

Title of the paper

Youth and cultural consumption in Piemonte – a first glance

Author

Osservatorio Culturale del Piemonte

Luca Dal Pozzolo, Cristina Favaro, Elena Di Federico, Maria Giangrande, Lucia Zanetta

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Text**General overview: new technologies, a new landscape**

New technologies, especially those linked to the Internet, have deeply re-configured the backdrop in which cultural consumptions and practices develop; such re-configuration appears even more interesting considering how quickly a series of innovative elements appeared, revolutionizing daily practices and attitudes for a large number of people: Google and Ryanair (1997), Napster (1998), the first series of "the Big Brother" in Italy (2000), the Ipod, Wikipedia (2001), Facebook (2004), Youtube (2005), 3D-movies at the cinema (2008), just to name a few.

On the one side **the new technologies** (especially, but not only, those linked to the Internet) **ease the access to (almost) all the contents of interest for the users**; on the other side they **facilitate the exposure to, and the random exploration of, new contents** or of contents not related to those originally searched, a serendipity within reach of everyone which stimulates new connections and opens a high number of new possible exploration paths without requiring additional efforts.

The ease and speed of access to contents and services facilitates the **multitasking** and the contemporaneous fruition of different contents (e.g. a number of "windows" open at the same time on one's pc and related to very different issues), as well as an extension of some activities once limited to precise places and situations, turning into frequent background activities (e.g. listening to a streaming radio during the working time). New technologies ease a superficial and quick fruition of contents, deriving from multitasking, googlism and wikipedism; but new technologies also ease the opposite **"extreme" deepening of contents** through an easier access to a wide number of resources and information, including sources not accessible before the Internet era – and above all before the Web 2.0 and social network revolution (users' and customers' comments about a product; "uncomfortable" information about enterprises; fandom). New issues appear: the reliability of information, the need to verify the sources, the opportunity of establishing forms of control and moderation of contents published by the users.

From the point of view of the analysis of **cultural consumption**, the latter appear today **more and more customized and less predictable**: the same person can easily get in touch with very varied contents by moving along random, and consequently often unpredictable, patterns of exploration. Users move agilely among very different contents (from a comic video on Youtube to a streaming TV series, from a cooking blog to a virtual visit to an archaeological site), following connections hard to foresee; social networks do not just reproduce the "real" social relationships, but even set up a "new sociality". **The distinction between "high" and "low" contents fades**, catalyzing a typical issue of surmodernity, started before new technologies appeared.

Also the **cultural production** is deeply influenced by the diffusion of new technologies: thanks to the participatory approach of the Web 2.0 **the distinction between contents producers and consumers fades**. Terms like *prosumers* and *user generated content* enter the researchers' dictionary, and talking about *cultural practices* seems more appropriate than talking about *cultural consumptions*. This began a few years ago with the reduction of the costs of technological products and their consequent diffusion through ever increasing strata of

the population. Activities and practices once limited to “those who could afford them”, both for economical matters and because of the technical skills needed to use specific techniques and tools, quickly entered the daily practices of anyone having slight disposable income, technical skills and “cultural capital”: photography, from an artistic activity requiring also from amateurs training, experience and dedication, has become a much more common activity, in principle accessible for everybody thanks to the diffusion of relatively low-cost digital cameras. The progressive integration of devices (e.g. the mobile phone capturing digital images; the iPhone) is making the process easier.

As the opportunities to take part to creation increase, the “risk” connected to it decreases and people feel freer to experiment and test, suggesting new and innovative works and actions. New topics appear, referring to the **artistic and cultural quality of products and contents**; also **the meaning of practices and produced contents changes**, referring not just to the artistic and aesthetic quality but also to the exchange and communication value (back to the example of photography, the latter increases exponentially its value as a tool for exchange, dialogue and real-time sharing within the communicative texture and life of the subject).

A change takes place also in the **cultural goods** themselves: contents and supports get dematerialized and easier to handle (whole video libraries archived in digital format on external hard-disks, easy to carry out) and customize (playlists adapted to different situations are available on a single mp3 reader). Such de-materialization together with the ease of access (directly or via file sharing and exchange) changes the user’s paradigm into “Everything, now and for free”; ethic questions connected to download and file sharing practices fade in front of a quiet confidence in the possibility of an immediate supply of any content one could ask for. Cultural practices thus change also from the point of view of **supply and fruition**: users’ willingness to pay for “tangible” cultural products is resized (e.g. one buys only the original CDs of the favourite singer; one goes to the cinema preferably to watch 3D-movies, plunging the spectator into an experience s/he cannot live at home) and the importance of emotional, socialization and sharing aspects of fruition increases (cinema and live concerts are first of all opportunities to meet - and to share an experience with - one’s friends).

