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Extension or Backstage? Different teens behind Facebook and Instagram from a dynamic perspective

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Abstract

The present research study investigates the social habits of adolescents when using digital formats. This paper explores users' motivations and preferences for Facebook and Instagram. 238 students of middle and high school are interviewed about their way of social site networking. Our findings show not only gender and age differences but give some suggestions in two other directions: the preference for online/offline friendship and what concerns the different dynamics in managing feedback both as the seeking of approval and as the risk of FoMO. Girls monitor and peek through Instagram while boys do the same through Facebook. Facebook and Instagram are an intriguing virtual escape for the youngest but become a support for relational life for adolescents. From a dynamic perspective we found different teens behind each Social Network site related to their layout: more relational Facebook, more seductive Instagram, especially where preadolescents are concerned.

Keywords: Adolescents; Instagram & Facebook; Gender differences; Age differences; Instagram fascination factors.

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Introduction

The diffusion of Social Network sites (SNs) has changed our way of communicating and influencing the fabric of society. Today, online communication is not only a routine activity but, in several circumstances, it is unavoidable. If previously, the net was used to contact people over long distances or to maintain contacts, digital devices are now used as an integral part of daily activities. Adolescents grow up closely with technology and have the opportunity to access information and practice their skills in a virtual environment which allows them to shape their own social network as well as supporting the construction of their identity (Cerutti, 2012). Online communication dynamics analyses that have been developed over the years, along with the increase of computing resources available to users and the considerable use of technology by young generations, have created different theoretical models to describe the effects and peculiarities of online communication in comparison with traditional face-to-face communication. The idea that Internet with its tools is a blank space where the user can have experiences and re-create himself as he wishes, raises many questions about the positive and negative effects of such experiences in the short- and long-term (Chiarolanza *et al.*, 2017; Christopherson, 2007; Erreygers *et al.*, 2017; Trepte *et al.*, 2015; Valkenburg *et al.*, 2017; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

Why? Teens' reasons. Internet seems to affect peer relationships positively (Barker *et al.*, 2015; Ellison *et al.*, 2007; Phua & Jin, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007); online peer-to-peer communication promotes adolescents' sense of belonging and self-disclosure as important processes for the construction of a personal identity (Borca *et al.*, 2015; Davis, 2012; Pediconi & Brunori, 2019). Adolescents use online communicative reality mainly to strengthen and maintain existing relationships (Reich *et al.*, 2012; Pediconi & Urbani, 2016), which can be both friendly and romantic (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008), preferring Facebook usage for this purpose (Phua *et al.*, 2017). Chatting also contributes to well-being by reducing levels of depression and loneliness (Shaw & Gant, 2004). Communication is the main reason for using SNs, but not the only one: we can also find looking at others' profiles, searching for information, sharing contents, spending time, exchanging opinions (Brandtzæg & Heim, 2009). Within the SNs the user can therefore choose between a more active use of the medium by interacting directly with others, approving and commenting status and posts or otherwise sharing his own contents. By contrast, he can choose to remain passively behind the scene, watching and monitoring other users' contents without actually engaging in interaction. However, if on the one hand, different research studies have confirmed the benefits linked to an active use of SNs that promotes the creation of social capital, the stimulation of connection with others and the decrease of loneliness, on the other hand a passive use aimed at monitoring the contents of others online without engaging in a direct exchange with them, can cause social comparisons and envy

with negative consequences for subjective well-being (Verduyn *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, "content consumers" are subjected to a reduction in bridging and bonding social capital with a relative increase in feelings of loneliness (Burke *et al.*, 2010).

Where? Facebook & Instagram. About half of the world's population (3.8 billion people) regularly use social media. The use of social media increases along with the increase in the number of the "connected": in fact, compared to 2019, users who are active on social media have increased by 9.2% (321 million more). According to the latest statistics the average Internet user this year will spend more than 100 days (6 hours and 43 minutes *per day*) online. Over a third of this time, 2 hours and 24 minutes a day, is spent on social media. Facebook still remains the most used social platform, while the influence of Instagram is definitely expanding and in recent years the number of its users has tripled¹. Each SNs is characterized by its own layout and specific peculiarities that have a certain behavioural and emotional impact on users; different platforms stimulate different behaviour (Binns, 2014). The different online spaces also affect the type and amount of information that is revealed; according to Emanuel *et al.* (2014) the disclosure of one's personal information is in fact more closely linked to contextual factors rather than to the user's personality; on the other hand, research continuously underlines the impact of personality factors on online behaviours (Błachnio *et al.*, 2016; Gosling *et al.*, 2011). Instagram is a latest generation SNs, mainly based on sharing photos, videos and short-lived stories among users and offers the chance to use filters before publication. It was released in 2010, and in recent years has grown to epic proportions. From a global point of view, the Instagram user base is slightly female in prevalence, in contrast to the male domain of Facebook and Twitter; it also hosts younger users compared to others SNs². Facebook, the social network *par excellence*, counts more than a billion subscribers and offers many possibilities: finding acquaintances, making friends, sending poke, joining groups or creating new ones. McAndrew & Jeong's (2012) research showed differences in Facebook usage based on age, gender and relational status: young people prefer to spend their time looking at the pages of their peers, while adults prefer the family environment by posting photos with family members or by looking at their profiles. It is girls, more than boys, who spend time on the profile of their female peers and try to direct the impressions of others by taking great care of the images of their own profile. Single boys spend significantly more time selecting their photos compared to their male friends, while girls, single or not, check the relationship status of other users more often than the opposite gender. In general, girls are more active than boys on Facebook: they interact more, spend more time there, look for personal information about others, look at peers' pages more often and engage in family activities (McAndrew & Jeong's, 2012; Metastasio *et al.*, 2016). Through qualitative and quantitative analyses, Hu and colleagues (2014) confirmed the conventional opinion that Instagram is mostly used for self-promotion and

