Online public engagement is the New Deal! Along the distinctive pathway of the Italian University

Letizia Lo Presti - Giulio Maggiore - Vittoria Marino

Abstract

Frame of the research: *A managerial perspective of public engagement can help universities to strengthen the communication of university identity from a social, scientific, or accessibility point of view.*

Purpose of the paper: *The goal of this paper is to investigate the concept of the online university public engagement from a managerial standpoint by examining those Italian universities that have engaged in Third Mission activities thanks also to recent ministerial decrees issued on the subject.*

Methodology: *A content analysis of the main official websites of 50 Italian universities was performed. An exploratory factorial analysis made it possible to identify the main approaches to online public engagement.*

Findings: *There are 4 main dimensions of online public engagement that have been communicated on Italian websites (social, cultural, research and widening engagement), each referring to a specific target. A so-called "Cultural engagement" approach emerges which underlines the role of the university as a pole of cultural and artistic attraction.*

Research limits: *The research explores public engagement only in the Italian context. Although the article investigates more than 50% of the Italian universities, it does not allow the extension of the results to the reference population.*

Practical implications: *Research results contribute to the understanding of online public engagement and map the current uses of stakeholder engagement activities in the university context to date.*

Originality of the paper: *The research enriches the knowledge of the online public engagement construct thanks to the identification of a new dimension "Cultural engagement", that had not yet emerged in international contexts.*

Key words: public engagement; web communication; managerial perspective; stakeholder; third mission; cultural engagement.

1. Introduction

Major changes that have affected the university world for some years now and due largely to strong pressure from society for a more participatory role of university institutions, have certainly been amplified by the new digital tools. It is now possible to communicate and share university strategies and activities with an enlarged community in almost real time thus allowing them to become the protagonists in a process of

close-knit integration with their territory and with their community. Universities are gradually abandoning their "ivory tower" to descend more and more often into the reality that surrounds them so that the knowledge they produce can be used for the benefit of their community. The Third Mission and public engagement, one of its main pillars, does precisely this and concretizes the osmotic idea of a relationship between a university and its territory, between the results of scientific research and their benefits for the community, between the processes of growth and social improvement, all activated through the virtuous circuits and synergies created between universities and society.

In particular, public engagement implies that universities listen to and interact with their internal and external communities; social networks and official websites seem to constitute valuable tools in strengthening engagement with all the stakeholders. Indeed, the simplicity, speed and diffusion of social networks may favour the creation of an effective bridge between research, teaching, and public services as they increase the possibility of stimulating the dialogue between and with the public. Despite the fact that the academic literature is unanimous in considering universities as the "engine" of change and social development (e.g. Kerr, 2001; Furco, 2010), yet little has been studied on development opportunities that the university can offer to the territory through the public engagement lever. In Italy, in particular, the potential of public engagement is still poorly understood and there are still many areas of application in our universities which remain unexplored. A synchronized use of all the levers of engagement can help create relationships of trust with citizens as well as new relationships between universities and citizens, universities and businesses, universities and the academic community (e.g. Baccarani, 1995; Stephenson, 2011; Chilvers, 2013; Bandelli and Konijn, 2013; Watermeyer and Lewis, 2018; Goldner and Golan, 2018; Lo Presti and Marino 2019). Public engagement therefore represents a cultural interpretative perspective of the relationships between universities and communities that cannot be separated from the use of digital communication tools (Marino and Lo Presti, 2017; 2018; Lo Presti and Marino, 2019). But how have Italian universities implemented public engagement? And above all how have they communicated and shared it through their digital media? This study aims to investigate the ways in which Italian universities have dealt with public engagement and what dimensions are used the most. Studying university public engagement through communication on official websites has inevitable managerial implications. In fact, by measuring what is actually communicated on the websites, it is possible to rethink and/or design those dimensions that have not yet received visibility. In addition, studies on university public engagement can help strengthen the communication of university identity from a social, scientific or accessibility point of view, depending on the positioning that the university wants to communicate to its public of reference.

