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Beauty, Wealth, And Fame: The Future Life Imagined by Italian Preadolescents

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Abstract: The purpose of the quali-quantitative research, conducted in the spring of 2021 (still during the ongoing Covid-19 emergency), was to analyze the relationship between the expectations towards future life of 260 preadolescents aged 10-12 from two cities in the Emilia-Romagna region (the capital, Bologna, and Parma) and the influence that media contents can have on it, with a particular focus on social media. The main research hypothesis was to consider that the dreams of preadolescents reflect the culture of the contemporary society to which they belong. Specifically, the prevailing values and lifestyles characterizing their subculture were observed (they belong to the so-called Generation Z, a hyper-connected generation). Another interesting aspect of this research was the possibility of comparing the results with those of a similar study on preadolescents imaginary conducted in 1995, involving 590 boys and girls from Milan and Bologna (belonging to the Millennial generation) to observe the social and cultural macro-changes in Italian society over the last decades.

Keywords: imaginary, preadolescents, social media, gender equality, gender stereotypes

Introduction

“The social imaginary is not a collection of ideas; rather, it is what makes the practices of a society possible, giving it meaning” (Taylor, 2004, p.2).

What is the imaginary? In phenomenological and constructivist terms, the imaginary is not understood as a separate dimension from reality, but rather as complementary and functional in “constructing” social representations of reality. Fundamentally, it is what allows us to dream on an individual level and, on a collective level, it serves to materialize the process of socialization that leads us to assume, first in fantastical terms and then in real terms, the culture, values, ideals, norms, stereotypes, prejudices, and *social representations* (Moscovici, 1989) of the main reference models for each of us and for our group of belonging. The imaginary, therefore, is like a “training ground” where we can exercise to take on social roles, to “console ourselves” in the face of frustrations, to understand the limits between reality and fantasy, and to enact behaviors first only dreamed of and, in a second stage, if possible, to realize.

In this sense, the imaginary is the driving force from which each of our life projects takes shape. This conception of the imaginary assumes a phenomenological and constructivist view of our becoming social actors, which is why we specifically refer to the well-known text by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann “The Social Construction of Reality” (1966). If we view the individual as a social actor, it is therefore implied that we want to emphasize their ability to actively act in the real world, moving away from a rather passive view of the human being - which presupposes that they are mostly and only able to “react” to stimuli received from the environment. According to the constructivist approach, instead, social reality is the product of the dialectical interaction between the individual and society: reality - that is, the set of phenomena that we recognize as independent of our will - is socially constructed and therefore collectively produced.

In every society, there are widespread knowledge and representations of reality shared and taken for granted by its members so that they can understand each other, aiming to achieve a correspondence between the meanings individually attributed to each situation and those attributed collectively, i.e., a *common sense* (Schutz, 1932). However, Berger and Luckmann remind us that, even though reality appears to us as mostly “objective” and unchangeable from birth, since humans construct it, they can continually modify it: *“The social world is objective because it appears to man as something external to him. The decisive question is whether he retains the awareness that, as objectified as the world is, it is his creation and can therefore be modified by him”* (1966, p.128).

At the core of the research (Capecchi & Ferrari, 2023), therefore, is the theoretical hypothesis that the imaginary and the ability to imagine serve preadolescents to simulate, initially only in a fantastical way, actions that end up characterizing life projects and desirable lifestyles, more or less achievable or totally unattainable.

During the preadolescent phase, the narratives concerning media characters as actors/actresses from the entertainment world, or YouTubers and influencers from social media, gradually take the place of the fairy tales told by our parents when we were young. While parents, up to a certain point, choose the stories to tell, slowly children gain the competence to autonomously select and enjoy stories individually. Thus begins an overlap between reality and imaginary stories, which can lead to the development of irrational ideas about what happens around us. This blending of reality and imagination, exacerbated by the media, leads to the construction of an *almost-reality* that significantly influences our individual and social behavior. Media consumption has become such an ingrained behavior that the stories they disseminate often influence our actions more than reality itself. Everything is played out with the contribution of our cognitive frameworks and our emotions intertwined with both social and media representations, which are collective constructs. This intertwining of cognitive frameworks and individual, as well as social, representations become more influential than concrete reality and what is tangible, as Serge Moscovici argues: *“These creatures of thought, which are representations, end up constituting a real environment. Due to their autonomy and the constraints they impose (even though we are perfectly convinced that they are nothing but ideas), it is indeed as indisputable realities that we are inclined to consider them. The weight of their history, their customs, and their cumulative content confronts us with all the resistance offered by a physical object, and perhaps this resistance is even greater, given that what is invisible is inevitably much harder to overcome than what is visible”* (Moscovici, 1989, p.32).

Thus, the imaginary, constituted by schemes, thoughts, and representations, ends up influencing our actions more than tangible reality. Jean Piaget (1967), in fact, argues that thought comes before action. Through our imagination and through what we desire on a fantastic level, we create our future. And it is the future imagined by a group of preadolescents that we wanted to investigate with our research.

Imagining is life, and without it, we would not act. In our imagination, we can project our fears and anxieties, but we can also, without fear, try out various roles we see others play around us, “virtually.” We act and set goals because we imagine we can achieve them. In this case, imagination plays a fundamental creative and projective role. In instances where we cannot realize our dreams, imagination can serve a role of psychological compensa-

tion, allowing us to offset, at least partially, various deficiencies and needs. Additionally, imagination can serve a *sociological function*, in the sense that through imitation, children acquire the ability to put themselves in the shoes of others and learn their role in social life. Exemplary in this sense is playing “as if...” (Giani Gallino, 1987, 1996), where children imagine themselves as parents or doctors and so on. The game of “as if...” or “if I were” serves as a platform to experiment with actions seen performed by others in social or even media reality. For example, a broom can become a beautiful horse, or a stick can become a magical sword.

Undoubtedly, what we imagine arises from actions already observed by various social actors, including peers, parents, relatives, actors/actresses, characters from the entertainment world, fairy tales, cartoons, and today, YouTubers/influencers. This composite and complex imagination guides us toward the realization of dreams and desires. The problem arises when what is imagined cannot be realized. The excessive *disconnection between reality and imagination*, strongly proposed by the media, can cause significant frustration and a decrease in self-esteem. Research reveals a distinct disconnection between imagination and current reality. If we fail to achieve our dreams, frustration sets in, forcing us to change our goals. However, this change requires considerable adaptability acquired over the course of life, which not everyone can develop. It may happen that if the formation of our imagination is predominantly influenced by media representations, generally characterized by models of life centered around “beauty, wealth, and fame,” frustration increases as the impossibility of becoming “beautiful, wealthy, and famous” in adulthood becomes apparent. Those who dream more realistically should theoretically be less prone to feelings of frustration resulting from the failure of overly ambitious aspirations.

