It's even more Complicated! The Influence of Media Practices in the Development of Adolescents' Identity

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ABSTRACT: *Social media have long been considered both a strong driver of peer-to-peer social relationships (Caron, Caronia, 2007) and an important ground for the constitution of participatory cultures that promote informal learning and opportunities for the construction and negotiation of one's identity path (Boyd, 2014; Ito et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2015). Particularly in the last decade, the infosphere (Floridi, 2017) has been traversed by a development that, while expected, has surprised in terms of rapidity and profound transformation of teenagers' online practices (Riva, 2012). The research, which involved 1657 students (14-19 y.o.) from ten secondary schools of different curricula in the metropolitan city of Bologna, intends to investigate, from an exploratory-phenomenological point of view, the influence that adolescent online practices (video-social platforms, gaming, etc.) have on the development and negotiation of their identity. Has the transversal and pervasive change generated by digital tools and environments affected the ways in which adolescents perceive themselves, negotiate their identity and their role in the peer group? What challenges and critical issues emerge for identity development from digital consumption? What emerges is a picture in which technologies are mediators of fundamental importance in the relationships of young adolescents; a situation that has been further emphasized by more than a year of health emergency with consequent lockdown and closure of schools. The figure of peers, even those known and frequented exclusively online, as well as that of influencers, play a very important role in the negotiation of the identity of young people and in the construction of their relational dynamics.*

KEYWORDS: *social media; media practices; adolescents; identity development.*

1. Theoretical preliminaries

The theoretical assumptions of this contribution are modulated according to three concentric circles. Starting from a macro-cultural perspective, we intend to focus more and more on the central question of the identity transformations of adolescents.

1.1 Infosphere and Network society

First, at the macro-cultural level, it affirms the central role in the contemporary world of digital devices. They are homeostatic artifacts, capable of communicative interaction and self-regulation through processes determined by internal algorithms (Rivoltella, Rossi, 2019, 26-28). The relationship between human beings and technology is therefore experiencing a new phase (Longo, 2006): it is no longer the exclusive world of humans, but it is a world inhabited by men and machines, interacting beings characterized by a symbiotic and interdependent relationship (Latour, 2005; Law, 2007). There is symbiosis because the machine cannot exist without man, and at the same time human life is almost totally conditioned by machines. Therefore the pervasiveness of digital devices makes their presence indispensable (CENSIS, 2018).

This is especially true for information machines, which collect, process, communicate and connect (Castells, 1996) a quantity of information regarding the exponentially growing human world (Lyman, Varian, 2003; Floridi, 2014). As Paul Valery wrote, this rare commodity – the information – will be prepared in malleable or edible forms, will be distributed to an increasingly numerous of people; it will become a thing of commerce, something that is exported, something that is imitated and reproduced almost everywhere (Longo, 1998). The passage of information from the functional-communicative level to the ontological level (Floridi, 2010, 10-15), which makes it the substratum of the phenomenal real, is happily expressed by the term infosphere (Floridi, 2002, 2014).

It designates the semantic space made up of the totality of information and agents – uniquely designated as informational entities – and their operations. ICTs, with numbering and binarization, make each one of us «informational matter», within a perennially interconnected reticular structure. We therefore speak of a network society, an expression that does not merely refer, trivially, to the diffusion and importance that computer networks have acquired in the contemporary social system. Network society rather designates a more general reticular paradigm in the interpretation of the morphology of society itself (Castells, 1996). In this case, therefore, the concept of «network» embraces much more than the internet, indicating a social model organization that tends to be horizontal, flexible, capable of adapting rapidly to changing environmental conditions with all the economic, symbolic and relational flows and exchanges.

1.2 Adolescents, social relationships and digital culture

If the network society represents the widespread paradigm to interpret the dimension of contemporary social systems, it is necessary verify it by observing the daily experiences in the lives of individuals. With this contribution – entering a more specific level, the second theoretical circle – we intend to investigate the relationship between teenagers and social media. In the second decade of 2000 this relationship became unavoidable.

Through the smartphone, which has become the main device for accessing the internet by pre-adolescents and adolescents in many industrialized countries (Mascheroni, Olafsson, 2016), a horizon of media practices has opened up which was previously confined to television consumption, telephone conversations or via chat / forum, and face-to-face meetings. The convergence operated by the smartphone in terms of multi-modal multimedia has contracted the times of relationships, languages and forms of socialization (Jenkins, 2008).

