

Article

Perception of Risk in the Use of Technologies and Social Media. Implications for Identity Building during Adolescence

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Abstract: Life for today's adolescents generally involves spending a large part of their time in front of a screen, permanently connected to the internet. It is no surprise to learn that recent years have witnessed an increase in the number of studies on how adolescent identities are being affected by the phenomenon of hyperconnectivity. This article addresses the perception adolescents have of the uses and functions they encounter during the time they are online and their self-perceived risks, as well as the tools or strategies they use to tackle the threats of a hyperconnected society. This involved designing a qualitative study in which 130 adolescents took part in different focus groups. The results revealed that adolescents use technologies mainly as a means of communication and entertainment, and as they mature, they perceive greater risks associated with this use. The study also found that they deploy few tools and strategies to deal with the self-perceived risks.

Keywords: identity; adolescence; hyperconnectivity; social media; online



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1. Introduction

We live in a technology-driven society, where nothing escapes the hyperconnectivity generated by the latest technological artefacts and devices, more commonly referred to as screens. This permanent connectivity that characterises our society is defined by the possibility of interacting with ourselves and others by accessing digital media through different devices and systems [1]. This is a scenario that fully impacts new generations, whereby for some years now adolescents have understood their lives to be a multiscreen society [2]. Yet these screens are not simply another accessory in the hands of an adolescent; instead, they constitute the scenario, place, environment, or context that permit the incorporation of processes of communication, interplay, and action [3]. In addition, the personal and social features that screens provide have advanced at a dizzying rate [4]. It is no surprise, therefore, that today's adolescents look upon technology as an essential tool for enjoying their free time and satisfying their needs for relating to their peers [5–7]. The increase in the number of these devices has been accompanied by new spaces and agents of socialisation; Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok have become the new settings for communication and interplay among new generations, constituting the most popular apps among today's adolescents [8,9]. Adolescents commonly use these apps not only to reveal their “digital self” but also to follow their favourite influencers, YouTubers, and streamers. These new scenarios of action and communication are governed by specific rules of behaviour that operate from a distance, prompting in adolescents thoughts, emotions, and actions specific to our Onlife world [10]. This means that most of the young users of these social media are not just mere consumers, but that also by updating their profiles they seek to act, influence, and communicate [11]. An adolescent controls their self and, through what Colley (1902) referred to as their “looking-glass self,” their photos, images, likes, comments, expressions, or signs of approval or negotiation, which enables them to adopt an intentional approach

to the way they present themselves to others [12]. In this sense, and according to Colley's reasoning, the "cybernetic self" enables these young people to present themselves to their followers considering the opinions they may have of them [13].

This situation has given rise to some concern over the extent to which these technologies may even be affecting identity-building processes among adolescents [12,14–16]. It is one thing to join the network and build up a personal identity, and quite another to be "hooked" [17].

It is fair to say that the use of social media can help adolescents to improve their communication processes, access new information, and, in short, contribute to the development of their own identities [9]. Nonetheless, this use is also associated with certain risks. Adolescents are increasingly becoming addicted to their screens, feeling pressured to go online [18] and needing to be continuously updated on the latest news in terms of both information and relationships, leading to a series of behaviours that makes them more concerned about self-expression than self-reflection [15]. Apps have transformed their self-expression into self-promotion [19]. A new manner of online self-expression stemming from the use of screens entails certain risks, as these technologies often hopelessly ensnare their users, as adolescents often lack the critical approach needed to be aware of the risks to which they are being exposed [20].

For some time now, studies have reported that we have gone from abusing technologies to depending on them, and sometimes to obsession and even addiction [21–24]. Internet use has not only produced superficial and individualistic mindsets among adolescents, but is also the cause, according to certain studies, of a recent increase in depressive episodes linked to self-harm and even suicide [9,25,26], a series of risks that also lead to an increase in such phenomena as cyberbullying, grooming, and sexting, among others. In turn, anonymity appears to be playing a major role in the type of use and the relationships that adolescents maintain on social media, as they can juggle different identities, online or otherwise, adjusting them according to the collective they are interacting with or their tastes. It is the outcome of believing to be someone on the internet, how they want to be perceived, and how they are truly perceived by themselves and by others [27]. It is the consequence of a complex construction in which the mainstay is the image they project, and that is not always the one intended or the real one. "There are therefore numerous studies that testify to the significance of aspects of the profile as a key factor in the nature and quality of a user's interactions on that social medium" [28].