In this contribution, we have proposed the individual as an active subject in the elaboration and construction of reality. The formation of individual and social representations is indeed an active cognitive process, in which the individual is primarily responsible, thanks to the skills acquired through interactions with others. With our research, we wanted to verify if some representations, which do not faithfully reflect reality but are not entirely fantastical either, perhaps emerge from the media, which, through their representations, manage to particularly influence the formation of our reality, transforming it into an “almost-reality.” For example, by almost-real characteristics, we mean the blending of extraordinary elements (such as villas with pools and football fields or imagining living in New York or Los Angeles: the “American dream” in the collective imaginary) detected in the dreams of the participating children, and ordinary elements (such as leading a life punctuated by precise routines). It’s as if these children dream of leading an ordinary life - presumably one lived with their parents - in extraordinary

contexts seen on TV series or social media. Should we then consider media learning to be as valuable as, if not more than, direct and indirect learning?

Research Methodology

Firstly, six Comprehensive Institutes have been considered: three in Bologna and three in Parma, involving two classes for each (one fifth-grade class from primary school and one first-grade class from middle school), totaling twelve classes. The predominant age group of the 260 preadolescents (55% girls and 45% boys) ranged from 10 to 12 years. The selection of Comprehensive Institutes was based on the intention to explore different socio-cultural contexts within the two cities, as it was hypothesized that the richer the family and social context in opportunities and cultural stimuli, the more varied, original, and imaginative the imaginary could be.

The quali-quantitative research utilized two investigative tools. Firstly, the preadolescents wrote an essay in class that encouraged them to project themselves into the future, describing the life they would ideally like to lead as adults. The title of the essay was: *“A daydream... twenty years have passed from today. One morning you wake up, and... try to imagine what you will do when you grow up. What job will you have? Where will you live? With whom will you live? How will you spend your days? And what will you do in your free time?”*. The essays were analyzed by reporting the data, sentences, and key words most significant to each of the five considered items. The themes of “couple/family” and “work/lifestyle” were given particular attention. From an analytical phase, the research proceeded to a synthetic phase, considering the meanings and values assumed by the various items investigated in the compositions as a whole. This process allowed for the extraction of six types of “dreams”, each characterized by a specific worldview and containing varying degrees of elements of “ordinariness” and/or “extraordinariness”. It is specified that, although the compositions were primarily analyzed qualitatively, all possible information was counted to enable comparisons also from a quantitative perspective.

Subsequently, a questionnaire with mainly closed-ended and some open-ended questions was administered to investigate their media consumption. The responses to closed-ended questions, structured in a dedicated dataset, were later processed using specific statistical software. It should be clarified that the group involved in the research is not to be considered a “representative sample”.

The main research hypothesis was to consider that the dreams of preadolescents reflect the lifestyles, prejudices, habits, customs, rules, in a word, the *culture of the contemporary society* to which they belong, as well as the *collective imaginary* that merges and overlaps with the culture itself. Spe-

cifically, one can identify social and media representations, as well as values and lifestyles, that characterize their *subculture* (belonging to the so-called Generation Z, a hyperconnected generation). Another objective was to investigate whether the dreams of these preadolescents are dominated by stereotyped and standardized actions, characters, and lifestyles - like those proposed by the most popular media content - or more original and imaginative, highlighting their ability to creatively rework the reality in which they are immersed, especially the cultural stimuli received in the living context where they have grown up.

In analyzing the compositions and questionnaire data, differences in gender and social class were considered, as well as those between those living in Bologna, the capital of the Emilia-Romagna region, and Parma, a provincial city. An important final objective was to observe if there were changes in preadolescents imaginary over a quarter of a century, as the research presented here represents a replication of the one conducted in 1995, involving 590 boys and girls from Milan and Bologna (Capecchi & Ferrari, 1998). The main limitation of this comparison concerns the fact that the metropolis of Milan is clearly a different context from Parma (even though its reference model is precisely Milan). Nevertheless, from the comparison it is possible to observe social and cultural macro-changes that affect Italian society in recent decades.

The private life imagined by preadolescents

First and foremost, the following dominant traits of the life imagined by these young boys and girls should be highlighted: regardless of the type of imagined work, the preadolescents express a *desire for possession, wealth, economic stability, as well as emotional stability*. For example, about two-thirds dream of living in a villa with a garden and a pool. The following account of a girl from Parma, a future singer, encapsulates the most desired “ingredients,” namely professional success, wealth, fame, and “true” love: “*I would like to live in a giant villa with my true love, I would like the whole world to know me, I would like to become very famous... I would like my life to be perfect, with a perfect family, a perfect house... Initially, I will become famous by putting videos on YouTube, and later I hope to enter a famous TV show... I would like to live in New York because there are many famous singers there, or in Milan because there are my favorite YouTubers.*”

It can be hypothesized that, in describing their future life, the preadolescents have drawn not only from direct experience but also from the contents of the media ecosystem in which they are immersed, blending realistic, “ordinary” elements with spectacular, hyperbolic, “extraordinary” elements.

Considering the social and media macro-representations emerged in relation to private life, it can be observed that the preadolescents have imagined an idyllic, almost “perfect” couple and family life, devoid of problems both in the organizational aspect of daily life and in the relational one: the representation of *the united and happy family*. In the imagined family, gender roles are not at all traditional. It should be emphasized that all the girls intend to work, and the majority specifies or implies that they would like to have a full-time job; the “daydream” primarily concerns their *professional fulfillment*.

About half of the preadolescents, projecting into the future when they are thirty or slightly older, imagine themselves married: 49% (48%F-50%M). Instead, 21% imagine themselves in a relationship (20%F-23%M). Summing up the percentages related to the married and those in a relationship, 70% of preadolescents envision themselves in a couple. A couple mostly with children (in 76% of cases), strictly heterosexual.

