



## Media consumption and the processes of recognition among young people: The *Twilight* case

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## **Media consumption and processes of recognition among young people: The *Twilight* case**

*Claudio Riva\** and *Ruggero Cefalo\*\**

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*Abstract:* This paper analyses the relationship between media consumption and social recognition by illustrating the outcomes of a qualitative research study carried out in the Veneto Region (Italy) in 2012. This research regards the fruition, by the youth audience, of the cinematographic product titled *Breaking Dawn, Part 2*, the last episode of the literary and film saga *Twilight*. The investigation was divided into two phases: the first phase consisted in 10 participant observation sessions during movie showings; the second phase consisted of 20 in-depth interviews with young men and women from 16 to 25 years old. The analysis focuses on some crucial issues of the relationship between young people and media products, such as emotional involvement while watching a movie, identification processes with the main characters, and gender differences in fruition. As a result, the research shows that seeing the movie led to the majority of the interviewees being involved in an eminently social dimension. As a matter of fact, young people show a significant need to share the contents of cultural consumption, a need that therefore affects the processes of recognition within the community or group to which they belong. This mainly concerns the peer group in which young people express their emotions by using the same shared cultural codes.

*Keywords:* media sociology, youth audience, cultural consumption, social recognition

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**Introduction: Identity, need of social recognition and media consumption**

Contemporary societies are characterised by high complexity and cultural differentiation that dismantles the traditional frameworks of the individual (Giddens, 1994). The indefiniteness of the social and cultural relationships involves the growing individualization of identity and biographical paths (Bauman, 2002). Teenagers and young people are more exposed to this uncertainty than adults. In the absence of specific and stable references, they build their identity finding their way through very different behaviours, action patterns and lifestyles (Beck, 2002; Ghisleni & Privitera, 2009). Thus, they experience a paradoxical condition of freedom: they can choose among very broad horizons of possibility, but they lack the guidelines to establish their choices.

The dissolution of traditional sources of identity is related to a widespread sense of rootlessness as well as with the perception of uncertainty and risk associated with the unpredictability of other people's choices (Crespi, 2004). The identity becomes something to build and invent – a project to realise. However, this does not translate into an isolation of the individual, but into a renewed desire of belonging: the research of a community that is based not only on social status, but on shared interests, experiences and behaviours (Fabris, 2003). In the current complex and fragmented societies, consumption takes on a central importance in building identities, as an act of social communication and identity expression (Codeluppi, 2012). Through the consumption practises that structure a more comprehensive lifestyle, the individual presents his own self in society. Thus, he expresses a demand for social recognition of his identity (Secondulfo, 2012; Setiffi, 2014) – that is, a request of belonging to the “warm circle” of the community (Bauman, 2007).

According to some authors, the identity potential of consumption behaviour is also closely linked to the fruition of messages coming from the media; what is highlighted is the growing importance of social-mediated relationships (Calhoun, 1992; Meyrowitz, 1995). According to Di Fraia (2004), individuals shape their own self using identity-models that come from media stories. In fact, the mass media spread narrations that allow people to identify with images, roles, rules and values due to the use of stereotypical figures (Stella, 1999). By consuming media messages, the individual receives directions about the lifestyle to embrace and the cultural

codes to share within the peer group or the longed one. He also compares his life with models and images represented by the media. Finally, he can use the narrative and symbolic forms coming from the media as resources within the double dynamic of recognition–identification that founds the process of identity building (Sciolla, 2000).

As recalled by Boni (2006), when the mass media produce messages, they build “representations of our world”; they take from reality some models and lifestyles, reinterpreting and offering them to the public within different frameworks. Such representations layer in the collective imagination; they provide possible readings of the society and constitute cognitive resources that individuals may apply to their own experiences.

In recent years, sociological reflection on the relationship between mass media and processes of identity building focused particularly on the younger members of the population. Many studies show that teenagers and young people use to confront themselves with medial narrations. By doing this, they give sense to their world and define spaces of identity and sociality (Livingstone, 2009; Livingstone & Haddon, 2009).

Media consumption can be seen as a negotiated practise and is rooted in the socio-cultural context of belonging (networks, friendships, relationships with adults). The media and the traditional socialization agencies are part of the social texture of relationships in which an individual lives. Together they contribute to the creation of a common sense and shared frames by which everyday life can be managed and understood (Belotti, 2005; Lull, 1990; Stella, Morcellini & Lalli, 2008). From this starting point, some scholars (Colombo, Boccia Artieri, Del Grosso Destrieri, Pasquali & Sorice, 2012; Osgerby, 2012) developed a strong focus on the youth segment of the audience and on its consumption behaviours. This is reflected in the analysis about the forms of reception, processing and horizontal transmission of content among groups of youths and within them and, also, in the analysis of generational relations among distinct age groups. In particular, the analysis of generational uses of the media shows similarities with research dealing with the relationship between mass culture and the spread of youth culture, seen as a new collective identity. It is a very broad field of research that includes, for example, reflections about stardom and the culture industry (Morin, 1963, 1995) or studies about the metropolitan tribes (Maffesoli, 2004).

Traditional media, such as television, and new media, more interactive and “social”, provide role models and influence the continuous negotiation

and construction of lifestyle. From this standing point, our research shows the persistent relevance of a traditional medium such as cinema in the contemporary culture system. The Twilight films (and books) triggered, in young users, dynamics of sharing and identification – but also of detachment – with which it is possible to measure the spread of role models and media stories that respond to youth's and adolescents' needs of social recognition.