2. Background

2.1 The Third Mission of Universities

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The significance of the Third Mission of University Institutions has its roots in the last century. Many trace its birth back to 1963 when the rector of the University of California Clark Kerr, in a speech at Harvard, introduced the concept of "Multiversity" thus paving the way for a new idea of University (Multi vs Uni) to be seen as the centre of a community, capable of both including and enhancing its differences and of interpreting those social changes that, stemming from the economic boom of the 1960s, gave way to global transformations around the world. The central point of the disruptive vision of this enlightened rector is the understanding of how the University had shut itself inside its own boundaries, sitting high in the exclusivity of its own circles, disconnected from its territory and people, and that it would soon implode on itself, accelerating society's perception of its deep detachment from the contemporary world. The University must become a community that creates value for society, thus contributing to the development of human capital and enabling it to face the new challenges of globalization. This innovative idea of University spread quickly and found a wide consensus; and pressure for an increasingly widespread awareness in this regard became stronger and stronger until it finally concretised in the form of recommendations and/or regulatory provisions from the authorities. A "new institutional aim" for universities was thus declared as being part of an open and dynamic system, increasingly interlaced with the external environment (Piccaluga, 2000). In addition to its traditional educational and research purposes (First and Second Mission), university institutions are now increasingly involved in a process of sharing and disseminating knowledge, due to the need to support an economic and social development that goes beyond the academic boundaries (Third Mission). In the very concept of the Third Mission lies the idea that the University is a resource for the territory itself (Cognetti, 2013) and that it must implement strategies and practices that takes its actions outside its actual premises (Gleeson, 2010). The Third Mission aims to enhance the social role of the University - a role, however, that can be interpreted with differing intensity, through different degrees of public involvement, such as awareness, consultation, collaboration or shared leadership. Furco (2010) uses the term "engaged campus" in order to emphasize the single objective of its tripartite mission. The author argues that university campuses can be defined as "engaged" when each mission has the same priority and when not only does the university engages its community of reference, but it is often called upon by the public with whom it interacts to collaborate, thus enabling a virtuous circle in which truly authentic strategies of engagement, aimed at establishing value and lasting relationships with the stakeholders, come into play. The last two decades of the 20th century, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries, saw numerous attempts to implement management models in order to confer more substance to the Third Mission. This multitude of more or less virtuous cases have given rise to an international case study whose goal is the definition of best practices and, therefore, valid

criteria for measuring performance and impact on the territory. In Italy, the debate on the Third Mission is in full swing.

With regard to Italy, ANVUR, the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Research, in its Public Announcement for The VQR 2004-2010, defined eight indicators of the Third Mission, most of them linked to financially valorising research, research contracts and subcontracted consulting, patents, spin-offs, participation in think-tanks and consortia with technological transfer purposes; other indicators referred to the enhancement of knowledge for the well-being of society, such as the management of archaeological sites, museum poles and other activities. An open category for "other activities of the Third Mission", broad and indefinite, shows a conceptual confusion that yet has not been fully clarified. In fact, creating a single final indicator for the Third Mission proved to be problematic and opened a phase of discussion and elaboration in the agency that saw the establishment of a group of Experts of the Third Mission for the analysis of evaluation criteria, possible indicators and sources, and the organisation of several workshops on the state of the art of the Third Mission indicators. With the second research assessment, the 2011-2014 Research Quality Assessment (VQR 2011-2014) where better tools tested by ANVUR were in fact used, the results of the assessment showed significant differences between universities, in particular in terms of comparability. As a result, it became clear that further reflection was needed on the definition of the Third Mission and its measurement. More recently, the Third Mission Assessment Manual for Italian Universities was approved and published in 2015 by ANVUR, effectively making the Third Mission one of the assessment parameters of research quality, together with Life-Long Learning and Public Engagement. In fact, according to some Authors, the Third Mission system can therefore be segmented into three main ambits: innovation and technology transfer; permanent education; Public Engagement (Boffo *et al.*, 2015). In the first area - innovation and technological transfer - research is transformed into knowledge useful for production purposes, using an entrepreneurial approach. Whereas in the other two ambits of permanent education and social engagement, a logic of community service tends to prevail through cultural, social, educational or civil content contributions, capable of enhancing and multiplying the collective resources: an invisible revolution that scholars have long highlighted at an international level - the overcoming of the traditional academic self-exaltation thanks to an increased interdependence with the surroundings in a mutually advantageous exchange of diverse strategic resources. This change of perspective in Italy is also evident in the last evaluation of the research (VQR 2015-2019). The Third Mission appears strengthened in the ability to give relevance to the University Institution in its territory, confirming and expanding the parameters of evaluation. The evidence of this activity is given through the case studies which, presented in limited numbers by the department and/or institution, must be able to illustrate the social, economic and cultural dimension of the impact, the relevance with respect to the reference context, the added value for the beneficiaries, the contribution of the proposing structure. Following a standard scheme provided directly by Anvur, with this new method of

presenting the results, an attempt was made to limit the risk of a conceptual confusion represented by the summary that was required in previous assessments.

2.2 Public Engagement: its Foundation and Purpose

Unlike the other areas of the Third Mission, Public Engagement remains, above all in Italy, a pillar of the Third Mission still to be explored and consolidated. Much attention is being focused today on this subject in view of the progressive financial squeeze that has been plaguing the university system for years, driving them more and more towards a collaboration with the world of business and local authorities. And if society as a whole does not fully understand the value produced by Universities and does not share its objectives, it will be increasingly difficult to attract the resources necessary for research, knowledge and progress, either from the public sector or from the private sector. Many initiatives, especially at an international level, aimed at coordinating the dissemination of scientific research and at enhancing scientific studies and research were already widely implemented well before what is the current level of diffusion of public engagement. In October 2002, a short article in Science informed the scientific community about the term "Public Understanding of Science" (PUS), better known as the Bodmer.