Regarding the formalization of the couple’s union, it is highlighted that none specify whether they got married with a religious or civil ceremony, nor is the wedding narrated as a special event in life. Marriage does not seem to be considered at all as the culmination of the “dream of love” according to the traditional *ideology of romantic love*; rather, in some cases, there is a mention of the hope of finding *true love* or a *soulmate*. Thus, a “modern” view of the relationship between men and women is expressed, always based on mutual emotional investment compared to the past, but presupposing greater equality between partners (Giddens, 1992).

From the city comparison, a greater inclination to imagine oneself married emerges among those living in Bologna compared to those in Parma (+20 percentage points). Considering gender differences as well, in Bologna, there are more females envisioning themselves married (65%F-58%M), whereas in Parma, there are more males (43%M-32%F). The striking data pertains to Parma’s girls: compared to those in Bologna, future brides are about half. Among those expressing a desire to live with their boyfriend/girlfriend, in Bologna, slightly more are females (20%F-18%M), while in Parma, significantly more are males (28%M-19%F). Overall, considering both married and engaged individuals, in Bologna, more girls aspire to a couple’s life (+9), while in Parma, there are significantly more boys (+20). 15% of our group imagines living alone, especially those in Parma (22%F-18%M) rather than in Bologna (7%F-12%M). Parmesan girls planning to live alone are three times as many as those in Bologna. 12% would like to live with friends. The most noticeable difference concerns Parmesan girls again, who are about four times as many as those in Bologna (23%PR-6%BO), outnumbering males in both cities (8% in Parma, 9% in Bologna). Finally, only 2% would like to

live with siblings, cousins, or parents, envisioning it in the latter case as a temporary solution.

In both cities, almost all those who imagine themselves married also imagine having children (87%): this is evidently a combination (marriage + children) still entrenched in the collective imaginary. However, it should be noted that the conception of having children without being married is now normalized: half of those who imagine themselves in a relationship dream of having children (51%), a condition that seems to be considered an alternative to marriage rather than a step towards formalizing the union.

Comparing those who want to have children regardless of marital status, based on their respective totals, in Bologna, the girls account for 70%, and boys for 61%, while in Parma, the percentages decrease to 41% for both females and males. In both cities, the average is about two children per woman, contradicting in fantasy what has long been the Italian fertility rate, one of the lowest in the world (1.24 children per woman; Istat, 2023a): generally, one male and one female, aligning with an idealized notion of the “perfect” family still promoted today by advertising.

Regarding the lower inclination of preadolescent girls from Parma, compared to those from Bologna, to get married and have children, and, on the other hand, the greater desire to live alone or with friends, it can be hypothesized that this depends on the fact that in Parma, young women take as a reference model the *career women* (focus more on their work) of Milan, the Italian city symbol of work, that is the main choice for university studies.

An interesting aspect to emphasize is that about half of the preadolescents of both cities - considering those in a relationship and those who will live alone, with friends, or with parents/other relatives - depict a family “unhooked” from tradition and marital institution, fluid in its composition and temporal duration, based on *free choice* (whether to live with someone or not, to get married or not, to have children or not): “*I live alone, but I have a girlfriend*”, “*I would like to live with my future partner, but not get married*”, “*I will find a girl who might eventually become my wife*”, “*I will live alone with my dog, I don’t want to have children*”, “*maybe I will live with a boyfriend, never with a husband*”, “*I live with my children and a roommate*”, “*I want to live with friends, maybe adopt a child*”, “*when I grow up (if I find a soulmate) I would like to live with my boyfriend, my dog, a cat, and maybe even some fish*”.

These examples demonstrate how the social changes that have occurred in recent decades in Western industrialized countries - such as the constant decline in marriages and births and, at the same time, the increase in marital instability, stepfamilies, common-law families, births out of wedlock, and individuals living alone - have led to the emergence of numerous ways of being and doing “family” (Zanatta, 2008; 2011; Saraceno & Naldini, 2021).

The couple as seen by the girls. Therefore, a vision of a predominantly equal couple relationship prevails: the desire for professional affirmation and female independence is reflected in the choice of a partner, whose profession is not specified in the majority of cases. All the girls have imagined working, often projecting themselves into high-level professional roles: therefore, none have expressed the desire to be supported by their husband, nor have they used the term “housewife”. There are also some cases of role reversal where women “support the family”: a pastry chef who would like to become famous and “*maybe open a YouTube channel to do cake tutorials*”, married with two children: “*I would like to earn a lot of money to support the family*”; a footballer from the Juventus women’s team married with two daughters: “*I would like to become rich because I imagine a better future for me and my children... I will buy them everything they want*”.

Some girls (10%) describe the physical appearance of their future husband or boyfriend, demonstrating the increasing importance of aesthetic appearance in Western societies, even regarding the male gender: a singer is married to a “*model, with hazel eyes, brown hair, and a perfect physique*”; a teacher is married to a lawyer “*tall with light eyes and blond hair*”, a chef is married to an entrepreneur “*with blue eyes and blonde hair, muscular*”.

It can be observed that the described male body model aligns with the dominant male beauty ideal: a toned and muscular body (Capecchi, 2009). To complete the picture, some would like a partner who is handsome, rich, and famous: a sports journalist will marry American actor Lucas Jade Zumann, the star of the TV series *Call Me Anna*; another girl will marry Archie Andrews, “*a protagonist of the world’s most famous series, Riverdale, which I have also seen*”.

Finally, a significant portion of the girls who plan to start a family hopes to find a *collaborative partner* regarding childcare and domestic chores. At the same time, they tend to take on most of the daily responsibilities related to childcare and housework (the reality of women characterized by the condition of “double presence”; Balbo, 1991; Naldini & Saraceno, 2011): areas considered “feminine” according to tradition. A jockey takes the children to and from school, cleans the house and cooks, while “*the husband clears and prepares the children for the night*”; an astronomer: “*I go to school to take and pick up the children, my husband meanwhile does the shopping and returns home, we set the table together while the children play*”; a teacher: “*my husband takes the children and the dog to grandma’s, then I pick up the children from school, prepare lunch, help them with homework, in the evening, I prepare dinner for the whole family and when my husband comes home, I would run into his arms*”.

Even the imagined free time is largely occupied by household chores and activities related to child care: “*In my free time, I will tidy up the house since*

it will be a disaster considering having a daughter and a dog, and I will also go shopping with my friends"; *"In my free time, I paint, listen to music, or clean the house"*; *"in free time, I go to the gym to stay in shape, cook, or do house chores, how boring!"*.

