

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of social media content, according to young people*

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The cultural industries have been greatly affected by the emergence of online user-generated content, often produced by non-professionals.

A large amount of literature has been produced in the last two decades on the positive or negative role of such Web 2.0 production.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on a “user-generated critique” of online cultural production by providing a qualitative analysis based on 225 young people's evaluations of Web 2.0 content.

According to such a sample, there are several good and bad aspects of UGC, therefore there is also a “grey zone” of digital productions, such as content that is liked “despite” being considered awful.

The paper aims to explore such positive, negative and grey dimensions of UGC and to stimulate new questions about the cultural appropriation of Web 2.0 content by audiences.

Keywords: cultural industries, user-generated content, social media critics, social media consumption

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The paper aims to share a reflection on the “Web 2.0” cultural industry, trying to analyze, through an empirical analysis of the reflections of 225 students, some of the cultural levers that animate young people’s media tastes and consumption.

Cultural production practices have undergone radical changes in recent decades due to the emergence of platforms for user-generated content (UGC), the transformation of cultural disintermediation models, and related changes in fruition practices (Albarran 2013). An extensive academic literature has accumulated on these issues, highlighting diverse and often conflicting positions (Burgess & Green, 2009; Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2013; Eichhorn, 2022).

Especially in the first phase of the emergence of Web 2.0, user-generated production provoked great enthusiasm, linked to the possibility of democratizing the processes of the cultural industry. Henry Jenkins (2006) sees in this dynamic the definitive emergence of a participatory culture, based on the passions and interests of people who are now able to express and share their positions, and definitively hybridize consumption and production practices within transmedia experiences. Other scholars have hypothesized that digital media may have an inherent egalitarian potential in their ability to foster a sharing economy and for many people to emerge and flourish in their capacities for self-expression (Benkler, 2006; Lessig 2004; Bruns 2008) and civic participation (Bennet, 2008), even in contexts of socio-cultural inequality and disadvantage (Kaskazi & Kitzie, 2023).

However, these enthusiastic views were quickly joined by more critical positions and analyses that highlighted problematic aspects related to both the processes of user-generated production, both its dissemination and, ultimately, the intrinsic quality of the products themselves.

Thus, a number of scholars (Peterson 2008; Morozov, 2011; Keen 2007; Lanier, 2010; Lovink, 2011, 2016), taking up in different ways the cultural tradition of the Frankfurt School, have brought forward a critical approach to Web 2.0 and social media, pointing out how they have generated new dynamics of degradation of the cultural product, the result of uncontrolled disintermediation, unbridled protagonism and obsessive pursuit of clicks and popularity.

Moreover, other scholars have pointed to the criticalities and distortions in the perception of online production work: van Dijck (2009), for example, highlights how, behind the rhetoric of great democratic participation in networked production, there is instead a much more asymmetrical dynamic in which a few creators who are able to achieve visibility and success are flanked by a very large majority of “lurkers”, users who maintain a role of spectator or low interactivity and who support the business models and profits of the platforms that host these contents. Fuchs (2021), on the other hand, from a neo-Marxist theoretical perspective, emphasizes the capitalist exploitation aspects of the labor of so-called prosumers. In this vein, Duffy (2015) conducts an empirical investigation of online creators, analyzing how myths such as amateur production, creative autonomy, and collaboration serve to manage the hierarchical, market-oriented, quantifiable, and self-promotional processes peculiar to the blogosphere and Web 2.0.

Finally, the logic of disintermediation is also problematized. Indeed, it is pointed out that the emergence of these participatory environments, far from erasing the presence and arbitrary role of cultural intermediaries, has only transformed them through opaque processes of “platformization” (Gillespie 2018). Through the logics of platforms, the supposed democratization of the process of evaluating cultural products is no longer reserved for a minority of human intermediaries (publishers, film producers, record companies, art critics, etc.), but codified through the definition of algorithmic criteria that determine the value of a product, in essence establishing a more or less violent and inescapable equation of quality=popularity (Bruns 2008).

As this brief theoretical reconstruction suggests, Web 2.0 cultural production has attracted lively interest in cultural and academic reflection. However, despite the extensive debate on the topic, research often settles for theoretical approaches that either ignore the empirical interpellation of audiences or rely on a representation of audiences that is quantitatively constructed through social media’s own metrics on the most popular content or creators.

