



Article

Social and Educational Coexistence in Adolescents' Perception in Current Social Problems through Networks

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Abstract: The use of social networks as a social and educational environment emphasizes an approach to social problems (bullying, cyberbullying, sexism, racism) that has emerged in today's society. Social networks offer a unique opportunity to increase channels for communication and socialization. The aim of this study is to analyze the adolescents' attitudes in sports practice in their extracurricular environment, and it highlights the importance of didactic communication as a tool for social cohesion to guarantee the interaction between adolescents. This objective has been evaluated through the "Sport and Social Integration. Survey on Secondary Schools in Italy" questionnaire. In this paper, we focus our attention on Section II to go deeper into the participants' opinion on previously mentioned social problems. The methods of research for this study were conducted through a descriptive, inferential, quantitative, and ex post facto design. The sample consisted of 286 Italian adolescents aged between 12 and 15 years old. Results show that there are positive correlations in the following variables: gender and verbal, psychological, or physical violence (Bullying) ($r = 0.260$) (Sig. = 0.000); gender and threats, crimes, and persecutions through the Internet (Cyberbullying) ($r = 0.226$) (Sig. = 0.000); gender and discrimination against women (Sexism) ($r = 0.133$) (Sig. = 0.025). In conclusion, this article underlines the importance of investing more systematically in the effort to prevent bullying and digital inclusion from an early age for the critical use of mobile devices and social networks.

Keywords: social networks; adolescents; education; communication; social problems



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1. Introduction

Today's society is becoming increasingly sedentary for different reasons, including the extensive use of digital devices and information technologies. Society is concerned about the use that young people make of their free time. Among the activities that adolescents carry out in their free time are sports and the use of technological activities.

On one hand, organized extracurricular free time activities have a positive impact on community health practices and reduce inequities in social and environmental opportunities among young Italians. Young Italians who participated in after-school activities were more likely to comply with physical activity recommendations and report lower rates of tobacco use and drunkenness [1].

The O.M.S. (2009) estimated that less than one-third of adolescents practice a sufficient level of physical-motor activity for their health. However, research shows that being physically active for at least 60 min every day has many benefits for teens, both physically, mentally, and socially. At the social level, sports practices provide values such as cooperation, friendship, respect, and expression of feelings [2] and group cohesion [3].

One of the key objectives within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) is literacy in order to guarantee an inclusive and equitable education that promotes learning opportunities. However, sustainable digital literacy remains a challenge.

The use of social networks as social and educational environment emphasizes addressing the social problems that emerge in this context, such as cyberbullying. Social networks offer a unique opportunity to increase channels for communication and socialization. Therefore, this article shows the importance of didactic communication as a tool for social cohesion to guarantee interaction between adolescents, therefore guaranteeing positive attitudes after using social networks at an early age.

During adolescence, relationships with others become more complex, and social cognition substantially develops. At this stage, the socialization process with the peer group becomes functional for the identity formation process of the adolescents. This is due to the fact that they obtain a status of 'belonging' to a particular group in which they can establish their own rules that are shared by members of their own age. In addition, they can behave with adults and other groups according to the norms of their group.

Therefore, peer relationships play a fundamental role in the development of adolescents, not only for the acquisition of social skills but also for the sense of social identity and personal skills. By social skills, we understand a system that helps people understand and interpret both themselves and their close social environment through activities that are founded for the first time in the family.

They are constituents of different individual qualities such as areas of behavior, emotions, communication, and interaction, allowing people to make healthy progressions in areas of development [4]. Subjects whose social skills are not developed may be subject to negative treatments such as exclusion from their peers, neglect by adults, inability to be successful in interpersonal relationships, or exclusion from the group. Furthermore, these negative social skills outcomes can lead to people's isolation [5]. Students without sufficient social skills experience a greater loneliness [6] and score higher on the depression and anxiety scales [7].

The diffusion of new technologies and new means of communication within today's societies has had important repercussions on the way in which we communicate. On one hand, communication is defined as 'the interaction of the people who enter it as subjects. Not only is it about the influence of one subject on another, but also the interaction and it requires at least two people, each of whom acts as a subject' [8]. On the other hand, cyber communication is defined as the process of communication mediated through social networks.

