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## Inexperienced, Addicted, at Risk. How Young People Describe Their Parents' Use of Digital Media

*Tiziana Piccioni\**, *Cosimo Marco Scarcelli\*\**, *Renato Stella\*\*\**

### Author information

\* Tiziana Piccioni, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padova, Italy. Email: [tiziana.piccioni@gmail.com](mailto:tiziana.piccioni@gmail.com)

\*\* Cosimo Marco Scarcelli, Department of Cultural Heritage, University of Padova, Italy and Department of Communication, IUSVE Venice, Italy. Email: [marco.scarcelli@gmail.com](mailto:marco.scarcelli@gmail.com)

\*\*\* Renato Stella, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padova, Italy. Email: [renato.stella@unipd.it](mailto:renato.stella@unipd.it)

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# Inexperienced, Addicted, at Risk. How Young People Describe Their Parents' Use of Digital Media

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*Abstract:* If we look at the relationship between young people and adults in terms of their usage of digital technologies, we can see that the studies conducted to date have paid little attention to adult users. Thanks to interviews and autoethnographic diaries, the present study looks at how young people view their parents' use of digital media. A 'mediologic approach' help us to look at the inter-generational relationships and the role of digital technologies from the young people's perspective, in an effort to shed light on those spaces in the discourse where expectations, stereotypes and generational boundaries are constructed. Young people's views are on a continuum with a shared rhetoric that now sees digital media as an established element in our social ecology, but also as a phenomenon capable of modifying human behaviour. Young people's narratives reveal an interesting picture: they worry about the older generation's use of these technologies. The study shows how interviewees interiorized the rhetoric digital native vs. digital immigrants moving the focus from the technical plane to the social one and emphasizing a role for the young who can occupy an independent space, uninfluenced by the classical hierarchies.

*Keywords:* digital media, parents, young people, smartphone, family

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## **Introduction**

The digital dimension of communication is increasingly involved in numerous aspects of our lives. Our processes for attributing sense and regulating our behaviour seem to rely on our means of communication in a relationship of circularity that includes changes in the sphere of the media, and changes in the cultural and social domains (Couldry, 2012; Couldry & Hepp, 2013, 2017).

The ever greater accessibility of digital technologies has contributed to this situation. During the decade from 2006 to 2016, for instance, the total number of people in Italy who had never been online dropped from over 60% to around 33%, despite the adoption of ICT in the country being lower than in other parts of Europe (Istat-FUB, 2018). Although the use of Internet depends on people's age and education level, in the main its users have significantly intensified their activities that rely on these technologies. Bearing in mind that just over 6% of the Italian population still do not use mobile phones, and that the arrival of the smartphone has strongly increased people's use of Internet, we could say that the presence of the new media in our daily lives is gradually becoming more and more important, although the traditional media continue to occupy a significant place in our homes (Nobile, 2015; Assinform, 2017; Istat-FUB, 2018).

The differences between young people and older people's use of digital technologies is becoming less evident, and more adults are beginning to occupy media territories that belonged exclusively to the younger generations up until not long ago.

In a society where there is still evidence of what Segatto and Dal Ben (2013) called the family digital divide, new technologies often become a terrain on which young people and adults stake their claims to autonomy, establish the need for control, tie bonds between generations, and devise systems of mutual dependence - suffice it to mention, for instance, the economic resources needed to purchase a digital device.

The above-described relationship has often been conceptualized by placing the accent on the risks the younger generations run when they use smartphones, tablets or computers (Buckingham, 2008; Haddon, 2018). Young people's state of being "constantly connected" is rarely perceived as a cultural practice situated in a more complex pattern of activities that include consumption, production, representation and (self)-regulation (Dru-sian, Magaudda & Scarcelli, 2019; Mascheroni, 2018).

Studies conducted to date on the relationship between young people and adults in terms of their use of digital technologies have paid little attention to adult users, except for the debate around the theme of 'sharenting', the practice of adults sharing online visual or textual material in relation to

their children. The research in this field of study has highlighted the risks of networking information for children, whose identity sometimes becomes defined through social media even before they have an active role in the universe of digital communication (Damkjaer, 2018). Therefore, in this case, it is the adults themselves who are recognized as making use of digital media that could put young people at risk. However, most investigations involving adults concern their parental mediation role in processes of control over their children's media use (Aroldi, 2015). The results have revealed a direct link between how parents and their children use new media (Mascheroni, 2012, 2013).

Using interviews and autoethnographic diaries, the present study looks instead at how young people view their parents' use of digital media, as well as some studies that have very specific subjects, in particular with regard to sharenting (Lipu & Siibak, 2019; Levy, 2017; Steinberg, 2017).

We thus reverse the classic approach that largely starts with adults talking about the young (Livingstone, 2009), or occasionally letting the young talk about themselves. The aim here is to look at the inter-generational relationships and the role of digital technologies from the young people's perspective, in an effort to shed light on those spaces in the discourse where expectations, stereotypes and generational boundaries are constructed.

