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OF ECONOMICS AND  
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**FIRST RESEARCH REPORT  
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***ADOLESCENTS, PARENTS, AND DIGITAL MEDIA: LOOKING FOR THE PATTERN  
THAT DIS/CONNECTS  
(AdoDigitFamX)***

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**1. Summary for publication (first version)**

**1.1. Summary of the context and overall objectives**

Scientific research and much public opinion are either enthusiastic and supportive or pessimistic and condemning for great harm and risks afforded by ICTs use. More empirical evidences are needed to overcome such dichotomies. Through the application of *innovative and transdisciplinary methods* for the study of families and children in everyday life this project intended to provide (1) new knowledge on *how ICTs are changing interpersonal relations within the families* and (2) operational advice for parents, children and practitioners. The core focus of our investigation is “pattern that connects”<sup>1</sup>, i.e. the *relationship* among parents-children-new media. The prefix *dis-(connect)* was added to the title to stress the ambivalent nature of ICTs mediation in interpersonal relations.

In the last two decades ICTs have changed the ways in which parents and children learn, communicate and interact in their everyday lives. Previous studies showed that ICT provide new possibilities for self-expression and personal experimentation that become particularly important in adolescence. *Adolescence* is indeed a time of high-level use of digital devices (smartphones, social networks, etc.), which often becomes the trigger of family disputes and conflicts<sup>2</sup>. Adolescence is also an intense time of re-organizations in family relations when the family system must find a new balance to adapt to children’s changes<sup>3</sup>. In a previous study I documented that the *processes* through which parents and children co-regulate their interactions during periods of destabilization and uncertainty, that I defined *microtransitions*, occur according to two dimensions: *coordination* and *oscillation*<sup>4</sup>. From their various combinations, I identified four patterns of family interactions: *stormy*, *drifting*, *quiet* and *critical* that are defined by specific relational dynamics: *acknowledgement of emerging competences*, *re-definition of power hierarchy*, and *re-regulation of interpersonal distances*. These different ways of interacting showed that the transition across adolescence occurs through everyday *collective micro-reorganizations*, in which family members transform their

<sup>1</sup> Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York, Ballantine.

<sup>2</sup> Livingstone, S. (2002). *Young people and new media: childhood and the changing media environment*. Sage, London, UK.

<sup>3</sup> Smetana, J. (2005) (eds). Changing boundaries of parental authority during adolescence. *New directions for child and adolescent development*, 108: Wiley Periodicals.

<sup>4</sup> Everri, M. (2010). *Families under the microscope: Observing interactional processes in family microtransitions* PhD Dissertation, Unpublished manuscript, March 22<sup>nd</sup>; Molinari, L., Everri, M., & Fruggeri, L., (2010). Family micro-transitions: observing the process of change in families with adolescent children. *Family Process*, 49, 236-250.



family organization by oscillating in terms of competences, power, and distances (e.g., in a drifting pattern, oscillations emerge when an adolescent's exploration of autonomy is complemented by parents' power lessening and maintenance of flexible protection).

Through a methodological protocol based on the *stance-tacking process* analysis, I documented that oscillations become observable in the ways family members switch their reciprocal *evaluations, positions, and alignments* (i.e., their *stances*) in the unfolding interactions<sup>5</sup>. These operational notions provide a solid basis for the empirical measurement of family interactive and transformative processes. *How does communication through digital media affect such interactive processes?*

Livingstone and colleagues<sup>6</sup> (who are collaborating in this research) showed that today's adolescents are called to experience self-actualization though careful and continual negotiations between the opportunities (for identity, intimacy, sociability) and risks (on privacy, misunderstanding, abuse) afforded by ICT-mediated communication. Parents face new challenges in regulating their practices with respect to digital media and children's control and protection. The transformations of family relationships are also highlighted in the recent *theory of mediated relationships*<sup>7</sup>. This theory opens interesting paths for further elaborations on family processes and digital media use during adolescence, as it gives centrality to *relationships* addressing the *mutually shaping process* between the "nature" of media and the "nature" of relationships. This is innovative as most research focuses either on children or parents' individual perspectives, thus addressing only their perceptions *on* the use of different digital devices.

