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**ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA
DEMOCRATICA"**

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Young Italians between Cyberbullying and Hate Speech. A Focus on Digital Communication Practices

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1. When hate meets the web

In the climate of generalized hatred that we experience daily, by watching the news or talk shows, reading online newspapers, or scrolling our Facebook timelines, it is essential to question educational programs' actual ability to oppose these shifts. Most importantly, we must start rethinking them, especially given the negative consequences of people's exposure to hostility, rudeness or incivility, both in online and offline spaces. Indeed, as shown by several studies, they amplify the audiences' negative emotions (Phillips, Smith, 2004), weaken trust in institutions (Mutz, Reeves, 2005), increase cynicism and encourage self-defence behaviors, often leading to social isolation (Antoci et al., 2016). When it comes to young people, who are more fragile and less equipped than other population groups, such risks are even more real.

Many countries in Europe have undertaken to implement online device projects aimed at tracking down and detecting violent content, and banning them from social media, in order to stem the growth of hate speech on digital platforms. However, a purely censored approach does not obviously get to the root of the problem. We must question why many users see hate speech or extreme speech as normal, or even desirable; why they have such a large following and generate such online sharing and dissemination mechanisms. In this regard, we must go beyond a purely punitive logic, and pay attention to the granularity of those everyday online practices underlying contemporary digital cultures (Udupa, Pohjonen, 2019).

This pilot study aims to examine the experiences of young people while surfing the web, and how they interpret these different kinds of hostile behavior on social media or online chats. In this respect, according to Toniolo Institute (2018), 63% of young people between the ages of 18 and 34 have got carried away by online heated discussions and have deliberately used offensive content in social media discussions, in 66% of cases. These data show that violent discourse, harassment practices and bullying are becoming increasingly popular, even among young people. Online resources can further fuel this hostility through exclusionary, discriminatory and derisive conducts, which can foster group identification by being often associated with forms of collective entertainment (Udupa, 2019). Indeed, references to looser social conventions, which are typical of these environments, as well as the possibility to stay anonymous, can accentuate a sense of 'deindividuation'. According to this, people perceive their individual identity as less important than the group identity, consequently disinhibiting their behavior (Oz et al., 2017). Also, the compulsive use of smartphones and the affordances of social network platforms contribute to this disinhibition effect, by exacerbating the collapse of spatial-temporal and social contexts, and increasingly blurring the boundaries between public and private (Boyd, 2014). Therefore, on the one hand the socio-technological aspects of

new media appear to significantly affect these phenomena; on the other, violent behavior online (including direct activities and sharing violent content) clearly appear as practices that are constitutive of identity and political subjectivity (Udupa and Pohjonen, 2019). Within this scenario, also political representatives play a major role. Instead of committing to pacify public opinion, they seem much more interested in riding the wave of dissent, especially through their social accounts, by resorting to hate speech, mocking and bullying practices against opponents and others. Restraint and moderation, which once characterized traditional political rhetoric, have now given way to feelings of hostility and demonization of opponents, aiming to galvanize followers and to instigate anger and social discontent. Indeed, this sharp communication style is intended not just to increase political visibility, due to uncivil messages' ability to engage users (Muddiman, Stroud, 2017). It also bridges the gap with ordinary people, who can identify more easily with such practices and styles, rather than with complex and abstract theoretical-political arguments. Although the best example of this strategy is undoubtedly Trump's use of Twitter (Kenski et al., 2017), there are some concrete examples in Italy as well, as shown by the social media campaigning for the 2018 general election (Rega, Marchetti, 2019).

Starting from these premises, this work focuses on an important segment of society, consisting of young people who grew up with Internet, in order to analyze their relationship with violent and aggressive online communication, both by their peers and political representatives. The attention is focused on two phenomena that were distinctly studied in academia: cyberbullying by young people (Langos, 2012; Tirocchi, 2015) and the different forms of incivility by politicians (Herbst, 2010; Mutz, Reeves, 2005). The goal is to examine the perceptions and meanings attributed by young people to the different types of hostile communication, by assessing the level of acceptability of each of them and its variations, depending on different contexts and actors (interpersonal; online interactions with institutional actors). In the following paragraphs, we will briefly explain the study, and discuss findings and implications.

2. Aims and Methods

This exploratory research on young Italians (16-34 years) was conducted within a wider study project, aimed at studying hybridizations between cyberbullying and incivility, in online environments. The study follows two guidelines:

1. The perceptions of the acceptability of the different forms of online cyberbullying and incivility;
2. The direct online communication experiences, intended to evaluate the tools used, the behavior/content conveyed, and their relationship with specific digital contexts.

