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Gender digital divide

The digital divide in Italy: a gender and territorial problem

Note by ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics)*

Abstract

Several studies have highlighted how in Italy so far there is a significant gender gap in favour of men with respect to ICT diffusion.

In fact, in 2022, 78.7 per cent of men aged 11 and over, compared to 72.8 per cent of women of the same age, say they regularly access the Internet. However, it should be emphasised that it is precisely among women in all age groups (with the exception of 11-14 year olds) that the greatest growth was recorded especially between 2020 and 2021. The gender gap has thus narrowed to zero for 20-54 year olds, while among the elderly the disparities remain wide: from age 65 onwards, the female disadvantage is about 10 percentage points.

These gender differences are in addition to strong territorial differences and gaps. In fact, it is observed that the North-east and South distance in Internet use is 8.4 pp and that in all Italian regions Internet use is always higher for men than for women. The paper presented here aims to show these dynamics in order to highlight the existing gender and territorial inequalities.

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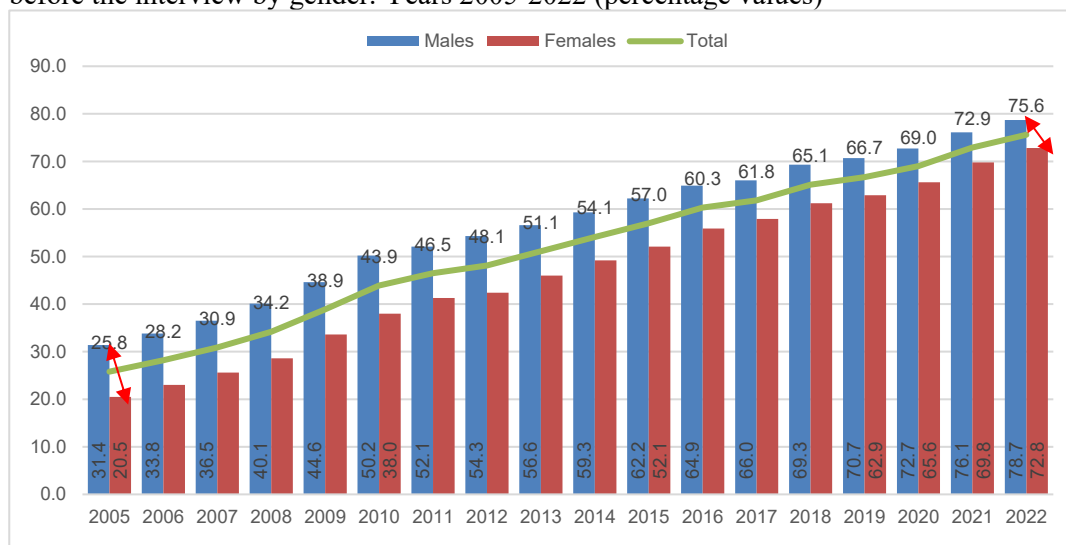
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I. Introduction

1. In Italy, over the last thirty years, the spread of the Internet has brought about a real revolution in people's lives, entailing changes in terms of customs and lifestyles, offering new modes of communication and new possibilities for experiencing the various spheres of one's life, from work and study to leisure and social and cultural participation.
2. There has been no lack of disparities in the spread of access and even today the North-South territorial divide, together with gender differences in favour of men combined with generational differences or those linked to educational credentials, characterise the spread of the Internet in Italy.
3. Analysis of the temporal trend shows how, especially in correspondence with the entry into the new millennium, the diffusion of the Net has been increasingly disruptive, with constant annual growth rates and population groups that have gradually been reached more and more, until reaching saturation in some cases.
4. Figure 1 shows how in Italy, starting from average diffusion levels of 25.8% in 2005 among the population aged 11 and over, we arrive at 75.6% in 2022. Over a period of nearly 20 years, therefore, the share of regular users (who used the Internet at least once a week in the three months preceding the interview) increased by about 50 percentage points. The increase over time has been very high for both men and women, but higher among women (from 20.5 to 72.8%), reducing the gap with men from ten to five percentage points (Graph 1).

