3 Breaking the silence

Young people, sex information and the internet in Italy and Portugal

Daniel Cardoso and Cosimo Marco Scarcelli

Using the internet to look for information about sex and sexuality has been recognised by prior research as a benefit of technological development and an important area to investigate, but few empirical studies have so far been conducted, especially those focusing on transnational comparisons. This chapter draws from two different qualitative works that the authors conducted in Italy and in Portugal. The empirical works involved 61 adolescents between 16 and 20 years old who lived in Italy and Portugal. The chapter will focus on the different ways that adolescents find information about sexual topics, using the internet, as well as on the reasons for using particular websites or platforms to seek information, the gender differences connected to internet usage for this purpose, adolescents' fears and expectations, and their own redefinitions of what constitutes 'information about sexual issues'. This chapter will allow for a comparison between two different countries that share many cultural similarities, stressing the similarities and differences between them. It will enable us to demonstrate the work of bricolage and resistance that adolescents perform every day when seeking information connected to the sexual sphere. In other words, the contribution will describe the dialogues between social spaces and actors that surround adolescents' efforts to understand sex and sexuality, in contexts that often only offer silence or normalised heteronormative experiences.

Introduction

Social, cultural and technological changes affect intimate aspects of people's lives (Döring 2009, Mowlabocus 2010), especially when it comes to teens and young people (Buckingham & Bragg 2004, Peter & Valkenburg 2006, Scarcelli 2018). Consequently, the internet seems to serve for young people as an environment that adds to the classic agents of socialisation, like schools or families, in terms of how they understand their bodies and sexualities, and it can also represent a source of anxiety for adults in general.

In fact, the internet is often framed (Haddon & Stald 2009) as being quintessentially sexual in public and media discourses and a medium providing what is seen as three specific possibilities: accessibility, anonymity and affordability (Peter & Valkenburg 2006). Nevertheless, these three characteristics, often presented as unique regarding online experiences, have been called into question. In what concerns accessibility, a popular US study from 1971 (so, before the internet existed) showed that 85% of boys and 70% of girls consumed porn (Wilson 1971); as for anonymity, browser cookies, user profiling and data mining continue to be a central concern for those who are concerned about leaving traces behind (Paasonen 2011); as for gratuity, the recirculation of material (Thompson 2017) has long served to detach consumption from spending money.

Another common misconception is the idea that a good deal of data online pertains to porn and/or that most of the use of online resources pertains to pornography consumption. This too seems to be counterfactual, as research shows that the searches and volume of data dedicated to pornography and other related sexual content is relatively small (Fae 2015, Ogas & Gaddam 2012) in comparison with the total volume of data and online searches.

Even so, there is much media panic surrounding internet and sexuality, and this becomes even more pronounced when children and young people are involved. They are often construed as pure and innocent, their sexuality is seen as something that adults are responsible for regulating in order to ensure a proper reproduction of the heterosexual patriarchal system of gender and sexuality (Cardoso 2018, Egan & Hawkes 2009, 2013, Scarcelli 2015). An example of this is how fears over the 'media effects' that pornography has over youngsters are used to pass legislation, such as proposals to use credit card checks for accessing pornography websites in the UK.

Michel Foucault (1994), in talking about the sexuality *dispositif*, also mentions how the child is made to be a liminal sexual being, whose careful management legitimates actions by the whole of society; he speaks of how 'sexualization of infancy' is fundamental to the social dissemination of the idea of 'sexuality' as an identity (p. 155). In fact, Foucault notes that sexuality has become a cornerstone of identity in contemporary society – that we ask sexuality to tell us 'our truth' about who we 'truly' are (1994, p. 73).

This means that both representations and the subjective work around sexuality involve well-established power relationships that are central to the development of a sense of self and identity in what concerns ones' sexual conduct. The pressure to know oneself is widespread, and that implies both that the individual has to know themselves as a subject (with a given sexuality) and has to have that knowledge recognised by and negotiated with others – governmentality becomes both a way for the subject to deal with themselves and each other (Foucault 2000a, 2000b, 2005).

Within the context of the co-optation of public discourse by media and moral panic (Fahs et al. 2013), internet becomes mainly represented as a hazard for normative sexual development that is expected of young people. This, in turn, erases or obscures how, for many young people, new media can serve as a lifeline out of heteronormativity or cisnormativity and a way to negotiate non-normative sexualities,

access sexual health information, access activist spaces and share spaces for personal experiences (Cardoso 2017b, Scarcelli 2015).

A further consequence of this is that young people's 'difficult citizenship' (Robinson 2012) is especially difficult when it comes to gender and sexuality, where they do not see their own worldviews or experiences validated or recognised (Egan & Hawkes 2009), and when the potential for critical education and personal growth is disavowed by parents, educators and the media (Tsaliki 2015). What is at stake, as Breanne Fahs (2014) puts it, is the recognition of young people's sexual citizenship, framed by the societal and structural hurdles around it and by the way young people themselves both reproduce and contest normative systems of meaning and representation. This is particularly so in the case of gender and sexual minorities – because their existence is both less visible and less legally acknowledged. Thus, intimate citizenship (Plummer 1994) can only be fully realised when unfettered and socially validated access to pluralistic modes of literacy can be achieved.