The method that we use is the one that Boccia Artieri (2012) called a 'medialogic approach'. This enables us to consider the media as spaces for the construction of significant individual and collective pathways. In other words, the media are conceived as spaces of contemporary experience that enable people to implement relational and identifying processes.

## **Digital media and the family**

The home and the family are a classic setting for studies on the media. Considerations regarding the emergence of a system for monitoring the use of the television at home have raised a question that has become a core issue in the contemporary debate. The focus is on exploring the family dynamics for managing access to the new media, and how they are used (Lull, 1990; Moores, 1993; Casetti, 1995; Tarozzi, 2007; Livingstone et al., 2011; Murru, 2012; Mascheroni, 2013; Haddon, 2013). Though it draws on contributions from various lines of research, the debate relies particularly on studies on the domestication of the media and digital technologies (Silverstone & Hirsh, 1992; Lie & Sørensen, 1996; Berker, Hartmann, Punie & Ward, 2006; Haddon, 2007). It focuses on the ways in which families and individuals integrate these media in their existing frames of meaning and routines at home. These studies have revealed that the new technologies are

adopted differently at home from what the public discourse on their consumption might lead us to imagine (Chambres, 2015), and that the parties involved have an active role in shaping this process (Silverstone & Hirsh, 1992; Haddon, 2018).

While families and their individual members take an active part in including the new media technologies in their domestic domain, and consolidating their usage, the appropriation and domestication process is actually multi-situated (Sorensen, 2006). This is especially true of mobile communication devices, and the smartphone in particular. With the huge variety of apps available and the device's limited size, the smartphone participates in various areas of social life, facilitating their interaction.

Between those who see this pervasiveness of the media as a resource, and those who consider it hazardous to our way of life and our relational dimension, the debate has generally focused on the adults' point of view (Riva & Scarcelli, 2016), concentrating largely on how they monitor and manage younger people's access to these resources (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1992; Tarozzi, 2007). Already between the 1980s and 1990s, in research on television-watching developed in the sphere of Cultural Studies, which emphasized important aspects of the relationship between the medium and the audience (Lull, 1999; Morley, 1986), parents were emerging as the agents who monitored their families' consumption. This was also a way to underscore the hierarchical structure of the balance of power within the family.

Today, in such a dense technological environment – inside and outside the home – the various debates still see adults as the wise administrators of the family's relations with the means of communication. Since most recent research has shown that there is still a generational gap in technological expertise – the young being more capable than older adults – it seems fair to say that a more general social dimension still takes priority into the frame of needed competences for the practical applications of ICT. It often just seems like a matter of common sense that adult users should see themselves as having the social expertise needed to regulate the use of digital media (if not to actually use them), so they seek to retain the power deriving from their belonging to a particular generation. In the domestic setting of the family, we might expect the new media to make no major difference to the usual power dynamics based on the generations and the roles attached to them. But this dynamic has to come to terms with a type of change that affects the family context too, where parents and their children, whatever the family structure, amidst televisions, old-fashioned radios, PlayStations, computers, tablets and smartphones dotted around the home, are party to a redefinition of their relationships that the new media technologies are contributing to engender (Aroldi, 2015).

The change underway leads family members to have increasingly tightly woven links between their interpersonal world and the digital universe. This phenomenon is often interpreted as risky for the family's relational structure because it would implicate a privatization and individualization of opinions (Donati, 2018; Aroldi, 2007). On the other hand, the latest report from the CISF (Centro Internazionale Studi Famiglia [International Center for Family Studies]) indicates that face-to-face interactions, telephone calls, and exchanges of written messages continue to coexist, showing that ICT are not in themselves responsible for the so-called networked individualism. Instead, they simply "provide the most adequate communicational infrastructure for managing it" (Aroldi, 2018, p. 81). Donati (2018) suggests that a hybridization of identities and relationships develops within families when exchanges mediated by digital technologies come to replace direct interpersonal relations. People can thus imagine being in a different reality from the one hitherto experienced, a reality that "escapes the original family roles and constraints" (p. 50). This would lead to changes in the original relationships and the emergence of a hybridized family structure. In a way, the changes cut across the fixity of the encoded roles of parents and their offspring, the former assumed to possess a wisdom that we might define as 'socio-technical', and the latter somehow more fragile and exposed to risks, despite their technical expertise. So, we are bound to wonder how this intersecting of abilities can be interpreted and managed.

Nowadays, with the availability of media technologies in the family rapidly changing, everyone concerned needs to keep abreast of the changes and learn new skills. It would consequently be worth investigating what the younger generation has to say, also about how their elders use ICT. The smartphone is of particular interest: it is a transversal medium, adopted by different generations of users; it participates in family relations inside and outside the home; and, generally speaking, its incorporation in the family's daily practices is still in the early stages (Magaudda, Piccioni & Scarcelli, 2019).

