

Long abstract – Monographic section

YOUNG PEOPLE BEYOND STEREOTYPES
Edited by Carlo Buzzi

First-Year University Students in the Pandemic Emergency: Daily Life, Emotional Dimensions and Mediatization of Distance

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The Covid-19 pandemic, identified as a “total social fact”, profoundly reshaped our lives, particularly affecting the younger generation in the intricate process of growth and identity construction. This study explores the daily lives of Italian first-year university students during the crucial transition from high school to university, aiming to delve into the formative, emotional, relational and media-related challenges encountered. Additionally, the pandemic impact on the use of digital communication tools is scrutinized, shedding light on the dialectical complexity between online and offline life.

The pandemic period was characterized by prevailing feelings of fear and anguish. Galimberti emphasizes anguish, stemming from the intangible threat of a virus. This feeling, explored by Sartre, arises from the reflective self-perception of freedom, imposing a profound sense of responsibility. This sentiment does not offer comfort but translates into a 'being of distances'. In our view, the 'being of distances' concept focuses on identity-related being, reflecting the individual need for sociability and communication even when physically separate from the others. Lockdowns and uncertainties intensified anguish and depression levels, especially among youth. Despite physical separation, individuals sought social reproduction through new channels, including digital media. Social media played a crucial role in maintaining social connections, even with undesirable effects, like spectacularization by traditional media and the proliferation of fake news through digital platforms.

Contributing to the broader investigation of the pandemic impact on youth, our study aligns with Lundström's review, emphasizing shared experiences of isolation, limitations, and structural inequalities. Youth actively engaged in collective strategies to mitigate the pandemic effects, showing resilience and community support. Examining the impact on university life, our study emphasizes the foundational importance of social relationships and institutional support for students, in agreement with existing literature. Issues like academic and social concerns, mental health challenges, and disruptions of academic and social lives reflect the vulnerability of university students.

The adopted methodology includes a questionnaire distributed to first-year university students from three diverse Italian universities. The web survey conducted in April and May 2021 explored experiences related to online and face-to-face teaching, relationships, emotional well-being, and

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digital platforms. With 235 valid responses, the study used open-ended questions to capture the emotional, social and communicative context of young students during their first university year amid the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Following data collection, a qualitative content analysis was conducted using *Atlas.ti* software, offering a holistic view of the students' experiences. The findings illuminated the multifaceted nature of these experiences during the pandemic. Many students perceived their first year as a loss, exacerbated by the challenges of remote learning and the absence of any human contact. However, for some of them, remote education presented unexpected opportunities. The pandemic triggered a range of complex emotions, including anguish, anger, and stress, intertwined with a sense of deprivation due to restrictions and social distancing. Coping strategies varied – some students sought psychological support, while others embraced resilience by rediscovering passions or cultivating new hobbies.

Social media, both traditional and digital, played a pivotal role, serving as sources of information and socialization; yet, they also contributed to moral panic and the spread of misinformation. What emerges is a portrait of a generation capable of self-reflection, navigating the intricate relationship with technology, and addressing the inherent risks of constant digital connection. The study highlights the importance of achieving a dynamic and virtuous balance between online relationships in the digital realm and daily offline interactions in physical spaces.

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