For this reason, international scholars agree in delineating that Social media have long been considered both a strong driver of peer-to-peer social relationships (Caron, Caronia, 2007) and an important ground for the constitution of participatory cultures that promote informal learning and opportunities for the construction and negotiation of one's identity path (Boyd, 2014; Jenkins, Ito, 2015; Ito et al., 2019). In Italy this trend has manifested itself from 2010 onwards with the consequence of sparking a debate about the dangers that young people are exposed to by using smartphones and other technologies. This debate has been followed by a reflection about the impacts that these devices can have on the development of adolescents. An increasingly unavoidable controversy, given that currently almost 99% of Italian teenagers owns a smartphone and with it can enter the world of the infosphere (Gui et al., 2021).

The debate was amplified by academic contributions that reached a wide audience: Sherry Turkle's two books (2011, 2015) described the loneliness of hyper-connected young people; Manfred Spitzer showed the neuropsychological risks of life online (Spitzer, 2012). *iGen* by Jean Twenge instead read the data on the decrease in the well-being of adolescents in relation to the arrival of digital media (Twenge, 2017).

1.3 Media practices of adolescents: a Media education analysis
Compared to these critical reflections, the pedagogical literature, grafted onto Media Education, has highlighted the cognitive and relational opportunities favored by smartphones and their use by adolescents. Instead of the danger of the instrument itself, we should focus on the way in which these devices are managed on a personal, school and family level (Pachler et al., 2010; Boyd, 2014; Bachmair, 2015; Rivoltella, Rossi, 2019).

To do this, we need to go into the third circle, the more specific, taking on the task of carrying out an analysis of the ways in which adolescents use ICT and verifying the media practices they activate in the context of the reticular society. This is because, as an essential part of Media research, the consumption analysis is a theoretical and methodological component of research in Media Education. In fact, it allows the identification of the real recipient of certain consumptions and it generates possible forms of self-reflexivity, thus acquiring greater awareness on media consumption practices (Aroldi, 2019). It is difficult to understand how the needs of a generation can be identified, hoping to answer them without knowing which media that particular target uses. In

other words, dealing with adolescents means knowing and sharing the social places, the profiles of the sub-cultures and the media environments that are experienced by them (Rivoltella, 2020).

If the phenomenon of technological mediation has been largely investigated for childhood, especially when considering the cognitive impacts on learning dynamics, local and specific studies on relational dynamics in adolescence are few (Bissaca et al., 2021). Therefore, there is a need to analyze the ways in which young users of digital technologies stage themselves as a function of a multifaceted and plural social paradigm and of the opportunities offered by the communicative environment generated by ICTs.

We will therefore analyze the media consumption and the networks of relationships that the high schools students activate in the horizon of reticular individualism. In other words, what kind of media interactions can be observed? Is it actually true that more and more often we choose the networks we belong to (networks of friends, colleagues, fans of particular themes or sports)? What effect do the so-called publics have in the structuring of identity?

1.4 Philosophy of education assumptions
Within this analysis that we intend to make, the philosophical-educational assumptions that fall within the theoretical framework now presented are essentially two:

1. If the human being is an emerging phenomenon of interacting subjects, ICT must also be included in the category of interacting subjects, which are devices that at the same time capture and develop forces and energies by promoting interactions, multiple connections and assemblies (Braidotti, 2014). In this sense, speaking of human identity can no longer evade the reference to the dimension of *techne*, actualized in digital devices and in the computerization of existence, as an inter-agent subject and which generates relational spaces and identity remediation.

2. If identity does not constitute an original *datum* that is the fruit of self-determination of the ego, but the result of the incessant dialectic between self and other, this constitutively implies the recognition of otherness. Knowing oneself means recognizing oneself through the mediation of otherness, in the different ways in which it manifests itself (the you, the historical context of belonging, the language, the institutions), and getting through a phase of being extraneous to oneself (Ricœur, 1991). In today's context, inhabited by the pervasiveness of ICTs, identity cannot be separated from recognizing digital technologies and the consumption they activate as otherness. ICTs must therefore be understood in the dual sense of narrative devices (which allow the propagation of self narratives in the network) and social mirrors (which return

feedback on oneself thanks to the largely dominant social functions in this age of the Internet) (Balbi, Magaudda, 2018). On this front, the effects that this relationship can generate on the forms of identity construction of adolescents are all to be studied.

