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Citation for final published version:

Morani, Marina 2022. Making the 'New Citizen': (self-)representation narratives of Italians of immigrant background on intercultural digital media platforms. *Comunicazioni Sociali* 1 , pp. 32-46.
10.26350/001200_000145

Publishers page: https://www.vitaepensiero.it/scheda-articolo_digit...

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MAKING THE ‘NEW CITIZEN’: (SELF-)REPRESENTATION NARRATIVES OF ITALIANS OF IMMIGRANT BACKGROUND ON INTERCULTURAL DIGITAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Abstract

The study critically examines the personal stories of Italians of immigrant background – or ‘new citizens’ – published on intercultural digital media platforms. It explores how and to what extent these individual narratives broaden, challenge, or subvert the dominant regime of representation of ‘immigration’ in Italy. Drawing on a conceptual framework informed by cultural studies and critical discourse analysis, the paper finds that the strategic, organising idea of the ‘new citizen’ articulated through a set of recurring discourses, while on the one hand seeks to challenge hegemonic portrayals of ‘the immigrant subject’, on the other hand strategically draws on neoliberal aspirations and essentialist interpretations of formal citizenship to legitimise a collective project of socio-political inclusion. The analysis informs final reflections on the potential, limitations and ongoing transformations of collective inter-cultural tactics of (self-)representation towards more inclusive and diverse discourses about cultural identity, citizenship and belonging.

Keywords

Intercultural digital media; representation; citizenship; cultural identity.

ISSN: 03928667 (print) 18277969 (digital)

DOI: 10.26350/001200_000145

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1. INTRODUCTION

While mainstream media coverage of (im)migration and ethnic minorities has been extensively examined in different contexts, comparatively fewer studies have focused on alternative media narratives seeking to challenge or transform dominant discourses of immigration and cultural diversity. Italy’s intercultural digital media represents one area where the possibilities for the construction of an alternative cultural politics of (self-)representation have been practiced. With the term ‘intercultural digital media’, the study considers alternative media outlets involving contributors of diverse immigrant backgrounds as well as of single Italian heritage. With peak activity in the early 2010s, these platforms aimed to offer more inclusive and diverse media spaces and representations and were established with the support of a range of public and private institutions and organisations.

As a media form that has received limited scholarly attention compared to the extensively researched field of ‘ethnic minority media’, intercultural digital media have

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the potential to restore agency, visibility and voice to Italians of diverse immigrant backgrounds. This study, drawing on doctoral research¹, aims to explore and understand how and to what extent the stories published on the platforms broaden, challenge, or subvert the dominant regime of representation of 'the immigrant subject' in Italy. Informed by cultural studies and critical discourse analysis, the article focuses on the strategic, organising idea of the 'new citizen' and ways in which it is articulated in the personal stories and testimonies of residents and citizens of immigrant background published on the platforms. The analysis reveals that the portrayal of the 'new citizen' is underpinned by three key discursive constructions: the *deserving citizen*, the *unrecognised citizen* and the *transcultural citizen*. The study argues that these intersecting discourses, while on the one hand seek to portray the 'new citizen' in contrast to 'othering' and stigmatising representations surrounding the 'immigrant subject', on the other hand strategically draw on neoliberal aspirations and essentialist interpretations of formal citizenship to *legitimise* inclusion of Italians of immigrant background inside the boundaries of the nation. The study concludes with a discussion on the potential, limitations as well as ongoing transformations of the construction of inter-cultural tactics of (self-)representation of under-/mis-represented groups and individuals in society reclaiming agency, voice and representation as equal citizens.

2. CHANGING THE REGIME OF REPRESENTATION: FROM 'IMMIGRANTS' TO 'NEW CITIZENS'

Despite the fact that Italy has a significant long-settled population of residents and citizens of immigrant background, the mainstream media coverage of 'immigration' has largely been concerned with the highly sensationalised 'sea-landings' of migrants and asylum seekers to Italy's Southern ports². Discursively inserted into the undifferentiated category of *immigrati* ('immigrants'), individuals of immigrant or ethnic minority background have traditionally been invisible or voiceless in news reports, while their 'foreignness' tended to appear newsworthy in crime stories as either victims or perpetrators³. The anti-immigration political rhetoric has routinely mobilised populist arguments pointing to alleged incompatible values between Italians and 'the others', fuelling public concerns about national security, economic resources and national identity. This has perpetuated an essentialist conception of 'Italian-ness' as 'white', 'catholic', and grounded on an 'ethno-centric' view of citizenship of colonial heritage⁴. Criminalising and 'othering' frames, however, have coexisted with the rhetoric of solidarity across the media and political arena depicting 'the immigrant' as a victimised subject, low-

¹ M. Morani, "New Italians and Digital Media: An Examination of Intercultural Media Platforms", Ph.D. diss., University of Cardiff, 2017. A seminal idea of this article was presented in Italian at the XXVI International Conference of Film Studies: *Migrations, Citizenships, Inclusion. Narratives of Plural Italy, between Imaginary and Diversity Politics*, Roma Tre University, 6-8 May 2021.

² See for example M. Bruno, "The Journalistic Construction of 'Emergenza Lampedusa': The 'Arab Spring' and the 'Landings' Issue in Media Representations of Migration", in *Destination Italy. Representing Migration in Contemporary Media and Narrative*, edited by E. Bond, G. Bonsaver, F. Faloppa, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015: 59-83.

³ See for example M. Mansoubi, *Noi, stranieri d'Italia: immigrazione e mass media*, Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi, 1990.