Report dating back to 1985, was now obsolete and, to indicate the increasingly complex relationship between scientific research and society, it was necessary to introduce a more explicit terminology to render its re-conceptualization and emphasise the dimension of public involvement: the "Public Engagement with Science and Technology" (PEST). The PUS was based on the assumption that the public passively receive the knowledge produced by the scientific community. The translation of the results of their research into a language that everyone understood was entrusted to the mass communication channels who used a language that was mostly improper and sometimes trivial and had the opposite effect to what was intended thus to all effects increasing the gap between science and the general public. No longer a diffusion of scientific knowledge and research results only and exclusively from the top down, today the focus is on a dialogue between the scientific communities and society in order to make the social consequences of science more and more effective, efficient and understandable. The one-way communication process, which has always characterized the transfer of knowledge, has also begun to feed off this dialogue between equals and the participation of those who will subsequently be the users and/or beneficiaries of that knowledge, and therefore sets off the involvement process right from the initial definition of its research paths and shares the dissemination of the results.

There have been some important foreign initiatives in this regard. The National Co-ordination Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) was founded in 2008 in the United Kingdom to assist universities in improving the quality and effectiveness of their public engagement activities. It is probably the institution that more than any other has inspired the philosophy of current public engagement and has made it a working

priority for all those who carry out basic and applied research activities. The same body defines public engagement as "[...] the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit" and identifies the following three macro categories of goals that Public Engagement must necessarily pursue. 1. Inspire, inform and educate the public and make the results of the university's work more accessible. 2. Activate permanent listening to the public's point of view, their concerns and any further knowledge they may require. 3. Work directly with the participation of the public to solve problems together and activate the mutual exchange of skills. The Carnegie Foundation in the United States has worked for years to increase the efficiency of public and private institutions, certifying universities as "community-engaged institutions" through a five-year survey of the extent of public engagement based on the documentation that the agencies involved spontaneously provide to the Foundation. The Carnegie Foundation uses the following definition of community engagement "the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2013). In Italy, Anvur describes public engagement as a set of non-profit initiatives of educational, cultural, and societal value, as illustrated in its Handbook for the Evaluation of the Third Mission of 2015. It also shows that the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be conveyed and shared with the public in a variety of ways and adds a number of activities that can be considered fully part of Public Engagement (Anvur, 2015). Subsequently, due to the confusion that still remains on the subject and the very heterogeneous measurements that were made in the first VQRs, during the first Assembly of the APEnet (Italian Network of Universities and Research Bodies for Public Engagement) in March 2018, in collaboration with ANVUR, a review of the definition of Public Engagement was proposed that, as a result of the critical issues which emerged, further specified the types of activities and recipients of the same. As a result, public engagement can be described as a collection of activities coordinated institutionally by the University or its non-profit structures that have educational, cultural, or societal value and are directed at a non-specialist audience. It is evident in this first classification, that the institutional nature of the activities that are part of Public Engagement and the need to address a non-specialist public has been highlighted, but it also confirms the fact that the definition of what public engagement is exactly and how it is to be implemented still remains, in Italy and in most cases also abroad, an unfinished work that certainly needs further investigation.

2.3 Public Engagement in the perspective of management studies

Despite its immediate conceptual association, the study of public engagement has been addressed from different perspectives, revealing

the complexity of how its actions are to be identified and implemented to enable the participation of the Public. In the strictly managerial sphere, public engagement is linked to the need for greater stakeholder involvement in the activities and in choosing organizations. There are many contributions present in the literature that, through qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches, illustrate theoretical experiences, best practices and frameworks (Bandelli and Konijn, 2013; Borum *et al.*, 2017; Bruning *et al.*, 2006; Curtis, 2014; Domegan, 2008; Hart and Northmore, 2011; Kim, 2007; Watermeyer, 2012, 2016; Watermeyer and Lewis, 2018). Studies on the subject converge towards the search for a unique definition of the phenomenon and the dimensions of the construct (Hart and Northmore, 2011) but little has been said about the nature of Public Engagement, its determinants, or the context in which it is studied (Davies, 2013a, 2013b; Hart and Northmore, 2011; Watermeyer and Lewis, 2018).

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Being able to observe Public Engagement in action at a university represents a great opportunity not only because of the great changes that are affecting the academic world but also because it allows us to circumscribe the phenomenon within well-defined boundaries. It is dealt with from three different perspectives: in relation to the context; in terms of the efficiency of its activities; and, finally, in relation to its usefulness for those who implement it and for those who benefit from it.

Preliminary studies on Public Engagement date back to 2004 in the ambit of Public Management and Communication and to 2006 for the Marketing area. But it has been the last five years that have shown a significant quantitative increase in the number of articles published in all thematic areas, demonstrating the growing interest in the subject. In particular, previous research has shown that University Public Engagement can be found mostly in the Communication Area, only partly in the Area of Public Management and residually in the Marketing Area (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018; Lo Presti and Marino, 2019). One of the most important studies (Hart and Northmore, 2011) identified the dimensions of public engagement, each of which can be identified as an objective for a specific target, both at the level of potential users and at the level of individuals directly involved in the organization, laying the groundwork for the definition of a theoretical framework of reference (Tab. 1).

