

***“One way or another I need to learn this stuff!”  
Adolescents, sexual information, and the  
Internet’s role between family, school, and peer  
groups.\****

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**Summary.** *The Internet is an important part of everyday life and many people also use it for activities connected to intimacy and sexuality. This essay describes the bricolage that adolescents collect every day from family, school, peer groups, and the Internet when searching for information connected to the sexual sphere. Nowadays a new socialization process, amplified by digital media, is present in adolescents’ life. This is a sort of auto-socialization process that allows them to construct knowledge through diverse, non-traditional sources of information. This paper describes the dialogues between social spaces that permit an adolescent to search for an understanding of what sex and sexuality are in contexts that often respond to their question with silence.*

**Key words:** *Adolescents, Internet, Sexual information, Online Sexual Activity*

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## **Introduction**

The Internet is an important part of everyday life (Bakardjeva, 2005; Pasquali et al. 2004; Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002) and many people also use it for activities connected to intimacy and sexuality (Ross 2005; Daneback 2006; Döring 2009). In Western societies sexuality is often associated with guilt during the personal and physical growth of the individual and problems connected to intimacy are often hidden from the others (Giddens, 1992). This forces the related pleasures and practices into an individual sphere which people try to hide from one another (Daneback and Löfberg, 2011). At the same time nowadays we can discuss about sex and sexuality more openly than in the past (Foucault, 1976). The Internet amplifies these conflicting tendencies especially when we consider Web 2.0., where the communicative flow is also composed by User Generated Content (UGC).

In general, when we speak about Online Sexual Activity (OSA), we refer to the use “of the Internet for any activity (including text, audio, graphic files) that involves sexuality whether for purposes of recreation, entertainment, exploration, support, education, commerce, efforts to attain and secure sexual or romantic partners, and so on” (Cooper, 2004, p. 1). Based on past research (Boies, 2002) Shaughnessy et al. (2011) categorized OSA in: “non-arousal activities (e.g., seeking sexual information); solitary-arousal activities (e.g., viewing sexually explicit videos); and, partners-arousal activities (e.g., maintaining a sex partner online)” (ibid, p. 419). This paper is based primarily on the “non-arousal activities” category.

The Internet can help one understand sexuality in general, the possible behaviours to try during intimacy, awareness of your own body, and so on. In this case the communicative flow that the media transmits is not only composed of technical information from experts, but also of representations that guide individuals in the understanding of their own actions. For many years the media has been one of the most important venues for understanding and analysing social change (Melucci, 1991; Grossi e Ruspini, 2007) and has also played a relevant role in constructing reality (Hawkins e Pingree, 1983; Meyrowitz 1985).

## **Objective**

The research seeks to understand how Italian adolescents use the Internet to gain and access information about sex, intimacy and related activities.

Hence the research objectives are: (a) to understand what web-sites, chat-room, forum, and so on, adolescents use in order to have access to

information and discussion connected to sexuality; (b) to understand why they use (or do not use) this media; (c) to define the extent of the internet's influence on the youths' experience of sexuality and their social construction; (d) to understand if there are gender differences in the use of the Internet regarding this specific topic.

## **Methods**

The research focused on meanings constructed by study participants relating to the OSA starting from everyday experiences. I chose qualitative methods to study phenomena and experiences of subjects starting from their point of view (Flick, 1998; Lobe et al., 2008). I use theoretical traditions connected to symbolic interactionism and phenomenology to reconstruct the participant's subjective experiences that give form to representation (Garfinkel, 1967).

The research used mixed methods and involved 64 adolescents both male and female aged between 16 and 18 living in Northeast Italy selected by a theoretical sampling (Cardano, 2003).

The empirical portion was divided into two steps: explorative phase and phase of qualitative in-depth analysis. The first has been useful to define research parameters and appropriate sociological instruments. The second step studies more deeply the topics which emerged in the preceding phase.

The core of the first step was composed of two participatory sessions called co-construction group with 1) a group of adolescents (one group composed by 4 boys and one group composed by 4 girls) and 2) a combined group with all participants (4 boys and 4 girls). The co-construction group were beneficial in that the participants helped me to better understand the field, find new interviewees, and test research instruments. Each question to be asked in the second stage of research was discussed at length with those who took part in the co-construction groups, because the young "assistants" could help me with the choice of correct language, to understand if a question was too intrusive, and ultimately to improve my capability as an interviewer in such a delicate field.

