Online communities as points of observation of the transnational migrant career: a case study on Italian immigrants in Toronto

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Online Communities as Points of Observation of the Transnational Migrant Career: a Case Study on Italian Immigrants in Toronto.

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the significance that social media plays in the lives of transnational migrants. Building on data collected during a six-month online/offline ethnography conducted among the members of a Facebook group for Italian migrants in Toronto, it is argued here that diasporic online communities provide a privileged location to capture the complex process of identity transformation undergone by migrants. Data suggests that research into online communities allows for a dynamic and adaptive understanding of the migratory experience capable of recognising the lives of migrants not just as the results of single events, but as trajectories that could help reach a better understanding of the evolution of life courses, as well as changes in social status.

Introduction

In Italy, the 2008 economic crisis generated – among other consequences – the reinvigoration of outbound migration, with a growing number of Italians leaving their homeland in search of better life opportunities. In 2012, the Italian citizens residing abroad represented the 7.3% of the Italian population as a whole, showing a 3.1% growth compared with the same data for the previous year (Fondazione Migrantes, 2013), confirming Italy as a nation interested in a twofold migration movement that sets the incoming immigrants against the Italians leaving their homeland. Yet, the most recent outbound of Italian migrants shows at least two innovative features if compared with previous waves of Italian immigration. First of all, the socio-demographic composition of the Italian migration has partially changed, showing an increasing number of young migrants (Tintori and Romei, 2017) looking for better opportunities abroad, while confirming the trend of college-educated and/or high-skilled workers (Istat, 2013; Tirabassi and Del Prà, 2014) leaving the country in search of employment both inside and outside the European Union. Secondly, the recent outbound migration is the first significant one to take place after the advent of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs), thus offering concrete possibilities to the new migrants to cultivate transnational identities (Bailey et al., 2008; Basch et al., 2005; Diminescu, 2008; Marino, 2015), while exploring new forms of social interactions and symbolic belonging

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(Castells, 2002) in the migratory context. The recent migratory flow of Italians does not exist in a void, but represents the latest manifestation of a broader socio-historical dynamic that commenced long before the advent of the Internet and digital media (Baldassar and Pyke, 2013; Gabaccia, 2013). As such, it is important to understand the significance of online communities as digitally mediated "cultural locations" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997) intersecting online and offline praxis (Rybas and Gajjala, 2007) rather than as mere expressions of the latest changes in communication technologies (Coleman, 2010; Moores, 2012; Morley, 2009).

Building on previous literature and using a multi-method qualitative approach, which includes participant observation of online and offline interactions among the members of a Facebook group for Italians living in Toronto, it is argued here that online communities serve as strategic locations where migrants perform their identities not only in relation to the specificities of their receiving society, but also in regard to their daily participation in the larger migratory social context (Rybas and Gajjala, 2007; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2007). As such, this empirical contribution aims to advance the development of a transnational framework for the study of migration capable of moving away from the study of large structural social dimensions (Freeman, 2007; Noble and Tabar, 2017) towards a more substantial observation of everyday transnational practices. This line of inquiry is directed at conceptualising the complex process of identity transformation (Vertovec, 2007) undergone by migrants during the settlement process. In particular, elaborating on the idea of "career" as proposed by Goffman (1970), online communities will be examined here as privileged locations where it is possible to observe the experiences of migrants not just as the result of a

sum of singular events happening in different locations but as trajectories expressing movement through life courses and changes in social status, thus allowing for a more accurate understanding of the migratory experience as a dynamic and adaptive process.

Digital media innovation in the migratory experience

There is a general consensus among migration scholars in defining the advent of the Internet as a definitive revolution for the history of human migration. Before the emergence of fast and convenient modes of communication and transportation, migration represented one of the most disruptive experiences in the lives of individuals. Separated from their homeland, removed from their culture and disconnected from their social relations, nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century migrants often had no other choice than to adapt to the habits and values embedded in the mainstream culture of their new social environment (Elias and Lemish, 2009; Hiller and Franz, 2004; Oh, 2016). However, with the spread of electronic communication technologies the forced segregation (both physical and relational), which until that point had defined the condition of migrants, diminished (Faist, 2010), opening up to new transformative opportunities for the redefinition of migrants' identities in the migratory context. In particular, digital media has enabled migrants to participate in communicative experiences capable of linking together in a previously unknown way (Landot, 2001) their societies of origin and of settlement, thus fostering the production and retention of new transnational identities (Appadurai, 1996; Castels, 2008; Bailey et al., 2007). Research literature outlines how digital communication technologies work as crucial facilitators in the