An online survey was carried out, consisting of 28 closed questions, including Likert scales and questions presented in previous studies on incivility and cyberbullying (Pew Research Center, 2018; Stryker et al., 2016). A pre-test involving 25 respondents was made in May 2019. Instead, the survey was published online on the CreateSurvey platform (05/16/2019 to 06/01/2019) and was answered by 290 respondents. Some empirical evidence is presented below.

3. Findings

The data reveal a prevalence of female participants (71.7%), with a 96.9% being Italian citizens. The majority of the survey respondents live in a region in

the North Italy (54.8%), followed by South and Islands (27.6%), and by Center (17.51%). They live with family (75.9%), friends (13.4%) or partners (8.3%). Regarding education, about 69% has a high school diploma and 22.1% owns a university bachelor's degree. The median age of participants is 23.9.

Beside demographics, it is important to focus on findings related to some key areas of the study. In particular: a) media consumptions patterns, highlighting the impact of social media and instant messaging tools; b) online harassment/cyberbullying communication behaviors on social media, both performed and experienced; c) acceptability of cyberbullying behaviors among peers; d) acceptability of online incivility behaviors by politicians.

As showed in table n.1, respondents reported a high use of digital media to search for information. Online newspapers and news websites are the most used channels for every day information seeking (59.7%), followed by Facebook (57.9%), and by friends and relatives (57.6%). Instagram is daily used for seeking information by 52.4% of the sample, a data that needs more analysis, since this site has been rarely studied for this use in Italy. Moreover, traditional media still play a role, especially television which is used at least weekly by 85.5% of the respondents, while newspapers appear to be less frequently used to get information (i.e., 9% every day) compared to other channels (i.e., radio 19.3% every day). Furthermore, Twitter has never being used by 64.9% of the sample, but it is used daily by 15.2% of the respondents.

TABLE. 1. Information channels and related frequency of use (%)

| Media/Channels | Every day | Sometimes a week | A few times a month | A few times a year | Never |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------|
| Television | 55.17 | 30.34 | 7.24 | 4.83 | 2.41 |
| Radio | 19.31 | 38.28 | 19.66 | 8.62 | 14.14 |
| Newspapers and magazines | 8.97 | 31.38 | 29.31 | 18.97 | 11.38 |
| Online newspapers and news sites | 59.66 | 29.31 | 8.28 | 1.72 | 1.03 |
| Facebook | 57.93 | 16.55 | 8.62 | 2.41 | 14.48 |
| Twitter | 15.17 | 7.93 | 6.9 | 5.17 | 64.83 |
| Instagram | 52.41 | 13.45 | 4.48 | 3.45 | 26.21 |
| Other social media (eg., YouTube) | 36.90 | 23.10 | 16.21 | 6.55 | 17.24 |
| Friends and relatives | 57.59 | 29.31 | 8.97 | 2.07 | 2.07 |
| Other channels | 14.14 | 17.93 | 15.86 | 13.10 | 38.97 |

Focusing on social media, 14.9% of the sample is always connected to these platforms, while the majority of the respondents stays online between 2 to 3 hours per day (58.6%). In total, 94.1% of respondents are Facebook users, followed by Instagram (87.6%), YouTube (67.9%) and Twitter (40.3%). Chats and instant messaging platforms (IMPs) are extensively used: in particular, WhatsApp (99.7%), Facebook Messenger (72.4%) and Telegram (42.8%).

In relation to cyberbullying, the survey focused on two types of behaviors: those experienced and those directly performed by respondents, both on social media and on IMPs.

Regarding the first type, data appear to not show differences among platforms: approximately two-thirds of our sample have experienced at least one form of online cyberbullying, with social media (71.7%) slightly higher than IMPs (67.24%). Similar findings emerged also in other countries (Pew Research Center, 2018), confirming a major role played by these tools for cyberbullying.

The most common form of online harassment action perpetrated on both platforms is receiving embarrassing images without request (42.8% IMPs vs. 35.9% social media), followed by offensive name calling (25.2% social media vs. 26.21% IMPs), and the spreading of false rumours (24.8% IMPs vs. 21.7%

social media). In addition, 'cyber- stalking' (a form of cyberbullying dealing with 'where you are, what you do, etc.', not being executed by parents) is more frequently on IMPs (24.5%) compared to social media (17.9%) as reported in table n.2.

