Gen Z and Web Reputation Management in Social Media. What Are the Implications for Digital Capital?[*]

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Abstract

Starting from the debate on Internet risks and opportunities for young people, the article focuses on the topic of web reputation in social media, and analyses GenZers' web reputation management strategies on social network sites. The study, based on empirical research conducted in the Campania region (South Italy) during the COVID-19 pandemic, describes the most relevant practices adopted by young people to cope with risky online experiences with the aim of minimizing the harm received, and the role of key agencies in mediating risks and supporting coping strategies. This work is intended to be useful for reflecting on the possibility of viewing young people's web reputation management strategies in relation to the concept of digital capital, drawing new considerations from the logic that rules the opportunities and risks dialectic arising from the use of social media.

Keywords: social media, web reputation, digital capital.

1. Introduction. Gen Z online: between risks and opportunities

In recent decades, the widespread penetration of the Internet and digital media into the everyday lives of young people has prompted many scholars to investigate the relationship new generations have with ICT. In the field of Internet Studies, the wealth of research conducted on the topic highlights that the digital media ecosystem plays important "mediating" functions in young people's growth, education and socialization, with significant implications for

the construction of identities, social relations and representations of reality (Savonardo, 2007, 2013, 2020; Savonardo & Marino, 2021).

Since the beginning of the third millennium, scientific debate has been dominated by the opposition between *digital natives* and *digital immigrants* (Prensky, 2001), to indicate the generational gap in the use of the Internet and digital media between younger generations – such as Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2000) and Generation Z (Dimock, 2019) – that are considered "native speakers" of the digital language, and adult generations – such as Generation X and Baby Boomers – that "learn it later in life" with greater difficulty. Although it is true that Millennials are the pioneers of digital and that GenZers are *always on*, anytime and anywhere (Savonardo & Marino, 2021), Prensky's definition has been widely accused of determinism (Buckingham & Willet, 2006; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007), so much so that the scholar later reformulated the original concept of digital natives into the idea of digital wisdom (Prensky, 2009).

In fact, over the years, much research has shown that not all "digital natives" are experienced users, but there are many gaps among Gen Z related to technological, economic, social, and cultural factors that affect access to and use of the Internet and new media and the development of digital literacy. In particular, studies point out that young people's media appropriation, digital activities, quality of online experiences, and digital literacy are conditioned by socioeconomic status (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007) and cultural and social capital of the family (Micheli, 2015), social, cultural, and technical skills possessed (boyd, 2014; Livingstone, 2009), ability to access online opportunities (Peter & Valkenburg Patti, 2006), levels of access, participation, and digital literacy within participatory cultures and Web 2. 0 (Jenkins et al., 2009; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), by parental socialization style to media (Aroldi, 2012; Mascheroni, 2013), by educational backgrounds and peer-to-peer socialization (Accorsi & Gui, 2006; Bulger & Davison, 2018; Marino, 2020; Morcellini & Mulargia, 2012; Savonardo & Marino, 2021).

This brief overview suggests that the relationship between the new generations, digital media and the Internet is highly articulated and can only be analyzed by considering the variety of factors involved and the range of material and immaterial resources that young people possess and are able to mobilize. One of the most relevant research frameworks in this sense is proposed by Sonia Livingstone as part of the European project EU Kids Online, which for more than a decade has been investigating the online behaviors of children and young people in more than 30 European countries, including Italy, focusing on the analysis of Internet risks and opportunities. In this user-centric perspective, young people are conceived as social actors with a particular knowledge of the digital environment, more or less socialized, aware and competent, acting online

according to different psychological, behavioral, technological, social and cultural factors.

EU Kids Online research specifically points out that opportunities and risks derived from Internet use are two sides of the same coin and move together, following a logic called *the more, the more* (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2018). In other words, there is a marked interdependence between access to opportunities and access to online risks: the more young people increase their access to the Internet and are exposed to online opportunities, the greater the likelihood of finding themselves in risky situations; likewise, the more young people experience risks and benefit from online opportunities, the more they gain awareness and skills (Livingstone et al., 2011). According to Livingstone (2009), the crucial issue is to understand how young people try to achieve a balance between maximizing opportunities and minimizing risks.

