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# Localizing diasporic digital media practices: Social stratification and community making among Somali women living in Rome

## **ABSTRACT**

*In this article, I inquire into the relationship between digital media practices, community making and forms of social stratification among Somali women living in Rome. Drawing on a critical approach to the study of 'digital diaspora', I use theories of 'field' and 'capitals' as analytical tools to examine the impact of different positionings assumed by Somali women within the local community on forms of diasporic networking through digital means. The relationality between offline and online reality is exposed, unpacking women's positioning and roles through an intersectional approach sensitive to age, class, literacy and gender dynamics. This reveals internal fractures or forms of solidarity shaping the landscape of the local field of Somali digital diaspora.*

## **KEYWORDS**

female migration  
digital diaspora  
Somali diaspora  
generation  
cultural capital  
social capital  
Rome

1. In the period comprised between October 2017 and September 2018, I conducted one or more semi-structured interviews about life experiences as migrants and digital media practices with thirteen ( $N = 13$ ) Somali women residing in Rome or its immediate surroundings. I also gathered ethnographic data through participant observation during several social events organized by the local community. The data used for this article are the product of this year of work in the field.

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## INTRODUCTION

‘I don’t know how to use the Internet’ was a very common answer to my first timid attempts to find potential research participants while hanging around Castrense, a small area of Rome close to the Termini central station. This area where I started my work in the field is the beating heart of the Somali community’s social life in the city, full of grocery shops run by Ethiopian and Somali inhabitants of Rome. It was also very common to receive this answer from Somali women who were carrying a smartphone in their hands. It seemed that the word ‘internet’ was somehow signifying something different from using social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, which were not considered part of using or knowing ‘the internet’, but rather a better and cheaper extension of phone calls. This aspect is particularly important, as the impact of digital media in the form of oral communication through phone and video calls has become an essential trait of Somali women’s digital practices, and it is a recurrent topic throughout my research. Oral and private communication formed the basis of Somali women’s everyday lives in Rome, articulating their local and transnational diasporic relationships.

In this article, I will investigate the reasons and dynamics that made oral communication through digital media an essential tool for local diasporic networking, while inquiring into the impact that ‘knowing’ or ‘not knowing’ how to use the internet had in processes of social stratification and community making among Somali women in Rome. Recent research has highlighted the important role that digital media have in migrants’ everyday lives, opening up opportunities that were unimaginable before the advent of the internet (see Candidatu et al. 2019; Ponzanesi 2020; Smets et al. 2020). Digital media, indeed, have allowed transnational communication in an easy, cheap and immediate way, facilitating the maintenance of relationships at a distance, but also enabling the creation of transnational digital networks among migrants for political, social and religious purposes (Brinkerhoff 2009; Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010). Especially in the case of the Somali diaspora, one of the largest in the world, research has highlighted the great impact of digital media in enhancing diasporic connectivity among Somali migrants residing in different parts of the globe (Issa-Salwe 2008; Kok and Rogers 2017). Nevertheless, little research has been done on the role of digital media in *local* diasporic relationships and community dynamics, especially from a gender perspective. The reason for researching Somali women<sup>1</sup> is linked to the diverse and highly feminized character of the Somali community in Rome, which is the product of the overlap between different *generations* of migration initiated in post-colonial times. This particular characteristic of the Roman community offers the possibility to look differently at the intertwinement of digital media practice and diasporic local dynamics, in a way that breaks loose from research that privileges studies of migration and digital media mostly from young men’s perspective.

Drawing on research on digital diaspora (Candidatu et al. 2019; Ponzanesi 2020; Andersson 2019) and Bourdieu's conceptualization of 'field' and 'capitals' in relation to theories of social stratification (Bourdieu 1985, 1993), my aim is to highlight how different positionings – along the lines of generation and gender – characterizing Somali women within the community have an impact on local diasporic dynamics and on the emergence of specific digital practices intended for diasporic networking.

Firstly, I will briefly describe the theoretical framing that backs my analytical approach. This will be followed by a contextualization of Somali women's migration to Italy, and how belonging to different migration generations influenced women's role within the community. Thirdly, I will analyse how the intertwining of local rootedness with other axes of differentiation, such as literacy and gender relations, deeply influenced diasporic digital practices and local practices of community making.