Our theoretical perspective is closely linked to media studies (De Blasio, Gili, Hibberd & Sorice, 2007; Stella, 2012) and it fits, more specifically, within the perspective of Audience Studies. We focus on the reception of media products, studied as a relationship between active audiences and media meanings. From this standpoint, the interpretation carried out by subjects gains a great relevance; people are able to negotiate the meaning of the messages they receive (Fiske, 1989) thanks to the social skills of decoding (gender, age, education, social status and cultural practises) (Hall, 1980). These social skills are strongly linked to the context where the communicative process takes place (Brown & Schulze, 1990; Liebes & Katz, 1990).

With the shift represented by the ethnographic research on audiences, the investigation about the sense and the interpretation of media contents that defines Audience Studies turns to the study of audiences' forms of consumption (Sorice, 2007). The core element of this approach is the adoption of ethnographic research methods, such as participant observation (Lull, 1990). As a consequence, these studies do not simply analyse what people say about their practises of media consumption, but audiences are also observed within their specific context of fruition (Schroder, Drotner, Kline & Murray, 2003).

In our research, we adopted a multidimensional approach combining ethnographic methods and in-depth interviews, typically used by Audience Studies. So we were able to analyse both forms of reception and modalities of fruition of the Twilight saga by young audiences.

In the first and most important phase of the research, we observed the audiences within movie theatres. These sessions allowed us to study the cultural phenomenon represented by the "Twilight case" in its specific context and development – that is, in the movie rooms where the film enjoyment by the audience took place. In the second phase of the research, we then focused on an analysis of the reception and the decoding of media texts by the audiences.

### **The *Twilight* case and the ethnographic approach**

The *Twilight* saga is a series of novels written by the American author Stephenie Meyer. It began in 2005 with the publication of the first book in the series, *Twilight*. Three more novels (*New Moon*, *Eclipse* and *Breaking Dawn*) were subsequently published over the years, with a significant increase of public interest. In 2008, the first book was adapted to film. Despite the fact that the published novels had already established a wide fan base, the film adaptation gave enormous propulsion to the diffusion of the saga. In November 2012, the airing of the fifth and final film, *Breaking Dawn Part II*, was a media and cultural event of great interest capturing the imagination of millions of people around the world.

In the literature, several contributions have investigated the issue of the popularity of the series adopting different approaches. First of all, reflections focused on the way the media texts were crafted: the success of the saga as a cultural product was analysed in terms of topics covered, characters' features and use of metaphors (Bucciferro, 2013; Click, Aubrey & Behm-Morawitz, 2010; Wilson, 2011). According to Morey (2012), the *Twilight* series is a hybrid of popular literary genres (the vampire tale, the romance, the coming-of-age story) that, in the movie version, also adopts some characteristics of the fantasy genre, of the drama genre (especially in the last episodes) and of teen movies. In addition, the seductive potential of *Twilight* for a young audience (even if internally segmented) derives from its roots in the contemporary world. Books and movies are, in fact, a textual landscape composed of many and even contradictory messages about femininity and masculinity, class, race, religion and morality (Wilson, 2011).

According to several authors, *Twilight* shares with other extremely popular series such as *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* the ability to trigger deep processes of identification in audiences, independently from cultural differences (Deyneka, 2012; Fowkes, 2010). The themes addressed by *Twilight* plunge into the roots of mythology and refer to love, hate, death and fate; these concepts are abstract enough to be understood by anyone (Bucciferro, 2013). This feature is enhanced by the use of metaphors and archetypal characters, although imperfect ones. Their weakness makes them closer to the public because it fosters emotional involvement (Codeluppi, 2009). From this point of view, the *Twilight* saga presents, especially in the character of Edward Cullen, a vampire model

very different from the classical one, which is rooted in mythology and popular folklore (Godwin, 2013). According to Ortoleva (2013), these new vampires are typical of contemporary media production and can be found in other popular television series (*The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, for example). They share some core features: first of all, they're teenagers or young people – a condition that is the same of the majority of their audience. Moreover, they're endowed with consciousness and feelings and, in addition, they live in the same places as their readers and viewers. This implies the transformation of the classic vampire, monstrous and evil, into a tormented hero – a sort of “dark” prince who strongly attracts consumers of popular culture.

Moving from the analysis of media texts to the study of audiences, sociological thinking is focused primarily on the reception and on the explanation of the Twilight saga's popularity among different audiences. Here, for example, we can find studies on fandom, seen as the deep connection between cultural users and particular artists or kinds of performance (McQuail, 1997) – in our case, film. These reflections have often adopted a gender perspective, focusing on the reception of distinct female audiences, such as teenagers or the “Twilight moms” (Dorsey-Elson, 2013). The same context also includes the analysis of interpretive communities related to Twilight, whose existence was strongly supported by the Internet and social networks like Facebook and Twitter (Groover, 2013).