For the second part of the research I used two on-line focus groups organized using Google talk, giving participants an account created by the researcher to maintain the anonymity between participants (but not with the researcher), and 48 face to face, in-depth, interviews. These methods have been the best way to explore the sense-making that adolescents give to their decisions and experiences. Using what La Mendola (2009) called a dialogic approach the interviews guided the researcher through adolescents' experiences and emotions.

The principal criteria to construct the sample were gender and age. To obtain a more heterogeneous sample I recruited participants through different social environments (juvenile associations, sport club, etc.) that identify adolescents with different familial, associative, and religious backgrounds.

The co-construction group and the interviews were audio taped. They were transcribed ad verbatim and for the online focus group I used the log file of Google Talk's chat. All of the data was analysed using Atlas.Ti software.

### **Family, school, and peer group**

#### *Family*

Barbagli et al. (2010) has shown that it is difficult to have dialogues within the family regarding discourses connected to sex and sexuality. We must make a distinction with regards to both gender and relations with different members of the family. Regarding the first aspect girls seem more inclined than boys to speak about sexuality with parents. This occurs by finding in the mother a fundamental referee in respect to matters related to the health: menstruation, prevention and therapy against vaginal infection, physical changes, etc. (Caprara e Fonzi, 2000). The mother is the specialized referee in sex matters, the only one that, when she permits the dialogue, could understand deeply the doubts and experiences of the daughter. The information is related to aspects that do not concern sexual behaviour or sexual practices. These kinds of matters are often too intimate to face with parents. In the interviews girls see the father as strict and distant about sexuality, making it more difficult to establish a discourse about intimacy.

*Sometimes a talk about sex with my mother, you know, the stuff you need to better understand something. You cannot go to the doctor every time you have a doubt. For example, sometimes you have burning sensations and, if after two days, it does not disappear I ask to my mother. Then, obviously, I do not use to ask her how to do a... mmm... oral sex or other things [laugh]. But with my mother I spoke about the birth control pill. But there is a limit, I feel ashamed to speak with her about particular things.*

*(Girl, 17)*

It's different for boys. They speak very little about sexuality with their parents because they see them as distant entities that cannot understand

intimacy matters. The mother could be a referee concerning sexual health of the young man. The father could be a referee regarding other questions connected to the intimate sphere, but frequently young men want to demonstrate to the fathers their compliance with heterosexual expectations (Kimmel 2001). The intimate matters are engaged by young men and their fathers on a nebulous dimension where they mix up provocation and interactions which are driven by the machismo and dominant gender definition.

*To speak about sex with my parents? Never! With my mother just if I got some disease... my father never speaks with me about sex, sometimes he looks at me and says "What about that pretty girl", that is all.*  
(Boy, 16)

In some families it is impossible to speak about sexual matters. They are a taboo that can be translated into explicit prohibition with sanctions mainly for the girls. In this case parents are seen as mere controllers and not as referees for growth. While the majority of interviewees described parents as people to keep away from their sexual experiences while remaining important figures when help is needed, in these cases strict control leads to the final closure of communication between parents and children regarding intimacy and sexuality.

Within the family there could be a mediating figure represented by elder brothers or sisters, a joining link between adolescents and parents. Especially for girls, older brothers or sisters could be an important reference point. Usually the interviewed boys do not think about elder brothers or sisters as someone to ask for help or information.

*Fortunately my sister exists. I could say everything to her and she never says anything to my parents or to other people. Then she is older than me so she has lived lots of experiences and could help me.*  
(Girl, 17)

The general situation seems to show that families often omit sex discourses delegating them to other socialization agents (also according to Porrovecchio, 2012). This silence sometimes comes from a real obstruction connected to the rejection of the idea that the adolescents – especially girls – could be engaged in practices related to pleasure. Frequently in the interviews the parents' embarrassment to speak about these matters with their own offspring emerges. This problem is also connected to an "excessive burden of responsibility and the tendency to psychologise in an

extreme way children's and adolescents' behaviour. This makes parents doubt their own educative capacity" (Maggioni, 2011, p. 32, translation of the author). With the exception of particular cases, parents remain an important referee to address health needs for the interviewed adolescents. The interviews show a lack of free and relaxed dialogue in which sexuality is approached without an aura of embarrassment and normativity that often comes with it. This type of conversation would fulfil the need for the boys in the family to find a fertile ground in which to plant the seeds of the discourse about the body and sexuality.