### **THE 'FIELD' OF THE SOMALI DIGITAL DIASPORA: A THEORETICAL FRAMING**

Mediated communication is an 'essential dimension of contemporary experience' (Silverstone 1999: 1). This is particularly true for the diasporic experience, being a process 'tightly interlinked with the constructions of identity and communities' (Georgiou 2006: 11) through 'the imagining of forgotten past and possible futures' (Hedge 2016: 3). For Somali women living in Rome, forms of mediated communication through letters, the press, radio, television and telephone have always been part of their past and contemporary diasporic experiences, having a central role in the development of a sense of belonging in a condition of rootlessness and for the reformulation of feelings of homeliness within the Italian context. Most of the time, this was possible through mediated practices that helped them maintain close relationships with family and friends who remained in Somalia or had fled to other parts of the world. These forms of social co-presence in physical absence (Hjort 2005; Madianou and Miller 2012; Alinejad 2019) have been furtherly strengthened nowadays by digital communication technologies. Digital media, indeed, have extended a phenomenon that was not new. The novelty of the technological advancement lies in the unprecedented scale and immediacy of social connectedness.

It is precisely for this reason that, in the past decade, a new term emerged in the field of digital media at the intersection with migration and diaspora studies: 'digital diaspora' (Brinkerhoff 2009; Bernal 2014; Everett 2009; Andersson 2019; Gajjala 2019), sometimes called 'e-diaspora' (Diminescu 2008; Diminescu and Loveluck 2014) or 'online diaspora' (Trandafoiu 2013). This term has been used to describe a wide range of scholarly attempts to frame migrants' digital practices and forms of diasporic connectivity (Alinejad 2017). Nevertheless, as Ponzanesi (2020) rightly points out, there is still little consensus over the real meaning of the concept, which is still undertheorized while being used for very different social phenomena related to migrants' digital connectedness. Indeed, each scholarly field uses different epistemologies and methodologies for the exploration of these studies (Candidatu et al. 2019), often applying the concept of 'digital diaspora' without a clear-cut definition.

My approach to the study of *digital diaspora* is the product of a wider reflection on how to frame *diaspora* – theoretically and analytically. In this respect, I owe much to postcolonial and poststructuralist theorists such as Brah (1996), Clifford (1994) and Gilroy (1993), who highlighted the relational,

fluid and power-led character of diaspora. Their approaches were, indeed, far from rigid conceptualizations based on the ‘myth of homeland and return’ (Safran 1991: 83), which often assigned diasporic experiences to a common condition of subalternity and oppression. Instead, I consider diaspora a *relational field of inquiry* through which I analyse contextual relations of power within diasporic communities, impacting the emergence of different forms of diasporic sociality, sense of the self and belongings at a certain time and space. This also leads to a reevaluation of digital diaspora, which I consider as an emanation of that relational field, hence a phenomenon which is the product of those *situated* (Haraway 1988) relations of power, leading to different forms of diasporic sociality conducted online. Hence, as for ‘diaspora’ more broadly, I am approaching digital diaspora not as a descriptive category, but rather as a ‘field’ (Bourdieu 1993). More specifically, I investigate it as a ‘domain of social practice in which variously positioned human agents and agencies compete and cooperate over matters of concern [...] by means of the Internet’ (Postill 2011: 4).

Looking at digital diaspora as a ‘field’ emerging along the online–offline continuum means grounding its investigation in the context that led to its emergence. In this respect, I do not consider digital diaspora to be a phenomenon not territorially bound (Hepp et al. 2012) whose relevance can be appreciated and understood only from a transnational perspective. Rather, I acknowledge the interrelation of transnational power dynamics with national and very local ones in the shaping of situated forms of digital diasporic sociality. Besides the acknowledgment of local dynamics in shaping digital ones, approaching digital diaspora as a ‘field’ (Bourdieu 1985; Thomson 2014) means giving centrality to the human actors who are ‘playing’ on it. More specifically, understanding the possibilities of action of different diasporic subjects within that space becomes essential in order to understand the functioning and interests leading to a certain field of digital diaspora’s emergence.