According to this perspective, some research carried out in Italy at a local and cross-regional level about the relationship between teenagers and social media (Aroldi & Vittadini, 2018; Marino, 2020; Savonardo & Marino, 2021) shows that even though young people are familiar with the Internet and digital media and are well aware of the opportunities offered by social networking sites (SNSs) in terms of expressiveness, identity construction, and sociability, they often experience risky online phenomena, such as cyberbullying, sexting, privacy violations, and personal data abuse. In particular, research shows that these risks are closely related to the social and relational opportunities provided by SNSs, and certain online behaviors of young people in taking advantage of these opportunities are found to be positively correlated with a higher likelihood of having risky experiences. Not surprisingly, the main factors of *risky communication* (Livingstone & Ólafsson, 2011) are precisely the elements that young people see as sources of individual and social opportunities, e.g., the amount and variety of personal information in user profiles, public profile visibility, friendship, and sharing private information with strangers. The research also makes it clear that a relevant dimension for analyzing the interdependence between online risks and opportunities relates to *web reputation management strategies*, i.e., the set of practices adopted by young people to cope with risky experiences in SNSs with the aim of minimizing the harm received. Web reputation analysis proves to be very useful in intercepting young people's coping strategies in the face of online risks and the ability to "learn from mistakes," turning the problematic situation into a learning opportunity to increase digital awareness.

In the wake of this research, our article aims to update knowledge related to the web reputation management strategies of GenZers in SNSs, with a focus on the territory of Campania, the Italian region with the highest social media penetration rate among the youth population (Istat, 2020), but is at the same

time weak on the digital divide and human capital development front (Agenda Digitale, 2020). Precisely because of these characteristics, Campania is a particularly interesting case in the national panorama. In addition, the article makes a contribution in the context of the research carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the Internet and digital media came to be of crucial importance in the everyday lives of young people, with a significant impact on the information and knowledge, school, work, entertainment and relationship fronts (Buffardi et al., 2021). In particular, the significant increase in the use of social media during lockdown and social distancing periods testifies that these tools play a relevant social glue function and support new generations in developing resilience practices to cope with fear, sadness, worry, stress, anxiety, mood swings, isolation, boredom, sense of marginalization, uncertainty about the present, and distrust in the future (Di Vanni et al., 2020; Lombardo & Mauceri, 2020; Toniolo Institute, 2020).

Starting from this overview, the article is structured as follows. In the second paragraph we discuss the main arguments that deal with the issue of web reputation in the social media context from a theoretical point of view, with the purpose being to highlight the conceptual revolution of reputation in Web 2.0 and its implications for studies about the online behaviors of Gen Z. In the third paragraph we describe the details of the empirical research, which uses a quantitative methodology through an exploratory survey conducted in the Campania region between 2020 and 2021 on GenZers' practices of web reputation management in relation to online risks such as cyberbullying, sexting, revenge porn, privacy violation and many others. Subsequently, in the fourth paragraph we provide a summary of the most relevant findings concerning the web reputation management practices adopted by young people to cope with the risks experienced in SNS, and the role of key agencies, such as family, school, and peer groups in mediating risks and supporting coping strategies. Finally, in the last section, we consider several implications derived from our research and we argue that there is the possibility of considering young people's web reputation management strategies in relation to the concept of *digital capital* and, therefore, drawing new considerations from the logic that rules the opportunities and risks dialectic arising from the use of social media.

2. Literature review. Web reputation and social media

Reputation is a very complex and multifaceted concept to define, with blurred boundaries, and which crosses numerous disciplinary fields. In the field of sociology, the topic of reputation is present in the study of the social structuring processes (Bourdieu, 1979; Simmel, 1900; Weber, 1922), knowledge

construction (Elias, 1969) and, in particular, the dynamics of identity and social recognition (Crespi, 2004; Goffman, 1959) and can be defined by the expression "what others say about us, even without our knowledge". In this sense, one can distinguish between a *subjective reputation*, which is the value attributed by an individual to himself or herself, and an *objective reputation*, which is the value attributed by other social actors to the individual. From Goffman's (1959) perspective, a good or bad reputation depends on the balance between *self-management* (assertion of one's identity and public image) and *impression management* (management of others' impressions). In fact, as Donatiello (2015) argues, reputation is a part of the construction of one's identity in relation to others, which is formed through social recognition and expressed through positive or negative judgments shared within one's social network. In this sense, reputation is not a fixed and unchanging "object," but a situated "process" that is constantly changing, according to the different relational dynamics among social actors and the different contexts of everyday life.

