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## **New Media & Youth Identity. Issues and Research Pathways**

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## **New Media & Youth Identity. Issues and Research Pathways**

*Chiara Pattaro*\*

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*Abstract:* Media have held a considerable and growing place in the social environment of industrial society in recent decades, transforming the perception that a people have of their place in the world and of their memberships and belonging, creating new paths for social relations, affecting lifestyles, socialization, and communication processes, and the construction of identity itself. The relationship between young people (especially teenagers and adolescents) and new media shows some peculiarities which are worth further reflection to understand the extent and outcomes of these social changes. This article aims to investigate the discourse on youth identity and new media in the social science literature, determining which are the key trends and exploring the more relevant research questions about this theme and the way these topics relate to one another. Titles and abstracts of articles published during the period 2004–2013 were selected from the Scopus social sciences database and they were analysed using different content analysis techniques supported by the T-Lab software. The international literature on these topics presents a certain liveliness and heterogeneity in themes and its perspectives on theoretical and empirical research. Nevertheless, it has been possible to identify some key trends, focusing mainly on the idea of active identity construction by new media.

*Keywords:* identity, new media, youth, socialization

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## Introduction

Media have held a considerable and growing place in the social environment of industrial society in recent decades (Arnett, 1995; 2006; Dubow, Huessmann & Greenwood, 2006), creating a new world of social communications that transcends traditional boundaries of time and space, creating new paths for social relations, affecting lifestyles, socialization, and communication processes and the construction of identity itself. Digital media have transformed the conditions and possibilities for the consumption and production of knowledge and culture, and the perception that people have of their place in the world and of their memberships and belonging (Besozzi, 2006; Pattaro, 2006; 2007).

In particular, the relationship between young people (especially teenagers and adolescents) and new media<sup>1</sup> shows some peculiarities which are worth further reflection to understand the extent and the outcomes of these social changes.

For the so-called Generation Y<sup>2</sup> (the Millennial Generation) - digital natives, rather than digital immigrants - the media environment is more different and complex than it has ever been before.

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<sup>1</sup> The terminology regarding the analysed social phenomena is often nebulous. Using terms such as “digital,” “virtual,” “interactive,” “online,” and “social” media tends to delimit the scope of analysis in different ways. “New media” has become an umbrella term used to describe all emerging and evolving digital technologies (PC, Internet, cell phone and smartphone). In this analysis, according to Zemmels (2012, p. 4), the “new” in “new media” refers in a broad sense to digital formats of communication, but also to the old forms of media reconstituted and redistributed as digital media content. We use the term new media “to describe a media ecology where more traditional media, such as books, television and radio, are “converging” with digital media, specifically interactive media and media for social communication” (Ito et al., 2008, p. 8).

<sup>2</sup> Brosdahl and Carpenter’s (2011) categorization of generations uses the following birth dates for each cohort: the Silent Generation (1925-1945), the Baby Boomers (1946-1960), Generation X (1961-1981) and Generation Y (born after 1981). The next most commonly used terms to define this last generation of young people are the Net Generation (Tapscott, 1998; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005), digital natives (Prensky 2001) and the Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Generation M—for media—(Roberts et al., 2005), digital kids (Hsi, 2007) and i-Generation (Rosen 2010) are also used in a similar way. Each of these terms

Hsi (2007, pp. 517-519) describes the characteristics of digitally fluent youth, stating that they:

- build on their own skills and knowledge;
- take on different identities and multiple roles;
- voluntarily spend time working on a set of technology-based skills, becoming fluent in their use over time;
- co-construct a social reality and establish norms for participation;
- take ownership of media creations and online expression;
- often embrace remix culture to produce meaning through the creation of objects, messages, representations, and other online expressions based on the re-use of electronic expressions;
- consume multimedia that was created by others and created by themselves;
- demonstrate fluency in simultaneously operating and managing multiple devices and media types; and
- work on complex problems that require distributed teams to solve.

Smith (2012, p. 6), extensively referring to the literature, suggests eight dominant claims about digital natives (a.k.a. the Net generation or Millennials), who are:

1. using new ways of knowing and being;
2. driving a digital revolution that is transforming society;
3. innately or inherently tech-savvy, desiring and using digital technology in all arenas;
4. multi-taskers, team-oriented and collaborative;
5. native speakers of the language of technology;
6. embracing gaming, interaction, and simulation;
7. demanding immediate gratification, with short attention spans and no tolerance for delays; and
8. reflecting and responding to the knowledge economy.

In response to prevalent definitions of the Net generation (Net gen), there has been growing criticism of digital native theories. These theories

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refers to some particular characteristic or metaphoric resonance, but generally all of the terms are used interchangeably (Jones, 2010).

are, indeed, often disputed to be a gross oversimplification, since they do not take into account many differences, such as gender, national and regional contexts (and their different technological infrastructures), socioeconomic status and many other variables (Jones, 2010). And, above all, “these approaches seem to completely overlook the subjective dimension of generation-building and the endogenous forces operating inside the generation and between its members” (Aroldi, 2011, p. 62).

Though these remarks are proper, as Smith (2012, p. 9) states: “examining digital native notions with a critical eye does not necessarily mean rejecting all Net gen claims outright. Rather, it involves careful examination of the complexities associated with such claims, and an awareness of assumptions and values that may need to be further questioned or revisited.”

