ANTONIO VÍCTOR MARTÍN GARCÍA (Coord.)

LA PEDAGOGÍA SOCIAL EN UNA SOCIEDAD DIGITAL E HIPERCONECTADA: DESAFÍOS Y PROPUESTAS

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EXPERIENCIAS

ADOLESCENTS' MEDIA PRACTICES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE METROPOLITAN CITY OF BOLOGNA

Elena Pacetti; Paolo Bonafede y Alessandro Soriani
University of Bologna. University of Trento

1. INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL SOCIETY AND ADOLESCENTS

In Floridi's interpretation (2014), digital devices take on active roles as co-actors in our contemporary world. They transcend their conventional identity as mere technological tools and embody the essence of third-order technologies, significantly influencing the ecosystem of human existence. The interplay of hardware and software orchestrates a redefinition of our formative horizon through a captivating symphony of interactions.

Within this philosophical-educational perspective, humans find themselves intricately woven into a web of interacting subjects, with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) assuming a central position. These ICTs promote multiple connections and assemblies, essentially blurring the boundaries between physical and informational/digital realms. Rivoltella and Rossi(2019) describe digital devices as homeostatic artefacts, capable of self-regulation and constant interaction

based on their programming algorithms. The concept of *onlife* and the notion of *infosphere* exemplify the shift from a functional-communicative level of information to an ontological level, making information the substratum of reality that permeates all activities through digital and informational devices.

This shift concerns also social constructions: the pulse of society beats to the rhythm of a reticular setting, exuding an air of horizontality, flexibility, and adaptability to every twist and turn of the ever-changing winds of economics, culture, and relationships (Rivoltella & Rossi, 2019). In fact this horizontality changes in a significant way: in western societies GAFAM – the Big Five oligopoly (Google, Amazon, Facebook/Meta, Apple, and Microsoft) – assumes its mantle as the human life conductor, orchestrating the harmonious flow of services and digital interactions, leaving an indelible impact on individual lives and the very fabric of macro-social transformations (Van Dijck, et al, 2018). Platforms don't merely reflect society; they actively produce the social structures that shape our lives. Consequently, it becomes crucial to examine the habits and interactions of adolescents in their digital practices and consumption to understand the impact of these changes at the individual and societal level.

From 2010 the smartphone has emerged as the primary Internet access device for pre-adolescents and adolescents in numerous industrialised nations (Mascheroni & Olafsson, 2016). This transformation has opened up avenues for a remediation of media practices in an *always-on* form (De Kerckhove,2010), allowing for entertainment, relational interactions, gaming (previously limited to television consumption), telephone conversations, and face-to-face meetings.

One of the most popular environments is the one created through social networks: the technological networks of interconnection correspond with the morphology of social networks, emphasising the significance of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) and the individual's access to diverse, temporary and personalised products, information and networks. The design

of social media is realised as dominant socio-digital environments, where everyone can activate peer-to-peer social relationships (Caron & Caronia, 2007) and interact with others by creating, in the spirit of informal learning, a common ground for the constitution of participatory cultures (Boydm 2014; Jenkins et al, 2015; Ito et al, 2019).

The digital communication era thrives, with a massive production of personal fragments shared in real-time through social networks, heightened by the pandemic context. Smartphones and social media play dual roles, acting as narrative devices for self-expression and social mirrors, offering feedback through dominant social functions (Balbi & Magaudda, 2018), especially for adolescents.

In Italy, the prevalence of social media usage among young individuals (14–29 years old) has been consistently increasing, with platforms like WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Tik Tok and Facebook being prominent (Censis, 2021; Bissaca, et al, 2021). An european research on adolescents media practices (Creswell, 2015) observes that daily activities revolve around communication and entertainment, including communicating with friends and caregivers, listening to music or watching videos, and playing games. These daily activities are related to communication and entertainment, leaving behind others skills connected to content creation and production; information navigating and processing; technological and operational.

Starting from these considerations on the macro and micro-social level, in this work we focused on the effects that the relationship between adolescents, devices and digital environments as social networks generates in terms of practices, consumption and types of socialisation.