It is evident that public engagement can be understood as an articulated construct that involves interaction and bidirectional exchange between two parties in order to co-create knowledge. In understanding the ultimate goal of public engagement, it is important to focus more and more on resources and intangible relationships (Vargo and Lush, 2004). In this way, value can be created through interaction that allows a co-creation process. Once again it is Vargo and Lush who introduce the interpretative scheme of the Service-Dominant Logic which is based on the assumption that organizations are interested in the exchange of services, that is, "the application of skills by one entity for the benefit of another" (Vargo and Lush, 2008). This, in practice, implies the recognition of the fact that the value of the service is generated collaboratively through a network of one's own resources that, once made available and integrated with each other, contribute to the co-

creation of value. The service ecosystem construct, adopted in the Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic), underlined the awareness of the opportunities arising from adequate resource management through the integration of economic, social and political actors and fostered the foundation of the concept of service ecosystem (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Even though there is agreement in the literature on the dimensions of public engagement and its objectives, there is still much debate regarding the different perspectives used for its definition and how it is to be implemented. Some authors see public engagement as a series of activities aimed at bringing the general public closer to science, stimulating informal debate and dialogue, for example students and teachers doing voluntary work.

Tab. 1: Subjects involved and beneficiaries for each dimension of university public engagement

N.	Dimension	Meaning	Subjects involved	Beneficiary subjects
1	Public access to facilities	Access to university structures: libraries, gyms; open-air spaces; multi-media rooms etc.	Citizens; Students (current and prospective students); parents; Non-profit organizations	Students; citizens
2	Public access to knowledge	Access and sharing of the results of the scientific research produced inside the university or in collaboration with the territory	Students, Enterprises; citizens; associations	University
3	Student engagement	Student involvement through voluntary activities or through collaboration with research	Students (current and prospective students)	Civil society
4	Faculty engagement	Involvement of the teaching staff in socially committed activities through voluntary activities or through the research for solutions to social problems	Academic staff; citizens	Civil society; territory
5	Widening participation	Activities for the constitution of partnerships with the territory	University	Students, citizens
6	Encouraging economic regeneration	Technology transfer or industry consulting activities	University	Firms and Institutions
7	Institutional relationships and partnership building	Activities aimed at the inclusion of subjects of discrimination by sex, race or physical condition	University	Public Institutions; Associations

Source: our adaptation from Marino and Lo Presti (2019)

It therefore refers to a series of initiatives that Universities can put into place to achieve the objectives of Public Engagement. As an example, we have open labs, live science, open days, live demonstrations, meetings to explain scientific research. Such activities are usually aimed at a wide and undifferentiated audience of individuals, schools, parents and pupils,

businesses and the whole community who could be interested in an active participation in the event organized by the University.

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From a more nuanced perspective, public engagement refers to a process of individual and collective problem solving on aspects related to scientific research whose main characteristic lies precisely in the involvement of stakeholders during the decision-making process. And it is precisely this involvement that stimulates innovation and the search for useful solutions (Bandelli and Konijn, 2013; Boland, 2014; Capurro *et al.*, 2015; Kim, 2007; Krabbenborg and Mulder, 2015; Watermeyer, 2016). This type of interpretative perspective focuses on the connector, that is, on the relational node capable of establishing a conjunction between the parties involved, thus making Public Engagement a process that will ensure the realization of a stable stakeholder participation. The stronger and more stable the connection, the more significant the benefits that are produced for the network of actors. Today public engagement is still considered by some authors to be a strategy or method orientated to making science available to the general public but also to bringing about social changes and a stronger and fairer democracy (Bruning, *et al.*, 2006; Curtis, 2014; Domegan, 2008 Fall, 2006; Hinchliffe, 2014; Miller *et al.*, 2009; Tang *et al.*, 2013; Tosse, 2013; Ward *et al.*, 2008). It is a knowledge-production strategy that strengthens the university's social role from an economic, social, and cultural standpoint (Davies, 2013a; Ostrander, 2004; Stephenson, 2011; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2011).

