

Digital Media and the New Sport Consumption Habits of Youths in France

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This paper, starting from a study carried out on the habits of online sports practice among Generation Z (Dorsey, 2022), proposes a reflection on the value of staying socially connected. Particularly since the first lockdown, the smartphone screen has become one of the new media that allows new sports practices to be implemented through digital applications and social networks: training, sharing interests with the community, participating in challenges, getting involved and trying out new sports experiences thanks to the ease of access and the flexibility of using these tools.

Keywords: digital communication, social networks, app, online sport, generation Z.

I media digitali e le nuove abitudini di consumo dello sport tra i giovani in Francia

Questo contributo, partendo da uno studio condotto sulle abitudini di pratica sportiva online tra gli appartenenti alla Generazione Z (Dorsey, 2022), propone una riflessione sul valore di restare socialmente connessi. In particolare, dal primo lockdown lo schermo dello smartphone è diventato uno dei nuovi media che permette di implementare nuove pratiche sportive attraverso applicazioni digitali e social network: allenarsi, condividere interessi con la community, partecipare a sfide, mettersi in gioco e provare nuove esperienze sportive grazie alla facilità di accesso e alla flessibilità nell'utilizzo di questi strumenti.

Parole-chiave: comunicazione digitale, social network, app, sport online, generazione Z.

Introduction

Social networks have helped to strengthen and reinvigorate the link between sports and traditional media. Indeed, their advent has increased the possibility of conveying in real time the typical characteristics of sport as an instrument of interaction, involvement and generator of emotions, values and passions. Social networking platforms have become indispensable places for any sphere of society and have brought about profound changes in the habits and lifestyles of many individuals. The message to be conveyed reaches users in a simple and targeted manner, and interaction is the innovation that has most favoured this type of change. Sports communication is no longer just the story of competitions or the report of the results of a match, on the contrary, people show interest in a multitude of facets: from gossip to the sportsman's daily life, from behind the scenes to their favourite brands. The difference from more traditional forms of communication is clear (De Knop *et alii*, 1999).

Digital and social processes underwent a rapid evolutionary process during the lockdown period, but the use of apps and social networks for sporting activities was already a practice and not only among younger people. For example, in 2016, research conducted in France (Fuchs & Guyon, 2016) showed that out of a sample of a thousand people belonging to Generation Z, 41% between the ages of 16 and 25 were already regularly using an app to do sport, either to record themselves during training and review their progress, or to follow their exercises. Over 60% of the sample shared their progress on social networks. Moreover, this shows how the link with the community of reference through social networks is very strong and it is used both to create new ties and to integrate into social groups. In particular, with the lockdown situation related to COVID-19, there was a surge of interest in fitness, with new demands from novice users, who needed advice and instruction, with motivating content and exercises accessible to all (Lim, 2020). It was precisely this need that prompted the industry to adapt and readjust to the context, implementing apps with more elements, such as the possibility of exercising alone, at home or outdoors and when required in complete autonomy, with

customisable programmes that can be adapted to each person's abilities and needs (Kang *et alii*, 2015). In addition, apps can be used as a diary in which all activities carried out so far are recorded, thus allowing one to monitor one's progress and performance. Apps are considered an excellent alternative to the gym, a way to introduce beginners to new practices and to enhance the performance of professionals. This longitudinal study, planned over five years, examined the way in which the practice of sporting activity was associated with the use of digital applications and social networks as social support for human connection, bringing about changes in sporting habits from the first lockdown among young people, represented by Generation Z (Dorsey, 2022) and which includes the 11 to 26 age group. The smartphone screen has thus become, for this generation of young people, one of the new media allowing them to implement new sporting practices: training, sharing interests with the community, participating in challenges, getting involved and trying out new sporting experiences. The research, in its second edition, looked at a sample of 579 French students, who took part in an online survey between November and December 2022 (44% women – 56% men). The average age of the research sample was 19 (Generation Z), and it was divided into two groups, one from 14 to 20 and one from 21 upwards, based on different lifestyles and purchasing power. Overall, it emerged that all the young people involved used social networks and digital applications to engage in sports activities, either for free or by paying for a service and testing themselves with “digital challenges” spread via hashtags.

