



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Strategie di Comunicazione
Classe LM-92

Tesi di laurea

*Postmodern Love and young adults:
how digital media are intertwined with
interpersonal relationships*

Relatore
Prof. Cosimo Marco Scarcelli

Laureanda
Teresa Roveda
n° matr. 2091338 / LMSGC

Anno Accademico 2023/2024

To the young hearts who still dare to believe
in the quiet power of a fleeting glaze,
in the warmth embarrassment of flushed cheeks,
in the electric spark of an unplanned smile.

To those who still trust in whispered words,
barely heard, but filled with meaning.
To those who still reach for hands, not phones,
who hold tight on their emotions,
unscripted, untamed, alive in every moment.

You remind the world that in an age
where everything passes through screens
the best connections are still the ones
that cannot be downloaded.

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Abstract

The constant social evolution and the digital development have radically transformed the manner in which young adults establish and sustain their interpersonal relationships, giving rise to new forms of love. This qualitative research seeks to investigate the ways in which social media, remediating practices and norms typical of face-to-face communication in digital environments, have shaped the process by which young people move from knowing individuals to forming a solid relationship. The experiences and opinions of adolescents between the ages of 16 and 18 were collected through the use of focus groups, an ethnographic research tool. Particular attention was paid to the topics of online self-representation, relationships, and digital media. The analysis revealed that social media plays an essential role in young people's self-representation, serving as a platform for identity exploration and development. Despite the pervasive influence of digital media, young people continue to value face-to-face interactions as a crucial aspect of fostering strong and enduring relationships.

Introduction

The present dissertation offers a comprehensive examination of the ways in which digital media are intertwined with adolescents' interpersonal relationships, with a particular focus on how their online interaction shape the nature of their romantic bonds. As a result of ongoing technological developments, new media such as social networks have become increasingly prevalent in youths' lives, assuming an ever-greater role in their daily activities. The boundless potential of these digital media has, thus, led to a notable expansion of avenues through which adolescents can establish connections with one another. In addition, the advent of Internet has significantly enhanced the quality and frequency of their linkages, leading to the development of new interaction and relationship management practices.

What is love for today's youths? Have digital media really changed the way in which adolescents interacts and maintain their relationships? Does contemporary postmodern love actually blossom through screens, in the mutual exchange of images, messages and emojis? The extant literature on this topic presents a multitude of conflicting and occasionally disparate perspectives and observations. In light of this consideration and with the enduring pervasiveness of digital media in everyday life, an in-depth analysis involving adolescents feels necessary to deepen and extend the findings of the existing research on the issue. The following chapters of this thesis aim, therefore, to answer these questions by investigating the romantic practices of today's young adults, capturing the possible shifts in interaction practices brought about by digital media.

The first chapter is designed to provide the theoretical framework necessary for the development of the subsequent analysis on the collected data. The initial section examines the various stages that characterize the transition from a romantic infatuation to the formation of a stable, long-term relationship. First impressions, shaped by factors such

as appearance, body language, and involvement in conversation, play a significant role in this process, emerging as a primary factor influencing the success or failure of the relationship (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). As posited by Kaufmann (2006), initial interactions are frequently idealized, emerging from expectations and aspirations inherent in the interlocutors. These can frequently lead to the onset of numerous disappointments if they are not aligned with reality, creating various difficulties and misunderstandings. Also of great relevance are the small acts of kindness performed by couples, these contribute to the creation of an “emotional bank account” (Covey, 2004), which, together with trust and open communication, help to create strong relationships.

The second part focuses on the concept of love, specifically on its evolution throughout history, in order to define its current characteristics. In the nineteenth century, love was shaped by social expectations, economic stability, and reputation (May, 1988), with families exerting a significant influence on relationships (Degler, 1980). Over time, feminist movements, particularly the second wave in the 1960s, redefined love by advocating for sexual freedom, gender equality, and personal autonomy (Freedman, 2002). This allowed women to choose partners based on emotional connection and attraction rather than on social constraints or moral norms (Huysen, 1986). Although love has become more liberated, modern relationships still face additional challenges such as unrealistic expectations, emotional complexity, insecurities and decision paralysis (Illuz, 2012). Contemporary dating has transformed partner selection into a "market", leading to increasingly commodified relationships (Bandinelli, 2018). Social norms, therefore, seems to still exert influence over choices, creating tension between personal freedom and societal pressures.

The concluding section examines the profound impact of digital technologies on the lives of young adults, with a specific emphasis on the emergence of new interaction paradigms. As Luciano Floridi claimed (2017), the pervasive penetration of Internet has resulted in the advent of a new dimension: the Onlife, an hybrid reality where digital and physical realms converge, creating a continuum (boyd, 2007) in which real-life and virtual actions wield reciprocal influence, resulting in a hybrid existence (Licoppe et al., 2016).

While digital platforms offer constant connectivity, they can also lead to superficial interactions (Hampton, Sessions Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011), privacy concerns and emotional stress due to public scrutiny and algorithm-driven content (Van Dijck, 2014). In fact, the concept of "platformized life" reflects how platforms commodify social interactions, influencing relationships while prioritizing commercial interests (Van Dijck, 2013). Additionally, platform surveillance customizes user experiences but raises ethical concerns about privacy, manipulation and the degradation of authentic social connections (Choi, Wong, and Fong 2018).

In the second chapter, a review of the relevant literature is developed. The rise of digital media has significantly reshaped romantic relationships among young adults, introducing new dynamics in self-representation and social interaction. Scholars such as Nadkarni and Hofman (2012) highlight how young adults carefully curate their online personas, emphasizing positive traits to foster social connections while managing self-image. Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006) explore self-presentation in online dating, revealing how users engage in "selective self-disclosure" to balance attractiveness and authenticity.

Research by Maxwell-Smith, Davis, and Giulietti (2017) further underscores the careful curation of online personas to align with social norms, while boyd (2014) discusses the challenges of "context collapse," where diverse offline audiences converge into a single online space, complicating self-representation. Digital media also impact romantic relationships, with Anderson (2023) noting that many young adults now meet partners online. However, while digital communication facilitates connections, it often leads to more superficial interactions, suggesting the need to balance online and offline engagement for more meaningful relationships (Al-Jbouri, Volk and Andrews, 2024).

The third chapter describes the methodology used for the current research which is based on the model of qualitative research. Qualitative research, as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), employs a naturalistic and interpretative approach to study phenomena in their natural settings, focusing on the meanings individuals ascribe to them. It is particularly effective in exploring complex social processes, capturing participants' perspectives and generating rich, detailed descriptions (Creswell, 2013). The data collected in qualitative research is typically non-numerical, such as text or visuals,

gathered through interviews, focus groups or observations to capture human emotions and social interactions (Patton, 2015).

The research is part of the Di.G.I.T. Project (2023-2025), a national collaboration between the University of Padua, Sapienza University of Rome, and Link Campus University, aimed at analyzing how Italian adolescents redefine their understanding of gender and intimacy in the digital age. The data analyzed were, thus, collected through several focus groups held throughout Italy and involving young people aged 16 to 18. Focus groups, which gather individuals to discuss specific topics under the guidance of a moderator, are highlighted as an important method for obtaining diverse perspectives. The collected data were analyzed following the method of thematic analysis that is a widely used method, which helps to identify recurring patterns and themes, offering new insights as the analysis progresses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These focus groups provided a rich dataset of adolescent's perspectives on relationships, intimacy and gender. Through recorded discussions and behavioural observations, the debates offered a detailed understanding of the ways in which adolescents interact and interpret digital platforms in their daily lives.

The fourth chapter of the current dissertation focuses on the analysis of the data collected through the focus groups. The analysis of young adults' interactions with social media and relationships provided an intricate understanding of self-representation, relationship dynamics and the role of digital platforms, sometimes confirming the literature, others providing interesting new perspectives. In general, the experiences and ideas shared by young people made a detailed picture of their perception and use of social media emerge. The role of social media in self-presentation and identity formation has been well-documented. According to adolescents while social platforms offer a unique opportunity for individuals to present themselves to the world, it is the continuous possibility of updating that allows users to build and maintain their identity. Although they use social media to post content that represents them, young adults are aware that what their peers share is not always reality.

Notwithstanding the numerous disadvantages that social media usage can have on romantic relationships, such as excessive surveillance or the emergence of phenomena such as love bombing, the positive effects of fostering connection and facilitating

communication appear to outweigh these concerns. In conclusion, the young people involved emphasised themselves the significant importance of face-to-face interaction, which digital media is inherently incapable of replicating. This view therefore opens up new perspectives on the necessary integration between digital platforms and traditional forms of face-to-face interaction in building and developing interpersonal relationships.

1. The essence of love

Love, such a simple and yet complex concept, a tangled combination of emotions and feelings. Its desperate search and the attempt to tame and understand it has been a defining aspect of human experience since the beginning of times. Across historical periods and cultural contexts, the concept of love has been in fact depicted, analysed and celebrated by philosophers, poets and writers. In their respective works, each author has endeavoured to unravel the essence of love, addressing himself this compelling question: What is the nature of love?

Among the firsts who sought to explain love, Plato is undoubtedly worthy of mention. In one of his most renowned works: “The Symposium”, a dialogue between various character gathered at a banquet the philosopher contemplates the essence of nature, the purpose of love, and the diverse manifestations of this profound emotion. “Love is neither wise nor beautiful, but is rather the desire for wisdom and beauty.” (Sheffield, 2008) states Socrate during his conversation with the other guests. It is evident that Plato regarded love as a fundamental tenet of philosophical inquiry and self-discovery. In the view of the philosopher the true purpose of love is to inspire the soul to seek truth and beauty in their highest form.

Subsequently, Dante Alighieri, influenced by the concept of “courtly love”, an idealized and often unattainable form of love, attempted in his “Divine Comedy” to untangle the dense plot of love. In between his verses, he sets forth and illustrates three distinct forms of love: Divine love, Romantic love and Misguided love. The concept of Divine love is posited as the driving force of the universe, capable to move “the sun and the other stars” (Alighieri, 2009). Romantic love, exemplified by Dante’s admiration for

the beloved Beatrice, is an enveloping feeling that elevates the poet's spirit and guides him towards a spiritual connection with God. Conversely, Misguided love, can be defined as a form of love which, corrupted and obsessive, becomes sin and lead people to damnation. The author, in his long journey through hell, purgatory and heaven, manages to recognize and outline different forms of love, each with its own characteristics and peculiarities. In light of these considerations, the notion of love as a multifaceted sentiment encompassing diverse manifestations begins to emerge.

A few decades later is William Shakespeare who developed a contrasting understanding of love as a many-sided emotion capable of evoking a wide range of divergent sentiments. In his most known tragedy, "Romeo and Juliet", the author explores an overwhelming and intense kind of love: "A madness most discreet, a choking gall and a preserving sweet." (Shakespeare, 1993). The complexity of this feeling emerges forcefully in his antitheses which refer to a continuous intersection of happiness and pain, sweetness and bitterness.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of love is not solely responsible for the generation of an intricate network of emotions and sensations; it is capable of much more. In his novel *Anna Karenina*, Leo Tolstoy describes love as an alienating emotion that can cause individuals to lose their sense of self. "He understood not only that she was close to him, but that he no longer knew where she ended and he began." (Tolstoy, 1995). These few lines convey a profound idea of love, a sentiment capable of uniting two individuals in a bond so strong that it can lead them to delve deeply into their own emotions.

These esteemed authors, in their own distinctive ways, strove to articulate their conceptions of love, thereby further emphasizing its multifaceted and intricate character. In the view of the ancient Greek philosophers, love, despite being a universal sentiment, manifests in different forms. These include Eros, also known as romantic love, which is characterised by an intense emotional and physical attraction that includes deep, passionate connection and desire (Lee, 1973), and Storge, a familiar form of love that develops slowly over time and is based on friendship, shared values, and mutual respect (Hendrick, 2000). Similarly, Ludos is another form of love that is playful and carefree. It is characterized by flirtation and the enjoyment of the act of loving itself, rather than the attachment to a specific partner (Lee, 1973). Another form of love is Agape, which is

divine or unconditional. It is usually understood as the love of God towards humans, which transcends and persists regardless of circumstances (Liddell & Scott, 1901).

The concept of love, encompassing a complex set of emotions and behaviours associated with strong feelings of affection, care, and respect for another person, is an ever evolving and multifaceted phenomenon. It is important to acknowledge that historical periods, cultural contexts, and sociological factors continue to shape the evolving definition of this concept. Over time, this term has undergone a significant process of conceptual evolution, giving rise to a multitude of distinct interpretations and applications. This, in addition to the intricate nature of the emotions that this sentiment evokes in individuals, makes its unequivocal definition a particularly hard challenge. Although it is universally recognized, numerous factors influence the individual perception and experience of love.

1.1. From falling in love to a stable relationship

The importance of first impressions

The process that leads from initial romantic attraction to the formation of a long-term, committed relationship is a complex phenomenon, influenced by numerous factors. First impressions, defined as the judgments and considerations that emerge during the initial encounters and contribute to the formation of a mental image of the other person (Mackie & Smith, 2007), are of paramount importance in establishing the foundations of the nascent bond. These typically establish the tone for subsequent interactions and can considerably influence the likelihood of a relationship developing. Indeed, positive impressions can facilitate further acquaintance, motivating the couple to continue the process of getting to know each other (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). Conversely, unfavourable impressions can hinder the progression of the relationship, leading to a precipitous loss of interest.

First impressions are typically formed based on an individual's perception of various interlocutor characteristics, including physical appearance and attitude, body language, verbal communication, and even the quality of the conversation. For example, eye contact, posture, and facial expression can enhance attraction and interest, while engaging and meaningful conversation can facilitate the establishment of a strong

connection among the speakers (Kaufmann, 2006). The process of forming these personal opinions of others is also referred to in the scientific literature as the first impressions bias. This is defined as a limitation in human information processing that causes individuals to make rapid and incomplete observations about others based on the initial piece of information they perceive (Lim, Benbasat & Ward, 2000). The rapid formation of assumptions about the other leads to a quick scan, allowing one to immediately identify whether a person corresponds to one's interests and tastes. However, these early impressions may also result in affected and untruthful judgments. It is evident that the role of initial interactions is of paramount importance in establishing a long-lasting relationship and in predicting its potential success or failure.

In addition to impressions and consideration, initial meetings are typically characterized by a multitude of expectations and hopes, which drive individuals to envision their potential partner based on the information exchanged during the first interactions. The idealization of one's potential partner is a crucial factor in the initial attraction phase, as it can increase the sense of excitement and fuel the desire to know the other person more deeply. However, individuals frequently construct an idealized image of their partner based on their own expectations and desires, which often diverge from reality. In such instances, the relationship is more susceptible to fragility, as even the slightest negative impression or the initial occurrence of behaviour that deviates from previously held ideals can impede its progress (Kaufmann, 2006).

The emotional Bank Account

According to Gottman and Silver (1999), small acts of kindness, attention and thoughtfulness performed during the initial stages of the relationship exerts a more profound influence on the formation of emotional attachment and trust than do grand gestures. Simple actions of care towards others have been demonstrated to facilitate the development of a sense of security and mutual respect. These gestures contribute to what Covey (2004) describes as the "emotional bank account," which can be conceptualized as a trust account where positive interactions and kind gestures accumulate, thereby creating a buffer against conflicts and misunderstandings. Frequent engagement in these constructive behaviours facilitates the accumulation of emotional capital, which can provide couples with a sense of tranquillity and assurance when confronted with

disagreements. The implementation of minor, straightforward actions directed towards one's partner has the potential to reinforce the bond between them, thereby enhancing the relationship's resilience in the face of adversity (Kaufmann, 2006).

Relationship: a balance of negotiations and adjustments

Following the initial stages of interaction, wherein individuals begin to know each other by exchanging interests and opinions, a deeper emotional connection is typically established. As the dates progress, the bond between the two individuals intensifies as a result of the time spent together, the experiences they mutually share, and the degree of openness that allows for in-depth conversations. The act of exposing oneself to the other person and being able to disclose one's fears and desires facilitates the development of intimacy and trust within the couple. During this period, misunderstandings and misinterpretations may frequently arise due to the absence of established norms and an understanding of each other's communication styles (Knapp, 1978). Caring attitudes, such as active listening, empathy, and mutual openness, are therefore fundamental in this complex phase of the relationship in order to achieve effective communication (Rogers & Farson, 1987).

The transition from the initial stages of romantic attachment to the establishment of a stable relationship is characterised by a continuous series of negotiations and adaptations. To establish a firm and enduring foundation, it is essential for couples to engage in discourse and achieve consensus on a series of pivotal aspects of their lives. These include economic concerns, domestic management, and future aspirations. This process requires a high degree of understanding of the other person's needs and the capacity for adaptability in order to navigate potential changes in habits and lifestyles (Kaufmann, 2006). Indeed, it is typical for couples to undergo changes and adaptations in their relationship over time, influenced by personal developments and external factors.

A further significant challenge faced by couples in the early stages of their relationship is the need to establish a balance between their individual and shared identity. It is crucial for individuals to maintain their identity in order to prevent feelings of suffocation and loss of autonomy, which can result in resentment and conflict (Mace & Mace, 1980). Conversely, couples who develop a robust shared identity tend to exhibit

enhanced closeness and emotional connection, enabling them to more effectively navigate potential challenges and misunderstandings (Aron & Aron, 1996).

As has been shown, love is not a straightforward concept. Multiple are the stages that characterize the development of romantic relationships, with infatuation evolving over time into a more defined and stable connection. Couples must navigate a series of compromises and adjustments in order to ensure a future together. It is through an ongoing process of negotiation that individuals are able to establish a balance within the relationship, define the norms that will govern their interactions, and develop their own unique communication style.

1.2. Story and evolution of love

The concept of love has undergone significant transformations over the centuries, from its initial manifestation until the present day. Social shifts, technological advancements, and changes in cultural norms have repeatedly shaped and redefined the practices of love, ultimately leading to the emergence of what is currently known as postmodern love. By mapping and outlining these developments, it becomes evident that the contemporary concept of love is the result of a complex interplay of social, political, economic, and cultural forces.

1.2.1. Love: a matter of society

In the nineteenth century, romantic love was more closely monitored and regulated by social norms, often perceived as a duty rather than an individual choice. The ideal of romantic love, rooted in pure emotion and fuelled by passion, eroded in the face of the cultural and social norms imposed by society. Love was predominantly perceived as a social concern that families were obliged to promptly address in order to safeguard their status and reputation. In fact, the necessity to rapidly attain economic stability and social respectability ultimately prevailed over emotional sentiments and passion (May, 1988). Peoples' relationships were subject to the constraints of rigidly prescribed cultural norms that delineated the appropriate conduct and the expected trajectory of the bond.

The crucial role of family

In accordance with tradition, parents were the primary matchmakers, responsible for

arranging their children's marriages and attending to all the details involved. The connections and social networks that families had were indeed fundamental to ensuring that their young daughters and sons were married to individuals from families with equal or higher status (Davidoff, 2006). Social gatherings, including formal balls, public events, tea parties and church banquets, represented optimal occasions for encountering potential suitors (Bailey, 1988). A substantial body of novels attests that these meetings, which were orchestrated by parents to facilitate their children's integration into society, often served as the setting for the blossoming of passionate and often forbidden romances.

The tragic love story of Romeo and Juliet, which arose from the naivety and purity of a stolen kiss, serves as a clear illustrative example of this phenomenon. Despite the obstacles the couple encounter, their feelings manage to evolve, as they converse with one another in private, away from the prying eyes of society. What initially appears to be a pure love story, capable of transcending the constraints of traditional relationships, ultimately reveals itself to be a real tragedy. Upon learning of the romantic involvement between Romeo and Juliet, their respective parents endeavour to terminate the relationship in order to preserve their honour and dignity. Ultimately, the death of the two lovers, who were too deeply in love to accept their fate, serves to reconcile the two families.

