

What is new in the digital divide?  
Understanding internet use by teenagers from different social backgrounds

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### **STRUCTURED ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** In recent times the relationship between social stratification and internet use has become more complex. In order to understand the new configuration of the digital divide, this chapter examines the relationship between socioeconomic background and digital engagements among youths.

**Methodology:** This study explores digital inequalities among Italian teenagers from a holistic perspective. It draws on primary data obtained with a triangulation of methods: a survey on a representative sample of 2,025 high school students and 56 semi-structured interviews with teenagers from different social classes.

**Findings:** The statistical models indicate that cultural capital and parents' occupational status do not associate with broader social media use but are positively related with online information-seeking. The interpretative analysis suggests that teenagers from the upper-middle class in *licei* make sense of the internet "vertically," in affiliation with parental socialization and are more concerned with capital enhancing activities. Instead, teenagers from less advantageous social contexts appropriate the internet "horizontally," jointly with peers, and are mostly interested in social-networking and UGC production.

**Practical implications:** School track, along with parents' socio-economic status and cultural capital, influences teenagers' internet use. Further studies could explore whether school tracking contributes to digital inequalities.

**Originality:** The study extends Annette Lareau's theory of parenting styles and social reproduction, but also obtains innovative results related to digital inequalities among youth.

Contrary to expectations, teenagers from less advantageous social backgrounds enrolled in vocational schools have better chances to actively participate in social media than teens from the upper-middle class in academic-oriented high schools.

**Keywords:** digital divide, young people, social media, social class, internet use, sociology

## **Introduction**

Contrary to media narrative about digital children and teenagers, notable differences exist in terms of internet access, usage and skills among youngsters. However, outside the field of digital inequalities, few scholars seem to acknowledge that social background shapes youth engagement with digital media. Greater emphasis is usually placed on other issues, such as undergoing transformations in learning, collaboration, sociality, civic participation and risks. Of course these are extremely relevant matters, but they are also intrinsically linked with differences and inequalities in internet use. Precisely because present-day children and teenagers are involved in such groundbreaking processes, increased research should be directed towards examining how traditional axes of inequality might influence digital inclusion leading to new forms of inequality. In particular, as Griffin points out, contrary to claims of a “classlessness youth,” it is still “important to interrogate the continuing significance of class in the neo-liberal social order” (Griffin, 2011, pp. 256). Indeed a class-based analysis of young people’s engagement with digital media not only can improve our understanding of information and communication technology’s role in the reproduction of existing inequalities, but can also shed light on the opportunities offered by ICT and how the internet can empower (disadvantaged) youths. In fact, a “middle-class” bias is often perceived as a “problem” in mainstream research on young people’s internet use. According to Boonaert and Vettenburg (2011), most research “implicitly assesses information-related internet use as more positive than other uses” and constructs young people “as a homogeneous group who all have to be lifted up to the same middle-class norm.” Scholars have urged digital inequality researchers to avoid “normativity” (Halford & Savage, 2010; Sims, 2013); instead of framing certain internet uses as preferable to

others, internet use and opportunities should be understood in context and examined from a holistic perspective.

Informed by such remarks, this chapter contributes to existing research on digital inequalities among teenagers by investigating how social background influences internet use and all-around internet appropriation. A survey of a sample of 2,025 high school students of Lombardy Region in Northern Italy - representative in terms of high school tracks and geographical area - will show how different types of internet use can be associated with teenagers' social background, while a set of 56 semi-structured interviews will examine in depth how teenagers from different social backgrounds make sense of the internet in their everyday life.

This chapter's most innovative results concern social media use, namely participation in social-network sites and through user-generated content. The literature review is therefore structured in two parts: the first presents established findings about digital inequalities among young people, mostly from the perspective of socio-economic and cultural background; the second illustrates recent and innovative results about social media and inequalities.

### **Digital inequalities among young people**

Although youngsters are usually celebrated as the "always-on" "digital generation," several studies have shown they are not necessarily advanced users if compared to adults (Robinson et al., 2015; Helsper & Eynon, 2009). Moreover, among young people there is a significant variation in technology use, as much as there is between generations (Bennet et al.,

2010). Social class - broadly defined as parents' occupational status, income and/or level of education - is profoundly linked with several dimensions of teenagers' digital media use.

Following the digital inequalities' framework, it is possible to say that social class influences internet access, skills and uses.

In Europe and the United States, only a scarce minority of young people is completely excluded from internet access in terms of the traditional digital divide between "haves" and "have-nots." However, the conditions in which children and adolescents go online are extremely diverse. Usually, in low-income families youths lack adequate parental support because adults are not familiar with digital media and struggle to guide them (Clark, 2009). For example, in a study among Latino immigrant families in Los Angeles, Tripp (2011) found that parents were worried about online risks and considered the internet beneficial only for schoolwork. Not being able to oversee their children, parents encouraged them to use digital media solely for a short amount of time and for focused activities. Kids were urged to stay "on task" and usually spent very little time online, so that it was actually impossible to learn. Moreover, in a research among economically underprivileged teens in rural California, Robinson (2009) showed how difficult conditions for internet access led to different dispositions and attitudes towards digital media, ultimately influencing patterns of internet use. Adolescents from disadvantaged families faced many obstacles in getting online - both physical (slow internet connections, old computers, short time spans for browsing the internet) and emotional (stress and frustration). Because of such difficulties, they were not interested in exploring the web for leisure and out of curiosity; hence they didn't develop the same set of skills as their peers from more advantaged backgrounds.

Digital literacy and internet skills represent another essential dimension of digital inclusion influenced by young people's socio-economic and cultural status (boyd, 2014). A relevant study conducted by Hargittai (2010) among first-year students in a public university established that parents' education was associated with different levels of *web know-how*. Students whose parents had a college-level education showed higher web knowledge even when the influence of other variables, such as online experience and quality of internet access, was considered. Probably, such differences would have been even greater, if the analysis was conducted on a representative sample of young people (not limited to university students). Gui and Argentin (2011) obtained a similar result when they administered an actual digital skills test to a representative sample of high school students in Italy. Students' social background (expressed by parents' level of education) was positively associated with both "operational skills" - the ability to use computer applications, recognize web environments and navigate efficiently - and "theoretical knowledge" of the web. These results are explained both by the greater resources available to young people who come from a higher socio-economic and cultural background and by the involvement of their parents in their online activities (Witte & Mannon, 2010).

The relationship between internet use and teenagers' social background has been interpreted in different ways. Livingstone and Helsper (2007) put forward a model based on the notion of "graduation" where the range of online activities is distributed progressively according to young users' socio-economic status and age. Digital inclusion is defined as a "ladder of opportunities": at the bottom there are users who perform a limited amount of activities (the most simple ones, such as information-seeking, email and gaming). At the top are users who perform

many different activities, even the most advanced (such as participation in peer-to-peer platforms and sharing user-generated content). Using data from a survey on UK 9-19 years-olds, they found that, if at the bottom levels there were kids from all kinds of socio-economic status, at the top there were only kids from upper and middle class families.

