International Virtual Youth Centre

Methodology, implementations and project results

Table of contents

01

What IVY is about and the Project Cycle.

Tihomir Velikinac

"The pandemic forced us to find another way to participate, opening a whole new chapter in cooperation and youth work for both youth workers and young people."

Thinking about this project and its experience opens up many questions. Some arose from the project itself, others from the pandemic, from our partners' activities during the pandemic, and from the special call with which this project was applied and implemented.

How did we organise activities for young people during the pandemic? How accessible was their participation? Did the pandemic teach us to work in a different environment? Do we now consider a broader, more digital or different approach to our work? Can we go back to the time before the pandemic and pretend it never happened?

To answer these questions we have to go back to the days of the pandemic; curfews, travel restrictions, home-schooling, etc. During this time, we worked with partners from different realities, each of which had different national regulations but some things in common: no youth centres, no open spaces and activities in youth centres, and no international travel and exchanges. Fortunately, we are all connected with young people who communicate with us, who want to participate, travel, explore, learn, share, and who have many skills. This prompted us to create an international network with daily activities for young people on both Instagram and Facebook. The content was varied, from sharing information to music challenges and mutual counselling. The pandemic forced us to find another way to participate, opening a whole new chapter in cooperation and youth work for both youth workers and young people. The

activities were quite experimental, so young people were curious and also gave feedback on how much it was influencing them, how much they think it can help them to participate better and also how much it was entertaining, connecting and educating them.

At this point came the call to the project and its implementation. This period of 'isolation' was a challenge and an opportunity for us to learn and transform. That is why, with the unexpected pandemic, in order to plan our project and future activities, we needed precise and stable ground on which to base our project. Together with our partners, we created a survey for young people participating in the activities of our organisations. A similar survey was also created for youth workers. With it, we obtained 'an open window' on participation times, networks, content, interests, sense of abandonment and aggregation, support, as well as the needs and wishes of young people and youth workers. This survey was a 'navigational chart' for all of us and with it also for the project, as our different regions had different needs and individual missions in the reality of each of our partners. The "Analysis of the reality of young people and youth workers after the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic" is free of charge and downloadable in 8 languages from the project webpage.

With the guidance of the survey, we created our international and local activity plans and understood at what level young people want/need to be digitally involved. We used this part to share information and provide support to young people in learning, interacting and sharing interests. Moreover, some partners, thanks to this research and the information it contained, as well as the competent support of the consortium, started their own local digital communities that they had previously avoided. Through the project, we saw the need to use social networks, content and digital communities to support our real existence,

activities, travel, real cultural learning and experiences with other cultures, etc. The results of the project helped us realise that current trends in technology and social networks can be used to support our work.

The activities of this project are officially over, the pandemic is considered over, yet with this project, we have created new communities and spaces to plan, participate and interact, learn about new cultures, exchange views and help each other. The content we consume is more 'filtered' and we see social media and online platforms not only as entertainment but also as a place to learn, interact and gather information. We and our project partners will also use our new digital spaces and communities in the future, transforming and adapting them according to the needs of our communities and sharing other projects with our partners and stakeholders.

Join us and follow our work!

02

Results of the Analysis of the Reality of Young People and Youth Workers after the Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

"The responses showed that young people want a safe socialising space based on respect for others, tolerance, open-mindedness and intolerance of discrimination, racism and xenophobia."

Chiara Maggi

This article summarises the results of two surveys conducted within the framework of the project "IVY - International Virtual Youth Centre", which were addressed to young people and youth workers and dealt with the effects of the pandemic period on their personal and professional lives, habits, and routines. The results of the surveys are comprehensively available and downloadable on the project website.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUTH WORKERS
The survey, aimed at identifying the main effects on youth workers during and after the pandemic, collected 35 responses from Spain, Serbia, Germany, Romania, Italy, Slovenia and Croatia. The surveys were conducted during the winter/spring of 2022.

Only 14% of respondents reported an improvement in youth work in the pandemic and post-pandemic period, with a positive effect on learning new digital tools and approaches in youth work. On the other hand, 77% declared a negative effect on their work. On a general scale, the strengthening of youth workers' digital skills was positive and workplaces adapted and introduced new digital tools and resources into their workflows. On the other hand, the main differences from previous working modalities were a reduction in face-to-face interaction, empathy, spaces for creativity and improvisation, and the spontaneity of youth participation. Online activities also did not reach 'everyone'.

