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Escape from the Streets. The Spatial Withdrawal of Adolescents in Teen Dramas of the Last Decade[*]

Emiliano Ilardi[**]
University of Cagliari

Alessio Ceccherelli[***]
Link Campus University

The category of the "adolescent" entered public discourse in the early twentieth century primarily as a problem. Newspaper accounts described the unsettling visibility of urban youth who appeared to elude the main agencies of modern socialisation – school, family, and wage labour – and were often associated with street bands, deviance, and petty crime. After the Second World War, however, the figure of the "teenager" gradually acquired cultural autonomy and, in many narratives, a positive aura. Cinema, popular music, and youth subcultures transformed the street into an initiatory space: a laboratory of identity, a theatre of conflict, and a site in which adolescents could temporarily exit institutional interiors and experiment with autonomy. From the 1980s onwards, this configuration began to change. Mainstream television and the expanding circuits of consumer culture increasingly relocated adolescence to regulated interiors – bedrooms, schools, malls, and other domesticated settings – while late-twentieth-century street-based subcultures persisted only as a residual "long tail". This process intensified in the early 2000s and radicalised in the 2010s. Contemporary teen dramas depict adolescents less as urban nomads than as subjects enclosed within micro-spaces such as bedrooms, corridors, and platform interfaces. The street largely reappears as a sign of danger, surveillance, or moral downfall, rather than as a space of discovery or freedom. This article conceptualises this transformation as a form of spatial withdrawal within the media imaginary of adolescence and interprets it as the outcome of a long historical genealogy rather than as a sudden decline in sociability. Focusing on teen seriality of the last fifteen years, the analysis traces this shift through three intertwined dimensions: the rise of a pervasive digital mediasphere that virtualises practices once tied to urban movement; the consolidation of informational capitalism, which erodes the boundary between leisure and labour by anticipating expectations of productivity and visibility into youth; and the intensification of social pressures, which displace conflict inward and foreground mental health, identity work, and defensive forms of self-protection. By treating the imaginary as an active symbolic infrastructure, the article shows how transformations of experience become narratively plausible before they are fully legible as sociological facts. In this perspective, the marginalisation of the street signals broader redefinitions of subjectivity, social control, and the conditions of becoming adult.

Keywords: adolescent imaginary; spatial withdrawal; teen drama; digital mediasphere; informational capitalism

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[**] ilardi@unica.it
[***] a.ceccherelli@unilink.it

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Over the past fifteen years, the media imaginary of adolescence has undergone a radical transformation. Whereas throughout much of the twentieth century and the early 2000s adolescents were often portrayed as metropolitan nomads, free to explore the city and its possibilities, contemporary youth narratives appear to have abandoned the streets in favour of domestic and interior spaces. Recent teen TV series (*Euphoria, Skam, Mare Fuori, Sex Education, 13 Reasons Why*, to name just a few) depict boys and girls increasingly enclosed within their own microcosm, made up of bedrooms, school corridors, and social networks. The street, once a privileged site for forging social relations autonomous from school and family and for youthful rebellion, now appears only sporadically. Compared with the past, it is framed almost exclusively in negative terms: a synonym for danger, deviance, or ruin, never for discovery, exploration, or sociability.

This shift raises questions about the cultural, economic, and technological forces that have produced such a spatial withdrawal of adolescence. Unlike the established academic literature in psychology, which typically uses the expression “social withdrawal” (Coplan & Bowker, 2014; Li & Wong, 2015), this article instead adopts the adjective “spatial”. The point is that adolescents do not withdraw primarily from social relationships – although these are often rigidly curated on digital platforms – but rather from spatial ones. How, then, did we move from the myth of the teenager *on the road* to the figure of the *hikikomori*, digitally hyperconnected yet self-confined to a single room? What social changes have pushed narratives to shift their centre of gravity from the outside (cities, streets) to the inside (the home, the minds of young people)? This article addresses these questions by tracing, step by step, the transformations of the adolescent imaginary and the factors that have shaped them. It first sketches a historical account of the figure of the adolescent in twentieth-century media, in order to contextualise the shift from open to enclosed spaces. It then turns to the period 2010-2025 and examines three drivers of the shift from urban exteriors to interior spaces: digital platform environments, informational capitalism’s early capture of youth, and intensifying socio-psychological pressures that foster introspection and isolation. Finally, the article considers possible future trajectories of the adolescent imaginary in light of these ongoing trends.