In information society, in particular in the communicative context of social media, which is based on the technological and ideological principles of Web 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), *convergence culture* (Jenkins, 2006) and *networked communication* (Cardoso, 2008; Castells, 1996; Rainie & Wellman, 2012), the new dimension of *web reputation* has gradually emerged, i.e. the overall totality of information posted online about a subject, which is the sum of the information shared by the subject themselves and information about them posted by others, even without their awareness.

Largely used as an interpretive category in economics and marketing (Chieffi, 2020; Gandini, 2019), web reputation is a recent topic in the field of sociology of communication because in social media – through multimedia, user generated content (UGC), social sharing activities (Jenkins et al., 2013; John, 2013), the creation of personal profiles and social networks (boyd & Ellison, 2008) – the occasions, means and processes through which opinions about a person are created, propagated, and changed are multiplied (Origgi, 2016).

According to the *Honeycomb of Social Media* model (Kietzmann et al., 2011), reputation represents one of the seven "functional building blocks" in users' experience of using social media (along with identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, groups). In this model, reputation is defined as the extent to which users know the social standing of others and content, from which derive some important implications, such as monitoring the strength, passion, sentiment, and reach of users and brands. So, in agreement with Boccia Artieri (2020), the rise of the Internet and social media is generating a conceptual revolution of reputation because social web platforms affect reputation building in new ways through the monetization of others' opinions,

ratings, and judgments. The "reputational profile" of a person, service, event, product or brand is built through online storytelling, created in person or by others through comments, likes and reviews; consequently, web reputation indicates social value and credit based on the collection and monitoring of content published and disseminated online, intentionally or without the knowledge of those involved. In other words, web reputation can be understood as a form of "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1979) that legitimizes new criteria of social distinction, based on others' recognition of a certain "value," "prestige," and "success," which is visible and measurable in social media. This happens, for instance, in the case of influencers, who are considered the entrepreneurs of reputation in the digital age.

In this scenario, the topic of web reputation assumes a crucial relevance in the field of studies and research related to the *digital risk society* (Lupton, 2014) and *platform society* (Van Dijck et al., 2018), which highlights the technological, cultural and social variables that intervene directly or indirectly in the reputation construction processes, in close connection with the management of identity, privacy and online relationships. Research that investigates the issue of web reputation in relation to the online behaviors of new generations also goes in this direction, both in reference to the processes of popularity construction and personal branding (Marwick, 2013), as well as the psychological and social distress caused by cyberbullying phenomena, sexting, revenge porn, privacy violations, identity theft, and many others, which have negative effects on the reputation and dignity of the person (boyd, 2014; Livingstone, 2009).

In particular, as mentioned above, research conducted as part of EU Kids Online makes clear that web reputation is a particularly relevant dimension for analyzing the quality of young people's online experience in social media and for grasping the interdependence between risks and opportunities. These studies describe the main web reputation management strategies of young people, i.e., the set of strategies adopted to cope with online risks with the aim of minimizing the damage and inconvenience suffered. According to Livingstone (2009), there are two types of web reputation management strategies: *preventive strategies*, based on the need to prevent a potential problem even before it occurs, in order to maximize the quality of the online experience; *corrective strategies*, based instead on the need to correct one's online behavior after the risky experience and to devise a coping strategy to deal with the violations and damages suffered. In this sense, web reputation management analysis proves very useful in intercepting young people's ability to "learn from mistakes", activate problem-solving strategies and increase their digital awareness.