This research has focused on the whole *family-in-interaction* to illuminate *how* some patterns of family interaction shape the use of digital media. A better understanding of the *underlying mechanisms* of family dynamics is also still missing. What are the family members' motives, emotions and representations underlying such interactive patterns? Do they contribute to the formation of specific patterns of family interaction? Lastly, most studies on children and ICT use are based on self-reports (perceptions of adolescents about the use of such devices) or observations (perception of the researcher about participants' behaviour). In other words, we still do not know *what children actually do* with such devices in their everyday lives: how, when and why do they use ICTs? Which their emotions and motives? In addition to this, recent European investigations<sup>8</sup> listed significant gaps in the literature on these themes, noting: (a) a prevalence of studies based on quantitative methods; (b) a neglect of focus on mobile, convergent and emerging technologies; (c) a persistent focus on risks and harm rather than opportunities and benefits; (d) scarce information on adults' roles in ICTs use, especially *parenting practices*, along with other forms of safety mediation, and a lack of knowledge of

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<sup>5</sup> Everri, M., Fruggeri, L. & Molinari, L. (2014). Microtransitions and the dynamics of family functioning. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 48, 61-78.

<sup>6</sup> Livingstone, S. & Bovill, M. (2001). Families and the internet. An observational study of children and young people's Internet use. Research report.

<sup>7</sup> Madianou, M. & Miller, D. (2012). *Migration and New Media. Transnational Families and Polymedia*. Routledge: New York.

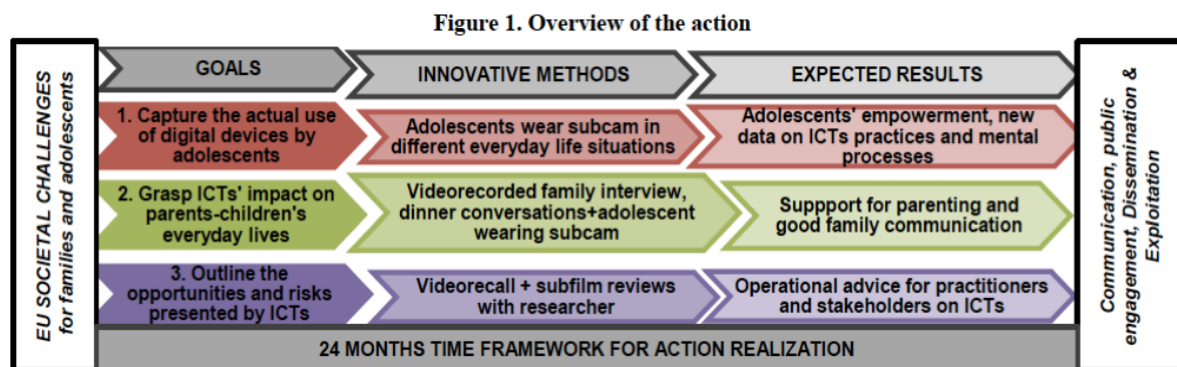
<sup>8</sup> <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Home.aspx>

their effectiveness. Our digital ethnographic methods have enabled us to address these questions with unprecedented realism and detail.

The present proposal intended to fill these gaps with new empirical evidence on family relations and child development through the study and application of innovative methodology. Two research questions guide our project: (1) *What is the impact of communication through digital media on family interactions and child development during adolescence?* (2) *How can we gather and analyse data on the mediating role of digital devices in real life situations?*

Starting from these questions, we have defined **three specific research goals**:

1. To **capture the actual use of digital devices**, i.e. all the technologies adolescents use to create, maintain, and transform communication in different situations of their everyday life: home, school, free time.
2. To better understand the role of digital devices in parent-child interaction, by **understanding the mutually shaping processes of ICTs**, human development and family communication.
3. To clarify the *opportunities and risks* of ICTs in family communication and child development, **documenting the good/bad practices** (e.g., strategies, parenting styles, etc.) thereby **providing** parents, practitioners (educators, clinicians, social workers) and stakeholders (e.g., media providers) with **operational advice**.