Building on these reflections, and seeking to go beyond what the platforms’ metrics decry as the “taste” of social media users, the approach proposed in the paper aims to return an assessment of the Web 2.0 culture industry “from the inside”, that is, through the gaze of the core audiences themselves on such products.

The underlying research questions are:

- What are the criteria young people use to judge the quality of online user-generated content?
- Based on these criteria, what content do young people consider useful for their existential and educational journey, and what content do they consider harmful?

Methodology

The work is based on an empirical, qualitative analysis of a sample of 56 reports produced by 225 students enrolled in the second year of the Bachelor of Science in Communication Studies in Turin. The students were divided into groups that worked together for two weeks until the final delivery. Each group was formed voluntarily, by the students themselves: the sample can therefore be defined as one of convenience and self-selected.

The work consisted of analyzing a positive and a negative case of online user-generated content. The analyses were part of an exercise for which the students had been prepared by a theoretical lecture introducing them to the topic of the cultural industry and its developments in the digital context. The choice was therefore made to use these short group reports as action research tools: indeed, the long and sedimented format of the auto-ethnographic report met the dual objective of activating meta-reflective processes while collecting data (Chang 2016). The action research nature of the work also stems from the pedagogical context in which the analysis was embedded: indeed, the purpose of the report production was to stimulate specific media literacy skills in the students, especially those related to the critical analysis of media products (Kellner & Share, 2007). In this sense, the

group work, structured in stages (individual research of examples, sharing and comparison of examples in the group, discussion and drafting of a short report able to summarize the different positions expressed, presentation and discussion in class), had the concrete educational goal of stimulating a practical impact on the students, leading them to exercise, even in their future media consumption, greater skills of analysis, cultural interpretation and criticism of the media products they enjoy.

Far from imposing a normative and moralistic view of one's own online consumption, the auto-ethnographic work aimed to construct a space in which students could explore their pleasure and emotional investment in media and identify its lights and shadows (Buckingham, 2003).

In addition to the theoretical contextualization of the cultural industry, a preparatory work with students also involved field delimitation and a more specific definition of what is meant by user-generated content, identifying some interpretive boundaries between professional and non-professional content within the social production landscape. As the literature itself acknowledges, the line between amateur and professional online production is becoming increasingly blurred. Cunningham and Craig (2019) define online creators, alternately called influencers, Instagrammers, YouTubers, livestreamers, gamers, as those cultural entrepreneurs who receive some form of remuneration from social platforms. However, the criterion of remuneration cannot yet be considered a distinguishing feature in the definition of professional users. In fact, there are many creators who, although they did not start out as professional producers, have reached such a level of consolidation and audience that their online activity is remunerative, in many cases more so than that of a professional journalist, a professional musician in an orchestra, a television scriptwriter, or any other professional belonging to the "classic" fields of the cultural industry.

Similarly, the distinction made by Bordieu, Boschetti and Bottaro (1992) between small-scale producers, who according to the scholars are characterized by low economic capital but greater autonomy and creative independence, and large-scale producers, who instead have economic capital but are forced to use it for a production oriented and directed by market logics, cannot be useful. In fact, although online participatory environments allow users to contribute and start according to small-scale logics, exemplified by the famous "garages" that are assumed to be the internships of very young content creators on Youtube, the supposed "creative independence" and autonomy from market logics that would be ascribed to this category is less self-evident: instead, in many cases, although starting from a small scale, online creators know and deal with market logics directly or indirectly, having introjected them in the form of metrics and algorithmic feedback on their work, coming from users and the platforms themselves (Abidin, 2018, Taddeo 2023a).

Even in the synthesis necessarily proposed here, it is clear that in defining a dividing line between professional and non-professional content producers, it is not possible to use the criterion of remuneration and profit to distinguish the two categories, nor that of creative autonomy from the logic of the market. The criterion offered to the students was therefore to reflect on the organizational nature of creative practice, using a definition provided by the OECD (2007), which defines User Generated Content (UGC) as

1. content published on the Internet

2. that reflects some creative effort, and
3. created outside of professional routines.