Following the model of EU Kids Online's European research, a number of local and cross-regional studies on teenagers' web reputation in SNSs have

been conducted in Italy in recent years, particularly in the regions of Lombardia, Lazio and Campania, in order to identify weaknesses and good practice in the various territories and to grasp peculiarities among different areas of the country (Aroldi & Vittadini, 2018; Marino, 2020; Savonardo & Marino, 2021). Beyond the territorial differences, in these studies it emerges that young Italians are interested in their web reputation in every area of SNSs use, with particular reference to *identity management* (information declared in their personal profile and identity performances); *privacy management* (private, public, business account); *friendship management and audiences management*; and *risk management* (cyberbullying, sexting, privacy violations, personal data abuse). However, young people often find it difficult to manage their web reputation because in SNSs it is composed of three types of digital footprints: "voluntary footprints" (what youths write online), "unintentional footprints" (the footprints they unknowingly leave on websites or in SNSs), and "suffered footprints" (what others write about them on their profiles or elsewhere). Indeed, in networked publics (boyd, 2008), which are characterized by persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability, web reputation management is particularly complex because of invisible audiences, collapsed contexts, and the blurring of public and private. Therefore, taking care of one's web reputation requires a great deal of attention and protection of one's identity, through conscious management of content, privacy and relationships with other users.

Based on the above reflections and from the results of the latest research, our study aims to update the knowledge regarding web reputation management practices in the SNSs of young people in Campania, with a focus on the strategies adopted to cope with online risks, such as cyberbullying, sexting, privacy violations, abuse of personal data, hate speech, revenge porn and many others, experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The next section discusses the details and methodology of the research conducted.

3.   Research methodology

The research detailed in this paper is part of a larger research project coordinated by the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Naples Federico II and funded by the Campania Regional Government as part of the Regional Youth Policy Observatory, which aimed to explore the relationship between young people, the Internet and social media in Campania with a focus on online risks, in order to provide policy makers with a scenario in which to

plan interventions aimed at fostering the development of human capital in the digital sphere.[1]

Starting from the general framework of the research project, this article focuses in particular on the online behaviors of GenZers, referring to the dimension of web reputation management and coping strategies which, as the inquiry shows, prove to be very useful in analyzing the interdependence between online risks and opportunities, and intercepting young people's ability to "learn from mistakes," turning a risky situation into an opportunity to increase their digital awareness. The specific objective of the research, in fact, is to explore and describe two sub-dimensions:

(a) the web reputation management practices adopted by young people, to cope with the risks experienced in SNS and instant messaging apps.

(b) the role of key agencies, such as family, school, and peer group, in mediating risks and supporting coping strategies.

The research was conducted in the Campania region between 2020 and 2021, using a quantitative methodology, through an exploratory survey (Amaturo, 2012). The study was developed in three phases.

In the first phase, the research design, the sample planning and a structured questionnaire were created. Specifically, the sample is composed of 500 young people aged between 14 and 23, belonging to Generation Z (Dimock, 2019), Internet users, residing in Campania. The sample was obtained using the quota sampling technique, based on data from young people in the Campania region aged 14-23 years, up to the 1st of January 2020 (Istat). The sample is representative of the population with reference to *sex, age* and *province of residence* (Marradi, 1997). The sample consists of males (51%) and females (49%), divided into two age groups: 14-17 years (39%) and 18-23 years (61%). The sample is distributed geographically in the provinces of Avellino (6%), Benevento (4%), Caserta (16%), Naples (56%) and Salerno (18%).

The second phase of the research was dedicated to the data collection, by questionnaire administration through online (CAWI) and face to face (CAPI) mode. Finally, the third phase was dedicated to data analysis and interpretation of the results. Survey data were analyzed using descriptive techniques (monovariate and bivariate), carried out with SPSS software.

The results, presented in the following paragraph, consist of a reasoned description related to the investigated dimensions, supported by tables.

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[1] Overall, the research project analyses young people's online behaviours by considering 8 dimensions: a) family and territorial context; b) Internet use; c) social media use; d) identity and privacy management; e) relationship and social management; f) online risks; g) web reputation management and coping strategies; h) digital literacy. The study also traces the main effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's online habits.