Accessing information is vital, both from a citizenship point of view and from an identity-construction point of view; it is a fundamental right of youth and of people in general, and it is essential to understand the complex dynamics involved in accessing information.

In this chapter we will focus on teens' use of internet resources to look for and find information related to sex and sexuality. To do that we will analyse the results of two different projects carried out in two different, but culturally similar, European countries: Italy and Portugal, by means of discourse analysis of semi-structured interviews.

After a brief comparison of the contexts, we will analyse the roles of family, school and peer groups as sources of sexual information for young people, and then we will focus on the internet and the practices of using different sources by young people. As the two main foci of analysis, we address how online search for information about sex and sexuality relate to other social groups and spaces that are part of young people's lives and how young people talk about the roles the internet plays for them, including the negotiation of gender dynamics.

Contexts in comparison

Both Italy and Portugal belong to a Southern European context that is recognised as such not only from an academic point of view but also from a political and mainstream discourse perspective (e.g. the PIIGS acronym).

The young people that were interviewed in the two projects were directly and indirectly affected by the 2008 economic crisis, coming into their teenage years when it was still playing out, which impacted their education, technological inclusion, literacy and even the material conditions they experienced when growing up.

More broadly, though, both countries can also be considered to be under what some authors call 'late modernity' – that is to say, a mix of traditional and modern sociological traits that coexist in tension (Ponte 2012). According to Leccardi (2006, p. 17, 18), and based on the works of Cavalli and Galland (1996), some of the main traits of this Mediterranean specificity have to do with more time spent in school, followed by a period of professional precarity (which forces youth and young adults to remain living with their parents for longer periods of time) and, frequently, the departure from the parents' house happening within the context of an intimate relationship.

Both countries also share similarities in how their contemporary histories have shaped their societies, in that both were clearly and deeply aligned with the most conservative faction of the Catholic Church, both were clearly concerned with moral puritanism and both were heavily invested in not allowing their citizenry access to education.

Discourse about sexual education in Portuguese schools is still mostly biomedical and about risk avoidance and pregnancy and STI prevention (Marinho et al. 2011), without a critical and empowering gendered perspective (Nogueira et al. 2007). Paula Vieira (2010, p. 128) takes this critique a step further when she flatly states that 'The pedagogy of heterosexuality – not of sexuality – dominates the pedagogic milieu.' Likewise, in Italy there are different and parcelled initiatives that create and reproduce a disjointed legal frame (Marmocchi et al. 2018) and experience. So, in the Italian legal system, sexual education is not mandatory and each headteacher has the power to decide whether or not to include it into the school curriculum.

The other customary source of education on sexuality –family – is also ultimately affected by similarities in modern political events in both countries. Parents are increasingly less formally educated than their children, and especially so when it

comes to sexual health. This creates a specific rhetoric within Portuguese and Italian families making ‘sex talk’ an age-related topic – that it is ‘too early’ to talk about the topic of sexuality and then ‘too late’ or unnecessary because parents assume young people are already somehow fully informed. For parents, it seems that there is never a ‘right time’ to talk about sexuality (Barbagli et al. 2010, Pais 2012). In this context, families leave all sorts of sex talk and discussions about sexuality to other agents, also bearing the task of educating the parents’ offspring about sexuality (see also Porrovecchio 2012).

Methods

Even though the two research projects were carried out independently, the results are comparable and connected due to the similar nature of the underlying research questions and the methods used.

Both research projects preferred a qualitative approach to study the phenomena and experiences of teens from their point of view (Flick 1998, Lobe et al. 2008). The researchers prioritised reflexivity and the production of critical knowledge that eschewed classical positivism in order to understand young people’s positions as useful to improving the issues that surround and affect them. These methods are the best way to explore the ‘sense’ that adolescents have of their decisions and experiences.

The empirical section was based on semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and involved young people between 16 and 20 years old – 11 in Portugal and 50 in Italy. In Portugal, recruitment was made via a previous online survey, and there were five young men and six young women, all of them attending undergraduate school, and from middle-class backgrounds. Sexual orientation was not asked, but nevertheless seven of them reported being LGB or having LGB experiences. In Italy, schools were contacted to help with recruiting young participants. There were 25 boys and 25 girls.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, sent to the respective adolescents for comments and then analysed using Nvivo10 (for the Portuguese project) and Atlas.Ti (for the Italian project).

Results

This section provides a detail account of the main results found when comparing both projects. The results we analyse have to do primarily with the position that new media take within different social groups, and how youngsters themselves see the role (positive and negative) the internet plays for them. As we will show, the internet operates as a *compensatory system,* a *mute friend* and a *technology of the self,* in an intricate interaction between cultural tendencies, everyday social interactions and their own processes of identity-formation.