### **Digital natives versus digital immigrants. Definitions that persist**

Going beyond the family, the relationships between older adults and the young - as regards the use of media technologies - have often been the object of an over-simplification that distinguished between two groups on the strength of their familiarity with digital media (Prensky, 2001). On the one hand, there are the digital natives, people born since the 1980s into a world where the new communication technologies were widely available. They consequently learned to use computers, Internet and mobile phones from a

very early age. They seem capable of processing different inputs at the same time, and are naturally adept at multi-tasking. On the other hand, there are those who immigrated into this world as adults. They consequently need to learn its language and acquire skills that they could not have learned before, and they unavoidably retain a certain (*digital*) *immigrant accent*. Their immigrant status is often revealed by clear signs, such as making a phone call to check that an e-mail has arrived or printing a text instead of reading it online.

The above-described distinction (that Prensky revisited in 2009) is based merely on the generational variable. Despite its excessive simplicity, it has prompted other interpretations on the use of digital media from a strictly generational perspective (Helsper & Eynon, 2010). This has given rise to labels with a strong symbolic content, and great communicational efficacy (Mascheroni, 2012), but that fail to fully grasp the complexity of the phenomenon, such as: born digital (Gasser & Palfrey, 2008); net generation (Tapscott & Williams, 2008); homo zappiens (Veen & Vrakking, 2006); new millennium learners (Pedrò, 2007); digital childhoods (Vandewater et al., 2007); cyberkids (Holloway & Valentine, 2003); and so on.

Albeit with their previously-mentioned limitations, the above studies are of interest for their contribution to our awareness of the media's central and pervasive role in the daily lives of the young and not so young, and of the importance attributed to generational identity in the processes that model our media diets and consumptions (Aroldi, 2011).

The idea of a gap between youth and older people's ability to use digital media is now commonly accepted (Guo, Dobson & Petrina, 2008), and the *digital natives versus immigrants* rhetoric seems to have been absorbed by general opinion (Helsper & Eynon, 2010). In this setting, studies by Tosolini et al. (2016) and by Pattaro et al. (2017) highlight how young people and adults alike are victims, each in their various ways, of a common conviction that what we already know is safe, while the unknown carries inherent security issues and risks. Remaining within this frame of sense makes the adults unaware of the discrepancy between the imagined and real risks, and consequently unable to understand exactly how the young use the media. On the other hand, it imprisons young people's reflexivity in the same rhetoric as that of adults. This situation was emphasized in a recent study (Drusian, Magaudda & Scarcelli, 2019) that, consistently with a report from Riva et al. (2016), found that young respondents applied the same stereotypes to young people as adults.

Ultimately, on the various levels of discourse, digital technology users are still generally seen as having a degree of socio-technical expertise directly proportional to their age, and the life experience acquired over the



years is what counts most when it comes to behaving appropriately online and making good use of ICT.

### **Methodological aspects**

Our considerations stem from qualitative data collected by means of two studies, both investigating the viewpoint of young people on the use of digital media. The two steps involved in constructing our empirical dataset consisted in:

- collecting written narratives (autoethnographic diaries) on the presence of digital media at home, and how family members use them;
- conducting in-depth interviews on the use of digital media in family relations.

Our methodological choices were made in an effort to focus on the younger generation's point of view, listening to their narratives and interpretations regarding not only their own experience with the new media (Lobe et al., 2008; Flick, 1998), but also and more especially how adults (mainly their parents) use them. In our opinion, this type of research is needed to take into account the role of younger people as social actors who are knowledgeable about their own experiences (James & James, 2004; Alanen, 2009). They are therefore capable of recognizing and describing the complex situation in which they are involved, also from the point of view of mediated intergenerational relationships.

#### **Diaries and interviews**

The first part of the study, concerning the usage of digital media at home, involved collecting written diaries produced by a group of 131 young men and women from 18 to 24 years old. These participants were all attending the first year of their university degree course in Mass Communications at the University of Padua during the academic years 2017/18 or 2018/19. They came almost entirely from regions in the north-east of Italy.

This sample of young people was invited to write a diary (as one of the options forming part of an examination paper) outlining the digital media available in their homes, and the uses that various family members made of them as part of their regular daily practices during the course of one week. Their report took the form of tables describing: their family's socio-demographics; the distribution around the home of traditional media (TVs, radios, newspapers, books, etc.), and digital media (computers, tablets, smartphones, etc.); their individual and collective usage (times of day and availability); and the rooms in which they were generally used. The students were also asked to complete this overall snapshot of the presence and usage of media at home with a personal comment.