⁴ G. Giuliani, *Race, Nation and Gender in Modern Italy. Intersectional Representations in Visual Culture*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

skilled and recipient of acts of solidarity⁵. At the same time, ‘pro-immigration’ arguments pointing to the positive benefits of immigrant workers to the national economy have been mobilised across the political spectrum and have served to legitimise periodic policies of labour market integration⁶.

Overall, the portrayal of residents and citizens of immigrant background has been largely subsumed into the highly politicised, polarised and all-encompassing discursive field of ‘immigration’ with limited opportunities for a wider range of voices, stories and representations. Yet, over the last decade, several media monitoring initiatives across professional bodies and third sector organisations have contributed to an increased awareness of the need for more robust ethical standards in the media coverage of immigration and ethnic minorities in Italy⁷. Furthermore, in the early 2010s, young residents and citizens of immigrant background were gaining unprecedented visibility in the public arena as a campaign for a reform of Italy’s citizenship law aimed at relaxing citizenship eligibility requirements or children of non-EU immigrant parents was being advocated and discussed across institutional and civic arenas. Yet, studies show that while in the time following the reform announcement the demands of the so-called ‘second-generations’ were significantly reported in the national media, the voices of the potential beneficiaries of the reform remained largely silent and their representation was informed by either ‘othering’ or ‘assimilationist’ approaches⁸.

Despite some tentative progress, recent reports note how in Italy’s mainstream media organisations the voices, experiences, and perspectives of Italians of immigrant or ethnic minority background are still under-represented across news and entertainment programmes⁹. In a comparative study, Meli showed that Italian broadcast producers display limited awareness and understanding of diversity and inclusion beyond an assistentialist logic of ‘equal opportunities’¹⁰. This results in slow progress towards delivering content that is innovative, creative and inclusive of a wide range of experiences, stories, and perspectives.

2.1. *The cultural politics of ‘new identities’: reclaiming spaces for self-representation*

Stuart Hall’s influential work on the identity politics of marginalised and racialised subjects in the context of post-war Britain, provides a useful framework to understand the resisting practices and discourses of self-representation of under-/mis-represented groups in society¹¹. According to Hall, a popular strategy adopted in popular culture to

⁵ M. Binotto, M. Bruno, “Spazi mediali delle migrazioni. Framing e rappresentazioni del confine nell’informazione italiana”, *Lingue e Linguaggi*, 25 (2018): 17-44.

⁶ M. Corte, “Noi e gli altri. L’immagine dell’immigrazione e degli immigrati sui mass media italiani”, *Prospettiva EP*, 1 (2002).

⁷ The work of NGO *Associazione Carta di Roma* has been instrumental in implementing and disseminating deontological guidelines towards ethical and more accurate media coverage of immigration and diversity.

⁸ D. Sredanovic, F.G. Farina, “Can Youth with a Migrant Background Speak? Representation, Citizenship and Voice in Italian TV and Press Journalism”, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 36, 6 (2015): 693-709.

⁹ Diversity Media Report, Diversity Lab, 2021. Available at: <https://integrazioneimmigranti.gov.it/it-it/Ricerca-news/Dettaglio-news/id/1788/La-rappresentazione-inclusiva-dei-media-italiani-Pubblicato-il-Diversity-Media-Report-2021>

¹⁰ A. Meli, *Europa, Media e diversità. Idee e proposte per lo scenario italiano*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2015

¹¹ S. Hall, “New Ethnicities”, in *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by D. Morley and K.H. Chen, London: Routledge, 1988: 441-459.

subvert racial stereotyping of black citizens and communities is the construction of a new positive collective identity by borrowing on the repertoire of the portrayal of the dominant white subject¹². This entails that the racialised subject can be admitted into the mainstream “but only at the cost of adapting to the white image of them and assimilating white norms of style, looks and behaviour”¹³. Similarly, marginalised communities might temporarily and *strategically* adopt an essentialist collective identity that homogenises the multiple and diverse cultural, ‘ethnic’ and political affiliations and experiences of its members to pursue a project of socio-political inclusion.

As identities at the margin of the institutional, public and media arena, young Italians of immigrant background have, over the last decade, mobilised to reclaim citizenship, voice and visibility in society. Since the early 2000s, a number of collective projects such as citizenship reform advocacy campaigns, grassroots networks, anti-racism campaigns and alternative media initiatives have expressed the urgency to advance new narratives about Italians of immigrant background¹⁴. As an attempt to move away from ‘othering’ discourses about ‘immigrants’ or ‘foreigners’ in Italy, new expressions such as *nuovi cittadini* (‘new citizens’) – or *nuovi italiani* (‘new Italians’) started circulating across various intersecting discursive arenas: political, institutional, civic, grassroots, and academic.¹⁵ Whether these naming practices and associated narratives drawing on an essentialist notion of national identity are super-imposed or are strategically deployed to pursue a collective agenda of citizenship rights advocacy remain open to investigation¹⁶. A crucial terrain where ‘new’ discourses of citizenship and self-representation narratives have been practiced is the alternative digital media sphere.