Internet and social groups: family, school and peers

Diverse social actors around young people, such as their family, school, and peer groups, inform and impact on what they use the internet for and how they perceive its usefulness regarding their social interactions.

The interviews show a lack of free and relaxed dialogue. Sexuality is often approached with an air of embarrassment and normativity that is so often associated with it. This type of conversation would possibly fulfil the need the young men who were interviewed feel, to find fertile ground in their families in which to plant the seeds of thinking about bodies and sexuality; this is especially relevant in Italy, where our results show that tensions around masculinity seem to be particularly high.

Often, shame is a part of this process, and family is a potential space where shame is felt, or even cultivated, in an attempt (by parents) to avoid the topic altogether, making the domestic context a difficult one where to talk about sexuality.

> When I was younger, I'd look up information about stuff that I was ashamed of asking my parents about, or even of talking openly to my doctor about, out of fear that she would talk to my parents about it.

(Maria,[1] 20, young woman, Portugal)

According to the interviewees, the schools offer purely health-related information and are not in line with the experiences of young people because they give instructions with respect to the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and little else and stay on a very superficial level. During the interviews, young people often complained about how the courses offered by their schools are not interesting, which is connected

[1] Respondents were asked to choose pseudonyms for themselves.

on the one hand to the content of the lessons themselves and on the other hand to how they were managed. Frequently, adolescents' participation is not expected or encouraged, and the schools do not give a lot of space for the adolescents' experiences and stories. Sometimes this type of interaction is present, but it is inhibited by the presence of the teacher in the classroom, a figure that still plays an institutional role, making it more difficult to talk about their intimacy.

> We do sex education at school … Yes, we do but it is useless. They show you reproductions systems, explain you something about venereal illness. They remember to use condom when you have sex. And that's all. It is difficult to ask for more information or speak about curiosity … the teacher is there. I am ashamed to talk about certain things with my teacher there.

(Filippo, 17, male, Italy)

There is also an element of discomfort, since young people feel that their privacy is at risk when accessing information about sexuality, even on school computers – they are afraid of 'getting caught' and suffering negative consequences for it:

> Ah, no, [I didn't use the school computers to look up information on sexuality] because there's always the browsing history, that fear of someone coming up from behind and look at what you're looking for

(Pamela, 20, young woman, Portugal)

In Italy in particular, teens' favourite people to discuss intimacy with are peers. In this case, adolescents speak mainly about the subjects that family discussions have no space for and that are connected to practices and sexual experiences or, in general, about subjects that belong to the sphere of desire. In Portugal, however, talking to friends is seen as something that happens mostly when they're extremely worried about something, and is something that is uncommon for them to do – unless it involves addressing older friends. This, in both Italy and Portugal, does not mean they never talk about sexuality with their peers – it means that specifically looking for information (and so creating a power imbalance by admitting to ignorance) is something that is not framed as part of their peer routines.

Talking about sex takes on distinctly different modes according to the group to which the adolescent belongs. In comparison with young men, Italian girls find it easier to

speak with other girls about sex and their own experiences. Indeed, their relationships with friends are based on sharing emotions and experiences (Grazzani & Ornaghi 2007), which is an important component in building a relationship of trust, in which hearing others' experiences becomes a way of learning how to cope with specific situations. In Portugal, however, it was mostly young women who explicitly denied talking to friends about sexuality ('If you have doubts about sexuality at 15, you're not going to ask your best friend […]. In school, since it's during adolescence, it's the worst! You can't ask anything to anyone. [laughs] Because they'll just gang up on you to make fun', Redgi, 19, young woman, Portugal), which is in line with a silencing and desexualisation of women and teenage girls present in families' and institutions' representations of them (Tsaliki 2015).

For the majority of the interviewed young men, the intimate realm is dealt with by keeping more private experiences hidden from the peer group. Among friends, including the closest, matters related to sexuality are frequently talked about in a humorous manner, through anecdotes referring to people outside the group or through jokes with sexual innuendos (Pascoe 2005, Porrovecchio 2012). This is due to the fact that they often have a fear of being laughed at by others and so have to show, in front of the group, self-confidence and skilled expertise in the world of sexuality.

> If I show to someone else … I mean to my friend … that I don't know any basilar points. [Interviewer: basilar points?] Yes, you know, the important staff about sex. How to do it, or what is a clitoris for example [laugh]. Anyway, if you show yourself ignorant, they will start to mock you. Honestly … sometimes you have to show them that you know the secrets of sex, even if it is not true.
>
> (Francesco, 17, young man, Italy)

The internet: potentials, affordances and challenges

Curiosity

Given the limited information available to them about the topic, young people not only take it upon themselves to look for sexuality-related content online but also turn this search into a self- and other-imposed mandate, surrounding it within a moral obligation to be curious. This means that, according to them, getting informed about sexuality is a personal, subjective responsibility. This curiosity is at the same time a

trait of the person looking for the information and an obligation, often also framed heteronormatively: ‘People [since they reproduce sexually] must take initiative; they must educate themselves’ (Miguel, 20, young man, Portugal).