Regarding the workflow, 65.7% of the survey participants observed an increase in the amount of work, with longer hours during and after the pandemic. While 48.5% believed that the use of new digital resources had improved the organisation of work, the need to learn new digital tools and adapt to more structured work made working hours particularly burdensome. A 36-hour working week would help according to the respondents. Worrying, then, were the results related to mental health: 51% consider it more difficult to do their job during this period; 28.5% find it difficult to get in touch with young people; 34% feel overwhelmed by their tasks; 25% feel like giving up; 34% have thought about consulting a professional.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG PEOPLE
During the spring of 2022, a survey to identify trends in online socialisation and the main effects of social networks on young people during and after the pandemic collected a total of 95 responses from Spain, Serbia, Germany, Romania, Italy and Slovenia. It emerged that although the use of social networks increased during the pandemic and post-pandemic period (60% of young people said they spent more time online after the pandemic, especially on Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube, WhatsApp and Facebook), 63.2% of them did NOT participate in online activities during the pandemic. The preference is still for face-to-face activities, while one of the reasons for non-participation online was a lack of information.

Also for this survey, unfortunately, the data on mental health and online daily routines were not positive: almost 18% of young people feel isolated from their friends; 30% say it is now more difficult to make friends; 41% feel the need to talk to someone to help them; 44% feel overwhelmed; 47% have difficulty concentrating; 51% feel like escaping their daily lives.

The survey then asked young people what characteristics a virtual youth centre should have. The responses showed that young people want a safe socialising space based on respect for others, tolerance, open-mindedness and intolerance of discrimination, racism and xenophobia. The virtual youth centre should offer audiovisual educational content, sharing and socialising spaces and promote youth issues through chats, real-time communication, videos and photos, including security filters to prevent fake news, bullying, hate speech and data protection. The interests of young people with regard to activities are very varied: from educational workshops to planning and creating trips, from dating/socialising to sharing feelings. But above all, they would like to socialise in a safe and secure environment.

03

The use of Discord. Development of the Participative Platform IVY: Contents and Methodology.

Chiara Maggi

The first work phase of the IVY project was to conduct an analysis of the reality of young people and youth workers after the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This analysis allowed us to develop strategies to build an online platform with partners: a virtual international youth centre.

For the development of the platform hosting our virtual international youth centre, the main points of the research conducted on young people were taken up. This was an initial orientation for the development process of the platform.

But first, through organised work in groups, we answered the following questions:

What are the differences between a physical and a virtual youth centre?

In a virtual youth centre, the space is unlimited, more accessible, intuitive, safe, requires fewer resources and adapts to the new habits of young people. A physical youth centre offers more/ better interaction and is more personalised.

Why IVY? What is its international flavour?

It uses English as the main language; it offers participants the opportunity to face new challenges, learn new digital technologies and learn about international projects; it raises awareness of the realities of each country; it offers the chance to discover new cultures.

What added value does a virtual youth centre have in a post-pandemic period?

It is more accessible, promotes digital skills, offers educational and emotional resources, creates an international virtual environment, strengthens experiences and sharing, maintains contact with young people participating in international exchanges and is flexible.

A virtual youth centre is also designed to complement and strengthen a physical youth centre by providing additional solutions (it is never a substitute). It also aims to create a safe and open environment for young people to socialise internationally and access new opportunities.

The online platform we chose to host our virtual youth centre is Discord, which is very intuitive and allows for the sharing of activities and content of interest to young people. To develop the 'platform content tree', we carried out an analysis of the form that a physical youth centre takes, in terms of the organisation of spaces. Particular attention was always paid to the needs of young people, which emerged from the research but also related to their use in the youth centres of each partner.

Based on the characteristics (in terms of spaces, activities and values) that a physical youth centre should have, we developed the content tree of our virtual youth centre - IVY, as follows:

· Rules and instructions for using the platform
· Info: welcome, announcements, official links, ongoing projects, FAQ
· Community: chat, ideas/feedback, memes area, Youtube area
· Virtual youth centre: music, languages, DIY, app-world, digital tools, gaming area, radio, cooking, sport
· International Cinema: film listings, group chat
· Competitions: photography, video, video games
· Podcasts: podcast ads, group chat
· Categories for each association: general chat, ongoing projects, local tips and tricks, space for calls and meetings
· Youth Workers Zone

This virtual youth space will enable young people to be in contact with young people from other European countries, improve their English, meet young people from other countries and cultures, access resources, share activities and workshops, etc.

Our community on Discord is a space where everyone can share their creations with other people.

Although it is for everyone, everything that happens in the community can only be seen by members who have passed and accepted the server rules. Even if young people and animators want physical contact, Discord can help them create bonds and friendships, even from a distance, allowing them to meet people from other countries that they might not otherwise have met.

Having an online community right now can help reach more people and make them realise the different opportunities they have.

04

The impact of Discord in Rural Youth Communities.

«One of the biggest ways that Discord has impacted the lives of rural youth is by providing them with a sense of belonging and community.»