Italy’s intercultural digital media represent a varied alternative media landscape which includes collective blogs, webzines and web portals involving contributors of various immigrant backgrounds as well as practitioners of solely Italian descent. With the intent and potential to engage a broader audience beyond the particularistic interests of specific ‘ethnic minority’ or ‘immigrant’ communities¹⁷, intercultural media assign importance – at least in principle – to the practice of more inclusive and diverse media spaces for people sharing a sense of membership to the national community. The establishment of these platforms in Italy had its peak momentum between 2008–2013 when public debates and campaign initiatives about the citizenship law reform gained visibility and support from a range of stakeholders committed to a progressive agenda of social change. Although intercultural digital media are largely not-for-profit enterprises, their establishment might have been facilitated by access to funding from public and private institutions including local government, media companies, third sector organisations, private foundations¹⁸.

¹² S. Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other”, in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by S. Hall, London: Sage, 1997: 225–279.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 271.

¹⁴ P. Musarò, P. Parmiggiani, “Beyond Black and White: The Role of Media in Portraying and Policing Migration and Asylum in Italy”, *International Review of Sociology*, 27, 2 (2017): 241–260.

¹⁵ See for example L. Turco, P. Tavella, *I nuovi italiani. L’immigrazione, i pregiudizi, la convivenza*. Milano: Mondadori, 2005.

¹⁶ See M. Antonsich, “What’s in a Name? Children of Migrants, National Belonging and the Politics of Naming”, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 2021: 1–19.

¹⁷ See for example M.D. Matsaganis, V.S. Katz, S.G. Ball-Rokeach, *Understanding Ethnic Media. Producers, Consumers and Societies*. New York: Sage, 2011 and for the Italian context: M. Maneri, A. Meli, *Un diverso parlare. Il fenomeno dei media multiculturali in Italia.*, Rome: Carocci, 2007.

¹⁸ For a more detailed overview of the media landscape of intercultural digital platforms including their political economy, see M. Morani, “Introducing Italy’s Intercultural Digital Media: Mapping the Landscape”, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 2021: 1–22.

This study draws on a systematic mapping¹⁹ identifying and mapping 34 intercultural digital media initiatives between 2000-2020. In particular, the article focuses on the content category devoted to the narration of personal stories of Italians of immigrant background to explore the practiced possibilities to advance alternative representations of ‘the immigrant’ subject in Italy re-lexicalised as ‘new citizen’ or ‘new Italian’ across many of the platforms. In particular, the paper will explore the following research questions:

(RQ1a) What kind of narratives are articulated in the personal stories published on intercultural digital media?

(RQ1b) How and to what extent do they promote an alternative inter-cultural politics of (self-)representation?

3. METHODOLOGY

The article draws on a sample of 20 stories of ‘new citizens’ retrieved from five intercultural media platforms: *ALMA.blog*, *Italiani+*, *Migrador Museum*, *Yalla Italia*, and *Prospettive Altre*²⁰. The personal stories of Italians of immigrant background represent a specific topic category commonly featuring across intercultural websites²¹. This largely encompasses auto-biographical stories as well as third-person narratives drawing on interviews with the protagonist of the story. The five initiatives were sampled on the basis of all being active during the same period of time (2012-2015) and offering variation in terms of formats and genres. The extracts of the stories – originally in Italian – used to illustrate the analysis, have been translated into English by the author of this article to facilitate international readership. Stories and extracts have been selected through purposive sampling to provide thematic and genre variation. Table 1 indicates, for each platform, the section from the menu bar of the website from which the stories were retrieved for analysis.

Table 1 - *Sample and sections from which stories were retrieved*

<i>Platform name</i>	<i>Section title</i>	<i>N stories</i>
1. ALMA.blog	<i>Nuovi cittadini / new citizens</i>	3
2. Migrador Museum	<i>Storie / stories</i>	3
3. Italiani+	<i>Ritratti / portraits</i>	5
4. Yalla Italia	<i>Senza Filtro / without filter</i> <i>Doppia vita / double life</i>	5
5. Prospettive Altre	<i>Società / society</i>	4
Total		20

¹⁹ See *ibid.*

²⁰ Except for ALMA.blog (<https://collettivoalma.wordpress.com/>) which is still accessible yet no longer updated, the other platforms are no longer active and can be partially retrieved through the Internet Archive: Italiani+: <https://web.archive.org/web/20141010173752/http://www.italianipiu.it/>;

Yalla Italia: <https://web.archive.org/web/20141218151849/http://www.yallaitalia.it/>;

Prospettive Altre: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140312115036/http://www.prospettivealtre.info/>;

Migrador Museum: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160201180229/http://www.migradormuseum.it/>.

²¹ For a systematic examination of the platforms’ agenda and topic categories, see Morani, “Introducing Italy’s Intercultural Digital Media: Mapping the Landscape”.

The analysis of the stories is influenced by the theoretical and analytical framework of critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA). CDA is informed by a view of discourse as social practice both influencing and influenced by socio-cultural, political and economic processes within society²². Cultural texts – including media texts – represent crucial sites for uncovering the often-hidden ideologies and unequal power relations that are enacted, reproduced, and resisted in and through discourse²³. A vast body of scholarly work in CDA has focused on institutional, political, and mainstream media discourse and how certain social groups – including ‘ethnic minorities’ – are (mis)represented within the hegemonic structures of society²⁴. Yet, fewer studies have considered counter- or alter-hegemonic discourse as the primary objects of critical analytical inquiry. By focusing on stories seeking to subvert or broaden the dominant regime of representation of ‘immigration’ in Italy, this study recognises that allegedly progressive cultural projects and alternative media agenda are still operating within – as well as might strategically benefit from – hegemonic socio-political discourses, interests, and ideologies in society.

