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Forms of *onlife* active citizenship
Media use for civic engagement by new generations with migrant background in Italy and the role of education

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Abstract This article explores the intersection between activism, civic engagement, and the onlife dimension, a framework that conceptualizes the inseparability of online and offline experiences. Drawing on a series of in-depth interviews with 20 young activists with migrant background (11 males and 9 females aged between 20 and 31 years), this research investigates the ways in which anti-racist and intersectional practices are shaped and amplified by digital media in Italy. The findings highlight the obsolescence of the online-offline dichotomy, demonstrating how digital technologies are seamlessly embedded in activism and everyday life. Participants recognize the dual role of digital media: as a powerful tool for mobilization and awareness but also as a space where hate speech and harmful stereotypes are propagated. The study underscores the urgent need for educational interventions rooted in media education, critical thinking, and intercultural perspectives. Such approaches can equip younger generations with the tools to counteract online hate speech, foster inclusivity, and leverage the *onlife* dimension for positive social change. This article ultimately calls for reimagining education as a transformative space where the digital and physical converge to promote active, inclusive citizenship.

Keywords. Civic - Engagement against racism and sexism - New generation with migrant backgrounds - Onlife citizenship and activism - Media literacy and education - Intercultural and postcolonial pedagogy.

1. Introduction

«Digital revolution» deserves to be explored in depth from a socio-pedagogical point of view at least for two reasons: 1) because of the undeniable influence that the new media exert on social relations, everyday behaviour and, in general, the life experiences of individuals; 2) because emerging technologies, in a specific historical and cultural context, are not simply a tool for human use but a means through which meanings and social realities are constructed (De Kerckhove, 2014). From the educational perspective, it becomes interesting to ask how new digital technologies influence and restructure the life experiences of individuals as the current world is characterized by a continuous

interaction between the real and the virtual, the online and the offline, the digital and the analogue (Floridi, 2015). So much so that making a clear distinction between these levels not only risks being misleading, but also fails to recognize that their fusion—the dimension of *hyperconnectivity*—is now the natural environment in which we live and, as a consequence, numerous educationial challenges arise (Neag, Bozdağ, & Leurs, 2022; Pasta, Rivoltella, 2022; Hasanah, Marini, & Maksum, 2021).

Among these, in order to create inclusive and democratic environments in the current multicultural contexts, it seems increasingly important to integrate media education with critical thinking and intercultural pedagogy, among other approaches, into educational paths (Hoechsmann, Thésée, Carr, 2021; Higdon, Huff, 2021; Council of Europe, 2016; Tarozzi, 2011; Zoletto, 2011, Burgio, 2022). This article presents some examples of online-offline integrated activism, *onlife* active citizenship among new generations of immigrant origin in Italy which show how postcolonial studies and intersectionality theories play a major role in their conceptualization of civic engagement. These examples demonstrate how the use of media and media education can address discriminations, contributing to a more inclusive society by transforming widely held racist and sexist representations.

2. The «new» digital scenario: the right to connectivity and the *onlife* dimension(s)

Attention towards the digital revolution and its impact on social and civic activism, from a pedagogical perspective, is relatively recent. Over the past two decades, many studies and didactic experiments have been conducted to keep up with the rapid development of technologies, particularly in the context of literacy paths for digital tools. There is already a tradition of using these technologies in schools, sometimes with the belief that they can «fix» underperforming educational systems, especially in STEM disciplines (Mochizuki, Bruillard, 2022). However, various authors have also highlighted the risks associated with these technologies:

> «Today's advocates of 'digital education»—digital learning, digital pedagogies, digital resources, digital classrooms, digital schools—seem to be convinced of the promises of digital technology in 'revolutionizing' or 'disrupting' ineffective education models. However, it is important to be fully aware that these technologies have also raised serious concerns with profound social and ethical implications.» (Mochizuki, Bruillard, 2022, p. 3)