Moreover, the cyber communication creates a cyber-culture. The cyber-culture is defined as a 'culture born from the application of the new information and communication technologies, in mass media such as the Internet. This culture in the Internet has advantages and disadvantages, absolute freedom, anonymity, cybercrimes; constituted by cybercitizens with rights and obligations' [9].

One of the tools that is most used by Internet users is social networks. Social networks are defined as 'environments whose purpose is to allow users to interact, communicate, share content and create communities' [10]. These networks allow users to easily create and share information, thoughts, and opinions. Some of the social networks most used today by teenagers are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tock, among others.

These technological means have various features that make them extraordinarily attractive to adolescents: it gives them autonomy, with respect to their parents; it allows communication to flow with their peers or the expansion and support of interpersonal connections [11].

In these communities, adolescents are immersed in groups or communities where hobbies or interests are shared for a certain topic, and these topics vary from music, games, sports, to even 'memes'. Adolescents develop within the networks in the way they adopt behaviors, expressions, and even ideals that are shared through this media [12]. The expressions that are used on the Internet belong to the groups and are externalized in offline life; cyber-cultures are adopted and adapted to the context in which they live, replicating the content of the web to the lives of adolescents [13]. Therefore, the feature that

we must emphasize that integration in a virtual social network offers is that adolescents are aware of their belonging to a group.

Furthermore, social networks help to maintain friendship relationships, mainly because they exceed space–time limits and contribute to the establishment of new friendships by facilitating communication when social skills are lacking [14]. Adolescents produce and publish images to stimulate sociability on social networks, which is why digital photography has become a playful and daily practice to share with their peer group [15].

In this way, virtual social networks represent for adolescents a fundamental element to define and identify themselves as subjects. However, the construction and definition of online identity depends on and requires the acceptance and recognition of others, often inducing a subjectivity molded to the demands of an increasingly demanding public, which can limit the freedom of gestures and opinions [16].

According to Gardner and Davis (2014) [17] ‘digital media offer youth the time and tools they need to create attractive identities as well as an audience that observes and responds to them’. From this, it can be inferred that social networks are allowing young people to manipulate their information to the point that they feel sheltered in this channel because they manage to get the approval of others [18]. However, only peers who are popular in terms of having many friends (popular sociometrics) have been shown to be especially inclusive in the intergroup attitudes of their friends [19].

Additionally, friendships connections have the ability to influence individual actions; then, personal opinions change and, subsequently, impact on the personal well-being [20]. Feta et al. (2018) demonstrate the usefulness of using emerging sources of data from social networks for public health interventions such as tobacco use.

It must also be taken into account that a lack of adequate preparation for the correct use of these tools exposes them to considerable risks. In fact, interpersonal relationships, are distorted in such a way that the virtual dimension often has the same value as the real one or is linked to that in a complementary way. Furthermore, international research has shown that cyber-offenders are not always capable of understanding (both in cognitive and empathic terms) the size and scope of the actions carried out and the consequences on the victim [21]. The direct consequence of a lack of adequate preparation for the correct use of the Internet tools is the growth, in recent years, of cyberbullying episodes that have had and continue having significant repercussions on the individual well-being of individual subjects [22,23].

Cyberbullying can be defined as ‘psychological intimidation or harassment that occurs between equals, frequently within the school environment, but not exclusively, sustained over time and committed with certain regularity, using digital devices. It can take place on social media, messaging platforms, mobile phones, etc. The characteristic of the phenomenon are: anonymity, immediacy, amplified publicity, instant diffusion, and viralization. The aim of cyberbullying is harming the victim, undermining his self-esteem and leading them to a situation of terror, impotence and stress’.

According to [24] Sánchez-Romero and López-Berlanga (2020), the aggressions suffered by students can be solved if training in digital inclusion from an early age for the critical use of digital devices and the information they share through social networks, which will allow them an appropriate use of digital technology.