The Imaginary as a Lens for Reading Social Transformations

To analyse a transformation as profound as the interiorisation of adolescent experience, it is not enough to focus on observable social behaviours or on the technological changes that accompany them. Rather, we must interrogate the imaginary that renders such behaviours thinkable, desirable, or fearful. The imaginary is not a mere repertoire of images, nor a passive mirror of social reality. It is an active system that organises individual and collective meaning, gives symbolic form to conflicts, fears, and desires, and helps orient cultural, social, and political practices. It can also anticipate change, often in narrative or figural form, before transformations become fully legible at the social and economic levels (Abruzzese,

2001; Legros et al., 2006; Tarzia, 2009; Grassi, 2012; Ragone, 2015; Marzo & Mori, 2019). Since its classical formulations (Durand, 1960; Castoriadis, 1975), theories of the imaginary have shown that societies do not merely produce institutions and material structures, but also horizons of meaning that define what it is legitimate to desire, fear, or imagine. From this perspective, the imaginary functions as a symbolic infrastructure: it does not mechanically determine behaviour but makes certain actions possible and inhibits others by establishing shared interpretive frames. To study the imaginary, then, is to observe society at the very moment it narrates itself, often before it fully understands what is taking place.

In this process, media play a decisive role. Cinema, television, serial storytelling, and digital platforms do not simply represent the social world. They give it form by offering narrative models, character types, symbolic spaces, and trajectories through which everyday experience is interpreted. In this sense, media also operate as a training ground for present and future transformations. Contemporary television seriality is a key site of imaginary production. Its duration, affective accumulation, and transnational circulation allow it not only to register diffuse sensibilities, but also to organise them into coherent, recognisable, and repeatable narratives.

From this standpoint, adolescence is an especially sensitive observatory. As a liminal phase suspended between dependence and autonomy, it concentrates expectations, fears, and desires that concern the social body as a whole. It is therefore no coincidence that, historically, shifts in the adolescent imaginary have often anticipated broader changes in the relations between individuals and institutions, between public and private space, and between work, consumption, and leisure (Moretti, 1999). Analysing how adolescents are represented – where they move, which spaces they inhabit, and which conflicts they traverse – thus means identifying early signals of a redefinition of the social contract (Cuzzocrea et al., 2023).

In this perspective, the gradual displacement of the adolescent from the street to enclosed spaces, and ultimately to digital and psychic interiors, cannot be read merely as an aesthetic or narrative variation. It signals a deeper transformation in the relationship between subjectivity and the external world, between embodied experience and symbolic mediation, between freedom and control. Before becoming a fully measurable sociological fact, spatial withdrawal takes shape in the imaginary, where it is rehearsed, normalised, and rendered narratively plausible.

It is from this theoretical framework that the following pages reconstruct the historical evolution of the adolescent imaginary, showing how the centrality of the street – as a symbolic space of freedom, risk, and conflict – has gradually given way to increasingly internal and regulated scenarios. From the early twentieth century to the platform era, this trajectory allows us to read adolescence not only as an object of representation, but as a privileged mirror of the metamorphoses of modernity and late modernity.

The Adolescent and the Street: A Historical Evolution of an Imaginary

The term “adolescent” appeared in journalistic discourse in the early twentieth century and initially carried a markedly problematic connotation. Its emergence must be situated within a broader historical context. Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the industrial city became both the laboratory of modernity and the stage on which collective fears accumulated, especially those linked to crowds, anonymity, and social mobility. Within this framework, “urban youth” often took on a liminal and ambivalent status. It was seen as a promise of the future when tied to production or the nation, and at the same time as a threat to social order. In public discourse and journalistic accounts, adolescence was associated with troubling behaviour, deviance, and petty crime. Street gangs were portrayed as resistant to the main institutions of modern socialisation, namely school, family, and work. The adolescent thus appeared as a subject lacking full social citizenship and was frequently represented as an excess within the urban order. It was figured as a young body circulating in spaces deemed improper and eluding the disciplinary grammars of the factory and the school system (Passerini, 1994; Savage, 2007). In this initial phase, adolescence was not yet a culture in its own right, but an interpretive category naming a problem, namely the irruption of youth into public space as a social issue.

It is in the post-war period that youth gradually acquired an autonomous and more positive cultural status, supported by the convergence of economic growth, mass education, and the consolidation of the cultural industries. From the 1950s onwards, the Anglo-American term *teenager* came into use to designate a life phase increasingly distinct from both childhood and adulthood. This phase was characterised by specific codes, rituals, languages, and cultural products. Adolescence thus became a symbolic category sustained by both media and markets. A recognisable youth audience emerged, with its own practices and forms of consumption, accompanied by an identity rhetoric that framed young people as “new” subjects with a distinctive lifestyle. During this period, an imaginary of youth as counterculture took shape, marked by opposition to adult values, rejection of institutions, and identity experimentation. Adolescent rebellion was not only ideological but also spatial. It involved leaving institutional interiors and occupying urban exteriors.