## 1.2. Work performed from the beginning of the project

This report concerns the actions carried out in the first year of the research project: 2015/2016. So far, three work packages and the corresponding three deliverables have been performed:

**WP 1. Preparatory activities:** (a) literature review, (b) starting DMC/DSP-LSE's training and courses, (c) formalizing hypothesis in the light of existing theories, (d) refining the protocol for children's subcam use, (e) preparation and testing the subcams and the associated equipment (custom mounts for those who wear glasses, and special neutral glasses for the others), (f) contacting schools for project presentation and negotiations of subcam use during



school time. Getting formal ethical approval (see section 7): the protocol will be discussed with stakeholders and submitted to LSE (London School of Economics), AIP (Italian Association of Psychology), of which I am a member, and regional (Emilia-Romagna) agency of professional psychologists (Ordine degli Psicologi) research ethics committees.

Deliverables: 1.1 Experimental protocol (phases, analyses grid, key factors of observation) 1.2 Documents for participants' recruitment (informed consent, document on ethical issues for using video procedures with children). Major milestone: 1.1 Reconsider wearing subcam at school in the case of teachers who do not give permission; if so, adolescents will be wear subcam only at home and during free time.

✓ ***Deliverables and Milestones accomplished (WP1)***

- Deliverables 1.1. and 1.2 are accomplished: I devised the research protocol and prepared specific documents for the participants' recruitment. I also obtained the consent to carry out research with children using audio and video procedures from Italian and UK ethical committees.
- Milestone M1.1: I had to reconsider the wearing of the subcam at school given that the school principals advanced some concerns about privacy. Thus, I asked participants to wear the subcams only in their homes and in their free time after school. This change in the protocol did not have major implications for the data collection: In fact, I was able to collect a considerable number of video recordings of different activities concerning adolescents' everyday life at home (e.g. doing homework, eating, watching TV, gaming, chatting with friends, etc.) and outside their homes (bicycling, playing football, walking with friends, visiting grandparents, etc.)

**WP 2. Pilot study**: collection and analysis of the initial set of data. Our protocol will be initially tested in one family recruited through personal contacts in Italy. The family will be visited at home to carry out the family interview and provide specific instructions on video recording dinnertime conversations to family members, and on subcam use to adolescents. First qualitative/ethnographic analyses through Diver (see section 2.1) will be carried out. Deliverables: 2.1. Protocol draft on subcam use for adolescents. 2.2. First report on the work state provided to LSE. 2.3. First result presentation at the DMC/DSP research team meetings/seminars, and conferences, especially AIP annual meeting (Social Psychology Section, in 2015). Dissemination in scientific journals, especially Qualitative Research. Major milestone: 2.1 Adaptation of the video-recording protocol on the basis of pilot outputs. Data will be discussed in a meeting with LSE ethics committee and DSP/DMC teams to make the necessary changes for the realization of WP3. A first report will also be provided to Italian ethics committee.