The reasons for the success of this activity are linked to the ease of access and the flexibility to train at any time and to share one's activities with the relevant communities. Through the results of this study, it is possible to confirm how digital has become an integral part of almost all activities in Western society and cannot be considered just a tool or a technology, but a true ecosystem (Doueiri, 2016). As in any ecosystem, new practices and new ways of learning have to be integrated into habits and daily routines in order to then be able to appropriate and use them in the best possible way. In the digital sports ecosystem, we can observe that young people have access to all the information but they must understand how to use and optimise it (*ibidem*). This essay, starting from the results of this research, therefore proposes a reflection on the value of remaining socially connected for Generation Z, maintaining a role identity and suggesting at the same time to sports companies, new eco-sustainable communication practices and strategic actions to be implemented

in order to maintain contact with this young public, which, through a 'digital' enjoyment of the rituals of sport, affirms its identity within the community.

The Screenology of Generation Z

The virtual life experienced during the lockdown periods due to the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced an entire generation of young people, who, according to various studies, consider their internet presence to be far more important than their real life. According to a Squarespace Survey (2021), 60% of Generation Z, born in the 1990s-2000s, and 62% of Millennials (or Generation Y), born in the 1980s-90s, say that online presence is more important than appearing in person, finding that the younger generations are the most involved on the Internet. The mobile phone screen is the main tool for enjoying video content, with 75% of Generation Z using it once a day for exactly this purpose (Horowitz Research, 2021), while 56% use laptops, followed by tablets, desktop computers, consoles and connected devices. Interestingly, 19% of young people, especially between the ages of 13 and 24, also use augmented reality to enjoy video content and not just video games. Short-form videos, such as *Instagram* reels or those posted on *TikTok*, are the favourites in this age group. The studies carried out so far and it show that interactivity is the predominant element of smartphone screen use, despite the prevalence of a sedentary, but second-screen experience (Filho & Santos, 2015) for almost two-thirds of Gen Z who send messages related to video content (Horowitz, 2021), using multiple screens at the same time. This type of fruition, which is part of Gen Z's habits, involves the use of social media at any time of the day, it is an onlife experience (Floridi, 2015), characterised by the continuous interaction between material reality and virtual reality, in a symbiotic bond with screens, the so-called *screenology* (Huhtamo, 2015) developed from birth by this generation. Given these premises, for Generation Z, therefore, the relationship with apps and social networks in their daily lives is very evident. Consequently, social media dedicated to sport have also become part of their habits and lifestyle, offering a different approach to sporting activity. Thanks to these platforms, young athletes of Generation Z have access to a wide range of content, personalised training programmes and information on fitness trends. They use apps to monitor their performance, share their progress with the community and participate in virtual challenges and competitions. Social

networks have become a place to exchange experiences, motivate each other and create links with other sports enthusiasts.

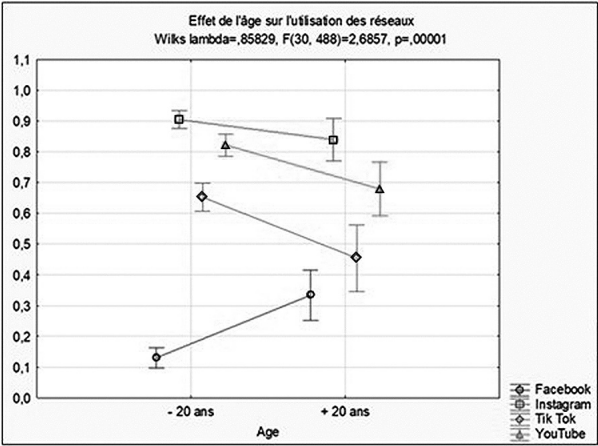
The French Survey: Sports Practice with Apps and Social Networks

In the context just presented, the research conducted by CY ILEPS Cergy Paris Université, as part of a multidisciplinary survey on post-lockdown sporting activity, which took into account various factors such as self-perception and self-esteem, posture in sporting practice, apps and social networks, fits into the context just presented above. The study, launched in 2021 to probe new habits in sport following the lockdown, is in its second year and is part of a longitudinal project to examine the evolution of certain sporting practices over time (self-diagnosis in sport, managerial attitudes, posture and movement).

The first survey, which was active in the last quarter of 2021, showed that 65% of those surveyed used social networks and digital apps for sporting activities, either for free or by paying for a service and testing themselves with 'digital challenges' spread via hashtags (#bougezchezvous). In particular, 33% said they started using sports apps and social networks for sports purposes during the lockdown, 15% started using them more than before, and 13% were already using them. Among the reasons that led users to cultivate this new habit, we find first and foremost time flexibility (39%), followed by the possibility of performing one or more sporting activities with motivation and commitment (31%), the possibility of reviewing exercises several times (12%), but also of not having to move from home (7%) and the opportunity to be able to follow masterclasses with athletes (3%). Among the most used platforms, *YouTube* emerges (35%) understandably due to its video broadcasting nature, followed by *Instagram* (28%) with live workouts, famous coaches or athletes to follow. Subsequently, *TikTok*, used by 12% of those questioned, had great success during the lockdown with a marketing campaign that made it known to the general public, and in last place, with 9% of users, is *Facebook*. Finally, it is noted that exercise apps are the most popular (between 22% and 26%) in contrast to online sports courses (between 7% and 13%).