I will draw on Bourdieu’s theory of social stratification and the feminist intersectional approach for the analysis of the field of the Somali digital diaspora in Rome. This is pursued by considering their positioning at the crossroads of different axes of differentiation such as gender, race, class, literacy and age. Moreover, my analysis focuses on Somali migrants’ use and accumulation of capital – economic, symbolic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1985) – and migrants’ ability to mobilize these forms of capital (Anthias 2007) in order to pursue an advantage or mitigate a disadvantage on a local level. This approach is meant to highlight the partiality of the digital diaspora, in opposition to approaches that consider it an indiscriminate representative of diasporic online presence, inquiring into *who*, within a specific digital field, can access it, and avoiding falling into the trap of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002). In other words, it aims to offer a nuanced understanding of digital diaspora emergence, identifying the articulation of dynamics of inclusion in *and* exclusion from digital practices intended for diasporic networking.

### **LOOKING AT HISTORY FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE: POSTCOLONIALISM AND COLONIAL ACCULTURATION IN PATTERNS OF SOMALI MIGRATION TO ITALY**

The history of Somali migration to Italy is quite difficult to delineate for several reasons. First, Italy has a long history of emigration, but only a relatively recent

history as a receiving country. This caused a delay in generating statistical data pertaining to migratory flows into the country, which began to be gathered only at the end of the 1970s. Nevertheless, even though it is hard to quantify Somali presence in Italy before that time, there are several sources which testify that small flows of Somali migration to Italy began at the end of the Second World War. This happened after the stipulation of the Paris Peace Treaties in 1947 that gave Italy the task of guiding Somalia towards full independence in the form of Trusteeship Administration (Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana della Somalia [AFIS]). Indeed, the resolutions no. 289 and no. 442 of the UN General Assembly imposed new commitments on Italy with respect to its former colonies, among which the 'entrusted responsibility for preparing the Somalis for self-government' by 1960 (Ware 1965: 173; Guglielmo 2013; Gentili 2008).

Historical accounts usually identify three waves of Somali migration to Italy. The first arrivals coincided with the beginning of the Italian Trusteeship Administration in 1950, thanks to scholarship programmes for Somali university students provided by the Italian government in the decade between 1950 and 1960 (Deplano 2017; Tripodi 1999). These programmes were meant not only to provide higher education for Somali people, but, less innocently, to strengthen Italy's relationship with the future independent élite of the Republic of Somalia (Deplano 2017). This first flow was a temporary one as the students were meant to return to Somalia at the end of the programme. A second wave of Somali migration started after the rise of Siad Barre's regime in 1969, which pushed many intellectuals and the regime's political opponents to flee to Italy as political refugees (Luraschi 2011; Pandolfo 2015). Many of them had already spent time in Italy through the university exchange programmes, which led them to choose Italy as the most natural choice as a destination. Unlike the previous wave, this second flow was not intended to be temporary, but permanent. The third and last wave began, after the fall of Siad Barre's regime, which brought the collapse of the Somali state and the rise of 'warlordism' in 1990 (Gentili 2008). The year 1990 represents, for many reasons, a central historical moment for Somali people, who started a process of mass migration that still continues today.

Especially in the case of the first two flows, the history of Somali migration to Italy has been narrated as a male phenomenon, giving the impression that Somali women did not take part in it, except in the form of family reunification. If, on the one hand, it is undoubtedly true that female migration grew exponentially after 1990, on the other hand, most of my oldest participants narrated a different story, in which Somali women were not excluded at all from the experience of migration before the outburst of civil war. Rather, their experiences followed different paths than men's during the trusteeship period, as their migration was the product of informal connections rather than institutional ones. Nuruddin Farah (2003) is one of the few scholars who has written about Somali women's presence in Italy in postcolonial times, claiming that the Somali community in Rome, back in 1994, was mostly represented by women who migrated to Italy with their Italian employers for whom they worked as nannies, cooks and housemaids during and after the trusteeship period.

This was confirmed by many of my interviews with older residents among Somali women in Rome. Indeed, these experiences were frequently mentioned in relation to accounts about their mother or aunts' history of migration to Italy. Moreover, the presence of close relatives was considered a push factor

for their migration to Italy, which was facilitated, in other cases, by the intermediation instead of Italian friends, employers or partners known in Somalia in postcolonial times. Hence I do consider this flow of female migration to be a 'postcolonial' flow, as its main character was shaped by the Italian presence in Somalia in the decades that preceded the outburst of the civil war. More specifically, it was linked to a sense of symbolic attachment to the 'metropole', due to a process of 'colonial acculturation' (Marchetti 2011) that had begun in Somalia, thanks to the proximity to Italian people, culture, language and education.