lives of the twenty-first century migrants. Firstly, ICT assists newcomers in gathering information on the receiving society, thus helping them to reduce their knowledge gap of the migratory context in a "continuum from macro issues (current events and politics) to micro information (everyday life, recent trends, practical information)" (Elias and Lemish, 2009: 538). Secondly, digital media allows migrants to individually define the adaptation process in their new social environment, helping them to select which elements are worthy of retaining from their home culture, and which ones are desirable of incorporation from their host environment (Mitra, 1997). Finally, ICTs appear to be a fundamental socialisation agency for migrants working strategically in reducing social alienation inside of the migratory context by promoting the constitution of deterritorialised online communities based on shared cultural identities and/or common interests (Bailey et al., 2007; Castells, 2002; Elias and Lemish, 2008; Georgiou, 2006; Giddens, 1990; Hiller and Franz, 2004; Marino, 2015; Komito, 2011; Oh, 2016).

Numerous scholars have described how online communities work as strategic locations for migrants who seek social support while experimenting with their newly formed transnational identities (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Hiller and Franz, 2004; Marino, 2015; Rheingold, 2000). Organised around the homeland as a fundamental common ground, online communities for migrants have often been described as providing a safe and sympathetic environment where members of even the most marginalised and small migrant communities can publicly discuss the sudden ruptures and discontinuities in their migratory experiences (Mitra, 1997) or seek material and emotional support while confronting the ordeals faced inside their host society. Furthermore, online communities have also been recognised as

playing a fundamental role within the settlement process as they help migrants in maintaining the balance of the "simultaneous and inextricable relationships" happening between here and there (Vertovec, 2007: 154), while offering social capital that could lead to offline advantages (Hiller and Franz, 2004). As such, it would be a mistake to consider online communities as social locations mostly detached from the rest of the migratory experience (Hiller and Franz, 2004). As a matter of fact, in order to reach a deeper comprehension of the settlement process of transnational migrants it is crucial to overcome the sharp separation between the offline and the online context (Beneito-Montagut, 2011) often perpetuated by migration scholars, recognising the two as intrinsically linked to one another (Hiller and Franz, 2004; Marino, 2015). In particular, if settlement into the migratory context should not be understood as a finite event (Galligan et al., 2014; Gomes, 2018), but as the result of a subjective and dynamic process influenced by time and experience, the same should be said for the affiliation of migrants to migrant-oriented online communities. As Hiller and Franz (2004) have demonstrated in their study on the usage of the Internet amongst migrants from Newfoundland, the evolution of the migration experience strongly affects the migrants' use of ITC. In particular, the two scholars have observed that different phases in the migration cycle correspond to different sets of usage of computer-mediated communication. What this paper aims to do is to push further their initial findings and argue that the migratory experience not only changes the way in which migrants use digital media but also reflects the different ways migrants perform their transnational identities inside their online communities of choice. More specifically, I will argue that online communities for migrants are social locations where it is possible to observe the unfolding of what could be called, borrowing from Goffman

(1970), the "career of the migrant". This concept, as Noble and Tobar (2014: 266) well illustrate, represents a powerful tool to investigate the experience of the transnational migrant as it is able to capture:

> …a movement through the life course and changes in social status. It is "moral" because it involves a sequence of changes in a person's sense of self and in their framework for judging themselves and others. Goffman's model allows us to move back and forth between the personal and the public, the self and society, to capture both the sense of trajectory which is significant here, the consequent shifts of social status and the importance of living and working in diverse social spaces, as a migrant must undergo to establish a viable life.

Far from being ideal spaces where members can interact and find support among equals, it will be demonstrated that online communities retain and reproduce most of the complexities and inequalities of the offline social world, leading to the emergence of a complex social dynamic in which different sets of identities are claimed, performed and challenged.

Study Context: Italian Immigration in Toronto

To better comprehend the object of this research it is important to take into consideration some of the specific characteristics of the Italian immigration in Toronto. The Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which includes the city of Toronto and four surrounding regional municipalities, comprises the largest Italian community in Canada, and one of the largest in the world. According to the 2016 Canadian National Census, there are currently just over a 100.000 first-generation Italians living just in the GTA. If second-generation Italians are included, the

