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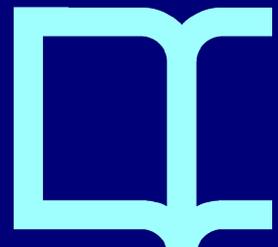
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‘Youngsplaining’ and moralistic judgments: exploring ageism through the lens of digital ‘media ideologies’

Abstract

In this paper we explore ageist depictions of both young and older people as they emerge from discourses addressing ‘other people’s’ digital media usage practices. We carried out 8 focus groups (four with teenagers, four with people aged 65 or older) in two southern European cities (Rome and Barcelona).

By negotiating the affordances and constraints of (digital) tools and platforms, people develop their own usage norms and strategies, which might – or might not – be intersubjectively shared. Discourses surrounding usage practices and norms tend to refer to what people understand as an *appropriate* way of using digital platforms: these discourses proved to be powerful triggers for expressing ageist stereotypes; ‘the others’ were depicted, by both teenage and older participants, as adopting inappropriate usage practices (with regard to content, form, skills and adherence to social norms). These reflections proved to have broader implications on how other age cohorts are perceived: participants tended to take discourses on digital media usage as an opportunity for making generalized judgments about ‘the others’, which address their manners, as well as their attitude towards communication and social life. Intergroup discrimination processes and ageist stereotypes play a major role in shaping the strong moralistic and patronizing judgements expressed by older and younger participants toward ‘the other’ age cohort.

Introduction

In their relations with digital tools and platforms, people tend to negotiate the meanings they attach to their actions by elaborating what have been defined as “media ideologies” and “idioms of practice” (Gershon 2010). While such meanings are generated through interpersonal negotiations, they are far from being generally shared among the whole population. In this context, discourses about the usage practices and norms of digital platforms constitute powerful triggers for stereotypical depictions of ‘the others’, who are often described as groups that do not follow one’s own understanding of what constitutes as an *appropriate* usage strategy (i.e., being perceived as using them in a ‘wrong’ way). Such considerations seem to have broader implications for the ways in which ‘others’ are perceived: starting from addressing ‘other people’s’ inappropriate usage practices, people tend to form generalized judgments about the manners, communication practices and attitudes to social life of ‘the others’. This mechanism is rooted in intergroup discrimination processes and stereotypes.

In the following section, we construct our theoretical framework by addressing the concepts of media ideologies and idioms of practice, generational media use, age-related stereotypes, ageism and moral judgments. Thereafter, we present our research questions and methods, and discuss the results by focusing on: intergroup discrimination; the values attached to one’s own vs the ‘other’ group’s usage strategies (in terms of usefulness and relevance); and the ‘strong judgments’ expressed toward the ‘other’ age cohort. In our conclusions we propose an interpretation of the results.

Background

Negotiating the meanings of digital platforms: affordances and media ideologies

Digital platforms and devices, when considered as cultural artefacts, undergo a complex process of negotiation which affects their meanings and related usage norms and practices (Du Gay et al. 2013; Vincent and Haddon 2017).

If we use an architectural metaphor, digital tools and platforms can be considered as ‘environments’ (boyd 2011): as with environments in the physical world, they offer affordances and constraints, based on an understanding of which social usage norms and practices are negotiated. By affordances we refer to “the relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used” (Norman 2013: 2). User interpretations, indeed “may not correspond with the intention of an object’s design” (Fox and McEwan 2017: 3).

In the current digital communication ecosystem, where people can rely on a “panoply of gadgets and applications to orchestrate their lives [...] they have to work harder to figure out which gadget or internet application to use for which kinds of activities” (Rainie and Wellman 2012: 146). In this context, users build an understanding of what they consider more appropriate for their own communicative goals (Fernández-Ardèvol and Prieto 2012; Madianou and Miller 2013; Madianou 2014; Comunello, Mulargia and Parisi 2016; Fernández-Ardèvol, Sawchuk and Grenier, 2017), rooted in the ways in which they perceive the characteristics of tools and platforms. In this, ‘idioms of practice’ are at stake: that is, “people figure out together how to use different media and often agree on the appropriate social uses of technology by asking advice and sharing stories with each other” (Gershon 2010: 6). This leads to the definition of what is considered to be an ‘appropriate’ usage, which derives from the negotiation between each platform’s affordances and constraints (Norman 2013), together with user perceptions and social usage norms.

While in offline ‘environments’ social norms appear to be more stabilized, more broadly shared (at least within a single culture), and less conflictual, the social norms related to digital and social media platform usage change rapidly over time (Comunello, Mulargia and Parisi 2016), and appear to be shared by smaller cohorts of people. This appears to be especially true with regard to age cohorts, and is one of the reasons why, when negotiating media ideologies and commenting on them, young and old people diverge in the perception and evaluation of proper ICT usage. At the same time, this divergence represents a typical generational gap in the technological domain.

Digital media as generational contexts: between intergroup discrimination and ageism

Following Mannheim’s definition of generation (1952), we can consider (digital) media environments as ‘generational contexts’, where different generations construct their relationship with technology in a similar way. According to Corsten (1999), generations exist as collective identities, and are different from ‘age groups’ in that the latter is not built around a shared identity. Indeed, “a generation is formed by the sense that the members of a generation have of the criteria for belonging” (Corsten 1999: 258), leading to what Bude (1997) defined as the ‘we-sense’ of a generation. This means that “members of a generation (...) share a *sense* that the other members of the same generation share similar background assumptions. They do not only have something in common, they also have a common sense (...) for the fact that they have something in common” (Corsten 1999: 258). In this regard, people’s digital media experience may shape the social construction of a “generational identity” (Colombo and Fortunati 2011). Specific media events, platforms and/or usage practices metaphorically shape people discourses, offering a reference which is both chronological and symbolic, in a context in which “the appropriation of digital technologies by different generations is a nonlinear and nonprogressive process”, and the very “question of digital generations is [...] clearly a process of doing and becoming a generation” (Fortunati, Taipale, De Luca 2019: 109).