Graph 1

Persons aged 11 and over who used the Internet at least once a week in the last three months before the interview by gender. Years 2005-2022 (percentage values)



Source: Istat, Aspects of daily live survey

5. From 2020 onwards, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic also had an impact by imposing a strong acceleration and further impetus on the spread of the Internet, when people's lives had to fall into the domestic and indoor spheres, and the Internet was a great opportunity and ally that could, for example, keep people in touch with each other despite the physical distance imposed by the restrictions in place or create opportunities for work, study and leisure. The total increase in just three years (from 2020 to 2022) was 13.3%, an average of

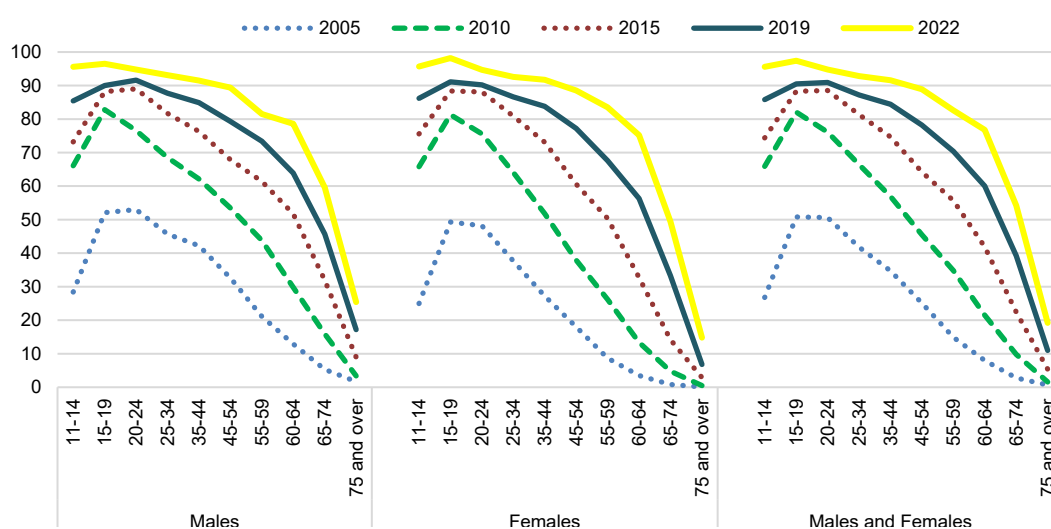
about 3 percentage points per year. The increase was higher among women: about 16% compared to an increase of 11% among men, showing how during the pandemic period the drive for ICT use also helped to narrow the gender gap.

A. Analysis by gender and generations

6. The analysis by age highlights how, regardless of gender, the increases over time have been high for both men and women and that, in the first period analysed (from 2005 to 2010), the greatest gains were observed especially among the youngest 11-14 year olds who, starting from levels of less than 30%, increased by more than double, reaching about 66% in 2010 and almost reaching saturation level in 2022 with more than 90% of regular users. This conquest by age gradually highlights the anticipated entry of the very young into the world of the Net and at the same time shows how in this age group any gender differences disappear and levels of use are similar between boys and girls. In more recent years, from 2010 to 2015, on the other hand, increases are also beginning to be observed among the older population groups that had remained less involved in the Net until that point. Thus, from 2010 to 2015, the rates of use among the population aged 45 and over are growing. In this population group, however, we still observe differences between males and females in this period: Internet use, in fact, spreads more widely and more incisively for the former, among whom in 2015 we find shares of over 50 per cent up to the age of 60-64. Between 2016 and 2022, the observed picture is consolidated and the share of the Internet above 85 per cent is reached by all age groups from 11 to 44 years and, throughout the five-year period, users for all age groups between 55 and 74 years grow by more than fifteen percentage points, with a simultaneous reduction in the gap between males and females, especially recorded between 2020 and 2021. It should be emphasised, however, that even though the gap is narrowing, it is still evident among the older age groups, where the male-female difference exceeds ten percentage points in favour of the former, a gender gap that not even the acceleration offered by the pandemic has been able to erode much.