This also means that people who are not well informed are responsible for not being well informed, in young people’s perspective; both as demonstrate in this quote, and in several others where they criticised themselves for not having had the initiative to look for more information online.

Curiosity is seen by young people as a twofold phenomenon – on the one hand as the aforementioned moral imposition of having to learn about sex, and on the other hand as a biological reaction that equates hormonal changes in adolescence with physiological responses that develop into curiosity: ‘I think it has to do with maturity; once it’s attained, [needing information] just isn’t an issue’ (Miguel, 20, young man, Portugal).

As we will show below, this curiosity then interacts with two other elements. First, it is mentioned as being fuelled by the lack of resources from parents, schools and peers, as explained above; second, it is hampered by difficulties that young people sometimes experience when it comes to identifying useful and truthful information.

At the same time, this also means that when they think that growth is finished, many adolescents consider that there is no longer any reason to keep looking for answers or information – that knowledge plateaus (where being a grown-up is intrinsically being knowledgeable): ‘No, I’ve got all the information I need, so I don’t need to look for it anymore (Tiago, 19, young man, Portugal).

Therefore, adolescents are curious about different kinds of information besides the biomedical paradigm usually offered at school, and yet they struggle with knowing if they can trust the information they find online and deploy several different strategies to cope with this, which we will explore below, and that have to do with finding different sources and types of information.

Categories of sex-related information

Information regarding sex on the internet is usually related to four informational categories (see also Scarcelli 2014): health, knowledge of the body, practices and curiosity.

Information related to health is related mainly to medical knowledge concerning the prevention of sexual diseases or unwanted pregnancy. Women who were presenting

as heterosexual seemed to be the most interested in this kind of information, and men seemed interested quite exclusively in contraceptive methods (also according to Donati et al. 2000, Graziano et al. 2012); among gay-identified men, the focus was more on STI prevention. The men, overall, are more focused on information related to their own bodies. They look for this kind of information in line with a certain 'normalization' (Shapiro, 2008) of the intimate sphere. An example is one of the interviewees in Portugal He had had had his testicles surgically removed for health reasons and therefore had prosthetics implanted and was taking testosterone. Therefore, he had to renormalise the experience of having a surgically altered body, and part of that process had to do with gathering information online.

Females that look for this kind of information use the internet mostly to better understand their own pleasure mechanisms (the 'G spot', female orgasms, etc.):

> Once I used the internet to understand how orgasm works. Everyone spoke about orgasms, but I did not feel that sensation, so I looked for information to understand if something did not work.

(Cristina, 18, woman, Italy)

The type of information connected to practices was read from two different perspectives, especially in the Italian interviews: one perspective concentrating on discovering the pleasure of 'the other' and the other dedicated to understanding the 'techniques' of sexual intercourse. This division tends to follow gender differences (with men more focused on techniques) and the amount of sexual experience of each individual (often associated with age).

Finally, there is the use of the internet to find information 'related to curiosity': information that is connected to terms related to pornographic and medical language but that does not fall within the previous categories. Here, a main focus is on 'the rather strange stuff' (Giulia, 17, young woman, Italy). Through the internet, teens try to find answers regarding the world of sexuality and its different practices, looking for images, videos or explanations that can help them to discover or understand what is usually indicated as perversion or paraphilia: 'My friends spoke about fisting and they laughed. I did not know what fisting was and so I looked on the internet' (Alberto, 17, young man, Italy).

In fact, showing each other this type of content can also serve as another layer of sexuality regulation (Cardoso 2017a).

Literacy and difficulties parsing online information

Looking for information requires being prepared to look for information (knowing how and where to look for it, and how to identify false information), and young people generally consider themselves ready to cope with false information. According to the latest EU Kids Online report (Smahel et al. 2020), which summarises results from 19 European countries, an average of 59% of youngsters (aged 12–16) say they know how to identify true information online, and 72% say they know which keywords to use when they're looking for information.

Some, however, do not feel so prepared and have personal experiences of finding incorrect information. There is no easy way to identify incorrect information, and several respondents noted that it is characteristic of the internet and so is to be expected. Others shared their strategies for managing incorrect information: comparing different websites, looking at official government websites and looking at the first few Google results that show up on the first page.

In comparison, some interviewees did not use the internet to look for this kind of information and considered the web to be an unreliable source because it contains uncertain information that is too generic. They also consider it a space in which sex and sexuality is presented only in the form of pornography.

The interviewees' words evoke two specific approaches taken by those who say they do not use the internet to find information, both connected to the validity of the source and the contents. In the first case, the interviewees frequently have an idea of sex and sexuality as things that can be handled only by health specialists or another kind of specialist, parents: 'On a first moment, of course I'll use the internet, but often the information is not reliable enough, and so I look for a doctor' (Ivo, 18, young man, Portugal).

In the second, case interviewees describe it as something that cannot be useful to fulfil the needs of specific people either in terms of health information or information about specific practices because the internet spreads only generic information that cannot be adapted to the person's situations.

> Because every person is different, for example, all the birth control pills are different, they don't all have the same effect [and so] it's very complicated to know what's real and what isn't, online.