¹ Simon Kemp (2020, January). Digital 2020: 3.8 billion people use social media. Web site: we are social, <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2020/01/digital-2020-3-8-billion-people-use-social-media>

² Marino (2018, April). Social network statistics 2018: all data of users. Italy and world. Web site: <https://www.digitalic.it/internet/social-network/statistiche-social-network-2018>

for socializing with friends, noting that 46.6% of the photos consist of selfies and shots with friends. Users use Instagram on the basis of 5 primary psychological and social motivations: social interaction, archiving, self-expression, escape from reality and for “peeking” at others (Lee *et al.*, 2015). Selfies are an effective means to get attention on Instagram, in fact users get more likes and comments than other genres of shared images (Souza *et al.*, 2015), among the photos those that portray faces receive more online appreciation (Bakhshi *et al.*, 2014).

Materials and Methods

Aims

Our research study explores the psychological qualities linked with the use of SNs based on users’ declared reasons in remaining connected. It analyses: the experience of connectedness and sharing that SNs add to teens’ relational life (Walther, 1996, 2007; Walther *et al.*, 2015); how SNs contribute to reinforce teens’ personality and their interpersonal skills.

Information related to times and reasons for connection will be described in dynamic terms:

- as *active* individual relational extension or
- as hesitant and *passive Monitoring&Peeking* of other users’ connections (Verduyn *et al.*, 2017).

Both cases give an extension of personal teens’ experience, technologically mediated by SNs communication. However, the extension of experience can take a direction of simple *self-presentation* or can offer a more complex *self-disclosure* of personal meanings (Davis, 2012).

When adolescents are online they are able to assume a third person perspective, they look for peers’ approval and intentionally share materials to seem attractive in the eyes of others, modelling both their self-presentations and self-disclosure (Yau & Reich, 2019). SNs represent an imaginary audience (Steinberg *et al.*, 2011) to which adolescents address their pressing needs to be accepted by peers (Birkeland *et al.*, 2014; Brown & Larson, 2009; Rubin *et al.*, 2006). Dynamically we can interpret adolescents’ search for acceptance as the deep desire underlying teens’ behaviours on SNs that researchers have called FoMO (Beyens *et al.*, 2016). In particular, our work analyses the peculiar behaviour that consists of a hesitant monitoring and surveillance of other users’ SNs materials. This peculiar behaviour does not specify the quality of extension mediated by SNs: hesitant monitoring and surveillance seem to build on relational competence, but at the same time this behaviour remains closed to a real sharing of self. When the other remains someone to be wary of, the search for acceptance interprets that conflict typical of the teenager: he is always fought between going out of himself and letting another one find a place there (Castilliego, 2014).

We wonder also if the layout of the two main SNs platforms, Instagram and Facebook, determines the quality of their use. In particular, how Instagram and Facebook collect and address the affective personal experience that teens entrust to SNs. Is the sharing of contents afforded by Facebook an opportunity to grow up or are young people completely dependent on

images that dominate Instagram? We are hypothesizing from a dynamic perspective that it is possible to find different teens behind Facebook and Instagram.

We summed up our objectives in three research questions:

- RQ1* What reasons support teens’ use of Facebook and Instagram?
RQ2 What differences based on gender and age will we find? And what are the preferences for offline/online relations among users of Facebook and Instagram?
RQ3 Referred specifically to the Monitoring & Peeking group, what gender difference will we find among users of Facebook and Instagram?

Materials

To collect data we used a brief *ad hoc* questionnaire administered in presence in November and December 2018. In the first part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to report personal data and social details such as age, gender and school attended, while the second part focused instead on the habits and methods of the use of SNs. In particular, subjects were asked to indicate their favorite SNs (“What is your favorite Social Network?”) and to answer the following multiple-choice items:

- What is your main reason for using social networks? (communicate with people you already know; communicate with new people; share images and videos; share your own moods and thoughts; watch what others share and their profiles; specify any other reason);
- How many hours on average do you spend on the SNs during the day? (up to one hour - up to two hours - more than two hours);
- Do you prefer to use chats and social networks sites or speak in person to make new acquaintances? (Chat - No chat).