THE RESEARCH

The research presented can be considered an explanatory study conducted using a phenomenological research approach. Due to the com-

plexity of the phenomenon being addressed, the researchers chose to adopt a mixed-method approach (Creswell, 2015) by employing an explanatory-sequential strategy of inquiry (Trinchero & Robasto, 2019). The research consisted of two main phases: firstly, a quantitative study aimed at gathering general information from the students through an online survey; and secondly, a qualitative study conducted through a series of online focus groups to gain a deeper understanding of the results from the quantitative phase. The inquiry was conducted in 88 classes of 9 upper secondary schools located in the Metropolitan City of Bologna. The online survey, which took approximately 15 minutes on average to complete, collected a total of 1657 responses (refer to Table 1 for a complete picture of the research anagraphic). It was divided into four parts: general information, online practices and consumer habits, dynamics of relationships related to media practices, and the impact of media practices on identity. Additionally, five online focus groups, with an average duration of 1 hour each, were conducted with volunteer students grouped by school year[1] (around 8-10 participants per focus group). The focus groups followed a semi-structured question framework designed to explore the results of the questionnaires in greater detail.

In this contribution, we present some of the data that emerged from a preliminary analysis. Specifically, we will focus on the first three parts of the survey and highlight the most relevant findings from the focus groups. It is important to note that the research, including data analysis, is still a work in progress.

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[1] The upper secondary school in Italy is made up of 5 years and it comprehends grades from 9 to 13.

TABLA 1. *Anagraphic of the research.*

School	Number of students	School years	Number of students	Gender	Number of students
School 1	133	9th grade	327	Males	707
School 2	377	10th grade	336	Females	930
School 3	30	11th grade	323	Empty	15
School 4	214	12th grade	313	Other	5
School 5	109	13th grade	358		
School 6	146				
School 7	128				
School 8	121				
School 9	399				

RESULTS

In figure 1 it is possible to observe the student's preferences in terms of entertainment platforms grouped per school year. The options to the Likert scale where: 1, I don't watch it; 2, I watch it 1-2 times per month; 3, I watch it 1-2 times a week; 4, I watch it once a day; 5, I watch it more than once a day. Instagram (4.5), is the most popular platform, followed by YouTube (3.8) and TikTok (3.3). Traditional Tv (3) and online streaming services (like Netflix, Prime Video or Disney plus) (2.3) remain quite popular habits, while online sport platforms (like Sky Sport, or DAZN) (1,7) and Twitch (1.6) are the least watched services.

The findings indicate a notable preference among younger respondents for the TikTok platform. Specifically, the Likert value for first-year students stands at 3.6, gradually declining to 2.9 for fifth-year students. A similar trend, though less pronounced, is observable in the levels of appreciation for Twitch. On the other hand, Instagram emerges as a platform that gathers higher appreciation among older students, as evidenced by the comparatively lower values recorded among first-year students (4.3), which progressively increase among fourth and fifth-year students (4.6).

FIGURE 1. *Students' online practices related to school year.*
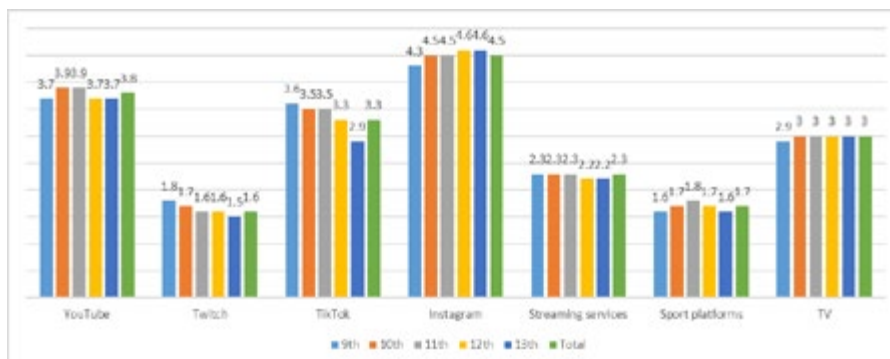
This tendency is corroborated by the data emerged in the focus groups and by marketing research, which show a continuous growth of TikTok, a platform where:

– they feel free to express themselves:

F1- I like it [TikTok] because I know I can post something funny to share with my friends. Even if it's something not important, I know I can put it there.
(Focus group, 10th grade)

– it is possible to access to countless possibilities of entertainment:

F1- On TikTok you can create your own format and decide what you are or are not interested in... So with 'for you' you can find a bit of everything!
(Focus group, 10th grade)

F1 - It's like an endless stream of stuff that we like!
(Focus group, 11th grade)

– it is possible to access interesting contents from which they can learn about something:

M1 - [...] but I use it also for looking for stuff that I want to learn. For instance, I used it to keep myself informed about Zan's law proposal2. (Focus group, 11th grade)