### *School*

According to the Italian legislation sexual education is not mandatory in the curriculum and the headmaster of the school can decide solely whether to insert it in the educational path or not.

During the interviews young people often complained about a lack of interest with respect to the sexual education courses that the school has proposed to them. This disinterest stemmed from both the content of the lessons themselves and how they were managed.

According to the interviewees the school offers largely superficial health information related to the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and a little more, leaving the broad range of young people's experiences absent. Frequently the participation of adolescents is not expected and the school does not give much space to the adolescents' experience and to their stories. Sometimes this interaction is present but it is inhibited by the presence of the teacher in the classroom, a figure that still plays an institutional role making it more difficult for youth to talk about intimacy.

*At school you could also do sex education, but you do not learn anything. Yes, they spoke about condom or birth control pills, of disease... But then is very difficult to question or to understand some things. For example I had question but I did not ask anything.*

*[Interviewer: why you did not ask anything?]*

*My teacher was there! Can you understand? There! It is difficult, she is your teacher...*

*(Girl, 16)*

During the interviews adolescents ask for more space to express themselves and to make their voice heard in the presence of a person able to help them with their doubts connected to sex-related practices. Briefly, the school, similar to the family, gives to adolescents only health information. Obviously, the school's approach is different from the family's approach. The lesson is a structured moment to transmit knowledge about sex and sexuality (or sometimes about love). But

oftentimes during the lessons a rigidity connected to a mono-directional communicative flow remains because of the institutional frame they create.

*Girl1 (17) I like situations like this [She is speaking about the co-construction group] because I can speak freely about sex, to have sex, about blowjob, but also about sexual diseases and you [she is speaking about the researcher] do not go to say everything to my mother!*

*Boy2 (17) Otherwise we will kill you [laugh]*

*Girl 2 (17) At school it is different. They come to explain only a few things and I thought: "I am not a baby, I am seventeen years old! I know everything you are explaining!" And so it is normal that I use the Internet to look for the other information.*

This frame is frequently overloaded with normative elements that characterize scholastic institutions, such as the teacher's presence or the schoolmates' *habitus* which becomes adopted within the school walls. Nonetheless the formative moment of the lessons remains important to the connection that adolescents create outside the school. Here the Internet can increase their knowledge about sex and sexuality initiated in school while releasing themselves from rigid elements of the school institution environment.

#### *Peer groups*

Peer groups are the preferred source of information about sex and sexuality (Donati et al., 2000; EURISPES, 2001). In the adolescents' opinion the peer group is the favourite interlocutor to discuss intimacy. In their peer group adolescents speak mainly about topics which find no space for discussion in the family or in school and which are connected to practices and concrete sexual experiences or, in general, topics belonging to the sphere of desire.

Talking about sex takes on certain different modes according to the group to which the adolescent belongs. In comparison with young men, it is easier for girls to speak with other girls about sex and their own experiences. Indeed, they base their relationship with friends on the sharing of emotions and experiences (Grazzani et al., 2007; Petter, 2002) which forms an important trusting relationship where hearing others' experiences becomes a way to learn how to manage specific situations.

For the majority of the interviewed boys the intimate dimension is dealt with by keeping more private experiences hidden from peer group. Among friends, including the most intimate, matters related to sexuality are frequently talked about in a joking way, through anecdotes referring to people external to the group or through jokes with sexual connections (Pascoe, 2005; Porrovecchio, 2012). This is due to the fact that they often

have the fear of being laughed at by others and so they have to show, in front of the group, self-confidence and skilled expertise in the world of sexuality and of its many “secrets.”

*It happens rarely that I speak about sex seriously with my friends. Maybe a little with my closer friends. You could say some bullshit, joke and sometimes put in the discourse of some serious thing. Just to understand what they think or what they know. But you cannot screw yourself over asking questions because then the other thinks that you are a loser. Then, obviously, it depends on the kind of question. But frequently I pretend to know everything also if I do not know.*

*(Boy, 18)*

Adolescents use a playful approach with swagger to cope with embarrassment ensuring the Self is safe.