overall figure is close to a million in a total population of just under 6.5 million. Italian migrants mainly arrived in Canada in two separate waves of immigration: between the 1880s and the beginning of the First World War, and then between the end of the Second World War and the early 1970s. Initially, the Italian migration was predominantly seasonal, with immigrants moving back and forth from the homeland or between different Canadian territories following employment opportunities. However, it did not take long before the first Italian settlements started to be established in major Canadian cities, creating a fertile ground for a more permanent type of migration. From that moment on, Italians moved to Canada mostly as a result of chain migration networks based on kinship (Harney, 1984). By the end of the 1970s the Italian economic boom and the consequent improvement of the living conditions in the country contributed to a significant reduction in outbound Italian migration, thus determining a substantial decrease in the number of new Italian immigrants landing in Canada. Accordingly to the Canadian National Census, 2016, in the 29 years between 1981 and 2010 just over 7000 Italian citizens settled into the GTA, a numeric tendency that seems to have been confirmed in most recent years. Nonetheless, the 2008 world economic crisis has had a profound impact on the already shaky Italian economy leading to growing pressure for Italians to leave the country to seek new employment opportunities abroad. In this scenario, temporary visa programs, such as the "International Experience Canada", have received unprecedented attention by young Italians eligible to apply. These programs, even if not intended to foster permanent forms of immigration, are often perceived by those who apply as a chance to find forms of employment that could lead to more stable forms of work sponsorship.

As a result of its longevity and size, the Italian community in the GTA represents a well-established group that has marked its presence in the area in several different ways. First of all, the Italian migration in Toronto is *spatially visible*. The city of Toronto and the surrounding municipalities count four different "little Italies": the College Street area in central Toronto, the neighbourhood of Corso Italia in the north-west of the city, and the two suburbs of Woodbridge and Vaughan (De Biase, 2012). These ethnic enclaves are populated by a large number of first - and second - generation Italians and provide Italian migrants with a wide range of ethnic commodities (food stores, shops, restaurants, cafes…) and Italian-speaking services (doctors, lawyers, real estates, churches, etc.). Secondly, in the GTA there is a large presence of *Italian-owned companies* mostly, but not only, operating in food services or construction. The story of the Italians living in Toronto is largely presented as a successful experience of integration: economic upliftment has often been described as one of the distinctive features of the Italian community (De Biase, 2012) with the Italo-Canadian population presented "as not only family-oriented but also as noble, hard-working people" (Amatiello, 2012: 74). Thirdly, through the years Italians have established a wide range of *community media.* Among others, Omni Television, a multilingual/multicultural media outlet owned by Roger Communication – one of the largest Canadian media outlets – offers daily newscasts and TV–programs in Italian. Similarly, the Italian frequency of CHIN radio is greatly appreciated by the members of the Italian community; it is almost impossible to enter an Italian-owned establishment in the city without a CHIN radio program broadcasting in the background. *Corriere Canadese*, a previously paper based – now online based – newspaper, has also played a central role in keeping Italian migrants informed on both Canadian and

Italian affairs. Finally, the Italian community is very active in the *promotion of the Italian culture* in Toronto. Numerous relevant initiatives are being organised by a number of regional and national Italian cultural associations and institutions all over the GTA. In particular, each June several initiatives are organized as part of Ontario's "Italian Heritage Month". Among others, the Italian Embassy, the Italian Chamber of Commerce of Ontario and other local institutions celebrate the Italian National Day at Casa Loma, a Toronto premier heritage location, with a series of events involving food, art installations, and music in the presence of Italian celebrities. Also in June, Toronto holds the largest Italian Film Festival outside Italy, the Italian Contemporary Film Festival (ICFF), which features contemporary Italian films, documentaries, and shorts. Homeland represents a fundamental symbolic anchor (Cohen, 1997; Faist, 2000; Safran, 1991; Van Hear, 1998) in the events held by these organisations. Italian food, cinema and the arts are among the most celebrated aspects of an Italian way of life that is often, but not always, presented permeated by a "sense of ethnic nostalgia which perpetuates both ethnic stereotypes and sentimentality" (Amatiello, 2012: 64).

Methodology

The present research is based on data collected combining online and offline ethnography. More specifically, the researcher followed the conversations held in a Facebook group called *Italiani a Toronto* for a six-month period between April and September 2014. This specific online community was chosen as it presents several of the preconditions identified by Kozinets (2010) in his seminal work on how to conduct online ethnography. In particular, the