Canonical films and novels fixed this grammar in a set of archetypal figures. Pasolini’s *Ragazzi di vita* (1955) depicts a working-class adolescence that inhabits the city’s peripheries and margins, engaging the street as a space of bonds, violence, desire, and survival. The Hollywood classic *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), with the iconic figure of James Dean, frames suburban adolescent rebellion as a crisis of recognition, a generational conflict, and a search for belonging. Here, the street and the automobile function both as means of escape and as tools of visibility. In these narratives, the city is not merely a setting. It becomes a palimpsest to be rewritten through signs, bodies, noise, and disruptive aesthetics. In all these cases, the street is not a neutral backdrop. It operates as a symbolic framework that allows adolescents to exist outside prescribed roles, to experiment with autonomy, and to confront the modern ambivalence between freedom and risk (Savage, 2007).

For roughly three decades after the war, the metropolis and the youth imaginary remained closely linked through practices of urban exploration. Moving freely through the city became an almost existential necessity for young people and, moreover, a form of informal learning. Fundamental experiences of socialisation took place on the street. Individual and collective identities were forged there, and alternative life possibilities were imagined beyond those offered by the adult world. Urban exteriors, such as streets, neighbourhoods, and informal meeting places, stood in contrast to domestic or scholastic interiors. Open spaces were associated with freedom, unpredictability, and discovery, whereas closed spaces embodied the authority of capitalist production and social reproduction. In this opposition, public space played a crucial symbolic role. It enabled encounters with alterity and contingency, made social conflict visible, and allowed forms of autonomy that had not yet been domesticated. It is therefore not surprising that, between the 1950s and the 1970s, numerous youth subcultures developed in close relation to urban space. These ranged from teddy boys and rock'n'roll to the hippie movement, British punk, and later hip-hop in American inner cities. These cultures were not merely musical styles or aesthetic formations. They were practices of spatial appropriation that involved occupying streets, marking territories, and inventing collective rituals. Studies on post-war youth cultures show that such practices often worked as bottom-up re-significations of the commodities and symbols of the cultural industries. They subtracted these elements from market logics and transformed them into antagonistic identity languages (Hebdige, 1979; Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004). Within this framework, unproductivity itself acquired a political and symbolic value. Youth claimed a time that was not immediately useful and not yet converted into performance or career. The utopian peak of this season was reached in the movements of the 1960s, before turning into the more nihilistic and disenchanted forms of European punk and, later, American *gangsta* rap, where the street also became a space of survival, violence, and informal hierarchies.

From the 1980s onwards, however, a significant shift occurred in the media imaginary of adolescence. This change concerned both space and the media that represented it. Generalist television, family-centred seriality, and mainstream pop culture progressively relocated the focus towards enclosed and regulated settings such as bedrooms, schools, diners, and suburban shopping malls. The growing success of the sitcom is emblematic in this respect, as it is a genre almost entirely set indoors. The teen sitcom, in particular, explicitly aims to remove young people from the street as a formative space. It suggests that meaning and formative experiences should not be sought in public urban space, but in more domestic and controlled environments capable of mediating class and generational conflicts. These television products centre on the everyday lives of adolescents who are often "saved" from the street and placed within protected and predictable settings. Examples range from *Happy Days* and *Diff'rent Strokes* to *Beverly Hills 90210*, *The Cosby Show*, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, as well as Italian productions such as *I ragazzi della 3ª C*. This shift signals a broader process of domesticating adolescence, which is gradually integrated into mainstream popular culture and, above all, into media-driven circuits of consumption (Bello, 2021). The cultural industries attempt to construct an adolescent figure that is more compatible with family life and market logics. The young person ceases to be a marginal

and potentially threatening presence, but a subject to be integrated, oriented, made recognisable, and ultimately manageable.

This does not mean that, during the 1980s and 1990s, the imaginary of the young person *on the road* disappeared entirely. On the contrary, several cultural forms continued to frame the street as a space of excess and transgression. One notable example is the so-called *chemical generation* depicted in *Trainspotting*, first in Irvine Welsh's novel (1993) and later in Danny Boyle's film adaptation (1996). Both works function as manifestos of rave culture and chemical hedonism. A similar role is played by *gangsta* rap, which in the 1990s brought the voices, experiences, and conflicts of the streets and urban peripheries into the centre of the global music industry. Yet these phenomena increasingly appear as the long tail of twentieth-century forms of rebellion. At the turn of the twenty-first century, as several youth sociologists have observed, a "post-subcultural" phase emerges, marked by more fluid and individualised identities that are less rooted in territorially defined collectives (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004). The nomadic, street-based adolescent gradually gives way to modes of expression that are more introspective and less dependent on the occupation of public space.