(Íris, 18, young woman, Portugal)

This shows a lack of experience with respect to web offerings relating to sex and sexuality, including experts' forums, webpages dedicated to sex and sexuality from a medical point of view and forums where individuals can talk about their problems or experiences, etc. It is a rather reductive and negativist view of the internet and is full of prejudices towards the medium, potentially replicating mainstream discourse about new media and sexuality. Furthermore, it serves to question the narrative about youngsters as digital natives, or as acritical consumers of online information.

It is also here where a particular difference between LGB and non-LGB youngsters can be seen – given society's compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 2007), information for queer adolescents is much sparser and community-building much more important. In fact, some of them treated pornography *as a source of information* – not about performance or bodies but about the validity itself of their emotions and desires, the only place where they felt represented, even if sometimes poorly (Cardoso 2017b, Cardoso & Ponte 2017).

Looking for experiences more than 'hard' information

Another interesting topic is the platforms that teens use to find information and the formats they prefer when trying to increase their knowledge about sexuality.

According to a considerable number of interviewees, the internet represents a sort of 'user guide' that they can read immediately: a set of instructions that comes from different platforms and sites that, thanks to multimedia content, affords them a step-by-step explanation of how to manage topics related to sex and pleasure.

But despite the presence of several websites and platforms dedicated to health and sexual information – medical or institutional websites, for example – the interviewees have far from an intense use of these resources and prefer to pay attention to alternative sources of information that have a common base: the ability to read about (and share) the experiences of people who have had to cope with similar problems, doubts and insecurities.

For teens, looking for experiences instead of what an interviewee called 'cold information' (Patrizia, 17, young woman, Italy) is a useful way to find answers to

their questions, by inserting themselves into what we could define as an enlarged peer group: a group consisting of people (sometimes not knowing each other) that supposedly belong together because they are the same age:

> You can easily find information when someone like you speaks about what happens to them. I prefer this kind of information. Someone that says, 'I did this', and it worked. Or, 'I had this problem and I solved it'.
>
> (Pietro, 18, man, Italy)

All four different informational categories mentioned above (health, knowledge of the body, practices and curiosity) are intersected by different information epistemologies. In fact, for all four different categories, young people mention looking for 'accurate' (or medical/scientific) information but also looking for personal, subjective experiences around those same topics.

As an example, the Portuguese young man who had had his testes removed had received all the information he wanted about the issue from his doctor; however, information about the *lived* experience of other people who had undergone the same kind of treatment was far more available online. Therefore, it is sometimes authenticity and realness of shared experiences that users value in turning to health-related sources.

As another interviewee put it: 'Besides more official information, aimed at informing people, there's something else I think is quite useful as well, which is forums, where anonymous people share their experiences' (Ivo, 18, man, Portugal).

For non-heterosexual adolescents in particular, looking for information is often connected to looking for community and spaces of sociality, and the internet is seen as the 'only place … with information [on LGBT topics]' (Beatriz, 20, woman, Portugal).

Therefore, some teens prefer peer narratives to complement other types of information, and the internet represents a place rich in narratives, echoing Ken Plummer's (1995) point about the importance of telling stories within intimate citizenship. It is interesting thus to note that while the use of narratives of other people is widespread, its production seems to be much less frequent (Cardoso & Ponte 2017).

Gender, performance and knowledge of the self

There are some differences between men and women in the way they talk about how they use the internet to find information and the kinds of information they look for.

We noticed a dividing line separating those who said they had had intercourse from those who claimed never to have had it. After the 'first times', the differences in the reported behaviour of the young women and men become more prominent: usually young women reported to have stopped using the internet as a source of technical instructions in order to use a different approach based on the comparison between friends' sexual experiences and their own direct experiences. Women show less anxiety connected to performance compared to men, and the most commonly researched information is related to body care, focused mainly on resolving and preventing, on the one hand, undesired pregnancy and, on the other hand, sexually transmitted diseases, especially in the case of women presenting as heterosexual or bisexual. This reflects mainstream dynamics about how girls and women will often bear the brunt of contraceptive and sexual health responsibility, and how masculinity is construed on notions of power, prowess and performance (hooks, 2004). This helps understand men's concerns with issues like penis length and the 'normal' duration of intercourse. It is also important to remember that mainstream narratives around the relationship between young women and the media posit it as intrinsically problematic and harmful (Bale 2010, 2011).

As for men, the internet represents an important source of information that becomes useful in preparing for the first experience of intercourse, for which they could not arrive 'unprepared':

> Before my first time I read information about sex on the internet.
>
> [Interviewer: Can you please explain better to me what you mean by 'sex information'?]
>
> Of course, I mean … what to do. Positions, how it works the first time, how long is the intercourse, etc. We can say I studied [laugh].
>
> (Michele, 17, man, Italy)

Males then act as the gatekeepers of sexual information and performance and as those who have the power to introduce girls to sexuality – in stark contrast with what

women think, since they don't feel dependent on men to access sexuality; however, work on sexual scripts and gatekeeping shows that there are conflicting narratives about who is seen as having control and initiative over sexual experiences (Sakaluk et al., 2014).