Cosmin Catană
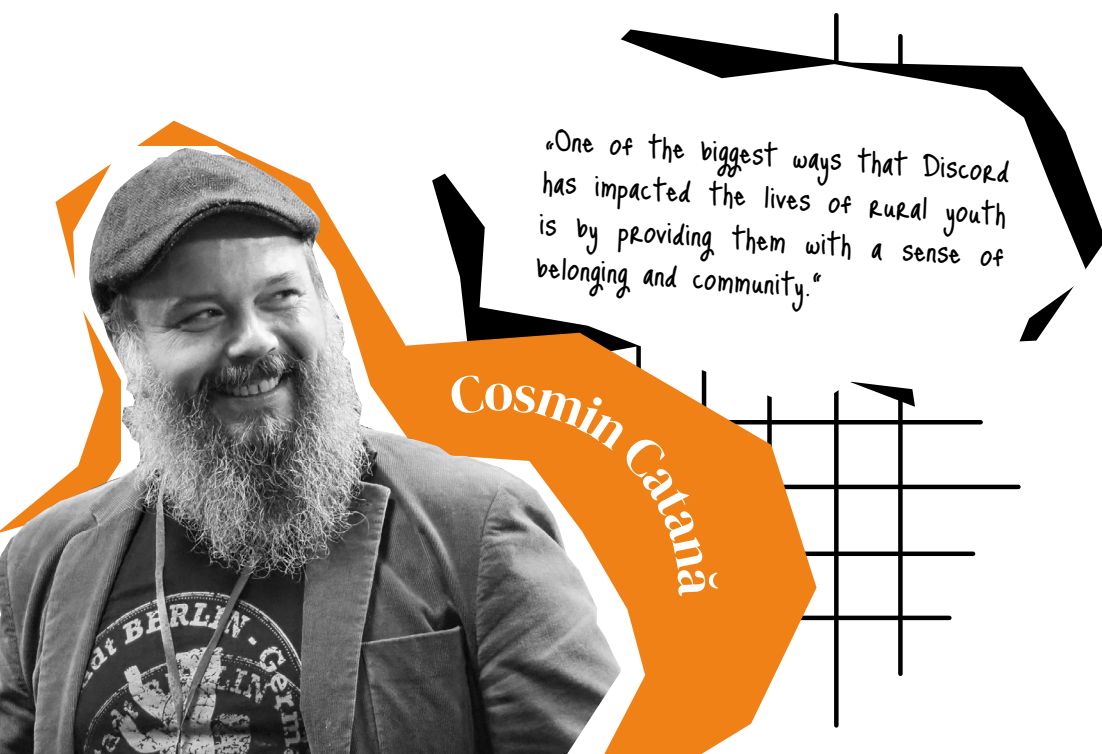
Discord is a popular communication platform that has been widely adopted by the youth in rural areas. This platform allows users to create and join virtual communities, called "servers," where they can chat, share media, and play games with others. The impact of Discord on the lives of rural youth has been significant, as it has provided them with a sense of connection and community that they may not have otherwise had access to.

One of the biggest ways that Discord has impacted the lives of rural youth is by providing them with a sense of belonging and community. Many rural youth may feel isolated and disconnected from their peers, as they may not have as many opportunities to socialise and interact with others in person. Discord provides a space where they can connect with others who share their interests and passions, and form friendships and communities that they may otherwise not have been able to.

In addition to providing a sense of community, Discord also allows rural youth to access information and resources that they may not have otherwise had access to. For example, many servers on Discord are dedicated to specific topics or interests, such as gaming, music, or education. These servers provide users with a wealth of information and resources on these topics, and can help rural youth to expand their knowledge and interests in ways that they may not have been able to otherwise.

Discord also provides rural youth with a sense of agency and control over their online interactions. Many social media platforms are designed to be highly curated and controlled, with algorithms that determine what content users see and who they interact with. Discord, on the other hand, is a more open and decentralised platform, where users have more control over their interactions and the content they see. This can be empowering for rural youth, as it allows them to take an active role in shaping their online experiences.

Overall, Discord has had a significant impact on the lives of rural youth by providing them with a sense of community, access to information and resources, and a sense of agency and control over their online interactions. While there are some concerns around the impact of social media on mental health, the benefits of platforms like Discord in providing a sense of community and connection for rural youth cannot be denied. It has given them access to resources and opportunities that they may not have otherwise had, and has helped to build a sense of belonging and connection in an otherwise isolated environment.

05

The Potential of Using Digital Tools to Support Youth Centre Activities and Youth Engagement in the Rural Areas of Romania.