The aforementioned risks seem to arise from a lack of control over the time spent online [29] as well as the lack of self-perception of the risk to which the adolescents themselves are exposed [5]. Technology, therefore, modifies the modes and mechanisms for perceiving and learning this new social reality, considering, narrating, and assimilating it. All this has a considerable knock-on effect for education, involving a lack of self-control, responsibility, self-determination, and critical thinking, and a steady loss of freedom and independence [30].

Therefore, the analysis of the enclaves of building the hyperconnected identity of Spanish adolescents has involved the launch of the CONECT-ID project, whose remit is, among other objectives, to discover how these adolescents perceive and manage their hyperconnected time. Our focal point here involves analysing how technology and the internet are used in their digital leisure time, the risks perceived, and their assessment of these risks as they mature.

2. Materials and Methods

The research followed a qualitative design, framed within a study of a participative nature with an ethnographic character, as the aim was to approach a social situation in its natural habitat in pursuit of an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon studied, seeking to understand or interpret the phenomena according to the meanings people give to them [31].

The study's main objective was to uncover the uses and function that adolescents make of technology and the internet, and the risks they perceive associated with their

online activity. The data-gathering technique involved the use of focus groups, organised as group discussions planned and designed to obtain information of interest, chaired by moderators, who in this case had a thematic semi-structured script that was drafted beforehand to facilitate the encounter [32,33]. The script established a series of guiding questions to favour the encounter and prompt discussion, centred on a series of aspects related mainly to self-concept and a digital profile, uses and functionalities, behaviours and actions, and time and critical thinking. These aspects were used to establish different dimensions for the subsequent analysis of content.

2.1. Instrument of Analysis and Procedure

As indicated, we approached the perceptions, opinions, and motivations held by adolescents regarding their use and habits involving technology through the arrangement of focus groups within the participants' own natural habitat, that is, at their respective schools or colleges. The script drafted for the meeting was first designed and approved by Salamanca University's research group on processes, spaces and educational practices [*Grupo de investigación Procesos, Espacios y Prácticas Educativas*], by means of different work and team seminars involving nine researchers with expertise in different fields (theory and history of education, research methods, sociology and anthropology). This semi-structured script was made available to the moderators of the encounters, who decided to hold the sessions with two age brackets: adolescents aged 12 to 15 (Group I), and those aged 16 to 18 (Group II).

The process of selecting the participating sample involved accessibility among the target population. The sessions were held with prior authorisation from the secondary schools and the adolescents' legal guardians, with the corresponding permissions requested. The schools were chosen according to criteria of accessibility, seeking to include a representation of the following types: rural (3), urban (4), state (7), direct grant (2), and private (1) from Spain's different regions (autonomous communities). The sessions were moderated by pairs of experts that were involved in the prior drafting of the script and in the process of identifying categories for the subsequent analysis of content.

A total of 14 sessions were held, which were recorded in audio format, transcribed, and loaded into Nvivo software (V.12, licenced to the research group) for coding and analysis, according to a system of categories drawn up by three researchers using an inductive procedure [34] who took part in the coding process. These categories were structured according to five dimensions (see Table 1) related to the adolescents' Digital Profile, Online Behaviour, Online Practices, Scenarios, Time Management, and Critical Thinking (focusing on self-perceived risks).

The discourse transcribed ran to a total of 188,026 words (68,980 in the 12–15 age group (Group I) and 119,026 in the 16–18 age group (Group II)). The total number of references coded amounted to 7392 (3229 in Group I and 4163 in Group II). The number of references coded and the content of each one of these categories were then used to analyse the results, taking age differences as the reference, which involved calculating the weight of the content and interpreting the assessments made by the participants. Figure 1 presents the interactive map for coding the content that was established prior to the intergroup comparison.

2.2. Participants

The overall sample consisted of 130 adolescents organised into 14 sessions (each lasting around 120 min), with six involved in Group I (79 individuals in total) and eight involved in Group II (51 in total). Profile diversity was sought based on the studies followed (mainly secondary and sixth form), status of the schools involved (one private, two direct grant, and four state), location (six Spanish towns), gender (50%–50% distribution of informants), and schooling (see Table 2).