We finally highlight the important of technology and Internet connectivity, which allows people to access education. Most governments around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. These nationwide closures are impacting over 91% of the world’s student population (UNESCO 2020). The impact of the first wave of COVID-19 on the Internet traffic in Europe was an increase of about 15–20% within a couple of weeks, and it also was noticeably higher for specific applications (remote work applications, teleconferencing, video on demand): in some cases up to 200% [25].

In addition, the results of the analysis of the interaction between young people (with different profiles: educators, researchers, and decision makers) show that the use of technological ecosystems to support the development of citizen science projects allows improving the processes of knowledge transfer between children and young people as well as the analysis of these processes [26]. In addition, technology and innovation create opportunities, give anyone the ability and resources necessary to prosper, and enable the inclusion of people with disabilities or at social risk. Digital skills foster inclusion and create opportunities and programs for people with visual, hearing, and physical disabilities and help them to develop technical skill.

It allows them to get jobs, develop their careers, gain personal independence, and overcome cultural stereotypes [27]. Furthermore, adolescents in situations of academic vulnerability and social risk generate leaning with greater meaning on identity symbols when they occur in relation to youth media culture, as well as with sociocultural communication and recreation practices recreation practices in cyberspace [28].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Methodology

The research carried out has been approached from a quantitative methodology.

The objective of our study was to analyze the attitudes toward sports practice in a set of Italian teens in their extracurricular environment, analyzing existing differences between gender (boys and girls) in the different items, through descriptive analyses, correlations, and statistical Student's *t* test. Statistical data analysis has been carried out using the IBM Statistical Package Program software for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24.

2.2. Participants

The present research took place in Castesano Public Secondary School (Italy). This town is located close to Bologna, with 15,363 inhabitants. The secondary school consists of 18 classrooms with 455 students. The sample was selected through non-probability sampling, allowing us to select those accessible cases that agreed to be included in the study. A total of 286 Italian adolescents took part in the survey with a range of age of 12 to 15 years old. By gender, the percentages of the participants were male $n = 155$ (54.2%) and female $n = 131$ (45.8%). The participants are predominantly middle-class Italian (95.8%) and other nationalities (3.8%).

The children's age groups are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution by students' age.

Age Groups	Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
12	42.3	42.3
13	43.4	85.7
14	14.0	99.7
15	0.3	100

2.3. Instrument

The "Sport and Social Integration. Survey on Secondary Schools in Italy" (Caruso, G. et al., 2018) questionnaire is a comprehensive survey of 32 questions in five sections (Section I—Your relationships; Section II—Your opinion; Section III—Sport; Section IV—Sport is for you . . . ; Section V—Your opinion about . . .). This questionnaire deals with different topics such as interpersonal relationships, opinions, attitudes, deviants, exclusion, and stereotypes.

For this article, we selected Section II—'Your opinion on social problems' with the aim of knowing the opinion that the participants have toward certain current social problems in sport practice:

- Verbal, psychological, and physical violence (Bullying)
- Threats, crimes, and persecutions through the Internet or mobile phones (Cyberbullying)
- Ethnic and racial discrimination (Racism)
- Discrimination against women (Sexism).

In addition, the internal consistency reliability of this questionnaire was measured by Cronbach's alpha with a score of 0.764.

2.4. Data Collection

For data collection, permission was requested from the center to parents and participants following ethical standards for the development of research with students (Council from International Organizations, Cioms, Oms, & Who, 2002; Namakforoosh, 2000).

3. Results

Section II, 'Your opinion', has been selected with the aim of knowing the opinion that the subjects have toward certain current social problems (bullying, cyberbullying, sexism, racism) that can emerge in social networks.

Firstly, we examined the judgments that the participants have toward certain social problems. Table 2 shows what participants think about verbal, psychological, or physical violence (Bullying). Most of the participants think that it is intolerable (79.9%); some participants think that it is difficult to judge (15.4%); and some participants think that it is a way of being (3.6%).

Table 2. Judgment distribution toward verbal, psychological, or physical violence.

	Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
It's a way of being.	3.8	3.8
It's difficult to judge.	15.4	19.2
It's intolerable.	79.7	100

The following Table 3 shows what participants think about threats, crimes and persecution through the Internet or mobile phones (Cyberbullying). Most of them think that it is intolerable (82%). However, some research subjects think that it is difficult to judge (13.3%) and it is a way of being (3.8%).