One of these concerns is related to the risks faced by children when using digital technologies, particularly if their use is not accompanied by the development of critical thinking, inclusive practices, and intercultural perspectives (Piatak, Mikkelsen, 2021). Media education, in particular, aims to foster critical information and the understanding of the nature of the digital tools that young people use on a daily basis (Zadra, Ceretti, 2020; Ranieri, Fabbro, Nardi, 2019). However, this statement does not fully account for the complex scenario in which we are immersed—a scenario that is the natural environment for younger generations. We no longer live solely in a concrete, analog environment where digital devices and internet connections are merely «present». Instead, the spaces we inhabit are deeply permeated by the coexistence of multiple technologies

that continuously connect us to dimensions that were unimaginable just a few decades ago. This includes a pluriverse of real-time information from remote corners of the planet, infinite archives of data, and tools for research, analysis, and processing of information that have become integral parts of our daily lives: the interconnectedness of minds and machines shapes our understanding of intelligence and communication in the digital era (De Kerckhove, 2001 and 2014).

Connectivity is so much a part of common everyday experience that in several countries[1] the possibility of using the Internet is now recognized as a fundamental right of the individual, according to the principle that to access services and information and to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and opinion, people must be able to use it (Klang, Murray, 2005; Mildebrath, 2021):

> «With digital technologies permeating all areas of life, and the internet becoming a prerequisite to exercising a number of fundamental rights, its importance for the individual can hardly be overstated. Industry and civil society are clearly in favour of full connectivity, and calls for a human or fundamental right to internet access have recently resurfaced» (Mildebrath, 2021, p. 1).

The interconnections between the virtual and digital worlds, the growing pervasiveness of devices connected to complex systems through the Internet of Things make it impossible to separate one dimension from the other. They mutually influence each other, permeating the daily lives of individuals and communities, and reshaping our interactions with the natural and human environments. As Passarelli and Paletta (2016) explain:

> «We experience the reconfiguration of social relationships and power structures, of economy and education, in a continuous ebb and flow of information and communication mediation interfaces. In this remixed culture, new logics, new semantics, and new laws emerge to cope with the new social order that forms and organizes itself on the interfaces (both between humans and machines, and between machines themselves) as surfaces of social relationship mediation within the growing flow of communication among connected actors.» (Passarelli, Paletta, 2016, p. 2)

In short, we live in what Floridi (2015) calls the *onlife*, an inseparable web of connections between online and offline dimensions that demands a rethinking of the distinction between the «real» world and the digital one—a differentiation that is almost incomprehensible to younger generations, as we will see from the interviews conducted for this study. Barone and Barbanti (2020) propose an interpretation of the «new» media using Foucault's concept of semiotechnical devices (Foucault, 1976). These devices consist of codified sets of ideas, ideologies, and representations that, together with specific material apparatuses, influence and transform social behaviors and processes of identity

[1] For instance, in EU, on April 30, 2016, the Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council of November 25, 2015, on «Measures regarding access to an open Internet «and amending Directive 2002/22/EC on «Universal service and users' rights relating to electronic communications networks and services» and Regulation (EU) No. 531/2012 on «Roaming on public mobile communications networks within the Union» entered into force.

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construction. Technologies, in this sense, act as experiential mediators, co-creating daily routines and actions, modifying relationships between individuals, objects, space, time, and bodies, and contributing to the production of new subjectivities (Barone, Barbanti, 2020, p. 104).

3. Xenophobia, racism, hate speech and their antibodies between on- and off-line scenarios

Hyperconnectivity, like other aspects of social interactions, also impacts phenomena such as discrimination, xenophobia, and racism: hate speech is a phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of the online and offline worlds (Matthes, 2022; Izs'ak, R. 2015). Various surveys confirm that since the 2000s, racism and xenophobia have been particularly intense in Europe, reinforced by the current economic crisis, which affects the most vulnerable (Keipi, Näsi, Oksanen, Räsänen, 2016). In combination with other factors, including the neoliberal turn in welfare, this crisis has strengthened anti-immigration discourse promoted by populist movements and political parties (Lazaridis, Campani, 2016). International migrations are often framed as threats to national identities, as well as risk factors for security, social cohesion, and economic burden for the states (Caiani, Parenti, 2013; Pajnik, Fabbro, Kamenova, 2016).