Cosmin Catană

The use of digital tools in youth centres in rural Romania can have a significant impact on the young people who use them, as well as on the community as a whole. Here are some potential impacts: Increased access to information: By using digital tools such as computers and the internet, young people in rural Romania can access a wealth of information that might not be available to them otherwise. This can help them with school work, research on career opportunities, and learning about the world beyond their immediate community. Improved digital literacy: Learning to use digital tools effectively is an important skill in today's world. By providing access to computers and other digital tools in youth centres, young people in rural Romania can improve their digital literacy skills and be better prepared for the workforce. Increased social connections: Digital tools can help young people in rural Romania connect with their peers and others beyond their immediate community. This can be especially important for those who feel isolated or disconnected from their peers. Enhanced creativity: Digital tools such as video and photo editing software can help young people express themselves creatively and develop new skills. This can be especially important for those who may not have access to other creative outlets in their community. Community development: By providing access to digital tools in youth centres, rural communities in Romania can attract new businesses and industries that require a digitally skilled workforce. This can help boost the local economy and provide new opportunities for young people in the area. Overall, the impact of using digital tools in youth centres in rural Romania can be far-reaching, from improved access to information and digital literacy to enhanced creativity and community development.

06

Young People and Social Media Use: What's the Impact on Mental Health?

Nikola Veljković

«It's important to primarily educate young people about all potential threats, from addiction problems and imposed standards to cyberbullying.»

Social networks have become an integral and unavoidable part of our lives, especially among young people. We use them to stay in touch with friends and family, share information and stay informed, share our views or be socially engaged. Social networks have enabled us to do all this quickly and easily. To make other people easily accessible to us, regardless of where they are in the world. For young people, this possibility of simple networking is important because through socialisation, among other things, they satisfy the need for connection, belonging, acceptance or fulfilment. However, in situations where these needs remain unsatisfied, a suitable ground is created for the development of various mental health problems, because social life is an important factor in our mental health. And what role does social media play in that?

After a large amount of research, it is now possible to talk about the negative aspects of them with great certainty. Does this mean that social media is bad? No, social networks do bring with them many benefits. When it comes to mental health, in various research we come across information that young people consider social media to be the main source of information and education on this topic. This is especially noticeable in societies where education and mental health care are not part of the formal education system, neither through the curriculum nor through an adequate system of psychological support. But then, what is the problem? How does the negative impact of social media on the mental health of young people come about? It is important to note that social networks are not a threat in themselves, but the

way that they are used can be harmful: excessive use (addiction, FOMO - fear of missing out), age-inappropriate content,, as well as the violence that is present in cyberspace, to which young people can be exposed, can lead to negative outcomes.

Social networks also lead to a distorted self-image. Young people are very sensitive in this matter because adolescence carries many questions and insecurities. For a significant percentage of young people, the number of followers, likes and positive comments have become a measure of personal value. For example, if their post does not get the number of likes they consider appropriate, there is a change in mood in a negative direction. Social networks have imposed certain "beauty standards", due to which young people often compare themselves with other people's content, often modified with different filters, which can lead to a young person starting to notice their flaws more and more, becoming dissatisfied with their appearance, which can later lead to mental health problems.

If we know that social media is full of these pitfalls, how can we overcome them? It's important to primarily educate young people about all potential threats, from addiction problems and imposed standards to cyberbullying. It is also important to work on developing their self-confidence and self-acceptance, as well as different skills such as questioning beliefs and attitudes, critical thinking, emotional intelligence or different social skills. It is also important to talk to young people about this topic and encourage them to understand the difference between the virtual world and the real world, and that it is perfectly okay to allow themselves to miss things.

So let's sum it up. Social networks can have a positive impact on the lives of young people if they are used responsibly. In order to avoid harmful consequences, it is important to educate

young people about potential threats, as well as to work on strengthening their critical thinking and various social skills. Social media platforms are an integral part of our everyday life and we should not run away from them, but rather teach young people how to use their potential in the best possible way.

"Social networks can have a positive impact on the lives of young people if they are used responsibly."

07

Social Media and Related Content in Young People's Lives.