### **THE 'OLD LIRAS': POSTCOLONIAL (DIS)ATTACHMENTS AT THE HEART OF THE 'METROPOLE'**

The postcolonial flow of Somali female migration is represented by an older generation of Somali women residing in Rome, who constitute a well-defined group within the diasporic community: *le vecchie Lire* (the *old Liras*). This name was coined by them because of its temporal and gendered connotation: Lira is a female noun in Italian, referring to the old Italian currency which preceded the introduction of the euro in 2002. In other words, with this label, they referred to themselves as a group of women who migrated to Italy before the euro became its national currency. The *old Liras* clearly problematizes the classic distinction of three waves of Somali migration identified by the literature – students, political dissidents of Siad Barre's regime and refugees fleeing the civil war – as their sense of belonging to the same group was detached from the classic separation of Somali migration flows between a 'before the civil war' and an 'after the civil war'. Rather, they shared similar experiences as postcolonial subjects who arrived in Italy through informal channels that were open because of the postcolonial condition lived by Somalia before the outburst of the civil conflict. Indeed, even when they arrived after 1990, their decision to live in Italy was linked to the presence of a network already there of strong and weak ties (Granovetter 1973) and to postcolonial cultural capital (Bourdieu 1985; Marchetti 2011) gained well before their arrival.

An example of this dynamic was highlighted by Fadia (2018), who moved to Italy in 1989 with her Italian husband, who used to work in Somalia, and their son. When I asked her how and when she learnt Italian, she replied straightforwardly: 'I have always had Italian boyfriends. I have always hung out with Italians'. She started hanging out with Italians after her divorce from her first husband, a Somali man. She then learnt Italian, thanks to her new circle of Italian friends. She stressed her entanglement with the Italian community of Mogadishu, pointing out how she even became a member of *La Casa d'Italia*, a popular private club of Italians living in the Somali capital. After migration, she was the first Black woman living in Latina, a town close to Rome, describing that situation as not particularly stressful, though:

I have never had problems. No, never. Because I think that my mind thought that I was also part of these people. I have never had problems. Then, I have always been well behaved [chuckles]. Knowing the system in which Italians live already from 'there' [from Somalia], I knew. I didn't need to learn a new life. I already knew it.

(Fadia 2018)

For Fadia, ‘knowing the system’ eased her experience of migration to Italy. Her case shows how everyday experiences of proximity had an even stronger impact in growing feelings of attachment to the Italian culture and people. At the same time, this strong sense of attachment caused an even stronger sense of betrayal in another participant, Mira, who arrived in Italy in 1991, right after the outburst of the civil war. Mira’s accounts show the paradoxes caused by the silence of Italian public authorities about Italy’s colonial and postcolonial role in Somalia, exposing how this silence allowed Italy not to confront its responsibilities towards its former colonies. This became evident when civil war broke out in Somalia. Mira is a highly educated woman, who graduated in Italian literature at the University of Mogadishu. She worked for an Italian company located in Somalia for many years before fleeing to Italy a few months after the outburst of civil war in 1990. Indeed, she had her mother in Italy who had moved there many years before to work as a housekeeper for Italian families:

We were a former Italian colony, I did school in Italian, I had Italian teachers, I have always worked with Italians. Again, when I came here, that was a second homeland for me. Then I realized that it wasn’t the case.

(Mira 2018)

Her realization came right after her arrival, when she saw that the Italian government was not offering the status of refugee to Somali people who were fleeing to Italy. Italy, at that time, was not releasing residency permits to Somali people – precisely those people who Italy had colonized – unless they decided to apply for asylum as political dissidents. It was disturbing for her to discover that the place that she imagined as a second homeland was, instead, uninterested when not overtly hostile towards her presence. In addition, she found it shocking to see how many White Italians did not know anything about Somalia when, on the contrary, she knew everything about Italy. The imbalance in the Somali–Italian relationship – ambiguous and blurred in Somalia – was now obvious at the heart of the ‘metropole’.