A tragic symbolic event marks this transition. The Columbine High School massacre (USA, 1999), in which two teenage students carried out a mass killing inside their own school, crystallised a profound shift. As narrated in Michael Moore's documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), youth violence no longer manifests primarily in the public space of the street or the gang. Instead, it erupts within a central institution of modern society, the school, taking a planned and individualised form. This violence is often fuelled by fantasies and resentments cultivated in isolation. The "dangerous" young person ceases to act as part of a group but strikes alone or in a small unit. As a result, interior spaces, starting with the school and extending to the suburban environment as a whole, are transformed into sites of anxiety and vulnerability. This episode functions as an unsettling prefiguration. At the threshold of the 2000s, adolescent rebellion increasingly assumes interiorised and individualistic forms, anticipating the growing eclipse of life outside the home that will shape the imaginary of subsequent decades.

This symbolic rupture overlaps, in the early 2000s, with a broader transformation of the Western cultural and political climate that further reshapes the relationship between youth and public space. The attacks of 11 September 2001 and the ensuing "war on terror", together with the violent repression of the No Global movement culminating in the events of the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001, inaugurate a phase of increasing securitisation of urban space. Streets, squares, and sites of collective gathering are progressively associated with surveillance, danger, and threat. The city, which in the twentieth-century youth imaginary had functioned both as a space of risk and as a site of freedom and productive conflict, is now increasingly represented as an exclusively hostile environment to be controlled and neutralised. This shift is not limited to urban policies or security apparatuses. It also permeates the media and symbolic imaginary. Public space progressively loses its aura of promise and acquires a strongly anxiety-inducing connotation, especially for younger subjects.

Concurrently, the school undergoes a parallel symbolic transformation. Traditionally represented as a space of passage, socialisation, and generational conflict, after Columbine it has lost its role as a site of discipline or adolescent rebellion. It becomes a vulnerable place, exposed to the possibility of sudden and unpredictable violence. This reconfiguration further weakens the formative function of external spaces. When both the street and the school appear as sites of danger or control, the horizon of youth experience contracts. It shifts towards contexts perceived as safer, more predictable, and more governable, while also being rich in new promises. These contexts are the home and, increasingly, emerging digital environments.

It is within this scenario that the move indoors acquires a new meaning. It is no longer simply a loss or a subtraction, but an adaptive strategy. It represents a symbolic response to a world perceived as excessively demanding, unstable, or threatening. The growing centrality of interior spaces should therefore not be read as a sign of passivity or disengagement. Rather, it is the outcome of a long historical transformation of the imaginary. After having functioned for decades as the privileged site of informal learning, conflict, and autonomy, the street loses its initiatory role and ceases to represent a necessary passage towards adulthood.

This shift prepares the ground for the representations of adolescence that emerge from the 2010s onwards. In these narratives, movement through urban space has become less central to the construction of identity. Youth experience is instead concentrated in increasingly restricted environments, both physical and symbolic. Within these spaces, relational, affective, and identity dimensions tend to be internalised. The city remains in the background, often as a threat, an absence, or merely a prompt for online experience. Conflict is displaced from the outside to the inside, from public space to subjectivity itself. It is through this long genealogy, moving from the street as a site of formation and rebellion to its progressive symbolic neutralisation, that it becomes possible to fully make sense of the contemporary reconfiguration of adolescent space as staged in teen dramas of the past fifteen years.

Spatial Withdrawal in the Contemporary Adolescent Imaginary

The progressive erosion of the street's centrality as an initiatory and formative space, reconstructed in the previous section, does not simply mark the end of a twentieth-century paradigm. It also prepares the ground for a new configuration of adolescent experience. When public space ceases to function as a site of trial, conflict, and autonomy, adolescence is forced to reorganise its relationship with the world through other environments, both physical and symbolic. This move indoors does not occur suddenly or accidentally. It should instead be understood as the outcome of a long transformation of the imaginary, one that finds a radical intensification in the contemporary moment.

To understand how and why contemporary adolescence moves away from public spaces towards increasingly interior and protected environments – domestic, medial, and psychic – this article proposes an analysis articulated around three intertwined movements. The first concerns technological and media reconfiguration. The digital mediasphere virtualises practices and experiences that, until a few decades ago, required physical movement through the city. The second concerns economic and institutional dynamics. Informational capitalism progressively erodes the boundaries between leisure time and labour, bringing expectations of productivity, visibility, and performance forward into youth. The third is psycho-cultural. Under growing pressure, the adolescent imaginary shifts towards introspection and increasingly frames isolation as a strategy of protection, control, and meaning-making. These dimensions do not operate in isolation. Platformisation enables new attention economies that, in turn, shape affects and identities. The emotional trajectories of fictional characters narratively reflect the constraints and possibilities imposed by technical infrastructures and social arrangements. For analytical clarity, these dimensions are addressed separately in the sections that follow, while showing how their interrelation makes the logic of spatial withdrawal fully intelligible.

Digital Mediasphere and the Virtualisation of Experience

One of the key drivers of adolescents' withdrawal from public space is the emergence of a pervasive digital mediasphere, which profoundly reshapes socialisation, entertainment, and identity construction. The internet, social media, and communication platforms do not merely provide new tools. They generate a fully fledged experiential environment in which many activities that once required physical presence in urban space can now take place.

