Teens' online and offline lives - How are they experiencing their sociability

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## Sample

Children from two different public schools, one from an urban area and the other from a rural one. In each school, two classes were chosen: one from the national 7th grade (12-14 year-olds) and the other from the 10th grade (15-16 year-olds). In total, 77 students completed the questionnaire, 78 participated in the workshops, and 40 were interviewed.

## Implications For Educators About

School innovation

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Creating a safe environment for children online

# Abstract

"Sociability - or, to put it simply, 'association for its own sake' (Simmel 1949, p. 254) has long been a recurrent subject of study. Despite being traditionally present in research on teenagers's relationship with the media, it has been gaining renewed interest in the digital and online communication era due to the proliferation of new technologies which open up possibilities for the creation of new formis of sociability. This concept, according to Haddon (2017, p. 244), has been used 'to capture the nature of our interactions, our communications, and our relationships' with others. Fortunari, Taipale, and de Luca (2013, p. 895) add that 'sociability takes place in cooperation with others and necessitates movement as well as communication'. Sociability has always been dependent on different kinds of constraints and the history of social ties is also the history of the fall of different technological barriers. Over time, numerous inventions determined different forms of mutual interaction (handwriting and paper, transport and post, to mention just a few), helping humans to model new ways to connect and to communicate with one another - with family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Each new technology, in its time, meant a small evolution, eliminating time and/or space constraints, facilitating the maintenance or the creation of social bonds; in sum, enriching sociability possibilities. In the last (almost) three decades (Fortunati et al. 2013), digital media has brought the technical possibilities of new forms of communication, interaction, and participation, giving people the opportunity to speak, to write, to share what is happening in their lives for the first time, combining three crucial factors: time (anytime). place (almost anywhere), and affordability (at minimal cost). However, there is no consensus regarding the consequences of this panorama since both apocalyptic and enthusiastic perspectives have been voiced, particularly regarding its impact on young people, On the one hand, it is argued that digital communication can merely promote superficial ties, decreasing the time people have for face to-face relations - an argument known as the displacement hypothesis (Valkenburg Peter, 2011) - and fostering shalow relationships and different kinds of risks, from excessive exposure to online harassment. On the other hand, a more optimistic perspective- the stimulation hypothesis (Valkenburg Peter, 2011) - underlines the promotion and the reinforcement of social interactions, saying that digital media help youngsters 'to conduct the social psychological task of adolescence' (Livingstone, 2008, p. 396), engaging in some risks and taking opportunities to present and manage their - now online and offline - personae while learning to make sense of social institutions (Lim, 2013, p. 325). The latter 'has received more support than the displacement hypothesis', as summarised by Valkenburg and Peter (2011, p. 124). However, both sides present valid arguments (...). Based on such topics discussed by earlier studies and having drawn on data provided by the Portuguese branch of the European research project Transmedia Literacy, this chapter is guided by the following research question: how are digital and online media contributing to teenagers' sociability? Floridi's onlife concept (2007, 2015), presented below, will anchor this discussion" (Pereira, S.; Fillol, J. Moura, P., 2021: 152-53).

# Outcome

"When analysing the media practices of the Portuguese sample, but also those from Italy and Spain (Percira et al, 2018), it is possible that the preference for a close circle of friends in their online sociability could also be a way to protect their privacy as it avoids greater exposure to risk and makes the experience pleasurable. Tenagers' online behaviour is not homogeneous and having access to the digital world or even interacting there does not equate to wise use. In this study, the results on teenagers' sociability are somewhat in line with the findings on media production practices and competences (Percira Moura, 2018). In the same way that having access to the media does not mean they produce content and participate in the digital public sphere, contacting others and friends online does not mean that they go beyond their close circle of friends and expand social ties and horizons. The experience reported above by the adolescents themselves conveys a strengthening of their existing social ties, showing that those with whom they socialise in the virtual sphere are mostly their everyday friends. The process of self-disclosure in this mediated sociability sphere 'becomes an ever-evolving cycle through which individual identity is presented, compared, adjusted or defended against a constellation of social, cultural, economic, or political realities" (Papacharissi, 2011. p. 304). In the stody reported here it was not possible to verify the premise of Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten (2006, p. 589) that 'positive feedback enhanced adolescents' self-esteem, and negative feedback decreased their self-esteem', but it was clear that teenagers regularly follow and monitor the posts that they, and others, share on social media and that they appreciate postive feedback on their posts, they count the likes obtained (for example, eliminating a photo that does not reach the number of likes they expect) and these make them happy, at least. Online sociability may not be free of risks (for instance, talking to strangers, revealing personal data, being tracked), however this was not a major concern among adolescents and did not figure much in their discourses. In fact, they said they feel confident and informed about such things. Online risks and their prevention are issues that draw schools' attention and therefore training sessions are usually held for students. In the schools participating in the study and throughout most of Portugal, this is, indeed, the media literacy topic that is most discussed and addressed in the school context, and sometimes the only one. To conclude, it may be argued that sociability is a subject of study that will never be exhausted. On the one hand, the lives of children and adolescents are dynamic, and, on the other hand, digital technologies and the internet, besides being dynamic as well, will continue to influence and affect how people communicate and interact with each other. Topics such as the risk of isolation and of being 'alone together' (Turkle, 2012), the fear of substitution of face-to-face interaction by online relationships, and sociability during vacation time, when teenagers do not regularly meet up with their schoolmates, need to be further studied. This chapter, based on results involving small sample of Portuguese adolescents, has brought to light some contributions to understand better how sociability is experienced in a hyperconnected era, having the advantage of making the voices of the young people themselves known. The major conclusion is undoubtedly that teenagers' sociability is deeply mediated by technologies that complement, expand, and reinforce forms of co-present sociability, but that it is also clearly different (Schroeder, 2016) in terms of the way they pay attention and how they verbally and non-verbally react one to another. When they interact and communicate online and when they share mundane events from their everyday life, they do not always intend to create or reinforce social bonds, they simple want to foster an 'online togetherness', that is, 'a sense of being together online' (Schroeder, 2016, p. 5634) in an increasingly 'onlife' world, always on" (Pereira, S.; Fillol, J. Moura, P., 2021: 157-58).