According to Porrovecchio (2012) and Barbagli et al. (2010) sex is not the principal topic in peer groups' discourses. It is in opposition with the common imagination that constructs all adolescents – and above all the boys – as constantly occupied in sex discourses. This happens mainly due to the discomfort of boys' confrontations with same gender friends with which they have to perform heterosexuality (Kimmel, 2001) and their “normality” to be accepted in the group.

### **The Internet**

In a situation as the one I just described, the use of the Internet could become an important instrument for adolescents who want to satisfy specific queries or want to learn more outside the usual contexts like school and family that in many instances reply with a certain silence (Daneback et al., 2012).

The empirical work showed that the majority of the interviewed adolescents, through different ways and different sources, use the web to find different kinds of information connected to intimacy and sex.

In general I could assert that, with the proper analytical distinction, the Internet is an important source of information related to sex and sexuality for adolescents, but not an exhaustive resource. Adolescents create a continuous *bricolage*, attempting to cope with their insecurities from failure and with the anxiety deriving from all “first times” they have to face. They can ride out these insecurities through a meta-experience accessible by different channels, each one with a specific contribution. The Internet is one of these many channels (Morrison et al., 2004). Below I describe those who choose not to use the Internet for these purposes and those who do.



*The adolescents that chose not to use the Internet to find information related to sex and sexuality*

The interviewees that did not use the Internet to look for this kind of information paints the web as an unreliable source because it contains User Generated Content (and therefore uncertain information) that is too generic. They also tend to view the Internet as a space where sex and sexuality is only represented by pornography. The interviewees' words evoke two specific analytical questions connected to the validity of the source and to the contents that this medium spreads. In the first case, one who does not use the Internet to find sexual information frequently has an idea of sex and sexuality as something that could be handled only by health specialists or another kind of specialist: the parents. For this group of interviewees the Internet is something that we can define as an "ignorant referee," a reference point that does not contain any form of knowledge, but rather that tends to reproduce the points of view of the individual and amplify a somehow distorted vision of reality.

*I looked for some information on sex on the Internet maybe when I was younger, just as a joke or out of curiosity... I do not remember what I looked for. Now I always ask mother.*

*[interviewer: why do you prefer to ask to your mother instead of looking on the Internet?]*

*Because my mother knows me and she knows how to help me. On the Internet you can find general answers, how can they understand what you are looking for? And my mother does not say bullshit, the Internet contains a mountain of bullshit [laugh].*

*(Girl, 17)*

Other interviewees have justified the decision not to use the internet to find information related to sex and sexuality using the rhetoric of "everyone is different." In this case the Internet is described as something that cannot fulfil the need of the single individual either for requests relating to health information or information about specific practices because the Internet spreads only generic information that could not be adapted to the person's situations. Some of the adolescents who claim not to use the Internet to find any kind of information related to sex and sexuality connect Internet use relating to sexuality mainly to the consumption of pornography. This shows a lack of experience with respect to the web offerings relating to sex and sexuality, for example expert forums, webpages dedicated to sex and sexuality from a medical point of view, or forums where one can talk about his/her problems or experiences. It is a rather reductive view of the Internet

and full of prejudices against a medium which tends to focus on the downsides especially without empirical evidence.

*Also if you go in that forum administrated by gynaecologists... how can they know exactly which kind of problem you have?! You read about a solution and maybe you have another kind of problem! Or you read about stuff that you believe but is not true!*

*(Girl, 16)*

*I do not use the Internet to looking for sex information. What can I use to solve my question? Pornography? Sex announcement? I cannot find what I am looking for because every time you write something about sex they put you on YouPorn or that kind of webpage!*

*(Boy, 17)*

#### *Four types of information*

While some adolescents do not use the Internet to look for sexual information at all, others find the resources that the Internet offers important.

To describe the various hues of the informative panorama painted by adolescents it is useful to make a distinction between the different types of information researched. The analysis of the interviews allowed me to create four informational categories related to: (a) health, (b) knowledge of their body; (c) practices and (d) curiosity.

The first of these four types describe the searching of information mainly related to medical knowledge principally concerning the prevention of sexual diseases or unwanted pregnancy. This kind of information is researched mainly by girls, while boys seem interested quite exclusively in contraceptive methods (according also to Donati et al., 2000; Graziano et al., 2012).

