

# Social media implementation in higher education institutions between mimicry and professionalism

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Social media are a worldwide phenomenon that is affecting the everyday life of individuals, organizations and public administrations (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011; Mergel, 2013; Tess, 2013; Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2016). The number of individuals with an internet connection available on their mobile phone has increased by 26,4% in the last two years (Nielsen, 2016). This has rendered social media accessible every time and from everywhere. Also organizations, with reference to both private enterprises and public administrations, have entered the social media wave, with several practitioner reports and academic discussions catalysed around this topic (e.g. Ernst and Young, 2016; Harvard Business Review, 2016; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2016).

Higher education institutions are not immune to this phenomenon (e.g. Moran et al., 2011). Studies on social media in higher education institutions are flourishing, with several scholars investigating students' perceptions about social media and the universities activities that social media can support, often through explorative empirical analysis (e.g. Junco et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2013; Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2013; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2016). Within this context, a lot of attention has been devoted to the activities supported by social media (e.g. teaching support, marketing support, job placement support) and their effects. Little is known about the implementation process that has lead universities to adopt social media to favour some university activities. This study wants to contribute to the current debate on social media in higher education by posing the emphasis on "why" social media are adopted and "how" they are implemented. This study investigates the implementation process that universities face when they decide to introduce social media channels. More specifically, the following research questions have been set: 1) why do higher education institutions adopt social media; 2) how is the social media decision translated into an everyday practice; 3) what are the approaches of social media use by higher education institutions?

This investigation about the social media implementation process has been framed within the neo institutional theory, with particular reference to the notion of normative, coercive and mimetic isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983). According to this view, organizations strive for similarities and adopt the same practice as a response to external pressures. We have not found social media studies endorsing this lens, but our choice to rely on institutional isomorphism is driven by its extensively adoption in similar studies that investigate the implementation process of a new practice

(e.g. e.g. Grandlung, 2001; Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2011; Azzone and Palermo, 2011; Maroung and van Zijl, 2016). Following these available studies, the implementation process has been framed into three different phases: adoption, design and use.

From a methodological perspective, we endorsed a multiple case study conducted in 17 Italian Universities during the years 2014-2015. We conducted 34 semi-structured interviews, 2 workshops with the involved participants, analysed social media reports and social media pages.

Results show three different patterns of social media implementation, addressed as mimicry, professionalism and nested patterns, characterized by different pressures for social media adoption, different design practices and a variety of uses. However, some common trends among universities were also emerging: limited availability of resources for social media activities, difficulties in distinguishing between official and non-official accounts and central role of social media professionals.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: available literature on social media in universities will be first analysed, posing particular emphasis on those investigations centred on experiences of implementation. Section three introduces the theoretical lens of institutional isomorphism, which have been here adopted in connection to the adoption, design and use phase of social media implementation. The methodology of analysis will be described in section four, followed by results, structured around the three different phases about social media implementation. The last sections of discussion and conclusion highlight the general themes emerged from the case study in connection with the social media implementation process, highlighting the contribution to theory and impact on practice.

## **2. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN UNIVERSITIES**

### *2.1 Social Media definition*

Social media is a continuous growing phenomenon worldwide at the organizational and at the individual level. Under the social media label, a variety of tools are identified such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube or Snapchat. Each of these tools has specific functionalities; for example, Facebook is the most diffuse and generalist social networking site, Twitter allows a 140-character text and is defined as a micro-blog service; LinkedIn is widespread among businesses with the intent to create professional connections; Instagram supports photo sharing, while YouTube video sharing. Yet they all share three basic functionalities that connects all these tools under the social media label: two-ways interaction, real time connection, and user generated content.

The first distinctive feature is that whatever type of social media allows a two way and synchronous interaction among the parties (Bertot et al., 2012). This characteristic has changed the on line communication paradigm that has moved from a one way and broadcasting information flow to a two-ways and dialogic communication between the parties (Solis, 2008). This feature has been widely exploited by local administration to enhance participatory dialogue with citizens (e.g. Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2016).

The second distinctive feature concerns the real time availability of social media. These tools are available, with an internet connection, 24/7 allowing everyone to post content from everywhere. These characteristic has dramatically speed up several organizational and business processes (Gandomi and Haider, 2015), posing also several problems for organizations to internally organize the profession of social media manager, who should be available 24/7.