However, young men who claim to have some sexual experience seem to shift their focus to women's bodies and libidos:

> I used the internet to … improve the technique [laugh]. To better understand how to do things.
>
> [Interviewer: Things?]
>
> You know … how to touch, how to make my girl crazy. Everyone knows there are some tricks. Then, of course, it is different for everyone … but I want my girl to say, 'You are the best' [laugh].
>
> (Luca, 17, young man, Italy)

Information becomes useful for enacting the idea of the 'great lover', and the internet, thanks to anonymity and personal-narrative resources where people can explain step by step what to do, becomes teens' favourite source.

As we have seen, then, the internet plays a multitude of roles for youngsters, and such roles interact heavily with other available resources (or the lack thereof) such as family or school support, their self-perceived media literacy, and their own gender or sexual orientation. Youngsters do not necessarily see themselves as inherently competent in navigating online experiences, but include it in a multi-layered approach to information seeking and, in fact, seek out different kinds of information.

Conclusions

We hope to have shown that young people's use of the internet for seeking information regarding sexuality and sexual health is complex and deeply intertwined with their contexts and cultural milieus. Markers like gender and sexual orientation are fundamental in understanding adolescents' positionality. Furthermore, the comparison between Portugal and Italy also demonstrates that cultural and historical markers, which impact the way sexuality is perceived and experienced, interact with technology and its role in young people's lives.

Our research makes evident three important aspects of the internet related to information about sex and sexuality. The internet operates as a *compensatory system*, a *mute friend* and a *technology of the self*.

The internet is an important source of information related to sex and sexuality for teens, but not the only one, and not unambiguously positive or negative (Tsaliki, Chronaki & Ólafsson 2014). Adolescents do a continuous *bricolage*, trying to cope with their insecurities from failure and the anxiety deriving from the 'first times' they have to face. They can ride out these insecurities through a meta-experience accessible by different channels, each with a specific contribution. The internet represents one of these many channels (Morrison et al. 2004). They can also challenge the kinds of information adults think are appropriate for them and how they are used, thus demonstrating an autonomous experience of sexuality.

The internet then operates as a *compensatory system* for gaps in other spheres of life (school, family, friends). The internet becomes a risk-avoidance strategy and is easier to access. However, some young people did mention that being fully anonymous was complicated, given the specific knowledge required about digital traces, but still easier than having to go through someone else.

The internet also offers something that more formal sources of information cannot offer as effectively that being, different kinds of information. For example, several adolescents (especially those who identify as LGBTQ) noted that the internet was where they could find testimonies of people going through specific situations (such as coming out or having a specific STI) through fora and social networks; some also mentioned that pornography in itself could be seen as a way to find information in a different way. In this context, young people are not looking for accuracy or scientific validity; they are looking for the subjectivity of personal experience, for representation of non-hegemonic sexualities and bodies and for different epistemologies.

To do that, teens frequently insert themselves into a space that allows them to speak not only with experts but also with what we define as an enlarged peer group. It is formed by other adolescents probably around the same age and could help them have access to experiences more so than to hard information. The difference between this kind of space and the peer group is that the ability to have a medium that can respond to the teens' questions without mocking the individual asking the question or affecting the young person's everyday peer group makes the internet a sort of *mute friend*

(paraphrasing Goffman 1959). The anonymity assumes a specific peculiarity: it is not just a way to find information without parental control but is also a way to access a sphere similar to the one composed of friends but in which adolescents have no risk of being embarrassed, perceived as having made a mistake or seen as incapable of managing their own bodies. And it is clearly connected to the importance of the performance mentioned above.

We see that online information is framed as having both opportunities and limitations. From the interviews, we can see that, for respondents in general, information *must* be sought and young people *must* be competent and capable of dealing with it (emotionally and physically); it *allows* some level of anonymity and safety, *allows* teens to fight the fear of the unknown or of problems associated with sexuality (such as STIs and pregnancy) and becomes a *key conduit* in establishing a 'truth' about how to perform sexuality.

This is to say, the internet operates as a technology of the self in the Foucauldian sense – as a way for young people to tap into narratives that purport to give access to a truth about sex and sexuality. As we have seen though, part of why the internet is so relevant pertains to how different social spheres concurrently circulate different epistemologies on what can constitute a truth about sexuality. Therefore, even though there is an association between adulthood and sexual maturity, young people negotiate their sexual identities by seeking information but also evaluating its trustworthiness or effectiveness.

In the cultural and social backgrounds that we described, the internet becomes a way for young people to modulate the silencing around sex and sexuality, re-appropriating discourses that contradict how adult society constructs youth sexuality. This happens, as we saw, by reconnecting the internet's characteristics with young people's culture and playing with ancient gender models, redefining and challenging them.