Table 1. Dimensions and categories used in the content analysis.

Digital Profile	Self-concept
	Virtual scenarios
Time Perception	Free time
	Availability
Time Management	Self-regulation
	Understanding of temporality
	Anxiety/frustration
	Parental controls
	School controls
Critical Thinking	Online risk perceived
	Lack of instruction
	Verifying information
	Values
Actions and Behaviour	Autonomy
	Communication
	Academic background
	Information
	Entertainment
	Emotional control

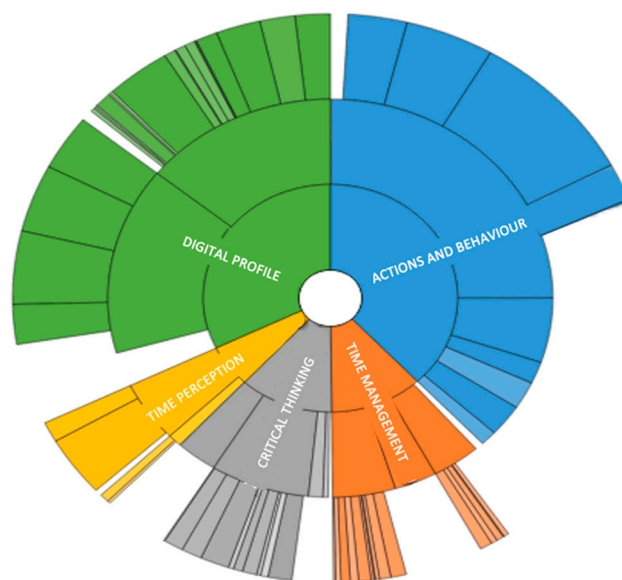


Figure 1. Hierarchical coding map of the content of the discourse. Source: screenshot from NVivo (v.12).

Table 2. General details of the discussion groups.

Group Code	n	Age		Sex		Schooling	School Status
GBAR001	7	\bar{x}	17.57	M	6	Basic	Private (urban area)
		S _x	0.79	F	1	Vocational training (VT)	
GBAR002	8	\bar{x}	18.00	M	3	VT	Private (urban area)
		S _x	0.00	F	5		
GBU001	8	\bar{x}	12.50	M	4	Secondary (first cycle)	Direct grant (urban area)
		S _x	0.53	F	4		
GBU002	8	\bar{x}	15.00	M	4	Secondary (second cycle)	Direct grant (urban area)
		S _x	1.07	F	4		
GMANZ001	8	\bar{x}	13.00	M	4	Secondary	State (rural area)
		S _x	0.93	F	4		
GMANZ02	12	\bar{x}	15.67	M	5	Sixth form	State (rural area)
		S _x	0.65	F	7		
GPLA001	16	\bar{x}	13.81	M	9	Secondary	State (rural area)
		S _x	1.17	F	7		
GPLA002	7	\bar{x}	17.57	M	4	VT	State (rural area)
		S _x	0.53	F	3		
GSA001	6	\bar{x}	13.83	M	4	Secondary (first cycle)	State and direct grant (rural and urban area)
		S _x	0.41	F	2		
GSA002	8	\bar{x}	16.12	M	4	Sixth form	State and direct grant (rural and urban area)
		S _x	0.83	F	4		
GSA003	10	\bar{x}	13.20	M	5	Secondary	State (rural area)
		S _x	1.03	F	5		
GSA00	11	\bar{x}	16.09	M	4	Sixth form and basic VT	State (rural area)
		S _x	0.8312	F	7		
GSA005	11	\bar{x}	13.46	M	4	Secondary	State (urban area)
		S _x	1.29	F	7		
GSA006	10	\bar{x}	16.30	M	5	Sixth form	State (urban area)
		S _x	0.67	F	5		

3. Results

3.1. Purposes and Uses of Technology and the Internet

The uses that adolescents claimed to make while online were classified into six codes according to the participants' discourse, with a total of 544 references. Considering the different apps and tools they stated they use and the intergroup study referred to in prior studies [35] they most often use instant messaging through apps such as WhatsApp and Instagram, with entertainment and communication with peers being the two main reasons for their use, with no differences between the sexes. The intergroup study, considering the two age brackets specified earlier, revealed (see Figure 2) that younger adolescents are the ones who use it for entertainment and even to control their emotions; that is, when they are online they feel (paradoxically) disconnected from tasks and obligations, whereas as they mature, they link its use to the need to communicate, enjoy themselves, keep up to date, or even improve their school performance.