As is the case with numerous other instances, this narrative portrays a passionate romantic attachment that is in conflict with the harsh reality of a society where every minor detail seems to hold greater significance than love. The newborn couples were subject to the influence of various factors, including financial considerations, reputation, respectability, social status and cultural norms, which collectively shaped the parameters of their relationship. The significance of an individual's familial context and the role of the family itself are once again highlighted. The decision of whom to marry and the approval of the prospective partner were within the purview of the family. Furthermore, the family had the right to intervene in the relationship if it was deemed unsatisfactory. (Degler, 1980).

It is all about reputation

Another emblematic novel is *Pride and Prejudice*, where Elisabeth falls in love with Mr. Darcy in the space of a handful of glances, during a formal ball orchestrated by her parents

in order to ensure that Elisabeth and her sisters find a husband. On the contrary of what would happen today, the love of the two youths develops almost exclusively through short public encounters, very often supervised. Elisabeth had to rely on what others say about him to build Mr. Darcy's image, unable to truly know him in person due to the few superficial encounters. Once again, another intriguing phenomenon has been brought to light: that of reputation. The collective and cultural norms that governed society at the time in question, dictating the manner and pace at which relationships should develop, prevent future couples from becoming intimately acquainted with one another. Such meetings were permitted, but only in the presence of a third party, and always under the watchful eye of society. As a result, the intricate and structured social conformation obligates individuals to rely on the instrument of reputation in order to construct a more defined conceptualization of the other. Social impressions appear to be of greater importance than the personal intimacy that is to be built between the two lovers, destined to be created only after marriage within the walls of the house (Bandinelli, 2024).

Despite the apparent focus on romantic love and passion, both stories are in fact governed by a set of underlying mechanisms that are typical of the social and cultural influences prevailing during the period in which they were written. The romantic love depicted in these novels often deviates from the realities of such relationships. As evidenced by historical records, couples were frequently formed based on economic considerations and social pressures exerted by family members, often diverging significantly from the personal preferences of the individuals involved. It was not uncommon for newlyweds to be paired with individuals with whom they did not share a romantic attraction. On occasion, the sentiment of mutual affection matured over time, thereby providing the newlyweds with a sense of stability and serenity. Rarely a true feeling of love arises. In the majority of cases, the house became a veritable cage, confining women to the role of domestic caretakers, forced to abandon their aspirations in order to manage the household and raise children.

Social roles and expectations

Once married, men and women were expected to abide by the established social norms that delineated the roles they occupied within the marital structure. Men were regarded as the primary providers for their families, bearing the responsibility of ensuring financial

stability and sustenance for their wives and children. Thus, men were expected to exemplify strength and reliability in order to provide a stable foundation for the family (Cott, 1977). Conversely, women were regarded as the moral custodians of the household, responsible for maintaining the family unit and raising children (Evans, 1989). As a result, women were effectively confined to the domestic sphere, thereby precluding them from pursuing a career or realizing their aspirations. These roles were further reinforced by cultural norms and societal expectations that defined the appropriate behaviour of men and women within the family (Smith-Rosenberg, 1985).

As time progresses and technology advances, media platforms, including television programs, magazines and advertisements, increasingly portray idealized family scenarios, reinforcing the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes. (Douglas, 2010). As a result, technological means become a conduit for communication, reinforcing social norms and shaping the ideals of love and relationships (Spigel, 1992). The concept of romantic love based on attraction and emotional connection emerged in the early 20th century and gained prominence in the 1950s (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1997).

1.2.2. Feminist movement's revolution

The initial steps towards a tangible transformation in the landscape of relationships and in the conceptualization of love can be traced back to the 1960s. At around the same time, feminist liberation movements began to assert their rights and fight for the emancipation of the sexual sphere from the constraints of rigid patriarchal norms. The intimate life, hitherto regarded as a private matter, became a political issue, the object and medium of a radical transformation aimed at the emancipation of women.

The First Wave of feminism

The first wave of feminism, which began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focused on legal issues, primarily on securing women's suffrage. Some of the goals the movement aimed at were in fact to secure the right to vote, to own a property and to gain access to education and employment. The women on first wave of feminism fought to gain their own political power by challenging the legal and social structures that had previously oppressed them, thereby laying down the groundwork for future feminist movements. Although they were able to achieve some of their goals, such as the right to vote, the

movement failed to address the other broader inequalities that many women continued to face. Consequently, the necessity for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to women's rights became apparent, paving the way for the second wave of feminism in the 1960s.

The Second Wave of Feminism

The second wave of feminism represented a significant and crucial turning point in the history of women's rights. The second wave of feminism broadened the scope of the feminist movement, addressing a wider range of issues than the preceding one. These included sexual freedom, reproductive rights, and gender equality (Freedman, 2002). This wave sought to challenge the traditional gender roles that confined women to the domestic sphere, advocating for reproductive rights, workplace equality, and the dismantling of patriarchal structures that perpetuated gender discrimination.

In her 1963 publication, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan identifies key issues for the feminist movement, namely the limited role of women in society and the myth of domestic happiness. Friedan highlighted how many women felt dissatisfied and trapped in the roles of housewives and mothers, fueling the feminist debate. The movement, in fact, advocated for women's independence and their right to pursue love and relationships on their own terms, away from social expectations and culturally imposed roles (Evans, 2003). Women thus begin to demonstrate their right to choose partners on the basis of feelings, attraction, emotional and intellectual compatibility rather than on social or economic considerations (Huysen, 1986).

The shift in relationships

The feminist movement also brought to light the necessity for women to be able to explore their sexuality without societal judgment or constraints. This undermined the traditional notion that women were required to be married to a man, to meet at a young age at the behest of their parents and to remain in that relationship for the entirety of their lives. This shift in perspective has reinforced the right of individuals to engage in premarital sexual activity and form relationships outside the conventional boundaries of traditional marriage (Bailey, 1988). The newly acquired sexual autonomy enabled women to engage in a novel form of love and intimacy, free from external constraints (Rosen, 2000). This

is what the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) refers to as "pure relationships," or those bonds that are free from any constraints. The author characterizes these relationships as those formed on the basis of emotional satisfaction and mutual fulfilment, rather than external pressures and traditional roles.

By advocating for sexual freedom, gender equality, and personal autonomy, these movements redefined romantic relationships and challenged pre-established societal norms. The emphasis on equality and shared responsibilities in relationships has resulted in a more egalitarian distribution of duties, with men assuming greater involvement in domestic tasks and women becoming more independent and capable of contributing economically to the family's financial stability (Coontz, 2005). This shift contributed to the dismantling of the traditional patriarchal model of marriage, facilitating the emergence of a partnership model based on mutual respect and cooperation (Stacey, 1990).

It is indubitable that the issues advanced by feminist movements have had a profound and enduring impact on society. These movements resulted in legislative changes and had a profound impact on popular culture, influencing the representation of women in media and literature. The second wave of feminism was particularly successful in transforming public attitudes towards gender roles, leading to increased awareness of issues such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, and the wage gap. This resulted in the normalization of the concepts of sexual freedom and gender equality, rendering them more accessible and acceptable to the broader public (Faludi, 1991). Furthermore, the feminist movements of the 1960s established the groundwork for subsequent waves of feminism, including the third wave in the 1990s and the current fourth wave. Subsequent movements have built upon the achievements of their predecessors, addressing issues such as intersectionality, LGBTQ+ rights, and the impact of digital technology on gender equality.

The legacy of the 1960s feminist movements continues to exert a significant influence on contemporary understandings of love and relationships.

1.2.3. Freed Love

The struggles for rights and female emancipation have challenged the established marital traditions by transforming the conceptualization of love and relationships. The emancipation of love and marriage from moral, religious, and social constraints has empowered women, enabling them to make autonomous decisions about their personal relationships. The ability to select a partner based on genuine feelings and compatibility, rather than societal expectations and obligations, has been linked to increased marital satisfaction and personal happiness.

Moreover, challenging traditional patriarchal structures that often confine women to roles of submission and dependence has facilitated the achievement of gender equality (Beauvoir, 1949). The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to a significant transformation in societal attitudes toward sex and relationships. This period marked a rejection of the restrictive norms that had prevailed in previous generations. The concept of "free love" became inextricably linked with the broader movement for personal and sexual autonomy.

Freed love and its hidden hazards

Nevertheless, despite the considerable advances brought about by feminist movements, even "pure love" (Giddens, 1992), unbound by any constraints, still presents its own inherent risks. As sociologist Eva Illouz (2012) posits, the concept of "courtly love", a tradition that originated in the Middle Ages, continues to exert a profound influence on our perception and experience of romantic relationships. This intense, transcendent, and transformative feeling, often overestimated and unattainable, continues to inform contemporary expectations regarding the nature of love. The freedom to love has thus invested women with new responsibilities in relationships, particularly in the context of relationship failures (Bandinelli, 2024).

While the freedom to love has enabled individuals to form relationships based on genuine affection, attraction, and compatibility, rather than being constrained by societal or familial expectations, the absence of societal norms and judgments can also result in uncertainty and anxiety in the selection of a suitable partner. The absence of clear guidelines can complicate this process, as individuals must navigate their own desires and

fears. Women may feel overwhelmed by societal expectations that, given their full freedom of choice, they should be able to find a partner who fulfils all their emotional, sexual, and intellectual needs. This conceptualization can result in heightened pressure and confusion, particularly for young women navigating the intricacies of contemporary relationships.

Illuz (2012) in fact argue that modern relationships are characterized by a heightened sense of individualism and emotional complexity. According to the sociologist the freedom to choose one's partner in a society that values autonomy and self-expression can lead to a paradox of choice, where the abundance of options can result in decision paralysis and dissatisfaction (Schwartz, 2004). The modern emphasis on romantic love as a path to personal fulfilment can create unrealistic expectations, making it difficult for individuals to find satisfaction in their relationships. (Illuz, 2012)

The marketization of love

In her research on digital dating cultures, Carolina Bandinelli builds on the insights of Illouz by examining the impact of contemporary technologies and cultural shifts on the process of partner selection. Bandinelli (2018) posits that the advent of online dating platforms has transformed the process of partner selection into a market exchange, wherein individuals are encouraged to maximize their choices and optimize their relationships in accordance with personal desires and social trends. This "marketization" of love, as Bandinelli describes it, can result in the commodification of relationships, whereby partners are evaluated based on their ability to meet specific criteria, rather than on the depth of emotional connection.

Furthermore, Bandinelli (2020) underscores the inherent tension between the aspiration for autonomy in selecting a partner and the pervasive influence of social norms and expectations. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of free love and personal choice, individuals remain subject to societal pressures, including the ideal of finding a partner who meets certain cultural or economic standards. This tension can give rise to a sense of ambivalence, as individuals grapple with the challenge of reconciling their aspiration for personal autonomy with the constraints imposed by social expectations.

1.3. Technological evolution and social media

The rapid evolution of digital media has fundamentally altered the way in which individuals communicate, interact and consume information, driving to a significant shift in the dimension of love (Harrod et al., 2022; Kavka, 2022). The development and diffusion of new technological means, capable of connecting to the internet, has rapidly erased the boundaries between the offline and online worlds.

The rise of the Onlife

People have landed in a new dimension, what Luciano Floridi defines as "onlife": a hybrid existence in which the real and the digital merge and confuse, becoming increasingly intertwined (Floridi, 2017). This "onlife" experience reflects a shift from a dichotomy of physical versus virtual to a more integrated and hybrid mode of existence, where actions and interactions in the digital space have real-world consequences and vice versa. As the clear separation between these two dimensions has progressively become blurred, digital and physical spaces have become part of a continuum (boyd, 2007) in which individuals can freely move, developing new forms of communication, whether mediated or face to face (Ling & Haddon, 2008).

The concept of a continuum between the digital and the real is further developed by scholars such as Nathan Jurgenson, who posits that the digital and physical realms are not discrete entities but are in fact profoundly intertwined. In his 2019 work, *The Social Photo*, Jurgenson introduces the concept of "digital dualism", which he uses to describe the false dichotomy between the online and offline worlds. He posits that digital and physical experiences are in a constant state of mutual influence and transformation, creating a continuum where actions in one domain impact the other.

Self representation

As the real world has become increasingly intertwined with the digital realm, it has introduced a multitude of practices and norms that shape the way individuals present themselves to others (Hampton et al., 2011) and create novel avenues for self-expression (Scarcelli & Mainardi, 2019). Indeed, social norms have been shown to influence the

behavior of individuals in online contexts and their self-representation on new platforms. The aspiration for social approval and the apprehension of adverse evaluations drive individuals to align with prevailing standards and trends, leading them to construct an idealized online self-representation (Chou & Edge, 2012).

Consequently, individuals present themselves to others with the intention of influencing perceptions and managing impressions of those who observe them. The concept of the "front stage" and "backstage" provides a valuable framework for the examination of this phenomenon. Goffman (1959) posited that individuals engage in a kind of performance during social interactions, wherein they present a controlled and idealized version of themselves to others (the "front stage"), while their true selves are often concealed (the "backstage"). In this view, social media platforms serve as a digital "front stage," where users meticulously manage their self-presentation to achieve desired outcomes, such as likes, comments, and followers.

The process is further amplified on social media by the affordances of digital platforms, which allow for selective self-presentation and asynchronous communication (boyd, 2014; Walther, 2007). This enables individuals to curate their profiles with great care. Indeed, users are able to exercise control over the content they share, carefully curating their profiles to convey a particular image of themselves. This may include selecting particular photos, status updates and interactions that align with their desired representation of success, happiness, and social desirability. The availability of filters, photo editing tools and algorithms that prioritise certain types of content enables individuals to construct a socially desirable image with relative ease. Boyd (2014) identifies that the affordances of social media enable users to manage their visibility and audience, tailoring their self-presentation to specific contexts and interactions. This form of self-representation enables individuals to experiment with different identities and to project an image that aligns with their aspirations and desired social roles (Turkle, 2011). The capacity to curate one's digital self is both empowering and constraining. On the one hand, it can facilitate more effective self-representation. However, on the other, it necessitates constant vigilance and adaptation to the evolving norms and expectations of online communities.

From one perspective, social media can be regarded as a potentially detrimental tool, capable of concealing the true identity of individuals and introducing new challenges, such as the pressure to conform to idealised standards and the potential for psychological distress. It is important to acknowledge that the advent of online platforms has also enabled individuals to congregate, establish interpersonal connections, and regulate their emotional states (Fuchs, 2014).

The network society

In his academic works, Manuel Castells addresses the evolution of the "Network Society," particularly the impact of digital communication on social interactions, including romantic relationships. The Network Society is distinguished by the dominant function of networks in the configuration and evolution of contemporary societies (Castells, 1996). Network societies are distinguished by the pre-eminence of information and knowledge. As posited by the author, the generation, manipulation, and dissemination of information serve as the primary sources of productivity and authority. A further defining characteristic of these novel social forms is the globalisation of communication and information. Networks are capable of transcending national boundaries, facilitating the instantaneous exchange of information on a global scale. In contrast to traditional hierarchical organizations, networks are distributed and non-centralized, which results in a more diffused distribution of power and the ability of various actors within the network to exercise power.

The internet, mobile communication, and other digital media serve as the foundation for this novel social structure, facilitating uninterrupted connectivity and real-time communication (Van Dijk, 2012). The aforementioned platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, serve to facilitate the creation and maintenance of social networks, thereby enabling users to share information, interact, and build relationships irrespective of their physical location (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In the past, social connections were constrained by the limitations of physical proximity and face-to-face interactions. However, the advent of digital media has provided the means to establish extensive and redefined online networks that facilitate communication and interaction between individuals across vast distances (Granovetter, 1973).

The advent of social media has introduced novel social dynamics that have transformed traditional forms of communication, redefining the manner in which individuals connect. Digital platforms facilitate asynchronous communication, enabling individuals to interact without the necessity of simultaneous physical presence. The flexibility afforded by this nascent network society ensures more frequent and convenient interactions, although it may also result in superficial engagements, increasing the number of relationships that lack depth (Walther, 1996).

1.3.1 “Digitalized” relationships

The advent of technology has precipitated a further transformation in the manner by which individuals establish and maintain connections and engage in communication, thereby introducing hitherto unanticipated dynamics into the context of romantic relationships. As posited by Sherry Turkle (2015), a sociologist specialising in the impact of technologies on human relationships, the advent of new communication technologies has significantly altered the horizon of love and intimacy. While these technologies offer new opportunities for connection, they also present challenges in maintaining the depth and authenticity of relationships. The dual nature of technological advancements has an impact on modern love, both enhancing and complicating the phenomenon. This makes the issue more complex than one might initially assume.

Hybrid ecologies

The integration between the offline and online worlds has resulted in the emergence of new hybrid ecologies, within which individuals navigate and manage their relationships across both physical and digital realms (Licoppe et al., 2016). As an extension of physical interactions, social networks have indeed provided new channels for communication and engagement, hybrid spaces where individuals can seamlessly transition between face-to-face interactions and digital communications, thereby creating a continuous flow of social engagement. One of the primary advantages of hybrid ecologies is the enhanced connectivity they facilitate.

Digital platforms facilitate communication between couples through the use of messaging apps, video calls, and social media updates, thereby enhancing their emotional connection despite physical distance (Baym, 2015). Furthermore, hybrid ecologies afford

individuals greater control over their social interactions. The utilisation of digital tools enables individuals to determine the circumstances under which they can engage with others, thereby allowing them to regulate the timing, frequency, and intensity of their communications. This reduces social pressure and facilitates more considered and deliberate interactions. Furthermore, the availability of diverse forms of communication enables individuals to express themselves in a manner that is both comfortable and effective for them.

Nevertheless, it is possible that hybrid ecologies have also introduced new challenges. Furthermore, the blurring of online and offline boundaries has resulted in an over-reliance on digital communication (Turkle, 2011). Additionally, it has eroded the distinction between the personal and public spheres, giving rise to concerns about privacy and surveillance. The pervasive nature of connectivity has the potential to create an illusion of intimacy, whereby superficial online interactions may supplant more profound, face-to-face communications (Hampton, Sessions Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). The platforms themselves, due to their configuration and intrinsic nature, frequently exert influence over the progression of relationships by prompting particular behaviours and interactions through their design and algorithms.

Platformized life

The manner in which social media influence and define everyday activities, including romantic interactions, is referred to as the concept of "platformized life" (Van Dijck, 2013). As Van Dijck posits, digital platforms have fundamentally altered the manner in which individuals interact with one another, transforming social interactions into commodified and data-driven exchanges. Platforms serve as intermediaries in nearly every aspect of social life, from personal communication to public discourse, thereby influencing the manner in which relationships are formed and sustained. The phenomenon that the author refers to as "platformization" denotes the manner in which digital platforms structure and impact social life, frequently prioritizing their own commercial interests over the quality of human interactions.

It is evident that the ability of these platforms to streamline various aspects of life, including event planning, memory sharing and the monitoring of important dates, is a significant advantage (Ellison et al., 2007). Nevertheless, the platformised nature of

modern life can also give rise to a number of adverse consequences. Furthermore, the prioritisation of certain content over others, driven by commercial interests and the promotion of misinformation and sensationalism, can also have a detrimental impact on privacy. The ease with which one can access a partner's social media activities, for instance by checking their posts and status updates, can foster distrust and insecurity (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Furthermore, the public nature of social media can result in relationships being subjected to external comparison due to the prevalence of models on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Facebook. This may contribute to additional stress and conflict within the couple (Fox & Warber, 2014).

Surveillance

A further issue that has come to light in connection with this topic is its relationship to the extensive data-gathering operations that are used for advertising purposes and social surveillance (Van Dijck, 2014). The user data amassed by the aforementioned platforms is, in fact, employed to refine the algorithms and generate content that is increasingly aligned with the interests of the people. One of the primary advantages of platformised surveillance is the customisation of services. The data collected by the platform are used to tailor content, advertisements and services, thereby enhancing the relevance and engagement of online experiences. However, these can also exert an influence on user behaviour and perception through the use of nudging, which is the process of directing individuals to carry out certain actions and the dissemination of misinformation (Burgess & Albury, 2021).