A different model proposed by Peter and Valkenburg (2006), also validated by other studies (Hasebrink, Livingstone, Haddon & Ólafsson, 2009), is based on the concept of “differentiation.” Adolescents from an upper socio-economic status use the internet more for capital-enhancing activities, while peers from a lower socio-economic status prefer to use it for leisure and play. According to the authors, being able to access the internet is not any more a source of inequality for youths, but social background still impacts the opportunities they choose to follow online. Only wealthy and cultured teens actually use the internet for increasing their knowledge. The result, confirmed also among adults, is known as “knowledge gap” or “San Matthew Effect” (Bonfadelli, 2002; Zillen & Hargittai 2009).

Finally, scholars have indicated a “participation gap” to underline the unequal engagement in user-generated content platforms by young people (Jenkins et al., 2006). Indeed social media enhance users’ opportunities to participate online, as the notion of “producer” (Bruns, 2008) suggests. The current web ecology is characterized by a “participatory culture,” and being able to create and share content online is an important skill to fully participate in contemporary cultural and civic life (Jenkins et al., 2006). Not all youths, however, are taking this opportunity. Jenkins and colleagues called for a “participation gap” to suggest the emerging of a new form of digital divide which marginalizes youths who can’t fully participate in digital media. A research among university students demonstrated that socio-economic status is linked

with content creation; again, students whose parents were graduates were more able to take advantage of social media than peers from less cultured families (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; see next section for further analysis).

Overall, the relationship between teenagers' socio-economic background and internet use is conceived as if young people from disadvantaged backgrounds consistently "lag behind" – in terms of web knowledge, breadth of online activities, online opportunities and participation – when compared to their more privileged counterparts. The next section will challenge such "linear" interpretation presenting innovative findings from researches on social media use.

### **Social media use and inequalities: an intriguing relationship?**

The association of social background with social media use is less straightforward and more complex than that of internet use in general. Indeed, recent findings suggest that disadvantaged youths (and adults) don't lag behind their peers when it comes to social media use, but, on the contrary, sometimes they participate more actively. Social media are online platforms for the production and distribution of user-generated content (UGC). They include blogs, social-network sites (SNS), location-based services, online communities, micro-blogs and many other web services, which enable users to actively participate and establish connections with other users. Online participation can be simple and "light," but also advanced and innovative, from "hanging out" with friends to "messaging around" with technologies or "geeking out" in communities of practice, as Ito and colleagues (2010) proposed in their "genres of participation."



Opening a profile on a social-network site is probably the first step for engaging in online participation. Hence, it is particularly meaningful that this is not directly influenced by users' background. Several studies assert that user status, income or education, don't affect access to social-network sites; thus there aren't digital inequalities in the uptake of SNS (Hargittai, 2007). For example, the research by Haight, Quan-Haase and Corbett (2014) on the digital divide in Canada found that income doesn't relate with use (or non use) of SNS, even if it does relate with internet access and breadth of online activities: "Once individuals overcome the barriers to access, income does not predict the use of SNS" (Haight et al., 2014, pp. 514). Moreover, education is only slightly associated with SNS use and, surprisingly, people *without* high school education are more likely to use SNS than high school graduates. Similarly, analyzing a national survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, Ahn (2011) found that teenagers whose parents have a high school degree are more likely to use SNS, than those with college-educated parents. However, this "leveling" in SNS adoption should not be overestimated. For example, teenagers carefully choose their preferred social-network platforms, and their choices might reproduce class and ethnic inequalities through a process of online "self-segregation" (boyd, 2011; 2014).

Taking into consideration the multifaceted nature of UGC, Blank (2013) analyzed three types of content creation in relation to social stratification. In a way, his work was groundbreaking because it challenged preexisting notions about digital divides and social media, at the same time being consistent with previous results. Using a national sample of the British population, he found that status variables (such as income and education) related differently with each type of content creation forming an "intriguing pattern" (2013, pp. 602). Only "political

content creation” was positively influenced by education. Instead, “skilled content” (such as blogs, websites and posting creative content) was not influenced by income or education (see also Correa, 2010). Finally, “social and entertainment content” was indeed influenced by income, but in a reverse way: higher incomes *reduced* the production of that content. The results contradict previous conceptualizations of digital inequalities that place UGC at the top of the ladder of opportunities. In particular, the *creation* of social and entertainment content (even if this confirms the preference for social and entertainment uses among low status groups) could indeed represent a capital-enhancing activity (Blank, 2013).

### **Research design**

This chapter draws on survey and interview data of adolescents’ internet use collected in Northern Italy between 2011 and 2012. The research design was based on a “triangulation” of qualitative and quantitative methods adopted simultaneously, not with the aim of a reciprocal results validation but as a strategy to seek complementary information (Hammersley, 2008). The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between traditional structural variables that define adolescents’ social background with internet use and meaning-making. A twofold research question oriented the study: To what extent are teenage internet use and appropriation shaped by their social background and might reproduce social inequalities? On the other hand, under which circumstances does teenage internet appropriation not “match” social background and is ‘against the odds?’ The research investigates the complex and constantly evolving configuration of digital inequalities acknowledging social media enabling features, without

underestimating how social background continues to shape young people's relationship with digital media.

Social background consists of many factors including gender, race, ethnicity, age, parents' occupation, income, education attainment and geographic location of residence (Kvasny 2006, pp. 162). This study focuses only on class-based factors<sup>1</sup> because these are particularly involved in the process of "social reproduction" (Bourdieu, 1973; Nash, 1990). Also, many scholars contend that education and income are the most striking sources of variation in internet use (see Witte & Mannon, 2010). The class-based factors accounted for in this study are the following: 1) parents' occupation, 2) parents' level of education, 3) teenagers' school.

Parents' occupational status was divided into four categories: a) Service workers, b) White collars and intermediate occupations, c) Petit Bourgeoisie or independents, d) Lower white collar workers, skilled and unskilled workers. These are the result of a rearrangement (in larger and easier to compare categories) of the European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC) which has been developed from another sociological classification known as the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero Schema (Harrison & Rose, 2006). Each student was attributed to a

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<sup>1</sup> In other societal contexts, it could also be important to factor in categories such as race and ethnicity. Although not strictly related with socio-economic status, the use of social media by ethnic and racial minorities continues to evolve (Robinson et al., 2015). Although gaps are decreasing, internet use has been lower for these groups than the rest of the population. However, when it comes to content creation the scenario changes. Several surveys show that African-Americans and US Latinos use Twitter significantly more than Whites (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier & Seoane Pérez, 2009; Correa, Hinsley & Zúñiga, 2010; Hargittai & Litt, 2011). Moreover, college students belonging to minority ethnic groups are more likely to create content than Whites, even after controlling for all the remaining variables (Correa, 2010; Correa & Jeon, 2011; Schradie, 2012). Similarly, the study about digital divides in Canada previously mentioned found out that recent immigrants are less likely to have internet access, but those online conduct a broader array of online activities than Canadian or earlier immigrants (Haight et al., 2014).

category according to the highest occupational status between mother and father. The four categories were also used as a proxy for social class in the qualitative research: upper-service class (service workers), middle class (white collars, intermediate occupations, petit bourgeoisie and independents), working class (lower white collars workers, skilled and unskilled workers).