### **GENERATIONAL COMPETITION AND WOMEN’S SOLIDARITIES: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE OLD LIRAS AND THE TITANICS**

This mixed feeling of home and betrayal certainly does not characterize the experiences of a younger generation of Somali residents, who arrived as refugees in more recent times. They are labelled the *Titanics* by the *old Liras*, due to their experience of reaching Italy by crossing the Mediterranean by boat. Interestingly, the identity of *old Liras* was posed in contraposition to that of the *Titanics*, both in generational and gender terms. Indeed, the *Titanics* are mostly men, who arrived in Italy in the last two decades while having very weak connections with other Somalis residing in Italy, and are now stuck in Rome because of the Dublin Regulation and unable to relocate elsewhere (Saggiomo 2017). Nevertheless, the fracture between the two generations seemed due to the political, social and cultural consequences that different experiences of war had produced. As Mira pointed out:

These are boys born and raised in a war context. It is different for us who have been helped in growing up. They [family, teachers] taught us,

they have. [...] Someone sat down for us and taught our tradition, how to behave. [...] They haven't experienced that. I mean, they were born running, right? Their mothers tried to save them from bombings, from the bullets. [...] They don't know what tradition is, they don't know what respect is. They, these boys who arrive by boat, literally come from another world.

(Mira 2018)

Mira's words show the great impact that war had on intra-diasporic relationships, dividing the oldest generation of Somalis, who experienced the conflict only mildly and from afar, from those who were born within that context of daily violence. Internal divisions seem to be the product of a lack of mutual understanding caused by a conflict which eroded Somali cultural, social and political fabric, making young Somalis unrecognizable in the eyes of the *old Liras*. The level of exposure to war also had a major impact on political views, often linked to clan-based affiliations for new residents, who were trying to mirror current homeland politics. This attitude caused tense relationships with old residents who were still influenced by the political views and cultural values of pre-war Somalia (Pikkalainen et al. 2013). At the same time, these tensions assumed clear gender connotations between the *old Liras* and the *Titanic* men, which found expression in the competition between the two groups as representatives of the Somali community in Rome. Their local competition was mirroring, on a small scale, the wider social fracture experienced after the fall of Siad Barre, that gave life to a conflictual political system based on clan divisions, which is fully rejected by the *old Liras*. On the other hand, the *old Liras'* relationship with *Titanic* women was made easier, thanks to a generational social hierarchy that regulated their rapport. Their relationship also mirrored a class dynamic, as the level of local power held by the *old Liras* was linked to stronger economic stability compared to the *Titanics*. The *Titanic* women were mostly unemployed, illiterate and unable to speak Italian, which was a condition that made them often dependent on the *old Liras'* solidarity, mediation and help.

The *old Liras* have a powerful position within the local community due to their cultural, economic and social capital gained through their long-time residency and postcolonial acculturation. Nevertheless, the implications of this positioning for digital practices aimed at diasporic networking are not straightforward. The 'field' of the Somali digital diaspora created by the *old Liras* reflects the gendered and generational divisions that have been previously highlighted, while also being the product of limitations posed by Somali women's widespread illiteracy or lack of digital literacy. These elements, indeed, tremendously impacted on most Somali women's capability – among both the *old Liras* and the *Titanics* – to make use of digital tools. The next sections will unpack the dynamics that these limitations produced: far from creating a digital void, on the one hand, they resulted in further social stratifications between Somali women of the Roman community, but, on the other hand, opened up original ways to take advantage of digital technologies' affordances and to make a community.

### **LOCALIZING THE FIELD OF SOMALI DIGITAL DIASPORA: OLD LIRAS, ILLITERACY AND THE 'GREY DIVIDE'**

As Issa-Salwe points out, 'when a society begins to disintegrate during a period of social or economic turmoil, it experiences an identity crisis', hence,



'in such a situation, people's endeavour to reconstitute their identities and social meaning by articulating and identifying with alternative discourses' becomes a necessity (2008: 54). The author approaches the use of technologies and the web by the Somali diaspora as functional to that process. On the one hand, he shows the way in which Somali migrants' digital practices reflect certain local political dynamics, promoting group political identities and 'virtually' reproducing antagonisms and conflicts happening in the homeland. On the other hand, Issa-Salwe outlines how the web witnessed a proliferation of websites that have allowed the Somali diaspora 'to communicate, regroup, share views, help their groups at home, and organize activities' since 1991 (2008: 54). In other words, computer-mediated forms of communication opened up new empowering possibilities for Somalis who fled abroad, overcoming the constraints posed by offline reality, while giving access to or sharing information in real time.