In descriptions of their characteristics, reference to the term “generation” focuses on an historical-social dimension of a space-time, social, cultural and economic context, grouping together peers simultaneously crossing the same or similar experiences and, therefore, influencing their worldview. These inextricably linked dimensions are greatly involved in young people development and in their transition to adulthood.

In this way, generation is therefore a socio-anthropological construct, characterized by specific markers (common experiences and events, rituals and myths). Both as technologies and as cultural institutions or communicative products, media are a set of elements that contribute to shape generational identities (Aroldi & Colombo, 2003; Vittadini et al., 2013). In the case of digital natives, one of these elements seems identifiable with the advent of the Internet and in the expansion of digital culture. They are the first generation to grow up in a digital environment. Information technology, in addition to traditional media, deeply affects their lives. They actively contribute, share, search for and consume content on social media platforms (Bolton et al., 2013) and live in an integrated communications environment, where online and offline are seamless.

For all these (and many other) reasons, the relation that the younger generation has with new media is receiving increased attention.

This relation has clearly advantages and disadvantages in terms of cognitive, emotional and social outcomes (Immordino-Yang et al., 2012).

Throughout history<sup>3</sup>, discussion tends to be polarized in opposite extremes: On one hand, there is the scepticism of those who see in digital technologies a virtual surrogate of everyday reality and relationships and a risk of dissolution of both intellect and social relations. On the other hand, there is instead the enthusiastic adhesion to the idea of the web as a public arena, where everyone has freedom of speech and which offers new opportunities for creativity, community and self-fulfilment.

However, most recent research gives attention to the concrete practices of new media use and to the way communications technologies are integrated into the daily lives of young people. This, for example, is the approach of major international research projects regarding the relationship between generations and new media, such as Mediapro (2006), Eukids online (Livingstone et al., 2011) and many surveys exploring the way in which young and adolescents define personal and collective identities and develop new styles of communication through the consumption of new media (Stella, Morcellini & Lalli, 2008; Giaccardi, 2010; Qualizza, 2012; Riva, 2012).

In the past, the impact of the “old media” was considered primarily from a collective and general point of view. However, the new traits of the relationship between people and the new media is leading sociology, and the social sciences in general, to more deeply explore also the effects that new digital technologies have on individuals (Morcellini, 2002).

The notion of identity is thus central in the understanding of the new media’s role in the everyday lives of contemporary society.

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<sup>3</sup> The distinction between Apocalyptic and Integrated (Eco, 1964), ideal-typical definitions of two opposite ways of representing and judging mass culture, has accompanied Western societies through a dialectic that follows cultural history from the old (at that time, new) media up to the multimedia society. On one hand, there are those who state that digital media represent a social world completely cut off from everyday life. On the other hand, there are those who point out that new media can have an explosive and positive effect on socialization. Besides the debate between Apocalyptic and Integrated, the two positions are equally appealing, which clearly highlights the rise of a new socio-anthropological paradigm, in which it becomes impossible to consider this media issue as neutral (Boccia Artieri, 2002).

### **The intersections between new media and identity**

The formation of the Self is a central part of the socialization process. Identity implies both resonance and difference; it is the result of a process which allows the individual to feel part of a social group and be recognized and, at the same time, to understand themselves as someone unique.

The dialectical relationship between individual and community identities is well summarized by Buckingham (2008, p. 1): “On one level, I am the product of my unique personal biography. Yet who I am (or who I think I am) varies according to the social situation in which I find myself, and the motivations I may have at the time, although I am by no means entirely free to choose how I am defined.”

Identity construction is therefore a continuous process that develops through successive stages over the course of socialization and has both intra-psychic and relational roots (Scabini & Cigoli, 2000). It is linked to experiences in different contexts, within relationships that necessarily influence the subject. It is therefore an ongoing process of identification and individuation, self-recognition and hetero-recognition (Melucci, 1991; Gius, 2004), influenced by the intertwining of individual variations and social stories, and by the continuous demands and values of the culture in which the subject is embedded.

As new media occupy a pivotal role in the lives of youth, they become a potentially crucial element in the construction of identity.

Digital media are indeed tools that different social actors use to construct and test their own identities. They are tools that rearticulate the public and private dimensions, redefining the boundaries. In digital space, the real and virtual converge, merging into a continuum that loses the real/virtual and online/offline distinctions, are defined in toto simply as experience and interaction. Identity becomes a plot on which the subject is constantly working, integrating self and others' narratives, relationships, memberships and media products that he creates or uses (Scarcelli, 2014). In this *bricolage high tech* (Drusian & Riva, 2010), new media provide various resources to manage the Self as well as the interactions.

With regard to the history of scholarship at the intersection of technology and identity, scholars have long argued about the meaning of

this issue, and this continues to be an area of lively debate (Boyd, 2008). Recent perspectives look at identity from different theoretical and methodological positions. The psychology of youth and online identity construction (Turkle, 1995), the digitalization of society (Clippinger, 2007) and the networked society and mass self communication (Castells, 2010), each in different ways, examine the fluidity of identities in mediated digital spaces (Zemmels, 2012, p. 6).

In a comprehensive analysis of the current thinking about youth and identity, Buckingham (2008) introduces five key approaches to framing identity and identifies implications for the study of youth and new media.