The stories of ‘new citizens’ articulate modes of belonging and lived experiences that seek to advance more positive and inclusive narratives about citizens and residents entertaining multiple cultural affiliations in contemporary Italy. These representations and re-formulations of cultural and national identity are profoundly influenced by macro-social and discursive practices as well as deep-seated sedimented ideologies²⁵. A CDA-informed approach to textual analysis attempts to show links between language choices and socio-cultural (discourse) practices²⁶. At the micro-level, the analysis presented in this study pays attention to the selection and use of linguistic resources including lexical choices, rhetoric tropes, sentence structure as well as omissions to expose the connotative meanings, wider discourses and ideologies associated to such choices²⁷. Furthermore, the analysis accords significant attention to thematic and narrative patterns across the texts examined. As stories narrating personal life journeys through sequences of unfolding events, the analysis will show how the selection of certain discursive constructions, themes, and narratives may (strategically) mobilise certain meanings and connotations embedded in established discourses and practices²⁸.

Overall, the analysis seeks to critically examine the extent to which the discursive choices made by text producers to propose alternative narratives of ‘immigration’, citizenship and national identity transform or challenge the hegemonic regime of representation.

²² N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman, 1995.

²³ T.A. van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis”, in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, edited by D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, H. Hamilton, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001: 352-371.

²⁴ See for example T.A. van Dijk, “Discourse and Migration”, in *Qualitative Research in European Migration Studies*, edited by R. Zapata-Barrero and E. Yalaz, Cham: Springer, 2018.

²⁵ See R. Wodak, M. Krzyzanowski, “Multiple Identities, Migration and Belonging: ‘Voices of Migrants’”, in *Identity Trouble: Critical Discourse and Contested Identities*, edited by C.-R. Caldas-Coulthard and R. Iedema, London: Palgrave, 2007: 95-119.

²⁶ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*.

²⁷ D. Machin, A. Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction*, Los Angeles: Sage, 2012.

²⁸ A. Hansen, D. Machin, *Media and Communication Research Methods: An Introduction*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

4. STORIES OF ‘NEW CITIZENS’

The analysis of the stories is organised around three key recurring discursive constructions surrounding the representation of the ‘new citizen’: *i*) the ‘deserving citizen’; *ii*) the ‘unrecognised citizen’; *iii*) the ‘transcultural citizen’. For analytical clarity, each category is individually presented. However, they should not be considered categorically distinct as more than one can be found entwined in the same story. Each discourse is analysed in each of the following sections and illustrated with extracts from the stories published on the respective intercultural digital media platforms.

4.1. *The deserving citizen*

The first discursive construction emerging from the analysis of the stories places emphasis on the professional achievements of the ‘new citizen’. Through the narrative of the ‘success story’, the protagonist is portrayed as a determined hard-working individual committed to a career dream.

The story of young rapper Michael Efe (aka Lil Wiser) is introduced in structural opposition to hegemonic narratives of migration to Italy. The deployment of figurative language serves to create a contrast with mainstream media representations of migrants and asylum seekers arriving via sea to Italy’s Southern coasts: the “smell of a rubber dinghy” and “salty taste” metaphorically evoke sensationalist images of overcrowded boats and de-humanised subjects. In contrast, Michael’s story begins with a migratory journey from his native Nigeria via legal routes and unfolds as a tale of self-realisation:

Young Rapper Lil Wiser: “The Pursuit of Our Dream Keeps Us Afloat”

Well, this time the story you are about to hear neither tastes salty nor has the smell of a rubber dinghy. It is the story of an ordinary victory, the dream of a fifteen-year-old who left his native Nigeria to follow his mother and, also, his dream. His name is Micheal Efe – aka Lil Wiser – and when, ten years ago, he boarded a plane to Italy, he was already dreaming of becoming a musician.

The rhetoric trope of “victory” selected to define Michael’s success story recurs in many stories of ‘new citizens’. It signifies achieved emancipation from a subaltern condition resulting from hegemonic expectations about ‘immigrants’ in Italy as subjects with reduced agency and narrow career options. The oxymoronic expression “ordinary victory” reveals the tension between an aspired normalisation of positive stories of (economic) migration and the exceptionality of such narratives within dominant public and media discourses. The protagonist of the story is presented as an exceptional individual whose remarkable qualities of determination, hard-work ethos and commitment set him apart from his peers:

Often, young people are fired up by ideals destined to vanish like darkness swallowed by dawn. However, this is not the case with Michael. In Italy, he attended high school, wishing to master his Italian to perfection. And he succeeded. As soon as he turned sixteen, he started working hard, very hard. He took up unskilled jobs as a manual labourer. But despite the hard work, Michael never abandoned his dream. [...]. With commitment and determination, he managed to make himself known in the Italian music scene.
(ALMA.blog, 17/11/2014)²⁹

²⁹ Retrieved from: <https://collettivoalma.wordpress.com/2013/03/04/lil-wiser/>.

Commitment towards one's lifelong dream, hard work and determination are viewed as key ingredients for an entirely self-made success. Accomplishment is symbolised by admittance to "the Italian music scene", indicating achieved inclusion into the symbolic and material boundaries of the nation. This suggests, inclusion is granted to those *deserving* subjects exhibiting remarkable talents and qualities of resilience and self-entrepreneurialism. The discourse of resilience is deeply entwined with the narrative of success. The story of Jamal Ainane, a Milanese fashion entrepreneur, is another tale of upward mobility. The disadvantaged background experienced in the native Morocco is positively re-evaluated to showcase the strength of character, altruism, and resourcefulness of the protagonist:

My Vindication is not a Revenge

My biggest fortune? Coming from a poor background. Very poor. I should also mention two further disadvantages: I was exploited and underrated. In Italy all this has changed. What it hasn't changed is my attitude towards life [...]. You see, despite the hard times, I have always smiled, even when I wanted to shout with rage; I would always offer a helping hand to my co-workers without ever asking for anything in return; I have always given and never asked.

