



Italy-Azerbaijan relations: an analysis by means of social networks

Enrico Bernardini

Anthropologist, Department of Education [DISFOR], University of Genoa.

Email: enrico.bernardini@edu.unige.it

Doi: 10.2478/gssfj-2018-0014

Abstract

The European focus on the Caucasus region has increased considerably and reflects the need for safe access to the various energy resources in the Caspian region.

In this sense, Azerbaijan plays a key political role because of its geographical location, as a privileged bridge for trade between East and West, but also for historical and cultural reasons, placed between Russia, Iran and Turkey, interlocutors with whom, especially today, it is necessary to confront.

The contribution aims to focus on the Italy-Azerbaijan relationship through the eyes of social networks, analyzing first how well they are known in the country of Central Asia and then which are those most used by the population. Secondly, the country's data will be related to the global trend to highlight similarities and differences. Finally, it will be analyzed the pages and groups of social networks that deal with the relationship between Azerbaijan and Italy, showing the main topics covered and how the two countries are getting closer not only for economic reasons, but also cultural because in Azerbaijan the Italian culture is known and appreciated, especially the language, music, art and gastronomy.

Keywords: *Azerbaijan, Italy, social networks, relations, culture.*

1. Introduction

The European focus on the Caucasus region has increased considerably and reflects the need for safe access to the various energy resources in the Caspian region.

In this sense, Azerbaijan plays a key political role because of its geographical location, as a privileged bridge for trade between East and West, but also for historical and cultural reasons, placed between Russia, Iran and Turkey, interlocutors with whom, especially today, it is necessary to confront¹.

The country is not very well known in Italy overall, but thanks to the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) project, the number of Italians who have decided to deepen their knowledge of the country has grown. Azerbaijan is now internationally renowned for the great infrastructures of the capital Baku, works by *archibstars* and for sporting reasons, mainly related to Formula 1 because the main city hosts a famous Grand Prix.

Recently, Italy has become increasingly close to Azerbaijan, not only for economic reasons but also for cultural ones. In 2016, Azerbaijan launched the Year of

¹ Source: <https://www.azerbaigianreportage.com/uno-sguardo-dellitalia-sullazerbaigian/>

* Part of this paper was presented at the *International Panel Discussion "Mediterranean, Black and Caspian Seas: 25 years of Italian-Azerbaijan relationships"* held in Genoa on May 12th 2017.

Multiculturalism, presented to the world its approach to the religion and secularity of the state and institutions. Although the country is predominantly Shiite Muslim, it has been able to create over time a relationship of peace and harmony with the Christian and Jewish minorities.

Azerbaijan, because of the coexistence of different ethnic groups and cultures, has become over time a model of acceptance and tolerance, of mutual respect between individuals of different faiths. In fact, it is one of the few Muslim countries to maintain economic and political relations with Israel and to accept Jews as an integral part of society; in the same capital, Baku, there are five synagogues and several Jewish schools². The country is also sensitive to the theme of interreligious dialogue, so much so that it has been one of the promoters of the Forum on Intercultural Dialogue in 2008, together with UNESCO, the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations, the World Tourism Organisation and the Council of Europe.

The Forum includes representatives of more than one hundred intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, parliamentarians, ministers, academics and diplomats from many countries. The Heydar Aliyev Foundation also plays an essential role in promoting inter-religious dialogue, activating initiatives against fundamentalism and in favour of mutual respect and cultural dissemination, such as student and university exchanges and the dissemination of information³.

Finally, Azerbaijan, with its millenary culture and natural beauty, is becoming more and more known in our country and in the world, thanks to the use of social networks that allow anyone with a modern device connected to the Internet to admire in a few minutes the main attractions, get a general idea and decide and organize a trip or not.

2. Internet and Social Networks

The tourism promotion and communication management of an emerging country, as in the case of Azerbaijan, cannot ignore the tools provided by web 2.0. In fact, the country has dedicated particular attention to the structuring of official websites, such as that of the prehistoric nature park of Gobustan, where they are present, both general directions to go there and the price list, but also explanatory videos that allow new and old visitors to discover the park, its peculiarities and specificities, so as to include it or not in the tourist itinerary of the trip⁴. Websites must be accessible

² Sources: <https://www.ilcaffegeopolitico.org/98275/uno-sguardo-italiano-sullazerbaigian-intervista-a-domenico-letizia?fbclid=IwAR3-NeDaYL52edbXPJsHXpzBQVz5-tb8BM1zDrkwpC3hPb9fnLEEBZoA6jA> and https://www.lumsa.it/uno-sguardo-dell%E2%80%99italia-sull%E2%80%99azerbaigian?fbclid=IwAR3AMovd_mj1BHRWGMmyhGtI0BHsY5OCewazPDofEeyhwkBRzRIsiY1styE

³ Source: <https://www.azerbaigianreportage.com/multiculturalismo-e-dialogo-interreligioso/>

⁴ Source: <http://www.gobustan-rockart.az/en/review/14/>

and contain information for users, as well as be *responsive*, which means they must be accessible without problems of viewing by mobile phones and tablets.

