

Cinema and social media in the digital age: upholding the right to sociality for children.

Insights from Focus Groups.

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Play and sociability¹ are children's fundamental rights such as health, private life, and family, and education. Each State has thus the duty to guarantee through appropriate legislative initiatives safe environments and appropriate conditions to realize one's personal attitudes and interests.

The first international document recognising the importance of play and sociability is the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*². In Article 31, it enshrines the right of children and adolescents to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to their age. It commits States Parties to ensure their participation in cultural and artistic life in accordance with the principle of equality. Article 31 should be interpreted in light of the entire Convention, which identifies four principles as essential for the healthy growth and optimal development of children and young people: the right to non-discrimination (Article 2), respect for the child's best interests (Article 3), the right to life, survival, and proper development (Article 6), and the right to be heard (Article 12).

These principles find significant practical application in the creative industries, especially in performing arts, like cinema. In this context, the performing arts contribute significantly to building inclusive and cohesive societies. This contribution is not only a strategic priority but also essential for promoting EU values and, in turn, supporting the well-being of children—both in their present lives and as they grow into adulthood.

Today, the economic value created by creative industries, such as the film industry, and their growth potential in comparison to other sectors of the economy, is becoming more evident. To become true promoters of sustainable and inclusive local development, these industries must be able to express a creative environment that fosters responsible competitiveness while also including and valuing minors' needs and rights. Cinema, in particular, should be designed as a space where young people can actively engage with culture and express themselves. By providing opportunities for participation, storytelling, and representation, cinema can contribute to their personal development, enhance their well-being, and reinforce their social and cultural rights, ensuring they are acknowledged not only as future citizens but also as active members of society today.

The analysis undertaken within Reboot's WP5 combines a theoretical and normative framework with the findings of empirical research to understand how new generations experience cinematic narratives in the digital age. The ongoing empirical study, which collected the experiences and impressions of 60

¹ Janot, J.B., & Rico, A.P. (2020). The right of the child to play in the national reports submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. *International Journal of Play*, 9(4), pp. 400–413.

² Convention on the Rights of the Child, New York, 1989

young people aged 12 to 24 living in Pisa, Italy, demonstrated how cinema is not only a tool for entertainment, but also a powerful means of cultural and social growth. According to preliminary findings, young people who participated to our focus groups view cinema as a space for inclusion and reflection, capable of raising awareness about critical issues, encouraging shared responsibility, and increasing participation in their community's social dynamics.³

The focus group discussions explored participants' film preferences, shedding light on their perceptions and expectations regarding cinematic content. For instance, films such as *The Intouchables* (in French *Intouchables*), and *Inside Out* were mentioned by the participants as examples of narratives that offer safe spaces to explore emotions, diversity, and relationships, contributing to the development of self-esteem, imagination, and social skills.

In addition, the desire to explore distant cultures and worlds emerged as a recurring reason for watching films. For several participants, cinema represents a way to “*travel without moving*”, offering the opportunity to learn about different realities and traditions.

Through narrative journeys, cinema not only entertains but becomes a powerful educational tool that encourages self-exploration and openness to new cultures and realities. Much like play and social interaction, it promotes paths of self-determination and reflection, building symbolic bridges between places, cultures, and generations.

The discussions also highlighted the pivotal role that social media plays in how new generations consume and reinterpret audiovisual content. Social media platforms have expanded the possibilities for discovering and sharing creative and artistic performances, enabling young people to creatively engage with film narratives. However, the widespread use of these platforms also presents significant challenges, influencing the growth process, including tastes and attitudes, affecting the overall well-being of minors⁴.

Digital inclusion and access to the web are vital tools for reducing inequalities and ensuring the exercise of rights such as play and sociability, as the physical, geographical, and socio-economic barriers can be easily overcome. The insights gathered through the focus groups demonstrate that young people use social platforms not only for entertainment, but also to discover, evaluate, and reinterpret film content in creative ways as well as to discuss plots and characters, and sharing experiences and ideas. These online spaces become arenas for self-expression and experimentation, where young people can express their opinions, by creating short reviews, personal reinterpretations, and edited clips (“short cuts”). That is an unprecedented opportunity to recognise children’s perspectives as users and consumers of the given creative industry.