In our investigation we have chosen to adopt an approach which is specifically ethnographic (De Blasio, Gili, Hibberd & Sorice, 2007), focusing the attention on the fruition forms by young audiences of the film *Breaking Dawn, Part 2*. The phenomenon was studied in its own frame of reference, starting from what happens in the movie theatre. The great success of Twilight, especially among teenagers and young women, make this saga a cultural phenomenon of interest for research studies which want to investigate the issue of culture and youth consumption. The relationship between young people and cinema has been investigated in connection with the desire of recognition (emotions, feelings, experiences of their inner and relational world) and belonging (especially referred to the peer group), which are at the core of identity development. We chose a qualitative method that aimed at observing the cultural phenomenon in all its complexity, according to the holistic analytical perspective that characterises ethnographic research of the audience (Sorice, 2007). In

doing this, we used two different tools: participant observation and in-depth interviews (La Mendola 2009; Nigris, 2003).

#### *Participant observation*

The first phase of the research consisted of “covered” participant observation (Semi, 2010) in movie theatres where the film was screened. The observation period covered the first two weeks of screening, from the 14th to the 25th of November 2012. Preference was given to multiplexes in order to deal with large fluxes of people and a greater number of shows. The movie theatres we selected were located in the cities of Padua, Vicenza, Treviso and Bassano del Grappa, and we had a total of 10 shows observed.

At this stage, the aim was to observe three specific phases of the fruition experience: before the showing, outside the theatre (upon the arrival of the people, how the groups are formed, etc.); during the showing, including the intermission and the end of the film, in order to take notes of the reactions of the audience during different scenes; after the showing, outside the theatre, in order to acquire potential interviewees for the second phase of the study.

The observation was guided by a grid which was useful in order to retrieve information such as the number of spectators; the characteristics of groups (age, gender, whether composed of young people or with the presence of adults, etc.); the distribution in the multiplex space and the use of the available services (both inside and outside, before and after the film) etc. The most important part of the notes was focused on the main public reactions to each scene or moment of the film. The purpose was to detect the behaviour of the audience and the intensity of the emotional involvement of the audience with the film, noticing moments of perceived suspense, silences, hand clapping, comments, etc.

Overall, the collected materials were organised and analysed, looking in particular to the characteristics of groups and relationships and to the reactions of the audience related to topics and values presented in the film.

#### *In-depth interviews*

The second phase of the research consisted of 20 in-depth interviews with young men and women aged between 16 and 25 years, who live in Veneto and have seen at least one movie and read at least one book of the

Twilight saga. Their names were collected and selected at the end of the sessions of participant observation. Through the interviews, we attempted to investigate some elements like: the quality of emotional involvement, the possibilities of identification and “deployment” with the characters, the values and behavioural patterns adopted from watching the movie. Furthermore we examined, specifically, the way of discussing the saga’s contents with the peer group and family and the differences of fruition between the male and female audiences. The interview was made up of five sections:

a) The first part of the interview was designed to gather personal information of the interviewee. We used these data to assess the context of her or his life, as a sort of interpretive framework of the interviewee.

b) The second part focused on questions about experiences of the Twilight saga in general to understand what kind of relationship the interviewees have with this product. The goal was to temporally anchor the experience of the interviewee in terms of the first contact with the saga. In addition, our intention was to investigate the ways of discussing the experience immediately after viewing the film.

c) The third part contained questions regarding the specific experience of the last film in the saga, *Breaking Dawn, Part II*, in order to investigate the level of satisfaction and involvement. Questions about involvement or preferences between book and film were aimed at investigating the link between product and respondent and how this could define a larger form of connection among viewers of the series.

d) The fourth part sought the motives for seeing Twilight, for relating with the saga in its entirety and for highlighting particular aspects of the movie – especially the values transmitted (the sense of love and friendship, courage, etc). The aim was to reconstruct the sources of identification with or preference for a particular character, or even how some scenes in the film were viewed as pleasant and acceptable within the framework of the interviewee.

e) The last part analysed the relationships with the peer group, with people of the opposite sex and with parents regarding the experience of Twilight in general, in an attempt to understand the meaning that young people give to it.

Then, the collected interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, as a specific model of narrative analysis aimed at finding common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report (Riessman,

2002; Cortazzi, 2001). As a consequence of the analysis, we identified some thematic issues that represent the fundamental features of the relationship between the film and the young audience. In the following sections, we first of all analyse the context of fruition, that is to say, the places and the composition of audiences. Second, we focus on the dynamics of involvement and identification triggered by Twilight films and characters. Third, we address the wide issues of socialization and identity building. The final section concludes by drawing some final remarks about the cultural experience of the Twilight saga.

### **Places and audiences**

The primary target of Twilight are, obviously, young people and mostly young girls. In all the movie theatres where we conducted the ethnographic research, the absolute majority of the audience was made up of teenagers or, at most, by people who were closer to 20 years old that probably had begun following the saga when they were under-age. The audience was predominantly female but, especially among the teenagers, there were many mixed-sex groups of friends and quite a few couples.

In the multiplex involved in the research, the film's success was evident, with a lot of sold out showings or showings with only a few seats left in the theatre, depending on the time when the movie was shown. Due to the type of theatre (for example if the cinema is in the city centre or if it is a multiplex located in the outskirts, if it is accessible by public transport, if the showing is on the weekends or during the week) the audience also consisted of groups of girls-only or with the presence of accompanying adults, who usually didn't stop for the movie showing<sup>1</sup>.