group appears to be: a) relevant, as at the time it had more than 2,200 members representing the largest online community of Italian migrants in the GTA, and one of the largest in Canada; b) active, with an average of two new posts published every-day that regularly generated numerous comments; c) interactive, as the posts and comments often provoked the beginning of articulated discussions among the members of the community; d) substantial, as the group could rely on a base of "expert" contributors who steadily participated in the conversations; e) heterogeneous, as *Italiani a Toronto* attracts members with very different backgrounds and socio-demographic characteristics; f) and, lastly, rich in descriptive data. In addition to these components, *Italiani a Toronto* emerged as an interesting case study as it presents both an online and an offline component, a factor that was considered particularly important to observe the production of migrant identities at the intersection of everyday online and offline praxis (Rybas and Gajjala, 2007). More specifically, the community of users of *Italiani a Toronto* organised – on a voluntary basis - numerous social gatherings such as weekly nights out in a pub, brief daily excursions to visit local attractions, social dinners at local Italian restaurants, group participation in local events, as well as home-gatherings and holiday barbeques. During these occasions, the members of the community have the opportunity to meet and develop new friendships, thus exploring the opportunity for the formation of more intimate social circles. It should be noted that when the observation was initially started *Italiani a Toronto* was administered as an open group, meaning that the contents of the group were public to anyone who was on Facebook. During the course of the observation, as a result of complex dynamics that will be presented later in this paper, the privacy of the group changed from open to closed, making the contents available only to group members.

The researcher's observation of the group was overt. Before the fieldwork commenced the group administrators were contacted and asked for their permission to observe the community. As a result, a disclaimer was pinned as evidence on the group's Facebook page to inform the members of the community about the presence of the researcher, her affiliation and the length of the observation period. A brief outline of the purposes of the research was provided, as well as the call for people willing to be interviewed for the study. The email of the researcher was also included for the members seeking additional information, or for those interested in further participating in the study. Alongside the online observation, 25 face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted. The initial participants were recruited among the most active users of the group, as well as the result of the expressions of interest generated by the post pinned in the group. A snowball sampling was employed, with the researcher asking the first respondents to refer other participants among their contacts. All the interviews were conducted in Italian and collected at a place of choice of the participants (cafes, homes, university studio, office) between June and September 2014. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. The average length of the recordings ranged from 42 minutes to over 3 hours; the extended duration of the interviews probably reflects the interest of the participants in participating in the study. Despite having been given the possibility to participate anonymously, all the participants gave their permission to use their names and as a result, the given names of the participants in the interviews are correctly reported in the text. On the other hand, when a piece of conversation was extrapolated from a conversation held in the group the names of the participants were anonymised. Despite the small number of interviews, the researcher met with saturation and redundancy in the data

collected, thus concluding that additional interviews were unlikely to add any more significant insight to the study. All the data was analysed using an interpretative approach aimed at reaching that "thick description" capable of unveiling the "stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures" (Geertz, 1973: 6) of a social phenomena. In particular, recurrent themes in the interviews and in the posts were identified, compared and regrouped into specific categories of meanings. Data triangulation, including the use of field notes to record reflections after the interviews, assured the collection of data that could capture the complexities of online social interactions (Beneito-Montagut, 2011).

Findings

The online community of *Italiani a Toronto* brings together a highly heterogeneous group of people of various ages, backgrounds and migratory experiences. As happens for other online communities, *Italiani a Toronto* attracts different kinds of users and reflects highly diversified sets of needs and levels of participation (Baym, 2015; Marino, 2015). The conversations held in the group cover a vast array of topics, from politics (both Italian and Canadian) to the organisation of social events, but the largest bulk of posts are generated by users seeking specific information either on everyday practicalities (e.g. advice on how to obtain a driving license, suggestions on health insurance, enquiries about living expenses, etc.), or advice on immigration policies and opportunities (e.g. requests about how to obtain a work visa or a sponsorship, generic information on work opportunities for specific professions, application times for different visa programs etc.). At first sight, *Italiani a Toronto* appears as a social

space relatively free of conflict. Most of the interactions occurring among community members are polite and the group seems to be inspired by a genuine interest to provide a safe and friendly environment for all participants. However, a closer look at the messages posted on *Italiani a Toronto* surrounding sensitive topics such as politics, migration or the advantages and disadvantages of living in Canada, shows that the community is often intersected by heated exchanges frequently degenerating into ad hominem attacks. In particular, what surfaces is the presence of a substantial conflict regarding the identity and the mission of the community itself, proving *Italiani a Toronto* to be a highly disputed space among its members. For example, a post presenting the 10 reasons not to move to Toronto received 291 comments alone in less then 3 days, leading to fierce exchanges among some of the members of the community resulting in user intimidation and derision. In particular, a small group of commentators suggested that the current generation of migrants from Italy has a particularly difficult time in obtaining legal permission to stay in Canada as a result of the persisting association between Italians and Mafia organisations. Moreover, some members went further in suggesting that a few national groups of migrants had taken control of some of the key offices in Canada, thus actively advancing the applications of their fellow nationals at the expense of others. Those who opposed this vision were ridiculed and ostracised from the conversation as could be seen in the passage below:

S.: If you look closely it is just *them*: at the airport, at customs, at the driving schools. It is just *them*.
P.: Do you find this annoying?