First, he looks at psychological approaches, in which identity is a developmental process, and focuses specifically on considering adolescence, marked by the ways in which identity is formed, or at least put into crisis. In this framework, young people's relations with digital media can exemplify this process, providing teens a variety of opportunity for self-reflection and self-realization, or to experience different potential identities.

Second, Buckingham turns to sociological approaches in which identity is marked through an individual's relation to society or culture. The sociological perspective focuses more on the socialization process, analysing the way the social and cultural dimensions of young people's identities (such as social class, gender and ethnicity) are particularly relevant to their interactions with digital media.

The remaining three perspectives Buckingham discusses are concerned with wider, interdisciplinary questions (sociological, anthropological and psychological) about the changing nature of identities, and the means of identity formation in contemporary societies.

With the third approach, the author offers a notion of social identity best understood as "identification," in which an individual's sense of self is marked in relation to the group, a perspective where Goffman's studies on self-presentation and impression management play a central role. With regard to young people's uses of digital media, this approach enables a deeper understanding of online interactions and the ways in which young people construct their online identities.

Fourth, he accounts for the concept of “identity politics.” This approach refers to activist social movements that explicitly question social power in social identity research, resisting repressive construction of identity by others. It includes discourses on class, race, gender and queer (see also boyd, 2008; Zemmels, 2012).

Fifth, Buckingham introduces how modern social theory approaches identity as being what Anthony Giddens calls a “self-reflexive ... project of the self” or what Michel Foucault might refer to as “self-monitoring.” These broader social theories might be useful in analysing specific aspects of young people’s digital cultures, as they consider technological change as one mere part of much broader social and historical developments. In particular, Buckingham suggests that “the *individualization* made possible by digital technology could be seen as an instance of much more general shifts in the ways in which identity is defined and lived out in modern societies, although . . . it is possible to interpret these developments in very different ways” (p. 10).

As the relation between new media and youth identity construction proves to be important, multifaceted and complex, it is also crucial to understand the orientations of the current theoretical and empirical research in this field.

Defining the main topics present in the international debate means indeed to contribute to the understanding of the increasing complexities, but also the challenges and potentialities of new media and youth identity construction.

### **Mapping the field: research method**

By analysing bibliographic elements, such as title, abstract and keywords of scientific publications in a given domain, it is possible to establish the structure of a field of study, identifying the main topics and how they relate to one another (Assefa & Rorissa, 2013) and recognizing a sort of “funnel of interest” (Callon et al., 1986) that highlights the general landscape of the area under investigation (Assefa & Rorissa, 2013). Mapping and clustering

techniques are frequently used to study such relationships, in order to provide insight into the structure of a network (Waltman et al., 2010).

Starting from this assumption, this paper aims to investigate the relationship between youth, new media and identity in the social science literature during the 2004–2013 period, exploring the major topics and the way these topics relate to one another. Inside the wide work of research examining the relationship between youth and new media, identity is the specific lens through which analysis is performed.

For this purpose, titles and abstracts of articles published over the last 10 years were selected from the Scopus<sup>4</sup> social sciences database.

References stored in Scopus are indexed by various fields, including article title, author, and keyword.

In view of the research's goal, we considered references that contained terms related to "identity," "young" and "new media"<sup>5</sup> in their article titles, abstracts or keywords.

In total, 250 articles published in English<sup>6</sup> in 158 peer-reviewed academic journals were selected<sup>7</sup>.

We are aware that this analysis defines the matter only partially (the topic about the intersection between new media and youth identity and the studies published in English in peer-reviewed academic journals that are present in the Scopus database) and therefore does not provide a

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<sup>4</sup> Scopus is the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature. The social sciences database in Scopus offers good coverage of sociology and of its major sub-disciplines and fields of study ([www.scopus.com](http://www.scopus.com)). In Scopus, the social sciences database was selected for its appropriateness in indexing the sociological and social science literature on the topic.

<sup>5</sup> The keyword for the research in Scopus was the following: IDENTITY (or identities; self-identity; selfhood) and NEW MEDIA (or internet; social media; online social network; social network\* site\*; digital media; web 2.0; new media; cyberspace; website\*; Facebook; Twitter; ICT; blog; virtual community\*; chat\*) and YOUNG (or youth; adolescent\*; teenager\*; teen\*).

<sup>6</sup> Articles written in English were chosen, as most relevant academic journals are published in this language (Papaoikonomou, Ryan & Valverde, 2011).

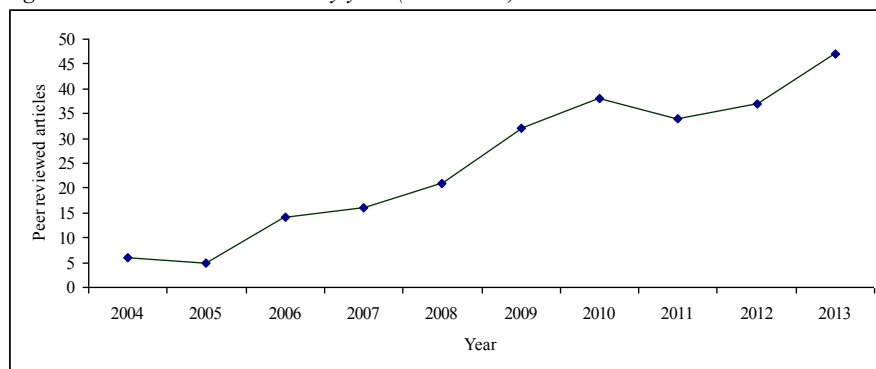
<sup>7</sup> An inclusive approach with respect to keywords was first used. Subsequently, document results in Scopus were reviewed by the researcher, excluding those that were not relevant to the subject. This research in Scopus yielded 363 articles; 113 were excluded from the analysis.

comprehensive representation of the whole field of study. However, we believe that this exploratory research can provide useful information about the key trends and the more relevant research questions from several approaches and points of view.