*Sometimes I used the Internet to know the pregnancy symptoms... when I supposed, maybe I am pregnant! When I had sex without a condom... So I searched for this kind of information. I could not ask to my mother!*

*(Girl, 17)*

Another type of information that adolescents look for in the Internet is what we called “searching for information related to their body.” In this case, with rare exceptions, mainly boys look for information related to their own body in line with a certain “normalization” of the intimate sphere. Girls who look for this kind of information - mainly the oldest that responded to our interviews – use the Internet mostly to better understand their own pleasure mechanism (‘G spot,’ female orgasm, etc.).

*Sometimes you ask to yourself if your penis is normal or not. Or that the first time having intercourse is too "fast"... then it is logic: you are rubbing your girlfriend for five hours and so in few minutes you came. The Internet has been useful also for this, for the first time... then you read that what happened to you also happens to other guys and you know that the next time will be better.*

*(Boy, 17)*

*One time I used the Internet to understand how the orgasm works. Everyone spoke about orgasm but I did not feel that sensation so I looked for information to understand if something did not work.*

*(Girl, 18)*

The third type of information is connected to the practices attempts to respond to the question "How can I do ...?" This question could be read following two different guidelines which overlap while maintaining a useful separation : the first is concentrated on the discovering of the pleasure of *Alter* (the other) and the second is dedicated to understanding the "techniques" of sexual intercourse. This division, as we shall see, follows gender differences and the sexual experience of each individual which often overlaps with age during adolescence.

*I am going to explain to you: if a girl finds a boy and wants to do something and, maybe she does not know what to do she looks for information on the Internet, because she could be embarrassed with that guy. So she looks for the information on the Internet to have a more clear idea.*

*(Girl, 16)*

*I used the Internet to understand technically the dynamics of intercourse. The first time... through images and video, not with Wikipedia!*

*(Boy, 17)*

Finally there is the use of the Internet to find information "related to curiosity." For example Internet platforms can be used to find information mainly connected to pornographic terms and medical languages, but that does not enter in the previous groups. The main features of this kind of information are to focus almost exclusively on "the quite strange stuff" (Girl, 17). Through the Internet adolescents try to satisfy their own curiosity on the world of sexuality and its different practices looking for images, videos, or explanations that can help them to discover or understand what usually is indicated as perversion or paraphilia.

*My friends spoke about fisting and they laughed. I did not know what the fisting was and so I look on the Internet.*  
(Boy, 17)

*A film spoke about sadomasochism... I do not remember the title of the film... but I wanted to understand better what that term means so I looked on the Internet. But I stopped looking at those things, these people that beat themselves, I suppose that you cannot do something like that if you love someone. I do not like it.*  
(Girl, 17)

### *The use of the Internet to find sexual information*

According to the interviewees, the Internet is often seen as a “user guide” that they can read immediately following their sexual behaviour. A set of instructions comes from sites, forums, chat-rooms, etc. which affords them a step-by-step explanation of what they can do. This has become simpler due to audio-video content that helps adolescents understand everything better. After the “first times” the interviews outline a difference in the behaviour of girls and boys. Reassured by the first experiences, girls usually cease to use the Internet as a source of technical instructions and instead rely on the comparisons with the friends’ sexual experiences and with their own direct experiences. Compared to the boys’ interviews the girl’s words show a minor anxiety connected to performance. Girls prefer to continue the knowledge process through the relationship with a partner or in the comparison with their friends’ experiences. On the contrary boys, after the first step connected to the anxiety generated by first times, start to use the Internet as a source of information on women’s bodies.

Women’s libido is seen as a secret to unveil by any means. Thanks to the resources provided by the Internet an experiential toolkit of vast dimensions is available anonymously and without risking too much in terms of reputation. Adolescents consider knowledge acquired through the Internet an important expedient to avoid or reduce the possibility of *défaillance*, in order to appear as an expert from a sexual point of view in the eyes of the partner, something very close to the ideal of “a great lover.”