When it comes to confronting different generations (and, more specifically, to confronting one’s own generation with older or younger ones), processes of *intergroup discrimination and ageism* seem at stake. Social psychologists have shown how members of another group tend to be seen as homogeneous, while differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ tend to be over-estimated. This not only

applies to groups rooted in well-established identities, such as ethnicity, political views, etc., but also to randomly created groups, as in Tajfel (1970). More specifically, “the mere perception of belonging to two distinct groups (...) is sufficient to trigger intergroup discrimination favouring the in-group. In other words, the mere awareness of the presence of an outgroup is sufficient to provoke intergroup competitive or discriminatory responses on the part of the in-group” (Tajfel and Turner 1979: 56). Indeed, it is in the process of building such a polarized and monolithic understanding of ‘the other’ that stereotypes arise. Overall, stereotypes can be defined as over-simplified mental images of some category of people that are shared among a population and accompanied by positive or negative predispositions (Stallybrass 1977).

Stereotypes might contribute to discrimination by ignoring the real habits, interests and values of an individual or a group (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer 2018). In particular, ageism reflects prejudices, discriminating against people based on their age. These complex considerations can be positive or negative, can be directed towards people of any age (Bodner, Bergman and Cohen-Fridel 2012), and take place at the individual and the societal level (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer, 2018). Ageism shapes both the image(s) individuals have of themselves (i.e., ‘self-stereotypes’) and the image(s) society has of life stages. Overall, when addressing older people, ageism is described as being based on a vision that mainly implies inferiorization, disabilities and patronage (Neves and Amaro, 2012), deprioritizing, disregarding or even excluding older people and, thus, reinforcing inequalities (Angus and Reeve 2006). Indeed, while we agree with Higgs and Gilleard’s recent critical account of ageism as an ideology (2019), for the scope of this paper we follow their suggestion that “[a]geism as a concept can still have its uses, serving to identify examples of discrimination or exclusion in cultural participation” (p. 11). Particularly, ageist assumptions inform the design of digital platforms (Trentham et al. 2015), and ageist (self-) stereotypes influence digital usage habits (Neves and Amaro 2012; Comunello et al., 2017), and have been identified as one of the elements that contribute to second-level digital divide (Lagacé et al. 2015), thus perpetuating the exclusionary stigmatization of older people (Stangor and Schaller 2000).

While an in-depth discussion about the concepts of morality and moral reasoning is beyond the scope of this paper, some insights from this literature can help understand the ways in which different age-groups differentiate themselves from the others. Even without positioning ourselves in the debate between the rationalist perspective in moral psychology (Kohlberg 1981) and the social intuitionist perspective (Haidt 2001), we need to recognize that moral judgments seem to be in play in the stereotypical depictions of the ‘other’ age cohort. More specifically, some of the results will be discussed adopting a frame that considers stereotypes as a “source of information to make decisions about appropriate or inappropriate social behaviours” (Horn, Killen and Stangor 1999: 99). Starting from this definition, the idea of old people, as digital media users, can be seen as “disruptive and unconventional” and contrasts with the idea of maintaining young “group order” based on stereotypes claiming that young people are more expert and skilled than older in using technology. As Rutland, Killen and Abrams (2010: 280) state: “the prejudice development involves a close interplay between the emergence of moral reasoning, concerns about group functioning, and the motivation to become fully integrated into a social group” (Ibidem: 280).

A definition of ‘moral’ we will use in this article, elaborating on Hakemulder’s (2000) previous work, is “the entirety of behavioral norms that is accepted and sanctioned in a community, as well as justified by social welfare” (Bilandzic 2011: 46).

In Goffman’s (1963) terms, stereotyping processes might lead to stigmatization, producing a discrediting depiction of the stigmatized individuals or groups, which may be built on moral judgments. Stigma can be defined as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Ibidem: 3), and individuals assigning the stigma may consider stigmatized persons’ behaviour as expressions of their defect.

A small but growing corpus of studies reports on the representations about other age cohorts, as they emerge when addressing usage of digital platforms. Alongside research on intergenerational digital platform usage (Taipale et al., 2018), insights into representations of younger users' practices also emerge in literature focusing on older people. For instance, in Birkland's (2019) ICT user typology, older respondents' representation of young people's ICT usage practices emerge; Kadylak et al. (2018) explicitly address older adults' perceptions of mobile phone use during face-to-face interactions, highlighting what participants perceive as younger people's *bad manners*; the grandmothers interviewed by Colombo, Aroldi and Carlo (2018) affirm their correct use of technology what they consider to be antisocial modes by younger generations. Less attention has hitherto been devoted to how young people represent older people's use of digital platforms (Piccioni, Scarcelli, Stella 2020). In previous research by the same authors addressing older people's mobile phone usage, several age-related stereotypes spontaneously emerged in respondents' narrations (AnonymizedForBlindReview). Therefore, in this paper we explicitly focus on stereotypical depictions of other age cohorts, as they emerge when people address their understanding of what constitutes an *appropriate* use of digital platforms, by framing them as what we consider to be generational contexts. While literature has recognized that "Digital generations are influenced by power structures" (Fortunati, Taipale, De Luca 2020: 109), the role of media ideologies and idioms of practice in the development, the adoption and the narration of ageist attitudes remains under-researched. Exploring how young and old digital platform users address the ways in which their own age cohort, as well as the 'other' age cohorts, interact with such environments contributes to shedding light into the dynamics leading to ageist depictions of 'the others'. Discourses addressing appropriate and inappropriate use have proven to be, for both groups, an opportunity for expressing broader concerns or criticism toward the 'other' age cohort.

Research questions and methods

This paper is a part of a broader research project aiming at exploring the generational use of digital and social media, together with the interaction between age-related stereotypes and the practices of using digital platforms. The project explores media ideologies and idioms of practice by focusing on social usage norms, and on discourses on what people understand as an *appropriate* way of using digital platforms. As digital media constitute generational contexts, these discourses proved to be powerful triggers for expressing ageist stereotypes addressing other age cohorts. Indeed, discourses related to digital platforms have broader implications on the ways in which 'the others' are perceived and depicted: the dimensions through which the representations of other age cohorts' digital media usage emerge shed light into broader representations of 'the others', and namely into the convergent and divergent stereotypes each group cultivates and addresses toward them, while the attitudes underlying such representations seem to reflect broader and differentiated attitudes toward them. Therefore, in this paper we address the representations of 'the other' age cohort in the case of teenagers and older individuals when addressing their digital platform usage practices, focusing on the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the dimensions through which these representations emerge?

RQ 2: What are the attitudes underlying such representations in the two age groups?