2. The research

2.1 Objectives and research questions

The research aims at investigating, from an explicative-phenomenological point of view, the influence that adolescents' online practices, especially those related to social networks, online video-streaming platforms and video gaming, have on the development and negotiation of their identity.

To investigate this dimension, the researchers identified two main research questions: what are the media practices of nowadays' adolescents? In which terms adolescents' online media-practices have an impact on the way they socialise and negotiate their identity?

2.2 Methodology

The hereby presented research can be considered as an explanatory study conducted by following a phenomenological research approach. Seen the complexity of the phenomenon addressed the researchers opted to adopt a mixed method approach (Creswell, 2015) by following a explanatory-sequential strategy of inquiry (Trinchero, Robasto, 2019). The phases of the research consisted in two main moments: in a first moment, a quantitative study devoted to collect – by the mean of an online survey – the general situation from the students and, in a second moment, a qualitative study – structured as a series of online focus groups – aimed to deeply understand the results of the quantitative phase.

The research was conducted in 9 upper secondary school located in the area of the Metropolitan City of Bologna.

The online survey (1657 collected, 15 minutes to complete on average) was structured in four parts: general information, online practices and consumers' habits, relationship's dynamics connected to the media practices and impacts of media practices on identity. Five online focus group (average duration: 1 hour) took place with a group of 8-12 volunteer students grouped by school year; the semi-structured backbone of questions that guided the focus groups aimed to deeper explore the results of the questionnaires.

In the present contribution we present some of the data emerged from a preliminary analysis. More specifically we will tackle the first three parts of the survey and some of the most relevant parts of the focus groups. The research, particularly the data analysis, is still a work in progress.

TAB. 1. *The numbers of the research*[1]

	N		N		N		N
Schools	9	School #1	133	First year	327	Males	707
Classes	88	School #2	377	Second year	336	Females	930
Surveys collected	1657	School #3	30	Third year	323	Empty	15
Focus groups recorded	5	School #4	214	Fourth year	313	Other	5
		School #5	109	Fifth year	358		
		School #6	146				
		School #7	128				
		School #8	121				
		School #9	399				

3. Data analysis

3.1. Adolescents' online practices and consumers' habits

In the following graphics are shown the adolescents' practices related to different entertainment platforms per gender (Fig. 1) and per school year (Fig. 2). The most preferred platforms are Instagram (Likert value: 4,5), YouTube (3,8), TikTok (3,3), Netflix (3,3) and traditional TV (3,0). By carefully observing the first graph (FIG. 1) it can be remarked that YouTube, Twitch and Discord (platforms more related to video gaming) and SkySport and DAZN (platforms more related to sports) are considered more appealing by males; on the other hand, TikTok, Instagram (platforms more related to the world of other adolescents, and to influencers) are more appreciated by females.

FIG. 1. *Adolescents' practices related to different entertainment platforms per gender – Likert scale: 1(min.)-5(max.)*

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[1] Upper secondary school in Italy lasts 5 years, from 14 to 19 years old, corresponding to ISCED 2011 level 3, high school.

If one observes the data about adolescent's media practices organised per school year (Fig. 3) it becomes evident that TikTok is more appreciated by younger students: the Likert value for first year's students is 3,6 and it lowers until it reaches the 2,9 of the fifth year's students (the same trend, with less intensity, can be observed also for the levels of appreciation of Twitch and Discord). With Instagram the situation is reversed: the lowest value is in first year's students (4,3) and raises until it reaches the fourth and the fifth year's students (4,6).