Parents' education level was considered only in the survey. It was structured into three types: "less than high school" for parents who didn't obtained a high school diploma, "high school degree" for families in which the highest educational title is a high school diploma, "university degree" where at least one parent finished college. While parents' occupational status is a proxy for adolescents' economic capital, parents' level of education is an indicator for cultural capital.

Another indicator for teenagers' cultural capital, however, is the school in which they are enrolled. The Italian secondary school system is hierarchically structured into tracks: vocational schools (*istituti professionali*), technical schools (*istituti tecnici*) and academic-oriented high schools (*licei*). Each track differs with the kind of curricula (vocational training to enter the job market, scientific and technical education, theoretical academic preparation)<sup>21</sup> and for students' social background. Tracking has been widely criticized for fostering the reproduction of social inequality across generations (Reay, 2011; Arum & Shavit, 1995). In particular, in Italy the choice of secondary school is undertaken early (13 years old), and it is highly influenced by parental education (Checchi, 2003). Studies show that "lower-class students are typically placed in lower tracks which, in turn, reduce their chances of attending university and of subsequently entering the professions and other high prestige occupations (Shavit & Muller, 2000)." Even if

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<sup>2</sup> High school of the same track can have different curricula, but learning objectives and teaching styles are similar.

all tracks allow students to attend college, transition to university strongly differs. In particular, vocational schools inhibit further educational attainment in several ways: restricted curriculum, students' cultural milieu, teaching style, college preparation and attitudes to learning (Shavit & Muller, 2000; Reay, 2005).

### ***The survey***

The survey was administered in spring 2012 to a representative sample of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students of Lombardy Region (Northern Italy), one of the most populated and prosperous regions in Italy. The sampling procedure was twofold: first a random sample of schools was selected, and then classes were randomly extracted in each school. Among the 63 schools selected, three refused to participate. The effective sample size was then: 60 schools and 117 classes. Students responded to the questionnaire in the computer lab of the school under the supervision of a researcher and a teacher. The sample is representative for school tracks (vocational schools, technical schools and academic-oriented high schools) and Lombardy's geographical areas. The analysis doesn't include students not enrolled in the secondary school system. The final sample comprised 2,025 students. Table 1 shows the sample's descriptive statistics.

[Table 1]

The questionnaire inquired about socio-demographic information relative to both the student and his or her parents. Participants were asked to choose between twenty professional

occupations for their father and mother (recoded in four occupational statuses). Parents' level of education was also recorded on a 7-item scale (later classified into three modalities). The survey also asked about gender and immigration status. Immigration status was structured into two modalities: "natives" (teenagers born in Italy with one or both native-born parent) and "first or second generation immigrants" (both parents are not native).

Several items measuring students' internet use were also included in the questionnaire. The following variables were considered: "Read news in websites or blogs," "Chat via Facebook, MSN or Skype," "Comment on a friend's post on Facebook," "Update your status or post new content on Facebook," "Post a new tweet on Twitter," "Manage a personal website or a blog," "Participate in an online forum or an online community," "Post self-produced content (such as music, video or illustrations)," "Write about a topic you are familiar with (reviews, Wikipedia entries, Yahoo Answers)," "Research information online to find material about a specific topic you want to explore." Respondents were asked to indicate how often they had engaged in the previous activities on a 5-point Likert scale (Never = 1, Rarely = 2, A few times a month = 3, Once or twice weekly = 4, Everyday or almost everyday = 5).

### ***The qualitative interviews***

To better understand digital inequalities, this study moves beyond a "decontextualized notion of 'use'" (Sims, 2013) and includes semi-structured qualitative interviews. Instead of only measuring online activities, it tries to grasp the meaning-making process, discourses and attitudes adolescents hold in relation to the internet. The research is based on the idea that users

“appropriate” the internet in multiple ways because they integrate it into their life according to their social position and individual needs (see Bakardjieva, 2005). As scholars in the field of Domestication theory (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1992; Berker et al., 2005), as well as in the Social Shaping of Technologies (Boczkowki & Lievrouw, 2008; Oudhsoor & Pinch, 2003; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999), have shown, users are active agents; they don’t passively accept technologies but attach meanings to them according to the context in which they live and the social/cultural/economic resources they possess. Qualitative methods can shed light in this meaning-making process, enhancing our understanding of digital inequalities and how they develop. Thus a “constructivist approach” to interviews was used: equal attention was placed on substance (“what interviewees say”) and form or discourses (“how interviewees say it”) (Silverman, 2000; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). As Hoover and colleagues noted, interviewees not only describe their habitual media use, they also “represent” their relationship with the media according to their family values, especially inter-subjective, such as social class and religion (Hoover, Clark & Alters, 2004).

A “purposive sampling” procedure was then conducted in order to have two groups of individuals oppositely positioned for socio-economic and cultural background (Cardano, 2003). To achieve this, teenagers were selected in vocational schools and in academic-oriented high schools. In total four schools were selected, located in the same big city in northern Italy, even if in very different areas.<sup>3</sup> The final sample included 56 teenagers attending 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Social

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<sup>3</sup> Vocational school 1) with a curriculum on graphics and advertising was in a disadvantaged area in the outskirts; Vocational school 2) had a curriculum in business and was close to the city center near a highly racially segregated neighborhood; Academic-oriented high school 1) was a “liceo classico” (curriculum on humanities and ancient languages) in a wealthy neighborhood in

class was taken into consideration together with school track.<sup>4</sup> Finally we had two groups: academic-oriented high school students mainly from upper-service class (elites), and vocational school students from working class and lower-middle class. Due to the comparative aim of the study, it was impossible to work with a fine-grained scale of socio-economic status; hence we selected adolescents located at distant poles of the scale and structured them into two groups (Lareau, 2003). See Table 2 for qualitative sampling characteristics.

[Table 2]

Every teenager was interviewed at school in a private space where teachers or peers couldn't overhear.<sup>5</sup> Interview length was approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were conducted, transcribed, coded and analyzed by the author. Interview topic guide included: everyday internet use (both for leisure and academic purposes), technologies in the home, conditions of internet access, first online experiences, internet socialization from family members and peers, opinion about internet opportunities and shortcomings, preferred online activities, parents' occupation and digital skills, hobbies and extra-curricular activities.

Data analysis was conducted to identify analogies among teenagers from similar social backgrounds and differences between teenagers from opposite social backgrounds. Moreover, in

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the city center; Academic-oriented high school 2) was a private "liceo scientifico" (curriculum on humanities, mathematics and sciences) in a wealthy neighborhood in the city center.