Table 3. Judgment distribution toward threats, crimes, and persecution through the Internet.

	Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
It's a way of being.	3.8	3.8
It's difficult to judge.	13.3	17.1
It's intolerable.	82	100

In accordance with the participants' opinion about ethnic and racial discrimination (Racism), most of the participants believe that ethnic and racial discrimination is intolerable (80.4%). However, some participants think that it is difficult to judge (14%) or it is a way of being (5%). The following Table 4 shows the results.

Table 4. Judgment distribution toward ethnic and racial discrimination.

	Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
It's a way of being.	5	5
It's difficult to judge.	14	19
It's intolerable.	80.4	100

Regarding the participants’ opinions about discrimination against women, most of them believe that discrimination against women is intolerable (85.3%). However, some of them think that it is difficult to judge (7.7%) or it is a way of being (5.9%). The following Table 5 shows the results.

Table 5. Judgment distribution toward discrimination against women.

	Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
It’s a way of being.	5.9	5.9
It’s difficult to judge.	7.7	13.6
It’s intolerable.	85.3	100

Figure 1 shows that the participants believe that the following is absolutely intolerable: the discrimination against women (Sexism) (85.3%); the threats, crimes, persecution through the Internet or mobile phones (Cyberbullying) (81.8%); ethnic and racial discrimination (Racism) (80.4%) and verbal, psychological, and physical violence (Bullying) (79.7%).

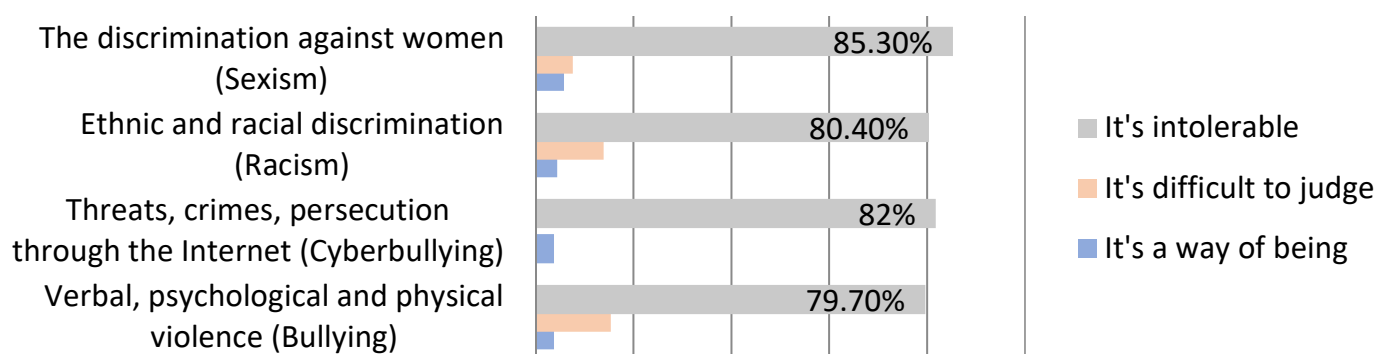


Figure 1. What judgments do you have about these problems?

Table 6 shows a significant positive correlation with 0.01 (bilateral) between the variables: gender and verbal, psychological, and physical violence (Bullying) ($r = 0.260$) (Sig. = 0.000); gender and threats, crimes, and persecutions through the Internet or mobile phones (Cyberbullying) ($r = 0.226$) (Sig. = 0.000) and; gender and discrimination against women (Sexism) ($r = 0.133$) (Sig. = 0.025).

Table 6. Your opinion toward these social problems.

Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient			
Gender	Verbal, psychological, and physical violence (Bullying)	Threats, crimes, and persecutions through the Internet or mobile phones (Cyberbullying)	Discrimination against women (Sexism)
Pearson’s correlation coefficient	0.260 **	0.226 **	0.133 *
Sig. (bilateral)	0.000	0.000	0.025
<i>n</i>	283	283	283

** The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral); * The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (bilateral).