As a useful tool to distinguish professional from non-professional productions, the idea has therefore been proposed to identify whether content producers have framed their production within an industrial-type organizational structure, as “wage earners”, or have organized their production and eventual revenue model through a direct relationship with digital platforms. Through this categorization, “non-professional online producers” were defined as both amateur-type creators who share content on a daily basis for reasons of identity, passion, or the development of social ties (with little or no economic return), and creators who produce content to achieve economic goals and who seek to professionalize and monetize their practice.

Invited to reflect on this stimulus, students submitted a very diverse set of examples for collective reflection. These examples were then collected in the course's Moodle platform and later analyzed using the method of content analysis.

Content analysis is an empirical-systematic method used to analyze audio, textual, and visual data (Krippendorff, 2004). The techniques of content analysis, as summarized by Tipaldo (2007), are many, depending on the different ways in which the process of breaking down and defining units of classification is implemented: they range from those of a more quantitative type, in which it is possible to identify classification units clearly and unambiguously grammatically (they include, for example, the traditional content analysis developed in the United States since the 1930s, but also co-occurrence analysis or lexicometric analysis), to more qualitative approaches, in which it is not possible to isolate the signifying units at the linguistic level (as, for example, within images), but proceed by identifying topoi or nodes through which to classify the empirical material. This second approach was more useful for the purposes of this research, which interrogated materials of both textual and visual nature.

The content was coded and analyzed using the qualitative analysis software NVivo 13, which is particularly effective in its flexibility of use for tagging and categorizing even audiovisual materials and for the possibility of crossing mixed techniques of analysis (manual coding with the automatic search for specific lexical terms, for example).

The main nodes of categorization were:

- type of content;
- values associated with the content;
- values associated with the publisher;
- values associated with potential audiences;
- style of the content;
- function of the content.

From the analysis, despite the heterogeneity of the corpus, some common lines of cultural interpretation of user-generated products emerged, which will be briefly presented in the following paragraphs.

The beauty of User Generated Content, according to young people

From the categorization of the 56 positive examples suggested by the youngsters, three main types of content can be identified:

- content that provides information, cultural and scientific popularization;
- content that promotes social values related to women's empowerment, minority rights, and environmental advocacy;
- pages and profiles of users who, with their testimonies and experiences, broaden the audience's horizons by proposing new topics, places and points of view.

The following sections attempt to elaborate on the characteristics of the different types.

Cultural information and dissemination content

Among the positive examples most often cited by the sample are user-generated online information spaces such as *Will-ita*. Here is one group's description of this profile:

Will_ita is an active community on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, LinkedIn and YouTube. It has about 1.5 million followers on Mark Zuckerberg's social media. To describe the content Will brings to his profiles, we can use the community's own slogan: "A space for the world's curious. To understand what's around us (and look good at dinner)".

On the official pages, there are also pills, video presentations, carousels, etc. that bring clarity to a wide variety of topics.

Other often-cited examples in this direction are creators who act as popularizers on scientific, historical, or philosophical topics. The role of these online actors is to provide channels of information and updates that are perceived as reliable and entertaining, enabling informal forms of learning in the interstices of everyday social entertainment (Taddeo 2023a).

Content that promotes social values

A second category of content that young people find constructive and useful is that which advocates and promotes social issues and causes.

For example, creators who promote issues such as environmental protection, minority rights, respect for one's own body and its differences, and gender issues are particularly popular.

As an example, the group cites the *Freeda* collective:

Freeda stands for women's freedom of expression; its content is meant to inspire women of all generations. (...) On a social level, it promotes the integration of women, since it publishes content

and advice that can help those who, at any given time, feel inferior to others with respect to a particularity or issue.

Young people therefore appreciate creators who are strongly linked to social causes, a trend that is also confirmed by the largest studies on cultural trends in the social sphere (Meta 2022). Their trust and affection also concern creators who turn social causes into a blatant business lever, showing how the sphere of values and the sphere of consumption are becoming increasingly intertwined in the new generations.

Content to "broaden horizons" and explore

Finally, a third category may refer to those creators who allow users to step outside their usual interpretive practices to learn about new contexts, viewpoints, or curiosities of the world. These creators stimulate the aspirational sides of young people, projecting them towards the idea of continuous growth and pushing them to explore the world by leaving the local dimension and traveling, at least online, to new horizons.