At the same time, digital media do not only respond to migrants' need to reconstitute their identity in a context of displacement. Digital media also help give them easy access to virtual networks of migrants where they receive different kind of support from fellow compatriots, through shared information or in job hunting (Keles 2015). According to some recent literature on digital practices and the migratory experience (Leung 2018; Dekker et al. 2014), the existence of online networks among migrants and refugees seems to have disrupted the need for 'offline' social networks based on 'strong ties', such as kinship, friendship or belonging to a same community or clan. Dekker et al. (2014) argue that nowadays building networks based on digitally led 'weak ties' has, instead, become central. Indeed, contemporary conditions of displacement make digital networks more useful in expanding migrants' social capital in an easy and immediate fashion, helping them to create bonds and early connections that provide useful information and resources for avoiding the risks associated with migration.

According to these views, Somali migrant women – especially the *Titanics* – should have been impacted by this new articulation of the migratory experience, hence massively relying on digital media throughout the journey and after their arrival in Italy. Nevertheless, the reality seemed more complex, as multiple factors intervened in shaping Somali women's use of digital media in Rome, especially in relation to diasporic networking. On the one hand, it confirmed an aspect that Keles (2015) highlighted: it is quite difficult for virtual communities to replace and operate like face-to-face communities. Keles indeed outlines the importance of personal contacts in building trust relationships to strengthen the social capital of diasporic subjects more effectively. On the other hand, the possibilities opened up by digital tools for enhancing diasporic networking were constrained, on a local dimension, by a digital divide between Somali women of the Roman community linked to their levels of literacy and education.

Despite *old Liras*' shared social power within the Somali community of Rome, their different levels of digital skills created further social stratifications within the group. Generally, the most digitally proficient among the *old Liras* were also the most educated and the younger members. This had a huge impact in terms of internal power dynamics, as Mira points out:

Not everyone from the Somali community has...as I have explained before, we have a percentage of [...] I mean, everyone who arrived in Italy as illiterate has done nothing to improve. So, we are many, but

2. The platforms are Roma Multietnica (<http://www.romamultietnica.it/>) and Volontariato Lazio (<http://www.volontariato.lazio.it/>). Accessed 9 November 2020.

those who use it [digital media], do not reach even a group of ten people. On the contrary, there is the word-of-mouth factor that works very well. So, there is this contact for who is proficient and knows how to use [WhatsApp], who is not proficient is contacted by phone, that works a lot. Because there is the one who calls the other, the other who calls another one and in a matter of minutes the whole community knows everything.

(Mira 2018)

Then Mira adds:

This group of ten, eleven people who use WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and anything else, has friends and family around the world. It happens that if something happens in Australia, this person tells that to his relative who writes it on Facebook and there, there is solidarity. If he is a close relative, we even organize events in the afternoon where we pray and give our condolences.

(Mira 2018)

These excerpts highlight several interesting aspects of the relationship between local diasporic dynamics among Somali women living in Rome and the influence that social media have in these dynamics. Firstly, the excerpts reveal how *online* transnational connectivity and communication enhanced by digital media works as the point of departure for the articulation of *offline* solidarity practices which serve to maintain old residents' social connectedness on a *local* level. Mira also highlights the existence of a small group of Somali women among the *old Liras* with whom she is in closer contact through digital media who mediate information received from different digital platforms to the rest of the community. The role of this sub-group is made possible because, unlike the rest, they use digital media more proficiently, thanks to their higher level of literacy, which is a factor that makes them a central node within the community. This is particularly interesting as Mira's accounts open up a wider reflection on the relationship between gender, generation, level of education and digital literacy for understanding the articulation of local diasporic networking along the online–offline continuum. Secondly, widespread illiteracy creates a particular situation, related to the predominance of oral communication over written communication. This explains Somali women's poor *public* presence on digital platforms, as their diasporic strategies for networking are mainly sustained by *private* forms of communication hardly traceable by an external eye.

Indeed, at the time of my fieldwork, I could not find any blog, website, Twitter or Instagram account or Facebook page created by Somali groups or associations in Italy, not to mention in Rome. There was no trace of Somalis' digital presence, private or institutional. I could only find a list of a few Somali associations on Italian platforms that were giving visibility to migrants' associations in Rome and the Lazio region.<sup>2</sup> It took me some time and a few phone calls with no answer to understand that those few associations were not even active. That 'silence' was impressive, and clashed with other research accounts (Issa-Salwe 2008; Osman 2017; Kok and Rogers 2017) that found a level of *transnational* connectivity and political and social engagement among Somalis through the internet that I found missing, however, on a *local* level. When I asked Mira what the reason could be for this public absence of the community from digital platforms, she claimed:

Do you think we never thought about it? If I spend 3000 euros to make a website of this kind, consider that only five, six people out of 150 can see it [...] Because 90% [of Somalis in Rome] are illiterate.