Some girls lament the difficulty of managing family and work showing that they can empathize with their mothers and expressing the desire to resort to external help: among these, the babysitter is mentioned first (6 cases), followed by grandparents (4 cases), and finally robots (2 cases): a married teacher with two children would like *"a robot because it can help me cook, clean, or take care of my children"*.

The couple as seen by the boys. Regarding male preadolescents, the imaginary related to the emotional dimension seems to be more traditionalist, mainly because few (only 9% of those envisioning themselves in a couple) mention the work done by their partner: evidently, an aspect considered less important, suggesting a model of family support based on a *male-breadwinner*, where only men earn the family income. In these rare cases, however, high-level jobs are depicted, envisioning "dual-career" couples: the founder of a globally renowned company is married to a *'blonde and beautiful, she will be a lawyer'*; a Serie A football player: *"I have two degrees, one in mathematics and one in physics; instead, my wife manages a company and has a degree in mathematics"*.

Furthermore, while the partner's profession is rarely mentioned, on the other hand, nobody labels her as a "housewife" or expresses explicit expectations in that regard, such as imagining coming home from work to find dinner ready. More often than the partner's job, physical appearance seems to matter (14%), in line with the dominant ideal of female beauty, emphasizing slimness: a football player, *"the strongest of all"*, is married to *"a woman with blonde hair and green eyes"*; a lawyer with a wife *"fairly tall, slim, brunette, blue eyes, and a fairly wealthy family"*.

In comparison with the girls, very few married or engaged boys with children refer to family and domestic organization (10%M-41%F) probably imitating their fathers. In these cases, they seem to respond to the girls' expectations, making themselves available mainly for taking the children to school and cooking: a Liverpool football player married with two children says, *"I will have to take my children to school and pick them up"*; a married engineer with three children takes them to school before going to work; a married computer programmer with one child says: *"I play with my child, when my wife arrives, we all cook dinner together"*; a married employee with two children mentions: *"I cook dinner because I enjoy cooking"*.

On the other hand, preadolescent boys often express a strong sense of *fatherhood*, translating into dedicating time to their children to build a spe-

cial relationship. Among the activities envisioned during leisure time, sports seem to be a privileged way for fathers and male children to connect.

Discussion: the comparison with the research conducted in 1995. From the comparison of these results with those emerging from the research conducted in 1995 (Capecchi & Ferrari, 1998), it is evident that the social macro-representation of the family has remained almost unchanged: *the united and happy family*. The imagined fertility rate has not changed either: both in 1995 and in 2021, it is about 2 children per woman. Furthermore, both researches indicate that about 70% of preadolescents, projecting into adult life, desire a life as a couple. However, there is a striking change in the inclination to formalize or not the couple's union: there is a significant decrease in those imagining themselves married (-16 percentage points); on the other hand, the number of those envisioning themselves engaged quadruples (+16), without prejudicing the possibility of cohabiting and having children. In 1995, the idea of cohabiting was rare, and the notion of having children without being married was not an option.

Among the causes of the "deinstitutionalization" of marriage is the spread of cohabitation and the equivalence of common-law partnerships with marital ones. Although marriage still holds great symbolic value, we have entered an era of *free choice*: unlike a few decades ago, there is no longer social sanction if one decides not to formalize a couple's union, dissolve a marriage, or remain childless. These novel aspects have been absorbed by the new generations (Saraceno & Naldini, 2021).

Another aspect of change concerns the "end" of the imagined concept of the *housewife* both by females and males (although, in reality, all working women continue to be housewives, as many preadolescent girls understand well). In 1995, some girls imagined becoming "housewives," but in 2021, none did. However, the amount of imagined domestic work, meticulously described, has decreased, although the sense of internalized duty remains unchanged (an unresolved "knot" in the female reality).

Moreover, concerns about work-family balance seem to be less prominent in 2021. In 1995, both roles were considered of equal importance, with many envisioning part-time work. In 2021, none of the girls refers to part-time work; the majority will pursue full-time jobs, investing all their energies. In most cases, there is a focus on the working dimension given as a taken-for-granted priority, not to be questioned too much about how to reconcile the two areas. Female professional aspirations have risen.

On the male front, some boys have imagined collaborating in taking care of the children (especially picking them up from school or playing with them) and in household chores (especially cooking). Furthermore, compared to the research conducted in 1995, there is a more pronounced desire for fatherhood.

All these changes in the imaginary related to the dimension of couple/family, occurring in a quarter of a century, indicate a “leap forward” in Italian society towards the *culture of free choice and gender equality*.

The professional life imagined by preadolescents

The imagined work and lifestyle, as the emotional life, reflect what preadolescents perceive from their family and social context, considering the set of socializing agencies. In certain cases, it is possible to observe the influence of media content that most fascinates them. As we have also found regarding the representation of the *couple/family*, girls and boys struggle to delve into what they have not yet directly experienced: it is not uncommon, in fact, to find inconsistencies between the type of work imagined (which implies a certain income) and the lifestyle, which often appears “beyond one’s means”.

The job as seen by the girls. As for the imagined professions, girls expressed a primary preference for jobs in the health sector (26%): doctor, surgeon, pediatrician. Second-place preferences were for jobs in the entertainment/fashion sector (18%): actress, designer, director, singer. In third place, they imagined jobs in the field of education (13%): teacher, professor. Some girls aspire to careers in STEM fields (8%): scientist, marine biologist, or architect. Others project themselves into the world of sports (7%): champions in horseback riding, swimming, or football. Fewer girls aspire to jobs in the art/design field (5%): illustrator, interior designer, photographer. Finally, some are venturing into the emerging field of digital media/robotics (3%): robot designer, YouTube video gamer, owner of an online clothing store.

Regarding the differences between the two cities, girls in Bologna are slightly more likely to imagine traditional jobs in health and education. In comparison, those in Parma express more interest in STEM, sports, and digital media/robotics; areas generally perceived as more male-centric.