This transformation did not emerge out of nowhere. Already in the 1980s and 1990s a transitional phase can be identified in the figure of the *nerd*. Shy and introverted, often confined to their bedroom, the nerd prefers mediated interactions with technologies and consumer objects over direct engagement with the external world. This figure anticipates a broader social tendency. The "street" begins to be brought into the home through earlier electronic media such as radio and television, and later through emerging analogue-digital technologies. Whereas in the early 1980s videogaming required going out to an arcade, the spread of home consoles and personal computers, such as the Commodore 64, relocated play into domestic space. A similar shift occurs with the introduction of the videocassette recorder in relation to movie theatres. These media prefigure the digital turn of the 1990s by promising to concentrate consumption, play, and social interaction within the home. They extend a longer process of interiorisation of experience and bodily confinement that had already been initiated by cinema and television.

During the 2000s, with the widespread adoption of smartphones and social platforms, this tendency became fully mainstream. Today, the digital ecosystem offers adolescents almost unlimited opportunities for relational and symbolic life without leaving home. Through screens, young people can meet peers, build affective communities, experiment with

identities, and express creativity. In this context, physical mobility gradually loses its formative and symbolic value. Moving through urban space no longer functions as a central metaphor of the youth trajectory (Cuzzocrea, 2020), while the online dimension becomes the primary site for self-construction and relational life (Bissacca et al., 2021). Contemporary adolescents can thus inhabit a parallel digital world that absorbs many of the stimuli, recognitions, and identity trials once sought outside.

This shift is clearly reflected in the imaginary of contemporary teen dramas. In many recent series, the bedroom becomes the core space of adolescent experience. It appears private, yet it is constantly crossed by communicative flows, notifications, messages, and the gaze of others. *Skam*, in all its national versions, makes this fusion of public and private particularly visible by integrating chats, voice messages, and social media directly into the diegesis. The city, understood as a space of adventure and discovery, often remains in the background or disappears altogether. It is replaced by a virtual "global village" in which characters move with ease. When they do leave home, encounters are rarely unexpected. Outings are typically planned through messaging apps, and even parties or social events involve little chance discovery, since participants already know who will be present through social media.

As Benasso and Cuzzocrea (2019) observe, we are thus facing a "generation living in a soap bubble", for whom the external world is so thoroughly filtered and mediated that it becomes almost abstract.

Informational Capitalism and Early Productivity

A second macro-factor reshaping the spatial configuration of adolescence is the evolution of capitalism towards an informational and cognitive model (Castells, 2001). Here again, the *nerd* plays a crucial transitional role in understanding contemporary representations of youth. In the 1980s, the nerd embodied a form of extreme yet largely non-confrontational consumer ethos. In parallel, this figure was a direct product of the domestic diffusion of early digital technologies, which began in the late 1970s. The nerd functioned as an attempt to reconcile the deep fractures that, in previous decades, had made adolescence a conflictual and uncompromising condition. For emerging informational capitalism, the challenge was to heal the rift between consumption and labour that had become evident after the Second World War, and to renew the traditional metaphor of adolescence as preparation for productive life.

This reconciliation was achieved by shifting the temporal axis of production forward. Through digital technologies, work could be anticipated and embedded within adolescence itself. Consumption was no longer opposed to labour but gradually merged with it, becoming immediately productive. In this way, capitalism reactivated its foundational narrative of merit and equal opportunity, according to which social mobility is accessible regardless of one's starting position. The success stories of figures such as Jobs, Gates, Zuckerberg, Page, Brin, or Musk further reinforce this mythology. Adolescence itself becomes a productive

condition, valued for its flexibility, openness to risk, capacity for continuous learning, and adaptability to rapid technological change. Digital culture also intensifies the demand for personalised consumption, transforming consumers into producers through practices such as fandom, content creation, and participation. Concepts such as *prosumer* and *produser* emerge precisely to describe this fusion of production and consumption.

Disguised as leisure, creativity, and self-improvement, labour progressively extends its grip over all dimensions of life, including what was once free time. Work ceases to function as a mediation between desire and consumption. It coincides with them. While this shift appears to reduce alienation, it simultaneously increases exposure to exploitation. The dominant illusion is that individuals can autonomously create the job they desire and monetise their passions. The contemporary myths of the influencer, the YouTuber, the TikToker, or the start-up founder exemplify this logic. Fictional narratives such as *The Circle* (Eggers, 2013) or *The Big Disruption* (Powell, 2018) portray digital workplaces populated by eternal adolescents. These environments celebrate creativity and informality while imposing rigid productivity demands. Informational capitalism thus requires subjects who are adolescent and adult at once. It needs youth for its orientation towards consumption, innovation, and future-making, but it simultaneously demands responsibility, discipline, and compliance with market rules (Cuzzocrea et al., 2023).