However, in the last decade, with the widespread use of the internet and the ease of communication through social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *TikTok*, *Twitter* etc., hate speech has taken on new forms and vigor, particularly targeting migrants and refugees as convenient scapegoats[2]. These platforms act as catalysts for social anger, frustration, and a growing sense of insecurity (Ranieri, Fabbro, 2017; Awan, Zempi, 2015). At the same time, research on civic engagement has found that social networks have an increasing impact on public and political discourse (see the meta-analysis of more than 300 researches and studies in Boulianne, 2020). In the United States, for example, one-third of the population is involved in various forms of social media activism, which can also serve as tools to counteract hate speech, discrimination, and racist discourse (Matamoros-Fernández, Farkas 2021).

Many scholars have underlined the opportunities that social media offer to build new relationships between the public and political spheres and young adults as they facilitate the social interaction connecting people, enhancing civic engagement and boosting participation (Goh, Ling, Huang, Liew, 2019; Loader, Vromen, Xenos, 2014) even if «purely social-, entertainment-, and leisure-oriented activities carried out on digital media do not necessarily mobilize individuals for civic or political action.» (Boulianne, Theocharis, 2020, p. 114). From the perspective of the target groups of hate speech, only recently wide-ranging surveys have been carried out to highlight recurring characteristics (Silva et al., 2016).

[2] Among others, LGBTQ+, body shaming, gender, etc.

4. Forms of activism and intellectual and civic engagement: *onlife* intersectionalities and the need for education

The integration of online and offline dimensions in activism reveals a shift in how young people engage with social causes. This area of research presents challenges in fieldwork, as the research method must necessarily span both the digital and analogue, conceptualizing them as co-present within the social practices of meaning-making mediated by technology. In this context, digital and physical experiences cannot be observed separately, as their intersection shapes contemporary forms of activism and civic engagement. This dual nature is essential for understanding the «*onlife*» dimension, where transitions in space, time, and presence become fluid (Bárcenas Barajas & Preza Carreño, 2019).

4.1 Methodology

To explore this evolving landscape, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 activists with a migrant background, either born in Italy or who arrived at a very young age, – 11 males and 9 females aged between 20 and 31 years – involved in anti-racism efforts and the promotion of migrants' rights, approached through a gender lens. Participants were identified using a snowball sampling method, a widely used qualitative research strategy particularly effective for accessing hard-to-reach populations (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). The recruitment began with known activists and bloggers engaged in online and offline activism, including those involved in citizenship rights campaigns and migrant or intercultural associations, many of whom, despite their youth, have been long engaged in combating hate speech and fostering social and cultural inclusion. These initial contacts referred other potential participants, expanding the sample in a way that allowed for greater diversity in experiences and perspectives.

The initial research question, broadly formulated so as to leave room for the narratives of the interviewees, concerned the forms of anti-racist activism and the relationship with *onlife* dimension in order to allow interviewees to narrate their own experiences and perspectives. The interviews followed an open-ended format, adapting over time as key themes emerged, consistent with the iterative process of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). This approach, which avoids imposing predefined categories, allows theoretical insights to emerge from the data itself, ensuring that the analysis remains closely tied to the activist's lived experiences. Their names have been anonymized, while their age and the place of origin, either their own or that of their parents, have been retained as accurate.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic coding, identifying recurring patterns related to digital activism, identity, and civic engagement. The grounded theory methodology ensured that findings were not shaped by preconceived assumptions but were instead developed inductively from the testimonies of the participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This methodological approach aligns with the study's objective of capturing the complexity of *onlife* activism and the evolving intersections between digital and physical spaces.

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4.2 Old Concepts, New Perspectives?