In the descriptions of the jobs they want to do, there is a mix of “ordinary” and “extraordinary” traits. For example, future doctors would like to pursue this profession to help others and save lives (some explicitly refer to the TV series *Grey’s Anatomy*): “*I would like to save lives*”; “*it is a beautiful day to save lives*”; “*I enjoy helping sick or injured people to make them happy*”. At the same time, many girls dreaming of this profession, especially in Parma, do not give up *fame, beauty*, and above all, *wealth*: “*I will spend my days working to pay for rent and to earn a lot of money so I can go shopping to fill my wardrobe like all wealthy people... I will go to the gym a lot to stay in shape since I would like to improve my body*”; “*I will become a doctor or a veterinarian because I enjoy taking care of people and animals in need... I think one can earn a lot with this profession... I would like to meet idols like Tony Lopez or Charli D’Amelio*”.

Among girls who want to become teachers, many describe an “ordinary” life: *“I admire my teacher. Now I am a bit like her; I enjoy teaching students to love school, knowledge, and to always be curious”*. Some future teachers, on the other hand, imagine an “extraordinary” life beyond the economic possibilities allowed by these professions: one girl thinks of living in a *“5-story villa with a huge walk-in closet full of beautiful clothes”*, another one imagines living in *“a huge seaside villa called Rosequartz”*. These last sentences highlight a complete “disconnection” from reality and demonstrate how the imaginary of preadolescent girls is predominantly influenced by the media.

Even among those who want to work in STEM fields, especially girls from Parma, the common thread of *wealth, beauty, and fame* emerges: *“I will live in a 3-story villa with a pool”*; *“I will have a very large luxury house with a beautiful garden and a pool”*.

It is especially girls who want to work in the world of entertainment and fashion who express the desire for professional success and luxury. In this case, the prevailing “American dream” that still pervades Western culture is evident: *“I want to be a famous model in America... I will be famous and have a fun life”*; *“I will be an actress... I am an ambitious girl... I want my fans to shout Agata! Agata! Agata!”*; *“I want to live in the United States because many famous people live there...I want to have a BMW and the ability to buy any dress”*.

References to social media are frequent: *“My brand is called Diamond... it’s a famous company on social media”*; *“I will become famous by putting videos on YouTube”*; *“I will become a painter... I will draw for TV and be a famous YouTuber”*.

Elements of emancipation can be discerned in imagining directing a company or in the willingness to fully commit to work: *“I will be a designer... it’s a very difficult job, I have to run a company”*; *“I wake up at 6 in the morning and think about designing new clothes”*; *“I will become a director... it’s not easy, I have to work hard”*; *“I will be a designer... I work in a fashion company... eight hours spent designing”*.

The job as seen by the boys. Male preadolescents have imagined working primarily in the following areas: sports (27%), digital media/robotics (13%), STEM (11%), health (6%), entertainment/fashion (4%), art/design (3%). The fields of health, entertainment/fashion, and education are therefore considered more “suitable for females”, while those of sports, digital media/robotics, and STEM are deemed “more suitable for males.” These stereotypical perceptions reflect real-world data regarding university career paths (Alma-Laurea, 2022).

Among sports professions (+20 compared to females), the most popular is a football player, followed by a basketball player and a Formula 1 driver. It’s interesting to note that future aspiring football players, in addition to

the values of *beauty*, *wealth*, and *fame* closely associated with this profession in the collective imaginary, express a desire to engage in charitable work to help those in need of money and also think of financially assisting their family members: “I will be a Juventus football player, 1.80 m tall, earning 21,000 euros (just to say a lot), I have a private jet, 6 Bugatti, 6 Ferrari... my wife is a model... I have two children, a dog... I live in a villa with a football field and pools... I will donate money to the needy”; “I dream of becoming a football player, I will earn a lot of money, and a quarter of it I will give to the homeless, all the rest to support my family and that of my parents and uncles”; “If I have a lot of money, I will buy many houses to give to the homeless, and I would like to hire them to work for me so they can have a job”.

After athletes, as the second preference among male preadolescents, there is an interest in working in the digital and robotics field (+10 compared to females). This includes YouTube gamers, computer programmers, and streaming site entrepreneurs: “streaming sites like Netflix, platforms where you can buy any single product you want like Amazon: I am this kind of entrepreneur. But I have to say thanks to those who inspired me, such as Steven Jobs; without him, I probably wouldn't be here, and also to Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon. But above all, I owe a big thanks to my mother”.

Male preadolescents interested in pursuing careers in the health sector are very few (-20 compared to females). Apparently, even the visibility gained by doctors during the pandemic did not convince them. The same goes for the world of entertainment and fashion (-14% compared to females). Finally, no one expressed the desire to work in the field of education.

Discussion: the comparison with the research conducted in 1995. Compared to the research on preadolescents imaginary conducted in 1995 (Capecchi & Ferrari, 1998), female professional aspirations are risen. Regarding the professional sectors those related to the health sector increase (+11 percentage points), and those related to the entertainment/fashion world double (+9). Interest in professions in the field of education remains similar, albeit with a slight decline (-3), and those in STEM fields show a slight increase (+2). Among the minority choices, there is a significant increase in girls who want to pursue a career in sports (+6) - including innovative sports like football - and in the field of digital media/robotics (from 0% to 3%).

If in 2021 the most mentioned professional figure is the “doctor”, in 1995 it was the “veterinarian”, two professions related to the *dimension of care*, traditionally associated with the female gender. However, compared to 1995, in 2021 there are many more girls aspiring to professions traditionally associated with the male gender, thus challenging gender stereotypes: surgeon, neurosurgeon, policewoman, judge, airplane pilot, director, football player, jockey, biologist, engineer, scientist, archaeologist, etc.

On the male front, the first choice continues to be professions related to the world of sports (23% in 1995 and 27% in 2021). The most striking novelty is the technological progress that leads to imagining careers in the digital/robotics field (from 0% to 13%). There is then a slight decrease in STEM professions (-2) and, conversely, a slight increase in those related to the world of entertainment/fashion (+2). What remains unchanged, and this also represents a significant finding, is the low interest in professions in the health sector and especially in education (from 4 children in 1995 who intended to become a “teacher” there is now a total lack of interest): it is hypothesized that these are perceived as highly “feminized” sectors.