G: I know that this state of things does not bother you P., but the "*Moroccans*"[1] here it is us. It is sad to say but it is true.

P.: I am not used to judging people on the basis of their skin colour, or on the way they dress, or on the God they pray to, or on the partner they have chosen to spend their life with.

S.: Or the smell they make. Lol.

N.: Paola would like for all of us just to move back to Italy, right?

Giancarlo: Because she never minds her own business. It's she that is racist towards us: not the other way around.

(Extract from a conversation in the group, April 2014)

Notably, *Italiani a Toronto* is a place where identities are continuously claimed and negotiated, reflecting not only "ways of being" in the migratory experience, but also "ways of belonging" residing in the emergence of "practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrate a conscious connection to a particular group" (Levitt and Glick Shiller, 2007: 187). In particular, the members of *Italiani a Toronto* can be categorised into four distinct groups of users, each of which incorporates different sets of roles and occupies a distinctive social place in the larger social context of the migratory experience.

The Italo-Canadians, or the Old Generation

The *Old Generation* loosely comprises all those Italians who migrated to Toronto prior to the beginning of the 1980s, hence well before the advent of the Internet and of social media. Their presence in the community of *Italiani a Toronto* and their participation in the group's life is

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[1] *Moroccan* is here used in a derogatory way that in the past was often used to point out Italian immigrants from Southern Italy and from countries of the Mediterranean basin.

virtually null. The very few members of the *Old Generation* active in the group are solely involved as administrators. As such, they mostly step in when they need to solve specific controversies raised among individuals, thus positioning themselves well outside the daily conversations and interactions carried on in the group. Despite not being particularly active, the *Old Generation* plays an extremely important role for all the members of the *Italiani a Toronto*'s community. In fact the Italo-Canadians work symbolically as a mirror for the most recent Italian immigration as they are constantly used as a reference to mark the profound separation that crosses the different generations of Italian migrants living in Toronto. In particular, according to the newest members of the Italian immigration, the *Old Generation* presents very distinctive sets of dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984) towards the Italian culture, the Italian national identity and the overall migratory experience. According to participants, these dispositions set them fundamentally apart from the rest of the Italian migrants. In particular the *Old Generation* is often described as the product of a historicised form of migration of low-skilled uneducated workers that do not have much in common with the often highly educated and/or trained new generation of Italian migrants:

Let's say it. The Italo-Canadians have a culture very different from ours, really different! Just to give you an example, I had to christen my younger daughter and so we went off looking for party favours. In Italy, we like to make something simple and elegant, while here I was presented with all these shiny and elaborate things and everybody was telling me "We are Italians, we really love these things: why don't you like them? Aren't you Italian?" I wanted just to tell them "Yes, I am Italian! But I am a contemporary Italian, not one coming right out of the 40s or the 60s!"This is the reason why I went online looking for a place where I could find Italians like me (Extract of interview with Elena, June 2014).

Moreover, the *Old Generation* is often accused of not being able to sympathise with the struggles of the newcomers. The Italo-Canadians are often deemed unwilling to share their social end economic capital to offer proper opportunities to those who have just recently moved to Toronto:

> The community up there [in Woodbridge] is mostly composed of post-war migrants. (…) A lot of people there have a very negative idea of Italy since it is in Canada that they have found a way of making a living, where they have formed a family and where they have lived for most of their lives. The idea they have of the wave of young people that have recently arrived from Italy is that of a bunch of desperate people seeking any job to let them secure a better future. This is true, in a way, but they are very much convinced that in Italy everyone is a cheater and that the country is beyond salvation (Extract of interview with Arianna, June 2014).

The *Old Generation* is often associated with an out-of-date understanding of a country that has profoundly changed both culturally and socially since they left it. As a result, the younger generation of Italian migrants reclaim *Italiani a Toronto* as a social space where they can meet and discuss with people who they perceive as equals and as being likeminded:

> I think that ["*Italiani a Toronto*"] is a group that is mostly dedicated to those who have just recently decided to migrate, or are planning to do so. (…) As such, in the group you can find a much deeper understanding of the present-day Italian culture, as opposed to what you can find in the older community of Italians living in Toronto. For work, I have had the opportunity to get to know a lot of people who have been living in Toronto since the end of World War II. I have always spoken highly

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of them, as they have come here with nearly nothing. I have always respected them. However, I realise that they have a rather nostalgic and old-fashion understanding of our country (Extract of interview with Luca, July 2014).