FIG. **2**. *Adolescents' practices related to different entertainment platforms per school year – Likert scale: 1(min.)-5(max.)*
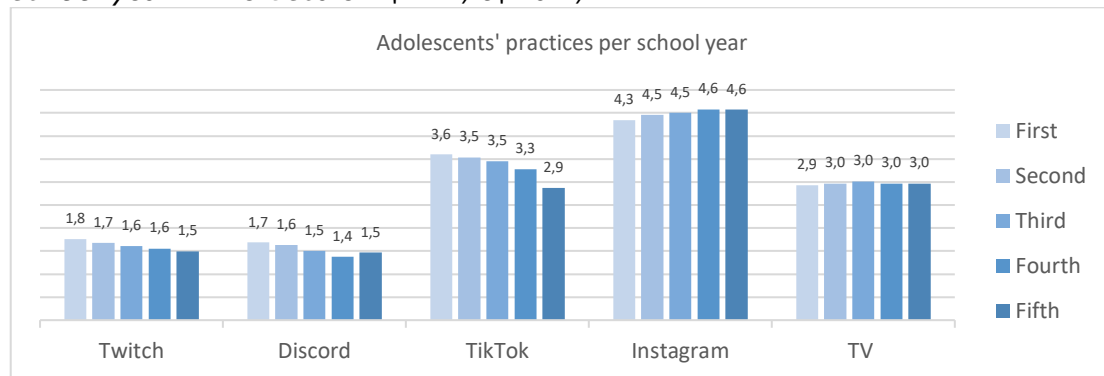
These numbers may be interpreted as the manifestation of a general trend, recognisable especially among younger students, to prefer TikTok over Instagram. This tendency is supported by the focus groups but also by marketing researches which show a continuous growth of TikTok[2] and which foresee that it will become more and more popular as youngster will tend to prefer the Chinese platform over the American one.

From the focus groups the researchers registered also the following considerations:

- TikTok is perceived as a platform where students feel free to express themselves and where it is possible to receive endless entertainment but also occasions for learning about interesting matters;
- students refuse to use Facebook, which is considered the social media of their parents and they do not want to expose themselves there.

The differences in the preferences according to the gender become more visible by looking at students' answers to the question «How much I appreciate the following contents» (Fig. 3).

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[2] Retrieved from: https://digitalagencynetwork.com/tiktok-vs-instagram-who-is-winning-at-social-media/ (Last access: 12/07/2021)

FIG. 3. *Adolescents 'answers to the question «How much I appreciate the following contents» – Likert scale: 1(min.)-5(max.)*
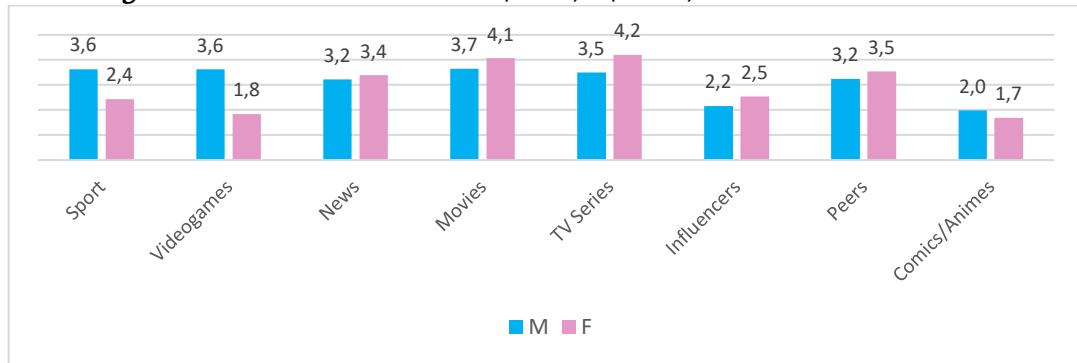
Sports (M:3,6 – F:2,4) and videogames (M:3,6 – F:1,8) are definitely more appreciated by males rather than females; narrative contents like movies (M:3,7 – F: 4,1) and TV series (M:3,5 – F:4,2) are more appreciated by females; social-relational elements like contents form influencers (M:2,2 – F:2,5) and peers (M:3,2 – F:3,5) are, once again, more appreciated by females.

In the graphic printed in Fig. 4, are represented more details concerning the preferred platforms for different kinds of contents.