✓ ***Deliverables and Milestones accomplished (WP2)***

- Deliverable 2.1 is accomplished and partially modified. The pilot study involved four families, instead of one. This is because we wanted to test the protocol in two different schools and with both male and female adolescents.
- Deliverable 2.2. The advancements of the research project were reported in meetings and presentations at the Department of Social Psychology (now Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science) and Department of Media and Communication at the LSE. LSE and Italian ethics committee were informed about the progress of the work via detailed periodic emails. This report is available for consultation on the LSE repository online.
- Deliverable 2.3 is accomplished and partially modified. Results about the methodological protocol were disseminated in two conferences: ISCAR Nordic Conference (16-18th June 2016) and ESFR (31st August-3rd September 2016) and seminars for PhD training in Italy. At the ISCAR conference, I organised and chaired a symposium on the methods to study children's use of digital media in their everyday life. The launch of the project was also disseminated through Italian newspapers and universities' websites both at the University of Parma and at the London School of Economics. At the moment (October 2016) two papers are in preparation: (1) The first is a methodological paper that illustrates the SEBE protocol for the study of adolescents' everyday life interactions with digital media. This paper will be submitted to the Journal of Research on Adolescence; (2) the second paper concerns a case study focused on the analysis of adolescents' subfilms, questionnaires, and replay interviews. The paper aims at defining adolescents' practices around the use of mobile phones, in particular. This will be submitted to the Journal of Child and Family Studies.
- Milestone M 2.1 is accomplished and integrated with additional materials. The video-recording protocol was adapted on the basis of the pilot study outputs. As part of the final protocol, two instruments were added: (1) A video tutorial illustrating SEBE procedures edited by the adolescents that participated in the pilot study, and (2) domestic media pictures: I asked the adolescents to take pictures of the technological devices present in their homes, especially where they were usually located (e.g. laptop on the desk in the bedroom, mobile phone on the sofa, TV in the kitchen, etc.). The self-report intended to assess the level of family conflict about digital media was also integrated with scales on family functioning, parental monitoring, and Internet self-efficacy. The self-report was administered to both parents and children.

**WP 3. Realization of the research design.** Pursuit of the empirical design through application of the protocol tested in WP2. Italian families will be recruited (minimum 5 families with low or no conflicts on ICTs use, and 5 with high conflicts), privacy and confidentiality issues will be guaranteed. Schools will get feedback on the project results. A period of mobility between Italy and UK to collect data is planned. Families' visits will be clustered in a definite time framework to save time and resources. The collected data will be analysed with the support of DSP/DMC at LSE teams and the protocol will be eventually refined. Deliverable: 3.1. Final subcam protocol for adolescents (equipment, instructions, timing, location, scene selection, etc.).

✓ **Deliverables and Milestones accomplished (WP3)**



- Deliverable 3.1. is partially accomplished. We recruited a higher number of families than what we had expected: 17 families having at least an adolescent child in the age range 13-16 years participated in the project. The fieldwork was concluded at the beginning of May 2016. During the fieldwork we did not encounter specific problems that could have affected the data collection. In addition, we have carried out a follow up with the families that participated in the pilot study to test the video-recall procedure: it consists in showing footages selected from the video-recorded family interviews and mealtime conversations and ask family members to comment them in a meeting with the researcher. The meeting was video-recorded. The footages were selected using a categorization system developed through a grounded theory approach and intended to grasp parent-children's interactive and communicative dynamics in relation to digital media use. This allowed us to confront our understanding of the observed processes with the actual points of view of family members. At this stage of the project (October 2016) we are analysing the collected material.

In the Gantt chart below, we reported the accomplished deliverables and milestones.



Gantt chart: Accomplished work packages, deliverables, and milestones are ticked. Updated: 14<sup>th</sup> month, October 2016

		Months																							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
<b>Work packages</b>	WP1. Preparatory activities	✓	✓	✓																					
	WP2. Pilot study				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓															
	WP3. Realization of the research project										✓	✓	✓	✓	✓										
	WP4. Discussion and conclusion																								
	WP5. Communication and public engagement strategies									✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓									
	WP6. Dissemination and exploitation of results									✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓									
<b>Deliverables</b>	D1.1 Experimental protocol		✓	✓																					
	D1.2 Documents for participants' recruitment (provided also to the REA)			✓	✓																				
	D2.1 Protocol draft									✓															
	D2.2 First report for LSE									✓															
	D2.3 Preparation of papers								✓	✓	✓														
	D3.1 Final <i>subcam</i> protocol for adolescents																								
	D4.1 Final report writing																								
	D4.2 Ethics protocol																								
	D4.3 DVD editing																								
	D5.1 Event in the schools																								
	D5.2 Report and DVD for participants																								
	D6.1 Report for LSE and dissemination via media (websites/platform)																								
	D6.2 Writing of papers									✓	✓	✓													
	D6.3 Seminars for PhD students																								
<b>Milestones</b>	M1.1 Redefinition of <i>subcam</i> use at school								✓	✓															
	M2.1 Changing/adapting <i>subcam</i> protocol for adolescents									✓	✓														
<b>Progress monitoring</b>	DSP and DMC mixed team meetings (Supervision and DSP team meetings are weekly)			✓					✓																
<b>Risk management</b>	Evaluation points: meetings with (LSE and Italian Ethics Committees) and research team			✓						✓															