(Migrador Museum, 16/08/2014)³⁰

The re-lexicalisation of issues of poverty and labour exploitation as "fortune" denote a proactive response to the "disadvantages" experienced by the protagonist. Yet, emphasis placed on the individual capacity to overcome 'challenges' deflects attention away from collective socio-political responsibilities towards structural economic and social problems.

A number of stories attribute social desirability to entrepreneurial careers and emphasise qualities of self-reliance, creativity and resourcefulness of the protagonists culminating in awards and professional accomplishments³¹. Within these narratives, the 'immigrant background' is not an impediment to success. In contrast to stigmatising attitudes towards 'difference', belonging to an 'immigrant' or 'ethnic minority' community here signifies transcultural capital bearing career potential³². Cultural diversity can even revamp the 'Made in Italy' sector through the contribution of young talented entrepreneurs with multiple cultural affiliations. In the story titled "Malindu Perera, Ambassador of 'Made in Italy' in Sri Lanka", the Sri Lankan-Italian identity of the protagonist is viewed as a fortunate professional "advantage" for the young food export entrepreneur and his business: "I was lucky enough to grow up in-between two cultures and this can only be an advantage for both countries to which I belong"³³.

The theme of entrepreneurial activity is closely linked to the articulation of citizenship claims. Drawing on the 'pro-immigration' argument which predicates acceptance of 'immigrants' based on their economic contributions, the 'stories of new citizens' are

³⁰ Retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160430075120/http://www.migradormuseum.it/2014/08/16/il-mio-riscatto-non-e-una-rivincita/>.

³¹ See C. Hawthorne, "Making Italy: Afro-Italian Entrepreneurs and the Racial Boundaries of Citizenship", *Social & Cultural Geography*, 22, 5 (2021): 704-724.

³² A. Triandafyllidou, U.H. Meinhof, "Beyond the Diaspora: Transnational Practices as Transcultural Capital", in *Transcultural Europe: Cultural Policy in a Changing Europe*, edited by U. H. Meinhof and A. Triandafyllidou, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006: 200-222.

³³ Retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140311154916/http://www.italianipiu.it/index.php/personaggi/848-malindu-perera-ambasciatore-del-made-in-italy-in-sri-lanka>.

conditioned by a set of expectations and assumptions of what constitutes a citizen *deserving* of inclusion within the boundaries of the nation.

Interestingly, signifiers of ‘material wealth’ or ‘ambition’ are omitted from the stories of ‘new citizens’ denoting the intention to stay away from unintended connotations that could lend weight to the idea of immigrants acting for their own self-interest at the expenses of the national community. In her story, Lifang Dong, a successful lawyer of Chinese origins, feels compelled to “return” her professional skills and services to the wider community by engaging in projects of solidarity. However, the rhetoric of ‘giving back’ implies a subordinate and unequal relation between the new citizen and society, conditioning ‘acceptance’ upon being a ‘model citizen’ who has paid their debt to the society which welcomed them³⁴.

Lifang Dong: First Female Italian Chinese Lawyer

[...] “Seeing the hard work and sacrifices that my parents made, certainly helped me to have an entrepreneurial spirit and DIY attitude stronger than normal people.” [...] She now returns part of this wealth by taking on social causes: “For example I offer legal advice through seven Italian-Chinese associations which I’m a representative of. I have not studied and worked only for myself but also for my family and for many immigrants who have not been as fortunate”.

(*Yalla Italia*, 23/09/2014)³⁵

Lifang Dong is another ‘new citizen’ who exhibits an outstanding “entrepreneurial spirit” and a proactive attitude towards life. She exhibits altruism and empathy though self-identification with those coming from a similar background who haven’t been “as fortunate”. However, societal responsibilities for not distributing opportunities equally among people from ‘ethnic minority’ or ‘immigrant’ communities are not explicitly addressed.

Overall, the success story of the ‘new citizen’ is strategically constructed to challenge hegemonic discourses of ‘the immigrant’ as a subaltern subject with limited agentic power. However, in doing so, it relies on – rather than dismantles – hegemonic assumptions about ‘model citizenship’ as attributed according to a hierarchy of ‘deservingness’ rather than as a discourse about social justice and citizenship rights. The construction of the ‘deserving citizen’ thus draws on the neoliberal imaginary of individual success as well as on hegemonic arguments about immigrant contributions to the national economy to *persuade* of the inclusion of Italians of immigrant background as *legitimate* citizens of the ‘nation’ in its essentialist conception.

4.2. *The unrecognised citizen*

A number of stories of ‘new citizens’ draw attention to the tension between individual aspirations of self-realisation and barriers of access to full participation and opportunities in society. Exclusion from fundamental structures and services of society due to lack of Italian citizenship can restrict people’s life choices and career options. “Viorica, known as Viola” is the fictional story of a hard-working woman from an unspecified

³⁴ See N. Shukla, “Editor’s Note”, in *The Good Immigrant*, edited by N. Shukla, London: Penguin Books, 2017.