Other studies see public engagement as a new way for universities to interact with their partners. In this situation, the University's public engagement encourages a sense of citizenship and social conscience and brings the community closer to the academic world of universities, traditionally perceived as very distant from society. In this new vision, the term "public engagement" is often used to describe the scope of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Boland, 2014). However, in order to connect with stakeholders, this modern vision necessitates institutional transformation, new curriculum frameworks, new capabilities, and a shift in conventional organizational models (Chilvers, 2013; Denson and Bowman, 2013; Kimmel *et al.*, 2012; Persell and Wenglinsky, 2004; Retzbach and Maier, 2015; Stephenson, 2011). Finally, there are studies that see public engagement as a communication tool (Chilvers, 2013; Poliakoff and Webb, 2007). Encouraging dialogue, discussion, participation and enabling the dissemination of scientific knowledge beyond the academic walls, are strategic objectives of the universities and are more easily achieved through a kind of communication orientated specifically towards these purposes. Today, in order to set up new training proposals, to better focus on research and to increase the number of social actors involved, it is essential to focus on all the activities of the University as any loss of attention on the part of the public concerned would result in an immediate loss of efficiency and effectiveness of the services offered. The focus on technology and innovation of communication styles and tools and the need to be attractive to students, teachers and social partners, with the adoption of marketing strategies, advertising, guidance and fundraising, are issues that in the past hardly ever emerged publicly in the context of

higher education, but today they have become necessary as the demand for university education and, consequently, its structures (Morcellini, 2005) increases. University communication today plays a strategic role as a tool in raising awareness in the general public of the role that the University plays in society today and its performance in every field of competence, especially in these times of identity crisis.

The literature also questions the results of public engagement in universities. One of the most important objectives is related to the dissemination of information related to the university world, increasing public awareness on all the scientific issues while maintaining a high interest, particularly in young people, for all the different scientific fields (Davies, 2013a; Curtis, 2014; Schoerning, 2018; Watermeyer, 2016; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2011; Winter, 2004). This can also lead to an improvement in the image, reputation and identity of university institutions in the community (Ward *et al.*, 2008; Watermeyer, 2016). It also improves the quality of learning as it is based on the actual needs of the community and helps to support businesses in their challenges by finding new opportunities in an ever-changing environment. The benefits of public engagement in terms of perceived quality are also evident in the collaboration between universities and communities to drive social and institutional change towards a more just society (Boland, 2014; Kimmel *et al.*, 2012; Ostranger, 2004; Stephenson, 2011; Kimmel *et al.*, 2012; Krabbenborg and Mulder, 2015). Public engagement also helps to build a deep synergy between academia and society in value co-creation processes, through the construction of learning action networks (LANs) that connect people through information and ideas (Dickerson-Lange *et al.*, 2016; Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2014; Kimmel *et al.*, 2012; Stephenson, 2011; Watermeyer, 2012). But public engagement also stimulates emotional and experiential aspects and raises one's level of personal satisfaction and enjoyment. In fact, science poles and museums serve as facilitators of public-scientist conversation and provide a valuable place for disseminating scientific content to the general public (Bandelli and Konijn, 2013; Chilvers, 2013; Denson and Bowman, 2013; Goldner and Golan, 2018; Miller *et al.*, 2009; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2011). Finally, public engagement, through the new online communication tools, facilitates the interaction between researchers, scientists and stakeholders, thus increasing accessibility, in particular for businesses, to the knowledge produced by scientists (Bandelli and Konijn, 2013; Chilvers, 2013; Denson and Bowman, 2013; Goldner and Golan, 2018; Miller *et al.*, 2009; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2011). The use of tools like websites and social networks, contributes to giving a greater impetus to public engagement and above all gives visibility to the multiple activities that fuel it.

3. Methodology

3.1 The sample

To assess the potential of the phenomenon of public engagement in countries like Italy that have only recently started to develop knowledge and sensitivity towards this phenomenon, we analysed the websites of

50 universities from a list of 98 universities (both public and private) present on the Italian territory and published on the ISTAT website for university institutions (www.ustat.miur.it). A study of the content of universities' official websites was used to examine the online university public engagement using an evaluation grid already validated in the literature (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018; 2019) for the analysis of online public engagement in British and American universities. Furthermore, our research was based on the theoretical framework proposed by Hart and Northmore (2011) who define university public engagement as a 7-dimensional construct. Each dimension of public engagement was then operationalized for a total of 23 items (Marino and Lo Presti, 2017).

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3.2 Website analysis and inter-rater reliability

In order to analyse the 50 university websites, a content analysis was adopted with a methodology consolidated in the literature in the context of university public engagement (Marino and Lo Presti 2018; 2019) and in the context of management (e.g. Schmidt *et al.*, 2008). Content analysis permits us to analyse the phenomena that are still in an exploratory phase. According to Woodside *et al.* (2011), the richness of content and ease of use are two factors that contribute to the overall quality of a website. Exploring the content on websites and applying statistical methods to measure its effectiveness permits us to understand which are the most critical aspects and which ones need improvement. Furthermore, a content analysis of the websites explores the content while taking into account its presentation and its communicative effectiveness (Wan, 2002; Polillo, 2005; Gordon and Berhow, 2009; Polillo, 2013; Marino and Lo Presti, 2017). To evaluate each website, the evaluation grid was divided into two sections: the first section explores the presence or absence of public engagement and/or the Third Mission on its homepage; whereas the second section explores the quality of the communication, accessibility and the navigability of the information for each dimension of public engagement within the website (Marino and Lo Presti, 2017).