4. Results. GenZer's web reputation management in SNSs and role of agencies

Our web reputation management analysis of Campania's youths in SNSs is based on the idea that risks experienced online, related to the sphere of identity, privacy, and sociability – such as cyberbullying, sexting, revenge porn, privacy violations, misuse of personal data, hate speech, and many others – negatively affect reputation, i.e., the reliability, esteem and consideration that young people seek within their online social networks (Savonardo & Marino, 2021). For this reason, the results presented below focus firstly on the web reputation management practices adopted by GenZers to cope with risky online experiences with the aim of minimizing the harm received; secondly, we report findings related to the role of agencies – such as family, school, and peer group – in mediating risks and developing coping strategies.

As Table 1 highlights, in order to safeguard their web reputation in SNSs, GenZers implement various actions aimed at controlling their own information, the content shared about them, and the audiences they target. Even when youths are greatly harmed and upset by risky online experiences, they tend to employ web reputation management strategies with the aim of minimizing the damage they receive, rather than giving up using SNSs. This means that, for the most part, the GenZers interviewed consider the use of SNSs more beneficial than harmful and the social and relational opportunities offered by these platforms far more relevant than the possible and inevitable risks. Specifically, with reference to the categories identified by Livingstone (2009), young people adopt two main web reputation management strategies: *preventive strategy* and *corrective strategy.*

Preventive strategy is based on the need to "prevent" a potential problem in order to maximize the quality of the online experience and avoid risky and unpleasant situations that could cause damage to one's identity and reputation. In our case, the most popular actions among young people in Campania for managing web reputation through preventive strategies are:

- *Privacy restrictions*, i.e. "I've set more restrictive privacy on my personal profile" (36%), "I posted false information to protect my privacy" (15%).
- *Limited social sharing*, i.e. "I decided not to post something out of fear that it might damage my image" (33%).
- *Social steganography*, i.e. "I posted coded messages that only some of my friends could understand" (25%).

Table 1. Web reputation management practices (% Yes).

	Total	Sex		Age	
		Male	**Female**	**14-17**	**18-23**
I've deleted or edited things I've posted in the past	48	41	55	54	44
I deleted someone from my contact list	47	37	58	48	46
I've reported inappropriate content or contact to the social media platform managers	41	34	50	46	38
I've set more restrictive privacy on my personal profile	36	25	48	35	36
I decided not to post something out of fear that it might damage my image	33	32	33	37	30
I removed my name from photos I was tagged in	31	28	34	34	29
I deleted comments that others had posted on my profile	26	28	23	32	23
I published statuses, comments, photos, videos, stories that I later regretted	25	28	21	32	21
I posted "coded messages" that only some of my friends could understand	25	24	26	27	24
I asked some contacts to remove a photo from their profile that I didn't want to appear in	23	27	19	30	19
I deleted or deactivated my profile on a social network	17	18	15	22	14
I posted false information to protect my privacy (a false name, incorrect age, etc.)	15	16	14	19	13

In general, preventive strategy is more common among women, teenagers (14-17 years old), those with a "private" profile and higher digital awareness. Further analysis shows that preventive strategy is associated with online behavior oriented toward *self-closure*, i.e. aimed at controlling privacy, personal information and content, and social networks; in fact, youths who adopt this strategy are less likely to have negative online experiences.

Conversely, *corrective strategy* is based on the need to "revise" one's online conduct and contrive a response to minimize the damage suffered with respect to one's web reputation. Unlike preventive strategy, corrective strategy is activated after having risky experiences online; in fact, it is more common among victims of cyberbullying, sexting, revenge porn, hate speech, privacy violations, and abuse of personal data. The most popular actions for managing web reputation through corrective strategy refer to:

- *Digital decluttering*, i.e. "I've deleted or edited things I've posted in the past" (48%), "I deleted comments that others had posted on my profile" (26%), "I published statuses, comments, photos, videos, stories that I later regretted" (25%).
- *Unfriending*, i.e. "I deleted someone from my contact list" (47%).
- *Photo tag removal*, i.e. "I removed my name from photos I was tagged in" (31%); "I asked some contacts to remove a photo from their profile that I didn't want to appear in" (23%).