Access and possession do not coincide anymore: one can know the whole discography of a band without possessing any CDs, and this does not exclude that s/he knows also the CD cover, the credits and the dedication in the inner pages (maybe downloadable from the band’s website).

The functional value that cultural consumptions had in the ‘60s and ‘70s, replaced by a status value in the ‘80s and by a symbolic value in the ‘90s-2000, has become an **experience and connection value**. Digital users’ behaviours reveal emotional and social aspects connected to cultural fruition: online activities are more and more characterized by sharing (file sharing, open source software) and participation (Wikipedia, comments on blogs).

In particular with the boom of social networks a new “social private” has appeared, which produced a new, hybrid, often “showcased” sociality, strongly searched although based on weak, or ephemeral, or only virtual links (e.g. users communities gathered around an issue of interest, made up of people who will never meet in person). Today, just because of the “showcasing approach” of the last years, the **awareness of one’s “connected personality” is getting stronger**, as well as the attention and care paid to online privacy issues.

The virtual and the community also ease the search for the group, the sharing and the ideological involvement: the users re-discover the dialogic and the nomadic dimension, and a new **community dimension** arises, no more based on physical proximity, but stemming out of the sharing of contents and ideas.

In a nutshell, the ending decade is an important moment of transition for cultural styles, consumptions and practices of the population, especially the youngest part of it. A transition which does not seem to mark a discontinuity with the past, but is rather declined along three directions:

- a **revisited continuity**, where contents remain the same and ways of fruition change only partially (e.g. 3D cinema; the Ipod replacing the walkman);

- **transformation/hybridization** of means of supply and fruition (e.g. digital photographs captured by mobile phones; download and peer to peer exchange of cultural contents; free online information);
- **new consumptions and new practices**, really appearing for the first time (e.g. creation and upload of digital images through brand new technologies; "cut and paste" approach; googlism; social networks).

What about "youngsters"?

The changes in cultural practices and their backdrop discussed so far concern the vast majority of the population, crossing transversally almost all the age groups without great differences; this is basically different from the situation of "youngsters" of a couple of generations ago, whose culture showed elements of opposition clearly clashing with those of their parents. Nowadays **youngsters are the group of population (with still uncertain age borders) for whom changes and new practices in cultural consumptions** deriving from new technologies **thicken and get more evident**, although they are not exclusive of this age group and do not oppose them irrevocably to other age groups.

Differences exist anyway and get more evident the more we consider **digital natives**, for whom technologies are not *added* to, but form an essential part of the "media diet" since the beginning of their life as consumers/active users, as expressed in the daily and frequent use of a high number of devices and technologies.

From this perspective, studying youth cultural consumptions and practices, understanding features and needs, might allow the researchers to choose the right lenses through which observe, in a quickly approaching future, a wider reality.

In the scenario opened by new technologies traditional analytics tools seem not appropriate anymore to describe the actual cultural practices of young people, and quantitative data just render a partial image of what is currently going on.

Statistics are obviously essential to define the reference frame. Talking about "youngsters" living in Piedmont – considering the 15-29 years old gap – means talking about some 622.000 people who constitute the wider audience group for some "traditional" cultural consumptions: cinema (responding first of all to socialising needs), museums and exhibitions (often object of forced school visits), radio and television, the two media more suffering the competition by the Internet, because of interactive channels (Youtube, Myspace), streaming and il/legal download, catching alternatives offering customization of contents and means and ways of fruition.

Also when analysing "traditional" consumptions the importance of qualitative analysis appears, especially for the evaluation of the meanings given to, and the needs addressed by, some products, such as cinema and performing arts, often matching first and foremost socio-relational, emotional, self-realization, and communication needs: a number of experience values which sublimate, as noted above, in the social networks and the creation of a new virtual socialisation.