### 1.3 Progress beyond the state of the art

The SEBE protocol has allowed us to access unprecedented data about contemporary families' everyday life. In addition, the integration of the protocol with other instruments (questionnaires, family interviews, video recordings of mealtime conversations) has allowed us to reach a 'thick' corpus of data which can account for: individual, interpersonal, and cultural processes occurring between today's parents and adolescent children. The description of the participants and the preliminary results are presented in the tables below.

Table 1  
*Description of the participants in AdoDigitFamX*

	<i>Adolescents</i>	<i>Parents</i>
Number	21 (4 participated in the pilot study)	39
Age	Mean: 14.90 years SD: 0.70 Min.- max. 14 - 16 years	Mothers: N=21 Mean: 47.48 years SD: 5.32 Min.-max: 38 - 62 years  Fathers: N=18 Mean: 50.5 years SD: 5.59 Min.-Max: 44-64 years
Sex	77.8% females, 22.2% males	55.2% mother, 44.8% fathers
Nationality	Italian	Italian (1 Ecuador)
Education	35.3% (First year of high school, 14/15 years) 64.7% (Second year of high school 15/16 years)	16.7% Master degree 66.6% High school degree 16.7% Middle school degree
Profession	-	12.82% Professionals/managers 64.10% Employees 12.82% Labourers 5.13% Retired 5.13% Housewife
Household structure	80.9% married/cohabiting two-parent, 6.7% divorced, 3.3% widowed	



Table 2  
*Preliminary results: AdoDigitFamX participant families (N=21), variables and instruments employed in the study.*

<i>Constructs/Variables considered</i>	<i>Instruments</i>	<i>Preliminary results</i>
1. Media environment	Questionnaire (scales about number of devices and frequency of use)/Pictures taken by adolescents	The lives of contemporary Italian families are imbued of technological devices, especially of a <i>combination of old and new media</i> . Smartphones and TVs are the most used devices in our sample of families (Adolescents: all have and use a smartphone. Parents: 80% have and use Smartphone). Computers (desktop and laptop) are used rarely. Adolescents: 64.7% have a desktop computer but 82.4% never use it. Only 23.5% of parents uses a laptop (Those that use it: 40% always use it; 40% never use it).
2. Internet self-efficacy	Questionnaire (modified scale on self-efficacy to assess: (a) ordinary activities, (b) creative/proactive activities, (c) control and privacy activities)	<i>Parents and children do not substantially differ in their internet-related skills</i> . In both ordinary and control/privacy activities they considered themselves as medium to high competent. While they considered themselves less competent in the creative activities. In general, adolescents rated their skills a bit higher than parents, especially for what concerns: downloading music, creating a group on WhatsApp, and keeping contact with families and friends. Adolescents seem to know more than their parents on how to protect their data, and what to do if they were victims of on-line aggressions (87.6% vs. 53.5%).
3. Level of conflict on ICTs' use	Questionnaire ( <i>ad hoc</i> scale)	Smartphones are the triggers of parent-child conflicts. According to