In addition, a significant mean differences have been found between the following variables: gender and verbal psychological or physical violence (Bullying) ($F: 20.297$; Sig.: 0.000); and, gender and threats, crimes, and persecutions through the Internet or mobile phone ($F: 15.115$; Sig.: 0.000). The following Table 7 shows these results.

Table 7. What is your opinion about these social problems?

	Verbal, Psychological, and Physical Violence (Bullying)	Threats, Crimes, and Persecutions through the Internet or Mobile Phone (Cyberbullying)	Ethnic and Racial Discrimination (Racism)	Discrimination Against Women (Sexism)
<i>n</i>	283	283	283	283
M	2.77	2.79	2.77	2.80
Sd	0.507	0.496	0.521	0.529
ANOVA	20.297	15.115	1.616	5.072
(Sig.)	0.000	0.000	0.205	0.025

Note: M = Mean, Sd = Standard deviation.

The following Table 8 shows the significant differences between the gender variable and participants' opinions about these problems.

Table 8. Student's T coefficient between variables: "gender" and "what is your opinion about these problems?".

	Gender	<i>n</i>	Means by Gender	T	P	Df
Verbal, psychological, or physical violence (Bullying)	Male	152	2.64	−4.505	0.000	281
	Female	131	2.91			
Threats, crimes, and persecutions through the Internet or mobile phones (Cyberbullying)	Male	152	2.68	−3.888	0.000	281
	Female	129	2.91			
Ethnic and racial discrimination (Racism)	Male	152	2.75	−1.271	0.000	281
	Female	131	2.81			
Discrimination against women (Sexism)	Male	152	2.74	−0.151	0.025	277
	Female	131	2.88			

Note: T = Calculated test statistic, P = Level of significance, Df = Degrees of freedom.

The female group has a higher average than the male group in the following variables: verbal, psychological, or physical violence (Bullying) (M = 2.91) ($p = 0.000$); threats, crimes, and persecutions through the Internet or mobile phone (Cyberbullying) (M = 2.91) ($p = 0.000$); ethnic and racial discrimination (Racism) (M = 2.81) ($p = 0.000$); discrimination against women (Sexism) (M = 2.88) ($p = 0.025$).

4. Discussion

In Italy, the type of victimization most reported between friends and classmates had been or often was being the object of offenses with insults, nicknames, etc. [29].

Moreover, the subjects have often been the object of unwanted offenses on their physique; these results are based on the idea that adolescents with severe obesity tend to suffer not only verbal victimization but also physical victimization and exclusion. In addition, the subjects have often been the object of unwanted offenses on their physique; these results are based on the idea that adolescents with severe obesity tend to suffer not only verbal victimization but also physical victimization and exclusion. These results are based on the idea that adolescents with severe obesity tend to suffer not only verbal victimization but also physical victimization and exclusion from group activities [30].

Finally, with a small percentage, the subjects affirm that they have often been the object of threats. These results are very relevant, since it has been shown that bullied Italian students are more likely to self-report lower school performance; Furthermore, a greater willingness to drop out of school has been shown [31].

In this study, we wanted to know the opinion of the participants about certain current problems; with this purpose, the participants' judgments were analyzed.

Firstly, regarding the problem of verbal, psychological, or physical violence (Bullying), there is a very high probability of considering it intolerable (79.9%). There has been a change in opinion and in bullying behavior in Italy since 2006, when the Italian government invested more systematically in the bullying prevention effort [32].

However, there are still some participants who believe that it is difficult to judge (15.4%) or it is a way of being (3.6%). In addition, there is a significant positive correlation with the problem of bullying and gender ($r = 0.260$) (Sig. = 0.000), with significant differences ($t = 4.505$; $p < 0.05$) in the female group ($M = 2.91$) when compared with the male group ($M = 2.64$); and the ANOVA obtained between this problem of bullying and gender (Sig. = 0.000 $< p = 0.05$) shows us that this difference is large enough to be considered statistically significant.

One of the interpretations of the difference in perception of the problem of harassment versus bullying may be due to the fact that bullying is a phenomenon with a marked masculine bias for the aggressor and feminine bias for the victim, with little perception of severity, which can be considered as an element that favors bullying in school contexts [33].