Milica Duždević
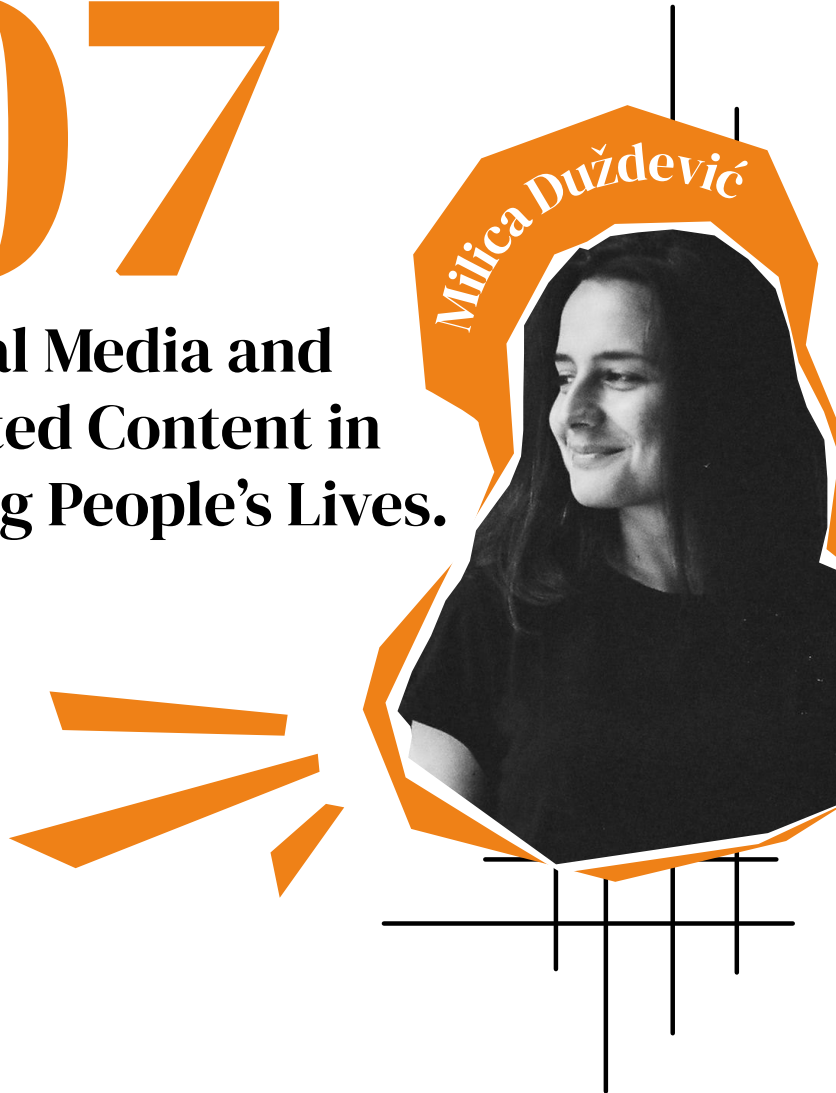
Social media has become an integral part of young people's lives in today's digital age. It has transformed the way we communicate, interact, and share information. While social media platforms offer many benefits such as the ability to connect with others, share experiences and learn about the world, there are also negative aspects that need to be considered. This text will explore the impact of social media on young people's lives and the associated content that is prevalent on these platforms.

Those platforms have opened up new avenues for communication and connection. They allow young people to connect with friends and family members who are far away, stay updated on current events, and express themselves in ways that were not possible before. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok have become the go-to places for young people to share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences. These platforms provide a way for young people to express themselves creatively, and to find others who share similar interests, which was one of the main goals of our project.

However, social media platforms are also associated with negative aspects that can impact young people's lives. One of the biggest issues is cyberbullying. Social media platforms can be a breeding ground for bullies who use these platforms to harass and intimidate others. Cyberbullying can have severe consequences on young people's mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and even suicide in some cases. Another issue is the prevalence

of misinformation and fake news on social media platforms, which can lead to confusion and even harm. Additionally, social media platforms can be addictive, leading young people to spend excessive amounts of time on these platforms, which can negatively impact their mental health and well-being.

The content that is prevalent on social media platforms can also impact young people's lives. The rise of influencer culture on social media has created an environment where young people are bombarded with unrealistic beauty standards and lifestyles. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. The excessive use of filters and editing software has led to a distorted sense of reality, leading young people to feel pressure to conform to these unrealistic standards.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the use of social media by young people. With lockdowns and social distancing measures in place, young people have increasingly turned to social media platforms as a means of staying connected with their peers and the wider world. Social media platforms provided a way for young people to stay in touch with friends and family, share their experiences, and engage in activities such as online learning, gaming, and entertainment. The increased use of social media during the pandemic has also highlighted the importance of digital literacy and responsible use of these platforms. It is crucial that young people are educated on how to use social media responsibly, including how to identify and avoid misinformation, how to protect their privacy and personal data, and how to deal with cyberbullying and online harassment. As young people continue to rely on social media during the pandemic, it is important to prioritise digital literacy education and promote responsible social media use. Parents, educators, and policymakers must work together to ensure that young people have the tools and knowledge to navigate social media

platforms safely and effectively. By promoting responsible social media use, we can harness the benefits of these platforms while mitigating the potential harms and ensuring that young people are equipped to thrive in the digital age.