Our research follows an *interpretive* approach (Morse 2017), as it focuses on "the meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with, and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences" (Maxwell 2008: 221). Our methodological choices are informed by such an interpretive framework: dealing with *soft* data, we do not engage in "numerical measurement" nor in "standardized (...) instruments" (Morse 2017: 798). Therefore, in

this paper, we focus on the ways in which participants describe ‘the others’, in terms of the alleged *relevance* (for everyday life) of their digital platform usage, the alleged excessive use of those digital platforms, and the strong normative judgments expressed by participants when addressing other age cohorts.

In order to explore these dimensions, we organized eight focus groups in late 2018, four in Rome (Lazio, Italy) and four in Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain). In each city, two focus groups involved older people (aged between 65 and 85), and two focus groups involved teenagers (aged between 16 and 19). Older participants were recruited by using a snowball sampling method, starting from community centers, while teenagers were recruited in their schools and were classmates. We chose different recruitment tactics for teenage and older participants to grant the flexibility (Maxwell 2012) needed for an interpretive-oriented research design. Indeed, we were not interested in analyzing actual digital skills or digital practices; we were neither interested in evaluating nor comparing participants’ levels of stereotypes and, therefore, such differences do not seem to exert a relevant impact on the data. Instead, adopting those recruitment tactics more suitable for each age cohort allowed the construction of environments where users were more likely comfortably to produce meaningful narrations. Only age, gender balance, and social media usage were considered as participants’ inclusion criteria, with the goal of enriching the analysis allowing the participation of a wider range of different personal profiles.

On the whole, focus groups involved 64 participants, 36 in Rome (13 people aged 65-84; 23 teenagers), and 28 in Barcelona (13 people aged 65-85; 15 teenagers). We stopped recruiting when we reached saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967); more specifically, we refer to both code and meaning saturation (Hennink, Kaiser and Marconi 2017).

Focus groups were selected not only on the basis of the exploratory nature of this study, but also because digital media usage practices, as well as the related representation and understanding of what constitutes an appropriate usage, are embedded in a relational and social context; therefore, interactions between participants are particularly relevant. Moreover, as most of the topics we focus on are experienced by users in an implicit way (users follow media ideologies without being explicitly aware of their influence), the interactions between participants might lead to a deeper understanding of the aforementioned dynamics.

In designing the project, and in conducting the focus groups, we adopted an ecological approach, considering the whole spectrum of platforms where people interact with others. As a stimulus, we offered a set of different everyday life scenarios, asking respondents how they would act in different situations, without explicitly mentioning, at first, any specific device or platform. More specifically, a first step consisted in asking respondents how they acted/would act in different everyday situations (such as birthday greetings, quickly gathering a piece of information, arguments with friends and family, etc.). While this information often emerged spontaneously, when it did not, a second step consisted in asking how they would act, in the same situations, when interacting with people their own age, and with people belonging to other age cohorts. Furthermore, we also asked how participants’ friends and relatives (belonging to different age cohorts) are used to relate to them in the same situations. Usage experiences, misunderstandings related to different ‘media ideologies’, appropriate and inappropriate usage patterns were also discussed. Moreover, while we selected participants based on their age, we did not provide them with any definition of what we considered to be ‘old’ and ‘older’, or ‘young’ and ‘younger’. Therefore, as will emerge in the results, participants adopted their own definition of ‘younger’ and ‘older’, often building a very broad category (including different age cohorts), thus following a symbolic rather than a factual definition of age. Not surprisingly, the researchers (who are in their 30s and 40s) were considered by older participants as belonging to ‘young people’, while many young participants include ‘people in their 40s/50s’ in the

‘older people’ category. Indeed, the researchers were included by participants of all focus groups in the ‘other’ age cohort.

The whole interactional setting of the focus groups (homogeneous with regard to participant age, and conducted by researchers perceived to belong to ‘the other’ age group) was designed in order to balance participants freedom to express their point of view (not being influenced by the very presence of ‘the others’, and by any pressure to be ‘polite’), with the goal of avoiding any reinforcement of stereotypical biases, possibly resulting from complete age segregation. Furthermore, the above mentioned 3-step approach in offering the stimula allowed for a relevant share of spontaneously provided stereotypical representations of the others not elicited by researchers.

Focus groups were conducted by the Authors, and were held, respectively, in Italian and Spanish. We transcribed and jointly analyzed them using thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2011), identifying emerging patterns (themes) within the interviews. More specifically, we inductively generated initial codes and then discussed jointly how different codes may combine to form a theme (Braun and Clarcke 2006). Recurring themes were inductively identified on the basis of circumstances and behaviors mentioned by participants, where divergent and convergent stereotypes, self-stereotypes, and judgements toward each age-group emerged. Those themes were considered as emergent data: namely “data that touch on unspoken cultural perspectives and normative values that are presumed to contribute to the participants’ beliefs attitudes, and behaviors. These kinds of data add to our understanding of meaning from the group perspective” (Massey 2011: 23). Themes were reviewed and a thematic map was generated, highlighting overarching themes. Following Boyatzis (1998), “a theme is a pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (p. vii). Accordingly, we identified themes that describe and organize observations, through which we addressed RQ1 (identifying the dimensions through which the representations of ‘the other’ age cohort emerge), and themes contributing to interpret the phenomenon, through which we addressed RQ2 (by focusing on underlying attitudes). Authors analyzed transcriptions in the original languages (having working knowledge of both), jointly discussed them, considering the related cross-cultural dimensions, and translated the quotations selected for the paper into English.

We decided to focus on two large, southern European metropolitan areas due to their dynamics of mobile communication and internet adoption. For instance, while mobile communication is pervasive and consolidated in both countries (in both Italy and Spain there has been more than one mobile subscription per inhabitant since 2006, [ITU, 2017]), internet adoption still shows inequalities between different age cohorts. Indeed, alongside socio-economic and cultural differences, the two areas show important affinities when compared, for instance, to Northern Europe or North America. In both the regions where our research took place, Lazio and Catalonia, internet adoption is higher than the country average (Lazio: 75%, Italy: 71%; Catalonia: 86%, Spain 85% [Eurostat 2019a]). The same applies to SNS usage: in Lazio, those who use SNS constitute 46% of the population (43% in Italy), while in Catalonia they are 60% (57% in Spain [Eurostat 2019a]).