The movie houses that offer more leisure or consumption services, such as bars, videogames and small carousels for children, were the ones that had a more diversified affluence of people. The walls of the multiplex were covered by billboards and the radio broadcasted currently popular songs

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<sup>1</sup> A woman, after that she delivered the tickets to a group of girls, said: 'Well, we'll see at the exit as soon as the movie ends' (Treviso, ethnographic note, November 18<sup>th</sup>). Numerous parents are seated on chairs at the corners of the entrance after having left their daughters at the bar. A woman, probably a mum, alone, attends with six little girls (Vicenza, ethnographic note, November 17<sup>th</sup>).

throughout the brightly lit halls. One cinema in particular had a library in which:

The store window displayed all the books of the Twilight saga and also all the DVDs of the associated films, together with the famous book written by J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, which will be released soon in cinemas (Vicenza, ethnographic note, November 17<sup>th</sup>).

We probably do not need to point out the role marketing strategies have had in creating the Twilight phenomenon. For some movie houses, the resemblance to a shopping centre, to the great cathedrals of consumption of our days (Fabris, 2003), is evident. What is offered is a wide consumption experience that is not limited to the use of a single media product, but is rather linked to the aestheticisation of spaces and to the creation of an emotionally warm atmosphere, spectacular and exciting at the same time.

The composition of the viewers of *Breaking Dawn, Part II* changed as we got closer to the evening shows: after five in the afternoon, the groups composed of early adolescent girls nearly disappeared while couples and small groups of twenty-somethings increased<sup>2</sup>. Despite the increase in age, the audience was still composed by a majority of women; the presence of many couples increased the percentage of men among the audience, who, however, remained uninterested in the film:

Two men behind me while they were entering the movie house – talking over their wives – asked between themselves if they would be able to stay awake (Padova, ethnographic note, November 25<sup>th</sup>).

What emerges from the interviews is that the experience of fruition is something to live and feel with someone else, mostly with friends or boyfriends. The experience of cinema consumption, as is confirmed by the literature (De Blasio, Gili, Hibberd & Sorice, 2007), becomes the desire to share and socialize, mainly the peer group (Ladd, 2006). As a matter of fact, the first contacts with the Twilight saga took place through word of mouth among friends, classmates and sport mates who were engaged in reading the book and/or watching the movie:

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<sup>2</sup> The age is different, I see people in their twenties and also forties but not a lot of teenagers; indeed, I see only one 13-year-old accompanied by his mother. Or is it he who accompanies his mother? (Padova, ethnographic note, November 25<sup>th</sup>).

I shared this experience with a friend in particular because we were reading the same book at the same time, phoning to exchange opinions about the subject. I did not discuss it with other friends because they were not interested in the saga. Then I insisted on telling my parents the plots of the movies; they say that I am a bit excessive, but they accept it anyway (Giorgia, 15 years old, Padova)<sup>3</sup>.

Peers are the favoured interlocutors; with the adults, and parents in particular, the sharing is minimal (Torrance, 1998; Pugh, 2009; Maggioni, Ronfani, Belloni & Belotti, 2013). First, teenagers do not believe that is something to share with parents. Second, parents seem uninterested in discussing with their sons about the Twilight films and books. Moreover, in the movie theatre, the facial expressions, gestures and silences revealed the lack of interest of the adults. Going with the children to the movie house is more than anything else a matter of maintaining control over what the children watch:

Next to me there is a family (a father and a mother with two children aged 8 years). The mother tells me: “We’ve read all the books and seen all the movies; we’ve watched on our own the last chapter to ensure that the content is suitable for them” (Bassano del Grappa, ethnographic note, November 23<sup>rd</sup>).

Sometimes, however, attempts at sharing occur: some girls and boys wanted to involve their parents in the Twilight story, leading them to the movie house, watching the film at home with them or guiding them in reading the books. It seems to be easier with mothers, partly due to the issues addressed in the film. Although they sometimes seek the involvement of their parents, the young people actually became really surprised when witnessing to the attendance of a lot of adults at the Twilight events. From this point of view, the reactions of young consumers to the “Twilight moms” phenomenon – adult women devoted to the saga that have attracted the attention of journalists and academics (Dorsey-Elson, 2013) – are very meaningful. For many of them, the presence of

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<sup>3</sup> I told my parents about the movies, I tried to make them read the books because I think that they are nice... but they both refused (Sarah, 19 years old, Vicenza). I told my mother something about the film, but she... well she was not very interested in it... my father even less (Laura, 16 years old, Castelfranco Veneto).

adults in the theatre was a source of wonder, as the levity of the topics would not make them suitable for an adult audience. One girl in particular is astonished by the attitude of some women:

I ask myself a lot of questions because I read, for example, that when the troupe came to shoot in Montepulciano, there was complete delirium. I wanted to go there, too, but, in the end, I did not. I read in the newspapers that there were a lot of women in their thirties that followed and hung out in front of the hotel where Robert Pattinson was, and I said to myself: but do these thirty-somethings have nothing better to do? (Laura, 17 years old, Padova).

So, what we observed was a way of sharing experiences with adults that, nonetheless, must keep a respectable distance, especially emotional, by the adults. The Twilight saga is and must remain a *generational* product.