One of the most striking findings is the participants' rejection of the traditional online-offline distinction. For many, this binary framework appears not only outdated but also misleading. As E., a 28-year-old Albanian activist, asserts:

> «I know that many people continue to make a distinction between online and offline, but it is a fiction, a false concept! How do you, for example, organize a demonstration, a sit-in, if you don't get in touch with someone? And how do you contact people, if not through technology, at least in the last century? Do we really believe that there are other ways?» (E., Albanian, female, 28)

Her words underline the critical role of digital tools in mobilizing and organizing grassroots efforts, illustrating how deeply intertwined these realms have become. Similarly, M., 31 years old and of Peruvian origin, highlights how younger generations seamlessly integrate digital communication into their lives:

> «But in short, we can no longer talk about online and 'real' life! There are no barriers. I am already of a certain age (author's note, 31 y.o) but I have a little brother who would not even understand me if I told him that, when he chats with his friends, he is not *really* with them, he is 'only' online.» (M., 31, male, Peruan origin)

These perspectives reinforce the notion that the «*onlife*» dimension challenges older generational assumptions about the separation between digital and physical realities, reshaping activism as an integrated practice.

4.3 The Social Media Impact

While the integration of online and offline realms can enhance activism, participants recognize the different impacts of digital tools versus traditional methods. S., a 22-year-old Moroccan activist, emphasizes the scale and immediacy achievable through online campaigns:

> «Does a strike that affects a few hundred or thousands of people have more impact, or an online campaign that gathers hundreds of thousands of subscriptions in a few days, or a post or video that goes around the world?» (S., female, 22, Moroccan origin)

R., a Congolese participant, highlights the role of social media in amplifying movements like #BlackLivesMatter, questioning whether traditional media could have achieved the same level of engagement or the worldwide spreading of the movement:

> «When people meet in person, are together for instance in a contest, the participation is apparent, but if no one else knows, what kind of echo can it have? What would #Blacklivematters be without all the circulation it has received in real time through social media? Would the newspapers have talked about it in such depth? Who would have really dealt with it in Italy, for example?» (R., male, 27, Congolese origin)

Such testimonies demonstrate how digital platforms enhance visibility, reach, and engagement, enabling movements to transcend geographic and cultural boundaries.

4.4 The «Risk of Conscience Manipulation», the «Keyboard Lions», and «Hate Propaganda»

However, participants also express concerns about the darker aspects of digital media. They highlight how online platforms can amplify stereotypes, prejudices, and hate speech. As K., a 33-year-old Albanian activist, notes:

> «Of course there is a risk of manipulation of consciences. Most people - not only young people, because we always stigmatize them but everyone does it! - use the internet and social media for futile purposes... When they do not indulge in 'easy' hate speech, as the 'keyboard lions' do, things they probably would never do in person or, at least, that's what I hope…» (K., male, 29, Albanian origin)

R., an Ivorian activist, describes this phenomenon as «hate propaganda»:

> «[…] and these kind of speech, which I call 'hate propaganda,' manipulates you, makes you recoil, can get you used to the fact that you can offend certain people, you can humiliate them for something they are because of their gender, of their race...» (R., male, 27, Ivorian origin)

The moral and social implications of such dynamics are further elaborated by M., a 28-year-old Tunisian activist:

> «So it also changes your moral perception and this can overflow out of the webpage, out of the chat and out of the forum. It has an effect on social relationships, on society... and the worst of society is reflected in hate speech: it is a vicious circle that gets stronger and stronger.» (M., female, 28, Tunisian origin)

4.5 The Role of Education

Participants unanimously stress the crucial role of education in addressing these challenges. They argue for media education programs rooted in intersectional and intercultural approaches to counter the proliferation of online hate speech and foster critical digital literacy. As one participant rhetorically asks:

> «But who has ever taught us at school, at home, how to use social media properly? Who made us realize that an online offence actually hurts a person, that it is not a video game?» (Y., female, 21, Egyptian origin)

Others advocate for postcolonial perspectives in school to promote empathy and understanding. R., a Bangladeshi activist, emphasizes the need for curricula to address colonial histories and global inequalities:

> «We speak about hate speech on the web… well. But why doesn't the school teach the encounter between peoples, history from many points of view, the beauty of the many countries of the world? Why doesn't it teach us to understand that there are many cultures and many points of view? And that if so many arrive in Europe, it is because they are fleeing from conditions that Europe itself may have created? A lot of lessons on colonialism, that's what we need!» (R., male, 29, Bangladeshi origin)