Prior research has posited that the quality of social life was more stable, or perhaps more accurately, that it was somehow purer, prior to the advent of the digital age and the influence of digital technology on social life (Bauman, 2003). A comparison of the relationships of young adults with those of their parents or grandparents reveals a growing conviction that the relationships of the past were superior because they were not influenced by technological means (Choi, Wong, and Fong 2018). In navigating intimacy in the context of the "unsettled time" (Swidler 1986, 2001), individuals continue to mature in their desire to find authenticity and a more organic way of life (Potter 2010)

1.3.2 Maintaining relationships in the age of social media

The advent of the digital era has brought about a profound transformation in the manner by which young adults engage in flirtation and the sustenance of relationships, with the utilisation of social media platforms playing a pivotal role. Such applications afford users the opportunity to remain connected and engage in social interactions with one or multiple audiences. These interactions encompass activities such as browsing posts, sending private messages and sharing posts with followers, across an evolving portfolio of web and mobile applications (Bayer, 2020). Social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter provide novel avenues for the initiation and sustenance of romantic interest.

As posited by Boyd and Ellison (2007), social media affords individuals the opportunity to curate a representation of themselves, enhancing their appeal to potential partners. This selective self-presentation enables users to accentuate their most favourable attributes, thereby increasing the likelihood of being perceived as attractive and capturing the interest of their potential partners. Furthermore, the asynchronous nature of social media provides a more conducive environment for flirting. In contrast to face-to-face interactions, where responses are immediate, social media affords users the opportunity to meticulously construct their messages and responses, thereby alleviating the pressure of real-time interaction. This aspect of online platforms can facilitate more considered and strategic flirting, as individuals have more time to reflect on their words and plan their subsequent actions (Fox, 2013).

Furthermore, social media plays a pivotal role in the formation and sustenance of romantic relationships among young adults. The uninterrupted connectivity afforded by these digital technologies enables couples to remain in communication and share their daily lives, thereby fostering a sense of proximity and intimacy, even when physically separated (Ledbetter, 2011). It is important to acknowledge that the pervasive influence of social media in romantic relationships is not without its own set of challenges. Indeed, the visibility afforded by social media can give rise to issues pertaining to jealousy and trust, particularly when posts or comments are misconstrued by one's partner.

In this sense, social media appear to be a significant risk factor due to their potential for unlimited connection. Such platforms can also drive particularly jealous

individuals to engage in obsessive behaviours, such as monitoring their partner's online activities meticulously (Muise, 2009). The performative nature of social media often results in couples constructing a meticulously curated image of their relationship, with the intention of showcasing their idyllic romantic lives to others. Nevertheless, this can result in additional pressure on the couple, compelling them to conform to the idealised representations of relationships they have presented online, which may subsequently impact their satisfaction and well-being (Choi & Bazarova, 2015).

1.3.3 New practices in romantic interactions

In addition to facilitating communication between partners, social media has also introduced new practices and norms that have altered the ways in which relationships are formed and sustained. One such phenomenon is the newly coined concept of "breadcrumbing," which involves sending sporadic, uncommitted messages with the intention of maintaining interest from another individual (Ansari, 2015). A plethora of other practices are employed by young adults in the digital dating landscape. Indeed, it is not uncommon for non-verbal cues such as likes, comments and shares to be employed as a means of expressing attraction and interest, thereby circumventing direct confrontation (Manago & Graham, 2008).

In the context of social media, for instance, the act of commenting on the post or story of an individual with whom one is interested can be perceived as a form of interest expression by the commenter. WhatsApp and Snapchat can be utilised by young adults as instruments for more intimate and immediate interaction, thereby facilitating emotional connection and the exchange of personal information (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). The capacity to send ephemeral messages and photos provides a means of flirting in a playful and more confident manner. Indeed, their absence serves to reduce the likelihood of sharing and enables a greater degree of spontaneity (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2016). In the context of digital media, maintaining relationships also necessitates the maintenance of continuous interaction across various social media platforms.

The innovative concept of Stories enables individuals to disseminate information regarding their daily activities and significant moments, thereby maintaining the interest and involvement of their followers, friends, and partners (Fox, Warber & Makstaller, 2013). Although social media provides a distinctive avenue for self-expression and

personalisation of communication, digital relationships may diminish face-to-face interactions, with potential implications for how individuals navigate complex emotions and manage challenging relationships. It is therefore imperative that young adults are able to strike a balance between their online interactions and the necessity for offline relationships.

1.4. Postmodern love

The concept of love has been subject to numerous redefinitions and reshaping, reflecting the profound changes in relationships brought about by cultural shifts, technological advancements, and the evolution of societal norms. The concept of "postmodern love" is characterised by its fluidity and complexity, representing a departure from traditional notions of romantic relationships. It is distinguished by a rejection of fixed roles or structures. In contrast to previous eras, where romantic love was frequently associated with stability, long-term commitment, and clearly delineated roles, postmodern love is more likely to be characterised by uncertainty and a focus on individual fulfilment. This concept, shaped by broader cultural shifts such as the rise of individualism, the decline of marriage as a social institution, and the growing acceptance of diverse relationship forms, captures the multifaceted and often paradoxical nature of romantic relationships in modern societies.

The concept of liquid love

In a postmodern context, love is not a linear path that leads to a specific achievement; rather, it is an ongoing, dynamic process. This concept is exemplified by Bauman (2003), who defines it as "liquid love" and emphasises the transient and unstable nature of relationships in a modern, consumer-driven society. The concept of liquid love is situated within the author's broader theory of liquid modernity, which posits that social structures are becoming increasingly fluid and less predictable. In a context of liquid modernity, traditional norms and institutions, such as marriage and family, are eroded, giving rise to a novel form of relationship characterised by instability and transience.

Bauman posits that liquid love is reflective of broader societal trends, namely individualisation and consumerism. In this context, relationships are treated as products to be consumed and discarded when no longer satisfying. While the fluidity of liquid love

allows individuals to embark on relationships that are fully satisfying and to prioritise self-discovery, gaining a deeper understanding of their desires and boundaries, its unstable nature can also give rise to numerous doubts and insecurities, which, over time, can have a detrimental impact on the well-being of individuals.

Shopping for partner

According to Illouz (2007) the process of digital mediation of intimacy that has led to the platformization of life, the creation of an app intended for every aspect of life, has reorganized the experience of love. New technologies have commodified love, turning it into a marketplace where individuals can "shop" for potential partners based on specific preferences, reflecting the intersection of capitalist values with intimate life, where love and romance are treated as commodities to be exchanged, optimized, and evaluated within a marketplace.

The marketisation of love has enabled individuals to establish specific criteria for the type of partner they are seeking, thus facilitating more intentional and selective dating practices. This can result in the formation of more satisfying and fulfilling relationships, as individuals are able to prioritise the attributes and characteristics that are most important to them in a partner and in a relationship (Bandinelli, 2020). Moreover, the marketisation of love has led to a democratisation of the dating landscape, with the advent of platforms that facilitate the formation of relationships between individuals who share specific identities or preferences. However, one of the most troubling aspects is the commodification of romantic relationships, where love and affection are regarded as commodities to be purchased and sold within a market economy. This perspective has the potential to diminish the emotional depth and authenticity of relationships, as individuals may tend to prioritize surface-level attributes or social status over genuine connection and emotional intimacy (Illouz, 2007).

Choice "overload"

Although the digital age is regarded as an exhilarating period that has introduced novel possibilities and prospects, it also prompts reflection on the extent to which applications have provided an excessively expansive range of options. Although the relationships experienced by previous generations may not have been without flaws, those individuals

were nevertheless content with their circumstances, imperfect though they may have been. This commodification, while providing more opportunities for connection, also introduces the paradox of choice, which can give rise to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity (Dalessandro, 2018). The abundance of options can impede individuals from committing to a single partner, as they are perpetually aware of the plethora of alternatives. This can result in a phenomenon known as "choice overload," wherein the sheer abundance of potential partners paradoxically makes it more challenging to find satisfaction in a relationship (Schwartz, 2004). The constant comparison and fear of missing out (FOMO) can erode the depth of connection in relationships, as individuals may always be on the lookout for someone who seems better or more compatible (Illouz, 2012).

The consequence of this infinite possibility of choice drives people to become more detached from reality. It is claimed, in fact, in numerous studies that quality of interpersonal bonds has decreased due to digital mediation (Turkle 2015). The marketization of love has highlighted a similarity with the dynamics and logic of gamification where actions do not have consequences, or meaning, outside of the app (Garda and Karhulahti's, 2019). Gamification refers to the application of game-design elements in non-game contexts, and in the realm of romance, this is evident in the design of dating apps and social media platforms. These technologies often encourage users to approach dating as a game, where success is measured by the number of matches, likes, or messages one receives (Bandinelli, 2020).

Once again this suggests how the understanding of love is not only personal driven but also it is deeply embedded in societal contexts and cultural norms. Postmodern love wants to avoid as much as possible the adrenaline of the risk of failure, of something that could go differently from what was imagined. It pushes towards an optimization of choice capable, in an algorithmic way, of discarding people with interests distant from one's own. The match provided by the platforms and the ease of connecting with multiple users at the same time lead to the triggering of multiple conversations, which can easily fade in a short time, thus jumping from one individual to another. Postmodern love tries to eliminate everything that can undermine the achievement of one's independence and fulfilment (Bandinelli, 2024).

Digital media have eroded the ancient idea of a romantic and passionate love, well told in novels, where love could overcome everything and go against rivalries between families and arranged marriages. The scenario that opens up before us reflects an increasingly aseptic and calculated love, dictated by new technologies. A love that does not contemplate the difficulties and unexpected events that a relationship between two people implies. A chained love, frozen by the fear of getting hurt and making mistakes. A fragmented love that reflects the current capitalist society where individualism and self-realization prevail over everything. And yet, is it really like this?

What is love for today's youth? Have digital media really changed the way in which teenagers meet and maintain their relationships? Is contemporary love actually born through screens and blossomed in the rapid exchange of messages, in the images and reactions? The following research aims to answer these questions by investigating the romantic practices of today's young adults, capturing the possible shifts in interaction practices brought about by digital media and all the arisen risks and dangers associated with their use.

2. State of Art

As previously seen, the contemporary landscape of romantic relationships among young adults has been significantly shaped by digital media which, with their development, have redefined the way people interact and connect with each other. With their evolution, new digital media have brought about numerous changes, not only in traditional ways of interaction, but also in the representation of one's identity, nowadays mediated by social network. The intricate and elaborate universe of online relationships, created and maintained through technological means, along with the evolution of love towards its postmodern form, have become a popular subject of study.

This broad field of research explores how traditional norms of personal interaction are shaped, mediated and transformed by digital technologies, particularly social media. All of these social and cultural revolutions have created new dynamics in the way in which young adults connect with each other and navigate their romantic relationships. This literature review aims to highlight all the key contributions provided by scholars, offering a detailed overview of the main findings in the area.

2.1 Redefined Practices

Self representation

The evolution and diffusion of digital media have brought about significant changes in the way people communicate and interact with each other. Most notably, the practices of self-representation and the construction of online identity have undergone a considerable evolution over the years, particularly due to the possibilities and affordances provided by new technological means. The distinctive attributes of new media have facilitated enhanced oversight of one's online representation, while also making a substantial contribution to the formation of one's identity.

The act of self-representation has consistently been a pivotal element in personal interactions, even in those conducted in person. People, to varying degrees, endeavour to enhance and nurture their appearance through the adoption of suitable behaviours, which are tailored to the circumstances they find themselves in, with the objective of making a favourable impression on others. A significant aspect of self-representation is the concept of the "digital self," which refers to the creation of online personas through which users can manage their identity by creating specially crafted content. These include profile pictures, status updates and shared images or videos. The objective of this content is to reflect the identity and values of the user in a manner that is perceived as reliable.

In the article entitled "Why do people use Facebook?", In their 2012 study, Nadkarni and Hofman examine existing literature on the motivations behind young adults' use of social networks, with a particular focus on Facebook. They also investigate the nature of the content shared on these platforms. The study is based on the dual-factor model of Facebook use, which posits that users engage with the platform for two key reasons: firstly, to foster social connection and feel part of a community, and secondly, to maintain relationships. Additionally, users engage with the platform to gain control over how they are perceived by others and to manage their self-image. The findings indicate that young adults deliberately construct their online personas with the intention of making a favourable impression on others. Individuals tend to accentuate and accentuate the positive characteristics and aspects of their lives, including significant achievements, accomplished goals, and all the social events they attend. Conversely, they often omit or downplay negative information. A review of the most frequently cited reasons revealed that the creation of an online identity is frequently undertaken with the intention of conveying social desirability and approval. Moreover, the study underscores that young people, cognizant of their audience, deliberately adapt their online communication to align with the norms and expectations they perceive from others, thereby managing the way they are perceived. The study confirmed that Facebook can have both positive and negative effects on self-esteem, depending on how users engage with the platform. The receipt of positive feedback regarding the content that is shared can, in fact, serve to enhance one's self-esteem, thereby fostering greater confidence. Conversely, the act of comparing one's own content with that of other users can give rise to feelings of insecurity.

Self disclosure

In “Managing Impressions Online: Self-Presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment” a study by Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) the authors explore how individuals manage their self-presentation in online dating environments, while trying to construct an attractive profile. This study falls within the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and examines how the affordances of digital platforms are able to influence self-representation. The research, based on qualitative methods, collects about thirty in-depth interviews capable of providing a detailed overview on the topic. The analysis shows how users carefully craft their profiles to maximize attractiveness while attempting to remain truthful. The desire to accentuate one's favourable traits coexist, according to the study, with the urge to present one's actual self to others. This is often reflected in the practice of “selective self-disclosure”, where users highlight certain attributes like hobbies and interests, downplaying or omitting others such as physical flaws and negative traits. People who aim to have an intimate and long-lasting relationship tend to have a higher level of self-disclosure. They usually believe that by opening up they encourage their interlocutors to do the same, being able to gather more information about them. They are also automatically more inclined to be honest because they know that by deviating too much from their authentic self they only make future face-to-face interactions more difficult. On the other hand, however the fear of not being accepted or extinguishing the interest in the other often pushes people to lie about some aspects of their lives in the first stages of relationship, to feel more confident and appreciated. A strong tension emerges between presenting an idealized self and the need to remain as accurate as possible to one's image to avoid future disappointments. Interactants in online contexts face the same constraints and demands with offline contexts, although computer-mediated communication affords users greater control over their self-presentation, enabling more strategic management of their online interactions.

As can be seen, online self-representation allows the deliberate construction of one's identity through the sharing of personal information, images and videos carefully selected to convey specific messages. It is precisely the concept of "mediated self" introduced by Turkle in 2011 that highlights how digital platforms serve as intermediaries between individuals and their audience, allowing users to create a personal image that can also differ greatly from their offline identity.

The hyperpersonal model

According to a study by Walther et al. (2011) are online interactions that have given rise to the "hyperpersonal model", a model of interpersonal communication that suggests how computer-mediated communication can become hyperpersonal, thus offering message senders a wide variety of communicative advantages over traditional face-to-face interaction. During online communication people have in fact the possibility to strategically develop and edit self-presentation by control timing, content, and tone of their messages, enabling a selective and optimized presentation of their self to others. At the same time, the study highlights how positive feedback received through social media can foster growth in self-esteem and personal consideration.

The fact that digital media such as Instagram and Facebook are based on a visual representation of one's identity, created and maintained through the sharing of photos and videos, pushes users to conform to social standards and expectations. This is what emerges from a study by Maxwell-Smith, Davis and Giulietti (2017) that highlights how people take care of their online profile to protect their own idealized image. Young adults in fact are quite deliberate in crafting their online personas in order to create a positive impression on others. This self-presentation is often aligned with social norms and expectation as they carefully select what content they want to share and how they want to portrait themselves to manage their reputation and maintain social approval.

Therefore all these findings confirm another important theory, according to which computer-mediated communication leads to a greater possibility of shifting one's online representation, which is modified by users precisely in relation to the feedback received. It can be observed that online identity is a matter in continuous evolution and construction and for this reason it's really difficult to present oneself in an authentic and real way.

Online Identity

The construction of one's identity within purely digital spaces is a complex process that is influenced by the interactive nature of the platforms. As boyd (2014) argues, online identity is not a static construction but a fluid and dynamic process, which is constantly influenced by interactions with other individuals. In her study, the researcher introduces the concept of "contest collapse" referring to the complications in self-representation

given by the progressive blurring of boundaries between different contexts that occurs in digital environments. In fact, it becomes difficult for young adults to present themselves and interact with people belonging to different contexts of their offline life such as family, classmates, friends and other more, since online all these people converge into a single audience, forcing users to navigate multiple identities simultaneously. It is precisely for this reason that, driven by users' need to manage the sharing of their content, platforms are introducing ever-increasing affordances regarding privacy, such as the ability to hide one's profile or create a list of close friends with whom to share more fun and spontaneous content.

Recent studies have also explored the impact of digital media on the exploration and expression of one's identity, especially among adolescents and young adults. A study by Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten (2006) found that online environments provide a safe space for individuals to experiment with different aspects of their identity. The anonymity provided by online platforms allows users to feel more comfortable in exploring the different facets of their identity, which would be more difficult in face-to-face interaction contexts. This experimentation is an important part of identity formation because it allows adolescents to identify with different contexts and roles. However, the pressure imposed by social media to conform to online norms and the fear of judgment can also lead to identity suppression or the adoption of inauthentic personas.

2.2 Online relationships

A part from the way people present themselves and construct their identity, new digital platforms have also significantly transformed how individuals initiate, maintain, and navigate their romantic relationships. The shift from face-to-face interactions to digital platforms has brought about new dynamics in the way people meet, in flirting practices and relationship maintenance.

How people meet

According to a Pew Research Center's study conducted by Anderson (2023), it seems that nowadays most young people meet their romantic partner online, thanks to the new spaces and the new ways of interaction provided by social media. The report highlights the profound impact of digital communication platforms on interpersonal relationships.

While these tools have certainly facilitated the connection between individuals, even those far from each other, they have also led to much more superficial connections. The ease of maintaining contact through text, social media, and messaging apps has sometimes resulted in less meaningful interaction. Nonetheless, looking to the future, even though technological means will continue to play a fundamental role in social relationships, there will continue to emerge an ever-increasing need to go back to most meaningful relationships such as face-to-face interaction.

Another paper "Adolescents' Partner Search in the Digital Age: Correlates and Characteristics of Relationships Initiated Online " by Marta Tienda, Rachel E. Goldberg, and Jay R. Westreich (2022) explored how young people find romantic partners in the digital landscape. In their analysis, the authors note that relationships take on distinct characteristics depending on the medium through which they began. Young people much more often use social media with platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat or Tinder to meet potential partners. These in fact allow not only to explore their romantic interests more freely, gathering more information about the person chosen, but also to pre-screen their compatibility by analysing common interests, social media contents, lifestyle indicators and other connections. Being able to gather different information about your interlocutor allows you to understand from the initial stages of the relationship if it is a good match and provides important details to get to know the other better. On the other hand, online interactions often begin with the exchange of messages which on the one hand allows for a more controlled interaction, but on the other hand turns out to be much less spontaneous. According to the same study, however, it can be noted that many romantic encounters still occur through in-person interactions at school, social events, extracurricular activities and mutual friends. In this case, sharing the context or experience already provides a solid basis for the easy continuation of the relationship. These interactions are recognized as being much more spontaneous and authentic because they occur in a simpler way and without any filters.

This is also supported by another research by Al-Jbouri, Volk and Andrews (2024) which aims to investigate how in-person and online interactions impact the closeness of young people's relationships. The study highlights some interesting aspects. It seems that face-to-face relationships are generally based on a stronger bond than the online's ones, which is why they are considered to have solid foundations. Despite this, however, it is

necessary to underline that social media play a fundamental role in maintaining the relationship, especially if at a distance. They can in fact enhance the quality by providing a means to stay in touch more easily, instantly share experiences and offer support. Technological means are therefore seen as a powerful means of union that allows to nourish and maintain the closest bonds.