The third characteristic is related to the possibility for user to generate content on line (Kietzmann et al. 2011; Chun and Luna-Reyes 2012). This user generation of the social media content has facilitated the creation of networks of users; for example, wikis, like Wikipedia, are based on the idea to value users' contribution to share knowledge. Moreover, giving users the possibility to provide their own contribution, the differences between the parties have been blurred with organizations and consumers posed at the same level when engaged in a social media conversation.

In this study, we focus on social media in higher education institutions. The next section will address the available literature in this field.

## *2.2 Social media studies in higher education*

Several studies in higher education have addressed social media within the university realm (e.g. Moran et al., 2011; Junco et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2013; Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2013; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2016). The majority of these contributions are explorative in nature and they rely on empirical investigations, mainly through cases studies or experiments, conducted in higher education institutions. These available studies explore two different aspects connected with social media: the types of university activities supported by social media and social media perceptions by students and staff.

The first stream of research is interested in investigating universities activities that can be supported by social media, such as teaching support, marketing and communication, or job placement. The majority of the retrieved studies have investigated the contribution of social media to teaching activities, by exploring their contribution to the learning process (e.g. Junco et al., 2012; Welch and Bonnan-White, 2012; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2016) and the extent of use by students (Lin et al., 2013). In this respect, it has been found that social media are intensively used by students at the beginning

of the course, but then gradually reduced (Lin et al., 2013). Moreover, while students using social media were found to be more engaged than those that do not use these tools and their adoption was found not connected with students' results. A second type of activity supported by social media consists of marketing and communication activities with social media being conceived as a commercial platform (Constantinides and Stagno, 2012; Spiller and Tuten, 2015). In this respect, social media have been found powerful in supporting the pre-admission activities of students, given that prospects students use to search on social media for advices about their future choices; communication through social media at this stage was therefore highlighted as a crucial issue for universities (Khanna et al., 2014). Another activity supported by social media concerns job placement, with social media being highlighted as a powerful tool to support career services in creating career communities within and outside the university campus (Dey and Cruzvergara, 2014). The second stream of studies instead is centred on students and staff perceptions of social media. As far as the perception of social media by students is concerned, by the study by Hurt et al (2012) highlights students' satisfaction in connection with Facebook usage to interact with classmates sharing university experiences. Another investigation has provided evidence that introvert students perceive social media as helpful in supporting their collaborative activities with their peers (Voorn and Kommers, 2013). At a general level, available contributions about students' perception of social media are positive (Venkatesh et al., 2014). This is instead not the case when moving to the perception by university staff. The study by Roblyer et al. (2010) compared the Facebook perception in classroom works by students and faculty members: while the former were found more open and incline to rely on this tool, faculty members preferred traditional technologies. The negative attitude towards social media by the staff was also confirmed in the study by Veletsianos and Kimmons (2013), who investigated the extent of social media use by faculty staff and they found a tension between their personal connections and professional responsibility given by the existence of official social networking sites and individual staff accounts, which are often not perceived as separated by students.

These prove the continuous diffusion of social media in higher education institutions and the variety of activities supported by these tools. Yet, the issue about why and how social media have been implemented is rather vague, and not directly addressed by the existent investigation.

This paper focuses on the social media implementation process in universities, by investigating the following research questions: 1) why do higher education institutions adopt social media; 2) how is the social media decision translated into an everyday practice; 3) what are the approaches of social media use by higher education institutions

### **3. NEO INSTITUTIONAL THEORY AND ISOMORPHISMS**

Social media implementation is here investigated through the theoretical lens of neo institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) with particular reference to the notion of isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983)

Neo institutional theory found its roots in the seminal paper by Meyer and Rowan (1977), who argue that organizations tend to resemble with each other, not because of internal objectives or requirements, but in the attempt to obtain legitimacy from the external environment. Their basis assumption is that organizations acted, not in order to improve efficiency or effectiveness, but change processes, and organizational actions at a more general level, are the results of pressures coming from the external environment. Organizations reacted to these pressures in order to achieve legitimacy often giving rise to a decoupling between formal structures and actual practices in use.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) further elaborated on this theme by developing the notion of isomorphism to describe a context where organizations strive for similarities: “organizations tend to model themselves after similar organizations in their field that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 152).