In both countries, internet adoption decreases with age. While almost 100% of young people are counted as regular internet users, the country average for internet use among adults (16 to 75) in 2018 was 86% in Spain and 74% in Italy. Among those aged 65-74, the equivalent percentage is 49% in Spain and 37% in Italy, while among the population aged 75 or over it decreases to 17% in Spain and 10% in Italy (Eurostat 2019b). Internet use among older people has increased in recent years (Eurostat 2019b), and family relationships, particularly with children and grandchildren, are the main motivation for older people to acquire digital technologies in Italy and Spain (Colombo, Aroldi, and Carlo 2018; Fernández-Ardèvol and Rosales 2017). While such differences in internet adoption among older people in Italy and Spain might shape their discourses and their understanding of digital

media, in this paper we mainly stress the similarities between respondents in the two cities; a thorough cross-national comparison will be carried out in a future paper.

Results and discussion

In this paper we focus on the age-based narrations related to digital media use that refer to the ‘other’ age group: young people talking (and commenting) on older people’s usage; old people commenting on young people’s usage. Often, these narrations imply opinions, judgments and stereotypical depictions about the ‘other’ age group that tend to go far beyond their actions as digital media users, and apply to the age group a whole. As we shall see, while some of the digital-media related ‘complaints’ about ‘the others’ are (somewhat ironically) shared by both groups, the overall frame and attitudes adopted by the two age groups are substantially different and address either digital media themselves, or broader social considerations.

It should be noted that these narrations tend to depict ‘the others’ as a monolithic group, following the aforementioned logics of *intergroup discrimination* (Tajfel 1970): in respondents’ narrations, members of another group tend to be seen as homogeneous, while differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ tend to be over-estimated.

When addressing communication patterns they consider inappropriate, and that relate to the ‘other’ age cohort, respondents seamlessly shift from referring to a single person (my grandmother, my grandchild, etc.) to the whole category (older people, young people); indeed, in some respondents’ words, even one single case when referring to ‘the others’, seems enough to make broad generalizations. On the other hand, when addressing their own age cohort, inappropriate behaviour (if any) is always related to single individuals. This is, for instance, the case with *chain letters*, judged by both age groups as inappropriate, annoying or naïve, but considered by young participants to be a common practice among older users, whereas older participants emphasise that they are sent by single older individuals and tend to be considered as *exceptions* among their own age cohort.

Indeed, both young and older participants stress the differences between practices adopted by older and younger generations, highlighting that ‘the others’ adopt inappropriate usage patterns, while their own are described (with some individual exceptions) as appropriate. This applies to several domains that are (somewhat ironically) addressed by respondents as belonging to both age cohorts. In the following sections, we focus on the dimensions by which the perception of ‘the other’ age cohort emerge (RQ1), namely, the perception that ‘the others’ 1) use smartphones (and digital platforms) “for silly things”, and 2) are “stuck to their phones.” Subsequently, we focus on the attitudes underlying such representations in the two groups (RQ2), namely, the *strong judgements* that emerge when describing the ways in which ‘the others’ use digital platforms, and the related broader frameworks and attitudes adopted by respondents when elaborating their narrations.

“They keep sending silly things” : older and younger respondents on the usefulness of digital platform usage practices

Both age groups seem to measure their own age cohort’s smartphone and digital platform usage in terms of *usefulness*, which is positively characterized as a *proxy* for appropriate usage. However, the ‘other’ age cohort is described as using such platforms for sending silly content, or for engaging in activities that are not important for their everyday life.

For instance, in their words, the way young people use digital platforms is strongly based on practical reasons, rooted in awareness and choice:

[BO17m]¹: [I contact] through WhatsApp, or if there is no answer, I would make a call. Because usually the call is faster, the answer is faster.

Young people, on the other hand, describe other age groups as being guided by some kind of *limitations*, or, at least, by some form of *inevitability*.

[RC17m] I mean, [older people say] “Ok, we are using WhatsApp”, but, to be honest, they use it for stupid and silly things, while they are not able to use it well, for their everyday life

In addressing the other age cohort’s *irrelevant* digital platform usage, an important difference emerges between the two groups: on the one hand, adults and older people are depicted by teenage participants as *not being able* to use digital platforms for important issues; in several quotes, on the other hand, young people are depicted by older respondents as simply *not being interested* in such aspects (with very few exceptions, mostly related to higher level digital literacy, young people are not depicted by older ones as lacking skills).

Young participants disqualify the type of content older people share through digital platforms, mainly addressing *chain letters*, and *silly* videos which happen to be shared, for example, as Christmas or Easter greetings (and which, according to young participants, are far from useful in everyday life).

[RM17m]: Well, or even chain letters, stuff like that, well, things that we don’t send each other, but they, among people in their fifties and older, they send this kind of stuff...

In the previous quote, for instance, young people’s usage practices (and the content they share) is taken as a benchmark for appropriate content (“things that we don’t send each other”); older people’s inappropriate usage, in terms of content shared, is defined as such by comparing it with young people’s own usage.

[RI17f]: It makes no sense to send the picture of a Lamb and the text “Happy Easter”; why would you do it? It makes no sense... Just write “Happy Easter” and that’s it, it makes no sense, it’s a really useless thing

A similar representation of the usage practices of ‘the others’, considered as being far from (one’s own) positive usage, seems to emerge when older participants describe young people’s reasons for using digital platforms. For instance, older respondents, particularly in Italy, highlight that the smartphone is a working tool. The following quotation also relates this dimension to a broader understanding of *civilization* (the examples used to support the claim about civilization are, indeed, related to safety and autonomy, and to being a communication tool at work).

[RB84m]: It’s a tool that provided us with civilization, it’s immensely convenient. Just think about those who go hiking, who go hunting, who go to work: with it, you can communicate. But, in my opinion, there it should stop.

The same participant goes on by opposing such practically oriented usage practices to those adopted by young people:

[RB84m]: When used by those youngsters who become stupid, they don’t write any more, they don’t talk anymore, because life is also made up of conversations, a nice conversation, a good discourse, practically... Always with the mobile, with their fingers like that...