FIGURE 2. *Platforms used to watch different kinds of contents grouped per student's gender – Data in percentage.*
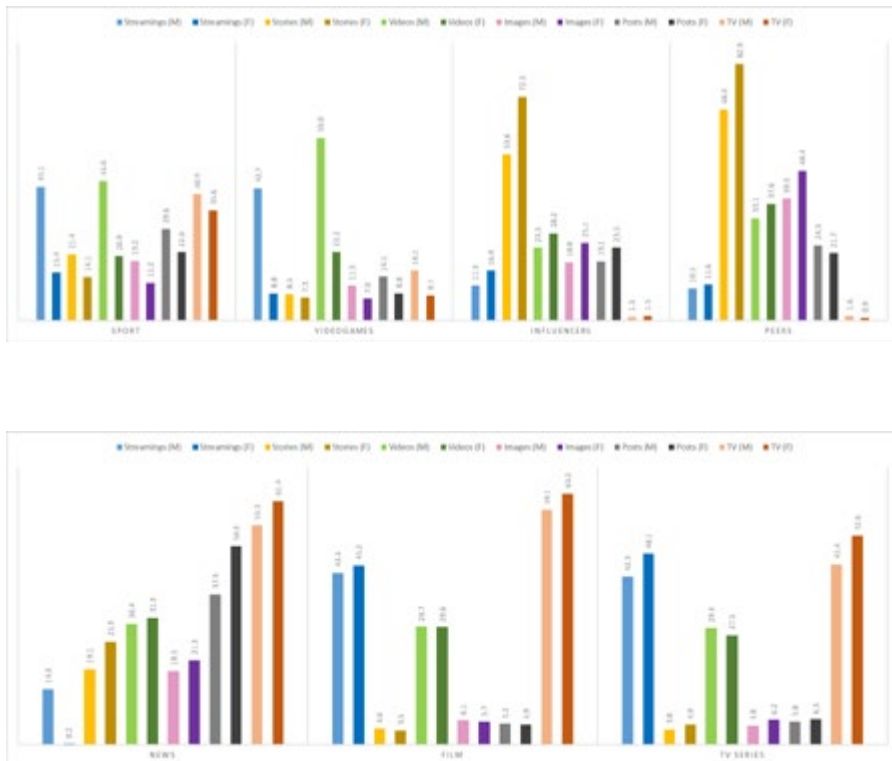
In figure 2 it is possible to observe the platforms used to watch different kinds of contents grouped per student's gender. Streaming services are

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2   The Zan's law proposal in Italy was presented in 2020 and it promoted «Measures to prevent and combat discrimination and violence on the basis of sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability». It was not approved.

most popular platforms where the students watch contents related to tv series (M: 42.3% - F: 48.1%), movies (M: 43.3% - F: 45.2%), sports (M: 43.1% - F: 15.4%), and video games (M: 42.7% - F: 8.8%). This data highlights interesting trends in content consumption among students, with streaming services emerging as the preferred platforms for watching TV series and movies, irrespective of gender. However, there are notable differences in preferences when it comes to sports and video games. It is intriguing to see that a significantly higher percentage of males opt for streaming services to watch sports and play video games compared to their female counterparts. This information sheds light on the varying entertainment choices and interests among male and female students, showcasing the diverse ways they engage with digital content.

Stories are the preferred channels to watch content produced by influencers (M: 53.6% - F: 72.3%) and peers (M: 68.2% - F: 82.9%). It is important to remark that peers' contents are also quite conveyed by images (M: 39.3% - F: 48.4%), videos (M: 33.1% - F: 37.6%) and posts (M: 24.3% - F: 21.7%): this gives a glimpse of the importance of the content produced by friends, acquaintances, and peers in general which generate lot of interest. The high level of interest generated by such content emphasises the influence of social connections in shaping individuals' content preferences and engagement.