The six types of “dreams”

Considering the above-described dimensions of *couple/family* and *work/lifestyle* jointly, six types of “dreams” emerge, six different paintings of future life. Each type of “dream” corresponds to certain social representations of daily life and a specific value horizon, regardless of the type of imagined work. Within each type of dream, there is also a mixture of “ordinary,” realistic, and common elements - presumed to be drawn mainly from direct and indirect experience - and “extraordinary,” fantastic, hyperbolic elements - often attributable to content spread by the media. What changes from one dream to another is the different “dosage” of these elements. It is specified that in classifying dreams, the predominant traits have been considered: it is not uncommon to encounter essays where there are elements attributable to multiple types of dreams. In particular, it is possible to observe that the common thread of the values of *beauty, wealth, and fame* is present in almost all types of dreams.

The prevalent dreams are two, both expressed by preadolescents from every social class: the dream proposed by more than half of the preadolescents (52%) can be defined as “hyper-realistic” (referring to the artistic movement that emerged in the United States in the early 1970s) due to the greater presence of realistic and “ordinary” elements. These elements sometimes become photographs of magnified details of reality. For instance, the descriptions of routine activities throughout the day or those related to one’s home are sometimes so meticulous and exaggerated as to seem idealized, of extreme realism, hence *hyper-realistic*. The second dream by order of magnitude (32%) has been defined as one of “beauty, wealth, and fame” due to the greater presence, instead, of “extraordinary” and spectacular elements evoked by these pursued values. This dream characterizes *contemporary collective imaginary* the most: if *beauty, wealth, and fame* have long been values spread by the traditional media, today they are exacerbated by the impres-

sion of a certain “ease” in achieving professional success and fame, thanks to the example set by influencers.

Following these, there are generally more original and imaginative dreams, mostly expressed by preadolescents from the middle/high social class, characterized by focusing on a specific theme/area: nature (the “ecological dream,” 6%), technology (the “space and new technologies dream,” 5%), adventure, and exploration (the “explorer’s dream,” 3%), science (the “scientist’s dream,” 4%).

There are noticeable differences especially between girls those living in Bologna and those in Parma: the former prefer the “hyper-realistic dream” (+17), while the latter favor the “dream of beauty, wealth, and fame” (also +17).

The “hyper-realistic” dream is the dream of those desiring an “ordinary,” routine life based on their profession and, in most cases, the formation of a traditionally understood family (couple + children + any pets): the dream of professional fulfillment and a united and happy family. This could explain, for example, that it is a type of life imagined mainly by girls from Bologna, much more inclined than those from Parma to start a family.

These families are often dual-career, well-off, mostly living in a large, spacious house, often on two floors; to a lesser extent, mention is made of a villa with a garden and a pool. The chosen place to live is more often the city where they already reside (Bologna or Parma), with less frequency mentioning metropolises like Milan, Rome, Paris, London, or New York.

The hyperrealism characterizing this dream is given by the exaggeration of daily routine and the most obvious and ordinary behaviors, as well as an emphasis on material and visual aspects. Also, in this type of dream, there is a certain superficiality in the description of the future couple relationship, as if adults’ lives, seen through the eyes of preadolescents, are mainly composed of a sequence of routine activities, without too many expressed emotions: *“Today is April 22, 2041; I wake up and have breakfast, I live in Nice in my seaside villa with my husband and my two children, Tommaso and Anna. I get ready and go out, I work in Paris at my clinic, working as a doctor (specialized in physiotherapy), helping my patients with physiotherapy, taking a small break for lunch... I start working again at 2:30 pm... At 5:00 pm, I close the clinic and go to the University of Paris, where together with other doctors, we explain how to do our job. At 6:00 pm, I return home where my husband and children are waiting for dinner. After dinner, my husband goes out because he has the night shift (he is also a doctor); after my husband leaves, my children and I watch a movie, and when they go to bed, I prepare for tomorrow’s appointments, then go to bed”; “When I grow up, I imagine being a judge and living in New York in a house with many windows, a garden, and a very large pool. I would like there to be very spacious rooms and also a wellness room. I would*

live with my cat, who would have a small but entirely his own room, preferably vintage. Additionally, I would also live with Samuele, who is my boyfriend”.

In contrast, the dream of “beauty, wealth, and fame” tends to prevail with “extraordinary” and spectacular elements, inspired to a large extent by media content. The girls’ career aspirations are very high, with ambition being the dominant trait. The house to live in is often “giant” and very “equipped”: mostly a villa with a garden and a pool. Compared to the “hyper-realistic dream,” wealth is more exhibited, certifying the achievement of professional success and the fame that follows. While the representation of *a united and happy family* prevails, there are more singles living with friends. The imagined locations to live in are mostly in the United States, particularly in the metropolises of New York and Los Angeles, identified with “wealth” and also being the cities where “famous people” live, such as Hollywood actors and actresses. Dubai has also entered the collective imaginary for billionaires living there and futuristic skyscrapers. The most mentioned Italian cities are the metropolises of Milan and Rome: *“In twenty years, I will be a director; I am almost sure I will go to America, if I do, I will definitely live in Hollywood in a large villa with two dogs, four cats, my husband, and my four children. The boys will be named Luke and Cameron, and the girls Lucy and Katy... The villa will have a kitchen, a balcony, five bedrooms, a playroom, a garden, a pool, and 4 bathrooms”*; *“I will be a famous streamer/YouTuber. I will live in New York, a beautiful city, in a very nice, technological, modern, and luxurious home. I will live with Khaby Lame, Tommaso Cassi, and Cristiano Ronaldo. I will spend my days streaming and doing live broadcasts on YouTube with my fans. In my free time, I will be with friends, take walks in New York, go to McDonald’s, play PlayStation”*.

The “ecological dream” is based on a love for nature and especially animals. Those who dream of this prefer to live in the countryside or mountains, away from the city and pollution, expressing awareness of the need to safeguard the environment. The mentioned family forms are varied: couples with or without children, singles living with parents, with siblings or other relatives, and in many cases, they own animals. It is interesting to note that those who deeply love nature and animals often express the desire to help marginalized or disadvantaged people (such as those belonging to the LGBT+ community, disabled people to integrate into society, and sick people in countries where hospitals are lacking, and those born in poverty-stricken contexts). In the dream characterized by ecological values, a visible depth and sensitivity emerge, not always apparent in other depictions of future life: a married veterinarian with two children: *“I would like to be a veterinarian because if I see abandoned dogs, cats, or other animals, I will take care of them and put them up for adoption”*. A single animal groomer: *“I have always been very attentive to pollution, even from a young age. I remember that in*

2021, they said that around these years, the world would be destroyed due to pollution, but finally, today, everyone has electric cars, and now pollution is decreasing... I am an animal groomer. I opened a shop with my cousin... I have a dog named Layla. I found her abandoned on the street... I do volunteer work at an LGBT+ center. We try to heal traumas caused by insults”.