- *Report to platform managers*, i.e. "I've reported inappropriate content or contact to the social media platform managers" (41%).
- *Account deletion/deactivation*, i.e. "I deleted or deactivated my profile on a social network" (17%).

In general, corrective strategy is more common among teenagers (14-17 years old) and women, although men are the majority of those who decide to permanently deactivate their accounts on SNSs to protect web reputation. In addition, further analysis shows that users with "public" and "business" profiles, who have a behavior aimed at online *self-disclosure* and *sociability*, i.e., users who experience all the advantages and disadvantages of SNSs and also adopt risky communication practices (e.g., contacts and conversations with unknown users, public sharing of personal information and content) resort to corrective strategy. In this case, web reputation management through corrective strategy represents a *problem-solving strategy*: according to the already mentioned logic *the more, the more* (para. 1), the youths who are most active online are also the most exposed to risks, but precisely because they experience risky experiences and suffer damage to their reputations, they develop *agency* and *reflexivity* and learn from mistakes by acquiring new awareness and skills, including the ability to assess and distinguish risks from opportunities online (Livingstone et al., 2011). However, it is worth pointing out that digital awareness, although it can be acquired "in progress," also depends on many other factors, such as technical and digital information and literacy, e-participation, confidence in browsing, the cultural and social skills possessed by young people, all of which refer to the more general concept of *digital capital* (Ragnedda, 2018; Ragnedda et al., 2019), as will be discussed below.

In addition to the web reputation management practices and strategies of GenZers in SNSs, the second aspect we investigated in our research concerns the role of agencies, such as family, school, and peer groups, in mediating risks and developing coping strategies. In other words, we asked: whom do young people in Campania turn to in order to deal with problematic situations, when they have negative experiences on SNSs that they cannot handle on their own? Many research studies emphasize the relevance of this for several reasons: one is that family, school, peer group, institutions, and online communities themselves can be useful resources for mediating youths' negative experiences and valuable problem-solving support (Smahel et al., 2020); the second is that young people's online practices can be better understood in relation to the social contexts in which media socialization processes and digital literacy are predominantly located, such as family and school, where factors affecting digital inequalities among youths can also be traced (para.1).

As Table 2 highlights, the main figures that GenZers in Campania would turn to in case of negative online experiences for advice, support, and help are mainly *brothers and sisters* (38%), *friends* (37%) and *parents* (33%). They are followed with lower percentages *partners* (18%), *others in the family* (13%), *schoolmates and university colleagues* (12%), *police and institutions* (12%), *trusted adults* (9%). Only a small, residual percentage of young people would turn to *social organizations* (5%), *users online* (5%), *teachers and professors* (4%), *Church and other religious organizations* (4%), *colleagues* (2%) and *boss* (2%), while in 4% of cases no one would be consulted.

Table 2. Reference figures (% Total).

	Frequency	Total
Brothers, Sisters	38	100
Friends	37	100
Parents	33	100
Boyfriend, Girlfriend	18	100
Others in the family	13	100
Schoolmates, University colleagues	12	100
Police, Institutions	12	100
Trusted adult	9	100
Social organizations	5	100
Users online	5	100
Teachers, Professors	4	100
Church, Religious organizations	4	100
Nobody	4	100
Colleagues	2	100
Boss	2	100

If the various actors mentioned are clustered together, it is clear that the family and peer group represent the main reference points for Campania's youth, i.e., the most valuable mediating resource and the primary support network in the case of unpleasant online situations, while institutions, school and other social and religious organizations appear more distant.

In particular, the world of education and school in the Campania region struggles to give students digital literacy, and teachers are only in some rare cases referred to as mediators of risky situations experienced by their students. This characteristic has distinguished the Campania region for several years, as other previous research shows (Marino, 2020; Savonardo & Marino, 2021). In fact, when young people had to deal with technical problems or unpleasant situations of various kinds online during the COVID-19 pandemic, friends were the most useful and problem-solving group (17%), underlining the importance of peer-to-peer socialization as a resource for online risk management, but the percentage of young people who say they dealt with issues on SNSs on their own is also very high (16%), especially women and over 18s. This evidence suggests that the prevention and mediation of online risks in school settings

should include the enhancement of training courses dedicated to media education, reformulated according to a learning-by-doing approach, focusing especially on the strengthening of informal culture and the exchange of experiences and practices among peers, which could be even more effective if integrated with the pedagogical intervention of teachers.