As a result, the status of adolescence is profoundly altered. If throughout the twentieth century it functioned as a preparatory phase, a protected interval before adulthood, in the new millennium it becomes immediately integrated into market logics. Labour enters early into young people's lives and colonises time previously devoted to play or experimentation. This process produces ambivalent effects.

First, youth is intensively treated as a productive resource. Traits traditionally associated with adolescence, such as creativity, technological intuition, adaptability, and even consumption itself, are directly valorised by platform capitalism (van Dijck et al., 2018). Education is no more oriented towards a deferred future but towards continuous present performance. The ideal adolescent is expected to be innovative yet conformist, experimental yet perfectly aligned with monetisation mechanisms and self-exploitation (Fisher, 2009).

By contrast, the early assumption of adult responsibilities generates intense psychological pressure. Narratively, this tension often translates into scenarios where adolescent characters seek escape from external expectations, particularly those imposed by family and society. The Italian series *Mare Fuori* (2020-in progress) offers a paradigmatic example. Set in a juvenile detention centre, it stages a striking paradox: prison becomes a space of perceived freedom, shielding young people from an outside world experienced as excessively demanding and judgemental. Several characters choose to return to detention after serving their sentences in order to avoid re-entering their family or social environments. This extreme narrative configuration reflects a broader cultural sentiment: the refusal to participate in the competitive game of adult society and the search for alternative refuges, both real and virtual. These include video games and closed online communities, often described as *echo chambers* (Sunstein, 2017), where adolescents can regulate exposure, judgement, and competition on their own terms.

It is therefore unsurprising that contemporary youth imaginaries are saturated with dystopian narratives that metaphorically stage hyper-competition. Works such as *Battle Royale* (1999-2000), *The Hunger Games* (2008-2012), and *The Giver* (2014), along with more recent series such as *Alice in Borderland* (2020-2025) and *Squid Game* (2021-2025), depict authoritarian futures in which young people are forced to compete violently for survival. These narratives resonate strongly with younger generations, particularly in cultural contexts such as Japan and South Korea, where educational and social competition is especially intense and where similar forms of spatial withdrawal phenomena are more widespread. In these allegories, school and society appear as zero-sum games. Only those who defeat others can secure a place in adulthood. Yet even within these extreme scenarios, moments of collective resistance emerge. Young protagonists often unite against the system itself, suggesting that beneath apparent passivity there remains a latent desire for change.

Finally, the competitive logic of informational capitalism undermines trust in traditional educational trajectories. In many contemporary narratives, social roles are rigidly assigned from adolescence onward, eliminating the possibility of meaningful choice. These fictional worlds amplify a real tendency towards the anticipation of life decisions. In present-day societies, aptitude tests, early orientation programmes, and personalised educational pathways push young people to define their future careers as early as possible. The meritocratic ideology underlying these practices conveys a clear message: hesitation and delay will be severely penalised. In this climate, adolescence loses its character as a creative interval and becomes an anxious prologue to adult life (Pitti & Tuorto, 2021).

The argument is complex and requires synthesis. The metropolis has always been both a burden and a resource for capitalism. In the first instance, it has functioned as a space that is never fully governable, generating conflicts in both production and consumption that often prove irreducible. Nevertheless, the city has been indispensable to capitalism since the nineteenth century, especially as it progressively dematerialised into finance, cultural industries, and media. The metropolis has served as a site of creativity and invention, of new forms of knowledge and technology, of highly qualified labour, and of maximal value extraction across social domains. For this reason, from the nineteenth century onwards, the metropolis has been symbolically associated with youth, while the province has been linked to adulthood or old age.

From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, with the development of electronic and digital media, capitalism became increasingly informational. As a result, it learned to globalise and virtualise itself, becoming at least partially independent from urban space as a permanent source of conflict (Ilardi, 2025). Innovation, precariousness, opportunity, competition, flexibility, ambition, and consumption-oriented behaviour, all traits traditionally associated with youth, were progressively displaced from physical public spaces to digital environments. Urban space increasingly became a mere function of the digital one, reduced to a reservoir of experiences and contents to be captured, reformatted, and circulated on platforms, websites, blogs, and social media. Digital environments learned to replicate many of the dynamics of urban space, but within contexts that were more controllable and

customisable. In parallel, through advanced surveillance technologies and increasingly repressive public policies, these environments also contributed to shaping and governing urban space itself (Cuppini et al., 2022).

Several scholars have argued that we now live *onlife* condition, in which the material and the immaterial are continuously intertwined (Floridi, 2015). Yet urban experience, understood as the physical traversal of spaces that contribute to identity formation and socialisation, appears far less meaningful than in the past. It is increasingly overshadowed by a digital experience that relies less and less on the materiality of the world to generate meaning.