*I prefer to let my guide be fantasy instead of using the Internet [...] in my opinion we learn through growing up and experimenting. I believe that looking for this kind of information on the Internet is a contrived thing. It is hypocritical to discover something like this that you could discover by experience.*  
(Girl, 17)

*Boy 1: The internet is useful to understand lots of things, more you grow more you know and more you ask yourself questions. The Internet permits to you understand better.*

*Boy 2: It is like continuously building your knowledge. You learn and try, but you have some ideas! In this way you also look more like an expert!*

According to the interviewees, the principal characteristics that make the Internet an important source of information are related to the speed at which it is possible to find information – see also “the triple A engine” Cooper (1998) – and the possibility of gaining access to video and audio which allows for a better understanding of what they are looking for. Moreover, anonymity is very important (*ibid.*) because it maintains a safe “face.” This is important especially in regard to the family because it becomes a sort of a protection: asking the parents what pregnancy symptoms are – one of the most researched pieces of information – or the reason for venereal disease could be equivalent to unveiling to the parents a sexual behaviour with the risk to incur, in some cases, a sanction or at least to open a dialogue on intimacy that could be seen as shameful.

The same happens with the peer group: according to the words of some interviewees – boys – sometimes speaking to friends about experiences with sexual diseases could be the same as defining themselves as abnormal. It is akin to showing embarrassment, the result of an error, the incapability to manage their own body.

*How can you say it to the others? Then they start to poke fun at you! If I look on the Internet I do not risk anything! That, then you know that this stuff continues and continues and you feel like you have a big problem and everyone talks about you and then the girls stay away from you.  
(Boy, 16)*

According to the interviews, thanks to the Internet the adolescents could insert themselves into a space which allows them to speak not only with experts but also with what we define as an “enlarged peer group.” It is formed by other adolescents roughly around the same age. This group, thanks to anonymity, relieves the tension that can exist mainly among boys when they speak about sex and sexuality. Paraphrasing Goffman (1959) the Internet becomes a “mute friend” – a medium that can respond to the adolescents’ questions without mocking the one who asks the question. Many interviewees referred to a particular strategy. If their friends joke or talk about sexual terms they do not know the meaning of, they do not ask their friend in order to avoid being mocked, but instead utilize the Internet to understand the definition.

Especially for information searches due to curiosity, the different practices that have intrigued our interviewees have been catalogued in line with the dominant thought, such as “strange,” “perverse,” deviating from

the norm. The protagonists of these movies or photographs are seen as individuals with psychological problems, exhibitionists who make a show of their own perversion.

Curiosity is connected to the desire of exploring something far away from the idea that adolescents have about “normal sexual intercourse.” Homosexuality, perversions, violent practices and so on, are categorized as deviant from the norm – something not to condemn if both subjects want to engage in those practices, but are relegated to the “abnormal area.” Exploring this area with friends has two meanings. On the one hand it has the function of protecting the access to this kind of experiential sphere as far away from one’s own experience and on the other hand it has a “group normalizing function.” Watching specific images with friends and laughing with them about it becomes a way to “weigh the normality” or “abnormality” of specific behaviours. Adolescents in this way make a specific *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1972), what Gagnon and Simon (1973) defined as *sexual scripts*, or the competence to understand and act out socially learned, interiorised, and incorporated performances.

*Sometimes you do not know what to do, it is boring. So you watch weird videos with your friend to laugh! Everyone knows a weird video! There is a famous video like, I don't know if you know... [laugh]... 'two girls one cup'... that video is sickening! Anyway there are a lot of videos that make you laugh and you ask how someone could invent something like that! We watch that video not because of pleasure, but you watch a weird video together and then, joking, you speak about that.*

*(Boy, 17)*

#### **Four Types of Users**

Without looking for a proportional representation we can assert that in general the more open the dialogue on sex and sexuality is in the family, the less the adolescent uses the Internet for this kind of Information. They judge the information about this topic in the Web as something untrustworthy. Otherwise, when adolescents rely less upon their family, considering it a mere strict controller of their sexual life, the Internet becomes increasingly important. In this case the Internet together with the peer group becomes one of the main sources of information (Bleakley et al., 2009; Brown, 2000; DFI, 2009; Donati et al., 2000; EURISPES, 2001) and the Internet becomes useful to escape parents’ control. Hiding the trails, both informational and physical, of sexual intercourse becomes the primary preoccupation of adolescents who try to escape from excessively strict control that can cause problems. In this case the Internet becomes the accomplice of this silence, an informational resource that allows youth to access information without adult control. The same happens with the peer

group: when dialogue is more open it creates comparisons with others' experiences without symbolic sanctions, therefore, the consumption of the Internet is lower or rather, the more the Internet functions to supplement their knowledge.