Thus, for example, the reference, among positive examples, to a creator like *Emanuele Malloru*:

Emanuele Malloru, a young videomaker, recently established himself on YouTube for his motivational content. In this video, together with Alex Bellini (extreme explorer), he navigated 300 kilometers down the Po River to its delta in a raft made entirely of discarded materials. The aim: to look at what surrounds us from a different perspective (in particular the role of rivers), to rediscover the manual know-how, the ability to reinvent, to give a second chance to those things that on the surface seem to be just "waste".

The ugliness of User Generated Content, according to young people

On the other hand, examples of content that the sample judged to be negative and likely to lower the general cultural level include:

- profiles of characters that promote harmful lifestyles through the display of vulgarity;
- content such as memes, gifs, stickers that promote the uninhibited use of irony to mock and attack others;
- fake news pages and sites that may promote a culture of misinformation;
- sites that encourage unbridled competition, from seemingly harmless challenges, to pro-ana and pro-mia sites that encourage harmful eating behaviors, to body advice sites that promote an obsessive focus on appearance.

Below are examples of each of these categories.

The trash that anesthetizes

The case of the influencer *Er Faina* was cited by several groups as an example of degrading content on social media.

Boys and girls cited this creator for different reasons, but which can be united by the theme of vulgarity and decidedly politically incorrect comedy. The most harmful element of this character, according to the youngsters, is his ability to penetrate public opinion through crude and immediate comedy, capable of desensitizing the audience, belittling and mocking the most constructive instances of the network. Here is how this influencer is presented by one of the groups:

Er Faina is an influencer from Rome, followed by many young people. In particular, this frame was taken from one of his unfortunately famous videos in which he belittles and denies the problem of catcalling in society. Videos of this kind desensitize users to social issues that are still being fought for today. All this leads to a regression in the achievement of collective sensitivity.

Toxic Irony

Other examples of content deemed harmful involve a more subtle, and therefore more ambiguous and insidious, irony. If, in fact, characters like *Er Faina* seem to face their politically incorrect role head-on, standing with a certain pride as the Italian banner of “alt-right” culture, many other examples cited operate with more subtle practices, in the folds of seemingly harmless and generalized irony. Here are some examples, identified by the sample, in this regard:

Alphawoman is a pure trash site. In this case, women are highlighted in an ironic way, and the site is often ridiculed. On a social level, this results in a site where people feel free to make fun of some common female aspects. The logo on a white background gives prominence to a female figure at her trashiest, with a bottle in her hand and her middle finger raised. It is a perfect example of mocking and poking fun at women in a light and ambiguous, yet edgy way.

In this category, we could also include a certain use of memes and stickers, which, according to one group’s analysis, “have become viral content, used superficially, inviting to be reinvented by often spreading misconceptions, nastiness, stereotypes”.

Under the guise of harmless visual additions, many stickers are identified as elements that, thanks to their viral spread, quietly and transparently spread often harmful social images and values, and through which: “over time, young people have begun to mock strong themes (racism, homophobia), even going so far as to depict scenes of explicit violence (self-mutilation, beheadings)”.

The images collected as evidence are clear examples of these trends (Figure 1).