Adolescents' shift away from external space is fully embedded in this dynamic. External spaces are abandoned because they are perceived as entirely subordinated to the competitive and extractive logics of capitalism, spaces in which no authentic margins of freedom remain. This movement takes place within the digital mediasphere, but only in those environments considered controllable and expressive. These include small thematic communities, fandoms, and non-mainstream social platforms. On the one hand, the system increasingly resembles a gamified space-time continuum, in which challenges multiply with age and success depends on continuously upgrading one's character through skills, credentials, reputational assets, and competitive advantages. Educational credits, training courses, internships, networking, and self-optimisation function as badges and power-ups within this logic. On the other hand, adolescents often refuse to play this game and to grow according to its rules. They withdraw instead into digital gaming spaces, where competition exists but is meaningful only within the game itself and not directly convertible into social or economic capital.

Social Pressures, Introspection, and Isolation

The final dimension, closely connected to the previous ones, concerns the psychological consequences of this socio-cultural context for the adolescent imaginary. Faced with increasing pressure to succeed and to maintain constant visibility, many young people turn inward in search of a stable point of reference. As a result, themes of introspection and psychic distress become increasingly prominent in contemporary narratives.

Compared to previous generations, today's adolescents appear intensely focused on themselves, on their private world, and on a restricted circle of peers. Youth malaise is no longer primarily expressed through collective rebellion or open confrontation with authority figures. Instead, it often takes the form of self-directed or relationally proximate forms of behaviour, including substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide attempts. In contemporary teen dramas, traditional generational conflicts with family or society, while still present, tend to recede into the background. What dominates instead are internal conflicts, personal insecurities, and identity crises.

A striking feature of these narratives is the constant presence of adult figures devoted to emotional care and listening, such as psychologists, counsellors, and therapists. This

suggests that mental health has become the central stake of adolescence. Bipolar disorder, depression, attention deficit disorders, paranoia, anxiety, chronic fatigue, anorexia, and bulimia are now widely represented and discussed, particularly among young people. According to UNICEF, more than 11 million children and adolescents under the age of 19 in the European Union – approximately 13 per cent of the total – live with a mental health condition (UNICEF, 2024). In Italy, the Italian Society of Child and Adolescent Neuropsychiatry (SINPIA) estimates that around one in five minors, roughly two million individuals, experience a neuropsychiatric or mental disorder (SINPIA, 2024). Service data further corroborate this trend. At the Bambino Gesù Children's Hospital in Rome, neuropsychiatric emergency consultations increased from 237 in 2013 to 1,415 in 2023, with a peak of 1,824 in 2021, representing an increase of over 500 per cent. Admissions related to self-harm rose from 25 in 2013 to 607 in 2023 (Ospedale Pediatrico Bambino Gesù, 2024).

At the same time, social media have contributed to the popularisation of scientific terminology related to mental health, often mediated by mental health influencers and online coaches, as well as by rap and trap music lyrics. Terms referring to hormones and neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, adrenaline, melatonin, endorphins, and cortisol, have entered everyday youth discourse. In a socio-economic system perceived as largely unchangeable, the mind itself becomes the primary battlefield of experience. It is within this internal space that young people attempt to manage emotions, impulses, neurochemical balances, and pharmaceutical interventions, treating psychic self-regulation as the main arena in which their life game is played.

This emphasis on introspection undoubtedly represents a step forward in terms of sensitivity and cultural awareness. However, it also reveals the difficulty of growing up in a hyper-competitive environment. As the psychoanalyst Massimo Ammaniti observes, the constant background noise of digital media interferes with adolescents' capacity for self-analysis, making the construction of a stable personal identity increasingly difficult (Ammaniti, 2018). Unlike the protagonists of classic coming-of-age narratives, today's young people cannot withdraw into a protected space in which to reflect on themselves away from external pressures. Even within their own bedrooms, they remain continuously exposed to the judgement of others through social networks and messaging platforms, living in what increasingly resembles a permanent display window (Bissacca et al., 2021). This condition fuels anxieties and insecurities that often result in defensive withdrawal.

Many recent television series foreground the emotional fragility of their protagonists. *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix, 2017-2020) addresses adolescent suicide and the collective responsibilities associated with bullying, constructing a narrative centred on the traumatic consequences of toxic relational dynamics. *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019-present) shifts the focus to sexuality and gender identity, portraying the transition to adulthood primarily as a confrontation with the body and desire, within a social horizon largely confined to school and a narrow circle of peers. In both cases, the "external world", understood as the domain of work, politics, and institutions, is almost entirely absent. Characters act within a socio-

affective bubble in which the only meaningful references are peers and, occasionally, figures of emotional support.