Figure 1 shows that research about the relation between new media and identity experienced a constant increase during the 2004–2013 period.

The development of the web in “social web” has led to a watershed in ability to analyse the relationship between identity and digital media, and to an increase in the need to understand this relationship in more complex and multidimensional terms. This is reflected in a veritable explosion of interest in this topic.

Figure 1. Peer reviewed articles by year (2004-2013)



The titles and abstracts of the selected articles were analysed using different content analysis techniques supported by T-Lab, software that allows a researcher to effectively combine statistical and hermeneutic analysis of texts (Nigris, 2003). T-Lab provides a set of linguistic and statistical tools for content analysis and text mining (Lancia, 2004)<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> The imported texts consisted of 250 titles and abstracts (corpus), with a size of 44,318 words (occurrences of word tokens). The corpus was therefore considered a medium sized one (Tuzzi, 2003). There were 5,909 word types, and 2,817 words occurred only once (hapax). The word types comprised 13.3% of the occurrences, and the relationship between

At first, a *word associations analysis* was performed, in order to interpret the two keywords with the highest number of occurrences, *identity* and *online*, in the semantic context in which they were produced. This T-Lab tool allows the researcher to pick out co-occurrence<sup>9</sup> and similarity relationships, which determine the local meaning of a selected key term within any corpus. Co-occurrence analysis can be presented both in a table with the cosine indices of association and in a radial plot. It displays words in a multidimensional space, where the spatial proximity between words indicates that those particular words are often both present simultaneously in the sentences of the analysed texts, therefore identifying a core of meaning (Pattaro & Setiffi, 2014).

At a later stage, the topics of the titles and abstracts of the articles were analysed using the *Thematic analysis of elementary contexts* tool, which provides a representation of the contents of the corpus through a few significant thematic clusters. Each cluster consists of a set of elementary contexts (that is, sentences, paragraphs or short texts characterized by the same patterns of keywords), is described by lexical units (lemmas or keywords) and can be considered as contextual fields of meanings, a sort of “lexical worlds” (Reinert, 1995; Emiliani et al., 2011).

### **New media, identity online and online identity: which association?**

To analyse the word *identity* as used in the whole corpus (article titles and abstracts), let us rebuild the semantic field organised around this theme, showing some particularly relevant elements.

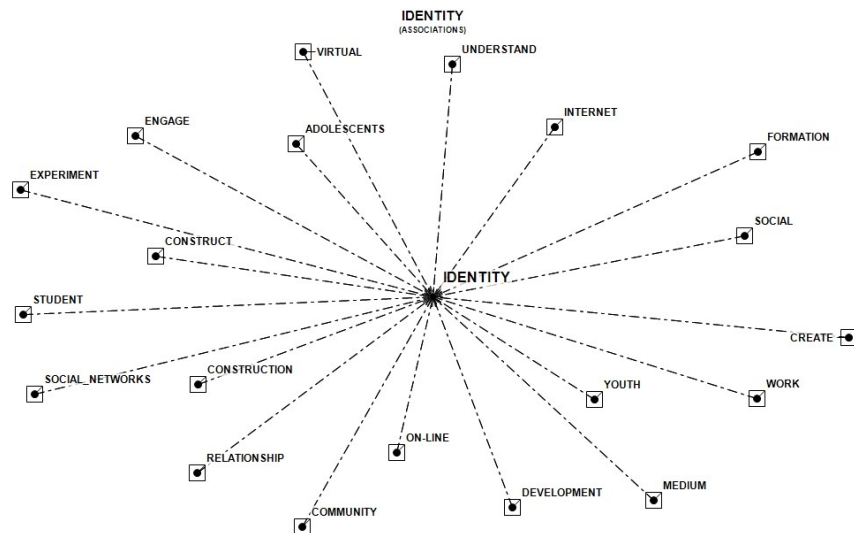
The keywords most associated with *identity* are displayed in the radial plot of Figure 2 and the cosine coefficients found in Table 1.

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hapax and word types was about 47.7%. As statistical studies suggest, if the ratio of word types/word tokens is <20% and the ratio of hapax/word types is <50%, the corpus can be considered analysable by a statistical approach (for the methodological criteria, see Tuzzi, 2003; Bolasco, 2004). The analysis was performed on 976 selected words, with a minimum threshold of 5 occurrences indicated by T-Lab.

<sup>9</sup> Co-occurrences are quantities which indicate the amount of elementary contexts (e.g. sentences, text fragments or paragraphs) in which each lexical unit (e.g. a word) is present together with each other (Lancia, 2004).