### **The *Twilight* reality between involvement and identification**

*Breaking Dawn, Part II* starts with the image of Bella – who has become a vampire – speaking with her husband, Edward, about their daughter, Renesmee, who grows very quickly because of her dual nature (of human and vampire). From here, the plot unfolds the family affairs of the Cullens and the parent–child relationships. The Cullens must face the threat of the Volturi, a vampire clan from Italy, whose function it is to keep the secret about the existence of vampires around the world. Renesmee is considered a danger to the vampire race by the Volturi and so they want to get rid of her.

The story gets at its core: all the members of the Cullens' family start their journey to contact other vampires who can help them in the imminent battle. Meanwhile, Jacob, the wolf-friend of Bella, calls to arms many wolf packs in defence of the girl. The two sides, the *good guys*, the Cullens (helped by werewolves) and the *wicked guys*, the Volturi, face each other in a violent battle that is won by the Cullens despite some painful losses. Here is the plot twist, which is cathartic and decisive: the battle never actually took place – it was just a vision in the mind of Aro, the Volturi's leader. This is the happy ending of the saga: Bella and Edward telepathically relive the highlights of their love story. And so they can begin their eternity together.

Vampires, werewolves and humans; a battle that never really took place; visions and telepathy. It's not reality, nor is it a representation. It is the assumption of a *cinematic experience* that creates a *discourse* about the world – a narration that is not reality but has the same density, particularly on the emotional side. Here lies the *unreal nature* of cinematic storytelling and, at the same time, that *effect of reality* that the representation owns and that the viewer perceives (Casetti, 1999).

Edgar Morin (1956) states that the cinema is the dialectical unity of the real and the unreal opening to the imaginary; it represents the meeting point between image and imagination. The cinema puts the audience in front of a fictional space that is not real but that has all the features of reality, allowing the audience members to “dream the same dream together”. The Twilight-dream, in this sense, shows how reality can be mixed with the oneiric, the fantastic, the surreal and the imaginary. The presence of vampires and werewolves, re-contextualised in an everyday context, in a small town of the US, is at the root of that interest that is, first of all, *involvement*.

The core themes of Twilight (and, earlier, of the books) are timeless. We can find them in myths and legends that exist all over the world, and in all literary traditions (Bucciferro, 2013). That is why they are so powerful:

- Sensuality, chastity and restraint;
- An impossible relationship;
- Unconditional love;
- “Tame your inner monster” and
- Commitment and choice.

These are very attractive topics that help explaining how Twilight is so deeply connected with our reality, on a global scale. This is true both in terms of the economic impact of the series and its capability for representing issues that are important for society at large. They suggest connections with other themes: femininity and masculinity, self-identity and social norms, romance and the topic of good versus evil.

The themes, the pace<sup>4</sup>, the characters and the emotions aroused have the power to engage the viewer, even negatively<sup>5</sup>, in a game of opposition and contrast:

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<sup>4</sup> I did not know the ending so I was very captured by every plot twist (Anna, 19 years old, Montebelluna).

In the vampires, in their history of love... we can find the concept of forever, which is something that really does not belong to us and that may fascinate but may also scare from a certain point of view (Gabriele, 18 years old, Treviso).

Through Bella, the main character, a teenager of the present time takes the centre of the storyline. She is often defined, in the interviews, as “an ordinary girl” with her own contradictions. And young people feel close to her, they project themselves into her experiences:

What is more striking is the impossible love story between Bella and Edward. It talks about the insecurities of a teenager; at that age you feel a bit out of place... you don't feel in the right place at the right time, and this is what Bella, the protagonist, lived. Then, with Edward, she found a place that was right for her. The idea of finding a person that can put you in the right place at the right time is good. I was curious to see how she transformed, how her life changed; all the awkwardness that she had before turned into strengths, it became courage, a ‘never give up’ theme (Viviana, 25 years old, Treviso).

One of the basic mechanisms of the connection between the viewer and the movie concerns the processes of identification, which Baudry (1970, 1975) defines as the “basic device” of the cinema. The spectator participates in the cinematic situation through mechanisms of *identification* and *projection*. Through the screen, audiences experience deep feelings, even conflicting ones (joy – sadness, emotion – indifference, anxiety – pleasure), empathizing with one or more characters. Sometimes, the audiences imagine themselves living what the characters live, experiencing first-hand their feelings and emotions (Fine, 1983). The main characters of the film are archetypal:

- The troubled hero, embodied in Edward, the vampire;
- The redeeming maiden, Bella and
- The restless youth, Jacob the werewolf, charismatic and attractive but who is not quite the hero.

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<sup>5</sup> It did not represent the myth well. They were too humanised. The imaginary world of the vampires and werewolves was completely overturned (Daniele, 22 years old, Abano Terme).

Archetypes are part of the collective unconscious and are cross-cultural. As such, they allow deep dynamics of projection, recognition and audience identification. In *Twilight*, they deal with inner struggles and outside challenges: classic themes such as love, hate, power, trust, fate and mortality versus immortality.

Girls identify themselves with Bella<sup>6</sup> and boys with either Jacob or Edward<sup>7</sup>. The characters are troubled, they are not perfect but that is properly what enables the identification. This appears to be particularly true for one of the main themes of the saga: the importance of choice and of making the right choice<sup>8</sup>.

As mentioned, the male characters had great success among the viewers, bringing the audience to side with either one or the other:

I am absolutely pro-Edward, because he was the ideal man, can you find – nowadays – a man that says to you: “no, first we get married and then we can do the rest”? (...) he is educated, intelligent, knows how to play the piano, has a smile to fall in love with, and is full of money (Marianna, 23 years old, Padova).