In an increasingly interconnected society, being online is essential, especially to develop the tourist attraction, because before going to a place, users look for what they want to see to make a first impression, but decisive in the choice of the tourist destination.

The home page of websites must become a *landing page*, which is a web page aimed at convincing the user to perform a conversion action that, in this case, consists in wanting to go to the country.

In addition to websites, in the case of tourist destinations online services such as Tripadvisor greatly influence the choice of destinations, whether natural, artistic or archaeological attractions, but also especially the choice of restaurants and hotels⁵. It should be underlined the democratic character of the same where it is given the opportunity for managers of businesses to interact with those who leave the reviews thus improving the functioning of the system and the enjoyment of the tourism product.

The process that allows the dissemination and dissemination of websites and social networks are called *funnel marketing*, a path through which the website visitor, a potential tourist, decides to become interested in a destination and include it in his trip (Epifani, 2011).

The stages of *funnel marketing* are:

- *Awareness*, the awareness that the potential customer (visitor) has of the brand.
- *Opinion*, the opinion that the potential visitor makes of the website.
- *Consideration*, the evaluation of the offer on the website.
- *Preference*, preference where the user decides whether or not to visit the tourist destination.
- *Purchase*, purchasing, in this case, the decision to go (or not) the tourist destination.

The *funnel* theory, developed with reference to large e-commerce platforms, can and should also be applied to other websites because it allows a more accurate and objective assessment of the brand and the possibilities offered to the public (Ejarque, 2016).

Finally, recent theories consider social media itself as a marketing funnel because they can guide the consumer towards conversion actions and the use of the product, guiding him on a path that starts from awareness, promotion, desire, and finally the purchase of the product.

For example, the new version of Facebook makes the pages become landing pages, inviting you to "like" the page, rather than to do other types of actions such as directing to the website or directly to the purchase of a product that can be of any type⁶.

⁵ According to Oxford Economics, TripAdvisor content has affected 13% of international travel and nearly 8% of all domestic travel worldwide. This means over 350 million trips and 1.8 billion overnight stays in 2014 alone. (Source: <https://www.tripadvisor.it/TripAdvisorInsights/w705>)

⁶ Source: <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-marketing-funnel/>

3. Social networks used and present in Azerbaijan

Social networks were born from the awareness that the traditional website does not offer moments of interaction and dialogue with users, which, on the contrary, is increasingly requested by the general public and used by professionals for an online marketing strategy.

The most used in Azerbaijan, both by individual citizens and companies, are the following:

- Facebook and Google+, used to tell their lives through the sharing of moods, images or favourite songs, or to perform storytelling actions, using the language of social media marketing.

- Instagram and Pinterest: social networks where images play a decisive role. Instagram, currently acquired by Facebook can be used in its full potential only thanks to the smartphone, because via PC you cannot perform some actions such as, for example, posting. Finally, on Instagram, you can also perform small photo editing activities before the publication of images (Barbotti, 2016). Even in the case of Pinterest are the images to let talk, that is why professionals use the social. However, unlike Instagram and despite being less known, Pinterest allows the creation of thematic photo galleries, a handy tool for advertising products for sale or to publish photographs of a holiday (Bernardini, 2019).

- Youtube: youtube channels are used for creating music albums, publishing tutorials and even for short videos to advertise yourself or merchandise for sale.

- Twitter: according to some theories it is considered a microblog and not a social network because of the publication limit of 140 characters, but its use can be significant, especially during events such as exhibition openings, conferences or other thanks to the activity of live tweeting, or inform users in real time on the topics discussed.

- VK (VKontakte) means *InContact* and is the most extensive social network in Russia and throughout the CIS; Russian programmer Pavel Durov founded it in 2006. In 2016 it reached 110 million registered users⁷.

- Tumblr, a microblogging and social networking platform that allows you to create a tumblelog by offering users the opportunity to create a blog where they can post multimedia content.

A good common rule for all social networks is the use of the hashtag technique at the end of posts. Using the hashtag (#) allows them to be grouped within the social network by category or more categories, to be easily localised by users. For the promotion of tourism, the hashtag is the basis for spreading the knowledge of the tourist destination to users interested in the subject and to new public potential reached through social networks.