Some of the statements made in the sessions enable us to understand and qualify the results presented above:

"I sometimes feel depressed (. . .) so I probably go onto Instagram, and although I'm not particularly interested in other people's lives, I forget about how I'm feeling for a time" (Participant_3_Male_GSA003_Group I)

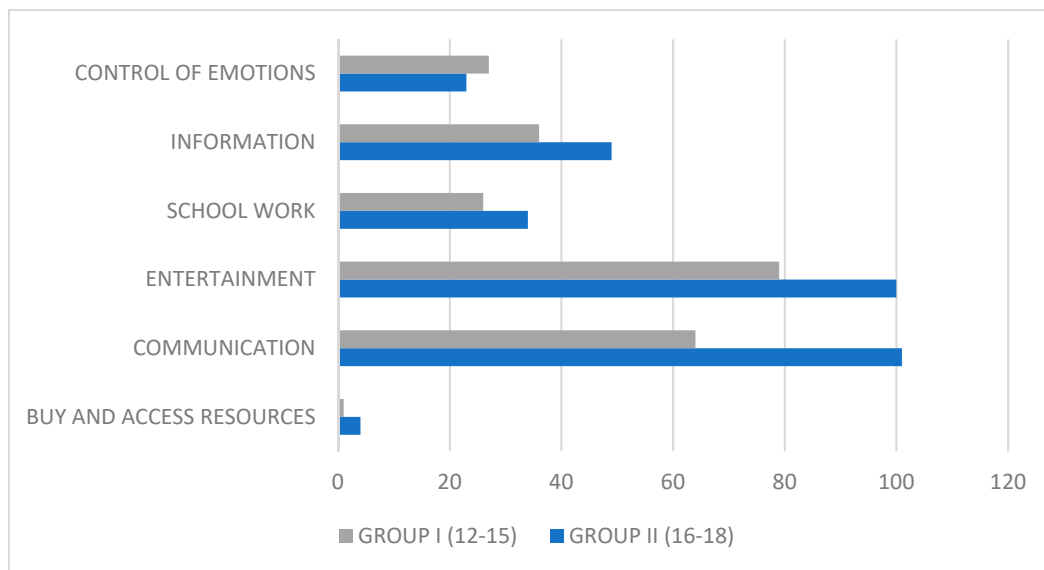


Figure 2. Main online uses according to the number of references coded.

Communication has a soothing effect and makes them feel closer to others and more in contact. They appreciate the advantages of being able to make contact quickly and in an asynchronous manner:

“I think that one of the good things about WhatsApp is that you can answer when you feel like it and when you think you have enough time. In contrast to what we’ve been doing most of our lives when using a landline . . . if you’re talking to someone else you can’t say, ok, I’ll call you back in five minutes because I can’t talk now, you have to keep a conversation constantly going, so . . . that’s also an advantage because if you’re doing something else you can answer at the same time . . . ” (Participant_6_Female_GSA004_Group II)

“Right, because if I want to know where you are, because in my case my mum doesn’t control me, but when I go out partying and I send her my location in real-time then she knows whether I’m on my way home, if anything’s up, so she doesn’t worry so much and I feel better going out and she knows where I am at any time” (Participant_6_Female_GBAR002_Group II)

“I think that rather than boredom it’s the fact that we have everything at hand, don’t we? I mean, you don’t have to get up to look at anything, you don’t have to think you have to go and play tennis and I don’t have to get all the gear ready and so on if you like tennis, you turn on YouTube and you’ve got something to watch all afternoon about whatever you want, I think it’s a question of convenience more than boredom, to be honest with you” (Participant_6_Male_GPLA002_Group II)

3.2. Perception of the Risks Associated with Habits and Uses Involving the Use of Technology and the Internet

As regards the type of online risks perceived, considering the number of discussion groups in which the content is addressed (see Figure 3)—reminding the reader it was an open question—we found that generally speaking, the adolescents mentioned that such risks are, above all, linked to misuses or situations of harassment they had either experienced personally or heard about. They also referred to the risk of addiction or being “hooked” through excessive use, referring also to the danger of a lack of privacy because they sometimes feel they disclose too much about themselves.