Figure 2. "Identity" and its association



The first five associations (*youth, online, construction, construct* and *adolescents*) clearly show that theoretical and empirical studies are moving in the direction of investigating the specific aspects of young people's identity with respect to the new media changes as part of a broader social, cultural and historical development.

Studies focus on identity formation in young people across multiple media contexts, in general, and on the influence of digital contexts on youth identity construction, in particular. These analyses explore the way in which the Internet is a place for youth and adolescents searching for their identity and the impact of interpersonal relationships and digital media use on adolescents' Self.

From this perspective, the new opportunities for self-expression provided by digital media through artefacts moving through time and space are also considered.

What seems to be converging in these studies is the idea of an "active" identity construction. Many researches are, indeed, focused on the way adolescents strategically manage and experiment with their identities through new media through socialization and self-socialization, but also by

obtaining new skills that influence the way they perceive and think about themselves.

Another convergence seems to focus on the way young people construct their personal identities in both the offline and online environments, taking for granted that the two contexts are inextricable in young people's everyday lives.

Table 1. Cosine coefficients of Word associations for "Identity": first twenty lemmas

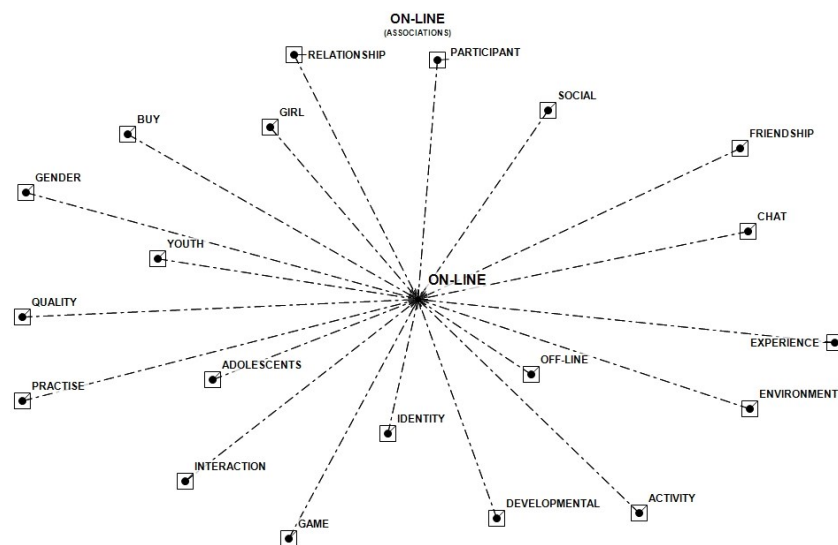
Lemma	Cos	Occ	Co-Occ	Chi <sup>2</sup>
Youth	0,313	413	115	1,605
On-Line	0,272	245	77	5,394
Construction	0,272	48	34	53,551
Construct	0,269	52	35	49,483
Adolescents	0,252	210	66	4,471
Internet	0,235	220	63	1,28
Social	0,233	159	53	5,691
Work	0,206	45	25	21,96
Development	0,199	65	29	12,989
Relationship	0,195	93	34	6,315
Student	0,187	101	34	3,736
Engage	0,186	47	23	13,94
Understand	0,185	56	25	11,14
Formation	0,185	26	17	22,043
Create	0,182	58	25	9,763
Medium	0,180	137	38	0,365
Community	0,178	76	28	5,354
Social Networks	0,177	127	36	0,555
Experiment	0,169	21	14	18,894
Virtual	0,169	35	18	12,594

The analysis of associations related to the word *online* (Figure 3 and Table 2) reinforces these considerations. The five keywords most associated with *online* are *off-line*, *identity*, *adolescents*, *youth* and *girl*.

In the first period of digital media analysis, often there was a clear line of demarcation between the online and offline world. The two universes have been described as separate and having completely different characteristics. In this division, the online life was a sort of "parallel life," in which the offline behavioural rules could be interrupted and could even present a split personality risk.

Today this distinction between “real world” and virtual world is anachronistic. On the contrary, more recent studies consider online and offline contiguous areas, two sides of the same experiences lived and absolutely real (Giaccardi, 2010a), where the boundaries between one and the other are continuously and easily crossed.

Figure 3. “Online” and its association



These associations highlight a focus on investigating the way a youth’s online identity contributes to realising their emerging offline identity.

Research also explores the comparison between norms and values both in offline peer group contexts and in online settings. It analyses hybrid online and offline communities and the online and offline interactions that adolescents have with each other and with digital media, as they contribute to the group and co-construct their group.

This result is in line with the trend of most recent analyses of the social web, highlighting that young people tests online their own identity, rather than showing a personality different from the real one (Scarcelli, 2014).

Table 2. Cosine coefficients of Word associations for "Online": first twenty lemmas

Lemma	Cos	Occ	Co-Occ	Chi <sup>2</sup>
Off-Line	0,368	61	45	122,557
Identity	0,272	326	77	5,394
Adolescents	0,256	210	58	11,345
Youth	0,236	413	75	0,464
Girl	0,193	44	20	20,143
Social	0,182	159	36	1,348
Chat	0,181	32	16	19,976
Environment	0,166	38	16	13,17
Developmental	0,165	15	10	21,962
Interaction	0,163	50	18	9,4
Quality	0,159	13	9	21,114
Buy	0,156	6	6	25,295
Participant	0,155	68	20	4,777
Friendship	0,153	21	11	15,084
Experience	0,149	97	23	1,347
Activity	0,148	42	15	7,579
Game	0,148	12	8	17,528
Practise	0,147	92	22	1,39
Gender	0,146	84	21	1,916
Relationship	0,146	93	22	1,256

The association between the keyword *online* and the lemma *girl*, instead, recalls gender studies. The analysed researches go beyond the classical issue of the differences between boys and girls in new media use. If early studies explored, above all, the gender gap in Internet use and the differences in the meaning of Internet-based communications by gender (Blais et al., 2008), in the recent academic works there seems to be a new interest in examining the female world online.