Data analysis

Psychometric analyses were conducted through the IBM SPSS Statistics statistical software version 25.0.

Sample

Participants were 238 adolescents from 2 schools in central Italy. The whole sample consisted of 69 girls and 169 boys with an average age of 14.33. In particular, 171 attended high school (41 females and 130 males between 14 and 18 years of age; average age 15.16, sd 0.912) and 67 attended middle school (28 females and 39 males between 11 and 14 years of age; average age 12.21, sd 0.962).

Results

At first, we divided the main reasons given by users into two categories:

- *Communicate&Share* indicates an active use of SNs, as one of the teens’ ways of interacting and relating with each other;

- *Monitoring&Peeking* indicates a basically passive use of SNs that leaves the adolescent in a type of relational backstage (Verduyn *et al.*, 2017).

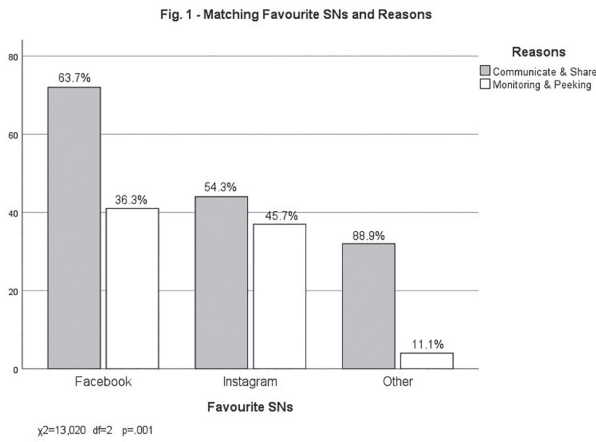
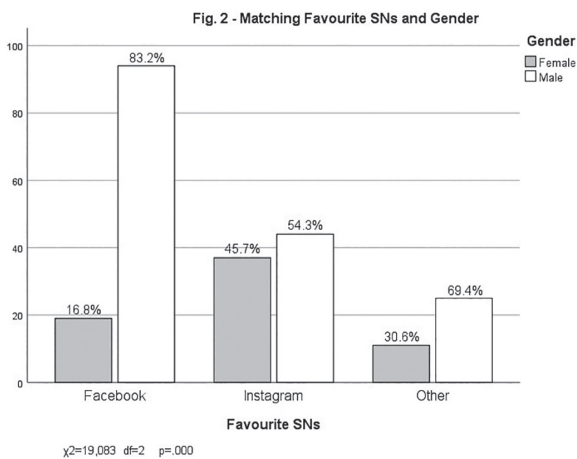


Figure 1 shows that: Facebook is used above all to *Communicate&Share* and is only secondary to *Monitoring&Peeking*; Instagram is used almost equally both in relation to *Communicate&Share* and *Monitoring&Peeking*; other SNs are used almost only to *Communicate&Share*.

In the category called Other we collected other platforms indicated by users, i.e. WhatsApp, Steam and other not so widespread SNs. It is interesting to observe that many adolescents indicated both Whatsapp and Steam – that are respectively an instant messaging platform and play platform – as their favourite SNs: they declare that they even use these platforms as real SNs. There were few preadolescents and teenagers who indicated Tik Tok as a favourite social platform; a fact of easy understanding if we take into account the period of administration that saw Tik Tok still in its infancy in Italy, with a constantly growing trend that has led it today to be one of the most used platforms especially among the youngest.



In Figure 2 we observe the distribution of favourite SNs based on gender. Boys clearly prefer Facebook, even though they do not mind Instagram or other platforms such as WhatsApp or Steam. On the other hand, girls clearly prefer Instagram and tend to leave aside Facebook and several other platforms.

Now we can put together the observation from Figure 1 and 2. Taking into account the reasons mainly shown by each SNs (see Figure 1), we can see some peculiarities related to gender. Facebook is used mainly to *Communicate&Share* and is used more by boys. We can suppose they post diverse contents in such continuous exchanges facilitated by Facebook. By contrast, Instagram with its more direct photographic nature, serves both the communication and *Monitoring&Peeking* reasons, and is used more by girls. Observing preferences for other platforms we note that they are used more by boys. We can explain this preference due to their passion for online games, indeed among other platforms there is the very well-known Steam which is a gaming platform.

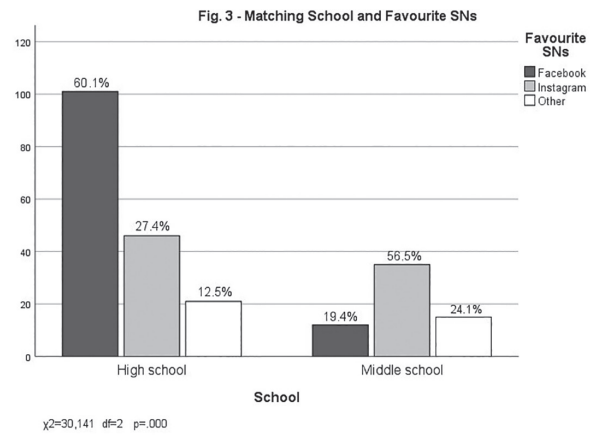


Figure 3 presents the distribution of preferences for SNs based on the kind of school attended, whether high or middle school. This distribution can be used to observe the preferences based on age because we find pre-adolescents at middle school (average age 12.21) and adolescents at high school (average age 15.16). Here we can observe a developmental passage of our sample from pre-adolescence to adolescence and its link with SNs habits.