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G. a 25-year-old activist, highlights the importance of countering stereotypical narratives with positive and inclusive representations, emphasizing the communicative power of images besides the language. According to her:

> «That is why it is important to work to create a different culture, a narrative of diversity, of migration, on women…that is positive, that is not just stereotypes, that also shows the beautiful things... It is not only a matter of words, of discourses… images are the most effective tools to attack people!» (G., female, 25, Russian origin)

This observation underscores the critical role of visual representations in shaping culture. G. points out that images can be incredibly powerful tools, capable of perpetuating discrimination or driving positive change. Her reflection calls for the conscious use of visual media to create narratives that foster inclusion and celebrate diversity. She also emphasizes the importance of combining online and face-to-face interactions to build meaningful connections in order to build a culture of respect:

> «However, it is not enough to respond in kind to insults or hate speech because they are stronger, more widespread. It is necessary to get organized, to create web pages, blogs, profiles where these things are discussed, and to promote face-to-face meetings through them because direct human contact, physical contact, is warm, it is imbued with emotions…» (G., female, 25, Russian origin)

Her words encapsulate the dual necessity of leveraging digital tools while nurturing human connections.

A., a 24-year-old activist, reflects on the balance between digital communication and in-person interactions, highlighting the irreplaceable value of direct human contact. She states:

> «I am happy to have chats with the other side of the world but then I also need to see people directly, not just through a screen, to hear the sound of a direct voice, not coming out of a microphone... maybe I am already old, who knows what the 6-year-old think, now!» (A., female, 25, Peruan origin)

Her comment emphasizes the limitations of digital communication, even in an era of global connectivity. While A. appreciates the ability to connect across distances, she underscores the unique emotional depth and authenticity of face-to-face interactions. Her humorous remark about generational differences adds a thoughtful layer, pointing to how younger individuals might perceive virtual interactions as equally or even more «real» than direct ones.

5. Education strategies for navigating *onlife* landscapes

The interview excerpts highlight how young people perceive the *onlife* dimension as a continuous reality, free from barriers between online and offline. This is clearly expressed by E., 28 years old, who describes such a distinction as «fictitious and misleading,» emphasizing that even seemingly analogue actions, such as organizing a demonstration, require technological tools to be realized. Similarly, M., 31 years old, links this view to

the experience of younger generations, for whom «chatting with friends» is equivalent to «being with them.»

This awareness of the fusion between the digital and the real is also reflected in the capacity of digital media to amplify activist messages, as pointed out by S., 22 years old, who contrasts the impact of a physical strike with that of an online campaign capable of gathering hundreds of thousands of supporters within hours. However, this influence is not without risks. As noted by R., 27 years old, digital media can act as catalysts for hate speech, creating a «vicious cycle» that manipulates moral perceptions and amplifies biases and stereotypes. The ability of digital media to shape behaviors and opinions necessitates an educational approach that includes media education, interculturality, and critical thinking. The literature emphasizes that media education should not be confined to acquiring technical skills but should instead promote the ability to critically analyze digital content (Ranieri, Fabbro, & Nardi, 2019). In a context marked by xenophobia and racism as well as gender discrimination amplified by the internet (Keipi et al., 2016), schools can become key sites for developing critical tools that enable young people to identify and counter hate speech.

An educational approach rooted in the *onlife* perspective must recognize the contamination between digital and physical experiences, leveraging this interplay to promote active and inclusive citizenship. The *onlife* dimension calls for new educational methodologies that integrate critical reflection on the digital representation of migrants, women and in general minorities with practical activities that engage students in creating alternative narratives, as suggested by Griffin and Turner (2021). In this sense, visual culture plays a critical role; images and videos, pervasive in digital communication, not only shape perceptions of identity and otherness but also provide opportunities to construct counter-narratives that challenge stereotypes and foster empathy (Giuliani, 2019).