In this excerpt, the respondent marks a huge difference between what he perceives as legitimate usage practices, which are described as belonging to adults/older people, and the excessive and dangerous usage by younger people. Indeed, in this excerpt the (perceived) legitimate use is explicitly related to specific contexts, features and goals (trekking or hunting – thus safety; people working – thus ‘communicating’); but it is also implicitly related to the frequency of use (as emerges – negatively – when describing young people’s usage patterns). Furthermore, there is an (implicit) difference between what is perceived as proper ‘communication’ (“people working: with it you communicate”), and what is perceived as non-legitimate communication (“young people, they don’t write any more, they don’t talk any more”), thus assuming that their communicative practices are different from “writing or talking.” Generally, older respondents make a significant difference between what they perceive to be legitimate usage practices, described as belonging to adults/older people, and the excessive and dangerous usage associated to younger people.

In broader terms, usage practices adopted by the respondents’ own group are framed in terms of choices, taken by empowered users, who master the whole ‘palette’ of tools and patterns, or at least those that are *relevant* to (the practical side of) their lives; ‘the others’, on the other hand, seem to act from more specific (and inevitable, given their limitations) reasons. Indeed, some patterns or features chosen by older people are interpreted by young participants as a mistake. They also implicitly link these kinds of behaviour to older people’s lack of digital skills:

[RY18m]: Yes, they (adults/older people) are really obsessed, even more than we teens are. While we have even more social networks (meaning SNS)... therefore you might upload a story on Instagram or on other social networks, while older people, like people around their fifties, as they only have WhatsApp, they can [only] upload their status on WhatsApp and therefore you see they always put those...

At the same time, older participants confirm their awareness of the different possibilities of digital media, and underline the fact that they make conscious decisions, based on practical, emotional and political implications, when selecting the platforms to be used and their uses.

[BA67m]: I like people to call me and talk. Then, with WhatsApp, it’s true that there are some friends who write at length, so I write “Oh, call me, so many letters and many things”. I want to listen to the voice, because otherwise I don’t recognize who is writing. Or I call them and I say “I like listening to the voice and to be able to explain things.”

[BW68m]: My private life is my private life, and my opinions are my opinions, I give it to the people I want to share it with, I don’t publish for everyone; because there is a hyper-controlling risk to individuals by organizations that are not under control.

[BA67m]: Now if you have a cell phone it is my cell phone, and this enslaves them. They think they are freer, but the truth is that it makes them more enslaved and less free to share their lives with other children.

“They are stuck to their phones”

Furthermore, both age groups suggest that ‘the others’ overuse the smartphone, thus detracting from what they consider ‘real life’, or ‘real communication’. Certainly, this notion of overuse tends to be

related to what each age group considers to be a form of useful, and therefore legitimate, usage, as discussed above.

Older respondents, for instance, accuse young people of using the smartphone too much, even in contexts where they would not consider it appropriate to do so.

[RG67f]: They're always on it... They keep on and on... It's always like that: I become aware everywhere I go [...] they are always on the phone, for one reason or another, always justifying themselves and saying "I have to take this."

Many quotations by older participants focus on the topic of overuse, which is described by mentioning examples of youths met in both public (bars, public transportation) and private (at home) physical contexts.

[BI73f]: For me, young people have crossed the line... by a long way. My grandchildren spend many hours. I'm ok with my cell phone, I use it when needed and nothing else. [...] But guys... you just don't know! I visit them, and they are in their rooms, they have the 'do not enter' sign on the door. Anyway, I enter, "What are you doing?", "Well, can't you see I'm talking? Can't you see that they are answering? I say "Well, you answer me." It is their free time, [and they are on this] or they are killing, because they kill a lot! This one is 14 years old, I tell him "you will leave the world empty" because he is always killing. I think, they've crossed the line. It's interesting, sometimes I see them doing incredible things, [...] but I think it is excessive.

Such behaviour is related to the idea that young people "hide behind the screen," withdrawing from 'real communication', and are not developing proper relational skills because they are attached to their cell phone all the time.

[RF65f]: In my opinion, young kids hide behind the virtual, therefore they don't speak face to face [what they mean] if they need to argue ...

[BG69f]: The issue of young people... well, young and not that young! I find that contact has been lost. Allow me to share an anecdote: there was a woman in the metro, she was sitting and started talking with a guy who was by her side. And a journalist observed them and used it in the news. Because, for ages, she hadn't seen two strangers talking on public transport. Because everybody has their little device, click, click, click and they don't communicate.

In broader terms, older participants also underline that young people prefer communicating via WhatsApp messages instead of using phone calls or other forms of communication, which are perceived as real, more 'personal' or more 'intimate', as well as, somehow, the norm for older people. A Catalan woman, for instance, associates the loss of printed greetings with the complete loss of Christmas greetings, in the same way that she considers face to face interaction as the sole form of communication.

[BT72f]: Nowadays, Christmas greetings have disappeared. Before, we used to make a bit of an effort to write. So, I think, that what we gain with continuous updates, we lose in quality of treatment. I think, this is important, because otherwise, the moment will come when people will not talk, will not communicate. It's one thing to get information, and another to communicate with people, the personal relationship gets lost with this kind of contact.

[BH65m]: In the family group, when someone starts, the rest carry on even if they were not aware. All of them wished me happy birthday. Although I never will know who knew it for real.

While older people complaining about young people's overuse of the phone is something of a commonplace, the opposite dynamic might appear somewhat surprising. Indeed, even young participants complain about adults' overuse of digital platforms, and thus withdrawing from 'living in the moment'.

[RN17f]: I remember a fit of anger I had [with my mom]. Not really because she wants to share them, but because she wants to remember the moments, but then doesn't live them. We were on the boat, everyone was dancing on the sea, and, well, she started taking a video of everything, not because she was asked to but because she wanted a memory, yet [this would be] the memory of you taking a video of the others, instead of dancing.

In this quote, not only does the participant express an offline/online divide ("the memory of you taking a video of the others"), similar to what older participants tend to underline when criticizing young people's behaviour, but she also seems to deny agency to the mother *as a smartphone user*, that "she was not asked to" take the video (so there was, apparently, no reason to do so).

In some cases, this also applies to specific digital domains, including videogames, interpreted, in the following quote by a teenage participant referring to his parents, as a form of addiction. Again, this statement constitutes a reversal of the common-sense assumption that young people are "addicted to videogames" (a theme that emerges in the statements of older participants, to the point that they depict videogames as a "drug" [W., m68]).