It is similar to what emerges from the study by M. Reich, Subrahmanyam and Espinoza (2012) which highlights how in reality the relationships of young people tend to overlap between their online and offline social networks. Many adolescents in fact have friends who belong to both their online connections and their offline groups. Usually the friends who are present in both networks, therefore with whom one has relationships both through social media and in real life, are those with whom one has a deeper bond. However, there are also cases in which new friendships are made online and then they move on to the offline context. In these cases it is reported how social platforms can be facilitators for meeting new people. Contrary to the previous ones, it emerges how friendships created and maintained only in online spaces, which do not include the transition to face-to-face interactions, tend to remain much more superficial. Furthermore, it can be noted that the duality of online interactions can have both negative and positive aspects. In fact social media, as previously seen, can favour the development of offline relationships by providing new channels of communication and connection, on the other hand they can also lead to conflicts and misunderstandings that can spill over into offline interactions.

Flirting on digital media

Flirting is often a practice used in the early stages of a relationship. It is usually characterized by a series of tactics and signals that are sent to a person to let them know that you are interested in them and want to get to know them better. Obviously, new media, along with all the innovations they have brought, have also offered new tools capable of revolutionizing flirting practices by transposing them into the digital world.

Digital platforms like social media, messaging apps, and virtual meeting spaces have redefined the boundaries of personal interaction. Scholars Lubis and Jamil (2024) analyzed the dynamics and behaviours of users at the beginning of a relationship on Meeff, a social networking application. The use of messages, emojis and visual media have become, with the transition to social media, crucial elements of communication for

the formation of first impressions and the development of future interactions. Each element of communication is strategically chosen to convey a specific message. As already analyzed by Dyer (2019), flirting techniques do not only include what is said and conveyed in messages but also they include other features such as the times of response. Emojis certainly play an important role in conveying the emotional feelings and making communication more captivating. Moreover, the language used in digital flirtation is often playful and ambiguous, with emojis and memes playing crucial roles. Li et al. (2018) highlighted that the use of emojis in online flirtation helps to convey tone and emotion, often softening or amplifying messages in ways that text alone cannot. This nuanced communication method is critical in avoiding misinterpretation, a common issue in digital communication. The timing of sending the message is equally important. Replying in a pressing manner allows people to increase appreciation to each other and keep the thread of the conversation, conveying feelings of availability and interest.

Another flirting tactic used in message exchange is the one that emerges from a research by Mortensen (2017) according to which users negotiate romantic connections through the strategy of "imagined togetherness" where the subjects, to convey their interest, allude to future points in which they can be together or to plans scheduled in the future. In this somewhat light-hearted and effortless way, individuals can make the other person understand that they are truly interested in progressing in the relationship and, at the same time, they demonstrate their desire to have their partner close to them in the future. The key, as regard this technique, is the sequential pattern characterized by the avoidance of closure and the preservation of implicit imagery.

Maintaining relationships online

Once the relationship is established, numerous studies confirm how social media can be helpful in maintaining and developing the connection. In fact, digital environments provide simple methods to stay in contact with the other through messages, calls, video calls and shared images, ensuring continuous interaction between the couple.

As emerges from a study by Hertlein and Ancheta (2014) social media are also helpful in establishing and developing emotional support. In fact, they allow people to stay constantly connected with the other person, talking about what happened in the day, confiding serious matters and discussing also important topics. This can be helpful in the

early stages of the relationship to get to know better each other. Another significant aspect is the privacy provided by digital media that allows people to quickly become intimate and have deep conversations without worrying about the context. Furthermore, social media are also important for communication, they can help young adults to maintain calm and tone during a fight, mitigating the climax and, on the other hand, they allow people to express emotions and feelings they otherwise might find difficult to share with the other person in a face-to-face context. At the same time, social media can lead to a better conflict management thanks to the possibility of “testing the waters” sending messages in order to understand whether the other person is still angry, also allowing the share of images aimed to sweeten a bit the situation.

Another positive side of digital media, explored by Jiang and Hancock (2013) regards their ability to help couples maintain constant communication, which is particularly beneficial in long-distance relationships. Their study found, in fact, that couples committed to long-distance relationships, who use digital communication, reported higher levels of intimacy than those in geographically close relationships. Long-distance couple engage in more adaptive self-disclosure conversation, forming more idealized relationships perceptions. As already seen, the asynchronous nature of digital communication tools allows partners to stay in touch despite time zone differences, enabling them to maintain intimacy and deep connection, while video calls offer a semblance of face-to-face interaction.

It is now well known how digital media can both enhance and complicate romantic relationships. New media have, as we have seen, a vast potential to foster closeness, but they also carry countless risks. First among these is certainly the risk of misunderstandings, usually frequent in text-based communication where the misinterpretations of the tone of voice or the irony of messages happen often. Along with this there is certainly also an increase in surveillance behaviours such as "partner monitoring", a control of all the contents and interactions that the partner has within his social networks. Furthermore, the constant connection of users on digital environments can lead to many challenges. Fox et al. (2013) explore the downsides effects of "hyperconnectivity" also known as the constant need to be present in online platforms. This phenomenon could create pressure for instant replies, not only leading to conflicts when one partner fails to meet these expectations, but also creating a real addiction.

Struggles and Challenges in Digital Relationships

While providing various opportunities to maintain and develop relationships online, social media can hide numerous hazards that may lead to the progressive weakening of the bond until their breakup.

In their research, Daiton and Stokes (2015) try to analyse the techniques of maintaining relationships within Facebook. As it emerges from their study, people strongly motivated to use Facebook as a method of maintaining the relationship, are the same ones to engage in phenomena of assurances and monitoring. The more individual used online monitoring and Facebook openness, the more they reported emotions and feelings of jealousy. Another challenge faced in the research is the blurring of boundaries between personal and public life. Social media platforms encourage people to share their personal experiences, which can sometimes lead to oversharing or publicizing aspects of a relationship that should remain private. As observed in the study oversharing on social media could lead to relationship dissatisfaction, as partners might feel their privacy is being invaded or their relationship is being judged by others.

2.3 Covid effects on relationships

While technological evolution has brought about many changes in the sphere of relationships, perhaps the greatest push towards the use of digital tools has been given by the pandemic itself. COVID-19 has in fact brought unprecedented changes to everyday life, through lockdowns, social distancing and other restrictions. These new changes have significantly impacted relationships, bringing both challenges and opportunities to couples.

According to a research by Pietromonaco and Overall (2021), couples who experienced high levels of emotional stress also suffered a decline in relationship satisfaction and an increase of conflict. The uncertainty and fear associated with the pandemic, along with all the other aspects that had to be dealt with such as working from home and health concerns, have provided great amounts pressure to couples. This is also

why the lockdown period was also marked by the emergence of issues correlated to mental health, due precisely to the difficulty in managing new sets of emotions and concerns, capable of undermining relationships. However, the changes brought about by the pandemic have led to an increase in relationship commitment for some. According to a study by William and Knudson-Martin (2021), couples who were able to perceive and face the pandemic as a shared challenge were also those most capable of increasing commitment. Facing adversity times together can in fact strengthen the bond between partner, leading to a more stable relationship.

While the pandemic has posed numerous challenges, it has also provided opportunities for couples to strengthen their bonds. Many couples reported increased emotional closeness, allowing them to be supportive of one another. Couples who were able to support each other emotionally during the pandemic reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Another key aspect certainly lies in effective communication, a key factor in allowing couples to navigate the challenges of the pandemic. Research by Balzarini et al. (2020) found that couples who engaged in open and honest communication were better equipped to handle the stress of the pandemic managing to build a relationship based on trust and mutual support. The study showed that good communication helped couples to manage conflicts more effectively and maintain a positive relationship dynamic in a continuous exchange of emotions and sensations. As can be seen from the research, for some couples, the pandemic provided an opportunity to improve their communication skills, leading to a stronger and more resilient relationship.

The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of technology in maintaining relationships. For couples separated by distance due to lockdowns or travel restrictions, virtual communication became essential. A research by Pollmann and Finkenauer (2020) found that while virtual communication cannot fully replace in-person interactions, it played a crucial role in helping couples stay connected during the pandemic. The study suggests that technology helped to mitigate the impact of physical separation, allowing couples to maintain their emotional connection.

2.4 Postmodern Love

As seen in the previous chapter, the concept of love has also changed over time, due to

broader social and cultural shifts, bringing to light numerous new practices to observe and study.

The evolution of love

In his research, Steven Seidman (1991) explores precisely these aspects in relation to American society in the early 19th century and the end of the 20th century. His analysis shows how the experience of love and relationships has significantly changed over time. In his book, he highlights various aspects of relationships, starting from the transition from duty to desire, according to which bonds have evolved to become increasingly more guided by personal desire and connection with the partner rather than societal duty. The author also highlights the transition from pre-established roles, governed by rigid patriarchal structures, to much flexible and egalitarian identities. Another aspect that is making its way forcefully into the panorama of relationships is the distancing from the bond of marriage. Previously seen as the only way to commit with the partner, in today's society it has lost its value, opening up to much freer relationships. Along with this, the new century has also brought about greater possibilities for self-exploration, allowing new personal and private experiences.

The shifts in traditional relationship's structures

Heaphy, Smart and Einarsdottir (2013) conducted a comprehensive investigation into the experiences of same-sex couples. The radical evolution of society and the shift to modern love has, in fact, led to a progressive opening towards different types of relationships, which are no longer constrained by the traditional norms that have been in place for many years. As evidenced by the research, previous generations may have perceived the necessity to adhere to heterosexual norms in order to conceal their relationships from the scrutiny of society. Consequently, the younger generations are able to establish their relationships in a more public and normalized context. In light of these developments, scholars posit that social acceptance will continue to expand, paving the way for even greater autonomy and diversity in the formation and sustenance of these relationships.

Against the concept of "pure relationships"

In her book Jamieson (1999) focuses on the critical analysis of the concept of "pure

relationship", introduced by the sociologist Anthony Giddens in his work on the transformation of intimacy in modern society. According to Giddens in late modernity, relationships have evolved into their purest form based on sexual and emotional equality, where people put their personal fulfilment first. However, the author critically examines this concept trying to understand if it actually reflects the majority of nowadays relationships. First of all, she argues that, despite the ideal of equity, very often, even in today's relationships, traditional dynamics of power and gender inequality persist. These can present themselves in different ways such as unequal emotional labour, financial dependence, and societal expectations of gender roles. Jamieson emphasizes also the role of communication in sustaining modern relationships. The idealized open and honest dialogue between the couple, that defines pure relationship, although crucial, it is often difficult to perform in the daily life scenario. Communication result to be often fraught with difficulties, misunderstandings, and emotional barriers, which can undermine the stability of the couple. Another important aspect that is connected to the next study is certainly the fact that the shifts regarding roles, the rise of individualism and the changes in the economic landscape, have influenced the way people form and maintain relationships.

The rise of Individualism

According to a study by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) that analyses how the increase in individualism has transformed intimate relationships by creating a tension between the desire for personal autonomy and the need for emotional connection. Modern societies are in fact characterized by a progressive rise in individualization that leads on the one hand to great freedom, but on the other to greater responsibility regarding personal decisions. According to the authors, as people prioritize personal goals, career aspirations and self-fulfilment, traditional forms of relationships, are increasingly questioned. Modern individuals often seek independence and personal growth, this request for autonomy may conflict with the demand for intimate relationships, shared compromises and commitment, typically required by the partner. Despite the push towards autonomy, people continue to seek love and connection, but balancing these with the desire for personal freedom might create a significant tension.

Capitalized love

One of the foundational studies in this area is the work by Eva Illouz in *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (2012), where the author explores the transformation of love in modern societies, emphasizing how emotional and romantic experiences have become intertwined with capitalist structures. Illouz argues that digital media, particularly dating platforms, have commodified romantic relationships, turning love into a market-driven exchange. In digital contexts, in fact, individuals are increasingly evaluated according to certain desirable traits. This commodification leads to the paradox of choice, where the abundance of options available online can result in unwanted effects such as decision paralysis, anxiety and a progressive decrease of satisfaction in relationships.

Building on Illouz's insights, Carolina Bandinelli's research (2018), offers a more specific analysis of how digital dating platforms shape the romantic experiences of young adults. The author examines how these platforms promote a neoliberal notion of subjectivity, where users are encouraged to maximize their romantic potential through self-optimization and strategic partner selection. She argues that this market-oriented approach to love fosters a superficial understanding of relationships, where the depth of emotional connection is often sacrificed for efficiency and convenience.

2.5 Limitations and Future Directions

While these studies offer a valuable contribution to understanding the full dynamics that exist between social, cultural, and economic changes and young adults' use of social media in their interpersonal relationships, several limitations persist.

First of all, many studies neglect the strict correlation between offline and online interaction. Many papers treat online and offline as two separate dimensions, without taking into account that they are actually a continuum of each other and therefore these studies do not explore how they influence each other. This separation could, in fact, lead to an incomplete understanding of how relationships develop and function in the digital age, omitting several key aspects in defining the landscape. Integrating offline relationship dynamics with online behaviours could therefore provide a more detailed overview of how social media shapes modern relationships.

Secondly, many of these studies do not delve deeply into the complexities of postmodern love dynamics, characterized by fluidity, ambiguity, and the breakdown of

normal relational norms. Qualitative studies could better explore how young adults navigate the complexities of postmodern love through social media, including how they deal with uncertainty, commitment, and the negotiation of identity.

Concluding, a significant portion of research lingers on the negative impacts of social media on relationships, such as behaviours of jealousy, surveillance, infidelity, or communication breakdowns, without considering the positive aspects. This focus can thus overshadow positive outcomes, such as enhanced connection or support. Investigating the positive aspects of social media, like its role in maintaining long-distance relationships or building communities of support, could balance the narrative and provide a more nuanced understanding.

3. Methodology

This chapter will present the methodology employed in the course of this research project. The particular attributes of qualitative research will be displayed, emphasizing its merits and advantages in examining the online interactions of young adults. This section will provide a brief overview of the project in which this research is embedded, its stated objectives, and future developments. Subsequently, the research method of focus groups will be elucidated, commencing with an explication of the script and concluding with an exposition of the data collection process. In conclusion, the analysis method will be outlined in brief, with a focus on the search for recurring patterns and comparison with existing literature.

1.1 Quantitative and qualitative research

A variety of research methodologies may be employed to examine a given phenomenon. The selection of the most effective method is typically based on the objectives that researchers aim to achieve and the questions they pose to themselves. The initial distinction that must be made is between qualitative and quantitative research. Both are subsumed under the same field of study but differ in various aspects, including the approach to data collection, the analytical techniques employed, and the interpretation of the results. As is often the case, each method has its own set of strengths and limitations. Therefore, it is essential to have a clear understanding of the research question beforehand in order to determine which method is most suitable for answering it.

A look into quantitative research

As posited by Matthews and Ross (2010), quantitative research is predicated on the utilization of structured, numerically represented data. Furthermore, it is founded upon statistical techniques that are capable of testing hypotheses and measuring variables,

thereby producing objective and generalizable results that can be utilized to predict and control a specific phenomenon. As Bryman (2016) observes, quantitative research entails the aggregation of numerical data and demonstrates a deductive relationship between theory and research, whereby a general truth can be derived into a more specific one. For these reasons, this method is particularly effective for testing theories, identifying patterns, and establishing causal relationships through structured data collection and rigorous statistical analysis.

Strengths of qualitative research

In contrast, qualitative analysis offers a comprehensive and contextualized understanding of the social phenomena under observation. Qualitative analysis entails the collection of non-numerical data, including words, images, and objects, and the subsequent interpretation of this data to uncover underlying meanings, patterns, and relationships. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) posit that qualitative research entails a naturalistic and interpretative methodology, enabling the examination of a phenomenon in its intrinsic form and elucidating its significance in relation to the meanings ascribed to it by individuals. This approach is particularly useful for exploring complex social processes, understanding participants' perspectives, and generating rich, detailed descriptions of specific contexts (Creswell, 2013).

Comparing two methods

One of the primary distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research lies in the methodology employed for data collection and the subsequent typology of the data. Quantitative data is expressed numerically and is collected through the use of instruments such as questionnaires, tests, and experiments. The objective is to obtain a consistent sample that is capable of representing the entire reference population, thereby enabling the generation of measurable and applicable results on a large scale (Neuman, 2014). In contrast, qualitative data is typically textual or visual in nature and is gathered through methods such as interviews, focus groups, or group observations. The objective is to capture the intricacies of human emotions and social interactions (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, qualitative analysis frequently entails the process of coding and thematic analysis, which enables researchers to discern recurrent patterns and themes within the

data. As the analysis progresses, the significance interpretation brings out new insights and understandings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

1.1.1 The focus group method

A focus group is a qualitative research method that employs a group discussion to collect data regarding the opinions, beliefs, and perceptions of the participants toward a specific topic. The moderator oversees the discussion to ensure that it remains on topic and that all participants have an opportunity to contribute. The composition of research groups typically ranges from six to twelve individuals, selected based on their shared characteristics pertinent to the subject matter under investigation. The selection of participants is made with the objective of ensuring the most representative sample possible, capable of elucidating the most meaningful insights.

The moderator figure

The moderator's presence ensures that all participants have the opportunity to contribute to the discussion and that the main themes of the research are addressed in their various aspects. The discussion is typically conducted in a neutral and comfortable setting that encourages dialogue and openness. The environment should be designed to minimize distractions and create a secure setting where all participants can express their opinions without fear of judgment. Although it is typically recorded to ensure accuracy in transcription, it is also crucial to document the nuances of non-verbal communication and group dynamics through detailed notes, as these can serve as valuable indicators of group dynamics.

1.2 Di.G.I.T. – Digital practices, Gender and Intimacy in Teen’s everyday life

This research is part of a broader project examining the ways in which adolescents utilize digital media to explore and experiment with intimacy and their gender identity, develop interpersonal relationships, and foster community connections. The project is part of the PRIN ministerial programs (Research Projects of Relevant National Interest), which were established through a collaboration between the University of Padua, Sapienza University of Rome, and Link Campus University. The objective is to examine how Italian

adolescents (re)define their understanding of gender and intimacy through interactions with digital media and its incorporation into their daily lives.

The project aims to make a significant contribution to the fields of gender studies and media studies over the course of its two-year duration (2023-2025). In particular, it will advance our understanding of digital media, young people, gender identities, and intimacy. In addition, Di.G.I.T. aims to facilitate transformative cultural change by providing educators and policy makers with accessible tools. Furthermore, it fosters critical literacy and gender awareness among adolescents, enabling them to comprehend and challenge the rationale behind digital platforms and media. Moreover, the project will contribute to the consolidation and formalization of a national research group, thereby facilitating international collaboration.

In order to achieve the previously mentioned objectives, a mixed approach will be implemented through four main phases of research activities. These activities will involve adolescents aged between 15 and 18 from different Italian regions, and will be conducted in accordance with a systematic literature review. The primary research activities will entail focus groups employing visual design methods to investigate the subject matter, face-to-face semi-structured interviews to examine the nexus between digital practices, gender, and intimacy in adolescents' daily lives and a national survey to generalize the qualitative findings, which will ultimately be disseminated.

1.3 The different stages of the research

1.3.1 Young Research Groups

Following a comprehensive and precise examination of the existing literature on the subject, it became evident that several key elements were already present in the discourse surrounding the core macro-themes of the project, including young adults, digital media, relationships, intimacy, and gender. Consequently, the project proceeded to the formation of the Young Research Groups (YRG). The YRG is a team of adolescent researchers, aged, in this specific case, between 15 and 18, whose task, through its direct knowledge, is to provide support to the project throughout its lifespan.

During the meetings, in fact, the youths participated in the co-construction of the focus group, offering to the moderators specific insights closely linked to one's own

personal experiences. The adolescents who decided to take part in the project through their PTCO, i.e. the transversal skills and guidance pathways promoted by the schools, were able to were, in fact, able to engage in a discussion on the macro-themes of reference for the research, thus assuming a primary role in defining the outline to be used in subsequent focus groups. The meetings between high school students, each lasting about three hours, were held in a neutral venue, namely the political science department of the University of Padua, so as to foster the creation of an environment conducive to dialogue and self-sharing.