TABLE. 2. *Cyberbullying activities experienced in IMPs (%)*

| Cyberbullying activities | Yes | No |
|---|-------|-------|
| Offensive name-calling | 32.76 | 67.24 |
| Being physically threatened | 17.93 | 82.07 |
| Being repeatedly offended by some friends /acquaintances | 35.86 | 64.14 |
| Spreading of false rumors | 1.03 | 98.97 |
| Someone shared embarrassing images of you without your consent | 15.86 | 84.14 |
| Someone shared sexual images of you without your consent | 21.72 | 78.28 |
| Receiving embarrassing images you didn't ask for | 11.38 | 88.62 |
| Constant asking of where you are, what you are doing, who you're with, by someone other than a parent | 7.59 | 92.41 |
| None of the above listed things | 25.21 | 73.79 |

About the second type of behavior, focusing exclusively on social media, less than 20% of respondents reported to have executed cyberbullying activities against peers or acquaintances. The most perpetuated harassment behavior is 'make fun of and mock a friend/acquaintance' (17.9%), followed by 'posting embarrassing images of a friend/acquaintance without permission' (12.4%), and by 'sharing videos of a friend/acquaintance without authorization' (10.7%). All other cyberbullying behaviors involve less than 10% of the sample (see table n.3). Furthermore, it is interesting to highlight that about 20% of respondents affirmed to have shared news that later turned out to be fake ones, confirming the diffusion of this digital practice among young Italians.

TABLE. 3. *Cyberbullying activities carried out in social media (%)*

| Cyberbullying activities | Yes | No |
|--|-------|-------|
| Threaten to spread embarrassing content related to a friend/acquaintance | 2.41 | 97.59 |
| Send messages, photos or videos using the account of a friend or acquaintance without permission | 8.97 | 91.03 |
| Create a social media profile to damage a friend/acquaintance | 1.38 | 98.62 |
| Make fun of a minor friend/acquaintance on social media for physical attributes | 1.38 | 98.97 |
| Share sexual images of a friend/acquaintance without permission | 1.38 | 98.62 |
| Post embarrassing images of a friend/acquaintance without permission | 12.41 | 87.59 |
| Make fun of and mock a friend/acquaintance | 17.93 | 82.07 |
| Physically threatening a friend/acquaintance in a public way | 0.34 | 99.66 |
| Share videos related to a friend/acquaintance without authorization | 10.69 | 89.31 |
| Post false or intentionally misleading information about someone to embarrass him/her | 3.1 | 96.9 |

A third area of findings was related to investigate the perceived acceptability of aggressive communication behaviors on social media. As shown in table n.4, the majority of cyberbullying forms listed in the survey were considered 'very unacceptable' by more than three quarters of the respondents. In particular, the most considered 'very unacceptable practice', is 'to post a sexual photo or video about a friend/acquaintance without consent' (93.8%), followed by 'write a post containing offenses related to race/religion/sexual orientation/gender of a friend/acquaintance (88.6%), and posting a message to attach a friend/acquaintance based on physical or personal traits (76.9%).

TABLE. 4. *Perceived acceptability of cyberbullying activities in social media (%)*

| Cyberbullying indicators | Very acceptable | Not acceptable | Just acceptable | Quite acceptable | Not at all acceptable |
|---|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Post a sexual photo or video about a friend/acquaintance without consent | 93.78 | 4.48 | 3.00 | 0.00 | 0.69 |
| Write a post containing offenses related to race/religion/sexual orientation/gender of a friend/acquaintance | 88.62 | 9.31 | 1.38 | 0.34 | 0.34 |
| Write a post attaching a friend/acquaintance based on physical/personal traits | 76.90 | 20.69 | 1.72 | 0.34 | 0.34 |
| Write a post containing false or intentionally misleading statements about a friend/acquaintance related to positions/actions | 76.21 | 21.03 | 2.41 | 0.34 | 0.00 |
| Write a post about gender/race/religion/sexual orientation involving a friend/acquaintance using stereotypes | 72.41 | 21.38 | 4.48 | 1.38 | 0.34 |
| Write a post insulting a friend or acquaintance | 70.69 | 23.45 | 3.45 | 1.72 | 0.69 |
| Write a post containing hashtag of derision against a friend/acquaintance (eg. #fat, #bigass, etc.) | 67.59 | 20.69 | 7.59 | 3.45 | 0.69 |
| Post a photo or video of a friend/acquaintance in embarrassing situations without consent | 50.59 | 32.41 | 13.1 | 3.79 | 0.00 |
| Write a post against the positions/ideas of a friend/acquaintance using uppercase and exclamation marks | 41.03 | 26.21 | 18.97 | 9.66 | 4.14 |
| Write a post containing sarcastic or derisive jokes about a friend/acquaintance | 38.28 | 33.10 | 18.62 | 8.28 | 1.72 |
| Post a photomontage or an ironic meme with the image of a friend/acquaintance | 14.14 | 12.07 | 29.66 | 34.48 | 9.66 |

Moreover, the less perceived 'unacceptable' social media behaviors are to 'post a message against the ideas of a friend using uppercase and exclamation marks' (67.2%), and 'to write a post containing sarcastic or derisive jokes about a friend or acquaintance' (71.4%). The results also reported other statements specifically connected with digital practices that are popular on social web, like using memes and emoticons. The majority of respondents consider 'posting a photomontage or a meme with the image of a friend/acquaintance' acceptable (73.8%), highlighting the role of irony and sarcasm in these digital practices. The last part of the survey investigated the acceptability of incivility communication behaviors carried out on social media by politicians. Table n.5 reports the complete breakthrough of the perception of incivility practices on social media.