The In-betweeners

Even if the *In-betweeners* are not numerically a majority in *Italiani a Toronto*, they surely appear among the most active contributors of the community, persistently engaging in the group's discussions either by opening up new posts or by participating in conversations started by others. The *In-betweeners* are the members of that group of Italians who decided to migrate to Canada after the 80s, but before the beginning of the financial crisis of 2007-2008, settling in Toronto in a historical time characterised by very low immigration pressure from EU countries. Many *In-betweeners* decided to move to Canada following professional opportunities, and then chose to settle permanently in the country. Others arrived in Toronto following their Canadian partner, while only a small minority migrated as a result of the perceived social and economic shortcomings faced in Italy. Having spent many years in Canada, the *In-betweeners* are usually well settled, they have good jobs and proper housing and have often started a family of their own in Toronto. Their migratory position is also generally secure: those who are not yet Canadians are living in Canada as Permanent Residents and as such are not limited by the work restrictions of other visa programs. Most of the *In-betweeners* have solid relationships with the older generation of Italian migrants; many have relatives in Toronto or are strongly connected professionally or socially with members of the local Italo-Canadian community. However, most of the *In-betweeners* that joined *Italiani a Toronto* did so as they felt the need to fill a void in their offline life (Elias and

Lemish, 2008) looking for a more meaningful connection with Italians of more recent immigration who they recognised as more similar and likeminded then the members of the old Italo-Canadian community.

> Even if I have been in Toronto for many years now I have just recently decided to join *Italiani a Toronto*. I did so because I realised that, beside the network of Italian people that I had the opportunity to met through my wife's family, I did not know any other Italians in the city. I've lived here for many years without knowing any other Italians like me, but it has to be said that until 2012 I was frequently going back and forth from Italy for work. I did not really need to interact with other Italians here as I was spending most of my free time with my Italo-Canadian family. But as soon as I broke my professional connection with my Italian company I felt the urgent need to meet Italians like me (Extract of interview with Fabio, July 2014).

Since the affiliation with *Italiani a Toronto* of the *In-betweeners* is mostly driven by the willingness to establish a relationship with others, many of them spend a considerable amount of their online time discussing topics related to life in the GTA, commenting the most recent Italian political and economic news and offering help to those seeking advice or guidance. The *In-betweeners* represent an invaluable source of information especially for the most recent members of the Italian immigration in Toronto as they often offer plenty of suggestions as to where to find the best ethnic services (restaurants, hairdressers, entertainment), and provide those who are struggling with immigration with first-hand accounts of their experiences dealing with Canadian bureaucracy (and with the immigration process). However, the relationship among the *In-betweeners* and the other members of *Italiani a Toronto* is not often

easy, showing a "conscious connection" linking them as a group separated from the others (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2007: 189)

> I cannot really explain it, but in this community there is a strong split between those who have just recently moved to Toronto and those of us who have been here for several years now. When you live in a foreign country you change, you start looking at things differently. Those who just arrived here are incapable of seeing the cultural differences of this country, or they don't want to. They resist change while they should be more open and give this place the possibility it deserves (Extract of interview with Paola, June 2014).

The *In-betweeners* usually strenuously defend the Canadian lifestyle, and as a result they harshly condemn those who criticise some aspects of it usually showing great adherence to Canadian multicultural society (De Biase, 2014). They express detached and de-romanticised feelings towards the homeland; Italy in their posts is often depicted as a country that offers no opportunities or perspectives, while Canada is usually presented as the country they have chosen for themselves and their families. For example, a post where a newcomer to Toronto asked where it was possible to find a "good loaf of Italian bread" triggered a long and harsh discussion among several members of the community, with some of the *In-betweeners* animatedly urging the members of the most recent Italian immigration to seek a more meaningful cultural experience in their migration process, embracing the numerous opportunities offered by their Canadian life:

> R.: Bread, coffee, sauce, bread-dipping. You look for everything that is Italian. If you aren't all mama's boys you surely are Italy's boys. It is time for you all to grow up. You should leave your zone of

comfort, adapt to your new home. Taste your own sauce, make your own coffee and your own bread. I assure you will enjoy it the most.

P.C.: Especially as here we can earn our living serenely and with dignity. I am really happy about living in Canada and when I feel the need I just take a plane and fly back to Italy (Extract from a conversation in the group, April 2014).