The main objective of the first meetings was to break the ice between the participants by giving them time to get to know each other and get acquainted. In the first part, in fact, the coordinators presented the project and provided the young adults with the main notions associated with qualitative research, in order to give them the ability to understand the nature of each further step. Subsequently, the main aim was to facilitate the youths' aptitude to interact with one another and to make them gain confidence. Indeed, the establishment of a secure environment was of prevalent importance. With the assistance of the moderators, a constructive atmosphere of discourse was cultivated, so as to create a safe place where everyone could freely express their opinion without feeling judged or evaluated. The activities conducted during the course of the meetings addressed a wide variety of different themes, prompting treasured insights and suggestions from participants that provided an invaluable source for the subsequent focus group phase.

Indeed, the personal perspectives of the young researchers allowed the coordinators to assimilate a great deal of information on the central themes of the project and to get a sense of the teenagers' views and opinions on the subject. The aim of this work with the adolescents was to calibrate activities and probative questions on the basis of the personal experiences of the adolescents so that they could first of all be something really engaging and stimulating for them, thus relevant to their daily practices and, subsequently, also easily understandable. In this way, useful insights could be gathered to understand the attitudes and behaviours of the young people under investigation, managing to structure a focus group more relevant and closer to their real interests.

3.3.2 Focus Groups

As a result of the numerous meetings held with high school students, it was therefore possible to construct a set of questions and activities that were specifically designed for the focus group participants. Following the conclusion of the first part of the project, the definition of the focus outline with the help of the young researchers in the first half of May, a series of focus groups was initiated. These were held in various Italian cities, ranging from northern countries to southern regions. It was decided to proceed in this way in order to ensure as large and heterogeneous a sample as possible and to be able to possibly study any differences brought about by the different geographical location. By conveying the initiative to the various schools and with the assistance of the YRG participants, a cohort of young people, friends and acquaintances aged between 15 and 18, hailing from different schools and neighbourhoods located, in this case, in Padua, was successfully assembled.

Once the group was formed, we moved on to the actual organisation of the focus group. In the same way as the YRGs, these meetings were also conducted in a neutral environment that could stimulate the sharing of young people without recalling a directly school-based structure. The focus groups were thus held in the hall of mirrors in the political science department of the University of Padua. The teenagers, under the guidance of a moderator, thus addressed the various central themes of the project. They talked about relationships, how they arise and how they are maintained, highlighting the various negative aspects and related risks. They described green and red flags, i.e. key elements in online and offline behaviour that can make a person decide whether or not to continue dating. They then went more specifically into online self-representation by looking at the online participants' behaviour and that of their peers and describing the attitudes one should and should not have on social networks. Finally, they moved on to talk about sexuality by presenting an activity in which the young people had to complete the story based on the incipit provided and try to describe the emotions and consequences of online sexting. Lastly, they went on to analyse gender stereotypes and how they are conveyed in online platforms.

To guarantee the accuracy of the transcript, the focus group was recorded. Additionally, during the discussion, notes were taken on the behaviour of the youths. This

method permitted the collection of comprehensive and detailed data, encompassing not only the ideas of the participants but also the interactions between them. Indeed, as the young people engaged in discussion on a range of topics, they brought to light a variety of issues, offering support for their own perspectives while also providing alternative interpretations of the same topic (Morgan, 1997).

Moreover, it was evident that the dynamics and interactions between the participants were observable, which is indicative of the manner in which opinions are formed and the social negotiation that is involved in their expression (Kitzinger, 1995). The different attitudes the young people held when confronting and discussing with each other could be observed, including determining elements such as tone of voice, facial expressions and facial expressions. Finally, the interactive nature of the focus groups facilitated active participation from all participants in the discussion.

3.3.3 Thematic analysis

In the context of data analysis, it is appropriate to mention the thematic analysis method, which is used to identify, analyze, and report different patterns present within the data. This flexible approach allows for a depth of analysis that enables the exploration of complex and nuanced social phenomena. The initial phase of the process entails a comprehensive engagement with the data set. By reading and re-reading the data, the researcher can foster a comprehensive understanding of its content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once the data has been subjected to comprehensive analysis, it is then necessary to define the codes or interesting features that emerge from the study of the data.

Subsequently, the various codes are placed into potential themes, which represent broader patterns of meaning. The researcher categorises the various codes into themes and collates all the pertinent coded data extracts within the identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this phase, the themes are subjected to further scrutiny and modification in order to guarantee their precise alignment with the data. Once a satisfactory thematic map has been developed, the themes are defined and named. Subsequently, the report is drafted, providing a clear, logical, and coherent account of the data. Additionally, illustrative data extracts may be included to exemplify the themes. Thematic analysis is an accessible method that can be used to provide clear and usable frameworks for a range of social research projects. The flexibility of this method allows researchers to more effectively

manage large amounts of data, which can then be readily organised and handled (Nowell et al., 2017). Most importantly, it enables researchers to identify the most significant patterns by offering comprehensive and sophisticated insights into the subject matter under investigation.

In this phase of the research, following a detailed examination of the transcripts and the identification of the most salient themes across the various observations of the young people, the research group proceeded to delineate the recurrent aspects and patterns within the focus group itself and in the focus groups analysed in general. A number of noteworthy aspects emerged from the comparison of the collected data. An initial division was made into the main areas of discussion, namely online self-representation, the initial meeting and acquaintance, relationship maintenance, and the potential negative consequences associated with the use of social media.

Self representation

With regard to self-representation, divergent perspectives were expressed regarding the manner in which young people present themselves online. The most prevalent of these were the distinction between one's online and offline personas, the clear delineation between public and private profiles, the perceived over-sexualisation of bodies, and the tendency to psychologise the act of self-presentation. Another noteworthy aspect pertains to the evolution of one's profile, which has undergone a notable transformation compared to when one was younger and held a more naive perspective. In addition, it was observed that depictions of couples are frequently implausible, featuring predominantly idealised female bodies and perpetuating sexist and gendered stereotypes. In particular, some individuals were observed to repeatedly expose their intimate activities on social media.

First approach

In terms of developing interpersonal relationships, it has been frequently asserted that young people prefer to gain familiarity with one another through direct, face-to-face interactions. This approach is perceived as being particularly conducive to enhanced communication efficacy, which in turn reduces the likelihood of misinterpretations and provides a sense of assurance regarding the identity and intentions of the individual with whom one is engaging. Conversely, a considerable number of young people asserted that

they were acquainted with their peers via the Internet, frequently indicating that they had already met in person. In such cases, the most frequently cited advantages were the reduced emotional risk, the continuity of contact, the geographical facilitation of communication, and the ability to overcome shyness.

Online flirt

Additionally, the discourse encompassed a multitude of references to flirting techniques with the objective of impressing the individual in question and initiating a dialogue. The most prevalent strategies appear to be sharing ostentatious photographs with the intention of attracting attention, liking or commenting on posts and stories to convey interest, utilising bait such as darts posted in the notes, and studying the profile in order to gain insight.

Surveillance practices

In the discussion about relationships, it was demonstrated that digital platforms facilitate communication between couples, thereby enabling a constant connection. Conversely, recurrent control practices were identified, including the utilisation of geolocation, the sharing of passwords with partners and the monitoring of online activities via social networks.

Recurring patterns

General Theme	Macro Codes	Codes
Online Self representation	The discrepancy between an individual's online persona and their actual self	Ipersexualization of bodys
		Overexposure on social media
		Psychology behind overexposure
	Profile costumization	
	Distinction between public and private profile	Public profile to most beautiful things
		Private profile where people can be themselves

	Profile evolution with growth and change of use	
	Couple's representation in online profiles	Exhibition of intimacy
		Gender stereotypes
		Unrealistic representations of the couple
First approach	Online	Geographic convenience
		Overcome in embarrassment
		Continuity of contact
		Emotionally less risky
		Difficulty in expression through messages
	Face to Face	Major safety regarding the person with whom people interact
Better communication and avoidance of misunderstandings		
Preference to get to know one another in person		
Online flirt	Flirting techniques	Sharing of provocative photos
		Reacting to stories
		Linking post
		Sending darts in Instagram notes
	Scripts	Write messages on direct
		Add to close friends
	Need for attention	

Relationship maintenance	Switching from Instagram to Whatsapp	
	Uses of social networks	Sharing moments of the day
		Staying in touch
	Downsides aspects	Exchange password with partner
		Obsessive checking of social posts
		Geolocalization

3.4 Limitations and further developments

Although focus groups are an excellent tool to engage young people in an interactive manner, fostering dialogue and confrontation, they also have limitations. On the one hand, in fact, they encourage individuals to bring out their points of view and support their theses through concrete experiences, stimulating storytelling and enabling extensive data collection. On the other hand, they may not be able to capture the full extent of individual experiences due to group dynamics and desirability bias. Some young people, in spite of the safe place created, may still feel unable to share their emotions and feelings, or may even simply be ashamed of what they have to say. In this way, there is a risk of missing observations relevant to the analysis, as participants may tend to conform to the mass by excluding somewhat more diverse points of view. Moreover, it must be remembered that these findings cannot be generalised to all young adults because they precisely cannot represent the population. Qualitative analysis in fact, as one must remember, goes to see what are the nuances that colour the different topics, but they cannot be representative for a larger reference population.

For this reason, the Di.G.I.T project includes in its research several more phases following the creation and analysis of the focus groups. First of all, a further Young Research Group will be organised, with the aim to create an outline for the semi-structured interviews which will take place starting from the end of the year including other adolescents. These will allow to have an even more defined picture of how digital

media are intertwined with the everyday lives of adolescents, influencing their relationships, the way they experience sexuality and build their gender identity.

Once the data has been collected and analysed, questionnaires will be created regarding the macro-themes covered which will then be disseminated through careful sampling to Italian adolescents. This will allow to reach a generalization of the data which will no longer describe only a single individual but will become representative for a specific reference population. The qualitative data collected will subsequently be analysed through statistical procedures and, after a careful comparing, the obtained result will be finally disseminated.

4. Analysis and discussion

This chapter presents all the data collected from various focus groups held in different Italian locations. In order to obtain a sample as representative as possible, the meetings conducted in Alexandria, Rome, Pesaro and Reggio Calabria were taken under consideration. Despite the existence of minor discrepancies in the manner in which young adults interact with one another and in their communication practices, no divergences were identified as substantial enough to feel the need for a geographic comparison. On numerous occasions, the adolescents within the same focus group expressed disparate perspectives, which prompted them to engage in constructive debate on the various topics under discussion. Notwithstanding attending almost the same schools or residing in the same towns, the participants still held on their unique views at the conclusion of the discussion. It was thus possible to demonstrate that the perception of love and relationships is a highly complex matter, which cannot be reduced to a single interpretation or definition. Rather, it is based on a multiplicity of different experiences that, in their own way, influence individuals.

To protect the privacy of the young people involved, all the extracts from the focus groups will be cited using fictitious names. They will, however, be included in order to assess any recurrence in their observations. The words of the young people will therefore help to better identify with the inside of their lives, providing unprecedented insights into their considerations and thoughts. In order to highlight any divergences in the different practices analyzed, age and sex will be taken under account.

The topics presented are connected to the various issues addressed in the preceding chapters in order to maintain coherence and consistency in the presentation of the findings. This chapter will begin with an investigation of the data regarding to online representations, a particular focus on the role of social media in the lives of young people

and the ways in which they utilize these platforms will be therefore exposed. During the discussion, it became evident that participants paid particular attention to how others presented themselves online, especially on Instagram. This careful observation led to the emergence of numerous observations and criticisms made toward the behaviour of some of their peers online. Similarly, the distinction between the various profiles young adults owned was noteworthy, the majority of them in fact possess both a public and a private profile, with many even maintaining a fake one.

Subsequently, the topic of relationships will be examined in detail, emphasizing the methods through which adolescents encounter one another and establish new relationships, both in their physical and online environments. A brief discussion will be held on the various techniques of approach and flirting, with an examination of the most commonly used methods and an analysis of the potential challenges and outcomes associated with them. Afterwards, the topic of relationship maintenance will be addressed, with a particular focus on the most prevalent interaction dynamics and the importance of communication in this context.

Furthermore, the critical issues that arise from the maintenance of relationships will be discussed. Among these, the control of a partner's social media and geolocation are particularly prevalent. Finally, a brief mention will be made to the couples' profiles, with an in-depth analysis of how it is managed.

4.1 Self-representation

As previously discussed in this work, the topic of self-representation is a pervasive theme within the discourse on digital media. The practices that were initially employed in face-to-face interactions have been adapted to the online environment, resulting in significant alterations to the ways in which individuals present themselves to others (Hampton et al., 2011). These digital spaces, which have become part of a continuum (boyd, 2007) with the real ones, have provided individuals with new opportunities to construct their own online identity and to represent their authentic personality (Scarcelli & Mainardi, 2019). Social media has consequently become an invaluable instrument for facilitating human interaction in the digital realm, enabling individuals to introduce themselves and engage with one another. Over time, young adults have begun to employ new practices that allow them to represent themselves in the most optimal manner, which can be closely aligned

with their authentic identity or may be considerably more constructed and idealized (boyd, 2014). However, as evidenced by the findings of the focus groups, the perceived value and utility of social media have undergone a transformation over time, evolving in response to the new affordances offered by these platforms.

4.1.1. My social media profile

Social media can be defined as a collective term for websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking (Oxford University Press, n.d.). The main aim of social media is the sharing of contents, with an emphasis on the concepts of community, interaction and collaboration. In the contemporary era, social media platforms are utilized by individuals for the purposes of maintaining connections with friends, family members, and various communities of people. These platforms have become an integral part of the lives of young people, accompanying them from the onset of their adolescence. While they offer a convenient venue for staying connected with peers, they can also present challenges and potential pitfalls that may complicate their lives.

Instagram profile as a logbook

In the course of the focus group discussion, the participants frequently referenced social media and offered insights into the ways in which these platforms are used and perceived. In contrast with the assertion made by Codeluppi (2007), who posited that social media constituted a showcase where individuals could present various aspect of their life, also presenting an idealised version of themselves, the debate has yielded a markedly different perspective. The youths involved in the discussion have, in fact, repeatedly emphasized that their perception of social media is more comparable to a logbook than to a showcase.

This perspective starkly contrasts with the hypothesis put forth by Goffman (1959) and Codeluppi (2007). With particular reference to Instagram, which is perceived by the participants to be the most prevalent and utilized social media among their peers, the adolescents have, with near-unanimous consensus, drawn a parallel between their profile and a personal journal. Indeed, this platform, due to its intrinsic linkage with image sharing, is regarded as the most efficacious for self-representation.

In this digital repository, which the participants have referred to as a "logbook," young adults share a wide variety of content, including photographs with friends and family and details of their most significant life events. The desire to exhibit their most valued characteristics while concealing certain crucial elements of their personality by (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006) does not appear to be a primary motivator in their decision-making when it comes to sharing their content. Posting images that represent the individuals and convey aspects of their identity to the viewers serves to enhance youths self-confidence, as it allows them to recognize themselves in their profile.

“..take your profile as a personal diary. Don't post anything you do at any time because it's useless, [...] but make it more as a diary of memories. A meaningful story, a meaningful post, an outing with friends that you really enjoyed and that you want to share and also keep as your memory.”

(Damiano, Male, 17 y.o.)

This brief excerpt illustrates how social media are perceived as a form of personal diary, a platform for self-expression and the sharing of one's individual experiences (Scarcelli & Mainardi, 2019). Furthermore, the theme of awareness in relation to the content shared in their profiles also emerges in the discussion. Young adults indicated that individuals should limit the quantity of content they post and, instead, focusing on sharing the most meaningful experiences they have. Images shared on social media should represent significant moments in the uploader's life, capturing something remarkable that has occurred and which people wish to preserve in memory.

From this perspective, the sharing of beautiful and meaningful events does not appear to be a practice undertaken with the intention of gaining consensus and approval from the audience (Peluchette & Karl, 2010). Rather, it seems to be a means of satisfying the individual in question. In the following declaration, it can be observed that the Instagram profile is compared to a sort of album, where the girl in question claims to include her experiences and the most significant moments of her year, with the intention of having a summary of each month within reach.

“... on that profile I also have my whole year, with a little summary of what I did for each month. So I keep it a bit like... a diary of memories”

(Flaminia, Female, 18 y.o.)

For young people, sharing pieces of their lives is not primarily an act of showing off; rather, it is an opportunity to create bonds and connections with their peers. As Fuchs (2014) asserts, the platform itself is responsible for generating interactions, consolidating relationships, and fostering a network of comments, tags, and re-shares capable of nurturing youth friendships. This is corroborated by the following statement. The young boy in question demonstrates a desire to connect and interact with others, both friends and acquaintances, through the uploading of images that depict his most significant moments. The act of posting content about specific events allows users to capture memories and make them accessible to everyone. This enables friends and family to rediscover images and relive those moments. He asserts that he posts his most memorable memories for the following reasons:

“Also because maybe a friend of mine wants to go and see a nice moment.”

(Dafne, Female, 17 y.o.)

It can be argued that social media are an effective conduit for fostering connections and maintaining communication with individuals who share a tangible, offline life with the user. The multiplicity of affordances offered by these platforms provides the opportunity to develop and reinforce the complex network of relationships that individuals possess (Licoppe. 2016).

Personal profile as a mirror

In particular, young people regard social media as indispensable instruments for establishing connections and fostering relationships, which they perceive as crucial for gaining recognition and visibility among their peers. Indeed, an online profile represents the sole means by which individuals can engage with the digital realm. It is only through this digital space that users can access different social networks, establish relationships, and connect with others. For many, the profile represents the only avenue through which individuals can present themselves to others in the digital realm. Consequently, it is of paramount importance to ensure that the profile accurately reflects their identity (Van Dijck, 2013). Indeed, users typically update and adapt their profiles incrementally, striving to align them with their desired self-representation.

“[...] now I recognize that my profile reflects me, because it is something I really use anyway. Since many people can get to know me only through my profile, I use it as a

mean able to introduce me to others. Instead, before, when I hadn't given it this use, it was something I saw more as entertainment, in the sense that I used it to see posts by famous people that I liked, but that was it.”

(Manuel, Male, 17 y.o.)

As the speaker himself attests, it was through the process of growing up that he came to recognize the significance of the platform. He began utilizing Instagram as a means of establishing a public profile and fostering connections with others, rather than as a mere source of entertainment. In his subsequent remarks, the young man also highlights his recognition of himself in his profile. The youth posits that social media, and in particular online profiles, function as mirrors, reflecting the personal image of each individual. As time progresses, the image in question inevitably undergoes changes. In addition, the user's engagement with the platform undergoes a transformation that aligns with their evolving identity. As a result, the way in which social media is understood evolves in parallel with the maturation of its users, who become increasingly aware of its potential and are able to transform the practices that they adopt on these platforms.

“... the way I use social media has changed from when I opened my profile to how I use it now. It has really changed a lot because I grew up with social media and so my page has grown with me.”

(Manuel, Male, 17 y.o.)

Not everything is reality

Despite the adolescents' assertions that their profiles accurately represent their identities and express their genuine perspectives, the discussion yielded another noteworthy insight. Indeed, young adults are keenly aware of the opportunities afforded by new technologies. While social networks afford young people the opportunity to explore their identity and present themselves in a manner that aligns with their authentic selves, they have also acknowledged that a considerable proportion of their peers utilize these platforms to portray themselves in a manner that is incongruent with reality. A considerable number of adolescents appear to engage in the construction and customization of their online persona, which frequently deviates from their actual self. (Chou & Edge, 2012). Social media platforms offer an ideal conduit for individuals to present themselves in the most

favorable light, showcasing their positive attributes while concealing any potential shortcomings. (Goffman, 1959).

“..don't think that what you see is always all reality. That may be, if a girl sees a photo of another beautiful girl in a swimsuit, don't think that's perfection. [...] obviously nobody is really like that, [...] don't let yourself be influenced and feel bad for unreal things.”

