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GENDER, INTIMACY, AND DIGITAL PRACTICES: INSIGHTS INTO ITALIAN TEENAGERS' EXPERIENCES

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Literature review

The relationship between digital practices, gender, and intimacy in teenagers' everyday life is gaining growing attention, often creating alarmism that reduces the debate on media usage to its effects (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). Overcoming a media effects approach, sociocultural digital research has engaged with questions of gender and intimacy by adopting a mutual shaping perspective to capture the complexity of the interactions between digital media and gender (Van Zoonen, 2002).

Through this framework, scholars have sought to understand how the social meaning of digital media is shaped by widespread gender conceptions (Wajcman, 1991), and how technologies help to re-shape or co-construct gender itself as "something that is done" and continuously re-created by social action and discursive negotiations.

We can look at digital media as environments that offer young people agency and spaces where they can construct and perform their identity (boyd, 2014) through bricolage practices (Willett, 2008) and by experimenting with their own selves, also with regard to gender and intimacy (De Ridder, 2017; Ferreira, 2021; Metcalfe & Llewellyn, 2020). Such experimentation can be linked to stereotypical/hegemonic ideas of masculinity and femininity by replicating them (van Oosten et al., 2017), emphasising

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them (Doring et al., 2015) or subverting them (Cook and Hasmath, 2014). Studies have also devoted particular attention to communicative interactions (e.g., “sexting”), investigating both the incorporation of and resistance to specific gender and sexual ideologies (Ringrose et al., 2013; Scarcelli, 2020).

Specific attention has also been given to the gendered dimensions of representations and self-representations of masculinity and femininity (Caldeira, 2021), and to the use of platforms for self-expression and social support, especially for women and the LGBTQ+ community (Tortajada et al., 2021). Research shows that, although the internet enables self-expression, it also reinforces gender stereotypes (Comunello et al., 2020). Research has also been devoted to violent practices such as misogyny, hate speech, and harassment (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021).

Overall, we recognize a gap in the literature due to the tendency to focus on: a) young and emerging adults more than on teens; and b) (digital) media representation more than on users' practices and motivations. In the Italian context, despite interesting insights coming from works on teens and digital media (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2018), research is still scarce and there are no systematic works on digital practices, gender, and intimacy in teens' everyday life. This gap is especially striking considering that data suggests that gender stereotypes are particularly present in Italy (Ragnedda & Budd, 2015), compared with other Global North countries, and that the country offers the worst conditions to LGBTQIA+ individuals in Western Europe (Ilga-Europe, 2023). Scappini et al. (2023) confirmed the endorsement of traditional gender scripts by young Italian adults.

Methods

The aim of our paper is to analyse how Italian teenagers (aged 15-18) (re)define their understanding of gender and intimacy by engaging with digital media and incorporating it into their daily lives. Our approach adopts a media practice paradigm in order to understand what young people do with and through digital media in the context of the specific situations in which they act (Couldry, 2012), examining how teenagers (re)negotiate their gender identities and intimate life in their everyday use of digital media.

Our project puts young people and their experiences at the centre of the research process. We adopt a participatory design approach, which makes use of practical activities and material artefacts to stimulate the generation of knowledge and mutual learning among participants. Specifically, focus group guides and activities are co-constructed through preliminary workshops with a group of 10 teenagers (“Young Researchers Group”), who act as “epistemic partners” (Holmes & Marcus, 2012) in devising content and structure that is suitable for use in participatory focus groups with other teenage participants.

Using the activities co-constructed with the Young Researchers Group, in the first step of our research we conducted six focus groups with students aged 15-18 from secondary schools in six cities located in three Italian regions. Focus groups employ

creative techniques to prompt participant discussion and enable participants to express themselves and reflect about sensitive topics such as sexual and intimate digital practices (Spawforth-Jones, 2021).

The empirical material collected from focus groups was analysed using thematic analysis. These findings will be further discussed with the Young Researchers Group to receive their feedback and interpretation.

The research follows AoIR's ethical guidelines and has been approved by the ethical committee of the University of Padua.

Results

At the moment, the research group is analyzing the data collected from the focus group discussions. The paper presents initial findings of this analysis, covering a wide set of digital practices and focusing on three interrelated dimensions: gender, sexuality, and intimate relationships. The analysis delves into the meanings that young people assign to everyday practices and how these are intertwined with the architecture of digital platforms.

The preliminary analysis of the focus group discussions reveals that, regarding the gender dimension, young people mostly embrace the increased visibility of gender identities beyond the binary, but sometimes fall back on traditional gender stereotypes and roles both inside and outside digital spaces (Belotti et al., 2022; Comunello et al., 2023; Farci & Scarcelli, 2023).

Concerning sex and the so-called Online Sexual Activities, the focus groups reveal a complex understanding of sexting that goes beyond moral panic and other oversimplified views of the relationship between teens and sex media (Attwood et al., 2018). These findings illuminate a complex array of behaviours and meanings, such as the prevalence of gendered and heteronormative scripts and the negotiation of boundaries of what is "acceptable" and "unacceptable" in sexting (De Ridder, 2017).

Regarding intimate relationships, the participants highlighted how digital culture is connected to perceptions and experiences of dating, showing significant instances of abuse and controlling behaviours, but also practices connected to romantic love that help young people gain spaces of autonomy.

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