For the purposes of the present study, we leave aside the initial family media mapping part, the purpose of which was mainly to prompt the students to reflect on the importance and weight of these means of communication in their lives. We focus here instead on the students' personal comments, i.e. on their interpretation of their "mediated" families<sup>12</sup>

The respondents' comments were not guided in any way. Apart from the instructions on how to present the initial narrative details in a table, there were no questions to answer or outlines to follow. The choice of the topics on which to comment, and the order of importance attributed to them, were freely chosen by the respondents. The comments thus express what each respondent considered most relevant in illustrating the relationship between the media, themselves and the various other members of their families. This approach was prompted by referring to two empirical-theoretical settings described in the literature, seeking to obtain the best combination for our analytical purposes: one is "autoethnography" (Ellis et al., 2011; Chang, 2016), also in its critical aspects (Anderson, 2006); the other is the classic biographical data collection by means of appropriately prompted self-narration (Di Fraia, 2004). In our case, the stimulus consisted in an essay assignment, and the request that respondents adopt a shared standard by completing a table.

The data collected by means of these narratives on the family's digital media consumption showed (as we shall see better in the next section) that our young respondents set their own uses against those of their parents, particularly as regards digital media, and especially the smartphone.

The issues that emerged from the personal comments were then used to frame the interviews in the second stage of the research, conducted with a different group of individuals. Sixty young people were enlisted by means of a cascade sampling method, but paying attention to ensure an equal distribution of age (within the range considered, i.e. 18- to 24-year-olds), and gender. We also ensured that the interviewees included some young workers, not just students (as in the first stage of the research).

The points on which the interviews were partially structured included: the importance of each type of medium in the routines of young girls and boys interviewed; the changes digital media had brought about in their practices in general and especially in the household; the influence of digital and traditional media technologies on relations with parents, siblings, friends, partners and any other person with whom they are related.

We used the technic of semi-structured interview, in order to grasp the various aspects of the issues we focused on, preserving a certain order in the topics, but also to follow the genuine speech flow of the youth interviewed (Corbetta, 1999). Each interview lasts on average an hour and a half.

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<sup>12</sup> "*La mia famiglia mediata*" [My Mediated Family] was the title of the diary assignment.

Like the previous written diaries, the interviews were collected and analysed following a precise ethical line, as recommended by Silverman (2013). In other words, we made sure that participation was voluntary, that the data and analytical results remained confidential, that respondents were protected against any type of harm, and that a mutual trust existed between researchers and participants.

Our empirical material was studied using thematic analysis - a specific model of narrative analysis that aims to identify topics and elements common to the experiences that respondents describe (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2002).

### **Between traditional and digital media**

In the words of our respondents, we find a fairly distinct separation between young people and adults inasmuch as concerns their usage of media technologies. The different types of media often serve as a rhetorical expedient for reinforcing a generational difference with clearly dichotomous features. On the one hand there are the parents, anchored to their use of the more traditional means of communication, such as television, radio and newspapers. On the other, we have their children, who are usually associated with the use of digital technologies. Here we can see clear signs of the rhetoric of digital natives versus immigrants, and the association between the presence of technologies in daily life and the natives' almost natural use of them. Among numerous examples, one comes from Marco (20 years old) who said of his parents: "It's obvious they belong to a past generation when TVs, smartphones, computers and tablets didn't originally exist".

Age is more of a technological watershed than other variables, such as gender. The interviews and diaries thus identify two macro groups, one consisting of the grandparents and parents, the other of respondents and their peers and siblings (be they younger or older). In some accounts of the families' media usage practices, the traditional media essentially defined the older generations, and the digital media characterized the younger generation:

"While my parents buy a newspaper every day, listen to the news on the radio, and watch the news on TV, my sister and I stay informed by reading the online newsreels, or following the newspapers' official accounts on social media" (Isabella, 20).

In other descriptions, what distinguishes the parents or grandparents from the younger generation is not so much the technologies in themselves, but the hybrid use made of them by the older generations. They adopt them alongside their traditional communication media, or simply transfer the content and format of the traditional media to the new digital device. For instance, it is not that grandparents and parents would prefer to read the print-

ed newspaper rather than the web-based version, but they would combine reading their usual daily with a look at the websites of other newspapers. Here, the generation gap shows in the way the younger people describe their elders showing a sort of resistance: they use the digital media but according to methods resembling those applied to the traditional media. Some respondents see this as a sign of the older generation's lesser propensity to keep up to date:

“My mum uses the Repubblica (a national newspaper) website, but she's a creature of habit. I mean, it's as if she were reading the printed paper. I would hardly go on the Repubblica site and read all the pages. She does the same as if it were the printed version. She goes to the website, and starts to read” (Enrico, 18).