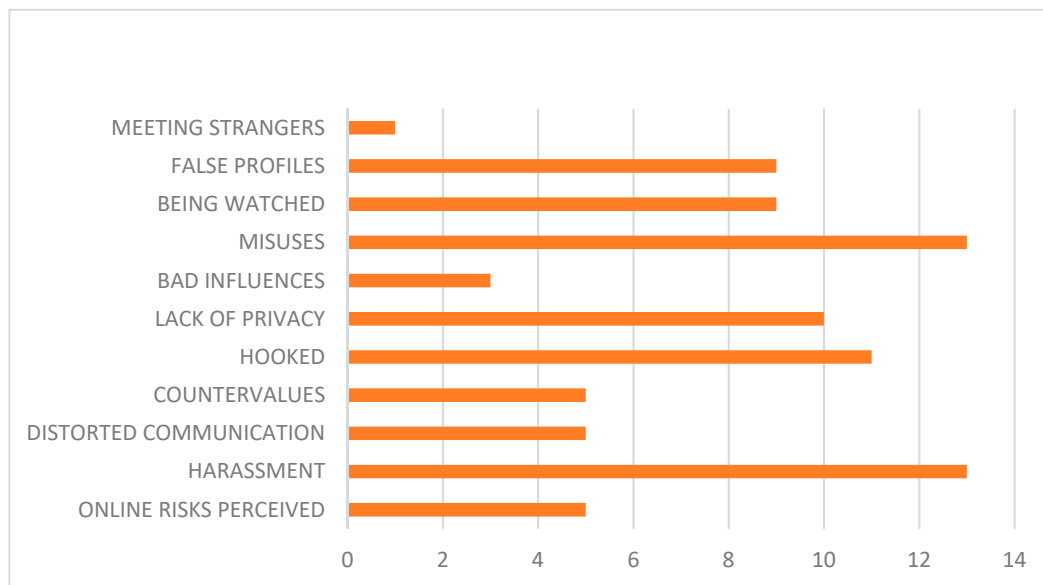


Figure 3. Categories and number of references coded in terms of risks mentioned.

3.3. Age Differences in the Selection and Modification of Risk Assessment

A study of the differences between age groups and the number of references coded in this aspect (see Table 3) revealed that as they get older, adolescents are more capable of identifying greater risks, although they do not always accept responsibility for them. Take, for example, the participants in Group II. When they referred to misuses, they blamed the youngest ones among them, mentioning the creation and existence of false profiles on social media. Likewise, when they mentioned being “hooked” on technologies, they rarely admitted to their own excessive use, but instead claimed that they knew of cases or people close to them who had gone through that situation.

Table 3. Comparison between groups in terms of self-perceived risks.

	GROUP I (12–15)		GROUP II (16–18)	
	No. of References	Category Weighting	No. of References	Category Weighting
Harassment	10	14.93	23	17.69
Distorted Communication	3	4.48	7	5.38
Countervalues	3	4.48	4	3.08
Hooked	14	20.90	14	10.77
Lack of Privacy	10	14.93	9	6.92
Bad Influences	0	0.00	5	3.85
Misuses	11	16.42	28	21.54
Being Watched	7	10.45	20	15.38
False Profiles	9	13.43	19	14.62
Meeting Strangers	0	0.00	1	0.77
	67	100.00	130	100.00

Delving further into their answers and into content analysis, when they were asked about strategies, they revealed that to protect themselves against the perceived risks, they resort to common sense, decision-making regarding the content to post, or the option of blocking people they think have false profiles. The following are some of the statements or opinions the adolescents provided:

“Yep, ultimately you have to be the one that acts as a filter, because you have to realise that what you are seeing online, much of it is objective, but most of it is subjective and consists of opinions, other people’s way of seeing things, you have to be the one that channels all the information, and present your own viewpoint” (Participant_6_Female_GSA002_Group II)

Likewise, they did not think they had been given any specific strategies to verify the information or make proper use of social media:

“Just as before when we were talking about risks, one of these for me is precisely that, information, I don’t think the solution lies in banning the internet but instead in the way we are educated. We are not taught to have a critical opinion toward the information we receive, but instead to memorise pages and pages of notes and then regurgitate them, and that has a consequence later, in the end what it does is cultivate ignorance and turn us into dummies” (Participant_6_Male_GSA002_Group II)