In particular, three different types of isomorphism have been identified: coercive, normative and mimetic. Coercive isomorphism occurs when formal and informal pressures are exerted on organization, often in the presence of an external government mandate. For example, when a new governmental imposition is set, organizations will become similar since they depend upon the same regulation. Normative isomorphism is connected to professionalism. Professionals, with their associations, skills and education produce a common cognitive ground that render organizations similar with each other. Mimetic isomorphism instead is triggered by uncertainty: “when goals are ambitious, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty, organizations may model themselves on other organizations” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991: 69).

The underlying assumptions behind these three patterns is that external pressures push organizations to resemble others in the same field explaining homogeneous organizations.

Neo Institutional theory, and in particular the notion of isomorphism, have been widely adopted in studies about change management to investigate the reasons behind a change process (e.g. Grandlung, 2001; Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2011; Azzone and Palermo, 2011; Maroung and van Zijl, 2016).

Although we are not aware about studies that endorse the same perspective to investigate social media implementation, we choose this perspective since it is aligned with the research objective to explore the reasons behind social media adoption.

Furthermore, relying on available studies rooted in the neo institutionalism, we frame the process of social media adoption around three main phases: adoption, design and use (Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2011).

The adoption phase is the moment in which the decision to introduce social media is made, which implies to account for both the reason behind the adoption and the organizational role that has driven the decision. The design phase translates the previous decision into operative plans. At this level, resources are mobilized, a social media plan and social media policy are expected to be set. Moreover, we expect to find also a leading actor in charge to drive the previous decision about social media adoption. The use phase is instead related to the everyday practices adopted on social media in terms of content of social media post and communication language adopted.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

The methodology of research consists of a multiple case study (Yin, 1994) that involved 17 Italian universities during the years 2014-2015. The case studies methodology has been selected given that is recognized suitable to answer the “Why?” and “How?” question (Yin, 1994). It is therefore aligned with our intent to explore why and how social media have been implemented inside universities.

Four main data sources constitute the available material: semi-structured interviews, documents analysis, social media analysis and workshops with representatives of the participant universities.

Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with the person in charge to manage social media inside the university. When contacting the universities, we asked for the roles that are in charge to plan and manage social media. In the majority of the cases these roles were represented by the head of communication, while in other cases we found staff of the student support offices. Moreover, the administrative figure was always interviewed together with the closest academic figure related to social media, this being represented by the rector delegate to student support, international offices or communication activities. We asked questions about the path towards social media, problems encountered, resources involved, results finally achieved. We were not allowed to record, but we took careful notes that were elaborated immediately after the meeting. Each interview lasted on average 1 hour with two people interviewed per each university, which gave us a sample of 34 interviews.

The second data source is represented by documents about social media strategies and policies. These are ad hoc social media reports prepared by the communication offices; they were not available in all

the universities, but only 5 of them had ad hoc documentation, which have been received and textually analysed together with insights from interviews.

The third source of data is represented by social media website. We entered the official institutional social media accounts of all the 17 universities, reading posts and comments in order to understand the discussion topics that occurred on that social media. We analysed these social media before the interviews, to be prepared at the conversation, but also after the meeting to verify if some assertion about content and languages of social media found a correspondence in practice.

The last source of data is represented by two workshops that have been organized with participant universities. One workshop was organized at the beginning of the research project to share with participants the aim of the research, the roles to be involved and to agree upon a common list of questions for interviews. A second workshop was organized at the end of the research project to share results, discuss the implementation patterns emerged and adjust misinterpretation. This was a crucial step to validate our identified implementation patterns.

## 5. RESULTS

Results are here presented distinguishing between the three phases of the social media implementation process: adoption, design and use. The investigation of the approaches per each of the three phases supported the identification of three main patterns of implementation that will be described in the discussion section (see Table 1).

University	Adoption	Design	Use	Patterns of implementation
B	Mimetic	Erratic and bottom up	Undifferentiated	Mimicry pattern
C				
D				
E				
F				
H				
M				
N				
O				
A			Differentiated	
G				
I	Planned and bottom up	Undifferentiated		
L				
P	Normative	Planned and dialectic	Differentiated	Professionalism pattern
Q				



R	Strategic	Planned and top-down	Differentiated	Nested pattern
S			Undifferentiated	

Table 1: Patterns of social media implementation

### 5.1 Adoption Phase

The adoption phase represents the moment in which the decision about the introduction of social media is made, which has required an investigation about “why” social media has been implemented and “who” has driven this decision. The reasons behind social media adoption and the leading actor were found different moving from one university to another. Endorsing the institutional perspective, these reasons can be attributed to three main isomorphic pressures: coercive, mimetic and normative. The first approach, which was found in the majority of the analysed universities (13 out of 17) is driven by a mimetic pressure. This means that the decision about the adoption of social media has been autonomously made by personnel in the communication offices. They became aware about the diffusion of social media among students, universities and other organizations and though that their university too should have been aligned to the other institutions. This desire to behave as other institutions was clearly visible from the interviews with the head of communication in University N

“We know that we have arrived late with the social media adoption. We looked at the other Italian universities. They all have Facebook and Twitter; for this reason, we thought it would have been beneficial for our university too to engage with these social tools. And we decided to open a Facebook account” (Head of Communication, University N).