In the past, it was the family's computer that represented a cause of conflict (and negotiation) between parents and their children. The former saw it mainly as a working tool, the latter as a source of entertainment, and for social contact with their peers (Scarcelli, 2010). Nowadays, the diffusion of smart TVs, tablets, and portable computers, and the availability of an Internet connection in virtually every home have completely changed the domestic media landscape. The old distinction between work and play has disappeared, and digital technologies have come to mean much the same thing for young people and their parents. Both social groups have relegated the computer to work- and study-related activities, while the tablet, smart TV, and smartphone are used to access Internet for recreational purposes, to find information, and for interpersonal relationships. The gap that seemed to exist nine years ago thus seems to have closed. Unlike the situation described by Scarcelli (2010), moreover, our respondents' diaries and interviews rarely mention parents asking their children for technical support in dealing with the minor problems they encounter in using the computer.

### **The smartphone as an important driver of change**

The smartphone seems to be the real great novelty on the stage of family relations between parents and their children. There were very, very few interviews and diaries that describe parents as having nothing to do with digital media; for all the others the arrival of the smartphone in the hands of the adults seems to have modified the family practices, as regards both the fruition of Internet content and interpersonal communications.

While a minimal proportion of respondents speak of their parents using smartphones just for phone calls and instant messaging, the vast majority of them describe their parents as having learned to make more use of digital media specifically since the arrival of the smartphone. A comment from Nicola (19 years old) neatly sums up this picture:

“It’s like what happened to my mum in the last few weeks. After she bought a new smartphone, her usage changed dramatically [she had an old mobile phone before]. Instead of using it just for phone calls and text messages, she switched to a more ‘social’ use, going onto social networks like Facebook and sources of information like Google”.

Being so easy to use, the smartphone becomes the key that opens the door to digital technologies and platforms. Social network sites, instant messaging apps, and other types of app start to become familiar even to the older adults who, until a few years ago, seemed reluctant to accept the novelties introduced by digital communications. Now the young sometimes complain about how their fathers, mothers or other relatives use some of their smartphones’ functions - when messaging, for instance. Generally speaking, however, they consider their parents capable of managing the device without help - from the strictly technical point of view, at least:

“My dad has had a smartphone for about a year now, let’s say. I told him how to download apps ... from the App Store, you know, not by cracking them, he’d be incapable of that [laughs]. Now he’s downloaded a whole pile of things, many of them useless, in my opinion. But he uses them. Like the satnav, for example, he uses that a lot. Or the app for when he goes cycling and he measures his journey, the calories, and all that stuff. Let’s say that he manages that sort of thing without any problems” (Paolo, 18).

Paolo’s words describe a parent who is digitally self-sufficient, even though the son clearly believes that he still has a technical edge (the ability to crack apps) and that his father is still a bit digitally immature in his passion for downloading apps (“many of them useless, in my opinion”). In essence, however, as Marco (20 years old) put it in comparing the smartphone to the computer:

“Nowadays, using a smartphone is common practice, something that everyone [in the family] knows how to do”.

It is only in a few cases that our young respondents still see themselves as agents of that socialization in reverse - so often theorized, starting with the studies by Robertson (1988) - in which the youths were leading their parents by the hand. Above all, this almost never happens with the smartphone, nor even with the tablet (the digital device preferred by the more elderly). As Paolo explains in his interview, once the young have helped them to grasp the basic functions, their parents are able to “get by on their own”. Camilla (21 years old) draws an interesting comparison between the smartphone and the bicycle:

“It’s a bit like a bike. I mean, I remember when my parents taught me. It’s not that they told me lots of things. They gave me a hand to start

with, to get moving, as it were. Then I learned and it's not that I kept asking them what to do all the time. It's a bit like that for them as well. You get them started and then they manage on their own".

The same applies to what Lucia (19 years old) says of her mother, when she explains how she "quickly learned Internet customs and terminology. So, she manages on her own, and solves any problems she encounters by herself".

This no longer continuous, but what we could describe as 'introductory' type of technical support, applies to the grandparents too, though they reportedly need the young people's help a little more frequently. The following excerpt comes from what Lucia (19 years old) had to say about her grandmother, a regular Internet and tablet user, mainly to share content with the family using WhatsApp:

"She learned the basic steps needed to get around on the Internet, but when she needs to do something more particular, like saving numbers in her Contacts or adding a site to her Favorites, she always asks me for help. Although they are very straightforward procedures, she refuses to learn them because she's afraid of making mistakes and also because, as they aren't essential things, she can wait for me to come back and do them for her".

Generally speaking, we can therefore say that, by comparison with the past, young people now consider their elders technically more capable users of the computer and other digital devices. We have termed their approach to helping their parents as 'introductory' because they often set up a device for them, and give them some initial instructions, then the mums and dads would appear to manage on their own.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that this view only applies on the technical level. Sometimes, when dealing with adults' digital expertise, our respondents' diaries acknowledge the latter a certain dexterity, but their words betray a sense of superiority. They seem convinced of their own necessarily high level of expertise on the use of these modern media, and tend to see their elders as users who might be out of their depth.