<sup>4</sup> Teenagers were asked to specify their parents' occupation. This information was treated according to the European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC). Even if teenagers sometimes struggled to describe their parents' job, the distinction between the opposite groups (upper-service class and working class) was always clear; hence bias in teenagers' description of their parents' job had no impact on groups' composition.

<sup>5</sup> All interviews were individual except for two girls who wanted to be interviewed together.

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order to be able to explain how social inequalities are reproduced, attention was placed on parents' role in channeling their children's internet use.

The large majority of interviewees had autonomous and continuous internet access with a personal computer at home; many used a portable device (smartphone, tablet or iPod touch) as well. Regardless of social background, shared access to the computer with siblings was also common, even though it did not compromise the autonomy of use. Due to space limits, the analysis does not focus on the few "peripheral users" (Selwyn, 2003) in the sample who did not consider the internet much as relevant in their life and used it in a limited way. Indeed, most of them, who belonged either to the upper-service class or the working class, did not enjoy "high-quality" home access.

## **Results**

### ***Online activities***

The descriptive statistics in Table 3 show that a large majority of teenagers are accustomed to using the internet for information-seeking, communication in social-network sites and reading the news. However, respondents who engage in information-seeking and news-reading on a weekly basis are significantly fewer. If 94.2% of respondents search for information online to find material about a specific topic, only 54.7% do so at least once a week. A similar gap could be found for news-reading that drops from 80.9% to 35.9%. Activities conducted on social-network sites remain significantly high also in terms of weekly frequency - even if it should be noted that the most common use is chatting (84.3%) and not updating or posting

content (66.3%). Social-network sites seem to be mostly used for private communication. This is perhaps confirmed by the low adoption rate of Twitter. Overall, activities which indicate online participation are less popular: only one in three students ever posted self-produced content or participated in an online community; even fewer have written entries or managed a blog. Moreover, respondents who participate online on a weekly basis are less than 10%.

[Table 3]

A principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted in order to identify which latent types of online activities existed among respondents (see Table 4). The model, run with the criteria of eigenvalues greater than 1, suggested a three-factor solution with 63.5% of the total variance explained. Even if they certainly don't represent a complete range of online activities (indeed important ones are missing, such as school activities, entertainment, civic or political participation), the components seem solid because they confirm types of internet use already found in the literature (Blank & Groselj, 2014; Blank 2013). The first factor was labeled "social-networking" because it includes all items directly associated with Facebook use: "Chat via Facebook, MSN or Skype" (0.89), "Comment on a friend's post on Facebook" (0.94), "Update your status or post new content on Facebook" (0.90). The second factor, defined as "Skilled content production," loads high with the following activities: "Manage a personal website or a blog" (0.77), "Post self-produced content" (0.74), "Participate in an online forum or an online community" (0.73), "Write about a familiar topic" (0.68) and "Post a new tweet on Twitter" (0.56). As suggested by Blank (2013), "skilled content" is the result of a particular kind of user-

generated content production that includes activities such as blogging and posting stories or other creative work. To engage in these kinds of practices, someone should have “technical skills,” a “considerable personal commitment” and also a certain amount of time to devote to the enterprise (Blank, 2013, pp. 601). The third factor was labeled “information-seeking” because it loads high on “Research material online” (0.84) and “Read news in websites or blogs” (0.75). It is one of the most classic types of internet use based on the “consumption” of information (Bakardjieva, 2005) that resonates with those defined as capital-enhancing activities.

[Table 4]

In order to understand to what extent social background influences teenage internet use, the components extracted with PCA were used as dependent variables in three hierarchical linear regression models. Independent variables were inserted in three steps: 1) socio-demographic variables (individual characteristics and parents’ occupational status), 2) cultural capital (parents’ level of education and respondents’ school track), 3) technological provision. In Table 5 standardized coefficients ( $\beta$ ) are shown. Values should be read as if the variables in the previous step were already considered - as if they were controlled for.

[Table 5]

Socio-demographic variables such as gender, immigrant status and parents’ occupational status are associated with types of online activities in contrasting ways. Information-seeking

prevails among males and students of higher socio-economic status, especially those whose parents are service workers ( $\beta = 0.13$ ). Social-networking, instead, prevails among females, but it is not associated with any other characteristic. Skilled content is prevalent among males and, interestingly, first- and second-generation immigrants. Moreover, parents' occupational status is only partially associated (and not directly) with skilled content: sons and daughters of "petit bourgeoisie or independent workers" are as likely to engage in this kind of activity as those of "service workers."

In the second step two indicators of students' cultural capital were added: parents' level of education and school track. Cultural capital is significantly associated with both information-seeking and skilled content production. Engagement in online social-networking, on the contrary, is not related with teenagers' cultural capital. As it could have been predicted, cultural capital variables are all strongly and progressively associated with using the internet for seeking information. Being in an academic-oriented school, even when controlling for parents' occupation and parents' education, is greatly connected with this type of internet use ( $\beta = 0.18$ ). Teenagers with parents without a high school degree and attending a vocational school are significantly less likely to look for information online than their peers. This result, consistent with prior work, is a classic example of the "knowledge gap" (Bonfadelli, 2002). Conversely, skilled content production shows less clear results. This type of use is partially influenced by parents' education (only when parents are college graduates) and negatively associated with school track: in academic-oriented schools content production is notably less common than in vocational schools. Paradoxically, if parents' education positively influences this (even if slightly), student education does so negatively.

Technological provision matters for all types of activities. Controlling for socio-demographic and cultural capital, the ownership of a personal computer and the amount of technology present in the household is still strongly connected with internet use for any kind of activity. Social-networking is the most significantly associated with this set of variables.

The remaining sections present findings from 56 semi-structured interviews with adolescents from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds attending academic-oriented high schools or vocational schools. Each section delves deeper into a type of online activity previously analyzed: “information-seeking,” “social-networking” and “skilled content production.”

### ***Looking for information online: where “cultural reproduction” takes place***

Although they appropriate the internet in diverse and heterogeneous ways, students in academic-oriented high schools from cultured and wealthy families often share a common attitude towards this medium. To them the internet is meaningful especially when used as a means to acquire more “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1979). As Lareau and Weininger (2003) efficiently point out in a review of Bourdieu’s writings, cultural capital doesn't necessary correspond to highbrow cultural consumption. Rather, it is a resource that provides access to advantages and scarce rewards, subject to monopolization and transmissible across generations. If understood in these terms, the concept effectively expresses how these teenagers make sense of the internet. They consider it as a means to increase their knowledge both about “legitimate” topics, such as recent history or literature, or also popular culture, such as music and sports. This

knowledge, they think, might be useful for their everyday life, at schools or with friends, and even for their career. This group assigned much relevance to the instructive and cultural opportunities offered by the internet, while this topic was almost absent in interviews with teenagers from less advantageous backgrounds enrolled in vocational schools.

Indeed teenagers often talked about “promises” of the internet, not actual activities they frequently performed online. Interviews are scattered with declarations of internet’s usefulness for acquiring culture or privileges, not always followed by concrete examples.