[BO17m]: My parents are hooked. Not that much, but my father is at level 2.000 (referring to the level users reach in a videogame). If only he had invested the time spent to get to this level on something else...

"Let him first cast a stone": strong judgments towards 'the others'

When talking about the 'other' age group's usage practices of digital platforms, both age groups express strong *judgments*. In fact, they do not limit themselves to describing the 'other' age group's usage practices, or to underlining the differences between 'us' and 'them' vis-à-vis digital platform usage, but adopt a judgmental attitude that, moving from digital platforms, may also lead to wider considerations. While such approach is present in both Rome and Barcelona, if we focus on choice of language, Italian respondents (both old and young) tend to be more caustic.

Participants seem to follow a set of media ideologies, derived from their understanding of appropriate and inappropriate usage, with regard to both the whole digital media ecology and each specific platform they use. Discourses on digital platform usage operate as powerful triggers for stereotypical depictions of the 'other' age groups. This applies to both old and young participants, although the two groups seem to be operating according to different conceptual frameworks.

"They are imbeciles, they are bullies": older participants addressing young people's usage patterns

When older participants address young people's usage practices, they generally address what could generally be defined as their 'manners'. Firstly, as we discussed above, they stress that young people are constantly stuck to their phones, thereby avoiding talking face-to-face with the people around them. In such discourses, indeed, talking about excessive smartphone usage leads to addressing broader social rules, as in the case of 'those needing to sit on a bus'; furthermore, the choice of language far exceeds the merely descriptive, often becoming judgmental (e.g. "very annoyed" and "absurd" in the following quotes).

[BM85f]: I get very annoyed when [I'm] on the bus, and they are playing. If it is a phone call, and you need to say something, I don't care. But they are there, like studying a master class... this really annoys me. Because [...] it's like they ignore everything around them. The bus can be full, and they are seated, and they see people coming to get a seat and they ignore them. I get irritated.

Indeed, in the previous quote the respondent complains about the civic responsibilities of citizens that are ignored because of the disconnection from the 'real world' that happens as result of the excessive use of smartphones by young users.

[RC82f]: Once I was in a cafe, there was a father with two sons, three men, I mean, not little children... they sat, all with that thing ('coso' - the phone) and they didn't look at each other's faces... I mean, how can you live like that? That's absurd!

Interestingly, several older Italian respondents, when describing young people's usage practice, define the phone by using the word '*coso*': a colloquial pejorative word for 'thing'.

In such discourses, a strong online vs offline dichotomy emerges, together with a shared negative judgment about spending "too much time" online: digitally-mediated communication is represented as "fake", "not real", and several older participants state that "you cannot live like that."

[RE82f]: But you cannot always live like that, because that way, you get fake communication, it's not real!

What older participants define as 'the virtual' is perceived as a way young people hide themselves; strong normative assumptions are attached to platform choice (for instance, while face to face appears to be the preferred environment, phone calls are perceived by older people as nearer to 'real communication').

[BW68m]: I have seen in [...] many restaurants a family get-together, and the youngest attached to the screen, [the] tablet, and the kid watching a video or whatever. So, the relationship, the communication between individuals seems to disappear. I have even seen kids in the pram with a screen in front, that is to say, from a very young age kids are exposed to this bombardment [...]. And this is wrong, it goes in the wrong direction. But well, this is what it is. I have even seen temper tantrums by a kid in another restaurant.

Strong normative attitudes toward young people's usage pattern emerge in both countries, and older participants tend to express their distance and their disagreement toward young people's communication patterns with strong words: "I feel sorry for them", "they are imbeciles", to the point that they "condemn" [RE82f] their behaviour for being "bullies" [RF84m]. In this regard, discourses about young people's usage of digital devices/platforms seem to act as powerful triggers for broader negative discourses (and judgments) about young people. That is to say, their *bad manners* in using

digital platforms seem to be interpreted as an epiphenomenon of their general bad manners, and their approach to relational life.

[RE82f]: I feel sorry for them! Because they cannot communicate with each other, each of them stays with that thing in their hands

[BK73m]: What is [...] the value of this tool for those kids who are 5-10-15 years old? Because, we can say that we (older people) had an education, a philosophical, Aristotelian [education], to explain it in some way, but what about them? What education, training or criteria do they get? Is it just the cell phone that counts for them? Or do criteria, critique, analytical capacity, citizenship, the human concept, even religion, etc.? Well, I don't know.

In the previous quote, for instance, by starting from commenting on children's and teenagers' use of digital tools, the respondent addresses much broader issues that relate to education and values.

Such a normative approach also emerges when addressing gaming practices, when contrasting proper ways of playing (which belonged to earlier generations: "playing in the street") to videogames:

[RA67m] I was lucky as I grew up in the streets, I used to go home only to sleep, I used to play all day in the street with girls and boys...

[BA67] I feel so sorry for them. I was lucky in the sense that I was able to grow up in the street.

[BC76f]: Kids don't play as they should.

Some respondents, moreover, express concerns about the consequences of intensive mobile phone use in terms of mental and physical health ("their fingers will become ankylosed" [RB84m]).

[RB84m]: [they are] always with their mobile, with their fingers like that (clicking). Science is already worried about what will happen to them when they turn 60. Well (...) I have to say that no one knows better than me: we had a car accident once, and, with a single call, you are taken and directly carried to A and E.

A further significant criticism of younger people's usage practices is related to what is perceived as a conspicuous display of the self, especially on Instagram. This criticism is less widespread than the previous ones, mainly because only a minority of older respondents are Instagram users and, therefore, witness the behaviour they define as conspicuous display. The following participant (a former school teacher) shifts the pupil-teacher relationship to the technological field, as she underlines that teens are not aware of the consequences of their behaviour, and that they need to be "educated" (by adults) about proper digital platform usage.

[RF65f]: I'd like to add [that] on Instagram young and very young people, [such as] my last pupils [who] are 12 years old now, [...] always upload videos. And I always get the notification "a live video is about to start, don't miss out." In my opinion, they don't realize that their images can be exploited [...]. They show off too much! The younger children are the ones who show off more. [...] In the 4th grade, when everybody had a phone, quite unpleasant things happened, and so this topic emerged. [...] They need to be educated, which is something parents [don't do]: they limit themselves to buying the mobile phone as a present for First Communion, but they don't teach them how to use it. So, if the school doesn't do it, these kids will remain unaware.