Graph 2

Persons aged 11 and over who used the Internet at least once a week in the last three months before the interview by gender and age class. Years 2005, 2010, 2015, 2019, 2022 (percentage values)



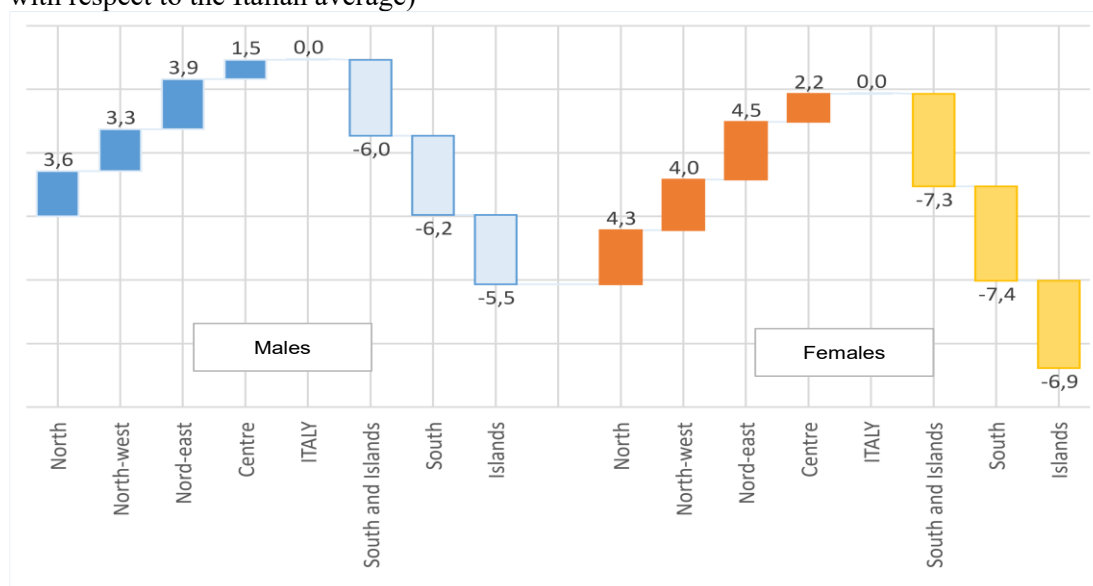
Source: Istat, Aspects of daily live survey

B. Analysis by gender and territory

- The diffusion of regular Internet use is differentiated in the various Italian regions, with generally higher levels in the central-northern regions and gradually lower levels in the southern regions (South and Islands). In 2022, compared with a national average of 75.6% of individuals aged 11 years who are regular Internet users, the share of users is 78.6% in the North, 77% in the Centre and 70.6% in the Southern regions (with the highest distance recorded between the North-east and South regions and equal to 8.4 pp). The analysis by gender and territory highlights similar differences for men and women with respect to the national average, with higher values of use in the Centre-North and lower values in the South. However, the territorial distances from the average value registered separately among men and among women are greater among women than among men, and this happens in both positive and negative directions (Graph 3).