FIG. 4. *Adolescents' practices to different entertainment contents per gender – Data in percentage*
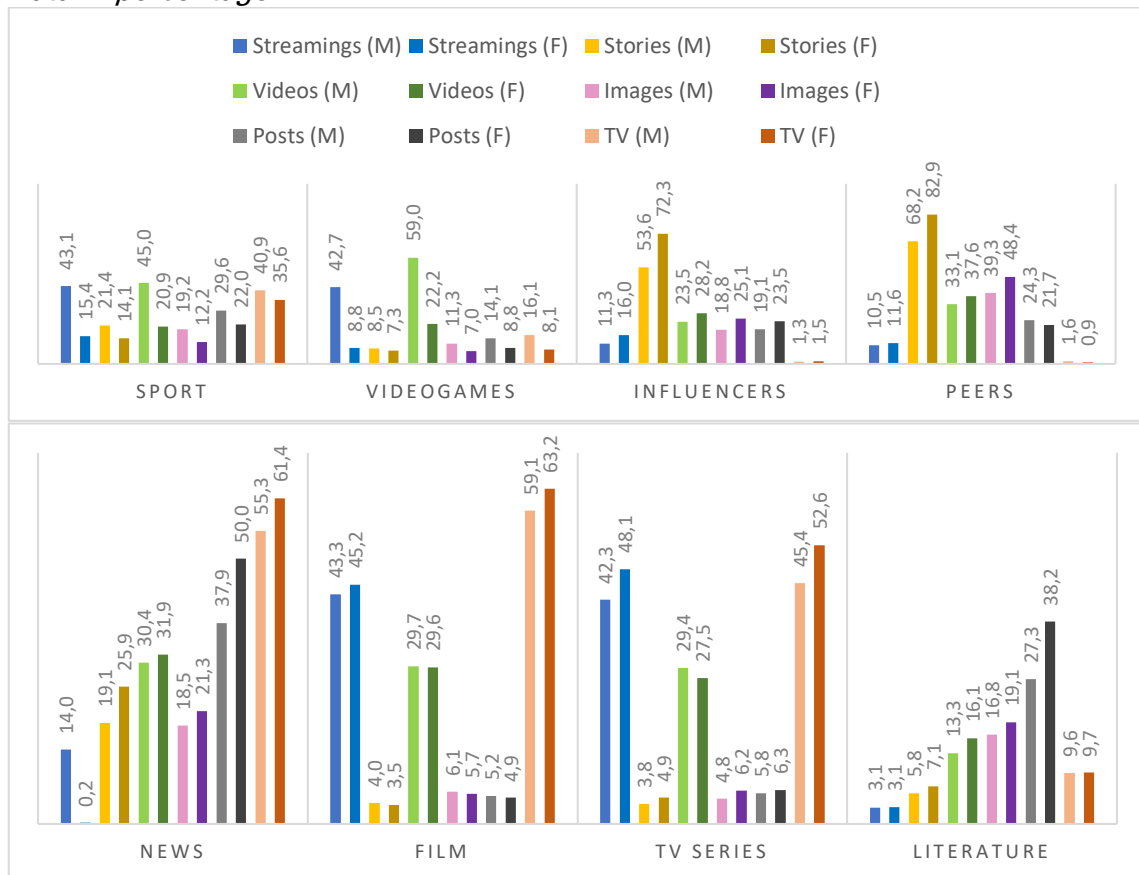
We would like to underline three considerations:
- Video-streaming platforms are more used for sports contents, video games (in these cases, especially by males) movies and tv series;
- Stories and reels are the preferred channels to benefit from influencers and friends' contents (and in these cases, we have a confirmation of the females preferences of these kinds of contents). About this, during the focus groups, students reported that, despite they are aware of being «somehow addicted» by social medias, they often do feel «captured by the social media's stream of contents» as they are somehow feared «of missing out contents»;
- Classic TV is still one of the most preferred platforms (with a balance of gender) to watch contents like news, movies and TV series.

### 3.2. Relationship's dynamics connected to the media practices

By analysing the answers to the question «How much is important for you that a content is presented to you by…» (FIG. 5) it is clear that the kinds of people more considered and listened are the closer ones: peers (Likert: 3,7), family members (Likert: 3,4) and teachers or coaches (Likert: 2,8).