These excerpts observe at the same time 'practices' and 'skills' and, interestingly, depict teenagers as not highly skilled (and in need of "education" by older people/adults).

They're smart(phone) user wannabes: young participants addressing older people's usage patterns

Young participants' discourses about adults and older people are also driven by a set of media ideologies rooted in the belief that one own's usage patterns are the appropriate ones. This understanding from young participants' perspective is rooted in both communication patterns and digital (operational) skills.

As mentioned above, one of the stereotypical depictions used by old people to describe young people (namely that "they are stuck to their smartphone" and therefore "don't live in the (real world) moment") is reversed and also used by young participants to describe the behaviour of adults and older people. A significant number of the criticisms focus on WhatsApp, which seems to be the platform where, currently, more intergenerational contacts occur (given that a relatively small number of teenagers and older people taking part in the focus groups actively uses Facebook and only a few older participants use Instagram).

Young participants address the ways in which older people deal with the grammar rules and netiquette of digital platforms, defining them as *bumbling*. More specifically, young participants focus on the ways in which adults use specific features, such as emojis, or, more broadly, the form of their messages, particularly regarding the excessive use of symbols. They focus, moreover, on what they consider inappropriate content, by normatively opposing what they perceive to be the perspective of older people (content that 'is supposed' to be funny, from older people's point of view) with what they consider to be the objective quality of the content (what young people themselves perceive as 'funny' is, in their perspective, 'objectively' funny).

[RN17f]: The things (videos) that in their opinion (adults/older people) are supposed to make you laugh, and that they might even show you even if they came from those groups with 50 members, but that don't make you laugh at all, well, they are really sad! [...] They send content that's supposed to be funny [...] but it's not funny at all! They're just sad!

In some cases, to be bumbling makes youngsters laugh and is perceived as funny or naive behaviour; in other cases, it is perceived as annoying. In both cases, however, older people can be defined as "pathetic", "sad", "embarrassing." In general, they are described as "[digital media user] wannabes" [RC17m].

Digital media usage patterns of older people are generally explained by young people as "inappropriate" because of an (alleged) lack of skills which seem to deny older people the agency to make media choices. The overall strong choice of language when addressing such issues shows the highly judgmental and patronizing attitude of young participants towards older users. Such judgements can be considered as an attempt to explain behaviour perceived as remote from their own habits, thus implicitly re-affirming the appropriateness of 'their own way' of use.

[RS18m]: You notice that there's this age difference. I mean, there are a lot of exclamation marks, commas, little faces (emojis), everything is... quite artificial!

[RQ17m] Like my colleague said, the ellipsis. Eighteen little dots at the end of each sentence! I mean, the whole message is made up of little dots.

[BE16m]: I get annoyed with emojis, [...] because you can understand from the context what a person who doesn't know how to use them wanted to say. But [with] a person who only uses emojis, you have to create the story by looking at the emojis, and you can understand it in many different ways.

In the first quote above, the participant spontaneously addresses the topic of age difference, which is used to explain the different writing style. In all quotes, older people are considered as a monolithic category, one that is ignorant of the proper way to write in digital contexts. Another participant, for instance, underlines that his mother follows traditional grammatical rules when texting, as if she were writing a traditional text, as opposed to digital writing. Again, such a slow (and offline-fashioned) writing style is addressed in a patronizing way; it is not simply perceived as a *different* way of using such platforms (and, possibly, as an appropriate way of using language), but as something that “is not ok.”

[BM16m]: I get irritated, for example, when my mother takes the cell phone, opens a message, she types a letter, waits for five seconds, types another letter, and she structures the text as if it were an essay; and that is not ok.

Beyond grammatical rules, there is a tension around the immediacy, synchronicity and availability of interactions. While in some cases young people argue they cannot, or do not want to, answer immediately, they also complain when others, especially parents, do not. Immediacy is valued over the clarity of the message and, once again, is associated with a lack of skills (while typos are not).

[BL16f]: When my mother writes, she takes half an hour just to say “OK”! Oh, no, she always puts “OK” and a full stop (pulls an angry face and imitates his mother writing with a single finger). It freaks me out!

Emojis constitute a significant arena where these judgmental attitudes emerge. In both Rome and Barcelona young people seem strongly convinced that emojis have a univocal meaning, and that attaching to an emoji a meaning that is different from what they believe to be the ‘correct’ one is the result of a lack of knowledge by older people. Indeed, even people belonging to the same age group, or to the same group of friends, tend to attach different meanings to the same emoji: this applies not only to very rarely used emojis, but also to some of the most common ones (with a very limited set of exceptions). The idea that there is just one correct meaning, and I and my group are referring to it, is ideological, as it assumes knowledge of the univocal meaning of an image.

[RG17f]: Yes, it's funny when they [...] use the wrong emoji and maybe they believe that the “little face” is sending kisses, while in reality it's chewing gum. And so they send the face [which means] “I bought you chewing gum” with the face sending kisses. I mean, what does this have to do with chewing gum? [They send] silly things, like that one.

An interesting explanation of the alleged inappropriate usage of emojis by older people, provided by a young participant, is that, “in order to make contact with young people, [adults/older people] think that that's what young people do, while it is not so” [RP16f]. In this quote, a double stereotype is at play. Young people depict older people as behaving according to their own stereotypical representation of young people. On the other hand, there is again the idea that the way ‘we’ (young people) use digital platforms is the right one; an idea which reflects older people saying they ‘adapt’ to the ways young people use digital platforms (but from the perspective of young people, adults try to adapt in the wrong way). Such expressions represent a sort of materialization of stereotypes, vividly expressed by young respondents.