		parents: Always: 43%; Sometimes: 36,7%. According to adolescents: Always: 29.4%, Sometimes: 47.1%. TV sometimes is the trigger of parents-children's conflicts (Parents: 47.1%, Adolescents, 41.1%).
4. Family functioning	Questionnaire (FACES IV scale)	<i>Families present a good level of functioning</i> (medium-high cohesion and flexibility). No discrepancies were found between parents' and children's perceptions on these variables.
5. Parental Monitoring	Questionnaire (Kerr and Stattin's scale validated in Italy)	Parental monitoring is medium, thus adaptive. Discrepancies between parents and children were found on the dimensions of: parental knowledge and parental control. Parents' rates were higher. This is in line with the literature.
6. Patterns of microtransitions	Family Interview	<i>Stormy/oscillating</i> : 5 families. <i>Quiet/stability</i> : 4 families. <i>Drifting/legitimizing</i> : 9 families. <i>Critical/resisting</i> : 3.
7. Socialization practices/parental mediation	Dinnertime conversations	Specific practices seem to emerge about the use of mobile phones, in particular. We provisionally named them as follows: (a) <i>restrictive</i> (a.1. no mobiles when eating for all family members; a.2. no mobile for children but yes mobile for parents as they need it for work); (b) <i>incorporating</i> (mobiles are used to share gossips, funny pictures, etc. while eating. Both parents and children are allowed to do that), (c) <i>triggering</i> (one family member uses his/her mobile phone to solicit a confrontation which involves all family members. Usually observed at the beginning or at the end of the meals).
8. Adolescents' everyday activities	Subfilms	A large number of subfilms were collected about different kinds of activities. It emerges: (a) tendency to <i>creatively transform</i> the use of

		<p>the medium according to the situations; (b) development of <i>control strategies</i> (e.g. hiding the phone under the pillow while doing homework in the bedroom); (c) use of the phone to <i>share</i> different things within a group of friends, (d) use of the mobile phone '<i>in presence</i>', e.g. in the living room with parents, (e) practices of <i>connection/disconnection</i> on the basis of the season/location, e.g. some adolescents use their mobiles less during the summer and when moving to the countryside during weekends and holidays.</p>
<p>9. Adolescents' goals, emotions, and motivations</p>	<p>Replay interviews</p>	<p>Some adolescents realised that they spent a large amount of time on their mobile phones (and some on TV). They seemed surprised. Others were aware of the actual use of these devices; others again were relieved as they were afraid of being 'addicted'.</p>

In general, preliminary findings provide information about the multifaceted experiences of adolescents with mobile devices, how parents intervene in regulating such practices (i.e. parental mediation), and what parents know about digital technologies and their use.

Considering the sample of the 21 families and parents and adolescents perspectives, almost 70% of the families consider the smartphone a source of parent-child conflict. The remaining 30% did not express particular concern for these devices but for other issues related to adolescents' development (e.g. going to the disco, coming back late at night, etc.).

What differentiate these families? Which strategies parents and/or children developed to cope with the use of these devices? Are the parents' concerns anchored to a real 'abuse' of smartphones and TV?

*Parents* motivated the concern for their adolescent children's usage of digital devices referring to three main arguments:

- a) *Time*: children waste time that they should dedicate to their school activities.
- b) *Relationships*: children get isolated and lack the opportunities offered by face to face interactions
- c) *Age*: younger children (10-13 years) need to be monitored more than older adolescents (15-16 years) as they are more responsible. As children gets older, parents lessen their control. However, mobile phone remains the most used mean of reward/punishment.



The preliminary analyses of the activities of *adolescents in their everyday life* has pointed out that:

- Smartphones accompanied most of the adolescents' everyday activities. This happened for both school-related and leisure time activities.
- Adolescents developed specific strategies to deal with mobile devices (separation, self-monitoring, self-control).
- Some adolescents 'absorbed' the family narrative agreeing on the need to control their use of digital devices in order to avoid the risk of 'addiction'. Others, despite an apparent adhesion to the family narrative, showed 'clandestine activities' which challenged families' rules and norms; others, again, directly confronted with their parents on rules and restrictions on smartphone use.

Preliminary results have been disseminated in conferences and professional meetings. A report to be disseminated in the participant schools is also under preparation. More detailed analyses will be carried out in the future (2016/2017).