Therefore, sexual citizenship and identity-development are connected – since speaking positions around citizenship are often predicated on specific identities – but accessing information is a fundamental aspect of both, as both are in fact intersubjective processes. As we have shown, there is a dialectical process between information-seeking and forms of sociability – and so to consider accessibility is to consider the social conditions under which access occurs: the social, economic, cultural and epistemic frameworks around information and its intelligibility as such.

References

Attwood, F. (2010). *Porn.com. Making Sense of Online Pornography*. New York: Peter Lang.

Bale, C. (2010). Sexualised culture and young people's sexual health: A cause for concern? *Sociology Compass*, *4*(*10*), 824–840. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00316.x.

Bale, C. (2011). Raunch or romance? Framing and interpreting the relationship between sexualized culture and young people's sexual health. *Sex Education*, *11*(*3*), 303–313. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2011.590088.

Barbagli, M., Dalla Zuanna, G. and Garelli, F., (2010). *La sessualità degli italiani*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Buckingham, D. and Bragg, S. (2004). *Young People, Sex and the Media: The Facts of Life?* Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cardoso, D. (2017a). Gazing upon the (disgusted) gaze: The abnormal regulation of 'normal' sexuality. *Porn Studies* [online], *4*(*4*), 468–472. Available from: doi:10.1080/23268743.2017.1398678.

Cardoso, D. (2017b). 'I sort of knew what I was, so I wanted to see what awaited me': Portuguese LGB youngsters and their situated experiences with new media. In A. Dhoest, Ł. Szulc and B. Eeckhout (eds), *LGBTQs, Media and Culture in Europe* (pp. 208–223). London and New York: Routledge.

Cardoso, D. (2018). Notas sobre a Criança transviada: Considerações queerfeministas sobre infâncias. *Revista Periódicus* [online], *1*(*9*), 214–233. Available from: doi:10.9771/peri.v1i9.25755.

Cardoso, D. and Ponte, C. (2017). Género, sexualidade e ativismo online: Um olhar interseccional para o papel da participação cívica na internet por jovens portugueses. *Ex aequo* [online], (*35*), 49–64. Available from: doi:10.22355/exaequo.2017.35.04.

Cavalli A., Galland O.(eds) (1996), Senza fretta di crescere, Napoli: Liguori.

Donati, S., Andreozzi, S., Medda, E. and Gandolfo, M.E. (2000). *Salute riproduttiva tra gli adolescenti: conoscenze, attitudini e comportamenti*. Rome: Istituto Superiore di Sanità.

Döring, N.M. (2009). The internet's impact on sexuality: A critical review of 15 years of research. *Computers in Human Behavior* [online], *25*(*5*), 1089–1101. Available from: doi:10.1016/j.chb.2009.04.003.

Egan, R.D. and Hawkes, G. (2009). The problem with protection: Or, why we need to move towards recognition and the sexual agency of children. *Continuum* [online], *23*(*3*), 389–400. Available from: doi:10.1080/10304310902842975.

Egan, R.D. and Hawkes, G. (2013). Disavowal and foundational fantasies: A psychosocial exploration of the class, race and the social construction of the sexual

child in the Anglophone West. *Sexualities* [online], *16*(*5–6*), 635–650. Available from: doi:10.1177/1363460713488285.

Fae, J., (2015). *Taming the Beast*. Letchworth Garden City: Berforts Information Press.

Fahs, B. (2014). 'Freedom to' and 'freedom from': A new vision for sex-positive politics. *Sexualities* [online], *17*(*3*), 267–290. Available from: doi:10.1177/1363460713516334.

Fahs, B., Dudy, M. and Stage, S. (eds) (2013). *The Moral Panics of Sexuality*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Flick, U. (1998). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Foucault, M. (1994). *História Da Sexualidade 1: A Vontade de Saber*. Lisbon: Relógio d'Água.

Foucault, M. (2000a). *Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity*. In P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984: Ethics* (pp. 163–173). London: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (2000b). *Technologies of the Self*. In P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984: Ethics* (pp. 223–251). London: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (2005). *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981–1982*. Edited by F. Gros and F. Ewald. New York: Picador.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.

Graziano, F., Pertosa, M.A. and Consoli, A. (2012). Educare alla sessualità e all'affettività in preadolescenza: Le fonti di informazioni e le domande dei ragazzi e delle ragazze. *Psicologia della Salute, 2*, 1–16.

Grazzani Gavazzi, I. and Ornaghi, V. (2007). *La narrazione delle emozioni in adolescenza*. Milan: McGraw-Hill.

Haddon, L. and Stald, G. (2009). A comparative analysis of European press coverage of children and the internet. *Journal of Children and Media* [online], *3*(*4*), 379–393. Available from: doi:10.1080/17482790903233432.

hooks, b. (2004). *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (reprint edn). Washington Square Press.

Leccardi, C. (2006). Facing uncertainty: Temporality and biographies in the new century. In C. Leccardi and E. Ruspini (eds), *A New Youth? Young People, Generations and Family Life* (pp. 15–40). Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate.

Lobe, B. et al. (2008). *Best Practice Research Guide: How to Research Children and Online Technologies in Comparative Prospective*. London: EU Kids Online.