(Mira 2018)

In other words, creating such a page or website was a waste of time and money, as it would have reached only a small part of the community. Talking about the *old Liras*, Nuna gave a further clarification of the reasons why just a few women among them were active users on social media platforms. She highlighted how the majority of the *old Liras* were now elderly. Hence there was what Morris (2007) and Friemel (2014) call the 'grey divide', specifically of people aged 65 plus, which adds to other socio-demographic dimensions which impact on the digital divide, such as gender, education and income. According to Friemel, there are several reasons for the 'grey divide' besides the lack of technical devices and access to the internet, namely 'motivational indifference (perceived uselessness of the information on the Internet or little relevance for one's life) or deficient knowledge' (2014: 316). This is particularly true for the case of the *old Liras* aged 65 plus who I interviewed. Indeed, even when they had access to the internet through their smartphone, they lacked digital skills. This prevented them from fully understanding the functioning of more complex platforms such as Facebook. This difficulty in fully understanding their functioning caused fear and rejection, such as in Sisi's case, with the consequent decision to close the account:

Once, I opened it [a Facebook account]. It has been opened on my phone by a friend of mine. She opened it. She told me that there are 600 people who got in [...] I should do [press] ok, ok [600 people asked for her friendship]. I have to accept these people. I told her 'please, close it'. That day she closed it. I don't like it, no. The other phone, normal, I call you every day. No, no, Facebook, I don't have the time and I don't like it. [...] I am an old lady, not a girl who plays on Facebook today. Better if I watch my TV, right?

(Sisi 2018)

If we consider both the impact of widespread illiteracy and the 'grey divide', it seems clear why Mira thought that starting any page or website for the community was a waste of time and money. This situation also pushed digitally literate women not to take advantage of their digital skills to keep their social bonds with other Somali women. Instead they relied on 'traditional' mediated forms of *communication*, such as phone calls, while digital skills allowed them to have access more rapidly to information relevant to the community. Digital skills allowed some of the *old Liras* to act, in other words, as social glue for the community, bridging old and new forms of mediated communication. In the meantime, the secondary relevance of written forms of communication brought many Somali women to take advantage of other affordances provided by apps such WhatsApp, Viber and IMO, as they provided the possibility to have phone calls and video calls at very low cost. In other words, digital tools seemed to have relevance in maintaining strong and weak ties among Somali women mainly because of the economic convenience. Hence, the field of Somali digital diaspora in Rome was ultimately based on traditional oral communication through the means of digital tools, so digital tools' affordances

3. According to a report by UNICEF (2016), Somalia is the country with the lowest enrolment rates for primary school aged children, as only 25 per cent of boys and 21 per cent of girls attend primary education. The situation is even worse in rural areas, where only 12 per cent of girls receive primary education. Extreme poverty across Somalia, alongside a privatized educational system that emerged from the ashes left by the state because of the conflict, made and still makes it difficult for parents to afford school fees.

were accorded to community members' *capacity* to connect through a specific medium in order to keep their social capital.

### **TITANIC WOMEN: DIGITAL PRACTICES AND MAINTAINING STRONG TIES**

As for the *old Liras*, in my interviews with Somali refugee women who had arrived more recently, there was no mention either of their access to, consumption of or engagement with digital networks and websites intended for the Somali diaspora, in Italy or transnationally. The level of illiteracy among my younger participants was much higher than among the *old Liras*, which is explained by the fact that access to education became increasingly difficult after the collapse of the Somali state, especially for young girls coming from rural areas (UNICEF 2016).<sup>3</sup> Their digital media literacy was, therefore, very basic, expressed using WhatsApp, IMO and Facebook Messenger for phone calls and video calls or to share pictures with family and friends abroad. Indeed, unlike the *old Liras*, the *Titanic* women's use of digital media was not aimed at building local connections, but rather aimed at keeping their ties 'strong' (Granovetter 1973) with family and friends through *transnational* communication.