FIG. 5. *Adolescents' answers to the question «How much is important for you that a content is presented to you by…» – Likert scale: 1(min.)-5(max.)*
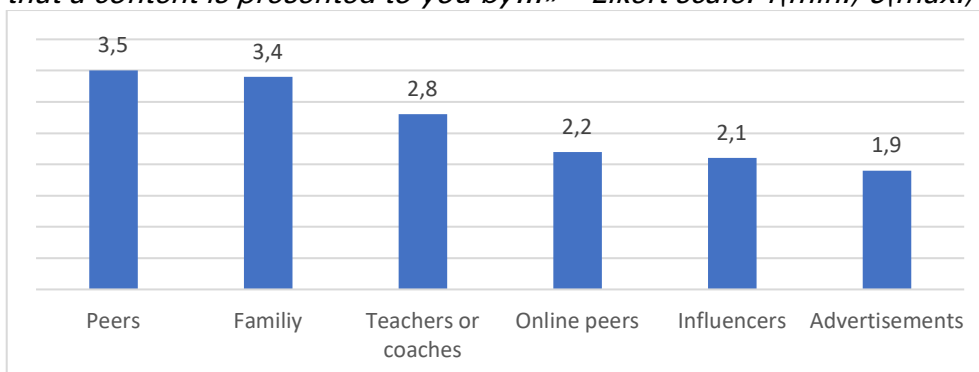
More insights about these dynamics can be found in FIG. 6 where are schematised students' motivations to the previous question: while teachers are considered more because of their authority and expertise in fields that are recognized as useful, family members and peers are considered more because of a direct contact. These categories of people are those with whom the students share a more direct relationship: they know them personally and have with them strong and long relationships which is also accompanied by a sense of trust.

FIG. 6. *Adolescents' motivations to the question in FIG. 5 organised in categories*
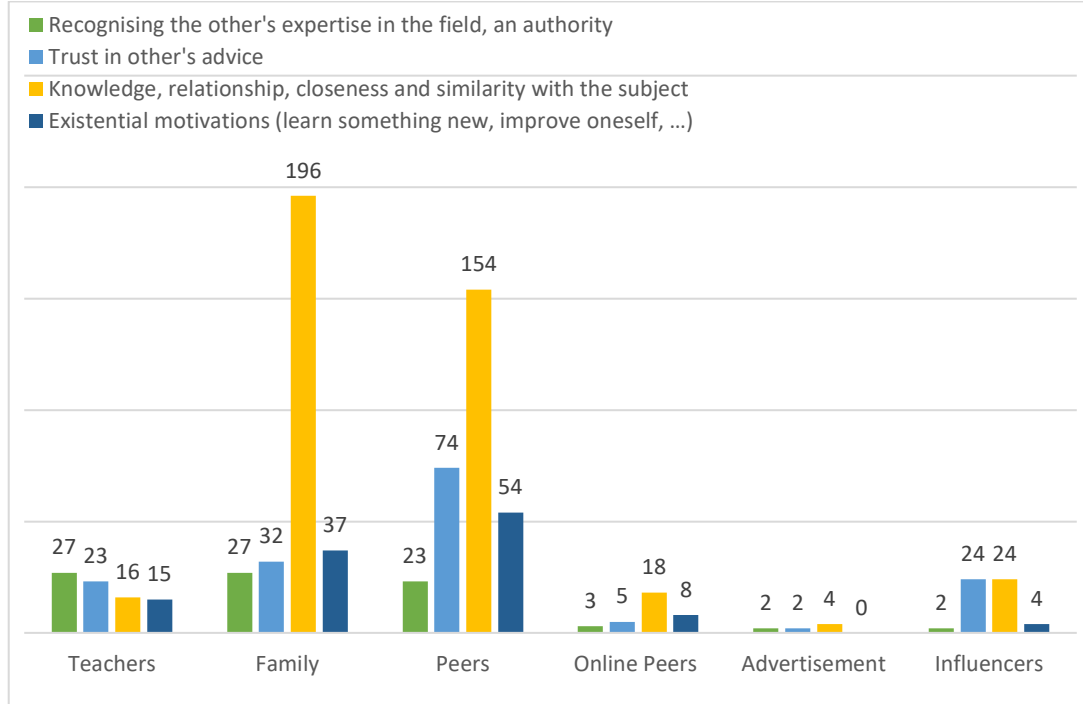
It is interesting to remark the fact that, among the motivations that students provided for listening and considering influencers' advices, one can find «trust» and «closeness of relationship/similarity with them» with the same value (N=24). From both the surveys and the interviews it did emerge a strong sense of trust and closeness not only with their friends, but also with social media's influencers: in other words, influencers are considered as persons who can be trusted and with whom students have a sense of close relationship. This can be explained with the presence of a para social relationship dynamic (Horton, Wohl, 1956).

In FIG. 6 are represented the answers to the question «Have you ever felt excluded from a group because you didn't know what media content they were looking at?»: by taking a closer look at it, it is possible to note that the number of students that answered positively («yes, often» and «yes, sometimes», 59%) is impressive, especially among female students (67,7%) over the males (47,5%).