It is important to underline the fact that these kinds of channels are used more to watch content created by friends, acquaintances and peers:

> *F1 - I use Instagram sometimes just for stories, to follow my friends.*
>
> *M1 - I am also someone who looks more at others... I always dwell on friends and stories...*
>
> *M2 - Sometimes I open Instagram and randomly go to the stories section... I start scrolling through stories but I don't even look at them... I scroll them randomly... and then I find that I'm kind of doing other people's business…*
>
> *F2 - on my Instagram there are 12 posts but I do a lot of stories… when I go out, it doesn't matter where... I always put the story: «who's here?» let's say that*

I go around quite a lot and in the city centre we are all practically a group... we all know each other and so everybody answers me to the story and we see each other like that... then after we go out, again photos together! I think that someone can also get tired... so many stories … But many of my friends are interested! Everybody does it…
(Focus group, 11th grade)

The publication of content by peers (even if it is not that frequent) is perceived positively and an appreciation emerges in the focus groups:

M1 - I have a friend who is an influencer... After all, she's got a lot of followers on Instagram, she's a tiktoker... a lot of people follow her... they follow her advice about gyms... but I think she's very normal... I was thinking about the fact that it rightly happens, perhaps as at the beginning, to judge someone like that... but when you listen, then you hear, you also put yourself in her shoes... what she does fits normal.
(Focus group, 11th grade);

M1 - He does have a talent, I don't see why mocking him! Actually I respect him for that.

M2- Yeah, if I were talented in something, I would do it too!
(Focus group, 12th grade)

M1 - I don't mind: they are normal people expressing themselves.
(Focus group, 13th grade)

These comments, in line with other researches (Mascheroni et al, 2015; Bell, 2019), also highlight the fear of appearing if you are not 'at your best': personal image and reputation are of fundamental importance in this age of change and uncertainty, and the same teenagers interviewed confirmed that when they decide to publish their images or videos, they must be perfect.

F1 - I like Instagram as an app, it also engages me a lot like doing post stories i.e. I use it to make my profile perfect.

(Focus group, 9th grade)

> *F1 - The moment I put something on Instagram it's because I really like it... for example if I take a photo that's maybe not mine... a photo of a sunset or something like that... it must be something I really like, which I therefore want to share... to show others that it is a good photo... to show others a good photo...*
> *(Focus group, 11ᵗʰ grade)*

By looking at figure 1 and figure 2 together, it is clear that Instagram and TikTok contents (both from influencers and from their peers) are the most frequent media practice among the students part of the research. Adolescents are therefore attracted to the fascinating worlds of Instagram and TikTok, and use these popular social media platforms to express themselves, connect with peers and engage with different content. In the focus groups emerged some interesting details connected to this practice. Some students reported that they are well aware of the fact that they spend too much time on social networks:

> *M1 - In the evening when I have to go to bed, I open TikTok ... is really a problem because it is very addictive, but a lot ... you say: «ok, they are short videos: fifteen seconds, 40 seconds» ... so I scroll TikTok, I watch some nice videos ... and an hour and a half passes ... TikTok is really a drug ... it's a problem because you say: «but they're short videos»... instead you scroll and scroll... it makes you laugh and so you keep on scrolling!*
>
> *M2 - Me too! I watch TikTok in the evening... I go to bed and actually I stay there for hours... until half past midnight, until one o'clock just watching great TikTok videos!*
>
> *(Focus group, 11ᵗʰ grade)*
>
> *F1- I feel I am being somehow addicted [by social networks]*
>
> *F2- Sometimes I feel like I am captured by the socials' stream of contents. I can't stop scrolling.*
> *(Focus group, 12ᵗʰ grade)*

While some others stated that they mildly suffer from FoMO (fear of missing out):

M1- […] yes, I keep looking at my notifications because I don't want to miss things

F3- yeah, me too… but it is something that if I can't access my phone, like I'm in school, it is ok. I can wait until the end of the class…

M1- yeah, but.. still… I think about it.
(Focus group, 11th grade)

One reflection concerning the differences in the answers from male students and females: while sports and video games are contents mostly frequented by the first group (especially on streaming platforms), contents from influencers and peers are mostly preferred by females.

The last element that has to be underlined is the role of traditional television in student' media practices. TV remains one of the most preferred platforms to watch movies (M: 59.1% - F: 63.2%), Tv series (M: 45.4% - F: 52.6%) and news (M: 55.3% - F: 61.4%). In this sense, the role of television continues to be central in terms of media habits: this figure is of significant importance because it indicates a particular use of digital technology, in which smartphones and other devices are used around the big screen, not excluding the simultaneous use of several devices.

CONCLUSION

We do not pretend to generalise on the results of the first year's research: however, the research highlighted the extent to which adolescents between 14 and 19 escape the conventional definitions that represent them as apathetic, incompetent and dependent on technologies. In fact, the reality is much more complex and multifaceted (Boyd, 2014). and gender, age, personal experiences, class attended are intersected to form a mélange of activities, curiosities, fears, emotions, chances that are also experienced through social media. In contrast to stereotypes, which emphasise superficiality in the use of media, in fact, a great level of awareness emerges on key concepts such as privacy, security, marketing, addictive mechanisms.