To carry out this task, three evaluators, experts on public engagement issues, assessed each aspect connected to each dimension of public engagement on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = definitely not visible to 5 = definitely visible) (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018; 2019). Before the assessment, the evaluators were "instructed" on how to compile the evaluation forms. In the presence of the authors of this paper, a pilot test was conducted in order to reduce the margins of error. Since the biggest limit of content analysis is subjectivity during the evaluation process, the coefficient of concordance was calculated, using Kendall's W test for each dimension. This coefficient ranges from 0 (absence of concordance) to 1 (maximum concordance).

The concordance test revealed a wide agreement between the evaluators (W = 0.50 p = <0.01 for public access to knowledge; W = 0.60 p = <0.01 for widening participation; W = 0.62 p = <0.01 for public access to facilities; W = 0.52 p = <0.01 for "encouraging economic regeneration" dimension and finally, W = 0.66 p = <0.01 for the "institutional relationship and partnership

building" dimension; W = 0.55 p = <0.01 for student engagement) and a discreet concordance for the faculty engagement dimension (W = 0.40 p = <0.01).

3.3 Reliability analysis and Exploratory Factor Analysis

For each dimension of university public engagement, the Item to Total Correlation (ITC) and Cronbach's Alpha were used to perform a reliability analysis (Table 3). This analysis led to the elimination of the faculty engagement dimension, made up of three items, which do not seem to adequately represent the dimension (Cronbach's Alpha <.65). The reliability analysis also made it possible to remove three other items that resulted from the analysis with Item to Total Correlation <.40 (Public engagement office within the Institutional partnership dimension; public databases and research involvement belonging to the Public knowledge dimension). At the end of this step, each dimension has a Cronbach Alpha > .65 and an ITC > .40 and the public engagement scale is composed of 17 items (Table 3). The overall Cronbach's Alpha of the scale is .887 and an ITC > .415.

An exploratory factorial analysis was conducted on the assessment of the 17 items in order to detect the approaches to public engagement adopted by Italian universities on their official websites. In fact, Italian universities can also be distinguished by a different approach to public engagement that could well be connoted to the mission that the university institution has set itself to achieve. Furthermore, resources and skills in this sense are strategic to identify which "approach" could be more suitable in relation to the "university vocation" and how much of these must be strengthened in order to make this attitude manifest (Marino and Lo Presti, 2019).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive analysis

The analysis of university public engagement through their official websites was conducted on the top 50 universities from a list that includes all Italian universities accredited by MIUR (51% of 98 universities). As can be seen in table 2, the analyses include the universities of Northern and Central Italy. Almost all the universities in the north-west and all those in the north-east of Italy were analysed. The analysis only partially includes the universities of Central and Southern Italy.

Of the 50 universities analysed, it was found that 28 universities presented a section dedicated to the Third Mission. 23 of these universities entered a reference to the Third Mission directly on the homepage accessible from the navigation bar. While only 24 universities report a section dedicated to Public engagement and, in 7 cases, this section can be reached from the homepage. While if we observe each single dimension of public engagement, the exploratory analysis of the websites gives a fairly homogeneous picture in terms of communication of the dimensions of

public engagement (table 3). The construct is averagely communicated on university websites (mean = 3.21).

In some Italian universities this index is above average (> 4.0) for all dimensions (e.g. University of Turin, University of Bergamo and University of Parma) except for faculty engagement which results the least communicated dimension among all the dimensions analysed. As can be seen from table 3, as a whole, the dimensions of public engagement that have greater online visibility are those dealing with access to university structures for non-academic publics (citizens, institutions, associations, companies), access to scientific knowledge and access to study that respects diversity. This concept of "access" is manifested not only through the possibility of entering university structures to participate in public conferences or science fairs, but must also be understood as facilitated "access" to scientific knowledge and greater participation in academic research results. Unlike the international context, the dimension of student engagement is poorly valorised (mean = 2.70) (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018).

Tab. 2: University sample for geographical area

Region	University sample	Italian Universities
Piemonte	4	4
Lombardia	14	15
Liguria	1	1
Valle d'Aosta	1	1
Nord ovest	20	21
Emilia-Romagna	4	4
Friuli Venezia Giulia	3	3
Trentino Alto Adige	2	2
Veneto	4	4
Nord est	13	13
Lazio	2	19
Marche	4	4
Toscana	7	8
Umbria	2	2
Centro	15	33
Abruzzo	1	5
Basilicata	0	1
Calabria	0	4
Campania	0	9
Molise	0	1
Puglia	1	5
Sud	2	25
Sardegna	0	2
Sicilia	0	4
Isole	0	6
Total	50	98

Source: our elaboration

In particular, the activities that promote student volunteer work or those that see the joint participation of students, teachers and communities in view of a common benefit for all, are on the whole not well developed. The "Institutional partnership" dimension also reports lower average values (mean = 2.65) than the public engagement index (mean=3.21) (calculated as Lo Presti and Marino, 2019), despite the fact that universities have shown themselves to be active in exploiting the possibility of enhancing visibility for web pages dedicated to the promotion of the university's territory and the beauty of its landscape.