Observing Figure 3, we clearly see Facebook as the first choice of high school students (60.1%), while middle school students tend to prefer Instagram (56.5%). We find an interesting distinction also in the second choice: if 27.4% of high school adolescents put Instagram in second place, then 24.1% of middle school pre-adolescents put other SNs in second place. If we consider that there are WhatsApp and Steam among other SNs, we can claim that the youngest use other platforms as real SNs, despite the fact that they are actually platforms devoted to texts and games (Colwell, 2007; O'Neill *et al.*, 2016). In third place there are other SNs (WhatsApp and Steam) for adolescents (12.5%); Facebook for pre-adolescents (19.4%).

Tab. 1. Anova Age and Duration Averages & Favourite SNs

Favourite SNs	Facebook	Instagram	Other	p
Age Average	14,85	13,79	14,22	.000
Duration Average	1,80	2,05	1,64	.017

Analysing preferences based on age and duration of connection (d.c.), presented in Table 1, we find significant differences between teens and pre-teens.

The youngest use Instagram (average age 13.79) and spends a lot of time on it (d.c. average 2.05), thus confirming the seductive power of Instagram for those discovering the SN world for the first time, a fascination that seems completely mediated by images.

The average age of Facebook users is almost 15 years of age (average age 14.85), confirming this SN as typically used by adolescents who spend less time every day (d.c. average 1.80) on platforms compared with the youngest group.

Other SNs (WhatsApp e Steam) attracted fourteen-year olds, which indicates that the age of transition from middle school to high school seems to favour the exploration of different possibilities in online communication and gaming. This transition from the fascination for Instagram to the exploration of texting and gaming platforms, seems to allow for a decrease in the duration of connection (d.c. average 1.64) that could be linked to a more selective and intelligent use of technology.

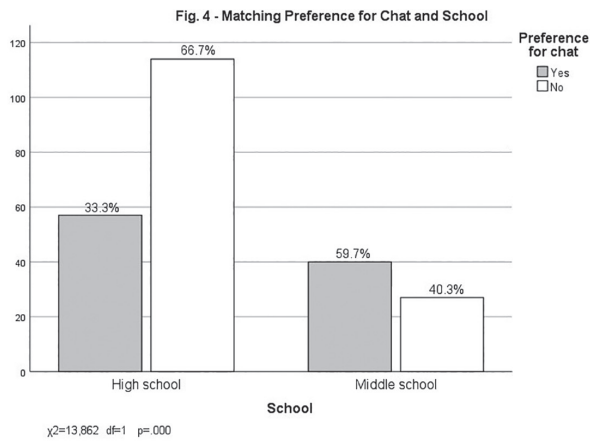
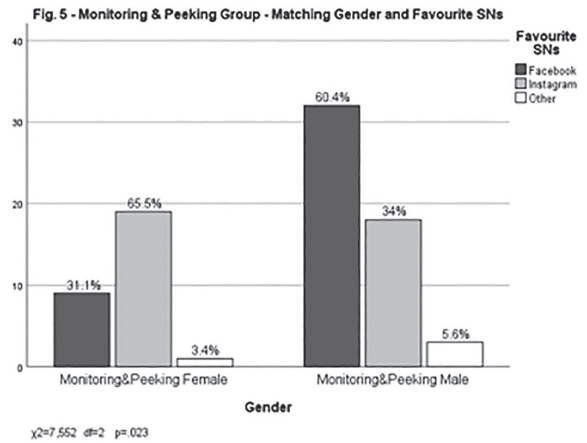


Figure 4 shows the preferences for online or offline exchanges based on the kind of school attended. High school adolescents show a significant preference for offline relations, while middle school preadolescents prefer online ones. The latter seem really attracted to chats, while older adolescents clearly prefer face-to-face communication, which may suggest they are recognising the limitations of social media in preferring offline relationships.

Taking into consideration the average age of teens who prefer offline communication and those preferring online communication (average age chat 13.76; average age no chat 14.72; t student -4.69, p .000), we note the age of transition between one and the other as starting around fourteen, at the time when middle school ends and high school starts, a time when the choice of school has an impact on professional orientation.