### **"It's they who are at risk"**

When we shift from the exclusively technical issues to the more complex aspects of digital media use, the young people's tone in describing their parents changes dramatically. In this case, what emerges most of all is the impression that their parents lack the cultural and social skills needed to live in digital spaces so remote from their own past experiences. It is here that we can see how much the young (just like their elders) have interiorized

the digital natives and immigrants rhetoric mentioned earlier in referring to Prenski's theories (2001).

Simply put, our young respondents reflect back those same criticisms that, in various arenas of the discourse, have traditionally been directed against them. The core issue seems to revolve around the social networks and instant messaging platforms (and especially the use of the so-called WhatsApp groups).

A commonly held conviction is contained in a simple sentence written by Miriam (22 years old):

“The fact is that they [the adults] may know how to use the social networks or WhatsApp, but they haven't a clue how to behave. Sometimes I'm tempted to say they're worse than the kids in secondary school [laughs]”.

Let us take a better look at what Miriam says in the light of our analysis of the diaries and interviews. The main point raised by the young people concerns their elders' excessive and indiscriminate use of social media. For the young it can be embarrassing if their parents use the same social networking platforms. According to several of our respondents, the way parents share certain stock images to say 'Good morning', for instance (defined by some as “classic 50-year-olds' stuff”), or post photos of their private lives, or show their online status on Facebook are proof of their digital immaturity. These parents have little understanding of the basic rules (or netiquette) regarding the online places they visit. Below are some very eloquent excerpts from the interviews on this aspect:

“My mum's embarrassing. I've looked at her profile now and again, because maybe she's even tagged me. She uploads these terribly kitsch photos ... for examples *buongornissimo caffè*, to give you an idea. But what on earth are you doing? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? I've even told her these things are for ... how can I put it? ... for twerps. She told me that's not true, meaning that she just doesn't get it. She says it's a nice thing to do for her colleagues and they're pleased. Pleased?!? Okay, fine, but then don't tag me. These things are really awful to witness” (Pietro, 21).

“No, seriously, it's been like a curse ever since she opened a Facebook profile. In fact, I've shut mine down [laughs]. Photos from when I was little, like a spotty teenager, with stupid written comments. It's just not nice. She thinks it is, but she makes me look such a fool ... But even he posts some awful photos ... he's just incapable. Or rather, he's capable because he uses the profile, but maybe it would be better if he didn't” (Mario, 22).

The pictures emerging from these two excerpts are partly an expression of the classic parent-child dynamics with the latter asking the mother or father not to embarrass them in front of their friends. But they also reveal an unrefined use of social media that exceeds the boundaries of good taste and disregards unwritten rules about what can and cannot be posted – rules that the young all seem to share.

Another issue frequently mentioned in the interviews and diaries concerns the sharing of fake news, usually via WhatsApp:

“One day I called my dad and got really angry. I was at the university taking an exam. My mobile phone vibrated 500 times and I couldn’t get it out because otherwise someone might think I was copying. I finish, look at the phone, see it’s my dad ... and get a fright. So, I open the message straight away and what do I find? A ridiculous hoax about I forget what kind of cosmetics being harmful. He sent me this message three times, because if I didn’t reply, he’d send it again” (Chiara, 21).

In Chiara’s account, apart from her father’s incompetence (his inability to distinguish between true and fake news), there is also a second problem relating to his inability to wait for her reply, or realize that the recipient of his message might be busy. Other respondents raised this issue too. As Luca (23) wrote, for instance:

“Well ... no, ok, this is even funny when you tell the story ... My mum writes to me, I maybe don’t answer because I’m doing something else. So, she writes to me again. Then she writes: ‘Why don’t you answer me?’, ‘Are you there?’, and so on ... You know, when you stop seeing someone and you don’t want to speak to them? ... and this person keeps writing to you and can’t understand that maybe you can’t answer them. Well my mum’s like that but multiplied by a hundred [laughs], and she doesn’t only do this to me, you know”.

The interviewees criticize their parents’ social interactions with other users, or with their children. This time what they dislike are the quantitative nature of the so-called ‘reactions’ that parents express on other people’s social profiles, that the young consider excessive.

“I think my mum believes she’s a social media manager [laughs]. She’s always stuck on that wretched profile. She comments on everything. She always has to have her say. She puts ‘likes’ all over the place. She’s a real stalker. I thought she only did it to me ... and that was already bad enough. Then one day a friend of mine says: ‘Oh, but your mum comments on all my photographs!’. You get it? She was commenting on all my friends, for heaven’s sake! She just doesn’t know how to behave” (Monica, 19).

What Monica says (“She’s always stuck on that wretched profile”) brings us to another idea the young voice about their parents, who they see as



being addicted to the digital technologies. Here is another term – addiction – that the adults very often use in speaking about the younger generation’s relationship with their smartphones. Our young respondents complain about the adults’ lack of defenses against these pervasive technologies capable of capturing people who, being digital immigrants unused to smartphones and social media, are at risk:

“The most ‘addicted’ is my dad. Ever since he discovered the world of Instagram and social networks he’s been spending up to two hours a day on there” (Leonardo, 20).