Tab. 3: Item Total Statistics

N.	Dimension	N. of Items	Mean	Min.	Max	Variance	Alpha di Cronbach
1	Public access to facilities	4	3.57	3.22	4.28	.23	.67
2	Public access to knowledge	**2**	3.83	3.50	4.16	.21	.65*
3	Student engagement	4	2.70	2.18	3.76	.52	.70
4	Faculty engagement	3	2.02	1.06	2.74	.75	.27**
5	Widening participation	2	3.55	3.32	3.78	.10	.89
6	Encouraging economic regeneration	3	3.18	2.70	3.46	.17	.82
7	Institutional partnership	2	2.65	2.10	3.20	.60	.66*
	Public engagement index	17	3.21	2.10	4.28	.42	.88

Note: * Cronbach's alpha is calculated missing the items with the ITC <.40; **the dimension of Faculty engagement has a Cronbach's Alpha <.65 for this reason therefore it was not taken into account for exploratory factorial analysis.

Source: our elaboration

4.2 Digital engagement approaches to online public engagement

Both the KMO index for the measurement of sample suitability equal to 0.728 (> of 0.50) and Bartelett's sphericity test (<0.001 df = 136) confirm that the implementation of the factorial analysis was sufficient (Lattin *et al.*, 2003). The Cronbach's α (coefficient of reliability), for the single factors is acceptable (1st factor: 0.86; 2nd factor: 0.73; 3rd factor: 0.82; 4th factor: 0.73). All of the variables have a commonality of at least 0.50, indicating that the study was effective in producing a four-factor structure (Table 4).

The exploratory factorial analysis generated 4 dimensions of online public engagement. Compared to the American or English context (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018), Italian universities give much more space to "social engagement" such that it is possible to identify another approach to university public engagement that could fall into the "cultural engagement" category. Most likely this is related to the Italian culture which boasts a historical past of great value and which can then be found in its web communication.

As for the other dimensions, we can confirm a certain affinity with the other dimensions that emerged from the research of Marino and Lo Presti (2018) on British and American universities. In particular, the "research engagement approach" dimension is confirmed, which corresponds to

the "encouraging economic regeneration" dimension identified by Hart and Nortmore (2011) and which seems to be communicated quite well at Italian universities. Furthermore, while in American universities there is an office for public engagement in Italy this is not yet the case.

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Tab. 4: Engagement approaches to online public engagement in the Italian sample

	Items	Dimensions of online public engagement			
		Widening engagement	Cultural engagement	Research engagement	Social Engagement
5.b	Strategy in favor of the public to encourage the access of students with disabilities	.976			
5.a	Financial assistance, peer-mentoring, etc. to improve recruitment and the success rate of students from non-conventional backgrounds	.940			
1.d	Public access to the sports facilities and to summer sports schools	.718			
3.a	Students doing voluntary work	.632			
4.a	Activities organized by the students, e.g. art, environment, etc.	.591			
1.c	Sharing structures, e.g. museums, art galleries and entertainment organized by the university		.798		
7.b	Web site with pages dedicated to location or city		.752		
7.c	Conferences with public access to discuss social questions, e.g. ceremonies, awards, shows		.680		
1.a	Access to the university libraries		.573		
6.a	Collaboration with research and technological transfer			.905	
6.c	Consultancy services for enterprises that produce and exchange goods and services of social utility (e.g. Social enterprises)			.834	
6.b	Initiatives for technological development (e.g. that brings together staff, students and members of the community to plan, and develop technology for people with disabilities)			.743	
2.a	Access to pre-established study programs				.871
1.b	Access to university spaces, e.g. for conferences, meetings, events, accommodation, gardens, walking tours, discovery programs, campus tours, etc.		.476		.626
2.b	Public involvement in events, science fairs, science shops, etc				.623
3.b	On-site learning, e.g. traineeships, collaboration in research projects, etc.				.415
3.c	Curriculum engagement				.338
	Eignvalue	6.246	1.709	1.579	1.229
	Percent of variance	36.743	10.054	9.288	7.228
	Cumulative percent of variance	36.743	46.797	56.085	63.314

Note: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization. Loading under 0.35 are not shown. The items were taken from the study conducted by Marino and Lo Presti (2018)

Source: our elaboration

Therefore, the factorial analysis allows us to recover the dimensions of online public engagement attributable to different approaches, that is to say methods of implementation of public engagement capable of putting in place actions aimed at involving the main players in the area:

- *Widening engagement* - this dimension is made up of items that involve students in research activities, volunteer work, also with financial assistance, and activities that encourage access for students with disabilities.
- *Cultural engagement* - this dimension includes all those activities that connect the university to local resources or that connect university resources to different non-academic publics (institutions, citizens and relatives). In this dimension, reference is made to the importance of culture which, especially in Italy, is connected to art and tourism. The university has a central role in these aspects and cultural engagement is a catalyst and the privileged conduit for cultural and educational activities.
- *Research engagement* - this dimension, on the other hand, includes all those activities related to technology transfer, consultancy activities, and activities aimed at involving the diversified publics in technological development.
- *Social engagement* - in this dimension we can find all those activities that directly involve universities with the territory. This involvement concerns opening the university to the outside community, through conferences for scientific dissemination and developing collaboration to finalize research towards applications useful to the real needs of the public. In this case, the university makes its skills and academic programs available to a wider audience in the form of applied knowledge.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This research shows that online university public engagement is a complex construct that can take on different facets depending on the country. In fact, while on the one hand the research confirms that the dimensions of online public engagement are those connected to the social dimension, to research and to its willingness to open university boundaries towards collaboration with other non-academic stakeholders, on the other hand this research identifies a new dimension connected to culture and to the dissemination of scientific knowledge through museum events and structures and access to libraries, which seems to be a distinctive feature of Italy as a country and another important manifestation of university public engagement. This result enriches current research on university public engagement and demonstrates the complexity of the construct which, to date, is struggling to be applied in its entirety despite the recognition of its importance. This paper tries to fill the gap of literature by providing a comprehensive study that investigates the nature of public engagement and its determinants by means of Italian context that it is not been fully investigated through digital communication.

At the same time, this research tries to demonstrate that public engagement, precisely by virtue of its complexity, is capable of demonstrating the social and community nature of the university also through its core product: culture. Indeed, the presence of a new dimension that communicates culture-orientated university public engagement seems to be a prerogative of the Italian university. This new perspective fits well both with the mission of public engagement and with the concept of culture itself (William, 1958). Hess *et al.*, (2007) talk about a model for cultural engagement resulting from the interaction and participation between multiple actors (academic and otherwise) in order to create effective cultural growth: "The CMCE (Conceptual Model for Cultural Engagement [ours]) develops long-term interactive relationships between faculty, students, and communities from an asset-based perspective […]. Individuals in this relationship are active participants in the process of growing toward cultural effectiveness" (Hess *et al.*, 2007, p. 34). Doyle (2010) also highlighted the social role of the university, especially with reference to the value of cultural engagement as an engine that activates university efforts. In fact, if we consider the definition of "culture" as provided by the principle scholars of the topic (e.g. William, 1958), the dual role of the university as a social promoter and cultural promoter clearly emerges. The former has to do with the norms and the values that form a society and through which the university expresses itself; the latter, on the other hand, is aimed more at enriching the quality of life. In Italian universities there is a wide variety of activities that involve both the university and other players in the area: civil society, companies, institutions and associations. In this sense, the university plays a decisive role in influencing the culture of a territory in terms of increasing cultural and social capital. This research shows that universities are not to be seen only as an allied service industry in which the knowledge of other territorial actors converge (Doyle, 2010), but also the place where the "sense of culture" is cultivated as an art through participatory and free learning in which processes of discovery and creative effort are activated (William, 1958). The rediscovery of this important role of the university enriches the very concept of public engagement. This means that academic research should commit to studying public engagement in a cross-cultural perspective in order to highlight the facets of the construct.

In this sense, the concept of cultural engagement also refers to the university's ability to use service-learning courses to assist students in developing cultural competence (Hess *et al.*, 2007). As a result, universities must foster reciprocal relationships among faculty, community partners, and higher education students in order to activate participation in culturally engaged learning (Hess *et al.*, 2007).

The research results show the absence of faculty engagement in the sample of the universities analysed. This important result should lead to some reflections on the importance of faculty engagement as another important dimension of the university's ability to be for and with its territory. This also leads us to imagine an opportunity to structure and plan activities that can adequately develop and communicate this dimension. Although this paper analyzes online communication strategies that do not

always coincide with the public engagement policies actually adopted by the universities, the indicators used are to be considered valid proxies of the real public engagement activities carried out by universities and therefore these indicators can provide useful information to help universities to fill the information gap on websites. This research investigates only a sample of Italian universities and therefore the results cannot be extended to the entire population. Moreover, this research carries out an analysis of online public engagement strategies at the University level, but future research developments could focus on investigating public engagement at the Departmental level. Despite this, the research investigates a country that has not yet been fully explored in the literature on the subject, particularly with reference to public engagement as a 7-dimensional construct.

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Letizia Lo Presti
Giulio Maggiore
Vittoria Marino
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distinctive pathway of the
Italian University

Academic or professional position and contacts

Letizia Lo Presti
Assistant Professor of Management
University of Rome Unitelma Sapienza - Italy
e-mail: letizia.lopresti@unitelmasapienza.it

Giulio Maggiore
Associate Professor of Management
University of Rome Unitelma Sapienza - Italy
e-mail: giulio.maggiore@unitelmasapienza.it

Vittoria Marino
Full Professor of Management
University of Sannio - Italy
e-mail: vmarino@unisannio.it

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