FIG. 6. *Adolescents' answers to the question «Have you ever felt excluded from a group because you didn't know what media content they were looking at?» – Data in percentage*
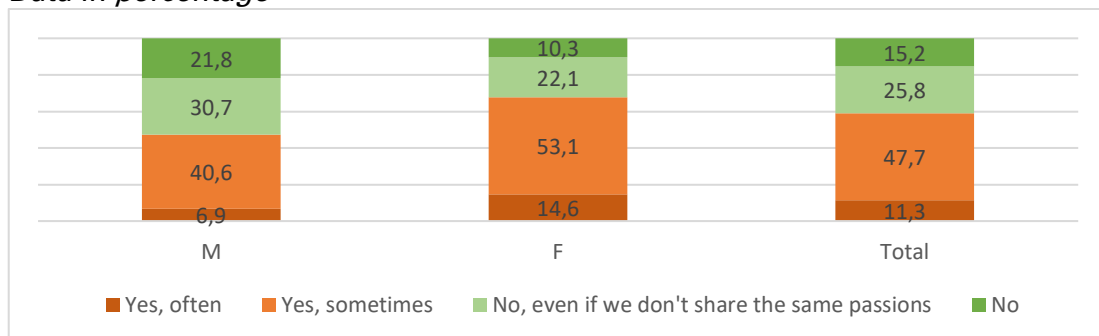
The five focus groups conducted with the students offered insights about the motivations behind these answers. The presence of such a number of students who feel excluded can be explained by the simultaneous presence of different peers sub-groups. Thanks to social media, these groups are in constant contact: this contribute to create, among the students, seamless streams of communication exchanges which produce, on one hand, a strong sense of belonging and friendship but, on the other hand, also dynamics of exclusion between peers.

Three possible categorisations came up from the interviews:
- students who are shy and not too much part of social life of the class: these boys and girls do not share the same media practices of the majority of their peers and tent to have their niches where they feel listened, appreciated and comfortable;
- students feeling excluded by given conversation topics and believing that they need to «catch up» in order to participate to the group: these category of boys and girls expressed the need for being up-to-date about the latest development of social/entertainment media to better be a part of their peers;
- students trusting their friends but feeling sometimes excluded by certain topics: these young boys and girls know that having different interests is enriching and this is not representing too much of a problem for them.

4. Conclusions

What emerges in this research is a picture in which technologies are mediators of fundamental importance in the relationships of young adolescents: the daily and constant use of ICTs in their lives is recognized as a possible source of addiction but also as an indispensable tool to communicate, connect and learn. If technologies are a right that cannot be renounced, the last year of health emergency due to COVID-19 directly has showed the benefits and the risks of the use of media in adolescents' time: this situation of lockdown and schools' closure forced young people to mediate most of their relationships only through digital devices and made them aware of opportunities and threats. Lockdown and the consequent massive use of ICTs was also a possibility to explore more content and to experiment new media practices, like the use of Clubhouse, Discord, Houseparty to listen and converse with others' voices and for their personal narrations.

Very few teenagers use «actively» social medias (in the sense of being content creators), but they perceive their friends who do it in a positive way: «they are normal people expressing themselves»; «he do have a talent, I don't see why mocking him»; «if I were talented in something, I would do it!».

Media practices play an important role in the way adolescents behave, interact, and act with their peers. In particular, the figure of peers, even

those known and frequented exclusively online, as well as that of influencers, contribute to the shape and negotiation of the identity of young people and to the construction of their relational dynamics. These peers and influencers might be very different one from another according to adolescents' interests and curiosities; music, fashion, videogames, street art, movies and tv series, news are the contents they follow and media experiences can be varied and multiform, suggesting the heterogeneity of practices. This variety might be the key to give voice and engage young people as active citizens in schools, communities and society: if we, adults, are able to listen to them and valorize their thoughts and competencies, to consider the time they spend online as an essential aspect of their lives and a right to express themselves, we could support them in better understanding these practices and reflect on them. «The relationship with the other and with his representations are fundamental aspects for building a satisfactory self-image, capable not only of serving as a presentation but also of being a fundamental point of reference in the process of identification and self-affirmation in which young people are engaged» (Bissaca et al., 2021, 12). As adolescents said during one of the focus group, there is always something to learn from our peers, if we give them space and time to express and confront without judging them.

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