*“Let’s say that, well, I love the internet because it is a gigantic source of information, endless information, really, you can find everything.” (Mattia)*

Even if such statements are vague and do not describe a concrete practice, they are meaningful because they are examples of “accounts of the media” (Hoover et al., 2004). Adolescents did not simply describe their habitual online activities, but also represented their “relationship” with the internet in which capital-enhancing activities had a prominent role. This finding not only corroborates what has been highlighted in the survey and is established in the literature (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008), but also shows how certain attitudes are developed via parental socialization and are strictly connected with the socio-cultural context. It is striking how these teenagers seem to feel the *need* to be updated and be cultured (also using the internet) in order to be part of their group of friends. It is not just a simple curiosity they are satisfying looking up information online but a social requirement. They do it to fit in their group and sometimes to avoid making a bad impression:

*“I go online with a purpose, maybe to look up information or... For example, recently in class we discussed about what happened in 1968 and I did not know anything about it, it*

*bothered me, so, well maybe someone could say you are a nerd but it is not true, but (I thought) maybe tomorrow back in class I don't know anything, so I went looking for information online..." (Nadia)*

The praise from capital-enhancing activities was sometimes strategic for the interviewees to represent themselves as members of a certain cultural milieu. These teens strategically want to “distinguish” themselves from their peers: several instances of vertical “distinction” (following school track hierarchy) or even “disgust” could be found in their discourses (Bourdieu, 1979).

*“I think (the internet) is very important because now we are attending an academic-oriented high school, so it is different, we are starting to... We are 16 year-old kids, but we begin to take an interest in politics and other important issues, you know, and I see that other peers [not in the same school] do not read the news about Berlusconi, or about what is happening in world, like Gaddafi story in Lybia, and so on, so I think it is really something we do, us, who are attending a liceo classico, because we have a different relationship with culture.” (Laura)*

Parents have a prominent role in the development of these attitudes. Not only do they conduct both “active” and “co-use” parental mediation, but they are also examples of “cultured” internet users looking for information online. When elaborating about the good ways in which the internet should be used, these teens spontaneously mentioned parents as role models. Besides engaging in numerous strategies of parental mediation – such as giving advices about how to look for information, limiting screen-time and browsing the web together – parents also perform advanced online activities, hence inspiring their children to do the same.

*“For studying I trust books, (I use the internet) for things that you don't study at school, for example history, because at school you don't go past the cold war and you don't know*

*anything about what happened afterwards, but also for the news, maybe to read an article, yes, my mom she uses the internet for that, she reads the newspaper, but (...) sometimes we wonder 'did it really go like it is reported in the newspaper?' then my father looks on several websites of other newspapers and at the end he says 'ok, it seems so,' but only few people do like that."*

*(Nadia)*

The relationship between children and parents is characterized by reciprocity. They share a common "way of seeing the world," well beyond internet use, but that nonetheless importantly influences it. Teenagers from academic-oriented high schools adhere to their parents' ideas about the internet as something useful to be adopted instrumentally to get advantages in life.

*"My parents have always, let's say, helped me because they have always provided me an internet connection, a computer... And they guided me because they think, correctly I would say, that the internet is a fundamental tool in everyday life, for the functions it offers, they always helped me because they think it can help me in my studies or even in my life, in different situations, there are many ways in which the internet could be helpful..." (Tommaso)*

In addition, it is worth mentioning that occasionally parents directly push their children to search for information online or to use the web in a positive way, for example in order to increase their knowledge about a certain topic.

*"My mother often urges me, like, if I say 'mum I am interested in this stuff', she says 'Why don't you search some information about it online?' Like that, yes, they push me to use the internet productively." (Giulio)*

Evidently the desire of these teenagers to acquire culture through the internet, while being mostly spontaneous, also depends on the mandate of parental agents.



***Social-networking: from “distinction” to “reckless sociability”***

Differently from internet use for information-seeking, social-network sites (and Facebook in particular) are widely adopted by the teenagers involved in the study irrespective of their socio-economic background. However, the ways in which Facebook is embraced are significantly diverse, if not juxtaposed, according to teens’ social background.

Adolescents attending academic-oriented high schools of high socio-economic status exhibit a critical stance towards social-network sites. Facebook is important to them, but it is described only as one among other online activities they like to do when using the internet. Moreover they were prone to say the site should be used wisely and cautiously. They framed discourses about Facebook along a dichotomy between “serious” and “stupid” or “positive” and “negative” use (“*I mainly use Facebook for fun, but also for serious stuff,*” “*Facebook is full of nonsense, but it could also be an opportunity to learn something new,*” “*Facebook is a communication medium, I think also respectable, I mean, you could also have some serious talks with it*”). They often admitted using Facebook a lot, but were also keen to highlight positive uses such as sharing knowledge and information, increasing their culture (thanks to literary or musical references) or even optimizing communication with classmates for school purposes (via Facebook groups). On the other hand, they negatively judged peers who spend too much time on it, share intimate information with a wide audience and establish connections with strangers (a girl defined it “sleazy”). Generally, they were very much likely to critique social media:

*“The problem is that among young people, the internet is popular mainly because of Facebook, that is evil because, to me, it is the realm of vanity.” (Giulio)*

*“The genius of Facebook, and maybe also the scary thing if you think about it, it is that in our society it is being normalized the fact that everyone is always reachable (...) It is known that Facebook is under control, or better that from your profile they did your tailored advertising.”*  
(Mattia)

*“It makes me laugh that on Facebook you can put your relationship status, that you are engaged and this kind of thing, if in a certain time I have a boyfriend I surely do not put that on Facebook, it really seems just a way to show off, so that everybody has to comment, it is a bit pathetic sometimes.”* (Paola)

Much of their criticism – often a wise consideration of social media problematic features – stems from the discourses and mediation of their parents. Indeed, a few interviewees directly cited their parents’ opinions in order to explain how Facebook should be used:

*“My father says that Facebook - and this is a speech I have heard him giving to his employees - should not be used as they do, because these people write on Facebook every little thing they do!”* (Carlo)

In the end, their critical stance is also a form of “distinction” (Bourdieu, 1979) from peers who use social-network sites less thoughtfully.

*“There are fanatics, maybe because they are not very much ‘in’ in the group, that the first thing they do at home is Facebook (...) I don’t want to discriminate, but someone attending our school [liceo classico] has much more to study than someone who attends other types of school, maybe those don’t have a lot to do, so, in the end, maybe it is fair that if it is raining and they don’t want to go out they spend more time on Facebook, it is normal.”* (Paola)

*“A Facebook profile has more pros than cons, maybe you can also find stupid things on it, but me and all the people I know... Essentially, we are not accustomed to that, I mean, we use Facebook for positive purposes.” (Giorgio)*

Very differently from their peers, teenagers from vocational schools and lower social classes were enthusiastic about social-network sites and not reluctant to say they made new friends (or even boyfriends/girlfriends) through them. Some even use the Internet almost only for Facebook as if the two were the same<sup>6</sup> (*“I like going on Facebook, like everyone, but beyond I don't go, I don't browse the internet a lot, I always visit the same things.”*). This Facebook-centric approach is not simply a matter of time spent on the website, but also of meanings attached to it. It seems that for these teenagers (much more than for their privileged counterparts) Facebook is extremely important. The social-network is mainly used to manage or amplify their social-network and to get emotional support. Precisely they take advantage of one of the main features of social-network sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007): browsing other users' contact list. They particularly appreciate how easy it is to add new contacts, such as peers met just once or Facebook's “friends of friends,” establishing deep relationships with them.