This narrative configuration corresponds to empirical phenomena observed by contemporary sociologists and psychologists. Extreme forms of adolescent isolation, epitomised by the figure of the *hikikomori*, the young person who isolates themselves in their room while avoiding contact with the outside world, have become an object of concern and study in Italy as well (Lancini, 2019). These cases are extreme, but they are indicative of a broader trend. The difficulty of confronting the challenges of adult society can lead young people to freeze within an extended adolescent comfort zone that is simultaneously protective and isolating. Research on Italy's Generation Z describes a "hyperconnected yet lonely generation" (Lancini, 2019) and highlights how many young people live as if under a glass dome, deprived of meaningful opportunities for autonomy (Pitti & Tuorto, 2021). In the most severe cases, withdrawal becomes tangible through school dropout or exclusively virtual relationships. More subtle forms of closure, however, are also detectable among adolescents who appear otherwise integrated.

Overall, adolescents represented in the media of the last decade are often portrayed as suspended between virtual hypersociality and real isolation. Constantly connected, they nonetheless experience profound inner solitude. Despite an unprecedented level of emotional self-awareness, they struggle to translate feelings into action in the external world. This image of a solitary and reflexive adolescence constitutes a defining feature of our time, markedly different from the rebellious, street-oriented youth imaginaries of the twentieth century.

Conclusions and Future Perspectives

The dynamics analysed in the preceding sections show that the spatial retreat of adolescence is neither an isolated nor an exclusively contemporary phenomenon. Rather, it is the outcome of a long transformation of the youth imaginary. Taken together, these shifts point to a structural reconfiguration of the relationship between youth subjectivities and the social world. The street loses its formative role; experience is increasingly interiorised through digital mediation; productive logics are anticipated into youth; and introspection becomes central. From this perspective, the reconfiguration of adolescent space should not be read simply as renunciation, but as a symbolic and adaptive response to a deeply reorganised social environment.

This new adolescent imaginary is profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, it opens up unprecedented spaces for subjective expression, enabling practices of self-narration, identity experimentation, and creativity that find relatively accessible environments within digital media. On the other hand, it exposes young people to specific risks of alienation, isolation, and symbolic and affective exploitation. While the shift into private space may reduce direct institutional surveillance, it simultaneously increases vulnerability to the pervasive logics of the digital market and to the constant comparison imposed by regimes

of visibility (Fisher, 2009; Bissacca et al., 2021). Concurrently, the move away from the public arena deprives society of the youth-driven conflictual energy that, throughout the twentieth century, often acted as a catalyst for cultural and social innovation (Savage, 2007).

Looking ahead, several trajectories for the adolescent imaginary can be envisaged. Technological developments, such as immersive virtual reality and applications of artificial intelligence, may further intensify the virtualisation of youth experience, reinforcing an *onlife* condition in which the boundaries between the digital and the real become increasingly blurred. In a more extreme scenario, adolescents may conduct much of their relational and formative experience within simulated environments, with significant psychological, educational, and social implications. In response, digital saturation itself may generate counter-movements and alternative imaginaries. A renewed emphasis on the body, physical space, and collective presence could emerge in new forms, for instance through ecological narratives, practices of territorial reconnection, or subcultures that once again reclaim urban space. Seemingly marginal phenomena, such as certain expressions of trap music originating in urban peripheries or the cultures surrounding football ultras, suggest that the street may continue to exert a symbolic appeal resistant to homogenisation, albeit in forms profoundly different from those of the past.

In sum, the future of the adolescent imaginary appears to oscillate between two poles. On the one hand lies further interiorisation of youth experience, mediated by technologies and characterised by prolonged residence in private and digital spaces. On the other lies the potential re-emergence, in new and unpredictable forms, of the adolescent as a visible and active subject within public space. Much will depend on the evolution of media infrastructures, educational policies, and socio-economic conditions that define the margins of autonomy available to new generations.

From this perspective, adolescence continues to anticipate the future by staging it before it becomes fully visible, through spatial arrangements and emotional regimes. If the street once served as the theatre of trial and freedom, its gradual eclipse from contemporary narratives signals not merely a withdrawal, but a rewriting of the relationship between subject and world. It marks a new and still unstable threshold upon which the next metamorphoses of the social imaginary are likely to be played out.

Biographical notes

Emiliano Ilardi is Full Professor at the University of Cagliari, where he coordinates the MA programme in Social Innovation and Communication and teaches Sociology of Communication and Media Studies and Digital Storytelling. His research interests include the sociology of the imaginary (with a focus on literature), urban sociology, cultural heritage communication, and digital storytelling.

Alessio Ceccherelli is Associate Professor of Sociology of Communication and Cultural Processes at Link Campus University. His research focuses on media, narratives, and the imaginary, with particular attention to how imaginaries absorb, rework, and reflect ongoing social change. His interests include the mediology of literature, the sociology of the

imaginary, narrative forms in contemporary media, and the relationship between technology and educational communication.

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