During the pandemic and even after it, the IVY project enabled young people to continue sharing their creativity online and the creation of an online community platform specifically designed for sharing art, music, and other creative content wouldn't be possible without our partners.

Join one of us and become part of this great online creative community!

„The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the use of social media by young people."
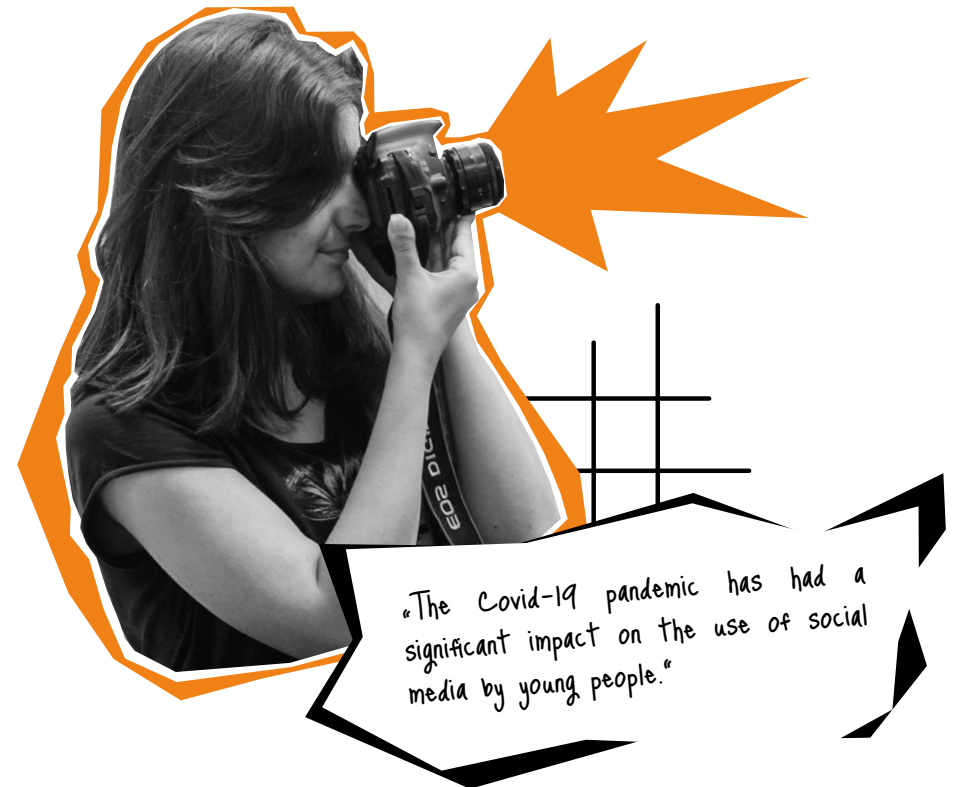
08

Impact of Social Media on the Youth in the Multicultural Communities in Different Municipalities Around Barcelona.

Veronica Peral

S ocial media is a mass phenomenon with homogenising tendencies in which youth are the predominant public user, and therefore it is important in the development phase of their personal identity.

On the one hand, adolescents feel an enormous need for recognition from others and need to see their identity recognised and accepted by the people who are significant to them since they are in a process of discovering their identity and finding out who they really are, or who they would like to be. On the other hand, one of the important aspects related to identity is the concept of self-esteem, understood as the idea that one has about one's own worth as a person and that is based on all the thoughts, feelings, sensations and experiences that have been collected throughout that person's life. In this sense, social networks play a very important role, since on many occasions, in order to feel accepted among their peers, young people tend to compare themselves with other people and create virtual personalities that become much more attractive than their own to relate and interact with other people, projecting an idealised image.

However, social interactions with their peers and the establishment of new friendships not only increase the self-esteem of young people, but it also helps them in learning and in the acquisition and comparison of social emotions, and it presents them with multiple possibilities of accessing information, generating flexible communities that allow different information

and socialisation alternatives in multicultural environments. With these interactions, adolescents and young people not only consume media content, but also share, reproduce, redistribute and comment on it, learning to cooperate, have different perspectives, and to be more confident, more altruistic, less aggressive and more open-minded and tolerant.

Likewise, in a context in which face-to-face socialising spaces have been reduced (parks), demonised ('botellón') or more expensive (nightclubs), and after a pandemic period in which millions of young people have seen their leisure options limited, time spent on social media has increased. But then, are social networks bad? The experts agree: no, but it is necessary to warn of its risks and educate in its use, because, beyond technology addictions, adolescents face, by the mere fact of existing on social networks, two significant risks: machismo and aesthetic pressure, which in turn, have their peculiarities depending on the cultural and social context to which the young people belong.