³ Bertacchini, E., & Santagata, W. (2012). *Creative Atmosphere. A Sustainable Development Model for Piedmont Based on Culture and Creativity*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

⁴ This dual nature of social media – as a space for creative engagement and a potential source of challenges – reflects broader findings on how minors interpret risks and opportunities in online environments. See: Livingstone, S. (2014). *Developing Social Media Literacy: How Children Learn to Interpret Risky Opportunities on Social Network Sites*. *Communications*, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 283–303.

Yet, rapid and fragmented access to content risks diminishing attention to more complex narratives. Many young people choose what to watch based on short trailers or promotional content shared on social media, which has become a powerful marketing tool. While this amplifies the reach of mainstream cinema, it tends to obscure lesser-known films that hold significant cultural value. It is evident that a delicate balance must be struck: minors shall be allowed to access the internet to exercise their fundamental rights to play and socialise, while ensuring that their development and education take place in a protected, egalitarian, pluralistic, and democratic environment.

In this scenario, the role of the creative industries, particularly the film one, is crucial. A long-term vision that balances economic objectives with social responsibility shall be adopted through targeted strategies.

Firstly, inspired by the remarks expressed by the young participants, it is essential to promote inclusive and meaningful content. Representing cultural and social diversity is not only an ethical choice but also an educational one. The focus groups revealed that young people appreciate films that address authentic and complex themes, reflecting universal experiences and offering positive role models.

Moreover, fostering interaction with audiences through collaborative projects and initiatives that involve young people as active protagonists can transform the digital experience into a space for in-depth analysis and cultural exchange, counteracting the tendency toward passive consumption of content. In this regard, most common social media platforms can evolve from mere tools of instant entertainment to vehicles for richer and more engaging narratives.

Another crucial aspect is investing in cultural education through partnerships with schools and institutions to integrate cinema into educational programmes. In this way, cinema becomes a tool for stimulating critical thinking and initiating dialogues on social and cultural issues.

Parents also play an indispensable role in guiding their children toward conscious and balanced consumption. Article 5 of the UN Convention⁵ recognises *“the responsibility, right and duty of parents (...) to provide appropriate guidance and advice to the child, in a manner consistent with the development of his or her capacities, for the exercise of the rights recognised in the present Convention”*. This role involves managing the timing and way visual content is consumed. Neuroscientific studies indicate that the immediate accessibility and speed of digital content, as noted by the young participants themselves during the focus groups, can negatively affect their ability to concentrate, exercise self-control, and support cognitive development⁶. It is therefore essential to set healthy boundaries and encourage a balanced use of both digital technologies and film viewing.

⁵ Lansdown, G. (2022). Article 5: The Right to Parental Guidance Consistent with the Evolving Capacity of the Child. In Vaghri, Z., Zermatten, J., Lansdown, G., & Ruggiero, R. (Eds.), *Monitoring State Compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children's Well-Being: Indicators and Research* (vol. 25). Springer.

⁶ Firth, J., Torous, J., Stubbs, B., Firth, J.A., Steiner, G.Z., Smith, L., Alvarez-Jimenez, M., Gleeson, J., Vancampfort, D., Armitage, C.J. and Sarris, J. (2019), *The “online brain”: how the Internet may be changing our cognition*. World Psychiatry, 18: 119-129. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20617>.

Additionally, parents can foster cultural dialogue by watching films together, discussing their messages, and addressing the complex issues they raise. This approach transforms entertainment into an educational opportunity, helping young people develop critical thinking and view cinema as a means for personal growth.

Ultimately, the success of a strategy that balances competitiveness and responsibility depends on collaboration among creative industries, families, and institutions⁷. Ensuring the well-being of young people means finding the right balance between the right to play and the responsible use of technology. The challenge is to create safe and enriching digital environments where children can express themselves and grow without sacrificing their right to play, socialise, and experience harmonious development.

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Livingstone, S. (2014). Developing Social Media Literacy: How Children Learn to Interpret Risky Opportunities on Social Network Sites. *Communications*, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 283–303.

⁷ “However, legislative policies must be established within a specific framework of reality, namely that of an evolving society. As a result, new strategies must be developed on a continuous basis to meet current and future needs while prioritising the best interests of children, both boys and girls, and carrying out actions in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.” Varricchio, A. (2023). The right to play and sociality of children and adolescents. In *Juridical review on childhood and adolescence*, 3/23, Legal study attached to the quarterly periodical Bibliographic Review on Childhood and Adolescence registered at the Court of Florence with n. 4963 of 15/05/2000.

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