“My mum lives with her cellphone constantly in her hand, what with chats to gossip on, and posts on Facebook to share. This shows how chronically stinky it is that parents should point a finger when they see their kids on their mobile phones, while using their other [hand] to scroll automatically down a social network noticeboard amidst photos of kittens and all sorts of well wishes” (Stefano, 21 years, p 4).

“They’re not used to smartphones and things of that sort. It’s different for us. We were born with them, so we know how to use them and how to avoid problems. They don’t. They acquire these very powerful objects and they don’t know what to do with them (Mariella, 20).

Mariella’s words echo those used countless times by adults in referring to their children, with the idea of a powerful tool in the hands of people incapable of using it properly. In this case, however, it is not that the habitual use digital media could lead some individuals to take things for granted and be unaware of the inherent dangers (as in the case of adults talking about their children). Instead, our respondents see being born into a technologically dense world acting as a sort of vaccine.

Adults are often considered naive in their use of digital technologies, sometimes clumsy and imprudent. In the words of our respondents, they are still taking their first steps in a technologically complex and difficult world. As Rina (23 years old) put it, they are like “learner drivers of these technologies”, people with not enough experience, and they are often seen as passive, undiscerning users. In one of the diaries about a family’s digital media consumption, for instance, we read:

“It’s as if they were fossilized in virtual networks. They always check the same blog, the same sites and the same social profiles – of a politician, for instance. [...] They’ve set themselves up with a network of contacts in Internet and they exchange views or learn information and news almost exclusively through them” (Sebastiano, 19).

“The past generations tend to prefer a passive role, which distracts them from directly searching for the material they want to see, giving

priority instead to a set of programs created by someone else. They also tend to content themselves with what they have instead of focusing on how they might improve their user experience” (Giulio, 19).

Some respondents believe that the adults’ naive use of digital technologies makes their parents more vulnerable to advertising and more susceptible to the manipulative power of the media:

“[we] use the television in the lounge (the smart TV) to watch films or serials on web platforms in streaming, especially Netflix. This isn’t what I’d call using the television like traditional media because by using it to watch other content, not produced by the television networks, we don’t come into contact with the advertising, and with everything designed and conceived with that ‘dominant idea’ ” (Antonio, 20).

Judging from what our respondents say, the adults’ addiction to the smartphone and social media affects the family’s social life and interactions within the home. The younger generation accuses the adults of paying too much attention to Facebook, WhatsApp and the like, influencing the family dynamics and lowering the quality of the relationship between the parents and their children:

“[when they’re on Facebook] they struggle to grasp what’s going on around them” (Marco, 20).

“The funny thing is they complain when they see a kid taking selfies, pulling weird or funny faces maybe ... then they go and take photos of all sorts of things, and when they’re on the social networks you can’t get them off! Even at the table, sometimes ... though that happens less now, actually” (Pina, 20).

## **Conclusions**

The narratives collected during our study by means of in-depth interviews and diaries bring to light points of view that had hitherto attracted little attention in research on the use of digital media, revealing young people’s perspective on their parents’ use of ICT.

As we saw in the previous sections, and discuss further below, these views are on a continuum with a shared rhetoric that now sees digital media as an established element in our social ecology (Ling, 2002), but also as a phenomenon capable of modifying human behavior - almost always negatively. As mentioned earlier, this type of concern is lacking in any solid empirical support (Ahn & Jung, 2016; Selwyn, 2009), and usually directed against the young, described as being incapable of maintaining a healthy

relationship with digital media. Their passion for the technology is seen as a kind of disease that society must deal with (boyd, 2014).

The novelty of our work lies in having given voice to those usually seen as victims or unwary users of digital media, and their narratives reveal a completely reversed picture: they worry about the older generation's use of these technologies. This stance is expressed by the young in tones curiously tainted by traces of technological determinism, and simplifications due to their having absorbed a dichotomous view. Belonging to the more expert group of digital natives or to that of the less capable digital immigrants is essentially a matter of age group.

The technologies, and their more or less 'natural' usage serve as a watershed between the generations. In some cases, the distinction is based merely on the more or less exclusive use of traditional media: TV, radio, and daily papers are for the oldies, whereas the kids use digital media. Sometimes, instead, the rhetoric focuses more on what distinguishes digital natives from immigrants: the former only use the digital tools of their own culture, while the latter adopt a hybrid version of theirs, simply transferring their traditional media onto digital devices.

By comparison with the past (Scarcelli, 2010), there are some points of contact that confirm, for instance, how computers were once considered differently by young people and adults, but now both groups place them in the category of tools for work or study. Such a change would seem to have been facilitated by the arrival of mobile technologies, and the smartphone in particular.