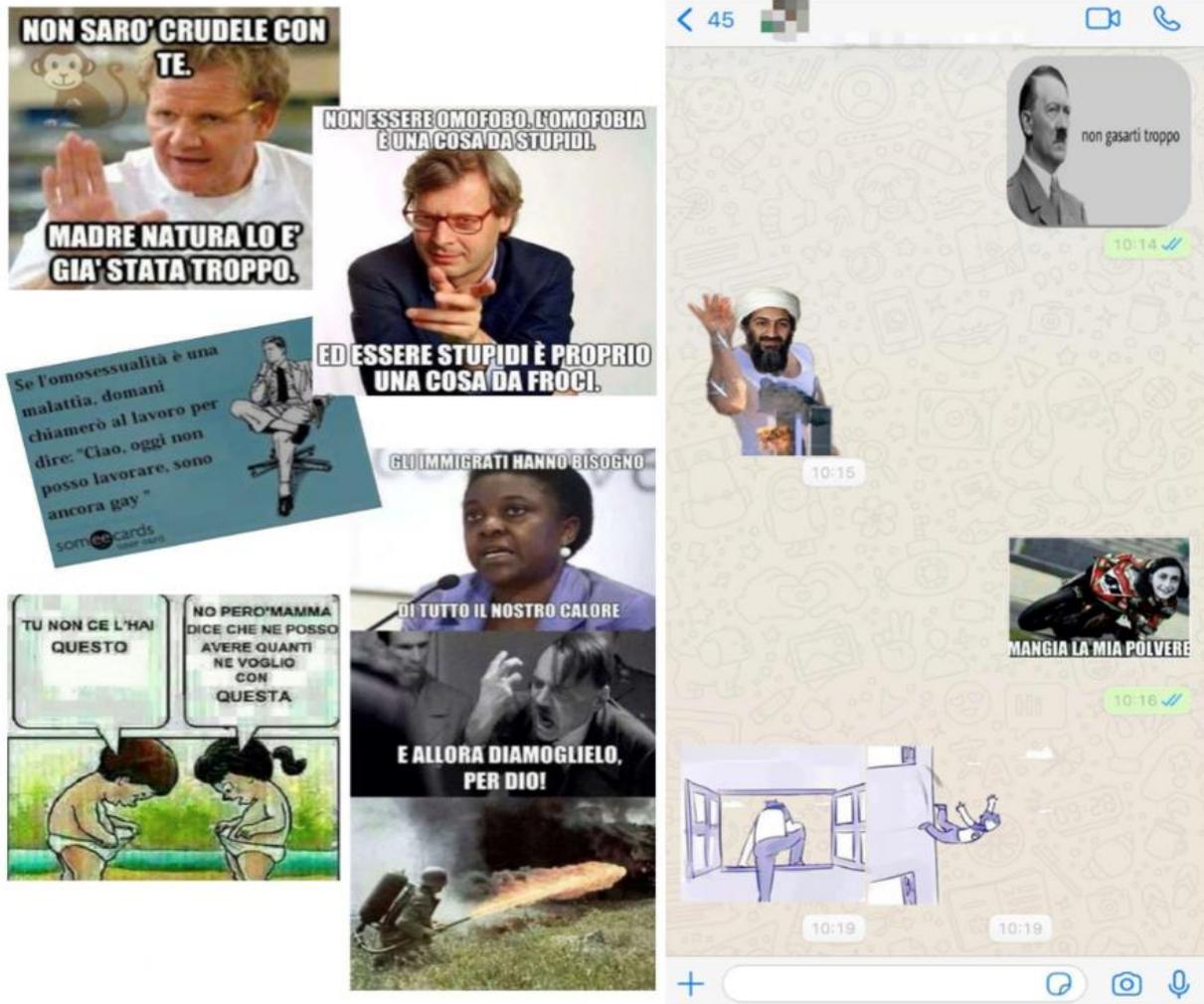


Fig. 1. Examples of stickers and memes collected from the sample through screenshots from their cell phones. Stickers and memes often promote false and dangerous values and ideas, according to the sample, through a seemingly innocuous format such as ironic and satirical

Disinformation and clickbait

Another strand of Web 2.0 content that young people see as harmful and negative for the public are channels that systematically spread misinformation. Here there is a reflection of young people on such issue:

Il Fatto Quotidiano is the classic and representative symbol of a blog dedicated to fake news. The name recalls the masthead of the Travaglio newspaper (Il Fatto Quotidiano), but reverses two letters, deceiving users into believing in its authority. (...). The naivety of users, who often only read the headlines, combined with the carelessness of not checking the seemingly correct link, leads to heated confrontations in the comments, bringing traffic and notoriety to sites that do not deserve it. Low attention threshold + sensational news = clickable content.