⁷ Source: <https://compassunibo.wordpress.com/2016/06/06/vkontakte-come-funziona-il-facebook-russo/>

Social networks influence and determine the *web reputation*, reputation created online by users of social channels. Having a good *web reputation* is very important because if the social channels and the website of an organization are not properly maintained and updated, they will have fewer and fewer visitors and, even worse, you risk the spread of a "bad name" that will negatively affect the consideration of the company or person.

The Azeris use a lot of social networks that, as in the rest of the world, allow you to rebuild their network of friendships offline, stay up to date on the areas of interest, know the world quickly by staying on your PC, using your smartphone or a tablet. The chart below (Figure 1) shows the use of social networks in the Caucasus country from September 2017 to September 2018:

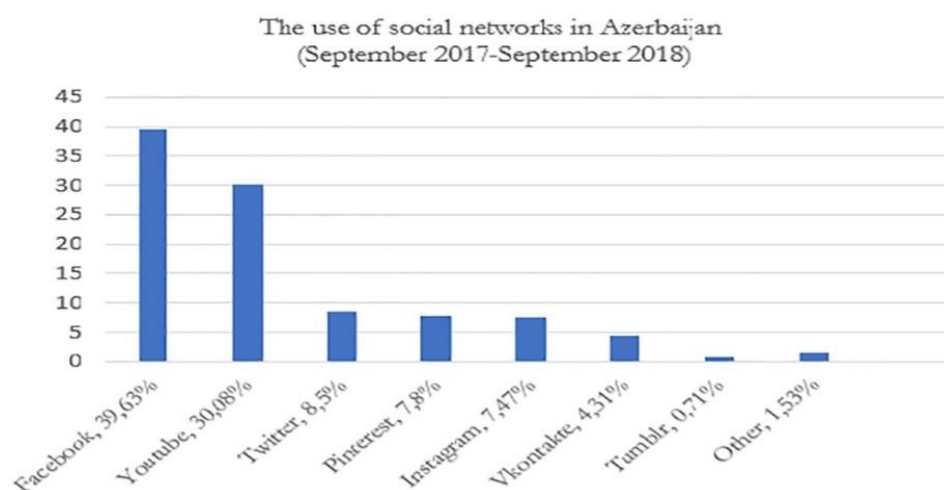


Figure 1. The use of social networks in Azerbaijan (September 2017-September 2018). Elaboration of the author, based on <http://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/azerbaijan/#monthly-201709-201809-bar>

Compared to the global trend, which we will see soon, it confirms Facebook as the first social network, but YouTube is much more used than in the rest of the world. This can be explained by the fact that the Azerbaijani people are very interested in music, even Western music and Italian music in particular. Italian singers are currently very successful in Russia and Central Asia, there are many concerts in Azerbaijan, Russia or Uzbekistan of artists such as Eros Ramazzotti and Albano and Romina Power. The country also uses V Kontakte, a social network developed and distributed in Russia by Pavel Durov, the same developer of the well-known instant messaging service Telegram, Whatsapp's main competitor worldwide. In fact, in all areas of the former Soviet Union, although each state has its national language, Russian is known fluently by the population, especially by those who have a good level of education.

The data of Figure 2 concern the use of social networks in the world; if compared with those of Azerbaijan, there is a much higher percentage for Facebook (although

it is still the first social network), a lower percentage for Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, the significant increase in users of Pinterest and the disappearance of Vkontakte in favour of the entry of Reddit. The last data can be explained by the fact that the Russian social network is mainly used in the Russian Federation and in the former USSR Central Asian states, while Reddit is little known in those regions. Reddit cannot be considered a real social network but a website containing the most varied news, from entertainment to scientific articles, where registered users can publish content that is organised in areas of interest or categories.