These studies investigate the topics of girlhood online, girls' online and offline self-disclosure, the way teen girls model their identity through the mediated spaces of fashion blogs and the way they conceptualize their online visual representation. These analyses aim at understanding how girls, through new media, come to realise their emerging offline identity, as a sort of test for womanhood.

As a whole, the crucial points of the associations related to the keywords *online* and *identity* are primarily the way new media (especially the social media) allow youth to accomplish online many of the tasks that are important to them offline: taking care of social relationships with peers and

family, making new friends, and sharing content and ideas. Studies aim also to explore how social media participation can offer youth and adolescents deeper benefits extended into their view of self, community and everyday life.

It is clear that international literature pays attention to the development of many issues, in which new media are in a different relationship with the identity in comparison with past analyses (e.g., see Turkle, 1995). New media recall the idea of areas for “playing” with identity and spaces in which young people can test and change it, with respect to themselves but also to others.

The results of cluster analysis, discussed in the following paragraph, will let us explore these considerations more deeply.

### **New media and the identity dimensions: considerations from cluster analysis**

In order to highlight the main thematic core characterizing the discourses on new media, youth and identity, a cluster analysis was performed. From the analysis, four clusters were identified.

The clusters group lemmas that co-occur in the same elementary contexts. These lemmas are ranked according to the decreasing value of Chi-square (Lancia, 2004). Each cluster has a different weight in percentage terms, on the basis of the relationship between elementary contexts of the cluster and the whole of elementary contexts in the textual corpus.

To interpret each theme emerging from the statistical results, the words with the highest Chi-square value for each cluster and the principal elementary context containing those words were identified. Then, a label was assigned to each cluster.

#### *Cluster 1: Identity's relational dimension online: friendship between self disclosure and self concept*

The first cluster seems to refer to the identity's relational dimension online (Table 3). It describes, through a few important words (such as

*online, communication, self-disclosure, friendship, self-concept, and offline*), the researchers' interest in the nature of adolescents' online exchanges with friends and the value they ascribe to these exchanges (e.g. see Davis, 2012).

*Table 3. Cluster 1: Identity's relational dimension: friendship between self disclosure and self concept*

<i>Lemmas &amp; Variables</i>	<i>Chi<sup>2</sup></i>
On-Line	190,369
Communication	91,516
Self-Disclosure	69,119
Participant	52,221
Friendship	49,545
Chat	45,71
Adolescents	44,513
Self-Concept	33,133
Off-Line	32,344
Riv_061	32,234
Anno_2006	31,67
Technology	29,006
Boy	27,132
Competence	24,754
ICT	24,279
Assistive	24,089
Feature	21,533
Quality	21,443
Real_Life	19,675
Increase	19,179

Members: 285 elementary contexts (e.c.) out of a total of 1184 classified, equivalent to 24.07%.

The quality of online friendships is analysed, taking into account intimacy, trust, self-disclosure and relational satisfaction (e.g. see Cheng et al., 2006) and the development of creative strategies to exchange identity information with peers (e.g. see Subrahmanyam, Greenfield & Tynes, 2004). Studies belonging to this cluster highlight, in particular, indicate the following:

- Online peer communications seem to promote adolescents' sense of belonging and self-disclosure, two important peer processes supporting identity development during adolescence (Davis, 2012).

- Boys and girls alike describe their online social interaction as occurring in private settings, such as the online world, with friends who are also part of their daily offline lives (Gross, 2004).
- Going online to communicate with friends appears to play a positive role in adolescents' social competence (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008) and in adolescents' sense of identity (Davis, 2013), especially for lonely adolescents.

This cluster confirms the bond of new media with the relational dimension of identity. In particular, as Boccia Artieri (2009) states, it is clear that relationships born on social networks are relationships for all intents and purposes. If there are any differences, they are to be found in the social contexts in which they arise, not in their nature. Therefore, as they are relationships for all intents, even those happening online deeply affect the socialization processes and identity construction of young people.

*Cluster 2: Creative learning and identity expression across multiple contexts*

Cluster 2 is the one with the highest percentage of elementary contexts. It is composed primarily of keywords referring to creative learning and identity expression across multiple contexts (Table 4).

The issue that appears in this cluster concerns new media as an empowering technology in the information society, alongside traditional education and socialization agencies, such as school.

Individual learning trajectories across domains are tracked, exploring the way young people's practices of using new media outside schools are different from the inside schools ones, in both form and content (see e.g. Erstad, Gilje & Arnseth, 2013). The way youth artefacts move through time and space is also explored, providing a new lens through which to understand how identity expression occurs in youth media use and production (see e.g. Gibbons, 2010). From this perspective, the relationship between identity and learning seems to be at the core of discussions about how to design successful learning environments for youth (e.g. see Halverson, 2009).