Focus on Monitoring&Peeking Group – Maintaining the observation on the qualitative level of online relationships, we asked what kind of affective investments in terms of friendship are mediated by SNs. Analysed data seem to show that initially SNs add new contacts to adolescents’ experience and allow the extension of their own groups (Davis, 2012; Henderson & Gilding, 2004). Impressions and feelings on SNs can be more lively than offline communicative exchanges thanks to processes

that make them more desirable and intimate (Walther,1996; Walther *et al.*, 2015). This first additional step is followed by a hesitant stop that we hypothesise as being linked with the dynamics of FoMO: “A form of social anxiety, a compulsive preoccupation that reveals the fear to lose a social interaction opportunity or a new experience” (Rizzo, 2019, p.73).



In order to support the analysis of a more passive use, we linked this with *Monitoring&Peeking*. Figure 5 shows a group of 82 teens (average age 14.50 s.d. 1.42; 53 males, 29 females) that declared *Monitoring&Peeking* as the main reason to stay connected. The figure shows the preferred SNs based on gender. It is clear to observe that *monitoring* girls prefer Instagram (65.5%) while *monitoring* boys prefer Facebook (60.4%). Both groups use SNs to stay connected through the use of *Monitoring&Peeking*. On the one hand, the *monitoring* girls watch over others on Instagram and leave Facebook as a second choice (31.1%). Other SNs are overlooked (3.4%). On the other hand, the *monitoring* boys choose a more complex SN such as Facebook to watch over others and leave Instagram as a second choice (34%) while other SNs are only partially considered (5.6%).

Discussion

The results of this research study show that the two main SNs, Instagram and Facebook, influence the quality of their respective use and convey the personal emotional experience of adolescents. They also allow us to track teenagers in particular who use Facebook & Instagram from a dynamic perspective. In discussing the results we will follow our research questions. *RQ1* What are the reasons that make teenagers use Facebook and Instagram respectively?

Commenting on the results relating to Fig.1, we are able to observe that Facebook is a more relational SN while Instagram with its more obvious visual nature is more “adhesive”: that is, those who post images could tend to attract others in a kind of double-sided game that maintains two indistinct opposite faces, both *Monitoring&Peeking* and *Communicate&Share*.

Choi & Sung (2018) highlighted how teenagers who mainly use Instagram, tend to gratify their psychological needs

by putting their ideal self into play and leaving their hidden qualities in the background. By contrast, Facebook seems to allow the expression of negative emotions (Waterloo *et al.*, 2018) that are involved in a more realistic self-disclosure.

The self-presentation brought to the fore by Instagram seems more exposed to social confrontation with other users, which leads to repercussions; on Instagram the formation of one's identity could be more influenced by reactions and feedback from others (Jang *et al.*, 2015). The quality of feedback plays an important role for young people (McLean *et al.*, 2019). Positive feedback can enhance self-esteem and wellbeing, while negative feedback can produce the opposite effect (Valkenburg *et al.*, 2006).

Focusing our observation on the qualitative level of digital relationships, we can ask ourselves which libidinal investment is mediated by social networks in relationships concerning friendship. The data analysed so far seem to show that initially social platforms add new knowledge to the experience of young people and allow the extension of their contact group (Davis, 2012; Henderson & Gilding, 2004). Online teenagers are adept at taking a third-person perspective, seeking peer approval, and intentionally sharing content in order to appear attractive to others by modelling their self-presentation.

On the basis of our most significant results, we can not only confirm that the two most popular SNs, Facebook and Instagram, mediate two different social experiences, but that this connotation is specifically based on gender and age as we had assumed in RQ2.

RQ2 What are the differences based on gender, age and preference for offline or online relationships that characterize teenagers who use Facebook or Instagram respectively? Is the sharing of content that Facebook stimulates intended as an opportunity for growth or are young people completely attracted by images that dominate Instagram? On this basis, we hypothesized the differences between teenagers using Facebook and Instagram.

The reasons that are mainly represented by each social network, presented in Fig. 2, show the gender specificities. Facebook is mainly used by boys who typically use it to *Communicate&Share* confirming the research by Ellison and colleagues (2007). Boys post the most diverse contents taking advantage of the continuous exchange that Facebook favours. Instagram, on the other hand, is typically preferred by girls who take advantage of its purely photographic nature. An initial interpretation of this preference, consistent with other research studies, confirms that girls mainly use images to communicate (Jang *et al.*, 2015) by photographically building their self-presentation. Instagram thus becomes their first showcase: on Instagram they strike a pose, test themselves, explore their own bodily and relational experience. Are they looking for feedback? (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Butkowski *et al.*, 2019; Kleemans *et al.*, 2018; Meier & Schäfer, 2018; Tiggemann *et al.*, 2018). On the one hand, therefore, for girls, Instagram is the first showcase that supports the reason behind *Communicate&Share*. On the other hand, they are more conditioned by social dialogue in the use of SNs, thus being influenced by the reason behind *Monitoring&Peeking*.