Graph 3

Persons aged 11 and over who used the Internet at least once a week in the last three months before the interview by gender and geographical areas. Year 2022 (percentage variations with respect to the Italian average)



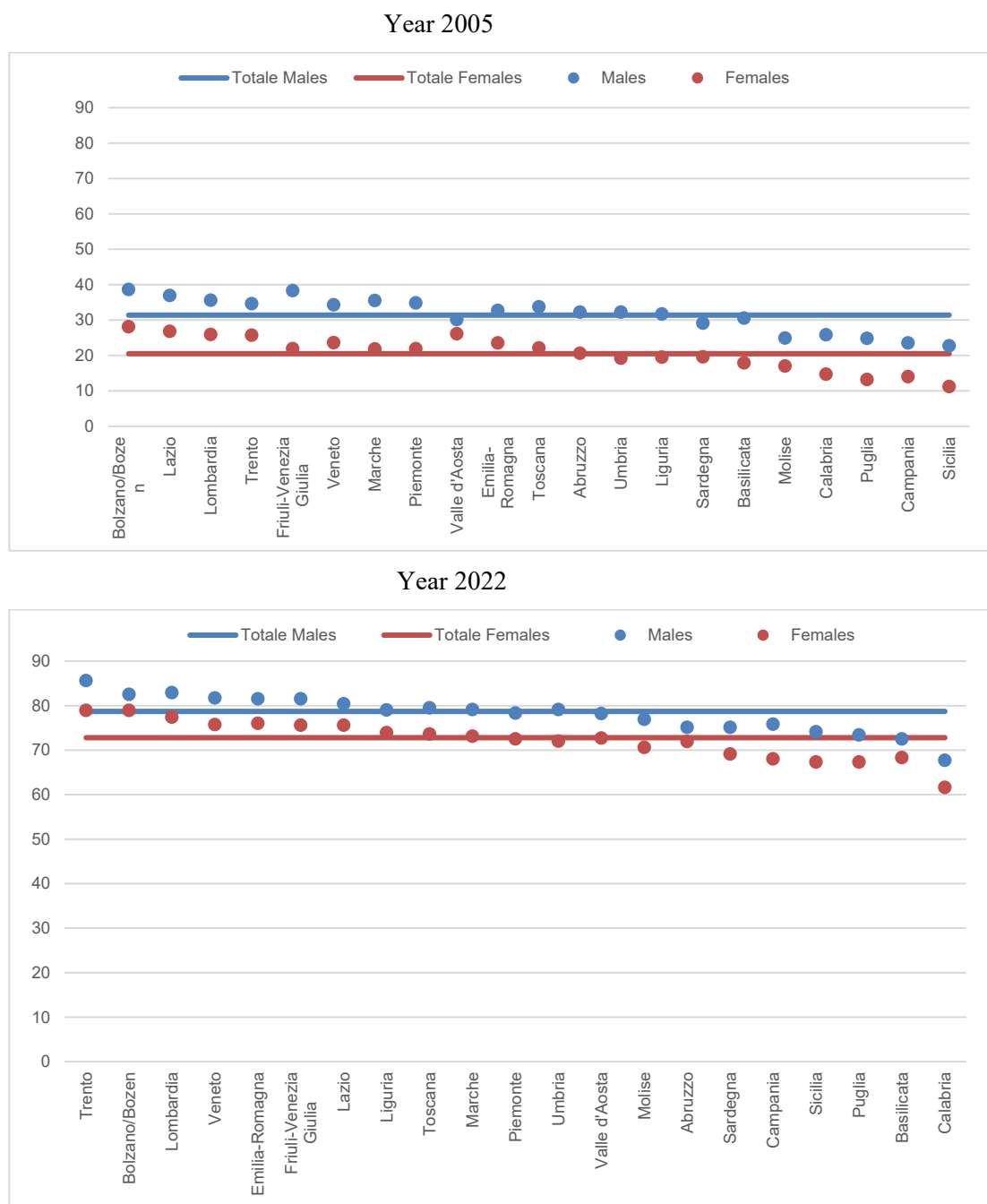
Source: Istat, Aspects of daily live survey