*Table 4. Cluster 2: Creative learning and identity expression across multiple contexts*

<i>Lemmas &amp; Variables</i>	<i>Chi<sup>2</sup></i>
Medium	131,436
Learning	87,134
Learn	86,026
Space	85,378
Youth	78,794
Digital	77,886
Practise	63,948
Explore	60,537
Literacy	57,955
Case	45,768
Place	30,39
Creative	29,662
Production	27,329
Draw	25,851
Experience	24,273
Lives	21,151
Article	20,191
Forum	19,872
Research	19,453
Lesbian	19,228

Members: 374 elementary contexts (e.c.) out of a total of 1184 classified, equivalent to 31,59%.

This refers to the classic debate about the formative polycentrism (Cesareo, 1976; Giovannini, 1987). Educational and socializing offers can be retrieved within all the spheres of the subject's life (e.g. see Maccarini, 2003; Besozzi, 2006; Scanagatta, 2010). This changes the "micro" perspective, since the subject needs to synthesize all the received information and suggestions. In addition, the "macro" perspective changes, as other socialization agencies, that cannot be considered - at least intentionally - educational, are present. In this context, media and new media provide exposure to diverse cultural content, contributing to the construction of the individual's identity, as young people confront new forms of access to information, entertainment and leisure, and new forms and strategies of communication. The new media use produces, therefore, global participation, introducing and strengthening in young people a new experience of socialization, different from the one experienced in other environments (e.g. family, school or work) (Besozzi, 2006).

As young people can competently perform complex tasks outside of school with digital media, but may not display these skills on academic tasks, this cluster demonstrates an awareness that it is crucial for both research and practice to more deeply understand the nature of learning in out-of-school settings and the way these practices develop in digitally mediated learning environments, even supporting learning in multiple settings, including school (Hsi, 2007).

Moreover, the considerable interest in these issues seems to express the awareness that - particularly when addressing learning and literacy that grows out of informal practices - it is necessary to realize that norms and standards are deeply situated in investments and identities of youth and adolescents' own cultural and social worlds. (Ito et al., 2008)

*Cluster 3: (Heterogeneous) sexuality issues between online and offline life*

The third cluster is the least wide (18.58% of elementary contexts) and includes characteristic words referring to some very different issues, all somehow related to sexuality (Table 5). It presents very specific, heterogeneous and, in some ways, opposite questions.

Part of the texts in this cluster focus on one of the most discussed topics about the relationship between adolescents and communications technologies: the "dark side" of new media. Indeed, beyond the opposition between "apocalyptic" and "integrated," the revolution brought about by electronic society also involves many controversial issues, with sometimes problematic implications on adaptive capacity, on emotional and relational equilibrium, and on the cognitive structure of the social actors.

Studies characterizing part of this cluster focus on adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit Internet material (see e.g. Peter & Valkenburg, 2008) and on online-related sexual victimisation or harassment (see e.g. Priebe & Svedin, 2012) in their identity-related issues. Another research subject focuses on pro-anorexia website contents and their effect on the construction of adolescents' identity (e.g. see Juarez, Soto & Pritchard, 2012). These websites, often blogs or forums, are indeed a means of disease participation, as well as a means to spread it among adolescents who use them daily. Again, though with different and negative implications, the relationship between new media and identity is clear: The

online community allows legitimization of the pro-ana identity, and eating disorders feed on the mutual affinity (Riva, 2012).

*Table 5. Cluster 3: (Heterogeneous) sexuality issues between online and offline life*

<i>Lemmas &amp; Variables</i>	<i>Chi<sup>2</sup></i>
Man	116,837
Student	113,114
Facebook	83,024
Sexual	63,013
Heterosexual	46,248
College	45,729
Drive	40,917
Pro-Anorexia	38,013
Professionalism	38,013
Subculture	35,319
Riv_107	33,26
Professional	33,26
Sexual-Minority	33,26
Slang	33,26
Sexually	32,036
Participation	30,842
Intergroup	28,506
Medical	28,506
Serious	28,506
Thinness	28,506

Members: 220 elementary contexts (e.c.) out of a total of 1184 classified, equivalent to 18.58%.

The second theme expressed in this cluster is related to a completely different link with sexuality: issues of sexual identity. This theme, relatively more recent than the previous one, recalls Buckingham's (2008) considerations that new media can afford to explore aspects of identity that may have previously been denied or stigmatized (e.g. allowing to express or even discover aspects of one's own "true self" in relation to sexuality), or simply to share information about these issues.

This second theme is highlighted by research focused on sexual orientation identities and their expression online, on talking about sexuality online, on the role of Internet in finding sexual health information, on sexual minority identity development and on sexual risk-taking behaviours.

All these themes often appear within wider analyses, based on the assumption that sexuality is but one aspect of identity (e.g. see Ross et al., 2005; Lever et al., 2008).

Last but not least, this cluster presents the idea that the Internet fills an important and unmet need for sexual health education and information (e.g. see Mustanski, Lyons & Garcia, 2011).

*Cluster 4: Identity's individual dimensions: self-identity and individualization*

Finally, the fourth cluster groups together lemmas that evoke a focus on identity's individual dimensions.