Other examples are not so much blatant examples of fake news, but rather information practices that are considered low-level and of little added value, such as those conveyed by the *Webboh* channel:

Webboh.it is now a reference community in the social media world, in fact it is present with a Youtube channel, Twitter and Instagram profiles. Especially on the latter, it has been able to reach more than half a million followers in less than a year (...). Webboh's main activity is to report on various scandals involving different web stars, including gossip about some Youtubers, TikTokers, Instagrammers and Streamers (...) In addition, it can happen that the reported facts involve sensitive issues, such as cyberbullying, which is however trivialized with the aim of creating mere outrage or slacktivism.

Excessive competitiveness

Some groups cited content, such as some challenges, that are supposed to be a format for fun and confrontation, but instead fuel competitive tendencies that are seen as toxic and, in some cases, even self-destructive.

The Blackout Challenge. The dangerous challenge, depopulated on TikTok, to resist for as long as possible with a tight belt around your neck. The depopulation of this trend, which has become deadly, has a harmful effect on users, especially teenagers.

In any case, competitiveness is not just about overtly challenging and competitive formats, but rather is identified as a toxic and insidious “tone of voice” that permeates all social communication.

The Instagram page @world_record_egg is an example of digital trash because it creates superfluous competition on trivial topics and shows once again how people tend to follow the masses

Discussion

From the analysis of the examples offered by the 225 involved students, it was possible to construct a rather interesting map of the cultural values and meanings that young people ascribe to content generated in online platforms by “non-professional” users.

The qualitative mapping of the content considered to be of high quality, as opposed to the content considered to be low quality and harmful, made it possible to answer, albeit partially and with some limitations, the research questions posed.

Specifically, with regard to the first research question, i.e. the criteria by which boys and girls judge the quality of content, it emerged that the products judged to be of value generally refer to specific types: content of an informative nature that promotes and deepens social

and activism-related issues, or content capable of stimulating curiosity and the desire to explore. Thus, a cross-cutting value attributed to the quality and usefulness of user-generated online content is that of providing a concrete contribution to the acquisition of skills, information and updates (Taddeo 2023b).

At the same time, it was possible to better focus on what, on the other hand, are the criteria behind negative user-generated reviews of social media products.

In this sense, particularly negative is the judgment on content that generates disinformation, but also on certain communicative “styles” such as the use of irony and parody in an aggressive and toxic way, or the pervasive competitive approach often carried out through these production practices.

The collection of examples and their discussion, reported in the words of the students themselves, seemed to be particularly useful in answering the second research question, since it returned not so much specific cases in a descriptive way, but rather the cultural, emotional approaches and signifying practices attributed to them.

The work yielded some interpretive insights into youth media consumption and the criteria and values behind judging user-generated content.

Alongside the empirical results, some thoughts and insights can be proposed for further problematization. At a general level, a first reflection may concern the placement of this content within more or less defined and codified media categories. The analysis shows that young audiences do not use specific coding strategies in this sense. Among the content presented as positive examples, several types emerge: web pages, social profiles, specific posts or memes, YouTube channels, Spotify content and “minor” social media content. The heterogeneity of media and content types shows that there is no “genre” effect that leads to the identification of certain content from certain channels or platforms as naturally invested with more or less cultural value, prestige, credibility or appeal. The attribution and evaluation of the quality of content is made on the basis of very dynamic and fickle subjective parameters.

It is interesting to note, however, that these parameters, according to the research, are only partially influenced by the logics of platformization. For example, the main criterion that regulates and governs the market of the Web 2.0 cultural industry, namely the popularity of the content, based on the logic of celebrity (Marwick, 2013) and the visibility and engagement metrics of each platform, is paradoxically absent from the sample’ evaluations. Indeed, among the negative examples, there is no hesitation to include actors and content - such as *Er Faina* or *Il Masseo*- to which social metrics attribute excellent popularity and visibility.

The numerical “success” on social, achieved through hits of likes and metrics, therefore does not automatically correspond to a recognition of cultural legitimacy on the part of young people: it is what I called in the title of the article “the bad” of social media. The bad of the social media is perceived by young people in an interstitial way in relation to what they like or dislike: it is the gray area that encompasses products that they like, while at the same time feeling their poor and somewhat “toxic” value.

Although it is not possible here to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation as to why this short-circuit between popularity and “badness” of social media content is created, we can

try to put forward some hypotheses based on the sample's own reflections, but which would merit further investigation and specific research.