One of the participant’s greatest concerns involved their public image—that is, what other people may think or what they let other people think about them. Although the vast majority of the participants affirmed that they were not worried about how many followers they had, what did concern them was their online image, and so the strategy they use involves creating several profiles on apps such as Instagram—the social media most often mentioned. They claimed to have different profiles where they create and post content depending on their target audience: (1) a public profile, where the content may be seen by any online user, any user may follow them, and more care is taken over the choice and posting of content and photos, and (2) a private profile, where other users have to ask to follow them if they want to see their content, which means fewer followers and less care taken in the posting of content and photos, as the followers in this case are considered to be more trustworthy. Besides the general distinction between public and private profiles, the participants resorted to other resources such as the “close friends” option for choosing which friends can access a given post.

“Basically, one is how people see my profile, so it has to be sort of attractive in some way, and the other is, well, they are my closest friends, I don’t really care what I post” (Participant_7_Female_GBU001_Group I)

“I go to a village in the country in summer, well as for the place itself, there’s not much going for it, I mean there are lots of people I meet and say hello to, there’s a little bit of everything, right? People I know personally and then people living in the area, I’ve been with them in class, but we’re not close friends, we’ve just seen each other before” (Participant_4_Female_GSA001_Group I)

“I have a public and a private profile, but the public one is for more people to follow me, anyone can follow me, and the other one is more for my friends, my close friends, and that’s where I post more things, more personal things” (Participant_2_Male_GBU001_Group I)

The study of the differences between groups regarding this category, corresponding to the profiles the participants use, revealed that Group I had more profiles than Group II and was more prone to have joint profiles—several users sharing the same identity in order to manage the account. The results showed that as they mature, adolescents tend to have profiles on private social media and not on open or public ones, increasing their screening of followers and protecting their posts more, and they prefer not to take part in accounts or profiles with a shared user identity.

4. Discussion

According to the data obtained, the educational research into self-perceived risks and time spent online cannot ignore what these adolescents perceive, feel, and convey, nor the educational weaknesses they indicate accordingly.

The results of the CONECT-ID project enable us to show that one of the main risks adolescents perceive is their own public exposure and their interaction with others, especially when they do not know whether a profile created on social media is false. All the adolescents that consume and take part in interactive games, social media, or online action platforms have at least one virtual profile that they use to project an image that enables them to interact with others. Furthermore, it is commonplace for adolescents, through the creation of sundry profiles on the same social network (a public one and another private one), can express several different versions of themselves, with the aim being to juggle with who they think they are online, how they want to be seen, and how they actually see themselves and others, with these aspects also reported by Thomas et al. [27]. At the same time, consistent with studies such as the one by Serrano-Puche [28], the forthcoming results revealed that the type of profile (public or private), as well as the content shown in it, informs the type and quality of interactions a user will have on that social medium. Along these lines, our findings also allow us to add that as they mature, adolescents become more protective of their privacy and are more careful about selecting the people in their virtual circle, whereby they do not always agree with statements such as “the photo matches the individual” [36], hence the reason that the older they are, the greater their online privacy, and mainly on social media. Nevertheless, it is a cause of some concern that at younger ages, between 12 and 15, they fully accept some divergence between reality and the image they present when posting photographs and pictures. In other words, adolescents in Group I preferred to present an idealised profile and prioritise how they want other people to see them, choosing to show off capabilities, physical aspects, and even humour or sociability, among other possibilities. The photos posted on Instagram, the likes sent or received, and the numerous messages sent via WhatsApp are an accumulation of ways of expressing the self in the search for the other, and it is in that interplay where other risks, such as deceit, are perceived less by younger adolescents, with these results ratifying the findings reported in other similar studies [37–39]. As already reported in prior studies [35,40], younger adolescents (age 12–15) have more parental and school controls, which might explain the self-perception of risk, which is related to the sense of freedom from control that adolescents experience in the virtual world, besides the quality of the information and instruction they may receive accordingly.