The Newcomers

The group of *Newcomers* comprises those members of *Italiani a Toronto* who have only recently moved to the city, often as a result of the impact that the 2007-2008 economic crisis had on European economies. Even if some *Newcomers* are Canadian Permanent Resident holders or Canadian citizens by familiar ties, most of them are living in Toronto either on a Working Holiday Visa, or on a temporary Work Visa. As a result, the migratory status of this specific group of migrants is characterised by a high instability (Giddens, 1990), which is also reflected in their approach and participation in the community of *Italiani a Toronto*. As a matter of fact, *Newcomers* are often a discontinuous presence in the community; they generally post messages when in need of information (Chen and Choi, 2001) or to respond to networking opportunities with other Italians, while they mostly refrain from interacting in messages posted by others. This discontinuity in participation could be seen as the result of at least two different factors. On the one hand, *Newcomers* have a limited time at their disposal to be on the Internet as they often dedicate a large amount of their downtime looking for more stable working positions, or ways to enter into more secure visa programs. On the other hand, most *Newcomers* posses little knowledge of Toronto and/or of the immigration process, and as such the quality and quantity of information they can share with others is limited:

As someone who has just moved here I think that one of the strengths of *Italiani a Toronto* is the fact that the group is animated by a lot of people who have a great knowledge of this city and of this country; people who can be helpful to others with their knowledge. I am not talking about me, I am talking about those who have been here for years now and can offer a lot of valuable information (Extract of interview with Ambra, August 2014).

Like the *In-betweeners,* the *Newcomers* also feel mostly disconnected from the older generation of Italo-Canadians. In particular, many *Newcomers* like to operate a distinction between their specific type of migration and the one that has characterised the older generation of Italians:

I have met many Italians who arrived in Toronto after 2005 who do not feel to have anything in common with the Italian community that previously immigrated here. They really feel different from them. I have talked with these people and I have asked, "But don't you think you're an immigrant? Aren't you an Italian immigrant in Canada?" They don't like being defined as migrants; they don't feel as though they belong to the Italian community in Toronto. If you ask them they mostly answer "I am simply an Italian living and working in Toronto" (Extract of interview with Andrea, July 2014).

Unlike most of the *In-betweeners*, *Newcomer*s often lament their living conditions in Canada, as well as some aspects of the Canadian lifestyle. They have a very emotional relationship with the homeland (Marino, 2015). Even if most *Newcomers* feel some anger/sadness towards Italy, which is often described as a country that has failed them, they also share a pervasive homesickness for their birth country that is described as unmatchable for beauty and lifestyle.

Frequently being accused of lacking adaptability, *Newcomers* often complain that the previous generations of Italian immigrants affiliated to *Italiani a Toronto* lack empathy towards their struggle, failing to provide the emotional and material support they need:

> I feel that sometimes there is not so much willingness to help those who are new in town from those who have been here for a while. So, is *Italiani a Toronto* a helpful community? Not always, no (Extract of interview with Partrizia, July 2014).

Since the migratory career of most *Newcomers* is so precarious, many leave, or chase the opportunity to be active members of the community of *Italiani a Toronto*, making their participation in the group's life highly unstable.

The Wannabees

The *Wannabees* are those members of *Italiani a Toronto* that are planning to move to the city at some point in the nearest future but are not yet living in the city. As such, the *Wannabees* are a rather heterogeneous group of users that comprises those who are already in the process of leaving for Toronto, and are looking online for useful information to give them the best start to life in Canada, and those who are just looking for general advice on the migratory experience. The participation by this group of members in the community is frequent, but the motivation is mostly utilitarian as they post their questions or requests for advice and often never interact in the group again.

The admission of the *Wanabees* to *Italiani a Toronto* has been the focus of many discussions among other users, revealing a profound divergence among the *In-betweeners* and the

Newcomers on the mission of the community. In particular, the *In-betweeners* preferred admitting into the community only those who are already in Toronto, claiming the necessity to strictly adhere to the mission of the group of creating a space for the Italians living in Toronto:

> I think that *Italiani a Toronto* has failed its mission. It has turned out to be a website used by many Italians who hope to come to live in Canada and as such they are asking members of the group for information on how to find a job or on how to apply for a work permit. This is not the reason why the group was initially created: the aim of the group was connecting those Italians who are already in Toronto, a space where it was possible to get to know those who were here and know what they were doing (Extract of interview with Andrea, July 2014).