First, one cause of this discrepancy between quality and popularity could be an effect of "algorithmic inertia". Although young people are able to activate a critical view of social content if they are asked to do so in appropriate educational settings, from a pragmatic point of view, in everyday practice they are unwilling to actively carry it out by "resisting" the content proposed by the algorithms and trying to differentiate their consumption from what the newsfeed suggests. Some content is therefore initially created for its ability to surprise and entertain, only to be pushed by the algorithms and find weak defense mechanisms in the audience, which is reluctant to move from a passive critical sense to the direct action of rejecting a content.

A second factor can be related to the widespread use and appreciation of the ironic register: an ingredient that, according to young people's testimonies, is indispensable in the packaging of contemporary cultural products and capable of making them successful beyond the "objective" value of a cultural product. Irony, self-mockery, parody, and political incorrectness emerge as powerful levers of cultural dynamics at the social level (Nagle 2017; Philips 2015; Miltner 2014), capable of activating various psycho-social mechanisms: the possibility to uplift and lighten oneself by smiling in comparison to the everyday; the possibility to exorcise fears and limitations, also glimpsed in one's own experience and to develop a sense of competence and protection by exposing oneself (Taddeo and Tirocchi 2021); and finally, as described by a boy in a group, the possibility to "feel better" in comparison to the ugliness that is shown, exaggerated, and ridiculed online.

While a fairly rich literature has been devoted to the aesthetics of comedians and their role in social media culture (Milner 2016; Shifman 2014; Phillips and Milner 2017; Phillips 2016), the analysis proposed here highlights the need to investigate the role of comedians and irony in social media cultural processes as ambivalent and perturbing levers that elicit mechanisms of attraction and repulsion towards online content, and that underlie the mysteries and contradictions of online virality dynamics.

Research limitations and conclusions

Given the food for thought provided by this exploratory study, some limitations of the work should be highlighted, which will require further study and possible integration with different research techniques in the future.

An important limitation is the type of sample involved in the work: certainly a specific target audience, already endowed with its own cultural and educational background on the issues of media cultures. It will therefore be interesting in the future to compare this type of analysis, coming from a somewhat "engaged" audience with media analysis skills, with that of young people from other socio-cultural backgrounds and even other age groups.

A second limitation is related to the format in which the analyses are returned: auto-ethnographic reports, while having the merit of allowing for "settled" and long-term reflection, are often synthetic and thus not always able to return, in a few sentences, the complexity of

the thinking behind them. A useful complement to this approach could therefore be the use of individual interviews, which would make it possible to go deeper and explore the issues raised.

However, I would also like to emphasize a methodological stimulus that I believe emerges from this research: namely, the possibility of tracing, through young people auto-ethnographic analyses, some critical and meta-reflective digital skills that are often difficult to capture and “measure” with standardized tests and questionnaires. In this sense, research on digital literacy often points out, with disappointment and concern, the lack of critical skills of young generations in dealing with digital consumption on social. From such analysis, however, it seems possible to reaffirm the usefulness of accompanying standardized tools (tests, questionnaires) and consumption metrics (such as those provided annually, for example, by the social media platforms themselves) with a more culturalist and qualitative approach to the analysis of skills, leading to listening to the voice of the users themselves regarding their perceptions and values, distinguishing behaviors and consumption data from the cultural elaborations that are intertwined with these them.

Compared to the emerging trend of the flattening and metrification of taste, dictated by the affordances of the platforms themselves, the need to give voice to audiences is thus asserted, restoring three-dimensionality and agency to their consumption practices, which are also often ambiguous and contradictory (Hall, 2012; Picone et al. 2019; Livingstone 2019), and reworking constructs of expertise based on self-perceived cultural meanings, beyond data-driven performances.

Nota biografica

Gabriella Taddeo insegna Teoria e Tecnica dei Media Digitali e Sociologia della Comunicazione presso l'Università di Torino. Si interessa da anni di pratiche culturali e forme della socialità digitale. Fra le sue recenti pubblicazioni su questi temi 'Persuasione Digitale. Come Persone, Interfacce, Algoritmi ci Influenzano Online' (Guerini Scientifica, 2023) e 'Social. L'industria delle Relazioni' (Einaudi 2024 in press).

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