Continuing with the characterization of teenagers using Facebook and Instagram, we can comment on Figure 3 which

shows us the differences based on age. What emerges as the third choice for younger pre-adolescents (11-14), is that Facebook definitely becomes the first choice of teenagers (14-18), confirming their preference for a more complex social network, designed to meet the needs of communicating and sharing their experiences with others. Taking into consideration that the first choice of the youngest pre-adolescents is for Instagram, we can hypothesize that nowadays this social network has become a real gateway to social experience. Despite the minimum age of 13 years has been established as an entry limit by protocols for both SNs, we observe that the younger users do not take this into account and start their own social experience through Instagram (Fardouly *et al.*, 2020; Lazzari, 2015).

We also add a note on the importance that pre-teens give to other social networks, such as WhatsApp and Steam. In particular, these pre-teenagers integrate their gaming experience and message exchange with social media. Young people like to play and get excited about the possibility of exchanging messages remotely: this exploration, typical of pre-adolescence, seems to be supported and amplified by platforms such as WhatsApp and Steam to which pre-adolescents give a real "social value" by exchanging them for real SNs.

At this point we can list the meanings mediated by the entry into the social experience of the youngest users: Instagram images, WhatsApp messages and Steam games. Our results can be interpreted according to the Hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1996) that interprets the social experience as a support for the stages of the personality: the youngest users initially support the first explorations of self-image on social media in terms of self-presentation (Chua & Chang, 2016; Wood *et al.*, 2016), together with initial remote communications and the desire for online competition. Teenagers support on social media, basically through Facebook, the increasingly important need to develop their relationship with peers by sharing and communicating their increasingly complex experiences in terms of self-disclosure (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Teenagers, compared to pre-teenagers, seem more aware of reactions provoked by their publications; for their part, pre-adolescents are more likely to be evaluated by an imaginary audience (Steinberg *et al.*, 2011), they are driven by the urgent need to be popular and accepted by peers (Brown *et al.*, 1986; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). Engaged in self-presentations they modulate their self-image as favourable and adherent to the rules of social platforms as much as possible (Yau & Reich, 2019). The social media seem to perform a specific support for the adolescent Ego towards an anaclitic objective choice (Corsano *et al.*, 2014; Freud, 1923; Pediconi & Brunori, 2019; Pediconi & Urbani, 2016;), combining and enriching the habits, needs and goals of adolescents' daily life, modelling themselves on their personal characteristics as well as their developmental path (Kidron & Rudkin, 2017).

By analysing the preferences for Instagram and Facebook on the basis of age and duration of connection presented in Table 1, we confirm the significant differences between teenagers and pre-teenagers. The latter clearly prefer Instagram and stay connected for a long time. We can interpret such data by identifying some reasons teenagers find the social experience mediated by Instagram such a fascinating one. These include a seductive power, all mediated by images, a power which holds

particular sway with those who discover the social world for the first time. Facebook seems to remain more immune from such fascination.

The reasons why young people find Instagram fascinating. Here we try to present the structural characteristics of Instagram, in comparison with Facebook, which could explain the attraction Instagram has for younger people.

- a) *Visual impact: stay focused!* - Instagram contents are always original and of high quality and do not derive from re-shares, as often happens on Facebook. Instagram requires those who use it to be creative and unique, to field their aesthetic ability to present themselves to the world, an aspect that remains decidedly secondary in other more complex platforms such as Facebook. (Manovich, 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Furthermore, there are no links that weigh down the shares. Instagram is not made to share posts that come from blogs or external web pages, the focus remains within it, between videos and personal photos which thus become shared materials. The only way to refer users to an external link is to insert it in the biography or add a "Swipe Up" link in the stories, the latter function is available only for those with more than 10,000 followers.
- b) *Instagram as a prerogative of teenagers* - Which teenager would like to share their secrets in a place where mom and dad are also present? If Facebook is also becoming popular among adults, Instagram remains an SNs which is not yet used by adults. Younger users look elsewhere and in order to experiment they choose a new virtual place, mainly populated by their peers, free to act spontaneously without feeling observed and controlled by adults. (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).
- c) *Front row viewers* - The high level of engagement has made this platform a reference point for VIPs brands, companies and influencers, and famous people. A real catwalk where dream photos are accompanied by "stories", an insight into everyday life that allows followers to enter the backstage of the big stars and feel closer to their friends or their favourite actors, even if only for 24 hours. Even the myriad of comments that caption most designer photos give the illusion of participating in their fame by making them more human. (Chung & Cho, 2017; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Ward, 2016).
- d) *Instagram hic et nunc: use and throw away* - available only on a smartphone, Instagram is based on the current moment, without creating memories (Serafinelli, 2017). The Instagram account promotes interaction with elements that the individual posts and which almost always concern him personally. It contains materials that focus on daily activities: a smart and fast way to let the world know what is happening in his life. The Instagram feed is configured as a stream of content continuously renewed and updated, posted and immediately consumed (Bakhshi *et al.*, 2014; Hu *et al.*, 2014). Stories last 24 hours and are automatically deleted, short or fragmented videos posted in 15 second frames, videos posted for 60 seconds: fast times for immediate reactions, refined impressions for an impact that leaves its mark. A bombardment for those who receive them and a meticulous selection of the coolest and astonishing images for those who post them (Amâncio, 2017; Blogmeter, report 2019; Sukmayadi & Yahya, 2019).