Conclusions and indications for future research

The narrative of ‘other’ people’s digital media usage practices proved to be a powerful trigger for stereotypical depictions of other age cohorts, framed according to an intergroup discrimination logics. Indeed, we understand digital platforms as generational contexts able to epitomize the dynamics that, in the digital sphere, seem to reinforce intergroup discrimination and ageism. Concepts as legitimate use seem to foster stereotypical constructions of ‘other age groups’; we are able to describe these in relation to the everyday digital practices of different generations. The study contributes to existing literature by highlighting that media ideologies represent a field where ageist stereotypes can be developed, employed, and emphasized; it shows the ways in which media ideologies and ageist stereotypes are intertwined and reinforce each other based on the attitudes that each age cohort develops about ‘the others’, and of their – and their own – (alleged) digital skills. Indeed, the dimensions through which these representations emerge, as well as the underlying attitudes, contribute shedding light into the *in-group vs out-group* dynamics leading to ageist depictions of other age cohorts. The generational context of digital platforms provides an arena in which different, and sometimes conflicting, media ideologies and idioms of practice operate, thus contributing to highlight the processes related to the formation, the adoption and the narration of ageist attitudes. Complaints about other people’s ‘inappropriate’ usage practices (in terms of content, form and amount of time spent on them) dominate participants’ narratives over more neutral or positive accounts, thus reinforcing stereotypes towards younger and older people. Indeed, stereotypical construction of age cohorts works in a double direction, shaping inter-generational relationships: it is not only older individuals being stigmatized in digital contexts, it works as well the other way around. Although digital environments (and related usage practices) can be considered a potential arena of contact between different age groups, thus representing a condition that can pave the way to reducing stereotypes and in-group vs out-group bias, literature on prejudice has highlighted that inter-group contact can positively reduce prejudices only if it is related to specific prerequisites; among which is setting interaction to promote equal status, cooperation and common goals (e.g. being part of a team) (Allport 1954). The importance of these prerequisites has been successively corroborated by more recent studies (for a recent literature review on this topic, see Dovidio, Gaertner and Kawakami 2003). As such prerequisites do not seem at work in intergenerational digital platform usage, the mere contact between different age groups, which takes place on some digital platforms, is not enough for reducing intergroup discrimination.

When talking about the ways in which ‘the others’ use social media, some complaints about inappropriate usage seem to be shared by both older and younger participants; these mainly relate to the *dimensions* through which representations of ‘the others’ emerge (RQ1). For instance, a) the idea that ‘the others’ are “stuck to their phones”; and b) that, therefore, they don’t live in “real life”; as well as c) the idea that ‘the others’ use digital platforms for silly things, while ‘we’ are empowered users, and use them for practical reasons relevant to our everyday life.

Indeed, when it comes to *shared* complaints, common social rules might be at stake (even if participants do not depict them as such). When expressed through such (or similar) words, “being stuck to one own’s phone” (or similar concepts) is considered by both groups as negative behaviour for spending too much time online, as the offline world is generally (and often rhetorically) positively connoted. Interestingly, in these cases, both groups tend to attribute such inappropriate behaviour to ‘the other’ group.

Such complaints can also be considered as common-sense with regard to digital media: common discourses, as well as in the media, repeatedly give these issues a negative connotation. Ironically, it seems that, in order to build a generational ‘we-sense’ (Bude 1997), participants rely on – and appropriate - fragments of the broadly shared common-sense surrounding digital platforms, without recognizing its *shared* character.

However, some other complaints are not shared and build on different stereotypical judgements. More specifically, this relates to the *attitudes* underlying the representations of ‘the other’ age cohort, when addressing their social media usage practices (RQ2). On the one hand, young participants show a patronizing attitude that mainly addresses older people’s *skills* (which tends to explain ‘inappropriate’ usage patterns by the lack of digital skills). On the other hand, older participants focus mainly on young people’s *manners*: their ‘inappropriate’ usage is negative for broader socio-cultural considerations.

In this regard, we might assume that older respondents share a stable concept of the appropriate use of the smartphone, in a way that also expresses a moralistic judgement based on an ideal image of what a society should be. What young people ‘do wrong’ with social media is perceived as ‘wrong for society’, ‘wrong for culture’, ‘wrong for their future’; starting from digital platforms, they therefore arrive at addressing broader societal considerations. Older participants’ narratives on young people’s inappropriate behaviour seem to look *outside digital platforms*, focussing on physical world contexts, be they public (a bar, a bus, etc.), or private (a home) places, thereby implicitly addressing issues that go beyond the digital environment. Young participants’ narratives, on the other hand, tend to take place *inside digital platforms*, as they focus on content, form, pace (with the dominant role of WhatsApp as a platform where different age cohorts meet and sometimes clash). Young participants, moreover, seem to be more influenced by the stereotypical reference to (the lack of) skills, when it comes to explaining older people’s inappropriate usage practices.

To summarize, we could state that, while the dimensions through which the representations of ‘the others’ emerge are shared by older and younger participants, the underlying attitudes strongly differ. More specifically, older participants seem to share a *moralistic* approach (judging younger users from a broader perspective), while young participants seem to adopt a *patronizing* point of view (judging older users on their skills, and taking digital platforms as their main horizon). This means that ageism does not only operate against older people, as it is usually conceived, but also against young people. Finally, we believe that the analytical issues we raise here are better illustrated because we focused on two distant age groups that tend to be identified, respectively, as heavy and savvy users (teens) and limited and unskilled users (older individuals). Including older adults in research on digital everyday life is significant as it delivers new insights that benefit from an approach to old age that overcomes the usual deficit model (by which we only analyze old age to solve their problems, not as another life stage).

While including in the analysis the role of digital literacy and perceived self-efficacy goes well beyond the scope of the current article, future research could explore whether these dimensions not only relate to usage, but also to age-based narrations of digital media use².

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¹ Participants are anonymized, and quotations are labelled as follows: the first letter (B, R) refers to the city where the focus group took place (Barcelona or Rome), the second letter arbitrarily identifies participants (it is not their initial, but an identified arbitrarily attributed to each participant), the following number identifies their age, while the last letter (m or f) identifies their sex.

² We have revised the paper in March-April 2020, when our countries were severely affected by the Covid-19 outbreak, and Authorities imposed a generalized “lockdown”. In these days of “physical distancing”, digital platforms have proved as the most effective (and often the only) way to keep interpersonal relations, in both professional and personal settings. This also means contact with family members not living in the same households, including growing intergenerational contact through video-call and group conversations. While it is too early to draw any conclusions, we believe future research should consider (whether and) how a setting of “physical distancing” shapes the way we communicate and (re)produce age-related stereotypes as they emerge from discourses addressing ‘other people’s’ digital media usage practices, exploring how stereotypes are being transformed and how they are shaping the way different generations communicate in a context of growing (or exclusive) digitally mediated contacts.