(Gioia, Female, 18 y.o)

This intriguing observation introduces a significant paradox that, to some extent, corroborates the hypotheses proposed by numerous scholars in this field. Indeed, as the interviewees themselves attest, some individuals utilize social media to present a curated image of themselves, rendering these platforms ideal venues for crafting a customized representation of one's identity. (boyd, 2014).

4.1.2. How others manage their social media profiles

The discussion with the youths revealed a number of discrepancies between their perception and utilisation of social media, and their observations of how others conduct themselves on their online profiles. As previously theorized, many users construct their "digital self" based on carefully curated images designed to present a favourable and polished version of themselves to the audience. Indeed, some individuals appear to devote an excessive amount of attention to their profiles, focusing predominantly on their outward appearance rather than their intrinsic qualities.

“Too much attention to his profile, to it's popularity, let's say. To much more attention to the appearance than the being.”

(Flaminia, Female, 18 y.o)

Seeking attention

In addition to meticulously curating their profiles to project a idealized image, even through the use of image-enhancing filters or the selective sharing of photographs that showcase a particular pose, young people have also observed a rising trend of posting explicit or slightly provocative images. During the focus group, participants provided numerous examples of individuals in their social circle who have posted images of themselves in a manner that could be perceived as flaunting their bodies. As indicated by

the adolescents, this inclination to display one's physique is not an indication of excellence or attractiveness, but rather a manifestation of numerous vulnerabilities.

“all the people I've met who post these kinds of stories are in a period of their life where they don't feel confident of themselves and are looking for attention. [...] I mean, I generalize and say that if you post photos in which you sexualize yourself in an extreme way, that means that you are a person who in any case at that moment has problems with himself that he has to resolve. ”

(Dafne, Female, 17 y.o.)

“photos in the closest friends of Instagram all with skimpy clothes to attract people. I mean, it's a symptom of fragility”

(Diana, Female, 18 y.o.)

The sharing of this type of content is therefore generally seen and perceived as a consequence of deeper psychological issues. Indeed, the results of the comparison indicated that adolescents frequently perceive such gestures as a desperate call for attention. An excessive display of one's body is, according to this line of reasoning, indicative of a profound need for self-worth and appreciation from others (Nadkarni & Hofman, 2012). In connection with this topic, it is essential to underscore another crucial and highly intriguing aspect. Some young people asserted that individuals who feel confident in their own bodies have no inherent reason to refrain from displaying them online. Conversely, one female participant asserted that this overt display of self is tantamount to an over-sexualization of the self.

“I think there's a line between showing yourself in a "I like myself" way and hyper-sexualizing yourself, and I think it would be do-gooder to say that's not true.”

(Dafne, Female, 17 y.o.)

Along with her, many others have expressed their position on the matter. The exhibitionist photos indeed seem to have sparked the conversation. The majority of presents considered sharing explicit photos as an exaggerated act, aimed only at gaining approval. Some have even pointed out the negative aspects this practice has on those who use it. According to the boy, the excessive display of one's body, even posting photos with one's butt in the foreground, only creates a circle of negative people around those who share this type of content. In fact, there is a danger that they will be more interested in the person's

appearance than in his or her personality. Looking at these photos, the boy himself lets slip another observation. According to him, those who post these photos must be particularly empty. In fact, he often wonders, "If this is what a person wants to post about himself, what else can he possibly have to offer?"

"It's not so much what you show. You want to show your ass? That's fine, but then you create a circle of people around you who are not there for you but for your ass. So if you post activities or travel photos I'm happier because I know that then you meet people who are there for your interests, for your person rather than for your body."

"I don't take you seriously if I see you post a picture of your ass on Instagram. [...] Is that like saying you have nothing else to show? This is all you can give of yourself?"

(Amedeo, Male, 18 y.o.)

Illusion of reality

A final aspect emerges in relation to this discussion of online self-image. Indeed, numerous young people attested to having observed genuine instances where the actuality of a situation did not align with the portrayal presented online. In addition, several individuals recalled an anecdote in which a girl of their age, passenger of a traveling cruise, published fantastic photos of the different destination, expressing throughout the trip her persistent dissatisfaction with the itinerary. What may have appeared to those who followed her through social media to be an idyllic vacation was, in fact, a disappointment for the girl in question. This experience illustrates how the distinction between reality and fiction is increasingly tenuous, making it challenging to discern when one is dealing with genuine content and when it is, on the contrary, presented a work of fiction.

"For example I went on a cruise this year with other kids from my school and again from the 5th grade, there was this girl who obviously posted a lot of pictures, [...] all great pictures and throughout the whole trip all she did was complain that she didn't like the trip, she didn't like the destinations, she wasn't happy. But then why on social media are you like this?"

(Diana, Female, 18 y.o.)

Therefore, social media do in fact allow those who use them to present themselves as they want. While there are young people, like those who participated in the discussion, who post only their most memorable memories, it must be considered that some adolescents

may use these platforms to stage their own representation of themselves, as suggested by Goffman (1959). On the one hand, it may indeed seem that even those who share photos depicting significant moments, although without the main and ultimate goal of constructing a false identity, are nevertheless posting content that, as the conversation revealed, is in some way interesting to the audience. In a perhaps unconscious and unintentional way, as Maxwell-Smith, Davis and Giuliatti (2017) argues, everyone is influenced by the vicious circle of media that focuses heavily on appearance and is therefore led, even without being directly aware of it, to create more and more stimulating content.

However, the interesting aspect that should be pointed out is how well adolescents are actually aware of this "possible" fiction. Among the "rules of good behaviour" in social media that emerged from the discussion, they actually confirmed that there are certain standards and behaviours that everybody should follow. In fact, by posting only the most important and memorable aspects of their existence, young people know that many things will necessarily be left out, thereby preventing a person from being shown in his or her entirety. Therefore, the most important thing is not so much the practice itself, but being aware that when you look at any social profile, what you see is only a small part of the whole.

4.1.3. Diversification of social media profiles

During the discussion of social use, the practice of having more than one online profile emerges in almost all focus groups. In fact, quite all participants reported owning at least two profiles, one public, thus open for all to see, and one private, where they accept people from their inner circle of closest friends. As the discourse unfolds, Goffman's dramaturgical distinction between the stage and the backstage space seems to spontaneously emerge. Indeed, the young people, in describing to the moderators the usefulness of the distinction between the two profiles, seem to remark on precisely the assumptions made by the author:

“The public profile is more how you think people who know you in general, so like your acquaintances, see you. It's the one that doesn't say maybe very much about you, however, it's kind of your identity [...]. Whereas those people you have more connection with belong more to the private one, I don't know how to explain it.”

(Flaminia, Female, 18 y.o.)

“I mean in the sense in the more private one I put the embarrassing things that I wouldn't show people randomly.”

(Dafne, Female, 18 y.o.)

It is perceived in these words, contrary to what was argued earlier it seems that one's personal profile at this point deliberately omits certain content, showing only a few, specially selected ones. Based precisely on the nature of the profile, whether is public, therefore accessible to all, or private, visible only to a selected circle, it influences the content that is posted. The profile therefore may not be carefully crafted, but according to participants' reports, it may certainly lack numerous facets. It is precisely another guy who points out how public profiling, while not necessarily based on pure fiction, still encourages certain representations of self aimed, as was said earlier, at stimulating and being interesting in the eyes of the public. The private profile, on the other hand, seems to be something more similar and closer to reality, a space where one can really be oneself and share even the least significant things.

I think it's kind of a way of masking though, because you have a private one on which you put everything that more or less might be what you do, No? You spend an afternoon in the little park, it's not an exciting thing, however you still put a story, whereas in the public one you have to be all cool, you have to be strong, you have to be handsome.

(Gregorio, Male,

Looked at from another point of view, however, the question seems to become more and more similar to a theory elaborated again by Goffman (1959) according to which precisely all people hold different behaviours, adapting from time to time, their language, tone and self-presentation to the context within which they are placed. Each of them plays a different role according to the different situations they inhabit on a daily basis; as their audience varies, people change the way they behave.

There has long been speculation, because of the arrival of social media, about the possible collapse of audiences (boyd,2014) driven by digital and its inability to differentiate its audience. It seems, however, that instead these new practices have led to a more segregated division of different followers within the contexts where they belong

even in offline life. Each person in fact performs a specific identity in the context in which he or she is; at work and in the family people will therefore show up differently than they do when they are with their friends. Therefore, similarly, the same thing happens also in social media, where certain aspects of one's personality are only right to emerge among a close circle of intimate friends. What has always been done by users to “get around” the system, and thus the creation of separate profiles, has now been implemented by the platform thanks to the possibility of sharing one's content with one's “close friends.”

4.2. How and where young people get to know each other

Among the numerous subjects discussed during the focus groups, the topic of relationships was unquestionably the one that was addressed with the greatest degree of detail. By means of the sharing of personal anecdotes, it was possible to gain an authentic insight into the lives of young people, and to analyse as truthfully as possible the dynamics through which young people form relationships. The following paragraphs seek to investigate and understand the disparate attitudes of adolescents in meeting new people. From the outset, it became evident that there was a divergence of opinion with regard to the methods employed to become acquainted with one another. Some appeared to favour the online domain, whereas others exhibited a preference for the offline realm.

4.2.1 Face to face encounters

When young people were asked how they form their relationships nowadays, they expressed their preference toward face-to-face encounters over those mediated by technologies. In fact, young people indicated that they used to meet new friends and even possible partners during their days, in the places they frequent on a daily basis. As previously stated by literature (Tienda, Goldberg, & Westreich, 2022) the most popular were found to be for example during school, in playing a sport, engaging in extracurricular activities such as theatre, reading or summer activities.

“Maybe at school in my opinion, because we spend most of our time there anyway.”

(Azzurra, Female, 17 y.o)

“And I met both my ex and my current girlfriend on summer vacation, and then we stayed in touch“

(Flaminia, Female, 18, y.o.)

Shared passions

The places previously listed, as mentioned, are those typically frequented by young adults. In fact, one male respondent indicated that at his age there are still numerous opportunities to meet someone and get to know new people. Each of them in fact habitually, in their daily activities can easily run into numerous people with whom to engage in different conversations. These people may belong either to the context related to the already existing social circle or to new acquaintances.

“Still we are young and it is easy to meet people who still have the same passions as you. Then as you get older the relationships get complicated, however as long as you have a lot of common topics, because anyway more or less the music is that, the sports are that, you go to school.”

(Manuel, Male, 17 y.o.)

As pointed out by the adolescent, the passions that are commonly shared among the younger generation are, for the most part, analogous. Additionally, the activities in which young adults commonly engage in are also strikingly similar. Because of this, it is much easier to get together with different people within now-familiar contexts or otherwise to get to know people with interests similar to one's own.

In contrast, another boy emphasizes how important it is to get to know people in well-known settings. Indeed, the familiarity that these situations provide makes interaction much smoother by removing many unknowns aspects that might put pressure on someone. This approach facilitates closer relationships, as knowing each other in known contexts provides more likely to have shared interests, granting a foundation for meaningful dialogue. Whether the passion is for sports or a hobby, the common ground allows for a starting point to initiate the conversation. Acquainting oneself with another individual within a familiar setting can, therefore, facilitate the early stage of conversation, as it provides a wealth of conversational prompts and a common ground shared by both participants in the interaction. This, in turn, can facilitate more effective and fluid communication.

“I think that acquaintance happens in contexts where you are more familiar, that is, in the sense in contexts that you know well, in contexts that you frequent very often

because maybe the interest is the same, it is transmitted between people. So two people know each other maybe have the same interests because they are in the same place.”

(Gulielmo, Male, 16 y.o.)

Better face to face

It can be reasonably assumed that adolescents are more likely to become acquainted with their peers in person, in situations that afford them greater opportunities for positive interaction, particularly in environments with high levels of peer density. The discussion revealed that youths tend to prefer direct, face-to-face contact over other forms of interaction. Indeed, such an approach enables the individual to immediately determine whether the other person is potentially engaging and whether it is worthwhile to pursue further interaction. For example, this individual compares his experiences and asserts that relationships formed in person were more successful than those initiated online.

“I feel the same way as most in this room, which is that eye contact is the most important thing, also because anyway with experience I have tested that contact via social has almost always failed. In the sense, starting via social and then finishing live, most of the time it went wrong, that is”

(Filippo, Male, 17 y.o.)

The female respondent also espouses this perspective, claiming that initiating a live encounter is a preferable approach, as it allows for a more comprehensive evaluation of the individual in question. She further argues that social media, because of the factors previously stated, does not facilitate the acquisition of comprehensive knowledge about another individual. It is important to note that the online world is not a direct reflection of reality. Individuals tend to present only the most salient aspects of their lives online, omitting numerous other details. Additionally, there is a possibility that people who possess an online profile may not accurately represent themselves according to reality. Forming an accurate impression of someone in person, claims the youth, is challenging because it requires a more nuanced and time-consuming process than the one that can be achieved online. She therefore express her preference to establish physical contact before engaging in online interactions.

“... a lot of times it happens to me that maybe guys write to me that I don't know, even if I find him to be a nice guy anyway I'm interested, I never tend to start dating through

social because I really prefer to see a person in person and actually understand what they're like. Yeah, anyway you have a hard time getting to know a person 100 percent even in person, so I think on social it's even harder.”

(Maddalena, Female, 17 y.o.)

Among the various factors that contribute to a preference, widespread among girls, for first contact through physical means, with a subsequent shift to digital communication, is precisely the risk of encountering malicious individuals. Indeed, it has been demonstrated on numerous occasions that there is a possibility of encountering fictitious profiles of individuals who appear to be young, but may, upon meeting in person, prove to be otherwise. Thus, establishing an initial connection in person provides a certain degree of assurance and enables an individual to immediately determine the potential risks involved, rather than facing adverse circumstances at a later stage of the relationship.

“...ask, introduce yourself then just have a few words to see if he is a maniac or not at first impact, and then ask him Instagram to contact the person later and try to get to know him”

(Camilla, Female, 18 y.o.)

Relay on friends advice

The suggestions and advices of close friends are also a determining factor in this process. Indeed, young people frequently establish relationships with individuals they have encountered at social gatherings or events, perhaps not belonging to their immediate social circle, but rather from connection with their acquaintances. In such instances, as the male adolescent notes, the prospective of friends who are already familiar with the person, potentially due to shared academic or social circles, can be highly influential. Indeed, they can offer valuable insights into the individual in question and highlight any shared interests.

“I mean like I prefer to meet someone first that maybe I've already seen around, that people have already told me a little bit about what that person is like, [...] if maybe a friend of mine knows him can tell me what that person is like, what character aspects he has, and so already maybe I find some commonalities that tell me yes, I want to know this person”

(Manuel, Male, 17 y.o.)

Other young people have argued that they prefer to become acquainted with a person they encountered in person and, if they find them appealing, continue their online interaction. According to another girl the individual one meets cannot be a random person; rather, it should be someone with whom one has developed a romantic interest. It is precisely this feeling that then later leads to a desire for a direct connection with that person, which can be done through social media. Getting to know each other in person makes it possible not only to detect possible interest quickly, but also to shorten the time by a great deal. Because of its immediacy, the face-to-face approach allows, should there be a feeling, to immediately propose a subsequent outing by quickly advancing the relationships.

“I too prefer to get to know a Person live, to hang out with them live. I would use social as a secondary method, if it is really impossible to see each other”

(Gabriella, Female, 18 y.o.)

“to get to know the person it can't be a person that you only met via the internet and then, I mean in the sense in my opinion it's a person that you must have fallen in love with live and then it can continue on the internet and not the other way around in my opinion.”

(Flaminia, Female, 18 y.o.)

“I always used the cheetah move, because I generally prefer to make friends verbally, getting to know people, talking to them. I don't like Instagram or texting so much, and so to shorten the time with which I would go and see this person, if there's a feeling, if you understand that there's a response and you immediately throw out the idea of going out”

(Gregorio, Male, 18 y.o.)

Although relationships initiated in person are undoubtedly more complex, they are also perceived as the most authentic and genuine. Indeed, establishing a connection in person presents a multitude of challenges, beginning with the decision of what to wear and extending to the moments of discomfort caused by prolonged silence and the pressure to perform well. These tensions, which arise from meeting in person, may initially appear to be significant obstacles. However, they can also serve as crucial determinants of the potential success of the relationship. Furthermore, direct interaction allows for the gathering of a vast amount of information about the individual in question, as well as feedback on the progression of the conversation. The lack of non-verbal cues in online

interactions results in a reduction in the overall information density of the communication. Such an approach is undoubtedly more challenging, but it is also believed to be more rewarding.

“Then another factor that I think is very relevant is that on social you're in a comfort zone because you don't have the problem of how to dress, how to hold the body pose one way rather than another, even the facial expressions. There's simply the chat, you don't even have to have your response ready because you have time to metabolize the message and respond calmly so you're much more confident and you can juggle it much better than live where maybe you feel the anxiety and the pressure to give a response quickly to avoid moments of silence. So it's a little bit more difficult. But in my opinion, if it works, it means that there is atonement and so it is better, much more truthful here.”

(Amedeo, Male, 18 y.o.)

4.2.2. Online acquaintances

The results of the discussion with young people indicate that the vast majority of them do not prefer to get to know each other exclusively via social media. As previously stated, meeting an individual in person provides assurance regarding their true identity, which may be obscured or presented as another in the online domain. Furthermore, it enables a more comprehensive evaluation of the potential trajectory of the relationship. Realizing quickly whether there is chemistry with a person and whether one is really interested in them drives most young people to interact in physical settings or, at the very least, to investigate through friends the people they wish to get to know better.

It is therefore reported that social media is perceived as a subsequent step, following the face-to-face meeting, which enables individuals to maintain contact with one another while enhancing the quality of the relationship. In fact, it often happens, as in traditional relationships, that young people get to know each other at social events where they exchange a few words and end up being interested in the other. In contrast to the practice of old generation, however, modern technology provide young people the opportunity to maintain communication and foster their relationships through the exchange of messages, images and other contents.

“Maybe you see a person around that you might be interested in, first you go on Instagram rather than other social media and then the physical relationship starts, let's say...”
(Manuel, Male, 17 y.o.)

“I use them too generally or to find someone maybe from school who is at a party and I'm interested in, or to stay in touch with people I've known for a long time.”
(Samuele, Male, 17 y.o.)

“Yes, maybe [a person] you met through an event or something, with whom thanks to social you can cultivate the relationship, being able to contact her and hear from her again...”
(Piergiorgio, Male, 17 y.o.)

Profile screening

Furthermore, social media affords users a multitude of actions that can be performed within them. Indeed, the platform enables people to search for individuals they have met on various occasions and with whom they are interested in communicating. By browsing the profiles of people they are interested in, adolescents can enter other people's worlds. By looking at the content they post, scrolling through their friends and searching for the other profiles they follow, young adults can gain valuable insights into that particular person, perhaps discovering their hobbies and passions. In fact, the Instagram profile, as seen above, turns out to be a good representation of individuals. Having met them in person or through mutual friends, give young people the assurance that the profile of the person they are looking at is real and more or less corresponds to their actual identity (Tienda, Goldberg, and Westreich, 2022). This "screening" process not only allows them to get a better idea of who they are engaging with, but also facilitates future face-to-face interactions. After viewing a person's profile, it will be easier to strike up a conversation because of the many conversational cues you have learned.

“On the profile maybe you ask for hobbies, look for maybe some hobbies, some common passions, the educational background, the career path you want to take, and try to maybe get to know the person character-wise first from a distance and then approach them live.”
(Camilla, Female, 18 y.o.)

Although it is not a common and often used practice, young people have argued that some individuals in their age group prefer to engage in predominantly online interactions. Some may be driven by the pressure to find a romantic partner quickly because they are in groups where all their peers are already in relationships. According to this boy's report, one of his friends uses social media to find someone geographically close to him to contact later and, if both are interested, to meet in person. Contrary to what has perhaps been claimed so far, it seems that social media is no longer seen as an obstacle to maturing relationships, but rather as an alternative tool for approaching someone in the online dimension. From the second observation made by the girl, it can be seen that the media have indeed become a kind of extension of the adolescent's body and have thus also become a fairly common and natural means of maintaining relationships and contact with each other.