- e) *Avoiding controls* - Instagram seems more confidential and anonymous than Facebook: others are not notified each time of the activities carried out and preferences are not notified to their friends. The comments left on Facebook appear on the walls of their friends, thus lending themselves to questioning, checking and judging. The Instagram user can instead remain more hidden, behind the scenes. His activities are not reported in the flow of images of others, comments remain limited to the photo in question and can be noticed only by those who have posted a comment on the same, notification of the tags only reaches the person concerned, without involving other people (Hoadley *et al.*, 2010; Jayalakshmi & Kavitha, 2018). Facebook is less discreet: each News Feed is completely built around the actions of the single user which immediately become a decisive trend that will catalyze similar content. The sharing of interests and the immediate use of other users' interests is an added value which however entails the cost of being introduced into the flow of news between friends: a flow over which the user loses control. Facebook tries to connect each user with and through his most important interests, but the user runs the risk of not feeling he is master but at the mercy of a logarithm. The user knows he cannot select everything he wants to put on the catwalk. On the contrary, in Instagram all control is in the user's hands. The user posts his ideal self-parade, offering others the illusion of being able to observe it. The user leads the game.
- f) *Backstage surveillance illusion* - While Instagram is for many a stage on which to show the most desirable part of themselves, on the other hand, not everyone likes to produce content just to show off. Above all, the youngest spend their time enjoying other people's contents, observing their posts and their stories from behind the scenes. A rich entertainment showcase where feeling comfortable and enjoying the show are guaranteed (Blogmeter, report 2019; Lee *et al.*, 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

At this point we can ask ourselves how to move forward beyond fascination, and re-establish a balance between online and offline use. By analyzing the results of Fig. 4, we find that the younger users seem extremely attracted to the chats, while the older ones, clearly preferring offline communication, are more willing to see the limits, and favour face-to-face interaction.

We could hypothesize on the basis of these data that the first encounter with the SNs experience remains affected by a fascination with the network as it gives an illusion of independence from adults that SNs seem to promise. At the beginning of the SNs experience, adults are left offline while peers are met online. Not long after, we observe that teenagers seem willing to reintegrate that offline level that they had temporarily abandoned. We can recognize in this passage from the fascination for online to the greater realism of offline, as a 2-step procedure that connotes the experience with SNs in general. We could hypothesize that even adults who encounter SNs for the first time experience this encounter in 2 stages. The first stage seems governed by a fascination for a modality full of promise that easily gives way to idealization. The second stage opens up again to the realism of the offline which does not overlook the advantages of the online but rather re-assesses it as a support even where it acknowledges its limits.

The importance of presenting oneself in a positive and desirable way does not fade over time, in particular, the sense of belonging and superfluous relationships assume less value with increasing age. (Yau & Reich, 2019). If on the one hand, the changes that adolescents are experiencing, along with the discovery of SNs, increase self-awareness, on the other they encourage reflection on how others perceive them, social comparison and insecurity about their social position (Azmitia, 2002; Finkenauer *et al.*, 2002; Harter, 2011). The need for approval can then in some cases lead to fears of positive and negative evaluation and to FoMO (Przybylski *et al.*, 2013; Weeks & Howell, 2012; Wolniewicz *et al.*, 2018).

The reason why older teenagers rely on Instagram or what support they need from it requires further exploration. For instance, love exchanges? Love exchanges mediated by images? The thrill of putting yourself on display? Creating connections with small “stories” of everyday life? The need for approval? The older ones put Instagram in secondary place, but we cannot exclude that it is an affectively more shady place, a sort of dark side of the SNs experience.

RQ3 Specifically dealing with the *Monitoring&Peeking* group, what are the gender differences in the most passive use of Facebook and Instagram respectively?

Focus on Monitoring & Peeking Group – Our results also confirm that online communication, thanks to its unique characteristics, promotes a sense of trust and facilitates the exchange between users by promoting a sense of belonging and self-disclosure (Davis, 2012; Henderson & Gilding, 2004). Impressions and relational states can be even more vivid than they are in offline communication exchanges thanks to processes that make them more desirable and intimate (Walther, 1996; Walther *et al.*, 2015). Recipients can idealize their interlocutors in the absence of concrete elements, those who send and post messages can resort to a selective self-presentation revealing the most desirable aspects of themselves. Furthermore, the asynchronicity of the medium allows the creation of optimal messages without being immersed in the flow of the conversation and without having to monitor the non-verbal cues. In this way a feedback dynamic is established between the interlocutors that perpetuate the relationship which in some cases remains exposed to the idealization-devaluation dynamics underlying the reasons for *Monitoring&Peeking*.