This approach was confirmed by many other interviewees, who asserted that, not only Italian Universities, but also American campuses were observed when the decision about social media was made. Even without having a specific objective in terms of activities that social media would have to support, and how to practically manage these channels, these universities decided to embark in the social media experience because their students and other universities are there:

“Students spend the majority of their time on Facebook and twitter. Other universities have also these social media. Therefore, we have to be there. We tried and then say: ‘Let’s see what will happen’”. (Communication Staff, University D).

The distinctive feature of an adoption driven by mimetic pressure is that the behaviour of other universities has driven the decision to adopt social media; the entire social media implementation

process is driven by the staff of the communication offices, without the involvement of top universities roles, and often following a serendipitous path.

The second approach is driven by normative pressures, and it was visible only in University P and University Q. The decision to implement social media was shared between the head of communication offices and the rector or administrative director of the university. More specifically, it was the head of the communication that individually developed over time a deep knowledge on social media by studying the field on his/her own and finally arriving with a proposal about social media implementation at the top roles of the university. This was confirmed by interviews:

“I was aware about the diffusion of social media worldwide. I spent my time, also my free time, to study this emergent phenomenon: I read books, attended seminars and short courses, visit some American universities when I was on holiday to understand how the social media worked there. When I understood the social media logics and mechanisms, I started thinking at the benefits of these tools for my university: Facebook would have helped to strengthening the dialogue with our students. I prepared a social media plan and proposed it to the rector and administrative director, who finally accepted it” (Head of Communication, University P)

“I studied the social media tools, their functionalities and experiences and best practices. In 2010 I proposed the Twitter implementation: in a university like this one, which is deeply integrated with the city, Twitter would have become a magazine to enhance the communication between the university and the students as well as the university and the territorial area. I proposed a Twitter account called UniQmagazine, defined a plan, a future development strategy and asked for the rector approval” (Head of Communication, University Q).

Two elements characterise a normative pressure for social media adoption: the professionalisms of the personnel in communication offices (usually the head of these offices) who developed skills and competences about social media; a shared decision between the proposal by professional and the approval by the top university roles.

Finally, the third approach, found in University R and University S is driven by strategic pressures with top university roles, either the administrative director or the rector, who autonomously defined about social media implementation but within a broader university strategy. Hence, social media was not the centre of the analysis and decision, but they were a small part of a wider plan. For example, at University R, the social media decision was driven by the rector within a broader strategy to improve and reinforce marketing activities of the university:

“Our rector, together with his representative of the incoming orientation process, decided to improve the marketing activity to attract high level students and academic staff. Within this strategy, they organized workshops with prospect students and seminars about research activities. Moreover, they decided to open a Facebook account to strengthen the connection with prospect students, a LinkedIn account to promote open job positions, and a Twitter

account to broadcast results about research project. This was a decision, validated in official plans, we just had to do it, and we did.” (Head of the Communication, University R).

In a similar way occurred at University S with the administrative director that imposed social media within a broader plan to improve the image of the university:

“During the Academic Year 2010/2011 a new governance was appointed. The administrative director set the strategic objective to renew the image of the university that was, until that time, perceived as an old one. The first practical action was the renewal of the university website, that was finally online in 2011. The year later, he decided to use social media to reinforce this new image of the University and planned a strategy to introduce Facebook and Twitter the following year. We received this mandate and opened these social media accounts” (Head of Communication, University S).

The distinctive feature of a social media adoption driven by strategic pressures is a top-down decision by the top organization roles of the university, who formally assigned a mandate for social media adoption to communication offices.

## ***5.2 Design Phase***

The design phase is concerned with how the decision of adopting social media is translated into an everyday practice. The implementation concerns two main issues: resources mobilized in the translation of the social media decision into an every-day working tool, and the leading actor in charge to coordinate the process.