On the one hand, many young women express that, although they have shared similar speeches and almost the same videos as their male peers, they have received insults or offensive language, sexualization, humiliation for physical reasons, intimidation, harassment and threats, while they (boys) have been taken very seriously and when they have been criticised, it has been with elaborate criticisms and, if they have been insulted, they have never gone beyond the personal sphere. On the other hand, there is an aesthetic pressure and often unattainable canons of beauty, which have accentuated eating disorders since the pandemic, although it must be taken into account that the development of an eating disorder is multifactorial and all the responsibility can not be attributed to what is projected on social media.

In conclusion, the important thing is to know how to convey that Tik Tok, Instagram and other platforms are a world of opportunity, where there are also many good things, but one has to know how to choose the references. Moreover, with technological globalisation, there is a process of cultural homogenisation and youth from different cultural backgrounds cannot remain oblivious to this reality. Networks offer the possibility of living in a global environment while strengthening local ideas, but they also serve as a speaker for the different cultures of the young people who live in the different municipalities around Barcelona, although they can also be extensible to other countries.

«Networks offer the possibility of living in a global environment while strengthening local ideas, but they also serve as a speaker for the different cultures of the young people who live in the different municipalities around Barcelona, although they can also be extensible to other countries."

09

Online Community Engagement Tools in Communities With Fewer Opportunities in Sicily.

«Certainly, the covid pandemic has had a major impact, forcing the use of digital tools due to the lockdown to overcome the impossibility of teaching and going to school in person.»

Dario Palermo

SITUATION OF DISABLED PEOPLE AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH FEWER OPPORTUNITIES IN THE AREA

Strauss works closely with organisations that work with disabled people for their support and social integration. At the same time, one of Strauss' targets are young people with fewer opportunities and who face disadvantages. Disabled people, apart from the support of their families and a few professional connections, suffer from social and physical isolation. The structural conditions and architectural barriers in the town certainly do not help. While they are not seen as a social stigma,they would certainly like to be more integrated into local society. Most of the young people in Mussomeli can be considered disadvantaged because of the geographical isolation that the area suffers. There is only one daily bus to larger cities such as Palermo, Agrigento or Caltanissetta. The nearest railway station is 10km away and is not connected to Mussomeli by any public transport. The solution, which is not always accessible to everyone and especially to young people, is to own a car. At the same time, some young people suffer from economic and other social disadvantages.

THE USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS IN YOUTHWORK – SCHOOLS AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

10 interviews were conducted with different target groups. The respondents were 3 youth workers, 3 social workers of a centre for disabled people (2 operators and 1 logopedist), 1 person affected by physical disability (spastic paresis), and 3 high school teachers. All the interviewees are from or live in Mussomeli. The age of the respondents ranged from 27 to 58 years old.

Of the 10 respondents, only 5 make regular or constant use of digital tools, specifically 2 youth workers and 2 teachers. It is interesting to note that, compared to the past, the use of digital tools to support learning has also taken off in schools. This is perhaps due both to the advancement and technological updating of teaching and to the drive of young people who are much more technologically minded than in the past.

Certainly, the covid pandemic has had a major impact, forcing the use of digital tools due to the lockdown to overcome the impossibility of teaching and going to school in person. At the same time, the pandemic allowed organisations such as Strauss APS to enhance and innovate the way they communicate and conduct their activities digitally. During the pandemic, in general all organisations' digital strategy was enhanced, work was made more digital, more integrated with new systems and more interactive, in order to cope with any other lockdowns or other need to work remotely.

Among the 3 operators of the disability centre interviewed, we found a total absence of the use of digital tools. One of the operators of the centre for the disabled underlined the negative impact of the pandemic and of digital on the users of the centre, because the screen divides and there is a need for human contact. In general, there is a mistrust towards digital tools and social networks even if it is acknowledged that they are and have been important to maintain contact with users. The person with disabilities interviewed stated that he/she does not want to use digital tools or social media and only uses video tools to watch videos of relatives or comic videos. He/she does not feel comfortable being seen in videos and therefore never records them because he/she does not like people to know about his/her things, and he/she is also a bit shy and, for example, prefers traditional calls to video calls.

NEEDS OF TARGET GROUPS, OPERATORS AND DIFFICULTIES DUE TO THE PANDEMIC

Depending on the target group identified, the needs encountered in general and during the pandemic period changed. The speech therapist and the operators of the centre for disabled people, as well as the disabled person interviewed, all mentioned the need to develop more awareness both for the disabled person and for the centres dealing with disabled people. The community and the territory should be closer and consider the centres not as a place for madmen and cripples, but places that provide different people with opportunities for growth and training. According to the speech therapist interviewed, the greatest need is not only social inclusion but also the participation of disabled people in the life of the community; that is, the real need of these people, the possibility to carry out the same social, recreational, and professional activities, and the possibility to access the same opportunities. The disabled person interviewed, besides feeling the need to live in an area without architectural barriers, would like people not to pity him/her or look at him/her in a strange way. This is why he/she feels uncomfortable being in public and, for example, going to eat in restaurants.