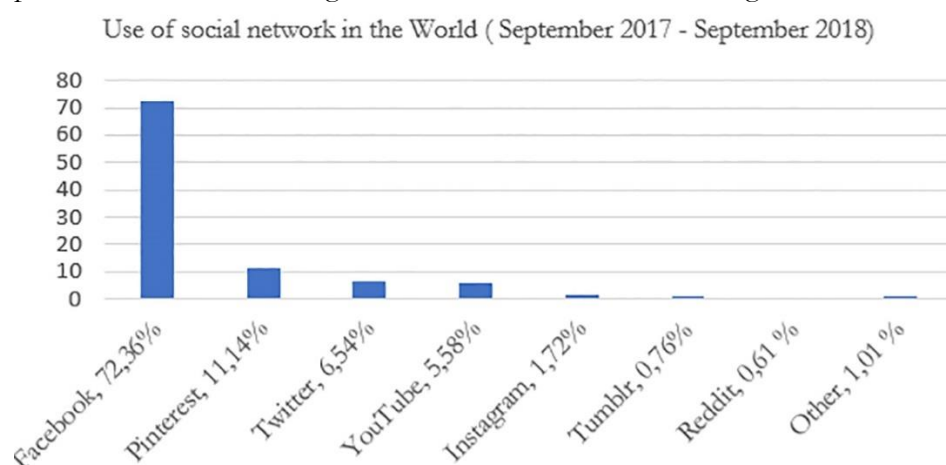


Figure 2. Use of social network in the World (September 2017 - September 2018), elaboration of the author based on <http://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats#monthly-201709-201809-bar>

Compared to the global figure, in Azerbaijan is not very well known Pinterest, the second social network with the most subscribers after Facebook for the fact that it is its dissemination to the general public has occurred only recently. Currently, Azerbaijani users for sharing images prefer Instagram but, in the coming years, will undoubtedly increase the use of Pinterest that allows the creation of photo galleries and is, therefore, more functional to use, especially in a corporate context of social media marketing.

The most recent data concerning November in Azerbaijan see an approach to the global trend with a significant increase in interest in Facebook, which goes from 39,63% to 51,78%, a decrease in YouTube, from 30,08% to 18,53%, while statistics on social networks remain almost unchanged⁸.

Finally, with regard to online searches carried out with devices, the Caucasus country is in line with the global trend that sees a decrease in the use of PCs and an increase in searches from tablets and smartphones, data confirmed by the world's top

⁸ Source: <http://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/azerbaijan/#monthly-201709-201809-bar>

position of the Android operating system, which is pre-installed on the majority of existing smartphones and tablets on the market⁹.

4. What Italians know about Azerbaijan: an analysis of social networks

As mentioned in the previous paragraph (see paragraph 1), Italy and Azerbaijan have excellent economic and cultural relations. Italian music and fashion are very much appreciated in the country, as well as the language, which is studied in different organisations and schools of the capital, Baku.

All this is naturally reflected in the use of social networks and on groups, and pages present online that describe the relations between the two countries. Concerning Facebook which, as described in the previous paragraph, is the most used social network in the world, the main groups dealing with relations between Italy and Azerbaijan are as follows¹⁰:

- Cultural Association of Azerbaijan in Italy (Associazione culturale dell'Azerbaijan in Italia) - 853 members.

- Italians in Baku (Italiani a Baku) - 550 members.

- Italy-Azerbaijan (Italia-Azerbaijan) - 61 members.

The main topics covered in these groups are as follows:

- Opportunities for the development of trade between the countries.

- The celebration of the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Italy and Azerbaijan (27 April 2017).

- Novruz Holiday: It is a traditional holiday, which celebrates the coming of Spring. There are many rituals connected to it, for example, cookies, traditional dishes and dyeing eggs.

- Events about contemporary Azerbaijani poetry (Milan, 2014).

- Exhibition of Azerbaijani paintings and theatre puppets (Milan, 2013).

- The architecture of the capital Baku.

- The possibility to take advantage of Italian courses organised by the Dante Alighieri Institute (Dante Alighieri Society).

- The visits of the Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Italy, H.E. Mammad Ahmadzada, to official events or conferences in the Italian territory.

- The Azerbaijani multicultural model.

- The possibility for students to make language exchanges between Italy and Azerbaijan.

- The natural beauty of the country, such as the prehistoric nature park of Gobustan.

- The possibility to travel to Azerbaijan with personalised guided tours in fact in these groups are present Azeri tour guides who offer their services as tour guides to future Italian tourists.

- The visit to Italy of Mehriban Aliyeva, First Vice-President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, on 25 September 2018.

⁹ Source: <http://gs.statcounter.com/os-market-share#monthly-201801-201812-bar>

¹⁰ The data are updated to 31 December 2018

As you know, Facebook in addition to groups allows users and organizations/companies to create pages¹¹.

The most popular pages dealing with the relations between Italy and Azerbaijan are¹²:

- the official page of the Italian Embassy in Baku (Ambasciata d'Italia a Baku - İtaliyanın Bakıdakı Səfirliyi), 4.626 like.

- the official page of the Interparliamentary Association Italy-Azerbaijan (Associazione Interparlamentare Italia-Azerbaigian), 312 like.

- the official page of the Italy-Azerbaijan Association (Associazione Italia - Azerbaigian), 791 like.

The posts on the pages mainly concern the following topics:

- Cultural events in Azerbaijan that see Italy as the protagonist as concerts of classical music/lyrics, food and wine events, musical evenings dedicated to music and Italian cinema.