The smartphone has marked an important turning point in relations between parents and their children, and not only as regards their exchanges conveyed by the devices themselves. Our study shows that it has cancelled the parents' technological subservience to their children, enabling the former to become more independent digital media users, and thus retain a degree of the traditional family hierarchy. They no longer constantly need their children's help because smartphones are extremely user-friendly. They can now manage without the advanced know-how that their children (considered digital natives) were assumed to possess. The young's role in their parents' relationship with the new media is often only to introduce them to the technology. Often, once they have explained the essential elements of how smartphones and social networking or instant messaging apps work, their job is done. It is at this point, in our respondents' narratives, that a role reversal occurs and the younger generation emerges as the more competent party.

Leaving aside certain behaviour apparently typical of their elders that the young consider wrong (such as their parents' susceptibility to fake news, or love of corny photos and messages), the fears often expressed by adults

about the young's relationship with digital media are reflected back, changing the perspective. And this happens in a different way from that highlighted by the studies on sharenting, a practice whose ambivalence between the need for self-expression of parents and the right of kids to their privacy (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017) becomes something that makes children feel embarrassed, annoyed and frustrated, as they are directly involved (Sii-bak & Traks, 2019). In our research, the kids consider the parents at risk for themselves. The keywords here are the same as those in the speech of adults: they speak of addiction, distraction, risks, imprudent usage, and so on. If we ignore the references to the different generations, what they have to say sounds just like what adults often say about young people.

We are seeing a partial reversal of the asymmetry in family relations as a result of the inclusion of digital media in daily practice, and the most slippery slope seems to be towards the social networks. In other words, young people describe their parents as being technologically well-equipped and competent, whereas their shortcomings emerge very clearly in the way they manage their mediated relationships and their predisposition to become the victims of hoaxes or manipulation by the media.

What we have described is a mechanism of memberships in which the media act as catalysts of the young people's concerns because they enable access to previously separate worlds (Meyrowitz, 1986). Comparing adult and young people's comments, we can see that – in a strange game of reflections – the digital native/immigrant rhetoric collapses, crushed under the generational dimension, as soon as it attempts to separate two groups that seem to be of the same opinion. The native/immigrant distinction is perfectly represented within the discourses of each side. Parents see themselves as natives of the broader social world (essentially the adult world) and consider the younger generation as new arrivals who still have a lot to learn, and are not yet ready to deal with the complexities they may encounter also through digital media. Their children, natives of a digital world, see their parents as immigrants exposed to risks because they are not well versed in this new world. The inherent dangers are amplified by social media, and their parents lack the basic tools needed to cope with them. They do not know the rules for interacting appropriately on social networks. So, the risks envisaged by either side partly overlap: addiction; the decline of face-to-face family relations due to an excessive use of smartphones; the risk of being swindled; and so on.

This complex picture leads us to draw some conclusions that, to our mind, seem important. First of all, as also suggested by Donati (2018) and Aroldi (2011), we can see just how fundamental digital technologies, and the ways in which they are represented and interpreted, have become in defining the concept of generation. It can no longer be characterized simply

on the grounds of a socialization based on an ideal identifying culture. The generations are increasingly defining and distinguishing themselves by reason of their socialization through a certain type of technology or artificial intelligence. Our respondents define their own identity in opposition to that of their parents' generation, focusing on the point where their parents' use of digital media and the debate on critical issues with their use overlap. At work here, there is not just the young's claim to a higher level of technical expertise, but also (and importantly) the fact that they attribute themselves a preparedness generally accredited to their elders in other spheres of life. The same reasoning also applies when young people speak about individuals younger than themselves (Scarcelli, 2015).

Second, especially when we concentrate on the smartphone, we find a rhetoric that seems to place both young people and adults' behaviour on a plane seen as problematic. The smartphone is perceived as an all-powerful technological device capable of influencing the behaviour of both age groups. This applies not only on the generational level, but follows stereotypes that also include women, for instance (Comunello, 2017), or digital immigrants. Mobile technologies are thus used as a pretext for defining power roles (Scarcelli, 2015), and the novelty lies in that - in playing this game - the young adopt the distinction between digital natives and immigrants to describe a niche where the classic situation that has always seen them subordinated to the adults is dismantled. It is no longer life experience that brings a greater or lesser competence, but technological experience. As we have seen, this discourse abandons the strictly technical plane and shifts to the social one, emphasizing a role for the young who can occupy an independent space, uninfluenced by the classical hierarchies. It will be interesting to see: (i) whether this process leads to a revision of the relationship between young people and adults, previously based on the assumption that the latter are more experienced, and therefore better able to manage social relations and the sensible use of media languages (Colombo, 2015); and (ii) in what way such a revision might be set against the rhetoric that sees the young as those at risk.

In future research it would also be interesting to investigate whether these types of rhetoric are also used by teenagers, as well as the young adults considered here (18 to 24-year-olds), who have already acquired a degree of autonomy in their experiential domains, and certainly engage in family dynamics from a stance that is less dependent on their parents.

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