“For many people, I'm also talking about experiences with my friends, they totally start from social. There are some friends of mine who make friendships starting from social, they see maybe a certain geographic area that may be convenient for them, they start a chat and if they have a good time talking to this person then they meet in person. Molta gente magari preferisce partire dal social perché si è più nascosti, se va male o piuttosto si conosce una persona che non va bene, sul social finisce lì, si blocca e via, non mi può più scrivere”

(Manuel, Male, 17 y.o.)

“By now I think social is something that doesn't get in your way. I mean it's like you used to go directly to talk to each other, no? Instead we as a medium use the app for example.”

(Giulia, Female, 17 y.o.)

Breaking down embarrassment

In alignment with the preceding findings, it is also reasonable to suggest that social media can serve as a facilitative tool in certain contexts. In particular, digital platforms can serve as a valuable resource for individuals who may lack confidence in initiating live relationships. Indeed, there are instances when some individuals observe an individual of interest at a social event but then experience difficulty initiating face-to-face interaction due to their character. Such individuals may exhibit characteristics such as reserve, shyness, or introversion. These traits may stem from an inherent personality or from past

experiences, potentially leading to difficulties in forming connections or a tendency to be overly preoccupied with potential outcomes. In this way, social media provides a safer environment for initiating and pursuing relationships. It can eliminate the initial awkwardness and anxiety associated with first encounters, allowing for greater control of the conversation and timing. Beginning an interaction online can act as an icebreaker by allowing young people to share some aspects of their lives, thus facilitating self-disclosure (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006) and enabling individuals to have minimal prior knowledge of their interlocutor when they meet him in person for the first time.

“I can't approach live, so social is a mask let's say, because maybe a person finds difficulties to talk or relate to other individuals on life situations. On social, maybe one is more open, one is more resourceful.”

(Guglielmo, Male, 16 y.o.)

Love bombing

Similarly, however, engaging in online relationships before having seen and met in person can also have negative consequences. Among these can be certainly recognized the practice of Love bombing i.e., that phenomenon that refers to a pattern of overly affectionate behavior that typically occurs at the beginning of a relationship (Strutzenberg, 2016). As demonstrated by the testimonies of the young girls this manipulative phenomenon of continuous appreciation turns out to be misplaced and lead to the emergence of negative emotions such as discomfort and embarrassment. This phenomenon can put those who experience it in a situation of discomfort.

Indeed, the sense of protection and partial anonymity afforded by social media can result in an oversharing of one's experiences and emotions. This is because the two individuals, lacking a personal connection and operating behind the facade of their profiles, feel less inhibited in disclosing such information. This practice can be beneficial if both individuals achieve a level of depth that facilitates the development of a healthy relationship. However, it can also be detrimental if there is a discrepancy between the two parties, whereby one individual shares significantly more than the other, thereby overwhelming the latter with a multitude of problems and emotions. Similarly, it can also be disappointing to find that, while social media facilitates highly fluid and

comprehensive discourse, when the parties are in person, they are unable to identify suitable topics for discussion.

“that is, it is too clingy, then you in retrospect however the moment he gives you too much attention in the beginning...”

(Dafne, Female, 17 y.o.)

“which is not a sincere thing because it is impossible for you to feel all that affection for a person, who maybe even on line, you have known for one day. [...] maybe the day before he had written me for the first time, the next day like good morning from the heart, it just seems intrusive to me.”

(Flaminia, Female, 18 y.o.)

“I was the only one talking, and he was always silent. After a while I asked him if he couldn't tell me something too....I mean like maybe you can even have expectations that disappoint you”

(Dafne, Female, 17 y.o.)

Lack of real-world experiences

Additionally, a considerable number of adolescents disclosed their observations regarding other detrimental aspects associated with the formation of online relationships. Among these, the most frequently cited issue is the superficial nature of the relationships formed. In comparison to relationships that are formed and developed in person, perhaps through a greater number of experiences and the sharing of information, online relationships appear to be much more structured and follow a set of predetermined stages. Indeed, the formation of strong and enduring bonds is more likely to occur when individuals have the opportunity to interact frequently in person and utilize social media as a conduit for sharing aspects of their lives, even when physical distance exists.

Conversely, relationships that are formed and maintained primarily or exclusively in the online domain, lacking the tangible experiences that are often a hallmark of in-person interactions, tend to be less robust and influential. As one female respondent observed, a considerable number of online relationships are initiated and sustained due to a lack of alternative outlets for boredom. The individual in question begins writing as a result of a lack of alternative leisure activities and, subsequently, the interest wanes.

“But I notice that so many other people who establish these relationships on social instead, it's not that they really write out of interest, but like it's a systematic thing. They pick up the phone, they write, then they throw the phone there and they don't care. I mean it's not something that I think has an importance in their life, then I don't know it could also be different however I see it that way.”

(Giulia, Female, 17 y.o.)

“But beyond these relationships, I, for example, on social media have never encountered the creation of a great friendship, because in my opinion it is not really where the creation of a real relationship takes place.”

(Gabiella, Female, 18 y.o.)

As evidenced by the data and experiences gathered from the discussion with adolescents, it can be posited that the majority of them still prefer relationships that are created in person. As supported by the relevant literature (Al-Jbouri, Volk & Andrews, 2024) can thus be argued that face-to-face relationships remain the optimal, most resilient, and longest-lasting relationships. It should be noted, however, that social networks are utilized not only for the maintenance and evolution of existing relationships but also, on occasion, for the avoidance of potential issues related to initial interactions. Indeed, such spaces are perceived as secure environments where individuals feel at ease and are able to present their best selves, thereby circumventing the potential issues associated with embarrassment and anxiety in initial encounters.

On the contrary, it has also been demonstrated that relationships formed and developed exclusively through social networks are similarly beset with numerous deficiencies. Such relationships may result in numerous disappointments and a loss of interest. Accordingly, the most effective approach for adolescents is to cultivate relationships that are sustained through both direct interactions and shared experiences in physical environments, as well as through the continued development of connections and bonds in the offline domain which actually results in an overlap of contexts (M. Reich, Subrahmanyam & Espinoza, 2012). This approach allows for a greater degree of control over the relationship, facilitating its optimal evolution through the integration of diverse contexts.

4.3. The first approach

As the discussion progressed, several noteworthy aspects pertaining to the method employed in the initial approach also came to light. It was observed that the approach in actual real-world contexts was perceived as the most challenging and complex. In contrast with the practices of the past, it is currently challenging for young people to approach a person they are interested in and directly ask her out or request their contact information. Indeed, they asserted that such an action would result in a negative perception, as it is not a common practice and may be perceived as indicative of malevolent motives.

“But there's no longer this thing here of going there and kind of saying, “You're cute, let's go out.” Nope”

(Azzurra, Female, 17 y.o.)

Introducing oneself thus casually, leaning towards a person once met at a party and without being introduced by anyone or having a pretext for doing so, as seen, is not considered the most optimal approach. On the other hand, it is a different matter if before asking for the number or Instagram profile the person in question manages to strike up a conversation, based on what is happening or on a specific topic. In fact, precisely for this reason, it turns out to be much more favourable and helpful to frequent and hang out in the same spaces as the people in whom one is interested. Joining extracurricular activities or seeing each other constantly at school make it easier to have common interests that can enable people to break the ice and initiate a conversations that can later lead to deepening online acquaintance.

“I made a lot of friends this summer, but just like there's a bar where everybody goes and maybe one night you don't have a lighter, you ask for a lighter, then you stop and talk, “What are you doing?””

(Gemma, Female, 18 y.o.)

It is not uncommon for these dynamics of interaction to manifest in online contexts too, particularly when the two individuals involved in the interaction belong to the same groups or engage in similar activities within the digital domain. Therefore, as occurs in tangible contexts where individuals engage in shared experiences or pursuits, so it also occurs in the digital domain. Indeed, there are environments frequented by different individuals, such as in video games, within Telegram groups or communities on TikTok,

where individuals can meet new people. In this case, the approach is more straightforward since, as in real-life scenarios, there is a mutual interest, providing a convenient starting point for a conversation.

“maybe there is Telegram that has so many groups, maybe so many different topics, so those who are members share a common passion, hang out in the same environment, so a common interest is there. It can be a starting point to create a relationship”

(Guglielmo, Male, 17 y.o.)

In regard to the manner in which young adults approach individuals with whom they have had direct contact, the most frequently used appears to be sending messages in direct. A considerable number of respondents indicated that they utilize social media as a primary means of initiating contact with individuals they have encountered in person and with which they wish to pursue further acquaintance. Once a potential match has been identified, a preliminary assessment of the individual's profile is conducted, encompassing an examination of the content shared and the social media pages followed. Only after this initial screening do people write to the subject in question, looking for a point of connection that might motivate contact. Indeed, social media affords users the opportunity to initiate an interaction with others in a relatively non-intrusive manner, while still maintaining a certain degree of communication.

The practice of initiating communication with individuals with whom one is not acquainted, and who are not members of the same social groups, is perceived as a source of embarrassment among young adults. Indeed, in such instances, there is no tangible rationale for initiating communication. Indeed, the recipient of a direct message may perceive the sender as engaging in indiscriminate texting, with the apparent aim of starting a relationship from scratch. This practice usually regarding especially girls quickly leads to the assumption that the person in question is not really interested in a real relationship but rather in passing the time or simply has malevolent intentions. Despite the assertion by adolescents that they do not utilize digital applications such as Tinder for the purposes of encountering novel individuals or potential romantic partners, it was nevertheless observed that this particular application offers a genuine rationale for such interactions.

“I mean, I kind of would be embarrassed to write like that to a person out of nowhere. So Tinder from a certain point of view gives you the justification to do that.”

(Amedeo, Male, 18 y.o.)

4.3.1. Flirting techniques

It is precisely for this reason, namely the embarrassment of writing to a person with whom one has never interacted and who does not belong to one's social circle, that over time and thanks to the development of new means of communication, real flirting techniques have been created, designed to make it clear to the person in question that one is really interested in them. In this respect, social media are really useful because they offer a wide range of opportunities that can allow a high level of control over the interactions of different individuals.

Signals in face-to-face interactions

In face-to-face interactions, it has always been very easy to pick up on signs in the other person that indicate his or her interest in a particular person. This is because there are countless studies on nonverbal communication gestures that unintentionally convey information about one's emotions and feelings. The adolescents have therefore indicated that it is solely through direct, in-person communication that a multitude of cues can be discerned, which can assist an individual in judging the level of genuine interest expressed by their interlocutor.

This process is arguably more challenging in an online context. Indeed, a multitude of factors can be considered, including but not limited to posture, tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and the manner in which the individual regards the other person. In the context of a social group, it becomes even more straightforward to ascertain interest, as the individuals in question will typically direct their eyes and attention fully towards the person they are interested in. This set of indicators can help people understand whether the person they are looking at is genuinely interested in a potential relationship.

“Well, in my opinion there is very simple to see if a person likes you or not, from the point, that is in the moment you are physically with them and you talk to them.”

(Dafne, Female, 17 y.o.)

“Yes exactly, they are more interested in developing the conversation, talking to you.”

(Flaminia, Female, 18 y.o.)

“Comparing the behavior he has when he is with you versus when he is with others. Then he looks at you. That is, people when they like you look at you.”

(Daphne, Female, 17 y.o.)

“He gives you more attention especially if you are in a group setting, maybe he focuses more on you than on others.”

(Flaminia, Female, 18 y.o.)

However, there are many other tricks that can be used in face-to-face interactions. For example, as this young man's comment illustrates, there are specific pickup jokes that are used to break the ice a bit and reveal a possible interest in that particular person. These techniques are mostly used by young people and are often done for laughs, so they are not always used with the intention of winning. In the case reported by this boy, however, they seem to have had the desired effect.

“My best friend met his current girlfriend last summer at one of these campuses because he went there just doing one of those silly pickup lines made on purpose, and it worked out.”

(Samuele, Male, 17 y.o.)

Online practices

As new media have evolved, they have opened up new ways for young people to interact, allowing them to stay connected in completely different and innovative ways. Indeed, over the years, new affordances have been developed that are capable of providing useful tools for approaching and building relationships online (Lubis and Jamil, 2024). In fact, during the discussion with young people, numerous flirting practices emerged that are used every day by their peers online. One of the most popular is obviously the sharing of photos within their profiles and among close friends.

According to the young adults it happens more than once to see people who are not used to post photos content within their profiles and as soon as they begin to write to each other and are interested in someone they begin precisely to bombard I share a flood of photos. The purpose is to create an excuse for the other person to comment on a post or perhaps respond to a story and thus try to start and spark a conversation. For others, on

the other hand, simply adding a person to one's circle of close friends on Instagram is synonymous with some kind of perceived interest in that person.

“There's this girl I know who hardly ever used to post on Instagram, and as soon as she started texting with a guy, she started sharing pictures all the time.”

(Gioia, Female, 18 y.o.)

According to youth reports, there are numerous instances of photos being used as a means of attracting attention. Girls usually post themselves in skimpy outfits or slightly provocative poses, while boys post themselves shirtless with chiselled abs to make themselves attractive and attract interest. As exposed by a girl, this usually happens because these same young people, perhaps browsing Instagram, observe how photos posted by models and models in swimsuits, underwear or otherwise portraying themselves in very elaborate poses lead to numerous views and, above all, numerous comments. Thus, another very important aspect emerges, which concerns precisely the ability of social media to influence the behavior of the people within them.

“Or girls putting pictures in their closest friends on Instagram all in skimpy outfits to get attention.”

(Diana, Female, 18 y.o.)

“In my opinion, this sort of thing has arisen not only in women, but also in men to put up these pictures maybe a little bit racy to get written about, also depending on the fact that maybe they see a match in the models getting into their underwear because all the women are responding.”

(Gabriella, Female, 18 y.o.)

Instagram notes

Instagram has always offered many ways for users to interact with other people online. These include the ability to send stories, like posts, share memes, and, one of the most recent innovations, the ability to include selected people in a small circle of close friends. Over time, the platform has undergone numerous updates and developments that have allowed its users to find new ways to interact and create innovative flirting practices. Among these, one of the most frequently mentioned in the discussion with young people is the possibility of entering notes, which are similar to statuses. Notes are, in fact, the sharing of users' thoughts and feelings that can be seen by all their followers.

“Above the directs are the notes. So a person can write anything and all the friends and contacts in short that he has can read that message. So of course nobody can understand unless of course it's a specific thing, that I don't know one is talking about another and so on and so forth”

(Raffaele, Male,

As suggested by the adolescents, these small phrases placed in the direct section of Instagram can be used as real messages aimed at attracting the attention of those who read them. Very often, in fact, so-called "subtle" or somewhat coded messages are sent specifically for a particular person. Subtle, often a sarcastic remark or dig, is usually used to describe a small and indirect criticism or joke directed at a specific person, usually phrased in a clever or witty way. It is not explicitly stated at whom it is directed, but the people to whom it is addressed should independently understand that it is directed at them.

As the adolescents themselves have indicated, the typical objective of these communications is to capture the attention of the intended recipient. In many instances, these messages are phrases that have been constructed with the specific intention of being comprehensible only to a limited number of individuals. These individuals are typically those who are acquainted with the proponent and possess a comprehensive understanding of their background and context. It is not uncommon for individuals to utilize phrases from song lyrics to exemplify a particular situation or articulate specific emotions. One further point highlighted by adolescents is the ambiguity surrounding these messages. They explain that, in theory, once the recipient has received the message and responded, the note can be removed. This allows the recipient to confirm that the message was indeed addressed to them. However, as pointed out, this process is complex and susceptible to misunderstanding and misinterpretation, according to someone even childish.

“Maybe there's a song that has a particular piece of the lyrics and this person uses it to refer to another person.”

(Giulia, Female, 17 y.o.)

“...Then I think she realized that let's say it wasn't for her, because then I didn't take it off the note, I left waiting for the other one and so let's say if I didn't take it off it wasn't for her.”

(Giacomo, Male, 16 y.o.)

“Well, you can understand how you can misunderstand.”

(Andrea, Male, 16 y.o.)

“any kind of shenanigans about history/notes in my opinion I don't know, it's a symptom of childishness, I mean for me it's an embarrassing thing for me it's a red flag”

(Flaminia, Female, 18 y.o.)

4.4. Maintaining the relationship

At this juncture, following a comprehensive examination of the various strategies employed to initiate contact and a detailed analysis of the methodologies utilized to foster connections, this paragraph begins to delve into the core of the relationship. If, in fact, after the initial stages of acquaintance, numerous positive aspects have emerged, and if both individuals remain interested in each other, are comfortable with one another and wish to continue the relationship, then social networks can act as facilitators in this area.

From Instagram to WhatsApp

One of the earliest indications that the initial stages of the getting-to-know-you phase are progressing favourably is the transition from Instagram to WhatsApp. As previously discussed, the initial stages of getting to know someone typically occur on Instagram, as evidenced by the experiences shared by the male participants in this study. It is precisely at this juncture that young people who become acquainted with someone at social gatherings or extracurricular activities endeavour to ascertain the source of their interest by perusing the subject's profile and attempting to glean insights into their interests and character traits. It is at this juncture that the initial contact is typically initiated, often through the exchange of likes or reactions to stories, which are then followed by messages.

In this context, Instagram can be considered the originator of these interactions. A multitude of relationships are initiated and evolve on this platform. Despite its focus on self-presentation, the platform serves as a secure environment for adolescents to initiate dating experiences while gauging the potential for positive outcomes. The medium of online interaction still allows for a certain degree of emotional distance between the individual engaging in the interaction and the other person involved. This is due to the

fact that, from a privacy perspective, the medium does not provide access to sensitive information. Indeed, the user is the sole arbiter of what information is shared and what is withheld.

Typically, there arises a point in the evolution of a romantic relationship when, if the relationship is progressing favourably and both parties feel at ease in making the relationship more intimate, the conversation is redirected to WhatsApp. Through the use of appropriate excuses, it is in fact suggested that the interaction be moved to another platform, thus avoiding the necessity of directly asking for the number. WhatsApp is perceived as a more intimate medium than Instagram, and thus is regarded as a more suitable platform for deepening the relationship. The platform is typically more immediate due to its focus on text-based communication rather than photo sharing. Additionally, WhatsApp is utilized extensively across various social spheres, facilitating easier monitoring of ongoing discourse by opening the application multiple times throughout the day, as opposed to accessing Instagram on a dedicated basis. Consequently, WhatsApp is the optimal platform for maintaining communication and sustaining an ongoing dialogue.

“To switch to Whatsapp, the excuse usually is: I don't fit in Instagram, I'll leave you my number, if you want to write me on Whatsapp.”

"Because it is, in my opinion it is a symbol of an higher level of confidence.”

(Ida, Female, 18. y.o.)

"Of closer relationship.”

(Angela, Female, 16 y.o.)

"I mean definitely before you see each other you have to have WhatsApp number in my opinion, at least that's the way it usually is.”

(Ida, Female, 18 y.o)

Social media as a means of communication

Once a new relationship is initiated, it is almost certain that digital media will be employed to facilitate its continuation. Indeed, as illustrated above, these tools are essential for enabling adolescents to maintain connections and share the most significant aspects of their daily lives. This finding corroborates the conclusions of previous research,

indicating that social networks can facilitate the evolution and development of relationships by providing platforms for the exchange of messages, photos, and videos.

In all relationships, especially those of adolescents, their use is crucial. Since they do not have the opportunity to share every moment of their day with their partner, which is perhaps the case in older couples living together, young people therefore need a tool that allows them to relate to each other. Although they see each other in person throughout the week or on weekends, when the two live far apart, being in the relationship and having a reference person entices young people to want to share with their partner the good and bad things that happen in the day. In fact, as the discussion revealed, young adults emphasize how having a person by their side makes it almost a given that they want to tell something about themselves on a daily basis and also want the other person to do the same.