- The visit to Italy of Mehriban Aliyeva, First Vice-President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, on 25 September 2018.

- Meetings between the President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella and the authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

- Concerts by Italian artists in Azerbaijan.

- Events concerning Italian fashion particularly appreciated in the country.

- Inauguration in Baku of the first Fiat-Chrysler-Alfa Romeo dealership - January 2017.

- The framework of the 25th anniversary of the diplomatic relations between Italy and Azerbaijan. 27 April 2017 -ADA University.

Overall, from a look at the social network Facebook, it is clear that in Azerbaijan is much appreciated the Brand "Made in Italy": music, fashion, Italian gastronomy animates the streets of the capital Baku with events and tourism throughout the year. Finally, in one of the most famous Azeri Instagram profiles, moda_azerbaijan, with 47,900 followers, are often present in the shared images references to major Italian fashion brands, and there are often references to Christian celebrations such as Christmas, although Azerbaijan is a country where Muslims make up more than 90% of the population. The portrait that emerges from the social networks is that of a country open to commercial and cultural exchanges, with a look at tradition but with a strong focus on modernity, symbolically represented by the Flame Towers of the capital, Baku.

¹¹ The data are updated to 31 December 2018

¹² The data are updated to 31 December 2018

5. Conclusions

The Italy-Azerbaijan relationship has been able to grow even more in the light of the Internet and the 2.0 revolution that has involved the entire world in recent years. The Internet, as described, has become very important in the field of tourism, in the choice of the destination and the construction of the tourist imaginary by visitors. An attractive website, clear, brief and precise descriptions, a link to social networks are the basis for a good corporate marketing strategy, but they are also indispensable means used by private individuals to make known their profile and their activities. The Azeris, like other Central Asian peoples of the former Soviet Union, know Russian fluently, a language spoken in a private context, but also an intellectual language, as well as the language of social networks, in particular, Vkontakte, a platform well known in Russia and Central Asia, but little used in Europe and the rest of the world.

Italy and Azerbaijan begin to know each other, not only for economic and commercial reasons since Italy is the first commercial partner of Azerbaijan, but also for cultural reasons: social networks are proof of this; Italians look at the Caucasian country as a possibility of cultural and commercial export, and Azerbaijan are extremely sensitive to many aspects of Italian culture such as art, music, language and gastronomy.

Commercial, student, linguistic and tourist flows are destined to increase and improve the relations between the two countries in the light of the Made in Italy and Multiculturalism, cultural model of the Azerbaijani society, more and more known in the world.

References

- Barbotti, I., (2016). Instagram marketing. Milano: Hoepli.
Bernardini, E. (2019). Le potenzialità di un Museo di Antropologia per la promozione turistica sul territorio. Atti del XXXII Congresso Geografico Italiano. Roma, 6-10 giugno 2017 (Conference Proceedings in course of printing).
Ejarque, J., (2016). Social media marketing per il turismo. Milano: Hoepli.
Epifani, S., Jacona, A., Paolillo, R., Lippi, R., (2011). Manuale di comunicazione politica in Rete. Roma: Edizioni Apes.

Web resources

- Azerbaijan reportage. [Online] Available: <https://www.azerbaigianreportage.com/multiculturalismo-e-dialogo-interreligioso/> (December 28, 2018).
Compass UniBo Blog. [Online] Available: <https://compassunibo.wordpress.com/2016/06/06/vkontakte-come-funziona-il-facebook-russo/> (December 28, 2018).
National Park of Gobustan. [Online] Available: <http://www.gobustan-rockart.az/en/review/14/> (December 30, 2018).
Statcounter Global stats. [Online] Available: <http://gs.statcounter.com/> (December 31, 2018)

Il caffè politico. [Online] Available: <https://www.ilcaffegeopolitico.org/98275/uno-sguardo-italiano-sullazerbaigian-intervista-a-domenico-letizia?fbclid=IwAR3-NeDaYL52edbXPjsHXpzBQVz5-tb8BM1zDrkwpC3hPb9fnLEEBZoA6jA> (December 31, 2018).

University LUMSA, Roma. [Online] Available: https://www.lumsa.it/uno-sguardo-dell%E2%80%99italiasull%E2%80%99azerbaigian?fbclid=IwAR3AMovd_mj1BHrWGMmyhGtI0BHsY5OCewazPDoFEcyhwkBRzRIsiY1styE (December 31, 2018).

Agency Sproutsocial. [Online] Available: <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-marketing-funnel/> (December 31, 2018).

Tripadvisor. [Online] Available: <https://www.tripadvisor.it/TripAdvisorInsights/w705> (December 31, 2018).