Although the first characteristic keyword in the cluster is *social*, the lemma is always associated with the context of social network sites, within studies and research (especially in the area of social and development psychology) that consider the way the processes of self-presentation and individualization are intricately entwined with the concept of identity (Table 6).

The concept of individualization present in this cluster seems to refer to the relationships among notions employed in psychological and sociological approaches to identity. In particular, it concerns the psychologically-oriented identity status paradigm, where individuation refers to the basic process of developing a sense of self, and the sociologically-oriented individualization theory, where individualization refers "to the extent to which people are left by their culture to their own devices in terms of meeting their own survival needs, determining the directions their lives will take, and making myriad choices along the way" (Côté & Schwartz, 2002, p. 573). The link between these two disciplinary approaches, especially useful in understanding the relationship between youth identity and new media, appears to be that the individualization process can be interpreted in terms of agency in identity formation (Côté & Schwartz, 2002).

Within this interconnection, the roles of new media in general and social networks in particular are analysed in depth with respect to the self-esteem, individualization and identity-making processes involved in the

presentation of oneself on a public scene and, more widely, to the implications of these tools on contemporary constructs of the Self.

*Table 6. Cluster 4: The identity's individual dimensions: self-identity and individualization*

<i>Lemmas &amp; Variables</i>	<i>Chi<sup>2</sup></i>
Social	134,134
Self	64,245
Gender	56,976
Self-Presentation	33,884
Riv_012	29,455
Film	28,401
Result	24,686
Expectancy	23,847
Female	21,786
Second_Life	21,073
Anxiety	20,282
Individualization	20,282
Predict	19,735
Mention	19,734
Appearance	18,31
Attribute	18,31
Test	18,31
Personal	18,245
Form	18,027
Self-Identity	17,618

Members: 305 elementary contexts (e.c.) out of a total of 1184 classified, equivalent to 25.76%.

This cluster draws attention to many complex, but closely linked considerations, particularly highlighting the following:

- Internet usage allows young people to fulfil critical needs of social interactions, self-disclosure and identity exploration (Bonetti, Campbell & Gilmore, 2010).
- Social networks are used by youth for exploring identity, engaging in social comparison and expressing idealized aspects of the selves they wish to become (e.g. see Manago et al., 2008). In this way, social networks become a tool by which young people can experience different potential identities and provide valuable opportunities for emerging adults to realize possible selves.

- The use of new media stimulates individualization, since it creates opportunities for individuals to establish social connections outside existing communities (see e.g. Caronia & Caron, 2004).

From this cluster, a series of open questions also emerges, stimulating further research, e.g. the importance of identifying possible ambivalence in the way one perceives oneself and the choices made to present one's self to others (Yusof, 2009), and the new opportunities that social websites provide to examine the patterns of gendered identity (Magnuson & Dundes, 2008).

In summary, this cluster reflects the idea that the new media (especially the social media) are tools that develop the Self, and therefore have a high value in identity construction.

## **Conclusion**

Youth and adolescents are engaged in complex processes of identity work to locate themselves in social worlds that are predominantly defined by school, family and peers. It is clear, however, that this process is not just about the experience in the sphere of everyday life, but also involves the interaction with new media, whose influence occurs not only in the transmission of information and knowledge, but also in the processes of personality development (Pattaro, 2006). Engaging in various forms of media is a routine activity for youth and adolescents. A large part of their social and emotional development is occurring with new media.

Starting from these considerations, the debate about the relationship between young people, new media and identity in social science has developed considerably in recent years, together with the development of new (especially digital) media and the social web.

The research question of this work was to understand the current and most relevant issues characterizing this debate. The analysis of the academic literature on these topics presents a certain liveliness and heterogeneity in the themes and perspectives of theoretical and empirical research.

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some key trends:

- the new opportunities for self-expression provided by new media;
- the new media as a playground for both the relational and individual dimensions of identity;
- the way youths and adolescents manage and experiment with their identity through new media by socialization and self-socialization;
- the way youths and adolescents construct their personal identities in both offline and online contexts; and
- the relationships between identity, learning and education.

Two fundamental concepts, on which most of the analysed research seems to converge, also emerge:

- the idea of an active identity construction using new media; and
- the idea that the differences between online and offline identities have been reduced, and the boundaries between one and the other are continuously and easily crossed.

The debate about the dark side of the relationship between new media and the construction of identity in young people is also present, especially in relation to the concern (never solved) about the effects of exposure to sexually explicit material and online-related sexual victimization or harassment, and about new concerns, such as those linked to pro-ana websites.

The global research pathway seems to take into account the need to critically confront the transformation of technological contexts, and it seems to do it with a good balance between analysis of the potential benefits and risks. Within a “mixed” space, online and offline (as in any environment), there are some risks associated with the youth’s “mixed lives”, but also new opportunities emerge, depending on freedom, responsibility and commitment of the involved subjects (Giaccardi, 2010).

Regardless of the disciplinary approaches and of the specific analysed themes, the considered studies seem to agree that the presence of the new media in everyday life assumes an important role in the construction of youths’ and adolescents’ identity and becomes a significant instrument for young people’s agency.

Understanding the ways in which this occurs, through the analysis of the scientific research, means to have at disposal one more tool to develop and evaluate education programs and strategies to give youth and adolescents interpretative instruments to move through their fragmented but interconnected socialization space.

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