*“(On Facebook) I met a boy who told me he has a girlfriend in Milan (...) he told me ‘if you want look at my photos’, I looked at his photos and made friends with him (...), I also met a girl from Southern Italy, now we also text, we have a good relationship, then I met a girl, she is a friend of a guy who is my class, and so, yes, I am getting acquainted with some new people.”*

*(Sara)*

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<sup>6</sup> Other websites were mentioned, especially YouTube and Wikipedia.

Besides extending their social-network, they also use Facebook to deepen friendships and manage romantic relationships. They describe Facebook as profoundly related with many aspects of their intimate lives. In interviews with vocational high school students there are many examples of how the website was the place for romances, breakups, declarations of love, courtships, fights, betrayals, envy and so on - instead, the same topic was almost ignored or expressed with criticism by peers from privileged social backgrounds.

*“I think the internet is good because it introduced me to several good people, and it introduced me to my boyfriend, but for the rest it is normal, I don’t know what to say, I mean, it is a past-time, but for that thing it was useful.” (Sandra)*

Someone even considered Facebook as a great resource to express emotions (through messages, photos and images) and escape from the burdens of everyday life thanks to friends’ support or entertainment. Overall, many depicted Facebook as an essential component of their life:

*“Facebook, it is like one of our friends now.” (Rosa)*

*“Some issues should be resolved face-to-face, but, well, (Facebook) at least helps, because when you are really nervous you unload yourself a bit in there and then it ceases... Because if there wasn’t for Facebook, sometimes I would have probably hit someone.” (Tatiana)*

*“That is the best part, whenever I login on Facebook I have thousands of buddies and gals online, and we write to each other “What’s up? Everything’s alright?” and also useless stuff, but, well, it is good to know that you are at home but you can be in touch with someone else who maybe is in the other side of the town.” (Sid)*

Adults are not appreciated and are rarely tolerated as friends in the social-network. Facebook is mostly an “adult free zone” both from parents or relatives, and strangers who try to get in touch with them (especially girls, who declared to be able to detect and block them). On the contrary, peers, such as brothers, sisters, cousins, friends and “crews,” were frequently mentioned as mentors and sources of information. Parents often don’t have digital skills and are not role models. Their main concern seemed to be balancing their children’s online and offline time (preserving family time, sleep and study), not guiding their online endeavors:

*“My mum, no, she doesn’t tell me off anymore because she gave in, however she also has Facebook now, so she realized that it is fun [laughing], she doesn’t say anything to me anymore, maybe she just says ‘stay here with us a bit’ because I see them only in the evening.” (Sara)*

### ***Different approaches to skilled content production***

Consistently with survey data, only a minority of interviewees engages in skilled content production (especially in a deep and systematic way) and vocational school<sup>7</sup> pupils are most willing to seize this opportunity compared to peers in academic-oriented high school. They use social media to foster involvement in an incredible amount of fields ranging from subcultures (hip hop, skateboarding) to *fandom* (comics, anime, fantasy literature, horror movies, fan fiction), from creative expression (street art, photography, illustration, digital graphics) to peculiar hobbies (robotics, medieval weapons). Social media seem to be playing a vital role in these adolescents’ identity formation process (Buckingham, 2008). Through production (and

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<sup>7</sup> Especially those enrolled in the vocational high school with a curriculum on graphic communication and advertising.

consumption) of online “skilled content” they define their tastes, perform cultural consumption, express belonging to a subculture, organize leisure time and even define their look or style.

However, skilled content production takes different forms also among this group. First, production of user-generated content is simply associated with being (heavy) consumers of other users’ content. The type of information teenagers search for online is more easily found in the “participatory web” (Jenkins et al., 2006) than in institutional websites and sources (such as online newspapers). Hence, the boundary between being just a consumer and also a producer is thin, and they seem to be accustomed to seamlessly switch from fruition to participation, even if it is just for sharing a little piece of information.

*“If someone publishes a link to an anime on Facebook then, yes, I comment on it, indeed I am subscribed to several Facebook groups related to anime in which I write comments, I also took part in some contests, I have fun, I also made a Facebook page dedicated to anime, created by me and two friends, from Palermo and Rome.” (Samantha)*

Social media are also a source of information and a place for informal learning (Ito et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2006). Teens participate in Facebook groups, online communities and forums around their interests and learn how to exchange knowledge with peers and experts. Many interviewees mentioned YouTube video tutorials as an effective way for learning practical skills about their interests. Examples of expertise acquired include: photo retouching with Photoshop, drawing techniques and video editing. Through these autonomous and informal learning practices, teenagers often gain confidence and a sense of empowerment.

*“Yes, I have published some drawings (in a fan art website) and occasionally experts gave me advice, like ‘look you did like that, but...’ and so on, so I understood, we helped each other.” (Carolina)*

In the most advanced cases, social media are consciously and systematically used for self-expression or even self-promotion. Few of them, usually males, produce and share contents to express their subcultural belonging (especially in hip hop or skating). They collaboratively create and publish video, professional photos, music files and so on. As Andrea’s quote shows, this can be a source of empowerment:

*“We are working on an EP and thanks to the internet we... I mean, we are not famous, we don’t have a record label, so we create a song, we mix it in the studio, we produce the master and then the first thing we do is upload it on the internet for free download, the internet helps us a lot, also because you do a video and it spreads (...) On Facebook I have a page for my ‘musical character’, I have my regular page, the fan page, MySpace, YouTube, let’s say I have a whole world in my computer and I like having those spaces, internet gives me many possibilities.” (Andrea)*

On the other hand, teenagers in academic-oriented schools don’t have a positive disposition to online content production and sharing. Besides rarely mentioning it, they also assert a conscious distance from those practices. The main reasons for not engaging in skilled content production are: lack of time and inclination, desire to preserve reputation and perception of risk. They are aware that any piece of content shared online could have a great visibility. Hence they don’t want to share low-quality data or anything that could infringe copyright laws.

Teenagers' awareness of internet cultural opportunities and, at the same time, of internet problematic sides seems to discourage engagement in skilled content production.

