza". Her topic: "New expressions of sociality in the new media age. An anthropological analysis on cultural change".

E-mail: frseganti@libero.it