³⁵ Retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170629162551/http://www.yallaitalia.it/2014/09/lifang-dong-prim-avvocato-donna-italo-cinese/>.

non-EU nation living and working in Italy. Non-recognition of the protagonist's qualifications significantly hinders professional opportunities and aspirations. Facing both stigmatising attitudes and social exclusion, the protagonist lives a precarious existence:

'Viorica', known as 'Viola'

Viorica calls herself Viola, because she does not like the stares, the smiles and the jokes that arise anytime she introduces herself [...]. Viorica/Viola was convinced it was enough to be competent and have the qualifications demonstrating it, even if not recognised. She thought that prejudices, narrow-mindedness, stereotypes, belonged only to the first generation of immigration of ten, fifteen years ago [...]. Meanwhile, time was going by and the necessity to find employment was increasing.

(ALMA.blog, 04/07/2014)³⁶

The story uses an introspective tone and the structural barriers faced by the protagonist are described through internalisation: "Viorica/Viola was convinced... She thought that...". This attributes responsibility to her own personal and individual (mis-)judgement concerning issues of socio-cultural discrimination and exclusion rather than to societal structures of systemic inequality and collective discriminatory attitudes. Yet, despite profound disillusion, the story ends with a sense of hope resuming the rhetoric of individual success through resilience: Viorica/Viola is gradually managing to turn her life around through determination and hard work.

While wider issues of discrimination and racism are rarely explicitly referenced and called out in the stories, the issue of the restrictive pathways to citizenship acquisition for youth of non-EU immigrant background frequently recurs in the stories. In the story-interview³⁷ of Phaim Bhuiyan, a young video-maker from Rome of Bangladeshi origin, defines the Italian citizenship "a denied right". The interviewee-protagonist also points to the existence of a disconnect between a fully embraced 'feeling' of national belonging (*to feel* Italian) and lack of recognition as Italian citizen at institutional-legal level ("documents identify him as a foreigner"). This results in a series of practical difficulties as well as a sense of social precariousness³⁸:

To Be, or not to Be Italian. A Young Video-Maker Recounts his Tor Pignattara"

[...] I find that this issue of citizenship is a denied right. This is well expressed by one of the two youths who I interview in my documentary: one of them says that despite being born and raised here and feeling Italian, documents identify him as a foreigner. Not to mention the difficulties arising from having to renew the [temporary] residence permit, in the absence of a national passport. I myself have applied for citizenship recently, on my eighteenth birthday, and I'm still waiting to finally be recognized Italian in all respects.

(*Prospettive Altre*, 20/11/2013)³⁹

In these stories, professional aspirations and entrepreneurial activity are closely tied to the articulation of citizenship claims signalling the persuasive intention to demonstrate deservingness of citizenship status based on creative-economic contributions to society.

³⁶ Retrieved from: <https://collettivoalma.wordpress.com/2014/07/04/nuovi-cittadini-10-viorica-anzi-viola/>

³⁷ Culturally diverse neighbourhood in the outskirts of Rome.

³⁸ See M. Fortier, *Uncertain Citizenship: Life in the Waiting Room*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

³⁹ Retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140416012928/http://www.prospettivealtre.info/2013/essere-o-non-essere-italiani-phaim-giovane-videomaker-racconta-la-sua-tor-pignattara/>.

Non-recognition of citizenship rights can also be presented as a deeply personal issue of a precarious sense of identity and belonging. In the story titled “I Feel, I Am, and I Would Like to Be”, a young Milanese woman of Sri Lankan origin tells her story in the first person and reflects on her identity. Lexical choices are used to define the unsolved tension (“eternal conflict”) between a fully professed sense of national belonging (“I feel deeply Italian”) and social-institutional unrecognition (“but *I am not* [Italian]... It would be more accurate and simpler to say that *I am a foreigner*”). ‘Italian-ness’ is therefore reclaimed as a professed ‘feeling’ of belonging which does not meet recognition at juridical (due to lack of citizenship) or social level leading to a precarious and conflicting identity duality:

I Feel, I Am, and I Would Like to Be

[...] In conclusion, I feel deeply Italian, but I am not. I feel Milanese, but perhaps it would be more accurate and simpler to say that I am foreigner. I do not know if I feel a second-generation, but surely, I must be [...]. My life has always been – and probably will always be – an eternal conflict between the person I feel and who I am; today, nearly twenty-one, I’m just surrendering to this bipolarity that always divides me.
(*Yalla Italia*, 29/05/2014)⁴⁰

Processes of exclusion from legal access to citizenship are internalised and *accepted* as an inevitable condition of being an Italian of immigrant background. The expression “surrendering to this bipolarity” deflects responsibility from society in redressing citizenship rights inequality and places the burden of unrecognition and its consequences on the shoulders of individuals expected to exhibit acceptance and resilience. This suggests a careful politics of moderation and persuasion conditioned by dominant expectations of what constitutes a model ‘new citizen’: someone who embraces and celebrates unquestioned ‘Italian-ness’, does not deconstruct its colonising and essentialist assumptions and avoids overt confrontation with the hegemonic state in reclaiming citizenship *rights*. The narrative remains deeply personal whereby the identity struggles of the ‘new citizen’ are internalised and dealt with at individual level as intimate sentiments of ongoing precariousness and ambivalent conflicting feelings of belonging and unrecognition. This is a discourse deeply intertwined with the success stories of ‘deserving citizens’: only by focussing on personal aspirations and objectives through hard work and resilience, equality and recognition can be eventually reclaimed.