I am pro-Jacob because I find him much nicer than Edward and because Jacob is more real and more awake; Edward is a complete idiot, totally unintelligent. At a certain point in the movie Bella is almost killed by a vampire... so Edward decides that it's better for her safety that he disappears. He practically disappears from her life and you think: “how stupid is this guy?”, just like men who suddenly disappear (Alessia, 25 years old, Vicenza).

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<sup>6</sup> I would choose Bella because, in the end, she has all that she wants from life... Bella has Edward forever, has Renesmee, has the vampire life... she says that she was born to be a vampire, and then, despite many shocks and traumas, at the end she really has all that she wants, and I think that, in the end, is something that everyone wants, but especially everyone wants to be sure to have a person who loves you so much and have a kind of love... that tends to perfection... that's exactly what I want (Laura, 17 years old, Padova).

<sup>7</sup> I identify mostly with Edward, because he's a bit old-fashioned, he likes traditional love stories, such as when he says: “I waited two hundred years before you came” (...) Then I identify myself with Jacob because... even though Bella, the girl he likes, told him no, he continues to hope (Sarah, 19 years old, Vicenza).

<sup>8</sup> In the relationship between Bella and Jacob, I hated her; I understand the hesitation to a certain extent (...) I didn't like the love triangle, because it's too easy to figure out, right from the beginning, how the story would go and who would win in the end (Marianna, 23 years old, Padova).

The opposition between “Team Edward” and “Team Jacob” was, not surprisingly, at the centre of a specific marketing campaign launched with the second movie of the saga (*New Moon*) – a campaign that divided the fans and calling for their overt identification, while featuring all kinds of merchandise, from key chains to pillowcases.

These characters personify, above all, values, which appear to be clearly identifiable in teenagers and young people:

There are the werewolves and the bond of the wolf pack, that unites them, the legends of the tribe, the friendships that exists between the groups, this is great. And then the vampires and the importance of family relationships, how meaningful they are, even for us (Marianna, 23 years old, Padova).

### **Finding a way in the world**

Novels and films such as the Twilight saga are sometimes easily dismissed as irrelevant by people, but popular culture products represent a distinct feature of contemporary societies (Couldry & McCarthy, 2004). The perspective of Audience Studies states that people do not passively absorb media content. Instead, they do things with it that influence how they manage the real world (Alasuutari, 1999). Issues that are difficult to address are represented within popular culture, and audiences actively negotiate their meaning (Schroder, Drotner, Kline & Murray, 2003). The success of Twilight (and its role in the definition of youth culture, together with the practises of socialization and identity construction) isn't simply due to its marketing strategies or because of the presence of young and beautiful characters. It's something deeper, that is also linked to the ability to give a meaning to some dynamics, situations and relationships. In Twilight, we have fictional stories but real issues. As a matter of fact, Twilight addresses a lot of topics that are very relevant, especially for young people and teenagers:

- Friendships, relationships and marriage;
- Gender roles and power dynamics;
- Differences based on race, class and status and
- The appeal of fantasy.

According to Andreani (2011), the love story between Bella and Edward is a continuously stimulating and creative work: a work made of mediation

and compromise between two very different beings who are at the same time similar, both autonomous and free. It is an encounter between two people who love each other and respect themselves despite their insurmountable, but also exciting, difference. How could anyone imagine something more appealing than this in the universe of the emotions, feelings and desires of the youth audience?

Young viewers immediately understood and appreciated that the relationship between different species and communities in conflict – together with love, hate and friendship – was at the core of the plot. What emerges from the interviews is, for example, a strong connection to traditional values such as love and family. The film recalls, to girls in particular, the image of “forever” (starting from the “obliged eternity”, represented by the figure of the vampire) and the strong desire for an everlasting love relationship, as an absolute value:

The love story that the two main characters live is something that everyone wants to experience, both from the male and the female point of view. It's the desire to find someone who matches your wish to be unconditional with him or her (Gabriele, 18 years old, Treviso).

At the end of the movie, when Bella shows some memories of her love affair with Edward, the girls around me have dreamy eyes. At the word 'eternity' someone sighs (Padova, ethnographic note, November 21<sup>st</sup>).

At the declaration of eternal love, after some buzz during the flashback, silence returns in the theatre. At the end of the declaration, applause starts (Treviso, ethnographic note, November 18<sup>th</sup>).

It's nice to dream... if I'm going to see a movie, I go to see a love story, something that involves me emotionally. I would like to feel just like that, something that goes outside the sketch (Viviana, 25 years old, Treviso).

In *Breaking Dawn, Part II*, as in the entirety of the Twilight saga, family is represented as a lifeline, a shelter where they are accepted and they will always find an help. The Cullen family is the one of the *rebirth*, in which, after a transformation, a human being is resocialised to a new life as a vampire in a climate of comparison and dialogue among equals. The werewolves, however, are a pack, relatively excluded from the community, where one finds acceptance and solidarity only after submission to the

orders of the leader. These are different settings that generate sympathy and different forms of attachment<sup>9</sup>. The Cullens are the picture of the perfect family, where all members live peacefully together, everyone is a friend to each other and they talk to solve any problems; they never withhold their support to a member. What emerges is the idea of a modern family, where the participation of each is possible than to the capability of welcoming and listening to one another. The little Renesmee, the daughter of the two protagonists, immediately arouses sympathy and attachment in the audience<sup>10</sup>, as she offers the image of innocence and “angelic” childhood to be protected in its innocence (Belotti, 2005; Riva, 2007).