The three forms mostly considered 'very uncivil' are to write a post containing offenses related to race/religion/sexual orientation/gender (88.3), to post a message about political issues using intentionally false or misleading arguments (82.4), and writing a post on political issues by exploiting the facts to distort reality (82.4). Instead, perceived lower levels of unacceptability referred to behaviors such as posting a message in which another politician is defamed, attacking his/her moral integrity (54.1 totally unacceptable), and writing a post about ethnic/religious minorities using capital letters or exclamation marks (60.7 totally unacceptable).

TABLE. 5. *Perceived acceptability of incivility in social media*

| Incivility indicators | Very acceptable | Not acceptable | Just acceptable | Quite acceptable | Not at all acceptable |
|--|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Write a post containing offenses related to race/religion/sexual orientation/gender | 88.28 | 9.66 | 1.03 | 0.34 | 0.69 |
| Write a post about political issues using intentionally false or misleading arguments | 82.41 | 15.17 | 1.38 | 0.69 | 0.34 |
| Write a post on political issues by exploiting the facts to distort reality | 82.41 | 15.17 | 1.38 | 0.69 | 0.34 |
| Write a post about ethnic/religious minorities (migrants, muslims) using hashtag like #tuttiacasa | 78.28 | 15.52 | 4.83 | 0.69 | 0.69 |
| Write a post attacking another politician based on personal traits (not for ideas and/or positions) | 77.93 | 18.62 | 1.72 | 1.03 | 0.69 |
| Write a post with statements about another politician that are false or intentionally misleading about positions/actions | 77.93 | 18.28 | 2.76 | 0.34 | 0.69 |
| Write a post about ethnic/religious minorities (migrants, muslims) using stereotypes | 76.9 | 16.55 | 4.14 | 1.03 | 1.38 |
| Write a post containing hashtag of derision against another politician (eg. #Pinocchio; #psiconano; etc.). | 65.86 | 24.14 | 6.21 | 3.45 | 0.34 |
| Write a post about political issues using vulgar language (caxx; incaxx) | 60.69 | 26.21 | 8.97 | 3.10 | 1.03 |
| Write a post about ethnic/religious minorities (migrants, muslims) using capital letters and/or exclamation marks | 60.69 | 20.00 | 9.31 | 6.90 | 3.10 |
| Write a post in which another politician is defamed, attacking his moral integrity (corrupt, mobster, etc.) | 54.14 | 27.59 | 12.41 | 3.79 | 2.07 |
| Write a post containing statements against another politician stressing ideological traits (traitor, anti patriotic, communist). | 54.14 | 33.1 | 8.97 | 2.76 | 1.03 |
| Write a post insulting another politician | 52.07 | 35.52 | 7.93 | 2.07 | 2.41 |

Conclusions

This research aimed at studying hybridizations between cyberbullying and incivility on online platforms. After performing a literature review, an empirical pilot study explored the range of digital communication practices by 290 young Italians and investigated their perception of bullying and hostile behaviors within the Internet. In particular, we explored the different meanings and levels of acceptability according to the peculiarities of different online contexts. Findings show how social media and IMPs play a central role in information seeking but also to relate with peers and politicians. Cyberbullying is widely spread on social web, furthermore, some behaviors are perceived as forms of entertainment of digital youth cultures. As a fluid phenomenon, cyberbullying and incivility show several similarities in terms of dimensions and effects. They are pervasive throughout the connected life of citizens, impacting negatively on the quality of relationships among people and institutions. In particular, the pervasive use of social media has reduced the distances between the communicative behaviors of politicians and lay publics, making the areas of interconnection between their practices even more visible and observed as a continuum of communicative actions influencing each other. This process requires the adoption of a holistic approach, in order to frame these phenomena within a broader reflection on the contradictory characteristics of contemporary digital communication practices and on their negative effects on online discussions.

Hostile speech as well as cyberbullying represent current phenomena that should be deeply investigated in further studies, trough also qualitative methods.

They also need specific and coordinated interventions by different social actors to mitigate their increasing negative effects on society. A milestone should be an extensive investment in media education and digital literacy in order to build a critical awareness of the use of digital technologies among the civil society. This will increase the skills and competences necessary to digitally interact in an informed and conscious manner, thus reducing the spread of aggressive online communications.

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