On the other hand, the *Newcomers* were very keen for the group to be kept open to everyone, claiming the need for safeguarding a space where everyone who is looking for an opportunity to move to Toronto is welcomed, respected and, possibly, helped:

> I am really annoyed by those who answer the questions of those who are not yet in Toronto in a rude and contentious way. They are in Canada and they have acquired a status in this country. They are strong in their status here. That's why I get angry when people are rude to those who are in Italy and would like to move here. I don't think it is correct. Those who are rude today were once in the same position as those who now are asking questions. I think that those who want to move here deserve respect, as they are probably in some kind of distress (Extract of interview with Luca, July 2014).

Conclusions

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We are not the traditional Italian migrants, we are… something different. We may be originally from

the same nation and we may share part of our culture, but we are probably more similar to a Canadian

than to an Italian migrant of the old generation (Extract of interview with Elena).

This paper contributes to the study of identity transformation among transnational migrants by looking at online communities for migrants as privileged locations where identities are claimed, performed and negotiated. The underlying assumption is that transnational migrants make themselves homes by connecting different locations in an endless back and forth between the offline and online. Within this framework, *Italiani a Toronto* proves to be an especially interesting case study as the online community is strictly linked to a geographical location, the GTA, where the Italians have deep historical roots and have established a strong cultural and social identity over the years. However, evidence indicates that most of the Italians affiliated to *Italiani a Toronto* share a common discomfort in being associated with the oldest generation of the Italo-Canadians. In particular, the data suggests that even if different generations of migrants are anchored to a shared national background, the "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) that symbolically links the members of the Italian immigration to their national and cultural identity does not always coincide, and is often a source of conflict. The social locations where the Italian immigration traditionally showcases its cultural identity are felt inadequate by the newest generations of Italian migrants, pushing them to look elsewhere to find a social space capable of representing and incorporating their instances and their experiences. In this separated location the most recent participants in the Italian immigration feel freer to perform their national and cultural

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identities, and recover an otherwise lost sense of affinity and authenticity. The members of *Italiani a Toronto* use the community to ask for a vast array of information, to voice their discontent, to socialise with likeminded Italians, and more importantly to claim their own identity pledging their "ways of belonging" (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2007). As such, *Italiani a Toronto* is far from being a safe haven (Marino, 2015) where everyone is welcomed and respected in the same way. The decision to change the privacy of the group from "open" to "private" is very explicative of the power held by a group of members in successfully advancing their request to distance the community from those Italians who have not yet settled in Toronto. As happens for the "offline world" differences in social status emerge inside online communities, unveiling an entrenched system of inequalities which reflects uneven distributions of social and cultural capital. This asymmetry in power distribution is clearly recognisable in the social organisation of the community, and is well reflected in the highly polarised and antagonistic conversation surrounding the quality of the migratory experience in the GTA that is constantly renewed among the members of the group. As the data has shown, through their affiliation to online communities migrants organise themselves not just around a common national belonging or a shared culture, but participate in the creation of innovative alliances between other members of the community who they recognise as being at a similar stage of the migratory career (Goffman, 1972). These alliances reproduce internal hierarchies and allow for the adoption of a transnational social field perspective (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2007) thus permitting a more dynamic analysis of what it means to be a "migrant" in a unique moment of time and at a specific stage of the migratory experience.

Addendum

According to the data released by Fondazione Migrantes (2018), between 2012 and 2017 more than 700,000 Italian citizens have permanently settled abroad, confirming the trend of Italians leaving the homeland to seek better life opportunities overseas. In the past five years, the community of *Italiani a Toronto* has consequently kept growing, reaching in September 2019 almost 5000 members. This was despite the group still being managed as a closed group on Facebook. Only a small portion of the members who actively participated in the group in 2012 are still active at the present time. Of those who are still active, most belonged to the group of the *In-betweeners* at the time when this research was conducted. Many of the *Newcomers* who were interviewed for this work, or who participated in the community back in 2012, do not reside in Toronto anymore. A large majority has moved back to Italy, while others have moved to a different country to keep pursuing their quest for a better life abroad. However, some of the *Newcomers* who were involved in this research are still living in Toronto, even if none of them appear to be currently active in the group. Interestingly, none of the participants who were interviewed for this research have left the community yet, whatever their actual country of residence may be. Despite the turnover in the contributors, *Italiani a Toronto* remains a very active group, with several posts generated in the community every week. As happened in 2012, the members of *Italiani a Toronto* use the group to organize social events, to ask for information and advices, to discuss specific issues or current events and, maybe even more importantly, to look for people who they perceive as similar to them in order to ease the settlement process and create new meaningful connections.

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