*"I have never published anything online because I never have had... not an opportunity, but a real interest. You know it is like a commitment, and if you write or do something wrong you risk legal actions (...) it is better to behave as clients, let's say, users, than authors."* (Giorgio)

However, exceptions do exist. Three teenagers from upper-class families interviewed in academic-oriented schools are indeed very engaged in skilled content production. All of them are seriously and deeply involved in the "participatory culture" (Jenkins et al., 2006) and acquire high profile technical skills as a by-product of their participation (such as video editing, 3D or digital graphics) (Ito, 2010). However, what distinguishes them from their less privileged peers is their parents' role in shaping online engagement, both indirectly as being role models (they are all professionals and creative workers, such as architects, programmers, scientists, engineers, designers) and directly through parental mediation. These families are characterized by a type of parental mediation based on reciprocity, dialogue and collaboration, akin to the one defined as "participatory learning" by Clark (2011). As a result, teenagers hold a very high consideration of skilled content production (an activity their parents approve): they think of it as a form of personal enrichment. Social media are not intended solely as a way to acquire status among peers and build identity, but also as cultural capital. For example in the next quote, Fausto, who is highly engaged in a YouTube community of "machinima" (Ito, 2011) and is an expert in video editing and 3D computer graphics, openly recognizes his parents' influence:

*"My mother was a stage designer, now she doesn't work anymore, but sometimes she helps my father (architect) (...) maybe they have inspired me, I see what I do online as the*



*development of scenography, I mean, before it was all done on paper, now it is 360° (...) I tried to make them understand I was not wasting my time online, I made comparisons with their life. I mean, what do they do? My father stands in front of a computer and “creates” a house, and what do I do? I stand in front of the computer and create a video of a videogame, I mean, I do something, it is not that I only visit some webpages, like Facebook, ‘oh so fun...’”*

## **Results**

The chapter provides an in-depth description of digital inequalities among teenagers and examines how social background shapes internet appropriation. In a nutshell, the key innovations of the study are a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods to explore internet use among teenagers, and a focus on class-based inequalities considering parents’ socio-economic status and education along with students’ own cultural capital (school tracks). The survey, which corroborates and integrates previous studies, shows that socio-demographic and cultural variables don’t hold a direct relationship with all types of internet use. The interviews, instead, provide support for the continuing relevance of social background in teenagers’ attitudes, discourses and meaning-making processes concerning the internet. Overall, findings are only apparently contradictory: internet use reproduces, and may eventually exacerbate, social inequalities, but the relationship between inequalities and internet use is not always linear nor predictable, especially when it comes to social media use.

Internet use for capital-enhancing activities is strictly connected with teens’ social background. Among the types of internet use examined in the regression models, information-seeking was the only one directly and positively influenced both by parents’ occupational status,

parents' level of education and students' school track. Thus, the gap in internet use for information-seeking between teenagers of highly educated elites and those from vocational high school and low socio-economic background is particularly wide. These results indicate that the "knowledge gap," established in prior works about the digital divide, is still very current also among teenagers (Bonfadelli, 2002; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). Moreover, school track widely contributes to differentiated online practices: even controlling for parents' background, students enrolled in academic-oriented high schools are more likely to engage in information-seeking. As Helsper claimed in her "corresponding fields model" (2012) of digital exclusion, offline cultural resources, available in the family and at school, are further expanded online. This resonates also with interview data. Students in academic-oriented high schools (especially *liceo classico*) not only praise the cultural opportunities offered by the internet, but they also "distinguish" themselves from their peers by acknowledging that ("*it is really something we do (...) because we have a different relationship with culture*"). They adopt an attitude of "distinction," in Bourdieu's (1979) terms, to represent their internet use, not only when they are talking about information-seeking activities, but for social-networking and user-generated content as well.

It goes without saying that social-network sites are extremely popular among teenagers. The ubiquitous adoption of social-network sites perhaps explains to some extent why the regression models didn't find any association with social background variables. In fact, besides gender and technological provision, there aren't any other statistically significant correlations with social-networking. Results about gender are consistent with prior findings (Cotten & Jelenewicz, 2006), while the high coefficients for technological provisions might indicate that the main obstacle to social-networking is ownership of devices. According to survey data,

respondents' social background does not affect their use of social-network sites. Interviews data, however, tell a different story. Even if teenagers' background does not influence the extent or amount of social-network use, it still shapes *how* they use and perceive these websites. Most teenagers are intensive Facebook users; however, students from upper-class families stress both the useful or "serious" opportunities offered by Facebook and its shortcomings. Their peers in vocational school, instead, praise (and discuss about) its actual social features such as making new friends, developing intimate relationships, being in constant touch, and so on. The first exhibit criticism ("*Facebook is evil (...) the realm of vanity*"); the others display empathy ("*Facebook is like a friend*"). This recalls the notion of the "consumption versus community" continuum proposed by Bakardjieva (2005) in her study about early internet users: those from disadvantaged social groups built communities and relationships online (and were empowered by that), while others preferred consuming information and not getting (emotionally) involved.

Only a minority of teenagers habitually engages in "skilled content production" (Blank, 2013). To do so, users should have "technical skills," a "considerable personal commitment" and a certain amount of free time (Blank, 2013). Perhaps this clarifies why only a few respondents (less than 10%) use the internet weekly for skilled content production (such as posting creative works or participating in online communities). Although rather uncommon, advanced participation in social media is not a prerogative of the elites. In fact, social background variables relate in unpredictable and ambivalent ways with this type of internet use. Parents' occupational status, for instance, is not directly associated with it. Children from "white collar" families do not perform any better than those from "working class" families, while "petit bourgeoisie" teenagers engage as much as those from the "upper-service class." Furthermore, cultural capital influence

is contradictory. Parents' education influences positively, although only if at least one parent has a university degree. On the other hand, teenagers' own cultural capital has an opposite influence: students in academic-oriented high schools are less likely than those in vocational schools to produce and share content in social media. This finding is elucidated by interview data. Participation in social media is indeed appreciated by many in vocational high schools. These students are more interested in experimenting online also because it intersects with their hobbies, creative interests and subcultures; participation in social media enables self-expression and informal learning, increases peer status and enhances self-esteem. Following Helsper's theoretical model (2012), there seems to be a correspondence between teenagers' offline involvement in an "illegitimate extra-curricular culture" (Bourdieu, 1979, pp. 16) and online engagement through social media. Contrary to their privileged peers, skeptical about spending time online for content creation (*"it is better to behave as clients, let's say, users, than authors"*), they participate in many ways - even if not necessarily advanced (*"I have published some drawing (in a fan art website) and occasionally experts gave me advice"*). There are also exceptions of upper-class teens that creatively participate in social media. However, their participation is shaped by parents (rather than peers) who are creative professionals and engaged in "participatory learning" mediation (Clark, 2011).