Insofar as time management is concerned, the findings showed that Spanish adolescents consider it to be a risk that they do not know how to control their online time and exposure in front of a screen, they have not been taught how to, or in the worst of cases, they do not consider themselves capable of using appropriate strategies. Surprisingly, the adolescents themselves are the ones that are defining new social, educational, and instructional challenges by claiming that they resort mainly to their “common sense” and to trial and error when managing their time and mitigating the possible risks associated with the time spent online. A series of steps is not enough, as young people need to be instructed in the use of this technology, furnished with the tools that will enable them to supersede a process of trial and error. Studies such as the ones by Badillo-Urquiola et al. [41] and Feal et al. [42] also reported that there are no educational answers beyond limiting online use and parental controls. As stressed in the study by Chou and Chou [43], the relationship between youth and the internet necessarily involves educating in competencies linked to developing a robust process of critical thinking that will be reflected in adolescents’ behaviours, actions, and uses of technology and the internet. This means teaching them to understand that the two main processes they are involved in—leisure and communication—may constitute an opportunity and not a threat, enabling them to build a secure identity in conjunction with the principles of post-critical pedagogy [44]. Along these lines, some scholars contend that in order to instruct young people in the proper and responsible use of these technologies, and before contemplating specific measures, we should first consider whether these devices have a purpose in and of themselves independently of the use we may make of them; screens educate us and reshape us as users [45,46]. This is a key aspect that we should convey to new generations to enable them to understand

the consequences of using these technologies as more than mere means of entertainment, disclosure, and communication. The hyper-classroom is one of the settings that has ideal tools for addressing these risks from an educational perspective [47], as it is considered the classroom of the future, a mobile, flexible, and open space. These classrooms are designed to meet the demands of our modern society, where we can provide future generations with the necessary competencies not only to handle these technologies responsibly, but also to understand how they work and what their use implies.

5. Conclusions

The internet is an environment for interrelating and socialising, a provider of scenarios in which adolescents, despite appearing or wishing to appear that they have everything under control, are sometimes overwhelmed and exposed. Ease of access, freedom of movement, and the provision of personal and social features mean that adolescents move around and develop at a frantic pace. It befalls the pedagogy of our times to draw attention to these phenomena, in particular, providing instruction that allows the internet's potential to be identified and exploited, as well as avoiding actions of a potentially hazardous nature. As we have already stated, adolescents today look upon screens as a tool for communication and leisure, as a tool that helps them to negotiate their daily lives. Accordingly, it is not just a question of teaching young people to manage their online time, as they are aware that although screens are used at school or for playing their favourite game, study time is one thing and leisure time is a very different thing. The problem arises when a single device enables us both to perform our academic duties and respond to social media messages. Hence, from an educational perspective, it would be more expedient to generate and furnish adolescents with strategies that will enable them to make healthy and responsible use of technologies, starting by helping them to understand that whatever use we are making of screens, they are educating us. Not only should we study this technology as an instrument, as a tool of information and communication, but we should also foster strategies, procedures, and even rules and regulations for dealing with these identity-building processes that, as we have seen, present original new angles, conflicts, and tangible risks. The development of adolescent identities involves a technological education, over and above the now-familiar mechanisms of digital literacy that have turned out to be insufficient. We have to go beyond the recommendations in the use of different social media, and focus on affective, relational, and communicational processes, making them aware of the continuity between the online and offline worlds.

6. Strengths and Limitations

Although the sample may be considered somewhat limited with a view to making generalisations, its use provided us with a greater wealth of information that has broadened the research perspective. This has allowed us to take into account the participants' opinions, thereby incorporating new study variables into the analysis that were not initially considered and that we plan to study using instruments of a quantitative nature. Likewise, studies such as this one have an undeniable value when considering the participants, who accept joint responsibility for the research approach and play an important role as the main players. Adolescents no longer feel that their responses are simply being assessed, but instead that they are being given a chance to express and think about their opinions regarding online uses and the risks involved, sharing viewpoints and, above all, paving the way for the need to consider educational responses that favour the building of a digital identity that suits the nature of today's society. The technique used, namely, focus groups, has meant that the sample is somewhat limited. Nevertheless, the use of this technique provided us with a wealth of information that was not restricted to the researchers' approach, as instead it took into account the participants' opinions, thereby incorporating new aspects into the analysis that were not initially considered.

This means that future research should not only replicate these kinds of studies, as they also enable us to further explore the participants' discourse, but also resort to other

studies of a quantitative nature that will enable us to verify and facilitate the generalisation of the results.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data supporting the reported results are stored on a password protected laptop and on the University servers.

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