“Exactly, we don't have a chance to see each other in the middle of the whole week so it's really something that starts from both of us feeling during the day even very often, because I miss him.”

(Gemma, Female, 18 y.o.)

“Yes I tell, I tell what I am doing but also I mean a little bit so out of curiosity. I am curious about what he is doing.”

(Angela, Female. 16 y.o)

“...I do something interesting, something beautiful, I feel like sharing it with you because you are the person I choose to share things with: I send you a picture, a message and from you I expect the same thing. ”

(Amedeo, 18 y.o)

A significant proportion of the adolescents interviewed reported that they are engaged in a long-distance relationship. Consequently, the smartphone, with its array of communication platforms, has become the primary means of maintaining contact. These statements clearly indicate the significant role that social networks play in the formation and maintenance of relationships. Indeed, as previously stated, these platforms facilitate the maintenance and reinforcement of interpersonal relationships between individuals residing in disparate locations, despite the physical distance that separates them. The affordances provided by these platforms facilitate comprehensive and authentic

communication through the capacity to send audio and voice messages or engage in video calls. The numerous possibilities afforded by the development of these platforms enable the recreation of the maieutics typical of traditional face-to-face interactions, thus intertwining with live engagement.

“Our only means of communication is the smartphone.”

(Angela, Female, 16 y.o.)

Social media's downsides

As with any beneficial phenomenon, social media also presents a number of critical issues that are not immediately apparent. While social media undoubtedly facilitates the maintenance of relationships by providing a conduit for dialogue and the sharing of personal information, it can also impede communication, giving rise to complex situations. The case presented by this young man illustrates that even relationships that function well in person can falter when communication is limited to online interactions. In this case, the boy notes that while these platforms undoubtedly offer significant opportunities, they also give rise to numerous challenges in managing distant relationships. Indeed, there are numerous potential pitfalls associated with social media use. For instance, the constant connectivity also argued by Fox et al. (2013) can be fulfilling initially but can also lead to significant stress over time. Additionally, there are expectations that users must meet, such as maintaining a consistent presence through daily greetings.

“I mean like last year I was engaged, live everything was working great while in chat a lot of problems were coming up because the conversations were all going to die. So online was creating a lot of problems in the long-distance relationship, also having to be there all the time, keeping in touch all the time. Like in the morning you wake up you have to go there and clock the good morning out and at the end of the day do it again the good night ..”

(Amadeo, Male, 18 y.o.)

Progressive adjustments

In addition to the inherent challenges, maintaining relationships in the digital sphere necessitates considerable effort and attention from both parties. In particular, during the initial stages of acquaintance, when one is not yet fully aware of the specific habits and

interaction patterns of the partner, the situation may become more complex. For instance, one might be overly concerned about the extended response time taken by the partner, or show apprehension that one has conveyed something erroneous or that the other has misinterpreted the intended message. In conclusion, the potential outcomes are numerous; the crucial element in these scenarios is to request that the partner address the concerns or issues and to exercise a considerable degree of patience. It is essential to recognize that maintaining a relationship, both in the digital and physical realms, necessitates a significant degree of adaptation and continuous adjustment to ensure a harmonious equilibrium.

I'm in a relationship and sure, maybe initially, at the beginning of the relationship that maybe I didn't really know what my girlfriend was doing, being that she's not staying in Pesaro, and maybe she wasn't answering me so I was a little bit worried, maybe I was thinking "she doesn't want to answer, maybe she did something I did." But knowing her better I know that she is someone who doesn't use the phone too often.

(Andrea, Male, 16 y.o.)

It is of paramount importance to underscore the paramount significance of effective communication in this context. This requires not only the expression of one's own thoughts and feelings but also the active seeking of comprehension of the perspectives of others. Notwithstanding the assertion of one boy that digital natives are adept at interpreting the tones and intentions of messages, it is evident that communicating indirectly and through technological intermediaries presents significant challenges. Indeed, it is often challenging to determine the unambiguous meaning of a message and to intuit the emotions and feelings it conveys in an aseptic environment such as an online chat. Another fundamental aspect for the maintenance of a positive relationship is trust, which is a necessary component for the longevity of the relationship..

"There has to be that balance where there is basic trust and then obviously if something happens you share."

(Amedeo, Male, 18 y.o.)

"if the relationship is based on trust, the trust has to be there."

(Piergiorgio, Male, 17 y.o.)

4.4.1. Couple profiles

A discussion of the diverse practices observed in online contexts, particularly in the context of relationships, gave rise to a vigorous debate among the male participants regarding the portrayal of couples in online profiles and the images that accompany these profiles. It is hypothesised that these profiles are the most deceptive, presenting a constructed representation of the couple that is far removed from reality. Indeed, this is evidenced by a multitude of illustrative examples recounted by young people with direct knowledge of individuals and their history, which demonstrate numerous discrepancies between the way they presented themselves and the actual circumstances.

For young people, the decision to share positive aspects of their lives on their personal profiles is a matter of personal preference. However, for couples, it appears to be a more authentic representation of their relationship. Indeed, as reported by participants, couples engage in two distinct acts: the act of showing off and the act of pretending everything is fine.

Flaunting

Indeed, there are individuals who unreservedly proclaim the details of their relationship, disseminating information regarding every aspect of their life together. Such individuals tend to exhibit a lack of distinction between what should be considered private and what can be made public, sharing all aspects of their relationship without regard for the nuances of intimacy and delicacy. Indeed, such couples are inclined to disseminate images of a hyper-sexualised nature, depicting them in states of undress or in moments of intimacy, frequently alluding to the sexual domain. Such images, coupled with the frequent positioning of the female figure at the forefront and surrounded by the male, appear to reflect a dynamic of possession that is often detrimental to the individual.

“I know this couple who basically did a Be Real where you could see that they were having sex, I mean you couldn't see it explicitly but you could tell and that's not because you're sure or because ...”

(Samuel, Male, 17 y.o.)

“I mean in my opinion just for that moment to brag I don't know why that is in the sense for me like putting pictures ...”

“it gave me like the feeling that you wanted to, like the guy wanted to somehow flaunt, I mean flaunt the fact that he has relations with his girlfriend I don't know how to say.”

(Flaminia, Female, 18 y.o.)

Pretending everything is fine

In contrast, some have proposed an alternative narrative, suggesting that the couple may not be as happy and smiling as they appear. This narrative posits that the couple may be concealing numerous problems and difficulties. Indeed, numerous participants have revealed that they are often approached by their friends who express persistent discontent regarding their romantic relationships. These friends often cite arguments and difficulties in their relationships, yet subsequently share stories or images with the hashtag #loveofmylife. Once more, the girls argue that these couples are primarily concerned with maintaining a public image and the perceptions other have about them. Therefore, the objective is not to resolve the issues at hand, but rather to maintain the status quo. This is regarded by some as a form of hypocrisy.

“I see my friends come to me and say I had a fight with my boyfriend, I hate him, this, this other and then in the afternoon they put the picture I love you you are all I have”

(Gabriella, Female, 18 y.o.)

“very often one puts a nice happy picture with her boyfriend or even of a landscape, of something, however then behind that picture actually there is something else. [...] Just to appear something they are not, just to show their status, that they are fine. And in reality it may not even be like that.”

(Giulia, Female, 17 y.o.)

“It's more about hypocrisy, in my opinion. That is, being hypocritical, doing one thing, saying one thing and then doing the exact opposite. That is, you don't follow your values, you are what suits you or how you want to appear to others.”

(Guglielmo, Male, 16 y.o.)

4.5. Surveillance practices

Among the primary adverse implications associated with the utilization of social media in romantic relationships, the issue of surveillance undoubtedly constituted the most pivotal and extensively deliberated topic. Indeed, the advent of new media has provided new avenues for individuals to exert control over their partners in the digital realm.

Indeed, there is a growing body of anecdotal evidence that individuals with high levels of possessiveness and a tendency to become obsessed with their partners seek to exert control over them in a variety of ways. Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of considering the dynamics that emerged from the confidences made to them by their peers. Indeed, as reported by the participants, many of them claimed that the primary means of control are related to the individuals with whom they interact and the manner in which they dress. In the course of the interviews, several instances were recounted in which the respondents had observed possessive and threatening attitudes on the part of their partners. In one case, for instance, the girl in question was compelled to change her clothes and was forbidden from going out with their friends, with the threat of immediate break of the relationship.

“In the fact that maybe i.e. you want to go out with your friends, “no, you don't go out, if you go out we'll end it there” I.e., just the fact that you argue, discuss and maybe even stop responding out of spite. You say “if you go I won't answer you anymore, if you go there we'll end it there...”

(Vera, Female, 18 y.o)

“Of course, like that I mean he would make her stop following all the males and if she kind of increased a following he would see it and call her all pissed off and she would continue to stay with him”

(Dafne, Female, 17 y.o.)

Additional intriguing findings emerged with regard to the regulation of interactions with others. Indeed, there are instances wherein some individuals request that their partners display their mobile devices to view the contacts and observe the communications. Such actions allow individuals to ascertain whether their partner is engaging in communication with other individuals. Furthermore, it appears to be a common practice to request passwords to access various social media profiles. This practice has been unanimously regarded as highly toxic by young people. The distinctive aspect is the PIN code that is required to unlock the phone. If this is a natural occurrence and not a mandatory requirement, it can be a valuable resource in situations where immediate access to the phone is necessary.

“In my opinion, looking at each other's contacts is a sign of problems. That is, there is a problem, there is a lack of trust, and that is a serious thing. If a person really gets

like that, it's possessiveness and then as the control becomes more and more obsessive, the relationship is doomed to die.”

(Amedeo, Male, 18 y.o.)

“... I mean I have nothing to hide from you, if you need to impose this [geolocation] application on me because you don't trust there is an underlying issue and it can't work.”

Piergiorgio, Male, 16 y.o.)

“No profile passwords no absolutely. But here on the cell phone there is I have nothing to hide from you, if like you need to open your cell phone to make a call or you need to go and look for a picture in the gallery, I mean I have nothing to hide from you, always based on trust, I'm happy to give it to you.”

(Amedeo, Male, 18 y.o.)

Trust issues

The underlying issue of these obsessive and possessive attitudes can be attributed to a lack of security regarding one's identity, the value one can offer to one's partner, and, most crucially, a lack of trust, which is a vital element for a successful relationship. The girls maintain that when these problematic behaviors persist, it is necessary to terminate the relationship, as the partner will gradually exert control over the individual in an increasingly compulsive manner, ultimately limiting their freedom to a minimum. Such behavior is antithetical to the fundamental tenets of a healthy relationship, which is predicated upon the establishment and maintenance of trust. Without trust, it is impossible to coexist peacefully with one's partner.

“That's what then makes a relationship basically toxic where precisely the person doesn't give you space because as the person says maybe it's not that they don't trust you, but they don't trust others however in the end then they don't let you live your life, they don't give you your space and the relationship turns into a toxic relationship”

(Vera, Female, 18 y.o.)

“But usually the person who is possessive is because they are fundamentally insecure and that is to say the phrase “I trust you, but I don't trust others” is rubbish because things are done in two.”

(Azzurra, Female, 17 y.o.)

5. Conclusions

In the contemporary interconnected world the dynamics of love have undergone a significant evolution, particularly with the advent of social media and digital communication tools. The analysis of young adults' interactions with social media and relationships provided an intricate understanding of self-representation, relationship dynamics, and the role of digital platforms. These findings provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of the ways in which relationships are formed and maintained in the digital age. This section presents a synthesis of the analysis, referencing previous research to confirm or challenge the findings.

Self-representation and Identity Construction

A significant finding of the analysis is the transformation of self-representation in the digital domain. In contrast with the findings of earlier research by Codeluppi (2007) and Goffman (1959), which positioned social media as a platform for presenting idealised and carefully curated self-images, the results of this study indicate that many young people now perceive platforms such as Instagram as "logbooks" or personal diaries, rather than as performative spaces. This shift indicates that social media profiles serve as repositories for significant life moments, memories, and self-expression, rather than as tools for constructing an idealized image with the aim of garnering approval. As evidenced by the data from the focus groups, adolescents appear to be less concerned with receiving validation through likes and more interested in using their profiles to capture and share authentic aspects of their lives. This finding is at odds with the assertions made by Boyd (2014) that social media users deliberately curate their profiles to influence audience perceptions.

Nevertheless, some evidence from the study corroborates Goffman's (1959) "front stage" and "back stage" concepts, indicating that although many young people aspire to authenticity, there is still a certain degree of curation and selective sharing. For example, the majority of participants indicated that they maintain both public and private profiles, utilizing the private profiles to disseminate content to a select, intimate circle of acquaintances. This lends support to Goffman's assertion that individuals assume different roles contingent on their audience, even within the digital domain. On contrary to early concerns about a collapse in audience segmentation (boyd, 2014), young people's strategic use of multiple profiles indicates a sophisticated ability to navigate these spaces.

Scarcelli & Mainardi (2019) advance the hypothesis that digital spaces facilitate authentic self-presentation. However, it was previously assumed that users would continue to construct an augmented version of their offline lives. The empirical data indicates a generational shift, whereby younger individuals prioritize a more authentic self-representation, aligning their digital personas closely with their actual identities. This finding is corroborated by more recent studies (Hampton et al., 2011). The contradiction can be found in the occasional inconsistency that young people acknowledge, aware that their peers may still manipulate their online presence to some considerable degree (Chou & Edge, 2012).

Another noteworthy discovery pertains to the recognition by adolescents in the study of the evolution of their social media profiles in conjunction with their maturation. As they mature, participants like Manuel observed a shift in their use of social media platforms like Instagram, moving from entertainment to meaningful interaction. This suggests a conscious and deliberate process of identity construction over time, which diverges from Van Dijck's (2013) argument that social media profiles remain static representations of an ideal self. Instead, it aligns with Licoppe's (2016) conclusion that social profiles become extensions of one's evolving identity, gradually adapting to life experiences.

Romantic relationships and social media

Another significant area of investigation is the evolution of romantic relationships in the digital age. Social media platforms provide novel avenues for the initiation, sustenance, and navigation of romantic interactions.

While the literature, as exemplified by Tienda, Goldberg & Westreich (2022), indicates an increasing role of online platforms in relationship formation, the data demonstrates that participants prefer face-to-face interaction for the establishment of authentic relationships. Filippo's assertion that social media interactions often prove inadequate in comparison to face-to-face encounters is consistent with the initial concerns raised by Hampton et al. (2011) regarding the limitations of purely digital connections. In such cases, offline interactions tend to offer a greater degree of authenticity than their curated online personas.

Although many young people tend to prefer face-to-face interactions for the formation of deeper connections, the study indicates that social media can serve as a supplementary tool for the maintenance of romantic relationships. In particular, platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp enable couples to remain connected throughout the day, thereby fostering closeness and intimacy even when physically separated (Ledbetter, 2011). The participants frequently indicated that social media facilitates the constant sharing of updates, which enhances emotional connections by ensuring that partners are informed about each other's daily lives. This mirrors Fox et al. (2013), who explored the critical role of social media in nurturing romantic connections.

Nevertheless, the study also identifies challenges associated with digital communication in relationships. The literature from scholars such as Fox et al. (2013) indicates that while social media facilitates connection, it also provides opportunities for invasive control, a conclusion that is supported by empirical evidence. The participants' experiences of jealousy and surveillance align with broader trends of trust issues intensified by digital technologies, consistent with theoretical perspectives on the implications of constant digital connectivity (boyd, 2014). The pressure to maintain constant contact via social media can precipitate feelings of stress and dissatisfaction, particularly when communication becomes superficial or repetitive. It was also observed that social media activity may give rise to feelings of jealousy and a lack of trust, particularly when it is misinterpreted or subjected to excessive scrutiny.

The practice of surveillance in relationships, including monitoring a partner's social media activity or demanding access to their accounts, is identified by many respondents as a toxic practice. This is consistent with the concerns previously articulated

by Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) regarding the psychological impact of social media on romantic relationships. The constant connectivity enabled by social media may result in a blurring of the boundaries between healthy communication and obsessive control.

Face to face versus online interaction

The analysis illuminates the intricate nuances of the relationship between online and offline dynamics. Although many participants indicated a preference for face-to-face interactions when establishing meaningful relationships, social media frequently serves as an initial point of contact. Some young people utilize digital platforms to conduct preliminary assessments of potential partners by examining their profiles before engaging in direct communication. This finding is consistent with the conclusions of earlier research by Tienda, Goldberg, and Westreich (2022), who determined that digital profiles offer significant insights into an individual's interests, background, and social connections. Nevertheless, while social media facilitates the initiation of relationships, the study confirms that in-person interactions are still perceived as the most genuine and effective means of building lasting emotional bonds.

The study presents a paradox regarding the role of social media in relationships. On the one hand, social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp provide unique opportunities for communication, self-expression, and connection, as observed by Fuchs (2014) and Licoppe et al. (2016). These platforms facilitate the maintenance of relationships across distances and the continued connection with peers in ways that were previously thought to be beyond the realm of possibility. Conversely, these same platforms can also give rise to complications, including the pressure to maintain an idealised online persona, the risk of miscommunication, and the emergence of surveillance behaviours within romantic relationships. As Turkle (2011) observed, the pervasive connectivity engendered by these technologies can foster an illusion of intimacy, resulting in superficial interactions devoid of depth and authenticity.

The findings substantiate the hypothesis that social media has the potential to enhance certain aspects of relationships, yet simultaneously introduces novel challenges that necessitate cautious navigation. It seems that striking a balance between online and offline interactions is crucial for young people who wish to maintain the authenticity and

emotional depth of their relationships while still leveraging the advantages offered by digital platforms.

In conclusion, the research offers significant insights into the ways in which young adults navigate self-presentation, relationship formation and romantic interactions in the digital age. The advent of social media has transformed conventional practices associated with flirting, communication and relationship maintenance, presenting both opportunities and challenges. The findings corroborate earlier theoretical propositions concerning the performative character of digital platforms (Goffman, 1959; boyd, 2014), while also disclosing a new tendency towards the utilisation of social media as a personal diary or logbook. The current study highlights the necessity of maintaining an equilibrium between online and offline interactions. While digital platforms offer valuable tools for communication and self-expression, users must also navigate the complexities of digital identity, privacy, and trust in order to sustain healthy and authentic relationships. While face-to-face relationships continue to be the basis for the birth and growth of new relationships, it must be acknowledged that social media, when used in the right way, can be a real asset. Indeed, by interacting online, couples can maintain regular conversations to grow closer and share different aspects of their days when they are not together. In this way, the relationship can be maintained and developed, becoming stronger and more stable.

Returning to the original hypothesis, it seems that the data collected indicate a different trend from that predicted by the advent of digital media. Love still exists and, contrary to what some authors claim, young people still tend to value their live interactions and try by all means to maintain them. Even today's relationships need physical contact, looks, caresses, kisses, hugs and smiles to develop and mature. Of course, social media plays a very important role, as outlined above, but even though the forms of relationships change with society and historical times, the fundamental nature on which they are based remains the same. In fact, as some of the young people's conversations revealed, relationships based solely on the exchange of messages and images online are, on average, much more superficial than those built face-to-face. Moreover, although many may have made their first move online, opening chats or liking pictures, they still admit to knowing the person at least by sight.

Thus, far from replacing face-to-face relationships, as many feared, the advent of social media has complemented them by providing new modes of contact. While these digital platforms offer many features that facilitate relationships, they can also increase the risks associated with them. These include those of control and manipulation, such as password requests or the sharing of geolocation data. However, it should also be stressed that young people are in fact well aware of these risks associated with the use of different applications and actively seek to mitigate them.

In conclusion, it can therefore be said that, despite technological evolution and scientific progress, digital media have not yet erased the desire for real, authentic relationships. Face-to-face interactions are therefore still to be considered as the most effective way to establish stable and long-lasting bonds. It is thus necessary to start thinking and seeing relationships in their totality of expression, in a continuous tangle of digital connections and real encounters, since they influence each other. Only by looking at these two dimensions as a single reality will one be able to fully understand all the phenomena and uniqueness that characterise them.

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