Secondly, the opinion about cyberbullying was analyzed, since among pre-adolescents and adolescents, it is important to consider the relationship between young people and ICT, highlighting the amount of use of different digital media and the preferences and choices of young people in their free time (in relation to the Internet, mobile devices, telephones, television, etc.) [34].

However, 82% of the Italian adolescents of the sample consider that the threats, crimes, and persecutions through the Internet (Cyberbullying) are absolutely intolerable. However, there is a small probability that some subjects think that it is difficult to judge with 13.3%. In addition, we have found a positive correlation with this cyberbullying problem and gender ($r = 0.226$) (Sig. = 0.000), with significant differences ($t = 3.888$; $p < 0.05$) in the female group ($M = 2.91$) when compared with the male group ($M = 2.68$); the ANOVA obtained between this problem and gender (Sig. = 0.000 $< p = 0.05$) shows us that this difference is large enough to be considered statistically significant.

An interpretation of the gender difference in the perception of cyberbullying may be that girls use the Internet more for social relations, while boys tend to give it other types of uses, such as access to online games [35]. In addition, we must point out that the intensive use of ICTs takes time away from sports and outdoor recreation [36].

Thirdly, the judgment that adolescents have toward ethnic and racial discrimination (Racism) was analyzed. In Italy, the risk of reporting bullying and fighting behaviors is evident in first-generation immigrants and decreases among second-generation immigrants, regardless of ethnic origin [1]. In our research, most of the subjects (80.4%) believe that ethnic and racial discrimination is intolerable. However, some subjects think that it is difficult to judge (14%) or it is a way of being (5%).

Finally, the opinion that the subjects have toward discrimination against women (Sexism) was analyzed, obtaining a very high probability that the majority of the subjects think that it is intolerable with 85.3%, although some participants think that it is difficult to judge (7.7%) and it is a way of being (5.9%). In addition, a positive correlation has been obtained between this problem of sexism and gender ($r = 0.133$) (Sig. = 0.025). In addition, there are significant differences ($t = -0.151$; $p < 0.05$) in the female group ($M = 2.99$) when we compared with the male group ($M = 2.74$). The ANOVA obtained between this problem of sexism and gender (Sig. = 0.025 $< p = 0.05$) shows us that this difference is large enough to be considered statistically significant.

In this sense, we must mention that in the Italian case, it suggests a complex situation in which the free and fluid self-expression of students in a respectful and non-discriminatory environment as a preventive factor of homophobic/transphobic harassment and gender violence continues to be an objective to be achieved [37].

5. Conclusions

In this article, we have identified the perception that participants have about certain current problems such as bullying, cyberbullying, or sexism, underlining the importance of investing in a more systematic way in the effort to prevent bullying and digital inclusion from an early age for the critical use of mobile devices and the files they share through social networks. The research subjects are victims of verbal aggression due to their physical

appearance, which has excluded them from performing group activities. These verbal attacks have an impact on their school performance and a greater willingness to drop out of school early.

Schools play a fundamental role in establishing and maintaining cultural and social values. Through the different subjects, the First Grade Secondary Schools in Italy aim to promote the ability to study autonomously and strengthen the attitudes of students regarding social interaction; they organize and increase knowledge and skills through literacy and the use of information technology as well as in relation to cultural tradition and the social, cultural, and scientific evolution of contemporary reality. Training in digital inclusion is the key to eradicate harmful behaviors and attitudes among equals. The educational community must take disciplinary measures so that these do not occur. Schools must guarantee the socio-educational inclusion of all students from quality training performance through key competencies to generate an inclusive culture of the center.

Through the subjects, knowledge and skills should be organized and increased in a transversal way, through literacy and in-depth study in information technology, as well as in relation to cultural tradition and social and cultural evolution and the scientific nature of contemporary reality.

People must be able to manage stress and frustration and express them in a constructive way, and it also differentiates the professional sphere from the private one. The civic competition revolves around three main themes: Constitution, Sustainable Development, and Digital Citizenship.

In conclusion, in the light of globalization and the information society, education in values constitutes a fundamental instrument for the exercise and defense of human rights and, at the same time, guides individual and social development in communities.

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