Empirical data revealed three main approaches to this phase: erratic and bottom up, planned and top down, and planned and dialectic implementation.

The erratic and bottom up implementation was found in the majority of the investigated universities and it is characterized by a mobilization of the bottom organizational roles, often personnel in the communication offices without a sharing plan with the head of the unit. Moreover, the top roles of the administrative director and the rector are not involved in this phase and in some cases not even aware about the existence of official and institutional social media accounts. It resulted that the leading actors in the design phase are the individual resources working in the offices that manage social media: a social media communication plan is missing and social media policies are not present. This gives rise to a “schizophrenic” and non-controlled path towards social media as highlighted by this quote:

“We opened four institutional social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, You Tube and LinkedIn). We would like to provide a unitary view of the university, but what happens is that our laboratories, departments and library have

their own accounts. These accounts are not regulated and we are also not even aware about how many of these accounts are present” (Head of Communication, University A).

The problem about the proliferation of several secondary pages by departments and other units in an uncontrollable manner was shared by many of the other interviewees and emerged as a difficulty still to be managed:

“We know that there are several secondary pages open by other university units. They are autonomously opened and managed. We asked people there to remove the university logo to highlight the fact that they are not official pages, but we have not been heard” (Head of Communication, University F)

This erratic path in social media design is visible at several levels: proliferation of social media secondary pages, but also lack of a social media plan and social media policy:

“There are several secondary pages, but there are no rules, no structure, no strategy shared between the different personnel that manage this social media accounts. The structure from one secondary page to another is completely different. We are trying to set a policy for social media, but we are still working on it and finally do not even know it will be agreed by the other units” (Head of Communication, University G).

An exception to this erratic and bottom up approach is represented by university L, that started in the same vein by with the appointment of a new head of communication gradually evolved towards a planned and bottom up approach:

“It was a big mess here with social media. In 2014 we had a new head of communication; she made a revolution and introduced a social media strategy and centralized all decisions about social media: she has defined a policy and included social media into a communication strategy that is now shared with the other offices” (Staff of communication, University L).

A second approach to the design phase is the planned dialectic approach that is characterized by the involvement of both top university roles and bottom roles in decisions regarding social media. It was visible at University P and University Q.

The key issue is that a dialogue is established between rector and administrative director and the offices in charge to manage social media, usually the communication offices. This dialogue allows to set a shared strategy for social media, which is then translated into a social media policy and communication plan, which includes, among the others, a social media plan:

“Together with our administrative director we set a plan for social media, by defining the content per each social media platform, and the required resources. For example, the personnel in the press office are in charge to update contents on Twitter given its aim to broadcast information; the marketing office provides support for Facebook given its role to attract prospect students, while the Incoming student offices supports the welcome day and the graphic office is in charge to ensure a unique layout of the different social media. We have not hire new personnel, but assign to one person the role of social media manager, in charge to post, manage and control social media under the overall communication strategy. We had a limited budget, but some of us attended two social media courses about storytelling and data management”. (Head of Communication, University P).

This planned and dialogic approach emerged also at University Q:

“We discussed with our rector about the role, structure and content of our social media. We have a Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube account. We finally arrived at a social media policy: the same logo should be on all the official pages to render them recognizable, a reference person per each social media should be defined and communicated with reference to both primary and secondary pages. We did not receive any resource to manage social media, but we internally reorganized to manage also this new activity.” (Head of Communication University Q).

Also within this approach, secondary pages were present and highlighted as a problem, but manageable:

“We have secondary pages about our departments or laboratories. Some of them seem also abandoned. They are not within our communication plan, but they are all controlled by us in order to ensure an adequate language and a proper university image” (Head of Communication, University P).

A final approach to the design phase concerns the planned and top-down approach, found in University R and University S. It consists of a planned design of social media in terms of definition of social media policy and social media plan. However, unlike the previous approach, these decisions are made top down by the rector and the administrative director:

“Our rector planned social media introduction, its role and target. For example, Twitter would have been introduced in 2012 with a broadcasting role and targeting both internal students but also external academic staff. We just listened to their decision and put them into practice: we had the possibility to attend a social media course, but we did not receive additional staff for social media” (Head of Communication University R).

“The design of social media was entirely driven by our administrative director. He constituted a new communication office, that was not present some years ago, with the responsibility over social media content; he assigned an external consultancy company the monitoring of social media conversation to periodically receive

insights from these media; he broadly set the do and don'ts of social media, which have been then translated into a social media policy by our office" (Head of Communication, University S).