The dreams of “space/new technologies”, “explorer’s,” and “scientist’s” affirm the existence of female interest in STEM disciplines: a single robot inventor: “It’s April 22, 2041; my beloved dog Foxy wakes me up barking. I feed him and get ready to go to work at R.C.M.I., which stands for Robotic, Costume, Mascot, Industry; a company that manufactures animal-shaped robots called ‘animatronics’. I leave home and stroll through the streets of New York City; I arrive at the office and work on designing a robot called Mangle”; a marine biologist who will live alone or with a roommate: “As an adult, I will be a marine biologist, observing fish, dolphins, and many other animals in their natural habitat. I will discover the secrets of creatures living in the abyss, and I will try to go to the bottom of the Mariana Trench”.

Discussion: the comparison with the research conducted in 1995. Comparing the results from this presented research with the study on preadolescents imaginary conducted in 1995 (Capecchi, Ferrari, 1998), significant changes emerge. Firstly, the “hyper-realistic dream” decreases (-10 percentage points), while the “dream of beauty, wealth, and fame” increases (+12). Regarding the minor dreams, there is a slight decline in the “ecological dream,” “explorer’s dream,” and “scientist’s dream” in 2021, while the “space/technology dream” increases slightly.

As for the “dream of beauty, wealth, and fame,” another difference is that in 2021, this dream is expressed by preadolescents from every social class, whereas in 1995, it was mostly imagined by those belonging to a middle/low social class. It can be hypothesized that values of *beauty*, *wealth*, and *fame*, traditionally spread by television, are now abundantly conveyed by social media, especially embodied by influencers, significantly impacting *collective imaginary* (such as Italy’s most-followed couple, Chiara Ferragni and Fedez, or the most-followed by preadolescents, Stef&Phere, YouTubers specializing in videogames).

The minor dreams, more original, imaginative, and non-conformist in both 1995 and 2021, are primarily formulated by preadolescents from the middle/high social class, further supporting the hypothesis of a correlation between the quantity and quality of received cultural stimuli and the richness of imaginative activity. In 2021, there is, however, a downsizing of “extraordinary” and “fantastic” elements in these dreams. Considering all dream types together, in 2021, more realism, conformity, and a desire for wealth emerge, driven by media consumption that has largely shifted from traditional media to social media. The result is a somewhat leaner fantasy, com-

pensated by a strong desire to travel – fueled by the same influencers – both for fashion and a genuine desire to explore the world.

Moreover, a new transversal element emerges from all dream types, which is the presence of a considerable *social commitment*. In 1995, this was confined to sporadic volunteer activities, while in 2021, various current themes such as *environmentalism, animal rights, civil rights, disability, marginalization, poverty, the need to care for anyone “in difficulty”* (heightened sensitivity during the pandemic) emerge.

Despite the prevailing representation in 2021 of a life focused on private matters, based on economic well-being, consumerism, and hedonism, there is a more pronounced openness towards the social and a curiosity towards the world compared to 1995. Undoubtedly, *Generation Z*, thanks to more frequent use of the Internet, is more informed and precociously mature.

Preadolescents and their intense use of social media

From the questionnaire on the preadolescents media consumption, several aspects related to the preferred media content and characters emerged, which can be linked to their imaginary expressed in the essays. In this paper we provide only some essential data.

Results related to activities regularly done at one’s leisure show that *Generation Z* is characterized by intense use of digital media, particularly social media. Considering them collectively, the activities that the majority of preadolescents engage in almost every day include: *watching content posted by influencers on social media, playing videogames, reading/sending messages/photos/videos and making video calls, and posting content on social media*. Additionally, many watch TV, movies, and TV series on on-demand streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+. They also listen to music and go to the park to play. Traditional activities like drawing, painting, cutting, reading books and comics, and playing board games follow.

Compared to males, many more girls listen to music (+25 percentage points), engage in manual activities like drawing and painting (+26), and read books (+13): these are expressive activities and/or activities that allow connecting with the inner dimension. Compared to females, many more boys play videogames (+50), and among social media-related activities, they watch content posted by influencers (+22). Regarding socioeconomic differences, preadolescents from middle/upper-class families read more compared to those from middle/lower-class families (+13).

Let’s delve into the specific use of social media and preferences related to influencers followed. The majority of preadolescents claim to have one or more social media accounts, with YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitch being the most popular in descending order. The consistent use

of social media typically starts around the transition from primary school to secondary school, coinciding with the acquisition of their first smartphone, obtained in most cases between the ages of ten (31%) and eleven (27%).

Preadolescents were asked to name up to three favorite influencers and explain their choices. Starting from the responses of females, they love particularly those in fashion, dance, drawing, and makeup like Chiara Ferragni, TikToker Charli D'Amelio, YouTubers Fraffrog and ClioMakeUp. Besides they appreciate some videogamers for their charm and gaming skills: especially Stef&Phere, Gabby16bit, Favij, and Lyon. "*Favij, Lyon, and Gabby16bit are fun and likable*"; "*Chiara Ferragni is at the top of fashion and talks about interesting topics*"; "*Chiara Ferragni and Charli D'Amelio show us a new lifestyle to follow*". Regarding male responses, the top preferences are *videogamers* (three times as much as females: videogamers are part of a predominantly male subculture). Among the most loved videogamers there are YouTubers like Lyon, Stef&Phere, Gabby16bit, Kendal, Favij, Twitch streamers Pizfn and Xiuder. "*I like gamers because they are fun and friendly*" "*YouTubers cheer me up*", "*Stef&Phere entertain me and provide me with information*".

Discussion: the comparison with the research conducted in 1995. Examining the changes in media consumption over a quarter of a century, it is evident that the most significant change in recent decades is the rapid increase in Internet users, particularly due to the global spread of smartphones (Capecchi, 2015; Arvidsson & Delfanti, 2016; Belluati & Tirocchi, 2023).