According to teachers, youth workers and social workers of the disability centres, in all target groups there is a very strong need for empathy and human contact - sometimes empathy should be increased even in professional figures. Targets need to relate with others, they need to express what they have experienced. Everybody has been down in the pandemic period, but nobody openly says so. Targets are more introverted, they don't let themselves go, they are almost used to being alone by now, they need to talk. The targets now need points of reference, they all need to go back to the life they had before the pandemic and not to hear about covid anymore.

The youth workers also register a very strong lack of trust that, also before the pandemic, was very high in their regard. In the organisation, from the pandemic onwards, even today, trust has been lacking, but not in relation to what they do, but to the fear that people have when sending children or young people to the organisation - they are always afraid that there could be a contagion, that there could be something difficult. Another thing they noticed is the need of young people to be listened to, because they don't feel involved, they don't feel enough, they don't feel accepted because they have been at home for a long time. They lived a digital life for 1 year, they didn't have contacts for a long time, and so now they feel the need to be protagonists.

«Certainly, the covid pandemic has had a major impact, forcing the use of digital tools due to the lockdown to overcome the impossibility of teaching and going to school in person.»

10

Social Networks and Youth Participation in the Rural Areas of Slovenia.

Marko Lenarčič

„Young people have not socialised, they have forgotten genuine personal contact and, above all, they have forgotten what it is like to be with their peers."

Unfortunately, youth work in Slovenia is still quite undervalued, and there is no study course in the school system where young people can study youth work to become youth workers. So, anyone in Slovenia can become a youth worker and get a job in a youth organisation or youth centre. Due to the great interest of young people in European mobility, municipalities in Slovenia have started to work on obtaining the "Youth Friendly Municipality" certificate. Municipalities started to adopt and prepare youth strategies, as they realised that rural areas were struggling with young people leaving and moving to the bigger Slovenian cities. As a result, Slovenian municipalities started to prepare strategic developments on youth housing, youth education, youth leisure activities and cultural events for young people. These measures are very important to ensure that we can maintain youth work and youth centres in rural areas in Slovenia because young people need them very much. Young people in rural areas in Slovenia are most likely to join active associations, but the most important thing for them is membership in the local volunteer fire association. Firefighting in Slovenia is part of tradition, part of the people and a very important part of growing up for young people. For young people, it is a way of strengthening their competencies, socialising with their peers and teaching them an important lesson in solidarity for life. Over the last 10 years, young people have had to cope with the closure of a large number of youth spaces in rural areas because, unfortunately, municipalities have not had enough money to maintain and fund these spaces. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we

realised that these spaces were a very important part of young people's lives and also an important part of the local community, so municipalities started to renovate and rebuild them. Another big reason was that we saw a big increase in the use of social networks. Young people have not socialised, they have forgotten genuine personal contact and, above all, they have forgotten what it is like to be with their peers. In the last 3 years, there has been a huge increase in the use of the Tik-Tok app, the Instagram app and the Snapchat app. The use of the Facebook app has increased among the middle generation, while young people have retreated more to the aforementioned social networks. However, through the research we have developed with our project partners, we have found that many Slovenian young people still use the Facebook app. When we talk about young people in Slovenia, we are overwhelmingly referring to young people from rural areas, as Slovenia has only two major cities, the capital Ljubljana and the second largest city Maribor. Other cities and towns are geographically remote and many young people come from rural areas or smaller towns where there has been a steady focus on youth and youth work in recent years. Policymakers have noticed that young people are leaving rural environments and moving to the aforementioned larger cities in Slovenia. Many young people have also gone abroad in recent years. Through our project and our research on online youth work in Slovenia, we have found that young people want face-to-face contact and personal interaction. Young people overwhelmingly disliked online activities and the "online youth centre" during the pandemic. In the survey, the vast majority of young people said that they were forced to study at a distance (online) due to school and therefore wanted a different approach and to spend their free time differently. Because of the pandemic, they were spending it on social networks. They did not want to participate in online events to a large extent because, as mentioned before, they did not want to stay connected through online tools after

school. In Slovenia, or in our part of the country, young people spent their free time online (Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat). This can be felt even after the pandemic, young people still stayed in touch through the aforementioned networks. But they are now making the most of every second for face-to-face contact and face-to-face socialising.

«Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we realised that these spaces were a very important part of young people's lives and also an important part of the local community, so municipalities started to renovate and rebuild them."