### 5.3 Use phase

The use phase is related to the every-day practices connected with social media, and refers therefore to the content post on social media and the adopted language.

At this level, we found two different approaches: undifferentiated and differentiated approach.

The undifferentiated approach to social media use is characterized by the adoption of the same language between the different social media, even when the declared target was said different from one platform to another. Moreover, also the content of the post is the same: this means that, if something has been posted on Twitter, then the same content can be found also on Facebook with the same language. We found 11 universities relying on this approach. An example is visible in Figure 1, which depict a post on Twitter (on the left) and a post on Facebook on the right. This university posted the same picture with the same description on both the channels, giving therefore rise to an undifferentiated approach to social media use.

in corso al Centro Fiera il test di  
ammissione ai corsi di laurea delle  
[#professionisanitarie](#).



In corso questa mattina al Centro Fiera il test di ammissione ai corsi di  
laurea delle Professioni sanitarie.



Figure 1: Example of undifferentiated approach to social media use

On the contrary, the differentiated practice takes into account the specificities of each social media: moving from one social media to another, different languages are visible as well as different contents are present. For example, accessing the social media of University P we found: the picture of the event occurred the night before on Instagram, the broadcast of the results of a new research project on Twitter, and an update about the university enrolment tests on Facebook.

While investigating the phase of social media use, we did not find any connection between the approaches adopted by the universities in the previous phases of adoption and design. Mimetic, normative and nested approach as well as the variety of approaches that characterize the design phase, can all turn into a differentiated or undifferentiated social media use. We found a justification about this result into the specific roles in charge to manage social media: it is the specific figure that posts on social media that is responsible about the content, timing and approach to the post. Hence, whatever the previous path of adoption and design, it is then the skills and competences of the social media manager that determines the final message communicated.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

The variety of approaches about social media adoption, design and use by universities can be grouped into three main patterns that characterize social media implementation: mimicry, professionalism and nested pattern.

### ***6.1 Mimicry pattern***

The mimicry pattern of social media implementation is driven by the desire of universities to resemble other institutions, spanning the social media wave. This was the pattern that characterized the majority of the investigated universities. The continuous diffusion of social media at the individual and organizational level, as well as the frequent emergence of new social media tools lead the majority of the investigated universities to endorse the same pattern. This decision comes from the communication offices, only driven by a few units of personnel and it is not shared with the high organizational roles inside the university, that are often unaware about the social media presence.

The design phase turns into an erratic approach with the absence of a clear plan about social media implementation; the philosophy behind this design is a “trial and error” approach, which is visible in the lack of expertise by the managers in charge to introduce and then manage social media. Given this unclear decision about why social media have been introduced and what their role should be, then a social media strategy is not mentioned in the communication plan as well as no social media policies are present inside the university. However, this erratic and bottom up approach, finally allows social media managers to learn by doing: by continuously engaging with the technology and continuously using social media tools, then these organizational roles acquire competences. This is for example the case of University L, where the appointment of a new head of communication led to a completely renewal of the social media strategy, that resulted into a social media plan and a document with social media policy.

The use phase instead is characterized by both undifferentiated and differentiated approaches, since we found this phases not being connected to the previous path of social media implementation, but strictly dependent on the professional roles in charge to operationally manage the tool.

### ***6.2 Professionalism pattern***

The professionalism pattern of social media implementation is driven by the pressures coming from professionals that have developed over time social media competences. These figure are typically represented by head of communication offices, who often have developed deeply competences about social media. They are the driver of the social media change inside the university, leading the entire implementation process, from the initial adoption phase until the use: during the adoption phase, they conceptualize a social media proposal to be submitted to the rector or administrative director for approval; during the design phase, they define the social media strategy, social media policy and drive and allocate resources for the management of the upcoming social media pages; finally, during the use phase, they define the content and languages of the social media communication.

The distinctive features of these approach are twofold: the expertise of social media professionals and the interactions with the rector and administrative director to obtain consensus about the social media implementation and therefore achieve internal legitimation for their actions.

### ***6.3 Nested pattern***

The nested pattern of implementation was found at two universities only: University R and University S. It is characterized by the implementation of social media within a broader strategy which include, among several interventions, also the introduction of social media. These tools are therefore nested in other broader university guidelines. For example, at University S, they have been nested in a broader strategy to improve the image of the university outside while at University R, social media were nested in a broader strategy to reinforce the communication and broadcasting of research activities.