We can create four types that summarize in an analytical way the behaviour of adolescents related to the use of the Internet in search of information related to sex and sexuality, in order to understand how the different sources of information take part with different import to the adolescent's experience. This categorization is based mainly on two dimensions: the trust in the source and the individual's sexual experience.

(1) The first type is composed of adolescents who do not use the Internet at all to look for information connected to sex and sexuality: "the sceptic." Due to the motivations explained earlier we have showed that this group of adolescents have a low level of trust in the Web. The sexual experience is variable. We can split this type in two different groups. On one hand there are adolescents who trust the family more and on the other hand girls and boys who prefer to speak about sex and sexuality with friends. Both groups are composed mainly of girls who find their mother or friends important referees with whom to speak about their experiences freely.

(2) Another type is what we can consider "embarrassed" and is composed of individuals who often use the Internet's resources to find information relating to sex and sexualities mainly in order to avoid derision and embarrassment. They do not speak about sex and sexuality with friends or parents. This group is composed mainly of boys with reduced sexual experiences.

(3) The third type is called "the balanced": those adolescents who use different sources of information about sex and sexuality in concert to better understand the diverse sexual issues from family, the Internet and in peer groups the answers they are looking for. This group is composed mainly of girls or boys with good sexual experiences who are able to speak with their mothers and friends. They also use the Internet to examine some questions in depth.

(4) Finally there are the "explorers" who use the Internet as an informational resource to satisfy their curiosity connected to topics that adolescents consider abnormal in relation to the sexual sphere. They use the Internet like a big encyclopaedia of sex and sexuality which can give information and images about paraphilia. This kind of use of the web, as I have described, is useful to define the idea of the border between normality and abnormality.

## Conclusion

The Internet allows adolescents to find resources for exploring their identity, emotions, and sexuality in creating relationships outside of traditional forms of support. What I have described is part of a much older process of social change that involves the transformation of the socialization processes and the agents connected with them.

The Internet amplifies changes in concepts of space, time, and interaction. Nowadays individuals live in a decline of the previously offered prescriptions and social norms. "The modern man is alone in the choice of goals and conduct of life, because today no one is capable of delivering certainty, if not temporary and revocable" (Morcellini, 1997, p. 11, translation of the author).

The socialization process, with the crisis of traditional agents (such as family, school, traditional media, etc.) that previously structured society, has changed over time into a process where the individual has more freedom to choose and to act while remaining within societal borders. This pluralisation was catalysed by the media, especially through the Internet. It puts the individual at the centre of communication flows (boyd, 2008) allowing them to decide, with an operation of *bricolage*, and to construct their own educational path (Wellman, 2012). Normativity of socialization allows the Internet to amplify this process by giving individuals access to an enormous quantity of information and gives more space for decision-making. This does not mean that the individuals are completely free to choose the contents and processes of socialization that affect them because of the social, cultural, and economic ties to which every human being is bound.

What I want to emphasize here is the enlargement of the peer group through a "do-it-yourself" socialization made possible through the Internet. This proves to be an advantage for adolescents who can combine ideas from the different agents of socialization, but it may become a drawback when the network becomes the only source of information. The research shows how the Internet is penetrating more and more into the adolescent's everyday life calling the role of specialists (not only medial, but also parents) into question. The change of the communication flow as I described in the introduction modifies the position of the actors both in the communication mechanism and in socialization. The presence of the Internet in everyday life assumes an important role in the social construction of sexuality and becomes a significant instrument that empowers the adolescent's agency. It is important to give to adolescents the interpretative instruments to move through this fragmented space composed by family, school, media, and peer group.



In sum, it is important to understand and focus on the everyday life of adolescents and their social conditions before focusing on what the Internet offers them (Livingstone, 2009). It is possible to lay the groundwork for adolescents to develop within digital media through using on-line resources in a critical way and recognizing the danger in that space. The presence of a new resource such as the Internet necessitates an integration with the other socialization agents (family, school, etc.) that have to leave behind silence around sex in order to support youth in their questions. To know how the Internet works – where to find information, for example – and to open up the possibility of dialogue with adults and peers could empower the knowledge around sexuality.

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