The value of friendship, faithful and disinterested, is always present in the saga. In *Breaking Dawn, Part II*, werewolves and vampires cooperate to save the little girl and put aside their centuries-old dislike of each other. This alliance between Jacob’s pack of werewolves and Bella with the vampires is cemented by the presence of the little Renesmee. The role of the little girl in the film is to make everyone aware of the fact that there is a righteous battle to be fought, something for the good of all vampires, that is collective and not merely individual. Love, friendship and a willingness for a greater good blend, embodying a message that powerfully hits the audience throughout the entire showing:

A girl yells: “The alliance creates strength” during the scene where Bella and Edward are searching a coalition with other vampires (Vicenza, ethnographic note, November 17<sup>th</sup>).

All in all, Renesmee is a narrative device to convey the message that we should do the right thing and help friends. Saving the child justifies the violence of adults, considering that she can’t defend herself, so it is rightful to resort to violence against those who threaten her. The violence becomes

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<sup>9</sup> In the battle scene, when the violent death of one of the young wolves occurred, the audience did not react at all; every time a vampire dies, however, regret, almost close to pain, is always expressed. When Esme dies, a girl shouts: “No, not her!” very loudly (Padova, ethnographic note, November 21<sup>st</sup>). When Carlisle dies, at the beginning of the battle, there are worried and pained exclamations, I see some desperate expressions and teardrops on the faces of the girls close to me (...) The audience seems anxious, and after the death of one of the Volturi many applaud (Bassano del Grappa, ethnographic note, November 23<sup>rd</sup>).

<sup>10</sup> When Bella sees her daughter for the first time, the audience whispers, saying, “she’s beautiful” here and there (Treviso, ethnographic note, November 18<sup>th</sup>).

morally acceptable. The film creates a sense of belonging to the “good guys”, who fight for Renesmee and against the “bad guys” who don’t yield to pity. Violence is never incited, but the reactions of grief and dismay emerge only when the “good guys” die or are in danger, as mentioned before. When it became clear that the whole battle was just a vision, the climate in the room died down; there was no longer tension rather relief, due to the fact that the heroes were still alive:

Plot twist: the battle is a vision that Alice sends to Aro. Everyone is happy, incredulous and comforted (Treviso, ethnographic note, November 18<sup>th</sup>).

When people discover that the whole scene was just a vision, laughter and astonishment, followed by relief fill the entire room. Many people exclaimed: “Oooh thank goodness!” (Bassano del Grappa, ethnographic note, November 24<sup>th</sup>).

It has a cathartic, reassuring happy ending. By restoring the initial situation, maintaining the relationships which the stories of the characters in the other films of the saga are built upon, *Twilight* offers to the viewers an opportunity to rebuild that order, made of values, on which they had based the preconditions of recognition and involvement.

A process of recognition that supports the understanding of contemporary life also by dealing with issues such as the inclusion and the acceptance of the difference. In the European tradition, vampires had to be chased away because they were evil and destructive, and so were werewolves. Moreover, vampires and werewolves always fought against each other. In the saga, these figures give up being vindictive, and their alliance is very significant because it implies the elimination of conflicts and barriers between “different”, and thus fosters integration<sup>11</sup>.

From a gender perspective, the research outcomes show that the girls enjoyed the film more than the boys did. The males often dismissed it as “stuff for females”:

They had to add more action (...) I do not go to see *Twilight* because I want to be educated about something or because I want to grasp something

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<sup>11</sup> The love relationships in the film are all interracial: humans and vampires (Bella and Edward), humans and werewolves (Charlie and his partner) and finally half-humans and half-vampires with werewolves (Renesmee and Jacob).

deep... I want to be entertained. The film surely satisfied the female gender, who has these tendencies toward the ideal, to the romantic side. Let's put some pretty violent scenes in so everybody will be quiet (Gabriele, 18 years old, Treviso).

When I brought my boyfriend to see the penultimate film, he was shocked; he asked me how could I enjoy this kind of stuff (Sara, 19 years old, Bassano del Grappa).

The Twilight saga deals with a kind of genre, romantic and fantastic, that involves and arouses desires, feelings and emotions that belong more to the experience of the girls. These girls find in the film not only an escapism experience but also recognition and complicity. As already demonstrated by Ang (1985) and Radway (1987) with regards to women's preferences, the identification with the characters and events relies on the *connotative* level of the narration. The *denotative* level is instead secondary, because the situations are far away from the everyday life experiences of the audience. The Twilight saga, which is based on the relationship between vampires, werewolves and humans, is narrated by using a registry that is *realistic* in terms of feelings. What matters is the "emotional realism" that makes the story realistic on an emotional level, encouraging the projection of the audience (Codeluppi, 2009; Hall, 2003). The emotions are real, such as the psychological reactions and the feelings, regardless of the "concreteness" of places, experiences or physical features of the characters involved. Love, friendship, jealousy, hatred, despair and fear are universal and recognizable feelings that enhance projection and recognition in the events, although they are narrated unrealistically. All in all, this requires a melodramatic imagination (Ang, 1985), an attribute that typically (but not exclusively) belongs to females and that makes a media product like Twilight more appreciated and "recognizable" by young women.