In order to understand their different approach to digital communication, it is important to understand the different positioning of these women compared to the *old Liras*. Firstly, their economic condition was very precarious: most of them could not speak Italian at all and, therefore, were struggling to find a job that could allow them to be financially independent. When not living in state facilities for asylum seekers or living as housewives, they were hosted by some of the older Somali residents, working for them as maids. From their interviews, it became clear that a monthly subscription for the internet on their mobile phones was considered a big investment that could not go wasted. It is precisely for this reason that they usually gave priority to phone calls and video calls with their close family members left behind, especially their children. Communication with friends and acquaintances was described as secondary, and in some cases not even mentioned. That was precisely the case of Aisha, a 40-year-old woman who arrived in Italy in 2009. She described in the following words her attachment to her smartphone, which she used mainly to maintain her relationship with her children, who were living in Finland:

I am on the phone with them and video call practically 24 hours a day, always checking on them and asking about their day. I listen to their problems. After and before school, without video-calls that are free, I would be lost as I would have no communication. [...] If I forget my phone, it's as if I have forgotten my life.

(Aisha 2018)

In the meantime, the network of 'weak ties' that some of them were maintaining was composed of friends made during the journey on the boat, in the reception facilities, or while trying to illegally reach northern Europe. These experiences were highly impactful from an emotional perspective, leading to the creation of strong friendships with their journey fellows. *Titanic* women often mentioned that they were in contact with these friends through WhatsApp, individually or in groups. With those who were residing in Italy, they were not only talking about their lives, but also sharing useful

bureaucratic information, for example about the procedures for asylum application, or to get a residency permit. Interestingly, their narratives highlighted a common experience of social isolation on a local level. Indeed, in most cases, journey fellows were not residing in Rome, so the maintenance of their relationships through digital means was not coupled with offline everyday encounters. Digital media, in this respect, functioned as a tool that allowed them to find temporary intimate connectedness that was not experienced, otherwise, in their everyday reality.

## CONCLUSION

This article has tried to highlight the linkages between digital practices, the diaspora and local dynamics of social stratification. Bringing together the concept of digital diaspora (Andersson 2019) with the concept of ‘capitals’ (Bourdieu 1985, 1993), I have highlighted the intertwinement of Somali women’s social positioning within the Roman community with specific forms of digital practices intended for local diasporic networking. My intervention’s aim was twofold: firstly, I wanted to offer a new perspective in the field of digital diaspora research. This has been pursued by looking at the impact of digital media on local forms of diasporic sociality, rather than confining the relevance of diasporic networking through digital media merely to transnational dynamics. Secondly, I wanted to highlight the importance of studying digital diasporas through a bottom-up approach that is sensitive to their ‘situatedness’ (Haraway 1988) and to the different positionings assumed by diasporic subjects within a certain social field in order to understand their articulation. In other words, I wanted to highlight the centrality of inquiring *who* is behind the emergence of specific forms of diasporic networking through the means of the internet, in order to understand the *how* and *why* of their emergence.

In the specific case of Somali women living in Rome, these aspects appear key. Indeed, I have first highlighted the very local dimension of their ‘field’ of digital diaspora, hence showing how local dynamics were very much implicated in the articulation of digital practices intended for diasporic networking. In the case of the *old Liras*, I have outlined how their privileged position within the community was linked to their level of local rootedness, and the various kinds of capital – cultural, economic and social – that they were able to mobilize (Anthias 2007), in contrast to the *Titanic* women. Other axes of differentiation were also implicated in the *old Liras’* role within the community, such as their level of education and literacy, which enabled a smaller group among them to take advantage of the possibilities offered by digital tools, especially in terms of access to relevant information for the community. Nevertheless, diasporic networking, precisely because of the limitations imposed by widespread illiteracy, was based on the use of digital media for oral communication in the form of phone calls and video calls using apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. The ‘field’ of digital diaspora that results from Somali women’s digital practices assumes the shape of a private one, untraceable by an external eye: not composed of networks of pages, websites, forums and hyperlinks, but made up of everyday oral communication through the means of messaging apps.

Finally, I have also highlighted how illiteracy and lack of cultural, social and economic resources might lead to different forms of digital practices being prioritized. That was precisely the case of the *Titanic* women, whose condition of vulnerability pushed them not to invest in the strengthening of weak

ties on a local level, but rather to give priority to the maintenance of stronger transnational relationships, represented by their children and relatives left behind or living abroad. To conclude, diasporic levels of connectivity cannot be measured by looking merely at the public display of diasporic presence on digital media. At the same time, as this case study has clearly shown, it is essential to understand diasporic subjects' positioning and resources in order to grasp how certain forms of diasporic digital connectivity come to life, locally and transnationally.

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