Altogether, the findings do not corroborate a "linear" conception of digital inequalities according to which greater resources (cultural, economic or social) correspond to a broader, innovative and more advantageous internet use. Yet, social class does contribute to shape how teenagers use the internet. It is possible to suggest an underlying coherence in these results that links teenagers' social background with their all-around internet appropriation. In privileged

social contexts, teenagers make sense of the internet “vertically,” through a fruitful relationship with adults (parents). On the other hand, teenagers from less advantageous social and cultural contexts appropriate the internet “horizontally” together with their peers. Interview data clearly show that teenagers from upper-class families draw heavily from their parents’ discourses and examples to define their relationship with digital media. They quoted them and incorporated their ideas about the internet as a “tool” to be used productively, with a purpose, for personal enrichment. Parents’ constant presence - both symbolically in their children’s words and effectively through mediation - seems to be the anticipated result of a precise parental strategy akin to what Lareau (2003) defined “concerted cultivation.” In fact, parents structure their children’s leisure time into constructive activities, limiting their autonomy but instilling a sense of entitlement and the ability of critical thinking. Drawing on the work of Annette Lareau on parenting and inequalities, we advance that the more upper-middle class is the adolescents’ social background, the more strongly socialization agents (parents in particular) mediate their digital engagement. Consistently with Lareau’s thesis about “concerted cultivation,” we see that digital resources are appropriated by the upper-middle class mostly as human capital enhancements rather than purely social or recreational resources.

Adolescents with a working class background, instead, could mostly count on their peers for learning about the internet: first, because their parents are often not digitally skilled enough to teach them; secondly, because of their parenting style that, similar to what Lareau (2003) defined as “accomplishment of natural growth,” is concerned with instilling obedience to rules, but does not interfere with children’s leisure activities. Leisure time (as well as internet time) is not directed by adults; it is organized with peers. To this group of teenagers the internet is an “adult-

free” world (Lareau 2003). Paradoxically, though, with less parental guidance, but more peer mediation, they have better chances to experiment with social media than teens from upper-middle class in academic-oriented high schools.

Overall the results dovetail nicely with Lareau’s theory about parenting styles and social reproduction, but they also show something new related to digital inequalities among youth. Internet use does not simply reproduce social and cultural inequalities. It can also be an opportunity for teenagers. If parental mediation and the school system create the conditions for cultural reproduction, social media use and peer mediation might indeed open up unexpected possibilities for teens in disadvantaged contexts.

To conclude, two limitations of the study that may inform future investigations are reported. First, the analysis did not cover the experiences of adolescents for whom the internet is trivial. However, a focus on the least engaged users could enhance our understanding of digital exclusion. Second, the school setting should be investigated more deeply. Schools are increasingly a place in which students are socialized to digital media - both by teachers and peers. Moreover this study finds that school tracks have a strong impact on different types of internet use. Hence, future research could address more directly the impact of the school system on digital inequalities.

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**Table 1. Survey sample's descriptive statistics**

	N	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	1,000	49.4
Male	1,025	50.6
<i>Immigrant status</i>		
Native	1,847	91.2
Immigrant (first and second generation)	178	8.8
<i>Parents' occupational status</i>		
Working class	385	19.3
Petit Bourgeoisie or independents	287	14.3
Middle class	732	36.6
Upper-service class	597	29.8
<i>Parents' level of education</i>		
Less than high school	599	30.2
High school	727	36.7
University	656	33.1
<i>School track</i>		
Academic-oriented high school	934	46.1
Technical school	728	36
Vocational school	363	17.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,025</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2. Qualitative sample characteristics**

<i>Gender</i>		
Male		26
Female		27
<i>Social class</i>		
Upper-service class		23
Middle class		15
Working class		18
<i>School track</i>		
Academic-oriented high school		16
Vocational school		7
<i>Groups</i>		
1) Academic-oriented high school students	Upper-service class	22
	Middle class	2
	Working class	1
2) Vocational school students	Upper-service class	1

	Middle class	13
	Working class	17

**Table 3. Online activities (%)**

	Performed	Weekly
Research information online to explore a specific topic	94.2	54.7
Chat via Facebook, MSN or Skype	92.6	84.3
Comment on a friend’s post on Facebook	88.6	77.9
Update your status or post new content on Facebook	86.5	66.3
Read news in websites or blogs	80.9	35.9
Post self-produced content (such as music, video or illustrations)	29.3	7.9
Participate in an online forum or an online community	27.7	9.4
Write about a familiar topic (reviews, Wikipedia entries, Yahoo	20.0	4.4
Post a new tweet on Twitter	15.2	7.9
Manage a personal website or a blog	11.8	5.1

N = 2,025 students. Notes: ‘Performed’ is per cent who do the activity more than never. ‘Weekly’ is per cent who do the activity at least once a week.

**Table 4. Internet activities: factor loadings from PCA**

	Social-networking	Skilled content	Information-seeking
Chat via Facebook, MSN or Skype	0.89		
Comment on a friend’s post on Facebook	0.94		
Update your status or post new content on Facebook	0.90		
Post a new tweet on Twitter		0.56	
Manage a personal website or a blog		0.77	
Participate in an online forum or an online		0.73	
Post self-produced content		0.74	
Write about a familiar topic		0.68	0.30
Research information online to explore a specific			0.84
Read news in websites or blogs			0.75

N = 2,025 students. Notes: Table contains sorted factor loadings after Varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization. Loadings less than 0.25 have been omitted.

**Table 5. Linear regressions ( $\beta$ ) coefficients for types of online activities**

	Information-seeking ( $\beta$ )	Social-networking ( $\beta$ )	Skilled content ( $\beta$ )
<i>Step 1) Socio-demographic</i>			
Gender			
Female (omitted)			
Male	0.06**	-0.12 ***	0.11 ***
Immigration status			
Italian (omitted)			
Immigrant (first and second generation)	0.02	-0.01	0.11 ***
Area of living			
Not urban (omitted)			
Town	0.00	-0.04	-0.02
Parents' occupational status (SEC)			
Lower white collar workers and other workers (omitted)			
Petit Bourgeoisie or independents	0.01	0.04	0.07 *
White collar / Intermediate occupations	0.08 **	0.01	0.02
Service workers	0.13 ***	0.04	0.06 *
<i>Step 2) Cultural capital</i>			
Parents' highest level of education			
Less than high school (omitted)			
High school degree	0.11 ***	-0.02	0.05
University degree	0.11 ***	-0.03	0.09 **
School track			
Vocational institute (omitted)			
Technical institute	0.07*	-0.02	-0.08 *
Academic-oriented high school	0.18 ***	-0.04	-0.12***
<i>Step 3) Technological provision</i>			
Ownership of a personal computer	0.09 ***	0.13 ***	0.09 ***
Technologies in the home	0.08 **	0.23 ***	0.13 ***
Step 1 Adjusted R2	0.01	0.02	0.02
Step 2 Adjusted R2	0.04	0.02	0.03
Step 3 Adjusted R2	0.06	0.10	0.06

N = 2,025 students. Notes: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Author Bio

Marina Micheli, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Sociology and Social Research at Milano-Bicocca University. Her research examines the relationship between social stratification and digital media use among young people. She has been involved in several research projects focusing on: ICT and education, children or teenagers use of mobile devices and social-network sites, digital skills and media literacy.