The interviewees' testimonies support this vision. For example, G., 25 years old, calls for greater awareness of the emotional effects of digital content («an online offense hurts as much as in real life»), underscoring the need to incorporate educational paths that address hate speech phenomena through an interdisciplinary approach. Particularly, M., 29 years old, stresses that schools should teach the «beauty of many cultures» and critically address the colonial past to foster a positive narrative about diversity.

In this regard, the role of schools in fostering an informed, conscious, and responsible use of digital media is crucial. As highlighted by MIUR:

«Responsibility is the attitude that characterizes digital competence. It is only minimally fueled by knowledge and technical skills, which must still be taught. Our young people, even though they are referred to as digital natives, often do not know how to use machines, operate fundamental software, spreadsheets, word processors, or navigate the web to search for information in a conscious manner. These are all skills that need to be taught. However, as European documents on digital education also suggest, technical skills alone are not enough. The majority of competence consists of knowing how to search, select, and evaluate information online and in the responsibility of using digital tools in a way that does not harm themselves or others.»[3] (MIUR, 2018, p. 16, Author's translation)

[3] MIUR (2018) «La responsabilità è l'atteggiamento che connota la competenza digitale. Solo in minima parte essa è alimentata dalle conoscenze e dalle abilità tecniche, che pure bisogna insegnare. I nostri ragazzi, anche se definiti nativi digitali, spesso non sanno usare le macchine, utilizzare i software fondamentali, fogli di calcolo,

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In line with this perspective, the school system must not only provide technical skills but also develop ethical competencies and a culture of respect. This involves promoting active citizenship paths that encourage participation in public life through emerging *onlife* scenarios (Floridi), where presence and connectivity are intertwined. By integrating these elements into the educational framework, schools can empower students to navigate the *onlife* dimension with awareness and responsibility, ensuring that digital spaces become arenas of constructive engagement rather than sites of exclusion or harm.

6. Conclusions

In an increasingly hyperconnected world, education is regarded as central (Delors, 1996), especially in countering racist and sexist hate speech that spreads within the *onlife* dimension. To address these challenges, it is essential to adopt educational strategies that integrate media education, critical thinking, and intercultural approaches. Through educational programs that encourage young people to reflect on their digital experiences and create content promoting inclusion and dialogue, we can build a more equitable and conscious society.

The experiences of the interviewed activists demonstrate that change is possible when education aligns with digital engagement, providing tools for active and committed citizenship. From this perspective, the future of *onlife* citizenship depends on our ability to recognize and harness the opportunities offered by the fusion of the digital and physical worlds, transforming risks into opportunities for collective growth.

However, fostering responsible digital citizenship requires a systemic commitment from educational institutions, policymakers, and society as a whole. Schools must cultivate students' ability to navigate hyperconnected environments with ethical awareness and critical thinking, ensuring they do not become passive consumers but active participants in digital spaces. This entails recognizing the importance of digital responsibility and civic engagement, as well as developing pedagogical frameworks that support a deeper understanding of the social implications of online interactions.

Moreover, the *onlife* dimension challenges traditional pedagogical approaches, demanding a shift towards more participatory, interdisciplinary, and experiential learning models. By integrating digital literacy with ethical reflection, schools can help shape future citizens who are not only proficient in using technology but also conscious of their digital impact. This shift is crucial in promoting a culture of respect, inclusivity, and democratic participation in both online and offline spheres.

Ultimately, in an era where connectivity is an intrinsic part of human experience, the role of education must be reimagined to equip younger generations with the tools needed to engage responsibly and constructively in digital environments. Only by fostering awareness, civic responsibility, and digital ethics can we ensure that the *onlife* landscape becomes a space of empowerment rather than exclusion or division.

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elaboratori di testo, navigare in rete per cercare informazioni in modo consapevole. Sono tutte abilità che vanno insegnate. Tuttavia, come suggeriscono anche i documenti europei sulla educazione digitale, le abilità tecniche non bastano. La maggior parte della competenza è costituita dal sapere cercare, scegliere, valutare le informazioni in rete e nella responsabilità nell'uso dei mezzi, per non nuocere a se stessi e agli altri.» (p. 16).

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