During focus groups, several students pointed out that they uninstall the most addictive apps (such as TikTok or Instagram) when they feel they spend too much time scrolling videos or posts and need to concentrate instead, especially when they do it at night (losing sleep hours).

Asked whether they considered themselves a representative sample of their peers, one boy replied:

> M1 - *I think that part of my peers that doesn't realise the problem of social overuse is missing... because in any case, in this Meet, well or badly, everyone has done a bit of self-criticism...*
>
> *We talked about our use of social networks, but we also explained the cons ... therefore affirming that there is a problem ... while I think there is a fairly large segment of my peers and others who are not aware of the problem ... that maybe it has become so normal and so established that the use of social networks has become a routine.*
>
> *And they simply don't see any problem in staying three hours on Instagram, 2 hours on TikTok, 5 hours on Youtube.*
> *(Focus group, 13th grade)*

However, research confirms the extent to which social media are powerful tools for adolescents to construct and affirm their identity, as well as for socialisation among young people: this was even more evident during the covid-19 pandemic, allowing communication during lockdown and restrictions[3]. Thanks to technologies, it was possible for adolescents to maintain friendships and relationships, experimenting new media practices (e.g. Houseparty, Discord and Clubhouse) to chat, narrate themselves, listen to others or to learn and deepen in various fields.

It is interesting to note how media practices contribute to the negotiation of adolescents' identities even if their active role in the media is very limited (in terms of publishing content): but belonging and the self are

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[3] In Italy, there were long periods of school closures and prohibitions on activities in public places.

constructed through the sharing of these online practices and in recognising themselves in the actions, behaviours and interactions between peers. In social media, everything related to music, videogames, tv series, sports, fashion, street art, contributes to creating their identities through a continuous process of building and rebuilding tastes, competences, interests, attitudes, beliefs. It is a very dynamic process where young people train themselves to cultivate their passions and to discover new ones, sharing contents, languages and ideas with peers or following influencers, it does not matter if they know them in real life or only online.

If, therefore, this informal education of adolescents is increasingly connected to media practices, it becomes important for schools to take this into account and to be able to valorise the experience that is experienced in social media: understanding and analysing their media practices allows to design formal and non-formal learning contexts that are consistent with the experiences lived by adolescents in order to build media education and digital citizenship pathways. It becomes necessary to promote future research on these issues in order to support teachers and provide elements of critical reflection within school teaching practices: so that teachers are more aware and able to promote digital learning environments that are inclusive and meaningful for adolescents and for the adults who accompany them in their growth and in the construction of their identity, as places of exchange, collaboration, culture, development of skills and well-being. As a girl was stating:

> F1 - I think that in order to better understand the behaviour of young people, one should have more time anyway, ask questions that go into more detail instead of the usual questions, the general ones that we also find on the internet… (Focus group, 13th grade)

And this is an invitation to adults to research more about it, even in the «small» context of the classroom, to pose the right questions, to care about what adolescents do in their daily online practices, to care about the time they do not spend at school.

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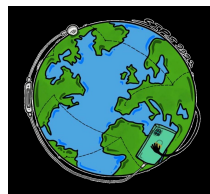
En un mundo donde la tecnología digital transforma nuestra manera de vivir, educar y relacionarnos, mediatiza las relaciones personales, las formas de crianza, la atención y el cuidado de los grupos sociales más vulnerables, en el que fenómenos asociados a la hiperconexión y digitalización introducen nuevas formas de control y vigilancia (en el hogar, en el trabajo, en la calle…), invadiendo nuestro espacio personal, la intimidad y la cotidianidad y en el que se acentúan situaciones de exclusión y marginación social derivados de la falta de acceso al mundo digital, planteamos en este texto algunos interrogantes sobre el papel que puede jugar la Pedagogía y la Educación Social para contribuir a mejorar una sociedad conectada, haciéndola más sostenible e inclusiva. Con ello se trata no solo de reflexionar y advertir de algunos de estos riesgos y desafíos que presenta la digitalización e hiperconectividad, sino igualmente queremos aportar soluciones, asumiendo en este libro que las tecnologías pueden ser vistas también como instrumentos para la solución de los problemas sociales.