Therefore, it can be seen that although the sporting level affects the practices and habits of the athlete, sports companies have unconsciously adopted new eco-friendly communication practices and strategic actions to maintain contact with their public (involvement of popular athletes, celebrities, sports coaches...).

This has been possible because technology facilitates the introduction of these practices into the communication routines of the main sports actors, becoming strategic in the management of their activities (apps to monitor performance, dedicated social profiles, virtual communities). Furthermore, it appears that in this type of digital enjoyment of sporting rituals, the media public is now accustomed to them and makes use of them to rediscover the comfort typical of sport and its values, integrating the new practices into everyday life. The data that emerged from this first study allows us to put into context the second survey, disseminated online in the last quarter of 2023 and to which 579 people responded, 255 women and 324 men. The average age is 19, 86% are between 14 and 20 years old, thus falling into the Generation Z category. To complete the picture, the remaining 14%, although falling within Generation Z, were considered as a separate group, as they are considered young-active people with different purchasing power and lifestyles. The research examined social media use and motivation, the relationship with physical activity and virtual training, and the predisposition to purchase or not to purchase paid services. Regarding the use of social networks, we find the use of *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *TikTok* and *YouTube*. If for *Facebook* and *TikTok*, age is representative (the younger I am the more I use *TikTok*, the less young I am the more I use *Facebook*) whereas for *Instagram* and *YouTube*, age has no particular incidence in this panel.



Facebook	P = 0,000 006
Instagram	P = 0,08 (ns)
TikTok	P = 0,001
YouTube	P = 0,003

Tab.1 Effect of age on use of major social networks

The use of social networks thus appears to be in line with the habits and expectations of Gen Z. Another interesting aspect, which once again confirms the trends, is related to motivation: accessibility, flexibility and gratuitousness are the elements that make people choose physical activity online. The data provided in the tables below allow us to reflect on the strengths of social media according to two age groups within Generation Z: under 20 and over 20. It is possible to state how some indicators correspond to both the values of sport and the characteristics of social networks: sharing, knowledge, and learning.

Relative frequency of shapes	- 20 years old	+ 20 years old
Accessibility	122	200
Motivation and desire	105	118
Flexibility	25	81
Enabling	64	59
Sport	75	52
Sharing	36	44
Advice	46	37
Free	46	37
Learn	30	37
Practice	17	30
Information	13	30
Exercise	33	22
Find	18	22
Sports	17	22
Take a course	6	22
People	25	15
World	10	15
Knowledge	9	15
Ideas	8	15
Examples	7	15

Tab. 2 Relative frequency of nouns and verbs based on their occurrence (> 10)

Relative frequency of adjectives and adverbs	- 20 years old	+ 20 years old
Easily	133	400
Practical	301	250
Fast	44	100
Social	80	50
Objective	35	50
Motivating	53	0
In solitary	71	0
Video	62	0
Simple	53	0
Physical	44	0

Tab. 3 Relative frequency of adjectives and adverbs based on their occurrence (> 10)

In particular, the concept of accessibility and time flexibility of digital media has more importance in the group over 20, while both classes attach importance to motivation and the desire to train with these tools.

Looking at the tables of adjectives and adverbs, however, “easily” clearly emerges with more than 400 references for young people over the age of 20 identifying digital sports practice in this way, while ‘practical’ is a concept recognized significantly by both classes.