The distinctive features of this pattern are the top down approach of implementation and the planned design of social media. On the one hand, the implementation process is entirely driven by top organizational roles, who want to control social media implementation as all the other actions defined within their broader strategy. It results that the adoption and the subsequent design phases become top-down controlled with the rector or the administrative directors setting the general guidelines that must then be acted upon by the designed offices. On the other hand, this nested pattern is characterized by a detailed planned of social media with the definition of a social media strategy, social media



communication plan and social media policy. Unlike the professionalism pattern, in this case, these decisions are driven by the top university roles rather than the professionals.

#### **6.4 Common trends**

Albeit this variety of patterns, we found three main elements common to all the three approaches: the lack of dedicated resources for social media; the complexity to manage official and non-official accounts, and the central role of social media professionals.

The first common theme is represented by the absence of dedicated resources for social media. All the universities have declared that the social media implementation has occurred without additional investments in additional personnel or technology. Only in some cases, social media courses were financed. This result underlines that, in a context of limited financial resources, as that of higher education institutions, social media are not a priority and tend to be implemented by relying on internal staff.

The second common theme concerns the complexity to manage the coexistence between official and non-official accounts. This has emerged as a crucial problem for all the interviewees, irrespectively of the implementation pattern adopted: beside official institutional accounts, usually managed by the central offices of communication, several secondary pages were introduced by departments or laboratory. The freedom of social media allows everyone to open a social media account and this poses problem from the outside (i.e. students) to distinguish between official and unofficial university pages, hence changing the trust about the information provided. This occurred in connection with social media pages created by individual account, but also with pages created by departments or research centres inside the university (i.e. secondary pages). We often found that the communication offices were not even aware about the type and amount of departmental accounts created. An approach to manage this issue is represented by the definition of a social media policy, which regulates the do and don'ts of social media inside universities.

The third common theme is related to the central role gained by social media professionals. Social media professionals represent organizational roles with deep knowledge in social media structure and functioning and they are usually represented by people working in communication offices. On the one hand, they have been the agent of change (i.e. professionalism implementation pattern) by planning, designing and leading the entire implementation process; on the other hand, even without being the promoter of social media, they gained a central role during social media use, by affecting the content and language of social media posts. The presence of social media professional was found

as explanatory factor for the differentiated and differentiated approach to social media use: even when social media have been introduced following mimetic pressures, if their every-day use is managed by social media professional, it turned out into a detailed social media plan, social media policy and differentiated approach in terms of content and language.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This study has focused on social media implementation in higher education institutions by investigating why social media have been adopted and the associated patterns of implementation. Through a multiple case study conducted in 17 Italian university and endorsing the theoretical lens of isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell), we found three different patterns of social media implementation. The mimetic pattern is driven by the desire to imitate other universities endorsing the same tools; it is characterized by the absence of a clear social media strategy, an erratic design of social media and often the unawareness about these tools from the top university roles. The professionalism pattern is characterized by the central role of social media professionals that drive social media implementation since its early phases: they decide about their adoption, after an agreement with the rector and the administrative director, they plan a social media strategy, allocate resource, define a social media policy. The nested patterns conceive social media within a broader university strategy, hence they are not the centre of the university change. Their adoption is usually top-down imposed by top university roles, which then delegate at the communication offices the practical day-by-day management.

These results contribute to extant literature under different perspectives. First, this study enlarges the current debate on social media in higher education institutions by providing evidence about their implementation process. To date, we have gained several evidence about the activities supported by social media (e.g. Junco et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2013; Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2013; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2016), but we have a little knowledge about the earlier implementation process. This study has addressed this issue by highlighting the variety of patterns.

The second contribution concerns the complexity associated with social media in higher education institutions. Social media are often investigated by showing their benefits in terms of opportunities for universities by endorsing social media to support teaching, marketing or job placement (e.g. Constantinides and Stagno, 2012; Spiller and Tuten, 2015). Our study highlights also the dark side connected with the existence of social media inside universities: these were found being mainly related to the absence of ad hoc resources to manage social media and the complexity to manage official and non-official proliferating accounts. This insight can open further research avenues on problems and criticisms of social media.

The third contribution is related to the emergent role of social media professionals. Little is known to date about the competences that a social media manager should have. This study found that it is the competences of the social media professional that determines the ability to manage the social media page, opening further research streams about the specific features of this new emergent professional role.

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