### **Conclusions: a cultural experience of sharing and belonging**

The Twilight saga went from a low-budget first movie to a money-making franchise and also from the highest-grossing film directed by a woman to four sequels directed by men. At first, it was an independent

project, but it soon became mainstream. The audience expanded from American teenage girls to different kinds of people worldwide. The themes delved into adult issues, going far beyond a teen romance by assuming features of the drama, the vampire tale and the fantasy narration. *Twilight* is an excellent example of how the entertainment industry creates cultural products that become representative of their time and place and yet transcend local boundaries. In this sense, the media both reflect and influence social trends (Gauntlett, 2008).

Actors Robert Pattinson (Edward), Kristen Stewart (Bella) and Taylor Lautner (Jacob) are emblematic within teen culture, especially for the female teenage audience. But *Twilight*'s worldwide success is not simply due to girls loving handsome actors. *Twilight*'s popularity should be considered in terms of the relationship between media texts and what they do for people (Bucciferro, 2013). *Twilight* pulls the audience into an emotional journey: emotions can be powerful and may even influence people's decisions. Through the development of Bella and Edward's relationship, the movie helps to explicate a variety of topics that are relevant to the adolescent development course.

The *Twilight* phenomenon is not merely an example of the rise of global fan cultures but, at the same time, it also offers the opportunity to understand some of the mechanisms of symbolic appropriation of reality by young people.

The cinematic experience extends itself into the universe of viewers' lives, especially in younger people. It creates and develops wishes (to see, to know, to believe, to possess) and satisfies social needs (of fun, escape, illusion, knowledge). In the different stages of our research, we have observed that the media contents, in this case the events of the saga, have become the subject of widespread discussion (small talk among friends, critical comments, public debates), and moreover, factors of cultural and social aggregation. More generally, the consumption of the *Twilight* saga has provided teenagers with cognitive resources that they use as instruments of sense to orient themselves in their everyday lives (Rivoltella, 2006; Caronia, 2002; Besozzi, 2009); media consumption improves skills and shared knowledge within other fields of action. In short, it becomes a widespread experience.

*Twilight*, in this sense, is not just a single movie saga: the majority of the respondents have read almost all the books of the series, which are considered more engaging than the movies. The readers of the saga, as soon

as the film was released, felt the need to compare the book with the film in order to verify how the latter reflects, more or less faithfully, the content of the pages. In some cases, the opposite occurred: watching the movie led to the purchase of the book in order to know the rest of the story<sup>12</sup>.

At movie theatre lobbies, while people wait to enter, they discuss the film; look at the posters; exchange impressions about the main characters and debate the content, the themes and the narrated situation<sup>13</sup>. Cinema and literature mingle with each other according to the interest or the curiosity of teenagers. The complexity of the literary text, the digressions, the detailed stories and the time spent on reading, turn into a more affordable level of consumption thanks to the dynamism and the speed of watching the movie. This, together with a different language and style, produces strong involvement.

Through the action of watching movies, reading novels and browsing websites, forums etc., the desire to imagine a different world emerges (Andreani, 2011), comparing it with daily life and its dilemmas, choices and situations. Adolescents and young people who watch *Twilight* are not simply attached to the serial pleasure of the episodes, which generates curiosity and loyalty to the story and its characters. They also consider the possibility of testing themselves regarding the obstacles that the characters must face throughout the adventure.

Even though there are significant gender differences in terms of styles of use and consumption, what is more striking, however, is the distance from the adult world, involving mutual difficulties as well as shared interests, opinions and passions.

As Audience Studies and, in particular, the ethnographic research on media audiences have shown (Boni, 2006), media contents can be considered to be social resources that enable identification processes. These

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<sup>12</sup> I have started reading the books. I started from the first thanks to the reviews in the newspapers – everybody was talking about it. I was sceptical but then it captured me. I read them in a short period of time. I did not even sleep because once you start reading, you just cannot stop. I saw the films when they came out because I had already read the books, and then I said, ‘well, let’s try, let’s see’; The first chapters sorely disappointed me, but, after that, they improved, both in terms of quality and history, how it was handled (Alessia, 25 years old, Vicenza).

<sup>13</sup> Looking at the billboards, people talk about their impressions of the books and how they were interpreted. They say that the books were very well written and that even though the film failed to convey the emotions that the book gave, they are happy with the result anyway (Padova, ethnographic note, November 25<sup>th</sup>).

processes enhance both a sense of individual identity and affinity to certain social groups: interpretive communities based on communicative fruition (Lindlof, 1988). Seeing the movie involved the majority of those interviewed in a dimension that is not only individual, but eminently social. As a matter of fact, young people show a significant need to share the contents of cultural consumption – a need that therefore affects the processes of recognition within the community or group to which they belong: they discuss and comment on what they saw, and they share the same emotions and experiences regarding codes, values and communication rituals in a complex and challenging framework worthy of sociological analysis.

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This study was a joint effort by both authors, though paragraphs *Introduction: Identity, need of social recognition and media consumption – The Twilight case and the ethnographic approach* are by Ruggero Cefalo, paragraphs *Places and audiences – The Twilight reality between involvement and identification – Finding a way in the world – Conclusions: a cultural experience of sharing and belonging* are by Claudio Riva

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