Regarding preferred media characters, the most significant change is undoubtedly the entry of influencers – mostly YouTubers – into the daily lives of preadolescents. Real-life figures become role models, entertaining while teaching how to behave “like grown-ups,” providing “lessons” on youth slang, clothing, and the most “fashionable” body and aesthetic models. In addition to providing entertainment, they contribute to spreading values of *beauty*, *wealth*, and *fame*, serving as ideal references for their appealing and seemingly enjoyable work: earning while having fun. These are values that in 2021, compared to the research conducted in 1995, seem to increasingly permeate the preadolescents' imaginary, as they can be found across almost all types of “dreams”.

Conclusions

The 260 preadolescents from Bologna and Parma involved in the study, belonging to *Generation Z*, have been born and raised in a media ecosystem dominated by the Internet, particularly social media. *Generation Z*, also known as the *mobile-first*, *hyper-connected*, or *iGen* (Savonardo, 2014; Introini & Pasqualini, 2018), is even more considered 100% digitally native than the preceding Millennials (Prensky, 2001). These youngsters naturally fluctuate

between the real and virtual dimensions in their daily lives, living *onlife*: a neologism indicating the breakdown of barriers between offline and online (Floridi, 2014).

The ownership of the first smartphone, as our research attests, mostly occurs between the ages of ten and eleven, becoming a rite of passage from childhood to preadolescence and from dependence to independence from parents. The abundance of online content to explore, the ability to post content on social media, and interact with others in synchronous and asynchronous modes – whether supervised by adults or not, in any case without the need for their presence as intermediaries, thus autonomously – have further fueled the phenomenon of *early adultization* initiated by traditional media. As observed by Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) regarding television, exposure to the same content breaks down the generational barrier: with the advent of social media, preadolescents gain early access to content once reserved for adults. Furthermore, irrespective of age, a similar lifestyle is followed, and similar consumption habits are adopted.

Our research indicates that it is in the transition from primary school to secondary school, primarily due to smartphone ownership, that attention tends to shift from content disseminated through television to social media. On social media, interaction with others occurs, content is posted, but most importantly, favorite influencers are followed, becoming true “media” as they continuously disseminate content, creating their own audience as if they were television networks. These are individuals who become role models by providing a wealth of information related to the world of young adults, especially concerning gender identity (including fashionable body models).

Considering the future life depicted in the essays, we can assert that the prevailing values and traits characterizing their subculture include *wealth, fame, beauty, love for family, friends, adventure, travel, sports, play, and fun*. To these, we can add others that reveal a certain sensitivity to social inequalities and a desire to protect the environment: *gender equality, inclusion, altruism, love for animals and nature, and environmentalism*.

Within the same subculture, some differences based on socioeconomic status can be observed: in Bologna, where the families involved have a slightly higher social class, there is more reading, while in Parma, activities related to social media are more prevalent. These differences are reflected in the type of future life envisioned: preadolescents in Bologna prefer the “hyper-realistic” and “ecological/naturalist” dreams, while those in Parma favor the dreams of “beauty, wealth, and fame” and “space and new technologies.” The hypothesis we propose is that closely following the content posted by influencers fuels dreams of “greatness,” the desire for professional success

that seems “within everyone’s reach”: dreams and desires that lead to imagining, for example, living in spectacular villas.

In particular, girls in Parma, besides being much less inclined to form a family compared to those in Bologna, seem to be more *hedonistic, self-centered, and independent* – true interpreters of the process of *female individualization*, where women pursue the dream of gender equality while simultaneously being “victims” or “accomplices” of the market when, in a postfeminist perspective (a mix of feminist and anti-feminist principles and values), they focus on individual life projects that largely involve consumerism (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Capecchi, 2022).

If we finally observe the changes that have occurred over more than a quarter of a century in relation to preadolescents imaginary (Capecchi, Ferrari, 1998), largely seen as indicative of the *collective imaginary*, we can note that the “dream of beauty, wealth, and fame” has increased while the “hyper-realistic” one has decreased. This is presumably influenced by the economic crisis experienced by Italy in recent decades, leading many families to curb consumption and therefore increase the “dream of becoming rich.” At the same time, the *influence of influencers* on the lives of young people cannot be overlooked.

Another reflection concerns the “minor” dreams (“ecological”, “space/new technologies”, “explorer’s”, “scientist’s”), which in both studies were imagined by preadolescents from the middle/high class. However, from the comparison between the two studies, it seems that in 2021 there is a decline in fantasy, that is, a lower presence of purely “fantastic” and “extraordinary” elements. Even in these types of dreams, *realism* tends to predominate, and sometimes the desire for *wealth and fame* reappears. It can be hypothesized in this regard that social media “steals time” from traditional media, emptying the imagination, as on social media, everything is revealed and “put on display,” from naked bodies to the most intimate events and thoughts (Codeluppi, 2021).

On the other hand, comparing the values expressed by preadolescents involved in the first study, belonging to the *Millennials* generation, and those involved in the second study, belonging to *Generation Z*, an increase in the value of *gender equality* is observed, especially regarding the high professional aspirations of girls and their idea of engaging in traditionally “masculine” professions (from a football player to an airplane pilot, from a judge to a neuroscientist). However, gender disparity in the division of tasks within the imagined couple persists: girls/future women, unlike boys/future men, still consider themselves primarily responsible for domestic work and childcare. It’s a contradiction still present in the reality experienced by their working mothers.

Other gender stereotypes (Priulla, 2013; Tirocchi, 2013; Biemmi & Leonelli, 2016; Abbatecola & Stagi, 2017; Capecchi, 2018; Ghigi, 2019) seem to persist in Italian society, spread primarily by the media: the clear preference among males for sports and videogames and the attention given to beauty, “staying in shape,” and shopping by the female gender.

Moreover, there is much more *social commitment and solidarity* towards marginalized, poor, or struggling people, and a greater *desire to travel*, a thirst for exploring the world.

In conclusion, the effects of media and especially the example provided by influencers on the preadolescent imaginary are quite evident. However, the picture that emerges from the research is complex and rich in contradictions: the analysis of the essays reveals not only “negative” effects such as excessive conformity, encouragement of consumerism, detachment from reality, early adultization at the expense of imagination, but also “positive” effects such as contributing to raising girls’ professional aspirations, encouraging the desire to travel, and informing about important social issues.

Future research on preadolescents imaginary could account for additional social changes in Italian society regarding the goal of *gender equality* and, specifically, the *culture of free choice* in the private sphere, thus demonstrating that humans can continually modify the reality they have constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

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