4.3. *The transcultural citizen*

Several stories articulate a discourse concerned with transculturality or hybridity within cultural identity. In various stories, the diverse cultural origins and the multiple cultural affiliations are emphasised as an important aspect of the new citizen’s identity and experiences. In the story of Phaim Bhuiyan, previously examined, the interviewee-protagonist acknowledges the importance of his Bangladeshi origins *alongside* a fully professed ‘Italian-ness’: “I feel Italian, but at the same time I care a lot about my origins”. The two juxtaposed identities *occasionally* result in a hybridised sense of cultural identity: “Sometimes I feel I am also something else, something indefinable, inexplicable, prob-

⁴⁰ The story can be only partially retrieved at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20171005202548/http://www.yallaitalia.it/2014/05>.

ably a sort of synthesis between the two". While multiple affiliations are recognised as 'juxtaposed', very rarely 'Italian-ness' as an essentialist mode of identification is questioned, de-colonised or reclaimed as inherently and historically inclusive of diversity.

The 'moment of rediscovery or search for roots' is a common turning point in the narrative of many of the stories exploring cultural identity⁴¹. It reveals the working of hegemonic societal pressures to 'assimilate' or conceal those traits of 'ethnic' or cultural 'difference' that are deemed to be incompatible with an essentialist notion of 'Italian-ness'. The protagonist of the previously analysed story titled "I Feel, I Am, I Would Like to Be" reflects on the time in which she visited the country of her mother, Sri Lanka, for the first time:

I learned Italian in about a year and just as quickly I forgot my native language, thanks to the teachers who had categorically forbidden me to talk to my mother in Sinhala. I got to know Sri Lanka the first time seven years after I arrived in Italy, in a summer that I still remember as one of the most beautiful of my life, entirely devoted to the search for the roots of the language, the culture that I had lost along the way [...].

Again, internalised language tends to attribute responsibility for assimilationist pressures on the individual rather than on dominant societal expectations informed by a narrow view of national identity and belonging (*I forgot my native language... I had lost along the way*). Teachers are not objects of direct blame or criticism as their intervention is accepted with a gentle, matter-of-fact tone ("thanks to the teachers...")⁴². This suggests reluctance to openly and explicitly call out the working of assimilationist ideologies.

Articulated within the discursive construction of the 'deserving citizen', some of the stories frame the process of roots-rediscovering as 'career capital'. In her story-interview, Karima (aka Anna Maria Gehnyei) – a music artist of Liberian origin who has just released her debut album titled '2G' – defines cultural origins as "pillar of success":

Karima: Through Music I Found My Roots. They are All 'in 2G'

But at some point, in my career as a vocalist I felt the need to belong to another context, I was not recognizing myself in that situation. I felt the call of my roots. [...]. In her songs there is politics, culture, identity and demands, but above all there is a plea: "I am convinced that the second generation can do it, can manage to achieve important results here, but without denying their origins, because these are the pillar of their success.

The discourse of success is once again deeply intertwined with notions of cultural identity and multiple belongings. A self-enterprising attitude and the capitalisation of 'difference' can grant acceptance and recognition as 'citizen'⁴³. Earlier in the story, Karima explicitly calls for young Italians of immigrant background to abandon self-victimising attitudes and start embracing 'citizenship':

"In [my album] '2G' there is my whole journey, there is awareness and in particular a message to the second generations: stop self-victimizing yourselves. A verse of the song says: "Do not blame the colour of your skin". For too long we have experienced the legacy of

⁴¹ S. Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities", in *Culture, Globalisation and the World System*, edited by A.D. King, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991: 41-68.

⁴² In the original Italian: "*complici le insegna...*".

⁴³ See Hawthorne, "Making Italy: Afro-Italian Entrepreneurs and the Racial Boundaries of Citizenship".

colonialism and the people have felt entitled to abuse, but now it is time to put an end to victimization, to react peacefully and to feel citizens”.

(*Italiani+*, 18/04/2014)⁴⁴

Self-victimisation is here presented as a hurdle to becoming ‘citizen’. Semantic choices suggest dismissal of the issue racial discrimination (“do not blame the colour of your skin”) which is casted as a problem that should be processed at individual level through resilience rather than as a collective intervention against a system of institutionalised inequality hindering equal opportunities and participation in society. An invitation to “react peacefully” connotes the suggestion to embrace a moderate cultural politics of participation which avoids upsetting or disrupting the hegemonic power of the ‘nation’. Overall, the discourse of multiple transcultural affiliations is channelled into a vision of national identity that heavily draws upon deep-seated expectations about ‘immigrants’ in Italy as subjects whose access to citizenship is predicated upon the extent to which they can provide valuable cultural-economic contributions to society without aspiring to question or transform the *status quo*.

Transculturality at societal level is also explored as interconnectedness of human experiences across different socio-cultural and geographical contexts⁴⁵. Some of the stories reflect upon ‘(im)migration’ as a universal human experience though a cosmopolitan lens that broadens common understandings of the migratory phenomenon. This includes stories establishing a similarity between the experiences of Italians of immigrant background in Italy and those of Italians of single heritage as immigrants abroad. These narratives show the migratory experience as a two-way phenomenon and invite a self-reflective viewpoint recognising ‘Otherness in Us and Self in the Other’⁴⁶. The platform *Prospettive Altre* features a section titled “Stories of New Migrants: Young Italians in the World” which presents stories of “young people leaving the *Bel Paese*” due to “low wages, inattentive politics, gerontocracy, unemployment and the lack of reward after years of study”. These stories mirror the narrative of the ‘success story’ with a focus on the self-determination, hard work ethos and resilience of those Italians of single heritage who have migrated abroad. Yet, while these narratives highlight *sameness* of motivations, expectations, and experiences between ‘economic migrants’ in the world, *difference* is hardly explored. For example, the privileges associated with an Italian (EU) passport and a non-racialised identity are side-lined in favour of the pursuit of a discursive strategy seeking to illustrate the universality of the migration experience and its cultural-economic value.