- It should be noted that over time, although a strong increase in the spread of Internet use has been observed in all regions, the resulting geography maintains a strong North-South territorial divide. The regional analysis over time shows, in fact, how about 20 years later (i.e. comparing 2005 and 2022) similar rankings are observed. However, comparing the two rankings, it can be seen that regions such as the PA of Trento, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Liguria, Toscana, Molise, Campania, and Sicilia have improved their position in the rankings, while regions such as the PA of Bolzano, Lazio, Marche, Piemonte, Valle d'Aosta, Abruzzo, Basilicata, and Calabria have worsened their position. Finally, regions such as Lombardia, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Umbria, Sardinia, and Puglia show no change in their ranking position after 20 years.
- The analysis by gender shows similar regional rankings for both sexes in the two years compared (2005 and 2022), although with levels for women in both years always lower than those for men in the same region of residence. Passing from the analysis of 2005 to that of

2022, an upward shift in the values observed is observed for all the regions with a range that for women in 2005 goes from 11.2 in Sicilia to 28.1 in the PA di Bolzano, and in 2022 from 61.6% in Calabria to 78.9% in the PA di Bolzano, while for men it goes in 2005 from 22.7 in Sicilia to 38.6 in the PA di Bolzano and in 2022 from 67.7% in Calabria to 85.6% in the Trento PA.

Graph 4

Ranking of regions with respect to Internet use at least once a week in the last three months before the interview of 11-year-olds. Years 2005 and 2022 (percentage changes)



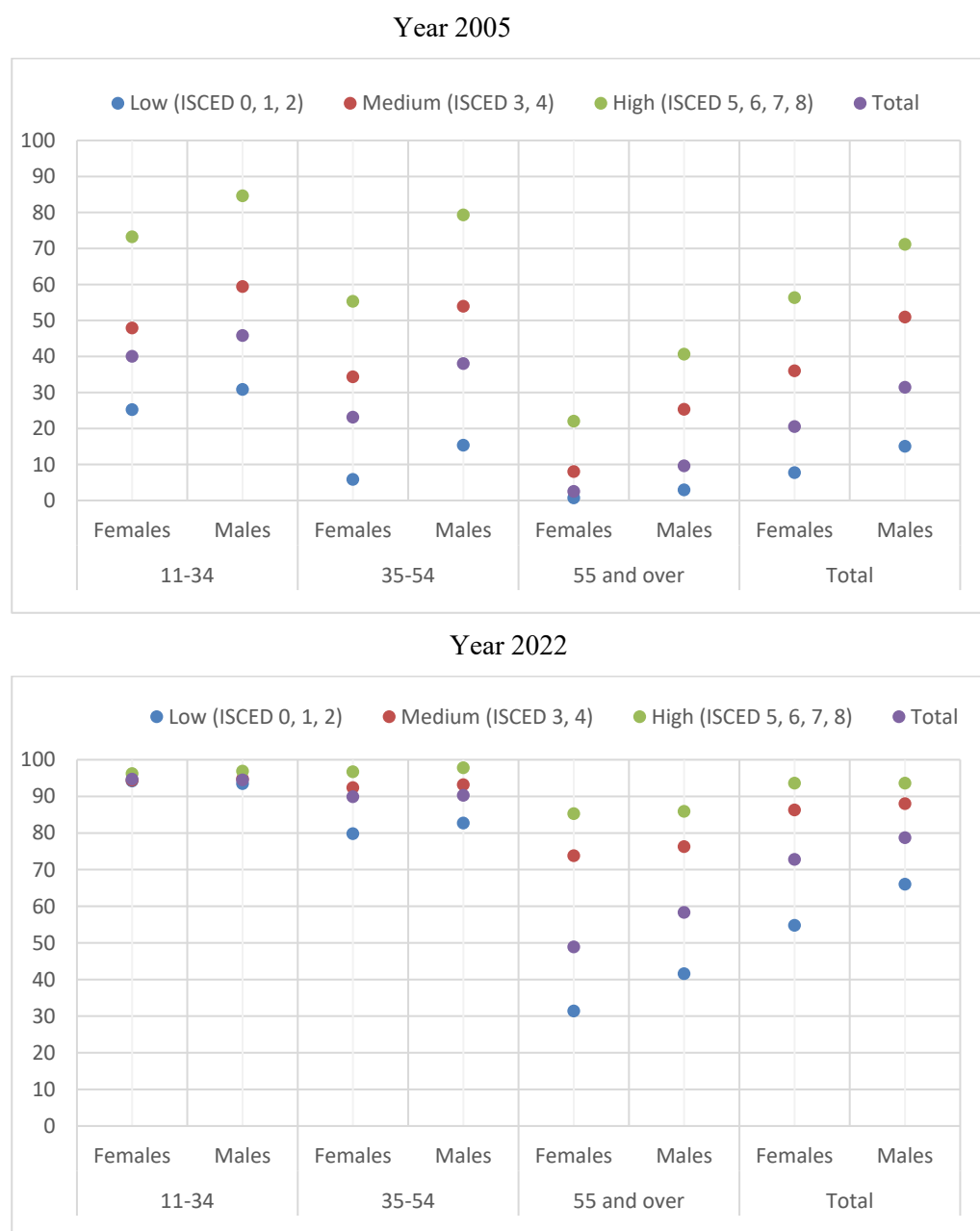
Source: Istat, Aspects of daily live survey