It must be remembered that accessibility is one of the key factors in the success of these digital technologies, which, let us remember, include both applications and social networks. Many technological tools were initially intended only for professionals, but the ease of use and user-friendly interfaces have made it possible for amateurs and the general public to use them as well, allowing them to collect and interpret personal data, but also to be guided and supported by a ‘virtual coach’, a coach or trainer capable of providing rhythm, corrections and presence during sporting activity (Pharabod, 2013). As emerged from the presented context, apps and social networks for learning sports activities need to fulfil three requirements to be considered as such: usefulness and effectiveness, usability understood as the possibility of handling the digital device, and acceptability, i.e., the decision

to use the tool. Only by appropriating the resource will users benefit from it (Roche, 2021). It clearly emerges that the link with tablets and smartphones is a must. In fact, the latter can be used for the different functions they offer in addition to the internet connection, such as the camera and geolocation, providing users with information both on themselves with a personalized profile and on the way they practice their sport, for example applications such as *Strava* or *Runtastic*, which via GPS allow users to share their activities with their community of reference, to compare themselves with other athletes, and to have statistics on their training sessions. There is also the possibility of sharing one's routes and results on social networks, such as *Facebook* for example. Therefore, they are not just used as a tool to analyse and measure one's performance, but also to share one's activities with friends and acquaintances.

Conclusions

While it is evident how apps and social networks have had an impact on sporting activity since the lockdown on the habits of Generation Z and beyond, this is but a first reflection on the subject. Digital technology in sports is constantly evolving, while social network algorithms change in record time, as do the habits and expectations of the users of these tools, which they know perfectly well. Factors with a positive impact are perceived usefulness, enjoyment, watchability and compatibility, while familiarity with the application, as well as ergonomics and interface, play another usage variant. If one considers, for example, the viewing of videos, i.e., via smartphones, tablets and computers, which allow one to watch workouts, review them, put them in slow motion, freeze the image, one has everything one needs to learn and to improve one's performance. It must be emphasised that research on this issue is not yet so developed as to be able to confirm or deny the large-scale impact of this type of sporting activity. If, on the other hand, the commercial impact is considered, made up of slogans and marketing strategies, the data is different. In addition, among the reflections, it is worth emphasising how all the data generated by the use of apps and social networks are used to best benefit everyone, in terms of health, learning and protection.

Among the opportunities and challenges offered by social platforms in the field of sport is the possibility of enhancing co-creation, as well as

interaction, in order to develop and share content between organisations (teams, management and agencies involved) and users (fans, athletes of other categories and journalists). This starts from the increased interaction between fans and their involvement in the discussions recorded on *Facebook*, and from the measurement of the result on the field, we move on to the estimation of reactions in real time equivalent. Opinions and needs of sport-users are fundamental to develop effective communication strategies, which is why listening becomes essential.

Social media monitoring makes it possible to identify and analyse the flow of communication that takes place between content and users, through various systemic operations: the collection of comments on posts and forums, keyword analysis, the use of polling tools and searches by hashtags, are just some of the listening techniques that make it possible to verify the effectiveness of the tools in order to activate appropriate communication. The success of sports apps is closely linked to the time spent on mobile phone screens, underlining a change that goes hand in hand with the *Internet of Things* market (Negroponte, 1995). Digital tools can be seen as an artefact, i.e., a means to facilitate operations and actions. An artefact is a tool or device that therefore offers a set of resources to help perform human actions by structuring the user's activities (Norman, 1993). Thus, it is not only a tool to support physical properties, but also a digital tool that aids in the collection, analysis and storage of data to help improve performance. Stiegler (2016) defines digital technology as disruptive, capable of great change and upheaval, a major source of transformation, capable of upsetting established positions, rules and paradigms. This is therefore happening in various sectors, including sport. Stiegler emphasises, however, that digital technology is not always positive, on the contrary, it must be managed with a new approach and new awareness before we can take advantage of this new way of living and performing activities. Notwithstanding the advantages of digital sporting activity, relative to the needs and advantages of Gen Z, the ease of access and flexibility with regard to times, places and spaces, the reduced costs, the possibility of personalising the services chosen, the great variety of content accessible on different platforms, the monitoring of performance and the sharing of experiences with the community of reference, we must also emphasise the presence of certain limitations that need to be better investigated. In fact, in addition to the research data presented here and still at an embryonic stage in this multi-year journey, the international scientific

context around the topic is also developing, the use of digital applications and social networks, may have certain limitations. For example, the lack of physical interaction and direct contact with others, calling into question the aggregative value of sport in the presence of others, and again, possible technical errors in the execution of training by following videos without the supervision of a coach, as well as the limitation of sports equipment that one does not possess. Among the limitations to be highlighted is the motivational factor. On this point, some American studies have shown that after the initial momentum in the days following the download of the application or the enrolment in the online course, interest wanes, often due to the constant confrontation with others.

To conclude, in line with the data that emerged from the CY ILEPS Cergy Paris Université research, and the theoretical, scientific and cultural context examined, it is possible to affirm how sport and social media seem to have found a perfect dimension of conviviality, considering the high emotional and interactional gradient.

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