In conclusion, the results of our research seem to indicate that the crucial point is the development of "critical digital competence", considering the technological and socio-cultural gaps in the family and school context of reference, which significantly increased with the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, as we argue in the next section, there are many contact points between the concepts of web reputation and that of *digital capital*, especially if we consider the relationship between digital capital, agencies and the web reputation management of GenZers.

5.   Discussion. Web reputation management and digital capital

The considerable complexity of the relationship between GenZers and digital media, which significantly contributes to the identity construction processes, social relations and representation of reality (Savonardo & Marino, 2021), is clearly evident from the heterogeneity of young people's online experiences, in terms of their levels of access and use of the Internet, social media and ICTs and the possibility of obtaining benefits and outcomes from them. In other words, within the backdrop of an *onlife* society (Floridi, 2014), in which the boundaries between the offline-type reality and the online-type environment are increasingly blurred, the variety of factors involved is marked by different levels of digital divide which determine different ways of managing online opportunities and risks.

In the case of the present research work, the digital gaps that distinguish the quality of youths' experiences on social media affect the web reputation strategies they activate to disentangle themselves in the opportunities and risks dialectic of social media platforms, which, as previously mentioned, proceeds according to a *the more, the more* logic: the more young people take risks and grasp online opportunities, the more awareness and skills they acquire. If the crucial question is to understand how youths balance opportunity optimization and risk reduction by learning from mistakes (Livingstone, 2009), then a reflection on the resources they are able to mobilize in this regard is essential. This reflection, the object of this section, will focus in particular on the recent concept of *digital capital* (Park, 2017; Ragnedda, 2018; Ragnedda et al., 2019b), a strategic resource to be understood in a Bourdieusian way (Bourdieu, 1979), in

a society in which the digital is a "total social fact" (Marres, 2017), and on the relationship between web reputation management, digital capital and agencies.

Although in the sociological literature of the last two decades, as Ragnedda et al. (2019b) explain, concepts with some characteristics of digital capital have been formulated, such as the *techno-capital* concept suggested by Rojas et al. (2004) and *informational capital* proposed by Hamelink (2000) and Prieur and Savage (2013), which explains the skills developed by users through the use of ICTs, Park (2017) defines digital capital as specific capital for the first time, capable of influencing the ways in which digital technology is accessed and used and, thus, determining new forms of digital inequality, creating a gap between those who benefit from technologies and those who do not. Similarly, Ragnedda (2018) defines digital capital as a set of digital skills (in terms of information, communication, security, content creation and problem solving) and digital technology, and explains that, like all other forms of capital, its constant accumulation tends to maintain social inequalities. Specifically, while the first level of the digital divide corresponds to the possibility of having access to the Internet or not, the level of digital capital acquired influences not only the quality of the online experience (second level of the digital divide), but also the possibility that it can be turned into benefits and outcomes transfereable to other forms of capital and in the social sphere, thus influencing the third level of the digital divide (Ragnedda, 2017; 2018). In this sense, digital capital is defined by Ragnedda (2018) as a *bridge capital* between online and offline life opportunities and is considered in relation to five other types of capital (5Cs): economic, social, cultural, personal, and political. While digital capital, therefore, capitalizes offline activities into digital activities (time spent online, information and knowledge found, resources and acquired skills), it remains deeply intertwined with the other offline capitals and relies on them to transfer the online experience into the social fabric, transforming it into social resources (Ragnedda, 2018; Ragnedda et al., 2022a).

Subsequent studies by Ragnedda's research group, pioneering both theoretical and empirical methods, focused on operationalizing and measuring the theoretical construct of digital capital, testing it with sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables first in the UK and then in Italy, thus they demonstrated its scientific relevance and, therefore, the possibility of isolating and implementing it in numerous contexts, showing a heterogeneity of interrelationships with the "traditional axes" of inequality (Addeo et al., 2023; Ragnedda et al., 2019b; Ragnedda & Ruiu, 2019a).