10. Comparing 2005 and 2022, it can be observed that in the first year analysed, the values for men in the last regions in the ranking were slightly lower than those for women in the first regions in the ranking, highlighting not only an evident territorial divide but also a strong gender gap. This situation changes when analysing the distribution some twenty years later. In 2022, in fact, improvements in the gender gap are observed, but at the same time inequalities on the territory are widening (Graph 4).

C. Gender, generations and educational status

11. Internet access is strongly associated with people's level of education, and this is combined with trends by gender and generation. The distributions by educational level show that the higher the educational qualification possessed the higher the access to the Internet and this evidence has remained fairly constant over time. Moreover, it tends to be men with high educational qualifications more than women with the same qualifications who use the net.
12. However, these differences have shifted over time. In fact, if we compare the distributions of men and women by educational qualification, we can see that in 2005, for all age groups, men with higher educational qualifications had significantly higher rates of Internet use than women with the same educational qualification (71.1% vs. 56.3%).
13. This evidence changes, however, if we look at the most recent data for 2022, which show that among the youngest, between the ages of 11 and 34, there are practically no differences, because, as pointed out earlier, the new generations have progressively reached saturation point in their use of the Internet; in this age group, levels of Internet use are similar among university graduates, high school graduates and those who have only completed compulsory education, regardless of gender and age.
14. As age increases, on the other hand, we find a similar situation to that observed in 2005, although with an upward shift in the levels of use for all educational qualifications, and when the educational qualification possessed is higher, the levels of use tend to be higher. However, the comparison between men and women shows that the gap in favour of the former is narrowing compared to 2005: especially in the case of university graduates there are almost no differences, and the levels of use of men and women almost overlap (men graduates aged 55 years and over = 85.3% versus women graduates aged 55 years and over = 85.3%) (Graph 5).

Graph 5
Persons aged 11 and over who used the Internet at least once a week in the last three months before the interview by gender, educational status and age class. Years 2005 and 2022 (percentage values)



Source: Istat, Aspects of daily live survey

II. Conclusions

- Over the past thirty years, there has been a continuous increase in Internet use in Italy. However, not all the population is accustomed to using the Internet on a regular basis (about one in four people used it less than once a week in the three months preceding the interview)

or never used it at all) and the use of the internet is so far very associated to social and demographic factors. Among the younger generations, a generalised spread has been observed over time that has cancelled out gender differences, but there is still a gender gap that connotes a disadvantage especially for elderly women and the residents in the South.

16. Digital capital has shown its indispensability in times of pandemic when it was fundamental for everyday life and the challenges of school and work activities and social and cultural participation. Equally evident, however, has been the impact of the digital divide, which has shown the difficulties of those sections of the population and territories that, precisely because of their lack of access to information and communication technologies, have found themselves excluded, either totally or partially.