New cultural practices and ways of fruition of new technologies by youngsters emphasize the **need to look for new research tools** overcoming the merely descriptive logic of statistics and quantitative data.

Some qualitative analysis on the kind of topics researched via Internet by youngsters, for instance, show that the age and the status (student/worker) deeply influence the kind of information they look for. Between 15 and 19 years old there is a predominance of leisure activities (music and games download) and the search for information about sports, school, health, study and working travels; people between 25 and 29 years old show also an interest for work, training, citizens' rights and home. Students normally are more interested into information about free time and school education opportunities, occasional work and travels for studying and working, but they are also more interested in social issues (globalisation and human rights, social engagement and volunteering, politics and society). Young workers instead focus their attention especially on tourism and holidays, wellness and health, house research, citizens' and consumers' rights, topics closer to those interesting for adults.

Considering the fruition of cultural contents, especially for people under 30 years old the new technological developments, mainly those referred to the Web and mobile telephones (Iphone and SmartPhone), give rise to new participated and interactive communicative practices, connected to **a more and more diffused and capillary circulation of information declined in accordance with tastes and lifestyles**. The increasing potentialities of media connection and the increasing digital alphabetisation level of young generations are creating a new sociality, shifting from collective and connective intelligence, grassroots narrative, the first attempts of public diaries (the semantic origin of the blog), the first chat conversations mainly with strangers, to the re-creation on the virtual layer of the everyday environment and setting. This shows how important it is to consider social networks when studying youngsters' cultural practices, since youngsters themselves are the main users of such tools – widespread, by the way, along the whole population. Also, this shows the need to adopt analysis techniques deriving from anthropology, since topics and discourses published on the Web (especially on social networks) refer more and more frequently to real life stores and personal issues.

A look at the future

It seems appropriate to overcome the idea that the cultural capital is the basic variable influencing cultural consumptions, tastes, and likes of people. Two consequences should be reconsidered too: on one hand, the hypothesis that identifying a certain kind of consumption allows to predict with reasonable success a number of related consumptions by the same subject; on the other hand, the possibility to allocate the consumers into homogeneous groups featuring specific consumption "styles". Single consumptions lose their power of marking precise social groups; what really matters today are intersections, crossing and overlapping, eased by new technologies, which give birth to a **cultural patchwork featured by additional overlapping and multiple belongings**. A new landscape appears which is made up of small and provisional communities, gathered on the basis of specific interests rather than on common tastes or proximity of socio-cultural conditions; an archipelago of small separated and independent islands, still open to contact and crossings.

Quantitative data measuring the "footsteps" left by "traditional" cultural consumptions (e.g. cinema and museum tickets) are not enough anymore; they still provide an essential information, but they do not allow anymore to study cultural practices and behaviours, nor to predict them as it was possible till a few years ago.

The limits of quantitative data gets more evident when considering cultural practices linked to new technologies. Saying that 20 million people in Italy (i.e. 40,5% of the total population) use at least one social network and spend there an average of 6 hours per day (thus placing Italy at the 1st place in Europe with England, at the same level of USA and Australia) provides an order of magnitude, but a significant analysis requires to side this information with indicators showing not just the access, but also the ways and the intensity of fruition and the activities actually carried out on the social networks (one thing is keeping Facebook open together with other six windows on one's pc, looking at it just twice during the working time; a different thing is using it actively – and if so, how? And why? – for 6 hours, maybe instead of working or studying).

Categories of interpretation of "lifestyles" or consumption appear less and less fitting to describe behaviours and practices. Quantitative parameters alone are not enough anymore to describe the complex scenario of cultural practices: the number of books bought or the number of museum visited per year do not allow anymore to foresee with reasonable approximation the number or the kind of other cultural consumptions by the same person. **What is needed now are new indicators, also of qualitative nature, expressing in a different way the resources and time devoted to activities connected to cultural fruition**; such indicators must be defined starting from new conditions, while it is not appropriate to adapt existing interpreting categories to a reality in which exposure, exploration, and active and passive fruition of cultural contents have deeply changed.

Key questions for the next future

- What is "culture" today for young people?
 - Where (and what) is the border between cultural consumption and production for the "digital natives"?
 - Do new technologies and social networks change also the differences between "cultural" and "other" consumption?
 - Which tools and indicators are appropriate to study cultural consumptions and practices in the Web 2.0 era?
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