Marinho, S., Anastácio, Z. and Carvalho, G.S. (2011). Desenvolvimento e implementação de projectos de Educação Sexual: Análise das dimensões biológica,

psicológica e social da sexualidade. In Atas do VI Congresso Internacional. Maia: AGIR (Associação para a Investigação e Desenvolvimento Socio-Cultural), May 2011, Chaves, Portugal [online]. (Accessed 4 March 2012). Available from: http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/handle/1822/12639.

Marmocchi, P., Raffuzzi, L. and Strazzari, E. (2018). *Percorsi di educazione affettiva e sessuale per preadolescenti: il progetto 'W l'amore'*. Centro studi Erickson.

Morrison, T.G., Harriman, R., Morrison, M.A., Bearden, A. and Ellis, S.R. (2004). Correlates of exposure to sexuality explicit material among Canadian post-secondary students. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, *13*, 143–156.

Mowlabocus, S. (2010). Porn 2.0: Technology, social practice and the new online porn industry. In F. Attwood (ed.), *Porn.com: Making Sense of Online Pornography* (pp. 69–87). New York: Peter Lang.

Nogueira, C., Saavedra, L. and da Costa, C.E.V. (2007). (In)Visibilidade do género na sexualidade juvenil: Propostas para uma nova concepção sobre a educação sexual e a prevenção de comportamentos sexuais de risco. *Pro-Posições*, *2*(*19*), 59–79.

Ogas, O. and Gaddam, S. (2012). *A Billion Wicked Thoughts: What the Internet Tells Us about Sexual Relationships*. New York: Plume.

Paasonen, S. (2011). *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography*. London: MIT Press.

Pais, J.M. (2012). *Sexualidade e afectos juvenis*. Lisbon: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.

Pascoe, C.J. (2005). 'Dude, you're a fag': Adolescent masculinity and the fag discourse. *Sexualities* [online], *8*(*3*), 329–346. Available from: doi:10.1177/1363460705053337.

Peter, J. and Valkenburg, P.M. (2006). Adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit material on the internet. *Communication Research* [online], *33*(*2*), 178–204. Available from: doi:10.1177/0093650205285369.

Plummer, K. (1994). *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*. New York: Routledge.

Ponte, C. (2012). *Crianças & Media: Pesquisa Internacional e Contexto Português Do Século XIX à Actualidade*. Lisbon: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.

Porrovecchio, A. (2012). *Sessualità in divenire: Adolescenti, corpo e immaginario*. Milan: FrancoAngeli.

Rich, A. (2007). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. In R. Parker and P. Aggleton (eds), *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, 2nd edn (pp. 209–236). London: Routledge.

Robinson, K. H. (2012). 'Difficult citizenship': The precarious relationships between childhood, sexuality and access to knowledge. *Sexualities* [online], *15*(*3–4*), 257–276. Available from: doi:10.1177/1363460712436469.

Sakaluk, J. K., Todd, L. M., Milhausen, R., & Lachowsky, N. J. (2014). Dominant heterosexual sexual scripts in emerging adulthood: Conceptualization and measurement. The Journal of Sex Research, 51(5), 516-531

Scarcelli, C.M. (2014). 'One way or another I need to learn this stuff!' Adolescents, sexual information, and the Internet's role between family, school, and peer group. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Family Studies*, 40–59.

Scarcelli, C.M. (2015). 'It is disgusting, but …': Adolescent girls' relationship to internet pornography as gender performance. *Porn Studies*, *2*(*2–3*), 237–249. Available from: doi:10.1080/23268743.2015.1051914.

Scarcelli, C.M. (2018). Young people and sexual media. In P.G. Nixon and I.K. Düsterhöft (eds), *Sex in the Digital Age.* London: Routledge.

Smahel, D., Machackova, H., Mascheroni, G., Dedkova, L., Staksrud, E., Olafsson, K., Livingstone, S., and Hasebrink, U. (2020). EU Kids Online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries. EU Kids Online.

Shapiro, T. (2008). Masturbation, sexuality, and adaptation: Normalization in adolescence. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, *56*(*1*), 123–146. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003065108315687.

Thompson, M. (2017). *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, 2nd edn. London: Pluto Press.

Tsaliki, L. (2015). Popular culture and moral panics about 'children at risk': revisiting the sexualisation-of-young-girls debate. *Sex Education* [online], *15*(*5*), 500–514. Available from: doi:10.1080/14681811.2015.1022893.

Tsaliki, L., Chronaki, D. and Ólafsson, K. (2014). Experiences with sexual content: What we know from the research so far. EU Kids Online, LSE.

Vieira, P. (2010). Silêncios simultâneos: Currículo e sexualidades. Master's thesis, Universidade do Minho. Available from: http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/handle/1822/14155 (accessed 21 March 2012).

Wilson, W.C. (1971). Facts versus fears: Why should we worry about pornography? *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* [online], *397*(*1*), 105–117. Available from: doi:10.1177/000271627139700113.