Overall, the analysis showed that the transcultural identity of the new citizen is explored both at the level of cultural identity as well as at societal level as interconnectivity of human experiences. Many stories draw attention to the fact that diversity of origins can ‘co-exist’ with a fully professed Italian identity. Yet, while there is an attempt

⁴⁴ The story is no longer available on *Italiani+* via the Internet Archive. However, it can be retrieved here: <https://expresolatino.net/noticias/para-saber/karima-con-la-musica-ho-ritrovato-le-mie-radici-sono-tutte-in-2g/>.

⁴⁵ V. Marotta, “The Multicultural, Intercultural and the Transcultural subject”, in *Global Perspectives on the Politics of Multiculturalism in the 21st Century: A Case Study Analysis*, edited by F. Mansouri and B.E. de B’béri, New York: Routledge, 2014: 90–102.

⁴⁶ E.G. Berrocal, “Building Italian-ness through the Logic of the ‘Other is Us’ and the ‘Self in the Other’”. An Anti-Nationalist Approach to the Italian Debate on a New Citizenship Law”, *Bullettin of Italian Politics*, 2, 1 (2010): 69–90.

to 'celebrate' the multiple cultural affiliations of 'new citizens', 'Italian-ness' is rarely deconstructed, de-colonised or narrated as inherently trans-cultural.

5. BEYOND 'NEW CITIZENS': RE-THINKING INTERCULTURAL TACTICS OF (SELF-)REPRESENTATION

Intercultural digital media are deeply situated within the socio-cultural context of their emergence. The demands of young Italians of immigrant background – and, in particular, the campaign for citizenship reform – deeply inform the cultural politics of representation of these initiatives⁴⁷. As a response to mainstream media practices and discourses, these platforms have – or had at the time of their existence – the potential to construct more inclusive, diverse and pluralist representations about an increasingly culturally diverse Italian society.

The analysis of the personal stories articulated in the platforms has shown that 'the new citizen' is *strategically* constructed in opposition to negative stereotypical representations of 'the immigrant subject'. While seeking to subvert the dominant regime of representation, the recurring narrative attributing success to exceptional individual talent, hard work, self-determination, and resilience draws on a persuasive rhetorical frame of *acceptance* conditional upon *deservingness*. Expectations of 'model citizenship' are borrowed from hegemonic discourses on the economic value of 'immigrant contribution to the national economy' alongside neoliberal aspirations of upward mobility and self-made success. This suggests a careful inter-cultural politics of moderation and negotiation whereby the 'new citizen' is tactically inserted into the 'old' frame of the 'good immigrant' whose acceptance and recognition as a *legitimate* citizen in society is granted upon demonstrating *assimilation* of the values, interests, lifestyles, and expectations of the 'nation'⁴⁸.

This strategic integrationist tactic, I argue, is informed by a project of socio-political and institutional inclusion such as the citizenship law reform as a common civic project advocated by the content producers and stakeholders of the platforms. Yet, a cultural politics of representation channelled into a project of citizenship rights advocacy implies that certain representations, stories and voices may be excluded. For instance, the voices of those questioning a nation-centric view of citizenship and national belonging or the stories of those 'new Italians' who despite hard work and good intentions 'haven't made it' because of structural inequalities in society. I therefore argue that the perpetuation of the trope of the 'good immigrant' neither lead to real equality⁴⁹ nor it does contribute to a truly transformative inter-/trans-cultural politics of representation. De-colonising essentialist notions of national belonging and reclaiming a wider spectrum of voices, representations and experiences of what it means to be 'Italian' within a diverse and inclusive interpretation of identity could provide a way forward.

Although the phenomenon of intercultural media output has slowed down significantly compared to its peak years, it is still an active and rapidly evolving media landscape. A few initiatives launched in the last few years seem to practice a broader intersectional representational agenda which might include informed discussions of societal structural inequalities and a better understanding of institutional racism as a

⁴⁷ Morani, "Introducing Italy's Intercultural Digital Media: Mapping the Landscape".

⁴⁸ Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other".

⁴⁹ See N. Shukla, ed., *The Good Immigrant*, London: Penguin Books, 2017.

key factor in hindering equal participation and representation in society. Furthermore, recent studies have suggested that young Italians of ethnic minority or immigrant background have signalled a preference for hyphenated labels of self-identification rather than homogenising collective categories⁵⁰. While the ‘new citizen’ as a tactical model of self-representation to advocate citizenship, visibility and inclusion might have lost its momentum, attention devoted to the personal stories and achievements of Italians of diverse backgrounds is still very much alive in a new generation of digital media platforms significantly relying on social media communication.

In examining the challenges towards the construction of an inter-cultural politics of representation, this study has the potential to inform further investigations concerning evolving tactics and public discourses in Italy and in other contexts practicing the collective construction of more inclusive and diverse modes of self-narration and representation.

⁵⁰ Antonsich, “What’s in a Name? Children of Migrants, National Belonging and the Politics of Naming”.