Further studies have specifically focused on the tangible impacts of digital capital: they "showed that the combination of both access and competence is positively associated with outcomes in political, social, economic, cultural, and personal arenas" (Ragnedda et al., 2022b: p. 33) by investigating how digital

capital produces benefits within social processes and empirically measuring, in doing so, the unequal distribution of tangible outcomes, which corresponds to the third level of the digital divide (Ragnedda, 2017).

Considering specifically the relationship between digital capital, agencies and the web reputation management of GenZers, the specific topic of this paper, means thinking about this consideration at the third level of the digital divide. If youths have access to social media platforms and instant messaging apps at different levels (first level of the digital divide) and thus, experience multiple ways of using them, thereby developing preventive and corrective web reputation management and risk minimizing strategies as we can see from our results (see para. 4), then they achieve a certain degree of competence and awareness of the digital environment (second level of the digital divide). We need to understand, in accordance with Livingstone (2009), how they balance optimizing opportunities with minimizing risks, that is, to explore in detail how they achieve benefits and outcomes (third level of the digital divide) from a certain accumulation of digital capital, i.e., "a set of internalised abilities and aptitudes (digital competencies), as well as externalised resources (digital technology) that can be historically accumulated and transferred from one arena to another" (Ragnedda et al., 2022b: p. 20).

Thus, there emerges the possibility of considering young people's web reputation management strategies in relation to digital capital and, therefore, drawing new considerations from the *the more, the more* logic that rules the opportunities and risks dialectic arising from the use of social media platforms. In general, it would involve reflecting on the relationship between digital capital as bridging capital (Ragnedda, 2018) between online, offline and onlife dimensions (Floridi, 2014) of social life – as well as among specific domains of capitals – and web reputation management as a situated process in the background of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) and the collapsed contexts (boyd, 2008) on the one hand, and as symbolic capital legitimizing new forms of social distinction on the other (Boccia Artieri, 2020; Bourdieu, 1979; Origgi, 2016). Specifically, since young people experience risky phenomena closely related to the social and relational opportunities offered by SNSs, due to risky communication factors such as a variety of personal information in profiles, public profiles and sharing of private information, from which "voluntary," "unintentional" and "suffered" traces remain on the web (see para. 2), understanding whether the accumulation of digital capital in youths induces preventive or corrective web reputation management strategies or, in other words, whether digital capital plays a preventive or corrective role, is essential.

As regards the role of agencies, a primary and secondary socialization sphere to social media platforms, it is fundamental in supporting the coping strategies adopted by youths to cope with online risks, especially if we refer to

family and peers (see para. 4). Indeed, where the two specific dimensions analyzed in this paper correspond, on the one hand, to the strategies adopted by young people to cope with online risks (cyberbullying, sexting, privacy violations, data abuse, hate speech and revenge porn) and, on the other hand, to the role of agencies as social capital and support for young people's coping strategies, a possible reflection can be outlined on the relationships between digital capital and agencies and how they affect young people's web reputation management or, viceversa, on the achievement of a balance between optimizing opportunities and minimizing risks that would, in fact, ensure tangible benefits and outcomes in young people's social lives.

Based on what has emerged so far, the recent construction of digital capital as both an independent bridging capital and a theoretical concept that can be isolated and measured in a multiplicity of contexts, offers varied insights. Considering the many contact points between the concepts of digital capital and web reputation, both of which are vectors of a certain degree of social mobility between onlife contexts (Floridi, 2014) across the three levels of digital divide (access, use and benefits related to the Internet), possible developments in this work could be directed precisely at an operational definition and empirical applications of a reflection on the relationship between web reputation management and digital capital in the context of youth cultures. Moreover, given that in the operationalizations of the digital capital concept by Ragnedda et al. (2019b), there is an indicator with regard to regarding online risk and safety management skills called "safety," which from our point of view corresponds, at least in part, to web reputation management strategies, redefining this indicator in terms of web reputation management could add value to an already valuable research work, insofar as it would trace the way to further horizons of meaning.

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