In dynamic terms these projective elements between idealization and devaluation could animate the passage that follows the initial fascination for SNs. It could be an awkward or ambivalent rebound effect. Trying to give voice to the dangerous emulations that derive from it, here is what we could find: “Will they control me? So do I control them? Do they love me? Do they prefer others to me? Who do they chat with? Meanwhile, I look at them so I become like them and they will love me more. I become like them to be accepted.” However, they do not seem to be definitive words because the older teenagers return to investing a more personal aspect in social networking. They are less dependent, less passive and return to sharing also *via* social networks.

Discussing the results of Fig. 5, which presents the *Monitoring&Peeking* group, it is clear that girls prefer Instagram (65.5%) while boys prefer Facebook (60.4%), realizing through different SNs their need to monitor others

and to stay informed about what they are doing. Boys carry out *Monitoring&Peeking* through Facebook, a less immediate and more articulated SN with its mix of texts and images. Girls carry out *Monitoring&Peeking* through Instagram and its images. We could interpret these data as a different way of “spying”: females monitor by comparison, they are more competitive, as in a continuous race. By contrast, males who monitor through Facebook could be more intimidated by the complexity of this social network and tend to avoid the race, while remaining tempted by an obsessive reflection that could be accompanied by shyness tinged with second thoughts (Balta *et al.*, 2020; Chang *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2014; Weeks & Howell, 2012; Vendemia *et al.*, 2017). Even the social experience includes a series of defence mechanisms in action which are typical of the adolescent as he/she develops his/her personality. The fear of positive evaluation involves feelings of apprehension about others’ positive evaluations of oneself, and associated distress. Furthermore, fear of negative evaluation involves apprehension that others will negatively evaluate oneself, and associated distress. Socially anxious individuals worry about their social performance, and their need to attain a positive evaluation adds pressure to perform positively (Weeks & Howell, 2012). For those who remain behind the scenes, being backstage is not a reaction to the impact with SNs, rather a construction over time and is affected by the use and quality of SNs.

Conclusions

This paper explores users’ reasons and preferences for using Facebook and Instagram. Our sample seems to shape and modulate its self-presentation and self-disclosure based on the two main SNs that are Facebook and Instagram. Facebook is used almost exclusively to *Communicate&Share*, whereas Instagram is used both to *Communicate&Share* and for *Monitoring&Peeking*. Facebook better supports self-disclosure, while Instagram is affected by feedback control and risks conditioning self-presentation in a more passive way.

Our findings show not only gender and age differences but give some suggestions in two other directions: regarding the preference for online/offline friendship and the different dynamics in managing feedback both as seeking approval and running the risk of FoMO. Girls monitor and peek through Instagram while boys do the same through Facebook. Between the two genders, boys prefer Facebook as a virtual plaza, while Instagram fascinates girls. Instagram represents a place capable of protecting the image of oneself, but on the other hand it remains open to the risks of social comparison and passivation in networking. Facebook, in particular, forms the main place of communication for older teenagers, while Instagram is preferred by the younger ones who use it in equal measure to communicate and monitor the contents of others. If younger teenagers find in the chat a support to deal with the not always easy conquest of relationships with peers, older teenagers juggle between offline and chat relationships with greater confidence. By observing some characteristics of high school adolescents, we note that Facebook supports both those who do not entrust their relational security to the use of chat, and those

who live an online life as an extra thrill more than face to face, confirming it as a virtual space able to accompany adolescent relational maturation. By contrast, Instagram offers itself as a mirror both for those who maintain contacts or acquire new ones through images, and for those who want to monitor the images of others while remaining in the shadows.

Our findings show that different teens behind Facebook and Instagram are related to the layout of each SNs: more relational the first, quite uncanny the second. We can hypothesize Instagram fascination factors based on a possible analysis of the typical behaviours of Instagram users:

- a) *Visual impact: stay focused;*
- b) *Instagram, the prerogative of teenagers;*
- c) *Spectators in the first row;*
- d) *Instagram Hic et nunc: use and throw away;*
- e) *Avoiding controls;*
- f) *Illusion of surveillance, observing from backstage.*

Our results demonstrate dynamic encounters with the SN experience in 2 stages: from a fascination that enchants to a regained realism. Facebook and Instagram are an intriguing virtual escape for the youngest users but become a support for adolescents in managing their relationships.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. A key strength of qualitative research is the ability it gives researchers to provide a detailed description of participants' subjective experiences. However, the small sample sizes that are typically used in such research preclude generalizing findings to a larger population. A bigger sample would allow for a more sophisticated statistical analysis. The second limitation regards the fact that the participants were recruited through convenient non-random sampling. Thus, generalizations cannot be made about the whole population. In addition, the number of males and females is not equally distributed, as well as the number of adolescents and pre-adolescents. Future research should try to dynamically explore what kind of meanings adolescents give to Instagram and Facebook in terms of affective and unconscious representations. In particular, Instagram, as an SN that supports monitoring and peeking habits, can be explored as a peculiar way to pathologically develop aspects of FoMO. It would also be interesting to investigate in future research the impact of the growing spread of Tik Tok as well as to understand the motivations behind the increasing use of this recent platform especially among the younger generation.

Author Contributions

The authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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